



STUDIES IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

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The Ecumenism of St. Francis de Sales

originally published in

Salesian Studies

5/2 (Spring 1968): 42-49

In connection with the present ecumenical movement Saint Francis de Sales in some ways seems an incongruous figure. True, he had the principal charge of a mission to convert an entire province of his native Savoy, and his later biographers have claimed that he was a forerunner of modern missionaries, relying on none but spiritual weapons to move consciences. He also took a great interest in various projects to re-introduce Catholicism into Geneva, and at one point in his life set down what he believed to be a feasible scheme for the general reconciliation of the Protestant churches with Rome.

Yet the historian cannot help noting that the saint shared the attitudes of his time concerning the nature of reunion among the churches and the intervention of the state in the process of conversion. These attitudes are no longer comprehensible to many of our own contemporaries, based as they were on conditions and responses three hundred years removed from us.

The form of the Reformation Francis de Sales knew best was Calvinism, as he met it in Geneva and the surrounding provinces of France and Savoy. With Lutheranism he seems to have had little if any personal acquaintance, nor did he have anything to say about the Anglican Church. The differences between the Protestant denominations did not concern him greatly. He tended to lump them together, as when he wrote, "We speak indifferently of Luther and Calvin, because we do not believe that their teachings are widely divergent." As far as he was concerned, Protestantism was heresy, and heresy was rebellion against God, the Church, and usually also the lawful authority of princes. His position on Catholic doctrine was equally uncompromising. He accepted the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent as final, never entertaining the thought that the articles of belief or discipline should be changed in any way to make it easier for

Protestants to return. If they returned, as he hoped they would do, it must be on Catholic terms. Moreover, insofar as the existence of Protestantism involved the authority and interests of Catholic princes, he believed it proper that they should intervene to hasten the progress of conversions by any means of pressure short of physical violence.

Francis de Sales' first major encounter with Protestantism was the mission to convert Chablais, a province of Savoy in the vicinity of Geneva. The population of Chablais was mostly Calvinist, the province having been occupied intermittently by Berne between 1536 and 1593. Duke Charles Emmanuel of Savoy preferred to see it Catholic, and not only for religious reasons. He considered a Calvinist Chablais too prone to disloyalty, too apt to collaborate with Geneva and Berne. Both diplomatic policy and lack of money however dictated that a mission to convert the province be conducted inconspicuously and on a modest scale.

Francis de Sales volunteered for the job. He was a young priest at the time, though already provost of the Cathedral chapter in Annecy. The years of the mission, 1594 to 1598, were for him an apprenticeship not only in the conversion of souls, but in the interrelationships of politics and religion. For the first three years he worked alone, preaching, discussing and writing. By the end of 1596 he estimated the number of new Catholics at between seven and eight hundred. That figure represented over ten per cent of a probable total population of some seven thousand—a respectable amount by modern standards, especially since up to that point the only means of persuasion employed had been spiritual ones. Had the rest of the province been conquered in the same way, Francis de Sales' reputation as a modern sort of missionary would have a better foundation in fact.

He himself was far from satisfied with the results of two years' work, and attributed the continuing resistance of the majority as much to political and secular considerations as to stubborn religious conviction. The status of Chablais remained uncertain until the Peace of Vervins in 1598, when it was finally recognized as the possession of Savoy. Meanwhile the inhabitants hesitated to commit themselves, claiming to fear reprisals for conversion if the province should again fall into the hands of the Swiss. Francis de Sales accordingly recommended to Charles-Emmanuel various actions designed to weight the choice of religion on the Catholic side: grants of pensions or tax relief to converts, deprivation of judicial or public office for persistent Calvinists, removal of the Calvinist minister and schoolmaster from Thonon, the capital of Chablais, and eventually exile for all those who refused to submit to Catholic instruction.

The duke attended the ceremonies concluding the mission, in October 1598, and on that occasion issued a series of edicts in line with Francis de Sales' requests. Only in the matter of monetary benefits was the duke niggardly, because his treasury was empty and military expenditures had first call. Several thousand people appeared to make their abjuration, though whether they were moved by conscience, fear, interest, or a combination of the three, no one can say. Not all the inhabitants were as yet converted. As late as 1601, Francis de Sales complained to the duke that Calvinists still existed who had not gone on from Catholic instruction to profession. As far as he saw, "No other way remains to have done with them, unless Your Highness, by a peaceable edict commands all his subjects to make profession of the Catholic faith and take oath on it within two months, in the hands of those who shall be deputed, or to leave the state, with

permission to sell their goods.” Just as the mission to Chablais had originated in a mixture of religious and political motives, so its success rested on the cooperation of church and state. Francis de Sales indeed never considered the use of physical violence; there were no dragonnades in Chablais. But political and economic pressures were legitimate weapons, not to force consciences, but to open them to receive what he firmly believed was the only truth.

