

## **Educational convergences between Francis de Sales and Don Bosco: Anthropology of the heart, relational methodology and itinerary of holiness for all**

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The relationship between Saint Francis de Sales and Saint John Bosco is a complex theme that has already been the subject of studies from different historical periods of the Congregation of Saint Francis de Sales - also called Salesians of Don Bosco. In this paper I start from the latest syntheses by Morand Wirth and Aldo Giraudo and I agree with them in affirming the existence of a profound syntony between our saints that derives from direct reading of some Salesian sources, from indirect Salesian influences especially through the works of Saint Alphonsus, and from the teachings of asceticism and mysticism received at the Convitto Ecclesiastico of Turin under the guidance of the theologian Guala and Saint Giuseppe Cafasso. This profound harmony goes beyond questions of direct doctrinal dependencies, lexical convergences or common themes.

This profound harmony on an anthropological level delineates a space of coordinates that are manifested, but not reduced, to certain common central themes: love as a central human energy, the anthropology of the heart that values the affective sphere and implies a specific primacy of the will over reason, the educational importance of kind and loving relationships, zeal for the good of the person, and proposals for itineraries of holiness for all. I will leave aside the differences between Don Bosco and Francis de Sales related to the preferred apostolic choice (young people/adults), the environment of origin (popular/aristocratic), the forms of accompaniment (more communitarian/more personalised) or the preferred style of writing (narrative-popular-practical/doctrinal-humanistic-literary).

The centrality of love is innovative in both our saints. In Francis de Sales' Treatise on the Love of God, the novelty lies in the conception of love as a central working movement of the person linked more to the dynamics of the will than to perceptions of pleasurable emotions, which are nevertheless enhanced and internalised in his model. "Francis, through deft strokes, while maintaining the canonical language of theology, introduces significant correctives with regard to both the understanding of the reality of the twofold affective and effective exercise of love, and the specific quality of the anthropological moment, linked to the dynamic that unites complacency to benevolence". The role of love in Salesian anthropology implies differences at the level of the operative modes of the faculties of the soul with respect to scholastic anthropology and with respect to St. Augustine one finds, instead, a humanistic optimism "in the inversion of the starting point, conventionally imposed by the prevailing Augustinian protocol: from the centring on the dogma of sin that sees humanity as a damned mass, to that on the goodness of creation and the universality of redemption". In contrast to St Ignatius, the strong idea of spiritual combat implying rather a rational-volontaristic spirituality of asceticism and the apostolate is overcome, expanding the

concept of will-love with Teresian resonances through the thematisation of the threefold ecstasy (affects, intellect, action).

For Don Bosco the theme of love is expressed with the process logic typical of biographical-narrative writings within a framework of coordinates created in some systematic writings. The pamphlet *The Preventive System in the Education of Youth* constitutes an important starting point being a synthetic "index" of the founding themes and arguments of Don Bosco's tradition and style of education. The privileged path of the educative processes seems to be included in the choice of five of the fifteen characteristics of charity in 1Cor 13, which is the founding biblical passage of the writing. Besides benignity, meekness, benevolence and practical and operational goodness, the first process virtue is magnanimous patience that looks far towards the goals of the educational call. Then there is sustaining, 'staying under' consisting of solidity that does not run away and holds up processes. The quality of the loving process of educational charity is connected with the capacity to endure, to suffer, not to lose heart in order to persevere with courage in misfortunes and problems, in a logic of hope that knows how to wait for salvation with joy and full trust, trusting in the will of the providential God. Interesting are the omissions of the gnoseological qualities of charity (faith and the joy of truth) that take second place.

The structure of the convergence between our saints follows the image of the tree of love which is, according to various authors, the organising symbol of the treatise: "Love is like a beautiful tree, the root of which is the will's agreement with the good, the stump is its complacency, the trunk is its tension (movement), the branches are its attempts and other efforts, the fruit is its union and enjoyment".

