

Rock, THE FOUNDATION AND NOT THE FOUNDER OF THE CHURCH

The role of the Pope according to Saint Francis de Sales

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^{ème}In the system of Catholic apologetics that followed the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, the visibility of the Church and its head on earth is continually exalted, even if it means neglecting the other dimensions to some extent. Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622) is no exception: for him, as for other Catholic controversialists of the time, the so-called *via primatus* is a real centrepiece of his approach according to a careful study of his *Controversies*.

The present study will demonstrate this, starting from the context and sources of the recourse to Peter in the work of Francis de Sales. We will then evoke the vocation of Peter, his role in the primitive Church and the question of his succession. Before considering in conclusion how Peter and his successors are yesterday and today the guarantors of the true Church and its unity, we shall say a word about Francis de Sales and the dogmatic definitions of the First Vatican Council (1870) concerning the papacy.

Without much pretension, this theological and specifically ecclesiological study hopes to highlight the relevance of St. Francis de Sales on issues relating to the understanding of the nature and structure of the Church, in particular on the Petrine ministry of the Pope according to the Catholic understanding, not without inevitable ecumenical repercussions in our days.

1. Context and sources of recourse to Peter in the work of Francis de Sales

By the time François de Sales (1567-1622) was born, Geneva and much of Switzerland had already embraced the ideas of the Protestant Reformation for many years¹. From 1535 onwards, the Catholic bishops had been banished from their episcopal see in Geneva and had to establish their residence in Annecy. François de Sales only knew the second or third generation of Protestant reformers. In Geneva, he had to deal mainly with Theodore de Bèze (1519-1605), successor of Calvin († 1564). He was undoubtedly part of the Counter-Reformation or Catholic Reformation movement

¹ For a better understanding of our purpose, in this study we take up some of the considerations that we expressed in the Lyon Colloquium on 25-27 November 2021. Our contribution was published in the proceedings of the colloquium under the following title *Saint Francis de Sales and the question of the true Church. Essai d'évaluation ecclésiologique de l'apologétique des Controverses*, in J.-M. GUEULLETTE (ed.), *Saint François de Sales. Parole publique et parole privée. Parole d'un évêque et d'un maître spirituel*. Proceedings of the International Colloquium organised at the Catholic University of Lyon on 25-27 November 2021 (Paris, Cerf 2022) 75-104.

initiated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which gave a new lease of life to the Catholic Church: the missions in the new worlds went hand in hand with attempts to reconquer the territories won by the Protestants thanks to a vast apologetic undertaking in the West. As a priest (18 December 1593) first and as a bishop (8 December 1602) later, François de Sales, who had wanted to be a "man of the Church" from a young age, was absorbed in numerous pastoral concerns *ad intra* and *ad extra*, i.e. towards his fellow Catholics and towards those who had turned to Protestantism. Here is how he himself presents the territory of his mission to Archbishop Julius Caesar Riccardi, Archbishop of Bari and Apostolic Nuncio in Turin, in a letter dated 19 February 1596: "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 Genevans and the French, the people fell back into their quagmire"². It is easy to understand the political and religious instability of the area, which required a great deal of patience and flexibility from the pastors. François de Sales devoted himself body and soul to this delicate mission.

The background of this study thus implies the complexity of the relations with the Protestants that Francis de Sales had to face in the field and in his writings. On the ground, he had to contend with the Calvinists. ^{ème}On the other hand, in his writings, we find all the main reformers of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, from John Wyclif († 1384) to Theodore de Bèze († 1605), including Jan Hus († 1415), Johannes Oecolampade († 1531), Huldrych Zwingli († 1531), Andreas Carlostadt († 1541), Martin Luther († 1546), Martin Bucer († 1551), Philipp Melanchthon († 1560), John Calvin († 1564) and Heinrich Bullinger († 1575), as can be noted in the index of heretical authors established in the first volume of the Complete Works dedicated to the *Controversies*³. This last work, posthumous (first edition in 1672), constitutes a major piece in the sources concerning the role of the apostle Peter and his successors in the Church. It is, in fact, in the *Controversies* that the bishop of Geneva skilfully handles the apologetic method which culminates in the *via primatus* as we shall see later. In related works (cf. the *Defense de l'Estendart de la sainte Croix*, the *Premier Titre du Code Fabrien* and the *Sermons de controverse*: t. VII, *Sermon 2*, 29 June 1593; *Sermon 3*, 1^{er} August 1593;

² FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Letter 66* (19 February 1596), in *Œuvres* t. XI, p. 185.

³ *Œuvres* t. I, pp. CXLI-CXLIII.

Sermon 31, 1^{er} August 1595)⁴ the same theme appears, always in the service of the defence of the orthodox faith and the return of heretics to the Catholic Church. As he himself says, Francis de Sales draws his doctrine above all from Sacred Scripture and Tradition⁵, in other words the Fathers of the Church and the Ecumenical Councils. Saint Augustine († 430), called the "phoenix among doctors"⁶, was the teacher par excellence of the Bishop of Geneva. Moreover, the latter made abundant use of the *Controversies* of Card. Robert Bellarmine († 1621), a "very excellent theologian"⁷, and other contemporary authors.

2. Peter's vocation and role in the early Church

In order to establish the authority of the apostle Peter and his successors, Francis de Sales uses the arguments of Sacred Scripture and Tradition. First of all, he presents the vocation of the first apostle, whom Jesus himself chose to be the foundation stone of his Church (cf. Mt 16:18): he gave him the keys of the Kingdom (cf. Mt 16:19) and prayed for his faith so that he would not fail and would confirm his brothers (cf. Lk 22:32), thus discharging the task of shepherding the whole flock (cf. Jn 21:15-17)⁸.

