 Reading time: 11 min.

In 1578 Francis de Sales was 11 years old. His father, wishing to make his eldest son a prominent figure in Savoy, sent him to Paris to continue his studies in the intellectual capital of the time. The boarding school he wanted him to attend was the college of nobles, but Francis preferred the Jesuit one. With the help of his mother, he won his case and became a student of the Jesuits at their college in Clermont.

Recalling his studies in Paris one day, Francis de Sales was full of praise: Savoy had granted him “his beginnings in the fine arts”, he would write, but it was at the University of Paris, “very flourishing and much frequented”, where he had “applied himself in earnest first to the fine arts, then to all areas of philosophy, with an ease and profit favoured by the fact that even the roofs, so to speak, and the walls seem to philosophise.”

In a page of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales recounts a recollection of Paris at that time, in which he reconstructs the climate in which the capital’s student youth was immersed, torn between forbidden pleasures, fashionable heresy and monastic devotion:

When I was a young man in Paris, two students, one of whom was a heretic, were spending the night in the suburb of Saint-Jacques, having a debauched night out, when they heard the morning bell ringing in the Carthusian church. The heretic asked his Catholic companion why he rang the bell, and the latter told him how devoutly the holy offices were celebrated in that monastery. O God, he said, how different these religious are from ours! They sing like angels and we like brute animals. The next day, wanting to verify for himself what he had learned from his companion’s account, he saw monks in their stalls, lined up like marble statues in their niches, motionless, making no gesture except that of psalmody, which they did with a truly angelic attention and devotion, according to the custom of that holy order. Then the young man, overwhelmed with admiration, was seized with an extreme consolation at seeing God worshipped so well by Catholics, and decided, as he then did, to enter the bosom of the Church, the true and only bride of him who had visited him with his inspiration in the dishonourable bed of infamy in which he lay.

Another anecdote also shows that Francis de Sales was not unaware of the rebellious spirit of the Parisians, which made them “abhor commands”. It was about a man “who, after living eighty years in the city of Paris, without ever leaving it, as

soon as he was ordered by the king to remain there the rest of his days, he immediately went out to see the countryside, something he had never wanted to do in all his life."

Humanities

The Jesuits at the time were urged on by their origins. Francis de Sales spent ten years in their college, covering the entire curriculum of studies, moving from grammar to classical studies to rhetoric and philosophy. As an external pupil, he lived not far from the college with his tutor, Fr Déage, and his three cousins, Amé, Louis et Gaspard.

The Jesuit method involved a lecture by the teacher (*praelectio*), followed by numerous exercises by the students such as writing verses and speeches, study of the lectures, declamations, conversations and disputations (*disputatio*) in Latin. To motivate their students, teachers appealed to two 'inclinations' present in the human soul: pleasure, fuelled by imitation of the ancients, a sense of beauty and the pursuit of literary perfection; and striving or emulation, encouraged by a sense of honour and a prize for the winners. As for religious motivations, they were first and foremost about seeking the greater glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*).

Going through Francis' writings, one realises the extent to which his Latin culture was extensive and profound, even if he did not always read the authors in the original text. Cicero has his place there, but rather as a philosopher; he is a great spirit, if not the greatest "among pagan philosophers". Virgil, prince of the Latin poets, is not forgotten: in the middle of a paragraph a line from the *Aeneid* or the *Eglogues* suddenly appears, embellishing the sentence and stimulating curiosity. Pliny the Elder, author of *Natural History*, would provide Francis de Sales with an almost inexhaustible reserve of comparisons, "similes" and curious, often phantasmagorical data.

At the end of his literary studies, he obtained the "bachelor's degree" that opened up access to philosophy and the "liberal arts".

Philosophy and the "liberal arts"

The "liberal arts" encompassed not only philosophy proper, but also mathematics, cosmography, natural history, music, physics, astronomy, chemistry, all "intermingled with metaphysical considerations". The Jesuits' interest in the exact sciences, closer in this to Italian humanism than to French humanism, should also be noted.

Francis de Sales' writings show that his studies in philosophy left traces in his mental universe. Aristotle, "the greatest brain" of antiquity can be found

everywhere in Francis. To Aristotle, he wrote, we owe this “ancient axiom among philosophers, which every man desires to know”. What struck him most about Aristotle was that he had written “an admirable treatise on the virtues”. As for Plato, he regards him as a “great spirit”, if not “the greatest”. He greatly esteemed Epictetus, “the best man in all paganism”.

Knowledge concerning cosmography, corresponding to our geography, was made possible by the travels and discoveries of the time. Completely unaware of the cause of the phenomenon of magnetic north, he was well aware that “this polar star” is the one “towards which the needle of the compass constantly tends; it is thanks to it that helmsmen are guided on the sea and can know where their routes take them”. The study of astronomy opened his spirit to the knowledge of the new Copernican theories.

