

Sacred eloquence in the 16th century and the theological-pastoral criteria of the preaching of St Francis de Sales

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ABSTRACT

The sudden change of technologies and communication dynamics in today's socio-cultural context continually urges the Church to reflect on how it proclaims the Gospel and remains faithful to its mission of evangelisation. The fourth centenary of the death of St Francis de Sales (1622-2022) is therefore a precious occasion for two reasons. On the one hand to recover those theological-practical criteria that made Salesian eloquence, and especially his preaching, fruitful and exemplary for the 17th century, and for the following centuries, as numerous testimonies attest. On the other hand, to grasp the topicality of his *ars prædicandi* and derive from it criteria that can guide the aims of human communication and the ecclesial communicative style.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the millennia, the Church continues to carry out its mission of proclamation and evangelisation as one of its essential tasks, indeed it is *the first*¹ and constitutes *the paradigm of every work of the Church*². The current context in which it is called to perform this mission is full of communicative challenges. In fact, communication seems to have become more and more an activity for insiders, weighed down by the mass of the continuous flow of information, burdened by the processes of verifying their authenticity, increasingly disempowered by contradictions, by fake-news, stretched by the incessant media polarisation, regulated by algorithms rather than by relationships; communication today is frustrated and risks generating situations of *socialitude*³ rather than proximity, communion, encounter.

St François de Sales, whose fourth centenary of death we are celebrating, states that between the Gospel that the Church proclaims and the saints, there is a close relationship, like that between a piece of written music and a cantata. And, just as it happens that "every time we try to return to the source and recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new paths, creative methods, other forms of expression, more eloquent signs, words charged with renewed meaning for today's world"⁴, in the same way, every time we go back to examine the lives of the saints and their teachings, we do not perform an archaeological operation, but find new treasures that the eternal Wisdom of God has transmitted, through them, for the contemporary world. In particular, here, we intend to focus on Salesian eloquence, because of his virtues as a communicator, and his recognised charisma as a preacher. Starting from what the tradition of more than a century has already recognised in him (I), we intend to present some characteristics of preaching in the 16th century (II) in order to better appreciate the originality and goodness of his eloquence (III) and draw important indications for the evangelising mission of the

¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter. *Redemptoris missio*, 7 December 1990, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [=AAS] 83 (1991), p. 280, n. 34.

² Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, in *AAS* 105 (12/2013), p. 1026, n.15. [From now EG].

³ V. MARINELLI, *Socialitude. Communication as proximity*, LUP, Vatican City 2018.

⁴ EG 11, p. 1024.

Church in the contemporary world.

I. EVIDENCE OF SALESIAN PREACHING OVER THE CENTURIES

In a garden full of flowers, it would be difficult to immediately choose the most beautiful. The choice would certainly be hampered by the plurality of colours, scents and shapes of each one. At the same time, being able to circumscribe and admire, among the many abilities of the Savoyard saint, his aptitude for preaching is not easy for several reasons.

Firstly, because preaching in itself is but a part of his ability to communicate and ministry as an evangeliser, which he exercised in an eminent manner throughout his life. To grasp the salient aspects of his ability to preach, outside of this intimate connection with the ministry of proclaiming the Word of God, would be limiting and misleading. Moreover, one must bear in mind that Salesian preaching, in a more technical sense, covers a time span of about thirty years, from his ordination to the priesthood until his death. A period in which he encountered different pastoral contexts, different kinds of hearers, different purposes and circumstances of proclamation. His *ars predicandi* therefore underwent many changes, so that, to name but a few of the most relevant, the sermons of the years when he was a missionary in the Chablais will be quite different from those he delivered in Paris, or those he delivered for the Daughters of the Visitation. Keeping this chronological development in mind allows one to better contextualise the statements of the missionary from those of the pastor, the spiritual director, or the man who, by now advanced in years, has reached maturity in his spiritual journey and is filled with an unspeakable love for his Saviour.

In addition to the vastness of the material at hand and the variety of texts, one must bear in mind a further fundamental distinction for those who approach the study of the Salesian Sermons. In his entire life, the bishop of Geneva published only one sermon, that de *l'oraison funèbre du duc de Mercoeur*. All other sermon texts, on the other hand, are to be distinguished between the autograph ones, taken from the sermon outlines written by the Saint, and those collected by the Visitation daughters in a careful and scrupulous manner⁵. Being aware of this distinction proves important in order to accredit the specific value that each one possesses.

Thirdly, it is useful to mention those who, well before the brief study we intend to present, left noteworthy attestations regarding Salesian virtue in preaching. Although offering an exhaustive outline of the various authors is a considerable task that is beyond the scope of this research, a brief examination of them seems necessary in order to enter into the intent. In this way, it is possible to trace the common elements that different voices have recognised about the Savoyard Saint. Among them, the assertions of the Pontiffs, high prelates, his contemporaries and some of his biographers stand out. In the biographies in fact, although passages from the Saint's life are inevitably recurring, it is nevertheless possible to identify nuances or singular anecdotes that distinguish one narrative from the other and that can help to recompose in a more complete manner the information available on the style of Salesian preaching.

Among the available material, we cannot omit to mention three important studies conducted on Francis de Sales the preacher, on which, however, it will not be possible to dwell due to the limitations imposed, but to which we will not fail to refer. The first study dates back to 1874 and is by Father Sauvage⁶. The second, probably best known, is by Rev. B. Mackey⁷ and constitutes the introduction to the fourth volume of sermons in the Annecy edition of 1898. The third study is the doctoral thesis

⁵ It is said that this Visitandina had a prodigious memory and could later rewrite the entire sermon after listening to it: R. CIONI, *Vita di San Francesco di Sales*, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, Florence 1942, p. 242: 'The Sermons that we have in print were said to the nuns and transcribed, almost verbatim, by a nun endowed with a prodigious memory'.

⁶ Cf. H. SAUVAGE, *Saint François de Sales. Prédicateur*. Thesis presented at the Faculty of Letters in Paris, A. Perenne, Paris 1874.

⁷ B. MACKEY, *Etude sur saint François de Sales Prédicateur*, in *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales, Evêque et Prince de Genève et Docteur de l'Eglise. Edition Complète, d'après les autographes et les éditions originales*, [=OA] vol. X, Monastère de la Visitation, Annecy 1898, p. V-XCVII.

prepared by H. Bordes on *Les sermons de Francois de Sales*⁸, in eight volumes⁹.

The abundance of the material cited makes it possible to deduce that the topic of interest enjoys a multiplicity of approaches, that the study of Salesian preaching finds considerable fruitfulness and, in the space available, it is difficult to dwell systematically on the contributions mentioned. Therefore, we intend first of all to proceed with a rapid overview of the salient aspects of Salesian preaching.

Pontifical Magisterium

In the life of Francis de Sales, there was no lack of direct relations with the Supreme Pontiffs, for many pastoral, doctrinal and political reasons. His conduct of life, his indefatigable mission in the Chablais, and his human and spiritual maturity induced the Popes of his time to rely on his wise counsels several times, and to take him on delicate diplomatic missions. But the link between the successor of Peter and Francis de Sales does not stop with the Popes who knew him during his lifetime. The teachings and examples of the Bishop of Geneva have on several occasions received the admiration and appreciation of the papal magisterium, which has proclaimed him first a Saint, then a Doctor of the Church and, in more recent times, the patron saint of Catholic writers. Among the various proclamations, it is of interest here to recall those attestations that successive Vicars of Christ have left on Salesian preaching.

On 5 March 1599, after a few months in Rome, at Clement VIII, Francis de Sales was examined by the Pontiff for the Coadiutorship of the Diocese of Geneva, contrary to the privilege held by the Dukes of Savoy. The result of the examination left the Pope satisfied, commenting that no candidate had ever pleased him in such a way and, embracing him, he uttered words of great admiration: "Drink the water from your cistern and the water that gushes from your well, so that your springs do not flow outside, your streams in the public squares" (Prov. 5:15-16)¹⁰.

Clement VIII's declaration to the future Bishop of Geneva is therefore the first in a long series of historical assertions about the abundance of Salesian doctrine and teachings, as well as the fruitfulness of his work as a preacher and evangeliser. These are the waters that nourish themselves from the divine source of Holy Scripture, are impregnated with God's love, extinguish the fire of heresy, build up the Church and enrich it with new conversions.

The episode of the episcopal examination sustained by the Saint Savoyard before Clement VIII and the jury of cardinals, and the subsequent appeals of the Pontiffs to his enlightened genius, as well as his canonisation, which took place on 19 April 1665 during the pontificate of Alexander VII, are taken up in the brief *Dives in Misericordia* of Pius IX¹¹, by which Francis de Sales is conferred the title of Doctor of the Church. A declaration that, while in line with the esteem that Salesian teaching already enjoyed, gives it even greater authority, placing it among the magnates of the Christian magisterium¹². The brief is thus a seal declaring that the fruitfulness of Salesian preaching is closely linked to the luminosity of its doctrine and the clarity of its teaching¹³.

⁸ H. BORDES, *Les sermons de Francois de Sales*, thesis for a doctorate in literature discussed at the institute *litterature et spiritualite*, University of Metz, Metz 1988-1989.

⁹ What is first of all to be noted about the three authors just mentioned is not only the different scope of their studies, but above all their different historical setting, a sign of a continuing interest in the theological and literary panorama on the life and works of St Francis de Sales and, in particular, on his *ars praedicandi*.

¹⁰ G. BARBERIS, *Life of St Francis de Sales*, vol. II,3, SEI, Turin 1919, p. 11.

¹¹ PIUS IX, Brief *DIVES in misericordiae Deus*, 16 November 1877, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* (q. 662 a. 1878 v. 5), pp. 137-148.