Speaking of the vocation of Simon, the future Peter and fisher of men, Francis de Sales states that he had to leave everything - especially his family and his wife - to follow Jesus, contrary to what the Huguenots say:

⁴ See B. MACKAY, *General Introduction*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. CXXVIII; see also p. XXX. To a lesser extent, one can also glean other elements scattered throughout the works of François de Sales, such as *Sermons* 34 (1595) and 46 (1595-1597); *Letters* 359 (cf. *Œuvres* t. XIII/1606) and 798 (cf. *Œuvres* t. XV/1612); etc.

⁵ Cf. FRANCIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres*, vol. I, pp. 148-195 (Sacred Scripture), 196-201 (Apostolic Traditions), 211-225 (Councils) and 226-228 (Church Fathers). See also FRANCIS DE SALES, *Sermon* 136 (1^{er} March 1617), in *Œuvres*, vol. VIII, pp. 322-324: "Are not the Scriptures sufficient? Are they not sufficient and superabundant? Surely, I would not want to say with very illustrious and learned people that they are not enough. Yes, they are sufficient; it is we who are not sufficient to draw Catholic doctrine from the Scriptures alone, taken in isolation. (...) The Church is sufficient because she gives us Scripture; Tradition is sufficient because it recommends Scripture; Scripture is sufficient because it recommends both the Church and Tradition. The Church is like a dove: she has two wings, Scripture and Tradition"; *Letter to Mgr Pierre de Villars*, Archbishop of Vienna (around 15 February 1609), in *Œuvres*, vol. XIV, pp. 126-127.

⁶ FRANCIS DE SALES, *Sermon* 33 (28 August 1620), in *Œuvres* t. IX, pp. 324-339, here 327.

⁷ FRANCIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 158 and 184. The two saints met in Rome in March 1599 and enjoyed each other's company. They continued their friendly trade in an extensive correspondence which is unfortunately largely lost: cf. FRANCIS DE SALES, *Letter* 1219 (to Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, 10 July 1616), in *Œuvres* t. XVII, pp. 238-248. See also *Œuvres* t. XI, p. 143; t. XIV, p. 127; t. XVIII, pp. 77 and 79.

⁸ These Petrine texts are systematically commented on by Francis de Sales in the VI^e Rule of Faith (cf. FRANCIS DE SALES, *The Controversies*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 229-246, 246-248 and 249-257).

"The Evangelist writes that Jesus *entered the house of Simon*, who was the great Apostle St. Peter, the first of the Apostles who had followed our dear Master with his brother St. Andrew. Saint Matthew testifies to this clearly in his eighth chapter, and Saint Mark indirectly in his first chapter, although in the Gospel which we read today, Saint Luke does not say so, but only that Jesus *entered Simon's house and healed his beautiful mother who was ill with fevers*. Several bigoted people have concluded that it was necessary for Saint Peter not to remain celibate at that time, and the Huguenots have said that since he had a beautiful mother, he had to have a wife when he had one, and therefore that he was married at that time; which is not the case, because he could not have followed Our Lord if he had been in charge of a wife. But if one were to say that since he had a beautiful mother he must have had a wife, and consequently a family, this would be something else and one would be mistaken. This shows that, although he had not always remained celibate, he was nevertheless celibate when he followed the Saviour, which he showed by saying to him: *We have left everything to follow you; what reward will you give us? We have left all*: he does not say in part, but *all*, without reservation of any thing; and since *we have left all, what reward shall we receive from you?* Now he could not have spoken like this if he had had a wife. Our Lord having chosen Saint Peter to be the head of the ecclesiastics, it was fitting that he should live in celibacy"⁹.

It is clear that Francis de Sales is trying to find the ecclesiastical celibacy practised in the Latin Church on the life of St. Peter. In fact, what is more important is the fact of having left everything to follow the Lord exclusively and thus to accomplish his mission.

Among the Twelve, Peter is the first and the spokesman of the group, as we can see in several gospel episodes (cf. Mt 16:16 // Mk 8:29 // Lk 9:20; Mt 26:30-35 // Mk 14:26-31 // Lk 22:33-34 // Jn 13:36-38; Mt 17:24-27; Jn 6:67-69; Jn 21:3.15-19). He was not lacking in weakness and his presumption should teach us to be humble and to rely only on God's grace. Only then will even the impossible be possible. This is how Francis de Sales teaches it:

"St. Peter said to Our Lord with great fervour: I will not leave you, but I will die with you; and at the mere voice of a chamber, he denied it three times. Certainly, when we have these ardent desires to do great things for God, we must then more than ever deepen our humility and self-defiance and trust in God, throwing ourselves into his arms, recognizing that we have no power to carry out our resolutions and good desires, nor to do anything pleasing to him; but *in him* and with his grace *all things* will be possible for us"¹⁰.

The height of Peter's cowardice is obviously his threefold denial of his master (cf. Mt 26:69-75 // Mk 14:66-72 // Lk 22:56-62 // Jn 18:17, 26-27). While reproaching him for his boldness (cf. Mt 16:22-23), the Lord nevertheless had pity on Peter and prayed for his conversion (cf. Lk 22:31-32). Peter was indeed converted and restored to humility, "so that he who was first in dignity might be

⁹ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Sermon* 60 (3 March 1622), in *Œuvres* t. X, pp. 281-297, here 281-282.

