

## Conclusions

The conference was held in two parts, the first dedicated to the posterity of Saint Francis de Sales, the second to some thematic insights. My concluding remarks, which are still provisional, also refer to these two moments, which are, after all, closely interconnected.

### I. Posterity

1. A first general consideration that seems to me to have emerged from this conference concerns the importance of the fruit for knowing the tree. Not only does Francis de Sales enlighten monastic orders, priestly institutes, religious congregations and lay associations that are inspired by his figure and teaching; the opposite is also true: this rich posterity helps us to better understand his magisterium and his theological and spiritual legacy.

Like every charism, the Salesian charism is not static, nor given once and for all, but develops in history in ever new ways. Examples would be numerous, but I will limit myself to three areas in which this Salesian charism has been incarnated, or rather increased: the mystical-contemplative area, the pedagogical-mystagogical area, and the apostolic-missionary area. Obviously in religious families inspired by Francis de Sales, the three spheres often intertwine. This charismatic development has occurred and continues to occur in relation to the challenges of history: different times, places, persons and situations have contributed to it.

a) We have seen how much the mystical-contemplative dimension has been enhanced and deepened by the Order of the Visitation of St Mary. Mariagrazia Franceschini's talk highlighted how central the objective of loving God in a total, radical, "pure" way was for Francis de Sales, beyond the juridical forms that the institute he founded with Jeanne de Chantal would take. We also understood how important the foundation of the Visitandine is for understanding the thinking of Francis de Sales on many aspects of the spiritual life. Again, the enormous spiritual stature of Jeanne de Chantal emerged, shining with her own light and not just that reflected by Sales. The fundamental role that the Order of the Visitation played in spreading Salesian spirituality should also be mentioned. Some of the greatest mystics or spiritual masters of the 17th and 18th centuries went to the monasteries: they brought there their spiritual direction and advice adapted to the Visitation rule; in contact with the great women they directed, they themselves found there matter for instruction or edification. The high esteem in which the Visitation observance has been held has resulted in nuns being asked to form new religious congregations or reform old ones.

b) As far as the pedagogical-magological sphere is concerned, the horizon widens enormously: from the sec. 18th century and throughout the 19th century, religious families sprang up that based their work on the educational style of Francis de Sales: from the Institute of the Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales, founded in 1740 by Fr. Domenico Leonati, to the Little Sisters of Charity of Mary of Sorrows, founded in 1818 by Teodora Campostrini; from the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, founded by Saint John Bosco in 1859, to the Congregation of the Oblate Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales, founded in 1871; from the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, founded by Mary Domenica Mazzarello, to the Society of the Priests of Saint Francis de Sales; from the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales, founded by Fr Carlo Cavina in 1872, to the Missionaries of Saint Francis de Sales.

In these institutions, charity is aimed at education and the contemplative life must go hand in hand. The Salesian spirit is taken up and reshaped here not so much in doctrinal terms, but starting from the educational reality, always dynamic and never reducible to a closed system. In this educative action, much attention is also paid to what we could call the mystagogical dimension: the acquisition of a familiarity with the Word of God, education to prayer and sacramental life, the assimilation of lifestyles and virtues such as gentleness and humility, attention to the vocational dimension: all elements easily traceable to the personal sensibility and magisterium of Francis de Sales.

c) The third trait of the Salesian heritage, the more apostolic-missionary one, is well illustrated by the Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales, founded in 1871 by Blessed Louis Bresson, inspired by Mother Chappuis, who felt called to proclaim the good news of the Gospel, which is the proclamation of mercy, with tones very different from those then in vogue, not only in France, that appealed to fear, terror and constraint. One feels the need to proclaim salvation not by keeping one's distance from the world, but by "throwing oneself headlong into it, even at the cost of getting muddy", as Cardinal Czacki said, quoted in Joseph Chorpenning's report. In the same charismatic declination, we can include the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, founded by Monsignor Mermier, and the Saint Francis de Sales Association, founded by Henri Chaumont and Caroline Carrè del Malberg in 1872: by means of instruments such as the Rule of Life, devotion to the Holy Spirit, formation through the method of trials and the cultivation of spiritual friendships, it offers men and women a proposal to follow Jesus for those living in the world. And again, in the 20th century, the Salesian Oblate Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, founded by Monsignor Giuseppe Cognata in 1933, who put the theme of offering at the heart of the mission.

d) The river of spiritual posterity flowing from the primitive 'spring' has also had the merit of giving prominence to works of Francis de Sales, perhaps considered secondary compared to the great masterpieces, such as the Spiritual Directory, considered a distillation where the Salesian's experience and wisdom are concentrated.

