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Translated from the original French, which appeared in three issues of *Cahiers salesiens* under the title of *Les cent mots-clefs de la spiritualité salésienne*, between 1998-2000.

NOTE: This is an interactive digital edition. Should there be a request for a print edition, this can be easily arranged.

Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Anglicised Catholic edition*

Translator's note: This work goes back a quarter of a century now, so clearly predates some important revision of certain documents the author regularly cites (e.g. what were then called the *Regulations of Apostolic Life* of the Cooperators, or his references to the *Ratio Formationis* from 1985, or to the so-called *Common Identity Card of the Salesian Family*, now supplanted by the *Charter of Charismatic Identity...*) but it is of immense value still as a not-too-far-removed 'snapshot' of Salesian spirituality at the end of the millennium, and for its detailed reference material (endnotes), most often from the original Italian or French.

If these references are quoted excerpts from the original, they have been left in that language (mostly Italian), since their content is for the most part included in English in the body of the text. Where it has been possible to indicate the English BM reference, this has been done, but the MB reference remains, since there are occasions when the English *Biographical Memoirs* leave out parts of the original.

It should be noted that any quotations from the revised 1984 SDB Constitutions are provided in the adjusted English translation agreed upon by the Rector Major in 2023. This adjusted translation is available in the **Salesian Digital Library (SDL)**

Finally, as this is a digital edition, the comprehensive subject index provided by Fr Desramaut has not been included. Users can very easily search for any word (or words) they wish to in their pdf reader.

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Preface

This work, halfway between a simple list of terms and a dictionary proper, was born in November 1996 at the suggestion of the Pontifical Salesian University's Institute of Spirituality in Rome. It was intended to enlighten, in an accessible manner, those interested in the spirituality of Don Bosco and the Salesian Family that draws its inspiration from him: Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Cooperators, Volunteers of Don Bosco, Past Pupils, members of the various religious Congregations associated with that family, friends or simple sympathisers, in search of clear information on one or the other aspect of Salesian life.

It is therefore not a high-level dictionary, accompanied by an up-to-date bibliography that allows one to progress in the study of the different issues raised. The author has had no other aim than to give an insight into often difficult and delicate topics. These annotations, which are clearly always quite incomplete in themselves and will therefore not fail to annoy specialists, have no other ambition than to *introduce a reflection* around the words chosen by the author. Those who seek a treatise or treatises on spiritual theology, "which develop a theology capable of honouring Trinitarian thought, the ecclesial dimension of Christian life, the consideration of mediations and a correct Christian anthropology", according to the wishes of one of my most enlightened correspondents, will be totally disappointed. Rather will they be interested in consulting one of the dictionaries of spiritual life or religious life that have appeared in recent years, for example, the valuable *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, whose seventeen-volume publication by Beauchesne in Paris began in 1932 and ended in 1995.

This volume is therefore intended for people pressed for work and largely active in the world of Don Bosco's sons and daughters. Experience is beginning to teach me that several are already using it in their sermons or personal meditations. May I be allowed to be grateful to the Lord, who is rich in grace?

Francis Desramaut

Toulon, 31 January 2000

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Abbreviations

Atti	Acts of the Superior (or General) Chapter (or Council)
CG	General Chapter of the Salesians (GC)
CGS	Special General Chapter of the Salesians (SGC 1971)
Epistolario	Giovanni Bosco, Epistolario
FdB	Microfiches from the Fondo Don Bosco, printed Catalogue in the Salesian Central Archives, Rome
FMA	Daughters of Mary Help of Christians
L.C.	Collection of circular letters of a Rector Major
MB	<i>Memorie biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco</i>
MO	Giovanni Bosco, <i>Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales</i> , ed. A. Ferreira Da Silva*
SDB	Salesiens of Don Bosco
VDB	Volunteers of Don Bosco

* Fr Desramaut frequently cites this Italian version in his notes. In the main body of the translated text, the citations are taken from the English translation of the *Memoirs of the Oratory...* by Daniel Lyons, Salesiana Publishers New Rochelle, New York, 2010.

Introduction

Salesian spirituality¹

Salesian spirituality, as conceived by Don Bosco (1815–1888) in his time, was and remains a simple matter.² In the middle of the twentieth century, one of his most insightful witnesses, Fr Alberto Caviglia, summed it up for young Salesians through a series of ten commandments. Here, he announced, is the “Salesian Decalogue.”

What did Don Bosco want his Salesians to be like? Here is a simple gauge. A person who does not want to work is no Salesian. One who is not moderate in eating and drinking (*temperante*) is no Salesian. One who is not in reality poor is no Salesian. One who is not kind-hearted is no Salesian. One who is not pure is no Salesian. One who is disobedient (*indocile*) is no Salesian. One who is undisciplined (*libertino*) is no Salesian. One who acts without the right intention is no Salesian. One who does not possess a Eucharistic soul is no Salesian. One who is not devoted to Mary is no Salesian. Now rewrite these sentences as positive commands and you have the Salesian Decalogue.³

Don Bosco, a practical man, only dreamed at night time. Once he got up, he thought only about being active. Though he revered metaphysics, he left it to slumber in books. Speculation did not tempt him. Moreover, lofty considerations would have put his audience to sleep. He advised his priests against them when they were preaching. “Tell stories, appeal to them, use language close to the people. That way, you won’t waste your time. You will be useful to young people and to all your listeners.” His spirit and therefore the spirituality he left his sons as his legacy, in this case the members of his Salesian Family, suffered from it as a result. They were thought to be simplistic. Something that was possible, but not a sure thing. This kind of hypothesis should be tested. Did the writers of the Gospels cultivate abstraction? For nearly two thousand years, the parables and the beatitudes with which their texts are studded have nourished the most delicate mystical souls. Real simplicity need not be stodgy. The vivid metaphor even conceals a richness of evocation that the bare concept lacks.

But is Salesian spirituality as static as Fr Caviglia believed, for whom Don Bosco and his posterity were one and the same? It has certainly changed during the twentieth century. Better yet, would it not have evolved to conform to the present century, like all

of Catholicity around it? In this essay, we would like to look at it a little more closely, not only as it blossomed in the soul of a nineteenth-century Piedmontese priest, but even in the perhaps unexpected forms it took at the dawn of the year two thousand.

What is spirituality?

What do we actually mean by the expression “the spirituality of the Salesian Family”, a term that encompasses men and women religious and lay people, consecrated or not, who want to follow Don Bosco?

We must first distinguish between “spirituality” and “spirit”, two cognate terms whose meanings only partially overlap. A set of ideas and feelings guides how communities behave. This is their spirit, whether it be good or not. “The spirit of the monarchy is war for expansion; the spirit of the republic is peace and moderation”, wrote Montesquieu,⁴ who had yet to live through the turbulent period of the French Revolution. Religious societies, like any community, have a spirit that is peculiar to them. Not without reason, the Society of Jesus has long been attributed with a spirit of its own. “No work is ever published by us that does not have the spirit of our society”, Blaise Pascal quoted one of its members as saying.⁵ The powerful originality of the spirit of the various religious societies is easily explained. A common rule of life, structures, customs, patterns and habits easily distinguish set the atmosphere of the Jesuit world apart from the Benedictine world. The Rule of St Benedict and St Ignatius’ Exercises shaped the habits and hearts of their followers. Monks or active religious cultivate values and reproduce examples that differ, and preach the style of relationships inside either the abbey or the residence. The visitor feels it as soon as he enters there. Let’s call this kind of invisible driving force scattered across a religious community its *spirit*, which decides personal or communal behaviour and sometimes manages to affect even the appearance of its members.

Spirituality, derived from the word spirit, is obviously related to it. This word can have several meanings. Let’s try to be specific. For us, it is not a question of the simple “nature of what is spiritual, independent of matter and body”, in the primary sense of spirituality. In this case the term has a necessarily religious resonance. Spirituality is always religious. This is a first specific feature. But the meaning of the word must still be refined. Two related meanings which must at least be distinguished, are attached to it in contemporary vocabulary. Spirituality applies either subjectively to the spiritual life (marked by religion) of a person or group, or, objectively, to the principles, beliefs and

practices that govern that spiritual life. We speak of the spirituality of St Francis of Assisi in the first sense, and, in the second, of the spirituality of the Friars Minor, his followers. Before we choose between them let us carefully settle into the Christian order of things. There is no religious life, therefore no spirituality in the sense that we give this word, apart from a relationship with God. The Christian's religion makes the individual an adopted son or daughter of God the Father. But the individual encounters this Father only in Christ, his incarnate Son, and under the movement of the Spirit. This person's spiritual life and therefore their spirituality must (or should) be rooted in the Holy Spirit. The Christian mystic, whose soul responds to the divine expectation, lives by the Spirit in which Christ is discovered. Principles, beliefs and practices of spirituality are only thinkable in the Holy Spirit. Moreover, as a consequence of the Incarnation, this Spirit is at work only in time, that is, in the mediating environment which is the Church. This digression does not remove us from the simple and practical world that is dear to the Salesian tradition. When the Spirit of God guides someone peacefully, the true mystic, if we follow Henri Bergson, enjoys

an intellectual health that is solidly based, exceptional, and easily recognisable. It is manifested by the taste for action, the ability to adapt and readapt to circumstances, firmness coupled with flexibility, prophetic discernment of the possible and the impossible, a spirit of simplicity that triumphs over complications, and finally superior common sense.⁶ Bergson's mysticism was very similar to our Don Bosco's.

Salesian spirituality will not be used here, except indirectly, to designate the Salesian spirit, the one normally found in communities that claim to belong to Don Bosco; nor will it designate the more or less successful spiritual life of those who follow him. Intentionally, as we strive to move from the subject(s) to their objectified mentality, to what, in theory, directs their thoughts and actions, we will designate spirituality as being the set of principles, ideas, feelings and models of conduct of Don Bosco's followers in fidelity to the Holy Spirit. This relationship to the Spirit should allow us to escape from merely behavioural sociology. For the Spirit living in the Church provides us with a tool for discernment in a changing reality that is at once historical, imperfect and dynamic.

Salesian spirituality is fluid

The spirituality of a religious society, even though we would like to define it once and for all, is indeed a fluid thing. Filled with reverential piety where their founder is concerned,

his followers, especially his most immediate ones, did not willingly recognise this obvious fact. Because they weaken the social construct, any modifications to the original form are distressing. For is not spirituality an integral part of the original form of their society?

Blessed Philip Rinaldi, the then Rector Major, understood this very well in 1931, a few months before his death, when he wrote an entire circular letter on the theme: “Let us preserve and practice our traditions.”

The natural attraction to all things new can lead to the neglect of tradition; we can forget that it is one thing to run after new things, another to always be at the forefront of all progress, as Don Bosco did and wanted us to do. Progress that forces us to renounce any of our best traditions, however small, does not suit us, my dear friends. In such cases, let us remain quietly in the rearguard to preserve our father’s heritage and we shall benefit in every way.⁷

In truth, however, spirituality must be understood as a complex and evolving thing. Ideas, principles of behaviour, common feelings and accepted models inevitably change with the years and particular societies. Some fade, others appear or gain strength. Their hierarchy can be turned on its head. This mindset lives on in history. All observers note that the life of the majority of religious societies changed greatly in the Western world during the seventies of this twentieth century. As proof of this it would be enough to enter a Carmelite convent or a Visitation monastery. What has become of the grills and black veils of old, recalled only here and there by a few enigmatic examples? Spirituality has evolved in these places. The principle of separation, as a means of escaping from the world, has been greatly undermined. The idea of entering religion has been changed. Certain austerities are no longer appropriate. Revered models are neglected or totally forgotten. Is that a good thing? Is it better? One should be careful not to consider what might merely be concessions to human fragility as progress. History has indeed undergone countless reforms of religious life as a result of changes that people now deplore. As the twentieth century draws to a close, we do not know what potential revivals of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries there might be. The fact remains that for many religious societies, the spirituality that regulates behaviour is not quite the same today as it was yesterday.

It would be extraordinary if the Salesian Family had escaped this evolutionary trend. The walls of abbeys and Carthusian monasteries was no protection from contact with a changing world. The Salesian Family’s apostolic activity immerses it in the world and in the Church. Being involved in the surrounding culture is an obligation for it, even when it has to judge and condemn it. The Salesian Family never ceases to receive the messages

which might come as orders from the Holy See. The saintly Rector Major, Fr Rua, had a bitter experience of this at the beginning of the twentieth century. At an earlier date I happened to write a book on the spirituality lived and taught by Don Bosco. I measured the distance between his perception of the world, including its religious dimension (the way he considered the Bible, history, miracles, the Church, religions or the sacraments) and the perception of these things that has become the norm a century after his death. Salesian spirituality has necessarily evolved over the years. The one we know today is no longer the spirituality of Don Bosco, but the spirituality of a community in the century that followed his. It has a history that can be studied from generation to generation. We will return to this issue.

By way of summary: by Salesian spirituality we mean the living, and therefore changing set of ideas, feelings, principles, behaviours and models which more or less clearly and consciously direct the spiritual life of the religious family that came into being through Don Bosco.

