

## Society of Saint Francis de Sales

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Don Bosco and Francis de Sales, let us start by saying it is a difficult history. The union of the saint from Turin and the saint from Annecy, once a beautiful kingdom together, has already been studied and at length in the past. And that, according to my predecessors, has led to certain conclusions. To put it in black and white, these conclusions range from: Don Bosco knew everything from Francis de Sales down to more than a charismatic similarity is not there. It is my deep conviction that to talk about any similarities and differences; one should avoid falling into the trap of being an expert on Don Bosco and then draw conclusions about St Francis de Sales or being an expert on St Francis de Sales and say something about Don Bosco. One should be an expert in the two so-called fields; finding these people is something as rare as unicorns.

The goal for us, as for the other congregations, is to explain where the “Società di Francesco di Sales” comes from on the one hand and clarify its connection with Francis de Sales. So for many of you, there will be nothing new under the sun.

Saint John Bosco was born on 16 August 1815 in a small hamlet near Castelnuovo d'Asti. As a farmer's son, he dreamed of becoming a priest, this he tells us in his autobiography “Le memorie dell’Oratorio”, which he wrote in the autumn of his life. The reason why he wants to become a priest, he is then 11 years old, he describes in a dialogue with his first mentor, don Calosso, “to approach many of my friends, to speak to them, to instruct them in religion, because they are not bad, but they become bad because no one cares for them.” John Bosco's priesthood is always linked to the care of young people. It is clear that in the rural environment where Bosco lives, as Stella affirms, no one talks about or even knows about the existence of Francis de Sales. In the countryside, other saints rule, Saint Rochus, Saint Anthony...

Presumably, in Chieri, when he was at the seminary, John Bosco met Francis de Sales for the first time. Francis of Sales was in Chieri to preach during Lent 1622 at the Dominican convent. And in the seminary church, John Bosco attended, one of the side altars had been dedicated to Francis de Sales since 1681. Since the 17th century, in the same church, a confraternity of Francis de Sales was founded, and probably as a priest student, he occasionally met Francis here. At his ordination on 9 June 1841, he made nine resolutions as a young priest. One of them was: "The love and gentleness of Saint Francis de Sales will guide me in everything."

After his ordination, Bosco continued his studies at the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin. At the end of his study, he had to decide for himself what he wanted to do as a priest. During this period, he describes the emblematic story of meeting the boy named Bartolomeo Garelli.

At the end of the meeting, he writes: "I was beginning to learn from experience that if young lads just released from their place of punishment could find someone to befriend them, to look after them, to assist them on feast days, to help them get work with good employers, to visit them occasionally during the week, these young men soon forgot the past and began to mend their ways. They became good Christians and honest citizens. This was the beginning of our Oratory." Don Bosco chooses the stay with boys.

More than in the seminary, John Bosco will get to know Francis de Sales better in the Convitto, under the guidance of saint Giuseppe Cafasso. Stella claimed that Cafasso was drenched entirely in "the spirit of Francis de Sales". But where, for Cafasso, Francis de Sales is presented mainly as a model for the confessor, emphasising the gentleness and cordiality regarding the sacraments, Don Bosco adds another accent. For Don Bosco, this gentleness and courtesy of Francis were also necessary for pastoral work with the poor and abandoned youth. Don Bosco knew that to work with the boys, this Salesian attitude was a *conditio sine qua non*.

Don Bosco himself, in his autobiography, motivates why he chose Francis de Sales as the patron of the work he began. "We began to call it after Saint Francis de Sales for two reasons: first, because Marchioness Barolo had in mind to found a congregation of priests under his patronage, and with this intention, she had a painting of this saint done, which can still be seen at the entrance to this area and, because we had put our own ministry, which called for great calm and meekness, under the protection of this saint in the hope that he might obtain for us from God the grace of being able to imitate him in his extraordinary meekness and in winning souls. We had a further reason for placing ourselves under the protection of this saint: that from heaven he might help us to imitate him in combating errors against religion, especially Protestantism, which was beginning to gain ground in our provinces, and more especially in the city of Turin."

It seems more than clear that it was, above all, the pastoral attitude that prompted Don Bosco to use the name of Francis de Sales frequently. The first oratorio and the first chapel in the "ospedaletto" of the Marchesa di Barolo where he lived. The first chapel in the Pinardi house, no more than a shelter, which Don Bosco had consecrated when he found a permanent place in the "suburbs" of Turin, was given Francis de Sales as its patron. The oratorio's regulations bear the name of the holy bishop. When the shelter of the Pinardi house becomes too small, Don Bosco, with the support of many benefactors, builds his first church dedicated to Francis. The other churches he will build bear the names of Sacred Heart, Maria Ausiliatrice and Saint John.

