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FS400 Provincial Letter 6 (February 2016)

Devotion, Love of a Heart on Fire

Dear Young People, Dear Lay Mission Partners, Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Salesian Family,

The peace of the Lord be with you always! After presenting the essence of our Patron St. Francis de Sales' teaching on Charity (Love) as expressed in his masterpiece *The Treatise on the Love of God*, let us proceed to investigate this teaching taking into account another master work of St. Francis de Sales.

Besides the *Treatise on the Love of God* (popularly known as the *Theotimus*), a second literary and spiritual masterpiece of St. Francis de Sales, is, undoubtedly, *The Introduction to the Devout Life* (popularly known as the *Philothea*). Two months ago we said something about the first masterpiece, of which we have just begun the 400th anniversary year of publication (1616-2016). This month we begin to appreciate our Patron Saint's second masterpiece. We shall do so by dealing with its main theme, the theme of "Devotion". If the *Theotimus* is the masterpiece of God's love (Charity), the *Philothea* is the masterpiece of Devotion (God's love on fire). The *Philothea* was published in 1608-1609, so its 400th Anniversary is already passed! Of the *Philothea*, we have two Chinese editions, one entitled *Ru De Zhi Men*, the other entitled *Cheng Sheng Jie Jing* (only the title is different, the Chinese translation is the same!)

What does St. Francis de Sales mean by using the word "devotion"? Let him answer this question: "Charity and devotion differ no more from each other than does the flame from the fire, for charity is a spiritual fire, which, when inflamed, is called devotion" (*Philothea* I, 1; Translation by John K. Ryan). So, devotion means "fervent love", "ardent love", "burning love", "love of a heart on fire". What St. Francis means by "devotion" is what today we would call "holiness" or "sanctity".

This month we may try to understand "devotion" in a concrete way by reviewing the long series of Saints who were formed by St. Francis de Sales' teaching on devotion. Many great spiritual daughters and sons of Saint Francis de Sales were produced by this teaching. Let us choose three daughters and three sons for review. May this review also prepare us to celebrate the imminent conclusion of the Year of Consecrated Life on February 2 and the imminent beginning of the sacred season of Lent on February 10.

Three spiritual daughters of St. Francis are: 1) the widow St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641) who, together with St. Francis de Sales, in 1610 founded the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary (the Visitation Sisters); 2) the Visitation Sister St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690), the apostle of Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus; 3) the Doctor of the "Little Way", the Carmelite Sister St. Teresa of Lisieux (1873-1897), who was educated, after the death of her mother, by 'my little Mother' Pauline, her elder sister who had been for several years a pupil of the Visitation Sisters at Le Mans.

A spiritual son of St. Francis de Sales is Pope St. John XXIII (1881-1963). In his autobiography, the *Journal of the Soul*, good Pope John mentions St. Francis de Sales 24 times. Earlier, a great spiritual son of St. Francis de Sales was, of course, our Saint John Bosco (1815-1888). In the words of an historian of St. Francis, "Don Bosco, a violent man by nature, admired the charity and gentleness of Saint Francis de Sales, his unflinching kindness for the poor and derelict: He resolved to imitate him [...]. He thus became the Father of the young Saint Dominique Savio, 'his pedagogical masterpiece'." (Lajeunie, II, 560-561). St. Dominic Savio is a third child of St. Francis teaching on "devotion".

With such fruits, we are curious to know more about the teaching of St. Francis de Sales on Charity and on Devotion. This we shall do in the following months. On 13 February we commemorate the 110th anniversary of the arrival in Hong Kong and Macau of the first Salesian of Don Bosco (Fr. Luigi Versiglia, now St. Luigi Versiglia). A pupil of Don Bosco, he was formed according to the teachings of St. Francis de Sales (so another child of St. Francis' "devotion"!). May we, the pupils of his pupils, follow the same blessed path of devotion, that is, of ardent love! Happy Year of the Monkey! Holy Lent! In Jesus Mary Joseph St. Francis Don Bosco, I am, Yours affectionately, Fr. Lanfranco M. Fedrigotti, Provincial