¹⁰ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Sermon* 11 (6 May 1616 or 1617), in *Œuvres* t. IX, pp. 81-82; cf. *Sermon* 55 (13 February 1622), in *Œuvres* t. X, 204.

first in humility"¹¹ . He even confessed three times the love of his master and accepted the office of shepherd of the Lord's flock (cf. Jn 20:15-19)¹² . From then on he imitated the latter to the point of going to prison and dying crucified upside down¹³ .

Given his position with Jesus and the group of Twelve, Peter had a prominent role in the early Church, as witnessed by the Book of *Acts* (cf. Acts 1-12; 15:7-11). His name received from the Lord (= "*You are Petrus*") is in itself a whole programme that expresses the particular excellence of his office. Francis de Sales enumerates many sublime titles given to him to indicate the primacy of his service in the Church¹⁴ : Peter is, among other things, the vicar of Jesus Christ but not his successor¹⁵ ; luminary and first preacher of the Gospel¹⁶ ; great prince of the Apostles, lieutenant general and governor of the Church militant and universal¹⁷ ; universal Bishop and Servant of the servants of God¹⁸ . Francis de Sales was careful to make a clear distinction between Jesus Christ and his apostle Peter. Indeed,

"Our Lord is the foundation and the founder, the foundation and the aedifier of the Church, but Saint Peter is only the foundation; Our Lord is its Master and Lord in ownership, Saint Peter has only the economy. (...(...)) Thus the supreme office which St. Peter had in the Church militant, by reason of which he is called the foundation of the Church, as head and governor, is not beyond the authority of his Master, but is only a

¹¹ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Sermon* 142 (9 March 1618), in *Œuvres* t. VIII, pp. 352-357, here 357. This is a quote from GREGORY THE GREAT, *Hom. in Ezech.* 2, 6, 9. See also *Treatise on the Love of God* X, 9, in *Works* vol. V, p. 199; *The True Spiritual Conversations* 17, in *Works* vol. VI, p. 329; *Sermon* 141 (8 March 1618), in *Works* vol. VIII, pp. 343-351; *Sermon* 145 (13 March 1618), in *Works* vol. VIII, p. 369; *Sermon* 65 (25 March 1622), in *Works* vol. X, pp. 374-376

¹² Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Le Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 249-257; *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* VI, 14, in *Œuvres* t. IV, p. 353; *Letter* 798 (1^{er} August 1612), in *Œuvres* t. XV, pp. 252-253.

¹³ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Defense de l'estendart de la Sainte Croix* II, 8, in *Œuvres* t. II, p. 149; *Sermon* 2 (29 June 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, pp. 47-48; *Sermon* 3 (1^{er} August 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, pp. 57-65; *Letter* 798 (1^{er} August 1612), in *Œuvres* t. XV, pp. 252-253.

¹⁴ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Sermon* 2 (29 June 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, pp. 34 and 38; *Premier Titre du Code Fabrien* (1595-1605), in *Œuvres* t. XXIII, pp. 147-148.

¹⁵ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 89 : " Nostre Seigneur abandoning his Church when in his corporeal and visible being, he left a visible lieutenant and general vicar, and this is Saint Peter, of whom he could well [say] : O Domine, quia ego servus tuus. You tell me, yes, but Our Lord is not dead, and he is always with his Church, so why do you give him a vicar? I answer you that, not being dead, he has no successor, but only a vicar, and of abundance, that he truly assists his Church in everything and through everything with his invisible favour, but, in order not to make a visible horn without a visible head, he still wished to assist him in the person of a visible lieutenant, by means of whom, in addition to the invisible favours, he perpetually administers his Church in a manner and [form] suitable to the suavity of his disposition. See also *Ibid.* , p. 276.

¹⁶ See FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 269-273 and 295-302.

¹⁷ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 87, 234 and 304; *Sermon* 2 (29 June 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, p. 32; *Sermon* 3 (1^{er} August 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, p. 56. François de Sales admits to basing himself on Robert Bellarmine and especially Nicolas Sander (cf. *De la Visible Monarchie*) to demonstrate the primacy of Saint Peter (cf. *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 263).

¹⁸ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 300 and 302. The first expression is reaffirmed against Gregory the Great († 604), who is the author of the second.

participation in it; so that he himself is not the foundation of this hierarchy beyond Our Lord, but rather in Our Lord, as we call him the most holy Father in Our Lord, outside of whom there would be nothing"¹⁹ .

Moreover, as Francis de Sales explains further:

"Our Lord, who is the foundation, is also St. Peter, but with such a notable difference that, if one is taken as the foundation, the other may be said not to be. For *Our Lord is the foundation and founder, the foundation without any other foundation*, the foundation of the Natural, Mosaic and Evangelical Church, the perpetual and immortal foundation, the foundation of the militant and triumphant, the foundation of ourselves, the foundation of our faith, hope and charity, and of the value of the Sacraments. *Peter is not the foundation of the whole Church, but founded on another foundation which is Our Lord*, foundation of the only Evangelical Church, foundation subject to succession, foundation of the militant not of the triumphant, foundation by participation, ministerial foundation, not absolute, finally administrator and not lord, and in no way foundation of our faith, hope and charity, nor of the value of the Sacraments "²⁰ .

