

STRENNA 2022

# **“Do all through love, nothing through constraint”**

(Saint Francis de Sales)

**IN THE FOURTH CENTENARY of the death of St Francis de Sales: two giants in continuity with one another in the *Salesian charism*.**

Let me begin by stating that it is not my intention to be writing a short book on the life of St Francis de Sales. There are already excellent biographies written by true experts. It would be absolutely presumptuous on my part and certainly beyond my ability and intentions. On the other hand, in the light of the splendid figure of St Francis de Sales I intend, through these pages, to throw light on the occasion of the 4th centenary of his death, and on our Salesian Family, the Family of Don Bosco, which has its roots in and draws daily from this Salesian spirituality.

From the outset I speak of *two giants who are in continuity with one another in the Salesian charism*, since both are a great gift in the Church and because Don Bosco, like no other, knew how to translate the spiritual strength of Francis de Sales into the day-by-day education and evangelisation of his poor boys. And, therefore, the entire Salesian Family continues to have this task in the Church and in today's world.

This is why I would like to state from the outset that “symbolically”, both Francis de Sales and John Bosco (Don Bosco) have much in common from the cradle onwards.

Francis de Sales was born beneath the Savoyard sky that crowns the valleys crossed by streams rising from the highest peaks of the Alps.

How could we not think that John Bosco, too, was a “Savoyard”? He was not born in a castle but had the same gift as Francis did: a gentle, faith-filled mother. Françoise de Boisy was very young when she was pregnant with her first child, and at Annecy, before the Holy Shroud that spoke to her of the passion of God's blessed Son, she was deeply moved and made a promise: this child would belong to Jesus forever.

One day Mamma Margaret would tell John: “When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin.”

Don Bosco, too, would kneel before the same Shroud in Turin. Christian mothers generate saints. In a castle, like Francis, or in a run-down country shack like John.

They say that the first sentence Francis managed to put together was: “The good God and my mother love me very much.”

The good God watched over Francis and John and gave them both a big heart. Francis studied in Paris and Padua, in the most famous universities in the world at the time. John studied by candlelight in an alcove in the “Caffè Pianta”. But the Spirit is not hindered by small human difficulties. The two were destined to somehow cross. And one day Don Bosco told a group of young men who had grown up with him: “We will call ourselves Salesians”. From that moment onwards, always led by the Spirit, the great tree of Don Bosco's Family, the *Salesian Family*, began to grow.

St Francis de Sales is an historical figure who, with the passing of time, has grown in relevance and significance, thanks to the prolific dissemination of his insights, experiences and spiritual convictions. Four hundred years later, his proposal of Christian life, his method of spiritual accompaniment and his anthropological vision regarding the relationship between human beings and God are still fascinating.

The theme chosen for this *Strenna for the Family*, ever faithful to the legacy and tradition bequeathed to us by Don Bosco himself, comes from the pen of Francis de Sales who is today at the centre of our attention in celebrations for the fourth centenary of his death.<sup>1</sup>

The Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco contain many of the elements and characteristics of the spirituality of St Francis de Sales. The same goes for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christian and for many other groups of *Don Bosco's Family*, given that their identity has so many *Salesian* elements to it. Thus it is not difficult to find harmony and direct applications and links between texts written four hundred years ago by Francis de Sales, and what belongs to our Salesian spiritual patrimony as features of our identity.

In particular, as a guide for what I am writing here, I turn to article 38 of the Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco which describe the characteristics of the Preventive System in our mission within the framework of our educative and pastoral service, and which expresses a summary of the aspects I wish to develop, almost as if it were an updated index to reading the thoughts of St Francis de Sales. Thus we read:

Don Bosco has handed on to us his Preventive System as a means for carrying out our educational and pastoral service.

“This system is based entirely on reason, religion and loving kindness”: Instead of constraint, it appeals to the resources of intelligence, love and the desire for God, which everyone has in the depths of his being.

It brings together educators and youngsters in a family experience of trust and dialogue.

Imitating God's patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom. We then accompany them, so that they may develop solid convictions and gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and as men of faith” (C. 38).

What distinguishes our Salesian Family in today's manifold and different societies and cultures is precisely Don Bosco's Preventive System, which is capable of being applied, known and accepted in

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<sup>1</sup> *Lettre CCXXXIV. A la Baronne de Chantal*, OEA XII, 359. The letter is dated 14 October 1604: “But if you really like the prayers you are used to saying, please don't drop them; and if you happen to leave out some of what I am telling you to do, have no scruples about it, for here is the general rule of our obedience written in capital letters: DO ALL THROUGH LOVE, NOTHING THROUGH CONSTRAINT; LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE. I want you to have the spirit of liberty, not the kind that excludes obedience (this is freedom of the flesh), but the liberty that excludes constraint, scruples and anxiety. If you really love obedience and docility, I'd like to think that when some legitimate or charitable cause takes you away from your religious exercises, this would be for you another form of obedience and that your love would make up for whatever you have to omit in your religious practice.”

the most diverse contexts. I find many common elements in the article cited, and in the central lines of the thought and spirituality of St Francis de Sales, which *allow me* to initiate a dialogue between Francis de Sales and Don Bosco on the basis of what we discover here:

1. **Nothing through constraint. Freedom is God's gift:** → and it is because of this that our system of education appeals to other resources "*instead of constraint*".
2. **God's presence in the human heart:** → through which we recognise the "*love and the desire for God, which everyone has in the depths of his being*".
3. **Life in God:** → which "*brings together educators and youngsters* [tr. note: the Italian Constitutional text here includes the phrase: "*in un'unica esperienza di vita*" which literally translates as "a unique experience of life". This has been omitted in the English text].
4. **A kind and friendly way of dealing with people:** → which leads to living with our youngsters "*in a family experience of trust and dialogue*".
5. **Unconditional and unrestrained love:** → which makes it possible in our family that by "*Imitating God's patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom*".
6. **With the need for a spiritual guide:** → hence "*We then accompany them, so that they may develop solid convictions*".
7. Ultimately doing "**All through love**": → so that "*gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and as men of faith*".

1. **Nothing through constraint. Freedom is God's gift**

This is why our system of education appeals to other resources "*other than constraint*".

"The charity and kindness of St Francis de Sales will guide me in everything."<sup>2</sup> At the seminary in Chieri, Don Bosco had the opportunity to get to know the basic works of St Francis de Sales. One of his resolutions before his priestly ordination says that he had found in him a model not only for his activities but also for his life. The charity and kindness that St Francis de Sales showed in his relationships with people throughout his life made a compelling impact on Don Bosco that marked him for the rest of his life, beginning with the dream he had when he was nine years old: "Not by blows"<sup>3</sup>.

"Nothing through constraint" is a beautiful proposal, an invitation to make it a precious gift of our personal life.

It is a guide, when accepting a task, to assume the attitude with which one carries out a mission, a responsibility or a service for others. It is what sustains and gives consistency to this option, to this way of living as Christians, in harmony with *the decision of God himself who created us and made us free*.

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<sup>2</sup> The young Don Bosco's fourth resolution during the retreat before his priestly ordination, in ISS, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, 971.

<sup>3</sup> G. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, in ISS, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, 1176. The translation here and in subsequent references is from the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, Salesiana Publishers New Rochelle, New York, 2010, p. 34.

We have all had the experience that when things are imposed, without reason, without a “why”, simply by imposition and constraint, they do not last long; or they last only while the command lasts. God does not act this way and St Francis de Sales experienced this in his pastoral activity. As a Tridentine bishop and a promoter of the Catholic counter-reformation raised in the struggle against lukewarm faith, he chose *the life of the heart and not that of constraint*. And all he was doing was contemplating and living God’s attitude. He wrote thus to his spiritual daughter: “Like a good father holding his son by the hand, he will adapt his steps to yours and will be happy not to walk faster than you.”<sup>4</sup>

For the humanist St Francis de Sales, freedom is the individual’s most precious element.<sup>5</sup> The reality of the Incarnation is the most sublime reasons for affirming this dignity. It can be said that God not only created us in his image and likeness, but that, in Christ, God himself – these are St Francis de Sales’ words – “made himself to our image and likeness”<sup>6</sup>. This greatness of the human being, the human being’s value as an individual, is manifested in the freedom that makes the human being responsible. For Francis de Sales, freedom is the person’s most important part because it is the life of the heart. And it has so much value and dignity that God himself, who gave it to us, does not demand it by force, and when he asks us for it, he wants us to give it to him with sincerity and willingness. God “never forced anyone to serve him and will never do so.”<sup>7</sup>

God’s intervention, his grace, never takes place without our consent. He acts forcefully, but never to oblige or constrain, instead to attract the heart, not to violate, but *out of love for our freedom*. The freedom God gave the human individual is always respected. God, as Francis de Sales used say, draws us to himself through his kind initiative, at times as a vocation or call, at times as the voice of a friend, as an inspiration or invitation and at times as a “prevention” because he always anticipates. God never imposes himself: he knocks at our door and waits for us to open it.<sup>8</sup>

In the same way Don Bosco, in his relationships with the most disadvantaged and poorest youngsters at Valdocco, learned to follow the way of the heart in accepting them and accompanying them in their

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Jeanne de Chantal (OEA XIV, 111). For the quotations from Saint Francis de Sales, we see that many authors cite the same sources, sometimes using different nomenclature. To avoid confusion, we will cite, if possible, the original work with its book and chapter so that it can be found more easily in any version or language. The most accepted reference of his works is the complete edition of 27 volumes based on handwritten items and original editions under the care of the Sisters of the Visitation of the first Monastery at Annecy, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales* quoted with the initials OEA (“Oeuvres Edition Annecy”, indicating the volume and page from this work). Sometimes I will only cite the secondary source. There is a magnificent digital library with all the works of St. Francis, available in various digital formats, for your reference and reading pleasure: [https://www.donboscosanto.eu/francesco\\_di\\_sales/index-fr.php](https://www.donboscosanto.eu/francesco_di_sales/index-fr.php)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales. Un progetto di formazione integrale*, LAS, Roma 2021, 76-77.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 76. The complete quote: “God has signified unto us by so many ways and means that his will is that we should all be saved, that none can be ignorant of it. To this purpose he made us to his own image and likeness by creation, and made himself to our image and likeness by his Incarnation, after which he suffered death to ransom and save all mankind.” *Treatise on the Love of God*, IV (English ed. All references to this work here are to the edition held by the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/desales/devout\\_life.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/desales/devout_life.html)).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Homily on the conversion of St Augustine (OEA IX, 335). Cited in M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 140.

education. His implementation of pastoral zeal, of the desire to save souls, of the commitment to the full development of his boys, was carried out without coercion, without imposition, always through the youngster's acceptance of the proposal to enter into this relationship of friendship because in his heart he felt that he was loved, that there was someone who was thinking of his good and who wanted him to be happy.

