

THE SERMONS OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

I am very happy to be here, and proud too, but afraid at the same time, because of my English and my accent; I *do not* teach English but French, and French of the 16th and 17th centuries. So please excuse me.

First of all, I want to say all my thanks to everyone who invited me: to Father Marceau who tried also to correct my English and to the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, from Stella Niagara and from France, who helped us, Father Jean Marie Le Maire and me, to travel, especially Father Joseph Power and Father Henri L'Honoré who founded 26 years ago the "Journées salésiennes", similar to the "Salesian Days" which have existed in the U.S. for seven years now.

When I was invited to give a paper for this sixteenth Conference of PMR, I thought without humility perhaps, that all that I discovered and wrote for my Doctorate in France, about the sermons of St. Francis de Sales, was one of the last, maybe the last (at least in Europe) academic work about the bishop. So I decided that this paper will have two parts: the first one will try to sum up what I discovered and wrote in my nearly 3,000 pages of work; the second part very much shorter will bring out some of the main points and their consequences.

I. The sermons of St. Francis de Sales:¹

Three thousand pages look enormous, and it is. In fact, it is the work of all my life since I began with Francis de Sales, when, as a student at the Sorbonne,

I had to write a very little thesis about "St. Francis de Sales and Italy", for the fourth level of my studies...40 years ago exactly last November. I later never really left Francis de Sales while I was teaching at the *lycée* level. When I thought about going to the university as a teacher I chose to study the sermons; nothing was really researched in that area; that is the reason why my work is such an enormous one. When I finished, I decided to include in this work, because I am no longer a young woman, everything I could; for instance, unpublished texts of St. Francis that I was so lucky to find with the help of my dear friend, Sr. Mary Patricia Burns from Rochester, NY, who is archivist at the monastery of the Visitation in Annecy, France, and just now, publishing the letters of St. Jeanne de Chantal. Of course, I could not give all the texts of St. Francis that I found (they are about 15), but I added some attributed to him, which can be read in manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and never really deeply explored. I also added some other texts of the Salesian spiritual family, unpublished and published too, and my own files, established during my research, for words and sentences, so that they can be used and corrected by future researchers.

So the work itself is shorter than it looks...only 2,000 pages maybe, and not always perfect in the microfilmed pages.

Just now, it is going to be published and there will be four books: I) texts and publication history of the sermons with the unpublished ones; II) rhetorical art of Francis de Sales in history and in his time; III) theology of the Incarnation and the Visitation in the sermons (that is the most important aspect that I was so happy to discover); IV) literature and spirituality.

At the moment, the work is only microfilmed, as I said, and there is since a few days, a copy at the De Sales Resource Center as there is one in every French university. Annexed documents I spoke about before, will remain microfilmed, as far as I can see.

As I said, the sermons of Francis de Sales have never been studied for themselves since we have a near perfect edition, due to the Annecy Visitation.² The works on Francis de Sales which mention them, only give an insufficient idea of them. Some discredit them, while during his life their author attracted large crowds and undoubtedly his preaching influenced his contemporaries as well as many who lived after him. The renewal of rhetorical studies and oratory under the reigns of Henri IV and Louis XIII³ allow us to consider their *ensemble* as one of the monuments that one can, without any exaggeration compare with the powerful synthesis that constitute the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *The Treatise on the Love of God*. These sermons serve as the analysis and the vulgarization of the thought of St. Francis de Sales such as we read it in these two works: for the same reason we read the innumerable and celebrated letters which have been left to us by this bishop. To these letters, however, he adds in the sermons an ecclesial and communitarian dimension, and they show how completely he was a part of the preaching of that period. This dimension owed a great deal to the 16th century at the same time that it was preparing for all the 17th century.

Several problems arise concerning these sermons. The first part of the work shows that at the center of these texts, the "collected" ones have particularly to be considered as having the same importance and the same value as the originals,⁴ and, furthermore, the

advantage of seeming to hear the very voice of Francis de Sales himself. Next, it was necessary to show that the history of the edition, tumultuous as it was, was best realized most perfectly in the "Annecy edition". It is well to recall that for some of the original sermons, we have a real autograph written all along from the hand of Francis de Sales, but that, very quickly, he did not write the whole sermon anymore, but some lines, often in Latin that he took with him to the pulpit; so that we know perfectly a sermon when we have at the same time the "autograph" and the collected sermons which happens sometimes. But it happened particularly that François de Sales used pieces of the same original several times, mixing everything. He took ideas from a kind of file he began to prepare very early in his life and which we have partly (that is the Manuscript from Turin).

