ST. FRANCIS DE SALES AND THE ORIGIN OF THE CATHOLIC CONTROVERSY

The Catholic Controversy is a remarkable work, a book one would admire as the accomplishment of a middle-aged cleric who had spent years in study and who had a long history of pastoral experience behind him. But the fact is that St. Francis wrote these pages between the ages of 27 and 29, beginning about one year after his ordination to the priesthood. He wrote them during a seemingly hopeless mission to win back to the Faith the 72,000 Calvinists in the Chablais (now eastern France). These people had heard just about nothing of the True Faith since the Church had been virtually obliterated in their area 60 years earlier by violent persecution and heavy fines for worshipping in the old religion (Catholicism). The government had recently returned to Catholic hands in principle, but the Calvinists still held sway and were adamant against a return to the old Faith. Salesian tradition tells us that when St. Francis arrived, only 27 persons out of the 72,000 were still Catholic, but that after four years of his efforts, the figure was exactly reversed, there remaining only 27 Calvinists: seventy-two thousand souls had returned to the True Faith. It is one of the most remarkable conversion stories in all Catholic history.

When St. Francis set out on this assignment on September 14, 1594, he was accompanied by his cousin, Canon Louis de Sales, though Louis returned home shortly because of a critical lack of funds. Entering into the Chablais, St. Francis would be seen as both a religious and a political enemy (although he had been invited in by the Duke), so for the time being he made the garrison of Allinges his home base, though he almost never accepted the offer of an armed escort as he traveled about the region on foot; he made light of the occasional physical attacks he had to face. This high-born young man of the nobility, with two university degrees----one in civil law and one in canon law----spent his first winter tramping around the countryside going door to door searching out Catholics and trying to make a friendly contact here and there among the Protestants. St. Francis' main financial support was supposed to come from his family, but his father, who deeply disapproved of Francis' mission to the Chablais, refused to send him any money. It was left to his mother to send him surreptitiously some items of necessary clothing and a little money. Sometimes St. Francis would spend the night in a hayloft, and on one occasion, to escape from wolves, he spent the night in a tree after tying himself onto a branch so he would not fall off in his sleep; some peasants found him the next morning and unfastened him, numb with cold. Though St. Francis had a strong constitution, he always suffered from poor circulation, which made the cold winter even more painful for him. For many months, the results of St. Francis' mission were about nil. He had found a few Catholics, but Calvinists were afraid to listen to him preach, even if they wanted to, for fear of reprisals, and the Saint was often greeted with jeers and stones. The one hopeful sign he could count was the fact that one or two Calvinist leaders had gone out of their way to be friendly to him. Some people "back home" did not approve of St. Francis' work, as they felt he might be stirring up political trouble. Yet in the midst of these struggles, during a month-long break from his arduous mission, St. Francis was to receive a special grace on the Feast of Corpus Christi. During prayer he experienced a sense of closeness to God which made him say, "Hold back, O Lord, this flow of grace. Come not so near me, for I am not strong enough to endure the greatness of Your consoling touch, which forces me to the ground." This was one of the extraordinary graces which St. Francis de Sales received during his life.

As time went on and St. Francis saw his efforts to preach to the Calvinists frustrated, he began to work on another approach: writing pamphlets. In these pamphlets the Apostle of the Chablais could say the things he could not preach to the Calvinists in person. These little tracts in defense of the truths of the Faith would be small enough to be slipped under the doors of those the Saint wished to reach. Soon he was having them
printed to be passed out hand to hand and also to be posted in appropriate places.

It was these pamphlets that would be gathered together after St. Francis' death and published as Controversies, or The Catholic Controversy. They are remarkably to the point, showing a thorough grasp of the Calvinist claims, courage in standing up to them, and a keen intelligence in exposing them. Despite the fact that St. Francis de Sales had only three books with him for reference (the Bible, St. Robert Bellarmine's Controversies and St. Peter Canisius' Catechism), his learning is obvious, as he confidently quotes the Sacred Scriptures, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and speaks of the Greek and Hebrew versions of the Bible. Yet these pamphlets were by no means academic; St. Francis was right there in the thick of the religious controversy fray, and he knew exactly what points to go after.

The tracts apparently did their work, enabling the Saint to reach his intended audience, who would not listen to him, and enabling the Calvinists to see that it is the Catholic Church, after all, which is the true religion of Christ, with the mission to teach in His name.

