 Reading time: 12 min.

Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva in the 17th century, revolutionised Christian spirituality by proposing a "civil devotion" accessible to all, not just reserved for monks and contemplatives. His most famous work, the "Introduction to the Devout Life" (Philothea), teaches that true devotion does not consist in outward practices or affected attitudes, but in an authentic love of God and neighbour, lived with joy in one's daily occupations. Opposing the notion that relegated holiness to monasteries, Francis de Sales shows that soldiers, artisans, spouses, and princes can all aspire to Christian perfection. His devotion is intelligent, discreet, and joyful, perfectly integrated into social life, transforming religion into a living presence in the world rather than an escape from it.

Addressing Philothea on the subject of social life in the world, Francis de Sales gives her the following advice: "To hunt for conversations, and to do all one can to avoid them, are two equally reprehensible extremes, from the point of view of that civil devotion of which I am speaking to you." This insistence on "civil devotion" is what seems to have most struck both ancient and modern readers of "Philothea", because it reveals the author's profound intention to form not only fervent Christians, but also good citizens of the earthly city.

True and False Devotion

At the beginning of the 17th century, the noun '*devotion*' had not yet acquired the weak and pejorative meaning it would often later assume. A devout person was not yet a bigot or a hypocrite. Nevertheless, Francis de Sales felt obliged to dismiss several false interpretations of devotion that were already common in his time:

One who is given to fasting will believe himself a good devotee because he fasts, even though his heart may be full of rancour; and though for sobriety's sake he dares not touch a little wine or even a little water with his tongue, he does not scruple to dip it in his neighbour's blood with slander and calumny. Another will think himself devout because he recites a great number of prayers every day, even though afterwards his tongue abounds in unseemly, arrogant, and injurious words among servants and neighbours.

All these individuals, the author of *Philothea* continued, are commonly considered devout, but they are not so in any way; they are merely "statues and phantoms of devotion." It must be added that it is not Lenten faces that make saints. The reply

he is said to have given one day about a holy man who always looked sad is attributed, not without reason, to Francis de Sales: “If a saint is sad, he is a sad saint.”
When devotion is affected and bizarre, it is false. Francis de Sales even reproached himself for having fallen into it once, during his adolescence:

When I was a young student in this city, a great fervour and a great desire to be holy and perfect came over me; I thought that for this purpose it was necessary for me to bend my head on my shoulder while saying the Hours, because another student who was truly holy did so, and I did it for a while with care, without becoming any holier for it.

In what, then, does true devotion consist? It is nothing other than “a spiritual agility and liveliness by virtue of which charity performs its actions in us, or we through it, with promptness and affection”; or again, it is “a general inclination and readiness of the spirit to do what we deem pleasing to God.” It is a love of God that aspires to perfection. Devotion is an inner fire.

Religion for Everyone

The success of Francis de Sales lay in placing the spiritual life within everyone’s reach, using clear language suited to the sensibility of the age. Indeed, if devotion is love—love of God first and foremost, but also, and in the same movement, love of neighbour—it is accessible to all, in all situations.
The “civil devotion” that he teaches and propagates takes into account all aspects of human reality, upon which it will exert a beneficial influence. The author of *Philothea* goes so far as to use the word *heresy* to denounce an attitude that seems to him incompatible with a balanced view of social realities and with the Christian life: “It is an error, nay a heresy, to wish to banish the devout life from the company of soldiers, from the artisan’s workshop, from the prince’s court, from the daily life of married couples.”
To lead an authentic Christian life, it is not essential to withdraw from the world, go into the desert, or enter a monastery. Addressing Philothea—that is, every person who wishes to love God—the author set out to trace for her a path of fervent Christian life in the midst of the world, teaching her how it is necessary to use her “wings to fly” to the heights of prayer, and, jointly, her “feet to walk with men women in holy and friendly conversation.”
In his book, we find, in fact, a wealth of advice and teachings on subjects that, before him, spiritual literature had seldom addressed, such as everyday life with its

problems, its chores, and matters pertaining to marriage, social relations, clothes, recreation, games, dancing, or friendships. More generally, it has been recognised that the Bishop of Geneva had the merit of bringing religion into life and life into religion.

