

What is Salesian in Don Bosco?

Francis de Sales and Don Bosco's pastoral spirit*

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Preliminary Remarks

St John Bosco choose St Francis de Sales as the patron for the educational works that he founded on behalf of poor adolescents and young adults. He used the adjective *Salesian* to describe his network of co-workers, as well as the spirit of his pastoral interventions. When prompted to found a religious community of men, he unhesitatingly called it the Pious Society of St Francis de Sales. The question is: why?¹

The two men lived in very different times. The great Francis, a nobleman of Savoy, served as bishop-in-exile of Geneva in the period following the Reformation.² John Bosco, youngest son of Piedmontese tenant farmers, became a priest for young people at-risk in Turin at the time when the leadership of that city spearheaded the unification of Italy.³ What is the spiritual relationship that existed between the two?

The question is not new. Don Bosco attempted to address this very issue when writing the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales*.⁴ As he recalled the beginnings of his

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¹ Pietro Stella has made a preliminary but thorough study of this theme, and published this as "Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales: Incontro fortuito o identità spirituale," in *San Francesco di Sales e i Salesiani di Don Bosco*, edited by Juan Picca and Józef Strus', Studi di Spiritualità Series, no. 4 (Roma: LAS, 1986), 139-159. I will make frequent reference to this article.

Other frequently quoted sources include: The Central Salesian Archives (Archivio Salesiano Centrale), Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma [hereafter = ASC], are the source for all of the unpublished documents cited here. All references to the *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco* are taken from the original Italian edition: Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Angelo Amadei and Eugenio Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco*, 19 vols.; index by Ernesto Foglio (S. Benigno Canavese/Torino: Tipografia Salesiana/SAID/SEI, 1898-1917, 1930-1938, 1948) [=MB]. Translations of ASC materials and MB, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

² Francis de Sales was a native of Savoy and bishop of Geneva. He was born on 21 August 1567 near the alpine settlement of Annecy. Trained in law, Francis brought a layman's sensitivity to ministry once he was ordained and sent as a missionary to the Calvinist valley of Chablais. When he became bishop of Geneva in 1602, he continued to work for reform and reconciliation of Christians. He founded the Visitation of Holy Mary with Jane-Frances de Chantal in 1610, and wrote two classics of spirituality: the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*. He died suddenly in Lyons at the age of 55 on 28 December 1622, and was canonized by Alexander VII on 19 April 1665.

³ John Bosco is well known to most of our readers, but by way of a quick profile, we recall that he was born in the hamlet of the Becchi, Castelnovo d'Asti, on 16 August 1815. He was orphaned of his father while still an infant, but as an adult dedicated his life to poor and at-risk young people. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1841. After nearly two decades educating young people, he founded the Society of St Francis de Sales in 1859, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1872, and the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators in 1876. He died in Turin on 31 January 1888, and was canonized on Easter Sunday, 1 April 1934.

⁴ Don Bosco crafted his "memoirs" for his "beloved Salesian sons," and did not intend that this work should be published. His only hope in writing about his own vocation and early ministry, he declared, was "that the sons will draw from these adventures, small and great, some spiritual and temporal advantage."

apostolic work, Don Bosco told of his experiences as a chaplain in the employ of the Marchesa Juliette Barolo. It was she, he tells us, who had the intention of founding a community of priests under the patronage of St Francis de Sales – as if to say that he came to the idea of founding and naming the Salesians through her influence. Was this truly the case? And who was the Marchesa Barolo? Let us take a moment to review her story.

Julie Colbert di Barolo, Marchesa and Foundress

Juliette Françoise Colbert de Maulèvrier (1785-1864) and her husband Carlo-Tancredi Falletti di Barolo (1782-1838) had been outstanding “benefactors” in the city of Turin during the first half of the 19th century. Motivated by Christian charity, they drew from their own resources to finance housing for the city’s poor, and to provide them with social and medical assistance. The couple opened their own home as a day-care center for the children of working women, and in 1822 founded the *Rifugio* – a “house of refuge” for rural girls who had been caught up in Turin’s sex trade but who were seeking escape. The experience would move Tancredi Falletti and his Marchesa to found two religious institutes of women: the Sisters of Saint Mary Magdalene (1833)⁵ and the Sisters of Saint Anne (1834).⁶

The *Rifugio* was located on the outskirts of the city: the Valdocco district. After her husband’s death, Marchesa Barolo organized groups of apostolic workers among the clergy and laity, to further the works she and Carlo-Tancredi had begun on behalf of Turin’s poor children. In the early 1840s, the Marchesa planned to build a small hospital for sick orphan girls. She had the property adjacent to the *Rifugio* cleared for the project, and began construction in 1844 on the “Little Hospital of St Philomena.”

See: S. Giovanni Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855: the autobiography of Saint John Bosco*, translated by Daniel Lyons, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, Lawrence Castelvechi, and Michael Mendl (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1989), 3.

⁵ Many of the first *Penitent Sisters of Saint Mary Magdalene* had themselves been rescued from the streets, and they led a contemplative and semi-cloistered life of prayer while providing a safe haven for young girls at-risk. Marchesa Barolo took the lead in forming the first group. She drafted their rule of life, modeling these on the constitutions of the Visitandines. The sisters lived the spirit of simplicity as described by Francis de Sales in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and testified to the saving power of the Crucified and Risen Christ as they worked to evangelize and instruct poor young women. The institute made its headquarters at the *Rifugio*. They received pontifical approval in March 1846. Their name later changed to *Daughters of Jesus the Good Shepherd*. Cf. Angelo Montonati, *Giulia di Barolo*, Collana Pionieri 69 (Leumann-Torino: Elle-di-ci, 1994), 22-24.

⁶ The Marquis of Barolo directed the beginnings of the Sisters of Saint Anne, housing the first ten young women in the family home in Moncalieri, not far from the Visitation monastery. The *Sisters Saint Anne and of Providence*, as they were first called, were an active and apostolic community. Carlo-Tancredi Falletti di Barolo provided for their training as educators specialized in early childhood education, and within a short time the group directed day care centers throughout Turin and Piedmont. They also cared for orphan girls, taking charge of the orphanage close to the Barolo home near Turin’s Marian shrine of the *Consolata*. Cf. “Barolo,” in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, edited by Guerrino Pelliccia and Giancarlo Rocca, vol. 1 (Roma: Paoline, 1974), col. 1053-1055; “Sant’Anna, di Torino, Suore di,” in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, edited by Guerrino Pelliccia and Giancarlo Rocca, vol. 8 (Roma: Paoline, 1988), col. 757-760.

It was during this same period that the Marchesa employed Don Bosco to assist with chaplain duties at the *Rifugio*. The plan was that eventually he would become chaplain of the little hospital when it would be completed.

In addition to working for the Marchesa on weekdays, Don Bosco gathered a number of working-class youths on Sundays and holidays. Here is how he described the arrangement he made with his employer, and the choice of a patron for his work with Turin's young people.

