 Reading time: 11 min.

Francis was born on 21 August 1567 at the Château de Sales, in Thorens, near Annecy in Savoy, in a landscape of mountains and country valleys.

Francis' father was a loyal, chivalrous, generous and at the same time emotional and impulsive man. By virtue of his wisdom and sense of fairness, he was often chosen as an arbitrator in disputes and trials. He was also very welcoming towards the poor in the neighbourhood, to the point that he would give his soup to a poor man rather than send him begging. Of his mother Frances, St Joan de Chantal drew this admirable portrait:

She was one of the most remarkable ladies of her time. She was gifted with a noble and generous soul, but pure, innocent and simple, like a true mother and nurturer of the poor. She was modest, humble and good-natured with everyone, very quiet in her home; she governed her family wisely, concerned to make them live in the fear of God.

At the birth of Francis, her eldest son, she was only fifteen years old, while her husband was over forty. This age difference was not uncommon at the time, especially among nobles, as marriage was considered first and foremost as an alliance between two families in order to have children and enlarge their lands and titles. Sentiment counted for little in those days, which did not prevent this apparently ill-combined union from turning out to be solid and happy.

Motherhood announced itself as particularly difficult. The mother-to-be prayed before the Holy Shroud, then kept in Chambéry, the capital of Savoy. Francis came into the world two months before his natural due date and, fearing for his survival, was quickly baptised.

On Francis, the eldest son, were pinned all the hopes of his father, who envisaged a prestigious career for him in the service of his country. This project would be a source of difficulty throughout his youth, marked by a tension between obedience to his father and his own particular vocation.

The first six years (1567-1573)

When little Francis was born, his young mother was unable to breastfeed him, so she turned to a peasant girl from the village. Three months later, his godmother, his maternal grandmother took care of him for some time.

"My mother and I", he would one day write, "are one". Indeed, the child "is not yet able to use his will, nor can he love anything but the breast and face of his

dear mother.” It is a model of abandonment to God’s will:

He does not think at all of wanting to be on one side or the other and desires nothing more than to be in the arms of his mother, with whom he thinks he forms one; nor does he care at all to conform his own will to that of his mother, because he does not perceive it, nor does he care to have it, and he lets his mother move, do and decide what she thinks is good for him.

Francis de Sales also stated that children do not laugh before the fortieth day. Only after forty days do they laugh, that is, they are comforted, because, as Virgil says, “only then do they begin to know their mother.”

Little Francis was not weaned until November 1569, when he was two years and three months old. At that age, he had already begun to walk and talk. Learning to walk happens progressively and it often happens that children fall to the ground, which is not at all serious, because “while they feel their mother holding them by the sleeves, they walk briskly and wander here and there, without being surprised by the tumbles that their insecure legs make them take.” Sometimes it is the father who observes his child, still weak and uncertain as he takes his first steps, and says to him: “take your time, my child”; if he then falls, he encourages him by saying, “he has taken a leap, he is wise, don’t cry”; then he approaches him and gives him his hand.

On the other hand, learning to walk as well as to speak happens by imitation. It is ‘by dint of hearing the mother and babbling with her’ that the child learns to speak the same language.

Childhood adventures and games

Childhood is the time of discovery and exploration. The little Savoyard observed the nature around him and was enraptured by it. In Sales, on the mountain slope to the east, everything is grandiose, imposing, austere; but along the valley, on the contrary, everything is verdant, fertile and pleasant. At the castle of Brens, in the Chablais, where he probably made several stays between the ages of three and five, little Francis could admire the splendour of Lake Geneva. At Annecy, the lake surrounded by hills and mountains never left him indifferent, as the numerous literary images of navigation show. It is easy to see that Francis de Sales was not a man born in the city.

The world of animals, at that time still very much found in castles, towns and even cities, is an enchantment and a source of instruction for the child. Few authors have spoken of it as abundantly as he did. Much of his (often legendary)

information he drew from his readings; however, personal observation must have counted for quite a bit, for instance when he writes that “dawn makes the cock crow; the morning star gladdens the sick, invites the birds to sing.”

