



# Round Table

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# SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY: INTRODUCTION

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Eunan Mc Donnell, sdb

## **The spiritual affinity between Francis of Sales and Don Bosco**

When recalling his shepherd dream of nine, in his memoirs of the Oratory, which also recurs at the age of 16 and in the last year of his seminary, we have a variation of a theme, where difficult young boys are transformed into lambs because of gentleness and loving kindness.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd, commissions him like Peter to feed my lambs, feed my sheep, pointing to his mother as teacher and guide. She, in turn, explains that he will win the hearts of these young people by *gentleness and love*. In this way, he is to become the face of her son, as Jesus gentle and humble of heart, among the young.

When speaking about St Francis de Sales, St Vincent de Paul describes him as ‘the man who most resembled Jesus Christ, meek and humble of heart, who had ever walked on the earth.’ Here we see clearly that the Salesian Charism is a spirituality that lives Jesus, gentle and humble of heart. A God who made himself small, so as to live among the little ones. Don Bosco lived this in a supreme way among the young who were abandoned and most in need; St Francis de Sales lived it in his pastoral outreach as bishop, in the founding of the visitation order bound by a simple bond of love, living the little virtues of simplicity, humility, and gentleness.

Let us not forget Don Bosco’s pre-ordination resolutions: “may the charity and gentleness of St Francis de Sales guide me in everything.” He specifically chooses St Francis de Sales as patron “because those who intend to dedicate themselves to this kind of work should adopt this saint as a model of charity and affability.”

Here we see the spiritual affinity between the two great saints, an affinity which revolves around gentleness and loving kindness. If we return to the dream of nine, Don Bosco is being instructed by Mary how to live in a manner that will attract the young and win their hearts through gentleness and loving kindness. In a certain sense we may say that the Salesian charism chooses Don Bosco rather than he choosing the charism. His heart has been prepared and instructed to live the charism of gentleness and loving kindness among the young in imitation of Jesus who is gentle and humble of heart.

## Heart Friendship

The search for friendship transcends all borders and cultures because it responds to the deepest desire of the human heart: *to love and be loved*. Indeed, friendship is the universal language of the heart. St Francis de Sales helps us to cherish the gift of friendship, but as a spiritual guide, helps us to navigate the river of friendship discovering its hidden depths in our heart. There we discover God, the source of love, who is quite simply ‘friend of the human heart.’ Such friendship expresses intimacy, belonging and love between God and us: “If human friendship is to be esteemed because we delight in its delicious fragrance, then, how wonderful must be the reciprocal love between the Father and the Son.”

God has created our heart to be his paradise and desires to enter into friendship with us. We can respond to God’s love in two ways: through prayer (affective love) and through service to our neighbour (effective love). The more we open ourselves to receive this love of God in prayer, the more our heart expands in love, enabling us to serve our neighbour. Such love involves a free choice which is why St Francis proclaims: ‘all by love, nothing by force.’ God draw us gently or sweetly always leaving us free as illustrated in the *Song of Songs*: If I follow you it is not because you pull me along but because you allure me. Perfumes have no power to draw us to them except their sweetness.

Indeed, in Salesian spirituality, it is the Holy Spirit, ‘the most profound source of every love.’ And ‘the author of spiritual friendships,” who brings people into our lives, transforming friendships into a sacrament of encounter with God. The God of Encounters becomes the God-between-us.

Made in the image and likeness of God, who is community, we are invited to share this God-between-us in our friendships with others. In this way, we give birth to Jesus between us who comes to live again in and through our friendships.

Does this not perfectly describe the charism of Don Bosco, where Jesus becomes present in his friendships with the young? Salesian spirituality, therefore, is eminently relational and communitarian, reflecting the inner life of God.

<sup>1</sup> MB.1:518.

<sup>1</sup> MB.3:91.

<sup>1</sup> OEA IV:133.

<sup>1</sup> Dirk Koster, “The Encounter of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal” in: Joseph Chorpenning ed. *Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition* (Rome: International Commission for Salesian Studies, 2007), 79.

