

FRANÇOIS
FÉNELON

FRANÇOIS FÉNELON

A BIOGRAPHY ✦ THE APOSTLE OF PURE LOVE

PETER J. GORDAY



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

François Fénelon: A Biography—The Apostle of Pure Love

2012 First Printing

Copyright © 2012 by Peter Gorday

ISBN 978-1-55725-801-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gorday, Peter J.

François Fénelon : a biography—the apostle of pure love / Peter J. Gorday.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-55725-801-4 (pbk.)

1. Fénelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe-, 1651-1715. 2. Authors, French—17th century—Biography. 3. Theologians—France—Biography. I. Title.

PQ1796.G55 2012

282.092—dc23

[B]

2011052032

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in an electronic retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	<i>Man, Quietist, Mystic</i>	vii
ONE	<i>Classical Education and Priestly Formation</i> 1651–1677	I
TWO	<i>Rising Intellectual Star</i> 1675–1689	21
THREE	<i>Pedagogue to Royalty</i> 1689–1697	45
FOUR	<i>Madame Guyon</i> THE CATALYST 1688–1695	67
FIVE	<i>Madame de Maintenon, Saint-Cyr, and the</i> <i>Question of "Pure Love"</i> 1689–1697	99
SIX	<i>From Issy to the Maxims and Beyond</i> FÉNELON AT HIGH NOON 1694–1699	123
SEVEN	<i>Louis Thunders, the Pope Decides</i> FÉNELON HUMBLER 1699–1715	153
EIGHT	<i>At Cambrai "PURE LOVE" IN ACTION</i> 1695–1715	173
EPILOGUE	<i>Fénelon for Us</i>	203
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		211
NOTES		213
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY		241
INDEX OF PROPER NAMES		251

“So it is to ensure that the operation of grace may remain a mystery of faith that God permits it to be slow and painful. . . . We would much rather be consumed at once by the flames of pure love, but so speedy a process would cost us nothing. It is utter selfishness that we desire to attain perfection so cheaply and so quickly.”

—INSTRUCTIONS AND ADVICE, 36 (TR. EDMONSON)



“As for myself, I am in a dry peace. . . . But the world seems to be like a bad comedy, which is going to disappear in a few hours. I distrust myself more than the world. I classify everything as a ‘makeshift,’ and it is in the depth of this ‘makeshift’ status of everything here below that I find peace.”

—LETTER TO THE COMTESSE DE MONTBERON
NOVEMBER 7–8, 1700

INTRODUCTION



Man, Quietist, Mystic

The winter in northern France along the border with the Low Countries that year was particularly harsh. It was the final strain on the increasingly frail health of the sixty-four-year-old archbishop and duke of Cambrai, François Fénelon. People noticed at Christmas services when he presided in the stately Gothic cathedral that he looked extremely drawn and feeble. He described himself as “a walking and talking skeleton that sleeps and eats a little bit.”¹ He had already been asking officially for help with administrative duties that were beyond his strength, although his mind was as sharp as ever. His mood and spirit were resigned, yet tranquil and hopeful. In the first week of January—the year was 1715—he took a sharp turn for the worse with what seems to have been bronchial pneumonia.² Medical help was summoned to no avail. Friends, family, local clergy, and supporters gathered in order to be with him as the end approached. There were final devotions and exchanges of affection, administration of the last rites, and the last blessing from the archbishop on all present. He was in considerable pain that night. By early morning on January 7, though, he was more peaceful; he kissed the crucifix for the last time and quietly expired.

Fénelon’s will was uncomplicated, because, as his secretary Ramsay said, “after his death he was found to be penniless and debt-free; he died as poor as he lived.”³ He swore his allegiance to Louis XIV in a final statement, asking His Majesty only to assure a pious successor to the archbishopric and the continuing supervision of the seminary by the Society of Saint-Sulpice. He had requested that the funeral observances be kept as simple as possible, so that, he said, “the modesty of bishops’ funerals would teach the laity to forgo the vain expenditures” that had become customary. It was decided also to dispense with any eulogies despite his saintly reputation.⁴

He was deeply mourned and fondly remembered as an exemplary priest and pastor. It is extraordinary, therefore, that such a beloved and revered man should have left such a complex legacy. Yet complex it is, at least partly because of the fascinating spiritual currents that will always swirl around his name.

At the center of this whirlpool was the fact that he had spent the last years of his life under the shadow of a papal condemnation that his own monarch, Louis XIV, had aggressively sought. By official pronouncement in March 1699, Pope Innocent XII had censured in the work of Fénelon certain theological propositions about the nature and import of "pure love." The matters were highly technical in nature, and the force of the censure was somewhat unclear. But, nonetheless, Fénelon had immediately and in good faith submitted. Others quickly disseminated his controversial writings, however, and his ideas spread like a devotional flood that could not be suppressed. Louis's disapproval and the pope's judgment failed to hold back the tide.

Thus, the lack of eulogy at his funeral notwithstanding, massive praise of Fénelon (as well as heated criticism) had already begun during his lifetime, only to mushroom after his death in a process that continues to this day.⁵ Our retrieval of the man and his message can still bear much good fruit.

The Maxims of the Saints

François Fénelon is either idealized or demonized because he continues to strike deep chords in the life of the spirit. For students of the history of Christianity he is remembered primarily as the author of the notorious work that led to his papal condemnation, the *Maxims of the Saints* (its full title is *Explication of the Maxims of the Saints on the Inner Life*). First published in 1697, then condemned in 1699, its further publication was suppressed until the nineteenth century. Modern readers are always surprised that such a dry composition should be so controversial. The *Maxims* is a strikingly innocuous composition at first glance.

Each of the "maxims" is actually an affirmation, or contention, about some aspect of how it is that the human soul, hungering for the perfection

of spiritual life, can draw closer to God in prayer. After being stated in what Fénelon considered a correct and orthodox form, the individual maxim is then coupled with an erroneous and distorted statement of the same central point. The intention is to help the reader separate a “true” from a “false” formulation of what is at issue. The core argument of the whole work, the underlying theme, is that “all interior paths tend toward pure or disinterested love” and that “this ‘pure love’ is the highest degree of Christian perfection.”⁶ In other words, if you want to grow in your relationship with God, then you must practice what Fénelon calls “pure”—that is, totally disinterested—love. The terms are slippery, but the claim is bold and is raised by Fénelon to the very highest level of intensity. The implications are radical and unsettling. And yet, says Fénelon, such an idea of “pure love” has always been at the heart of the best spiritual teaching in all times of the church’s life. Consequently, the *Maxims* actually stirred up a hornet’s nest.

But there was even more to it. By publishing the *Maxims* Fénelon aimed at accomplishing something else on a deeply personal level. He wanted to vindicate the essential insights of his friend Madame Jeanne Guyon. She had been a catalyst in his development. He considered her a saintly, well-intended, but misunderstood and mistreated spiritual teacher. Her book, *A Short and Easy Method for Prayer*, had been well received initially by seriously devout readers in the most aristocratic circles. Then doubts arose. Careful examination by church authorities had turned up some troubling expressions. Her personal history was also controversial, even scandalous. In the prolonged struggle that was set in motion Guyon was apprehended, then interrogated by Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, bishop of Meaux and senior theologian of the French church, and then invited to produce a defense. Fénelon rose to her side in the *Maxims*, but failing to exonerate her, he brought about his own condemnation as well. As part of the complex fallout Fénelon came under official censure, and his intimate relations with Louis XIV and his consort, Madame de Maintenon, were ruined for good.

The grounds of the condemnation are somewhat obscure to us today. In essence Fénelon was accused (as had been Guyon earlier) of the doctrinal heresy known as “quietism.” The label had come to be linked specifically with the notorious heretic Miguel de Molinos, whose writings

and life had already been condemned by the pope in November 1687, following which Molinos was thrown into prison. His rejected teaching, now labeled "quietist," made use of the concept of "pure love." So in the minds of many people "pure love" automatically implied "quietism," and "quietism" meant the forbidden teachings of Molinos. Fénelon's name and his ideas about "pure love" thus came to be permanently associated with a formal heresy, and the very concept of "pure love"—despite a respectable legacy in orthodox theological discourse—became tainted. It is *this* version of the quietist Fénelon that is best known to students of church history.

Two Problematic Terms: Quietist And Mystic

So it is that we must come to grips with two terms if we are to begin to understand Fénelon. The first charge is that he was a "quietist." And the second is that his spirituality is "mystical" and that he is a "mystic." Both concepts are closely associated in the tradition and thus must be taken in tandem. What makes definition difficult here is that they had achieved a kind of red-flag status in the later seventeenth century because each of them had become an "ism," that is, a set of doctrines. There was *quietism* and there was *mysticism*. As soon as one of them was used, people judged their orthodoxy or unorthodoxy. Can good Catholics be quietists and mystics? At the very least, both terms suggested to the minds of many people dangerous tendencies in religion.

But there was distortion here. In the Molinist form in which it had been condemned, quietism consisted, to be sure, of a set of (officially objectionable) theological propositions, and this is how it is defined in theological encyclopedias. In its more original and more general usage the term referred, as Ronald Knox argued,⁷ not to an articulated doctrinal posture of some sort, but rather to a type of pastoral guidance common in the seventeenth century. Pious souls were encouraged to embrace what was sometimes called the "sleeping devotion" or "the prayer of quiet" or "the prayer of simple regard." In theoretically articulated form it was a devotion that had roots in Spanish and Italian circles and was then popularized in France by Francis de Sales. Traditionally considered a higher and more advanced form of prayer for monastics, it proved to be quite

helpful for ordinary layfolk as well. The purpose of this kind of prayer was to help devotees avoid two perennial traps in the disciplined practice of prayer, especially where concern with method was paramount: scrupulosity about intention (am I doing this with the right spirit?) and self-conscious preoccupation with technique (am I doing this in the right way?). What then happens, ironically, is that the "self" of the worshiper becomes the center of attention instead of God. Henri Bremond, the great historian of the history of French spirituality (to whom I shall refer often), described the dilemma in terms of the anxious "disquietude" that easily fills our hearts when we are "self"-focused in prayer.⁸ The "prayer of quiet" is then a way to shift the focus onto God, so that the soul of the one who prays might be filled with trusting "quietude." It was a bit like telling someone who is learning to dance to stop thinking about their feet and just swing with the rhythm. The goal is a worthy one.

