

Revolution in Charity

Chapter Two

THE UPSURGE OF MYSTICAL RELIGION

The consensus of opinion among historians of French religious sentiment is that late sixteenth century piety was characterized by formalism. Catholics in general, taking example from the Court, obeyed the Church law to the letter, but, as Strowski put it, this law was considered “applicable on in certain predetermined cases which had no pretensions to penetrate the heart of man in order to make him better and holier. The religious obligation is enclosed within certain hours and walls. The hour struck, the threshold passes, the believer has paid his debt; religion has nothing more to do with him... life goes on elsewhere.”¹ Among educated people, the standard of conduct appears to have been human rather than divine wisdom; the inspiration of philosophy took precedence over that of Christ.²

The French Church was, from the point of view of discipline, in an extremely bad way. There is no doubt that bishop’s evaded residence requirements, ecclesiastical benefices were accumulated in incompetent hands, and the lower clergy was often ignorant and lax in the fulfillment of its duties, if not immoral in its conduct.

As late as 1617, when Vincent de Paul too possession of his first country parish, Chatillon-les-Dombes, he found it in deplorable condition. Most of the principal citizens were Huguenots; no attempts had been made to convert them. There were no monks or nuns-only six old priests living in a confraternity in scandalous fashion. Public as well as private morality was remarkably low. Upon the death of the incumbent Cure, the local count, in great disgust, had turned to the Oratory in order to obtain a more worthy replacement. Vincent de Paul was recommended for the post. When he arrived in town, he found the parish house in ruins, so that he had to accept the hospitality of the Huguenots.³ The report of these conditions was made by an investigator at the first canonization trial of Vincent de Paul; there is nothing in it to suggest that the situation was in any way singular.

Added to such disorders were widespread accounts of relaxed religious houses filled with wayward monks and nuns. This state of affairs was not confined to France; things were the same in the neighboring Duchy of Savoy. In 1598 Francis de Sales, the Coadjutor to the Bishop of Geneva, petitioned Rome to send a visitor-general with legatine powers to Savoy, in order to reform the convents and monasteries there-for it was no longer possible to tell the difference

¹ Fortunat Strowski, *Saint Fracois de Sales* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1989), p. 38.

² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³ St. Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, P. Coste, ed. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1925), Vol. 13, pp. 45-47.

between secular and regular clergy.⁴ The ancient rules were not observed too closely, especially where the community of material goods and a strict enclosure were concerned.⁵ As Bremond has pointed out, however, “With some rare exceptions, our abbeys did not become pleasure gardens, for the simple reason that many among them had not a penny left.”⁶

Religious houses had indeed been hard to hit by the disorders of the civil wars. Discipline had to be restored along with material means of support, and a general reform was indicated. For such a radical step, the compelling force of spiritual renewal was necessary. Yet sixteenth century France showed no signs of that mystical and missionary fervor which was so active in Spain and Italy.⁷

What mysticism there was in France existed mainly in the camp of the *religion pretendue reformee*? The need for an intense spirituality was, in fact, felt by Catholics, but it generally served to turn them away from a Church which had become a suspect through flirtations with pagan naturalism.⁸ Sympathy for the *religion pretendue reformee* therefore became widespread among thoughtful people until, after the Colloquy of Poissy in 1561, it appeared that the chasm between Catholics and Huguenots was unbridgeable, and that the Protestants might even present a danger to the state.⁹ Orthodox mysticism then was scattered among isolated, often obscure individuals. Although it was subterranean, the impulse towards a deeper piety seems to have been pervasive, gathering momentum with time, until it came to fruition late in the century.

