St Francis de Sales, personal companion

written by P. Wirth MORAND | December 19, 2024

'My spirit always accompanies yours,' wrote Francis de Sales one day to Jeanne de Chantal, at a time when she felt assailed by darkness and temptations. He added: 'Walk therefore, my dear Daughter, and advance in bad weather and during the night. Be courageous, my dear Daughter; with God's help, we shall do much.' Accompaniment, spiritual direction, guidance of souls, direction of conscience, spiritual assistance: these are more or less synonymous terms, as they designate this particular form of education and formation exercised in the spiritual sphere of the individual conscience.

Formation of a future companion

The formation he received as a young man had prepared Francis de Sales to become a spiritual director in turn. As a student of the Jesuits in Paris he most likely had a spiritual father whose name we do not know. In Padua, Antonio Possevino had been his director; with this famous Jesuit Francis would later rejoice at having been one of his 'spiritual sons'. During his tormented path to the clerical state, his confidant and support was Amé Bouvard, a priest friend of the family, who then prepared him for ordination.

At the beginning of his episcopate, he entrusted the care of his spiritual life to Father Fourier, rector of the Jesuits in Chambéry, 'a great, erudite and devout religious', with whom he established 'a very special friendship' and who was very close to him 'with his advice and warnings'. For several years, he went to confession regularly to the cathedral penitentiary, whom he called 'dear brother and perfect friend'.

His stay in Paris in 1602 profoundly influenced the development of his gifts as a director of souls. Sent by the bishop to negotiate some diocesan affairs at court, he had little diplomatic success, but this prolonged visit to the French capital allowed him to establish contacts with the spiritual elite who came together around Madam Acarie, an exceptional woman, mystic and hostess at the same time. He became her confessor, observed her ecstasies and listened to her without question. 'Oh! what a mistake I made,' he would later say, 'for not having taken sufficient advantage of her most holy company! She did indeed open her soul to me freely; but the extreme respect I had for her meant that I did not dare

to inform myself of the slightest thing.'

A, insistent activity 'that reassures and heartens'

Helping each individual, personally accompanying them, advising them, possibly correcting their mistakes, encouraging them, all this requires time, patience and a constant effort of discernment. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* speaks from experience when he states in the preface:

I grant that the guidance of individual souls is a labour, but it is a labour full of consolation, even as that of harvesters and grape-gatherers, who are never so well pleased as when most heavily laden. It is a labour which refreshes and invigorates the heart by the comfort which it brings to those who bear it.

We know this important area of his formative work especially from his correspondence, but it should be pointed out that spiritual direction is not only done in writing. Personal meetings and individual confessions are part of it, although one must distinguish them properly. In 1603, he met the Duke of Bellegarde, a great figure in the kingdom and a great sinner, who a few years later asked him to guide him on the path to conversion. The Lenten series that he preached in Dijon the following year was a turning point in his 'career' as a spiritual director, because he met Jeanne Frémyot, widow of the Baron de Chantal.

From 1605 onwards, the systematic visitation of his vast diocese brought him into contact with an endless number of people of all circumstances, mainly peasants and mountain people, most of whom were illiterate and left us no correspondence. Preaching Lent at Annecy in 1607, he found a twenty-one year old lady, 'but all gold', named Louise Du Chastel, who had married the bishop's cousin, Henri de Charmoisy. The letters of spiritual direction that Francis sent to Madame de Charmoisy would serve as basic material for the drafting of his future work, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Preaching in Grenoble in 1616, 1617 and 1618 brought him a considerable number of daughters and spiritual sons who, having heard him speak, would seek closer contact. New women followed him on his last trip to Paris in 1618-1619, where he was part of the Savoy delegation that was negotiating the marriage of the Prince of Piedmont, Victor Amadeus, to Christine of France, sister of Louis XIII. After the princely wedding, Christine chose him as her confessor and 'great chaplain'.

The director is father, brother, friend

When addressing the people he directed, Francis de Sales made abundant, use, according to the custom of the time, of titles taken from family and social life, such as *father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, niece, godfather, godmother, or servant*. The title of father signified authority and at the same time love and confidence. The father 'assists' his son and daughter with advice using wisdom, prudence and charity. As a spiritual father, the director is the one who in certain cases says: I do! Francis de Sales knew how to use such language, but only in very special circumstances, as when he ordered the baroness not to avoid meeting with her husband's murderer:

You asked me how I wanted you to behave in the meeting with the one who killed your lord husband. I answer in order. It is not necessary for you to seek the date and occasion yourself. However, if this arises I want you to welcome it with a gentle, kind and compassionate heart.

He once wrote to a distressed woman: 'I command you in the name of God', but it was to remove her scruples. His authority was always humble, good, even tender; his role with regard to the people he directed, he specified in the preface to the *Introduction*, consisted of a special 'assistance', a term that appears twice in this context. The intimacy that was established between him and the Duke of Bellegarde was such that Francis de Sales was able to respond to the duke's request, hesitatingly using the epithets 'my son' or 'monsignor my son', knowing full well that the duke was older than him. The pedagogical implication of spiritual direction is underlined by another significant image. After recalling the tiger's swift race to save her cub, moved by the power of natural love, he goes on to say:

And how much more willingly will a paternal heart care for a soul that it has found full of desire for holy perfection, carrying it on its breast, like a mother her child, without feeling the weight of the dear burden.

With regard to the people he directed, women and men, Francis de Sales also acted like a brother, and it is in this capacity that he often presented himself to the people who had recourse to him. Antoine Favre was constantly called 'my brother'. At first he addressed the Baroness de Chantal as '*madame*' (lady), but later he switched to 'sister', 'this name, which is the one by which the apostles and the first Christians used to express their mutual love'. A brother does not

command, he gives advice and practices fraternal correction.

But what best characterises the Salesian style is the friendly and reciprocal atmosphere that united the director and the directee. As André Ravier said so well, 'there is no true spiritual direction if there is no friendship, that is, exchange, communication, mutual influence'. It is not surprising that Francis de Sales loved his referents with a love that he witnessed to them in a thousand ways; it is surprising, instead, that he desired to be equally loved by them. With Jeanne de Chantal, the reciprocity became so intense as to sometimes turn 'mine' and 'yours' into 'ours': 'It is not possible for me to distinguish *mine* and *yours* in what concerns us is *ours*'.

Obedience to the director, but in an atmosphere of confidence and freedom

Obedience to the spiritual director is a guarantee against excesses, illusions and missteps made more often than not for one's own sake; it maintains a prudent and wise attitude. The author of the *Introduction* considered it necessary and beneficial, without resorting to it; 'humble obedience, so much recommended and so much practised by all the ancient devotees', is part of a tradition. Francis de Sales recommended it to the Baroness de Chantal with regard to her first director, but indicating the way to live it:

I greatly commend the religious respect you feel for your director, and I urge you to preserve it with great care; but I must also say one more word to you. This respect must undoubtedly induce you to persevere in the holy conduct to which you have so happily adapted yourself, but it must by no means impede or stifle the just liberty which the Spirit of God gives to whomever he possesses.

In any case, the director must possess three indispensable qualities: 'He must be full of charity, knowledge and prudence: if one of these three is lacking, there is danger' (*I* I 4). This does not seem to be the case with Mme de Chantal's first director. According to her biographer, Mother de Chaugy, he 'bound her to his direction' warning her never to think of changing it; they were 'inappropriate ties that kept her soul trapped, cooped up and without freedom'. When, after meeting Francis de Sales, she wanted to change her director, she was plunged into a sea of scruples. To reassure her, he showed her another way:

Here is the general rule of our obedience, written in very large letters: YOU MUST DO EVERYTHING OUT OF LOVE, AND NOTHING BY CONSTRAINT; YOU

MUST LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE. I leave you the spirit of freedom: not the one that excludes obedience, for then one would have to speak of the freedom of the flesh, but the one that excludes compulsion, scruple and haste.

The Salesian way is founded on the respect and obedience due to the director, without any doubt, but above all on confidence: 'Have the greatest confidence in him, together with sacred reverence, so that reverence does not diminish confidence and confidence does not impede reverence; trust him with the respect of a daughter towards her father, respect him with the confidence of a daughter towards her mother'. Confidence inspires simplicity and freedom, which foster communication between two people, especially when the one being directed is a fearful young novice:

I will tell you, in the first place, that you must not use words of ceremony or apology in my regard, for, by God's will, I feel for you all the affection you could desire, and I would not know how to forbid myself to feel it. I love your spirit deeply, because I think God wills it, and I love it tenderly, because I see you still weak and too young. Write to me, therefore, with all confidence and freedom, and ask all that seems useful for your good. And let this be said once and for all.

How should one write to the Bishop of Geneva? 'Write to me freely, sincerely, simply,' he said to one of the souls he directed. 'On this point, I have nothing more to say, except that you must not put *Monsignor* on the letter either alone or accompanied by other words: it is enough for you to put *Sir*, and you know why. I am a man without ceremony, and I love and honour you with all my heart.' This refrain returns frequently at the beginning of a new epistolary relationship. Affection, when it is sincere and especially when it has the good fortune to be reciprocated, authorises freedom and utmost frankness. 'Write to me whenever you feel like it,' he said to another woman, 'with full confidence and without ceremony; for this is how one should behave in this sort of friendship.' He told one of his correspondents: 'Do not ask me to excuse you for writing well or badly, because you owe me no ceremony other than that of loving me. This means speaking "heart to heart".' The love of God as well as the love of our neighbour makes us go on "in a good way, without a lot of fuss" because, as he put it, 'true love does not need a method'. The key to this is love, for 'love makes lovers equal', that is, love works a transformation in the people one loves, making them equal, similar and on the same level.

‘Every flower requires special care’.

While the goal of spiritual direction is the same for everyone, namely the perfection of the Christian life, people are not all the same, and it belongs to the skill of the director to know how to indicate the appropriate path for each person to reach the common goal. A man of his time, aware that social stratifications were a reality, Francis de Sales knew well the difference between the gentleman, the artisan, the valet, the prince, the widow, the girl and the married woman. Each, in fact, should produce fruit ‘according to his qualification and profession’. But the sense of belonging to a particular social group went well, in him, with the consideration of the peculiarities of the individual: one must ‘adapt the practice of devotion to the strengths, activities and duties of each one in particular’. He also believed that ‘the means to achieve perfection are different according to the diversity of vocations’.

The diversity of temperaments is a fact which must be taken into account. One can detect in Francis de Sales a ‘psychological flair’ that predates modern discoveries. The perception of the unique characteristics of each person is very pronounced in him and is the reason why each subject deserves special attention from the spiritual father: ‘In a garden, each herb and each flower requires special care. Like a father or mother with their children, he adapts to the individuality, temperament, and particular situations of each individual. To this person, impatient with himself, disappointed because he is not progressing as he would like, he recommends self-love; to this other, attracted by the religious life but endowed with a strong individuality, he advises a lifestyle that takes into account these two tendencies; to a third, wavering between exaltation and depression, he suggests peace of heart through the struggle against distressing imaginations. To a woman in despair because of her husband’s ‘spendthrift and frivolous’ character, the director will have to advise ‘the right means and moderation’ and the means to overcome her impatience. Another, a woman with a head on her neck, with an ‘all in one piece’ character, full of anxieties and trials, will need ‘holy sweetness and tranquillity’. Still another is distressed by the thought of death and often depressed: her director inspires her with courage. There are souls who have a thousand desires for perfection; it is necessary to calm their impatience, the fruit of their self-love. The famous Angélique Arnauld, abbess of Port-Royal, wanted to reform her monastery with rigidity: he needed to recommend flexibility and humility to her.

As for the Duke de Bellegarde, who had meddled in all the political and amorous intrigues of the court, the bishop encouraged him to acquire ‘a

masculine, courageous, invariable devotion to serve as a mirror to many, exalting the truth of heavenly love, worthy of reparation for past faults'. In 1613 he drew up a *Reminder for making a good confession*, containing eight general 'warnings', a detailed description 'of sins against the ten commandments', an 'examination concerning capital sins', 'sins committed against the precepts of the Church', a 'means of discerning mortal sin from venial sin', and finally 'means of turning the great away from the sin of the flesh'.

Regressive method

The art of direction of conscience very often requires the director to take a step back and leave the initiative to the recipient, or to God, especially when it comes to making choices that require a demanding decision. 'Do not take my words too literally,' he wrote to Baroness de Chantal, 'I do not want them to be an imposition on you, but that you retain the freedom to do what you think best. He wrote, for example, to a woman who was very attached to 'vanities':

When you left, it came into my mind to tell you that you should renounce musk and perfumes, but I restrained myself, in order to follow my system, which is gentle and seeks to await those movements which, little by little, the exercises of piety tend to arouse in souls who consecrate themselves entirely to divine Goodness. My spirit, in fact, is extremely friendly to simplicity; and the billhook with which it is customary to cut off useless suckers, I habitually leave in God's hand.

The director is not a despot, but one who 'guides our actions with his warnings and counsels', as he says at the beginning of the *Introduction*. He refrains from commanding when he writes to Madame de Chantal: 'These are good and suitable counsels for you, but not commands'. She would also say, at his canonisation process, that she sometimes regretted that she was not guided enough with commands. In fact, the role of the director is defined by the following response of Socrates to a disciple: 'I will therefore take care to return you to yourself better than you are'. As he always declared to Madame de Chantal, Francis had 'devoted himself', put himself at the 'service' of the 'most holy Christian freedom'. He fought for freedom:

You will see that I speak the truth and that I fight for a good cause when I defend the holy and lovable freedom of the spirit, which, as you know, I honour in a very special way, provided it is true and free from dissipation and libertinism, which

are nothing but a mask of freedom.

In 1616, during a retreat, Francis de Sales had the mother of Chantal do an exercise of ‘undressing’, to reduce her to ‘the lovely and holy purity and nakedness of children’. The time had come for her to take the step towards the ‘autonomy’ of the directee. He urged her, among other things, not to ‘take any nurse’ and not to keep telling him – he specified – ‘that I will always be her nurse’, and, in short, to be willing to renounce Francis’ spiritual direction. God alone suffices: ‘Have no other arms to carry you but God’s, no other breasts on which to rest but His and Providence. […] Think no more of the friendship or unity that God has established between us’. For Madame de Chantal the lesson is harsh: ‘My God! My true Father, whom you have cut deeply with your razor! Can I remain in this state of mind for long’? She now sees herself ‘stripped and naked of all that was most precious to her’. Francis also confesses: ‘And yes, I too find myself naked, thanks to Him who died naked to teach us to live naked’. Spiritual direction reaches its peak here. After such an experience, spiritual letters would become rarer and affection would be more restrained in favour of a wholly spiritual unity.