 Reading time: 11 min.

1. The early years
Francis was born in the family castle at Thorens (about 20 km from Annecy). He was seven weeks old and “it was a miracle that, in such a dangerous birth, his mother had not lost her life”. He was the eldest son followed by seven brothers and sisters. His mother, Françoise de Sionnaz, was just 15 years old while his father, Monsieur de Boisy, was 43! In those days, marriage among aristocrats was an opportunity to climb the social ladder (to gain noble titles, lands, castles…). The rest, including love, came later!


Church of St. Maurice de Thorens, France

He was baptised in the small church of St Maurice in Thorens. Years later, Francis chose that humble little church for his episcopal consecration (8 December 1602).

Francis spent his early years with his three cousins in the same castle: he played with them, amused himself and contemplated the splendid nature that surrounded him. It became the great book from which he would draw a thousand examples for his own books. The education he received from his parents was clearly Catholic. 'One must always think of God and be a man of God,' his father said, and Francis would treasure this advice. His parents regularly attended the parish and treated their employees fairly. They gave generously to them when needed. Francis' earliest memories were not only of the beauty of that wonderful nature, but also of the destruction and death caused by fratricidal wars in the name of the Gospel.

The time to go to school arrived: Francis left home and went to boarding school, first at La Roche for about two years and then for three years at Annecy in the company of his cousins. This time was marked by some important facts:

– he received his First Communion and Confirmation in the church of St Dominique (present-day Church of St Maurice) and from then on would frequently receive communion.

– he enrolled in the confraternity of the Rosary and from then on made a habit of saying the rosary daily.

– He asked to receive the tonsure: his father granted him permission, since this step did not imply the start of a clerical career at the time.

Francis was a normal, studious, obedient lad with a characteristic trait: "you never saw him make fun of anyone!"

By this time, Savoy had taught him all he could. And so in 1578, with his inseparable cousins and under the watchful eye of his tutor Déage, Francis left for Paris where he was to remain for ten years as a pupil at the Clermont college run by the Jesuits.

2. Ten significant years: 1578-1588

The timetable at the College was strict and the religious precepts were also demanding. During these years Francis studied Latin, Greek, Hebrew, familiarised himself with the classics and perfected his French. He had excellent teachers.

In his spare time, he frequented high-ranking circles, had free access to the Court, excelled in skills particular to the nobility, and took some theology courses at the Sorbonne. In particular he listened to Fr Génébrard's Commentary on the Song of Songs and was deeply moved by it: he discovered the passion of God for humanity in this allegory of the love of a man for a woman. He felt loved by God! But at the same time the idea of being excluded from this love grew in his thinking. He felt he

was damned! He experienced a time of crisis and for six weeks did not sleep or eat. He wept and fell ill. He only emerged from this state by entrusting himself to Our Lady in the church of St-Etienne-des-Grès with an act of heroic abandonment to God's mercy and goodness. He said a Salve Regina and the temptation vanished. Finally, having completed his final exams, he was able to leave Paris, though not without regret. What a joy it was for Francis to return home and re-embrace his parents, his little brothers and sisters who had meanwhile arrived to cheer up the family.
All for only a few months, because he had to leave once more to achieve his father's dream: to become a great lawyer.

3. The Padua years: 1588-1591
These were the decisive years for Francis on a human, cultural and spiritual level. Padua was the capital of the Italian Renaissance with thousands of students coming from all over Europe: the universities were home to the most famous teachers, the best spirits of the time.
Here Francis studied law and at the same time developed his theological studies, read the Church Fathers, and placed himself in the hands of a wise spiritual director, Jesuit Father Possevino. He came close to death's door, probably due to typhoid fever, received the sacraments and made a will: 'When I die, give my body to the medical students'. Such was the fervour for study and thirst for knowledge of the human body that medical students, short of corpses, would go to the cemetery to dig them up!
This testament of Francis is important because it speaks of a sensitivity he would retain for the rest of his life, for culture and the scientific innovations typical of the Renaissance.
He recovered, completed his studies brilliantly on 5 September 1591 and left Padua having "graduated with full marks *in utroque"* (civil and canon law). His father was proud of him.

4. Towards the priesthood: 1593
There were other dreams in Francis' heart, far removed from his father's, but how to tell him? Monsieur de Boisy placed all his hopes in Francis!
Francis was appointed Provost of Annecy Cathedral. On the strength of this honorary title, he met with his father to tell him of his intention to become a priest. It was a harsh and understandable confrontation.
"I thought and hoped that you would be the staff of my old age and the support of the family…I do not share your intentions, but I do not deny you my blessing," his

father concluded.
The way to the priesthood was open: in a few months, Francis received minor orders, the sub-diaconate, the diaconate and finally, on 18 December, priestly ordination. He spent three days preparing to celebrate his first mass on 21 December.
A few days after Christmas, Francis de Sales could be officially “installed” as provost of the cathedral and on that occasion he delivered one of his most famous addresses, a veritable **harangue**. One can already sense the ardour and zeal of the pastor, in tune with what the Council of Trent had indicated as the way to reform.

