The Education of Conscience with St. Francis de Sales

It was most likely the advent of the Protestant Reformation that brought the issue of conscience—and more precisely, "freedom of conscience"—to the forefront. In a 1597 letter to Clement VIII, the Provost of Sales lamented the "tyranny" that the "state of Geneva" imposed "on the consciences of Catholics." He asked the Holy See to intervene with the King of France to ensure that the Genevans would be granted "what they call freedom of conscience." Opposed to military solutions for the Protestant crisis, he glimpsed in libertas conscientiae a possible way out of violent confrontation, provided reciprocity was respected. Claimed by Geneva for the Reformation and by Francis de Sales for Catholicism, freedom of conscience was about to become a pillar of modern thought.

The Dignity of the Human Person

The dignity of the individual lies in conscience, and conscience is first and foremost synonymous with sincerity, honesty, frankness, and conviction. The Provost of Sales acknowledged, for example, "to ease his conscience," that the project of the Controversies had been somewhat imposed on him by others. When presenting his reasons in favour of Catholic doctrine and practice, he took care to specify that he did so "in conscience." "Tell me in conscience," he asked his opponents. A "good conscience" ensures one avoids certain acts that contradict oneself.

However, individual subjective conscience cannot always be taken as a guarantee of objective truth. One is not always obliged to believe what someone says in conscience. "Show me clearly," the Provost said to the lords of Thonon, "that you are not lying at all, that you are not deceiving me when you say that in conscience you had this or that inspiration." Conscience can fall victim to illusion, whether voluntarily or

involuntarily. “Hardened misers not only do not confess their greed but do not even think in conscience that they are greedy.”

The formation of the conscience is an essential task because freedom of conscience carries the risk of “doing good and evil,” but “choosing evil is not using, but rather, abusing our freedom.” It is a difficult task because conscience sometimes appears as an adversary that “always fights against us and for us.” It “steadily resists our bad inclinations,” but does so “for our salvation.” When one sins, “inner remorse moves against our conscience with a drawn sword,” but only to “pierce it with holy fear.”

A means to exercise responsible freedom is the practice of the “examination of conscience.” Examining one’s conscience is like following the example of doves that look at each other “with clear and pure eyes,” “groom themselves carefully, and adorn themselves as best they can.” Philothea is invited to perform this examination every evening before bed, asking oneself, “how one behaved at various times of the day. To make it easier, one should reflect on where, with whom, and in what occupations one was engaged.”

Once a year, we must conduct a thorough examination of the “state of our soul” before God, our neighbour, and ourselves, not forgetting an “examination of our soul’s affections.” The examination—Francis de Sales tells the Visitandines—will lead you to “probe your conscience deeply.”

How to lighten the conscience when burdened by error or fault? Some do so poorly, judging and accusing others “of vices they themselves succumb to,” thinking this will “soften their conscience’s remorse.” This multiplies the risk of rash judgments. Conversely, “those who properly care for their conscience are not at all prone to rash judgments.” The case of parents, educators, and public officials deserves special consideration, for “a good part of their conscience consists in carefully watching over the conscience of others.”

Self-Respect

From the affirmation of each person's dignity and responsibility must arise self-respect. Socrates and all ancient pagan and Christian thought had already shown the way:

It is a saying of the philosophers, yet held valid by Christian doctors: "Know thyself"—that is, know the excellence of your soul so as not to debase or despise it.

Certain acts offend not only God but also human dignity and reason. Their consequences are deplorable:

The likeness and image of God we bear within us is stained and disfigured, the dignity of our spirit dishonoured, and we are made similar to irrational animals […], enslaving ourselves to our passions and overturning the order of reason.

There are ecstasies that elevate us above our natural state and others that debase us. "O men, how long will you be so senseless," writes the author of Theotimus, "as to trample your natural dignity, voluntarily descending and plunging yourselves into the condition of beasts?"

Self-respect helps avoid two opposite dangers: pride and contempt for one's gifts. In a century where honour was highly exalted, Francis de Sales had to denounce crimes, particularly duelling, which made his "hair stand on end," and even more, the senseless pride behind it. "I am scandalised," he wrote to the wife of a duelling husband; "truly, I cannot fathom how one could have such unbridled courage even over trifles." Fighting a duel is like "becoming each other's executioner."
Others, conversely, dare not acknowledge their gifts and thus sin against gratitude. Francis de Sales condemns "a certain false and foolish humility that prevents them from seeing the good in themselves." They are wrong, for "the goods God has placed in us must be acknowledged, valued, and sincerely honoured."
The first neighbour I must respect and love, the Bishop of Geneva seems to say, is myself. True self-love and due respect

demand that I strive for perfection and correct myself if needed, but gently, reasonably, and “following the path of compassion” rather than anger and fury.

There exists a self-love that is not only legitimate but beneficial and commanded, “Charity well-ordered begins with oneself,” says the proverb, reflecting Francis de Sales’ thought—provided one does not confuse self-love with self-centredness. Self-love is good, and Philothea is asked to examine how she loves herself:

Keep good order in loving yourself? For only disordered self-love can ruin us. Ordered love requires that we love the soul more than the body and seek virtue above all else.

Conversely, self-centredness is selfish, “narcissistic” love, fixated on itself, jealous of its beauty, and concerned only with self-interest. “Narcissus, say the profane, was a youth so scornful he would offer his love to none; finally, gazing at his reflection in a clear fountain, he was utterly captivated by his beauty.”

The “Respect Due to Persons”

If one respects oneself, one is better prepared to respect others. Being “the image and likeness of God” implies that “all human beings share the same dignity.” Francis de Sales, though living in a deeply unequal society marked by the ancient regime, promoted thought and practice marked by “respect due to persons.”

Start with children. St. Bernard’s mother—says the author of Philothea—loved her newborns “with respect as something sacred God had entrusted to her.” A grave rebuke from the Bishop of Geneva to pagans concerned their contempt for defenceless lives. Respect for a baby about to be born emerges in a letter written according to the Baroque rhetoric of the time to a pregnant woman. He encourages her by explaining to her that the child forming in her womb is not only “a living image of the Divine Majesty”, but also an image of its mother. He advises another woman:

Offer often to the eternal glory of your Creator the little creature whose formation He has wanted to take you as His cooperator.

Another aspect of respect for others concerns the theme of freedom. The discovery of new lands had as a disastrous consequence, the re-emergence of slavery, that recalled the practice of the ancient romans at the time of paganism. The sale of human beings degraded them to the level of animals.

One day, Marc Antony bought two youths from a merchant; back then, as still happens in some lands, children were sold—men procured and traded them like horses in our countries.

Respect for others is subtly threatened by gossip and slander. Francis de Sales insists heavily on "sins of the tongue." A chapter in Philothea which deals explicitly with this subject, is titled Honesty in Words and Respect Due to Persons states that ruining someone's reputation is "spiritual murder," robbing them of "civil life." When condemning vice, one should spare the person involved as much as possible.
Certain groups are easily scorned. Francis de Sales defends the dignity of common people, citing the Gospel. He comments that "St. Peter was rough, coarse, an old fisherman of low station; a trader of low condition. Saint John, on the contrary, was a gentleman, sweet, lovable, wise; saint Peter, instead, was ignorant." Well, it was St Peter who was chosen to guide others and to be the "universal superior".
He proclaims the dignity of the sick, saying that, "the souls who are on the cross are declared queens." Denouncing "cruelty towards the poor" and exalting the "dignity of the poor", he justifies and specifies the attitude to be taken towards them, explaining "how we must honour them and, therefore, visit them as representatives of our Lord." No one is useless; no one is insignificant. "There is no object in the world that cannot be useful for something; but you must know how to find its use and place."

The “one-different” Salesian”

The eternal human that has always tormented human society is reconciling individual dignity and freedom with that of the others. Francis de Sales offered an original solution by coining a term. In fact, assuming that the universe is made up of “all things created, visible and invisible” and that “their diversity is brought back into unity”, the Bishop of Geneva proposed to call it “one-diverse“, that is, “unique and diverse, unique with diversity and diverse with unity.”

For him, every being is unique. People are like Pliny’s pearls, “so unique in quality that no two are perfectly equal.” His two major works, Introduction to the Devout Life and Treatise on the Love of God—are addressed to individuals, Philothea and Theotimus. What variety and diversity among beings! “Without doubt, as we see that two men are never perfectly equal as to the gifts of nature, so they are never perfectly equal as to the supernatural gifts.” The variety also enchanted him from a purely aesthetic point of view, but he feared an indiscreet curiosity about its causes:

If someone asked why God made melons larger than strawberries, or lilies bigger than violets; why rosemary isn’t a rose or a carnation a marigold; why peacocks are prettier than bats, or figs sweet and lemons sour—we’d laugh and say: poor man, the world’s beauty requires variety, it is necessary that in things there are diverse and differentiated perfections and that the one is not the other. This is why some are small, others large; some harsh, others sweet; some more beautiful, others less. […] All have their value, their grace, their splendour, and all, seen in the totality of their varieties, constitute a wonderful spectacle of beauty.

Diversity does not hinder unity; on the contrary, it makes it richer and more beautiful. Each flower has its characteristics that distinguish it from all the others. “It is not exactly of the roses to be white, it seems to me, because those vermilions are more beautiful and have a better scent, which

however is proper to the lily.” Of course, Francis de Sales does not tolerate confusion and disorder, but he is equally an enemy of uniformity. The diversity of beings can lead to dispersion and rupture of communion, but if there is love, “bond of perfection”, nothing is lost, on the contrary, diversity is exalted by the union.

