Francis de Sales, accompanied by his tutor, Monsieur Déage, a steward and a personal servant, set out for Paris sometime in the late summer of 1580 or 1581 so as to reach the city in time for the opening of the scholastic year at the beginning of October. Sons of noble houses in Savoy were not allowed to leave the country for their education without the duke’s permission. The official pass had already been obtained together with that for his three elder cousins who had left Brens for Paris two or three years earlier. It was dated 1579. Before setting out, Francis was given his sword, the sign of his standing, and he himself chose a personal motto, the one which he kept all his life: *non excidet*, a prayer, the powerful and complex word “excidere” implying: “may he not fail in his attempt, perish, be lost.” It was his already characteristic response to the general atmosphere of adulation and high hope which surrounded his setting out.

The journey took about a fortnight, partly on horseback and partly by boat along the Rhône and the Loire, the great towns through which they passed being Lyons, Bourges, and Orléans. The road from Orléans to Paris was the only stretch of highroad in France which was paved all the way at that time, and it was along this ancient Roman highway leading straight to the Quartier Latin on the left bank of the Seine that the travelers entered Paris through the gate of Saint Jacques. The college to which Francis was to go, that of Clermont, was situated in this same rue de Saint Jacques not far from the gate, and the house where he lived at first, the Hôtel de la Rose Blanche, was almost opposite. Adjoining it was the Sorbonne, the college which had given its name to the whole theological faculty of the University of Paris. The road sloped more steeply to the river then than it does now. Steps led down the hill, and on either side of the highroad, behind the shops clustered onto the main academic buildings, narrow alleyways led from one
college to another, a network of paths replacing the older ways which had traversed the vineyards once situated on the Mont Saint Geneviève in Gallo-Roman and Merovingian times.

No sooner had Francis ungirded his sword in the hostelry where the party had put up on arrival than he at once asked to be directed to the college of the Jesuit fathers, saluted the perfect of studies and make his petition to be taken on as a student. He was well received and at once liked. Clermont College had been the boy’s own independent choice, and this was the first time that he had broken away from the paths decreed by family counsel. His cousins had gone to the College of Navarre, a short walk from Clermont and situated where the Ecole Polytechnique is now. It had seemed a matter of course to monsieur de Boisy that Navarre was the right choice; for Savoyard noblemen. Navarre followed Annecy rather like King’s College followed Eton. It was among the most aristocratic of all, the academy par excellence of the French nobility; it was just what Francis’ father wished for his eldest son who was to make the right contacts. But it was also true, as Francis had found out from older friends and possibly from his cousin Louis who had an outlook similar to his own, that there was much irregular, even debauched living at this and other colleges, that Clermont was one of the few places where teachers and pupils were not morally suspect and where decent, devout behavior was the rule. This college too had its share of students from among the nobility, and quite apart from that Francis was attracted by what he had heard of Jesuit teaching methods.

The “Company” was then in its first vigor. The founder had only been dead some twenty-five years when Francis went to Paris. Jesuit schools had spread rapidly all over Europe, and the particular programme of religious humanism which they made their aim was a talking point even in Savoy. Chambéry, the former capital of the duchy, had a Jesuit college. Francis, not wanting to affront his father and his uncle, the head of the family, felt that a considerable amount of tact was called for in explaining his preference. He put the whole thing to his mother, telling her too of his real fear of being influenced by his own strong impulses and by bad example: “Tu es inclin au mal,” he had said to himself. She understood his fear, then spoke “so persuasively and effectively” to her husband that he too began to see the point and finally gave his parental blessing for Clermont.

In his speech of thanks to the Senate of the University of Padua after his doctorate was conferred on him ten years later, Francis spoke with affection of Paris as a most flourishing university. “It was here,” he said, “that I first applied myself to the humanities and then to philosophy in all its aspects; and my task was made all the easier and more fruitful because this university is so addicted, as one might say, to philosophy and theology, that its very walls and rooftops seem to join in philosophical discussion.” An immensely lively and stimulating atmosphere had for centuries been the hall-mark of the University of Paris which had, in the past, attracted the finest intellects of Europe. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the peak of its reputation; a certain decline set in during the course of the following century when intellectual leadership in Europe had gone to Italy, the country least disturbed by the Reformation, or rather where the Renaissance had to some extent played the role of the Reformation. From about the middle of the sixteenth century the decline had been arrested to some degree by the foundation of the Collège Royal directly by the crown, and then by the more gradual emergence of Clermont, dating from 1563. It was the aim of both these colleges to convey and extend the best humanist
tradition of the Renaissance, and in the case of Clermont, the object was expressly to christianize
the humanism, that is, to apply the principles and spirit of the Counter-Reformation to the
upbringing and education of the young, making the two great pagan cultures of the ancient world
serve the faith. What did this mean in practice, and what was the form of training which Francis
de Sales received at Clermont for the next eight years?

We are told that first of all, for three or four years, he continued the humanities which he had
already begun at Annecy and which led up to rhetoric. In 1584 at the age of seventeen he was
promoted to philosophy, remaining in this class for the last four years of his stay in Paris. At the
end of this course he was pronounced “proficient in the humanities” but had no degree on paper
as the Jesuits in France were at that time forbidden to give official academic degrees. This was a
merely formal prohibition which deceived no one. During the last years of Francis’ stay he also
attended theology lectures at the Sorbonne together with his tutor, himself a student of theology,
whose notebooks he in any case read throughout the years, avidly absorbing this and every other
form of knowledge which presented itself. Theology was, however, a graduate field, together
with law, medicine, and music, this being the traditional arrangement of subjects at the medieval
university which was still current in Europe throughout the sixteenth and a part of the
seventeenth century. At Clermont Francis had not yet begun to specialize officially.

