



## STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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### *Mission according to St. Francis de Sales, based on his mission to the Chablais*

Can faith & law live happily together in the mission to the Chablais?

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In 2010, at the time of the pilgrimage-session in Annecy, in the chapel of the chateau of the Allinges, Blandine Delahaye gave a presentation on "The Apostolic Charity of Francis de Sales at the time of his mission to the Chablais."<sup>1</sup>

What are the real intentions of Francis de Sales in the Chablais? He espoused the concept of his time: "*cujus regio, ejus regio*" – whatever the religion of the prince, that is the religion of his country and of his people. For him, the duke of Savoy is Catholic, so it is completely normal to think that the inhabitants of the Chablais should be Catholics. For the child who grew up in the chateau de Sales, in Thorens, the Protestant Savoyard appeared as a man who made a pact with Geneva, meaning with the enemy.

Two small episodes, cited by several biographers of Francis de Sales, show us the state of the spirit of the young Francis. When his father, Monsieur de Boisy, received a Protestant in the courtyard of the chateau, little Francis ran after the chickens shouting:

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<sup>1</sup> Blandine Delahaye, "The Apostolic Charity of Francis de Sales in His Mission to the Chablais," *Annales Salésiennes*, new series, number 3 (1<sup>st</sup> semestre, 2011): 51-60.

“Away with the heretics!” And when one asked his father what he thought of the religious point of view of the Reformation, he said: “How can you desire that I be of a religion that is younger than I am by twenty years?!”

## 1. Francis de Sales wishes to reconquer the Chablais to the Catholic faith

Let us not forget that Francis de Sales is a man of the law whose juridical positions are often rigorist.<sup>2</sup> In his mission to the Chablais, the political jurist appeared quite often in him. His principles are summarized in a letter of December 21, 1596 addressed to the duke of Savoy.<sup>3</sup> Francis de Sales wished for a total reconversion of the Chablais to the Catholic faith, accepting, however, a very limited tolerance of the Protestants. It was necessary to allow them a liberty of conscience, but nevertheless to prefer Catholics in all things and, consequently, to make the Reformers understand that they must simply “use the permission that they have, without bringing themselves to impede those who, by all reasons, and by the example of their sovereign prince, work to advance the Catholic faith.”

In brief, he desired to reduce the Protestants to a strict and limited right and to favor the Catholics. Francis will ask that all the Huguenots be taken away from public offices, conforming to the constitutional right of Savoy that these be reserved to Catholics, that all the ministers of the Protestant cult be removed, and that the Protestant teachers be replaced by Catholic teachers.<sup>4</sup> This was to be a manner of clearing the slate of Protestantism in order to replace it with Catholicism.

The mission to the Chablais is nevertheless arduous and difficult. The first year, between 1594 and 1595, Francis was not accepted by all. Nevertheless the jurist showed another aspect of his personality, that which he developed in his “Exhortation by the Provost,” namely, charity (and) spiritual weapons.<sup>5</sup> It was rightly by these spiritual weapons that the Protestants came to open themselves to him. There was no one capable of responding before him. The Protestant ministers in Thonon always refused public controversies. Francis de Sales, on the day chosen by the two parties, was

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<sup>2</sup> Francis de Sales, *Oeuvres complete, édition d'Annecy*, tome XXII (Opuscules), “Notes on Law,” 1591. (Hereafter cited as *OEA*).

<sup>3</sup> *OEA* XI:226.

<sup>4</sup> “Huguenot” is the term given by the French Catholics to the Calvinists. “Protestant” is the term for those faithful to the Churches and Christian communities that arose from the Reformation.

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Legros, “The Exhortation by the Provost,” *Annales Salésiennes*, new series, number 4 (2<sup>nd</sup> semester, 2011): 49. (An English translation of excerpts from this speech is available online at <http://web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/ExhortationtoProvost.pdf>.)

present, but the Protestant ministers did not show up. Throughout the year 1595, Francis did not merely preach; he traveled through the Chablais, visited the sick, and if they were Catholic, brought them the Eucharist, all the while conducting talks and conferences with the Calvinists who came discreetly or openly to discuss matters with him, in particular Antoine d'Avully, a notable person of Thonon.<sup>6</sup> In order to be able to speak with the Protestants, Francis solicited and obtained the authorization of Rome to read the writings of Calvin, otherwise forbidden to Catholics, and particularly *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*,<sup>7</sup> in order better to counter the arguments of the heretics.