### 1. 'Complaisance', language of the heart and the art of loving encounter

In the conceptions of Francis de Sales there is an originality around the idea of complacency and the affections that implies a shift from the idea of spiritual life conceived as a struggle to a more integrated paradigm of a devout life. It seems to us that this new perspective has three causes: the decidedly pedagogical aspect of Salesian writing, which is that of a pastor who believes more in encouragement than in negation and struggle; an optimistic conception of man; finally, in Francis de Sales one notes a systematic distrust of any exhortation to introversion that is too analysing.

For Francis, the will has 'a very close relationship with the good; this fact generates the satisfaction that the will feels in perceiving and perceiving the good. This complacency moves and impels the will to the good'. Complacency is, in other words, the first shock, the first emotion, the awakening that the good provokes in the will by grabbing it, capturing it, captivating it. Making a sort of phenomenology of the spiritual life we are faced with the intuition of an irreducibly affective root of the soul accompanied by a recognised primacy of the will.

Don Bosco is in tune with the approach of complacency, sympathy, joy as the beginning of the educational process. However it does not presuppose a formed conscience so the preventive role of the educator is contemplated in the discovery of a "point accessible to the good". The joy of the first meeting between the educator and the educand is pointed out in the exemplary biographies, and Don Bosco himself takes his first steps into the interior life thanks to the meeting with Don Calosso who introduces him to "taste the spiritual life": "Freed from conditioning and immersed in the great flow of the spiritual life with its processes of desire, determination, purification, prayerful communion, virtuous construction, interior illumination, tension towards unitive love. For him it is a joyful, exciting discovery, the perception of an unthought-of, profoundly fulfilling dimension".

Also in the Giovane Provveduto, a prayer manual for young people, the starting point is the life of true pleasures and joy. For Don Bosco as for Francis de Sales, absolute happiness and the absolute meaning of life can only be found in God. Therefore, through the spiritual life, he wants to teach them a way of life that can make them happy, showing them where true enjoyments and pleasures can be found. The scholar Pietro Braido warns of the existence of a first objective within Don Bosco's educational approach: to help young people who are completely lost to find the most basic 'reason to live', which means to make them experience the desire and joy of living.

## 2. "Convenience" of the roots and the asceticism of conformation to the good

Looking at the image of the tree in an evolutionary logic, after the first impulse of complacency aroused by a desired good, the seed of the new tree begins to grow by casting deeper roots that are called by Francis de Sales by the term "convenience". We could distinguish a dual semantics of the term: the first, expressed with the concepts of affinity, conformity and convenience, refers to anthropological coordinates and the second refers to a conscious educational choice expressed as pact, alliance, relationship and agreement.

Saint Francis de Sales argues, following Vives and de Granada, that the expediency "that gives rise to love is not always found in similarity, but can be found in proportion, relationship and conformity", using examples of musical agreement in discordance, the relationship between doctor and sick person, or the sympathy between old people and children. As much as the doctor of love is interested in the anthropological suitability between God and man, referring to the similarities and correspondences that go back to the creation of man in the image and likeness of God, Don Bosco rather sets in motion a suitability between educator and educand. God educates in a loving, provident and preventive way and the educator is called to imitate this educational process with the preventive system. Similarity and diversity of educational convenience are expressed in three ways.

The "first expediency" between the young person and the good of his growth implies a path of purification, that is, of making oneself more conformed to the good in the way of reasoning, acting and feeling. To make the roots of the student grow in the solid ground of goodness

requires a preliminary purification of the mind and heart, the one darkened by ignorance and prejudice, the other corrupted by vice and bad habits. "To enlighten the mind in order to make the heart good" was for Don Bosco from the beginning the specific aim of his instruction and education.

A second way of understanding convenience applies to the training of educators. To be able to welcome young people in a welcoming, loving, sympathetic and empathetic way, arousing "complaisance", a preparation for "expediency" is necessary. Embracing the founding principle of the important Letter from Rome - that young people "should not only be loved, but that they themselves should know that they are loved", it becomes necessary to love what they like, adapt to their tastes, understand the world of youth, live in it, stay in contact with it, train in relational skills, study their growth processes, fail and try again, etc.