It is commonplace among the biographers to say that as a writer he owed a great deal to his
humanist education at Clermont, but to substantiate this we are given little more than the names
of his classes and of the men, well known in their time but now long forgotten, who were his
teachers. We are told that he learnt how to write and to speak eloquently. It seems worthwhile
to take a rather closer look at the curriculum he followed during these seven or eight years, to see
how his training was organized and how its general spirit and even to some extent its concrete
detail might have influenced a future writer.

Francis was one of 1200 pupils at Clermont. The number had risen to 1500 by the time he left,
and although many of these boys became statesmen and ecclesiastics of note, very few are
remembered as writers. It is true that Molière and Voltaire followed Francis de Sales in the same
school later on, but this is not mentioned as a proof that the Clermont form of teaching
automatically produced results. Just as Milton as a poet and writer is, however, unthinkable
without the background of seventeenth century scholastic learning at Cambridge, much though
he personally disapproved of it, so Francis de Sales’ whole cast of mind and the nature and
structure of his literary work could not have come into being without the *Ratio Studiorum* of this
early Jesuit school. Because of the highly centralized nature of the Company and its systematic
documentation at every stage, there is ample evidence about the detail of the curriculum
followed at Clermont in Francis’ time. It will be described in outline insofar as it may be
considered relevant to the study of Francis de Sales as a writer.

The official foundation of the Society of Jesus goes back to 1540. When St. Ignatius died in
1556, there were already more than seventy schools and seminaries, and by the time Clermont
was opened in 1563, developing into a school from a house of studies for Jesuits working at the
Sorbonne, the plan of education at the school already had a systematic shape. The college was
named after the Bishop of Clermont, Guillaume du Prat, who had housed Ignatius’ students in
his own home and had left money for them to buy another property after his death. This was the
Hôtel de Langres in the rue de Saint Jacques, a fifteenth-century building of severe aspect with high, forbidding walls toward the street but unexpectedly pleasant within, having a large court and a garden with a well of its own. The establishment of the college aroused immediate opposition on the part of the Sorbonne and of parliament; education there was free, as laid down by the founder, and from the beginning these excellent new teachers attracted large numbers. Their sober, strict way of life and the general sense of ordered discipline and hard work amounted to an implied criticism of what was going on in most of the neighboring establishments in the Quartier Latin. The Jesuits were forbidden to call the school by their own name and so they adopted that of their benefactor. In the seventeenth century it enjoyed the high favor of Louis XIV and was named after him. Remodeled considerably, the building still stands in the same spot, and is still one of the most renowned schools in Paris, the Lycée Louis le Grand, now run by the state.

It was never the intention of the Jesuits to be innovators or revolutionaries in education; they simply wanted to ensure sound traditional instruction on scholastic lines. As the administrative center of the Company was in Rome, and many of the earliest members were Italian, they were naturally influenced by the Italian court and city schools which were in a leading position in Europe. Their humanist ideal was that laid down by Quintilian; a truly educated man was one who could express himself with sincerity, readiness, and persuasiveness on the entire circle of knowledge, that is, classical, or Greek and Latin knowledge. For there was no other. The Jesuits absorbed this basic ideal into their general aim of preparing educated apostles of Christ’s Kingdom on earth by means of a harmonious development of intellect and will, mind and spirit. Apart from the overall spiritual training, the means by which this was achieved was the teaching of the humanities, a training of the literary faculties. The student’s reasoning powers were developed and his mind furnished with knowledge so that by applying logic to facts he was in a position to express his thoughts as accurately and perfectly as possible. Expression and communication were the final aim. The ethical and moral aspects of this training ensured that what was expressed and communicated served, ultimately, to extend the sphere of Christian influence.

As it seemed essential to the Company to coordinate instruction in its various schools, a number of provisional schemes were drawn up from the beginning. This resulted in the first printed plan, or the *Ratio Studiorum*, published in Rome in 1586, that is, while Francis was actually at Clermont. It was worked out by a committee of six, the representative for France, it is pleasant to remember being a Scotsman, James Tyrie (1543-97), who had taught at Paris. After criticism had been submitted from every school in Europe, and after further suggestions from experts in the leading Roman college itself, the *Ratio* was redrafted and given two further editions in 1591 and 1599. The alterations concerned detail and local variations; the essential lines of instruction were unchanged from the time Francis was at Clermont.

The humanistic curriculum was divided into five main sections, three lower, or grammar classes, followed by the humanities class and finally by rhetoric. Philosophy, the next class, was already a distinct subject though not yet a graduate specialized field. Graduate studies were not represented at Clermont but they were professed at the Jesuit universities of Pont-à-Mousson in Lorraine, and at Ingolstadt in Bavaria. The syllabus of the Ratio had developed out of the older scholastic educational scheme of the seven liberal arts arranged as the Trivium (grammar,
dialectics, rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy). This still pertained in the universities unaffected by humanist changes, and constituted the arts faculty which was only preparatory to the three main ones, theology, law, and medicine. In the Jesuit schools no age groups were fixed; promotion depended entirely on progress, but a boy could reckon to reach rhetoric at the age of about seventeen, as Francis did, and then spend three or four years in philosophy. He was not considered ready to specialize before the age of twenty-one.

