

Crown of the Seven Sorrows of Mary

The publication "Crown of the Seven Sorrows of Mary" represents a cherished devotion that St. John Bosco instilled in his young followers. Following the structure of the "Way of the Cross," the seven sorrowful scenes are presented with brief reflections and prayers to guide towards a deeper participation in the sufferings of Mary and her Son. Rich in tender imagery and contrite spirituality, the text reflects the desire to unite with the Sorrowful Mother in redemptive compassion. The indulgences granted by various Popes attest to the pastoral value of this text—a small treasury of prayer and reflection to nurture love for the Mother of Sorrows.

Preface

The primary aim of this booklet is to facilitate remembrance and meditation of the bitterest Sorrows of the tender Heart of Mary, a devotion most pleasing to her, as she has often revealed to her devotees, and a most efficacious means for us to obtain her patronage.

To make this meditation easier, it is first practised with a chaplet indicating Mary's seven principal sorrows, which can then be meditated upon in seven distinct brief reflections, much like the *Way of the Cross*.

May the Lord accompany us with His heavenly grace and blessing so that the desired intention is achieved, so that each soul may be deeply moved by the frequent remembrance of Mary's sorrows for spiritual benefit and the greater glory of God.

Chaplet of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary with Seven Brief Reflections Presented in the Form of the Way of the Cross

Preparation

Dearest brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, we undertake our

usual devotions by meditating devoutly on the bitterest sorrows that the Blessed Virgin Mary endured in the life and death of her beloved Son, our Divine Saviour. Let us imagine ourselves present at Jesus hanging on the Cross, as His afflicted Mother says to each of us, "Come and see if there is any sorrow like mine."

Trusting that this merciful Mother will grant us special protection as we meditate on her sorrows, let us invoke divine aid with the following prayers:

Antiphon: Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful, and kindle in them the fire of Thy love.

*Send forth Thy Spirit, and they shall be created,
And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.
Remember Thy Congregation,
Which Thou hast possessed from the beginning.
O Lord, hear my prayer,
And let my cry come unto Thee.*

Let us pray.

Enlighten our minds, we beseech Thee, O Lord, with the light of Thy brightness, that we may see what is to be done and have the strength to do what is right. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

First Sorrow: The Prophecy of Simeon

The first sorrow was when the Blessed Virgin Mother of God presented her only Son in the Temple in the arms of the holy elder Simeon, who said to her, "This child shall be a sword that shall pierce thy soul," foretelling the Passion and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

One Our Father and seven Hail Marys.

Prayer`

O sorrowful Virgin, by that sharp sword with which the holy elder Simeon foretold that thy soul would be pierced in the Passion and death of thy dear Jesus, I beseech thee to obtain

for me the grace always to remember thy wounded heart and the bitterest pains suffered by thy Son for my salvation. Amen.

Second Sorrow: The Flight into Egypt

The second sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when she had to flee to Egypt due to the persecution of cruel Herod, who wickedly sought to kill her beloved Son.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O Mary, most sorrowful sea of tears, by the anguish thou didst endure fleeing to Egypt to protect thy Son from Herod's barbaric cruelty, I implore thee to be my guide, that through thee I may be freed from the persecutions of visible and invisible enemies of my soul. Amen.

Third Sorrow: The Loss of Jesus in the Temple

The third sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when, after being in Jerusalem with her spouse Joseph and her beloved Son Jesus the Saviour during Passover, she lost Him on the return to her humble home and mourned the loss of her only Beloved for three days.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O disconsolate Mother, thou who sought thy Son anxiously for three days after losing His bodily presence, pray that sinners too may seek Him with acts of contrition and find Him. Amen.

Fourth Sorrow: Meeting Jesus Carrying the Cross

The fourth sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when she met her most sweet Son carrying a heavy Cross on His tender shoulders to Mount Calvary to be crucified for our salvation.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O Virgin, more afflicted than any other, by the agony thou didst feel in thy heart upon meeting thy Son as He bore the wood of the Holy Cross to Calvary, grant that I may accompany

Him continually in thought, weep for my sins, the cause of His and thy torment, and grow in love for Him. Amen.

Fifth Sorrow: The Crucifixion of Jesus

The fifth sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when she saw her Son raised upon the hard wood of the Cross, shedding blood from every part of His Most Sacred Body.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O Rose among thorns, by the bitter sorrow that pierced thy heart as thou beheld thy Son wounded and lifted on the Cross, grant that I may seek only Jesus

crucified, remembering always that my sins caused His suffering. Amen.

Sixth Sorrow: The Descent from the Cross

The sixth sorrow of the Blessed Virgin was when her beloved Son, wounded in the side after His death and taken down from the Cross, was placed in thy most holy arms, so pitilessly slain.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O afflicted Virgin, thou who received thy dead Son into thy arms, kissing His most sacred wounds and weeping a sea of tears, grant that I too may wash with tears of true contrition the mortal wounds my sins inflicted upon thee. Amen.

Seventh Sorrow: The Burial of Jesus

The seventh sorrow of the Virgin Mary, our Lady and Advocate, was when she accompanied the Most Holy Body of her Son to the tomb.

One *Our Father* and seven *Hail Marys*.

Prayer

O Martyr of Martyrs, Mary, by the bitter torment thou didst suffer when, after burying thy Son, thou had to depart from

that beloved tomb, obtain for all sinners the grace to recognise the grave harm of being far from their God. Amen.

Three *Hail Marys* shall be recited in profound respect for the tears shed by the Blessed Virgin in all her sorrows, to implore through her a similar sorrow for our sins.

Hail Mary, etc.

After finishing the Chaplet, the Lament of the Blessed Virgin is recited—the hymn “*Stabat Mater*,” etc.

Hymn – Lament of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Supreme Pontiff Innocent XI, grants the indulgence of 100 days each time the *Stabat Mater* is recited. Benedict XIII granted the seven-year indulgence to those who recite the Crown of the Seven Sorrows of Mary. Many other indulgences were granted by other Popes especially to the Brothers and Sisters of the Company of the Sorrowful Mary.

The seven sorrows of Mary meditated in the form of the Way of the Cross

Stabat Mater dolorosa
 Iuxta crucem lacrymosa,
 Dum pendebat Filius.
 Cuius animam gementem
 Contristatam et dolentem
 Pertransiuit gladius.
 O quam tristis et afflicta
 Fuit illa benedicta
 Mater unigeniti!
 Quae moerebat, et dolebat,
 Pia Mater dum videbat.
 Nati poenas inclyti.
 Quis est homo, qui non fleret,
 Matrem Christi si videret
 In tanto supplicio?
 Quis non posset contristari,
 Christi Matrem contemplari
 Dolentem cum filio?
 Pro peccatis suae gentis
 Vidit Iesum in tormentis
 Et flagellis subditum.
 Vidit suum dulcem natura
 Moriundo desolatum,
 Dum emisit spiritum.
 Eia mater fons amoris,
 Me sentire vim doloris
 Fac, ut tecum lugeam.
 Fac ut ardeat cor meum
 In amando Christum Deum,
 Ut sibi complaceam.
 Sancta Mater istud agas,
 Crucifixi fige plagas
 Cordi meo valide.
 Tui nati vulnerati
 Tam dignati pro me pati
 Poenas mecum divide.
 Fac me tecum pie flere,
 Crucifixo condolere,
 Donec ego vixero.
 Iuxta Crucem tecum stare,
 Et me tibi sociare
 In planctu desidero.
 Virgo virginum praeclara,
 Mihi iam non sia amara,
 Fac me tecum plangere.
 Fac ut portem Christi mortem,
 Passionis fac consortem,
 Et plagas recolere.
 Fac me plagis vulnerari,
 Fac me cruce inebriari,
 Et cruore Filii.
 Flammis ne urar succensus,
 Per te, Virgo, sim defensus
 In die Iudicii.
 Christe, cum sit hinc exire,
 Da per matrem me venire
 Ad palmam victoriae.
 Quando corpus morietur,
 Fac ut animae donetur
 Paradisi gloria. Amen.

At the cross her station keeping,
 Stood the mournful Mother weeping,
 Close to Jesus to the last.
 Through her heart, His sorrow sharing,
 All His bitter anguish bearing,
 Now at length the sword had passed.
 Oh, how sad and sore distressed
 Was that Mother highly blest,
 Of the sole begotten One!
 Christ above in torment hangs.
 She beneath beholds the pangs
 Of her dying glorious Son.
 Is there one who would not weep,
 Whelmed in miseries so deep,
 Christ's dear Mother to behold?
 Can the human heart refrain
 From partaking in her pain,
 In that Mother's pain untold?
 Bruised, derided, cursed, defiled,
 She beheld her tender Child,
 All with bloody scourges rent.
 For the sins of His own nation,
 Saw Him hang in desolation
 Till His spirit forth He sent.
 O thou Mother, fount of love!
 Touch my spirit from above,
 Make my heart with thine accord.
 Make me feel as thou hast felt;
 Make my soul to glow and melt
 With the love of Christ my Lord.
 Holy Mother, pierce me through;
 In my heart each wound renew
 Of my Savior crucified.
 Let me share with thee His pain,
 Who for all my sins was slain,
 Who for me in torment died.
 Let me mingle tears with thee,
 Mourning Him who mourned for me,
 All the days that I may live.
 By the Cross with thee to stay;
 There with thee to weep and pray,
 Is all I ask of thee to give.
 Virgin of all virgins best,
 Listen to my fond request:
 Let me share thy grief divine.
 Let me to my latest breath,
 In my body bear the death
 Of that dying Son of thine.
 Wounded with His every wound,
 Steep my soul till it hath swooned
 In His very blood, away.
 Be to me, O Virgin, nigh,
 Lest in flames I burn and die,
 In His awful Judgment day.
 Christ, when Thou shalt call me hence,
 Be Thy Mother my defence,
 Be Thy Cross my victory.
 While my body here decays,
 May my soul Thy goodness praise,
 Safe in Paradise with Thee. Amen.

