

Salesian Holiness 2024

Every year, the postulator for the causes of saints of the Salesian Congregation, Don Pierluigi Cameroni, publishes the "General Postulation Dossier of Don Bosco Salesians – 2024," which presents the updated list of saints and blessed related to the past year. In this edition, in addition to the updated list, we also find the new [poster](#) dedicated to these witnesses of Salesian faith. We offer you an overview of the names included in the dossier and the main activities of the Postulation planned for 2024, to continue spreading the spirit of Don Bosco and devotion to his saints and blessed.

"Let us not forget that it is precisely the saints who drive the Church forward and make it grow"
(Pope Francis).

"From now on, let it be our motto: let the holiness of children be proof of the holiness of the father."
(Don Rua)

It is necessary to express deep gratitude and praise to God for the holiness already recognized in the Salesian Family of Don Bosco and for the one in the process of recognition. The outcome of a Cause of Beatification and Canonization is an event of extraordinary importance and ecclesial value. In fact, it is a matter of discerning the reputation of holiness of a baptized person, who lived the Gospel beatitudes to a heroic degree or who gave his life for Christ.

From Don Bosco to our own day there is attested a tradition of holiness to which attention deserves attention, because it is the incarnation of the charism that originated from him and that was expressed in a plurality of states of life and forms. These are men and women, young people and adults, consecrated and lay people, bishops and missionaries who in historical, cultural and social contexts different in time and space have

made the Salesian charism shine with a singular light, representing a heritage that plays an effective role in the life and community of believers and for people of good will.

1. List as at 31 December 2024

Our Postulation involves 179 Saints, Blesseds, Venerables, Servants of God.

The Causes followed directly by the Postulation are 61 (+ 5 extra).

SAINTS (10)

Saint John Bosco, priest (date of Canonization: April 1, 1934) – (Italy)

Saint Joseph Cafasso, priest (22 June 1947) – (Italy)

Saint Maria D. Mazzarello, virgin (24 June 1951) – (Italy)

Saint Dominic Savio, adolescent (12 June 1954) – (Italy)

Saint Leonard Murialdo, priest (3 May 1970) – (Italy)

Saint Luigi Versiglia, bishop, martyr (October 1, 2000) – (Italy – China)

Saint Callistus Caravario, priest, martyr (October 1, 2000) – (Italy – China)

Saint Luigi Orione, priest (May 16, 2004) – (Italy)

Saint Luigi Guanella, priest (23 October 2011) – (Italy)

Saint Artemide Zatti, religious (9 October 2022) – (Italy – Argentina)

BLESSED (117)

Blessed Michael Rua, priest (date of beatification: October 29, 1972) – (Italy)

Blessed Laura Vicuña, adolescent (September 3, 1988) – (Chile – Argentina)

Blessed Filippo Rinaldi, priest (April 29, 1990) – (Italy)

Blessed Magdalene Morano, virgin (5 November 1994) – (Italy)

Blessed Joseph Kowalski, priest, martyr (June 13, 1999) – (Poland)

Blessed Francis Kęsy, layman, and 4 companion martyrs (June 13, 1999) – (Poland)

Czesław Józwiak, layman

Edward Kaz mierski, layman

Edward Clinic, Laico

Jarogniew Wojciechowski, layman

Blessed Pius IX, Pope (September 3, 2000) – (Italy)

Blessed Joseph Calasanz, priest, and 31 companion martyrs
(March 11, 2001) – (Spain)

Antonio Maria Martin Hernandez, priest

Recaredo de los Ríos Fabregat, priest

Giuliano Rodríguez Sánchez, priest

Giuseppe Giménez López, priest

Augustine García Calvo, layman

Giovanni Martorell Soria, priest

Giacomo Buch Canal, layman

Pietro Mesonero Rodríguez, chierico

Giuseppe Otín Aquilué, priest

Alvaro Sanjuán Canet, priest

Francesco Bandrés Sánchez, priest

Sergio Cid Pazo, priest

Giuseppe Batalla Parramó, priest

Giuseppe Rabasa Bentanachs, layman

Gil Rodicio Rodicio, layman

Angelo Ramos Velázquez, layman

Filippo Hernández Martínez, cleric

Zaccaria Abadía Buesa, cleric

Giacomo Ortiz Alzueta, layman

Saverio Bordas Piferrer, cleric

Felice Vivet Trabal, cleric

Michael Domingo Cendra, cleric

Giuseppe Caselles Moncho, priest

Joseph Castell Camps, priest

Giuseppe Bonet Nadal, priest

Giacomo Bonet Nadal, priest

Alessandro Planas Saurí, lay collaborator

Eliseo García García, layman

Giulio Junyer Padern, priest

María Carmen Moreno Benítez, vergin

María Amparo Carbonell Muñoz, vergin

Blessed Luigi Variara, priest (April 14, 2002) – (Italy – Colombia)

Blessed Maria Romero Meneses, virgin (April 14, 2002) – (Nicaragua – Costa Rica)

Blessed Augustus Czartoryski, priest (April 25, 2004) – (France – Poland)

Blessed Eusebia Palomino, virgin (April 25, 2004) – (Spain)

Blessed Alexandrina M. Da Costa, laywoman (April 25, 2004) – (Portugal)

Blessed Alberto Marvelli, layman (5 September 2004) – (Italy)

Blessed Bronislaus Markiewicz, priest (June 19, 2005) – (Poland)

Blessed Henry Saiz Aparicio, priest, and 62 companion martyrs (October 28, 2007) – (Spain)

Felice González Tejedor, priest

Giovanni Codera Marqués, coadjutor

Virgilio Edreira Mosquera, cleric

Paolo Gracia Sánchez, layman

Carmelo Giovanni Pérez Rodríguez, subdeacon

Teodulo González Fernández, cleric

Tommaso Gil de la Cal, aspirant

Federico Cobo Sanz, aspirant

Igino de Mata Díez, aspirant

Giusto Juanes Santos, cleric

Vittoriano Fernández Reinoso, cleric

Emilio Arce Díez, layman

Raimondo Eirín Mayo, layman

Matteo Garolera Masferrer, layman

Anastasio Garzón González, layman

Francesco Giuseppe Martín López de Arroyave,
layman

Giovanni de Mata Díez, lay collaborator

Pio Conde Conde, priest

Sabino Hernández Laso, priest

Salvatore Fernández Pérez, priest

Nicola de la Torre Merino, layman

Germano Martín Martín, priest

Giuseppe Villanova Tormo, priest
Stefano Cobo Sanz, cleric
Francesco Edreira Mosquera, cleric
Emanuele Martín Pérez, cleric
Valentino Gil Arribas, layman
Pietro Artolozaga Mellique, cleric
Emanuele Borrajo Míguez, cleric
Dionisio Ullívarri Barajuán, layman
Michele Lasaga Carazo, priest
Luigi Martínez Alvarelllos, cleric
John Larragueta Garay, cleric
Fiorenzo Rodríguez Güemes, cleric
Pasquale de Castro Herrera, cleric
Stefano Vázquez Alonso, layman
Eliodoro Ramos García, layman
Giuseppe Maria Celaya Badiola, layman
Andrea Jiménez Galera, priest
Andrea Gómez Sáez, priest
Antonio Cid Rodríguez, layman
Antonio Torrero Luque, priest
Antonio Enrico Canut Isús, priest
Michele Molina de la Torre, priest
Paolo Caballero López, priest
Onorio Hernández Martín, cleric
John Louis Hernández Medina, cleric
Antonio Mohedano Larriva, priest
Antonio Fernández Camacho, priest
Giuseppe Limón Limón, priest
Giuseppe Blanco Salgado, layman
Francesco Míguez Fernández, priest
Emanuele Fernández Ferro, priest
Felice Paco Escartín, priest
Tommaso Alonso Sanjuán, layman
Emanuele Gómez Contioso, priest
Antonio Pancorbo López, priest
Stefano García García, layman
Raffaele Rodríguez Mesa, layman

Antonio Rodríguez Blanco, diocesan priest

Bartolomeo Blanco Márquez, layman

Teresa Cejudo Redondo, lay

Blessed Zeffirino Namuncurá, layman (11 novembre 2007) – (Argentina – Italia)

Blessed Maria Troncatti, virgin (November 24, 2012) – (Italy – Ecuador)

Decree on the miracle: November 25, 2024

Canonization September 7, 2025?

Blessed Stephen Sándor, religious, martyr (19 October 2013) – (Hungary)

Blessed Titus Zeman, priest, martyr (30 September 2017) – (Slovakia).

VENERABLE (20)

Ven. Andrea Beltrami, priest, (date of the Decree super virtutibus: December 15, 1966) – (Italy)

Ven. Teresa Valsè Pantellini, virgin (July 12, 1982) – (Italy)

Ven. Dorotea Chopitea, laywoman (June 9, 1983) – (Spain)

Ven. Vincenzo Cimatti, priest (December 21, 1991) – (Italy – Japan)

Ven. Simone Srugi, religious (April 2, 1993) – (Palestine)

Ven. Rodolfo Komorek, priest (6 aprile 1995) – (Polonia – Brasile)

Ven. Luigi Olivares, bishop (December 20, 2004) – (Italy)

Ven. Margherita Occhiena, laywoman (23 October 2006) – (Italy)

Ven. Giuseppe Quadrio, priest (December 19, 2009) – (Italy)

Ven. Laura Meozzi, virgin (June 27, 2011) – (Italy – Poland)

Ven. Attilio Giordani, layman (9 October 2013) – (Italy – Brazil)

Ven. Joseph Augustus Arribat, priest (8 July 2014) – (France)

Ven. Stefano Ferrando, bishop (3 March 2016) – (Italy – India)

Ven. Francesco Convertini, priest (20 January 2017) – (Italy – India)

Ven. Joseph Vandor, priest (20 January – 2017) – (Hungary – Cuba)

Ven. Octavius Ortiz Arrieta Coya, bishop (27 February 2017) –

(Peru)

Ven. Augusto Hlond, cardinal (19 May 2018) – (Poland)

Ven. Ignazio Stuchly, priest (21 December 2020) – (Czech Republic)

Ven. Carlo Crespi Croci, priest (23 March 2023) – (Italy – Ecuador)

Ven. Antonio De Almeida Lustosa, bishop (22 June 2023) – (Brazil)

SERVANTS OF GOD (27)

The Causes are listed according to the progress

Positio examined by cardinals and bishops

Elia Comini, priest (Italy) martyr

Peculiar Congress of Theologians: May 5, 2022

Peculiar Congress of Theologians: April 11, 2024

Ordinary session of Cardinals and Bishops: 10 December 2024

Decree on martyrdom: 18 December 2024

Positio examined by theologians

John Świerc, priest and 8 companion martyrs (Poland)

Ignacio Dobiasz, priest

Francis Harazim, priest

Casimiro Wojciechowski, priest

Ignazio Antonowicz, priest

Lodovico Mroczek, priest

Carlo Golda, priest

Vladimiro Eyes, priest

Francesco Miśka, priest

Positio delivered: 21 July 2022

Peculiar historical congress. March 28, 2023

Ordinary session of the Cardinal and Bishops: June 2025

Positio delivered

Costantino Vendrame, priest (Italy – India)

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 1 February 2013

Positio delivered: 19 September 2023

Peculiar Congress of Theologians: January 23, 2025

Oreste Marengo, bishop (Italy – India)

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 6 December 2013

Position delivered: 28 May 2024

Peculiar Theologians Congress: September-October 2025

Rodolfo Lunkenbein, priest (Germany – Brazil) and Simão Bororo, layman (Brazil), martyrs

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 16 December 2020

Positio delivered: 28 November 2024

Peculiar Theologians Congress: September-October 2025

The drafting of the Positio is underway

Andrea Majcen, priest (Slovenia – Cina – Vietnam)

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 23 October 2020

Vera Grita, laywoman (Italy)

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 14 December 2022

Cognata Giuseppe, bishop (Italy)

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 11 January 2023

Carlo Della Torre, priest (Italy – Thailand)

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 1 April 2016

Silvio Galli, priest (Italy)

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 19 October 2022

Akash Bashir, layman, martyr (Pakistan)

Decree of validity of the Diocesan Inquiry: 24 October 2024

Waiting for validity of the Diocesan Inquiry

Antonietta Böhm, virgin (Germany – Mexico)

Opening of the Diocesan Inquiry: 7 May 2017

Diocesan Inquiry Closed: 28 April 2024

Validity of the Diocesan Inquiry

Antonino Baglieri, layman (Italy)

Opening of the Diocesan Inquiry: 2 March 2014

Closure of the diocesan inquiry. May 5, 2024

Validity of the Diocesan Inquiry

Cause temporarily stopped

Anna Maria Lozano, virgin (Colombia)

Closure of the Diocesan Inquiry: 19 June 2014

The diocesan inquiry is underway

Luigi Bolla, priest (Italy – Ecuador – Peru)

Opening of the Diocesan Inquiry: 27 September 2021

Closure of the Diocesan Inquiry

Rosetta Marchese, virgin (Italy)

Opening of the Diocesan Inquiry: 30 April 2021

Closure of the Diocesan Inquiry

Matilda Salem, laywoman (Syria)

Opening of the Diocesan Inquiry: 20 October 1995

Carlo Braga, priest (Italy – China – Philippines)

Opening of the Diocesan Inquiry: 30 January 2014

EXTRA CAUSES FOLLOWED BY POSTULATION (5)

Venerabile COSTA DE BEAUREGARD CAMILLO, PRIEST (France)

The Decree *super virtutibus*: January 22, 1991

Medical consultation *super miro*: March 30, 2023

Peculiar Congress of Theologians: October 19, 2023

Ordinary Session of Cardinals and Bishops: 20 February 2024

Beatification: 17 May 2025

Venerable BARELLO MORELLO CASIMIRO, Franciscan tertiary (Italy – Spain)

The Decree *super virtutibus*: 1 July 2000

Venerable TYRANOWSKI GIOVANNI, layman (Poland)

The Decree *super virtutibus*: 20 January 2017

Venerable BERTAZZONI AUGUSTO, bishop (Italy)

The Decree *super virtutibus*: October 2, 2019

Venerable CANELLI FELICE, priest (Italy)

The Decree *super virtutibus*: May 22, 2021

Also to be remembered are the Saints, Blesseds, Venerables and Servants of God who at different times and in different ways have met with the Salesian charism such as: the Blessed, Edvige Carboni, the Servant of God Cardinal Giuseppe Guarino, founder of the Apostles of the Holy Family, the Servant of God Salvo d'Acquisto, past pupil and numerous others.

2. EVENTS OF 2024

On Tuesday, January 16, 2024, the opening session for the **canonical recognition and conservation treatment of the mortal remains of the Venerable Camille Costa de Beauregard** (1841-1910), diocesan priest, took place at the chapel of the Bocage Foundation in Chambéry.

