

Educating the Faculties of Our Spirit with Saint Francis de Sales

St. Francis de Sales presents the spirit as the highest part of the soul, governed by intellect, memory, and will. At the heart of his pedagogy is the authority of reason, a “divine torch” that truly makes a person human and must guide, illuminate, and discipline passions, imagination, and the senses. To educate the spirit therefore means cultivating the intellect through study, meditation, and contemplation, exercising memory as a repository of received graces, and strengthening the will so that it consistently chooses good. From this harmony flow the cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance – which shape free, balanced individuals capable of genuine charity.

Francis de Sales considers the spirit as the higher part of the soul. Its faculties are the intellect, memory, and will. Imagination could be part of it to the extent that reason and will intervene in its functioning. The will, for its part, is the master faculty to which particular treatment should be reserved. The spirit makes humans, according to the classic definition, a “rational animal.” “We are human only through reason,” writes Francis de Sales. After “bodily graces,” there are “gifts of the spirit,” which should be the object of our reflections and our gratitude. Among these, the author of the *Philothea* distinguishes the gifts received from nature and those acquired through education:

Consider the gifts of the spirit; how many people in the world are foolish, furiously mad, mentally deficient. Why are you not among them? God has favoured you. How many have been educated rudely and in the most extreme ignorance; but you, divine Providence has had you raised in a civil and honourable

way.

Reason, "Divine Torch"

In an Exercise of Sleep or Spiritual Rest, composed in Padua when he was twenty-three years old, Francis proposed to meditate on an astonishing topic:

I will stop to admire the beauty of the reason that God has given to man, so that, illuminated and instructed by its marvellous splendour, he may hate vice and love virtue. Oh! Let us follow the shining light of this divine torch, because it is given to us for use to see where we must put our feet! Ah! If we let ourselves be guided by its dictates, we will rarely stumble; it will be difficult to hurt ourselves.

"Natural reason is a good tree that God has planted in us; the fruits that come from it can only be good," affirms the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. It is true that it is "gravely wounded and almost dead because of sin," but its exercise is not fundamentally impeded.

In the inner kingdom of man, "reason must be the queen, to whom all the faculties of our spirit, all our senses, and the body itself must remain absolutely subject." It is reason that distinguishes man from animal, so we must be careful not to imitate "the apes and monkeys that are always sullen, sad, and lamenting when the moon is missing; then, on the contrary, at the new moon, they jump, dance, and make all possible grimaces." It is necessary to make "the authority of reason" reign, Francis de Sales reiterates.

Between the upper part of the spirit, which must reign, and the lower part of our being, sometimes designated by Francis de Sales with the biblical term "flesh," the struggle sometimes becomes bitter. Each front has its allies. The spirit, "fortress of the soul," is accompanied "by three soldiers: the intellect, memory, and will." Therefore, beware of the "flesh" that plots and seeks allies on the spot:

The flesh now uses the intellect, now the will, now the imagination, which, associating against reason, leave it free field, creating division and doing a bad service to reason. [...] The flesh allures the will sometimes with pleasures, sometimes with riches; now it urges the imagination to make claims; now it arouses in the intellect a great curiosity, all under the pretext of good.

In this struggle, even when all the passions of the soul seem upset, nothing is lost as long as the spirit resists: "If these soldiers were faithful, the spirit would have no fear and would not give any weight to its enemies: like soldiers who, having sufficient ammunition, resist in the bastion of an impregnable fortress, despite the fact that the enemies are in the suburbs or have even already taken the city. It happened to the citadel of Nizza, before which the force of three great princes did not prevail against the resistance of the defenders." The cause of all these inner lacerations is self-love. In fact, "our reasonings are ordinarily full of motivations, opinions, and considerations suggested by self-love, and this causes great conflicts in the soul."

In the educative field, it is important to make the superiority of the spirit felt. "Here lies the principle of a human education," says Father Lejeune, "to show the child, as soon as his reason awakens, what is beautiful and good, and to turn him away from what is bad; in this way, to create in his heart the habit of controlling his instinctive reflexes, instead of following them slavishly. It is thus, in fact, that this process of sensualisation is formed which makes him a slave to his spontaneous desires. At the moment of decisive choices, this habit of always yielding, without controlling oneself, to instinctive impulses can prove catastrophic."

The Intellect, "Eye of the Soul"

The intellect, a typically human and rational

faculty, which allows us to know and understand, is often compared to sight. For example, we say: "I see," to mean: "I understand." For Francis de Sales, the intellect is "the eye of the soul"; hence his expression "the eye of your intellect." The incredible activity of which it is capable makes it similar to "a worker, who, with hundreds of thousands of eyes and hands, like another Argus, performs more works than all the workers in the world, because there is nothing in the world that he is not able to represent."

How does the human intellect work? Francis de Sales has precisely analysed the four operations of which it is capable: simple thought, study, meditation, and contemplation. Simple thought is exercised on a great diversity of things, without any purpose, "as flies do that land on flowers without wanting to extract any juice, but only because they meet them." When the intellect passes from one thought to another, the thoughts that thus cram it are ordinarily "useless and harmful." Study, on the contrary, aims to consider things "to know them, to understand them, and to speak well of them," with the aim of "filling the memory," as beetles do that "land on roses for no other purpose than to satiate themselves and fill their bellies."

Francis de Sales could have stopped here, but he knew and recommended two other higher forms. While study aims to increase knowledge, meditation aims to "move the affections and, in particular, love": "Let us fix our intellect on the mystery from which we hope to draw good affections," like the dove that "coos holding its breath and, by the grumbling that it produces in its throat without letting the breath out, produces its typical song."

The supreme activity of the intellect is contemplation, which consists in rejoicing in the good known through meditation and loved through such knowledge; this time we resemble the little birds that frolic in the cage only to "please the master." With contemplation, the human spirit reaches its peak; the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God* affirms that reason "finally vivifies the intellect with

contemplation.”

Let us return to study, the intellectual activity that interests us more closely. “There is an old axiom of philosophers, according to which every man desires to know.” Taking up this affirmation of Aristotle on his part, as well as the example of Plato, Francis de Sales intends to demonstrate that this constitutes a great privilege. What man wants to know is the truth. The truth is more beautiful than that “famous Helen, for whose beauty so many Greeks and Trojans died.” The spirit is made for the search for truth: “Truth is the object of our intellect, which, consequently, discovering and knowing the truth of things, feels fully satisfied and content.” When the spirit finds something new, it experiences an intense joy, and when one begins to find something beautiful, one is driven to continue the search, “like those who have found a gold mine and push themselves further and further to find even more of this precious metal.” The amazement that the discovery produces is a powerful stimulus; “admiration, in fact, has given rise to philosophy and the careful search for natural things.” Since God is the supreme truth, the knowledge of God is the supreme science that fills our spirit. It is he who “has given us the intellect to know him”; outside of him there are only “vain thoughts and useless reflections!”

Cultivating One's Intelligence

What characterizes man is the great desire to know. It was this desire that “induced the great Plato to leave Athens and run so far,” and “induced these ancient philosophers to renounce their bodily comforts.” Some even go so far as to fast diligently “in order to study better.” Study, in fact, produces an intellectual pleasure, superior to sensual pleasures and difficult to stop: “Intellectual love, finding unexpected contentment in union with its object, perfects its knowledge, continuing thus to unite with it, and uniting ever more, does not cease to continue to do so.”

It is a matter of “illuminating the intellect

well," striving to "purge" it from the darkness of "ignorance." He denounces "the dullness and indolence of spirit, which does not want to know what is necessary" and insists on the value of study and learning: "Study ever more, with diligence and humility," he wrote to a student. But it is not enough to "purge" the intellect of ignorance; it is also necessary to "embellish and adorn" it, to "wallpaper it with considerations." To know a thing perfectly, it is necessary to learn well, to dedicate time to "subjecting" the intellect, that is, to fixing it on one thing before moving on to another.

The young Francis de Sales applied his intelligence not only to studies and intellectual knowledge, but also to certain subjects essential to man's life on earth, and, in particular, to "consideration of the vanity of greatness, riches, honours, comforts, and voluptuous pleasures of this world"; to "consideration of the wickedness, abjection, and deplorable misery present in vice and sin," and to "knowledge of the excellence of virtue."

The human spirit is often distracted, forgets, and is content with vague or vain knowledge. Through meditation, not only on eternal truths, but also on the phenomena and events of the world, it is able to reach a more realistic and profound vision of reality. For this reason, in the *Meditations* proposed by the author to *Philothea*, there is dedicated a first part entitled *Considerations*.

To consider means to apply the mind to a precise object, to examine its different aspects carefully. Francis de Sales invites *Philothea* to "think," to "see," to examine the different "points," some of which deserve to be considered "separately." He urges her to see things in general and then to descend to particular cases. He wants her to examine the principles, causes, and consequences of a given truth, of a given situation, as well as the circumstances that accompany it. It is also necessary to know how to "weigh" certain words or sentences, the importance of which risks escaping us, to consider them one by one, to compare them with each other.

As in everything, so in the desire to know there can be excesses and distortions. Beware of the vanity of false wise men: some, in fact, "for the little science they have, want to be honoured and respected by all, as if everyone should go to their school and have them as teachers: therefore, they are called pedants." Now, "science dishonours us when it swells us up and degenerates into pedantry." What ridiculousness to want to instruct Minerva, *Minervam docere*, the goddess of wisdom! "The plague of science is presumption, which swells spirits and makes them hydroponic, as are ordinarily the wise men of the world."

When it comes to problems that surpass us and fall within the realm of the mysteries of faith, it is necessary to "purify them from all curiosity;" we must "keep them well closed and covered in the face of such vain and foolish questions and curiosities." It is "intellectual purity," the "second modesty" or "inner modesty." Finally, one must know that the intellect can be mistaken and that there is the "sin of the intellect," such as that which Francis de Sales reproaches to the lady of Chantal, who had made a mistake by placing an exaggerated esteem in her director.

Memory and its "warehouses"

Like the intellect, so memory is a faculty of the spirit that arouses admiration. Francis de Sales compares it to a warehouse "that is worth more than those of Antwerp or Venice." Is it not said "*to store*" in memory? Memory is a soldier whose fidelity is very useful to us. It is a gift from God, declares the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*: God has given it to you "so that you may remember him," he says to *Philothea*, inviting her to flee "detestable and frivolous memories."

This faculty of the human spirit needs to be trained. When he was a student in Padua, the young Francis exercised his memory not only in his studies, but also in his spiritual life, in which the memory of benefits received is a fundamental element:

First of all, I will dedicate myself to refreshing my memory with all the good motions, desires, affections, purposes, projects, feelings, and sweetnesses that the divine Majesty has inspired and made me experience in the past, considering its holy mysteries, the beauty of virtue, the nobility of its service, and an infinity of benefits that it has freely bestowed upon me; I will also put order in my memories about the obligations I have towards her for the fact that, by her holy grace, she has sometimes weakened my senses by sending me certain illnesses and infirmities, from which I have drawn great profit.

In difficulties and fears, it is indispensable to use it "to remember the promises" and to "remain firm trusting that everything will perish rather than the promises will fail." However, the memory of the past is not always good, because it can engender sadness, as happened to a disciple of St. Bernard, who was assailed by a bad temptation when he began "to remember the friends of the world, the relatives, the goods he had left." In certain exceptional circumstances of the spiritual life "it is necessary to purify it from the memory of perishable things and from worldly affairs and to forget for a certain time material and temporal things, although good and useful." In the moral field, to exercise virtue, the person who has felt offended will take a radical measure: "I remember too much the taunts and injuries, from now on I will lose the memory."

"We must have a just and reasonable spirit"

The capacities of the human spirit, in particular of the intellect and memory, are not destined only for glorious intellectual enterprises, but also and above all for the conduct of life. To seek to know man, to understand life, and to define the norms concerning behaviours conforming to reason, these should be the fundamental tasks of the human spirit and its education. The central part of *Philothea*, which deals with the "exercise of virtues," contains, towards the

end, a chapter that summarizes in a certain way the teaching of Francis de Sales on virtues: "We must have a just and reasonable spirit."

With finesse and a pinch of humour, the author denounces numerous bizarre, foolish, or simply unjust behaviours: "We accuse our neighbour for little, and we excuse ourselves for much more"; "we want to sell at a high price and buy cheaply"; "what we do for others always seems a lot to us, and what others do for us is nothing"; "we have a sweet, gracious, and courteous heart towards ourselves, and a hard, severe, and rigorous heart towards our neighbour"; "we have two weights: one to weigh our comforts with the greatest possible advantage for us, the other to weigh those of our neighbour with the greatest disadvantage that can be." To judge well, he advises *Philothea*, it is always necessary to put oneself in the shoes of one's neighbour: "Make yourself a seller in buying and a buyer in selling." Nothing is lost by living as "generous, noble, courteous people, with a regal, constant, and reasonable heart."

Reason is at the base of the edifice of education. Certain parents do not have a right mental attitude; in fact, "there are virtuous children whom fathers and mothers can hardly bear because they have this or that defect in the body; there are instead vicious ones continuously pampered, because they have this or that beautiful physical gift." There are educators and leaders who indulge in preferences. "Keep the balance straight between your daughters," he recommended to a superior of the Visitation nuns, so that "natural gifts do not make you distribute affections and Favours unjustly." And he added: "Beauty, good grace, and gentle speech often confer a great force of attraction on people who live according to their natural inclinations; charity has as its object true virtue and the beauty of the heart, and extends to all without particularisms."

But it is above all youth that runs the greatest risks, because if "self-love usually distances us from reason," this perhaps happens even more in young people

tempted by vanity and ambition. The reason of a young person risks being lost above all when he lets himself "be taken by infatuations." Therefore, attention, writes the bishop to a young man, "not to allow your affections to prevent judgment and reason in the choice of subjects to love; since, once it has started running, affection drags judgment, as it would drag a slave, to very deplorable choices, of which he might repent very soon." He also explained to the Visitation nuns that "our thoughts are usually full of reasons, opinions, and considerations suggested by self-love, which causes great conflicts in the soul."

Reason, source of the four cardinal virtues

Reason resembles the river of paradise, "which God makes flow to irrigate the whole man in all his faculties and activities." It is divided into four branches corresponding to the four virtues that philosophical tradition calls cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

Prudence "inclines our intellect to truly discern the evil to be avoided and the good to be done." It consists in "discerning which are the most appropriate means to reach the good and virtue." Beware of passions that risk deforming our judgment and causing the ruin of prudence! Prudence does not oppose simplicity: we will be, jointly, "prudent as serpents so as not to be deceived; simple as doves so as not to deceive anyone."

Justice consists in "rendering to God, to our neighbour, and to ourselves what is due." Francis de Sales begins with justice towards God, connected with the virtue of religion, "by which we render to God the respect, honour, homage, and submission due to him as our sovereign Lord and first principle." Justice towards parents entails the duty of piety, which "extends to all the offices that can legitimately be rendered to them, whether in honour or in service."

The virtue of fortitude helps to "overcome the difficulties that are encountered in doing good and in

rejecting evil.” It is very necessary, because the sensitive appetite is “truly a rebellious, seditious, turbulent subject.” When reason dominates the passions, anger gives way to gentleness, a great ally of reason. Fortitude is often accompanied by magnanimity, “a virtue that pushes and inclines us to perform actions of great importance.”

Finally, temperance is indispensable “to repress the disordered inclinations of sensuality,” to “govern the appetite of greed,” and to “curb the passions connected.” In effect, if the soul becomes too passionate about a pleasure and a sensible joy, it degrades itself, rendering itself incapable of higher joys.

In conclusion, the four cardinal virtues are like the manifestations of this natural light that reason provides us. By practicing these virtues, reason exercises “its superiority and the authority it has to regulate sensual appetites.”

With Nino Baglieri, Pilgrim of Hope, on the Journey of the Jubilee

The path of the 2025 Jubilee, dedicated to Hope, finds a shining witness in the story of the Servant of God Nino Baglieri. From the dramatic fall that left him tetraplegic at seventeen to his inner rebirth in 1978, Baglieri moved from the shadow of despair to the light of active faith, transforming his bed of suffering into a throne of joy. His story intertwines the five Jubilee signs – pilgrimage, door, profession of faith, charity, and reconciliation – showing that Christian hope is not escapism but a strength that opens

the future and supports every journey.

1. Hoping as Waiting

Hope, according to the online Treccani dictionary, is a feeling of “trustful expectation in the present or future fulfillment of what is desired.” The etymology of the noun “hope” comes from the Latin *spes*, which in turn derives from the Sanskrit root *spa-* meaning to stretch toward a goal. In Spanish, “to hope” and “to wait” are both translated with the verb *esperar*, which combines both meanings in one word: as if one could only wait for what one hopes for. This state of mind allows us to face life and its challenges with courage and a heart always burning with light. Hope is expressed – positively or negatively – in some popular proverbs: “Hope is the last to die,” “While there is life, there is hope,” “He who lives by hope dies in despair.”

Almost gathering this “shared feeling” about hope, but aware of the need to help rediscover hope in its fullest and truest dimension, Pope Francis dedicated the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025 to Hope (*Spes non confundit* [Hope does not disappoint] is the bull of convocation) and already in 2014 said: “The resurrection of Jesus is not the happy ending of a beautiful fairy tale; it is not the happy end of a movie; it is the intervention of God the Father where human hope breaks down. At the moment when everything seems lost, in the moment of pain, when many people feel the need to get down from the cross, that is the moment closest to the resurrection. The night becomes darkest just before the morning begins, before the light begins. In the darkest moment God intervenes and raises up” (cf. Audience of 16 April 2014).

In this context, the story of the **Servant of God Nino Baglieri** (Modica, May 1, 1951 – March 2, 2007) fits perfectly. As a seventeen-year-old bricklayer, he fell from a seventeen-meter-high scaffold due to the sudden collapse of a plank, crashing to the ground and becoming tetraplegic: from that fall on May 6, 1968, he could only move his head and

neck, depending on others for life in everything, even the simplest and humblest things. Nino could not even shake a friend's hand or caress his mother... and saw his dreams vanish. What hope for life did this young man have now? What feelings could he face? What future awaited him? Nino's first response was despair, total darkness before a search for meaning that found no answer. First a long wandering through hospitals in different Italian regions, then the pity of friends and acquaintances led Nino to rebel and lock himself away in ten long years of loneliness and anger, while the tunnel of life grew ever deeper.

In Greek mythology, Zeus entrusts Pandora with a jar containing all the evils of the world; when opened, men lose immortality and begin a life of suffering. To save them, Pandora reopens the jar and releases *elpis*, hope, which remained at the bottom. It was the only antidote to life's troubles. Looking instead to the Giver of all good, we know that "hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5). Pope Francis writes in *Spes non confundit*: "In the sign of this hope, the apostle Paul encourages the Christian community in Rome [...] Everyone hopes. In the heart of every person is enclosed hope as desire and expectation of good, even without knowing what tomorrow will bring. The unpredictability of the future, however, gives rise to sometimes opposing feelings: from trust to fear, from serenity to discouragement, from certainty to doubt. We often meet discouraged people who look to the future with skepticism and pessimism, as if nothing could offer them happiness. May the Jubilee be an opportunity for all to revive hope" (ibid., 1).

