



UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)

di A. Pisani

Schede autori Atti costitutivi, ordinamenti, agiografie, etc.

Louis Bourdaloue

Born at Bourges, 20 August, 1632; died at Paris, 13 May, 1704. He is often described as the "king of preachers and the preacher of kings." He entered the Society of Jesus at the age of fifteen years. His father, Etienne Bourdaloue, a distinguished legal official of Bourges, though opposing his choice for a time, in order to test his sincerity, willingly consented, having had similar aspirations himself in his youth. A genealogist of the seventeenth century named Hodeau has attempted to trace back the family to the time of the Crusades, but the learned and laborious Tausserat informs us that the first of the race was Mace Bourdaloue, an humble tanner of Vierzon, about 1450. During Bourdaloue's lifetime, there were some titles of nobility in the family for military prowess, and although his father was conspicuous in his profession, yet they were by no means wealthy. One of his relatives married a shoemaker, and considerable difficulty was experienced in providing her with a modest dower. Attempts have been made to discover some descendants of the Bourdaloues in our own time, but though the name is common enough, the family is extinct.

When young Bourdaloue entered the society, he immediately attracted attention by his quick and penetrating intelligence, his tireless industry, and his strict observance of religious discipline. He was subsequently made professor of philosophy and moral theology, but certain sermons which he was called on to unexpectedly preach brought him into notice as an orator, and it was determined to devote him altogether to the work of preaching.

He began in the Provinces in 1665, and was transferred to Paris in 1669, and for thirty-four consecutive years preached with a success that reached its climax only at the end of his career. He was the contemporary and friend

of [Bossuet](#), and though quite unlike each other in their methods, their eloquence gave to the French pulpit a glory which has perhaps never been equaled in modern times. They died within two months of each other, though Bossuet was famous long before Bourdaloue appeared.



They followed different lines: Bossuet was distinguished for the subtlety and vast sweep of his conceptions, the marvelous conciseness, splendor, and grandeur of his language, as well as the



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magisterial and almost royal manner in which he grasped his subject and dominated his hearers. He often spoke with scant preparation, so that very few of his wonderful discourses were put on paper before being delivered. His glory as an orator is based mainly on his wonderful "Oraisons Funèbres."

Bourdaloue, on the contrary, was essentially a preacher. He wrote his discourses with extreme care, and though they were numerous enough to form editions of twelve and sixteen volumes, there is only one sermon that is incomplete. He has a pronounced dislike of the "Oraisons Funèbres"; he even objected to the name and called them *acute éloges*. In the entire collection of discourses we find but two of that character, both of them panegyrics of the Condés, [Henri](#) and [Louis](#), and both undertaken to pay a debt of gratitude which the Jesuits owed to that family. The first was prompted also by the purpose of gaining an influence over the Great Condé, in order to lead him to a better life. This was realized, for when only four years after the first discourse Conde's corpse was borne to the same church where he had listened to the panegyric of his father, Bourdaloue was again the orator, and startled his audience by saying:

"God gave me a presentiment of the Prince's conversion. I had not only formed the wish but, as it were, anticipated it by a prayer which seemed then to contain something of a prediction. Whether it was an inspiration or a feeling of zeal, I was transported beyond myself, O Lord, and I was assured by Thee, that Thou wouldst not leave this great man, whose heart was so true as I knew it to be, in the way of perdition and corruption of the world. He heard my voice; he has heard Thine."

This apostolic motive never failed to reveal itself in all his utterances. Nevertheless, his funeral oration on Henri de Bourbon was considered at the time equal oratorically to any of Bossuet's. Mme. de Sévigné describes it as "the most beautiful that could be imagined. It is the finest and most Christian panegyric that has ever been pronounced." Such indeed was the universal verdict at the time. Condé himself according to Chérot let it be known that he considered "the oration to be so noble, so eloquent, and so solid, that it would be difficult enough to surpass it, or perhaps even to imitate it." He has [Jouveney](#) translate it immediately into Latin, and he himself supervised the work.

[Boileau](#), though somewhat a [Jansenist](#), says that Bourdaloue was le plus grande orateur dont le siècle se vante. This appreciation, however, does not agree with that of some later critics, and [Villemain](#), while acknowledging "numerous beauties of a superior order" declared that Bourdaloue was not well fitted for funeral orations, "on account of the richness and fecundity of imagination which they require." On the other hand, [Lord Brougham](#), himself an orator, says that "Bourdaloue displays a fertility of resources, and an exuberance of topics whether for observation or argument, not equaled by any other orator, sacred or profane." He ranks him far beyond Bossuet, but for other reasons inferior to [Massillion](#), about whom another writer remarks that whereas Bourdaloue preached to the men of a vigorous age, Massillion addressed those of a period remarkable for its effeminacy. Bourdaloue raised himself to the level of the great truths of religion; Massillion conformed himself to the weakness of the men with whom he lived. [Nisard](#), in his "Histoire de la littérature française," says that "Bourdaloue's success was the most brilliant and sustained that human speech has ever obtained." [Taine](#) ranks him with [Cicero](#), Livy, Bossuet, Burke, and Fox; [Fénelon](#), however, is said to have deprecated him in the "Dialogues sur l'éloquence," but according



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to the "Revue Bourdaloue," the authenticity of the "Dialogues" is doubtful, and besides, Bourdaloue is not named; the description is assigned to him only by conjecture.

