

## The St. Francis de Sales Association

On this happy occasion when we have come together in Rome to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the entrance into eternal life of our beloved patron, St. Francis de Sales, I am grateful to have the opportunity to present this brief talk on the history, traditions, and spirituality of the St. Francis de Sales Association. The Association is the lay branch of the Society of the Daughters of St. Francis de Sales, a spiritual family in the Church, founded by Fr. Henri Chaumont and Mme (now Venerable) Caroline Carré de Malberg in 1872. In an unusual turn of events, the religious branch developed from the lay branch, with four lay Daughters setting out as Catechist Missionaries from France for Nagpur, India, in October of 1889. In 1936 the Catechist Missionaries were formally established as a religious congregation, now known as the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate. Today the Society is composed of about 2,300 lay Associates and some 1,400 Sisters in 22 countries on five continents. The Act of Consecration made by both lay women and religious sisters when they make their commitment to the Society unites the two autonomous branches “by means of a common spirituality in two different states of life.”<sup>1</sup> For lay Associates, the Act of Consecration takes the form of a simple promise, understood as a renewal of their baptismal commitment, whereas religious Sisters make the Act of Consecration as well as vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The founder of the Society, Fr. Henri Chaumont, was born in Paris on December 11, 1838. While he was in the seminary, he was given two special graces that would have a profound influence on the Society he would one day establish. First, he discovered the writings of St. Francis de Sales and came to understand how Salesian spirituality, “centered on love of the divine will was capable of leading lay people toward authentic holiness in line with their own vocations.”<sup>2</sup> Second, he read the Acts of the Apostles. Prayerful reflection led him to observe:

“The Apostles formed the faithful living in the world to the practice of virtue and the faithful then became their auxiliaries. . . . If ever God deigns to entrust a few souls to me, if he gives them to me to direct in the midst of the world, I will conform to the apostolic tradition. I will use the method the Apostles used.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, he realized that properly formed lay persons could play an important part in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to others.

Henri was ordained January 17, 1864, and began serving at St. Marcel parish in a poverty-stricken area of Paris. In January of 1868 he suffered an acute attack of rheumatism, so severe that his friends feared he would not survive. His longtime spiritual director, Monsignor Gaston de Ségur (1820-1881) advised him to pray to St. Francis de Sales and promise that if he were healed, he would make a pilgrimage to Annecy in thanksgiving. On January 29, the feast of St. Francis de Sales, Henri began to recover! True to his word, he went to Annecy the following June, celebrating Mass at the tomb of St. Francis de Sales and spending hours in

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<sup>1</sup> *Statutes of the Society of the Daughters of St. Francis de Sales*, “First Part, Common to the Statutes of the St. Francis de Sales Association and the Constitutions of the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate” (Paris: The Association, 2009), Chap. I, Art. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Henri Chaumont and the Sanctification of the Laity* (Paris: Centre Salésien, 1969), 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

prayer as he formulated his plan to establish a group of lay people from “every state of life in order to help them, through spiritual friendship, to lead an authentic and truly evangelical Christian life.”<sup>4</sup>

In December of that year, Canon Chaumont was transferred to St. Clotilde parish in an upscale district of Paris. There he had his first encounter with the woman who would one day become the Society’s foundress.

Caroline Barbara Colchen was born on April 8, 1829, at Metz. At age twelve she was sent by her parents to a boarding school run by the Sisters of the Visitation where she remained for five years. There she absorbed the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales and developed a special devotion to him.

At age twenty Caroline married Paul Carré, a captain in the army. Paul was a “soldier accustomed to having his orders obeyed.”<sup>5</sup> He was so difficult to live with that after three months, Caroline seriously considered returning to her parents’ home. However, with the grace of God she persevered in her vocation, and gradually their home life became more tolerable. Together they endured great suffering at the loss of all four children—one in infancy, two at age four, and their remaining son, Paul, who died tragically at age thirty after a fall from a horse.