Human freedom will always be a value to safeguard, even when other values come into play like faith, justice and truth. For us, Don Bosco's Family, this is fundamental. We do not believe it possible to educate without sacred respect for the freedom of every individual. Where the freedom of the individual is not respected, God is absent. This is why, according to St Francis de Sales, God attracts people through his love in the way that most conforms to our nature. Here is how he puts it in this wonderful text:

The band of the human will is delight and pleasure. We show nuts to a child, says St Augustine, and he is drawn by his love; he is drawn by the cords, not of the body but of the heart. Mark then, how the Eternal Father draws us: while teaching, he delights us, not imposing on us any necessity... So sweet is God's hand in the handling of our hearts! So dexterous is it in communicating unto us its strength without depriving us of liberty, and in imparting unto us the motion of its power without hindering that of our will! He adjusts his power to his sweetness in such sort, that as in what regards good his might sweetly gives us the power, so his sweetness mightily maintains the freedom of the will. *If thou didst know the gift of God*, said our Saviour to the Samaritan woman, *and who he is that saith to thee, give me to drink; thou perhaps wouldst have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water...* Theotimus, inspirations prevent us, and even before they are thought of make themselves felt, but after we have felt them it is ours either to consent to them so as to second and follow their attractions, or else to dissent and repulse them. They make themselves felt by us without us, but they do not make us consent without us<sup>9</sup>

As Francis de Sales writes, God attracts like the perfumes of which the Song of Songs speaks. **The attempt to combine human freedom and God's attraction occurs gently.** The strength of God's attraction, powerful but not violent, lies in the sweetness of his attraction, and, moreover, God's love has nothing to envy with regard to human love for creatures in the spiritual experience lived and shared by Francis de Sales. No love ever turns our hearts away from God except what is contrary to him. Far from excluding love for others, the Salesian mystical experience, this love of God we are speaking of, demands it.<sup>10</sup>

And so we understand that God respects human freedom and at the same time wants our good and offers us so many signs of his love. Undoubtedly, perhaps the first of these would be his unconditional respect for our freedom. Love vanishes if it seeks to impose or demand, and herein lies the intensity with which Francis de Sales presents the positive image of a loving God who offers his friendship, who gives of his goods, and who leaves us room in freedom to reciprocate it through communication with him.

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<sup>9</sup> *Treatise on the Love of God*, XII: That divine inspirations leave us in full liberty to follow them or repulse them. (English ed. All references to this work here are to the edition held by the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/desales/love.html>)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. F. VINCENT, *Saint François de Sales, directeur d'âmes. L'éducation de la volonté*, 264 (note 1). Quoted in M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 140.

This is also enlightening for us regarding the care and respect for each individual's religious freedom. Having, as Francis de Sales did, a friendly presence among non-Catholics, a presence that we understand as a form of evangelisation through witness, having a presence that at times must be calm, silent, respectful, will be perfectly valid since it is based not only on the principle of non-violence but, more importantly, on a profound respect for people's freedom.

We identify very much with this mode of presence that St Francis de Sales was already practising in conflict zones due to the religious wars of his time, offering a prophetic testimony of patience and perseverance with a style focused on Christ's cross and Mary's motherly intercession.

Our presence as a *Salesian Family* in so many parts of the world demands that we make the choice of this kind of presence.

And certainly, exploring the legacy of Francis de Sales and seeking to apply his spirituality to the very real situations of our time will be the best way to grow in "Salesianity".

## 2. **God's presence in the human heart:**

We recognise "*the desire for God, which everyone has in the depths of his being.*"

Saying "Nothing through constraint" is not just a strategy or method but above all a deep belief of trust and faith in the human being – Christian humanism – that St Francis de Sales had, going very much against the current, and that Don Bosco was able to magnificently develop through his optimism and complete trust in the young, in his boys: the human being, the young person, every individual, each of us, carries the need for God, the desire for God, "a natural inclination for God", inscribed in our being.<sup>11</sup> The natural desire to see God is transformed in our saints into the conviction that God is present and makes himself present to each individual in those moments of their life that only God himself chooses and in the way that only God knows.<sup>12</sup>

These theological principles, so contemporary to us, are expressed concretely in the profoundly Salesian spiritual attitude of collaboration with God's action: serving human beings in a spirit of freedom that had already taken shape in St Francis de Sales in optimism, positivity, faith in human nature and, consequently, in the value of friendship and the likely search for happiness.

From this positive image of God who offers us his friendship, it is easy to understand this element that throws light on the lived Salesian spirituality proposed by Don Bosco: "Strive to make yourself

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Treatise on the Love of God*, XVIII: "But seeing we have not power naturally to love God above all things, why have we naturally an inclination to it? Is not nature vain to incite us to a love which she cannot bestow upon us? Why does she give us a thirst for a precious water of which she cannot give us to drink? Ah! Theotimus, how good God has been to us!"

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 22: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light [...] All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men,(32) and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery."

loved rather than feared.”<sup>13</sup> Our father Don Bosco, following Francis de Sales, wanted God to be loved rather than feared, and if the “fear of God” should be how one walks in holiness, it will not be out of fear of a terrible punishment, but a fear closely united with trust in God’s goodness.

Far from sowing pessimism, negativity or fear, the presence of God, the desire to meet God, the desire for his friendship and for that to be returned, are the basis of Salesian spirituality. Contrary to those who look on God as a guardian who represses violations of the law, or as a distant and indifferent God, Francis de Sales experienced him as a God concerned for his creatures and their happiness, always respectful of their freedom and committed to guiding them with firmness and gentleness.<sup>14</sup>

Francis de Sales shares the Aristotelian idea that there is an aspiration for happiness in every individual, a movement towards that end, a natural desire that is common to all humanity. But at the same time, from his personal experience, he was aware that a first approach to happiness consists of self-acceptance, accepting who we are, because happiness can be confused with the means of achieving it. Some seek it in wealth, others in pleasure, others in human glory. In fact, for Francis de Sales, only the supreme good can fully satisfy the human heart. This supreme good is God to whom the human heart naturally tends. He had learned from his philosophy teachers that “practical happiness” consists in possessing wisdom, honesty, goodness and pleasure, but that the “essential happiness” of the human being can be found in God alone. As a disciple of Thomas Aquinas he trusted in the ability of the human intellect and will to intuit or discover God as the ultimate end. St Augustine's *Confessions* comes to mind, marvellously summing up these ideas and with which Francis de Sales composed some of his homilies: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (*Confessions*, I, 1.1).<sup>15</sup>

But the tendency that we naturally feel towards God cannot be achieved by ourselves, because it is God’s gift; he always takes the initiative. St Francis de Sales offers us the conviction in his spirituality that although we tend to happiness – identified with the encounter with God, and cannot achieve this alone – God is committed to giving it to us because this is what he wants. And this promise of fullness, together with the desire in us for God, is called to bear much fruit.

We can understand that Francis de Sales’ theological and anthropological vision allows us to keep the dialogue between faith and reason in its correct balance – and this is also very important for us today. In his time when Francis de Sales was in conversation with his adversaries (whom he called brothers) he maintained that accepting God as the supreme good found support in reason, in human nature itself. Unlike those who relied solely on the Bible, Francis de Sales showed that reason and faith spring from the same source, and being the work of the same Author, they cannot be contrary to each other. Theology does not destroy the use of reason but presumes it; it does not cancel it out but completes it.

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<sup>13</sup> Commentators on St Francis de Sales suggest that a line that expresses the depth of this principle be attributed to St. Francis de Sales: “Those who love to make themselves feared, fear to make themselves loved...”

<sup>14</sup> Cf. M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 130, note 1: “In the manuscript of the philosophy course for the month of March 1586, he had copied in large type this Latin phrase from St. Augustine: “*Fecisti nos – inquit- Domine, ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec revertatur ad Te*” (OEA XXII, 7). It is also found in a homily from 1594 (OEA VII, 189).

This is the context in which Francis de Sales developed his reflection and his spirituality. It is up to us today to give continuity to this spiritual current that has brought so much light into the lives of so many people in their search for happiness and, ultimately, in their search for God himself.