In Francis de Sales there is certainly a real culture of the individual, but this is never a closure to the group, the community or society. He spontaneously sees each person marked by their “state of life,” which marks the identity and belonging of each one. It will not be possible to establish an equal programme or project for all, simply because it will be applied and implemented in a different way “for the gentleman, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the widow, the maiden, the married.” It must also be adapted “to the strengths and duties of each individual. The bishop of Geneva sees society divided into vital spaces characterized by social belonging and group solidarity, as when he deals with “the company of soldiers, the workshop of craftsmen, the court of princes, the family of married people.”

Love personalizes and, therefore, individualizes. The affection that binds one person to another is unique, as demonstrated by Francis de Sales in his relationship with Chantal’s wife, “Every affection has a peculiarity that differentiates it from the others. What I feel for you possesses a certain particularity that comforts me infinitely, and, to say everything, is very fruitful for me.” The sun illuminates each and every one, “illuminating a corner of the earth, it does not illuminate it less than what it would do if it did not shine elsewhere, but only in that corner.”

The human being is in a state of becoming

A Christian humanist, Francis de Sales ultimately believed in the human person’s capacity for self-improvement. Erasmus had coined the phrase: Homines non nascuntur sed finguntur (Men are not born but made). While animals are predetermined beings driven by instinct, humans, in contrast, are in perpetual

evolution. Not only do they change, but they can also change themselves, for better or for worse.
What entirely preoccupied the author of Theotimus was perfecting himself and helping others to perfect themselves, not only in religious matters but in all things. From birth to the grave, man is in a state of apprenticeship. Let us imitate the crocodile, which "never stops growing as long as it lives." Indeed, "remaining in the same state for long is impossible. in this traffic, whoever does not advance falls behind; on this ladder, whoever does not climb, descends; in this battle, whoever does not conquer is conquered." He quotes St. Bernard, who said, "It is written especially for man that he will never be found in the same state: he must either advance or regress." Let us move forward:

Do you not know that you are on a journey and that the path is not made for sitting but for moving forward? He is so made for progress, that moving forward is called walking.

This also means that the human person is educable, capable of learning, correcting themselves, and improving themselves. And this holds true at all levels. Age sometimes has nothing to do with it. Look at these choirboys of the cathedral, who far surpass their bishop's abilities in this domain. "I admire these children," he said, "who can barely speak yet already sing their parts; they understand all musical signs and rules, while I, a grown man who might pass for a great figure, would not know how to manage." No one in this world is perfect:

There are people naturally frivolous, others rude, others still reluctant to listen to others' opinions, and others prone to indignation, others to anger, and others to love. In short, few are free people are free from one or another of these imperfections.

Should we despair of improving our temperament, correcting some of our natural inclinations? Not at all.

For though these traits may be innate and natural in each of us, if they can be corrected and regulated through disciplined effort, or even eradicated, then, I tell you, Philothea, it must be done. Bitter almonds have been made sweet by piercing them at the base to drain their juice; why should we not drain our own perverse inclinations to become better?

Hence, the optimistic yet demanding conclusion. “There is no good nature that cannot be corrupted by vicious habits, nor any nature so perverse that it cannot, first by God’s grace and then through diligent effort, be tamed and overcome.” If man is educable, we must never despair of anyone and guard ourselves well against prejudice in regard to people:

Do not say: That man is a drunkard, even if you have seen him drunk; ‘an adulterer,’ for having witnessed his sin; ‘incestuous,’ for catching him in that disgrace, because one action is not enough to define a thing. […] And even if a man were long steeped in vice, you’d risk falsehood by calling him vicious.

The human person has never finished tending their garden. This was the lesson the founder of the Visitation nuns instilled when urging them to “cultivate the soil and garden” of their hearts and minds, for no one is “so perfect as to need no effort to grow in perfection or preserve it.”

Educating the Faculties of Our Spirit with Saint Francis

de Sales

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

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

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

Reason, "Divine Torch"

In an Exercise of Sleep or Spiritual Rest,

composed in Padua when he was twenty-three years old, Francis proposed to meditate on an astonishing topic:

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

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

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

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

The flesh now uses the intellect, now the will, now the imagination, which, associating against reason, leave it free field, creating division and doing a bad service to reason. […] The flesh allures the will sometimes with

pleasures, sometimes with riches; now it urges the imagination to make claims; now it arouses in the intellect a great curiosity, all under the pretext of good.

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

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

The Intellect, “Eye of the Soul”

The intellect, a typically human and rational faculty, which allows us to know and understand, is often compared to sight. For example, we say: “I see,” to mean: “I understand.” For Francis de Sales, the intellect is “the eye of the soul”; hence his expression “the eye of your

intellect." The incredible activity of which it is capable makes it similar to "a worker, who, with hundreds of thousands of eyes and hands, like another Argus, performs more works than all the workers in the world, because there is nothing in the world that he is not able to represent."

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

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

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

Let us return to study, the intellectual activity that interests us more closely. "There is an old axiom of philosophers, according to which every man desires to know."

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

Cultivating One's Intelligence

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

It is a matter of "illuminating the intellect well," striving to "purge" it from the darkness of "ignorance." He denounces "the dullness and indolence of spirit, which does not want to know what is necessary" and insists on the value of study and learning: "Study ever more,

with diligence and humility," he wrote to a student. But it is not enough to "purge" the intellect of ignorance; it is also necessary to "embellish and adorn" it, to "wallpaper it with considerations." To know a thing perfectly, it is necessary to learn well, to dedicate time to "subjecting" the intellect, that is, to fixing it on one thing before moving on to another.

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

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

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

As in everything, so in the desire to know there can be excesses and distortions. Beware of the vanity of false wise men: some, in fact, "for the little science they have, want to be honoured and respected by all, as if everyone

should go to their school and have them as teachers: therefore, they are called pedants." Now, "science dishonours us when it swells us up and degenerates into pedantry." What ridiculousness to want to instruct Minerva, *Minervam docere*, the goddess of wisdom! "The plague of science is presumption, which swells spirits and makes them hydroponic, as are ordinarily the wise men of the world."

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

Memory and its "warehouses"

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

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

First of all, I will dedicate myself to refreshing my memory with all the good motions, desires, affections, purposes, projects, feelings, and sweetnesses that the divine

Majesty has inspired and made me experience in the past, considering its holy mysteries, the beauty of virtue, the nobility of its service, and an infinity of benefits that it has freely bestowed upon me; I will also put order in my memories about the obligations I have towards her for the fact that, by her holy grace, she has sometimes weakened my senses by sending me certain illnesses and infirmities, from which I have drawn great profit.

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

"We must have a just and reasonable spirit"

The capacities of the human spirit, in particular of the intellect and memory, are not destined only for glorious intellectual enterprises, but also and above all for the conduct of life. To seek to know man, to understand life, and to define the norms concerning behaviours conforming to reason, these should be the fundamental tasks of the human spirit and its education. The central part of *Philothea*, which deals with the "exercise of virtues," contains, towards the end, a chapter that summarizes in a certain way the teaching of Francis de Sales on virtues: "We must have a just and reasonable spirit."

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

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

But it is above all youth that runs the greatest risks, because if “self-love usually distances us from reason,” this perhaps happens even more in young people tempted by vanity and ambition. The reason of a young person risks being lost above all when he lets himself “be taken by infatuations.” Therefore, attention, writes the bishop to a

young man, “not to allow your affections to prevent judgment and reason in the choice of subjects to love; since, once it has started running, affection drags judgment, as it would drag a slave, to very deplorable choices, of which he might repent very soon.” He also explained to the Visitation nuns that “our thoughts are usually full of reasons, opinions, and considerations suggested by self-love, which causes great conflicts in the soul.”

Reason, source of the four cardinal virtues

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

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

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

The virtue of fortitude helps to “overcome the difficulties that are encountered in doing good and in rejecting evil.” It is very necessary, because the sensitive appetite is “truly a rebellious, seditious, turbulent subject.” When reason dominates the passions, anger gives way

to gentleness, a great ally of reason. Fortitude is often accompanied by magnanimity, “a virtue that pushes and inclines us to perform actions of great importance.”

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

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

The way to hell paved with feeble resolutions (1873)

San Giovanni Bosco recounts in a “good night” the result of a long plea to Mary Help of Christians: to understand the main cause of eternal damnation. The answer, received in repeated dreams, is shocking in its simplicity: the lack of a firm, concrete resolution at the end of Confession. Without a sincere decision to change one’s life, even the sacrament becomes ineffective and sins are repeated.

A solemn warning: Why do so many go to destruction? Because they do not make good resolutions when they go to confession.

At the “Good Night” on May 31, 1873, Don Bosco gave his pupils a serious warning, which. he said, was “the

result of his humble prayers” and came from the Lord:

Throughout the whole month of May-he said-particularly during the novena of Mary, Help of Christians, I constantly offered Masses and prayers to Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin imploring them to let me know what, most of alL drags souls into hell. I do not say now that the Lord did or did not enlighten me. I only say that almost every night I dreamed that this is due to the lack of firm resolves in confessions. I seemed to see boys leaving church after confession, their heads sprouting two horns.

What causes this? I asked myself. *Ah, this is due to feeble resolutions.* That’s why so many go frequently to confession but never mend their ways and keep confessing the same sins over and over again. There are some (I am only conjecturing. not going on anything heard in confession, because of the seal) who at the start of the school year were doing rather poorly in studies and are still doing no better: there are others who griped and are still griping. I thought it best to let you know this, because it is the result of my humble prayers and because it does come from the Lord.

