The Story Behind the Story of the Introduction to the Devout Life

During this first quarter of the 21st century, we have the privilege of celebrating the 400th anniversary of a number of key events in the life of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622). 2002 was the fourth centenary of his episcopal ordination (as well as the 125th anniversary of his declaration as a Doctor of the Universal Church); 2004, of Francis’s initial encounter with St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641); and 2006, of the establishment of the Académie Florimontane. Next year, 2010, is the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the Visitation Order, the fruit of that first meeting of Francis and Jane; 2016, of the publication of Francis’s masterpiece, Treatise on the Love of God; and 2022, of our saint’s passing into eternal life. Last but by no means least, this year, 2009, is the 400th anniversary of the publication of Francis’s most popular and best-selling book, Introduction to the Devout Life (Figure 1).

Some elements of the story of how the Introduction came to be are well known.1 The young Louise de Châtelet, Madame de Charming (1587-1645), was married to Francis’s cousin Claude de Charmois, and, as would happen with Jane a little over a year later, Francis first encountered Louise as she sat among the congregation in front of him while he was preaching in January 1603. Although Louise strongly felt that Francis’s sermon was specially meant for her, it was not until four years later, in April 1607, that she formally put herself under his direction, asking the bishop for guidance in her effort to live a Christian life amidst the luxury and moral decadence of the court.

While Louise was preparing to be away from Annecy for six months to attend to a case she had before the senate in Chambéry, Francis gave her some brief treatises or memos (Mémoires) he had written on various spiritual subjects—e.g., how to order the day to accommodate a life of devotion, Christian virtues, the meaning of the life of “perfection” (at the time, a term synonymous with vowed religious life), etc.—and exercises—e.g., prayer and meditation, etc.—to take with her. The bishop had composed these over the course of several years, having them at hand to share, as needed, with his various directees. During her stay in Chambéry, Francis advised Louise to place herself under the direction of the Jesuit Jean Fourier, rector of the college of the Society of Jesus there.2 Louise showed Francis’s memos to Fourier, who also happened to be Francis’s spiritual director, and, in a letter of 25 March 1608 to Francis, he urged our saint to publish this material in book form.

The Introduction was first published in 1609, and quickly sold out (Figure 2). Francis immediately set to work on a second edition, which was published in or just before September 1609.
practices were newly available in vernacular translations and people were hungry to read them. People were also seeking out guides to the spiritual life, and men like Francis, who had much to say on the topic, were in great demand. Yet because so many of the classic treatments on prayer were written for and by individuals in the monastic vocation and thus reflected a spirituality appropriate to a life of withdrawal, and because spiritual directors were not easy to come by, there was a crying need for a book that could distill some of the collective wisdom of centuries of Christian experience and make it accessible to persons in various walks of life. . . . [Francis] had something to share that [people from all walks of life] were hungry to hear. . . .

Since the Introduction’s first edition, it has never gone out of print, and it continues to offer practical, commonsense spiritual advice to countless laypeople, religious, and clergy.

There is also a “back-story” to the Introduction—the story behind the story—whose elements may be less familiar. This back-story has two principal elements: first, Francis’s student days in Paris and Padua; and, second, his 1602 visit to Paris. Most accounts of Francis’s composition of the Introduction’s first edition explain that he pulled it together rather quickly, in the midst of a busy schedule, by reworking a series of memos he had sent to Madame de Charmois and others like her into chapter form, addressing them to an imaginary “Philothea,” a feminine name that simply means “lover of God.” While this explanation is accurate, the Introduction’s back-story invites us to consider this Salesian classic from the broader, often overlooked, perspective that it is the fruit of a prolonged period of personal spiritual development and gestation on the part of Francis. This is the approach taken in this essay.

1. Portrait of the Saint as a Young Man

Francis at the Jesuit College de Clermont in Paris

The story of the Introduction actually begins with Francis’s own efforts as a layperson to live the devout life during his student days in Paris and Padua. As a spiritual teacher and director, Francis imparted to others lessons he first thoroughly learned himself. For Francis, this learning process commenced decades before he engaged in the ministry of spiritual direction that led to the Introduction’s composition and publication.