## Annotations and questions

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# **THE GRACE OF UNITY (ecstasy of life and action)**

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Giuseppe M. Roggia, sdb

## **Historic context between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century**

It was the era of broken hearts at the turn of the 16th century heading into the 17th. A time of disorientation caused by religious wars, disenchantment with the laxity and corruption in the Church on either side of the Alps, and the many strands of mysticism that appeared in Europe in the meantime: Spanish, Italian, French, Flemish spiritualities.

The people in general felt an urgent need for balance, peace, social purification, but in the first instance for peace and harmony in hearts that were torn apart by the inner dynamics of opposing forces, caught up between the natural attraction of sensual ecstasy and the attraction of grace to spiritual ecstasy.

The human drama then, and still today, is played out in the inner dynamics of these opposing forces, which then radiate into every expression of the individual, whether they are gathered in prayer or engaged in any kind of activity.

## **Activity missionary of Francis of Sales**

Francis de Sales: we admire the prodigious activity of this bishop on horseback, riding far and wide to visit even the remotest corner of the diocese.

Before that the young 27-year-old missionary was sent to the Chablais: for 4 years (1594 – 1598) to a region ravaged by religious wars with no Catholic place of worship, churches ransacked, prohibitive weather conditions, persecuted as a papist, a magician, nicknamed the 'goat' who brings evil, in danger of being killed at any moment.

The bishop who had sent him, it seems, soon thought of bringing him back, so serious and without prospect of success was the situation. However, little by little, the witness and zeal of the young missionary brought about a change of attitude: papist he might be but he seemed to be a saint who could sow the leaven of the search for truth in consciences. And then came the amazing result, as Francis himself described to Pope Clement VIII: “if at the beginning of the mission there were barely 100 Catholics in the whole region, by the end of 1598 there were no more than 100 heretics in the whole territory”.

## The inner life through the constant exercise of love

It was the martyrdom of the heart, a martyrdom as strong as that of blood, which he accepted to the end and which urged people to return to the Catholic faith. And it was the way he lived heroically, like Christ, for his unbelieving or heretical brethren while not neglecting the journey of Christian maturity to holiness of those who were in the Lord's fold.

But at the same time, the Saint leads us deeper into the initiation of inner life through the constant and patient exercise of love, worship of the presence of God, profound prayer in the midst of action, and all because of his fundamental principle to do everything through love and nothing through constraint. It is love, in fact, that gathers up and unites all aspects of action.

It must be said that rarely, not only in his time, has the problem of apostolic and spiritual action been correctly resolved; and the reason is always because love does not sufficiently move spirits and the heart. The Bishop of Geneva became the master and fruitful inspirer of this synthesis of action and contemplation. How?

There is a need to start from the realism of life, not from cultural theories and assumptions, most of which lead to absolutizing the parts over the whole; and realising that starting from the reality of life sees that human life is made up of opposites held together by life itself.

Hence, we discover that there is a vital centre, something at the heart of life, which is deputed to bring order and harmony as an inner balancing centre of gravity. This vital centre is traversed by the path of love which, through the contribution of beauty, is attracted and absorbed in Christ; in Him, overcoming all opposites is the end and harmony of everything.

This path, which Francis envisaged in his concrete accompaniment of people, the many examples of *Philothea* and *Theotimus* whose paths he crossed during his short life, is collected as the maturation of his thought in three fundamental works: *Introduction to the Devout Life*, *Spiritual Conferences* and the *Treatise on the Love of God and*, sprinkled throughout the thousands of letters of spiritual direction and all finally summed up in the word *dévotion*.

In the context of the *devotio moderna* he had the ability to bring the concept of *dévotion* back to its original spirit, i.e. to the theological container offered by St Thomas but reinterpreted with the mystical passion of St Bernard.

Hence *dévotion* for him is that magnetic point that brings about harmony between action and contemplation, that is to say, an impulse of charity, a

response of the heart to God beyond the opposing circumstances of the present, above and beyond action and contemplation. An inner impulse under the influence of an ongoing attraction on God's part.