¹² *Il Breve che dichiara San Francesco di Sales Dottore di S. Chiesa*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* (q. 662 a. 1878 v. 5), pp. 129-130: "Before the decree, the doctrines of St. Francis de Sales enjoyed, yes, the esteem in which they were held by the author's reputation for learning; but they were valued chiefly according to the weight of the reasons he gave in confirmation: whereas, now that the Saint is numbered among the magnates of the Christian magisterium, each of his sentences boasts, moreover, of his doctrinal authority, which is the same as the right to teach the Christian people, of which he legally takes possession. But in the same way that any proposition, even if not demonstrated, perhaps even not exactly demonstrable, acquired some degree of probability merely by the favourable opinion of St. Augustine, or of St. Jerome, or of St. Thomas, so he will acquire it from now on by the mere fact of having thus heard St. Francis de Sales.

¹³ *IBID*, p. 137: 'Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, exemplary of noble holiness and teacher of true and pious doctrine, was

The Vicar of Christ recalls not only the pontiffs just mentioned and contemporaries of St. Francis de Sales, but also other of his predecessors who, in turn, expressed admiration for the work of the Doctor of the Love of God, including Boniface VIII, who proclaimed him one of the Doctors of the Church¹⁴, and Benedict XIV, who described him as a 'most wise director of souls' and affirmed that 'the books of the Bishop of Geneva were written with divinely received doctrine'¹⁵.

Pius IX, on the other hand, described him as the restorer and master of sacred eloquence, because of his teachings and the method with which he preached.

"From this great love of the Holy Bishop for the Church, and from his ardour in defending it, originated the method which he kept in preaching the divine word, both in eruditing the Christian people in the elements of faith, and in informing the customs of the most learned, and in guiding all the faithful to the height of perfection. For, knowing that he was indebted to the wise and the unwise, and adapting himself to each, he endeavoured to teach the simple and the unlearned by the simplicity of speech, and among the wise he spoke with wisdom. In this he taught most prudent things, and obtained that the dignity of sacred eloquence, which had declined due to the vice of the times, should be restored to its ancient splendour, following the example of the holy fathers; so that from this school came those most eloquent orators, from which copious fruits flowed throughout the Church. Hence he was reputed by all to be the restorer and master of sacred eloquence'.¹⁶

The pontifical attestations on the need to draw on the *great Salesian doctrine* and its *vigorous eloquence*, continue even in the recent Magisterium, not out of sterile repetition, but as a result of an ever-increasing awareness and deepening of its exemplary life and its ability to evangelise and communicate with all.

Pius XI in his encyclical *Rerum Omnium Perturbationem*¹⁷, composed on the occasion of the third centenary of the saint's birth to heaven, declares Francis de Sales the patron saint of Catholic writers¹⁸. The papal document states that it can be said of him 'with all truth [that] his conversation has no bitterness, nor does living with him give tedium, but gladness and joy (*Wis.*, VIII, 16)¹⁹. With regard to his relations with the Calvinists and as a controversialist, the Pontiff recognises that "if at times his words seem somewhat strong, from them, however, he always exhales, as his adversaries themselves admitted, that breath of charity, which was the regulating virtue of all his disputes"²⁰ and hopes that priests "know how to convert Sales' doctrine into juice and blood and imitate his most gentle eloquence"²¹. In conclusion, the Pope appeals to Catholic writers and journalists, following Sales' example, to study Catholic doctrine with the utmost diligence and "to take care of the same form and elegance of speech, and to endeavour to express thoughts with perspicuity and ornamentation of words, so that readers may delight in the truth"²².

More recently Paul VI said of him that 'when he writes, as when he preaches to the people, his readers,

among the number of such enlightened men: *he not only* pierced the monsters of insurgent errors with his *voice*, *but* also with immortal writings, he consolidated the faith, demolished vices, amended morals, and showed everyone the way that leads to heaven'. (*Italics ours*).

¹⁴Ibid: "The Doctors of the Church are like "bright and burning lamps set above the candelabrum in the house of God: they, having dispelled the darkness of error, like the morning star radiate the body of the whole Church", "they dissect the enigmas of Scripture, and with profound and splendid sermons, almost with shining gems, illustrate the building of the Church itself".

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 140.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 144.

¹⁷ An analysis of the reasons that led Pius XI to proclaim him patron saint of Catholic writers can be found in V. MARINELLI, *Francesco di Sales comunicatore*, YCP, Lecce 2021, p. 13-44.

¹⁸ Cf. PIUS XI, Encyclical *Rerum Omnium Perturbationem*, [=RO], 23 January 1923, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, q. 1744 a. 74 v. 1, Rome 1923, p. 289-311.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 307.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 304.

²¹ Ibid, p. 307.

²² Ibid, p. 308.

as once his hearers, have only one fear: that he will finish too soon²³. John Paul II, on the other hand, recognised his ability to address anyone using *wonderfully appropriate language*, calling him a man of communication²⁴.

In the general audience on the Saint, Benedict XVI recalled his ability as a preacher, his capacity for dialogue even in adverse contexts, and the value he placed on personal relationships and charity rather than on theological confrontation²⁵.

Testimonies of contemporaries

The pontifical declarations on Salesian eloquence pronounced throughout the centuries have allowed us to understand the different resonances his communicative style has achieved throughout history. But the effect of his eloquence was visible from the very beginning. Various testimonies by his contemporaries express, and at the same time ground, the magisterial attestations examined in the previous paragraph.

During the life of the Bishop of Geneva, it can be observed that his fame as a preacher is expressed from several quarters, from people of different social backgrounds, and from certain historical events that provide further corroborating elements.

In 1602, King Henry IV, having heard the praises of the young preacher, was eager to listen to him. Trochu reports the King's words about Bishop De Granier's coadjutor: 'He is a rare bird, he said, he is devout, learned and noble at the same time'²⁶. Two years later, Mgr. André Fremyot asked the Bishop of Geneva to enlighten him on the art of preaching. The letter with which he responds, which will be examined below, demonstrates first of all the esteem and credit in which Francis de Sales was held by his contemporaries on the subject of preaching²⁷. There are many statements made by some witnesses of his time on his preaching style. The Duchess of Montpensier said of him: 'The others, in speaking, fly, but this orator of sacred love descends on his prey, reaches the heart and takes possession of it'²⁸, while Germain Pilliod testified that 'when the church in which he would preach was known, as early as four o'clock in the morning people would go to take their seats'²⁹. In fact, Bousset notes with regard to this statement that "[Francis de Sales] knew that heat pervades much more than light: the latter does no more than lightly lick and lightly gild the surface; heat penetrates to the bowels, to bear marvellous fruit and produce inestimable riches. It is this goodness of heat that gave such extraordinary effectiveness to his preaching'³⁰. Barberis, on the other hand, reports the impression of St. Vincent de Paolis: "Vincenzo said of Francis that his sweetness, majesty, modesty, all his manners, painted the Divine Saviour so vividly that he seemed to see Jesus conversing with men in him"³¹. Lajeunie quotes Mother De Chantal's words

²³ Cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Letter. *Sabaudiae gemma*, 29 January 1967, in AAS 59 (1967), pp. 120-121. [Tr. it. in https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19670129_sabaudiae-gemma.html].

²⁴ John Paul II, *Homily*, 7 October 1986, in Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, IX/2, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2012, p. 942 [Tr. mia: Among the saints who brought the Gospel message to their contemporaries in so many ways, Francis de Sales is among those who knew how to find a wonderfully appropriate language. We would say today that he was a man of communication].

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 2 March 2011, in Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI, vol VII/1, LEV, Vatican City 2012, p. 272: 'apostle, preacher, writer, man of action and prayer; committed to realising the ideals of the Council of Trent; involved in controversy and dialogue with Protestants, experiencing more and more, beyond the necessary theological confrontation, the effectiveness of personal relationship and charity; entrusted with diplomatic missions at a European level, and social tasks of mediation and reconciliation'.

²⁶ F. TROCHU, *Saint François de Sales*, vol. II, Librairie catholique Emmanuel Vitte, Lyon, Paris 1955, p.654 [Translation mine].

²⁷ Caussin in 1637 already defines it as: 'one of the most instructive that can be seen or desired on this so important subject, and in which the point and judgment of this Blessed appears in an excellent manner, as well as the correctness of his ends and good advice, with the strength, elegance and argumentation of his style, and the great experience he had in this holy exercise', in N. CAUSSIN, *Traicté de la conduite spirituelle selon l'esprit du B. François de Sales, Evêque et Prince de Geneve*, Sebastien Chapelet, Paris 1637, p. 591. [Translation mine].

²⁸ PIER GIACINTO GALLIZIA, *La vita di San Francesco di Sales*, Pezzana, Venice 1720, p. 295.

²⁹ 1st Trial, III, art. 35, in F. TROCHU, op. cit., vol. II, p. 621.

³⁰ Ibid [Translation mine].

³¹ Ibid, p. 306.

defining Salesian preaching as 'apostolic'.

"He preached with a zeal and ardour aimed solely at the conversion and profit of souls: this alone was, in fact, the sole and great aim of his sermons; he did not think in any way of being a great preacher...In his sermons he put the same ardour on both the small and the great pulpits, so that everywhere there might be a great profit...He went into the pulpit with a great humility and submission to the divine goodness...nothing else seeking the profit of souls and neglecting all praise...He preached not only by word but also by the example of his admirable life...as a man with an apostolic soul, who contained within himself something that exceeded the limits of the human"³².

