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THE “SALESIANITY” THAT WINS ALL HEARTS

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On September 8, 1877, Don Bosco convoked the first General Chapter of the Salesian Society at Lanzo. Towards evening, following the opening hymn, he gave a brief introductory talk to the twenty-three ex-officio chapter members. Also present at this gathering were consultants and observers such as Count Charles Cays and Don Secondo Franco, S.J. ¹

Among other things, Don Bosco said, “We are about to begin our first General Chapter... It will have extreme importance for our congregation... May Saint Francis of Sales, our patron, himself preside over our meetings... May he obtain for us from God the help we need to take decisions that are faithful to his spirit.” ²

From a distance of 115 years, the reader may be surprised to learn that at the first canonical assembly of Salesians, Don Bosco was equating fidelity to our Society with the broad road of “Salesianity” mapped out in such a human and holy way by Saint Francis of Sales himself. In his mind’s eye the Founder envisioned the presence of the Patron (proclaimed only two months before a Doctor of the Church) as the ghostly gray eminence who was presiding in the Society’s chair of honor.

However, the Salesians who had convened for the chapter meetings were not in the least surprised at Don Bosco’s homely invocation on that occasion. For more than twenty years, first as boys and then as men, they had absorbed

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¹ *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, Eugenio Ceria, ed., New Rochelle, New York. English version. (Hereafter cited as *EBM*). Vol. XIII, 183.

² *Ibid.* 183.

from their beloved mentor a gentle Salesian humanism. It was he who had trained them to become “good Christians and responsible citizens”.³ They had carried this message these many years in their priestly ministry in the world of work. But on the occasion of that first General Chapter in 1877, bound to Don Bosco by bonds of friendship as well as by vows, they now shared a common “Salesianity”, or the banner of their identity -- *bandiera* as Pietro Stella so aptly put it.⁴ It was the Founder who had singled out this heartwinning “Salesianity” that would identify his men in particular and the Salesian family in general: “I regard as belonging to the Salesian family any young person educated along the traditions of this great saint. By this standard you are all Salesians.”⁵

The following presentation, after a brief explanation of the concept of “Salesianity”, will attempt to trace the early signs of the Salesian Way as seen in Don Bosco’s life and work. In general, the period covered will extend from 1835 to 1865, with what I call “Salesianity”—a term that during this period will become established in both meaning and practice. But our main focus, and the least surveyed and charted, will cover the ten-year span between 1835-1845. This decade covers our Founder’s years of study both at the Chieri seminary and at the *Convitto*. It terminates with Don Bosco’s early efforts at the *Rifugio*, the Women’s Shelter of the Marchesa Barolo. We will touch briefly the emerging “Salesian” signs at work in Don Bosco’s early career at the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales and his first endeavors in founding the Salesian Society. Our essay will conclude with a final resume and assessment of our subject as we underscore the significance of the meaning of “Salesianity” in Don Bosco’s early life and mission.

I. Salesianity—an Overview

From the start we must come to grips with the definition of “Salesianity” as used throughout this study—a term quite distinct from the way it is currently used in Salesian literature today. There is, therefore, a crucial need to identify its points of intersection, or better, its broad areas of confluence with Don Bosco’s life and work. So throughout this article the concept of Salesianity, now shorn of its quotation marks, will refer specifically to the pastoral practice

³ John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory*. Translated by Daniel Lyons, SDB with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, SDB; Lawrence Castelveccchi, SDB; Michael Mendl, SDB. (New Rochelle, 1989). 190. (Hereafter cited as *Memoirs*).

⁴ Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica* (Rome, 1981), 502.

⁵ E. Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco*, Vol. XVII, 176 (Torino, 1936).

and spiritual teaching of Saint Francis of Sales. As pastor, director of souls, and founder of a religious congregation, Francis at first put his thoughts and teachings into correspondence when communicating with his many soul-friends. In time his prolific letter writing expanded more explicitly into books which have become classics of spirituality. This sequence—from letters to tracts—is of prime importance and cannot be stressed enough. In Francis’ eyes, personal communication and pastoral practice in daily life had to precede any sort of theoretical instruction. The Christian had first of all to learn by doing, and then by reading. Such pastoral “love-in-action”, Francis was fond of saying, had to be gentle and pleasant, yet totally dedicated.

For this reason the terms ‘Salesianity’ and ‘Salesian Way’ are used in preference to the oft-repeated expression ‘Salesian spirituality’. The two are distinctly disparate. The former have their roots in the spirit of Francis of Sales; the latter is an extension of their spirit as lived by our Founder.

At the risk of oversimplifying our thesis statement, a sampler of Salesianity themes, extrapolated from Francis of Sales’ *Treatise and Introduction to a Devout Life*, is given below. Our purpose is to show what for many years we have accepted as “Salesian maxims”, that is, religious and educational principles perceived as emanating from our own Salesian history when in reality they are found as basic themes in Francis’ own writings and define his Salesianity. In the course of time these Salesian maxims became assimilated in Don Bosco’s thought and work, and gradually became identified as his own religious and educational principles. Some of Francis’ more Salesian axioms follow:

The human heart is drawn to God by its own natural inclinations.

(Francis, much like Augustine’s compelling conviction that God has made us for himself, believed that “our hearts are restless until they rest in him.”)

True charity is always based on mutual friendship and finding in communication (dialogue) its strongest and most basic foundation.

(For Francis, a real loving relationship was never a tacit understanding between two persons. It had to be expressed in a caring, heart-level exchange.)

Nothing conquers a heart like love. When someone knows he is loved, my dear Theotimus, no matter by whom, he cannot help but love in return.

(This was the basis of Don Bosco’s magnetic appeal. Moreover, he often reiterated this principle to his educators, insisting

that they should not only love the children entrusted to their care, but repeatedly tell them they were loved.)

We are drawn to God, not by iron chains like bulls and buffaloes, but by the cords of the human heart. God's grace and love act strongly and sweetly, leaving us free to cooperate as we please. I beg of you, Theotimus, to observe how gently God proceeds.

(Francis' Salesianity was vitiated by one overriding enemy: violence and compulsion. For him, even the hint of coercion was repulsive. Love conquered all; constraint was self-defeating. By the same token, Don Bosco's *sistema preventivo* is anchored firmly on loving care free of all physical coercion.)

