

Dedication of the Marian Statue

"OUR LADY OF DELIVERANCE"

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Center Valley has reason to hope!

commentary by
THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S.

As a young lad of twelve years old, Francis de Sales was sent off to school by his parents. Accompanied only by his cousins and their tutor, they traveled from the south of France, where they encountered along the way the scars of many wars. The grand cities of Lyons, Bourges and Orleans, and the cathedrals in them, had suffered the desecration of invading armies. When they arrived in the environs of grand Paris, Francis took his place at the Jesuit school at Clermont, a bastion of papism at the time, where the medieval gargoyles on the façades of the buildings suggested an eerie, yet certain, sense of refuge and security.

Though centuries apart and separated by an ocean, the scene of this young student is not all that different from life on campus today. The students who come to Center Valley have been sent here, away from their families for a time, but entrusted to the university's faculty, administration, and staff. As their tutors, it is we, perhaps more than any other adult in their lives, that they will long remember when looking back on their own histories. Along the way, they may not pass cathedrals destroyed by war, but they cannot help but see places of worship that we know are increasingly more empty. Still they come. They come to this peaceful place where they will develop and form themselves in the transition to their adult lives. They come to this serene valley to find stability in a changing, often times troubled, world. They come to this university, it seems, to get an education. But, they really come, and are sent here, in search of hope.

In search of his own education and vocational development, the young Francis was to spend several years in Paris. There he encountered first-hand the ways of the world. Life at the court of high society in Paris was everything you might well imagine! For the youth of that time, it presented a throng of new and sometimes wild experiences. Followers of the courtly life were known to "sing the pleasures of drinking, hunting, and loving."¹ In this scene, remember, Francis is not yet a glorified saint; he is but a teenager, and by all accounts, quite a handsome one, who had his fair share of admiring young women.

Francis undertook his studies in a curriculum informed by the Humanism of his time. His professors no longer limited themselves to teaching the abstract and calculated logic of medieval literature; instead, they read the more colorful and life-like teachings of the ancients. In this way, the young Francis was subjected to a host of classical writings, whose pagan influence exalted a life lived according to nature not grace, a life of worldly elegance and passionate action unencumbered by the challenges of religious asceticism. Surely, his mother did not bring him up to think or live this way!

Then, when he strolled over to the Sorbonne to take in a few lectures in Theology, he found yet another contrast. On the one hand, he sat through raging disputations on the theory of pre-destination in which, it seemed, God was free to decide who among us was to suffer the pangs of

eternal damnation. On the other hand, Francis also heard the wise and learned lectures of Gilbert Génèbrard, a famous theologian who spoke about the biblical Canticle of Canticles and their portrayal of God as joining with humanity in the historical unfolding of the eternal story of love. Now the poor lad was thoroughly confused!

This brings us to the key event. It took place, by common consensus, over a six-week period from December 1586 to January 1587, when Francis was only nineteen years old. It would be, for all intents and purposes, the lowest point in his life. For at this time, the young Francis was forced to acknowledge and confess the weakness of flesh that he so painfully felt. He knew all too well the temptations that life in Paris offered, even to the point of being tricked by his companions into visiting a house of ill repute. He knew all too well his own temperament, with its flashes of anger, as evidenced in more than one sword fight which he joined. He knew all too well that the pious exercises and scrupulous penances he practiced were of no real use, because the gnawing reality of his own human desires would not give way to his craving for holiness.

And thus he fell into a deep despair. In fact, he became convinced, in mind and heart and soul, that he, too, was among the number destined for hell. And this conviction became an obsession. Fixated on the idea "of being for all eternity the enemy of God,"¹² he was unable to eat or to sleep with any regularity.

Then it happened. In desperate prayer one night, kneeling before the statue of the Black Madonna, *Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance*, he prayed thus:

Whatever may happen, O God, you who hold all things in your hand, whose ways are *justice and truth*, whatsoever you may have decreed concerning me in the eternal secret of your predestination and reprobation, you whose judgments are unfathomable, you who are ever Just Judge and Merciful Father, I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity!³

And when he finished praying, the crisis was over, the despair had passed, the obsession had subsided.

It is hard to judge what actually caused such a traumatic event in Francis' young life. It may have been physical fatigue, the energy of his many youthful endeavors finally wearing him out. It may have been intellectual consternation, the theological debates just not sitting well with him. It may have been a psychological complex, his naturally high anxiety yielding its destructive force on his delicate conscience. Whatever the cause, this crisis would prove to be a spiritual "conversion" for Francis. As one of his biographers proclaims: "he overcame his 'saintly craving' for God by transcending it completely."⁴ No longer would he seek holiness in the naïveté of romantic fervor; instead, he realizes that whatever good he can muster, and whatever bad he might suffer, are far and away surpassed by the mercy of God.

As a result of this defining moment, Francis changes -- both inwardly and outwardly. On the inside, he now knows sympathy and can "relate" to others who suffer in a similar way. On the outside, he takes up a life of service to others in response to the merciful example of the Son of God, who came not to be served but to serve. But all of this, and the volumes of writing about the spiritual life that would follow in his later years, all of this is built on hope, on an experiential

optimism that exalts the goodness of life, not as a result of human accomplishment, or even the worthiness of human nature, but as the very real effect of a true understanding of divine mercy.

May all who visit the statue of Our Lady of Deliverance and seek her heavenly intercession find mercy for their minds, hope for their hearts, and solace for their souls.

1. Cited in E.J. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, the Thinker, His Influence*, 2 vols. (translated by Rory O'Sullivan) (Bangalore, India: SFS Publications, 1986), I:56.

2. Cited in Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, I:68.

3. Cited in Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, I:71.

4. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, I:71.

St. Francis de Sales at Clermont College

by ELISABETH STOPP

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Francis de Sales, accompanied by his tutor, Monsieur Dééage, a steward and a personal servant, set out for Paris sometime in the late summer of 1580 or 1581 so as to reach the city in time for the opening of the scholastic year at the beginning of October. Sons of noble houses in Savoy were not allowed to leave the country for their education without the duke's permission. The official pass had already been obtained together with that for his three elder cousins who had left Brens for Paris two or three years earlier. It was dated 1579. Before setting out, Francis was given his sword, the sign of his standing, and he himself chose a personal motto, the one which he kept all his life: non excidet, a prayer, the powerful and complex word "excidere" implying: "may he not fail in his attempt, perish, be lost." It was his already characteristic response to the general atmosphere of adulation and high hope which surrounded his setting out.

The journey took about a fortnight, partly on horseback and partly by boat along the Rhône and the Loire, the great towns through which they passed being Lyons, Bourges, and Orléans. The road from Orléans to Paris was the only stretch of highroad in France which was paved all the way at that time, and it was along this ancient Roman highway leading straight to the Quartier Latin on the left bank of the Seine that the travelers entered Paris through the gate of Saint Jacques. The college to which Francis was to go, that of Clermont, was situated in this same rue de Saint Jacques not far from the gate, and the house where he lived at first, the Hôtel

de la Rose Blanche, was almost opposite. Adjoining it was the Sorbonne, the college which had given its name to the whole theological faculty of the University of Paris. The road sloped more steeply to the river than it does now. Steps led down the hill, and on either side of the highroad, behind the shops clustered onto the main academic buildings, narrow alleyways led from one college to another, a network of paths replacing the older ways which had traversed the vineyards once situated on the Mont Saint Geneviève in Gallo-Roman and Merovingian times.

No sooner had Francis ungirded his sword in the hostelry where the party had put up on arrival than he at once asked to be directed to the college of the Jesuit fathers, saluted the perfect of studies and make his petition to be taken on as a student. He was well received and at once liked. Clermont College had been the boy's own independent choice, and this was the first time that he had broken away from the paths decreed by family counsel. His cousins had gone to the College of Navarre, a short walk from Clermont and situated where the Ecole Polytechnique is now. It had seemed a matter of course to monsieur de Boisy that Navarre was the right choice; for Savoyard noblemen. Navarre followed Annecy rather like King's College followed Eton. It was among the most aristocratic of all, the academy par excellence of the French nobility; it was just what Francis' father wished for his eldest son who was to make the right contacts. But it was also true, as Francis had found out from older friends and possibly from his cousin

Louis who had an outlook similar to his own, that there was much irregular, even debauched living at this and other colleges, that Clermont was one of the few places where teachers and pupils were not morally suspect and where decent, devout behavior was the rule. This college too had its share of students from among the nobility, and quite apart from that Francis was attracted by what he had heard of Jesuit teaching methods.

The "Company" was then in its first vigor. The founder had only been dead some twenty-five years when Francis went to Paris. Jesuit schools had spread rapidly all over Europe, and the particular program of religious humanism which they made their aim was a talking point even in Savoy. Chambéry, the former capital of the duchy, had a Jesuit college. Francis, not wanting to affront his father and his uncle, the head of the family, felt that a considerable amount of tact was called for in explaining his preference. He put the whole thing to his mother, telling her too of his real fear of being influenced by his own strong impulses and by bad example: "Tu es inclin au mal," he had said to himself. She understood his fear, then spoke "so persuasively and effectively" to her husband that he too began to see the point and finally gave his parental blessing for Clermont.

In his speech of thanks to the Senate of the University of Padua after his doctorate was conferred on him ten years later, Francis spoke with affection of Paris as a most flourishing university. "It was here," he said, "that I first applied myself to the humanities and then to philosophy in all its aspects; and my task was made all the easier and more fruitful because this university is so addicted, as one might say, to philosophy and theology, that its very walls and rooftops seem to join in philosophical discussion." An immensely lively and stimulating atmosphere had for centuries been the hall-mark of the University of Paris which had, in the past, attracted the finest intellects of Europe. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the peak of its reputation; a certain decline set in during the course of the following century when intellectual leadership in Europe had gone to Italy, the country least disturbed by the

Reformation, or rather where the Renaissance had to some extent played the role of the Reformation. From about the middle of the sixteenth century the decline had been arrested to some degree by the foundation of the Collège Royal directly by the crown, and then by the more gradual emergence of Clermont, dating from 1563. It was the aim of both these colleges to convey and extend the best humanist tradition of the Renaissance, and in the case of Clermont, the object was expressly to christianize the humanism, that is, to apply the principles and spirit of the Counter-Reformation to the upbringing and education of the young, making the two great pagan cultures of the ancient world serve the faith. What did this mean in practice, and what was the form of training which Francis de Sales received at Clermont for the next eight years?

