

## **A bishop and a parish priest in love with God and souls**

### **Saint Francis de Sales and the Venerable Servant of God Fr Carlo Cavina**

#### **(Sister Mariapaola Campanella FSFS)**

"You will recognise St Francis de Sales as your Father and St Jeanne Frances Chantal as your Mother; both because you receive their name from them and because your Congregation must be informed by the spirit of these two great souls; and therefore it will be your obligation to study their lives, works and writings, to put their teachings into practice and to copy in yourselves their virtues, especially that spirit of truly apostolic zeal united to that singular gentleness and gentleness with which they gained so many souls for God".

These are the words that the Venerable Servant of God Don Carlo Cavina wrote in the booklet entitled "Regulations of Life for the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jeanne Frances de Chantal", the first Rule of the new Congregation, founded in Lugo di Romagna on 23 August 1872. It is with immense joy that our Religious Family celebrates the 150th anniversary of its foundation in the very year in which the 400th anniversary of Saint Francis de Sales' birth to heaven occurs. Coincidence or gift of grace? Certainly the second option, which we welcome as a gift to re-appropriate with greater awareness our spirituality and our Salesian roots, because this is how our beloved Founder wanted us.

#### Historical-ecclesial premises

Certainly the historical scenario characterising the period in which Saint Francis de Sales lived is very different from the time of Father Carlo Cavina, just as the geographical location is very different.

It was a time of bloody religious wars and strong contrasts between Catholics and Protestants, the weakening of the French monarchy, the governance of Richelieu and Mazarin in France at the time of Saint Francis de Sales; a time of secret societies, Carbonari uprisings and insurrections, wars of independence and everything that belongs to the Italian Risorgimento until the achievement of the much-discussed and sought-after national unity in the time of Fr.

If Francis de Sales, as a young priest and later as a bishop, found himself having to contend with the Calvinists of Chablais, fierce opponents of his commitment to Catholic orthodoxy, two and a half centuries later Don Cavina found himself in a completely different context, but not without problems and difficulties, both political and ecclesiastical. His land, Romagna, which had belonged to the Church State for centuries, had been alternately in the possession of the Austrians or the French since the beginning of the 19th century, becoming part of the Papal State again in 1815. This had provoked widespread reactions from the people with the participation in various series of insurrectional uprisings, the flourishing of Freemasonry and the spread of anticlerical sentiments.

The final defeat of Austria in the Second War of Independence and the takeover of the territories of the Church State by the Kingdom of Sardinia, ruled by the Savoy, put an end to the centuries-old papal dominion over Romagna.

These were very hard times for the Church, characterised by strong tension with the State, and also for the religious orders, put into crisis by the laws enacted between 1855 and 1867, which is why some of them were suppressed and their property confiscated.

Saint Francis de Sales inspires don Carlo Cavina

But what is it that so deeply links a parish priest from a small town in Romagna, who lived between the second half of the 16th century and the first two decades of the 17th century, to the Bishop of Geneva?

Our Venerable Founder loved to read the lives and works of the saints, something that emerges constantly from the Rule of Life, in which there are frequent quotations from one or the other saint, but for Francis de Sales - and obviously for his spiritual daughter Joan Frances of Chantal - he nurtured a deep admiration, he was so fascinated by his spirituality that he named the Congregation he founded after him, pointed him out to the sisters as a Father to be followed and urged them to study his life and writings, in order to grasp and put into practice his teachings and virtues.

Thanks to some studies and in-depth studies carried out in the Congregation, we know that Father Carlo Cavina was inspired by the "Spiritual Directory for the Sisters of the Visitation of Saint Mary", written for the monastic order of the Visitandine Sisters, and we have made a curious and pleasant discovery: there is a remarkable affinity between this Directory and the Rule of Life written by Father Cavina for the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales, even entire parts are faithfully reproduced there. It is not the Directory written by Saint Francis de Sales, as it is much later, but it bears his imprint and contains the spirituality that this great Father passed on to his Daughters of the Visitation. Drawing on this Directory is one of the signs that underline the great spiritual affinity between the Bishop of Sales and Father Charles.

Another great unequivocal sign, and one that is very dear to us, is the Founder's wish that the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales wear the Salesian cross of the Sisters of the Visitation, a cross that the two co-founders, Mother Teresa Fantoni and Mother Luigia Montanari, wore on 23 October 1872, two months after the foundation of the Institute, and which is still the fundamental sign of belonging to the Congregation of the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales.

Spiritual affinity

Let us ask ourselves then: what spiritual affinity do our two characters have in common? Surely what makes these two pastors of souls close and partly similar is first and foremost a strong and overwhelming love for God, which makes the inner chords of the soul vibrate.

He who is called 'the Doctor of the Love of God' writes: 'Love makes us take pleasure in the sight of the Beloved, and the sight of the Beloved makes us delight in his divine love that sets the hearts of both on fire.'