Devotion is good “for men as for women,” we read in the preface to *Theotimus*. Philothea is a female name chosen to designate every soul that aspires to devotion, he writes, adding with a touch of irony that “men also have a soul just like women.” Furthermore, devotion does not depend on “natural temperament.” There are people who have “a heart inclined to love,” for whom “it is easy to want to love God,” but they run “the risk of loving badly [because their love] is linked to the ease of loving.” Others have “a sour, harsh, melancholic, and sullen soul”: their love will be “more valid and praiseworthy, just as the other will also be more graceful and delightful.” All these people endowed with a different temperament “will undoubtedly love God to the same degree, but not in the same manner.”

An Intelligent and Discreet Devotion

The Christian’s devotion must be “intelligent,” and one must understand the prayers one says: “I wish you to have a French translation of all the prayers you will recite,” Francis de Sales wrote to the Baroness de Chantal. “I do not want you to say them in French, but in Latin, which fosters devotion, but I want you to know in some way the meaning of the prayers you recite.” He would give the same advice to Philothea in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, adding a warning against the excesses of verbal devotion, “because a single *Pater* recited with feeling is worth more than many recited in a hurry.”

To understand their religion, the Christian living in the world must educate themselves. As a spiritual director, Francis de Sales recommended listening to the word of God during preaching and reading works useful for spiritual formation, such as the life and works of Saint Teresa of Ávila, as well as those of great spiritual authors of his time. Although personal reading of the Bible was not yet the order of the day for Catholics, abundant nourishment was available to people wishing to attain Christian perfection. The Bishop of Geneva would contribute significantly to this, particularly with the publication of *Philothea* and *Theotimus*.

The Christian must know, in a special way, that in the spiritual life what matters above all is the interior. Devotion, he would tell the Visitandines, must be “intimate, strong, and generous” (E I 1005). If the devout person becomes infatuated with practices and exercises to the point of making them the end in themselves, if they wear them like a garment of human vanity, they must be induced to rid themselves of them, because true love “strips them of the most pleasant affections, such as

those they felt in spiritual consolations, in exercises of piety, and in the perfection of virtues."

In all things, but especially in devotion, discretion is necessary. Beware of excesses that irritate family and acquaintances. "Oh! how happy you will be," he writes to a correspondent, "if you carefully observe the moderation I have indicated in your religious practices, adapting them as much as you can to your domestic occupations!" "First of all, regulate your practices of piety," he writes to another acquaintance, "in such a way that their length does not weary your soul nor irritate the souls of those with whom God makes you live."

Here is a kind of code of civil devotion, intended for a young bride whose desires for perfection risked making her unbearable. After advising her to visit hospitals sometimes, to console and help the sick, he gives her specific recommendations:

In all this, take care that your husband, your servants, or your relatives have no reason to feel offended because you spend too much time in churches, live too long in seclusion, neglect the care of the house for too long, or, as sometimes happens, judge the conduct of others too rigidly or disdain too openly conversations in which the rules of devotion are not scrupulously observed. In all this, we must be dominated and enlightened by charity, which leads us to comply with the will of our neighbour in everything that is not contrary to the commandments of God.

Civil devotion requires adapting to others and not making them feel any spiritual superiority. To Mother de Chantal, who wanted to devote herself too much to fasting, and she alone among the first Visitandines, he wrote, paraphrasing Saint Paul: "You will have to be a Jew with the Jews and a Gentile with the Gentiles, eat with those who eat, laugh with those who laugh."

Choosing Your Models

Beware! There are saints who have led a life more worthy of admiration than of imitation. "Is it not a frightening thing," he wrote, "to see a Saint Paul the Hermit, in the middle of the desert, confined to a cave like a wild man, eating only bread and drinking only water?" All forms of asceticism that are practised in solitude and in the desert are not advisable for everyone without distinction. One cannot, therefore, propose to people of the world models of "purely contemplative, monastic, or religious" devotion: one must choose models of saints who have lived "in the secular state."

