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“HIS FACE WAS ALL GENTLENESS AND PEACE WHEN HE LOOKED AT YOU”: ENCOUNTERING FRANCIS DE SALES THE PREACHER

It would be difficult to exaggerate the long-term significance and impact of the meeting for the first time of Francis de Sales, the 37-year-old Savoyard prince bishop of Geneva resident at Annecy, and Jane Frances Frémyot Baroness de Chantal, the 32-year-old Burgundian widow of three years with four small children, on Friday, 5 March 1604. It has been observed that without that encounter and the subsequent friendship between Francis and Jane that flowered, perhaps there would not be the Salesian charism as we know it, the Visitation Order and other institutes and communities, such as the De Sales Oblates, Oblate Sisters, Salesians of Don Bosco, and Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales, would not have been founded, and Francis may not have been canonized a saint and declared a doctor of the Church.¹

The initial encounter of Francis and Jane took place in the Sainte-Chapelle in Dijon, the ancient city of the dukes of Burgundy. Lent and Advent were the two most important preaching seasons of the year, and in the major cities of Europe, it was the custom to invite a preacher of renown to spend the duration of these seasons, preaching at least three times a week, if not daily or in some cases several times a day. Francis had been invited to preach the Lenten season of 1604 in Dijon.

Francis's sermons were greatly anticipated by the populace of Dijon, and on that 5 March, Jane was among the crowd surging into the Sainte-Chapelle to hear the bishop. Jane had



Figure 1. St. Francis de Sales Preaching in Dijon on 5 March 1604 (detail). 1941-52. Stained-glass window by Charles Plessard and Francis Chigot, Limoges, France. Basilica of St. Francis de Sales, Annecy.

her chair placed opposite the pulpit. When Francis mounted the pulpit to begin his sermon, Jane recognized him as the figure she had seen in her vision in the meadow on the estate of Bourbilly where she had lived with her husband. For his part, Francis took note of the young widow's presence and close attention to his sermon, later questioning his host, André Frémyot, the archbishop of Bourges and Jane's brother, about this woman. André was pleased to introduce her as his sister.²

A Pastoral Bishop Breaking Open God's Word

What was it like to encounter Francis de Sales? Jane first encountered Francis not as a spiritual director, but as a pastoral bishop faithfully carrying out his primary episcopal responsibility of breaking open the Word of God. In fact, this was the way that many people first encountered Francis, and Francis's exercise of spiritual direction was often the continuation of the “heart to heart” dialogue that began in his preaching.

The testimony offered at the processes for Francis's canonization by Jane and others (especially St. Vincent de Paul [1581-1660], and Claude Favre de Vaugelas [1585-1650], the renowned grammarian and influential member of the Académie Française) open a window onto what encounter with our saint as

preacher must have been like for his contemporaries. The principal hallmarks of Salesian spirituality are salient in Francis's ministry of preaching, including the primacy of the heart, the importance of adaptability, the indispensability of human relationships, and the practice of the relational virtues of humility and gentleness (see "The Salesian Charism and the Second Vatican Council," *ICSS Newsletter*, No. 13 [Dec. 2003-Jan. 2004]: 1-3).

Francis was equally at ease preaching to a small flock or a large congregation, to his Visitation sisters or the court. Sometimes the number of people who turned out to hear him was so great that he had to wade through the crowd to get to the pulpit. In Paris in 1618, the crowd who came to hear him preach in the church of the Oratorians on the feast of St. Martin of Tours was so immense that Francis could not make his way into the building at all, and was forced to reach the pulpit from outside by means of a ladder to the nearest window.

With his characteristic personal balance, Francis always kept such events in proper perspective. For example, Jane recounts: "One day when he came back after preaching to a large and distinguished congregation, I asked him whether he was satisfied with his sermon. 'No,' he said, without the least concern for the world's esteem, 'but does it really matter?'" (TSC, 85). Jane later adds, "he was not out to be a great preacher, though in fact he was one, and recognized as such by universal opinion, yet without laying any claim to this reputation" (TSC, 104).

