

The childhood of a future saint: Saint Francis de Sales

Francis was born on 21 August 1567 at the Château de Sales, in Thorens, near Annecy in Savoy, in a landscape of mountains and country valleys.

Francis' father was a loyal, chivalrous, generous and at the same time emotional and impulsive man. By virtue of his wisdom and sense of fairness, he was often chosen as an arbitrator in disputes and trials. He was also very welcoming towards the poor in the neighbourhood, to the point that he would give his soup to a poor man rather than send him begging. Of his mother Frances, St Joan de Chantal drew this admirable portrait:

She was one of the most remarkable ladies of her time. She was gifted with a noble and generous soul, but pure, innocent and simple, like a true mother and nurturer of the poor. She was modest, humble and good-natured with everyone, very quiet in her home; she governed her family wisely, concerned to make them live in the fear of God.

At the birth of Francis, her eldest son, she was only fifteen years old, while her husband was over forty. This age difference was not uncommon at the time, especially among nobles, as marriage was considered first and foremost as an alliance between two families in order to have children and enlarge their lands and titles. Sentiment counted for little in those days, which did not prevent this apparently ill-combined union from turning out to be solid and happy.

Motherhood announced itself as particularly difficult. The mother-to-be prayed before the Holy Shroud, then kept in Chambéry, the capital of Savoy. Francis came into the world two months before his natural due date and, fearing for his survival, was quickly baptised.

On Francis, the eldest son, were pinned all the

hopes of his father, who envisaged a prestigious career for him in the service of his country. This project would be a source of difficulty throughout his youth, marked by a tension between obedience to his father and his own particular vocation.

The first six years (1567-1573)

When little Francis was born, his young mother was unable to breastfeed him, so she turned to a peasant girl from the village. Three months later, his godmother, his maternal grandmother took care of him for some time.

"My mother and I", he would one day write, "are one". Indeed, the child "is not yet able to use his will, nor can he love anything but the breast and face of his dear mother." It is a model of abandonment to God's will:

He does not think at all of wanting to be on one side or the other and desires nothing more than to be in the arms of his mother, with whom he thinks he forms one; nor does he care at all to conform his own will to that of his mother, because he does not perceive it, nor does he care to have it, and he lets his mother move, do and decide what she thinks is good for him.

Francis de Sales also stated that children do not laugh before the fortieth day. Only after forty days do they laugh, that is, they are comforted, because, as Virgil says, "only then do they begin to know their mother."

Little Francis was not weaned until November 1569, when he was two years and three months old. At that age, he had already begun to walk and talk. Learning to walk happens progressively and it often happens that children fall to the ground, which is not at all serious, because "while they feel their mother holding them by the sleeves, they walk briskly and wander here and there, without being surprised by the tumbles that their insecure legs make them take." Sometimes it is the father who observes his child, still weak and uncertain as he takes his first steps, and says to him: "take your time,

my child"; if he then falls, he encourages him by saying, "he has taken a leap, he is wise, don't cry"; then he approaches him and gives him his hand.

On the other hand, learning to walk as well as to speak happens by imitation. It is 'by dint of hearing the mother and babbling with her' that the child learns to speak the same language.

Childhood adventures and games

Childhood is the time of discovery and exploration. The little Savoyard observed the nature around him and was enraptured by it. In Sales, on the mountain slope to the east, everything is grandiose, imposing, austere; but along the valley, on the contrary, everything is verdant, fertile and pleasant. At the castle of Brens, in the Chablais, where he probably made several stays between the ages of three and five, little Francis could admire the splendour of Lake Geneva. At Annecy, the lake surrounded by hills and mountains never left him indifferent, as the numerous literary images of navigation show. It is easy to see that Francis de Sales was not a man born in the city.

The world of animals, at that time still very much found in castles, towns and even cities, is an enchantment and a source of instruction for the child. Few authors have spoken of it as abundantly as he did. Much of his (often legendary) information he drew from his readings; however, personal observation must have counted for quite a bit, for instance when he writes that "dawn makes the cock crow; the morning star gladdens the sick, invites the birds to sing."

Little Francis considered at length and admired the work of the bees, observed and listened attentively to the swallows, the doves, the hen and the frogs. How many times did he have to witness the feeding of pigeons in the castle courtyard!

Above all, the child needs to manifest his desire to grow up through play, which is also the school of living together and a way of taking possession of his surroundings.

