 Reading time: 15 min.

(continuation from previous article)

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.

Medicine

Alongside the faculties of law and theology, the studies of medicine and botany enjoyed extraordinary prestige in Padua, especially after the Flemish physician Andrea Vesalius, the father of modern anatomy, had dealt a mortal blow to the old theories of Hippocrates and Galienus with the practice of dissecting the human body, which scandalised the established authorities. Vesalius had published his *De humani corporis fabrica* in 1543, which revolutionised knowledge of human anatomy. To procure corpses, the bodies of the executed were demanded or the dead were dug up, which did not happen without provoking sometimes bloody disputes with gravediggers.

Nevertheless, several things can be said. First of all, it is known that during the serious illness that laid him low in Padua at the end of 1590, he had decided to donate his own body to science if he died, and this was to avoid quarrels among medical students intent on searching for corpses. Did he therefore approve of the new method of dissecting the human body? In any case, he seemed to encourage it with this hotly debated gesture. Moreover, one can detect in him an abiding interest in health problems, in doctors and surgeons. There is a big difference, he wrote for example, between the brigand and the surgeon: 'The brigand and the surgeon cut the limbs and make the blood flow, one to kill, the other to heal."

Also in Padua at the beginning of the 17th century, an English doctor,

William Harvey, discovered the rules of blood circulation. The heart truly became the author of life, the centre of everything, the sun, like the prince in his state. Although the English physician would only publish his findings in 1628, it is possible to assume that by the time Francis was a student, such research was already underway. He himself wrote, for example, that "*cor habet motum in se proprium et alia movere facit*", i.e. that "the heart has within it a movement which is proper to it and which makes everything else move." Quoting Aristotle, he would say that "the heart is the first member that comes to life in us and the last that dies."

Botany

Probably during his stay in Padua, Francis also became interested in the natural sciences. He could not be unaware that there was the first botanical garden in the city, created to cultivate, observe and experiment with indigenous and exotic plants. Plants were ingredients in most medicines and their use for therapeutic purposes was mainly based on texts by ancient authors, which were not always reliable. We possess eight collections of *Similitudes* by Francis, probably compiled between 1594 and 1614, but whose origin can be traced back to Padua. The title of these small collections of images and comparisons drawn from nature certainly manifests their utilitarian character; their content, on the other hand, testifies to an almost encyclopaedic interest, not only in the plant world, but also in the mineral and animal worlds.

Francis de Sales consulted the ancient authors, who in his time enjoyed an undisputed authority on the subject: Pliny the Elder, author of a vast *Natural History*, a true encyclopaedia of the time, but also Aristotle (that of the *History of Animals* and *The Generation of Animals*), Plutarch, Theophrastus (author of a *History of Plants*), and even St Augustine and St Albert the Great. He was also familiar with contemporary authors, in particular the *Commentari a Dioscorides* by the Italian naturalist Pietro Andrea Mattioli.

What fascinated Francis de Sales was the mysterious relationship between natural history and man's spiritual life. For him, writes A. Ravier, "every discovery is the bearer of a secret of creation." The particular virtues of certain plants are marvellous: "Pliny and Mattioli describe a herb that is salutary against plague, colic, kidney stones, inviting us to cultivate it in our gardens." Along the many paths he travelled during his life, we see him attentive to nature, to the world around him, to the succession of the seasons and their mysterious significance. The book of nature appeared to him as an immense Bible that he had to learn to interpret, which is why he called the Fathers of the Church "spiritual herbalists". When he exercised the spiritual direction of very different people, he would remember that "in the garden,

every herb and every flower requires special care.”

Personal life programme

During his stay in Padua, a city where there were more than forty monasteries and convents, Francis again turned to the Jesuits for his spiritual direction. Stressing as is appropriate the leading role of the Jesuits in the formation of the young Francis de Sales, it must be said, however, that they were not the only ones. A great admiration and friendship bound him to Father Filippo Gesualdi, a Franciscan preacher from the famous convent of St Anthony of Padua. He frequented the Theatine convent, where Father Lorenzo Scupoli came from time to time to preach. There he discovered the book entitled *Spiritual Combat*, which taught him how to master the inclinations of the lower part of the soul. Francis de Sales “wrote not a few things” Camus said, “of which I immediately discover the seed and the germ in some passages of the *Combat’”* During his stay in Padua, he also seems to have dedicated himself to an educational activity in an orphanage.