So, where's the problem? While everyone agreed that the prayer of quiet is a good thing for particularly distressed and fretful souls—which is all of us at times—there are deeply important questions about the nature of this prayer. What exactly happens between the soul and God in such prayer? If we practice such prayer, what are the implications for more ordinary meditative practices and devotional disciplines, for the use of the sacraments, for relations to church authority, and, most of all, for Christian ethics? All of these require methodical attention to duties and "correctness." How is the requirement to love thy neighbor affected? Or loving God? If I quietly *love* God in my prayer, is it acceptable to *hope* for something as well? Or does that let anxiety about whether I am doing it "right" slip in by the back door? Fénelon addressed all of these questions eventually. As we shall see, much of this devolved into a debate about the relation between "self-love" and love of the "other," in this case God, or "a love of God for what he does [for me] and a love of God for what he is [in himself]"⁹—a debate just as alive in our own time as in that of Fénelon.

The core quietistic idea is solid. It is the belief that God is found by the still, resting, empty, and *contemplating* mind, not by the mind as it *actively* manipulates quasi-visual imagery or verbal constructs, that is, not by *discursive* mental labor or *meditation*. When God "comes" to the patiently waiting and expectant soul, it is because we *listen* and cease talking; it is because we sit in stillness and wait for God and (seemingly!) cease to *do*

anything. We do not find God, but God finds us: it is one way of emphasizing the priority of grace and gift, of receptivity, in the spiritual life. Quietist writers often make this point by saying that we must get the "self" out of the way in making ourselves available to God. This "self" may be understood morally as our prideful, arrogant, conceited, self-important self, but also more cognitively as our consciously thinking, analyzing, self-reflexive (thinking about ourselves and self-aware) self. Notice also, though, that this contrast may be formulated as "the self doing something" in the presence of God, that is, in "action," versus "the self at rest" in the presence of God, that is, in a "state" of repose. It is one small step, then, to say that this "self" must be "annihilated" if we wish to give ourselves over to, or "abandon" ourselves to, God's presence and then to divine providential care. The intention is clear, but the language is risky.

The point at which "mysticism" enters the picture is with the contention that this abandoning of ourselves or giving ourselves over to God must proceed by means of a rediscovered, intensely felt, and profoundly inward sense of the immediate presence of God.¹⁰ The consequent yielding of the self to this experience of God must happen at a hidden location deep within the individual's inner "space," often called the "center" or "fine point" of the soul. "Mysticism" then denotes this sense of being "filled" with divine presence deep within. We should notice as well that the sense of being "filled" may be expressed positively or negatively. That is, God may be present, for example, as a burning fire (positive) or, paradoxically, as a desolating emptiness (negative). Likewise the presence may be depicted with vivid imagery (positive) or, contrariwise, by means of an abstract language of negation (negative). The experience may be one of joy (positive) or agony (negative). And so on. There was also the issue, often heard in Fénelon's time, of whether mystical experience was reserved only for adepts or something to be desired for all Christians.

Now in the early stages, this inward experiencing of the mystic is marked by a retreat from the mundane, from the outward, superficial, and distracting world of daily concerns and activities, in order to pursue a re-centered, "purified" sense of the self (a "losing of the self to find the self" experience). But then in its more advanced stages the soul, no longer or not entirely invested in a retreat from the outward, may move back to the mundane with "eyes that have been opened," with, we might say, "the eyes

of God." Bremond's more technical definition is that "mysticism" denotes "that natural disposition which leads certain souls by a sort of sudden compulsion to seize with direct and daring love on the spiritual beneath the veil of sense, the one in the many, the order amid the confusion, the eternal in the transitory, the divine in the created."¹¹ The mystical consciousness *generalizes*; having started in prayer, it becomes a way of perceiving everything. For Fénelon, as we shall see, it is not so much that the world looks different because of mystical experience, but that he understands it differently (as being providentially ordered by grace, rather than meaningless), and he can now ethically relate to it differently (with the will of God, rather than with his own).

It is useful, then, to combine the terms. If we say that this quietist prayer of repose combined with the deep inwardness of the mystical experience is something genuine, even something beautiful and highly to be desired, it may also have a dangerous and subversive quality about it. Sometimes the mystic, immersed in a deep and inward quiet with God, overlooks and even bypasses the ordinary practices and disciplines of community life. Trouble then begins and conflict ensues with authoritative traditions and offices in the church. The stage is set for charges of heresy, or immorality, or "special revelations" vouchsafed to mystical "prophets." Precisely because of their unregulated nature, quietistic-mystical spiritualities tend to be manifestations of individual religious genius. They may be freewheeling, undisciplined, ineffably private, vulnerable to the one-sidedness of idiosyncrasy, bizarre and extreme language, and grandiose claims for personal authority. Religious fanaticism, pathology, and delusion, as well as outright charlatanism, may enter the picture. All of the rules are broken, or at least stretched. The mystic does not have to live by the ordinary requirements because he or she operates on a higher level of consciousness and "knows" better.

Fénelon was exceedingly careful here. We will see how hard he labored to restrain what appeared excessive with Guyon. Quietistic-mystical spirituality *does* tend toward overstatement, he admitted. But abuse does not do away with correct use. We will also see that he was equally intent on preservation of a rich essence as well. This spirituality is fecund with spiritual renewal for all of us, but it must be *rightly understood*. It was the function of the titanic struggle with his archrival Bossuet about

these matters that allowed him to craft the all-important distinctions and clarifications. His purpose was to "detoxify" quietist-mysticism, to show that it contains a *way* of relating to God and a *way* of living that are authentically Christian. That *way* is "pure love." And in this he was eminently successful, despite the official condemnation of his masterwork.

Fénelon the Man and the Spiritual Teacher

For most modern readers of spiritual texts, the old ecclesiastical disputes with their sometimes arcane and off-putting technical language may seem, perhaps, like dinosaurs. We are more likely to know Fénelon as the benignly smiling figure (in the famous Vivien portrait) who graces the book jackets of anthologies. These are usually abbreviated selections drawn from compilations put together after his death or excerpted from his vast correspondence. In such collections we do not meet Fénelon the embedded controversialist and polemicist on matters of seventeenth-century church dogma. Instead, we encounter a more user-friendly Fénelon, who seems more contemporary because he is dealing with perpetual matters. *This* Fénelon is an expert on prayer, a passionate lover of all that is beautiful and exalted, and a therapist for the sin-sick soul, all at once! One danger in such a way of experiencing Fénelon, though, is that his ideas about "pure love" can have a certain vapid quality, as if the very notion is a harmless vagary of "sweet" Fénelon! One of the purposes of this biography is to honor our modern interest in Fénelon the man, but also to re-immense the concept of "pure love" in Fénelon's own context, so that it might shine more clearly, as it were, with its own peculiar light.

Typically in the volumes of selections we hear Fénelon at work as a spiritual director. Serious Catholics at the court of Louis XIV, the group known as the *dévots*, sought out certain clergy or laypersons with a reputation for mature spiritual wisdom to function in the role of spiritual directors. Either in direct meeting or through letters, the director kept the directee hard at work in the development of mature interiority. Growth in the practice of prayer, sensible regulation of the passions and appetites, the practice of devotional habits (such as the cultivation of silence),

appropriate preparation for sacraments, thoughtful and balanced self-examination, and practical charity might all be included. Much stress was laid on faithfulness to role, duty, and vocation, as director and directee discerned and understood these. Practically from the beginning of his priestly ministry, Fénelon was sought out as a director, and thus passages of direction are often cited in modern collections.¹²

His directees were male and female, young and old, laity living very active lives in the world (including soldiers), and especially members of religious orders. It is in this capacity that he eventually became known as “the Swan of Cambrai,” renowned for his charming presence, graceful literary style, and disarming gentleness of manner (the source of his “sweetness”). We should be clear, however, that just as he was a rigorous thinker, a determined and sharp opponent in debate, and a biting adversary when he wished to be, his spiritual direction was nothing if not forceful. The contrast with Bossuet as “the eagle of Meaux,” with razor-sharp talons ready for the defense of churchly orthodoxy and royal absolutism, is often overstated, with the implication that Fénelon was “soft.” In fact, he operated, as we shall see, with a velvet-gloved fist—all smooth and soothing on the outside, but hard and potentially crushing on the inside. To some people he seemed cunning and arrogant, but the truth is that he operated with the kind of street smarts that the aristocratic milieu of Versailles required. People experienced him (mostly) as a good friend or (on occasion) as a rugged adversary, although he could be both at different times with the same individual. Call it versatility.

Part of what makes him so enjoyable to read is that he had the ability to use words in that polished lapidary fashion that is a mark of the high literature of the French seventeenth century. His way of stating ideas often has a gem-like, proverbial quality. This style of smooth, pellucid writing (called the “Fénelonian style”) made him, in French literary tradition down through the nineteenth century, an acknowledged master of classical literary elegance and an exemplar to be imitated. We know from the popularity of his slightly earlier contemporary La Rochefoucauld (1613–80) that epigrammatic writing was vastly popular at this time, and surely Fénelon exemplified the trend in a powerfully evocative way. (One of my favorites, packed with Fénelon’s theology, which we will unfold in the course of this biography, is: “Privations are the bread of the strong.”)¹³

Spiritual truth simply stated and with maximum economy of words has a timeless quality.

