



The Biography of Fenelon

The place was the countryside, a few miles outside of the town of Bergerac in the southwestern part of France and in an area called Perigord. On August 6, in the year 1651, François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fenelon was born. History remembers him as François de Fenelon, or -- more simply -- Fenelon. At the time of his birth his father was quite old and, consequently, Fenelon became the major interest of this aging man (Fenelon was the second son of the second wife -- among fifteen children -- of Pons de Salignac de Fenelon). Until he was twelve years old Fenelon remained at his home receiving a typical Catholic education. He left home at about that age to enroll, for a short time, at the College of Cahors. A major influence entered Fenelon's life at Cahors in the form of his uncle, Marquis Antoine de Fenelon, bishop of Sarlat. His uncle took note of Fenelon's sensitive temperament and the potentiality of this remarkable young boy. Insightfully, his uncle recommended that he transfer to Paris and continue his education there.

In Paris, Fenelon entered the College du Plessis where, soon after, he distinguished himself among his classmates as a scholar possessing an unusual gift of eloquence and speech.

Interestingly, in the years to come, Fenelon's path would cross again and again that of a Catholic priest named Bossuet. There is a similarity in their lives, even in their youth. Like Bossuet, it was at the age of fifteen that Fenelon was allowed to deliver his first sermon. And, like Bossuet, he quickly attracted attention, captivating people by his mannerisms and his scholarship. Fenelon, though, perhaps by the wisdom of his uncle Antoine was saved from the flattery that was to be the Achilles heel of Bossuet. And how was the young Fenelon rescued from youthful pride? The Marquis de Fenelon had his young nephew transferred to the Seminary at Saint-Sulpice. (He actually began in a section of the school called the Petit Seminaire.) This occurred in the year 1672 when Fenelon was age 21.

Several major turning points awaited Fenelon at Saint-Sulpice. The first influential factor that moved into his life there was a man named Tronson, director of the seminary. This man was to become Fenelon's closest, dearest friend and counselor.

There was a unique feature to the seminary at Saint-Sulpice. It had a long and very significant relationship to Canada. From Saint-Sulpice a large number of young priests (we would call them missionaries) had gone forth to convert the French portion of the new world. (Remember at that time Eastern Canada was French-speaking.) Soon it was Fenelon's desire to go to this area and take up the cause of this mission. His uncle opposed, Fenelon relented, giving himself over to his studies until the time he was ordained into the priesthood. After his seminary studies were concluded he continued in the parish at Saint-Sulpice.

Fenelon's work was mostly among the poor, the sick and the very sinful. Yet even up until 1675, he had not shaken the idea of the mission field. At that time his ambition was to go to Greece. Again he relinquished this dream, probably in deference to his uncle.

To understand what happened next we have to know a little about the history of France during that period. Ninety percent of France was Catholic, with the other ten percent Protestant, the Protestants being referred to as Huguenots. Under Louis XIV's encouragement growing persecution was being experienced by the Huguenots.

Some years before, in 1634, a community had been formed in Paris made up of Huguenot women who had left the Protestant faith and joined themselves to the Roman Catholic church. These Protestants-turned-Catholics were called *Nouvelles Catholiques*. In about 1678 Fenelon was appointed to head this community. His job was to indoctrinate these women into the Catholic faith and for ten years devoted himself to this work.

During this period of his life Fenelon developed a close relationship with a few pious friends. One of these close friends was the Duc de Beauvilliers, a man destined to play a formative role in Fenelon's life.

The Duc's wife was the mother of eight daughters, and Fenelon became something the Catholics called a *Spiritual Director*, or *Spiritual Guide*, to this entire family. Out of this experience was to come Fenelon's first book, a work much celebrated in the French world and French language. It is called *A Treatise on the Education of Girls*.

As an educator, Fenelon was very influential, although not very systematic. His concern for girls' education was rare in his day, and he wanted this kind of education to develop specific feminine aspects. *

And now a very dark page in French history opens. In October of 1685, Louis XIV revoked something called The Edict of Nantes (1598) which protected the Protestants of France and gave them a small measure of religious freedom. For several years previous Louis XIV had encouraged increased harassment of the Huguenots. In fact, the reason given for revoking the Edict of Nantes was that there were so few Protestants left in France the law was meaningless. (By no means was this true.)

Persecutions spread. Tens of thousands, and finally hundreds of thousands, of Protestants fled France. Historians have called this perhaps the greatest single blunder ever committed by a reigning monarch in the history of Europe. The Protestants, history would reveal, were the solidifying, cohesive force in the commerce of France. The banking business, accounting, in fact almost the entire financial community and a large part of France's business transactions rested their credibility on the honesty of the Huguenots. When the Huguenots made this exodus from their native land something of the genius of France disappeared with them.

