

Why Francis de Sales founded the Visitation (Sr Mariagrazia Franceschini vsm)

In this talk I want to address the particular question of Francis de Sales' real intentions in founding the Visitation. It is indeed astonishing to see how much has been said and written, and continues to be said and written on the subject, usually arguing apart from what the Saint himself said most explicitly.

It is probable that the difference between the face of the Visitation as seen at the Galerie on 6 June 1610 and that of the following decades and then centuries has favoured the emergence of more or less fanciful inter-preferences, which can be summed up in a statement like this: Francis de Sales wanted the Congregation he founded to take care of the poor and the sick, so he did not want enclosure for his daughters. He was then forced by circumstances to divert his innovative project towards the classical model of cloistered monasteries, while maintaining a certain softening of the observances.

Basing myself on Francis' own texts, both legislative and epistolary, I would like to show how things actually are. I would also like to emphasise that one cannot consider the foundation of the Visitation divorced from the framework of the founder's thought and theological vision. Suffice it to think that the time of gestation and then affirmation of the Visitation coincides with that of the drafting of the Treatise on the Love of God.

Some clarifications as a premise. At the time of Francis a distinction was made between formal Religions (Ordini), and Congregations. By formal Religion is meant an Institute officially approved by the Holy See, with enclosure and solemn vows, placed under one of the recognised Rules (of Basil, Augustine, Benedict); by Congregation is meant any other Institute, with simple vows or oblation.

The Constitution *Ne nimia* of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which prohibited the foundation of new orders, is still in force.

The Council of Trent further specified that a Congregation can be erected in a canonically valid manner by the bishop, while the intervention of the Holy See is required for the possible erection of an Order. The form of a Congregation does not require enclosure or recitation of the Roman Office, as is the case for formal Religions. Presenting a more agile structure, congregations can easily adapt to the conditions and needs of the places where they are erected, but their members under canon and civil law are not properly considered religious.

To use today's language, Francis de Sales thus founded a Congregation of Diocesan law, initially conceived for the city of Annecy alone, although open to possible establishment elsewhere. He could certainly have immediately started the canonical process to request the erection of his Congregation as an Order, as he did in 1616. He did not do so for various reasons that he himself will say and that we will see later; but above all, I think, because he is not a man of planned projects, with schemes defined a priori: he feels the pulse of the life

in which he is immersed and he awaits the developments that providence, through circumstances, will want to give to those modest beginnings.

Why does Francis de Sales intend to found a new religious family? He writes: "[to] give God women of prayer and such interior souls that they may be found worthy to serve his infinite Majesty and adore him in spirit and truth" (OA XVII,16-17).

To Jeanne François de Chantal, who will be the cornerstone of the foundation, he envisages a 'giving up everything', a 'dedicating oneself totally to pure love in order to be consumed by it', a 'wanting nothing but God for time and eternity', a 'leaving the world to serve God, to follow God, to love God' (OA XIV, 68). a going out "from the world to serve God, to follow God, to love God" (OA XIV, 68). And again: 'How I long for us to be one day totally annihilated in ourselves in order to live solely for God [...]. We must arm ourselves with great courage to serve God in the highest and most generous way' (OA XIV, 313). Shortly before, he had proposed: 'Reduce our whole life to his service and to the purest love' (OA XIV, 296). Note that 'pure love' is an expression that in that early 17th century recalled even more clearly than now a decidedly contemplative and mystical di-mension.

The passage from a letter to the Baroness de Cusy is interesting: 'Do not be troubled by what the world says. It is true that the Pope does not want new Religions to be founded without his authorisation, and he is right, but he does not prevent, indeed he appreciates that we do what we will do, with God's help' (OA XIV, 287-288). In none of the Saint's letters to persons wishing to enter the Visitation is a possible service to the sick mentioned as a goal. Rather, he invites them to assess whether they have "enough affection, strength and courage to embrace the crucified Christ and bid farewell to this miserable world" (OA XIV, 294); whether there is a sincere desire "to be all of our Lord" (OA XIV, 247); whether there is a readiness not to do great external penances but to have "a heart completely bare and naked of earthly attachments; [...] the head well covered, but the spirit completely uncovered through perfect simplicity and the stripping away of one's own will" (OA XIV, 232).