I went in fact to speak with [Marchesa] Barolo. As the little hospital was not to be opened till August of the following year, that charitable lady was happy to put at our disposal for use as a chapel two large rooms intended for the recreation of the priests of the Refuge when they should transfer their residence there. Access to the new Oratory, therefore, was through where the door of the hospital is now, along an alley running between the Cottolengo Institute and the aforementioned building, to what is now the priests' residence, and inside up to the third floor. That was the site Divine Providence chose for the first Oratory church. We began to call it after St Francis de Sales... because Marchesa Barolo had in mind to found a congregation of priests under his patronage, and with this intention she had a painting of this saint done, which can still be seen at the entrance to this area.⁷

Not only did the Marchesa permit Don Bosco to gather and catechize young people on her premises, she was very supportive of this initiative. Further, Don Bosco tells us that she had intentions of founding a congregation of priests who would be engaged in educative and social apostolates. This is not surprising. As we have seen, she and her husband had founded two congregations of religious women, and after her husband's death, the Marchesa had financed a normal school to train women teachers. By 1844 she had employed a corps of secular priests to serve as chaplains to her many "pious works." Some of the priests were already housed in her institutions, and her fervent wish was to form the group into a religious community under the protection of St Francis de Sales.

As one of the youngest priests to be employed by the Marchesa Barolo, Don Bosco knew of these plans. We are not sure how he felt about becoming a member of such a community, but there was a practical side to this. The Marchesa had placed the portrait of the saint in the environment in which the young Don Bosco gathered his poor boys for his Sunday Oratory. Francis de Sales thereby became a "familiar face," and so it was easy to call upon him as patron of the "oratory church," makeshift as it was during those months when the little hospital was under construction.

Pastoral aspects of the Salesian patronage

Don Bosco worked as a member of Marchesa Barolo's chaplaincy team for less than two years, but it was this experience that brought him to the Valdocco district of Turin where soon afterwards he would launch a full-time ministry of outreach to working youth. After a period of starts and stops, he finally located a few short blocks from the *Pia Opera Barolo*. In the transition, he proposed the gentle Bishop of Geneva as the patron of the work, which he named the Festive Oratory of St Francis de Sales. Reflecting back on those early days, he cited two reasons for choosing this patron:

⁷ Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, 216-217.

We had put our own ministry, which called for great calm and meekness, under the protection of this saint in the hope that he might obtain for us from God the grace of being able to imitate him in his extraordinary meekness and in winning souls.

We had a further reason for placing ourselves under the protection of this saint: that from heaven he might help us to imitate him in combating errors against religion, especially Protestantism, which was beginning to gain ground in our provinces, and more especially in the city of Turin.⁸

Giovanni Bonetti, publishing “historical notes” of the founding of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales in the *Bollettino Salesiano* in the 1880s, ratifies this account. He states that “Don Bosco desired to obtain the assistance of that great champion of the Faith who had in his own time overcome so many of the sects, and accomplished great things for the good of the Church.”⁹

Was this really the case? Would Don Bosco have been worried about the “sects” and other evangelical sects in the 1840s? This does not seem likely. Turin, like most of the Kingdom of Sardinia, was officially and thoroughly Catholic during the era of the Restoration. And although there were pockets of Waldensians in Susa and Pinerolo at the time, just as there were Jewish ghettos in Chieri and other small cities, no one spoke of freedom of worship before the beginning of the Risorgimento.

In 1848 King Charles Albert granted freedom of religion and full civil rights to the Waldensians. During the next decade, the Waldensian community established a center in Turin, with church and printing press close to the main train station. It was only then that they began to proselytize among the Turinese.¹⁰

When Don Bosco began his work among the abandoned youth of the capital, he had no contact with Protestants. No Reformed or Lutheran churches existed in the city at that time, and the Waldensians would not arrive for another decade. If Don Bosco was concerned about proselytism, this was not his first thought when organizing his first youth center. This means that we can discount this as a motive for invoking Francis de Sales as patron during the earliest years of Don Bosco’s ministry.

What is true, however, is that he did seem to look to this saint as a model of pastoral charity. This can be discerned from Don Bosco’s own wording in the regulations he drew up between 1847 and 1852:

This oratory is placed under the patronage of Saint Francis de Sales, because those who intend to dedicate themselves to this kind of work should adopt this saint as a model of

⁸ Cf. Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, 217.

⁹ Giovanni Bonetti, History of Don Bosco’s Early Apostolate, declared venerable, July 23rd, 1907; a translation from the work of G. Bonetti, S.C., with a preface by His Grace the Archbishop of Westminster (London: Salesian Press, 1908), 18.

¹⁰ The Waldensians credit King Charles Albert with bringing freedom of worship to Italy, thanks to his open letter of 17 February 1848, followed by the “Fundamental Statute of the Monarchy of Savoy,” issued by the King on 4 March of the same year. Shortly afterwards the Waldensians began to function openly in Turin (capital city of the Duchy of Savoy and Kingdom of Sardinia). In 1853 they completed the construction of their “temple” and in 1855 they opened a printing press which was to become the “Editrice Claudiana,” foremost Protestant publishing company in Italy.

charity and affability. These are the sources of the good fruit that we expect from the Work of the Oratories.¹¹

This is our first clue that Don Bosco had personal reasons for choosing Francis de Sales. This was not a saint employed to respond to “the sects.” Nor did Don Bosco settle on Francis de Sales simply to please the Marchesa Barolo, even if he credits her with the first inspiration. He chose Francis de Sales for pastoral reasons: “because those who intend to dedicate themselves to this kind of work should adopt this saint as a model of charity and affability.”

Salesian influence in Don Bosco’s life

When Don Bosco tried to explain his choice of patron (and name) in the 1870s, he told stories of his beginnings. He represents 1844 as the period when Francis de Sales came into focus for him, and credits Marchesa Barolo as making him aware of the saintly Bishop of Geneva as a model of pastoral charity. However, this was not entirely the case. Don Bosco had certainly become aware of the saint while still a seminarian and as a newly ordained priest. But why did he, the son of Piedmontese tenant farmers, identify in what seems to be a personal way with this post-Tridentine bishop from Savoy? Was this local saint simply part of the devotional landscape in which John Bosco lived and worked?

Francis de Sales and the devotional landscape

The cult of Francis de Sales, canonized in 1665, found fertile ground in Savoy, Piedmont, Liguria and Sardinia, in the Dauphine and Provence. For all that, Francis de Sales was never exactly a popular saint. His picture did not occupy a prominent place in churches, and in rural parishes he was less important than the miracle-working saints.

If there was any attempt to bring the sayings of Francis de Sales into popular preaching, this would have had little effect on the peasant masses. Rural crowds were barely reached by sermons and instructions. In those years, farmers and their families usually arrived at Mass in time for the “Credo” or came to the Sunday-evening Vespers at about the time the choir intoned the “Adoro te devote” at Benediction.

If images of Francis de Sales were printed and distributed by the clergy, the nobility, and upper class, they tended to find their way into the homes (and devotional books) of the more established families.¹² However, he was a saint who had little to offer to the lower

¹¹ MB 3:91.

¹² Even so, the politicized nobility of Savoy seem to have been less enthralled by Francis de Sales than by the first Savoia bishop of Geneva, and indeed the first Duke of Savoy: Amedeus VIII of Savoy (1383-1451). Amedeus had retired to a hermitage that he had founded in Ripaille (on Lake Geneva) when his son Louis came of age, and was elected anti-pope Felix V by the Council of Basel in 1439. He eventually resigned in favor of peace with Pope Nicholas V, and remained in Geneva in full communion with Rome, as bishop and cardinal. Duke Amedeus died in “the odor of sanctity.” His grandson, Amadeus IX of Savoy (1435-1472) and his pious wife Yolande of France, endeared themselves to the people, ruling the duchy with a great sense of justice and peace; he died in Vercelli and was beatified in 1677. In the conflicts between Rome and the House of Savoy in the 17th and 18th centuries, Amedeus VIII and his grandson Amedeus IX, were handy “saints” with some political clout!

classes, it would seem (and it is helpful to recall that John Bosco was a rural boy, the son of tenant farmers). Farmers turned to saints that helped in the agricultural cycles: John the Baptist, Lawrence, Martin; the poor cultivated a practical devotion to those saints who seemed to be effective in warding off disease and pestilence: Sebastian, Rocque, Anthony of the Desert, Apollonia.