True devotion, Philotea, not only makes us more faithful to our state of life and to our everyday duties, but also makes them more pleasant and agreeable.

(For Francis, love of God was both practical as well as 'heartfelt'. Reduced to its lowest common denominator loving God consisted simply in doing one's daily duty faithfully and cheerfully.)

Don't be satisfied with just talking to poor people, Philothea. Make yourself their servant by looking after the sick, waiting on them with your own provisions, washing and mending their clothes.

(This was charity in action, practiced all his life by the kindly but down-to-earth bishop of Geneva. Don Bosco took this advice literally, feeding, clothing, and lodging the children of the poor. True Christian zeal for both Francis and John never tired of doing good to others.)

We may not always be able to exhibit good spirits in our daily life, but that is no excuse for not trying to be consistently pleasant, agreeable, and considerate at all times. Works of charity are meaningless if not performed in a courteous and friendly way.

(This was the hallmark of Francis' "Salesian style." Be amiable and mild-mannered with everyone at all times—something he himself practiced with unflinching good humor.)

Insignificant activities and even trivial acts, when done with love and with a pure intention will sanctify us if done for the love of God...The practice of recollection and frequent ejaculatory prayer will likewise make us holy. This is a good way of making up for our shortcomings in prayer.

(On the surface the mysticism of Francis of Sales seems to be very simplistic—lacking deep encounters of the soul with God. But his “live Jesus” exhortation in our daily life reached unexpected depths not only in his own pastoral activity but in the souls of those whom he counseled.)⁶

The above citations are intended to illustrate the principles that motivated Saint Francis of Sales as he pursued his ministry along his own “Salesian way”. They are also fundamental in helping us understand our Founder’s own motivation in modeling his life and work after the teachings of the bishop of Geneva. More than two centuries later Don Bosco would translate the example and teaching of Francis into his own Salesian ideology. This then is the story of how he assimilated the Salesianity of Francis in creating his own Salesians.

II. Early Signs of Salesianity in John’s Life

Seminary Days at Chieri

What emerges as a promising first reference to John’s early Salesianity, spoken by Bishop Cajetan Alimonda to his seminarians, turns out in the context to be something of a damp squib. In addressing his students on the feast of Saint Francis of Sales, the bishop asked rhetorically: “What can I say about John Bosco regarding the bishop of Geneva? You first came to know Francis when you were a young boy; it was then that you first drank in his gentle wisdom, his charming holiness...”⁷ Alimonda gave no further details to substantiate his claim, so tantalizing, so we are left to fall back on the oral tradition that John’s father, Francis Bosco, was named after the gentle bishop of Geneva. In the family genealogy, we do in fact find a recurrence of ‘Francis’ as a Bosco given name, for the roots of the Bosco family can be traced to the holy Bishop’s own sub-alpine territory. Additional weight is given to this hypothesis by the fact that John Bosco’s family was not originally from Castelnuovo, but from nearby Chieri, a traditional focus of devotion to Saint Francis of Sales.⁸

⁶ These citations can be found in Francis de Sales, *Oeuvres* (Opera Omnia). Annecy, 1892-1963. Hereafter cited as *OEUV*.

⁷ E. Ceria, *EBM*, Vol. XIV, 34. (Cardinal Alimonda spoke these words in the year 1879).

⁸ Michele Molineris, *Don Bosco Inedito* (Castelnuovo Don Bosco, 1974).

As a “*Savoiaro connazionale*”, early links of John’s family with the people who populated the northern slopes of the French Alps should be expected. Lemoyne adds support to this claim: “The name of Francis of Sales was becoming a household name.”⁹ Teresio Bosco backs up this position; “Francis of Sales was for Piedmont what Charles Borromeo was for Lombardy—‘*Il santo di casa*’.”¹⁰ In turn Father Arnaldo Pedrini sees Turin (rather grandly) as the “epicenter of Salesianity in Piedmont”. However, historian Pietro Stella is not impressed by these rather grandiose claims. After all, he asks, why is there such a scarcity of images or statues of Francis in Piedmont’s rural churches? Furthermore, he avers, the country folk were much more devoted to the plebeian wonder-working saints like Rocco and Anthony than to an unspectacular patrician bishop like Francis, whose appeal seemed limited to urban, intellectual, and clerical classes. However, this issue is debatable.¹¹

We now come to the first explicit “Salesian” reference in John’s life. It is an allusion that we find rather late in his life. It consists of testimony from Father John Giacomelli, a “treasured friend”, when the two were seminarians together in Chieri. Giacomelli recalls: “John was called Bosco of Castelnuovo to distinguish him from another student of the same name. In this regard I can recall an incident that I have never forgotten. This ‘other Bosco’ once remarked, ‘I want to be known as *Bosco di nespole* [a hard edible fruit from the loquat tree], so from now on just call me ‘*nespolo*’. “And I”, John chimed in, “want to be known as *Bosco di sales* [from the pliant and flexible willow], so you can call me ‘*sales*’”. Hardly a major patronal reference, but interesting nonetheless. Moreover, further testimony from Giacomelli, by no means flattering, is quite impressive, considering that he later became Don Bosco’s confessor. The gentle sweetness of Francis did not come natural to John: “No other seminarian, to my knowledge, was so prone to flare up in anger as John was.”¹²

The first so-called “explicit reference” that identifies John with Francis’ Salesianity has often been linked to his first dream at the age of nine. But such an inference does strain the imagination. A more plausible “implicit theory” to this claim is pointed to in the gentle yet strong way of winning hearts in this first dream. The mysterious Lady’s urging the young lad to win over the rebellious youths “not by blows, but by gentle loving kindness” is resonant of Francis’ kindly ways. Further, the advice to “become humble, tough-minded and strong” is reasonably close to Francis of Sales’ classic “strongly and sweetly”

⁹ J. B. Lemoyne, *EBM*. Vol.II, 196.

¹⁰ Teresio Bosco, *Storia di un prete* (Torino, 1987), 111.

¹¹ Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco e San Francesco di Sales: Incontro fortuito o identità spirituale?* (Roma, 1986), 141.