On February 27, 2024, in the **Ordinary Session of the Cardinals and Bishops** of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, a positive vote was given (7 out of 7) to the alleged miracle attributed to the intercession of the **Venerable Camille Costa de Beauregard**, diocesan priest (1841-1910), which occurred to the child René Jacquemond, for healing from “intense keratoconjunctivitis with grinding of the cornea, strong perikeratic injection, redness and injection of the conjunctiva, photophobia and tearing of the right eye due to violent trauma from the plant-burdock agent” (1910).

On 7 March 2024, the **Medical Advisory Board of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints** gave a positive opinion, with all affirmative votes, to the **alleged miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Maria Troncatti**, Daughter of Mary Help of Christians (1883-1969), from “open brain trauma with comminuted fracture of the skull, exposure of brain tissue in the right fronto-parieto-temporal area and state of coma (G6)” (2015).

On 14 March 2024, the Supreme Pontiff authorized the same Dicastery to **promulgate the Decree concerning the miracle** attributed to the intercession of the **Venerable Servant of God**

Camillo Costa de Beauregard, diocesan priest; born in Chambéry (France) on 17 February 1841 and died there on 25 March 1910. The miracle, which took place in 1910, concerns the child René Jacquemond, cured of “intense keratoconjunctivitis with grinding of the cornea, strong perikeratic injection, redness and injection of the conjunctiva, photophobia and tearing of the right eye due to violent trauma from the plant-burdock agent” (1910).

On 15 March 2024 in Lahore (Pakistan) the **Diocesan Inquiry** into the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of **Akash Bashir (1994-2015)**, a layman, a former pupil of Don Bosco, killed in hatred of the faith, was closed. It is the first Cause of Beatification in Pakistan.

On 11 April 2024, during the **special Congress of Theological Consultors at the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints**, a positive opinion was expressed on the Positio super martyrio of Servant of God Elia Comini, Professed Priest of the Salesian Society of St. John Bosco (1910-1944), killed in hatred of the faith in the Nazi massacre of Monte Sole on 1 October 1944.

On April 28, 2024, in Cuautitlán (Mexico) **closing of the Diocesan Inquiry** of the Cause of the Servant of God **Antonieta Böhm (1907-2008)**, Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

On May 5, 2024, in Modica (Ragusa) **closing of the Diocesan Inquiry of the Servant of God Antonino Baglieri (1951-2007)**, Layman, Volunteer with Don Bosco.

On May 28, 2024, the **peculiar Congress of Theologians of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints** gave a positive vote to the **alleged miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Maria Troncatti**, Daughter of Mary Help of Christians (1883-1969), from “open brain trauma with comminuted fracture of the skull, exposure of brain tissue in the right fronto-parieto-temporal area and state of coma (G6)” (2015).

On May 31, 2024, the volume of the *Positio super Vita, Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis* by the **Servant of God Oreste Marengo (1906-1998), Salesian missionary bishop in Northeast India**, was delivered to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican.

On Tuesday, June 4, 2024, at the “Zeffirino Namuncurà” community in Rome, the **new premises of the Salesian General Postulation** were inaugurated and blessed by the Rector Major, **Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime**.

On 24 November 2024, the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints in the Ordinary Congress gave **legal validity to the Diocesan Inquiry for the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God Akash Bashir** (Risalpur 22 June 1994 – Lahore 15 March 2015) Layman, Past Pupil of Don Bosco.

On 19 November 2024, in the **Ordinary Session of the Cardinals and Bishops** of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, a **positive vote was given to the alleged miracle** attributed to the intercession of **Blessed Maria Troncatti**, Professed Religious of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1883-1969), which occurred miraculously healed of a Lord from “Open cranio-encephalic trauma with comminuted fracture of the skull, loss of brain substance and exposure of brain tissue in the right front-parieto-temporal area, diffuse axonal damage (DAI), severe coma evolved in a type 2 vegetative state”, which occurred in 2015 in Ecuador.

On 25 November 2024, the Holy Father authorized the same Dicastery to promulgate the Decree concerning – **the miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Maria Troncatti**, a professed nun of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, born in Córteno Golgi, Italy, on 16 February 1883 and died in Sucúa, Ecuador, on 25 August 1969.

On November 28, 2024, the volume of the *Positio super martyrio*

of the Servants of God Rodolfo Lunkenbein, **Professed Priest of the Society of St. Francis de Sales** and Simão Bororo, **Layman, killed in hatred of the faith on July 15, 1976**, was delivered to the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints in the Vatican.

On Tuesday, December 3, 2024, **the Theological Consultors** of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, during the Peculiar Congress, **responded affirmatively regarding the *Positio super martyrio* of the Servants of God John Świerc and VIII Companions**, Professed Priests of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, killed in odium fidei in the Nazi extermination camps in the years 1941-1942.

On Tuesday, December 10, 2024, during the **Ordinary Session of Cardinals and Bishops** at the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, a positive opinion was expressed regarding the *Positio super martyrio* of **Servant Elia Comini**, Professed Priest of the Salesian Society of St. John Bosco (1910-1944), killed in hatred of the faith in the Nazi massacre of Monte Sole on October 1, 1944.

On Wednesday, December 18, 2024, the **Holy Father Francis authorized** the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints to promulgate **the Decree concerning: the martyrdom of the Servant of God Elia Comini**, professed priest of the Society of St. Francis de Sales; born on May 7, 1910 in Calvenzano di Vergato (Italy, Bologna) and killed, in hatred of the Faith, in Pioppe di Salvaro (Italy, Bologna) on 1 October 1944.

Blessed Luigi Variara: 150th

Anniversary of His Birth

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Blessed Luigi Variara, an extraordinary priest and Salesian missionary. Born on January 15, 1875, in Viarigi, in the province of Asti, Luigi grew up in an environment enriched with faith, culture, and fraternal love, which shaped his character and prepared him for the extraordinary mission that would lead him to serve those most in need in Colombia.

From his childhood spent in Monferrato, in a family marked by the spiritual influence of Don Bosco, to his missionary vocation developed in Valdocco, the life of Blessed Variara represents a commendable example of dedication to others and fidelity to God. Let us retrace the highlights of his childhood and formation, offering a glimpse into the extraordinary spiritual and human legacy he left us.

From Viarigi to Agua de Dios

Luigi Variara was born in Viarigi, in the province of Asti, on January 15, 1875, 150 years ago, to a deeply Christian family. His father, Pietro, had listened to Don Bosco speak in 1856 when he came to the village to preach a mission. When Luigi was born, his father Pietro was forty-two years old and had married for the second time to Livia Bussa. Pietro had obtained a teaching diploma, loved music and singing, and animated parish functions as an organist and as the director of the choir he himself had founded. He was a highly esteemed and appreciated presence in the village of Viarigi. When Luigi was born, it was during a harsh winter, and due to the circumstances of his birth, the midwife deemed it prudent to baptise the newborn. Two days later, the baptismal rites were completed.

Luigi's childhood was inspired by local traditions and family life, a cultural and spiritual blend that helped shape his character and impart valuable meaning to the growth

of the young boy, marking his future missionary vocation in Colombia.

Luigi's relationship with his father Pietro was important. Pietro was his mentor and teacher and instilled in him the Christian sense of life, the early fundamentals of school, and a love for music and singing—elements that, as we know, would affect the life and mission of Luigi Variara. His younger brother Celso recalls: "Although he never accomplished anything exceptional, Luigi was all goodness and love in the manifestations of his life, both with our parents, and especially with our mother, and with us... I don't remember my brother ever being less courteous and less fraternal with us, younger siblings. A faithful and devoted attendee of Church and its functions, he spent the rest of his time not having fun in the streets, rather at home, reading and studying his school books and keeping his mother company."

It is also nice to remember the relationship of young Luigi with his older sister Giovanna, daughter from the first marriage and godmother at his Baptism. Although she married young, Giovanna always maintained a special bond with little Luigi, helping to strengthen the features of his personality, his inclination towards piety and study. Of Giovanna's children, one, Ulisse, would become a priest, and Ernestina, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. Furthermore, Giovanna, who would die at ninety in 1947, maintained the epistolary ties between Luigi and their mother Livia during her brother's missionary life.

Another aspect that would influence the growth of little Luigi is that the Variara home was almost always full of children. His father Pietro, at the end of lessons, would take the students most in need with him, and after doing some tutoring, he would entrust them to the care of mother Livia. Other families did the same. A witness recounts: "Mrs. Livia was the mother of the whole neighbourhood; her yard was always full of boys and girls; she taught us to sew, played with us, and was always in a good mood." Luigi grew up in this "oratory" atmosphere, where one felt at home, felt loved, and

the paternal presence of father Pietro and the maternal presence of mother Livia were top-quality educational and affectionate resources not only for their children, but for many other children and young people, especially the poorest and most disadvantaged.

During these years, Luigi met and dedicated himself to a disabled companion, Andrea Ferrari, taking care of him and making him feel at ease. In this, one can glimpse a seed of that solicitude and closeness that would later mark the life and mission of Luigi Variara in serving leprosy patients in Agua de Dios, Colombia.

Indeed, as a child, Luigi Variara experienced, with his siblings and the neighbourhood children, the sincere love of his parents, and through their example, he came to know the true face of God the Father, the source of authentic love.

Passing through Valdocco

Don Bosco was well known in Monferrato. He had travelled through it in every direction with the well-known autumn walks alongside his boys, who, with their noise and contagious joy, brought festivity wherever they went. The local boys happily joined the cheerful and lively troop, and later, many would leave to find themselves with that priest, eager to be educated by him in the oratory of Turin.

In Viarigi, the visit of Don Bosco in February 1856 left a deeply heartfelt memory. Don Bosco had accepted the invitation of the parish priest, Fr. Giovanni Battista Melino, to preach a mission, as the village was deeply troubled and divided due to the scandals of a former priest, a certain Grignaschi, who had gathered around himself a true sect, gaining great popularity. Don Bosco managed to attract a very large audience and invited the population to conversion. Thus, Viarigi regained its religious balance and spiritual peace. The spiritual bond that was created between this Asti village and the Saint of the young continued over time. It was young Luigi who, at his First Communion, was prepared by the

parish priest Fr. Giovanni Battista Melino, the same one who had invited Don Bosco to preach the popular mission.

In the Variara family, according to the wishes of father Pietro, Luigi was to orient himself towards the priesthood: However, at the end of elementary school, he had no desire or particular vocational concerns. In any case, he had to continue his studies, and at this point, Don Bosco comes into play. The memory he left in Viarigi, his reputation as a man of God, his friendship with the parish priest, the dreams of father Pietro, the fame of the oratory in Turin led Luigi to enter Valdocco on October 1, 1887, having enrolled in his first year of middle school, with the desire of his father who wanted his son to be initiated into the priesthood. However, young Luigi, in all simplicity but firmly speaking, did not hesitate to declare that he felt no vocation, but his father replied: "If you don't have it, Mary Help of Christians will give it to you. Be good and study!" Don Bosco died four months after the arrival of young Variara at the oratory of Valdocco, but the encounter that Luigi had with him was enough to mark him for life. He himself recalls the event: "We were in the winter season, and one afternoon we were playing in the large courtyard of the oratory when suddenly we heard shouting from one side to the other: 'Don Bosco, Don Bosco!' Instinctively, we all rushed towards the point where our good Father appeared, who was being taken out for a walk in his carriage. We followed him to the place where he was to get into the vehicle. Immediately, Don Bosco was seen surrounded by the beloved crowd of children. I was desperately looking for a way to get to a spot where I could see him how I wanted to, since I ardently desired to meet him. I got as close as I could, and the moment they were helping him get into the carriage, he turned to me with a sweet look, and his eyes rested attentively upon me. I do not know what I felt at that moment... it was something I cannot express! That day was one of the happiest for me. I was sure I had met a Saint, and that this Saint had read something in my soul that only God and he could know."

Saint Francis de Sales, founder of a new school of perfection

For Francis de Sales, religious life is “a school of perfection”, in which one “consecrates oneself more simply and more totally to Our Lord”. “Religious life”, adds the founder of the Visitation, “is a school where everyone must learn the lesson: the teacher does not require that the student knows the lesson perfectly every day; it is enough that they strive to do what they can to learn it”. Speaking of the congregation of the Visitation he founded, he used the same language: “The congregation is a school”; one enters it “to embark on the path toward the perfection of divine love”.

It was the founder’s responsibility to form his spiritual daughters, taking on the role of “instructor” and Novice Master. He performed this role excellently. According to T. Mandrini, “Saint Francis de Sales occupies a primary place in the history of religious life, like Saint Ignatius of Loyola; we can even say that, in the history of women’s religious life, Saint Francis de Sales occupies the place that Saint Ignatius holds in the history of men’s religious life”.

Joan of Chantal at the origins of the Visitation

In 1604, in Dijon, where he was preaching during Lent, Francis de Sales met the woman who was to become the “cornerstone” of a new institute. At that time, Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot was a thirty-two-year-old young widow. Born in 1572 in Dijon, she was married at twenty to Christophe Rabutin, Baron of Chantal. They had one son and three daughters. Fifteen days after the birth of their last daughter, her husband was mortally wounded during a hunting

party. Left as a widow, Joan courageously continued to care for her children's education and to help the poor.

The meeting of Chantal with the Bishop of Geneva marked the beginning of a true spiritual friendship that would lead to a new form of religious life. At first, Francis de Sales instilled in Joan the love of the humility required by her state as a widow, without thinking of a new marriage or religious life; the will of God would manifest itself in due time. He encouraged her in trials and temptations against faith and the Church.

In 1605, the baroness came to Sales to see her director again and to discuss the issues that concerned her. Francis evasively responded to Joan's desire to become a nun but added these strong words, "The day you abandon everything, you will come to me, and I will ensure that you find yourself in total detachment and nakedness, to belong entirely to God". To prepare her for this ultimate goal, he suggested: "sweetness of heart, poverty of spirit, and simplicity of life, along with these three modest exercises: visiting the sick, serving the poor, comforting the afflicted, and others like them".

At the beginning of 1606, as the baroness' father urged her to remarry, the issue of religious life became urgent. What to do, wondered the Bishop of Geneva? One thing was clear, but the other was uncertain:

I have learned up to this moment, my Daughter, that one day you will have to leave everything; or rather, so that you do not understand the matter differently than I have understood it, that one day I will have to advise you to leave everything. I say leave everything. But that you should do it to enter religious life is unlikely, because it has not yet happened to me to be of this opinion: I am still in doubt, and I see nothing before me that invites me to desire it. Understand me well, for the love of God. I am not saying 'no', but I am only saying that my spirit has not yet found a reason to say 'yes'.

The prudence and unhurriedness of Francis de Sales is easily explained. The baroness, in fact, perhaps dreamed of becoming a Carmelite, and he, on the other hand, had not yet matured the project of the new foundation. But the main obstacle was constituted by the children of Madame de Chantal, who were all still young.

The foundation

During a new meeting that took place in Annecy in 1607, Francis declared to her this time: "Well! My daughter, I have decided what I want to do with you"; and he revealed to her the project of founding a new institute with her. There remained two major obstacles towards its realization: the family duties of Madame de Chantal and her permanent move to Annecy, because, he said, "it is necessary to sow the seed of our congregation in little Annecy". And while Madame de Chantal was probably dreaming of a completely contemplative life, Francis cited the example of Saint Martha, but Martha "corrected" by the example of Mary, who divided the hours of her days in two, "dedicating a good part to external works of charity, and the better part to her own inner self through contemplation".

