

□ Reading time: 10 min.

Alongside the “sentiment for the child”, the 15th century saw the development of a sentiment for the family, which was barely evident in the Middle Ages, when priority was given to relationships with the general populace, leaving little room for intimacy and private life. On the other hand, there was a re-evaluation of marriage and family at the expense of ecclesiastical and monastic celibacy. For humanists and reformers, these realities greatly favoured the life of society and the Church. Luther and Calvin, not content with denouncing the celibacy of monks and priests as a cause of immorality and hypocrisy, encouraged marriage for all.

Saint Francis de Sales, while maintaining the tradition of religious celibacy and its evangelical superiority, did not fail to go beyond the social conventions of the time. Most of his letters of spiritual direction are addressed to married men and women. In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, he wrote two chapters of undeniable originality compared to all spiritual literature of the past. One contains “advice for married people”, the other deals with the “honesty of the marriage bed”.

Marriage is a Vocation

Marriage is a “human bond by which heart, body, and possessions are communicated to each other”. After firmly stating that marriage is “honourable to all, in all, and for all, that is, in all its parts,” the author of the *Philothea* explains: “To all, because even virgins must honour it with humility; in all, because it is equally holy among the poor and the rich; in all, because its origin, its end, its uses, its form, and its matter are holy.”

Not only did he consider marriage a great sacrament of the Church and the “seedbed of Christianity”, but he also declared that “the preservation of the good of marriage is extremely important for the republic.” Destined for marriage by his father, François de Sales had refused it, according to Chaugy’s mother, “not out of contempt for marriage, which he perfectly honoured as a sacrament, but out of a certain inner and spiritual ardour that drove him to dedicate himself totally to the service of the Church, and to be all for God without having a divided heart.”

Did the dignity of marriage require that the young man, and especially the young woman, be free to choose their own “match”? At the time, the question was not so clear and practices varied. Ancient traditions persisted, especially among nobles, where daughters were often promised at a young age and the husband, much older, exercised indisputable authority over the couple. This does not mean that everything was bad, as we can see from the case of Francis de Sales’ parents. Elsewhere too, there was a certain evolution of morals: young people married at a

younger age and consequently exercised greater freedom.

One of Francis de Sales' most significant contributions was to help spouses realise that their state of life is a vocation. He himself wrote to Philothea, who was married, about marriage. "If all must honour it, honour it much, especially you who by vocation are in it." Since marriage is a vocation, its purpose is the holiness of the spouses. "You will walk in this vocation," he wrote to a young woman who had just married, "you will find much consolation in it and you will become very holy in the end."

Marriage is a vocation because it involves first a gift and then a call, a responsibility. This is what the author of the Introduction wants to instil in married people when he tells them, "It was God, my friends, who with His invisible hand tied the sacred knot of your marriage and gave you to each other; why do you not love each other with a love all holy, all sacred, all divine?" He also wrote to a young woman who had just married, "Love your husband tenderly, as if he were given to you by the very hand of Our Lord."

Love in Marriage

Francis de Sales was a proponent of love marriage in his time. Rabelais and Montaigne, who extolled paternal feelings, paid little attention to love between spouses. Marriage was often considered incompatible with love, confused with passionate love, and the logical conclusion was that it was merely an institution necessary for society. For Francis de Sales, mutual love had to be the main characteristic, with its two corollaries of "indissoluble union" of hearts and "inviolable fidelity to each other".

In the Introduction, the author urges spouses to increasingly grow their "mutual love". He immediately defines the love of spouses as a mutual friendship in which "the communication of life, possessions, affections, and indissoluble fidelity" is practised. Gestures of affection should not be lacking. The model is the great Saint Louis, who "was almost reproached for being abundant in these caresses".

However, the qualities of love are different for men and women. Husbands must love their wives "tenderly, constantly, and cordially", while wives must love their husbands "tenderly, cordially, but with a respectful and reverent love". Francis de Sales admired married people who lived "so sweetly together with mutual respect, that it cannot be without great charity".

As for the sacrament, it is a powerful aid against the changeability of our resolutions. How many marriages would we see dissolve, he exclaimed, "if they were not strengthened by the sacrament that prevents the variation of this type of

life! With surprising realism, he also said, "A man who has lived in peace with his wife all his life, if he could have changed her he would have done so a dozen times." Indeed, "this inconstancy of the human spirit is extravagant, but it must be stopped by the strength of our first resolutions."

