 Reading time: 11 min.

For Francis de Sales, religious life is “a school of perfection”, in which one “consecrates oneself more simply and more totally to Our Lord”. “Religious life”, adds the founder of the Visitation, “is a school where everyone must learn the lesson: the teacher does not require that the student knows the lesson perfectly every day; it is enough that they strive to do what they can to learn it”. Speaking of the congregation of the Visitation he founded, he used the same language: “The congregation is a school”; one enters it “to embark on the path toward the perfection of divine love”.

It was the founder’s responsibility to form his spiritual daughters, taking on the role of “instructor” and Novice Master. He performed this role excellently. According to T. Mandrini, “Saint Francis de Sales occupies a primary place in the history of religious life, like Saint Ignatius of Loyola; we can even say that, in the history of women’s religious life, Saint Francis de Sales occupies the place that Saint Ignatius holds in the history of men’s religious life”.

Joan of Chantal at the origins of the Visitation

In 1604, in Dijon, where he was preaching during Lent, Francis de Sales met the woman who was to become the “cornerstone” of a new institute. At that time, Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot was a thirty-two-year-old young widow. Born in 1572 in Dijon, she was married at twenty to Christophe Rabutin, Baron of Chantal. They had one son and three daughters. Fifteen days after the birth of their last daughter, her husband was mortally wounded during a hunting party. Left as a widow, Joan courageously continued to care for her children’s education and to help the poor.

The meeting of Chantal with the Bishop of Geneva marked the beginning of a true spiritual friendship that would lead to a new form of religious life. At first, Francis de Sales instilled in Joan the love of the humility required by her state as a widow, without thinking of a new marriage or religious life; the will of God would manifest itself in due time. He encouraged her in trials and temptations against faith and the Church.

In 1605, the baroness came to Sales to see her director again and to discuss the issues that concerned her. Francis evasively responded to Joan’s desire to become a nun but added these strong words, “The day you abandon everything, you will come to me, and I will ensure that you find yourself in total detachment and nakedness, to belong entirely to God”. To prepare her for this ultimate goal, he suggested: “sweetness of heart, poverty of spirit, and simplicity of life, along with these three modest exercises: visiting the sick, serving the poor, comforting the

afflicted, and others like them".

At the beginning of 1606, as the baroness' father urged her to remarry, the issue of religious life became urgent. What to do, wondered the Bishop of Geneva? One thing was clear, but the other was uncertain:

I have learned up to this moment, my Daughter, that one day you will have to leave everything; or rather, so that you do not understand the matter differently than I have understood it, that one day I will have to advise you to leave everything. I say leave everything. But that you should do it to enter religious life is unlikely, because it has not yet happened to me to be of this opinion: I am still in doubt, and I see nothing before me that invites me to desire it. Understand me well, for the love of God. I am not saying 'no', but I am only saying that my spirit has not yet found a reason to say 'yes'.

The prudence and unhurriedness of Francis de Sales is easily explained. The baroness, in fact, perhaps dreamed of becoming a Carmelite, and he, on the other hand, had not yet matured the project of the new foundation. But the main obstacle was constituted by the children of Madame de Chantal, who were all still young.

The foundation

During a new meeting that took place in Annecy in 1607, Francis declared to her this time: "Well! My daughter, I have decided what I want to do with you"; and he revealed to her the project of founding a new institute with her. There remained two major obstacles towards its realization: the family duties of Madame de Chantal and her permanent move to Annecy, because, he said, "it is necessary to sow the seed of our congregation in little Annecy". And while Madame de Chantal was probably dreaming of a completely contemplative life, Francis cited the example of Saint Martha, but Martha "corrected" by the example of Mary, who divided the hours of her days in two, "dedicating a good part to external works of charity, and the better part to her own inner self through contemplation".

During the following three years, the main obstacles fell one after another: Chantal's father allowed her to follow her own path, also agreeing to care for the education of the firstborn; the eldest daughter married Bernard de Sales, Francis's brother, and joined him in Savoy; the second daughter would accompany her mother to Annecy; as for the youngest, she died at the end of January 1610 at the age of nine.

On June 6th, 1610, Joan of Chantal settled in a private house with Charlotte, a friend from Burgundy, and Jacqueline, daughter of President Antoine Favre. Their

purpose was to “consecrate all the moments of their life to loving and serving God”, without neglecting “the service of the poor and the sick”. The Visitation would be a “small congregation”, uniting interior life with a form of active life. The first three *Visitandines* (Visitation Sisters) made their profession exactly one year later, on June 6th, 1611. On January 1st, 1612, they would begin visits to the poor and the sick, as provided in the original draft of the Constitutions. On October 30th of the same year, the community left the house, which had become too small, and moved to a new house, awaiting the construction of the first monastery of the Visitation.

