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THE 400TH ANNIVERSARY OF ST. FRANCIS DE SALES'S LETTER ON PREACHING TO ANDRÉ FRÉMYOT

As is well known, 5 March 2004 marked the fourth centenary of the first meeting of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane Frances de Chantal. Another, perhaps less noted, anniversary also occurred in 2004: the 400th anniversary of the letter on the ministry of the Word that Francis wrote to Jane's younger brother André Frémyot (1573-1641), who had recently become archbishop of Bourges.¹ The last issue of our *ICSS Newsletter* (No. 14) focused on the former anniversary; this issue will consider the latter, which was another outcome of the same providential circumstances that led to the initial encounter of Francis and Jane in that Lent of 1604 in Dijon. The focus of this reflection will be not so much the content of this immensely important letter, but the relational context out of which it developed. An effort will be made especially to give a human face to this letter's recipient.



Figure 1. André Frémyot (1573-1641), archbishop of Bourges. Engraving by Baltazar Moncornet, 17th c.

A Potential Enemy Becomes a Friend

In the major cities of Europe, it was the custom to invite an outstanding preacher to spend the duration of Lent (one of the two most important preaching seasons of the year—the other being Advent), preaching at least three times a week, if not daily or in some cases several times a day. There was keen competition to find such a preacher, and Dijon had the good fortune of securing for Lent 1604 Francis de Sales, the 37-year-old French-speaking Savoyard prince bishop of Geneva living in exile at Annecy. Francis's preaching in Paris in 1602 had won him great renown not only in the capital and court circles, but also throughout France. The invitation to Francis to preach the Lenten season of 1604 in Dijon was extended by the city's magistrates, among them André Frémyot, the 31-year-old newly consecrated archbishop of Bourges and the brother of the recently widowed Jane Frances Frémyot Baroness de Chantal.

For his part, Francis had several good reasons to accept this invitation. One was his intense interest in the proposal for a foundation of St. Teresa of Ávila's Discalced Carmelite nuns in the Burgundian capital. This reason is best understood in

light of Francis's involvement, during his 1602 visit to the French capital, with the Parisian group of committed laypeople and ecclesiastics that was instrumental in bringing to France the Teresian Carmel. Teresa's "mission statement" for her reformed Carmel avowed that its life of prayer and strict observance was an antidote for the attacks on the Church being waged in France by the Huguenots (*Way of Perfection*, ch. 1). Hence, those seeking to renew Catholicism in France in the aftermath of the wars of religion had as their first priority the introduction of the Teresian Carmel. Francis was delegated by this group to seek permission for this new foundation in Paris from Pope Clement VIII.

Another reason for Francis accepting this invitation was that King Henri IV had given André Frémyot certain ecclesiastical revenues in the canton of Gex in Francis's diocese, forgetting that he had already ceded them to Geneva. A lawsuit was pending in the matter, but Francis regarded such public conflicts between prelates as scandalous. Thus, a sojourn in Dijon would afford the opportunity to meet one-on-one with André, who at this point was not personally known to Francis, and to settle the affair in an amicable manner. Taking this approach, Francis made a lasting friend of a potential enemy.

Quickly putting aside his quarrel with Francis, André was a hospitable host who showered his guest with attention and, as a native of Dijon, was an invaluable source of assistance and information to Francis. Francis delivered his Lenten sermons in the Sainte-Chapelle, a magnificent gothic church attached to the former palace of the dukes of Burgundy and one of the most famous shrines of medieval France (it was destroyed during the French Revolution). When Francis mounted the pulpit to preach his initial sermon on the Friday after Ash Wednesday, 5 March 1604, he observed a young widow seated opposite him who listened attentively to his every word. Francis later questioned his host about the identity of this woman, and André was pleased to introduce her as his sister.

Who Was André Frémyot?

Francis has been described as having "more friendships than would seem humanly possible" so that "he breathed friendship." Among those who were privileged to enjoy his friendship was André Frémyot. As already noted, Francis's person-to-person, one-on-one approach to resolving the conflict over the Gex region won over André. By the same token, Francis's initiative was surely reciprocated by what Francis describes as André's "natural goodness of disposition and heart" (*Oeuvres*, 12:327). Francis's subsequent letter of 5 October 1604 to André, as well as what he says about him elsewhere, reveals our saint's great personal fondness for, and the depth and warmth of his fraternal friendship with, André. Who was André Frémyot when Francis first encountered him in Dijon in Lent 1604?

