

# A pergola of roses (1847)

*Don Bosco's dreams are gifts from on high to guide, warn, correct, encourage. Some of them were set down in writing and have been preserved. One of these – made at the beginning of the saint's mission – is the dream about the pergola of roses, which he had in 1847. We present it in full.*

Don Bosco first related it himself seventeen years later in 1864 when one night, after prayers, as was his custom at times, he gathered the members of his [infant] Congregation in his anteroom for a conference. Among those present were Father Victor Alasonatti, Father Michael Rua, Father John Cagliero, Father Celestine Durando and [the two clerics] Joseph Lazzero and Julius Barberis. After speaking of detachment from the world and from one's own family to follow Our Lord's example, he continued:

I have already told you of several things I saw as in a dream. From them we can infer how much Our Lady loves and helps us. But now that we are all together alone, I am going to tell you not just another dream, but something that Our Lady herself graciously showed me. I am doing this that each of us may be convinced that it is Our Lady Herself who wants our Congregation. This should spur us to work ever harder for God's greater glory. She wants us to place all our trust in Her. I am taking you into my confidence. Please do not mention what I tell you to anyone else in this house or to outsiders, lest you give evil tongues occasion to wag.

One day in 1847, after I had spent much time reflecting on how I might help others, especially the young, the Queen of Heaven appeared to me. She led me into a beautiful garden. There stood there a rustic but wide and charming portico built as a vestibule. Its pillars were dressed with climbing vines whose tendrils, thick with leaves and flowers, stretched upward together and knitted a graceful awning. The portico opened on a lovely walk that soon became,

as far as the eye could see, a breathtakingly beautiful pergola, whose sides were lined with enchanting roses in full bloom. The ground too was covered with roses. The Blessed Virgin said to me: "Take off your shoes!" When I had done so, She added: "Walk under that rose pergola, for this is the path you must take."

I gladly removed my shoes because it would have been a pity to step on such gorgeous roses. I took but a few steps and immediately felt very sharp thorns piercing my feet and making them bleed. I had to stop and turn back.

"I had better wear my shoes," I told my guide.

"Yes, indeed," She replied, "sturdy ones." So I put my shoes on again and returned to the rose pergola, followed by a number of helpers who had just showed up and asked to go along with me. They followed me under the indescribably beautiful pergola, but as I went along I noted that it was becoming narrow and low. Many of its branches were draped like festoons; others instead just dropped straight down. Some branches, here and there, jutted sideways from the rose stalks, while others formed a thicket which partly blocked the path; still others crept along the ground. All the branches, however, were thick with roses. There were roses about me, roses above me, and roses under my feet.

As my feet made me wince with pain, I could not help brushing against the roses at my sides, and even sharper thorns pricked me. But I kept walking. My lacerated legs, though, kept getting entangled in the lower branches. Whenever I pushed aside a bough barring my way, or skirted the sides of the pergola to avoid it, the thorns dug into me and made me bleed all over. The roses overhead also were thick with thorns which pricked my head. Notwithstanding, I went forward, encouraged by the Blessed Virgin. Now and then, however, some sharper thorns pierced me more than others and caused greater pain.

Meanwhile those who were watching me walk under that bower – and they were a crowd – passed comments, such as, "How lucky Don Bosco is! His path is forever strewn with

roses! He hasn't a worry in the world. No troubles at all!" But they couldn't see the thorns that were piercing my poor legs. I called on many priests, clerics, and laymen to follow me, and they did so joyfully, enthralled by the beauty of the flowers. When, however, they discovered that they had to walk over sharp thorns and that there was no way to avoid them, they loudly began complaining, "We have been fooled!"

I answered: "If you are out for a nice time, you had better go back. If not, follow me."

Many turned back. After going on for a while, I turned to look at my followers. You cannot imagine how I felt when I saw that some had disappeared and others had already turned back and were walking away. I went after them and called them back, but it was useless; they would not even listen to me. Then I broke into tears and wept unrestrainedly as I asked myself: "Must I walk this painful path all alone?"

But I was soon comforted. I saw a group of priests, clerics and laymen coming toward me. "Here we are," they said. "We are all yours and ready to follow you." So I led them forward. Only a few lost heart and quit; most of them followed me through.

After walking the whole length of the pergola I found myself in another enchanting garden, and my few followers gathered around me. They were exhausted, ragged and bleeding, but a cool breeze healed them all.

Another gust of wind came and, like magic, I found myself surrounded by a vast crowd of boys, young clerics, coadjutor brothers and even priests, who began helping me care for all those boys. Many of these helpers I knew, but many more were strangers.

Meanwhile I had come to a higher spot in the garden, where a very imposing, majestic building stood. I entered and found myself in a spacious hall so grandiose that I doubt one could find its like in any royal palace. Fresh thornless roses, set all through the hall, filled it with a most delicate fragrance. The Blessed Virgin, who had been my guide all along, now asked me: "Do you grasp the meaning of

what you now see and of what you saw before?"

"No," I said. "Please explain it to me."

She replied: "The path strewn with roses and thorns is an image of your mission among boys. You must wear shoes, a symbol of mortification. The thorns on the ground stand for sensible affections, human likes and dislikes which distract the educator from his true goal, weaken and halt him in his mission, and hinder his progress and heavenly harvest.

The roses symbolize the burning charity which must be your distinguishing trait and that of your fellow workers. The other thorns stand for the obstacles, sufferings and disappointments you will experience. But you must not lose heart. Charity and mortification will enable you to overcome all difficulties and lead you to roses without thorns."

As soon as the Mother of God finished speaking, I awoke and found myself in my room.

Don Bosco understood the purport of the dream and concluded by saying that from then on he knew exactly the path he had to follow. Already known to him were the obstacles and snares with which his adversaries would attempt to block his progress. Many would be the thorns on his path, but he was sure, absolutely sure, of God's will in the matter and of the ultimate success of his great undertaking.

The dream also warned him not to be discouraged by the defection of some who seemed called to help him in his work. Those who first deserted him were priests and laymen who in the early days of the festive oratory had volunteered to help him. Those who came later were his own Salesians, and the wind symbolized the forthcoming divine assistance and comfort. On a later occasion Don Bosco revealed that this dream or vision was repeated in 1848 and in 1856, each time under slightly different circumstances, which we have integrated in our narration to avoid repetitions.

*(BM III, 25-28)*

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# Don Bosco in the Solomon Islands

*Accompanied by a local Salesian, we get to know a significant educational presence in Oceania.*

The presence of Don Bosco has reached every continent in the world. We can say that only Antarctica is missing, and even in the islands of Oceania the Salesian charism, which is well adapted to the different cultures and traditions, is spreading.

For almost 30 years, the Salesians have also been working in the Solomon Islands, a country in the southwest Pacific comprising more than 900 islands. They arrived on 27 October 1995, at the request of Archbishop Emeritus Adrian Smith, and started work with three confreres from Japan, the first Salesian pioneers in the country. Initially they moved to Tetere, in the parish of Christ the King on the outskirts of the capital Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal, and later opened another presence in Honiara in the Henderson area. There are fewer than ten Salesians working in the country and they come from different countries in Asia and Oceania: Philippines, India, Korea, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.



The Solomon Islands is a very poor country in the oceanic region of Melanesia, which has experienced a lot of political instability and social problems since independence in 1978, experiencing conflicts and violent ethnic clashes within its borders. Although known as the “Happy Islands”, the country is gradually moving away from this identity, as it is

facing all kinds of challenges and problems stemming from drug and alcohol abuse, corruption, early pregnancies, broken families, lack of employment and educational opportunities, and so on, says Salesian Thomas Bwagaaro, who accompanies us in this article.

Solomon Islands has an estimated population of about 750,000 people, and the majority are young people. The population is predominantly Melanesian, with some Micronesian, Polynesian and other peoples. The majority of the population is Christian, but there are also other faiths such as the Bahai Faith and Islam that are gradually making their way into the country. The paradisiacal seascapes and the rich biodiversity make these islands a fascinating and fragile place at the same time. Thomas tells us that the young people are generally docile and dream of a better future. However, with the increase in population and the lack of services and even a space to get a higher education, it seems that today's youth are generally frustrated with the government and many young people resort to crime, such as dealing illegal drugs, drinking, pickpocketing, stealing and so on, especially in the city, just to earn an income. In this not easy situation, the Salesians roll up their sleeves to offer hope for the future.

In the Tetere community, the work is concentrated in the school, a vocational training centre offering agricultural courses, and in the parish of Christ the King. In addition to the formal education courses, there are playgrounds in the school for students, young people attending the parish and communities living in the same area, and the oratory is open at weekends. The challenge the community faces is the distance from Honiara and the lack of resources to help the school meet the welfare of the students. As far as the parish is concerned, the poor condition of the roads leading to the villages is a major concern, which often contributes to vehicle problems and therefore makes transportation more

difficult.

The Honiara-Henderson community runs a vocational technical school that caters for young men and women who have dropped out of school and do not have the opportunity to continue their studies. Technical courses range from electrical technology, metal fabrication and welding, business office administration, hospitality and tourism, information technology, automotive technology, building construction and solar energy course.

In addition to this, the community also supports a learning centre that mainly caters for children and young people from the Honiara landfill and the communities surrounding the school who do not have the opportunity to attend normal schools.



However, due to the lack of facilities, not everyone can be accommodated at the centre, despite the efforts of the entire community. Following Don Bosco's Preventive System, the Salesians not only offer educational opportunities, but also take care of the spiritual aspect of the students through various programmes and religious activities, to form them to be 'good Christians and upright citizens'. Through its programmes, the Salesian school conveys positive messages to the children and educates them in discipline and balance, to prevent them from falling into the problems of drug and alcohol abuse, which are widespread among young people. One challenge the Salesian community faces in providing quality education is the training of staff, so that they are always professional and at the same time share Salesian charismatic values, in a spirit of educational co-responsibility. The school needs lay missionaries and volunteers who are committed to helping young people realise their dreams and become a better version of themselves.

Although the current situation in the country is likely to be more difficult in the years to come, Thomas tells us, “believe that the young people of Solomon Islands want and hope for a better future, they want people who inspire them to dream, who accompany them, who listen to them and guide them to hope and to look beyond the challenges and problems they continually experience every day, especially when they migrate to the city.”

