

## Francis de Sales and the Protestants: the duty of Christian charity

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### Introduction

Protestants are omnipresent in the life and work of Saint François de Sales (1567-1622). A "Savoyard by birth and obligation", provost of the Chapter of Saint-Pierre-de-Genève at the age of twenty-six, missionary in the Chablais region and then bishop of Geneva in exile in Annecy because of the Protestant reform and the emergence of Calvinism in Geneva, François de Sales' relationship with the Protestants was one of reconquest by the Christian rule of charity. For him, charity is the absolute first condition of any positive exchange.

The attitude of St. Francis de Sales towards Protestants has already been the subject of in-depth studies based on his writings. From the first years after his death, the bishop of Geneva is celebrated as the apostle of the return of Catholicism to the Chablais. Ruth Kleinman, in her book *François de Sales et les protestants*, attempts an objective study of the attitude of François de Sales by reviewing the opinions of previous biographers. The author evokes the Salesian methods of conversion, which were not always gentle given his friendly relations with the political authorities. André Ravier, in his preface to the three great spiritual works of François de Sales in the *Collection de la Pléiade*, considers the Doctor of Love to be a "polemicist engaged in action" in his relations with Protestants. Even more recently, Thomas Gueydier has taken an interest in the attitude of the bishop of Geneva towards the Reformed. The author finds in François de Sales, thanks to Augustine as a common thread, the inspiration and arbiter of a new type of debate. An innovation that he situates 'no longer on the minefield of theology but on the apparently less chaotic terrain of history'.

Our contribution to this colloquium is to demonstrate that Francis de Sales remained faithful to the path of Christian charity in his search for union with the Protestants. In this paper we will focus on three major sites of de Sales' encounter with the Protestants of his time: the uncertain political terrain, the open religious intrigue and the tacit linguistic polemic. The paths of charity that the apostle of Chablais walked in a delicate context can still inspire the steps of God's children in search of unity today, 400 years after his death. I would like to thank Professor Wim Collin and the organising team of this International Colloquium for agreeing to associate this modest contribution with a panel of internationally renowned specialists in Saint Francis de Sales and well-informed participants. Thank you, and forgive me at once for any shortcomings in my stammerings.

#### I. Francis de Sales' political commitment as a duty of charity

"I am in any case a Savoyard, both by birth and by obligation".

The political courage of Saint Francis de Sales is remarkable. Three elements of this commitment draw our attention: his participation in the elaboration of a code of civil law, his evangelical presence among civil and religious authorities and his doctrine of devotion for all at the heart of everyone's life. In order to better understand to what extent the bishop's political intervention denotes his duty of charity towards the Protestants in the three points mentioned above, we need to say a brief word about the political situation in Savoy in the 16th-17th centuries.

The political atmosphere in the time and place of Francis de Sales was critical: this was not an asset for the unity between Catholics and Reformed. In a letter of 19 February 1596 to Monsignor Julius Caesar Ricardi, Archbishop of Bari, Apostolic Nuncio in Turin, the young priest tells the story of the prolonged affliction of the Chablais:

A part of this diocese of Geneva was invaded by the Bernese sixty years ago, and remained heretical; but, these years having passed, this country, by force of arms, returned to the domination of His Highness and was reunited with its ancient patrimony. Many of the inhabitants, more moved by the clash of the arquebuses than by the preaching which was made to them by order of Monseigneur l'Evêque, came back to the faith and returned to the bosom of our mother the holy Church; but afterwards, these regions having been infested by the incursions of the Genevese and the French, the people fell back into their mire.

We understand here that the people of Saint Francis de Sales passed alternately from one dominion to another, from periods of war, famine, peace and plague. It should be added that the duchy was on the "Spanish route" and was an important stage in the passage of armed troops to the neighbouring countries. Furthermore, François de Sales was the son of a period in which religion was closely interwoven with politics. He had to contend with the decisions of King Henry VI of France and Charles-Emmanuel I, the (Catholic) Duke of Savoy from 1580-1630, whose policy was not always one of charity towards Protestants. Although the Duke gave gifts and alms to converted Protestants, he did not hesitate to expel from his territory with the greatest atrocity all those who claimed to be from the "Rome of Protestants". It was in this uncertain political situation that Francis de Sales developed his talents as an "immense politician" whose duty of charity embraced the Calvinists.

