 Reading time: 11 min.

“Philotheas are philanthropic”, wrote Francis de Sales, wishing thereby to demonstrate that there was no contradiction between the two terms. The love of God is inseparable from the love of man and there is a strict correspondence between the two loves; indeed, “wherever the love of God flourishes, the love of the neighbour also flourishes”. Moreover, the growth of one cannot happen without the growth of the other: “They are two loves that cannot go one without the other, and the more we love God the more we will also love our neighbour”.

Why love one’s neighbour?

The two commandments of the love of God and the love of the neighbour are similar, despite the distance that separates the infinite from the finite, the immortal from the mortal, heaven from earth. This is by virtue of the fact that man is made in the image and likeness of God. We can all see that we are “the image of one another”, because we all carry within us the image of the Creator.

Another reason is derived from the mystery of the Incarnation, that is, from the life and passion of Christ. In a valuable chapter of the *Theotimus*, the author sets out in the form of a “list” or “summary” the twelve properties of love through which Jesus manifested “the kindness and love of God for man”: complacency, benevolence, union, effusion, ecstasy, admiration, contemplation, tranquillity, tenderness, zeal, languor, and death.

Mount Calvary becomes for the author of the *Theotimus* the “mountain of lovers”, so called because it was the mountain of Him who fell in love with humanity. Now, the love for man, lived by Jesus, becomes our love, and His shed blood constitutes the “cement” that binds us closely to one another:

Let us therefore love one another very much, and to this end let us use that motive which has so much power to incite to holy love, namely, that Our Lord from the cross shed His blood on the earth to the last drop, as if to make a sacred cement, with which to wall, unite, join, and bind all the stones of His Church.

Finally, we must love our neighbour and every person, because God created human beings “to keep His Son company, to participate in His graces and His glory, and to adore and praise Him for eternity”. No one is predestined to hell and damnation. God wants all people to be saved, and everyone, for their part, is called to cooperate freely in the work of salvation. God leaves every person their freedom, but freedom entails responsibility. “He who created us without us, will not save you without you; he made us without our knowing it; He will not save you without your wanting it.”

Charity in thoughts, in words, in deeds, and in forbearance

The love of neighbour can be practised in different ways, starting with charity in thoughts and words. To love them in thoughts means not judging them. It means trying to see the positive aspect in all the actions of our neighbour: “If an action could have a hundred faces, you must look at the most beautiful one”.

There are people who take a sadistic pleasure in finding evil or in converting into evil everything that is found in their neighbour: “They do not resemble bees but wasps, disgusting animals, which actually fly over flowers, but not to extract honey, but poison; and if they collect honey, it is to turn it into gall”.

Charity in thoughts defends against making rash judgements, an important theme to which the *Introduction to the Devout Life* devotes a chapter. With surprising finesse, the author lays bare a good dozen motives that drive us to make judgements about others. Sometimes, it will be because of a “rigid and harsh” character, but above all out of pride, for the terrible pleasure that the mistakes of the neighbour make us “savour”, to “indulge and excuse” our own vices, for the taste of “philosophising” on “the habits, customs, and moods of people”, out of love or hatred towards others, out of ambition, jealousy, fear, and finally, out of “other weaknesses of spirit”.

To heal from this evil, it is necessary to correct the inclination of our “affections” and cultivate a positive *a priori*. Let us be prudent in our judgements. “Who can assure us that he who, yesterday, was a sinner and wicked, is such also today?” After his conversion, it can no longer be said that Zacchaeus was a thief, and Mary

Magdalene, after her change of life, must be called an “arch-virgin”.

Charity in words, then, is so difficult to observe that the author dedicated various chapters of the *Philothea* to it. The fundamental recommendation states: “Let your speech be gentle, frank, sincere, straightforward, cordial, and truthful. Beware of duplicity, artifice, and pretence”.

He dwells in particular on three major defects of conversation: detraction, slander, and derision. The first two are serious because, “with detraction and slander one plunges one’s tongue into the blood of one’s neighbour”. Detraction, “the true plague of conversations”, “is among the first places” among the “extremely pernicious effects” of rash judgement. As for mockery, it is “the most wicked kind of offence that can be done to a neighbour with words; because other offences are done with some esteem for the offended party, but this one solely with contempt”.

But these are only the negative aspects of charity. How to serve the neighbour through speech? The answer is found in this recommendation to Philothea: “When charity dictates it, we must communicate clearly and gently with our neighbour, not only in what is necessary for their instruction, but also in what is useful to console them”.