Besides the apostle Peter, Francis de Sales also speaks of the other apostles and especially of Saint Paul²¹ . He was chosen by God and given an extraordinary vocation to be a great teacher and apostle of the Gentiles. His mission was, however, authorised by the leaders of the Church and therefore it could not be opposed²² . Having suffered martyrdom in Rome, the Church in that city is thus built on the testimony of Peter and Paul, as the primitive tradition already affirms. Among other witnesses, François de Sales quotes Irenaeus of Lyon: "*Maximae et antiquissimae et omnibus cognitae, a duobus gloriosissimis Apostolis Petro et Paulo Romae fundatae Ecclesiae, etc.; and shortly afterwards: Fundantes igitur et instruentes beati Apostoli Ecclesiam, ejus administrandae episcopatum Lino tradiderunt; succedit ei Anacletus, post eum, tertio ab Apostolis loco, episcopatum sortitur Clemens*"²³ . With this Church, in virtue of its *potentior principalitas*, must necessarily be

¹⁹ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 235 and 237. Contextually (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 236), Francis de Sales wanted to respond to Calvin's objection that the stone on which the Church is built is Christ himself and to Luther's objection to Peter's confession of faith.

²⁰ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 237-238; *Sermon 2* (29 June 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, pp. 47 and 50.

²¹ Cf. *Doctrinal Index* s.v. *Paul*, in *Œuvres* t. XXVII, pp. 75-76.

²² Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 32 and 267-268; *Les vrais entretiens spirituels*, in *Œuvres* t. VI, p. 214; *Sermon 10* (6 February 1594), in *Œuvres* t. VII, pp. 123 and 125.

²³ IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Adv. Haer.* 3, 3, 2; quoted by FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 282; cf. pp. 290-291. On the importance of this text, see E. LANNE, *L'Église de Rome "a gloriosissimis duobus apostolis Petro et Paulo fundatae et constitutae ecclesiae"* (AH III, 3, 2), in *Irénikon* 49 (1976) 275-322; or in IDEM, *Tradition et communion des Églises. Collection of studies* = BETL 129 (Leuven, University Press-Uitgeverij Peeters 1997) 101-138.

agreed any Church²⁴ . To use the expression of Victor of Utica and Justinian, the Roman Church is "*caput omnium Ecclesiarum*"²⁵ , in other words, head of all the Churches.

Ignoring any anachronism, Francis de Sales alludes to the three patriarchal sees traditionally attributed to Peter, namely Antioch, Alexandria and Rome²⁶ . In Rome, where he is said to have spent the last 25 years of his life, St. Peter was bishop and died a martyr under the Emperor Nero after having established St. Clement as his successor²⁷ , an office which the latter, however, did not wish to assume until the death of Linus and Cletus, who had been coadjutors of St. Peter in his primatial government²⁸ .

3. The Pope, successor of Peter and visible head of the Church

After his return to the Father who had sent him, Jesus did not abandon his Church and continues to assist her spiritually, especially in his Word and in the Eucharist (cf. Mt 28:20). On earth, he also left a visible vicar and lieutenant in the person of Peter and his successors. Peter crowned his service with martyrdom, fully imitating his master. From the death of the apostle Peter, who was crucified upside down, Francis de Sales deduced a curious explanation of apostolic succession. In one of his first Sermons on the Feast of St. Peter, delivered probably on June 29, 1593, well before his ordination to the priesthood by express order of his bishop, he states:

"Before I finish, I want to satisfy the curiosity of those who might ask why Saint Peter wanted to die with his head down. The first cause was out of humility. The second was because Our Lord had his feet against the earth, to show that he came from Heaven to earth; St. Peter has his feet against heaven, to show that he went from earth to heaven. Moreover, Our Lord, when he died, always had his face and eyes turned towards the earth, to show that he would have no less care for his Church after his death than before it, and that he always wanted to be its Shepherd; St. Peter turned his face towards the earth, and his eyes towards heaven, to

²⁴ Cf. IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Adv. Haer.* 3, 3, 2; quoted by FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 295 and 310; *Premier Titre du Code Fabrien* (1595-1605), in *Œuvres* t. XXIII, pp. 147-148. Similarly FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 309-310: "Saint Ambrose [*Oratione de obitu fratris Satiri* 1, 47; *De sacram.* 3, 1, 5] holds that *communicare et convenire cum Episcopis Catholicis et convenire cum Ecclesia Romana* are one and the same thing.

²⁵ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 296-297; *Premier Titre du Code Fabrien* (1595-1605), in *Œuvres* t. XXIII, p. 148. Even more (*Ibid.*), Leo and Prosper calls the Roman Church "*caput orbis et mundi et religionis*"! On this title, see Y. CONGAR, *Cephas - Céphalè - Caput*, in *Revue du Moyen Âge Latin* 8 (1952) 5-42.

²⁶ See FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 269-270.

²⁷ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 278: "Saint Peter died as Bishop of Rome, so the Bishopric of Rome was the last seat of the head of the Church, so the Bishop of Rome, who was after the death of Saint Peter, succeeded to the head of the Church, and, consequently, was head of the Church. See *Ibid.* pp. 280-286, 288, 290-291; *Sermon* 2 (29 June 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, pp. 41-42.

²⁸ See FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 291-292.

show that in dying he was leaving his office to his successor. Thus Our Lord is always head of the Church, but not St. Peter; Our Lord has his vicar, and St. Peter has his successor. Our Lord has his vicar, and St. Peter has his successor. St. Peter, moreover, turned his head to the ground to show that, going to heaven, he was nevertheless leaving his estate on earth, from which Our Lord said to him: *Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam*. Imagine that Saint Peter is the first foundation after Jesus Christ; but his successors have successively built on him as cornerstones that hold together the building of the Church²⁹.

