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SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (1567–1622):
BISHOP OF GENEVA, DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH, HUMANIST.
ON THE 400TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF THE PATRON
OF THE FRANCIS DE SALES SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY

Abstract

The 400th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis de Sales is an opportunity to evoke in “Seminare. Learned Investigations” his figure, academic and ascetic heritage and to pay tribute to the patron of Francis de Sales Scientific Society. This very author of “Introduction to the Devout Life” and “Treatise on the Love of God,” enamored with God and man, became the inspiration for initiatives of the scientific Society that was established 15 years ago in the Salesian milieu. Acknowledged by both secular historiography and Catholic hagiography as a *humanist theologian*, de Sales delineates the humanistic and personalistic profile of the research conducted within the framework of the Francis de Sales Scientific Society. The paper depicts de Sales as the Bishop of Geneva, Doctor of the Church, and patron of the Francis de Sales Scientific Society. The second part of the paper discusses the origin and the activities of the Society in its 15 years of existence.

Keywords: Francis de Sales, Francis de Sales Scientific Society

ŚWIĘTY FRANCISZEK SALEZY (1567–1622):
BISKUP GENEWY – DOKTOR KOŚCIOŁA – HUMANISTA.
W 400-LECIE ŚMIERCI PATRONA TOWARZYSTWA NAUKOWEGO FRANCISZKA SALEZEGO

Abstrakt

400-lecie śmierci św. Franciszka Salezego jest okazją do przywołania na łamach „Seminare. Poszukiwania naukowe” jego postaci oraz naukowego i ascetycznego dziedzictwa biskupa Genewy oraz by oddać cześć patronowi Towarzystwa Naukowego Franciszka Salezego. To właśnie autor *Filotei i Teotyma*, zakochany w Bogu i w człowieku, stał się inspiracją inicjatyw założonego przed 15 laty w kręgu salezjańskim towarzystwa naukowego. Uznany zarówno przez historiografię świecką, jak i hagiografię katolicką za *teologa humanistę* wyznacza humanistyczny i personalistyczny profil prowadzonym w ramach towarzystwa naukowego badaniom. Tekst pokazuje Salezego jako

biskupa Genewy, doktora Kościoła oraz patrona Towarzystwa Naukowego Franciszka Salezego. W drugiej części artykułu dokonano syntetycznej retrospekcji na genezę i główne obszary działalności Towarzystwa w 15-lecie jego istnienia.

Słowa kluczowe: Franciszek Salezy, Towarzystwo Naukowe Franciszka Salezego

INTRODUCTION

The 400th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis de Sales is an excellent opportunity to evoke his figure on the pages of “Seminare” not only because it is always worthwhile to delve into the academic and ascetic heritage of the Bishop of Geneva but also to pay tribute to the patron of the Francis de Sales Scientific Society. This very author of “Introduction to the Devout Life” and “Treatise on the Love of God,” enamored with God and man, has been an inspiration for initiatives of the Society that was established 15 years ago in the Salesian milieu. Acknowledged by both secular historiography and Catholic hagiography, de Sales is known as a humanist theologian, theologian of humanism, or a true humanist (Zarzycki 2008, 9). Thus, he delineates the humanistic and personalistic profile of the research conducted within the framework of the Francis de Sales Scientific Society.

1. AN ARISTOCRAT AND BISHOP OF GENEVA

Francis de Sales was born on the 21st of August 1567 in Thorens, near the Huguenot capital. His birth was preceded by two significant events that – each in a different way – would play a significant role in his later life and activities: in 1563, the Council of Trent was solemnly concluded; a year later, John Calvin died in Geneva (Rybałt 2016, 17).

As a Savoyard, De Sales was a thoroughly Romance figure, who combined French and Italian traits. He was educated in line with his noble background, being the son of the Lord of Sales. From the age of six, he was taught by private tutors and in the local schools in La Roche and Annecy. In 1580, 13-year-old Francis was sent to the Jesuit Collège de Clermont in Paris, where he studied Latin, Greek, philosophy, and rhetoric. At the same time, he read theology at the Sorbonne. In 1592, he obtained a doctorate in *utroque iure* (both civil and canon law) from the University of Padua. Respecting his father’s wishes, he studied law while pursuing his interests in theology. This harmonious blend of both fields foreshadowed the later congruity of his religious and intellectual life (Nigg 1980, 178). While in Paris, he overcame a profound spiritual crisis stemming from a debated, heterodox doctrine on predestination among Parisian theologians. This, however, made him capable of deeply understanding souls tormented by spiritual struggle. The crisis may have led to Francis’ optimism, significant in his doctrine, based on trust in God-Love (Struś 1989, 459–460).

