 Reading time: 12 min.

Francis de Sales did not wish to become a bishop. “I was not born to command,” he allegedly told a confrere, who encouraged him, saying “But everyone wants you!” He accepted when he recognised God’s will in the opinion of the Duke, of Bishop de Granier, the clergy and the people. He was consecrated bishop of Geneva on 8 December 1602 in the small church in his parish in Thorens. In a letter to Jane de Chantal, he wrote that, on that day, “God had taken me from myself to take me for himself, and thus, give me to the people, meaning that he had transformed me from what I was for me into what I should be for them.”

To fulfil the pastoral mission entrusted to him and aimed at serving “this miserable and afflicted diocese of Geneva”, he needed collaborators. Of course, according to the circumstances he liked to call all the faithful “my brothers and my collaborators”, but this was directed all the more to the members of the clergy, his “confreres”. The reform of the people called for by the Council of Trent could indeed begin with them and through them.

The pedagogy of example

First and foremost, the bishop had to set an example: the pastor had to become the model for the flock entrusted to him, and first and foremost for the clergy. To this end, Francis de Sales imposed upon himself an Episcopal Rule. Drafted in the third person, it stipulated not only the strictly religious duties of the pastoral office, but also the practice of a number of social virtues, such as simplicity of life, habitual care of the poor, good manners and decency. From the very beginning, we read an article against ecclesiastical vanity:

Firstly, as regards external behaviour Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, will not wear silk robes, nor robes that are more precious than those hitherto worn; however, they will be clean, well tailored so as to be worn with propriety around the body.

In his episcopal household he would content himself with two clerics and a few servants, often very young. They too would be formed in simplicity, courtesy and a sense of welcome. The table would be frugal, but neat and clean. His house must be open to all, because “the house of a bishop must be like a public fountain,where the poor and the rich have the same right to approach to draw water.”

In addition, the bishop must continue to be formed and to study: “He will

make sure that he learns something every day that is in any case useful and appropriate for his profession.” As a rule, he would devote two hours to study, between seven and nine in the morning, and after dinner he was able to read for an hour. He recognised that he enjoyed studying, but it was indispensable to him: he considered himself a “perpetual student of theology”.

Knowing people and situations

A bishop of this stature could not content himself with being merely a good administrator. To lead the flock, the shepherd must know the flock, and to know the exact situation of the diocese and the clergy in particular, Francis de Sales undertook an impressive series of pastoral visits. In 1605, he visited 76 parishes in the French part of the diocese and returned “after beating the countryside for six weeks without interruption”. The following year, a large pastoral tour lasting several months took him to 185 parishes, surrounded by “frightful mountains, covered with a sheet of ice ten to twelve inches thick”. In 1607, he was in 70 parishes and, in 1608, he put an end to the official visits of his diocese by moving to 20 parishes around Annecy, but he continued to make many more visits in 1610 to Annecy and the surrounding parishes. In the course of six years, he would have visited 311 parishes with their branches.

Thanks to these visits and personal contacts, he acquired a precise knowledge of the real situation and the concrete needs of the population. He observed the ignorance and lack of priestly spirit of certain priests, not to mention the scandals of some monasteries where the Rule was no longer observed. Worship reduced to a function and tainted by the pursuit of profit, recalled all too often the bad examples taken from the Bible: “We resemble Nabal and Absalom, who rejoiced only in the shearing of the flock.”

Widening his view of the Church, he went so far as to denounce the vanity of certain prelates, true “courtiers of the Church” whom he compared to crocodiles and chameleons: “The crocodile is an animal that is sometimes terrestrial and sometimes aquatic, it gives birth on earth and hunts in the water; this is how the courtiers of the Church behave. Trees drop their leaves after the solstice: the elm, the lime, the poplar, the olive, the willow; the same happens among churchmen.”

To the complaints about the behaviour of the clergy he added reproaches for their weakness in the face of injustices committed by the temporal power. Recalling some brave bishops of the past, he exclaimed: ‘Oh! how I would like to see some Ambrose commanding Theodosius, some Chrysostom scolding Eudoxia, some Hilary correcting Constantius! If one is to believe a confidence of his mother Angelica Arnauld, Bishop de Sales also groaned about the “unrest in the Curia of

Rome", true "tearful topics", well convinced however that "to speak of them to the world in the situation in which it finds itself, is a cause of useless scandal."

Selection and formation of candidates

The renewal of the Church entailed an effort to discern and form future priests, very numerous at the time. During the first pastoral visit in 1605, the bishop received 175 young candidates; the following year he had 176; in less than two years he had met 570 candidates for the priestly ministry or novices in monasteries.