The origins of Don Bosco's religious experience

At the root of this spirituality lies the experience of the founder, Don Bosco. It will always be impossible to ignore it. When they read and reconstruct their spirituality one cannot imagine the Benedictines forgetting St Benedict, the Franciscans' St Francis of Assisi, the Dominicans' St Dominic, the Jesuits' St Ignatius of Loyola, the Oratorians' St Philip Neri or the Redemptorists' St Alphonsus Liguori. The founders imprinted a character essential to their identity on their religious societies. To ignore this is to do it harm. However, this imprint is not necessarily significant in every respect. Thus, it would be necessary to wait for Father Daniel Brottier (1876–1936) to have a pattern of spiritual life in the *Oeuvre des Orphelins-Apprentis d'Auteuil* (The Work of Orphan-Apprentices), founded in Paris in 1866 by Abbé Louis Roussel. Don Bosco did not just put his stamp on the work he established, but also on the spirituality of his Salesian Family. He established what Egidio Viganò called his “spiritual school”, calling him the *caposcuola* (founder) of a new style of holiness.⁸ This school of holiness was generated not by doctrine, but by religious experience.

Authentic religious experience takes place in voluntary adherence to the divine absolute, adherence to a fabric as varied and as rich as life itself. Man is indeed an incarnate spiritual being marked by his environment and the experience he has acquired; his judgements and decisions are based on multiple experiences and data. Religious

experience is “the act – or set of acts – by which he grasps himself, thus surrounded, in relation to God.”⁹

In this environment, in which we distinguish three levels, there is first of all the primitive data made up of race, nature, heredity and temperament. Without always being aware of it, experience, even of the most spiritual kind, is rooted in space and time; we call this vital or essential experience. There is also social experience conveyed by family, environment, school and profession, made up of influences that shape personality and decisions. But the most important is the personal element of human experience shaped by instinctive and reflective choices, diverse reactions, a chance psychological event, a behaviour or a way of being and assimilating experience. This personal data does not yet imply a judgement of finality or freedom. The three kinds of data (the vital, the social and the personal) flesh out the experience of the embodied person and command his vision of Being and of beings. A sort of “middle ground between nature and actions”, they are both an enrichment and a burden. Man is shaped by life; he is never naked or neutral in the face of truth and values. Habits, powers of inclination and transformation, make up a fund of spiritual dispositions for him that open or close the door to the Infinite. It is in this already oriented movement that the individual is confronted with choices concerning his existence and the meaning of all reality. These successive choices, made over the course of his history, weave his experience, first and foremost his religious experience.

Experience is properly spiritual when, in the face of the Infinite, it amounts to a total and radical act of awareness, involving the whole person in all of their multiple and constituent relationships. It is spiritual, profound and total, when it is “an experience taken in its personal totality, with all its structural elements and all its principles of movement; an experience built and grasped in lucidity”, when it emanates “from an awareness that is self-possessive and in the generosity of a love that gives itself; in short, [when it is] a fully personal experience in the strict sense of the word.”

In his deepest spiritual experience John Bosco was conditioned by very typical data which we need to reflect on to understand his lifelong experience and enter into his personal spirituality.

The Piedmontese stock which he came from was much more akin to the industrious ant than the musical cicada. The tenant farmers in the countryside were eager to become small landowners. Hardworking, persevering and with their own winning ways, Piedmontese peasants were also pleasant to deal with. The Catholic religion had shaped Piedmont since antiquity. Dissenters, uniformly described as Protestants, and pagans,

who could only be “savages”, were treated with contempt. The parish priest ruled the village. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, new ideas from neighbouring revolutionary France were considered suspect and dangerous. Like the rest of the Bosco family, John was a hard worker. His kindness and smile were unfailing. And he would never envisage the possibility of salvation, let alone holiness, outside of Roman Catholicism.

The Bosco family, led by Margaret Occhiena who had lost her husband when John was about twenty months old, was eminently pious. Margaret accustomed her sons to a life of hardship and mortification: simple meals, a hard straw mattress, early mornings. Above all, she took great care to teach her children religion, accustom them to obey and provide them with things to be done that were adapted to their age. The Bosco family prayed morning and evening. “When I was still very small,” Don Bosco explained, “she herself taught me to pray. As soon as I was old enough to join my brothers, she made me kneel with them morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together, including the rosary.”¹⁰ Daily prayer in common in the morning and evening were then the rule in Piedmontese families, as well as the rosary in the evening. Three times a day, the family greeted Mary with the Angelus. Illiterate, Margaret nevertheless knew by heart the main lessons of the diocesan catechism. According to her biographer Lemoyne, a moraliser as ever, but, in this case he spoke the truth, she knew “how great is the power of a mother’s Christian upbringing, and that God’s law, taught by the catechism every evening and reinforced during the day, is the best way to make children obedient to their mothers. So she repeated the questions and answers as many times as necessary for them to commit them to memory.”¹¹ Don Bosco himself testified to this: “I knew the entire little catechism ... Because we lived far from the parish church, the parish priest did not know us, and my mother had to do almost all the religious instruction.”¹² We can be sure that she began by teaching little John the formula and gesture of the sign of the cross, with which Christians from early times began all their important acts. In this way, she instilled in her children the idea of an ever-present personal God. This conviction never left John Bosco. He began to live under the gaze of the God of the Our Father, Lord of supreme dignity and the infinitely good father who gives us our “daily bread”, forgives the faults we have committed and restrains the unfortunate on the verge of re-offending. When the child was seven or eight years old, Margaret carefully prepared him for his confession. “Sin” became something horrible and dreadful to him. She would later watch over his his First Communion at Easter 1827. During the preceding Lent she had accompanied him three times to the confessional. At home, she had made him pray or read an edifying book and had given him plenty of advice. When the big day

arrived, she would not let him talk to anyone, and went with him to the church. First of all the “preparation”, then the communicant’s “act of thanksgiving”, that is, she took part in the recitation of the appropriate “acts” which the parish priest said aloud then had the congregation repeat.¹³ In this way, under the guidance of his mother, the child experienced a quality sacramental life, which, as a priest, he would continue to recommend to his followers.

However, his spiritual life still lacked depth. As a teenager, he had the good fortune to meet a priest who gave him food for thought. Saddened by his inability to study for the priesthood he was longing for, Fr Calosso, the chaplain in his hamlet, offered to help him when he was already fourteen. He gave him the fatherly support he had always unconsciously sought around him. The boy also found a director for his soul in this elderly priest. Fr Calosso encouraged him to go to confession and Holy Communion, and to do a little “meditation” (a short spiritual reading) every day. His religious life, hitherto very formal, was taking a turn for the better. “From then on I began to savour the spiritual life”, he wrote. “Up till then I had acted in a purely mechanical way, not knowing the reasons.”¹⁴

His training as a college student and seminarian took place at the time of the Restoration, that is to say in an officially very strict period in terms of morality and very demanding both for young people and for their teachers. We can see what his spiritual life was through the examples he admired and endeavoured to reproduce in himself. Luigi Comollo and Fr Giuseppe Cafasso were the main ones. Let’s just talk about the first of them. Luigi Comollo, a boy about his own age (he was two years younger than him), a school friend, and then together at the seminary, was of an opposite temperament to his. Bosco, a solid and irascible young man, loved sport, if not a fight. Comollo allowed himself to be insulted without flinching. Bosco contented himself with the regulatory requirements in matters of piety while Comollo liked long periods of adoration in the church. Bosco added nothing to the acts of mortification provided for by rules in force at the time, while Comollo fasted rigorously even though dispensed from such because of his age. The friendship which united their hearts caused John to defer to Luigi, made him accept all his remarks and gradually transformed his tastes. He was experiencing genuine piety.

On the eve of entering the seminary, John thus made some important resolutions regarding a more austere life. He brought all the ardour of his twenties to the task. “My life in the past had not been wicked, but I had been proud and dissipated, given over to

amusements, games, acrobatics and other such things. These pursuits gave passing joy but did not satisfy the heart.”¹⁵

Henceforth he would no longer go to public shows at fairs and markets, he would no longer be seen at balls and theatres, and, if possible, he would no longer take part in festivities. No more sleight of hand, magic tricks, tightrope walking; no more violin, no more hunting. “These things I hold totally contrary to ecclesiastical dignity and spirit.”¹⁶

The cleric Bosco would therefore live a retiring life, he would be moderate with food and drink and would take only the time for rest essential to his health. He would serve his God with religious readings, replacing the secular ones to which he had, in his opinion, given too much attention. He would fight the pitfalls of chastity with all his might: thoughts, words and deeds. A little spiritual reading, and tell at least one uplifting story a day, even if only to his mother. He wrote these resolutions, he then tells us, to fix them firmly in his mind, went before an image of the Blessed Virgin, read them, prayed and promised Mary to observe them “no matter what sacrifice it cost.”¹⁷ “Temperance” would be one of the defining features of his spiritual experience.

He did not, however, treat vile nature as an enemy. In the battle between the theologians of his time in Turin after his ordination, he found himself on the side of the Liguorians rather than the “probabiliorists” who were labelled Jansenists for their rigour. He thus sided with a gospel understanding in preference to inhuman legalism. Alphonsus Liguori was his moralist theologian and his master of spirituality, even if he felt he had to modify some of the things he said.

His spiritual experience proper, in the sense given to this above, had been sketched in his early years. He had been offered a choice in life from his childhood. He had given himself to God, or more precisely to Christ and his Mother, whom he thought he met in a dream. The dream when he was nine years of age, during which these two characters had invited him to work for children some of whom were foulmouthed, had decided the meaning of his life. We judge his dream only from the dreamer’s oft-repeated memory. Faced with many animals, some of them wild ones, he was told by Mary, “This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic. And what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children.”¹⁸

He looked again. The animals were replaced by very gently lambs who seemed to be welcoming Jesus and his mother. The gift, strengthened over the years, then made sacred by priestly ordination, was complete. John never forgot it. His vocation would always be apostolic, even if he wondered about its precise form (in the diocesan clergy or

in a religious congregation). But he was energetic, intelligent and very sensitive. Taking it easy was something suspect for him, especially for a priest. Pious desires did not satisfy him: he looked around, noticed what was needed and acted.

His gift to the Lord would result in the service of people, especially the young and the poor, to whom he would consecrate his life. His motto would be “Give me souls.” It is for them that he founded, despite the difficulties, two religious societies, the Salesians in 1859, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1872, systematically adding “Cooperators” to them, who were not obliged to live in community under a regime of duly pronounced religious vows. It was to these sons and daughters, for whom he was a model of life, that Don Bosco passed on his spiritual experience.

These were his free choices “for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls”, in the words that were dear to him. In his undertakings he experienced the good favour of the Virgin Mary and the support of Divine Providence. He was God’s, and God was for him. He insisted on repeating this. “God is for us, he encourages us on the path we are following” he told his followers. Don Bosco’s profound and total religious experience lasted for all of his life.

Don Bosco’s spirituality

Don Bosco lived this fundamental experience according to a spirituality. That is to say, in the sense given above to this term: a set of principles, ideas and behaviours which we must endeavour to sum up here, their details being referred to in everything that follows.¹⁹

Over time, this spirituality acquired the form of an original kind of moderate humanism. He was born into a conservative world, but his natural wisdom, the necessities of life, and the movement of his time urged him to adapt to the world in which he lived. His love of fine literature, games and shows could have made him a humanist in the ancient tradition of his country, if an ideology similar to *The Imitation of Christ* had not ended up moderating his youthful enthusiasm. And he was formed by rigorous clerics with Jansenist tendencies. But the schools of the Liguorians and the Ultramontanes, the attitudes and teachings of Saint Philip Neri, Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Vincent de Paul and others also belonging to the same tendencies, those who prevailed in the Church at the time of the first Vatican Council, ultimately won him over. He believed in the redemptive and sanctifying value of apostolic action, and founded Congregations whose members were as close as possible to common Christian associations. He proposed a Christian way of life to children and adults, lay people and

religious, in short, to all those he reached through his institutions, his conferences and his many books. This way of life was a spirituality.

The human being, created good, is marked by fate, weakness and evil. The human being's earthly existence is a marvellous gift of the Lord, but there is no rest except in God, and after death. God wants everyone to be holy. But unfortunately, "infidels" abound, without a relationship with Jesus, the only fount of salvation. And many Christians go astray along life's journey. Don Bosco's optimism about human nature was very relative. In his understanding, life was a race to death, whose point of arrival, rest in God, could always be missed. But blessed is the one who progresses towards God with his head, and especially with his "heart", for such will be saved! If such a person cultivates "virtue" perhaps he "will even become a saint", like Aloysius Gonzaga and Dominic Savio!

Don Bosco's spiritual world began to evolve: a just and good God, Christ as a friend, model and source of life, the Virgin Mary, radiant with holiness and inexhaustible kindness, a whole theory of blessedness, and finally, the visible Church, could only urge him and his immediate followers to holiness understood as the heroism of Christian virtue.

The spiritual person makes progress with the support of such a beatific environment, both visible and invisible. Don Bosco himself made progress in this way in a real world, or he made it real, which was the birthplace he came from but also was part of his personal experience. He may have lived under the gaze of a God who was judge and father, with a gentle and good historical Christ, a Eucharistic Christ "present in the tabernacle" as a companion, with an Immaculate Virgin, Queen and Helper "terrible as an army arrayed in battle", with legions of angels and saints who could show the way of salvation and perfection to human beings "of every age and condition", but this can be explained by his formation, the zeitgeist of the time, by the desires of his listeners or readers, or in other words, by his world of relationships. It had to do essentially with his fundamental choices of life for his God. He really felt that God, Mary and the saints were at his side. This was the world of his life and therefore of his spirituality.

