



TEXTS IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

Exhortation to Clerics: That They Apply Themselves to Study

(1603-1605)¹

Oeuvres de St. François de Sales

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(translated by Thomas F. Dailey, OSFS)

Those among you who are employed in occupations that impede them from study are like people who wish to eat fancy foods, contrary to the character of their plain stomachs, and because of that they grow faint little by little. I can say to you truthfully that there is no great difference between ignorance and malice, except that ignorance is to be feared even more, especially when you consider that, not only is it offensive in itself, but it also leads to contempt for the ecclesiastical state.

For this reason, my very dear Brothers, I implore you to attend seriously to study, because knowledge, to a priest, is the eighth sacrament of the hierarchy of the Church. [Without it] a greater misfortune happens to the priest than when the Ark [of the Covenant] is found in the hands of men who were not Levites (cf. 1 Samuel 4:3-11).

This is why our poor, unfortunate Geneva has surprised us. Noticing our idleness, in that we were not on our guard and were contenting ourselves simply to say our Breviary without thinking of making ourselves more knowledgeable, they trumped the simplicity of our fathers and of those who have preceded us, making them believe that up to that time no one had understood anything of Sacred Scripture. And so, while we were sleeping, "the enemy sows tares

in the field" of the Church (cf. Matthew 13:25, 27, 28) and makes to glisten the error which has divided us and put fire to this entire conflict.

By this fire you and I would have been consumed, along with many others, if the goodness of our God had not mercifully raised up those powerful spirits, I mean to say the Jesuits, who oppose themselves to the heretics and enable us in our time to sing gloriously: *Misericordiae Domini quia non sumus consumpti* (It is thanks to the mercies of the Lord that we have not been consumed). These great men, solely by virtue of Him whose name they bear, began vigorously to divide this cause, at the hour when Calvin thought to sever the reality within the Testament that God has left to us. For that reason, pressed by the heretics, but more sensibly oppressed by those who are not our brothers except in appearance, they would suffer, and they do suffer still from persecutions that issue entirely from Geneva. But their indefatigable courage, their zeal without apprehension, their charity, their profound doctrine, and the example of their holiness and religious life -- these have established, by revelation of their Founder, that those violences would last a century, after which they will be triumphant over error and over the heretics.² Thus do we already see how one ceases to oppress their innocence in the measure that the sect of the Calvinists declines. And so the popular hatred that the heretical leaders have cast against them in the spirit of vulgarity is diminishing. There are some ostriches who digest the iron of calumnies in the same way that they devour books by their continual studies. Despite supporting an infinite number of injuries and outrages, they have established and affirmed our claim to, and all the sacred ministries of, our faith. And still today, by their very great works, they replenish the world with learned men who destroy heresy in all its parts.

And now, since divine Providence, without showing any regard for my incapacity, has ordained me your Bishop, I exhort you to study everything that is good, so that, being learned and of good life, you would be irreproachable, and ready to respond to all those who question you in matters of the faith.

1 - This exhortation is borrowed, as were the two preceding pieces, from the biography of the saint by Msgr. de Maupas (part IV, chap. 4, p. 201), who writes: "Beyond the advice indicated in the following Synod" -- that of 1603 -- the Servant of God gave his priests "some particular lessons on all that concerned their conditions, their responsibilities, and their obligations, because this holy Bishop could not suffer the ignorance of his clergy. That is why he would never confer with his clerics unless, having exhorted them to live well, he also roused them to study well." And the biography cites the counsels that one can read.

For his part, André de Sauzée, who was part of the episcopal household during the first years that followed the ordination of Francis de Sales (see tomes XII, p. 271, n. 1 and XXII, p. 113, n. 2), made the following deposition at the process [of canonization] in Paris: "He taught in his room at Annecy many theological matters, to his canons and to others, and, as he had been a theological canon, he would give these lessons to them in Latin and dictate it to them in writing."

Jean-François de Blonay tells us, in his turn, that the young bishop "had introduced a variety of good exercises among the clerics in Annecy, like preaching, the catechism, [and] the academies. And in order to have still more access, he resolved to teach in his residence some lessons of theology three times a week, where all the clerics would gather. But," he adds, "the great occupations which supervened on him ... would cause this exercise not to last very long" (*Process. remiss. Gebenn.* I, ad art. 43).

According to these witnesses, we believe it more probable to place this document in the beginning of the episcopacy of our Saint, supporting this decision on the final lines: "And now, since divine Providence ... has ordained me your bishop ..."

2 - The better Jesuit accounts on the life of St. Ignatius and the origins of his Company do not recount the narrative of this revelation in any document, whether manuscript or publication. From this, they conclude that it would have been transmitted by tradition, and that St. Francis de Sales would have learned it from one of the fathers who maintained a very close relationship with him