He never thought of publishing his sermons and they were copied and copied by the Sisters of the Visitation and sent from one convent to another, until 1642 particularly. La Mère de Chantal (and others) decided at that time to put some order for an edition and finally the disorder became terrible, with many cuts and manuscripts lost, in spite of what the Mother wanted and tried to do. It remained more or less the same until the Annecy edition (about 1896-1898 for the Sermons).

The second part of my work wants to outline, in as much detail as possible, the background in its extreme variety from which is drawn Salesian predication. One cannot measure the originality of this preaching nor its fascinating place in its period without doing a historical panorama; and even this does not reveal the enormity of possible perspectives: too long or too short, according to the way one reads it, and

incessantly surpassed by a progressing research, this part on the oratorical art and the intellectual Salesian world, is intended to be the foundation of the work which will permit us to judge the true value of the theoretical texts of Francis de Sales, and in particular that of the *Lettre à Monseigneur Frémyot* (1604). This enables us to study other authors, theoreticians or preachers, of whom we shall cite here only one: Louis de Grenade.

The content of the sermons of Francis de Sales, which extends from 1593 to 1622, that is, from the moment when he is still only Provost of the cathedral of St. Peter in Geneva in exile at Annecy, to when, three days after Christmas, he is going to die, is as the story of his responsible and pastoral life. The parts which follow, and which are essential to the work, study the sermons in showing that it is there, where a personal and coherent theological thought presented in the *Introduction* and in the *Treatise* is found; constantly juxtaposed with the sermons, these two works authenticate them, (if they need it).

The texts are studied from several points of view. Of course, successively envisaged in the work, these points of view for all practical purposes are contemporary and concomitant in the sermons, and, thus the same passage can be analyzed several times in a different way. The circular process of Salesian reasoning is clearly evident, and the notion of time as well, by the use of the four senses of medieval exegesis, accents this aspect. To all this is added that all pedagogy tends to be repetitive, and pedagogy is one of the major concerns of the bishop, as we said already.

However, the work presents separately the theological world of Francis de Sales and the painting, if the word is appropriate here, of how he sees God

and man (third and fourth parts of the work). This theological reading of creation, of the world, the universe, the cosmos (Francis de Sales is using these four words), this reflection on God, are the only way for grasping the range of Salesian spirituality and understanding, as well that it is an abuse to reduce the bishop to being only a "spiritual author".

Of course, however, this spirituality is studied in the work I wrote in relation to some fundamental subjects for the thought of Francis de Sales and essential to the sermons (though there would be many others to examine). Here we have limited ourselves to Mary the Virgin, to the mystery of the Visitation and to the notion of happiness.

One realizes very soon, in spite of current opinion, that Francis de Sales is a "Platonist" only in the atmosphere of his time, and that Neoplatonism for him is more a manner of writing, born of his culture (which has many other sources), than a philosophical system drawn toward theology. Even though he did not know well the Hebrew language, the style of Hebrew, and thus biblical thought, is essential to the world in which he lives. He has never forgotten his formative years in Paris where this intellectual world is revealed to him by the teaching of his professors, particularly those at the Collège de Clermont, and especially of Génébrard for the *Song of Songs*. It is to this formative period that he is indebted for having overcome the torments of the problem of predestination by the contemplation of the trinitarian God, who is the plenitude of revelation; this contemplation, constantly lived, will lead his life in the ways of the mystery of the Visitation and of peace of soul through abandon.