2. From Witness of "Despair" to "Ambassador" of Hope

Let us return to the story of our Servant of God, Nino Baglieri.

Ten long years had to pass before Nino emerged from the tunnel of despair, the thick darkness cleared, and Light entered. It was the afternoon of March 24, Good Friday 1978, when Father Aldo Modica, with a group of young people,

went to Nino's home, urged by his mother Peppina and some people involved in the Renewal in the Spirit movement, then in its early days in the nearby Salesian parish. Nino writes, "While they invoked the Holy Spirit, I felt a very strange sensation, a great warmth invaded my body, a strong tingling in all my limbs, as if a new strength entered me and something old left. At that moment I said my 'yes' to the Lord, accepted my cross, and was reborn to a new life, becoming a new man. Ten years of despair erased in a few moments, because an unknown joy entered my heart. I desired the healing of my body, but the Lord granted me an even greater grace: spiritual healing."

A new path began for Nino: from "witness of despair" he became a "pilgrim of hope." No longer isolated in his little room but an "ambassador" of this hope, he shared his experience through a broadcast on a local radio station and – an even greater grace – God gave him the joy of being able to write with his mouth. Nino confides: "In March 1979 the Lord performed a great miracle for me: I learned to write with my mouth. I started like this; I was with my friends doing homework, I asked for a pencil and a notebook, I began making marks and drawing something, but then I discovered I could write, and so I began to write." He then began to write his memoirs and correspond with people of all kinds around the world, thousands of letters still preserved today. The regained hope made him creative; now Nino rediscovered the joy of relationships and wanted to become – as much as he could – independent. With a stick he used with his mouth and an elastic band attached to the phone, he dialed numbers to communicate with many sick people, offering them words of comfort. He discovered a new way to face his suffering, which brought him out of isolation and set him on the path to becoming a witness to the Gospel of joy and hope. "Now there is so much joy in my heart, there is no more pain in me, in my heart there is Your love. Thank you, my Lord Jesus, from my bed of pain I want to praise you and with all my heart thank you because you called me to know life, to know true life."

Nino changed perspective, made a 360° turn – the Lord gave him **conversion** – and placed his trust in that merciful God who, through “misfortune,” called him to work in His vineyard, to be a sign and instrument of salvation and hope. Thus, many who came to console him left comforted, with tears in their eyes. They did not find on that little bed a sad and gloomy man, but a smiling face that radiated – despite many sufferings, including bedsores and respiratory problems – the joy of living; the smile was constant on his face, and Nino felt “useful from the bed of the cross.” Nino Baglieri is the opposite of many people today, constantly searching for the meaning of life, aiming for easy success and the happiness of fleeting and worthless things, living online, consuming life with a click, wanting everything immediately but with sad, dull eyes. Nino apparently had nothing, yet he had peace and joy in his heart. He did not live isolated but supported by God’s love expressed through the embrace and presence of his entire family and more and more people who knew him and connected with him.

3. Rekindling Hope

Building hope means that every time I am not satisfied with my life and I commit to changing it. Every time I do not let negative experiences harden me or make me distrustful. Every time I fall and try to get up, not allowing fears to have the last word. Every time, in a world marked by conflicts, I choose trust and always try again, with everyone. Every time I do not flee from God’s dream that tells me, “I want you to be happy,” “I want you to have a full life... full even of holiness.” The pinnacle of the virtue of hope is indeed a gaze toward Heaven to live well on earth or, as Don Bosco would say, **walking with feet on the ground and heart in Heaven.**

In this furrow of hope, the Jubilee finds fulfillment, which, with its signs, asks us to set out, to cross some frontiers.

First sign, the pilgrimage: when moving from one

place to another, one is open to the new, to change. Jesus' whole life was "a setting out," a journey of evangelization fulfilled in the gift of life and beyond, with the Resurrection and Ascension.

Second sign, the door: in John 10:9 Jesus says, "I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved; he will come in and go out and find pasture." Passing through the door means being welcomed, being community. The Gospel also speaks of the "narrow door": the Jubilee becomes a path of conversion.

Third sign, the profession of faith: expressing belonging to Christ and the Church and declaring it publicly.

Fourth sign, charity: charity is the password to heaven; in 1 Peter 4:8 the apostle Peter admonishes, "Keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."

Fifth sign, therefore, reconciliation and Jubilee indulgence: it is a "favorable time" (cf. 2 Cor 6:2) to experience God's great mercy and walk paths of rapprochement and forgiveness toward others; to live the prayer of the Our Father where we ask, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It is becoming new creatures.

Even in Nino's life, there are episodes that connect him – along the "thread" of hope – to these Jubilee dimensions. For example, his repentance for some childhood mischiefs, like when three of them (he recounts), "stole the offerings from the sacristy during Masses, we used them to play foosball. When you meet bad companions, they lead you astray. Then one took the Oratory keys and hid them in my schoolbag in the study; they found the keys, called the parents, gave us two slaps, and kicked us out of school. Shame!" But above all, in Nino's life there is charity, helping the poor person in physical and moral trial, reaching out to those with psychological struggles, and writing to brothers in prison to testify to them God's goodness and love. Nino, who before the fall had been a bricklayer, writes, "[I]

liked to build with my hands something that would last over time: even now I feel like a bricklayer working in God's Kingdom, to leave something that lasts, to see the Wonderful Works of God that He accomplishes in our Life." He confides, "My body seems dead, but my heart keeps beating in my chest. My legs do not move, yet I walk the paths of the world."

4. Pilgrim Toward Heaven

Nino, a consecrated Salesian cooperator of the great Salesian Family, ended his earthly "pilgrimage" on Friday, March 2, 2007, at 8:00 a.m., at only 55 years old, having spent 39 years tetraplegic between bed and wheelchair, after asking forgiveness from his family for the hardships his condition caused. He left this world dressed in tracksuit and sneakers, as he expressly requested, to run in the green flowering meadows and leap like a deer along the streams. We read in his spiritual Testament, "I will never stop thanking you, O Lord, for having called me to You through the Cross on May 6, 1968. A heavy cross for my young strength..." On March 2, life – a continuous gift that begins with parents and is slowly nurtured with wonder and beauty – placed the most important piece for Nino Baglieri: the embrace with his Lord and God, accompanied by the Madonna.

At the news of his passing, a unanimous chorus rose from many quarters: "a saint has died," a man who made his bed of the cross the banner of a full life, a gift for all. Thus, a great witness of hope.

Five years after his death, as provided by the *Normae Servandae in Inquisitionibus ab Episcopis faciendis in Causis Sanctorum* of 1983, the bishop of the Diocese of Noto, at the request of the Postulator General of the Salesian Congregation, after consulting the Sicilian Episcopal Conference and obtaining the *Nihil obstat* from the Holy See, opened the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Nino Baglieri.

The diocesan process, lasting 12 years, followed two main lines: the work of the Historical Commission, which

researched, collected, studied, and presented many sources, especially writings “by” and “about” the Servant of God; and the Ecclesiastical Tribunal, responsible for the Inquiry, which also heard witnesses under oath.

This process concluded on May 5, 2024, in the presence of Monsignor Salvatore Rumeo, current bishop of the Diocese of Noto. A few days later, the procedural acts were delivered to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, which opened them on June 21, 2024. At the beginning of 2025, the same Dicastery declared their “Legal Validity,” allowing the Roman phase of the Cause to enter full swing.

Now the contribution to the Cause continues also by spreading knowledge of Nino’s figure, who at the end of his earthly journey recommended: “Do not leave me doing nothing. I will continue my mission from heaven. I will write to you from Paradise.”

The journey of hope in his company thus becomes a longing for Heaven, when “we will meet face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12) and will be able to read with joyful admiration the mystery of the universe, which will share with us endless fullness [...]. Meanwhile, we unite to take care of this home entrusted to us, knowing that whatever good is in it will be taken up in the feast of heaven. Together with all creatures, we walk on this earth seeking God [...] We walk singing!” (cf. *Laudato Si’*, 243-244).

Roberto Chiaramonte

St Dominic Savio. The places

of his childhood

Saint Dominic Savio, the “little great saint,” lived his brief but intense childhood among the hills of Piedmont, in places now steeped in memory and spirituality. On the occasion of his beatification in 1950, this young disciple of Don Bosco was celebrated as a symbol of purity, faith, and devotion to the Gospel. We retrace the principal places of his childhood—Riva presso Chieri, Morialdo, and Mondonio—through historical testimonies and vivid accounts, revealing the family, scholastic, and spiritual environment that forged his path to sainthood.

The Holy Year 1950 was also the year Dominic Savio was beatified, which took place on 5 March. The 15-year-old disciple of Don Bosco was the first lay saint ‘confessor’ to ascend the altars at such a young age.

On that day, St Peter’s Basilica was packed with young people who bore witness, by their presence in Rome, to a Christian youth entirely open to the most sublime ideals of the Gospel. It was transformed, according to Vatican Radio, into an immense and noisy Salesian Oratory. When the veil covering the figure of the new Blessed fell from Bernini’s rays, a frenzied applause rose from the whole basilica and the echo reached the square, where the tapestry depicting the Blessed was uncovered from the Loggia of Blessings.

Don Bosco’s educational system received its highest recognition on that day. We wanted to revisit the places of Dominic’s childhood after re-reading the detailed information of Fr Michele Molineris in his *Nuova Vita di Domenico Savio*, in which he describes with his well-known solid documentation what the biographies of St Dominic Savio do not say.

At Riva presso Chieri

Here we are, first of all, in [San Giovanni di Riva presso Chieri](#), the hamlet where our “little great Saint” was

born on 2 April 1842 to Carlo Savio and Brigida Gaiato, as the second of ten children, inheriting his name and birthright from the first, who survived only 15 days after his birth.

His father, as we know, came from Ranello, a hamlet of Castelnuovo d'Asti, and as a young man had gone to live with his uncle Carlo, a blacksmith in Mondonio, in a house on today's Via Giunipero, at no. 1, still called 'ca dèlfré' or blacksmith's house. There, from 'Barba Carlòto' he had learned the trade. Some time after his marriage, contracted on 2 March 1840, he had become independent, moving to the Gastaldi house in San Giovanni di Riva. He rented accommodation with rooms on the ground floor suitable for a kitchen, storeroom and workshop, and bedrooms on the first floor, reached by an external staircase that has now disappeared.

The Gastaldi heirs then sold the cottage and adjoining farmhouse to the Salesians in 1978. And today a modern youth centre, run by Salesian Past Pupils and Cooperators, gives memory and new life to the little house where Dominic was born.

In Morialdo

In November 1843, i.e. when Dominic had not yet reached the age of two, the Savio family, for work reasons, moved to [Morialdo](#), the hamlet of Castelnuovo linked to the name of St John Bosco, who was born at Cascina Biglione, a hamlet in the Becchi district.

In Morialdo, the Savios rented a few small rooms near the entrance porch of the farmstead owned by Viale Giovanna, who had married Stefano Persoglio. The whole farm was later sold by their son, Persoglio Alberto, to Pianta Giuseppe and family.

This farmstead is also now, for the most part, the property of the Salesians who, after restoring it, have used it for meetings for children and adolescents and for visits by pilgrims. Less than 2 km from Colle Don Bosco, it is situated in a country setting, amidst festoons of vines, fertile fields

and undulating meadows, with an air of joy in spring and nostalgia in autumn when the yellowing leaves are gilded by the sun's rays, with an enchanting panorama on fine days, when the chain of the Alps stretches out on the horizon from the peak of Monte Rosa near Albugnano, to Gran Paradiso, to Rocciamelone, down as far as Monviso. It is truly a place to visit and to use for days of intense spiritual life, a Don Bosco-style school of holiness.

The Savio family stayed in Morialdo until February 1853, a good nine years and three months. Dominic, who lived only 14 years and eleven months, spent almost two thirds of his short existence there. He can therefore be considered not only Don Bosco's pupil and spiritual son, but also his countryman.

In Mondonio

Why the Savio family left Morialdo is suggested by Fr Molineris. His uncle the blacksmith had died and Dominic's father could inherit not only the tools of the trade but also the clientele in Mondonio. That was probably the reason for the move, which took place, however, not to the house in Via Giunipero, but to the lower part of the village, where they rented the first house to the left of the main village street, from the Bertello brothers. The small house consisted, and still consists today, of a ground floor with two rooms, adapted as a kitchen and workroom, and an upper floor, above the kitchen, with two bedrooms and enough space for a workshop with a door on the street ramp.

We know that Mr and Mrs Savio had ten children, three of whom died at a very young age and three others, including Dominic, did not reach the age of 15. The mother died in 1871 at the age of 51. The father, left alone at home with his son John, after having taken in the three surviving daughters, asked Don Bosco for hospitality in 1879 and died at Valdocco on 16 December 1891.

Dominic had entered Valdocco on 29 October 1854, remaining there, except for short holiday periods, until 1

March 1857. He died eight days later at [Mondonio](#), in the little room next to the kitchen, on 9 March of that year. His stay at Mondonio was therefore about 20 months in all, at Valdocco 2 years and 4 months.

Memories of Morialdo

From this brief review of the three Savio houses, it is clear that the one in Morialdo must be the richest in memories. San Giovanni di Riva recalls Dominic's birth, and Mondonio a year at school and his holy death, but Morialdo recalls his life in the family, in church and at school. '*Minòt*', as he was called there – how many things he must have heard, seen and learnt from his father and mother, how much faith and love he showed in the little church of San Pietro, how much intelligence and goodness at the school run by Fr Giovanni Zucca, and how much fun and liveliness in the playground with his fellow villagers.

It was in Morialdo that Dominic Savio prepared for his First Communion, which he then made in the parish church of Castelnuovo on 8 April 1849. It was there, when he was only 7 years old, that he wrote his "Reminders", that is, the resolutions for his First Communion:

1. I will go to confession very often and take communion as often as the confessor gives me permission;
2. I want to keep feast days holy;
3. My friends will be Jesus and Mary;
4. Death but not sin.

Memories that were the guide for his actions until the end of his life.

A boy's demeanour, way of thinking and acting reflect the environment in which he lived, and especially the family in which he spent his childhood. So if one wants to understand something about Dominic, it is always good to reflect on his life in that farmstead in Morialdo.

The family

His was not a farming family. His father was a

blacksmith and his mother a seamstress. His parents were not of robust constitution. The signs of fatigue could be seen on his father's face, his mother's face stood out for its delicate lines. Dominic's father was a man of initiative and courage. His mother came from the not too distant Cerreto d'Asti where she kept a dressmaker's shop "and with her skill she made it possible for the local inhabitants to get clothes there rather than go elsewhere." And she was still a seamstress in Morialdo too. Would Don Bosco have known this? His conversation with little Dominic who had gone to look for him at the Becchi was interesting:

"Well, what do you think?"

"It seems to me that there is good stuff (in piem.: Eh, m'a smia ch'a-j'sia bon-a stòfa!)."

"What can this fabric be used for?"

"To make a beautiful suit to give to the Lord."

"So, I am the cloth: you be the tailor; take me with you (in piem.: ch'èmpija ansema a chiel) and you can make a beautiful suit for the Lord." (OE XI, 185).

A priceless conversation between two countrymen who understood each other at first sight. And their language was just right for the dressmaker's son.

When their mother died on 14 July 1871, the parish priest of Mondonio, Fr Giovanni Pastrone, said to his weeping daughters, to console them: "Don't cry, because your mother was a holy woman; and now she is already in Paradise."

Her son Dominic, who had preceded her into heaven by several years, had also said to her and to his father, before he passed away: "Do not weep, I already see the Lord and Our Lady with open arms waiting for me." These last words of his, witnessed by his neighbour Anastasia Molino, who was present at the time of his death, were the seal of a joyful life, the manifest sign of that sanctity that the Church solemnly recognised on 5 March 1950, later giving it definitive confirmation on 12 June 1954 with his canonisation.

Frontispiece photo. The house where Dominic died in 1857. It

is a rural dwelling, likely dating from the late 17th century. Rebuilt upon an even older house, it is one of the most cherished landmarks for the people of Mondonio.

Father Crespi and the Jubilee of 1925

In 1925, in anticipation of the Holy Year, Father Carlo Crespi promoted an international missionary exhibition. Recalled by the Collegio Manfredini of Este, he was given the task of documenting the missionary endeavours in Ecuador, collecting scientific, ethnographic, and audio visual materials. Through travels and screenings, his work connected Rome and Turin, highlighting the Salesian commitment and strengthening ties between ecclesiastical and civil institutions. His courage and vision transformed the missionary challenge into an exhibition success, leaving an indelible mark on the history of Propaganda Fide and the Salesian missionary work.

When Pius XI, in view of the Holy Year of 1925, wanted to plan a documented Vatican International Missionary Exhibition in Rome, the Salesians embraced the initiative with a Missionary Exhibition, to be held in Turin in 1926, also in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Salesian Missions. For this purpose, the Superiors immediately thought of Fr. Carlo Crespi and called him from the *Collegio Manfredini* of Este, where he had been assigned to teach Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Music.

In Turin, Fr. Carlo conferred with the Rector Major, Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, with the superior responsible for the missions, Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, and, in particular, with Msgr. Domenico Comin, Apostolic Vicar of Méndez and Gualaquiza

(Ecuador), who was to support his work. At that moment, travels, explorations, research, studies, and everything else that would arise from Carlo Crespi's work, received the approval and official start from the Superiors. Although the planned Exhibition was four years away, they asked Fr. Carlo to take care of it directly, so that he could carry out a complete scientifically serious and credible work.

This involved:

1. Creating a climate of interest in favour of the Salesians operating in the Ecuadorian mission of Méndez, enhancing their endeavours through written and oral documentation, and providing an appropriate collection of funds.

2. Collecting material for the preparation of the International Missionary Exhibition in Rome and, subsequently transferring it to Turin, to solemnly commemorate the first fifty years of the Salesian missions.

3. Conducting a scientific study of the aforementioned territory in order to channel the results, not only into the exhibitions in Rome and Turin, but especially into a permanent Museum and a precise "historical-geo-ethnographic" work.

From 1921 onwards, the Superiors commissioned Fr. Carlo to conduct propaganda activities in various Italian cities in favour of the missions. To raise public awareness in this regard, Fr. Carlo organised the projection of documentaries on Patagonia, *Tierra del Fuego*, and the Indians of Mato Grosso. He combined the films shot by the missionaries with musical comments personally performed on the piano.

