

Daniel Moulinet

THE PRIESTS OF ST FRANÇOIS DE SALES AND THE SALESIAN INSPIRATION

Father Henri Chaumont (1838-1896), a priest of the diocese of Paris, founded three Salesian societies: the Daughters of St. Francis de Sales in 1872, with the help of Caroline Carré de Malberg (1829-1891), the Priests of St. Francis de Sales in 1876, the Sons of St. Francis de Sales in 1887. In 1889, a fourth group, the Missionary Catechists, which later became a religious congregation, the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, became part of the Daughters of St Francis de Sales. To study the place of the holy bishop of Geneva in the spirituality of these four societies would be a task of too great a scope. We will only try here to answer this question for the founder himself and for the Society of Priests, while remaining well aware of the limits of the exercise.

1. Henri Chaumont and St. François de Sales

Henri Chaumont came from a family originally from Franche-Comté but established in Paris - his father was a cabinetmaker in the St. Sulpice district - and quickly came under the spiritual direction of Mgr Gaston de Ségur, who was to become one of the most widely read spiritual writers of the time. The prelate had difficulty appeasing the young man's tendency to scruples. He entered the minor seminary, then the major seminary of St Sulpice in Paris. It was there that he first encountered the thought of St Francis de Sales, whose Letters were read in the refectory. His fellow students describe his character as authoritative and severe, but tempered by a constant friendliness. With several of them, he founded a society of seminarians who, once they became priests, proposed not to seek a career, but to keep a certain simplicity of life.

Ordained a priest on 18 January 1864, he was appointed curate in the parish of St-Marcel, in a working-class district of Paris. A turning point came when Mgr de Ségur, who was a renowned - and probably overworked - director of souls, entrusted his disciple with the care of several ladies of high society. To the Countess of Tury, H. Chaumont advised her to adopt a rule of life that he had taken from the writings of Saint Francis de Sales. He first invited her to read the Gospels and the lives of the saints, in order to strengthen her faith and to abandon the prejudices that set Christian practice against life in the world. He does not hesitate to ask her to make a real break in her way of life and insists on the demands of the Gospel, calling her to internalise them in a radical way. The Imitation of Jesus Christ is the

first reading he assigns to him. The Introduction to the Devout Life came later. In another case, that of a postal worker, Miss Loiseau, Mgr Laveille shows Abbé Chaumont to be less rigorous, since it was a question of accompanying a young woman who was already advanced in the spiritual life, in whom he sought to encourage inner peace, fervour and recollection. We are closer to the Salesian school. H. Chaumont tried to form a group around her that would follow the school of St. Francis de Sales.

Appointed curate at the parish of St Clotilde, a recent parish in a very well-to-do district of the capital, he was able to devote a significant part of his time to the ministry of confession. There he found women who were already very committed to the Christian life, some of whom he even had to moderate in the use of instruments of penance, and others who had a tendency to scruples.

Between 1868 and 1877, Abbé Chaumont published fifteen booklets grouped together in a collection: Spiritual Directions after St. Francis de Sales, dealing with temptations (1868), friendship, humility (1870), the last ends (1872), Christian obedience, the Holy Eucharist, the religious vocation (1873), confession, the cross (1874), prayer (1875), suffering (1876), the return of the soul to God, the Virgin Mary (1877), holy hope and simplicity (1878), charity towards one's neighbour (1879). Abbé Chaumont's reading of St François de Sales is certainly influenced by the trends of the time and by his own temperament. He readily shows himself to be meticulous, even scrupulous, wanting to detail everything in the practices of piety, with a certain stiffness which is not entirely in the spirit of the holy bishop. However, in Francis he sees above all a man who is led by the Spirit of Jesus to be a true copy of Christ.

Among the women who accompanied Abbé Chaumont to St Clotilde, Mme Carré de Malberg was undoubtedly the most important, since it was with her that he founded the Society of the Daughters of St Francis de Sales.

2. Abbé Chaumont and Mme Carré de Malberg

Caroline Barbe Colchen (1829-1891), a native of Metz, had been sent by her parents as a boarder at the Visitation in the same city (1841-1846). From this stay, she had kept habits of piety: daily mass, spiritual reading, recitation of the rosary with a little meditation, weekly confession and frequent communions. In 1829, she married her cousin, Paul Carré, who was entering the military career. The marriage soon proved to be only half a success. In 1862, Major Carré, after several posts, was appointed to Paris. His wife had to combine worldly obligations with piety. In 1869, as a parishioner of St Clotilde, Mme Carré placed

