



Rabelais, Francis de Sales and the *Abbaye de Thélème*

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The casual reader might be surprised to see how St. Francis de Sales, the gentleman saint, could in any way be linked or associated with François Rabelais, whose writings are at times admittedly scabrous and obscene. And yet even in the 17th century, an admirer of Francis de Sales apparently saw a close relationship. He had portraits of Rabelais along with Erasmus and the saint in his study and referred to these men as his "*dieux tutélaires*." ¹ It might even surprise the saint himself to have his name mentioned in the same breath as Rabelais, especially in view of the opinion he had of him. In a letter to Celse-Bénigne, son of St. Jane de Chantal, as he was going off to court, de Sales advises the young man not to read that "infamous Rabelais and certain other writers of our era who make a career out of doubting everything, of despising everything and making fun of the maxims of antiquity." ² It is Rabelais' mocking and scoffing attitude that the saint finds particularly offensive. Perhaps this severe judgment can be explained by the fact that the saint probably read a poor or incomplete edition of Rabelais' works. ³

Whatever the reason for this severe judgment, the main purpose of this paper is to show a relationship between Rabelais' ideas on Christian life and freedom as expressed in the *Abbaye de Thélème*, especially the first two paragraphs of chapter 57 of *Gargantua* that contain the famous motto - "Do what you will" ("*Fais ce que voudras*"), and the ideal of the religious life proposed by the saint to the first sisters of the Visitation.

The long shadow of Erasmus, the prince of Christian humanists, was cast on both of these well-known writers, who helped to fashion the modern French language. Rabelais was a close friend and admirer of Erasmus, who had a great influence on his writings, especially in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. ⁴ The influence of Erasmus on Francis de Sales was brought to bear primarily through Louis de Granada, the Spanish Dominican, particularly in his *Libros de la*

oracion, which exudes the spirit of Erasmus' *Enchiridion*. Definite similarities to Erasmus can be seen in Salesian spirituality:

The principal traits of Erasmus' spirituality - return to Sacred Scripture and the Fathers, interiorization of the Christian life, an invitation to all to climb the high road of the spiritual life, the primacy of mental prayer, etc. - that Louis de Granada brings to the fore finds a faithful echo in Salesian thought, especially in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*.⁵

As we examine more closely these two writers, the influence of Erasmus on both of them will become more evident. Rabelais' description of the Abbey of Thélème is particularly helpful. This was a unique abbey unlike any that existed at the time. As a Franciscan friar and later a Benedictine monk, Rabelais was intimately acquainted with the religious life of his day and became disenchanted with it. He depicts this abbey as a splendid Renaissance castle in contrast to all the others. There were no external walls and no clocks. It was coeducational, admitting girls from 10 to 15 years and boys from 12 to 18. They could even marry, amass riches and live in freedom. Rabelais described it in this fashion to make Thélème the very anti-thesis of monastic life that prevailed in his day.

As a true Christian humanist, Rabelais tried to reconcile the Christian religion reinvigorated by its original inspiration (i.e., scriptural texts) with the total development of human nature, an essential aspiration of the Renaissance. The whole rule of the monastery was summed up by the motto: "Do what you want (or what you will)" (*Fais ce que voudras*). Over the main entrance of the abbey was an inscription that forbade entrance to hypocrites, and others but admitted people of noble families and noble bearing and carriage and also "evangelical Christians." "Enter that you may find a profound faith. Then you may confound both by speaking and writing the enemies of the holy word."⁶ To fully appreciate the relationship of Rabelais to Erasmus, it is necessary to cite the well-known passage from chapter 57 of *Gargantua*:

Their whole life was governed not by laws, statutes or rules, but according to free will. They got up when they wanted to, drank, ate, worked, slept when they had the desire to do so. No one awakened them or forced them to drink or to eat or do anything else. . . . In their rule, there was only this regulation:

Do what you want.

because free people, well-born [*bien nés* - the same expression used by de Sales in his letter to Celse-Bénigne] and learned who associate with good people have a natural gift and inclination that always impel them to act virtuously and avoid vice. They call this honor.⁷

This passage has aroused a good deal of commentary. Both Lucien Febvre and Michael Screech as well as others have convincingly demonstrated that it is no longer tenable to hold that this story is of pagan origin.⁸ The light that Screech has thrown on the evangelism of Rabelais and especially on these two paragraphs favors the view that certain characteristics of the Christian and religious life are common to de Sales and Rabelais.