Did Francis rock on wooden horses? In any case, he recounts in one of his sermons that "children swing on wooden horses, call them horses, neigh for them, run, jump, amuse themselves with this childish amusement." And here is a personal recollection from his childhood: "When we were children, with what care we assembled pieces of tiles, of wood, of mud to build little houses and tiny buildings! And if someone destroyed them we felt lost and cried."

But discovering the world around us does not always happen without risk and learning to walk holds surprises. Fear is sometimes a good counsellor, especially when there is a real risk. If children see a barking dog, "they immediately start screaming and do not stop until they are close to their mother. In her arms they feel safe and as long as they shake her hand they think no one can hurt them." Sometimes, however, the danger is imaginary. Little Francis was afraid of the dark, and here is how he was cured of his fear of the dark: "Little by little, I endeavoured to go alone, with my heart armed only with trust in God, to places where my imagination frightened me; in the end, I became so refreshed that I considered the darkness and solitude of the night delightful, because of this presence of God, which in such solitude becomes even more desirable."

Family upbringing

The first education fell to the mother. An exceptional intimacy was established between the young mother and her first-born son. It was said that she was inclined to cuddle her son, who, moreover, looked a lot like her. She preferred to see him dressed as a pageboy rather than in a play costume. His mother took care of his religious upbringing, and, anxious to teach him her "little creed", took him with her to the parish church in Thorens.

For her part, the child experienced all the affection of which he was the object, and the child's first word would be this: "My God and my mother, they love me so much." "The love of mothers towards their children is always

more tender than that of fathers", Francis de Sales would write, because in his view, "it costs them more." According to a witness, it was he who sometimes consoled his mother in her moments of melancholy by telling her, "Let us turn to the good Lord, my good mother, and he will help us."

From his father he began to learn a "just and reasonable spirit." He made him understand the reason for what was asked of him, teaching him to be responsible for his acts, to never lie, to avoid games of chance, but not those of dexterity and intelligence. He was certainly very pleased with the answer his son gave him when he suddenly asked him what he was thinking about: "My father, I think of God and of being a good man."

To strengthen his character, his father imposed on him a manly lifestyle, the avoidance of bodily comforts, but also open-air games with his cousins Amé, Louis and Gaspard. Above all, Francis spent his childhood and youth with them, at play and at boarding school. He learned to ride horses and handle hunting weapons. He was also given boys from the village as companions, but carefully chosen.

A usually wise and quiet boy, Francis nevertheless manifested surprising fits of rage in certain circumstances. On the occasion of a Protestant's visit to the family castle, he gave vent to his animosity against the chickens, whom he started clubbing, shouting at the top of his voice: "Up! Up! At the heretics!" It would take time and effort to convert to 'Salesian gentleness'.

Entering school

At the age of six or seven, the child reaches the use of reason. For the Church, he or she now has the ability to discern good and evil, and, for humanists, can begin to attend primary school. This is the age at which children in noble families usually pass from the hands of women to those of men, from mother to father, from governess to guardian or tutor. The age of reason also marked, for a small minority of children, entry into a school or boarding school. Now Francis

showed remarkable dispositions to study, indeed such impatience that he begged to be sent to school without delay.

In October 1573, Francis was sent to the boarding school in La Roche, in the company of his cousins Amé, Louis et Gaspard. At the tender age of six, Francis was then separated from his family. He stayed there for two years to do his "little grammar school". The children housed in the town, placed under the supervision of a particular pedagogue, mingled during the day in the mass of three hundred pupils attending the boarding school. A servant of the family took special care of Francis, who was the youngest.

According to what we know of the schools of the time, the children began to read and write, using syllabaries and the first elements of grammar, to recite prayers and selected texts by heart, to learn the rudiments of Latin grammar, the declensions and conjugations of verbs. The commitment to memory, still very much dependent on the didactic method in use, was concentrated above all on religious texts, but emphasis was already placed on the quality of diction, a characteristic trait of humanist education. In terms of moral education, which then occupied an important place in the humanist education of students, it borrowed its models more from pagan antiquity than from Christian authors.

From the very beginning of his studies at the college at La Roche, Francis behaved as an excellent pupil. But this first contact with the scholastic world may have left him with some less pleasant memories, as he himself told a friend. Had it never happened to him to unintentionally miss school and be "in the situation in which good pupils sometimes find themselves who, having arrived late, have cut certain lessons short"?