It would be true to say that his preparatory, non-specialist studies on the Italian Jesuit model were exceptionally long and thorough, which was of the greatest possible advantage to a man whose life was to be spent largely in speaking, preaching, and writing. The fostering of these capacities was the great aim of this system. Latin and Greek served as the medium through which the pupil learnt the use of his own mother tongue, at that time not yet considered a sufficiently developed and cultured medium for the purpose of actual training. In every other way the vernacular had already been firmly established by the Renaissance.

The object of the grammar classes was to achieve accurate simple Latin, to be written and spoken proprie et pure et absque vitio. Latin was begun with an actual grammar composed by one of the Jesuits; in the middle and upper sections of grammar there was Vives’ De Exercitatione Linguae Latinae (also used at the English court at that time). A beginning was made on the easier letters of Cicero and on his De Amicitia or De Senectute, and there might be a selection from Terence or from Virgil’s Eclogues. In the humanities at the age of fourteen or fifteen, Greek was begun. There was greater concentration on matters of style which was to be copia et elegantia, and there was also more poetry, for instance the third book of Horace’s Odes, the Ars Poetica, Ovid’s De Tristibus and De Ponte, while Cicero’s letters, together with Caesar’s Gallic Wars still formed the staple diet. To this was added, for light relief, Erasmus’ guide on letter writing, De Conscribendis Epistolis. For Greek there was above all Aesop’s book of fables, also Aristophanes’ Pluto, and other works, carefully edited in the interests of decency. In fact, Greek was under a slight cloud in Paris as a whole towards the end of the sixteenth century, since it was closely identified with the name Erasmus who was considered theologically suspect as a forerunner of Luther. There was still more Greek at Clermont than elsewhere in Paris except at the Collège Royal, but it remains true to say that Greek appears to have had little real influence on Francis de Sales. It never became a part of his mental horizon in the way that Latin did, and what does remain of Greek culture in his works reached him largely through the medium of Latin. The aim in the rhetoric class was eloquentia perfecta contendo esse Ciceroni aequalem, the concept of eloquentia having a far wider connotation than our equivalent idea of surface polish. It embraced the whole man and his general culture by which he could express and put across to the world the spiritual and intellectual thought content of his mind. The pupil now proceeded to Cicero’s orations, to Quintilian’s works on oratory, to further historical authors in both Latin and Greek. Lucian’s dialogues also found a place as a form of relaxation from sterner studies.

In philosophy there was a radical change, as here the subject matter became for the first time an end in itself; and in order to help the student to deal consciously with the influx of new material, and ethics, he was introduced to the systematic organization of his thought by means of logic. He was actually taught how to think and be aware of the mechanism of his thought process, to
link his judgements into a sequence by means of analogy, relation, and especially by syllogisms where a new conclusion followed naturally from a previously known factor common to two earlier statements. Logic in the first philosophy year was paired with the elements of Euclid, especially geometry, and with introductory physics, this not being the current narrower field of the properties of matter and energy, but the study of natural phenomena in general, such as zoology, biology, plant life as well as cosmology. This last was the theory of the universe being an ordered whole governed by definite laws and by a supreme lawgiver, God. The second philosophy year saw the continuation of mathematics and science and the beginning of metaphysics, that is, especially psychology as the study of the relationship between soul and body, the way in which the intellect works and the method of operation of the five senses. Metaphysics in the final year was continued by the study of moral philosophy and ethics, this being not so much distinctions between right and wrong, or moral rules, but the discovery of what form of life is conducive to man’s highest good, what virtues lead to his greatest happiness and fulfillment. Aristotle’s *Organon, Physics* and *Metaphysics* were read in the Latin translations of Italian humanist scholars who had given his treatises these names; they were studied in conjunction with their Christian exegesis and commentary, the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

By what methods was this comprehensive scheme of literary education implemented at Clermont, and what was the actual aspect of the lessons and lectures Francis de Sales attended for these seven or eight years? The most striking thing about the practical side of Jesuit teaching was that although the system was supple and could be adapted in its detail to local conditions, nothing about the main outline and method was left to chance. It was a judicious blend of actual teaching and of training the pupil to learn on his own. There were five hours of class instruction every day, divided equally between morning and afternoon, the actual points of time being fixed by local custom. In Paris the first lesson began at seven o’clock with the *praefectio* by the teacher. This was the direct predecessor of the French *explication de texte*, and popularizing this humanist method was one of the most notable contributions which the Company made to education in general. The teacher first read aloud the new subject matter, for example one of Cicero’s letters or part of an Eclogue of Virgil, then commented on the grammatical structure, the literary content and form, in accordance with the models given by the *Ratio at* several stages of knowledge. In the humanities and rhetoric the *praefectio* dealt more with knowledge. In the humanities and rhetoric the *praefectio* dealt more with ideas and the manner of expressing thought, with allusions, figures of speech and mythological references, differentiating between synonyms and accounting for the author’s choice of vocabulary. Greater emphasis was placed on erudition, but the general aim remained as before, to teach the pupil how to study, understand and make practical use of a text for the enriching of his own thought and style: *imitatio est anima praefectio*.