People criticize Rabelais for having a lapse of memory in this section because in the latter part he seems to take back the only law of the monastery - "Do what you want." Instead of following their own will, the Thelemites submit themselves to the good pleasure of others. "If someone says, 'Let's drink,' everyone drank; if someone says, 'Let's play,' everyone played. . . ." ⁹ Michael Screech explains that this paradox was well-known at the time of Rabelais because it was the one preached by Luther in his treatise on *Christian Liberty*. The pertinent passage from this work cited by Screech is as follows:

And so that I may make the road smooth for the unlearned, whom alone I intend to serve, I will set down then two propositions on the freedom and servitude of the spirit:

The Christian man is very free, the Lord of all, subject to no one.

The Christian man is very obliging, the servant of all, subject to

all. ¹⁰

Luther explains that these two propositions come from St. Paul, especially his first letter to the Corinthians where the Apostle says: "For while free with regard to all, I have made myself the servant of all. . . ." (1Cor 9:19). It is this kind of freedom so admired by Erasmus and Luther which is the foundation of the ideal of the Thelemites. But we must not conclude that Rabelais embraces all aspects of Luther's teaching.

Here Rabelais wants to contrast the life of the Thelemites with that led by the majority of monks and religious of the time, who, by their lack of self-discipline, compromised their evangelical freedom in order to merit. But the Thelemites are free not to follow their own self-love, but to be at the service of each other. "The Abbey of Thélème," remarks M. Screech, "rejects rigorism in favor of an obliging love of one's neighbor." ¹¹

The scoffing of Erasmus and Rabelais with regard to the corruption of the religious life of the time must have had an effect on Francis de Sales. These two men as well as the saint were very sensitive to the necessity of reforming many monasteries and religious life itself. "It is very sad," the saint wrote to Pope Clement VIII, "that among several monasteries of different orders established in

this diocese, you can hardly find one where discipline is not shaken, and even completely trampled under foot." ¹² In their eyes, the only effective way to accomplish the reform of religious and monastic life was to call the religious back to the Gospels, to Christian love. We must remember that the reason why de Sales founded the Visitation was precisely to help reform the Church and religious life. 13

Our saint remarked that far too many monks professed the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience without practicing them. They had all the privileges of the religious state without leading a genuine Christian life. There is an allusion to this deplorable situation in the *Introduction to a Devout Life*:

If they are vowed. . . they place a man in the state of perfection. Yet to arrive at perfection itself, it suffices that they be observed. There is indeed a difference between the state of perfection and perfection itself. Bishops and religious are in the state of perfection, and yet all are not arrived at perfection itself, as is too plainly to be seen." 14

In the beginning, the Visitandines were not obligated to make public vows, but on the advice of their confessor and of their superiors, they could take the simple vow of charity. The Congregation of the Visitation was originally founded for widows and young girls of weak constitution who were not able to bear the austerities of an order of women in those days. Consequently, fraternal love would replace the austerities of religious orders as the second article of the first Constitutions indicates:

Since the Congregation does not have many austerities nor bonds as indissoluble as those found in religious orders and regular Congregations, it is necessary that the fervor of charity and the power of a very intimate resolve supply for all of that and take the place of laws, vows and jurisdiction. . . . 15

Because it lacked austere practices common to religious orders of that day, the Visitation was attacked and derisively called "The Confraternity of the Descent from the Cross." One could say with M. A. Screech that de Sales "rejects rigorism here in favor of an obliging love of the neighbor." In a passage reminiscent of the obliging Thelemites, de Sales expands the meaning of obedience by stressing its Latin root meaning of *obaudire* in the sense of to listen to God speaking to us through the will and desires of others:

The fourth kind of obedience is a certain flexibility of our will to follow the will of others. It is an extremely attractive virtue which . . . disposes us to always do God's will. For example, if while going in one direction, I encounter a sister who tells me to go in another direction, God's will for me is to do what she wants. . . and so it is in all indifferent matters. 16

The two principal exercises of the Congregation of the Visitation were contemplation and the care of the sick and the poor. Here is the way de Sales describes the mission of the Visitandines: "Now this Congregation having two principal exercises: one, contemplation and prayer, which is practiced primarily in the community, the other the service of the poor and sick." ¹⁷ It is the apostolic work of visiting and taking care of the sick which inspired the saint to give his Congregation as patron Our Lady of the Visitation.

Perhaps now the relationship of the Visitation with the Abbey of Thélème becomes more plausible. Several years before the foundation of the Visitation, de Sales wrote to St. Jane de Chantal, the co-founder of this Congregation, words which emphasized the relationship between the spirituality of the Thelemites and that of the Visitation:

If you happen to leave out some of what I am telling you to do, have no scruples about it, for here is the general rule of our obedience written in capital letters:

DO ALL THROUGH LOVE, NOTHING THROUGH CONSTRAINT;

LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE

I want you to have a spirit of liberty, not the kind that excludes obedience, (this is freedom of the flesh), but the liberty that excludes constraint, scruples and anxiety. If you really love obedience and docility, I'd like to think that when some legitimate or charitable cause takes you away from your religious exercises, this would be for you another form of obedience and that your love would make up for whatever you have to omit in your religious practice. ¹⁸

The saint inculcated this ideal in St. Jane and in the first sisters of the Visitation as we see from several spiritual conferences and sermons.

Like Rabelais, Francis de Sales did not want his religious to do anything by force or constraint, but totally and completely out of love. In a very real sense, he wanted St. Jane de Chantal, all of the Visitandines and all those who sought his spiritual guidance and advice to do what they wanted or what they freely willed. Salesian obedience is not conceived in a narrow, legalistic fashion, nor is it limited to the fulfilling of an external rule. The spirit of liberty or the spirit of freedom (*liberté d'esprit* - the same expression utilized in the French translation of Luther's treatise on *Christian Liberty*), i.e., the liberty of the gospels, leaves us free to respond to the needs of our neighbor. It is a liberty which does not exclude submission. The ideal of the Thelemites does not exclude submission either, but inclines us to submit to each other out of love. It is what de Sales calls the "obedience of love." Speaking of the conformity of our heart with God's through holy benevolence which moves us to will what God wills, the saint explains: "In this point consists the very profound obedience of love, which

does not have to be moved by threats or rewards, nor by any law or commandment. . . ." ¹⁹

The motto "Do what you want" fits in well with this passage. The saint would say that we do what we will or what we want when we do it freely and spontaneously not by force but by love, which is constrained only by liberty. Moreover, this motto is the equivalent of the principle "follow nature" so esteemed by the Ancients and by the saint. In one of his spiritual conferences, de Sales recommends to the Visitation sisters this maxim to follow nature or reason so as to achieve equanimity of mind. It is here especially that the link between the ideal of the Thelemites and that of the Visitandines becomes clearer. In a sermon preached to the sisters in 1614 (i.e., when the Visitation was still a Congregation without solemn vows), he recommends that they follow "reason and the superior point of the soul, which always tends to the true good by the instinct which God gives it." ²⁰ These words recall those of Rabelais, who says that the Thelemites do what they will because, "free people, well-born, learned, who associate with good people have a natural gift and inclination [*instinct*] that always impel them to act virtuously and avoid vice. They call this honor."