As a practical man, more interested in how things should be done than in speculative justifications of results, when John Bosco had set himself a goal his agile mind immediately applied itself, with all his resources, to the means he would use to achieve it: an "oratory" to bring together young workers, trade workshops to give them a human and religious upbringing by removing them from the dangers of the city, a network of propagandists to disseminate his magazine, the *Catholic Readings*, throughout Italy, the

Union of Salesian Cooperators to garner the goodwill of his country, Western Europe and, who knows, the whole world... What should be done? That was his problem. No one will be surprised that he dealt with questions of the soul in the same spirit. What can I do for it? This soul must be enlightened, guided, nourished along life's journey, and exercised by appropriate aids or "instruments". Don Bosco certainly believed in asceticism and sanctification through charity – we will insist on this shortly – but he believed first and foremost in the illuminating virtue of the Word, the support provided by the sacrament of Penance, the divine strength provided by the Eucharist and spiritual devotions.

Don Bosco's spirituality was certainly not suspended somewhere between heaven and earth to the point of forgetting the earth for love of heaven. The "human nature" which was celebrated in his books did not disappear under the weight of sermons, sacraments, devotions, and pious exercises which might have carried his immediate followers away from the world and its joys. Earthly goods even helped to assure them the peace and joy which their master held dear. In doing so, he probably deviated from the Liguorian tradition, by which he was constantly inspired in asceticism, to approach the Oratorian tradition of Saint Philip Neri and, through this, the whole of the Italian Renaissance. One adverb suffices to measure how much he differed from Liguori with a proposition of St Alphonsus, who seemed to know only of the human being's super-terrestrial end: "You are not born nor should you live to enjoy, to enrich yourself and become powerful, to eat, to drink and to sleep like brutes, but only to love your God and for your eternal salvation" as St Alphonsus wrote, who apparently saw goods of this world as only the means offered to the human being "to help him reach his great end." In adapting these lines for *The Companion of Youth*, Don Bosco did not explicitly duplicate the goals, saying, "The only end for which [God] created you is to be loved and served [by you] in this life", but he continued, at the cost of an implicit contradiction, to say "So that you are not *only* in the world to enjoy, to enrich yourself, to eat, drink and sleep as beasts do, but your end is to love your God and to save your soul." He thus added a natural end to enjoy, to be enriched ... to only the supernatural end which St Alphonsus seemed to consider the only one, to love God and to save his soul.²⁰

Don Bosco's "method of life" which was a spiritual method was enough, as he explained to his boys (again in *The Companion of Youth*), to allow them to "also be a joy to [their] parents, a glory to [their] country, good citizens on earth, and one day blessed inhabitants of heaven."²¹

Therefore he was not only concerned with the life beyond. Don Bosco wanted the fulfilment of the legitimate desires of his subjects and their happiness in both orders, that of grace first and foremost, but also that of nature. To make the human being happy in body and soul, in all the physical and moral possibilities, and in the world that is his until his death, such was his great desire. But he never lost sight of the religious essence of the spiritual life. No happiness is possible, he taught, without God and a genuine relationship with him.

The preference for God does not come without renunciation. Asceticism was an integral part of Don Bosco's spirituality. "Work and Temperance" was one of his slogans. We must first and foremost renounce sin, and therefore its pleasures. Don Bosco was constantly preoccupied with the purity (he preferred the less suggestive term "modesty") of his boys. Peace is assured to those who practise it. Peace is guaranteed to those who practice an asceticism of renunciation and even more so of acceptance. "God generously rewards sacrifices made in obedience to his Holy Will..."²²

Finally, all spiritual life must be directed to the service of the greater glory of God. We serve God through prayer and action. Don Bosco's prayer was simple and dignified. Without ever neglecting it and, still less, forgetting it, he leaned towards action, first of all apostolic action, animated by charity and which aims at the total good of others. The disciple of Saint Benedict prefers prayer, while the disciple of Don Bosco will prefer action. The action triggered a kind of "ecstasy" in him, according to a term that the Rector Major, Fr Viganò, borrowed from Saint Francis de Sales. This book, which this essay introduces, will often speak of the style of this action, the main features of which belong to his system of education, called the preventive system. There was nothing brutal about Don Bosco's action. Gentleness, agreeableness, if possible affection, imbued all his relationships and those of his faithful disciples. He himself very much liked St Paul's words about charity. "Charity is patient...." From the time he had known about him, he admired Francis de Sales, a doctor of charity and therefore of kindness, and made him a model.

His richness of soul and heart, with his taste for action and some other traits inherited from the best humanism of the sixteenth century, bring the spirit (and therefore the spirituality) of Don Bosco closer to things that have conquered the Western Christian world in the second half of the twentieth century for its greater good (at least according to optimists): the concern for the health of body and mind, *joie de vivre*, the "demystification" of prayer in favour of action, acceptance of pleasure, humility without masochism, love shared equally. It also contained some antidotes to the inevitable

deviations. Tomorrow's eulogists of Don Bosco will demonstrate the very religious sense of his spirituality, his true and complete renunciation, an eschatological approach that so wonderfully and straightforwardly harmonised with the "incarnation" of the present, a very Catholic sensitivity to the living and sacramental presence of God in the world and other precious values, correct or complete tendencies, not all of which can avail themselves of the promises of eternal life. For, in whatever century he or she lives, the Christian will find true holiness only in Christ who died and is risen.

Saint Francis de Sales in Don Bosco's spiritual school

Don Bosco led a school. He even left a legacy of holiness, a "living letter" in the hearts of the young according to the words of John Paul II in his homily for the Beatification of Laura Vicuña (3 September 1988). The pope went on to say,

This "letter" makes a particularly clear and eloquent statement in that from generation to generation new saints and blessed continue to arise out of this heritage. We are familiar with the splendid retinue of chosen souls formed in Don Bosco's school. We may mention Saint Dominic Savio, Blessed Michael Rua, Don Bosco's first successor, the blessed martyrs Louis Versiglia and Callistus Caravario, Saint Mary Dominica Mazzarello, co-founder of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and young Laura Vicuña, who today, on the occasion of the Salesian jubilee, is raised to the glory of the altars.

Don Bosco's spiritual school is part of an already long tradition. He himself identified masters and models, such as Philip Neri and Alphonsus Liguori. Among them, Francis de Sales came to the fore more and more with the passage of time. Let me be clear here. It was chance (a very happy chance) between 1844 and 1846 that made Francis de Sales the patron saint of the original oratory at the work run by the Marchioness Barolo, and then at the Valdocco in Turin. Don Bosco was delighted, as he explained (in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*), because in this way, he offered his close co-workers a model of kindness, gentleness and zeal perfectly adapted to his ideas about education. About fifteen years passed and, quite naturally, the patron saint of the oratory became the patron saint of the religious family, the pious society of St Francis de Sales. The founder certainly did not estimate all the consequences of his choice. But the result was that he placed his embryonic spiritual school within the "Salesian" mould in the literal sense. Henceforth, he and his disciples would be led to seek lessons for life not only in the historical image (in which only Don Bosco was really interested), but in

the often admirable written work of the Savoyard saint of the seventeenth century. His disciples would study him with even greater gusto as the affinities between Francis de Sales and Don Bosco are many, as we will often have the opportunity to verify, despite the frequently emphasised diversity of their appearance.

Three Salesian Rectors Major have said how they have reacted to this patronage. Fr Paul Albera in 1921 in preparation for the third centenary of the death of Francis de Sales, Luigi Ricceri in 1967, for the centenary of his birth, and Egidio Viganò in 1990, in the letter that we will soon find on “*Spiritualità salesiana per la nuova evangelizzazione*”.²³

“We, who must not only borrow his heart, but also his spirit, have a duty to surpass all others in celebrating the event worthily.” And Fr Albera remarked that the providential choice of the term ‘Salesian’ made Don Bosco’s mission “as a reflection or better a continuation of the mission begun by Francis de Sales more than three centuries ago.” The third centenary of the death of this saint would encourage the Salesians to deepen their knowledge of his life and writings, in correlation with the work which bears his name “and which, for this reason, is intended to disseminate and popularise, by all available means, his spirit and his doctrine, already perfectly assimilated by Don Bosco and brilliantly transfused by him in his system of education.”²⁴

This overly generous conclusion should not lead us to forget the previous observations, which placed Don Bosco’s message in the tradition of Francis de Sales de Sales and urged the Salesians, his sons, to assimilate the spirit of this saint.

On the occasion of the fourth centenary of the birth of Saint Francis, in 1967, the Rector Major Fr Luigi Ricceri dedicated a letter to the patron saint of the Salesian Society. “For the Salesians,” he wrote, “Francis de Sales is a master of spirituality and, in education, a model for the atmosphere of freedom, dialogue and loving-kindness that he always advocated.” In the second part of his letter, he recalled that in this type of apostolate, Francis de Sales was a model for Don Bosco and has remained so for his disciples.²⁵

Seventy years after Fr Albera, Fr Viganò rediscovered the eloquence of this Rector Major on the importance of Francis de Sales in Salesian spirituality. The adjective “Salesian” attached to the spirituality of his religious family encouraged him to “restore St Francis de Sales to a more fitting and influential place in our spirituality.” For the doctrine of this saint profoundly enriches Salesian spirituality and gives it a particular direction. Fr Viganò explained himself by recalling his insistence on “apostolic charity”:

“he is, in fact, the doctor of that kind of pastoral charity which is the summation and centre of our apostolic spirit.” And he set out to show Francis de Sales as the initiator of a powerful spiritual renewal. The author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* in fact made the practice of the gospel in the world amenable by valuing all conditions and states of life; he harmonised interiority and external activity; he gave importance to everyday life; he fought against rigourism; he demanded a concrete spirituality for all. The “devout life” that he preached, gentle, easy and pleasant, was neither repulsive nor simple. Then the Rector Major went on to the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Francis de Sales had, he said, developed the “doctrine” (understand: theology) of the love of charity. The *Treatise* seemed to him to be a “book of life, almost an autobiography”, an effort of constant progress in a project of spiritual growth according to process that was not monastic, but apostolic; a committed work, a kind of *vademecum* for the disciple who wants to live by believing in the world. And he paused complacently on the opening sentence of the tenth book of this great work: “Man is the perfection of the universe, the spirit is the perfection of man, love that of the spirit, and charity that of love: that is why the love of God is the end, the perfection and the excellence of the universe.” For Fr Viganò, unlike Francis, the charity celebrated here could only be that of the *l’apôtre au coeur mangé* [translator’s note: Literally, ‘the apostle of the eaten heart’, a reference to an ancient legend, rewritten by Camus, but found in literature and art worldwide].

John Paul II, he continued, described Don Bosco as a “genius of the heart”. “In St Francis de Sales the heart found not only one of the most genial interpreters of its human riches made perfect by charity, but also a keen and contemplative thinker able to discern its beating even to the highest level of the gift of itself in apostolic activity.” The adjective ‘Salesian’, he wrote of his family’s spirituality, and to conclude his paragraph, means “relaunching among youth a taste for God, the festivity that is life, commitment for history. responsibility for all created things and a willing and generous sharing in ecclesial responsibility.”²⁶

These concluding sentences give us an idea of the extent to which the doctrine of Saint Francis de Sales, read and rethought by Salesian teachers (from Don Bosco onwards), served to illustrate their favourite ideas. The fact remains that over the years the influence of St Francis de Sales on the Salesian tradition (of Don Bosco) has greatly expanded. After a century, he was no longer just a model of kindness, charity and zeal, but also a revered doctor, whose lofty lessons in spiritual theology they were invited to ponder.

Changing attitudes in the twentieth century

The Rectors Major Frs Albera and Viganò, who seriously addressed the question of the influence of Francis de Sales on their society, were sensitive to changes in law and mentality which affected Salesian life during the twentieth century.

Fr Paul Albera had suffered badly along with all his Congregation during the 1914–1918 War: the nations his Salesians lived in opposed to each other, works closed or at risk, confreres, especially missionaries, engaged in combat, sometimes killed or seriously wounded. Moreover, in 1917 a new Code of Canon Law was published in Rome, which was intended to strongly influence the life of the Congregations. The Rector Major was divided on the state of affairs resulting from the war: rather enthusiastic at the beginning of 1920, he declared himself very pessimistic a fortnight later.

On the first day of 1920 he told Provincials about his confidence in the future.

Tremendous changes have taken place in the world, and these in turn have given rise to new situations, all of which affect the life and development of our Congregation. Consider, for example, the amazing activity of the Apostolic See. Its recent vigorous action will go down as a milestone in the annals of the Church's disciplinary reform. I am referring to the promulgation of the new code of canon law. Civil society also has undergone profound changes. Many social barriers have fallen; many of the old ideas have been left behind; new forces are stirring; everywhere new wholesome energies are being released. All this movement holds out the hope that, with the Lord's help new bright and beautiful days will dawn for the Church, and for all those who, with the Church and for the Church, work for the good of souls...²⁷

But on 19 March 1921, his reflections on the public spirit that was the result of the war were bleak. Unbridled egalitarianism and materialistic immorality saddened him:

We give thanks to God that the dreadful European war is over. But its many evil effects are still with us, and will be with us no one knows for how long. Most damaging among them is the overthrow of the principles that should at any time guide the course of human society. All authority, whether divine or human, is rejected out of hand; no longer are rights, rank, and status honoured. There are those who would want everybody reduced to the same material and moral level. In effect no longer is any consideration given to moral values; only that which is material, indeed basely material, is of any account. This is the kind of air we breathe, and it is so completely saturated with these pernicious errors that even

good people may finally suffer contamination. For one is always under pressure to conform to prevailing ways of thinking, and so to seek justification for one's defection from those Christian principles that ought to serve as norm for life and conduct.²⁸

Twenty years later, a second World War was still shaking up people's thinking. The cultural transformations that followed were not really perceived by the Salesian authorities until they were recognised and highlighted by Vatican II (1962–1965). On his return from the Council, Fr Viganò, who had participated in it as a theological *peritus* for the Archbishop of Santiago de Chile, made it one of his favourite themes. The term “sociocultural changes” appeared in 1978 in the title of the first part of his programmatic address as Rector Major entitled “Not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit”.²⁹

We are living in an hour of crisis, he announced, but it is an hour of Pentecost, “the dawn of a new day, even if we don't know how this day will go.”