From 1578 to 1588, Francis studied humanities, philosophy, and liberal arts at the Jesuit College de Clermont in Paris, which was the premier educational institution of the Society of Jesus in France. These years were pivotal not only for Francis’s intellectual formation, but also his spiritual development. According to Francis’s own testimony, given many years later, he first struggled with the question of what constituted true devotion—a topic he takes up at the outset of the Introduction—as a young student in Paris.

It is necessary to avoid feigned behavior since all that is affected must be abhorred. . . . I mean playing devout persons and saints in our external appearance as I once
did... When I was a young student in this city, I suddenly had a great fervor and desire to be holy and perfect. I began to imagine that to be a saint I had to lean my head on my shoulder while saying my Book of Hours, because another student, who really was a saint, did it. I carefully did likewise for some time, but without becoming more saintly.  

In all likelihood, it was at Clermont where Francis was first exposed to St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, which had a formative and lasting influence on him. One of the enduring lessons that Francis learned from the Exercises and the Jesuits at Clermont—a lesson that would be reinforced in Padua by Lorenzo Scupoli's Spiritual Combat (1589)—is that cultivation of the spiritual life in the midst of the world required strategy. The key was to order each day: daily attendance at Mass, meditative prayer, frequent reception of Holy Communion, weekly Confession, devotion to the Virgin Mary and the saints, and, of course, the practice of the virtues, specifically obedience, humility, piety, fidelity to the duties of one's state of life, civility, and chastity. These would later become the central elements of the Introduction's second and third parts.  

While at Clermont, Francis was admitted to its elite Marian sodality, and in due course he was elected its secretary and later, its president. This sodality was part of a European-wide network of such groups promoted and maintained by the Jesuits, many in the schools of the Society, with a view to fostering the spiritual development of their students and ultimately to revitalizing and transforming the wider Catholic society. Francis's experience of the Marian sodality at Clermont may have influenced the importance that he later ascribed to community and spiritual friendships for the devout life:  

[The delightful balm of devotion is distilled from one heart into another... For those who live in the midst of the worldly-minded and who embrace true virtue, it is necessary to join with other like-minded persons by holy and sacred friendship; for, by this means they encourage, assist, and lead one another to goodness (Introduction, Part 3, chapter 19).  

No consideration of Francis's student days in Paris is complete without reference to his six-week anguished temptation to despair of his salvation—the primary defining experience of his life and the theological foundation of Salesian spirituality (Figure 3). The fruit of this experience is Francis's subsequent unshakable faith in the scriptural truth of God's will to save all (1 Timothy 2:4), which is the theological foundation for the universal call to holiness. From these dark days, Francis confided to his friend, Jean-Pierre Camus (1584-1652), bishop of Belley, that he also learned a lesson that he would never forget and that would shape the rest of his life and his future ministry: "to have compassion for the weakness of others."  

Compassion was the lens through which Francis read the universal salvific will of God, which reveals the divine compassion and gentleness, which is enflashed in the self-emptying (kenosis) of the crucified Jesus. This is the archetype that Francis's own compassion for others sought to mirror, and that Salesian gentleness and humility personalize and seek to make present in human relationships. As Francis insists, in the Introduction, Part 3, chapter 8, humility and gentleness bring us closest to the perfect imitation of Christ, who, in Matthew 11:29, invites all to learn these virtues from Him.  

Francis's Rule of Life at Padua  
After receiving his licentiate and master of arts degrees in Paris and a brief visit home with his family, Francis enrolled for higher studies, on 26 December 1588, at the University of Padua. He is inscribed in the university's register as Nob. D. Francisus Salesius, Sabaudus Gallus, that is, "Noble lord, Francis de Sales, French-speaking Savoyard." At Padua, Francis studied law to please his father, and theology to please himself, since he had already discerned a vocation to the priesthood. These studies culminated, three years later, with Francis taking a double doctorate in utroque jure, i.e., in canon and civil law.  