These people who for 60 years----two or three entire generations----had not heard what the Catholic Faith teaches now learned about it again. Centuries later, in declaring St. Francis de Sales a Doctor of the Church (1877), Pope Pius IX stated that this book is "a full and complete demonstration of the Catholic religion." St. Francis begins his argument with an examination of mission from God, showing that the Catholic Church possesses this mission and the Protestant sects do not. He also delineates eight Rules of Faith----Holy Scripture, the Apostolic Traditions, the authority of the Church, the authority of Councils, the authority of the ancient Fathers of the Church, the authority of the Pope, miracles, and the harmony between faith and reason----showing how all point to the Catholic Faith as the Divinely given religion. He states: "Ultimately, however, the sole and true Rule of right-believing is the Word of God preached by the Church of God." But why, he asks, should anyone bow to the supposed authority of a Luther or a Calvin?

Our admiration of St. Francis' technique must not blind us to the fact that his weapons were first of all spiritual. He had planned to take Geneva by love----"Love will shake the walls of Geneva." "Ardent prayer must break down the walls of Geneva and brotherly love charge them . . . Everything gives way to love. Love is as strong as death, and to him who loves, nothing is hard. . . ." In speaking of his hope to win back the Chablais for the Church, St. Francis said, "But the way to this is the propitiation of Almighty God by our penances." A huge mural in the Visitation Monastery of Thonon in the Chablais gives another clue to the Saint's success: It pictures him and his cousin Louis invoking the Guardian Angel of the diocese as they approached the region for the first time. And it will be recalled that in his youth St. Francis had promised Our Lady to pray the Rosary daily. His apostolic use of intelligence, perseverance and personal contact were certainly fueled and directed by much grace.

St. Francis' own beautiful personality played a large part here, as it would for the rest of his apostolic life. He took time to speak with the peasants, joining in the daily chitchat. To a talkative old woman who loved to converse with him and who one day said she was scandalized by the celibacy of the clergy, St. Francis answered, "But, my dear, you keep on coming to see me. Think of the time it takes to talk to you. How on earth could I manage to help you with all your difficulties if I had a wife and children!"

Slowly the tide began to turn, such that on Christmas day of 1596 St. Francis felt bold enough to offer the first public Mass offered in Thonon in 60 years. (He had made that city his headquarters some time before.) The fact
that there was no public disturbance on this occasion was in itself a sign of the great progress made in the preceding two years. The church furnishings were gone, and he had to make do with, as he expressed it, a "badly made, simple wooden altar we put together for Christmas."

Having the Mass gave the Catholics new heart and set many Calvinists to thinking. The following Lent, however, some of the latter created a great disturbance when St. Francis proceeded to restore the old Catholic custom of giving out ashes; in the face of threats of prison and even death, he had to retreat out an open door. When St. Francis de Sales had been in the area three years, he organized a Forty Hours Adoration of continual solemn exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, accompanied by constant prayers. This was then a new devotion which had started in Italy, but was not yet widespread. It was still too risky to hold it in the city of Thonon, but a procession of 500 people began in Thonon and moved 18 miles to the town of Annemasse, where the devotion would be held. Another procession, headed by the Bishop, came up from Annecy. Many more people joined along the way, and in the end something like 30,000, including some curious Calvinists, were present. A year later Forty Hours Devotion was again held, this time in Thonon itself. At this occasion, many Protestants asked to be Baptized and confirmed----200 from one parish, 60 from another, etc. Priests and a bishop were busy administering the Sacraments. Another Forty Hours was held two weeks later, attended by officials of Church and State. On this occasion the Papal Legate was present to receive the abjurations of Protestantism from many notable persons; the Vatican Archives has a list of some 2,300.

Around this time there was a stir over a report of a miracle attributed to St. Francis de Sales. A baby, the child of a Protestant mother, had died without Baptism. St. Francis had gone to speak to the mother about Catholic doctrine, and prayed that the child would be restored to life long enough to receive Baptism. His prayer was granted, and the whole family became Catholic.

With souls being won back to God and the Church, St. Francis' task became one of an administrator who had to reopen parishes and obtain the missals, chalices, crosses and other needed items which had disappeared over the years. Around 18 parishes would come back into operation. A priest named Père Cherubin would largely take charge of these matters, with St. Francis de Sales in the background to help out in difficulties. At this point, St. Francis was still only 31 years old.

Soon after the conversion of the Chablais, political conflicts again arose to test the new converts' faith, but they held firm. This is a testimony to the fact that St. Francis had gone right to the core with his little tracts, dismantling the very heart of the Calvinist position, rather than simply engaging in ostentatious rhetoric. And of course he went beyond tearing down, as he worked to rebuild the edifice of faith that had been possessed by the Catholic ancestors of these peasants of the Chablais three generations before.