It was at this time (1685) that the most powerful religious figure in France, Bossuet, recommended that Fenelon be sent to the most troubled area of France, the heavily Protestant districts of Poitou and Saintogne. Persecution and confusion prevailed there, along with an air of rebellion. The king, who virtually always did whatever Bossuet suggested in religious matters, dispatched Fenelon to this area. Fenelon agreed, with one rather unusual stipulation. He was not to be accompanied by military troops, but rather, he would go to do a work of peace and mercy. It was a task he was well equipped for by his nature and by the experience afforded him with the *Nouvelles Catholiques* in Paris. The military was to withdraw from any area where Fenelon had jurisdiction.

Fenelon understood the Protestant mind.

A story illustrates how this man weaved his way through the impossible situation in Saintogne. A devout Catholic called upon Fenelon to come attend to his kin, a dying Protestant "heretic". On the way, Fenelon composed a prayer which, we are told, the two men -- a Protestant heretic and a Catholic bishop -- prayed together!

"Thou knowest, my Savior, that I desire to live and die in the Truth; forgive me if I was mistaken."

As his stay in this area lengthened, both the Huguenots and the Catholics were impressed with the way he handled his task. It was said that though the Protestants were not converted by him they were charmed by his character. Grudgingly, perhaps, it seems he may have even won their esteem and admiration. Fenelon's success in Poitou caused the public, for the first time, to focus attention upon this man and his ministry.

In August 1689, when Fenelon was 38, he was given one of the most influential positions that could befall any Frenchman. Louis appointed him Preceptor of the Duc of Burgundy. That title may have very little meaning to anyone unacquainted with French history. But we understand the implication better when we realize that, for all practical purposes, Fenelon was given the task of raising the young man who would succeed Louis XIV to the throne of France. Fenelon was now in the inner circle of influence in France. He also had one of the most difficult tasks imaginable as the young Duc was a terror. Could Fenelon handle him?

A contemporary of Fenelon has left us the following description of Fenelon's appearance. Reading it helps us to understand a little better the magnetism of this man.

"This prelate was a tall, thin man, well made, pale, with a large nose, eyes, from whence fire and talents streamed as from a torrent, a physiognomy the like of which I have never seen in any other man, and which, once seen, one could never forget. He combined everything, and the greatest contradictions produced no want of harmony. A united seriousness and gaiety, gravity and courtesy, the man of learning, the bishop and the grand seigneur; the prevailing characteristics, as in everything about him, being refinement, intellect, gracefulness, modesty, and above all, noblesse.

"It was difficult to take ones eyes off of him. He possessed a natural eloquence, grace and finesse, and a most insinuating, yet noble and appropriate courtesy; an easy, clear, agreeable utterance; a wonderful power of explaining the hardest matter in a lucid,

distinct manner. He was a man who never sought to seem cleverer than those with whom he conversed, who brought himself insensibly to their level, putting them at their ease, and enthralling them so, one could neither leave him, nor mistrust him, nor help seeking him again."

Another contemporary describes Fenelon this way:

"...one of those rare men, destined to create an epoch in their times, and to do honor as much to humanity by their virtue as to letters by their exceeding talent -- easy, brilliant, characterized by fertile, graceful, dominant imagination, which yet never made its domination felt. His eloquence was winning rather than vehement, and he reigned as much through the charm he had on society as by the superiority of his talents; always bringing himself to the level of others, and never arguing; seeming, on the contrary, to yield to others at the very time he was convincing them. His whole bearing was marked with a noble singularity, and an indescribable and sublime simplicity gave a sort of prophet-like stamp to his character; the fresh, though unaffected, way in which he expressed himself made many people fancy that he knew everything by inspiration. He seems almost as if he had invented rather than acquired the sciences. He was always original, always creative, imitating no one, and himself wholly inimitable."

It has been said of him that he was a man dead to vanity.

One of his contemporaries noted, "I never knew him to speak brusquely to anyone, nor to the best of my knowledge did a harsh or contemptuous word ever escape him." Another observer gave this critique of Fenelon:

"I have seen him adapt himself within a short space of time to all classes, associating with the great, and using their style, without any loss of episcopal dignity, and then turning to the lowly and young, like a kind father teaching his children. There was no effort or affectation in his readiness to turn from one to the other; it seems as though his mind naturally embraced all varieties."

It was to this man that was given the Herculean task of bringing a violent and difficult seven year old child into management. But just how difficult was this child? Here is a description left to us of the little monster!