The propaganda with conferences yielded about 15 thousand Lire [re-evaluated this corresponds to € 14,684] later spent for travel, transport, and for the following materials: a camera, a movie camera, a typewriter, some compasses, theodolites, levels, rain gauges, a box of medicines, agricultural tools and field tents.

Several industrialists from the Milan area offered several quintals of fabrics for the value of 80 thousand Lire

[€ 78,318], fabrics that were later distributed among the Indians.

On March 22, 1923, Fr. Crespi embarked, therefore, on the steamship "Venezuela," bound for Guayaquil, the most important river and maritime port of Ecuador. In fact, it was the commercial and economic capital of the country, nicknamed for its beauty: "The Pearl of the Pacific."

In a later writing, with great emotion he would recall his departure for the Missions: *"I remember my departure from Genoa on March 22 of the year 1923 [...]. When, once the decks that still held us bound to our native land had been removed, the ship began to move, my soul was pervaded by a joy so overwhelming, so superhuman, so ineffable, that I had never experienced it at any moment of my life, not even on the day of my First Communion, not even on the day of my first Mass. In that instant I began to understand who a missionary was and what God reserved for him [...]. Pray fervently, so that God may preserve our holy vocation and make us worthy of our holy mission; so that none of the souls may perish, which in His eternal decrees God wanted to be saved through us, so that He may make us bold champions of the faith, even unto death, even unto martyrdom"* (Carlo Crespi, New detachment. The hymn of gratitude, in *Bollettino Salesiano*, L, n.12, December 1926).

Fr. Carlo fulfilled the task he received by putting into practice his university knowledge, in particular through the sampling of minerals, flora, and fauna from Ecuador. Soon, however, he went beyond the mission entrusted to him, becoming enthusiastic about topics of an ethnographic and archaeological nature that, later, would occupy much of his intense life.

From the first itineraries, Carlo Crespi did not limit himself to admiring, rather he collected, classified, noted, photographed, filmed, and documented anything that attracted his attention as a scholar. With enthusiasm, he ventured into the Ecuadorian East for films, documentaries, and to collect valuable botanical, zoological, ethnic, and

archaeological collections.

This is that magnetic world that already vibrated in his heart even before arriving there, of which he reports as follows inside his notebooks: *"In these days a new, insistent voice sounds in my soul, a sacred nostalgia for the mission countries; sometimes also for the desire to know scientific things in particular. Oh Lord! I am willing to do anything, to abandon family, relatives, fellow students; all to save some soul, if this is your desire, your will"* (place and date unknown). – *Personal notes and reflections of the Servant of God on themes of a spiritual nature taken from 4 notebooks*).

A first itinerary, lasting three months, began in Cuenca, touched Gualaceo, Indanza, and ended at the Santiago River. Then he reached the valley of the San Francisco River, the Patococha Lagoon, Tres Palmas, Culebrillas, Potrerillos (the highest locality, at 3,800 m a.s.l.), Rio Ishpingo, the hill of Puerco Grande, Tinajillas, Zapote, Loma de Puerco Chico, Plan de Milagro, and Pianoro. In each of these places, he collected samples to dry and integrate into the various collections. Field notebooks and numerous photographs document everything with precision.

Carlo Crespi organised a second journey through the valleys of Yanganza, Limón, Peña Blanca, Tzaranbiza, as well as along the Indanza path. As is easy to suppose, travel at the time was difficult: there were only mule tracks, as well as precipices, inhospitable climatic conditions, dangerous beasts, lethal snakes, and tropical diseases.

In addition to this there was the danger of attacks by the indomitable inhabitants of the East that Fr. Carlo, however, managed to approach, laying the foundations for the feature film *"Los invencibles Shuaras del Alto Amazonas,"* which he would shoot in 1926 and screen on February 26, 1927, in Guayaquil. Overcoming all these pitfalls, he managed to gather six hundred varieties of beetles, sixty embalmed birds with wonderful plumage, mosses, lichens, ferns. He studied about two hundred local species and, using the sub-

classification of the places visited by naturalists on Allionii, he came across 21 varieties of ferns, belonging to the tropical zone below 800 m a.s.l.; 72 to the subtropical one that goes from 800 to 1,500 m a.s.l.; 102 to the Subandean one, between 1,500 and 3,400 m a.s.l., and 19 to the Andean one, higher than 3,600 m a.s.l. (A very interesting comment was made by Prof. Roberto Bosco, a prestigious botanist and member of the Italian Botanical Society who, fourteen years later, in 1938, decided to study and systematically order "the showy collection of ferns" prepared in a few months by "Prof. Carlo Crespi, botanizing in Ecuador).

The most noteworthy species, studied by Roberto Bosco, were named "Crespiane."

To summarise: already in October 1923, to prepare the Vatican Exhibition, Fr. Carlo had organised the first missionary excursions throughout the Vicariate, up to Méndez, Gualaquiza, and Indanza, collecting ethnographic materials and lots of photographic documentation. The expenses were covered through the fabrics and funds collected in Italy. With the material collected, which he would later transfer to Italy, he organised a trade fair Exhibition, between the months of June and July 1924, in the city of Guayaquil. The work aroused enthusiastic judgments, recognitions, and aid. He would report on this Exhibition, ten years later, in a letter of December 31, 1935, to the Superiors of Turin, to inform them about the funds collected from November 1922 to November 1935.

Father Crespi spent the first semester of 1925 in the forests of the Sucúa-Macas area, studying the Shuar language and collecting further material for the missionary Exhibition of Turin. In August of the same year, he began a negotiation with the Government to obtain a significant funding, which concluded on September 12 with a contract for 110,000 Sucres (equal to 500,000 Lire of the time and which today would be € 489,493.46), which would allow the Pan-Méndez mule track to be completed). Furthermore, he also obtained permission to withdraw from customs 200 quintals of iron and material confiscated from some traders.

In 1926, having returned to Italy, Fr. Carlo brought cages with live animals from the eastern area of Ecuador (a difficult collection of birds and rare animals) and boxes with ethnographic material, for the Missionary Exhibition of Turin, which he personally organised, also giving the official closing speech on October 10.

In the same year, he was busy organising the Exhibition and then giving several conferences and participating in the American Congress of Rome with two scientific conferences. This enthusiasm and his competence and scientific research responded perfectly to the directives of the Superiors, and, therefore, through the International Missionary Exhibition of 1925 in Rome and that of 1926 in Turin, Ecuador became more widely known. Furthermore, at the ecclesial level, he contacted the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, the Holy Childhood, and the Association for the Indigenous Clergy. At the civil level, he established relationships with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Italian Government.

From these contacts and from the interviews with the Superiors of the Salesian Congregation, some results were obtained. In the first place, the Superiors gave him the gift of granting him 4 priests, 4 seminarians, 9 coadjutor brothers, and 4 sisters for the Vicariate. Furthermore, he obtained a series of economic funds from the Vatican Organisations and collaboration with sanitary material for the hospitals, for the value of about 100,000 Lire (€ 97,898.69). As a gift from the Major Superiors for the help given for the Missionary Exhibition, they took charge of the construction of the Church of Macas, with two instalments of 50,000 lire (€ 48,949.35), sent directly to Msgr. Domenico Comin.

Having exhausted the task of collector, supplier, and animator of the great international exhibitions, in 1927 Fr. Crespi returned to Ecuador, which became his second homeland. He settled in the Vicariate, under the jurisdiction of the bishop, Msgr. Comin, always dedicated, in a spirit of obedience, to propaganda excursions, to ensure subsidies and

special funds, necessary for the works of the missions, such as the Pan Méndez road, the Guayaquil Hospital, the Guayaquil school in Macas, the Quito Hospital in Méndez, the Agricultural School of Cuenca, the city where, since 1927, he began to develop his priestly and Salesian apostolate.

For some years, he then continued to deal with science, but always with the spirit of the apostle.

Carlo Riganti

President of the Carlo Crespi Association

Image: March 24, 1923 – Fr. Carlo Crespi Departing for Ecuador on the Steamship Venezuela

Educating our emotions with Saint Francis de Sales

Modern psychology has demonstrated the importance and influence of emotions in the life of the human psyche, and everyone knows that emotions are particularly strong during youth. But there is hardly talk anymore of the “passions of the soul,” which classical anthropology has carefully analysed, as evidenced by the work of Francis de Sales, and, in particular, when he writes that “the soul, as such, is the source of the passions.” In his vocabulary, the term “emotion” did not yet appear with the connotations we attribute to it. Instead, he would say that our “passions” in certain circumstances are “moved.” In the educational field, the question that arises concerns the attitude that is appropriate to have in the face of these involuntary manifestations of our sensibility, which always have a physiological component.

“I am a poor man and nothing more”

All those who knew Francis de Sales noted his great sensitivity and emotionality. The blood would rush to his head and his face would turn red. We know of his outbursts of anger against the “heretics” and the courtesan of Padua. Like any good Savoyard, he was “usually calm and gentle, but capable of terrible outbursts of anger; a volcano under the snow.” His sensitivity was very much alive. On the occasion of the death of his little sister Jeanne, he wrote to Jane Frances de Chantal, who was also dismayed:

Alas, my Daughter: I am a poor man and nothing more. My heart has been touched more than I could ever imagine; but the truth is that your grief as well as my mother's have contributed a great deal to this: I was afraid for your heart as well as my mother's.

At the death of his mother, he did not hide that the separation had made him shed tears. He certainly had the courage to close her eyes and mouth and give her a last kiss, but after that, he confided to Jane Frances de Chantal, “my heart swelled greatly, and I wept for this good mother more than I had ever done since the day I embraced the priesthood.” In fact, he did not systematically restrain from manifesting his feelings externally. He accepted them serenely given his humanistic approach. A precious testimony from Jane Frances de Chantal informs us that “our saint was not exempt from feelings and outbursts of passions, and did not want to be freed from them.”

It is commonly known that the passions of the soul influence the body, causing external reactions to their internal movements: “We externalize and manifest our passions and the movements that our souls have in common with animals through the eyes, with movements of the eyebrows, forehead and entire face.” Thus, it is not in our power not to feel fear in certain circumstances: “It is as if one were to say to a person who sees a lion or a bear coming towards them: Do not be afraid.” Now, “when feeling fear, one becomes pale, and

when we are called to account for something that displeases us, our blood rushes to our faces and we become red, or feeling displeasure can also make tears well up in our eyes." Children, "if they see a dog barking, they immediately start screaming and do not stop until they are near their mother."

When Ms. de Chantal meets her husband's murderer, how will her "heart" react? "I know that, without a doubt, that heart of yours will throb and feel shaken, and your blood will boil," her spiritual director predicts, adding this lesson of wisdom: "God makes us see with our own eyes, through these emotions, how true it is that we are made of flesh, bone, and spirit."

The twelve passions of the soul

In ancient times, Virgil, Cicero, and Boethius broke the passions of the soul down to four, while Saint Augustine knew only one dominant passion, love, articulated in turn into four secondary passions: "Love that tends to possess what it loves is called cupidity or *desire*; when it achieves and possesses it, it is called *joy*; when it flees what is contrary to it, it is called *fear*; if it happens to lose it and feels the weight of it, it is called *sadness*."

In *Philothea*, Francis de Sales points out seven, comparing them to the strings that the luthier must tune from time to time: *love, hate, desire, fear, hope, sadness, and joy*.

In the *Treatise on the Love of God*, on the other hand, he lists up to twelve. It is surprising that "this multitude of passions [...] is left in our souls!" The first five have as their object the good, that is, everything that our sensibility makes us spontaneously seek and appreciate as good for us (we think of the fundamental goods of life, health, and joy):

*If good be considered in itself according to its natural goodness, it excites **love**, the first and principal passion; if good be regarded as absent, it provokes us to **desire**; if being*

*desired we think we are able to obtain it, we enter into hope; if we think we are unable, we feel **despair**; but when we possess it as present, it moves us to **joy**.*

The other seven passions are those that make us spontaneously react negatively to everything that appears to us as evil to be avoided and fought against (we think of illness, suffering, and death):

*As soon as we discover evil, we **hate** it; if it is absent, we **fly** it; if we cannot avoid it, we **fear** it; if we think we can avoid it, we grow bold and **courageous**; but if we feel it present, we grieve, and then **anger** and wrath suddenly rush forth to reject and repel the evil or at least to take vengeance for it. If we cannot succeed we remain in **grief**. But if we repulse or avenge it we feel satisfaction and satiation, which is a pleasure of **triumph**, for as the possession of good gladdens the heart, so the victory over evil exalts the spirits.*

As can be noted, to the eleven passions of the soul proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, Francis de Sales adds victory over evil, which “exalts the spirits” and provokes the joy of triumph.

Love, the first and main passion

As was easy to foresee, love is presented as the “first and main passion”: “Love comes first, among the passions of the soul: it is the king of all the outbursts of the heart, it transforms everything else into itself and makes us be what it loves.” “Love is the first passion of the soul,” he repeats.

It manifests itself in a thousand ways and its language is very diversified. In fact, “it is not expressed only in words, but also with the eyes, with gestures, and with actions. As far as the eyes are concerned, the tears that flow from them are proof of love.” There are also the “sighs of

love." But these manifestations of love are different. The most habitual and superficial is the emotion or passion, which puts sensitivity in motion almost involuntarily.

And *hate*? We spontaneously hate what appears to be evil. It should be noted that among people there are forms of hatred and instinctive, irrational, unconscious aversions, like those that exist between a mule and a horse, or between a vine and cabbages. We are not responsible for these at all, because they do not depend on our will.

Desire and flight

Desire is another fundamental reality of our soul. Everyday life triggers multiple desires, because desire consists in the "hope of a future good." The most common natural desires are those that "concern goods, pleasures, and honours."

On the other hand, we spontaneously flee from the evils of life. The human will of Christ pushed Him to *flee* from the pains and sufferings of passion; hence the trembling, anguish, and sweating of blood.

Hope and despair

Hope concerns a good that one believes can be obtained. Philothea is invited to examine how she behaved as regards "hope, perhaps too often placed in the world and in creatures; and too little in God and eternal things."

As for *despair*, look for example at that of the "youth who aspire to perfection": "As soon as they encounter a difficulty along their path, one immediately gets a feeling of disappointment, which pushes him/her to make many complaints, so as to give the impression of being troubled by great torments. Pride and vanity cannot tolerate the slightest defect, without immediately feeling strongly disturbed to the point of despair."

Joy and sadness

Joy is "satisfaction for the good obtained." Thus,

“when we meet those we love, it is not possible not to feel moved by joy and happiness.” The possession of a good infallibly produces a complacency or joy, as the law of gravity moves the stone: “It is the weight that shakes things, moves them, and stops them: it is the weight that moves the stone and drags it down as soon as the obstacles are removed; it is the same weight that makes it continue the movement downwards; finally, it is always the same weight that makes it stop and settle when it has reached its place.”

Sometimes joy comes with laughter. “Laughter is a passion that erupts without us wanting it and it is not in our power to restrain it, all the more so as we laugh and are moved to laugh by unforeseen circumstances.” Did Our Lord laugh? The bishop of Geneva thinks that Jesus smiled when He wanted to: “Our Lord could not laugh, because for Him nothing was unforeseen, since He knew everything before it happened; He could, of course, smile, but He did so deliberately.”

The young Visitation nuns, sometimes seized by uncontrollable laughter when a companion beat her chest or a reader made a mistake during the reading at the table, needed a little lesson on this point: “Fools laugh at every situation, because everything surprises them, not being able to foresee anything; but the wise do not laugh so lightly, because they employ reflection more, which makes them foresee the things that are to happen.” That said, it is not a defect to laugh at some imperfection, “provided one does not go too far.”

Sadness is “sorrow for pain that is present.” It “disturbs the soul, provokes immoderate fears, makes one feel disgust for prayer, weakens and lulls the brain to sleep, deprives the soul of wisdom, resolution, judgment, and courage, and annihilates strength”; it is “like a harsh winter that ruins all the beauty of the earth and makes all the animals indolent; because it takes away all sweetness from the soul and makes it as lazy and impotent in all its faculties.”

In certain cases, it can lead to weeping: a father, when sending his son to court or to study, cannot

refrain “from crying when saying goodbye to him”; and “a daughter, although she has married according to the wishes of her father and mother, moves them to tears when receiving their blessing.” Alexander the Great wept when he learned that there were other lands that he would never be able to conquer: “Like a child who whines for an apple that is denied him, that Alexander, whom historians call the Great, more foolish than a child, begins to weep warm tears, because it seems impossible for him to conquer the other worlds.”

Courage and fear

Fear refers to a “future evil.” Some, wanting to be brave, hang around somewhere during the night, but “as soon as they hear a stone fall or the rustle of a mouse running away, they start screaming: My God! – What is it, they are asked, what did you find? – I heard a noise. – But what? – I don’t know.” It is necessary to be wary, because “fear is a greater evil than the evil itself.”

As for *courage*, before being a virtue, it is a feeling that supports us in the face of difficulties that would normally overwhelm us. Francis de Sales experienced it when undertaking a long and risky visit to his mountain diocese:

I was about to mount my horse for the pastoral visit, which would last about five months. [...] I left full of courage, and, since that morning, I felt a great joy in being able to begin, although, before, for several days, I had experienced vain fears and sadness.

Anger and the feeling of triumph

As for *anger* or *wrath*, we cannot prevent ourselves from being seized by it in certain circumstances: “If they tell me that someone has spoken ill of me, or that I am being treated with any other form of discourtesy, I immediately fly into a rage and there isn’t a vein in my body that isn’t twisting, because the blood is boiling.” Even in the

Visitation monasteries, occasions for irritation and anger were not lacking, and the attacks of the "irascible appetite" were felt to be overwhelming. There is nothing strange in this: "To prevent the resentment of anger from awakening in us and the blood from rising to our heads will never be possible; we will be fortunate if we can reach this perfection a quarter of an hour before we die." It can also happen "that anger upsets and turns my poor heart upside down, that my head smokes from all sides, that the blood boils like a pot on the fire."

The satisfaction of anger, for having overcome evil, provokes the exhilarating emotion of triumph. He who triumphs "cannot contain the transport of his joy."

In search of balance

Passions and outbursts of the soul are most often independent of our will: "It is not expected of you to not have no passions; it is not in your power," he said to the Daughters of the Visitation, adding: "What can a person do to have such and such a temperament, subject to this or that passion? Everything therefore lies in the actions that we derive from it by means of that movement, which depends on our will."

One thing is certain, moods and passions make a person an extremely variable being in terms of one's psychological "temperature," just like climatic variations. "His/her life flows on this earth like water, fluctuating and undulating in a perpetual variety of movements." "Today one will be excessively happy, and, immediately after, exaggeratedly sad. In carnival time one will see manifestations of joy and cheerfulness, with foolish and crazy actions, then, immediately afterwards, you will see such exaggerated signs of sadness and boredom so as to make one think that these are terrible and, apparently, irremediable things. Another, at present, will be too confident and nothing will frighten him, and, immediately afterwards, he will be seized by an anguish that will sink him down to the ground."