#### I.1 His contribution to the drafting of a code of civil law and his friendship with Favre

François de Sales remained a jurist concerned with the political unity of his country. His political commitment obliged him to stand up against Protestantism, which for him remained not only a religious heresy but also a political schism. He rejected Protestantism as the cause of political division, not the Protestants. Out of charity, François de Sales, who had freely renounced worldly life in order to be a churchman, put his knowledge of civil and ecclesiastical law at the service of his region. He also participated in the elaboration of the Code Fabrien (1595-1605) with his friend the senator Antoine Favre. In the prologue to Title I of this code of civil law, the Protestants are present, but in terms that threaten the reputation of the saint's kindness and gentleness today:

"In the last century, there escaped from hell a race of men of whom I know not whether they are more worthy of horror or of pity. Abandoning the unity of the Christian religion and of our holy Catholic faith, and, as a just consequence, the truth, they introduce on all sides new dogmas and new heresies...".

There is no doubt for Francis de Sales that the heretics are in total error. Their political heresies must be denounced and rejected. However, the intransigence of the Bishop of Geneva on the level of political law is aimed at saving the souls of heretics from the damnation of the sin of division. It is with the charity of his heart that he would like to bring back the lost children of God. We can admire this outburst of heart at the end of a long enumeration of "some political heresies of the innovators":

Finally, I ask you, in the charity of God and with the respect I profess for you, that if you think I have said anything too acerbic against heresies or heresiarchs, you believe that it is not to

offend you as adversaries that I have said and written it, but to rouse you, as friends, from your lethargic sleep

In addition to this contribution, François de Sales let himself be advised by Antoine Favre, this friend and expert in law in the management of his legal affairs. It was with him that he created the Florimontane Academy with the aim of training the Christian elite in the exercise of Christian charity.

### I.2 His evangelising presence among political, civil and religious authorities

Francis de Sales did not give up meeting the political authorities. He had a good influence with the king and the duke. He was not discouraged despite the intrigues and calumnies of the court and his method of action was different from that of the secular authorities. While Charles-Emmanuel I, for example, had decided to restore Catholicism in the Chablais region by employing a plan of coercion: confiscation of Calvinists' property, destruction of their writings, expulsion of Protestant ministers with a ban on holding any public office. For Francis de Sales, however, it was possible to avoid armed conflicts and other forms of violence if dialogue was favoured. He therefore worked out of love for the Protestants. His dealings with the duke were always benevolent towards the people.

Furthermore, Francis de Sales attached particular importance to the evangelisation of the intellectual elite, both Catholic and Protestant. For him, this constituted a reliable gateway for further conversion or reconversion, a victory of "combat by their lieutenant". It is in this light that we must look at his threefold encounter with Theodore de Bèze (1519-1605), successor to John Calvin (1509-1564) on the throne of Geneva. François de Sales' dialogue will be more convincing with other elites such as the M. d'Avully and the syndics of the city

### I.3 His doctrine of holiness for all includes the Huguenots

Francis de Sales attaches particular importance to the reflection and commitment of Christians in their environment. All are called to the perfection of charity and each according to his vocation. The spiritual director introduces holiness into the political field as well. It is a spirituality of love in daily life that forces us to bring religion closer to life and life closer to religion.

## II. The duty of religious reconquest through spiritual weapons

"It is through charity that the walls of Geneva must be shaken

The solution by charity to shake the walls of Geneva consists essentially of two levels: an ad intra phase within the Catholic Church itself and a direct phase with regard to the duty of charity towards the Protestants. Before visiting these two worlds, let us trace the extent of this religious controversy.

