 Reading time: 11 min.

(continuation from previous article)

Beginning of a new stage

From this moment on, everything would happen quickly. Francis became a new man: “At first he was perplexed, restless, melancholic” according to A. Ravier, “but now makes decisions without delay, he no longer drags out his undertakings, he throws himself into them headlong.”

Immediately, on 10 May, he put on his ecclesiastical habit. The next day, he presented himself to the vicar of the diocese. On 12 May, he took up his position in the cathedral of Annecy and visited the bishop, Bishop Claude de Granier. On 13 May, he presided at the Divine Office in the cathedral for the first time. He then settled his temporal affairs: he gave up the title of Lord of Villaroget and his rights as first-born son; he renounced the magistracy to which his father had destined him. From 18 May to 7 June, he retired with his friend and confessor, Amé Bouvard, to the Château de Sales to prepare for holy orders. For one last time he was assailed by doubts and temptations; he emerged victorious, convinced that God had manifested himself to him as “very merciful” during these spiritual exercises. He then prepared for the canonical examination for admission to orders.

Invited for the first time by the bishop to preach on the day of Pentecost, which that year fell on 6 June, he very carefully prepared his first sermon for a feast on which “not only the elderly but also the young should preach”; but the unexpected arrival of another preacher prevented him from delivering it. On 9 June, Bishop de Granier conferred the four minor orders on him and two days later promoted him to sub-deacon.

An intense pastoral activity then began for him. On 24 June, the feast day of St John the Baptist, he preached in public for the first time with great courage, but not without first feeling a certain trembling which forced him to lie down on his bed for a few moments before climbing into the pulpit. From then on, the sermons would multiply.

A daring initiative for a sub-deacon was the foundation in Annecy of an association intended to bring together not only clergymen, but above all laymen, men and women, under the title of “Confraternity of the Penitents of the Holy Cross”. He himself drew up its statutes, which the bishop confirmed and approved. Established on 1 September 1593, it began its activities on the 14th of the same month. From the beginning, the membership was numerous and, among the first members, Francis had the joy of counting his father and, some time later, his

brother Louis. The statutes provided not only for celebrations, prayers and processions, but also for visits to the sick and prisoners. At first there was some dissatisfaction especially among the religious, but it was soon realised that the testimony of the members was convincing.
Francis was ordained deacon on 18 September and a priest three months later, on 18 December 1593. After three days of spiritual preparation, he celebrated his first mass on 21 December and preached at Christmas. Some time later, he had the joy of baptising his little sister Jeanne, the last born of Mme de Boisy. His official installation in the cathedral took place at the end of December.

His “harangue” in Latin made a great impression on the bishop and the other members of the chapter, all the more profound as the topic he addressed was a burning one: recovering the ancient see of the diocese, which was Geneva. Everyone agreed: Geneva, the city of Calvin that had outlawed Catholicism, had to be regained. Yes! But how? With what weapons? And first of all, what was the cause of this deplorable situation? The provost’s answer would not have pleased everyone: “It is the examples of perverse priests, the actions, the words, in essence, the iniquity of everyone, but particularly of the clergy.” Following the example of the prophets, Francis de Sales no longer analysed the political, social or ideological causes of the Protestant reform; he no longer preached war against heretics, but the conversion of all. The end of exile could only be achieved through penance and prayer, in a word, through charity:

It is by charity that we must dismantle the walls of Geneva, by charity invade it, by charity recover it. […] I propose to you neither iron, nor that dust, the smell and taste of which recall the infernal furnace […]. It is with hunger and thirst suffered by us and not by our adversaries that we must defeat the enemy.

Charles-Auguste states that, at the end of this address Francis “came down from his ambo amid the applause of the whole assembly” but one can assume that certain canons were irritated by the harangue of this young provost.

He could have contented himself with “enforcing the discipline of the canons and the exact observance of the statutes”, and instead launched into ever more intense pastoral work: confessions, preaching in Annecy and in the villages, visits to the sick and prisoners. When needed, he employed his legal knowledge for the benefit of others, settled disputes and argued with the Huguenots. From January 1594 until the beginning of his mission in Chablais in September, his work as a preacher must have had a promising start. As the numerous quotations show, his sources were the Bible, the Fathers and theologians, and also pagan authors such

as Aristotle, Pliny and Virgil, whose famous *Jovis omnia plena* he was not afraid to quote. His father was not used to such overwhelming zeal and such frequent preaching. “One day” Francis told his friend Jean-Pierre Camus, “he took me aside and said:

Provost, you preach too often. I even hear the bell ringing on weekdays for the sermon and they tell me: It’s the provost! The provost! In my time it wasn’t like that, sermons were much rarer; but what sermons! God knows, they were scholarly, well-researched; they were full of wonderful stories, a single sermon contained more quotations in Latin and Greek than ten of yours: everyone was happy and edified, people rushed to hear them; you would have heard that they went to collect manna. Now you make this practice so common that we no longer pay attention to it and no longer hold you in such esteem.”