When Francis de Sales introduced Jeanne Frances de Chantal and her two companions into the house of the Galerie on 6th June 1610, he gave Chantal an outline of the constitutions he had drafted (cf. OA XXV, 211-214). The first chapter clearly states the end and the means to achieve it. The aim: to make accessible to as many people as possible the way that leads to the perfection of God's love in total dedication to Him. The means: the exercise of contemplation and that of fraternal charity.

Francis de Sales has a father's heart and a pastor's heart, and in the practice of spiritual direction he has long caught the desire of 'many women' who, while desiring to 'purely serve the Lord by consecrating their whole being and all the moments of their lives to him', find themselves unable to realise this aspiration because of contingent reasons, such as weak health, advanced age, widowhood, and a widow's condition, widowhood and the relative need to take care of some family business, prevent them from entering the traditional

religious Orders, but he also caught the yearning of many others for a more authentic religious life that expresses itself less in devotional formulas and physical austerities and more in the interior dimension, in a journey of purification, renunciation of one's own will, detachment, commitment to prayer, not afraid to dare to reach the heights of union with God. To all these people Francis opens the doors of the Visitation, a reality in which "everything is modest, except the aspiration of those who dwell there, which is to reach the perfection of divine love" (OA XV,343).

Having clarified the end, Francis indicates two means to achieve it: the first and principal "is the exercise of contemplation and prayer" (OA XXV,214), the second is the practice of charity. Charity that is essentially expressed in a life of serene fraternity, in "cordial friendship", in the profound union of hearts, in mutual meekness and condescension. It is enough to read the Spiritual Treatises to grasp the whole range of situations in which charity can be declined within the monastery- This charity will also be poured out, in different ways and according to circumstances, on the brothers and sisters who live 'outside'. And here the visit to the sick has its place. Already emphasised by the first biographer of Mother de Chantal, perhaps because of the novelty of the matter in the Savoy town, it is not, however, the only form of 'external' charity, nor, in the eyes of Francis, even the most important.

We already read in the earliest manuscripts of the constitutions (ms G 1610? and K 1613): 'Since the Congregation has been entrusted with the service of the poor, and since there is no greater poverty than that of the soul, it will be permitted to receive into the house not only for one day but for several days [...] women who, either for their own consolation or to prepare to make a general confession or to confirm the conversion of their life, will need some time of retreat' (OA XXV, 220). As for visiting the sick, the same constitutions indicate conditions, modalities and restrictions that would not be appropriate for a Congregation whose aim was to provide such assistance. For the sisters, and 'only the eldest', who in turn will perform this service, a real ritual is provided that almost makes one think of a liturgical action rather than an assistance one. Even more significant is an article entitled "On the suppression of outings" that Francis inserted in the constitutions of 1613 (ms K) when requests for foundations were already appearing in Lyons and Paris: "but if the Congregation were to establish itself in some large city where the outings to visit private patients were peri-colous, it will be up to the prelate of the place either to eliminate them altogether or to limit them [...], as he judges most opportune. And also, if the Congregation has the means, it will be possible to make up for this by preparing only the necessary food for the sick, poor and suffering" (OA XXV, 226-227). An article that, it seems to me, would not make sense in a legislative text intended for a Congregation founded to visit the sick.

In 1615, the Visitation lands in Lyons: another state, the kingdom of France, another social and cultural context, another diocese and another bishop, Denis de Marquemont, who is also primate of the Church of France. Francis and Marquemont, both experts in law, could not be more different. Francis is a pastor, faithful to the Council of Trent, interpreting its

norms with a broad spirit and in the light of all the teaching of the Church since the first centuries, open to the new sensitivities emerging (cf. Preface... in OA XXV, 291-321). Marquemont is, on the contrary, the champion of the intransigent and rigid legalist tendency that marks the Church of France at the time, where it is impossible to conceive of female religious life without enclosure and strict penitential observances.