It is a call to the perfection of love with the capacity to absorb the individual's traits and behaviour in order to launch them in the direction of God and his will, thus becoming an ecstasy of action and life, that is to say, of even more love, faith and hope. It is an ecstasy of action and life whereby everything is drawn to and absorbed in God while at the same time given to the concrete everyday life of adherence to God's will and charity towards one's neighbour.

### **Annotations and questions**

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# THE RELIGIOUS LIFE IN FRANCIS OF SALES

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Sr Maria Grazia Franceschini, a Visitation Sister.

## The vision of God and humanity of Francis of Sales

Francis of Sales in a letter:

“[In that community] you can no longer see the face of sacred dilection (love) and union [*two terms characteristic of FdS’ language: ‘dilection’ [note: from Latin dilectio: the word as such is rare in English, though we might say ‘predilection’] is a love that involves choice and preference, while union is the term to which the movement of love, both human and divine, tends*] without which Religion is but an illusion.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus writes St Francis de Sales in a letter. These words already help us glimpse what Religious life was for him, but to understand them in depth we need, at least in summary, to understand the view that Francis of Sales has of God and humankind.

God is Love, Trinity. Between the divine Persons there is therefore a relationship, what Francis of Sales more precisely calls "friendship". Now, the human being is created in the image and likeness of this God; therefore what the human being is called into existence for, what our purpose is, is "friendship". Charity, divine friendship given, is poured into the heart by the Holy Spirit at baptism to make the human being capable of fulfilling their own vocation: to love God and their brothers and sisters in friendship. There are many ways in which this can be accomplished, many different ways: a variety that makes the Church beautiful. Religious are those who, in response to a divine call, choose to make charity-friendship the unique and absolute form of their lives.

It is important to keep this in mind in order to understand the work of reform carried out by FdS. This work is placed, with its own originality, within the reform movement initiated by the Council of Trent and that, it seems to me, we can see as taking three directions:

- *institutional*, documented by letters and memos sent to the Pope, the Nuncios and the Prince of Savoy;
- *director of souls*, documented by his correspondence with superiors and religious;
- *founder of the Visitation*, documented above all by the legislative texts he drafted and by the conferences held with the first sisters.

Let us take a quick look at these three directions.

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<sup>1</sup> OA18,8

## The institutional aspect

Francis of Sales found himself dealing with Religious life from the time he became Coadjutor to Bishop de Granier, the Bishop of Geneva. He succeeded him in 1602, and would have to deal with painful situations in many monasteries and convents both male and female, in the diocese. There was more than just a handful of them: 6 male abbeys all with commendatory abbots, 2 communities of canons, 5 conventual priories e 35 rural priories of various Orders, most *in commenda*<sup>2</sup>, 4 Carthusian monasteries, 4 mendicant convents, 1 Capuchin convent, 2 Poor Clare monasteries, 2 Cistercian monasteries, 1 Carthusian monastery. He sought remedies, in some cases even requesting the intervention of the Holy See for the application of the provisions of the Council of Trent, which in many cases remained a dead letter.

The work of reform, not always successful, involved targeted and enlightened interventions according to the situation. At the Cluny priory in *Talloires*, arquebuses were fired at the legitimate cloistered prior installed by the bishop...

From the *Resoconti* (Accounts) and *Memoriali* (Memos) sent to the various authorities we see that Francis identified the causes of decadent religious life as being especially in the *commenda* statutes (a phenomenon of his time) but even more (and this, in my view, is a real danger today as well) in the vanishing of common life, and other evils as a consequence: disappearance of poverty, chastity exposed to risks of various kinds, obedience *ad libitum*, disorder and discord, lack of separation from the world in both a moral and spiritual, as well as material sense. And the scandal, Francis notes, is all the more serious given the closeness to Calvinist Geneva.

From the Account of the State of the Diocese of Geneva sent to Paul V November 1607:

“It is surprising to see to what extent regular discipline is everywhere ruined in the abbeys and priories of this diocese (except for the Carthusians and the mendicants) [...] so much so that they induce the enemies of God to blaspheme by saying: Where then is the God of these people [...]. The doors of the Cistercian nuns are open to all, for nuns to leave and for men to enter. On the other hand, both the Cistercians and the Poor Clares lacked those aids that the Council of Trent wanted them to be given. [...]” (OA 23,311ff).