5. Missionary in the Chablais: 1594-1598

The Chablais is the territory bordering Lake Geneva. The priests in this area of Savoy had been driven out by the Calvinists in Geneva and the churches were without pastors. But now, in 1594, Duke Charles Emmanuel had reconquered the area and urged the Bishop of Annecy to send new missionaries. The proposal was passed on to the clergy, but no one had the courage to go to such hostile areas, risking their lives. Only Francis declared himself available and on 14 September, with his cousin Louis, he left for this mission.
He took up residence in the Allinges, a castle where Baron d’Hermance watched over his safety. Every morning, after Mass, he went down in search of the elders of Thonon. On Sundays he preached in the church of St Hippolytus, but the faithful were few in number. So he decided to write and have his sermons printed: he posted them in public places and slid them under the door of Catholics and Protestants alike.



Chapel of the Château des Allinges, France

His model was Jesus on the streets of Palestine: he was inspired by his gentleness and goodness, his frankness and sincerity. There was no lack of hostility and rejection, but ‘the first ears of corn’, the first conversions did come about.He was stern and inflexible towards error and those who spread heresy, but of unlimited patience towards all those he considered victims of the heretics’ theories.
“I love preaching that relies more on love of neighbour than on indignation, even of the Huguenots, whom one must treat with great compassion, not by flattering them, but by deploring them.” The Salesian spirit seems to be concentrated in this expression of Francis: “**Truth that is not charitable springs from charity that is not true”.**
The initiative to celebrate **the three Christmas Masses** in the church of St Hippolytus in 1596 is still worth remembering as a reminder, in this extraordinary

period, of Francis' zeal, kindness and courage.
But the initiative that contributed most to dismantling heresy in the Chablais was Forty Hour devotion promoted and led by Francis' new collaborator, Fr Cherubin de la Maurienne. The devotion was celebrated at Annemasse in 1597, on the outskirts of Geneva.
The following year the Forty Hours were held at Thonon (beginning of October 1598).
At the end of the year, Francis had to leave the "mission" and go to Rome to deal with various problems of the diocese.
He made important friends in Rome (Bellarmine, Baronio, Ancina…) and met the priests of the Oratory of St Philip Neri and fell in love with their spirit.
He returned to Annecy via Loreto, then by ship he sailed up to Venice; he stopped in Bologna and Turin where he discussed with the Duke how much the Pope had granted to the parishes of the diocese.
In 1602, he went to Paris again to negotiate with the Nuncio and the King on delicate diplomatic issues concerning the diocese and relations with the Calvinists. He remained there for nine long months but returned home empty-handed. Despite this being the diplomatic result, the spiritual and human profit was able to draw from it was very rich and important.
Decisive for Francis' life was his encounter with the famous 'Madame Acarie' group: it was a kind of spiritual gathering where the works of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross were read, Thanks to this spiritual movement, the reformed Carmelite Order would be introduced to France.
On his way back, Francis received the news that his beloved bishop had died.

6. Francis, Bishop of Geneva: 1602–1622
Francis was consecrated bishop on 8 December 1602, in the little church of Thorens, and remained at the head of his diocese for twenty years. "On that day God took 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."
Let me highlight three important aspects of this period:

6.1 Francis the pastor
During these years his zeal shone through in the words: "***Da mihi animas"*** which became his programme.
"The priest is all for God and all for the people" he used to say, and he was the model of this first of all!

The problems of the diocese were many and very serious: they concerned the clergy, the monasteries, the training of future ministers, the non-existent seminary, catechesis, the lack of economic resources.
Francis immediately began visiting the more than four hundred parishes. This period of visitation lasted five or six years: he spoke with the priests, comforted, encouraged, solved the most thorny problems, preached, administered the sacrament of Confirmation to children or future spouses, celebrated weddings...
To remedy the ignorance of the clergy, he taught theology at home, and gathered his priests together in synod each year. He preached… "For some years, he taught many theological subjects to his canons in Annecy and dictated lessons to them in Latin."
There were many who aspired to religious life or the priesthood: it was not vocations that were lacking. It was very often a real sense of vocation that was lacking!
He wrote a pamphlet, *Advice to Confessors*, a jewel of pastoral zeal where doctrine, personal experience, advice were interwoven…
He visited the numerous monasteries in the diocese: some he closed, had people in others transferred elsewhere, founded new ones.
He struggled to have a seminary, right to the end: funds were lacking due to the selfishness of the Knights of St Lazarus and St Maurice, who withheld the revenues due to the diocese.
The dominant characteristic in Francis the pastor was his ability **to accompany people.**
"It is a real effort to guide individual souls, but an effort that makes one feel it is as light as the reapers' and harvesters' efforts, who are never as happy as when they have much work and a biog load to carry."
The characteristics of this individualised style of education:
Richness of humanity: "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."
Father and brother: he could be very demanding, but always in a gentle and serene way. He never avoided the real issue at stake: just read the first part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* to realise this.
Prudence and practicality: "Be kind to yourself during this pregnancy… if you get tired of kneeling, sit down, and if you don't have enough attention to pray for half an hour, pray for just a quarter of an hour…" (Madame de la Fléchère)
Sense of God: "You need to do everything through love and nothing through constraint; love obedience more than you fear disobedience. "May God be the God

of your heart."
Francis was described as the truest copy of Jesus on earth (St. Vincent de Paul)