So if this saint made no impact on John Bosco in terms of popular piety, we may ask whether he learned something of the saint when finally, at age 15, he began his formal education. Indeed, Francis de Sales had a following in Chieri, a provincial market town 12 km from Don Bosco's home town.

The city of Chieri was a center of some importance. Besides its agricultural markets, it had a well-developed textile industry and a fervent faith community. The city hosted several large religious communities, a major seminary for the archdiocese of Turin, confraternities of laymen that had remained active even during the Napoleonic years. It was here that John Bosco attended secondary school under the guidance of the Dominicans, participated in youth activities with the Jesuits, and seriously considered joining the Franciscans. The town had numerous religious foundations, and a very active laity. Confraternities abounded, the most popular being the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, and the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary. There was an "Association of St Francis de Sales" in the church of Philip Neri, which had been in existence since 1723, but it made little impression in a population of 13,000 inhabitants. John Bosco's initiatives during his student days in Chieri are more typical of the spirit of Philip Neri than that of Francis de Sales, as his *Società d'allegria* repeats the apostle of Rome's invitation to joy and service.

It is only when John Bosco entered his early 20s that he seems to have developed an attraction for St Francis de Sales. This is not surprising. Francis de Sales and Philip Neri were the two principal patrons of the diocesan seminary of Chieri, where John Bosco studied from 1835 to 1841. While the Chieri seminary kept a number of feast days (26 May: St Philip Neri; 21 June: St Aloysius Gonzaga; 2 July: Visitation), the day dedicated to St Francis de Sales (29 January) outshone the others as one of the principal feasts of the seminary, second only to the feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 December), who was the principal patroness of the seminary. Seminarians participated in a novena to prepare for the celebration of Francis de Sales' feast day, which included solemn liturgies, and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Leaders of the local churches (pastors, confessors and canons) were invited to take part in the celebration, and in the afternoon the doors of the seminary were opened so that all the lay people who wanted could take part in the celebration of Vespers, with a specially prepared panegyric and Benediction. Besides the religious functions, seminarians were treated to a holiday from all lessons and tutoring, and a festive banquet.¹³

¹³ Cf. Aldo Giraudo, *Clero, seminario e società: Aspetti della Restaurazione religiosa a Torino* (Roma: LAS, 1992), 264, 267, 444.

It was not all food and fun. Francis de Sales was designated as the principal patron of the little seminary at Chieri.¹⁴ As happened elsewhere during that period, this saint, together with Charles Borromeo, was proposed to the seminarians at Chieri as a model of priestly fidelity and holiness.¹⁵

John Bosco evidently considered the gentle bishop of Geneva as a model for his own priesthood. As he completed his retreat in preparation for ordination, he looks for Salesian inspiration as he composes resolutions to guide him on his way. He writes: "May the charity and sweetness of St Francis de Sales guide me in everything."¹⁶

Following his ordination, John Bosco enrolled in a pastoral course at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin.¹⁷ Here too, Francis de Sales was presented as a patron and model to the newly ordained who prepared themselves for active ministry, mainly among Piedmont's unchurched population.

Given that the *Convitto* was a type of center for the renewal of the local Church, the stress was not only on pastoral effectiveness but on holiness in the pastors and ministers themselves. Francis de Sales was seen as a model of holiness that fostered renewal and reform in line with the directives of the Council of Trent and the tenor of the times (during the post-Napoleonic Restoration).

As in the seminary of Chieri, the professors at the *Convitto* presented Francis de Sales as a great model: missionary among people alienated from the Church; director of consciences; teacher of the clergy; founder and reformer of religious life.

Model for Reform

Since his canonization, Francis de Sales had been added to the lineup of holy pastors who, by their actions and writings, had overcome heresy and brought about a new flowering of the Church. In second half of the 17th Century, many in France placed Francis de Sales beside Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) as the ideal bishop. He was presented as the model churchman who devoted himself wholeheartedly to his pastoral duties and who remained strictly committed to the reform of the Church. The operative word here is "strict," for the French monarchs had been slow to accept the Council of Trent. By the time the Tridentine decrees were published, the need for reform was most keenly felt, and "reform" came to be associated with "rigor." In this context, the

¹⁴ Cf. Piero Trabuco, "2001: San Francesco di Sales: Protettore del nostro anno centenario," Lettera del Superiore Generale, 1 novembre 2000, in *Bollettino dell'Istituto Missioni Consolata*, #91 (gennaio 2001): 2.

¹⁵ Cf. Stella, "Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales," 144, 157.

¹⁶ MB 1:518.

¹⁷ One of the most important initiatives toward the reform of the clergy in Piedmont during the 19th Century was the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, begun in 1817 by the theologian Luigi Guala (1775-1848) in the convent of S. Francesco d'Assisi, one block distant from Turin's city hall. The *Convitto* was a live-in program that offered an environment of reflection and prayer, pastoral courses, apostolic training, and a community in which a young priest might find guidance for the early years of priesthood. The program normally lasted two years, although there were some exceptions, as in D. Bosco's case. He entered the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in November 1841, and remained there until 1844.

teachings of both Francis de Sales and Charles Borromeo came to have a more rigorous interpretation in France than they did in Italy.

Jansenism only reinforced this rigorous sense – and this was the same on either side of the Alps. In the 18th-century, Francis de Sales was often invoked as an example of the faithful and wise pastor of souls, but few editions of his writings were reprinted. The Jansenists claimed his patronage, but, in the words of Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694), portrayed him as “more gentle in his writings than he was in his conduct” in demanding adequate penitential preparation for the reception of the sacraments.¹⁸

This Jansenist approach held sway in Turin as well. A manual for confessors became quite popular there in the latter half of the 1700s. It was entitled “Advice of St Charles and St Francis de Sales to confessors and a brief summary of the penitential canons.”¹⁹ This work, directed to seminarians and priests engaged in pastoral ministry, gave a rigorist interpretation to the pastoral norms issued by both saints, listing sins into categories and carefully identifying those sins that were reserved or incurred excommunication.

Model of Sweetness and Pastoral Zeal in the 1800s

The Restoration that followed the fall of Napoleon brought a new reading of moral and pastoral theology in Turin. The “Avvertimenti” were no longer published. Students of moral theology began to study the writings of Alphonsus de’ Liguori (1696-1787),²⁰ particularly his pastoral manual entitled *Homo Apostolicus*.²¹ Those interested in the renewal of the clergy of Turin and Piedmont – figures such as Bruno Lanteri²² and Giuseppe Cafasso²³ – insisted on the gentle charity of Francis de Sales as a means to

¹⁸ Quotation is from Antoine Arnauld’s *De la fréquente communion*, pt. II, chap. XLIV, as quoted in Stella, “Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales,” 143. Antoine Arnauld was the youngest brother of Mère Angélique Arnauld, abbess of Port Royal, which was the center of Jansenism; he became its foremost spokesman.

¹⁹ *Avvertimenti di S. Carlo e di S. Francesco di Sales ai confessori e breve notizia dei canoni penitenziali*, was published in Avondo in 1767, and went through two reprint editions in 1769 and 1796. For a description, see Stella, “Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales,” 145-146.