A Fresh and Engaging Manner of Preaching

Protestantism had won its success primarily through preaching. Many people in Francis's diocese were attracted to Calvinism by their longing for a deeper religious life that they were not finding in Catholicism. A major way that Francis sought to counteract Calvinism's attraction was to reclaim the pulpit by developing a riveting and novel form of preaching that aimed to win the hearts of his listeners, stirring them to conversion and the practice of virtue, rather than simply to convince or impress them with erudition. His sermons "focused on the beauty of the Catholic faith in all its rich symmetry, rather than upon negative characterizations or even disputed doctrinal questions."¹⁹ Francis's ministry of the Word also served "to inspire all his priests to give of their best" (TSC, 141).

"What people most admired in [Francis's] preaching was his very easy and clear way" of explaining Sacred Scripture and "the

most abstruse mysteries of our holy faith" (TSC, 104) so "that his listeners found it easy and pleasant to follow him" (VdEP, 82). Vaugelas offers the most ample testimony on this point:

I have never known a preacher who delighted and touched me as deeply as he did. I experienced an extraordinary pleasure in listening to him. To begin with, he had as his object the only real purpose of the preacher—the conversion of souls—towards which he labored rather by way of the love of God than by the fear of hell. . . . [T]he whole of his sermon was so judicious, so well arranged, that—although I have a very poor memory—it would have been easy for me to remember with a minimum of effort all that he had said. His language was clear, vigorous, persuasive. . . . Not only that: his mind abounded with beautiful thoughts. So fertile was he in his ideas, that many great and well-read people have confessed that they never listened to his preaching without hearing much that was quite new to them, and which they had never before read in any book or heard from any speaker (CFdV, 14-15).

So effective was Francis's preaching that, during his missionary days in the Chablais, the local newspaper warned its readers to avoid encountering this dangerous man adept in the arts of black magic who cast a spell over his listeners by his bewitching language. During that Lent of 1604 in Dijon, Francis "won all hearts" (TSC, 104). At his departure a large crowd gathered to bid him farewell, and some shouted that "he was a great thief because he was stealing away every heart in Dijon; as indeed he did, for he found a place deep in all their affections" (TSC, 148).



Figure 2. St. Francis de Sales Preaching in Chambéry on Good Friday, 24 March 1606. Lithograph, 19th-century France.

"Heart speaks to heart": Recovering the Biblical Model of Communication

"Our words must be set aflame, not by shouts and unrestrained gestures, but by inward affection. Say what you will, lips speak but to ears, heart speaks to heart" (*Oeuvres*, 12:321). Thus Francis writes in his famous letter of 5 October 1604 to his younger colleague in the episcopacy, André Frémyot, on the ministry of preaching.

Francis's understanding of the heart is rooted in the Bible (see *ICSS Newsletter*, No. 13 [Dec. 2003-Jan. 2004]: 2). So too is his emphasis on the heart's pivotal role in human communication, particularly preaching. Francis's theology of preaching as "heart speaking to heart" is based on the Biblical

conviction that the spoken word has the unique ability to communicate the profound inner core of the speaker to the innermost depths of the listener's being.⁴ In preaching, Francis "never used a word that did not serve its purpose. . . . Most of all did he excel in his selection of words, of which he made so exquisite a choice that it rendered him slow and deliberate in his delivery" (CFdV, 14). Francis recommended that preaching be "a little slow" and deliberate, "to avoid a kind of curt and brusque way that diverts the eyes rather than pierces the heart" (*Oeuvres*, 12:322).

Our saint was acutely aware of the power of the spoken word, for he confessed to Vincent de Paul that he "could sense when someone was inwardly moved by his preaching. 'For I noticed,' he said, 'that something went out from me, not through any inspiration of mine . . . but uttered by me through divine impulse'" (VdP, 82). In the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis likens the spoken word to a dart that enters the body through the ear and penetrates the heart (Pt. 3, ch. 27). According to Francis, thought is breathed forth by the heart to the tongue that utters the word that is breathed in by the ear and goes straight to the heart (*Introduction*, Pt. 3, ch. 21). Vincent reports that Francis's words inflamed his listeners "like burning darts" (VdP, 82) that enkindled their hearts with "a powerful flame of spiritual devotion" (VdP, 85).