With the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes, religion became more a matter of theological than of political concern. As Dom Mackey put it, after decades of tribulation, “souls turned with an irresistible movement towards the consolations of the interior life.”¹⁰ This was the time when new Orders were founded in France, and the old ones reformed, when a wave of spirituality seemed to sweep the land.¹¹

The New Jerusalem did not rise overnight from the preceding disorders. Clerical reforms were slow incoming; as we have seen above, the Decrees of Trent were universally adopted by the French clergy as late as 1615. The reform of religious Orders became widespread much earlier. The Jesuits, who had been accused of political intrigue and expelled in 1595, were fully reinstated in 1603 and with renewed intensity taught a more spiritual religious practice to both laity and clergy. As early as 1574, Catherine of Medicis had called the Capuchin Minorities to

⁴ St. Francois de Sales, *Oeuvres de...*, Mackey, Navatel, etc., eds. (Annecy: Imprimerie J. Neirat, 1932), Vol. 22, pp. 198-199.

⁵ Henri Bremond, *Histoire Litteraire du Sentiment Religieux en France* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1916), Vol. 2, p. 401.

⁶ *Loc. Cit.*

⁷ L. Cristiani, *L'Englise a l'Epoque du Concile de Trente* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1948), p. 362.

⁸ Fortunat Strowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ St. Francis de Sales, *op. cit.*, Vol. 13, p. x.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. x-xi, and Henri Bremond, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 318, 336.

France, where in the course of the years they attracted much popular attention by the fervent simplicity of their chant, service, and general manner of life.¹²

Among the reforms of established Order, that of the Benedictines was one of the most sweeping. A whole generation of young women, all the nobility and generally brought up in the convents they later directed, renewed the inner validity of the religious life of the Order. They “seemed to have transferred to the spirit the fixed and rigorous discipline which had formerly been reserved for the body.”¹³

The introduction of the Discalced Carmelites into France was, however, an even more impressive and influential phenomenon. While traveling in Spain from 1582 to 1586 Jean de Bretigny- or, as he was later known, Jean de Quintanadoine- was deeply struck by the teaching of Teresa of Avila. He was the French nobility, young, with a pronounced tendency towards the spiritual life. The austerity of the Carmelite convents, their dedication to contemplation and mental prayer, greatly appealed to him. In 1588 he financed the first Spanish edition of Teresa’s complete works;¹⁴ he was also her first translator into French.¹⁵ Not content with this, he regretted that France had no religious Order equal to the Discalced Carmelites in their mystical devotion, a lack which he considered lamentable.

Nor was Quintanadoine the only one to arrive at such a thought. In Paris, from the 1590’s on, there flourished a circle of ecclesiastical and lay devotees of the spiritual life, centering about the renowned mystic, Madame Acarie. Madame Acarie had been, to all appearances, a simple bourgeoisie, until, early in her marriage, she became subject to mystical experience. These provoked likely hostilities on the part of her relatives- and especially of her husband, a prosaic lawyer- but her ecstasies were finally certified to be genuine and orthodox by leading theologians. From that time on, Madame Acarie acquired an unparalleled eminence in Parisian religious society.¹⁶ Pierre de Berulle was one of her intimates, and Francis de Sales was for a short time her confessor. It was her decision that was instrumental in bringing the Carmel to France.

Soon after Quintanadoine’s translation of the works of Teresa of Avila had appeared, someone read an excerpt from her.¹⁷ Naturally enough, she felt a close affinity with Teresa. The idea came to her, as it had come to Quintanadoine, that France stood in need of Carmelite spirituality. It would not suffice to import the rules and constitutions of the reformed Order; if it was to be founded in the true spirit, Spanish nuns must be obtained as well-preferably nuns trained by Teresa herself.

¹² *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 140-141.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

¹⁵ This translation was published in 1601, according to Dom Mackey in the *Oeuvres de Saint Francois de Sales*, Vol. 13, p. 117, note 1.