During the early years, no other foundation was dreamed of, until in 1615 a persistent request came from some people in Lyon. The archbishop of that city did not want the Sisters to leave the monastery for visits to the sick; according to him, the congregation needed to be transformed into a true religious order, with solemn vows and enclosure, following the prescriptions of the Council of Trent. Francis de Sales had to accept most of the conditions: the visit to the sick was suppressed, and the Visitation became an almost monastic order, under the rule of Saint Augustine, while still retaining the possibility of welcoming outsiders for a bit of rest or for spiritual exercises. Its development was rapid: it would count thirteen monasteries at the founder’s death in 1622 and eighty-seven at the death of Mother Chantal in 1641.

Formation through gatherings

George Rolland has well described the role of the formation of the “daughters” of the Visitation, which Francis de Sales took on from the very beginning of the new institute:

He assisted them in their beginnings, working hard and dedicating much time to educate them and guide them on the path of perfection, first all of them together and then each one in person. Therefore, he would go to them, often two or three times a day, giving them guidance on issues that came to their minds, both of a spiritual and material nature. […] He was their confessor, chaplain, spiritual father, and director.

The tone of his “gatherings” was very simple and familiar. A gathering, in fact, is a friendly conversation, a dialogue or family discussion, not a “sermon”, but rather a “simple conference in which each one expresses their opinion”. Normally, the questions were posed by the Sisters, as is clearly seen in the third of his *Gatherings* where he speaks of *Confidence and Abandonmen*t. The first question was to know “if a soul aware of its misery can turn to God with full confidence”. A

little further on, the founder seems to seize the opportunity offered by a new question: “But you say that you do not feel this confidence at all”. A little further, he states: “Now let us move on to the other question, which is to abandon oneself”. And even further on, there is a chain of questions like these: “Now you ask me what this soul that completely abandons itself into the hands of God occupies itself with”; “you tell me at this hour”; “now you ask me”; “to respond to what you are asking”; “you want to know more”. It is possible, indeed probable, that the secretaries suppressed the questions of the interlocutors to place them on the bishop’s lips. The questions could also have been formulated in writing, because at the beginning of the eleventh *Gathering* we read, “Let me begin our conversation by responding to a question that was written to me on this note”.

Instructions and exhortations

The other method used in the formation of the Visitation Sisters excluded questions and answers: they were *sermons* that the founder gave in the chapel of the monastery. The familiar tone that characterizes them does not allow them to be classified among the great sermons for the people according to the style of the time. R. Balboni prefers to call them *exhortations*. “The speech I am about to give you”, the founder would say as he began to speak. He would sometimes refer to his “little talk”, a qualification that certainly did not apply to its duration, which was usually about an hour. Once he said, “Having some time, I will treat of…”. The bishop addressed a particular audience, the Visitation Sisters, to which relatives and friends could be added. When he spoke in the chapel, the founder had to take this audience into account, which could be different from that of the *Gatherings* reserved for the religious. The diversity of his interventions is well described by the comparison between the barber and the surgeon:

My dear daughters, when I speak before the laity, I act like a barber; I am content to shave off the superfluous, that is, I use soap to soften a little the skin of the heart, as the barber does to soften that of the chin before shaving it; but when I am in the parlour, I behave like an expert surgeon, that is, I bandage the wounds of my dear daughters, even though they cry out a little: Ouch!, and I do not stop pressing my hand on the wound to ensure that the bandaging helps to heal it well.

But even in the chapel, the tone continued to be familiar, similar to a conversation. “We need to go further”, he would say, “because I lack the time to dwell longer on this topic”; or again, “Before finishing, let us say one more word”. And another time, “But I will go beyond this first point without adding anything

more, because it is not on this theme that I intend to dwell”. When he speaks of the mystery of the Visitation, he needs extra time, “I will conclude with two examples, although time has already passed; in any case, a brief quarter of an hour will suffice”. Sometimes he expresses his feelings, saying that he has felt “pleasure” in discussing mutual love. Nor did he fear to make some digression, “In this regard”, he would say another time, “I will tell you two little stories that I would not narrate if I had to speak from another pulpit; but here there is no danger”. To keep the audience attentive, he would engage them with a “tell me”, or with the expression, “Notice then, I beg you”. He often connected back to a topic he had previously developed, saying, “I wish to add one more word to the speech I gave you the other day”. “But I see that the hour is passing quickly”, he exclaims, “which will make me finish by completing, in the little time that remains, the story of this gospel”. And, when the moment to conclude arrives, he says, “I have finished”.

It is important to keep in mind that the preacher was welcomed, listened to attentively, and sometimes even authorized to tell the same story again, “Although I have already narrated it, I will not fail to repeat it, since I am not before people so appalled that they are unwilling to listen to the same story twice; those who have a good appetite gladly eat the same food twice”.