¹² J. B. Lemoyne, *EBM*. Vol. I, 302.

counsel in his *Treatise On the Love of God, a Pastoral Way* which is so compelling. Whether the testimony in John's boyhood dream is implicit or not, its message is Salesian, for it contains the living and perennial teaching of the gentle Francis of Sales.¹³

After this probing and halting start, we are confronted with a puzzling dilemma. In the absence of early specific and weighty references to Francis' Salesianity at work in John's early years, how does one explain an unexpected but very Salesian guideline to his future conduct that the young priest-to-be drew up in 1841? I refer to the fourth of the nine resolutions that John Bosco penned on the eve of his ordination. In significance and import this resolution seems to dwarf all the others. It read: "I will make the gentle, loving kindness of Saint Francis of Sales my guide in all my undertakings."¹⁴ This resolve conveys more than just a sudden rush of blood to the head, or some surge of neosacerdotal pietism. It clearly represents a decisive point of arrival and of departure, a serious lifelong commitment, as subsequent events would demonstrate. And yet in the absence of any logical clue which led John to this vital option to make Salesianity one of his guiding principles, such a momentous resolution comes totally unexpected, bordering on a *deus ex machina* intervention.

Even when we turn to the usually reliable Pietro Stella for some plausible explanation, we are disappointed. He too seems to balk at any detailed clarification: "In the Chieri seminary John's cheerful and affectionate qualities came to be channeled within the banks of Salesian gentleness."¹⁵ A facile statement that obviously evades the question. One wants to know precisely how and when and why did such "channeling" occur.

Perhaps an acceptable solution to this dilemma can be found, first, in the favorable "Salesian" climate that prevailed in the delightful city of Chieri (but by no means in its seminary). Another possible solution is suggested in the "Salesian" spiritual direction that John, while still in Chieri, would receive from Father Joseph Cafasso. This vital formative counseling occurred during John's final year of theological studies when the now mature seminarian was undergoing a depression crisis, triggered it seems by fears of predestination.¹⁶

It might be worth our while to examine some existing sources, thin though they may be, yet reinforced by internal evidence, which may shed some light on this obscure yet crucial period of John's emerging Salesianity.

¹³ One of Francis' principles that "Nothing is so strong as true gentleness, and nothing so gentle as true strength", seems to be inculcated early in John's youth. See the advice given him by the "dignified man" in his first dream. *Memoirs*, 18.

¹⁴ J. B. Lemoyne, *EBM*. Vol. I, 385.

¹⁵ Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work* (New Rochelle, 1985), 67.

¹⁶ Arnold Pedrini, *S. Francesco di Sales e Don Bosco* (Roma, 1983), 31-33.

Among the numerous Piedmontese cities and towns visited by Francis of Sales during his pastoral and diplomatic duties were Turin, Chieri, Saluzzo, and Pinerolo, all places well known to John Bosco in his day. While numerous churches and convents still cherish relics and mementos of his visits, it was in Chieri, at the church of Saint Philip Neri, attached to the seminary John attended, that a strong center of Salesianity emerged and thrived. Every month members of a Confraternity of Saint Francis of Sales met there. The records of this group's meetings are still extant and date back to 1723. Arnold Pedrini in his estimable work, *San Francesco di Sales e Don Bosco*, lists the reading material that was at John's disposal in his seminary: the statutes of the Confraternity; biographies of the Saint; a collection of themes and tracts culled from his writings. Moreover, it was a common practice of the Confraternity to distribute a page of the saintly Bishop's sayings and religious axioms whenever its members met.

Chieri's impressive baroque church dedicated to Saint Philip Neri was familiar ground to John, for it was connected to the seminary by means of a long and narrow corridor. As the seminarians passed through it, the first object that caught one's eye was an exquisite painting of Saint Francis of Sales by Claudine Beaumont (1694-1760). It portrays Francis kneeling before the Virgin Mary and was long venerated by the members of the Confraternity. Further, in the seminary chapel, the presence of Francis of Sales was revealed in a modest painting which hung next to the statue of the Sacred Heart.¹⁷

However important icons and devotional manuals may be, perhaps the real clue to John's early Salesianity at Chieri, and later at the *Convitto*, may be found in real-life experiences and interpersonal relationships. It is in these circumstances that true Salesianity in John's early years struck its roots. That John yearned for such personal encounters is clear from his own *Memoirs of the Oratory*: "My heart was not satisfied. How often I would have liked to have spoken with my superiors, to ask their advice, to resolve my problems, but I never had an occasion to do so."¹⁸

Yet, even from this depressing and futile institutional climate, in which the seminary staff kept a cautious distance from their students, John managed to derive a lasting benefit. He converted this negative episode into a positive resolve, as can be seen in an entry in his *Memoirs*: "This experience served to

¹⁷ Aldo Giraud and Giuseppe Biancardi, *Qui è vissuto Don Bosco* (Torino, 1988), 91.

¹⁸ John Bosco, *Memoirs, op. cit.*, 131.

inflare my heart to become a priest as quickly as possible, so I could reach out to young people, help them, and meet their every need." 19

An allusion was made above to a crushing bout of depression which John suffered in his last year at the seminary. It was, for the young seminarian, a searing negative experience that burned deeply into his whole personality. It can be traced to a series of causes, each of which is the very negation of some vital principle of Salesianity: the ironclad, inflexible seminary regimen that left little room for spontaneity; a tense and totally other-worldly asceticism that was the very antithesis of a devout and genial humanism; a cold formality that distanced teacher from student and which precluded any kind of cordial interaction. Underlying this rigid seminary climate was a rigorist moral theology, Jansenist-tainted, that left little room for a demonstration of benign compassion. The underpinning of all the above factors was a heartless dogmatic theology which stressed the overpowering grace of predestination and left little room for the full and free cooperation of the human will. It was enough to break any young man's spirit. 20

It was the theological *bête noire* of predestination that deeply depressed John's sensitive nature. It would, in fact, be the straw that almost broke the camel's back. Father John Francesia, our gentle Salesian poet laureate, is the sole source of this revelation. He writes: "When studying the theological tract on predestination, John began to experience a real fear for his own personal salvation. Nothing could calm him. In fact, a prolonged dejection eventually brought on a breakdown of his health. It was his confessor who came to his rescue: 'Bosco, doesn't the Gospel say: "If you want to enter eternal life..." Do you understand that question? If you *will* to enter! God's grace will not fail you, as long as you cooperate with it.' These words restored John's peace of mind, and he continued his studies without further perturbing thoughts. Don Bosco himself told me about this fear that had so long agitated him as a youth."