They would certainly like to return to the compulsory timetable and win back the benevolence of their professors; but oscillating between fear and hope, they cannot decide at what time to appear before the irritated professor; should

they avoid his current anger by sacrificing the hoped-for forgiveness, or obtain his forgiveness by exposing themselves to the risk of being punished? In such hesitation, the child's spirit must struggle to discern what is most advantageous to him.

Two years later, still with his cousins, there he was at the boarding school [college] in Annecy, where Francis would study for three years. With his cousins, he stayed in the city with a lady, whom he called his aunt. After the two years of grammar school at La Roche, he entered the third year of classical studies and made rapid progress. Among the exercises used at the college were declamations. The boy excelled in them, "because he had a noble bearing, a fine physique, an attractive face and an excellent voice."

It seems that discipline was traditional and severe, and we know that a regent behaved like a real chastiser. But Francis' conduct left nothing to be desired; one day he himself would ask to be chastised in place of his cousin Gaspard who cried in fear.

The most important religious event for a child was First Communion, the sacrament by which "we are united and joined to divine goodness and receive the true life of our souls." As he would later say about communion, he had prepared "his little heart to be the dwelling place of Him" who wanted to "possess" it whole. On the same day he received the sacrament of confirmation, the sacrament by which we are united with God "like the soldier with his captain." On that occasion, his parents gave him Fr Jean Déage as his tutor, a gruff, even choleric man, but totally devoted to his pupil, whom he would accompany throughout his education.

On the threshold of adolescence

The years of Francis' childhood and boyhood in Savoy would leave an indelible mark on him, but they would also arouse in his soul the first seeds of a particular vocation. Committed to giving others a good example with

discretion, he intervened with his companions with appropriate initiatives. Still very young, he liked to gather them together to teach them the catechism lesson he was learning. After the games, he would sometimes take them to the church in Thorens, where they had become children of God. On holiday days, he would take them with him for walks in the woods and by the river to sing and pray.

But his intellectual training was only just beginning. At the end of three years at the boarding school in Annecy, he knew everything that Savoy could teach him. His father decided to send him to Paris, the capital of knowledge, to make him a “scholar”. But to which college should he send such a gifted son? His choice was first the college at Navarre attended by the nobility. But Francis cleverly intervened with the help of his mother. At his son’s insistence, his father finally agreed to send him to the Jesuit Fathers’ college in Clermont.

Significantly, before leaving, Francis asked to receive the tonsure, a practice still permitted at the time for boys destined for an ecclesiastical career, which, however, must not have pleased his father, who did not wish an ecclesiastical vocation for his eldest son.

Having reached the threshold of adolescence, the boy began a new stage in his life. “Childhood is beautiful” he would one day write, “but to always want to be a child is to make a wrong choice, because a child of a hundred is despised. To begin to learn is very praiseworthy, but he who begins with the intention of never perfecting himself would be acting against reason.” After receiving in Savoy the seeds of these “manifold gifts of nature and grace”, Francis would find in Paris great opportunities to cultivate and develop them.

The pleasure of loving God like St Francis de Sales

In his famous *Treatise on the Love of God*, St Francis de Sales wanted to present his reader with a summary of his entire doctrine in twelve points. Like Jesus, who practised twelve “acts of love”, he wants to encourage us to practise the following acts in our turn: complacency, benevolence and union; humility, ecstasy and admiration; contemplation, rest and tenderness; jealousy, sickness and the death of love. In speaking of acts of love, he by no means downplays the role of feelings, but proposes the practical exercises that true love requires. It is not surprising that the author of this treatise was proclaimed to be the “doctor of love”.

The pleasure of the human heart

The first act of love for God – but this also applies to love of neighbour – is to practise “complacency”, that is, to seek and find pleasure with him and in him. There is no love without pleasure, as they say. To illustrate this truth, St Francis de Sales offers the example of the bee: “And as the bee being born in honey, feeds on honey, and only flies for honey, so love is born of complacency, maintained by complacency, and tends to complacency.” This is true of human love, but it is also true of divine love.

When Francis was a young student in Paris, he had sought and found this pleasure in the love story told in that marvellous book of the Bible called the Canticle of Canticles, or Song of Songs, to the point of exclaiming in a transport of joy: “I have found Him whom my heart loves, and I shall never leave Him!”