While supporting the authority of men within the family, the Bishop of Geneva was well aware that they could abuse it. With a gentle irony about male pretensions, he recommends understanding and indulgence to the woman. "My God, what a good father we have and what an excellent husband you have! Alas, they are a little jealous of their empire and their dominion, which seems to them a little violated when something is done without their authority and command. What do you want, they must allow this little humanity."

It must be said that this "little humanity" was common in families, hence this somewhat disillusioned observation, but good for comforting a widow, "It is true, no doubt, that it is a great help to have a good husband, but there are few, and however good you have him, you receive more submission than assistance."

Marriage is a School

"Among thorns or among flowers," he wrote to Jeanne de Chantal, who was a happily married woman before suffering tragedy and loneliness, "God makes us gain at his school." Everything begins with a "change of condition" and a new beginning that must give rise to gratitude and trust. Marriage is a gift, but a gift to be cultivated. "We must therefore cultivate this beloved heart with great care," he wrote to a young bride, "and spare nothing that can be useful to its happiness." To protect and promote "the progress of their marriage" and "sanctify it more and more with friendship and mutual fidelity," he gave spouses advice suited to their situation.

First, Francis de Sales taught that married people must love their state of life. "We must love what God loves: he loves our vocation; let us love it well too and not amuse ourselves by thinking about that of others." We often find that everyone would like to change their condition, "who is married would like not to be, and who is not would like to be." And the Bishop of Geneva wondered: "Where does this general restlessness of souls come from, if not from a certain discontent with constraints and from a malignity of spirit that makes us think that everyone is better than us?" As always, a comparison comes to mind, "He who has a fever cannot find a good place; he has not spent a quarter of an hour in one bed when he would like to be in another; it is not the bed that can do it, it is the fever that torments him everywhere." The conclusion is obvious: "He who does not have the fever of his own will is content with everything; as long as he serves God, he does

not care in what guise God employs him. As long as he does God's will, it is the same for him."

Like few spiritual writers before him, Francis de Sales dares to speak of "nuptial commerce", "carnal pleasures", and "marriage bed". To do so, he uses a traditional, delicate but transparent comparison. One sits at the table, he explains, not only "to nourish and preserve the person", but also "for the duty of mutual conversation and condescension that we owe each other." The two things to avoid are excess, which consists "in eating too much", and imbalance "in the way and manner of eating." When the couple was in crisis, he appealed not only to God's will, but also to duty and reason. To a woman disgusted by the actions of a "dissipated and carefree" husband, he gave advice of wisdom and prudence. "I told her that she could speak with strength and resolution, on occasions when it was necessary, to keep the person she knew to duty, but that strength was stronger when it was calm and when it arose from reason, without a mixture of passion."

He advised husbands and wives to help each other in spiritual life, otherwise the man becomes "a severe, harsh, and hard animal", and the woman without devotion "is very fragile and prone to decay or tarnish her virtue". On the contrary, what a blessing it is when man and woman "sanctify each other in the true fear of the Lord!"

Parents are God's "Co-operators"

The conception and birth of a child are wonderful gifts that make spouses "co-operators in such a worthy task". Francis de Sales even composed a special prayer – which he was said to repeat often – for those who were unable to "consummate" their marriage. This was actually an exorcism, because impotence and sterility were thought to be caused by the devil and evil spells.

The love of parents should serve as a model for all those who are responsible for others, to whom we should wish "the heart of fathers, solid, firm, and constant, without forgetting the tenderness of mothers who make children desire sweets, according to the divine order that governs everything with an all-sweet strength and an all-strong gentleness."

There is a kind of imitative love between parents and children. "Fathers love their children well, but especially when they resemble them or some of their predecessors. They look at them as in a mirror and enjoy seeing them portray their manners, their faces, and their countenances." The love of mothers for their children is surprising, especially in times of danger. Instinct certainly plays an important role. The hen is an animal without courage and generosity until she becomes a mother, but when she does "she has a lion's heart, always with her head

held high, always with sleepy eyes, always rolling her gaze everywhere, as long as there is an appearance of danger for her little ones.”