¹⁶ Henri Bremond, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 190 ff.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

Thus Quintanadoine's project gained new supporters and new force. Madame Acarie interested Marie de Medicis in the affair; Madame de Longueville was persuaded to act as foundress. Berulle and Michel de Marillac, the future Chancellor, worked on the preliminaries, while Francis de Sales also exerted himself to further the enterprise. Berulle accompanied Quintanadoine to Spain in 1604. After no end of trouble they returned with a group of handpicked Spanish nuns, every one of whom fully expected to be martyred by the French barbarians.¹⁸

Their expectations were happily deceived; the newcomers from Spain were received with acclamations, and were soon deluged with postulants. Already in 1605, De Sales wrote to Quintanadoines that he was extremely pleased with the happy news of the progress made by the monasteries of holy Mother Teresa.¹⁹ By 1644, there were fifty-five houses of the Discalced Carmelites in France; their influence on the spirituality of other religious Orders in France was proportionately great. The Carmelites even gained great influence among the people, although respect for the Orders was certainly mixed with superstition. Since the nuns were mystics, they were credited with the gift of prophecy. Marie de Medicis importuned then continually to tell her the outcome of various Court conspiracies, until she was summarily discouraged by Mother Marguerite Acarie, a daughter of the celebrated Madame Acarie.²⁰ While the siege of La Rochelle was in progress, Richelieu also sent regularly to the Carmelites-to implore their prayers and to find out what measures the English were likely to take.²¹

Another significant institution was founded in the early years of the seventeenth century-the French Oratory. The Congregation of the Oratory had its origin in Italy, where Phillip Neri in 1554 gathered about him a group of clergy desirous of sanctifying their lives and consequently their ministry by meditation and discourse on spiritual subjects. In 1600, Pierre de Berulle, already admitted to the priesthood, underwent a conversion. He was no longer content merely to be a member of the secular clergy, but he felt no vocation for any religious Order. He seemed to be called rather to a change of spirit within his estate.²² The need was filled by an organization on the model of Neri's Oratory, although Berulle's Congregation of the Oratory differed from the earlier one in several respects. It had no general superior; its houses were independent of one another, and its members were bound only by temporary vows. The end, nevertheless, was the same-to enable secular priests to attain greater spirituality in their calling by means of a life in community, with strong emphasis on mental prayer.²³ Mere punctiliousness in adherence to

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-297.

¹⁹ St. Francis de Sales, *op. cit.*, Vol. 13, pp. 118-119.

²⁰ Henri Bremond, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 359.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 330, 353-354.

²² *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 16-18.

²³ L. Cristiani, *op. cit.*, Vol. 16, p. 136.

dogma and practice had not been enough in Berulle's eyes; piety had to be intimately associated with the letter of the law.

The new institute soon branched out all over France. Its effectiveness was unquestionable. Francis de Sales, writing in 1614 to Father Nicolas Soulfour of the Oratory to encourage the foundation of a house in Tours, expressed the highest esteem for the Congregation.²⁴ In 1617 he wrote directly to his old acquaintance, Pierre de Berulle, requesting the establishment of a house in his diocese, and giving full details as to the revenues available and the low cost of living in the area.²⁵ The project was not realized in his lifetime, but he continued to send likely postulants to the Paris Oratory, with letters of recommendation to Berulle.

How had Francis de Sales come to be associated with the principal developments in French religion? He was, after all, a subject of the Duke of Savoy, and relations between France and the Duchy were not always cordial. In fact, De Sales' close relations with French ecclesiastics and statesmen, the invitation he received to preach in Paris, Dijon, Grenoble and other French cities, more than once roused the suspicions of his sovereign. In 1609, for example, the Bishop had cause to complain bitterly to a friend of the degrading servitude in which he found himself.²⁶ Such shadows, however, were not in evidence seven years before, when he had been sent to the Court of Henry IV to obtain the reestablishment of public Catholic worship in the territory of Gex—a part of the diocese of Geneva recently annexed by France. The Calvinists also had their representatives at Court, to defend their predominant position in the area in question. De Sales at the time was a young man of thirty-five, coadjutor to the Bishop of Geneva. On what grounds had he been chosen to execute such a delicate diplomatic mission?