"Monseigneur was born with the disposition which made one tremble. He was so passionate that he would break the clocks when they struck the hour which summoned him to some unwelcomed duty, and fly into the wildest rage at the rain which hindered some pleasure. Resistance made him perfectly furious. I have often been a witness to this in his early childhood. Moreover, a strong inclination attached him to whatever was forbidden to his mind or body. His satirical power was all the more biting because it was clever and pungent, and he seized promptly on the ridiculous side of things. He gave himself up to all that pleased him with a violent passion, and with an amount of pride and hauteur past description; he was dangerously quick in penetrating both things and people, in seeing the weak side, and reasoning more powerfully and deeply than his masters. But, on the other hand, as soon as the storm of passion was over, reason would return and get the upper hand; he would see his faults, and acknowledge them, sometimes so regretfully as almost to renew the storm. His mind was lively, quick, penetrating, resolute to meet difficulty; ...literally speaking, transcendent in every way. The marvel is, that in so short a time, devotion and grace should have made an altogether new being of him and changed so many redoubtable faults into the entirely opposite virtues."

And here is another description of the young man who, save for the miracle called Fenelon, was destined to be a tyrant.

"He was intensely obstinate, desperately fond of good eating, of hunting, of music, of games at which it was dangerous to play with him, and he could not endure to be beaten; he was disposed to be cruel, and he looked upon the rest of mankind as an inferior race with which he had nothing in common. Even his brothers, who were supposed to be brought up on precisely the same footing as himself, he considered as merely a sort of link between himself and the ordinary human race."

And so Fenelon set about his task. He was to give the child a literary education, but his main struggle was the boy's fiery temperament. It was patience and gentleness together with firmness that began to corral the fury of this wild child who would be king.

When one of his evil moods seized him, instructions were given to everyone in the household to relapse into silence. No one was to speak to him if they could help it. He was to be treated with a sort of humiliating compassion which might be shown a madman; his books and everything else that had to do with the constructive part of his life were to be put aside as useless in this state of rage.

This tactic had a gradual effect upon the young boy. Full of penitence, he would sometimes come and throw himself in the fullest affection and trust, mixed with childish remorse, upon the never-failing patience of his Preceptor. A bond grew between them. Soon the boy was won over to Fenelon and continued to almost worship him until the very day he died. He even grew to learn to assist those who strove to conquer his faults.

It was in the ensuing three years that he lived in the court of Louis XIV that Fenelon wrote two more works, *The Dialogue of Death*, and *Télémaque*. (*Télémaque* ranks in French literature something like one of Shakespeare's better works might in English literature. Its content has caused some to call Fenelon "the first modern mind.")

Télémaque was in fact a kind of instruction for the young prince, in which Fenelon exposed his ideas about the ideal government. But Fenelon, himself a class-conscious grand seigneur, was firmly opposed to royal despotism. When this book was published, the reading public interpreted it as a satirical criticism on the government situation under Louis XIV. This made his situation very delicate in relation to his life in the royal court and his influence over the heir to the throne.

Also during this same period the single greatest influence of his adult life was to make its entrance. While in the king's court, Fenelon met Madame Guyon. Madame Guyon, in turn, was to introduce Fenelon to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. It is to the everlasting credit of this powerful and influential man that he humbled himself before this obscure woman and received from her the guidance that he did.

But don't expect a secular historian to agree with that observation! Secular historians have never forgiven Guyon for being the one flaw in Fenelon's life, causing him to be denied a cardinal's cap and a place in French history alongside the very greatest of her sons.

Events begin to move quickly now. Fenelon is caring for the grandson of the king, the honors of the world and the admiration of France are upon him. In 1693 he is chosen to become a member of the French academy. The next year, in appreciation for what Fenelon had done for his grandson, Louis XIV gave Fenelon the position of Abbey of Saint Valery. One year later, in 1695, the Pope elevated Fenelon to the auspicious position of Archbishop of an area in France called Cambrai. (An Archbishop is one step from Cardinal, which is but one step from Pope!)

But in exactly those same years Bossuet made himself the enemy of Madame Guyon. Now it happened that the two most powerful religious figures in France found themselves on a collision course. Fenelon was Guyon's friend; Bossuet was her avowed enemy.

Fenelon could find nothing wrong with either Guyon's life or her teachings. He even went further to become her defender, knowing full well the danger of crossing the powerful Bossuet.

At the same time, in their private lives, both men were working on a book, neither knowing the other was doing so. Bossuet, knowing nothing of Fenelon's book, asked Fenelon to endorse his own. The book by Bossuet condemned the teachings of Madame Guyon, and Fenelon refused. Bossuet was outraged. Bossuet soon found not only the teaching of Madame Guyon unacceptable, but also Fenelon's book *The Maxims of the Saints* just as bad. Bossuet was determined to cross swords with his friend Fenelon and ruin him in the battle. So ensued one of the greatest ecclesiastical confrontations that church history has ever recorded.