²⁰ Alphonsus de’ Liguori left a career in law to enter the priesthood and evangelize the poor of Naples. He founded the Redemptorists in 1732 and became Bishop of Sant’Agata dei Goti in 1762. He was canonized in 1839, during Don Bosco’s formation years. S. Alphonsus was one of the most widely read authors in the 19th Century and remained popular through the first half of the 20th Century.

²¹ *Homo Apostolicus* deals with “what the confessor should know and how he should conduct himself in various areas,” from the realm of the 10 Commandments and the Precepts of the Church (vol. 1), through a discussion of the Sacraments (vol. 2), to pastoral prudence and charity when dealing with penitents (vol. 3). The last chapter (Tract 22) applies all these teachings in a pastoral effort to help different types of penitents, from children to widows, from those estranged from the Church to mystics.

²² Pio Brunone Lanteri (1759-1830) had been active in formation of laity and clergy through the movement known as the *Amicizie Cattoliche* during the years of the French Imperial occupation of northern Italy. He founded the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, and was instrumental in establishing the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin where Saints Joseph Cafasso, John Bosco, Leonard Murialdo and many other zealous Turinese priests received their pastoral training

²³ S. Joseph Cafasso was born in Castelnovo d’Asti on 16 January 1811. He was Turin’s great spiritual guide and formator of the clergy. In spite of a very fragile constitution, D. Cafasso was a hard worker and a cheerful, approachable person from his youth. He was among the first to attend the regional seminary in Chieri. He was ordained in 1833, after which he entered Turin’s *Convitto Ecclesiastico*,

counteract the image of the austere rigorist presented by Jansenism. The “sweetness” of Francis could again attract the faithful to the sacraments administered by priests schooled in the methods of the benign Saint Alphonsus.

D. Cafasso presents Francis de Sales to priests

D. Cafasso often presented Francis de Sales as a model for priests who were destined for parishes, many of which were rural. These priests came from a more or less stable environment, and their main ministry would be sacramental. D. Cafasso trained them to become good confessors, but he urged them to be confessors who did not wait behind the closed doors of the church to do their ministry. Francis de Sales exemplified the tireless shepherd of souls, who went in search of the sheep. The salvation of souls must be the only concern of the apostolic priest, D. Cafasso told his confreres gathered for the spiritual exercises:

Souls therefore, my dear brothers, souls for Heaven. “Give me souls,” St Francis de Sales went through life repeating, “Give me souls, O Lord, if you want me to feel somehow happy in this world!”²⁴

Winning souls, D. Cafasso taught, entailed fighting sin. One implied the other in the spiritual combat of the pastor of souls. This was the essence of the priest’s pastoral reflection, his examination of conscience, his motivation for ministry, the theme of his annual retreat, the test of his virtue. The model of this type of priestly zeal was Francis de Sales, and it was in reference to the gentle bishop of Geneva that D. Cafasso drew together all the threads of his pastoral teaching:

Oh, my brothers! I would never finish speaking, and yet it is time to do so! Souls and sins: that’s all I have to say, that’s the conclusion of my talk. Souls and sins: these are the two rings around which all we have had to say during these days [of retreat] must revolve. “Give me souls, O Lord,” let us say with that great apostle of charity St Francis de Sales. “Give me souls to save! Give me sins to combat, to exterminate.” Let us leave those who want the madness and pomp of this world have all they want, while we apply our efforts to increase the population of paradise, and to block sins from gaining ground on earth. I have great expectations that the fruit of our retreat will be rich and lasting, but even if the only result of these days would be that each of us could block one sin from being committed, I would die very happy, for I’m sure that many voices would call out for God’s mercy for you and me.²⁵

located at the church of S. Francesco d’Assisi. At the end of his two year pastoral course, the rector and founder of the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, Theologian Luigi Guala, invited him to join the staff. He began as an assistant lecturer, and soon took over the classes in moral theology. He eventually succeeded D. Guala as rector. A dedicated instructor, fervent preacher, able confessor and guide, D. Cafasso became mentor and friend of Turin’s young clergy and an advocate on behalf of Piedmont’s poor and imprisoned. He died on 23 June 1860, and was eulogized by D. Bosco. Pius XI, who beatified D. Cafasso in 1925, called him the “pearl of the Italian clergy.” Pope Pius XII canonized him on 22 June 1947.

²⁴ S. Giuseppe Cafasso, *Meditazioni per Esercizi Spirituali al Clero*, edited by Giuseppe Allamano (Torino: Canonica, 1892), 318.

²⁵ S. Giuseppe Cafasso, *Istruzioni per Esercizi Spirituali al Clero*, edited by Giuseppe Allamano (Torino: Canonica, 1893), 309.

D. Bosco presents Francis de Sales to co-workers

Don Bosco's biographer, Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, asserts that it was D. Cafasso who suggested Francis de Sales as a patron for Don Bosco's work. This proposal, according to Fr. Lemoyne, was seconded by his mentor, the theologian Giovanni Borel²⁶ some time between 1844 and 1846.²⁷

Is this entirely true? Don Bosco does not mention either priest when speaking of choosing a patron for his work, and only credits the Marchesa Barolo with indicating Francis de Sales. Yet we know that D. Cafasso and the theologian Borel were both part of that apostolic circle of priests, religious and laity that worked for the renewal, social and religious, of Turin and Piedmont, and of which the Marchesa was also key player. How much personal contact did Don Bosco actually have with the Marchesa during the brief year and a few months he was under her employ? Conversely, he worked side by side with D. Borel on a daily basis, and met with D. Cafasso every week for confession, spiritual direction, and continued guidance in his own pastoral development. It may well be that all three influenced him in warming up to the figure of Francis de Sales.

Even so, John Bosco seems to have welcomed the gentle bishop of Geneva as his own model before he came to either the *Convitto* or the *Rifugio*. As we have seen, when writing his spiritual resolutions before ordination, he took inspiration from the pastoral charity and gentle approach of Francis de Sales and prayed that he might always be guided by that same spirit.²⁸ He also proposed the saint as a model to others quite early in his ministry. When he published a history of the Church in 1845, he included a thumbnail sketch of Francis de Sales as zealous missionary and combatant for true religion.

While the heresy of Calvin and Luther seemed to have triumphed completely in the Chablais valley, it would suffer final defeat through the work of one man. This was St Francis de Sales, native of Savoy. Urged forward by the voice of God who called him to great things, and armed only with gentleness and charity, he set out for the Chablais. At the sight of churches razed, monasteries destroyed, and crosses over-turned, he was enflamed with zeal and began his apostolate. The heretics mocked him, insulted him, and tried to murder him; with patience, preaching, writing, and noteworthy miracles he quieted every disturbance, won over would-be assassins, disarmed the wrath of hell, and the Catholic faith triumphed in such a way that, in a short time, he guided more than seventy-two thousand heretics back to the bosom of the Church from the Chablais region alone. His reputation for wisdom and holiness spread, and almost by force, Francis was created Bishop of Geneva. From there he doubled his zeal. He did not neglect the most menial task in his ministry. In the end this Prelate, revered by the people, honored by princes, loved by Supreme Pontiffs, respected by heretics, rendered his pure and innocent

²⁶ Giovanni Borel (1801-1873) had studied theology at the Royal University of Turin in preparation for priesthood, and in completing his doctorate, was awarded the title of "theologian," as was customary at the University. He was on intimate terms with D. Cafasso, who asked him to help place the young D. Bosco in an apostolic ministry. Fr Borel had experience as a retreat preacher and, in 1844, was head chaplain at Marchesa Barolo's *Rifugio*. This made him D. Bosco's immediate superior when the latter came as chaplain to the projected children's hospital of St Philomena.

