St Francis de Sales at the service of education

Francis de Sales was convinced that ‘on the good or bad education of the youth depends radically the well-being or malaise of society and the state’; he also believed ‘that colleges are like nurseries and seminaries, from which come out those who will later fill offices and hold positions, destined to be administered well or badly to the extent that previously the grafts have been well or badly cultivated’. He therefore wanted ‘youth to be educated equally in piety and morals, as in letters and sciences.

School, boarding school and vocational training in Thonon

The formation of youth in studies and the Catholic faith was particularly urgent in Thonon, a town near Geneva. Several projects occupied the spirit of Francis de Sales for many years, at the time when he was provost and later as bishop.

Before the town’s return to Catholicism, there was a school in Thonon founded thanks to a bequest that ensured sufficient resources for the education of twelve schoolchildren. In 1579, education was provided there by two or three governesses. With the restoration of Catholicism in Thonon in 1598, the provost de Sales asked that the bequest be used for twelve pupils ‘who were Catholics’.

But the project that was closest to the provost’s heart was to bring the fathers of the Society of Jesus to Thonon: ‘Whoever would add to this a Jesuit college in this town, would make the whole of the surrounding area, which, as far as religion is concerned, is almost completely indifferent, participate in this good. The provost prepared a *Memoir* in which he strongly affirmed the general conviction: ‘There is nothing more useful for this province of Chablais than to build a college of the Society of Jesus in the town of

Thonon’.

At the end of October 1599 the first Jesuit arrived, at the end of November a second and the others were on their way from Avignon. Towards the end of the year, the Jesuits who arrived in Thonon began with a ‘little school’, which would have one hundred and twenty pupils the following year. As a result of the turmoil in 1600, they were dispersed for several months, after which they started schools again with about three hundred pupils.

But what use would grammar schools be if, for humanity’s sake, pupils were forced to attend Protestant colleges? There was an urgent need to create secondary and higher classes in philosophy, theology, Holy Scripture and law. At the beginning of December 1602, everything seemed ready for the opening of the college and future university of Thonon. Now, a few days later, the failed attempt by the Duke of Savoy to retake Geneva caused the Jesuits to leave again. They were soon forced to withdraw permanently.

After the Jesuits’ departure, the school was revived with the help of local staff. The college of Thonon would not see any real development until late 1615, when the bishop called on the congregation of Barnabites, already established in the college of Annecy.

While literary studies were being provided for, another project mobilised the energies of the provost and his collaborators. In 1599, François de Sales advocated the foundation of a ‘residence of all sciences and arts’, i.e. a kind of professional school with a printing press, a paper factory, a mechanics workshop, a passementerie and an armoury.

The idea of an institution for training in the ‘arts and crafts’ should be emphasised, because learning normally took place at home, with the father teaching his trade to the son destined to succeed him, or with a craftsman. On the other hand, it can be seen that Francis de Sales and his collaborators were interested in manual trades considered vile, which the majority of humanists seemed to ignore. Promoting the ‘mechanical arts’ also meant valuing the

craftsmen that the elites tended to despise.

The small schools in the diocese

In 1606, there were fifteen boys' schools in the diocese, where grammar, literature and catechism were taught. On the surface, this was little. In reality, literacy was fairly widespread in the parishes; short courses were organised at certain times of the year, especially in the winter season, thanks to temporary agreements with teachers and especially thanks to the goodwill of the parish priests and assistant priests.

Teaching was elementary and consisted first of all in learning to read by means of a spelling book. The teacher usually did not have his own room, but used any room, a stable or a stable. Sometimes 'his lessons, held in the open air, even at an altitude of 1500 or 2000 metres, with pupils sitting on a stone, a cart, a fir-tree trunk or on the arms of a plough, were not without charm and picturesqueness'.

As one can guess, the teachers were generally recruited from among the diocesan clergy and religious. In the will of a certain Nicolas Clerc, it is stipulated that the parish service 'shall be performed by a rector capable of instructing the youth up to and including grammar'; should he 'digress and neglect the divine office or the instruction of the youth, after being admonished three times' and 'referred to the bishop', he shall be deprived of his income and replaced by another clergyman.

In 1616, the bishop accepted the request of the principals of the town of Bonne, who begged him to provide them with a monk from a neighbouring convent, entrusting him with 'instructing the youth in letters and piety', 'in view of the great fruit and usefulness that can be derived from it in view of the good instruction that he has begun to give to the youth of the said town and its neighbourhood, who intend to send their own children there'.

