

The rose

The German poet Rilke lived for a time in Paris. To go to university, he walked every day in the company of a French friend, along a busy street.

One corner of this street was permanently occupied by a beggar woman who asked passers-by for alms. The woman always sat in the same place, motionless like a statue, her hand outstretched and her eyes fixed on the ground.

Rilke never gave her anything, while his companion often gave her a few coins.

One day the astonished young Frenchwoman asked the poet:

"But why do you never give the poor girl anything?"

"We should give something to her heart, not her hands", replied the poet.

The next day, Rilke arrived with a beautiful, newly bloomed rose, placed it in the beggar's hand and made to leave.

Then something unexpected happened: the beggar woman looked up, looked at the poet, barely lifted herself from the ground, took the man's hand and kissed it. Then she left, clasping the rose to her breast.

For a whole week no one saw her again. But eight days later, the beggar woman was again sitting in the usual corner of the street. Silent and motionless as ever.

"What must she have lived on all these days when she received nothing?" asked the young Frenchwoman.

"The rose, of course", replied the poet.

"There is only one problem, only one on earth. How to give humanity spiritual meaning again, to arouse a restlessness of spirit. Humanity needs to be sprayed from above and for something resembling Gregorian chant to descend upon it. You see, one cannot go on living by dealing only with fridges, politics, budgets and crosswords. It is not possible to go on like this", wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

The letter from Rome (1884)

In 1884, while in Rome, a few days before returning to Turin, Don Bosco had two dreams that he transcribed into a letter that he sent to his beloved sons and boys in Valdocco. It is known as "The Letter from Rome" and is one of the most studied and commented on texts. We are offering the full, original text for your reading.

My most beloved children in Jesus Christ:

I am always thinking of you, whether I am near you or far away. I have only one wish and that is to see you happy in this world and eternity. It was this thought, this desire, that induced me to write you this letter. My dear boys, I feel the weight of being away from you and not seeing you, not hearing you, causes such a pain for me that you can hardly imagine. That was why I would have liked to write you this letter a week ago, but all the things I had to do prevented me. Nevertheless, although there are now only a few days left before my return home, I want to anticipate my return among you at least by means of a letter, not being able to do it in person. It is one who loves you tenderly in Jesus Christ who writes to you, and it is his duty to speak to you with the liberty of a father. You will allow me to do this, will you not?

And you will be attentive and will put into practice what I am now about to tell you.

I have told you that you are the one and constant thought of my mind. On one of these past evenings, I had gone to my room, and while I was getting ready for bed, I had begun to say the prayers that my dear mother had taught me. Just then, I do not know whether sleep overcame me or whether something distracted me, but it suddenly seemed that two former boys from the

Oratory appeared before me.

One of them came up to me, greeted me affectionately and said, "Oh, Don Bosco! Do you recognize me?"

"Yes, I recognize you," I answered.

"Do you still remember me?" the other asked.

"I remember you and all the others. You are Valfre and you attended the Oratory prior to 1870."

"Listen," he said then, "would you like to see the boys who were at the Oratory in my day?"

"Of course! Show them to me," I said. "I would be delighted."

So Valfre showed me the boys and they all looked the same. They were the same height and age as I had known them then. I thought I was in the old Oratory at recreation time. It was a picture full of life, full of movement and merriment. Boys were running, skipping and jumping. Some were playing leapfrog and others were playing ball. In one corner, there was a cluster of boys avidly listening to a priest, who was telling a story. In another corner, a cleric was playing flying donkey and trades with another cluster of boys. People were singing and laughing everywhere and there were clerics and priests with cheerful boys gathered around them. It was obvious that the utmost cordiality and familiarity existed between the boys and their superiors.

I was mesmerized by that spectacle, and Valfre said to me, "You see, familiarity breeds affection, and affection breeds confidence. This is what opens up their hearts and the boys reveal everything to their teachers, assistants and superiors. They are frank in their confession and outside of it, and docile and obedient to anything they are told to do by someone they know is honestly fond of them."

Just then, the other former pupil, who now had a white beard, came up to me and said, "Don Bosco, would you now like to see and know the boys who live at the Oratory today?" This was Joseph Buzzetti.

"Yes," I answered. "It is already a month since I saw them last."

He pointed them out to me. I saw the Oratory and all of you at recreation, but I no longer heard the shouts of joy, singing or the lively animation that I had just seen before.

Sadly, boredom, weariness, sullenness, and diffidence were evident on the boys' faces and in their actions. It is true that I saw a good many of them running and playing, but I also saw a good many more who were standing alone and leaning against the pillars, prey to disquieting thoughts. Other boys had withdrawn from the general recreation to sit on the stairs, the corridors or on the balconies overlooking the garden. Others strolled slowly in groups, talking softly among themselves, casting suspicious or malicious glances around them. Here and there, someone smiled, but such smiles were accompanied by glances that not only aroused suspicion, but also the conviction that had St. Aloysius been in the company of those boys, he would have blushed. Even among the boys who were playing, I saw a few so listless that it was obvious that they found no pleasure in their games.

"Have you seen your boys?" the past pupil asked.

"Yes, I have seen them," I answered with a sigh.

"How different they are today from what we were!" the former pupil exclaimed.

"Unfortunately! How listless they are at recreation!"

"This causes the indifference that many show when they receive the Holy Sacraments. They are careless in their practices of piety in church and elsewhere, and that is why they are reluctant to live in an environment where Divine Providence showers all its bounty on their bodies, souls and intellects. That is why many of them do not follow their vocation and are ungrateful to their superiors, and that is why they grow secretive and complain while other deplorable things occur as a consequence."

"I see, I see." I said. "But how can I restore the former vivacity, cheerfulness and expansiveness of these dear children of mine?"

"With charity!"

"With charity?2 I asked. "But are not my boys loved enough?"