Invoke divine help by saying:

We beseech Thee, O Lord, to anticipate our actions by inspiring us, and to continue them by helping us, so that all our prayer and work may always begin with Thee, and, having begun through Thee, may be ended. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Act of Contrition

Most Afflicted Virgin, alas! How ungrateful I have been in the past towards my God, with what ingratitude I have responded to His countless benefits! Now I repent, and in the bitterness of my heart and the weeping of my soul, I humbly ask Him for forgiveness for having offended His infinite goodness, firmly resolved in the future with heavenly grace, never to offend Him again. Ah! By all the sorrows you endured in the barbaric passion of your beloved Jesus, I beg you with the deepest sighs to obtain for me from Him, pity and mercy for my sins. Accept this holy exercise I am about to perform and receive it in union with those pains and sorrows you suffered for your son Jesus. Ah, grant me! Yes, grant me that those same swords that pierced your spirit may also pierce mine, and that I may live and die in the friendship of my Lord, to eternally partake of the glory He has acquired for me with His precious Blood. Amen.

First Sorrow

In this first sorrow, let us imagine ourselves in the temple of Jerusalem, where the Most Blessed Virgin heard the prophecy of the old Simeon.

Meditation

Ah! What anguish the heart of Mary must have felt upon hearing the sorrowful words with which the holy old Simeon foretold the bitter passion and atrocious death of her sweetest Jesus: while at that same moment there came to her mind the insults, abuses, and tortures that the wicked Jews would inflict on the Redeemer of the world. But do you know what was the most

piercing sword that wounded her in this circumstance? It was the consideration of the ingratitude with which her beloved Son would be repaid by men. Now reflecting that, because of your sins, you are miserably among these, ah! Throw yourself at the feet of this Sorrowful Mother and say to her weeping (all kneel): Ah! Most Compassionate Virgin, who experienced such bitter anguish in your spirit seeing the abuse which I, unworthy creature, would make of the blood of your beloved Son, grant, yes grant by your most afflicted Heart, that in the future I may respond to the Divine Mercies, make use of heavenly graces, and not receive in vain so many lights and inspirations which you will deign to obtain for me, so that I may be among those for whom the bitter passion of Jesus is an eternal salvation. Amen. *Hail Mary* etc. *Glory be* etc.

Mary, my sweet love,
Imprint your sorrows in my heart.

Second Sorrow

In this second sorrow, let us consider the most painful journey the Virgin made towards Egypt to save Jesus from Herod's cruel persecution.

Meditation

Consider the bitter sorrow Mary must have felt when, at night, she had to set out on her journey by the Angel's order to preserve her Son from the massacre ordered by that fierce Prince. Ah! At every animal cry, at every gust of wind, at every rustle of leaves she heard in those deserted roads, she was filled with fear lest some harm befall the child Jesus she carried with her. Now she turned one way, now another, now hastened her steps, now hid herself, thinking she was overtaken by soldiers who might tear her most beloved Son from her arms and subject Him to barbaric treatment before her eyes. Fixing her tearful gaze upon her Jesus and pressing Him tightly to her breast, giving Him a thousand kisses, she sent forth the most anguished sighs from her heart. And here reflect how many times you have renewed this bitter sorrow for

Mary by forcing her Son with your grave sins to flee from your soul. Now that you know the great evil committed, turn repentantly to this merciful Mother and say to her:

Ah, sweetest Mother! Once Herod forced you and your Jesus to flee because of the inhuman persecution he commanded; but I, oh! How many times have I obliged my Redeemer, and consequently you too, to depart quickly from my heart, introducing into it the cursed sin, merciless enemy of you and my God. Ah! Full of sorrow and contrition, I humbly ask your forgiveness.

Yes, mercy, O dear Mother, mercy, and I promise in the future with Divine help to always keep my Saviour and You in full possession of my soul. Amen. *Hail Mary* etc. *Glory be* etc.

Mary, my sweet love,
Imprint your sorrows in my heart.

Third Sorrow

In this third sorrow, let us consider the most afflicted Virgin who, weeping, searches for her lost Jesus.

Meditation

How great was Mary's sorrow when she realised, she had lost her beloved Son! And how her grief increased when, having diligently searched for Him among friends, relatives, and neighbours, she could find no trace of Him. Not minding discomfort, fatigue, or dangers, she wandered for three continuous days through the regions of Judea, repeating those words of desolation: Has anyone seen Him whom my soul truly loves? Ah! The great anxiety with which she sought Him made her imagine at every moment that she saw Him or heard His voice, but then, finding herself disappointed, oh how she shuddered and felt more keenly the grief of such a deplorable loss! Great confusion for you, O sinner, who, having so often lost your Jesus through grave faults, took no care to seek Him, a clear sign that you make little or no account of the precious treasure of Divine friendship. Weep, then, for your blindness, and turning to this Sorrowful Mother, say to her

sighing thus:

Most Afflicted Virgin, ah, make me learn from you the true way to seek Jesus whom I have lost by following my passions and the wicked suggestions of the devil, so that I may succeed in finding Him, and when I have regained possession of Him, I will continually repeat those words of yours, I have found Him whom my heart truly loves. I will keep Him always with me, and never let Him depart again. Amen. *Hail Mary* etc. *Glory be* etc.

Mary, my sweet love,
Imprint your sorrows in my heart.

Fourth Sorrow

In the fourth sorrow, let us consider the meeting of the sorrowful Virgin with her suffering Son.

Meditation

Come, then, O hardened hearts, and see if you can endure this most tearful spectacle. It is the most tender, most loving mother meeting her sweetest, most beloved Son; and how does she meet Him? O God! Amidst the most impious mob dragging Him cruelly to death, covered with wounds, dripping with blood, torn by injuries, with a crown of thorns on His head and a heavy beam on His shoulders, weary, gasping, languishing, seeming at every step about to breathe His last.

Ah! Consider, my soul, the mortal shock the Most Holy Virgin felt at the first glance she fixed upon her tormented Jesus. She would want to bid Him a last farewell, but how, when grief prevents her from uttering a word? She would throw herself at His neck, but remains motionless and petrified by the force of inner affliction. She would vent her grief with tears, but her heart feels so constricted and oppressed that she cannot shed a tear. Oh! And who can restrain tears seeing a poor mother plunged in such great anguish? But who is the cause of such bitter sorrow? Ah, I know, yes, it is I with my sins who have made such a barbaric wound in your tender heart, O Sorrowful

Virgin. Yet who would believe it? I remain unmoved, without being touched. But if I was ungrateful in the past, I shall be so no more.

Meanwhile, prostrate at your feet, O Most Holy Virgin, I humbly ask your forgiveness for so much sorrow I have caused you. I know and confess that I do not deserve pity, being the true reason you fell with grief upon meeting your Jesus all covered with wounds; but remember, yes remember that you are the mother of mercy. Ah, show yourself thus to me, and I promise in the future to be more faithful to my Redeemer, and so make up for so much displeasure I have given your most afflicted spirit. Amen. *Hail Mary* etc. *Glory be* etc.

Mary, my sweet love,
Imprint your sorrows in my heart.

Fifth sorrow

In this fifth sorrow, let us imagine ourselves on Mount Calvary where the most afflicted Virgin saw her beloved Son expire on the Cross.

Meditation

Here we are at Calvary where two altars of sacrifice are already raised, one in the body of Jesus, the other in the heart of Mary. Oh, tragic spectacle! We behold the Mother drowned in a sea of anguish as she sees her dear and beloved child torn from her by pitiless death. Alas! Every hammer blow, every wound, every laceration that the Savior receives upon His flesh deeply reverberates in the heart of the Virgin. She stands at the foot of the Cross so penetrated by sorrow and pierced by grief that you could not decide who would be the first to expire—Jesus or Mary. She fixes her eyes on the face of her agonizing Son, observes His languishing pupils, His pale face, His livid lips, His laboured breath, and finally realizes that He no longer lives and has already surrendered His spirit into the hands of His eternal Father. Ah, her soul then makes every possible effort to separate from her body and unite with that of Jesus. And who can endure such

a sight?

Oh, most sorrowful Mother, instead of withdrawing from Calvary to avoid feeling such acute anguish, you remain motionless there to drink to the last drop the bitter cup of your afflictions. What confusion this must bring to me, who seek every means to avoid the crosses and small sufferings that the Lord deigns to send for my good? Most sorrowful Virgin, I humble myself before you—ah! Grant that I may once clearly know the preciousness and great value of suffering, that I may become so attached to it that I never tire of exclaiming with St. Francis Xavier: “More, Lord, more, Lord—more suffering, my God.” Ah yes, more suffering, O my God. So be it. *Hail Mary*, etc. *Glory be*, etc.

Mary, my sweet beloved,
Imprint your sorrows upon my heart.

Sixth sorrow

In this sixth sorrow, let us imagine ourselves seeing the disconsolate but Virgin Mother receiving into her arms her deceased Son taken down from the Cross.

Meditation

Consider the most bitter pain that pierced Mary’s soul when she saw the lifeless body of her beloved Jesus placed in her lap. Ah! As she fixed her gaze upon His wounds and sores, beholding Him crimson with His own blood, the force of her inner grief was such that her heart was mortally pierced, and had she not died, it was Divine omnipotence that preserved her life. Oh, poor Mother—yes, poor Mother, who leads to the tomb the dear object of your tenderest affections, who from a bouquet of roses has become a bundle of thorns due to the mistreatment and lacerations inflicted by wicked executioners. And who would not pity you? Who would not feel crushed by sorrow seeing you in such a state of affliction as to move even the hardest stone to pity? I see John inconsolable, Magdalene and the other Marys weeping bitterly, Nicodemus unable to bear the grief any longer. And I? I alone shed no

tear amid such sorrow! Ungrateful and thankless wretch that I am!

