##### **Two Giants of the Salesian Charism – In continuity with one another**

Salesian Spirituality is strong and stands the test of time because it is firmly united to two unique historical figures in the providential history of the Church: St. Francis de Sales and St. John Bosco.

I wish you a happy New Year, my friends, readers of the Salesian Bulletin. May 2022 be happy and blessed!

On Tuesday, December 28, we opened the year of St. Francis de Sales. On that date in 2022, we will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the death of this great saint—a genial and unique saint in his time. Now we are in January and will celebrate his liturgical feast on the 24th of this month. It is because of St. Francis de SALES that we Salesians of Don Bosco bear his name.

One day, Don Bosco said to a group of boys who had grown up at his side, “We will call ourselves Salesians.” Thus began this fascinating “adventure in the Spirit” that would give rise to the huge tree that today is the Salesian Family of Don Bosco. This tree sinks its roots deep into this spirituality of St. Francis de Sales and drinks of it daily with the style, practice, and sensitivity of another giant: our own great Don Bosco.

It is for this reason that I speak of two giants of the Salesian charism, with one following the other, because both great gifts in the Church, and because Don Bosco knew how to translate it into the circumstances of his boys’ daily lives like no other. He took the spiritual strength of Francis de Sales and applied it in the education and evangelization of his poor boys. His entire Salesian Family bears the responsibility to keep this gift alive and share it in the Church and in the world today.

So now, I want to declare that, symbolically-speaking, both Francis de Sales and John Bosco have had much in common right from the cradle.

**Two Saintly Mothers**

Francis de Sales was born under the Savoyard sky that crowns valleys crossed by streams which find their origins in the highest peaks of the Alps. His mother, Françoise de Boisy, was very young when she was expecting her first child. One day in Annecy, in front of the Holy Shroud, which spoke to her heart about the passion of God’s Beloved Son, she was moved to make a promise: the child in her womb child would belong to Jesus forever. As for St. John Bosco, how can we not think of him as a Savoyard? He was not born in a castle, it is true, but he had the same gift as Francis: a mother, sweet and filled with faith. One day, Mamma Margaret told her son, John, "When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin." And, in Turin, before this same Shroud, Don Bosco would one day kneel. Christian mothers raise up saints—whether in a castle like Francis or in a ramshackle country house like John.

They say that the first complete sentence that Francis managed to formulate was, "The Good Lord and my mother love me very much."

And the Good Lord did take care of Francis and John. He gave each of them a huge heart. Francis studied in Paris and Padua in the most prestigious universities of the time. John studied by candlelight in the basement of a cafe. But the Spirit does not give up when facing human difficulties. The two were destined to "meet."

**Twelve Grace-filled Months**

St. Francis de Sales is one of the figures in history who, with the passage of time, has grown in relevance and significance due to the fruitful expansion of his insights, experiences, and spiritual convictions. Four hundred years after his entrance into heaven, his proposal of Christian living, his method of spiritual accompaniment, and his humanistic vision of the relationship of the human being with God remain fascinating. Don Bosco, like no other, knew how to interpret it.

Throughout this year, there will be several events which will enable us to draw closer to the figure of St. Francis de Sales, in tandem with the Salesian Spirit through the mysticism Don Bosco experiened at Valdocco. My greeting to you today is a wish for happiness in the new year and an invitation to all the friends of Don Bosco's charism to savor the profoundly human and spiritual freshness that flows, like a great river: the Salesian spirituality that comes from Francis de Sales through Don Bosco. This river carries within itself a great strength that is found in these "Salesian" thoughts that spring from St. Francis’ own heart and that Don Bosco made his own in his life with his young men:

* “God, in his grace, never acts without our consent. He acts with strength, not to force or constrain us but, rather, to draw our heart not to violate our freedom but to fall in love with it.”
* “God,” as Francis de Sales loved to say, “draws us to Himself through His kind initiative, sometimes through a vocation or a call and other times through the voice of a friend, as an inspiration or an invitation. At still other times, He does so through a ‘prevention’ for He always acts first. God does not impose himself: He knocks on the door and waits for us to open it to Him.”
* “God is present and makes Himself present to each person in those moments of one’s life that God alone chooses and in the way that God alone knows.”

Both Francis de Sales and Don Bosco sought to make everyday life an expression of God's love, which is both received and reciprocated. Our saints both wanted to bring our relationship with God to our lives and life to our relationship with God. We are speaking here of being "saints next door" or "the middle class of holiness" of which Pope Francis speaks with so much affection:

            I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God’s people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence. We might call them ‘the middle class of holiness.’

* “God does not love us because we are good, but because He is good.”

Doing God's will does not come from feelings of “unworthiness,” but from hope in God's mercy and goodness. This is Salesian optimism. Francis responds to God's love with love:

* “I will love you always, O Lord, at least in this life! At least in this life will I love you, if it is not given me to love you in eternity!... and I will always wait on Your Mercy.”

Francis de Sales’ crisis reveals the profound depths of his being: a heart in love with God. The conviction that God's love is not based on feeling good, but on doing the will of God the Father, is the axis of Francis de Sales' spirituality and should be the guide for Don Bosco’s entire Family.

* “Move from the consolations of God to the God of consolations, from enthusiasm towards true love.”
* “Do everything out of love, nothing out of fear, because it is God's mercy and not our own merits that moves us to love.”

If St. Augustine said that “our heart is restless until it rests in you”, following the thought of Francis de Sales, we could say with von Balthasar, that “our heart [O, God] feels restless until we rest in You, until time and eternity merge, submerged in one other. As Don Bosco wanted: “May love for Christ lead us to love young people! This is an attitude characteristic of our Salesian life and a permanent challenge to Don Bosco's Family today and always.

* “Charity is the measure of our prayer, because our love for God is manifested in love for our neighbor.”
* “In this consists the ‘prayer of life’: in carrying out all one’s activities in love and for the love of God, in such a way that all of life becomes a continuous prayer.”
* “It is good for us to find moments to retreat into our own heart, away from the hustle and bustle and activism, and to speak hear- to-heart with God.”
* “In Her (Mary) we see what God is willing to do with one’s love when He finds hearts available like Mary's. In emptying herself, she receives the fullness of God. By remaining available to God, He is able to accomplish great things in Her.”

Don Angel

[1]St. Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, I, 1.