 Reading time: 12 min.

The educational thinking of Saint Francis de Sales reveals a profound and innovative vision of the role of women in the Church and society of his time. Convinced that the education of women was fundamental for the moral and spiritual growth of the entire community, the holy bishop of Geneva promoted a balanced education that respected female dignity but was also attentive to fragility. With a paternal and realistic gaze, he was able to recognise and value the qualities of women, encouraging them to cultivate virtue, culture, and devotion. Founder of the Visitation with Jane de Chantal, he vigorously defended the female vocation even in the face of criticism and prejudice. His teaching continues to offer relevant insights into education, love, and freedom in choosing one's own life.

During his trip to Paris in 1619, Francis de Sales met Adrien Bourdoise, a reformist priest, who reproached him for paying too much attention to women. The bishop calmly replied that women were half of humanity and that by forming good Christian women, there would be good young people, and with good young people, there would be good priests. After all, did not St. Jerome devote a great deal of time and various writings to them? Francis de Sales recommended the reading of his letters to Madame de Chantal, who found in them, among other things, numerous instructions "for educating her daughters". It can be deduced that, in his eyes, the role of women in education justified the time and attention devoted to them.

Francis de Sales and the women of his time

"We must help the female sex, which is despised," the Bishop of Geneva once said to Jean-François de Blonay. To understand Francis de Sales' concerns and thinking, it is necessary to place him in his own time. It must be said that a number of his statements still seem very much in line with the thinking of the current time. In the women of his time, he deplored "this feminine tenderness towards themselves," their ease "in pitying themselves and desiring to be pitied," a greater propensity than men "to give credence to dreams, to be afraid of spirits, and to be credulous and superstitious," and above all, the "twists and turns of their vain thoughts." Among the advice he gave to Madame de Chantal on the education of her daughters, he wrote without hesitation, "Remove vanity from their souls; it is born almost at the same time as sex."

However, women are endowed with great qualities. He wrote about Madame de La Fléchère, who had just lost her husband, "If I had only this perfect

sheep in my flock, I would not be distressed at being the shepherd of this afflicted diocese. After Madame de Chantal, I do not know if I have ever met a stronger soul in a female body, a more reasonable spirit and a more sincere humility." Women are by no means the last in the practice of virtue. "Have we not seen many great theologians who have said wonderful things about virtue, but not in order to practise it, while, on the contrary, there are many holy women who cannot speak of virtue, but who nevertheless know very well how to practise it?"

Married women are the worthiest of admiration, "Oh my God! How pleasing to God are the virtues of a married woman; for they must be strong and excellent to endure in such a vocation!" In the struggle to preserve chastity, he believed that "women have often fought more courageously than men."

Founder of a congregation of women together with Jeanne de Chantal, he was in constant contact with the first religious. Alongside praise, criticism began to rain down. Pushed into these trenches, the founder had to defend himself and defend them, not only as religious women, but also as women. In a document that was to serve as a preface to the Constitutions of the Visitandines, we find the polemical vein he was capable of displaying, directing himself no longer against 'heresiarchs' but against malicious and ignorant 'censors':

The presumption and inappropriate arrogance of many children of this century, who ostentatiously condemn everything that is not in accordance with their spirit […], gives me the opportunity, or rather compels me, to write this Preface, my dearest Sisters, to arm and defend your holy vocation against the barbs of their pestilent tongues, so that good and pious souls, who are undoubtedly attached to your lovable and honoured Institute, may find here how to repel the arrows shot by the temerity of these bizarre and insolent censors.

Perhaps foreseeing that such a preamble might damage the cause, the founder of the Visitation wrote a second, softened edition, with the aim of highlighting the fundamental equality of the sexes. After quoting Genesis, he commented as follows, "Woman, therefore, no less than man, has the grace of having been made in the image of God; equal honour in both sexes; their virtues are equal."