As for music, he confides that without being a connoisseur of it, he nevertheless enjoyed it “very much”. Gifted with an innate sense of harmony in everything, he nevertheless admitted he knew the importance of discordance, which is the basis of polyphony: “For music to be beautiful, it is required not only that the voices be clear, sharp and distinct, but also that they be linked together in such a way as to constitute a pleasing consonance and harmony, by virtue of the union existing in the distinction and the distinction of the voices, which, not without reason, is called a discordant chord, or rather, a concordant discord”. The lute is often mentioned in his writings, which is hardly surprising, knowing that the 16th century was the golden age of this instrument.

Extracurricular activities

School did not entirely absorb the life of our young man, who also needed relaxation. From 1560 onwards, the Jesuits initiated new possibilities such as reducing the daily timetable, inserting recreation between school and study hours, relaxing after meals, creating a spacious “courtyard” for recreation, walking once a week and excursions. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* recalls the games he had to participate in during his youth, when he lists “the game of court tennis, ball, ring races, chess and other board games”. Once a week, on Thursdays, or if this was not possible, on Sundays, an entire afternoon was set aside for fun in the countryside.

Did the young Francis attend and even participate in drama/theatre at the Clermont college? More than likely, because the Jesuits were the promoters of plays and moral comedies presented in public on a stage, or on platforms set up on trestles, even in the college church. The repertoire was generally inspired by the Bible, the lives of the saints, especially the acts of the martyrs, or the history of the

Church, without excluding allegorical scenes such as the struggle of virtues against vices, dialogues between faith and the Church, between heresy and reason. It was generally considered that such a performance was well worth a good sermon.

Riding, fencing and dancing

His father watched over Francis' complete training as a perfect gentleman and the proof lies in the fact that he required him to engage in learning the "arts of nobility" or the arts of chivalry in which he himself excelled. Francis had to practise riding, fencing and dancing.

As for fencing, it is known that it distinguished the gentleman, just as carrying a sword was part of the privileges of the nobility. Modern fencing, born in Spain at the beginning of the 15th century, had been codified by the Italians, who made it known in France.

Francis de Sales sometimes had the opportunity to show his prowess in wielding the sword during royal or simulated assaults, but throughout his life he would fight against duelling challenges that often ended in the death of a contender. His nephew recounted that during his mission to Thonon, unable to stop two "wretches" who "were fencing with bare swords" and "kept crossing their swords against each other", "the man of God, relying on his skill, which he had learned a long time ago, hurled himself at them and defeated them to such an extent that they regretted their unworthy action."

As for dance that had acquired noble titles in Italian courts, it seems to have been introduced to the French court by Catherine de' Medici, wife of Henry II. Did Francis de Sales participate in any ballet, figurative dance, accompanied by music? It is not impossible, because he had his acquaintances in some of the great families.

In themselves, he would later write in the *Introduction*, dances are not a bad thing; it all depends on the use one makes of them: "Playing, dancing is licit when done for fun and not for affection". Let us add to all these exercises the learning of courtesy and good manners, especially with the Jesuits who paid much attention to "civility", "modesty" and "honesty".

Religious and moral formation

On the religious level, the teaching of Christian doctrine and catechism was of great importance in Jesuit colleges. The catechism was taught in all classes, learnt by heart in the lower ones following the *disputatio* method and with prizes for the best. Public competitions were sometimes organised with a religiously motivated staging. Sacred singing, which the Lutherans and Calvinists had developed greatly, was cultivated. Particular emphasis was placed on the liturgical

year and festivals, using “stories” from Holy Scripture.

Committed to restoring the practice of the sacraments, the Jesuits encouraged their students not only to attend daily Mass, not at all an exceptional custom in the 16th century, but also to frequent Eucharistic communion, frequent confession, and devotion to the Virgin and the saints. Francis responded fervently to the exhortations of his spiritual teachers, committing himself to receive communion “as often as possible”, “at least every month.”

With the Renaissance, the *virtus* of the ancients, duly Christianised, returned to the fore. The Jesuits became its promoters, encouraging their pupils to effort, personal discipline and self-reformation. Francis undoubtedly adhered to the ideal of the most esteemed Christian virtues, such as obedience, humility, piety, the practice of the duty of one’s state, work, good manners and chastity. He later devotes the entire central part of his *Introduction* to “the exercise of the virtues”.