We are told that first of all, for three or four years, he continued the humanities which he had already begun at Annecy and which led up to rhetoric. In 1584 at the age of seventeen he was promoted to philosophy, remaining in this class for the last four years of his stay in Paris. At the end of this course he was pronounced ““proficient in the humanities”” but had no degree on paper as the Jesuits in France were at that time forbidden to give official academic degrees. This was a merely formal prohibition which deceived no one. During the last years of Francis’ stay he also attended theology lectures at the Sorbonne together with his tutor, himself a student of theology, whose notebooks he in any case read throughout the years, avidly absorbing this and every other form of knowledge which presented itself. Theology was, however, a graduate field, together with law, medicine, and music, this being the traditional arrangement of subjects at the medieval university which was still current in Europe throughout the sixteenth and a part of the seventeenth century. At Clermont Francis had not yet begun to specialize officially.

It is commonplace among the biographers to say that as a writer he owed a great deal to his humanist education at Clermont, but to substantiate this we are given little more than the names of his classes and of the men, well known in their time but now long forgotten, who were his teachers. We are told that he learnt how to write and to speak eloquently. It seems worthwhile to take a rather closer look at the curriculum he followed during these seven or eight years, to see how his training was organized and how its general spirit and even to some extent its concrete detail might have influenced a future writer.

Francis was one of 1200 pupils at Clermont. The number had risen to 1500 by the time he left, and although many of these boys became statesmen and ecclesiastics of note, very few are remembered as writers. It is true that Molière and Voltaire followed Francis de Sales in the same school later on, but this is not mentioned as a proof that the Clermont form of teaching automatically produced results. Just as Milton as a poet and writer is, however, unthinkable without the background of seventeenth century scholastic learning at Cambridge, much though he personally disapproved of it, so Francis de Sales’ whole cast of mind and the nature and structure of his literary work could not have come into being without the Ratio Studiorum of this early Jesuit school. Because of the highly centralized nature of the Company and its systematic documentation at every stage, there is ample evidence about the detail of the curriculum followed at Clermont in Francis’ time. It will be described in outline insofar as it may be considered relevant to the study of Francis de Sales as a writer.

The official foundation of the Society of Jesus goes back to 1540. When St. Ignatius died in 1556, there were already more than seventy schools and seminaries, and by the time

Clermont was opened in 1563, developing into a school from a house of studies for Jesuits working at the Sorbonne, the plan of education at the school already had a systematic shape. The college was named after the Bishop of Clermont, Guillaume du Prat, who had housed Ignatius' students in his own home and had left money for them to buy another property after his death. This was the Hôtel de Langres in the rue de Saint Jacques, a fifteenth-century building of severe aspect with high, forbidding walls toward the street but unexpectedly pleasant within, having a large court and a garden with a well of its own. The establishment of the college aroused immediate opposition on the part of the Sorbonne and of parliament; education there was free, as laid down by the founder, and from the beginning these excellent new teachers attracted large numbers. Their sober, strict way of life and the general sense of ordered discipline and hard work amounted to an implied criticism of what was going on in most of the neighboring establishments in the Quartier Latin. The Jesuits were forbidden to call the school by their own name and so they adopted that of their benefactor. In the seventeenth century it enjoyed the high favor of Louis XIV and was named after him. Remodeled considerably, the building still stands in the same spot, and is still one of the most renowned schools in Paris, the Lycée Louis le Grand, now run by the state.

It was never the intention of the Jesuits to be innovators or revolutionaries in education; they simply wanted to ensure sound traditional instruction on scholastic lines. As the administrative center of the Company was in Rome, and many of the earliest members were Italian, they were naturally influenced by the Italian court and city schools which were in a leading position in Europe. Their humanist ideal was that laid down by Quintilian; a truly educated man was one who could express himself with sincerity, readiness, and persuasiveness on the entire circle of knowledge, that is, classical, or Greek and Latin knowledge. For there was no other. The Jesuits absorbed this basic ideal into their general aim of preparing educated apostles of Christ's Kingdom on earth by means of a harmonious development of intellect and will, mind and spirit. Apart from the overall spiritual training, the means by which this was achieved was the teaching of the humanities, a training of the literary faculties. The student's reasoning powers were developed and his mind furnished with knowledge so that by applying logic to facts he was in a position to express his thoughts as accurately and perfectly as possible. Expression and communication were the final aim. The ethical and moral aspects of this training ensured that what was expressed and communicated served, ultimately, to extend the sphere of Christian influence.

As it seemed essential to the Company to coordinate instruction in its various schools, a number of provisional schemes were drawn up from the beginning. This resulted in the first printed plan, or the *Ratio Studiorum*, published in Rome in 1586, that is, while Francis was actually at Clermont. It was worked out by a committee of six, the representative for France, it is pleasant to remember being a Scotsman, James Tyrie (1543-97), who had taught at Paris. After criticism had been submitted from every school in Europe, and after further suggestions from experts in the leading Roman college itself, the *Ratio* was redrafted and given two further editions in 1591 and 1599. The alterations concerned detail and local variations; the essential lines of instruction were unchanged from the time Francis was at Clermont.

The humanistic curriculum was divided into five main sections, three lower, or grammar classes, followed by the humanities class and finally by rhetoric. Philosophy, the next class, was already a distinct subject though not yet a graduate specialized field. Graduate studies were not represented at Clermont but they were professed at the Jesuit universities of

Pont-à-Mousson in Lorraine, and at Ingolstadt in Bavaria. The syllabus of the Ratio had developed out of the older scholastic educational scheme of the seven liberal arts arranged as the Trivium (grammar, dialectics, rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy). This still pertained in the universities unaffected by humanist changes, and constituted the arts faculty which was only preparatory to the three main ones, theology, law, and medicine. In the Jesuit schools no age groups were fixed; promotion depended entirely on progress, but a boy could reckon to reach rhetoric at the age of about seventeen, as Francis did, and then spend three or four years in philosophy. He was not considered ready to specialize before the age of twenty-one.

It would be true to say that his preparatory, non-specialist studies on the Italian Jesuit model were exceptionally long and thorough, which was of the greatest possible advantage to a man whose life was to be spent largely in speaking, preaching, and writing. The fostering of these capacities was the great aim of this system. Latin and Greek served as the medium through which the pupil learnt the use of his own mother tongue, at that time not yet considered a sufficiently developed and cultured medium for the purpose of actual training. In every other way the vernacular had already been firmly established by the Renaissance.

The object of the grammar classes was to achieve accurate simple Latin, to be written and spoken *proprie et pure et absque vitio*. Latin was begun with an actual grammar composed by one of the Jesuits; in the middle and upper sections of grammar there was Vives' *De Exercitatione Linguae Latinae* (also used at the English court at that time). A beginning was made on the easier letters of Cicero and on his *De Amicitia* or *De Senectute*, and there might be a selection from Terence or from Virgil's *Eclogues*. In the humanities at the age of fourteen or fifteen, Greek was begun. There was greater concentration on matters of style which was to be *copia et elegantia*, and there was also more poetry, for instance the third book of Horace's *Odes*, the *Ars Poetica*, Ovid's *De Tristibus* and *De Ponte*, while Cicero's letters, together with Caesar's *Gallic Wars* still formed the staple diet. To this was added, for light relief, Erasmus' guide on letter writing, *De Conscribendis Epistolis*. For Greek there was above all Aesop's book of fables, also Aristophanes' *Pluto*, and other works, carefully edited in the interests of decency. In fact, Greek was under a slight cloud in Paris as a whole towards the end of the sixteenth century, since it was closely identified with the name Erasmus who was considered theologically suspect as a forerunner of Luther. There was still more Greek at Clermont than elsewhere in Paris except at the *Collège Royal*, but it remains true to say that Greek appears to have had little real influence on Francis de Sales. It never became a part of his mental horizon in the way that Latin did, and what does remain of Greek culture in his works reached him largely through the medium of Latin. The aim in the rhetoric class was *eloquentia perfecta contendo esse Ciceroni aequalem*, the concept of *eloquentia* having a far wider connotation than our equivalent idea of surface polish. It embraced the whole man and his general culture by which he could express and put across to the world the spiritual and intellectual thought content of his mind. The pupil now proceeded to Cicero's orations, to Quintilian's works on oratory, to further historical authors in both Latin and Greek. Lucian's dialogues also found a place as a form of relaxation from sterner studies.

In philosophy there was a radical change, as here the subject matter became for the first time an end in itself; and in order to help the student to deal consciously with the influx of new material, and ethics, he was introduced to the systematic organization of his thought by means of logic. He was actually taught how to think and be aware of the mechanism of his thought

process, to link his judgements into a sequence by means of analogy, relation, and especially by syllogisms where a new conclusion followed naturally from a previously known factor common to two earlier statements. Logic in the first philosophy year was paired with the elements of Euclid, especially geometry, and with introductory physics, this not being the current narrower field of the properties of matter and energy, but the study of natural phenomena in general, such as zoology, biology, plant life as well as cosmology. This last was the theory of the universe being an ordered whole governed by definite laws and by a supreme lawgiver, God. The second philosophy year saw the continuation of mathematics and science and the beginning of metaphysics, that is, especially psychology as the study of the relationship between soul and body, the way in which the intellect works and the method of operation of the five senses. Metaphysics in the final year was continued by the study of moral philosophy and ethics, this being not so much distinctions between right and wrong, or moral rules, but the discovery of what form of life is conducive to man's highest good, what virtues lead to his greatest happiness and fulfillment. Aristotle's *Organon*, *Physics* and *Metaphysics* were read in the Latin translations of Italian humanist scholars who had given his treatises these names; they were studied in conjunction with their Christian exegesis and commentary, the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

By what methods was this comprehensive scheme of literary education implemented at Clermont, and what was the actual aspect of the lessons and lectures Francis de Sales attended for these seven or eight years? The most striking thing about the practical side of Jesuit teaching was that although the system was supple and could be adapted in its detail to local conditions, nothing about the main outline and method was left to chance. It was a judicious blend of actual teaching and of training the pupil to learn on his own. There were five hours of class instruction every day, divided equally between morning and afternoon, the actual points of time being fixed by local custom. In Paris the first lesson began at seven o'clock with the *praelectio* by the teacher. This was the direct predecessor of the French *explication de texte*, and popularizing this humanist method was one of the most notable contributions which the Company made to education in general. The teacher first read aloud the new subject matter, for example one of Cicero's letters or part of an *Eclogue* of Virgil, then commented on the grammatical structure, the literary content and form, in accordance with the models given by the *Ratio* at several stages of knowledge. In the humanities and rhetoric the *praelectio* dealt more with knowledge. In the humanities and rhetoric the *praelectio* dealt more with ideas and the manner of expressing thought, with allusions, figures of speech and mythological references, differentiating between synonyms and accounting for the author's choice of vocabulary. Greater emphasis was placed on erudition, but the general aim remained as before, to teach the pupil how to study, understand and make practical use of a text for the enriching of his own thought and style: *imitatio est anima praelectionis*.