But how can a vocation to Salesian consecrated life be born in Solomon Islands?

Thomas Bwagaaro is one of only two Salesians from Solomon Islands. “It is a privilege for me to work for young people in my country. As a local, dealing with young people and listening to the struggles they sometimes face gives me strength and courage to be a good Salesian.” The educational work and personal testimony of life can be a source of inspiration for other young people who want to join the Salesian congregation and continue Don Bosco’s dream of helping young people in this region, as happened in Thomas’ story. His journey to become a Salesian began as a student at Don Bosco Tetera in 2011. Inspired by the way the Salesians interacted with the students, he was captivated and remembers his two years there as the best student experience, which gave him hope and the chance to dream of a bright future, despite the difficult situation and lack of opportunities. The vocational journey in the community began with participation in the Salesians’ morning and evening prayer times, with a gradual and growing sense of sharing. Thus, in 2013, Thomas entered the Salesian Savio Haus aspirantate in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, attending boarding school for four years with other companions. The clearly international Salesian formation continued in the Philippines, in Cebu, with the pre-novitiate and subsequent novitiate, at the end of which Thomas made his first vows as a Salesian at the Shrine of Mary Help of Christians in Port Moresby on the solemnity of Mary Help of Christians, 24 May 2019. He then returned to the Philippines



to study philosophy and finally returned to the PGS Vice-Province that includes Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. "As a local Salesian, I am very grateful to my family who supported me wholeheartedly and to the brothers who set a good example and accompanied me on my journey as a young Salesian." Religious life, alongside young people together with many exemplary lay people, is still as relevant today as it was in the past. "Looking to the future, I can confidently say that the Solomon Islands will continue to have many young people and the need for Salesians, Salesian volunteers and lay missionary partners to continue this wonderful apostolate of helping young people to be good Christians and upright citizens will be very relevant."

*Marco Fulgaro*

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## **Interview with Fr Philippe BAUZIÈRE, Provincial Brazil Manaus**

*We asked Fr Philippe BAUZIÈRE, the new Provincial of Brazil Manaus (BMA) to answer a few questions for readers of the OnLine Salesian Bulletin.*

*Fr Philippe Bauzière was born in Tournai, Belgium, on 2 February 1968. He did his Salesian novitiate at the house in Woluwe-Saint-Lambert (Brussels) and made his first profession, also in Brussels, on 9 September 1989. In 1994 he arrived in Brazil for the first time, in Manaus, where he made his perpetual profession on 5 August the following year. He was ordained a deacon in Ananindeua on 15 November 1997,*

and a year later, on 28 June 1998, he was ordained a priest in the cathedral of his home town, Tournai.

His first years as a priest were spent at the Salesian presence in Manaus Alvorada (1998-2003). From 2004 to 2008, he then lived in Porto Velho, first as parish priest and then as Rector (2007-2008). In the following years, he lived in Belém, São Gabriel de Cachoeira and Ananindeua. From 2013-2018 he was in Manicoré as Parish Priest and Rector. Back in Manaus, he lived in the houses in Alvorada, Domingos Savio and Aleixo until 2022. This year, 2023, he is in Ananindeua, where he accompanies the Salesian School of Work. Since 2019, he has been a member of the Provincial Council, where he has held various positions of responsibility: since 2021, he has been Vice-Provincial and also Provincial Delegate for the Salesian Family and for Formation.

Fr Bauzière succeeds Fr Jefferson Luís da Silva Santos who has completed his six-year term as Superior of the Province of Brazil-Manaus.

### **Can you present yourself?**

I am Philippe Bauzière, a Salesian of Don Bosco, a missionary for thirty years in Brazil and a priest for twenty-six. I understood my vocation, the Lord's call, especially through the missionary aspect. A great influence was the parish priest of my village in Belgium: he was an Oblate of Mary Immaculate who had lived for many years in Sri Lanka and Haiti, who shared his missionary experience... So, at the age of eighteen, after discernment, I realised that the Lord was calling me to religious life and the priesthood.

A curiosity: I am the eldest of my two brothers, and at the time they were attending a Salesian school; I was attending a diocesan school... Yet it was I who discovered the Salesians! And it was the Salesian spirit that won me over.

In September 1989 I made my first religious profession, asking to go to the missions. The Councillor for the Missions at the time, Fr Luciano Odorico, sent me to the Amazon Province (Manaus, Brazil), where I arrived on 30 June

1994.

The first challenges were those of adaptation: a new language, the equatorial climate, different mentalities... But everything was counterbalanced by a beautiful surprise, that of the welcome I received from my confreres and the people.

After my ordination, I was sent to work in social works and parishes, where I had the opportunity to meet many young people and simple people. As a Salesian, I am very happy about this contact, to be able to serve the Lord together with young people and families. I feel small before the Lord's action in so many young people, and also the Lord's action in myself.

### **What are the greatest difficulties you have encountered?**

Today we Salesians in Amazonia feel the powerful challenges that young people face: the lack of opportunities, training and work; the burden of drug trafficking, addictions and violence; many young people who do not feel loved in their homes or families (they feel more at home in our Salesian works, than in their own homes...); the major mental health problems (depression, anxiety, alcoholism, suicide, etc.); the lack of a sense of life among young people; the lack of guidelines for the proper use of new technologies.

We also feel the challenge of ensuring that ethnic groups in Brazil do not lose their cultural identity, especially young people. Faced with this picture, we understand that our life must be given to the Lord, at the service of defending the LIFE of so many people, especially the young. May the Lord enlighten us! May Don Bosco intercede for us!

### **What are the most urgent local needs?**

Times are changing rapidly – as you can understand – and we must respond appropriately to these new times. Our works need a lot of financial resources (especially since our location in Amazonia entails very high costs, due to the great distances involved), as well as adequate and renewed training

for our human resources (Salesians and lay people). The demands are many: we need more Salesians! It would be a great good if we had vocations, even indigenous ones.

**What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?**

I believe that, as in Don Bosco's life, Our Lady is our Help of Christians; she is present and helps us.

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## **Interview with Fr Francisco LEZAMA, Provincial of Uruguay**

*We asked Fr Francisco LEZAMA, the new Provincial of Uruguay (URU), a few questions for the readers of the Salesian Bulletin OnLine.*

*Fr Francisco Lezama was born in the city of Montevideo on 11 September 1979. He got to know the Salesians in the Salesian work of Las Piedras, where he took part in youth groups and parish activities.*

*His parents Luis Carlos Lezama and Graciela Pérez currently live in the city of Las Piedras.*

*He did all his initial formation in the city of Montevideo. He made his perpetual profession on 31 January 2006 in Montevideo. He was ordained priest on 11 October 2008 in Las Piedras (Uruguay). His first years as a priest were spent in the Salesian presence of the Colegio Juan XXIII in the city of Montevideo. From 2012 to 2015 he studied Sacred Scripture at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.*

*From 2018-2020 he was rector and parish priest of the Colegio Pio IX in Villa Colón, a member of the formation team and in charge of vocations ministry. In the year 2021 he takes up the service of Provincial Vicar and Provincial Delegate for Youth*

*Ministry until October 2022 when he was appointed Provincial Economist.*

*Fr Lezama succeeds Fr Alfonso Bauer as Provincial of URU, who finished his six-year term in January 2024.*

*Can you introduce yourself?*

I am Francisco Lezama, a Salesian priest. I am 44 years old... I am passionate about educating young people, I feel at home among them. I come from a family that has taught me the value of justice and concern for others. Life has given me friends with whom I can share who I am and who help me to grow all the time. I dream of a world in which everyone has a place, and I work to the best of my ability to make this a reality.

**What is the story of your vocation?**

Since I was a child I felt called to put my life at the service of others. I looked in many places: I became involved in political and social activism, I thought of dedicating myself professionally to education as a teacher... As a teenager I approached the parish because of my desire to help others. There, participating in the oratory, I discovered that this was the environment in which I could be myself, in which I could develop my deepest self... and in this context, a Salesian suggested that I discern a consecrated vocation. I had never consciously considered it, but at the time I felt a light in my heart that told me it was that way.

Since then, in the Salesian vocation, I have been developing my life, and even with the thorns among the roses I have been discovering that Jesus' calls have been marking my path: my profession as a religious, my university studies in education, my ordination to the priesthood, my specialisation in Sacred Scripture, and above all each mission, each young person with whom God has given me the gift of meeting, allow me to continue to be grateful and to unfold my vocation.

**Why a Salesian?**

I am passionate about education, I feel called to fulfil my

vocation there, and I also believe that it is an instrument to change the world, to change lives. I have also discovered that as a Salesian I can give my whole life, “until my last breath”, and that makes me very happy.

**How did your family react?**

They have always accompanied me and my siblings, so that everyone can find their own way to happiness. In my father's family I have an uncle and an aunt who have also been called to the consecrated life, but above all I have in my family many examples of faithful and generous love, starting with my parents, and lately I see it in the love of my sister and my brother-in-law for their children, who have given me the vocation of an uncle, and help me to discover new facets of the same love, which comes from God.

**Who first told you the story of Jesus?**

I remember my grandmother and my godfather who encouraged me a lot to get to know Jesus... then in the catechesis of my parish, I began to follow the path that allowed me to grow in his friendship... Finally, with the Salesians, I discovered that Jesus is close to me, makes himself present in everyday life and encourages me to grow in his friendship.

**You studied Sacred Scripture at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Are young people today interested in the Bible? How can you bring them closer to it?**

I have discovered that young people are very interested in the Bible; even in a university youth centre in Montevideo, a group of young people asked me for Greek classes so that they could study the text in depth! The reality is that the biblical text shows us the Word of God always in dialogue with cultures, with the challenges of the times, and young people are very sensitive to these realities.

**What have been the greatest challenges you have faced?**

There is no doubt that the injustices and inequalities that our societies experience are very great challenges, because

for us they are not figures or statistics, but they have a name and a face, in which the suffering face of Christ is reflected.

**What have been your greatest satisfactions?**

For me, it is an immense joy to see God at work: in the hearts of young people, in the communities that listen to his voice, in the people who bet on love even in the face of difficulties.