Francis was not of this opinion: for him, “to blame a worker or a vine-dresser because he cultivates his land too well was to praise him.”

The beginnings of his friendship with Antoine Favre

The humanists had a taste for friendship, a favourable space for epistolary exchange in which one could express one’s affection with appropriate expressions drawn from classical antiquity. Francis de Sales had certainly read Cicero’s *De amicitia*. The expression with which Horace called Virgil “the half of my soul” (*Et serves animae dimidium meae*) came to mind.

Perhaps he also recalled the friendship that united Montaigne and Étienne de La Boétie: “We were in all respects each other’s halves” wrote the author of the Essays, “being one soul in two bodies, according to Aristotle’s felicitous definition”; “if I am asked to explain why I loved him, I find that this cannot be expressed except by answering: Because he was him and because I was me.” A true friend is a treasure, says the proverb, and Francis de Sales was able to experience that it was true at the moment his life took a definitive turn, thanks to his friendship with Antoine Favre.

We possess the first letter Favre addressed to him on 30 July 1593 from Chambéry. With allusions to the “divine Plato” and in elegant and refined Latin, he expressed his desire: that, he wrote, “not only to love and honour you, but also to contract a binding bond forever.” Favre was then thirty-five years old, had been a senator for five years, and Francis was ten years younger. They already knew each other by hearsay, and François had even attempted to make contact with him. On receiving the letter, the young provost of Sales rejoiced:

I have received, most illustrious man and upright Senator, your letter, most precious pledge of your benevolence towards me, which, also because it was not expected, has filled me with so much joy and admiration, that I cannot express my feelings.

Beyond the obvious rhetoric, aided by the use of Latin, this was the beginning of a friendship that lasted until his death. To the “provocation” of the “most illustrious and upright senator” that resembled a challenge to a duel, Francis replied with expressions suited to the case: if the friend was the first to enter the peaceful arena of friendship, it will be seen who will be the last to remain there, because I – Francis said – am “fighter who, by nature, is most ardent in this kind of struggle.” This first exchange of correspondence would give rise to a desire to meet: in fact, he writes, “that admiration arouses the desire to know, is a maxim that one learns from the very first pages of philosophy.” The letters quickly followed one another.

At the end of October 1593, Francis replied to him to thank him for procuring another friendship, that of François Girard. He had read and re-read Favre’s letters “more than ten times.” The following 30th November, Favre insisted that he accept the dignity of senator, but on this ground he would not be followed. At the beginning of December, François announced to him that his “dearest mother” had given birth to her thirteenth child. Towards the end of December, he informed him of his forthcoming ordination to the priesthood, a “distinguished honour and excellent good”, which would make him a different man, despite the feelings of fear within him. On Christmas Eve 1593, a meeting took place in Annecy, where Favre probably attended the young provost’s installation a few days later. At the beginning of 1594, a fever forced Francis to take to his bed, and his friend comforted him to such an extent that he said that your fever had become “our” fever. In March 1594, he began to call him “brother” while Favre’s bride was to be “my sweetest sister” to Francis.

This friendship turned out to be fruitful and fruitful, because on 29 May 1594, Favre in turn founded the Confraternity of the Holy Cross in Chambéry; and on Whit Tuesday, the two friends organised a large common pilgrimage to Aix. In June, Favre with his wife, called “my sweetest sister, your most illustrious and beloved bride” by Francis, and their “noble children” were eagerly awaited in Annecy. Antoine Favre then had five sons and one daughter. In August, he wrote a letter to Favre’s children to thank them for their writing, to encourage them to follow their father’s examples and to beg them to pass on his feelings of “filial piety” to their mother. On 2 September 1594, in a hastily written note, Favre announced his next visit “as soon as possible” and ended with repeated greetings

not only to his “beloved brother”’, but also to “hose of Sales and all Salesians”.

There were those who did not refrain from criticising these rather magniloquent letters, full of exaggerated compliments and over-cherished Latin periods. Like his correspondent, the provost of Sales, interspersing his Latin with references to the Bible and the Fathers of the Church, was especially busy quoting authors of classical antiquity. The Ciceronian model and epistolary art never escaped him, and, moreover, his friend Favre qualifies Francis’ letters not only as “Ciceronian”, but as “Athenian”. It is not surprising that one of his own letters to Antoine Favre contains the famous quote from Terence: “Nothing human is foreign to us”, an adage that has become a profession of faith among humanists.

In conclusion, Francis considered this friendship as a gift from heaven, describing it as a “fraternal friendship that divine Goodness, the forger of nature, wove so vividly and perfectly between him and me, even though we were different in birth and vocation, and unequal in gifts and graces that I possessed only in him.” During the difficult years that were to come, Antoine Favre would always be his confidant and his best support.

