

**“Da mihi animas
cetera tolle”
Symposium**

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**Don Bosco Hall,
Berkeley**

Participants

**Province of Mary Help,
Australia**

Fr. Ian Murdoch
Fr. Peter Rankin
Fr. Mosese Vitolio (Samoa)

**Province of Mary Help,
China**

Fr. Savio Hon

**Province of the Adolescent
Jesus, Israel**

Fr. Francis Preston

**Province of St. Patrick,
Ireland**

Fr. Patrick Hennessy
Br. Padraig McDonald

**Province of Mary, UPS,
Rome, Italy**

Fr. Aldo Girauda

**Province of St. Francis
Xavier, Japan**
Fr. Shinjiro Urata

**Province of Mary Help,
Cebu, Philippines**
Fr. Fidel Orendain

**Province of St. Thomas,
U.K.**
Fr. John Dickson

**Province of St. Philip,
New Rochelle, USA**
Fr. Dominic Tran

**Province of St. Andrew,
San Francisco, USA**
Fr. Joseph Boenzi
Sr. Mary Greenan
Fr. Arthur Lenti
Fr. Thomas Prendiville
Br. John Razor
Fr. John Roche
Fr. Gael Sullivan

**Province of St. Paul,
Thailand**
Fr. John Lissandrin
Br. Anan Thanad

**Province of St. Luke,
Venezuela**
Fr. Rafael Borges
(CSRFP Quito)

Da Mihi Animas

Cry of the Pastoral Heart of Francis de Sales

Joseph Boenzi, SDB

Don Bosco cites a motto

On September 12, 1884, Don Bosco met with his general council to discuss a proposed design for an official coat of arms for the Salesian Society. The shield would be used on the façade of the new church of the Sacred Heart in the Castro Pretorio quarter of Rome, but would have other uses for the Salesian Society.

The artwork was presented by a Turinese sculptor named Boidi who knew Don Bosco and his works very well. Boidi had designed a shield with a large anchor in the middle; on the right of the anchor was the bust of St. Francis de Sales and on the left a flaming heart. At the top of the shield was a shining, six-pointed star, and beneath the anchor was a grove of evergreen trees in front of tall mountains. The shield rested between a laurel branch and a palm branch, and a scroll unfurled beneath with the words *Sinite parvulos venire ad me* (Mt 19:14).³

Don Bosco immediately gave his feedback as to the graphics, suggesting certain changes to the shield and the surrounding frame, which the sculptor duly noted. Then Don Bosco listened to the members of the council as they discussed the scroll beneath the shield and the proposed motto. It seemed that every member of the council had something to say about the motto, for it did not seem to satisfy any of them. Each offered one or more suggestions. Finally Don Bosco spoke. "A motto

³ Cf. Eugenio Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche di san Giovanni Bosco* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1936), 17:365.

was already adopted since the dawn of the Oratory, back in the days of the *Convitto* when I used to visit the prisons,” he said. “Our motto is simply this: *Da mihi animas cetera tolle*.”⁴

Everyone in the group immediately approved of Don Bosco’s proposal for the motto. A number of them remembered seeing this very phrase in a hand-made poster over Don Bosco’s desk when they were boys at the Oratory. They remembered that Don Bosco had always claimed that the phrase had come from St. Francis de Sales.⁵ What better way to proclaim their Salesian identity than to live by the motto adopted by Francis de Sales himself?

The personal motto of Francis de Sales

Don Bosco claimed that the motto *Da mihi animas cetera tolle* came from Francis de Sales, and we Salesians presume that this was the cherished phrase that the saintly Bishop of Geneva claimed for his own. And yet...was this really Francis de Sales. motto? On his own coat of arms as bishop we find a totally different phrase. That episcopal shield is, in all reality, the De Sales family crest, which Francis did not alter. He did, however, substitute the family motto – *Nec Plus Nec Minus* – with his own favorite phrase: *Non Excidet*. Francis had adopted this phrase at age 11 when he left Savoy for Paris to pursue his secondary education. The verb *excidere* is a strong one and was usually understood in the passive voice: *to be razed, demolished, laid waste, destroyed*.

Constructed as a motto, the phrase *Non Excidet* is more akin to a prayer than a statement of bravado. As Elisabeth Stopp suggests, the young Francis was already feeling the pressure to live up to high expectations on the part of his father who was sending him

⁴ Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche*, 17:365-366 [translation mine].