In the *Controversies*, Francis de Sales returned several times to the question of apostolic succession in controversy with the reformers³⁰. Here, as elsewhere, it is a question of demonstrating the subsistence of the Church of Christ and, therefore, the permanence of the true Church. In general, by right of succession, the Pope inherits the prerogatives of the Apostle Peter, except of course those which were personal and non-transmissible. It may be thought that Francis de Sales too quickly assumes a quasi-automatic and mechanical passage from the Petrine ministry to the papacy, in virtue of a theological necessity that is nevertheless plausible. Without phagocytizing this principle, exegetical and historical studies have since demonstrated that the path is more sinuous than one might think (type: Peter → Church of Rome → See of Rome → Bishop of Rome)³¹. For this reason, the content and form of the exercise of Peter's ministry is still discussed today in the ecumenical perspective of the search for the restoration of unity among Christians.

Thus, *roughly speaking*, the titles of the Pope are those of Peter as we have seen above, since the Pope is *Petrus ipse*, as St. Leo the Great († 461) often claimed³². The very name 'Pope' is reserved for the Bishop of Rome³³, also called 'Holiness' for the excellence of his office in the Church³⁴. This is a supreme office, because the Pope is the successor of Peter and vicar of Jesus Christ³⁵. As

²⁹ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Sermon 2* (29 June 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, pp. 31-54, here 47; cf. *Ibid.* pp. 41-43 (with allusion to the *quo vadis* legend).

³⁰ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 274-286 and passim.

³¹ Cf. W. KASPER, *Bleibendes und Veränderliches im Petrusamt*, in IDEM, *Die Kirche und ihre Ämter. Schriften zur Ekklesiologie*, II = WKGS 12 (Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder 2009) 539-542; J. RATZINGER, *Primat und Episkopat*, in IDEM, *Kirche - Zeichen unter den Völkern. Schriften zur Ekklesiologie und Ökumene*, I = JRGS 8/1 (Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder 2010) 630-645.

³² For titles given to the Pope in general, see FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 295-302; *Premier Titre du Code Fabrien* (1595-1605), in *Œuvres* t. XXIII, pp. 147-148. On the title of the Pope as "*Petrus ipse*" especially in Leo the Great, see for example P. BATIFFOL, *Cathedra Petri. Études d'histoire ancienne de l'Église* = Unam Sanctam 4 (Paris, Cerf 1938); Y. CONGAR, *L'ecclésiologie du Haut Moyen Âge. De Saint Grégoire le Grand à la désunion entre Byzance et Rome* (Paris, Cerf 1968) 187-190; G. CORTI, *Pietro fondamento e pastore perenne della Chiesa*, in *La Scuola Cattolica* 84 (1956) 321-335; 401-426; 85 (1957) 25-58; R. MINNERATH, *La primauté de l'Évêque de Rome et l'unité de l'Église du Christ* = Le Point théologique 63 (Paris, Beauchesne 2010) 70-71 and 90-91; K.D. SCHMIDT, *Papa Petrus ipse*, in ZKG 54 (1935) 267-275; W. ULLMANN, *Leo I and the Theme of Papal Primacy*, in *Journal of Theological Studies* 11 (1960) 25-51.

³³ See FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 278 and 301.

³⁴ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 302; *Defense de l'estendart de la Sainte Croix*, in *Œuvres* t. II, p. 183.

³⁵ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 285, 288 and 191; *Sermon 2* (29 June 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, pp. 47 et seq.; *First Title of the Fabrian Code* (1595-1605), in *Œuvres* t. XXIII, p. 146; *Letter 248* (16 July 1605), in *Œuvres* t. XIII, pp. 69-73.

'universal bishop' in a sense³⁶, the Pope is 'head of the bishops' and 'servant of the servants of God'³⁷. He is in all things the only visible head of the whole Church (VII, 47, 49; XII, 407). Having received the charism of confirming his brethren like Saint Peter (cf. Lk 22:32), the Pope is infallible in matters of faith and morals³⁸. The Pope exercises primacy over the universal Church and presides over Councils through his legates³⁹. St. Francis de Sales does not hesitate to say that the Pope ensures the stability of the Christian republic, which is why in *ad limina* visits or by correspondence he must make a "conscientious and faithful report of the events which concern the Church in each country"⁴⁰. Like Thomas Aquinas, Francis de Sales does not seem to claim the authority of the Church in temporal matters or precisely the authority - at least direct - of the Pope over princes. In substance, one must give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but also to God what is God's (cf. Mt 22:21 // Mk 12:17 // Lk 20:25)⁴¹. Let us quote the letter probably addressed to Mrs. President Brûlart, which clearly illustrates the position of the Bishop of Geneva, where we note a social conception still reflecting the Christian regime or Christianity:

"Great, but reciprocal obligation between the Pope and the Kings; an invariable obligation, an obligation which extends up to and including death, and a natural, divine and human obligation, by which the Pope and the Church owe their spiritual forces to the Kings and kingdoms, and the Kings, their temporal forces to the Pope and the Church. The Pope and the Church are to the kings to nourish, preserve and defend them against all and against all spiritually; the kings and kingdoms are to the Church and the Pope to nourish, preserve and defend them against all and against all temporally; for the fathers are to the children and the children to the fathers. Kings and all sovereign Princes, however, have a temporal sovereignty in which neither the Pope nor the Church claim anything, nor do they ask for any kind of temporal recognition; so that, to put it briefly, the Pope is a very sovereign Pastor and spiritual Father, the King is a very sovereign prince and temporal lord. The authority of the one is not contrary to the other, but they support each other; for the Pope and the Church excommunicate and hold as heretics those who deny the sovereign authority of Kings and Princes, and the Kings strike with their sword those who deny the authority of the Pope and the Church, or if they do not strike them, it is while waiting for them to amend and humiliate themselves"⁴².

³⁶ See FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 300.

³⁷ See FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 302; *Sermons* 84 (7 March 1612) and 129 (21 February 1617), in *Œuvres* t. VIII, pp. 80 and 285.

