 Reading time: 6 min.

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ST. FRANCIS DE SALES AND FRIENDSHIP (2/8)

Having met Francis de Sales through the story of his life, let us look at the beauty of his heart and present some of his virtues with the aim of awakening the desire in many people to explore the rich personality of this saint.

The first snapshot, the one that immediately fascinates those who approach Francis de Sales, is friendship! It is the calling card with which he presents himself.

There is an episode when Francis was in his twenties that few people know about: after ten years of study in Paris, the time had come to return to Savoy, home, to Annecy. Four of his companions accompanied him all the way to Lyon and bid him farewell in tears.

This helps us to understand and savour what Francis wrote towards the end of his life, giving us a rare snapshot of his heart:
“There are no souls in the world who love more warmly, more tenderly and I would say more completely and lovingly than I since it has pleased God to make my heart thus. But just the same I love independent, vigorous souls that are not effeminate; since such great tenderness clouds the heart, worries it and distracts it from loving prayer to God, it prevents complete resignation and perfect death of self-love. What is not God is nothing to us.”

And to a woman he spoke of his thirst for friendship:
“I must tell you these few words in confidence: there is no man in the world whose heart is more tender and more thirsty for friendship than mine, or who feels separations more painfully than I do.”



Antoine FAVRE – Portrait, private collection
Source: Wikipedia

From the hundreds of recipients of his letters, I have chosen three, writing to whom Francis highlights the characteristics of Salesian friendship, as he lived it and which he proposes to us today. The first great friend we meet is his fellow citizen **Antoine Favre**. Francis, a brilliant law graduate, had a great desire to meet and earn the esteem of this luminary.

In one of his first letters we find an expression which sounds like a kind of oath:

“This gift (friendship), so appreciable even for its rarity, is truly priceless and all the more dear to me in that it could never have been due to my own merits. The ardent desire to diligently cultivate all friendships will always live in my breast!”

The first characteristic of friendship is communication, the giving of news, the sharing of moods.

Francis’ youngest sister, Jeanne, was born at the beginning of December 1593, and he promptly told his friend:
“I learn that my dearest mother, who is in her forty-second year, will soon give birth to her thirteenth child. I am going quickly to her, knowing that she rejoices greatly at my presence.”

We are only a few days away from his ordination to the priesthood and Francis confides to his friend:
“You, honourable friend, seem to me to be the only one able to understand the turmoil of my mind since you deal with divine things with so much respect and so much veneration that you can easily judge how dangerous and fearful it is to preside at their celebration and how difficult it would be to celebrate them with the dignity they deserve.”

Not even a year after ordination, we find Francis as a “missionary” in the Chablais: he communicates his fatigue and bitterness to his friend:
“Today I begin preaching Advent to four or five people: all the others are maliciously ignorant of the meaning of the word Advent.”
A few months later he joyfully gave him news of his first apostolic successes:
“At last the first ears of corn are beginning to ripen!”

Another great friend of Francis was **Giovenale Ancina**: The two met in Rome (1599); they would both be consecrated bishops a few years later. Francis wrote several letters to him; in one he begged his friend, the Bishop of Saluzzo, to keep him “closely united with him in his heart and also deign to often give me the advice and reminders that the Holy Spirit will inspire in you.”

Among the friends he met in Paris, his friendship with the famous Fr Peter de Bérulle, whom he met at Madame Acarie’s group, stands out. Francis wrote to him a few days after his episcopal consecration:

“I have been a consecrated bishop since the 8th of this month, the day of Our Lady. This prompts me to beg you to help me all the more warmly with your prayers. There is no remedy: we will always need to be washing our feet, since we are walking in dust. May our good God grant us the grace to live and die in his service.”

Another great friend of Francis was **Vincent de Paul**. A friendship was born between them that continued beyond the death of the founder of the Visitation, as Vincent took the Order to heart and became its reference point until the end of his days (1660). Vincent always remained grateful to the holy bishop from whom he had received salutary reproaches about his impetuous and touchy character. He treasured this and little by little corrected himself and, thinking of his friend, did not hesitate to describe him as “The man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth.”

Reading these letters we discover some of the qualities that must govern true friendship: communication, prayer and service (forgiveness, correction …).

We now come across many men and women to whom Francis addresses letters of spiritual friendship. Some examples:

To Madame de la Fléchère he writes:
“Be patient with everyone, but mainly with yourself. I mean to say that you must not be upset by your imperfections and always have the courage to recover promptly.”



St. Vincent de Paul – Founder of the Congregation of the Mission (Lazarists)
Portrait, Simon François de Tours; Source: Wikipedia

To Madame de Charmoisy he writes:
“You must be careful to begin gently, and from time to time take a look at your heart to see if it has kept sweet. If it has not kept so, soften it before doing anything.”

These letters are a **treatise on friendship**, not because they speak of friendship but because the writer lives a relationship of friendship, knows how to create a

climate and a style so that it is perceived and bears good fruit in life.

The same applies to the correspondence with **his daughters, the Visitandines**.

To Mother Favre, who felt the weight of her office, he wrote:
“It is necessary to arm ourselves with a courageous humility and to reject all temptations of discouragement in the holy confidence we have in God. Since this office has been imposed on you by the will of those whom you must obey, God will place Himself at your right hand and carry it with you, or rather, He will carry it, but you will carry it too.”

To Mother de Bréchard he wrote:
“He who can maintain meekness amid pain and weariness, and peace amid worry and over- whelming cares, is well nigh perfect. Perfect evenness of temper, true gentleness and sweetness of heart, are more rare than perfect chastity, but they are so much the more to be cultivated. I commend them to you, my dearest daughter, because upon these, like the oil of a lamp, depends the flame of good example. Nothing is so edifying as a loving good temper.”



Saint Jeanne François FRÉMIOT DE CHANTAL, co-founder of the Order of the Visitation of Saint Mary
Author unknown, Monastery of the Visitation of Mary in Toledo, Ohio (USA); Source: Wikipedia

Among the various Founding Mothers, a special place belongs to the Foundress, **Jane Frances de Chantal**, to whom Francis wrote from the beginning:
“Believe firmly that I have a living and extraordinary desire to serve your spirit with all the capacity of my strength. Take advantage of my affection and use all that God has given me for the service of your spirit. Here I am all yours.”

And he declared to her:
“I love this love. It is strong, expansive, without measure or reserve, but sweet, strong, most pure and most tranquil; in a word, it is a love that lives only in God. God, who sees all the folds of my heart, knows that there is nothing in it that is not for Him and according to Him, without whom I want to be nothing to anyone.”

This God whom Francis and Jane intend to serve is always present, is the guarantee that their love would always be consecration to Him alone:
“I would like to be able to express to you the feeling that I had of our dear unity today, as I took communion, because it was a great, perfect, sweet, powerful feeling, such that it could almost be called a vow, a consecration.”
“Who could have fused two spirits so perfectly that they were no more than one indivisible and inseparable spirit, if not He who is unity by essence? […]. Thousands of times each day my heart is close to you with thousands of good wishes which it presents to God for your consolation.”
“The holy unity that God has wrought is stronger than all separations, and distance cannot harm it in the least. So may God always bless us with his holy love. He has made us one heart in spirit and in life.”

I end with a wish, the one Francis wrote to one of the first Visitandines, Jacqueline Favre:
“How is your poor and beloved heart? Is it always courageous, and careful to avoid the surprises of sadness? Please do not torment it, not even when it has played some little nasty trick on you, but gently take it back and guide it on its way. This heart will become a great heart, made after God’s own heart.”

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