During the following three years, the main obstacles fell one after another: Chantal's father allowed her to follow her own path, also agreeing to care for the education of the firstborn; the eldest daughter married Bernard de Sales, Francis's brother, and joined him in Savoy; the second daughter would accompany her mother to Annecy; as for the youngest, she died at the end of January 1610 at the age of nine.

On June 6th, 1610, Joan of Chantal settled in a private house with Charlotte, a friend from Burgundy, and Jacqueline, daughter of President Antoine Favre. Their purpose was to "consecrate all the moments of their life to loving and serving God", without neglecting "the service of the poor and the sick". The Visitation would be a "small congregation", uniting interior life with a form of active life. The first

three *Visitandines* (Visitation Sisters) made their profession exactly one year later, on June 6th, 1611. On January 1st, 1612, they would begin visits to the poor and the sick, as provided in the original draft of the Constitutions. On October 30th of the same year, the community left the house, which had become too small, and moved to a new house, awaiting the construction of the first monastery of the Visitation.

During the early years, no other foundation was dreamed of, until in 1615 a persistent request came from some people in Lyon. The archbishop of that city did not want the Sisters to leave the monastery for visits to the sick; according to him, the congregation needed to be transformed into a true religious order, with solemn vows and enclosure, following the prescriptions of the Council of Trent. Francis de Sales had to accept most of the conditions: the visit to the sick was suppressed, and the Visitation became an almost monastic order, under the rule of Saint Augustine, while still retaining the possibility of welcoming outsiders for a bit of rest or for spiritual exercises. Its development was rapid: it would count thirteen monasteries at the founder's death in 1622 and eighty-seven at the death of Mother Chantal in 1641.

Formation through gatherings

George Rolland has well described the role of the formation of the “daughters” of the Visitation, which Francis de Sales took on from the very beginning of the new institute:

He assisted them in their beginnings, working hard and dedicating much time to educate them and guide them on the path of perfection, first all of them together and then each one in person. Therefore, he would go to them, often two or three times a day, giving them guidance on issues that came to their minds, both of a spiritual and material nature. [...] He was their confessor, chaplain, spiritual father, and director.

The tone of his “gatherings” was very simple and familiar. A gathering, in fact, is a friendly conversation, a

dialogue or family discussion, not a “sermon”, but rather a “simple conference in which each one expresses their opinion”. Normally, the questions were posed by the Sisters, as is clearly seen in the third of his *Gatherings* where he speaks of *Confidence and Abandonment*. The first question was to know “if a soul aware of its misery can turn to God with full confidence”. A little further on, the founder seems to seize the opportunity offered by a new question: “But you say that you do not feel this confidence at all”. A little further, he states: “Now let us move on to the other question, which is to abandon oneself”. And even further on, there is a chain of questions like these: “Now you ask me what this soul that completely abandons itself into the hands of God occupies itself with”; “you tell me at this hour”; “now you ask me”; “to respond to what you are asking”; “you want to know more”. It is possible, indeed probable, that the secretaries suppressed the questions of the interlocutors to place them on the bishop’s lips. The questions could also have been formulated in writing, because at the beginning of the eleventh *Gathering* we read, “Let me begin our conversation by responding to a question that was written to me on this note”.

Instructions and exhortations

The other method used in the formation of the Visitation Sisters excluded questions and answers: they were *sermons* that the founder gave in the chapel of the monastery. The familiar tone that characterizes them does not allow them to be classified among the great sermons for the people according to the style of the time. R. Balboni prefers to call them *exhortations*. “The speech I am about to give you”, the founder would say as he began to speak. He would sometimes refer to his “little talk”, a qualification that certainly did not apply to its duration, which was usually about an hour. Once he said, “Having some time, I will treat of...”. The bishop addressed a particular audience, the Visitation Sisters, to which relatives and friends could be added. When he spoke in the chapel, the founder had to take this audience into

account, which could be different from that of the *Gatherings* reserved for the religious. The diversity of his interventions is well described by the comparison between the barber and the surgeon:

My dear daughters, when I speak before the laity, I act like a barber; I am content to shave off the superfluous, that is, I use soap to soften a little the skin of the heart, as the barber does to soften that of the chin before shaving it; but when I am in the parlour, I behave like an expert surgeon, that is, I bandage the wounds of my dear daughters, even though they cry out a little: Ouch!, and I do not stop pressing my hand on the wound to ensure that the bandaging helps to heal it well.

But even in the chapel, the tone continued to be familiar, similar to a conversation. "We need to go further", he would say, "because I lack the time to dwell longer on this topic"; or again, "Before finishing, let us say one more word". And another time, "But I will go beyond this first point without adding anything more, because it is not on this theme that I intend to dwell". When he speaks of the mystery of the Visitation, he needs extra time, "I will conclude with two examples, although time has already passed; in any case, a brief quarter of an hour will suffice". Sometimes he expresses his feelings, saying that he has felt "pleasure" in discussing mutual love. Nor did he fear to make some digression, "In this regard", he would say another time, "I will tell you two little stories that I would not narrate if I had to speak from another pulpit; but here there is no danger". To keep the audience attentive, he would engage them with a "tell me", or with the expression, "Notice then, I beg you". He often connected back to a topic he had previously developed, saying, "I wish to add one more word to the speech I gave you the other day". "But I see that the hour is passing quickly", he exclaims, "which will make me finish by completing, in the little time that remains, the story of this gospel". And, when

the moment to conclude arrives, he says, "I have finished".

It is important to keep in mind that the preacher was welcomed, listened to attentively, and sometimes even authorized to tell the same story again, "Although I have already narrated it, I will not fail to repeat it, since I am not before people so appalled that they are unwilling to listen to the same story twice; those who have a good appetite gladly eat the same food twice".

The *Sermons* present themselves as a more structured instruction compared to the *Gatherings*, where the topics sometimes follow one another rapidly, driven by questions. Here, the connection is more logical, and the different articulations of the discourse are better indicated. The preacher explains Scripture, comments on it through the Fathers and theologians, but it is a rather meditative explanation capable of nourishing the mental prayer of the religious. Like every meditation, it includes considerations, affections, and resolutions. Indeed, all his speech revolved around an essential question, "Do you want to become a good daughter of the Visitation?"

Personal accompaniment

Lastly, there was personal contact with each Sister. Francis had a long experience as a confessor and spiritual director of individuals. It was necessary to take into account, it is quite evident, the "variety of spirits", temperaments, particular situations, and progress in perfection. In the memoirs of Marie-Adrienne Fichet, there is an episode that shows the way of doing of the Bishop of Geneva, "Monsignor, your Excellency, would you be so kind as to assign to each of us a virtue to individually commit to practicing?" Perhaps it was a pious stratagem invented by the superior. The founder replied, "Mother, gladly, we must start with you". The Sisters withdrew, and the bishop called them one by one and, while strolling, secretly threw a "challenge" to each. During the subsequent recreation, all evidently became aware of the challenge he had confided to each in

particular. To Mother Chantal, he had recommended “indifference and loving the will of God”; to Jacqueline Favre, “the presence of God”; to Charlotte de Bréchar, “resignation to the will of God”. The challenges directed at the other religious concerned, one after another, modesty and tranquillity, love for one’s condition, mortification of the senses, affability, inner humility, outer humility, detachment from parents and the world, and mortification of passions. To the Visitation Sisters tempted to consider perfection as a garment to be put on, he humorously reminded them of their personal responsibility:

You would like me to teach you a way of perfection that is already beautifully ready-made, so that there would be nothing to do but put it on, as you would with a dress, and thus you would find yourselves perfect without effort, that is, you would like me to present you with a perfection that is already packaged [...]. Certainly, if this were in my power, I would be the most perfect man in the world; indeed, if I could give perfection to others without doing anything, I assure you that I would take it for myself first.

How to reconcile in a community the necessary unity, or rather uniformity, with the diversity of the people and temperaments that compose it? The founder wrote in this regard to the superior of the Visitation of Lyon, “If one finds some soul or even some novice who feels too much repugnance to submit to those exercises that are indicated, and if this repugnance does not arise from a whim, from presumption, from arrogance, or melancholic tendencies, it will be up to the Novice Mistress to lead them by another way, although this is useful for the ordinary (formation journey), as experience shows”. As always, obedience and freedom should not be opposed to one another. Strength and sweetness must also characterise the way in which the superiors of the Visitation should “mould” the souls. Indeed, he tells them, it is “with your hands” that God “moulds souls, using either the

hammer, or the chisel, or the brush, in order to shape them all to His liking". The superiors must have "hearts of solid, steadfast, and constant fathers, without neglecting the tenderness of mothers who make sweets desirable to children, following the divine order that governs everything with a very gentle strength and a very strong gentleness". The Novice Mistresses deserved to have particular attention from the founder because "on the good formation and direction of the novices depend the life and good health of the congregation". "How to form future Visitation Sisters when one is far from the founders?", the Novice Mistress in Lyon asked. Francis replied, "Say what you have seen, teach what you have heard in Annecy. Here! This little plant is very small and has deep roots; but the branch that separates from it will undoubtedly perish, dry up, and be good for nothing but to be cut and thrown into the fire".

A manual of perfection

In 1616, Saint Francis de Sales published the *Treatise on the Love of God*, a book "made to help the already devout soul to progress in its project". As is easy to see, *Teotimo* proposes a sublime doctrine on the love of God, which has earned its author the title of "doctor of charity", but it does so with a marked pedagogical sense. The author wants to accompany along the path of the highest love a person called *Teotimo*, a symbolic name that designates "the human spirit that desires to progress in holy love", that is, in the love of God. *Teotimo* reveals itself as the "manual" of the "school of perfection" that Francis de Sales intended to create. Implicitly, it reveals the idea of the necessity of ongoing formation, illustrated by him through this image drawn from the plant world, "Do we not see, from experience, that plants and fruits do not have a proper growth and maturation unless they bear their grains and seeds that serve for the reproduction of plants and trees of the same species? Virtues never have the right dimension and sufficiency unless they produce in us the desire to make progress. In short, we must

imitate this curious animal that is the crocodile, 'Very small at birth, it never ceases to grow as long as it is alive'." In the face of the decline and sometimes scandalous conduct of numerous monasteries and abbeys, Francis de Sales traced a demanding but amiable path. In reference to the reformed orders, where a severity and austerity reigned that drove a good number of people away from religious life, the founder of the Visitation Sisters had the profound insight to concentrate the essence of religious life simply in the pursuit of the perfection of charity. With the necessary adaptations, this "pedagogy which reached its peak", and was born in contact with the Visitation, would largely transcend the walls of its first monastery and captivate other "apprentices" of perfection.

Andrew Beltrami virtuous profile (2/2)

[*\(continuation from previous article\)*](#)

3. Story of a soul

3.1. Loving and suffering

Fr Barberis sketches Beltrami's life parable very well, interpreting it as the mysterious and transforming action of grace at work "through the main conditions of Salesian life, so that he might be a general model of pupil, cleric, teacher, university student, priest, writer and sick person; a model in every virtue, in patience as in charity, in love of penance as in zeal." And it is interesting that Fr Barberis himself, introducing the second part of his biography dealing with Fr Beltrami's virtues, states: "The life of our

Fr Beltrami could be said to be the story of a soul rather than the story of a person. It is all intrinsic; and I do my utmost to make the dear reader penetrate that soul, so that he may admire its heavenly charisms." The reference to "The Story of a Soul" is not accidental, not only because Fr Beltrami was a contemporary of Saint Therese of Lisieux, but we can say that they are truly brother and sister in the spirit that animated them. The apostolic zeal for salvation is most authentic and fruitful in those who have experienced salvation and, having found themselves saved by grace, live their lives as a pure gift of love for their brothers and sisters, so that they too may be reached by the redemptive love of Jesus. "The whole life, in truth, of our Fr Andrew could be summed up in two words, which are his motto: Loving and suffering – Love and Sorrow. The most tender, the most ardent, and, I would also say, the most zealous love possible for that good in which all good is concentrated. The most vivid, the most acute, the most penetrating sorrow for his sins, and the contemplation of that supreme good which lowered itself to the folly, to the pains and death of the Cross for us. Hence the feverish eagerness for suffering: the more it abounded, the more he felt desire for it. Hence also the taste, the ineffable delight in suffering, which is the secret of the saints, and one of the most sublime marvels of the Church of Jesus Christ."

"And as in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, burning with flames and crowned with thorns, both these affections of love and sorrow find such abundant pasture, and so admirably proportioned to them, so, from the first instant in which he knew this devotion, until the last of his life, his heart was like a vase of elect aromas that always burned before that divine heart, and handed down the perfume of incense and myrrh, of love and sorrow." "To obtain from the Heart of Jesus the longed-for grace of living long years to suffer and atone for my sins. Not die but live to suffer, while always subject to God's will. Only thus will I be able to satisfy this thirst. It is so beautiful, so sweet to suffer when God helps

and gives us patience to do so!" These texts are a summary of Fr Beltrami's victim spirituality, which in the perspective of devotion to the Sacred Heart, so dear to 19th century spirituality and to Don Bosco himself, overcomes any sorrowful interpretation or even worse a kind of spiritualistic masochism. It was in fact also thanks to Fr Beltrami that Fr Rua officially consecrated the Salesian Congregation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the final night of the 19th century.

3.2. In the footsteps of Saint Therese of Lisieux

The brevity of his years of life was made up for by the surprising richness of the witness of a virtuous life, which in a short time expressed an intense spiritual fervour and a singular striving for gospel perfection. It is not insignificant that the Venerable Beltrami died exactly three months after the death of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, who was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by John Paul II for the outstanding Divine Love that distinguished her. Through "The Story of a Soul" emerges the inner biography of a life moulded by the Spirit in the garden of Carmel, that blossomed with fruits of holiness and apostolic fruitfulness for the universal Church, so much so that in 1927 she was proclaimed Patroness of the Missions by Pius XI. Fr Beltrami also died of tuberculosis like St Therese, but in the outpourings of blood that quickly brought them to the end, both did not see so much the wasting away of a body and the waning of strength, but grasped a particular vocation to live in communion with Jesus Christ, which assimilated them to his sacrifice of love for the good of their brothers and sisters. On 9 June 1895, on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, St Therese of the Child Jesus offered herself as a holocaust and victim to God's merciful Love. On 3 April of the following year, on the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday, she had a first manifestation of the illness that would lead to her death. Teresa received it as a mysterious visit from the divine Bridegroom. At the same time she entered the trial of faith, which would last until her death. As her health deteriorated, she was

transferred to the infirmary from 8 July 1897. Her sisters and other religious picked up her words, while the pains and trials, endured with patience, intensified until culminating in her death on the afternoon of 30th September 1897. "I am not dying; I am entering life," she had written to her spiritual brother, Fr Bellière. Her final words "My God, I love you" were the seal of her existence.

