 Reading time: 5 min.

Between Don Bosco's Oratory and Saint Francis de Sales, there was a bond that progressively strengthened. The choice of the saint as patron originated within the circle of the Marchioness of Barolo's works and was shared with the chaplains of the Refuge, in a context where Salesian spirituality was already familiar to Don Bosco. Pietro Stella speaks of affinity and spiritual congeniality rather than a simple chance encounter. For Don Bosco, Francis de Sales became a model of a pastor, educator, and apostle of charity. Numerous official documents attest to the permanent adoption of the title, "Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales", the celebration of his feast day, requests to ecclesiastical and civil authorities, and petitions to Pius IX, which present the Oratory as a congregation dedicated to the religious education of youth.

Because he gave himself a model and a teacher.

The connection of the catechism work with Saint Francis de Sales was certainly an initiative agreed upon between Don Bosco and the two chaplains of the Refuge, the theologian Borel and Fr. Pacchiotti. This is not surprising. Saint Francis de Sales had been a presence for Don Bosco both in the seminary and at the Convitto. Furthermore, the work of the Marchioness of Barolo was particularly linked to the figure and spirituality of the Savoyard bishop. In the *Constitutions and Rules of the Institute of the Sisters of St Anne*, *regarding Meditation,* it was established: "The sisters will follow the method of St Francis de Sales prescribed for meditation, in the second part of his *Introduction to the Devout Life*." According to the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Don Bosco knew that "the Marchioness of Barolo had in mind to found a Congregation of priests under this title, and with this intention had commissioned the painting of this Saint."

At the conclusion of his essay on Don Bosco and *St Francis de Sales*, Pietro Stella poses the question: *"A chance encounter or spiritual identity?"* And he answers: "From what we have said, it is clear that in the early 19th century, an encounter with Charles Borromeo and Francis de Sales was inevitable for every seminarian, and therefore also for Don Bosco. The move to Turin to the ecclesiastical Convitto and

then into the sphere of the Marchioness of Barolo's works helped to mature in him a sort of predilection and the transition from a Francis de Sales as a model for pastors to a Francis de Sales as a patron and model for educators. Spiritual identity? I would say rather: affinity, congeniality, and devotion to the Saint as an intercessor within the context of Tridentine religiosity. All this does not exclude the fact that there was a virtual opening towards a more specific spirituality, organised and lived according to the teachings of the Saint as a model and teacher." In this light, the other two reasons given by Don Bosco to explain the name given to the Oratory also become plausible, almost as a commission to those who worked there: to take the saint of gentleness as a protector and model, both as educators of the young and as apologists for Catholicism against Protestant proselytism. This was already evident from the profile of the apostle of the Chablais drawn in the *Ecclesiastical History*. In it, he recalled what had happened following the Council of Trent: "A lively apostolic zeal was awakened in a great number of evangelical workers, who with their labour and holiness healed the wounds inflicted on the Church by the heretics, and restored to it the fervour of the early times. Among them, St Pius V, St Teresa, St Charles Borromeo, St Philip Neri, St Francis de Sales, St Vincent de Paul deserve special mention." Of all of them, he emphasised the pastoral and apologetic aspects.

These were particularly reiterated, with a strong missionary accent, in the short biography dedicated to Saint Francis de Sales: "Driven by the voice of God who called him to great things, with only the weapons of gentleness and charity, he set off for the Chablais. At the sight of the ruined churches, the destroyed monasteries, the overturned crosses, he was all inflamed with zeal and began his apostolate. The heretics clamoured, insulted him, and attempted to assassinate him. He, with his patience, with his preaching, with his writings, and with outstanding miracles, quelled every tumult, won over the assassins, disarmed all of hell, and the Catholic faith triumphed in such a way that in a short time in the Chablais alone he brought back to the bosom of the true Church more than seventy-two thousand heretics."

After the blessing of the chapel at the Refuge dedicated to the Savoyard Saint, there are quite a few documents that sanction the Salesian name of the Oratory for the future. It soon appears in the request, addressed to the municipal authorities, to use a larger venue for "a society of boys, who gather every Sunday and feast day in an Oratory under the protection of St Francis de Sales." The feast of Saint Francis de Sales was celebrated, certainly from 1846, as Borel, in the *Memorial of the Oratory*, under the date of 1st February, recorded among the expenses: "Various

items to be given as gifts on the feast day of St Francis." Other collective petitions followed, generally in Borel's handwriting, addressed to the archbishop or others from the "priests assigned to the instruction of the young people of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales recently opened in Valdocco outside this capital." On 11th November 1846, they asked the archbishop to be able to establish there "the holy practice of the Way of the Cross and in another subsequent to the move to Valdocco, they requested to be able to convert the previous oratory to secular use for the benefit of the little hospital of St. Philomena"; towards the end of June, they had approached the mayors of Turin in order to obtain disused furnishings to equip a Sunday school for many young people who wished to "learn to read and write." However, a letter addressed to the archbishop on a date prior to 18th December 1847, was signed only by "Fr. Gio. Bosco", in which "Fr. Bosco Gio., and Mr. T. Borel, responsible for the spiritual direction of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, having opened a new Oratory between Viale de' Platani and R. Valentino 'Porta Nuova', beseech Monsignor Fransoni "to delegate the Parish Priest of Madonna degli Angeli for the blessing and to permit the celebration of Holy Mass, and to give the blessing with the Blessed Sacrament as he had already granted for the Oratory of St. Francis by his decree dated 6th December 1844."

Of particular importance was the presentation that Don Bosco made of himself and the Oratory at the beginning of a petition addressed to Pius IX on a date prior to 14th December 1848, to ask for the faculty to distribute Holy Communion at the midnight Mass of Christmas. "Fr. Giovanni Bosco, Director of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales in Turin, humbly explains to Your Holiness that this Oratory is established in that city with the permission of the Ecclesiastical and Civil Authorities, and is usually frequented by a pious gathering of Youths, and no persons of the opposite sex attend."

The presentation of Saint Francis de Sales as the patron of the Oratory reached its peak in petitions addressed to Pius IX, all dated 28th August 1850, with the aim of obtaining indulgences, for the first two, and the faculty to bless indulgenced rosaries, crucifixes, and medals, for the third. The synonymous use of the terms congregation and oratory appeared in them. Congregation could indicate either those who gathered at the individual oratories, or the group of ecclesiastics and lay people who were committed to promoting the various activities there, or, more appropriately, the whole of both groups.

"The Torinese Priest Giovanni Bosco," it was written in one of the petitions,

“respectfully explains to Your Holiness that a Congregation has been legitimately established in that city under the title and protection of St. Francis de Sales, of which he is the Director and which has no other purpose than that of instructing abandoned youth in religion and piety.” Various indulgences were requested for the “members” and finally a partial Indulgence of 300 days to be gained by all those who, even if they are not members, take part in the procession that is usually held in honour of the said saint on the first Sunday of each month of the year.”

Pietro BRAIDO, Don Bosco, Priest of the Young in the Century of Liberty, v.1, p. 191