Francis de Sales and Don Bosco, each in his own time, lived with this strong conviction and bequeathed it to us. Francis wrote: “There is no soil so thankless that the farmer's dedication cannot make it productive.”<sup>16</sup> And so he proposes another fundamental element of Salesian spirituality and pedagogy: patience, which is nothing other than the imitation of the patience that God has with us. This was also a constant in Don Bosco's life.

Today, as a family sharing in this spirituality, it is up to us to continue to trust in and consolidate the resources of our intelligence, heart and desire for God in confronting any kind of difficulty. Certainly this work requires a specific and well-defined profile of the Salesian educator who has and strongly guards within him or herself the conviction that the good is always nestled in the heart of every person, of every young person, however hidden it may be – as Don Bosco also believed – and that every human heart is capable of encountering God. It is up to us to help every young person and every other individual on this path.

### 3. **Life in God:**

*that “brings together educators and youngsters” in a unique experience of life.*

Francis de Sales was able to present spiritual life as *something available to everyone*. The term par excellence that he uses to refer to this Christian life in God is “*devotion*”, as an expression of love for God which is not exclusive.

Francis de Sales found no opposition in wanting to be completely of God while fully living his being in the world. Probably this is his most original and “revolutionary” proposal.

If devotion is love of God before anything else, it is also love of neighbour, and this devotion is to be exercised by everyone in any human situation. It is not necessary withdraw from the world, going into the desert or entering a convent, to lead an genuine Christian life.

In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, addressing himself to anyone, using the poetic name ‘Philothea’, who wants to love God, he charts a way of living a Christian life amid the world, showing that *it is necessary to use one’s wings* to achieve the heights of prayer, while at the same time *using one’s feet* to journey together with other human beings in holy and friendly conversation.

But, in fact, all true and living devotion presupposes the love of God; —and indeed it is neither more nor less than a very real love of God, though not always of the same kind; for that Love one while shining on the soul we call grace, which makes us acceptable to His Divine Majesty;—when it strengthens us to do well, it is called Charity;—but when it attains its fullest perfection, in which it not only leads us to do well, but to act carefully, diligently, and promptly, then it is called Devotion [...] In short, devotion is simply a spiritual activity and liveliness by means of which Divine Love works in us, and causes us to work briskly and lovingly; and just as charity leads us to a general practice of all God’s Commandments, so devotion leads us to practise them readily and diligently. And

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. OEA XV, 28, quoted in M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 29.

therefore we cannot call him who neglects to observe all God's Commandments either good or devout, because in order to be good, a man must be filled with love, and to be devout, he must further be very ready and apt to perform the deeds of love.<sup>17</sup>

I cannot resist quoting here some of the most luminous and fruitful lines of our Author which refer to the conviction that each individual comes into this world with a personal plan of God for them; a plan of happiness and full realisation of God's will for each of his creatures. In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, speaking of the need for each one to find, in their state of life, the best way to give glory to God, St Francis de Sales, in dialogue with Philothea, says:

A different exercise of devotion is required of each—the noble, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the maiden and the wife; and furthermore such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual. I ask you, my child, would it be fitting that a Bishop should seek to lead the solitary life of a Carthusian? And if the father of a family were as regardless in making provision for the future as a Capuchin, if the artisan spent the day in church like a Religious, if the Religious involved himself in all manner of business on his neighbour's behalf as a Bishop is called upon to do, would not such a devotion be ridiculous, ill-regulated, and intolerable? Nevertheless such a mistake is often made, and the world, which cannot or will not discriminate between real devotion and the indiscretion of those who fancy themselves devout, grumbles and finds fault with devotion, which is really nowise concerned in these errors.<sup>18</sup>

This path leads to a Christian theology of vocation in which it is up to each one to carry out the process of searching for his or her own vocation, in harmony with what was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council: all the faithful, Christians of every condition and state, strengthened by so many and so powerful means of salvation, are called by the Lord, each one in his or her own way, to the perfection of that holiness by which the Father himself is perfect. (Cf. *LG*, 11).

Both Francis de Sales and Don Bosco make daily life an expression of the love of God which is received and also returned in exchange. Our saints wanted to bring the relationship with God closer to life and life closer to the relationship with God. This is the proposal of “next-door-neighbour holiness” or “the middle-class of holiness” which Pope Francis speaks to us about with so much affection. “I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God's people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence. We might call them ‘the middle class of holiness.’”<sup>19</sup>

Like Don Bosco, we too must be experts today in carrying out this important task of accompanying the young in their search for their vocation and holiness, as well as doing this ourselves. Perhaps this is what they are asking of us most urgently, and how they are in need of it! We still hear the recent echo of the appeal made to the Church during the Synod on young people who ask, among other

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<sup>17</sup> *Introduction to the Devout Life* I, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Introduction to the Devout Life*, I, 3.

<sup>19</sup> JOSEPH MALEGUE, *Pierres noires. Les classes moyennes du Salut*, Paris 1958, Quoted in FRANCIS, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 7.

things, to be accompanied in the discernment of their vocation. Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, seeking to respond to the young, is also a challenge for us as a Salesian Family:

There are many priests, men and women religious, lay and professional persons, and indeed qualified young people, who can help the young with their vocational discernment. When we are called upon to help others discern their path in life, what is uppermost is the ability to listen.<sup>20</sup>

And so we touch, almost with our own hands, another fundamental element of our spirituality: presence and listening, precisely to help all those who come to us, those we approach, to establish a relationship of friendship, an encounter of closeness, something that once again acquires the Salesian flavor of putting the young person, the human person, at the centre. Don Bosco's "*Da mihi animas*", which before that was Francis de Sales', is still fully valid today.

St Francis de Sales oriented his pastoral life towards the accomplishment of a mission entrusted to him. It was his participation in God's love that led him to share in the saving mission of Christ the Good Shepherd. Beginning with his personal experience of God's love, he felt that this ardent love, or loving ardour, is translated into joy at the conversion of the sinner and sorrow at the hardness of heart of those who reject this invitation. This is the particular reading of the *da mihi animas* of St Francis de Sales.<sup>21</sup>

We would be implementing this pastoral zeal and charity of St Francis well if, like him, we were to keep our life firmly rooted in Christ. Only this way can apostolic action be fruitful, because it is carried out starting from the need we experience to communicate the love with which we feel ourselves loved. **Yet again a beautiful homage to St Francis de Sales in the fourth centenary of his death would be *the renewal* and, in some cases, *the recovery* of the apostolic energy of the *da mihi animas coetera tolle*, giving ourselves to God and the young with the same pastoral charity that he and Don Bosco had.**

Don Bosco's Salesian spirituality, compared with other spiritual current that certain specialist call "abstract", falls along very different lines because it is inspired by a master like Francis de Sales, proposing a spirituality for ordinary life.<sup>22</sup> In a happy expression attributed to the Saint, it is said that "we must flourish where God has planted us". This is a fundamental characteristic of Salesian spirituality: it is realistic. Learning to love the circumstances that are ours, accepting life as it is, and loving it as a manifestation of acceptance of God's will, may seem a passive thing, but it is not so when it comes to practising virtue, doing good, carry out one's duty, the things of daily life, in the

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<sup>20</sup> CV, 291

<sup>21</sup> In dealing with zeal for souls in his book on the Spirit of Blessed Francis de Sales, Bishop Jean Pierre Camus, Bishop of Belley and a personal friend of Francis de Sales praises the saint's detachment from material goods, his purely pastoral concern, and puts on his lips the prayer addressed to the Lord: "*da mihi animas, coetera tolle*". For this prolific writer, these words express the ardent pastoral zeal that always guided all his undertakings. Cf. J. P. CAMUS, *El espíritu de San Francisco de Sales II*, Balmes, Barcelona 1947, p. 339. Cited in E. ALBURQUERQUE, *Don Bosco y sus amistades espirituales*, CCS, Madrid 2021, San Francisco de Sales. Afinidad y convergencia espiritual, p. 11-27.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 156. St Francis de Sales draws his inspiration from spiritual masters who were preachers, pastors and spiritual directors all in one, such as St Philip Neri, founder of the Oratory in Rome. His main sources of spirituality are works of spirituality that bring Christian perfection closer to the common condition of the Christian in the world.

place where God's providence planted us, and perhaps where we did not always want to be, or perhaps would have liked to be. It is to prepare the heart for the acceptance of *God's will*.

It immediately comes to mind that this was the spirituality proposed by Don Bosco himself to his boys and to the Salesians. For example, Dominic Savio's acts of mortification.

"You've got me in a real bind. Our Blessed Lord says that if I don't do penance I will not get to heaven. I am forbidden to do any penance; what chance then have I of heaven?"

"The penance Jesus wants from you is complete obedience; obey and that's enough."

"Can't I do some other penance?"

"Yes, you can allow yourself the penance of being patient with others and the unpleasant things of life; to accept equally the heat and the cold and the rain; to be cheerful when tired and not feeling so well and whatever God wants to give you."

"But," said Dominic "these things come to you whether you like it or not."

"Precisely," I replied "offer them willingly to God; there is nothing that will please him more, and you will be doing real penance."

Thus reassured, Dominic was very happy and completely at peace.<sup>23</sup>

Our Salesian family has embraced his way of living the relationship with God through the fulfilment of duty, with the knowledge that this is the way we correspond, participate and cooperate with God in his creative action and with Christ in the building up of the Kingdom.