The religious rift at the time of Francis de Sales was profound. The division between Catholics and Protestants was complete. The Bishop of Geneva and his Chapter had been expelled from Geneva because of the Protestant reformation. And when François de Sales accepted the perilous mission of the Chablais, he was obliged to find shelter in the fortress of Allinges, under high military protection, whose escort he would later refuse during his

visits to Thonon. In reality, the picture is bleak. A letter of 14 September addressed to Antoine Favre describes it in these words:

"...the principals of Thonon having assembled their council, swore to themselves, by a sovereign perfidy, that neither they nor the people would ever attend the Catholic preaching. It would not be enough, no doubt, of the private obstinacy of each one, if they did not make fun of the desires of the prince as well as of our efforts, and did not strive for their loss by an abominable agreement. This was done, I am told, the day before yesterday in the town hall, and many had already taken this resolution in the assembly of the godless, which they call their consistory, where they had met under the pretext of invalidating, according to their custom, certain marriages. What would you do, my brother? Their hearts are hardened; they have said to God, 'We will not serve; withdraw from us; we do not want to walk in the commandments of God. They do not want to listen to us because they do not want to listen to God.

The separation is complete. It is rejection and physical and verbal violence. The Protestant authorities of Thonon do not allow the people to attend the preaching of François de Sales. And Francis called their consistory an "assembly of impious people". Violence mounted on both sides and the apostle of the Chablais was more and more convinced of Geneva's responsibility as "the source of all heresies, the feeder of all the internecine wars which have since devastated France.

Faced with this religious drama of the tearing apart of the faith, François de Sales opted for reconquest through charity. The main lines of his plan of action had already been announced in his keynote speech on his installation as Provost of the Chapter of Geneva: "It is through charity that the walls of Geneva must be shaken, through charity that it must be invaded, through charity that it must be recovered [...]. Sincere charity can do anything, it prevails over everything, it will not end, it does not act hastily.

His attitude towards the Protestants is a work for the unity of the faith by thinking of the reunion of the Reformed.

## II.1 Unity is first of all interior

Francis de Sales is aware that union with the Protestants is first of all a movement of interior conversion. Speaking of Christians he says,

it is the examples of the perverse priests, the actions, the words, in a word, the iniquity of all, but especially of the ecclesiastics. It is because of us that the name of God is blasphemed every day among the nations, and it is with full reason that the Lord complains so bitterly through his Prophets.

"It is by hunger and thirst, endured not by our adversaries but by ourselves, that we must repel the enemy. It is by prayer that we shall drive him out; for this kind of demon, as you know, can only be driven out by prayer and fasting." Indeed, as he repeated in a letter to Antoine Favre at the beginning of his mission in Chablais, "Prayer, almsgiving and fasting are the three parts that make up the cord that is difficult for the enemy to break.

## II.2 The outstretched arms of charity

-Francis de Sales and the Papal League

### III. Linguistic innovation, a form of charity

"I speak the language of my heart and not the language of this age".

#### III.1 Linguistic competence at the service of Christian unity

Linguistic competence goes beyond simple questions of communication, even though it has resulted from a given geographical location. For Viviane Mellinghoff-Bourgerie, it is a "fact of culture, it served the interests of the Counter-Reformation at the right time". We take up here the ideas of this author, whose intuition serves the duty of Christian charters towards the Reformed. The author invites us not to forget this essential fact:

For François de Sales, bishop of Geneva, the competition between Catholicism and Calvinism was also a linguistic one. The debate on the use of Latin is well known in this respect. But the use of Italian was just as virulent. [...] It was in the context of a fin de siècle stigmatised by denominational struggles that François de Sales subjectively perceived his multilingualism and experienced his belonging to the French-speaking world.

The advantage of language appears here to be a privileged meeting place for François de Sales' relations with the Protestants. While Calvin had succeeded in removing from his Institution of 1560 the Latinisms that characterise the first translation of his Institutio published in 1541, François de Sales and his friend Favre resisted for a long time before switching to a correspondence entirely in French.