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<sup>2</sup> From the Latin *commendare*= to entrust. In the ecclesiastical field, practised as early as the Middle Ages, it consisted in entrusting a benefice, e.g. an abbey but also a bishopric, to a person who was not the owner and sometimes was a lay person, who enjoyed the fruits, often squandered the goods of the monastery, did not reside there and did not take care of the life, both material and spiritual, of the religious.

## Director of souls

The letters Francis of Sales sent to religious, especially to superiors and those wanting to reform their communities (to mention two names among others, Rose Bourgeois Abbess of Puits d'Orbe, Angelique Arnauld, who at the time she exchanged letters with Francis was Abbess at Maubuisson) reveal his style. Sharpness of judgement in identifying the evils to be remedied and the goals to be achieved, combined with a great ability to accompany, adapting to the pace of the other and the real contingencies of their life, without ever losing sight of the goal, imposing nothing by constraint, but trying to arouse a taste for good and to bring back fidelity seen as a demand of love.

From a letter of FdS to a religious sister at St Catherine's monastery (1620):

“In a monastery where I would have had the authority to do so, I did not want to impose seclusion because the nuns did not feel inclined to it [...] and while external authority can certainly ensure nuns are enclosed, it cannot make them religious nuns.” (OA 19,158).

## Founder of the Visitation

Above all, it was with the foundation of the Visitation that FdS was able to express and experience his concept of religious life at first hand. Why found a new religious family? He himself provides the answer:

“To give God women of prayer so inwardly focused that they may be found worthy to serve His infinite Majesty and to worship God in spirit and truth.”<sup>3</sup>

He intended to offer this possibility also to those who, at the time, for various reasons (age, health, marital status) were precluded from access to the reformed orders, but also to those who felt the aspiration to a form of contemplative life less tied to external practices and lived in greater simplicity.<sup>4</sup>

Browsing through his Spiritual Conferences, conversations he held especially at the beginning with the sisters and which they quickly wrote down, we can grasp the spirit and style he wanted them to live:

— humility before God and kindness to one's neighbour (So much so that if there is no more kindness (gentleness) then there is no longer the Visitation<sup>5</sup>);

— external austerities at a minimum, however, beware:

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<sup>3</sup> OA 17,16-17

<sup>4</sup> Cf. OA 25,211-214

<sup>5</sup> Cf. TS (Spiritual Conferences) 13 in OA 6,228ss

"I desire that the daughters [of the Visitation] have their feet well shod, but their hearts completely bare and bereft of all earthly attachments; their heads well covered, but their spirits completely uncovered through [...] the stripping of their own wills")<sup>6</sup>;

- structures reduced to the essential and to simplicity (“[At the Visitation] everything is small, humble, modest, except the aspiration of those who live there which is [...] to reach the perfection of divine love.”<sup>7</sup>),
- everything lived in an atmosphere of cordial friendship<sup>8</sup> (in the Spiritual Conferences this key word of Francis of Sales thinking returns time and time again).

To summarise, I would say that, in the thinking of Francis of Sales, the Visitation is a laboratory of friendship in action: towards God and towards one's neighbour, starting with the sisters themselves.

## **Annotations and questions**

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<sup>6</sup> OA 14,232

<sup>7</sup> OA 15,343-344

<sup>8</sup> Vedere per es. il TS 4 in OA 54 ss

# A SPIRITUAL PROPOSAL FOR THE LAITY AND HOLINESS AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE

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Ms Vania De Luca

Thank you for the invitation to this meeting which I accepted because I believe I am in debt to St Francis de Sales who is the patron saint of journalists. I came to know about him through UCSI, (*Unione Cattolica della Stampa Italiana* or the Italian Catholic Press Association) which is under his patronage.

In the lives of the saints there is always a mirror of their times and at the same time something universal which can speak to every man and woman of every age and every geographical place. In Francis de Sales, an example of lay spirituality and of a way of holiness accessible to all, even after five centuries we can find something that concerns us, and also something prophetic that opens to the future. I will try to indicate five traits.