Ah! Most merciful Mother, here I am at your feet, receive me under your powerful protection and let my heart be pierced by the same sword that passed through your most afflicted spirit, that it may soften at last and truly weep for my grave sins, which brought you such cruel martyrdom. So be it. *Hail Mary*, etc. *Glory be*, etc.

Mary, my sweet beloved,
Imprint your sorrows upon my heart.

Seventh sorrow

In this seventh sorrow, let us consider the most sorrowful Virgin as she sees her deceased Son enclosed in the tomb.

Meditation

Consider the mortal sigh that escaped Mary's afflicted heart when she saw her beloved Jesus laid in the tomb! Oh, what pain, what grief her spirit felt when the stone was raised to seal that most sacred monument! It was impossible to detach her from the edge of the sepulchre, for her sorrow rendered her insensible and immobile, never ceasing to gaze upon those wounds and cruel lacerations. And when the tomb was finally sealed—ah, then the force of her inner anguish was such that she would undoubtedly have fallen dead had God not preserved her life. Oh, most tormented Mother! You will now depart from this place with His body, but surely your heart remains here, for here lies your true treasure. Ah, fate—may all our affection, all our love, remain with Him. How can we not be consumed with love for the Savior, who shed all His blood for our salvation? How can we not love you, who suffered so much for our sake?

Now, sorrowful and repentant for having caused so much pain to your Son and such bitterness to you, we prostrate ourselves at your feet. And for all those sorrows you allowed us to meditate upon, grant us this favour, that the memory of them may remain vividly impressed upon our minds, that our hearts

may be consumed with love for our good God and for you, our sweetest Mother, and that the last sigh of our life may be united to those you poured forth from the depths of your soul in the sorrowful Passion of Jesus, to whom be honour, glory, and thanksgiving for all ages. Amen. *Hail Mary*, etc. *Glory be*, etc.

Mary, my sweet beloved,
Imprint your sorrows upon my heart.

Then the *Stabat Mater* is recited, as above.

Antiphon: "*A sword shall pierce your own soul also*"—Simeon's prophecy to Mary.

Pray for us, O most sorrowful Virgin.

That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray

O God, in whose Passion, according to the prophecy of Simeon, a sword of sorrow pierced the sweetest soul of the glorious Virgin and Mother Mary, mercifully grant that we who recall her sorrows may attain the blessed fruit of Your Passion. You who live, etc.

Praise be to God and to the most sorrowful Virgin.

With ecclesiastical approval

The Feast of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated by the Pious Union and Society, falls on the third Sunday of September in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi.

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The Tenth Hill (1864)

Don Bosco's dream of the "Tenth Hill", recounted in October 1864, is one of the most evocative passages in Salesian tradition. In it, the saint finds himself in a vast valley filled with young people: some already at the Oratory, others yet to be met. Guided by a mysterious voice, he must lead them over a steep embankment and then through ten hills, symbolising the Ten Commandments, towards a light that prefigures Paradise. The chariot of Innocence, the penitential ranks, and the celestial music paint an educational fresco: they show the effort of preserving purity, the value of repentance, and the irreplaceable role of educators. With this prophetic vision, Don Bosco anticipates the worldwide expansion of his work and the commitment to accompany every young person on the path to salvation.

It came to him the night of October 21, and he narrated it the following night. [Surprisingly] C ...E... a boy from Casale Monferrato, had the same dream, during which he seemed to be with Don Bosco, talking to him. In the morning the boy was so deeply impressed that he went to tell it all to his teacher, who urged him to report to Don Bosco. The youngster met Don Bosco as he was coming down the stairs to look for the boy and tell him the very same dream. [Here is the dream]:

Don Bosco seemed to be in a vast valley swarming with thousands and thousands of boys-so many, in fact, that their number surpassed belief. Among them he could see all past and present pupils; the rest, perhaps, were yet to come. Scattered among them were priests and clerics then at the Oratory.

A lofty bank blocked one end of the valley. As Don Bosco wondered what to do with all those boys, a voice said to him: "Do you see that bank? Well, both you and the boys must reach its summit."

At Don Bosco's word, all those youngsters dashed toward the

bank. The priests too ran up the slope, pushing boys ahead, lifting up those who fell, and hoisting on their shoulders those who were too tired to climb further. Father Rua, his sleeves rolled up, kept working hardest of all, gripping two boys at a time and literally hurling them up to the top of the bank where they landed on their feet and merrily scampered about. Meanwhile Father Cagliero and Father Francesia ran back and forth encouraging the youngsters to climb.

It didn't take long for all of them to make it to the top.

"Now what shall we do?" Don Bosco asked.

"You must all climb each of the ten bills before you," the voice replied.

"Impossible! So many young, frail boys will never make it!"

"Those who can't will be carried," the voice countered. At this very moment, at the far end of the bank, appeared a gorgeous, triangular-shaped wagon, too beautiful for words. Its three wheels swiveled in all directions. Three shafts rose from its comers and joined to support a richly embroidered banner, carrying in large letters the inscription *Innocentia* [Innocence]. A wide band of rich material was draped about the wagon, bearing the legend: *Adiutorio Dei Altissimi, Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*. [With the help of the Most High, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.]

Glittering with gold and gems, the wagon came to a stop in the boys' midst. At a given order, five hundred of the smaller ones climbed into it. Among the untold thousands, only these few hundred were still innocent.

As Don Bosco kept wondering which way to go, a wide, level road strewn with thorns opened before him. Suddenly there also appeared six white-clad former pupils who had died at the Oratory. Holding aloft another splendid banner with the inscription *Poenitentia* [Penance], they placed themselves at the head of the multitude which was to walk the whole way. As the signal to move was given, many priests seized the wagon's prow and led the way, followed by the six white-clad boys and the rest of the multitude.

The lads in the wagon began singing *Laudate pueri Dominum* [Praise the Lord, you children – Ps. 112, 1] with indescribable sweetness.

Don Bosco kept going forward, enthralled by their heavenly melody, but, on an impulse, he turned to find out if the boys were following. To his deep regret he noticed that many had stayed behind in the valley, while many others had turned back. Heartbroken, he wanted to retrace his steps to persuade those boys to follow him and to help them along, but he was absolutely forbidden to do so. "Those poor boys will be lost!" he protested.

"So much the worse for them," he was told. "They too received the call but refused to follow you. They saw the road they had to travel. They had their chance."

Don Bosco insisted, pleaded, and begged, but in vain.

"You too must obey," he was told. He had to walk on.

He was still smarting with this pain when he became aware of another sad fact: a large number of those riding in the wagon had gradually fallen off, so that a mere hundred and fifty still stood under the banner of innocence. His heart was aching with unbearable grief. He hoped that it was only a dream and made every effort to awake, but unfortunately it was all too real. He clapped his hands and heard their sound; he groaned and heard his sighs resound through the room; he wanted to banish this horrible vision and could not.

"My dear boys," he exclaimed at this point of his narration, "I recognized those of you who stayed behind in the valley and those who turned back or fell from the wagon. I saw you all. You can be sure that I will do my utmost to save you. Many of you whom I urged to go to confession did not accept my invitation. For heaven's sake, save your souls."

Many of those who had fallen off the wagon joined those who were walking. Meanwhile the singing in the wagon continued, and it was so sweet that it gradually abated Don Bosco's sorrow. Seven hills had already been climbed. As the boys reached the eighth, they found themselves in a wonderful village where they stopped for a brief rest. The houses were

indescribably beautiful and luxurious.

In telling the boys of this village, Don Bosco remarked, "I could repeat what St. Teresa said about heavenly things-to speak of them is to belittle them. They are just too beautiful for words. I shall only say that the doorposts of these houses seemed to be made of gold, crystal, and diamonds all at once. They were a most wonderful, satisfying, pleasing sight. The fields were dotted with trees laden simultaneously with blossoms, buds, and fruit. It was out of this world!" The boys scattered all over, eager to see everything and to taste the fruit.

(It was in this village that the boy from Casale met Don Bosco and talked at length with him. Both of them remembered quite vividly the details of their conversation. The two dreams had been a singular coincidence.)

Here another surprise awaited Don Bosco. His boys suddenly looked like old men: toothless, wrinkled, white-haired, bent over, lame, leaning on canes. He was stunned, but the voice said, "Don't be surprised. It's been years and years since you left that valley. The music made your trip seem so short. If you want proof, look at yourself in the mirror and you will see that I am telling the truth." Don Bosco was handed a mirror. He himself had grown old, with his face deeply lined and his few remaining teeth decayed.

The march resumed. Now and then the boys asked to be allowed to stop and look at the novelties around them, but he kept urging them on. "We are neither hungry nor thirsty," he said. "We have no need to stop. Let's keep going!"

Far away, on the tenth hill, arose a light which grew increasingly larger and brighter, as though pouring from a gigantic doorway. Singing resumed, so enchanting that its like may possibly be heard and enjoyed only in paradise. It is simply indescribable because it did not come from instruments or human throats. Don Bosco was so overjoyed that he awoke, only to find himself in bed.

He then explained his dream thus: "The valley is this world; the bank symbolizes the obstacles we have to surmount in

detaching ourselves from it; the wagon is self-evident. The young sters on foot were those who lost their innocence but repented of their sins." He also added that the ten hills symbolized the Ten Commandments whose observance leads to eternal life. He concluded by saying that he was ready to tell some boys confidentially what they had been doing in the dream: whether they had remained in the valley or fallen off the wagon.

When he came down from the stand, a pupil, Anthony Ferraris, approached him and told him within our hearing that, the night before, he had dreamed that he was with his mother and that when the latter had asked him whether he would be coming home next Easter, he had replied that by then he would be in paradise. He then whispered something else in Don Bosco's ear. Anthony Ferraris died on March 16, 1865.

