

References to Saint Francis de Sales in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

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The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) maintains an explicit and vital reference to Saint Francis de Sales. The charismatic educational spirituality of the FMA is rooted in the Christian humanism of Saint Francis de Sales, which, in turn, draws from the source of God Love and which became a way of life in daily life and in the educational mission.

1. The reference to Saint Francis at the origins of the Institute: in the Founders and the Constitutions

As for the Salesian Congregation, for the FMA Institute it was decided that one of the decisive dates of the foundation process should fall on the feast of Saint Francis de Sales. The date chosen was the feast of Saint Francis de Sales, 29 January 1872. On that day, all the Daughters of Mary Immaculate of Mornese gathered and Fr Pestarino gave the group the Rules and each one expressed their decision to belong or not to belong to the new Institute. The election of the Governing Council was held and Maria Domenica Mazzarello was elected.

On the day of his religious profession (5 August 1872), in a familiar conversation with the first FMA, Don Bosco recalled Saint Francis de Sales as a model of gentleness of manner.

Don Bosco also proposed Saint Francis de Sales as a model for mastering one's own faults and a heart wholly of God. In a letter he wrote on 24 May 1886, to prepare the Institute for the election of the Mother General and her Council, after the first six-year term of Sr. Caterina Daghero, he addressed the FMA helping them to reflect on the needs of the Institute. He, as Founder, makes a list of attitudes and virtues that the FMA must have, including that of "mastering their own faults and keeping their hearts turned to God only to be able to say with Saint Francis de Sales: 'If I knew that a fibre of my heart was not for God, I would tear it out'".

1.1. The reference to Saint Francis de Sales in the Constitutions

But where more than ever we must look for the vital reference to Saint Francis de Sales is in the Constitutions. They are imbued with the "Salesian spirit", albeit many times in an implicit and indirect manner.

Already in the first drafts of the Constitutions Saint Francis de Sales, together with Saint Teresa of Avila is indicated as Patron of the Institute. In the 1878 Constitutions the Philothea adapted to the youth of Saint Francis de Sales is indicated among the texts for spiritual reading proposed to the FMA. It is prescribed to celebrate "with particular devotion and solemnity the feasts of St Joseph, St Francis de Sales, St Teresa who are the particular Patrons of the Institute".

In the introduction to the 1885 Constitutions - the last text revised and corrected by the Founder - Don Bosco emphasises the importance of accountability in a climate of confidence and recalls a passage from the Constitutions of the Visitandine, drafted by Saint Francis de Sales: 'With all simplicity and faithful confidence she [the FMA to the Superior] will open all her secrets to her, with the same sincerity and candour with which a daughter would show her mother the scratches, bruises and stings that the wasps had made on her'.

In the articles on the Novice Mistress, inserted by Don Bosco and the result of a long and thoughtful revision, one finds implicit but obvious references to Saint Francis de Sales when he outlines the figure of the formator who must be "affable and full of goodness" and when describing the spirit of the Institute: "Do not forget that the spirit of the Institute is a spirit of charity and gentleness, a spirit of self-denial and sacrifice, and therefore take care to inform and animate the Novices with this spirit, so that after their profession they may be able to be instruments of the glory of God and the health of souls".

In listing the Virtues proposed for the study of the Novices and the practice of the Professed Don Bosco gives primacy to charity aimed at education. The adjectives with which it is presented are significant, as is the aim: "patient and zealous charity not only towards childhood, but also towards young spinsters and towards any person, in order to do the greatest possible good to souls".

The chapter on the virtues concludes with a reference to the exercise of the presence of God and the unity of life because in the FMA "the active and contemplative life must go hand in hand".

In these hints one glimpses an obvious and perhaps intentional reference to the reasons for choosing Saint Francis de Sales as the patron saint of the Congregation: meekness and gentleness, zeal for the salvation of souls through the exercise of educational charity, unity of life by combining contemplation and action.

These references by Don Bosco to Saint Francis de Sales in regard to the FMA Institute have remained fixed points up to the present Constitutions, despite the various revisions and reworking of the constitutional text throughout the Institute's history.

The current Constitutions of the FMA, in fact, are leavened by the spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales. There is an implicit reference to the spirit of freedom and charity in all dimensions of Salesian consecrated life: it runs through the articles of consecration, communion, prayer, mission, animation and governance, and formation.