In the lower classes a little French was allowed, but the general rule for all questions and answer in class was Latin. The actual work of learning followed on the *praelectio* with the teacher calling on pupils to repeat in their own words certain aspects of what had been explained, to translate, to read out from their notebooks the personal comments made while the explanation was going on. As the class might be very large, anything up to about two or three hundred at Clermont in Francis' time, it was then divided into two main groups called Spartans and Carthaginians, to encourage a spirit of healthy emulation. Each camp was subdivided into units of ten in charge of a bright pupil who was called a *decurion* and who functioned for only a month at a time. It was his duty to repeat and memorize the text with his

team for the next hour while the teacher walked round helping, testing and, in the last half hour, hearing the assembled decurions. In the afternoon skilful questioning about the morning's work helped to settle the new material and then there might be written work or else a further brief praelectio. Memorizing well-understood passages of Latin and Greek was considered important, not only to sharpen the memory itself but to provide the pupil with a store of words and phrases and to give him a sense of rhythm and style for his own writing. The written work, Latin and Greek essays or verses on set topics, for instance a proverb, some historical event, the virtues and vices, was a regular and new feature of the teaching designed to arouse mental activity and reflection: *ut excitetur ingenium*. Independently organized material laid before the tutor was the forerunner of the present weekly essay at the older universities. Essays alternated with oral practice, that is, with a declamation on some subject, or else with recitation of memorized matter where much attention was paid to voice-production, pronunciation, gesture, and stance. On Saturday, which was a kind of field day, there were contests between the two camps and this took the form of a survey of the week's new work. The daily brief period of catechism was also revised at the weekend.

To help the boys in their written work they were instructed from the beginning in how to keep a *copia verborum*, or commonplace book, of their own, arranging it systematically under headings. These books were an important instrument of humanist teaching. They abound even now in MSS in Oxford and Cambridge college libraries, and they account to a large extent for what is to us the astonishing allusiveness of seventeenth century writing in general. The early habit of keeping a *copia verborum* is certainly of importance for understanding Francis de Sales' manner of writing; he continued throughout his life to read and write with an eye on his notebook of "similitudes" and other quotable material.

Great emphasis, too, was placed on good, clear speaking, and this was further fostered by the famous and novel Jesuit practice of producing school plays in Greek and Latin on sacred or classical subjects. The idea came not from Italy but from Portugal, which also invented the system of decurions in school. At Clermont drama was not prominent till the following century when it became a vogue of considerable importance for the French classical theater. It may be said in passing that both the Corneille brothers were pupils of the Company's school at Rouen. Clermont produced a play on Herod in 1579, just before Francis' time, and no others are noted in the records though it is likely that there were small informal productions. Ceremonial prize-giving with declamations by the boys, and also singing, were another special feature of school life designed to foster confidence and a sense of occasion. But on the whole music played no very great part at Clermont, and certainly not in Francis' own life. It always remained no more than an adjunct for him and a means for the worthier celebration of the liturgy. We are told, however, that he had a good voice and an accurate ear.

As the student progressed up the school --by examination only, strict justice being done, and the masters specially instructed not to yield to pressure on the part of importunate parents- the praelectio assumed greater significance than ever and filled more of the teaching time. In rhetoric this was reduced to four hours daily of which one was Greek. In philosophy the praelectio became a lecture pure and simple. The students' contribution by essay and declamation, on a larger and more adult scale, became increasingly important as compared with learning which was now done out of class and alone. By this time a boy was expected to be able to speak, *impromptu* if necessary, on any set topic, and to show that he had mastered the techniques of rhetoric as set out by Aristotle. These techniques, as anyone who glances at

this now for all practical purposes neglected treatise can see, included the knowledge of a great deal of psychology. It was no use trying to convince, sway or move a visible or invisible audience by your words if you did not know how the human mind works and responds, your own mind to begin with, and then that of others. Francis de Sales' preaching and his *Introduction à la vie dévote* presuppose a thorough study of the art of persuasion.

The teachers in a large college such as Clermont were well aware that they lacked, to some extent, personal contact with individual pupils. In order to achieve this they had to select, and this they did in the fairest way possible by forming a self-perpetuating and intellectual commando group known as the sodality. Its constitution was part of the *Ratio Studiorum* as it was a vital part of the whole educative process. This congregation approved by the pope in 1580 under the title and patronage of the Blessed Virgin of the Assumption recruited members by selection from among boys who took both their religion and their work seriously. It had the double function of being a devotional confraternity and a literary academy, with separate branches for each of the main school classes. Soon after he entered Clermont, Francis was considered distinguished enough to be admitted to the sodality, and was in due course elected secretary and later president, that is, the leader of the group under a moderator appointed from among the professors. This election was by a secret vote of the members; the president had to be someone who "excelled in virtue, talent and learning" and who stood out clearly among his fellows. While the spiritual part consisted for the main in a special service once a week, and in the promise to frequent the sacraments at least once a month, the group met as an academy on Sundays when papers or poems were read by members, or a debate took place, in Latin, of course. "Enigmas, inscriptions and symbolical devices," that is, emblems, were composed and lettered or designed and submitted for general criticism. In this way the emblematic habit of mind, without which Francis' writing in unthinkable, was fostered. Once or twice a year on a feast day of Our Lady there was an open day at Clermont and work was exhibited. Sometimes the moderator himself read a paper on some literary topic, but this was rare. Each individual member was urged to use his own initiative, develop his inventive powers, and do some personal literary work according to his own bent of mind. It is not necessary to stress the literary value of such personal training and experience over a whole school career.

Without exception, the saint's biographers, ancient and modern, have only mentioned the sodality as a spiritual stamping ground, but the intellectual and literary side is surely of great significance too. Later on, this former president of the sodality founded his own literary academy, the *Académie Florimontane*, established in 1606 with the help of his friend, the senator and later president of the *Chambéry* parliament, Antoine Favre. He too was an old boy of Clermont, having preceded Francis by ten years. Favre's daughter was one of the first Visitation sisters, his son Claude Favre de Vaugelas, the author of *Remarques sur la langue française*, 1647. In founding their academy the two friends were continuing a tradition well known to them both from their Clermont days and which had reached France through Italian humanist influence in school and court.

Monsieur de Boisny did not intend that his son's seven or eight years in Paris should be spent entirely over books and in the classroom. They were meant to be important formative years in his career as a courtier and nobleman. He had to learn to present himself suitably in the great houses where the De Sales family had connections, and also at the court itself. *Civilitéé*, or the art of producing oneself courteously in public was not left to chance any more than was oratory; nor was it a mere set of exterior conventions followed in a craven spirit of social

conformity. It was a training which affected the whole man, and the accomplishments connected with civilité were merely the outward expression of a fundamental attitude towards society, slowly formed and perfected from boyhood in a man of good standing. Monsieur Déage was in charge of the social arrangements and had to see that his pupil learnt fencing, riding, and dancing. A similar sort of mystique was attached to these accomplishments as was in a later age transferred to games in the public school ethos. They did, of course, also serve as exercise, by no means neglected by humanist educators, well versed in the Greek attitude to physical culture.

We are told by his nephew that Francis considered these exercise rather useless for the kind of life he was planning for himself in secret, but that he obediently did what was required. As he is said to have distinguished himself in these skills, his assent was perhaps more than merely formal. They certainly left their mark on the whole man: he was noted for both outer and inner poise. He also learnt the more advanced techniques of horsemanship. Equitation took place in one of the great indoor riding academies, the idea of the manège having been brought to Paris from Italy in the course of that century. For fencing he went to a private master. The sword he wore until the day he put on his clerical robe was not just a decorative sword. He learnt to fight in real earnest, and when occasion warranted, as happened one night in a *melée* in Padua, he was easily able to disarm his adversaries.

Some knowledge of the formal dances of the time was necessary for his *entrée* to houses like that of the Duke of Mercoeur where his father had been a page earlier in the century. On festive occasions he had to be able to take his place in the formal, measured dances of the day, the *gavotte* and the *minuet*, which actually originated in France at about this time though we are apt to associate both with a later *rococo* age. There was also the more dashing *courante* brought from the courts of Renaissance Italy. Again, skill in dancing of this kind was more than a mere badge of social distinction, for the ability to manage formal, intricate patterns of disciplined movement was an artistic skill fostering grace and a sense of rhythm in other spheres. Again, there is no mention of any training in music as such.

He was not, however, unaware of the potential dangers of dancing, nor can one suppose him to have been blind to licentiousness of student and social life in the Paris of this time, and especially at court. We are told that he made purity the subject of continual prayer and strengthened his will power by making a formal vow of chastity in the church next to the college, Saint Etienne des Grès. He had the habit of praying there by an ancient statue of Our Lady, Notre Dame de la bonne Délivrance, also called Notre Dame des Âmes en peine. It was to her help that he looked in his struggle to keep himself intact. The profound insight that he later showed in his description of emotional attitudes between the sexes shows that he knew from observation and psychological awareness what he was talking about. His advice on this subject in the Introduction is penetrating and still relevant.

His longing for intactness in this sphere, his precocious understanding in the years of adolescent turmoil of what freely chosen virginity for a religious motive really meant, is stressed, though in rather different terms, by all the early biographers. One of the most vivid details is that related by Charles Auguste who reports how Francis used to make his way to the Louvre and enter the state apartments, as he was entitled to do, to watch the Queen of Henri III at her meal. He always tried to get close to her and touch the hem of her garment, for he felt that virtue went out from her. She was distinguished for her marital faithfulness and purity

under shockingly difficult conditions. With other people, too, who were distinguished for chastity in a licentious age, Francis would make the same instinctive attempt to keep in actual physical touch with the virtue so deeply preoccupying him.