We jotted down Don Bosco's dream that very evening, October 22, 1864, and added this note: "We are sure that in explaining the dream Don Bosco tried to cover up what is most mystifying, at least in some instances. The explanation that the ten hills symbolized the Ten Commandments does not convince us. We rather believe that the eighth hill on which Don Bosco called a halt and saw himself as an old man symbolizes the end of his life in the seventies. The future will tell."

The future is now past; facts have borne out our belief. The dream revealed Don Bosco's life-span. For comparative purposes, let us match this dream with that of The Wheel of Eternity, which we came to learn only years later. In that dream each tum of the wheel symbolized a decade, and this also seems to be the case in the trek from hill to hill. Each hill stands for a decade, and the ten hills represent a century, man's maximum life-span. In his life's first decade, Don Bosco, as a young boy, begins his mission among his companions at Becchi and starts on his journey; he climbs seven hills-seven decades-and reaches the age of seventy; he climbs the eighth hill and goes no farther. He sees beautiful buildings and meadows, symbols of the Salesian Society which, through

God's infinite goodness, has grown and borne fruit. He has still a long way to go on the eighth hill and therefore sets out again, but he does not reach the ninth because he wakes up. Thus he did not live out his eighth decade; he died at the age of seventy-two years and five months.

What do our readers think of this interpretation? On the following evening, Don Bosco asked us our opinion of the dream. We replied that it did not concern only the boys, but showed also the worldwide spread of the Salesian Society.

"What do you mean?" a confrere countered. "We already have schools at Mirabella and Lanzo, and we'll have a few more in Piedmont. What else do you want?"

"No," we insisted. "This dream portends far greater things."

Don Bosco smiled and nodded approval.

(1864, BM VII, 467-471)

The wise man

Emperor Cyrus the Great loved to converse amiably with a very wise friend named Akkad.

One day, having just returned exhausted from a war campaign against the Medes, Cyrus stopped by his old friend to spend a few days with him.

"I am exhausted, dear Akkad. All these battles are wearing me out. How I wish I could stop and spend time with you, chatting on the banks of the Euphrates...."

"But, dear sire, by now you have defeated the Medes, what will you do?"

"I want to seize Babylon and subdue it."

"And after Babylon?"

"I will subdue Greece."

"And after Greece?"

"I will conquer Rome."

“And after that?”

“I will stop. I will return here and we will spend happy days conversing amiably on the banks of the Euphrates...”

“And why, sire, my friend, shall we not begin at once?”

There will always be another day to say “I love you”.

Remember your loved ones today, and whisper in their ear, tell them how much you love them. Take the time to say “I am sorry”, “Please listen to me”, “Thank you”.

Tomorrow you will not regret what you did today.

The cricket and the Coin

A wise man from India had a close friend who lived in Milan. They had met in India, where the Italian had gone with his family on a tourist trip. The Indian had acted as a guide for the Italian, taking them to explore the most characteristic corners of his homeland.

Grateful, the Milanese friend had invited the Indian to his home. He wanted to return the favour and introduce him to his city. The Indian was very reluctant to leave, but then gave in to his Italian friend's insistence and one fine day he disembarked from a plane at Malpensa.

The next day, the Milanese and the Indian were walking through the city centre. The Indian, with his chocolate-coloured face, black beard and yellow turban attracted the gaze of passers-by, and the Milanese man walked around proud to have such an exotic friend.

Suddenly, in Piazza San Babila, the Indian stopped and asked, “Do you hear what I hear?” The Milanese, a little bewildered, strained his ears as much as he could, but admitted that he heard nothing but the great noise of the city traffic.

“There is a cricket singing nearby,” the Indian continued,

confidently.

"You are wrong," replied the Milanese. "I only hear the noise of the city. Besides, there can't be crickets around here."

"I am not mistaken. I hear the song of a cricket," retorted the Indian and resolutely started searching among the leaves of some shrunken saplings. After a while he pointed out to his friend, who was watching him sceptically, a small insect, a splendid singing cricket, which was cowering and grumbling at those disturbing his concert.

"Did you see that there was a cricket there?" said the Indian. "It's true," admitted the Milanese. "You Indians have much sharper hearing than us Whites..."

"This time it is you who are wrong," smiled the wise Indian. "Be careful..." The Indian pulled a coin out of his pocket and pretending not to notice, dropped it on the pavement.

Immediately four or five people turned to look.

"Did you see that?" the Indian explained. "This coin's jungle was more thinner and fainter than the cricket's trill. Yet have you noticed how many Whites heard it?"

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Interview with the Rector Major, Fr. Fabio Attard

We had an exclusive interview with the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr. Fabio Attard, looking back over the key stages of his vocation and his human and spiritual journey. His vocation began in the oratory and was consolidated through a rich formative journey that took him from Ireland to Tunisia, Malta, and Rome. From 2008 to 2020, he was General Councillor

*for Youth Ministry, a role he carried out with a multicultural vision acquired through experiences in different contexts. His central message is **holiness** as the foundation of Salesian educational action: 'I would like to see a holier Congregation,' he says, emphasising that professional efficiency must be rooted in consecrated identity.*

What is your vocation story?

I was born in Gozo, Malta, on 23 March 1959, the fifth of seven children. At the time of my birth, my father was a pharmacist in a hospital, while my mother had started a small fabric and dressmaking shop, which over time grew into a small chain of five shops. She was a very hard-working woman, but the business always remained a family affair.

I attended local primary and secondary schools. A very beautiful and special part of my childhood was that my father was a lay catechist at the oratory, which until 1965 had been run by the Salesians. As a young man, he had attended that oratory and had remained there as the only lay catechist. When I started attending at the age of six, the Salesians had just left. A young priest (who is still alive) took over and continued the activities of the oratory in the same Salesian spirit, having himself lived there as a seminarian.

We continued with catechism, daily Benediction of the Eucharistic, football, theatre, choir, trips, parties... everything you normally experience in an oratory. There were many children and young people, and I grew up in that environment. In practice, my life took place between my family and the oratory. I was also an altar boy in my parish. So, after finishing high school, I turned towards the priesthood, because I had had this desire in my heart since I was a child.

Today I realise how much I was influenced by that young priest, whom I looked up to with admiration. He was always there with us in the courtyard, in the activities of the oratory. However, at that time the Salesians were no longer there. So, I entered the seminary, where at that time there

were two years of preparatory studies as an intern. During the third year – which corresponded to the first year of philosophy – I met a family friend about 35 years old, an adult vocation, who had entered as a Salesian aspirant (he is still alive today and is a coadjutor). When he took this step, a fire was lit inside me. And with the help of my spiritual director, I began a vocational discernment. It was an important but also demanding journey. I was 19 years old, but that spiritual guide helped me to seek God's will, and not simply my own. So, in my last year – the fourth year of philosophy – instead of following him to the seminary, I lived as a Salesian aspirant, completing the required two years of philosophy.

My family environment was strongly marked by faith. We attended Mass every day, recited the Rosary at home, and were very close-knit. Even today, although our parents are in Heaven, we maintain that same unity among brothers and sisters.

Another family experience marked me deeply, although I only realised it over time. My brother, the second in the family, died at the age of 25 from kidney failure. Today, with advances in medicine, he would still be alive thanks to dialysis and transplants, but back then there weren't many options. I was by his side during the last three years of his life. We shared the same room and I often helped him at night. He was a peaceful, cheerful young man who lived his fragility with extraordinary joy.

I was 16 when he died. Fifty years have passed, but when I think back to that time and that daily experience of closeness made up of small gestures, I realise how much it has marked my life.

I was born into a family where there was faith, a sense of work and shared responsibility. My parents are two extraordinary examples for me. They lived their cross with great faith and serenity, without ever burdening anyone, and

at the same time, they knew how to convey the joy of family life. I can say that I had a very happy childhood. We were neither rich nor poor, but always modest and discreet. They taught us to work, to manage resources well, not to waste, to live with dignity, elegance, and above all, with attention to the poor and the sick.

How did your family react when you made the decision to follow your vocation as a religious?

The time had come when, together with my spiritual director, we had made it clear that my path was that of the Salesians. I also had to tell my parents. I remember it was a quiet evening; we were eating together, just the three of us. At one point I said, "I want to tell you something. I have made my discernment and I have decided to join the Salesians."

My father was delighted. He replied immediately, "May the Lord bless you." My mother, on the other hand, began to cry, as all mothers do. She asked me, "So you're leaving?" But my father intervened gently and firmly, "Whether he leaves or not, this is his path."

They blessed me and encouraged me. Those moments will remain etched in my memory forever.

I particularly remember what happened towards the end of my parents' lives. My father died in 1997, and six months later my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

At that time, my superiors had asked me to go and teach at the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS), but I didn't know what to do. My mother was not well and was nearing the end of her life. Talking to my brothers, they said to me, "Do what your superiors ask you to do."

I was at home and talked to her about it. "Mom, my superiors are asking me to go to Rome."

With the clarity of a true mother, she replied, "Listen, my son, if it were up to me, I would ask you to stay here, because I have no one else and I don't want to be a burden on your brothers. But..." – and here she said something that I

carry in my heart – “You are not mine; you belong to God. Do what your superiors tell you.”

That sentence, spoken a year before her death, is a treasure for me, a precious legacy. My mother was an intelligent, wise, and perceptive woman. She knew that her illness would lead to her death, but at that moment she was able to be free inside. Free to say words that confirmed once again the gift she herself had given to God: offering a son to the consecrated life.

My family's reaction, from the beginning to the end, was always marked by deep respect and great support. And even today, my brothers and sisters continue to carry on this spirit.

What has been your formative journey from novitiate to today?

It has been a very rich and varied journey. I began my pre-novitiate in Malta, then I did my novitiate in Dublin, Ireland. It was a truly beautiful experience.

