 Reading time: 10 min.

Don Bosco saw in Saint Francis de Sales not only a master of gentleness, but a true missionary model. In the difficult mission of the Chablais, amidst hostility, dangers and religious resistance, the Savoyard saint chose the most evangelical weapons: patience, charity, preaching, writings, and trust in grace. His action, far from any violence, aimed to win hearts with dialogue, meekness and truth. This very style deeply struck Don Bosco, who made it a reference for his educational and pastoral method. From the Chablais to Valdocco, the same apostolic passion: "Da mihi animas, cetera tolle".

What struck Don Bosco, the Piedmontese disciple of Saint Francis de Sales, the most was his missionary activity in the Chablais (1594-1598). It is worth quoting the paragraph dedicated to this mission in his *Church History*:

Driven by the voice of God calling him to great things; with the sole weapons of gentleness and charity he sets off for the Chablais. At the sight of the demolished churches, destroyed monasteries, overturned crosses, he is entirely inflamed with zeal and begins his apostolate. The heretics clamour, insult, and attempt to assassinate him; with his patience, with sermons, with writings, and with remarkable miracles he calms every tumult, wins over the assassins, disarms all of hell, and the Catholic faith triumphs in such a way that, in a short time, in the Chablais alone he brought back to the bosom of the true Church more than seventy-two thousand heretics.

Don Bosco writes that Saint Francis de Sales was "driven by the voice of God". There is no evidence that he had an extraordinary calling; since the voice of God was transmitted to him through a formal invitation from his bishop, Monsignor Claude de Granier. His programme of conquest was explicitly defined by him in the famous "harangue" he delivered as provost before the Cathedral Chapter in Annecy:

It is by means of charity that we must dismantle the walls of Geneva, by means of charity invade it, recover it. […] I propose to you neither iron, nor that powder, whose smell and taste recall the infernal furnace […]. Do you want an easy method to take a city by storm? I beg you to learn it from the example of Holofernes. Besieging Bethulia, he cuts the aqueduct and places all the fountains under guard. […] There is an aqueduct that feeds and revives, so to speak, all the races of heretics: they are the examples of perverse priests, the actions, the words, in essence, the iniquity of all, but in particular of the ecclesiastics. […] We must overthrow the walls of Geneva by means of ardent prayers, and launch the assault of fraternal charity. It is by means of this charity that our assault forces must press hard.

To prepare for the mission, Francis de Sales, 27 years old, a priest for a year, had equipped himself with the “three-stranded cord that is not easily broken”: prayer, fasting, and charity.

The Chablais

The Chablais is a small territory bordered to the north by Lake Geneva (or Lac Léman) and by the Faucigny mountains to the south. The capital is the town of Thonon, on the shores of the lake. The region had at the time about 25,000 inhabitants, once divided into about fifty parishes. Politically it had long been under the Dukes of Savoy, but then it was often pulled hither and thither, between the Swiss, France and Savoy.

From an ecclesiastical point of view, it was part of the diocese of Geneva. But in 1536, the Chablais was invaded by the Protestants of Bern and Geneva, up to Thonon and the Dranse torrent. After a few months of tolerance, they imposed the new religion: devastated monasteries, ruined churches, destroyed images and statues, obligation to attend Protestant worship, prohibition to celebrate the Catholic mass, to promote “papist superstitions and idolatries”. Out of 25,000 inhabitants, barely a hundred Catholics remained.

A first attempt at “re-Catholicisation” was made in 1589, when Duke Charles Emmanuel asked Monsignor de Granier to send about fifty priests. The failure was

total and the frightened priests withdrew. Another method was needed.

In 1593, after the abjuration of Henry IV of France, which weakened the Protestant pressure, the Chablais was returned to the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel, who wanted to bring the inhabitants back to the Catholic faith, asking Monsignor de Granier to do what was necessary. The latter gathered his clergy and asked for some volunteers... Only Francis de Sales accepted the proposal, despite his father's opposition.

Brief chronology of the mission

On 14 September 1594, Francis arrives at the fortress of Allinges, his Catholic refuge in a Calvinist province. From this place he sets out on foot every day for his apostolate after celebrating mass in the fortress chapel. On 18 September, he delivers his first sermon in the capital of Thonon, in the church of St Hippolytus, which had become a Protestant temple for years, on the authority and mission of the preachers of the Church: "Calvin, who sent you?". Shortly after, the Protestant leaders of Thonon swear never to go to the sermons of the "papist" priest. On 27 November, Francis begins preaching Advent to "four or five little people". The winter of 1594-1595 is full of dangers: intense cold, packs of wolves, and intimidation.

