

Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales 1740-2022

About Us

"The Sisters of St Francis de Sales, or Salesian Sisters, are an Institute of pontifical right, in which the sisters, by taking the three public vows of chastity, poverty and obedience,¹ tend towards Christian perfection according to the spirituality and mission entrusted to them by their Founder Fr Dominic Leonati".²

Salesian motivations of the Founder

"These Rules which are presented to you, my beloved Sisters, are almost all taken from the Constitutions of Saint Francis de Sales for his Religious [...]. I recommend you to consider this Saint as your Father and Founder".³

Thus our first Rules begin.

Fr Dominic Leonati considers it almost presumptuous to be the creator of an institution that he considers to be the fruit of Providence, therefore, with a paradoxical expropriation and fascinated by the demanding and serene spirituality of the saint of meekness and gentleness, he refers us to Sales urging us to be "perfect imitators of him"⁴ and to follow Jesus "meek and humble of heart"⁵, "with simplicity, kindness, joy and peace".⁶

These statements led the Congregation to refer to the spirituality of Saint Francis, and only after the Second Vatican Council did we discover the Founder, a figure almost lost in time, behind the upheavals of the Napoleonic suppression (1810).

The 1700s

The 1700s, the time in which the Founder lived, is a century of cultural, political and religious transformation for Europe. At this time the Church aimed to implement the reforms of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), but there was a lack of seminaries, most of the clergy were in search of socio-economic well-being and often did not set a good example.

In this historical period, in the large diocese of Padua, alongside a minority of well-to-do people, poverty and misery prevailed among a population of peasants, boatmen, porters and shoemakers forced to reckon with frequent natural disasters, epidemics, animal plagues, etc. The people are illiterate, there is superstition, marginalisation and exploitation by Venetian patrician landowners with numerous villas. There is the custom of crying noisily in church, the taverns, called 'anti-parish', are also frequented by women and the youth is in disarray. There is a frivolous atmosphere in the monasteries, which does not help the spiritual life. Religion follows the wave of sentimentalism and folklore.⁷

In the eighteenth century, the diocese of Padua still benefits from the pastorate of Saint Gregory Barbarigo (1625-1697), a devotee of Sales, who aimed at the formation of the clergy, the re-founding of the seminary and religious instruction, lines also followed by his

successors.⁸ The story of our Founder, whose cause for beatification is in progress, is inserted in this context.

Fr Dominic Leonati

Dominic Leonati was born on 12 February 1703 in Battaglia (today Battaglia Terme), in the province of Padua. He is the tenth of thirteen children, two of whom will be priests like his brother.

At the age of seven, he was orphaned by his father. He was educated by his parish priest don Antonio Gentili who, seeing young Domenico's good predispositions for piety and study, recommended him to the Patriarch of Venice Pietro Barbarigo (1671-1725), who welcomed him free of charge in the 'Schola sacerdotum' at the monastery of St. Cyprian, in Murano.

After seven years he moved to Padua to the Collegio Tornacense. In 1722, at the age of nineteen, he graduated in Canon and Civil Law at the University of Padua. He was ordained in 1726.

Pastoral animation

Don Domenico Leonati carries out his pastoral ministry always around Padua. He is chaplain in Montagnana (1730-1734), vice-parish priest in Battaglia (1734-1737) parish priest in Ponte di Brenta (1737-1751) spiritual father in the diocesan seminary, substitute postulator of the blessed Maria Maddalena Martinengo, founder of the Conservatorio di Vanzo and confessor in several monasteries in Padua for 27 years.⁹

Everywhere he offered a testimony of an exemplary priest. In his ministry, the Founder has the youth at heart. He opened a boarding school for poor young university students, first in Padua, then in Montagnana where he moved with his brother priest, in Ponte di Brenta he started a Conservatory for poor and orphaned girls. At the behest of Bishop Minotto Ottoboni, he went to help his elderly and sick parish priest. After three years, in 1737, he was appointed parish priest of Ponte di Brenta, now a populous suburb of the municipality of Padua.

The parish of Ponte di Brenta is populated by boatmen, innkeepers, tenant farmers. In the area there are numerous villas of Venetian lords, each with its own semi-public oratory and its own chaplain.

For convenience, parishioners attend the nearest places of worship and only go to the parish church for the Easter precept, baptisms, weddings and funerals. Don Leonati, with prudence and original initiatives, makes the faithful converge on the parish church without irritating anyone, not even the lords of the villas among whom there will be many benefactors.