On the other hand, it is a great joy to share the charism with the Salesian brothers and with so many lay people who make it possible today to develop the Salesian work in Uruguay. We have taken very significant steps towards synodality, sharing life and mission, in a style that enriches us and allows us to work from the depths of our identity.

**What are the most significant works in your area?**

There are many works that have great significance in Uruguay. Some have a high impact on society, such as the Tacurú Movement on the outskirts of Montevideo, which is undoubtedly the most relevant social project in Uruguayan society as a whole. There are other works with great significance in their area, such as the Paiva Institute in the department of Durazno, which allows adolescents from rural areas to access secondary education (which would not be possible for them otherwise) and to open up new horizons in their lives. Or Obra Don Bosco, in the city of Salto, which in addition to various projects that accompany them from birth to 17 years of age, has a specific project for adolescents in conflict with the law, accompanying them in various aspects of their lives.

**Do you have any project that particularly interests you?**

The last project we started is a home for children that the state has taken under its guardianship, because their rights were being violated, and entrusted them to us, the Salesians. Significantly, we have called it "Casa Valdocco", and there the children are accompanied while at the same time we look for a way for them to rejoin a family reality that can help

them in their development.

### **What place does Mary Help of Christians occupy in your life?**

In Uruguay we have many churches and works dedicated to Mary Help of Christians. In fact, it is in our province that the tradition of the monthly commemoration, every 24th, was born. But there are two places that are significant to me: one is the National Shrine, in Villa Colón, the mother house of the Salesians in Uruguay, from where missionaries later went out to all America. The other place, in the north of the country, is Corralito, in Salto. There, devotion to Mary Help of Christians arrived before the Salesians did, thanks to former students who spread their devotion. I believe that this is a sign of the vitality of our Family, and also of how she is always present, using means and ways that always surprise and amaze us.

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## **The turning point in the life of St Francis de Sales (2/2)**

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

### **Beginning of a new stage**

From this moment on, everything would happen quickly. Francis became a new man: “At first he was perplexed, restless, melancholic” according to A. Ravier, “but now makes decisions without delay, he no longer drags out his undertakings, he throws himself into them headlong.”

Immediately, on 10 May, he put on his ecclesiastical habit. The next day, he presented himself to the vicar of the diocese. On 12 May, he took up his position in the cathedral of Annecy and visited the bishop, Bishop



Claude de Granier. On 13 May, he presided at the Divine Office in the cathedral for the first time. He then settled his temporal affairs: he gave up the title of Lord of Villaroget and his rights as first-born son; he renounced the magistracy to which his father had destined him. From 18 May to 7 June, he retired with his friend and confessor, Amé Bouvard, to the Château de Sales to prepare for holy orders. For one last time he was assailed by doubts and temptations; he emerged victorious, convinced that God had manifested himself to him as "very merciful" during these spiritual exercises. He then prepared for the canonical examination for admission to orders.

Invited for the first time by the bishop to preach on the day of Pentecost, which that year fell on 6 June, he very carefully prepared his first sermon for a feast on which "not only the elderly but also the young should preach"; but the unexpected arrival of another preacher prevented him from delivering it. On 9 June, Bishop de Granier conferred the four minor orders on him and two days later promoted him to sub-deacon.

An intense pastoral activity then began for him. On 24 June, the feast day of St John the Baptist, he preached in public for the first time with great courage, but not without first feeling a certain trembling which forced him to lie down on his bed for a few moments before climbing into the pulpit. From then on, the sermons would multiply.

A daring initiative for a sub-deacon was the foundation in Annecy of an association intended to bring together not only clergymen, but above all laymen, men and women, under the title of "Confraternity of the Penitents of the Holy Cross". He himself drew up its statutes, which the bishop confirmed and approved. Established on 1 September 1593, it began its activities on the 14th of the same month. From the beginning, the membership was numerous and, among the first members, Francis had the joy of counting his father and, some time later, his brother Louis. The statutes provided not only for celebrations, prayers and processions, but also for

visits to the sick and prisoners. At first there was some dissatisfaction especially among the religious, but it was soon realised that the testimony of the members was convincing.

Francis was ordained deacon on 18 September and a priest three months later, on 18 December 1593. After three days of spiritual preparation, he celebrated his first mass on 21 December and preached at Christmas. Some time later, he had the joy of baptising his little sister Jeanne, the last born of Mme de Boisy. His official installation in the cathedral took place at the end of December.

His "harangue" in Latin made a great impression on the bishop and the other members of the chapter, all the more profound as the topic he addressed was a burning one: recovering the ancient see of the diocese, which was Geneva. Everyone agreed: Geneva, the city of Calvin that had outlawed Catholicism, had to be regained. Yes! But how? With what weapons? And first of all, what was the cause of this deplorable situation? The provost's answer would not have pleased everyone: "It is the examples of perverse priests, the actions, the words, in essence, the iniquity of everyone, but particularly of the clergy." Following the example of the prophets, Francis de Sales no longer analysed the political, social or ideological causes of the Protestant reform; he no longer preached war against heretics, but the conversion of all. The end of exile could only be achieved through penance and prayer, in a word, through charity:

*It is by charity that we must dismantle the walls of Geneva, by charity invade it, by charity recover it. [...] I propose to you neither iron, nor that dust, the smell and taste of which recall the infernal furnace [...]. It is with hunger and thirst suffered by us and not by our adversaries that we must defeat the enemy.*

Charles-Auguste states that, at the end of this address Francis "came down from his ambo amid the applause of

the whole assembly” but one can assume that certain canons were irritated by the harangue of this young provost.

He could have contented himself with “enforcing the discipline of the canons and the exact observance of the statutes”, and instead launched into ever more intense pastoral work: confessions, preaching in Annecy and in the villages, visits to the sick and prisoners. When needed, he employed his legal knowledge for the benefit of others, settled disputes and argued with the Huguenots. From January 1594 until the beginning of his mission in Chablais in September, his work as a preacher must have had a promising start. As the numerous quotations show, his sources were the Bible, the Fathers and theologians, and also pagan authors such as Aristotle, Pliny and Virgil, whose famous *Jovis omnia plena* he was not afraid to quote. His father was not used to such overwhelming zeal and such frequent preaching. “One day” Francis told his friend Jean-Pierre Camus, “he took me aside and said:

*Provost, you preach too often. I even hear the bell ringing on weekdays for the sermon and they tell me: It's the provost! The provost! In my time it wasn't like that, sermons were much rarer; but what sermons! God knows, they were scholarly, well-researched; they were full of wonderful stories, a single sermon contained more quotations in Latin and Greek than ten of yours: everyone was happy and edified, people rushed to hear them; you would have heard that they went to collect manna. Now you make this practice so common that we no longer pay attention to it and no longer hold you in such esteem.”*

Francis was not of this opinion: for him, “to blame a worker or a vine-dresser because he cultivates his land too well was to praise him.”

### **The beginnings of his friendship with Antoine Favre**

The humanists had a taste for friendship, a favourable space for epistolary exchange in which one could express one's affection with appropriate expressions drawn

from classical antiquity. Francis de Sales had certainly read Cicero's *De amicitia*. The expression with which Horace called Virgil "the half of my soul" (*Et serves animae dimidium meae*) came to mind.

Perhaps he also recalled the friendship that united Montaigne and Étienne de La Boétie: "We were in all respects each other's halves" wrote the author of the *Essays*, "being one soul in two bodies, according to Aristotle's felicitous definition"; "if I am asked to explain why I loved him, I find that this cannot be expressed except by answering: Because he was him and because I was me." A true friend is a treasure, says the proverb, and Francis de Sales was able to experience that it was true at the moment his life took a definitive turn, thanks to his friendship with Antoine Favre.

We possess the first letter Favre addressed to him on 30 July 1593 from Chambéry. With allusions to the "divine Plato" and in elegant and refined Latin, he expressed his desire: that, he wrote, "not only to love and honour you, but also to contract a binding bond forever." Favre was then thirty-five years old, had been a senator for five years, and Francis was ten years younger. They already knew each other by hearsay, and François had even attempted to make contact with him. On receiving the letter, the young provost of Sales rejoiced:

*I have received, most illustrious man and upright Senator, your letter, most precious pledge of your benevolence towards me, which, also because it was not expected, has filled me with so much joy and admiration, that I cannot express my feelings.*

Beyond the obvious rhetoric, aided by the use of Latin, this was the beginning of a friendship that lasted until his death. To the "provocation" of the "most illustrious and upright senator" that resembled a challenge to a duel, Francis replied with expressions suited to the case: if the friend was the first to enter the peaceful arena of

friendship, it will be seen who will be the last to remain there, because I – Francis said – am “fighter who, by nature, is most ardent in this kind of struggle.” This first exchange of correspondence would give rise to a desire to meet: in fact, he writes, “that admiration arouses the desire to know, is a maxim that one learns from the very first pages of philosophy.” The letters quickly followed one another.

At the end of October 1593, Francis replied to him to thank him for procuring another friendship, that of François Girard. He had read and re-read Favre’s letters “more than ten times.” The following 30th November, Favre insisted that he accept the dignity of senator, but on this ground he would not be followed. At the beginning of December, François announced to him that his “dearest mother” had given birth to her thirteenth child. Towards the end of December, he informed him of his forthcoming ordination to the priesthood, a “distinguished honour and excellent good”, which would make him a different man, despite the feelings of fear within him. On Christmas Eve 1593, a meeting took place in Annecy, where Favre probably attended the young provost’s installation a few days later. At the beginning of 1594, a fever forced Francis to take to his bed, and his friend comforted him to such an extent that he said that your fever had become “our” fever. In March 1594, he began to call him “brother” while Favre’s bride was to be “my sweetest sister” to Francis.

This friendship turned out to be fruitful and fruitful, because on 29 May 1594, Favre in turn founded the Confraternity of the Holy Cross in Chambéry; and on Whit Tuesday, the two friends organised a large common pilgrimage to Aix. In June, Favre with his wife, called “my sweetest sister, your most illustrious and beloved bride” by Francis, and their “noble children” were eagerly awaited in Annecy. Antoine Favre then had five sons and one daughter. In August, he wrote a letter to Favre’s children to thank them for their writing, to encourage them to follow their father’s examples and to beg them to pass on his feelings of “filial piety” to their mother. On 2 September 1594, in a hastily written note,

Favre announced his next visit "as soon as possible" and ended with repeated greetings not only to his "beloved brother"', but also to "hose of Sales and all Salesians".