At the beginning of his mission, after a very rude period in which he was rejected, Francis perceived a certain interest, and he wrote to the apostolic nuncio, Bishop Riccardi: "We are now, thanks to this novelty of near peace (signed between Savoy and France on February 19, 1595)<sup>8</sup> on the verge of reaping what we have sown here."<sup>9</sup> But he quickly realized that in the course of his absences, for he had to return to Annecy several times, his little flock of the faithful was violently dispersed by the Calvinists, despite the presence of his cousin, Louis de Sales.

He expressed a certain moment of discouragement in a letter he wrote to Antoine Favre:

The harvest in Thonon is a burden which depletes my strength, but I am resolved not to abandon it with your agreement (and) your order. However, I continue to prepare by all sorts of expediciencies and labors new workers for this work, and to seek them by means of subsistence. I notice no end, no close to the ruses of the enemy of the human genre. I have been tormented and I am still, my Brother, seeing that among such catastrophes that threaten our heads, there remains for us scarcely a moment to cultivate the devotion of which we would have so pressing a

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<sup>6</sup> On February 19, 1596 Baron Antoine d'Avully professed the Catholic faith in the church of Saint-Hippolyte of Thonon, and on August 26, in Turin, he pronounced his abjuration before the apostolic nuncio.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536 (Latin), 1541 (French). Edited by J.D. Benoit (Paris: Vrin, 1957-1963). English translation available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html>.

<sup>8</sup> May 2, 1598, Peace of Vervins between Henry IV, king of France, and Charles-Emmanuel I, duke of Savoy.

<sup>9</sup> OEA letter LXVI; *Letters of Spiritual Friendship* (hereafter *LSF*) 78, letter 48 to Bishop Jules-César Riccardi, nuncio in Turin, 19 February 1596.

need. It is necessary however, counting on the mercy of Our Lord, to elevate our hearts to greater hopes.<sup>10</sup>

One could see the discouragement of Francis, but at the same time his will to continue. That he did quite voluntarily. Some months later, he could write to Antoine Favre:

See, finally, my Brother that a large and beautiful door is opened for us to enter into this harvest of Christians; for it happened yesterday that M. d'Avully and the councilors of the village ... came openly to the preaching, because they had heard that I would speak of the blessed sacrament of the altar. They had such a great desire to learn from me the exposition of the faith of Catholics and their proofs touching on this mystery that, having hated to come publicly, afraid of seeming forgetful of the law that they had imposed, they listened to me from a certain place where they could not be seen, even though the weakness of my voice was an obstacle there. ... Assuredly, we are in a good way.<sup>11</sup>

By means of these letters, one senses always the will of Francis de Sales to reconquer the Chablais to the Catholic faith. However, what interests us today, in a religious context marked by ecumenism, is the method of evangelization of Francis de Sales which had been at the heart of his mission.

## **2. The conferences with Theodore de Bèze, successor of Calvin**

The conferences that Francis de Sales came to have with Theodore de Bèze, successor of Calvin, showed clearly his will to be pacifyingly in contact and in dialogue with the Protestants. Francis met him in Geneva itself, three times. Francis thought that Theodore de Bèze was ready to return to the Catholic faith, as he writes to Pope Clement VIII on April 21, 1597: The past year "Fr. Esprit des Beaumes and myself ... we have begun in good hope the return and conversion of de Bèze." The former was in charge of speaking to the pope, seeing that Francis would profit "as diligently and prudently as possible" from meeting the Genevose minister.<sup>12</sup>

By a brief of October 1, 1596, Clement VIII asked Francis de Sales to do it.<sup>13</sup> The first encounter took place on April 9, 1597. Francis was able to have a one-on-one meeting

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<sup>10</sup> OEA letter LVII; LSF 25, letter 15 to President Antoine Favre, 2 August 1595.

