Chapter Six

AN EVALUATION

Although Vincent de Paul cannot be equated with Francis de Sales, there is no doubt that he was deeply influenced by him. The teaching of De Sales corroborated, as it were, De Paul’s love of the poor. Whereas the Bishop of Geneva had seen the poor only in relation to the whole of society, and their relief as the individual responsibility of all, Monsieur Vincent concentrated his entire attention on them. He talked of the moral obligation of the richer classes towards the destitute—a language that De Sales would never have used for were not rich and poor alike Christians?

It has been suggested that the contrast between the two saints may have been due to the difference in their social origins. De Sales was firmly ensconced in the society of provincial nobility and gens de robe; De Paul was the outsider, the son of a peasant, coming to the world of nobility with a different perspective and therefore able to envisage the necessary reforms. This analysis probably has a large grain of truth in it, but it is not adequate to account for the difference between the temperaments of the two men. It would surely be foolhardy to maintain that De Sales was a mystical theoretician merely because he had been born and raised in a castle, while De Paul thought in such concrete terms as hospital wards and soup-kitchens just because he had herded sheep in his youth!

Francis de Sales had indeed been accused of impracticality. He confined himself to moralistic teaching, exercising no initiative in the matter of schools, foundling homes and so forth! This statement is, for one thing, grossly inaccurate. De Sales was by no means indifferent to the need for elementary schools. The work of the Visitation came to include the education of young girls and we have already mentioned De Sales’ high esteem for the Ursulines and his desire to found a Company of teaching Sisters. He had also cherished a project that seems very similar to some of the foundations De Paul made later. In 1599 he petitioned the Roman Curia on behalf of the diocese of Geneva. Many Calvinist converts had, by their reception into the Church, forfeited their possessions and means of livelihood, for they were resident on the borders of Geneva and therefore economically dependent on the city. Since their numbers were increasing steadily, action would have to be taken. Francis de Sales proposed the establishment of a “house of mercy” where “those banished for the sake of Christ, especially the children, and young people of both sexes, could be welcomed, brought up and taught in a Christian manner. Each one

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3 Ibid., p. 31
would be taught according to his ability, either the arts and sciences or some trade, which would later enable him to earn his living.”

The Duke of Savoy and several private gentlemen had already contributed over 18,000 ecus to the proposed establishment, but additional revenues were needed, preferably an income from some ecclesiastical benefice. For this reason De Sales was appealing to Rome. Although he was Coadjutor at the time and thus only wrote for the Bishop of Geneva, there can be no doubt that he was at least one of the originators of the scheme. The territory in question had, after all, been the scene of his missionary labors since 1593; he, moreover, had almost exclusive charge of it. Unfortunately the project seems never to have materialized, though all his life he was particularly generous to disposed converts from Calvinism.

It cannot, therefore, be said that Francis de Sales inhabited an ivory tower. Nor can anyone dispute the fact that he profoundly influenced the current of French religious life by the infusion of mystical elements into formal religious practice. Since it was an essential part of his doctrine that divine love is the supreme incentive to good works, his teaching must also have had an impact on the exercise of charity.

We have already discussed the diffusion of his ideas through the Introduction to the Devout Life and the Treatise on the Love of God, and his personal contacts. In addition, the Order of the Visitation spread phenomenally. By 1634 it counted sixty-five houses, located all over Savoy and a good half of France. For many years it was considered fashionable for the great of the Court, clergy and society to attend readings of De Sales’ works and of the lives of the first Mothers in the Visitation convents. Nor did Francis de Sales lack disciples. One in particular was very zealous, Jean-Pierre Camus, the Bishop of Belley.

Mysticism obviously cannot be shared by everyone. It can, however, tinge the thought of a generation. Francis de Sales achieved the supreme synthesis of love for God and love for man. Through it he taught the rich respect for the poor and the poor respect for themselves; he taught that the service of one’s fellow-man is good in itself.

A goodly portion of his teaching must have sifted down the mass of the laity, for the attitude towards the poor had clearly changed by the middle of the seventeenth century. As late as 1606 it was possible for the Parliament of Paris to order all beggars to be deported from the city in order to rid it of loafers and vagabonds. By 1656 such a thing had become unthinkable.

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5 The *ecu* was generally worth three *livres*.
The Crown was building a great complex of hospices in the midst of Paris, so that the destitute might be sheltered as befitted fellow-Christians.\textsuperscript{10}

Vincent de Paul had had a great deal to do with the change. Yet it would have been impossible for him to accomplish as much as he did, had not Francis de Sales prepared the way for the workers of charity-Francis de Sales who taught that the love of God produces a consuming zeal: “this holy passion which causes so many pious books to be written, so many churches, altars, and pious houses to be built…which causes so many of the servants of God to watch, work and die amid its devouring flames.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Andre Menabrea, \textit{Saint Vincent de Paul} (Paris: Editions du Vieux Colombier, 1944), pp. 288-289. Menabrea is an unreliable source where interpretation is concerned; I have cited him here only because the text of the royal proclamation in question seems to be unavailable elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{11} St Francis de Sales, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. 4, p. 288.