The testimonies of contemporaries, conveyed by the voice of biographers, allow us to reconstruct Salesian preaching in greater detail and definition. What emerges is a portrait of a preacher sought after by the crowds because he was able to speak to the hearts of his listeners, not only Catholics or those who esteemed him for his exemplary life and teachings, but also those who, like the heretics, listened to him with contrary and hostile dispositions of mind. It is precisely this last aspect that makes Salesian preaching particularly interesting to study in depth for today's context full of communicative challenges for every person and for the Church's mission of evangelisation. In fact, as the pulpits and sources from which the Gospel is proclaimed proliferate, so do the possible opportunities to hear this message; to meet and come into contact with those who proclaim it and are committed to witnessing to it; to be informed about and become aware of the numerous initiatives that are organised throughout the world to spread it. The enormous potential offered by social networks in contributing to the mission of the Church requires responsibility on the part of those who manage them and those who communicate through them, because the content disseminated can be used by anyone and not only by those who tend to be closest and most likely to receive it. The style of Salesian preaching therefore becomes a safe model from which anyone can draw because, regardless of the platform used to evangelise, it is capable of speaking to the heart of everyone and urging people to draw closer to God.

The declarations of the pontifical magisterium over the centuries, the testimonies of the contemporaries of the Holy Bishop of Geneva, manifest first and foremost the continued interest in his life, his teachings, but at the same time reveal that Saint Francis de Sales was effective in filling that yearning, inherent in the heart of every believer, to be able to hear and understand the Word of God. In fact, when this yearning is unfulfilled, the homily or sermon is immediately taken away from the listener; on the contrary, when it is well proclaimed, it reaches the hearts of the faithful and is capable of provoking a change of life more in line with the Gospel. It is therefore a question of understanding how and from what theological foundations a sermon can be said to be well proclaimed.

II. SACRED ELOQUENCE IN 16TH CENTURY FRANCE

Like the sun silhouetted in the sky at sunset, Salesian preaching, as has been pointed out so far, would not emerge in its brilliance if there were not the proper background to give it prominence. It is therefore important to fix our gaze on at least four main factors that constitute the context³³ in which Francis de Sales preached and, alongside them, two other events, no less important, that occupied the scene in the 16th century and influenced the style of preaching. On the one hand, the Protestant Reformation which, increasingly rampant in central Europe, had also strongly influenced Catholic preaching, and on the other hand, the norms issued by the Council of Trent which affected the ministry of the Word.

³² F. CHANTAL, *Vie et Oeuvre*, t. III, Paris 1876-1880, in E. M. LAJEUNIE, *La spiritualità di San Francesco di Sales*, Elle Di Ci, Turin 1967, p.79.

³³ For a more in-depth study of the subject, see the following texts: F. CHEVALIER, *Prêcher sous l'Édit de Nantes. La prédication réformée au XVIIe siècle en France*, Labor et fides, Geneva 1994; P. BAYLEY, *French Pulpit Oratory 1598-1650*, University Press, Cambridge 1980; M. FUMAROLI, *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l'Europe moderne (1450-1950)*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1999; L. TAYLOR *Preachers and people in the reformations and early modern period*, Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2001.

Factors in the decline of sacred eloquence

A first important factor was a religious movement, the *Sainte Ligue*, which arose in France at the end of the 16th century to combat the Protestant Reformation, which was already in full swing, and to defend the truths of the Catholic faith that were being challenged. But the ideas and aims of this movement did not remain only in the social sphere, and came to influence even the themes and tone of sacred eloquence, so much so that "the sacred tribune soon turned into a political tribune"³⁴. Freppel comments that they reached even lower tones than the profane style, tones that he calls impertinent, insolent and unforgivable³⁵.

A second factor was *the abuse of the scholastic method* that, as Mackey notes, made sermons 'a dense web of abstract deductions, subtle arguments, an inextricable tangle of divisions and subdivisions that fatigued the attention without enlightening the intelligence'³⁶.

Another characteristic of the preaching of the time was *the exaggerated use of profane erudition in the proclamation of the Word of God* due to the rediscovery of the classical world in the Renaissance era. The result of the numerous citations of classical authors and the overuse of reminiscences of ancient poems within the preaching was obviously a burdening of the discourse itself, which tired the listeners³⁷ and demeaned and dishonoured the power of the proclaimed Word.

A final aspect of the preaching of the time is *the use of empty and sterile rhetoric*. As Freppel himself defines it, the style of sermons was characterised by

'an affectation of tone that eschews simplicity and a grandiosity of style that aims for effect to achieve the ridiculous. Everywhere there are only cold antitheses, only exaggerated metaphors. Sometimes the speaker lets go of his ideas, we follow him as he flutters on the point of a needle, another turn and his sentence ends in an epigram. Sometimes his language becomes slack and dull, his style becomes monotonous, and sometimes it seems as if he is about to turn into a madrigal. Here it is an accumulation of stitches that tire the eye, there it is a heap of figures under which the idea disappears'³⁸.

Preaching in the Reformation and according to Calvin

Preaching was one of the main instruments through which the principles of the Reformation were propagated. Indeed, the pulpit was already "one of the most important means of mass communication in the medieval period"³⁹. The importance given to biblical preaching is a consequence of the application of one of the principles of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*. Preaching is regarded by the Reformed as the historical place where the encounter between the Word and the Church takes place.

For Calvin, the preaching of the Gospel is the element that, together with the administration of the sacraments, constitutes the office of pastors⁴⁰. Their admonitions and teachings are among those external aids that Jesus provided for our salvation, so that faith is born and progresses in us⁴¹. Faith in fact comes from hearing the Word of God, and the community of believers constitutes the invisible

³⁴ Cf. C. É. FREPPEL, *Bossuet et l'éloquence sacrée au XVIIe siècle*, vol. 1, A. Bray et Retaux, Paris, 1893, p. 122.

³⁵ *Ibid* "The Aubry, the Jean Boucher, the Commelet, the Leicestre, the Porthaise had reduced the dignity of the pulpit to coarse invective, to criminal provocation, to linguistic violence, which you will no doubt justify, up to a point, for the liveliness of the polemic, for the harshness of the characters, for the coarseness of the customs of the time, but which did not even constitute what I would call the profane genre, but which you will allow me to call the impertinent genre' [Translation mine].

³⁶ B. MACKEY, *op. cit.*, p. LXXVIII [TR. IT. IN B. MACKEY, *Introduction*, in FRANCIS DE SALES, *Exhortations*, [=ES] vol. 6/1, Città Nuova, Rome 2012, p. 87].

³⁷ Cf. C. É. FREPPEL, *op. cit.*, p. 145-146.

³⁸ C. É. FREPPEL, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 147. [Translation mine].

³⁹ A. E. MCGRATH, *The Thought of the Reformation*, Claudiana, Turin 1999, p. 222.

⁴⁰ G. TOURN (ed.), *John Calvin. Istituzione della religione cristiana*, vol. I, Mondadori, Milan 2009, p. 1245.

⁴¹ *IBID*, p. 1191.

church, that of the elect, known only to God. The visible Church, on the other hand, is the Church in which the elect and the reprobate are found together. It is a historical contingency and does not coincide with the invisible Church, which is eternal.

Some of the topics of the reformed preaching were related to the economy: usury, tithes, monopolies; others emphasised the role of the laity, criticism of traditional authorities such as the Church, the nobility and the princes. The preaching appealed to the peasant masses who demanded a reduction in taxes, the abolition of serfdom, the restoration of ancient hunting and grazing rights, the right of the local community to choose its own shepherds⁴².

In addition to the theology and themes of preaching, there is also no lack of practical guidance from Calvin on the style and criteria that should guide a sermon. He emphasises that the purpose of preaching is to touch hearts to lead them to obedience to the Word of God. Therefore, one must beware of *maquignons* those who, while indicating that one should praise God, leave the people in the same idolatry in which they find themselves, dissimulating the truth of God's Word. They use obscure and convoluted passages that leave the people as doubtful and ignorant as they were⁴³. There are still *les coquards* who set aside the truth of Scripture to seek that which delights the spirit and imagination, do not proclaim what edifies, but linger in speculation and frivolous matters⁴⁴. Lastly, the third type of orators not to be imitated are those whom Calvin calls *sophistes*, because with subtlety of reasoning they divert from the simplicity of the Word of God for the sole purpose of getting their hearers excited without reaching any conclusion.

The Decree on Preaching at the Council of Trent

In the fifth conciliar session of 17 June 1546, the second decree *on the reading of Holy Scripture and preaching* was approved. It consists of 17 paragraphs, but only paragraphs 9 to 17 deal with preaching. The Decree gives a glimpse of the situation preaching was in in the 16th century: evangelisation more generally, and preaching in particular, was not the specific occupation of either bishops, parish priests or those who had care of souls. Rather, it was the religious who were in charge of preaching, but often without a mandate, and sometimes their preaching was steeped in doctrinal errors and ignorance of the biblical text.

According to the Council, preaching is no less necessary for the People of God than the reading of Sacred Scripture, and therefore, for effective preaching, it is first of all necessary that the clergy be culturally educated and duly trained in the Sacred Sciences. The Council states that bishops and their equivalents are obliged to preach the Gospel in person as a *precipuum munus*⁴⁵, a primary duty, or, unless there is a legitimate impediment, through persons hired for preaching⁴⁶. Failure to do so is punished with a severe penalty. Furthermore, the frequency of Preaching is regulated, expressing the desire that it be preached often for the salvation of the faithful, at least every Sunday and on solemn feasts, during Lent and Advent of the Lord, every day, or at least three times a week, if they deem it opportune, and also whenever it may be deemed useful.

The Council also emphasises some of the ways in which preaching must be conducted: it is necessary to use salutary words, according to the ability of the preacher. The Council Fathers show that they are well aware of the style of the sermons of the time, which were often excessive in their

⁴² Cf. M. LEINHARD, *The Spread of the Lutheran Message*, in Aa. Vv. *History of Christianity. Religion - politics - culture. Dalla riforma della Chiesa alla riforma protestante (1450 - 1530)*, vol. VII, Borla/Città Nuova, Roma 2000, p. 661-702.

