

Francis de Sales in the Pulpit

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St. Francis de Sales was a fine preacher. This is not a merely superlative statement tossed generously at a famous French bishop who has been dead nearly four hundred years. Neither is it a safely gratuitous assertion made at a distance without fear of contradiction.

Not every speaker can hold a great city like Paris spellbound time after time. St. Francis did. In Paris alone, one year, he preached 365 sermons. The clergy, learned doctors of the Sorbonne, noble lords and ladies of the court, domestic servants and beggars—all flocked to hear him.

Paris was not his only conquest. Annecy (where he lived), Chambéry, Dijon, and Grenoble, all heard him preach. Everywhere crowds thronged the churches for his sermons.

Francis made his first appearance in a pulpit six months before his ordination. He was only a subdeacon. On the feast of St. John the Baptist, June 24, 1593, he preached in the cathedral at Annecy on the Real Presence.¹ The audience marvelled at his learning and his eloquence. His old father was moved to tears. The bishop, Msgr. Claude de Granier, was especially impressed. Turning to his canons at the end of the service, he exclaimed: "Well, you have heard my son. What do you think of him now? Didn't he tell us wonderful things in a wonderful way? Surely we

¹ Giving evidence at the Process for St. Francis' Canonization, St. Jane Frances de Chantal said: "He preached his first sermon on St. John the Baptist's day. He was seized with such violent spasms, such intense physical pain, when he heard the bell ringing, that he was forced to lie down for a while. I don't remember what he told me long afterwards as to how he conquered this nervous agony, but I believe he put himself completely in God's hands. If his preaching was to be successful and for the glory of God—then God would see to it."

have a new apostle!"

This sermon, which converted one of several heretics in the congregation, was followed by at least five other appearances in the pulpit (at the church of St. Francis of Assisi in Annecy) before the young cleric was ordained to the priesthood on December 18, 1593. From that day invitations to preach flowed in from all sides.

One of these sermons, preached on Septuagesima Sunday (February 6) at Seyssel on the Rhone, caused a considerable stir. On this occasion, we are told, he reached a height of eloquence which far outstripped his first utterances. He was inspired at once by the keen interest of his audience, which was composed partly of Catholics in daily contact with the enemies of the Faith and partly of Protestants curious to hear him. Roused by the danger of the former, who were constantly exposed to hearing new doctrines, and no less moved by the unhappy state of those whom error had already seduced, he preached with a depth of feeling, an apostolic power and an energy of language which strongly confirmed the Catholics in their faith and effectively shook the convictions of the Calvinists. Such, indeed, was his power that the report of this sermon spread throughout the neighboring country into Geneva itself, and henceforth the leaders of the new religion in that city marked down the saint as one whose eloquence and learning were a menace to their security. Msgr. de Granier, the exiled Bishop of Geneva, hearing of this success and of others like it, was filled with the utmost joy and thankfulness. "God has chosen to refuse me the gift of eloquence for myself," he humbly exclaimed, "but he has given me a son who will be for me my word and my voice."²

Francis never had the heart to refuse when asked for a sermon, sometimes preaching three and four times a day. "How can I help it?" he would say. "It isn't in me to refuse. I was made to accept invitations to preach, it seems, not to decline them." The size of his audience did not count at all. He was just as ready to preach to a handful of peasants in some tiny village as to the huge crowds which filled the great city churches. Once, in later years, he confided to the Bishop of Belley:

Be glad when you go into the pulpit and see only a few people in front of you or have a thinly-scattered audience. . . . I am speaking from thirty years' experience. I have always seen greater results from sermons I have preached to small congregations than from those I have given to large ones.