At the beginning of 1595, Francis suffers an assassination attempt. On 25 January, the feast of the conversion of Saint Paul, Francis tries a new method, he begins to distribute weekly sheets or "leaflets" where he explains the true Catholic doctrine. In mid-March, another assassination attempt. On 11 April, he informs his friend Favre that among the first "ears of corn" of the harvest is the lawyer Pierre Poncet who decides to become a Catholic. On 25 May, the feast of *Corpus Christi*, at three in the morning, Francis experiences a mystical experience regarding the Eucharist. On 1 July he is attacked in the woods of Voiron, and again on 18 July at the foot of Allinges. On 18 September, he can write to his friend Favre: "Here finally, my brother, a wider and more beautiful door opens to us". Baron d'Avully and some representatives of the city have come to listen to him without being seen.

At the beginning of the year 1596, the Protestant minister Viret does not dare to face the provost in a public dispute. Baron d'Avully abjures in the church of Thonon. Francis dares to preach in the market square of Thonon for two hours. The people

react by saying: “May God put us on the right side!”. In March he holds a public dispute in Geneva with the minister Antoine de La Faye, a collaborator of Theodore Beza, on the Real Presence, Purgatory, the invocation of the Saints… On 16 July, he organises a public dialogue catechism with his thirteen-year-old brother Bernard. On 25 December 1596, for the first time in more than half a century, Francis celebrates the three Christmas masses in the church of St. Hippolytus in Thonon.

In 1597, he goes again to Geneva for a conversation with Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor, on the problem of salvation in the Church. The conversion of Pierre Fourier follows. A new conversation with Theodore Beza in Geneva on human cooperation with grace and on the necessity of good works. In September, Eucharistic celebration of the Forty Hours in the town of Annemasse, opposite Geneva. In November, Francis falls seriously ill until January.

On 13 June 1598, Francis asks the Nuncio to intervene to obtain the exercise of Catholic worship in Geneva. In September-October, the Forty Hours are celebrated in Thonon, in the presence of the duke and the cardinal-legate. Francis de Sales resurrects a child of a Protestant mother who converts. About 2,300 fathers of families return to the Catholic Church.

Da mihi animas cetera tolle

Francis de Sales’ strategy consisted of approaching the “Lords” of Thonon, the capital of the Chablais, to enter into dialogue with them, but also to get in touch with the simple country people.

The beginnings were very hard. He is called a papist, magician, sorcerer, *bigle* (cross-eyed). In all his interventions with the Protestants, Francis relies above all on argumentation and persuasion, focusing on some essential elements of the true faith: the interpretation of the canonical books, the visibility of the Church, the primacy of Saint Peter and his successors, the reality of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, the invocation of the Saints, justification through faith and works.

Francis’ zeal was exalted by his friend and disciple, Monsignor Jean Pierre Camus, Bishop of Belley, in his book on *The Spirit of Blessed Francis de Sales*, in which he explains the true motive of his apostolate:

When the Apostles had nothing, they possessed everything, and when ecclesiastics want to possess too much, the too much is reduced to nothing. He sighed only for the conversion of those souls rebellious to the light of truth, which shines only in the true Church. Indeed, it is a well-established fact that the soul is more than food, and the body more than clothing. He sometimes said sighing: 'Da mihi animas, cetera tolle tibi', speaking of his Geneva which he always called his poor or his dear – terms of compassion and love – despite its rebellion.

Francis de Sales wore a short habit so as not to frighten people and avoided invectives, verbal violence. He called his adversaries "brothers", "children of the Church in disposition", "brothers in hope of the same vocation to salvation", without letting himself be impressed by accusations of "flattery". The other missionaries, especially the Capuchins, used a bitter medicine, Camus reports, trying to make themselves feared, using words like "uncircumcised, rebels to the light, obstinate, brood of vipers, rotten members, children of the devil and of darkness".

Our blessed Father followed a completely different path, and caught more flies with a spoonful of that honey which was so habitual to him, than all of these with barrels of vinegar. His external and internal behaviour were all in accommodation, his words, his gestures and his actions in complaisance. If the others wanted to make themselves feared, he desired to make himself loved and to enter into spirits through the door of complaisance.

Francis was also concerned with the conversion and formation of the young. Seeing that they were scarcely present in the church of Saint Hippolytus, he looked for a way to "attract the youth of the city with whom he could not overcome the difficulty, even if he already had some neophytes, but rather in secret than in the open." He drafted a small dialogue catechism with questions and answers, and asked his brother Bernard, who had come to visit him, to give the answers before the public invited on that occasion (16 July 1596). Francis taught catechism as often as possible, in public or in private homes.

The writings

Don Bosco also mentioned the role of writings as a means of conversion, in particular the loose leaflets, later gathered into a book. The title *Controversies*, given to the collection of those loose sheets, is from the editors and not from the author, who called them *Memorials*. The editors wanted to underline the character of the work, alluding to the converging points with the *Controversiae* of Cardinal Bellarmine.