Charity is also exercised on two fronts: active help and patient forbearance of the neighbour, in other words, with action and patience. The first consists in acting effectively in their favour and is the love of benevolence or effective love. It concerns the good on both a temporal and spiritual level:

The perfect love of the neighbour, which comes from God, is communicated in various ways. It helps them with words, with deeds, and with example; it provides, as far as possible, for all their needs. It rejoices in their fortune and temporal happiness, but much more in their spiritual progress. It procures temporal goods for them insofar as they can serve to obtain eternal beatitude. It wishes them the principal goods of grace and virtues that can perfect them according to God; it procures them through all lawful means and with great affection.

But there is another form of charity. It is the passive charity of compassion, of

mutual forbearance, and of the offering of sufferings. Indeed, there are situations in which nothing can be done, but one can always love. According to Francis de Sales, charity is manifested not only in actions; it probably encounters more occasions and demonstrates greater strength when one suffers for the love of others. Mutual forbearance constitutes, consequently, a fundamental element of the Christian programme. “Ah! My daughter, a notable part of our perfection consists precisely in this, that we know how to bear with one another in our imperfections. How could we, in fact, exercise the love of our neighbour, if we did not have to bear with one another?” The extreme case is the attitude of Jesus on the cross, totally deprived of all power, but animated by an infinite charity that works the salvation of the world.

In certain situations, when it becomes almost impossible, humanly speaking, to bear with our neighbour gently, the only solution is to look at them with the eyes and bear with them with the heart of Christ:

When will we learn to see the souls of our neighbour in the sacred breast of the Saviour? Alas! whoever sees the neighbour outside that breast, runs the risk of not loving them purely nor constantly and justly. But inside there, who would not love them? Who would not bear with them? Who would not tolerate their imperfections? Who would find them ungraceful? Who would find them boring? Now, my dearest Daughter, our neighbour is right there, in the bosom and breast of our divine Saviour; they are there as a most beloved and so lovable object, that the Lover dies of love for them.

The Christian who loves their neighbour does not perform extraordinary gestures every day, but remembers to put into practice the programme outlined by St Paul: “Charity is patient, kind, generous, prudent, accommodating”.

Gentleness, the flower of charity

One could say that charity lived in the Salesian manner is called gentleness, or that gentleness is the concrete way of living charity according to the Bishop of Geneva. It is the spirit of the Visitation, a spirit not only of humility towards God, but also of

“gentleness towards the neighbour”. For Francis de Sales, besides being a virtue among others, gentleness is the “flower of charity”. Many admirers of the Bishop of Geneva have considered that it was the distinctive sign of the Salesian spirit. Just as humility must mark the relationship with God, so gentleness is called to summarise the attitude towards the neighbour.

In this light, the binomial “charity and gentleness” is no longer considered as a juxtaposition of two separate virtues, but rather as the synthesis of Salesian teaching pertaining to the love of the neighbour.

Francis de Sales does not like “ceremonious gentleness” or gentleness that is not “authentic and sincere, but rather artificial and apparent”. Therefore, he willingly associates other virtues with gentleness, in particular, simplicity, an evangelical virtue highly appreciated by him:

The virtue of simplicity is opposed and contrary to the vice of cunning, a vice that is the source of subtleties, artifices, duplicity. Cunning is a heap of artifices, deceits, malice, and it is by means of cunning that we invent things to deceive the spirit of our neighbour and of those with whom we have to deal, to lead them to the point we want [...]; a thing infinitely contrary to simplicity, which requires our interior to correspond exactly to our exterior.

Gentleness does not entirely exclude anger. Regarding meekness, he declares that it “manipulates and moderates anger and wrath to keep them within the bounds of reason. Anger in fact, well guided, is good, and meekness has such a task, to be used nevertheless only rarely and only when it is necessary to show great courage on occasions when it is necessary to win, overcome difficulties, and punish errors”.

Although gentleness should not be confused with exaggerated sensitivity and affectation, nevertheless it does not exclude the world of feelings and affectivity at all. It is the object of frequent and insistent recommendations, addressed in particular to Madame Brulart:

Do everything you can to acquire a particular gentleness towards your own, I mean towards your family. I do not say that it is necessary to be soft or too remiss, but gentle and sweet. You must think of this when you enter the house, when you leave it, when you are inside in the morning, at noon, and at any other hour. It is necessary to dedicate some time to take particular care of the practice of this virtue, leaving almost everything else aside.

With angry people there is no other means to calm them: “Nothing soothes the infuriated elephant more than the sight of a little lamb, and nothing absorbs the violence of cannon shots better than wool”. This method is also valid in great political and religious controversies, as in the harmful *dispute* about the power of popes over princes, where “prudence and gentleness are much more useful than fiery doctrine and ardour of spirit”.

Gentleness is nothing other than charity manifested with humility, finesse, affability, and cordiality. The term *cordiality* was so dear to Francis de Sales, to the point of inducing him to make it the subject of one of his Spiritual *Entertainments* with the Visitandines. He also offers a definition of it: “Cordiality is nothing other than the essence of true and sincere friendship, which can exist only between reasonable people, who arouse and nourish their friendships by means of reason”. And further on: “Perhaps you will ask me: but what does cordial friendship mean? It is equivalent to indicating a friendship that has its foundation in the heart”.