³⁸ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 303; *Sermon* 3 (1^{er} August 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, p. 63; *Sermon* 129 (21 February 1617), in *Œuvres* t. VIII, p. 286.

³⁹ See FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 214-215 and 308-311.

⁴⁰ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Letter* 204 (15 November 1603), in *Œuvres* t. XII, p. 228.

⁴¹ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Letter* 1211 (1-5 September 1611), in *Œuvres* t. XV, pp. 95-96; 1222 (1611), in *Œuvres* t. XV, p. 114; *Letter* 1260 (around 20 March 1612), in *Œuvres* XV, pp. 183-190; *Letter* 1261 (March 1612), in *Œuvres* t. XV, pp. 191-194.

⁴² FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Letter* 1261 (March 1612), in *Œuvres* t. XV, pp. 191-194, here 194. The thesis of Ruth Kleinman (cf. *Saint François de Sales et les protestants* = Parole et Tradition [Lyon, Éditions du Chalet 1967]) who wanted to make François de Sales a political finesse is undoubtedly excessive.

Moreover, the ministerial succession mentioned above goes hand in hand with the doctrinal tradition. Irenaeus, taken as a witness, rightly says that 'those who have the succession of the apostles have certainly received, with this episcopal succession, the gift of truth, according to the will of the Father'⁴³. Thus, the presence of Peter and his successors guarantees permanence in the truth. In attacking the Protestant reformers, François de Sales states bluntly: "*The true Church must have a visible head in its government and administration; yours has none, so yours is not the true Church. On the contrary, there is a Church in the world, true and legitimate, which has a visible head, and there is none which has one than ours, ours alone is the true Church*"⁴⁴. A little further on, the bishop of Geneva adds: "*All this division has its foundation in the contempt which you make of a visible head on earth, because, not being bound for the interpretation of the Word of God to any higher authority, each one takes the side which he thinks best: this is what the Wise Man says, that the superiors are always in dissension [Prov 13,10], which is a mark of true heresy. Those who are divided into several parties cannot be called by the name of Church, because, as St. Chrisostom says, 'the name of Church is a name of consent and concord'*"⁴⁵. Thus, the dissensions observed among the reformers are a sign of error and heresy, for Christ cannot be divided (cf. 1 Cor 1:13), just as his body is the Church.

By his approach, Francis de Sales is clearly following in the footsteps of the *via historica*, by which "apologists endeavour to show, through the examination of ancient documents, that the Roman Catholic Church is indeed the Christian Church of all time, which appears in history as a single, visible, permanent, hierarchically and monarchically organised society; the *via primatus* is only a simplification of this first way, since, neglecting the other kinds of historical continuity, it is content, in order to establish the truth of the Roman Church, to prove that its head is the only one who can legitimately call himself the successor of Peter"⁴⁶. His *Controversies* can be seen as an attempt to offer a treatise *De vera Ecclesia*, no doubt with its merits and limitations. While they show the Catholic Church and its orthodox doctrine in the best light by accumulating evidence from the Bible and Tradition, they believe they can pillory their opponents by extrapolating here and there their dubious positions.

⁴³ IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Adv. Haer.* 4, 26, 2; quoted thus by FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Sermon 29* (23 April 1595), in *Œuvres* t. VII, p. 250. See also Joseph Ratzinger's suggestive formulation in this regard: "So zeigt sich, dass 'apostolische Überlieferung' und 'apostolische Nachfolge' sich gegenseitig definieren. *Die Nachfolge ist die Gestalt der Überlieferung, die Überlieferung ist der Gehalt der Nachfolge*" (J. RATZINGER, *Primat, Episkopat und successio apostolica*, in J. RATZINGER - K. RAHNER, *Episkopat und Primat = Quaestiones Disputatae* 11 [Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder 1961] 49).

⁴⁴ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 92.

⁴⁵ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 97. The introduction to this article (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 93), which cites the ancient testimonies on the centrality of the See of Peter, already indicates the meaning of the demonstration.

⁴⁶ G. THILS, *Les notes de l'Église dans l'apologétique catholique depuis la Réforme* (Gembloux, J. Duculot 1937) IX-X.

4. Saint Francis de Sales, precursor of the First Vatican Council

From what we have said so far, it follows that St. Francis de Sales used the apologetic method of the *via historica* to demonstrate where the true Church is. This Church was built by the Lord on the apostles, and precisely on Peter, so that we can say "*ubi Petrus, ibi ergo Ecclesia*", to use the expression of Saint Ambrose of Milan († 397)⁴⁷. If from the right hand of God Christ continues to direct his Church, on earth he has a lieutenant general and a vicar in the person of Peter and his successors. Saint Francis de Sales never ceases to repeat this when he says, for example:

"The Church is a monarchy, and therefore it needs a visible head who governs it as the sovereign lieutenant of Our Lord; for otherwise, when Our Lord says: *Dic Ecclesiae*, to whom would we speak, or how would we preserve the unity of the faith? And when a person wants to emancipate himself, who can bring him back into the fold? How can we prevent division in the Church? (...) It is therefore certain that the Church must have a lieutenant general; and let us now see what he may be. Certainly not other than Saint Peter and his successors"⁴⁸.

On the *primacy of Peter and the Pope*, Saint Francis de Sales has no doubt, even if it means sacrificing the role of the college of bishops. The reason is that Jesus Christ instituted his Church on the foundation of the apostles in general, and on Saint Peter in particular:

"In authority and government St. Peter was ahead of all the others, inasmuch as the head surpasses the members; for he was constituted the ordinary and supreme Head Pastor of the Church, the others were delegated and committed pastors, with as much full power and authority over all the rest of the Church as St. Peter, except that St. Peter was the head of them all, and their pastor as well as of the whole of Christianity"⁴⁹.