There were those who did not refrain from criticising these rather magniloquent letters, full of exaggerated compliments and over-cherished Latin periods. Like his correspondent, the provost of Sales, interspersing his Latin with references to the Bible and the Fathers of the Church, was especially busy quoting authors of classical antiquity. The Ciceronian model and epistolary art never escaped him, and, moreover, his friend Favre qualifies Francis' letters not only as "Ciceronian", but as "Athenian". It is not surprising that one of his own letters to Antoine Favre contains the famous quote from Terence: "Nothing human is foreign to us", an adage that has become a profession of faith among humanists.

In conclusion, Francis considered this friendship as a gift from heaven, describing it as a "fraternal friendship that divine Goodness, the forger of nature, wove so vividly and perfectly between him and me, even though we were different in birth and vocation, and unequal in gifts and graces that I possessed only in him." During the difficult years that were to come, Antoine Favre would always be his confidant and his best support.

### **A dangerous mission**

In 1594, the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel I (1580-1630), had just recaptured Chablais, a region close to Geneva, south of Lake Geneva, which had long been disputed between neighbours. The political-religious history of Chablais was complicated, as shown by a letter written in rough Italian in February 1596 and addressed to the nuncio in Turin:

*A part of this diocese of Geneva was occupied by the Bernese, sixty years ago, [and] remained heretical; which being reduced to the full power of His Serene Highness these past years, by*

*the war, [and reunited with] its ancient patrimony, many of the [inhabitants,] moved rather by the rumbling of the arquebuses than by the sermons that were being preached there by order of the Bishop, were reduced to the faith in the bosom of holy mother Church. But then, those lands being infested by the incursions of the Genevans and the French, they returned to the mire.*

The duke, intending to bring that population of some twenty-five thousand souls back to Catholicism, turned to the bishop to do what needed to be done. Already in 1589, he had sent fifty parish priests to regain possession of the parishes, but they were soon driven back by the Calvinists. This time it was necessary to proceed differently, namely to send two or three highly educated missionaries who were able to cope with the storm that would not fail to hit the "papists". At an assembly of the clergy, the bishop outlined the plan and called for volunteers. No one breathed a word. When he turned his eyes towards the provost of Sales, the latter said to him: "Bishop, if you think I am capable and if you command me, I am ready to obey and I will go willingly."

He knew well what awaited him and that he would be received with "insults on the lips or stones in the hand." For Francis, his father's opposition to such a mission (detrimental to his life and even more to his family's honour) no longer appeared to be an obstacle, because he recognised a higher will in the bishop's order. To his father's objections concerning the very real dangers of the mission, he replied proudly:

*God, my Father, will provide: it is he who helps the strong; one only needs courage. [...] And what if we were sent to India or England? Should one not go there? [...] True, it is a laborious undertaking, and no one would dare deny it; but why do we wear these clothes if we shy away from carrying the burden?*

He prepared himself for the mission to Sales

Castle at the beginning of September 1594, in a difficult situation: "His father did not want to see him, because he was totally opposed to his son's apostolic commitment and had hindered him with all imaginable efforts, without having been able to undermine his generous decision. On the last evening, he said goodbye in secret to his virtuous mother."

On 14 September 1594, he arrived in Chablais in the company of his cousin Louis de Sales. Four days later his father sent a servant to tell him to return, "but the saintly young man [in reply] sent back his valet Georges Rolland and his own horse, and persuaded his cousin to return as well to reassure the family. The cousin obeyed him, though he later returned to see him. And our saint recounted [...] that in all his life he had never felt such great interior consolation, nor so much courage in the service of God and souls, as on that 18th September 1594, when he found himself without companion, without valet, without crew, and forced to wander hither and thither, alone, poor and on foot, engaged in preaching the Kingdom of God."

To dissuade him from such a risky mission, his father cut him off. According to Pierre Magnin, "Francis's father, as I learned from the lips of the holy man, did not want to assist him with the abundance that would have been necessary, wishing to divert him from such an undertaking initiated by his son against his advice, well aware of the obvious danger to which he was exposing his life. And once he let him leave Sales to return to Thonon with only a shield, so that [Francis] was forced [...] to make the journey on foot, often ill-fitting and ill-clad, exposed to a severe cold, wind, rain and snow unbearable in this country."

After an assault he suffered with Georges Rolland, the Lord of Boisy tried again to dissuade him from the venture, but again without success. Francis tried to rattle the strings of his fatherly pride by commendably writing him these lines:

*If Rolland were your son, while he is but your valet, he would*



*not have had so little courage as to back down for such a modest fight as the one that has befallen him, and he would not speak of it as a great battle. No one can doubt the ill-will of our adversaries; but you do us a wrong when you doubt our courage. [...] I beseech you therefore, my Father, not to attribute my perseverance to disobedience and to always consider me as your most respectful son.*

An enlightening remark handed down to us by Albert de Genève helps us better understand what eventually convinced the father to cease opposing his son. The grandfather of this witness at the process of beatification, a friend of Monsieur de Boisy, had told Francis' father one day that he must feel "very fortunate to have a son so dear to God, and that he considered him too wise and God-fearing to oppose [his son's] holy will, which was aimed at realising a plan in which the holy name of God would be greatly glorified, the Church exalted and the House of Sales would receive greater glory than all other titles, however illustrious they might be."

### **The time of responsibilities**

Provost of the cathedral in 1593 at the age of only twenty-five, head of the mission in the Chablais the following year, Francis de Sales could count on an exceptionally rich and harmonious education: a well-groomed family upbringing, a high quality moral and religious formation, and high-level literary, philosophical, theological, scientific and legal studies. True, he had benefited from possibilities forbidden to most of his contemporaries, but beyond the ordinary in him were personal effort, generous response to the appeals he received and the tenacity he showed in pursuing his vocation, not to mention the marked spirituality that inspired his behaviour.

By now he was to become a public man, with increasingly broader responsibilities, enabling him to put his gifts of nature and grace to good use for others. Already in line to become coadjutor bishop of Geneva as early as 1596,

appointed bishop in 1599, he became Bishop of Geneva upon the death of his predecessor in 1602. A man of the Church above all, but very much immersed in the life of society, we will see him concerned not only with the administration of the diocese, but also with the formation of the people entrusted to his pastoral ministry.

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## **Interview with don Alexandre Luís de Oliveira, Provincial of the Salesian Province of São Paulo**

*We asked Fr Alexandre Luís de Oliveira, the new Provincial of the Salesian Province of São Paulo (BSP), some questions for readers of the OnLine Salesian Bulletin.*

*Fr De Oliveira was born in Campinas, in the State of São Paulo, on 18 October 1975. He met the Salesians in the Salesian work in Campinas, where he was a student at the institute and participated in youth groups and parish activities.*

*His mother, Tamar A. Da Silva, still lives in the city of Campinas.*

*He did his novitiate in Indápolis, near Dourados, his postnovitiate in Lorena, his practical training in San Carlos and Pindamonhangaba, and his theological studies in the house at Lapa in São Paulo. He made his perpetual profession on 31 January 2004 in São Paulo, and was ordained a priest on 17 December 2005 in Campinas.*

*He spent his first years as a priest in the Salesian presence*

*in Lorraine, at the San Joaquín Institute (2006-2008). From 2009 to 2011 he was Rector and Parish Priest of the Salesian work in the city of Americana; in 2012 he became Rector of the Provincial House in São Paulo, and at the same time Delegate for Youth Ministry; from 2013 to 2017 he was Rector of the Postnovitiate in Lorraine and Provincial Delegate for Formation; from 2018 to 2022 Rector and Parish Priest of the Mary Help of Christians house in Campinas, and is currently Rector of the San José house, also in Campinas. He also served as Provincial Councillor for three consecutive three-year terms, from 2012 to 2020.*

*Fr De Oliveira succeeds Fr Justo Piccinini, who has completed his six-year term as Provincial.*

### **Can you present yourself?**

I am Fr Alexandre Luís de Oliveira, Brazilian, from the Salesian Province of São Paulo (BSP). I am 49 years old, 25 years of religious profession, 19 years of priestly ordination and I am currently a Provincial.

I am from the city of Campinas SP. I attended the Salesian house as a child. I was a little chorister, attended the oratory and was a former student at the Don Bosco Vocational Centre at the Salesian St Joseph's school. Together with my family, I also attended the chapel at St Joseph's and the Parish of Our Lady Help of Christians. Living with the Salesians and frequenting these places I felt called to vocational discernment.

### **Why Salesian?**

Salesian, because I feel deeply identified with Don Bosco's charism: the education and evangelisation of young people.

### **How did your family react?**

From the beginning, my family accompanied me with its support and constant prayers so that God's will for me would be fulfilled and that I would be happy with my life project.

### **The encounter and individual who most impressed you**

I have always been impressed by the presence of the Salesians who are very close to young people. This ease of access always brings back good memories and has also stimulated me in my vocational response.

**Your greatest joy?**

My greatest joy is my religious consecration and the day of my priestly ordination. Being a Salesian priest fulfils me deeply.

**What are the most urgent local and youth needs?**

I believe that the most urgent need of young people is to have creative references in their formation/education in values.

**What could be done more and better?**

I believe that, as Salesians of Don Bosco, we can be closer to young people, we can offer them more opportunities for contact with us as consecrated persons, and in this way, through our witness, we can also invite them to their vocation.

**Plans for the future? Dreams? Initiatives?**

For the present and the future, we can be living signs of Don Bosco's presence among the young, our communities can be more open to welcoming them and offering them real opportunities for spiritual, human, educational and professional growth.

**Do you have a message for the Salesian Family?**

A message of living hope, of a return to our origins, of a return to Don Bosco. May we dream his dream and the dreams of the young. May our communities, schools, social works, parishes and university centres be a home for young people, a place for their realisation.

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# The turning point in the life of St Francis de Sales (1/2)

After ten years of study in Paris and three years at the University of Padua, Francis de Sales returned to Savoy shortly before the beginning of spring 1592. He confided to his cousin Louis that he was “more and more determined to embrace the ecclesiastical state, despite the resistance of his parents”. Nevertheless, he agreed to go to Chambéry to enrol in the bar of the Senate of Savoy.

