

The 'Latin' letters of Saint Francis de Sales to Antoine Favre

Miran Sajovic

Introduction

The subject of our contribution will focus on the communication written in Latin between two friends, namely between Saint Francis de Sales, a young priest and fervent missionary in the Chablais region, and Antoine Favre, an expert in law, a politician and a convinced Catholic. As we will indicate later, we will only deal with the Latin letters written by Saint Francis de Sales to his friend. In order to better illustrate this correspondence, we have divided our contribution into three parts: in the first, we will briefly present the personality of Antoine Favre; in the second, we will examine some Latin letters from their correspondence; in the third, we will attempt to evaluate the philological aspect of the letters examined.

1. Antoine Favre, Baron of P erouges (1557-1624)

Antoine Favre was born in Bourg-en-Bresse on 5 October 1557, ten years before Saint Francis de Sales. He received a good education in Paris as a student at the famous Coll ege de Clermont, run by the Jesuits. He studied law at the University of Turin, where he received his doctorate in 1579. As a lawyer he worked in Chamb ery, as a judge in Bresse and Bugey, so much so that he earned the prestigious title of l egislateur de la Bresse.

Baron Favre also took an active part in political life, first as a member of the Senate of Chamb ery and later, in 1587, as its president; in 1596 he was elected president of the Council of Geneva and in 1610 president of the Senate of Savoy. In 1618, he was called to be part of the special ducal delegation to negotiate the marriage of Christine of France to the Crown Prince of Savoy. His life ended in Chamb ery on 28 February 1624, two years after his death.

Senator Favre was a convinced Catholic, and for this reason his deep friendship with ecclesiastical men should not come as a surprise: for example, he was a friend not only of Saint Francis de Sales, but also of the Jesuit Antonio Possevino. As a fervent Catholic, he also founded the fraternity of penitents in Chamb ery following the example of the one in Annecy. Nor should we be surprised by his keen interest in the Catholic mission in Chablais (1594-1598), which had a fervent missionary in Saint Francis de Sales, with the aim of bringing back into the arms of the Catholic Church many faithful seduced by the Calvinist heresy. He also participated in the second meeting between Saint Francis de Sales and the Calvinist Theodore de B eze in Geneva on 3 July 1596.

Antoine Favre's name is also important for the history of jurisprudence, having left behind a monumental work written in Latin and entitled *Codex Fabrianus* (1606). The work contains the decisions of the Court of Chambéry, short and clear judgments arranged in the order of the *Codex Iulianus*. The *Fabrianus* became a classic of European legal literature, and Saint Francis de Sales also collaborated on its drafting, particularly with regard to Catholic doctrine.

Favre also published a tragedy in verse in French entitled *Les Gordiens et Maximins ou l'Ambition* (1589) and in Turin a collection of sonnets and quatrains entitled *Entretiens Spirituel* (1601).

2. The 'Latin' letters of Saint Francis de Sales to his friend Antoine Favre (1593-1596)

Among the various letters the Saint wrote, those written in Latin have also been preserved. We do not know if they are all, but we possess a substantial number of letters written between 1593 and 1596. Those sent to the famous Favre, which we examine here, can be found in the *Opera Omnia* of Saint Francis de Sales entitled *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales, évêque de Genève et docteur de l'Église, Lettres 1585-1598*, vol. 11, part one, published in Annecy in 1900. This volume will also be the point of reference for the reading and analysis of our letters. The period in which these letters were written is that of the years in which Saint Francis de Sales was living the realisation of his dream, i.e. complete belonging to the Catholic Church; it is the period of his ordination to the priesthood, his appointment as provost of Geneva and the first years of his ardent mission in Chablais with the aim of winning back the faithful of the region to the Catholic Church, often even at the risk of his own life. These were therefore the years in which the Saint was inspired by his famous speech as provost concerning the reconquest of Geneva.

About 40 letters have been preserved, almost all written in Latin, and, as we have said, addressed to Antoine Favre between the years 1593-1596. We will not dwell on all the letters, but on those that we consider to be the most significant in this correspondence, and which particularly concern activity during the mission to Chablais or which leave us with some significant information to better understand the friendly relationship between the two. The Latin letters written by Saint Francis de Sales have been preserved, as have those of Favre, also written in Latin, which are indirectly mentioned in the Saint's replies. For example, in Letter 33 we find this testimony: *Non antea potui, mi Frater, suavissimis illis tuis litteris respondere...* (I could not before, my Brother, reply to those very sweet letters of yours ...).