²⁷ Cf. MB 2:252-254.

²⁸ Cf. MB 1:518.

spirit to God in the room of a gardener, where for humility he had taken lodging in 1622. He is the founder of the order of the Visitation.²⁹

This spectacular (if not totally accurate) account appears in the first edition of Don Bosco's *Storia Ecclesiastica*. He wrote this Church History soon after he left the *Convitto*, and directed it to secondary students. Stella wonders what the young Don Bosco had in mind. If he viewed Francis de Sales as a model for clergy, as had been stressed by D. Cafasso and others of his formators, could it be that he intended to gather a group of priests to share his ministry? Or did he view the gentle Francis de Sales as a saint for people?³⁰

In concrete, Don Bosco made frequent reference to Francis de Sales as he trained his assistants, priests and laymen who came to help him in his outreach to young people at risk. Their ministry was active, but in many ways unstructured. Don Bosco invited them to educate young people who came when they pleased to an open environment (an oratory rather than a school), and he knew they could be turned off by a rigorist but attracted by a friend. Francis de Sales was an able catechist and conversationalist, at once gentle and approachable. Here was a pastor with a mission, who thirsted for souls, who rode the length of valleys and hiked the narrow paths of the mountain passes, stopping at nothing to "save souls." This was a model with whom Don Bosco's educators could identify.

Even if Don Bosco was predisposed to choose Francis de Sales as a patron, given what he considered the wishes of the Marchesa Barolo or the training he had received from D. Cafasso, he began to grow in his appreciation of the saint. He saw Francis as a "double model" of gentle loving-kindness, and of apostolic urgency. Certainly, D. Cafasso had presented Francis de Sales as a confessor who modeled the gentle approach that endeared him to penitents, but Don Bosco's own experience taught him that young people looked for the same gentle support in their educators. This was particularly true for those who came from rough and exploitative experiences of the streets of Turin would never continue to come to the free-form Oratory unless they were met with acceptance and loving kindness on the part of the director and assistants alike. The "sweetness" of Francis de Sales set the educative tone in his outreach among the young.

D. Cafasso emphasized the slogan of Francis de Sales – that "give me souls" – as the cry of the confessor who fortified himself in the combat against sin. D. Bosco turned this cry into his prayer and motto as he set off to win the hearts of young people at risk.³¹ Rather than force the young into their own categories, he recognized that educators must respond to the needs, feelings, and religious mentality of the young people whom they served. It was their good that the educator must seek, and so must turn to God continually and pray: "give me souls, take away the rest."

²⁹ S. Giovanni Bosco, *Storia ecclesiastica ad uso delle scuole, utile per ogni ceto di persone*; dedicata all'Onorat.mo Signore F. Ervé de la Croix, provinciale dei Fratelli D. I. D. S. C., compilata dal sacerdote B. G. (Torino: Tipografia Speirani e Ferrero, 1845), 321-322 [Translation mine].

³⁰ Cf. Stella, "Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales," 147-148.

³¹ Cf. MB 5:126; 17:366.

The Holy Patron and Valdocco

Having said all this, it is helpful to recall that Don Bosco, the son of tenant farmers, spent his entire life and ministry among the young and the poor. His young people were on the fringe of society, and their religiosity was both popular and traditional, even if they were unchurched.

What did the young and the poor of Piedmont think about patron saints in the 19th Century? Did Don Bosco, as a peasant priest, share their sentiments? Or does the figure of Francis de Sales bring him (and his young people) to a new understanding of faith and practice?

The Holy Patron among the young and the poor

The common people throughout 19th-century Italy nurtured a fierce loyalty to their patron saints of their hometowns, their trades, and even their parishes. The reason was simple. They sensed (and therefore experienced) that the “holy patron” had always been fiercely loyal to them. Just as miracle-working saints were popular among the people for a variety of personal and family needs, the “Holy Protectors” of towns and trades gave the people a corporate identity.³² Country priests lived the same enthusiasm, and it was common in the 19th-century that they might urge the people to pray to the patron and protector of village and town to combat impending evil, both spiritual and political.

Don Bosco did not entirely stray outside the popular consideration of patrons for places and situations, miracles and healings, as seen in his “biography” of St Pancratius.³³ This devotion to patron saints is best understood in the context of the anti-Protestant rhetoric of the post-Tridentine era: Catholics had saints to invoke; Protestants refused to do so... but to disregard the saints’ intercession was unreasonable, as Don Bosco explains in his “Life of St Martin,” which he published in 1855.

If it is permitted to turn to the friends of God and ask their help and their prayers on our behalf while they are alive, why would it be less permissible to turn to them when they reign with God in heaven? Is it possible that those saints who gave their lives and their means to charity will no longer listen to those who call upon them now that they are blessed in heaven? But their capacity to love is much greater now than it was when they lived on earth. Is it possible that they cannot help us? But if they could help us when they were mortal, why can they no longer help us when they are glorious and immortal?³⁴

³² This mentality is evident in an explanation offered by Canon Gaetano Fusco in his *Compendio della Vita e del Culto de’ Santi Cuono e Figlio Protettori della Città di Acerra* (Acerra: Tipografia Vincenzo Fiore, 1925), 38: “The saints are also human, and they can have a special predilection for one place over another. Perfection does not destroy but refines the sentiments of the heart, and the heart of the saints can become attached, in a special way, to those places where they are remembered and to those souls who venerate them” [translation mine]. ³³ Cf. S. Giovanni Bosco, *Vita di s. Pancrazio martire*, pel sacerdote Bosco Giovanni; Letture cattoliche, 4.3 (Torino: G. B. Paravia, 1856). This popular, 112-page paperback went through four reprints during the author’s lifetime.

³³ Cf. S. Giovanni Bosco, *Vita di s. Pancrazio martire*, pel sacerdote Bosco Giovanni; Letture cattoliche, 4.3 (Torino: G. B. Paravia, 1856). This popular, 112-page paperback went through four reprints during the author’s lifetime.

³⁴ S. Giovanni Bosco, *La vita di san Martino, vescovo di Tours*, per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni; Letture cattoliche 3.15-16 (Torino: Tipografia Ribotta, 1855), 75 [translation mine].

Don Bosco called attention to his patron through various physical monuments. He began by having the chapel of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales blessed and dedicated in the saint's honor (Easter 1846), and later built the church of St Francis de Sales to accommodate the growing number of young people who came to him for assistance (1852). He sought special indulgences for his associates who worked in the name of Francis de Sales (granted by Rome 1850), and wrote a rule for oratories and youth centers, constituting a "Congregation" under the saint's patronage (1854-59). All of his early work took place under protection of this saint. The recognition of a patron saint gave the organization a form of piety and a feast to celebrate!

Ordinarily, devotion to the "holy patrons" always included "paying for the feast," and that went beyond what may happen in church. Patron saints were honored with solemn liturgies and processions, food booths and banquets, musical performances and fireworks. Even so, Don Bosco seems to have encouraged his young people to "invoke the saints" in new ways, as described below.

Celebrating the saints in Don Bosco's house

When it came to feast days, the celebrations in honor of Francis de Sales were not the most dramatic at the Oratory. The best celebrated events over the course of the year were the days commemorating the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary (December 8), Christmas (December 24), Carnival (between January 13 and Ash Wednesday), Easter, St Aloysius Gonzaga (June 21). Beginning in the 1860s the feasts of St Joseph, worker and foster father of Jesus (March 19), Mary Help of Christians (May 24), and John the Baptist (June 24), were given greater prominence. These were the boys' feasts, and they looked forward to them. There were games, theatrical presentations, music and special treats from the kitchen, but the bulk of the work went into spiritual preparation. A novena of instruction and catechesis prepared the community for the feasts of the Immaculate Conception and Christmas, and it took six Sundays to prepare for the feast of Saint Aloysius. The feast of Mary Help culminated an entire "month of Mary," with a daily regime of prayers, practices of charity, and the opportunity to approach the sacraments.