A dangerous mission

In 1594, the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel I (1580-1630), had just recaptured Chablais, a region close to Geneva, south of Lake Geneva, which had long been disputed between neighbours. The political-religious history of Chablais was complicated, as shown by a letter written in rough Italian in February 1596 and addressed to the nuncio in Turin:

A part of this diocese of Geneva was occupied by the Bernese, sixty years ago, [and] remained heretical; which being reduced to the full power of His Serene Highness these past years, by the war, [and reunited with] its ancient patrimony, many of the [inhabitants,] moved rather by the rumbling of the arquebuses than by the sermons that were being preached there by order of the Bishop, were reduced to the faith in the bosom of holy mother Church. But then, those lands being infested by the incursions of the Genevans and the French, they returned to the mire.

The duke, intending to bring that population of some twenty-five thousand souls back to Catholicism, turned to the bishop to do what needed to be done. Already in 1589, he had sent fifty parish priests to regain possession of the parishes, but they were soon driven back by the Calvinists. This time it was necessary to proceed differently, namely to send two or three highly educated

missionaries who were able to cope with the storm that would not fail to hit the “papists”. At an assembly of the clergy, the bishop outlined the plan and called for volunteers. No one breathed a word. When he turned his eyes towards the provost of Sales, the latter said to him: “Bishop, if you think I am capable and if you command me, I am ready to obey and I will go willingly.”

He knew well what awaited him and that he would be received with “insults on the lips or stones in the hand.” For Francis, his father’s opposition to such a mission (detrimental to his life and even more to his family’s honour) no longer appeared to be an obstacle, because he recognised a higher will in the bishop’s order. To his father’s objections concerning the very real dangers of the mission, he replied proudly:

God, my Father, will provide: it is he who helps the strong; one only needs courage. […] And what if we were sent to India or England? Should one not go there? […] True, it is a laborious undertaking, and no one would dare deny it; but why do we wear these clothes if we shy away from carrying the burden?

He prepared himself for the mission to Sales Castle at the beginning of September 1594, in a difficult situation: “His father did not want to see him, because he was totally opposed to his son’s apostolic commitment and had hindered him with all imaginable efforts, without having been able to undermine his generous decision. On the last evening, he said goodbye in secret to his virtuous mother.”

On 14 September 1594, he arrived in Chablais in the company of his cousin Louis de Sales. Four days later his father sent a servant to tell him to return, “but the saintly young man [in reply] sent back his valet Georges Rolland and his own horse, and persuaded his cousin to return as well to reassure the family. The cousin obeyed him, though he later returned to see him. And our saint recounted […] that in all his life he had never felt such great interior consolation, nor so much courage in the service of God and souls, as on that 18th September 1594, when he found himself without companion, without valet, without crew, and forced to wander hither and thither, alone, poor and on foot, engaged in preaching the Kingdom of God.”

To dissuade him from such a risky mission, his father cut him off. According to Pierre Magnin, “Francis’s father, as I learned from the lips of the holy man, did not want to assist him with the abundance that would have been necessary, wishing to divert him from such an undertaking initiated by his son against his advice, well aware of the obvious danger to which he was exposing his life. And once he let him

leave Sales to return to Thonon with only a shield, so that [Francis] was forced […] to make the journey on foot, often ill-fitting and ill-clad, exposed to a severe cold, wind, rain and snow unbearable in this country."

After an assault he suffered with Georges Rolland, the Lord of Boisy tried again to dissuade him from the venture, but again without success. Francis tried to rattle the strings of his fatherly pride by commendably writing him these lines:

If Rolland were your son, while he is but your valet, he would not have had so little courage as to back down for such a modest fight as the one that has befallen him, and he would not speak of it as a great battle. No one can doubt the ill-will of our adversaries; but you do us a wrong when you doubt our courage. […] I beseech you therefore, my Father, not to attribute my perseverance to disobedience and to always consider me as your most respectful son.

An enlightening remark handed down to us by Albert de Genève helps us better understand what eventually convinced the father to cease opposing his son. The grandfather of this witness at the process of beatification, a friend of Monsieur de Boisy, had told Francis' father one day that he must feel "very fortunate to have a son so dear to God, and that he considered him too wise and God-fearing to oppose [his son's] holy will, which was aimed at realising a plan in which the holy name of God would be greatly glorified, the Church exalted and the House of Sales would receive greater glory than all other titles, however illustrious they might be."

The time of responsibilities

Provost of the cathedral in 1593 at the age of only twenty-five, head of the mission in the Chablais the following year, Francis de Sales could count on an exceptionally rich and harmonious education: a well-groomed family upbringing, a high quality moral and religious formation, and high-level literary, philosophical, theological, scientific and legal studies. True, he had benefited from possibilities forbidden to most of his contemporaries, but beyond the ordinary in him were personal effort, generous response to the appeals he received and the tenacity he showed in pursuing his vocation, not to mention the marked spirituality that inspired his behaviour.

By now he was to become a public man, with increasingly broader responsibilities, enabling him to put his gifts of nature and grace to good use for others. Already in line to become coadjutor bishop of Geneva as early as 1596, appointed bishop in 1599, he became Bishop of Geneva upon the death of his predecessor in 1602. A man of the Church above all, but very much immersed in

the life of society, we will see him concerned not only with the administration of the diocese, but also with the formation of the people entrusted to his pastoral ministry.