His personality comes through as well in these letters, and there are famous descriptions of Fénelon's graceful, almost mesmerizing self-presentation from his Versailles contemporaries. Many of them were captivated by, but some were maliciously envious of, his suavely aristocratic demeanor (his *politesse*), and others were just put on edge by him. The descriptions often come from courtiers and royal officials, that is, people who appreciated subtlety and nuance in the arts of self-presentation. As descriptions they may, of course, say more about the describer than the one being described. The most sophisticated characterization comes from the royal chancellor Henri d'Aguesseau and deserves full quotation: "Never has one man better united in himself qualities so contrary and incompatible with one another. Uncomplicated but fine-grained, transparent but profound, modest but ambitious, feeling but indifferent, able to desire and yet have disdain for everything, always agitated but always tranquil, aloof from everything but entering into everything, Sulpician and missionary and yet a courtier, ready to play the most brilliant roles and yet to live in obscurity, finding his sufficiency in everything and yet self-sufficient, a versatile genius who could assume any character without losing his own, whose depth was an imagination fecund, gracious, and dominant without causing one to feel that domination."¹⁴

But the most famous description—archly ambiguous and deliciously cutting—is drawn from the reminiscences of the frustrated and envious aristocrat, the Duc de Saint-Simon, a man "of misanthropic character and satirical spirit, more given to censure than praise."¹⁵ To him Fénelon was marked by "a charming wit and pleasing manners," mixed with much "ambition," and "a piety which made him all things to all men," so that his "constant craving for admiration" allowed him to please everybody.¹⁶ Indeed, Saint-Simon's favorite words for Fénelon would be "ambitious" and "charming." Thus, Saint-Simon is the source for the common perception that Fénelon's "softness" was a mask for cunning. Literary personality portraiture was almost a cult in the time of Louis XIV, and we should be careful here of some overembroidering. Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, Fénelon's most recent biographer, goes so far as to make the bewitchment

that people experienced with Fénelon's person (*Fénelon l'enchanteur*) the central mystery of the man.¹⁷

I suggest, by contrast, in this biography that our present *intellectual* perceptions of Fénelon are much the more important ones, the ones that can make him spiritually significant and edifying *for us*. In fact, he was a first-rate mind capable of articulating a tough and continually compelling spiritual vision. Appreciation of Fénelon as a thinker, therefore, is critical. A short recalling of the history of the interpretation of Fénelon's thought can frame our narrative and position us to hear him afresh.

The Archbishop's Legacy: The First Two Hundred Years

So, as low-profile, quiet, and austere as his earthly end was, in the relative obscurity of pastoral responsibility in a frontier diocese for his last twenty years, Fénelon died as a hero and martyr for his many contemporary admirers. He had been officially "disgraced" because of the condemnation of the *Maxims* and the friendship with Guyon. But he also had aimed impolitic criticism at Louis as well as sharp reproof to his consort, Madame de Maintenon. The result was banishment (being dismissed from Versailles was tantamount to exile) to Cambrai. But well before his death his work was being anthologized for posterity, and in due course he passed into the French national heritage as an icon of various spiritual, political-moral, and cultural values. But in different ways for different generations, since "each age has 'its Fénelon' in accordance with the sensibilities of the time and the records that historians have managed to unearth."¹⁸ In broad terms the history of his veneration, or as it may be, his vilification, has passed through three phases.

The initial phase, that of the eighteenth century with traces persisting to the present, was inaugurated by means of the first, profoundly hagiographical biography (1723) of Fénelon, that written by his devoted disciple, the chevalier André-Michel Ramsay (actually a Scot, Andrew Michael Ramsay).¹⁹ He was the first to argue that the idea of a pure love for God in which the lover eschews all self-interest is the heart of Fénelon. By going on to suggest that this "pure love" can be seen as the universal master key to the truth of all religions, Ramsay created the

image of Fénelon that endeared him to the Enlightenment. Unselfish loving is the ideal for human goodness everywhere. This way of viewing what Fénelon meant by "pure love" made him the ultimate liberal and model of Christlike goodness. The paradox here was that a devout Catholic archbishop became the mostly secularized arch-representative of tolerance, reason, and humanity.

Enlightenment readers loved certain of his compositions. As the author of a treatise advocating liberal education for young women, the *Treatise on the Education of Daughters*, he was seen as a forebear of the progressive ideas of the great Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As the author of an apologetic work, the *Demonstration of the Existence of God*, in which some arguments, traditional (part 1) and contemporary (part 2), for the reality of God are set forth with grace and clarity, he was seen as an orthodox but also intelligent and urbane philosopher of religion. As the author of animal fables in the style of the ancient Aesop and the modern La Fontaine and moral dialogues in the style of the ancient Lucian of Samosata and the modern Fontenelle, he was seen as an educational writer and moralist of particular elegance and charm. But most of all, as the writer of *The Adventures of Telemachus*, a spin-off from Homer's *Odyssey* and a long lesson on the virtues of the enlightened ruler, he was seen as a great defender of a humane political order of universal justice far in advance of its time. Study of the *Telemachus* eventually became a mainstay of French culture and maintained that position until the First World War. *Telemachus* made Fénelon a champion of freedom and earned him an honored place, despite the changed and lowered status of the Catholic Church, in the roster of heroes of the French Revolution.²⁰

But with the reestablishment of the church's authoritative position under Bonaparte, and then the return of the monarchy at Napoléon's downfall, the time was ripe for the retrieval of Fénelon as a widely respected writer, *but also* a good Catholic. A Fénelon dusted off and taken back from the secularists for churchly use, despite the charges of error and the old condemnation, was much to be desired. In order to effect this reappropriation it was important to recognize all of his enlightened values and writing, but also to downplay the stains left by the quietist controversy. It became customary on the part of Catholic defenders now to minimize, or qualify, the official condemnation by arguing that the

pope had frowned only on certain tendencies, certain dangers, in Fénelon's expressions, but that his essence and his person, solid and good, remained orthodox and untarnished. Protestants, as they had from the beginning, continued to see the old condemnation as simply unjust, another example of unevangelical ecclesial repression and papal tyranny.

For both sets of interpreters, much depended on an assessment of Madame Guyon. Was she an asset or a liability? How valuable and sound was her teaching on the spiritual life? What was the degree and nature of her influence, for better or worse, on Fénelon? There were some few Catholics who defended her. On the one hand, the marquis Gabriel-Jacques de Salignac-Fénelon, grand-nephew of Fénelon and the first comprehensive collector of his personal papers (published 1734), acknowledged and valued her influence.²¹ On the other hand, a spiritual writer such as the Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade, already eager to respect the views of both Bossuet and Fénelon on mystical prayer by synthesizing them, completely ignored Guyon's existence.²² It was entirely different with Protestant writers, who, beginning with Pierre Poirer's early edition of her collected works in nineteen (!) volumes between 1713 and 1732, greatly valued her quietist spirituality. Moreover, distinguished American Protestant readers of Fénelon in the nineteenth century, such as Horace Bushnell and William Ellery Channing, tended to see Guyon and Fénelon as inextricably linked in a favorable mutual influence.²³ All of these efforts at reclaiming Fénelon's writing had the effect of vindicating either his essential orthodoxy (for Protestants), or his essential Catholicism (for Roman Catholics), or his spiritual usefulness (for both readerships and others as well), while the status of Guyon remained controversial.

But then there was the matter of his relationship with Bossuet. Protestants saw the bishop of Meaux primarily as a fawning ecclesiastical tyrant of the ancien régime, while for Catholics, especially in France, he always remained an esteemed figure. Considerable effort was invested in showing that at heart there had been no real disagreement between the great Fénelon, whatever his errors in the *Maxims*, and the great Bossuet on substantive matters. It had all been just a morass of personal animosities, hurt feelings, rivalries, and misunderstandings, with a bedrock of real love and affection underneath. Interpreters of Fénelon's work, while greatly valuing his perspectives, were able to appreciate important elements of

truth in Bossuet's side of the debate as well. A consensus view emerged in which it was argued that Fénelon was wrong with regard to those dangerous quietist leanings on which the church, led by Bossuet, condemned him, but right on a range of disputable questions, where Bossuet was obtuse. They tended, as we say, to talk past one another. The battle between them was a draw.

Such was the posture, for instance, of Cardinal Pierre de Bausset, author of the first multivolume critical biography of Fénelon (first published in 1808, third edition in 1817), and of Jean Gosselin, general editor of the two major nineteenth-century editions of Fénelon's collected works. Furthermore, after a long period of obscurity the letters between Fénelon and Guyon became widely available to scholars only at the beginning of the twentieth century, so that major reassessments were in order. One result was that Guyon's influence over Fénelon appeared to have been less comprehensive than had been thought, and the struggle with Bossuet began to look more political and psychological than theological. Thus Henri Bremond, eager to revive the pure-love spirituality of Fénelon by reinstating him with all good Catholics, produced his famous 1910 *Apologie pour Fénelon*. The book is a defense of *both* Bossuet and Fénelon, who as wise spiritual teachers, Bremond thought, aimed at the same truths, loved the church dearly, and were ultimately upholders of true Catholic orthodoxy. Ronald Knox in *Enthusiasm* (1950) articulated a similar, mediating position, but with this difference: Bremond admired Fénelon's depth, beauty, and boldness, while Knox admired Bossuet's balance and caution.

And, of course, rarely is the whole truth in complex debates on one side, and the tendency is for opponents to caricature one another through overstatement. The critics and historians agreed that Fénelon had indeed tapped into a powerful and important stream of spirituality, but that Bossuet, better informed than often realized (or than Fénelon could admit), had been right to raise warning flags, especially in light of the sometimes bizarre nature of Madame Guyon's contribution.

Context is all-important here, because profound-sounding statements can be tweaked in so many directions. When, for instance, Fénelon tells us that privations are the bread of the strong, he is articulating a classic quietist tenet—that by divine intent suffering is gracious and loss is gain, so long as they lead us into the death of self and a closer relationship

with God. Is such a statement a mere truism, dangerously one-sided, or profoundly wise? Certainly it is more than a banality ("no pain, no gain"). Nor is it mere popular Stoicism ("through bitter things to the stars"). Nor with the insight of our post-Freudian and feminist age can it be seen as an invitation to a kind of spiritual masochism with a perverse delight in, or rationalization of, passive acquiescence in suffering ("living is hurting"). Bossuet came close to understanding Fénelon that way. Bossuet was only being sensible, so the argument goes, whatever the lack of subtlety in his own thought, to be deeply suspicious of the incautiousness, the exaggeration, the fondness for extreme statement, and the subjective enmeshment with fantasy and fanaticism attending some quietist thinking. The only problem was that he had misunderstood Fénelon, who was, I suggest, voicing a deep insight into the nature of love—an insight that tends to escape merely "reasonable" people.