In comparison, the feast of Francis de Sales, then kept on 29 January, was celebrated in a subdued manner. It was not that the saint was unknown – the first church within the Oratory compound was dedicated to him, after all! Yet, the manner in which Don Bosco celebrated the feast of the "Holy Patron" shows that a transition takes place in his understanding of the saints. Francis de Sales was not a miracle-working or healing saint. The young people did not participate in tournaments during his feast day, and no fireworks lit up the January night sky. Instead, Don Bosco prepared them for the feast with a series of "Good Night" talks describing the virtues "which ought to adorn the heart of a young person." Then, when the day arrived, each group and class would elect, by secret ballot, a classmate whom they felt had worked hardest to learn and practice virtue since the beginning of the year.³⁵

³⁵ Cf. Costanzo Rinaudo, Torino, to Calogero Gusmano, Valdocco, 19 June 1919, ALS, ASC, B0330203, p. 2: "For us the unforgettable and brief evening talks by our common father D. Bosco, who recommended to us to practice the virtues that ought to adorn a young person, all became concrete in the light of the model we saw in our own dear [companions].... It was a plebiscite of boys who were aware

Don Bosco, the writings and teachings of Francis de Sales

Lemoyne asserts that Don Bosco had a profound knowledge of the life and works of Francis de Sales, that that he would often speak about “this admirable apostle” to his young people, from the earliest days of his ministry and in later years as well: bringing out “a maxim now or an episode later.”³⁶ This may have been true, but when Lemoyne speaks of “the life and works” of Francis de Sales, does he use “works” to identify his ministry or his writing? Don Bosco could have collected the “maxims” and “episodes” from any number of popular publications without ever seriously consulting the saint’s writings. What we can do, however, is to examine Don Bosco’s own writings in attempt to discover traces of Francis de Sales’ thought and teaching.

Here we are faced with a problem. Don Bosco had multiple goals when writing and publishing, and these goals were practical. He never meant to produce scholarly work, but aimed at popularizing religious teaching for the young and for the common people. Since he destined his works for as wide an audience of “the people” as possible, most of his “books” were really pocket-sized paperbacks, which were highly devotional, spiritual and “preachable.” As he became more organized (and in response to the concerns of the bishops of Piedmont), he produced a series of practical handbooks that he called the “Catholic Readings” – *Letture Cattoliche* – which were designed to equip Catholic laity to defend their faith in the face on an onslaught of anti-clerical and anti-religious literature flooding Turin and Italy at the time. Thus, Don Bosco did not produce theological or spiritual syntheses, but wrote simply to bring God (faith, morality, religious instruction, a sense of Christian responsibility) to the people in a simple, almost family-like way.³⁷ In many ways, he succeeded.³⁸

Among Don Bosco’s works prior to 1850, the only page derived from the writings of Francis de Sales is in *The Companion of Youth*, a prayer book that he composed for young people in 1847. After presenting a simple version of daily devotions appropriate for teenagers, he offers his young readers a suggested seven-day process as a type of

and conscientious, attracted in their own frank honesty by the power of deep and real-life virtue” [translation mine]. See also: MB 5:11-12.

³⁶ MB 2:254.

³⁷ The *Letture Cattoliche* appeared in the form of a monthly periodical, which D. Bosco launched in March 1853 and which he financed mainly through yearly subscriptions. Unlike journals or magazines, the *Letture Cattoliche* did not present a variety of articles each month. Rather, each issue featured a “monograph,” which was a complete, albeit short book in itself. It could be sold separately or as part of the series. They were in no way pretentious, either in language or in format. These paperbacks were given a uniform blue paper cover, following the French style, which was a sign in itself that the “blue book” was destined for the common people. In the early years, D. Bosco wrote most issues, but with time he was able to interest others to compose devotional monographs. By the late 1860s, most articles were written by members of the Salesian Society even if D. Bosco’s name appeared as author.

³⁸ D. Bosco began publishing the *Letture Cattoliche* in 1853, and because of its popularity, he was able to purchase his own printing press and bindery within a few short years. These became the basis for putting Salesian technical education into the scientific and technological forefront, while the publications prepared at the Salesian Graphics School popularized D. Bosco’s mission among the young throughout Italy, Europe and on other continents. As for the *Letture Cattoliche*, their publication continued uninterrupted to the end of the 19th Century (earning a mention in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* under the voice “Periodical Literature, Italy”), and into the middle of the 20th Century.

retreat experience. The approach of the seven-days is similar to that of the spiritual exercises that the Jesuits, but with a difference. For the first six days he paraphrases the “eternal maxims” of St Alphonsus de’ Liguori,³⁹ but on the seventh day, he presents a meditation on Paradise which he takes, almost directly, from Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*.⁴⁰

These same reflections figure into a book of Marian devotions that Don Bosco wrote eleven years later for the May 1858 issue of the *Catholic Readings*. Here he presented 31 meditations, one for each day of the “month of May consecrated to Mary Immaculate Most Holy.” The meditations during the first part of the month are the typical fare of the Ignatian spiritual exercises: the soul, sin, death, judgment, God’s mercy, the sacraments, firm amendment and the need to cultivate virtue. On the 28th day, the meditations turn the devotee’s thoughts to the promise of Paradise, and the protection of Mary in life and at the moment of death. It is in this context that Don Bosco weaves in some simple Salesian considerations, similar to those he used in his *Companion of Youth*.⁴¹

Echoes of Francis de Sales are found in Don Bosco’s *Life of Michele Magone*, in a scene where Magone makes an emotional comparison between the chaos in his own young life and the peaceful obedience of the ancient Harvest Moon in the majestic night sky.⁴² Some have seen this as an allusion to images used in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*,⁴³ but Pietro Stella cautions that it is difficult to prove that any direct dependence exists. The contrast between the turbulent soul and the order of God’s creation was common in 17th-century devotional literature, as well as in 19th-century anti-Enlightenment spiritual writings.⁴⁴ Don Bosco the storyteller, or the 13-year-old Michele Magone himself may have been drawing from a common, spiritual patrimony.

The longest explicit citation appears in *The Catholic Instructed in His Religion*, which Don Bosco first published in 1853.⁴⁵ This work launched the periodical *Catholic*

³⁹ A new edition of “The Eternal Maxims” had been published in Turin in 1845 by Giacinto Marietti, for whom D. Bosco sometimes worked as a proofreader, although we have evidence that D. Bosco had studied this particular work as a seminarian. See: “Massime eterne,” in *Opere ascetiche di S. Alfonso Maria de’ Liguori* (Torino: G. Marietti, 1845), vol. 2.

⁴⁰ Cf. S. Giovanni Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de’ suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà, per la recita dell’uffizio della Beata Vergine, e de principali Vespri dell’anno, coll’aggiunta di una scelta di Laudi Sacre, ecc.* (Torino: Paravia, 1847), 48-50, paraphrasing considerations on paradise from the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part I, chapter 16.

⁴¹ Cf. Giovanni Bosco, *Il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata*, per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni; *Lecture cattoliche*, 6.2 (Torino: G.B. Paravia, 1858), 158-162. Pietro Stella documents that D. Bosco’s other source for this little Marian calendar of devotions was Alfonso Muzzarelli, *Il mese di Maria, del padre Alfonso Muzzarelli della Comp. Di Gesù* (Torino: G. Marietti, 1842): cf. Stella, “Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales,” 151.