When one considers the poor prospects of success St. Francis had faced at the beginning of his mission to the Chablais, the results are rightly seen as truly remarkable. In one of his later sermons St. Francis would assure his hearers that no amount of preaching and exhortation will produce religious vocations, which are something only God can give; he would certainly affirm the same thing with regard to conversions to the Faith. We can be sure that we will never on this earth know the full story behind the remarkable success of St. Francis de Sales' mission to the Chablais.

We are indeed blessed to have, four centuries later, these tracts which were so instrumental in so many
conversions. They are still apropos today, as the same objections against the Faith have unfortunately seen a resurgence in recent years. We hope that St. Francis de Sales' pamphlets may still work today to clear away obstacles to the acceptance of the Catholic Faith in minds and hearts and lead many back to that ancient and ever fresh and pure Faith which is the Faith of Peter, the Faith of our Fathers, the Faith left to us by Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and still taught the world over by the Roman Catholic Church.

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AUTHOR'S GENERAL INTRODUCTION *

GENTLEMEN, having prosecuted for some space of time the preaching of the Word of God in your town, without obtaining a hearing from your people save rarely, casually, and stealthily,----wishing to leave nothing undone on my part, I have set myself to put into writing some principal reasons, chosen for the most part from the sermons and instructions which I have hitherto addressed to you by word of mouth, in defence of the faith of the Church. I should indeed have wished to be heard, as the accusers have been; for words in the mouth are living, on paper dead. "The living voice," says S. Jerome, "has a certain indescribable secret strength, and the heart is far more surely reached by the spoken word than by writing." 2 This it is which made the glorious Apostle S. Paul say in the Scripture: How shalt they believe Him of Whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? . . . Faith then cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. 3 My best chance, then, would have been to be heard, in lack of which this writing will not be without good results. (1.) It will carry to your houses what you will not receive at our house, at our meetings. (2.) It will satisfy those who, as sole answer to the arguments I bring forward, say that they would like to see them laid before some minister, and who believe that the mere presence of the adversary would make them tremble, grow pale, and faint away, taking from them all strength; now they can be laid before them. (3.) Writing can be better handled; it gives more leisure for consideration than the voice does; it can be pondered more profoundly. (4.) It will be seen that I deny a thousand impieties which are attributed to Catholics; this is not in order to escape from the difficulty, as some have said, but to follow the holy intention of the Church; for I write in everybody's sight, and under the censorship of superiors, being assured that, while people will find herein plenty of ignorance, they will not find, God helping, any irreligion or any opposition to the doctrines of the Roman Church.

I must, however, protest, for the relief of my conscience, that all these considerations would never have made me take the resolution of writing. It is a trade which requires apprenticeship, and belongs to learned and more cultivated minds. To write well, one must know extremely well; mediocre wits must content themselves with speech, wherein gesture, voice, play of feature, brighten the word. Mine, which is of the less, or, to say the downright truth, of the lowest degree of mediocrity, is not made to succeed in this exercise; and indeed I should not have thought of it, if a grave and judicious gentleman had not invited and encouraged me to do it: afterwards several of my chief friends approved of it, whose opinion I so highly value that my own has no belief from me save in default of other. I have then put down here some principal reasons of the Catholic faith, which clearly prove that all are in fault who remain separated from the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church. And I address and offer it to you with good heart, hoping that the causes which keep you from hearing me will not have power to hinder you from reading what I write. Meanwhile, I assure you, that you will never read a writing which shall be given you by any man more devoted to your spiritual service than I am; and I can truly say that I shall never receive a command with liiore hearty acceptance, than I did that which Monseigneur, our most
reverend Bishop, gave me, when he ordered me, according to the holy desire of His Highness, whose letter he put into my hand, to come here and bring you the holy Word of God. Nor did I think that I could ever do you a greater service. And in fact I thought that as you will receive no other law for your belief than that interpretation of the Scripture which seems to you the best, you would hear also the interpretation which I should bring, viz., that given by the Apostolic Roman Church, which hitherto you have not had except perverted and quite disfigured and adulterated by the enemy, who well knew that had you seen it in its purity, never would you have abandoned it. The time is evil; the Gospel of Peace has hard striving to get heard amid so many rum ours of war. Still I lose not courage; fruits a little late in coming preserve better than the forward ones. I trust that if Our Lord but once cry in your ears his holy Ephpheta, this slowness will result in much the greater sureness. Take then, gentlemen, in good part, this present which I make you, and read my reasons attentively. The hand of God is not withered nor shortened, and readily shows its power in feeble and low things. If you have with so much promptitude heard one of the parties, have yet patience to hear the other. Then take, I charge you on the part of God, take time and leisure to calm your understanding, and pray God to assist you with His Holy Spirit in a question of such great importance, in order that He may address you unto salvation. But above all I beg you never to let other passion enter your spirits than the passion of Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, by which we all have been redeemed and shall be saved, unless we are wanting on our part; since He desires that all men should be saved and should come to the knowledge of His truth. I beseech His sacred Majesty that He would deign to help me and you in this affair, as He deigned to regard the glorious Apostle S. Paul [whose] conversion [we celebrate] today.