On 26 January 1854, in Don Bosco's room, some of his most loyal boys are gathered; Michele Rua, the man who will become Don Bosco's first successor, writes on a piece of paper the size of a smartphone: "On the evening of January 26, 1854, we gathered in Don Bosco's room; with Don Bosco himself, Rocchietti, Artiglia, Cagliari and Rua. A practical

exercise of charity towards one's neighbour, with the help of the Lord and of Saint Francis de Sales, was proposed to us; and later to take a promise, if it seems possible and convenient, to make a vow to the Lord. From that evening, the name Salesian was placed on those ready to do the same".

In 1859, Don Bosco gathered several of those boys back in his room. First, on 9 December, when he held a conference and, at the end of the meeting, proposed to found a congregation. Don Bosco describes what a religious congregation is, what benefits this means for their own salvation and the salvation of others, and what it means to dedicate oneself to God. Not wanting to force the boys, Don Bosco gave them one week to reflect on his proposal. Those who wanted to join would return; the others did not have to. "Frate o no, I will stay with Don Bosco," the future Cardinal Cagliero said then.

On 18 December 1859, at nine in the evening, about 20 boys gathered in don Bosco's room. The purpose of the gathering was clear. They met to preserve the spirit of Caritas necessary for the work in the oratory and to ensure the work with the neglected and at-risk youth.

The liturgical feast of Francis de Sales is celebrated extensively in the Oratorio and Don Bosco's works. A novena is held in all houses; there is the solemn celebration of the Eucharist, premiums are awarded to the boys of the oratorio on that day, there is the annual conference for all superiors of the Salesian houses on the feast of Francis de Sales and also for the Salesian staff. In addition, Don Bosco emphasises in many of his writings several virtues that he attributes to Francis each time: "dolcezza" (sweetness) is the most common. This "dolcezza" is often complemented by words such as Kindness, Patience, Optimism, Sensitivity, Mercy, Work/ Zeal, Religious spirit, Love of the Holy Scripture, and Love of the Pope and the Holy See.

Trying to find the deeper bond between Francis de Sales and Don Bosco: Fortuitous encounter or spiritual identity.

In his contribution following the 1983 seminar on Francis de Sales, Pietro Stella writes: "Certainly in the last years of his life, Don Bosco felt the urgent desire to do something more for Saint Francis de Sales... But the urge to do something more did not go as far as self-criticism on the forms of knowledge he had of his Patron Saint and his doctrines. Don Bosco was perhaps never in doubt that he had failed in his dealings with his Patron, whose writings he does not seem to have known at all. Nor, on the other hand, did he expect more from his collaborators. For him and his collaborators, Francis de Sales was, in essence, none other than the Patron Saint, model and intercessor of zeal and gentleness."

Allow me to express some reservations about these last words of Stella. It all seems too little when Don Bosco is only our Patron saint, model and intercessor of zeal and gentleness. Lets investigate some of the Don Bosco Salesian Spirit

First and foremost, Don Bosco indicates why Francis de Sales became the patron of the works and the congregation he founded and gives his reasons. The reasons he himself gave.

In addition, are there textual similarities, just as don Bosco cuts and pastes from writings by Bossuet and Segneri, he also cuts and pastes, as you can see in the exhibition, from the writings of Francis de Sales. Entire sentences from the *Introduction* are copied to paste into his works. It is important to remember here that when he does so, for example, in the *Giovane Provveduto*, this does not happen in the last editions, but it is present from the first edition of 1847 onwards. Don Bosco reads the *Introduction* and likes, agrees and confirms what he reads because otherwise, he would not have used it.

Moreover, when Don Bosco inserts a chapter on vocational discernment in the same work in 1880, he explicitly talks about Francis de Sales' vocation. "When Saint Francis de Sales had made it clear at home that God was calling him to the priesthood, his parents remarked that as the first-born son of the family, he should be their support and backing; that his inclination to the ecclesiastical state derived from an exaggerated devotion and that he would have been able to sanctify himself even while living in the world. And to better commit him to their intentions, they proposed an honourable and advantageous marriage. But nothing could move him from the holy intention."

