

CELEBRATION OF IMPORTANT ANNIVERSARIES

1st Centenary of the death of Fr Paul Albera - 2021

4th Centenary of the death of Saint Francis de Sales - 2022

Dear confreres and members of the Salesian Family,

I send you all my affectionate greetings, together with my best wishes that all may be well at this particular time we are sharing with the rest of humanity.

I believe that many of you will receive this letter together with the document setting out our Congregation's programme for the next six years, following GC28 which, as you know, finished early. The next written item that will come to you will be a publication entitled: "GC28. Chapter Reflections". In other words, its title will not be "Chapter Documents", given that the process of study and approval by the Chapter itself was not fully completed.

It is certainly the case that this has been a very special time that, until now, has not been experienced by the Congregation, with the exception of what happened to Fr Paul Albera who was elected Rector Major at the 11th General Chapter, and who remained in office for twelve years due to the First World War. This prevented a new General Chapter. It was 21 September 1921 when he convened the new General Chapter and I quote his words: "Twelve years without a General Chapter. Next year will be twelve years since the loving Providence of the Lord, who usually chooses the weak and the inept for the accomplishment of his works, called me to succeed the venerable and unforgettable D. Rua in the government of the Congregation; therefore, according to the norms of our Constitutions, the General Chapter must meet for the election of the new Rector Major."¹

¹ *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani*, Lettera XLIII. Direzione Generale delle Opere Salesiane, Torino, 1965, p. 548.

Therefore, the reason for this letter is because two important anniversaries will soon be upon us.

29 October 2021 will be the first centenary of the death of Fr Paul Albera, the second successor of Don Bosco, and 28 December 2022 will be the fourth centenary of the death of our patron and titular saint, Saint Francis de Sales. Given the occasion of these anniversaries, I would like to announce that **2021 will be the year for commemorating Fr Albera, and 2022 the year for commemorating Saint Francis de Sales.**

Fr Paul Albera was Rector Major from 1910 to 1921. Don Bosco felt that he was very close to his spirit since he was a boy at the Oratory. As Rector Major, despite the terrible time of the First World War, that saw a prolonged interruption to the growth and formation of the Congregation (1914-1918), he succeeded in maintaining and developing the Salesian work in Europe and other continents. He was a man of culture and elevated spirituality as we can grasp from his circular letters.

The young Paul was a calm, smiling and studious lad. The memory of Dominic Savio, who had died the year before he came to Valdocco, encouraged the best boys to follow in his footsteps. He became a friend of Michael Magone, his neighbour in the dormitory. He excelled in school, but also stood out for his piety. One day in 1861, it was he whom Don Bosco chose to pose at his side for the historic photograph that pictures him as a penitent making his confession to Don Bosco.

The young Albera was among the first group of 22 Salesians to publicly profess their vows on 14 May 1862. In 1881 Don Bosco sent him as Provincial to France, where the people affectionately called him *le petit don Bosco*. In 1892 he returned to Turin to take up the role of “Catechist General” – in charge of formation. He undertook a lengthy visit to America from 1900 to 1903, as Fr Rua’s extraordinary representative, and in 1905 he accompanied Fr Rua on his trip to the Holy Land.

The 11th General Chapter commenced at Valdocco in Turin on 15 August 1910. This General Chapter had “the peculiarity of having had as its protagonists the first three successors of Don Bosco: it was

convened by Fr Rua, who died before it began; it was reconvened, opened and presided over for two days by Fr Rinaldi, and presided over and closed by Fr Albera, who was elected Rector Major at this Chapter.²

On 16 August 1910, the members of the 11th General Chapter chose Fr Albera as the second successor of Don Bosco, after Fr Rua. He himself would write, recalling the moment eleven years earlier: "I remember now how it was now the memorable morning of August 16, 1910, when I saw myself, unworthy as I was, raised to such a sublime office, such a grave responsibility. I remember the emotion, or rather the consternation felt at the time; the anxieties, the fears, the tears shed that day at the tomb of D. Bosco, the ardent prayers that I addressed to this good Father of ours so that he might come to my aid; and how, in the end, I induced myself to accept the charge, albeit with great repugnance, and only so as not to contradict the divine appointment... Then, all the marvels that God was pleased to work over these years, making use of my poor person, parade before my memory."³