Bible study and theology

On a carnival Sunday in 1584, while all of Paris went out to have a good time, his tutor saw Francis looking worried. Not knowing whether he was ill or sad, he proposed that he attend the carnival. To this proposal the young man responded with this prayer taken from Scripture: “Turn away my eyes from vain things”, and added: “*Domine, fac ut videam”*. See what? “Sacred theology”, was his reply; “it will teach me what God wants my soul to learn.” Fr Déage, who was preparing his doctorate at the Sorbonne, had the wisdom not to oppose the desire of his heart. Francis became enthusiastic about the sacred sciences to the point of skipping meals. His tutor gave him his own course notes and allowed him to attend public debates on theology.

The source of this devotion was to be found not so much in the theological courses at the Sorbonne, but rather in the exegesis lectures held at the Royal College. After its foundation in 1530, this College witnessed the triumph of new trends in Bible study. In 1584, Gilbert Genebrard, a Benedictine from Cluny, commented on the *Song of Songs*. Later, when he composed his *Treatise,* the bishop of Geneva remembered this master and named him “with reverence and emotion, because” he wrote, “I was his pupil, though an unsuccessful one, when he taught at the royal college in Paris.” Despite his philological rigour, Genebrard passed on to him an allegorical and mystical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, which enchanted him. As Father Lajeunie writes, Francis found in this sacred book “the inspiration of his life, the theme of his masterpiece and the best source of his optimism.”

The effects of this discovery were not long in coming. The young student

experienced a period marked by exceptional fervour. He joined the Congregation of Mary, an association promoted by the Jesuits, which brought together the spiritual elite of the students of their college, of which he soon became the assistant and then the “prefect”. His heart was inflamed with the love of God. Quoting the psalmist, he said he was “drunk with the abundance” of God’s house, filled with the torrent of divine “voluptuousness”. His greatest affection was reserved for the Virgin Mary, “beautiful as the moon, shining like the sun’.”

Devotion in crisis

This sensitive fervour lasted for a time. Then came a crisis, a “strange torment”, accompanied by “fear of sudden death and God’s judgement.” According to the testimony of Mother Chantal, “he almost completely ceased eating and sleeping and became very thin and pale as wax.” Two explanations have attracted the attention of commentators: temptations against chastity and the question of predestination. It is not necessary to dwell on the temptations. The way of thinking and acting of the surrounding world, the habits of certain companions who frequented “dishonest women”, offered him examples and invitations capable of attracting any young man of his age and condition.

Another reason for crisis was the question of predestination, a topic that was on the agenda among theologians. Luther and Calvin had made it their battle-horse in the dispute over justification by faith alone, regardless of the “merits” that man can acquire through good works. Calvin had decisively affirmed that God “determined what He intended to do for each individual man; for He does not create them all in the same condition, but destines some to eternal life, others to eternal damnation.” At the Sorbonne itself, where Francis took courses, it was taught, on the authority of St Augustine and St Thomas, that God had not decreed the salvation of all men.

Francis believed that he was a reprobate in God’s eyes and destined for eternal damnation and hell. At the height of his anguish, he made a heroic act of selfless love and abandonment to God’s mercy. He even came to the conclusion, absurd from a logical point of view, of willingly accepting to go to hell but on condition that he did not curse the Supreme Good. The solution to his “strange torment” is known, in particular, through the confidences he gave to Mother Chantal: one day in January 1587, he entered a nearby church and, after praying in the chapel of the Virgin, it seemed to him that his illness had fallen at his feet like “scales of leprosy”.

Actually, this crisis had some really positive effects on Francis’ spiritual development. On the one hand, it helped him move from sensitive, perhaps selfish

and even narcissistic devotion to pure love, stripped of all self-interested and childish gratification. And on the other, it opened his spirit to a new understanding of God's love, which wants the salvation of all human beings. Certainly, he would always defend the Catholic doctrine about the necessity of works to be saved, faithful in this to the definitions of the Council of Trent, but the term "merit" would not enjoy his sympathies. The true reward of love can only be love. We are here at the root of Salesian optimism.

Balance

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the ten years the young Francis de Sales spent in Paris. He concluded his studies there in 1588 with the licence and degree "in the arts", which opened the way for him to higher studies in theology, law and medicine. Which did he choose, or rather, which were imposed on him by his father? Knowing the ambitious plans his father had for his eldest son, one understands that the study of law was his preference. Francis went on to study law at the University of Padua, in the Republic of Venice.

From the age of eleven to twenty-one, that is, during the ten years of his adolescence and young adulthood, Francis was a student of the Jesuits in Paris. The intellectual, moral and religious formation he received from the priests of the Society of Jesus would leave an imprint that he would retain throughout his life. But Francis de Sales retained his originality. He was not tempted to become a Jesuit, but rather a Capuchin. 'Salesianity' would always have features that were too special to be simply assimilated to other ways of being and reacting to people and events.