The first letter sent to Favre, written in August 1593, is one of the longest - unlike the others, which are generally rather short - and is an affectionate reply to Favre's letter (which has not

reached us). In the letter, we note great esteem and respect for Antoine Favre, who is already mentioned in the opening salutation: *Clarissimo viro, Senatori integerrimo Antonio Fabro* (To the very clear man, very honest Senator Antoine Favre). Francis de Sales feels like a young 'recruit', invited by a very important man (*gravissimus vir*) of the senatorial order to accept his invitation of friendship (*ad amicitiam provocas*). Following the letter, we realise that it was Antoine Favre who invited the Saint to become his friend and begin an epistolary correspondence. From the text that follows, we note Francis' deep esteem and admiration for Senator Favre. The Saint continually addresses his friend the senator, defining him, through the use of poetic language, as an excellent tree because of its fruit (*ex fructu arbor optima et sis et habearis*); he himself sets the senator as a model to be observed day and night to form one's life on his example: *mihi unus perpetuo propositus es quem noctes diesque respicerem, et ad cuius esemplar quam maxime possem genuine animum meum efformarem*. A few lines further on, the Saint writes: *Ego enim tuarum illustrium virtutum et amator et admirator fui priusquam vel de nomine tibi notus esse possum...* (In fact, I was a lover and admirer of your noble virtues even before I could be known to you, even if only by name...). This kind of admiration for Senator Favre is not unique, but is also found in other letters. Most clearly we find it in Letter 27, written in Annecy, around 13th August, where Saint Francis de Sales confesses his utmost respect for his friend.

The first Latin letter that has come down to us, therefore, inaugurates both the friendship between the two and the beginning of an epistolary correspondence that would continue until the Saint's death, although not always with the same frequency and not always in Latin. The letters that follow are of varying lengths, so much so that they may remind the reader of our telephone calls, through which the two friends exchange brief news, concerning for example their families, make requests for mutual favours or help, comment on the current situation in the region, and exchange some advice.

As is known, on 14 September 1594, the Saint left with Canon Louis de Sales for his mission, which was both courageous and dangerous, in the region of Chablais. Letter 33, written in the Fortress of Allinges in October 1594, gives us some news about the initial days of the mission.

The Saint reports to his beloved interlocutor, called *mi Frater* (my brother), that he could not answer his letters earlier. Saint Francis reveals that the mere thought of knowing Favre spiritually present encourages him in the mission, which is by no means easy, indeed dangerous. We read that after thick darkness, a light was finally seen to dawn: the governor, Baron d'Hermance, together with some Catholics, had secretly urged both the surrounding peasants and the inhabitants of Evian to attend the missionaries' sermons to promote the righteous faith. But he was opposed by the devil (*daemon*), who through a meeting of convinced Calvinists (*consistory*) tried to hinder, and even forbid, participation in the sermons of the Catholic missionaries. What a disappointment! *Quid faceres, mi Frater?* (What would you have done, my brother?). *Nolunt audire nos, quoniam nolunt audire Deum.*

(They do not want to listen to us, because they do not want to listen to God). The Saint has the impression that, with this meeting and decision, the Calvinists are sending a subtle message: to force the missionaries to leave (*rerum agendarum spe amissa ad discessum quodammodo compellere*). And immediately one notices the Saint's determination and courage: *At apud nos contra. Quamdiu per inducias et Principis utriusque tum ecclesiastici tum saecularis licuerit voluntatem, operi instare, nullum non movere lapidem, obsecrare, increpare in omni qua nos Deus donaverit patientia et doctrina omnino ac firmissime constitutum est*. Even more, he wishes that sooner, in addition to sermons, the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice (*non modo conciones imo vero Sacrificia*) could also be introduced as an effective support in the mission. At the end of the letter the Saint appeals to the need for prudence (*magnam requiri video prudentiam*).

Letter 44 was written in the middle of February 1595 in the fortress of Allinges. This very short letter gives us some information about the composition of his *Controversies*. These were written when Saint Francis de Sales was 27 years old, thus a young priest and totally absorbed in the mission in Chablais. Although the work highlights the Saint's acumen and subtlety, he himself acknowledges in this letter: *Incoepi tamen, et ita incoepi ut paulo difficilior sit quam credideram ad exitum rem deducere* (I have nevertheless begun, and I have begun so that it is a little too difficult for me to have believed in completing the thing). The *Controversies* is an apologetic work with which the young missionary, by the route of confrontation and persuasion, tries to convince Calvinists who are strongly hostile to the Catholic Church. The *Controversies* were born one day after another, as 'flying' sheets to be circulated among the population. Their composition was not easy, because they lacked the necessary books to consult: *libris careo mihi necessariis*.