In truth, the entire direction of his life was at stake. On the one hand, in fact, there was his father's authority commanding him, as Francis was the eldest son, to consider a career in the world; on the other, there were his inclinations and the growing awareness that he had to follow a particular vocation “to be of the Church”. If it is true that “fathers do everything for the good of their children”, it is equally true that the views of one and the other do not always coincide. His father, Monsieur de Boisy, dreamed of a magnificent career for Francis: senator of the Duchy and (why not?) president of the sovereign Senate of Savoy. Francis de Sales would one day write that fathers “are never satisfied and never know how to stop talking to their children about the means that can make them greater”

Now, for him obedience was a fundamental imperative and what he would later tell Philothea was a rule of life that he certainly followed from childhood: “You must humbly obey your ecclesiastical superiors, such as the pope and the bishop, the parish priest and their representatives; you must then obey your political superiors, that is, your prince and the magistrates he instituted in your country; you must finally obey the superiors of your house, that is, your father, your mother.” The problem arose from the impossibility

of reconciling the different obediences. Between his father's will and his own (which he increasingly perceived to be God's) the opposition became inevitable. Let us follow the stages of the vocational maturation of a "sweet rebel"

### **Retrospective look**

To understand the drama experienced by Francis it is necessary to revisit the past, because this drama marked his entire youth and was resolved in 1593. From the age of about ten, Francis cultivated his own life project within himself. More than a few events he experienced or provoked bear witness to this. At the age of eleven, before leaving for Paris, he had asked his father for permission to receive the tonsure. This ceremony, during which the bishop placed the candidate on the first step of an ecclesiastical career, actually took place on 20 September 1578 Clermont-en-Genevois. His father, who at first opposed it, eventually gave in because he considered it to be nothing more than a childish whim. During the preliminary examination, amazed at the accuracy of the answers and the candidate's modesty, the bishop allegedly told him "My boy, cheer up, you will be a good servant of God". At the moment of sacrificing his blond hair, Francis confessed that he felt a certain regret. However, the commitment he made would always remain fixed in his memory. Indeed, he confided one day to Mother Angélique Arnauld: "From twelve years on, I have been so determined to be of the Church that I would not have changed my intention, not even for a kingdom."

When his father, who was not unsympathetic, decided to send him to Paris to complete his studies there, he must have felt contradictory feelings in his soul, described in the *Treatise on the Love of God*: "A father sending his son either to court or to his studies," he wrote, "does not deny tears to his departure, testifying, that though according to his superior part, for the child's advancement in virtue, he wills his departure, yet according to his inferior part he has a repugnance to the separation." Let us also recall the choice

of the Jesuit college in Paris, preferred to the one at Navarre, Francis' behaviour while growing up, the influence of Father Possevino's spiritual direction in Padua and all the other factors that could have played in favour of the consolidation of his ecclesiastical vocation.

But before him stood a rocky obstacle: his father's will, to which he owed not only humble submission according to the custom of the time, but also something more and better, because "the love and respect that a son bears his father make him decide not only to live according to his commands, but also according to the desires and preferences he expresses". In Paris, towards the end of his stay, he was deeply impressed by the decision of the Duke of Joyeuse, an old favourite of Henry III, who had become a Capuchin following the death of his wife. According to his friend Jean Pasquelet, "If he had not been afraid of upsetting the soul of Monsieur de Boisy, his father, being his eldest son, he would have become a Capuchin without fail."

He studied out of obedience, but also to make himself useful to his neighbour. "And it is still true, Father de Quoex testified, "what he told me while he was in Paris and Padua, that he was interested not so much in what he was studying, but rather in thinking whether one day he would be able to serve God worthily and help his neighbour through the studies he was doing." In 1620 he confided to François de Ronis: "While I was in Padua, I studied law to please my father, and to please myself I studied theology." Similarly, François Bochut declared that "when he was sent to Padua to study law to please his parents, his inclination led him to embrace the ecclesiastical state", and that there he "completed most of his theological studies, devoting most of his time to them". This last statement seems clearly exaggerated: Francis de Sales certainly had to devote the greater part of his time and energy to the juridical studies that were part of his "duty of state". As for his father, Jean-Pierre Camus relates this significant confidence: "I had the best father in the world" he told me; "but he was a good

man who had spent most of his years at court and at war, so he knew those principles better than those of theology.”

It was probably Father Possevino who became his best support in guiding his life. According to his nephew Charles-Auguste, Possevino told him: “Continue to think about divine things and to study theology”, adding gently: “Believe me, your spirit is not suited to the labours of the forum and your eyes are not made to endure its dust; the road of the century is too slippery, there is a danger of getting lost. Is there not more glory in proclaiming the word of our good Lord to thousands of human beings, from the cathedrals of the churches, than in warming one’s hands by beating one’s fists on the benches of the prosecutors to settle disputes?” It was undoubtedly his attraction to this ideal that enabled him to resist certain manoeuvres and distasteful farces by some comrades who were certainly not models of virtue.

### **A very difficult discernment and choice**

On his return journey from Padua, Francis de Sales carried with him a letter from his old professor Panciroli addressed to his father, advising him to send his son to the Senate. Monsieur de Boisy wanted nothing more, and to this end had prepared a rich library of law for Francis, provided him with land and a title, and destined him to be the Lord of Villaroget. Finally, he asked him to meet Françoise Suchet, a fourteen-year-old girl, “an only child and very beautiful”, Charles-Auguste pointed out, to make “preliminary marriage arrangements”. Francis was twenty-five, an age of majority in the mentality of the time and suitable for marriage. His choice had been made a long time ago, but he did not want to create any ruptures, preferring to prepare his father for the favourable moment.

He met the young lady several times, making it clear, however, that he had other intentions. “To please his father”, François Favre declared at the beatification process, “he visited the young lady, whose virtues he admired”, but “he could not be convinced to accept such a marriage, despite all



his father's efforts in this regard." Francis also revealed to Amé Bouvard, his confidant: "In obedience to my father, I saw the young lady to whom he wholeheartedly intended me, I admired her virtue"", adding, bluntly and with conviction: "Believe me, I tell you the truth: my only wish has always been to embrace the ecclesiastical life." Claude de Blonay claimed to have heard from Francis' own lips "that he had refused such a beautiful covenant, not out of contempt for marriage, of which he had great respect as a sacrament, but rather out of a certain ardour, intimate and spiritual, that inclined him to place himself totally at the service of the Church and to be all of God, with an undivided heart."

Meanwhile, on 24 November 1592, during a session in which he gave praiseworthy proof of his abilities, he had been accepted as a lawyer at the Bar in Chambéry. On his return from Chambéry, he saw a celestial sign in an incident reported by Michel Favre: "The horse collapsed under him and the sword from its scabbard came to rest on the ground with the point pointing at him, [so] from this he drew further convincing proof that God wanted him in his service, together with the hope that He would provide him with the means." According to Charles-Auguste, the sword "out of its sheath had traced a kind of cross". What seems certain is that the prospect of a profession as a lawyer should not have excited him, if one lends credence to what he would later write:

*[According to some,] when the chameleon swells, it changes colour; this happens out of fear and apprehension, say others. Democritus states that the tongue torn out while they were alive made those who had it in their mouths win trials; this applies well to the tongues of lawyers, who are true chameleons.*

A few weeks later, he was given a senator's licence from Turin. It was an extraordinary honour for his age, because if "lawyers argue in the bar with many words about the facts and rights of the parties", "the Parliament or

Senate resolves all difficulties with a decree from above." Francis did not want to accept such a high office, which could upset all the facts of the matter again. Despite the scandalised astonishment of his father and pressure from his best friends, he strictly maintained his refusal. And even when it was shown to him that the accumulation of civil and ecclesiastical offices was permissible, he replied that "one should not mix sacred and profane things".

The day finally came when, by a happy combination of circumstances, he was able to unravel a complicated situation that could have degenerated into a painful break with his family. A few months later, and precisely after the death of the provost of the cathedral in October 1592, some confidants had unbeknownst to him submitted an application to Rome for him to take this position, which made him the first person in the diocese after the bishop. On 7 May 1593, the Roman appointment arrived. Two days later, the meeting that was to mark the turning point of his life took place. With the support of his mother, Francis made a request to his old father that he had never dared to make: "Have the courtesy, my father, [...] to allow me to be of the Church."

It was a terrible blow for Monsieur de Boisy, who suddenly saw his plans crumble. He was "shocked" because he had not expected such a request. Charles-Auguste adds that "his lady was no less so", having been present at the scene. For the father, his son's desire to be a priest was a "mood" that someone had put in his head or "advised" him.

*"I hoped" he told him, "that you would be the rod of my old age, and instead you turn away from me before your time. Be careful what you do. Perhaps you still need to mature in your decision. Your head is made for a more majestic beret. You have devoted so many years to the study of the law: jurisprudence will do you no good under a priest's cassock. You have brothers whom you must be a father to when they are missing."*

For Francis it was an inner need, a “vocation” that engaged his whole person and his whole life. His father had respect for the priesthood, but he still considered it a simple function, a profession. Now the Catholic reform aimed to give the priesthood a renewed, higher and more demanding configuration, that is, to consider it a call from God sanctioned by the Church. The duty to respond to this divine call perhaps also corresponded to a new right of the human person, which Francis defended in the face of his father’s “unilateral” decision. The latter, after setting out all his good reasons against such a project, knowing that his son would occupy a very honourable position, ended up giving in: “For God’s sake, do what you believe.”

In a work that appeared in 1669, Nicolas de Hauteville commented on this episode, comparing Monsieur de Boisy’s drama to that of Abraham, whom God had commanded to sacrifice his son. But with this difference, that it was Francis who had imposed the sacrifice on his father. In fact, wrote the ancient chronicler, “the whole of [Francis’] adolescence and youth was a time of joy, hope and consolation that was very gratifying for his good father, but in the end it must be confessed that this [new] Isaac was for him a boy cause of worries, bitterness and pain.” And he added that “the struggle that was unleashed within him made him seriously ill, finding it hard to allow this beloved son to marry a breviary instead of a handsome and wealthy young lady heiress of a very noble and ancient house of Savoy.”