In the lower classes a little French was allowed, but the general rule for all questions and answer in class was Latin. The actual work of learning followed on the *praefectio* with the teacher calling on pupils to repeat in their own words certain aspects of what had been explained, to translate, to read out from their notebooks the personal comments made while the explanation was going on. As the class might be very large, anything up to about two or three hundred at Clermont in Francis’ time, it was then divided into two main groups called Spartans and Carthaginians, to encourage a spirit of healthy emulation. Each camp was subdivided into units
of ten in charge of a bright pupil who was called a decurion and who functioned for only a month at a time. It was his duty to repeat and memorize the text with his team for the next hour while the teacher walked round helping, testing and, in the last half hour, hearing the assembled decurions. In the afternoon skilful questioning about the morning’s work helped to settle the new material and then there might be written work or else a further brief praelectio. Memorizing well-understood passages of Latin and Greek was considered important, not only to sharpen the memory itself but to provide the pupil with a store of words and phrases and to give him a sense of rhythm and style for his own writing. The written work, Latin and Greek essays or verses on set topics, for instance a proverb, some historical event, the virtues and vices, was a regular and new feature of the teaching designed to arouse mental activity and reflection: ut excitetur ingenium. Independently organized material laid before the tutor was the forerunner of the present weekly essay at the older universities. Essays alternated with oral practice, that is, with a declamation on some subject, or else with recitation of memorized matter where much attention was paid to voice-production, pronunciation, gesture, and stance. On Saturday, which was a kind of field day, there were contests between the two camps and this took the form of a survey of the week’s new work. The daily brief period of catechism was also revised at the weekend.

To help the boys in their written work they were instructed from the beginning in how to keep a copia verborum, or commonplace book, of their own, arranging it systematically under headings. These books were an important instrument of humanist teaching. They abound even now in MSS in Oxford and Cambridge college libraries, and they account to a large extent for what is to us the astonishing allusiveness of seventeenth century writing in general. The early habit of keeping a copia verborum is certainly of importance for understanding Francis de Sales’ manner of writing; he continued throughout his life to read and write with an eye on his notebook of ‘similitudes’ and other quotable material.

Great emphasis, too, was placed on good, clear speaking, and this was further fostered by the famous and novel Jesuit practice of producing school plays in Greek and Latin on sacred or classical subjects. The idea came not from Italy but from Portugal, which also invented the system of decurions in school. At Clermont drama was not prominent till the following century when it became a vogue of considerable importance for the French classical theater. It may be said in passing that both the Corneille brothers were pupils of the Company’s school at Rouen. Clermont produced a play on Herod in 1579, just before Francis’ time, and no others are noted in the records though it is likely that there were small informal productions. Ceremonial prize-giving with declamations by the boys, and also singing, were another special feature of school life designed to foster confidence and a sense of occasion. But on the whole music played no very great part at Clermont, and certainly not in Francis’ own life. It always remained no more than an adjunct for him and a means for the worthier celebration of the liturgy. We are told, however, that he had a good voice and an accurate ear.

As the student progressed up the school –by examination only, strict justice being done, and the masters specially instructed not to yield to pressure on the part of importunate parents- the praelectio assumed greater significance than ever and filled more of the teaching time. In rhetoric this was reduced to four hours daily of which one was Greek. In philosophy the praelectio became a lecture pure and simple. The students’ contribution by essay and declamation, on a larger and more adult scale, became increasingly important as compared with
learning which was now done out of class and alone. By this time a boy was expected to be able to speak, impromptu if necessary, on any set topic, and to show that he had mastered the techniques of rhetoric as set out by Aristotle. These techniques, as anyone who glances at this now for all practical purposes neglected treatise can see, included the knowledge of a great deal of psychology. It was no use trying to convince, sway or move a visible or invisible audience by your words if you did not know how the human mind works and responds, your own mind to begin with, and then that of others. Francis de Sales’ preaching and his *Introduction à la vie dévote* presuppose a thorough study of the art of persuasion.

The teachers in a large college such as Clermont were well aware that they lacked, to some extent, personal contact with individual pupils. In order to achieve this they had to select, and this they did in the fairest way possible by forming a self-perpetuating and intellectual commando group known as the sodality. Its constitution was part of the *Ratio Studiorum* as it was a vital part of the whole educative process. This congregation approved by the pope in 1580 under the title and patronage of the Blessed Virgin of the Assumption recruited members by selection from among boys who took both their religion and their work seriously. It had the double function of being a devotional confraternity and a literary academy, with separate branches for each of the main school classes. Soon after he entered Clermont, Francis was considered distinguished enough to be admitted to the sodality, and was in due course elected secretary and later president, that is, the leader of the group under a moderator appointed from among the professors. This election was by a secret vote of the members; the president had to be someone who “excelled in virtue, talent and learning” and who stood out clearly among his fellows. While the spiritual part consisted for the main in a special service once a week, and in the promise to frequent the sacraments at least once a month, the group met as an academy on Sundays when papers or poems were read by members, or a debate took place, in Latin, of course. “Enigmas, inscriptions and symbolical devices,” that is, emblems, were composed and lettered or designed and submitted for general criticism. In this way the emblematic habit of mind, without which Francis’ writing in unthinkable, was fostered. Once or twice a year on a feast day of Our Lady there was an open day at Clermont and work was exhibited. Sometimes the moderator himself read a paper on some literary topic, but this was rare. Each individual member was urged to use his own initiative, develop his inventive powers, and do some personal literary work according to his own bent of mind. It is not necessary to stress the literary value of such personal training and experience over a whole school career.