The general tone of Francis de Sales is lively, incisive, even polemical, especially when he deals with Luther, Calvin, and their associates. But when he addresses the "Lords of Thonon", he does so with great benevolence and compassion. "I assure you – he writes – that you will never be able to read a writing addressed to you by someone who is more affectionate to your spiritual service than I am".

The main purpose of the author is to demonstrate that all those who are separated from the Church of Rome live in error. After a heartfelt letter to the "Lords of Thonon", and a premise on the theme of scandal, the book is presented in three parts.

The first is a defence of the authority of the Church. Francis de Sales shows that the ministers have not received their mission, neither from the people, nor from secular princes, nor from Catholic bishops, and cannot claim an extraordinary mission. Then, the ministers are in error regarding the nature of the Church. The Church is visible, and contains good and bad; the Church cannot perish; it has never remained hidden, and cannot err. The true Church must be one, holy, accompanied by miracles and the spirit of prophecy, striving towards the perfection of evangelical life, universal and perpetual, fruitful and apostolic.

In the second part, the author describes the eight norms of faith that were violated by the leaders of the Reformation: first of all, the Holy Scripture, then the apostolic traditions, the authority of the Church, that of the Councils, of the ancient Fathers, of the Pope, of miracles and of natural reason.

In the third part, the author proposes to resolve, in the light solely of the "pure and simple word of God", some particular points that caused difficulty with the Protestants: the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, confession and marriage, the cult of the saints, the ceremonies of the Church, the merit of works, justification and indulgences. But of this part only two chapters remain: one on the sacraments, and

the other, unforeseen, on purgatory.

The *Controversies* are an apologetic and theological work. Indeed, some are of the opinion that it would be the most theological work we possess by the doctor of the Church. In fact, they expound in a clear and convinced manner the nature and mission of the Church.

The other writing of that period is called: *Defence of the Standard of the Holy Cross.* This work by Francis de Sales is, like the previous one, of an apologetic and polemical nature and was also born in the period of his apostolate in the Chablais. In September 1597, with the help of Fr. Cherubino, a Capuchin, he had organised a great Eucharistic manifestation (the Forty Hours) in Annemasse, opposite Geneva. One of the points of the programme included the erection of a large cross. It was a moment of great triumph, also because many Protestants returned to Catholicism.

To invite the population to the veneration of the cross and explain its meaning, the missionaries had composed three posters (*placards*). Geneva reacted by entrusting the minister Antoine de La Faye with the drafting of a response, which will be entitled: *“Brief treatise on the virtue of the Cross and the way to honour it”.* For the Calvinists, in fact, the “adoration” of the cross by Catholics was considered an idolatry or superstition and also for this reason they had destroyed crucifixes and calvaries everywhere.

Francis then wrote a response to the Protestant minister, entitled *Defence of the Standard of the Holy Cross*. The work comprises four books. The first deals with the honour and virtue of the true cross; the second with the honour and virtue of the image of the cross; the third with the honour and virtue of the sign of the cross; and the fourth with the quality of the honour that is due to the cross. In this book, Saint Francis de Sales reveals to us his love for the Cross of Jesus, the place it occupies in his thought, in his life, in his action. The missionary of the Chablais advances under the standard of the Cross, he plants it not only in minds and hearts, but also in public squares and on main roads; everywhere he wants to restore the profaned calvaries.

Conclusion

Don Bosco rightly highlighted the four means used by our missionary: patience,

sermons, writings, and miracles. In the life and action of the Piedmontese disciple of the Savoyard saint, especially in his educational mission towards youth, we can find these fundamental elements with some particular emphases.

Patience and loving-kindness are characteristic traits of Don Bosco's preventive method in the education of youth. In 1880, Don Bosco will say to his former pupil priests: "Never forget the gentleness of manners; win the hearts of the young through love; always remember the maxim of Saint Francis de Sales: you catch more flies with a dish of honey than with a barrel of vinegar".

Sermons in church, outside the church, in the courtyard, in the squares, or rather speeches, meetings, dialogues with the young are fundamental.

And when he launched his *Catholic Readings* to the public, the example of the Savoyard saint certainly inspired him. Having to answer Pius IX about his activities in Turin, Don Bosco indicated these two: the education of youth and the *Catholic Readings*.

As for miracles, it is established that the resurrection of the child of Thonon was at the origin of the conversion of the whole family and of many people of Thonon. Numerous miracles were also attributed to Don Bosco: healings, multiplications of hosts and chestnuts, prophetic dreams and visions.

The example of Saint Francis de Sales inspired Don Bosco in various ways, certainly because both were animated by a strong missionary spirit.