This preoccupation was a natural part of his development but which in a gifted and emotional boy, living away from a normal home and family background, can easily produce a state of extreme nervous tension. The general excitement of this stage tends to find a focus in whatever aspect of experience presents the greatest value, and for Francis this was his own personal religion, his attitude to God. The devil, says Dom Jean, considered Francis to be doing so well that a challenge was indicated; God allowed his servant to suffer a violent assault so as to prepare "this great master of spiritual fencing" for his future combat on God's side. In Paris the powers of darkness fought against God for the possession of this young Job's soul, and the points of attack selected by the adversary were the emotions and the intellect. To make things worse, the encounter took place at the psychologically difficult time of mid-winter when resistance is at its lowest ebb and when a physical illness seemed to be threatening Francis.

The crisis came in December, 1586 and the first two weeks of the following January. Francis was nineteen and well launched in his philosophy class which brought so much new scientific material to bear on his consciousness: the nature of matter, the mathematics of space and time, the creative process at work behind the structure of living organisms. At the same time Monsieur Déage was now taking him to the Sorbonne for certain lecture courses in theology. One of the great subjects of debate at the faculty at this time was that of predestination, the problem posed by Calvin, who took the extreme position, as it seemed to the opposite camp, of defending it outright. Christian humanists, Erasmus, and later on, the Jesuit Molina, opposed it out and out, while the official opinion of the Church, represented by St. Augustine and St. Thomas, took up what appeared as an intermediate and therefore inconclusive position. God predestined his saints to glory independently of their good works, which he indeed foresaw and for which he gave them grace, but this was only a general part of his original will for them and thus a manifestation of his justice.

Predestination expressed in human terms did not present itself to Francis as an intellectual conundrum so closely connected with the nature of God in himself as to be in the last resort insoluble for the finite mind. He never seems to have been in any serious doubt, intellectually, about his position; the problem was an emotional, psychological one, and very probably mystical as well. Unlike most of the people around him who argued the matter as a theological abstraction, Francis saw it as a burning life question: "Am I myself, tempted as I am by the pleasures I see going on all round me, and inclined to evil as I know myself to be, am I fated to be damned or to be saved? Am I destined to be parted from God for ever and ever, and shall I perhaps never be able to show him my love, however hard I try here and now to live the good life?" At a time of intense emotional stress he opted for the answer of despair, and no amount of rational argument, no effort of his own or of his teachers and friends could reach him. To a person of less vivid faith and love, the question could never have become so real. Had he really been evil, he would not have hesitated to choose the easy way out. But it was part of his problem that he could not see his own quandary in the light of logic. For weeks on end he wept and cried aloud to God, mourning the loss of him and of all he had ever lived and worked for. Sleepless, he knelt by his bed in tears: "O Love, O beauty, am I never to know you, to take my joy in you? O Mary, my mother, am I never to see you in your Son's kingdom? Did not my beloved Jesus die for me too and redeem me?"

His state rapidly deteriorated, he was caught up in a tangle of emotional argument which expressed itself in an intense depression. According to his biographers, his melancholy forced its way out and appeared as an all-over yellowing of his skin which was, as a rule, healthy but now looked like wax; he suffered a catastrophic loss of weight and such severe attacks of pain that he could neither sleep, eat, nor drink. He dragged himself around more dead than alive but refused to take to his bed. From these symptoms one would be inclined to think that his despair came upon him at the same time as an actual illness and that the mental state was aggravated by the physical. This is in no way to question or decry the spiritual validity of an experience that bears many signs of a mystical trial in a personality as sane and confident as Francis had always shown himself to be. There is no reason why a physical illness should not form part of a perhaps mystical crisis which may well affect the whole man. Indeed, St. John of the Cross implies that this is not unusual. The fact remains that the details given by contemporary witnesses correspond, as far as one can judge, to an attack of jaundice caused, perhaps, by some gallstone disorder which is known to have an intensely depressing effect. The evidence rests on the account of his servant, on the witness of Monsieur Dééage and of two fellow students. There was also Francis' own account to Madame de Chantal, as well as some written evidence preserved through the canonization documents.

One could wish there were some letters in which Francis had expressed his feelings, but with the exception of one insignificant thank-you letter, the whole correspondence of the Paris years was burnt when the castle at Thorens was looted and burnt in 1634. In any case it is very unlikely that he would have written the kind of personal letter one might now expect. All we have is a brief protestation and a page of quotations from the psalms, both copied from what he had himself written down at the time. These scripture verses which he used to say and sob out aloud as he knelt by his bed at night may seem impersonal, but to one who knew the whole psalter off by heart and whose prayer was naturally cast in liturgical forms, David's timeless cry for help was the most natural and powerful way to express what lay far beyond the reach of his own words:

Will God then leave me forsaken forever, and in anger forget to show me mercy?
Let God arise, and his enemies will vanish before him like smoke, and as wax melts in the fire, the devil's assaults will perish. God is our refuge and our strength; we will not fear even if the earth should fall to pieces all around us and the hills be carried away into the depths of the sea. My enemies have prepared a snare for my feet, they bowed down my soul, they dug a pit in my path. I will take refuge under the shelter of thy wings till the storm passes by; I will cry out to the most high God, he will snatch my soul from the lion's den. God save me! See how the waters close about me shoulder high! I am like one who sticks fast in deep mire, with no ground under his feet, one who has ventured out to mid-ocean to be drowned by the tempest. Save me from sinking in the mire, rescue me from my enemies, from the deep waters that surround me; let me not sink beneath the flood, swallowed up in its depths, let not the well's mouth close over me! Shall not my soul be subject to God? For from him is my salvation. In thee, Lord, have I hoped; let me not be confounded.

The prayers begin and end on a strong note of hope which is never absent throughout the earthquake and storm which have engulfed him, with the waters closing, as it were, over

his head, and his feet seeming to sink ever deeper into the quicksand. He saw himself, too, as ensnared by his enemy, as having stumbled into a trap and being exposed to wild beasts who threatened to tear him to pieces. No words of his own could have described his state of inner disintegration more vividly than the series of symbols he took from the Bible, and it is worth noticing that he who was to build so much of his own work on a theory of the spiritual effectiveness of images, instinctively chose passages which gave him a concrete and tangible picture of his plight.

His greatest fear, as he told Madame de Chantal, was that if he were indeed damned, as it seemed to him, he would never in all eternity be able to show his love for God and for Mary. As the weeks passed he clung firmly to the resolution that he would at least show his love by serving God all the more faithfully here on earth, and he would accept his own damnation because God had apparently willed it. All that really mattered was that God's decrees should be fulfilled. Put like this, the proposition sounds so tragically senseless to a Christian who believes in a loving God that it is hard to imagine how Francis could have held it. Yet it is obvious from his protestation that this was his line of thought. "If I am damned because I deserve it, that is, on my own merits, at least let me not be among those who curse your holy name," was his final word on the subject and at the same time the clearest possible demonstration of his true love of God. He had driven his ideas to an extreme point of pseudo-logical absurdity which corresponds somehow to the extreme point of state of nervous tension in which he found himself. He had reached a point of heroic acceptance, giving himself up unconditionally to God and being subject to him, without any reliance on his own very considerable merits, his own young strength into which, without knowing it, he had put much of his trust in the course of his struggle for virtue. He was to learn the mystic's first and last lesson-to rely on God alone. And now he was prepared, as far as in him lay, for the ending of his trial which came from above. As yet, his feelings, so deeply disturbed over the past weeks, lagged behind the reasoned conclusion which he had so far not been able to accept as yet on the emotional level, making it possible for head and heart to come together again in a conflict healed.

Walking home one day from the Louvre-his physical condition must already have been somewhat improved by then as this is a good half hour's walk along the Seine- he crossed the bridge by Notre Dame and went up the hill just past his college, where he turned into a side road to enter Saint Etienne des Grèès. In a small chapel to the left of the high altar there stood the ancient statue, so well known to him, of Notre Dame des âmes en peine, as she was called by those who came to her in distress. He knelt down, picked up the little wooden tablet on which was pasted a handwritten copy of St. Bernard's prayer to our Lady, the Memorare, and said it right through in a spirit of deep and childlike trust. When he rose up to go, he suddenly felt "as if his torment had fallen about his feet like a leper's scales" and he realized that from this moment he was completely cured. The leprosy of temptation and despair which had made of him an outcast and put him, as he thought, beyond the reach of God's love and robbed him of his own capacity to love God, vanished in an instant as he knelt before the Virgin Mother and her Child.

She holds a sceptre, the sign of her royal power; the Child on her arm reaches out towards her with one hand while in the other he holds an orb surmounted by a cross-the world redeemed. Madonna and Child are shown inclined towards one another, their faces serene and simple, with the half smile so characteristic of medieval French groups of this kind. The

Virgin's painted red robe with its full blue mantle is draped in a way that gives the stone fabric a sense of life and movement while the line of the folds leads the eye naturally to the arm and hand which form, as it were, a throne for the Child King. Both figures are now crowned, but this is a twentieth-century addition. The medieval statue had no need to state so overtly the symbols of kingship, perhaps because the royal power in heaven was far more present to people's consciousness then and needed no stressing. The statue is not a great work of art, the Virgin's broad, placid face has an almost archaic simplicity, but the indefinable look of tenderness and understanding in the Madonna's calm gaze remains in the mind of those who come to worship the King as a child in her arms.

Like others of her kind at Chartres, Rocamadour and in Francis' own Savoy, this "Vierge Noire" had been in her shrine from time immemorial. The nearly life-size black stone figure of the early fourteenth century had replaced a wooden one, blackened with age, which in its turn had perhaps been adapted from a Mother Earth image of pagan times. As in the case of many of the ancient black Madonnas, its appeal of motherliness was to something very deep in the human consciousness. The statue was the concrete focus of a large local confraternity which must have been well known to Francis as it was confirmed by Pope Gregory XIII in 1585 and enriched with further indulgences. The members pledged themselves in a special way to help their brethren when they were ill or distressed, and they gave alms for the redemption of prisoners who were locked up for debt.

Twice a year, in spring and summer, the statue was carried in procession down to the Seine and across the bridge to Notre Dame, the mother church on which Saint Etienne depended. After the return of the procession, which was always a colorful event for the rue Saint Jacques, the officers of the confraternity, and anyone else who liked to join them went to the prison to free debtors with the money that had been collected. The debtors were, as a rule, simple tradesmen of the district, locksmiths, carpenters, bakers, whose gratitude to our Lady through whom charity had been mobilized in this practical way knew no bounds. Her little chapel was rarely deserted at any time of the day, and this Madonna was known not only all over Paris but in the surrounding country as well. Even the court held it in high favor which increased still more in the course of the next century.