It is easy to lose one's way here by misunderstanding the meaning of the word "instinct" and conclude that Rabelais is favoring naturalism. But M. A. Screech points out that by speaking of "instinct," Rabelais borrows from the language of the scholastics. The latter used the expression "a natural instinct" to signify a "gift of God." ²¹ This is precisely the meaning that de Sales gives to this word in the passage cited above. In this same sermon to the Visitandines, the saint emphasizes this idea: "We have a self which is completely heavenly that makes us perform good works; this is the instinct which God has given us to love him" ²²

We should note here that it is not all human beings but only the heavenly or celestial man in the Pauline sense who does what he wills or wants because he freely chooses to be guided by the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Love, and in so doing follows his own will. Paradoxically, while doing his own will, he fulfills at the same time the will of God, who wants us to love one another. The very word "*thélème*" is taken by Rabelais from the New Testament where it is used about 60 times to designate the will of God. ²³ So the Thelemites, far from being libertines, are essentially those who freely and lovingly do the will of God.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that in a very limited but important way there are some striking similarities between François Rabelais and François de Sales. The ideal of the Thelemites and that of the Congregation of the Visitation are very closely related because they are based on the good news and represent a reaction against the legalism and the formalism which prevailed in many monasteries of

that day and, indeed, in Christian life and thought and which Erasmus attacked so effectively. Both ideals combine the concept of love with the liberty of service of the neighbor. They express confidence in human nature ennobled by grace and divine love - a hallmark of the Christian humanism of Erasmus as well as of Salesian Christian humanism.

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Notes

1. Guy Patin, *Lettres de Gui Patin*, éd. Reveillé-Parise, (Paris: J.H. Baillière, 1846), 3 vols. 2: 284. "Je les [les trente-six de se collègues] traitai dans ma chambre, où pardessus la tapisserie se voyaient curieusement les tableaux d'Erasme. . . Montaigne, Charron. . . Il y avoit encore trois autres portraits d'excellents hommes, de feu M. de Sales, évêque de Genève, . . . et enfin de François Rabelais. . . Que dites-vous de cette assemblée? Mes invités n'étaient-ils en bonne compagnie?, " 571. All translations from the French are the author's unless otherwise noted.

2. François de Sales, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, Évêque et Prince de Genève et Docteur de l'Église* (Annecy: Niérat, 1892-1932), 27 vols., 15: 377. This work will be hereinafter designated by OEA. It might be helpful to cite here the original text. "Sur tout, gardés vous de mauvais livres, et pour rien du monde ne laissés point emporter vostre esprit apres certains escritz que les cervelles foibles admirent, a cause de certaines vaines subtilités qu'ilz y hument, comme cet infame Rabelais et certains autres de nostre aage, qui font profession de revoquer tout en doute, de mespriser tout et se mocquer de toutes les maximes de l'antiquité."

3 For another view, see Edwin M. Duval, *The Design of Rabelais's Pantagruel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 145. He ascribes the gross misinterpretation of Rabelais' writings to an excessive erudition. "Paradoxically," he claims, "it is those readers best equipped by a fine humanistic education to understand the fullness and complexity of the *Pantagruel* who have mistaken most grievously the intention and meaning of its design." Yet the very erudition he himself exhibits in elucidating the design of this work appears to contradict this assertion and does not, in my view, adequately explain the difficulty that Francis de Sales, certainly an erudite and profound Christian humanist, had with Rabelais' writings. See also M.A. Screech, *Rabelais* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), xii-xv where the noted Rabelaisian scholar sets forth the many challenges facing the reader.

4. See Lucien Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle: la Religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1962), especially the chapter on "Rabelais, Érasme et la philosophie du Christ," pp. 329-360; M. A. Screech, *Rabelaisian Marriage*. London: Edward Arnold, 1958; *L'Évangélisme de Rabelais*. Geneva (Droz: 1959); and more recently E. Duval. 41, 56-60, and 90-92; Camilla J. Nilles, "Re-reading Folly: Rabelais's Praise of Triboulet," *Renaissance and Reformation*, 29, (1994), 19-31. Rabelais in a letter to Erasmus considers him to be one of his "dieux tutélaires," to borrow Guy Patin's expression. See François Rabelais, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Pierre Jourda (Paris: Garnier, 1962), 2 vols., 2: 497-500. All citations of Rabelais are taken from this edition.