From the 17th century onwards, the figure of Francis de Sales emerges as a watershed in the religious, ecclesiastical and cultural panorama that opposes the rigorist, Jansenist and austere instances, generating a new 'religious mentality' that will have a strong influence until the beginning of the 20th century. The proposal of a Christianity with "sweet" and "human" traits responds to a religious need that until then had not found an adequate response.

We can therefore endorse what the historian Henri Brémond said about the cultural significance of the influence of Francis de Sales: "Is this not a capital fact? I do not say that all those who have read this book have fully assimilated its spirit (on the contrary, I am convinced of the contrary). But many have drawn something from it. Either words are worthless, or one must consider Salesian doctrine as one of the ferments of modern civilisation'.

## 2. Influences on 20th century spiritual figures

As far as the spiritual posterity of Saint Francis de Sales is concerned, let me suggest that it goes far beyond the sphere of religious families that explicitly refer to him. It also encompasses saints and spiritual masters

up to the 20th century. By way of example, I mention two figures that I have had the opportunity to study in terms of their 'Salesian-ness': Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI.

a) Saint Francis de Sales is one of the saints who had the greatest influence in the life of Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who began to admire and venerate him as early as his seminary years in Bergamo, choosing him as his "special protector and very special model", to then become a constant in his biography.

The first mention of Francis de Sales dates back to 1895, when Angelo Roncalli, as a young teenager, at the suggestion of his spiritual director Fr Luigi Isacchi, began writing his spiritual diary, *Il giornale dell'anima*. The more time passed, the more numerous and precise the references to Francis de Sales became. In 1903, the cleric Roncalli, now resolutely oriented towards the priesthood, dedicated a very important text to Francis de Sales, in which he enthusiastically declared his affectionate devotion. Of the holy bishop he highlights the virtues and doctrine, the love for Christ and the Church, the amiable and gentle temperament towards his neighbour, the idea of a holiness to be lived with humility and trust in the ordinary and everyday circumstances of existence. Hence the firm decision to maintain a constant familiarity with him, reading and re-reading his biography, meditating on his examples and nurturing a tender devotion to him: 'Today was a complete feast day; I spent it in the company of Saint Francis de Sales my sweetest saint. What a beautiful figure of a man, of a priest, of a bishop! If I were to be like him, he would do nothing to me even when they created me Pope. It is sweet for me to think of him often, of his virtues, of his doctrine; how many times I have read his life! How his sentences descend sweetly to my heart! How I feel more disposed to be humble, sweetly tranquil in the light of his examples! My life, the Lord tells me, must be a perfect copy of that of Saint Francis de Sales, if it is to be fruitful of any good. Nothing extraordinary in me, in my conduct, other than the way of doing ordinary things, *omnia communia sed non communiter*. Great love, most ardent, towards Jesus Christ and his Church, unalterable serenity of spirit, ineffable gentleness with my neighbour, that is all. O my loving Saint here before you at this moment how many things I would like to say to you! I love you with tenderness: for you I shall always have a thought; to you my gaze. O Saint Francis, I have no more words, see what I feel and do the rest that I need to resemble you" .

The reference to Saint Francis de Sales will run through Roncalli's entire life, with different emphases. It is a substantial reference, not an extemporaneous one. In presenting his figure, work and magisterium, Roncalli gives proof of having assimilated the Salesian spiritual lesson in a profound and original way, so much so as to offer a mature synthesis already as a young priest, in the Panegyric of 1906 and in an essay of 1911. There are many traits of Salesian holiness that Roncalli absorbed and made his own to such an extent that they would strongly connote his spirituality up to his pontificate: meekness, moderation, balance, wisdom in government, cordiality, but also courage and great inner freedom.