Until the end of his life, Fr Beltrami too would be faithful to his offering of himself as a victim, as he wrote a few days before his death to his novice director: "I always pray and offer myself as a victim for the Congregation, for all the Superiors and confreres and especially for these novitiate houses, which contain the hopes of our pious Society."

4. Victim Spirituality

Fr Beltrami also relates a sublime degree of charity to this victim spirituality: "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). This does not only mean the extreme, supreme gesture of the physical gift of one's life for another, but the individual's entire life oriented towards the good of another. He felt called to this vocation: "There are many," he added, "even among us Salesians, who work a lot and do great good; but there are not so many who really love to suffer, and want to suffer a lot for the Lord: I want to be one of these." Precisely because it is not something coveted by most, consequently it is not understood either. But this is nothing new. Even Jesus when he spoke to the disciples about his Passover, about his ascent to Jerusalem, met with incomprehension, and Peter himself turned him away from it. At the supreme hour his "friends" betrayed him, denied him and abandoned him. Yet the work of redemption was and is only accomplished through the mystery of the cross and the offering that Jesus makes of himself to the Father as a victim of atonement, uniting to his sacrifice all those who accept a share in his sufferings for the salvation of their brothers

and sisters. The truth of Beltrami's offering lies in the fruitfulness offered by his holy life. In fact he gave efficacy to his words by supporting his confreres in their vocation in particular, urging them to accept the trials of life with a spirit of sacrifice in fidelity to the Salesian vocation. Don Bosco in the first Constitutions presented the Salesian as one who "is ready to endure heat and cold, thirst and hunger, toil and contempt, whenever it is a matter of the glory of God and the salvation of souls."

The same illness led Fr Beltrami both to increasingly severe tuberculosis and forced isolation, which left his perceptive and intellectual faculties intact, indeed almost refining them with the blade of pain. Only the grace of faith allowed him to embrace that condition that day by day, assimilated him more and more to the crucified Christ and that a statue of *Ecce homo*, with its shocking and repugnant realism, which he wanted in his room, constantly reminded him of. Faith was the rule of his life, the key to understanding people and different situations. "By the light of faith he considered his own sufferings as graces from God, and together with the anniversary of his religious profession and priestly ordination, he celebrated the anniversary of the beginning of his serious illness, which he believed had begun on 20 February 1891. On this occasion he heartily recited the *Te Deum* for having been allowed by the Lord to suffer for him. He meditated and cultivated a lively devotion to the Passion of Christ and to Jesus Crucified: "Great devotion, which can be said to have informed the entire life of the servant of God... This was the almost continuous subject of his meditations. He always had a crucifix before his eyes and mostly in his hands... which he enthusiastically kissed from time to time."

After his death, a purse was found hanging around his neck with the crucifix and the medal of Mary Help of Christians, containing some papers: prayers in memory of his ordination; a map on which the five continents were drawn, to remind the Lord always of the missionaries scattered throughout the world; and some prayers with which he formally

made himself a victim to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, especially for the dying, for the souls in purgatory, for the prosperity of the Congregation and the Church. These prayers, in which the prevailing thought echoed Paul's plea "*Opto ego ipse anathema esse a Christo pro fratribus meis*", were signed by him in his own blood and approved by his Rector Fr Luigi Piscetta on 15 November 1895.

5. Is Fr Beltrami relevant today?

The question, not an idle one, was already posed by the young confreres at the International Theological Studentate in the Crocetta, Turin in 1948, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the death of the Venerable Fr Beltrami, when they organised a commemorative day. From the very first lines of the booklet that collected the speeches given on that occasion, one wonders what Beltrami's testimony had to do with Salesian life, a life of apostolate and action. Well, after recalling how he was exemplary in the years in which he was able to throw himself into apostolic work, "he was also Salesian in accepting sorrow when it seemed to crush a career and a future so brilliantly and fruitfully undertaken. Because it was there that Fr Andrew revealed a depth of Salesian feeling and a wealth of dedication that before, in work could be taken for youthful daring, an impulse to act, a wealth of gifts, something normal, ordinary. The extraordinary begins, or rather, reveals itself in and through illness. Fr Andrew, set apart, now forever excluded from teaching, from the fraternal life of collaboration with his confreres and from Don Bosco's great enterprise, felt he was set on a new, solitary path, one that was perhaps repugnant to his confreres; certainly repugnant to human nature, all the more so to his own nature which was so rich and exuberant! Fr Beltrami accepted this path and set out on it with a Salesian spirit: in a Salesian way."

We are struck by the claim that Fr Beltrami somehow began a new path in the wake traced by Don Bosco, a special call to illuminate the deep core of the Salesian

vocation and the real energy that is pastoral charity: "We need to have what he had in his heart, what he experienced profoundly in his innermost being. Without that inner wealth our action would be in vain; Fr Beltrami could reproach us for our vain life, saying with Paul: *"nos quasi morientes, et ecce: vivimus!"* He himself was aware that he had started out on a new path, as his brother Giuseppe testified: "Halfway through the lesson he tried to convince me of the need to follow his way, and not thinking like him, I opposed it, and he suffered because of this." This suffering lived in faith was truly fruitful apostolically and vocationally: "It was a manifestation of the new and original Salesian concept which he desired and implemented, one of physical and moral, active, productive pain, even materially so, for the salvation of souls."

It must also be said that, either due to a certain somewhat pietistic spiritual climate, or perhaps more unconsciously so as not to be provoked too much by his testimony, over time a certain interpretation took root that gradually led to this being forgotten, also due to the major changes that took place. An expression of this process are, for example, paintings of him which those who knew him, like Father Eugenio Ceria, did not really like, because they remembered him as jovial, with an open appearance that inspired confidence and trust in those who approached him. Fr Ceria also recalls that already during his years in Foglizzo, Fr Beltrami lived an intense interior life, a profound union with God nourished by meditation and Eucharistic communion, to such an extent that even in the middle of winter, in freezing temperatures, he did not wear a greatcoat and kept his window open, so that he was called a "polar bear".

5.1. Witness of union with God

This spirit of sacrifice matured into profound union with God: "His prayer consisted of being continually in the presence of God, keeping his eyes fixed on the Tabernacle and seeking with the Lord through constant brief prayers and

affectionate aspirations. His meditation could be said to be continuous...it was so much a part of him that he did not notice what was happening around him, and I heard him tell me in confidence that he generally came to understand the mysteries he was meditating on so well that he seemed to see them as if they were appearing before his eyes." This union signified and was realised in a special way in the celebration of the Eucharist, when all the pains and coughs ceased as if by magic, translated into perfect conformity to God's will, especially by accepting suffering: "He considered the apostolate of suffering and affliction to be no less fruitful than that of the more active life; and while others would have said that those not so brief years were sufficiently occupied in suffering, he sanctified suffering by offering it to the Lord and conforming to the divine will so generally that he was not only resigned to it, but content with it."

The request made by the Venerable himself to the Lord is of considerable value, as can be seen from several letters and in particular the one to his first Rector in Lanzo, Fr Giuseppe Scappini, written just over a month before his death: "Do not be distressed, my sweetest father in Jesus Christ, by my illness; on the contrary, rejoice in the Lord. I myself asked the Good Lord for it, to have the opportunity to expiate my sins in this world, where Purgatory is done with merit. Truly, I did not ask for this illness, for I had no idea of it, but I asked for much to suffer, and the Lord has granted me this. May he be blessed for ever. And help me always to bear the Cross with joy. Believe me, in the midst of my sorrows, I am happy with a full and accomplished happiness, so that I laugh when they offer me condolences and wishes for my recovery."

5.2. Knowing how to suffer

"Knowing how to suffer": for one's own sanctification, for expiation and for the apostolate. He celebrated the anniversary of his own illness: "20 February is the anniversary of my illness: and I celebrate it, as of a day

blessed by God; a blessed day, full of joy, among the most beautiful days of my life." Perhaps Fr Beltrami's testimony confirms Don Bosco's words that "there is only one Beltrami", as if to indicate the originality of the holiness of this son of his in having experienced and made visible the secret core of Salesian apostolic holiness. Fr Beltrami expresses the need for the Salesian mission not to fall into the trap of an activism and outward action that in time would lead to the fatal destiny of death, but to preserve and cultivate the secret core that expresses both depth and breadth of horizon. The translations in practice of this care of interiority and spiritual depth are fidelity to the life of prayer, serious and competent preparation for one's mission, especially for the priestly ministry, fighting against negligence and culpable ignorance; the responsible use of time.

More profoundly, Fr Beltrami's testimony tells us that one does not live off past glories or achievements, but that every confrere and every generation must make the gift received bear fruit and know how to pass it on in a faithful and creative form to future generations. The interruption of this virtuous chain will be a source of damage and ruin. Knowing how to suffer is a secret that gives fruitfulness to every apostolic enterprise. Fr Beltrami's spirit of offering of himself as a victim is admirably associated with his priestly ministry, for which he prepared himself with great responsibility and which he lived in the form of a unique communion with Christ immolated for the salvation of his brothers and sisters: in the struggle and mortification against the passions of the flesh; in the renunciation of the ideals of an active apostolate he had always desired; in the insatiable thirst for suffering; in the aspiration to offer himself as a victim for the salvation of his brothers and sisters. For example, for the Congregation in addition to prayer and the *nominatim* offering for several confreres (holding the Year Book of the Congregation in his hands), houses and missions, he asked for the grace of perseverance and zeal, the preservation of the spirit of Don Bosco and his

educational method. One of the books written about him significantly bears the title *La passiflora serafica*, meaning “passionfruit flower”, a name given to it by the Jesuit missionaries in 1610, due to the similarity of some parts of the plant with the religious symbols of Christ’s passion: the tendrils being the whip with which he was scourged; the three styles the nails; the stamens the hammer; the sepals the crown of thorns. Fr Nazareno Camilleri, a deeply spiritual soul, says authoritatively: “Fr Beltrami seems to us to eminently represent, today, the divine yearning for ‘the sanctification of suffering’ for the social, apostolic and missionary fruitfulness, through the heroic enthusiasm of the Cross, of Christ’s Redemption in the midst of humanity.”

5.3 Passing the baton

In Valsalice, Fr Andrew was an example to all: a young cleric, Louis Variara, chose him as a model of life: he became a priest and Salesian missionary in Colombia and inspired by Fr Beltrami, founded, the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Born in Viarigi (Asti) in 1875, Louis Variara was taken to Valdocco in Turin by his father when he was 11 years old. He entered the novitiate on 17 August 1891 and completed it by taking perpetual vows. Afterwards he moved to Valsalice, near Turin to study philosophy. There he met the Venerable Andrew Beltrami. Fr Variara was to take inspiration from him when he later proposed “victim consecration” to his Daughters of the Sacred Hearts in Agua de Dios (Colombia).

End

Blessed Maria Troncatti, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, will be canonised

On November 25th, 2024, Pope Francis authorised the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the decree regarding the miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Maria Troncatti, a professed Sister of the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, born in Corteno Golgi (Italy) on February 16th, 1883, and who died in Sucúa (Ecuador) on August 25th, 1969. With this act of the Holy Father, the path to the canonisation of Blessed Maria Troncatti is opened.

Maria Troncatti was born in Corteno Golgi (Brescia) on February 16th, 1883. Devoted to parish catechesis and the sacraments, the adolescent Maria developed a deep Christian sense that opened her to a religious vocation. The *Salesian Bulletin* arrived in Corteno, and Maria thought about her religious vocation. However, out of obedience to her father and the parish priest, she waited until she was of age before asking for admission to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. She made her first profession in 1908 in Nizza Monferrato. During World War I (1915-1918), Sister Maria attended health assistance courses in Varazze and worked as a Red Cross nurse in the military hospital. During a flood in which she risked drowning, Maria promised the Madonna that if she saved her life, she would go to the missions.

In 1922, Mother General, Caterina Daghero assigned her to the missions in Ecuador. She spent three years in Chunchi. Accompanied by the missionary Bishop Mons. Comin and a small expedition, Sister Maria and two other sisters ventured into the Amazon rainforest. Their mission field was the land of the Shuar Indians, in the south-eastern part of Ecuador. They

settled in Macas, a village of colonists surrounded by the collective homes of the Shuar. Together with her sisters, she carried out a difficult work of evangelization amidst various risks, including those posed by forest animals and the dangers of swirling rivers. Macas, Sevilla Don Bosco, and Sucúa are some of the “miracles” still flourishing out of Sister Maria Troncatti’s work: nurse, surgeon and orthopaedic doctor, dentist, and anaesthetist... But above all, she was a catechist and evangeliser, rich in wonderful resources of faith, patience, and fraternal love. Her work for the promotion of Shuar women flourished in hundreds of new Christian families, formed for the first time by the free personal choice of the young spouses. She was nicknamed “the doctor of the jungle”, fighting for human promotion, especially of women. **She was the “little mother” (*madrecita*)**, always eager to reach out not only to the sick but to all those in need of help and hope. From a simple and poor clinic, she founded a real hospital and personally trained the nurses. With maternal patience, she listened, fostered communion among the people, and educated both natives and colonists in forgiveness. “A glance at the Crucifix gives me life and courage to work”, this is the certainty of faith that sustained her life. In every activity, sacrifice, or danger, she felt supported by the maternal presence of Mary Help of Christians.

On August 25th, 1969, in Sucúa (Ecuador), the small plane carrying Sister Maria Troncatti to the city crashed a few minutes after take-off, on the edge of that jungle which had been for almost half a century her “heart’s homeland”, the space of her tireless donation among the “Shuar”. Sister Maria experienced her last take-off: the one that took her to Paradise! She was 86 years old, all spent as a gift of love. She had offered her life for reconciliation between the colonists and the Shuar. She wrote, “I am increasingly happy with my missionary religious vocation!”

She was declared Venerable on November 12th, 2008, and

beatified during the pontificate of Benedict XVI in Macas (Apostolic Vicariate of Méndez – Ecuador) on November 24th, 2012. In the beatification homily, Cardinal Angelo Amato outlined her figure as a consecrated and missionary woman. In the ordinariness and simplicity of her maternal and merciful gestures, Card. Amato highlighted the extraordinary nature of the “example of dedication to Jesus and his Gospel of truth and life” for which, more than forty years after her death, she was remembered with gratitude. “Sister Maria, animated by grace, became an untiring messenger of the Gospel, expert in humanity and a profound knower of the human heart. She shared the joys and hopes, the difficulties and sorrows of her brothers and sisters, both great and small. She was able to transform prayer into apostolic zeal and concrete service to others”. Cardinal Amato concluded the homily by reassuring those present, including the Shuar, that “from heaven, Blessed Maria Troncatti continues to watch over your homeland and your families. Let us continue to ask for her intercession, to live in fraternity, concord, and peace. Let us turn to her with confidence, so that she may assist the sick, console the suffering, enlighten parents in the Christian education of their children, and bring harmony to families. Dear faithful, as she was on earth, so from heaven Blessed Maria Troncatti will continue to be our Good Mother”.