Letter 49, written in April 1595 in Thonon, reports among other things the interesting news of the conversion of an eminent Calvinist, the lawyer Pier Poncet (lat. *Petrus Poncetus*), a native of Gex. Although he joined the Calvinists, he had in every way retained faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist (*qui cum jam pridem de presentia corporis Christi in Eucharistia recte sentiret*). His conversion was a particular undertaking, because he had to make a certain journey that hindered his swift return to the Catholic fold (*ad caulas vero Catholicas redire peculiare fuit negotium*). The obstacles were first and foremost related to private life: the fear of losing the family patrimony (*rei familiaris perdendae timor*), the reproach of old Calvinist friends (*antiquorum amicorum obiurgatio*), the uncertain period of peace (*induciarum incerta duratio*). But the saint does not seem to despair, the slowness of conversion will bear sweet fruit (*Tarditatem suavitas compesabit*).

Letter 53, written at the end of May 1595, while the place of composition is not mentioned, contains many personal traits of the Saint. In the first part, he shows compassion for the accident of a mutual friend, a certain Guichard (*De Guichardi nostri casu...*), towards whom he expresses respect and predilection (*meam erga ipsum clarissimum Guichardum observantiam et propensionem explere possim*). Antoine Fabre in 1595 published a poetic

work entitled *Méditations*, which the author himself gave to the Saint for his judgement. Saint Francis de Sales was able to read these poetic meditations with his family while he was staying for a few days in Annecy. In this letter, the judgement on the *Meditations* is striking: *Amo, ut uno dicam verbo, modestia* (I love, ut uno dicam verbo, modesty). In the last part of the letter, the saint expresses a judgement about the mission in Chablais, which he does not want revealed to others (*Nolim tamen alii haec cuiquam dicas*): it is about the conviction of the inhabitants of the region that the missionaries carry out their mission beyond the wishes of the Prince.

Nos in ea provincia credunt versari praeter Principis voluntatem omnes fere, quin etiam contra plerique, nec abs re. Magno namque est argumento silentium ubi vel levissimum sufficeret verbum, et homines videre, inter media Ecclesiae praedia, sub principe Catholico, praecario propemodum et in dies vivere.

Almost everyone thinks that we stay in that province beyond the prince's will, indeed many against [his will], and this not without reason. For a great proof of this is the silence, where even a very slight word would suffice, and men see in the midst of the Church's estates, [which are] under the Catholic prince, that one lives from day to day almost in precariousness.

In Letter 57, written on 2 August 1595 in Annecy, the saint informs his addressee that he has decided to lay down the burden of the 'harvest' in Thonon for a while with the approval of Antoine Favre, a lawyer himself, recognising that the mission exceeds his strength:

Onus messis Tononiensis, meis impar humeris, non nisi te volente, jubente, deponere constitui; in eam tamen rem alios operarios iisdemque commeatum dum artibus modisque omnibus pergo parare, nullum, inter infinitas hostis generis humani versutias, exitum, nullum finem facio.

I have decided to lay the burden of the harvest at Thonon, disproportionate to my shoulders, only because you willed, you commanded; for that mission (in eam... rem) however I continue to prepare the other workers and for them the supplies in all possible ways (artibus modisque omnibus), I place no end, no limit among the infinite cunning of the enemy of mankind.

At the end of the same letter, the mission in the Chablais region is called "La Sparta", a synonym for hard work, and promises that it will be heard through a few letters: *Redeo crastina die ad Spartam meam [...], faciamque deinceps ne integro mense inter nos audiatur*

silentium. (Tomorrow I return to my Sparta [...], afterwards I will see to it that during the whole month no silence is heard between us).

Letter 59, written on 18 September 1595 in Thonon, contains the interesting news of the success of the Saint's preaching. In fact, some prominent Calvinist men came to hear him, albeit secretly:

Et jam, mi Frater, latior simul laetior patet ad Christianorum messem aditus. Heri namque parum abfuit quin Avullaeus cum urbis sindicis, uti vocant, ad concionem palam venirent, quod me de augustissimo Eucharistiae Sacramento disputaturum audivissent. Quo de mysterio sententiam rationesque Catholicorum ex me audiendi tanto tenebantur desiderio, ut qui palam nondum venire, ne legis suae immemores viderentur, ausi sunt, me ex diverticulo quodam secreto audiverint, si tamen per vocis meae tenuitatem licuit.

And already, my brother, the entry of Christians into the harvest is more ample and more serene. In fact, yesterday it was not long before Monsieur d'Avully together with the mayors of the city, as they call them, came to the public meeting, because they heard that I was going to speak about the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. And they were seized with so great a desire to hear from me the thoughts and reasons of Catholics concerning this mystery that those who did not dare to come in attendance again, lest they should seem to have forgotten their law, listened to me from a hidden place, if however it was possible to hear through the subtlety of my voice.

Letter 61, written on 14 October in Thonon, reports the interesting news of the writing of the famous Codex Fabrianus. We have already mentioned this codex at the beginning of our prologue. Saint Francis de Sales collaborated on the drafting of the first part, which contains a true apologetic treatise: *De Summa Trinitate et Fide Catholica*.