Figure 3. Statue of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance of the Dominican church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès, presently in the convent of the Sisters of St. Thomas of Villanova, Neully-sur-Seine. A deep devotion to the Virgin Mary was part of St. Francis de Sales's spiritual life from his youth. Not long after matriculating at the Jesuit College de Clermont in Paris, he was admitted to its Marian sodality, and in due course he was elected its secretary, and later, its president. At the height of his anguished six-week temptation to despair of his salvation, Francis was delivered from this trial after praying the Memorare before this statue of Our Lady. These dark days left an indelible mark on Francis's life and subsequent ministry, teaching him to have compassion on the weakness and struggles of others. Compassion was the lens through which he read the Biblical truth of the universal salvific will of God (1 Timothy 2:4), enflashed in the crucified Jesus—the archetype his own compassion for others sought to mirror.
Impressed by the practicality, wisdom, and excellence of these exercises, some of Francis’s fellow students obtained his permission to make copies of them for their own use and benefit. In this way, “they became on a small scale what the [Introduction] was afterwards to be in a much larger sphere.” Likewise, it is of no little interest that these exercises enjoyed a privileged place in the ministry to youth of St. John Bosco (1815-88) and the first Salesians.

II. A Turning Point

Francis’s 1602 Visit to Paris

Another key episode of the Introduction’s back-story is Francis’s diplomatic trip on ecclesiastical and state business to Paris in 1602. Francis was welcomed as the acclaimed “Apostle of the Chablis,” and the 35-year-old bishop-designate’s preaching at court and in the city’s churches made him the toast of Paris. While in the French capital, he was also a frequent visitor to the home of Pierre and Barbe Acairie (Barbe Avrillot; in religion, Marie of the Incarnation, 1566-1618), a gathering spot for a group of devout lay people and clerics, whose “names . . . read like a Who’s Who of Counter-Reformation Paris” (Figure 5). The members of the Acairie circle “sought to nurture their own internalized and often mystical piety and at the same time to spark a broader renewal of Catholic institutions and faith” (ibid., 78), in the aftermath of the devastation of the bloody civil Wars of Religion between Calvinists and Catholics (1562-98).

Francis was introduced to the elite Acairie spiritual salon by Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629), a cousin of Madame Acairie, the founder of the French Oratory, and future cardinal (1627). During his sojourn in Paris, Francis served as Madame Acairie’s confessor. He also actively participated in one of this circle’s major projects—the introduction to France of the reformed Discalced Carmelite nuns of St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-82): he was delegated by the group to seek permission for the new foundation from Pope Clement VIII. After her husband’s death in 1613, Madame Acairie herself entered Carmel, taking the name “Marie of the Incarnation,” by which she is best known in the annals of sanctity, being beatified in 1791.

While frequenting the Acairie circle and collaborating on its projects, Francis was also aware that the spiritual vision that predominated in the salon Acairie, and which would take the shape of the French School of Spirituality, was different from his own. This difference becomes clear when, for example, the theological anthropology, approach to the imitation of Christ, and pastoral orientation of Francis and Bérulle, who is regarded as the founder of the French School of Spirituality, are compared.

Both Francis and Bérulle were products of Jesuit education—both alumni of the Collège de Clermont—and “had Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises imprinted on their hearts.” However, whereas Salesian spirituality is deeply embedded in the thought world of Christian humanism, in which Francis and Bérulle would have been immersed at Clermont, Bérulle had little attraction to it. Francis’s view of human nature is profoundly optimistic, affirming...
that the capacities with which persons are gifted are God-given and are, in fact, the medium through which response to God occurs. Thus, all human works are designed to be utilized, not bypassed, in the Christian life. ... Salesian thought imbues the humanist spirit by affirming the essential goodness and Godward capacity of humanity. Moreover, it is a very "human devotion" in the sense that it is practical, balanced, down to earth, and accessible (ibid., 158-59).

By contrast, Bérulle's view of human nature part company with Christian humanism. The keynote of Bérulle's spirituality is abnegation and annihilation (anéantiissement) of the self, which leads one to have a very low estimate of all created things and especially of oneself, and a very high idea of God. ... Abnegation involves a detachment from all that hinders one from adhering to Jesus. ... It is only through a radical abnegation of one's very self that a person can adhere fully to Jesus who is our life and our all. The object of abnegation or annihilation is to live entirely for God in Christ Jesus.²²

For Bérulle, abnegation and annihilation of the self is the conditio sine qua non for the imitation of Christ, which consists in seeking "consciously to conform one's whole life to the interior life of Jesus, to what Bérulle calls the 'states' of the Incarnate Word," most especially "the self-humiliation of the Word Incarnate, particularly in Christ's state of infancy. ... [which] was basically ... a state of servitude ..." (ibid., 289-90). From his understanding of the imitation of Christ, Bérulle develops the practice of making a devotional vow of servitude to Jesus and Mary. His insistence that the Carmelite nuns adopt this vow ignited a firestorm of controversy.²³ Bérulle's and Francis's approaches to the imitation of Christ, each rooted in a distinctive theological perspective, could not be more different.