From there come the essential points of his theological matter: François de Sales is a follower of

Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria, Andrew of Crete, and Irenaeus of Lyons (and others); and especially Duns Scotus for whom the Incarnation is not the consequence of original sin; God, who is love, is, as a result of that love, "movement"; in the celebrated Platonic equivalent established between Just, True, Beautiful, Good, without neglecting any of these aspects, the bishop accents goodness which "of itself and by itself. . . tends toward communication".⁵ The beginning of the *Treatise* (which as we know was composed after the body of the work and to which François de Sales was profoundly attached, if one reads carefully the preface of his work), says it insistently; the same insistence, still more strongly indicated, is found in the sermons. Man, the image ("icone" of God), according to *Genesis* (1,26) cannot attain his true dimension except in realizing in himself, within his own limits, the infinitely divine image, thus manifesting that he himself is also "movement", and "universe" movement, that is, "unique with diversity and diverse with unity".⁶

Theology and spirituality as well as the practice of oratorical art, are going to agree that the fundamental structure of man accomplishing in himself the new Paulinian man, that of the Transfiguration, is the mystery of the Visitation, when Easter is lived to its fullness, in the present instant. This reading of the mystery of the Visitation, model of the "hidden life", gives complete unity to the thought and Salesian style, and is for the bishop the thread that unites the mysteries of faith with them. Thus, the Incarnation is "visitation" of man by God, as well as Passion-Resurrection, and of course, as is the Transfiguration, Pentecost and the life of the Church as that of each. The Visitation which only exists reciprocally, of man by God, of God by man (prayer, "abandon", "spiritual

combat"...bear the evident signs of it and the great saints, Mary, Joseph, Madeline, Louis, king of France, are its incarnate manifestations). The exchange which is the mystery of the Visitation shows how the love of God and the love of neighbor, comparable but not identical, cannot function without each other.⁷

And the style, once again, is dominated by an "incarnate" aspect where the images, the pictures, metaphors, etc. are marked by a constant figure of exchange, of insistent chiasmus, figure as present in the written works as in oral ones, and of which the best example is the "unidirectional universe" ("unique avec diversité et divers avec unité") cited above. The word and the writing are also in themselves "visitation". This, because in itself the Trinity, the Triune, the unique God is "visitation".

This is the outline of the whole work I wrote. The demonstration has been conducted in depending often on long and detailed analyses of little known texts, and even unknown others, and paralleling a contemporary scholar, Father Jean Boucher. Therefore, no one, except Mother de Chantal, who is not a disciple, a Philothea, nor "a master", but veritably a soul-sister, sees and describes the world as does François de Sales.⁸

Through this reading of the mystery of the Visitation, in the effervescence which this period knew in regards to oratorical art, the voice of François de Sales and his word possess a unique totality. To live and to speak the Visitation is to live and to speak Easter in the light of the actual mystery of Christ, the Transfiguration at work in the world and in time. It is the realization, ecclesial as individual, of the Incarnation, when God is made man in order that man may be

God.⁹ Theology, spirituality and literature are thus fundamentally united in the sermons.

II. The main lines and some of their consequences and conclusions:

When we read this way the sermons, we can answer two questions about Francis de Sales. Yes, he has a system, a logic around which his mind and life have found their unity, and the key to them is the mystery of the Visitation. Francis de Sales has not only written splendid books, very often difficult, and always full of ideas he found in others. As far as I can see, the first who tried successfully to find the Salesian unity, was Father André Brix, osfs; he died last year. From him I learned everything while I was working for my Doctorate. He was the first to demonstrate that everything in Francis de Sales' world, has not only an interest as an analysis (which has been made many times and wonderfully on many points before André Brix) but as a synthesis and a mystical one, built around a meditation of the *Song of Songs*. Alas, Father Brix has not enough time to write,¹⁰ but he spoke; as St. Francis de Sales he never said, "No", when someone called him; and as he was the best Salesian specialist in the world, I am proud he was kind of a master for me.

Studying the sermons according to his idea, because they are sermons about the Visitation,¹¹ I discovered as I said, the place of the mystery and, for instance, why, when the Bishop had some difficulties with the new Order (to which he had given the name of the mystery of the Visitation), he finally wished apparently only some details to remain, and especially the name. Not a detail, we see now. And he said that

the Sisters could never end in discovering new points in "their" mystery.

Numerous are the consequences!

