

Meeting Vera Grita of Jesus, Servant of God

Vera Grita, together with Alexandrina Maria da Costa (from Balazar), both Salesian Cooperators, were two privileged witnesses of Jesus present in the Eucharist. They are a gift of Providence to the Salesian Congregation and to the Church, reminding us of the last words of Matthew's Gospel: "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The invitation to an encounter

Vera Grita (1923-1969), laywoman, consecrated with private vows, Salesian Cooperator, mystic, has been included in recent years among the Salesian Family's figures of holiness. Vera is now a Servant of God (the diocesan phase has been concluded and the Roman phase of the Cause is currently underway) and her importance for us derives essentially from two reasons: as a Cooperator she charismatically belongs to the great Family of Don Bosco and we can feel that she is a "sister"; as a mystic, the Lord Jesus "dictated" to her the Work of the Living Tabernacles (a Eucharistic Work of broad ecclesial scope) which, by the will of Heaven, is entrusted first and foremost to the Salesians. Jesus strongly calls the Salesians so that they may know, live, deepen and bear witness to this Work of Love of his in the Church, for every human being. To know Vera Grita therefore means, today, to become aware of a great gift given to the Church through the sons of Don Bosco, and to be in tune with Jesus' request that it be the Salesians themselves who guard this precious treasure and give it to others, putting themselves profoundly at stake.

The fact that this Work is first and foremost Eucharistic (... "Living Tabernacles") and Marian (Mary Immaculate, Our Lady of Sorrows and Our Lady Help of Christians ,Mother of the Work) can only bring us back to Don Bosco's "dream of the two pillars", in which the ship of the

Church finds safety from the enemies' attack by anchoring itself to the two pillars of the Virgin Mary and the Most Holy Eucharist.

There is therefore a great, constitutive Salesianity running through Vera's life: this helps us to feel her close, a new friend and sister in spirit. She takes us by the hand and leads us – with her typical gentleness and strength – to a renewed encounter of great beauty with Jesus in the Eucharist, so that He may be received and brought to others. This too is a gesture of preparation for Christmas, because Mary ("golden tabernacle") brings and gives Jesus to us: the Word of life (cf. 1 Jn 1:1), made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14).

Biographical-spiritual profile of Vera Grita

Vera Grita was born in Rome on 28 January 1923, the second child of the four daughters of Amleto Grita and Maria Anna Zacco della Pirrera. Her parents were originally from Sicily: Amleto belonged to a family of photographers; Maria Anna was the daughter of a Modican baron and, by marrying against her father's wishes, had lost every privilege and the very possibility of cultivating any ties with her family of origin, forever. Vera was born from this emotional rift, but also out of a great love which her parents remained faithful to through many trials.

Her father Amleto's anti-fascism, a theft of photographic equipment and, above all, the 1929-30 crisis had serious repercussions for the Grita family: in a short time, they found themselves poor and unable to provide for their daughters' growth. So, while Amleto, Maria Anna and their youngest daughter Rosa remained together and started again from Savona in Liguria, Vera grew up with her sisters Giuseppina and Liliana in Modica with her father's aunts: women of faith and talent, fully in the world but "not of the world" (cf. Jn. 17). In Modica – the Sicilian UNESCO heritage town due to the splendours of its Baroque – Vera attended the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and received First Communion and Confirmation. She was attracted to the life of

prayer and attentive to the needs of her neighbour, keeping silent about her own sufferings to be a “mother” to her little sister Liliana. On the day of her First Communion, she no longer wanted to take off her white dress because she was aware of the value of what she experienced and all that it signified.

Returning to the family in 1940, Vera obtained her teacher’s certificate. The early death of her father Amleto in 1943 forced her to help the family with work, but she gave up her desired teaching.