⁵ Cf. S. Giovanni Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico, allievo dell’Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*, per cura del Sacerdote Bosco Giovanni (Torino: G.B. Paravia, 1859), 35-38.

to higher studies as the firstborn of a noble family. Add to that the praise and pride of relatives and friends, the youngster may have worried that he would not succeed. He embraces a third person construction, then, when he says *non excidet*, and with these two short words is saying: "may he not fail in his attempt, perish, be lost."⁶

This schoolboy motto would take on greater spiritual meaning when Francis battled the temptation of despair in the face of the theory of predestination several years later. Being lost had eternal consequences, and "firmly believing that he was doomed to go to hell and had no hope of salvation," he went "cold with fear, especially when he thought how the damned have no power to love God or to see the Blessed Virgin."⁷ He abandoned himself to God's love wholeheartedly through the hands of the Virgin Mother with the prayer "Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection ... was left unaided."

After months of anguish, the young Francis "rose from his knees and at that very moment felt entirely healed; his troubles, so it seemed to him, had fallen about his feet like a leper's scales."⁸ Knowing that God's is a saving love, Francis continued to pray that he would never fail in his attempt, be lost or perish, but come to the fullness of God's love in this life and in the next.

Whether it was this experience that firmed up Francis' esteem for his boyhood motto, we do not know. However, it is plain that he held on to *Non Excidet* as his motto when he became Bishop of Geneva in 1602.

⁶ Cf. Elisabeth Stopp, *A Man to Heal Differences: Essays and Talks on St. Francis de Sales* (Philadelphia: St Joseph University Press, 1997), 23.

⁷ S. Jeanne-Françoise (Frémyot) Rabutin de Chantal, *St. Francis de Sales: a Testimony by St. Chantal*; newly edited in translation with an introduction by Elisabeth Stopp (Hyattsville: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), 44-45.

⁸ S. Jeanne de Chantal, *St. Francis de Sales: a Testimony* 45.

Spiritual motto for Francis de Sales' Religious Community

As a spiritual director and, ultimately, as the founder of a religious community, Francis de Sales often coined phrases or quoted proverbs that could often be construed as mottoes. One of his favorite such phrases consisted of the words *Vive Jésus*, or *Live Jesus*.

Live Jesus appears at the conclusion of his most popular spiritual book, *The Introduction to the Devout Life*. There, as he gives his parting words to the devout soul Philothea, Francis encourages her:

Look up to heaven, and do not forfeit it for earth. Look down into hell, and do not cast yourself into it for the sake of fleeting things. Look upon Jesus Christ, and do not renounce him for all the world. And when the labors of a devout life seem hard to you, sing with St. Francis of Assisi:

Such are the joys that lure my sight
 All pains grow sweet, all labors light!
 Live Jesus! to whom, with the Father
 and the Holy Spirit be all honor
 and the glory, now and throughout
 the endless ages of eternity. Amen.⁹

The same exclamation features as the ending of Francis' second great work, *The Treatise on the Love of God*. Instead of using the phrase as part of an exhortation, the words *Live Jesus* become the moving force of a lyrical hymn of thanksgiving:

O love eternal, my soul needs and chooses you eternally! Ah, come Holy Spirit, and inflame our hearts with your love! To love – or to die! To die – and to love! To die to all other love in order to live in Jesus' love, so that we may not die eternally. But that we may live in your eternal love, O Savior of our souls, we eternally sing, "Live, Jesus!

⁹ S. François de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, translated and edited, with an introduction and notes by John Kenneth Ryan, 3rd Image Book ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 278-279 (part 5, chap. 18) [PL 317].

Jesus, I love! Live, Jesus, whom I love! Jesus, I love, Jesus who lives and reigns forever and ever. AMEN."¹⁰

Here the words *Live Jesus* become a refrain that express a longing on the part of the Christian to place Jesus at the center of life in such a way as to allow him to animate and give meaning to every thought and word, to every action and work, to every decision and affection, and to all devotion.

By the time, Francis de Sales published these books, he had made a habit of using this invocation in his correspondence. The first instance seems to be in the summer of 1605 when Francis used the exclamation within the text of a letter to Jane de Chantal (1572-1641),¹¹ whom he had met the year prior in Dijon and with whom he would found the Visitation Order in 1610. By the end of that year he had begun to use the phrase more regularly as the complimentary close of his letters to her.¹² In so doing, he sometimes attached an added intention to the invocation. For example, writing to Jane de Chantal in February 1607, he reflects on what he has learned from children to whom he has been teaching the catechism. Simply and profoundly, the children prompt him to this regal acclamation of long life to Jesus:

Live joyously and courageously, my dear daughter. We must not doubt that Jesus Christ is ours. "Yes," a little girl once answered me, "He belongs to me more than I belong to Him, and more than I belong to myself."

