Saint Francis, promoter of culture

As the pastor of a diocese the vast majority of which was made up of illiterate villagers and mountain dwellers, heirs to an ancestral and practical culture, Francis de Sales was also the promoter of a learned culture among the intellectual elite.To convey his message, he understood that he had to get to know his audience and take account of their needs and tastes.When he spoke to people, and especially when he wrote for educated people, his method was the one he set out in the Preface to his 'Treatise on the Love of God': 'Of course, I took into consideration the condition of the minds of this century, and I had to: it is very important to consider the age in which one writes'.

Francis de Sales and popular culture

Born into a noble family with strong ties to the land, Francis de Sales was never a stranger to popular culture. The environment in which he grew up already brought him into close contact with the common people, to the extent that he himself would willingly place himself among the 'big mountain people' when they got up in the morning. During his pastoral visits, he used the patois, colloquially familiar with 'the coarse language of the country to make himself better heard'. In any case, it is certain that direct contact with the population as a whole gave his pastoral experience a concrete and warm character.

As we know, popular culture is much better expressed in narrative form than in writing. Need we remind you that while a certain percentage of the population could read, most could not write? Nevertheless, books from established booksellers and hawkers were appearing, not only in towns but also in villages. This production of inexpensive booklets must have been very varied, with the majority

undoubtedly coming from popular literature that conveyed a still medieval sensibility: lives of saints, romances of chivalry, marvellous tales, stories of brigands or almanacs with their weather forecasts and practical advice.

But popular culture was also conveyed through everyday encounters and festivals, when people went out to eat and drink together in taverns and cabarets, particularly ‘on weddings, christenings, funerals and confraternities’, and at fairs and markets. Francis de Sales may well have done society a favour by not systematically shunning all forms of conviviality and public revelry, imposing restrictions only on ecclesiastics who were obliged to keep to themselves.

Wisdom and know-how

A sympathetic observer of nature and people, François de Sales learned a great deal through his contact with them. It was the farmers and those who ploughed the land who told him that when it snows in winter, the harvest will be better the following year. As for the shepherds and herdsmen in the mountains, their care for their flocks is an example of ‘pastoral’ zeal. In the world of trades, we often discover admirable know-how:

‘*Ploughmen do not sow fields until they have cleared them and removed the thorns; masons do not use stones until they have cut them; locksmiths do not use iron until they have beaten it; goldsmiths do not use gold until it has been purified in the crucible.*’

Humour is not absent from some of the stories he tells. Since ancient times, barbers have been known as great talkers; when one of them asked a king: ‘How would you like me to do your beard? the king replied: ‘Without saying a word.’ Carpenters work small miracles: with a twisted piece of wood they can create ‘some beautiful masterpiece’. Glassmakers, too, are astonishing, creating marvels with the breath of their mouths.

As for the art of typography, he understood its importance, especially for religious purposes. In a letter to

the nuncio in Turin in May 1598, he lamented: '*There should be a printer in Annecy. Heretics are publishing very pernicious books all the time, while many Catholic works remain in the hands of their authors because they cannot be sent safely to Lyon and they have no printer at their disposal*'.

Art and artists

In the arts, the triumph of the Renaissance shone through in works inspired by antiquity. Francis de Sales was able to contemplate them during his visits to Italy and France. In Rome, during his trip in 1599, he admired the great dome of St Peter's, barely finished a few years earlier, and noted that Christian Rome had nothing to envy of pagan Rome: *Tell me, where is the memory of Nero? Everything aid about him now is bad.Oh, what is the memory of the glorious apostle Saint Peter, a poor fisherman, barefoot and simple!Great is the palace, the basilica, the monument of Saint Peter; that of Nero is nothing.*

At the time, classical sculpture was the object of the greatest admiration, so much so, he said, that even 'the parts of ancient statues are kept as a reminder of antiquity'. He himself mentions several sculptors of antiquity, starting with Phidias: he, who 'never represented anything so perfectly as the divinities', 'made a statue of Minerva, all of ivory, twenty-six cubits high in Athens', and on his shield 'he engraved his own face with such art that not a single strand of his image could be removed,' says Aristotle, 'without the whole statue collapsing'. Here is Polyclitus, 'my Polyclitus, who is so dear to me', he said, whose 'master hand' worked on the bronze. Francis de Sales also evoked the Colossus of Rhodes, symbol of divine providence, in whom there is 'neither change nor a shadow of vicissitude'.

Now we come to the famous painters mentioned by Pliny and Plutarch: Aurelius, a man who 'painted all the faces of the images he made in the air and likeness of the women he loved'; the 'unique Apelles', Alexander the Great's favourite painter; Timanthe, who veiled Agamemnon's head because he

despaired of being able to convey the consternation on his face at the death of his daughter Iphigenia; Protogenes, who ‘made an excellent masterpiece of an admirable satyr who enjoyed playing the flageolet’.