All comes back to the saying of the prophet, Destruction is thy own, O Israel! Our Lord was the true Saviour Who came to enlighten every man and to be a light unto the revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Israel; whereas Israel takes hereby occasion of ignominy. Is not this a great misfortune? And when it is said that He is set for the ruin of many, this must be understood as to the actual event, not as to the intention of the Divine Majesty, As the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil had no virtue to teach Adam either good or evil, though the event gave it this name, because Adam by taking the fruit experienced the evil which his disobedience caused him. The Son of God came for peace and benediction, and not for evil to men; unless some madman would dare to cast up to our Lord his holy Word: Woe to that man through whom scandal cometh, and would condemn him by his own law to have a millstone tied about his neck and be cast into the depths of the sea. Let us then confess that not one of us men is scandalised save by his own fault; This is what I undertake to prove by force of argument. O my God, my Saviour, purify my spirit; make this Your word distil sweetly into the hearts of my readers, as a sacred dew, to cool the ardour of the passions which they may have; and they shall see how true, in You, and in the Church Your Spouse, is that which You have said.

It was, I think, that great facility which men find for taking scandal, which made Our Lord say that scandals needs must come, or, as S. Matthew says, Woe to the world because of scandals; for if men take occasion of their harm from the sovereign good itself, how could there not be scandals in a world where there are so many evils? Now there are three sorts of scandals, and all three very evil in their nature, but unequally so. There is a scandal which our learned theologians call active. And this is a bad action which gives to another an occasion of wrongdoing, and the person who does this action is justly called scandalous. The two other sorts of scandal are called passive scandals, some of them passive scandals ab extrinseco, others ab intrinseco. For of persons who are scandalised, some are so by the bad actions of another, and receive the active scandal, letting their wills be affected by the scandal; but some are so by their own malice, and, having otherwise no occasion, build and
fabricate them in their own brain, and scandalise themselves with a scandal which is all of their own making. He who scandalises another fails in charity towards his neighbour, he who scandalises himself fails in charity towards himself, and he who is scandalised by another is wanting in strength and firmness. The first is scandalous, the second scandalous and scandalised, the third scandalised only. The first scandal is called \textit{datum}, given, the second \textit{acceptum}, taken, the third \textit{receptum}, received. The first passes the third in evil, and the second so much passes the first that it contains first and second, being active and passive both together, as the murdering and destroying oneself is a cruelty more against nature than the killing another. All these kinds of scandal abound in the world, and one sees nothing so plentiful as scandal: it is the principal trade of the devil; whence Our Lord said, \textit{Woe to the world because of scandals.} But scandal taken without occasion holds the chief place by every right, [being] the most frequent, the most dangerous, and the most injurious.

And it is of this alone that Our Lord is the object in souls which are given up as a prey to iniquity. But a little patience: Our Lord cannot be scandalous, for all in Him is sovereignly good; nor scandalised, for He is sovereignly powerful and wise; how then can it happen that one should be scandalised in Him, and that He should be set for the ruin of many? It would be a horrible blasphemy to attribute our evil to His Majesty. \textit{He wishes that every one should be saved and should come to the knowledge of His truth.} He would have no one perish. Our destruction is from ourselves, and our help from His Divine goodness. Our Lord then does not scandalise us, nor does His holy Word, but we are scandalised in Him, which is the proper way of speaking in this point, as Himself teaches, saying: \textit{Blessed is he that shall not be scandalised in Me.} And when it is said that He has been set for the ruin of many, we must find this verified in the event, which was that many were ruined on account of Him, not in the intention of the supreme goodness, which had only sent Him as a light for the revelation of the Gentiles and for the glory of Israel. But if there are men who would say the contrary, they have nothing left [as I have said] but to curse their Saviour with His Own words: \textit{Woe to him by whom scandal cometh.}

I beseech you, let us look in ourselves for the cause of our vices and sins. Our will is the only source of them, Our mother Eve indeed tried to throw the blame on the serpent, and her husband to throw it on her, but the excuse was not valid. They would have done better to say the honest \textit{peccavi}, as David did, whose sin was immediately forgiven.