However, it becomes interesting when, in the first part of the same chapter, we look at the different steps described by Don Bosco to do the actual vocational discernment: "pray, seek counsel, decide and put the decision into practice". Let's compare these steps with what Francis de Sales describes in the *Treatise on the love of God*, specifically in the fourteenth chapter, "Brief method of knowing the will of God", of the eighth book. We see that the different stages proposed by Francis de Sales are almost identical to what Don Bosco suggests. This could all be coincidental, were it not for the fact that if we take the "*Memorie dell'Oratorio*" and look at how Bosco presents his discernment process in the last years of his schooling in Chieri, we cannot but notice the exact steps on vocational discernment described in the *Giovane Provveduto* and the *Treatise*. And he does this twice. The first time, when Don Bosco talks about his desire to become a Franciscan and does not follow the steps, the process of discernment fails; the second time, when he goes through the process and follows the steps, the process of discernment, like described in the *Giovane Provveduto* and the *Treatise*, succeeds.

If we look further at the content of some themes, for example, the way both saints describe friendship, we find the same ideals hidden, the same method of thinking, and the same pattern of acting. Both Francis de Sales and Don Bosco describe three categories of friends: The bad friends, i.e. those to be avoided like the plague; the ordinary friends, about whom they rarely speak; and finally, the good friends. Good friends are those friends who bring each other closer to God. The Company of the Immaculate, founded in June 1851 by

Domenico Savio and his friends, has as its goal, and I quote, "striving for Christian perfection and apostolic action among companions". In the *Giovane Provveduto* in the second article on the things to avoid, "the bad friends", Don Bosco describes how good friends encourage you to do good, take communion, confess, and live a virtuous life. Francis de Sales perhaps describes it in slightly more words and in a more profound way: friendship should have the goal of bringing each other closer to God. Friendship is perfect if it is a spiritual friendship. Francis calls this "holy friendship". The bishop is convinced that friendship has its origin in God himself. When Francis talks about friendship, he almost always uses words like "love" and "loving". Friends love each other, not for what they do but for who they are, and the origin of that love for the other is God himself. So here too, we notice a particular affinity, the way of looking at friendship is almost identical.

It is in a few sentences in the Introduction of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* that Francis de Sales has had a considerable impact on the history of spirituality. "Almost everyone who has written about the devotional life has had in mind persons who have withdrawn completely from the world, or at least the devotional life would lead to that. My aim is to help people who live in the city, who have a household or who dwell at court and are thus obliged by their state of life to lead a social life. There is often a misunderstanding among these people that they cannot live a devout life." Francis teaches that the devout life, as he calls it, the "spiritual life", is accessible and necessary for everyone, but differently. "When God created the plants, He commanded them to bear fruit, each according to its kind. In the same way, He commands Christians, living plants of the Church, to be godly, each according to his nature and state of life. That devotion is different for a nobleman and a labourer, different for a prince and a servant, different for a young girl, a married woman and a widow. The devotion must adapt to each individual's capabilities, pursuits and duties." Saint Pope John Paul II wrote in his letter "Iuvenum Patris" on the occasion of the centenary of Don Bosco's death in 1988, exactly what we mean: we cannot help but notice that the ideal of devotional life, the spiritual life, the ideal of holiness put forward by Francis de Sales for ordinary people, was translated by Don Bosco at the level of young people and their environment. What Francis de Sales did for ordinary people, Don Bosco did for the young. Suppose we analyse, for example, the biography written by Don Bosco of the life of Dominic Savio. We do not read only how Don Bosco does not want the youngster to do, for example, mortifications that are not adapted for his age, like Francis de Sales in many letters stresses that a housewife is not a monk, and a bishop is not a hermit. But we hear Dominic asking: I want to become holy; I want to become a saint. If we go further on this path of analysing the proposal of spiritual life of Don Bosco, we can find not one or two similarities but many parallels.

Too many to be accidental. Does this suddenly make Don Bosco the great connoisseur of Francis de Sales? Is Francis de Sales the Patron Saint of Don Bosco? Yes, he is. Is Francis de Sales a model and intercessor of zeal and gentleness for Don Bosco? Yes, he is. Did

Don Bosco know everything about Francis de Sales? Certainly not; he uses only what he thinks is suitable for his purpose. Does Don Bosco interpret Francis de Sales in his original way? Don Bosco synthesised what he knew of Francis the Sales and looked for ways to implement this in his pedagogical and pastoral thoughts and actions.

Does this suddenly make Don Bosco the great connoisseur of Francis de Sales? Probably not, but it allows us to understand better and know our founder, and it will enable us in the future to re-examine or further explore how close these two saints were.