As his object was exclusively the salvation of souls, Bourdaloue adapted himself to the audience which, in spite of its worldliness, frivolity, and vice, proved itself, and with reason, on its power of appreciating what was intellectual and scholarly, and though scandalously irreverential in the very temple of God, had an insatiable craving for religious discourses. To influence them, the preacher had to resort to reason; and consequently his discourse was constructed after a clearly defined and frankly enunciated plan, each part closely knit with, and evolved from, the preceding. The proposition is always distinctly stated; argument after argument is elaborated with irresistible logic; doctrines whose orthodoxy is without reproach are carefully and minutely explained, and moral principles are expounded, but never exaggerated or strained in the practical application which he never fails to make; sophistries are dispelled, objections answered, and errors refuted, the orator not fearing to return to a point for greater clearness; mysteries are discussed, though he purposely avoided what is too profound, even if by doing so he incurred the reproach of avoiding the sublime, for he is aiming at a moral deduction; the whole delivered with a style which Fénelon says "had, perhaps, arrived at the perfection of which our language is capable in that kind of eloquence," and with a lucidity and clearness that amazed and captivated his hearers, and evoked applause, which he was powerless to prevent. There is never a diversion made merely to dazzle or delight, there is rarely an appeal to the emotions; but the vividness and splendor of the doctrine he was propounding, the startling truthfulness of the psychological picture he was placing before their eyes--even La Bruyère professed to be his disciple in this respect--entreated, or induced, or compelled his hearers to a reformation of life. He hurried on with an extraordinary rapidity of utterance, but with a distinctness of enunciation and a marvelous sweetness and power of voice that filled every part of the edifice in which he was speaking, and kept his audience spellbound to the end of his discourse. Places were secured at daybreak; princes and prelates crowded to hear him, and on one memorable occasion, several of the most distinguished members of the hierarchy, among them Bossuet himself, withdrew in anger because the seats they claimed were not granted. Bossuet himself, however, remained in a gallery apart to listen to the discourse.

Although covering such a vast field in every one of his sermons, Bourdaloue never exhausted his subject, and we find two and even three of the same theme, not only without any repetition, but each one improving on what preceded, so that [Louis XIV](#) said that he would rather "hear Bourdaloue's repetitions than what was novel from anyone else." He appeared at the court on ten different occasions for courses of sermons, and each time his welcome was more enthusiastic than before. He was a court preacher but did not flatter, and one of his sermons is made use of by modern Socialists in support of their teaching. A few years ago, considerable controversy was evoked by it, and [Jules Lamaitre](#) finds in it a condemnation of contemporary egoism. He was preaching on "Riches," and used the phrase of St. Jerome: "Every rich man is an unjust man, or the heir of one." "If you go to the source of riches," he said, "even in houses or families that are proud of their origin, nay even those who are distinguished for their probity and religion, you will discover things that will make you tremble." In the twelve-volume edition, there is one number containing sermons for Advent, three others for Lenten discourses, three more for Sundays of the year, two on the Mysteries, while the last two books contain sixteen panegyrics, six sermons for religious investitures, and the two funeral orations. Considerable ingenuity has been exercised by his editors



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in fixing the time when the various discourses were pronounced; they are all undated. When they were given is largely a matter of conjecture. The sermons of least merit are those on the Mysteries, but it is explained that he purposely avoided any sublime or profound considerations on those topics and restricted himself to what could be easily stated so as to have the opportunity of deducing a moral lesson. "Everything was practical" says Joubert, "in the judicious Bourdaloue." Someone has said that "the Jesuits answered [Pascal's](#) attacks about their moral teaching by making Bourdaloue preach." As regards his literary style, [Sainte-Beuve](#) says "He was a good orator; he is a good writer." He is free from the turgid, pedantic, and ridiculous phraseology which was rampant at that time in forensic as well as sacred eloquence--though there are some examples of it. His compliments to the exalted personages in the audience are not so much examples of bad literary taste as a mark of the servitude to which the court preachers of that day had to submit. About his correctness of language, however, the "Revue Bourdaloue" (1 April, 1904) admits that authentic manuscripts no longer exist, and that it is impossible to make out how much his editor, Bretonneau, has tampered with the text.