In the power of the keys, Peter received ordinary authority in pastoral, sacramental and disciplinary matters over the whole Church. The other apostles also received the same prerogatives, but Peter was given primacy to manifest the unity of the Church. The Bishop of Geneva holds the principle of apostolic succession sacrosanct. Immediately after his death, Peter had successors in his see of Rome and in the vicariate of Christ, who is still the head and sovereign pontiff of his Church. The reason is simple: "*The sheepfold of Our Lord must last until the consummation of the world* [Mt

⁴⁷ Cf. AMBROSE OF MILAN, *Enarr. in Psalm. 40*, 30 (= PL 14, 1134).

⁴⁸ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Sermon 2* (29 June 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, p. 48. See also *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 274 and 311.

⁴⁹ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, p. 239.

28:20] in unity, the unity given by a shepherd must still last, all of which has been well proven above: from which it clearly follows that St. Peter had successors, still has successors, and will have successors until the consummation of the century"⁵⁰. It is necessary to specify that the principle of succession passes exclusively from the apostles to the bishops. Our author is thus firmly opposed to the so-called "presbyteral succession" which is sometimes mentioned in connection with the first reformers⁵¹.

Exercising primacy over the universal Church, following the Apostle Peter, the Pope is also called "*the infallible Confirmer*" when he teaches *ex cathedra*. It is with good reason that a few centuries later, Francis de Sales' insistence made a strong impression on the Fathers of the First Vatican Council (1870):

"All this did not take place only in St. Peter, but in his successors, for the cause remaining the effect still remains; *the Church always needs an infallible confirmer* to whom one can add, a foundation that the gates of hell, and especially error, cannot overturn, and that its pastor cannot lead his children to error: the successors of St. Peter have all these same privileges, which do not follow the person, but the dignity and the public office"⁵².

As can be seen from the history of the Church, many internal and external circumstances (such as conciliarism, Protestant reform, the French Revolution, rationalism, liberalism and secularism) provoked currents of withdrawal, restoration and traditionalism which led to the convocation and decisions of the First Vatican Council⁵³. It has also been acknowledged, however, that the teaching of Francis de Sales had an influence on the definitions concerning the primacy of the Pope and the infallibility of his magisterium solemnly promulgated in the Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus* of the First Vatican Council (18 July 1870). This is at least evident from the official documentation published in the award of the degree of Doctor of the Church to the Bishop of Geneva (1877):

⁵⁰ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 274-286, here 275. See also FRANCIS DE SALES, *First Title of the Fabrian Code. Quinta nota haereticorum: contemptus Sedis Apostolicae*, in *Œuvres* t. XXIII, pp. 146-147.

⁵¹ See FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 27-29. For a first approach to the question, see W. KASPER, *Zur Frage der Anerkennung der Ämter in den lutherischen Kirchen*, in IDEM, *Einheit in Jesus Christus. Schriften zur Ökumene*, II = WKGS 15 (Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder 2013) 195-211, especially 197-203.

⁵² FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres*, t. I, p. 305; cf. also *Ibid.* pp. 214, 247, 275, 303 and 312-313; *Sermon 3* (1st August 1593), in *Œuvres* t. VII, p. 63; *Sermon 129* (21 February 1617), in *Œuvres* t. VIII, p. 286: "*Hinc infallibilitas Ecclesiae, in qua Papa errare non potest ex cathedra docens*".

⁵³ Cf. A. ANTON, *El misterio de la Iglesia. Evolución histórica de las ideas eclesiológicas*, II = BAC 30 (Madrid-Toledo, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos-Estudio teológico de san Ildefonso 1987) 355-400; R. AUBERT, *Ecclesiology at the Vatican Council*, in AA.VV., *The Council and the Councils. Contribution à l'histoire de la vie conciliaire de l'Église = Unam Sanctam. Hors-série* (Paris, Cerf 1960); G. MARTINA, *Il Concilio Vaticano I e la fine del potere temporale*, in *Rassegna storica toscana* 16 (1970) 131-149; H.J. POTTMEYER, *Towards a Papacy in Communion. Perspectives from Vatican Councils I & II* (New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company 1998).

Decretum *Urbis et orbis* (7 July 1877), cit. in *Works*, vol. I, pp. XI-XIV, here XII :

"Profecto in selectis Conclusionibus seu Controversiarum libris quos Sanctus Episcopus conscripsit, manifeste elucet mira rei theologicae scientia, concinna methodus, ineluctabilis argumentorum vis, tum in refutandis haeresibus tum in demonstratione Catholicae veritatis, et praesertim in *asserenda Romani Pontificis auctoritate, jurisdictionis Primatu ejusque Infallibilitate, quae ille tam scite et luculenter propugnavit, ut definitionibus ipsius Vaticanae Synodi praelusisse merito videatur* ".

Similarly, in the Brief of PIUS IX, *Dives in misericordia Deus* (16 November 1877), in *Œuvres*, t. I, pp. XV-XXII, here XIX-XX:

"Imprimis auctoritatem hujus Apostolicae Sedis, ac Romani Pontificis Beati Petri successoris propugnavit, ac ipsius *Primatus* vim ac rationem ea perspicuitate explicavit, ut Vaticani Oecumenici Concilii definitionibus feliciter praeluserit. Certe, quae *de infallibilitate Romani Pontificis*, in quadragesimo sermone 'Controversiarum' asserit, cujus autographum, dum in Concilio res ageretur, detectum est, ejusmodi sunt, quae nonnullos Patres tunc ea super re adhuc ancipites, ad definitionem decernendam veluti manu duxerint ".

