



UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

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

Schede autori Sotto attacco

Fénelon François de Salignac de la Mothe

A celebrated French bishop and author, b. in the Château de Fénelon in Périgord (Dordogne), 6 August, 1651 ; d. at Cambrai, 7 January, 1715. He came of ancient family of noble birth but small means, the most famous of his ancestors being Bertrand de Salignac (d. 1599), who fought at Metz under the Duke Guise and became ambassador to England; also François de Salignac I, Louis de Salignac I, Louis de Salignac II, and François de Salignac II, bishops of Sarlat between 1567 and 1688. Fénelon was the second of the three children of Pons de Salignac, Count de La Mothe-Fénelon, by his second wife, Louise de La Cropte. Owing to his delicate health Fénelon's childhood was passed in his father's château under a tutor, who succeeded in giving him a keen taste for the classics and a considerable knowledge of Greek literature, which influenced the development of his mind in marked degree. At the age of twelve he was sent to the neighbouring University of Cahors, where he studied rhetoric and philosophy, and obtained his first degrees. As he had already expressed his intention of entering the Church, one of his uncles, Marquis Antoine de Fénelon, a friend of Monsieur Olier and St.



Vincent de Paul, sent him to Paris and placed him in the Collège du Plessis, whose students followed the course of theology at the Sorbonne. There Fénelon became a friend of Antoine de Noailles, afterwards, Cardinal and Archbishop of Paris, and showed such decided talent that at the age of fifteen he was chosen to preach a public sermon, in which he acquitted admirably. To facilitate his preparation for the priesthood, the marquis sent his nephew to the Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice (about 1672), then under the direction of Monsieur Tronson, but the young man was placed in the small community reserved for ecclesiastics whose health did not permit them to follow the excessive exercises of the seminary. In this famous school, of which he always retained affectionate memories. Fénelon was grounded not only in the practice of piety and priestly virtue, but above all in solid Catholic doctrine, which saved him later from [Jansenism](#) and [Gallicanism](#). Thirty years later, in a letter to Clement XI, he congratulates himself on his training by M. Tronson in the knowledge of his Faith and the duties of the ecclesiastical life. About 1675 he was ordained priest and for a while thought of devoting himself to the Eastern missions. This was, however, only a passing inclination. Instead he joined the community of Saint Sulpice and gave himself up to the works of the priesthood especially preaching and catechizing.

In 1678 Harlay de Champvallon, Archbishop of Paris, entrusted Fénelon with the direction of the house of "Nouvelles-Catholiques", a community founded in 1634 by Archbishop Jean-François de Gondi for protestant young women about to enter the Church or converts who needed to be



UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

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

Schede autori Sotto attacco

strengthened in the Faith. It was a new and delicate form of apostolate which thus offered itself to Fénelon's zeal and required all the resources of his theological knowledge, persuasive eloquence, and magnetic personality. Within late years his conduct has been severely criticized, and he has been even called intolerant but these charges are without serious foundation and have not been accepted even by the Protestant authors of the "Encyclopédie des Sciences Religieuses"; their verdict on Fénelon is that in justice to him it must be said that in making converts he ever employed persuasion rather than severity".

When Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, by which Henry IV had granted freedom of public worship to the Protestants, missionaries were chosen from among the greatest orators of the day, e.g. **Bourdaloue**, Fléchier, and others, and were sent to those parts of France where heretics were most numerous, to labour for their conversion. At the suggestion of his friend Bossuet, Fénelon was sent with five companions to Santonge, where he manifested great zeal, though his methods were always tempered by gentleness. According to Cardinal de Bausset, he induced Louis XIV to remove all troops and all evidences of compulsion from the places he visited, and it is certain that he proposed and insisted on many methods of which the king did not approve. "When hearts are to be moved", he wrote to Seignelay, "force avails not. Conviction is the only real conversion". Instead of force he employed patience, established classes, and distributed New Testaments and catechisms in the vernacular. Above all, he laid especial emphasis on preaching provided the sermons were by gentle preachers who have a faculty not only for instructing but for winning the confidence of their hearers". It is doubtless true, as recently published documents prove, that he did not altogether repudiate measures of force, but he only allowed them as a last resource. Even then his severity was confined to exiling from their villages a few recalcitrants and to constraining others under the small penalty of five *sous* to attend the religious instructions in the churches. Nor did he think that preachers ought to advocate openly even these measures; similarly he was unwilling to have known the Catholic authorship of pamphlets against Protestant ministers which he proposed to have printed in Holland. This was certainly an excess of cleverness; but it proves at least that Fénelon was not in sympathy with that vague tolerance founded on scepticism which the eighteenth century rationalists charged him with. In such matters he shared the opinions of all the other great Catholics of his day. With Bossuet and St. Augustine he held that "to be obliged to do good is always an advantage and that heretics and schismatics, when forced to apply their minds to the consideration of truth, eventually lay aside their erroneous beliefs, whereas they would never have examined these matters had not authority constrained them."