The “signs of the times”, signs of “growth in humanity”, challenge us. The term “signs of the times” in the clerical language of the time preferably designated the major aspects of the mentality of the time. The signs noted by Fr Viganò concerned “the whole man: in his way of being, acting and living with others.” “They are transforming mentality, lifestyle and methods of action.”³⁰ These signs according to him were: a) the acceleration of history, b) a process of personalisation, c) a process of socialisation, d) a process of secularisation, finally e) a process of liberation. And to proclaim the necessary impact of these “processes” on Salesian life, because any Congregational renewal is unthinkable if it is not “achieved in consonance with what man is today, with the culture and lifestyle that surrounds us, in order to be effective signs of God in our time.”³¹

The Rector Major was not fooled by the ambiguity of the “signs”, which partake of the spontaneous appetites of a sinful humanity. It is indeed the same social sensibility that led simultaneously to Lenin's revolutionary movement and Cardinal Cardijn's renewal movement. But he clung to their aspects in accordance with the divine will, or, if you like, the Gospel message.

The words he used need to be explained. For the “signs of the times”, as they had been perceived by the Rector Major, were to strongly influence his spirituality, and thereby the new spirituality of the Salesian Family. History is speeding up, he observed. Five years is like a century. In a decade one social group gives way to another that opposes it. Science, technology and political relations are constantly evolving. Let us think today

of biology, computer science, multimedia, the end of the Cold War and the erasure of communist Marxism. The stereotyped formulas of the past, which regulated the days of apostolic organisations, often no longer apply the next day. The organisation of the school changes, the presence in the hospital changes, the mentality of youth changes, the problems of the parents differ with the years. The rapid evolution of history forces managers to think, to study, to seek advice. Those who claim to have an impact on their times must always be engaged in ongoing research. Throughout his mandate (1978–1995), Fr Viganò sought a better expression of the great principles of the spirituality of the religious family entrusted to him.

By “process of personalisation” he meant an “increased sense of the dignity of the person.” The freedom, choices and decisions of people now have something sacred about them. The subordinate may be right in his dialogue with the one in charge. Fr Albera deplored this new mentality without naming it when, in 1921, he regretted the rejection (with closed eyes!) of any authority. Sixty years later, authority alone which was not guaranteed by competence, would command no better hearing than that claimed by mere power. Moreover, there was little regard for personal fulfilment in the monasteries of yesteryear. The process of personalisation challenged authoritarian systems, which gave everything to the leader and cared little for the satisfaction of subordinates.

The enigmatic expression “process of socialisation” designates, among the “signs of times”, the progress of individuals in their *participation* in the life of communities: the neighbourhood, the city, politics, business, the union, the party, and also the religious institute. The links between the “personalisation process” and this “socialisation process” are obvious. The religious institute can no longer be regarded as the exclusive business of superiors, Fr Viganò remarked. Paternalism is reprehensible. He denounced in barely veiled terms the fascist ideology abandoning societies to their leaders or “guides”, which had penetrated into the Salesian world in the first half of the century.³²

The current socialisation was based on the interest of each member in the movement of the organisation as a whole.

“Secularisation” is perhaps more familiar to us. By “secular” here, we mean the secular world, whose autonomy secularisation recognises, an autonomy which religion does not take from it (or no longer takes from it). “Temporal” and “world” are equivalents of “secular”. The secularisation movement dates from the Middle Ages. In the West the secular nature of the state is a consequence of secularisation. Politics have thus been secularised. The Church’s attitude towards the world and her awareness of her relation to the temporal have undergone change. Today, the temporal is no longer

only political power, but the social, the cultural, in a word the whole of human effort. Fr Viganò remarked here that pedagogy cannot be deduced from the Gospel and that the school, a cultural institution, is not in itself a Church structure. That said, the temptation would be to cut off the “temporal”, i.e. the world, from God and the Church. For a secularised world, God no longer exists. It is understandable that secularisation poses delicate problems in mixed areas such as morality and education. The Church and society have frequently clashed over bioethics in the latter half of the century

Finally, Fr Viganò saw another sign of the times in the “process of liberation” underway in the twentieth century. It was not the liberation of the individual, included for him in “personalisation”, but the liberation of peoples oppressed by unjust structures. Liberation theology haunted this superior, who had lived for decades in Latin America. This was the liberation of the Third World, but he felt that the entire Salesian Family should feel concerned about this process.

Other “signs of the times” (to use the language of the Rector Major) appeared after 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the relative obliteration of Marxism, the globalisation of liberal capitalism, the end of multiple political and ideological certainties and the entry into an era of individualism, plurality and the relative. The obsolete messianisms gave way to a secular morality. The deregulation of beliefs was followed by outbreaks of fundamentalism, as well as a flowering of religiosity parallel to the great monotheistic religions. Feeling regained its rights. Beauty, kindness and generosity, which arouse emotion, were admired and sought after. It was necessary to “re-enchant the world”, whose cold rationality, unbridled liberalism, the collapse of secular utopias often left people at a loss. How could we not dream of morality and a world less harsh world? It was the era of “re-enchantment”. In modern times, the search was not so much for God, but for the “divine”. Beliefs no longer functioned along a beyond-below, transcendence-immanence axis, but along a horizontal axis, where other oppositions were at play which were constantly recurring in the discourse of thinkers of the time, whether Christian or not: sense-nonsense, life-death, health-illness, wellbeing-malaise, imagination-rationality. Salvation was no longer what it once was. It was sought in a surprising world of “religions without God.”³³

Spirituality, that is to say, the ideas, principles and models of the spiritual life of the Salesian Family, was affected by these phenomena of rapid “historicisation”, “personalisation”, “socialisation”, “liberation”, “secularisation” or “re-enchantment” of the human being of the time, alone or in society, religious or secular, static or historical. At the end of this century, which was decisive for it, the Salesian Family rethought and

reformed all its rules of life. It did so in more or less critical communion with a Catholic spirituality that filled its mental horizon.

Catholic spirituality at the end of the twentieth century

History was moving forward, unknown calls were emerging, great currents were sweeping through the Church – charismatic renewal, feminist ideology, inculturation, ecology, the search for certainties and reassuring emotions, a certain pluralistic relativism, all of which gave Catholic spirituality a new face. Some features remained unchanged following Vatican II. Catholic spirituality was now Trinitarian, Christocentric, ecclesial, biblical, liturgical and ecumenical. It sought inspiration in the Bible and the liturgy, meditating on the Holy Spirit and Christ the universal Saviour, and systematically extended her gaze and her prayer beyond the borders of the visible Church in search of all people of good will. The spiritual re-orientations were sometimes ephemeral, but for the most part they were lasting.³⁴

Rejections of contemporary spirituality

Some tendencies or ideas on which it seems good to dwell have dominated the intentions of contemporary spirituality. But let us start with what is rejected.

Contemporary spirituality rejects (in principle) the spiritualities of escape which separate the spiritual life from the person's history. The urgency of social commitment has been imposed on Christians because of the fraternal love it advocates. Liberation theology, which was very popular in the 1970s, emphasised the liberating nature of Christianity. At the end of the century, it is hard to imagine a passive, ineffective Christian spirituality, detached from the human being's historical destiny. A spirituality hovering above history would only be, it is commonly thought, no more than an ideology serving as a cloak for the systems in force and selfish disengagement. Neutrality or political innocence that abandons the world to its fate risks collaborating in maintaining the status quo and playing into the hands of those who oppose the transforming power of the Spirit. Spiritual individualism, which sees the Christian life as a set of pious practices and acts of worship cut off from historical movement and focused solely on the perfection of the individual, is suspect. The spiritual journey of Christians cannot be confined to what is within: the Christian must, it is said, measure up to the concrete tasks of humanity and become involved in the "progress" of society and the Church. In

other words, we need to combine worship and life, interiority and social commitment, union with God and ecclesial and communion.

Contemporary spirituality is also viscerally hostile to dualistic approaches to human realities incapable of profoundly unifying the various aspects of salvation and Christian perfection. Spirituality must distance itself from a dualistic anthropology, which privileges the soul at the expense of the body. The human being, who is not a fallen angel, is both soul and body together. Otherwise human beings lose their historical dimension and their ability to communicate harmoniously with others. They must therefore rediscover the function of the body in the spiritual life and insert it in the process of salvation that culminates in the resurrection.

Contemporary spirituality is wary of ultra-terrestrial projections that refer salvation and the Kingdom of God exclusively to the afterlife. For contemporary spirituality the present and the future must be considered in their own right, since, it believes, the future is the definitive stage of spiritual and salvific realisation in the present. The final realities should not cancel out but support the historical commitment to integral salvation. Let us remain on earth until death. Contemporary spirituality does not deny “eternal life”, but it says very little about it.

Finally, this spirituality commonly wishes to avoid any supernaturalism or monophysite tendencies which would annihilate the human element for the sake of the triumph of divine grace. Of course, it is careful not to forget the necessary ascetic work of purification from evil. It does not therefore accept “nature” without criticism or struggle. But it absolutely refuses to think of God and man in any way as opposites or rivals. On the contrary, according to contemporary spirituality, God’s glory can only be our happiness. Promoting the human being is a sign of spiritual authenticity.

Contemporary spirituality: a spiritual project possible for everyone

The achievements of this spirituality are more important to us than are its rejections.

First of all, spiritual life, that is, spirituality in the subjective sense of the term, is recognised as being possible for every authentic individual who is faced with reality and history and has made a decisive, fundamental and unifying choice capable of giving a definitive meaning to their life. Such an individual then experiences the Absolute, of which Jean Mouroux spoke in his description of religious experience. The vigorous search for the meaning of life joins the creative project (of God). This quest can take all

kinds of forms. There are many values capable of giving consistency and unity to the many events, from artistic creativity to scientific commitment, from love for humanity to the fight against injustice, to humanisation and integral human advancement. Here a philosopher tells me that life finds its definitive consistency “in the direction of that mysterious reality which stands at the origin of all existence: the Creator God, who, through his very existence, calls man to seek communion, freedom and personal eternal life.”³⁵

A more attentive study of the history of salvation has enabled theology to recognise the action of grace in every human being, particularly in the believers of different religions. Since God is the universal Father, “who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4), there is no lack of help for his children to reach their spiritual dimension in the search for truth and love. If Christ died for all and is the beginning and end of the whole universe (Colossians 1:15-20), he is present to all people for their salvation, especially those in need (Matthew 25:31-46). Finally, if every being is created according to a Spirit who is at work not only in the Church, but in the whole world, Christians can (must!) consider non-Christians not as people who have chosen error instead of the truth because they were more obtuse, ill-intentioned or more unfortunate than themselves, but as creatures who are already blessed in their innermost being or are capable of being so by the divine grace of the universal will of salvation. The biblical figures of Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20), Balaam (Numbers 22-24), Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1), Cornelius (Acts 10:1-33) sufficiently demonstrate that religious experience, priesthood and prophetism can be found among “pagans”, genuine gifts of the Spirit.

“God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:5). The Spirit blows where He wills. Life has meaning for those who experience the gift of the Absolute, whatever its particular form. But blessed is the person who then benefits from faith in a God who is Creator and Father. The awareness of possessing life as a gift from God and even of having mission to fulfil is, for this person, an overwhelming and beneficial experience which provokes an overwhelming and coherent response, transformed into a positive option in the face of God’s revelation in history in Jesus Christ the Saviour.

The experience of God in history and commitment to the world

Contemporary spirituality insists that the spiritual experience of God as saviour is fulfilled in history, the ceaseless movement of created reality in time. Because we discover

that we have an essential relationship with time, today's person of the Bible and the great religious traditions is attentive to God's action in events. This was a constant theme of meditation for Don Bosco. To people of this kind, the Totally Other is revealed as the condition for the success of history. He is the peace that makes our peace possible, freedom of our freedom, the strength to act and simply be in history. The presence of God in life was made visible to the people of Israel, especially through their liberation from Egyptian slavery. Let us reread the Psalms, which readily return to this. For Christians, it is the mystery of the Paschal Christ, with his resurrection, understood as an offer of salvation and new and eternal life that is the sign of this. In continuity with tradition, Christians experience the living God through meditation on the revealed Word, participation in worship, commitment to justice and adherence to God's will as expressed in life.³⁶

The result is a Christian experience in which God is both the origin and the attractive centre. This spirituality combines a triumphant horizontalism with a verticalism without which there is no authentic Christianity. The spiritual life is God's communication in time.