Jane de Chantal's spiritual director identified the different "seasons of the soul" experienced by her at the beginning of her fervent life very well:

I see that all the seasons of the year are in your soul. Now you feel the winter through all the barrenness, distractions, heaviness and boredom; now the dew of the month of May with the scent of the little holy flowers, and now the warmth of the desires to please our good God. Only autumn remains of which, as you say, you do not see many fruits. Well, it often happens that, threshing the wheat or pressing the grapes, one finds a more abundant fruit than the harvests and the vintage promised. You would like for it to always be spring or summer; but no, my Daughter: the alternation of the seasons must take place inside as well as outside. Only in Heaven will everything be spring as regards beauty, everything will be autumn as regards enjoyment and everything will be summer as regards love. Up there, there will no longer be winter, but here it is necessary for the exercise of self-denial and the thousand small beautiful virtues, which are exercised in the time of aridity.

The health of the soul as well as that of the body cannot consist in eliminating these four moods, rather in obtaining a "invariability of moods." When one passion predominates over the others, it causes diseases of the soul; and since it is extremely difficult to regulate it, it follows that people are bizarre and variable, so that nothing else is discerned among them but fantasies, inconstancy and stupidity.

What is good about passions is that they allow us "to exercise the will to acquire virtues and spiritual vigilance." Despite certain manifestations, in which one must "suffocate and repress the passions," for Francis de Sales it is not about eliminating them, which is impossible, rather controlling them as much as possible, that is, moderating them and orienting them to an end that is good.

It is not, therefore, about pretending to ignore

our psychic manifestations, as if they did not exist (which once again is impossible), but of “constantly watching over one’s heart and one’s spirit to keep the passions in order and under the control of reason; otherwise there will only be originality and unequal behaviours.” Philothea will not be happy, if not when she has “sedated and pacified so many passions that [they] caused [her] restlessness.”

Having a constant spirit is one of the best ornaments of Christian life and one of the most lovable means of acquiring and preserving the grace of God, and also of edifying one’s neighbour. “Perfection, therefore, does not consist in the absence of passions, but in their correct regulation; the passions are to the heart as the strings to a harp: they must be tuned so that we can say: We will praise you with the harp.”

When passions make us lose inner and outer balance, two methods are possible: “opposing contrary passions to them, or opposing greater passions of the same kind.” If I am disturbed by the “desire for riches or voluptuous pleasure,” I will fight such passion with contempt and flight, or I will aspire to higher riches and pleasures. I can fight physical fear with the opposite, which is courage, or by developing a healthy fear regarding the soul.

The love of God, for its part, imprints a true conversion on the passions, changing their natural orientation and presenting them with a spiritual end. For example, “the appetite for food is made very spiritual if, before satisfying it, one gives it the motive of love: and no, Lord, it is not to please this poor belly, nor to satisfy this appetite that I go to the table, but, according to your Providence, to maintain this body that you have made subject to such misery; yes, Lord, because it has pleased you so.”

The transformation thus operated will resemble an “artifice” used in alchemy that changes iron into gold. “O holy and sacred alchemy! – writes the Bishop of Geneva -, O divine powder of fusion, with which all the metals of our passions, affections and actions are changed into the purest

gold of heavenly delight!”.

Moods of the soul, passions and imaginations are deeply rooted in the human soul: they represent an exceptional resource for the life of the soul. It will be the task of the higher faculties, reason and above all will, to moderate and govern them. A difficult undertaking: Francis de Sales accomplished it successfully, because, according to what the mother of Chantal affirms, “he possessed such absolute dominion over his passions as to render them obedient as slaves; and in the end they almost no longer appeared.”

Venerable Francesco (Francis) Convertini, pastor according to the Heart of Jesus

The venerable Father Francesco Convertini, a Salesian missionary in India, emerges as a shepherd after the Heart of Jesus, forged by the Spirit and totally faithful to the divine plan for his life. Through the testimonies of those who met him, his profound humility, unconditional dedication to the proclamation of the Gospel, and fervent love for God and neighbor are revealed. He lived with joyful evangelical simplicity, facing hardships and sacrifices with courage and generosity, always attentive to everyone he met along his path. The text highlights his extraordinary humanity and spiritual richness, a precious gift for the Church.

1. Farmer in the vineyard of the Lord

Presenting the virtuous profile of Father Francesco Convertini, Salesian missionary in India, a man who let himself be moulded by the Spirit and knew how to realise

his spiritual physiognomy according to God's plan for him, is something both beautiful and serious because it recalls the true meaning of life, as a response to a call, a promise, a project of grace.

There is a quite original summary sketched about him by a priest from his town, Fr Quirico Vasta, who got to know Father Francis (as he was known in India) on rare visits to his beloved Apulia. This witness offers us a summary of the virtuous profile of the great missionary, introducing us in an authoritative and compelling way to discover something of the human and religious stature of this man of God.

"The way to measure the spiritual stature of this holy man, Father Francis Convertini, is not an analytical approach, comparing his life to the many religious 'parameters of behaviour' (Father Francis, as a Salesian, also accepted the commitments proper to a religious: poverty, obedience, chastity, and remained faithful to them throughout his life). On the contrary, Father Francis Convertini appears, in summary, as he really was from the beginning: a young peasant farmer who, after – and perhaps because of – the ugliness of the war, opened himself up to the light of the Spirit and leaving everything behind, set out to follow the Lord. On the one hand, he knew what he was leaving behind; and he left it not only with the vigour typical of the southern peasant who was poor but tenacious; but also joyfully and with the very personal strength of spirit that the war had invigorated: the strength of someone who intends to pursue headlong, albeit silently and in the depths of his soul, what he has focused his attention on. On the other hand, again like a peasant who has grasped the 'certainties' of the future and the groundedness of his hopes in something or someone and knows 'who to trust' he allowed the light of the one who has spoken to him put him in a position of clarity in what to do. And he immediately adopted the strategies to achieve the goal: prayer and availability without measure, whatever the cost. It is no coincidence that the key virtues of this holy man are silent activity without show (cf. St Paul: 'It is when I am weak that

I am strong') and a very respectful sense of others (cf. Acts: 'There is more joy in giving than in receiving').

Seen in this way, Father Francis Convertini was truly a man: shy, inclined to conceal his gifts and merits, averse to boasting, gentle with others and strong with himself, measured, balanced, prudent and faithful; a man of faith, hope and in habitual communion with God; an exemplary religious, in obedience, poverty and chastity."

2. Distinguishing traits: "charm emanated from him, which healed you".

Retracing the stages of his childhood and youth, his preparation for the priesthood and missionary life, God's special love for his servant and his correspondence with this good Father are evident. In particular, they stand out as distinctive features of his spiritual character:

– Unbounded faith and trust in God, embodied in filial abandonment to the divine will.

He had great faith in the infinite goodness and mercy of God and in the great merits of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, in whom he confided everything and from whom he expected everything. On the firm rock of this faith he undertook all his apostolic labours. Cold or heat, tropical rain or scorching sun, difficulty or fatigue, nothing prevented him from always proceeding with confidence when it was a matter of God's glory and the salvation of souls.

– Unconditional love for Jesus Christ the Saviour, to whom he offered everything as a sacrifice, beginning with his own life, consigned to the cause of the Kingdom.

Father Convertini rejoiced in the promise of the Saviour and rejoiced in the coming of Jesus, as universal Saviour and sole mediator between God and man: "Jesus gave us all of Himself by dying on the cross, and shall we not be able to give ourselves completely to Him?"

– Integral salvation of our neighbour, pursued with passionate

evangelisation.

The abundant fruits of his missionary work were due to his unceasing prayer and unsparing sacrifices made for his neighbour. It is people and missionaries of such temperament who leave an indelible mark on the history of the Salesian missions, charism and priestly ministry.

Even in contact with Hindus and Muslims, while on the one hand he was urged by a genuine desire to proclaim the Gospel, which often led to the Christian faith, on the other hand he felt compelled to emphasise the basic truths easily perceived even by non-Christians, such as the infinite goodness of God, love of neighbour as the way to salvation, and prayer as the means to obtain graces.

– Unceasing union with God through prayer, the sacraments, entrustment to Mary Mother of God and ours, love for the Church and the Pope, devotion to the saints.

He felt himself to be a son of the Church and served her with the heart of an authentic disciple of Jesus and missionary of the Gospel, entrusted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and in the company of the saints felt as intercessors and friends.

– Simple and humble evangelical asceticism in the following of the cross, incarnated in an extraordinarily ordinary life.

His profound humility, evangelical poverty (he carried with him only what was necessary) and angelic countenance transpired from his whole person. Voluntary penance, self-control: little or no rest, irregular meals. He deprived himself of everything to give to the poor, even his clothes, shoes, bed and food. He always slept on the floor. He fasted for a long time. As the years went by, he contracted several illnesses that undermined his health: he suffered from asthma, bronchitis, emphysema, heart ailments... many times they attacked him in such a way that he was bedridden. It was a marvel how he could bear it all without complaining. It was precisely this that attracted the veneration of the Hindus,

for whom he was the “sanyasi”, the one who knew how to renounce everything for the love of God and for their sake.

His life seemed to be a straight ascent to the heights of holiness in the faithful fulfilment of God’s will and in the gift of himself to his brothers and sisters through the priestly ministry lived faithfully. Lay, religious and clergy alike speak of his extraordinary way of living daily life.

3. Missionary of the Gospel of joy: “I proclaimed Jesus to them. Jesus the Saviour. Merciful Jesus.”

There was not a day when he did not go to some family to talk about Jesus and the Gospel. Father Francis had such enthusiasm and zeal that he even hoped for things that seemed humanly impossible. Father Francis became famous as a peacemaker between families, or between villages in discord. “It is not through arguments that we come to understand. God and Jesus are beyond dispute. We must above all pray and God will give us the gift of faith. Through faith one will find the Lord. Is it not written in the Bible that God is love? By the way of love one comes to God.”

He was an inwardly peaceful man and brought peace. He wanted this to exist among people, in homes or villages, where there should be no quarrels, or fights, or divisions. “In our village we were Catholics, Protestants, Hindus and Muslims. So that peace would reign among us, from time to time father would gather us all together and tell us how we could and should live in peace among ourselves.” Then he would listen to those who wanted to say something and at the end, after praying, he would give the blessing: a wonderful way to keep the peace among us. He had a truly astonishing peace of mind; it was the strength that came from the certainty he had of doing God’s will, sought with effort, but then embraced with love once found.

He was a man who lived with evangelical simplicity, the transparency of a child, a willingness to make

every sacrifice, knowing how to get in tune with every person he met on his path, travelling on horseback, or on a bicycle, or more often walking whole days with his rucksack on his shoulders. He belonged to everyone without distinction of religion, caste or social status. He was loved by all, because to all he brought "the water of Jesus that saves".

4. A man of contagious faith: lips in prayer, rosary in hands, eyes to heaven

"We know from him that he never neglected prayer, both when he was with others and when he was alone, even as a soldier. This helped him to do everything for God, especially when he did first evangelisation among us. For him, there was no fixed time: morning or evening, sun or rain; heat or cold were no impediment when it came to talking about Jesus or doing good. When he went to the villages he would walk even at night and without taking food in order to get to some house or village to preach the Gospel. Even when he was placed as a confessor in Krishnagar, he would come to us for confessions during the sweltering heat of after lunch. I once said to him, "Why do you come at this hour?" And he replied, "In the passion, Jesus did not choose his convenient time when he was being led by Annas or Caiaphas or Pilate. He had to do it even against his own will, to do the Father's will."

He evangelised not by proselytism, but by attraction. It was his behaviour that attracted people. His dedication and love made people say that Father Francis was the true image of the Jesus he preached. His love of God led him to seek intimate union with him, to collect himself in prayer, to avoid anything that might displease God. He knew that one only knows God through charity. He used to say, "Love God, do not displease Him."

"If there was one sacrament in which Father Francis excelled heroically, it was the administration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For any person in our diocese of Krishnagar to say Father Francis is to say the man of God who

showed the Father's fatherhood in forgiveness especially in the confessional. He spent the last 40 years of his life more in the confessional than in any other ministry: hours and hours, especially in preparation for feasts and solemnities. Thus the whole night of Christmas and Easter or patronal feasts. He was always punctually present in the confessional every day, but especially on Sundays before Masses or on the evening eve of feasts and Saturdays. Then he would go to other places where he was a regular confessor. This was a task very dear to him and much expected by all the religious of the diocese, for who he was available weekly. His confessional was always the most crowded and most desired. Priests, religious, ordinary people: it seemed as if Father Francis knew everyone personally, so pertinent was he in his advice and admonitions. I myself marvelled at the wisdom of his admonitions when I went to confession to him. In fact, the Servant of God was my confessor throughout his life, from the time he was a missionary in the villages until the end of his days. I used to say to myself: "That is just what I wanted to hear from him...". Bishop Morrow, who went to him regularly for confession, considered him his spiritual guide, saying that Father Francis was guided by the Holy Spirit in his counsels and that his personal holiness made up for his lack of natural gifts.

Trust in God's mercy was an almost nagging theme in his conversations, and he used it well as a confessor. His confessional ministry was a ministry of hope for himself and for those who confessed to him. His words inspired hope in all who came to him. "In the confessional the Servant of God was the model priest, famous for administering this sacrament. The Servant of God was always teaching, trying to lead everyone to eternal salvation... The servant of God liked to direct his prayers to the Father who is in heaven, and he also taught people to see the good Father in God. Especially to those in difficulties, including spiritual ones, and to repentant sinners, he reminded them that God is merciful and that one

must always trust in him. The Servant of God increased his prayers and mortifications to discount his infidelities, as he said, and for the sins of the world.”

Father Rosario Stroschio, religious superior, who concluded the announcement of Father Francis’ death, spoke eloquently as follows: “Those who knew Father Francis will always remember with love the little warnings and exhortations he used to give in confession. With his weak little voice, yet so full of ardour: ‘Let us love souls, let us work only for souls... Let us approach the people... Let us deal with them in such a way that the people understand that we love them...’ His entire life was a magnificent testimony to the most fruitful technique of priestly ministry and missionary work. We can sum it up in the simple expression: ‘To win souls to Christ there is no more powerful means than goodness and love!’”

5. He loved God and loved his neighbour for God’s sake: Put love! Put love!

His mother Catherine used to say “Put love! Put love!” to Ciccilluzzo, his nickname at home as he helped in the fields watching turkeys and doing other work appropriate to his young age,

“Father Francisco gave everything to God, because he was convinced that having consecrated everything to him as a religious and missionary priest, God had full rights over him. When we asked him why he did not go home (to Italy), he replied that he had now given himself entirely to God and to us.” His being a priest was all for others: “I am a priest for the good of my neighbour. This is my first duty.” He felt indebted to God in everything, indeed, everything belonged to God and to his neighbour, while he had given himself totally, reserving nothing for himself: Father Francesco continually thanked the Lord for choosing him to be a missionary priest. He showed this sense of gratitude towards anyone who had done anything for him, even the poorest.

He gave extraordinary examples of fortitude by

adapting to the living conditions of the missionary work assigned to him: a new and difficult language, which he tried to learn quite well, because this was the way to communicate with his people; a very harsh climate, that of Bengal, the grave of so many missionaries, which he learned to endure for the love of God and souls; apostolic journeys on foot through unknown areas, with the risk of encountering wild animals.

He was a tireless missionary and evangeliser in a very difficult area such as Krishnagar – which he wanted to transform into Christ-nagar, the city of Christ – where conversions were difficult, not to mention the opposition of Protestants and members of other religions. For the administration of the sacraments he faced all possible dangers: rain, hunger, disease, wild beasts, malicious people. “I have often heard the episode about Father Francesco, who one night, while taking the Blessed Sacrament to a sick person, came across a tiger crouching on the path where he and his companions had to pass... As the companions tried to flee, the Servant of God commanded the tiger: “Let your Lord pass!”, and the tiger moved away. But I have heard other similar examples about the Servant of God, who many times travelled on foot at night. Once a band of brigands attacked him, believing they could steal something from him. But when they saw him thus deprived of everything except what he was carrying, they excused themselves and accompanied him to the next village.”

His life as a missionary was constant travelling: by bicycle, on horseback and most of the time on foot. This walking on foot is perhaps the attitude that best portrays the tireless missionary and the sign of the authentic evangeliser: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger of glad tidings who proclaims peace, the messenger of good things who proclaims salvation” (Is 52:7).

6. Clear eyes turned to heaven

“Observing the smiling face of the Servant of God and looking at his eyes clear and turned to heaven, one

thought that he did not belong here, but in heaven. On seeing him for the very first time, many reported an unforgettable impression of him: his shining eyes that showed a face full of simplicity and innocence and his long, venerable beard recalled the image of a person full of goodness and compassion. One witness stated: "Father Francis was a saint. I do not know how to make a judgement, but I think that such people are not easily found. We were small, but he talked to us, he never despised anyone. He did not differentiate between Muslims and Christians. Father went to everyone in the same way and when we were together he treated us all the same. He would give us children advice: 'Obey your parents, do your homework well, love each other as brothers'. He would then give us little sweets: in his pockets there was always something for us."

Father Francis displayed his love for God above all through prayer, which seemed to be uninterrupted. He could always be seen moving his lips in prayer. Even when he spoke to people, he always kept his eyes raised as if he were seeing someone he was talking to. What most often struck people was Father Convertini's ability to be totally focused on God and, at the same time, on the person in front of him, looking with sincere eyes at the brother he met on his path: "Without a doubt he had his eyes fixed on the face of God. This was an indelible trait of his soul, a spiritual concentration of an impressive level. He followed you attentively and answered you with great precision when you spoke to him. Yet, you sensed that he was 'elsewhere', in another dimension, in dialogue with the Other."

He encouraged others to holiness, as in the case of his cousin Lino Palmisano, who was preparing for the priesthood: "I am very happy knowing you are already in practical training; this too will soon pass, if you know how to take advantage of the graces of the Lord that he will give you every day, to transform yourself into a Christian saint of good sense. The most satisfying studies of theology await you,

which will nourish your soul with the Spirit of God, who has called you to help Jesus in His apostolate. Think not of others, but of yourself alone, of how to become a holy priest like Don Bosco. Don Bosco also said in his time: times are difficult, but we will *puf, puf*, we will go ahead even against the current. It was the heavenly mother telling him: *infirmi mundi elegit Deus*. Don't worry, I will help you. Dear brother, the heart, the soul of a holy priest in the eyes of the Lord is worth more than anything else. The day of your sacrifice together with that of Jesus on the altar is near, prepare yourself. You will never regret being generous to Jesus and to your Superiors. Trust in them, they will help you overcome the little difficulties of the day that your beautiful soul may encounter. I will remember you at Holy Mass every day, so that you too may one day offer yourself wholly to the Good Lord."