Without exception, the saint’s biographers, ancient and modern, have only mentioned the sodality as a spiritual stamping ground, but the intellectual and literary side is surely of great significance too. Later on, this former president of the sodality founded his own literary academy, the Académie Florimontane, established in 1606 with the help of his friend, the senator and later president of the Chambéry parliament, Antoine Favre. He too was an old boy of Clermont, having preceded Francis by ten years. Favre’s daughter was one of the first Visitation sisters, his son Claude Favre de Vaugelas, the author of *Remarques sur la langue francaise*, 1647. In founding their academy the two friends were continuing a tradition well known to them both from their Clermont days and which had reached France through Italian humanist influence in school and court.
Monsieur de Boisy did not intend that his son’s seven or eight years in Paris should be spent entirely over books and in the classroom. They were meant to be important formative years in his career as a courtier and nobleman. He had to learn to present himself suitably in the great houses where the De Sales family had connections, and also at the court itself. Civilité, or the art of producing oneself courteously in public was not left to chance any more than was oratory; nor was it a mere set of exterior conventions followed in a craven spirit of social conformity. It was a training which affected the whole man, and the accomplishments connected with civilité were merely the outward expression of a fundamental attitude towards society, slowly formed and perfected from boyhood in a man of good standing. Monsieur Déage was in charge of the social arrangements and had to see that his pupil learnt fencing, riding, and dancing. A similar sort of mystique was attached to these accomplishments as was in a later age transferred to games in the public school ethos. They did, of course, also serve as exercise, by no means neglected by humanist educators, well versed in the Greek attitude to physical culture.

We are told by his nephew that Francis considered these exercise rather useless for the kind of life he was planning for himself in secret, but that he obediently did what was required. As he is said to have distinguished himself in these skills, his assent was perhaps more than merely formal. They certainly left their mark on the whole man: he was noted for both outer and inner poise. He also learnt the more advanced techniques of horsemanship. Equitation took place in one of the great indoor riding academies, the idea of the manège having been brought to Paris from Italy in the course of that century. For fencing he went to a private master. The sword he wore until the day he put on his clerical robe was not just a decorative sword. He learnt to fight in real earnest, and when occasion warranted, as happened one night in a mêlée in Padua, he was easily able to disarm his adversaries.

Some knowledge of the formal dances of the time was necessary for his entrée to houses like that of the Duke of Mercoeur where his father had been a page earlier in the century. On festive occasions he had to be able to take his place in the formal, measured dances of the day, the gavotte and the minuet, which actually originated in France at about this time though we are apt to associate both with a later rococo age. There was also the more dashing courante brought from the courts of Renaissance Italy. Again, skill in dancing of this kind was more than a mere badge of social distinction, for the ability to manage formal, intricate patterns of disciplined movement was an artistic skill fostering grace and a sense of rhythm in other spheres. Again, there is no mention of any training in music as such.

He was not, however, unaware of the potential dangers of dancing, nor can one suppose him to have been blind to licentiousness of student and social life in the Paris of this time, and especially at court. We are told that he made purity the subject of continual prayer and strengthened his will power by making a formal vow of chastity in the church next to the college, Saint Etienne des Grès. He had the habit of praying there by an ancient statue of Our Lady, Notre Dame de la bonne Délivrance, also called Notre Dame des Âmes en peine. It was to her help that he looked in his struggle to keep himself intact. The profound insight that he later showed in his description of emotional attitudes between the sexes shows that he knew from observation and psychological awareness what he was talking about. His advice on this subject in the Introduction is penetrating and still relevant.
His longing for intactness in this sphere, his precocious understanding in the years of adolescent turmoil of what freely chosen virginity for a religious motive really meant, is stressed, though in rather different terms, by all the early biographers. One of the most vivid details is that related by Charles Auguste who reports how Francis used to make his way to the Louvre and enter the state apartments, as he was entitled to do, to watch the Queen of Henri III at her meal. He always tried to get close to her and touch the hem of her garment, for he felt that virtue went out from her. She was distinguished for her marital faithfulness and purity under shockingly difficult conditions. With other people, too, who were distinguished for chastity in a licentious age, Francis would make the same instinctive attempt to keep in actual physical touch with the virtue so deeply preoccupying him.

This preoccupation was a natural part of his development but which in a gifted and emotional boy, living away from a normal home and family background, can easily produce a state of extreme nervous tension. The general excitement of this stage tends to find a focus in whatever aspect of experience presents the greatest value, and for Francis this was his own personal religion, his attitude to God. The devil, says Dom Jean, considered Francis to be doing so well that a challenge was indicated; God allowed his servant to suffer a violent assault so as to prepare “this great master of spiritual fencing” for his future combat on God’s side. In Paris the powers of darkness fought against God for the possession of this young Job’s soul, and the points of attack selected by the adversary were the emotions and the intellect. To make things worse, the encounter took place at the psychologically difficult time of mid-winter when resistance is at its lowest ebb and when a physical illness seemed to be threatening Francis.