You know that I love them. You know how much I have suffered and endured for them during the course of some forty years, and all that I am still suffering and enduring now! All the privations, humiliations, oppositions and persecution I have endured in order to provide them with food, shelter, teachers and especially in order to ensure the salvation of their souls! I have done all I could and all I know for them, who represent the love of my whole life."

"I am not referring to you."

"Then to whom do you refer? To those who took my place? To the directors, prefects, teachers and assistants? Don't you see how they spend the youthful years of their lives caring for those entrusted to them by Divine Providence? Don't you see that they are martyrs of their work and study?"

"I see it and I am aware of it, but that is not enough. The best is still missing."

"What is it that is missing?"

"The boys must not only be loved, but they must know that they are loved."

"Don't they realize that everything that is done for them is done out of love?"

"No, and I repeat, it is not enough."

"So what then is needed?" I implored.

"That they be helped to understand and love the things that are not so agreeable to them, by participation in their childish pleasures. The things that are disagreeable to them are discipline, study, and self-mortification. They must learn these things with love and enthusiasm."

"Please explain yourself more clearly!"

"Watch the boys at recreation."

I watched them and then said, "What special thing is there to see?"

"You do not see it, even though you have been educating boys for all these years? Look again! Where are our Salesians?"

I looked and saw that there were only a few priests and clerics mingled with the boys, while even fewer participated in their games. The superiors were no longer the animating

spirit at recreation. For the most part, they strolled up and down, talking among themselves, without paying any attention to what the boys were doing. Occasionally, someone did observe some wrongdoings, but they did nothing to correct the behavior. There were some Salesians who would have liked to mingle with the boys in their groups, but I saw that some of these youngsters were studiously trying to get away from their teachers and superiors.

"Were you not always in the midst of the boys at the Oratory in the old days, especially at recreation time?" my friend asked. "Do you remember those wonderful years? It was a thing for rejoicing, like Heaven, a period upon which we shall always look back lovingly, for we were guided by affection and held no secrets from you."

"Certainly! Everything was delightful then for me as well, and the boys were all eager to come and talk to me. They were always eager for my advice, so that they could put it into practice. But now I see that continuous audiences with others, increased business matters and my health prevent me from doing all this."

"That is all very true, but if you are unable, why are the Salesians not imitating you? Why do you not insist and demand that the Salesians behave toward the boys the same way as you did?"

"I talk myself hoarse, but unfortunately, they do not feel like shouldering the burdens as we once did."

"So by neglecting to do what costs them least, they lose what is most important, and waste all their efforts thereby. They must learn to love what the boys love, so that the boys may love that which is dear to their superiors. In this way, their efforts will be light. The cause of the present change in the ways of the Oratory lies in the number of boys who do not confide in their superiors. Once their hearts were like an open book before their superiors, and they loved them and obeyed them promptly. But now they look on the superiors precisely as superiors, no longer as fathers, brothers and friends. Therefore, they fear them and love them little. If

there is to be but one heart and soul, then for the love of Jesus, this fatal barrier of diffidence must be broken so heartfelt trust can take its place."

"What must be done to break down this barrier?" I asked.

"It is imperative to achieve familiarity with the boys, especially at recreation time. Without familiarity, affection cannot be shown and without affection, there cannot be confidence. He who wants to be loved has to show that he loves. Jesus Christ became little with the little ones and shouldered our own infirmities. There we have the master of familiarity. A teacher who is seen only at the teacher's desk is only a teacher and no more, but if he joins the boys at recreation, he becomes a brother.

If one is seen only when he preaches from the pulpit, we shall only say of him that he is doing his duty, but should he utter a word or two during recreation time, his will be regarded as the word of someone who loves. How many conversions were brought about by such words whispered unexpectedly into the ear of a boy at play! Those who know they are loved give love in return, and those who are beloved, especially by children, will obtain everything. Such a feeling of confidential trust is like an electric current between the boys and their superiors! They lay bare their hearts and make their needs known and reveal their faults. A love like this will enable the superiors to endure fatigue, displeasures, ingratitude, annoyance, shortcomings and neglect on the part of the boys.

Jesus Christ did not snap the reed already bent, nor did He extinguish the smoldering wick. That's your model! Then you'll have no chance to see people who work for vanity, who will punish only to take revenge on their offended pride or who leave their assistance assignment out of jealousy for the overpowering ability of others. There will be no one who knocks down others in order to be loved and esteemed by the boys. Then you will not see anyone who favors one child and neglects all the other boys, someone who neglects his very serious duty to assist out of love of his personal comfort.

If there is really true love, nothing but the love of God will

be sought after and the salvation of souls. When this kind of love wanes, then things will begin to go wrong. Why should charity be substituted by the coldness of a rule? Why is it that the superiors abandon the observance of those educational rules dictated to them by Don Bosco himself? Why is it that the system of preventing transgressions with vigilance and love is slowly being replaced with one of less worth? If neglected, these laws will breed contempt for the superiors and will be the cause of very serious shortcomings.

And this does happen if familiarity is missing. If the Oratory is to return to its former happiness, the former system must come back. The superior should be always ready to listen to any doubts or complaints with all eyes to supervise their behavior and all heart to look for the temporal and spiritual good of those entrusted to him by Divine Providence. Then the boys will no longer barricade their hearts. Only in cases of immoral demeanor are the superiors to be inexorable. It is better to run the risk of expelling an innocent boy than to risk retaining one that will cause a problem. The assistants must look at it as their duty to report to their superiors anything that may in any way be offensive in the eyes of God that is brought to their attention."

Then I asked, "What is the best thing to do to make sure that a family spirit, love and trust emerge triumphant?"

"Strict observance of the house rules."

"Nothing more?"

"The most appetizing course in any meal is a good cheer."

As my former pupil finished speaking on this note, I continued watching the recreation with real displeasure, and little by little I was overcome by increasing fatigue. Such weariness overcame me that I could no longer endure it, so I shook myself and returned to my senses.

I found myself standing at the foot of the bed. My legs were so swollen and painful that I could no longer stand upright. It was very late, so I went to bed, determined that I would write all this to my beloved children.