The *Sermons* present themselves as a more structured instruction compared to the *Gatherings*, where the topics sometimes follow one another rapidly, driven by questions. Here, the connection is more logical, and the different articulations of the discourse are better indicated. The preacher explains Scripture, comments on it through the Fathers and theologians, but it is a rather meditative explanation capable of nourishing the mental prayer of the religious. Like every meditation, it includes considerations, affections, and resolutions. Indeed, all his speech revolved around an essential question, “Do you want to become a good daughter of the Visitation?”

Personal accompaniment

Lastly, there was personal contact with each Sister. Francis had a long experience as a confessor and spiritual director of individuals. It was necessary to take into account, it is quite evident, the “variety of spirits”, temperaments, particular situations, and progress in perfection. In the memoirs of Marie-Adrienne Fichet, there is an episode that shows the way of doing of the Bishop of Geneva, “Monsignor, your Excellency, would you be so kind as to assign to each of us a virtue to individually commit to practicing?” Perhaps it was a pious stratagem invented by the superior. The founder replied, “Mother, gladly, we must start with you”. The Sisters withdrew, and the bishop called them one by one and, while

strolling, secretly threw a “challenge” to each. During the subsequent recreation, all evidently became aware of the challenge he had confided to each in particular. To Mother Chantal, he had recommended “indifference and loving the will of God”; to Jacqueline Favre, “the presence of God”; to Charlotte de Bréchard, “resignation to the will of God”. The challenges directed at the other religious concerned, one after another, modesty and tranquillity, love for one’s condition, mortification of the senses, affability, inner humility, outer humility, detachment from parents and the world, and mortification of passions. To the Visitation Sisters tempted to consider perfection as a garment to be put on, he humorously reminded them of their personal responsibility:

You would like me to teach you a way of perfection that is already beautifully ready-made, so that there would be nothing to do but put it on, as you would with a dress, and thus you would find yourselves perfect without effort, that is, you would like me to present you with a perfection that is already packaged […]. Certainly, if this were in my power, I would be the most perfect man in the world; indeed, if I could give perfection to others without doing anything, I assure you that I would take it for myself first.

How to reconcile in a community the necessary unity, or rather uniformity, with the diversity of the people and temperaments that compose it? The founder wrote in this regard to the superior of the Visitation of Lyon, “If one finds some soul or even some novice who feels too much repugnance to submit to those exercises that are indicated, and if this repugnance does not arise from a whim, from presumption, from arrogance, or melancholic tendencies, it will be up to the Novice Mistress to lead them by another way, although this is useful for the ordinary (formation journey), as experience shows”. As always, obedience and freedom should not be opposed to one another. Strength and sweetness must also characterise the way in which the superiors of the Visitation should “mould” the souls. Indeed, he tells them, it is “with your hands” that God “moulds souls, using either the hammer, or the chisel, or the brush, in order to shape them all to His liking”. The superiors must have “hearts of solid, steadfast, and constant fathers, without neglecting the tenderness of mothers who make sweets desirable to children, following the divine order that governs everything with a very gentle strength and a very strong gentleness”. The Novice Mistresses deserved to have particular attention from the founder because “on the good formation and direction of the novices depend the life and good health of the congregation”. “How to form future Visitation Sisters when one is far from the founders?”, the Novice Mistress in

Lyon asked. Francis replied, “Say what you have seen, teach what you have heard in Annecy. Here! This little plant is very small and has deep roots; but the branch that separates from it will undoubtedly perish, dry up, and be good for nothing but to be cut and thrown into the fire”.

A manual of perfection

In 1616, Saint Francis de Sales published the *Treatise on the Love of God*, a book “made to help the already devout soul to progress in its project”. As is easy to see, *Teotimo* proposes a sublime doctrine on the love of God, which has earned its author the title of “doctor of charity”, but it does so with a marked pedagogical sense. The author wants to accompany along the path of the highest love a person called *Teotimo*, a symbolic name that designates “the human spirit that desires to progress in holy love”, that is, in the love of God. *Teotimo* reveals itself as the “manual” of the “school of perfection” that Francis de Sales intended to create. Implicitly, it reveals the idea of the necessity of ongoing formation, illustrated by him through this image drawn from the plant world, “Do we not see, from experience, that plants and fruits do not have a proper growth and maturation unless they bear their grains and seeds that serve for the reproduction of plants and trees of the same species? Virtues never have the right dimension and sufficiency unless they produce in us the desire to make progress. In short, we must imitate this curious animal that is the crocodile, ‘Very small at birth, it never ceases to grow as long as it is alive’.” In the face of the decline and sometimes scandalous conduct of numerous monasteries and abbeys, Francis de Sales traced a demanding but amiable path. In reference to the reformed orders, where a severity and austerity reigned that drove a good number of people away from religious life, the founder of the Visitation Sisters had the profound insight to concentrate the essence of religious life simply in the pursuit of the perfection of charity. With the necessary adaptations, this “pedagogy which reached its peak”, and was born in contact with the Visitation, would largely transcend the walls of its first monastery and captivate other “apprentices” of perfection.