Pleasure moves our hearts in the direction of a beauty that attracts us, of a goodness that delights us, of a kindness that makes us happy. As in human love, pleasure is

the great motor of God's love. The beloved of the Canticle of Canticles loves her beloved because his sight, his presence, all his qualities bring her great happiness.

Meditating on the Canticle of Canticles, the doctor of love did not want to dwell on the carnal pleasures described therein. Not that they are bad in themselves, for it is the Creator who has ordained them in his wisdom, but in certain cases they can give rise to wrong behaviour. Hence this warning, "The one who does not know how to spiritualise them well will only enjoy them in wrongdoing."

In order to avoid any difficulties, Francis de Sales often prefers to describe the child's pleasure at his mother's breast: "The bosom and breasts of the mother are the storeroom of the little infant's treasures: he has no other riches than those, which are more precious unto him than gold or the topaz, more beloved than all the rest of the world."

With these considerations on human love, St Francis de Sales wants to introduce us to the love of God. We know by faith that "the Divinity is an incomprehensible abyss of all perfection, sovereignly infinite in excellence and infinitely sovereign in goodness." If, therefore, we carefully consider the immensity of the perfections that are in God, it is impossible for us not to experience great pleasure. It is this pleasure that makes the beloved of the Canticle say: "How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful You are all desirable, indeed you are desire itself!"

God's pleasure

The most beautiful thing is that in divine love, pleasure is reciprocal, which is not always the case in human love. On the one hand, the human soul receives pleasure in discovering all God's perfections; on the other hand, God rejoices in seeing the pleasure He gives it. In this way, these mutual pleasures 'make love of incomparable delight'. Thus the soul can cry out: "O my king how lovable are thy riches and how rich thy loves! Oh! which of us has more joy, thou that enjoyest it, or I who rejoice thereat!"

In the love duet between God and us, it is actually God who has more pleasure than we do. Francis de Sales states this explicitly: God has “more pleasure in giving his graces than we do in receiving them.” Jesus loved us with a love of complacency because, as the Bible says, “Verily his *delights are to be with the children of men.*”

God did not become man reluctantly, but willingly and joyfully, because he loved us from the beginning. Knowing this, and knowing that God himself is the source of our love, “we delight in God’s pleasure infinitely more than in our own.”

When we think of this mutual happiness, how can we not think of a meal shared with friends? It is this happiness that makes the Lord say in Revelation: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me”

Another image, also found in the Canticle of Canticles, is that of the garden full of “apple trees of his delights”. It is in this garden, the image of the human soul, that the divine Bridegroom comes to dwell with all his gifts. He comes there willingly, for he delights to be with the children of men whom he has made in his image and likeness. And in this garden it is he himself who has planted the loving delight we have in his goodness.

Nothing expresses the mutual happiness of those who love each other better than the expression used by the bride in the Canticle to describe their mutual belonging: “My beloved is mine and I am his.” In other words, she can also say: “God’s goodness is all mine since I enjoy his excellences, and I again am wholly his, seeing that his delights possess me.”

An endless desire

Those who have already tasted God’s love will not cease to desire to taste it more and more, because “while satiating ourselves we would still eat, as whilst eating we feel ourselves satisfied.” The angels who see God continue to

desire him.

Enjoyment is not diminished by desire, but perfected by it; desire is not stifled, but refined by enjoyment. The enjoyment of a good that always satisfies never withers, but is continually renewed and flourishes; it is always lovable and at the same time always desirable.

It is said that there is a herb with extraordinary properties: whoever holds it in their mouth is never hungry or thirsty, so full is it, and yet it never makes one lose their appetite. Rest of heart does not consist in remaining still, but in needing nothing but God; it does not consist in not moving, but in having no impediment to move.

The chameleon is said to live on air and wind; wherever it goes, it has something to eat. So why does it always go from one place to another? Not because it is looking for something to satisfy its hunger, but because it is always practising feeding on the air of time. He who desires God by possessing Him does not desire Him to seek Him, but to exercise the affection he enjoys.

When we walk to a beautiful garden, we do not stop walking once we get there, but we take advantage of it to stroll and pass the time pleasantly.

Let us therefore follow the exhortation of the Psalmist: *"Seek ye the Lord and be strengthened, seek his face evermore."* Let us always seek the one we love, says St Augustine; love seeks what it has found, not to have it, but to have it always.

