 Reading time: 12 min.

*Education according to St. Francis de Sales is a path of love and care toward the young, based on essential principles: gentleness, understanding, and balanced correction. From the family to society, St. Francis urges those responsible to show sincere affection, knowing that young people need to be guided with patience and inspiration. Education is a gift that helps shape free souls, capable of thinking and acting in harmony. Like a mountain guide, the Savoyard bishop reminds us that to correct is to accompany—safeguarding the spontaneity of growing hearts while always aiming for inner transformation. In this way, an integral education is born.*

**A duty to be performed with love**

Education is a universal phenomenon, based on the laws of nature and reason. It is the best gift that parents can give their children, one that will foster gratitude and filial piety. Speaking of those responsible for others—whether in the family or in society—Francis de Sales recommends that they show affection: “Therefore, let them do their duty with love.”

Young people need guidance. If it is true that “he who rules himself is ruled by a great fool,” this is even more so for those who have not yet gained experience. Similarly, Celse-Bénigne, the eldest son of Madame de Chantal—who was a source of concern for his mother—needed guidance to help him “taste the goodness of true wisdom through admonitions and recommendations.”

To a young man about to “set sail into the world,” he suggested finding “some courteous spirit” who could visit him from time to time to “refresh and regain spiritual breath.” We should do as the young Tobias in the Bible did: sent by his father to a distant land where he did not know the way, he received the advice, “Go, therefore, and find a man to guide you.”

A mountain expert, the Savoyard bishop loved to remind us that those who walk on rugged and slippery paths need to be bound together—tethered to one another in order to advance more securely. Whenever he could, he offered help and advice to young people in danger. To a schoolboy engrossed in gambling and debauchery, he wrote “a letter full of good, gentle, and friendly warnings,” urging him to make better use of his time.

A good guide must be able to adapt to the needs and abilities of each individual. Francis de Sales admired mothers who knew how to give each of their children what they needed and to adjust to each “according to the capacity of his spirit.” This is how God accompanies people. His teaching is like that of a father

attentive to each one's abilities: "Like a good father who holds his child's hand," he wrote to Jeanne de Chantal, "he will adjust his steps to yours and will be content not to go faster than you."

**Elements of youth psychology**

For an educator to have any chance of success, they must know something about young people in general and about each young person in particular. What does it mean to be young? Commenting on the famous vision of Jacob's ladder, the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* observes that the angels ascending and descending the ladder possessed all the charms of youth: they were full of vigour and agility; they had wings to fly and feet to walk alongside their companions; their faces were beautiful and cheerful; "their legs, their arms, and their heads were all bare," while "the rest of their bodies were covered, but with a beautiful and light garment."

But let us not idealize this stage of life too much. For Francis de Sales, youth is by nature reckless and bold; young people tend to tackle difficulties from afar while fleeing those that are close at hand. "Young and ardent" are two adjectives that often go hand in hand, especially when used to describe a mind "teeming with ideas and strongly inclined toward extremes." And among the risks of this age is "the ardour of youthful blood that begins to boil and a courage not yet guided by prudence."

Young people are versatile—they move and change easily. Like young dogs that love change, they are fickle and inconsistent, stirred by various "desires for novelty and change," and are liable to provoke "great and unfortunate scandals." It is an age in which passions are fierce and difficult to control. Like butterflies, they flutter around the fire at the risk of burning their wings.

They often lack wisdom and experience, for self-love blinds reason. We must be wary of two opposing attitudes in them: vanity, which is actually a lack of courage, and ambition, which is an excess of courage that leads them to seek glory and honour in an unreasonable way.

What a wonder, however, when youth and virtue meet! Francis de Sales admired a young woman who, though she had every reason to indulge in the pleasures of the springtime of her life, loved and esteemed "the holy virtues." He praised all those who, during their youth, kept their soul "always pure amidst so many infections."

Above all, young people are sensitive to the affection they receive. "It is impossible to express how much we are friends," he wrote to a father regarding his relationship with his undisciplined—even unbearable—son at school. As can be

seen, Francis de Sales was happy to proclaim himself a friend of the young. He likewise wrote to the mother of a little girl for whom he was godfather: “The dear little goddaughter, I believe, carries within her a secret indication of my affection for her, so strong is the love she shows me.”

Finally, “this is the right age to receive impressions,” which is an excellent thing because it means that young people can be educated and are capable of great things. The future belongs to the young, as we have seen at the Montmartre abbey, where it was precisely the young—with their even younger abbess—who carried out the “reform.”

**The sense of purpose in education**

On the one hand, realism imposes on educators the need to truly know the people to whom they address their efforts; on the other hand, they must never lose sight of the purpose of their actions. There is nothing better than a clear awareness of the goals we set for ourselves, for “every agent acts for the sake and according to the end.”