Before and after his mission at Saintonge, which lasted but a few months (1686-1687), Fénelon formed many dear friendships. Bossuet was already his friend, the great bishop was at the summit of his fame, and was everywhere looked up to as the oracle of the Church of France. Fénelon showed him the utmost deference, visited him at his country-house at Germany, and assisted at his spiritual conferences and his lectures on the Scriptures at Versailles. It was under his inspiration, perhaps even at his request, that Fénelon wrote about this time his "Réfutation du système de Malebranche sur la nature et sur la grâce". In this he attacks with great *velour* and at length the theories of the famous Oratorian on optimism, the Creation, and the Incarnation. This treatise, though annotated by Bousset, Fénelon considered it unwise to publish; it saw the light only in 1820. First among the friends of Fénelon at this period were the Duc de Bauvilliers and the Duc de Chevreuse, two influential courtiers, eminent for their piety, who had married two daughters of Colbert, minister of Louis XIV. One of these, the Duchesse de Beauvilliers, mother of eight daughters, asked Fénelon for advice concerning their education. His reply was the "Traité de



UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

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

di A. Pisani

Schede autori Sotto attacco

l'education des filles", in which he insists on education beginning at an early age and on the instruction of girls in all the duties of their future condition of life. The religious teaching he recommends is one solid enough to enable them to refute heresies if necessary. He also advises a more serious course of studies than was then customary. Girls ought to be learned without pedantry; the form of instruction should be concrete, sensible, agreeable, and prudent, in a manner to aid their natural abilities. In many ways his pedagogy was ahead of his time, and we may yet learn much from him.

The Duc de Beauvilliers, who had been the first to test in his own family the value of the "Traité de l'education des filles", was in 1689 named governor of the grandchildren of Louis XIV. He hastened to secure Fénelon as tutor to the eldest of these princes, the Duke of Burgundy. It was a most important post, seeing that the formation of the future King of France lay in his hands; but it was not without great difficulties, owing to the violent, haughty, and character of the pupil. Fénelon brought to his task a whole-hearted zeal and devotion. Everything down to, the Latin themes and versions, was made to serve in the taming of this impetuous spirit. Fénelon prepared them the better to his plans. With the same object in view, he wrote his "Fables" and his "Dialogues des Morts", but especially his "Télémaque", in which work, under the guise of pleasant fiction, he taught the young prince lessons of self-control, and all the duties required by his exalted position. The results of this training were wonderful. The historian Saint-Simon, as a rule hostile to Fénelon, says: "De cet abîme sortit un prince, affable, doux, modéré, humain, patient, humble, tout appliqué à ses devoirs." It has been asked in our day if Fénelon did not succeed too well. When the prince grew to man's estate, his piety seemed often too refined; he was continually examining himself, reasoning for and against, till he was unable to reach a definite decision, his will being paralysed by fear of doing the wrong thing. However, these defects of character, against which Fénelon in his letters was the first to protest, did not show themselves in youth. About 1695 every one who came in contact with the prince was in admiration at the change in him.

To reward the tutor, Louis XIV gave him, in 1694, the Abbey of Saint-Valéry, with its annual revenue of fourteen thousand livres. The Académie had opened its doors to him and Madame de Maintenon, the morganatic wife of the king, began to consult him on matters of conscience, and on the regulation of the house of Saint-Cyr, which she had just established for the training of young girls. Soon afterwards the archiepiscopal See of Cambrai, one of the best in France, fell vacant, and the king offered it to Fénelon, at the same time expressing a wish that he would continue to instruct the Duke of Burgundy. Nominated in February, 1696, Fénelon was consecrated in August of the same year by Bossuet in the chapel of Saint-Cyr. The future of the young prelate looked brilliant, when he fell into deep disgrace.