⁴³ Cf. P. RODOLPHE, *Rhétorique et prédication selon Calvin*, in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, 55 no. 2 (1975), p. 252.

⁴⁴ Cf. IBID. p. 252-253.

⁴⁵ As the Second Vatican Council will take up and specify, '*precipuum*' is to be understood in an assertive and non-exclusive sense. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25; *Presbiterorum Ordinis*, 4; *Christus Dominus*, 12). The Council of Trent gave preaching a logico-chronological primacy, because faith is born from hearing the word of God and therefore preaching is a *sine qua non* (cf. Rom 10:14).

⁴⁶ Cf. G. ALBERIGO (ed.), *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*, Edizione Dehoniane Bologna, Bologna, 1991, p. 669 (Session V, Article 9); p. 763 (Session XXIV, Article 4). [From now on COD].

use of rhetoric, pompous, full of vain words and often impregnated with profane elements.

The object of preaching must be twofold: on the one hand, to teach those truths of faith that are necessary for salvation, and on the other hand, the vices to be shunned and the virtues to be practised in order to attain entry into the Kingdom of God.

The bishops are also empowered to grant free licence for religious to preach in a church that does not belong to their order, after they have presented the licence of their superior. The bishops are also responsible for supervising⁴⁷ the doctrine preached and for prohibiting the preaching of preachers or questors who sow error or scandal⁴⁸.

Finally, it has the task of promulgating the Word of God⁴⁹, it can approve the vernacular translation of the catechism so that the faithful can be well trained to receive the sacraments with devotion and reverence.

St Francis de Sales would only remain firm to the Tridentine indications, showing that he had personally meditated and internalised them. This is evident not only from the explicit citations of the Tridentine canons in the advice he offered on how to preach, but above all from the style of his preaching, the subject matter and frequency of his sermons, and his personal example as we elaborate on in the next section.

III. SALESIAN PREACHING

The journey so far has made it possible to focus ever more closely on Salesian preaching. Starting from the magisterial declarations that constitute its historically most remote context and that, in an uninterrupted continuity throughout the centuries, underline its perennial value, we have come to the context closest to St Francis de Sales, to the voice of the testimonies of his contemporaries, as well as to an in-depth study of the way of preaching in the 16th century. In this third part, the intention is to grasp what lies at the heart of Salesian eloquence, that is, the theological criteria of preaching, and the technical attentions through which to express them. However, before examining the formation and exercise of the ministry of preaching through which the Bishop of Geneva implemented these theological-practical criteria, it is necessary to set out the characteristics of eloquence, its relationship with eloquence, and more generally, with communication.

Speech and verbal communication

Preaching or sacred eloquence is inscribed in the panorama of human communication and more precisely within its verbal dimension. Even before being characterised by the style and content of the sermon, sacred eloquence is made up of certain elements that make each speaker unique. Eloquence in general, and not only sacred eloquence, is characterised by eloquence, that is, by the specific way in which each person possesses and makes use of language 'with a view to expressing his or her own personal thought'⁵⁰. Thus, eloquence is the linguistic behaviour one engages in, an individual act of intelligence and will, which is in turn distinguished into two elements: the first is the individual language or 'idiolect', the second is the linguistic performance or execution.

The first element, i.e. the individual language or 'idiolect', is "the set of linguistic particularities and specific habits of an individual speaker. The richness and variety of the individual language depends on various factors: age, experience of use, education, social relations, means of communication"⁵¹.

"According to Saussure, linguistic behaviour is the individual dimension of language. In reality, it is both individual and social because the way a person uses language, speaks or

⁴⁷ Cf. COD, p. 713. (Sess. XIV, proem).

⁴⁸ Cf. COD, p. 670 (Sess. V, Art. 13;15;17).

⁴⁹ Cf. COD, p. 764. (Sess. XXIV, Art. 7).

⁵⁰ F. DE SAUSSURE, *Corso di linguistica generale*, Laterza, Bari 1978, p. 24.

⁵¹ Cf. G. GILI - F. COLOMBO, *Communication, culture, society. L'approccio sociologico alla relazione comunicativa*, La Scuola, Milano 2012, p. 223.

writes is linked to his or her social being: to being male or female, young or old, to the group or class to which he or she belongs, to the position he or she occupies in society, to his or her education. In short, language is both individual and collective property, and from the way a person uses a language - the language varieties he or she knows, the words he or she chooses, how he or she pronounces them, the particular accent - we can understand many things about his or her social affiliations and cultural references⁵² .

The second element that characterises speech is the linguistic performance or execution, i.e. 'the concrete communicative act that the individual produces at a specific time and circumstance as a specific realisation of language in general and of his or her own idiolect'⁵³ .

It should also be added that the eloquence, or linguistic behaviour, of each speaker, while expressing the individual dimension of language, at the same time contributes to its evolution. Gili-Colombo describe how the dynamic dimension of eloquence contributes to the progress of language itself.

"Speaking follows the rules of the language and reflects the cultural characteristics and choices of the linguistic community for which it fulfils a function of reproduction of the language system and, more generally, of the cultural system of which that language is a part, but at the same time speaking, i.e. the concrete linguistic performance of the speakers, is a process of creation. To a greater or lesser extent, we all contribute to this process of language transformation. Some, such as Dante or Petrarch, through their 'personal language' have formed and transformed the Italian language; today, this happens mainly through the work not only of writers and intellectuals, but especially through those working in journalism, advertising and the media⁵⁴ .

This last consideration anticipates some possible implications of this research for pastors, journalists, *influencers* and all those who work in the field of communication or are present in various capacities through social communication platforms. Indeed, all of them have important communication responsibilities precisely because they address a wide audience, the extent of which is sometimes impossible to imagine. For them, it is fundamental to refer to a model of effective communication that is not only based on the technical aspects of communication, but also offers 'theological' values, that is, an anthropological model that is capable of inspiring an ethics of human communication, shared also in the non-confessional sphere, that induces the promotion of an edifying communication, capable of generating proximity and communion.

Monsignor Freppel, a scholar of sacred eloquence, in fact traces a eulogy of the saint's eloquence, emphasises its style, and provides evidence of what is claimed, namely how Salesian eloquence anticipated and influenced 17th century French literature.

"I am not at all surprised to meet, at the beginning of this great epoch (the 17th century), a man whose enchanting simplicity, lively and graceful turn of phrase, the picturesque forms of his style, recall all that had been present in French literature in the 16th century, while on the other hand, a more sure taste, less rude sounds, a more regular periodicity, a more refined and moderate diction, announce under his pen or in his words, the simple and solemn style of the 17th century, of which he is one of the first and most glorious representatives; a man who sums up in himself all that can be found in Christian literature of the finest, most delicate and spiritual kind; a writer who, moving through all the rigours of dry doctrine, with his brilliant and flowery imagination, was able to infuse charm even into *Controversies*; an orator whose beautiful soul shines through in expressions of infinite tenderness and exquisite sweetness; a man, finally, in whom the most perfect holiness came to crown all the gifts of the spirit, all the qualities of the heart, so much so that it is enough to pronounce his name to

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ IBID, p. 224.

feel the soul invaded by the delicious perfume emanating from his writings: this man is St Francis de Sales⁵⁵.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that if sweetness and loving-kindness transpired from the Salesian eloquence, as Mackey recalls, it should not be attributed to a natural predisposition of his character, 'because this sweetness acquired at the price of twenty-two years of struggle against himself was actually the triumph of his strength'⁵⁶. The vigour of Salesian eloquence is thus the result of his sanguine personality, but imbued with the gentle and merciful love of God.

Salesian eloquence, between formation and exercise of the apostolic ministry

One cannot understand Salesian preaching in depth without considering that he spent his entire life evangelising and proclaiming God's love to whomever Providence placed in his path. His apostolic zeal was an inclination that he nurtured from his childhood. Forming him in the first rudiments of the faith was the profound piety of his mother Frances of Sionnaz and Francis of Boisy his father.

Even as a boy, it is known that he loved to gather his playmates around the baptistery of the Church of Thorens to communicate to them the first teachings of the faith that he received. The apostolic zeal that distinguished him was then able to express itself in an increasingly enriched and sustained form through the teaching of Latin grammar, classical studies, rhetoric and diction that he learned first at the college of La Roche and then at the College of Annecy. It is well known that Francis de Sales excelled in the exercise of declamation because of his bearing, physique and voice⁵⁷.

But it was at the Jesuit college of Clermont⁵⁸ in Paris that Francis de Sales perfected his classical and humanistic culture, practised the method of *disputatio* and, according to Morand⁵⁹, took part in plays and moral comedies inspired by the lives of saints, the testimony of martyrs or the History of the Church. Msgr. Freppel states that 'it is precisely here, in the studies of the early age, that one must seek the origin of the writer and orator; the germ of his future, the secret of his development'⁶⁰.

Although it is known that during his Parisian years he would go to listen to sermons and theological disputes even skipping meals⁶¹, it was during his legal studies in Padua⁶² that he met speakers of the calibre of Father Gesualdo, Scupoli and Possevino. It was the latter, to whom Francis had entrusted the guidance of his soul, who suggested to him, by a divine intuition, to keep away from the agitation of the forum: "Is it not a truer glory to announce the word of our good God to thousands of men in the pulpits of the Churches rather than to become heated in the disputes of the procurators?"⁶³.

In addition to his professors and formators, Francis de Sales probably also became acquainted with jurists such as Du Vair, Pasquier and Thou and other authors, as Mackey points out⁶⁴, little known in France, but from whose method and examples the Bishop of Geneva drew inspiration. These authors,

⁵⁵ C. FREPPEL, *op. cit.*, p. 70. [Tr. it. in ES I, p. 24]. *Lesson IV* is entirely dedicated to St François de Sales.