⁴² Cf. S. Giovanni Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele, allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, per cura del sacerdote Bosco Giovanni; *Lecture cattoliche* 9.7 (Torino: G.B. Paravia, 1861), 64-65.

⁴³ Cf. S. François de Sales, “The Eighth Meditation – On Paradise,” consideration 1, and affections 2-3, in *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part I, chapter 16.

⁴⁴ Cf. Stella, “Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales,” 152.

⁴⁵ Cf. S. Giovanni Bosco, *Il cattolico istruito nella sua religione*, epilogati dal sac. Bosco Giovanni; *Lecture Cattoliche* 1:1-2,5,8-9,12 (Torino: P. De Agostini, 1853). The original Italian edition of *Il cattolico*

Readings. In compiling this manual, Don Bosco pulled themes and arguments from Francis de Sales' *Controversies*. However, the resulting text seems to be a free adaptation rather than a direct quotation either from the original French or from the Italian editions of the *Controversies* then in circulation. *The Catholic Instructed* essentially takes 16th-century religious disputes born during the Reformation and relates them to 19th-century problems of irreligious sentiment and indifference.

The *Catholic Readings* we find two more booklets that hint at attachment to Francis de Sales. In June 1876, *Catholic Readings* presented excerpts from the writings of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque under the very Salesian title of *Live Jesus!*⁴⁶ A decade later, an 1887 issue honoring Leo XIII on his golden jubilee of priestly ordination listed epigrams and honorable tributes from the Fathers of the Church for the Successors of Peter as reported in Francis de Sales' *Controversies*. The compiler's name is not given on the title page, but he was definitely one of Don Bosco's collaborators.

Francis de Sales as a Formative Figure

Don Bosco's Salesian Society

The patron saint is not a celestial giant for Don Bosco. In speaking of St Francis de Sales, he presented "the Holy Patron" as a model of goodness,⁴⁷ chastity,⁴⁸ and zeal for souls⁴⁹ – virtues to which Francis had given outstanding witness throughout his life.⁵⁰

In the early years of his ministry, Don Bosco took advantage of the feast as a formative moment in interacting with those who showed signs of a vocation to ministry or religious consecration.⁵¹ And those who belonged to the Salesian Society belonged to Francis de Sales! He said as much to 45 novices who made their first profession into his hands on 4 October 1885 in San Benigno Canavese. "You are no longer children of this age," he them, "but beloved sons of Jesus, of Mary and of Saint Francis de Sales. Each of you must say this to himself: I am no longer a child of this age! And if we are assailed by temptations, we need to respond: No, I am a son ... and that's why we cannot let a single glance, or thought, or word go against the vows we have made."⁵²

Don Bosco stressed the same point with the leadership among his priests and religious. As the Salesian Society began to expand, he designed the celebration of the Patron's feast as a means of calling together the directors of all his houses. In contemporary terms, it

istruito appeared in 6 installments between March and December 1853. De Agostini published a two-volume French-language version the following year under the title: *Le catholique instruit dans sa religion*.

⁴⁶ Cf. S. Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, *Viva Gesù*; *Lecture cattoliche* 24.6 (Torino: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1876).

⁴⁷ Cf. MB 15:383: the Italian *dolcezza*, the term used to describe Francis de Sales and his spirit, can be translated as sweetness, gentleness or goodness.

⁴⁸ Cf. [S. Giovanni Bosco], *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales, secondo il Decreto d'Approvazione del 3 aprile 1874* (Torino: [Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana], 1875), 13, cap. V, art. 6.

⁴⁹ Cf. MB 5:126.

⁵⁰ Cf. Stella, "Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales," 156.

⁵¹ Cf. MB 5:9; 17:368.

⁵² MB 17:561.

became a privileged time for “ongoing formation” and “continuing education” rather than a manifestation of popular piety. Each year Don Bosco organized the *triduum* in preparation for the feast at a time that was most convenient.⁵³ The directors (i.e., the superiors and leaders) of all the houses returned to the mother house for a three-day event called “The Conferences of Saint Francis de Sales.” The schedule could be grueling, and the accommodations were Spartan, but the joy of coming together made up for all the difficulties.⁵⁴ These conferences, divided into private and public sessions, did much to strengthen the identity of individuals and communities. They were days to share, to evaluate, to study and discuss policy, to deliberate and plan, to pray and celebrate together.⁵⁵

The annual “Conferences” offered the members of the Salesian Society the opportunity to strengthen their sense of belonging, not just to the community but to one another. Many had grown up together or had been classmates at some time during their initial formation. Their enthusiasm for the Salesian mission and their affection for one another energized the younger members of the community as well as the artisans, students and youth from the Oratory with whom they shared the annual event. At the same time, the feast of Francis de Sales was the time to remember deceased members, and to entrust them once again to the mercy of God – an affectionate and grateful conclusion to the celebration of the saint whose name they bore. Don Bosco enshrined this pious practice in the Constitutions of the Salesian Society.

Every year, on the day following the feast of Saint Francis de Sales, all the priests will celebrate one Mass for the deceased members. All the others will approach Holy Communion, and recite a third part of the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary with other prayers.⁵⁶

As for teachable moments, we see Salesian elements in the yearly practice or *strenna* that Don Bosco proposed to the membership. For 1880, while he recommended that directors “practice the patience of Job,” Salesians engaged in ministry were to live “the gentleness of St Francis de Sales in dealing with others.”⁵⁷

It was in 1884 that the founder’s long-cherished invocation – the *Give me souls* attributed to Francis de Sales – became the official motto of his Society. Nor could he imagine it

⁵³ D. Bosco did not always keep the feast of Francis de Sales on 29 January. In 1870, for example, he scheduled the celebration for 6 March, which happened to be the First Sunday of Lent (MB 9:831). In 1876, the feast was moved to Sunday, 30 January, and the Conferences took place after the feast, from 1-4 February (MB 12:52). Due to the death of Pius IX on Thursday, 7 February 1878, the Salesians in Valdocco did not celebrate the feast of their patron that year (MB 14:39).

⁵⁴ Cf. MB 12:52-53.

⁵⁵ Cf. MB 11:21-30; 12:52-84; 13:64-86; 14:40-53.

⁵⁶ *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, 39, cap. XIII, art. 11 [translation mine]. This practice is first specified in the draft of Salesian constitutions prepared in 1873 for submission to the Holy See for official approval. The article (later numbered 163) would remain in the Constitutions of the Salesian Society until 1972. See also: *Costituzioni della Società di San Francesco di Sales (1858-1875)*, critical edition and notes by Francesco Motto (Roma: LAS, 1982), 34, 191.

⁵⁷ MB 14:383. That year Don Bosco celebrated the feast of Francis de Sales in Marseilles. On 29 January he took part in the celebrations with the boys of the Salesian Oratory and *Patronage Saint Leone*. The next day he celebrated Eucharist at the monastery of the Visitandines, after which he visited the sick sisters and young women in their infirmary (cf. MB 14:408, 410-411).

otherwise. “A motto was already adopted since the dawn of the Oratory, back in the days of the *Convitto*, when I used to visit the prisons. *Da mihi animas cetera tolle* is our motto.”⁵⁸

Don Bosco’s Cooperator Salesians

Even as he reinforced the formative element for his collaborators, Don Bosco managed to bring devotion and popular piety into play. This becomes apparent in the spread of the third branch of the Salesian Family, the Association of the Salesian Cooperators.