Francis de Sales did not hesitate to seek "saints" among figures from the Old Testament, such as, in particular, "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David, Job, Tobit,

Sarah, Rebecca and Judith.” Who more lovable than the ideal biblical couple, formed by Isaac and Rebecca, “the most chaste married couple of ancient times”? They “were observed through the window caressing each other in such a way that Abimelech could easily understand, although there was nothing dishonest in it, that they could be none other than husband and wife.”

Among the figures of the New Testament and the saints of Christianity, he chooses first and foremost “the holy Virgin, with Saint Joseph, Saint Louis, Saint Monica, and a hundred thousand others who are in the phalanx of those who have lived in the world.” He praises the “extraordinary Saint Magdalene,” “the queen and mistress of all perfumers,” as well as Saint Martha, the “cook of our dear Master,” of whom it is said “that she prepared Our Lord’s bread, that she welcomed him into her house, and was very concerned that he should lack for nothing.”

The author of *Philothea* readily catalogues Christian models according to their profession: “Saint Joseph, Lydia, and Saint Crispin were perfect devotees in their workshops; Saint Anne, Saint Martha, Saint Monica, Aquila and Priscilla in their marriages; Cornelius, Saint Sebastian, Saint Maurice under arms; Constantine, Helena, Saint Louis, the Blessed Amadeus, Saint Edward on their thrones.” As for the “great Saint Maurice,” he would highlight that this heroic soldier suffered the martyrdom of the heart before that of the body, because “he saw his entire dear legion killed before his eyes; and it can be said that he suffered martyrdom as many times as there were the soldiers he saw fall.”

Saint Monica, mother of Saint Augustine, is often cited as a model of a wife, widow, mother, and educator. “With what firmness she pursued the enterprise of serving God, in her marriage, in her widowhood!” As an educator she was admirable. “While she was pregnant with the great Saint Augustine, she consecrated him several times to the Christian religion and to the service of God’s glory, as he himself states when he says he had tasted the salt of God from his mother’s womb.” When her son began to follow a bad path, she “with so much fervour and so much perseverance fought against the bad inclinations of Saint Augustine, following him by sea and by land, as to make him blessedly more the son of her tears, with the conversion of his soul, than he had been the son of her blood by the generation of his body.”

At the moment when Philothea commits to the devout life “in the form of an election and a choice,” the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* places before her eyes not only “the procession of virgins, men and women, whiter than the lily,” but also “the assembly of widows” adorned with “holy mortification and humility,” and above all “the host of numerous married people who live so sweetly together and with mutual respect, which cannot be separated from great charity”. And he adds, “Note how these devout souls marry the care of their outer home with

that of their inner one."

"One Must Follow the Laws of the World in Which One Is"

A general principle of Salesian teaching states: "Since we are in this world, we must follow its laws," without, however, forgetting the addition, "in everything that is not contrary to the law of God."

The laws of the world are first and foremost the laws of civility, of courtesy, of good manners. The Christian must be courteous. Devotion, when it is true, is also true humanity, wisdom, tact, moderation, constancy. Francis de Sales declares with determination, "I absolutely do not want a fantastic, turbulent, melancholic, grumpy, and sad devotion, but a sweet, gentle, pleasant, peaceful, and, in a word, an extremely frank piety, which makes itself loved by God first, but also by men." Respect for social rules and proprieties may sometimes have exceptions, as in the case of King David who "danced and leaped before the ark of the covenant a little more than decorum required," but it was because of the "extraordinary and immeasurable contentment he had in his heart."

Furthermore, civility does not mean duplicity. One must always be sincere and ensure that the exterior corresponds to the inner feeling, without, however, appearing disagreeable in society under the pretext of "truth" and "frankness."

The world, Francis de Sales reminds us when he uses this noun in the ambivalent sense it has in Scripture, is governed by the law of the threefold concupiscence, that is, by the desire for pleasure, for goods, and for honours. Now, these three temporal realities do not fundamentally have a negative value.