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# St Francis de Sales university student in Padua (2/2)

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

Francis went to Padua, a city belonging to the Venetian Republic, in October 1588, accompanied by his younger brother Gallois, a twelve-year-old boy who would study with the Jesuits, and their faithful tutor, Fr Déage. At the end of the 16th century, the law faculty of the University of Padua enjoyed an extraordinary reputation, surpassing even that of the famous Studium in Bologna. When he delivered his Discourse of Thanksgiving following his promotion to doctor, Francis de Sales weaved its praises in dithyrambic form:

*Up to that time, I had not dedicated any work to the holy and sacred science of law: but when, afterwards, I decided to commit myself to such a study, I had absolutely no need to look for where to turn or where to go; this college of Padua immediately attracted me by its celebrity and, under the most favourable auspices, in fact, at that time, it had doctors and readers such as it never had and never will have greater.*

Whatever he may say, it is certain that the decision to study law did not come from him, but was imposed on him by his father. Other reasons might have played in Padua's favour, namely the need that the Senate of a bilingual state had for magistrates with a dual French and Italian culture.

## **In the homeland of humanism**

Crossing the Alps for the first time, Francis de Sales set foot in the homeland of humanism. In Padua, he could not only admire the palaces and churches, especially the basilica of St Anthony, but also Giotto's frescoes,

Donatello's bronzes, Mantegna's paintings and Titian's frescoes. His stay in the Italian peninsula also allowed him to get to know several cities of art, in particular, Venice, Milan and Turin.

On a literary level, he could not fail to be in contact with some of the most famous productions. Did he have in his hand Dante Alighieris *Divine Comedy*, the poems of Petrarch, forerunner of humanism and first poet of his time, the novellas of Boccaccio, founder of Italian prose, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, or Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*? His preference was for spiritual literature, in particular the thoughtful reading of Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*. He acknowledged modestly, "I don't think I speak perfect Italian."

In Padua, Francis had the good fortune to meet a distinguished Jesuit in the person of Father Antonio Possevino. This "wandering humanist with an epic life" who had been charged by the pope with diplomatic missions in Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Poland and France, had taken up permanent residence in Padua shortly before Francis' arrival. He became his spiritual director and guide in his studies and knowledge of the world.

### **The University of Padua**

Founded in 1222, the University of Padua was the oldest university in Italy after Bologna, of which it was an offshoot. It successfully taught not only law, regarded as the *scientia scientiarum*, but also theology, philosophy and medicine. The 1,500 or so students came from all over Europe and were not all Catholics, which sometimes led to worries and unrest.

Fights were frequent, sometimes bloody. One of the favourite dangerous games was the "Paduan hunt" Francis de Sales would one day tell a friend, Jean-Pierre Camus, "that a student, after striking a stranger, with his sword, took refuge with a woman he discovered was the mother of the young man he had just murdered." He himself, who did not go round

without a sword, was one day involved in a fight by fellow students, who considered his gentleness to be a form of cowardice.

Professors and students alike appreciated the proverbial *patavinam libertatem*, which in addition to being cultivated in intellectual pursuit, also incited a good number of students to “flutter about” by giving themselves up to the good life. Even the disciples closest to Francis were not models of virtue. The widow of one of them would later recount, in her picturesque language, how her future husband had staged a farce in bad taste with some accomplices, aimed at throwing Francis into the arms of a “miserable whore”.

### **The study of law**

In obedience to his father, Francis devoted himself courageously to the study of civil law, to which he wanted to add that of ecclesiastical law, which would make him a future doctor of *utroque jure*. The study of law also involved the study of jurisprudence, which is “the science by means of which law is administered”.

The study focused on the sources of law, that is, ancient Roman law, collected and interpreted in the 6th century by the jurists of the Emperor Justinian. Throughout his life, he would remember the definition of justice, read at the beginning of the *Digesto*: “a perpetual, strong and constant will to render to everyone what belongs to him.”

Examining Francis’ notebooks, we can identify some of his reactions to certain laws. He is in full agreement with the title of the Code that opens the series of laws: *Of the Sovereign Trinity and the Catholic Faith*, and with the defence that immediately follows: *That no one should be allowed to discuss them in public*. “This title” he noted, “is precious, I would say sublime, and worthy of being read often against reformers, know-it-alls and politicians.”

Francis de Sales’ legal education rested on a foundation that seemed unquestionable at the time. For the Catholics of his time, “tolerating” Protestantism could take

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But in the end, his law studies must have bored him quite a bit. On a hot summer's day, faced with the coldness of the laws and their remoteness in time, he wrote, disillusioned: "Since these matters are old, it did not seem profitable to devote oneself to examining them in this steamy weather, which is too hot to comfortably deal with cold and chilling discussions."

## **Theological studies and intellectual crisis**

While dedicated to the study of law, Francis continued to take a close interest in theology. According to his nephew, when he freshly arrived in Padua, "he set to work with all possible diligence, and placed on the lectern in his room the Summa of the Angelic Doctor, St Thomas, so that he could have it before his eyes every day and easily consult it to understand other books. He greatly enjoyed reading the books of St Bonaventure. He acquired a good knowledge of the Latin Fathers, especially the 'two brilliant luminaries of the Church', 'the great Saint Augustine' and Saint Jerome, who were also 'two great captains of the ancient Church', without forgetting the 'glorious Saint Ambrose' and Saint Gregory the Great. Among the Greek Fathers, he admired St John Chrysostom 'who, because of his sublime eloquence, was praised and called Golden Mouth'. He also frequently cited St Gregory of Nazianzus, St Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Athanasius, Origen and others."

Consulting the fragments of notes that have come down to us, we learn that he also read the most important authors of his time, in particular, the great Spanish exegete and theologian Juan Maldonado, a Jesuit who had successfully established new methods in the study of the texts of Scripture and the Church Fathers. In addition to personal study, Francis was able to take theology courses at the university, where Fr Déage was preparing his doctorate, and benefit from the help and advice of Fr Possevino. It is also known that he often visited the Franciscans at the Basilica of St Anthony.

His reflection focused again on the problem of predestination and grace, to the point that he filled five notebooks. In reality, Francis found himself faced with a dilemma: to remain faithful to convictions that had always been his, or to stick to the classical positions of St Augustine and St Thomas, "the greatest and unrivalled doctor." Now he found it difficult to "sympathise" with such a discouraging doctrine of these two masters, or at least with the current interpretation, according to which men have no



right to salvation, because it depends entirely on a free decision by God.

By his adolescence, Francis had developed a more optimistic view of God's plan. His personal convictions were reinforced after the appearance in 1588 of the book by Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina, whose Latin title *Concordia* summed up the thesis well: *Concord of Free Will with the Gift of Grace*. In this work, predestination in the strict sense was replaced with a predestination that took into account man's merits, i.e. his good or bad deeds. In other words, Molina affirmed both God's sovereign action and the decisive role of the freedom he bestowed on man.

In 1606, the bishop of Geneva would have the honour of being consulted by the pope on the theological dispute between the Jesuit Molina and the Dominican Domingo Báñez on the same issue, for whom Molina's doctrine granted too much autonomy to human freedom, at the risk of jeopardising God's sovereignty.

The *Treatise on the Love of God*, which appeared in 1616, contains in Chapter 5 of Book III the thought of Francis de Sales, summarised in "fourteen lines", which, according to Jean-Pierre Camus, had cost him "the reading of one thousand two hundred pages of a large volume." With a commendable effort to be concise and exact, Francis affirmed both the divine liberality and generosity, and human freedom and responsibility in the act of writing this weighty sentence: "It is up to us to be his: for although it is a gift of God to belong to God, yet it is a gift that God never refuses to anyone, on the contrary, he offers it to all, to grant it to those who will willingly consent to receive it."

Making his own the ideas of the Jesuits, who in the eyes of many appeared to be innovators, and whom the Jansenists with Blaise Pascal would soon brand as bad theologians, too lax, Francis de Sales grafted his theology into the current of Christian humanism and opted for the "God of the human heart" Salesian theology, which rests on the goodness of God who wants all to be saved, would likewise

present itself with a pressing invitation to the human person to respond with the whole “heart” to the appeals of grace.

## Medicine

Alongside the faculties of law and theology, the studies of medicine and botany enjoyed extraordinary prestige in Padua, especially after the Flemish physician Andrea Vesalius, the father of modern anatomy, had dealt a mortal blow to the old theories of Hippocrates and Galienus with the practice of dissecting the human body, which scandalised the established authorities. Vesalius had published his *De humani corporis fabrica* in 1543, which revolutionised knowledge of human anatomy. To procure corpses, the bodies of the executed were demanded or the dead were dug up, which did not happen without provoking sometimes bloody disputes with gravediggers.

Nevertheless, several things can be said. First of all, it is known that during the serious illness that laid him low in Padua at the end of 1590, he had decided to donate his own body to science if he died, and this was to avoid quarrels among medical students intent on searching for corpses. Did he therefore approve of the new method of dissecting the human body? In any case, he seemed to encourage it with this hotly debated gesture. Moreover, one can detect in him an abiding interest in health problems, in doctors and surgeons. There is a big difference, he wrote for example, between the brigand and the surgeon: ‘The brigand and the surgeon cut the limbs and make the blood flow, one to kill, the other to heal.’

Also in Padua at the beginning of the 17th century, an English doctor, William Harvey, discovered the rules of blood circulation. The heart truly became the author of life, the centre of everything, the sun, like the prince in his state. Although the English physician would only publish his findings in 1628, it is possible to assume that by the time Francis was a student, such research was already underway. He himself wrote, for example, that “*cor habet motum in se proprium et alia movere facit*”, i.e. that “the heart has within it a movement which is proper to it and which makes

everything else move.” Quoting Aristotle, he would say that “the heart is the first member that comes to life in us and the last that dies.”

## **Botany**

Probably during his stay in Padua, Francis also became interested in the natural sciences. He could not be unaware that there was the first botanical garden in the city, created to cultivate, observe and experiment with indigenous and exotic plants. Plants were ingredients in most medicines and their use for therapeutic purposes was mainly based on texts by ancient authors, which were not always reliable. We possess eight collections of *Similitudes* by Francis, probably compiled between 1594 and 1614, but whose origin can be traced back to Padua. The title of these small collections of images and comparisons drawn from nature certainly manifests their utilitarian character; their content, on the other hand, testifies to an almost encyclopaedic interest, not only in the plant world, but also in the mineral and animal worlds.