In the presentation of the text concerning the 11th General Chapter presided over by Fr Albera, I myself write that, approaching the first centenary of his death in 1921, we have a "unique opportunity to take advantage of the circumstance and to make known this Rector Major about whom we do not have many sources, although those we do have are of incalculable value: his circulars, his intimate diary, the chronicles of his travels, especially the one he made to America as a delegate of Fr Rua, during which, with great sacrifice, he visited all the Houses in the American continent. His correspondence and that of his companion, Fr Gusmano, with the superiors of Turin, offer invaluable information about his life, adventures, sufferings, and his brilliant successes with his confreres who worked there. Likewise the news reports in the Salesian Bulletin and the many Spanish newspapers that reported his numerous

² González Jesús-Graciliano, *XI Capitolo Generale della Pia Società Salesiana presieduto da Don Paolo Albera (1910)*, CCS, Madrid, 2020, p. XLVIII.

³ *Lettere circolari...*, *op.cit.*, p. 549.

interventions during the almost five-month-long triumphal journey he made through the Iberian Peninsula.”⁴

Gifted with refined sensitivity, and given his familiarity with many spiritual writers among whom in particular Saint Francis de Sales, Fr Albera wrote circular letters that are precious mini treatises that make him a kind of master of Salesian virtues.

As Rector Major he undertook many travels because he felt the need for direct contact with the growing Salesian Family.

In any case, his greatest trial was the First World War (1914-1918). A direct consequence of this tragic event was the impossibility of holding a General Chapter during his time of office, as already indicated. Fr Albera recommended to those in charge to assist confreres in the military both morally and materially. He insisted on the maintaining of existing works, and intervened personally on behalf of refugees and war orphans, and wrote a monthly circular letter to Salesians who were called to arms. Despite the losses and the slowdown caused by the war, the Congregation resumed its path, uphill though it was, as soon as the hostilities ceased.

For us, Fr Albera is a great model of love for Don Bosco. He is also an inspiration for the time we are going through, the first global pandemic to affect life in all countries on a planetary scale, the long-term effects of which we can only imagine, for now, with a large degree of uncertainty.

The second successor of Don Bosco was also a valiant scholar and imitator of the virtues of St Francis de Sales. I would like to remind you that it was indeed Fr Albera who in 1921 announced a year of celebration for the 3rd centenary of the death of our Patron. On that occasion he wrote: “Another topic very close to my heart that I would like to direct your attention to is that of the 3rd centenary of the death of St Francis de Sales, which will take place on 28 December of the coming year.

⁴ González Jesus – Graciliano, *op.cit.*, p. XVI.

We should not only take our name from him but likewise his spirit, so we have a duty before all others to celebrate this worthily.”⁵ Then after reminding people that Don Bosco’s educational principles were those of Saint Francis de Sales, “charity, gentleness, familiarity, the holy fear of God infused into hearts, preventing, obstructing evil so that we are not then forced to punish it,”⁶ Fr Albera puts the following request to the confreres: “In each of you, my dear children, may there be a holy fervour to further explore the writings of our heavenly Patron, especially the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, the *Treatise on the Love of God* and the *Spiritual Letters*: this is the first and most practical way to celebrate his glorious centenary.”⁷

After writing this beautiful letter announcing this “Salesian” year, Fr Paul Albera gave up his soul to the Lord on 29 October 1921, leaving the celebration of the jubilee year he had promulgated up to his successor, Fr Philip Rinaldi.

Now it is up to us to celebrate both the first centenary of the death of dear Fr Albera, and the fourth centenary of the death of our holy Patron, Francis de Sales.

Saint Francis de Sales died in Lyons, during a journey, on 28 December 1622. His solemn funeral took place in his cathedral in Annecy on 24 January 1623, and on 29 January that year his body was buried in the church belonging to the first Visitation monastery in Annecy. He was listed among the saints in 1665. Blessed Pius IX proclaimed him as a Doctor of the Church in 1877. On 26 January 1923, Pius XI proclaimed him as the patron of journalists. In 1967, in his letter *Sabaudiae gemma* Saint Paul VI described him as “doctor of divine love and evangelical kindness” as well as “doctor of spiritual direction”⁸.

⁵ *Lettere circolari...*, *op.cit.*, p. 552.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 553-554.

⁷ *Idem*, p. 554.

⁸ Paul VI, *Sabaudiae Gemma. Apostolic Letter for the fourth centenary of the birth of St Francis de Sales Doctor of the Church*, Rome 29 January 1967.