The boarding schools

Secondary education provided in boarding schools in Savoy originated mostly through the development of primary schools, which, thanks to donations, were able to add Latin, grammar and fine arts classes.

The bishop intervened to save the college of La Roche, where he had done his first grammar studies. The college did not always enjoy quiet days. In 1605, Francis de Sales wrote to the canons of the collegiate church to silence 'the personal opinion' of some, begging them to 'again secure the general consensus': 'you can and must contribute,' he wrote them, 'not only with your voices, but also with your warnings and the work of conviction, since the erection and preservation of this college will serve the glory of God and the Church', and will also procure 'the good of this city'. The spiritual purpose was, yes, in first place, but the temporal good was not forgotten.

In Annecy, the bishop followed closely the life of the college founded by Eustache Chappuis, in which he himself had studied from 1575 to 1578. The difficulties he was experiencing probably led him to visit this institute frequently. Moreover, the presence of the bishop was a sought-after honour, especially on the occasion of philosophical disputes, to which 'Monsignor, the most reverend bishop of Geneva' was invited.

The records of the college's decisions indicate his presence on the occasion of discussions as well as interventions to support requests or to draw up contracts with professors. According to one witness, the bishop went there early in the morning to attend 'public events, disputes, performances of historical events and other exercises, to encourage the youth, and, in particular, public disputes in philosophy at the end of the courses'. The same witness adds: 'I often saw him personally take part in philosophical disputes'.

In reality, according to one of the professors of the time, 'fine literature as well as healthy morals had lost much of their lustre' and income had declined. The

administration was experiencing shocks. The bishop dreamed of a new and stable direction for the college, which appeared to him ‘almost like a wasteland’.

In 1613, while passing through Turin, he was suggested the name of a new congregation that was sailing with the wind in its sails: the Barnabites. In Milan, he met their superior general and the deal was concluded. In December 1614, he signed the contract for the Barnabites to enter the Chappuis college.

Francis de Sales was so pleased with the Barnabites that, as we have said, he called them without delay to Thonon. In April 1615, he was able to write to a friend of his: ‘Certainly, our good Barnabites are really very good people: sweeter than can be said, compliant, humble and gentle far more than is fashionable in their country’. Consequently, he suggested that they should also come to France:

‘For me, I think that, one day, they will be of great service to France, because they do good not only by the instruction of the youth (which is not excessively necessary in a country where the Jesuit fathers do it so excellently), but they sing in choir, hear confessions, give catechism even in the villages to which they are sent, preach; in a word, they do all that can be desired, they do it very cordially, and they do not ask much for their livelihood.

In 1619 he was involved in negotiations to have the Barnabites take charge of the college in Beaune, Burgundy. Since this deal failed, they were able to settle in Montargis the following year.

Higher studies

The Duchy of Savoy, being unable to count on large cities and seeing its stability often threatened, did not have its own university. Students who were able to do so went to study abroad. Francis de Sales’ brother Louis was sent to Rome to study law there. In France, there were Savoyard students in Montpellier, where they went to study medicine, and in

Toulouse, where they went to study law.

In Avignon, the Savoyard Cardinal de Brogny had founded a college in his palace to receive twenty-four law students free of charge, sixteen of whom were from Savoy. Unfortunately, the Savoyards lost the places reserved for them. In October 1616, Francis de Sales made several attempts with the Duke of Savoy and also in Rome to find 'some effective remedy against the disorders that, in the same college, have occurred' and so that the seats in the college would be returned to 'Your Highness' subjects'. On the occasion of his last journey, which took him to Avignon in November 1621 and before he finally ended it in Lyons, he spoke at length with the pope's vice-legate to once again defend the Savoyard interests of the college.

Savoyard students were even to be found in Louvain, where Eustache Chappuis had founded a college for Savoyards attending the university. The Bishop of Geneva was in constant and friendly contact with Jacques de Bay, president of the college; on several occasions Francis de Sales wrote to him to recommend those who went there to place themselves, as he said, 'under your wings'. In cases where parents encountered difficulties in bearing the costs, he said he was ready to reimburse them. He followed his students: 'Study more and more,' he wrote to one of them, 'with a spirit of diligence and humility'. We also possess a letter from 1616 to the new president of the college, Jean Massen, in favour of a theology student, his own relative, whose 'progress in letters and virtue' he hoped for.

Schools for girls?

