 Reading time: 9 min.

After ten years of study in Paris and three years at the University of Padua, Francis de Sales returned to Savoy shortly before the beginning of spring 1592. He confided to his cousin Louis that he was “more and more determined to embrace the ecclesiastical state, despite the resistance of his parents”. Nevertheless, he agreed to go to Chambéry to enrol in the bar of the Senate of Savoy.

In truth, the entire direction of his life was at stake. On the one hand, in fact, there was his father’s authority commanding him, as Francis was the eldest son, to consider a career in the world; on the other, there were his inclinations and the growing awareness that he had to follow a particular vocation “to be of the Church”. If it is true that “fathers do everything for the good of their children”, it is equally true that the views of one and the other do not always coincide. His father, Monsieur de Boisy, dreamed of a magnificent career for Francis: senator of the Duchy and (why not?) president of the sovereign Senate of Savoy. Francis de Sales would one day write that fathers “are never satisfied and never know how to stop talking to their children about the means that can make them greater”

Now, for him obedience was a fundamental imperative and what he would later tell Philothea was a rule of life that he certainly followed from childhood: “You must humbly obey your ecclesiastical superiors, such as the pope and the bishop, the parish priest and their representatives; you must then obey your political superiors, that is, your prince and the magistrates he instituted in your country; you must finally obey the superiors of your house, that is, your father, your mother.” The problem arose from the impossibility of reconciling the different obediences. Between his father’s will and his own (which he increasingly perceived to be God’s) the opposition became inevitable. Let us follow the stages of the vocational maturation of a “sweet rebel”

Retrospective look

To understand the drama experienced by Francis it is necessary to revisit the past, because this drama marked his entire youth and was resolved in 1593. From the age of about ten, Francis cultivated his own life project within himself. More than a few events he experienced or provoked bear witness to this. At the age of eleven, before leaving for Paris, he had asked his father for permission to receive the tonsure. This ceremony, during which the bishop placed the candidate on the first step of an ecclesiastical career, actually took place on 20 September 1578

Clermont-en-Genevois. His father, who at first opposed it, eventually gave in because he considered it to be nothing more than a childish whim. During the preliminary examination, amazed at the accuracy of the answers and the candidate's modesty, the bishop allegedly told him "My boy, cheer up, you will be a good servant of God". At the moment of sacrificing his blond hair, Francis confessed that he felt a certain regret. However, the commitment he made would always remain fixed in his memory. Indeed, he confided one day to Mother Angélique Arnauld: "From twelve years on, I have been so determined to be of the Church that I would not have changed my intention, not even for a kingdom."

When his father, who was not unsympathetic, decided to send him to Paris to complete his studies there, he must have felt contradictory feelings in his soul, described in the *Treatise on the Love of God*: "A father sending his son either to court or to his studies," he wrote, "does not deny tears to his departure, testifying, that though according to his superior part, for the child's advancement in virtue, he wills his departure, yet according to his inferior part he has a repugnance to the separation." Let us also recall the choice of the Jesuit college in Paris, preferred to the one at Navarre, Francis' behaviour while growing up, the influence of Father Possevino's spiritual direction in Padua and all the other factors that could have played in favour of the consolidation of his ecclesiastical vocation.

But before him stood a rocky obstacle: his father's will, to which he owed not only humble submission according to the custom of the time, but also something more and better, because "the love and respect that a son bears his father make him decide not only to live according to his commands, but also according to the desires and preferences he expresses". In Paris, towards the end of his stay, he was deeply impressed by the decision of the Duke of Joyeuse, an old favourite of Henry III, who had become a Capuchin following the death of his wife. According to his friend Jean Pasquelet, "If he had not been afraid of upsetting the soul of Monsieur de Boisy, his father, being his eldest son, he would have become a Capuchin without fail."

He studied out of obedience, but also to make himself useful to his neighbour. "And it is still true, Father de Quoex testified, "what he told me while he was in Paris and Padua, that he was interested not so much in what he was studying, but rather in thinking whether one day he would be able to serve God worthily and help his neighbour through the studies he was doing." In 1620 he confided to François de Ronis: "While I was in Padua, I studied law to please my father, and to please myself I studied theology." Similarly, François Bochut declared that "when he was sent to Padua to study law to please his parents, his inclination led him to embrace the ecclesiastical state", and that there he "completed most of

his theological studies, devoting most of his time to them". This last statement seems clearly exaggerated: Francis de Sales certainly had to devote the greater part of his time and energy to the juridical studies that were part of his "duty of state". As for his father, Jean-Pierre Camus relates this significant confidence: "I had the best father in the world" he told me; "but he was a good man who had spent most of his years at court and at war, so he knew those principles better than those of theology."

It was probably Father Possevino who became his best support in guiding his life. According to his nephew Charles-Auguste, Possevino told him: "Continue to think about divine things and to study theology", adding gently: "Believe me, your spirit is not suited to the labours of the forum and your eyes are not made to endure its dust; the road of the century is too slippery, there is a danger of getting lost. Is there not more glory in proclaiming the word of our good Lord to thousands of human beings, from the cathedrals of the churches, than in warming one's hands by beating one's fists on the benches of the prosecutors to settle disputes?" It was undoubtedly his attraction to this ideal that enabled him to resist certain manoeuvres and distasteful farces by some comrades who were certainly not models of virtue.