The biography written by Sister Domenica Grassiano, “Jungle, Homeland of the Heart”, helped to make the testimony of this great missionary known and to spread her fame of holiness. This Daughter of Mary Help of Christians singularly embodied the pedagogy and spirituality of the preventive system, especially through that motherhood that marked her entire missionary witness throughout her life.

As a young Sister in the 1920s: while continuing as a nurse, she dedicated particular attention to the oratory girls, especially to a group of them who were rather neglected, noisy, and intolerant of any discipline. Sister Maria welcomed

and treated them in such a way that “they had a veneration for her: they knelt before her, so great was their esteem. They felt in her a soul belonging entirely to God and entrusted themselves to her prayer”.

She also reserved **special attention for the postulants**, communicating trust and courage, “Be brave, do not let yourself be taken by regret for what you have left behind.. Pray to the Lord, and He will help you realise your vocation”. The forty postulants of that year all reached to receiving the habit and making their profession, attributing this result to Sister Maria’s prayers, which instilled hope, especially when she saw difficulties in adapting to the new way of life or in accepting separation from one’s family.

As Mother of the poor and needy. With her example and message, she reminds us that “we do not only care for the body, but also for the needs of the human soul: for those who suffer from the violation of rights or from a broken love; for those who find themselves in darkness regarding the truth; who suffer from the absence of truth and love. We care for the salvation of people in body and soul”. How many souls she saved! How many children she saved from certain death! How many girls and women she defended in their dignity! How many families she formed and safeguarded in the truth of marital and family love! How many fires of hatred and revenge she extinguished with the strength of patience and the giving of one’s life! And she lived all this with great apostolic and missionary zeal.

The testimony of Father Giovanni Vigna, who worked for 23 years in the same mission, illustrates very well the heart of Sister Maria Troncatti, “Sister Maria stood out for her exquisite motherhood. She found a solution to every problem that proved always the best, in light of the facts. She was always willing to discover the positive side of people. I saw her treat human nature in all its aspects, even the most miserable: she treated them with that excellence and

gentleness that were spontaneous and natural in her. She expressed motherhood as affection among the Sisters in the community: it was the vital secret that sustained them, the love that united them to one another; the full sharing of labours, pains, and joys. She exercised her motherhood especially towards the younger ones. Many Sisters experienced the sweetness and strength of her love. This was also true for the Salesians who frequently fell ill because they did not spare themselves in their work and effort. She cared for them, supported them morally, sensing crises, fatigue, and turmoil. Her transparent soul saw everything through the love of a Father who cares for us and saves us. She served as God's instrument for wonderful works!"

St Francis de Sales, personal companion

'My spirit always accompanies yours,' wrote Francis de Sales one day to Jeanne de Chantal, at a time when she felt assailed by darkness and temptations. He added: 'Walk therefore, my dear Daughter, and advance in bad weather and during the night. Be courageous, my dear Daughter; with God's help, we shall do much.' Accompaniment, spiritual direction, guidance of souls, direction of conscience, spiritual assistance: these are more or less synonymous terms, as they designate this particular form of education and formation exercised in the spiritual sphere of the individual conscience.

Formation of a future companion

The formation he received as a young man had prepared Francis de Sales to become a spiritual director in

turn. As a student of the Jesuits in Paris he most likely had a spiritual father whose name we do not know. In Padua, Antonio Possevino had been his director; with this famous Jesuit Francis would later rejoice at having been one of his 'spiritual sons'. During his tormented path to the clerical state, his confidant and support was Amé Bouvard, a priest friend of the family, who then prepared him for ordination.

At the beginning of his episcopate, he entrusted the care of his spiritual life to Father Fourier, rector of the Jesuits in Chambéry, 'a great, erudite and devout religious', with whom he established 'a very special friendship' and who was very close to him 'with his advice and warnings'. For several years, he went to confession regularly to the cathedral penitentiary, whom he called 'dear brother and perfect friend'.

His stay in Paris in 1602 profoundly influenced the development of his gifts as a director of souls. Sent by the bishop to negotiate some diocesan affairs at court, he had little diplomatic success, but this prolonged visit to the French capital allowed him to establish contacts with the spiritual elite who came together around Madam Acarie, an exceptional woman, mystic and hostess at the same time. He became her confessor, observed her ecstasies and listened to her without question. 'Oh! what a mistake I made,' he would later say, 'for not having taken sufficient advantage of her most holy company! She did indeed open her soul to me freely; but the extreme respect I had for her meant that I did not dare to inform myself of the slightest thing.'

A, insistent activity 'that reassures and heartens'

Helping each individual, personally accompanying them, advising them, possibly correcting their mistakes, encouraging them, all this requires time, patience and a constant effort of discernment. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* speaks from experience when he states in the preface:

I grant that the guidance of individual souls is a labour, but it is a labour full of consolation, even as that of harvesters and grape-gatherers, who are never so well pleased as when most heavily laden. It is a labour which refreshes and invigorates the heart by the comfort which it brings to those who bear it.

We know this important area of his formative work especially from his correspondence, but it should be pointed out that spiritual direction is not only done in writing. Personal meetings and individual confessions are part of it, although one must distinguish them properly. In 1603, he met the Duke of Bellegarde, a great figure in the kingdom and a great sinner, who a few years later asked him to guide him on the path to conversion. The Lenten series that he preached in Dijon the following year was a turning point in his 'career' as a spiritual director, because he met Jeanne Frémyot, widow of the Baron de Chantal.

From 1605 onwards, the systematic visitation of his vast diocese brought him into contact with an endless number of people of all circumstances, mainly peasants and mountain people, most of whom were illiterate and left us no correspondence. Preaching Lent at Annecy in 1607, he found a twenty-one year old lady, 'but all gold', named Louise Du Chastel, who had married the bishop's cousin, Henri de Charmoisy. The letters of spiritual direction that Francis sent to Madame de Charmoisy would serve as basic material for the drafting of his future work, the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Preaching in Grenoble in 1616, 1617 and 1618 brought him a considerable number of daughters and spiritual sons who, having heard him speak, would seek closer contact. New women followed him on his last trip to Paris in 1618-1619, where he was part of the Savoy delegation that was negotiating the marriage of the Prince of Piedmont, Victor Amadeus, to Christine of France, sister of Louis XIII. After the princely wedding, Christine chose him as her confessor and 'great

chaplain'.

The director is father, brother, friend

When addressing the people he directed, Francis de Sales made abundant use, according to the custom of the time, of titles taken from family and social life, such as *father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, uncle, aunt, niece, godfather, godmother, or servant*. The title of father signified authority and at the same time love and confidence. The father 'assists' his son and daughter with advice using wisdom, prudence and charity. As a spiritual father, the director is the one who in certain cases says: I do! Francis de Sales knew how to use such language, but only in very special circumstances, as when he ordered the baroness not to avoid meeting with her husband's murderer:

You asked me how I wanted you to behave in the meeting with the one who killed your lord husband. I answer in order. It is not necessary for you to seek the date and occasion yourself. However, if this arises I want you to welcome it with a gentle, kind and compassionate heart.

He once wrote to a distressed woman: 'I command you in the name of God', but it was to remove her scruples. His authority was always humble, good, even tender; his role with regard to the people he directed, he specified in the preface to the *Introduction*, consisted of a special 'assistance', a term that appears twice in this context. The intimacy that was established between him and the Duke of Bellegarde was such that Francis de Sales was able to respond to the duke's request, hesitatingly using the epithets 'my son' or 'monsignor my son', knowing full well that the duke was older than him. The pedagogical implication of spiritual direction is underlined by another significant image. After recalling the tiger's swift race to save her cub, moved by the power of natural love, he goes on to say:

And how much more willingly will a paternal heart care for a

soul that it has found full of desire for holy perfection, carrying it on its breast, like a mother her child, without feeling the weight of the dear burden.

With regard to the people he directed, women and men, Francis de Sales also acted like a brother, and it is in this capacity that he often presented himself to the people who had recourse to him. Antoine Favre was constantly called 'my brother'. At first he addressed the Baroness de Chantal as '*madame*' (lady), but later he switched to 'sister', 'this name, which is the one by which the apostles and the first Christians used to express their mutual love'. A brother does not command, he gives advice and practices fraternal correction.

But what best characterises the Salesian style is the friendly and reciprocal atmosphere that united the director and the directee. As André Ravier said so well, 'there is no true spiritual direction if there is no friendship, that is, exchange, communication, mutual influence'. It is not surprising that Francis de Sales loved his referents with a love that he witnessed to them in a thousand ways; it is surprising, instead, that he desired to be equally loved by them. With Jeanne de Chantal, the reciprocity became so intense as to sometimes turn 'mine' and 'yours' into 'ours': 'It is not possible for me to distinguish *mine* and *yours* in what concerns us is *ours*'.

Obedience to the director, but in an atmosphere of confidence and freedom

Obedience to the spiritual director is a guarantee against excesses, illusions and missteps made more often than not for one's own sake; it maintains a prudent and wise attitude. The author of the *Introduction* considered it necessary and beneficial, without resorting to it; 'humble obedience, so much recommended and so much practised by all the ancient devotees', is part of a tradition. Francis de Sales recommended it to the Baroness de Chantal with regard to

her first director, but indicating the way to live it:

I greatly commend the religious respect you feel for your director, and I urge you to preserve it with great care; but I must also say one more word to you. This respect must undoubtedly induce you to persevere in the holy conduct to which you have so happily adapted yourself, but it must by no means impede or stifle the just liberty which the Spirit of God gives to whomever he possesses.

In any case, the director must possess three indispensable qualities: 'He must be full of charity, knowledge and prudence: if one of these three is lacking, there is danger' (*I I 4*). This does not seem to be the case with Mme de Chantal's first director. According to her biographer, Mother de Chaugy, he 'bound her to his direction' warning her never to think of changing it; they were 'inappropriate ties that kept her soul trapped, cooped up and without freedom'. When, after meeting Francis de Sales, she wanted to change her director, she was plunged into a sea of scruples. To reassure her, he showed her another way:

Here is the general rule of our obedience, written in very large letters: YOU MUST DO EVERYTHING OUT OF LOVE, AND NOTHING BY CONSTRAINT; YOU MUST LOVE OBEDIENCE MORE THAN YOU FEAR DISOBEDIENCE. I leave you the spirit of freedom: not the one that excludes obedience, for then one would have to speak of the freedom of the flesh, but the one that excludes compulsion, scruple and haste.

The Salesian way is founded on the respect and obedience due to the director, without any doubt, but above all on confidence: 'Have the greatest confidence in him, together with sacred reverence, so that reverence does not diminish confidence and confidence does not impede reverence; trust him with the respect of a daughter towards her father, respect him with the confidence of a daughter towards her mother'. Confidence inspires simplicity and freedom, which

foster communication between two people, especially when the one being directed is a fearful young novice:

I will tell you, in the first place, that you must not use words of ceremony or apology in my regard, for, by God's will, I feel for you all the affection you could desire, and I would not know how to forbid myself to feel it. I love your spirit deeply, because I think God wills it, and I love it tenderly, because I see you still weak and too young. Write to me, therefore, with all confidence and freedom, and ask all that seems useful for your good. And let this be said once and for all.

How should one write to the Bishop of Geneva? 'Write to me freely, sincerely, simply,' he said to one of the souls he directed. 'On this point, I have nothing more to say, except that you must not put *Monsignor* on the letter either alone or accompanied by other words: it is enough for you to put *Sir*, and you know why. I am a man without ceremony, and I love and honour you with all my heart.' This refrain returns frequently at the beginning of a new epistolary relationship. Affection, when it is sincere and especially when it has the good fortune to be reciprocated, authorises freedom and utmost frankness. 'Write to me whenever you feel like it,' he said to another woman, 'with full confidence and without ceremony; for this is how one should behave in this sort of friendship.' He told one of his correspondents: 'Do not ask me to excuse you for writing well or badly, because you owe me no ceremony other than that of loving me. This means speaking "heart to heart".' The love of God as well as the love of our neighbour makes us go on "in a good way, without a lot of fuss" because, as he put it, 'true love does not need a method'. The key to this is love, for 'love makes lovers equal', that is, love works a transformation in the people one loves, making them equal, similar and on the same level.

'Every flower requires special care'.

While the goal of spiritual direction is the same

for everyone, namely the perfection of the Christian life, people are not all the same, and it belongs to the skill of the director to know how to indicate the appropriate path for each person to reach the common goal. A man of his time, aware that social stratifications were a reality, Francis de Sales knew well the difference between the gentleman, the artisan, the valet, the prince, the widow, the girl and the married woman. Each, in fact, should produce fruit 'according to his qualification and profession'. But the sense of belonging to a particular social group went well, in him, with the consideration of the peculiarities of the individual: one must 'adapt the practice of devotion to the strengths, activities and duties of each one in particular'. He also believed that 'the means to achieve perfection are different according to the diversity of vocations'.

The diversity of temperaments is a fact which must be taken into account. One can detect in Francis de Sales a 'psychological flair' that predates modern discoveries. The perception of the unique characteristics of each person is very pronounced in him and is the reason why each subject deserves special attention from the spiritual father: 'In a garden, each herb and each flower requires special care. Like a father or mother with their children, he adapts to the individuality, temperament, and particular situations of each individual. To this person, impatient with himself, disappointed because he is not progressing as he would like, he recommends self-love; to this other, attracted by the religious life but endowed with a strong individuality, he advises a lifestyle that takes into account these two tendencies; to a third, wavering between exaltation and depression, he suggests peace of heart through the struggle against distressing imaginations. To a woman in despair because of her husband's 'spendthrift and frivolous' character, the director will have to advise 'the right means and moderation' and the means to overcome her impatience. Another, a woman with a head on her neck, with an 'all in one piece' character, full of anxieties and trials, will need

'holy sweetness and tranquillity'. Still another is distressed by the thought of death and often depressed: her director inspires her with courage. There are souls who have a thousand desires for perfection; it is necessary to calm their impatience, the fruit of their self-love. The famous Angélique Arnauld, abbess of Port-Royal, wanted to reform her monastery with rigidity: he needed to recommend flexibility and humility to her.

As for the Duke de Bellegarde, who had meddled in all the political and amorous intrigues of the court, the bishop encouraged him to acquire 'a masculine, courageous, invariable devotion to serve as a mirror to many, exalting the truth of heavenly love, worthy of reparation for past faults'. In 1613 he drew up a *Reminder for making a good confession*, containing eight general 'warnings', a detailed description 'of sins against the ten commandments', an 'examination concerning capital sins', 'sins committed against the precepts of the Church', a 'means of discerning mortal sin from venial sin', and finally 'means of turning the great away from the sin of the flesh'.

Regressive method

The art of direction of conscience very often requires the director to take a step back and leave the initiative to the recipient, or to God, especially when it comes to making choices that require a demanding decision. 'Do not take my words too literally,' he wrote to Baroness de Chantal, 'I do not want them to be an imposition on you, but that you retain the freedom to do what you think best. He wrote, for example, to a woman who was very attached to 'vanities':

When you left, it came into my mind to tell you that you should renounce musk and perfumes, but I restrained myself, in order to follow my system, which is gentle and seeks to await those movements which, little by little, the exercises of piety tend to arouse in souls who consecrate themselves

entirely to divine Goodness. My spirit, in fact, is extremely friendly to simplicity; and the billhook with which it is customary to cut off useless suckers, I habitually leave in God's hand.