Publicly he gave no other details, but undoubtedly he took advantage of this dream to encourage and admonish. What little he did say and the way he said it constituted a grave warning, such as should frequently be given to our boys. *(BM X, 48-49)*

Educating our emotions with Saint Francis de Sales

Modern psychology has demonstrated the importance and

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

"I am a poor man and nothing more"

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

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

At the death of his mother, he did not hide that the separation had made him shed tears. He certainly had the courage to close her eyes and mouth and give her a last kiss, but after that, he confided to Jane Frances de Chantal, "my heart swelled greatly, and I wept for this good mother more than I had ever done since the day I embraced the priesthood."

In fact, he did not systematically restrain from manifesting his feelings externally. He accepted them serenely given his humanistic approach. A precious testimony from Jane Frances de Chantal informs us that “our saint was not exempt from feelings and outbursts of passions, and did not want to be freed from them.”

It is commonly known that the passions of the soul influence the body, causing external reactions to their internal movements: “We externalize and manifest our passions and the movements that our souls have in common with animals through the eyes, with movements of the eyebrows, forehead and entire face.” Thus, it is not in our power not to feel fear in certain circumstances: “It is as if one were to say to a person who sees a lion or a bear coming towards them: Do not be afraid.” Now, “when feeling fear, one becomes pale, and when we are called to account for something that displeases us, our blood rushes to our faces and we become red, or feeling displeasure can also make tears well up in our eyes.” Children, “if they see a dog barking, they immediately start screaming and do not stop until they are near their mother.”

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

The twelve passions of the soul

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

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

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

If good be considered in itself according to its natural goodness, it excites ***love****, the first and principal passion; if good be regarded as absent, it provokes us to* ***desire****; if being desired we think we are able to obtain it, we enter into hope; if we think we are unable, we feel* ***despair****; but when we possess it as present, it moves us to* ***joy****.*

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

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

As can be noted, to the eleven passions of the soul proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, Francis de Sales adds

victory over evil, which “exalts the spirits” and provokes the joy of triumph.

Love, the first and main passion

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

It manifests itself in a thousand ways and its language is very diversified. In fact, “it is not expressed only in words, but also with the eyes, with gestures, and with actions. As far as the eyes are concerned, the tears that flow from them are proof of love.” There are also the “sighs of love.” But these manifestations of love are different. The most habitual and superficial is the emotion or passion, which puts sensitivity in motion almost involuntarily.

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

Desire and flight

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

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

Hope and despair

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

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

Joy and sadness

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

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

The young Visitation nuns, sometimes seized by uncontrollable laughter when a companion beat her chest or a reader made a mistake during the reading at the table, needed a little lesson on this point: "Fools laugh at every situation, because everything surprises them, not being able

to foresee anything; but the wise do not laugh so lightly, because they employ reflection more, which makes them foresee the things that are to happen." That said, it is not a defect to laugh at some imperfection, "provided one does not go too far."

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

In certain cases, it can lead to weeping: a father, when sending his son to court or to study, cannot refrain "from crying when saying goodbye to him"; and "a daughter, although she has married according to the wishes of her father and mother, moves them to tears when receiving their blessing." Alexander the Great wept when he learned that there were other lands that he would never be able to conquer: "Like a child who whines for an apple that is denied him, that Alexander, whom historians call the Great, more foolish than a child, begins to weep warm tears, because it seems impossible for him to conquer the other worlds."

Courage and fear

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

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

diocese:

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

Anger and the feeling of triumph

As for *anger* or *wrath*, we cannot prevent ourselves from being seized by it in certain circumstances: “If they tell me that someone has spoken ill of me, or that I am being treated with any other form of discourtesy, I immediately fly into a rage and there isn’t a vein in my body that isn’t twisting, because the blood is boiling.” Even in the Visitation monasteries, occasions for irritation and anger were not lacking, and the attacks of the “irascible appetite” were felt to be overwhelming. There is nothing strange in this: “To prevent the resentment of anger from awakening in us and the blood from rising to our heads will never be possible; we will be fortunate if we can reach this perfection a quarter of an hour before we die.” It can also happen “that anger upsets and turns my poor heart upside down, that my head smokes from all sides, that the blood boils like a pot on the fire.”

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

In search of balance

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

will."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

developing a healthy fear regarding the soul.

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

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

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

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donbosco.info: a Salesian search engine

We present the new donbosco.info platform, which is a Salesian search engine designed to make it easier to consult documents related to the charism of Don Bosco. Created to support the

Salesian Bulletin Online, it overcomes the limitations of traditional archiving systems, which are often unable to intercept all occurrences of words. This solution integrates dedicated hardware and specially developed software, also offering a reading function. The deliberately simple web interface allows you to navigate through thousands of documents in different languages, with the ability to filter results by folder, title, author, or year. Thanks to the OCR scanning of PDF documents, the system identifies the text even when it is not perfect, and adopts strategies to ignore punctuation and special characters. The contents, rich in historical and educational material, aim to spread the Salesian message in a widespread manner. With free uploading for documents, continuous enrichment of the platform is encouraged, improving the search.

As part of the work for the drafting of the Salesian Bulletin Online, it was necessary to create various support tools, including a dedicated search engine.

This search engine was conceived taking into account the limitations currently present in the various Salesian resources available online. Many sites offer archiving systems with search functionality, but often fail to locate all occurrences of words, due to technical limitations or restrictions introduced to avoid overloading the servers.

To overcome these difficulties, instead of building a simple archive of documents with a search function, we have created a real search engine, also equipped with a reading function. This is a complete solution, based on dedicated hardware and specially developed software.

During the design phase, we evaluated two options: software to be installed locally or a server-side application accessible via the web. Since the mission of the Salesian Bulletin Online is to spread the Salesian charism to the greatest number of people, it was decided to opt for the web solution, so as to

allow anyone to search for and consult Salesian documents.

The search engine is available at www.donbosco.info. The web interface is deliberately essential and "spartan" to ensure faster loading speeds. The "home page" lists the files and folders present, in order to facilitate consultation. The documents are not only in Italian, but also available in other languages, selectable via the icon at the top left.

Most of the uploaded files are in PDF format derived from scans with OCR (optical character recognition). Since OCR is not always perfect, sometimes not all the words searched for are detected. To overcome this, several strategies have been implemented: ignoring punctuation and accented or special characters, and allowing searches even in the presence of missing or incorrect characters. Further details can be found in the FAQ section, accessible from the footer.

Given the presence of thousands of documents, the search can return a very high number of results. For this reason, it is possible to narrow the scope of the search by folder, title, author, or year: the criteria are cumulative and help to find what you need more quickly. The results are listed based on a relevance score, which currently mainly takes into account the density of keywords within the text and their proximity.

Ideally, it would be preferable to have the documents in vector format instead of scanned, as the search would always be accurate and the files would be lighter, with consequent advantages in terms of speed.

If you have documents in vector format or of better quality than those already present in the search engine, you can upload them via the upload service available on www.donbosco.space. You can also add other documents not present in the search engine. To obtain access credentials (username and password), send a request via e-mail to bsol@sdb.org.

Educating the body and its 5 senses with Saint Francis de Sales

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

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

Salesian realism

Between the divinisation of the body and its contempt, Francis de Sales offers a realistic view of human nature. At the end of the first meditation on the theme of the creation of man, "the first being of the visible world," the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* puts on the lips of Philothea this statement that seems to summarise his thought: "I want to feel honoured for the being that he has given me." Certainly, the body is destined for death. With stark realism, the author describes the soul's farewell to the body, which it will leave "pale, livid, disfigured, horrid, and foul-smelling," but this does not constitute a reason to neglect and unjustly denigrate it while one is alive. Saint

Bernard was wrong when he announced to those who wanted to follow him “that they should abandon their bodies and go to him only in spirit.” Physical evils should not lead to hating the body: moral evil is far worse.

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

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

is internal.

The close connection between body and soul

First of all, Francis de Sales affirms that the body is “a part of our person.” With a hint of tenderness, a personified soul can also say: “This flesh is my dear half, it is my sister, it is my companion, born with me, nourished with me.”

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

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

In the meantime, we should be fair towards the body. In case of malaise or mistakes, it often happens that the soul accuses the body and mistreats it, as Balaam did with his donkey: “O poor soul! If your flesh could speak, it would say to you, as Balaam’s donkey: why do you beat me, miserable one? It is against you, my soul, that God arms His vengeance; you are the criminal.” When a person reforms their inner self, the conversion will also manifest externally: in all

attitudes, in the mouth, in the hands, and “even in the hair.” The practice of virtue makes a person beautiful internally and also externally. Conversely, an external change, a behaviour of the body can favour an inner change. An act of external devotion during meditation can awaken inner devotion. What is said here about spiritual life can easily be applied to education in general.

Love and dominance of the body

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

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

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

The love of the body is indeed recommended, but the body must remain subject to the spirit, as the servant to his master. To control appetite, I must “command my hands not to provide the mouth with food and drink, except in the right measure.” To govern sexuality, “one must remove or give to the reproductive faculty the subjects, objects, and foods that excite it, according to the dictates of reason.” To the young man who is about to “set sail in the vast sea,” the bishop recommends: “I also wish you a vigorous heart that prevents you from pampering your body with excessive delicacies in eating, sleeping, or other things. It is known, in fact, that a generous heart always feels a bit of contempt for bodily delicacies and delights.”

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

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

In any case, the bishop of Geneva took care of his body, as was his duty, and obeyed his doctor and the “nurses.” He also took care of the health of others, giving advice on appropriate measures. He would write, for example, to the

mother of a young student at the college of Annecy: “It is necessary to have Charles examined by doctors, so that his abdominal swelling does not worsen.”