Habebis a me quam primum caput unum meorum adversus haereticos Commentariorum, in quo quam veri non Ecclesiae sed antiquarum haeresum sint reformatores conabor ostendere.

You will soon have a chapter of my Commentaries against heretics from me, in which I will try to show how they are not true reformers of the Church but of ancient heresies.

Four letters written in Latin to Senator Antoine Favre have been preserved from the year 1596. Among these letters, two contain relevant news about the mission in the Chablais

region. In Letter 74, written between 23 and 24 November in Annecy, the saint is hopeful about the situation in Thonon (*Incaeperam bene sperare...*). Letter 78, written on 7 December 1596 in Thonon, also continues in this vein, in which the saint speaks of the preparations for the forthcoming Christmas festivities in the same town, albeit for the few faithful (*paucosque quos habet hic fideles*).

This letter ends the corpus of 'Latin' letters that Saint Francis de Sales sent to his friend Antoine Favre. Whether the correspondence in Latin ended or the letters were not preserved may be a subject for further study or research.

3. Some Philological Observations Concerning the "Latin" Letters

We will try to offer a few observations regarding the Latin used by Saint Francis de Sales in the letters we have just presented. First of all, it is convenient to say at the outset that Saint Francis de Sales' Latin is the one he learnt during his studies in Paris. From October 1578 until August 1581, he attended "grammar" classes, and from October 1581 until August 1584, "rhetoric" classes to obtain the title of "baccalaureate". These years were fundamental, according to the Jesuits' *Ratio studiorum*, to acquire a good knowledge of Latin (and also of Greek, though to a lesser extent). As far as we can see, the Saint uses the Latin language well and with due exactitude. We have noticed no grammatical lapses, and the vocabulary is the usual one of the time. There is also no lack of rhetorical figures such as alliteration (*cum vero non solum speciem, sed ne quidem specimen*), gradation (*te quidem excusatione, me benevolentia, utrumque admiratione dignum redderet*), puns (*latior simul laetior patet ad Christianorum messem aditus; frater amantissime, hisce liberalibus, si intra Fabricarum limina Fabrum viderint Fabricenses*).

Saint Francis follows in the wake of a tradition inaugurated a few centuries earlier by the Italian humanists, i.e. the use of Latin as a language of communication between cultured people, among whom the senator Antoine Favre must surely be counted. The literary genre used is that of epistolography, following certain fixed points: the initial greeting (Saint Francis de Sales, unlike the ancients, mentions the addressee first: e.g. *Fratri suavissimo Antonio Fabro, Senatori amplissimo, Franciscus De Sales salutem dicit*); the conclusion of the letter often, but not always, invokes the help of Jesus Christ: *Christum vobis precor propitium et nobilissimi liberis* or *Bene vale, Frater millies suavissime, et Christum habeto propitium*.

However, among the letters sent by the Saint to his dearest friend there are also those written in French - difficult to say for what reason, perhaps for lack of time. Composing a letter in Latin, in fact, requires proper recollection and time. The mission in Chablais did not allow the Saint to answer all the letters written and sent by his friend. We note that there

were few letters in Latin in the year 1596, perhaps because there was no time to devote to them.

Moreover, from time to time, it was necessary to find some new Latin words for certain names or expressions. This can be seen in Letter 45 where Saint Francis de Sales asks Favre how to render *commissaire des guerres* in Latin, and whether the Latin expression *procurator Principis* would correspond to the Latin expression *procurator fisci*.

A remark also on the word *salesius*, the Latinised form of the surname 'de Sales'. We find this word twice in the letters examined: at the opening greeting of Letter 23: *Senatori amplissimo Antonio Fabro, Franciscus Salesius, Ecclesiae Gebennensis Praepositus, salutem dicit*; and in Letter 52: *Ero igitur diebus aliquot apud Salesios nostros*. The word *salesius*, as we can see, corresponds to the French *de Sales*. The question remains whether the expression was coined by Saint Francis himself, or whether it already existed before.

Conclusion

In this contribution of ours, therefore, we have analyzed some "Latin" letters of Saint Francis de Sales addressed to his friend, Senator Antoine Favre. In the epistolary of the Saint there are also other letters written in Latin, but also in French and Italian. The letters offer us precious information on the life, activity and thought of the saint, of which we have already had news in the various studies conducted on the figure of Saint Francis de Sales, as well as in the biographies written by the various authors. What is surprising in these letters, at least for us moderns, is that two friends, both French-speaking, often use the language of the Romans in their correspondence. The only cause of such a decision, in our opinion, could lie both in the habit among erudite people of communicating in the Latin language and in the love for the Latin language, which gives a certain solemnity (and importance) to an exchange of news and friendly feelings.