Conclusion

As at the beginning, so also at the end of this brief excursus on the virtuous profile of Father Convertini, here is a testimony that summarises what has been presented.

"One of the pioneer figures that struck me deeply was that of the Venerable Father Francis Convertini, a zealous apostle of Christian love who managed to bring the news of the Redemption to churches, parish areas, to the alleyways and huts of refugees and to anyone he met, consoling, advising, helping with his exquisite charity: a true witness to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, on which we shall be judged: always ready and zealous in the ministry of the sacrament of forgiveness. Christians of all denominations, Muslims and Hindus, accepted with joy and readiness the one they called the man of God. He knew how to bring to each one the true message of love, which Jesus preached and brought to this land: with evangelical direct and personal contact, for young and old, boys and girls, poor and rich, authorities and pariahs (outcasts), that is, the last and most despised rung of (sub)human refuse. For me and for many others, it was deeply emotional experience that helped me to understand and

live the message of Jesus: 'Love one another as I have loved you'."

The last word goes to Father Francis, as a legacy he leaves to each of us. On 24 September 1973, writing to his relatives from Krishnagar, the missionary wanted to involve them in the work for non-Christians that he had been doing with difficulty since his recent illness, but always with zeal: "After six months in hospital my health is a little weak, I feel like a broken and patched piñata. However, the merciful Jesus miraculously helps me in his work for souls. I let Him take me to the city and then return on foot, after making Jesus and our holy religion known. Having finished hearing confessions at home, I go among the pagans who are much better than some Christians. Affectionately yours in the Heart of Jesus, Father Francis."

Don Elia Comini: martyr priest at Monte Sole

On December 18, 2024, Pope Francis officially recognized the martyrdom of Don Elia Comini (1910-1944), a Salesian of Don Bosco, who will thus be beatified. His name joins that of other priests—such as Don Giovanni Fornasini, already Blessed since 2021—who fell victim to the brutal Nazi violence in the Monte Sole area, in the Bologna hills, during World War II. The beatification of Don Elia Comini is not only an event of extraordinary significance for the Bologna Church and the Salesian Family, but also constitutes a universal invitation to rediscover the value of Christian witness: a witness in which charity, justice, and compassion prevail over every form of violence and hatred.

From the Apennines to the Salesian courtyards

Don Elia Comini was born on May 7, 1910, in the locality of "Madonna del Bosco" in Calvenzano di Vergato, in the province of Bologna. His birthplace is adjacent to a small Marian sanctuary dedicated to the "Madonna del Bosco," and this strong imprint in the sign of Mary will accompany him throughout his life.

He is the second child of Claudio and Emma Limoni, who were married at the parish church of Salvaro on February 11, 1907. The following year, the firstborn Amleto was born. Two years later, Elia came into the world. Baptized the day after his birth—May 8—at the parish of Sant'Apollinare in Calvenzano, Elia also received the names "Michele" and "Giuseppe" that day.

When he was seven years old, the family moved to the locality of "Casetta" in Pioppe di Salvaro in the municipality of Grizzana. In 1916, Elia began school: he attended the first three elementary classes in Calvenzano. During that time, he also received his First Communion. Still young, he showed great involvement in catechism and liturgical celebrations. He received Confirmation on July 29, 1917. Between 1919 and 1922, Elia learned the first elements of pastoral care at the "school of fire" of Mons. Fidenzio Mellini, who had known Don Bosco as a young man and had prophesied his priesthood. In 1923, Don Mellini directed both Elia and his brother Amleto to the Salesians of Finale Emilia, and both would treasure the pedagogical charisma of the saint of the young: Amleto as a teacher and "entrepreneur" in the school; Elia as a Salesian of Don Bosco.

A novice from October 1, 1925, at San Lazzaro di Savena, Elia Comini became fatherless on September 14, 1926, just a few days (October 3, 1926) before his First Religious Profession, which he would renew until Perpetual, on May 8, 1931, on the anniversary of his baptism, at the "San Bernardino" Institute in Chiari. In Chiari, he would also be a "trainee" at the Salesian Institute "Rota." He received the minor orders of the ostiariate and lectorate on December 23,

1933; of the exorcist and acolyte on February 22, 1934. He was ordained subdeacon on September 22, 1934. Ordained deacon in the cathedral of Brescia on December 22, 1934, Don Elia was consecrated a priest by the imposition of hands of the Bishop of Brescia, Mons. Giacinto Tredici, on March 16, 1935, at just 24 years old: the next day he celebrated his First Mass at the Salesian Institute "San Bernardino" in Chiari. On July 28, 1935, he would celebrate with a Mass in Salvaro.

Enrolled in the Faculty of Classical Letters and Philosophy at the then Royal University of Milan, he was always very well-liked by the students, both as a teacher and as a father and guide in the Spirit: his character, serious without rigidity, earned him esteem and trust. Don Elia was also a fine musician and humanist, who appreciated and knew how to make others appreciate "beautiful things." In the written compositions, many students, in addition to following the prompt, naturally found it easy to open their hearts to Don Elia, thus providing him with the opportunity to accompany and guide them. Of Don Elia "the Salesian," it was said that he was like a hen with chicks around her ("You could read all the happiness of listening to him on their faces: they seemed like a brood of chicks around the hen"): all close to him! This image recalls that of Mt 23:37 and expresses his attitude of gathering people to cheer them and keep them safe.

Don Elia graduated on November 17, 1939, in Classical Letters with a thesis on Tertullian's *De resurrectione carnis*, with Professor Luigi Castiglioni (a renowned Latinist and co-author of a famous Latin dictionary, the "Castiglioni-Mariotti"): focusing on the words "*resurget igitur caro*", Elia comments that it is the song of victory after a long and exhausting battle.

A one-way journey

When his brother Amleto moved to Switzerland, their mother—Mrs. Emma Limoni—was left alone in the Apennines: therefore, Don Elia, in full agreement with his superiors, would dedicate his vacations to her every year. When he

returned home, he helped his mother but—as a priest—he primarily made himself available in local pastoral work, assisting Mons. Mellini.

In agreement with the superiors and particularly with the Inspector, Don Francesco Rastello, Don Elia returned to Salvaro in the summer of 1944: that year he hoped to evacuate his mother from an area where, at a short distance, Allied forces, partisans, and Nazi-fascist troops defined a situation of particular risk. Don Elia was aware of the danger he faced leaving his Treviglio to go to Salvaro, and a confrere, Don Giuseppe Bertolli SDB, recalls: “As I said goodbye to him, I told him that a journey like his could also be without return; I also asked him, of course jokingly, what he would leave me if he did not return; he replied in my same tone that he would leave me his books...; then I never saw him again.” Don Elia was already aware that he was heading towards “the eye of the storm” and did not seek a form of protection in the Salesian house (where he could easily have stayed): “The last memory I have of him dates back to the summer of 1944, when, during the war, the Community began to dissolve; I still hear my words that kindly addressed him, almost jokingly, reminding him that he, in those dark times we were about to face, should feel privileged, as a white cross had been drawn on the roof of the Institute and no one would have the courage to bomb it. However, he, like a prophet, replied to me to be very careful because during the holidays I might read in the newspapers that Don Elia Comini had heroically died in the fulfillment of his duty.” “The impression of the danger he was exposing himself to was vivid in everyone”, commented a confrere.

Along the journey to Salvaro, Don Comini stopped in Modena, where he sustained a serious injury to his leg: according to one account, he interposed himself between a vehicle and a passerby, thus averting a more serious accident; according to another, he helped a gentleman push a cart. In any case, he helped his neighbor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “When a madman drives his car onto the sidewalk, I cannot, as

a pastor, be content to bury the dead and console the families. I must, if I find myself in that place, jump and grab the driver at the wheel."

The episode in Modena expresses, in this sense, an attitude of Don Elia that would emerge even more in Salvaro in the following months: to interpose, mediate, rush in personally, expose his life for his brothers, always aware of the risk this entails and serenely willing to pay the consequences.

A pastor on the front line

Limping, he arrived in Salvaro at sunset on June 24, 1944, leaning on a cane as best he could: an unusual instrument for a 34-year-old young man! He found the rectory transformed: Mons. Mellini was hosting dozens of people, belonging to families of evacuees; moreover, the 5 Ancelle del Sacro Cuore sisters, responsible for the nursery, including Sister Alberta Taccini. Elderly, tired, and shaken by the war events, that summer Mons. Fidenzio Mellini struggled to make decisions; he had become more fragile and uncertain. Don Elia, who had known him since childhood, began to help him in everything and took a bit of control of the situation. The injury to his leg also prevented him from evacuating his mother: Don Elia remained in Salvaro, and when he could walk well again, the changed circumstances and the growing pastoral needs would ensure that he stayed there.

Don Elia revitalized the pastoral work, followed catechism, and took care of the orphans abandoned to themselves. He also welcomed the evacuees, encouraged the fearful, and moderated the reckless. Don Elia's presence became a unifying force, a good sign in those dramatic moments when human relationships were torn apart by suspicion and opposition. He put his organizational skills and practical intelligence, honed over years of Salesian life, at the service of many people. He wrote to his brother Amleto: "Certainly, these are dramatic moments, and worse ones are foreseen. We hope everything in the grace of God and in the

protection of the Madonna, whom you must invoke for us. I hope to be able to send you more news."

The Germans of the Wehrmacht were stationed in the area, and on the heights, there was the partisan brigade "Stella Rossa." Don Elia Comini remained a figure estranged from any claims or partisanship: he was a priest and asserted calls for prudence and pacification. He told the partisans: "Boys, watch what you do, because you ruin the population...", exposing it to reprisals. They respected him, and in July and September 1944, they requested Masses in the parish church of Salvaro. Don Elia accepted, bringing down the partisans and celebrating without hiding, instead preferring not to go up to the partisan area and, as he would always do that summer, to stay in Salvaro or nearby areas, without hiding or slipping into "ambiguous" attitudes in the eyes of the Nazi-fascists.

On July 27, Don Elia Comini wrote the last lines of his Spiritual Diary: "July 27: I find myself right in the middle of the war. I long for my confreres and my home in Treviglio; if I could, I would return tomorrow."

From July 20, he shared a priestly fraternity with Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, born on September 20, 1912, in Nembro in the Bergamo area, and already a teacher of Sacred Scripture in Bologna, also a guest of Mons. Mellini and helping with the pastoral work.

Elia and Martino are two scholars of ancient languages who now have to attend to more practical and material matters. The rectory of Mons. Mellini becomes what Mons. Luciano Gherardi later called "the community of the ark," a place that welcomes to save. Father Martino was a religious who became passionate when he heard about the Mexican martyrs and wished to be a missionary in China. Elia, since he was young, has been pursued by a strange awareness of "having to die," and by the age of 17, he had already written: "The thought that I must die always persists in me! – Who knows?! Let us act like the faithful servant: always prepared for the call, to 'render account' of the management."

On July 24, Don Elia begins catechism for the

children in preparation for their First Communions, scheduled for July 30. On the 25th, a baby girl is born in the baptismal font (all spaces, from the sacristy to the chicken coop, were overflowing) and a pink bow is hung.

Throughout August 1944, soldiers of the Wehrmacht are stationed at the rectory of Mons. Mellini and in the space in front. Among Germans, displaced persons, and consecrated individuals... the tension could have exploded at any moment: Don Elia mediates and prevents even in small matters, for example, acting as a "buffer" between the too-loud volume of the Germans' radio and the now too-short patience of Mons. Mellini. There was also some praying of the Rosary together. Don Angelo Carboni confirms: "In the constant effort to comfort Monsignore, Don Elia worked hard against the resistance of a company of Germans who, having settled in Salvaro on August 1, wanted to occupy various areas of the Rectory, taking away all freedom and comfort from the families and displaced persons hosted there. Once the Germans were settled in Monsignore's archive, they again disturbed, occupying a good part of the church square with their vehicles; with even gentler manners and persuasive words, Don Elia also obtained this other liberation to comfort Monsignore, who the oppression of the struggle had forced to rest." In those weeks, the Salesian priest is firm in protecting Mons. Mellini's right to move with a certain ease in his own home – as well as that of the displaced persons not to be removed from the rectory –: however, he recognizes some needs of the Wehrmacht men, which attracts their goodwill towards Mons. Mellini, whom the German soldiers will learn to call the good pastor. From the Germans, Don Elia obtains food for the displaced persons. Moreover, he sings to calm the children and tells stories from the life of Don Bosco. In a summer marked by killings and reprisals, with Don Elia, some civilians even manage to go listen to a bit of music, evidently broadcast from the Germans' device, and to communicate with the soldiers through brief gestures. Don Rino Germani sdb, Vice-Postulator of the Cause, states: "Between

the two warring forces, the tireless and mediating work of the Servant of God intervenes. When necessary, he presents himself to the German Command and, with politeness and preparation, manages to win the esteem of some officers. Thus, many times he succeeds in avoiding reprisals, looting, and mourning."

With the rectory freed from the fixed presence of the Wehrmacht on September 1, 1944 – "On September 1, the Germans left the Salvaro area free, only a few remained for a few more days in the Fabbri house" – life in Salvaro can take a breath of relief. Don Elia Comini continues in his apostolic initiatives, assisted by the other priests and the nuns.

Meanwhile, however, Father Martino accepts some invitations to preach elsewhere and goes up into the mountains, where his light hair gets him into big trouble with the partisans who suspect him of being German, while Don Elia remains essentially stationary. On September 8, he writes to the Salesian director of the House of Treviglio: "I leave you to imagine our state of mind in these moments. We have gone through very dark and dramatic days. [...] My thoughts are always with you and with the dear confreres there. I feel a deep nostalgia [...]"

From the 11th, he preaches the Exercises to the Sisters on the theme of the Last Things, religious vows, and the life of the Lord Jesus.

The entire population – declared a consecrated person – loved Don Elia, also because he did not hesitate to spend himself for everyone, at every moment; he did not only ask people to pray, but offered them a valid example with his piety and the little apostolate that, given the circumstances, was possible to exercise.

The experience of the Exercises gives a different dynamic to the entire week and involves both consecrated and lay people. In the evening, in fact, Don Elia gathers 80-90 people: he tried to ease the tension with a bit of cheerfulness, good examples, and charity. During those months, both he and Father Martino, along with other priests, first among them Don Giovanni Fornasini, were on the front lines in

many works of charity.

The massacre of Montesole

The most brutal and largest massacre carried out by the Nazi SS in Europe during the war of 1939-45 was that which took place around Monte Sole, in the territories of Marzabotto, Grizzana Morandi, and Monzuno, although it is commonly known as the “massacre of Marzabotto.”

Between September 29 and October 5, 1944, there were 770 casualties, but overall the victims of Germans and fascists, from the spring of 1944 to liberation, were 955, distributed across 115 different locations within a vast territory that includes the municipalities of Marzabotto, Grizzana, and Monzuno and some portions of the surrounding territories. Of these, 216 were children, 316 were women, 142 were elderly, 138 were recognized partisans, and five were priests, whose fault in the eyes of the Germans was being close, with prayer and material help, to the entire population of Monte Sole during the tragic months of war and military occupation. Along with Don Elia Comini, a Salesian, and Father Martino Capelli, a Dehonian, three priests from the Archdiocese of Bologna were also killed during those tragic days: Don Ubaldo Marchioni, Don Ferdinando Casagrande, and Don Giovanni Fornasini. The cause for beatification and canonization is underway for all five. Don Giovanni, the “Angel of Marzabotto,” fell on October 13, 1944. He was twenty-nine years old, and his body remained unburied until 1945, when it was found heavily mutilated; he was beatified on September 26, 2021. Don Ubaldo died on September 29, shot by a machine gun on the altar step of his church in Casaglia; he was 26 years old and had been ordained a priest two years earlier. The German soldiers found him and the community engaged in the prayer of the rosary. He was killed there, at the foot of the altar. The others – more than 70 – in the nearby cemetery. Don Ferdinando was killed on October 9, shot in the back of the neck, along with his sister Giulia; he was 26 years old.

From the Wehrmacht to the SS

On September 25, the Wehrmacht leaves the area and hands over command to the SS of the 16th Battalion of the 16th Armored Division "Reichsführer – SS," a division that includes SS elements "Totenkopf – Death's Head" and was preceded by a trail of blood, having been present at Sant'Anna di Stazzema (Lucca) on August 12, 1944; at San Terenzo Monti (Massa-Carrara, in Lunigiana) on the 17th of that month; at Vinca and surroundings (Massa-Carrara, in Lunigiana at the foot of the Apuan Alps) from August 24 to 27.

On September 25, the SS establish the "High Command" in Sibano. On September 26, they move to Salvaro, where Don Elia is also present: an area *outside* the immediate influence of partisans. The harshness of the commanders in pursuing total contempt for human life, the habit of lying about the fate of civilians, and the paramilitary structure – which willingly resorted to "scorched earth" techniques, in disregard of any code of war or legitimacy of orders given from above – made it a death squad that left nothing intact in its wake. Some had received training explicitly focused on concentration and extermination, aimed at: the suppression of life, for ideological purposes; hatred towards those who professed the Jewish-Christian faith; contempt for the small, the poor, the elderly, and the weak; persecution of those who opposed the aberrations of National Socialism. There was a veritable catechism – anti-Christian and anti-Catholic – of which the young SS were imbued.

"When one thinks that the Nazi youth was formed in the contempt for the human personality of Jews and other 'non-chosen' races, in the fanatical cult of an alleged absolute national superiority, in the myth of creative violence and of the 'new weapons' bringing justice to the world, one understands where the roots of the aberrations lay, made easier by the atmosphere of war and the fear of a disappointing defeat."

Don Elia Comini – with Father Capelli – rushes to comfort, reassure, and exhort. He decides to welcome primarily

the survivors of families in which the Germans had killed in retaliation. In doing so, he removes the survivors from the danger of finding death shortly after, but above all, he tears them – at least to the extent possible – from that spiral of loneliness, despair, and loss of the will to live that could have translated into a desire for death. He also manages to speak to the Germans and, on at least one occasion, to dissuade the SS from their intention, making them pass by and thus being able to subsequently warn the refugees to come out of hiding.

The Vice-Postulator Don Rino Germani sdb wrote: “Don Elia arrives. He reassures them. He tells them to come out because the Germans have left. He speaks with the Germans and makes them go on.”

Paolo Calanchi, a man whose conscience reproaches him nothing and who makes the mistake of not fleeing, is also killed. It is still Don Elia who rushes, before the flames attack his body, trying at least to honor his remains, having not arrived in time to save his life: “The body of Paolino is saved from the flames by Don Elia who, at the risk of his life, collects him and transports him with a cart to the Church of Salvaro.”