Fénelon and Jansenism

Before we can fully appreciate Fénelon in the twentieth century and for our own time, we must address one more major factor in how he is viewed by historians. In addition to "quietism" and "mysticism," another seventeenth-century "ism" dogs his steps, not because he is labeled with this "ism" but precisely because he is not. This is the phenomenon known as "Jansenism," which has played an immense role in French religious and cultural history.

Eventually condemned by the pope for certain of its doctrinal tenets, Jansenism is often compared with the teachings of figures collectively labeled as the "French School" of spirituality. The followers of the French School, which would include Fénelon (although technically he is not classed with them, because he came later), supported mystical prayer, whereas the followers of Jansenism did not. Writers of the French School *inclined* toward quietist practice, and the Jansenists hated it. We will deal with the French School in chapter two, but let us glance here at the nature of the Jansenist movement and then consider why it is important for understanding the complexity of pro- and anti-Fénelon positions.

Jansenism has been described by its opponents as a Catholic crypto-heresy and by its defenders as a form of Catholic orthodoxy hostile to the

powerful Jesuit order.²⁴ Essentially it was a movement of church reform. But it ended up having profound political and cultural ramifications for all of French society up to the time of the Revolution. It began with a Dutch theologian at Louvain, Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), and his book *Augustinus* (posthumously published in 1640). Jansen set out for his academic readers his own interpretation of controverted matters in the theology of Saint Augustine. Issues of the nature of human sinfulness, grace, free will, and predestination—central concerns of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation—were the focus. Jansen took a hard position. We are *utterly* depraved by sin, he said, and reduced to total helplessness, and salvation must be *entirely* by means of a special dispensation of God's grace given *only* to that portion of humankind destined for salvation. Prickly questions abounded. How does grace work? What about human free will in salvation? Does the depth of our sinfulness disable the power of human reason? And so on. Jansen's reading of Augustine was within orthodox boundaries, but the devil was in the details and the implications that others drew.

Indeed, others *did* pick up Jansen's ideas, because a hard reading of Augustine lent itself to a "get tough" policy in church discipline. And in a time of heightened secularism the atmosphere was ripe for it. Jean Duvergier de Hauranne, known as the Abbé de Saint-Cyran (1581–1643), and the famous Sorbonne theologian Antoine Arnauld (1612–94) translated Jansen's teaching into a "rigorist" set of prescriptions for devotional practice. One of the most controversial was that, given our radical sinfulness, we should come to Holy Communion infrequently. We must receive the Eucharist not just in a state of *attrition*, or simple recognition of the wrongfulness of our sin coupled with a salutary fear of divine judgment—as the Jesuits taught—but rather in a state of deep *contrition*, that is, love for God's holiness and deep sorrow for the insult to God caused by our sin.

This is harsh talk, but it caught on like wildfire. Catholic monastic orders and schools were deeply affected, and some became predominantly Jansenist in practice. The culmination was in the spiritual and cultural life generated by the two massively influential religious communities named Port-Royal in the Paris area. Under the influence of scholar-teachers in these communities, a whole generation of distinguished thinkers, artists,

and writers provided some of France's best minds. The most famous are the dramatist Racine, the philosopher-theologians Pierre Nicole and Antoine Arnauld, and the mathematician–spiritual savant Blaise Pascal. Many clergy and laity were indirectly affected. Jansenist influence suffused everywhere.

Initially supportive of all aspects of culture and learning, Jansenist thinkers gradually became, as their doctrine hardened under persecution, more puritanical, more austere, and more hostile to any practice that seemed to weaken Christian witness by compromising with a secular spirit. With regard to ecclesiastical politics, they tended to operate with a sectarian mindset, resisting the control of local bishops, even when backed with royal authority, where this conflicted with their basic theology or practice. When the backlash came, the church hierarchy was aroused and eventually charges of heresy were raised; the upshot was a papal pronouncement in May 1653. Jansenist doctrine was condemned as Calvinist error in the famous five propositions supposedly extracted from Cornelius Jansen's work. A subscription oath was placed on clergy and university teachers. Public conformity coupled with private resistance on various levels followed. Complicated and convoluted debates continued until finally Pope Clement IX terminated the furor with an imposed silence. We will address some of the subtleties of Jansenism later and will see Fénelon's part in all of this during his Cambrai years.

Where the modern understanding and assessment of Fénelon enter the picture, though, is with the viewpoint often articulated since the nineteenth century: that the Jansenist movement was the real spiritual center of authentic Christian spirituality in Fénelon's time. The usual reasons for this view have to do with admiration for Pascal and the power of his emotional, passionate witness for Christ—and this admiration is then generalized to all of Jansenism—and admiration for the resistance that many Jansenists made to an absolutist monarchy and an authoritarian church when constraints were imposed. The Jansenists are seen as advocates for freedom against tyranny. But *if* the Jansenists are the spiritual heroes of the age, then their opponents, including Fénelon, are the villains. This contrast has been worked up in many ways.

Two noted examples illustrate the point. The most distinguished pro-Jansenist, and thus anti-Fénelonian, writer of the nineteenth century was

the literary critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve. He has been closely followed by the twentieth-century expert on French ecclesiastical history, John McManners. In his famous study of Jansenism, the five-volume *Port-Royal*, finished in 1859, Sainte-Beuve presented the Jansenists of Port-Royal as truly Christian, as having "spiritual magic."²⁵ He admired the sturdy, vigorous quality of their belief and practice. In the excellence of their writing he saw them as the true forerunners of all that would be progressive, free-spirited, and aesthetically superior in the artistic productions of later times. Their resistance to churchly authority made them harbingers of the Republic. Even their negativity to aspects of their contemporary culture manifested the ability to be "critical" in an age of fawning panegyric. Referring to the hermit-scholars of Port-Royal, for whom he had the highest regard, Sainte-Beuve praised them for their "exceptional moral adventure" and for representing "the magnificent example of a society of beings, pure and courageous."²⁶

Fénelon, by contrast, Sainte-Beuve described²⁷ as an admirably spiritual man, a man of beautiful thoughts, whose intentions were good (he taught the Duc de Bourgogne that "a king is made for the people"²⁸) and his writing elegant, but whose actions manifested weakness and vacillation (a man of an "excellent mind," but also an "irritating gentleness"), who is always counseling "submission" to authority.²⁹ In a similar way, as well, he saw a certain manliness and robustness in the great Bossuet, despite the wrongheadedness of that court-prelate's royal absolutism, since his vigorous statements of Catholic truth always contrasted with a certain "feeble side"³⁰ in Fénelon, even if the latter had truth on his side. "His piety had wings," said Sainte-Beuve of Fénelon,³¹ but he was a "patriotic dreamer" in the end, and a "deviser of pastoral utopias," says McManners.³² Furthermore, by comparison with Pascal, that great martyr of human moral struggle and the stormy, agonized search for God, Fénelon's piety, contended Sainte-Beuve,³³ had a smooth, unruffled, overly intellectualized quality about it (a "feline deftness," says McManners).³⁴ And so on, in a comparison of virile "strength" and feminized "weakness"—in which making the Jansenists look good entails making Fénelon look bad!

Again as an arch-example, the counterbalance to Sainte-Beuve is Bremond, who popularized the idea that the Jansenists were basically

Catholics in the tradition of the French School, but who, under Calvinist influence, gradually slipped more and more into a dark and anti-mystical reading of St. Augustine.³⁵ Catholicism rightly understood, argued Bremond, is a "devout humanism," that is, a combination of the central Catholic dogma of the Incarnation and the affirmation of all that is best in human culture. The seventeenth century, begun by Francis de Sales and then blossoming in the French School, represents this authentic Catholic balance. The point is that Fénelon and "pure love" captured and completed the work begun by Francis de Sales, whereas the Jansenists in all of their puritanical rigor, all of their sense of the dark tragedy of sin and the mystery of God's separation of the saved and the damned, were the antithesis.

Bremond was a Catholic Modernist. He was one of those scholar-historians who, around the turn of the twentieth century, were beating the drum for the more disciplined use of historical scholarship in Catholic self-understanding. By publishing his 1910 work on Fénelon, and then in composing his massive eleven-volume *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* between 1916 and 1933, he was attempting to make a case for what he considered the more humanistic, less dogmatic side of Catholicism, namely, the tradition of the great mystical writers. In this perspective where spiritual inwardness is placed at the center and strict doctrinal orthodoxy is subordinated to the dynamics of religious experience, Fénelon was once again tending to be read with respect. What historians call a "pietist" tradition of spirituality now began to link up with nineteenth-century romanticism and the renewed interest in emotional and aesthetic experience as a reaction to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Mysticism moved center stage, because it involved *feelings*; it is *soulful*, not denatured by the (seemingly) cold intellectuality of dogmatic theology, or the formal creeds of an institution, or the logical constructs of the rational mind. Heart-religion is coming to seem more authentic than intellect-religion. We will see in due course, though, how valid this contrast is in understanding Fénelon.

Quietism and Mysticism in Fresh Perspective

With the new availability of critical editions of his work in the nineteenth century, especially his letters, and with the church's own increasingly historical-critical understanding of its own past, Fénelon was rediscovered. People began to encounter him in the way that most of his contemporaries knew him, that is, as a sage and guide for the inner life, a sophisticated psychologist for the spiritually hungry soul. Such subjects as the nature of prayer, the pursuit of holiness, and the desire for "perfection," gifts of the Spirit, and the discernment of vocation, the interest in meditation and the cultivation of contemplative practices, and so on, began to make Fénelon a favorite for pious readers. What then happened is that this kind of reading tended to bring back into focus the whole story of the quietist controversy once again, along with all of the debates with Bossuet about the "states" of prayer, the nature of passivity in the devout soul, the meaning of "indifference" in Christian living, the hope for salvation, and the elimination of the "self" in the quest for God. The whole relationship with Madame Guyon and her "short way" to God comes back into focus again as well.