Hygiene is at the service of health. Francis de Sales desired that both the heart and the body be clean. He recommended decorum, very different from statements like that of Saint Hilary, according to which “one should not seek cleanliness in our bodies, which are nothing but pestilential carcasses and only full of infection.” He was rather of the opinion of Saint Augustine and the ancient people who bathed “to keep their bodies clean from the dirt produced by heat and sweat, and also for health, which is certainly greatly aided by cleanliness.”

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

Educating our senses, especially the eyes and ears

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

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

the other, the recommendation to “set up sentinels for the eyes, the mouth, the ears, the hands, and the sense of smell.”

It is necessary to start with sight, because “among all the external parts of the human body, there is none, in terms of structure and activity, more noble than the eye.” The eye is made for light. This is demonstrated by the fact that the more beautiful, pleasant to the sight, and properly illuminated things are, the more the eye gazes at them with eagerness and liveliness. “From the eyes and words, one knows what the soul and spirit of a man are, for the eyes serve the soul as the dial serves the clock.” It is well known that among lovers, the eyes speak more than the tongue.

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

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

Besides, it must be known that “the heart and the ears converse with each other,” for it is through the ear that the heart “listens to the thoughts of others.” It is also through the ear that suspicious, insulting, lying, or malevolent words enter into the depths of the soul, from which one must be very careful. For souls are poisoned through the ear, just as the body is through the mouth. The honest woman

will cover her ears so as not to hear the voice of the enchanter who wants to cunningly seduce her. Remaining in the symbolic realm, Francis de Sales declares that the right ear is the organ through which we hear spiritual messages, good inspirations, and motions, while the left serves to hear worldly and vain discourses. To guard the heart, we must therefore protect the ears with great care.

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

The other senses

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

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

There are numerous olfactory images drawn from the Song of Solomon, an oriental poem where perfumes occupy a prominent place and where one of the biblical verses most

commented on by Francis de Sales is the heartfelt cry of the bride: “Draw me to you, we will walk and run together in the wake of your perfumes.” And how refined is this note: “The sweet fragrance of the rose is made more subtle by the proximity of the garlic planted near the rose bushes!”.

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

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

Finally, regarding touch, Francis de Sales speaks of it especially in a spiritual and mystical sense. Thus, he recommends touching Our Lord crucified: the head, the holy hands, the precious body, the heart. To the young man about to set sail into the vast sea of the world, he requires that he govern himself vigorously and to despise softness, bodily delights, and daintiness: “I would like you to sometimes treat your body harshly to make it experience some harshness and

toughness, despising delicacies and things pleasant to the senses; for it is necessary that sometimes reason exercises its superiority and the authority it has to regulate sensual appetites.”

The body and spiritual life

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

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

The “Good Night”

One evening, saddened by a certain general indiscipline noticed at the Valdocco Oratory among the

boarders, Don Bosco came, as usual, to say a few words to them after evening prayer. He stood for a moment in silence on the small desk at the corner of the porticoes where he used to give the youngsters the so-called "Good Night", which consisted of a short evening sermon. Glancing around, he said:

"I am not satisfied with you. That's all I can say tonight!"

Then, without allowing them to kiss his hand [a customary mark of respect to a priest] he would slowly walk away toward the stairs leading to his room without saying another word. Stifled sobs could be heard while tears ran down many faces as all went to bed sorrowful and pensive. To them, offending Don Bosco was the same as offending God. (BM IV, 394).

The evening peal

Salesian Fr John Gnolfo says in his study: *Don Bosco's "Good Night",* points out that the morning is the awakening of life and activity, the evening instead is suitable for sowing an idea in the minds of young people that germinates in them even while sleep. And with a daring comparison he even refers to Dante's 'evening peal':

Era già l'ora che volge il desìo
ai naviganti e intenerisce il core…
"It was the hour when longing stirs
the hearts of sailors and softens their souls…"

It is precisely at the hour of evening prayer that Alighieri describes, in fact, in the eighth Canto of "Purgatory", the kings in a small valley while they sing the hymn of the Liturgy of the Hours *Te lucis ante terminum...* (Before the light ends, O God, we seek Thee, that Thou mayest keep us).

Don Bosco's "Good Night" was a fond and sublime moment! It began with praise and evening prayers and ended with his words that opened his children's hearts to reflection, joy and hope. He really cared about that evening meeting with the whole Valdocco community. Fr G. B. Lemoyne

traces its origin to Mamma Margaret. The good mother, putting the first orphan boy who came from Val Sesia to bed, offered some recommendations to him. From there came the beautiful custom in Salesian boarding schools of addressing brief words to the youngsters before sending them off to rest (BM, 142). Fr E. Ceria, quoting the Saint's words when thinking back to the early days of the Oratory, "I began to give a very short little sermons in the evening after prayers" (MO, 156 New Rochelle, 2010), thinks rather of a direct initiative of Don Bosco. However, if Fr Lemoyne accepted the idea of some of the early disciples, it was because he thought that Mamma Margaret's "Good Night" emblematically fulfilled Don Bosco's purpose in introducing that custom (Annals III, 857).

Characteristics of the "Good Night"

A characteristic of Don Bosco's "Good Night" was the topic he dealt with: some topical time that made an impression, something actual that created suspense and also allowed questions from the listeners. Sometimes he would ask questions himself, thus establishing a dialogue that was highly attractive to all.

Other characteristics were the variety of topics covered and the brevity of the discourse to avoid monotony and consequent boredom in the listeners. However, Don Bosco was not always brief, especially when he recounted his famous dreams or the journeys he had made. But it was usually a speech of just a few minutes.

These were, in short, neither sermons nor school lessons, but short affectionate words that the good father addressed to his sons before sending them off to rest.

Exceptions to the rule, of course, made an enormous impression, as happened on the evening of 16 September 1867. After every means of correction had been attempted by the superiors, some boys turned out to be incorrigible and were a scandal to their companions.

Don Bosco stood up on the little podium. He began by quoting the Gospel passage where the Divine Saviour

pronounces terrible words against those who scandalise the children. He recalled the serious admonitions he had repeatedly made to the boys causing scandal, the benefits they had obtained at the college, the fatherly love with which they had been surrounded, and then he continued:

"*They think they are not known, but I know who they are and could name them in public. If I do not name them, do not think that I am not fully aware of them…. That if I wanted to name them, I could say: It is you, A… (and pronounced first and last name) a wolf who prowls among his companions and drives them away from the superiors by ridiculing their warnings… It is you, B… a thief whose words tarnish the innocence of others… You, C… a murderer who with certain notes, with certain books, tears Mary's children from her side… You, D… a demon who spoils his companions and prevents them from attending the Sacraments with your taunts…*"

Six were thus 'named'. Don Bosco's voice was calm. Every time he mentioned a name, a muffled cry from the culprit could be heard echoing amidst the sullen silence of his stunned companions.

The next day some were sent home. Those who were allowed to stay changed their lives: the "good father" Don Bosco was not an easy-going man! And exceptions of this kind confirm the rule of his "Good Night".

The key to morality

There was a reason why, one day in 1875, Don Bosco listed the secrets employed at Valdocco to those who were amazed that the Oratory did not have certain disorders complained of in other colleges, and among them he pointed out the following: " Another powerful means of persuasion, exercising a good influence over the boys, was the short fatherly talks addressed to them every evening after prayers. These short talks forestalled any trouble" (BM XI, 203-204).

And in his precious document on*The Preventive System in the Education of Youth*, he left it written that the "Good Night" from the Rector of the House could become "the

key to morality, good progress and success in education" (Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, p. 239-240).

Don Bosco saw that his boys experienced their day between two solemn moments, even if they were of very different kinds. In the morning the Eucharist, so that the day would not dampen their youthful ardour, in the evening, prayers and the "Good Night" so that before sleep they would reflect on the values that would illuminate the night.

The new rooms of the Salesian General Postulation

On 4 June 2024, the new rooms of the Salesian General Postulation located at the Zeffirino Namuncurà community in Via della Bufalotta in Rome were opened and blessed by the then Rector Major, Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime.In the plan to restructure the headquarters, the Rector Major with his Council decided to locate the rooms relating to the Salesian General Postulation in this new Salesian presence in Rome.

From Don Bosco to the present day we recognise a tradition of holiness that deserves attention, because it is the embodiment of the charism that originated with him and that has been expressed in a plurality of states of life and forms. We are talking about men and women, young people and adults, consecrated and lay people, bishops and missionaries who in different historical, cultural and social contexts in time and space have made the Salesian charism shine with special light, representing a heritage that plays an effective role in the life and community of believers and for people of good will. The Postulation accompanies **64 Causes of**

Beatification and Canonisation concerning 179 Saints, Blesseds, Venerables, Servants of God. It is worth noting that about half of the Salesian Family groups (15 out of 32) have at least one Cause of Beatification and Canonisation underway.

The **plans for the work** were drawn up and supervised by architect Toti Cameroni. Having identified the space for the location of the Postulation rooms, which originally comprised a long and wide corridor and a large hall, it then went on to the study of their distribution based on the requirements. The final solution was thus designed and realised:

The library with full-height bookcases divided into 40×40 cm squares that completely cover the walls. The purpose is to collect and store the various publications on saintly figures, in the knowledge that the lives and writings of the saints have, since ancient times, constituted frequent reading among the faithful, arousing conversion and a desire for a better life: they reflect the splendour of Christ's goodness, truth and charity. In addition, this space is also well suited for personal research, hosting groups and meetings.