The third way of living the similarity-proportionality dynamic finds its place in the relationship between the educator and the educand in the challenge-reliance dynamic. In the first paradigmatic encounters, Don Bosco brings together a helpful and empathetic attitude with a challenging offer of the possibility of growing by developing one's gifts and talents. In the encounter Don Bosco intentionally provokes expectation, desire, curiosity that brings the young person out of his own narrow horizons.

### 3. "Mouvement" of the trunk and the dynamics of growing entrustment

In the system of Saint Francis de Sales, love becomes the origin and regulator of the course of all conscious and intentional, i.e. ethical, activity of the heart's affections and their effects in the individual spheres of life. This is also possible by pointing out the clear differences between complacency and love, the former being an 'e-motion' and the latter already a 'motion': "We can say that the good grasps, captures and grips the heart with complacency, but with love attracts it, guides it and leads it to itself; by means of complacency it brings it out, but with love it makes it make the journey and the journey; complacency is the awakening of the heart, but love is its action; complacency sets it on its feet, but love makes it walk; with complacency the heart spreads its wings, but with love it takes flight. Love, then, to speak clearly and precisely, is nothing other than the movement, the flowing and advancing of the heart towards the good". In this way, the trunk of the tree that is movement is no longer complacency, it is benevolence, which causes God to grow within us and out of us towards others, in works and, finally, in the ecstasy of action.

Francis de Sales' integrated anthropology connects the roots and trunk of the tree, creating continuity between thought and prayer. The four degrees of the functioning of intelligence connect thought, which is exercised on a great diversity of things, with study, which aims at knowledge and understanding, with meditation, which aims to move the affections, and, in particular, with contemplation, which consists in rejoicing in the good known through meditation and loved through such knowledge. If we place Don Bosco's insistence on the exercise of meditation in this context, we move from an exercise of piety to a crucial moment

of convergence between knowledge and faith that moves the affections to grow the tree of vocation to the love of God and neighbour.

In Don Bosco's experience, the educational process begins after the first meeting with entrustment to the educator in the 'convenance' and then develops through the 'mouvement' in a direction towards total entrustment to God. It seems that we can read the second decade of the Memoirs of the Oratory in this key of the movement of unconditional surrender in charity and holy indifference. The dynamic was born during the seminary years, was consolidated during the three years spent at the Convitto Ecclesiastico, under the direction of Saint Joseph Cafasso, and then was brought to a total transformation in 1846 through the crises of the itinerant oratory and his own health. Similarly in the lives of the exemplary young people of the Oratory, the movement of progressive self-surrender begins with docile entrustment to the 'faithful friend of the soul'. Subsequently, the baptismal decision to follow Christ is realised in openness to grace, and after a crisis, in full adherence to God's will. They live out the movement of the 5th book of Theotimus through the transformation of self from the motivational logic of complacency to a donation of ever more total benevolence.

#### 4. "Moyens", the branching out of educational itineraries into the ecstasy of action

The effective love of benevolence implies a conformity and transformation of intentions, actions and affections. Activities, endeavours, efforts are means of the dynamic of love to conform ourselves to God, and Francis de Sales expounds a simple method of decision-making to avoid scrupulosity, infantilism, weakness or lightness in life. Primarily, one is called to act according to a threefold logic: obey the commandments by God's authority, follow his counsels by his friendship, and let oneself be animated by his inspirations.

Then in more important matters, he indicates not "to think of discovering God's will by dint of examinations and subtleties of reasoning; but after having asked for the light of the Holy Spirit, [...] having listened to the advice of our director and, if there is none, of two or three spiritual persons, one must decide and choose in the name of God and, afterwards, not to go back on the choice". At the level of the symbol used, the individual choices, attempts and activities intertwine with each other in daily life and create a systemic and original whole of the crown of the tree.