Born at Dijon on 26 August 1573, André was the only son of Bénigne Frémyot, seigneur de Thostes, one of the greatest nobles of this period in French history. During the wars of religion, Bénigne firmly supported the Church and the king, and he suffered severely for his loyalty. When his son André was held hostage by enemy forces and threatened with death unless the father, then in exile, changed sides, Bénigne gave this answer: "It is better that my son dies innocently than his father lives in perfidy." Both father and son became close friends with Francis, and it was in their home in Dijon where Francis was first introduced to Jane.

André's earliest tutor was Claude Robert (1564-1636), vicar general and archdeacon of Langres, and the author of the original edition of *Gallia Christiana*, the first comprehensive attempt at a history of France's bishops. André received his doctorate in law at the University of Padua, Francis's *alma mater*. On his return to Dijon, he was a councillor at the Dijon parliament, before inheriting the ecclesiastical benefices that the king had conferred on his father, but which the latter could not use. In 1595 André was made abbot in *commendam* of the Augustinian abbey of Saint-Étienne de Dijon. He received minor orders and subdiaconate. While still a subdeacon, he was named archbishop of Bourges in 1603 by Pope Clement VIII—a see that had probably been reserved for him since 1595-96.

André was consecrated in Paris on 6 December 1603, and took possession of his diocese by procurator on 24 December of the same year. Francis's friendship with André was such that he assisted him as deacon at his First Mass in the Sainte-Chapelle in Dijon on Holy Thursday, 15 April 1604. As it was permitted to celebrate only one Mass on that day, Francis received Holy

Communion from André. Six months passed before André made his solemn entry into his diocese, or, as Francis puts it, went "to join his flock" (*Oeuvres*, 12:325), on 24 October 1604. Unable to leave the work of his own diocese and make the long journey to Bourges for the occasion, Francis wrote his friend a letter to wish him well and to share with him ideas on "the duties of our common vocation" (*Oeuvres*, 12:327) as bishops, primary among which was preaching—a longstanding Church teaching that had been reiterated by the Council of Trent. Such is the origin of the letter on preaching.



Figure 2. André Frémyot, archbishop of Bourges, presents his sister, the Baroness de Chantal, to Francis de Sales, prince bishop of Geneva, in Dijon in March 1604 (detail). 1941-52. Stained-glass window by Charles Plessard and Francis Chigot, Limoges, France. Basilica of St. Francis de Sales, Annecy.

The Letter: A Conversation and Visit between Friends

Letters were highly prized in Francis's day, and letterwriting was an art form. The practice of letterwriting in the Renaissance gave rise to a substantial body of theoretical works in Latin—the international language of communication—that explained what letters were and prescribed how they should be written. These works built on the well-established medieval tradition of the *ars dictaminis*. Renaissance humanism added an important element to this tradition with the rediscovery of the letters of the authors of Classical Antiquity.

Foremost among the Renaissance authors of manuals of letterwriting was the Dutch Christian humanist Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1469-1536), who retrieved this definition of the letter from the Greeks: "A letter is a conversation between two absent persons." Erasmus further explains that "conversation [means] familiar speech ... that the letter

differs hardly at all from the ordinary speech of everyday conversation.... For the style of a letter should be simple and even a bit careless, in the sense of a studied carelessness" (quoted in Stewart and Wolfe, 21). Like many of his contemporaries, Erasmus wrote to both friends and strangers in order to forge and consolidate relationships. During his studies at the Jesuit Collège de Clermont in Paris, Francis learned the art of letterwriting from Erasmus's *De conscribendis epistolis* (*On the Writing of Letters*), or a manual closely modeled on this work.

In fact, Francis's letter to André continues their conversation about the service of God and the Church that was initiated in Dijon, as Francis declares in a letter of 7 October 1604 to André's father (*Oeuvres*, 12:327). A distinctive Salesian note is added to the idea of the letter as a conversation in Francis's letter of 14 October 1604 to Madame de Chantal when he speaks of visiting by means of spiritual letters (*Oeuvres*, 12:369). Thus, letters of spiritual friendship are, in Francis's view, not merely a means of communication, but sacred encounters that partake of the primary Salesian Biblical mystery of the Visitation.⁵

This letter of Francis to André, then, also serves to nurture and strengthen their friendship “founded on Jesus Christ” and their “common vocation” (*Oeuvres*, 12:327). For Erasmus, the familiar letter provided an insight into the relationship between the writer and recipient. Several insights may be gleaned from Francis’s letter to André when it is read in a relational context. To offer just three examples: First, the most familiar and often quoted sentence in this letter is: “Say what you will, lips speak but to ears, heart speaks to heart” (*Oeuvres*, 12:321), which sets forth not only the cardinal principle of Salesian preaching, but, first and foremost, the quality of the conversation and visit recorded in this letter. Second, Francis’s emphasis on preaching as “speaking . . . ‘the word of reconciliation’ [2 Cor 5:19]” (*Oeuvres*, 12:325) had a clear resonance in his friendship with André, which began with their reconciliation in the dispute over the Gex region. And, finally, Francis’s affirmation that he is “never at the altar without commending [André] to our Lord” (*ibid.*) is a poignant reminder, especially in this “Year of the Eucharist,” that, for Francis, true friendship is inseparable from the sacramental life and the communion of saints.