From here we move on to **the reception** area, which is intended to be a space for spirituality and meditation, as in the visits to the monasteries of Mount Athos, where the guest was first introduced to the chapel of the relics of the saints: that is where the heart of the monastery was located and from there came the incitement to holiness for the monks. In this space there is a series of small **showcases** illuminating reliquaries or valuables related to Salesian holiness. The right-hand wall is lined with wooden ***panelling*** with replaceable panels depicting some of the Salesian Family's saints, blessed, venerable and servants of God.

A door leads into the largest room of the postulation: **the archives**. A 640 linear metre compactor allows for the archiving of a large number of documents relating to the various processes of Beatification and Canonisation. A

long chest of drawers is located under the windows: there are liturgical images and vestments.

A small corridor from the reception area, where canvases and paintings can be admired on the walls, leads first into **two brightly lit offices** with furnishings and then into the **relics case**. Also in this space, furniture fills the walls, cabinets and drawers accommodate the relics and liturgical vestments.

A storage room and a small room used as a rest area complete the postulation rooms.

The opening and blessing of these rooms reminds us that we are custodians of a precious heritage that deserves to be known and valued. In addition to the liturgical-celebratory aspect, the spiritual, pastoral, ecclesial, educational, cultural, historical, social, missionary… potential of the Causes must be fully valorised. Holiness recognised, or in the process of being recognised, on the one hand is already a realisation of evangelical radicalism and fidelity to Don Bosco's apostolic project, to be looked to as a spiritual and pastoral resource; on the other hand it is a provocation to live one's vocation faithfully in order to be available to bear witness to love to the extreme. Our Saints, Blesseds, Venerables and Servants of God are the authentic incarnation of the Salesian charism and the Constitutions or Regulations of our Institutes and Groups in the most diverse times and situations, overcoming that worldliness and spiritual superficiality which undermine our credibility and fruitfulness at the root.

Experience confirms more and more that the promotion and care of the Causes of Beatification and Canonisation of our Family, the celebration together of events related to holiness, are dynamics of grace that give rise to gospel joy and a sense of charismatic belonging, renewing intentions and commitments of fidelity to the call received and generating apostolic and vocational fruitfulness. The saints are true mystics of the primacy of God in the generous

gift of self, prophets of evangelical fraternity, servants of their brothers and sisters with creativity.

In order to promote the Causes of Beatification and Canonisation of the Salesian Family and to get to know at first hand the heritage of holiness that flourished from Don Bosco, the Postulation is available to **welcome people and groups who wish to get to know and visit these environments**, also offering the possibility of mini-retirements with itineraries on specific themes and the presentation of documents, relics, significant objects. **For information write to postulatore@sdb.org**.

Photo gallery – The new rooms of the Salesian General Postulation

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2023
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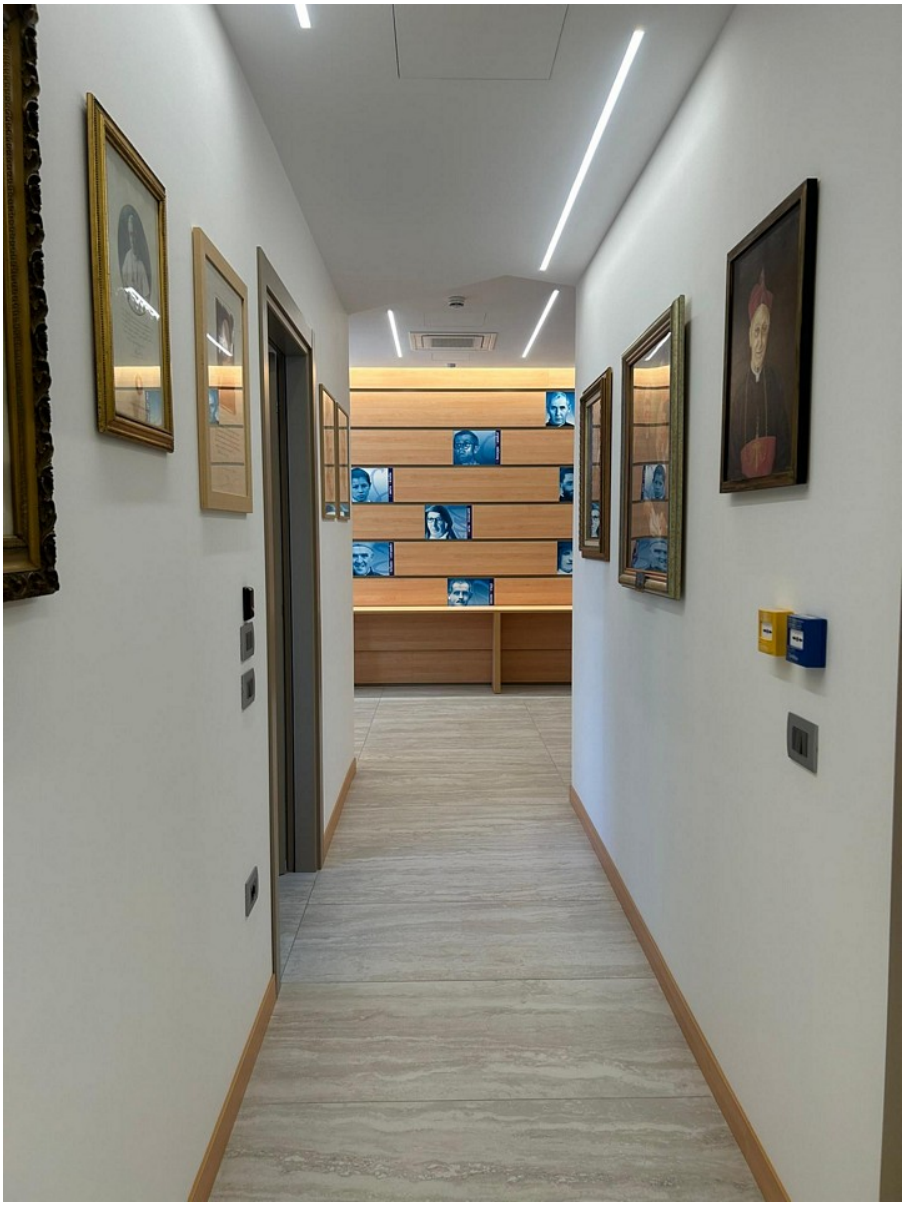
Sanctity in the Salesian Family
Santità nella Famiglia Salesiana
La Sainteté dans la Famille Salésienne
Santidade na Família Salesiana
Santi
Saints
Santos
Święci
Beati Blessed
Bienheureux
Beatos
Bem-aventurados
Błogosławieni
Venerabili
Venerables
Vénérables
Venerables
Veneráveis
Czcigodni
Servi di Dio
Servants of God
Serviteurs de Dieu
Siervos de Dios
Servos de Deus
Sługzy Boży




Artemide Zatti
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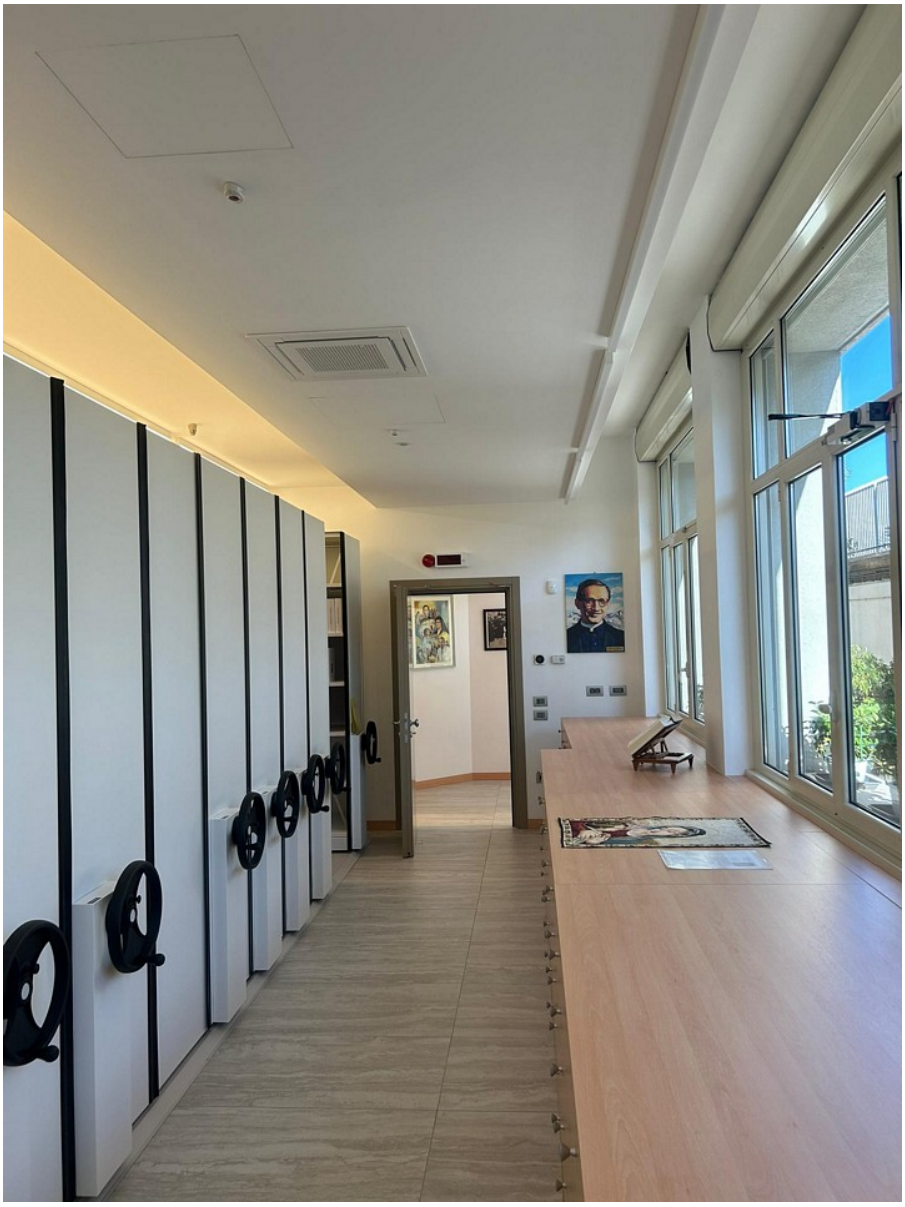

