 Reading time: 8 min.

Francis went to Padua, a city belonging to the Venetian Republic, in October 1588, accompanied by his younger brother Gallois, a twelve-year-old boy who would study with the Jesuits, and their faithful tutor, Fr Déage. At the end of the 16th century, the law faculty of the University of Padua enjoyed an extraordinary reputation, surpassing even that of the famous Studium in Bologna. When he delivered his Discourse of Thanksgiving following his promotion to doctor, Francis de Sales weaved its praises in dithyrambic form:

Up to that time, I had not dedicated any work to the holy and sacred science of law: but when, afterwards, I decided to commit myself to such a study, I had absolutely no need to look for where to turn or where to go; this college of Padua immediately attracted me by its celebrity and, under the most favourable auspices, in fact, at that time, it had doctors and readers such as it never had and never will have greater.

Whatever he may say, it is certain that the decision to study law did not come from him, but was imposed on him by his father. Other reasons might have played in Padua's favour, namely the need that the Senate of a bilingual state had for magistrates with a dual French and Italian culture.

In the homeland of humanism

Crossing the Alps for the first time, Francis de Sales set foot in the homeland of humanism. In Padua, he could not only admire the palaces and churches, especially the basilica of St Anthony, but also Giotto's frescoes, Donatello's bronzes, Mantegna's paintings and Titian's frescoes. His stay in the Italian peninsula also allowed him to get to know several cities of art, in particular, Venice, Milan and Turin.

On a literary level, he could not fail to be in contact with some of the most famous productions. Did he have in his hand Dante Alighieris *Divine Comedy*, the poems of Petrarch, forerunner of humanism and first poet of his time, the novellas of Boccaccio, founder of Italian prose, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, or Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*? His preference was for spiritual literature, in particular the thoughtful reading of Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*. He acknowledged modestly, "I don't think I speak perfect Italian."

In Padua, Francis had the good fortune to meet a distinguished Jesuit in the person of Father Antonio Possevino. This "wandering humanist with an epic life"

who had been charged by the pope with diplomatic missions in Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Poland and France, had taken up permanent residence in Padua shortly before Francis' arrival. He became his spiritual director and guide in his studies and knowledge of the world.

The University of Padua

Founded in 1222, the University of Padua was the oldest university in Italy after Bologna, of which it was an offshoot. It successfully taught not only law, regarded as the *scientia scientiarum*, but also theology, philosophy and medicine. The 1,500 or so students came from all over Europe and were not all Catholics, which sometimes led to worries and unrest.

Fights were frequent, sometimes bloody. One of the favourite dangerous games was the "Paduan hunt" Francis de Sales would one day tell a friend, Jean-Pierre Camus, "that a student, after striking a stranger,ì with his sword, took refuge with a woman he discovered was the mother of the young man he had just murdered." He himself, who did not go round without a sword, was one day involved in a fight by fellow students, who considered his gentleness to be a form of cowardice.

Professors and students alike appreciated the proverbial *patavinam libertatem*, which in addition to being cultivated in intellectual pursuit, also incited a good number of students to "flutter about" by giving themselves up to the good life. Even the disciples closest to Francis were not models of virtue. The widow of one of them would later recount, in her picturesque language, how her future husband had staged a farce in bad taste with some accomplices, aimed at throwing Francis into the arms of a "miserable whore".

The study of law

In obedience to his father, Francis devoted himself courageously to the study of civil law, to which he wanted to add that of ecclesiastical law, which would make him a future doctor of *utroque jure*. The study of law also involved the study of jurisprudence, which is "the science by means of which law is administered".

The study focused on the sources of law, that is, ancient Roman law, collected and interpreted in the 6th century by the jurists of the Emperor Justinian. Throughout his life, he would remember the definition of justice, read at the beginning of the *Digesto*: "a perpetual, strong and constant will to render to everyone what belongs to him."

Examining Francis' notebooks, we can identify some of his reactions to certain laws. He is in full agreement with the title of the Code that opens the series

of laws: *Of the Sovereign Trinity and the Catholic Faith*, and with the defence that immediately follows: T*hat no one should be allowed to discuss them in public*. “This title” he noted, “is precious, I would say sublime, and worthy of being read often against reformers, know-it-alls and politicians.”

Francis de Sales’ legal education rested on a foundation that seemed unquestionable at the time. For the Catholics of his time, “tolerating” Protestantism could take on no other meaning than that of being accomplices to error; hence the need to fight it by all means, including those provided by the law in force. Under no circumstances was one to resign oneself to the presence of heresy, which appeared not only as an error on the level of faith, but also as a source of division and disturbance in Christianity. In the eagerness of his twenties, Francis de Sales shared this view.