The cause of Fénelon's trouble was his connection with Madame Guyon, whom he had met in the society of his friends, the Beauvilliers and the Chevreuses. She was a native of Orléans, which she left when about twenty-eight years old, a widowed mother of three children, to carry on a sort of apostolate of mysticism, under the direction of Père Lacombe, a Barnabite. After many journeys to Geneva, and through Provence and Italy, she set forth her ideas in two works, "Le moyen court et facile de faire oraison" and "Les torrents spirituels". In exaggerated language characteristic of her visionary mind, she presented a system too evidently founded on the [Quietism](#) of Molinos, that had just been condemned by Innocent XI in 1687. There were, however, great divergencies between the two systems. Whereas Molinos made man's earthly perfection consist in a state of uninterrupted contemplation and love, which would dispense the soul from all active virtue and reduce it to absolute inaction, Madame Guyon rejected with horror the dangerous conclusions of Molinos as to



UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

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

di A. Pisani

Schede autori Sotto attacco

the cessation of the necessity of offering positive resistance to temptation. Indeed, in all her relations with Père Lacombe, as well as with Fénelon, her virtuous life was never called in doubt. Soon after her arrival in Paris she became acquainted with many pious persons of the court and in the city, among them Madame de Maintenon and the Ducs de Beauvilliers and Chevreuse, who introduced her to Fénelon. In turn, he was attracted by her piety, her lofty spirituality, the charm of her personality, and of her books. It was not long, however, before the Bishop of Chartres, in whose diocese Saint-Cyr was, began to unsettle the mind of Madame de Maintenon by questioning the orthodoxy of Madame Guyon's theories. The latter, thereupon, begged to have her works submitted to an ecclesiastical commission composed of Bossuet, de Noailles, who was then Bishop of Châlons, later Archbishop of Paris, and M. Tronson; superior of-Saint-Sulpice. After an examination which lasted six months, the commission delivered its verdict in thirty-four articles known as the "Articles d' Issy", from the place near Paris where the commission sat. These articles, which were signed by Fénelon and the Bishop of Chartres, also by the members of the commission, condemned very briefly Madame Guyon's ideas, and gave a short exposition of the Catholic teaching on prayer. Madame Guyon submitted to the condemnation, but her teaching spread in England, and Protestants, who have had her books reprinted have always expressed sympathy with her views. Cowper translated some of her hymns into English verse; and her autobiography was translated into English by Thomas Digby (London, 1805) and Thomas Upam (New York, 1848). Her books have been long forgotten in France.

In accordance with the decisions taken at Issy, Bossuet now wrote his instruction on the "Etats d' oraison", as an explanation of the thirty-four articles. Fénelon refused to sign it, on the plea that his honour forbade him to condemn a woman who had already been condemned. To explain his own views of the "Articles d'Issy", he hastened to publish the "Explication des Maximes des Saints", a rather arid treatise in forty-five articles. Each article was divided into two paragraphs, one laying down the true, the other the false, teaching concerning the love of God. In this work he undertakes to distinguish clearly every step in the upward way of the spiritual life. The final end of the Christian soul is pure love of God, without any admixture of self-interest, a love in which neither fear of punishment nor desire of reward has any part. The means to this end, Fénelon points out, are those long since indicated by the Catholic mystics, i.e. holy indifference, detachment, self-abandonment, passiveness, through all of which states the soul is led by contemplation. Fénelon's book was scarcely published when it aroused much opposition. The king, in particular, was angry. He distrusted all religious novelties, and he reproached Bossuet with not having warned him of the ideas of his grandsons' tutor. He appointed the Bishops of Meaux, Chartres, and Paris to examine Fénelon's work and select passages for condemnation, but Fénelon himself submitted the book to the judgement of Holy See (27 April, 1697). A vigorous conflict broke out at once, particularly between Bossuet and Fénelon. Attack and reply followed too fast for analysis here. The works of Fénelon on the subject fill six volumes, not to speak of the 646 letters relating to Quietism, the writer proving himself a skillful polemical writer, deeply versed in spiritual things, endowed with quick intelligence and a mental suppleness not always to be clearly distinguished from quibbling and a straining of the sense. After a long and detailed examination by the consultors and cardinals of the Holy Office, lasting over two years and occupying 132 sessions, "Les Maxims des Saints" was finally condemned (12 March, 1699) as containing propositions which, in the obvious meaning of the words, or else because of the sequence of the thoughts, were "temerarious, scandalous, ill-sounding, offensive to pious ears, pernicious in practice, and false in fact". Twenty-three propositions were selected as having incurred this censure, but the pope by no means intended to



UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

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

Schede autori Sotto attacco

imply that he approved the rest of the book. Fénelon submitted at once. “We adhere to this brief”, he wrote in a pastoral letter in which he made known Rome’s decision to the flock, “and we accept it not only for the twenty three propositions but for the whole book, simply, absolutely, and without a shadow of reservation.” Most of his contemporaries found his submission adequate, edifying and admirable. In recent times, however, scattered letters have enabled a few critics to doubt its sincerity. In our opinion a few words written impulsively, and contradicted by the whole tenor of the writers’s life, cannot justify so grave a charge. It must be remembered, too, that at the meeting of the bishops held to receive the Brief of condemnation, Fénelon declared that he laid aside his own opinion and accepted the judgement of Rome, and that if this act of submission seemed lacking in any way, he was ready to do whatever Rome would suggest. The Holy See never required anything more than the above-mentioned spontaneous act.

Louis XIV, who had done all he could to bring the condemnation of the “Maximes des Saints”, had already punished its author by ordering him to remain within the limits of his diocese. Vexed later at the publication of “Télémaque”, in which he saw his person and his government subjected to criticism, the king could never be prevailed upon to revoke this command. Fénelon submitted without complaint or regret, and gave himself up entirely to the care of his flock. With a revenue of two hundred thousand livres and eight hundred parishes, some of which were on Spanish territory, Cambrai, which had been regained by France only in 1678, was one of the most important sees in the kingdom. Fénelon gave up several months of each year to a visitation of his archdiocese, which was not even interrupted by the War of the Spanish Succession, when opposing armies were camped in various parts of his territory. The captains of these armies, full of veneration for his Fénelon, left him free to come and go as he would. The remainder of the year he spent in his episcopal palace at Cambrai, where with his relatives and his friends, the Abbés de Langeron, de Chanterac, and de Beaumont, he led an uneventful life, monastic in its regularity. Every year he gave a Lenten course in one or other important parish of his diocese, and on the principal feasts he preached in his own cathedral. His sermons were short and simple composed after a brief meditation, and never committed to writing; with the exception of some few preached on more important occasions, they have not been preserved. His dealings with his clergy were always marked by condescension and cordiality. “His priests”, says Saint-Simon, “to whom he made himself both father and brother, bore him in their hearts.” He took a deep interest in their seminary training, assisted at the examination of those who were to be ordained, and gave them conferences during their retreat. He presided over the concursus for benefices and made inquiries among the pastors concerning the qualifications of each candidate.

Fénelon was always approachable, and on his walks often conversed with those he chanced to meet. He loved to visit the peasants in their houses, interested himself in their joys and sorrows, and, to avoid paining them, accepted the simple gifts of their hospitality. During the War of the Spanish Succession the doors of his palace were open to all the poor who took refuge in Cambrai. The rooms and stairways were filled with them, and his gardens and vestibules sheltered their live stock. He is yet remembered in the vicinity of Cambrai and the peasants still give their children the name Fénelon, as that of a saint.

Engrossed as Fénelon was with the administration of his diocese, he never lost sight of the general interests of the Church. This became evident when Jansenism, quiescent for nearly thirty years, again raised its head on the occasion of the famous Cas de Conscience, by which an anonymous writer endeavoured to put new life into the old distinction between the “question of law” and “question of fact” (question de droit et question de fait), acknowledging that the Church could



UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

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

di A. Pisani

Schede autori Sotto attacco

legally condemn the famous five propositions attributed to **Jansenius**, but denying that she could oblige any one to believe that they were really to be found in the “Augustinus” of that writer. Fénelon multiplied publications of every kind against the reviving heresy; he wrote letters, pastoral instruction, memoirs, in French and in Latin, which fill seven volumes of his works. He set himself to combat the errors of the *Cas de Conscience*, to refute the theory known as “respectful silence”, and to enlighten Clement XI on public opinion in France **Père Quesnel** brought fresh fuel to the strife by his “*Reflexions morales sur le Nouveau Testament*”, which was solemnly condemned by the Bull “Unigenitus” (1713). Fénelon defended this famous pontifical constitution in a series of dialogues intended to influence men of the world. Great as was his zeal against error, he was always gentle with the erring so that Saint-Simon could say “The Low Countries swarmed with Jansenists, and his Diocese of Cambrai, in particular, was full of them. In both places they found an ever-peaceful refuge, and were glad and content to here peaceably under one who was their enemy with his pen. They had no fears of their archbishop, who, though opposed to their beliefs, did not disturb their tranquillity.”

In spite of the multiplicity of his labours, Fénelon found time to carry on an absorbing correspondence with his relatives, friends, priests, and in fact every one who sought his advice. It is in this mass of correspondence, ten volumes of which have reached us, that we may see Fénelon as a director of souls. People of every sphere of life, men and women of the work, religious, soldiers, courtiers, servants, are here met with, among them Mesdames de Maintenon, de Gramont, de la Maisonfort, de Montebon, de Noailles, members of the Colbert family, the Marquis de Seignelay, the Duc de Chaulnes, above all the Ducs de Chevreuse and de Beauvilliers, not forgetting the Duke of Burgundy. Fénelon shows how well he possessed all the qualities he required from directors, patience, knowledge of the human heart and the spiritual life, equanimity of disposition, firmness, and straightforwardness, “together with a quiet gaiety” altogether removed from any stern or affected austerity”. In return he required docility of mind and entire submission of will. He aimed at leading souls to the pure love of God, as far as such a thing is humanly possible, for though the errors of the “*Maximes des Saints*” do not reappear in the letters of direction, it is still the same Fénelon, with the same tendencies, the same aiming at self-abandonment and detachment from all personal interests, all kept, however, within due limits; for as he says “this love of God does not require all Christians to practice austerities like those of the ancient solitaries, but merely that they be sober, just, and moderate in the use of all things expedient”; nor does piety, “like temporal affairs, exact a long and continuous application”; “the practice of devotion is in no way incompatible with the duties of one’s state in life”. The desire to teach his disciples the secret of harmonizing the duties of religion with those of everyday life suggests to Fénelon all sorts of advice, sometimes most unexpected from the pen of a director, especially when he happens to be dealing with his friends at court. This has given occasion to some of his critics to accuse him of ambition, and of being as anxious to control the state as to guide souls.

It is especially in the writings intended for the Duke of Burgundy that his political ideas are apparent. Besides a great number of letters, he sent him through his friends, the Ducs de Beauvilliers and de Chevreuse, an “*Examen de conscience sur les devoirs de la Royauté*”, nine memoirs on the war of the Spanish Succession, and “*Plans de Gouvernement, concretes avec le Duc de Chevreuse*”. If we add to this the « *Télémaque* », the « *Lettre à Louis XIV* », the « *Essai sur le Gouvernement civil* », and the « *Mémoires sur les precautions à prendre après la mort du Duc de Bourgogne* », we have a complete exposition of Fénelon’s political ideas. We shall indicate only the points in which they are original for the period when they were written. Fénelon’s ideal government



UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

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

Schede autori Sotto attacco

was a monarchy limited by an aristocracy. The king was not to have absolute power; he was to obey the laws, which he was to draw up with the co-operation of the nobility; extraordinary subsidies were to be levied only with the consent of the people. At other times he was to be assisted by the States-General, which was to meet every three years, and by provincial assemblies, all to be advisory bodies to the king rather than representative assemblies. The state was to have charge of education; it was to control public manners by sumptuary legislation and to forbid both sexes unsuitable marriages (*mésalliances*). The temporal arm and the spiritual arm were to be independent of each other, but to afford mutual support. His ideal state is outlined with much wisdom in his political writings are to be found many observations remarkably judicious but also not a little Utopianism.