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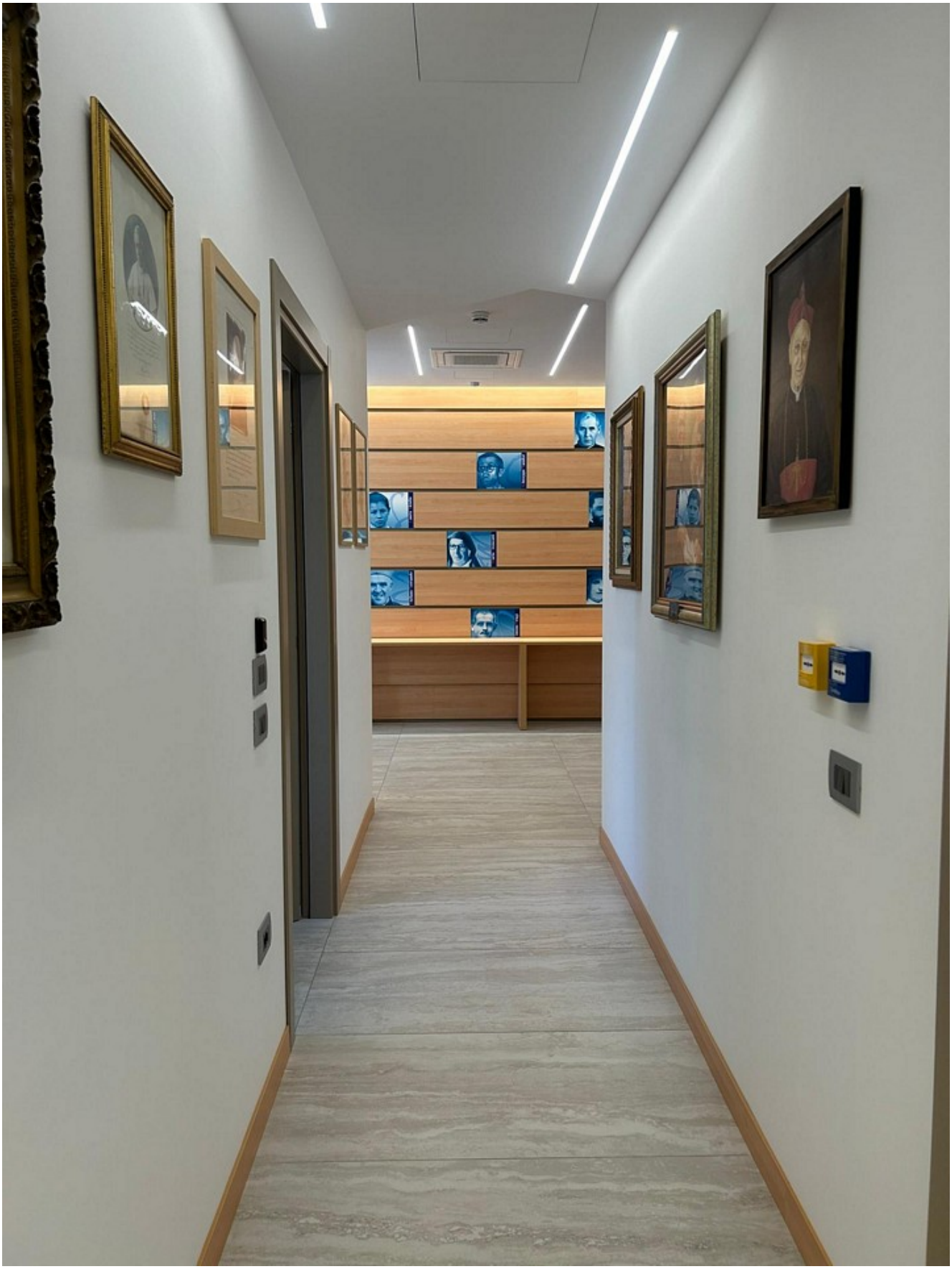
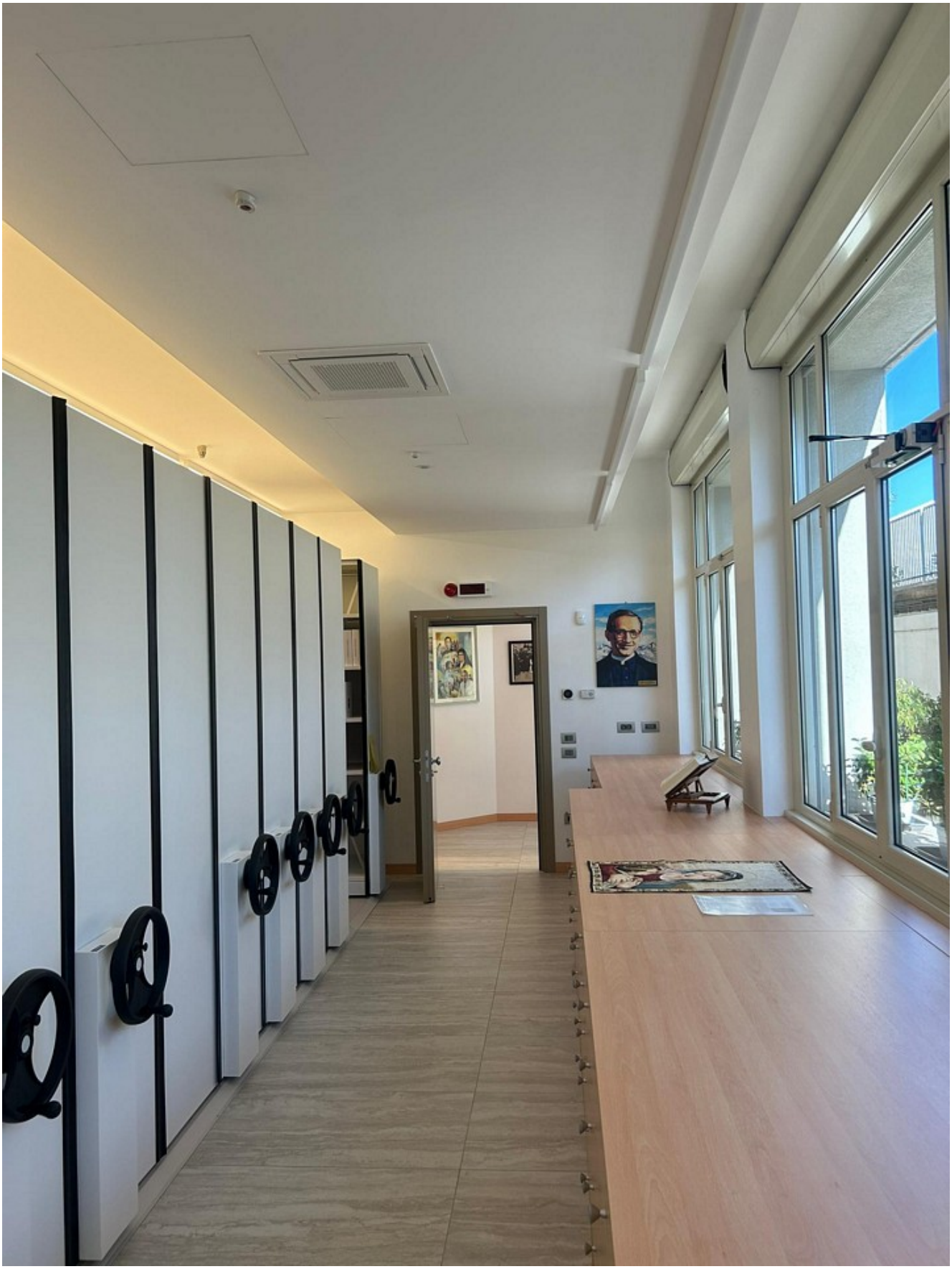



Teresa Valsè Pantellini
Costantino Vendrame
Carlo Della Torre
Luigi Variara
Artemide Zatti



Spreading Don Bosco's missionary spirit

We are approaching the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the First Salesian Missionary Expedition (1875-2025). The missionary dimension of the Salesian Society is part of its 'DNA'. It was so desired by Don Bosco from the very beginning, and today the Congregation is in 136 countries. This initial impetus continues today and is supported by the Missions Sector. Let us briefly present their activities and organisation.

Although Don Bosco never set out for distant lands as a missionary *ad gentes*, he always had a missionary heart and an ardent desire to share the Salesian charism in order to reach all the borders of the world and contribute to the salvation of the young.