At the head of each letter that Francis wrote throughout his writings are found the words, "Live Jesus!" Rather than a cheer of affirmation or a rallying cry, "Live Jesus!" is an emphatic statement about how Francis saw himself and what he was about in the world.²⁴ As Francis tells Philothea,

I have wished, above all else, to engrave and inscribe on your heart this holy and sacred maxim, "Live Jesus!" After that, I am certain that your life, which comes from your heart ... will produce all its actions, which are its fruits, inscribed and engraved with the same word of salvation. Just as this gentle Jesus will live in your heart, so too He will live in all your conduct. ... And you will be able to say reverently in imitation of St. Paul, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me." [Galatians 2:20] (Introduction, Part 3, chapter 23).

In Salesian spirituality, the imitation of Christ takes the form of "living Jesus" in one's state of life by the practice of the little virtues, whose conquest Our Lord has set forth for our study and labor. Such are patience, gentleness, self-mortification, humility, obedience, poverty, chastity, tenderness toward our neighbors, bearing with their imperfections, diligence, and holy fervor (Introduction, Part 3, chapter 2).

Francis urges Philothea to apply herself to learning from Christ Himself, who teaches us, by word and example in the Gospels, how to practice the little virtues in order to live Jesus, to be refashioned into another Christ.

[Just as little children learn to speak by listening to their mothers and lisping words with them, so also by keeping close to our Savior by meditation and by observing His words, actions, and affections, we learn, by His grace, to speak, act, and will like Him (Introduction, Part 2, chapter 1).

As they were for Jesus Himself, the little virtues "are fundamental to our relational lives with God and others and ... we have ample opportunity to practice them, in one form or another, many times every day."²⁵ Francis further puts a human face on the practice of the little virtues by calling attention to the example of the Virgin Mary and the saints, who likewise serve as models in this regard.²⁶

Francis's instructions to Philothea on the little virtues, which can be practiced in any state of life, and which bring us closest to the imitation of Christ since in the Gospels He teaches them to us by word and deed, has a very different feel from Bérulle's formal, intellectual, and systematic discourses on the "states" that must be entered through prayer to attain incorporation into Christ.²⁷ The bishop of Geneva's emphasis on the primacy of "the solid evangelical virtues" is regarded as being of a piece with the realism of Teresian mysticism.²⁸ There is no better testimony to the effectiveness of the practice of the little virtues for interior and exterior conformation to Christ than the
lived witness of Francis himself. In her deposition at the first canonical process for Francis's beatification (1627), Mother de Chantal avers: “Several great servants of God said they knew no one who more vividly showed them what Our Lord must have been like in His dealings with men, and that the Blessed seemed to them a true image of the Son of God.”

The pastoral orientations of Francis and Bérulle were also distinctive. Responding to one of the greatest needs of the Church of his day, Bérulle discerned that he had a special vocation to work for the education and sanctification of the diocesan clergy. For this purpose, he founded in 1611 the French Oratory at Paris, a congregation modeled on the Oratory of St. Philip Neri (1515-95) in Rome. The Oratory's mission was to restore the dignity and grandeur of the Catholic priesthood, “the Order of Jesus Christ,” so as to remedy the widespread clerical corruption and immorality at the time.

For his part, Francis was himself a model bishop of the early modern Catholic reform, lent his enthusiastic support and encouragement to Bérulle in founding the Oratory, and worked tirelessly in his own diocese to improve and renew the clergy. At the same time, he believed that the Holy Spirit was leavening the loaf of a renewed Christendom by raising up “devout persons” not only in the episcopate and presbyterate, but in all walks of life, including married people, widows, professionals, workers in the service industry, etc.