The difference is that the quietism and mysticism of Fénelon and Guyon could now begin to be viewed as *modes* of religious experiencing and as *ways* of spiritual practice. They could be viewed as *spiritual phenomena*. What I termed above the "ism" quality of quietism and mysticism—their status as a set of technically formulated doctrines—was coming to seem less important than the record of divine-human interaction that they might contain. If we can understand that record, empathize with it, grasp its essence, then it may become accessible to us as well. Even more, quietism and mysticism may in their own way contain elements that are vital components of all living religion and thus have something to say about the universal human condition.

The question that the nineteenth century addressed to Fénelon was not about the orthodoxy of his teaching, but about its *meaning*. It is this meaning that makes it relevant for us as well, and potentially of very great interest. The way we say this today is that we are looking for "wisdom," wisdom that is convertible and usable, in Fénelon's experience and teaching. We seek insight into spiritual truth. But these insights will take the

form not so much of theological statements as of reports of what it is like to be close to God and how we can get there too.

The answer that Fénelon gives here is that the way to God is open. In order to walk that way we must become serious about what he calls "pure love." We can enjoy the deep satisfaction—what he terms "dry peace"—of the quietist practice of inward prayer, as well as the mystical sense of immediate encounter with God, once we recognize that "pure love" is the indispensable key. But then we must spend some time pondering what this "pure love" really is, because its nature is not self-evident. Some deep reflection is in order, since misunderstanding is perilously easy. It is impossible to obtain a firm grip on what Fénelon meant by "pure love," I would suggest, without retracing the steps and the history by which he worked out his mature thought.

"Pure love" has its critics, even in our modern age. For many there is a suspect air about the concept because there is the sense that it contains something overstated, angelic, unrealistic, ultimately inhuman. This is Bossuet's old criticism, implied as well in Pope Innocent XII's condemnation of the *Maxims*, and more recently echoed by Thomas Merton in the 1960s.³⁶ One is also reminded of Reinhold Niebuhr's criticisms of utopianism in the name of "realism." "Pure love" as something highly desirable is not necessarily obvious or legitimate. The case has to be made.

The problem always is to get clear about what Fénelon meant by the phrase, because he insisted that, however deserved the papal condemnation, he was only trying to say in a perhaps inadequate and misleading way what great teachers had always said. Augustine himself, after all, had asserted in a famous passage from the *Confessions* "that we are to love God and then do as we wish," and all will be well. Everybody, including Madame Guyon, quoted that tag from the *Confessions*, but the question for Fénelon was: how seriously, really, do we take that statement? So it is that we will have to revisit Fénelon's use of classical sources, including Augustine, to appreciate his thinking about "pure love." Everything depends, says Fénelon, on what this "love" is, and what it means for it to be "pure," if we are really to approach God and really to be transformed. A great deal is at stake indeed.

So, in what follows, we are going to be looking for points of entry into what Fénelon meant by "pure love." We will discover that a galaxy

of themes, gradually emerging in the course of his biography, crystallize and cohere around this concept. By way of introduction, let us hear from Fénelon himself as his earthly end approached, when, in an offhand manner, he offered a concise summary.

In the last of his extant letters of spiritual advice, posted from Cambrai on December 30, 1714, one week before he died, Fénelon hit the essential notes of his life's work. The letter is a very occasional piece, and written to someone whom he did not know, a woman member of a religious order, but all the more significant and touching because of that. He had been urged to write to her, and possibly visit, because informants had indicated that both he and she would profit from a spiritual conference face-to-face. He indicates that he cannot make this visit, although he urges her to open her heart "in all simplicity" to him. From his side he would like nothing more, he says, than to be instructed by God's spirit working through her, since his personal desire always is to be "the least and smallest of God's children," however much he has been invested with high pastoral authority. To receive her advice, and even correction, would be a joy to him. For, after all, his sole goal has been always "to be without a will of his own" in submitting to the maternal embrace of the church. He then adds, tellingly, that this desire to give up his own will arises from a more fundamental urge to place himself in submission to every human being (1 Peter 2:13), "so as to die to self-love and his own pride." He apologizes for his intimate directness in this letter, since he does not know her personally, but his sense is that she genuinely seeks God, and thus, as he finishes this short letter, he indicates his wish to engage in that search with her.

There we have it. Simplicity, spiritual childhood,³⁷ the release of the selfish self, the transformation of the will—these are major points of entry into what Fénelon means by "pure love." They were themes that resonated with the sweeping spiritual currents of his time and culture. They were themes that he evoked with a kind of transparent freshness to the very end. His critics accused him of hypocrisy—of exalting himself by means of the language of self-abnegation, where all talk of the rejection of self-love is nothing but a cover for the most egregious forms of the thing itself—but we shall have to assess that for ourselves as we revisit his

biography, allow ourselves to be enlightened as to the nature of love of God, and attempt to reclaim Fénelon's legacy.

"Beware of your own intellectual gifts and those of others. Judge no one according to them. God, the only wise Judge, takes a very different tack: he gives preference to children and the childlike mind."

—LETTER TO SR. CHARLOTTE DE SAINT-CYPRIEN,
NOVEMBER 27, 1695 (TR. EDMONSON)



"However, religion ought to be in practice what it is in speculation. That is, it has to actually go as far as knocking our intellect off its feet and surrendering us up to the foolishness of the crucified Savior. How easy it is to be a Christian on the condition that we are wise, masters of ourselves, full of courage, great, punctual in fulfilling our duties, and marvelous in every way!"

—MANUAL OF PIETY, "GOOD FRIDAY" (TR. EDMONSON)

ONE



Classical Education and Priestly Formation

1651–1677

All of Fénelon's biographers bemoan the lack of information about his early years. The fact is that we know virtually nothing. His extant correspondence begins only when he is eighteen or nineteen years old and already a student in Paris. And we begin to have a real abundance of material in the form of letters only during the time of his first encounter with Madame Guyon (1688–89). Indeed, by that time he is a well-known and popular figure, beginning to move easily within the circle of the aristocratic *dévots* at court. Before this time, though, we have the barest outline of dates and names and places in Fénelon's life, combined with some scanty reminiscences from his later years of the flavor of his childhood in an idyllic place.

Most of what can be reasonably surmised with regard to Fénelon's formative years has to do with the quality and depth of his educational and priestly formation. So, after a brief look at his place of origin and family circumstances, that is the place to start.

Born François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon either on August 6, 1651 (the traditional date), or in the early weeks of 1651,³⁸ he was the second son of Pons de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon and his second wife, Louise de la Cropte, sister of the Marquis de Saint-Abre. The family is described as "impecunious old nobility," as marked by "genteel poverty," but also as living in a state of complex fiscal "ruine," although "no less distinguished for its antiquity than for its celebrity."³⁹ Fénelon appears always to have had a strong sense, throughout his career, of "illustrious origins" and aristocratic standing.⁴⁰ The paternal estate and chateau, still there today, where young François spent his childhood, and which he always remembered fondly, are in the picturesque

Périgord region of France, east of Bordeaux in the Dordogne river valley.⁴¹ Surrounded by siblings from his father's first and second marriages,⁴² he enjoyed a robust family life in what apparently were moderately comfortable and privileged material circumstances. He is described as having been of "a weak and delicate constitution" but "amiable dispositions."⁴³ The family was devoutly Catholic, a number of close relatives having been active with groups strongly committed to the renewal of pious Catholic practice, but also appreciative of humanistic learning. Fénelon seems to have been one of those younger sons who were often marked out for the priesthood early on. The standard procedure thus was to give him a solid foundation in the classical languages and texts along with the cultivation of habits of personal religious devotion. This blend is his earliest formative matrix, and its influence would stay with him forever.

Because of the social standing of his family, and given the generally mediocre quality of schools at the time, his education was conducted at home under the supervision of a "governor" or lay tutor, as well as a priest-tutor and chaplain to the family, from the local parish of Sainte-Mondane. One scholar describes his home environment this way: "he lived in an atmosphere both Christian and cultivated, where learning was not oriented to novelties but to steady development of good character, and where nothing is forced or hasty, but always given time to ripen in a setting of 'ambitions pursued in a peaceful spirit.'"⁴⁴ Another has written that Fénelon had "a solitary and privileged education" with nothing "schoolish" about it.⁴⁵ We should recall also that at this time there is nothing like a French national literature, but instead only a mass of medieval lore and material layered on top of the heritage of Greece and Rome. The whole spirit of the European renaissance in the centuries before Fénelon had been one of recovery of, and deep veneration for, this ancient heritage, slow and deep immersion in which was the absolute prerequisite for cultural sophistication. In due course Fénelon would encounter the artistic experimentation and creativity of the newer Parisian salon culture, but such innovation was not typical of the provinces, which were conservative in spirit. What he received in his childhood was aristocratic education in the elegant and polished style of France's grand siècle in the environment of a country chateau.⁴⁶

There are various indications that Fénelon was a brilliant student from the first, and in due course he did some study at the Jesuit college in Cahors, from which he eventually received a degree. The religious orders of the Oratorians and the Jesuits largely controlled higher education. We know enough about the curriculum in these provincial Jesuit academies of the time to know that he would have received an excellent grounding in Latin and Greek, in rhetoric and the arts of verbal expression, and in the rudiments of dramatic composition. The Jesuits were also quite open to the new science and may have encouraged an interest in Descartes and contemporary thinkers as well. One description has it that "his education had a Jesuit character about it" in that it was "well balanced and always directed to the formation of the will and the development of a 'spiritual aesthetic' grounded in the good use of language." The Jesuit teachers, known for their cosmopolitan humanism, may have imparted "that particular accent which gives his Catholicism such a generously opened aspect."⁴⁷

His father having died in 1663, he spent some substantial time under the tutelage of an uncle, François de Fénelon, the bishop of nearby Sarlat ("a loving pastor to his flock, and beloved of them," wrote Fénelon in a letter of 1706 to Pope Clement XI).⁴⁸ We have no way of knowing when and how his vocation to the priesthood began, but it seems to have been there early on and then to have been taken for granted. By 1674 he had been taken under care by another uncle, Antoine de Salignac, Marquis de Magnac (known as the Marquis de Fénelon), "a man nourished in the purest principles of religion and of honor"⁴⁹ and a lieutenant general in the king's army. Under uncle Antoine's watchful eye he could continue his higher education in Paris, which had only in this century and quite recently become the cultural and intellectual center of French life.