6.2 Francis the writer:
Despite the commitments associated with his being a bishop, Francis found time to devote himself to writing. Writing what? **Thousands of letters** to people asking for his spiritual guidance, to the newly founded monasteries of the Visitation, to prominent members of the nobility or the Church to try to solve problems, and to his family and friends.
The *Introduction to the Devout Life* was published in 1608: it is Francis' best known work.
"It is in the character, in the genius, but above all in the heart of Francis de Sales that one must seek the true origin and remote preparation of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* or *Philothea"*: thus wrote Dom B. Mackey, a man who dedicated his life to the study of the Saint's works, in the introduction to the Annecy critical edition.
The preface bears the date of 8 August 1608.
This book received **an enthusiastic reception**.
La Chantal speaks of it as "a book dictated by the Holy Spirit". In its 400 years of life, the book has had over 1300 editions with millions of copies, translated into all the languages of the world.
Four centuries later, these pages still retain their charm and relevance.

In 1616, another of Francis' writings appeared: *The Treatise on the Love of God*, his masterpiece, written for those who want to aim for the heights! He guides them with wisdom and experience to live total abandonment to God's will… up to the point "where lovers meet!" that is, to Calvary. Only the saints know how to lead us to holiness.

6.3 Francis the founder
In 1604, Francis went to Dijon to preach for Lent, invited by the Archbishop of Bourges, Andrew Fremyot. From the outset he was struck by the attention and devout behaviour of one woman there, Baroness Jeanne François [Jane Frances] Fremyot, the archbishop's sister.
Between 1604, the year Jane met Francis, until 1610, the date Jane entered the novitiate at Annecy, the two saints met four or five times, each time for a week or ten days. The meetings were enlivened by the presence of various people from the family (Francis' mother, sister) or friends (Madame Brulart, the abbess of Puy d'Orbe…).

Jane Frances would have wanted to speed things up, but Francis proceeded with caution.
Little by little the various knots were loosened, they found consensus, serenity and peace grew and this allowed the problems to be better resolved.
God had taken possession of her heart and made her a woman ready to give her life for Him. Her long-cherished dream came true on 6 June 1610: a historic day! Jane Frances and her two friends (Giacomina Favre and Carlotta de Bréchard) entered a small house, "la Galerie" and began their novitiate year.
On 6 June the following year the three made their first professions before Francis. Meanwhile, other young people and women asked to be received. Thus began the religious family inspired by the Visitation of Mary.
The expansion of the new Order was prodigious. Some figures: from 1611 (year of foundation) to 1622 (year of Francis' death) there were thirteen foundations: Annecy, Lyon, Moulins, Grenoble, Bourges, Paris…. By the time of Jane Frances' death in 1641, there would be 87 monasteries with an average of over 3 new ones per year! Among them two in Piedmont: Turin and Pinerolo!

7. Final years
Francis had to take the road to Paris twice in the last years of his life: important diplomatic and spiritual journeys, tiring journeys for him as he was already tired and in ill health.
Francis' reputation for holiness was known in Paris to the point that Cardinal Henri de Gondi thought of him as his likely successor and put it to him. Francis' sympathetic reply can be noted: "I married a poor woman (the diocese of Annecy); I cannot divorce to marry a rich one (the diocese of Paris)!"
In the last year of his life he undertook another trip to Pinerolo, Piedmont, at the Pope's request, to restore peace in a monastery at Foglianti (reformed Cistercians) who could not agree on their superior general. Francis managed to reconcile minds and hearts to their unanimous satisfaction.
Another order from the Duke required Francis to accompany Cardinal Maurice of Savoy to Avignon to meet King Louis XIII.
On his return, he stopped in Lyon at the Visitandine Monastery. Here he met Jane Frances de Chantal for the last time. He was exhausted, but still preached until the end, which came on 28 December 1622.
Francis died with a dream: to retire from the affairs of the diocese and to spend the last years of his life in the peaceful Monastery at Talloires, on the shores of the lake, writing what he thought of as his final work, a *Treatise on the Love of Neighbour,* and praying the Rosary. We can be certain that he had already written this book

through the example of his life; as for praying the Rosary, he now lacks neither time nor the tranquillity.

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