1.2. In the life of Mary Domenica Mazzarello, Co-Foundress

There are as yet no studies on the "Salesian" matrix of the spirituality and educational style of Mary Domenica Mazzarello, but it is not difficult to grasp some key aspects from an analysis of the sources.

First and foremost, the spiritual realism of the Saint, which is expressed as fidelity to the person in his or her totality, as "long patience and sweetness without measure" in the educative relationship (L 27:11), as balance in discernment, the exercise of God's presence, apostolic ardour, the valorisation of the typical dimensions of life: friendship, simplicity, frankness, communicative joy, holiness in daily life.

For Mary on Sunday, God has the face of love that becomes close, saves us in Christ, unites us in communion, and one can address him even in dialect, that is, with deep familiarity. She lives this relationship to the extent that Msgr. Giovanni Cagliero said of her that she 'lived lost in God', a woman who lived the ecstasy of action of which Saint Francis de Sales speaks.

The vigilant attention to remain in communion with God to the point of accusing herself of being a quarter of an hour without thinking of Him recalls Saint Francis de Sales' answer to Chantal. One day she asked him if he went long without thinking of God and he replied: 'Sometimes almost a quarter of an hour'.

Sister Maria Domenica's commitment to transform every needlepoint, every action, every moment of time into love evokes an approach to life unified by the fundamental value of the Christian life: love. She did not write a Treatise on the love of God, but expressed it in her daily life to the point of recommending even to her sisters: "Do freely whatever charity requires" (L 35:3).

She did not write a Philothea, but she meditated on this spirituality and assimilated it existentially to such an extent that she too can be called 'a friend/lover of God'. She will say of herself: 'Men can take everything from me, but not the heart to love God'. She will then say to her sisters: "Let Jesus be able to say to you: my child, you are dear to me, I am pleased with your work" (L 65:2).

One of the ejaculators dearest to the community of Mornese was 'It pleases God, it pleases me'. It recalls Saint Francis de Sales' thought of 'pleasing God' and 'holy indifference'.

Saint Francis de Sales gave Chantal an essential watchword he wrote in capital letters: "Everything must be done out of love and nothing out of compulsion!". Maria Mazzarello in her formative guide translates with simplicity of language expressions recurring in the Saint's doctrine. Fr Lemoyne, in his Report on Mother's illness and death, cites some of her habitual formative guidelines: "Among the notices she repeatedly gave [there] were these: Do not give daily accounts. Do not enslave the spirit. Leave that holy freedom desired by St Francis de Sales.

There is also a profound harmony between Maria Domenica's conception of true religious piety and Salesian 'devotion'. Mother Mazzarello said: 'True religious piety consists in fulfilling all our duties in time and place and only for the love of God. "One should not rejoice too much, nor be too saddened by anything of this world". Saint Francis de Sales writes: "True devotion consists in embracing with readiness and love that which pleases God; in doing all things with a spirit of gentleness and sweetness, with calmness and humility, in receiving sorrows without allowing oneself to be brought down by grief; and joys without allowing oneself to be carried away by excessive joy".

The humanism of the Holy Bishop of Geneva is pervaded with optimism, so he frequently writes words of encouragement to his penitents: 'Live in joy, for our God is the God of joy'; 'Live in joy even in the midst of all your afflictions'. Mary Sunday recommends joy, indeed she demands it of her spiritual daughters as it is the authentic proof of holiness, "the sign of a heart that loves the Lord very much" (L 60:5).

Even the idea of fighting and working on oneself has a 'Salesian' dimension: detachment from one's own will, death to self-love, working to form oneself into a gentle and serene character were all geared towards putting God's will at the centre and making oneself more and more a sign and expression of God's love. All this is summed up for Saint Francis in his life orientation: 'We must be what we are and be it well, to do honour to the Maker, whose work we are'. The Chronicle, narrating the mortification of her own will and the work on herself of the young Maria Domenica, describes her effort from a Salesian perspective:

"Did Father Pestarino not want her to restrain her own nature, so that everyone would be comfortable with her? That, following in the footsteps of St Francis de Sales, she would control her own vivaciousness and impatience even at work and even when she was alone? And Mary, now having for her good ally her acquired repugnance for half-measures and half-obedience, interdicted herself of all vivacity, all impatience, having always fixed in her heart the desire to please the good God. She found that it was not too much to deny herself and overcome herself at every hour, at every minute, in order to have every morning some spiritual fruit to offer to Jesus, in exchange for the infinite gift she received from the sacrament of Love".