Becoming a Priest

The intention was that he would begin priestly studies with two years of pre-seminary study in the humanities at the Collège du Plessis under a Sorbonne professor, Charles Gobinet. That academician seems to have been especially acceptable to the Marquis as preceptor for his

nephew because he was an ultramontane, that is, a Catholic with a strong preference for papal authority over against the ancient autonomy of the French church.⁵⁰ The Marquis also set up young Fénelon in residence with the gentlemen-priests of the parish of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, where he would become subject to their spirituality and discipline. As Gobinet further drilled him in classical learning, the Sulpicians introduced him to the teachings of the French school. The principal figures here would be St. Francis de Sales (just canonized, in 1665!) as precursor, then Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle as principal and founder of the Oratorians, followed by the Sulpician founder, Jean-Jacques Olier.

The Sulpician order of clergy, initially an offshoot of the Oratorians, had as its mission the upgrading of seminary education and the setting of high standards for well-educated pastoral work by parish priests. Henri Bremond has described the Sulpician tradition as an important part of that "devout humanism" that marked the best in Catholic revival, where sincere faith is coupled with a sophisticated understanding of the psychology of human development.⁵¹ These years spent with the Sulpicians provided for Fénelon an important means for integrating more deeply the humanistic values of classical learning and the dogmas of the church. After his death the priests of Saint-Sulpice would become the keepers of his letters and personal documents and would produce some of the first critical editions of his oeuvre. In their spirit he himself would be both a pastor and priest-pedagogue.

A Classical Education

French culture of the seventeenth century is so saturated with the literature of ancient Greece and Rome that this period is called "the age of French neoclassicism." In a manner that would be hard to overstate, the ingestion of aesthetic standards as well as substantive content from classical models was the very engine of artistic inspiration. The literature of ancient Greece and Rome provided models for imitation and standards to be emulated in all artistic production, on the one hand, but also a repository of texts to be mined for plots, characters, and ideas that would serve as instruments for new and contemporary expression,

on the other. Whether the goal was the reproduction of classical forms and sentiments or the use of those same forms as a springboard for novel expression, the ancient sources provided the artistic point of departure. The fundamental attitude of this classicism was most famously stated by Jean de La Bruyère in his massively popular, steadily reprinted and expanded *Les Caractères*: "Everything has been said already, and one comes too late after 7,000 years in which men have lived and reflected on their existence. On the subject of human behavior the best and the better have been harvested, and one can only glean behind the ancients and the most talented of our contemporaries."⁵² The best mind does not say anything essentially new; it only says it *differently*.

The sources of this seventeenth-century French fascination with classical art forms lie ultimately in the dynamics of political and social stabilization in France after the end of the Wars of Religion at the end of the last century. Under Louis XIII, and then even more under Louis XIV, France was organized, ordered, structured, and bureaucratized in every conceivable way, not least of all in the arts. The great heritage of classical Greek and Roman culture with its criteria of beauty and excellence lay at hand as a treasury of riches to be exploited endlessly—and mined, excavated, and plundered it was. Royal support was generous, and the organization of the French Academy created an elite body of practitioners. The practical upshot for us in understanding Fénelon is that the so-called school of 1660, consisting of the dramatists Racine, Boileau, Molière, and the writer La Fontaine, along with the composer of maxims La Rochefoucauld, forms the immediate backdrop to his own literary endeavors. These authors are, in the genres of tragedy, comedy, popular fable, and proverbial philosophy, the literary psychologists of the time. Human personality and its complex dynamics and possibilities are endlessly fascinating for them, not least of all the intricacies of love!

We must then take some time to imagine what it was that Fénelon absorbed from the classics that was to feed into his mature and elaborated thought about the nature of "pure love." Here we can get a sense of what he studied and its impact on him from the scholarly circles in which he moved as a young priest, from his later use of the classics as a preceptor and tutor to others, as well as from his own literary output. The overwhelming impression we get is that Fénelon metabolized

early on, and integrated profoundly, the Greek or Hellenic side of the classical tradition, so that there have been many studies by scholars of the implications of his Hellenism.

Of the two great philosophical traditions inherited from the classical world—Aristotelianism, transmitted mostly through the Scholastic theology of the church, and Platonism, transmitted largely through the humanist traditions of the Renaissance—Plato is by far the dominant force for Fénelon. The massive influence of Plato came partly through his own lifelong study, much of this mediated through the study of Augustine and the Augustinian use of Plato, and partly through the Roman Cicero, who was not only a great classical orator but also an encyclopedic compiler of the views of the ancient, that is, Greek, philosophical schools. We also have good reason to think that as Fénelon became immersed in his higher education in Paris, he moved into friendship and discussion with philosophically sophisticated friends, foremost of whom during the 1680s would have been Claude Fleury, like Fénelon a priest-pedagogue, but also a known interpreter of Plato, and eventually his assistant in the educational supervision of the young Duc de Bourgogne.

What philosophical perspective would Fénelon have learned from Plato and the Platonic tradition that would be fundamental for his whole way of thinking and acting? The central idea was this: the goal of human living is the full discernment of what is good, beautiful, and true in a world where all objects partake of these qualities only to some limited degree. All human growth and maturation is a process of moving from less adequate to more adequate discernments of such truth/beauty/goodness, as the mind discards inferior manifestations for superior ones. The purpose of education is the progressive refinement of the mind's capacity to make these discernments through dialectical reasoning, so that the mind is enlightened and the will is thereby formed for choosing and practicing good ends in one's life.

In Fénelon's time the question of just *how* the mind grasps what is true through this process of discernment involved complex debate about the nature of "ideas" and the means by which they inform thinking and engage the "will." The underlying assumption, though, was that as its discernment improves, the mind's adherence to goodness, beauty,

and truth in objects becomes a desire for, a "love" of, an attraction to these objects. So here we have what would have been a first crucible of formation for Fénelon, namely, the Platonic conception of love, *eros*, as the mind's act of discernment, leading to passion, followed by a total yielding to the lovable object.

Furthermore, the mind's ability to make these discernments, to engage in true love, will be steadily improved as the individual herself grows in goodness, beauty, and truth, that is, in character and virtue, since "like perceives like." This is to say that the mind's act of adherence to what is lovable is not just intellectualizing or curiosity, but a movement of the soul or heart of the whole person. The tendency of the physical body and of the material world in general is to cloud this process of discernment by enmeshing the mind in passions that are the propagators of fantasy and illusion. If erotic desiring and possession are to be valid, to be grounded in what is real, they must find a way to bypass, or overcome, this false *eros* and its precipitation of misjudgment about what is truly lovable in objects. The whole debate about "pure love" in Fénelon's teaching will focus on the effort to distinguish more adequate from less adequate forms of loving what is good.

Thus far, broadly speaking, does Plato take us. What the tradition called neoplatonism (represented preeminently by the third-century thinker Plotinus) then added was a great elaboration in thinking about the nature of the mind's "ascent" to truth. Plotinus makes the mind's rise to higher and higher levels of discernment a kind of mystical journey, quasi-religious in nature, and profoundly inward—increasingly contemplative, wordless, and tranquil—as the mind progresses upward toward the One, who is the transcendent source of all beauty and goodness, and away from external objects. The mind, that is, the seat of the soul, finally obtains that for which by nature it yearns and arrives at a state of perfect unity with this One.

This tradition from Plato, mediated by Plotinus, is what Augustine inherited in the fourth and fifth centuries and passed on to later generations in the Christian form of the restless soul ("our hearts are restless till they rest in thee") enslaved by mortality and sin, yet yearning for redeeming truth and moral goodness. Augustine's contention was that whatever the mind supremely discerns as good, beautiful, and true

is ultimately the work of the God—who is the “One” whom Plotinus sought—of Christian Scripture. But because the human will is in bondage to sin through its concupiscent or disordered desiring, said Augustine, the mind is darkened and cannot perceive truth, beauty, and goodness accurately. The gift of God’s saving grace is to free the will and enlighten the mind. The redeemed sinner is thereby empowered to experience the “victorious delectation” of once again taking full delight in what is good, beautiful, and true. This is to say that the redeemed sinner can begin to love *rightly* by obeying God’s holy law. And that law prescribes that we shall love God above all things.

Later we will see how Fénelon’s views of Augustine put him in direct opposition to antihumanistic Jansenists like Pascal, who wished to erect a high wall between the “God of the philosophers” and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As strongly as anyone, Fénelon will criticize an overreliance on reason—that is, rationalism—but will always insist that Christian revelation can be clarified and more deeply embraced with the help of philosophical tools.⁵³ More forcefully than anyone else perhaps, it has been Henri Bremond who has reminded us that all of the best spirituality of the French seventeenth century is saturated with Plato, so that “it is not so difficult to pass from the Academy of Plato to that of the Crib and Calvary”⁵⁴—a short step indeed!

But there is something else as well. It is a combination of classical factors, compounded of the ancient Greek tragedies, the philosophy of Stoicism, and the moralizing literature of late Hellenistic antiquity. This mixture of traditions captures the view that life is not just a spiritual *quest*, as with Plato, but also a spiritual *struggle*. This struggle is a dark process of suffering, frequent defeats, and the emergence of enduring wounds. On the one hand, our spiritual lives are an upward movement toward higher ground, but on the other hand, there is the daily encounter with the insidiousness and intractability of human limitations and all of the destructive urges—our own and those of other people. We must imagine Fénelon immersed in his formative years in the sunniness, so to speak, of a Platonic worldview, but also increasingly aware of the shadowside of our mortality and dust. The great Roman Stoics, who conveyed Greek ideas to a wider audience—writers like Marcus Aurelius and Seneca—but also the ancient playwright Sophocles, or the late moralist Plutarch,

were great favorites. We must take a moment to capture the flavor of their perspectives, especially on suffering, in order to appreciate a critical factor in Fénelon's makeup.