#### II.2 The controversy over the cross

The interminable controversy between Antoine de la Faye and François de Sales over the cult of the cross was played out under the influence of linguistic importance. In 1597, the Protestant scholar Jean de la Faye published a *Brief Traité de la vertu de la croix et de la manière de l'honorer* (Treatise on the Virtue of the Cross and the Way of Honouring it) following the anti-Protestant placards that had been distributed to the population of Annemasse during the celebration of the "Forty Hours". Saint François de Sales responded with his *Defence of the Standard of the Holy Cross*. However, in 1604, Antoine de La Faye returned to the charge with his *Replique Chrestienne à la Response de M.F. de Sales*, in which the author asked François de Sales to improve a little "his language, which is very poorly spoken in some places".

This reproach is not really founded. François de Sales had a good knowledge of French, Latin, Italian and his mother tongue. His skills in Italian enabled him to take better advantage of the richness of Scupoli's *Combattimento*, which was one of his "dear books" carried in his pocket.

In conclusion: "As you and I, Father are one":

Three Salesian paths for ecumenism today

Politics, religion and language are the three major areas of confrontation between Francis de Sales and the Protestants. Beyond controversy, Francis de Sales opted for a dialogue of charity in order to save men (and women) through the unity of faith. One could gain by learning more about the notion of "university" in Salesian theology and by studying in detail the sermon of the... entitled "As you and I are one" to try to broaden horizons as to how to engage in the contemporary ecumenical movement in the light of the Savoy gem. This may be the subject of further work. For the moment, let us limit ourselves to suggesting three courses of action.

-For a culture of encounter

How to meet others? Francis de Sales appears as a man of dialogue, inventive and innovative because he loved God. The patron saint of journalists invites us to dare to meet today more than yesterday in the digital arena. Reclaiming Geneva today means reinventing all the places of possibility for human encounter. I implore the Lord for a Salesian Pentecost in Haute-Savoie today, to reconquer the Geneva of hearts. This is a possible mission given the ever-increasing number of Salesian families today.

-The power of friendship in the search for unity

Francis de Sales had to offer his friendship to many heretics, but he especially counted on the friendship of a few reliable people for his enterprise of reconquest through Christian charity. Antoine Favre was one of them. He kept up an abundant correspondence with him on the subject of the Protestants and it was again he who accompanied him to the second meeting with Theodore de Bèze in Geneva, probably on 3 July 1597. Monsignor Riccardi, apostolic nuncio in Turin, is the addressee of the letter of 18 May 1598 which praises the merits of this admirable apostolic friendship:

"M. le Président Favre, a person of singular piety and merit, and, to put it in my own way, the phoenix of our Savoy, is going to Turin, then to Ferrara. I would very much like to undertake this journey with him, because being the only layman who is well aware of what has been done and what still remains to be done for the holy faith in these countries, he would certainly have been of great help to us in the matters we have to deal with on this subject before His Holiness.

This friendship with Antoine Favre and many others teaches us that the ecumenical enterprise requires a journey with, a journey together.

-The language of the heart

The heart occupies a central place in the spirituality of St Francis de Sales. All authentic dialogue emanates from the heart and seeks to reach the heart. It refers to the interiority of man in his most intimate depths. It is there, in this interior intimacy, where God resides, in the depths of the heart. The doctor of love recognises that 'it is very true that this depth of the heart is reserved for God alone and that only he can penetrate it'. For him, the heart is therefore the place of presence and fullness, not of absence and emptiness. "We must therefore know that love has its seat in the heart. Ecumenism must be a matter of the heart. Whoever has touched the heart of man has touched all of man. "He who preaches with love preaches enough against the heretics, even though he does not say a single word of argument against them. For Francis de Sales the heart is the place par excellence of God's

communication. The heart is to be understood here as that which is at the very bottom of the being, prior to the action of the intelligence or the will. It can almost be interchangeable with the generic term soul. Francis de Sales speaks, for example, of "the honourable inclination that God has placed in our souls".

In short, to defeat heresy with Francis de Sales, one must love the heretic. For the heart speaks to the heart and the mouth speaks only to the ear. Long live Jesus!