Having completed his studies, much to his father’s surprise, Francis chose the priesthood. He was ordained a priest on the 18th of December 1593. He volunteered to

recatholicize the inhabitants of Chablais, who had been Calvinists for two generations. The four-year mission ended with a partial success. Biographers of de Sales tend to call this stage of his missionary work heroic. By the order of Clement VIII, Francis went to Geneva, the then-center of Calvinism, where he unsuccessfully tried to convert John Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza (Rybalt 2016, 34–54).

Subsequently, de Sales's influence extended throughout northern Savoy. In 1599, he became coadjutor, and in 1602, the Bishop of Geneva. On the 8th of December 1602, he was appointed as a bishop. Six days later, he officially entered not the cathedral in Geneva (controlled by the Huguenots), but the parish church in Annecy where he had been baptized years ago. St Bernard of Clairvaux's saying "the measure of love is to love without measure" became his episcopal motto (Nigg 1980, 182; Rybalt 2016, 34–54). As the Bishop of Geneva, de Sales reformed religious life in the diocese in the spirit of the Council of Trent, reconvening diocesan synods and reforming old monasteries. In 1610, with Jane Frances de Chantal, he founded the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, in Poland colloquially known as the Visitandines (Struś 1989, 460).

2. DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH

The life of St Francis de Sales coincides with a turbulent period not only due to historical events and the history of Christianity. It was also a time when many various conceptions regarding the nature of man, man's perfection, and spirituality emerged. While Protestantism devalued the role of the individual in the pursuit of holiness, humanism, on the other hand, extolled humanity and our greatness. These were dialectical stances: Protestantism proclaimed the loss of our free will, and humanism acclaimed man as an absolute value. They both influenced de Sales' attitude: Christian humanism inspired by God's revelation. Francis rejected anthropocentrism while emphasizing the natural dignity of a man called to love God. Here, God is the One who draws us and encourages us to become His friends. Thus, sainthood is not a privilege of the chosen but an ideal for every Christian. (Struś, 1989, 460). In *Introduction to the Devout Life*, de Sales wrote:

When God created the world, He commanded each tree to bear fruit after its kind; and even so He bids Christians, the living trees of His Church, to bring forth fruits of devotion, each one according to his kind and vocation. A different exercise of devotion is required of each – the noble, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the maiden, and the wife; and furthermore such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual. [...] Everybody fulfills his special calling better when subject to the influence of devotion: family duties are lighter, married love truer, service to our King more faithful, every kind of occupation more acceptable and better performed where that is the guide. It is an error, nay more, a very heresy, to seek to banish the devout life from the soldier's guardroom, the mechanic's workshop, the prince's court, or the domestic hearth. Of course, a purely contemplative devotion, such as is especially proper to

the religious and monastic life, cannot be practiced in these outer vocations, but there are various other kinds of devotion well-suited to lead those whose calling is secular, along the paths of perfection. [...] Be sure that wheresoever our lot is cast we may and must aim at the perfect life (Part 1, Chapter 3).

It is important to remember that the medieval model of holiness (limited to the consecrated life or the clergy and linked to the doctrine of *contemptus mundi*) was still in force. Therefore, one did not look for perfection and holiness in the world. De Sales' Copernican revolution in religious life (which made him the precursor of lay theology) consisted in withdrawing devotion solely from monasteries and churches and showing that the ideal of perfection is available to all (Mierzwa 2004, 19). De Sales' great merit consisted in showing the individual character of vocation and, what followed, the individual path to perfection (Fournier 2004, 63-64). He conveyed essential features of secular holiness on the pages of *Introduction to the Devout Life* (a manual of spirituality addressed to the laity in particular) and in his letters, especially those written to lay people (of which over 2000 have been preserved). It is through this form of contact that de Sales primarily developed his spiritual guidance.