All that has been said so far only concerns the education of boys. It was only for them that schools existed. And for girls? At the time of François de Sales, the only institutions that could offer help to families in this respect were women's monasteries, which were, however, primarily concerned with recruitment. Jeanne de Sales, the last daughter of Madame de Boisy, was sent to the monastery in 1605, 'to

give her a change of air and give her a taste for devotion'. She entered at the age of twelve, but as she felt no attraction for religious life, it is not reasonable, asserted Francis de Sales, 'to leave a young girl who does not intend to stay there forever for so long in a monastery'. She withdrew already in her second year.

But what to do if the monastery was closed to them? There was the solution of the Ursulines, who were beginning to be known as a congregation for the education of young women. They had been present in the French capital since 1608. The bishop encouraged their coming to Chambéry, writing in 1612 that 'it would be a great good thing if, in Chambéry, there were Ursulines, and I would like to contribute by doing something for this'; 'three daughters or courageous women would be enough,' he added, 'to begin'. The foundation would not take place in the ancient capital of Savoy until 1625.

In 1614, he was able to rejoice at the recent arrival of the Ursulines in Lyon, 'one of the congregations,' he said, 'that my spirit loves most'. He also wanted them in his diocese, particularly in Thonon. In January 1621, he wrote to the superior of the Ursulines of Besançon to try to encourage this project, because, he wrote, 'I have always loved, esteemed and honoured those works of great charity that your congregation uses to practise, and therefore, I have always deeply desired its diffusion also in this province of Savoy'. The project, however, could only be implemented in 1634.

The education of young girls in the Visitation monasteries

When, starting in 1610, Francis de Sales founded with Jeanne de Chantal what was to become the Order of the Visitation, the question of the admission and education of young women destined or not destined for religious life soon arose. We know the case of the daughter of the Lady of Chantal, the cheerful and coquettish *Franceschetta*, who was only eleven years old when her mother, wanting her to become a religious, took her with her into the house that was to become

the home of the first Visitandine. But the young girl had to take another path. Girls sent to monasteries unwillingly had no choice but to make themselves unbearable.

In 1614, a nine-year-old girl, daughter of the guardian of the castle of Annecy, was accepted at the first Visitation monastery. At the age of fourteen, by dint of insistence, she was allowed to wear the religious habit, but without having the requisites to be a novice. Sick with lung disease, she aroused the admiration of the founder, who felt 'an incredible consolation, finding her indifferent to death and life, in a gentle attitude of patience and with a smiling face, in spite of the very high fever and the many pains she suffered. As her only consolation, she asked to be allowed to make her profession before she died'. Very different, however, was another companion, a young woman from Lyons, daughter of the chief merchant and great benefactor, who made herself unbearable in the community to the point that Chantal's mother had to correct her.

At the Visitation in Grenoble, a twelve-year-old girl asked to live with the religious. To the superior, who hesitated to accept this 'rose' who might bear some thorns, the founder advised with a smile and a hint of cunning:

'It is true that these young girls do give some thorns; but what should one do?In this world, I have never found a good that did not cost something.We must arrange our wills in such a way that they do not seek comforts, or, if they seek them and desire them, know how to adapt themselves serenely to the difficulties that are always inseparable from comforts.In this world, we have no wine without a bottom.We must therefore calculate well.Is it better that we have thorns in our garden so that we can have roses, or that we have no roses so that we do not have thorns?If it brings more good than evil, it will be good to admit it; if it brings more evil than good, it should not be admitted.

In the end, the founder was very circumspect about

admitting young girls into the Visitation monasteries, because of the incompatibility with the way of life of religious women.

In fact, the Visitation had not been conceived and desired for such a work: ‘God,’ the founder wrote to the superior of Nevers, ‘has not chosen your institute for the education of little girls, but for the perfection of the women and young ladies who are called to it at the age when they are already able to answer for what they do’. He was well aware that monastery life could hardly provide a suitable environment for the development of girls: ‘Not only experience, but also reason teaches us that girls so young, placed under the discipline of a monastery, generally disproportionate for their age, begin to detest and hate it’.

Despite some regrets, Francis de Sales did not become the founder of an institute dedicated to education. However, it is a fact that his efforts in favour of the education and upbringing of boys and girls, in all its forms, were numerous and burdensome. The overriding motive that guided him was spiritual, especially when it came to keeping the youth away from the ‘poison of heresy’, and in this regard he succeeded rather well, as the Catholic Reformation gained ground; however, he did not neglect the temporal good of educating the youth for the benefit of society.