Pleasure beyond suffering

Suffering is not contrary to pleasure. According to St Francis de Sales, Jesus took pleasure in suffering, because he loved his torments. At the height of his passion, he was content to die in pain for me. It was this pleasure that made him say on the cross: "All is accomplished."

It will be the same for us if we share our sufferings with his. "The more our friend is dear to us," says the doctor of love, "the more we enjoy sharing his joys and

sorrows." *"Now shall I die with joy,"* said Jacob after seeing his son Joseph, whom he thought dead. It was the delight in Jesus' passion that drew his stigmata to St Francis and St Catherine of Siena. Curiously, honey makes absinthe even more bitter, but the sweet scent of roses is sharpened by the proximity of sour garlic. Similarly, the compassion we feel for Jesus' sufferings does not take away our delight in his love.

St Francis de Sales wants to teach us both the suffering that comes from love and the love of suffering, loving compassion and sorrowful complacency, lovingly sorrowful ecstasy and sorrowfully loving ecstasy. When the great holy souls suffered the stigmata, they tasted the "joyous love of suffering for a beloved one" who died on the cross. The love gave them such happiness that sharing in Jesus' sufferings filled them with a sense of consolation and happiness.

St Paul's love for the life, passion and death of his Lord was so great that he derived extraordinary pleasure from it. We see this clearly when he says he wanted to glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Elsewhere he also says: "'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." St Clare so delighted in the Saviour's passion that she drew upon herself all the signs of his passion, her heart "being made such as the things it loved."

Everyone should know how much the Saviour longs to enter our souls through this love of sorrowful compassion. In the Canticle of Canticles, the beloved implores his beloved: "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night." This dew and these drops of the night are the afflictions and pains of his passion. The divine Lover, laden with the sorrows and sweats of his passion, also says to me: "Open then thy heart towards me as the pearl-mothers open their shells towards the sky, and I will shed upon thee the

dew of my passion, which will be changed into pearls of consolation.”

The “misunderstood” God of St Francis de Sales

A curious episode

In the life of Francis de Sales, a young student in Paris, there is a curious episode that had great repercussions throughout the rest of his life and in his thinking. It was *Carnevale* day (Carnival). While everyone was thinking about having fun, the 17-year-old seemed preoccupied, even sad. Not knowing whether he was ill or simply melancholic, his tutor suggested he go to see the festival performances. Faced with this suggestion, the young man suddenly formulated this biblical prayer: “Turn away my eyes from seeing vain things”. Then he added: “Lord, let me see”. See what? He replied: “Sacred theology; it is this that will teach me what God wants my soul to learn.”

Until then Francis had studied the pagan authors of antiquity with great profit and even success. He liked them and was very successful in his studies. However, his heart was unsatisfied, he was looking for something or rather someone who could satisfy his desire. With the permission of his tutor, he began at that time to attend lectures given by the great professor of Sacred Scripture, Gilbert Genebrard, who was commenting on a book of the Bible that tells the love story of two lovers: the *Song of Songs*.

The love described in this book is the love between a man and a woman. However, the love celebrated in the

Song of Songs can also be understood as the spiritual love of the human soul with God, Genebrard explained to his students, and it is this entirely spiritual interpretation that enchanted the young student, who rejoiced in the words of the bride: "I have found Him whom my heart loves."

The *Song of Songs* became the favourite book of St Francis de Sales from then on. According to Father Lajeunie, the future Doctor of the Church had found in this holy book "the inspiration of his life, the theme of his masterpiece (the *Treatise on the Love of God*), and the best source of his optimism." For Francis, Father Ravier also assures us, it was like a revelation, and from then on "he could no longer conceive of the spiritual life other than as a love story, the most beautiful of love stories."

No wonder, then, that Francis de Sales has become the "doctor of love" and that the theme of love has been the focus of the commemoration marking the fourth centenary of his death (1622-2022). Already in 1967, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of his birth, St Paul VI had described him as a "doctor of divine love and evangelical gentleness". Fifty-five years later, on the anniversary of Francis de Sales' birth to heaven, Pope Francis, with his Apostolic Letter *Totum Amoris Est*, offers us new insights into the life and doctrine of the holy bishop and authoritatively re-proposes to us the true face of God often ignored or misunderstood.