[...] May Jesus always be in our hearts and live and rule there for all eternity; may His holy name and that of His glorious mother be ever blessed. Amen. Live Jesus, and may the world perish if it does not wish to live for Jesus. Amen.¹³

¹⁰ S. François de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, translated by John Kenneth Ryan (Rockford: TAN, 1974), 2:281-282 (bk 12, chp. 13); see *PL* 971.

¹¹ S. François de Sales, Annecy, Letter to S. Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot Rabutin de Chantal [Monthelon], 1 August 1605, "Lettre CCCIV," in *OEA* 13:81.

¹² S. François de Sales, Annecy, Letter to S. Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot Rabutin de Chantal [Monthelon], 5 December 1605, "Lettre CCCXXI," in *OEA* 13:128.

¹³ S. François de Sales, Annecy, Letter to S. Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot Rabutin de Chantal, 11 February 1607, in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, by François de Sales,

Put in the context of “belonging to Jesus,” but especially of “Jesus belonging to me,” this invocation, this enthusiastic cry, *Live Jesus*, becomes a triumphant cheer, a shout for joy! At the same time, there is a deep intimacy to this cry. The yearning is for Jesus to live and reign, yes, throughout the world and the entire universe, but that he starts his reign “in our hearts,” always and “for all eternity.” His name and the name of “his glorious mother” are planted in the human heart where they become a blessing. To cry out *Live Jesus*, then, is to invite the faithful to a deeper faith, a deeper intimacy with God through Jesus Christ and his mother.

The invocation “*Live Jesus!*” was not simply a literary device; it articulated a spirit and a path of Christian discipleship. This can be affirmed by the fact that Francis and the first Visitandine community at Annecy had made this prayer part of their daily experience, and intentionally so. On New Year’s Day 1613, Francis directed the religious women of the Visitation to inscribe the words «*Vive Jésus!*» at the start of every letter that they would write. In this way, “*Live Jesus*” served as an invocation and a greeting among those connected to this first Salesian community.¹⁴ For the Visitation Order, and for many groups that take their spirit from Francis de Sales, *Live Jesus* has become the slogan that recalls them to the roots of their spirituality and charism.¹⁵

Apostolic slogan in the pastoral style of Francis de Sales

We are left with a doubt and not a few questions. Don Bosco was so convinced that the motto of Francis de Sales was *Da*

and Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot Rabutin de Chantal, translated by Péronne Marie Thibert, *The Classics of Western Spirituality Series*, edited by Kevin Lynch (New York: Paulist, 1988), 149-150; see “Lettre CCCLXXXV,” in *OEA* 13:266-267.

¹⁴ Cf. *Année Sainte des religieuses de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie* (Annecy: Charles Burdet, 1867), 1:1-2.

¹⁵ Cf. “Live + Jesus,” on the website of Visitation Academy, St Louis and posted at <https://www.visitationacademy.org/about/live.asp> accessed February 28, 2007.

Mihi Animas, Cetera Tolle, but what is the source of this tradition? For his personal motto Francis rejected his family maxim *Nec Plus, Nec Minus* to embrace the strong but strange adage *Non Excidet*. For the sisters of the religious congregation that he founded, the holy founder and father proposed *Live Jesus* as a program and a joyful shout that expressed faith in the transforming power of Gospel love. Where did *Da Mihi Animas* come into play?

Pastoral heart

Francis de Sales gave the slogan *Live Jesus!* to Jane de Chantal and his spiritual daughters at the Visitation of Holy Mary in Annecy. It is a spiritual son, however, who tells us of Francis' pastoral heart. Jean-Pierre Camus (1584-1652), ordained bishop by Francis de Sales while still quite young, began to seek the saint's guidance quite early after he took possession of the diocese of Belley, which bordered Geneva. Soon Jean-Pierre claimed Francis as his spiritual director and mentor. He accompanied the elder bishop on pastoral visits and molded his own pastoral practice on what he witnessed. Through all this, their friendship grew, so much so that Jean-Pierre Camus wanted nothing more than to treat Francis as his father, and have Francis treat him as a son.¹⁶

Camus portrays the noble bishop of Geneva as one who lived humbly and spoke simply. This humility and simplicity come to the fore in his frequent use of popular proverbs and maxims. Francis, in fact, loved to speak in maxims and, Camus tells us, was very capable of coining new ones. It was a gentle way of teaching the truth of faith and forming others in the mission of the Church.