This has been possible thanks to the availability of so many Salesians sent on missionary expeditions (at the end of September this year the 155th will be celebrated) who, working with locals and lay people, have allowed the Salesian charism to be spread and inculturated. Compared to the first 'pioneers', today the figure of the missionary must respond to different challenges, and the missionary paradigm has been updated to be an effective vehicle of evangelisation in today's world. First of all, as Fr Alfred Maravilla, General Councillor for the Missions, reminds us (in 2021 he wrote a letter, "The Salesian missionary vocation"), missions no longer respond to geographical criteria as they once did, and today's missionaries come from and are sent to the five continents, so there is no longer a clear separation between "mission lands" and other Salesian presences. Furthermore, there is the very important distinction between the Salesian

missionary vocation, i.e. the call that some Salesians receive to be sent for a lifetime in another place as missionaries, and the missionary spirit, typical of all Salesians and of all members of an educative-pastoral community, which manifests itself in the oratorian heart and in the drive for the evangelisation of the young.

The task of promoting the missionary spirit and keeping it alive in the Salesians and the laity is entrusted above all to the "Provincial Delegates for Missionary Animation" (DIAM), i.e. those Salesians, or lay people, who receive from the Inspector, the Salesian superior of the province in question, the task of taking care of missionary animation. The DIAM has a very important role, he is the "missionary sentinel" who, through his sensitivity and experience, is committed to spreading missionary culture at various levels (see *Salesian Missionary Animation. Handbook of the Provincial Delegate, Rome, 2019*).

The DIAM triggers missionary sensitivity in all the communities of the Province and works in synergy with the leaders of the other areas to testify to the importance of this dimension, common to every Christian. On a practical level, it organises a number of initiatives, promotes prayer for the missions on the 11th of the month, in memory of the first missionary expedition on 11th November 1875, promotes "Salesian Mission Day" in the Province every year, disseminates the materials prepared by the Congregation on missionary themes, such as the "Cagliero11" bulletin or the "CaglieroLife" video. Salesian Mission Day, which has been recurring since 1988, is a beautiful occasion to stop and reflect and relaunch missionary animation. It does not necessarily have to be a day, it can be an itinerary of several days, and it does not have a fixed date, so that everyone can choose the best time of the year that suits the rhythm and calendar of the Province. Each year a common theme is chosen and some animation materials are prepared as food

for thought and activities, which can be adapted and modified. This year the theme is “builders of dialogue”, while in 2025 the focus will be on the 150th anniversary of the first missionary expedition according to the three verbs “Give Thanks, Rethink, Relaunch”. “Cagliero11”, on the other hand, is a simple missionary animation bulletin, created in 2009 and published every month, two pages containing missionary reflections, interviews, news, curiosities and the monthly prayer that is proposed. “CaglieroLife” is a one-minute video based on the missionary prayer of the month (in turn based on the monthly intention proposed by the Pope), that helps to reflect on the theme. These are all tools that enable DIAM to carry out its task of promoting the missionary spirit well, in line with today’s times.

The DIAM collaborates or coordinates the Salesian Missionary Volunteer Service, that is, youth experiences of solidarity and free service in a community other than one’s own for a continuous period of time (in summer, for several months, a year…), motivated by faith, with a missionary style and according to the pedagogy and spirituality of Don Bosco (*The Volunteer Service in the Salesian Mission. Identity and Orientations of Salesian Missionary Volunteering*, Rome, 2019).

This year, in March, a first meeting of MissionVolunteering coordinators was held in Rome, attended by about fifty participants, including lay people and Salesians, under the guidance of a mixed team that took care of the organisation. Among the salient points that came out of the meeting, which was very rich especially in terms of sharing experiences, were the exploration of the identity of the Salesian missionary volunteer, the training of volunteers and coordinators, collaboration between lay and religious, accompaniment at all levels, and networking. A new symbolic cross was presented, which can be used by all volunteers in the various experiences around the world, and the draft of a new website, which will serve as a data and networking platform.

The DIAM also visits the communities of the

province and accompanies them from a missionary point of view, taking care especially of Salesians who are seeing if they are called to become missionaries *ad gentes*.

Obviously, all this work cannot be done by a single person. Teamwork and project mentality are important. Each Province has a missionary animation commission made up of Salesians, lay people and young people, which formulates proposals, creative suggestions and coordinates activities. It also draws up the provincial missionary animation project, to be presented to the Provincial, which is the compass to be followed with objectives, timetables, resources and concrete steps. In this way, improvisation is avoided and action is taken following a structured and strategic plan on the basis of the broader Salesian Educative and Pastoral Plan (SEPP), promoting a shared vision of missionary animation. In the Province times for ongoing formation, reflection and discussion are organised, and a missionary culture is promoted at various levels. These structures that have been created over time enable more effective animation and coordination, with a view to always giving the best for the good of the young.

Another important aspect is the sharing between DIAMs from different countries and provinces. Each Region (there are seven: America South Cone, Interamerica, Central-Northern Europe, Mediterranean, Africa – Madagascar, East Asia – Oceania and South Asia) meet regularly, in person once a year and on-line about every three months, to pool their riches, share challenges and work out a regional path. The on-line meetings, which began a few years ago, allow greater knowledge of the DIAMs and the contexts in which they operate, continuous quality updating, and a fruitful exchange that enriches everyone. In each Region there is a coordinator who convenes the meetings, promotes the regional journey and moderates the common processes, together with the Salesian contact person of the central team of the Sector for the

Missions, who represents the General Councillor for the Missions, bringing ideas, insights and suggestions to the group.

This great commitment, tiring but very useful and full of true joy, is one of the pieces that joins the many pieces of the Salesian mosaic, and ensures that Don Bosco's dream can continue today.

Marco Fulgaro

St Francis de Sales forms his collaborators

Francis de Sales did not wish to become a bishop. "I was not born to command," he allegedly told a confrere, who encouraged him, saying "But everyone wants you!" He accepted when he recognised God's will in the opinion of the Duke, of Bishop de Granier, the clergy and the people. He was consecrated bishop of Geneva on 8 December 1602 in the small church in his parish in Thorens. In a letter to Jane de Chantal, he wrote that, on that day, "God had taken me from myself to take me for himself, and thus, give me to the people, meaning that he had transformed me from what I was for me into what I should be for them."

To fulfil the pastoral mission entrusted to him and aimed at serving "this miserable and afflicted diocese of Geneva", he needed collaborators. Of course, according to the circumstances he liked to call all the faithful "my brothers and my collaborators", but this was directed all the more to the members of the clergy, his "confreres". The reform of the people called for by the Council of Trent could indeed begin

with them and through them.

The pedagogy of example

First and foremost, the bishop had to set an example: the pastor had to become the model for the flock entrusted to him, and first and foremost for the clergy. To this end, Francis de Sales imposed upon himself an Episcopal Rule. Drafted in the third person, it stipulated not only the strictly religious duties of the pastoral office, but also the practice of a number of social virtues, such as simplicity of life, habitual care of the poor, good manners and decency. From the very beginning, we read an article against ecclesiastical vanity:

Firstly, as regards external behaviour Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, will not wear silk robes, nor robes that are more precious than those hitherto worn; however, they will be clean, well tailored so as to be worn with propriety around the body.

In his episcopal household he would content himself with two clerics and a few servants, often very young. They too would be formed in simplicity, courtesy and a sense of welcome. The table would be frugal, but neat and clean. His house must be open to all, because “the house of a bishop must be like a public fountain,where the poor and the rich have the same right to approach to draw water.”

In addition, the bishop must continue to be formed and to study: “He will make sure that he learns something every day that is in any case useful and appropriate for his profession.” As a rule, he would devote two hours to study, between seven and nine in the morning, and after dinner he was able to read for an hour. He recognised that he enjoyed studying, but it was indispensable to him: he considered himself a “perpetual student of theology”.

Knowing people and situations

A bishop of this stature could not content himself

with being merely a good administrator. To lead the flock, the shepherd must know the flock, and to know the exact situation of the diocese and the clergy in particular, Francis de Sales undertook an impressive series of pastoral visits. In 1605, he visited 76 parishes in the French part of the diocese and returned “after beating the countryside for six weeks without interruption”. The following year, a large pastoral tour lasting several months took him to 185 parishes, surrounded by “frightful mountains, covered with a sheet of ice ten to twelve inches thick”. In 1607, he was in 70 parishes and, in 1608, he put an end to the official visits of his diocese by moving to 20 parishes around Annecy, but he continued to make many more visits in 1610 to Annecy and the surrounding parishes. In the course of six years, he would have visited 311 parishes with their branches.

Thanks to these visits and personal contacts, he acquired a precise knowledge of the real situation and the concrete needs of the population. He observed the ignorance and lack of priestly spirit of certain priests, not to mention the scandals of some monasteries where the Rule was no longer observed. Worship reduced to a function and tainted by the pursuit of profit, recalled all too often the bad examples taken from the Bible: “We resemble Nabal and Absalom, who rejoiced only in the shearing of the flock.”

Widening his view of the Church, he went so far as to denounce the vanity of certain prelates, true “courtiers of the Church” whom he compared to crocodiles and chameleons: “The crocodile is an animal that is sometimes terrestrial and sometimes aquatic, it gives birth on earth and hunts in the water; this is how the courtiers of the Church behave. Trees drop their leaves after the solstice: the elm, the lime, the poplar, the olive, the willow; the same happens among churchmen.”

To the complaints about the behaviour of the clergy he added reproaches for their weakness in the face of injustices committed by the temporal power. Recalling some brave bishops of the past, he exclaimed: ‘Oh! how I would like

to see some Ambrose commanding Theodosius, some Chrysostom scolding Eudoxia, some Hilary correcting Constantius! If one is to believe a confidence of his mother Angelica Arnauld, Bishop de Sales also groaned about the “unrest in the Curia of Rome”, true “tearful topics”, well convinced however that “to speak of them to the world in the situation in which it finds itself, is a cause of useless scandal.”