I do not want to have such dreams because they tire me

excessively. The next day, I felt myself aching all over and could not wait to get to bed that next evening. But as soon as I was in bed, the dream started all over again. I saw the playground, the boys who are now in the Oratory, and the same former pupil.

"I will tell the Salesians what you told me, but what am I to tell the boys at the Oratory?" I asked him.

He answered, "That they must appreciate all that their superiors, teachers and assistants are tirelessly doing out of love for them, for if it were not for their welfare, they would not shoulder such sacrifices. Tell them they must learn how to endure the faults of others, for perfection is not of this world and is found only in Paradise. They must desist from complaining because this makes the heart grow cold. Above all, that they must strive to live in the holy grace of God. He who is not at peace with God will not find peace within himself or with others."

"Do you mean to say that among the boys there are some who are not at peace with God?"

"This is the primary cause of the malaise of which you are now aware, and which must be remedied. There is no need for me to specify such causes now. A person who has secrets to safeguard and who fears that his secrets will be discovered is the one who is distrustful. At the same time, the heart that is not at peace with God is full of anguish and is restless, intolerant of obedience, irritated over nothing and feels that everything is going wrong. And since he has no love, he feels that the superiors do not love him."

"Yet, my friend, do you not see how often boys go to confession and communion here at the Oratory?"

"It is true that they go frequently to confession, but the thing that is radically wrong in the case of many of the boys is that they lack steadfast resolution when they go to confession. They do confess, but confess always the same faults, temptations, bad habits, acts of disobedience and neglect of their duties. They go on this way for months and months, even years, sometimes right through their fifth year

of high school. Such confessions count for little or nothing at all. They, therefore, bring no peace of mind, and if a boy is summoned before the judgment of God in such a state of mind, it would fare badly for him."

"Are there many such boys at the Oratory?" I asked.

"There are only a few in comparison with the great many boys living in the house," he answered as he pointed them out to me.

I looked around and saw these boys, but in those few, I saw things that grieved my heart sorely. I do not want to commit them to paper, but when I return, I shall confer with those concerned. At this time, I will only say that it is now time to pray and make steadfast resolutions not only with words, but in deeds, and to show that the Comollos, the Dominic Savios, the Besuccos and the Saccardis still live amongst us in spirit.

Finally, I asked my friend, "Have you anything else to tell me?"

"Tell all of them, old and young alike, to remember always that they are the children of Mary Help of Christians. They should remember that she brought them here to rescue them from the dangers of the world, so that they might love one another like brothers. They should give glory to God and to her with their good conduct. They must remember that it is our Lady who provides them with food and with the possibility of studying, together with countless graces and miracles. They must remember that it is now the vigil of the feast of this most holy mother of theirs, and with her assistance, the barrier of diffidence that the devil has been able to erect between the boys and their superiors to bring about the ruin of souls must come down."

"Are we going to succeed in removing this barrier?"

"Most certainly, provided that old and young alike are willing to endure a few minor mortifications for the love of Mary and put into practice all that I have been saying."

Meanwhile, I continued watching the boys and saw how some of them were heading for eternal damnation, and I felt so sharp a

pain in my heart that I woke up. I saw many important things that I would like to tell you, but this is neither the place nor do I now have the time for it.

After all this, do you know what this poor old man, who has consumed his whole life for his beloved boys, wants from you all? Nothing more than the return of the happy days of the old Oratory when love and Christian trust between the boys and their superiors and the spirit of harmony and mutual endurance for the love of Jesus Christ prevailed. I need you to comfort me with the hope and the promise that you will do everything I wish for the benefit of your own souls. You do not realize how lucky you have been to live at the Oratory. I declare to you before God that a boy who enters a Salesian house will be immediately taken under the special protection of the Most Holy Virgin. So let us all work in harmony. The charity of those who command and must obey should ensure that the spirit of St. Francis of Sales reigns among us. Oh, my beloved children, the time is drawing near when I shall have to leave you for eternity.

[Note by his secretary: here Don Bosco stopped his dictation, his eyes filled with tears, not out of regret, but out of the infinite tenderness that was evidenced by his glance and the tone of his voice.]

I, therefore, am most anxious to leave you, my priests, clerics and most beloved children, on the road of God on which our Lord Himself wishes you to walk.

To this same end, the Holy Father (whom I saw on Friday, May 9th) sends you his sincerest blessing. I shall be with you in front of the picture of our loving Mother Mary Help of Christians on her feast day. I want this magnificent feast to be celebrated with the greatest solemnity, and I want Father Lazzero and Father Marchisio to make sure that you are cheerful, even in the dining room. This feast of Mary Help of Christians should be the prelude to the eternal feast we shall enjoy one day together in Paradise.

Rome, 10 May 1884

*Most affectionately in Jesus Christ,
Rev. John Bosco
(BM XVII, 85-94)*

St Francis de Sales as a young student in Paris

In 1578 Francis de Sales was 11 years old. His father, wishing to make his eldest son a prominent figure in Savoy, sent him to Paris to continue his studies in the intellectual capital of the time. The boarding school he wanted him to attend was the college of nobles, but Francis preferred the Jesuit one. With the help of his mother, he won his case and became a student of the Jesuits at their college in Clermont.

Recalling his studies in Paris one day, Francis de Sales was full of praise: Savoy had granted him “his beginnings in the fine arts”, he would write, but it was at the University of Paris, “very flourishing and much frequented”, where he had “applied himself in earnest first to the fine arts, then to all areas of philosophy, with an ease and profit favoured by the fact that even the roofs, so to speak, and the walls seem to philosophise.”