The crisis came in December, 1586 and the first two weeks of the following January. Francis was nineteen and well launched in his philosophy class which brought so much new scientific material to bear on his consciousness: the nature of matter, the mathematics of space and time, the creative process at work behind the structure of living organisms. At the same time Monsieur Déage was now taking him to the Sorbonne for certain lecture courses in theology. One of the great subjects of debate at the faculty at this time was that of predestination, the problem posed by Calvin, who took the extreme position, as it seemed to the opposite camp, of defending it outright. Christian humanists, Erasmus, and later on, the Jesuit Molina, opposed it out and out, while the official opinion of the Church, represented by St. Augustine and St. Thomas, took up what appeared as an intermediate and therefore inconclusive position. God predestined his saints to glory independently of their good works, which he indeed foresaw and for which he gave them grace, but this was only a general part of his original will for them and thus a manifestation of his justice.

Predestination expressed in human terms did not present itself to Francis as an intellectual conundrum so closely connected with the nature of God in himself as to be in the last resort insoluble for the finite mind. He never seems to have been in any serious doubt, intellectually, about his position; the problem was an emotional, psychological one, and very probably mystical as well. Unlike most of the people around him who argued the matter as a theological abstraction, Francis saw it as a burning life question: “Am I myself, tempted as I am by the pleasures I see going on all round me, and inclined to evil as I know myself to be, am I fated to be damned or to be saved? Am I destined to be parted from God for ever and ever, and shall I perhaps never be able to show him my love, however hard I try here and now to live the good
life?” At a time of intense emotional stress he opted for the answer of despair, and no amount of rational argument, no effort of his own or of his teachers and friends could reach him. To a person of less vivid faith and love, the question could never have become so real. Had he really been evil, he would not have hesitated to choose the easy way out. But it was part of his problem that he could not see his own quandary in the light of logic. For weeks on end he wept and cried aloud to God, mourning the loss of him and of all he had ever lived and worked for. Sleepless, he knelt by his bed in tears: “O Love, O beauty, am I never to know you, to take my joy in you? O Mary, my mother, am I never to see you in your Son’s kingdom? Did not my beloved Jesus die for me too and redeem me?”

His state rapidly deteriorated, he was caught up in a tangle of emotional argument which expressed itself in an intense depression. According to his biographers, his melancholy forced its way out and appeared as an allover yellowing of his skin which was, as a rule, healthy but now looked like wax; he suffered a catastrophic loss of weight and such severe attacks of pain that he could neither sleep, eat, nor drink. He dragged himself around more dead than alive but refused to take to his bed. From these symptoms one would be inclined to think that his despair came upon him at the same time as an actual illness and that the mental state was aggravated by the physical. This is in no way to question or decry the spiritual validity of an experience that bears many signs of a mystical trial in a personality as sane and confident as Francis had always shown himself to be. There is no reason why a physical illness should not form part of a perhaps mystical crisis which may well affect the whole man. Indeed, St. John of the Cross implies that this is not unusual. The fact remains that the details given by contemporary witnesses correspond, as far as one can judge, to an attack of jaundice caused, perhaps, by some gallstone disorder which is known to have an intensely depressing effect. The evidence rests on the account of his servant, on the witness of Monsieur Déage and of two fellow students. There was also Francis’ own account to Madame de Chantal, as well as some written evidence preserved through the canonization documents.

One could wish there were some letters in which Francis had expressed his feelings, but with the exception of one insignificant thank-you letter, the whole correspondence of the Paris years was burnt when the castle at Thorens was looted and burnt in 1634. In any case it is very unlikely that he would have written the kind of personal letter one might now expect. All we have is a brief protestation and a page of quotations from the psalms, both copied from what he had himself written down at the time. These scripture verses which he used to say and sob out aloud as he knelt by his bed at night may seem impersonal, but to one who knew the whole psalter off by heart and whose prayer was naturally cast in liturgical forms, David’s timeless cry for help was the most natural and powerful way to express what lay far beyond the reach of his own words:

Will God then leave me forsaken forever, and in anger forger to show me mercy? Let God arise, and his enemies will vanish before him like smoke, and as wax melts in the fire, the devil’s assaults will perish. God is our refuge and our strength; we will not fear even if the earth should fall to pieces all around us and the hills be carried away into the depths of the sea. My enemies have prepared a snare for my feet, they bowed down my soul, they dug a pit in my path. I will take refuge under the shelter of thy wings till the storm passes by; I will cry out to the most high God, he will snatch my soul from the lion’s den. God save me! See how the waters close about
me shoulder high! I am like one who sticks fast in deep mire, with no ground under his feet, one who has ventured out to mid-ocean to be drowned by the tempest. Save me from sinking in the mire, rescue me from my enemies, from the deep waters that surround me; let me not sink beneath the flood, swallowed up in its depths, let not the well’s mouth close over me! Shall not my soul be subject to God? From him is my salvation. In thee, Lord, have I hoped; let me not be confounded.

The prayers begin and end on a strong note of hope which is never absent throughout the earthquake and storm which have engulfed him, with the waters closing, as it were, over his head, and his feet seeming to sink ever deeper into the quicksand. He saw himself, too, as ensnared by his enemy, as having stumbled into a trap and being exposed to wild beasts who threatened to tear him to pieces. No words of his own could have described his state of inner disintegration more vividly than the series of symbols he took from the Bible, and it is worth noticing that he who was to build so much of his own work on a theory of the spiritual effectiveness of images, instinctively chose passages which gave him a concrete and tangible picture of his plight.