Don Bosco promoted and lived the characteristics of this simple, neighbourly, daily way of being in relationship with God with his young people and his Salesians. It corresponds to Francis de Sales' way of proposing the daily practice of virtues, but the virtues that correspond to one's condition and status, not that of others. "When God created the world He commanded each tree to bear fruit after its kind: and even so He bids Christians,—the living trees of His Church,—to bring forth fruits of devotion, each one according to his kind and vocation"<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. **A kind and friendly way of dealing with people:**

which leads to living with our youngsters "*in a family experience of trust and dialogue*"

St Francis de Sales is known above all for his kindness and gentleness. In one of his letters he writes:

I love especially these three little virtues: Gentleness in the heart, poverty in the spirit and simplicity in life. And also, the rougher exercises: Visiting the sick, serving the poor,

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<sup>23</sup> G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico, allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francis de Sales*, in ISS, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, 1059. English translation here available at Salesian Digital Library, <http://sdl.sdb.org/greenstone3/library/collection/dbdonbos/browse/CL4#CL4.4,CL4.4.10>

<sup>24</sup> *Introduction to the Devout Life* I, 3.

comforting the afflicted and the like, but everything without impetuosity, but in true freedom.<sup>25</sup>

Those who have studied his life and personality agree in saying that his friendly and amiable character was not something spontaneous,<sup>26</sup> just as it wasn't in Don Bosco. St Francis de Sales proposed the imitation of Jesus Christ, meek and humble of heart as a model to be imitated<sup>27</sup> and it could be said that meekness was his characteristic virtue. "His meekness, however, differed altogether from that artificial gentility which consists in the mere possession of polished manners and in the display of a purely conventional affability. It differed, too, both from the apathy which cannot be moved by any force and from the timidity which does not dare to become indignant, even when indignation is required of one. This virtue, which grew in the heart of St. Francis as a delightful effect of his love of God and was nourished by the spirit of compassion and tenderness, so tempered with sweetness the natural gravity of his demeanour and softened both his voice and manners that he won the affectionate regard of everyone whom he encountered."<sup>28</sup>

It was this meekness that also attracted Don Bosco from the beginning of his pastoral work, and that also characterised his educative style in relating to his boys. Reflecting today on kindness and gentleness, from Rome, allows us to intuit some of the feelings that Don Bosco himself had towards his boys and that he passed on, not without pain, in his letter of 10 May 1884 to his Salesians. He reminds us: "May the charity of those who command and the charity of those who must obey cause the spirit of St Francis de Sales to reign among us."<sup>29</sup> Don Bosco teaches us that acceptance, cordiality, courtesy, kindness, patience, affection, trust, gentleness, meekness, are expressions of love that generate confidence and familiarity. It is in this environment that our Salesian spirituality was born, rich in understanding and mercy, in acceptance and the ability to wait patiently for young people to grow.

Like Francis de Sales, Don Bosco wanted to live with the meekness and humility of Jesus' heart. (*Mt* 11:29). In the dream at nine years of age he received a command from the "Teacher", amid a crowd of goats, dogs, cats, bears and other animals: "This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble,

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<sup>25</sup> Letter 308. to Baronness de Chantal, 8 September 1605. Consulted in digital edition, p. 83/321. OEA XIII, 92. Quoted in: Cf. EUNAN McDONNELL, *God Desires You*, DeSales Resource Center, Stella Niagra, N.Y., 2008, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> For example: "Many biographers say that he had a choleric temperament, strong, impatient, very much of his race, a true Savoyard. Because of this, anger often boiled in his head, he felt discouraged by insolent language or inconsiderate actions, he was irritated by disorder, his countenance changed colour and he reddened at a contradiction. However, the constant struggle against these temptations, vigilance, ascetic effort, personal mastery and the help of grace, lead him to that exquisite meekness which makes him a living image of Christ. We should not, therefore, speak of a natural gentleness of Francis de Sales, but rather we should see in it the fruit of a victorious struggle." Cf. E. ALBURQUERQUE, *Espíritu y espiritualidad salesiana*, Editorial CCS, Madrid 20217, 105-12.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. EUNAN McDONNELL, *God Desires You*, p.56-67.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. PIUS XI, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Omnium Perturbationem*, 26 January 1923. Pope Benedict XV intended to write an encyclical for the third centenary of the death of St Francis de Sales. In 1923 it was his successor who did so, Pius XI, emphasising a holiness that was kind and accessible to all. His meekness of heart shone through, which could be said to be his characteristic virtue.

<sup>29</sup> G. Bosco, *Lettera da Roma alla comunità salesiana dell'Oratorio di Torino-Valdocco*, in ISS, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, 451. The English translation of the *Letter from Rome* here is found in the appendix to the *Constitutions and Regulations*.

strong and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children.”<sup>30</sup> What is so moving is that in these early memories recorded in the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, which Don Bosco wrote out of obedience, there is a high priority given to the humble attitude with which to confront difficulties.

The qualities of meekness and humility of heart were, for Francis de Sales, the only help he had in his mission in the Chablais region, where he carried out a wonderful pastoral ministry as a missionary, a model for apostolic style today. In a very different way to other missionaries, who sought to make themselves feared, Francis de Sales attracted more flies with a spoonful of his usual honey than with a barrel full of vinegar!<sup>31</sup>

This spirit of kindness, gentleness and meekness was deeply ingrained in the first Salesians, since it belongs to our most ancient tradition. Everything indicates that we cannot neglect it, nor even less lose it, at the risk of significantly damaging our charismatic identity. The way in which this spirit of goodness and kindness is transmitted and communicated among us can be seen in the lives of the boys who became Salesians, precisely because of their personal experience of the familiar, welcoming, kind and respectful traits offered by living with Don Bosco and the first Salesians at Valdocco. In fact, in the early days there was talk of a “fourth Salesian vow” that included *kindness* (first of all), work and the preventive system.<sup>32</sup>

Combining this testimony with the one left to us by the witnesses in the dream in the *Letter from Rome*, especially Valfré who appears in the dream and who was at the Oratory before 1870, we read:

It was a scene full of life, full of movement, full of fun. Some were running, some were jumping, some were skipping [...] In one corner a group of youngsters were gathered around a priest, hanging on his every word as he told them a story. In another a cleric was playing with a group of lads at *chase the donkey* and *trades* [...] You could see that the greatest cordiality and confidence reigned between youngsters and superiors [...] closeness leads to affection and affection brings confidence [...] it is this that opens hearts.<sup>33</sup>

We cannot imagine a Salesian presence around the world, a presence of the *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, of the *Salesians of Don Bosco* or of the thirty-two groups that make up the *Salesian*

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<sup>30</sup> G. Bosco, *Memorie dell’Oratorio di S. Francis de Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, in ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, 1176-1177. The translation here is from the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, Salesiana Publishers New Rochelle, New York, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. J.-P. CAMUS, *L’Esprit du bienheureux François de Sales*, partie I, section 3. Quoted in M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 97. Bishop Jean Pierre Camus, speaking of his personality, highlights the expressions he used before his opponents and adversaries, which reflect well his humble disposition and his meekness. He spoke of brothers, sons of the Church in readiness, brothers in hope in the same vocation to salvation, and he always called the See of Geneva “my poor” or “my dear” Geneva, terms of compassion and love.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. A. GIRAUDO, *op.cit.* p. 3-5, “[...] *abbiamo tre quarti voti. Secondo i vari aspetti: la bontà, il lavoro, il sistema preventivo* [...]” (p. 70). Cf. commentary by A. ALBURQUERQUE, *Espíritu y espiritualidad salesiana*, “El cuarto voto salesiano” and in a note: A. CAVIGLIA, *Conferenze sullo Spirito Salesiano*, Istituto Internazionale Don Bosco, Torino 1953, p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> G. Bosco, *Lettera da Roma alla comunità salesiana dell’Oratorio di Torino-Valdocco*, in ISS, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, 444-445. Or in the *appendix to the Constitutions, Letter from Rome*, p. 259.

*Family of Don Bosco*, that does not have this characteristic of kindness as its distinguishing element, or at least we should have it, as Pope Francis sought to remind us through his enlightening expression, the “Valdocco option”.<sup>34</sup> It is our option for the Salesian style of kindness, affection, familiarity and presence. We have a treasure, a gift received from Don Bosco, which it is now up to us to revive.

In the *Charter of Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family* we see that affection and Salesian loving-kindness are a characteristic feature of the identity of the Salesian Family.

The loving kindness of Don Bosco is without doubt a characteristic trait of his pedagogical method which is considered still valid today, both in contexts still Christian and in those in which young people belonging to other religions are living.

It cannot, however, be reduced to simply being a pedagogical principle but needs to be recognised as an essential element of our spirituality.

It is, in fact, authentic love because it draws its strength from God; it is love which shows itself in the language of simplicity, cordiality and fidelity; it is love which gives rise to a desire to correspond; it is love which calls forth trust, opening the way to confidence and to profound communication (“education is a matter of the heart”); it is love which spreads out and in this way creates a family atmosphere, where being together is beautiful and enriching.<sup>35</sup>

Francis de Sales drew people to himself through his gentleness. St Vincent de Paul described him as the man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth.<sup>36</sup> He had learned from Jesus, meek and humble of heart. This heart of Jesus had deep significance for Francis de Sales and for Don Bosco. God’s love, become flesh, found in the human heart of Jesus the most eloquent expression of love. Starting from the freedom with which God creates humanity, through gentleness, goodness and affection as God’s way of treating his sons and daughters, we arrive at the core of Salesian spirituality, which is also the model of our being and living: *love*.