In a page of the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales recounts a recollection of Paris at that time, in which he reconstructs the climate in which the capital’s student youth was immersed, torn between forbidden pleasures, fashionable heresy and monastic devotion:

When I was a young man in Paris, two students, one of whom was a heretic, were spending the night in the suburb of Saint-Jacques, having a debauched night out, when they heard the

morning bell ringing in the Carthusian church. The heretic asked his Catholic companion why he rang the bell, and the latter told him how devoutly the holy offices were celebrated in that monastery. O God, he said, how different these religious are from ours! They sing like angels and we like brute animals. The next day, wanting to verify for himself what he had learned from his companion's account, he saw monks in their stalls, lined up like marble statues in their niches, motionless, making no gesture except that of psalmody, which they did with a truly angelic attention and devotion, according to the custom of that holy order. Then the young man, overwhelmed with admiration, was seized with an extreme consolation at seeing God worshipped so well by Catholics, and decided, as he then did, to enter the bosom of the Church, the true and only bride of him who had visited him with his inspiration in the dishonourable bed of infamy in which he lay.

Another anecdote also shows that Francis de Sales was not unaware of the rebellious spirit of the Parisians, which made them "abhor commands". It was about a man "who, after living eighty years in the city of Paris, without ever leaving it, as soon as he was ordered by the king to remain there the rest of his days, he immediately went out to see the countryside, something he had never wanted to do in all his life."

Humanities

The Jesuits at the time were urged on by their origins. Francis de Sales spent ten years in their college, covering the entire curriculum of studies, moving from grammar to classical studies to rhetoric and philosophy. As an external pupil, he lived not far from the college with his tutor, Fr Déage, and his three cousins, Amé, Louis et Gaspard.

The Jesuit method involved a lecture by the teacher (*praelectio*), followed by numerous exercises by the students such as writing verses and speeches, study of the

lectures, declamations, conversations and disputations (*disputatio*) in Latin. To motivate their students, teachers appealed to two 'inclinations' present in the human soul: pleasure, fuelled by imitation of the ancients, a sense of beauty and the pursuit of literary perfection; and striving or emulation, encouraged by a sense of honour and a prize for the winners. As for religious motivations, they were first and foremost about seeking the greater glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*).

Going through Francis' writings, one realises the extent to which his Latin culture was extensive and profound, even if he did not always read the authors in the original text. Cicero has his place there, but rather as a philosopher; he is a great spirit, if not the greatest "among pagan philosophers". Virgil, prince of the Latin poets, is not forgotten: in the middle of a paragraph a line from the *Aeneid* or the *Eglogues* suddenly appears, embellishing the sentence and stimulating curiosity. Pliny the Elder, author of *Natural History*, would provide Francis de Sales with an almost inexhaustible reserve of comparisons, "similes" and curious, often phantasmagorical data.

At the end of his literary studies, he obtained the "bachelor's degree" that opened up access to philosophy and the "liberal arts".

Philosophy and the "liberal arts"

The "liberal arts" encompassed not only philosophy proper, but also mathematics, cosmography, natural history, music, physics, astronomy, chemistry, all "intermingled with metaphysical considerations". The Jesuits' interest in the exact sciences, closer in this to Italian humanism than to French humanism, should also be noted.

Francis de Sales' writings show that his studies in philosophy left traces in his mental universe. Aristotle, "the greatest brain" of antiquity can be found everywhere in Francis. To Aristotle, he wrote, we owe this "ancient axiom among philosophers, which every man desires to know". What

struck him most about Aristotle was that he had written “an admirable treatise on the virtues”. As for Plato, he regards him as a “great spirit”, if not “the greatest”. He greatly esteemed Epictetus, “the best man in all paganism”.

Knowledge concerning cosmography, corresponding to our geography, was made possible by the travels and discoveries of the time. Completely unaware of the cause of the phenomenon of magnetic north, he was well aware that “this polar star” is the one “towards which the needle of the compass constantly tends; it is thanks to it that helmsmen are guided on the sea and can know where their routes take them”. The study of astronomy opened his spirit to the knowledge of the new Copernican theories.

As for music, he confides that without being a connoisseur of it, he nevertheless enjoyed it “very much”. Gifted with an innate sense of harmony in everything, he nevertheless admitted he knew the importance of discordance, which is the basis of polyphony: “For music to be beautiful, it is required not only that the voices be clear, sharp and distinct, but also that they be linked together in such a way as to constitute a pleasing consonance and harmony, by virtue of the union existing in the distinction and the distinction of the voices, which, not without reason, is called a discordant chord, or rather, a concordant discord”. The lute is often mentioned in his writings, which is hardly surprising, knowing that the 16th century was the golden age of this instrument.

Extracurricular activities

School did not entirely absorb the life of our young man, who also needed relaxation. From 1560 onwards, the Jesuits initiated new possibilities such as reducing the daily timetable, inserting recreation between school and study hours, relaxing after meals, creating a spacious “courtyard” for recreation, walking once a week and excursions. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* recalls the games he had to participate in during his youth, when he lists “the

game of court tennis, ball, ring races, chess and other board games". Once a week, on Thursdays, or if this was not possible, on Sundays, an entire afternoon was set aside for fun in the countryside.

Did the young Francis attend and even participate in drama/theatre at the Clermont college? More than likely, because the Jesuits were the promoters of plays and moral comedies presented in public on a stage, or on platforms set up on trestles, even in the college church. The repertoire was generally inspired by the Bible, the lives of the saints, especially the acts of the martyrs, or the history of the Church, without excluding allegorical scenes such as the struggle of virtues against vices, dialogues between faith and the Church, between heresy and reason. It was generally considered that such a performance was well worth a good sermon.

Riding, fencing and dancing

His father watched over Francis' complete training as a perfect gentleman and the proof lies in the fact that he required him to engage in learning the "arts of nobility" or the arts of chivalry in which he himself excelled. Francis had to practise riding, fencing and dancing.

As for fencing, it is known that it distinguished the gentleman, just as carrying a sword was part of the privileges of the nobility. Modern fencing, born in Spain at the beginning of the 15th century, had been codified by the Italians, who made it known in France.