The evil stemmed primarily from the absence of vocation in a good number of them. Often the attraction of temporal benefit or the desire of families to place their second-born sons was pre-eminent. In each case, discernment was required to assess whether the vocation came "from heaven or from earth".

The Bishop of Geneva took the decrees of the Council of Trent very seriously, which had provided for the creation of seminaries. Formation had to begin at an early age. As early as 1603, an attempt was made to set up an embryonic minor seminary in Thonon. Adolescents were few in number, probably due to lack of means and space. In 1618, Francis de Sales proposed to appeal directly to the authority of the Holy See to obtain legal and financial support for his project. He wanted to erect a seminary, he wrote, in which the candidates could "learn to observe ceremonies, to catechise and exhort, to sing and exercise the other clerical virtues" All his efforts, however, were in vain due to a lack of material resources.

How to ensure the formation of future priests in such conditions? Some attended colleges or universities abroad, while the majority were formed in canonries, under the guidance of a wise and educated priest or in monasteries. Francis de Sales wanted every major centre of the diocese to have a "theologian", i.e. a member of the cathedral chapter in charge of teaching sacred Scripture and theology.

Ordination, however, was preceded by an examination and before being assigned a parish (with the attached benefice), the candidate had to pass an exam. The bishop attended and personally questioned the candidate to ensure that he possessed the required knowledge and moral qualities.

Ongoing formation

Formation was not to stop at the moment of ordination or assignment to a parish. To ensure the ongoing formation of his priests, the main means at the bishop's disposal was the annual convocation of the diocesan synod. The first day of this assembly was solemnised by a pontifical mass and a procession through the city of Annecy. On the second day, the bishop gave the floor to one of his canons,

had the statutes of previous synods reread and collected the comments of the parish priests present. After this, work would begin in commissions to discuss questions concerning church discipline and the spiritual and material service of the parishes.

Since the synod constitutions contained many disciplinary and ritual norms, care for ongoing, intellectual and spiritual formation was visible in them. They referred to the canons of the ancient Councils, but especially to the decrees of the "Most Holy Council of Trent". On the other hand, they recommended reading works that dealt with pastoral care or spirituality, such as those of Gerson (probably the *Instruction of the Parish Priests to Instruct the Simple People*) and those of the Spanish Dominican Luis de Granada, author of an *Introduction to the Symbol*.

Knowledge, he wrote in his *Exhortation to Clerics*, "is the eighth sacrament of the hierarchy of the Church." The ills of the Church were mainly due to the ignorance and laziness of the clergy. Fortunately, the Jesuits arrived! Models of educated and zealous priests, these "great men", who "devour books with their incessant studies" have "re-established and consolidated our doctrine and all the holy mysteries of our faith; so that even today, thanks to their praiseworthy work, they fill the world with learned men who destroy heresy everywhere." In the conclusion, the bishop summed up his whole thinking: "Since divine Providence, without regard to my incapacity, has established me as your bishop, I exhort you to study endlessly, so that, being learned and exemplary, you may be blameless, and ready to answer all those who question you on matters of faith."

Forming preachers

Francis de Sales preached so often and so well that he was considered one of the best preachers of his time and a model for preachers. He preached not only in his diocese, but also agreed to preach in Paris, Chambéry, Dijon, Grenoble and Lyon. He also preached in Franche-Comté, in Sion in the Valais and in several towns in Piedmont, in particular Carmagnola, Mondovì, Pinerolo, Chieri and Turin.

To know his thoughts on preaching, one must refer to the letter he addressed in 1604 to Andrea Frémyot, brother of the baroness of Chantal, young archbishop of Bourges (he was only thirty-one), who had asked him for advice on how to preach. To preach well, he said, two things are needed: knowledge and virtue. To achieve a good result, the preacher must try to instruct his hearers and touch their hearts.

To instruct them, one must always go to the source: Holy Scripture. The works of the Fathers should not be neglected; indeed, "what is the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church, if not an explanation of the Gospel and an exposition of Holy

Scripture?” It is equally good to make use of the lives of the saints who make us hear the music of the Gospel. As for the great book of nature, God’s creation, the work of his Word, it constitutes an extraordinary source of inspiration if one knows how to observe and meditate on it. “It is a book,” he writes, “that contains the Word of God.” As a man of his time, brought up in the school of the classical humanists, Francis de Sales did not exclude the pagan authors of antiquity and even a hint of their mythology from his sermons, but he used them “as one uses mushrooms, that is, only to whet one’s appetite.”

Moreover, what greatly aids the understanding of preaching and makes it enjoyable is the use of images, comparisons and examples, taken from the Bible, ancient authors or personal observation. Indeed, similes possess “an incredible effectiveness when it comes to enlightening the intelligence and moving the will.”