If not the originator, Bourdaloue is largely the model, of French pulpit orator in the arrangement of sermons. The method he adopted is condemned by Fénelon as never having been used before, and as being poorly adapted to arouse the feelings of the audience. Its use by Bourdaloue is explained by the fact that he was combating Protestant Rationalism which was at that time making inroads against Catholic thought, and also because the use of clever and convincing reasoning was the vogue of the day. A reaction had set in from the silly idealism of a short time before. Bourdaloue took his hearers as he found them, and Voltaire, referring to the form of his discourses, says "he was the first one to make reason speak, and always eloquently." Possibly the inaptness of the instrument he employed only shows more clearly his greatness as an orator. Only such a man as he could use it. For most readers the printed text of his discourses is wearisome in spite of the wealth of instruction it contains. It needs the voice and action of the orator to give it power. The vogue which his method has obtained is sometimes considered a mistake, if not a misfortune for French pulpit eloquence. It supposes a Bourdaloue, as well as conditions which have long since ceased. Chérot, who has made an exhaustive study of Bourdaloue, dismisses with contempt the story that the orator spoke with his eyes shut. For a court preacher who had to distribute compliments to the dignitaries present, and who angered them if he did not do it skillfully, or omitted anyone who expected it (as happened in the case of Mme de Guise), it would have been a difficult or rather impossible task to perform that duty if he did not use his eyes. The picture that so represents him was taken after his death. Similarly, to suppose that he would dare to say to Louis XIV in the sermon on "Adultery:" *tu es ille vir*, like Nathan to David, is to be ignorant of the conditions that prevailed in that servile court. The alleged sermon, moreover, is nowhere to be found. It is said to have been burnt. More likely it was never written. Mme. Sevigne speaks of a sermon on "Impurity" in which Bourdaloue was merciless, but had that reproach been addressed to the king, she, above all writers, would have told it. Besides, that sermon was preached in the Jesuit church, and there is no assurance that it was repeated at Versailles. Again, some of his biographers, in speaking of his sermon on "The Magdalene," insinuate that it was directed at Mmes. de Montespan and de Fontanges, the king's mistresses who sat before him. It is not certain that "The Magdalene" sermon was ever preached before the court. Moreover, Bourdaloue was too prudent to irritate uselessly.

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Considerable discussion has been raised with regard to his attitude in the quarrel between the pope and the king about the Four Gallican Articles. It is admitted that in the panegyric of St. Louis, pronounced in the presence of Louis XIV, the preacher referred to "the rights of the Crown" and "the new attempts of the Court of Rome," and also the manner in which St. Louis defended those rights. He added, however, that "while Louis in his quality of king recognized no superior on earth" (all of which has a Gallican tinge), yet the monarch should remember that he was, at the same time, the eldest son of the Church. His defenders maintain that we have no right to infer from this phrase that he was a Gallican or stood side by side with Bossuet. Another point which has called for inquiry was his "abstention" from the subject of the infallibility of the pope; he never spoke of it. Not only that, but when asked about it by Father Alleaume, he said that he had a sermon on the "Infallibility of the Church" that he had never preached. Beyond that, we have no means of knowing his theological views on the question of the pope. However, papal infallibility was not then a matter of discussion. His sermon on the "Infallibility of the Church" is not to be found, under that heading, at least; but in the second sermon on the feast of St. Peter, on "Obedience to the Church," he speaks explicitly of the Church's infallibility.

Bourdaloue seems to have written but very few letters. The collator, Monseigneur Blampignon, found only eighteen; five more have been discovered since then--none of them letters of friendship. Some of them are requests for interviews, which would suggest a preference for information by the medium of conversation. One of these letters is noteworthy as it is a congratulation to his intimate friend, the Duc de Noailles, on the appointment to the See of Paris of the duke's brother. Bourdaloue "thanks God for having inspired the king to appoint such a worthy and holy bishop." The prelate became afterwards very unfriendly to the Jesuits. In this communication he speaks of himself as one of the ancient servitors of the house of Noailles, a phrase which intimates who was at the back of Bourdaloue's mission to the Protestants of Languedoc after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. In the fulfilment of that mission Protestants and Catholics came in throngs to hear him, and his gentleness and prudence won all hearts. There is a very elaborate letter, or rather disquisition, in the collection, addressed to Mme. de Maintenon who was bring alienated from the Jesuits. Bourdaloue was remarkable as a director of souls. While paying proper respect to the great, he was the devoted friend of the poor, and assiduous in the confessional. He was of a gentle and amiable disposition and exerted a wonderful power at the death-bed, especially of hardened sinners. Towards the end of his life he desired to quit Paris, and live in seclusion at La Flèche, and though he had received the permission of the general, the provincial thwarted the plan. It only increased his zeal, and he continued to preach, hear confessions, and visit the poor until the end of his life. After a sickness of two days he died at the age of seventy-two.

Sources

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