⁵⁶ B. MACKEY, *op. cit.*, p. LXVI. [Tr. it. ES I, p. 76].

⁵⁷ C.A. DE SALES, *Histoire du bien-heureux François de Sales*, François La Bottiere & Jean Iuillard, Lyon 1634, p. 5.

⁵⁸ For an in-depth study of the Salesian formation received at the college of Clermont see H. BORDES, *Les sermons de François de Sales*, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 248-255; and W. MORAND, *Francis de Sales and Education*, LAS, Rome 2006, p. 67-86.

⁵⁹ W. MORAND, *op. cit.*, p. 76. "It was generally believed that a performance of this kind was well worth a well-turned sermon"⁵⁹. It is therefore legitimate to think that all this cultural and 'artistic' background influenced Francis de Sales in two ways. On the one hand that he made use of it in the most opportune measure to make his sermons more effective and incisive, and on the other to avoid those theatrical and theatrical forms in vogue among the orators of the time and not very appropriate to sacred eloquence.

⁶⁰ C. FREPPEL, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 73 [Translation mine].

⁶¹ Testimony given by Noël Roget at the Process of Canonisation, in *Process. Remiss. Gebenn.* (I), ad art. 33, in B. MACKEY, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.

⁶² For an in-depth study of the Salesian education received at the Clermont college, see H. BORDES, *Les sermons de François de Sales*, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 255-261; and W. MORAND, *op. cit.*, p. 87-105.

⁶³ Testimony Deposited by Claude-Louis-Nicolas de Quoex at the Process of Canonisation, in *Process. Remiss. Genn.*, I, ad art. 1, in B. MACKEY, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

⁶⁴ Cf. B. MACKEY, *op. cit.*, p. LXXXIV.

of different nationalities, he mentions in his Sermons and they are Panigarola Francesco, San Carlo Borromeo, Nausea Federico, Pietro Canisio, Luigi di Granada, Francesco-Ferdinando Galvan, Diez Filippo, Hylaret Maurizio.

The Apostolic Ministry of Preaching

On his return to Savoy in 1592 after completing his studies in Padua, Francis de Sales firmly decided to offer his whole life to God despite his father's expectations. On 21 December 1593, he was ordained a priest and celebrated for the first time by delivering a very fervent sermon on the theme of Christ's sacrifice. Mackey summarises that 'from this moment the authentic apostolic activity of St Francis de Sales began; he would not tire of preaching as one would not tire of listening to him. In whatever church he proclaimed the word of God, he saw gathered at the foot of the pulpit such a large and attentive assembly that his zeal was inflamed and his eloquence inspired'⁶⁵.

During the mission in Chiabrese, undertaken between 1594 and 1598, worthy of note was the initiative of the *placards*, flyers of an apologetic or controversial nature on which he wrote the defence of the Catholic faith, illustrated the norms of the Faith and demonstrated their application in the Catholic Church. This initiative, later collected and published posthumously in *The Controversies*, was undertaken by Francis de Sales to communicate with the population of Thonon since the city authorities had banned people from attending his sermons with heavy administrative and penal sanctions⁶⁶.

Consecrated bishop on 8 December 1602, he devoted himself strenuously to preaching not only in his own diocese, especially during Lent or the Advent and Christmas season, but also in neighbouring dioceses in different circumstances. Among the various sermons are those in Paris in 1602 and 1618-19, in Dijon in 1604, where he met Mother de Chantal during Lent. At Chambéry in 1606 and at Rumilly in 1608 where he preached other Lenten days; at Grenoble where he preached Advent in 1616 and Advent and Lent in 1617. Again in Lyons in 1615 and then in 1621. In Piedmont he preached in different years in Carmagnola, Mondovì, Pinerolo, Chieri and Turin.

The apostolic zeal uninterruptedly lavished by Saint Francis de Sales finds visible expression in the boundless number of sermons delivered by the Bishop of Geneva, many of which have not come down to us⁶⁷. Although he himself declared himself a 'weak and loutish' preacher⁶⁸, in the twenty-nine years of his presbyteral and episcopal ministry, it is estimated that he delivered approximately three to four thousand sermons, many of which were included in the four volumes of the opera omnia entitled *Sermones*, others have unfortunately been lost.⁶⁹

But it would be erroneous to consider Salesian eloquence only as the result of an application of rules, it is rather, as Verniolles defines it⁷⁰, a talent, a gift of nature and not of study⁷¹.

Every talent, however, grows to the extent that it is practised. The willingness of Francis de Sales

⁶⁵ B. MACKAY, *op. cit.*, p. XVI [Tr. it. ES I, p. 32].

⁶⁶ Referring to the content of the Work, Pius XI recognises that although it is a controversial and apologetic work, the style in which it is written reveals that Francis de Sales' primary aim is not polemics, but charity, which does not aim to reproach those who profess the Calvinist faith for their doctrinal errors, but to hope for their return to the Catholic faith.

⁶⁷ Cioni reports that 'unfortunately the best of his sermons have not survived. In general, he did not write them down; he took notes and meditated for a long time before going up to the Chair; so that he had everything stretched out in his mind' in CIONI, *op.cit.*, p. 242.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Lettres*, [=Lt] in OA, vol. XII, Monastère de la Visitation, Annecy 1902, p. 299: Letter CCXXIX to Bishop André Frémyot. [Hence Lt CCXXIX].

⁶⁹ J. STRUS, *Francis de Sales*, in *Dictionary of Homiletics*, Elledici-Velaz, 2013, p. 581.

⁷⁰ J. VERNIOLLES, *Cours d'études à l'usage des petits séminaires et des collèges. Cours élémentaire de rhétorique et d'éloquence*, Louis Giraud, Paris 1866, p. 3: [Translation mine: "Eloquence is the talent to persuade by means of speech clothed in oratorical forms. This is how the ancients considered it when they defined it: ars bene dicendi, the art of saying well, or the art of speaking in such a way as to persuade. The precepts we have left out on the art of oratory must all be understood in this sense, and although the rules we give here apply to writers, we mean the orator proper"].

⁷¹ Ibid: [Translation mine: "There is a big difference between rhetoric and eloquence. Eloquence is above all a talent a natural gift, rhetoric is the result of study or is an art; one indicates the method, the other follows it; one teaches the tools, the other uses them. They differ from each other as theory differs from practice"].

not to give up any sermon asked of her is legendary. He was not only more inclined to acquiesce to those who asked him to preach, but advised, contrary to the tendency of the time, to preach often⁷².

While he was a tireless preacher, often finding himself preaching to numerous assemblies, he nevertheless preferred preaching to smaller groups. Indeed, he himself states that 'I have always reaped more fruit from preaching to small audiences than to large ones'⁷³. Indeed, among the most copious fruits he was able to reap from his sermons and teachings, one cannot omit the *Entretiens* he held with the Daughters of St. Mary of the Visitation, a small group of 'white doves' whose hearts he always wished to fill with devotion and a holy indifference of love for God.

Moreover, anyone who thought that a preacher of his reputation disdained to listen to other preachers would be surprised to hear him say that "I never hear a sermon that I do not learn something good"⁷⁴. In doing so, he made evident an essential truth, namely that every preacher proclaims the same Word of God, and gave evidence of practising what he taught about obedience to the Word of God⁷⁵.

Lastly, it must be emphasised that obedience to the Word of God and its apostolic zeal would not be put to good use if its application were not guided by "theological criteria", if Salesian communication were not illuminated in its goals and criteria by a light that is superior to human techniques and goals, that of Revelation. It would not be possible to grasp the Salesian indications on the art of preaching without illuminating them by the theological reason that forms their background.

The theology of Salesian preaching

Verniolles, starting from the distinction between eloquence and rhetoric, specifies, among the various forms of eloquence, what sacred or pulpit eloquence is, referring to Francis de Sales and his "letter on preaching", and defines it as that eloquence that has the word of God as its object⁷⁶. The author defines this eloquence as superior to any other for several reasons: for 1) the One who grants the mandate to proclaim it, for 2) the object it deals with, for 3) the means it employs and for 4) the end it aims at. He who practises sacred eloquence receives its authority from God and cannot practise it for himself, in order to prove his science or ingenuity, but must do so in the name of God, because he proclaims His Word. The latter, which is the object of sacred eloquence, is not assimilated to the preacher's personal point of view, but contains the truths revealed by God Himself and faithfully transmitted over the centuries by the Church⁷⁷.

In Lecture VI on *l'eloquence de la chaire au commencement du dix-septième siècle*, Bishop Freppel⁷⁸ distinguishes two contextual aspects within preaching, which give it grace and form, or rather the

⁷² Cf. Lt CCXXIX, p. 324 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, in *Opere Complete di San Francesco di Sales*, vol. 8/1, Città Nuova, Roma 2016, p. 565-566: "Preach often: there is no other way to become truly expert [...] begin, Monsignor, to preach once at ordinations and once on the occasion of some Communion; say four words, then eight, then twelve, up to half an hour; then go up to the pulpit"].

⁷³ CIONI, *op.cit.*, p. 244.

⁷⁴ *IBID.*

⁷⁵ Cf. *Sermons*, [=S] LXIII, in OA, vol. X, p. 339, [tr. it. in ES II, *op. cit.*, p. 340]. For he maintained that one does not listen to all preachers in the same way, because, it is said, they do not have a pleasant language. But if one loved God and what he commands, one would listen pleasantly to every preacher's proclamation, instead one is attentive to the manner in which one proclaims the word and not to the One from whom it comes, 'God will not ask us whether those who taught were saints or sinners, but whether we have profited from what comes from him, and whether we have received it in a spirit of humility and respect'.

