### **BS 2022-02: The great gift is St. Francis de Sales**

"May the charity and sweetness of Francis de Sales guide me in everything." This was the resolution that Don Bosco made at the beginning of his life as a priest and educator. It is from this reference to St. Francis de Sales that Salesian pedagogy takes its name.

A teacher wrote, “Every day, I make my rounds to the classrooms. Whenever I would enter a room before COVID-19, the children would get up and huddle around me. That doesn't happen anymore. The fourth and fifth grade children want to run to me but hold back. The first graders, on the other hand, don’t even budge; they sit still, distant, and don’t react at all. This deeply worries me about their future ability to express affection.” Another adds, "We are facing a definite increase in aggression among the middle schoolers.” Parents tell their children to "stay away from the others.”

What weight of loneliness, depression, and insecurity will today's children carry with them and for how long? What is the best pedagogical intervention?

"Whoever feels loved will love," said Don Bosco. But kindness and goodness have never been spontaneous virtues.

For Don Bosco, sweetness was not a natural gift either. He claimed to have awakened from the "dream" he had when he was nine years old with his fists aching from the blows he had given to the young blasphemers.

As a teenager, he vigorously defended his friend Luigi Comollo. He himself said, “The next one who says something evil will have to deal with me. The tallest and most insolent ones made a wall in front of me, while two slaps landed on Luigi's face. Blinded at seeing this, I let myself be carried away by anger. Since I didn’t have a stick or a chair in my hand, I grabbed one of those young men by the shoulders and, using him as a club, I began to beat the others. Four fell to the ground, the others turned on their heels and ran away screaming.”

Later, the good Luigi scolded him for that vehement display of strength. “Enough,” he implored. “Your strength scares me. God did not give it to you to massacre your companions. Forgive and return good for evil, please.” That advice echoed what the Man in the dream had said, "Not with blows, but with sweetness and love you have to gain their friendship."

John thus learned not only how to forgive, but also how important it is to gain control over oneself. He will never forget it. He would always carry the spirit of the meek everywhere, and no one would know how much it always cost him. For this reason, according to the words of Jesus, "He will inherit the earth."

«I recommend to you above all the spirit of sweetness for that warms the heart and conquers souls.»

St. Francis de Sales

The panegyrics of St. Francis de Sales, which were usually held in the seminary, made Don Bosco reflect. According to his Spiritual Testament, Don Bosco’s fourth resolution at the time of his priestly ordination was "May the charity and sweetness of St. Francis de Sales guide me in everything."

When it came time for him to choose a name for the nascent Oratory, Don Bosco had no doubts: "It will be called ‘The Oratory of St. Francis de Sales.’" Sometime later, he would say to those first young men who would share his life "We will call ourselves Salesians." Why? "For the part of our ministry that demanded great calm and meekness, we placed ourselves under the protection of this Saint, so that he would obtain for us the grace from God to be able to imitate him in his extraordinary meekness and in winning over many souls."

Sweetness—this virtue "rarer than perfect chastity"—is "the flower of charity." “It is charity put into practice,” St. Francis de Sales taught. "I recommend above all the spirit of sweetness, which is what warms the heart and conquers souls," he wrote to a young abbess.

At the end of a war which, for four long years, had, at the very least, ignored and despised the virtue of sweetness in relations between peoples, the Rector Major Don Paolo Albera dedicated an entire circular letter to sweetness. "The virtue of sweetness requires you to gain control over the liveliness of your character, to repress any act of impatience, and to forbid your tongue to utter even a single word that is offensive to the person with whom you are dealing,” wrote Don Albera. “It demands the rejection of all forms of violence in behavior, proposals, and actions." For Don Albera, it seemed impossible to forget, in the framework of the sweetness left to us, "a nod to that serene gaze, full of goodness, which is the true and clear mirror of a sincerely sweet soul which desires only to make anyone who approaches it happy."

Sweetness is not synonymous with “sugar-coated” and “sappy sweet,” which are but deceitful caricatures of it. Sweetness is not weakness at all—uncontrolled violence is weakness. Kindness is peaceful, patient, and humble strength. Don Bosco united sweetness and firmness in his authority.

This spirit of goodness, sweetness, and meekness was deeply engrained in the first Salesians and belongs to our earliest traditions. This just shows that we cannot neglect it—let alone lose it—at the risk of significantly damaging our charismatic identity.

For many of our young people, what they remember most often about meeting the Salesian Family in the world is the familiarity, welcome, and affection they felt: in short, the Salesian Family Spirit. In the early days, there was talk of a "fourth Salesian vow," which included goodness (first of all), work, and the Preventive System.

We cannot imagine a Salesian presence in the world, of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, of the Salesians of Don Bosco, or of the current thirty-two groups that make up the Salesian Family of Don Bosco, which does not have this characteristic of kindness as its distinctive element or, at least, should have it, as Pope Francis sought to remind us through his enlightening expression the “Valdocco option.”

This is our option for the Salesian style of kindness, affection, familiarity, and presence. We have a treasure, a gift received from Don Bosco, which it is now up to us to revive.