It was no mere chance, then, that brought Francis to pray before her at such a crisis in his life. When the solution had been prepared by his unconditional surrender, not to despair, but to God, Notre Dame de la Délivrance was the channel for the grace which ended the conflict. This was, as far as is known, his only great spiritual trial. It helped to confirm the confident, optimistic attitude that was natural to him, looking on God, as St. Chantal said, as a beloved child looks to its father. It also helped him to a store of personal insight into one of the fundamental and often misunderstood tenets of the Calvinists in his future diocese. On the rational level he had studied the problem of predestination from every angle, and he continued to do this afterwards without any fear of falling back into his despair, a proof that the difficulty had been far more than a merely intellectual one.

Looking back on his experience four years later in Padua when he was writing out lecture notes about the reprobation of the wicked, he added a personal summary of his own position of confidence: "The light is too dazzling for my blind eyes, and I am prepared to be ignorant of everything else for the sake of the Father's own knowledge which is Christ crucified." In describing his attitude he seems to hear God addressing him directly in words

analogous to those of the scriptures: “““Have no fear, my son, I do not seek the death of a sinner but rather that he should live to serve me and grow in holiness. Your sickness is not unto death; so take heart, my little servant, [serve parve], unworthy you may be, but you are faithful, hoping in me, willing as you were to glorify my name by your damnation, had this been my will. I will establish you over much and you shall praise my name where bliss is eternal.” Then I will reply as I did before: “Amen, Father, this has seemed good to you, Amen, Jesus, Mary.”

““I learnt many things in Paris to please my father,”” Francis was to say later, ““and a few to please myself.”” Monsieur Dééage was at times rather worried about the intensity of his pupils religious feelings, his confirmed habit of solitary walks and his apparent indifference to worldly advantages. He was beginning to be afraid Francis might enter some religious order before he could ever get him back to Savoy. As for the particular direction his thoughts might be taking, for a president of the sodality and a boy who regularly made the Exercises of St. Ignatius in the modified form customary at Clermont, the Company itself might have been indicated. But the first rule of the retreat giver was to leave the soul alone with God and to be strenuously on guard not to exert influence. There were also the Capuchin Franciscans whose monastery near the Louvre Francis was known to frequent almost daily, especially towards the end of his Paris stay when the twenty-four year old widower Duke Henri de Joyeuse, a member of his own Lorraine court circle, entered there as Frère Ange. Francis liked to watch him serving Mass clothed in his poor coarse habit, barefooted, humble, where a short while before he had seen him at court resplendent in all his finery. ““What an example for us. God wants to tell us something by this, he wants to call us,”” he was heard to say.

In his way Francis profited by such calls. It is known that on three days of the week during this last year after his recovery he fasted and wore a hair shirt. This must have been done with the permission of his director in the sodality. He went to Mass every day and to the sacraments week by week, and he began each day with a period of prayer: ““From that time he meditated diligently on divine things and gave himself up to interior recollection, always remembering the presence of God. Now that his heart was on flame with love, he lifted it up continually towards that uncreated beauty which was gradually being revealed to his soul.”” As a symbol of his complete giving up of self he had renewed his vow of virginity before Notre Dame de la Dèèlvrance and had at the same time promised, in thanksgiving for his healing, to say the rosary every day. He kept his promise to the end, referring to it in later years as his ““spell of duty at the Queen’s court.””

According to the account of his biographers and the testimony of his friends, he was greatly beloved in Paris among the students and teachers and also beyond the college in his own particular circle. There was grief when the time came for him to go in the early summer of 1588 after the final examinations in the arts faculty which took place just before Easter. When he and his escort consisting of Monsieur Dééage and the two servants rode out of Paris, four of Francis’ friends attached themselves to his group and travelled with him as far as Lyons. There Francis was met by a Savoyard friend of his father’s who came with horses from the stables at home. ““I found him so attractive and impressive, his whole bearing had such beauty that I thought most highly of him ever afterwards,”” said this same friend in his testimony.

What was he like in his twenty-first year? The witnesses are too unanimous in attributing great personal attractiveness to him for this to have been mere exaggeration. In his Padua notebook he copied from his reading the observation that virtue does not only render

man beautiful within but also affects his outward appearance. Over the years Francis had developed the beauty of expression which comes from within. The sense of rightness and harmony about him was so strong that even strangers would stop to look at him as he passed them in the street. He had a certain easy and unselfconscious dignity in his bearing, was a little above average height, well built and always carefully dressed. Nothing in his clothes betrayed the hair shirt beneath. One must think of him in the becoming costume of the late Renaissance, something like a character out of one of Shakespeare's Italian comedies: a frilled collar framed his rather long, oval face, he wore a wide-shouldered doublet or short jacket shaped in to the waist, long trunk hose with puffed breeches whose full pleats were lined with a lighter colored satin. A short cloak hung from his shoulders, his sword at his left side was attached to an embroidered belt. On his head he wore a softly draped velvet cap with a curling plume. A small tuft of feathers, a panache, also decorated the other type of fashionable headgear in the fifteen-eighties, a close fitting rimless toque. The hat was an important status symbol and a man of rank was entitled to keep it on even in church, a privilege of which Francis, it is said, never availed himself. He had the habit, even in his student days, of lifting his hat when he passed the outside of a church. He was known in later years for his practice of doffing his hat to his inferiors in rank and even to his own clerical staff.

When he arrived at his uncle's castle at Brens in the Chablais plain where his parents were still living at that time, the whole household, his parents, his uncle and aunt, brothers, sisters, cousins and servants "" all ran out with great joy to meet him as he came in sight. His mother embraced and kissed him with tears, his father was delighted beyond all telling to find him so capable and accomplished. Both of them could have gone on listening all day and all night while he talked and his words flowed more sweetly than honey. He now had plenty of time to see his friends and relations, and wherever he went people marvelled at him and loved him.

From Despair to Hope: One Student's Struggle with Truth

by ALEXANDER POCETTO, O.S.F.S.

The Newman Lecture at Lehigh University (4/2/03)

When I was Academic Dean at DeSales University, I once asked one of our students what she thought about the new art instructor we had hired. She replied, "He's a little unusual. He makes us draw the shadows instead of the objects themselves." I remarked, "Well, that seems to me to be a good way of appreciating the light because there are no shadows without light." This novel approach evidently worked well for the instructor, as well as for his students.

However, in our personal lives there is a danger of focusing on the shadows because we can easily become mesmerized by them and fail to see the light, especially with the current war in Iraq and the threat of terrorism. As one writer observed, "The agony of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane has seemed to many commentators, Christian and otherwise, a profound metaphor for the human condition today." [1] The words of one of the foremost Catholic theologians of the twentieth century still ring true today:

Fear mercilessly grips the human throat. It fills the psychiatrists' consulting rooms, populates the psychiatric hospitals, increases the suicide figures, lays blast-bombs, sets off cold wars and hot wars. We try to root it out of our souls like weeds, anesthetizing ourselves with optimism, trying to persuade ourselves with a forced philosophy of hope; we make all possible stimulants available.... We invite people to engage in every form of self-alienation." [2]

The only issue I would take with von Balthasar's statement is that optimism is anesthetizing. (But I will tackle that later). The same fears, multiplied, still "mercilessly grip the human throat." Condoleeza Rice, National Security Advisor, stated at a National Prayer Breakfast meeting last February, "Struggle frees us from our fragility and leads to self-knowledge." I would slightly modify this to say, "Struggle frees us from the fear of our fragility." It is essentially the fear of death, the fear of our annihilation that is the root cause of all of our fears. When we honestly and courageously confront the fear of our fragility in the light of our Catholic and Christian faith, we not only gain deeper insights into the knowledge of ourselves, but also of God, of others and our world.

My talk this evening is entitled, "From Despair to Hope: One College Student's Struggle with Truth." The student I would like to dwell on is St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), the French-speaking Savoyard Bishop of Geneva and one of the foremost spiritual writers of the Catholic Church. He is most noted for two works, the Introduction to a Devout Life and the Treatise on the Love of God.

As a student at the Jesuit College of Clermont in Paris, when he was about eighteen or nineteen years old, he suffered from severe depression that cast a long and distressing shadow over his student life for about six weeks and almost led him to despair of his salvation. The effect of this struggle is poignantly described by one of his close friends, who learned about it from those who lived with the saint at that time:

He began to fail daily, and because of his tears, seemed to be in agony, crying day and night with increased sobs. He filled the air with moaning and redoubled his efforts to pierce heaven and tried to touch the heart of God, either to be delivered from every temptation, or that, comforted by God, he might persist courageously in his faith. Finally, the unchangeable hope that he had placed in his mercy [was not in vain]. [3]

St. Jane de Chantal, his closest friend, tells us in her testimony at the first process of his canonization that during this struggle or trial, he was not able to sleep or eat. This is how strongly it affected him.

To deal with this struggle, Francis resorted to spiritual aspirations or ejaculatory prayers drawn principally from the Psalms, which we are told, he wrote down from memory, in order to calm his fears and, "so to speak, pierce the heart of God with all of these arrows of love and pain and to move the very bowels of his mercy." [4]

Happily, we have some of the notes that he made during this trial in Paris. The following gives the flavor and fervor of his agonizing experience: "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy because my soul has placed its confidence in you, and in the shadow of your wings, I will hope for this evil to pass. I will cry aloud to the most high God, to God who has done what is good for me.... God will send his mercy and his truth... (Psalm 57:56 [in the Vulgate], as cited in OEA, 22: 15-16). Along the same line, he prays, "According to the greatness of your mercy, hear me, according to the truth of your salvation." [5] In passing, let us just note he not only selects those passages from the Psalms that stress God's loving mercy, but also the importance of truth, of God's truth.