It is undoubtedly due to the beneficial influence of these teachers, in particular Father Possevino, that Francis wrote various rules of life, of which significant fragments have survived. The first, entitled *Exercise of Preparation*, was a mental exercise to be performed in the morning: “I will endeavour, through it” he wrote, “to prepare myself to deal with and perform my duty in the most praiseworthy manner.” It consisted in imagining everything that could happen to him during the day:”I will therefore think seriously about the unforeseen events that may happen to me, the groups where I may be forced to intervene, the events that may occur to me, the places where people will try to persuade me to go.”And here is the purpose of the exercise:

I will study diligently and seek the best ways to avoid missteps. I shall thus dispose and determine within myself what it shall be expedient for me to do, the order and behaviour I shall have to remain in this or some other circumstance, what it will be appropriate to say in company, the demeanour I shall have to observe and what I shall have to flee and desire.

In his *Particular Conduct to spend the day well*, the student identified the main practices of piety he intended to do: morning prayers, daily Mass, time of “spiritual rest”, prayers and invocations during the night. In the *Exercise of Sleep or Spiritual Rest*, he would specify the subjects on which he was to focus his meditations. Alongside the classical themes, such as the vanity of this world, the detestation of sin, divine justice, he had carved out space for considerations, with a

humanist flavour, on the “excellence of virtue”, which “makes man beautiful inwardly and also outwardly”, on the beauty of human reason, this “divine torch” that spreads a “marvellous splendour”, as well as on the “infinite wisdom, omnipotence and incomprehensible goodness” of God. Another practice of piety was devoted to frequent Communion, its preparation and thanksgiving. There is a development in his frequency of Communion compared to the Parisian period.

As for the *Rules for Conversations and Meetings*, they are of particular interest from the point of view of social education. They contain six points that the student set out to observe. First of all, a clear distinction had to be made between simple encounters, where “companionship is momentary” and “conversation” where affectivity comes into play. As far as encounters are concerned, one reads this general rule:

I will never despise or give the impression of completely shunning meeting any individual; this could give reason to appear haughty, severe, arrogant, censorious, ambitious and controlling. […] I will not take the liberty of saying or doing anything that is not balanced, lest I appear insolent, letting myself be carried away by too easy a familiarity. Above all, I will be careful not to bite or sting or mock anyone […]. I will respect everyone in particular, I will observe modesty, I will speak little and well, so that the companions will return to a new meeting with pleasure and not with boredom.

With regard to conversations, a term that at the time had a broad meaning of habitual acquaintance or companionship, Francis was more cautious. He wanted to be “a friend to all and familiar to few”, and always faithful to the one rule that allowed no exception: “Nothing against God”.

For the rest, he wrote, “I will be modest without insolence, free without austerity, gentle without affectation, yielding without contradiction unless reason suggests otherwise, cordial without dissimulation.” He would behave differently towards superiors, equals and inferiors. It was his general rule to “adapt himself to the variety of company, but without prejudice to virtue in any way.” He divided people into three categories: the brash, the free and the closed. He would remain imperturbable before insolent people, would be open with free (i.e. simple, welcoming) people and would be very prudent with melancholic types, often full of curiosity and suspicion. With adults, finally, he would be on his guard, to deal with them “as with fire” and not get too close. Of course, one could testify to them about love, because love “begets freedom” but what must dominate is respect that “begets modesty”.

It is easy to see what degree of human and spiritual maturity the law student had reached by then. Prudence, wisdom, modesty, discernment and charity are the qualities that leap to the eye in his life programme, but there is also an “honest freedom”, a benevolent attitude towards all, and an uncommon spiritual fervour. This did not prevent him from going through difficult times in Padua, of which there are perhaps reminiscences in a passage of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* where he states that “a young man or a young lady who does not go along in speech, in play, in dancing, in drinking or in dressing with the unruliness of a debauched company will be mocked and taunted by others, and their modesty called bigotry or affectation.”

Return to Savoy

On 5 September 1591, Francis de Sales crowned all his studies with a brilliant doctorate *in utroque jure*. Taking leave of the University of Padua, he departed, he said, from “that hill on whose summit dwell, without doubt, the Muses as in another Parnassus.”

Before leaving Italy, it was appropriate to visit this country so rich in history, culture and religion. With Déage, Gallois and a few Savoyard friends, they left at the end of October for Venice, then on to Ancona and the sanctuary at Loreto. Their final destination was to reach Rome. Unfortunately, the presence of brigands, emboldened by the death of Pope Gregory XIV, and also the lack of money did not allow them to do so.

On his return to Padua, he resumed his study of the *Codex* for some time, including the account of the journey. But at the end of 1591, he gave up because of fatigue. It was time to think about returning to his homeland. Indeed, the return to Savoy took place towards the end of February 1592.