For us in the Congregation and the Salesian Family, there is no lack of reasons for celebrating a year dedicated to Saint Francis de Sales:

- Don Bosco, drawing inspiration from the kindness and zeal of the holy Bishop of Geneva, gave us the name Salesians, and pointed out a programme of life in the maxim: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* (C. 4);
- Other than to Our Lady Help of Christians and st Joseph, Don Bosco entrusted our Society to Saint Francis de Sales, “zealous pastor and doctor of charity” (C. 9);
- The Salesian relies on the intercession of Saint Francis de Sales in order “to be faithful” (C. 24);
- The entire Salesian Family of Don Bosco is placed under the protection of this great Patron Saint.

The main objective that we set ourselves in this anniversary is to make the figure, spirituality and pedagogy of St Francis de Sales known among us Salesians.

Saint Francis de Sales reminds us that holiness is for everyone and that we must accompany the young on the way to this goal.

At this moment in the life of the Church and our Family, we are especially sensitive to spiritual accompaniment. And our Patron is one of the great teachers of this art in the Church’s history. We have much to learn from him. To the practice of spiritual direction, inherited from St Ignatius of Loyola, St Francis de Sales wanted to add the friendship between the one who accompanies and the one being accompanied – and Don Bosco, spontaneously, added the community dimension to this.

But in the first instance St Francis de Sales speaks to us about the heart and invites us to recover the loving-kindness and healthy affection that are at the heart of the Preventive System that Don Bosco left us, since “whosoever gains the heart has won the whole man”.⁹

⁹ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part III, Chap. XXIII.

EVENTS PLANNED

Several initiatives are planned. Here I mention those of a more comprehensive and international nature. I hope that many others will be promoted and carried out at regional level, the level of provinces or individual communities.

2021: Year dedicated to Fr Paul Albera

- 14 January 2021: opening of the centenary at Valdocco, Turin during the Salesian Family Spirituality Days.
- 30 October – 1 November 2021: congress on Fr Paul Albera, at Valdocco, Turin.
- 16 January 2022: closure of the centenary dedicated to Fr Albera and the Opening of the year dedicated to St Francis de Sales, at Valdocco, Turin, also during the Salesian Family Spirituality Days.

Among the other initiatives at world level we should recall the publication of a Life of Fr Paul Albera and a new edition of some of his letters.

2022: Year dedicated to Saint Francis de Sales

- As indicated previously, on 16 January 2022: closure of the year dedicated to Fr Paul Albera – Opening of the year dedicated to St Francis de Sales at Valdocco, Turin, during the Salesian Family Spirituality Days.
- 18-20 November 2022: congress on Francis de Sales, UPS, Rome.
- 28 December 2022, fourth anniversary of his death: participation at Annecy in celebrations at diocesan level.
- 15 January 2023: conclusion of the year at Valdocco, Turin, during the Salesian Family Spirituality Days.

Other initiatives at world level: the Strenna for 2022 will have charity in St Francis de Sales as its theme; a series of retreats will be held in Annecy in various languages; these will take advantage of the places of St Francis de Sales (Annecy, Lyons, Turin, Treviso...); aids will be published for the retreats and video conferences to assist days of

recollection and community days; biographies and works at a popular level, to be integrated into programmes for Salesian initial formation phases and available to all communities; video presentations introducing the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, *The Treatise on the Love of God* and the *Letters*; web pages with access to works and an extended bibliography for further exploration.

Saint Francis de Sales was the founder of and inspiration behind a number of Institutes of Consecrated Life. Where possible I encourage collaboration with these institutes, as also with the diocese associated with him in a special way.

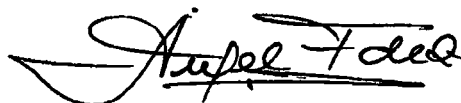
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Dear confreres, dear members of the Salesian Family,

These two anniversaries are a great opportunity for a further understanding of the charism we have received. We recall Don Bosco's words: "I am now sketching a rough copy of the Congregation. I shall leave it to those who will come after me to perfect it."¹⁰ It is up to us, now, to build a small piece of our great story, for the good of so many young people throughout the world, for the good of their families and those we intend to accompany and for the growth in charismatic fidelity of our beautiful Salesian Family of Don Bosco.

May Our Lady Help of Christians sustain us at all times and extend her hand over us as her much beloved sons and daughters.

With great affection in Don Bosco,



Fr Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, sdb
Rector Major

¹⁰ *MB XI*, 309, but the translation is taken from the English edition of the *Biographical Memoirs*, Vol XI, p. 289 (New Rochelle, New York 1964).