In subsequent years, after he had become bishop, his combat against Protestantism continued in other ways. Part of his diocese belonged to France. In this portion the district of Gex was largely Calvinist, and Francis de Sales never ceased his efforts to receive the same support from the French crown which Charles-Emmanuel had given in the case of Chablais. He obtained relatively little however; the Edict of Nantes was maintained in the French territory.

As prince-bishop in exile of Geneva, he also had a natural interest in the fate of that city. There is no evidence whatever to connect him with Charles-Emmanuel’s most famous military enterprise against Geneva, the Escalade of 1602. In time though, Francis de Sales came to abandon the hope that Geneva could be brought by diplomatic pressure alone to admit freedom of conscience for Catholics. On four occasions between 1604 and 1620 he recommended to the duke or his officials men who had come to him with plans concerning Geneva. At least three of the schemes seem to have been military, although apparently they found no favor at court. Charles-Emmanuel had enough ideas of his own about the capture of Geneva.

Francis de Sales’ view ranged wider than Geneva in any case. He believed it possible to reconcile all the Protestant churches of Europe to Rome, if only the Catholic princes and the Pope were to act in concert. The idea occurred to him as he was returning from a visit to the Swiss canton of Wallis, where he had helped consecrate the archbishop of Sion. Catholics in Wallis, were free to worship, but not to engage in public disputation on religious matters. It struck him that, while the Catholics remained so handicapped in Wallis and elsewhere, no way was open to persuade Protestants of their errors: “If we thus abandon the Swiss of Zurich, Basel, Berne, and other cantons (the same may be said for England and the other heretical countries), they will never be converted; ...in growing old this heresy indeed will not make further progress, but the important thing is, that neither will it diminish, and it will remain like an incurable paralysis in these very noble parts of Europe.

The remedy he proposed was a set of national councils, one in France and one in Germany, to which the Catholic princes would invite delegates from the Protestant states. The agenda was to be strictly limited. The delegates would consider practical terms for the reunion of the churches, but would not be permitted to debate points of doctrine. On doctrine indeed there was to be no concession. The Holy See on the other hand would have to abandon claims to former church property, asking only for the restoration of revenues sufficient to support the Catholic cult. Besides, Protestant ministers should be promised a livelihood for themselves and their families, while apostate clergy should be assured of amnesty and dispensation from their vows. By this means “all may see that, the Catholic faith excepted, Holy Church is ready to expend generously revenues and other things which will be judged necessary....” At the very least the project ought to be applied to the Protestant Swiss, with the cooperation of the king of Spain, the emperor, the king of France, the duke of Savoy, and the Catholic cantons.

Francis de Sales himself realized that the political moment was unfavorable to his plan. The Catholic princes were only nominally at peace with each other, and when he sent his memorandum to a person of rank in Rome, he asked that the authorship be kept secret. Nevertheless he did not believe the idea to be impossible: "This grace may be had from God our Lord by prayer, and the sacred hand of the Holy Father working sincerely for it, could bring to pass this miracle, as formerly crusades and other warlike and dangerous enterprises were organized, while this would be altogether peaceful and without peril."

It was clearly not the plan of a political realist. Where the Council of Trent had failed, national councils two generations later would hardly do better, even supposing they could ever be gathered at all. Nor was Francis de Sales realistic in religious terms. He completely ignored the doctrinal differences that had been debated for so long and with so much bitterness, not only between Catholics and Protestants, but among the Protestant denominations themselves. As far as he was concerned, the Protestant heresy was motivated by the sin of pride, compounded with other sins, and people adhered to it out of ignorance, obstinacy, and material and political interest. Those were only a further proof of the falseness of their teachings. Reunion must come on Catholic terms alone, and here as in the case of domestic missions, the state must cooperate with the Church.

We can hardly reproach Saint Francis de Sales for having held these views. He lived in his time, not in ours. When he took Orders, in 1593, Calvin had been dead less than thirty years, and Luther less than fifty. The lines of demarcation between the Protestant denominations themselves were barely hardening, while the Catholic Church was caught up in a wave of renewal. The Reformation, did not necessarily look like an irreversible process. After Trent moreover, doctrinal concessions to Protestants would have been difficult if not impossible to consider seriously. The Catholic Church had taken up spiritual battle stations; it was not the psychological moment for the exploration of common ground and a negotiated peace. Most Protestants for their part felt much the same way, expecting not only to maintain themselves but also to expand. Wars were still going to be fought, whose origins might not lie altogether in religious motivation, but whose outcome would certainly affect religious settlements.

