 Reading time: 10 min.

Understanding Francis de Sales means immersing oneself in the heart of seventeenth-century Europe: an era marked by religious wars, cultural ferment, and profound spiritual renewal. Born in 1567 in the Duchy of Savoy – a borderland between France, Italy, and the reformed world of Geneva – Francis grew up in a politically unstable context, crossed by tensions between Catholics and Protestants. He breathed Christian humanism in the Jesuit classrooms in Paris and Padua, inherited the fervour of the Council of Trent, and engaged with the great mystical currents of his time. His figure cannot be understood without this background. It is precisely within history, and not on its margins, that Francis became the saint of goodness and gentleness.

Savoy

Francis de Sales was neither French nor Italian. He was Savoyard, meaning he was born in the Duchy of Savoy, which also included Piedmont. “I am, however, Savoyard, both by birth and by obligation,” he wrote to a secretary of Duke Charles Emmanuel in 1616. Don Bosco, too, born in 1815, was part of this Alpine state, which would eventually become the Kingdom of Italy in 1861. A year earlier, Savoy had been ceded to France.

Francis was born in 1567, at the Château de Sales, in the municipality of Thorens, 15 km north of Annecy, during the time of Duke Emmanuel Philibert. The latter, in 1562, had moved the capital from Chambéry to Turin. From 1580 to 1630, which was almost his entire life, Duke Charles Emmanuel reigned, a decisive man but entangled in multiple intrigues with powerful neighbours constantly at war, especially France and Spain. The wars, alliances, and marriages had as their main purpose to protect and, if possible, enlarge their territories.

To promote his interests, the Duke of Savoy was forced into a dangerous game of alliances: either with Spain against France, or with France against Spain. As a result, the duchy lost possessions to the west (Bresse, Bugey, Gex, Geneva) and gained some in Piedmont, to the east (Marquisate of Saluzzo and Montferrat).

From a religious point of view, the duchy was not homogeneous. In an era when religion and politics were intimately intertwined and the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion) tended to impose a single Christian confession on the populations of a specific territory, one can understand the Catholic Charles Emmanuel's concern for religious unification.

In Geneva, the Protestant Reformation had taken root in 1535. Calvin would consolidate it, and the Catholic bishop of Geneva would choose exile. Geneva became missionary and warmongering. Its religious and political influence extended over the Chablais and the Pays de Gex. The situation worried the rulers. There was no shortage of international conflicts, internal struggles with military operations, and sometimes diplomatic negotiations, in which religious interests combined with political discussions. The last (failed) attempt by the Duke of Savoy to reconquer Geneva by force of arms was in 1602 (the famous Escalade).

Society was structured according to a hierarchical order, in which families strove to emerge to acquire power. Thus, the de Sales family also managed to buy the castle (*castrum*) of Thorens. The feudal structure was no longer that of the Middle Ages, but it had not disappeared. This society was also hierarchical: there were the nobles, then the bourgeoisie (whose influence was strengthened by Calvinism), and finally the common people of the cities, countryside, and mountains.

Humanism in Savoy and France

Born in Italy in the fifteenth century, this movement, which marked the beginning of the modern era, was enthusiastically received by the elite in Savoy and France. However, humanism did not possess a unitary meaning. Following Henri Bremond, in his vast *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, we can distinguish a **naturalistic humanism**, a **Christian humanism**, and a **devout humanism**.

Naturalistic humanism represents that effort to glorify human nature. "The extreme humanist," Bremond writes, "knows only our greatness and his own. He praises human nature with exuberant enthusiasm… He has an unshakeable confidence in the fact that man is fundamentally good. Even where he is weak, he excuses him, defends him, and exalts him." Greco-Roman antiquity became the source and model of the most elegant literature and the highest education, in contrast to scholastic and medieval models. But at the same time, with the classical authors,

pagan contents were soon welcomed into culture and philosophy, while piety was relegated to the convents.

Christian humanism seeks a balance between humanism and Christian life. One writes in a style conforming to classical models, and man comes increasingly to the fore. Meanwhile, the dangers inherent in this current cannot be hidden: the mixing of Christian thought with pagan thought, the fracture between faith and the moral formation of the personality, a merely external Christian life, and also the fracture between the elite and the masses.

Finally, there is devout humanism, in which devotion prevails and uses humanism for its own purposes. Bremond explains it thus: “Devout humanism does nothing but apply the best traditions of the Renaissance both in the personal sanctification of those who live it and in the direction of the faithful.”

It is clear that the humanism of Francis de Sales must be placed in this last current, as attested by his entire education in Savoy, Paris, and Padua. At the age of six, he learned a saying from his father that became his watchword: “I think of God and of behaving as an honest man.”

At La Roche and the college of Annecy, his first teachers introduced him to classical culture. Francis was praised for his ability to learn, his etiquette, and also his thirst for knowledge regarding the mysteries of the faith. Sent by his father to study in Paris, he chose the Collège de Clermont, where the Jesuits cultivated piety alongside humanistic studies, striving to Christianise Renaissance humanism. In Padua, he then studied law and theology and chose the famous Jesuit Antonio Possevino as his spiritual director. It can be deduced from all this formation that the humanism of Francis de Sales was a critical humanism, which chose and selected what was valid and also beautiful, tearing its pagan soul away from humanism.