The notion of the means of spiritual "perfection" was thus adjusted in this direction. In previous centuries, Christian perfection may have consisted in fleeing the world to give oneself over to divine contemplation. Today (to the great satisfaction of Don Bosco's follower), it is rather through action in the world that one becomes holy. Work throughout the week is by no means without religious experience, which would be reserved for Sunday [in the previous order of things]. It is not even necessary, to give it its dignity, to elevate it by the intention of doing it "for the greater glory of God", despite the praiseworthy nature of this habit. It is always excellent to offer one's day to God in the morning. Teilhard de Chardin invited Christians to be passionate about their daily activities with the conviction that in so doing they were collaborating in the fulfilment of the world in Christ. God does not turn our gaze prematurely away from the work that he himself has imposed on us: he presents himself to us as accessible in and through this very work. Action itself thus becomes a means of communion with God, a "divine milieu" where it is possible to encounter Him.³⁷

Contemporary theology, which recognises a religious value in the world because of creation and incarnation, supports and confirms this principle of spirituality. God is not in competition with human beings, who should therefore limit their action for God to act. This caricatured God of the existentialists was never anything but imaginary. To reduce Christianity to a set of rites detached from life is a related error. It is necessary

to transform one's own life into a spiritual worship pleasing to God, into an existential liturgy.³⁸

If, in order to be sanctified, it is not enough to act with the right intention of offering God one's work, it is even more insufficient to *content oneself* with brief prayers or quality times of retreat. In this way, we run the risk of depriving almost all of our existence of spiritual meaning and leading people to believe that God can only be found in certain privileged moments. It's true that the spiritual pendulum swing of the 1970s was probably excessive. To work is to pray, some loud-mouthed agitators proclaimed. Just in time, charismatic directors and evangelical movements have restored contemplative worship to a prominent place in contemporary spirituality. A modern Congregation such as Mother Teresa's can only conceive of charitable work for the poorest people as being framed by hours of silent meditation. Times of recollection, exodus or retreat remain necessary, often indispensable. But, let's be clear life it is the whole of life, with its often uninterrupted work, that must be pleasing to God and a source of spiritual vitality. This is what the spirituality of the second half of the twentieth century insisted on.

We are thus referred back to the structure of action, which is uplifting by its internal order, by its systematic insertion into the context of life and by its openness to God's saving calls.³⁹

The professional commitment and competence of the one who acts are therefore relevant to the spiritual life. Work and earthly realities can enrich it. Faith and upright morality correct action so that its intrinsic order is respected. Commitment to action goes a long way: it is a question of progressing without limits in the field of one's activities, while taking into account the ethical imperatives of justice humanity and Christian fellowship.

Without in any way rejecting religious encounters with God, which in other times were sufficient for spiritual progress, today we are seeking contact with a more everyday God, a God of ordinary life. The emphasis is shifting from sacred and separate religiosity to religious feeling immersed in everyday life. At the same time, the focus is broadening to the dimensions of the universe. Going beyond their individual tasks, everyone, especially those who have an experience of faith, should feel committed to the universal task of building a better world.

Spirituality of liberation and communion

Contemporary Catholic spirituality is also liberating. The process of liberation that affects the entire Christian ideology – we have just seen it above – has affected spirituality, especially in the Latin American context where the historical situation of neo-colonial dependence, misallocation of resources, underdevelopment and human exploitation has been described by the episcopate as a “sinful situation”. “To speak of a situation of injustice, we refer to those realities which express a situation of sin.”⁴⁰ Where there are glaring social, political, economic and cultural injustices, there is a rejection of the Lord’s gift of peace; even more, there is a rejection of the Lord himself. To enter into salvation and communion with God it is not enough to elaborate theological categories. We need a vital, global attitude which embraces the totality and details of our life. In other words, a spirituality. This spirituality was not reserved for a continent. Latin American intuitions inspired all believers who felt the urgency of proclaiming the liberation of the oppressed,⁴¹ although certain lines from the Bible should not be abused and Christian eschatology reduced to the created world.

The spirituality of liberation has imposed some fundamental attitudes. The objective was the constitution of a new man in a new world, the creation of evangelical fraternity, the establishment of a more just and free system of human relations. The Christian, who placed love of neighbour according to the message of the Gospel at the centre of his ideology, could not believe that he would please God solely by his individual and religious relationships with him. Prayer and liturgy as such were not enough for him. He turned his attention to his oppressed neighbours. For him, this meant moving away from indifference and neutrality and declaring himself openly in favour of the poor and exploited. This choice implied a twofold duty. First, the prophetic denunciation of social injustice, even at the risk of hostile reactions from those in charge of the established order. Preaching resignation to the poor in the expectation of heaven had become difficult for churchmen to tolerate. In its mission of liberation, the Church had no right to appease the oppressed, to lull them into slavery or alienate them with resignation. Following in the footsteps of the prophets of Israel, it had a duty to defend the poor and make them aware of their situation by protesting against the injustice that was the cause of their poverty. Her second duty was to show solidarity with these poor people in order to promote integral liberation from within. Because sin also tainted social institutions, liberation not only had to wrest evil from the heart of man, but also eliminate or transform the unjust structures of society. Charity thus became a political commitment,

demonstrating its effectiveness by going beyond, but not excluding, exclusively private or individual aid.

This combative spirituality, far from cultivating hostility and hatred, sought to arouse hope and joy. Communion with the Lord and with all human beings filled the spirit with gratitude and trust. If God acts in history in favour of the poor, the Christian can only rejoice with Mary for this experience of God as Saviour.⁴²

Trusting in the promises of Christ and in the power of the Spirit, Christians were open to hope. In their opinion, the universal liberation and fellowship they were calling for would become possible, not not only in some distant eschatology (of which they no longer spoke much!), but already in this world, albeit in a partial and provisional way. That, in any case, was their cry of hope.

In a (Western) world that remained terribly individualistic despite the often conflicting claims of the press, Catholic spirituality in the mid-twentieth century was inspired by the then triumphant socialisation in popular democracies, to spread and encourage a communal spiritual model. Vatican II, very personalist, proclaimed that “by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential”.⁴³ At the same time, the mass media transformed the world, developed the sense of humanity of the human family, desired democracy everywhere and demanded the overcoming of an individualistic ethic. Contemporary Christianity was sensitive to the communal dimensions of life. While the Councils of the early centuries focused their reflection on Christ, and while the Council of Trent focused its attention on the justification of the individual sinner, Vatican II focused its attention on the reality of the Church, the mystical body of Christ and the people of God gathered in the bond of love of the Trinity.⁴⁴

The Church is communion, that is, fundamentally solidarity between the persons who make it up. There is only one principle on which it is founded: the Spirit of the Risen Lord, by which the members are inserted into the body of Christ.

This perspective has altered some features of earlier spirituality. The religious vision is now less individual and more communal. “God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness.”⁴⁵

The words of the hymn: “But one soul have I that must be saved, preserved from everlasting flames”, no longer apply. The need to live as brothers and sisters was felt, even

to the point of forming communities similar to that described in the Acts of the Apostles, where “those who believed were of one heart and one soul.” “New communities” were born. Liturgical participation was intended to be intense. Community prayer was to contribute to the building up of the group in the Lord. They experienced the fatherhood of God through a lively sense of fraternity and identification with Christ, model of filial life, in docile listening to the Spirit and in the exercise of charisms. It was a modern repetition of cenobitic monasticism.

However, these communities remained convinced of the irreplaceable value of the person. Their humanism was personalist. The effort to create a climate in which personal and community aspirations could be fulfilled had to be ongoing. In these communities, therefore, the art of dialogue was cultivated (in principle at least), as well as unconditional acceptance of the other, rational management of conflicts, the exchange of experiences and information, the recourse to compromise in order not to break the unity of the common journey.

It all comes down to self-sacrificing love. Are the ideas or strengths of a contemporary spirituality which seeks to be open to all, realistic, personalised, committed, liberating, communitarian and well inscribed in human history, all called to persist as they are? This wisdom can certainly lead to a foundational religious experience capable of structuring the personality and culture of fully modern, autonomous, free individuals. It could be shown that it is not so new in the Church and that, looking closely at it, the medieval lay confraternities cultivated identical values. And then, a dimension that the restless spiritual people at the end of the century are so avidly seeking, seems to be missing. By dint of immersing God in the world, it trivialises the sacred. Look at what has become of Eucharistic worship. A God at one with the world would lose his divine identity. Monophysitism threatens those for whom “all is grace”. A world completely divinised would make us forget the truly transcendent God. Islam would then teach Christians some useful lessons. Today’s spirituality could be more resolutely committed, communitarian and liberating, communitarian and liberating, but also more truly religious. Would this not be a way of appeasing the dissatisfaction of a world, particularly its youth, in search of the “divine”?

Values that had faded from people’s minds, even been neglected and forgotten, have reappeared after having served as landmarks for generous Christians of another era in their desire to live an ardent spiritual life. Whatever the case, today the Salesian Family does not aspire to anything other than this intimate ardour.

Salesian spirituality according to Don Bosco's Seventh Successor

The Twenty-third General Chapter of the Salesians prompted the Rector Major Fr Viganò to express himself almost *ex professo* on Salesian spirituality, which this assembly had said was linked to the devout humanism of Saint Francis de Sales “translated by Don Bosco into the experience of the Oratory.”⁴⁶ He did so in a letter dated 15 August 1990.

He had already mentioned this spirituality incidentally in earlier circular letters to the Salesians, recalling that Don Bosco’s preventive system can be presented as an authentic spirituality of apostolic action,⁴⁷

- that Salesian associations are imbued with the spirituality of Don Bosco, which is a youthful spirituality,⁴⁸

- that the “dream of diamonds” narrated by Don Bosco presents a spiritual profile of the Salesian,⁴⁹

- that the lay spirituality of the Salesian Cooperator has its own traits,⁵⁰

- that the commentary on the Constitutions must be approached according to a certain Salesian spirituality,⁵¹

- that spirituality is of vital importance for the (religious) community to become the animating nucleus of the Salesian Family,⁵²

- that in 1988, on the centenary of the death of Don Bosco, the Pope entrusted Salesians with the task of instilling a spirituality of mission in the world of young people,⁵³

- that the credibility of the community in the education of young people in the faith is supported, according to the Twenty-Third General Chapter by two characteristic and complementary pillars, which are spirituality and pedagogy.⁵⁴

The letter of 15 August 1990, which was entitled *Spiritualità salesiana per la nuova evangelizzazione* (Salesian Spirituality for the New Evangelization), dealt directly with Salesian spirituality, albeit from a particular perspective dear to this Rector Major. We will read it here without claiming to remain within his formulation alone.⁵⁵

Fr Viganò did not think he was giving in to what was fashionable, and talking about spirituality wasn’t a tired refrain for him. “If we were devoid of it, we would be incapable of continuing our journey as evangelisers” he felt (in essence). One cannot conceive of spiritual renewal without spirituality. And the recent Chapter witnessed to a growing demand for spirituality among groups of young people.

Let us reconstruct the outline of a fairly lengthy document. It said, firstly, what the Rector Major meant by spirituality; then that the spirituality of the Salesians seemed to him to be an essential element in (young people's) journey of faith; that, while contemporary reality might seem in some respects discouraging to the apostles of the new evangelisation, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual actor *par excellence*, was a guarantee of hope that this much-needed spirituality was rooted in Saint Francis de Sales and in St John Bosco; that it possessed inalienable traits, carefully highlighted and that it required the formation of fervent evangelising communities under the maternal guidance of Mary Help of Christians.⁵⁶

Let us focus instead on the nature of Salesian spirituality as the Rector Major conceived of it. He saw it as a set of principles and certainties. Every authentic spirituality lived, he taught, is an energy on each person's journey towards their own end. It helps to discern and face problems, it infuses souls with the will and enthusiasm necessary to progress towards their goal. Creative and daring, it is always in dialogue with real life. Certainly, it remains faithful to the values of its origins and of living tradition, but by nature it is called to descend into reality in order to be a gift of life, an appropriate response and also an evangelical challenge. Its strength comes from faith, its energy in history. A gradual experience of God, it is a vital force in every individual for their freedom, convictions and conduct. In his time, therefore, Fr Viganò preached a spirituality embodied in history.

As a logical consequence, this attitude calls for a strong "social dimension". "(lived) spirituality is the behaviour of committed believers." "The faith that we are committed to making grow is not separated from the human, is not juxtaposed to it, but, by germinating within it, gives it a new meaning (resignifies it), enlightens it and transcends it by broadening the horizons beyond history." This is not "a spirituality of escape", but a "spirituality of frontiers, of research, of initiative, of courage, in a word, of realism", explained Fr Viganò, thus echoing one of the major features of Catholic spirituality at the time. Human maturity is not a separate sector of the spiritual journey, but a "dimension" that is present at every step. It is a search for meaning, where life is seen as a gift received and a task to be accomplished, with a concern to recognise the emptiness of the idols that weigh on it. The incarnation of the spiritual man is critical.

There is no shortage of disappointments along the contemporary spiritual journey. Fr Viganò listened intently to the regrets of the representatives of his worldwide community. Secularisation brings with it its share of values and counter-values. Faith is difficult if we do without dogmas. "What is evangelisation without truths to pass

on?” Social contexts: consumer societies or poor societies, decolonised peoples or those emerging from totalitarian regimes, large states or ethnic minorities, Catholicism in the majority or multiple Christian denominations, atheism or the Catholic Church. Christian denominations, atheism or the major religions rarely facilitate an evangelising spirituality. Educational institutions: the family, schools, associations, social communication, preparing young people for work or to play their part in a changing world, all find themselves in delicate situations.