The nature and cause of this temptation or trial or struggle are disputed by the saint's biographers. It is my opinion that Lajeunie, in his critical biography of the saint, gives the most plausible explanation. The saint is in the prime of his youth, strongly influenced by the pagan authors of Classical Antiquity that formed an integral part of the *ratio studiorum* or liberal arts education at the Jesuit college and whose writings were not always the most edifying. [6] This biographer sees the struggle in Paris essentially as the tension of the flesh with the spirit and explains:

Francis was discovering in himself a new man, or rather he was becoming a man according to nature, and the reality of the flesh shocked his fine ideal, the ideal of virginity for the love of Christ. He was "human to his fingertips" ("tant homme que rien plus"), extremely sensitive, with a lively imagination, timorous by nature yet hot-blooded. Though he avoided brothels, he attended a court that disguised vice under a mantle of glory. [7]

To fully understand the nature of his struggle, it is helpful to mention the other influences on his life at that time. In addition to pursuing a liberal arts education at Clermont, his mentor permitted him to study theology as well. He was fortunate to attend the lectures on the Song of Songs or Canticle of Canticles given by the renowned Benedictine teacher of Hebrew and scripture scholar, Gilbert Générard, to whom he later pays tribute in his Treatise on the Love of God, which is considered to me a lengthy commentary on the Canticle. Générard's approach to the Canticle opened up new horizons for the young student and made him appreciate God's relation with humanity as one great and glorious love story.

The theological circles of Paris and, in fact, all of Europe at that time were abuzz with debates and rancorous disputes on predestination, primarily because of the enormous influence the Reformers, Calvin and Luther, had throughout the sixteenth century. Calvin taught that God from all eternity predestines some people to heaven and others to perdition independent of their merits or demerits. [8] Surprisingly, the Sorbonne, the great bastion of Catholic theology and theologians, taught that St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas espoused the same notion of predestination. [9] Francis was strongly tempted to believe that he was predestined to perdition.

One day, when he was particularly overwhelmed by the feeling of despair, he slipped into the Marian chapel of the Dominican church of St. Etienne des grès, located in the Latin Quarter. He knelt down before the statue of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance, commonly known as the Black Virgin of Paris, and made this very moving prayer of complete abandonment to God's will:

Whatever may happen, O God, you who hold all things in your hand, whose ways are justice and truth, whatsoever you may have decreed concerning me in the eternal secret of your predestination and reprobation, you whose judgments are unfathomable, you who are a very Just Judge and Merciful Father, I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity! ... If my merits demand it, and I am to be one damned among the damned, ... grant that I should not be among those who curse your name.[10]

Then, he picked up a prayer card near the statue and recited the Marian prayer, the "Memorare," and, as St. Jane de Chantal testified, "he found himself instantly and completely cured, and it seemed to him that the evil fell like leprous scales at his feet." [11]

The Padua Crisis

If the emotional and psychological struggle subsided in Paris, the intellectual struggle with the problem of predestination, the desire for a deeper understanding of this experience, was renewed when, a few years later, he was a law student at the University of Padua. The existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard tells us that we live our life forward but we understand it backward. Francis was so taken with this problem of predestination and the positions he believed to be those of Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas that he filled six notebooks with his thoughts.[12] For Francis, it was crucial to have a true understanding of this problem because it involved the concept of human freedom, "psychological and emotional freedom, the need for good works, the [value] of human activity, and ultimately, the very ... value of life itself" (Lajeunie, I: 81). Moreover, it raised questions about the very goodness and justice of God and the moral authority of such theological giants as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

He could not swallow the teaching falsely presented as that of St. Thomas Aquinas, that those predestined for perdition existed solely to give glory to God's justice. What Francis rejected with "horror" was "the notion that God would will the sinner and his sin in order to demonstrate his justice" (Lajeunie, I: 87). Not being able to reconcile his understanding of God's goodness and mercy and the nature of human freedom with this position, he humbly but decisively decided on what he believed from childhood to be the true position on predestination, namely, that God predestines us to glory by the good actions we perform through the gift of his grace, and we are predestined to perdition by the evil and sinful actions we freely choose to commit. Our own free actions, not the foreknowledge of God, are the cause of our perdition.

We need to look more carefully at his theological notes to see how they shaped his self-understanding, his knowledge of God, and his relationship to others.

Self-knowledge, Knowledge of God, and Human Solidarity

The theological reflections he made as a graduate student at the University of Padua are extremely valuable for his understanding of the significance of this experience, which was a turning point in his life and thought. What strikes us from the outset is the way in which he approaches the problem. He formulates the question of sin and predestination in terms of personal responsibility and of solidarity with other human beings. The ties that bind us to others and particularly to our parents in no way harm our individuality. It is Christ who gives us more human perspectives by his coming. Francis zeroes in on scriptural texts that stress individual responsibility "The son will not bear the iniquity of the father, but it is the sinful soul that will die of itself." [13] In his eyes, it is Christ, in his person and his life, who realizes completely this prophecy. Christ is the one who wipes away communal guilt and holds the individual responsible. [14]

His observation here on individual responsibility has a great deal of relevance today when our society, judging from some of the jury awards in civil suits and jury decisions in criminal cases, seems to believe that people with the deepest pockets are most responsible or that socio-economic factors are to be blamed for the grievous misdeeds committed by individuals. (For example, consider the jury judgment for the man who bought a new Winnebago and, while driving down an interstate, put it in cruise control and then went in the back to make himself a cup of coffee. The Winnie crashed; the man sued because it didn't specify in the owner's manual that you couldn't do this, and he was awarded over \$1.5 million and given a new Winnebago!

So as not to become proud and haughty in the independent position he takes on the question of predestination, the saint declares himself ready to exchange all knowledge "in order to know the one who is the knowledge of the Father, 'Christ crucified'." [15] Of course his point of departure is revelation, but to arrive at the knowledge of Christ and at the same time the knowledge of himself, he is independent and critical in his thinking. Respectfully but decisively, he sets aside the opinions of St. Augustine and St. Thomas, and opts for the salvific will of God towards all sinners, a will that he envisions as presiding over the creation of the universe. The opinion of the Thomists leaves him dumbfounded and "lifting his eyes upward" toward God, he hears this comforting answer: "I do not will the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live.... I have made you like all other things, for myself. My will is nothing other than your sanctification, and my soul hates nothing that it has made." [16] He turns to the God of mercy and forgiveness, and hears God say, "my name is not the 'One Who Condemns' but 'Savior'" (OEA, 12: 65-66).

While reflecting on his deliverance from this struggle, he described the experience as if he were one of the many people in the Gospel that were touched by the healing power of Jesus. He sees himself as taking part in salvation history just as these people did by their direct contact with Christ. This tendency of identifying himself with the persons and events of the Bible clearly illustrates that for him salvation can be understood, evaluated and achieved only in the terms of what God did for his people (cf. OEA, 12: 42). In his mind the Christian vocation consists essentially of being called to a communitarian life. In his Meditations on the church (unfortunately more commonly known as the Controversies), he stresses the idea that the first effect of our predestination is the invitation to live with others. "Now it was for a good reason that the Christian people were called Church or convocation, because the first benefit that God

has given to man to put him in grace, is to call him to the Church. This is the first effect of predestination" (OEA, 1: 42). This is an interesting and intriguing twist to the whole problem of predestination and forms for him the fundamental principle of human solidarity and of his ecclesiology, his conception of the nature of the Church.

Essentially, Francis sees the destiny of a Christian as being inextricably joined to the destiny of all humanity. It is not simply a vocation but a "con-vocation." (In Latin, convocare means to be called with other people.) As a result we cannot know ourselves fully apart from others, apart from the ecclesial assembly in particular. The rather important place that this idea occupies in his thought becomes evident if we further examine how he understood his struggle at Paris with the problem of predestination. He realizes that self-knowledge is developed and deepened by one's relationship to the Church while meditating on these words of Isaiah. "Come to the mountain of the Lord. Let us go to the temple of the God of Jacob so that He will teach us his ways.... For from Sion will come the law and from Jerusalem the oracle of the Lord" (Isaiah 2:3).

It is this same verse, "Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord," that summarizes for him the whole experience of the knowledge of self, of God, of the Church and of others. He uses these words to describe this great crisis in his life. To achieve knowledge of himself, he had to climb this "mountain of the Lord" which was for him, as it was for the Fathers, a symbol of the Church. In his eyes the true oracle for self-knowledge and self-development does not reside at Delphos ("Know thyself") but on the "mountain of the Lord", that is, in the Church. It is here that we find the true "oracle of the Lord." Although his experience at Paris was a profoundly personal one, it cannot be completely understood except in the light of the ecclesial designs of God for all humanity.[17]

The relationship between the oracle at Delphi and the role of the Church in the knowledge of oneself becomes more evident in a sermon that the saint preached about the same time that he was working on his Treatise on the Love of God.[18] When he tells us that the spouse in the Canticle of Canticles "places the first elements of the knowledge of God in the knowledge of self," we can see some areas of agreement with Erasmus (1469-1536) and some of the independent thinkers of his day (Charron, La Mothe, Le Vayer). Erasmus, known as the Prince of Christian humanists, saw the obligation and the necessity of studying and knowing oneself as arising from Sacred Scripture, particularly from the Canticle of Canticles. Like Erasmus, Francis sees a close connection between the Delphic oracle and the same verse of the Canticle of Canticles: "If you do not know yourself, O most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the flocks and lead the kids to pasture near the dwelling of the shepherds" (OEA, 8: 80).

In his exegesis of this verse, Francis considers it a response to the preceding verse where the spouse represents "the voice of human nature in search of its happiness." He goes on to say, "The spouse answers. He places the first elements of the knowledge of God in the knowledge of self: 'If you do not know yourself, oh most lovely one.' As if he were to say: 'Do you want to be sure...begin by the knowledge of yourself.'" To emphasize, like Erasmus, that self-knowledge is basically a problem of love, he makes his thought more explicit: "If you do not know yourself, oh most beautiful of women, follow the tracks of the flocks, that is to say, of your different affections. Lead your kids to pasture, that is to say, your evil affections" (OEA, 8: 80); in other words, put aside your evil inclinations.

If we remember that this sermon was delivered at the time he was working on and planning the *Treatise on the Love of God*, and that his knowledge and love of the *Canticle of Canticles* was rooted in his student days at Paris along with his personal struggle, we can better appreciate the human dimensions or the anthropological orientation of the opening chapters of this great spiritual classic. Here he does nothing more than follow the principle enunciated in this sermon, namely that the knowledge of God springs from the knowledge of self. He does not begin by considering the attributes of God but with the beauty, nature and function of our human faculties. The tone is set by the very first chapter, which he entitled: "For the Beauty of Human Nature God Has Given Dominion over All the Faculties of the Soul to the Will" (OEA, 4: 23). These opening chapters deal with our affections and our passions and the manner in which we must shape our personality and our relations with God and with others through the proper use of the gift of freedom. It also sets forth the relationship between human freedom and love, when he states "Love has neither convicts (forçenés) nor slaves" (*Treatise*, bk 1, ch 6).