Francis de Sales was born on August 21, 1567, the eldest son in a family of old Savoyard nobility. His parents were pious in the traditional way, but Francis early showed a disposition for a deeper spirituality. He was educated first by the Jesuits in Paris and later at the University of Padua, where he studied law to please his father and theology to please himself. He was a subject for a great wonder to his fellow students, for, without seeming arrogant, he held himself aloof from the pleasures usually to be found in university towns. He finished his courses brilliantly, obtaining a doctorate in both canon and civil law. On November 24, 1592, he was duly received at bar by the Senate of Savoy. His father was naturally delighted; he proceeded to arrange a suitable marriage for his son. At this point, Francis balked. Things had gone far enough; it was time to reveal his long-cherished desire to enter the priesthood. Since all opposing arguments were met with quiet but firm resolution, the father finally acquiesced. Francis de Sales was ordained a sub-deacon, deacon, and priest over a period of seven months in 1593. Almost

²⁴ St. Francis de Sales, *op. cit.*, Vol. 16, p. 136.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 18, pp. 60-61.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 14, p. 182.

immediately he was formally installed as Canon and Provost of the Cathedral Chapter of Annecy-Bishop of Geneva felt very fortunate to have a man of such extraordinary piety as Francis de Sales among his clergy. Nor were his hopes disappointed.

Annecy had become the Episcopal residence after the Calvinist had taken over Geneva. The people were fairly pious; they especially loved processions. Religion did not, however, seem to influence their lives very deeply.²⁷ Francis de Sales determined to do something about this. In September 1593, even before his final ordination, he established a new confraternity, the Penitents of the Holy Cross. Membership was open to both clergy and laity. The Penitents were to serve as edifying examples of fervor in interior life and exterior works, in order to raise the standards of piety. They were obliged to frequent the Sacraments, to catechize children and country people, to visit and console prisoners and the sick, and to avoid the bane of society and of fraternal charity-the lawsuit.²⁸ The Confraternity indeed flourished; it spread rapidly, not only in the bishopric of Annecy-Geneva, but in neighboring diocese as well.²⁹

The young Provost turned out to be an indefatigable preacher. He never refused an invitation to deliver a sermon. This was highly unusual; his father went so far as to reproach him on occasion for what he considered excessive, unbecoming zeal.³⁰ In the circumstances, it was not surprising that De Sales was chosen in 1594 to lead an expedition for the recon version of the Chablais, recovered from the Genevans some years before. He labored there during four long years, often in danger of losing his life either at the hands of the Calvinists or in the mountains and rivers. In 1597 he even smuggled himself into the stronghold-Geneva-to debate with Beza. The discussion took place; Beza was impressed, but nothing further came of the encounter. The mission as a whole, however, was eminently successful. By 1598, Catholicism was again established in the Chablais. Duke Charles-Emmanuel was rebuilding churches, subsidizing parish priests, and establishing a Jesuit college in Thonon. Francis de Sales himself had been appointed coadjutor and thereby presumptive successor to Bishop Granier. It was in the fall of 1602, shortly after the trip to France, that Francis became Bishop of Geneva.

When he was sent to France, therefore, he had already acquired a considerable reputation for sanctity of life, pastoral zeal, and diplomatic tact. He acquitted himself very ably to his task at Court. Catholic worship in the territory of Gex was to be placed under the protection of the French Crown. While De Sales was in Paris, however, he eagerly noted all the religious ferment that was going on there. Through the Acarie circle he met the leading figures in the spiritual renaissance. He not only made acquaintances which connected him intimately with French religious developments for the rest of his life, but he also became fully cognizant of his own knowledge of souls and powers of direction.

²⁷ Francis Trochu, *Saint Francois de Sales* (Paris: Librairie Catholique Emmanuel Vitte, 1946), Vol. 1, p. 264.