In 1869, forty-year-old Mme Carré was looking for a priest to lead her closer to Christ. One day in June, she entered Fr. Chaumont’s confessional at St. Clotilde’s. After her confession, Fr. Chaumont asked her about her life. She confided to him her sorrow over the recent loss of her third child and found great comfort in his words. Over time, he recognized in her someone who ““was one of those privileged persons for whom God had special plans.””<sup>6</sup>

In November of that year Caroline asked Fr. Chaumont to be her spiritual director. He helped her grow in prayer through meditation on Sacred Scripture and the writings of St. Francis de Sales. He instructed her to practice acts of self-denial, cultivate the virtues suitable to her state in life, and strive to live joyfully in God’s presence. She began to gather around her a group of like-minded women who prayed together, reflected on the Gospels, and engaged in apostolic works.

In the summer of 1872, Mme Carré and two friends traveled to Annecy. Unexpectedly, they met Fr. Chaumont who had gone there on another pilgrimage. They prayed together at the Gallery where St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal had planted the seeds of the Visitation order more than two hundred and sixty years earlier. They left this sacred place firmly resolved to begin the work Fr. Chaumont had envisioned when he was a young seminarian.

The first meeting of the new Society took place on October 15, 1872, when Mme Carré and two friends gathered with Fr. Chaumont in a small attic room at 37 rue Cassette in Paris. They prayed together, and Fr. Chaumont read them the *Rule* he had composed, showing them

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Madame Carré de Malberg: Witness and Apostle* ([Paris: Centre Salésien], 1969), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Henri Chaumont, *La Première Mère de la Société des Filles de Saint-François de Sales* (Paris: Au siège de la Société, 1894), quoted in *Madame Carré de Malberg: Witness and Apostle*, 26.

how their lives could be transformed for the glory of God, their own personal sanctification, and the good of the Church.

Today, 150 years after that first meeting, Daughters of St. Francis de Sales continue to seek those same three goals: the glory of God, their own personal sanctification, and the good of the Church. Let me, then, share with you four traditions handed down to us by our founders that help us strive for those goals, namely, our Rule of Life, devotion to the Holy Spirit, formation through the method of probations, and the cultivation of spiritual friendships.

## Rule of Life

The *Rule of Life* Fr. Chaumont presented to the first three Daughters that memorable evening in 1872 firmly roots the Society in the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales as described in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Fr. Chaumont held St. Francis de Sales' signature work in the highest esteem, once describing it to the Daughters as a "catechism of true piety, the precious treasure of your spiritual family."<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the 1874 edition of the *Rule* was entitled *Rule of Life According to the Introduction to the Devout Life*. In the 1882 edition, among others, footnotes link individual articles of the *Rule* to specific chapters in the *Devout Life*. For example, the exhortation in the *Rule* that Daughters should make "a little meditation each day"<sup>8</sup> correlates with Part II, chapters 1-9 of the *Devout Life*.

There is another aspect of the *Rule* that points to the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales who is, of course, the Doctor of the Love of God in the Church, and that is the Society's motto, "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13:10), which has had a prominent place on the first page of the *Rule* as far back as 1878.

Today's version of the *Rule*, approved by our General Assembly in 1973, is composed of thirty-six articles divided into four parts, expressing four ways members are invited to respond to the universal call to holiness:

- According to the Spirit of Jesus
- In the Church and in the World
- As Disciples of St. Francis de Sales
- With Mary, Mother of the Church and our Mother.

Fr. Chaumont urged the first Daughters to re-read the *Rule* frequently. "Put your *Rule* in front of you," he said, "and you will see if you are what God wants you to be. . . ."<sup>9</sup> It is a tribute to Father Chaumont's foresight that a *Rule* he composed 150 years ago has had the

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<sup>7</sup> Henri Chaumont, *Explanatory Notes on the Introduction to the Devout Life, Gathered from the Conferences of Canon H. Chaumont* (Kumbakonam: St. Joseph's Press, 1961), [1].

<sup>8</sup> *Règlement de Vie Selon la Méthode de Saint François de Sales* (1882), Art. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Canon Henri Chaumont, "Course on the Spirit of the Society," in *Continuing Formation to Deepen our Salesian Life: Stage Three: Our Spiritual Family* (Paris: St. Francis de Sales Association, October 15, 2008, updated April 2012), 21.

capacity to keep its original coherence, while evolving in a way that makes it a sure, yet flexible, guide for women of the twenty-first century who genuinely desire to grow in love of God and neighbor.