So his sermon gives the rationale for the basic orientation of this work and of his whole spirituality, but rooted in his excruciating experience in Paris. The most original aspect of the notion of self-development and of human flourishing in his thought is the ecclesial aspect that he gave to the interpretation of this verse of the *Canticle of canticles*. Self-knowledge implies the knowledge of one's common destiny in the assembly of love, which is the Church. Setting aside the opinion of Saints Ambrose, Gregory and Bernard who interpret the verb "leave," that is "be gone," as a reproach, Francis follows the interpretation of the foremost exegetes of his day. "For my part, I do not see a reproach here but a benevolent counsel which teaches us the way we must begin in our search for God. 'If you do not know yourself, go out of [yourself]'; that is to say, you will go out of [yourself]."[19]

For both Erasmus and Francis de Sales, the verb "leave" represents an invitation to a knowledge of oneself conceived as a voyage outside of oneself, a voyage of love and ecstasy because we do not contain within ourselves the complete explanation of ourselves. The direction of this search for God and for our own identity is not turned exclusively inward. It is not meant to isolate or alienate us from others but calls us to go out of ourselves. So it is ecstatic in this sense. It is precisely here that Francis parts company with the Ancients and with Montaigne (1533-1592), his contemporary, who over-emphasized the introspective aspect of the knowledge of self. "The oracle of the Lord," in contrast with the Delphic oracle, leads us to consider our relations with others as necessary for self-knowledge. This is why Francis follows the interpretation of his contemporaries and of Erasmus. Like them, he understands this verse of the *Canticles* as an invitation to put oneself in contact with the Church and the Fathers. Their meaning would be: " 'If you do not know, Oh soul, where I rest at midday, follow the tracks of the flocks' of the ancient Fathers, follow the recognized and common doctrine and lead your kids to pasture near the tent of the pastors, that is to say, of the Bishops proposed to the faithful by the Council of Councils, the apostolic seat." [20]

For Francis, the teaching of the Fathers of the Church is "the Gospel explained, Sacred Scripture expounded ... for they have been the instruments by which God has communicated to us the true meaning of his Word." [21] So, for our saint, the official teaching of the Church, especially based on the doctrine of the Fathers, is necessary not only for developing and deepening our spiritual lives, but also and concomitantly for a deeper understanding of ourselves. We see this depth and richness of understanding of human nature reflected in the saint's writings and in his own life.

After having rejected the opinion of those mentioned above, he underscores the twofold meaning of the Delphic motto to highlight “the twofold ignorance” in which “we live with regard to ourselves:” ‘Know yourself.’ Socrates ... says that the knowledge of ourselves consists in the knowledge of the excellence of our soul; others say that it is the knowledge of our baseness with regard to our bodies....”[22] As a reminder of our lowliness, Francis reminds his listeners that God gave the name of “Adam” to humanity, a name that signifies that which is drawn from the soil, from the earth, that is, earthly or terrestrial. Even though our origin is supposed to make us think of death, he ends this sermon on a positive note, namely that self-knowledge leads us to consideration of the sublime dignity of our soul because it is the image and likeness of God.

Conclusion

From the long, disturbing shadow of despair that hung over him, Francis comes to see the bright light of the truth about his humanity, about God and about the humanity of others. He was desperately searching for the Truth that is at the same time beauty and goodness. His struggle in Paris led him from the depths of despair to the heights of hope and moved him to fashion an optimistic and positive spirituality. It is not an 'anesthetizing optimism,' as von Balthasar would have it, that ignores the shadows of our lives, but one that makes us focus on the light of faith which illumines every aspect of our lives. It is an optimism born of struggle and hope in the face of the shadowy side of our human existence and helps to fashion an encouraging and positive idea of human perfection, namely "perfection consists in struggling against our imperfections" (Introduction to a Devout Life, I: 5). So he sees this as a life-long battle.

The truth that our humanity and our human freedom matter emerged from his grappling with the notion of predestination. He comes to understand that "freedom is from God and for God" and that it is given to us so that we can love.[23] He learned through his struggles that there is no true and lasting love without freedom. Our free choices shape the kind of human being we become and not some implacable, mysterious and tyrannical god. With the wondrous gift of freedom comes individual responsibility, a responsibility that cannot be shirked or dismissed no matter how congenial our tort laws may be to a disturbing, disquieting and ever growing sense of irresponsibility. The idea of freedom and responsibility that he espoused is a healthy antidote for the notions of determinism, whether biological or socio-economic, that are put forth with great self-assurance in the lecture halls of some of our most prestigious universities.

We see in Francis' struggle the essential relationship between freedom and truth, a question that Fr. Richard John Neuhaus understands to have enormous consequences because of the distorted notions of freedom that permeate our society. As Fr. Neuhaus forcefully and convincingly states:

The question includes ecclesial obedience to truth, as Catholics believe the truth is made known. We are bound by the truth, and when we are bound by the truth, we are bound to be free. The relationship between truth and freedom is as true for non-Catholics or, indeed for non-Christians as it is true for Catholics, as is magnificently argued by John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth).... The Catholic insight about human freedom, an insight that we dare to say has universal applicability, is that we are bound to be free. The truth, in

order to be understood, must be loved, and love binds. And so also with the apostolic community that embodies and articulates the truth.[24]

Francis de Sales understood this relationship very clearly and embodied it in his personal life and in his teaching. He believed that there is such a thing as objective truth and that our minds are bound to love and accept it, cost what it may.

As we noted, his self-understanding is inextricably joined to his concept of God. True self-knowledge leads to the beginning of the knowledge of God. The scriptural passages that he latched on to, while swimming in a sea of a not-so-quiet desperation, were those that proclaimed God's goodness, mercy, and forgiveness rather than his justice and judgment. This led him to distill his understanding of humanity in a striking, positive and comprehensive manner: "Man [humankind] is the perfection of the universe. The mind is the perfection of man. Love is the perfection of the mind and charity [the love of God] is the perfection of love" (Treatise, book 10, chapter 10).

[1] George Weigel, *The Truth of Catholicism* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2001), 16.

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *In the Fullness of Faith: On the Centrality of the Distinctively Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 20]. (Cited by George Weigel, *The Truth of Catholicism* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2001), 16.

[3] Deposition of P. de Quoex: "Tous les jours il défaillait, et, à force de pleurer, semblait en agonie; versant des larmes jour et nuit et redoublant ses tristes sanglots; il fatiguait l'air de ses lamentations, en frappait le Ciel à coups redoublés et essayait de toucher le coeur de Dieu, soit pour être délivré de toute tentation, soit pour que, réconforté par Lui, il résistât courageusement dans la foi, et qu'enfin l'espérance immuable qu'il avait placée en sa miséricorde [ne fut pas vaine]" (As cited in *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales, évêque et Prince de Genève et Docteur de l'Eglise, édition complète, 26 vols.* (Annecy: J. Nierat, 1892-1932), 22: xvi. This work will be cited as OEA in future references. All English translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

[4] P. de Quoex, "Par ces oraisons jaculatoires tirées de tous les Psaumes et Cantiques du Roi-Prophète que, grace à la très heureuse mémoire don't il était doué, il retenait au plus profond de son âme, il calmait les angoisses de son coeur désolé, et, pour ainsi dire, perçait le coeur de Dieu par toutes ces flèches d'amour et de douleur, et émouvait les entrailles de sa miséricorde" (as cited in OEA, 12: xvii).

[5] "Ayez pitié de moi, ô Dieu, ayez pitié de moi parce que mon âme s'est confiée en vous; et à l'ombre de vos ailes, j'espérerai jusqu'à ce que l'iniquité soit passée. Je crierai au Dieu très-haut, au Dieu qui m'a fait du bien. ...Dieu enverra sa miséricorde et sa vérité...[Ps. 57] (OEA, 22: 15-16) [Written in Latin]. "Selon la grandeur de votre miséricorde, exaucez-moi, selon la vérité de notre salut" [Ps. 69] (OEA, 22: 16) [Written in Latin].

[6] "It is the custom, Castellion tells us, to have children read Lucien in Greek and Terence in Latin; the former describes Jupiter's adulterous adventures and Mercury's theiveries; the latter, shameful practices of the young, the perversity of the courtesan and the infamy of the procurer" (E.J. Lajeunie, O.P., *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence*, trans. Rory O'Sullivan, OSFS [Bangalore, India: S.F.S. Publications, 1986]), I: 55 where he refers us to Goulou's life of St. Francis de Sales, 34).

[7] Lajeunie, I: 66.

[8] "Nous appelons Prédestination le conseil éternel de Dieu par lequel il a déterminé ce qu'il vouloit faire d'un chascun homme. Car il ne les crée pas tous en pareille condition, mais ordonne les uns à la vie éternelle, les autres à éternelle damnation ... Le Seigneur a une fois constitué en son conseil éternel et immuable, lesquelz il vouloit prendre à salut, et lesquelz il vouloit laisser en ruine" (De Institutione Christiana, 1560, as cited OEA, 22: xiv). Luther had already taught essentially the same idea. This teaching was condemned in 1520 by Pope Leo X in the Bull *Exsurge*.

[9] "Dieu 'n'a pas décrété le salut de tous. Il faut donc conclure que ceux qui sont privés du salut, le sont, non par suite de leur propre refus, mais par le refus de Dieu lui-même" (Labache, *Leçons de théologie dogmatique* [Paris, Bloud, 1908] cité par Francis Vincent: *Saint François de Sales, Directeur d'âmes* [Paris, Beauchesne, 1923], p. 37 as cited in OEA, 22: xv).

"Dieu prédestine ses saints à la gloire uniquement par son bon plaisir, indépendamment de la prévision de leurs oeuvres, et, en vertu de ce décret a priori, leur conférant les grâces nécessaires pour qu'ils puissent mériter cette gloire" (Homan-Letourneau, *Vie de saint François de Sales* (éd. 1909), tome Ier, liv. I, chp. Iii, p. 55, as cited in OEA, 22: xv).

"Que ces doctrines soient exactement, la première de saint Augustin, l'autre de saint Thomas, nous n'avons pas à l'examiner ici; il suffit qu'elles fussent alors enseignées sous le nom de ces deux Docteurs" (OEA, 22: xv).

[10] OEA, 22: 19-20, as translated by R. O'Sullivan, *Lajeunie*, I: 71.