"Charity and devotion differ from each other like fire from flame; charity is a spiritual fire, which when it burns with a strong flame is called devotion: devotion only adds to the fire of charity the flame that makes charity ready, active and diligent, not only in the observance of God's Commandments, but also in the exercise of heavenly counsels and inspirations" .

He is echoed by Fr Carlo Cavina who, in the Rule of Life, expresses it thus: 'A soul truly invested by the power of love rises above every human thing, above every feeling of nature, above every interest to live in perfect freedom and simplicity of pure love of God' .

And using the same image used by Francis de Sales he adds: 'Love is a flame of fire. Have you observed how a flame is constantly moving, impatient to become more and more enkindled and to burn everything around it? This is how your love for God must be: a living and working love.

This ardent love for God that animates the hearts of Francis de Sales and Carlo Cavina cannot but flow into that apostolic zeal that animated them from the very beginning of their priestly vocation, making them both tireless and creative pastors, missionaries in love with Christ Jesus and burning with love and passion for souls and the Church.

Saint Francis de Sales himself defines it in the Theotimo: "Zeal is nothing other than ardent love, or rather the ardour found in love" and again: "It is this divine passion that gave rise to so many apostolic enterprises [...] in short, that made so many servants of God watch, work and die in the flames of the zeal that consumed and devoured them".

And Fr Carlo Cavina captured this 'ardour' of apostolic zeal in his master, passing it on, like a delivery, like a witness that passes from hand to hand, to the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales: 'The love of God and neighbour, with which you must burn as Spouses of the Sacred Heart, must inflame you with a truly apostolic zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls; it must kindle in you a very lively desire to see the object of your love known, loved and honoured by all'.

And again: "You can understand what must be the spirit by which your every thought, your every word, your every action must be informed: a spirit of truly apostolic zeal, which makes you completely die to every other interest, whether personal or worldly, to live solely for the interests of the Heart of Jesus".

For both of them, the immense love for God and his Son Jesus translates into a passionate love for the Church, which Francis de Sales depicts as "a garden coloured by an infinite variety of flowers...of different size, different colour, different fragrance and, in short, different quality. All have their merit, their grace, their splendour and all, seen in the totality of their varieties, constitute a marvellous spectacle of beauty' .

For this variegated Church, rich in charisms, but also burdened by the many problems of the time in which it lived, Francis de Sales showed himself to be an attentive shepherd for every category of people, from his brother priests, entrusted to his care as bishop, to the many souls, religious and lay, who entrusted themselves to his spiritual direction, to all the people of all social backgrounds, whom he strove to reach in every way, through his preaching but also through his visits, from the rich lords to the peasants scattered across the countryside of the Diocese of Geneva.

He also proved to be a great catechist who, by setting a good example to his priests, formed children and lay catechists to the Catholic faith, aware that only a solid Christian education

could keep the young generations away from the danger of falling into the web of Protestant doctrine.

Some two hundred and fifty years later, Don Cavina revealed his apostolic ardour and love for the Church, spending all his time, talents and energy as a true pastor in the service of the people of Romagna, sparing no effort.

The testimonies deposited in the 'Positio super virtutibus' of the Venerable Servant of God by his brother priests, lay and religious brothers and sisters of the place, are a clear testimony to the fact that he was, in every situation, capable of 'knowing how to unravel difficult circumstances with the tenacity of persuasion, faithful in this too to Saint Francis de Sales, according to whom one catches more flies with a spoon of honey than with a barrel of vinegar'.

During his priestly ministry, which lasted 37 years, Fr Cavina took care of the Lord's vineyard in its entirety from the very beginning, giving impetus to devotions typical of popular piety and introducing new initiatives aimed at reawakening and reinvigorating people's faith. A pastor of souls and spiritual guide, he has the merit of having brought a convinced Anglican believer closer to the Catholic Church and of having worked to counter the spread of Freemasonry and anticlericalism in Romagna.

The spiritual care of souls went hand in hand with attention and support for families, especially those most in need, but also and above all for the educational emergency concerning girls and young people, who were particularly exposed to the risks that the new wave of moral emancipation and the anticlerical climate that had emerged after the fall of the Church's temporal power had spread.

It is precisely with this charism, a gift of the Holy Spirit, that the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales were born, called to be, in the Church and for the Church, educators of the faith, especially of children, boys and young men, but with a heart always wide open to the world around them.

Jesus,' says Fr Cavina in the Rule of Life, 'invites you to raise your minds above the material interests and concerns of the times and to take part in the labours of the Church, in the efforts of the Lord's ministers, in the great work of Providence, that is, in the salvation of souls' .

In order for the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales to carry out this "taking part in the labours of the Church" by dedicating themselves "to the salvation of souls", the founder Carlo Cavina gives them a special imprinting, which is the style of Francis de Sales, his indications for the spiritual life, the virtues he recommended to the Visitation sisters he founded.