<sup>11</sup> OEA XI:160, letter LIX; LSF 26, letter 16 to President Antoine Favre, 18 September 1595.

<sup>12</sup> OEA XI:268-269.

<sup>13</sup> OEA XI:453.

alone with Theodore de Bèze. Andre Ravier has sought to reconstruct this meeting from the writings of three of the first biographers of Francis: M. Longuetterre, Fr. Louis de la Rivière, and Charles-Auguste de Sales.<sup>14</sup>

When Francis and Louis presented themselves in the very house in which Calvin had lived and died, Theodore de Bèze was alone in his reception room. The conversation between the grand old man of seventy-eight and the young provost began with the courtesy and amiability that befitted two "lords", each of whom esteemed the frankness, honesty, and learning of the other. Soon, all the ice broken, Bèze led Francis into his study.

The conversation then became more personal. Francis told Bèze the purpose of his visit: knowing his "reputation for doctrine", he came to him "to reveal his most secret thoughts", and - wanting to have his opinion on certain points of controversy - he wished to chat with him "with doublet unbuttoned".

Bèze reflected a few moments and finally said to Francis: "Sir, you oblige me by much courtesy, and you proceed with me as I have always wished others to do, because I esteem nothing so much as candor and sincerity. What is more, I shall try to satisfy your propositions, though limited by the smallness of my mind and the experience I have acquired over so many years."

"Sir," Francis then said, "can one achieve his salvation in the Roman Church?"

This question took Bèze by surprise. He remained silent for some time, his eyes fixed on a corner of the room. "Permit me to think about this a bit more profoundly." And, giving Francis a little book "to peruse", he passed into the next room, where Francis heard him pacing. The interval lasted a quarter of an hour.

"You have asked me," Bèze said, "if one can achieve his salvation in the Roman Church. Certainly, I answer you affirmatively; it is possible without any doubt, and no one can deny the truth that she is the Mother Church."

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<sup>14</sup> A. Ravier, *Un sage et un saint: François de Sales* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1985), pp. 72-73. (See A. Ravier, *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint*, tr. Joseph Bowler [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988], pp. 83-85.)

Francis went on: "Since that is so, why have you planted this Reform with so many sackings, ruins, conflagrations, rapes, murders, destructions of churches, and other innumerable evils?"

"I do not deny," Bèze replied, "that you are achieving your salvation in your religion. But there is this misfortune that you embroil souls in too many ceremonies and difficulties, because you say that good works are necessary for salvation, which, however, are merely decency."

"Indeed," Francis replied, "can you ignore the reason why our Lord, when instructing his apostles as to what he wished them to expect at the Last Judgment, makes no mention of sins committed but speaks only of how he will condemn them because they will not have performed good works: 'Go, you accursed, to eternal fire: because I was hungry and you did not give me anything to eat.'<sup>15</sup> And the rest. If these were merely decency, as you say, would we be punished so rigorously for having neglected to do them?"

At this Bèze lost his self-control, and "let himself utter a few words unworthy of a philosopher."

"Sir," said Francis, "I have not come here to vex you, God forbid! I have come only to confer with you about a few points of controversy and to explain frankly and in good faith my small objections, and I was hoping to know your feelings about them. But since I see that you are upset, I pray you to excuse me. This will never happen again through my fault."

Bèze had the graciousness "to acknowledge that he had been to blame". "One is not always in control of one's first feelings", he confessed, and he attributed this "incivility" to his zeal for religion. He now very courteously "invited the provost to come often: M. de Sales would oblige him enormously by paying him another visit."