Young people are “dissatisfied”, in search of values and new relationships. Many are far removed from the faith or are strangers to it altogether. Others are open to it, but their choices are varied. There are also, perhaps, young practising Christians but sometimes without any great ideals. Finally, there are those who find in the faith a concrete guide for their lives and become a leaven for others. An evangelising spirituality is based on them.

Challenges respond to disappointments: the challenge of the strangeness of faith, which is at the heart of spirituality, the challenge of poverty, the challenge of the uselessness of faith for life and culture, the challenge of encountering other religions, and finally, quite simply, the challenge of life. Infusing spirituality into this world is not something that can be taken for granted.

Finally Fr Viganò tried to characterise the spirituality that he would have liked to see flourish in his family members, especially in his religious. He started from a reflection borrowed, he tells us, from Fr Philip Rinaldi: “Saint Francis de Sales is the master of a spiritual doctrine that lives and pulsates in his immortal works (i.e. his writings); Don Bosco, for his part, imprinted his spirituality not on paper, but on the society he created... The doctrine already existed, God called Don Bosco to realise it and to give it life in the family founded by him for the salvation of youth. Would it be enough to reproduce the face it took on in the second half of the nineteenth century? Without proclaiming it too loudly, the Rector Major could not bring himself to do so. A line from the Roman document *Mutuae Relationes*:⁵⁷ “The very charism of the Founders appears as an “experience of the Spirit” transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth” allowed him to submit his own personal view of things.

The spirituality of the Salesian Family is a spirituality of young people. The spirituality of the Salesians and the spirituality of the young differ, but are closely interrelated, said the Rector Major, following the General Chapter that had just been held. And to recall the time when Don Bosco’s *Il Giovane provveduto* was the common

prayer book of young people and their educators and teachers. Salesian spirituality is therefore a spirituality of stages. It obliges us to make and redo our spiritual catechumenate. According to him it seemed to present six major notions:

1. a practical realism centred on everyday life, with duty taking on a religious meaning at every moment of the day;
2. an attitude of hope imbued with joy;
3. a real and strong friendship with Christ recognised and frequented in prayer, the Eucharist and the Gospel;
4. an ever more responsible and courageous sense of belonging to the particular and universal Church;
5. a concrete commitment to the service of good according to the social responsibilities taken on and the material and spiritual needs of others;
6. a simple and trusting entrustment to the maternal assistance of the Virgin Mary.

Here, religious were invited to cultivate “apostolic interiority” within, a synthesis of consecration and mission; to make Christ the Good Shepherd the existential centre of their consecrated life ; to see their work of education as an aspect of their mission; to love consciously in the Church and to want to act according to her for the advent of a fraternal world in Christ; to cultivate joy in their daily lives, in everyday life, because Salesian pedagogy believes in man’s natural and supernatural resources without ignoring his weaknesses; and finally, to give Mary her rightful place in the work of evangelisation.

The Rector Major concluded with satisfaction: “We have therefore a quite specific Salesian spirituality with concrete aspects on which we must concentrate the programming of ongoing formation in the provinces and houses, as, we seek also to study more deeply the heart of Don Bosco.”⁵⁸

He did not add anything new in the circulars that followed until his death in 1995. He repeated his convictions.

- i. Salesian spirituality is a “dynamic interiority” that proceeds from of the pastoral charity with which Don Bosco’s heart was filled.⁵⁹
- ii. It is an educational spirituality.⁶⁰
- iii. Spirituality, pastoral quality and vocational accompaniment should work together in the religious.⁶¹
- iv. Spirituality is indispensable for communion between religious and laity.⁶²

The Salesian spirituality characterised by Fr Viganò, clearly in tune with the culture of his time, also met the needs of the new evangelisation called for by Pope John Paul II. His final invitation of 15 August 1990 recalled that it should be nourished by the spiritual experience of Don Bosco. Today's Rector Major, challenged by a thousand new trends in spirituality, was therefore careful not to forget the humble roots of the previous century. Was he faithful to him? Did his desire to conform to the theology of Vatican II cause him to forget the principles dear to its founder? Only a careful analysis of the whole of his spiritual doctrine, which cannot be reduced to a few sentences, could tell us. tell us. A study of the key words of Salesian spirituality will begin to enlighten us.

The key words of Salesian Spirituality

Whether lived or taught, the spirituality of Don Bosco's Salesian Family comes to us in images and words. The images are usually those of people who have practised it in a way considered exemplary or in particularly significant settings. To tell the story of Don Bosco, to develop an image of him, was enough to infuse many with his spirituality. As for words, they often appear in phrases. Phrases like: Work and Temperance; Work, Piety and Joy; *Da mihi animas*; Spirit of Mornese; Serve the Lord in Gladness; Pastoral Charity; The Preventive System is a System of Kindness; The pillars of Salesian education are: Reason, Religion and Loving-kindness (*Amorevolezza*)...

The language of Salesian spirituality has therefore been built around words, which recur with varying degrees of insistence. Of course, like ideas language has evolved. Many of Don Bosco's usual expressions have evolved. Several expressions customary to Don Bosco have become rare in the circulars of his seventh successor Egidio Viganò, who spoke much less than he did of "God's glory", "salvation of souls" and "visits to the Blessed Sacrament", expressions absent from the *Indice analitico per argomenti* of the collection of his letters. On the other hand, he did not fail to treat of "personal accompaniment", "daily asceticism", "charism", "social communication", "apostolic consecration", "shared responsibility"... phrases that would be sought in vain, not only from Don Bosco, but from his immediate successors at the head of the Salesian Congregation.

In spirituality, certain words or phrases immediately evoke an idea, a method, an example: among the Benedictines, the *Opus divinum* makes one think of the liturgical office; to the sons of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *election* makes one think of the choice of a state of life; in the Cistercian world, *Mystical Marriage* makes one think of the

commentary on the *Song of Songs* by Bernard of Clairvaux. It is true that, apart from proper names, really evocative words do not abound in Salesian spiritual literature. The vast majority of these words are common, very common, like Action, Love, Apostolate, Gentleness, Eucharist, Family, Vocation, Zeal... However, beware, since the way they are used may have given them a particular colour. The “reason” and “religion” of Don Bosco’s pedagogical trinomial had, under his pen, meanings that elude commentators a century after him. Whether specific or not, these words and expressions, provided they are understood and commented on, allow us to enter in one way or another into the understanding of the spirituality of the Salesian family. They offer us the *keys* to it.

Ultimately, we would like to have a *Dictionary of Spiritual Life*. Today’s public is crazy about dictionaries, which they think will save them a lot of reading in books or magazines that are not very accessible. With a dictionary, a whole range of knowledge is at their fingertips. The Salesian world, usually very busy, recognises itself in this ordinary public. The *Istituto di Spiritualità* at the Salesian University in Rome thought that a dictionary was the way to go. All the more so as the thick *Dictionnaire de spiritualité montfortaine* published under the direction of Stefano De Fiores⁶³ was a source of emulation. But the undertaking was bound to be complex, long and difficult. It would involve theologians, liturgists, historians, educationalists, and perhaps sociologists, for a considerable number of years. So would we have to wait until 2015 to have all the information we need? It seemed appropriate to prefer an average solution and opt for a kind of dictionary. Without prejudging the real dictionary planned, this would meet the expectations of our contemporaries.

A hundred key words (or terms) have therefore been selected in the very broad field of the Salesian Family’s spirituality: ten proper names of Saints or Blesseds, whose examples and teaching have left traces in Salesian history, and ninety virtues, behaviours, instruments of holiness, etc. which often reappear in Salesian spiritual literature of the past or today. The choices had to be made in a not too arbitrary fashion. Fear of God (with the word God), a favourite topic of Fr Rua’s and Fr Albera’s, together with Charism and Inculturation, which did not appear in Salesian literature until the second half of the twentieth century. Terms such as Play and Spectacle have been grouped together in a single entry, in this case Free Time. Spiritual pathology and Perfection have disappeared from the initial proposal. Angels and also Music, initially ignored, were later included in the list. It did not seem wise to distinguish the terms Love and Charity, terms which can appear together in spirituality.⁶⁴

Both of these terms therefore appear in the final list, albeit with different implications. The fanciful ideas of countless commentators on Don Bosco's thinking have had no place in documenting the entries. We have used the authentic writings of the family's saints and well-founded testimonies concerning them, circular letters of the Rectors Major who have followed Don Bosco's death: Michael Rua (1888–910), Paul Albera (1910–921), Philip Rinaldi (1922–1931), Peter Ricaldone (1932–1951), Renato Ziggotti (1952–1965), Luigi Ricceri (1965–1978), Egidio Viganò (1978–1995) and Juan Vecchi (since 1996); various texts of the Constitutions and Regulations of the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Volunteers of Don Bosco, Salesian Cooperators; Acts of their General Chapters or General Assemblies; Acts of canonisation processes, biographical essays of saints or Servants of God. Considerations have been given to spiritual authors (Alberto Caviglia, Joseph Aubry, Domenico Bertetto ...), in which the Family has recognised his thinking without any problems, as well as items from the Salesian Spirituality Weeks organised since 1973 at the Salesian General House in Rome.

After saying that spirituality is always, to some extent, a child of the surrounding culture, it was also necessary to avoid being locked into a closed world. The commentary will therefore, on occasions, be nourished by references or allusions to Vatican II, to addresses by the popes of the twentieth century, especially John Paul II, and to the reflections of contemporary theologians or commentators on spirituality.

I apologise for the repetitions that are inevitable in any dictionary. How can we talk about the Gospel Beatitudes without praising meekness, purity, poverty and the cross of the afflicted? I have merely tried to be consistent and not contradict myself. The notes that follow, of course, always very incomplete in themselves and which, therefore, will not fail to upset specialists, have no other ambition than to *offer a reflection* on the terms which have been chosen. Anyone looking below for a treatise or treatises on spiritual theology, “developing a theology that gives due consideration to Trinitarian thought, to the ecclesial dimension of Christian life, to the consideration of mediation and to a proper Christian anthropology”, according to the wishes of one of my most enlightened correspondents, will be coming to the wrong place. Such a person should preferably consult one of the dictionaries of spiritual or religious life which have sprung up in recent years, for example the remarkable *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, the seventeen-volume publication by Beauchesne in Paris, begun in 1932, and completed in 1995. May what follows be part of the struggle against spiritual superficiality, which Fr Egidio Viganò readily deplored in the ranks of his Salesian sons! It does not claim to do anything else.

Francis Desramaut

NOTES

- 1 “Da quell’epoca ho cominciato a gustare che cosa sia vita spirituale, giacché prima agiva piuttosto materialmente e come macchina che fa una cosa, senza saperne la ragione.” MO Da Silva, p. 47. The question of Salesian spirituality was addressed in its own right at the Salesian University in Rome by the Rector Major Egidio Viganò in his address to the Third Spirituality Seminar (3 November 1989), published in *Don Egidio Viganò all’Università salesiana* (ed. R. Giannatelli), Rome, UPS, 1996, pp. 162-164).
- 2 It is hoped that the faithful and admirers of St Francis de Sales will forgive us for the systematic use of the qualifier *Salesian*, belonging to their father, to designate the work and thought of Don Bosco’s spiritual family. Moreover, we will often have the opportunity to highlight the close relationship between the master Francis de Sales and his original disciple, John Bosco.
- 3 “Come Don Bosco volva i suoi salesiani? Ecco. Chi non vuole lavorare, non è salesiano. Chi non è temperante, non è salesiano. Chi non è povero Mot du soir de don Boscoin pratica, non è salesiano. Chi non ha cuore, non è salesiano. Chi non ha purezza, non è salesiano. Chi è indocile, non è salesiano. Chi è libertino, non è salesiano. Chi non ha retta intenzione, non è salesiano. Chi non ha un’anima eucaristica, non è salesiano. Chi non ha divozione mariana, non è salesiano. Voltate la formola al positivo, e voi avrete il Decalogo del salesiano.” Alberto Caviglia, *Conferenze sullo spirito salesiano*, Turin, 1949, p. 13.
- 4 *Esprit des lois*, IX, 2.
- 5 B. Pascal, *Lettres provinciales*. IX.
- 6 *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, Paris, 1937, p. 243-244.
- 7 “Anche la naturale attrattiva verso tutto ciò che sa di novità può indurre alla trascuranza delle tradizioni, perchè non si riflette che altro è correre dietro le novità ed altro essere sempre all’avanguardia di ogni progresso, come faceva e voleva D. Bosco. I progressi che esigono la rinunzia di qualcuna delle migliori tradizioni, per piccole che siano, non fanno per noi, o miei cari. In simili casi restiamocene tranquillamente nella retroguardia alla custodia della nostra eredità paterna e ne avvantaggeremo per ogni verso.” *Atti* 56, 26 April 1931, pp. 933-948.
- 8 “Un quarto richiamo di Don Bosco alla sequela del Cristo secondo il Vangelo lo possiamo vedere nella sua caratteristica di ‘caposcuola’ di un nuovo stile di santificazione.” Letter to Salesians, 19 March 1985.
- 9 These paragraphs on religious experience are based on two books by the personalist theologian Jean Mouroux (1901–1973): *Sens chrétien de l’homme*, Paris, 1945; and *L’expérience chrétienne. Introduction à une théologie*, Paris, 1952.
- 10 “Finché era piccolino mi insegnò Ella stessa le preghiere; appena divenuto capace di associarmi co’ miei fratelli, mi faceva mettere con loro ginocchioni mattino e sera e tutti insieme recitavamo le preghiere in comune colla terza parte del Rosario.” MO Da Silva, p. 34.
- 11 “Margherita conosceva la forza di simile educazione cristiana e come la legge di Dio insegnata col catechismo tutte le sere, e ricordato di freMot du soir de don Boscoquente anche lungo il giorno fosse il mezzo sicuro per rendere i figli obbedienti ai precetti materni. Essa quindi ripeteva le domande e le risposte tante volte quanto era necessariio perchè i figli le mandassero a memoria.” G. B Lemoyne, *Scene morali di famiglia ...*, 1886, pp. 18-19.