Francis de Sales consulted the ancient authors, who in his time enjoyed an undisputed authority on the subject: Pliny the Elder, author of a vast *Natural History*, a true encyclopaedia of the time, but also Aristotle (that of the *History of Animals* and *The Generation of Animals*), Plutarch, Theophrastus (author of a *History of Plants*), and even St Augustine and St Albert the Great. He was also familiar with contemporary authors, in particular the *Commentari a Dioscorides* by the Italian naturalist Pietro Andrea Mattioli.

What fascinated Francis de Sales was the mysterious relationship between natural history and man's spiritual life. For him, writes A. Ravier, “every discovery is the bearer of a secret of creation.” The particular virtues of certain plants are marvellous: “Pliny and Mattioli describe a herb that is salutary against plague, colic, kidney stones, inviting us to cultivate it in our gardens.” Along the many paths he travelled during his life, we see him attentive to

nature, to the world around him, to the succession of the seasons and their mysterious significance. The book of nature appeared to him as an immense Bible that he had to learn to interpret, which is why he called the Fathers of the Church "spiritual herbalists". When he exercised the spiritual direction of very different people, he would remember that "in the garden, every herb and every flower requires special care."

### **Personal life programme**

During his stay in Padua, a city where there were more than forty monasteries and convents, Francis again turned to the Jesuits for his spiritual direction. Stressing as is appropriate the leading role of the Jesuits in the formation of the young Francis de Sales, it must be said, however, that they were not the only ones. A great admiration and friendship bound him to Father Filippo Gesualdi, a Franciscan preacher from the famous convent of St Anthony of Padua. He frequented the Theatine convent, where Father Lorenzo Scupoli came from time to time to preach. There he discovered the book entitled *Spiritual Combat*, which taught him how to master the inclinations of the lower part of the soul. Francis de Sales "wrote not a few things" Camus said, "of which I immediately discover the seed and the germ in some passages of the *Combat*'" During his stay in Padua, he also seems to have dedicated himself to an educational activity in an orphanage.

It is undoubtedly due to the beneficial influence of these teachers, in particular Father Possevino, that Francis wrote various rules of life, of which significant fragments have survived. The first, entitled *Exercise of Preparation*, was a mental exercise to be performed in the morning: "I will endeavour, through it" he wrote, "to prepare myself to deal with and perform my duty in the most praiseworthy manner." It consisted in imagining everything that could happen to him during the day: "I will therefore think seriously about the unforeseen events that may happen to me, the groups where I may be forced to intervene, the events

that may occur to me, the places where people will try to persuade me to go."And here is the purpose of the exercise:

*I will study diligently and seek the best ways to avoid missteps. I shall thus dispose and determine within myself what it shall be expedient for me to do, the order and behaviour I shall have to remain in this or some other circumstance, what it will be appropriate to say in company, the demeanour I shall have to observe and what I shall have to flee and desire.*

In his *Particular Conduct to spend the day well*, the student identified the main practices of piety he intended to do: morning prayers, daily Mass, time of "spiritual rest", prayers and invocations during the night. In the *Exercise of Sleep or Spiritual Rest*, he would specify the subjects on which he was to focus his meditations. Alongside the classical themes, such as the vanity of this world, the detestation of sin, divine justice, he had carved out space for considerations, with a humanist flavour, on the "excellence of virtue", which "makes man beautiful inwardly and also outwardly", on the beauty of human reason, this "divine torch" that spreads a "marvellous splendour", as well as on the "infinite wisdom, omnipotence and incomprehensible goodness" of God. Another practice of piety was devoted to frequent Communion, its preparation and thanksgiving. There is a development in his frequency of Communion compared to the Parisian period.

As for the *Rules for Conversations and Meetings*, they are of particular interest from the point of view of social education. They contain six points that the student set out to observe. First of all, a clear distinction had to be made between simple encounters, where "companionship is momentary" and "conversation" where affectivity comes into play. As far as encounters are concerned, one reads this general rule:

*I will never despise or give the impression of completely*

*shunning meeting any individual; this could give reason to appear haughty, severe, arrogant, censorious, ambitious and controlling. [...] I will not take the liberty of saying or doing anything that is not balanced, lest I appear insolent, letting myself be carried away by too easy a familiarity. Above all, I will be careful not to bite or sting or mock anyone [...]. I will respect everyone in particular, I will observe modesty, I will speak little and well, so that the companions will return to a new meeting with pleasure and not with boredom.*

With regard to conversations, a term that at the time had a broad meaning of habitual acquaintance or companionship, Francis was more cautious. He wanted to be "a friend to all and familiar to few", and always faithful to the one rule that allowed no exception: "Nothing against God".

For the rest, he wrote, "I will be modest without insolence, free without austerity, gentle without affectation, yielding without contradiction unless reason suggests otherwise, cordial without dissimulation." He would behave differently towards superiors, equals and inferiors. It was his general rule to "adapt himself to the variety of company, but without prejudice to virtue in any way." He divided people into three categories: the brash, the free and the closed. He would remain imperturbable before insolent people, would be open with free (i.e. simple, welcoming) people and would be very prudent with melancholic types, often full of curiosity and suspicion. With adults, finally, he would be on his guard, to deal with them "as with fire" and not get too close. Of course, one could testify to them about love, because love "begets freedom" but what must dominate is respect that "begets modesty".

It is easy to see what degree of human and spiritual maturity the law student had reached by then. Prudence, wisdom, modesty, discernment and charity are the qualities that leap to the eye in his life programme, but there is also an "honest freedom", a benevolent attitude

towards all, and an uncommon spiritual fervour. This did not prevent him from going through difficult times in Padua, of which there are perhaps reminiscences in a passage of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* where he states that “a young man or a young lady who does not go along in speech, in play, in dancing, in drinking or in dressing with the unruliness of a debauched company will be mocked and taunted by others, and their modesty called bigotry or affectation.”

### **Return to Savoy**

On 5 September 1591, Francis de Sales crowned all his studies with a brilliant doctorate *in utroque jure*. Taking leave of the University of Padua, he departed, he said, from “that hill on whose summit dwell, without doubt, the Muses as in another Parnassus.”

Before leaving Italy, it was appropriate to visit this country so rich in history, culture and religion. With Déage, Gallois and a few Savoyard friends, they left at the end of October for Venice, then on to Ancona and the sanctuary at Loreto. Their final destination was to reach Rome. Unfortunately, the presence of brigands, emboldened by the death of Pope Gregory XIV, and also the lack of money did not allow them to do so.

On his return to Padua, he resumed his study of the *Codex* for some time, including the account of the journey. But at the end of 1591, he gave up because of fatigue. It was time to think about returning to his homeland. Indeed, the return to Savoy took place towards the end of February 1592.

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# **St            Francis            de            Sales**

# university student in Padua (1/2)

Francis went to Padua, a city belonging to the Venetian Republic, in October 1588, accompanied by his younger brother Gallois, a twelve-year-old boy who would study with the Jesuits, and their faithful tutor, Fr Déage. At the end of the 16th century, the law faculty of the University of Padua enjoyed an extraordinary reputation, surpassing even that of the famous Studium in Bologna. When he delivered his Discourse of Thanksgiving following his promotion to doctor, Francis de Sales weaved its praises in dithyrambic form:

*Up to that time, I had not dedicated any work to the holy and sacred science of law: but when, afterwards, I decided to commit myself to such a study, I had absolutely no need to look for where to turn or where to go; this college of Padua immediately attracted me by its celebrity and, under the most favourable auspices, in fact, at that time, it had doctors and readers such as it never had and never will have greater.*

Whatever he may say, it is certain that the decision to study law did not come from him, but was imposed on him by his father. Other reasons might have played in Padua's favour, namely the need that the Senate of a bilingual state had for magistrates with a dual French and Italian culture.

## **In the homeland of humanism**

Crossing the Alps for the first time, Francis de Sales set foot in the homeland of humanism. In Padua, he could not only admire the palaces and churches, especially the basilica of St Anthony, but also Giotto's frescoes, Donatello's bronzes, Mantegna's paintings and Titian's frescoes. His stay in the Italian peninsula also allowed him to get to know several cities of art, in particular, Venice,



Milan and Turin.

On a literary level, he could not fail to be in contact with some of the most famous productions. Did he have in his hand Dante Alighieris *Divine Comedy*, the poems of Petrarch, forerunner of humanism and first poet of his time, the novellas of Boccaccio, founder of Italian prose, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, or Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*? His preference was for spiritual literature, in particular the thoughtful reading of Lorenzo Scupoli's *Spiritual Combat*. He acknowledged modestly, "I don't think I speak perfect Italian."

In Padua, Francis had the good fortune to meet a distinguished Jesuit in the person of Father Antonio Possevino. This "wandering humanist with an epic life" who had been charged by the pope with diplomatic missions in Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Poland and France, had taken up permanent residence in Padua shortly before Francis' arrival. He became his spiritual director and guide in his studies and knowledge of the world.

### **The University of Padua**

Founded in 1222, the University of Padua was the oldest university in Italy after Bologna, of which it was an offshoot. It successfully taught not only law, regarded as the *scientia scientiarum*, but also theology, philosophy and medicine. The 1,500 or so students came from all over Europe and were not all Catholics, which sometimes led to worries and unrest.

Fights were frequent, sometimes bloody. One of the favourite dangerous games was the "Paduan hunt" Francis de Sales would one day tell a friend, Jean-Pierre Camus, "that a student, after striking a stranger, with his sword, took refuge with a woman he discovered was the mother of the young man he had just murdered." He himself, who did not go round without a sword, was one day involved in a fight by fellow students, who considered his gentleness to be a form of cowardice.

Professors and students alike appreciated the proverbial *patavinam libertatem*, which in addition to being cultivated in intellectual pursuit, also incited a good number of students to “flutter about” by giving themselves up to the good life. Even the disciples closest to Francis were not models of virtue. The widow of one of them would later recount, in her picturesque language, how her future husband had staged a farce in bad taste with some accomplices, aimed at throwing Francis into the arms of a “miserable whore”.