Selection and formation of candidates

The renewal of the Church entailed an effort to discern and form future priests, very numerous at the time. During the first pastoral visit in 1605, the bishop received 175 young candidates; the following year he had 176; in less than two years he had met 570 candidates for the priestly ministry or novices in monasteries.

The evil stemmed primarily from the absence of vocation in a good number of them. Often the attraction of temporal benefit or the desire of families to place their second-born sons was pre-eminent. In each case, discernment was required to assess whether the vocation came “from heaven or from earth”.

The Bishop of Geneva took the decrees of the Council of Trent very seriously, which had provided for the creation of seminaries. Formation had to begin at an early age. As early as 1603, an attempt was made to set up an embryonic minor seminary in Thonon. Adolescents were few in number, probably due to lack of means and space. In 1618, Francis de Sales proposed to appeal directly to the authority of the Holy See to obtain legal and financial support for his project. He wanted to erect a seminary, he wrote, in which the candidates could “learn to observe ceremonies, to catechise and exhort, to sing and exercise the other clerical virtues” All his efforts, however, were in vain due to a lack of material resources.

How to ensure the formation of future priests in such conditions? Some attended colleges or universities abroad, while the majority were formed in canonries, under the

guidance of a wise and educated priest or in monasteries. Francis de Sales wanted every major centre of the diocese to have a "theologian", i.e. a member of the cathedral chapter in charge of teaching sacred Scripture and theology.

Ordination, however, was preceded by an examination and before being assigned a parish (with the attached benefice), the candidate had to pass an exam. The bishop attended and personally questioned the candidate to ensure that he possessed the required knowledge and moral qualities.

Ongoing formation

Formation was not to stop at the moment of ordination or assignment to a parish. To ensure the ongoing formation of his priests, the main means at the bishop's disposal was the annual convocation of the diocesan synod. The first day of this assembly was solemnised by a pontifical mass and a procession through the city of Annecy. On the second day, the bishop gave the floor to one of his canons, had the statutes of previous synods reread and collected the comments of the parish priests present. After this, work would begin in commissions to discuss questions concerning church discipline and the spiritual and material service of the parishes.

Since the synod constitutions contained many disciplinary and ritual norms, care for ongoing, intellectual and spiritual formation was visible in them. They referred to the canons of the ancient Councils, but especially to the decrees of the "Most Holy Council of Trent". On the other hand, they recommended reading works that dealt with pastoral care or spirituality, such as those of Gerson (probably the *Instruction of the Parish Priests to Instruct the Simple People*) and those of the Spanish Dominican Luis de Granada, author of an *Introduction to the Symbol*.

Knowledge, he wrote in his *Exhortation to Clerics*, "is the eighth sacrament of the hierarchy of the Church." The ills of the Church were mainly due to the ignorance and laziness of the clergy. Fortunately, the Jesuits arrived!

Models of educated and zealous priests, these “great men”, who “devour books with their incessant studies” have “re-established and consolidated our doctrine and all the holy mysteries of our faith; so that even today, thanks to their praiseworthy work, they fill the world with learned men who destroy heresy everywhere.” In the conclusion, the bishop summed up his whole thinking: “Since divine Providence, without regard to my incapacity, has established me as your bishop, I exhort you to study endlessly, so that, being learned and exemplary, you may be blameless, and ready to answer all those who question you on matters of faith.”

Forming preachers

Francis de Sales preached so often and so well that he was considered one of the best preachers of his time and a model for preachers. He preached not only in his diocese, but also agreed to preach in Paris, Chambéry, Dijon, Grenoble and Lyon. He also preached in Franche-Comté, in Sion in the Valais and in several towns in Piedmont, in particular Carmagnola, Mondovì, Pinerolo, Chieri and Turin.

To know his thoughts on preaching, one must refer to the letter he addressed in 1604 to Andrea Frémyot, brother of the baroness of Chantal, young archbishop of Bourges (he was only thirty-one), who had asked him for advice on how to preach. To preach well, he said, two things are needed: knowledge and virtue. To achieve a good result, the preacher must try to instruct his hearers and touch their hearts.

To instruct them, one must always go to the source: Holy Scripture. The works of the Fathers should not be neglected; indeed, “what is the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church, if not an explanation of the Gospel and an exposition of Holy Scripture?” It is equally good to make use of the lives of the saints who make us hear the music of the Gospel. As for the great book of nature, God’s creation, the work of his Word, it constitutes an extraordinary source of inspiration if one knows how to observe and meditate on it. “It is a book,” he writes, “that contains the Word of God.” As

a man of his time, brought up in the school of the classical humanists, Francis de Sales did not exclude the pagan authors of antiquity and even a hint of their mythology from his sermons, but he used them “as one uses mushrooms, that is, only to whet one’s appetite.”

Moreover, what greatly aids the understanding of preaching and makes it enjoyable is the use of images, comparisons and examples, taken from the Bible, ancient authors or personal observation. Indeed, similes possess “an incredible effectiveness when it comes to enlightening the intelligence and moving the will.”

But the real secret of effective preaching is the charity and zeal of the preacher who knows how to find the right words in the depths of his heart. One must speak “with warmth and devotion, with simplicity, with candour and with confidence, be deeply convinced of what one is teaching and inculcating in others.” Words must come from the heart rather than the mouth, because “the heart speaks to the heart, while the mouth speaks only to the ears.”

Forming confessors

Another task undertaken by Francis de Sales from the dawn of his episcopate was to draw up a series of *Advice for Confessors.* They contain not only a doctrine on the grace of this sacrament, but also pedagogical norms directed to those who have a responsibility to guide people.

First of all, those who are called to work for the formation of consciences and the spiritual progress of others must begin with themselves, lest they deserve the reproach: “Physician, heal thyself”; and the apostle’s admonition: “You who judge others, condemn yourself.” The confessor is a judge: it is up to him to decide whether or not to absolve the sinner, taking into account the inner dispositions of the penitent and the rules in force. He is also a doctor, because “sins are spiritual illnesses and wounds”, so it is up to him to prescribe the appropriate remedies. Francis de Sales, however, emphasises that the confessor is above all a father:

Remember that the poor penitents call you father when they begin their confession and that indeed you must have a fatherly heart towards them. Receive them with immense love, patiently enduring their coarseness, ignorance, weakness, slowness of comprehension and other imperfections, never desisting to help and succour them as long as there is some hope in them that they may correct themselves.

A good confessor must be attentive to the state of each person's life and proceed in a diversified manner, taking into account each person's profession, "married or not, cleric or not, religious or secular, lawyer or procurator, artisan or farmer." The type of reception, however, had to be the same for everyone. According to Chantal's mother, he received everyone "with equal love and gentleness": "ords and ladies, bourgeoisie, soldiers, maids, peasants, beggars, the sick, stinking convicts and abjects."

Regarding inner dispositions, each penitent presents himself in his own way, and Francis de Sales can appeal to his own experience when he draws up a kind of typology of penitents. There are those who approach "tormented by fear and shame", those who are "shameless and without any fear", those who are "timid and nurture some suspicion of obtaining the forgiveness of their sins", and those who, finally, are "perplexed because they do not know how to tell their sins or because they do not know how to make their own examination of conscience."

A good way to encourage the timid penitent and to instil confidence in him is to acknowledge yourself that "you are no angel", and that "you do not find it strange that people commit sins." With the shy person it is necessary to behave with seriousness and gravity, reminding him that "at the hour of death of nothing else will he give a full account but of the confessions he has made." But above all, the Bishop of Geneva insisted on this recommendation: "Be charitable and discreet towards all penitents and especially towards women." One finds this Salesian tone in the following fragment of

advice:”Beware of using words that are too harsh towards penitents; for sometimes we are so austere in our corrections that we show ourselves to be more blameworthy than those we reproach are guilty.” Furthermore, try “not to impose confused but specific penances on penitents, and to be more inclined to gentleness than severity.”

Form together

Finally, it is worth considering a concern of the Bishop of Geneva regarding the community aspect of formation, because he was convinced of the usefulness of encounter, mutual animation and example. We do not form well if not together; hence the desire to bring priests together and also, as far as possible, to divide them into groups. The synodal assemblies that, in Annecy, saw parish priests gathered once a year around their bishop were a good thing, even irreplaceable, but not sufficient.

To this end, the bishop of Geneva expanded the role of the “overseers”, a kind of animator of pastoral sectors with the “faculty and mission to support, warn, exhort the other priests and watch over their conduct.” They were in charge not only of visiting the parish priests and churches under their jurisdiction, but also of bringing their cnfreres together twice a year to discuss pastoral issues. The bishop was very keen on these meetings, “emphasising the importance of the assemblies, and ordering his overseers to send him the registers of those present and the reasons for those absent.” According to one witness, he had them deliver “sermons on the virtues required of a priest and the duties of pastors concerning the good of the souls entrusted to them.” There was also “a spiritual conference on the difficulties that might arise concerning the meaning of the Synodal Constitutions or the means necessary to obtain better results in view of the salvation of souls.”

The desire to gather fervent priests suggested a project to him modelled on the Oblates of Saint Ambrose, founded by Saint Charles Borromeo to help him in the renewal

of the clergy. Could not something similar be attempted in Savoy to encourage not only reform but also devotion among the ranks of the clergy? In fact, according to his friend Bishop Camus, Francis de Sales would have cultivated the project of creating a congregation of secular priests “free and without vows”. He renounced it when the congregation of the Oratory was founded in Paris, a society of “reformed priests” that he tried to bring to Savoy.

While his efforts were not always crowned with success they testify, in any case, to his constant concern to form his co-workers as part of an overall project for the renewal of church life.