 Reading time: 5 min.

(continuation from previous article)

THE EUCHARIST IN SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (6/8)

Francis received his First Communion and Confirmation at the age of about nine. From then on he received Communion every week or at least once a month.
God took possession of his heart and Francis would remain faithful to this friendship that would gradually become the love of his life.

His fidelity to Christian life continued and was strengthened during the ten years in Paris. “He received communion at least once a month, if he could not do so more often.” And this for ten years!

Regarding his time in Padua we know that he went to Mass every day and that he received communion once a week. The Eucharist united with prayer became the nourishment of his Christian life and vocation. It is in this profound unity with the Lord that he perceived His will: it is here that the desire to be “all of God” matured.

Francis was ordained a priest on 18 December 1593 and the Eucharist would be at the heart of his days, and his strength for spending himself for others.
Here are some testimonies taken from the Beatification Process:
“It was easy to notice how he kept himself in deep recollection and attention before God: his eyes modestly lowered, his face recollected with a sweetness and serenity so great that those who observed him carefully were struck and moved by it.”

“When he celebrated Holy Mass he was completely different from how he usually was: a serene face, without distraction and, at the moment of communion, those who saw him were deeply impressed by his devotion.”

St Vincent de Paul adds:
“When I repeated his words to myself, I felt such an admiration for him that I was led to see in him the man who best
reproduced the Son of God living on earth.”

We already know of his departure in 1594 as a missionary to the Chablais.

He spent his first months in the shelter of the Allinges fortress. Visiting what remains of this fortress, one is impressed by the chapel which has remained intact: small, dark, cold, made of stone. Here Francis celebrated the Eucharist every morning at around four o'clock and paused in prayer before going down to Thonon with a heart full of charity and mercy, drawn from the divine sacrament.
Francis treated people with respect, indeed with compassion, and "Some wished to make themselves feared; but he desired only to be loved, and to enter men's hearts through the doorway of affection" (J.P. Camus).

It is the Eucharist that sustained his initial struggles: he did not respond to insults, provocations, lynching; he related to everyone with warmth.
His first sermon as a sub-deacon had been on the subject of the Eucharist and it would certainly serve him well in the Chablais, because "this august sacrament" would be his warhorse: in the sermons he gave in the church of St Hippolytus, he would often address this subject and expound the Catholic point of view with clarity and passion.

The following testimony, addressed to his friend A. Favre, tells of the quality and ardour of his preaching on such an important subject:
"Yesterday M. d'Avully and the elders of the city, as they are called, came openly to my preaching, because they had heard that I was to speak about the august sacrament of the altar. They had such a desire to hear from me the exposition of what Catholics believe and their proofs concerning this mystery that, not having dared to come publicly, for fear of seeming to be ignoring the law they had imposed on themselves, they listened to me from a place where they could not be seen."

Little by little, the Body of the Lord infused his pastor's heart with gentleness, meekness, goodness, so that even his preacher's voice was affected: a calm and benevolent tone, never aggressive or polemical!
"I am convinced that he who preaches with love, preaches sufficiently against heretics, even if he does not say a single word or argue with them."

More eloquent than any treatise is this experience that took place on 25 May 1595. At three in the morning, while engrossed in deep meditation on the most holy and august sacrament of the Eucharist, he felt moved to rapture by the Holy Spirit in an abundance of sweetness… and since his heart was overwhelmed by such delight, he was finally forced to throw himself to the ground and exclaim:"Lord, hold back the waves of your grace; withdraw them from me because I can no longer bear the

greatness of your sweetness, which forces me to prostrate myself."

In 1596, after more than two years of catechesis, he decided to celebrate the three Christmas Masses. They were celebrated amidst general enthusiasm and emotion. Francis was happy! This midnight Mass on Christmas 1596 was one of the high points of his life. In this Mass was the Church, the Catholic Church re-established in its living foundation.

The Council of Trent had advocated the practice of the **Forty Hour Devotion**, which consisted of the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament for three consecutive days by the entire Christian community.
At the beginning of September 1597, they took place in Annemasse, on the outskirts of Geneva, in the presence of the bishop, Francis and other collaborators, with **much greater fruit than hoped for**. They were intense days of prayer, processions, sermons, masses. Over forty parishes participated with an incredible number of people.

Given this success, the following year they were held in Thonon. It was a feast lasting several days that exceeded all expectations. Everything ended late at night, with the last sermon given by Francis. He preached on the Eucharist.

Many scholars of the life and works of the saint maintain that only his great love for the Eucharist can explain the 'miracle' of the Chablais, that is, how this young priest was able to bring the entire vast region back to the Church in just four years.
And this love lasted all his life, until the end. In the last meeting he had in Lyons with his Daughters, the Visitandines, by then near to death, he spoke to them about confession and communion.

What was the Eucharist for our saint? It was first and foremost:

The heart of his day, which meant he lived in intimate communion with God
"I have not yet told you about the sun of the spiritual exercises: the most holy and supreme Sacrifice and Sacrament of the Mass, the centre of the Christian religion, the heart of devotion, the soul of piety."

It was the confident handing over of his life to God whom he asks for

strength to continue his mission with humility and charity.
“If the world asks you why you receive communion so often, answer that it is to learn to love God, to purify you from your imperfections, to free you from your miseries, to find strength in your weaknesses and consolation in your afflictions. Two kinds of people must receive communion often: the perfect, because being well-disposed they would do wrong not to approach the fountain and source of perfection; and the imperfect in order to strive for perfection. The strong not to weaken and the weak to strengthen themselves. The sick to seek healing and the healthy not to become sick.”

The Eucharist creates a profound unity in Francis with so many people
“This sacrament not only unites us to Jesus Christ, but also to our neighbour, with those who partake of the same food and makes us one with them. And one of the main fruits is mutual charity and gentleness of heart towards one another since we belong to the same Lord and in Him we are united heart to heart with one another.”

It is a gradual transformation in Jesus
“Those who have good bodily digestion feel a strengthening for the whole body, because of the general distribution that is made of the food. So, My daughter, those who have good spiritual digestion feel that Jesus Christ, who is their food, spreads and communicates to all parts of their soul and body. They have Jesus Christ in their brain, in their heart, in their chest, in their eyes, in their hands, in their ears, in their feet. But what does this Saviour do everywhere? He straightens everything, purifies everything, mortifies everything, enlivens everything. He loves in the heart, understands in the brain, breathes in the chest, sees in the eyes, speaks in the tongue, and so on: he does everything in everyone and then we live, not we, but it is Jesus Christ who lives in us.
It also transforms the days and nights, so that ‘Nights are days when God is in our hearts and days become nights when He is not.’”

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