I shall take only a few of them. I said, contrary to the idea we read everywhere, that he is not a real Platonist, or even Neoplatonist, even with St. Augustine and Ficino. We have to believe him; the first part of the sermon for the Visitation in 1622¹² is nearly all against the Platonist dichotomy; the senses, the body, pleasure and happiness (not only happiness without our body, I insist), have a place, and a large one, in life; and even, we *have* to be happy; of course, not against God, but even not against what God made us. Our soul is not exiled in our body. The real way for a man to exist is, like in the biblical idea of man to be alive, body and soul inseparable; Resurrection is logical, death, even if we know it by experience, is illogical.¹³ And in fact, even in Neoplatonism, and Ronsard could be a good example, to share body and soul is often like a blind alley; and really, for Francis de Sales it is a kind of death.

So, even the story of the birth of Love, taken from the *Symposium* of Plato¹⁴, in the *Treatise on the Love of God* is not Platonist. And to speak theologically, if God - Trinity is movement in Himself,¹⁵ Incarnation is the perfection of this movement, and Visitation the way for man to realize Incarnation. But we cannot welcome God in us so that we become really God's image, "semblance" says Francis de Sales, if we are not empty of false gods. So emptiness which is love in Plato, and emptiness which is love in the Bible and Francis de Sales are all different. The first vanishes, says Plato, when it has what it wants. For the Bible, the more man is empty, the more God is going to fill him. This emptiness, without any end, says Francis de Sales, is

the poverty of the first Beatitude in the Gospel. And Christ, perfectly God and man - is perfect poverty of the first Beatitude in the Gospel. And Christ, perfectly God and man - is perfect poverty as the perfect God. What else are the lovers of the *Song of Songs* if not poor? And what else the *Song of Songs* if not a Visitation, too?

No one is a Platonist only because he speaks about beauty and harmony.

We could say exactly the same things about sin, Incarnation and Redemption. The Augustinian "Felix culpa" is not the Scotist "God made Himself a man so that man became God".¹⁶ Incarnation has not the meaning usually given to St. Paul's humiliation.¹⁷ It is glorification through *metanoia*. Of course, St. Francis de Sales loves St. Augustine (for his lyricism, his mystical love of Christ, his sermons that he knows so well, his warmth, for instance), but not for his Platonism and his idea of sin, liberty and Predestination. François de Sales said it and wrote it.¹⁸

He was very young when he wrote that he was "begging his pardon" to St. Augustine (and St. Thomas as well). But he never changed his mind.

Let me say, in conclusion, that in Francis de Sales, the mystery of the Visitation is how to live already risen from the dead, and already in the world of the Transfiguration, when Creation is not anymore "groaning in one great act of giving birth".¹⁹

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NOTES

1. Bordes, Helene. *Les Sermons de François de Sales*. Doctorat d'Etat, 1989, Université de Metz (France). Microfilmed (10 files). This form is yet a kind of draft and not the exactly definitive one.
2. *Oeuvres...de François de Sales*, Annecy...1892-1964; 27 vol. Can be found at the Monastery of the Visitation, 74000-An-necy.
3. Fumaroli, Marc. *L'Age de l'éloquence*, Genève, 1980 (Pro-fessor at the Collège de France)

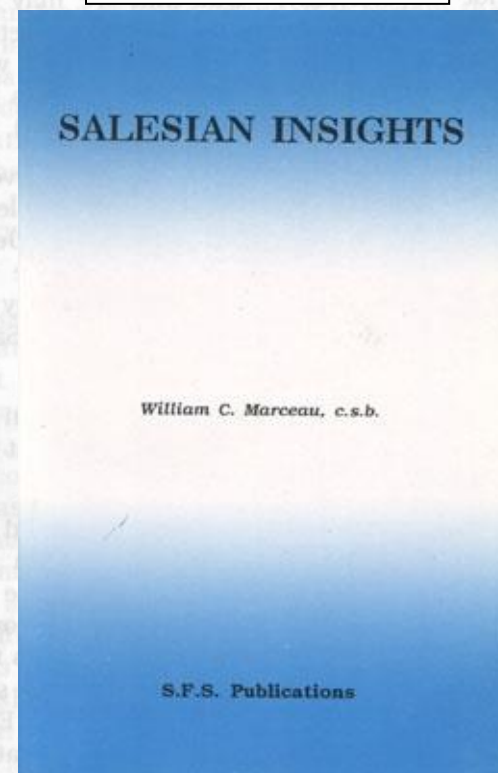
Bayley, Peter. *French Pulpit Oratory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980 (Professor at Caius College, Cambridge), U.K.