Those familiar with the life of Francis of Sales will recall here a striking parallel. Francis himself endured a similar spiritual crisis, one brought on by fears of predestination when he was a student at the University of Paris.²¹ Those fears were dispelled after he recited an anguished *Memorare* before the statue of the Black Madonna which was venerated in Saint Stephen's church in Paris. By a remarkable coincidence, Don Bosco himself would pray before this

19 Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, *op. cit.*, 45-69. (cf Note 16 above)

20 Pietro Stella, *op. cit.*, 51-52. (cf note 19 above)

21 André Ravier, *Francis de Sales, Sage and Saint* (San Francisco, 1988), 31-34. The exegesis of the "Song of Songs" by Gilbert Genebrard, which "showed Christian life as a love-story" also lifted Francis' spirit at this time.

very statue in 1883, though it was no longer in its original location. It had been moved to the church of Saint Thomas of Villanova in Paris after a disastrous fire.

Just how and when John finally regained his equilibrium before ordination, after the extreme and highly-strung asceticism of the Comollo period, can be inferred from his own testimony: "When I think now of the virtues required for that most important step (the order of the subdiaconate), I am convinced that I had not been sufficiently prepared for it. But since I at the time had no one to direct me in my vocation, I turned to Father Cafasso. He advised me to go on and to trust in his spiritual direction."²²

A final lifeline that John grasped for during his crisis period was the pre-ordination retreat made in the Vincentian Institute in Turin. This religious house was originally a Visitation Convent founded personally by Saint Jane de Chantal in 1638... "In memory of Francis of Sales' love for the Duke of Savoy." John would later make three retreats in that peaceful haven, and though the "Salesian connection" may seem to some a bit farfetched, there hung in the adjacent chapel a painting showing Francis of Sales handing the Constitutions of her new order to Jane de Chantal. Further, in this former Visitation convent small sketches adorned the chapel columns, depicting scenes from Francis' life and ministry. It was in this Salesian-steeped ambiance, then, that John prepared in prayer and reflection for his three major orders.²³

Most admiring spiritual writers have focused on Father Cafasso's option for his benign interpretation of Alphonsus Liguori's *moral theology*; only a relative few have written on his option for the benign *pastoral theology* of Francis of Sales. It is in the latter that one uncovers major implications in Cafasso's direction of young John Bosco at this critical period of his preparation for the priesthood. Even a brief sampling from spiritual writers who have traced the spirit of Francis in the developing spirituality of Cafasso can be most revealing.

For example, during Cafasso's beatification process, one biographer of Don Bosco's saintly mentor underlined the strong Salesian dimension found in Cafasso's busy life: "The amiable spirit of Francis of Sales had taken possession of Don Cafasso... He realized that for the spiritually-wounded what was needed was the wine and oil of the Good Samaritan, a pastoral remedy that had won over all comers in the case of Francis of Sales... Neither weariness nor lack of response could make Cafasso less gentle, less calm with people, or turn him aside from the benign spirit of Francis of Sales."

²² John Bosco, *Memoirs, op. cit.*, 165.

²³ Aldo Giraudo and Giuseppe Biancardi, *op. cit.*, 123-126.

Once, at the conclusion of a retreat sermon to a group of seminarians, Cafasso urged his young listeners to "...say with the holy bishop of Geneva, 'Give me souls, Lord, give me souls to save; let me face sin to combat and destroy; let me gather souls for heaven and confirm my priestly vocation by good works.'" ²⁴

To say that some of Father Cafasso's Salesianity must have rubbed off on John during his days at the Chieri seminary, even before his *Convitto* experience, is an understatement. What Cafasso's mature friendship did for John in his final year at the seminary was to open his eyes to the value of the negative experience the young seminarian had just passed through. Perhaps it was the closest that John approached to that mystical desolation of the spirit, immortalized by John of the Cross in his classic, *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

In light of all this, John's fourth ordination resolution: "The gentle kindness of Francis of Sales will be my guide in all my undertakings", should now seem less enigmatic or illogical than it did earlier. On leaving the Chieri seminary John departed with ambivalent feelings. While he took pains not to cast any derogatory comments upon the staff, neither did he attempt to conceal the dark side of seminary life as he had experienced it. Perhaps it was this ambivalence that greeted him when going through the seminary entrance for the first time; his eye had caught the inscription on the sundial which faced the threshold: *Afflictis lentae, celeres gaudentibus horae*, (On leaden feet drags time for the sad/ On swiftest wings flies time for the glad). ²⁵

Before leaving seminary life behind him, John took a moment of time to inscribe two citations in his breviary. They were taken from his beloved Dante.

*I will rise from this dark, most holy shade, cleansed and eager to leap
the stars. (Purgatorio)*

and

It is love that moves the sun and all the constellations. (Paradiso) ²⁶

²⁴ Carlo Salotti, *La perla del clero* (Turin, 1925), 37. Guido Accornero, *La dottrina spirituale di S. G. Cafasso* (Turin, 1986), 233. *La vita del Ven. G. Cafasso* (Turin, 1920), 233 (Document used in the process for beatification). *Giuseppe Cafasso, The Priest and Man of God* (New York, 1968), 267-268.

²⁵ John Bosco, *Memoirs, op. cit.*, 127.

²⁶ The source for these citations can be found in *Giovanni Bosco, Scritti spirituali*, ed. Joseph Aubry, SDB (Rome, 1976), 12-13.

In some eyes these words are found symbolic of the cold institutionalism of the past and the friendly Salesianity of the future—a journey from purgatory to paradise.