Perhaps the most favorite of Francis de Sales' mottoes was: "*Do all by love and nothing by constraint.*" Indeed, it was

¹⁶ Cf. Jean-Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of S. Francis de Sales, Bishop and Prince of Geneva*, translated by Henrietta Louise Farrer Lear, new impression ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1921), 136-137.

the mainspring of his rule for directing others. He has been heard to say many times that it is a tyranny abhorrent to both God and man to force the human will. He could not tolerate that absolutism which insists on obedience, willing or unwilling. "Those who love to be feared, fear to be loved," he said, "and they themselves are more afraid than anyone, for whereas other men fear only them, they fear everyone."

How often I have heard the Bishop say: "There are no galley-slaves in the royal vessel of divine love – every man works his oar voluntarily!"¹⁷

There we see it! Camus quotes three mottoes that Francis used when he wanted to teach pastoral charity. It is in this pastoral context that we find Francis de Sales responding in simplicity to his calling to teach and spread the Gospel. There is no other motive, Camus tells us, but zeal for the Gospel and compassion for people who are struggling to hear Christ's call.

This is so counter cultural. How many churchmen in that era were more concerned with status and rank! Francis, noble by birth and poor by choice, would have none of this. Nowhere is this more evident than in his attitude toward the people of Geneva. While others pined after the lost benefices and the deprivation of revenues brought about by Geneva's estrangement from Savoy and from Catholic unity, Francis de Sales was preoccupied with the eternal salvation of the people of that beacon-city of the Reformation. Camus tells us that Francis' attachment to evangelical poverty derives from his apostolic yearning for the salvation of those alienated from the Church.

Although the people of Geneva neglected nearly all their obligations to the See and Chapter, I never heard the Bishop complain for lack of funds, so little did he care for the things of this world. He often said that the property of the Church resembled a beard – the more it was shaved, the thicker it grew. When the Apostles had nothing, they possessed everything; and if Churchmen seek to possess too much, it

¹⁷ Jean Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, translated and edited by Carl Franklin Kelley (New York: Harper, 1952), 63, ch. 7, sct. 3.

becomes nothing. His constant longing was for the conversion of those whose eyes were closed to the light, and speaking of these dear people of Geneva, he would say: *Give me their souls and you may have all the rest!*¹⁸

Here is the reference for which we have been searching. According to tradition that Don Bosco followed, the *Da mihi animas* was Francis de Sales' motto. Yet, we do not find the phrase anywhere in the saintly bishop's principal writings. Nor does any reference to these words, taken from Genesis, appear in what remains of his correspondence, sermons, guidelines or diocesan directives.¹⁹ If Francis did indeed embrace this scriptural maxim (and we know that he loved to speak in maxims and reflect on their wisdom), then our source for knowing that he did so is Jean-Pierre Camus.

It makes sense that Francis de Sales would nurture such sentiments. In his very first pronouncement as provost of the cathedral canons in 1593, nine years before he became bishop, he urged the clergy of Catholic Geneva to stop brooding over material losses and become men of prayer and penance, that God might channel the grace of conversion into the hearts of the citizenry of Geneva.²⁰ That Francis de Sales persevered in these sentiments is well documented.

Camus recounts this anecdote as he describes Francis de Sales' pastoral heart and apostolic zeal. He immediately follows the *Da mihi animas* passage with the saint's observations of what would be the characteristics of true zeal.²¹ This, in turn, leads to a description of Francis de Sales' prayer that he may

¹⁸ Camus, *The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, 167.

¹⁹ It is easy to check on Francis de Sales' use of the Scriptures, thanks to the extensive indexing done for his writings that makes up the final tome of the critical edition of his writings. We find that Francis did cite passages on either side of Gen 14:21 (*Dixit autem rex Sodomorum ad Abram da mihi animas cetera tolle tibi*), but there is nothing preserved for any written commentary on this particular phrase. See: *OEA* 27:210.

²⁰ Cf. S. François de Sales, «Harangue pour la Prévôté, Fin décembre 1593, Rédaction définitive», in *OEA* 7:109.