In a letter to the pope, written after this meeting, Francis, by contrast, is much more pained and pessimistic about this meeting. He painted a portrait without concession of Theodore de Bèze, to whom he seemed to have such easy access but who quickly closed himself up before questions posed to him, and Francis concludes: "When finally I withdrew myself, after having attempted all the means of wresting from him the acknowledgment of his thought, without having left a stone unturned, I found in him

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<sup>15</sup> Matt 25:42.

only a heart of stone, obstinately impossible, or at least insufficiently roused, an old man in a word hardened, full of bad day.”<sup>16</sup>

Francis de Sales came to convert. In response, the pope encouraged him to pursue these encounters. But in the meantime Francis had to return again to Annecy, the bishop being gravely ill. Francis knew the reason for this recall. Bishop de Granier wished to make him his coadjutor bishop; the duke of Savoy, in January 1596, had already given his agreement. But Francis refused.

During his sojourn, the bishop recovered, and Francis put off the project of coadjutorship until later. He could return to the Chablais. Francis went back to Geneva on July 3. The meeting was the most discrete possible. It lasted three hours.

Andre Ravier recounts anew:

Starting with Bèze’s proposition at the time of the first interview, “The Roman Church is the Mother Church,” Francis maintained that there could not exist *two* true Churches. Bèze replied that the Roman Church was only a part of the universal Church; even if one granted that she is the principal part, it remained to be proved that she “had ever been ordained by God as the perpetual and infallible rule of truth.” One could separate oneself from the Roman Church without leaving – for all that – the Catholic Church.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, Theodore de Bèze confided to Francis de Sales “that he was ready to quit his Religion if one could make him see that it was in error, and that he prayed to God to make him know this.”<sup>18</sup>

We do not know the date of the third interview, but according to Charles-Auguste de Sales, it had taken place.<sup>19</sup> Francis offered Theodore de Bèze, on the part of the pope, an annual pension of 4,000 écus of gold if he would leave Geneva. He refused. The tenor of this third interview profoundly shocked the Protestants. They interpreted it as a corrupt maneuver by the Roman Church to buy the conversion of Theodore de Bèze. In reality, the Catholic Church thought that in proposing to him that he leave Geneva, the

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<sup>16</sup> OEA XI: 269-270.

<sup>17</sup> Ravier, *Un sage et saint*, p. 75. (*Sage and Saint*, p. 86).

<sup>18</sup> First process of beatification, deposition of Roland, archives of the Visitation of Annecy, P 1,16.

<sup>19</sup> Charles-August de Sales, *Histoire de Bien-heureux François de Sales* (Paris: Vivès, 1879), tome 1, pp. 183-184.

Reformation would be profoundly weakened. The money was destined not to make him decide to convert, but to make him leave the Reformed Rome. But the evil was done. The visits of Francis de Sales had already been found suspect. They stopped there. Youthful and without doubt a bit utopian, Francis de Sales undoubtedly did not consider thoroughly that Theodore de Bèze was too rooted in his reformed faith and in his city of Geneva to cede to his gentle but firm evangelical pressure to convert himself.

### 3. Sketch of a portrait of Francis de Sales, the evangelizer

Let us attempt to trace the portrait of the evangelizer such that Francis de Sales was in the Chablais by means of his own person. We find there the portrait of the great missionaries of the Church, since the apostle Paul. First of all, the missionary is in the front line, a bit alone, even if Francis de Sales was accompanied by his cousin in the entire first part of his sojourn. It is Francis who carries and conducts the mission. He lived poor, deprived of resources. He had little by way of human support. Certainly the baron of Hermance, who governed the chateau of the Allinges where the only Catholic army of the Chablais resided and where Francis de Sales went each night to sleep, took care of him; but Francis refused to preach the Gospel protected by weapons. The duke of Savoy followed his mission from afar, but gave him neither an official delegation for the mission nor financial means. And slowly, patiently, without being discouraged, Francis pursued his mission by laboring there each day. His hope was in God alone. Prayer and daily Mass were his strength.<sup>20</sup> Even if he was insulted and mocked, even if the Protestants avoided or assailed him, he treated them with a great respect and a profound charity and took them seriously. He privileged dialogue to confrontation.