Francis de Sales sometimes had the opportunity to show his prowess in wielding the sword during royal or simulated assaults, but throughout his life he would fight against duelling challenges that often ended in the death of a contender. His nephew recounted that during his mission to Thonon, unable to stop two "wretches" who "were fencing with bare swords" and "kept crossing their swords against each other", "the man of God, relying on his skill, which he had learned a long time ago, hurled himself at them and defeated

them to such an extent that they regretted their unworthy action."

As for dance that had acquired noble titles in Italian courts, it seems to have been introduced to the French court by Catherine de' Medici, wife of Henry II. Did Francis de Sales participate in any ballet, figurative dance, accompanied by music? It is not impossible, because he had his acquaintances in some of the great families.

In themselves, he would later write in the *Introduction*, dances are not a bad thing; it all depends on the use one makes of them: "Playing, dancing is licit when done for fun and not for affection". Let us add to all these exercises the learning of courtesy and good manners, especially with the Jesuits who paid much attention to "civility", "modesty" and "honesty".

Religious and moral formation

On the religious level, the teaching of Christian doctrine and catechism was of great importance in Jesuit colleges. The catechism was taught in all classes, learnt by heart in the lower ones following the *disputatio* method and with prizes for the best. Public competitions were sometimes organised with a religiously motivated staging. Sacred singing, which the Lutherans and Calvinists had developed greatly, was cultivated. Particular emphasis was placed on the liturgical year and festivals, using "stories" from Holy Scripture.

Committed to restoring the practice of the sacraments, the Jesuits encouraged their students not only to attend daily Mass, not at all an exceptional custom in the 16th century, but also to frequent Eucharistic communion, frequent confession, and devotion to the Virgin and the saints. Francis responded fervently to the exhortations of his spiritual teachers, committing himself to receive communion "as often as possible", "at least every month."

With the Renaissance, the *virtus* of the ancients, duly Christianised, returned to the fore. The Jesuits became

its promoters, encouraging their pupils to effort, personal discipline and self-reformation. Francis undoubtedly adhered to the ideal of the most esteemed Christian virtues, such as obedience, humility, piety, the practice of the duty of one's state, work, good manners and chastity. He later devotes the entire central part of his *Introduction* to "the exercise of the virtues".

Bible study and theology

On a carnival Sunday in 1584, while all of Paris went out to have a good time, his tutor saw Francis looking worried. Not knowing whether he was ill or sad, he proposed that he attend the carnival. To this proposal the young man responded with this prayer taken from Scripture: "Turn away my eyes from vain things", and added: "*Domine, fac ut videam*". See what? "Sacred theology", was his reply; "it will teach me what God wants my soul to learn." Fr Déage, who was preparing his doctorate at the Sorbonne, had the wisdom not to oppose the desire of his heart. Francis became enthusiastic about the sacred sciences to the point of skipping meals. His tutor gave him his own course notes and allowed him to attend public debates on theology.

The source of this devotion was to be found not so much in the theological courses at the Sorbonne, but rather in the exegesis lectures held at the Royal College. After its foundation in 1530, this College witnessed the triumph of new trends in Bible study. In 1584, Gilbert Genebrard, a Benedictine from Cluny, commented on the *Song of Songs*. Later, when he composed his *Treatise*, the bishop of Geneva remembered this master and named him "with reverence and emotion, because" he wrote, "I was his pupil, though an unsuccessful one, when he taught at the royal college in Paris." Despite his philological rigour, Genebrard passed on to him an allegorical and mystical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, which enchanted him. As Father Lajeunie writes, Francis found in this sacred book "the inspiration of his life, the theme of his masterpiece and the best source of his optimism."

The effects of this discovery were not long in coming. The young student experienced a period marked by exceptional fervour. He joined the Congregation of Mary, an association promoted by the Jesuits, which brought together the spiritual elite of the students of their college, of which he soon became the assistant and then the "prefect". His heart was inflamed with the love of God. Quoting the psalmist, he said he was "drunk with the abundance" of God's house, filled with the torrent of divine "voluptuousness". His greatest affection was reserved for the Virgin Mary, "beautiful as the moon, shining like the sun'."

Devotion in crisis

This sensitive fervour lasted for a time. Then came a crisis, a "strange torment", accompanied by "fear of sudden death and God's judgement." According to the testimony of Mother Chantal, "he almost completely ceased eating and sleeping and became very thin and pale as wax." Two explanations have attracted the attention of commentators: temptations against chastity and the question of predestination. It is not necessary to dwell on the temptations. The way of thinking and acting of the surrounding world, the habits of certain companions who frequented "dishonest women", offered him examples and invitations capable of attracting any young man of his age and condition.

Another reason for crisis was the question of predestination, a topic that was on the agenda among theologians. Luther and Calvin had made it their battle-horse in the dispute over justification by faith alone, regardless of the "merits" that man can acquire through good works. Calvin had decisively affirmed that God "determined what He intended to do for each individual man; for He does not create them all in the same condition, but destines some to eternal life, others to eternal damnation." At the Sorbonne itself, where Francis took courses, it was taught, on the authority of St Augustine and St Thomas, that God had not decreed the salvation of all men.

Francis believed that he was a reprobate in God's eyes and destined for eternal damnation and hell. At the height of his anguish, he made a heroic act of selfless love and abandonment to God's mercy. He even came to the conclusion, absurd from a logical point of view, of willingly accepting to go to hell but on condition that he did not curse the Supreme Good. The solution to his "strange torment" is known, in particular, through the confidences he gave to Mother Chantal: one day in January 1587, he entered a nearby church and, after praying in the chapel of the Virgin, it seemed to him that his illness had fallen at his feet like "scales of leprosy".

Actually, this crisis had some really positive effects on Francis' spiritual development. On the one hand, it helped him move from sensitive, perhaps selfish and even narcissistic devotion to pure love, stripped of all self-interested and childish gratification. And on the other, it opened his spirit to a new understanding of God's love, which wants the salvation of all human beings. Certainly, he would always defend the Catholic doctrine about the necessity of works to be saved, faithful in this to the definitions of the Council of Trent, but the term "merit" would not enjoy his sympathies. The true reward of love can only be love. We are here at the root of Salesian optimism.