He identifies the main deficiency the community suffers from, in the lack of the proclamation of the Word. He writes: "[...] souls found themselves without a pasture of the word of God, with those fatal consequences that arise from ignorance".¹⁰

In his pastoral work he gave priority to catechesis, extraordinary preaching, Eucharistic adoration, the Octave of the Dead and he restructured the church by involving families.

In 1740, he started a Conservatory. In his autobiographical Memoir we find this annotation: "[...] in Ponte di Brenta the work of piety began, consisting in collecting wretched girls, to

take them away from ignorance about our holy Religion, and from idleness, having them assisted by teachers of great probity".¹¹ It is the beginning of our Congregation.

In 1751 Cardinal Rezzonico, Bishop of Padua and future Pope Clement XIII, appointed Leonati as confessor in the diocesan seminary and the Conservatory was transferred to Padua in the Vanzo area. The Work was carried on by our first sisters who started free popular schools in Padua and Venice. Over time, many young people dedicated themselves to the Work. At the time of the Founder's death (1793) there were about fifty, with two hundred poor girls to care for and thirty-three boarding school girls.

In Ponte di Brenta the educators were called 'Secular Virgins' and in Padua 'Virgins of Vanzo' or 'Virgins of Perpetual Adoration'.

In 1810 the Conservatory suffered Napoleonic suppression. Once the storm had passed, Restorer Pasqua Sandrini restarted the Conservatory in S. Croce (PD), in the former Collegio dei P. Somaschi.

With the Decree of Praise of 1911, the Institute became of pontifical right with the name of 'Sisters of St Francis de Sales'.¹²

The cornerstones of pastoral animation

Trinitarian devotion

Fr Dominic learnt the devotion to the Trinity in his parish; he was enrolled in the Confraternity of the Trinity. In the Rule he often mentions the Father and the Son, while he mentions the Holy Spirit in relation to the word of the Bible, the tradition of the church, good books and the useful word in conversation. A wise and transparent word comes from the Spirit. This concept will guide him in the different tasks of his life.

In his Testament he expresses this desire: "Immediately after my death let a Holy Mass be celebrated in thanksgiving to the Most Holy Trinity [...] in whom I abandon myself now and forever".¹³ It is the ecstasy of life for which everything is given in adherence to God's will to which St Francis de Sales invites us to conform our hearts.¹⁴

The Eucharistic mystery and the community

The Founder nourishes Eucharistic devotion with daily frequentation of the Mystery. He writes: 'I, Don Domenico Leonati, diocesan priest, celebrate at the altar of St Catherine, in the Collegiate Church of Montagnana every day, ...'.¹⁵ Which was very rare at that time.

In Ponte di Brenta he instituted daily adoration, which would later be introduced also in Battaglia, while in the Conservatorio he started perpetual adoration. The Restorer Pasqua Sandrini qualified the Conservatory as the 'Institute of the Virgins of Perpetual Adoration'.

Don Domenico exhorts us to keep "continuous and loving company with the divine Bridegroom".¹⁶ He writes in the Rule: "Nothing can separate you from the Heavenly Bridegroom who has united you together, nor from this union which can hold you close to Him [...]".¹⁷ He suggests that we approach communion with "great faith, great reverence, great love".¹⁸ And to live this Divine presence also in daily life, in an attitude of "modesty, composure, humility and exactness of duty".¹⁹

He calls his body a 'Tabernacle', a space that contains a mystery that surpasses it, and exhorts, like Saint Paul, to 'clothe oneself with the sentiments of Christ',²⁰ because what counts is the 'inner garment', the heart.

The practice of perpetual adoration also responds to an indication from Pope Clement XIII, who asked for prayers for him and for the needs of the Church, and is open to the public by the explicit will of the Founder, as reiterated in the Decree of Praise.²¹

Over time, the Congregation has remained faithful to Eucharistic adoration (now only during the day). This practice is carried out in the various communities and, considering the time zones where we are present, there are always Salesian sisters before the Eucharist.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart

The devotion to the Heart of Christ is part of Salesian spirituality.²² Fr Leonati drew it from Sales and encouraged its spread. In Ponte di Brenta, he had a wonderful altar to the Sacred Heart erected, which was unusual for the time.

It was not until 1765 that Pope Clement XIII started an archconfraternity and approved the Office and Mass in honour of the Sacred Heart.