## **Francis, bridging individual**

He was a "bridging individual" who witnessed his faith in a hostile context, living at a transitional time. Faced with new problems that challenged the Church and the world, he did not give old answers, but sought new ones, as Pope Francis so often invites us to do today, calling for creativity.

St Francis anchored the Catholic Counter-Reformation in an "inner sense" of the way indicated by God towards freedom: He wrote letters (more than 30,000), preached in a Calvinist context, spoke of God in personal conversations, together with Antonio Favre founded the Florimontane Academy (1606-1607), to encourage theological, philosophical, scientific and literary study (symbolised by the orange tree, an evergreen, which bears flowers and fruit almost in every season).

## **Communicative person**

He communicated the faith through the "new media" of the time, to "heal" the religious and political fractures in a Europe in search of peace in both culture and society. He experienced some failures in his priestly task: he was not listened to from the pulpit, and so he began to publish leaflets or flyers, think

of them as large Tweets of his day, which he posted on the walls or slipped under the doors of the houses.

Because of his way of searching for new forms of communication, the Church placed the lives of journalists, writers, and all those who spread Christian truth using the means of social communication, under his protection. He was convinced that in dealing with people, including heretics, one must always avoid "vinegar," but use gentleness, understanding, respect, and serious and sincere dialogue instead: "If I err," he would say, "I want to err out of too much kindness than too much rigour," or "every time I have resorted to sharp retorts, I have had to repent. People do more out of love and charity than out of severity and rigour."

### **The way: love and charity**

He came away from a deep crisis of faith in 1587, entrusting himself to God: "I will love you, Lord." For him, love and charity were the way. "The queen bee" he wrote in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 'never takes wing without being surrounded by all her Subjects; even so, Love never enters the heart but it is sure to bring all other virtues in its train (...). The righteous man is 'like a tree planted by the water side, that will bring forth his fruit in due season;' inasmuch as Love, watering and refreshing the soul, causes it to bring forth good works, each in season as required."

The *Introduction* was published in 1608, and in 1656 it was translated into 17 languages. It is a viaticum that introduces you to the spiritual life. Philothea, his 'addressee', is the personification of a soul, a feminine "you" whom St Francis directs, stage by stage, including with some very practical advice (for example the "spiritual bouquet of reflections and prayers" he suggests bringing together at the end of meditations, to be used and "smelled" during the day).

### **Love concrete**

Love is never abstract but concrete. An example of this in the life of St Francis is his encounter with Martin, a deaf-mute, whom he took by the hand and welcomed into his home as a son. To communicate with him he learned sign language (our saint is also "doctor of love and "protector of deaf-mutes").

A gentle, serene human trait emerges from his writings. They are words of a great soul, an example of acceptance of others as well as oneself: "We need to put up with others", he said, "but first of all we need to put up with ourselves and resign ourselves to being imperfect." He asked for objectivity rather than selfishness: "What we do for others always seems like a lot to us, while what

others do for us seems like nothing.” He invited us to patience: “One must have a heart capable of patience; great designs can only be realised with a lot of patience and time”. He pointed to the Crucifix as “the ladder by which we pass from these temporal years to eternal years” (Spiritual letters 31 December 1610)

### **The beatitudes of the journalist**

In conclusion, let me suggest “the beatitudes of the journalist” to you, a set of commandments that concerns not only those who provide information, but those for whom the information is destined, and it owes much to the spirituality of our Saint. It came about during the UCSI school of formation for young people in Assisi in 2020.

Blessed is the journalist who

- *seeks neither success nor personal interest, and who never puts themselves at the centre of the story*
- *does not hide in the shadow of power but is the voice of the voiceless, the eyes of those who do not see, and the ears for those whom nobody listens to*
- *does not feed fear and isolation but nurtures trust and hope*
- *is never happy with news written behind a desk*
- *listens to their conscience and never clips the wings of freedom*
- *reports on many of the things that are wrong, to make life better*
- *always seeks truth and never compromise, even when there is a price to pay*
- *loves peace and justice, becomes salt, yeast, and light for the community*
- *tells good news that generates social friendship*
- *is a wordsmith but knows the value of silence.*

Thank you.

### **Annotations and questions**

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