Certainly, the Association of Salesian Cooperators was a unique creation in the 19th century. A number of lay associations had arisen during the same period, the most famous of which was the St Vincent de Paul Society. This “conference” or “society” was founded in 1833 by Frederick Ozanam while still a student of the University of Paris; it was to become the prototype of many other lay associations. Most groups formed to meet the social or religious needs of the poor, and while a few remained regional, others grew into national and international movements.

Don Bosco, himself a member of the St Vincent de Paul Society,⁵⁹ saw his own Association in a different light. He always spoke of “Salesian co-operation,” and asserted that his own apostolic works had their beginning in the association of laity who first gathered to help him work among Turin’s poor young people. After many attempts to include laity among the members of the Salesian Congregation, Don Bosco finally yielded to the demands of the Holy See, and established the *Union of Salesian Cooperators* in 1875 as a separate juridical entity from the *Pious Society of St Francis de Sales*. The purpose was simple, and obvious. “It is necessary for Christians to unite in the doing of good works,” he wrote in 1876. “At all times it was considered that union among good people was necessary in order to help one another to do good and to keep far away from evil... We Christians ought to be united in these difficult times to promote the spirit of prayer, of charity with all the means that religion furnishes and so remove or at least mitigate those evils which jeopardize the good morals of growing youth in whose hands rests the destiny of civil society.”⁶⁰

Difficult times, evils that jeopardize good morals – the conditions he described when calling for Christian laity to unite on behalf of youth at risk correspond to those he depicted when telling his religious of the origins of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. In the 1870s as in the 1840s, he proposes a Salesian approach. Prayer, pastoral outreach, professional planning and advocacy: these are the means he proposes to Christian laity, under the banner of Francis de Sales, as he challenges them to take action as members of the Union of Salesian Cooperators. “This Association,” he explained, “is considered by

⁵⁸ MB 17:366.

⁵⁹ D. Bosco joined the St Vincent de Paul Society when the association was first introduced into Turin. It was this Society which underwrote some important Salesian works outside Piedmont, including the Oratory of San Vincenzo in Sampierdarena near Genoa (1871), and the expansion of the Patronage Saint Pierre in Nice (1876).

⁶⁰ S. Giovanni Bosco, “The “Rules” Given by Don Bosco to the Cooperators,” in *Regulations of Apostolic Life*, Association of Salesian Cooperators, translated by George Williams, reprint (Roma: Tipografia Don Bosco, 1995), 88, art. 1.

the Holy Father [Pius IX] as a Third Order.” However, he went on, there is one major difference. “In the older Third Orders, Christian Perfection was proposed in the exercise of piety. This [association] has for its principal end an active life in the exercise of charity towards one’s neighbor and especially towards youth who are in moral danger.”⁶¹

In the Regulations that Don Bosco gave to Cooperator Salesians, he outlined days of ongoing formation and devotion around the feast of the holy patron. He made these formative events a matter of governance. “On the feast of St Francis of Sales and on the feast of Mary Help of Christians,” he stipulated, “every Rector and every Promoter will bring together the Cooperators so that they may animate one another to devotion to the heavenly Protectors, invoking their patronage in order to persevere in the works undertaken according to the scope of the Association.”⁶²

Gatherings on the feast of the “Holy Patron” would offer an opportunity to take up a collection on behalf of Salesian works for the poor,⁶³ and would also be an occasion to remember, in prayer, all the deceased members of the association.⁶⁴ As members of the Association, Salesians were encouraged to renew their devotion to Saint Francis de Sales through the simple practices of piety of a good Christian.⁶⁵ In so doing, they were called to take up the cause of poor and exploited young people.⁶⁶

As the Association of Salesian Cooperators grew, Don Bosco called upon local directors to foster the experience of the “Salesian Conferences” among them. The *Bollettino Salesiano* offered practical guidelines for organizing the yearly gatherings⁶⁷ and gave detailed reports on their outcome.⁶⁸ In increasingly difficult and dangerous times, Cooperators looked to inculcate a spirit of gentleness and goodness in the hope of saving young people at-risk and of, ultimately, renewing Society. The spirit of Francis de Sales was their inspiration in combating evil:

The spirit of evil continues to grow and is bent on destroying everything in its path. Let us revive the spirit of goodness among us, the spirit of St Francis de Sales, or rather, the

⁶¹ “The “Rules” Given by Don Bosco to the Cooperators,” 90, art. 3. For a critical study on the socio-political context and founding of the Association of Salesian Cooperators, see: Francis Desramaut, *Don Bosco en son temps, 1815-1888* (Torino: SEI, 1996), 976-998.

⁶² “The “Rules” Given by Don Bosco to the Cooperators,” 92, art. 5.8.

⁶³ Cf. “The “Rules” Given by Don Bosco to the Cooperators,” 93, art. 6.4.

⁶⁴ Cf. “The “Rules” Given by Don Bosco to the Cooperators,” 94, art. 7.4: “The day after the Feast of St. Francis of Sales all Salesian priests will celebrate Holy Mass for deceased members. Those who are not priests will go to Holy Communion and recite five decades of the Rosary.”

⁶⁵ Cf. “The “Rules” Given by Don Bosco to the Cooperators,” 95, art. 8.3: “Each one will recite every day an Our Father, and a Hail Mary in honor of St. Francis of Sales according to the intentions of the Holy Father. Priests and those who say Divine Office or the office of Our Lady are dispensed from these prayers. For them it is sufficient that they have this intention when saying the Office.”

⁶⁶ Cf. “The “Rules” Given by Don Bosco to the Cooperators,” 89, 90, 91.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Bollettino Salesiano* 2.1 (gennaio 1878): 6-7; 5.1 (gennaio 1881): 4-5; 6.1 (gennaio 1882): 7.

⁶⁸ Cf. “La festa del Dottore S. Francesco di Sales e la prima Conferenza dei Cooperatori in Roma,” in *Bollettino Salesiano* 2.3 (marzo 1878): 9-12; “Relazione sulla festa di San Francesco di Sales e sulle Conferenze dei Cooperatori,” in *Bollettino Salesiano* 6.3 (marzo 1882): 42-43.

spirit of O. L. Jesus Christ, and with our words and action, let us strive to save those souls redeemed by Him through the shedding of His blood.⁶⁹

Conclusion

In early the 1800s, Charles Borromeo and Francis de Sales were presented as model pastors to all seminarians. John Bosco, as a seminarian at that time, would certainly have been familiar with both figures. Yet, he chose Francis de Sales as the model of his priesthood and patron of his work. It may not be proper to say that he “identified” with this post-Tridentine saint, but we can speak of “affinity,” “congeniality,” and “devotion.” This does not rule out that he may have been open to a more systematic understanding of Salesian spirituality, but we cannot verify this based on Don Bosco’s own writings or teaching.

Don Bosco was the son of tenant farmers, and spent his life working among poor young people, most of whom were also the children of peasants or the urban poor. His basic attitude remains that of the practical man, not different from the common people of his age. But here there was a change. He looked to the patron saint as a model rather than a protector, and stressed doing “charitable works” more than hoping in miracles. Certainly, developing and living by the “virtues” of the saint were more important to him than meditating on his “literary works.” Maxims and sayings of the saint could be inserted into the “discourse,” but the urgent thing was to “do the work.”

⁶⁹ Cf. “La festa di S. Francesco di Sales,” in *Bollettino Salesiano* 10.1 (gennaio 1886): 7 [translation mine].