5. A. Pocetto. *Ecclesial Dimensions of Salesian Thought*. (Hyattsville, Md.: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1971), 17. This work contains a more detailed demonstration of the relationship of de Sales to Erasmus, esp. 15-19.

6. "Entrez, qu'on confonde ici la foi profonde, Puis, qu'on confonde, et par voix et par rolle, les ennemys de la sainte parolle!," 1: 197. The clever play on words is obviously lost in translation.

7. "Toute leur vie estoit employé par loix, statuz ou reigles, mais selon leur vouloir. Se levoient du lict quand bon leur sembloit, beuvoient, mangeoient, travailloient, dormoient quand le desire leur venoit; nul ne les esveilloit, nul ne les parforeçoit ny à boyre, ny à manger, ny à faire chose aultre quelconques. . . . En leur reigle n'estoit que ceste clause:

FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS,

parce que gens liberes, bien nez, bien instruitctz, conversans en compaignies honnestes, ont par nature un instinct et aguillon, qui tousjours les poulse à faictz vertueux et retire de vice, lequel ilz nommoient honneur," 1: 203-204.

8. See the works cited above in note 3.

9. "Par ceste liberté entrerent en louable emulation de faire tous ce que à un seul voyaient plaie. Si quelqu'un ou quelcune disoit: 'Beuvons,' tous buvoient; si disoit: 'Jouons,' tous jouoient. . . ," 1: 204.

10. Luther. *Traicté tresexcellent de liberté Chrestienne*. s.l. 1569 (Moor no. 8),p. 27 as cited by M. A. Screech, *Evangélisme*, 35. " Et enfin que j'aplanisse le chemin aux rudes, auxquels seul j'entens servir, je mettray devant ces deux propositions touchant la liberté et servitude de l'esprit:

L'HOMME CHRESTIEN EST TRESLIBRE, SEIGNEUR DE TOUS, SUJET A NUL;

L'HOMME CHRESTIEN EST TRESSERVIALE, SERVITEUR DE TOUS. SUJET A TOUS.

11. M. Screech, *Evangélisme*, 36 : "Le paradoxe central de l'abbaye doit tout à Luther, mais le reste est là pour faire opposition à sa doctrine." Screech convincingly demonstrates in these pages Rabelais' essential opposition to Luther's teaching. He also points out that Erasmus shared with Luther the fundamental concept of Christian freedom rooted in St. Paul. See *Rabelais*, 201

12. OEA, 12: 371-372

13. OEA, 25:134: "L'intention de nostre tres honoré Père. . .que toute la vie et exercice des Religieuses de la Visitation fussent dédiés pour leur union avec Dieu, pour ayder par prières et bon exemple a la reformation de l'Eglise et au salut du prochain. . . ."

14. *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. J.K. Ryan. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 154.

15. OEA, 25: 216: " Car cette Congregation n'ayant pas beaucoup d'austerités ni des liens si indissolubles comme les Religions formelles et Congregations regulieres, il faut que la charité

et la force d'une tres intime resolution suppleent a tout cela et tiennent lieux de lois, de voeux et de jurisdiction affin qu'en cette Congregation soit verifié le dire de l'Apostre [Col. 3:14] qui assure que le lien de la charité est le lien de la perfection."

16. *Saint François de Sales: Oeuvres*. ed. A. Ravier (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 1015

17. OEA, 25: 214

18. *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction*. trans. Peronne Marie Thibert, V.H.M., selected and introduced by Wendy M. Wright and Joseph Power, O.S.F.S. (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 134.

19. *Treatise on the Love of God*. trans. J.K. Ryan (Rockford,Ill.: Tan, 1975) 2 vols., 2: 61.

20. OEA, 9: 17

21. *Evangélism* , 40, note 34.

22. OEA, 9: 16-17.

23. Cf. Per Nykrog, "Thélème, Panurge et la Dive Bouteille," *Revue d'Historie Littéraire de la France*. Juillet-Septembre, 1965, No. 3, 388.