At the time I was provost, I was sent out preaching with some other priests by my predecessor in this see. One Sunday, when the weather was very bad, there were only seven people in church. Someone suggested that it was not worthwhile preaching to so small a number. I replied that I was never encouraged by a large audience nor disheartened by a small one. Provided someone was helped, I was satisfied. So I went into the pulpit that day, and I remember my sermon was on prayer to the saints. I treated the subject very simply. I said nothing either pathetic or vehement. However, one of the congregation began to weep bitterly, even to sob and sigh quite

² Harold Burton, *The Life of St. Francis de Sales* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1925), Vol. I, pp. 91-92.

audibly. I thought he was ill, so I told him not to worry as I was about to finish and would come and help him if he needed anything. He was not ill physically, he assured me, and begged me to go on, saying that I was dressing the wound which required it. When the sermon—which was short—was over, he came and threw himself at my feet. "Provost," he exclaimed, "I owe my life to you; you have saved my soul today! Blessed be the hour when I came here and heard you! It has been worth eternity to me." He then told me that he had been discussing this subject of praying to the saints with some Protestant ministers who had assured him that it was terrible idolatry, and that he had fixed the following Thursday for his abjuration of the Catholic religion. He found the sermon he had heard so instructive, however, that his doubts were completely removed. He now bitterly regretted the promise he had made to the ministers and declared anew his obedience to the Church of Rome.

I cannot tell you what an impression this example made on the whole neighborhood—occurring, as it did, amongst such a small number of people—and how docile and ready to receive the word of God it rendered the hearts of others.³

St. Francis preached in Paris for the first time in 1602, the year he was consecrated bishop. The priest who had been appointed to provide the Lenten sermons in the Royal Chapel was unable for some reason to fulfil his engagement. Francis was asked to take his place. He began the course on Ash Wednesday, February 25. Soon the chapel was too small for the crowds who came to hear him. Nor, we are told, did they find their expectations disappointed. Those sermons contained everything—profound learning, unusual sympathy born of true understanding, natural eloquence, a vigorous yet dignified delivery, but above all an intense earnestness and personal sanctity.⁴

Two years later he preached the Lenten course at Dijon in a fine gothic church known as the Sainte Chapelle. His sermons on the Passion during Holy Week brought the whole city to its knees. On the day after his wonderful Good Friday sermon the president of the local parliament, who was not leading a good life, complimented Francis on his preaching and remarked that he had never wept so much in his life. "Sir," replied the bishop, "the daughters of Jerusalem wept in the same way when they saw the sufferings of the God-man; and our Saviour told them to weep over themselves. The children of the Church are not satisfied merely with this dew of tears; they tear up from the soil of their souls those thorns that

³ Jean Pierre Camus, *Esprit de S. François de Sales* (Paris: 1833), II, xxvii.

⁴ St. Francis, replying to a letter of congratulation from the Duchess of Longueville, gives us his own opinion of these sermons: "I am only sorry not to have corresponded better with what was demanded by the dignity of my audience and of the pulpit I occupied. That, however, must not be attributed either to want of appreciation or of diligence, but simply to the limitations of my mind and the ruggedness of my speech."—Charles Auguste de Sales, V, p. 315; quoted by Burton, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 315.

hinder the seed from giving forth fruit a hundredfold." The president saw the point, and promised to reform.

When Francis visited Paris again in 1618 his reputation drew an immense crowd to hear him preach the panegyric of St. Martin in the church of the Oratorians on November 11. Long before the time for the service every available space was filled by an enthusiastic congregation which included the king and queen, together with numerous prelates, theologians and scientists. Francis, when he arrived, could not make his way into the building at all. He was forced to reach the pulpit from outside by means of a ladder to the nearest window. In front of that vast assembly his humility was alarmed. He preached the simplest of sermons in the simplest of styles. Naturally a few of the Parisians were disappointed. He revealed afterwards that while he was preaching he heard someone near the pulpit mutter disgustedly: "Look at him, come from his mountains to mumble here! If that is all he has to say, he would have been better advised to stay at home, instead of coming all this way to bore us!"⁵

The attendance at his next sermon a few weeks later, after the reactions of the more discriminating had come to the surface, clearly demonstrated the attractiveness of his personality. He began the Advent course in the church of St. André-des-Arts on December 2. This time even cardinals, bishops, and princes experienced difficulty in finding places. This time

⁵ "One lady, more far-seeing than the others, complained to the bishop himself that he had chosen the wrong occasion for practising his humility. Francis parried the thrust by remarking: 'What did they expect? Assuredly, from a mountain tree you can scarcely gather aught but wild fruit.' That the saint's apparent failure in this sermon was deliberate we know from a letter of St. Vincent de Paul, who learned the fact from the lips of St. Francis himself, and who recorded his admiration for this self-humiliation in a letter written to his brethren exactly thirty-seven years afterwards."—Burton, *op. cit.*, II, p. 206.

In a letter to Monsieur Martin, 1651, St. Vincent wrote: "The first time that his late Lordship of Geneva preached in Paris on the occasion of his last visit there, great crowds from all over Paris came to his sermon; the court and everyone else was there, to make a fitting audience for this famous preacher. All expected a sermon in that characteristically powerful manner with which he was wont to enrapture his hearers. But what did this great man of God do? Very simply he recounted the life of St. Martin with the set purpose of humbling himself before so many illustrious persons whose presence to another would have been cause for pride. By this heroic act of humility he was the first to benefit from his preaching. Afterwards, he used to tell Madame de Chantal and me about this and said: 'How I humiliated our sisters who were expecting me to preach of high matters in the presence of this exalted company! A certain lady (speaking of a postulant who was afterwards a nun) was there and as I preached she said to herself: "See this simpleton from the mountains, how poorly he preaches; fancy his coming from a great distance to speak as he is doing and try the patience of this great crowd!"' "—*Oeuvres*, Vol. V, pp. 472-473; quoted in St. Vincent de Paul, Msgr. Jean Calvet, p. 65.

there was no disappointment.

Francis could not understand why people should be so anxious to hear what he considered the unpolished utterances of a provincial bishop. "Aren't you astonished," he asked a friend, "to see all these good Parisians coming to hear me—*me*, whose tongue is so awkward, whose ideas are so poor, whose sermons are so dull?"

"Do you really think," came the answer, "that fine words are what they come to hear from you? It is enough for them to see you in the pulpit; your heart speaks to them through your eyes and your mouth. If they only saw you offering up a short prayer, they would be satisfied. Your homely language, burning with the fire of charity, goes straight to their hearts and moves them. There is something extraordinary in your sermons: everything gets home. Another man might say three times as much, and no attention would be paid to it. You have in you a certain rhetoric of Annecy—or rather, of paradise—which produces wonderful results."⁶

Amédée de Margerie describes the more salient features of the saint's manner in the pulpit:

... the deep spiritual feeling, the subtle individual charm, the sympathy, the insight into souls, the power of putting himself into touch with his audience, the faculty for not generalizing, for not speaking in the abstract like a book, but according to the particular needs, dispositions, social habits and conditions of his listeners. This faculty he called *alloqui hominem*, "speaking to his man." This he did so skillfully that each individual was made feel that he, personally, was being addressed; that a kind of dialogue was in fact being carried on between his soul and the preacher.

He preached for thirty years without any great alteration in manner. As an older man, and a bishop, his speech became rather slower and graver, more authoritative, more paternal; his action acquired a certain grace of greater dignity, but the old charm remained, while the added qualities appear to have made a great impression on his contemporaries. As a younger man, perhaps still a little overawed by the dignity of his state, he had been too humble to be as vigorous, as energetic a preacher as he afterwards became; but, to the end, it was his gentleness, his intense charm, quite as much as his strength, that delighted all who heard him.⁷

Monsieur de Boisy, the saint's father, was his most persistent critic. This good man did not approve of the frequency of his son's sermons, nor of their direct simplicity. We learn of this from St. Francis himself:

I had the best father in the world. He spent most of his life, however, at court or on the battlefield.

⁶ Abbé Hamon, *La Vie de St. François de Sales* (Paris: Gabalda, 1909), Vol. II, p. 214. Hamon is quoting Father Binet in *Quel est le meilleur gouvernement?* p. 193.

⁷ Amédée de Margerie, *St. François de Sales* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1908), pp. 152-3.

When I was provost I used to preach at every opportunity—in the cathedral, in the various parishes, even to the smallest confraternities. I never knew what it was to refuse, remembering our Lord's saying: "Give to him who asks."

My good father, hearing the bell ring for a sermon, would ask who was preaching. He would be told: "Who should it be but your son?" One day he took me aside and warned me: "Provost, you are preaching too often. Even on work days I hear the bell ringing for a sermon, and every time people say to me—'It's the provost, the provost.' In my time it was not like that. Sermons were much rarer; but, on the other hand, what sermons they were! They were learned, well thought out, full of wonderful things. There was more Latin and Greek quoted in one of those sermons than there is in ten of yours. Everyone was delighted and edified; people gathered for them in crowds. . . . Nowadays you are making this exercise so common that they no longer think anything of it. What is more, they no longer have the same appreciation of yourself."

My good father was speaking according to his lights and in all frankness. He was speaking according to the maxims of the world in which he had been reared. But the maxims of the gospel are of quite another stamp. Jesus Christ, the mirror of perfection and the model of preachers, never used all this pomp and circumstance. Neither did the apostles who followed in his steps.

Believe me, we shall never preach too much. *Nunquam satis dicitur quod nunquam satis discitur*: what can never be known too well cannot be repeated too often.⁸

And the provost continued to preach as frequently as before.

It is important to recognize Francis de Sales for what he was—a saint and one of the great church orators of his day. We have proof of this, fortunately, in the words of one who heard him preach—Vaugelas, the famous grammarian who, as a man of education and taste, may be considered a good judge.

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 fear of hell. He displayed admirable judgment in his exact observance of the actual circumstance, whether of place, time or particular audience. He never used a word that did not serve its purpose; and the 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. 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. He could not endure that artificial, over-decorated style which so many people affect at the present day, and which many more take in their delusion for real eloquence.

Not only that: his mind abounded with beautiful thoughts. So fertile was he

⁸ Jean Pierre Camus, *op. cit.*, III, v.

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. Yet these same thoughts were always perfectly judicious—never extravagant nor far-fetched, but such as made appeal not only to the imagination but to calm reason itself.⁹

In a letter to one of his Visitation nuns at the beginning of January 1619, St. Francis shows how much he depended on prayer for the real success of his sermons. He prayed for this intention himself; he asked the prayers of others.

Dear me! Do you really envy me the privilege of preaching to the world the glories of God? I'm surprised; how comforting it is sometimes to be able to make known the goodness of one we love! Well, if you want to preach with me, please do so, my child, by asking God to give me words to satisfy both his heart and your desires. How often it happens that we preachers say good things because some kind soul gains us the grace to do so! Will not that in itself pass for preaching?—and with this advantage: by remaining unaware of it, such a one avoids the danger of vanity creeping in. We preachers are like organs—where the blower really does all the work, but gets no praise for it. So, often breathe a prayer for me, my child; then you will surely be preaching along with me.¹⁰

When Msgr. André Frémyot, the newly-consecrated Archbishop of Bourges, wrote to St. Francis in the autumn of 1604 for advice on the fulfilment of what the *Pontifical* calls a bishop's "first and great duty," he could not have guessed the service he was rendering posterity. The young prelate was the brother of St. Jane Frances de Chantal. He was only a subdeacon when Pope Clement VIII appointed him Archbishop of Bourges on June 16, 1603. Henry IV, in 1595, had conferred the see on André's father, but the old man was canonically impeded from enjoying the benefice and it passed to his son who was consecrated at Paris on December 6, 1603. He said his first Mass in his native city of Dijon on the following Holy Thursday. St. Francis, who was preaching the Lenten course at Dijon that year (1604), acted as his assistant priest. The friendship which grew up between the two prelates resulted in Msgr. Frémyot's appeal for advice on how to preach.

In October of the same year, while spending a few days of much-needed rest with his mother, St. Francis wrote a long letter in reply to his friend's

⁹ *Process. remiss. Parisiensis*, ad art. 35; quoted by Dom Mackey in his *Étude sur St. François de Sales prédicateur* at the beginning of Vol. X of the *Oeuvres de St. François de Sales, Evêque de Genève et Docteur de l'Eglise—édition complète d'après les autographes et les éditions originales enrichie de nombreuses pièces inédites . . . publiée . . . par les soins des Religieuses de la Visitation du 1er Monastère d'Annecy*. Cf. X, p. lxi. This edition will be referred to in succeeding notes as "Annecy Edition."

¹⁰ Annecy Edition, Vol. XVIII, letter mcdxcviii, p. 335.

request. Throughout its pages he did his best to offer Msgr. Frémyot a method of sacred eloquence that would turn the duty of preaching into a joy. It is more like a treatise than a letter, both in length and content. It is, in fact, a little masterpiece, which St. Alphonsus Liguori was to recognize years later and use in the training of his Redemptorists. The clear concise rules which St. Francis gives were drawn from his own experience or practice and from the many years of thought which he had given to the subject.

The art in preaching is to say something short and simple, but say it well. How, then, are you to deliver your sermons? Carefully avoid the involved sentences, gestures, tricks of facial expression or exaggerated postures of studied oratory. All that sort of thing is the plague of preaching. Your delivery should be natural, dignified, earnest, simple, enthusiastic, reverent, grave and somewhat slow. All you have to do to preach like this is just speak with feeling and sympathy, frankness and confidence. Be in love with the doctrine you are teaching and conveying to your listeners. The supreme art is to have no art. Our words should take their fire from an inner love, not from exaggerated shouts and actions. They should come from the heart rather than the mouth. Say what you like, heart it is that speaks to heart; the tongue's vibrations reach but the ear.¹¹

In this letter, in his own words, we have an excellent portrait of the saint himself in the pulpit. If we may believe the various descriptions given by people who heard him preach, he practiced to the full the advice he was giving to Msgr. Frémyot.

Let me enlarge on the qualities of a good delivery which I have just enumerated. It should first of all be *natural*. In other words, avoid a delivery that is stilted or studied. It should be *dignified*. Don't imitate the common behaviour of some who bang their fists, feet or stomachs against the pulpit, and who shout and bellow in a most extraordinary way—often quite out of keeping with their subject. The delivery should be *earnest*. Preachers should betray no signs of timidity in their way of speaking, as though they were addressing their fathers instead of their disciples and children. It should be *simple*. There should be nothing artificial or affected about it. The delivery should also be *enthusiastic*. It shouldn't be lifeless, effeminate or ineffectual. It should be *reverent*. This excludes anything savoring of flattery or worldliness. It should be *grave*. Some people have the irritating habit of constantly doffing their birettas, bowing to their audiences, making a foolish display of their hands or surplices, and using other unbecoming gestures. It should be somewhat *slow*. In this way you will avoid the short sharp manner which attracts attention, but doesn't touch the heart. Your language, too, should be clear, simple and to the point. There should be no display of Greek or Hebrew words, and no use of novel or flattering expressions. The construction of the sermon should be natural. There is no need for an exordium or for finely turned phrases. I

¹¹ Annecy Edition, Vol. XII, p. 321. A translation of this letter is available under the title *On the Preacher and Preaching*, by Msgr. John K. Ryan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964).

also believe in making the division of the various points clear, so that people can follow the sequence of thought.¹²

St. Francis once told the Bishop of Belley the following anecdote: "A very famous preacher came to Annecy one day. I begged him to preach, and he agreed. Starting off in a lofty style, he propounded his sublime ideas in such pompous language and with such a display of eloquence that our good mountain folk were quite amazed. As they came out, nothing was to be heard but expressions of delight and admiration. Never was so much incense of praise offered to mortal man. They vied with each other in their applause, in lauding the good man to the skies."

Francis had been present at this sermon [the bishop tells us] and realized that it was well above the intellectual level of its admirers. So he took some of them aside and questioned them, to find out how much of it they had retained and what particular profit they had gained. Not one of them could tell him a word. One fellow, more ingenuous than the rest, replied: "If I had understood it and could retail it to you, it would only show that he had said nothing uncommon. It is our ignorance which excites our admiration. He talked of such high and lofty things that they were far above our heads. This makes us have a greater esteem for the sublime mysteries of our religion." Francis praised his candour, and decided that he had drawn some sort of profit from the sermon after all.

Spring flowers are not enough, however, unless they are followed by autumn fruit. The preacher who has only the leaves of language or fine thoughts is in peril of being classed among those unfruitful trees which are threatened in gospel with axe and fire. "The task I have appointed you," said our Lord to his apostles, "is to go out and bear fruit, fruit which will endure" (Jn 15:16).¹³

St. Francis, the Bishop of Belley tells us, was highly in favor of short sermons, and said that lengthiness was the most general defect in the preachers of his day. "A multitude of words," he used to say, "never produces great results. Look at the homilies and sermons of the Fathers of the Church—how short they are! Yet how much more efficacious they were than ours! . . . Believe me—I speak from experience, and from very long experience—the more you say, the less will be remembered. The more you say, the less will be your hearers' profit. By dint of overloading their memories, you cause them to break down; just as lamps are put out by too much oil, or plants are stifled by too much watering. When a sermon is too long, the end makes us forget the middle, while the middle obscures the beginning. Preachers of only moderate power are endurable provided they are brief. Even good preachers become wearisome when they are too long. A preacher cannot have a more offensive fault

¹² Annecy Edition, Vol. XII, letter ccxxix, pp. 321-322.

¹³ Jean Pierre Camus, *op. cit.*, XV, iv.

than lengthiness."¹⁴

The words of guidance to the Archbishop of Bourges were not the first of their kind which St. Francis wrote. A year earlier a friend of his, Antoine de Revol, was appointed to the see of Dol in Brittany. Francis undertook to obtain from Rome the Bulls needed for his consecration, and forwarded them with a covering letter on June 3, 1603.¹⁵ This letter contains much wise advice for the future conduct of the new bishop. Francis concludes by urging his friend to be constant in the work of preaching. After quoting the Council of Trent on the point, he continues:

Don't do it in order to become a great preacher. Do it solely because it is your duty and God's will. The fatherly sermon of a bishop is worth all the artistry in the elaborate sermons of preachers of another type. A bishop needs very little in order to preach well. His sermons ought to be on essential and useful subjects, avoiding what is strange or far-fetched; his words simple, not affected; his delivery fatherly and natural, bereft of artificial or studied gestures.

On November 16, 1877, by the Bull *Dives in misericordia*, Pope Pius IX conferred on St. Francis de Sales the title of Doctor of the Church. One passage from this important document deserves quotation and may serve as a résumé of this study in salesian preaching.

He gave the wisest precepts and, after the example of the holy Fathers, caused the dignity of sacred eloquence, which had become lowered in the lapse of time, to be restored to its ancient splendor. From his school came those most eloquent orators who produced such abundant fruit throughout the whole Church. He was held by all, therefore, to be the restorer and master of sacred eloquence.

With good reason does the Bull call Francis the restorer and master of sacred eloquence. "Preaching at that time was frequently a formless chaos of dry theology, abstract philosophy, profane quotations in Greek and Latin, pedantic triflings and inflated pathos."¹⁶ Francis redeemed it by his wisdom, his natural and refined taste, his perfect realization of the spirit of Christ and the apostles, and his firmness in never being led astray by an error, however universal. "He gave a strong and successful impetus. It was followed in the Society of Jesus to end in Bourdaloue; in

¹⁴ Jean Pierre Camus, *op. cit.*, II, xxvi. On another occasion St. Francis said: "You must say something short and good, and carefully drive it home. Do not pay any attention to those fastidious minds who are displeased when a preacher repeats a thing or goes over the same ground again. Surely, if you are making something out of metal, it has to be beaten again and again. How many repeated strokes of the artist's brush are required in putting the finishing touches to a painting! Such repetition is all the more necessary when it comes to imprinting eternal truths on hearts confirmed in evil or on hardened intellects."—Jean Pierre Camus, *op. cit.*, XVI, vii.

¹⁵ Annecy Edition, Vol. XII, letter clxxxiv, pp. 187-193.

¹⁶ Hamon, *op. cit.*, II, p. 325.

the Oratory to end in Massillon; and among the secular clergy to end in Fléchier, Fénelon and the prince of sacred eloquence, Bossuet."¹⁷

More than any of his contemporaries it was St. Vincent de Paul who appreciated the oratorical principles of his great friend Francis de Sales. To the priests of his Society, to the ordinands who made their retreats with him, and to the Paris clergy at the famous "Tuesday conferences," Monsieur Vincent—as all Paris called him—expounded these principles in order to teach them to preach like missionaries. It has even been said¹⁸ that in reading the letter of St. Francis on the art of preaching it is not difficult to imagine that we are listening to St. Vincent talking on the same subject.

A councillor of the Paris parliament said that Francis de Sales had done him great good, but also incurable harm—the Bishop of Geneva had disgusted him with all other preachers! Henry IV of France declared Francis to be the greatest preacher in the world. The approbation of the court was for once given in the right quarter. There was no doubt that the saint's originality appealed to jaded tastes. He had broken away from the elaborate pretentious style of the time, and formed his own method.

It was noticeable from the first that in his preaching Francis de Sales was determined to avoid the style of the day. It was then the fashion amongst pulpit orators to embellish their sermons with Greek and Latin quotations, with passages from the pagan classics, with allusions to ancient mythology. Ecclesiastics had formerly been taunted by the apostles of the Renaissance with their ignorance of the ancient classics and their want of good literary and elocutionary style. This necessarily reacted upon clerical education, and, both as a removal of the reproach and as a manifest necessity of the times, greater attention had been paid to ancient literature, eloquence was modelled, often very badly, upon that of the orators of old, and a certain display of classical erudition became the vogue. But the thing had gone too far. For a cultivated audience this style of preaching might be beneficial or, at least, excusable: for a mixed congregation, such as the ordinary church generally enclosed, it was a useless and unpardonable pedantry. Greek was Greek indeed to the poor and ignorant, while the mythological allusions, wherever they might be understood, were not necessarily edifying to those who claimed to be disciples of Christ. All this was very clearly seen by Francis de Sales; and as he was preaching not for his own reputation as a scholarly orator, but for the salvation of souls, he chose to adapt his language to the people to whom he spoke. The consequence was that for all classes of the faithful his sermons had the greatest attraction. His gift of clear thought and his habit of thoroughly digesting his reading gave him the power of imparting his learning with such lucidity that it was understood even by the ignorant; his appreciation of what was human gave him sympathy; his natural eloquence and grace were a charm to the more cultivated; whilst the impulse of divine charity, his love of God and of God's creatures, gave him the real driving power, the

¹⁷ Le Feret, *Life of Du Perron*, pp. 101-102; quoted by Dom Mackey in *Four Essays on the Life and Writings of St. Francis de Sales*, 1883, p. 52.

¹⁸ Abbé Maynard, *St. Vincent de Paul: sa Vie, son Tempus, ses Oeuvres, son Influence* (Paris: 1874), II, vi, 1.

genuinely effective force for conversion, without which his other gifts might have tended to mere display.¹⁹

He used to the full his extensive theological learning, his wonderful general knowledge outside the sphere of theology, his unerring insight into the workings of the human heart and his great powers of illustration. His words came from his heart; they left his lips so earnestly and so gracefully as to win the most hardened souls.

He was criticized for not conforming to tradition, but his sermons had more effect. So they should. He was following closely in the footsteps of the great model of preachers who used the homely words, and phrases of Galilee when he came to convert the world.

¹⁹ Burton, *op. cit.*, I, p. 92.

Preaching . . .

No doubt, priestly preaching is often very difficult in the circumstances of the modern world. If it is to influence the mind of the listener more fruitfully, such preaching must not present God's Word in a general and abstract fashion only, but it must apply the perennial truth of the gospel to the concrete circumstances of life.

VATICAN II

Secular Institutes: Communities of Eschatological Faith

CAROL LEE COWGILL

INTRODUCTION

In attempting to describe secular institutes theologically, one recognizes that they will have to be compared with the other states of perfection,¹ whether religious congregations or societies of common life, even though satisfactory theologies have not yet been worked out for these. Much of the confusion surrounding discussion of these states comes, on the one hand, from using the term "state of perfection" in more than one sense indiscriminately. The term may refer to the individual's formal, stable, and community-oriented commitment which all agree is the essence of the state of perfection.² The term may also refer to the specific forms which this commitment has taken: religious orders, societies of common life, secular institutes. In order that the discussion of secular institutes may be kept as unambiguous as possible, the term will be used in the second sense.

Officially to approve any group, the Church must see it as in some significant way expressive of her life and mission. The Church is, first of all, "the Catholic, all-embracing community of salvation and love."³ So inseparable are the concepts of community and salvation that they

¹ This term is used because of its historical importance. Most theologians and canonists prefer either "states of total dedication" or "states of the evangelical counsels" as indicating more clearly the essence of the charism.

² Cf. Jean Beyer, "Nature canonique des Instituts séculiers: Lignes essentielles et Questions disputées," *Études sur les Instituts séculiers*, ed. Jean Beyer (Bruges, 1963), p. 165.

³ Bernard Haering, *The Law of Christ*, I (Westminster, 1963), pp. 440-441.