He put in motion an apostolate of contact which had for its sole model only Jesus going along his way in Galilee and in Judea. He had Jesus in his eyes as in his heart. Francis went ordinarily by foot, by pastoral choice, as was the habit quite simply of a rustic gentleman; this manner permitted him to encounter workers in their shops, the peasants in their fields or villages. Thereby he established a simple relation, man-to-man. By way of such a relationship, when a sympathy is established, the friend then became in turn his witness in relation to his own friends. The apostolate of contact is a beginning. He followed it by his preaching. Francis preached with the same care for his rather small flock of faithful in the Chablais as he would for a crowd of the faithful. He took the same means as his adversaries, namely, the Scriptures, in speaking of the totality of the Bible, as they did. "The ministers wish to combat only with Scripture, I wish it; they wish from Scripture the parts that please them, I will grant it."<sup>21</sup> Adding to

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<sup>20</sup> In the epoch of Francis de Sales, priests did not celebrate Mass every day.

<sup>21</sup> OEA I:346.

the sermons are the oral conferences of which we have already spoken. But it is above all his personal example of life – by way of his courage, his faith, his charity, and his perseverance – that touched the hearts and led to conversion.

Francis evangelized by word, life, and faith. He wished to reawaken in his separated brothers the spirit and heart of Jesus Christ. He went slowly and surely to accept and to love and to reverse all the oppositions that he encountered and met on his route.

#### 4. The end of the mission in the Chablais

One can consider that the true time of the mission of Francis de Sales in the Chablais ended a little before 1597, when he accepted then to be coadjutor bishop. The mission in the Chablais lasted four years. Again in place the institutional Catholic Church came back in force, with the return of the parish priests, the arrival of religious communities, and the grand religious and popular manifestations of the Catholic faith around the Eucharistic cult, as the Forty Hours in Annemasse, at the very doors to Geneva, and in Thonon.

What are the Forty Hours? It is a Christian feast which lasts two days with processions, sermons, the singing of religious and popular songs, music, firing of arms (muskets), etc. The Holy Sacrament is exposed throughout and great crosses are erected. The Forty Hours in Annemasse took place facing Geneva, on September 8 and 9, 1597. The Calvinists were provoked, and Antoine de la Haye, in order to counter this Catholic initiative, rapidly drew up a *Brief Treatise on the Virtue of the Cross and of the Manner of Honoring It*. Francis de Sales replied by writing *The Defense of the Standard of the Holy Cross*, a work which appeared much later, in 1600.<sup>22</sup>

After the ceremonies in Annemasse, Bishop de Granier took upon again the proposition of the coadjutorship. Francis finally accepted it all in telling the chaplain to his bishop, “You tell the Bishop that I have never desired to be bishop ... but that he if wishes and commands it, I am ready to obey and to serve God in all things.” Francis went back to Thonon to pass the torch to his collaborators. He placed in charge of the missionaries the Capuchin priest Cyprien Chérubin, whose spirited missionary engagement he appreciated and who would continue in a remarkable manner the work already begun. Francis made no more than only brief trips to the Chablais.

Politics took over. The duke of Savoy came to preside in person at the Forty Hours of Thonon which took place at the end of September and beginning of October 1598. The feasts were grandiose, with the presence of the cardinal-legate de Médicis (the future

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<sup>22</sup>OEA II.

Pope Leo XI), Bishop de Granier, and Francis de Sales. The duke presented Francis de Sales to the cardinal-legate by these eloquent words:

Bishop, the one I present to you is the apostle of the Chablais; you see a man blessed by God and sent from heaven to us who, enflamed by a great zeal for the salvation of souls, (and) not without great peril to his life, has come at first boldly to this province, where he has poured out the word of God (and) has planted the cross of Our Lord. For my part, I have borne here my sword in order to second his holy undertakings; but there is no one who could negate that all the praise of this good work is due to him.

This portrait of the duke to the cardinal-legate is a worthy summary of that which Francis de Sales realized and accomplished in the Chablais. It is a sincere recognition by the duke for the work of Francis who had brought the Chablais back to the Catholic faith, in conformity with the law. On the night of October 2 and 3, with a grand feast, a great cross was erected on the site of the village, and the festivities were ended with one last sermon on the Eucharist by the provost.