The education of daughters

The enemy of true love is "vanity". This was the flaw that Francis de Sales, like the moralists and educators of his time, feared most in the education of young women. He points out several manifestations of it. Look at "these young

ladies of the world, who, having established themselves well, go about puffed up with pride and vanity, with their heads held high, their eyes open, eager to be noticed by the worldly."

The Bishop of Geneva amuses himself a little in mocking these "society girls", who "wear loose, powdered hats", with their heads "shod like horses' hooves", all "plumed and flowered beyond description" and "laden with frills". There are those who "wear dresses that are tight and very uncomfortable, just to show that they are slim; this is true madness that mostly makes them incapable of doing anything."

What then are we to think of certain artificial beauties transformed into "boutiques of vanity"? Francis de Sales prefers a "clear and clean face;" he wants "nothing affected, because everything that is embellished is displeasing." Should we therefore condemn all "artifice"? He readily admits that "in the case of some defect of nature, it must be corrected so that the correction can be seen, but stripped of all artifice."

And perfume? the preacher asked himself when speaking of Mary Magdalene. "It is an excellent thing," he replied, "even the one who is perfumed perceives something excellent in it," adding, as a connoisseur, that "Spanish musk is highly prized throughout the world." In the chapter on "decency in dress," he allows young women to wear clothes with various adornments, "because they may freely desire to be pleasing to many, but with the sole purpose of winning a young man with a view to holy matrimony." He concluded with this indulgent observation, "What do you want? It is only fitting that young ladies should be a little pretty."

It should be added that reading the Bible had prepared him not to be harsh in the face of female beauty. In the lover of the *Song of Songs*, admired "the remarkable beauty of her face, like a *bouquet* of flowers." He describes Jacob who, meeting Rachel at the well, "wept tears of joy when he saw a virgin who pleased him and enchanted him with the grace of her face." He also loved to tell the story of St. Brigid, born in Scotland, a country where "the most beautiful creatures one can see" are admired; she was "an extremely attractive young woman," but her beauty was "natural," our author points out.

The Salesian ideal of beauty is called 'good grace,' which designates not only "the perfect harmony of the parts that make something beautiful," but also the "grace of movements, gestures, and actions, which is like the soul of life and beauty," that is, goodness of heart. Grace requires "simplicity and modesty." Now, grace is a perfection that comes from within the person. It is beauty combined with grace that makes Rebecca the feminine ideal of the Bible. She was "so beautiful and graceful at the well where she drew water for the flock," and her "familiar

goodness” inspired her to give water not only to Abraham’s servants but also to his camels.

Education and preparation for life

In the time of St. Francis de Sales, women had little opportunity to pursue higher education. Girls learned what they heard from their brothers and, when the family could afford it, attended a convent. Reading was certainly more common than writing. Colleges were reserved for boys, so learning Latin, the language of culture, was practically forbidden to girls.

We must believe that Francis de Sales was not opposed to women becoming educated, but on condition that they did not fall into pedantry and vanity. He admired Saint Catherine, who was “very learned, but humble in her great knowledge,” Among the bishop of Geneva’s female interlocutors, the Lady of La Fléchère had studied Latin, Italian, Spanish, and the fine arts, but she was an exception.

In order to find their place in life, both socially and religiously, young women often needed special help at a certain point. Georges Rolland reports that the bishop personally took care of several difficult cases. A woman from Geneva with three daughters was generously assisted by the bishop, “with money and credit; he placed one of her daughters as an apprentice with an honest lady in the city, paying her board for six years, in grain and money.” He also donated 500 florins for the marriage of the daughter of a printer in Geneva.

The religious intolerance of the time sometimes caused tragedies, which Francis de Sales tried to remedy. Marie-Judith Gilbert, educated in Paris by her parents in the ‘errors of Calvin,’ discovered the book *Filotea* at the age of nineteen, which she dared to read only in secret. She took a liking to the author, whom she had heard about. Closely watched by her father and mother, she managed to be taken away by carriage, was instructed in the Catholic religion, and entered the Visitation Sisters.