herself under the spiritual direction of Abbé Chaumont. Following the principles of St. Francis de Sales, the priest invited his new penitent to a general confession, which was to be a determining moment for her. He then imposed a six-day retreat so that she could discern her duties of social life and her duties of piety. At the end of the retreat, she made a commitment to serve God and follow his will: "I accept with all my heart all that you will send me this year in terms of sorrows and joys. I bless in advance your divine hand, which chastises only to heal. Mme Carré quickly turned to the apostolate of women in her environment who were anxious to progress, inaugurating a sort of spiritual salon, from which all mundane, banal or vain conversation was banished. After the war of 1870-1871, which represented a parenthesis, a period she spent at a friend's house near Toulouse, Mme Carré took up the resolution proposed by François de Sales in the Introduction under the title: "Authentic protest to engrave in the soul the resolution to serve God and to conclude acts of penance". During 1872, Abbé Chaumont led several of his penitents to Mme Carré and this was to be the embryo of the society of the Daughters of St Francis de Sales. The foundress called them to strive for evangelical holiness, relying on God's grace by practising the Christian virtues and, in particular, the precept of charity towards their neighbour. They are to meet weekly to encourage each other in devotion.

3. Abbé Chaumont and the priests of St. Francis de Sales

It was at the end of 1874 that Abbé Chaumont conceived the first idea of a society of priests. His biographer, Mgr Laveille, recounts an anecdote which may have been decisive in his plan: the account given to him by Mme Carré of the death of a little girl without the sacrament, in a country parish, due to the negligence of the priest. Stressing the bad influence of the contemporary "world", Abbé Chaumont calls on priests not to model themselves on it, but to remain faithful to spiritual demands. However, Mgr de Ségur invited him to give them a particular orientation: to emphasise a better practice of the sacrament of penance, under the aegis of the holy bishop of Geneva, presented as "the doctor and model of both the gentlest and the strongest virtues". Mgr de Ségur emphasised two of them: humility and meekness. Abbé Chaumont therefore drew up a first set of rules for the future members, then a second, which seemed less severe. The Society was finally founded in 1876. A first meeting was held on 29 August and the agreement of the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr François Richard, was obtained on 16 October. It was the archbishop who gave his name to the Society that Abbé Chaumont wanted to call the Priests of the Spirit of Jesus. One of the missions devolved to the priests of the Society was the spiritual accompaniment of the Daughters of St Francis de Sales. Very quickly, the function of probator was established within the Society, which designated those responsible for training the members in piety and the guidance of souls in the school of Francis de Sales.

An important stage in the history of the Society is the retreat that H. Chaumont preached at the house of Athis, home of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, in 1892, the content of which is still today an obligatory passage for priests asking to join the Society. This retreat consists of eight instructions:

Saint Francis de Sales

The foundation of a Society of priests in the school of St Francis de Sales

The spiritual physiognomy of the priest of St Francis de Sales

The external physiognomy of the priest of St Francis de Sales

The priest of St Francis de Sales, director of souls

The apostolate of the priest of St Francis de Sales

The auxiliaries of the priest of St Francis de Sales

The future of the society of the priests of St Francis de Sales

H. Chaumont opened the retreat by presenting Francis de Sales not only as having particularly illustrated the virtues of humility and meekness but as having perfectly imitated Jesus Christ. "He was a new apparition of Our Lord, made available to the men of our time. He expands on Titus 3:4: "The goodness and humanity of God our Saviour has appeared," stating, "He never raises his voice, he never rebukes with severity, he avoids anything that might frighten fearful souls, the little ones, even sinners." (p.9) The word *humanitas* he translates as simplicity, the concern not to be noticed. After showing this imitation of Christ in public life, he emphasizes it in intimate life: the Holy Spirit leads him to excel in all the virtues; the saint declares, "I seek only the good pleasure of God and will seek it to the last moment." (p. 13) "His doctrine has the three qualities of the Master's: elevation, [...], simplicity, [...] practicality." (p. 15)

But all this stems from a single principle: "Following the example of Jesus, St. Francis de Sales wanted to remain delicately, lovingly, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit." (p. 38) H. Chaumont then invites to have a special devotion to the Holy Spirit which allows to unify life and apostolate. He then proposes a method: self-denial, which he invites us to obtain by the practice of the probationary virtues of humility, obedience, poverty and chastity. It is then that perfection can take place. In the third instruction, he defines the physiognomy of the priest of St. Francis de Sales by three qualities: "a profound and very particular humility, a singular simplicity, a very ardent charity. (p. 56) In the line of the holy bishop, it is only after having spoken of the interior qualities that he addresses "the exterior physiognomy" of the priest. He first defines it as being in the image of St. Francis, "a modest dignity", to which he adds "a noble affability". However, we sense that he is somewhat reserved about the eutrapelic,