Balance

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the ten years the young Francis de Sales spent in Paris. He concluded his studies there in 1588 with the licence and degree "in the arts", which opened the way for him to higher studies in theology, law and medicine. Which did he choose, or rather, which were imposed on him by his father? Knowing the ambitious plans his father had for his eldest son, one understands that the study of law was his preference. Francis went on to study law at the University of Padua, in the Republic of Venice.

From the age of eleven to twenty-one, that is,

during the ten years of his adolescence and young adulthood, Francis was a student of the Jesuits in Paris. The intellectual, moral and religious formation he received from the priests of the Society of Jesus would leave an imprint that he would retain throughout his life. But Francis de Sales retained his originality. He was not tempted to become a Jesuit, but rather a Capuchin. 'Salesianity' would always have features that were too special to be simply assimilated to other ways of being and reacting to people and events.

St Joseph – a Father's Heart (video)

St Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus, is a not a well known saint, Little has been written about him because there are not too many testimonies about him. However, devotion to him has seen a steady increase in recent times, a sign of the powerful intercession that this hard-working and silent saint has with God.

Already from ancient times several Church Fathers showed a tender devotion to St Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus. In Italian he is called the *padre putativo di Gesù*. The Latin word "puto" means "I believe", i.e. he was the one "believed to be" his father (cf. Lk 3:23). Devotion to him is also found among other saints of the Church. The most famous expression is found in St Teresa of Jesus (of Ávila) when she says: "Until now I do not remember ever having asked him for a favour that he did not grant me. It fills me with awe to think of the extraordinary graces bestowed on me by God and the dangers from which he has delivered me, both material and spiritual, through the intercession of this blessed saint.

While it seems to other saints that the Lord has granted us succour in a single need, I have experienced that the glorious Saint Joseph comes to our aid in all of them. Therefore, the Lord wants us to understand that in the same way that he was subject to him on earth – where Saint Joseph, who was his father, having custody of him, could give him orders – also in heaven he does what he asks of him. Other people, to whom I used to tell them to entrust themselves to him, have found this to be true, and there are now many who have become devoted to him, because they have experienced this truth.” (Book of Life).

The spread of devotion to him saw steady progression. In 1726, his name was included in the Litany of the Saints. In 1833, the little office of St Joseph to be prayed on Wednesdays was approved. In 1844, the Saint’s name was included among the invocations in the prayers to be recited after Mass. In 1847 Pope Pius IX extended the feast of the Patronage of St Joseph to the whole Church, a celebration that was to be replaced in 1956 with that of St Joseph the Worker, assigned to 1 May. However, the one that would give him greater prominence would be the declaration of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church, which took place on 8 December 1870 by Blessed Pope Pius IX with the decree *Quemadmodum Deus*. Thus began this decree:

“As almighty God appointed Joseph, son of the patriarch Jacob, over all the land of Egypt to save grain for the people, so when the fullness of time had come and He was about to send to earth His only-begotten Son, the Savior of the world, He chose another Joseph, of whom the first had been the type, and He made him the lord and chief of His household and possessions, the guardian of His choicest treasures. Indeed, he had as his spouse the Immaculate Virgin Mary, of whom was born by the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ our Lord, who deigned to be reputed in the sight of men as the son of Joseph, and was subject to him. Him whom countless kings and prophets had desired to see,

Joseph not only saw but conversed with, and embraced in paternal affection, and kissed. He most diligently reared Him whom the faithful were to receive as the bread that came down from heaven whereby they might obtain eternal life.

Because of this sublime dignity which God conferred on his most faithful servant, the Church has always most highly honored and praised blessed Joseph next to his spouse, the Virgin Mother of God, and has besought his intercession in times of trouble.”

On 15 August 1889, Pope Leo XIII wrote the Encyclical [*Quamquam Pluries*](#), in which he recommended devotion to Saint Joseph. With this Encyclical, the now classic prayer “To you, O Blessed Joseph” was also spread.

In 1909, the Holy See approved a litany in honour of Saint Joseph proposed to the whole Church, sanctioned by Pope Saint Pius X and published in the [*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*](#).

On 9 April 1919, Pope Benedict XV inserted a Preface proper to St Joseph into the Missal. Later, Pope John XXIII wanted to include the name of St Joseph in the Roman Canon. And on 1 May 2013, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments established the inclusion of the name of St Joseph in all the Eucharistic Prayers (II, III, IV) of the Roman Missal, through a [decree](#) approved by Pope Francis.

On 25 July 1920, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church, Pope Benedict XV issued a *motu proprio*, *Bonum Sane*, in which he confirmed the devotion to St Joseph.

Popes Pius IX and Pius XI dedicated the month of March to St Joseph.

On 7 March 1958, Pope Pius XII had a prayer to St Joseph published in the [*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*](#) and enriched it with a partial indulgence. We present it below.

"O glorious Patriarch, Saint Joseph, humble and just artisan of Nazareth, thou hast given to all Christians and particularly to us an example of a perfect life through diligent labor and admirable union with Jesus and Mary.

Assist us in our daily work in order that we, Catholic artisans, may also see in it an effective means of glorifying God, of sanctifying ourselves, and of being a useful member in the society in which we live. These should be the highest ideals for all our actions.

O dearest Protector, obtain for us from the Lord humility and simplicity of heart, love for our work and kindness towards our fellow-laborers; conformity to God's will in the unavoidable trials of this life together with joy in bearing them; recognition of our specific social mission and a sense of responsibility; the spirit and discipline and prayer; docility and respectfulness towards superiors; the spirit of brotherhood towards our equals; charity and indulgence with our dependents.

Accompany us in times of prosperity when the opportunity is given for an honest enjoyment of the fruits of our labors; sustain us in our hours of sadness, when Heaven seems to be shut in our regard, and even the very tools with which our hands toil appear to rebel against us.