The social role of women was still rather limited. Francis de Sales was not entirely opposed to women’s involvement in public life. He wrote in these terms, for example, to a woman who was given to intervene in public affairs, both appropriately and inappropriately:

Your sex and your vocation allow you to repress evil outside yourselves, but only if this is inspired by good and accomplished with simple, humble, and charitable remonstrances towards transgressors and by warning your superiors as far as possible.

On the other hand, it is significant that a contemporary of Francis de Sales, Mademoiselle de Gournay, an early feminist *ante litteram*, an intellectual and author of controversial texts such as her treatise *L'égalité des hommes et des femmes* (The Equality of Men and Women) and *La plainte des femmes* (The Complaint of Women), expressed great admiration for him. She devoted her entire life to demonstrating this equality, gathering all possible evidence on the subject, without forgetting that of the "good and holy bishop of Geneva".

Education to love

Francis de Sales spoke a lot about God's love, but he was also very attentive to the manifestations of human love. For him, in fact, love is one, even if its 'object' is different and unequal. To explain God's love, he could do no better than start from human love.

Love arises from the contemplation of beauty, and beauty can be perceived by the senses, especially by the eyes. An interactive phenomenon is established between the gaze and beauty. "Contemplating beauty makes us love it, and love makes us contemplate it." The sense of smell reacts in the same way; in fact, "perfumes exercise their unique power of attraction through their sweetness."

After the intervention of the external senses, the internal senses take over, the imagination and fantasy, which exalt and transfigure reality. "By virtue of this reciprocal movement of love towards sight and sight towards love, just as love makes the beauty of the beloved more resplendent, so the sight of the beloved makes love more enamoured and pleasant." We can then understand why "those who have painted Cupid have blindfolded him, affirming that love is blind." At this point, love-passion arrives; it makes us "seek dialogue, and dialogue often nourishes and increases love;" moreover, "it desires secrecy, and when lovers have no secrets to tell each other, they sometimes take pleasure in telling them secretly;" and finally, it leads us to "utter words that would certainly be ridiculous if they did not spring from a passionate heart."

Now, this love-passion, which perhaps boils down to nothing more than 'amorucci' (little loves) and 'galanterie' (gallantries), is exposed to various vicissitudes, to such an extent that it prompts the author of the *Filotea* to intervene with a series of considerations and warnings about "frivolous friendships that are formed between people of the opposite sex and without any intention of marriage." Often, they are nothing more than "abortions or, rather, semblances of friendship."

St. Francis de Sales also expressed his views on kissing, wondering, for example, along with the ancient commentators, why Rachel allowed Jacob to embrace her. He explains that there are two kinds of kisses: one bad, the other

good. Kisses that are easily exchanged between young people and that are not bad at first can become so later because of human frailty. But a kiss can also be good. In certain places, it is required by custom. “Our Jacob embraces his Rachel very innocently; Rachel accepts this kiss of courtesy from this man of good character and clean face.” “Oh!” concluded Francis de Sales, “give me people who have the innocence of Jacob and Rachel, and I will allow them to kiss each other.”

On the question of dancing, which was also on the agenda, the Bishop of Geneva avoided absolute commands, as did the rigorists of the time, both Catholic and Protestant, while still showing great prudence. He was even harshly reproached for writing that “dances and ballroom dancing are in themselves indifferent things.” As with certain games, they too become dangerous when one becomes so attached to them that one can no longer detach oneself from them. Dancing “must be done for recreation and not for passion; for a short time and not to the point of exhaustion and dizziness.” What is more dangerous is that these pastimes often become occasions that provoke “quarrels, envy, mockery, and love affairs.”