The Convitto

The bonds that tied Francis of Sales to Turin were particularly evident in the numerous associations and confraternities established in his honor. Typical of the latter, for example, was the so-called “Confraternity of a Hundred Priests in Honor of Francis of Sales”, an association of priests that dated back to the 1720s. Such bodies originally were identified as counterreformation groups and had a conservative ring about them. Under Pio Bruno Lanteri’s guiding hand some such associations had acquired a benevolent dimension and were referred to as the “Priestly Formation Movement”. The *Convitto* of Turin, where Liguori’s benign pastoral theology was taught, was such a center. So too was it a center of Francis of Sales’ pastoral theology. Such teaching was in sharp contrast with the rigorist moral instruction and inflexible pastoral practice of the Jansenists which flourished in the University of Turin and in the major seminary of the archdiocese.²⁷ Just how successful the *Convitto* influence was upon its student priests can be measured by the fury of Vincenzo Gioberti’s attack against it: “It is difficult to assess the harm that this group of upstart priests of the *Convitto* has done to religion not only in Turin, but throughout all Piedmont. I have heard that statement reiterated many times by old and experienced pastors.”²⁸ By an ironic twist Francis himself had complained two centuries earlier that it was in this same Piedmont that his “little book” (*Introduction to a Devout Life*) had been torn to shreds in some pulpits for its alleged frivolity. This work of Francis of Sales had been roundly condemned because it encouraged such innocent pastimes as games, singing, dancing, and company keeping. With that courteous but telling irony of his, Francis had replied to his accusers: “Strange, but in those parts of Piedmont that I have visited, people *do* play games, *do* sing and dance, and *do* make love.”²⁹

At the *Convitto* all emphasis was placed on Salesian realism in the form of pastoral, practical, and personal priestly formation. Just how deeply Don

²⁷ Jose Costeto, *Life of Luigi Anglesio* (Turin, 1967), 37. The founder of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary (O.M.V.), Father Pio Bruno Lanteri, championed St. Alphonsus’ benign moral theology against the Jansenists. Throughout his life he was a stout defender of the exiled Pope Pius VII, and through Lanteri’s influence, his protege, Don Luigi Guala, founded the *Convitto* in Turin.

²⁸ Pietro Stella, *op. cit.*, 79 (footnote).

²⁹ *OEUV*, XIX, 319.

Bosco appreciated the contrast between the *Convitto's* environment and the theoretical moral casuistry that permeated the Chieri seminary can be judged by the ultimate tribute that the new priest paid to the *Convitto* staff: "It was there that we learned to become priests."

Included among his pastoral rounds of the city that Don Bosco regularly made with Don Cafasso, was the obligatory visits to Turin's four jails. Just how effective the latter was with "the wine and oil of the Good Samaritan" in winning back hardened criminals to God was an immediate object lesson for young Don Bosco. He watched as his mentor, often called that *petrocolo* ("little runt of a priest"), initially treated with disdain and contempt, gradually win over some of the most notorious inmates. They quickly succumbed to persistent zeal and gentle concern. Pietro Mottino, an ex-Bersagliere-turned-bandit, for example was the most infamous. He had become the local folk-hero, the Piedmontese version of Jesse James. But his bravado melted in the presence of the saintly Cafasso. In a short time young John Bosco learned his lesson well. Like Cafasso he began to visit young reformatory inmates armed not only with Christian zeal but with pockets "stuffed with tobacco, fruit, and rolls."³⁰

During the *Convitto* years, as the wandering Oratory became more consolidated and organized, it seemed time to choose a patron for it. Don Bosco turned to his two trusted advisors, Fathers Cafasso and Borel for their enlightenment. After a brief discussion, Cafasso proposed Saint Francis of Sales as the Oratory patron. Father Borel warmly seconded the choice.³¹

The encounter between young Father Bosco and Bartholomew Garelli on December 8, 1841 has generally been viewed as a chance meeting during which Don Bosco's work for the young took hold. But that chance meeting had a far deeper significance, too easily overlooked. To appreciate its full significance in Salesian literature one needs to go back to 1643, when the Jesuit abbe, Father Fichet, first used the classic Salesian expression, "the God of encounters".³² This was the phrase used to describe the first meeting and ensuing dialogue between Francis of Sales and Jane De Chantal. Thereafter, throughout Salesian literature, the encounter experience would recur like an underlying motif. Such encounters would henceforth be characterized in Salesian literature by deep dialogue and described at length and in great detail, as if the writer each time was aware of the vital significance of a providential meeting.

³⁰ John Bosco, *Memoirs, op. cit.*, 180, 198.

³¹ J. B. Lemoyne, *EBM*, Vol. II, 252.

³² André Ravier, *op. cit.*, 135. By design or coincidence, the new constitutions of the Salesian Society have a splendid article on the theme of "the God of Encounters": "Immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, the Salesian learns to meet God through those to whom he is sent." (Article 95).

Don Bosco's first encounters with Don Calosso, Don Cafasso, Bartholomew Garelli, Michael Rua, Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, John Cagliero, John Baptist Lemoyne and Maria Mazzarello come strongly to mind. On each occasion what seemed to be chance meetings resulted in forming a heart-winning friendship that drew both parties together through the "God of Encounters" with lifelong benefit. It was generally the warmth of Don Bosco's genial kindness that broke the ice: "A warm welcome is what, above all, attracts young people... One must, from the very start, find a way to win their hearts."³³

On this point, even before his exposure to any overt influence of Francis of Sales, young John was already "Salesian" at heart. For example, while still a child at Castelnuovo he yearned for these encounters: "Often I'd meet our parish priest on the road and greet him from a distance. My greeting was always returned in a courteous if distant manner as the priest continued on his way. Often I'd cry and say to myself, and sometimes even to others, 'If I were a priest, I'd act differently. I'd get near to every child I met and exchange a few words with him. How happy I would have been if I had been able to talk with my pastor in the way I used to talk with Don Calosso.'"³⁴

At the *Rifugio*

It is no exaggeration to say that Don Bosco's transition from the *Convitto* to the *Rifugio*, as Father Borel's assistant chaplain, was simply a change of one Salesian environment for another. The Marchesa Giuletta Colbert di Barolo had made public her intention of founding a congregation of priests under the patronage of Saint Francis of Sales. In fact, a large mural of the Saint greeted visitors at the *Rifugio* entrance. It was there, in his own personal quarters on the third floor of the infirmary that Don Bosco first began his oratory work. A portrait of Francis of Sales adorned the bare wall of the tiny improvised chapel. In his *Memoirs* Don Bosco felt compelled to explain his choice of the oratory patron, as if answering criticism. He gave two reasons for selecting the gentle bishop of Geneva: "We began to call our fledgling oratory after Saint Francis of Sales for two reasons," he begins. Then he went on to add a third reason. His choice of Francis was out of respect for his patron, the Marchesa. The second was his conviction that the gentle kindness of Francis was essential in the type of work he was embarking upon. Then out of the blue he adds a third reason: Francis of Sales seemed the ideal patron for countering the anti-Catholic

³³ J. B. Lemoyne, *EBM*, Vol II, 98-99.