In the history of Christian spirituality, de Sales' concept of Christian perfection will later be called Salesian spirituality (which includes the spirituality of the congregations founded by St John Bosco). Its foundation is love (as the source and center of Christian life), inner peace and joy, gentleness, patience, and humility. It is a spirituality of realism that acknowledges human weakness and limitations, but also, perhaps most importantly, a spirituality of optimism with the central belief that we were created as *imago Dei* and that we are given as much grace as is indispensable to fulfill the commandment of love (Mierzwa 2004, 20-33).

The universal Church appreciated de Sales' teaching on the universal call to perfection and declared him Doctor of the Church on the 19th of July 1877. By doing this, Pius IX placed the Bishop of Geneva alongside great figures, who greatly contributed to the Church's treasury of wisdom. De Sales' biographers have called him the doctor of perfection and the doctor of love. Because of these traits, St John Bosco chose him as the patron of his multiple educational works thus treating de Sales as his guide in his spiritual life and the field of education: "I will be guided in all things by the love and goodness of St Francis de Sales" (Memorie 1898, I, 518). In Fr Bosco's preventive system, the gentleness and goodness of Francis took the original form of "familiarity," which integrated an educational community and bore fruit in the lives of the Oratory's students (Łuczyński 2018, 254).

3. A HUMANIST

On the 2nd of November 1607, in one of his letters to Jane Francis de Chantal, Francis wrote, "I am, above all, a human being." St. Francis was a man of the Renaissance, more precisely, of Renaissance humanism. The main ideas of

humanism, reaching back to antiquity, were revived at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries. First, it happened in Italy and then in the European culture, contributing to the emergence of a new type of individual – the Renaissance man. This new spirit also swept through France, influencing various aspects of life, including religious life. According to Henri Bremond (Bremond 1916, 68), de Sales represents a form of what is called “devout humanism,” *l’humanisme dévot*, (distinguishing itself from pagan as well as Christian humanism), which embraces the most genuinely humanistic Christian perspective.

In the latest monograph dedicated to de Sales and his spirituality, published in Poland on the 400th anniversary of his death, Eugenio Alburquerque Frutos (2023, 13-14) thus characterizes the humanism of de Sales:

To St Francis de Sales, humanism was the way of living and being in the world with one’s neighbors and with God. This marked everything that Sales was, did, and wrote. His entire life remained imbued with this humanism, which encompasses the entire human being and incorporates his/her into the work of salvation. Francis de Sales is recognized as a profoundly human saint, always caring for others, sensitive to human weaknesses, and constantly ready to show considerateness and uplift others in spirit.

Historians of spirituality interpret *l’humanisme dévot* as a reaction to the spreading naturalistic humanism and those manifestations of Christian humanism that distorted the actual image of Christianity. “Devout humanism” differed from Christian humanism in that it did not emphasize intellectualism or theory, but rather focused on the practice of spiritual life and experience, appreciating human emotionality. The spiritual treatises characteristic of this trend delve into the topic of love for God, love for the homeland, marriage, friendship, loyalty, humility, and simplicity. They were primarily a school for personal holiness, a doctrine, undoubtedly a theology, but affective and entirely focused on practice. Significantly, they were not addressed only to the elite but aimed to contribute to the personal holiness of everyone (Zarzycki 2008, 14).

The key to understanding the humanism of the Doctor of Love is grasping the foundations of his life: deep faith that prompted him to grow constantly and to transcend himself, as well as his philosophy of humanism that emphasized the freedom and dignity of man. Solid education he obtained in Padua and Paris played a significant role as well. De Sales knew Italian, Latin, and, to some extent, Greek and Hebrew. He profoundly revered the Holy Scripture. He drew extensively from Aristotle, Plato, Epictetus, Homer, Cicero, Pliny the Elder, Seneca, and numerous Church Fathers, mainly Augustine, whom he most frequently referenced in his writings. His literary talent, linguistic style, and eloquence predisposed him to become a classic of French literature (Zarzycki 2008, 13–15). De Sales harmoniously combined all these sources and derived from them an optimistic vision of man and the world. In the “Treatise on the Love of God”, he expressed the essence of his vision:

Man is the perfection of the universe;
 the spirit is the perfection of man;
 love, that of the spirit;
 and charity, that of love.
 Wherefore the love of God is the end,
 the perfection and the excellence of the universe (De Sales 2002, X 1 517).