The portrait of the duke can be compared to that with which Antoine Favre himself made of Francis de Sales:

I acknowledge principally the episcopacy the Most Good and Most Great God made to prosper thanks to the first and unprecedented conversion of the heretics of the entire duchy of the Chablais ... I do not despair that, by the same manner that the negligence of nearly all the preceding bishops had opened the way to the audacity of the heretics, in return, before the new example given by a bishop of such breadth, a living model of the ancient bishop, the heretics, conquered without war, finally made an act of amendment, without pursuing further their battle, and that it be thus permitted to us to obtain from the divine mercy that the Church of God, bathed by such tears, does not cease to press her Beloved that he accord to us to see the bark of Peter, so heavily and miserably cast about in the course of such years, find again without delay repose with the appeasement of the tides, and of seeing arrive the time of one sole and unique Pastor of all Christians, under one sole Christ, whom we know to be not divisible, and of one sole and unique shepherd. Amen, amen, amen.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> OEA XXIII, opuscles 2, "Praise of St. Francis de Sales by President Antoine Favre," extract of the last article of the first Title of his Codex Fabrianus.

## 5. Is it necessary or not to maintain the Protestant cult in the Chablais?

Francis de Sales is opposed to this, thinking that religious pluralism can only be the source of numerous conflicts. The decisions of the duke went along the same lines. On the fifth of October, the duke called together his council. He wished to examine how to recognize Catholicism officially in the Chablais. He asked Francis de Sales what he proposed. For Francis, it was necessary to re-establish the ancient parishes, to restore to the new pastors all the goods of the Church, to dismiss the Protestant ministers – who in reality had already departed – to replace the Protestant head of the school with a Catholic, and to defend against any Calvinist exercising a public office. This program was accepted.<sup>24</sup> The duke added another decision, one more serious; he decided to interdict the Protestant religion totally in the Chablais. The Calvinists in the Chablais opposed that violently! The duke called them together at the city hall around October 12, in the presence of Bishop de Granier, Francis de Sales, and Father Chérubin. The Huguenots resisted completely. The duke was offended. To those who wished not to listen, he told them to vacate their States in three days! Francis de Sales did not protest. A witness recounts that Francis went from one to another to invite them by *sweet and agreeable remonstrances* to obey the duke. He managed to convince several of them. As for the others – without doubt about twenty families – they preferred exile. Francis, however, remained in dialogue and contact with them.

## 6. The true face of the apostle to the Chablais

Let us come back to Francis de Sales, by contemplating his noble face as apostle to the Chablais. He is the pioneer of Catholicism in this Calvinist territory, the soul of re-conversion,<sup>25</sup> preaching a religion of love, of union, and of unity. He put it into practice, as we have seen, and gave the perfect example of it, wishing only the good of the Church and not his own glory. His role was delicate among the duke, the bishop, the nuncio, and the other missionaries who came little by little to assist him. He was respected and admired, but not always understood or followed. But he succeeded in this mission because he was humble and gentle, knowing how to proceed, and that he had divine charity padding him.

But he was also a man of the law, a jurist, and he espoused the positions of his time. His uncompromising firmness on political principles can astonish us. We can say that politically and intellectually Francis defended vigorously the cause of Catholicism. The

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<sup>24</sup> OEA XXII, opuscles 1.

<sup>25</sup> For the contemporaries of Francis de Sales, it is a “re-conversion.” Today, in a time of ecumenism, we would speak instead of a “reconquest” of the Chablais to the Catholic faith.

jurist in him held faithful to his formation: Protestantism is, in his eyes, not only a religious heresy, but also a political schism. In asking the duke for the dismissal of the ministers and the interdiction against a Protestant exercising a public function, Francis thought thereby to re-establish a political unity. Throughout his episcopacy, Francis will have the same attitude. He will maintain a rigorous intransigence on the plan of political rights, out of a concern to restore the unity of Christianity after the schism of the Reformation, and particularly in Savoy.