For many of our young people, the most remembered experience of meeting the Salesian Family in the world is very often the family trait, the acceptance and affection with which they feel treated. In short, *the family spirit*.

Where does this capacity for love and amiability come from, this gift of self in Francis de Sales? Undoubtedly from the deep certainty he came to after surviving two powerful crises that made him feel unworthy of God’s love. In fact, the experience of crisis and darkness, which we can all experience, was also what other great saints went through, like Teresa of Avila, Teresa of Calcutta, St John of the Cross etc... In Francis de Sales a purified hope was born that led him to trust not in his own merits, but in the mercy and goodness of God. He moved in the direction of “pure love”, a love that loves God for Himself. God does not love us because we are good, but because He is good, and we do not love God because we want something good from Him, but because He Himself is the greatest good. Fulfilment of God’s will is not achieved through feelings of “unworthiness”, but

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to members of GC28*, in AGC 433, “*What kind of Salesians for the youth of today?*” *Post-Chapter Reflection of the Society of St Francis de Sales*, Roma 2020.

<sup>35</sup> *Letter of Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family*, no. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. EUNAN McDONNELL, *God Desires You*, p. 57. Cf. Also André Ravier SJ *St Francis de Sales*, ed. Aldo Girauda, p. 12.

through hoping in the mercy and goodness of God. *This is Salesian optimism*. This perspective leads us to strongly reject any idea that portrays God as arbitrary and vengeful, and to accept instead the God revealed by Jesus – a God who is mercy and love – and contemplate how in Francis de Sales his heart expands when he perceives the infinite love of God. So when he is telling us about God’s love he is speaking of his own experience. This is his own story. So then, *Francis de Sales responds to God’s love with love*. The following deeply sincere statement he makes in prayer is truly moving:

Whatever happens, Lord, you who hold everything in your hand and whose ways are justice and truth: whatever you have ordained for me regarding the eternal decree of predestination and reprobation: you whose judgements are a deep abyss, you who are ever a just judge and merciful father, I will love you, Lord, at least in this life if it is not granted me to love you in eternal life; I will love you at least here, my God, and I will always hope in your mercy, and will always repeat your praise, despite all that Satan’s angel continues to inspire me to the contrary. O Lord Jesus, you will always be my hope and my salvation in the land of the living. If, because my conduct requires it, I must be cursed among the cursed who will not see your most sweet face, at least grant me that I will not be among those who curse your holy name.<sup>37</sup>

Francis de Sales’ crisis revealed the deepest part of his being: *a heart deeply in love with God*. He understood that the submission of one’s will, in imitation of Christ in the Garden of Olives, is the apex of pure love. Such an answer can only be given out of pure love, and it springs from the most sublime centre of the spirit. It is a heroic love based on perseverance and sacrifice for the beloved. Jesus, in the agony in the garden, is our model in this regard: “Yet, not what I want, but what you want” (*Mk 14:36*)<sup>38</sup>.

The conviction that God’s love is not based on feeling good, but on doing the will of God the Father, is the core of Francis de Sales’s spirituality and must be the model for the whole Family of Don Bosco. Francis expressed this splendidly by alluding to the need to move on from the consolations of God to the God of consolations, from enthusiasm to true love, remaining faithful amid trials; passing from falling in love to true love for others. A pure, disinterested love that seeks nothing for itself, is detached from self. God, who wishes all to be saved, shows us that perfect love drives away all fear. Do all through love, nothing out of fear, because it is the mercy of God and not our merits that urges us to love.

Starting from this Salesian spirituality, it will be significant for us to discover the unconditional love of God as the centre of all the dynamics of charity and pastoral zeal toward others that Francis de Sales first, and Don Bosco later, developed so magnificently.

##### **5. Unconditional and unrestrained love:**

*“Imitating God’s patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom.”*

Holiness for everyone is an essential element of Francis de Sales’ spiritual proposal, based on love of God, and for each and every person. It is in devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus that this love has a solid model to imitate and follow. Together with meekness and humility, submitting one’s will, the

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<sup>37</sup> OEA XXII, 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. EUNAN MCDONNELL, *God Desires You*, p.18.

imitation of Christ in the Garden of Olives, it is the apex of pure love. To love is an act of the will, an act of abandonment in which one chooses God's will.

Francis de Sales mentions the heart more than three hundred times in the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Being a Christian humanist, he continually refers to the person created in the image and likeness of God; and in the human person he finds the "perfection of the universe":

Man is the perfection of the universe; the spirit is the perfection of man; love, that of the spirit; and charity, that of love. Wherefore the love of God is the end, the perfection and the excellence of the universe. In this, Theotimus, consists the greatness and the primacy of the commandment of divine love, which the Saviour calls the first and greatest commandment.<sup>39</sup>

The heart of the human being (woman and man), a prodigal heart, when it turns away from the good, will always keep that will which continues to draw it to the good, because this is the way God has created us, and we cannot reach God by our own strength alone, depending only on our human nature, if he does not help us with his providence, his grace and his love. The natural inclination towards the good, the beautiful and the true may be enough to set us off, to set us on our way, and it is there that God's action in us, his grace, which is not denied to anyone who seeks it, assists and guides us.

If St Augustine said that "our heart is restless until it rests in Thee"<sup>40</sup>, by following the thinking of Francis de Sales we could say with von Balthasar "Your heart, O God, is restless, until we rest in You."<sup>41</sup>

In the Salesian tradition we find numerous examples of the preferential devotion to the Heart of Jesus, both in Francis de Sales and in Jeanne de Chantal, and especially in one of her daughters of the Visitation, St Margaret Mary Alacoque; and right up to the time of Don Bosco with the particular impulse given to this devotion by Pope Pius IX,<sup>42</sup> who beatified Margaret Mary Alacoque and in 1877 declared St Francis de Sales a Doctor of the Church. Don Bosco's era was marked by devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and since the building of the Basilica accomplished by our father at the request of Pope Pius IX, *the Salesian Family has been bound to the Love of Jesus expressed in the heart*. Perhaps this is another point of likeness and contact between St Francis de Sales and Don Bosco: *fidelity to the Church and to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel, placing Christ at the centre of pastoral activity in order to reach everyone*. It is not inconsequential to describe the minor Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome an "International church", like "Tibidabo" in Barcelona and many other

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<sup>39</sup> *Treatise on the Love of God*, X, 1

<sup>40</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, I, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. H. U. VON BALTHASAR, *The Heart of the World*, Ignatius Press, 1979, quoted in EUNAN MCDONNELL, *God Desires You*, p.30.

<sup>42</sup> Pius IX published various documents on the Office of the Mass of the Sacred Heart, erected numerous confraternities, granted indulgences to multiple devotional practices, and also beatified Margaret Mary Alacoque (August 19, 1864). Some of these important motifs are reflected in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in the *Castro Pretorio* in Rome: The painting over the high altar is a canvas by artist Francesco de Rohden whom Don Bosco commissioned. It represents the third apparition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to St Margaret Alacoque in 1687. The composition was designed by Don Bosco himself: Christ is placed in the centre with a flaming heart in his hand. Surrounding him is a multitude of angels. At the bottom is a kneeler with depictions of St Francis de Sales and St Margaret Alacoque. At the top, a cherub holds a scroll with the quotation from the Book of Proverbs.: "*Praebe, fili mi, cor tuum mihi*" (Prov. 23:26): My child, give me your heart.

churches dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus throughout the Salesian world and, of course, in the whole Church.

Alive in the Heart of Jesus there is the *incarnate* presence of God's love and His will for the redemption of the world. This assures us that God's last word in the world is Him, love. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in his precious and masterful encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, describes Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God's love, the manifestation of God's intervention in human history, which finds its highest expression in Jesus:

When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. 19:37), we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move.<sup>43</sup>

This brief *excursus* on devotion to the Sacred Heart brings us to the centre of our spirituality. There is no goodness, there is no dedication to the needy, there is no kindness or freedom, there is no charity or any of the traits we have presented, if the original source of God's love is missing. It is love and not sin that explains God's free decision to be part of humanity and to be one of us. Thus we understand that the Incarnation, the becoming man, was eternally willed by God. It is not a kind of plan “b” that God invents because of man's sin. Even if there had been no sin from which to redeem us, God would still have become man. This is the deep conviction of Francis de Sales. Furthermore, the Incarnation is not just an historical fact, but a continuous, metaphysical and personal one. God is incarnated in our history, through His pure and free initiative.

Hence the apostolate and our dedication to the mission take on their fullness of meaning, as an imitation of the One who gave his life out of love for us; loving in the same way, with the gift of our life, with that humility that Francis de Sales called “descending charity”, entering into relationships with others, *making ourselves small with the little ones, out of love, to lift them up*. This is the “ecstasy”, going out of ourselves to encounter others in an attitude of service like Jesus’ washing of the feet (*Jn 13*): “Jesus called them to him and said... ‘whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many’” (*Mt 20:27-28*).

We can read Don Bosco’s fatherliness in the light of the Word of the Lord and following the good example of Francis de Sales. It was an expression of his unconditional love for poor, abandoned and at risk young people.

In our Salesian spirituality, devotion and the spiritual life are not separate from the apostolate and the exercising of charity. For this reason, next to the church, Don Bosco wanted an educational and formation centre for his boys; a house that, like the one in Valdocco and like all the others around the world, would be a home for the neediest youngsters. Playgrounds where they could meet with their

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<sup>43</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 12.

friends. This is how genuine devotion, which leads to the exercise of charity towards one's neighbour, is made complete and fully realised. Don Bosco wants *love for Christ to lead us to love for the young*, a Salesian characteristic of our life and an ongoing challenge for Don Bosco's Family today and always.