The daughter of Paolo Calanchi testified: “My father was a good and honest man [‘in times of ration cards and famine, he gave bread to those who had none’] and had refused to flee, feeling at peace with everyone. He was killed by the Germans, shot, in retaliation; later, the house was also set on fire, but my father’s body had been saved from the flames by Don Comini, who, at the risk of his own life, had collected him and transported him with a cart to the Church of Salvaro, where, in a coffin he built with spare planks, he was buried in the cemetery. Thus, thanks to the courage of Don Comini and, very likely, also of Father Martino, after the war, my mother and I were able to find and have our dear one’s coffin transported to the cemetery of Vergato, alongside that of my brother Gianluigi, who died 40 days later while crossing the front.”

Once, Don Elia had said of the Wehrmacht: "We must also love these Germans who come to disturb us." "He loved everyone without preference." Don Elia's ministry was very precious for Salvaro and many displaced persons during those days. Witnesses have stated: "Don Elia was our fortune because we had a parish priest who was too old and weak. The entire population knew that Don Elia had this interest in us; Don Elia helped everyone. One could say that we saw him every day. He said Mass, but then he was often on the church steps watching: the Germans were down, towards the Reno; the partisans were coming from the mountain, towards the Creda. Once, for example, (a few days before the 26th) the partisans came. We were coming out of the Church of Salvaro, and there were the partisans there, all armed; and Don Elia urged them so much to leave, to avoid trouble. They listened to him and left. Probably, if it hadn't been for him, what happened afterward would have happened much earlier"; "As far as I know, Don Elia was the soul of the situation, as with his personality he knew how to keep many things in hand that were of vital importance in those dramatic moments."

Although he was a young priest, Don Elia Comini was reliable. This reliability, combined with a deep rectitude, had accompanied him for a long time, even as a cleric, as evidenced by a testimony: "I had him for four years at the Rota, from 1931 to 1935, and, although still a cleric, **he gave me help that I would have found it hard to get from any other older confrere.**"

The triduum of passion

The situation, however, deteriorates after a few days, on the morning of September 29, when the SS carry out a terrible massacre in the locality "Creda." The signal for the start of the massacre is a white rocket and a red one in the air: they begin to shoot, the machine guns hit the victims, barricaded against a porch and practically without a way out. Hand grenades are then thrown, some incendiary, and the barn – where some had managed to find refuge – catches fire. A few

men, seizing a moment of distraction from the SS in that hell, rush down towards the woods. Attilio Comastri, injured, is saved because the lifeless body of his wife Ines Gandolfi shielded him: he will wander for days, in shock, until he manages to cross the front and save his life; he had lost, in addition to his wife, his sister Marcellina and his two-year-old daughter Bianca. Carlo Cardi also manages to save himself, but his family is exterminated: Walter Cardi was only 14 days old, he was the youngest victim of the Monte Sole massacre. Mario Lippi, one of the survivors, attests: "I don't even know how I miraculously saved myself, given that of the 82 people gathered under the porch, 70 were killed [69, according to the official reconstruction]. I remember that besides the fire from the machine guns, the Germans also threw hand grenades at us, and I believe that some shrapnel from these slightly injured me in the right side, in the back, and in the right arm. I, along with seven other people, took advantage of the fact that on [one] side of the porch there was a small door leading to the street, and I ran away towards the woods. The Germans, seeing us flee, shot at us, killing one of us named Gandolfi Emilio. I specify that among the 82 people gathered under the aforementioned porch, there were also about twenty children, two of whom were in swaddling clothes, in the arms of their respective mothers, and about twenty women."

In Creda, there are 21 children under 11 years old, some very small; 24 women (including one teenager); almost 20 "elderly." Among the most affected families are the Cardi (7 people), the Gandolfi (9 people), the Lolli (5 people), and the Macchelli (6 people).

From the rectory of Mons. Mellini, looking up, at a certain point, smoke is seen: but it is early morning, Creda remains hidden from view, and the woods muffles the sounds. In the parish that day – September 29, the feast of the Archangels – three Masses are celebrated, in immediate succession: that of Mons. Mellini; that of Father Capelli, who then goes to bring Extreme Unction in the locality "Casellina"; that of Don Comini. And it is then that the drama

knocks at the door: "Ferdinando Castori, who also escaped the massacre, arrived at the Church of Salvaro smeared with blood like a butcher and went to hide inside the spire of the bell tower." Around 8, a distraught man arrives at the rectory: he looked "like a monster for his terrifying appearance," says Sister Alberta Taccini. He asks for help for the wounded. About seventy people are dead or dying amid terrible tortures. Don Elia, in a few moments, has the clarity to hide 60/70 men in the sacristy, pushing an old wardrobe against the door that left the threshold visible from below, but was nonetheless the only hope of salvation: "It was then that Don Elia, he himself, had the idea to hide the men next to the sacristy, then putting a wardrobe in front of the door (one or two people who were in Monsignore's house helped him). The idea was Don Elia's; but everyone was against the fact that it was Don Elia who did that work... He wanted it. The others said: 'And what if they discover us?'" Another account: "Don Elia managed to hide about sixty men in a room adjacent to the sacristy and pushed an old wardrobe against the door. Meanwhile, the crackle of machine guns and the desperate screams of people came from the nearby houses. Don Elia had the strength to begin the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the last of his life. He had not yet finished when a terrified and breathless young man from the locality 'Creda' arrived asking for help because the SS had surrounded a house and arrested sixty-nine people, men, women, and children."

"Still in sacred vestments, **prostrated at the altar, immersed in prayer**, he invokes for all the help of the Sacred Heart, the intercession of Mary Help of Christians, St. John Bosco, and St. Michael the Archangel. Then, with a brief examination of conscience, reciting the act of sorrow three times, he prepares them for death. He commends all those people to the care of the sisters and to the Superior to lead the prayer strongly so that the faithful may find in it the comfort they need."

Regarding Don Elia and Father Martino, who returned shortly after, "some dimensions of a priestly life

spent consciously for others until the last moment are evident: their death was a prolongation in the gift of life of the Mass celebrated until the last day." Their choice had "distant roots, in the decision to do good even if it were the last hour, even willing to martyrdom": "Many people came to seek help in the parish, and unbeknownst to the parish priest, Don Elia and Father Martino tried to hide as many people as possible; then, ensuring that they were somehow assisted, they rushed to the site of the massacres to bring help to the most unfortunate; even Mons. Mellini did not realize this and continued to look for the two priests to get help to receive all those people" ("We are certain that none of them was a partisan or had been with the partisans").

In those moments, Don Elia demonstrates great clarity, which translates into both organizational spirit and the awareness of putting his own life at risk: "In light of all this, and Don Elia knew it well, we cannot therefore seek that charity which leads to the attempt to help others, but rather that type of charity (which was the same as Christ's) that leads **to participating fully in the suffering of others**, not even fearing death as its ultimate manifestation. The fact that his choice was **lucid and well-reasoned** is also demonstrated by the organizational spirit he manifested until just a few minutes before his death, trying promptly and intelligently to hide as many people as possible in the hidden rooms of the rectory; then the news of the Creda and, after fraternal charity, heroic charity."

One thing is certain: if Don Elia had hidden with all the other men or even just stayed next to Mons. Mellini, he would have had nothing to fear. Instead, Don Elia and Father Martino took the stole, the holy oils, and a container with some consecrated Hosts: "They then set off for the mountain, armed with the stole and the oil of the sick": "When Don Elia returned from having gone to Monsignore, **he took the Ciborium with the Hosts** and the Holy Oil and turned to us: that face again! It was so pale that he looked like someone already dead. And he said: 'Pray, pray for me, because I have

a mission to fulfill.' 'Pray for me, do not leave me alone!' 'We are priests and we must go and we must do our duty.' **'Let us go to bring the Lord to our brothers.'**

Up at the Creda, there are many people dying in agony: they must hurry, bless, and – if possible – try to intercede regarding the SS.

Mrs. Massimina [Zappoli], also a witness in the military investigation in Bologna, recalls: "Despite the prayers of all of us, they quickly celebrated the Eucharist and, driven only by the hope of being able to do something for the victims of such ferocity, at least with a spiritual comfort, they **took the Blessed Sacrament and ran towards the Creda**. I remember that while Don Elia, already launched in his run, passed by me in the kitchen, **I clung to him in a last attempt to dissuade him**, saying that we would be left at the mercy of ourselves; he made it clear that, as serious as our situation was, there were those who were worse off than us and it was from them that they had to go."

He is unyielding and refuses, as Mons. Mellini later suggested, to delay the ascent to the Creda when the Germans had left: "It was [therefore] a passion, before being bloody, [...] of the heart, the passion of the spirit. In those times, everyone was terrified by everything and everyone: there was no longer trust in anyone: anyone could be a decisive enemy for one's life. When the two priests realized that someone truly needed them, they had no hesitation in deciding what to do [...] and above all they did **not resort to what was the immediate decision for everyone, that is, to find a hiding place**, to try to cover themselves **and to be out of the fray**. The two priests, on the other hand, went right in, consciously, knowing that their lives were 99% at risk; and they went in to be truly priests: that is, to assist and to comfort; to also provide the service of the Sacraments, therefore of prayer, of the comfort that faith and religion offer."

One person said: "Don Elia, for us, was already a saint. **If he had been a normal person [...] he would have hidden**

too, behind the wardrobe, like all the others."

With the men hidden, it is the women who try to hold back the priests, in an extreme attempt to save their lives. The scene is both frantic and very eloquent: "Lidia Macchi [...] and other women tried to prevent them from leaving, they tried to hold them by the cassock, they chased them, they called out loudly for them to come back: driven by an inner force that is the ardor of charity and missionary solicitude, they were now decisively walking towards the Creda bringing religious comforts."

One of them recalls: "I hugged them, I held them firmly by the arms, saying and pleading: – Don't go! – Don't go!"

And Lidia Marchi adds: "I was pulling Father Martino by the robe and holding him back [...] but both priests kept repeating: – We must go; the Lord is calling us."

"We must fulfill our duty. And [Don Elia and Father Martino,] like Jesus, went to meet a marked fate."

"The decision to go to the Creda was made by the two priests out **of pure pastoral spirit; despite everyone trying to dissuade them**, they wanted to go driven by the hope of being able to save someone among those who were at the mercy of the soldiers' rage."

At the Creda, almost certainly, they never arrived. Captured, according to a witness, near a "little pillar," just outside the parish's field of vision, Don Elia and Father Martino were later seen loaded with ammunition, at the head of those rounded up, or still alone, tied up, with chains, near a tree while there was no battle going on and the SS were eating. Don Elia urged a woman to run away, not to stop to avoid being killed: "Anna, for charity, run, run."

"They were loaded and bent under the weight of many heavy boxes that wrapped around their bodies from front to back. Their backs curved so much that their noses were almost touching the ground."

"Sitting on the ground [...] very sweaty and tired, with ammunition on their backs."

“Arrested, they are forced to carry ammunition up and down the mountain, witnesses of unheard-of violence.”

“[The SS make them] go up and down the mountain several times, under their escort, and also committing, under the eyes of the two victims, the most gruesome acts of violence.”

Where are the stole, the holy oils, and above all the Blessed Sacrament now? There is no trace of them left. Far from prying eyes, the SS forcibly stripped the priests of them, getting rid of that Treasure of which nothing would ever be found again.

Towards the evening of September 29, 1944, they were taken with many other men (rounded up and not for reprisal or because they were pro-partisan, as the sources show), to the house “of the Birocciai” in Pioppe di Salvaro. Later, they, divided, would have very different fates: few would be released after a series of interrogations. The majority, deemed fit for work, would be sent to forced labor camps and could – later – return to their families. Those deemed unfit, for mere age criteria (cf. concentration camps) or health (young, but injured or pretending to be sick hoping to save themselves) would be killed on the evening of October 1 at the “Botte” of the Canapiera in Pioppe di Salvaro, now a ruin because it had been bombed by the Allies days before.

Don Elia and Father Martino – who were interrogated – were able to move until the last moment in the house and receive visits. Don Elia interceded for everyone and a very troubled young man fell asleep on his knees: in one of them, Don Elia received the Breviary, so dear to him, which he wanted to keep with him until the last moments. Today, careful historical research through documentary sources, supported by the most recent historiography from a secular perspective, has shown how no attempt to free Don Elia, made by Cavalier Emilio Veggetti, ever succeeded, and how Don Elia and Father Martino were never truly considered or at least treated as “spies.”

The Holocaust

Finally, they were included, although young (34 and 32 years old), in the group of the unfit and executed with them. They lived those last moments praying, making others pray, having absolved each other and giving every possible comfort of faith. Don Elia managed to transform the macabre procession of the condemned up to a walkway in front of the canapiera reservoir, where they would be killed, into a choral act of entrustment, holding the Breviary open in his hand for as long as he could (then, it is said, a German violently struck his hands and the Breviary fell into the reservoir) and above all singing the Litanies. When the fire was opened, Don Elia Comini saved a man because he shielded him with his own body and shouted "Pity." Father Martino instead invoked "Forgiveness," struggling to rise in the reservoir, among the dead or dying companions, and tracing the sign of the Cross just moments before dying himself, due to a huge wound. The SS wanted to ensure that no one survived by throwing some hand grenades. In the following days, given the impossibility of recovering the bodies immersed in water and mud due to heavy rains (the women tried, but even Don Fornasini could not succeed), a man opened the grates and the impetuous current of the Reno River carried everything away. Nothing was ever found of them: consummatum est!

They had shown themselves willing "even to martyrdom, even if in the eyes of men it seems foolish to **refuse one's own salvation to give a miserable relief to those already destined for death.**" Mons. Benito Cocchi in September 1977 in Salvaro said: "Well, here before the Lord we say that our preference goes to these gestures, to these people, to those who **pay personally**: to those who at a time when only weapons, strength, and violence mattered, when a house, the life of a child, an entire family were valued as nothing, knew how to perform gestures that have no voice in the war accounts, but which are true treasures of humanity, resistance, and an alternative to violence; to those who in this way were laying **roots for a more humane society and coexistence.**"

In this sense, “The martyrdom of the priests constitutes the fruit of their conscious choice to share the fate of the flock until the ultimate sacrifice, when the efforts of mediation between the population and the occupiers, long pursued, lose all possibility of success.”

Don Elia Comini had been clear about his fate, saying – already in the early stages of detention –: “To do good we find ourselves in so much suffering”; “It was Don Elia who, pointing to the sky, greeted with tear-filled eyes.” “Elia leaned out and said to me: ‘Go to Bologna, to the Cardinal, and tell him where we are.’ I replied: ‘How can I go to Bologna?’ [...] Meanwhile, the soldiers were pushing me with the rifle barrel. Don Elia greeted me saying: ‘We will see each other in paradise!’ I shouted: ‘No, no, don’t say that.’ He replied, sad and resigned: ‘We will see each other in Paradise.’”

With Don Bosco...: “[I] await you all in Paradise”!

It was the evening of October 1, the beginning of the month dedicated to the Rosary and Missions.

In the years of his early youth, Elia Comini had said to God: “Lord, **prepare me to be the least unworthy to be an acceptable victim**” (“Diary” 1929); “Lord, [...] **receive me as a victim of atonement**” (1929); “**I would like to be a victim of holocaust**” (1931). “[To Jesus] I asked for death rather than failing in my priestly vocation and in my **heroic love for souls**” (1935).

Educating the body and its 5 senses with Saint Francis de

Sales

A good number of ancient Christian ascetics often considered the body as an enemy, whose decay had to be confronted, in fact, as if it were an object of contempt and given no consideration. Numerous spiritual men of the Middle Ages did not care for the body except to inflict penances upon it. In most schools of the time, nothing was provided to allow “brother donkey” to rest.

For Calvino, human nature that was totally corrupted by original sin, could only be an “outhouse.” On the opposite front, numerous Renaissance writers and artists exalted the body to the point of paying it cult, in which sensuality played a significant role. Rabelais, for his part, glorified the bodies of his giants and took pleasure in showcasing even their less noble organic functions.

Salesian realism

Between the divinisation of the body and its contempt, Francis de Sales offers a realistic view of human nature. At the end of the first meditation on the theme of the creation of man, “the first being of the visible world,” the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* puts on the lips of Philothea this statement that seems to summarise his thought: “I want to feel honoured for the being that he has given me.” Certainly, the body is destined for death. With stark realism, the author describes the soul’s farewell to the body, which it will leave “pale, livid, disfigured, horrid, and foul-smelling,” but this does not constitute a reason to neglect and unjustly denigrate it while one is alive. Saint Bernard was wrong when he announced to those who wanted to follow him “that they should abandon their bodies and go to him only in spirit.” Physical evils should not lead to hating the body: moral evil is far worse.

We surely do not find any oblivion or overshadowing of bodily phenomena in Francis de Sales, as when

he speaks of various forms of diseases or when he evokes the manifestations of human love. In a chapter of the *Treatise on the Love of God* titled: "That love tends to union," he writes, for example, that "one mouth is applied to another in kissing to testify that we would desire to pour out one soul into the other, to unite them reciprocally in a perfect union." This attitude of Francis de Sales towards the body already provoked scandalised reactions in his time. When Philothea appeared, an Avignonese religious publicly criticised this "little book," tearing it apart and accusing its author of being a "corrupted and corrupting doctor." An enemy of excessive modesty, Francis de Sales was not yet aware of the reserve and fears that would emerge in later times. Do medieval customs survive in him or is it simply a manifestation of his "biblical" taste? In any case, there is nothing in him comparable to the trivialities of the "infamous" Rabelais.

The most esteemed natural gifts are beauty, strength, and health. Regarding beauty, Francis de Sales expressed himself while speaking of Saint Brigid: "She was born in Scotland; she was a very beautiful girl, since the Scots are naturally beautiful, and in that country, one finds the most beautiful creatures that exist." Let us also think of the repertoire of images regarding the physical perfections of the bridegroom and the bride, taken from the *Song of Solomon*. Although the representations are sublimated and transferred to a spiritual register, they remain indicative of an atmosphere in which the natural beauty of man and woman is exalted. There were attempts to have him suppress the chapter of *Theotimus* on kissing, in which he demonstrates that "love tends to union," but he always refused to do so. In any case, external beauty is not the most important: the beauty of the daughter of Zion is internal.

The close connection between body and soul

First of all, Francis de Sales affirms that the body is "a part of our person." With a hint of tenderness, a personified soul can also say: "This flesh is my dear half, it

is my sister, it is my companion, born with me, nourished with me."

The bishop was very attentive to the existing bond between body and soul, between the health of the body and that of the soul. Thus, he writes of a person under his care, who was in poor health, that the health of her body "depends a lot on that of the soul, and that of the soul depends on spiritual consolations." "Your heart has not weakened – he wrote to a sick woman – rather your body, and, given the very close ties that unite them, your heart has the impression of experiencing the pain of your body." Everyone can see that bodily infirmities "end up creating discomfort even to the spirit, due to the close bonds between the one and the other." Conversely, the spirit acts on the body to the point that "the body perceives the affections that stir in the heart," as occurred with Jesus, who sat by Jacob's well, tired from His heavy commitment to the service of the Kingdom of God.