The director is not a despot, but one who 'guides our actions with his warnings and counsels', as he says at the beginning of the *Introduction*. He refrains from commanding when he writes to Madame de Chantal: 'These are good and suitable counsels for you, but not commands'. She would also say, at his canonisation process, that she sometimes regretted that she was not guided enough with commands. In fact, the role of the director is defined by the following response of Socrates to a disciple: 'I will therefore take care to return you to yourself better than you are'. As he always declared to Madame de Chantal, Francis had 'devoted himself', put himself at the 'service' of the 'most holy Christian freedom'. He fought for freedom:

You will see that I speak the truth and that I fight for a good cause when I defend the holy and lovable freedom of the spirit, which, as you know, I honour in a very special way, provided it is true and free from dissipation and libertinism, which are nothing but a mask of freedom.

In 1616, during a retreat, Francis de Sales had the mother of Chantal do an exercise of 'undressing', to reduce her to 'the lovely and holy purity and nakedness of children'. The time had come for her to take the step towards the 'autonomy' of the directee. He urged her, among other things, not to 'take any nurse' and not to keep telling him – he specified – 'that I will always be her nurse', and, in short, to be willing to renounce Francis' spiritual direction. God alone suffices: 'Have no other arms to carry you but God's, no other breasts on which to rest but His and Providence. [...] Think no more of the friendship or unity that God has established between us'. For Madame de Chantal the lesson is harsh: 'My God! My true Father, whom you have cut

deeply with your razor! Can I remain in this state of mind for long'? She now sees herself 'stripped and naked of all that was most precious to her'. Francis also confesses: 'And yes, I too find myself naked, thanks to Him who died naked to teach us to live naked'. Spiritual direction reaches its peak here. After such an experience, spiritual letters would become rarer and affection would be more restrained in favour of a wholly spiritual unity.

Andrew Beltrami virtuous profile (1/2)

The Venerable Fr Andrea Beltrami (1870-1897) is an emblematic expression of a constitutive dimension not only of the Salesian charism, but of Christianity: the self-offering and victim dimension, which in Salesian terms embodies the demands of "caetera tolle". A testimony that stands out both for its uniqueness or for reasons partly linked to the past or handed down through popular understandings, has been far less visible in the Salesian world. The fact remains that the Christian message intrinsically presents aspects that are incompatible with the world, and if ignored they risk making the gospel message itself and, specifically, the Salesian charism, unprotected in its charismatic roots of a spirit of sacrifice, hard work, and apostolic renunciation. The testimony of Father Andrew Beltrami is paradigmatic of a whole strand of Salesian holiness that, starting with the three candidates for sainthood, Fr Andrew Beltrami, Blessed Augustus Czarторыski, Blessed Louis Variara, continues over time with other family figures such as Blessed Eusebia Palomino, Blessed Alexandrina Maria da Costa, Blessed Laura Vicuña, without forgetting the numerous host of martyrs.

1. Radical understanding of the gospel

1.1 Radical in vocational choice

Andrew Beltrami was born in Omegna (Novara), on the shores of Lake Orta, on 24 June 1870. He received a profoundly Christian upbringing in his family, which was then developed at the Salesian college in Lanzo, where he entered in October 1883. Here his vocation came to maturity. At Lanzo, one day, he had the great good fortune to meet Don Bosco. Fascinated by him, a question arose within him: "Why couldn't I be like him? Why not spend my life too for the formation and salvation of the young?" In 1885, Don Bosco told him: "Andrew, you too will become a Salesian!" In 1886 he received the clerical habit from Don Bosco at Foglizzo and on 29 October 1886 he began his novitiate year with one resolve: "I want to become a saint". This was not formal resolution, but became a reason for his life. Especially Fr Eugenio Bianchi, his novice master, in his report to Don Bosco, described him as perfect in every virtue. Such a radical approach right from the novitiate was expressed in obedience to superiors, in the exercise of charity towards his companions, in religious observance that he was described as being the "Rule personified". On 2 October 1887, at Valsalice (Turin) Don Bosco received his religious vows: he had become a Salesian and immediately undertook studies to prepare for the priesthood.

The firmness and determination in his response to the Lord's call was very striking, a sign of the value he attributed to his vocation: "The grace of vocation was for me a unique, invincible, irresistible, efficacious grace. The Lord had put into my heart a firm persuasion, an intimate conviction that the only way that suited me was to become a Salesian; it was a voice of command that admitted no reply, that removed every obstacle that I would not have been able to resist even if I had wanted to, and therefore I would have overcome a thousand difficulties, even if it had been to pass over the body of my father and mother, as Chantal did when she

passed over the body of her son.” These expressions are very strong and perhaps not very pleasing to our palate; they are like the prelude to a vocational story lived so radically that is not easy to understand, let alone accept.

1.2. Radical in his journey of formation

An interesting and revealing aspect of prudential action is the capacity to let oneself be advised and corrected, and in turn become capable of correction and advice: “I throw myself like a child into your arms, abandoning myself entirely to your direction. May you lead me along the path of perfection, I am resolved with the grace of God, to overcome any difficulty, to make any effort to follow your advice” is what he told his spiritual director Fr Giulio Barberis. In the exercise of teaching and assistance “he always spoke calmly and serenely... first he carefully read the regulations of the same offices... the rules and regulations on assistance and on the way of teaching... he soon acquired a knowledge of each of his pupils, of their individual needs, then he became all things to all and to each of them”. In fraternal correction, he was inspired by Christian principles and intervened by weighing his words well and expressing his thoughts clearly.

It was during this period that Andrew made the acquaintance of the Polish prince Augustus Czartoryski, who had recently entered the Congregation, and with whom he became close friends: they studied foreign languages together and helped each other climb to the summit of holiness. When Augustus fell ill, the superiors begged Andrew to stay close to him and help him. They spent their summer holidays together in the Salesian institutes in Lanzo, Penango d’Asti and Alassio. Augustus, who had meanwhile reached the priesthood, was Andrew’s guardian angel, teacher and heroic example of holiness. Fr Augustus passed away in 1893 and Fr Andrew would say of him: “I looked after a saint”. When Fr Beltrami in turn fell ill with the same disease, one of the probable causes was

the time he had spent with his sick friend.

1.3. Radical in trial

His illness began in a brutal way on 20 February 1891 when, following a very strenuous journey and during days of harsh winter weather, the first symptoms of an illness appeared that would undermine his health and lead him to his grave. If the causes include schooling and contact with Prince Czartoryski who was suffering from the same disease, both the ascetic effort and the offering of self as a victim are worth mentioning. His fellow citizen and novitiate companion Giulio Cane testifies to this struggle with the old man within him: "I was always convinced that the servant of God suffered the most serious blow to his health from the violent and constant way in which he forced himself to renounce all his own will in order to make himself, I would say, a slave to the will of the Superior, in whom he saw God's will. Only those who were able to know the servant of God in the years of his adolescence and youth, with his impulsive, ardent spirit, when he was almost rebellious to all restraint, and who know how the Beltrami Manera people hold tenaciously to their own opinions, can form a clear idea of the effort the Servant of God had to impose on himself to master himself. From the conversations I had with the Servant of God, I came to this conviction: wary of being able to master himself by degrees in his character, from the very first months of his novitiate, he had the intention of radically renouncing his will, his tendencies, his aspirations. All this he achieved with constant vigilance over himself so as never to fail in his purpose. It is impossible that such an internal struggle did not contribute, more than the labours of study and teaching, to undermining the health of the Servant of God." Truly the young Beltrami took the words of the Gospel literally: "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force" (Mt 11:12).

He lived his suffering with inner joy: "The Lord wants me to be a priest and a victim: what could be more

beautiful?" His day began with Holy Mass, in which he united his suffering to the Sacrifice of Jesus present on the altar. Meditation became contemplation. Ordained a priest by Bishop Cagliero, he gave himself entirely to contemplation and the apostolate of the pen. With an all-out tenacity of will, and a vehement desire for holiness, he consumed his life in pain and unceasing work. "The mission God entrusts to me is to pray and to suffer," he said. "I am content and happy and I always celebrate. Neither dying nor healing, but living to suffer: in suffering I have found true contentment," was his motto. But his truest vocation was prayer and suffering: to be a sacrificial victim with the divine Victim who is Jesus. This is revealed in his luminous and ardent writings: "It is also beautiful in the darkness, when everyone is resting, to keep company with Jesus, in the flickering light of the lamp before the Tabernacle. One knows then the infinite greatness of his love." "I ask God for long years of life to suffer and atone, to make reparation. I am content and always rejoice because I can do it. Neither die nor heal, but live to suffer. In suffering lies my joy, suffering offered with Jesus on the cross." "I offer myself as a victim with Him, for the sanctification of priests, for the people of the whole world."

2. The secret

In his fundamental text for understanding the story of Fr Andrew Beltrami, Fr Giulio Barberis aligns the holiness of the young Salesian with Don Bosco, apostle of abandoned youth. Barberis speaks of Fr Beltrami as "shining like a distinguished star... who shed so much light as good example and encouraged us to good by his virtues!" It is therefore a matter of grasping what an exemplary life this is and to what extent it is an encouragement to those who look upon it. Fr Barberis' testimony becomes even more cogent and he states boldly: "I have been in the Pious Salesian Society for over 50 years; I have been the Director of Novices for over 25 years: how many holy confreres have I known, how many good young men have passed under me in that time! How many chosen

flowers the Lord was pleased to transplant into the Salesian garden in Paradise! And yet, if I have to express myself fully, although I do not intend to make comparisons, my conviction is that no one has surpassed our dearest Fr Andrew in virtue and holiness." And in the process he said. "I am convinced that it is an extraordinary grace that God wanted to bestow on the Congregation founded by the incomparable Don Bosco, so that by seeking to imitate him, we may achieve in the Church the goal that the venerable Don Bosco had in founding it." This attestation, shared by many, is based both on an in-depth knowledge of the saints' lives and on a familiarity with Fr Beltrami over more than ten years.

At a superficial glance, Beltrami's light of holiness would seem at odds with Don Bosco's holiness of which it is supposed to be a reflection, but a careful reading allows one to grasp a secret warp upon which authentic Salesian spirituality is woven. It is that hidden invisible part which is nevertheless the backbone of the spiritual and apostolic nature of Don Bosco and his disciples. The tension of the *Da mihi animas* is nourished by the asceticism of the *caetera tolle*; the front of the mysterious character in the famous dream of the ten diamonds, with its gems of faith, hope, charity, work and temperance, demands that the back corresponds to those of obedience, poverty, reward, chastity and fasting. Fr Beltrami's short life is packed with a message that represents the gospel leaven that ferments all pastoral and educational activity typical of the Salesian mission, and without which apostolic activity is destined to exhaust itself in sterile and inconclusive activism. "Fr Beltrami's life, spent entirely hidden in God, entirely in prayer, in suffering, in humiliation, in sacrifice, entirely in hidden but constant work, in heroic charity, although restricted to a small circle given his circumstances, all in all seems so admirable to me as to make one say: faith has always worked wonders, it works wonders even today, as it certainly will work wonders as long as the world lasts."

It is a total and unconditional handing over of

oneself to God's plan that motivates the authentic radical nature of gospel discipleship, that is to say, of what lies at the basis of a life lived as a generous response to a call. The spirit with which Fr Beltrami lived his life is well expressed by this testimony reported by one of his companions who, while commiserating with him over his illness, was interrupted by Beltrami in these terms: "Leave it," he said, "God knows what he is doing; it is up to each one to accept his place and in that to be a true Salesian. You other healthy people work, we sick people suffer and pray", so convinced was he that he was a true imitator of Don Bosco.

Of course it is not easy to grasp such a secret, such a precious pearl. It was not easy for Fr Barberis, who knew him seriously for ten years as spiritual director; it was not easy for the Salesian tradition, which gradually marginalised this figure; nor is it easy for us today and for an entire cultural and anthropological context that tends to marginalise the Christian message, especially in its core of redemptive work that passes through the scandal of humiliation, passion and the cross. "Describing the unique virtues of a man who always lived locked up in a religious house, and, in his most important years, in a small room, without even being able to go down the stairs because of his illness, of a man of such humility that he carefully got rid of all the documents that could have made his virtues known, and who sought to avoid any shadow of his piety from leaking out; of one who proclaimed himself a great sinner by mentioning his innumerable sins, whereas he had always been held up as the best in whatever school and college he had presented himself, is not only something difficult, but almost impossible." The difficulty in grasping this virtuous profile depends on the fact that such virtues were neither conspicuous nor supported by particular external facts to attract attention or arouse admiration.

[\(continued\)](#)

Fr Rinaldi at the Becchi

Blessed Don Filippo Rinaldi, the third successor of Don Bosco, is remembered as an extraordinary figure, capable of uniting in himself the qualities of Superior and Father, a distinguished master of spirituality, pedagogy, and social life, as well as an unparalleled spiritual guide. His deep admiration for Don Bosco, whom he had the privilege of knowing personally, made him a living testimony of the founder's charisma. Aware of the spiritual importance of the places linked to Don Bosco's childhood, Don Rinaldi paid particular attention to visiting them, recognizing their symbolic and formative value. In this article, we retrace some of his visits to Colle Don Bosco, discovering the special bond that connected him to these holy places.

For the shrine of Mary Help of Christians

With the inauguration of the little shrine to Mary Help of Christians, which Fr Paul Albera wanted built opposite Don Bosco's cottage, and precisely from 2 August 1918, when Archbishop Morganti, archbishop of Ravenna, assisted by our Major Superiors, solemnly blessed the church and bells, the permanent presence of the Salesians at the Becchi began. Fr Philip Rinaldi, Prefect General, was also there on that day, and with him Fr Francesco Cottrino, the first rector of the new house.

From then on, Fr Rinaldi's visits to the Becchi were repeated every year at a steady pace, a true expression of his great affection for the good Father Don Bosco, and of his keen interest in purchasing and appropriately arranging the memorable places of the Saint's childhood.

From the handful of news items from the Salesian house at the Becchi it is easy to deduce the care and love

with which Fr Rinaldi promoted and personally followed the work needed to honour Don Bosco and appropriately serve pilgrims.

So, in 1918, after coming to the Becchi for the blessing of the church, Fr Rinaldi returned there on 6 October together with Cardinal Cagliero for the Feast of the Holy Rosary, and took the opportunity to start negotiations for the purchase of the Cavallo House behind Don Bosco's.

Care for the work on the cottage

In 1919 Fr Rinaldi made two visits to the Becchi: one on 2 June and the other on 28 September, both in view of the restoration work to be carried out in the historic area known as Colle (Don Bosco).