³⁴ John Bosco, *Memoirs*, *op. cit.*, 48.

publications which were making their rounds in Piedmont to the detriment, especially, of the working-class youths in Turin.³⁵

On this choice of oratory patron, historian Pietro Stella makes a perplexing observation: "If Don Bosco made this choice of patron with all due consideration, then it is one of the most carefully calculated and decisive steps he had taken in his life so far."³⁶ Now if Stella had made this very same statement earlier in regard to John's fourth ordination resolution ("The gentle kindness of Francis of Sales will be my guide in all my undertakings."), then everyone would nod in agreement. But here, after a long series of Salesian connections, it seems most odd and almost out of place. Perhaps Stella, having just remarked on the "shrewd gesture" of Bosco's patronal choice, is now at pains to point out that he was no house spaniel lapping up the Marchesa's financial morsels tossed his way; or, again, he may be indicating that there is far more here than a "chance meeting" (his own phrase), although he never comes round to discussing the classic "God of encounters" term which Francis of Sales consistently spoke about.

It was during the *Rifugio* period that Don Bosco chose his decisive option of working for the poor and homeless children of Turin, turning his back on more rewarding alternative ministries. In his mind's eye he equated his ministry among the children of the poor as one of true Salesianity. In practice this meant: a people-oriented church (non-elitist) with an open door to the sacraments; education open to the children of the common people (non-privileged) with ready access to both academic and vocational schooling; a popular pastoral orientation (non-rigorist) with catechesis adapted to the unschooled, a catechesis which blended into their free time and which a friendly family spirit enhanced. By this popular Salesian approach, Don Bosco hoped to win back God's forgotten people, with a welcome from the "God of Encounters". Almost at this very time this approach towards the common man is echoed in the words of Abraham Lincoln who reiterated this same message in his inimitable way: "God must love common, everyday people since he made so many of them."

³⁵ Originally called the "Poor men of Lyons", the Waldensians carried considerable political clout in Piedmont during the anticlerical movement of the Risorgimento. For a time they had the support of Camillo Cavour and the right-wing Freemasons. They in turn adopted the slogan of Pastor Alexander Vinet and his Geneva revivalists, "A free church in a free state." This link made the Waldensians popular with the young people of Turin where their ascetical zeal and vitriolic publications created considerable tension in the Porta Nuova area which was in the immediate vicinity of the Salesian Oratory of Saint Aloysius.

³⁶ Pietro Stella, *op. cit.*, 107.

Early Salesian Signs At Work

In retrospect, the three formative stages of John Bosco's Salesianity—at Chieri, at the *Convitto*, and at the *Rifugio*—can perhaps best be seen in an horticultural analogy. Chieri was the sowing period (with the mystical dying-sprouting of the seed in the ground); at the *Convitto* the seed struck deep roots and broke through the hard encrusted earth; the *Rifugio* saw the first early shoots and tender leaves of his youth apostolate.

The next two decades (1845-1865) would see the greening period, the legendary green years of Don Bosco's Salesianity—full leaf, spring buds, and the first choice summer fruits. The period of 1865-1880 his Salesianity would come to full flower with its abundant crops. Finally, the decade of the 80's (1881-1888) would see the marginal wilting and the discouraging die-back as the Society's Salesianity reached a crisis-point in Europe and South America, moving Don Bosco to make an impassioned plea for a second spring, a return to the Salesian green years of bygone days. A plea for the revival of the spirit of Saint Francis of Sales.³⁷

But it is during the crucial period between 1845 and 1865 that we now wish to focus our attention. After the nomadic existence of the wandering oratory, Don Bosco finally settled his activity on the Pinaridi property at Valdocco in 1846. Don Bosco's first humble chapel in the Pinaridi shed was dedicated to Saint Francis of Sales, the portrait of the Saint having been transferred there from the *Rifugio*. The first permanent church dedicated to Saint Francis was built on the Valdocco property in 1852. This cherished structure, later affectionately known as the *Chiesa Vecchia*, "The Old Church", became the Salesian Portiuncula, full of precious memories and anecdotes. From the day it opened, Don Bosco had placed in the sanctuary a picture of Saint Francis of Sales, probably the same one that had graced the *Rifugio* chapel and hung in the Pinaridi shed. Later, this portrait was replaced by a fine statue of the patron (now in the Basilica museum). In the restoration of the *Chiesa Vecchia* in 1959, Enrico Reffo was commissioned to do a fresco of Francis of Sales (a copy of the Saint by Crida) showing him kneeling, pen in hand, composing his spiritual *Treatises*.³⁸

How did the youthful Oratory population respond to Francis' ubiquitous presence in word and painting and prayer which surrounded them? That they were well aware of his pervasive presence and appreciated its benevolence can be inferred from abundant testimony. John Bonetti, for example, recalls that Don

³⁷ Arnaldo Pedrini, *St. Francis of Sales—Don Bosco's Patron*, ed. Francis J. Klauder, SDB (New Rochelle, 1987), 62-64.

³⁸ Aldo Giraud and Giuseppe Biancardi, *op. cit.*, 210, 212.