From Franz Königbauer’s study on humanism in the life and doctrine of Saint Francis de Sales, we can draw some interesting elements that demonstrate the influence of humanism on the Salesian:

– the pursuit of literary perfection;

– his personality traits;

– the image of God marked by perfection and infinite goodness;

– the image of man destined for union with God;

– the valuation of the body;

– the revaluation of feeling and affection;

– free will (and the limits of freedom);

– the power and effect of love.

A Church in need of reform

The life of Saint Francis de Sales fits into a very important era in the history of the Church. He was born in 1567, fifty years after Luther's revolt in Wittenberg in 1517, and four years after the closure of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). His entire life and ministry would be marked by the Protestant question and the need for Catholic reform.

What were the causes of the Protestant Reformation? Modern historians, writes Giacomo Martina, are rather divided in identifying the causes of the Protestant revolution. Father Martina considers above all the decline of papal authority in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In this key of interpretation, the following events can be interpreted:

– the attack against Pope Boniface VIII in Anagni (1303);

– the exile in Avignon (1309-1376);

– the Western Schism starting in 1378;

– the theory of the superiority of the council over the pope;

– the tendency towards the formation of national churches;

– the accentuation of worldly concerns at the time of the Renaissance;

– the moral corruption of some popes.

The same author nevertheless also notes other religious elements that influenced the genesis of Protestantism:

– the decline of scholasticism;

– the intellectual trends of the era (Ockham’s nominalism);

– false mysticism;

– evangelism (Erasmus of Rotterdam and the *alumbrados* in Spain);

– the corruption of some of the Church’s top leadership, especially in Italy and Germany;

– the psychological restlessness of the fifteenth century.

Alongside the religious factors, it is also important to take into account the political, social, and economic causes, especially in Germany: the resistance against Rome, the resistance against the centralisation and absolutism of the Habsburgs, the economic and social situation, and, finally, the personality of Luther.

Born in Saxony in 1483, Luther studied philosophy in Erfurt, in an environment steeped in Ockhamism. In 1505, he entered the Augustinian friary in that city. After his priestly ordination, he was called to teach in Wittenberg in 1508. Between 1515 and 1517, he began to formulate the new doctrine under the influence of Ockhamism, his personal interpretation of St. Paul and St. Augustine, and his profound psychological restlessness. In 1517, he launched his protest against the sale of indulgences, which marked the beginning of the Reformation. The essential points of Lutheranism are: the recognition of the Bible as the sole authority in matters of faith (without Tradition, the mediation of the Church with its magisterium), justification by faith alone (without good works), and salvation by grace alone (without the mediation of the Church, the hierarchy, or the sacraments).

In Geneva, which theoretically depended on the Duke of Savoy and the Prince-Bishop, the ideas of the Reformation were brought by German merchants starting from 1525. In the following years, the Protestant movement developed, primarily through the work of the preacher Guillaume Farel and with the protection of the Bernese. In 1534, for religious but also political and economic reasons, the majority of the ruling class converted to the Reformation, and the frightened Bishop Pierre

de la Baume left the city. On 10 August 1535, the City Council suspended the Mass. On 21 May 1536, the Council confirmed the adoption of the Reformation. Two months later, Calvin settled in Geneva, which became the “Protestant Rome”. At the same time, Catholic worship was suppressed in Thonon, the capital of Chablais, where an end was put to “papist ceremonies, sacrifices, offices, institutions, and traditions”. The successors of Pierre de la Baume and the cathedral chapter chose the city of Annecy as the “provisional” seat (in exile) of the Diocese of Geneva.

Born in Noyon (France) in 1509, Calvin (Jean Cauvin or Calvin) studied theology in Paris and law in Orléans and then in Bourges, where he became acquainted with Luther’s doctrine. For safety reasons, he went to Strasbourg and Basel, where in 1536, he published the first edition of his fundamental work, the *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. Passing through Geneva, he was begged by Guillaume Farel to stay in the city, of which he became the religious and political leader. Calvin’s doctrine takes up the essential themes of Luther and Zwingli, the reformer of Zurich. The core of his system is the doctrine of predestination. God, from eternity and independently of the foresight of original sin, elects some to eternal bliss and others to eternal damnation. Regarding the Eucharist, Calvin denies transubstantiation, asserting that the bread and wine are instruments through which we enter into communion with the substance of Christ. Worship is reduced to prayer, preaching, and the singing of psalms; there are no longer ornaments, organs, or hierarchy. Calvin’s most faithful disciple and successor was Théodore de Bèze (Theodore Beza), whom Francis de Sales met three times.