But, by contrast, we can also affirm that his pastoral practice concerning persons is entirely otherwise. In that he appeared as a model of the evangelizer, as we have demonstrated in tracing his portrait; it reveals a man concerned for each human being whom he knew to be loved infinitely by God in Jesus Christ, and who preferred to allure and attract the Protestants by goodness, much more than to convince them by intellectual arguments. In Thonon, in the presence of the duke of Savoy, the jurist and the missionary came face to face in Francis. This tension enables us to discover a new aspect of his personality, an interior strength that permits him to reconcile the exigencies of the law and the exigencies of the faith, namely, the charity of his heart.

## **7. At the heart of the evangelization by St. Francis de Sales: Christ!**

In order to complete this portrait, it is necessary to highlight a fundamental aspect of the thought of Francis de Sales that is truly at the heart of the conception of his mission. We can always appreciate it and meditate on it, desiring to grow, in his school, in devotion and the way of perfection; it can clarify our own Christian witness today.

Let us begin with the words of another great spiritual author:

Truly, when I pronounce the name of Jesus, I evoke before me a man gentle and humble of heart, a good man, sober, chaste, merciful, radiating rightness and holiness. And this man is God, a God who can be all: by his example he heals me; by his aid, he strengthens me. Behold all that comes to mind in me, whenever the name of Jesus is pronounced.<sup>26</sup>

For Bernard of Clairvaux, the name of Jesus is light, nourishment, (and) remedy. He puts all his confidence in him and radically gives him all his life. What symbiosis with Francis de Sales! Both have been seduced by the Canticle of Canticles, that so beautiful chant of human love where they have perceived that infinite love, given and preserved from the Father to the beloved Son! Both have expressed their total faith in the God of

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<sup>26</sup>St. Bernard, sermon on the Canticle of Canticles, 15.

love, by each writing a *Treatise on the Love of God*. The love of Christ is not for either of them a servitude; on the contrary, their response is a liberating act.

Since his crisis in Paris, Francis lives always in the presence of God. For him, God is only a relation of love with man, a relation that man perceives already in the depth of his being as a mutual correspondence. For Francis de Sales, without any doubt, we are created in the image and likeness of God, as the book of Genesis affirms.<sup>27</sup>

To correspond to God, we have in the heart of our heart this natural inclination to love Him,<sup>28</sup> which makes it so that for him "As soon as man thinks a bit attentively about the Divinity, he senses a certain sweet emotion of the heart, which witnesses that God is God of the human heart; and never does our understanding have such pleasure than in this thought of the Divinity, of which the least knowledge surpasses the greatest of other things."<sup>29</sup>

Francis de Sales did not provide a basis for the existence and omnipresence of God in the life of man. For him, and for the men of his time, the question is hardly posed, for God IS! He is present in the life of men. Later, during the Enlightenment, the reign of reason, the development of the human sciences, opened the way to other conceptions of the relations between God and man. But men of all time always pose the same questions about the sense of their life and of their existence – life, death, the afterlife, evil, suffering – and man is always invited to bring forth a response.

What changes in comparison to the time of Francis de Sales are not the questions that men pose from generation to generation, but the choice of admitting or not the very existence of God. There you have, for we who are Christians, a wager and a challenge.

A wager! The wager for the Christian is to believe, by the gift of faith, in the existence of a God of love, incarnate in our humanity in his beloved Son, Jesus, crucified for love of us, and resurrected so that we may enter fully into the eternal vision of God. We believe freely, as the Second Vatican Council says, "in that union with Christ, who is the light of the world, by whom we proceed, by whom we live, toward whom we tend" and to which "all men are called."<sup>30</sup> At the center of our faith, there is Jesus Christ, whose person today provides a basis for human existence. He is its heart, and in that we meet again the free and confident faith of Francis de Sales, for whom the Incarnation is, itself, already the redemption of humanity.

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<sup>27</sup> Gen 1:26-27.

<sup>28</sup> OEA IV:77, *Treatise on the Love of God* I:16, Pleiade edition, p. 398.

<sup>29</sup> OEA IV:74, *Treatise on the Love of God* I:15, Pleiade edition, p. 395.

<sup>30</sup> Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 3.