In John Bosco we can see a great deal of harmony with Francis de Sales in this point of means and activities, both for the practical and active temperament and for the inspirations drawn from the Philothea he knew and recommended. Beyond the different emphases, one can easily see the unitary structure of the formation programme outlined by Don Bosco in the different types of his writings. There is an emphasis on the pedagogy of responsible duty, the orderly use of time and diligence in fulfilling the commitments of study and work. Duty is combined with a pedagogy of spontaneous joy that finds its typical expression in moments of leisure and spontaneity. Joy finds its deep root in peace with God and with one's own conscience. The last component is the pedagogy of vocational commitment that makes

the young person the protagonist, not only of his own growth, but of many forms of service to his neighbour, of beautiful friendships and of ardour for the material and spiritual good of all in view of a vocational choice. Ubiquitous and constitutive is the religious dimension, which is evident above all in the importance given to the sacraments of the Eucharist and reconciliation, thus concretising a constant and trusting accompaniment by the director-confessor.

The way of being of the educators also reflects the balance between rules, counsels and inspirations. The Salesian assistant is called to be present, in a Pauline logic, all things to all people, conformed to the needs of the people, 'always ready to listen to every doubt or complaint of the young, all eyes to paternally supervise their conduct, all heart to seek the spiritual and temporal good of those whom Providence has entrusted to him'. Finally, there is a typical trait of Don Bosco's educational work - numerous proposals for concrete applications and resolutions at the end of the catechesis, narratives, good nights or dream-visions that he proposes to the boys.

##### 5. "Union" with God between ecstatic work, peaceful temperance and generative zeal

Union with God is basically expressed in the Salesian motto 'living Jesus'. What indicates our spiritual growth is not only found in intensely religious feelings or thoughts, but in emptying ourselves to serve others. As such the ecstasy of action can exist without the ecstasy of prayer, but the reverse is not possible.

The exercise of the virtues, overcoming oneself and "living in the midst of the world against all worldly opinions and principles and going against the current [...] through ordinary resignation, renunciation and denial of ourselves, is not to live humanly, but superhumanly; it is not to live in us but outside of us and above us: and since no one can rise in this way above himself, if the eternal Father does not attract him, this type of life must then be a continuous rapture and a perpetual ecstasy of action and operation". For Don Bosco, the ecstasy of action is summed up in the concept of 'work' which constitutes the synthesis of the Salesian's asceticism and mysticism. Don Bosco conceives work in such a way that it becomes, or can become, prayer.

Secondly, union with God's plans creates an attitude of "holy indifference" that "loves nothing except for the sake of God's will". Indifference is declined by Don Bosco and his successors rather actively as a sense of measure, "temperance" in activities, work and life. Illuminating in this sense is the deepening of the 10th book of the Theotimus on the possibility of loving God and also loving many other things together with God: "He who says everything excludes nothing; [...] so that belonging everything to everyone, he will belong everything to everyone. [...] Then there are other souls who love neither excesses nor excessively, but simply love what God wants and how God wants. [...] These souls love nothing except in God, although they love many things with God and God with many things.

As a third effect, union generates zeal, understood as the ardour of charity. "True zeal is the child of charity, because it is its ardour: that is why, like her, it is patient, benign, serene, without contention, without hatred, without envy, and rejoices in the truth. [...] True zeal has extreme but constant, stable and sweet ardours, dynamic and always amiable and untiring; on the contrary, false zeal is turbulent, confusing, insolent, proud, choleric, temporary and, at the same time, impetuous and inconstant'. The profound dynamic of the Salesian motto 'da mihi animas coetera tolle' is full of zeal for the true good of all, leading Don Bosco to place the supreme educational objective of holiness at the summit of his educational proposal.

The union with the zealous God spreads and becomes generative to the point of leading Don Bosco to plan a worldwide movement for the education of the young. On some good nights he stimulated the heroic self-giving of the young people of the Oratory by exhorting: 'But perhaps the world is in our power, so that we can go everywhere? Yes, as you see, everyone is calling us; then the Roman Church is universal, and therefore it can be preached everywhere. Each one then according to his courage and according to how he feels will be able to go to regions nearer or further away. Extending the image of Saint Francis de Sales we can say that union with God is the fruit of the tree that is generative, and with time a whole forest grows from the tree.'