Bosco often reminded his boys of the importance of *growing* into gentleness by imitating the gentle bishop of Geneva: "We had learned by this time that Don Bosco, a model of calm tranquillity and patience, had not developed these qualities naturally. Very much like Francis he too had been headstrong in his youth." Paul Albera, after reading a life of Saint Francis of Sales, wrote: "This biography reminds me so much of Don Bosco's own life which we witnessed. The same ideals at work: love, gentleness, a kind affection for everyone."³⁹

Was the name day of Francis of Sales kept as a special event in the early years of the Oratory? Pietro Stella believes it was not, especially during the 1850s. He intimates that the feast of Saint Francis at first was celebrated at the Oratory to cultivate the presence and assistance of adult benefactors and friends of Don Bosco's work, rather than an occasion of festivity for the enjoyment of the Oratory boys. This inference, however, does not square with the various descriptions of Francis' name day as related by biographer Lemoyne in his *Memorie Biografiche*. For example, a newspaper account which he cites in detail describes the feast in honor of Francis of Sales as a very joyous affair. On the feast of Francis of Sales in 1858 the High Mass that day, the "choir was composed entirely of Oratory boys". The youngsters then spent the rest of the day playing games and enjoying the music of the oratory band. The solemn vespers in the evening was presided over by a local bishop. The festivity came to a joyous close with an evening entertainment which took place in a gas-lit hall and featured a drama by the playwright Baldini, with Louis Fumero, an oratory alumnus, playing the leading role. Between acts, awards were distributed to various pupils who had distinguished themselves for their deportment and their scholastic achievement. Finally, a rousing song, composed to memorialize Pope Pius VII's exile from Rome, concluded the festivities.⁴⁰ All in all a fun-filled day made memorable with spiritual exercises and entertainment. Certainly the feast of Saint Francis could not have been celebrated in a more "memorable" manner.

It was during these halcyon days (1854-1865) that youthful holiness flourished at the Oratory. Sainly youths like Michael Magone, Dominic Savio, and Francis Besuccio were each led gently along the Salesian path to holiness. And the means used by Don Bosco were simple enough, daily duties done cheerfully and faithfully, but reminiscent of Francis' method of inducing his close followers to follow the Salesian way. This pattern of lay-holiness, a Salesian pattern first mapped out for Philothea and Theotimus, is one of our overlooked Salesian references. "Carrying out our daily duties will be our first and special care." (Cf. the first Sodality Regulations.)

³⁹ Paulo Albera, *Circular Letters* (553, Turin).

⁴⁰ J. B. Lemoyne, *EBM*, Vol. V, 631 (appendix).

Winning friends to God was also part of Don Bosco's blueprint to achieve youthful holiness. The very first advice Dominic Savio was given to become a saint was to "win souls to God."⁴¹

In the first recorded reference to the Salesian congregation ever made (September 28, 1850), it is Francis of Sales whose name is most prominent. In a response from the Holy See regarding a petition for indulgences, the brief includes the following references: "A congregation under the name and protection of Francis of Sales...A second plenary indulgence on the feast of Saint Francis of Sales...A 300 days indulgence for participating (each month) in a procession to honor Francis of Sales."

Four years later, on January 16, Francis would again make his presence felt in a meeting that Don Bosco would convene when he called Rochietti, Argiglia, Rua, and Cagliero to his room. He proposed to them,...with God's help and the assistance of Francis of Sales, to begin a trial period during which they would dedicate themselves to works of charity. He further proposed that they might wish to extend this commitment by binding themselves by vow in furthering God's work. That was the magic moment when the term "Salesian" first became identified with Don Bosco's work and family: "From that evening on, the name 'Salesian' would be given to those who agreed or would come to agree to these proposals". On Don Bosco's part no further explanation seemed necessary to explain his choice of patron and of name. "Salesianity" was now firmly in place.⁴²

Four years earlier, in 1850, Don Bosco had put out feelers to test the waters of lay involvement and cooperation in his plan for Catholic action. This plan consisted in his aborted "Pious Union of Saint Francis of Sales". Twenty-six years later, his project of Salesian cooperators, which had lain dormant all those years, finally took shape. This was the beginning of the Salesian cooperators movement in 1876. This cooperator movement now formed the basis of his farsighted concept of "Salesians living at home."

The early 1850s saw the beginnings of a very Salesian activity. In his attempt to fend off Protestant propaganda and proselytizing launched by the Waldesi, Don Bosco decided on a typical Salesian counterattack. He began publishing his *Letture Cattoliche* (*Catholic Readings*), which were to have a long and very successful life. In the following year the *Galantuomo* (*The Gentleman's Almanac*) appeared. The latter was an attempt to counter the Waldesi's new and popular almanac entitled *L'Amico di Casa* (*The Family Friend*). Don Bosco had taken his cue, as he himself attested, from Francis of

⁴¹Wallace Cornell, *Don Bosco, Spiritual Director of Young People* (Manila, 1986), 62-66.

⁴²J. B. Lemoyne, *EBM*, Vol. V,9.

Sales' own attempt to frustrate Calvinist propaganda by passing out, door-to-door, his famous leaflets which stirred up religious controversy in the Chablais. In a memorable letter, Don Bosco acknowledged his literary debt to his Patron: "Spreading good literature is one of the principal aims of our congregation. Our *Salesian Bulletin* has this goal, among many, of animating in young men who have completed their stay with us, a love for the spirit of Saint Francis of Sales. Moreover, it is our hope that they will be encouraged, after reading our publications, to work for the spiritual welfare of other young people. I ask you, therefore, to help mold these young men into so many apostles who will spread wholesome reading in their communities."⁴³

To the end of Don Bosco's life, Francis of Sales would remain "Il Santo di casa" in every Salesian community. This was not done by imposing the magisterial presence of Francis in his academic and doctoral robes, but in a benevolent, almost grandfatherly way.

Our essay set out to trace the very first signs of the Salesian Way in Don Bosco's life at Chieri, at the *Convitto*, and at the *Rifugio*, experiences which embraced the years 1835-1845. We then proceeded to touch on similar Salesian manifestations which attended the beginnings of both his Oratory and the Salesian Society. There is no need to retrace that ground here.

A brief resume of the pattern behind that early Salesian connection will be attempted now. John Bosco's childhood and adolescence were marked by periods of loneliness and episodes of abandonment. John's yearning for a close relationship and affectionate friendship with priests in the communities in which he lived were seldom realized. This protracted negative experience reached its nadir in the Chieri seminary—an experience now viewed in hindsight as a godsend. Through Cafasso's Salesian guidance which reflected the optimism, humanism, and compassion of Saint Francis of Sales, John would at last find a springboard to help him bounce back to a positive reaction and return to a spirit renewed with optimism. He now became fired up with fixed and lasting determination never to let young people, or for that matter anyone with whom he was associated, leave his presence without a pleasant and friendly welcome and a cordial heart-to-heart exchange.⁴⁴

⁴³*Epistolario di San Giovanni Bosco*, ed. E. Ceria (Turin, 1959), Vol. IV, 320.