However, since "the body and spirit often proceed in opposite directions, and as one weakens, the other strengthens," and since "the spirit must reign," "we must support and strengthen it so that it always remains its strongest." So, if I take care of the body, it is "so that it may serve the spirit."

In the meantime, we should be fair towards the body. In case of malaise or mistakes, it often happens that the soul accuses the body and mistreats it, as Balaam did with his donkey: "O poor soul! If your flesh could speak, it would say to you, as Balaam's donkey: why do you beat me, miserable one? It is against you, my soul, that God arms His vengeance; you are the criminal." When a person reforms their inner self, the conversion will also manifest externally: in all attitudes, in the mouth, in the hands, and "even in the hair." The practice of virtue makes a person beautiful internally and also externally. Conversely, an external change, a behaviour of the body can favour an inner change. An act of external devotion during meditation can awaken inner devotion. What is said here about spiritual life can easily be applied to

education in general.

Love and dominance of the body

Speaking of the attitude one should have towards the body and physical realities, it is not surprising to see Francis de Sales that recommends Philothea, first of all, gratitude for the physical graces that God has given her.

We must love our body for several reasons: because it is necessary for us to perform good works, because it is a part of our person, and because it is destined to participate in eternal happiness. Christians must love their bodies as a living image of that of the incarnate Saviour, as coming from Him by kinship and consanguinity. Especially after we have renewed the covenant, truly receiving the body of the Redeemer in the adorable Sacrament of the Eucharist, and, with Baptism, Confirmation, and the other sacraments, we have dedicated and consecrated ourselves to supreme goodness.

Loving one's own body is part of the love owed to oneself. In truth, the most convincing reason to honour and wisely use the body lies in a vision of faith, which the bishop of Geneva explained to the mother of Chantal after she recovered from an illness: "Take care of this body, for it is of God, my dearest Mother." The Virgin Mary is presented at this point as a model: "With what devotion she must have loved her virginal body! Not only because it was a sweet, humble, pure body, obedient to holy love and totally imbued with a thousand sacred perfumes, but also because it was the living source of that of the Saviour and belonged to Him very closely, with a bond that has no comparison."

The love of the body is indeed recommended, but the body must remain subject to the spirit, as the servant to his master. To control appetite, I must "command my hands not to provide the mouth with food and drink, except in the right measure." To govern sexuality, "one must remove or give to the reproductive faculty the subjects, objects, and foods that

excite it, according to the dictates of reason." To the young man who is about to "set sail in the vast sea," the bishop recommends: "I also wish you a vigorous heart that prevents you from pampering your body with excessive delicacies in eating, sleeping, or other things. It is known, in fact, that a generous heart always feels a bit of contempt for bodily delicacies and delights."

In order for the body to remain subject to the law of the spirit, it is advisable to avoid excesses: neither mistreat it nor pamper it. In everything, moderation is necessary. The spirit of charity must prevail over all things. This leads him to write: "If the work you do is necessary for you or is very useful for the glory of God, I would prefer that you endure the pains of work rather than those of fasting." Hence the conclusion: "In general, it is better to have more strength in the body than is needed, rather than ruin it beyond what is necessary; because it is always possible to ruin it whenever one wants, but to recover it is not always enough to just want it."

What must be avoided is this "tenderness one feels for oneself." With fine irony but in a ruthless manner, he takes it out on an imperfection that is not only "characteristic of children, and, if I may dare to say, of women," but also of cowardly men, of whom he gives this interesting characteristic representation: "There are others who are compassionate towards themselves, and who do nothing but complain, coddle, pamper and look at themselves."

In any case, the bishop of Geneva took care of his body, as was his duty, and obeyed his doctor and the "nurses." He also took care of the health of others, giving advice on appropriate measures. He would write, for example, to the mother of a young student at the college of Annecy: "It is necessary to have Charles examined by doctors, so that his abdominal swelling does not worsen."

Hygiene is at the service of health. Francis de Sales desired that both the heart and the body be clean. He recommended decorum, very different from statements like that

of Saint Hilary, according to which “one should not seek cleanliness in our bodies, which are nothing but pestilential carcasses and only full of infection.” He was rather of the opinion of Saint Augustine and the ancient people who bathed “to keep their bodies clean from the dirt produced by heat and sweat, and also for health, which is certainly greatly aided by cleanliness.”

In order to work and fulfil the duties of one’s office, everyone should take care of their body regarding nutrition and rest: “To eat little, work a lot and with much agitation, and deny the body the necessary rest, is like demanding much from a horse that is exhausted without giving it time to chew a bit of fodder.” The body needs to rest. This is quite evident. Long evening vigils are “harmful to the head and stomach,” while, on the other hand, getting up early in the morning is “useful for both health and holiness.”

Educating our senses, especially the eyes and ears

Our senses are wonderful gifts from the Creator. They connect us to the world and open us to all sensitive realities, to nature, to the cosmos. The senses are the door to the spirit, which they provide, so to speak, with the raw material; indeed, as the scholastic tradition says, “nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.”

When Francis de Sales speaks of the senses, his interest leads him particularly to the educational and moral levels, and his teaching on this matter is connected to what he has presented about the body in general: admiration and vigilance. On the one hand, he says that God gives us “eyes to see the wonders of His works, a tongue to praise Him, and so for all the other faculties,” without ever omitting, and on the other, the recommendation to “set up sentinels for the eyes, the mouth, the ears, the hands, and the sense of smell.”

It is necessary to start with sight, because “among all the external parts of the human body, there is none, in terms of structure and activity, more noble than the eye.” The eye is made for light. This is demonstrated by the

fact that the more beautiful, pleasant to the sight, and properly illuminated things are, the more the eye gazes at them with eagerness and liveliness. "From the eyes and words, one knows what the soul and spirit of a man are, for the eyes serve the soul as the dial serves the clock." It is well known that among lovers, the eyes speak more than the tongue.

We must be vigilant over the eyes, for through them temptation and sin can enter, as happened to Eve, who was enchanted by the beauty of the forbidden fruit, or to David, who fixed his gaze on Uriah's wife. In certain cases, one must proceed as one does with a bird of prey: to make it return, it is necessary to show it the lure; to calm it, one must cover it with a hood; similarly, to avoid bad looks, "one must turn the eyes away, cover them with the natural hood, and close them."

Granted that visual images are largely dominant in the works of Francis de Sales, it must be recognised that auditory images are also quite noteworthy. This highlights the importance he attributed to hearing for both aesthetic and moral reasons. "A sublime melody listened to with great concentration" produces such a magical effect as to "enchant the ears." But be careful not to exceed auditory capacities: music, however beautiful, if loud and too close, bothers us and offends the ear.

Besides, it must be known that "the heart and the ears converse with each other," for it is through the ear that the heart "listens to the thoughts of others." It is also through the ear that suspicious, insulting, lying, or malevolent words enter into the depths of the soul, from which one must be very careful. For souls are poisoned through the ear, just as the body is through the mouth. The honest woman will cover her ears so as not to hear the voice of the enchanter who wants to cunningly seduce her. Remaining in the symbolic realm, Francis de Sales declares that the right ear is the organ through which we hear spiritual messages, good inspirations, and motions, while the left serves to hear worldly and vain discourses. To guard the heart, we must

therefore protect the ears with great care.

The best service we can ask of the ears is to hear the word of God, the object of preaching, which requires attentive listeners eager to let it penetrate their hearts so that it may bear fruit. Philothea is invited to “let it drip” into the ear, first of one and then of the other, and to pray to God in the depths of her soul, that He may enjoy letting that holy dew penetrate the hearts of those who listen.

The other senses

Also, as regards the sense of smell, the abundance of olfactory images has been noted. The perfumes are as diverse as the fragrant substances, such as milk, wine, balm, oil, myrrh, incense, aromatic wood, spikenard, ointment, rose, onion, lily, violet, pansy, mandrake, cinnamon... It is even more astonishing to observe the results produced by the making of scented water:

Basil, rosemary, marjoram, hyssop, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, lemons, and musk, mixed together and crushed, do indeed give off a very pleasant fragrance from the mixture of their odours. However, it is not even comparable to that of the water distilled from them, in which the aromas of all these ingredients, isolated from their cores, blend more perfectly, giving rise to an exquisite fragrance that penetrates the sense of smell much more than would happen if the material parts were present along with the water.

There are numerous olfactory images drawn from the Song of Solomon, an oriental poem where perfumes occupy a prominent place and where one of the biblical verses most commented on by Francis de Sales is the heartfelt cry of the bride: “Draw me to you, we will walk and run together in the wake of your perfumes.” And how refined is this note: “The sweet fragrance of the rose is made more subtle by the proximity of the garlic planted near the rose bushes!”.

However, let us not confuse the sacred balm with

the perfumes of this world. There is indeed a spiritual sense of smell, which we should cultivate in our interest. It allows us to perceive the spiritual presence of the beloved subject, and also ensures that we do not let ourselves be distracted by the bad odours of others. The model is the father who welcomes the prodigal son returning to him "semi-nude, dirty, filthy, and stinking of filth from long association with pigs." Another realistic image appears in reference to certain worldly criticisms. Let us not be surprised, Francis de Sales advises Giovanna di Chantal, it is necessary "that the little ointment we have seems stinking to the nostrils of the world."

Regarding taste, certain observations by the bishop of Geneva might lead us to think that he was a born gourmand, indeed an educator of taste: "Who does not know that the sweetness of honey increasingly unites our sense of taste with a continuous progression of flavour, when, keeping it in the mouth for a long time instead of swallowing it immediately, its flavour penetrates more deeply into our sense of taste?" Granted the sweetness of honey, however, it is necessary to appreciate salt more, for the fact that it is more commonly used. In the name of sobriety and temperance, Francis de Sales recommended knowing how to renounce personal taste, eating what is "put before us."

Finally, regarding touch, Francis de Sales speaks of it especially in a spiritual and mystical sense. Thus, he recommends touching Our Lord crucified: the head, the holy hands, the precious body, the heart. To the young man about to set sail into the vast sea of the world, he requires that he govern himself vigorously and to despise softness, bodily delights, and daintiness: "I would like you to sometimes treat your body harshly to make it experience some harshness and toughness, despising delicacies and things pleasant to the senses; for it is necessary that sometimes reason exercises its superiority and the authority it has to regulate sensual appetites."

The body and spiritual life

The body is also called to participate in the spiritual life that is expressed primarily in prayer: "It is true, the essence of prayer is in the soul, but the voice, gestures, and other external signs, through which the innermost part of hearts is revealed, are noble appurtenances and very useful properties of prayer. They are effects and operations. The soul is not satisfied with praying if man does not pray in his entirety; it prays together with the eyes, the hands, the knees."

He adds that "the soul prostrated before God easily makes the entire body bend over itself; it raises the eyes where it elevates the heart, lifts the hands there, from where it awaits help." Francis de Sales also explains that "to pray in spirit and truth is to pray willingly and affectionately, without pretence or hypocrisy, and engaging the whole person, soul and body, so that what God has joined is not separated." "The whole person must pray," he repeats to the visiting sisters. But the best prayer is that of Philothea, when she decides to consecrate to God not only her soul, spirit, and heart, but also her "body with all its senses". This is how she will truly love and serve Him with all her being.

Vera Grita, pilgrim of hope

Vera Grita, daughter of Amleto and Maria Anna Zacco della Pirrera, was born in Rome on January 28, 1923, and was the second of four sisters. She lived and studied in Savona, where she obtained her teaching qualification. At the age of 21, during a sudden air raid on the city (1944), she was overwhelmed and trampled by the fleeing crowd, suffering serious consequences for her body, which remained marked by suffering forever. She went unnoticed in her short earthly

life, teaching in the schools of the Ligurian hinterland (Rialto, Erli, Alpicella, Deserto di Varazze), where she earned the esteem and affection of all for her kind and gentle character.

In Savona, at the Salesian parish of Mary Help of Christians, she participated in Mass and was a regular at the Sacrament of Penance. From 1963, her confessor was the Salesian Don Giovanni Bocchi. A Salesian Collaborator since 1967, she realized her calling in the total gift of herself to the Lord, who extraordinarily gave Himself to her, in the depths of her heart, with the "Voice," with the "Word," to communicate to her the Work of the Living Tabernacles. She submitted all her writings to her spiritual director, the Salesian Don Gabriello Zucconi, and kept the secret of that calling in the silence of her heart, guided by the divine Master and the Virgin Mary, who accompanied her along the path of hidden life, of self-denial, and of annihilation of self.

Under the impulse of divine grace and welcoming the mediation of spiritual guides, Vera Grita responded to God's gift by witnessing in her life, marked by the struggle of illness, the encounter with the Risen One and dedicating herself with heroic generosity to the teaching and education of her students, meeting the needs of her family and witnessing a life of evangelical poverty. Centred upon and steadfast in the God who loves and sustains, with great inner firmness, she was made capable of enduring the trials and sufferings of life. Based on such inner solidity, she bore witness to a Christian existence made of patience and constancy in good.

She died on December 22, 1969, at the age of 46, in a small room of the hospital in Pietra Ligure, where she had spent the last six months of her life in a crescendo of accepted suffering lived in union with Jesus Crucified. "The soul of Vera," wrote Don Borra, Salesian, her first biographer, "with the messages and letters, enters the ranks of those charismatic souls called to enrich the Church with flames of love for God and for Jesus Eucharistic for the

expansion of the Kingdom.”

A life devoid of human hope

Humanly, Vera’s life has been marked since childhood by the loss of a horizon of hope. The loss of her family’s economic independence, then the separation from her parents to go to Modica in Sicily to stay with her aunts, and especially the death of her father in 1943, put Vera in front of the consequences of particularly painful human events.

After July 4, 1944, the day of the bombing of Savona that would mark Vera’s entire life, her health conditions would also be compromised forever. Therefore, the Servant of God found herself a young girl without any prospects for the future and had to repeatedly revise her plans and give up many desires: from university studies to teaching and, above all, to having her own family with the young man she was seeing.

Despite the sudden end of all her human expectations between the ages of 20 and 21, hope was very present in Vera: both as a human virtue that believes in a possible change and commits to realising it (despite being very ill, she prepared for and won the competition to teach), and especially as a theological virtue – anchored in faith – that infused her with energy and became a tool of consolation for others.

Almost all the witnesses who knew her noted this apparent contradiction between compromised health conditions and the ability to never complain, instead attesting to joy, hope, and courage even in humanly desperate circumstances. Vera became a “bringer of joy.”

A niece says: «She was always sick and suffering, but I never saw her discouraged or angry about her condition; she always had a light of hope sustained by great faith. [...] My aunt was often hospitalised, suffering and delicate, but always serene and full of hope for the great Love she had for Jesus».

Vera’s sister Liliana also drew encouragement,

serenity, and hope from their afternoon phone calls, even though the Servant of God was then burdened by numerous health problems and professional constraints: «She instilled in me, she says – trust and hope, making me reflect that God is always close to us and leads us. Her words brought me back into the arms of the Lord, and I found peace».

Agnese Zannino Tibiroso, whose testimony is particularly valuable as she spent time with Vera at the “Santa Corona” hospital in her last year of life, attests: «Despite the severe suffering that illness caused her, I never heard her complain about her state. She brought relief and hope to all those she approached, and when she spoke of her future, she did so with enthusiasm and courage».

Until the end, Vera Grita maintained this: even in the last part of her earthly journey, she kept a gaze toward the future, hoping that with treatment, the tuberculoma could be reabsorbed, hoping to be able to take the chair at the Piani di Invrea for the 1969-1970 school year, as well as to dedicate herself, once out of the hospital, to her spiritual mission.

Educated in hope by her confessor and in her spiritual journey

In this sense, the hope attested by Vera is rooted in God and in that sapiential reading of events that her spiritual father Don Gabriello Zucconi and, before him, her confessor Don Giovanni Bocchi taught her. Don Bocchi’s ministry – a man of joy and hope – had a positive influence on Vera, whom he welcomed in her condition as a sick person and taught to value the sufferings – not sought – with which she was burdened. Don Bocchi was the first master of hope. It has been said of him: «With always cordial and hope-filled words, he opened hearts to magnanimity, forgiveness, and transparency in interpersonal relationships; he lived the beatitudes with naturalness and daily fidelity». «Hoping and having the certainty that as it happened to Christ, it will also happen to us: the glorious Resurrection», Don Bocchi carried out through his ministry an announcement of Christian hope,

founded on the omnipotence of God and the Resurrection of Christ. Later, from Africa, where he had gone as a missionary, he would say: «I was there because I wanted to bring and give them Jesus Who is Alive and present in the Most Holy Eucharist with all the gifts of His Heart: Peace, Mercy, Joy, Love, Light, Union, Hope, Truth, Eternal Life».

Vera became a provider of hope and joy even in environments marked by physical and moral suffering, by cognitive limitations (as among her small hearing-impaired students) or suboptimal family and social conditions (as in the «heated climate» of Erli).

Her friend Maria Mattalia recalls: «I still see Vera's sweet smile, sometimes tired from so much struggle and suffering; remembering her willpower, I try to follow her example of kindness, great faith, hope, and love [...]».

Antonietta Fazio – a former janitor at the Casanova school – testified about her: «She was very well-liked by her students, whom she loved so much, especially those with intellectual difficulties [...]. Very religious, she transmitted faith and hope to everyone, even though she herself was suffering very much physically but not morally».

In those contexts, Vera worked to revive the reasons for hope. For example, in the hospital (where the food is not very satisfying), she deprived herself of a special bunch of grapes to leave part of it on the bedside table of all the patients in the ward. She also always took care of her appearance so as to present herself well, orderly, with composure and refinement, thus also contributing to countering the environment of suffering in a clinic, and sometimes the loss of hope in many patients who risk “letting themselves go.”

Through the **Messages of the Work of the Living Tabernacles**, the Lord educated her to a posture of waiting, patience, and trust in Him. Indeed, there are countless exhortations about *waiting for the Bridegroom or the Bridegroom who awaits His bride*:

“Hope in your Jesus always, always.

May He come into our souls, may He come into our homes; may He come with us to share joys and sorrows, labours and hopes.

Let my Love do, and increase your faith, your hope.

Follow me in the dark, in the shadows because you know the «way».

Hope in Me, hope in Jesus!

After the journey of hope and waiting, there will be victory.

To call you to the things of Heaven”.

Provider of hope in dying and interceding

Even in illness and death, Vera Grita witnessed Christian hope.