He was especially attracted to religious painting, which was strongly recommended by his former spiritual director Possevin, who sent him his ‘charming work’ *De poesi et pictura*. He considered himself a painter, because, as he wrote in the preface to *his Introduction to the Devout Life*, ‘God wants me to paint not only the common virtues, but also his very dear and beloved devotion on people’s hearts’.

Francis de Sales also loved singing and music. We know that he had hymns sung during catechism classes, but we would like to know what was sung in his cathedral. Once, in a letter, the day after a ceremony where a text from the *Song of Songs* had been sung, he exclaimed: ‘Ah! how well it was sung yesterday in our church and in my heart! He knew and appreciated the differences between instruments: ‘Among instruments, drums and trumpets make more noise, but lutes and spinet instruments make more melody; the sound of one is louder, and the other more suave and spiritual’.

The Florimontane Academy (1606)

“The city of Annecy,” wrote his nephew Charles-Auguste de Sales pompously, “was similar to Athens under such a great prelate as Francis de Sales, and under such a great president as Antoine Favre, and was inhabited by a large number of doctors, either theologians or lawyers, or people well versed in humanities.”

People have wondered how Francis de Sales came up with the idea of founding an academy with his friend Antoine Favre at the end of 1606, which they called ‘Florimontane’, ‘because the Muses flourished in the mountains of Savoy’. Coming into existence in Italy at the end of the 14th century, the academies had spread far and wide across the Alps. It should not be forgotten that the Calvinists in Geneva had their own, and this must have played a major role in the

creation of a Catholic rival.

The Florimontane Academy had its own emblem: an orange tree, admired by Francis de Sales because it was full of flowers and fruit almost all year round (*flores fructusque perennes*). In fact, explained Francis, 'in Italy, on the coast of Genova, and even in these countries of France, as in Provence, along the shores you can see it bearing its leaves, flowers and fruit in every season'.

The Academy was made up of recognised scholars and masters, but public lectures were planned to give it the air of a small people's university. Indeed, the general assemblies could be attended by 'all brave masters of the honest arts, such as painters, sculptors, carpenters, architects and the like'.

We can guess that the aim of the two founders was to bring together the intellectual elite of Savoy and to place literature, the sciences and the arts at the service of faith and piety in accordance with the ideal of Christian humanism. The meetings were held in Antoine Favre's home, where his children helped to welcome the guests. So there was something of a family atmosphere. In fact, as one article put it, 'all the academicians will maintain a mutual and fraternal love'.

The Academy got off to a brilliant and promising start. In 1610, no more than three years after its beginnings, Antoine Favre was appointed President of the Senate of Savoy and left for Chambéry. The bishop, for his part, was unable to maintain the Académie on his own, and it declined and disappeared. But while its existence was short-lived, its influence was enduring. The cultural project that had given rise to it was taken up by the Barnabites, who arrived at Annecy College in 1614. It is sometimes said that the Florimontane Academy inspired Cardinal Richelieu to create the Académie Française.

A Galileo affair in Annecy?

The Collège d'Annecy was famous for Father Baranzano. This Barnabite from Piedmont, who embraced the new

scientific theories, was a brilliant teacher who aroused the admiration and even the enthusiasm of his pupils. In 1617, without the permission of his superiors, his disciples published a summary of his lectures, in which he developed Copernicus' planetary system and the ideas of Galileo. The book in question immediately caused such a stir that the author was recalled to Milan by his superiors.

In September 1617, Bishop de Sales wrote a letter to his superior general asking him to return to Annecy, where he was 'much appreciated' and 'very useful'. The bishop's wish was granted and Father Baranzano returned to Annecy at the end of October that year. In 1618, the religious published a pamphlet to make amends for his mistake, but there is no evidence that he renounced his ideas.

In 1619, he published *Novae opiniones physicae* in Lyon, the first volume of the second part of an ambitious *Summa philosophica anneciensis*. The bishop gave his official approval to 'this erudite work by an erudite man', and authorised its printing. It should be noted that Baranzano acquired an international reputation and came into contact with Francis Bacon, the English promoter of the reform of the sciences, with the German astronomer Johannes Kepler, and with Galileo himself. It was a time when Galileo was being recklessly prosecuted in order to safeguard the authority of the Bible, which had been compromised by the new theories on the rotation of the earth around the sun.

While Cardinal Bellarmine was worried about the dangers of the new theories, for François de Sales there could be no contradiction between reason and faith. And was not the sun the symbol of celestial love around which everything moves, and the centre of devotion?