There were three visits in 1920: one on 16-17 June, to negotiate the purchase of the Graglia house and the Bechis brothers' field; one on 11 September to visit the works and the Graglia property; and, finally, one on the 13th of the same month to attend the drafting of the deed for the purchase of the Graglia house.

There were two visits in 1921: on 16 March, with Archbishop Valotti, for the project of a road leading to the Sanctuary and a Column and Pilgrims Area on piazzetta; on 12-13 September, with Archbishop Valotti and Cavaliere Melle, for the same purpose.

In 1922 Fr Rinaldi was again at the Becchi twice: on 4 May with Cardinal Cagliero, Fr Ricaldone, Fr Conelli and all the Members of the General Chapter (including Salesian Bishops), to pray at the Casetta after his election as Rector Major; and on 28 September with his closest collaborators.

He then arrived there on 10 June 1923 to celebrate the Feast of Mary Help of Christians. He presided at Vespers in the sanctuary, gave the sermon and imparted the Eucharistic blessing. In the Academy that followed, he presented the Cross "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" to Mr Giovanni Febbraro, our benefactor. He then returned there in October with Cardinal Cagliero for the feast of the Holy Rosary, celebrating Mass at

7 a.m. and carrying the Blessed Sacrament in the Eucharistic procession, which was followed by the blessing imparted by the Cardinal.

On 7 September 1924 Fr Rinaldi led the Pilgrimage of Fathers and Past Pupils from Turin Houses to the Becchi. He celebrated Holy Mass, gave the sermon and then, after breakfast, took part in the concert organised for the occasion. He returned again on 22 October of the same year, together with Fr Ricaldone, and Valotti and Barberis, to resolve the thorny issue of the road to the shrine, which involved difficulties on the part of the owners of the adjacent land.

Fr Rinaldi was at the Becchi on three occasions in 1925: on 21 May for the unveiling of the plaque to Don Bosco, and then on 23 July and 19 September, accompanied this time again by Cardinal Cagliero.

On 13 May 1926 Fr Rinaldi led a pilgrimage of about 200 members of the Don Bosco Teachers' Union, celebrating Mass and presiding at their meeting. On 24 July of the same year he returned, together with the whole Superior Chapter, to lead the pilgrimage of Rectors of Houses in Europe; and again on 28 August with the Superior Chapter and the Rectors of Houses in Italy.

Renovation of the historical centre

Three other visits by Fr Rinaldi to the Becchi date back to 1927: 30 May with Fr Giraudi and Valotti to determine building works (construction of the portico, etc.); 30 August with Fr Tirone and the Directors of the festive Oratories; and 10 October with Fr Tirone and the young missionaries from Ivrea. On the latter occasion Fr Rinaldi urged the Rector at the time, Fr Fracchia, to place plants behind the Graglia house and in the meadow of the Dream,

Fr Rinaldi was at the Becchi in 1928 on four occasions: On 12 April with Fr Ricaldone for an examination of the work carried out and work in progress. On 9-10 June with Fr Candela and Fr V. Bettazzi for the Feast of Mary Help of

Christians and for the inauguration of the *Pilone del Sogno*. On this occasion there was a sung Holy Mass and, after Vespers and the afternoon Eucharistic Blessing, blessed the *Pilone del Sogno* and the new Portico, addressing everyone from the balcony. In the evening, he attended the light show. On 30 September, he came with Fr Ricaldone and Fr Giraudi to visit the Gaj locality. On 8 October he returned at the head of the annual pilgrimage of young missionaries from Ivrea. It was in that year that Fr Rinaldi expressed his desire to purchase the Damevino villa to use as accommodation for pilgrims or, better still, to assign it to the Sons of Mary aspiring missionaries.

As many as six visits were made to the Becchi in 1929: – The first, on 10 March, with Fr Ricaldone, was to visit the Damevino villa and the Graglia house (the first of which was later purchased that same year). As Don Bosco's beatification was imminent, Fr Rinaldi also wanted a little altar to the Blessed to be set up in the kitchen of the *Casetta* (which was carried out later, in 1931). – The second, on 2 May, was also a study visit, with Fr Giraudi, Mr Valotti and the painter Prof. Guglielmino. – The third, on 26 May, was to attend the feast of Mary Help of Christians. The fourth, on 16 June, was with the Superior Chapter and all the members of the General Chapter for the Feast of Don Bosco. The fifth, on 27 July, was a short visit with Fr Tirone and Bishop Massa. The sixth, finally, was with Bishop Mederlet and the young missionaries of the Ivrea House, for whom Fr Rinaldi made no secret of his predilections.

In 1930 Fr Rinaldi came twice more to the Becchi: on 26 June for a brief reconnaissance visit of the various localities; and on 6 August, with Fr Ricaldone, Mr Valotti and Cav. Sartorio, to search for water (which Fr Ricaldone then found in two places, 14 and 11 metres away from the spring called Bacolla).

In 1931, which was the year of his death on 5 December, Fr Rinaldi came to the Becchi at least three times: on 19 July, in the afternoon. On that occasion he recommended the commemoration of Don Bosco on the 16th of each month or

the following Sunday. On 16 September, when he approved and praised the recreation camp prepared for the young people of the Community. On 25 September, and it was the last, when, with Fr Giraudi and Mr Valotti, he examined the plan for the trees to be planted in the area (it will be carried out later, in 1990, when the project for the planting of 3000 trees on the various slopes of Colle dei Becchi began, precisely in the year of his beatification.).

Not counting any previous visits, there are therefore 41 visits made by Fr Rinaldi to the Becchi between 1918 and 1931.

Life according to the Spirit in Mamma Margaret (2/2)

[*\(continuation from previous article\)*](#)

4. Exodus to her son's priesthood

From the dream at the age of nine, when she was the only one to understand her son's vocation, "who knows, maybe he will become a priest", she was the most convinced and tenacious supporter of her son's vocation, facing humiliation and sacrifice for this: "His mother then, who wanted to support him at the cost of any sacrifice, did not hesitate to make the resolution to have him attend the public schools in Chieri the following year. She then took care to find truly Christian people with whom she could place him to board." Margaret discreetly followed John's vocational and formation path, amidst serious financial straits.

She always left him free in his choices and in no way conditioned his path towards the priesthood, but when the parish priest tried to convince Margaret why John should not

choose the religious life, so as to guarantee her financial security and help, she immediately reached out to her son and said words that would remain engraved in Don Bosco's heart for the rest of his life: "I only want you to examine carefully the step you want to take, and then follow your vocation without looking to anyone. The parish priest wanted me to dissuade you from this decision, in view of the need I might have in the future for your help. But I say: "have nothing to do with these things, because God is first of all. Do not bother yourself about me. I want nothing from you; I expect nothing from you. Think well: I was born in poverty, I have lived in poverty, I want to die in poverty. Indeed I protest to you. If you resolve to become a secular priest and by misfortune become rich, I will not come to pay you a single visit, indeed I will never set foot in your house again. Remember this well!"

But along this vocational journey, she did not fail to be strong for her son, reminding him, on the occasion of his departure for the seminary in Chieri, of the demands of the priestly life: "John, you have donned the priestly habit; I feel all the consolation that a mother can feel at her son's good fortune. But remember that it is not the habit that honours your state, it is the practice of virtue. If you ever come to doubt your vocation, ah for pity's sake, do not dishonour this habit! Lay it down quickly. I would rather have a poor peasant, than a priest son who has neglected his duties." Don Bosco would never forget these words, an expression both of his awareness of his priestly dignity and the fruit of a profoundly upright and holy life.

On the day of Don Bosco's First Mass Margaret once again made herself present with words inspired by the Spirit, both expressing the authentic value of the priestly ministry and her son's total surrender to his mission without any pretence or request: "You are a priest; you say Mass; from here on you are closer to Jesus Christ. Remember, however, that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You will not realise it at once, but little by little you will see that

your mother has told you the truth. I am sure that you will pray for me every day, whether I am still alive or already dead; that is enough for me. From now on think only of the health of souls and do not take any thought for me." She renounce her son completely to offer him in the service of the Church. But losing him she found him again, sharing his educational and pastoral mission among the young.

5. Exodus from the Becchi to Valdocco

Don Bosco had appreciated and recognised the great values he had drawn from his family: peasant wisdom, healthy shrewdness, a sense of work, the essential nature of things, industriousness in keeping busy, optimism to the full, endurance in times of misfortune, the ability to bounce back after beatings, cheerfulness always and in any case, the spirit of solidarity, living faith, the truth and intensity of affection, a taste for welcome and hospitality; all goods that he had found at home and that had built him up that way. He was so marked by this experience that, when he thought of an educational institution for his boys, he wanted no other name for it than "home" and defined the spirit that would be impressed on it as "family spirit". And to give the right imprint, he asked Mamma Margaret, by now old and tired, to leave the tranquillity of her little house in the hills, to go down to the city and take care of those boys picked up from the streets, those who would give her no small amount of worry and sorrow. But she went to help Don Bosco and to be a mother to those who no longer had family and affections. While John Bosco learned the art of loving concretely, generously, unselfishly and towards everyone at Mamma Margaret's school his mother would share her son's choice to devote his life to the salvation of the young to the very end. This communion of spirit and action between son and mother marked the beginning of the Salesian work, involving many people in this divine adventure. Having reached a peaceful situation, she accepted, despite being no longer young, to leave the quiet life and security of the Becchi, to go to Turin in a suburban area and

in a house stripped bare. It was a real departure in her life!

So Don Bosco, after thinking and rethinking how to get out of the difficulties, went to speak to his parish priest at Castelnuovo, telling him of his need and his fears.

"You have your mother!" The Parish Priest replied without a moment's hesitation: "have her come with you to Turin."

Don Bosco, who had foreseen this answer, wanted to make some reflections, but Don Cinzano replied:

"Take your mother with you. You will find no one better suited to the work than her. Rest assured; you will have an angel at your side!"

Don Bosco returned home convinced by the reasons put before him by the provost. However, two reasons still held him back. The first was the life of privations and changed habits to which his mother would naturally have to be subjected in that new position. The second came from the repugnance he felt at proposing to his mother a task that would have made her in some way dependent on him. For Don Bosco his mother was everything, and with his brother Joseph, he was accustomed to keep her every wish as unquestionable law. However, after thinking and praying, seeing that there was no other choice left, he concluded:

"My mother is a saint, so I can propose to her!"

So one day he took her aside and thus spoke to her:

"I have decided, mother, to return to Turin among my dear young people. From now on, as I will no longer be staying at the Refuge, I will need a servant; but the place where I will have to live in Valdocco, because of certain people who live near there, is very risky, and does not leave me calm. I therefore need to have at my side a safeguard to remove every reason for suspicion and gossip from malevolent people. You alone could remove all fear from me; would you not gladly come and stay with me?" At this unanticipated exodus, the pious woman remained somewhat thoughtful, and then answered:

"My dear son, you can imagine how much it costs my heart to leave this house, your brother and other loved ones; but if it seems to you that such a thing might please the Lord I am ready to follow you."

Don Bosco assured her, and thanking her, concluded:

"Let us arrange things then, and after the Feast of the Saints we will leave."

Margaret went to live with her son, not to lead a more comfortable and pleasant life, but to share with him the hardships and sufferings of hundreds of poor and abandoned boys; she went there, not attracted by greed for money, but by love of God and souls, because she knew that the part of the sacred ministry Don Bosco had taken on, far from giving him any resources or profit, obliged him to spend his own goods, and also to seek alms. She did not stop; on the contrary, admiring her son's courage and zeal, she felt even more encouraged to be his companion and imitator, until her death.

Margaret lived at the Oratory bringing the motherly warmth and wisdom of a profoundly Christian woman, heroic dedication to her son in times that were difficult for his health and physical safety, thus exercising an authentic spiritual and material motherhood towards her priest son. In fact, she settled in Valdocco not only to cooperate in the work begun by her son, but also to dispel any occasion for slander that might arise from the dubious premises nearby.

She left the quiet security of Joseph's home to venture with her son on a mission that was not easy and was risky. She spent her time in unreserved dedication to the youngsters "of whom she was a mother". She loved the boys of the oratory as her own children and worked for their welfare, education and spiritual life, giving the oratory that family atmosphere that would be a characteristic of Salesian houses from the beginning. "If there is the holiness of ecstasies and visions, there is also the holiness of pots to clean and socks to mend. Mamma Margaret was such a saint."

In her relations with the children she was

exemplary, distinguishing herself by her refined charity and her humility in serving, reserving the humblest of occupations for herself. Her intuition as a mother and spiritual woman resulted in recognising in Dominic Savio as an extraordinary work of grace.

Even at the Oratory, however, there was no lack of trials and when there was a moment of hesitation due to the harshness of the experience, caused by a very demanding life, the glance at the Crucifix pointed out by her son was enough to infuse her with new energy: "From that instant no word of lament escaped her lips. Indeed, from then on she seemed insensitive to those miseries."

Fr Rua summed up the testimony of Mamma Margaret well, after living for four years at the oratory: "A truly Christian woman, pious, generous-hearted and courageous, prudent, who devoted herself entirely to the good education of her children and her adoptive family."

6. Exodus to the Father's house

She was born poor. She lived poor. She died poor wearing the only dress she used; in her pocket were 12 lire destined to buy a new one, which she never bought.

Even at the hour of death, she turned to her beloved son and left him with words worthy of the wise woman: "Have great confidence in those who work with you in the vineyard of the Lord... Take heed that many seek their own good instead of the glory of God... Seek neither elegance nor splendour in works. Seek the glory of God; have poverty of deed as your basis. Many love poverty in others, but not in themselves. The most effective teaching is for us to be the first to do what we command others."

Margaret, who had consecrated John to the Blessed Virgin, had entrusted him at the beginning of his studies to her, recommending devotion and the propagation of love of Mary, now reassured him: "Our Lady will not fail to guide your affairs."

Her whole life was a total gift of self. On her

deathbed she could say: "I have done my whole share." She died at the age of 68 in the Valdocco Oratory on 25 November 1856. The Oratory boys accompanied her to the cemetery, mourning her as "Mamma".

Don Bosco, saddened, said to Pietro Enria: "We have lost our mother, but I am sure she will help us from Heaven. She was a saint!" And Enria himself added: "Don Bosco did not exaggerate in calling her a saint, because she sacrificed herself for us and was a true mother to us all."

In conclusion

Mamma Margaret was a woman rich in interior life and with a rock-solid faith, sensitive and docile to the voice of the Spirit, ready to grasp and realise God's will, attentive to the problems of her neighbour, available to provide for the needs of the poorest and especially the abandoned young. Don Bosco would always remember the teachings and what he had learned at his mother's school and this tradition would mark his educational system and spirituality. Don Bosco had experienced that the formation of his personality was vitally rooted in the extraordinary climate of dedication and goodness of his family; that is why he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities in his work. Margaret intertwined her life with that of her son and with the beginnings of the Salesian work: she was Don Bosco's first "Cooperator"; with active goodness she became the maternal element of the Preventive System. At the school of Don Bosco and Mamma Margaret this means caring for the formation of consciences, educating to the fortitude of the virtuous life in the struggle, without discounts and compromises, against sin, with the help of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, growing in personal, family and community docility to the inspirations and motions of the Holy Spirit to strengthen the reasons for good and to bear witness to the beauty of faith.