For the Stoics, as the French understood them, human existence is unremitting conflict with the powers of nature. The most that we can hope for is the excellence of our own virtue in the face of every contingency. When challenged by temptation, by hardship, and by the overwhelming forces of circumstance, we have nothing left in the final analysis but the personal integrity of ethical uprightness. Life may often be tragic, but it is potentially meaningful in the courageous integrity of the person who suffers what he or she does not (at least, not entirely!) deserve. The reason, or soul, of such an individual is transcendent over all, even though the dark passions and inveterate perversity of human society, and finally the sheer travail of mortality, are practically insurmountable. Practical wisdom consists of the ability to choose what is truly good and to be willing to pay whatever price is required for its pursuit, even if the result is disaster in worldly terms. The danger always is that we become pretentious. The great French dramatists, such as the tragedians Corneille and Racine and Molière in his comedic way, work these themes incessantly, and thus they provided the stuff of a certain kind of moral reflection for their lettered listeners. Fénelon drank deeply at this well, as did all of his contemporaries, with the result that the Christian concept of sin, with Augustine's help, easily merges with Stoic/tragic views of the kind of moral suffering required by the conditions of human existence. This combination will play out richly throughout all of Fénelon's thought.

Now, a concept that Fénelon would have picked up from his classical studies, especially in the Platonic and Stoic philosophies just described, is the notion of "indifference." The wise person, the good person, the Christian person is in love with what matters, and this means that he or she is "indifferent" to all of the rest, because the rest is inherently inferior. In Jeanne-Lydie Goré's formulation, indifference is "the cessation of desire . . . in order to rise above the immediate, the moment, to attend to an infinite horizon."⁵⁵ It is thus both a mental posture and an ethical commitment. "Indifference," for Christian writers, was then an ideal way of describing the spiritual state of the believer open to God's

direction and hanging loose (the technical word is *detached*), as it were, from the things of this world as it passes away.⁵⁶ Indeed, Christ teaches us to seek only God's righteousness and God's kingdom, to focus only on the "one thing," and to cease concerning ourselves with other things. That is, we are to practice "indifference" by seeking *only* the supreme value. As will become evident, not only did Fénelon appropriate the idea of indifference from his classical and Christian sources, but also he made it central to the correct understanding of "pure love."

A Spirituality Distinctively French

In his formation at Saint-Sulpice Fénelon would have followed the daily routines and disciplines of that community, with its regular round of sacraments and prayer, its instruction and study, and he would also have been under the care of a spiritual director. This last was the popular and beloved director of the seminary, Louis Tronson (1622–1700), for whom Fénelon came to have a deep veneration. Much later in a letter to Pope Clement XI, he said of Tronson, "Never was any man superior to him in love of discipline, in skill, in prudence, piety, and insight into character," and to Tronson himself at one point he gushed, "Remember that you have functioned as my father from my early years." Tronson was to be an advisor and consultant to him on numerous occasions and would serve on the board of commissioners examining Madame Guyon at Issy. He seems to have filled a vital emotional vacuum for Fénelon, who trusted him completely.⁵⁷

What would he have learned from his Sulpician teachers? Three key ideas came to him, one each from the three central writers of the French School tradition. From Francis de Sales he absorbed the view that our love for God, if it is to be genuine, must take the form of a radical "holy indifference" to *absolutely everything else*. From Pierre de Bérulle he came to understand that the practice of this indifference is made possible when we embrace the ideal of self-annihilation. This deep denial of the self occurs when we lovingly identify with the *inner state* of Jesus Christ both as a helpless child and as the crucified One. From Jean-Jacques Olier he learned that our sinful human ego, profoundly crafty

and always intent on self-glorification, is our most formidable enemy in this work of learning to practice holy difference in self-annihilation. Fénelon embraced all three ideas with gusto but wove them into his own distinctive synthesis. What they share in common is the insight that love of God and a true life of prayer centered on God must be something that God does in us, when we get ourselves out of the way. In order to experience loving prayer directed at Ultimate Love, we must become theocentric in focus, always letting God take the lead and not allowing ourselves to become distracted by our own inadequacies or our own agenda.⁵⁸

Francis de Sales

In terms of the pervasive effect of his writings on all classes of society, and by his emphasis on practical charity in discipleship, Francis de Sales was the great champion of the spirit of the Counter-Reformation in early seventeenth-century France.⁵⁹ He was "the man of genius" who "achieve[d] completely the necessary adaptation and popularization" that "brought the whole Christian Renaissance within the reach of the lowliest in a little book of devotion." The reference is to de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life*, which, along with the later *Treatise on the Love of God*, became the virtual "charter of devout humanism" and of the "higher mysticism" in France.⁶⁰ Fénelon would lean on him heavily for ideas and constantly appeal to him in later debate as a foundation, calling him "a man who [possessed] a great penetration, and a perfect sensitivity for judging the depth of things, and for knowing the human heart."⁶¹

Having first published the *Introduction* in 1608,⁶² Francis produced a book centered, in the words of one modern interpreter, on "the universal emphatic call of God to all human beings and in every form of life to that charity which was friendship and salvation."⁶³ The key idea is that God is to be loved with all of the resources of the human heart, once the impulse to a fear-based relationship has been neutralized. The goal of all Christian living, Francis tells us, is "perfection," which is a state where we do good "carefully, frequently, and promptly," making our charity into a "spiritual fire, which, when it bursts into flame, is called

devotion." Arrival at this perfection must be a very gradual process in which setbacks and lapses are to be expected as salutary reminders of our continuing dependence on God. Our human desiring, which is the energy of the soul and center of our personalities, will gradually be so purified, Francis says, that eventually all we will want is God and God's glory. We will have found that it is "sweeter" to love and serve God than anything else.⁶⁴ Fénelon agreed completely, with the one reservation that the affectively charged language of a "spiritual fire" was, he thought (and as we shall see), risky.

Although, in conventional fashion, Francis is quite clear that the individual must renounce sinful behaviors through a process of purging, what most concerned him is the redirecting and refocusing of desire, of the "affections." Desiring God, in other words, is more important—because it is more fundamental—than godly behavior as such. His key term, then, for the state of desiring God is "holy indifference." In such a state we are resigned to the circumstances and condition in which we find ourselves at every moment, these being in some way the will of God. Most important are our "inner attractions" to what is holy, so that while we may not be able to embrace holy objects completely, we feel *drawn* to make the effort. In that being drawn, we know that grace is at work within us ("God knocks at the door"), however far from perfection we may actually be.⁶⁵ Fénelon agreed completely, and it is here that he found support for his idea that our inner "states" are far more important than our outer actions.

Spiritual directors are people who help us clarify these inner states, especially when all is darkness, temptation, and struggle. Francis picks up the traditional idea that our souls have a "superior part" where we can continue to love God, even if the "inferior part" is consumed with either earthly delight or agony. This is a way of saying that there can be a zone of quiet deep within, no matter what may be the case outwardly. When temptations come, as long as the soul does not inwardly consent, all is well. He also introduces the idea that will become controversial in quietist teaching: that the best way to defeat a temptation in the end is to gently ignore it, until "it" goes away. Francis describes the "two hands of God" as consolations and afflictions, both of which come at God's behest, but our job is to persist "in a constant, resolute, prompt, and

active will to do whatever we know is pleasing to God," leaving the rest up to God. "Imitate little children," he says, "who with one hand hold fast to their father while with the other they gather strawberries and blackberries from the hedges. So too if you gather and handle the goods of this world with one hand, you must always hold fast with the other to your heavenly father's hand and turn toward him from time to time."⁶⁶

In 1616 Francis added clarifications and theoretical grounding with the *Treatise on the Love of God*. "In holy Church all is by love, in love, for love, and of love," he said in the preface. He argued the so-called voluntarist view that if God is essentially loving and purposeful, that the dominant component in our own souls is the will, and that, therefore, we are saved by the purification of the will. Our approach to God must happen by means of the conforming of *our* wills to that of God, where, in the highest stage, we *lose* our wills in the divine Will.

But now, as it would be for Madame Guyon and for Fénelon, the metaphors become crucial. How shall I conform my will to that of God? Francis contends that as human beings (this is his optimistic "humanism") we have a natural taste for God like that of a child for its creator-parent. "There is an infinite workman who has stamped on me this limitless desire to know and this appetite which cannot be satiated. For this reason I must strive towards him and reach out for him so as to unite and join myself to his goodness. I belong to it and I exist for it." As God's children we can learn to love God as "we love our fathers, not because they belong to us but rather because we belong to them. It is thus that we love and desire God in hope."⁶⁷ Later on, as we shall see, Fénelon and Bossuet will struggle mightily with the logic of what Francis is saying. Is he telling us that we place our hope for well-being in our parents because we first love them and trust them, or is he saying that we love and trust our parents because we first hope for the best from them?