The confrontation is inevitable. But if it is true that the opinion of the bishop of Lyons has its weight in the decision to transform the 'little Congregation' into a religious Order, it must also be said that in any case Francis should have clarified the juridical statute of his foundation, by then proven fruitful after a few years of life, and in the face of requests for new foundations.

On 20 January 1616 Marquemont sent a Memoire (OA XXV, 322-332) to François de Sales in which he presented all his objections and what, in his opinion, made it problematic if not impossible to establish the Visitation in his diocese as it was. Contrary to what has been said, the visitation of the sick is not at issue, to which he makes no reference and which he had already abolished on his own authority, as Francis himself had foreseen. In essence, the crucial point is: the visitands at the canonical level are not properly religious; since their vows are not recognised at the civic level, they retain the right to inherit and contract legitimate marriages, which jeopardises the patrimony of their families. The lengthy and punctilious Memoire ends by offering the bishop of Geneva an alternative: either transform the Visitation into an Order, or leave it as a Congregation but imposing enclosure according to Tridentine norms, interpreted in the strictest way. Without one of these two solutions there is no room for the Visitation in Lyon.

Francis de Sales replies shortly afterwards, on 2 February (OA XXV, 333-342), and it is a reply that should at least be read; one would immediately understand that there is no capitulation, no nau-fragio of audacious dreams with the peace of so many authors even contemporary (at least in Italy).

Francis' answer, which leaves nothing to be desired in terms of juridical precision, can be summarised as follows: the Visitation as erected is fully legitimate, conforms to similar foundations made by the most faithful bishops at the Council of Trent, has obtained recognition and praise from the pontiff through bulls and indulgences, and has benefited many people. However, since the possibility of its expansion in the kingdom of France, where it is already in demand in several places, depends on whether or not the Archbishop of Lyons agrees, I accept that it be erected as a religious Order, especially since this transformation in no way changes the Visitation's proper purpose, as long as the specific objectives are kept intact, which can be done in fidelity to the Tridentine dictate, according to the "sweet and understanding interpretation that is given in Rome".

On the same day Francis de Sales wrote to Mother Favre, Superior in Lyons, telling her of Marquemont's proposal and the reply he had given: 'I leave the choice to him without any reservation other than that of the principal aim of our Congregation: that widows may be received there [...] and that secular women may have access to it in order to practise and decide for a committed Christian life. [...] Now my opinion is that it would have been better done under the title of a simple Congregation in which only the love and fear of the Spouse would have served as a cloister, [...], but since the good reception that Monsignor the Archbishop will give to this Congregation of ours in his city depends on what can be expected in the whole of France, I agree that it should be made a formal Religion, subject to the two points indicated above [...]. Congregations and Religions are not at all different in the eyes of the Lord because, for Him, the vows of the one are as strong as those of the other. And not being held in such esteem and esteem, I liked the title of Congregation better' (OA XVII, 150-151).

In this consent there is no 'compulsion' nor is it given out of obedience, as has been said, to an 'ecclesiastical superior' (Marquemont had no authority over the bishop of Geneva). Not only was Francis free to maintain the initial form, but he would also have had on his side the authoritative opinion of a cardinal such as Bellarmine who, urged by Francis himself to support the request for the erection of the Order of the Visitation in Rome, had replied that in his opinion it would be better to leave things as they were and not change what 'goes well as they are', all the more so considering the fruit of good that he was bringing (OA XVII, 418-419).

On the part of Francis de Sales in accepting the transformation of the Visitation with a view to its future expansion there is, moreover, only the profound conviction that he is a mere instrument for a work that surpasses him, that originates in God and is destined for God's glory.

In front of these texts, I wondered how the reading on the origins of the Visitation that I mentioned at the beginning came about.