- 12 “Sapevo tutto il piccolo catechismo (...) Io poi per la lontananza dalla chiesa , era sconosciuto al parroco, e doveva quasi esclusivamente limitarmi alla istruzione religiosa della buona genitrice.” MO Da Silva, p. 42.
- 13 I am repeating here a few paragraphs from *Don Bosco en son temps* (Turin, 1996), pp. 18-19, 25-26.
- 14 “Da quell’epoca ho cominciato a gustare che cosa sia vita spirituale, giacché prima agiva piuttosto materialmente e come macchina che fa una cosa, senza saperne la ragione.” MO Da Silva, p. 47.
- 15 “Negli anni addietro non era stato uno scellerato, ma dissipato, vanaglorioso, occupato in partite, giuochi, salti, trastulli ed altre cose simili, che rallegravano momentaneamente, ma che non appagavano il cuore.” MO Da Silva, p. 88-89.
- 16 “Queste cose le reputo tutte contrarie alla gravità ed allo spirito ecclesiastico” MO Da Silva, p. 89.
- 17 “... osservarle a costo di qualunque sacrificio.” MO Da Silva, p. 90.
- 18 “ ... Ecco il tuo campo, ecco dove devi lavorare. Renditi umile, forte, robusto; e ciò che in questo momento vedi succedere di questi animali, tu dovrai farlo pei figli miei.” MO Da Silva, pp. 34-35. The gift, strengthened over the years, then made sacred by priestly ordination, was complete.
- 19 Paragraph based on the partial conclusions of my book *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, Paris, 1967.
- 20 “Non sei nato nè dei vivere per godere, per farti ricco e potente, pert mangiare, per bere e dormire come i bruti: ma solo per amare il tuo Dio e salvarti in eterno.” (S. Alfonso de’ Liguori, *Opere ascetiche*, vol II, Turin, 1846, p. 473); “... e l’unico fine per cui ti creò si è per essere amato e servito in questa vita, per renderti poi felice in Paradiso. Sicché non sei al mondo solamente per godere, per farti ricco, per mangiare, bere et dormire, come fanno le bestie; ma il tuo fine si è di amare il tuo Dio e salvar l’anima tua.” (*Il Giovane provveduto ...*, Turin, 1847, *Sette considerazioni...*, p. 32).
- 21 “ ... vi presento un metodo di vivere breve e facile, ma sufficiente perchè possiate diventare la consolazione dei vostri parenti, l’onore della patria, buoni cittadini in terra per essere poi un giorno fortunati abitatori del cielo.” (*Il Giovane provveduto*, same edition, p 7.)
- 22 “Dio sa largamente ricompensare i sacrifici che si fanno per obbedire alla sua santa volontà.” (Don Bosco on his dream, 20 May 1875 ; MB XI, 243, BM 224).
- 23 That is, “Salesian spirituality for the new evangelisation”.
- 24 “Noi, che da lui [Francesco di Sales] dobbiamo non solo prendere il cuore, ma altresì lo spirito,” Fr Albera wrote, “abbiamo il dovere di precedere tutti gli altri nel celebrarlo [il Centenario] degnamente. ... come un riflesso, o meglio una continuazione di quella iniziata più di tre secoli fa dal Salesio, e per ciò destinata a diffondere e popolarizzare, con tutti i mezzi di cui dispone, il suo spirito e la sua dottrina, già perfettamente assimilati da Don Bosco e da lui genialmente trasfusi nel suo sistema educativo” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 21 September 1921; pp. 504-506, L. C., pp. 504-506.)).
- 25 Subheadings of the letter: “St Francis de Sales Master of spirituality and model of education in a climate of freedom, dialogue and loving-kindness. - St Francis de Sales Don Bosco’s model and ours in an ever more relevant apostolate: the Press - Reminders of St Francis de Sales to Don Bosco in a dream.” (AGC 249, August 1967, pp. 223-245).

- 26 “... ridare un posto più consono e influente a S. Francesco di Sales nella nostra spiritualità. ... Egli, infatti, è il dottore di quella carità pastorale che è “il centro e la sintesi” del nostro spirito apostolico. ... Ebbene, in S. Francesco di Sales il cuore trova non solo uno dei più simpatici interpreti delle sue ricchezze umane perfezionate dalla carità, ma anche l’acuto pensatore contemplativo dei suoi battiti fino alle supreme altezze dell’estasi del dono di sé nell’attività apostolica. . . . Un appellativo, quindi, che intende rilanciare tra i giovani il gusto di Dio, la festa della vita, l’impegno per la storia, la responsabilità per il creato e una generosa corresponsabilità ecclesiale.” (E. Viganò, ACG 334, 1990, L.C. pp 1058-1062).
- 27 “.. quante nuove situazioni si creano nel mondo, che hanno un diretto influsso sulla vitalità e sullo sviluppo della nostra Congregazione! Basti accennare all’attività sorprendente della Sede Apostolica, accresciuta in questi ultimi tempi da quell’atto vigoroso, che rimarrà celebre nella storia, della rinnovazione di tutta la disciplina ecclesiastica mediante la promulgazione del nuovo Codice di Diritto Canonico. E nella società civile, quante cose sono mutate! Molte barriere son cadute; molte concezioni sono superate; nuove forze s’agitano, energie sane si manifestano dappertutto; e ciò, con l’aiuto del Signore, fa bene sperare che giorni belli e sereni abbiano presto a splendere sul cielo della Chiesa e di tutti coloro che, con la Chiesa e per la Chiesa, lavorano al bene delle anime ...” (P. Albera, Circular to Salesian Provincials, 1 January 1920, L.C. pp. 295-296).
- 28 “... È finita, grazie a Dio, la tremenda guerra europea, ma perdurano tuttora, e chissà fino a quando, gl’innumerabili suoi effetti deleteri. Tra questi primeggia lo sconvolgimento dei principii che devono reggere l’umana società. Non si vuol più riconoscere autorità di sorta, nè divina nè umana, non più diritti, non più dignità ne’ gradi: si pretende ridurre tutti ad uno stesso livello materiale e morale, anzi, di valori morali non si parla più affatto, ma solo della materia, della sordida materia! Tutta l’atmosfera che si respira è così’ pregna di sifatte perniciose aberrazioni, che anche i buoni possono alla fine essere inquinati, conformando ad esse la propria condotta, o cercando di scusare o giustificare con esse le defezioni da quei principii cristiani che dovrebbero essere la loro norma di vita.” (P. Albera, Circular to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L.C. p. 391).
- 29 “Non secondo la carne, ma secondo lo spirito”, Rome, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1978, 1 fasc.
- 30 “Se è vero che i segni dei tempi sono una crescita in umanità, sapete che cosa toccano? Tutto! E toccano tutto perchè toccano l’uomo nella sua maniera di essere, di agire e di convivere; quindi trasformano la mentalità, lo stile di vita e i metodi di azione.” (Op. cit., p. 131).
- 31 “La genuinità del nostro rinnovamento nello spirito deve essere raggiunta in consonanza con ciò che è l’uomo d’oggi, con la cultura e lo stile di vita che ci circonda, per essere segni efficaci di Dio nel nostro tempo.” (Op. cit., p. 137).
- 32 Una tale idea sbagliata [considerare un Istituto come una cosa esclusiva dei superiori], apparsa anche nei nostri ambienti a causa dello stile culturale della prima metà del secolo, non è più accettabile oggi. Un Istituto non può reggersi con stile fascista o paternalistico o maternalistico; è una comunità di fraternità con partecipazione di tutti...” (Op. cit., p. 134).
- 33 See issue 233 of the magazine *Esprit*, June 1997, entitled: “Le temps des religions sans Dieu”, 1 fasc., 329 pages.

- 34 For this paragraph on Catholic spirituality at the end of the twentieth century, I am inspired by S. De Fiores, "Spiritualité contemporaine" in his *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle*, in collaboration with T. Goffi, Paris, 1983. pp. 1067-1077, an authorised article in such a context, several sentences of which have been reproduced here unchanged, even if it means toning down a few assertions judged to be excessive and extending a sometimes dated line of thinking to the end of the century. I hope this will not come as too much of a surprise. I had to be careful not to give the impression of fabricating and proposing a so-called contemporary spirituality.
- 35 According to an article by A. Dondeyne "God in het leven van de moderne mens", a fragment reproduced in Italian translation in J. Gevaert, *Antropologia catechetica*, photocopied course, Rome, 1997, p. 179.
- 36 Words borrowed from S. De Fiores, art. cit, p. 1070.
- 37 P. Teilhard de Chardin, "La divinisation des activités", in *Le milieu divin (Oeuvres, vol. 4, Paris, 1957)*, pp. 29-67.
- 38 See Romans 12:1.
- 39 Considerations taken up in the entries on *Action, Apostolate, Work*, that follow.
- 40 "Al hablar de una situación de injusticia nos referimos a aquellas realidades que expresan una situación de pecado." (Latin American Episcopate, 2nd General Conference, Medellín (Montevideo, 1968), document "Paz", p. 35.)
- 41 Luke 4:18.
- 42 See the *Magnificat*, Luke 1:46-55.
- 43 *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.
- 44 *Lumen Gentium*, 7-10.
- 45 *Lumen Gentium*, 9.
- 46 23rd General Chapter, 1990, no. 158.
- 47 Letter of July-December 1978, L.C, p. 39.
- 48 Letter of 24 August 1979. L.C, p. 103.
- 49 Letter of April-June 1980. L.C., pp. 258ff.
- 50 Letter of Feast of the Sacred Heart 1986. L.C. pp. 693ff.
- 51 Letter of 6 December 1986. L.C. pp. 723ff.
- 52 Letter of 19 March 1987. L.C. p. 767.
- 53 Letter of 8 December 1988. L.C. p. 909.
- 54 Letter of 10 June 1990. L.C. p. 1039.
- 55 This is for the benefit of those who would attribute to him phrases in inverted commas that he never uttered.
- 56 Letter of 15 August 1990. L. C., pp. 1043-1077.

- 57 S. Congregation of Bishops and the Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes, *Mutuae Relationes*, 14 May 1978, no. 11.
- 58 “Abbiamo, dunque, una spiritualità salesiana ben specifica con degli aspetti assai concreti su cui concentrare la programmazione della formazione permanente nelle Ispettorie e nelle Case, proponendoci anche di scrutare più a fondo il cuore di Don Bosco.” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1990 L.C. pp. 1062-1070).
- 59 Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1990. L.C.; pp. 1103-1104.
- 60 Letter to Salesians, , 19 May 1991. L.C., pp. 1167-1171.
- 61 Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1990, L.C. p. 1215.
- 62 Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1994. L.C. p. 1517, 1520
- 63 Québec, Novalis, 1994, 1360 pages.
- 64 “Love. See Charity”, as the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (vol. 1, col. 531) puts it succinctly, not devoting a specific article to Love as an entry.

Action

A concept of action¹

“This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic”, the Lady said to John Bosco in his dream when he was nine years old.²

He was presented, then, with a large group of children to educate. The disciple of Don Bosco is, as he was in his own time, someone of action and practice.

Strictly speaking, his action would not be “immanent”, something within, as would be the action of the orator or philosopher (examples: seeing, understanding, knowing), but “transitive”, having an effect on something (examples : heating, harvesting, educating). So the only action we will try to clarify here will be (in principle) *praxis*, a form of action that Aristotle distinguished from other forms such as *theôria* (examination), *poiësis* (production) or *proairesis* (choice in advance, project, plan).

Don Bosco considered his action in religious terms, the terms of his dream. He naturally opposed action to contemplation. To each his own. There are contemplative and active people in the Church. Monks contemplate and pray, he thought, simplifying things greatly, while Salesians act. He therefore aligned himself systematically with those who were active and enlisted his own men among them. The charity he planned for them in the first article of the Salesian Constitutions was ‘active charity’, in other words, the practice of charity.

He was not satisfied with just any kind of action. He certainly did not confuse it with activity, disorderly or otherwise. Following Aristotle, he would have conceived of it as a sequence of stages: desiring, deliberating, choosing, acting.³

A good example would be when he launched the missions among the *Indios* in Patagonia in 1875. The wise individual knows where he is heading. He decides only after reflection, makes a choice in full knowledge, and then finally, acts. This action is part of reality: it is practical. Those who reduce it just to the final movement, the one that brings the pleasure of the accomplished work, have cut it off from the source.

The theoretical problems that could be raised by Salesian practical action are endless. A few observations seem to suffice here: on the necessity of practical action, on the difference between action and agitation, on the spiritual value of practice. A set of

considerations on Salesian action based on a recent official document will conclude this entry.

“We need to act” (Fr Rua)

The world is full of ‘wannabes’ who remain in the preliminary stages of action, as we understand it here. Fr Rua once dedicated an entire sermon to them, which he entitled: “*Bisogna fare*” (We need to act).⁴

He wrote it down in his notebook: “*Omnis arbor quae non facit fructus bonos excidetur et [in] ignem mittetur*”, or in other words “Any tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire”, the unhappy fate of the inactive, to whom he promises hell.