His greatest fear, as he told Madame de Chantal, was that if he were indeed damned, as it seemed to him, he would never in all eternity be able to show his love for God and for Mary. As the weeks passed he clung firmly to the resolution that he would at least show his love by serving God all the more faithfully here on earth, and he would accept his own damnation because God had apparently willed it. All that really mattered was that God’s decrees should be fulfilled. Put like this, the proposition sounds so tragically senseless to a Christian who believes in a loving God that it is hard to imagine how Francis could have held it. Yet it is obvious from his protestation that this was his line of thought. “If I am damned because I deserve it, that is, on my own merits, at least let me not be among those who curse your holy name,” was his final word on the subject and at the same time the clearest possible demonstration of his true love of God. He had driven his ideas to an extreme point of pseudo-logical absurdity which corresponds somehow to the extreme point of state of nervous tension in which he found himself. He had reached a point of heroic acceptance, giving himself up unconditionally to God and being subject to him, without any reliance on his own very considerable merits, his own young strength into which, without knowing it, he had put much of his trust in the course of his struggle for virtue. He was to learn the mystic’s first and last lesson—to rely on God alone. And now he was prepared, as far as in him lay, for the ending of his trial which came from above. As yet, his feelings, so deeply disturbed over the past weeks, lagged behind the reasoned conclusion which he had so far not been able to accept as yet on the emotional level, making it possible for head and heart to come together again in a conflict healed.

Walking home one day from the Louvre-his physical condition must already have been somewhat improved by then as this is a good half hour’s walk along the Seine- he crossed the bridge by Notre Dame and went up the hill just past his college, where he turned into a side road to enter Saint Etienne des Grès. In a small chapel to the left of the high altar there stood the ancient statue, so well known to him, of Notre Dame des âmes en peine, as she was called by those who came to her in distress. He knelt down, picked up the little wooden tablet on which was pasted a handwritten copy of St. Bernard’s prayer to our Lady, the *Memorare*, and said it right through in a spirit of deep and childlike trust. When he rose up to go, he suddenly felt “as
if his torment had fallen about his feet like a leper’s scales” and he realized that from this moment he was completely cured. The leprosy of temptation and despair which had made of him an outcast and put him, as he thought, beyond the reach of God’s love and robbed him of his own capacity to love God, vanished in an instant as he knelt before the Virgin Mother and her Child.

She holds a sceptre, the sign of her royal power; the Child on her arm reaches out towards her with one hand while in the other he holds an orb surmounted by a cross—the world redeemed. Madonna and Child are shown inclined towards one another, their faces serene and simple, with the half smile so characteristic of medieval French groups of this kind. The Virgin’s painted red robe with its full blue mantle is draped in a way that gives the stone fabric a sense of life and movement while the line of the folds leads the eye naturally to the arm and hand which form, as it were, a throne for the Child King. Both figures are now crowned, but this is a twentieth-century addition. The medieval statue had no need to state so overtly the symbols of kingship, perhaps because the royal power in heaven was far more present to people’s consciousness then and needed no stressing. The statue is not a great work of art, the Virgin’s broad, placid face has as almost archaic simplicity, but the indefinable look of tenderness and understanding in the Madonna’s calm gaze remains in the mind of those who come to worship the King as a child in her arms.

Like others of her kind at Chartres, Rocamadour and in Francis’ own Savoy, this ‘Vierge Noire’ had been in here shrine from time immemorial. The nearly life-size black stone figure of the early fourteenth century had replaced a wooden one, blackened with age, which in its turn had perhaps been adapted from a Mother Earth image of pagan times. As in the case of many of the ancient black Madonnas, its appeal of motherliness was to something very deep in the human consciousness. The statue was the concrete focus of a large local confraternity which must have been well known to Francis as it was confirmed by Pope Gregory XIII in 1585 and enriched with further indulgences. The members pledged themselves in a special way to help their brethren when they were ill or distressed, and they gave alms for the redemption of prisoners who were locked up for debt.

Twice a year, in spring and summer, the statue was carried in procession down to the Seine and across the bridge to Notre Dame, the mother church on which Saint Etienne depended. After the return of the procession, which was always a colorful event for the rue Saint Jacques, the officers of the confraternity, and anyone else who liked to join them went to the prison to free debtors with the money that had been collected. The debtors were, as a rule, simple tradesmen of the district, locksmiths, carpenters, bakers, whose gratitude to our Lady through whom charity had been mobilized in this practical way knew no bounds. Her little chapel was rarely deserted at any time of the day, and this Madonna was known not only all over Paris but in the surrounding country as well. Even the court held it in high favor which increased still more in the course of the next century.

It was no mere chance, then, that brought Francis to pray before her at such a crisis in his life. When the solution had been prepared by his unconditional surrender, not to despair, but to God, Notre Dame de la Délivrance was the channel for the grace which ended the conflict. This was, as far as is known, his only great spiritual trial. It helped to confirm the confident, optimistic
attitude that was natural to him, looking on God, as St. Chantal said, as a beloved child looks to its father. It also helped him to a store of personal insight into one of the fundamental and often misunderstood tenets of the Calvinists in his future diocese. On the rational level he had studied the problem of predestination from every angle, and he continued to do this afterwards without any fear of falling back into his despair, a proof that the difficulty had been far more than a merely intellectual one.