### Virtues and Salesian Style

In Chap. V of the Rule of Life, tracing the spiritual journey of the Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales, Fr Cavina devotes a large section to the virtues to be put into practice in order to walk on the path of holiness and, after the theological virtues, the virtues that we find in the Philothea, the Retreats, the Letters and other writings of Saint Francis de Sales find their place.

Francis de Sales, who states in the *Philothea* that "the Saints, and especially the King of Saints and his Mother, honour and love humility more than all the other moral virtues", is echoed by Venerable Fr. is echoed by the Venerable Fr Cavina, who states in the Rule of Life: "As you know, the virtue of humility is the basis, the foundation of all virtues and the sure proof of true holiness".

As a great connoisseur of the human heart, Francis de Sales explains to *Filotea* that "we often say that we are nothing, or rather that we are misery in person, the trash of the world; but we would be very hurt if we were taken literally and if we were considered in public according to what we say" and it is a concept that Fr Cavina takes up with regard to false humility: "There are some who in their speeches often speak of their own misery, calling themselves wretched and mean, but as soon as they are despised by others, offended, mocked, insulted, they immediately become angry, resentful, disdainful and cannot bear with peace the slightest sting that is done to them".

If the Holy Bishop tells *Philothea* that 'humility hides and covers the virtues to preserve them, lets them be seen when charity demands it, to increase, develop and perfect them'. Fr Charles writes for his Daughters that "true humility seeks to conceal the other virtues and much more itself" .

Francis of Sales points to Jesus as the only true model of humility, "He who lived and died as the obscurity of men and the abjection of the people in order to elevate us" and Fr Cavina urges his Daughters to fix their eyes "often on the most lovable Redeemer who was so humiliated and scrambled for your love" and who "humbled himself to the point of submitting to the infamous and abhorrent death of the cross".

The presence of the Salesian imprint is also very evident in the Rule of Life with regard to the virtue of simplicity from the very first lines: "If you are pure of spirit and humble of heart, you will also be able to be simple, of that simplicity of the dove, which makes the soul dear to God, and like God, because He is most simple and loves the simple".

This expression echoes the words we find in the 12th Treatise: 'Learn from the dove to love God in simplicity of heart, having but one aspiration and one end in all that you do' . But what is really important is how they both grasped and explained the essence of simplicity: for Francis de Sales, it is the virtue that 'aims directly at God, without ever suffering any mixture of self-interest' . Further on he adds: 'He who is attentive to lovingly pleasing the heavenly Lover, has neither the heart nor the time to turn back on himself, because his spirit is constantly tending to the side where love leads him' .

Fr Charles makes this concept his own and personalises it with his own sensitivity and spiritual experience: 'By means of this virtue you must go directly to God, without considering yourself, nor other people, nor other things. By it you must walk in the divine will and by virtue of it fulfil it as perfectly as the greater glory of God requires it' .

But if humility, simplicity and patience are important, there is nevertheless a Salesian virtue that touched Fr Cavina's heart in an extraordinary way and which he tried to inculcate radically in the sisters he founded, also in view of the mission of educators to which they are called: it is the virtue of gentleness. Article 19 of the Rule of Life, entitled "Gentleness and meekness" begins: "How could you call yourselves Spouses of the Divine Heart and Daughters of Saint Francis de Sales without gentleness and meekness?" It is the article that

most frequently mentions or quotes the words of Saint Francis de Sales, pointing to him as an example of life.

"Look at your Father St Francis de Sales: was he not, by his gentleness and gentleness, a living image of Jesus Christ?" .

And as for the apostolate that the sisters are called to carry out, Fr Charles points out: "You are called to the education of youth; but what means can be more effective than gentleness and meekness to make this apostolate of yours fruitful? 'Always be gentle,' says your Father Saint Francis de Sales, 'as much as you can, remembering that you catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar'" .

Even with regard to correction, when it is necessary, Father Cavina exhorts the sisters: "If you have to correct a person of some vice or defect, always do it with gentleness and peace [...], since the human spirit is made in such a way that with rigour it becomes rigid; while with gentleness it remains completely docile", taking up the Salesian teaching in Philothea: "A father's observations, if made with gentleness and cordiality, are much more effective in correcting his son, anger and outbursts". taking up the Salesian's teaching to Philothea: "A father's remarks, if made with gentleness and cordiality, are much more effective in correcting his son than anger and outbursts".

Francis to the Visitandine said: 'He who meets his neighbour with blessings of gentleness, will be the most perfect imitator of Our Lord'. , Don Cavina to his sisters would say: 'Take a look at the life of Jesus Christ, and you will be amazed at the sight of the great meekness and gentleness of his Heart' .

In conclusion, even though this search for common ground between the two men of God could go on for a very long time, Francis de Sales and Father Carlo Cavina make us feel and almost touch with our own hands how incisive the effects of the greatness and power of the Holy Spirit are in the history of the Church and the world. He shortens the distances of space and time, unites in love and passion for souls those who fix their gaze on God and cherish what was dear to Christ's heart and the summit of his mission: 'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I lose nothing of all that he has given me.