⁴⁴ Former Anglican (Episcopalian) Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Fischer, made a most revealing comment on this topic after a visit with Pope John XXIII: "The force of Pope John's personality is such that he transforms all official contacts into a personal experience." (Quoted by Bernard J. Boelen, in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, Vol. X, No. 3 (Nov. 1989).

It was precisely on this personal pastoral level of dialogue and friendship that we begin to discern, at this stage a swelling confluence of John's life into the Salesian mainstream (something far different from the mere trickle of Salesianity influence that is all too often depicted). The beginnings of these frequent and vital relationships were never seen by John (nor by Francis) as mere "chance encounters". Rather they were providential meetings designed by the "God of encounters" as Francis viewed them, encounters which blessed and benefited all parties concerned. For many young people these first contacts—whether with the priest in Valdocco or the Bishop in Geneva—were the first real experience of salvation. That is, they initiated an introduction to divine love, first discovered at the heart of a human relationship.⁴⁵

In her recent study of Saint Francis of Sales, Wendy Wright points to the current dramatic shift to the understanding of compassion in Francis "spirituality of the heart". Just how prophetic our own Salesianity has been can be measured by the double Salesian axiom of long standing based on our education and our own spirituality: "The heart of all Salesian education is the education of the heart; the heart of all Salesian spirituality is rooted in the spirituality of the heart."⁴⁶

In practice, winning hearts by kindness is the core of Salesianity, whether we read this in the life and work of Francis of Sales or in Don Bosco's ministry among the poor children of Italy. In contrast many religious figures are often seen as prophetic "signs of contradiction" against the excesses of their age. Salesians instead are called to be "signs of affirmation", thereby assuming a role more servant-like than prophetic, a role designed to help the young to see what is good in God's world and to make it their own. This kind of orientation reflects the positive witness of an optimistic humanism that goes to the heart of Francis of Sales' teaching.

Young John Bosco, recalling his first dream—You will win them over not by blows but by kindness—focused on this attractive element. In his reply to Don Calosso who queried him on "why do you want to become a priest?" John's response had been, "I want to draw close to my companions so that I can

⁴⁵ To those who may be disturbed by anti-intellectual methods revealed here, one can quickly point to such outstanding contemporary thinkers like Bernard Longergan and his praxis, Victor Frankl and his reality of meaning, Gabriel Marcel and his view of knowledge via experience, and José Calle's life-situation catechetics. Being a highbrow or a lowbrow was not an issue for Francis; but being human and cordial was.

⁴⁶ *Spiritualities of the Heart: Approaches to Personal Wholeness in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Annice Callahan (New Jersey, 1990). Cf. article by Wendy Wright on Saint Francis of Sales (143-158), "Spiritual Friendship and Spiritual Direction in the Salesian World". Spring 1989, Vol. XII.

talk to them about religious things".⁴⁷ As early as 1936, the eminent French writer, Henri Ghéon, had already identified this attractive facet of Salesianity as the very "Secret of Saint John Bosco." Ghéon wrote: "Don Bosco followed in the De Sales tradition. For it was the Bishop of Geneva who said: 'We can get all people to accept salvation, if we can succeed in making salvation attractive to them.'"⁴⁸

To the casual reader this may seem to be a flimsy and even precarious base for an entire Salesian education and spirituality. It may even be viewed as shallow to the point of blatant manipulation and cheap commercialism, akin to Dale Carnegie's now infamous come-on, "How to win friends and influence people." And yet in 1989, a Louvain philosopher, Bernard J. Boelen, identified this precise charm, namely, "the spiritual ability to be attractive, to evoke growth, life, spirituality, and love in other people, as 'the greatest power ever given to a human being.'"⁴⁹

Francis of Sales showed himself to be relentless in his attempt to call his audience back to the deep mystical origins of this powerful attraction. More than twenty times in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, he reiterates that the deepest, most innate tendency in every human being is this heartfelt attraction towards God's love.⁵⁰ Don Bosco's Salesians, soundly interpreting both their Patron and Founder, insist that "it is our task to draw young people towards God, to attract them to Him, by our love for them." This is almost a paraphrase of Francis of Sales' exquisite passage on Jacob's ladder: "One and the same charity reaches out to touch both God and neighbor." The gentle Salesian attraction of John's first dream now becomes congruous with the Salesian theme of "the God of Encounters". It is also seen as a variation on one of the oldest, most profound spiritualities of the Church tradition: the heart's innate attraction to God, so dear to Augustinian and Benedictine spiritualities.

This Johannine theme of "attractio patris", the drawing power of the Father's love, was a favorite theme of that Salesian devotee, Abbot Columban Marmion, O.S.B.⁵¹ Marmion stressed the total everlasting dimension of that divine attraction and our reciprocal response: a theme that both Francis of Sales

⁴⁷ John Bosco, *Memoirs*, *op. cit.*, 35.

⁴⁸ Henri Ghéon, *The Secret of Saint John Bosco* (London, 1936), 147.

⁴⁹ Bernard J. Boelen, "On the Formative Power of Personal Charm", in *Formative Spirituality* (Pittsburgh, 1989), Vol. X, No. 3, 333.

⁵⁰ Andre Brix, OSFS, "L'Acualité de St. Francois de Sales" in *Studi di Spiritualità* ed. J. Picca and J. Strus (Rome, 1989), 109.

⁵¹ John, 6: 65: "No one can come to me unless the Father draws him." Francis of Sales also turned to the prophet Jeremiah here: "I have loved you with an everlasting love, and therefore, I have drawn you." (Jeremiah, 31: 3).

and Don Bosco expressed in more practical, pastoral terms of spending one's life "to the last breath" for broken people and abandoned youth. Finally, in Francis' classic *Treatise*, the writer indicates, by his choice of a scriptural quotation that squares so perfectly with his source of Salesianity's heart-winning attraction: "I have loved you with an everlasting love, and therefore, I have drawn you."