Bérulle also had a great regard for the laity, believing that all were called to perfection, each through his/her own unique manner of participating in the various states of Christ. In comparison, Salesian spirituality seems less formal, abstract, and intellectual and more “practical, . . . down to earth, and accessible.” Francis reworks the Ignatian principle of “finding God in all things” into the Salesian principle of “finding God wherever you are.” Francis meets people where they are, namely, in their state of life, and there he assists them in living Jesus, living the devout life, in the quotidian vocational and relational context in which they find themselves. Salesian spirituality is intrinsically flexible and adaptable, not being linked to one lifestyle, especially not a monastic or religiously professional life, although it may be practiced in those settings. Rather, it emphasizes God, practicing the devout life, in the busyness of one’s ordinary duties. There, in the midst, the worker, householder, courtier or greengrocer makes Jesus live (ibid., 159).

Of course, the manifesto of this hallmark of Salesian spirituality is the introduction, and, as already noted, the key to its popularity and success as a best-seller in Francis’s day was that he had something to share that people from all walks of life were hungry to hear. In the four hundred years since the introduction was first published, it has never gone out of print and continues to provide practical spiritual guidance to countless readers.

Students of Francis’s life and spirituality often observe that his 1602 visit to Paris marks a turning point in his life and ministry in that his encounter with the Acarie circle made him fully conscious of the singularity of his own approach and spiritual vision. As Père Lajeunie puts it, “He had been revealed to himself by Paris. . . . He was then aware of his capacities and his vocation. . . .” On his return to Annecy, Francis wasted no time in giving voice to his own intuitions and ideas in his first letters of spiritual direction, which, together with the rule of Padua, may justifiably be considered the “first draft” of the introduction.

One final observation on Francis and the Acarie spiritual salon: Although members of the Acarie circle, such as Bérulle, and Francis held very different, even opposing, theological views and understandings of the spiritual life, Francis, nonetheless, maintained respectful and profoundly gracious friendships with these individuals, and together they supported one another’s efforts in the renewal of the Church. For example, Francis’s relationship with Bérulle did not end when the bishop returned to Annecy, but continued through a correspondence that linked these two men from 1605 until just a few months before Francis’s death in 1622. Francis’s letters to Bérulle make known his admiration for the latter’s work of reform, especially the foundation of the Oratory, as well as his deep respect for Bérulle’s person and writings. This is a striking example of how, in Francis’s life, genuine friendships did not originate simply in shared interests or complementary views, but in God and God’s love, whereby all who are engaged in works of love on behalf of God’s kingdom are part of the circle of friends in Christ.

Francis’s Idea of Devotion

One of the most important and influential ideas that Francis put forth, subsequent to his 1602 visit to Paris, was his notion of true devotion. As already noted, as early as his student days in Paris, Francis reflected on the meaning of authentic devotion, rejecting pious posturing that often passed for devotion. He found confirmation of his view in Scupoli’s Spiritual Combat, which was published while Francis was a law student in Padua. Francis carried a copy of the first edition of this work on his person throughout his life and read and reread it. One of his favorite books, it made a deep impression upon him. Here Francis read Scupoli’s warning about [F]rope . . . [who] imagine that they have already reached the state of the angels and feel that God Himself is present in them. . . . However, anyone can see clearly . . . how far they are from true perfection, if he looks at their life and character. As a rule, they always wish to be preferred to others; they love to live according to their own will and are always stubborn in their decisions; they are blind in everything relating to themselves, but are very clear-sighted and officious in examining the words and actions of others. . . . if anyone interferes with them in their pious occupations and works of asceticism, especially in the presence of others—God forbid—they immediately become
indignant, boil over with wrath and become quite unlike themselves.\(^{35}\)

In the Introduction, Francis takes his own approach in defining devotion. Devotion does not mean devotions, but "simply true love of God," which is expressed by the careful, frequent, and prompt fulfillment of His will that more often than not takes the form of practicing the little virtues amidst the duties of our state of life (Part 1, chapter 1; Part 3, chapters 1-2). In the letters of spiritual direction on which the Introduction is based, Francis insists on these very same points. One of his most poignant descriptions of devotion is found in a letter of 3 May 1604 to Madame Brailart (+1622), the wife of the President of the Burgundian Parliament in Dijon.