For the entire Salesian Family, this testimony is a further invitation to adopt a privileged attention to the

family in the pastoral care of young people, forming and involving parents in the educational and evangelising action of their children, valuing their contribution in processes of affective education and encouraging new forms of evangelisation and catechesis of and through families. Mamma Margaret today is an extraordinary model for families. Hers is a family holiness: as a woman, a wife, a mother, a widow, an educator. Her life contains a message of great relevance, especially in the rediscovery of the sanctity of marriage.

But another aspect must be emphasised: one of the fundamental reasons why Don Bosco wanted his mother beside him in Turin was to find in her a guardian for his own priesthood. “Take your mother with you”, the old parish priest had suggested to him. Don Bosco took Mamma Margaret into his life as priest and educator. As a child, an orphan, it was his mother who took him by the hand, and as a young priest it was he who took her by the hand to share a special mission. One cannot understand Don Bosco’s priestly holiness without the holiness of Mamma Margaret, a model not only of family holiness, but also of spiritual motherhood for priests.

Saint Francis, promoter of culture

As the pastor of a diocese the vast majority of which was made up of illiterate villagers and mountain dwellers, heirs to an ancestral and practical culture, Francis de Sales was also the promoter of a learned culture among the intellectual elite. To convey his message, he understood that he had to get to know his audience and take account of their needs and tastes. When he spoke to people, and especially when he wrote for educated people, his method was the one he set out in the Preface to

his 'Treatise on the Love of God': 'Of course, I took into consideration the condition of the minds of this century, and I had to: it is very important to consider the age in which one writes'.

Francis de Sales and popular culture

Born into a noble family with strong ties to the land, Francis de Sales was never a stranger to popular culture. The environment in which he grew up already brought him into close contact with the common people, to the extent that he himself would willingly place himself among the 'big mountain people' when they got up in the morning. During his pastoral visits, he used the patois, colloquially familiar with 'the coarse language of the country to make himself better heard'. In any case, it is certain that direct contact with the population as a whole gave his pastoral experience a concrete and warm character.

As we know, popular culture is much better expressed in narrative form than in writing. Need we remind you that while a certain percentage of the population could read, most could not write? Nevertheless, books from established booksellers and hawkers were appearing, not only in towns but also in villages. This production of inexpensive booklets must have been very varied, with the majority undoubtedly coming from popular literature that conveyed a still medieval sensibility: lives of saints, romances of chivalry, marvellous tales, stories of brigands or almanacs with their weather forecasts and practical advice.

But popular culture was also conveyed through everyday encounters and festivals, when people went out to eat and drink together in taverns and cabarets, particularly 'on weddings, christenings, funerals and confraternities', and at fairs and markets. Francis de Sales may well have done society a favour by not systematically shunning all forms of conviviality and public revelry, imposing restrictions only on ecclesiastics who were obliged to keep to themselves.

Wisdom and know-how

A sympathetic observer of nature and people, François de Sales learned a great deal through his contact with them. It was the farmers and those who ploughed the land who told him that when it snows in winter, the harvest will be better the following year. As for the shepherds and herdsmen in the mountains, their care for their flocks is an example of 'pastoral' zeal. In the world of trades, we often discover admirable know-how:

'Ploughmen do not sow fields until they have cleared them and removed the thorns; masons do not use stones until they have cut them; locksmiths do not use iron until they have beaten it; goldsmiths do not use gold until it has been purified in the crucible.'

Humour is not absent from some of the stories he tells. Since ancient times, barbers have been known as great talkers; when one of them asked a king: 'How would you like me to do your beard?' the king replied: 'Without saying a word.' Carpenters work small miracles: with a twisted piece of wood they can create 'some beautiful masterpiece'. Glassmakers, too, are astonishing, creating marvels with the breath of their mouths.

As for the art of typography, he understood its importance, especially for religious purposes. In a letter to the nuncio in Turin in May 1598, he lamented: *'There should be a printer in Annecy. Heretics are publishing very pernicious books all the time, while many Catholic works remain in the hands of their authors because they cannot be sent safely to Lyon and they have no printer at their disposal'*.

Art and artists

In the arts, the triumph of the Renaissance shone through in works inspired by antiquity. Francis de Sales was able to contemplate them during his visits to Italy and France. In Rome, during his trip in 1599, he admired the great dome of St Peter's, barely finished a few years earlier, and noted that Christian Rome had nothing to envy of pagan Rome:

Tell me, where is the memory of Nero? Everything said about him now is bad. Oh, what is the memory of the glorious apostle Saint Peter, a poor fisherman, barefoot and simple! Great is the palace, the basilica, the monument of Saint Peter; that of Nero is nothing.

At the time, classical sculpture was the object of the greatest admiration, so much so, he said, that even 'the parts of ancient statues are kept as a reminder of antiquity'. He himself mentions several sculptors of antiquity, starting with Phidias: he, who 'never represented anything so perfectly as the divinities', 'made a statue of Minerva, all of ivory, twenty-six cubits high in Athens', and on his shield 'he engraved his own face with such art that not a single strand of his image could be removed,' says Aristotle, 'without the whole statue collapsing'. Here is Polyclitus, 'my Polyclitus, who is so dear to me', he said, whose 'master hand' worked on the bronze. Francis de Sales also evoked the Colossus of Rhodes, symbol of divine providence, in whom there is 'neither change nor a shadow of vicissitude'.

Now we come to the famous painters mentioned by Pliny and Plutarch: Aurelius, a man who 'painted all the faces of the images he made in the air and likeness of the women he loved'; the 'unique Apelles', Alexander the Great's favourite painter; Timanthe, who veiled Agamemnon's head because he despaired of being able to convey the consternation on his face at the death of his daughter Iphigenia; Protogenes, who 'made an excellent masterpiece of an admirable satyr who enjoyed playing the flageolet'.

He was especially attracted to religious painting, which was strongly recommended by his former spiritual director Possevin, who sent him his 'charming work' *De poesi et pictura*. He considered himself a painter, because, as he wrote in the preface to *his Introduction to the Devout Life*, 'God wants me to paint not only the common virtues, but also his very dear and beloved devotion on people's hearts'.

Francis de Sales also loved singing and music. We know that he had hymns sung during catechism classes, but we

would like to know what was sung in his cathedral. Once, in a letter, the day after a ceremony where a text from the *Song of Songs* had been sung, he exclaimed: 'Ah! how well it was sung yesterday in our church and in my heart! He knew and appreciated the differences between instruments: 'Among instruments, drums and trumpets make more noise, but lutes and spinet instruments make more melody; the sound of one is louder, and the other more suave and spiritual'.

The Florimontane Academy (1606)

"The city of Annecy," wrote his nephew Charles-Auguste de Sales pompously, "was similar to Athens under such a great prelate as Francis de Sales, and under such a great president as Antoine Favre, and was inhabited by a large number of doctors, either theologians or lawyers, or people well versed in humanities."

People have wondered how Francis de Sales came up with the idea of founding an academy with his friend Antoine Favre at the end of 1606, which they called 'Florimontane', 'because the Muses flourished in the mountains of Savoy'. Coming into existence in Italy at the end of the 14th century, the academies had spread far and wide across the Alps. It should not be forgotten that the Calvinists in Geneva had their own, and this must have played a major role in the creation of a Catholic rival.

The Florimontane Academy had its own emblem: an orange tree, admired by Francis de Sales because it was full of flowers and fruit almost all year round (*flores fructusque perennes*). In fact, explained Francis, 'in Italy, on the coast of Genova, and even in these countries of France, as in Provence, along the shores you can see it bearing its leaves, flowers and fruit in every season'.

The Academy was made up of recognised scholars and masters, but public lectures were planned to give it the air of a small people's university. Indeed, the general assemblies could be attended by 'all brave masters of the honest arts, such as painters, sculptors, carpenters, architects and the

like'.

We can guess that the aim of the two founders was to bring together the intellectual elite of Savoy and to place literature, the sciences and the arts at the service of faith and piety in accordance with the ideal of Christian humanism. The meetings were held in Antoine Favre's home, where his children helped to welcome the guests. So there was something of a family atmosphere. In fact, as one article put it, 'all the academicians will maintain a mutual and fraternal love'.

The Academy got off to a brilliant and promising start. In 1610, no more than three years after its beginnings, Antoine Favre was appointed President of the Senate of Savoy and left for Chambéry. The bishop, for his part, was unable to maintain the Académie on his own, and it declined and disappeared. But while its existence was short-lived, its influence was enduring. The cultural project that had given rise to it was taken up by the Barnabites, who arrived at Annecy College in 1614. It is sometimes said that the Florimontane Academy inspired Cardinal Richelieu to create the Académie Française.

A Galileo affair in Annecy?

The Collège d'Annecy was famous for Father Baranzano. This Barnabite from Piedmont, who embraced the new scientific theories, was a brilliant teacher who aroused the admiration and even the enthusiasm of his pupils. In 1617, without the permission of his superiors, his disciples published a summary of his lectures, in which he developed Copernicus' planetary system and the ideas of Galileo. The book in question immediately caused such a stir that the author was recalled to Milan by his superiors.

In September 1617, Bishop de Sales wrote a letter to his superior general asking him to return to Annecy, where he was 'much appreciated' and 'very useful'. The bishop's wish was granted and Father Baranzano returned to Annecy at the end of October that year. In 1618, the religious published a pamphlet to make amends for his mistake, but there is no

evidence that he renounced his ideas.

In 1619, he published *Novae opiniones physicae* in Lyon, the first volume of the second part of an ambitious *Summa philosophica anneciensis*. The bishop gave his official approval to 'this erudite work by an erudite man', and authorised its printing. It should be noted that Baranzano acquired an international reputation and came into contact with Francis Bacon, the English promoter of the reform of the sciences, with the German astronomer Johannes Kepler, and with Galileo himself. It was a time when Galileo was being recklessly prosecuted in order to safeguard the authority of the Bible, which had been compromised by the new theories on the rotation of the earth around the sun.

While Cardinal Bellarmine was worried about the dangers of the new theories, for François de Sales there could be no contradiction between reason and faith. And was not the sun the symbol of celestial love around which everything moves, and the centre of devotion?

Religious poetry

The Renaissance had rehabilitated ancient, pagan poetry, which François had studied at school, and from which the Jesuits had expunged the most disturbing passages for young sensibilities. As a young man, he had been seduced by the biblical poetry of the *Song of Songs* and the *Psalms*, which would accompany him throughout his life. He himself wrote a number of religious poems that have come down to us.

The fact remains that it was not a few rather clumsy verses that ensured his literary reputation, which, during his lifetime, was sufficiently established for writers and poets to seek contact with him. Such was the case with the Provençal magistrate and poet Jean de la Ceppède, one of the great exponents of Baroque religious poetry, who sent him a copy of his *Théorèmes sur le sacré mystère de la Rédemption*. What delighted him most in this poet's verses was that he had succeeded in 'transforming the pagan muses into Christians, to remove them from this old Parnassus and lodge them on the new

sacred Calvary'.

Francis de Sales knew and admired the power of poetry, 'for it is marvellous how much power discourse compressed into the laws of verse has to penetrate hearts and subdue memory'. In 1616, the Lyonnais poet René Gros de Saint-Joyre sent him his manuscript of *La mire de vie à l'amour parfait*, a poem in French verse divided into stanzas of eight lines, dedicated to the abbess of the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Pierre de Lyon.

By the Basque-born poet and humanist Jean de Sponde, he cites not the *Sonnets d'amour* or the *Stances sur la mort*, but the *Réponse au Traité des marques de l'Église* by Théodore de Bèze and the *Déclaration* sur les motifs de la conversion by this former Calvinist, whom he considered a 'great mind'. He was also in contact with the Burgundian poet and memoirist Jean de Lacurne, who was considered 'the delight of Apollo and all the Muses', and to whom he declared: 'I make much of your writings'.

Learned culture and theology

He also asked about the theological books that were appearing. After having 'seen with extreme pleasure' a draft of the *Somme de théologie*, he took the liberty of giving the author some advice. His opinion was that it was necessary to cut out all the 'methodical', 'superfluous' and 'importunate' words, to prevent the *Summa* from becoming too 'fat', to ensure that it was 'nothing but juice and marrow', by making it 'more palatable and pleasant', and not to be afraid of using the 'affective style'.

Later, writing to one of his priests who was engaged in literary and scientific work, he made more or less the same recommendations. It was necessary, according to him, to take into account 'the mood of the world', 'to write to the taste of this poor world', and 'to treat pious and holy things in a pleasant, historical way and which charmed a little the curiosity of the spirits of the time'. To write 'to the taste of this poor world' meant agreeing to use certain means

capable of arousing the interest of the reader of the time:
Sir, we are fishermen, and fishers of men. We must therefore use not only care, work and vigilance in this fishing, but also bait, tricks, lures, yes even, if I dare say, holy tricks. The world is becoming so delicate that from now on we will only dare to touch it with musk gloves, or dress its wounds with civet plasters; but what does it matter, as long as men are healed and saved at last? Our queen, charity, does everything for her children.

Another fault, especially among theologians, was the lack of clarity, to the point where one felt like writing on the first page of certain works: *Fiat lux*. His friend, Bishop Camus, recalls this comment by his hero about the work of an illegible author: 'This man has given several books to the public, but I don't realise that he has brought any of them to light. It's a great pity to be so learned and yet not be able to express oneself. It's like those women who are pregnant with several children and can't give birth to any of them. He added with conviction: 'Above all, long live clarity; without it nothing can be pleasant'. According to Camus, the works of Francis de Sales certainly contain difficulties, but obscurity is a flaw that was never found on his pen.

A writer full of projects

Towards the end of his life, his pen was still busy with numerous projects. Michel Favre has stated that he planned to write a treatise *De l'amour du prochain*, as well as a *Histoire théandrique*, in which 'he wanted to describe the life of Our Lord humanised and suggest ways of easily practising the evangelical maxims'. According to his confidant and future biographer, Dom Jean de Saint-François, the *Histoire théandrique* was to consist of four books: a 'clear and vulgar version of the four evangelists united and allied together in a manner of concordance', a demonstration 'of the principal points of the creed of the Catholic Church', an 'instruction in good morals and the practice of Christian virtues', and finally a history of the Acts of the Apostles to

show 'what the face of the primitive Church was at its birth, and the order and conduct that the Holy Spirit and the apostles established in it at its first beginning'.

He also had in mind a *Book of the four loves*, in which he wanted to teach how we should love God, love ourselves, love our friends and love our enemies; a book of the *evangelical maxims*, as well as a *familiar explanation of the mysteries of our holy faith*.

None of these works will ever see the light of day. I shall die like pregnant women,' he wrote, 'without producing what I have conceived. His 'philosophy' was that 'you have to take on much more than you know what to do with, and as if you were going to live a long time, but don't worry about doing more than if you were going to die tomorrow'.