Roncalli admired Saint Francis de Sales for fully implementing the decrees of the Council of Trent and undertaking that reform of the Church which, albeit in a different way, he too, as pope, would initiate with the Second Vatican Council. It was precisely the Council desired and inaugurated by John XXIII that would re-propose typically Salesian themes and perspectives, such as the primacy of charity, the universal call to holiness, the ecumenical method, the missionary thrust, creative fidelity to tradition, the importance of the means of social communication, openness to culture and that Christian humanism that characterised the holy bishop of Annecy.

b) Also for Giovanni Battista Montini, references to the holy Bishop of Geneva are numerous and recurrent at every stage of his spiritual journey, in the family environment, during his episcopal ministry and as pope. If in the youthful period a devotional approach prevails, absorbed in the family atmosphere, strongly

imbued with the Salesian spirit, later, in the years of his priestly ministry and even more so as archbishop of Milan, the approach to Saint Francis de Sales is more targeted: it focuses on the distinctive traits of his figure, his spiritual temperament, with increasing attention to show his 'modernity', his harmony with contemporary sensibilities, the cues capable of nourishing more evangelical styles of spiritual life.

The Salesian school is considered a true 'school' from which Montini himself wished to learn the teachings of Christian life. The portrait and the work of the Founder of the Visitation are sketched with quick and precise brushstrokes: the preaching against the Calvinist heresy, in a style of truth in charity; the pastoral ministry, exercised with intelligence and total dedication, following the example of Saint Charles Borromeo; the "apostolate of the pen", through which he was able to transmit the Gospel proclamation in a fresh and elegant language, accessible to all.

## II. The Themes

To the three areas indicated above, one could perhaps add a fourth, no less important, in which one can see a fruit of the Salesian heritage: the theological one. And here I turn to the second part of our conference, devoted to some thematic insights.

1. A first observation concerns the connection of the topics discussed at this conference with the current historical and ecclesial situation. It is inevitable that every era, when studying a figure from the past, tries to bring out what it feels closest to itself. And so here too: on the long wave of the Second Vatican Council, topics were proposed that have to do with the conciliar perspective.

a) For example, the topic of ecumenical dialogue: Amoungou recalled some aspects of Francis de Sales' relationship with the Protestant world, which played such a large part not only in his biography, but also in the elaboration of his spirituality. In a context strongly marked by controversy, his choice to place charity at the centre of his missionary pastoral, has important consequences even today in the way he approaches relations not only with Protestants, but also with those who belong to other religions or who declare themselves non-believers: the rejection of verbal and physical violence, the sincere offer of friendship, the importance of civil legislation that respects every creed.

b) The universal call to holiness, proclaimed in chapter V of *Lumen gentium*, was also the subject of Eugenio Alburquerque's speech, who indicated the cornerstones of the Salesian conception of holiness, convincingly showing the close harmony with the recent magisterium, in particular with Pope Francis' *Gaudete et exsultate*. Common is the attention to the conditions of ordinary life in which the path to holiness can and must grow; common is the centring of holiness on charity, which is expressed in various ways, according to the conditions of life; common is the insistence on freedom and joy, the special characteristics of true Christian holiness; finally, common is the invitation to undertake the path to holiness not individually, but communally, and to allow oneself to be accompanied by a guide that helps in discernment.

c) For his part, Aimable Musoni's contribution showed well how Francis de Sales' thought on the role of Peter was not only taken up by the First Vatican Council, but also offers insights to the current ecclesiological debate, not so much for his apologetic writings but rather for his spiritual texts and his pastoral practice. Francis de Sales still gives food for thought, especially for his way of understanding the Petrine primacy and for imagining a Church with a synodal style. After all, already more than half a century ago, Pope Paul VI, in the *Sabaudiae gemma*, saw in Francis de Sales a forerunner of the ecclesiological orientations of the recently concluded Second Vatican Council.

2. The conference highlighted a second series of Salesian themes that intercept contemporary culture.

a) First of all, the valorisation of the human, psychological and political dimensions of his spirituality, his attention to the world of women and to the social and ecclesial role of women, his predilection for educational action.

Wendy Wright's talk highlighted well not only the importance that women's relationships had in the psychological, human and spiritual maturation of Francis de Sales, but also how they developed in a cultural and religious context that was increasingly sensitive in this regard, although still little known. For example, the possibility of frequenting Madame Acarie's circle in Paris enabled Francis de Sales to assimilate new spiritual currents, such as that of Teresa of Avila's reformed Carmelite Order. Equally decisive was the long spiritual relationship with Jeanne de Chantal. Through the many relationships of spiritual accompaniment with numerous female figures, Francis de Sales matured an extraordinary experience, developed special virtues, such as kindness, affective sensitivity, attention to emotions and feelings, the cult of friendship, a religious language rich in symbols and metaphors, often drawn from the lives of women, brides and mothers.