In this fluid situation, it is important to note that neither side thought a separation of church and state either possible or desirable. Anabaptists believed in such a separation, but their influence was negative if anything. In France as a measure of self-preservation, the *Politiques* adopted a secular theory of political authority, yet even they remained a minority. On the whole Protestants as well as Catholics continued to adhere to the medieval view that political authority rested on religious sanction, and that princes must defend the church. Diversity of religion within one state seemed unnatural, often dangerous. Religious minorities, however they might protest the contrary, were apt to have ties with hostile foreign states; this was true, for example, of the Huguenots in France and the Catholics in England. Liberty of conscience, not to mention freedom of public worship, had yet to establish themselves as other than emergency measures. Francis de Sales was acting quite normally in allowing the state an active part in what he regarded as the struggle against heresy.

Had he done only what was normal for his time, he would have been a champion of the Catholic Reformation, but would scarcely be thought of in connection with modern Ecumenism. He did

do more however, or rather, he did things differently. Religious controversy was not his main interest; he reserved first place for the teaching of charity and the devout life to Catholics and Protestants alike.

Francis de Sales shocked some of his contemporaries, including some of his fellow missionaries, by his gentle and considerate conduct with the Calvinists he met. They protested that he did not even preach as was proper, sternly and vehemently, when addressing heretics. His sermons from the Chablais mission have not come down to us, but he supplemented them with a series of pamphlets designed to “set forth...some principal proofs of the Catholic faith, which show that all those are in error who remain separated from the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Catholic.” Most of them were collected and published after his death under the title of *Controversies*. They were not controversies in then accepted usage of the term. For one thing, their tone was courteous and easy, very different from the style of invective customary in such pieces. And they carried no scholarly apparatus of doctrinal debate: what Francis de Sales offered were homilies, written in the vernacular and accessible to a literate general public. They must have provoked discussion, although their effectiveness is impossible to calculate by the number of converts. The pamphlets had a wide distribution, but those Protestants who came to abjure did not give references for their change of mind.

After the *Controversies*, Francis de Sales wrote only two more pieces against Protestantism as such: the *Defense of the Standard of the Holy Cross*, which replied to a Genevan minister’s attack against veneration of the image of the cross; and the first book of the *Codex Fabrianus*, his friend Senator Antoine Favre’s commentary on the laws of Savoy. This first book, entitled “Of the sovereign Trinity and Catholic faith: that dangers of Protestant belief to the safety of the state. Neither of the two works had a large circulation, and his reputation did not rest on that.

The book which made Francis de Sales famous in his own time was the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which contained the essence of his method for converting either Protestants to Catholicism or Catholics to religious practice. He addressed himself to those who “do not wish so much as to think of undertaking the devout life, being of the opinion that amid the press of worldly affairs.” He proceeded to show them their mistake, by demonstrating that every calling offers opportunities for the exercise of devotion. As queen of the virtues, devotion could properly accompany any profession or vocation, only it “must be practiced differently by the gentleman, the artisan, the valet, the prince, the widow, the girl, the wife; and not only that, but the practice of devotion must be proportioned to the strength, the circumstances and the duties of each person.” The emphasis must be on interior rather than exterior piety, and every action, however apparently indifferent, referred to the love and service of God. The result would be a life made whole, and outward religious observance made meaningful by inward participation.

Judging by the editions, reprints and translations which appeared in Francis de Sales’ own lifetime, the attraction of the book was remarkable. Not only Catholics felt it. Francis de Sales himself liked to point out the number of Protestants who had been converted after reading it. One of the greatest strengths of the Reformation was that it made lay life religiously respectable and now this challenge had been met. The Reformation had also drawn ammunition from perfunctory observance and laxity of morals. The correction of these faults, Francis de Sales hoped, would induce many Protestants to return.

He was said to have a special gift for the conversion of individual souls. If this was so, it was because he undertook to convert hearts rather than minds. Moralist rather than argumentative theologian, he could say: "Whoever preaches with love, preaches sufficiently against the heretics, even though he utters not a word of dispute against them."

Were he to speak today, he would probably not use the word "heretics," nor would he face the same problem. He would be flexible enough, however, to adjust to present needs. An innovator in his own day, he played a major part in the renewal of spiritual life among seventeenth century Catholics. Another renewal is now at issue, and other answers must be found. But charity remains, and for Saint Francis de Sales charity was the tie which binds together all human society.

The same charity which produces acts of the love of God, produces in like manner those of love for our fellow man: and just as Jacob saw one ladder touching heaven and earth, serving the angels to descend as well as to ascent, we know also that the same love extends to cherish God and our fellow man, raising us to the union of our spirits with God and leading us back to the loving society of our fellow men.