**6. The need for a spiritual guide:**

*“we then accompany them so that they may develop solid convictions.”*

The Salesian Family continues to develop the art of accompaniment, the same art that Francis de Sales and Don Bosco developed, each in his own time. The ministry, the service of spiritual direction has been and is esteemed in the Church as something that is really important in the Salesian system of education and pedagogy and that we should put into practice even better: *accompaniment*. For this challenge, too, we implement Salesian principles, those inherited from Francis de Sales: goodness, kindness, patience, listening, waiting...

The young people of today, like those of all times, are waiting for a helping hand on their journey. The spiritual direction that Francis de Sales offered to so many people, helping them to journey towards God in the state of life in which they found themselves, was what Don Bosco did with his young people. Accompanying each of them through an educational environment and personal contact. After all, it was Don Bosco who invented the “word in the ear”, his way of saying that he was suggesting a personal journey of holiness and growth to each of them, in their own lives, to the point of becoming what God had “dreamed” for each of them.

Reflecting on this service to young people encourages us to explore the meaning that the accompaniment of individuals has for us. It is a precious way of serving others by generously giving of our time to listen to others. There is nothing more appreciated in the relationship between people than the time generously given to listening to the other: leaving aside other commitments, other tasks, offering full availability to welcome, listen, orient, guide, make suggestions, accompany.

During the fourth centenary of the death of Saint Francis de Sales we cannot forget this simple and humble service to young people, which clearly expresses the appreciation and importance we place on their lives when we dedicate our time to be with them, listen to them, understand them and help them follow the plan that God proposes to them in their life. For us, followers of the spirituality of St Francis de Sales in Don Bosco, helping young people to discover and follow God's will gives meaning to our educative and evangelising vocation. This is also the reason why we came into being in the Church, the reason why the Holy Spirit gave rise to the Salesian charism in Don Bosco and which his religious family puts into practice today.

Our predilection for poor and abandoned young people is made concrete and expressed in this dimension of the pastoral service of accompaniment. It is certainly not the same cultural environment, nor are they the same kinds of people whom Francis de Sales accompanied. However, there is no difference in the importance given to the search for God's will in the life of each individual, each young person, each beneficiary of our mission. It becomes clear that the individual before us is important when we leave other things aside to pay attention to their life, their story, their situation. This is the concrete way to put into practice Don Bosco's motto: “Da mihi animas, caetera tolle” – as urgent and important for us today as it was for him.

We find Don Bosco's desire to become the “soul friend” of many young people in the vividness of Salesian language. Just as Francis de Sales had experienced the spiritual friendship that ensued from the people he accompanied, Don Bosco, following in the footsteps of Francis de Sales, sought to lead his young people to friendship with God, the centre of all spiritual life: in daily life, in the most ordinary circumstances as well as in special and difficult moments. He wanted to be that kind of friend for young people who could trust him, and as a friend and father bring them closer to God. Don Bosco himself recounts:

On such occasions I found out how quite a few were brought back to that place; it was because they were abandoned to their own resources. “Who knows?” I thought to myself, “If these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them religion on feast days... who knows but they could be steered away from ruin or at least the number of those who return to prison could be lessened?” I talked this idea over with Fr Cafasso. With his encouragement and inspiration I began to work out in my mind how to , leaving to the Lord’s grace what the outcome would be. Without God’s grace all human effort is in vain.<sup>44</sup>

In the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis de Sales places no conditions when suggesting looking for a “friend of the soul” in life’s journey. Unconditional acceptance also consists of this. This is the “Salesian style of accompaniment”.<sup>45</sup>

When Tobias was bidden to go to Rages, he was willing to obey his father, but he objected that he knew not the way;—to which Tobit answered, “Seek thee a man which may go with thee:” and even so, daughter, I say to you, If you would really tread the paths of the devout life, seek some holy man to guide and conduct you. This is the precept of precepts, says the devout Avila,—seek as you will you can never so surely discover God’s Will as through the channel of humble obedience so universally taught and practised by all the Saints of olden time.”<sup>46</sup>

Finding a friend of our soul who will accompany us on our journey would also be a beautiful fruit of this Salesian centenary. Don Bosco took much account of this, and made it concrete with unconditional acceptance, seeing to the setting and presence, friendship, affection, trust, the search for the good of each person, listening to God who put the very person who can accompany us on our path. He himself shows from his own experience the great value of accompaniment in his life, especially at certain decisive moments. He says:

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<sup>44</sup> G. Bosco, *Memorie dell’Oratorio di S. Francis de Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, in ISS, *Fonti salesiane. I. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, 1234-1235. *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, New York, 2010, pp. 101-102.

<sup>45</sup> The study of accompaniment has regained interest in recent years, and there is no lack of works that present interesting proposals for further study. In our Salesian environment, cf. FABIO ATTARD – MIGUEL ANGEL GARCÍA (EDS), *L’accompagnamento spirituale. Itinerario pedagogico spirituale in chiave salesiana al servizio dei giovani*, Elledici, Torino 2014, and also CRESPO-BUEIS, J. (coord.), *Acompañar a los jóvenes*, CCS, Madrid, 2021

<sup>46</sup> *Introduction to the Devout Life*, I, 4

Fr Cafasso, who for six years had been my guide, was especially my spiritual director. If I have been able to do any good, I owe it this worthy priest in whose hands I placed every decision I made, all my study and every activity of my life.<sup>47</sup>

Francis de Sales had written about this in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*:

In truth, your spiritual guide should always be as a heaven-sent angel to you;—by which I mean that when you have found him, you are not to look upon him, or trust in him or his wisdom as an ordinary man; but you must look to God, Who will help you and speak to you through this man, putting into his heart and mouth that which is needful to you; so that you ought to hearken as though he were an angel come down from Heaven to lead you thither. Deal with him in all sincerity and faithfulness, and with open heart; manifesting alike your good and your evil, without pretence or dissimulation. Thus your good will be examined and confirmed, and your evil corrected and remedied;—you will be soothed and strengthened in trouble, moderated and regulated in prosperity. Give your guide a hearty confidence mingled with sacred reverence, so that reverence in no way shall hinder your confidence, and confidence nowise lessen your reverence: trust him with the respect of a daughter for her father; respect him with the confidence of a son in his mother. In a word, such a friendship should be strong and sweet; altogether holy, sacred, divine and spiritual.<sup>48</sup>

At the end of the time he spent at the *Convitto ecclesiastico* in Turin, Don Bosco wanted God's will to guide his steps in what he had to begin, and he entrusted himself to the judgement of the one who knew him best and could guide him: Fr Cafasso. He shows us, in the following brief dialogue with him, how he had fully assimilated what Francis de Sales had taught about indifference, sincere research and obedience in accompaniment. He shows us a way of living – not a proposal addressed to others, but to be put into practice ourselves first.

One day, Fr Cafasso took me aside and said, “Now that you’ve finished your studies you must get to work. These days the harvest is abundant enough. What is your particular bent?”

“Whatever you would like to point me towards.”

“There are three posts open: curate at Buttigliera d’Asti; tutor in moral theology here at the Convitto and director at the little hospital beside the Refuge. Which would you choose?”

“Whatever you judge best.”

“Don’t you feel any preference for one thing rather than another?”

“My inclination is to work for young people So do with me whatever you want I shall know the Lord’s will in whatever you advise.”

“At the moment, what’s the wish nearest your heart? What’s on your mind?”

“At this moment I see myself in the midst of a multitude of boys appealing to me for help.”

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Fonti salesiane. I. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, document no. 309: “*memorie dell’Oratorio di S. Francis de Sales dal 1815 al 1855*”, p. 1234. *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, New York, 2010, p. 101.

<sup>48</sup> FRANCIS DE SALES, *op. cit.*, I. 4

“Then go away for a few weeks holiday. When you come back I’ll tell you your destination.”

I came back from the holiday, but for several weeks Fr Cafasso never said a word. And I asked him nothing.

One day he said to me, “Why don’t you ask me about your destination?”

“Because I want to see the will of God in your choice, and I don’t want my desires in it at all.”

“Pack your bag and go with Dr Borrelli. You’ll be director at the Little Hospital of St Philomena, and you’ll also work in the Refuge Meanwhile God will show you what you have to do for the young.”

At first this advice seemed to cut across my inclinations. With a hospital to take care of, preaching, and confessions in an institute for more than four hundred girls, there would be no time for anything else Nevertheless this was the will of heaven, as I was soon assured.<sup>49</sup>

In the spirituality of Francis de Sales we discover, therefore, with regard to accompaniment, that our educational style is a “spiritual mystagogy” that assumes responsibility for the other with an educational friendship that enlightens, introduces to interior life and generates a relationship with God; with a lifestyle and a friendly, jovial, close relationship that is not superficial but capable of accompanying each one on a journey that leads to the Love of God. And the Salesian who does the accompaniment must also have the attitudes proper to those who live the preventive system and pastoral charity.<sup>50</sup>

#### 7. “All through love”:

so that “*they may gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and as men of faith.*”

One element that runs through all Salesian spirituality (of Francis de Sales) is the great value given to prayer. I have referred in these pages to some forms of devotional expression such as to the Sacred Heart, the fundamental attitude of trust, abandonment into the hands of Providence, the awareness of having an “inner sanctuary” in us, the friendship with God that we must cultivate, and to the goodness of God who never refuses his help to those who do all they can and are faithful in small things.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, documento n. 309: “*memorie dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*”, p. 1240. *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, New York, 2010, p. 108.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. ALDO GIRAUDDO, «Direzione spirituale in san Giovanni Bosco. Connotazioni peculiari della direzione spirituale offerta da don Bosco ai giovani», in: FABIO ATTARD – MIGUEL ANGEL GARCÍA (EDS), *L’accompagnamento spirituale. Itinerario pedagogico spirituale in chiave salesiana al servizio dei giovani*, Elledici, Torino 2014, 160. “Don Bosco is a model: he tends to identify in himself the educator, the confessor and the spiritual director; he insists on affectionate acceptance, kindness, magnanimity and care for individuals, the intensity of affection shown in such a way that the young people have confidence and trust, and collaborate in the formative action with willing and cordial obedience.”