"amiable gaiety" of the saint, because he himself gives a more serious, even more severe image of the priest. He encourages priests to cultivate two qualities which are in good agreement with St. Francis: "inexhaustible goodness" and "a paternal firmness" (pp. 107-108). H. Chaumont reproduces at length the episode of the bishop's visit to the unrepentant priest in the episcopal prison to show how his apostolate knew no limits. He concludes: "What does it matter where you live or what your ministry is? Wherever you are, be apostles. It is not the most honourable posts that raise the priest, but his zeal for the salvation of souls. (p. 130)

4. Reference to the patron saint by the priests of St. Francis de Sales today

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to give an exhaustive picture of the influence of St. Francis de Sales on the priests of the Society as it is today. First, it is clear that the members are and remain diocesan priests. Salesian spirituality is not there to set them apart from their confreres, but to enable them to live out their diocesan commitment in a certain way. "Let us be what we are, but let us be good. The insistence on the Holy Spirit is very present, with an invitation to read the book of Acts as a kind of "gospel of the Spirit". Members of the Society are invited to allow themselves to be guided by the Spirit, taking the means of discernment indicated by Francis de Sales.

The formation of members is currently provided by a small magazine, *Peace and Joy in the Holy Spirit*, which is published in several language versions, with ten issues per year, usually of 28 pages, but sometimes of up to 36 pages. Three times a year, the issue features a probation, usually on a virtue to be practiced by priests. Some examples are: *Accompaniment and Discernment* (May 2013), *Holiness* (May 2015), *Joy* (November 2015), *St. Francis de Sales to Confessors* (November 2016), *Meekness* (February 2017), *St. Francis de Sales to Preachers* (November 2019 and February 2020), *Hope* (April-May 2020), *Keeping Courageous Hearts* (November 2020), *Humility* (February 2021), *Francis and Us Today* (November 2021).

Several of them, as we can see, make explicit reference to St Francis de Sales. The one from November 2017, written by François Corrigan , is directly about him. The author invites us to deepen our understanding of the thought of the holy bishop on the Church, presenting it particularly as "a garden of varied flowers" but also as "a hospital". He reminds us of the importance of attesting, in his footsteps, that holiness is for everyone, and the place to be given to spiritual accompaniment, highlighting several features: accommodation "to the capacity of each person", goodness, the love of God as the inspirer of direction, the encouragement to the directed to live in trust, to form themselves to detect true and false

inspirations and to walk at the pace of the Spirit. Corrigan also reminds priests of the criteria for discernment mentioned in Books VII and VIII of the TAD. Each probation, which usually takes place over the course of a month, is accompanied by questions, usually week by week, which invite the priest member of the Society to question his spirituality and practice in the light of what is set out in the probation, and to share this with his probationer who responds.

Some of the other probations have brought to the attention of their readers several texts of Francis de Sales, whose meditation can be enriching for the priest. The issue dealing with confession contains Warnings to confessors, a fragment of advice to confessors, and Advice to confessors and directors on discerning the operations of the Spirit of God and the evil spirit in souls. The one devoted to preaching reproduces the letter to Mgr Frémyot of 5 October 1604 which constitutes a veritable treatise on the subject. The issues for 2022, the year of the 400th anniversary of the saint's death, all deal with "Saint Francis de Sales and us" and the November 2021 issue, written by F. Corrigan, is entitled : Francis and us today and the author presents Francis as "a Christocentric humanist".

This being the case, the authors of probations with another theme do not fail to refer to St Francis de Sales. Olivier Bousseau, author of the one on gentleness (February 2017), devotes the 4th part to our saint and bases his remarks on numerous references to the IVD as well as the Entretiens. The same is true of F. Corrigan in the probation on hope (April-May 2020). The examples could be multiplied.

Compared to the early days of the Society, the "formal" aspect of probations has been toned down. Until a few decades ago, members had to keep a "regularity sheet", allowing them to control their prayer and meditation times. This aspect, inherited from Abbé Chaumont, which could lead to a greater emphasis on self-confidence than on dependence on grace, has disappeared in favour of greater freedom.

The Society of Priests under his patronage is therefore very much in the tradition of St Francis de Sales. It is not a purely historical reference but an interiorised spirituality, nourished by meditation on the works of the holy bishop of Geneva, in dialogue with everyday pastoral work. It aims both to strengthen the spiritual qualities of the priest and to guide him in the pastoral relationship. The founder of the Society, Abbé Chaumont, has preserved a certain number of meditations on St. Francis de Sales, but the tendency is to refer more to the writings of the holy bishop himself, so as not to introduce the spiritual orientations of the 19th century.