She knew that when her mission was completed, her life on earth would also end. «This is your task, and when it is finished, you will say goodbye to the earth for Heaven»: therefore, she did not feel as an “owner” of time rather she sought obedience to God’s will.

In the last months, despite being in an increasingly serious condition and being exposed to a worsening clinical situation, the Servant of God attested serenity, peace, and an inner perception of a “fulfilment” of her life.

In the last days, although she was naturally attached to life, Don Giuseppe Formento described her as «already at peace with the Lord». In this spirit, she was able to receive Communion until a few days before her death and received the Anointing of the Sick on December 18.

When her sister Pina visited her shortly before her death – Vera had been in a coma for about three days – contrary to her usual reserve, she told her that she had seen many things during those days, beautiful things that unfortunately she did not have time to recount. She had

learned of the prayers of Padre Pio and the Good Pope for her, and she added – referring to Eternal Life – «You all will come to paradise with me, be sure of it».

Liliana Grita also testified that, in the last period, Vera «knew more about Heaven than about earth». From her life, the following assessment was drawn: «She, suffering so much, consoled others, infusing them with hope and she did not hesitate to help them».

Finally, many graces attributed to Vera's interceding mediation concern Christian hope. Vera – even during the Covid-19 Pandemic – helped many to rediscover the reasons for hope and was for them a safeguard, a sister in spirit, a help in the priesthood. She helped a priest who, following a stroke, had forgotten the prayers, unable to articulate them due to his extreme pain and disorientation. She ensured that many returned to pray, asking for the healing of a young father struck by haemorrhage.

Sister Maria Ilaria Bossi, Mistress of Novices of the Benedictines of the Most Holy Sacrament of Ghiffa, also notes how Vera – a sister in spirit – is a soul that directs to Heaven and accompanies toward Heaven: «I consider her as a sister on the journey to heaven... Many [...] who recognise themselves in her, and refer to her, in the evangelical journey, in the race toward heaven».

In summary, it is understood how the entire story of Vera Grita has been supported not by human hope, by merely looking to “tomorrow”, hoping it would be better than the present, but by a true theological Hope: «She was serene because faith and hope always sustained her. Christ was at the centre of her life; from Him, she drew strength. [...] She was a serene person because she had in her heart the theological Hope, not the superficial hope [...], but that which derives only from God, which is a gift and prepares us for the encounter with Him».

In a prayer to Mary of the Work of the Living Tabernacles, one can read: «Lift us [Mary] from the earth so

that from here we may live and be for Heaven, for the Kingdom of your Son».

It is also nice to remember that **Don Gabriello** also had to accomplish a pilgrimage in hope through many trials and difficulties, as he writes in a letter to Vera dated March 4, 1968, from Florence: «However, we must always hope. The presence of difficulties does not take away the fact that in the end, what is right, good, and beautiful will all triumph. Peace, order, and joy will return. The man, Son of God, will regain all the glory he had from the beginning. Man will be saved in Jesus and will find in God every good. Then all the beautiful things promised by Jesus come to mind, and the soul in Him finds its peace. Come on: now it is as if we are in combat. The day of victory will come. It is certainty in God».

In the Church of *Santa Corona* in Pietra Ligure, Vera Grita participated in Mass and went to pray during her long periods of hospitalisation. Her testimony of faith in the living presence of Jesus Eucharistic and the Virgin Mary in her short earthly life is a sign of hope and comfort for those in this place of care who will ask for her help and intercession before the Lord to be lifted and freed from suffering.

Vera Grita's journey through daily laborious work also offers a new secular perspective on holiness, becoming an example of conversion, acceptance, and sanctification for the 'poor,' the 'fragile,' the 'sick' who can recognise themselves in her and find hope.

Saint Paul writes, «that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us». With «impatience», we await to contemplate the face of God because «in hope we have been saved» (*Rom* 8:18, 24). Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to hope against all hope, «*Spes contra spem*». Because, as Charles Péguy wrote, Hope is a «irreducible» child. Compared to Faith, which «is a faithful bride», and Charity, which «is a Mother», Hope seems, at first glance, to be worth nothing. And instead,

it is exactly the opposite: it will be Hope, writes Péguy, «that came into the world on Christmas Day» and that «bringing the others, will traverse the worlds».

«Write, Vera of Jesus, I will give you light. The flowering tree in spring has borne its fruits. Many trees will have to bloom again in the appropriate season so that the fruits may be abundant... I ask you to accept with faith every trial, every pain for Me. You will see the fruits, the first fruits of the new flowering». (Santa Corona – October 26, 1969 – Feast of Christ the King – Penultimate message).

Education according to st. Francis de Sales

Education according to St. Francis de Sales is a path of love and care toward the young, based on essential principles: gentleness, understanding, and balanced correction. From the family to society, St. Francis urges those responsible to show sincere affection, knowing that young people need to be guided with patience and inspiration. Education is a gift that helps shape free souls, capable of thinking and acting in harmony. Like a mountain guide, the Savoyard bishop reminds us that to correct is to accompany—safeguarding the spontaneity of growing hearts while always aiming for inner transformation. In this way, an integral education is born.

A duty to be performed with love

Education is a universal phenomenon, based on the laws of nature and reason. It is the best gift that parents can give their children, one that will foster gratitude and filial piety. Speaking of those responsible for others—whether in the family or in society—Francis de Sales recommends that

they show affection: "Therefore, let them do their duty with love."

Young people need guidance. If it is true that "he who rules himself is ruled by a great fool," this is even more so for those who have not yet gained experience. Similarly, Celse-Bénigne, the eldest son of Madame de Chantal—who was a source of concern for his mother—needed guidance to help him "taste the goodness of true wisdom through admonitions and recommendations."

To a young man about to "set sail into the world," he suggested finding "some courteous spirit" who could visit him from time to time to "refresh and regain spiritual breath." We should do as the young Tobias in the Bible did: sent by his father to a distant land where he did not know the way, he received the advice, "Go, therefore, and find a man to guide you."

A mountain expert, the Savoyard bishop loved to remind us that those who walk on rugged and slippery paths need to be bound together—tethered to one another in order to advance more securely. Whenever he could, he offered help and advice to young people in danger. To a schoolboy engrossed in gambling and debauchery, he wrote "a letter full of good, gentle, and friendly warnings," urging him to make better use of his time.

A good guide must be able to adapt to the needs and abilities of each individual. Francis de Sales admired mothers who knew how to give each of their children what they needed and to adjust to each "according to the capacity of his spirit." This is how God accompanies people. His teaching is like that of a father attentive to each one's abilities: "Like a good father who holds his child's hand," he wrote to Jeanne de Chantal, "he will adjust his steps to yours and will be content not to go faster than you."

Elements of youth psychology

For an educator to have any chance of success, they must know something about young people in general and

about each young person in particular. What does it mean to be young? Commenting on the famous vision of Jacob's ladder, the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* observes that the angels ascending and descending the ladder possessed all the charms of youth: they were full of vigour and agility; they had wings to fly and feet to walk alongside their companions; their faces were beautiful and cheerful; "their legs, their arms, and their heads were all bare," while "the rest of their bodies were covered, but with a beautiful and light garment."

But let us not idealize this stage of life too much. For Francis de Sales, youth is by nature reckless and bold; young people tend to tackle difficulties from afar while fleeing those that are close at hand. "Young and ardent" are two adjectives that often go hand in hand, especially when used to describe a mind "teeming with ideas and strongly inclined toward extremes." And among the risks of this age is "the ardour of youthful blood that begins to boil and a courage not yet guided by prudence."

Young people are versatile—they move and change easily. Like young dogs that love change, they are fickle and inconsistent, stirred by various "desires for novelty and change," and are liable to provoke "great and unfortunate scandals." It is an age in which passions are fierce and difficult to control. Like butterflies, they flutter around the fire at the risk of burning their wings.

They often lack wisdom and experience, for self-love blinds reason. We must be wary of two opposing attitudes in them: vanity, which is actually a lack of courage, and ambition, which is an excess of courage that leads them to seek glory and honour in an unreasonable way.

What a wonder, however, when youth and virtue meet! Francis de Sales admired a young woman who, though she had every reason to indulge in the pleasures of the springtime of her life, loved and esteemed "the holy virtues." He praised all those who, during their youth, kept their soul "always pure amidst so many infections."

Above all, young people are sensitive to the

affection they receive. "It is impossible to express how much we are friends," he wrote to a father regarding his relationship with his undisciplined—even unbearable—son at school. As can be seen, Francis de Sales was happy to proclaim himself a friend of the young. He likewise wrote to the mother of a little girl for whom he was godfather: "The dear little goddaughter, I believe, carries within her a secret indication of my affection for her, so strong is the love she shows me."

Finally, "this is the right age to receive impressions," which is an excellent thing because it means that young people can be educated and are capable of great things. The future belongs to the young, as we have seen at the Montmartre abbey, where it was precisely the young—with their even younger abbess—who carried out the "reform."

The sense of purpose in education

On the one hand, realism imposes on educators the need to truly know the people to whom they address their efforts; on the other hand, they must never lose sight of the purpose of their actions. There is nothing better than a clear awareness of the goals we set for ourselves, for "every agent acts for the sake and according to the end."

What, then, is education and what is its purpose? Education, says Francis de Sales, is "a multitude of solicitations, aids, services, and other necessary provisions for the child, carried out and continued toward him until the age when he no longer needs them." Two aspects stand out in this definition: on one hand, the emphasis on the multitude of attentions that education requires, and on the other, its end, which coincides with the moment when the individual has reached autonomy. Children are educated to achieve freedom and full control over their own lives.

In concrete terms, Francis de Sales' educational ideal seems to revolve around the notion of harmony—that is, the harmonious integration of all the various components that exist in the human being: "actions, movements, feelings, inclinations, habits, passions, faculties, and powers."

Harmony implies unity, but also distinction. Unity requires a single commandment, yet that very commandment must not only respect differences but also promote distinctions in the pursuit of harmony. In the human person, governance belongs to the will, to which all the other components refer—each in its proper place and in interdependence with one another.

Francis de Sales employs two analogies to illustrate his ideal. They are reminiscent of the two fundamental human drives highlighted by psychoanalysis: aggression and pleasure. An army, he explains, is beautiful when it is composed of distinct parts arranged in such a way as to form one cohesive force. Similarly, music is beautiful when the voices are united in their distinction even as they join together.

Starting from the heart

“Whoever has conquered the heart of man has conquered all of man,” writes the author of *Introduction to the Devout Life*. This general rule should apply in the field of education. The expression “to conquer the heart” can be interpreted in two ways. It can mean that the educator must aim for the heart—that is, the inner centre of the person—before concerning themselves with outward behaviour. Alternatively, it means winning a person over through affection.

Man is built from the inside out; this appears to be one of the great lessons of Francis de Sales, a trainer and reformer of individuals and communities. He was well aware that his method was not shared by all, for he wrote, “I have never been able to approve of the method of those who, in order to reform man, begin from the outside—from his bearing, his clothes, his hair.” One must therefore start from within, that is, from the heart—the seat of the will and the source of all our actions.

The second point is to win the affection of others, in order to establish a good educational relationship. In a letter to an abbess advising her on the reform of her

monastery—which was largely composed of young people—we find valuable insights into how the Savoyard bishop conceived his method of education, formation, and, in this case more precisely, “reform.” Above all, we must not alarm them by giving the impression that we intend to reform them; the goal is for them to reform themselves. After these preliminaries, one must use three or four “tricks.” It is not surprising, since education is also an art—in fact, the art of all arts. First, ask them to do things often, but with great ease and without giving the impression of forcing them. Second, speak frequently and in general terms about what needs to be changed, as if thinking of someone else. Third, strive to make obedience pleasant, while once again highlighting its benefits and advantages. According to Francis de Sales, gentleness should be preferred because it is generally more effective. Finally, those in charge must show that they do not act on a whim but in virtue of their responsibility and for the good of all.

To command, to advise, to inspire

It seems that the interventions proposed by Francis de Sales in the educational field are modelled on the three ways in which God communicates His will to men: commands, advice, and inspirations.

It is obvious that parents and teachers have the right and duty to command their children or pupils for their own good, and that they must obey. He himself, in his responsibility as bishop, did not hesitate to do so when necessary. However, according to Camus, he abhorred absolute spirits who demanded unquestioning obedience and to whom everything must yield. He said, “those who love to be feared, fear to be loved.” In some cases, obedience may be compelled. Referring to the son of one of his friends, he wrote to the father: “If he persists, we will be satisfied; if he does not, we will have to resort to one of these two remedies: either withdraw him to a school a bit more restrictive than this one, or provide him with a private tutor—a man to whom he must

render obedience." Can the use of force be entirely excluded?

Usually, however, Francis de Sales resorted to advice, warnings, and recommendations. The author of *Introduction to the Devout Life* presents himself as an advisor, an assistant—someone who gives "advice." Even though he often uses the imperative, it is advice he is giving, especially as it is frequently accompanied by a conditional: "If you can do it, do it." Sometimes the recommendation is disguised as a statement of value: it is good to do this, it is better to do that, and so on.

But when he can, and when his authority is not in question, he prefers to act by inspiration, suggestion, or insinuation. This is the quintessential Salesian method, one that respects human freedom. It seemed particularly suitable to him when choosing a way of life. This is the method he advised Madame de Chantal to use for the vocation she desired for her children, "inspiring in them with gentle thoughts in harmony with it."

Yet inspiration is not communicated solely through words. The heavens do not speak, as the Bible says, but proclaim the glory of God with their silent testimony. In the same way, "a good example is a silent preaching"—as exemplified by St. Francis, who, without uttering a single word, attracted a great number of young people with his example. Indeed, example leads to imitation. "The little nightingales learn to sing with the great," he recalled, and "the example of those we love has a gentle and imperceptible influence and authority over us," to the point that we are compelled either to follow them or to imitate them.

How to correct?

The spirit of correction consists in "resisting evil and repressing the vices of those entrusted to us, constantly and valiantly, but with gentleness and calm." However, faults must be corrected without delay – while they are still small – "because if you wait for them to grow, you will not be able to remedy them easily."

Severity is sometimes necessary. The two young religious who were causing scandal had to be set back on the right path if one wished to avoid a multitude of deplorable consequences. Although their youth might have been used as an excuse, "the continuation of their behaviour now renders them unforgivable." There are even cases in which it is necessary "to keep the wicked in some fear of the resistance they will offer." The Bishop of Geneva quotes a letter from St. Bernard to the monks of Rome who needed correction, in which he "speaks to them as one ought, and with a rebuke that is rather severe." Let us act like the surgeon, for "it is a weak or poor friendship to see one's friend perish and not help him, to see him die of apostasy and not dare to offer him the razor's edge of correction to save him."

Yet correction must be administered without passion, because "a judge punishes the wicked much more effectively when he issues his sentences with reason and in a spirit of calm, rather than when he does so with impetuosity and passion—especially since, judging with passion, he does not punish faults according to what they are but according to what he himself is." In the same way, "a father's gentle and cordial admonitions have far more power to correct a child than his anger and wrath." This is why it is important to guard against anger. The first time you feel anger, he told Filotea, "you must quickly gather your strength—not suddenly or with impetuosity, but with gentleness and seriousness." In a letter to a nun who had complained about "a surly and disruptive little girl" entrusted to her care, the bishop advised: "Do not correct her, if you can, with anger." Let us not act like King Herod or like those men who claim to rule because they are feared, when in truth to rule means "to be loved."

There are many ways to correct. One of the best methods is not so much to reprimand what is negative, but to encourage all that is positive in a person. This is called "correcting by inspiration," because "it is wonderful how the gentleness and kindness of something good is a powerful way to

attract hearts.”

His disciple, Jean-Pierre Camus, recounted the story of a mother who cursed the son who had insulted her. It was thought that the bishop should do the same, but he replied, “What do you want me to do? I feared that in a quarter of an hour I would pour out the little liquor of kindness that I had laboured to collect over twenty-two years.” Camus also relates this “unforgettable” saying of his master: “Remember that you catch more flies with a drop of honey than with a barrel of vinegar.”

Kindness is preferable not only toward others but also toward ourselves. Everyone should be ready to recognize their own mistakes calmly and to correct themselves without becoming angry. Here is a good piece of advice for a “poor girl” who is angry with herself: “Tell her that, no matter how much she complains, she will never be surprised or angry with herself.”

Progressive education

St. Francis de Sales, who possessed a keen sense of reality and possibility—as well as the necessary moderation and tact—was convinced that great projects are achieved only with patience and time. Perfection is never the starting point and will probably never be reached, but it is always possible to make progress. Growth has its own laws that must be respected: bees were first larvae, then nymphs, and finally “formed, made, and perfect” bees.

Doing things in an orderly fashion—one after the other, without clamour, even if with some slowness, but never stopping—seems to be the ideal of the Bishop of Geneva. “Let us move forward,” he would say, “and no matter how slowly we advance, we will cover great distances.” Similarly, he advised an abbess tasked with the arduous job of reforming her monastery: “You must have a great and enduring heart.” The law of progression is universal and applies in every field.

To illustrate his thought, the saint of gentleness employed countless analogies and images to instil a sense of

time and the necessity of perseverance. Some people are prone to fly before they have wings, or to want to become angels all at once, when they are not yet merely good men and women. When children are small, we give them milk; and when they grow and begin to have teeth, we give them bread and butter.

An important point is not to be afraid of repeating the same thing over and over. One must emulate painters and sculptors who create their masterpieces by repeating brush strokes and chisel blows. Education is a long journey. Along the way, one must purge oneself of many negative “humours,” and this purification is slow. But we must not lose heart. Slowness does not mean resignation or a casual waiting. On the contrary, we must learn to make the best use of everything, not wasting time and knowing how to use “our years, our months, our weeks, our days, our hours, even our moments.”

Patience, often taught by the Bishop of Geneva, is an active patience that allows us to move forward—even if in small steps. “Little by little and step by step, we must acquire this mastery,” he wrote to an impatient Filotea. “First we learn to walk in small steps, then to hurry, then to walk halfway, and finally to run.” The growth toward adulthood begins slowly and then accelerates, just as formation and education do. Finally, patience is nourished by hope: “There is no land so unfruitful that the love of the labourer cannot fertilize it.”

Integral education

From all that has been said so far, it is quite clear that for Francis de Sales education could not be confined to just one dimension of the person—such as mere instruction, good manners, or even a religious education devoid of human foundations. Naturally, one cannot deny the importance of each of these specific areas. With regard to the education and formation of the mind, one need only recall the time and effort he himself devoted during his youth to acquiring a high intellectual and “professional” culture, as

well as the care he took in nurturing education in his diocese.

However, his primary concern was the integral formation of the human person, understood in all its dimensions and dynamics. To demonstrate this, we must focus on each of the constitutive dimensions of the human being in its full symbolic entirety: the body with all its senses, the soul with all its passions, the mind with all its faculties, and the heart—the seat of the will, of love, and of freedom.