Little Francis considered at length and admired the work of the bees, observed and listened attentively to the swallows, the doves, the hen and the frogs. How many times did he have to witness the feeding of pigeons in the castle courtyard!

Above all, the child needs to manifest his desire to grow up through play, which is also the school of living together and a way of taking possession of his surroundings. Did Francis rock on wooden horses? In any case, he recounts in one of his sermons that “children swing on wooden horses, call them horses, neigh for them, run, jump, amuse themselves with this childish amusement.” And here is a personal recollection from his childhood: “When we were children, with what care we assembled pieces of tiles, of wood, of mud to build little houses and tiny buildings! And if someone destroyed them we felt lost and cried.”

But discovering the world around us does not always happen without risk and learning to walk holds surprises. Fear is sometimes a good counsellor, especially when there is a real risk. If children see a barking dog, “they immediately start screaming and do not stop until they are close to their mother. In her arms they feel safe and as long as they shake her hand they think no one can hurt them.” Sometimes, however, the danger is imaginary. Little Francis was afraid of the dark, and here is how he was cured of his fear of the dark: “Little by little, I endeavoured to go alone, with my heart armed only with trust in God, to places where my imagination frightened me; in the end, I became so refreshed that I considered the darkness and solitude of the night delightful, because of this presence of God, which in such solitude becomes even more desirable.”

Family upbringing

The first education fell to the mother. An exceptional intimacy was established between the young mother and her first-born son. It was said that she was inclined to cuddle her son, who, moreover, looked a lot like her. She preferred to see him dressed as a pageboy rather than in a play costume. His mother took care of his religious upbringing, and, anxious to teach him her “little creed”, took him with her to the parish church in Thorens.

For her part, the child experienced all the affection of which he was the object, and the child’s first word would be this: “My God and my mother, they love me so much.” “The love of mothers towards their children is always more tender than that of fathers”, Francis de Sales would write, because in his view, “it costs

them more.” According to a witness, it was he who sometimes consoled his mother in her moments of melancholy by telling her, “Let us turn to the good Lord, my good mother, and he will help us.”

From his father he began to learn a “just and reasonable spirit.” He made him understand the reason for what was asked of him, teaching him to be responsible for his acts, to never lie, to avoid games of chance, but not those of dexterity and intelligence. He was certainly very pleased with the answer his son gave him when he suddenly asked him what he was thinking about: “My father, I think of God and of being a good man.”

To strengthen his character, his father imposed on him a manly lifestyle, the avoidance of bodily comforts, but also open-air games with his cousins Amé, Louis and Gaspard. Above all, Francis spent his childhood and youth with them, at play and at boarding school. He learned to ride horses and handle hunting weapons. He was also given boys from the village as companions, but carefully chosen.

A usually wise and quiet boy, Francis nevertheless manifested surprising fits of rage in certain circumstances. On the occasion of a Protestant’s visit to the family castle, he gave vent to his animosity against the chickens, whom he started clubbing, shouting at the top of his voice: “Up! Up! At the heretics!” It would take time and effort to convert to ‘Salesian gentleness’.

Entering school

At the age of six or seven, the child reaches the use of reason. For the Church, he or she now has the ability to discern good and evil, and, for humanists, can begin to attend primary school. This is the age at which children in noble families usually pass from the hands of women to those of men, from mother to father, from governess to guardian or tutor. The age of reason also marked, for a small minority of children, entry into a school or boarding school. Now Francis showed remarkable dispositions to study, indeed such impatience that he begged to be sent to school without delay.

In October 1573, Francis was sent to the boarding school in La Roche, in the company of his cousins Amé, Louis et Gaspard. At the tender age of six, Francis was then separated from his family. He stayed there for two years to do his “little grammar school”. The children housed in the town, placed under the supervision of a particular pedagogue, mingled during the day in the mass of three hundred pupils attending the boarding school. A servant of the family took special care of Francis, who was the youngest.