[11] "...en ce mesme instant se trouva parfaitement et entièrement gueri; et il luy sembla que son mal estoit tombé sur ses pieds comme des escailles de lepre" (as cited in OEA, 22: xx).

[12] *Lajeunie*, I: 81.

[13] *The Opuscles*, 1: 1; *Oeuvres*, 22: 63-67. The scriptural texts he quotes are from Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2,20.

[14] *Ibid.*, 64.

[15] *Loc. cit.*

[16] *Ibid.*, 42.

[17] OEA, 22: 66. For the idea of the Church as the "mountain of the Lord," see OEA, 1: 135.

[18] OEA, 8: 74-75. This sermon was written in 1612.

[19] *Sermon 2*: 84; *Oeuvres 8*: 80-81.

[20] At the end of this sermon, he uses the story of the Greek painter, Phidias, and his painting of Minerva. We find the same story in the *Treatise* (book 4, chapter 4) but used in a different way.

[21] Mais qu'est-ce autre chose la doctrine des Peres de l'Eglise que l'Evangile expliqué, que l'Escriture Sainte exposee? Il y a a dire entre l'Escriture Sainte et la doctrine des Peres comme entre une amande entiere et une amande cassee, de laquelle le noyau peut estre mangé d'un chacun, ou comme d'un pain entier et d'un pain mis en pièces et distribué. Au contraire donq il faut s'en servir, car ilz ont esté les instrumens par lesquelz Dieu nous a communiqué le vray sens de sa Parole" (OEA, XII: 305-306, Letter to Archbishop of Dol).

[22] *Treatise 1:1*; *Oeuvres*, 4: 23.

[23] John R. Sachs, S.J., *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 28.

[24] Richard John Neuhaus "The Persistence of the Catholic Moment," *First Things* (February 2003): 29-30.

Mary's Role in the Faith Crisis of St. Francis de Sales

by MARIE CHANTAL SBORDONE, V.H.M.

University students in the late sixteenth century were not very different from those of today, searching, questioning, and discussing endlessly any controversial aspect of the human condition. It is not surprising that the bright, gifted young nobleman from Savoy, Francis de Sales, should be quickly caught up in the intellectually stimulating life of Paris where he studied from 1578-1588. At this particular period in European history, the burning topic in both Catholic and Reform circles was the issue of predestination. The doctrines of Martin Luther and Calvin on this subject were loudly proclaimed and hotly debated everywhere.[1] Further, preachers, in an effort to teach sinners and move them to repentance, expounded on God's judgement and wrath, rather than on his mercy and forgiveness.[2]

Young Francis, who was unusually sensitive and pious, began to feel vaguely oppressed by the thought that he might well be one of those souls destined to be eternally damned by God. Anxieties and doubts, one after another, began to invade his thoughts: he belonged to Adam's race; he was a weak and fragile mortal; he was a sinner; God might well abandon, reject, and damn him. Impressionable, vulnerable to all that he encountered in university life, his heart and mind were the soil in which seeds of doubt and fear, disillusion, and mistrust could take root and grow. St. Jane de Chantal wrote in her testimony at the first canonization inquiries for his cause in 1627 that as a student in Paris, Francis "was tried by a state of extreme mental anguish, firmly believing that he was doomed to go to hell and had no hope of salvation. This made him go cold with fear, especially when he thought how the damned have no power to love God or to see the Blessed Virgin." [3]

By the year 1586-87 he was experiencing a full-blown crisis. This was the result of a violent conflict between, on the one hand, the growing doubts about his eternal salvation and, on the other, the spiritual enthusiasm awakened in his soul by G n brard's commentary on the Canticle of Canticles. In the fall of 1584, Francis had occasion to attend the lectures of Gilbert G n brard, the well-known Benedictine scholar from Cluny. These lecturers were of a very high caliber and presented a deep, mystical interpretation of the Canticle of Canticles.[4] The love between the Sulamites and the shepherd was presented as the symbol of the relationship between God and the human heart, and of that between Christ and the Church. Such an interpretation was a startling revelation to Francis. From the moment he grasped its full implication, he would never again be able to conceive of the spiritual life as anything other than a true love story, the most beautiful love story in all creation.[5]

What about the impact of the lecturers he was hearing at the Sorbonne on the subject of predestination? Theologians were greatly concerned about the doctrine promulgated by Martin Luther and Calvin who seemed to rely heavily on the authority of St. Augustine and St.

Thomas Aquinas. Francis expected his professor to refute the ideas of the Protestant masters and to supply him with another interpretation of Augustine and Aquinas that was less pessimistic and hopeless than the one he was hearing. He was disappointed.[6] He became increasingly disturbed by the thought of being one of those whom God had destined for eternal damnation. In his torment he turned to the psalms of anguish, writing them down and repeating them over and over: "Save me, O God, for the waters have risen and have entered my soul." [7]

At stake in this drama was the possibility that, having already experienced the great love of God, he might be deprived of this love forever. "Insignificant creature that I am," he wrote in his notes, "am I to be deprived of the grace of him who has allowed to me so lovingly? O Love, O Charity, O Beauty in whom I have placed all my affections! Will I never again delight in your presence?...O Virgin, most pleasing among all the daughters of Jerusalem, will I never then see you in the kingdom of your Son?...And will I never participate in the immense benefits of his redemption?...Yet, did my sweet Jesus not die for me as well as for others?...However it may be, Lord, if I cannot love you in eternity, may I love you here on earth." [8]

These outpourings were so tragic and pain-filled, and in December 1586 the tension became almost insupportable, even physically. Francis was wearing down under the strain.[9] Yet there seemed to be no way out for him, until one day in January 1587. Late one afternoon, returning to his lodging after classes, he stopped, as was his custom, for a visit to the Dominican Church of St. Etienne-des-Grès. "One day, however, divine providence mercifully delivered him," reported Jane de Chantal in her deposition.[10] Francis' own revelation of the event to his tutor and to a Benedictine monk as well as to her enable us to follow the steps of this memorable deliverance, even if the accounts which have come down to us differ on certain details.

Upon entering the church, Francis went directly to the chapel of the Black Madonna. There he made an heroic act of abandonment: "Whatever you have desired concerning me, Lord, in your eternal secret of predestination and reprobation, you whose judgements are unfathomable...I will love you always, at least in this life, if it is not given me to love you in eternity. If, deserving it, I am to be...among the damned who will never gaze upon your face, grant that at least I may not be among those who curse your holy name." [11] Then he happened to pick up a tablet that was hanging from the railing in the chapel, suggesting to all visitors to recite the prayer the Memorare.[12] Francis began, "Remember, O most gracious Virgin..." and recited the prayer in its entirety. "He said it right through, rose from his knees, and at that very moment felt entirely healed," wrote Saint Jane de Chantal. "His troubles, so it seemed to him, had fallen about his feet like a leper's scales." [13]

All at once, in a spirit of gratitude and for fear that one day his eyes, or mouth, or hands might betray what was really in his heart, he made a vow of virginity to God and to the Blessed Mother. To secure this, he promised to say the rosary [14] every day for the rest of his life. [15] No one will ever know all that this crisis involved, nor the extent of the graces and insights gained for Francis from this temptation. Surely, this strange episode in his youth mysteriously prepared him for the apostolic work that he would undertake as Bishop of Geneva. It has been said that, in Paris, grace laid the foundation on which Francis would build his theological optimism, an optimism that remained unshaken and strong the rest of his life. One may also

conclude that the "miracle" wrought through the intercession of the Black Madonna left its mark on Francis' relationship with the Virgin Mary. He was always moved, often to tears, in speaking of her. He sometimes cried out, in filial respect: "Oh, ma I belong to you forever, and may all creatures with me live and die for your love!"[16] Throughout his life he bore toward Mary a grateful, tender, and deep devotion.

[1] Francis Trochu, *Saint Francois de Sales*, Lyon et Paris Libraire Catholique Emmanuel Vitte, 1946, Vol. I., p.125-127.

[2] Ibid., p.125.

[3] Elisabeth Stopp, ed. & trans., *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, Hyattsville, MD, Institute of Salesian studies, 1967, p.44-45.

[4] Francis refers to these lecturers in the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Oeuvres Completes, Annecy Edition, V.5, p.277.

[5] Andre Ravier, *Un sage et un saint: Francois de Sales*, Paris, Nouvelle Cite, 1985, p.26.

[6] Francis Trochu, *Saint Francois de Sales*, p.126; Andre Ravier, *Un sage et un saint: Francois de Sales*, p.26 27.

[7] André Ravier, *Un sage et un saint: Francois de Sales*, p.27.

[8] This text, based on testimony of Dom Claude de Quoex and François Favre, valet of the saint, was first cited by Charles Auguste de Sales, *Historie du Bienheureux Francois de Sales, Eveque et Prince de Geneve*, F. de la Bottere et J. Julliard, Lyon, 1634, p.11, 12. Cited in Francis Trochu, *Saint Francois de Sales*, p.130.

[9] Francis Trochu, *Saint Francois de Sales*, p.131.

[10] Elisabeth Stopp, ed. & trans., *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony*, by St. Chantal, p.45.

[11] This text, recorded by Francis' tutor, Abbé Deage, was part of the deposition of Dom Quoex. Francis Trochu, *Saint Francois de Sales*, p.131.

[12] The Memorare of Saint Francis de Sales is cited in Antony Kolenchery ed., *Praying With Sait Francis de Sales*, Bangalore, SFS Publications, 1986, p.147-48.

[13] Elisabeth Stopp, ed. & trans., *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony* by St. Chantal, p.45.

[14] Saint Francis de Sales followed a particular method for the recitation of Rosary and it is written on August 1606. The method Francis used for the recitation of Rosary is cited in John Sankarathil ed., *Samarpanaajali*, Bangalore, Samarpanaram, 1997, p.70-72. Oeuvres Completes, Annecy Edition, v. XXVI, p.233.

[15] Francis Trochu, *Saint Francois de Sales*, p.132. Ravier suggests that the crisis may have been linked to violent temptations against chastity provoked by the dissolute example of some classmates, by the atmosphere at the home of the Queen's sister-in-law which Francis was accustomed to visit, and by acquaintance with certain "mignons" of the Court. St. Francois de Sales: Oeuvres, Preface et Chronologie par André Ravier, Gallimard, 1969, p. xxix.

[16] Nicholas Talan, *La vie du Bienheureux Francois de Sales*, Ch.I, p.34-36, cited in Francis Trochu, *Saint Francois de Sales*, p.135.