I have said all this, gentlemen, to make known to you whence comes this great dissension of wills in matter of religion, which we see amongst those who in their mouths make profession of Christianity. This is the principal and sovereign scandal of the world, and, in comparison with the others, it alone deserves the name of scandal, and it seems to be almost exactly the same thing when Our Lord says it is necessary that scandals come, and St. Paul says that \textit{there must be heresies;} for this scandal changes with time, and, like a violent movement, gradually grows weaker in its evilness. In those Christians who begin the division and this civil war, heresy is a scandal simply \textit{taken}, passive \textit{ab intrinseco}, and there is no evil in the heresiarch save such as is entirely in his own will; no one has part in this but himself. The scandal of the first whom he seduces already begins to be divided;---but unequally, for the heresiarch has his share therein on account of his solicitation, the seduced have a share as much the greater as they have had less occasion of following him. Their heresy having taken root, those who are born of heretical parents among the heretics have ever less share in the fault: still neither these nor those come to be without considerable fault of their own, and particularly persons of this age, who are almost all in purely passive scandal. For the Scripture which they handle, the neighbourhood of true Christians, the marks which they see in the true Church, take from them all proper excuse; so that the Church from whom they are separated can put before them the words of her Lord: \textit{Search the Scriptures, for you think}
in them to have life everlasting: and the same are they that give testimony of Me. 12 The works that I do in the name of My Father, they give testimony of Me. 13

Now I have said that their scandal is purely or almost purely passive. For it is well known that the occasion they pretend to have for their division and departure is the error, the ignorance, the idolatry, which they aver to be in the Church they have abandoned, while it is a thing perfectly certain that the Church in her general body cannot be scandalous, or scandalised, being like her Lord, who communicates to her by grace and particular assistance what is proper to him by nature: for being her Head he guides her feet in the right way. The Church is his mystical body, and therefore he takes as his own the honour and the dishonour that are given to her; so it cannot be said that she gives, takes, or receives any scandal. Those then who are scandalised in her do all the wrong and have all the fault: their scandal has no other subject than their own malice, which keeps ever tickling them to make them laugh in their iniquities.

See then what I intend to show in this little treatise. I have no other aim than to make you see, gentlemen, that this Susanna is wrongfully accused, and that she is justified in lamenting over all those who have turned aside from her commandments in the words of her Spouse: They have hated Me without cause. 14

This I will do in two ways: (1.) by certain general reasons; (2.) by particular examples which I will bring forward of the principal difficulties, by way of illustration. All that so many learned men have written tends and returns to this, but not in a straight line. For each one proposes a particular path to follow. I will try to reduce all the lines of my argument to this point as to the centre as exactly as I can. The first part will serve almost equally for all sorts of heretics: the second will be addressed rather to those whose reunion we have the strongest duty to effect. So many great personages have written in our age, that their posterity have scarcely anything more to say, but have only to consider, learn, imitate, admire. I will therefore say nothing new and would not wish to do so. All is ancient, and there is almost nothing of mine beyond the needle and thread: the rest I have only had to unpick and sew again in my own way, with this warning of Vincent of Lerins: “Teach, however, what thou hast learnt; that whilst thou sayest things in a new way thou say not new things.” 15

This treatise will seem perhaps to some a little too meagre: this does not come from my stinginess but from my poverty. My memory has very little stored up, and is kept going only from day to day; and I have but very few books here with which I can enrich myself. But still receive favourably, I beg you, gentlemen of Thonon, this work, and though you have seen many better made and richer, still give some little of your attention to this, which will perhaps be more adapted to your taste than the others are; for its air is entirely Savoyard, and one of the most profitable prescriptions, and the last remedy, is a return to one's natal air. If this profit you not, you shall try others more pure and more invigorating, for there are, thank God, of all sorts in this country. I am about therefore to begin, in the name of God, Whom I most humbly beseech to make His holy Word distil sweetly as a refreshing dew into your heart. And I beg you, gentlemen, and those who read this, to remember the words of S. Paul: Let all bitterness and anger, and indignation, and clamour, and blasphemy be taken away from you, with all malice. Amen. 16

* Addressed to the inhabitants of Thonon. [Tr.]
2. Ep. ad Paulinum.
3. Rom. x.
4. 1 Tim. ii. 4.
5. Osee xiii. 9.
8. xvi. 7.
9. The Saint adds in margin: This is the will of God, your sanctification, 1 Thess. iv. 3. [Tr.]
11. 1 Cor. xi. 19.
13. ibid. x. 25.
15. Comm. 1st cap. xxxvi.