Grant that, in imitation of thee, we may keep our eyes fixed on our Mother, Mary, thy dearest Spouse, who as she spun silently in a corner of thy shop would let the sweetest smile course over her lips. Besides, may we never take our eyes off Jesus, Who was busily occupied with thee at the carpenters bench, in order that we in like manner may lead on earth a peaceful and a holy life, a prelude to the life of eternal happiness that awaits us in Heaven for ever and ever. Amen. "

On 19 March 1961, the Supreme Pontiff John XXIII asked for St Joseph's protection for the Second Vatican Council in the Apostolic Charter "The Voices".

On 15 August 1989, St John Paul II published the

Apostolic Exhortation [*Redemptoris Custos*](#), on the occasion of the centenary of the proclamation of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church.

On the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December 2021, the Holy Father Francis sent an Apostolic Letter, [*Patris Corde*](#), on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church and dedicated the year 2022 as the 'Year of St Joseph'.

On 1 May 2021, in a [letter](#) addressed to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments requested the inclusion of new invocations in the [Litany in honour of St Joseph](#).

All these official interventions by the Church are in addition to many other devotions that have taken root among the Christian people, such as the practice of the Seven Sorrows and Joys of St Joseph, the Litany of St Joseph, the Girdle or Cord of St Joseph, the Chaplet of St Joseph, the Scapular of St Joseph, the Sacred Mantle in honour of St Joseph, the Nine Wednesdays, the Perpetual Novena, the Perpetual Crown, the Perpetual Court.

But not a word is preserved about St Joseph in the Gospels. Instead, we are reminded of his actions, his fidelity to God, from which the practice of the Seven Sorrows and Joys also derives: the acceptance of Mary as Mother of the Messiah (Mt. 1:18-25), the birth of Jesus (Lk. 2,4-7), the circumcision (Lk. 2,21), the presentation in the Temple (Lk. 2,22-33), the flight into Egypt (Mt. 2,13-15), the return to Galilee (Mt. 2,19-23) and the finding of Jesus in the Temple (Lk. 2,39-51).

This silence and this action of St Joseph remind us that witness is borne first and foremost by works of faith, before words. And it reminds us that the Tradition of the Church is not only formed by words delivered in writing, but is first

and foremost a living communication that comes from the Holy Spirit, who may or may not make use of written texts.

The intercession of St Joseph continues even today, most often in silence, as was also his life. A documentary film, called 'Father's Heart', launched in the year 2022 dedicated to him, comes to highlight this mediation with God. The director Andrés Garrigó, who searched various countries for traces of this saint's devotion, discovered that "... Joseph of Nazareth, the giant of silence, is more active than ever, attracting thousands of people every day and acting in their lives in an extraordinary way".

It is a film that presents historical and theological aspects, but above all the intercession of Saint Joseph in people's lives, even in those who are initially distrustful: conversions, failed marriages, assistance to the dying, etc. It turns out that Saint Joseph is not just a man who lived more than 2000 years ago or a figure from the crib, but a saint who acts in the lives of the people who invoke him, a saint who is worshipped all over the world.

The film is primarily aimed at a believing audience, but is suitable for all age groups, without restrictions.

Here is also the film's fact sheet.

Title: Father's Heart

Original title: Corazón de padre

Year of release: 2022

Cinema release: 18.03.2022

Running time: 91 min

Genre: Documentary

Suitable audience: Everyone

Country: Spain

Director: Andrés Garrigó

Main actors: Paco Pérez-Reus, María Gil

Screenplay: Josepmaria Anglés, Andrés Garrigó

Photography: Ismael Durán

Production company: Andrés Garrigó

Cinema distribution: [Goya Producciones](#)

Official website: <https://www.saintjosephthemovie.com/>

Rating: 7/10 (tens21)

Trailer:

This is love...

this is the simple and silent good that Don Bosco did. This is the good that we continue to do together.

Friends, readers of the Salesian Bulletin: as you do every month, please accept my warmest greetings, greetings that I prepare by letting my heart speak, a heart that seeks to continue looking at the Salesian world with the hope and certainty that Don Bosco himself had, and that together we can do much good and that the good that is done must be made known.

I see in many Salesians Don Bosco's "passion" for the happiness of young people. A formula that has become famous attempts to condense Don Bosco's educational system into three words: reason, religion, loving-kindness. School, church, playground. A Salesian house is all this realised in stone. But Don Bosco's oratory is much more. It is an arsenal of encouragement and creativity: music, theatre, sport and walks that are true immersions in nature. All seasoned with real, fatherly, patient, enthusiastic affection.

Mother courage

Well then, as I read the chronicle of Sudan with pain and

concern, where everyone's situation is very difficult, including the Salesian situation, today I would like to offer another beautiful testimony, although this time I was not an eyewitness, but I recount what was shared with me.

The scene takes place in Palabek (Uganda), where, when the first refugees arrived five years ago, we Salesians of Don Bosco wanted to be with the first refugees that went there. The accommodation was a tent and the chapel for prayer and the celebration of the first Eucharist was the shade of a tree.

Every day many hundreds of refugees from Sudan arrived at Palabek. First because of the conflict in South Sudan. Years later, they continue to arrive, now because of the conflict in Sudan (North Sudan, that is).

It was the General Councillor for Missions who told me what I am telling you. He had gone to Palabek a few days earlier to continue to accompany this presence in a refugee camp where tens of thousands have already been received.

Ten days ago, a woman arrived with eleven children. Alone, without any help, she had crossed several regions full of danger for herself and the children; she had walked more than 700 kilometres in the last month and the group of children was growing. And this is what I want to talk about, because this is HUMANITY and this is LOVE. This woman arrived in Palabek with eleven children in her care, and she presented them all as her children. But in reality six were her children from her womb. Three others were the children of her brother who had recently died and whom she had taken in charge, and two others were little orphans she had found on the street, alone, with no one and, of course, without papers (who can think of papers and documentation when the most essential things for life are missing?), and they had become this woman's foster children.