A very difficult discernment and choice

On his return journey from Padua, Francis de Sales carried with him a letter from his old professor Panciroli addressed to his father, advising him to send his son to the Senate. Monsieur de Boisy wanted nothing more, and to this end had prepared a rich library of law for Francis, provided him with land and a title, and destined him to be the Lord of Villaroget. Finally, he asked him to meet Françoise Suchet, a fourteen-year-old girl, "an only child and very beautiful", Charles-Auguste pointed out, to make "preliminary marriage arrangements". Francis was twenty-five, an age of majority in the mentality of the time and suitable for marriage. His choice had been made a long time ago, but he did not want to create any ruptures, preferring to prepare his father for the favourable moment.

He met the young lady several times, making it clear, however, that he had other intentions. "To please his father", François Favre declared at the beatification process, "he visited the young lady, whose virtues he admired", but "he could not be convinced to accept such a marriage, despite all his father's efforts in this regard." Francis also revealed to Amé Bouvard, his confidant: "In obedience to my father, I saw the young lady to whom he wholeheartedly intended me, I admired her virtue"", adding, bluntly and with conviction: "Believe me, I tell you the truth: my only wish has always been to embrace the ecclesiastical life." Claude de Blonay

claimed to have heard from Francis' own lips "that he had refused such a beautiful covenant, not out of contempt for marriage, of which he had great respect as a sacrament, but rather out of a certain ardour, intimate and spiritual, that inclined him to place himself totally at the service of the Church and to be all of God, with an undivided heart."

Meanwhile, on 24 November 1592, during a session in which he gave praiseworthy proof of his abilities, he had been accepted as a lawyer at the Bar in Chambéry. On his return from Chambéry, he saw a celestial sign in an incident reported by Michel Favre: "The horse collapsed under him and the sword from its scabbard came to rest on the ground with the point pointing at him, [so] from this he drew further convincing proof that God wanted him in his service, together with the hope that He would provide him with the means." According to Charles-Auguste, the sword "out of its sheath had traced a kind of cross". What seems certain is that the prospect of a profession as a lawyer should not have excited him, if one lends credence to what he would later write:

[According to some,] when the chameleon swells, it changes colour; this happens out of fear and apprehension, say others. Democritus states that the tongue torn out while they were alive made those who had it in their mouths win trials; this applies well to the tongues of lawyers, who are true chameleons.

A few weeks later, he was given a senator's licence from Turin. It was an extraordinary honour for his age, because if "lawyers argue in the bar with many words about the facts and rights of the parties", "the Parliament or Senate resolves all difficulties with a decree from above." Francis did not want to accept such a high office, which could upset all the facts of the matter again. Despite the scandalised astonishment of his father and pressure from his best friends, he strictly maintained his refusal. And even when it was shown to him that the accumulation of civil and ecclesiastical offices was permissible, he replied that "one should not mix sacred and profane things".

The day finally came when, by a happy combination of circumstances, he was able to unravel a complicated situation that could have degenerated into a painful break with his family. A few months later, and precisely after the death of the provost of the cathedral in October 1592, some confidants had unbeknownst to him submitted an application to Rome for him to take this position, which made him the first person in the diocese after the bishop. On 7 May 1593, the Roman appointment arrived. Two days later, the meeting that was to mark the turning point of his life took place. With the support of his mother, Francis made a request

to his old father that he had never dared to make: “Have the courtesy, my father, […] to allow me to be of the Church.”

It was a terrible blow for Monsieur de Boisy, who suddenly saw his plans crumble. He was “shocked” because he had not expected such a request. Charles-Auguste adds that “his lady was no less so”, having been present at the scene. For the father, his son’s desire to be a priest was a “mood” that someone had put in his head or “advised” him.

“I hoped” he told him, “that you would be the rod of my old age, and instead you turn away from me before your time. Be careful what you do. Perhaps you still need to mature in your decision. Your head is made for a more majestic beret. You have devoted so many years to the study of the law: jurisprudence will do you no good under a priest’s cassock. You have brothers whom you must be a father to when they are missing.”

For Francis it was an inner need, a “vocation” that engaged his whole person and his whole life. His father had respect for the priesthood, but he still considered it a simple function, a profession. Now the Catholic reform aimed to give the priesthood a renewed, higher and more demanding configuration, that is, to consider it a call from God sanctioned by the Church. The duty to respond to this divine call perhaps also corresponded to a new right of the human person, which Francis defended in the face of his father’s “unilateral” decision. The latter, after setting out all his good reasons against such a project, knowing that his son would occupy a very honourable position, ended up giving in: “For God’s sake, do what you believe.”

In a work that appeared in 1669, Nicolas de Hauteville commented on this episode, comparing Monsieur de Boisy’s drama to that of Abraham, whom God had commanded to sacrifice his son. But with this difference, that it was Francis who had imposed the sacrifice on his father. In fact, wrote the ancient chronicler, “the whole of [Francis’] adolescence and youth was a time of joy, hope and consolation that was very gratifying for his good father, but in the end it must be confessed that this [new] Isaac was for him a boy cause of worries, bitterness and pain.” And he added that “the struggle that was unleashed within him made him seriously ill, finding it hard to allow this beloved son to marry a breviary instead of a handsome and wealthy young lady heiress of a very noble and ancient house of Savoy.”

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