### **The study of law**

In obedience to his father, Francis devoted himself courageously to the study of civil law, to which he wanted to add that of ecclesiastical law, which would make him a future doctor of *utroque jure*. The study of law also involved the study of jurisprudence, which is “the science by means of which law is administered”.

The study focused on the sources of law, that is, ancient Roman law, collected and interpreted in the 6th century by the jurists of the Emperor Justinian. Throughout his life, he would remember the definition of justice, read at the beginning of the *Digesto*: “a perpetual, strong and constant will to render to everyone what belongs to him.”

Examining Francis’ notebooks, we can identify some of his reactions to certain laws. He is in full agreement with the title of the Code that opens the series of laws: *Of the Sovereign Trinity and the Catholic Faith*, and with the defence that immediately follows: *That no one should be allowed to discuss them in public*. “This title” he noted, “is precious, I would say sublime, and worthy of being read often against reformers, know-it-alls and politicians.”

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optimistic view of God's plan. His personal convictions were reinforced after the appearance in 1588 of the book by Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina, whose Latin title *Concordia* summed up the thesis well: *Concord of Free Will with the Gift of Grace*. In this work, predestination in the strict sense was replaced with a predestination that took into account man's merits, i.e. his good or bad deeds. In other words, Molina affirmed both God's sovereign action and the decisive role of the freedom he bestowed on man.

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# **Nino, a young man like so many... meets the purpose of life in his Lord**

Nino Baglieri was born in Modica Alta on 1 May 1951 to his mother Giuseppa and father Pietro. After just four days he was baptised in the Parish of St Anthony of Padua. He grew up like many boys, with a group of friends, some struggles during his school years and the dream of a future made up of work and the possibility of forming a family.

A few days after his seventeenth birthday, celebrated at the seaside with friends, on 6 May 1968, the liturgical memorial of Saint Dominic Savio, during a day of ordinary work as a bricklayer, Nino fell 17 metres when the scaffolding of the building – not far from home – on which he was working collapsed: 17 metres, Nino points out in his Diary-Book, “1 metre for every year of life.” “My condition” he recounts, “was so serious that the doctors expected my death at any moment (I even received extreme unction). [A doctor] made an unusual proposal to my parents: ‘if your son managed to get through these moments, which would only be the result of a miracle, he would be destined to spend his life on a bed; if you believe, with a lethal injection both you and he will be spared so much suffering.’ ‘If God wants him’ replied my mother, ‘let him take him, but if he lets him live, I will be happy to look after him for the rest of his life.’ So my mother, who has always been a woman of great faith and courage, opened her arms and heart and embraced the cross first.”

Nino would face difficult years of wandering through different hospitals, where painful therapies and operations would try him hard, though not resulting in the desired recovery. He would remain a tetraplegic for the rest of his life.

Back home, followed by the affection of his family and the heroic sacrifice of his mother, who was always at his side, Nino Baglieri was once again seen by friends and acquaintances, but all too often with a feeling of pity that disturbed him: "mischinu poviru Ninuzzu...!" ("poor poor Nino...!"). He thus ended up closing in on himself for ten painful years of loneliness and anger. These were years of despair and blasphemy since he did not accept his condition and asked questions like "Why did all this happen to me?"

The turning point came on 24 March 1978, the eve of the Annunciation and – that year – Good Friday: a priest from the Renewal in the Holy Spirit went to visit him with some people and they prayed over him. In the morning Nino, still bedridden, had asked his mother to dress him: "If the Lord heals me I will not be naked in front of people.". We read from his Diary: "Father Aldo immediately began the Prayer, I was anxious and excited, he placed his hands on my head, I did not understand this gesture; he began to invoke the Holy Spirit to come down on me. After a few minutes, under the laying on of hands, I felt a great warmth in my whole body, a great tingling, like a new force entering me, a regenerating force, a living force, and something old going out. The Holy Spirit had come down upon me, with power he entered my heart, it was an Effusion of Love and Life. In that instant I accepted the Cross, I said my Yes to Jesus and I was reborn to New Life, I became a new man, with a new heart; all the despair of 10 years erased in a few seconds, my heart was filled with a new and true joy that I had never known. The Lord healed me, I wanted physical healing and instead the Lord worked something greater, the Healing of the Spirit, so I found Peace, Joy, Serenity, and so much strength and so much will to live. When I finished praying, my heart overflowed with joy, my eyes shone and my face was radiant; even though I

was in the same condition as a sufferer, I was happy.”

A new period then began for Nino Baglieri and his family, a period of rebirth marked in Nino by the rediscovery of faith and love for the Word of God, which he read for a year page by page. He opened up to those human relationships from which he had shied away without others ever ceasing to love him.

One day, urged on by some children who were close to him and asked him to help them draw a picture, Nino realised that he had the gift of writing with his mouth: in a short time he was able to write very well – better than when he wrote by hand – and this allowed him to objectify his own experience, both in the very personal form of numerous Diary Notebooks and through poems/short essays that he began to read on the Radio. Then, with the expansion of his network, thousands of letters, friendships, meetings..., through which Nino would express a special kind of apostolate until the end of his life.

In the meantime, he deepened his spiritual journey through three guidelines which guided his experience of the Church as part of his obedience to the encounters that God placed in his path: his closeness to the Renewal in the Holy Spirit; his link with the Camillians (Ministers of the Sick); his journey with the Salesians, first becoming a Salesian Cooperator and then a consecrated layman in the Secular Institute of Volunteers with Don Bosco (and when asked by the delegates of the Rector Major, he also gave a contribution to the drafting of the CDB Project of Life). It was the Camillians who first suggested a form of consecration to him: humanly speaking, it seemed to capture the specific nature of his life marked by suffering. Nino's place, however, was to be in Don Bosco's house and he discovered it over time, not without moments of fatigue, but always entrusting himself to those who guided him, and learning to compare his own desires with the ways through which the Church calls us. And while Nino went through the stages of formation and consecration (until his perpetual profession on 31 August 2004), there were many other vocations



– including to the priesthood and consecrated life for women – that drew inspiration, strength and light from him.

The World Leader of the CDB expresses himself thus on the meaning of lay consecration today, also lived by Nino: “Nino Baglieri has been for us Volunteers With Don Bosco a special gift from heaven: he is the first of us brothers to show us a path to holiness through a humble, discreet, joyful witness. Nino fully realised the vocation to Salesian consecrated secularity and teaches us that holiness is possible in every condition of life, even those marked by the encounter with the cross and suffering. Nino reminds us that we can all conquer through the One who gives us strength: the Cross that he loved so much, like a faithful bridegroom, was the bridge through which he united his personal history as a man with the history of salvation; it was the altar on which he celebrated his sacrifice of praise to the Lord of life; it was the stairway to paradise. Encouraged by his example, we too, like Nino, can become capable of transforming all daily circumstances as good leaven, certain of finding in him a model and a powerful intercessor with God.”

Nino, who could not move was the Nino who over time learned not to run away, not to evade requests, and became more and more accessible and simple like his Lord. His bed, his small room or his wheelchair were thus transfigured into that “altar” where so many brought their joys and sorrows: he welcomed them, offered himself and his own sufferings for them. Nino who was “just there” was the friend on whom people could “unload” many worries and “lay down” their burdens: he welcomed them with a smile, even if his life – guarded in reserve – would not lack moments of great moral and spiritual trial.

In letters, in meetings, in friendships he shows great realism and was always able to be true, recognising his own smallness but also the greatness of God’s gift in him and through him.

During a meeting with young people in Loreto, in the presence of Card. Angelo Comastri, he would tell them, “If

any of you are in mortal sin, you are much worse off than I am!" It was this completely Salesians awareness of "death but not sin", and that our true friends must be Jesus and Mary, from whom we must never be separated.

The Bishop of the Diocese of Noto, Bishop Salvatore Rumeo, stressed that "the divine adventure of Nino Baglieri reminds us all that holiness is possible and does not belong to past centuries: holiness is the way to reach the Heart of God. In the Christian life there are no other solutions. Embracing the Cross means being with Jesus in the season of suffering to participate in His Light. And Nino is in God's Light."

Nino was born to Heaven on 2 March 2007, after having uninterruptedly celebrated 6 May (the day of the fall) as the "anniversary of the Cross" for him since 1982.

After his death, he was dressed in running gear and trainers, so that, as he had said, "on my last journey to God, I will be able to run towards him."

Fr Giovanni d'Andrea, Provincial of the Salesians in Sicily, invites us to "...get to know Nino and his message of hope better and better. We too, like Nino, would like to put on 'running gear and trainers' and 'run' on the road to holiness, which means realising God's Dream for each one of us, a Dream that each one of us is: to be 'happy in time and in eternity', as Don Bosco wrote in his Letter from Rome, 10 May 1884."

In his spiritual testament, Nino exhorts us "not to leave him without doing anything to do": his Cause for Beatification and Canonisation is now the instrument made available by the Church to learn to know and love him more and more, to meet him as a friend and example in the following of Jesus, to turn to him in prayer, asking him for those graces that have already arrived in great numbers.

"May Nino's testimony" the Postulator General Fr Pierluigi Cameroni sdb hopes "be a sign of hope for those who are in trial and pain, and for the new generations, so that they may learn to face life with faith and courage, without

becoming discouraged and despondent. Nino smiles on us and supports us so that, like him, we can make our 'run' towards the joy of heaven."

Finally, Bishop Rumeo, at the end of the closing session of the Diocesan Inquiry, said. "It is a great joy to have reached this milestone for Nino and especially for the Church in Noto. We must pray to Nino, we must intensify our prayer, we must ask for some grace from Nino so that he can intercede from heaven. It is an invitation to us to walk the path of holiness. Holiness is a difficult art because the heart of holiness is the Gospel. Being holy means accepting the word of the Lord: if someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other. If someone asks for your cloak offer your tunic as well. This is holiness! [...] In a world where individualism prevails, we must choose how we understand life: either we choose a human reward, or we receive the reward of God. Jesus said that he came and remains a sign of contradiction because he is the watershed, the year zero. The coming of Christ is the needle, the pointer in the balance: we are either with him, or against him. Love, love one another is the claim that must guide our life."

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