The report by Michal Vojtas on the "educational convergences between Francis de Sales and Don Bosco", highlighting some central themes common to the two saints - the centrality of love, the primacy of the will over reason, the importance of interpersonal relationships, etc. - highlights new keys to interpreting the saint's life. - enhances new interpretative keys of the saintly bishop of Geneva. Acutely developing the intuitions of some recent studies (e.g. Cristiano Passoni, Hélène Michon and Thomas Gueydier), Vojtas highlights the role of the heart and will in Salesian anthropology, which explains some significant differences compared to other spiritual proposals, such as Augustinian or Ignatian. Important is the idea of complaisance understood as the intuition of an irreducibly affective root of the soul accompanied by a recognised primacy of the will. In this "attractive force of the good", in this "promise of good life", which the subject must then reverse with his own will and freedom, lies the beginning not only of the educational process but also of every spiritual and moral life.

3. A third series of considerations concerns certain "gains" that this conference has achieved. I will mention a few of them.

a) From various speakers, mainly Marinelli and Sajovic, but also Amougou Amougou, the importance of studying the language of Francis de Sales emerged. Even technical aspects such as the accompanying

gestures or the use of Latin are far from secondary for understanding his mentality and pastoral work. This confirms certain directions of contemporary theology that are very attentive to the aspect of language, which should not be understood as a mere label, but an element that contributes to shaping a culture and spirituality. For example, think of Michel de Certeau's studies in the area of mystical language.

In particular, Vincenzo Marinelli has well illustrated the importance of Salesian preaching, at a time when the *ars praedicandi* was undergoing an extraordinary development, on the wave of Renaissance culture, and Baroque culture, without forgetting the Protestant emphasis on the primacy of the Word and the Council of Trent's indications on preaching. This also implies for Francis de Sales a return to the biblical and patristic sources on which preaching must draw, first in missionary action in the Chablais, then in the exercise of episcopal ministry and spiritual direction. The preaching of Francis de Sales is distinguished not only by its content, but also by its warm style, sober in its gestures but capable of touching the hearts of its hearers, also because it is a reflection of a life marked by charity.

Miran Sajovic studied the curious initiative of Francis de Sales to write in Latin in his correspondence with friends, for example Antoine Fabre. This choice, in addition to giving the letters a certain solemnity, confirms Sales' familiarity with classical letters and his sensitivity to the themes of Humanism, such as a return to the sources, especially Sacred Scripture, and a love of the beautiful. The predilection for the Latin language is a significant clue to confirm Henri Brémond's brilliant if debatable expression, according to which Francis de Sales is the leader of the so-called 'devout humanism'. As Paul VI rightly observed, for Francis de Sales, 'the love of God, coming down from on high, does not destroy the natural faculties, but rather elevates them, orders them and harmonises them, and expresses every form of beauty and all the perfection of human nature in the flesh' .

As we have said, the linguistic aspect was also touched upon by Amougou Amougou, in the context of the relationship between Francis de Sales and the Calvinists: his is, so to speak, an ecumenical multilingualism, in the sense that the knowledge of several languages favours encounter and relationship.

b) The Mariological dimension of Francis de Sales, which was presented to us by Antonio Escudero, showed the fruitfulness of this point of view in appreciating the Salesian way of doing theology. His is not a doctrinal approach, that is, a theology that starts from doctrine, but rather a reflection that takes up and thematises personal spiritual experience. If it is not reduced to a simple autobiographical narrative, this mode can be very important, because it involves the theologian in his capacity as a believer and not only as a scholar. On the other hand, we have seen how Mariology gives Francis de Sales' spiritual experience a greater Christological focus and a beautiful pneumatological openness.

c) From the talk by Thierry La Goaziou we learn an important lesson: the possibility and the need to reread the teaching of Francis de Sales with new theological and spiritual categories that, without betraying it, are more in tune with contemporary culture and can benefit from the valuable contributions of psychology and pedagogy, linguistics and sociology. In this way, fundamental aspects of Christian life, such as mysticism, ascetics and prayer can regain a right of citizenship in the contemporary anthropological and cultural debate.