## Devotion to the Holy Spirit

Article 1 of our *Rule of Life*, which has retained our Founder's own words (below in italics), testifies to the central role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Daughters of St. Francis de Sales:

We have become children of God and members of the Mystical Body through baptism, called to live in faith, hope and charity. We will remember that, to glorify the Father, *the essence, the life and the ultimate aim of the Christian soul is union with our Lord Jesus Christ in his Holy Spirit.*

Fr. Chaumont had a great devotion to the Holy Spirit whom he referred to as the Spirit of Jesus. It was, in fact, his intention to call the Society he established "Daughters of the Spirit of Jesus." On the second anniversary of the Society's founding he stated that "'our small Association's aim is to spread all around it the Spirit of Jesus.'"<sup>10</sup>

On the feast of St. Francis de Sales in 1875, Fr. Chaumont announced that Pentecost would be "the great feast of the Society,"<sup>11</sup> and each year he invited the Daughters to prepare for Pentecost with a novena to the Holy Spirit in union with Mary in the Cenacle. Gradually, a kind of "hierarchy"<sup>12</sup> was established among the patrons of the Society: first, the Holy Spirit; second, Mary, and third, St. Francis de Sales, whom Fr. Chaumont saw as "'a most perfect copy of the Spirit of Jesus.'"<sup>13</sup>

Like Fr. Chaumont, Mme Carré had a great devotion to the Holy Spirit. In 1873, shortly after the Society was founded, she wrote, "'If we really understood the grace God has given us in choosing us, with no merit on our part (to be his apostles), we would want to fill ourselves with the Spirit of Jesus at any price so as to communicate him to others.'"<sup>14</sup> In 1874 she asked Fr. Chaumont if he would approve of the Daughters concluding their prayers by saying, "'Spirit of Jesus, come into our souls.'"<sup>15</sup> She thought this invocation would be transformative for the Daughters.

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<sup>10</sup> Sister Claude, SMMI, "The Spirit of Jesus: Major Stages of the Thought of Father Henri Chaumont: First Stage: 1874," *Salesian Bond* (September/October 2010): 4.

<sup>11</sup> Sister Claude, SMMI, "Some Practices and Customs," in *Continuing Formation: Stage Three*, 50.

<sup>12</sup> Sister Claude, SMMI, "Spirit of Jesus and the Holy Spirit: Major Stages of Father Henri Chaumont's Thinking: Second Stage: The Years 1875-1882," *Salesian Bond* (January/February 2011): 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> H. Garcia, "The Holy Spirit in the Life of Madame Carré de Malberg," *Salesian Bond* (June/July 1975): 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Today the traditions established by our founders continue to be held dear. Pentecost is celebrated as the Society's major feast and is preceded each year by a novena. On Pentecost Sunday Associates recite a special prayer to the Holy Spirit and renew their Act of Consecration.

On the back of the medal a Daughter receives when she makes her Act of Consecration is an image of Mary and the Apostles, receiving the Holy Spirit on the first Pentecost. Engraved around the outside of the medal (in Latin) are these words, "They were all persevering, united in prayer with Mary, Our Lady at the Cenacle" (cf. Acts 1:14). On the front of the medal is an image of St. Francis de Sales.

Our Association Prayer Book contains several prayers to the Holy Spirit, and the expression, "Spirit of Jesus, come into our souls," cherished by our foundress, is invoked by members throughout the day.

Finally, Daughters continue the tradition begun by our founder of having an image of the Holy Spirit in all chapels of the Society, including the Association's Center in Paris and SMMI chapels around the world.

## The Method of Probations

In addition to the Rule of Life and devotion to the Holy Spirit, a third aspect of the spirituality of the members of the St. Francis de Sales Association is referred to as the method of probations which Fr. Chaumont first learned about on one occasion while he was making a retreat at a Redemptorist house. The word "probation" comes from the Latin word *probare*, meaning "to try." Probations are the cornerstone of our initial, two-year formation program and our ongoing formation, as well. Our *Statutes* explain:

The probation method, passed down by the Founder, consists in deepening, by reading and reflection, a special aspect of the imitation of Christ, according to the spirit of St. Francis de Sales, assimilating it by meditation and prayer and putting it into practice in one's daily life.<sup>16</sup>

Probations are based on Sacred Scripture, Church documents, and the writings of St. Francis de Sales and our founders. Today there are ten probations covered during our two-year formation program which prepare candidates to make their Act of Consecration. Topics include many virtues dear to the heart of St. Francis de Sales, such as prayer, humility, and conformity to the will of God. In keeping with the tradition established by Fr. Chaumont, candidates reflect on each probation for a month and then spend the following month putting into practice some aspect of the subject they have been considering.