On some occasions, a mother who gave her life to defend her child has been called a "courageous mother". In this case, I would like to give this mother of eleven children the title of Mother Courage. She is above all a woman who knows very well – in the "bowels of her heart" – what it is to love, even to the point of suffering, because she lives and has lived in

absolute poverty with her eleven children.

Welcome to Palabek, brave Mother. Welcome to the Salesian presence. No doubt everything possible will be done so that these children do not lack food, and then a place to play and laugh and smile – in the Salesian oratory – and a place in our school.

This is the simple and silent good that Don Bosco did. This is the good that we continue to do together because, believe me, to feel that we are not alone, to have the certainty that many of you see with pleasure and sympathy, the effort we make every day for the benefit of others, also gives us a lot of human strength, and no doubt the Good Lord makes it grow.

I wish you a wonderful summer. No doubt ours, mine too, will be more serene and comfortable than is the case for this mother in Palabek, but I think I can say that having thought of her and her children, we have, in some way, built a bridge. Be very happy.

The stork and its duties

The white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) is a large bird, unmistakable for its tapering red beak, long neck, very long legs, and predominantly white plumage, with black feathers on the wings. It is migratory by nature, and its arrival in spring in many countries of Europe is considered a good omen. As soon as they arrive, these birds start to make or rebuild their nests in high places, often in the same place.

In the past, when there were no electricity grid support poles, the highest places were the covered chimneys of houses, and the warmest ones were preferred by storks. And the houses that were also warm in the spring were those where a newborn baby was in need of a propitious environment. Hence the legend

of the stork carrying babies, a legend that has become a symbol. In fact, even today, greeting cards to new mothers feature a stork in flight, with a bundle tied to its beak.

The Creator endowed storks with superior instincts, making them noble birds. And they are so faithful to the task assigned to them by nature that they deserve to be placed among the first in the "book of creation".



The first thing that strikes one is that they tend to be monogamous: once a couple is formed, they stay together for life. Sure, there will be squabbles in their existence, but these never lead to separation.

They almost always return to the same nest, rebuilding and enriching it. They never tire of repairing it every year and improving it, even if this requires much effort. And the nest is always high up, on chimneys, electric poles or bell towers, because they want to protect their offspring from wild animals.

Although no one has taught them, they manage to build wonderful nests that can exceed two metres in diameter with twigs and also with other materials they find within their flying range, even with textiles and plastics; they do not destroy nature, but recycle.

The female lays three to six eggs, not worrying about how she will support her young. Once the eggs are laid, she never neglects her duty to brood, even if she has to face bad times. If the nests are close to roads, the constant noise of cars, the vibrations caused by heavy vehicles or their dazzling lights at night does not make them leave. When the sun gets scorching hot, the stork opens its wings a little or moves occasionally to cool off, but does not try to get into the shade. When it is cold, especially at night, it does everything it can not to leave its eggs outside too much. When

a strong wind comes, it does not let itself be carried away and does everything to keep still. When it rains, she does not take cover to protect herself from the water. And when even a hailstorm comes, it stoically resists at the risk of losing its life, but does not stop doing its duty.

And this behaviour is wonderful if we remember the basic instincts that the Creator has left to every living being. Even in the most basic organisms, the single-celled ones, we find four basic instincts: nutrition, excretion, preservation of the individual (self-defence) and preservation of the species (reproduction). And when an organism has to choose whether to give priority to one of these instincts, the preservation of the individual, self-defence, always prevails. In the case of the stork, the fact that it stays put to protect its eggs even in storms, even when there is a hailstorm endangering its life, shows that the instinct of preservation of the species becomes stronger than that of preservation of the individual. It is as if this bird is aware that the liquid in those eggs is not a generated product from which she can separate, but that inside the egg is a life that she must protect at all costs.

The female alternates with the male while brooding. The male is ready to give his consort a change to allow her to get food and get some exercise. And this for the entire time, just over a month, until the eggs hatch and the new creatures come to light. After this period, the parents continue to take turns to provide a warm place for the young, to feed them for another two months until they begin to leave the nest. And up to three weeks they feed them with regurgitated food because their young are unable to feed themselves otherwise. They are content with what they find: insects, frogs, fish, rodents, lizards, snakes, crustaceans, worms, etc.; they make no demands for food. And by satisfying this need to feed, they participate in the natural balance, reducing agricultural pests such as grasshoppers.

They ensure the survival of their chicks by defending them

from predatory sparrows, hawks and eagles, because they know that they are incapable of recognising aggressors or even defending themselves.

The young, once they have grown wings, learn to fly and look for food, and gradually leave their nest, as if they are aware that there is no more physical space for them, as the nest is limited in size. They do not live by weighing on their parents, but they get busy. They are non-possessive birds; they do not mark their territory, but coexist peacefully with others.

In this way, young storks begin to live as adults, even if they are not yet adults. In fact, to begin to reproduce they must wait their time, until they are 4 years old, when they join forces in pairs with another bird of the same temperament, but of the opposite sex, and begin the adventure of their lives. For this they will have to learn that in order to survive they must migrate even very long distances, struggling, seeking their opportunities to live in one place during the summer and in another during the winter. And to do so safely, they will have to associate with other storks which have the same nature and interest.

The instincts of these creatures have not escaped human observation. Since ancient times, the stork has been the symbol of love between parents and children. And it is the bird that best represents the ancient bond between man and nature.

The white stork has a mild character and for this reason it is loved by people and is well liked everywhere; the Abbey of Chiaravalle even wanted it in its coat of arms next to the pastoral baculus and mitre.

Today it is difficult to see it in nature. It is not often you see a stork's nest and even less so up close. But someone came up with the idea of using technology to show the life of these birds by placing a live video camera next to a nest on a road. Watching to learn. The "book of nature" has so much to teach us....