Attending to the Particular

Emphasis on the enduring relevance of this letter sometimes overshadows the particularity of its historical context and of its writer and his correspondent. Attention to and care for people in their particularity was a hallmark of Francis’s pastoral ministry, which was always adapted to people’s concrete needs. John K. Ryan aptly describes the particularities that circumscribe this letter on preaching:

It is easy to picture this young man at the time St. Francis’s letter was written to him. Thirty-one years old, the son of a famous father, and heir to wealth and rank, he had been chosen to be bishop of a great French see, although without experience, special training for the priesthood, and perhaps any great inclination to it. The long months between his consecration and first Mass, and the still longer months between appointment and taking up residence in his diocese, are indicative of his state of mind as well as of ecclesiastical procedure in seventeenth-century France. . . . The letter manifests how ardently St. Francis wanted to help his friend, not only as a preacher, but in other ways as well, and reveals how clearly he saw both Frémyot’s limitations and his native talents along with the particular dangers to which he would be exposed (7).

André’s subsequent career continues to exhibit the “vocational ambiguity” that was evident to Francis (and others) in 1604. It may be that André did not have a real inclination to the priesthood, nonetheless, his tenure as archbishop of Bourges

has been assessed as “highly active” (Bergin, 627). He became known for his charitable activity, and established foundations in his archdiocese of the most important new or reformed orders, such as the Capuchins, Augustinians, Minims, Carmelites, and Visitandines. Political pressure forced him to resign his see in 1621, although until his death in 1641 André continued to play an important part in the affairs of the French church, including serving as a judge on the tribunal for the first process of inquiry for Francis’s canonization.

At the same time, there is also evidence that André was not always what he could and should have been. As a result of a near fatal illness in 1624, André underwent a conversion, asking God to grant him a few more years so that he could amend his life. The resolutions that he took are revealing: a vow of perpetual chastity, going on pilgrimage to Loreto and from there to Rome to receive the plenary indulgence of the Jubilee of 1625, and daily celebration of Mass. In 1604 Francis was present to André to encourage and help him to maximize his gifts and to overcome his shortcomings. Two decades later, at another turning point in his life, André receives the spiritual guidance and support he needs to fulfill his resolutions from his sister Jane, as her letters to him during this period attest.⁴



The 400th anniversary of this extraordinary letter on preaching invites us to discover it anew in light of the particularity of the relational context of the friendship between Francis and André. Hopefully, this reflection will be of assistance in some way in the process of reading and recovery of this rich document of our Salesian heritage and patrimony. ☞ JFC

REFERENCES

1. For the complete text of the letter, see *Oeuvres* 12:299-325. This reflection is based on the following sources, which are not further cited unless quoted: J. Bergin, *The Making of the French Episcopate 1589-1661* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996), 218, 231, 297, 304-5, 422, 627; B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 95-96, 103; V. Mellinghoff-Bourgerie, *François de Sales (1567-1622): Un homme de lettres spirituelles* (Geneva: Droz, 1999), 159-67; J. K. Ryan, introduction to his trans. of St. Francis de Sales, *On the Preacher and Preaching* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1964), 3-17; A. Stewart and H. Wolfe, *Letterwriting in Renaissance England*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2004), 21-22; E. Stopp, *Madame de Chantal: Portrait of a Saint* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1963), 52-54, and *A Man to Heal Differences: Essays and Talks on St. Francis de Sales* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s Univ. Press, 1997), 176-77.
2. T. McGoldrick, *The Sweet and Gentle Struggle: Francis de Sales on the Necessity of Spiritual Friendship* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1996), introduction (unnumbered pages).
3. A. Pocetto makes this important point in his essay “Freedom to Love: A Close Reading of Francis de Sales’s Letter of 14 October 1604 to Jane de Chantal,” which will be published in the ICSS volume *Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition*.
4. See Sainte Jeanne de Chantal, *Correspondance, Tome II, 1622-25*, ed. Sr. Marie-Patricia Burns, V.H.M. (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 330, 493-99.