On 3 July 1944 – at the age of 21 and while seeking shelter from an air raid – Vera was run over and trampled by the fleeing crowd: she lay on the ground for hours, lacerated, bruised, with serious injuries, believed dead. Her body was scarred for life and, over time, ailments such as Addison’s disease (which depletes the hormone responsible for stress management) and continuous surgery, including the removal of her uterus at a young age, took their toll. The events of 3 July and the compromised clinical picture prevented her from forming a family as she would have wished. *“From then on it was a succession of hospitalisations, operations, analyses, excruciating pains in the head and all over the body. Terrible diseases were diagnosed, various cures were tried. The affected organs did not respond to treatment and, in that inexplicable disorder, one of her attending physicians, amazed [,] declared: ‘It is not understood how it is possible that the patient could have found her balance.’”*

For 25 years, until the end of her earthly life, Vera Grita courageously bore a suffering that would deepen into a moral and spiritual one, and she would veil it with discretion and a smile, without ceasing to dedicate herself to others. Hers became a “heavy” body (although a graceful one: Vera was always very feminine and beautiful), a body that imposed constraints, slowness and fatigue at every step.

Thirty-five years old, she realised her dream of teaching with great strength of will and from 1958 to 1969 she was a teacher in schools almost all in the Ligurian

hinterland: difficult to reach, with small classes and sometimes disadvantaged or handicapped students to whom she gave confidence, understanding and joy, going so far as to give up her medicine so she could buy the tonics necessary for their growth. Even in the family, she was more a “mum” with her nieces than their own mother, testifying to a very fine educational sensitivity and a unique generative capacity, humanly inseparable from her tried conditions (cf. Is. 54). When the relationship with others, situations, problems seemed to get the upper hand and Vera experienced human discouragement or was tempted to rebel because of a perceived sense of injustice, she was able to reread the situation in the light of the Gospel and remember her “place” as a “little victim”: “*Today [...],*” she would write one day to her spiritual father “*I see things in their value.*” “*Let us remain calm in obedience*” this priest recommended to her.

On 19 September 1967, while she was praying before the Blessed Sacrament exposed in the little church of Mary Help of Christians in Savona, she inwardly felt the first of a long series of Messages that Heaven communicated to her in the brief space of two years and which constitute the “Work of the Living Tabernacles”: a Work of Love with which Jesus in the Eucharist wants to be known, loved and brought to souls, in a world that believes him and seeks him less and less. For her, it was the beginning of a relationship of growing fullness with the Lord, who entered into her daily life with his Presence, within a real conversation like that of two lovers, participating in Vera’s life in everything (Jesus dictated his own thoughts even as Vera wrote them down, so the letter was written by “four hands” with the greatest familiarity). From “*bringing to Jesus*” to “*bringing Jesus*”.

Vera submitted everything to her spiritual father and obedience to the Church, with a high concept of dependence on them, much obedience, an immense humility: Jesus had taken a “teacher” and placed her in the school of his Love, teaching her through the Messages and above all calling her to consistency of faith and life. He was a very sweet and yet

very demanding Bridegroom in training her in this virtuous path: he resorted to the images of digging, of work, of the chisel, of the hammer with its “blows” to teach Vera how much she must remove from herself, how much work must be done in a soul so that it may be a true Temple of God’s Presence: *“I am working in you with chisel blows [...]. The barrenness, the small and large crosses, are my hammer. So, at intervals the blow will come, my blow. I must take many, many things away from you: resistance to my love, distrust, fears, selfishness, useless anxieties, non-Christian thoughts, worldly habits.”*. Vera’s docility was a daily asceticism, the humility of one who touches the limit but makes it available to God’s omnipotence and mercy. Jesus, through her, teaches a path of holiness that – while clearly oriented to be able to welcome the fullness of His Life – is expressed through a “less” of what we are and how we resist him: holiness... by “subtraction” to become transparency of him. The first characteristic of the Tabernacle is, in fact, to be empty and willing to welcome a Presence. As the novice Mistress of a Benedictine Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament wrote: *“The thoughts she writes are of Jesus. How clean the texts are, even! Sometimes, even in the spiritual diaries of holy and beautiful souls, how much subjectivity emerges [...] and it is right that it should be so. [...] Vera [instead] disappears, she is not there [,] she is not speaking of herself”*

Vera would one day write: *“My pupils are part of me, of my love for Jesus.”* It is the ripe fruit of a Eucharistic life that made her “broken bread” with the One Victim. Without Jesus, she could no longer live: *“I want Jesus no matter what. I can no longer live without Him, I cannot.”* An “ontological” statement that speaks of the indissoluble bond between her and her Eucharistic Bridegroom.