One can perceive in all this the pastoral zeal of Francis de Sales, his patience with everyone, his kindness, optimism, fortitude and also his desire to communicate the good news of the Gospel to all. This is all the result of his profound and simple, daily relationship of true friendship with God. His prayer life is his personal love story with God, of his progress and what he did to avoid his relationship with the Heart of his heart, the centre of his life, growing cold.

For Francis de Sales, prayer as communication with God is the heart of the person who speaks to the Lord's heart. It is the prayer form of embodied spirituality. God is not only God of the human heart but is the "friend of the human heart".

*Prayer allows us to find this heart of God and conform our hearts to His.*

"We unite our understanding to God to behold and penetrate the features of his infinite beauty; and upon the seventh, we join our wills to God, to taste and experience the sweetness of his incomprehensible goodness; for upon the top of this ladder, God bending towards us, gives us the kiss of love, and makes us taste the sacred breasts of his sweetness, better than wine."<sup>51</sup>

Francis de Sales experiences prayer as a dialogue of hearts in which God takes the initiative.

A friend's present is always grateful. The sweetest commandments become bitter when they are imposed by a tyrannical and cruel heart. Jacob's service seemed a royalty unto him, because it proceeded from love... Many keep the commandments as sick men take medicines, more from fear of dying in a state of damnation, than from love of living according to our Saviour's pleasure. On the contrary, the loving heart loves the commandments; and the harder they are, the more sweet and agreeable it finds them, because it more perfectly pleases the beloved, and gives him more honour.<sup>52</sup>

It is about loving God's will, putting it into practice, and finding the best support for accomplishing it in prayer. The key to this spirituality is that we turn to prayer to be with the One we know loves us, to make the beating of our heart coincide with that of the Master, like the beloved disciple, to contemplate, since prayer is not about thinking much but loving much; and to rest in Him, as a way to recover and find the strength to continue loving.

### ***Charity as the measure of our prayer***

Charity is the measure of our prayer because our love of God is manifested in our love for our neighbour. This is the "*prayer of life*" that is so important for St Francis de Sales<sup>53</sup>. It consists in doing all our activities in love and for love of God, so that our whole life becomes a continuous prayer. Those who do works of charity, visit the sick, assist in the courtyard, give time to others to listen, welcome those in need ... are praying. Commitments and occupations should not hinder union with God, and whoever practises this form of prayer does not run the risk of forgetting God. When two people love each other – Francis de Sales concludes – their thoughts are always for each other.

The simple means he suggests for achieving union with God – a question so dear to our spirituality as sons and daughters of Don Bosco – are ones we recognise in the practices of piety Don Bosco proposed for his boys and his first Salesians. To those who are busy with temporal things, he advises

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<sup>51</sup> FRANCIS DE SALES, *Treatise...*, *op. cit.*, XI, 12

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, VIII, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 160.

finding moments, even very short ones, of recollection to unite the heart to God with brief aspirations, short prayers and good thoughts, or to just be aware of God in our spirit. While in the midst of conversations or activities, we can always remain in God's presence. In this way, true prayer does not neglect the obligations of daily life. Anyone who has experienced all this recognises that Francis de Sales lived what he advised and taught others. What he did, he did for God and in God. He considered this “active prayer” better than the others. When he was overwhelmed with tasks and commitments, he devoted almost no time to formal prayer: “his life was a continuous prayer.”<sup>54</sup>

Francis de Sales offers the degrees of prayer in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, closely following the example of St Teresa of Jesus (vocal, mental, contemplative and silent prayer). For our daily practice, it would be worthwhile to elaborate on the value of meditation for Francis de Sales, who considers that just as a watch is wound up so as not to stop, so prayer and time devoted to the Lord in meditation and examination of conscience, and other practices of piety, keep alive our zeal, our apostolic ardour, and our desire to belong to God. It is good to find moments to retreat into your heart, away from the hustle and bustle, and have a heart-to-heart conversation with God.

There is no clock, however good, but must be continually wound up; and moreover, during the course of each year it will need taking to pieces, to cleanse away the rust which clogs it, to straighten bent works, and renew such as are worn. Even so, any one who really cares for his heart's devotion will wind it up to God night and morning, and examine into its condition, correcting and improving it; and at least once a year he will take the works to pieces and examine them carefully;—I mean his affections and passions,—so as to repair whatever may be amiss. And just as the clockmaker applies a delicate oil to all the wheels and springs of a clock, so that it may work properly and be less liable to rust, so the devout soul, after thus taking the works of his heart to pieces, will lubricate them with the Sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist. These exercises will repair the waste caused by time, will kindle your heart, revive your good resolutions, and cause the graces of your mind to flourish anew.<sup>55</sup>

When the process is a genuine one, prayer leads to action and vice versa. The added value is that prayer is practised with simplicity and with the abandonment of “ask for nothing, refuse nothing”. And this helps to purify the motivations for following Christ, allows us to be guided by God and readies us to be genuinely free.

### ***Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Let us turn to this Mother and call on her motherly love***

I will only make a brief and concise reference to this, but I want to emphasise that human growth in faith also finds a model in Mary, the mother of Jesus.<sup>56</sup> St Francis de Sales said that the work of the Visitation, founded together with Jeanne de Chantal, would have as its symbol a heart pierced by two arrows, crowned by a cross, surrounded by a crown of thorns and with the holy names of Jesus and Mary engraved on it. Mary's role in Francis de Sales' theology is identical with that of the Second Vatican Council. She is placed firmly in the heart of the Church. And her mission is to “attract and lead

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. M. WIRTH, *San Francesco di Sales*, 160. In a note, he refers to this fact in the letter from Chantal's mother to dom Jean de Saint-François, in JEANNE-FRANÇOISE FRÉMYOT DE CHANTAL, *Correspondance*, t. II, 305.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, *op.cit.* V, 1.

<sup>56</sup> EUNAN MCDONNELL, *God Desires You*, p.127-135.

all people to her Son”.<sup>57</sup> This is why Francis de Sales encourages us to join with Mary, like the disciples, to receive the source of unity, the Holy Spirit.

Honour, revere and respect the Blessed Virgin Mary with a very special love; she is the Mother of our Sovereign Lord, and so we are her children. Let us think of her with all the love and confidence of affectionate children; let us desire her love, and strive with true filial hearts to imitate her graces.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, the figure of Mary, model of all virtues, presented as “clothed in Christ”, walks the path of humility like her Son, with her total dependence on God, available to him; she receives God's generosity in abundance. When she sings the humility of her servant in her *Magnificat*, it is because she has attracted God's gaze.

Finally, the Salesian trait of devotion to the Virgin, our mother and guide, corresponds to the trust that Don Bosco placed in Mary as the *Consolata* (Consoled), Mary Immaculate and Help of all of her Son's brothers and sisters. She cooperates in God's plan of salvation and, in the words of Francis de Sales, God made Mary “pass through all states of life, so that all people may find in her whatever they need to live well in their own state of life.”<sup>59</sup> In her we see what God is ready to do with his love when he finds willing hearts like Mary's. By emptying herself, she receives the fullness of God. By remaining available to God, He is able to accomplish great things in her.

Mary's contemplation, with her life and her yes to God, invites us to open ourselves to God's love in the knowledge that the heart of Jesus, on the tree of the cross, contemplates us and loves us. In Mary we see completed the true destiny of our heart, the heart of God.

### **Francis de Sales, a Christian humanist who communicates God**

There is another characteristic of Francis de Sales for which he is perhaps best known in the cultural circles of our world: he is the Patron Saint of journalists. At a time when communication is carried out in many ways, with its undeniable advantages and defects, Francis de Sales stands out for a value that gives dignity to the journalistic profession: the search for and dissemination of the truth.

In 1923, when Pope Pius XI declared Francis de Sales patron of journalists,<sup>60</sup> he pointed to his principal characteristics as a communicator. His gracious manner of holiness showed others, through his writings, the sure and simple way of Christian perfection.

Demonstrating, as Francis de Sales did, that holiness is for everyone and that it is perfectly reconcilable with all the offices and conditions of civil life, also involves knowing how to communicate the contents of faith and religion in simple, understandable and pleasant language. And this is the Salesian virtue and characteristic of communicating the truth, using every possible means so that the proclamation reaches everyone and helps everyone to understand the message that is intended to be transmitted.

This desire to communicate the truth of the Gospel was accompanied by an unparalleled creativity and originality, such as the posters he hung in public places or distributed under doors when he did

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. OEA XXVI, 266. Quoted in EUNAN MCDONNELL, *God Desires You*, p.128.

<sup>58</sup> *Introduction to the Devout Life.*, II,16

<sup>59</sup> OEA IX, 342. Quoted in EUNAN MCDONNELL, *God Desires You*, p.134.

