DON BOSCO THE EDUCATOR

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DON BOSCO SAYS

***8.***

WHAT SANCTIFIES IS NOT THE SUFFERING, BUT THE PATIENCE

***Returning from Barcelona and Paris***

That evening of May 12, 1886 I arrived at Grenoble tired and exhausted by a long trip that, in three months, I had taken from Turin to France and Spain. I was subjected to a veritable *tour de force* because the construction of the church in honour of the Sacred Heart stagnated due to a chronic lack of money.

I was nicely greeted by Rector of the seminary who, worried with the pitiful state of exhaustion in which he found me, addressed fraternal words of comfort: "Reverend Father, none better than you knows how much suffering sanctifies". Whereupon, I was allowed to correct him by saying that "What sanctifies is not the suffering, but the patience". It wasn't just a phrase for effect; it was the synthesis of my existence, troubled and painful: 71 years that were now weighing on my shoulders and I had been reduced to "*a man killed by fatigue*", repeating those same words which Dr. Combal, in Montpellier said to me authoritatively a few days before, when he came to visit me in Marseille in March 1884.

***A family chat and some confidence***

I remember that in a lecture I gave to my Salesians I had explained to them the meaning of the word "patience" and had made reference to the Latin verb that means *"to undergo, tolerate, suffer, be violent."* And I pointed out with great realism: *"If it doesn’t cost effort, patience would be no more."* Then, I added: *"We need a lot of patience; or better to say, a lot of charity topped with condiments of St. Francis de Sales: gentleness, meekness".*

Based on the experience that I was going through and with a directness that I knew, I pre-empted an objection and I opened myself with confidence by saying: *"I, too, realize that it costs. And please do not think that it’s the greatest pleasure in the world staying in all morning engaged in interviews or stuck at a table all evening to give way to all chores, to letters or similar. Oh!, I assure you that many times I'd go out glad to get some air and maybe I would have a real need ... Please don’t think that it doesn’t cost me too, after having appointed someone to do a job or after having sent some errand either delicate or of concern, and not finding it done in time or even badly done, that it doesn’t cost me to keep calm; I assure you that sometimes the blood boils in my veins, a tingling dominates all senses. So what? Get Impatient? Don't you see that the job not done is done, and even corrects itself with fury".* And I ended with a thought very dear to me*: "What sustains patience must be hope. This supports us, were we to lack patience".*

Many times I realized not to have been understood, even by someone I was roughly ‘told off’ about the method by which (especially in the early years) I was training my future Salesians. Can I justify myself by claiming that I was opening up a new path. I brought out a totally different experience, but I didn't go blindly. I just contented myself to be as prudent as possible, even though my view went further. A few decades later, doing a re-scanning of the path I was walking and recalling the challenges faced, I said: *"Many clerics were staying in bed in the morning, some were not going to school, they were not doing spiritual reading, nor meditation ... I saw all those disorders and I left that to be brought forward as one could. If I wanted to get rid of all the riots at once, I would have to close the Oratory and send away all the young people, because the clerics would not have adapted to strict rules, and would all go away. I saw that of those clerics who also went away many worked willingly, were of good heart, of wholly proven morality, and, beyond that the fervor of youth, I would then have helped a lot. And I have to say that several of the priests of the Congregation, who were part of that number, are now among those who work more, have a better ecclesiastical spirit, while they certainly went away rather than submit to certain restrictive rules ... If everything went to perfection I would have been reduced to a small group, not having finished anything. "*

***The art of knowing how to wait***

A good farmer had learned to wait, learning and practising the lesson of patience, I remembered hearing many times from my mum a saying filled with wisdom: "By walking you lighten the burden of the donkey". This was the most common means of transport, safe and economical. The goods were divided into parts with equal weights on both sides of the animal through two large saddlebags or baskets. During the journey, the inevitable jolts ended up with having to adjust the load. This memory of my childhood made me say later: *"When I encounter a difficulty I do what one does going down the street and at a certain point is blocked by a large boulder. If you can't get it out of the way, you get over or around it. Or, leave the job begun unfinished, in order not to lose time in unnecessary waiting, put your hand to something else. However, do not lose sight of the interrupted initial work. For over time, the medlars ripen, men change, the difficulties are smoothed out".*

Towards the end of my life, with the number of confreres increasing, it had become impossible to write a couple of lines to each one personally. I sent a circular to all my Salesians to wish them a year blessed by Lord enriched with many initiatives. In 1884 (6th January) I wrote: *"Do we want to go to heaven in a carriage? We are in fact religious not to enjoy, but – through sacrifice – to obtain merits for the other life. Take heart, therefore, my dear and beloved children. Let's move on. It will cost us effort, there will be hardships: we shall reply: If the size of the award fascinates us, we must not be scared of all the hardships that we must undergo to deserve it".*

Death was at home in Valdocco. But it wasn’t the heavy and lugubrious atmosphere that some authors have described. Every month I offered the boys and the Salesians the *Exercise of the Happy Death*, a devotional practice that already existed. It was a plunge into the solemn mysteries of eternity. I, the educator of joy and healthy fun, predicted with great naturalness the imminent deaths of teenagers, not to scare them, but to make their love of life grow in them. I was able to spread peace even when I spoke of death, because the last word was about Paradise. I was talking about it as a child speaking about their dad's house. The boys who died in Valdocco spoke with ease and conviction of heaven, as their *home*, accepted *messages* from classmates and their teachers, were dying with a smile on their face. I remembered without doubt a phrase that I loved to repeat: *"Paradise pays everything"*. The death became an irresistible appeal to goodness of a God who forgives, who welcomes children and feasts with them.

Due to my training, I wasn't very inclined to accept external forms of exaggerated penances. I had to restrain that holy boy called Dominic Savio and rule out any kind of mortification. Let him only *" bear with patience the insults if someone insults thee, bear with patience the heat, cold, wind, rain, tiredness and all those difficulties of health that God allows".* It was what I advised everyone: *"To make up in themselves the sufferings of Jesus, the ways are not lacking there are: heat, cold, illness, people, events. These are the means to live humbly".* I gathered my thoughts with this expression: *" to kiss the cross is not enough; you have to carry it ".*