Vera Grita had received a first Message, followed by eight years of silence, in Alpicella (Savona) on 6 October 1959. On 2 February 1965 she took the vows of perpetual chastity and to be a “little victim” for priests, whom she served with particular delicacy and dedication. She became a

Salesian Cooperator on 24 October 1967. She intensely loved Mary, to whom she had consecrated herself, and lived her filial relationship to her in the spirit of de Montfort's "slavery of love". Later she offered herself for different intentions of an ecclesial nature: in particular for priests who during the late 60s abandoned their vocation, yet remained beloved sons, never far from the Heart of Christ as he himself assured her.

Considered worthy of faith, much loved and esteemed, with a reputation for holiness, Vera died at the Santa Corona hospital in Pietra Ligure (Savona) on 22nd December 1969 of hypovolemic shock from massive haemorrhage and consequent multi-organ failure: "bride of blood", as she had been called by Jesus in the Messages, long before she understood what this meant.

A few moments later the chaplain – with a gesture as spontaneous as it was unusual – raised her remains to Heaven, praying and offering everything, presenting Vera as a welcome offering: *consummatum est!* It was the last in a series of gestures that punctuated the life of the Servant of God and that, in other ways, she herself had performed: the sign of the cross; the genuflection well done, slowly; the Holy Staircase on her knees with the Booklets in which she transcribed the Messages of the Work; the offering of herself brought even to St Peter's. When she did not understand, in weariness and sometimes in doubt, Vera Grita *acted*: she knew that the most important thing was not her own feeling, but the objectivity of God's Work in her and through her. She had written of herself: "*I am 'earth' and of no use except to write under dictation*"; "*Sometimes I understand and do not understand*"; "*Jesus does not leave me but uses this rag for his divine Plans.*" Her spiritual director, astonished, commented one day – referring to the words of the Messages: "*I find them splendid, even beatifying. And how can you remain dry?*" Vera had never looked at herself and, as for every mystic, a stronger light had become for her dark night, bright darkness, proof of faith.

Eight years later, on 22 September 1977, Pope Paul VI (already the recipient of some of the Work's Messages, and who had instituted the Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist in 1972), received Vera Grita's spiritual father, Fr Gabriello Zucconi sdb, in audience and blessed the Work of the Living Tabernacles.

On 18 May 2023, the Bishop of Savona-Noli, Bishop Calogero Marino, *"approved the Statutes of the Association known as 'Opera dei Tabernacoli Viventi' and on 19 May erected it as a private Association of the faithful, also recognising its juridical personality."* The Rector Major of the Salesians, Card. Arttime, already in 2017 authorised and charged the SDB Postulation to *"accompany all the necessary steps so that the Work [...] continues to be studied, promoted in our Congregation and recognised by the Church, in a spirit of obedience and charity."*

Being and becoming "Living Tabernacles"

At the centre of the Messages to Vera is Jesus in the Eucharist: we all have experience of the Eucharist, however it should be noted (cf. theologian Fr. François-Marie Léthel, OCD) how the Church has deepened *over time* the significance of the Sacrament of the Altar, from discovery to discovery: for example, from the celebration to the *Eucharistic Reserve* and from the *Reserve to the Exposition* during the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament... Jesus asks, through Vera, for a further step: from Adoration in church, where one must go to meet Him, to that *"Take me with you!"* (cf. *below*) through which he himself, having made his dwelling in his Living Tabernacle (us), wants to leave the churches to reach those who would not spontaneously enter a church; those who do not believe him; do not seek him; do not love him or even lucidly exclude him from their life. The **charismatic grace** linked to the Work is in fact that of the **Eucharistic permanence of Jesus in the soul**, so that whoever receives Jesus-Eucharist in the Holy Mass and lives sensitive to his calls and to his Presence, radiates him in the world, to every