Bossuet published a book accusing Fenelon of holding doctrines contrary to the true faith and called upon Fenelon to make response. Fenelon wrote a short book to his defense. Bossuet wrote a book denouncing Fenelon, his teachings and his

answer. Each answered with another book and after that, each answered the answer with yet another book! Paris (as well as France and a good part of Europe) was standing on its ear. This series of books, from the hands of these two awesome men, were literally the talk of a large portion of the continent. These little books are still considered to be literary masterpieces. The only way to adequately describe the place this confrontation holds in French history would be to compare it to the Lincoln-Douglas debates in the United States. (If you are British, try to image a literary duel between Shakespeare and John Locke.) Until this very day, the school children of France study this clash of titans both in their French history classes and in French literature.

Louis XIV, siding with Bossuet -- as always -- forbade Fenelon to live any longer in Paris and removed him as Preceptor of his grandson. The controversy spiraled.

Bossuet demanded that Fenelon be investigated. The whole matter landed on the desk of the Pope himself, the same Pope who had only recently purged himself of the Michael Molinos dispute! (See *The Spiritual Guide*, also published by Christian Books.)

A Vatican committee was appointed to settle the matter. It took that committee years to thrash through the matter. Bossuet threw the totality of his influence behind a demand for the worst possible condemnation and in so doing tarnished his place in history. The final verdict handed down by the committee was not much more than hand-slap on Fenelon. Bossuet was outraged. The original book, *The Maxim of the Saints*, was only moderately condemned. The final written statement on the matter was a study in mildness of condemnation. The Pope showed the greatest tenderness and respect for Fenelon. Nonetheless, Fenelon's book had been denounced and, upon receiving word of this, Fenelon immediately recanted. (In Roman Catholic circles, this simply means that he renounced his own teachings.) He did this out of firm belief that he was to be submissive to the Pope and to the mother church in all things.

Although he was allowed to remain Archbishop, Fenelon was banished to his diocese.

In the meantime, Bossuet and Louis XIV had seen to it that Madame Guyon had been imprisoned, without trial and without even charges being laid against her. The influence of Madame Guyon on the court of Louis XIV and even upon the religious life of France had come to an end. Nonetheless, the things she said, the

things she stood for and the testimony of her life have had a habit of periodically resurrecting now and again. For better or worse, Madame Guyon has simply never quietly gone away.

The now banished Fenelon devoted the remainder of his life to the duties of his diocese. It was during this time he penned most of the letters you will find in this book.

Unfortunately, few of his sermons have been left to us. The writings for which he is mostly remembered are *The Maxims of the Saints*, *Télémaque*, and his letters. (His works on child raising are all but forgotten, yet their concepts are, to this very hour, woven into the fabric of western culture.)

As an educator, Fenelon is representative of 17th century galant education. His pedagogic work focused on young people of the upper classes. Regarding the education of young women, he did his utmost to make future motherhood and the ability to manage a complex household the central themes. A striking element in his pedagogy is the great value Fenelon attributed to the education of children of toddler age. He highlighted the influence that early childhood experiences may have on the development of a child's character. This insight is a modern one. In his educational methods, Fenelon tried to make use of the natural curiosity of young children by explaining much in the form of stories. And learning by playing should start as early as possible. *

His letters are generally conceded to be the most perfect of their kind to be found in the French language. Many a believer has found solace and benefit in his thoughtful correspondence. They are, truly, spiritual letters and some of the best Christian correspondence dealing with the matter of a deeper walk with Christ which has ever found its way to print.

What was not learned about Fenelon until the twentieth century was that, even years after Madame Guyon was released from prison, the two of them carried on a secret correspondence. Here is clear evidence that neither of them really abandoned either the belief or practice of their walk with the Lord.

It is interesting to note that the three great Catholic names of this era (as deals with the deeper aspects of the faith) -- Molinos, Guyon and Fenelon -- held on to their convictions to the very end of their lives.

Perhaps the greatest disappointment to come to Fenelon and Guyon was the death of the king's grandson in 1712. They had hoped this young man would succeed Louis XIV and bring to France a real witness of Jesus Christ and perhaps, they dreamed, that he might play a major role in the reformation of the Catholic Church. The young Duc's death was, in fact, a moment of sadness that stilled the hopes of an entire nation.

Two years later Fenelon suffered another keen loss. Fenelon's friend, the Due de Beauvilliers, died in 1714. Fenelon was broken hearted, not realizing that he himself had only four more months to live for, by that time, Fenelon's own health had broken.

In November of 1714, while crossing a bridge, one of the horses pulling his carriage shied ... the carriage overturned and Fenelon was injured. He came down with fever on January 1, 1715. By the end of the week, on January 7 at 5:15 in the morning, Fenelon passed away at the age of 63.

Two years later Madame Guyon, who was two years older than he, also died. An epoch in French history had ended. A high water mark in Christian devotion and in experiential faith was over. But as I have said before, their influence seems to have a disconcerting way of rising from the dead from time to time. Perhaps one day it shall do so yet again.