Francis de Sales also felt within himself “the impulses of paternal love” when he dealt with his “son”, the Duke of Bellegarde. To show his constant concern for his ‘son’, he once wrote to him that “good children often think of their fathers; but it is not often, it is always that fathers have their spirit in their children.” If a father behaves differently towards his eldest son, “a well-made man, a brave and generous soldier,” and towards the youngest, “a cute little one who is still a child, with good grace,” it does not mean that he loves the former less than the latter. His love is expressed in a way that suits each person.

As for the responsibility of parents in education, for Francis de Sales it was clear that its foundation was religion, in biblical terms the fear of God. Hence this urgent recommendation, “When children come into the world and begin to use reason, fathers and mothers must take great care to instil in their hearts the fear of God.” Parents have a great responsibility in education, to the point that their lack can be their own ruin. In a severe sermon, he warns them, “They sin if they laugh when they see their children indulge in bad language, in the worst beginnings of vanity.” There are parents who, out of a misguided love for their children, are willing to spend all kinds of money on them, but have “nothing to educate them in letters and good morals.” Finally, the love of parents can also become “disordered love” when they prevent their children from becoming priests or entering religious life.

The Child is the “Living Image” of the Parents

The child is the “precious pledge” of marriage and the “living image” of the father and mother. While they are heirs of their parents, they are not primarily heirs in a material sense. Speaking to the widow of the late Duke de Mercœur, Francis de Sales said of her daughter that she was “the legitimate heir of his virtues, which he left to your care, Madam, so that you may cultivate them through the noble and Christian education you have reserved for her.”

The first virtue of children is obedience. Their obedience is a source of joy for parents, because “everyone knows the satisfaction that fathers receive from the obedience that children show them, and the more children show themselves submissive and obedient to their desires, the more they take pleasure in loving them.” But “a well-born child does not obey his father because of the power he has to punish his disobedience, nor because he can disinherit him, but simply because he is his father.”

The counterpart of obedience is the filial trust that children have in their parents. This is illustrated by the allegory of the surgeon’s daughter. When she was ill, she

did not think about the painful treatment he was giving her, but entrusted herself completely to her father's care, simply saying: "My father loves me, and I am all his."

As children became adolescents and young adults, the recommendations of the Bishop of Geneva became more insistent and demanding. To young people, he said in a sermon on the theme of the cross that each of us must bear, "I entrust the cross of obedience, chastity, and moderation in their behaviour, a salutary cross that crucifies the ardent impulses of young blood that begins to boil and of a courage that does not yet have prudence as a guide." To these virtues must be added filial piety, of which storks are a wonderful model, because "they carry their old fathers and mothers in their train, as when they were still young their fathers and mothers had carried them on the same occasion."

The Union of the Family

In his book on *Saint Francis de Sales and our heart of flesh*, Henry Bordeaux rightly wrote, "It is difficult to imagine a Saint Francis de Sales who did not come from a large and united family, who had not experienced the legitimate tenderness of the heart. He would be a different saint; he would not be the intelligent comforter, the sweetly authoritarian father, the restorer of the family spirit, the doctor of hidden wounds."

Family union is greatly facilitated by natural ties of blood and kinship, but this is not enough. In fact, "when union is natural, it produces love, and the love it produces leads us to a new voluntary union that perfects the natural one."

During one of his stays in Sales, Francis was so struck by the harmony that reigned there that he felt the desire to talk about it to his spiritual daughter. In a letter to Jeanne de Chantal, he wrote, "It would please you to see such close harmony between things that are usually so discordant: mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, brothers and brothers-in-law. Among all these, my true daughter, I can assure you, to the glory of God, that here there is only one heart and one soul."

Dissensions in the family often arose over inheritance matters. When in 1608, Monsieur de Boisy's property was divided among his children, there was a real risk that the father would leave the first choice to the youngest Bernard and that the older children would feel defrauded. Francis was very relieved to see that everything took place amicably and in harmony.

In case of conflict between husband and wife, "the mutual support of one to the other must be so great that the two never become embittered together." With tenacity, Francis de Sales taught to overcome repugnance, to remain "in the boat in which we find ourselves," and to stay there "sweetly and willingly." His most

insistent recommendations concern mutual support, faithful friendship not interrupted by “outside loves”, concern for the education of children, without forgetting the good example to be given to the whole family.

Ultimately, it is love that best summarises everything Francis de Sales said about marriage and family, but a love that is both realistic and ideal. Education in this area will therefore consist in helping young people to grasp all the dimensions of what makes the family the heart of human existence.