Looking back on his experience four years later in Padua when he was writing out lecture notes about the reprobation of the wicked, he added a personal summary of his own position of confidence: “The light is too dazzling for my blind eyes, and I am prepared to be ignorant of everything else for the sake of the Father’s own knowledge which is- Christ crucified.” In describing his attitude he seems to hear God addressing him directly in words analogous to those of the scriptures: “‘Have no fear, my son, I do not seek the death of a sinner but rather that he should live to serve me and grow in holiness. Your sickness is not unto death; so take heart, my little servant, [serve parve], unworthy you may be, but you are faithful, hoping in me, willing as you were to glorify my name by your damnation, had this been my will. I will establish you over much and you shall praise my name where bliss is eternal.’ Then I will reply as I did before: ‘Amen, Father, this has seemed good to you, Amen, Jesus, Mary.’

“I learnt many things in Paris to please my father,” Francis was to say later, “and a few to please myself.” Monsieur Déage was at times rather worried about the intensity of his pupils religious feelings, his confirmed habit of solitary walks and his apparent indifference to worldly advantages. He was beginning to be afraid Francis might enter some religious order before he could ever get him back to Savoy. As for the particular direction his thoughts might be taking, for a president of the sodality and a boy who regularly made the Exercises of St. Ignatius in the modified form customary at Clermont, the Company itself might have been indicated. But the first rule of the retreat giver was to leave the soul alone with God and to be strenuously on guard not to exert influence. There were also the Capuchin Franciscans whose monastery near the Louvre Francis was known to frequent almost daily, especially towards the end of his Paris stay when the twenty-four year old widower Duke Henri de Joyeuse, a member of his own Lorraine court circle, entered there as Frère Ange. Francis liked to watch him serving Mass clothed in his poor coarse habit, barefooted, humble, where a short while before he had seen him at court resplendent in all his finery. “What an example for us. God wants to tell us something by this, he wants to call us,” he was heard to say.

In his way Francis profited by such calls. It is known that on three days of the week during this last year after his recovery he fasted and wore a hair shirt. This must have been done with the permission of his director in the sodality. He went to Mass every day and to the sacraments week by week, and he began each day with a period of prayer: “From that time he meditated diligently on divine things and gave himself up to interior recollection, always remembering the presence of God. Now that his heart was on flame with love, he lifted it up continually towards that uncreated beauty which was gradually being revealed to his soul.” As a symbol of his complete giving up of self he had renewed his vow of virginity before Notre Dame de la Délivrance and had at the same time promised, in thanksgiving for his healing, to say the rosary every day. He kept his promise to the end, referring to it in later years as his “spell of duty at the Queen’s court.”
According to the account of his biographers and the testimony of his friends, he was greatly beloved in Paris among the students and teachers and also beyond the college in his own particular circle. There was grief when the time came for him to go in the early summer of 1588 after the final examinations in the arts faculty which took place just before Easter. When he and his escort consisting of Monsieur Déage and the two servants rode out of Paris, four of Francis’ friends attached themselves to his group and travelled with him as far as Lyons. There Francis was met by a Savoyard friend of his father’s who came with horses from the stables at home. “I found him so attractive and impressive, his whole bearing had such beauty that I thought most highly of him ever afterwards,” said this same friend in his testimony.

What was he like in his twenty-first year? The witnesses are too unanimous in attributing great personal attractiveness to him for this to have been mere exaggeration. In his Padua notebook he copied from his reading the observation that virtue does not only render man beautiful within but also affects his outward appearance. Over the years Francis had developed the beauty of expression which comes from within. The sense of rightness and harmony about him was so strong that even strangers would stop to look at him as he passed them in the street. He had a certain easy and unselfconscious dignity in his bearing, was a little above average height, well built and always carefully dressed. Nothing in his clothes betrayed the hair shirt beneath. One must think of him in the becoming costume of the late Renaissance, something like a character out of one of Shakespeare’s Italian comedies: a frilled collar framed his rather long, oval face, he wore a wide-shouldered doublet or short jacket shaped in to the waist, long trunk hose with puffed breeches whose full pleats were lined with a lighter colored satin. A short cloak hung from his shoulders, his sword at his left side was attached to an embroidered belt. On his head he wore a softly draped velvet cap with a curling plume. A small tuft of feathers, a panache, also decorated the other type of fashionable headgear in the fifteen-eighties, a close fitting rimless toque. The hat was an important status symbol and a man of rank was entitled to keep it on even in church, a privilege of which Francis, it is said, never availed himself. He had the habit, even in his student days, of lifting his hat when he passed the outside of a church. He was known in later years for his practice of doffing his hat to his inferiors in rank and even to his own clerical staff.

When he arrived at his uncle’s castle at Brens in the Chablais plain where his parents were still living at that time, the whole household, his parents, his uncle and aunt, brothers, sisters, cousins and servants “all ran out with great joy to meet him as he came in sight. His mother embraced and kissed him with tears, his father was delighted beyond all telling to find him so capable and accomplished. Both of them could have gone on listening all day and all night while he talked and his words flowed more sweetly than honey. He now had plenty of time to see his friends and relations, and wherever he went people marvelled at him and loved him.