2. In the first FMA: Saint Francis de Sales and the educative relationship

The Salesian inheritance of Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello was preserved and interiorized with great care by the FMA not so much at the level of doctrinal deepening as at the level of spiritual experience lived in community and in the educative mission.

The community greeting "Long Live Jesus, Long Live Mary" - which has become a tradition in the FMA Institute (cf. Reg. 41), also has its roots in the spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales. In fact, the invocation "Long Live Jesus" found in the *Philothea*, the *Treatise on the Love of God* and very often in the letters of Francis de Sales expresses the Christian's desire to place Jesus at the centre of life, so that he can animate and give meaning to every thought and word, every action and work, every decision and affection. To exclaim "viva Jesus" then, is not simply a literary quirk, but an expression of a spirit and attitude of a Christian disciple, of the FMA.

Especially in the early FMA, Salesian spirituality was rooted and continually revitalised through readings, reflections and reminders from the Superiors, as we can glean from the writings of Mother Emilia Mosca, Maddalena Morano, Marina Coppa with an explicit reference to the educative relationship.

For Emilia Mosca, Saint Francis de Sales is a model of the educative relationship, of justice that never excludes goodness, a model of gentleness and firmness. For Marina Coppa, he is a model of patience, of good done with love and calm tranquillity, of meekness, of educational piety. Mother Magdalena Morano, a wise catechist and educator, proposed Saint Francis de Sales as a model of Christian perfection, of cordial and spontaneous condescension, of charity and gentleness, of a spirit of mortification.

3. More recent times. A vital decision: recovering the "Salesian root" of the charism

It is striking that reference to and interest in the patron saint is waning especially after the canonisation of Don Bosco. However, some elements are to be highlighted throughout the history of the Institute in the reference to the Patron Saint.

Until the 1960s, the novices and sisters used the works of Saint Francis de Sales, especially the *Philothea* and *Spiritual Retreats*, as spiritual reading texts.

Also worth mentioning are some dissertations on certain aspects of the spirit and communicative style of Saint Francis de Sales presented by FMA in the 1940s-60s for their degrees.

From the 1990s onwards, the FMA Institute has been trying to recover the "Salesian root" of the charism thanks to the stimuli especially of Mother Antonia Colombo, the pilgrimages or courses of *Spiritual Exercises* organised by some Provinces and the *Course of Spirituality* in the places where Saint Francis de Sales lived.

In the Formative Project, it is stated that the style of relationship of the FMA "is inspired by the Christian humanism of Saint Francis de Sales, translated at the educational level by son Bosco, vitally elaborated by Mary Domenica and continually enriched by successive generations". It is therefore a matter of taking care of the formation of the FMA identity because it reflects the Christian meaning of life founded on love and because the art of educating in a positive manner springs from this model. This same conviction illuminates the current lines of the educational mission of the FMA. The vision of educational reference is placed in the anthropological horizon of the Christian humanism of Saint Francis de Sales.

Within the horizon of the Formative Project and the Lines of the educative mission the educative-spiritual accompaniment is placed in a Salesian perspective: even if there is no structured method, there is a clear goal: the communion of our will with God's will, and there are conditions, presuppositions, guidelines, without, however, the tendency to excessively control the process of the person's maturation. Maximum value is placed on God's initiative and the free response of the heart.

The circular letters of the General Mothers, especially from the 1990s onwards, make more explicit and frequent references to the spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales. The circular letters reflect the journey of the Institute and certain choices aimed at recovering the "Salesian root" of the charism.

The last General Chapters have also been incisive in the journey to recover the "Salesian root" of our spirituality. Above all GC XXII (2008) made this return to the origins of Salesian spirituality more explicit, with clear operational choices. This General Chapter had as its theme: To be today a sign and expression of God's prevenient love for the young generations. It recognised our Founders and Patrons as signs of God's love: "In the humanism of Saint Francis de Sales, love has a prominent place, because God created us in his image, in love and for love. Hence the priority commitment for us to bring out this image by promoting the integral growth of the person through the experience of accompaniment, a typical aspect of Salesian spirituality". One of the operational choices was to "find the roots of our spirituality in Francis de Sales and Teresa of Avila, signs of a life unified in God and given to others, expert guides on the path to holiness".