²⁸ St. Francis de Sales, *op. cit.*, Vol. 24, pp. 352-362.

²⁹ Francis Trochu, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, pp. 264-267

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 286-287.

What were the characteristics of the movement with which De Sales came in contact in 1602, to which he himself had already contributed and was to contribute much more? They were mental prayer, and meditation—a great novelty not only to the laity but also to persons in religion. When the abbess of one Benedictine convent wished to introduce the practice of spiritual meditation, the nuns refused to accept it until she had devoted herself to it for one year, with no ill effects.³¹ The fear of the nuns was not altogether without substance, for mental prayer is the first step in the mystic way—a road full of unknown dangers and not much traveled at any time. It nevertheless became increasingly popular during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Almost all the great mystics were then translated, from Dionysius the Areopagite to Teresa of Avila; together with modern manuals of method, the classics of mysticism enjoyed an enormous vogue.³²

It is always well to define the word mysticism wherever it is used. Bremond's explanation of the term is particularly clear. "We understand by mysticism that natural disposition which leads certain souls to seize directly, lovingly, by a sort of sudden constriction, the spiritual elements hidden beneath material appearances."³³

In practice, the mystic divides the human faculties into three areas—the zone of the senses, the domain of reason, and the apex of the soul where God makes himself felt directly. The will operates outside of but in conjunction with the first two. When a soul is called to mystical prayer, it becomes the task of will so to concentrate upon the highest that the faculties of reason and emotion gradually act only as instruments for the Divine Master. This state of perfection is reached by a series of definite steps. In a person who has attained it as far as humanly possible, every merely human attachment is completely annihilated. At the highest point, the will itself is paralyzed in what is known as the ligature; then the soul can no longer pray actively but is called to the prayer of quiet, or infused contemplation.³⁴

Various physical manifestations often accompany the spiritual ecstasy. Probably this is one of the reasons why mysticism has been associated with mental pathology by many learned persons. It has been suggested, for example, that mystics such as Teresa of Avila were afflicted with some form of psychological derangement. So far there has been no definite proof of that diagnosis; indeed, the evidence to the contrary is often very striking. In the circumstances it seems reasonable to state that mystics are individuals with an extraordinary capacity for love who, seeing nothing at all on earth to satisfy them, refuse to compromise and pursue the absolute even though it means self-annihilation. For the keynote of mysticism is love; the mystic is engulfed in love, and the external world is transformed by it. Just as the trees are greener, the sky is bluer and all people seem good to human lovers, so far the mystic everything he sees is infused

³¹ Henri Bremond, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 439-440.

³² *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 19 and Vol. 2, p. 6, note 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 517.

³⁴ R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 246.

with the wonderful joy of God. The self is forgotten in the divine element which is manifested to the soul either directly or through animate and inanimate creation.

This is not to say that everyone who read the mystics at the turn of the sixteenth century came anywhere near the state of perfection. Many did, but in the main mysticism was, as it were, filtered down to the body of the faithful in a more accessible form. Precisely the early seventeenth century saw a theological development of this sort, initiated by Pierre de Berulle. Bremond has summarized it as theocentrism.³⁵ While Berulle was not the first to say that attention should go primarily to God and secondary to the rewards promised to believers, he was systematic in his teaching by the Oratory. The Church has always maintained that the end of man is God. In practice these words has been interpreted by all but saints mean that God exists for the sake of man. The concept which had been implicit before was cast into an explicit intellectual formulation within the grasp of everyone.³⁶

In order to possess inner validity, theocentrism must be combined with love. It follows that from this union all religious practices, such as attendance at the Sacraments to charity to the poor, receive new significance quite apart from their value as passports to Paradise. Pierre de Berulle was not, however, the great preacher of divine love in his time. That place was reserved for Francis de Sales.

³⁵ Henri Bremond, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, pp. 24 ff.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.