brother and sister and especially to the most needy. Thus, Vera Grita becomes the example and model (in the literal sense of the term: one who has already lived what is required of each one) of a life spent in a profound body-to-body with the Eucharistic Lord, until he himself watches, speaks, acts, through the "soul" that carries and gives him. Jesus says: *"I will use your way of speaking, of expressing yourself, to speak, to reach other souls. Give me your faculties, that I may meet with everyone and in every place. In the beginning will be for the soul a work of attention, of vigilance, to discard from itself everything that poses an obstacle to my Permanence in her. My graces in the souls called to this Work will be gradual. Today you bring Me into the family, My kiss; another time, something more and more, until, almost unbeknownst to the soul itself, I will do, act, speak, love, through her as many as will approach this soul, that is to say, Me. There are those who act, speak, look, work feeling guided only by my Spirit, but I am already the Living Tabernacle in this soul, and it does not know it. It must know it, however, because I want its adhesion to my EUCHARISTIC PERMANENCE in its soul; I also want this soul to give me its voice to speak to other people, its eyes so that mine may meet the gaze of its brothers, its arms so that I may embrace others, its hands to caress the little ones, the children, the suffering. This Work, however, has **love** and **humility** as its basis. The soul must always have before it its own miseries, its own nothingness, and never forget of what dough it has been kneaded."* (Savona, 26 December 1967).

One can then also understand a further aspect of the "Salesian" relevance of the charism: being for others; sent in particular to the little ones, the poor, the least, the distant; living an "apostolic interiority" that means being all in God and all for one's brother and sister; the great gentleness of those who do not bear themselves, but radiate the meekness, meekness and joy of the crucified and risen Lord; the privileged attention to the young, who are also called to participate in this vocation.

Vera – whose confessor in life was a Salesian (Fr Giovanni Bocchi) and whose spiritual father was also a Salesian (Fr Gabriello Zucconi) and a reference person of the mystical experience (Fr Giuseppe Borra) – returns today to knock on the door of Don Bosco's sons. The Work itself was born in Turin, in the cradle of the Salesian charism.

Bibliographic references:

– Centro Studi “Opera dei Tabernacoli Viventi” (ed.), [*Portami con Te! L'Opera dei Tabernacoli Viventi nei manoscritti originali di Vera Grita*](#), ElleDiCi, Turin 2017.

– Centro Studi “Opera dei Tabernacoli Viventi” (ed.), [*Vera Grita una mistica dell'Eucaristia. Epistolario di Vera Grita e dei Sacerdoti Salesiani don G. Bocchi, don G. Borra e don G. Zucconi*](#), ElleDiCi, Torino 2018.

Both texts include studies of historical-biographical, theological-spiritual, Salesian and ecclesial contextualisation of the Work.

“Mother of Jesus, Mother of beautiful Love, give love to my poor heart, give purity and holiness to my soul, give will to my character, give holy enlightenment to my mind, give me Jesus, give me your Jesus forever.” (Prayer to Mary that Jesus teaches Vera Grita)

St Francis de Sales as a young student in Paris

In 1578 Francis de Sales was 11 years old. His father, wishing to make his eldest son a prominent figure in Savoy, sent him to Paris to continue his studies in the intellectual capital of the time. The boarding school he

wanted him to attend was the college of nobles, but Francis preferred the Jesuit one. With the help of his mother, he won his case and became a student of the Jesuits at their college in Clermont.

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

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

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

lay.

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

Humanities

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

The Jesuit method involved a lecture by the teacher (*praelectio*), followed by numerous exercises by the students such as writing verses and speeches, study of the lectures, declamations, conversations and disputations (*disputatio*) in Latin. To motivate their students, teachers appealed to two ‘inclinations’ present in the human soul: pleasure, fuelled by imitation of the ancients, a sense of beauty and the pursuit of literary perfection; and striving or emulation, encouraged by a sense of honour and a prize for the winners. As for religious motivations, they were first and foremost about seeking the greater glory of God (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*).

Going through Francis’ writings, one realises the extent to which his Latin culture was extensive and profound, even if he did not always read the authors in the original text. Cicero has his place there, but rather as a philosopher; he is a great spirit, if not the greatest “among pagan philosophers”. Virgil, prince of the Latin poets, is not forgotten: in the middle of a paragraph a line from the *Aeneid*

or the *Eglogues* suddenly appears, embellishing the sentence and stimulating curiosity. Pliny the Elder, author of *Natural History*, would provide Francis de Sales with an almost inexhaustible reserve of comparisons, “similes” and curious, often phantasmagorical data.