After the novitiate, my companions moved to Maynooth to study philosophy at the university, but I had already completed my studies. For this reason, my superiors asked me to remain at the novitiate for another year, where I taught Italian and Latin. After that, I returned to Malta for two years of internship, which were very beautiful and enriching.

I was then sent to Rome to study theology at the Pontifical Salesian University, where I spent three extraordinary years. Those years gave me great open-mindedness. We lived in the student residence with forty brothers from twenty different countries: Asia, Europe, Latin America... even the teaching staff was international. It was the mid-1980s, about twenty years after the Second Vatican Council, and there was still a lot of enthusiasm in the air. There were lively theological debates, liberation theology, and interest in method and practice. Those studies taught me to read faith not only as intellectual content, but as a choice of life.

After those three years, I continued with two more years of specialisation in moral theology at the Alfonsian Academy with the Redemptorist fathers. There, too, I met significant figures, such as the famous Bernhard Häring, with whom I formed a personal friendship and went to talk to him regularly every month. It was a total of five years – between my bachelor's and licentiate degrees – that deeply formed me from a theological point of view.

Afterwards, I volunteered for the missions, and my superiors sent me to Tunisia, together with another Salesian, to re-establish the Salesian presence in the Country. We took over a school run by a female congregation which, having no more vocations, was about to close. It was a school with 700 students, so we had to learn French and also Arabic. To prepare ourselves, we spent a few months in Lyon, France, and then devoted ourselves to studying Arabic.

I stayed there for three years. It was another great experience because we found ourselves living the Salesian faith and charism in a context where we could not speak explicitly about Jesus. However, it was possible to build educational programmes based on human values: respect, availability, truth. Our witness was silent but eloquent. In that environment, I learned to know and love the Muslim world. Everyone – students, teachers, and families – were Muslims, and they welcomed us with great warmth. They made us feel part of their family. I returned to Tunisia several times and always found the same respect and appreciation, regardless of our religious affiliation.

After that experience, I returned to Malta and worked for five years in the social field. In particular, I worked in a Salesian house that welcomes young people in need of more attentive educational support, including residential care.

After these eight years of pastoral work (between Tunisia and Malta), I was offered the opportunity to complete my

doctorate. I chose to return to Ireland because the subject was related to conscience according to the thinking of Cardinal John Henry Newman, now a saint. After completing my doctorate, the Rector Major at the time, Fr. Juan Edmundo Vecchi – of blessed memory – asked me to join the Pontifical Salesian University as a professor of moral theology.

Looking back on my entire journey, from aspirant to doctorate, I can say that it has been a combination of experiences not only in terms of content but also in terms of very different cultural contexts. I thank the Lord and the Congregation for offering me the opportunity to experience such a varied and rich formation.

So, you know Maltese because it is your mother tongue, English because it is the second language in Malta, Latin because you taught it, Italian because you studied in Italy, French and Arabic because you were in Manouba, Tunisia... How many languages do you know?

Five or six languages, more or less. However, when people ask me about languages, I always say that it is a bit of a historical coincidence.

In Malta, we grow up with two languages: Maltese and English, and we study a third language at school. In my day, Italian was also taught. Then, I had a natural aptitude for languages, so I also chose Latin.

Later, when I went to Tunisia, I had to learn French and Arabic.

In Rome, living with many Spanish-speaking students, my ear got used to it, and when I was elected Councillor for Youth Ministry, I also studied Spanish a little, which is a very beautiful language.

All languages are beautiful. Of course, learning them requires commitment, study, and practice. Some people are more gifted than others; it is part of one's personal disposition. But it is neither a merit nor a fault. It is simply a gift, a natural predisposition.

From 2008 to 2020, you served two terms as General Councillor for Youth Ministry. How did your experience help you in this mission?

When the Lord entrusts us with a mission, we bring with us all the baggage of experiences we have accumulated over time.

Having lived in different cultural contexts, I did not run the risk of seeing everything through the filter of a single culture. I am European; I come from the Mediterranean, from a Country that was a British colony, but I have had the grace to live in international, multicultural communities.

My years of study at UPS also helped me a lot. We had professors who did not just impart knowledge, but taught us to synthesise and develop a method. For example, when studying Church history, we understood how essential it was to understand patristics. When studying biblical theology, we learned to connect it with sacramental theology, morality, and the history of spirituality. In short, they taught us to think organically.

This ability to synthesise, this architecture of thought, then becomes part of your personal formation. When you study theology, you learn to identify key points and connect them. The same applies to pastoral, pedagogical or philosophical proposals. When you meet people of great depth, you absorb not only what they say, but also how they say it, and this shapes your style.

Another important element is that, at the time of my election, I had already had experiences in missionary environments, where the Catholic religion was practically absent, and I had worked with marginalised and vulnerable people. I had also gained some experience in the university world and, at the same time, I had devoted myself a lot to spiritual accompaniment.

Furthermore, between 2005 and 2008 – just after my experience at the UPS – the Archdiocese of Malta asked me to found a Pastoral Formation Institute, following a diocesan synod that

had recognised the need for it. The archbishop entrusted me with the task of starting it from scratch. The first thing I did was to build a team of priests, religious, and lay people – men and women. We created a new formation method, which is still used today. The institute continues to function very well, and in some ways that experience was a valuable preparation for the work I did later in youth ministry.

From the beginning, I have always believed in teamwork and collaboration with lay people. My first experience as a director was precisely in this style: a stable educative team, today we would call it a CEP (Educative-Pastoral Community), with regular, not occasional, meetings. We met every week with educators and professionals. And this approach, which over time has become a method, has remained a reference point for me.

Added to this is my academic experience: six years as a lecturer at the Salesian Pontifical University, where students came from over a hundred countries, and then as an examiner and director of doctoral theses at the Alfonsian Academy. I believe that all this has prepared me to live this responsibility with clarity and vision.

So, when the Congregation asked me to take on this role during the General Chapter of 2008, I already had a broad, multicultural vision. This helped me because bringing together diversity was not difficult for me; it was part of normality. Of course, it wasn't simply a matter of making a 'fruit salad' of experiences; it was necessary to find the common threads, to give coherence and unity.

What I was able to experience as General Councillor was not a personal achievement. I believe that any Salesian, if he had had the same opportunities and support from the Congregation, could have had similar experiences and made his own generous contribution.

Is there a prayer, a Salesian goodnight ritual, a habit that you never fail to do?

Devotion to Mary. At home we grew up with the daily Rosary, recited as a family. It was not an obligation; it was something natural. We did it before meals, because we always ate together. Back then it was possible. Today perhaps it is less so, but back then that was how we lived, the family together, shared prayer, the common table.

At first perhaps, I did not realise how deep that Marian devotion was. But as the years passed, when you begin to distinguish what is essential from what is secondary, I realised how much that maternal presence had accompanied my life.

Devotion to Mary is expressed in different ways: the daily Rosary, when possible; a moment of pause before an image or statue of Our Lady; a simple prayer, but one made from the heart. These are gestures that accompany the journey of faith.

Of course, there are some fixed points: daily Eucharist and daily meditation. These are pillars that are not discussed; they are lived. Not only because we are consecrated, but because we are believers. And faith is lived only by nourishing it. When we nourish it, it grows in us. And only if it grows in us can we help it to grow in others. For us, as educators, it is clear: if our faith does not translate into concrete life, everything else becomes a facade.

These practices – prayer, meditation, devotion – are not reserved for saints. They are an expression of honesty. If I have made a choice of faith, I also have a responsibility to cultivate it. Otherwise, everything is reduced to something external, apparent. And this, over time, does not hold up.

If you could go back, would you make the same choices?

Absolutely yes. There have been very difficult moments in my life, as there are for everyone. I don't want to come across as the 'victim of the moment'. I believe that every person, in

order to grow, must go through phases of darkness, moments of desolation, loneliness, of feeling betrayed or unjustly accused. And I have experienced these moments. But I have had the grace of having a spiritual director at my side.

When you go through certain hardships accompanied by someone else, you can sense that everything God allows has a meaning, a purpose. And when you come out of that 'tunnel', you discover that you are a different, a more mature person. It is as if, through that trial, we are transformed.

If I had been alone, I would have risked making wrong decisions, without vision, blinded by the fatigue of the moment. When you are angry, when you feel alone, it is not the time to decide. It is the time to walk, to ask for help, to be accompanied.

Going through certain passages with someone's help is like being dough put in the oven; the fire cooks it, makes it mature. So, when asked if I would change anything, my answer is no. Because even the most difficult moments, even those I didn't understand, have helped me become the person I am today.

Do I feel like a perfect person? No. But I feel that I am on a journey, every day, trying to live in the mercy and goodness of God.

And today, as I give this interview, I can say with sincerity that I feel happy. Perhaps I have not yet fully understood what it means to be Rector Major – it takes time – but I know that it is a mission, not a walk in the park. It brings with it its difficulties. However, I feel loved and esteemed by my collaborators and by the whole Congregation.

And everything I am today, I am thanks to what I have experienced, even in the most difficult moments. I would not change them. They have made me who I am.

Do you have any projects that are particularly close to your

heart?

Yes. If I close my eyes and imagine something I really want, I would like to see a holier Congregation. Holier. Holier.

I was deeply inspired by Fr. Pascual Chávez's first letter in 2002, entitled "Be saints". That letter touched me deeply and left a mark on me.

There are many projects, all of them valid, well structured, with broad and deep visions. But what value do they have if they are carried out by people who are not holy? We can do excellent work, we can even be appreciated – and this, in itself, is not a bad thing – but we do not work to achieve success. Our starting point is an identity; we are consecrated persons.

What we offer only makes sense if it comes from there. Of course, we want our projects to be successful, but even more than that, we want them to bring grace, to touch people deeply. It is not enough to be efficient. We must be effective in the deepest sense, effective in our witness, in our identity, in our faith.