The dogmatic definitions of the First Vatican Council still constitute the core of the Catholic doctrine on the papacy, a doctrine which was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council in a broader perspective by also illustrating episcopal collegiality. Even if we can note a certain praxis of collegiality in Francis de Sales in his relations with Rome and with his colleagues, in theory it seems to us that he did not thematise this doctrine much in his writings⁵⁴. Moreover, his very Christocentric ecclesiology could have gained much by opening up to a more pneumatological and eschatological perspective, better recognising the limits of the pilgrim Church. Paradoxically, it is in the writings of a mystical and ascetic nature (cf. *Introduction to the Devout Life; Treatise on the Love of God; Spiritual Conversations*) that Francis de Sales better emphasises the charismatic dimension, which gives pride of place to the laity and to the consecrated life. Finally, today the Pope's ministry is better seen within an ecclesiology of communion and synodality⁵⁵.

5. Peter and his successors, guarantors of the true Church

⁵⁴ Cf. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Controverses*, in *Œuvres* t. I, pp. 87-89, 238-240 and 300; *Lettres*, in *Œuvres* t. XII, pp. 246, 297, 302 and 327; *Premier Titre du Code Fabrien* (1595-1605), in *Œuvres* t. XXIII, pp. 124-125.

⁵⁵ Cf. Second VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* (21 November 1964), nn. 18-27; JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995), nn. 88-99; CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter *Communio notio* (28 May 1992), nn. 11-18; CONGREGAZIONE PER LA DOTTRINA DELLA FEDE, *Il primato del successore di Pietro nel mistero della Chiesa*. Testo e commenti (Città del Vaticano, LEV 2002).

Although the contribution of St. Francis de Sales finds its place in the apologetic and controversialist current of the post-Tridentine Catholic reform, which is not free of exaggeration, it is not without interest. Apart from the light it sheds on a rather complex page in the history of the Church, it continues to ask us today about the unresolved questions concerning the division between Christians and the visible unity of the Church. Without necessarily having to go through the *via primatus*, these two questions cannot be considered without taking into account the role of Peter and his successors in the Church that our Lord built on the foundation of the apostles. This leads us to summarise the results of our brief study of the doctrine of St. Francis de Sales in four points:

- Basing himself mainly on the testimony of Sacred Scripture and Tradition, Francis de Sales rightly recalls that the Church was founded by Jesus Christ and entrusted to those whom he had called, especially the Twelve. As the first of the disciples and leader of the Twelve, Peter enjoyed special prerogatives. Not without reason, Francis thus considers him the foundation, but not the founder, of the Church.
- Jesus Christ promised to be among his people until the end of time (cf. Mt 28:20). He gave his Spirit who continues to lead his disciples into all truth as they await his return. In the meantime, in obedience to the Lord's command, the Church remembers him under the guidance of the apostles and their successors. Francis de Sales rightly insisted on this principle of "apostolic succession", which makes it possible to remain in the orthodox faith and in the authentic mission. In this he merely confirmed the ancient Tradition (cf. e.g. Irenaeus of Lyons and Tertullian) which recognised the Pope and the Bishops as true successors of Peter and the Apostolic College. From the point of view of visible organisation, they are the guarantors of the true Church.
- Although the name of St. Francis de Sales was not mentioned by name in the Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor aeternus* (18 July 1870) of the First Vatican Council, there is every reason to believe that his testimony was decisive for the Council Fathers in the definitions concerning the primacy of the Pope and the infallibility of his magisterium *ex cathedra*. By calling the Pope an "infallible confirmer", Francis de Sales emphasises the service of the successor of Peter from the evangelical perspective of the salvation of souls and not of the authority sought as such. This must not be lost sight of, despite some expressions which today seem exaggerated if used without nuance (for example: the Church as monarchy, the Roman Church as mother and head of the Churches, the Pope as universal Bishop and head of the Bishops, etc.).
- In today's ecumenical perspective, the Bishop of Geneva's teaching on St. Peter contains an invitation to seriously reconsider the Petrine ministry in the configuration of the

Churches and ecclesial communities with regard not only to their unity but also to their fidelity to the Gospel and to the primitive Tradition. Indeed, according to Pope John Paul II, "all the Churches are in full and visible communion, because the pastors are in communion with Peter and are thus in the unity of Christ. By the power and authority without which this function would be illusory, the Bishop of Rome must ensure the communion of all the Churches. As such, he is the first servant of unity" (Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, 94). This sensitivity is not entirely absent, for after the Second Vatican Council there have been *ad hoc* dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and the other Churches of the East and West, with sometimes significant, but inconclusive, advances. Even the invitation of Pope John Paul II (cf. Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, n. 95) to rethink the primacy without renouncing the essence of its mission has remained practically a dead letter. Thus, the position of St. Francis de Sales still questions us and urges us not to be satisfied with the *status quo*, which contradicts the testament of the Lord before his death for his disciples: "*Ut unum sint*" (Jn 17:21).

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It is in this sense that we quote in conclusion these words of Francis de Sales:

"The Church must turn to Peter, as the bride to the bridegroom; for the Lord prayed for Peter on behalf of the Church, of which he made him the bridegroom; *and the bridegroom is the head of the bride. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife* (...) In the days of the Gospel, it is from the house of Peter that the glorifying Christ is to be expected; in it Christ will be received"⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Sermon 31* (1^{er} August 1595), in *Œuvres* t. VII, 265-267, here 266 and 267.