Cordial love is also manifested with affability and with “good conversation”. Affability “puts a certain sweetness in the affairs and serious communications we have among ourselves”, while good conversation “makes us pleasant and acceptable in the less serious communications we have with our neighbour”.

Showing love

We must love our neighbour, but that is not enough; we must show that we love them and the other needs to know they are loved. In the *Philothea*, he will comment: “We must love our neighbour as ourselves. To show that we love our neighbour, we must not avoid being together with them”; fleeing from conversations prevents us from showing that we love them and this “smacks of self-

sufficiency and contempt for the neighbour”.

In his *Entertainments* with the first Visitandines he insists on this point: “We must manifest love for our dear Sisters and demonstrate that their company pleases us”. Let us imitate the great Apostle: “St Paul himself, who teaches us to act in such a way that our affections are manifested in a holy manner, wants and teaches us to do so with kindness, giving us the example. Greet, he says, such a one, who knows for certain that I love him from my heart, and that other who must know that I love him like a brother, and in particular his mother, who knows with certainty that she is also mine.” In this way reciprocity can be born, which is not only the foundation of friendship, but also the condition for an authentic educational or other type of relationship.

His teaching will become more explicit when speaking with the Visitandines, in particular regarding natural inclinations and aversions. The question is of some importance: is showing affection to a person towards whom one feels aversion not hypocrisy? The founder responds by basing himself on the distinction between the lower part of the being, that of passions and natural antipathies and sympathies, and the higher part which is our true self. A clarification was necessary. “There is a deception in the spirit of many people, who think that treating with courtesy and giving testimony of friendship to those for whom they feel aversion are acts of duplicity and artifice, which is not true; in fact, aversions are involuntary and reside in the lower part of the soul, the will rejects them, even if they do not go away.

One of the most usual ways of manifesting that one loves is “condescension”, a spiritual attitude to which an entire *Entertainment* is devoted. It designates not only a social behaviour, a *priori* very suspect, but rather, as emerges from its etymology, the attitude of one who descends to put oneself exactly on the same level as the other. The term recalls the condescension of God who becomes one of us. St Anselm, a saint “whose birth greatly honoured our mountains”, because – so said the Bishop of Geneva – he was born in Aosta, on the borders of Savoy with Piedmont, was famous for his “great compliance and condescension”. The “greatest art” of St Paul, then, was that, in his words, “of making myself all things to all men, laughing with those who laugh, weeping with those who weep, drinking with those who drink, to make myself one with everyone”.

Loving to what extent?

From the similarity between the love of the neighbour and the love of God, Francis de Sales derives an important consequence: we must love our neighbour without measure. He preaches this truth to the Visitandines, citing a well-known sentence of St Bernard, according to whom, “the measure of loving God is to love him without measure”:

We must love our sisters with all the capacity of our heart, and not be content to love them as ourselves, according to the obligation of God’s commandment; but we must love them more than ourselves, to observe the norms of evangelical perfection, which asks it of us. Our Lord said it: Love one another, as I have loved you. This must be considered with great attention. Love one another as I have loved you, this means more than ourselves.

If the end to which love tends can be none other than union with the beloved person, it will be necessary to say that, just as the love of God tends to union with God, so the love of the neighbour is naturally oriented to union with them. The Christian will seek union with the neighbour in order to establish with them “one heart and one soul”. The perfection of charity lies in the “union of our souls with God and with our neighbour”.

Francis de Sales refers here to spiritual union, which consists in the union of wills or hearts. To will the same thing together, to will what the other wills; this is the perfection of the love of the neighbour, just as the perfection of the love of God lies in willing what he wills. “When the soul says sincerely: I no longer have any will but yours, Lord, then it finds itself completely united to God; thus, renouncing our will to always do that of our neighbour, we realise true union with our neighbour: and all this must be done for the love of God.”

Becoming “one heart and one soul” seems to be the ideal of the Bishop of Geneva, who remembers the first Christian community of Jerusalem, as it is described by the *Acts of the Apostles*. The wish he expressed at the end of a letter to Jane de Chantal corresponds to a desire for unity, which cannot be realised except through an admirable transformation of spiritual alchemy:

May that sacred fire which transforms everything into itself, transform our heart, so

that it is no longer anything but love, and thus we ourselves are no longer lovers, but love, and no longer two, but only one, since love unites all things in the supreme Unity.

In truth, “love unifies, unites, gathers, assembles, binds, and brings everything to unity”. Even the pagan Aristotle had understood it: “When – so he says – we want to express how much we love our friends, we say: his soul and mine are but one soul”.