²¹ Cf. Camus, *Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, translated by H L Lear, 245-246.

learn to be zealous for souls following an experience that took place during a pastoral visitation to a remote alpine parish. We listen to Camus:

During a visitation tour in the snow mountains of Facigny the Bishop was much touched by the death of a poor shepherd who, in trying to save one of his cows, fell over a precipice, and was found dead and frozen. He applied the lesson to his own flock, and the duty of not sparing his very life for their sakes. "During the last few days," he says, "I have seen the mighty mountains covered with ice and snow, and the inhabitants of the neighboring valley told me that one of their shepherds, while seeking a stray heifer, had fallen into a fissure, and was killed. O my God, said I to myself, this poor shepherd sought his missing heifer with an ardor which the ice could not chill while he lived; wherefore then am I so cold in seeking my sheep? My heart was deeply moved, and melted within me. I saw other things too which read me a lesson; the valleys are full of dwelling-places, while the high mountains are barren and icebound. Even so I said to myself, poor widows and village folk are full of goodness and piety, while we Bishops, who are placed upon the Church's heights, are cold and hard. Is there no sunshine able to melt the chilliness of my heart?"²²

Chilliness of heart? Francis de Sales? We do not believe that he was cold-hearted, and yet, like Camus, we are moved by his words. His shepherd's heart tells him that the needs are great and the resources are limited. What better prayer to make his own than the words of Genesis 14: *give me souls, take away the rest.*

Pastoral awareness, pastoral attitude

Don Bosco stated simply that the motto *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* came from St. Francis de Sales and that it signaled the purpose and way of life that he had promoted at his Oratory in Valdocco from the beginning.

In searching for the origin of this motto, we looked in directions that we thought were logical, but were disappointed.

²² Camus, *Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, translated by H L Lear, 246.

We thought that, if this is a motto, we should look at the bishop's coat of arms – but we were baffled to find a phrase that was totally different. *Non Excidet* is a brilliant personal motto, but is more about the pilgrim's journey than about the apostle's passion. We thought that, if Francis de Sales was a great founder, we should look at the motto that he handed on to his spiritual daughters of the Visitation of Holy Mary – but we found a slogan and an exclamation rather than a motto. *Live Jesus!* is a joyful exclamation and a project of life, but it is more the shout of the enthusiastic crowd of disciples than the action-step of an educator and an apostle.

To find the key to the origin of this motto, or saying, or aspiration in the life of Francis de Sales we needed to look at his pastoral heart. There, as he visited the mountain parishes and as he looked at the separated city of Geneva, his longing converted into a program of action and a journey of continual conversion. Just like the shepherd boy who lost his life trying to save his family's livestock, Francis de Sales asks only for the souls of those who are adrift and alienated. He asks only for sunshine to melt the chilly hearts of pastors who have not learned to reach out to people, especially the poor.

At the end of the day, the *Da mihi animas* is a prayer and a gesture that becomes a life-long investment. Don Bosco had to learn this for himself. He had heard it from his spiritual director, Don Giuseppe Cafasso, who proposed this image of Francis de Sales the missionary and apostle.²³ He also learned it from his students – young boys like Dominic Savio who understood the significance of the phrase. “I think I get it,” Dominic said, looking up at the poster behind Don Bosco's desk on the very day that he first arrived at the Oratory. “Here you do not do business with money, but you do business with souls. I get it

²³ Cf. Giuseppe Cafasso, *Meditazioni per Esercizi Spirituali al Clero*, a cura di Giuseppe Allamano (Torino: Canonica, 1892), 318: *Anime dunque, fratelli miei, anime pel Cielo. – Datemi anime, andava ripetendo S. Francesco di Sales, anime o Signore, se volete ch'io provi un po' di contento a questo mondo.*

now, and I hope that my soul will figure into your trade and commerce."²⁴

The young Francis de Sales prayed that he would not fail, but persevere on the path of Jesus: *non excidet!*

He learned that to do so he must cultivate compassion and pastoral zeal, becoming totally available to those whom God put on his path: *omnibus omnia factus sum ut omnes facerem salvos!*

Aware that the needs are greater than the resources, he divests himself of everything but the Gospel and asks only to move hearts and souls for God: *da mihi animas, cetera tolle!*

Success is not something that can be quantified, but what can be perceived is that, in God's good time, all things will work toward the good. He has learned this from alpine shepherds and from aristocratic women who came to him for spiritual direction. He has learned this from Jane de Chantal and the first women of the Visitation. He has learned this from children as he taught them catechism, and from young bishops like Jean-Pierre Camus who struggled to understand God's call in their lives. And all this learning becomes a motive for praise, as Francis de Sales and those who share his spirit fervently shout *Live Jesus!*

Joseph Boenzi, SDB

Associate Professor of Theology

Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, Berkeley

Visiting Professor of Spiritual Theology

Facoltà di Teologia, Università Pontificia Salesiana, Roma

²⁴ Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 38.