The starting point is a dialogue that would have taken place between Francis de Sales and Jean-Pierre Camus (1584-1652), bishop of Belley, and reported by the latter: "As for me [it would be Francis de Sales speaking], I remain amazed that [...] with an incomparable sweetness of spirit, I accomplished what I intended to undo and undid what I wanted to do, [I thought only] of making a small society of young people and widows who, without vows and without enclosure, had no other good than that of holy charity [...]. Their occupation in the house would be prayer and manual labour, and outside they would visit the abandoned sick [...]. Now that they will be locked up, they will know how to visit rather than be visitors'. I note that this last statement clashes with the tenacity with which Francis de Sales defended

the title of Visitation, after it was already 'enclosed', in the face of those who proposed other titles objecting that by now the sisters were no longer 'going to visit'!

Camus' text was later reworked in 1700 by Pierre Collot who had Francis de Sales say: 'Now it is a cloistered Order [the Visitation], living under the Rule of St Augustine, with vows and enclosure, which is incompatible with the first project [...]. So I would be more their stepfather than their founder'. At the height of the 19th century, then Emile Bougaud in his biography of Saint Jeanne Frances de Chantal presents her as the first, unsuccessful daughter of the Daughters of Charity, while Francis de Sales would be the failed pioneer of the bold project to abolish the cloister! . Leaving aside Collot's and Bougaud's re-elaborations, too far removed from the sources and where the instrumental purpose of the assertions is all too evident, I stop at Camus's text and wonder why a minimum of textual and historical criticism has not been applied here, how the same weight, indeed greater weight, could be given to assertions written several years later, and who knows from what pen, to those of Francis himself and Mother de Chantal. I quote her in a text that has some assonances with Camus' but with a very different meaning: "It displeased our blessed father to change the simplicity of his little Congregation, seeming to him that this less conspicuous way of life would have offered more reasons to keep himself in his own littleness. However, looking to divine providence, he gave his consent and shortly afterwards told me that, after having weighed and considered everything well, it was the best thing for us to be religious with solemn vows and that God had done his will despite his personal repugnance, and therefore he blessed him and was extremely satisfied with this decision.

Francis de Sales' decision seems perfectly consistent with his vision. Scrolling through his letters at the time of the Lyon foundation we find expressions that are surprising. To Mother Favre, Superior in Lyons, he advises Marquemont to keep an attitude of unconditional surrender to God's blessing on what is to be done about the Visitation and writes: 'In fact, my dearest daughter, it is necessary to have this spirit in our Congregation, because it is the perfect and apostolic spirit. And if it could help to establish many other congregations of good servants of God, without ever establishing itself, it would only be more pleasing to God because it would be less subject to self-love" (OA XVII, 150-151). Characteristic of the Visitation is "to keep herself very low and modest [...]. It is enough for her that God has created her for his service and to give a little good perfume in the Church" but, and perhaps because of this, "it is without doubt the greatest glory of God that there is a Visitation in the world" (OA XVI, 236).

And this is how he describes the life of his daughters: 'The whole interior and exterior reality of the Daughters of the Visitation is consecrated to God, they are [...] living holocausts and all their actions and renunciations are all prayers and prayers, all their hours are dedicated to God, [...] and they are fruits of charity: this, in my opinion, must be enough' (OA XX, 288-289).

In founding the Visitation Francis de Sales is thus a true innovator, not in the sense of anticipating institutes of active life, but in having dared to found his religious family on pure love alone. Canonical enclosure or not, solemn or simple vows mattered little to him, just as the form in which the good is done mattered little to him. What matters to him is that his daughters live in quiet tension of loving response to the Love that predeceased them. A passage from one of his sermons on the Visitation is enlightening (cf. OA IX, 160-161): 'Mary on her way to Ain Karim carried in her womb the One who is love and therefore had herself become love'. This is the ideal of the visitandine: to become love. In meek service, whether of the sisters or of any other brother, in praise and joy, in grateful and generous humility, in complete abandonment to God's bon plaisir, in living ultimately all those nuances of love contained in the 'little joyful mystery' of the Visitation.