Tietz, Manfred. "Die Predigt bei Saint François de Sales" and "Literarische Untersuchungen zur Predigt praxis bei Saint François de Sales". *Jahrbuch 1973* and *Jahrbuch 1974 für salesianische Studien*, Eichstätt, Bayern, France - Sales Verlag 1974 & 1975 (Publications of the OSFS). (Professor at the University of Bochum, Germany).
4. We know better and better, since the last work about rhetori-cal art in the 16th and 17th centuries (cf., above) what those times called "written" : pieces collected by the listeners and then written by them are exactly considered as pieces written by the author. We have many proofs of it and, about St. Fr. de Sales, we are perfectly sure that the Sisters of the Visitation would never have changed anything of his. We know too that Fr. de Sales spoke slowly, with a Savoyard accent, repeating again and again some ideas with very little differences. So we are sure that in the training of memory at this time, we really read Fr. De Sales speaking (cf., Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*. She was a teacher at London University. U.K.
5. *The Love of God*: Book II, chap. 4.
6. *Idem*. Book II, chap. 2.
7. This is the main line of my work and what I propose as a subject for the last "Journées salésiennes" at Annecy last July, *Dieu a visité son peuple* ; I was as one on the committee and President of RES, in charge of a collection of the main texts of Fr. de Sales about the Incarnation and Visitation, and of the presentation of the problem. During the session,

- spoke particularly Fr. Marceau (*L'Incarnation d'après st Iréné de Lyon*) and Fr. J. M. Le Maire (*Une visitation de Fr. de Sales : l'évêque de Genève et la Mère Angélique Arnauld*). So rich, important and interesting is the problem that we shall continue this subject next year, July, 1992.
8. Cf., Wendy M. Wright. *Bond of Perfection*, Jeanne de Chantal & Francis de Sales, New York, Mohawk, Paulist Press, 1985.
 9. *Love of God*: Book X, Chap. 2. (This is one of the chapters about God as movement).
 10. However, cf. Brix, André, *François de Sales commente le "Cantique des cantiques"* (place and date unavailable. Can be found at OSFS 118, avenue Pierre Dumond 69290, Craponne, (France) where all the most important texts in which St. François speaks of the *Song of songs* are collected and presented; so that André Brix could show how coherent are the thought and reasoning of SFS from the beginning of the work to the last sermon the bishop pronounced three days before his death, Christmas, 1622 at midnight Mass (He died on the 28th.)
 11. The mystery is, of course, in all the works, but not too clearly and particularly as in the sermons. So one can see it in *The Devout Life* and *The Love of God* after having read the sermons.
 12. Annecy edition, x, p. 61 s.
 13. Cf., Sermon for St. Brigitte of Scotland. Annecy Edition, X, p. 18 s. *Love of God*, Book I, chap. 12 (for the portrait of man like a Temple. Same ideas in sermons: Palm Sunday 1615, Annecy Edition, IX, . 67-68). Many other examples. A Student at Limoges, C. Papeix, is writing her doctorate on *Le Plaisir et le bonheur dans "L'Introduction à la vie dévote" et "Le Traité de l'Amour de Dieu" de saint François de Sales*. Another, G. Pochat wrote her own on *François de Sales et la pauvreté*. Paris, Ed's. SOS, Paris, 1988.
 14. *Love of God*, Book VI, chap. 15.
 15. Cf., all the beginning of *The Love of God*. Cf., specially the first sermon ever written (it is really written and contains all of F. de Sales notions, all that he will say during his life). Annecy, VIII, p. 1-30. For Pentecost, 1593.

16. *Love of God*, Book X, chap. 17. Innumerable forms of examples in the sermons.
17. Philippians, II, 6-11.
18. Annecy, XXII, p. 64-67. Most probably written in 1591.
19. Romans, VIII, 22.

article by HELENE BORDES in



Bangalore, India - 1999