For we who are Christians, this wager for Christ is also a challenge. Humanity is already resurrected with Christ, and his Spirit is already at work in the heart of the world. Our faith tells us that our world is ways groaning in infancy, that humanity, beyond all the evils that it may suffer, is always in constant development, that the values of love, of truth, of fraternity are lived more and more. If the cry of the poor rises toward God, there also rises to Him the praise of a humanity that constructs, beginning here blow, the Kingdom.

Let us rejoin here the last chapter of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. With Francis de Sales, the Cross must be our daily cross in a faith without limit and full of hope in the Christ who speaks the love of the Father and who, by the Spirit, raises up man.

Pope Paul VI in *Sabaudiae Gemma*, his letter to the bishop of Annecy on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the birth of Francis de Sales,<sup>31</sup> characterizes the thought of Francis de Sales as “Christocentric superhumanism.” The life of Francis de Sales (and) his writings, like the “Exhortation by the Provost,” are the expression of it and invite us to live it ourselves.

## 8. Conclusion

The pastoral approach of accompaniment is rightly supported by that knower of the human heart who is Francis de Sales. That is what we can also perceive by way of the catechesis on Saint Francis de Sales that Pope Benedict XVI gave in a general audience in March 2012. Here I give you the conclusion, which will also be mine:

In reading his book on the love of God and especially his many letters of spiritual direction and friendship one clearly perceives that St Francis was well acquainted with the human heart. He wrote to St Jane de Chantal: “... this is the rule of our obedience, which I write for you in capital letters: do all through love, nothing through constraint; love obedience more than you fear disobedience. I leave you the spirit of freedom, not that which excludes obedience, which is the freedom of the world, but that liberty that excludes violence, anxiety and scruples” (*Letter* of 14 October 1604).

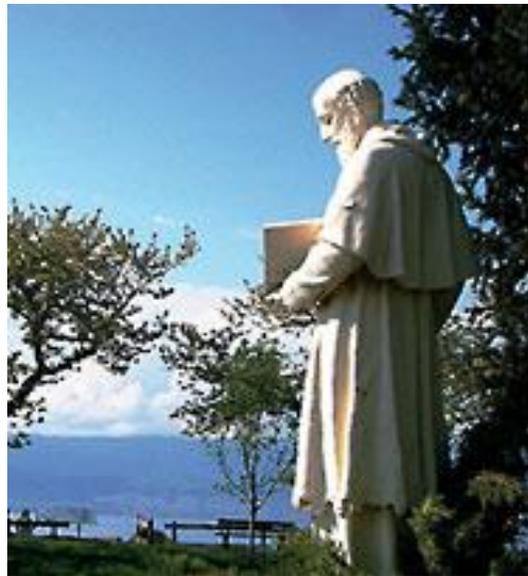
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<sup>31</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Sabaudiae Gemma*, the Gem of Savoy, on the occasion of the fourth centenary 1567-1967 of the birth of Saint Francis de Sales, in *Documentation Catholique*, no. 1489, 3 March 1967, col. 3850-398. English translation available at <http://web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/PaulVI-Sabaudiae.pdf>.

It is not for nothing that we rediscover traces precisely of this teacher at the origin of many contemporary paths of pedagogy and spirituality; without him neither St John Bosco nor the heroic “Little Way” of St Thérèse of Lisieux would have come into being.

Dear brothers and sisters, in an age such as ours that seeks freedom, even with violence and unrest, the timeliness of this great teacher of spirituality and peace who gave his followers the “spirit of freedom”, the true spirit.

St Francis de Sales is an exemplary witness of Christian humanism; with his familiar style, with words which at times have a poetic touch, he reminds us that human beings have planted in their innermost depths the longing for God and that in him alone can they find true joy and the most complete fulfillment.<sup>32</sup>



*The Chablais - Statue of St. Francis de Sales at the Chateau les Allinges*

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<sup>32</sup> Benedict XVI, “Catechesis on Saint Francis de Sales,” general audience on Wednesday, March 2, 2011. *Annales Salésiennes*, new series, number 3 (1<sup>st</sup> semester 2011), pp. 25-28. English translation available at [hwww.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20110302\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110302_en.html).