⁷⁶ J. VERNIOLLES, *op. cit.*, p. 136 [Translation mine: "Sacred eloquence or pulpit eloquence has as its object evangelical preaching. Therefore, preaching is the word of God drawn from Scripture and tradition and proclaimed to men in order to sanctify and save them"].

⁷⁷ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution. *Dei verbum*, 18 November 1965, no. 21, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* (EV) 1/904, Dehoniane, Bologna 1981. The relationship between preaching and the Word of God expressed by Francis de Sales is echoed in the conciliar text: "It is necessary, therefore, that all ecclesiastical preaching as well as the Christian religion itself be nourished and regulated by sacred Scripture. In the sacred books, in fact, the Father who is in heaven comes very lovingly to meet his children and enters into conversation with them; in the word of God then is inherent such efficacy and power, as to be the support and vigour of the Church, and for the children of the Church steadfastness of the faith, food for the soul, pure and perennial source of spiritual life". On the relationship between Scripture-Tradition and the Magisterium, see n. 10 of the same document.

⁷⁸ C. É. FREPPEL, *op. cit.*, p. 115-137.

objective, permanent and unchanging character and the subjective, changeable and variable character. The first aspect is conferred on it by God and makes the homily a sacramental, a communicative place in which He, acting through His Holy Spirit, bestows on the one who listens to it in a docile and obedient manner, the light that emanates from His Word. The second character, on the other hand, is determined by the man, by the subject who, at that moment, has the task of proclaiming the Word of God and who, consequently, gives the exposition a determined form: concise, brilliant, vigorous, or, on the contrary, cowardly, weak, boring and long. One must therefore agree with Freppel in stating that 'in this personal work, man reappears integrally; he shows himself as he is, he reveals what is in him'⁷⁹.

The human element that constitutes preaching is therefore the most variable not only because of the characteristics of the subject, including, as illustrated above, the characteristics of the eloquence, but also because it is influenced by the style of the time, the socio-political circumstances, and the trends of the moment.

Mullois, in his essay on *The Way of Speaking to the People*, emphasises how important charity towards the men to whom one speaks is for good preaching. This is the first and most important rule because, whatever the spiritual or moral condition of men, it is charity that enables one to address them, it is the magic of eloquence⁸⁰. In fact, it highlights how, when one has the goal of saving those one loves, one is always eloquent and is always heard. Conversely, without charity and love for the salvation of one's brethren, one does not have the gift of eloquence⁸¹.

Mullois' affirmations echo what Francis de Sales already claimed about the need for pastors to possess charity as an essential condition for preaching. In his letter to Bishop Camus, he states that "nothing is lacking for pastors who love [...] Two words inspired by love are sufficient"⁸². Charity is therefore what shapes communication and preaching according to the Bishop of Geneva. It is only by having it as the ultimate goal that one can grasp the proper purpose of sacred eloquence. This in fact, unlike profane eloquence that excites human passions, has the objective of correcting the disordered passions of the human heart, of appealing to the most generous and noble sentiments of man and of stirring up resistance to the Word of God from within. As for the intention of those who practise sacred eloquence, Verniolles makes his own the words of Francis de Sales, affirming that the preacher must do what Jesus Christ came to do in the world: "Now he came into the world that sinners dead to iniquity might live for righteousness, and that the righteous might have life with greater abundance. Unlike profane orators who seek only fragile and uncertain advantages, the preacher must aspire to the eradication of vice, to the triumph of truth, to the eternal salvation of those who listen to him"⁸³. This is why Francis de Sales suggests that the preacher should have a good conduct of life, sound doctrine and a legitimate mission. Each of these three aspects is not secondary and takes on a specific meaning depending on the historical and social context, to which we have given space in the previous paragraphs. In fact, the call to a good conduct of life represents a surpassing of the Ciceronian requirement for the '*Vir bonus, dicendi peritus*', because it requires a moral life that knows how to bear witness to Christ. For

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 119-120. He adds that 'the sacred orator has at his disposal a constant theme that he has not created, that he receives. Very well; but this theme he arranges, arranges, and combines; he brings together the threads of doctrine to form a looser or tighter fabric; he spreads it over a wider area or gathers it into a narrower frame; he spreads his ideas along a more or less regular line; in developing them he follows a more or less methodical and conscious order; he slows down or hastens his march, spreading gently like clear water, or gushing like a torrent that nothing can stop. Whatever he does, the sacred word, when it comes from his lips, will take on the hues of a strong or graceful imagination, will bear the traces of a confident or inexperienced taste, the imprint of a sound or faulty judgement. This pearl of doctrine, as Scripture calls it, will be enriched with precious stones or charged with false glitter. It will adorn it lavishly or be sober in its ornaments' [Translation mine].

⁸⁰ Cf. I. MULLOIS, *Cours d'éloquence sacrée populaire, ou Essai sur la manière de parler au peuple*, vol. I, Paulmier, Libraire, Paris 1853, p.1.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 2 [Translation mine: "You are always eloquent when you want to save someone you love, and you are always listened to when you are loved; but when the one who listens does not love, instead of listening, he tries in his mind to reject the truth, and on this point human malice is rarely at its height. If, therefore, you do not feel in you a great love and a deep pity for humanity; if, in the presence of its miseries and its errors, you do not feel the impulses, the holy quivers of charity, take your stand, the gift of Christian eloquence is denied you: you will never grasp, you will never dominate souls, and you will never possess the most beautiful kingship of this world, the kingship of hearts"].

⁸² S CXXIX, in OA, vol. VIII, p. 289. [Translation mine].

⁸³ J. VERNIOLLES, *op. cit.*, p. 137 [Translation mine].

bishops in particular, Francis de Sales recalls that it is not enough to be exempt from mortal sin, but also to avoid venial sins or even other acts that are not sinful, and quotes St Bernard's adage: things that are foolishness among seculars become blasphemy on the lips of priests⁸⁴. Sound doctrine, on the other hand, is the eighth sacrament necessary to overcome the ignorance of the times and adequately instruct the people, who were often unable to unmask the accusations made against the Catholic Church by Calvinist preachers because they were insufficiently instructed in Catholic doctrine. Francis de Sales also states that the preacher must take care that what is proclaimed is sufficient and not excellent. For the preacher always knows enough as long as he does not pretend to prove more than he knows⁸⁵. Lastly, the legitimate mission is necessary because it distinguishes Catholic preachers from Calvinist preachers who practised their sermons without a mandate from the Church, as accurately and profusely illustrated in *Controversies*⁸⁶. For bishops in particular, he refers to the Council of Trent, recalling that preaching is their primary duty, and adds that they more than possess the mission, they possess the sources of preaching⁸⁷.

So if Charity is the ultimate goal that shapes Salesian communication, and the proclamation of salvation to the brethren is the specific goal of preaching, it becomes easier to understand the criteria for evaluating successful preaching according to St Francis de Sales. The pastoral evidence of good preaching is certainly neither the attendance, nor the fame that the preacher may achieve, nor the requests to preach that may come to him from many quarters, not even the recognition, praise or material benefits. Although Francis de Sales also achieved all these results, he nevertheless always looked at all this with detachment, because what solely animated his apostolic style was the desire for the conversion of souls. In fact, he himself wrote to M.me de Chantal:

"Our sermons are going very well. Yesterday, we started confessing fifteen or twenty ladies, most of them very devout, and I see, I think, some fruit for Lent"⁸⁸.

By fruit he means first and foremost the conversions from Calvinism to the Catholic Church, which he harvested very abundantly throughout his life, but he also means the return of many sinners to a more authentic way of life.

To what has been highlighted so far on the theological criteria of Salesian preaching, it is necessary to add that along with the charity that animated Francis de Sales, the fruit of his sermons would not have been possible without the action of the Spirit who, through him, acted in such a wonderful and fruitful way, according to Hennequin's notes.

"The more the years go by, the less Francis de Sales writes, often limiting himself to the exordium and a few quotations. For the rest, he improvises and delivers his sermons inspired by the Holy Spirit, this 'inner preacher' who converts the listener and leads him to put into practice the preaching he has received"⁸⁹.

The action of the Spirit in Salesian preaching, is the principle of many conversions, as reported many times by biographers⁹⁰ to such an extent that Cardinal Du Perron, a famous controversialist at the court of Henry IV, states that he himself had the task of convincing heretics, but to convert them he had to lead them to the Bishop of Geneva. This statement provides further confirmation of the action of the

⁸⁴ Cf. Lt CCXXIX, p. 302 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 542].

⁸⁵ Cf. Ibid.

⁸⁶ Cf. FRANCIS DE SALES, *Le Controversie*, in *Complete Works of St Francis de Sales*, vol. 1, Città Nuova, Rome 2019, pp. 43-57. [Chapter I, Art. 1-3].

⁸⁷ Cf. Lt CCXXIX, p. 301. [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 541].

⁸⁸ G. PAPASOGLI, *As it pleases God. Francis de Sales and his great daughter*, Città Nuova, Rome 1995, p. 481. Cf. Lt MCCLXIV, in OA, vol. XVII, p. 318.

⁸⁹ J. HENNEQUIN, *Les principes de prédication de saint François de Sales*, in L. Fraisse (ed.), *L'histoire littéraire: ses méthodes et ses résultats; mélanges offerts à Madeleine Bertaud*, Droz, Geneva 2001, p. 504 [Translation mine].

⁹⁰ G. PAPASOGLI, *Come piace a Dio*, op. cit., p. 333: 'Francis' commitment was to make everyone, healthy, sick, practising, far from the faith, understand God's love for everyone and the love we owe God. To his words pervaded by a stupendous faith, extraordinary conversions sometimes responded. On 29 August 1606, a concubinarian was present in Villard, who had previously declared: 'if you excommunicate me, I will go and become a Protestant in Geneva'. He listened to the sermon and was moved to such an extent that he repented publicly: he proclaimed before everyone that he was guilty and wanted to cut off his sin, asked for forgiveness and found peace".

