

JOURNAL OF SALESIAN STUDIES

January – June 2016

Volume 17, Number 1

Revised Edition

© 2016 – Salesian Society (SUO)

ISSN 2333–4061 (print)

ISSN 2333–4118 (online)

Subscription information and digital versions available online at:
SalesianJournal.org

A semiannual journal founded in 1990 and published by the

INSTITUTE OF SALESIAN STUDIES
DON BOSCO HALL | BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

a work of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales
USA - West

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A Significant Resource, A Good Read

Book Review of *Saint Francis de Sales, Life and Spirit*

by John Puntino, SDB

Saint Francis de Sales, Life and Spirit, by Joseph Boenzi, DeSales Resource Center, Stella Niagara, New York, 2013, paperback 337pp.

In the Preface to his work, Fr. Joseph Boenzi states that he “cannot claim to add anything to the great work of so many scholars on themes that derive from Francis de Sales and the Salesian tradition,” but hopes instead that, “these pages continue to add to the conversation, allowing people to resonate with Francis de Sales in their own circumstances.”¹

On the contrary, Fr. Boenzi’s book, while not a treatise, does lay claim to a unique place among the studies on this doctor of the Church and patron of communicators. For he presents his life, work, teaching, and lasting influence in a way that is attentive to details and yet clear and enjoyable to read.

The author further distinguishes this work by adding three appendices: a chart that correlates contemporary events to the life and legacy of Francis de Sales²; an examination of the institutes that belong to the Salesian family, that is, profess allegiance to the saint’s spirituality;³ and biographies of persons connected with his life and place in the Church.⁴

Throughout the first thirteen chapters (Parts I, II and III), Fr. Boenzi weaves an impressive amount of detail into the fabric of his presentation but in such a way that it draws attention to and highlights his main points, whether they concern Francis de Sales’ personal formation, diplomatic and

1. See page 11.

2. See Appendix 1, 233-241.

3. See Appendix 2, 243-280.

4. See Appendix 3, 281-296.

administrative career, theological outlook, pastoral practice or the founding and guiding of the Visitation Order.

He gives a fresh and in-depth explanation of the three-fold crisis (p. 30) that Francis de Sales experienced in his adolescence and young adulthood, and that influenced his theological vision and pastoral style throughout his life (Chapter 2). He gives due attention to his lesser-known pastoral and cultural initiatives (Chapter 11). In presenting the serpentine process of his canonization (Chapter 22) and the delays in Rome declaring the saint a doctor of the Church caused by the “quietist quarrel” (Chapter 23), Fr. Boenzi gives a full and balanced description of the negative as well as positive currents at play.

In Part IV, entitled *Spiritual Theology*, after setting the stage with a description of Francis de Sales’ theological background (Chapter 14) and historical sources (Chapter 15), the author gives highlights of his teaching on prayer (Chapter 16), love of God and neighbour (Chapter 17) and ordinary life spirituality (Chapter 18) with its practice of the virtues (Chapter 19). He concludes the section with a chapter on the greeting, wish, and blessing: “Live Jesus!” (Chapter 20).

The reader needs to slow down and be attentive to the rich spiritual content of these last five chapters. What they lack in historical detail they replace with substantial and systematically organized quotes and summaries from his writings.

The book is further enriched with occasional reproductions of sketches and portraits mostly of individuals. Most chapters end with a text boxed quote, but only thirteen of the twenty-four chapters begin with a quote. An occasional typo and the unequal quality of the reproductions may distract from a smooth reading of the text.

The rich content of this work on the life and spirit of Saint Francis de Sales deserves a wide audience of readers. When the time comes, please God, for a second edition, it would not only need to address the minor shortcomings of the current one but update Appendix 2. For inevitably some of the listed institutes will undergo juridical changes and new institutes that find inspiration in Saint Francis de Sales may come to take their place in the Salesian family.