According to what we know of the schools of the time, the children began to read and write, using syllabaries and the first elements of grammar, to recite

prayers and selected texts by heart, to learn the rudiments of Latin grammar, the declensions and conjugations of verbs. The commitment to memory, still very much dependent on the didactic method in use, was concentrated above all on religious texts, but emphasis was already placed on the quality of diction, a characteristic trait of humanist education. In terms of moral education, which then occupied an important place in the humanist education of students, it borrowed its models more from pagan antiquity than from Christian authors.

From the very beginning of his studies at the college at La Roche, Francis behaved as an excellent pupil. But this first contact with the scholastic world may have left him with some less pleasant memories, as he himself told a friend. Had it never happened to him to unintentionally miss school and be “in the situation in which good pupils sometimes find themselves who, having arrived late, have cut certain lessons short”?

They would certainly like to return to the compulsory timetable and win back the benevolence of their professors; but oscillating between fear and hope, they cannot decide at what time to appear before the irritated professor; should they avoid his current anger by sacrificing the hoped-for forgiveness, or obtain his forgiveness by exposing themselves to the risk of being punished? In such hesitation, the child’s spirit must struggle to discern what is most advantageous to him.

Two years later, still with his cousins, there he was at the boarding school [college] in Annecy, where Francis would study for three years. With his cousins, he stayed in the city with a lady, whom he called his aunt. After the two years of grammar school at La Roche, he entered the third year of classical studies and made rapid progress. Among the exercises used at the college were declamations. The boy excelled in them, “because he had a noble bearing, a fine physique, an attractive face and an excellent voice.”

It seems that discipline was traditional and severe, and we know that a regent behaved like a real chastiser. But Francis’ conduct left nothing to be desired; one day he himself would ask to be chastised in place of his cousin Gaspard who cried in fear.

The most important religious event for a child was First Communion, the sacrament by which “we are united and joined to divine goodness and receive the true life of our souls.” As he would later say about communion, he had prepared “his little heart to be the dwelling place of Him” who wanted to “possess” it whole. On the same day he received the sacrament of confirmation, the sacrament by which we are united with God “like the soldier with his captain.” On that occasion,

his parents gave him Fr Jean Déage as his tutor, a gruff, even choleric man, but totally devoted to his pupil, whom he would accompany throughout his education.

On the threshold of adolescence

The years of Francis' childhood and boyhood in Savoy would leave an indelible mark on him, but they would also arouse in his soul the first seeds of a particular vocation. Committed to giving others a good example with discretion, he intervened with his companions with appropriate initiatives. Still very young, he liked to gather them together to teach them the catechism lesson he was learning. After the games, he would sometimes take them to the church in Thorens, where they had become children of God. On holiday days, he would take them with him for walks in the woods and by the river to sing and pray.

But his intellectual training was only just beginning. At the end of three years at the boarding school in Annecy, he knew everything that Savoy could teach him. His father decided to send him to Paris, the capital of knowledge, to make him a "scholar". But to which college should he send such a gifted son? His choice was first the college at Navarre attended by the nobility. But Francis cleverly intervened with the help of his mother. At his son's insistence, his father finally agreed to send him to the Jesuit Fathers' college in Clermont.

Significantly, before leaving, Francis asked to receive the tonsure, a practice still permitted at the time for boys destined for an ecclesiastical career, which, however, must not have pleased his father, who did not wish an ecclesiastical vocation for his eldest son.

Having reached the threshold of adolescence, the boy began a new stage in his life. "Childhood is beautiful" he would one day write, "but to always want to be a child is to make a wrong choice, because a child of a hundred is despised. To begin to learn is very praiseworthy, but he who begins with the intention of never perfecting himself would be acting against reason." After receiving in Savoy the seeds of these "manifold gifts of nature and grace", Francis would find in Paris great opportunities to cultivate and develop them.