Fénelon also took much interest in literature and philosophy. Monsieur Dacier, perpetual secretary to the Académie Française, having requested him, in the name of that body, to furnish him with his views on the works it ought to undertake when the “Dictionnaire” was finished, Fénelon replied in his “Lettre sur les occupations de l’Académie Française”, a work still much admired in France. This letter, which treats of the French tongue, of rhetoric, poetry, history, and ancient and modern writers, exhibits a well-balanced mind acquainted with all the masterpieces of antiquity, alive to the charm of simplicity, attached to classical traditions yet discreetly open to new ideas (especially in history), also, however, to some chimerical theories, at least concerning things poetical. At this very time the Duc d’Orléans, the future regent was consulting him on quite different subjects. This prince, a sceptic through circumstances rather than by any force of reasoning, profited by the appearance of Fénelon’s “Traité de l’existence de Dieu” to ask its author some questions on the worship due to God, the immortality of the soul, and free will. Fénelon replied in a series of letters, only the first three of which are answers to the difficulties proposed by the prince. Together they form a continuation of the “Traité de l’existence de Dieu”, the first part of which had been published in 1712 without Fénelon’s knowledge. The second part appeared only in 1718, after its author’s death. Though an almost forgotten work of his youth, it was received with much approval, and was soon translated into English and German. It is from his letters and this treatise that we learn something about the philosophy of Fénelon. It borrows from both St. Augustine and Descartes. For Fénelon the strongest arguments for the existence of God were those based on final causes and on the idea of the infinite, both developed along broad lines and with much literary charm, rather than with precision or originality.

Fénelon’s last years were saddened by the death of his best friends. Towards the end of 1710 he lost Abbe de Langeron, his lifelong companion; in February, 1712, his pupil, the Duke of Burgundy, died. A few months later the Duc de Chevreuse was taken away, and the Duc de Beauvilliers followed in August, 1714. Fénelon survived him only a few months, making a last request to Louis XIV to appoint a successor firm against Jansenism, and to favour the introduction of Sulpicians into his seminary. With him disappeared one of the most illustrious members of the French episcopate, certainly one of the most attractive men of his age. He owed his success solely to his great talents and admirable virtues. The renown he enjoyed during life increased after his death. Unfortunately, however, his fame among Protestants was largely due to his opposition to Bossuet, and among the philosophers to the fact that he opposed and was punished by Louis XIV. Fénelon is therefore for them a precursor of their own tolerant scepticism and their infidel philosophy, a forerunner of Rousseau, beside whom they placed him on the facade of the Pantheon. In our days a reaction has set in, due to the cult of Bossuet and the publication of Fénelon’s correspondence, which has brought into bolder relief the contrasts of his character, showing him at once an ancient and a



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UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)
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modern, Christian and profane, a mystic and a statesman, democrat and aristocrat, gentle and obstinate, frank and subtle. He would perhaps have seemed more human in our eyes were he a lesser man; nevertheless he remains one of the most attractive, brilliant, and puzzling figures that the Catholic Church has ever produced.

The most convenient and best edition of Fénelon's works is that begun by Lebel at Versailles in 1820 and completed at Paris by Leclere in 1830. It comprises twenty-two volumes, besides eleven volumes of letters, in all thirty-three volumes, not including an index volume. The various works are grouped under five headings: (1) Theological and controversial works (Vols. I-XVI), of which the principal are: « *Traité de l'existence et des attributs de Dieu* », letters on various metaphysical and religious subjects; « *Traité du ministère des pasteurs* »; « *De Summi Pontificis auctoritate* », « *Réfutation du système du P. Malebranche sur la nature et la grâce* »; « *Lettre à l'Evêque d'Arras sur la lecture de l'Écriture Sainte en langue vulgaire* », works on Quietism and Jansenism. (2) Works on moral and spiritual subjects (Vols. XVII and XVIII): « *Traité de l'éducation des filles* »; sermons and works on piety. (3) Twenty-four pastoral charges (XVIII). (4) Literary works (Vols. XIX-XXII): « *Dialogues des Morts* »; « *Télémaque* »; « *Dialogues sur l'éloquence* ». (5) Political writings (Vol. XXII): « *Examen de conscience sur les devoirs de la Royauté* »; various memoirs on the War of the Spanish Succession; « *Plans du Gouvernement concertés avec le Duc de Chevreuse* ». The correspondence includes letters to friends at court, as Beauvilliers, Chevreuse, and the Duke of Burgundy; letters of direction, and letters on Quietism. To these must be added the « *Explication des maximes des Saints sur la vie Interieure* » (Paris, 1697).

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