Efficiency can exist without any religious reference. We can be excellent professionals, but that is not enough.

Our consecration is not a detail. It is the foundation. If it becomes marginal, if we put it aside to make room for efficiency, then we lose our identity.

And people are watching us. In Salesian schools, people recognise that the results are good – and that is good. But do they also recognise us as men of God? That is the question.

If they see us only as good professionals, then we are only efficient. But our life must be nourished by Him – the Way, the Truth, and the Life – not by what 'I think' or 'I want' or 'what seems right to me'.

So, rather than talking about my personal project, I prefer to talk about a deep desire, to become saints. And to talk about

it in concrete terms, not in an idealised way. When Don Bosco spoke to his boys about *study, health, and holiness*, he was not referring to a holiness made up only of prayer in the chapel. He was thinking of a holiness lived in relationship with God and nourished by relationship with God. Christian holiness is the reflection of this living and daily relationship.

What advice would you give to a young person wondering about their vocation?

I would tell them to discover, step by step, what God's plan is for them.

The vocational journey is not a question you ask and then wait for a ready answer from the Church. It is a pilgrimage. When a young person says to me, "*I don't know whether to become a Salesian or not*," I try to steer them away from that formulation. Because it is not simply a matter of deciding, "*I'm going to become a Salesian*." A vocation is not an option in relation to a 'thing'.

In my own experience, when I told my spiritual director, "I want to become a Salesian, I have to be one", he calmly made me reflect; "*Is this really God's will? Or is it just your desire?*"

And it is right for a young person to seek what he desires; it is healthy. But those who accompany him have the task of educating that search, of transforming it from initial enthusiasm into a journey of inner maturation.

"Do you want to do good? Good. Then know yourself, recognise that you are loved by God."

It is only from that deep relationship with God that the real question can emerge; "What is God's plan for me?"

Because what I want today may not be enough for me tomorrow. If vocation is reduced to what 'I like,' then it will be something fragile. Vocation, on the other hand, is an inner voice that calls us, that asks us to enter into dialogue with

God, and to respond.

When a young person reaches this point, when they are accompanied to discover that inner space where God dwells, then they truly begin to walk.

For this reason, those who accompany them must be very attentive, profound, and patient. Never superficial.

The Gospel of Emmaus is a perfect image. Jesus approaches the two disciples and listens to them even though He knows they are talking confusedly. Then, after listening to them, He begins to speak. And in the end, they invite Him; *“Stay with us, for it is nearly evening.”*

And they recognise Him in the gesture of breaking bread. Then they say to each other, *“Were not our hearts burning within us while He was talking to us on the way?”*

Today, many young people are searching. Our task as educators is not to be hasty. But to help them, calmly and gradually, to discover the greatness that is already in their hearts. Because there, in that depth, they encounter Christ. As St Augustine says, *“You were within me, and I was outside. And there I sought you.”*

Do you have a message for the Salesian Family today?

It is the same message I shared during the recent meeting of the Salesian Family Council; ***Faith. Let us root ourselves ever more deeply in the person of Christ.***

It is from this rootedness that an authentic knowledge of Don Bosco is born. When the first Salesians wanted to write a book about the real Don Bosco, they did not call it *“Don Bosco, Apostle of Youth,”* but *“Don Bosco with God”*— a text written by Fr. Eugenio Ceria in 1929.

This gives us pause for thought. Why did they, who had seen him in action every day, not choose to emphasise Don Bosco's tireless work, his organisational skills, his talent as an educator? No, they wanted to portray Don Bosco as a man deeply

united with God.

Those who knew him well did not stop at appearances but went to the root. Don Bosco was a man immersed in God.

To the Salesian Family I say: we have received a treasure. An immense gift. But every gift entails a responsibility.

In my final discourse, I said: ***“It is not enough to love Don Bosco, you have to know him.”***

And we can only truly know him if we are people of faith.

We must look at him with the eyes of faith. Only in this way can we encounter the believer that Don Bosco was, in whom the Holy Spirit acted with power, with *dýnamis*, with *cháris*, with charism, with grace.

We cannot limit ourselves to repeating certain maxims of his or recounting his miracles. Because we run the risk of dwelling on the anecdotes of Don Bosco, instead of dwelling on the story of Don Bosco, because Don Bosco is greater than Don Bosco.

This means study, reflection, depth. It means avoiding all superficiality.

And then we will be able to say with truth, ***“This is my faith, this is my charism: rooted in Christ, in the footsteps of Don Bosco.”***

Educating the Faculties of Our Spirit with Saint Francis

de Sales

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

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

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

Reason, “Divine Torch”

In an Exercise of Sleep or Spiritual Rest,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Intellect, "Eye of the Soul"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cultivating One's Intelligence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Memory and its "warehouses"

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

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

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

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

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

"We must have a just and reasonable spirit"

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

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

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

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

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

Reason, source of the four cardinal virtues

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Educating our emotions with Saint Francis de Sales

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

"I am a poor man and nothing more"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The twelve passions of the soul

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

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

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

*If good be considered in itself according to its natural goodness, it excites **love**, the first and principal passion; if*

*good be regarded as absent, it provokes us to **desire**; if being desired we think we are able to obtain it, we enter into hope; if we think we are unable, we feel **despair**; but when we possess it as present, it moves us to **joy**.*

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

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

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

Love, the first and main passion

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

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

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

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

Desire and flight

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

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

Hope and despair

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

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

Joy and sadness

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

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

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

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

In certain cases, it can lead to weeping: a

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

Courage and fear

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

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

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

Anger and the feeling of triumph

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

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

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

In search of balance

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

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

seized by an anguish that will sink him down to the ground.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

passions, affections and actions are changed into the purest gold of heavenly delight!".

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

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 name

In the Faculty of Medicine at a major university, the professor of anatomy distributed a questionnaire to all students as a final exam.

One student who had prepared meticulously answered all the questions promptly until he came to the last one.

The question was: “What is the first name of the cleaning lady?”

The student handed in the test, leaving the last answer blank. Before handing in the paper, he asked the professor if the last question on the test would count towards the grade.

“It is clear!” replied the professor. “In your career you will meet many people. They all have their own degree of importance. They deserve your attention, even with a small smile or a simple hello.”

The student never forgot the lesson and learned that the cleaning lady’s first name was Marianne.

A disciple asked Confucius, “If the king asked you to rule the country, what would be your first action?”

“I would like to learn the names of all my collaborators.”

“What nonsense! It is certainly not a matter of primary concern for a prime minister.”

“A man cannot hope to receive help from what he does not know,” replied Confucius. “If he does not know nature, he will not know God. Similarly, if he does not know who he has by his side, he will have no friends. Without friends, he will not be able to devise a plan. Without a plan, he will not be able to

direct anyone's actions. Without direction, the country will plunge into darkness and even the dancers will no longer know how to put one foot next to the other. Thus a seemingly trivial action, learning the name of the person next to you, can make a huge difference.

The incorrigible sin of our time is that everyone wants to put things right immediately and forgets that they need others to do this."

In Memoriam. Cardinal Angelo Amato, SDB

The universal Church and the Salesian Family bid farewell for the last time on December 31, 2024, to Cardinal Angelo Amato, S.D.B., emeritus Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Born in Molfetta (in the province of Bari, Italy) on 8 June 1938, he served the Holy See for many years and became a point of reference in theology, academic research, and the promotion of holiness within the Church. The funeral rites, presided over on 2 January 2025 by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, Dean of the College of Cardinals, were held at the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter's Basilica. At the conclusion, His Holiness Francis presided over the rite of the "Ultima Commendatio" and the "Valedictio," paying his homage to this illustrious son of St. John Bosco.

Below is a biographical profile retracing his life, the most significant stages of his formation, his academic and pastoral experiences, up to his mission as Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

The Origins and the Salesian Choice

Angelo Amato was born in Molfetta on 8 June 1938, the eldest

of four children in a family of shipbuilders. Growing up in an environment that fostered a spirit of commitment and responsibility, he completed his early studies at elementary schools run by the Alcantarine Sisters and the Salesian Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Molfetta. Later, he continued with middle school and, foreseeing a possible future in a maritime career, enrolled at the Nautical Institute in Bari, in the section for long-course captains. It was during his third year of studies, in October 1953, that he decided to pursue the priesthood: he left the Nautical Institute and entered the Salesian aspirantate in Torre Annunziata.

Thus, his religious vocation was intertwined from the beginning with the Salesian Family. After a probationary period, he completed his novitiate at Portici Bellavista from 1955 to 1956. On 16 August 1956—the day that Salesian tradition reserves for the first profession of the novices—he made his religious vows, becoming a Salesian of Don Bosco. From that moment on, his life would be profoundly linked to the Salesian charism, with particular attention to youth and education.

After the novitiate, Angelo Amato attended the philosophical seminary in San Gregorio in Catania, where he obtained his classical high school diploma (in 1959) and, subsequently, a degree in Philosophy at the then Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum in Rome (today the Pontifical University of the Salesian Order). In 1962 he made his perpetual profession, definitively consolidating his belonging to the Salesian Congregation. In those same years, he also undertook a practical internship at the Salesian College in Cisternino (Brindisi), teaching literature at the middle school level—an experience that immediately brought him into contact with youth apostolate and teaching, two dimensions that would mark his entire mission.

Ordination and Theological Studies

The next step in Angelo Amato's journey was studying Theology at the Theological Faculty of the Salesian University, also in Rome, where he earned his licentiate in Theology. Ordained a

priest on 22 December 1967, he decided to further specialize and enrolled at the Pontifical Gregorian University. In 1974, he obtained his doctorate in Theology there, thus joining the ranks of the university teaching staff. The field of theology fascinated him deeply, a passion that would be reflected in the great number of publications and essays he authored over the course of his academic career.