The Protestant struggles and protests reawakened the energies of the Church. Twice suspended due to plague or war, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) gave the signal for the Catholic Reformation with its dogmatic decisions and disciplinary decrees. On a doctrinal level, the Council Fathers intervened on the sources of Revelation, justification, and the sacraments. Regarding the sources of Revelation, the council fixed the list of inspired writings of the Old and New Testaments, adopted the Vulgate as the official version of the Church, and declared that Tradition was a source of faith along with Scripture, and that the latter should be interpreted, not according to individual sense, but according to the teaching of the Church. Regarding justification, it was defined that faith alone is not enough to justify the believer, but that works performed under the influence of grace are also needed. On the sacraments, the council defined the divine institution, nature, minister, required dispositions, and effects of the seven sacraments. It also proclaimed the existence of purgatory, the legitimacy of indulgences, the invocation

of saints, and the veneration of relics and images.

On a disciplinary level, the council took several measures that had a great influence: the duty of residence for bishops and parish priests; a ban on preachers of indulgences receiving money; the creation of seminaries; a ban on monks possessing property; absolute enclosure for convents of women; the reaffirmation of the indissolubility of marriage and the prohibition of clandestine marriages; and the prohibition of duelling.

After the council, St. Pius V (1566-1572) published the Roman Catechism (1566), the Missal, and the Breviary; Gregory XIII (1572-1585) founded ecclesiastical colleges in Rome; and Sixtus V (1585-1590) organised the Roman Curia into 15 Congregations. The great architects of the Catholic Reformation were bishops, such as St. Charles Borromeo of Milan (1538-1584), new religious orders (primarily the Jesuits of St. Ignatius of Loyola), as well as the theologians and saints of that era.

A spiritual renewal in progress

In the era we are concerned with, spirituality was cultivated according to different forms, traditions, and countries, but also with mutual exchanges and influences.

In the Northern countries (Netherlands, Rhineland, Flanders, Alsace), a tradition of “abstract” mysticism prevailed, dating back to the late Middle Ages and continuing to exert a great influence, even on Luther himself. The first of all was Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), a Dominican, provincial of Saxony, and professor of theology in Strasbourg. According to the “master’s” thought, the truly spiritual man must seek the union of the soul with the divine essence, even beyond the humanity of Christ. Among his disciples should be mentioned Blessed Henry Suso, also a Dominican and professor of theology in Constance (1295-1366), Johannes Tauler, theologian, mystic, and preacher of Strasbourg (c.1300-1361), and the Fleming Jan Ruysbroek (1293-1381), propagator of the *devotio moderna*, of which the most representative text is the *Imitation of Christ*, attributed to Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471).

Italy contributed greatly to the Catholic renewal. St. Pius V and St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) were Italians. Numerous orders and congregations had been born in Italy: Theatines, the Oratory of St. Philip Neri (1515-1594), Capuchins,

Ursulines of St Angela Merici, etc. Mystical Italy remained under the influence of St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), a mystic very concerned with the reform of the Church, and the saints of the fifteenth century, especially St. Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510). The 16th century is characterised by two mystics: St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi (1566-1607), a Carmelite, and Catherine de' Ricci (1522-1590), a Dominican, who were also concerned with the reform of the Church.

Spain experienced its "*siglo de oro*" (Golden Age) in the 16th century, also in the religious and spiritual field. It produced great names in mysticism, especially Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), saint and reformer of the Carmel, John of the Cross (1542-1591), and Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Francis de Sales also greatly appreciated the Dominican Luis de Granada (+1588), who proposed a path of perfection for everyone through prayer, the word of God, interiority, and union with God. On the other hand, the movement of the *Alumbrados* ("illuminated" directly by the Spirit) appeared suspicious of heterodoxy to the authorities.

In France, under the reign of Henry III (1574-1589), during and after the wars of religion, a brilliant spiritual renewal began. In this period, the life of piety still drew from imported models. Many Italian and Spanish authors were translated into French. The works of the Northern school were also translated into updated Latin. Indeed, Rhenish mysticism of an abstract tendency dominated; the "supereminent life" of direct union with the Supreme Being, beyond the humanity of Christ, exerted a strong attraction. The writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, a Neoplatonic author of the 5th-6th century, were the preferred reading of the French.

Francis came into contact with this movement in Paris, where he stayed from January to September 1602, while frequenting an environment eager for interior life: the house of Madame Acarie. This lady was not only an accomplished, elegant, and cheerful hostess and mother, always ready to help the poor, but she also frequently fell into ecstasies. Francis was chosen by her as a confessor and supported her project to introduce the reformed Carmel of St. Teresa of Avila to France. In the "*Cercle de Madame Acarie*," he made the acquaintance of Pierre de Bérulle, the future cardinal, and also encouraged his project to introduce the Oratory of Philip Neri to France; Bérulle would be the founder and first superior, in 1611, of the Oratory of France. Francis also met with the Capuchin of English origin Benoît de Canfeld, the greatest mystical authority of his time; with Dom Beaucousin, vicar of the Charterhouse of Paris; with André Duval, a great evangeliser of the poor; with Father Cotton, the Jesuit future confessor of Henry IV; with Father de Brétigny, who had met John of the Cross in Spain; and other figures

of the era. In those years, the school of spirituality known as the "*École française*" (H. Bremond) was born around Bérulle, which would have as its major representatives St. Vincent de Paul, Jean-Jacques Olier, St. Jean Eudes, St. Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, and St. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort.