

PATRON OF WRITERS

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HAT were the great names in the French language and literature in the sixteenth century?" The interrogator was M. de Lacretelle, professor of history in the Faculty of the Sorbonne, one of an impressive row of nine noted professors examining a young man for the degree of Doctor of Literature. In his answer the young aspirant, whose name was Frederick Ozanam, placed St. Francis de Sales in the forefront; then, in chronological order, Rabelais, Montaigne, Charron, and the other noted masters of the pen. The professor, grown old in the University whose temper was then not too Catholic, immediately objected to the priority given the Savoyard Bishop. Ozanam ably defended himself, and parried other objections with equal success, so that M. de Lacretelle was forced to desist. St. Francis de Sales stayed in the first place. And Frederick Ozanam, founder of the novel Society of St. Vincent de Paul, after brilliantly defending his thesis on Dante, won his doctorate. That was on January 7, 1839. More than eighty years later, on January 26, 1923, Pius XI advised Catholic journalists and writers that St. Francis de Sales, "by his example, teaches them in no uncertain manner precisely how they should write"; and the Pontiff concluded his encyclical letter, *Rerum Omnium*, by proclaiming the Saint "Heavenly Patron of All Writers."

Urged on by these testimonies to the literary genius of the gentle Bishop of Geneva, the student of literature is naturally curious to know the secret of his prowess. Was he one of those few naturally gifted persons, facile of mind and pen, on whom Fate bestows that blessed leisure in which books are born? One must distinguish. There can be no doubt that Francis was singularly blessed with the ideas, imagination and ease of expression which produce classic writing. But on the other hand, as one reads through the two volumes of Burton's adaptation¹ from Abbé Hamon's *Vie de S. Francois de Sales*, with the record of ceaseless activity in prayer, meditation, preaching, acts of charity, controversy, letter-writing, episcopal administration and princely diplomacy, it is a wonder that

¹ Burton, Rev. Harold, *The Life of St. Francis de Sales* [New York, 1925 (Vol. I); 1929 (Vol. II)].

the Saint had any time to compose works of classic merit. He once wrote in a letter to the Bishop of Dol: "I am in a continual turmoil, incessantly caused by the varied business of this diocese, so that there is not a single day when I can turn to my poor books, which once I used to love so much, and which now I dare no longer love, lest I make still more cruel the divorce which separates me from them." Yet here and there in his life there are indications which when brought together form a composite of Francis the writer. Perhaps these will prove of interest and assistance to present-day apostles of the pen.

A strong indication of his character, and one significant for his writing career, is found in the rule of conduct which he drew up for himself when a student at Padua. "Before everything else," he wrote, "I will always place the exercise of preparation; I will make it at least once in a day, and that in the morning." In a sense, his success was the fruit of a long, sometimes imperceptible, preparation. M. Hamon points out that the very scenery of his boyhood, the picturesque neighborhood of Thorens, to the west of which extends a fertile valley, rich in beauteous treasures of nature, its sides sloping down towards the torrent of the Fier and the lake of Annecy, all impressed the youth's vivid imagination with illustrations which were to serve him so handsomely in his writings. Not only nature's book, "so open writ," but also those volumes containing the learning of men intrigued him. So avid was the young Francis to go to school that he enlisted his nurse's intercession with his parents, assuring her with amusing sincerity: "I have nothing to give you now, because I am so small, but when I am grown up and am my own master, I will have a beautiful dress of red ratteen made for you every year."

The precocious youth soon had his chance at schooling. It is recorded of him when a student of the college at Annecy that he made a collection in a notebook of all the striking passages that he read or heard, all the choice phrases or rhetorical epigrams such as might be useful in his later writing and preaching. He listened to the sermons of the best preachers, impressing on his memory the oratorical highpoints and the technique of composition as well as the truths expressed. That the young Francis was not a mere copyist in this regard is evident from his own preaching as Provost. He rid his sermons of the many Greek and Latin quotations, the pagan and mythological references, embellishments which were all too frequent in the labored sermons of his day. Even his father, the conservative M. de Boisy, complained, "There was more Latin and Greek quoted in one of those sermons than there is in ten of yours."

While he anxiously avoided literary superfluities, Francis was not unaware of the value of general culture. He read widely, not only ancient but modern works as well, the *Essays* of Montaigne being among his literary fare. He tried to broaden his mind with a wide knowledge, for the purpose of illustration and interest. Realizing that the day of popular Latin writing was on the wane, the young cleric exercised himself in the French style, of which M. Hamon remarks: "He is of the school of Montaigne and loves a language that is picturesque, vivid, and full of images. He does not care for the dry abstract style of Calvin and his school. He wants our language to keep its simplicity, its flexibility, its originality, and its liberty, and he will regulate himself upon those principles during the whole course of his life." Nor was this interest in style and imagery at the expense of more solid studies. The *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas was constantly open on his desk, while the tomes of the Fathers, particularly St. Cyprian, St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine, and St. Jerome were eagerly read by the studious theologian. He even penned several compositions, now lost, in imitation of St. Cyprian, whose rich, smooth style fascinated him. His devotion to the Sacred Scriptures enabled him to capture some of their startling simplicity and forcefulness, traits which made his addresses so irresistible to the Calvinists in later years, and so harassing to Protestant ministers of the Bible who, as Pope Pius noted, "were accustomed to warn their followers against being deceived and won over by the flatteries of the missionary from Geneva."

Shortly after his ordination to the priesthood, the zealous Provost of Annecy had occasion to apply his literary gifts. He had volunteered to penetrate the province of Chablais, stronghold of Calvinism, and though he had labored indefatigably he had but a few devout souls to show for all his efforts. He preached with concentrated zeal at Thonon, a town of the province, but either human respect or fear of the Protestant ministers kept the people from attending his sermons. Upon the suggestion of his friends the Saint resolved to reach the absentees by means of the written word. This was in 1595. He published leaflets containing apologetic material such as his sermons contained, written in the few free hours of his busy day, and these were posted in public places or circulated amongst various families. These scattered and sometimes fragmentary pieces were collected after Francis' death and comprised his first book, the *Controversies*. After stating his reasons for writing the series in his *Epistle to the Gentlemen of Thonon*, the Provost concludes: "Nevertheless, I must protest, for the relief of my conscience, that all these reasons had

never of themselves determined me to write: for writing is an art in itself, possessed only by the most learned and cultured intellects. One must be talented indeed in order to write well: more moderate minds should content themselves with speaking, in which method, gesture, voice and feature lend illumination to the spoken word. My talent, which is of the slightest or, at the very highest estimate, is on the lowest steps of the very ordinary, cannot possibly succeed in this employ." After this humble profession which is an unconscious tribute to his own genius, the apostle of Chablais adds these significant words, well worthy of the patron of writers: "I have, then, set out here a few of the principal arguments for the Catholic faith. . . . Let me assure you, moreover, that you will never have beneath your eyes a writing from the pen of a man more devoted to your spiritual service than am I."

In the *Controversies*, the Commissioners of Canonization in 1658 said that St. Athanasius, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine had done no better work in support and defense of the true faith. Nor did the Saint stop at this. He consigned to writing an account of the spiritual graces he received from God; he composed a dialogue on the dogmas and duties of Christians which was carried on publicly before a crowd of Catholics and Protestants in Thonon; in answer to a minister who proclaimed the Mass an idolatry, he wrote his *Simple Considerations on the Symbol of the Apostles for the Confirmation of the Catholic Faith with regard to the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar* (1597); in 1599, he published the *Defence of the Standard of the Holy Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ*; while his enormous correspondence punctuated every day of his life—letters to princes, to fellow clerics, to converts real and prospective, those exquisite epistles to Mme. de Chantal and Mme. de Charmois, which abound in spiritual and literary gems. His letter to André Fremiot, Archbishop of Bourges and brother of Mme. de Chantal, assumed the proportions of a treatise on preaching.

Out of the mass of his letters on spiritual subjects rose the famous *Introduction to the Devout Life*, of which Cardinal Wiseman exclaimed: "He could not make the narrow road a wide one—God forbid! But how many unnecessary briars has he not plucked out of it, how many a heavy stone has he not rolled aside from before our feet, how many a yawning chasm has he not bridged over for our secure passage, how many a dark nook and gloomy turn has he not lighted up by his cheerful torch! Has he not made meditation more easy, prayer more confident, confession less painful, communion more refreshing, scruples less annoying, temptations less formidable, the

world less dangerous, the love of God more practicable, and virtue more amiable?" Various friends are presented by the Saint's biographers as having urged the adaptation of his spiritual counsels for the use of the general public. That his letters to Mme. de Charmois contributed much to the first edition is quite certain, and there is a letter of his to Mme. de Chantal in which he asks her to bring him all the letters and memoranda which he had ever sent her, since they will help to make a fuller second edition such as his critics asked for. The work, which first appeared in 1609, was very well received, and five editions were brought out under the supervision of the Saint, the last appearing in 1619. The General of the Carthusians thought the *Devout Life* so perfect that he advised Francis never to write again; to which the modest author replied: "If God has deigned to bless this little book, why should He not grant His blessing to a second work?" And again, with a delightful turn: "If this little book has gained for me some sort of literary renown, I ought to build another of less worth to dissipate this incense, and to gain that blessed contempt from mankind which makes us all the more agreeable to God. . . ."

Fate was kinder to Francis than to some authors of one "best-seller." In 1616, he published a volume for souls on the way of perfection, the *Treatise of the Love of God*, a work which, in the opinion of M. Hamon, "placed the Bishop of Geneva amongst the most sublime thinkers of Christianity: and particularly was it this learned study which merited his being declared a Doctor of the Church by Leo XIII. . . ." The Carthusian General mentioned above now asked Francis never to cease writing again in the future. Pope Pius calls the *Treatise* "a veritable history of the love of God." Relative to its style, the Father of Christendom observes: "When necessary he even goes deeply into explanations of the most difficult problems as, for example, that of efficacious grace, predestination, and the gift of faith. This he does not do dryly but, by reason of the agile and well-stored mind which he possessed, in such a way that his discussions abound in most beautiful language and are filled with an equally desirable unction. He was also accustomed to illustrate his thoughts by an almost infinite variety of metaphors, examples, and quotations taken for the most part from the Holy Scriptures, all of which gave the impression that what he wrote flowed no less from his heart and the depths of his being than from his intellect."

That Francis de Sales, burdened though he was by many cares, was eager to do more writing is evident from his words to St. Jane Francis de Chantal in 1620: "O mother, whether Providence wills me to change my dwelling-place, or whether it leaves me here—it is

all one to me—shall I not be the better off for not having so much to do, in order that I may find breathing space in the Cross of our Lord and may write something for His glory?" In the year before his death he commissioned the Prior de Quoex at Talloires to build five or six cells to which he might retire some day and devote himself to prayer and the writing of books. "I will use this time of rest for the glory of God and the instruction of His people, in committing to paper the things that have been in my mind these thirty years, and of which I have made use in my sermons, instructions and private meditations. I have a great quantity of material in notes. . . ." He wanted to write a *History of Jesus Christ*, a work on the *Epistles* of St. Paul, a book on the Love of our Neighbor as sequel to that on the Love of God, and a series of pastoral letters to parish priests. But in the next year, 1622, death plucked the pen from the great Bishop's hand, and save for his collected *Letters*, and the *Spiritual Conferences* taken down by the Sisters of the Visitation, the literary world was denied more of his classic compositions.

The universal demand for his writings kept increasing though the hand that had penned them was stilled. We have seen that more than two centuries after his death Frederick Ozanam reckoned him the prince of early French literature, and another century saw him raised up as the patron of all writers, to teach them precisely how they should write. Pius XI has shown what lessons for literary neophytes are demonstrated by the Savoyard litterateur. "In the first place, and this is the most important of all," he says, "each writer should endeavor in every way, and as far as this may be possible, to obtain a complete comprehension of the teachings of the Church. They should never compromise where the truth is involved, nor, because of fear of possibly offending an opponent, minimize or dissimulate it." One thinks of Francis' comments in his letter on the work of the preacher: "Be in love with the doctrine which you are teaching and urging upon your hearers. The supreme art is to have no art." Knowledge, he was wont to say, is for a priest the eighth sacrament of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the Church's greatest evils have come from the fact that the ark of knowledge was found in other hands than those of the Levites.

Knowledge, however, is not enough. Once Francis picked up a book in which a laconic reader had written on the first page the words, *Fiat lux*—"Let there be light." The Saint thought the remark fitting, and confided to his friend, Msgr. Camus, Bishop of Belley: "The author has given several books to the public, but in not one of them is there any light. It is a great pity that one so learned is ignorant

of the art of expressing himself." Pope Pius accordingly continues that writers "should pay particular attention to literary style and should try to express their thoughts clearly and in beautiful language so that their readers will the more readily come to love the truth." The Bishop of Geneva was all for making doctrine appetizing and he urged others to follow suit. He wrote to a friend of literary tastes: "I must tell you that the knowledge I gain every day of the world's present tendencies makes me desire passionately that the Divine Goodness would inspire someone of His servants to write in accordance with the taste of that poor world. . . . After all, Sir, we are fishermen—and *fishers of men*. We ought then to use in our fishing not only care and labor and watching, but also attractions, ingenuities, baits, yes, even I venture to say, a kind of holy ruse." The episcopal penman was not adverse to a certain literary dressing, but he insisted that the dressing must not obscure the food. "I approve of making one's method clear and manifest, not hiding it in any way, as do some preachers, who think that it is a master-stroke to work in such a way that no one shall recognize their plan."

The Holy Father adds one more rule for writers: "When it is necessary to enter into controversy, they should be prepared to refute error and to overcome the wiles of the wicked, but always in a way that will demonstrate clearly that they are animated by the highest principle and moved only by Christian charity." Here again, Francis is the great exemplar. His life was one long series of controversies, won by the contagiousness of his gentleness and charity. His letter on preaching furnishes this maxim: "I like preaching which breathes rather the love of one's neighbor than indignation against him. And this is true even of the Huguenots, not flattering them indeed, but pitying them."

Writers anxious to serve the sterling cause of truth will find St. Francis de Sales a worthy patron. If they will but imitate his fidelity to doctrine, share that broadminded literary culture, that love for apt, beautiful expression which he fostered, and finally, if their pens flow with an abundance of charity, the cause of Christian literature will be greatly, and needfully, furthered. In Francis they will have met one who admirably measures up to Cardinal Newman's description of a great author:

"His page is the lucid mirror of his mind and life—

"He writes passionately, because he feels keenly; forcibly, because he conceives vividly; he sees too clearly to be vague; he is too serious to be otiose; he can analyze his subject, and therefore he is rich; he embraces it as a whole and in its parts, and therefore he is

consistent; he has a firm hold of it, and therefore he is luminous. When his imagination wells up, it overflows in ornament; when his heart is touched, it thrills along his verse. He always has the right word for the right idea, and never a word too much. If he is brief, it is because few words suffice; when he is lavish of them, still each word has its mark, and aids, not embarrasses the vigorous march of his elocution. He expresses what all feel, but all cannot say; and his sayings pass into proverbs among his people, and his phrases become household words and idioms of their daily speech, which is tessellated with the rich fragments of his language, as we see in foreign lands the marbles of Roman grandeur worked into the walls and pavements of modern palaces."²

² *The Idea of a University*, (London, 1888), pp. 292-3.