The centrality of the Word

The Salesian charism is rooted in the Word of God. The expression: "Let the Word of Jesus Christ dwell in you"²³ shows how much the Rules are a condensation of the Word itself, of that Word with which Sales' works are also imbued.

The Preface of our first Rules refers to the text of Ezekiel. The verbs: "come, keep, take, eat [...], swallow this book, fill your powers, nourish your heart", urge us to assimilate the Rules and, as a consequence, to feed on the Word so that: "his words may be exposed day and night before your eyes to meditate on them and above your arms to practise them".²⁴

In the Constitutions of Saint Francis for his Religious there is the same quotation, but this does not obscure the love of our Founder for the Word, of which he felt the urgent need for his time. In his pastoral work he used preaching, catechism, popular Missions and Spiritual Exercises to sow the Word. The Conservatory itself will have this purpose, as well as that of preserving.

Trusting abandonment in Mary

Fr Dominic, in his preaching and manifestations of popular religiosity, had occasion to recall the devotion to Mary, assimilated from his village where he was a member of the Confraternity of the Rosary. Mary, whom Francis calls "the most beloved of creatures",²⁵ is an essential reference figure in his life and that of the Institute. In the Rules and the Directory he urges us to recognise her as "our true Mother and principal Superior".²⁶ We, Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales, contemplate Mary in the Mystery of the Visitation.

The founding project of Fr Leonati

The original Sales project, channelled along traditional lines, has opened up new avenues. One of these is the Vanzo Conservatory, the initial nucleus of our Congregation. Elaborating on the ideal of Saint Francis de Sales and his spirituality based on love, Fr Dominic Leonati drew the inspiration for an Institute dedicated to the education and social redemption of disadvantaged youth, according to a rule of life centred on the apostolate and spiritual life in the community. It opens up a new way of guarding, preserving, educating by bringing out the potential of each one, and trains educators capable of proposing positive experiences in environments capable of overcoming hardship and creating a possible future.

In continuity with the founding idea, in our educational mission we pay special attention to the age of development, placing the person at the centre so that he or she may mature in himself or herself the project of God. Sales' educational charism is inspired by Sales' anthropological vision of Christian humanism, which, in turn, draws on the thought of philosophers and pedagogues from before his time such as Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas.

Over time, other thinkers contributed to orienting the pedagogical perspective that places the person, understood as a synthesis of values and experience, at the centre. The thought of these pedagogues, for some of whom Sales' Christian humanism was an inspiration, has also influenced our educational style.

This perspective animates the action of our educating community, is a guide for the Educational Project and directs processes, strategies and style of community relations. Faced with a culture in which the ethical-religious aspect has changed, we feel the urgency to reaffirm the vision of the human person created in the image of God.

The Christian humanism of Saint Francis de Sales

In Salesian humanism there is a vision of a God concerned for man's happiness, respectful of his freedom and committed to guiding him firmly and gently. It is a good, provident and preventive God. From this vision comes the preventive method, implemented by our Founder, who, having cultivated throughout his existence a particular devotion to the Most Holy Trinity, aims to share, educate, guard and accompany in a family spirit, through a style based on gentleness and paternal goodness. The educational activity of Sales, Leonati and ours is carried out with love, without forcing, and aims at the integral formation of the person to establish harmony between nature and grace.

Our educational-pastoral service

Our mission in the Church finds its priority realisation in the educative-pastoral service. Fr Domenico Leonati combined evangelisation and human promotion.

The educational path is aimed at unfolding all the potential inherent in the person, so that the person can also contribute to the growth of his or her social and ecclesial community.

Considering the educational style of Sales and Leonati, and encouraged by their witness, we commit ourselves to contribute to the realisation of the Kingdom of God with self-denial and holiness of life. We propose values that form to Goodness, Truth and Beauty in order

to orient the students to a positive construction of themselves and their lives, in relation to creation and history.

With the vivid desire to be good guides, capable of that closeness and trust that are born of love, we create positive relationships aiming at the heart of the people because, as Saint Francis states, "whoever conquers the heart of man conquers the whole man".²⁷

We are committed to the integral formation of youth. We dedicate ourselves in particular to the age of development, with special attention to situations that require a specific form of accompaniment. We are present in parishes, schools, university boarding schools, care facilities for minors, centres for the promotion of women, houses of spirituality, centres for life, rehabilitation and care centres, and rest homes.

Educating is a passion that we carry in our hearts with a lively sense of ecclesial responsibility. Each sister bears witness to the glad tidings by fostering a family, friendly and joyful atmosphere.