The Experience in Greece and the Research on the Orthodox World

A decisive phase in Father Angelo Amato's formation was his stay in Greece, beginning in 1977, promoted by the then Secretariat for Christian Unity (today the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity). Initially, he spent four months at the Jesuit residence in Athens, where he devoted himself to the study of modern Greek—both written and spoken—in preparation for enrolling at the University of Thessaloniki. Once admitted to the courses, he obtained a scholarship from the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which allowed him to reside at Monì Vlatadon (Vlatadon Monastery), home to an institute for patristic studies (Idrima ton Paterikon Meleton) and a rich library specializing in Orthodox theology, enhanced by microfilms of the manuscripts of Mount Athos.

At the University of Thessaloniki, he attended courses in the history of dogmas with Professor Jannis Kaloghiros and systematic dogmatics with Jannis Romanidis. Simultaneously, he carried out an important study on the sacrament of penance in Greek Orthodox theology from the 16th to the 20th century: this research, supported by the well-known Greek patrologist Konstantinos Christou, was published in 1982 in the series *Análekta Vlatádon*. This period of ecumenical exchange and in-depth acquaintance with the Eastern Christian world greatly enriched Amato's formation, making him an expert in Orthodox theology and the dynamics of dialogue between East and West.

Return to Rome and Academic Commitment at the Pontifical Salesian University

Back in Rome, Angelo Amato assumed the role of professor of Christology in the Theological Faculty of the Pontifical Salesian University. His scholarly abilities and clarity of exposition did not go unnoticed: he was appointed Dean of the same Theological Faculty for two terms (1981–1987 and 1994–1999). Furthermore, between 1997 and 2000, he served as Vice-Rector of the University.

During those years, he also gained further international experience: in 1988, he was sent to Washington to deepen his knowledge of the theology of religions and to complete his manual on Christology. Alongside his academic work, he held advisory roles for several bodies of the Holy See: he was a consultor for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and for the Pontifical Councils for Promoting Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue. He also served as an advisor to the Pontifical International Marian Academy, underlining his interest in Mariology—a field typical of the Salesian spirituality centered on Mary Help of Christians.

In 1999, he was appointed Prelate Secretary of the restructured Pontifical Academy of Theology and Director of the newly founded theological journal *Path*. Moreover, between 1996 and 2000, he was part of the theological-historical commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, thus contributing significantly to the organization of the jubilee celebrations.

Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Episcopal Ministry

On 19 December 2002, a very significant appointment came: Pope John Paul II designated him Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, concurrently elevating him to the rank of Archbishop and assigning him the titular see of Sila, with the personal title of Archbishop. He received episcopal ordination on 6 January 2003 in the Vatican Basilica, from none other than John Paul II himself (now Saint John Paul II). In this role, Monsignor Angelo Amato collaborated with the then Prefect, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (the future Benedict

XVI). The Dicastery's task was, and remains, to promote and safeguard the Catholic doctrine throughout the world. During his mandate, the new Archbishop continued to maintain an academic approach, combining his specialized expertise in theology with ecclesial service aimed at upholding the orthodoxy of the faith.

Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and the Cardinalate

A further step forward in his ecclesiastical career came on 9 July 2008: Pope Benedict XVI appointed him Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, succeeding Cardinal José Saraiva Martins. In this dicastery, Monsignor Amato was responsible for overseeing the processes of beatification and canonization of the Servants of God, discerning heroic virtues, miracles, and the testimony of those who, throughout history, have become saints and blessed in the Catholic Church.

At the Consistory of 20 November 2010, Benedict XVI created him a Cardinal, assigning him the deaconry of Santa Maria in Aquiro. With his new red hat, he was able to participate in the conclave of March 2013, which elected Pope Francis. During Francis's pontificate, Cardinal Amato was confirmed "*donec aliter provideatur*" as Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints (on 19 December 2013), continuing in this role until 31 August 2018, when he resigned upon reaching the age limits, leaving a lasting legacy through the number of beatifications and canonizations examined during those years.

Commitment to the Local Church: The Example of Don Tonino Bello

A particular testimony to Cardinal Amato's bond with his homeland occurred in November 2013, when he traveled to the Cathedral of Molfetta for the closure of the diocesan phase of the beatification and canonization process of Don Tonino Bello (1935–1993). The latter, Bishop of Molfetta from 1982 to 1986, was dearly loved for his commitment to peace and the poor. On

that occasion, Cardinal Amato emphasized that holiness is not the privilege of a select few but a universal vocation: all believers, inspired by the person and message of Christ, are called to live their faith deeply, with hope and charity.

Final Years and Death

After stepping down from the leadership of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Cardinal Angelo Amato continued to serve the Church by participating in events and ceremonies, always making his deep theological knowledge available. His commitment was always marked by a refined human touch, evident respect for his interlocutors, and a humility that often moved all who met him.

On 3 May 2021, his deaconry of Santa Maria in Aquiro was elevated *pro hac vice* to a presbyteral title, further honoring his long and faithful dedication to ecclesiastical ministry.

The death of the Cardinal, which occurred on 31 December 2024 at the age of 86, has left a void in the Salesian Family and in the College of Cardinals, now composed of 252 cardinals, of whom 139 are electors and 113 are non-electors. The announcement of his passing elicited reactions of sorrow and gratitude throughout the ecclesial world: the Pontifical Salesian University, in particular, recalled his many years of teaching as a professor of Christology, his two mandates as Dean of the Theological Faculty, and the period during which he served as Vice-Rector of the institution.

A Legacy of Fidelity and the Pursuit of Holiness

In reflecting on the figure of Cardinal Angelo Amato, certain traits emerge that characterized both his ministry and his testimony. First and foremost, his profile as a Salesian religious: his fidelity to his vows, his deep bond with the charism of St. John Bosco, and his attention to youth, as well as intellectual and spiritual formation, represent a constant guiding line throughout his life. Secondly, his vast theological production—particularly in the areas of Christology and Mariology—and his contribution to dialogue

with the Orthodox world, of which he was a passionate scholar. Undoubtedly, his service to the Holy See as Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and as a Cardinal, underlines the importance of his role in promoting and safeguarding the Catholic doctrine, as well as in valuing the witnesses of holiness. Cardinal Amato was a privileged witness to the spiritual richness that the universal Church has expressed over the centuries, and he played an active role in the recognition of figures who serve as beacons for God's people.

Moreover, his participation in a conclave (that of 2013), his closeness to great Pontiffs such as John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, and his collaboration with numerous dicasteries testify to a service given in every possible dimension—a fusion of academic insight and pastoral governance within the Church.

The death of Cardinal Angelo Amato leaves behind a legacy of doctrine, ecumenical sensitivity, and love for the Church. The Diocese of Molfetta, which had already experienced his participation in the beatification process of Don Tonino Bello, remembers him as a man of faith and tireless pastor, capable of uniting the demands of theological discipline with those of pastoral charity. The Salesian Family, in particular, recognizes in him the fruit of a well-lived charism, imbued with that “educational charity” that, since Don Bosco, has accompanied the journey of countless consecrated individuals and priests around the world, always in service to the young and the needy.

Today, the Church entrusts him to the mercy of the Lord, in the certainty that, as the Pontiff himself affirmed, Cardinal Amato, a “good and vigilant servant,” may now behold the face of God in the glory of the saints he helped to recognize. His testimony, made concrete by a life devoted to service and by profound theological preparation, remains as a sign and encouragement to all who wish to serve the Church with fidelity, meekness, and dedication, until the end of their

earthly pilgrimage.

In this way, the message of hope and holiness that animated every action of his finds its fulfillment: whoever sows in the field of obedience, truth, and charity reaps a fruit that becomes a common good, an inspiration, and a light for future generations. And this, ultimately, is the most beautiful legacy that Cardinal Angelo Amato leaves to his religious family, to the Diocese of Molfetta, and to the entire Church.

And We Must Not Overlook the Scriptural Legacy Left by Cardinal Angelo Amato.

Below is a list – surely not complete – of his publications:

No.	Year	Title	Info
1	1974	I pronunciamenti tridentini sulla necessità della confessione sacramentale nei canoni 6-9 della sessione XIV (25 novembre 1551)	Essay on conciliar hermeneutics
2	1975	Problemi attuali di cristologia	Lectures of the Salesian Theological Faculty 1974–1975
3	1976	La Chiesa locale: prospettive teologiche e pastorali	Lectures of the Salesian Theological Faculty 1975–1976

4	1977	Cristologia metaecclesiale?	Considerations on E. Schillebeeckx's "metadogmatic" Christology
5	1977	Il Gesù storico	Problems and interpretations
6	1977	Temi teologico-pastorali	
7	1978	Annuncio cristiano e cultura contemporanea	
8	1978	Studi di cristologia patristica attuale	Concerning two recent publications by Alois Grillmeier
9	1979	Il sacramento della penitenza nelle "Risposte" del patriarca Geremia II ai teologi luterani di Tübingen (1576,1579,1581)	
10	1980	Annunciare Cristo ai giovani	(Co-author)

11	1980	Il Cristo biblico-ecclesiale	Proposal of a criteria-based synthesis on the essential contents of contemporary Christological proclamation
12	1980	Il Cristo biblico-ecclesiale latinoamericano	The “religious-popular” Christological module of Puebla
13	1980	La figura di Gesù Cristo nella cultura contemporanea	Christ in the conflict of interpretations
14	1980	Selezione orientativa sulle pubblicazioni cristologiche in Italia	
15	1980	L'enciclica del dialogo rivisitata	Concerning the International Study Conference on Paul VI's “ <i>Ecclesiam suam</i> ” (Rome, 24–26 October 1980)