But this eagerness also had free rein over those who favoured injustice and persecution, since, with regard to Title XXVI of Book III, he wrote: “As precious as gold and worthy of being written in capital letters is the ninth law which states: ‘Let the relatives of the prince be punished with fire if they persecute the inhabitants of the provinces.’”

Later, Francis would appeal to the one he designated as “our Justinian”to denounce the slowness of justice on the part of the judge who “excuses himself by invoking a thousand reasons of custom, style, theory, practice and caution.” In his lectures on ecclesiastical law, he studied the collection of laws that he would later use, in particular those of the medieval canonist Gratianus, inter alia, to demonstrate that the bishop of Rome is the “true successor of Saint Peter and head of the Church militant”, and that religious men and women must be placed “under the obedience of the bishops.”

Consulting the handwritten notes taken by Francis during his stay in Padua, one is struck by the extremely neat handwriting. He went from the Gothic script, still used in Paris, to the modern script of the humanists.

But in the end, his law studies must have bored him quite a bit. On a hot summer’s day, faced with the coldness of the laws and their remoteness in time, he wrote, disillusioned: “Since these matters are old, it did not seem profitable to devote oneself to examining them in this steamy weather, which is too hot to comfortably deal with cold and chilling discussions.”

Theological studies and intellectual crisis

While dedicated to the study of law, Francis continued to take a close interest in theology. According to his nephew, when he freshly arrived in Padua, “he set to work with all possible diligence, and placed on the lectern in his room the

Summa of the Angelic Doctor, St Thomas, so that he could have it before his eyes every day and easily consult it to understand other books. He greatly enjoyed reading the books of St Bonaventure. He acquired a good knowledge of the Latin Fathers, especially the 'two brilliant luminaries of the Church', 'the great Saint Augustine' and Saint Jerome, who were also 'two great captains of the ancient Church', without forgetting the 'glorious Saint Ambrose' and Saint Gregory the Great. Among the Greek Fathers, he admired St John Chrysostom 'who, because of his sublime eloquence, was praised and called Golden Mouth'. He also frequently cited St Gregory of Nazianzus, St Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Athanasius, Origen and others."

Consulting the fragments of notes that have come down to us, we learn that he also read the most important authors of his time, in particular, the great Spanish exegete and theologian Juan Maldonado, a Jesuit who had successfully established new methods in the study of the texts of Scripture and the Church Fathers. In addition to personal study, Francis was able to take theology courses at the university, where Fr Déage was preparing his doctorate, and benefit from the help and advice of Fr Possevino. It is also known that he often visited the Franciscans at the Basilica of St Anthony.

His reflection focused again on the problem of predestination and grace, to the point that he filled five notebooks. In reality, Francis found himself faced with a dilemma: to remain faithful to convictions that had always been his, or to stick to the classical positions of St Augustine and St Thomas, "the greatest and unrivalled doctor." Now he found it difficult to "sympathise"with such a discouraging doctrine of these two masters, or at least with the current interpretation, according to which men have no right to salvation,because it depends entirely on a free decision by God.

By his adolescence, Francis had developed a more optimistic view of God's plan. His personal convictions were reinforced after the appearance in 1588 of the book by Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina, whose Latin title *Concordia* summed up the thesis well: *Concord of Free Will with the Gift of Grace*. In this work, predestination in the strict sense was replaced with a predestination that took into account man's merits, i.e. his good or bad deeds. In other words, Molina affirmed both God's sovereign action and the decisive role of the freedom he bestowed on man.

In 1606, the bishop of Geneva would have the honour of being consulted by the pope on the theological dispute between the Jesuit Molina and the Dominican Domingo Báñez on the same issue, for whom Molina's doctrine granted too much autonomy to human freedom, at the risk of jeopardising God's sovereignty.

The *Treatise on the Love of God*, which appeared in 1616, contains in

Chapter 5 of Book III the thought of Francis de Sales, summarised in “fourteen lines”, which, according to Jean-Pierre Camus, had cost him “the reading of one thousand two hundred pages of a large volume.” With a commendable effort to be concise and exact, Francis affirmed both the divine liberality and generosity, and human freedom and responsibility in the act of writing this weighty sentence: “It is up to us to be his: for although it is a gift of God to belong to God, yet it is a gift that God never refuses to anyone, on the contrary, he offers it to all, to grant it to those who will willingly consent to receive it.”

Making his own the ideas of the Jesuits, who in the eyes of many appeared to be innovators, and whom the Jansenists with Blaise Pascal would soon brand as bad theologians, too lax, Francis de Sales grafted his theology into the current of Christian humanism and opted for the “God of the human heart” Salesian theology, which rests on the goodness of God who wants all to be saved, would likewise present itself with a pressing invitation to the human person to respond with the whole “heart” to the appeals of grace.

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