Pleasure is linked to certain acts and experiences both at the level of the senses and at the level of our higher faculties. If pleasure is not perverted and is kept in just measure, and above all if the desire is legitimate and does not turn into dependence and slavery, what harm is there in it? Even the sisters of the Visitation will have to welcome "with peace and sweetness of spirit" not only all sorts of "pains and mortifications," but also the things they will find "entirely agreeable and fully in conformity with their will and necessity, such as drinking, eating, resting, taking recreation, and similar things, so that, following the Apostle's advice, whatever we do, may be done in the name of God and solely to please Him."

As for the goods of the world, Christians must take care of them even more than "worldly" people, because "we possess them, but not as our own". "God has given them to us to cultivate and wants us to make them fruitful and useful." It is not even forbidden to increase them. "Let us therefore have this graceful care for the preservation, and even for the increase of our temporal goods, when a just occasion presents itself and to the extent that our state requires, because God wants us to

do so, for love of him.” The Christian may have riches, but must not let themselves be “poisoned” by them, that is, they must not attach their heart to them.
As for the pursuit of honours and a good reputation, it is not in itself in contradiction with well-understood Christian humility. Everyone must strive to preserve their good name, which is “one of the foundations of human society; without it we are not only useless, but even harmful to the public, because of the scandal it would receive.” Consequently, “charity demands and humility welcomes that we desire it and that we preserve it preciously.” It will help us not to “offend the eye of the good” nor to “give satisfaction to that of the wicked.”

Witnesses to Christian Joy

The most frequent reproach levelled at devotion is well known. “The world, my dear Philothea, slanders holy devotion as much as it can, painting devout people with dark, sad, and afflicted faces, and spreading the word that devotion makes one melancholy and unbearable.” In proposing the example of Saint Louis to a young man, Francis de Sales shows him that this saint was “of good humour” and that this king knew how to “laugh amiably when the occasion arose.”
Numerous are the invitations to joy scattered throughout the letters and writings of Francis de Sales. One could spend a very long time gleaning expressions such as the following: “Live joyfully for as long as you can”; “be always joyful”; “do not give yourself over to sadness at all”; “live in peace and joy, or at least be content”; “often awaken in yourself the spirit of cheerfulness and gentleness”; “in this our brief pilgrimage, let us live joyfully, accommodating the tastes of our hosts in all that is not sin”; “preserve that holy and cordial gaiety, which nourishes the spirit’s strength and edifies our neighbour”; “preserve a holy joy of spirit, which, diffused with modesty in your actions and words, will be a consolation to those who see you”; “be constant, courageous, and cheerful because [divine Goodness] gives you the gift of wanting to be all His”; “live fully content before God”; “live generously and nobly joyful in Him who is our only joy.”
Why constantly look for what is wrong? It is a fact that when the spirit of contradiction becomes systematic, nothing is ever right. Hence, this rebuke to the “rebellious brothers”: “You force me to say that you seek out the sewers and rubbish heaps, instead of the gardens and orchards.” Does reality afflict us? “We must let afflictions pass through our hearts, but not allow them to remain there.” Is the world in a bad way? Should we perhaps imitate the Israelites “who could never sing in Babylon, because they thought of their homeland”? I, says Francis de Sales, “I would like us to sing everywhere.”
The Christian does not complain about the imperfections he discovers in himself.

“We would all like to be without imperfections; but, my dearest Daughter, we must have patience; our nature is human and not angelic.” He ignores nothing of our mortal condition, but he does not wish to frighten our spirit. His conduct in the daily walk of life moved in the same direction. According to Michel Favre, his secretary and confidant at all times, the bishop “had a jovial and gracious nature, an enemy of sadness and melancholy, yet he maintained a humbly grave and majestic demeanour, his face gentle and serene, accompanied by a moderate reserve and great modesty, not at all unkempt or disorderly in his bearing, nor too expansive in moments of cheerfulness. He never showed a sad face, much less a sullen one, no matter how much he had been troubled, but received everyone with a very serene and contented countenance.” It was his conviction that “God is the God of joy.”