16	1981	Il Salvatore e la Vergine-Madre: la maternità salvifica di Maria e le cristologie contemporanee	Proceedings of the 3rd International Mariological Symposium (Rome, October 1980)
17	1981	La risurrezione di Gesù nella teologia contemporanea	
18	1981	Mariologia in contesto	An example of inculturated theology: "The mestizo face of Our Lady of Guadalupe" (Puebla no. 446)
19	1982	Il sacramento della penitenza nella teologia greco-ortodossa	Historical-dogmatic studies, 16th–20th century
20	1983	Inculturazione-Contestualizzazione: teologia in contesto	Elements of selected bibliography
21	1983	La dimension "thérapeutique" du sacrement de la pénitence dans la théologie et la praxis de l'Église gréco-orthodoxe	

22	1984	Come conoscere oggi Maria	
23	1984	Inculturazione e formazione salesiana	Proceedings of the meeting in Rome, 12–17 September 1983 (co- author)
24	1984	Maria e lo Spirito Santo	Proceedings of the 4th International Mariological Symposium (Rome, October 1982)
25	1985	Come collaborare al progetto di Dio con Maria	Principles and proposals
26	1987	La Madre della misericordia	
27	1988	<u>Gesù il Signore</u>	Essay on Christology
28	1989	Essere donna	Studies on John Paul II's Apostolic Letter <i>"Mulieris dignitatem"</i> (co-author)

29	1990	Cristologia e religioni non cristiane	Problems and current issues: introductory considerations
30	1991	Come pregare con Maria	
31	1991	Studio dei Padri e teologia dogmatica	Reflections following the Instruction of the Congregation for Catholic Education of 10 November 1989 (=IPC)
32	1991	<i>Verbi revelati 'accommodata praedicatio' lex omnis evangelizationis"</i> (GS n.44)	Historical-theological reflections on inculturation
33	1992	<u>Angeli e demoni Il dramma della storia tra il bene e il male</u>	The drama of history between good and evil
34	1992	Dio Padre – Dio Madre	Preliminary reflections
35	1992	Il mistero di Maria e la morale cristiana	

36	1992	Il posto di Maria nella “Nuova evangelizzazione”	
37	1993	Cristologia della <i>Secunda Clementis</i>	Initial considerations
38	1993	Lettera cristologica dei primi concili ecumenici	
39	1994	<u>Trinità in contesto</u>	
40	1996	Maria presso la Croce, volto misericordioso di Dio per il nostro tempo	Marian Conference of the Servants of Mary Reparatrix, Rovigo, 12–15 September 1995
41	1996	<i>Tertio millennio adveniente:</i> Lettera apostolica di Giovanni Paolo II	Text and pastoral theological commentary
42	1996	<u>Vita consecrata. Una prima lettura teologica</u>	

43	1997	Alla ricerca del volto di Cristo: ... ma voi chi dite che io sia?	Proceedings of the 27th Diocesan Theological Week, Figline Valdarno, 2–5 September 1997
44	1997	Gesù Cristo verità di Dio e ricerca dell'uomo	Christology
45	1997	La catechesi al traguardo. Studi sul Catechismo della Chiesa cattolica	(Co-author)
46	1997	Super fundamentum Apostolorum	Studies in honor of His Eminence Cardinal A.M. Javierre Ortas (co-author)
47	1998	El Evangelio del Padre	
48	1998	Gesù Cristo morto e risorto per noi consegna lo Spirito	Theological meditations on the Paschal mystery (co- author)
49	1998	Il Vangelo del Padre	

50	1998	Una lettura cristologica della “ <i>Secunda Clementis</i> ”	On the existence of Pauline influences?
51	1999	Evangelización, catequesis, catequistas	A new stage for the Church of the third millennium
52	1999	La Vergine Maria dal Rinascimento a oggi	
53	1999	Missione della Chiesa e Chiesa in missione]. Gesù Cristo, Verbo del Padre	Field II
54	1999	La Chiesa santa, madre di figli peccatori	Ecclesiological approach and pastoral implications
55	2000	<i>Dominus Iesus</i> : l’unicità e l’universalità salvifica di Gesù Cristo e della Chiesa	Declaration
56	2000	Gesù Cristo e l’unicità della mediazione	(Co-author)
57	2000	Gesù Cristo, speranza del mondo	Miscellany in honor of Marcello Bordoni

58	2000	La Vierge dans la catéchèse, hier et aujourd'hui	Communications presented at the 55th Session of the French Society for Mariological Studies, Sanctuaire Notre-Dame-de- la-Salette, 1999 (co-author)
59	2000	Maria e la Trinità	Marian spirituality and Christian existence
60	2000	Maria nella catechesi ieri e oggi	A synthetic historical overview
61	2001	Crescere nella grazia e nella conoscenza di Gesù	
62	2002	Dichiarazione "Dominus Iesus" (6 agosto 2000)	Studies (co-author)
63	2003	Maria Madre della speranza	For an inculturation of hope and mercy. [Component part of a monograph]

64	2005	La Madre del Dio vivo a servizio della vita	Proceedings of the 12th International Mariological Colloquium, Santuario del Colle, Lenola (Latina), 30 May – 1 June 2002 (co- author)
65	2005	Lo sguardo di Maria sul mondo contemporaneo	Proceedings of the 17th International Mariological Colloquium, Rovigo, 10–12 September 2004
66	2005	Maria, sintesi di valori	Cultural history of Mariology (co- author)
67	2007	Sui sentieri di Clotilde Micheli fondatrice delle Suore degli Angeli adoratrici della SS. Trinità	Spirituality and human promotion (co- author)
68	2007	<u>San Francesco Antonio Fasani apostolo francescano e culture dell'Immacolata</u>	
69	2007	Il vescovo maestro della fede	Contemporary challenges to the magisterium of truth

70	2008	<u>Gesù, identità del cristianesimo Conoscenza ed esperienza</u>	Knowledge and experience
71	2008	La <i>Dominus Iesus</i> e le religioni	
72	2009	Catholicism and secularism in contemporary Europe	
73	2009	<u>Futuro presente Contributi sull'enciclica "Spe salvi" di Benedetto XVI</u>	Contributions on Benedict XVI's encyclical " <i>Spe salvi</i> " (co-author)
74	2009	La santità dei papi e di Benedetto XIII	
75	2009	Maria di Nazaret. Discepola e testimone della parola	
76	2009	Reflexiones sobre la cristología contemporánea	
77	2010	<u>I santi nella Chiesa</u>	

78	2010	Il celibato di Cristo nelle trattazioni cristologiche contemporanee	A critical-systematic review
79	2010	Il celibato di Gesù	
80	2010	Il santo di Dio. Cristologia e santità	
81	2011	Dialogo interreligioso Significato e valore	
82	2011	I santi si specchiano in Cristo	
83	2011	Istruzione "Sanctorum mater"	Presentation
84	2011	Le cause dei santi	Aid for the "Studium"
85	2011	Maria la Theotokos. Conoscenza ed esperienza	
86	2012	I santi testimoni della fede	

87	2012	<u>Santa Ildegarda di Bingen</u>	
88	2012	<u>Santi e beati. Come procede la Chiesa</u>	
89	2012	Testi mariani del secondo millennio	(Co-author)

90	2013	<p><u>I santi evangelizzano</u></p>	<p>Contribution to the Synod of Bishops of October 2012, which documents the indispensable evangelizing nature of the Saints, who, thanks to their exemplary Christian conduct, nourished by faith, hope, and charity, become points of reference for the Catholic Church and for the faithful of all nations and cultures, guiding them toward a life of holiness. The volume is divided into two parts: the first contains doctrinal reflections on the concept of Holiness and the causes of Saints, while the second gathers homilies, letters, and reports given throughout 2012, which describe the lives and work of Saints, Blesseds, Venerables, and Servants of God.</p>
91	2013	<p><u>Il Paradiso: di che si tratta?</u></p>	

92	2014	Accanto a Giovanni Paolo II	Friends and collaborators recount (co-author)
93	2014	<u>I santi profeti di speranza</u>	
94	2014	<u>La Santissima Eucaristia nella fede e nel diritto della Chiesa</u>	(Co-author)
95	2014	<u>San Pietro Favre</u>	
96	2014	<u>Sant'Angela da Foligno</u>	
97	2015	I santi: apostoli di Cristo risorto	
98	2015	<u>Gregorio di Narek. Dottore della Chiesa</u>	
99	2015	<u>Beato Oscar Romero</u>	
100	2015	<u>Santa Maria dell'incarnazione</u>	

101	2015	<u>San Joseph Vaz</u>	
102	2015	<u>I Santi apostoli di Cristo risorto</u>	
103	2016	<u>I santi: messaggeri di misericordia</u>	
104	2016	Misericordiosi come il Padre	Experiences of mercy in the lived holiness
105	2017	<u>I santi, ministri della carità</u>	Contains reflections on charity and a gallery of men and women (saints, blesseds, venerables, and servants of God) exemplary in the heroic exercise of this divine energy known as charity
106	2017	Il messaggio di Fatima tra carisma e profezia	Proceedings of the International Forum on Mariology (Rome, 7–9 May 2015)
107	2018	<u>I santi e la Madre di Dio</u>	

108	2019	Perseguitati per la fede	The victims of National Socialism in Central and Eastern Europe
109	2019	<i>Sufficit gratia mea"</i>	Miscellany of studies offered to His Eminence Cardinal Angelo Amato on the occasion of his 80th birthday celebration (genetliaco)
110	2019	Un'inedita Sicilia. Eventi e personaggi da riscoprire	
111	2020	Il segreto di Tiffany Grant	
112	2021	<i>Iesus Christus heri et hodie, ipse et in saecula</i>	Collection of contributions promoted by the Pontifical Salesian University for Cardinal Angelo Amato on the occasion of his 80th birthday celebration (genetliaco)
113	2021	Dici l'anticu... La cultura popolare nel paese del Gattopardo. Proverbi di Palma di Montechiaro	

114	2023	<u>Una Sicilia ancora da scoprire. Eventi e personaggi inediti</u>	
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