4. Cues for new research and insights

As Beppe Roggia's speech has well outlined, Francis de Sales proposes a harmonious synthesis between contemplation and action, coining the ingenious expression 'ecstasy of action'. To elaborate his concept of mystical union, Francis de Sales chooses different references that he reshapes in original ways. For example, in books VI and VII of the Treatise, he closely follows the Teresian classification of the degrees of prayer, taking up its stages and vocabulary: meditation, contemplation, recollection, wounded love, etc. To express the prayer of union, Teresa of Avila uses various images. The most pregnant, in the Fifth Mansions, is that of the white butterfly derived from the worm, which depicts the transformed soul. Another image is that of the river that flows and is lost in the sea, so that they can no longer be separated: such is the soul in spiritual marriage. Speaking of the culmination of the mystical union, Francis de Sales does not take up images that suggest an annihilation, a death, a disappearance of the subject and its activity. He prefers to take up the biblical lexicon of "liquefaction", present in the Song of Songs: grace does not annihilate the soul but makes it malleable, malleable, like wax or molten metal.

With Francis de Sales, there is a shift from an anthropology of combat to an anthropology of harmonious encounter: the emphasis is not on the fracture between man and God, but on their harmony. He then combines two mystical traditions, that of inner space, centred on the heart, and that of inner architecture, whose focal point is the 'tip of the soul'. Finally, by proposing an original definition of 'ecstasy', he makes a reconciliation between ascensional mysticism and the spiritual life that rests on the practice of virtues.

Fr Roggia again emphasised the importance of the category of devotion. It is little used today and always viewed with a certain suspicion, but it can be taken as the guiding thread to explore the spiritual universe of Francis de Sales. By devotion is meant the response that every man, though wounded by original sin, is able to give to the gratuitous love revealed by God in creation and in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. It takes on the features of an astonishment before the mystery of God's presence, and at the same time of a decision that involves man in all his dimensions and calls for continuous development and progressive purification, until he becomes pure love. Moral commitment, the effective practice of the virtues - especially charity, which is the soul and synthesis of them all - constitute the only proof of true devotion.

Devotion that aspires to become perfect cannot be a matter of mere resonance or emotional gratification, but consists fundamentally in the firm resolution to belong entirely to God; this love is not necessarily felt, nor even less sensitive; its criterion resides solely in the union of our will with God's. The relationship between devotion and sensitivity is a delicate crux of Salesian thought.

Allow me to quote Roncalli again here, who attributes to Francis de Sales the idea of "true devotion", that is, of holiness that is identified with charity and is within the reach of all, as the Second Vatican Council would recall many years later. Roncalli's synthesis of Salesian spirituality is of astonishing precision and beauty: 'Saint Francis de Sales by his words, by his examples, by his writings [...] brought truth back into devotion and said: what God asks of you is your heart, devotion is giving yourself to him. To serve God is to walk in the way of his commandments; to be devoted is to run, to fly with the wings of love, with the joy of sacrifice. Thus devotion is no longer a vain appearance but a living reality; it is no longer the privilege of a few special vocations, but the high inspiration of every life that wants to belong to God. And herein lies one of the greatest merits of Saint Francis de Sales: to have simplified and reduced religious life to greater simplicity, to have taken it by the hand - I will use Bossuet's beautiful expressions - from the cloisters where it had been relegated for so long, and without removing either its cross or its crown of thorns, to have brought it back with honour into the midst of society'.

Finally, I like to recall the spiritual portrait of Saint Francis de Sales summarised with extraordinary effectiveness by Pope Paul VI in *Sabaudiae gemma* (1967): "Acute intuition of mind, strong and clear intelligence, penetrating judgement, incredible loving kindness and goodness, smiling gentleness of face and speech, quiet ardour of spirit always industrious, rare simplicity of life not without a modest boast of his lineage, serene and tranquil peace, moderation always unaltered and secure, not however separated from strength - gentleness comes from the strong - with which he knew how to love tenderly, but also to be firm and achieve his intent; sublime loftiness of mind and love of beauty, eager to give others the highest good: heaven and poetry; almost infinite zeal for souls and love of God, which like a most shining sun preceded the other virtues in him: and all these endowments the superabundance of divine grace sublimated and heightened: these are the main lines which, with other similar ones, trace the sublime figure of Sales".

One of the most significant passages of the Letter highlights in the saintly Savoyard Bishop the perspective that was particularly close to Paul VI's heart, the ability to make the new flourish on the ancient, that is, to follow a double loyalty: to tradition and to his own time:

"He is to be called an original and modern Doctor, not because he breaks the bonds of continuity with the most ancient, rather his doctrine is radically adherent to the faith of the Church, to sacred Tradition, to the doctrine of the holy Fathers [...]. He seeks, however, to place the ancient doctrine in a new light, to place it wisely at the service of modern life, suitably adapting it to its manifold needs".