You must not only be devout and love devotion, but you must render it lovable to everyone. Now you will make it lovable if you render it useful and pleasing. The sick will love your devotion if they receive care and comfort from it; your family will love it if they see you more attentive to their well-being, more gentle in handling your affairs, more kind in correcting and so on; your husband will love it if he sees that as your devotion increases, you become more warm and affectionate toward him; your relatives and friends will love it if they see you more free, supportive of others, and yielding to them in matters that are not contrary to God's will.\(^{39}\)

Salesian devotion "perfects . . . adorns and beautifies" (Introduction, Part 1, chapter 3), rather than stunts or harms, one's life and human development, relationships, and vocation. It is—in Mother de Chauffy's memorable phrase—a "well-mannered devotion,"\(^{40}\) which is delightfully illustrated by an episode from the life of Francis' most eminent director, Madame de Chantal. As her servants testified: "Madame's first (spiritual) guide made her pray only three times a day, and we were all annoyed by it, but the bishop of Geneva makes her pray at all hours of the day, and this disturbs no one" (ibid.).

Concluding Thoughts

In his biography of our saint, Francis de Sales: Sage & Saint, André Ravier, SJ, observes: "Devotion—such as Francis de Sales intended it—was born of his personal experience and of the confidence of his Philotheus" (178). The preceding pages have tried to indicate how the Introduction was born of Francis' own experience, first, as a student at Paris and Padua, and, then, as a participant in the Acarie circle during his 1602 visit to Paris. The latter was indeed a turning point, as it confirmed the singularity of Francis' approach and spiritual vision that would quickly be revealed in his letters of spiritual direction, which, together with the Spiritual Exercises of Padua, may be aptly regarded as the first draft of the Introduction.

It is hoped that this exploration of the back-story of the Introduction may contribute in some way to a better appreciation and understanding of the nearly three-decade developmental process that yielded this spiritual classic, as we mark the 400th anniversary of its publication. At the same time, the Introduction's back-story is also a vivid reminder that spiritual growth and development tends to be a slow, gradual process, even for a saint, and that more often than not it requires diligence, patience, perseverance, and humility—little virtues that Francis models in an exemplary fashion.

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NOTES


4. Wight, 33-34.


7. Spiritual Conference on Modesty (Saint François de Sales, Oeuvres, eds. A. Ravier and R. Devos, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade [Paris: Gallimard, 1969], 1055-51). Quotations from the Introduction are also from this edition, and are simply referenced parenthetically in the text by part and chapter. Unless otherwise noted, English translations of citations are my own.

8. Bremond, 1: 146; La Bedoyère, 35-36; Wirth, 64-65.


10. Cassus quoted in Bremond, 1: 126.


12. On the friendship between Francis and Penesino, see E. Stopp, "St. Francis de Sales: Attitudes to Friendship," in her A Man to Heal Differences, 119-37, esp. 128-27. On Francis' student days at Padua, see Ravier, Sage & Salt, 35-45, and (continued on page 16)
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“François de Sales à l’écoute des jeunes,” 409-11, Lajournée, J. 75-119; and Whitley, 71-84.


17. H. Barton, The Life of St. Francis de Sales, adapted from Abbé Hamon’s Vie de S. François de Sales [1854-55], 2 vols. (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1925), 1: 50. It might also be noted that on the front and end-pages of his copy of the Spiritual Combat, Francis copied an abridged version of the spiritual exercises he had worked out under Possevino; see Ravier, Sage & Saint, 40.

18. Werth, 81, note 32.


26. See, e.g., the fragment of a letter (c. 1605-8) to Madame de Chantal, in which Francis enumerates how Mary practiced the little virtues throughout the course of her life, from the Annunciation to the foot of the cross at Calvary (OEA, 14: 109-10), and Fiocchi, 20-1.


32. Wright, “The Salesian and Béatist Spiritual Traditions,” 158.

33. Thompson, 58.


35. Lajournée, J. 242. Also see Remond, J. 133-36; Ravier, Sage & Saint, 112; and M. Muller, St. Francis de Sales (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1937), 14-15.


38. Quoted in La Bedoyère, 35-36.