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<sup>16</sup> *Statutes, Second Part, Pertaining to the St. Francis de Sales Association (Lay Branch of the Society)*, Chap. II, Art. 8.

Each year the General Council selects three probations for consecrated Daughters to reflect upon in November,<sup>17</sup> February, and June. Every seven years the Association observes a Year of Renewal when members return to some of the probations used during initial formation.

Probations are discussed at local group meetings, and each Associate is encouraged to discuss them privately with her Companion and her spiritual director, focusing on the specific resolution she has made to practice some aspect of a particular virtue.

As our Rule of Life reminds us, “The Christian vocation is a constant call to conversion.”<sup>18</sup> The assurance that simultaneously, all over the world, consecrated Daughters are studying, praying, and striving to practice the virtue proposed during a given month is a source of mutual encouragement as we make every effort to grow together in the love of God.

## Spiritual Friendship

The fourth and final hallmark of the St. Francis de Sales Association to be mentioned here is the cultivation of spiritual friendships among the members, following the advice of St. Francis de Sales in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*:

For those who live in the world and desire to embrace true virtue it is necessary to unite together in holy, sacred friendship. By this means they encourage, assist, and lead one another to perform good deeds.<sup>19</sup>

Fr. Chaumont understood the importance of spiritual friendships and saw them as enhancing the apostolate. In the 1885 version of our *Rule*, he wrote, “True spiritual friends, they will be all for all to bring them to Jesus Christ and to make His Spirit penetrate the world more and more.”<sup>20</sup>

Fr. Chaumont also envisioned a more specific type of spiritual friendship. This would involve certain qualified Associates who would be charged with guiding candidates through formation, nurturing friendships with them in the process. They would be known as “Spiritual Mother-friends.”<sup>21</sup>

Fr. Chaumont saw Mary as the model of spiritual motherhood “with her qualities of obedience, humility, discernment and discretion.”<sup>22</sup> He taught his Daughters that the spiritual mothers had a threefold role of “teacher, counselor and consoler.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The “Salesian Year” begins on October 15, the anniversary of the Association’s founding.

<sup>18</sup> *Rule of Life* (1973), Art. 7.

<sup>19</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1989), III, 19, 175.

<sup>20</sup> St. Francis de Sales Association, *Future Companion Formation* (Paris: The Association, March 2009, updated April 2015), 3.

<sup>21</sup> “Course on the Spirit of the Society,” 1886-87, in *FCF*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

By 1894 or so, these “Spiritual Mother-friends” began to be known as “Probatrices”<sup>24</sup> because they were leading potential members through formation by the method of probations. Logically, the candidates came to be known as Probanists.

Today, Probatrices (now referred to as Companions in English-speaking countries), undertake important responsibilities, as outlined in the Association’s *Statutes*:

- Helping those confided to them discover their Salesian vocation
- Initiating them into the spirit of the Association
- Forming them by the Probation method
- Seeking with them how to practice the *Rule of Life* while remaining faithful to their duties of state
- Facilitating their integration into the spiritual family.

They must be careful not to intrude in the realm of conscience.<sup>25</sup>

Fr. Chaumont considered Companions to be “the pillars of the Society and the channels through which grace moves.”<sup>26</sup> Today the hope is that Companions and those they guide through formation will cultivate genuine Salesian friendships that will contribute to an ever-stronger union of members throughout the world.

## Conclusion

For the past 150 years, thousands of Catholic women from a variety of countries and cultures, myself included, have discovered in the St. Francis de Sales Association a viable path to union with our Lord Jesus Christ in his Holy Spirit in a way that is perfectly compatible with the duties of our state in life.

With great gratitude to our founders for their fidelity to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, their love for the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales, and the shining example of the holiness of their lives, we can only say in response, “May God be praised!”

Margaret Margeton  
September 12, 2022

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Statutes, Second Part*, Chap. XV, Art. 60.

<sup>26</sup> St. Francis de Sales Association, *Guide for Companions (USA)*, “Introduction,” (St. Louis: The Association, April 2019), 1.