A holy relation with God, Francis says, "is a form of friendship and disinterested love, since by charity we love God for his own sake because of his most supremely pleasing goodness." This charity, which is disinterested love, "is present in the will as on its throne, to reside there and to make it cherish and love its God above all things." God's love is like mother's milk, which we eat and drink, and the more we

learn to trust this divine nourishment, the more it transforms us into its own substance. Francis has an image of the child not as greedy for mother's milk but simply trusting it to be there at the right time. Mature prayer, he says, is like the rapt attention of the baby to its mother, a state so delicate that it no longer feels like attention. "There is a deep, sweet, sleep-like quality to this repose of the soul. It is better to sleep upon that sacred breast than to be awake elsewhere, no matter where it may be." Just as a baby would cry when its mother puts it down, "it is the same with the soul that is in repose and quiet before God. In an almost insensible way it draws in the delight of his presence, without thinking, without working, without doing anything by means of any faculty except the highest part of the will, which it moves softly and imperceptibly." These are crucial passages in which Francis describes what has come to be known as "mystic quiet," not an induced and contrived stillness, be it noted, but a sense of being "held" securely. In a striking anticipation of the whole debate between Bossuet and Fénelon, Francis says that spiritual tranquility happens when we arrive at "holy quiet," where finally we will know the difference between "concerning ourselves with the contentment that God gives" and "being occupied with God, who gives us this contentment."⁶⁸

Finally, in the controversial last sections of the *Treatise*, Francis takes up the theme of tribulations in relation to "holy indifference." Tribulations, he says, "considered in themselves are dreadful things; [but] looked at in God's will, they are things of delight." A loving heart loves God most "in afflictions, but it loves it most of all in the cross, in pain and labor." It is in suffering, says Francis, that we learn to delight in what is truly delightful, and when we yield to that experience, we enter into "the acquiescence, or resignation, of spirits in tribulation [that] approaches perfect love." "Pure" or perfect love is this "holy indifference," which is "the supreme and most delicate point of the spirit." Such love is "so rigorous that it permits love of paradise only with the intention of more perfect love for the goodness of him who gives it." The soul practicing holy indifference is "like a ball of wax in God's hands," a plaything at the divine disposal, we might say.⁶⁹

But then came the notoriously famous "impossible supposition": if it were God's predestinating will that we be in hell, however saintly

we may be, we should prefer the delight of conforming to that will rather than the contrary position of being in paradise without conformity to God's will. The loving soul "would prefer hell with God's will to paradise without God's will." If God wants hell for me, I will out of love for him take delight in that eventuality—which is to say that out of love for God I will give up even the hope of my salvation! What makes the supposition "impossible" (in theory) is the orthodox view that God could never have consigned to hell a soul whose love for God was so perfect. Or differently stated in the orthodox view: if I truly love God, the knowledge that God intends me for paradise will be present as well. But the bare statement of the impossible supposition is a way of reinforcing the idea that love of God must be radical. It must be a love of *God*, not of my own salvation, if it is truly God that I love. Jesus himself in the despair and abandonment of his sufferings continued to love God's good pleasure by means of the "highest part of his soul," even while the lower part was overwhelmed with sorrow and anguish. This, says Francis, is where blessed love reigns supreme even in the midst of a nightmare. So it is that "finally, we see that Mount Calvary is the school of love."⁷⁰

Francis de Sales has sowed the seed that Fénelon will water, but he has also sowed controversy, as we shall see. The idea of the indifferent love of God opens many doors in many directions.

Bérulle and Olier

Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629), a "religious Copernicus," thought Bremond,⁷¹ and eventually a cardinal, is the founder of the Oratorian order in France, an order of priests living in community and following a community rule, but working and practicing in the secular world primarily as parish clergy and as educators in schools. This order has had a succession of leaders and writers, all expressing themselves within the tradition of thought articulated by Bérulle, a tradition now known through Bremond's popularizing as "the French school."⁷²

In his writings, which influenced Fénelon's own, Bérulle⁷³ emphasizes the importance of turning away from self-love in order to focus one's

loving energies on God. Thus, he introduced the idea that self-love is the great impediment and the overcoming of this self-love through "abasement," or self-annihilation, is the remedy. Whereas de Sales's preferred strategy is that of the training of affections and the crystallizing of resolutions by focusing on what is beautiful, Bérulle does something different, something more fundamentally inward. He encourages a process of imaginative, at times intensely emotional, identification between the worshiper and the inner "states" of the Incarnate Lord at every stage of his earthly ministry. The goal is an "adhesion" of the soul of the believer to that of Jesus. Since the Incarnation is the supreme dogmatic fact for Bérulle, every moment in the course of Jesus's earthly existence is a fit object for meditation and thus for inner renewal for the believer. By imaginatively entering into this identification, the believer is "elevated" (an important word for Bérulle) so that the Holy Spirit ignites "flames of love" in the human heart.⁷⁴ What Fénelon appropriated here was Bérulle's concern for creating a mystical and immediate match between what happens inside Jesus as he is glorified, and what happens inside the believer as he or she grows in holiness. What he disliked, however, was Bérulle's attempt to harness the imagination in creating this match. It is too dependent on our sensual capacities, and thus too vulnerable to mere fantasy.

Bérulle went on to argue that the Incarnation is the most sacred of all "mysteries," and we know that "this mystery is love and only love. For since in it love has united God to man, then also the greatness of God and the lowliness of man are transformed into love by the power of love accomplishing this mystery and triumphing in this mystery."⁷⁵ Notice, though that it is the *lowliness* of human existence that provides the point of entry. By means of abasement, the abandonment of self, and detachment from all earthly sources of security and power we position ourselves to enter into the mystery of the helplessness and weakness that the Incarnate Word embraced in our human existence. Now there is no question that Fénelon strongly affirmed this Bérullian perspective, but, as suggested, he will limit it primarily to the state of "childhood" and the state of the "cross." It will be in combining these two in a distinctive fashion, partly under Guyon's influence, that he will develop his own perspective. His sense, though, that he was basically loyal to

the heritage of the French school came in the heat of the Conferences of Issy in February 1695, when he signed a statement of loyalty to the principles of Bérulle as a sufficient statement of his orthodoxy.

It is, then, one small step to Jean-Jacques Olier and the stress on self-effacement in priestly formation at Saint-Sulpice. "Their modesty was carried to the point of dreading glory as the most dangerous snare. . . . Strangers to all the feeling that ambition, interest or pride can stir up among men, they would never get involved in party-conflicts, or factions of opinion; they attached themselves only to the decisions and authority of the Church," says one historian.⁷⁶ "Never had the spirit of nobility and disinterestedness been expressed to such a remarkable degree."⁷⁷ So it is that Olier tells us in his *Introduction to the Christian Life and Virtues* that the practical response of Christians to God's revealing of true religion in Jesus must be the "annihilation" of self in all manner of sacrifice. Humility is the foundational virtue,⁷⁸ and we reach its peak when we love our "own vileness, littleness and nothingness in other people's awareness as well as in our own," for then "only nothingness remains, and this is our core and true reality."⁷⁹ "Self-centeredness is a horrible monster and the hideous ocean of all sin, just as abnegation is the summary of perfection and the source of the Christian life and virtues," and he made charts that compared and contrasted the qualities of self-centeredness with the qualities of self-abnegation.⁸⁰ The fruit of such humility is practical. "Love fosters union among all things. It becomes a center point where every line ends and comes together. Unlike false charity, which divides people who are united in order to draw them to oneself alone, true charity holds together people with the most diverse inclinations. Through its care the most polarized are maintained in relationship."⁸¹

Bremond contends that Olier carries self-renunciation to a rarified level that approaches Fénelon's best insights and that echoes Madame Guyon's stress on the "disappropriation" of self in relation to God. There is something truly radical at work here. Olier will not tolerate all of the games played by the human ego, when it seeks to please God and then is pleased with having pleased; he can see through the façade of self-serving virtue and self-glorifying religiosity!⁸² Olier's thought is a direct precursor of Fénelon's insistence that our greatest spiritual enemy is the

ever-present *moi*, the "me" that tends to run the show in everything that I do and am. It is the greatest barrier to our desire to love God.

So, there we have it. The combination of a Christian Platonism with Francis de Sales and French School spirituality set the mold, so to speak, within which Fénelon would operate. In the eventual debates with Bossuet, and with input from Madame Guyon as a critical factor, we will be observing an epic struggle to define the "limit-states" of spirituality, where loving God involves a radical disconnect from all that is not God, so that everything about us might be "in God."⁸³ The more powerful the individual is in worldly terms, the more excruciating this process must (not just "will" but *must*) be. Putting the mix to work at the Versailles of Louis XIV would be a major challenge.

By 1677, Fénelon had completed his education, been ordained, and had begun to preach in Sulpician parishes. He was also starting to become known to, and befriended by, some of the leading lights in the church, foremost among them Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet of Meaux, official preacher to the royal court at Versailles. Perhaps uncle Antoine was again the go-between here. But, however it happened, they became acquainted, and Fénelon quickly found himself in the hands of one of those older churchmen who have an eye for up-and-coming talent. Bossuet liked to surround himself with some of the "best and the brightest," and Fénelon was included.

But there were also rivalries. According to Bausset,⁸⁴ Fénelon, after meeting Bossuet, who had been impressed with him, "cultivated the older man, somewhat to the chagrin of François de Harlay de Champvallon, archbishop of Paris, who was a bit jealous and whose feelings were hurt." Fénelon avoided him because of his unsavory reputation, and so the story goes that Harlay said to him one day, "You wish to be obscure, well you shall be just that!" But it was "with eagerness and delight," according to that same historian, that Bossuet, about the same time that he was appointed official tutor to the dauphin, took up the role of mentor to Fénelon. Under his patronage the young priest's engagement with current philosophy, his introduction into court circles, and his awareness of au courant controversy could pick up steam in earnest.

A relationship that began with great affection and much mutual respect would, in time, do a complete reversal as the two priests became the bitterest of antagonists.

"O infinite Truth, you find all truth within yourself. Created objects, far from conferring knowability on you, receive all of their own knowability from you. And since this knowability comes only from you, it means that we have no knowability in ourselves. It means that you cannot know us in terms of what we are, for we are nothing. You can know us only as we are in you, for you are the reason for our existence."

—DEMONSTRATION OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD
AND OF THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD DRAWN
FROM INTELLECTUAL IDEAS, 118



"It is better to be vanquished by truth, than by the shame of having distanced oneself from the truth, as Saint Augustine says; truth bestows the crown of victory only on the 'vanquished' who are sincere and humble enough to follow her."

—THE REFUTATION OF FATHER MALEBRANCHE'S
SYSTEM CONCERNING NATURE AND GRACE, 36