But the real secret of effective preaching is the charity and zeal of the preacher who knows how to find the right words in the depths of his heart. One must speak “with warmth and devotion, with simplicity, with candour and with confidence, be deeply convinced of what one is teaching and inculcating in others.” Words must come from the heart rather than the mouth, because “the heart speaks to the heart, while the mouth speaks only to the ears.”

Forming confessors

Another task undertaken by Francis de Sales from the dawn of his episcopate was to draw up a series of *Advice for Confessors.* They contain not only a doctrine on the grace of this sacrament, but also pedagogical norms directed to those who have a responsibility to guide people.

First of all, those who are called to work for the formation of consciences and the spiritual progress of others must begin with themselves, lest they deserve the reproach: “Physician, heal thyself”; and the apostle’s admonition: “You who judge others, condemn yourself.” The confessor is a judge: it is up to him to decide whether or not to absolve the sinner, taking into account the inner dispositions of the penitent and the rules in force. He is also a doctor, because “sins are spiritual illnesses and wounds”, so it is up to him to prescribe the appropriate remedies. Francis de Sales, however, emphasises that the confessor is above all a father:

Remember that the poor penitents call you father when they begin their confession and that indeed you must have a fatherly heart towards them. Receive them with immense love, patiently enduring their coarseness, ignorance, weakness, slowness of comprehension and other imperfections, never desisting to help and succour them as long as there is some hope in them that they may correct themselves.

A good confessor must be attentive to the state of each person's life and proceed in a diversified manner, taking into account each person's profession, "married or not, cleric or not, religious or secular, lawyer or procurator, artisan or farmer." The type of reception, however, had to be the same for everyone. According to Chantal's mother, he received everyone "with equal love and gentleness": "ords and ladies, bourgeoisie, soldiers, maids, peasants, beggars, the sick, stinking convicts and abjects."

Regarding inner dispositions, each penitent presents himself in his own way, and Francis de Sales can appeal to his own experience when he draws up a kind of typology of penitents. There are those who approach "tormented by fear and shame", those who are "shameless and without any fear", those who are "timid and nurture some suspicion of obtaining the forgiveness of their sins", and those who, finally, are "perplexed because they do not know how to tell their sins or because they do not know how to make their own examination of conscience."

A good way to encourage the timid penitent and to instil confidence in him is to acknowledge yourself that "you are no angel", and that "you do not find it strange that people commit sins." With the shy person it is necessary to behave with seriousness and gravity, reminding him that "at the hour of death of nothing else will he give a full account but of the confessions he has made." But above all, the Bishop of Geneva insisted on this recommendation: "Be charitable and discreet towards all penitents and especially towards women." One finds this Salesian tone in the following fragment of advice:"Beware of using words that are too harsh towards penitents; for sometimes we are so austere in our corrections that we show ourselves to be more blameworthy than those we reproach are guilty." Furthermore, try "not to impose confused but specific penances on penitents, and to be more inclined to gentleness than severity."

Form together

Finally, it is worth considering a concern of the Bishop of Geneva regarding the community aspect of formation, because he was convinced of the usefulness of encounter, mutual animation and example. We do not form well if not together; hence the desire to bring priests together and also, as far as possible, to divide them into groups. The synodal assemblies that, in Annecy, saw parish priests gathered once a year around their bishop were a good thing, even irreplaceable, but not sufficient.

To this end, the bishop of Geneva expanded the role of the "overseers", a kind of animator of pastoral sectors with the "faculty and mission to support, warn, exhort the other priests and watch over their conduct." They were in charge not

only of visiting the parish priests and churches under their jurisdiction, but also of bringing their cnfreres together twice a year to discuss pastoral issues. The bishop was very keen on these meetings, “emphasising the importance of the assemblies, and ordering his overseers to send him the registers of those present and the reasons for those absent.” According to one witness, he had them deliver “sermons on the virtues required of a priest and the duties of pastors concerning the good of the souls entrusted to them.” There was also “a spiritual conference on the difficulties that might arise concerning the meaning of the Synodal Constitutions or the means necessary to obtain better results in view of the salvation of souls.”

The desire to gather fervent priests suggested a project to him modelled on the Oblates of Saint Ambrose, founded by Saint Charles Borromeo to help him in the renewal of the clergy. Could not something similar be attempted in Savoy to encourage not only reform but also devotion among the ranks of the clergy? In fact, according to his friend Bishop Camus, Francis de Sales would have cultivated the project of creating a congregation of secular priests “free and without vows”. He renounced it when the congregation of the Oratory was founded in Paris, a society of “reformed priests” that he tried to bring to Savoy.

While his efforts were not always crowned with success they testify, in any case, to his constant concern to form his co-workers as part of an overall project for the renewal of church life.