The misunderstood God

In the time of Francis de Sales, King Henry IV of France, a great admirer of the abilities and virtues of the bishop of Geneva, one day regretted with him the distorted image his contemporaries had of God. According to a witness, the king "saw several of his subjects experiencing all kinds of freedoms, saying that the goodness and greatness of God did not closely care for the deeds of men, which he was strongly critical of. He saw others, in great numbers, who had a low opinion of God, believing that he was always ready to surprise

them, waiting only for the hour when they had fallen into some slight fault to condemn them eternally, which he did not approve of.”

Francis de Sales, for his part, was well aware that he was offering an image of God different from those very common in his day. In one of his sermons, he likened himself to the Apostle Paul as he announced the unknown God to the Athenians: “It is not that I want to speak to you about an unknown God” he pointed out, “since, thanks to his goodness, we know him, but I could certainly speak of a misunderstood God. I, therefore, will not make you know, but discover, that so lovable God who died for us.”

The God of St Francis de Sales is not a policeman God nor a distant God, as many of his time believed him to be, and he is not the God of “predestination”, who has always predestined some to heaven and others to hell, as many of his contemporaries claimed, but a God who wants the salvation of all. He is not a distant, solitary and indifferent God, but a God who is provident and “ready for communication”, a God who is attractive like the Bridegroom in the *Song of Songs* to whom the bride addresses these words: ‘Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes...Take me away with you—let us hurry!’

If God attracts man, it is so that man becomes a co-operator with God. This God respects man’s freedom and capacity for initiative, as Pope Francis reminds us. With a God with a loving face like the one proposed by Francis de Sales, communication becomes a “heart to heart”, the aim of which is union with him. It is a friendship, because friendship is communication of goods, exchange and reciprocity.

The God of the human heart

In the Old Testament, God is called God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. The covenant established by God with the patriarchs truly signifies the deep,

unbreakable bond between the Lord and his people. In the New Testament, the covenant established in Jesus Christ unites all men, all humanity. Henceforth, everyone can invoke God with this prayer of St Francis de Sales: "O my God, you are my God, *the God of my heart*, the God of my soul, the God of my spirit."

These expressions mean that for St Francis de Sales, our God is not only the God of the human heart in the person of the God made man, but also the God of the human heart. True, the Son of Mary receiving from her his humanity, received a human heart, both strong and gentle. But by the expression "God of the human heart", the doctor of love means that the face of our God corresponds to the desires, the deepest expectations of the human heart. Man finds in the heart of Jesus the unexpected fulfilment of a love he dared not even think or imagine.

The young Francis felt this when he discovered the love story delivered in the *Song of Songs*. The bride and the Bridegroom, the human soul and Jesus discover themselves made for each other. It is not possible that their meeting was accidental. God made them for each other in such a way that the bride can say: "You are mine and I am yours". All that St Francis de Sales said and wrote vibrates with this wonderful story of mutual belonging.

In Psalm 72, St Francis de Sales read these words that struck him: "God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." He liked the expression "God of my heart" very much. According to the doctor of love, "if man thinks with a little attention of the divinity, he immediately feels some sweet emotion in his heart, which proves that God is the God of the human heart." To St Joan de Chantal, with whom he founded the order of the Visitation, he recommended saying often: "You are the God of my heart and the inheritance I desire eternally."

If we have unruly affections or if our affections in this world are too strong, even if they are good and legitimate, we need to cut them off in order to be able to say to Our Lord like David: "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot." For it is for this intention that Our Lord comes to us, that we may all be in him and for him.

The heart of Jesus is the place of true rest. It is the dwelling place "most spacious and dearest to my heart", confided St Francis de Sales, who made this intention: "I will establish my dwelling place in the furnace of love, in the divine heart pierced for me. At this burning hearth, I shall feel the flame of love, hitherto so languid, revive in the midst of my bowels. Ah! Lord, your heart is the true Jerusalem; allow me to choose it forever as the place of my rest."

No wonder, then, that the treasures of the Heart of Jesus were revealed to a spiritual daughter of St Francis de Sales, Margaret Mary Alacoque, the religious of the Visitation of Paray-le-Monial. Jesus said to her: "Behold this Heart that so loved men, to the point of consuming itself entirely for them."

Two centuries later, St Francis de Sales, his disciple and imitator, Don Bosco, said that "education is a thing of the heart": all work starts here, and if the heart is not there, the work is difficult and the outcome is uncertain. He also said: "May young people not only be loved, but may they themselves know that they are loved." Loved by God and by their educators. It is from this assumption that Don Bosco passed on to the Salesian Family, that Salesian educational activity begins.