Religious poetry

The Renaissance had rehabilitated ancient, pagan poetry, which François had studied at school, and from which the Jesuits had expunged the most disturbing passages for young sensibilities. As a young man, he had been seduced by

the biblical poetry of the *Song of Songs* and the *Psalms*, which would accompany him throughout his life. He himself wrote a number of religious poems that have come down to us.

The fact remains that it was not a few rather clumsy verses that ensured his literary reputation, which, during his lifetime, was sufficiently established for writers and poets to seek contact with him. Such was the case with the Provençal magistrate and poet Jean de la Ceppède, one of the great exponents of Baroque religious poetry, who sent him a copy of his *Théorèmes sur le sacré mystère de la Rédemption*. What delighted him most in this poet's verses was that he had succeeded in 'transforming the pagan muses into Christians, to remove them from this old Parnassus and lodge them on the new sacred Calvary'.

Francis de Sales knew and admired the power of poetry, 'for it is marvellous how much power discourse compressed into the laws of verse has to penetrate hearts and subdue memory'. In 1616, the Lyonnais poet René Gros de Saint-Joyre sent him his manuscript of *La mire de vie à l'amour parfait*, a poem in French verse divided into stanzas of eight lines, dedicated to the abbess of the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Pierre de Lyon.

By the Basque-born poet and humanist Jean de Sponde, he cites not the *Sonnets d'amour* or the *Stances sur la mort*, but the *Réponse au Traité des marques de l'Église by Théodore de Bèze* and the *Déclaration* sur les motifs de la conversion by this former Calvinist, whom he considered a 'great mind'. He was also in contact with the Burgundian poet and memoirist Jean de Lacurne, who was considered 'the delight of Apollo and all the Muses', and to whom he declared: 'I make much of your writings'.

Learned culture and theology

He also asked about the theological books that were appearing. After having 'seen with extreme pleasure' a draft of the *Somme de théologie*, he took the liberty of giving the author some advice. His opinion was that it was necessary

to cut out all the ‘methodical’, ‘superfluous’ and ‘importunate’ words, to prevent the *Summa* from becoming too ‘fat’, to ensure that it was ‘nothing but juice and marrow’, by making it ‘more palatable and pleasant’, and not to be afraid of using the ‘affective style’.

Later, writing to one of his priests who was engaged in literary and scientific work, he made more or less the same recommendations. It was necessary, according to him, to take into account ‘the mood of the world’, ‘to write to the taste of this poor world’, and ‘to treat pious and holy things in a pleasant, historical way and which charmed a little the curiosity of the spirits of the time’. To write ‘to the taste of this poor world’ meant agreeing to use certain means capable of arousing the interest of the reader of the time:
Sir, we are fishermen, and fishers of men.We must therefore use not only care, work and vigilance in this fishing, but also bait, tricks, lures, yes even, if I dare say, holy tricks.The world is becoming so delicate that from now on we will only dare to touch it with musk gloves, or dress its wounds with civet plasters; but what does it matter, as long as men are healed and saved at last?Our queen, charity, does everything for her children.

Another fault, especially among theologians, was the lack of clarity, to the point where one felt like writing on the first page of certain works: *Fiat lux*. His friend, Bishop Camus, recalls this comment by his hero about the work of an illegible author: ‘This man has given several books to the public, but I don’t realise that he has brought any of them to light. It’s a great pity to be so learned and yet not be able to express oneself. It’s like those women who are pregnant with several children and can’t give birth to any of them. He added with conviction: ‘Above all, long live clarity; without it nothing can be pleasant’. According to Camus, the works of Francis de Sales certainly contain difficulties, but obscurity is a flaw that was never found on his pen.

A writer full of projects

Towards the end of his life, his pen was still busy with numerous projects. Michel Favre has stated that he planned to write a treatise *De l'amour du prochain*, as well as a *Histoire théandrique*, in which 'he wanted to describe the life of Our Lord humanised and suggest ways of easily practising the evangelical maxims'. According to his confidant and future biographer, Dom Jean de Saint-François, the *Histoire théandrique* was to consist of four books: a 'clear and vulgar version of the four evangelists united and allied together in a manner of concordance', a demonstration 'of the principal points of the creed of the Catholic Church', an 'instruction in good morals and the practice of Christian virtues', and finally a history of the Acts of the Apostles to show 'what the face of the primitive Church was at its birth, and the order and conduct that the Holy Spirit and the apostles established in it at its first beginning'.

He also had in mind a *Book of the four loves*, in which he wanted to teach how we should love God, love ourselves, love our friends and love our enemies; a book of the *evangelical maxims*, as well as a *familiar explanation of the mysteries of our holy faith*.

None of these works will ever see the light of day. I shall die like pregnant women,' he wrote, 'without producing what I have conceived. His 'philosophy' was that 'you have to take on much more than you know what to do with, and as if you were going to live a long time, but don't worry about doing more than if you were going to die tomorrow'.