What, then, is education and what is its purpose? Education, says Francis de Sales, is “a multitude of solicitations, aids, services, and other necessary provisions for the child, carried out and continued toward him until the age when he no longer needs them.” Two aspects stand out in this definition: on one hand, the emphasis on the multitude of attentions that education requires, and on the other, its end, which coincides with the moment when the individual has reached autonomy. Children are educated to achieve freedom and full control over their own lives.

In concrete terms, Francis de Sales’ educational ideal seems to revolve around the notion of harmony—that is, the harmonious integration of all the various components that exist in the human being: “actions, movements, feelings, inclinations, habits, passions, faculties, and powers.” Harmony implies unity, but also distinction. Unity requires a single commandment, yet that very commandment must not only respect differences but also promote distinctions in the pursuit of harmony. In the human person, governance belongs to the will, to which all the other components refer—each in its proper place and in interdependence with one another.

Francis de Sales employs two analogies to illustrate his ideal. They are reminiscent of the two fundamental human drives highlighted by psychoanalysis: aggression and pleasure. An army, he explains, is beautiful when it is composed of distinct parts arranged in such a way as to form one cohesive force. Similarly, music is beautiful when the voices are united in their distinction even as they join together.

**Starting from the heart**

"Whoever has conquered the heart of man has conquered all of man," writes the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life*. This general rule should apply in the field of education. The expression "to conquer the heart" can be interpreted in two ways. It can mean that the educator must aim for the heart—that is, the inner centre of the person—before concerning themselves with outward behaviour. Alternatively, it means winning a person over through affection.

Man is built from the inside out; this appears to be one of the great lessons of Francis de Sales, a trainer and reformer of individuals and communities. He was well aware that his method was not shared by all, for he wrote, "I have never been able to approve of the method of those who, in order to reform man, begin from the outside—from his bearing, his clothes, his hair." One must therefore start from within, that is, from the heart—the seat of the will and the source of all our actions.

The second point is to win the affection of others, in order to establish a good educational relationship. In a letter to an abbess advising her on the reform of her monastery—which was largely composed of young people—we find valuable insights into how the Savoyard bishop conceived his method of education, formation, and, in this case more precisely, "reform." Above all, we must not alarm them by giving the impression that we intend to reform them; the goal is for them to reform themselves. After these preliminaries, one must use three or four "tricks." It is not surprising, since education is also an art—in fact, the art of all arts. First, ask them to do things often, but with great ease and without giving the impression of forcing them. Second, speak frequently and in general terms about what needs to be changed, as if thinking of someone else. Third, strive to make obedience pleasant, while once again highlighting its benefits and advantages. According to Francis de Sales, gentleness should be preferred because it is generally more effective. Finally, those in charge must show that they do not act on a whim but in virtue of their responsibility and for the good of all.

**To command, to advise, to inspire**

It seems that the interventions proposed by Francis de Sales in the educational field are modelled on the three ways in which God communicates His will to men: commands, advice, and inspirations.

It is obvious that parents and teachers have the right and duty to command their children or pupils for their own good, and that they must obey. He himself, in his responsibility as bishop, did not hesitate to do so when necessary. However, according to Camus, he abhorred absolute spirits who demanded unquestioning obedience and to whom everything must yield. He said, "those who love to be

feared, fear to be loved.” In some cases, obedience may be compelled. Referring to the son of one of his friends, he wrote to the father: “If he persists, we will be satisfied; if he does not, we will have to resort to one of these two remedies: either withdraw him to a school a bit more restrictive than this one, or provide him with a private tutor—a man to whom he must render obedience.” Can the use of force be entirely excluded?

Usually, however, Francis de Sales resorted to advice, warnings, and recommendations. The author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* presents himself as an advisor, an assistant—someone who gives “advice.” Even though he often uses the imperative, it is advice he is giving, especially as it is frequently accompanied by a conditional: “If you can do it, do it.” Sometimes the recommendation is disguised as a statement of value: it is good to do this, it is better to do that, and so on.

But when he can, and when his authority is not in question, he prefers to act by inspiration, suggestion, or insinuation. This is the quintessential Salesian method, one that respects human freedom. It seemed particularly suitable to him when choosing a way of life. This is the method he advised Madame de Chantal to use for the vocation she desired for her children, “inspiring in them with gentle thoughts in harmony with it.”

Yet inspiration is not communicated solely through words. The heavens do not speak, as the Bible says, but proclaim the glory of God with their silent testimony. In the same way, “a good example is a silent preaching”—as exemplified by St. Francis, who, without uttering a single word, attracted a great number of young people with his example. Indeed, example leads to imitation. “The little nightingales learn to sing with the great,” he recalled, and “the example of those we love has a gentle and imperceptible influence and authority over us,” to the point that we are compelled either to follow them or to imitate them.

**How to correct?**

The spirit of correction consists in “resisting evil and repressing the vices of those entrusted to us, constantly and valiantly, but with gentleness and calm.” However, faults must be corrected without delay — while they are still small — “because if you wait for them to grow, you will not be able to remedy them easily.”