The choice of lifestyle

When the little daughter grows up, “the day comes when it is necessary to talk to her, I mean to refer to the decisive word, the one in which one tells young women that one wants to marry them off.” A man of his time, Francis de Sales largely shared the idea that parents had an important role in determining their children’s vocation, whether to marriage or religious life. “One does not usually choose one’s prince or bishop, one’s father or mother, and often, not even one’s husband,” noted the author of *Filotea*. However, he clearly states that “daughters cannot be given in marriage as long as they say no.”

The current practice is well explained in this passage from the Philothea: “For a marriage to truly take place, three things are necessary with regard to the young woman who is to be given in marriage. First, that the proposal be made to her; second, that she accepts it; and third, that she consents to it.” Since girls often married at a very young age, their emotional immaturity is not surprising. “Girls who marry very young truly love their husbands, if they have them, but they never cease to love their rings, their jewellery, and their friends with whom they have so much fun playing, dancing, and acting foolishly.”

The problem of freedom of choice arose equally for children who were destined for religious life. La Franceschetta, daughter of the Baroness of Chantal, was to be placed in a convent by her mother, who wanted her to become a nun, but the bishop intervened. “If Franceschetta willingly wants to be a nun, fine; if not, I do not approve of her will being anticipated by decisions that are not hers.” Moreover,

it would not be appropriate for the reading of St. Jerome's letters to lead the mother too much in the direction of severity and coercion. He therefore advised her to "use moderation" and to proceed with "gentle inspiration".

Some young women hesitate between religious life and marriage, without ever making up their minds. Francis de Sales encouraged the future Mrs. de Longecombe to take the step of marriage, which he wanted to celebrate himself. He did this good work, her husband would later say, in response to his wife's request "that she wished to marry by the hands of the bishop, and without his presence, she would never have been able to take this step, because of the great aversion she felt towards marriage."

Women and 'devotion'

Unfamiliar with any form of feminism *ante litteram*, Francis de Sales was aware of the exceptional contribution of femininity on a spiritual level. It has been pointed out that by encouraging devotion in women, the author of *Philothea* also encouraged the possibility of greater autonomy, a "private life for women".

It is not surprising that women have a particular disposition for 'devotion'. After listing a number of doctors and experts, he was able to write in the preface to *Teotimo*: "But in order that it may be known that this kind of writing is better composed with the devotion of lovers than with the doctrine of the wise, the Holy Spirit has caused many women to perform wonders in this regard. Who has ever better manifested the heavenly passions of divine love than Saint Catherine of Genoa, Saint Angela of Foligno, Saint Catherine of Siena, and Saint Matilda?" The influence of Chantal's mother in the writing of the *Teotimo* is well known, particularly in the ninth book, "your ninth book on the *Love of God*," according to the author's expression.

Could women get involved in matters concerning religion? "Here is this woman who acts as a theologian," says Francis de Sales, speaking of the Samaritan woman in the Gospel. Must we necessarily see this as disapproval of women theologians? Not necessarily. Especially since he strongly affirms, "I tell you that a simple and poor woman can love God as much as a doctor of theology." Superiority does not always reside where one thinks it does.

There are women who are superior to men, starting with the Blessed Virgin. Francis de Sales always respected the principle of order established by the religious and civil laws of his time, to which he preached obedience, but his practice testified to a great freedom of spirit. Thus, for the government of women's monasteries, he believed that it was better for them to be under the jurisdiction of the bishop rather than dependent on their religious brothers, who risked weighing

excessively on them.

The Visitation Sisters, for their part, would not depend on any male order and would have no central government, each monastery being under the jurisdiction of the local bishop. He dared to give the unexpected title of ‘apostles’ to the sisters of the Visitation setting out on a new foundation.

If we interpret the thinking of the Bishop of Geneva correctly, the ecclesial mission of women consists in proclaiming not the word of God, but ‘the glory of God’ through the beauty of their witness. The heavens, prays the psalmist, tell of God’s glory only by their splendour. “The beauty of the heavens and the firmament invites men to admire the greatness of the Creator and to proclaim his wonders;” and “is it not a greater wonder to see a soul adorned with many virtues than a sky studded with stars?”