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

Philosophy and the “liberal arts”

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

Francis de Sales’ writings show that his studies in philosophy left traces in his mental universe. Aristotle, “the greatest brain” of antiquity can be found everywhere in Francis. To Aristotle, he wrote, we owe this “ancient axiom among philosophers, which every man desires to know”. What struck him most about Aristotle was that he had written “an admirable treatise on the virtues”. As for Plato, he regards him as a “great spirit”, if not “the greatest”. He greatly esteemed Epictetus, “the best man in all paganism”.

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

As for music, he confides that without being a connoisseur of it, he nevertheless enjoyed it “very much”. Gifted with an innate sense of harmony in everything, he

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

Extracurricular activities

School did not entirely absorb the life of our young man, who also needed relaxation. From 1560 onwards, the Jesuits initiated new possibilities such as reducing the daily timetable, inserting recreation between school and study hours, relaxing after meals, creating a spacious "courtyard" for recreation, walking once a week and excursions. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* recalls the games he had to participate in during his youth, when he lists "the game of court tennis, ball, ring races, chess and other board games". Once a week, on Thursdays, or if this was not possible, on Sundays, an entire afternoon was set aside for fun in the countryside.

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

Riding, fencing and dancing

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

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

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

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

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

Religious and moral formation

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

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

With the Renaissance, the *virtus* of the ancients, duly Christianised, returned to the fore. The Jesuits became its promoters, encouraging their pupils to effort, personal discipline and self-reformation. Francis undoubtedly adhered to the ideal of the most esteemed Christian virtues, such as obedience, humility, piety, the practice of the duty of one’s state, work, good manners and chastity. He later devotes the entire central part of his *Introduction* to “the exercise of the virtues”.

Bible study and theology

On a carnival Sunday in 1584, while all of Paris went out to have a good time, his tutor saw Francis looking worried. Not knowing whether he was ill or sad, he proposed that he attend the carnival. To this proposal the young man responded with this prayer taken from Scripture: “Turn away my eyes from vain things”, and added: “*Domine, fac ut videam*”. See what? “Sacred theology”, was his reply; “it will teach me what God wants my soul to learn.” Fr Déage, who was preparing

his doctorate at the Sorbonne, had the wisdom not to oppose the desire of his heart. Francis became enthusiastic about the sacred sciences to the point of skipping meals. His tutor gave him his own course notes and allowed him to attend public debates on theology.

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

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

Devotion in crisis

This sensitive fervour lasted for a time. Then came a crisis, a “strange torment”, accompanied by “fear of sudden death and God’s judgement.” According to the testimony of Mother Chantal, “he almost completely ceased eating and

sleeping and became very thin and pale as wax." Two explanations have attracted the attention of commentators: temptations against chastity and the question of predestination. It is not necessary to dwell on the temptations. The way of thinking and acting of the surrounding world, the habits of certain companions who frequented "dishonest women", offered him examples and invitations capable of attracting any young man of his age and condition.

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

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

Actually, this crisis had some really positive effects on Francis' spiritual development. On the one hand, it helped him move from sensitive, perhaps selfish and even narcissistic devotion to pure love, stripped of all self-interested and childish gratification. And on the other, it

opened his spirit to a new understanding of God's love, which wants the salvation of all human beings. Certainly, he would always defend the Catholic doctrine about the necessity of works to be saved, faithful in this to the definitions of the Council of Trent, but the term "merit" would not enjoy his sympathies. The true reward of love can only be love. We are here at the root of Salesian optimism.

Balance

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

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

What are the requirements for entering the Salesian Society

In various parts of the world the time is approaching when some young people, attracted by God's grace, are preparing to say their "Fiat" in the following of Christ, according to the charism that God has instituted through St John Bosco. What would be the dispositions with which they should approach joining the Salesian Society of St John Bosco? The saint himself tells us in a letter addressed to his sons (MB VIII, 828-830).