Severity is sometimes necessary. The two young religious who were causing scandal had to be set back on the right path if one wished to avoid a multitude of deplorable consequences. Although their youth might have been used as an excuse, “the continuation of their behaviour now renders them unforgivable.” There are even cases in which it is necessary “to keep the wicked in some fear of the

resistance they will offer." The Bishop of Geneva quotes a letter from St. Bernard to the monks of Rome who needed correction, in which he "speaks to them as one ought, and with a rebuke that is rather severe." Let us act like the surgeon, for "it is a weak or poor friendship to see one's friend perish and not help him, to see him die of apostasy and not dare to offer him the razor's edge of correction to save him."

Yet correction must be administered without passion, because "a judge punishes the wicked much more effectively when he issues his sentences with reason and in a spirit of calm, rather than when he does so with impetuosity and passion—especially since, judging with passion, he does not punish faults according to what they are but according to what he himself is." In the same way, "a father's gentle and cordial admonitions have far more power to correct a child than his anger and wrath." This is why it is important to guard against anger. The first time you feel anger, he told Filotea, "you must quickly gather your strength—not suddenly or with impetuosity, but with gentleness and seriousness." In a letter to a nun who had complained about "a surly and disruptive little girl" entrusted to her care, the bishop advised: "Do not correct her, if you can, with anger." Let us not act like King Herod or like those men who claim to rule because they are feared, when in truth to rule means "to be loved."

There are many ways to correct. One of the best methods is not so much to reprimand what is negative, but to encourage all that is positive in a person. This is called "correcting by inspiration," because "it is wonderful how the gentleness and kindness of something good is a powerful way to attract hearts."

His disciple, Jean-Pierre Camus, recounted the story of a mother who cursed the son who had insulted her. It was thought that the bishop should do the same, but he replied, "What do you want me to do? I feared that in a quarter of an hour I would pour out the little liquor of kindness that I had laboured to collect over twenty-two years." Camus also relates this "unforgettable" saying of his master: "Remember that you catch more flies with a drop of honey than with a barrel of vinegar."

Kindness is preferable not only toward others but also toward ourselves. Everyone should be ready to recognize their own mistakes calmly and to correct themselves without becoming angry. Here is a good piece of advice for a "poor girl" who is angry with herself: "Tell her that, no matter how much she complains, she will never be surprised or angry with herself."

**Progressive education**

St. Francis de Sales, who possessed a keen sense of reality and possibility—as well as the necessary moderation and tact—was convinced that

great projects are achieved only with patience and time. Perfection is never the starting point and will probably never be reached, but it is always possible to make progress. Growth has its own laws that must be respected: bees were first larvae, then nymphs, and finally “formed, made, and perfect” bees.

Doing things in an orderly fashion—one after the other, without clamour, even if with some slowness, but never stopping—seems to be the ideal of the Bishop of Geneva. “Let us move forward,” he would say, “and no matter how slowly we advance, we will cover great distances.” Similarly, he advised an abbess tasked with the arduous job of reforming her monastery: “You must have a great and enduring heart.” The law of progression is universal and applies in every field.

To illustrate his thought, the saint of gentleness employed countless analogies and images to instil a sense of time and the necessity of perseverance. Some people are prone to fly before they have wings, or to want to become angels all at once, when they are not yet merely good men and women. When children are small, we give them milk; and when they grow and begin to have teeth, we give them bread and butter.

An important point is not to be afraid of repeating the same thing over and over. One must emulate painters and sculptors who create their masterpieces by repeating brush strokes and chisel blows. Education is a long journey. Along the way, one must purge oneself of many negative “humours,” and this purification is slow. But we must not lose heart. Slowness does not mean resignation or a casual waiting. On the contrary, we must learn to make the best use of everything, not wasting time and knowing how to use “our years, our months, our weeks, our days, our hours, even our moments.”

Patience, often taught by the Bishop of Geneva, is an active patience that allows us to move forward—even if in small steps. “Little by little and step by step, we must acquire this mastery,” he wrote to an impatient Filotea. “First we learn to walk in small steps, then to hurry, then to walk halfway, and finally to run.” The growth toward adulthood begins slowly and then accelerates, just as formation and education do. Finally, patience is nourished by hope: “There is no land so unfruitful that the love of the labourer cannot fertilize it.”

**Integral education**

From all that has been said so far, it is quite clear that for Francis de Sales education could not be confined to just one dimension of the person—such as mere instruction, good manners, or even a religious education devoid of human foundations. Naturally, one cannot deny the importance of each of these specific areas. With regard to the education and formation of the mind, one need only recall

the time and effort he himself devoted during his youth to acquiring a high intellectual and “professional” culture, as well as the care he took in nurturing education in his diocese.

However, his primary concern was the integral formation of the human person, understood in all its dimensions and dynamics. To demonstrate this, we must focus on each of the constitutive dimensions of the human being in its full symbolic entirety: the body with all its senses, the soul with all its passions, the mind with all its faculties, and the heart—the seat of the will, of love, and of freedom.