<sup>60</sup> PIUS XI, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Omnium Perturbationem*, 26 January 1923.

not have a pulpit to give his catechesis to the people of God who had been entrusted to him as their pastor. In this simple, free and accessible way he made himself present.

In his encyclical for the third centenary of the death of Francis de Sales, Pius XI spells out the fundamental principles which are still current and worthy of consideration as a model of upright, professional and honest behaviour.

*It is Our wish that the greatest fruits should be gained from this solemn Centenary [the third centenary of the death of Francis de Sales] by those Catholics who as journalists and writers expound, spread, and defend the doctrines of the Church. It is necessary that they, in their writings, imitate and exhibit at all times that strength joined always to moderation and charity, which was the special characteristic of St. Francis. He, by his example, teaches them in no uncertain manner precisely how they should write. In the first place, and this the most important of all, each writer should endeavour in every way and as far as this may be possible, to obtain a complete comprehension of the teachings of the Church. They should never compromise where the truth is involved, nor, because of fear of possibly offending an opponent, minimise or dissimulate it. They should pay particular attention to literary style and should try to express their thoughts clearly and in beautiful language so that their readers will the more readily come to love the truth. When it is necessary to enter into controversy, they should be prepared to refute error and to overcome the wiles of the wicked, but always in a way that will demonstrate clearly that they are animated by the highest principles and moved only by Christian charity. Since St. Francis, up to this time, has not been named the Patron of Writers in any solemn and public document of this Apostolic See, We take this happy occasion, after mature deliberation and in full knowledge, by Our Apostolic authority, to hereby publish, confirm and declare by this encyclical, everything to the contrary notwithstanding, St. Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva and Doctor of the Church, to be the Heavenly Patron of all Writers.*<sup>61</sup>

We have here a valuable commitment to truth and its proclamation, to the Salesian style of goodness and gentleness, to simple proclamation and to the right intention of getting the proclamation of truth out to everyone, always seeking the good of people.

In addition to what we have just said, proclaiming, announcing the faith entails another important aspect to consider because Francis de Sales was faithful to it. As Bishop of Geneva, he was always concerned with the evangelisation of the people of God and especially with catechesis. We cannot lose this charismatic value as Don Bosco's Family. Communicating the message of the Gospel so that it may be lived is part of our charism. The Salesian Congregation, the Salesian Family, were born

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<sup>61</sup> PIUS XI, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Omnium Perturbationem*, 26 January 1923. Italics and parentheses are mine.

from a simple catechism lesson.<sup>62</sup> The Church has recently instituted the Ministry of Catechist.<sup>63</sup> We are offered a wonderful opportunity to revitalise our evangelising dimension with these perspectives.

Let us not forget that Don Bosco, too, with the means he had at his disposal at the time, published three hundred and eighteen works over the course of forty years, because, like Francis de Sales, he was convinced that a good word or a rich reading could do great good. Whatever the effort, it was nothing to him if it meant gaining someone's good and salvation.

Finally, it was always Francis de Sales' intention to reach out to everyone and proclaim the salvation and liberation that God's Love offers. This became a reality in the particular and amiable way he practised pastoral zeal, going out to visit, meet, seek and encourage people in various ways. The founding of the Order of the Visitation together with Jeanne de Chantal, speaks to us, in the language of the time, of this "Church going forth" proposed by Pope Francis, a Church which goes out to meet anyone who wants to hear the message of Jesus.

The image of Don Bosco visiting the boys during the week in their places of work, the image of Francis de Sales visiting his parishioners and leaving a message of faith and love for God under the doors of their homes, the inspiring image of the Virgin Mary visiting her relative Elizabeth, should encourage and enthuse us, and be pretty much a challenge to us.

## Conclusion

We too, as a Salesian Family, need to make the "charism of the visitation" explicit as a desire of the heart to announce, without waiting for others to come to us, going into areas and places inhabited by so many people for whom a kind word, an encounter, a look full of respect can open their horizons towards a better life.

*In short, going out to meet young people, wherever they may be and in whatever situation, continues to be our most distinctive feature, confirming Don Bosco's desire to love what young people love so that they will love what we love, spreading the Salesian spirit, our "Valdocco option", wherever the desire to be with young people takes us, living a true "Salesian sacrament of presence", and the commitment to carry out "small charity works". This is how we were born and this is how we want to follow Don Bosco, who found in Francis de Sales a model and a kindred spirit, a sort of soul mate.*

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<sup>62</sup> The meeting with Bartholomew Garelli in the Church of St Francis of Assisi, 8 December 1841. "[...] I stood up and made the sign of the cross to begin; but my pupil made no response because he did not know how to do it. In that first catechism I taught him how to make the sign of the cross. C I also taught him to know God the creator and why he created us. [...] This was the beginning of our Oratory. It was to be blessed by the Lord with growth beyond my imagining at that time." Cf. ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera. Raccolta antologica*, LAS, Roma 2014, documento n. 309: "*Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francis de Sales dal 1815 al 1855*", p. 1237. *Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales*, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, New York, 2010, p. 104-105.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Letter in the form of the "*Motu Proprio*" *Antiquum Ministerium*, 10 May 2021 (Liturgical Memorial of St John of Avila) with which he instituted the ministry of catechist.

May the anniversary we are celebrating this year help us to continue to grow in our dedication to poor and abandoned youth with the Salesian charism of Don Bosco imbued with the spirit of St Francis de Sales.

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### **SOMETHING TO READ OVER ONCE MORE AND REFLECT ON, AND FOR OUR HEART TO DWELL ON**

Let me end this essay with some thoughts from St Francis de Sales, Don Bosco, Pope Francis, and even from what I have written myself. Perhaps these, among others, might help us to reflect, be something for our hearts to dwell on after reading the Strenna. Among others, I have “collected” the following:

- The charity and kindness of St Francis de Sales will guide me in everything.
- “Nothing through constraint” is a beautiful proposal, an invitation to make it a precious gift of our personal life.
- As a Tridentine bishop and a promoter of the Catholic counter-reformation raised in the struggle against lukewarm faith, he chose *the life of the heart and not that of constraint*. And all he was doing was contemplating and living God’s attitude.
- God’s intervention, his grace, never takes place without our consent. He acts forcefully, but never to oblige or constrain, instead to attract the heart, not to violate, but *out of love for our freedom*.
- God, as Francis de Sales used say, draws us to himself through his kind initiative, at times as a vocation or call, at times as the voice of a friend, as an inspiration or invitation and at times as a “prevention” because he always anticipates. God never imposes himself: he knocks at our door and waits for us to open it.
- We do not believe it possible to educate without sacred respect for the freedom of every individual. Where the freedom of the individual is not respected, God is absent.
- The strength of God’s attraction, powerful but not violent, lies in the sweetness of his attraction.
- Far from excluding love for others, the Salesian mystical experience, this love of God we are speaking of, demands it.
- the human being, the young person, every individual, each of us, carries the need for God, the desire for God, “a natural inclination for God”, inscribed in our being.
- God is present and makes himself present to each individual in those moments of their life that only God himself chooses and in the way that only God knows.
- Both Francis de Sales and Don Bosco make daily life an expression of the love of God which is received and also returned in exchange. Our saints wanted to bring the relationship with God closer to life and life closer to the relationship with God. This is the proposal of “next-door-

neighbour holiness” or “the middle-class of holiness” which Pope Francis speaks to us about with so much affection. “I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God’s people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence. We might call them ‘the middle class of holiness.’”

- God does not love us because we are good, but because He is good.
- Fulfilment of God’s will is not achieved through feelings of “unworthiness”, but through hoping in the mercy and goodness of God. *This is Salesian optimism.*
- *Francis de Sales responds to God’s love with love.*
- I will love you, Lord, at least in this life if it is not granted me to love you in eternal life; I will love you at least here, my God, and I will always hope in your mercy.
- Francis de Sales’ crisis revealed the deepest part of his being: *a heart deeply in love with God.*
- The conviction that God’s love is not based on feeling good, but on doing the will of God the Father, is the core of Francis de Sales’s spirituality and must be the model for the whole Family of Don Bosco.
- move on from the consolations of God to the God of consolations, from enthusiasm to true love
- Passing from falling in love to true love for others.
- Do all through love, nothing out of fear, because it is the mercy of God and not our merits that urges us to love.
- If St Augustine said that “our heart is restless until it rests in Thee”<sup>64</sup>, by following the thinking of Francis de Sales we could say with von Balthasar “Your heart, O God, is restless, until we rest in You.”
- Don Bosco wants *love for Christ to lead us to love for the young*, a Salesian characteristic of our life and an ongoing challenge for Don Bosco’s Family today and always.
- His prayer life is his personal love story with God.
- For Francis de Sales, prayer as communication with God is the heart of the person who speaks to the Lord’s heart. It is the prayer form of embodied spirituality.
- Prayer allows us to find this heart of God and conform our hearts to His.

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<sup>64</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, I, 1.

- Charity is the measure of our prayer because our love of God is manifested in our love for our neighbour.
- This is the “*prayer of life*”: It consists in doing all our activities in love and for love of God, so that our whole life becomes a continuous prayer.
- It is good to find moments to retreat into your heart, away from the hustle and bustle, and have a heart-to-heart conversation with God.
- In her we see what God is ready to do with his love when he finds willing hearts like Mary's. By emptying herself, she receives the fullness of God. By remaining available to God, He is able to accomplish great things in her.