On Pentecost Sunday [1867] Don Bosco addressed a letter to all Salesians concerning the goal a candidate should have in mind when seeking admission to the Salesian Society. He also stated that the Society's definitive approval might not be long in coming. However, pertinent documents on hand give no such assurance. Since Don Bosco's personally written letter is dated "May 24, Feast of Mary, Help of Christians," we feel that it may have been this feast which inspired him to write and perhaps gave him a more vivid vision of the future. Be that as it may, he had several copies of his letter made, and then he himself changed the date and addressed each respectively: To Father Bonetti and to My Dear Sons of St. Francis de Sales at Mirabello; To Father Lemoyne and to My Dear Sons of St. Francis de Sales at Lanzo. He also signed them himself and added the postscript: "Let the director read and explain as he judges necessary."

Here is the copy addressed to the Salesians at the Oratory:

"To Father Rua and to My Beloved Sons of St Francis de Sales in Turin.

Before long our Society may be definitively approved. I therefore feel the need frequently to communicate with you, my dear sons. Being unable at times to do so personally, I will

try to reach you by letter.

First I shall treat of the general purpose of our Society, leaving the explanation of our rules to some other occasion.

The primary aim of our Society is the sanctification of its members. On entering it, therefore, everyone must discard any other intention and concern. It would be wrong to enter in order to enjoy a tranquil life, complete one's education, or free oneself of parental or other authority. This would hardly be a response to Christ's call. Such a person would be seeking temporal advantages, not his spiritual good. Our Savior praised the Apostles and promised them an eternal kingdom not because they had abandoned the world, but because they had abandoned it in order to follow Him through thick and thin; this they indeed did, wearing themselves out with work, penance, and suffering, and finally undergoing martyrdom.

It would also be wrong for anyone to enter or remain in this Society with the notion that he is necessary. **From the Superior General down to the last member, let everyone keep well in mind that nobody is necessary to the Society.** God alone is its head, its absolute, necessary master. Its members must therefore turn to Him as to their head, true master and rewarder. Those who join this Society should work, obey, and abandon all worldly possessions exclusively for God's sake so that, at the end of their lives, they can tell their Savior, *"Behold, we have left all and followed You. What then shall we have?"* [Matt. 19:27]

By saying that **one should enter the Society only to serve God more perfectly and do good to himself**, we mean his true good, his spiritual eternal good. Anyone who seeks an easy, comfortable life in our Society is not rightly motivated. Our basic motive must stem from Our Lord's words that whoever wishes to be His disciple must sell his possessions, give to the poor, and then follow Him. But where can we follow Him, since He had nowhere to lay His weary head? He explains that

we must follow Him in prayer, in penance, especially in self-denial, in accepting our daily crosses ... *"Let him deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow Me."* [Luke 9, 23] Till when? Till death and, if necessary, even till death on the cross.

This is what one does in our Society when he wears himself out in the sacred ministry, in teaching or in other priestly work till death, till even a violent death through imprisonment, exile, sword, fire, or water. Then, after having suffered and died with Jesus Christ on earth, he will join Him in the happiness of heaven.

This is how I understand Saint Paul's words to all Christians: *"Whoever wishes to rejoice with Christ must also suffer with Christ."*

After entering the Society with these good dispositions, a member must be undemanding and willing to accept any task-even the most menial- readily and cheerfully because what matters before God is not the task itself but the intention with which it is done. All jobs are equally noble because they are all equally meritorious in God's sight.

My dear sons, trust your superiors. They shall have to give God a strict account of your actions. Hence they study your abilities and inclinations and use them in a manner compatible with your strength, but always in accordance with what seems best for God's greater glory and the good of souls.

If applicants enter our Society with these intentions, our houses will certainly be an earthly paradise. Peace and concord will reign, charity will guide superiors, and obedience and respect will anticipate their decisions, their undertakings, and even their wishes. Thus we shall have a family of brothers around a father, all united to promote God's glory on earth so as to be with Him some day and praise Him in the immense glory of the blessed in heaven.

May God abundantly bless you and your efforts. May He sanctify your activities and help you persevere in doing good.

Turin, 9 June 1867, Pentecost Day.

Affectionately yours in Jesus Christ,

Father John Bosco