4. PATRON SAINT OF THE FRANCIS DE SALES SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY

Francis de Sales Scientific Society (TNFS) was established in 2008 by the initiative of the Salesians. It is a nationwide Society registered as an association, collaborating with national and international scientific centers. Its primary goal is scientific research and educational activities in the spirit of St. Francis de Sales, the patron saint of scholars and educators, as well as the integration of the scientific community comprising members and friends of the Salesian Society. In line with its statute, the Society conducts research, publishes its findings, and promotes knowledge, especially in the field of humanities. It organizes and supports symposia, scientific and academic conferences, public lectures, and exhibitions under its patronage. Also, it publishes its scientific journal “Seminare. Poszukiwania Naukowe” [Seminare. Learned Investigations] along with three scientific publishing series. Moreover, the Society grants awards for scientific achievements: the Society of Francis de Sales Award and the Fr. Prof. Adam Durak Award for works in the field of theology, and liturgical theology in particular. The statutory goals of the Society also include maintaining documentation and collecting bibliographies of scientific works by members of the Scientific Society, the Salesian Society and works about them. Also, the Society gathers and stores all kinds of scientific, library, archival, and museum materials primarily related to the activities of the Salesian Society.

At the end of 2022, the Society had 125 members. Over 15 years of activity, 189 members participated in its work. Honorary members of Francis de Sales Scientific Society include Rev. Dr. Pascual Chávez – Rector Major of the Salesian Society (2002–2014); Rev. Ángel Fernández Artime – Rector Major of the Salesian Society (2014–); and the late Bishop Dr. Adam Śmigielski, Bishop of Sosnowiec, who died on the 7th of October 2008. Supporting members include all four Polish Salesian Inspectorates as well as Salesian Theological Seminaries in Łódź and Kraków.

The most important annual event in the life of the Society is its Congress combined with the General Assembly of members and a scientific conference as part of the research series “Youth and Their World”. The main activities of the Society’s authorities include regular board meetings aimed at the current coordination of the Society’s work, preparation and approval of the budget, preparation for the General Assembly, and other tasks following the statute. Advisory representatives from the Audit Committee, the chief editor of the journal “Seminare”, and other individuals invited by the President take part in the Board meetings. The Board meets around 4 to 8 times a year.

A detailed list of past Congresses, their locations, dates, and the themes of scientific conferences are included in the table below.

Name	Date	Place	Theme of the TNFS Congress academic conference	Important events
Founding Meeting The Francis de Sales Scientific Society (TNFS)	9 June 2007	Polana	Founding meeting of Francis de Sales Scientific Society (TNFS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Choosing the name and statute of TNFS – Adopting the founding resolution – Electing the founding committee – Electing the first-term authorities
I TNFS Congress	6-7 June 2008	Kutno	The objectives and forms of activity of scientific societies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Approving the Board's Regulation – Establishing the TNFS Award
International Scientific Conference	23 Oct. 2008	UKSW, Warszawa	The educational system of St. John Bosco in the service of human rights	
II TNFS Congress	12-13 June 2009	Częstochowa	150 years of the Salesian Society	Zofia Langowska – the first laureate of the TNFS Award
III TNFS Congress	11-12 June 2010	Kutno	Youth in "democratic freedom" (I)	Rev. Prof. Roman Murawski SDB – laureate of the TNFS Award
IV TNFS Congress	13-14 May 2011	Kutno	Youth and their world: Youth in "democratic freedom" (II)	Międzynarodowy Festiwal im. Księdza Stanisława Ormińskiego SDB w Rumii [Rev. Stanisław Ormiński SDB International Festival in Rumia] – laureate of the TNFS Award
V TNFS Congress	5-6 Mar. 2012	Toruń	Youth and their world: Youth in "democratic freedom" (III)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Congress (part of XIX Economic Forum in Toruń) – Electing the second-term authorities – WSDTS in Łódź nad Wartą – laureate of the TNFS Award
VI TNFS Congress	3-5 Mar. 2013	Aleksandrów Kujawski/Toruń	Youth and their world: Work axiology and pitfalls related to work	Scientific part of the Congress (part of XX Economic Forum in Toruń)
Congress of Salesians Engaged in Academic Work	4-5 Oct. 2013	Niepokalanów	The role of education in the Salesian Society Academic achievements of Polish Salesians	
VII TNFS Congress	16-17 May 2014	WSDTS, Kraków	Youth and environmental challenges	
VIII TNFS Congress	15-16 May 2015	Gietrzwałd	The educational system of St. John Bosco on the 200 th anniversary of his birth; current challenges	
IX TNFS Congress	13-14 May 2016	UKSW, Warszawa	Youth and their world: marriage and family	Electing the third-term authorities
X TNFS Congress	19-20 May 2017	WSDTS, Łódź nad Wartą	Youth and their world: youth and the church	Rev. Prof. Stanisław Wilk SDB – laureate of TNFS Award
XI TNFS Congress	18-19 May 2018	Stoczek Klasztorny	An adult in the world of youth: patriotic education of youth. The 100 th anniversary of Poland regaining independence	
XII TNFS Congress	9-10 May 2019	Białobrzegi	Youth and their world: youth and the European Union	
XIII TNFS Congress	14 May 2021	Online	Youth and their world: reflections on the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis "Christus vivit"	
XIV TNFS Congress	19-20 May 2022	Ślesin koło Komina	Youth and their world: Youth and their post-pandemic world	Electing the fourth-term authorities
XV TNFS Congress	18-19 May 2023	Dom Polonii, Putusk	Youth and war: challenges in the context of the war in Ukraine	Rev. Prof. Henryk Skorowski SDB – laureate of TNFS Award