Spirit through the validity of the arguments offered by the doctrine of Francis de Sales, and the anointing of his words⁹¹. The latter in fact states that he loves "preaching that is inspired more by love of one's neighbour than by indignation, even if this is addressed to the Huguenots, whom we must treat with great compassion, without flattering them, but commiserating with them"⁹².

Francis de Sales' style unmasks the hypocrisy and errors of his adversaries with confidence, vigour and knowing irony. The result is a persuasive style, at once instructive and affective⁹³ that aims to communicate and make his readers enjoy the happiness he himself rejoices in.

In summary, it can be said that charity, love for the salvation of mankind and docility to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit are the theological source of Salesian preaching. It is from this triple source that he was able to give a personal and highly original form to what he had learnt during his years of training on preaching and eloquence in his time. The technical suggestions that he presented to the Archbishop of Bourges, who asked his friend for advice on how to preach, are therefore not to be considered the answers of a teacher to a student's questions, but those of one who shares more than a technique a spiritual mission and transmits his personal method to implement it. Alongside the theological dimension of Salesian preaching, therefore, a brief presentation of the technical elements cannot be omitted.

Technical aspects of Salesian preaching

The preacher's eloquence is in vain if he delivers his sermon coldly, without arousing the interest of his hearers. That is why it is important to master not only the form and content of the speech, but also the voice and gestures are important to deliver it in public. Preaching is therefore a difficult art that cannot be improvised.

Mgr. André Fremyot⁹⁴, appointed archbishop of Bourges, following his episcopal consecration, asked his friend Francis de Sales for advice on preaching, due to their friendship and his own friend's reputation, as he considered himself ill-suited to carry out this ministry, due, understandably, to his young age and inexperience.

The pastoral sensitivity of the Bishop of Geneva not only led him to respond to his friend's request, but also to encourage him in the preaching that the Council of Trent itself defined as a primary obligation for a bishop.

Landry summarises some characteristics of the advice and style of this letter on preaching⁹⁵ composed between 4 and 5 October 1604.

"One must begin by naming Saint Francis de Sales, the "restorer of sacred eloquence"⁹⁶ [...] He gives very simple, pertinent and common sense advice: speak simply, with a clear, precise style, spontaneous if necessary, avoiding academic or foreign words, without resorting to mythological allusions or scholastic language. Above all, one must proclaim the Gospel, and proclaim it fervently, letting one's heart speak"⁹⁷.

⁹¹ Cf. *Les Controverses, [=C] in OA, vol. I, p. CXXVII.*

⁹² Lt CCXXIX, p. 323 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 564].

⁹³ C, p. CXXVII: [Translation mine: "The style of our Saint is "not only instructive, but affective": it is the secret of his persuasion. If he addresses energetic words to the devout people, if he reproaches them for their sad defection, it is only in order to arrive at a more penetrating, a more tender appeal. One senses that he has but one aim: to communicate, to make his hearers, his readers, taste the happiness he himself enjoys"].

⁹⁴ Brother of Baroness De Chantal, he was consecrated Archbishop of Bourges on 6 December 1603 in Paris, while still a sub-deacon at the age of twenty-six. Mgr Fremyot himself welcomed a Visitation monastery in his diocese and was appointed by Urban VIII as apostolic commissioner for the beatification process of Francis de Sales himself.

⁹⁵ Cf. Lt CCXXIX, p. 229-325 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., pp. 540-567].

⁹⁶ J. P. LANDRY, *Éléments pour une histoire littéraire de la prédication en France au XVII^e siècle*, in L. Fraisse (ed.), *L'histoire littéraire: ses méthodes et ses résultats*, op. cit., p. 149: [Translation mine: these are the words that appear in the decree promulgated by Pius IX consecrating him a Doctor of the Church, 19 July 1877].

⁹⁷ J. P. LANDRY, op. cit., p. 149: [Translation mine].

In illustrating the method by which to preach, the author of the Letter also indirectly responds to certain schools of thought, present in his time, on how to preach. For him, in fact, the preacher must not delight, but "give light to the intelligence and warmth to the will"⁹⁸. Mackey emphasises that the intelligence⁹⁹ receives light from sound doctrine, and clear and methodical exposition, while the will receives warmth from a discourse full of pathos with which the preacher is able to convey in souls all the noble and holy emotions with which his soul is filled¹⁰⁰.

If the preacher has one delight to take care of, it is that of 'teaching' and conviction, and it is that delight that the listener experiences when he 'learns to know well and holily the way to Heaven'¹⁰¹. This delight, as Cioni reports, the saint distinguishes it from that "which is a pure tickling of the ears, and comes from a certain scholastic, worldly and profane elegance, from certain curiosities, from certain artifices of voice and words, and this is to be left to the orators of the world, to charlatans and courtiers. They preach but not Jesus Christ crucified, but themselves".¹⁰²

Bordes emphasises in the Salesian method a humility of technique in which the difference between instructing, moving and delighting, very marked in her time, does not become predominant, but attenuated¹⁰³.

The Salesian method, he himself declares, leads one not to focus on the preacher's abilities, but on the content of the sermon. "At the end of the sermon I would not like to hear behind me: 'Oh what a speaker! What memory! What doctrine! How well he speaks! But I would like to hear: How beautiful is penance! How necessary it is! How good and just you are, O God! and similar exclamations'"¹⁰⁴. Francis de Sales thus draws attention to the form. It is this that gives being and soul to things. "Say wonders, but do not say them well: it is nothing. To say little and say it well is much".¹⁰⁵

It is from this general purpose that Francis de Sales illustrates some technical aspects that must not be neglected in preaching. In particular, he dwells on the preacher's eloquence, the use of voice and gestures, and the timing of preaching, all elements that are not secondary, but useful in giving expression to the charity that must animate the preacher.

The Voice

The voice is essential to attract the attention of the audience and prevent them from becoming distracted. It is precisely on the modulation of the voice that Francis de Sales stated that 'when one speaks to a whole audience in the same tone as one speaks to a person, one applies the preacher's instruction well to oneself, more so than when one hears him burst out in a loud voice that, varying in tone, seems to be uttered to strike the air and not the conscience of the listeners'¹⁰⁶. Mackey defines this method of preaching by addressing the entire assembly using the voice as if directed towards a single speaker *alloqui hominem*¹⁰⁷.

Gestures

⁹⁸ Lt CCXXIX, p. 304 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 545].

⁹⁹ Cf. B. MACKEY, op. cit., p. LXIII.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. B. MACKEY, op. cit., p. LXIV.

¹⁰¹ Lt CCXXIX, p. 304 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 545].

¹⁰² R. CIONI, op. cit., p. 239.

¹⁰³ Cf. H. BORDES, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 259. [Translation mine: It is also true that, in spite of the doctrinaires, docere, *movere and delectare* will ultimately make less of a difference than their treatises. The Letter to Monseigneur Frémyot demonstrates this well: it is already the work of a man of experience, of a man of the field; the sermons that precede or follow it only accentuate this trait: distinctions must exist but without being too subtle; there is a kind of humility in the technique of choosing at the same time several paths that seem to exclude each other, in not giving prevalence to any of the possible choices but in making them coexist, in an indissoluble manner the images do not "dress" the text: they "tell" it. This was the guiding principle of François de Sales].

¹⁰⁴ R. CIONI, op. cit., p. 239.

¹⁰⁵ Lt CCXXIX, p. 321 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 562].

¹⁰⁶ B. MACKEY, op. cit., p. XLV [Tr. it. ES I, p. 57].

¹⁰⁷ B. MACKEY, op. cit., p. LII [Tr. it. ES I, p. 64].

The eloquence of a preacher is not only the content of his sermon. The words he utters without the accompanying gestures would be less incisive, just as the gestures without the words would be less clear and expressive. The completeness of a communicative act would not be such without the verbal and non-verbal dimensions together.

For Francis de Sales, the preacher's behaviour must be noble 'to exclude the uncouth attitude of some, who use to bang their fists or feet, slam their stomach against the pulpit, shout or make strange and often inappropriate shouts'¹⁰⁸.

More generally, he always proves himself averse to all constructed and set forms of communication, preferring by far a simple and natural, cordial and sincere way of communicating: 'our words must be inflamed not by shouting or exaggerated gestures, but by inner affection, they must come out of the heart rather than the mouth. One has fine words, but the heart speaks to the heart, while the tongue speaks only to the ears'¹⁰⁹.

The Time of Speech

"When too much oil is put into a lamp, it goes out. When a sermon is too long, the end makes one forget the means, the means makes one forget the beginning. There is no more detestable quality in an orator than length'¹¹⁰. Francis de Sales also focuses his attention on the timing of the sermon and how to organise the development of the discourse. He disapproves of those who begin the discourse and keep hidden from the audience the points at which it will be developed, believing that they are even doing something extraordinary. The method one follows must be clear and manifest. Furthermore, "the weaving of the discourse must be natural without too many preambles and without too subtle plots. I approve of saying first, the first point, and second, the second point, so that the people may understand the order'¹¹¹.

The Bishop of Geneva again emphasises how important it is to follow the hierarchy of sources to be cited, so that one does not overdo it by drawing too much from some while neglecting those that are necessary and irreplaceable. In first place is Holy Scripture. It is followed by the doctrine of the Fathers, which is already an explanation of Scripture, and the lives of the Saints, which are the Gospel put into practice. More carefully and with great circumspection, on the other hand, one must make use of the secular stories and fables of the poets. Natural stories are suitable for developing comparisons and similes because "the world is a book that contains the Word of God, but written in a language that not everyone understands'¹¹²". When one does not respect the proper relationship between the various sources from which one draws, the risk is to dilute the sermon and compromise its quality.