The local church constituted the historical space of Sales and Leonati's pastoral work, so we share with the parishes the commitment to evangelisation, in harmony with the bishop and the diocesan presbytery. We collaborate with the laity to realise the educational-apostolic ideals of the Salesian charism, and we engage in ongoing formation to competently support and accompany age groups as they approach life, especially where special situations require it.

For almost three centuries, we have continued our mission in the wake of Saint Francis de Sales, our Founder and the sisters who preceded us.

The educational method bequeathed to us by the Founder and the fascinating Salesian spirituality urge us to seize what may be considered a problem as an opportunity, not to get bogged down in incidental things that are subject to change over time, to look at reality with new eyes, with the commitment and will to be good guides, following God's pedagogy.²⁸

In almost three centuries of history, the Institute of the Sisters of Saint Francis de Sales has gone through difficult times: the Napoleonic suppression, the risk of a new suppression in 1855, the intervention of the government that declared it a pious Work, distorting its physonomy, the cholera that sowed mourning, the two world wars and the destruction of part of the Institute caused by a bomb.²⁹

Despite this, the Congregation has spread to various regions of Italy and is open to missions. Currently, in addition to Italy, we are present in Angola, Ecuador, Peru, Cuba, Argentina, Brazil and soon in Mozambique.

Among the missionary sisters I remember Sr Liduina Meneguzzi, who died at the age of forty in Dire Dawa (Ethiopia) and was beatified by John Paul II in 2002. She who, with apostolic zeal, spoke of God with her life, continues to support us in our educational mission.³⁰

Abbreviations

RL = Leonati Rule

RdV = Rule of Life

SL = Sales Leonati

AS = Salesian Archives

ASP = State Archives of Padua

APPB = Ponte di Brenta parish archives

Notes

Cf. Code of Canon Law, Norms common to all Institutes of Consecrated Life, cann.573 and Religious Institutes, cann.607.

2 RdV, Art. 1.

3 RL, Preface.

4 Col 3,12-17.

5 RdV, art. 2.

6 RL, Preface.

7 GIUSEPPE BELLINI, Sacerdoti educati nel seminario di Padova distinti per virtù, scienza, posizione sociale, Libreria Gregoriana, Padova 1951, p. 20.

8 Cf. IRENEO DANIELE, S. Gregorio Barbarigo, in PIERANTONIO GIOS, Diocesi di Padova, Libreria Gregoriana, Padua 1996, pp. 245-269; ALBERTO VECCHI, Correnti religiose nel Sei-Settecento veneto, Venice Rome 1962, pp. 99-102.

9 Cf. ANNA BURLINI CALAPAJ, I vescovi nel Settecento, in P. GIOS, Op. cit., 271-296; GUIDO BELTRAME, Padova cristiana dalle origini al Duemila, Ed. Messaggero, Padua 1997, pp. 211-216.

10 APPB, Cronicum, pp. 287 ff.

11 Memoria autobiografica e di intenti, di don Domenico Leonati, 1779 ASP Corporazioni Soppresse, Vergini di Vanzo, mazzo II, foglio F.

12 AS Fondo 3, Padua I.

13 From the Testament of don Domenico Leonati 18 July 1765, ASP - Corp. Soppr., Virgins of Vanzo, bundle II, folio E.

14 Saint Francis de Sales, Treatise on the Love of God, VIII, 3 edited by R. Balboni, Paulines, Rome 1984; Letter 343.

15 Autobiographical Memoir, cit.

16 RL, ch. VIII.

17 RL, Preface.

18 RL, ch. XVIII.

19 Ibid.

20 Col 3.12.

21 SL, 2.2.2.

22 RdV, Art. 20.

23 RdV, art. 8.

24 RL, Preface.

25 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the love of God*, edited by RUGGIERO BALBONI, Paoline, Milan 1966 - Prayer dedicated to Our Lady; cf. RdV, art. 21.

26 RL, ch. I; RdV, art. 21; SL, 2.3.1.

27 Philothea. *Introduzione alla vita devota*, edited by R. BALBONI, Paoline, Milan 1984, p. III, art. 23; *Linee educative*, Padova 2012.

28 Cf. *Linee educative*, Padua 2012.

29 Cf. IGINO MORELLO, *Storia della Congregazione delle suore di S. Francesco di Sales o Salesie*, Antoniana, Padua 1959.

30 RdV, art. XII.