Publishing is an integral part of the Francis de Sales Scientific Society's activities. The publishing house's mission is to popularize research findings from various human studies and promote research ideas and concepts inspired by the humanism of Francis de Sales. The TNFS publishing house disseminates not only the research findings of its members and scientific conferences held under its auspices but also makes it possible to share and exchange achievements of Polish and international scientific milieus while fostering high work standards. For their publishing activities, the TNFS and the quarterly "Seminare. Poszukiwania naukowe" [Seminare. Learned Investigations] editorial team received Mały Feniks [Little Phoenix] award from Stowarzyszenie Wydawców Katolickich [Association of Catholic Publishers]. The award aims to promote and recognize valuable publications on Catholicism or those that positively show Christian values. The award was given during XXV Targi Wydawców Katolickich [the 25th Catholic Publishers Fair] in 2019.

The Society's journal "Seminare" has been available in print since 1975 (ISSN 1232-8766) and electronically (e-ISSN 2450-1328). The journal's profile and thematic scope encompass the broadly understood "world of youth" examined from the perspective of various scientific disciplines. It publishes works especially in pedagogy, education, psychology, sociology, family studies, law, philosophy, anthropology, theology, and the history of education. Moreover, "Seminare" aims to create a broad platform for exchanging ideas and experiences about the "world of youth" and contemporary debates about humanity.

Moreover, the Society publishes academic and scientific monographs in three series:

- Studies and Dissertations
- Biblica et Theologica TNFS
- Library of Francis de Sales Scientific Society

The "Studies and Dissertations" series (established in 2009) includes scientific monographs (books written by professors, habilitation, and PhD dissertations) and scientifically edited monographs. As part of the series, 15 publications will be published by the end of 2022. As part of the "Biblica et Theologica TNFS" series, initiated in 2016, seven works will be published by the end of 2022. Five works have been published as part of the "Library of Francis de Sales Scientific Society" series, initiated in 2008.

Another essential part of the Francis de Sales Scientific Society (TNFS) activities is the scientific patronage of various scientific events organized mainly by Salesian entities. During its first 15 years of activity, the TNFS has assumed patronage over 31 scientific conferences and symposiums.

CONCLUSION

This jubilee paper aims to show St Francis de Sales as the Bishop of Geneva, Doctor of the Church, and a great representative of Christian humanism. Through his life and activities, he had a profound impact on his contemporaries, not only contributing to the renewal of the Church but also promoting the spirituality of love, growth of inner life, and simplicity. In the Apostolic Letter *Totum Amoris Est* on the fourth centenary of the death of St Francis de Sales, Pope Francis writes that “All this was supremely evident in the life of the saintly Bishop of Annecy, and now, once more, it is entrusted to each of us.” For 15 years, the Francis de Sales Scientific Society has been trying to fulfill the mission of being the depositary of this heritage, conducting research, educational, and publishing activities in the spirit of the patron saint of writers and journalists.

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