St Francis de Sales also suggests that the course of speech should be free, noble, generous, simple, strong saintly, grave and somewhat slow. Pedantry, long periods, courtly and worldly flattery should be avoided'¹¹³. Likewise, the language 'must be clear, clean and simple, without ostentation of Greek, Hebrew, new or courtly words'¹¹⁴.

Finally, it should be noted that he himself acknowledges that in the past he has exceeded the sermon time and vows to correct himself: 'it is always better for the sermon to be short rather than long, and in this, I have failed so far. I hope to be able to correct myself. When it has lasted half an hour, it is no longer too short'¹¹⁵.

¹⁰⁸ Lt CCXXIX, p. 321 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 563].

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ R. CIONI, op. cit., p. 244.

¹¹¹ Lt CCXXIX, p. 322 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 564].

¹¹² Lt CCXXIX, p. 307 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 548].

¹¹³ Lt CCXXIX, p. 322 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 564: "Our ancient Fathers [...] always abstained from useless compliments and worldly jovialities. They spoke heart to heart, spirit to spirit, like good fathers to their children. Ordinary appellations must be 'my brothers', 'my people', or, if it is yours, 'my dear people', or 'Christians who listen to me'"].

¹¹⁴ Lt CCXXIX, p. 322 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 563].

¹¹⁵ Lt CCXXIX, p. 323 [tr. it. in *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 565].

The focus on Salesian eloquence examined here has allowed a better understanding of the foundation of that admirable fruit that was his sermons, which both the Magisterium of the Church and the numerous witnesses and biographers have so much appreciated and admired down through the centuries to the present day. He did not disdain to make use of the instruments and communicative devices of his time, but he did so by letting himself be guided by charity, by the love of God, the centre of his entire life. Animated by this charity he was able to reach the hearts of all those he met because he was eager to make every person share in this love of which he continually experienced and for which he consumed every fibre of his ministry.

It can truly be said that Francis de Sales was an authentic communicator, because he was able, with a full circularity between words and life witness, to touch hearts, enlighten the intelligence by proclaiming the truth of the Gospel, warm the will of his interlocutors and drive them towards the good. With his teachings and writings he did not just pass on catechetical notions about the faith, but left posterity a much more precious legacy: his heart filled with the love of God, the source from which every word, every glance and every gesture of the Saint departed.

CONCLUSION

After four centuries since the death of Francis de Sales, it can be affirmed that the investigation conducted so far has not been aimed at an archaeological operation, because even when looking at the past, one is always moved by the interest and questions aroused in particular by the communicative dynamics that increasingly characterise the social context and the Church's commitment to proclamation and evangelisation. In fact, in order to faithfully fulfil the missionary mandate entrusted to her by the Lord to "preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15), the Church has the task of delving into the evolution of the communicative practices peculiar to the present historical moment and to the men to whom she addresses herself in order to reach them in every place, communicate to them the event of the Redemption and invite them to participate in the Trinitarian communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A primary role in this mission is played by ecclesial preaching, which, precisely because it is the Church's oldest communicative practice, is the one that has undergone the greatest evolution over the centuries and is *semper reformanda* like the Church itself. The *prædicatio evangelii*, understood in its broadest sense, is therefore the task of the whole Church, of each of its members, safeguarding the specificity of each state within it.

The new context of evangelisation has not only multiplied and differentiated the pulpits from which the Gospel message can be preached, but has also revolutionised the very dynamics and methodologies of communication. This is why it is more appropriate than ever for Church preaching to know how to wisely combine the old and the new, drawing from its plurimillennial tradition those criteria and methods that have proved most effective in evangelisation, and with them rereading current communication dynamics and contexts. It is for this reason that, starting from the path taken so far, we wish to outline some contributions that the Salesian communicative style, and its *ars prædicandi*, can offer for the human communication of this time.

First of all, we need to recover the apparent distance between Francis de Sales and us. In fact, what unites the 16th century to the 21st century is greater than what differentiates it. For while the dynamics of communication are quite different, and the tools and channels of communication have evolved and become digitalised, the ground on which communication takes place remains common. This ground is our humanity; communication, even with the passage of centuries and generations, always remains human communication. It is conceived in man's heart, even before his intelligence, because it is an expression of his feeling, of his soul, of his personal experience, and it always remains destined for another man, it desires to reach deep within and touch his spirit. Conceived in this way, communication, even though today it also makes use of chatbots, computer algorithms, and other programmes for automatic interaction with users, always remains the same and preserves a strong call to that yearning inherent in the heart of every man, a yearning that desires peace, communion among peoples, proximity

among men. The Salesian communicative style therefore refers to this type of communication, or rather to the profound meaning of every communicative act, and constitutes a warning against all those forms of communication reduced to mere information, to the transmission of synthetic, formal and programmed contents.

Salesian communication again refers us to another essential characteristic of human communication, which is that of generating relationships. In fact, there is no communication that does not affect relationships either by intensifying or alienating them, and vice versa, there is no relationship that in order to grow and intensify itself does not need 'good' communication, tending to the good, to respect the dignity of others, to the spiritual growth of the friend, and of one's interlocutor. The connection between communication and relationships is therefore an intrinsic and indivisible dimension, and St Francis de Sales always held it close to his heart. In a society increasingly prone to isolation precisely because of a divisive, polarised communication, sometimes even aimed at fomenting hatred, easy judgments and pillorying anyone, without modesty or restraint, Salesian gentleness towards heretics, and more generally towards all his opponents, reminds us that we must always know how to safeguard the dignity of the other, whatever his sin or fault.

Salesian communication is therefore always oriented towards the good and spiritual growth of his interlocutor. Without ever renouncing charity, he teaches the Truth that is the way to Heaven and offers those who listen to him the opportunity to become sharers in that love of God that he himself enjoyed and of which he took care to always be a witness. From a practical point of view, this did not only translate into transmitting Catholic doctrine, but in urging the people he came into contact with to live in human and Christian virtues. It was his deepest wish that whoever met him would leave him better than he arrived. And to achieve this he was of course continually engaged in great vigilance over himself, over his own passions, so as to assume constant equality of character. This does not mean indifference, apathy or disinterestedness, but on the contrary a strong self-mastery so that he could welcome anyone with charity, without invalidating or limiting it by the effects of previous encounters or his own inner motions.

However, in addition to the characteristics of Salesian communication that we wanted to highlight and that remain constant and invariable for human communication, we also want to indicate some pragmatic criteria to be observed while communicating, especially in the context of evangelisation in the digital environment.

Today there are many pulpits from which one evangelises and there are an unlimited number of evangelisers. Social platforms have multiplied the possibilities of proclaiming the Gospel and, while they represent a great opportunity, they also make it impossible to verify the reliability of the content offered, which is why Francis de Sales indicated the importance of receiving a legitimate mission from those who evangelise. Today, this mandate could be translated into an ecclesial recognition of the published content, lasting one or more years for example, renewable over time, which ascertains, after a pastoral theological training course on communication, the reliability and quality of the content disseminated.

Moreover, one must consider that social communication platforms impose logics of use that cannot be ignored and that one must be aware of. These logics in fact consist of real algorithms that regulate the visibility and outcome of publications. Alongside these are Trends, real trends, ways of communicating a message that require the use of specific effects, sounds and animations. The phenomenon is very broad and would merit a separate and accurate analysis for each platform. However, it is possible, simplifying extremely, to see in the pressure exerted by these modern communication dynamics an analogy with the trendy communication modes and techniques in the 16th century that influenced the preaching and proclamation of the Gospel. Francis de Sales thus teaches that careful discernment is necessary and that even if everything is permissible, not everything is beneficial. It is charity that fuels the desire to win the visitor to the Gospel and at the same time constitutes the criterion for choosing which techniques to use and to what extent. It is for it that the limits of the times, ways and forms to make use of these platforms must also be identified. It is for it that Francis de Sales favoured simple language, devoid of Latin or classical terms, made use of images and emphasised the importance of preaching in short periods that would facilitate the attention of the hearers.

First of all, I believe that an important and highly topical aspect should be noted here. While it is true that these platforms serve to unite and create relationships that were unthinkable just a few decades

ago, on the other hand they are conceived for commercial purposes that risk reducing the contacts and relationships they generate between users to the status of followers, numbers of interactions and statistics that flow into depersonalising metrics. Francis de Sales spoke from the pulpit as if he were speaking to a single person and preferred preaching to small groups. This criterion that has been called *alloqui hominem* imposes an important check on the purposes sought in evangelisation through the use of social platforms. On the one hand, therefore, there is no need to chase the large numbers that platforms are capable of achieving, thus avoiding falling into the trap of unfulfilling failure with respect to the energies and resources deployed by individuals or communities or ecclesial institutions. On the other hand, however, it is always important to question oneself on the effectiveness of one's own communication, whether there are additional expedients or techniques that one should acquire or that one is neglecting. The risk in fact is that of using communication logics and techniques that are alien to these platforms and for this reason incapable of generating *engagement*.

A final consideration I would like to dedicate to the Salesian gentleness capable of generating confidence, trust, openness in the interlocutor. This becomes a further criterion that Salesian communication offers to verify the way in which one evangelises. Sometimes we communicate in such a way as to focus attention on the person, rather than on the content or message of the Gospel to be transmitted, or by using vehement, ironic or judgmental modes of communication that rather than facilitating participation and dialogue, alienate and condemn.

This latest openness to the world of digital communication further enables us to appreciate the continuing novelty of Salesian communication teachings and witness, in the hope that the celebration of this 4th centenary since his death will help us to further deepen and imitate his inexhaustible legacy.