Adaptability to Circumstances and People in Their Particularity

In day-to-day interaction with people, Francis was at ease with and "most approachable and very easy of access to anyone who wanted to talk to him" (TSC, 138). Simply put, he loved people. This attention to and care for people in their particularity was also characteristic of Francis's preaching, which was never generalized or abstract, but adapted to the concrete needs of the listeners seated before him. "He displayed admirable judgment in his exact observance of the actual circumstance, whether of place, time or particular audience" (CFdV, 45). This manner of preaching made each individual feel that he/she was personally being addressed, and elicited a response of warm affection and trust from all (TSC, 105).

Francis spent time getting to know the people to whom he was preaching. During that Lent of 1604, he was not only a frequent guest in the homes of the first families of Dijon, but also, as Jane testifies, "he was at home to anyone who wanted to see him, he heard very many confessions, gave many talks, taught people the ways of the life of the spirit, visited hospitals, prisoners and the sick. I myself witnessed all this when he was at Dijon" (TSC, 105). Francis's "way of life was [deemed] as effective a sermon as his doctrine" (TSC, 104).

A Living Image of the Son of God

The overwhelming impression that Francis made on those who encountered him, whether in the pulpit or on the street, was that "his face was all gentleness and peace when he looked at you" (TSC, 49). Francis's gentleness made tangible his generous vision of divine love and grace, and contrasts dramatically with the severity of Calvinism and its doctrine of

predestination. It was precisely this attribute of Francis that led Vincent de Paul to exclaim: "How good You are, O God, my God, how good You are, since indeed in my Lord Francis de Sales, your creature, there is such great gentleness!" (VdP, 91). Indeed, it was widely held by Francis's contemporaries that he revealed what our Lord must have been like in His interaction with people, that he "reflected the Son of God as a living image," and "in seeing him they seemed to see our Lord on earth."⁵

A Picture Worth a Thousand Words

It is a truism that a picture is worth a thousand words. This reflection began with the image of Francis preaching on 5 March 1604 in Dijon (Figure 1). We conclude by focusing on another image of Francis preaching (Figure 2). While Francis was preaching in the church of St. Dominic in Chambéry, the centuries-old capital of his native Savoy (before the capital was transferred to Turin in 1563), on Good Friday, 24 March 1606, the congregation saw the seven-foot 13th-century Crucifix facing Francis project rays of light that enveloped him.

Unlike that other great lover of the cross of Christ, his patron saint Francis of Assisi who received the stigmata in the rustic solitude of Mount Alvernia, Francis de Sales is illuminated by the crucified Savior in the midst of an urban parish church filled to capacity, as he faithfully carries out his primary responsibility as a bishop to preach the Word of God. Concurrently Francis reflects this illumination to his hearers by his ministry of the Word, which, as Francis counseled André Frémyot, is, above all, "the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19; *Oeuvres*, 12:325). Finally, this episode would have confirmed the perception by his contemporaries that, by his gentleness, Francis was a living image of the Son of God on earth. ☞ JFC

REFERENCES

The quotation in the title is from *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, ed. and trans. with an introduction by E. Stopp (London: Faber and Faber/Hyattsville, Md.: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), 49, hereafter TSC. References to the testimony of St. Vincent de Paul are to his *Correspondence, Conferences, Documents III*, newly trans., ed., and annotated by Marie Poole et al., vol. XIIIa (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 80-96, hereafter VdP, and to that of Claude Favre de Vaugelas are to V. Kerns, "Francis de Sales in the Pulpit," *Salesian Studies*, 5, no. 4 (Autumn 1968):9-20, esp. 14-15, hereafter CFdV.

1. This topic will be the focus of the essay "The Flowering of a Friendship," to appear in the ICSS volume of collected essays *Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition*.
2. A more detailed account of this episode may be found in W. M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal & François de Sales*, new enhanced ed. (Stella Niagara, NY: De Sales Resource Center, 2001), 33-36.
3. W. M. Wright, *Seeking God's Will Together: Discernment in the Salesian World of Hearts* (Wilmington, De.: Wilmington-Philadelphia Province, Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, 2003), 5.
4. See W. J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), 12-14, 176-91.
5. Jane de Chantal, letter of Dec. 1623 to Dom Jean de Saint François, in TSC, 165-72, at 172.