Many think about doing good, want to do good, say that they will do good, but in the end, do nothing. Their ideas, their plans, their statements of intent, none of which are followed up, then provoked his somewhat sarcastic reflections. We *think* about doing something when prompted by the possibility of sudden death, but that’s where things remain. The inert thinker is nothing but a statue from which nothing can be expected. Saint Paul mocked the pagan philosophers who were futile amid all their philosophical musings.⁵

There is no lack of *desire* for good deeds around the world. We want to do good, improve ourselves and, who knows, even become virtuous. But a thousand difficulties get in the way: human respect, not changing a friend (or friends), an inconvenience we can’t deny ourselves, a satisfaction we can’t resist. And life goes on. These are not true desires, Fr Rua felt, but half-wishes, half-resolutions. The heart, like the heart of the lazy person, “craves, and gets nothing.”⁶

Then, finally, there are the *talkers*. Like the one who said yes but did not go, they speak but do nothing. These kinds are full of promises they will never keep. Strangely, Fr Rua finds their behaviour in the young Maccabee in the Bible who held out both his tongue and his hands to the executioner. But in their case they stick out their tongues, and never hold out their hands.

Ideas are not enough, nor are desires; nice words without the works they proclaim are not enough. Hell is paved with good intentions. It is not the one who says: “Lord, Lord who will be saved,” but “only the one who does the will of my Father.”⁷

Fr Rua then quotes an anonymous saint: words without deeds are like wood for the fires of hell. He then concluded with an anecdote. His devilishly composed sermon with its handful of biblical quotations was no masterpiece of rhetoric! But what interests us are the steps that lead to practical action, and his regret, as a good Salesian, at seeing people stop along the way. Sublime thoughts, grandiose projects and grandiose speeches are not to be despised. The Salesian awaits the next step, which is action.

Action and restless activity

If we are to believe the Rector Major, Fr Albera, this Salesian was, at least in the past, a little too inclined to be content with this, and to confuse action with agitation or restless activity.

This disease of restless, unbridled activity, was a threat at the beginning of the 20th century. A circular in 1911 was a blunt warning:

The great disease of many who are devoted to the service of God is the restlessness and excessive ardour they bring to external things. How difficult it is to keep our activity within proper limits! If we are not careful, we run the risk of following the movement of the world which allows itself to be dragged along in the whirlwind of business, a victim of the evil which St Bernard already called *evisceratio mentis*, that is, the disembowelling of the soul. The soul exhausts all its faculties, its intelligence, memory, imagination in study and external works. As the wise man said of the person completely absorbed in their occupations: *proicit in vita intima sua*.⁸

There is never a moment to reflect, to discover oneself, to know where one is going. The world believes that those who walk with great strides are righteous, but Saint Augustine assures us that they stray from the right path: *magni passus, sed extra viam* (big steps but out of the way). They do so much but their work is not geared *ad aeternitatem*. Oh! May the Salesians continue to give an example of initiative and great activity, but may this always and everywhere be the result of true, prudent, constant zeal supported by solid piety.⁹

Let us go back over those last words again. Fr Albera was influenced by Dom Chautard's *The Soul of the Apostolate*. Before he died, the monk once again denounced "action for action's sake", the new ideal of his century.¹⁰

"The Salesian is still on the run", Augustin Auffray used to say happily in the retreat conferences I heard in the middle of the century. He seemed to find nothing to take back.

But in this the disciple hardly imitated his masters and models. Let's not talk here about Don Bosco, a holy man who was naturally in such a hurry that he often missed a train. "Bah," he observed philosophically, "we'll take the next one." The Salesian made haste slowly.

Blessed Philip Rinaldi, so good-natured in appearance, was a man of action throughout his life. His biography tells us how constant and intense his activity was as Rector, then as Provincial, then as Prefect General and finally as Rector Major. Here we can consider him just at the time he was Provincial in Spain. The concerns of the provincial house, correspondence and travel for new foundations, the journeys his office required, internal affairs of various kinds, financial difficulties, direct care of the houses and interests of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. All these tasks filled his days with preoccupations, especially since he had no one to share his responsibilities with. One day in mid-February he wrote to one of his friends: "This year I'm up to my eyeballs in things. From New Year's Day until yesterday, I haven't stopped. The work just keeps piling up" (16 February 1895). And on another occasion: "Some days I have so much on my mind that I have no time to think" (2 March 1895). Or again: "I am surrounded by more problems than ever. I need prayers and advice, but I don't even know how to ask for them" (5 December 1900). And yet, anyone who imagined him frantically running hither and thither, or at least so caught up that he had no time to think, nor the leisure to think about his subordinates, would be completely wrong. On various occasions Fr Rinaldi had noted Don Bosco's imperturbable calm amid the hassles of life. The image he retained of him led him to proceed constantly with calm and perfect equilibrium. He could not forget that he was the father to many children. All the testimonies about this period of his life concur in assuring us that he was calm and fatherliness personified.¹¹

"Prayerfulness" and thoughtful calm ideally characterise Salesian action.

Spiritual value of practical action

Don Bosco had thus glorified practical action in and throughout his life, and five years after his death a Christian philosopher, Maurice Blondel (1861–1949), was happy to theorise about it, subtitled his great 1893 work, entitled *Action*: "Essay on a critique of life and a science of practice".¹² In connection with a profound revival of Kantianism ("critique of life," not only of reason), he thus planned to found a "science of practice" which would allow us to value a Salesian spirituality, a spirituality of practice. Without complexes and in contrast to Plato, who had privileged knowledge, he interpreted this

science and its object as the summit of philosophy. Is not practice the finest flower of action?¹³

For Blondel, action was the whole of man as a synthesis in motion. From chapter to chapter he patiently showed its meaning and greatness. To act is a necessity. Neither the dilettante who claims to want nothing, nor the pessimist who wants nothingness, can avoid it, because to want nothing is still to want, and to want nothingness is, after all, to “want to be better.” In fact, no one dodges the problem of practice, and everyone “inevitably decides” on it. Without making any concessions to a truth external to reason, but relying on the latter’s autonomy, by following action in all its unfolding Blondel managed to identify a law of action: the mismatch between the willing will and the willed will. No realisation of the (willing) will ever succeeds in exhausting the more fundamental project that inhabits the (willed) will of man. Action inevitably tends to integrate voluntarily that which it employs spontaneously and necessarily. It transforms into a conscious end, a willed will, that which is in itself a lived principle, a willing will or else it contradicts itself. Blondel demonstrated this by deconstructing action.

Therefore, if, beyond natural, psychic and social forces, there is an infinite at the beginning of action, this infinite must be restored at the end. This is, moreover, what the superstitious action of infinitising the finite seems to show. But this presence of the infinite poses a problem for action which, without ever succeeding in avoiding it, it cannot solve. Because it is impossible to integrate the infinite, one can only *integrate oneself* with the infinite. And at this point, reason retreats unbidden. But the Christian message challenges it. The gesture, in itself impracticable, would be made possible by a liberal communication of God which, initiated in every spirit as illumination and motion, could go as far as divinisation. Action leads to an existential crossroads: choice when faced with the one thing necessary: “Man aspires to be God: to be God without God and against God. To be God through God and with God, this is the dilemma.”¹⁴

This is how the problem or hypothesis of the *supernatural* arises in the dialectic of action. As a philosopher, Blondel was careful not to jump from hypothesis to reality. The positive answer to the necessary question could only be given in another light. Unable to rule out this hypothesis or even to give it content, reason can only trace the conditions and, so to speak, the form. Reason knows that this question commands all others, since ultimate perfection is universally realising. Practice is nourished by a *desiderium naturale* for good, to take up an idea that Saint Thomas developed in his *Contra Gentiles*.

Let’s go back a bit and point out some of the spiritual consequences of Blondel’s analysis. The necessary freedom of choice triumphs in “perfect action” which is practice.

But choice means the primacy of will over intelligence. If knowledge is not blinded, at least momentarily, choice loses its essential character: it is no longer an option. Thus, in Salesian spirituality, the will naturally takes precedence over the intelligence. We must replace St John's "In the Beginning was the Word" with the "In the beginning was the action" of the Goethean myth. Action, which extends to operation, perfects the individual and makes him or her grow. And then, when we say "choice" in relation to the one thing necessary, we are magnifying man's part in this passage to infinity. Blondel recognised this in the ontological weight he attributed to this cornerstone of his science of practice.¹⁵

Theologians immediately denounced this Pelagian threat in Blondel's approach. The campaign against the "method of immanence" lasted well into the twentieth century.

We can see to what spiritual degree action raises us, and how much the union with the Infinite, that is to say with God the Father (through the Son and in the Spirit), which religious practice demands, a term that is unconsciously desired in action, is important to the Christian wishing to give it all its fullness. Daily practice, which is Salesian practice. Reflection highlights its (potential) link with the supernatural world. It is not only possible, but normal to sanctify ourselves through practical action.

The nature of Salesian action

The result of a theological reflection on work during Fr Viganò's time as Rector Major, the Cooperators' *Regulations for Apostolic Life*, promulgated in 1986, speaks of it often. The characteristics of the practice of the entire Salesian Family clearly emerge. Following in the footsteps and in imitation of Don Bosco – *initiatives, projects and achievements* (to the extent possible, it goes without saying). The Regulations were careful not to overlook Fr Albera's recommendations on essential reflection. And it went right to the logical conclusion of practice, the time for decision and real suffering.

The Cooperators promise, as part of their commitment, to collaborate in the initiatives of their local Church. They are available for new initiatives in response to the needs they discover. They take them up with the other groups of the Salesian Family. And the Rector Major, assisted by the Cooperator Advisory Council, endeavours to coordinate them.¹⁶

The *projects* of the Union of Salesian Cooperators are essentially apostolic ones. For each individual it is a life project; and, for the Union, an apostolic project. The overall

project of the Cooperators was defined by Don Bosco. After him, the Rector Major of the Salesians is the guarantor of fidelity to this project throughout the Family. When the Cooperator sets out on his or her journey, they promise to live the evangelical project of the association. This association is entirely responsible for the vitality of Don Bosco's plan for the world.¹⁷

Finally, one article explicitly describes the Cooperator's "style of action", i.e. what the Cooperator *achieves*. It highlights the qualities that should distinguish Salesian action: interior life, availability, generosity, a sense of concrete initiative and decisiveness, creativity, the ability to review, and courage in adversity.

“§ 1. Don Bosco was a practical and enterprising man, a tireless and creative worker, with a deep spiritual life. Convinced of the importance of action, the Cooperators base it on union with God and fulfil their various tasks with zeal and resolution: they are generous and readily available.

§ 2 Awake to reality and the signs of the times, they have a practical approach, are able to discern God's design, and commit themselves with a spirit of initiative to providing a response to the urgent needs which they meet, ready always to evaluate and readjust their own mode of action.

§ 3 “Work and temperance!” was Don Bosco's recommendation. The Cooperator faces up calmly to the toil and difficulties of life, and accepts the cross which unfailingly accompanies apostolic work.”¹⁸

Fr Egidio Viganò¹⁹ was happy to take up this idea and, more or less, the idea of St Francis de Sales on the “ecstasy of action”, applied in his *Treatise on the Love of God* (Book VII, Chapters IV-VI), to the “operation” i.e. to the ordinary practice of life. Ecstasy, whatever it may be, lifts us above ourselves and the world. And “sacred ecstasies” are of three kinds, wrote this saint: “one of them belongs to the understanding, another to the affection, and the third to action. The one is in splendour, the other in fervour, the third in works: the one is made by admiration, the other by devotion, and the third by operation.” This third kind of ecstasy proceeded, in its interpretation, from the meeting of the practical with the supernatural, the infinite of God. Francis de Sales, with words reminiscent of Maurice Blondel, dwelt on “an ecstasy all holy, all worthy of love, the crown of the two others – the ecstasy of work and life.”²⁰

Do not deceive, do not lie, do not commit lust, pray to God, do not swear in vain, love and honour your father, do not kill, is to live according to the natural reason of man; but to leave all our possessions, to love poverty, to call it and hold it to

be a most delightful mistress, to hold opprobrium, scorn, abjection, persecution and martyrdom to be happiness and beatitudes, to maintain absolute chastity, and in the end to live in the world and in this mortal life against all the opinions and maxims of the world and against the current of the river of this life by ordinary resignations, renunciations and self-denial, is not to live humanly, but superhumanly; It is not living within us, but outside us and above us; and because no one can go out above himself in this way unless the eternal Father draws him, therefore this kind of life must be a continual rapture and a perpetual ecstasy of action and operation.²¹

“The ecstasy of action, point of reference for Saint Francis de Sales, is the soul of apostolic charity in Don Bosco”, said the Common Identity Card of the Salesian Family.²²

NOTES

- 1 Bibliography. - M. Midali (ed.). *Spiritualità dell'azione. Contributo per un approfondimento* (series: *Studi di spiritualità* 3), Rome, LAS, 1977, 302 pages.
- 2 MO Da Silva, p. 36.
- 3 The distinctions from Aristotle were taken from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 2 and III, 1-7.
- 4 Unpublished notes for an undated sermon, based on his first words between two retreats: "*Parte di voi ha term[inato]. poco innanzi gli esercizi, parte li comincerà lunedì.*" Ms in FdB 2907 CI-4.
- 5 Fr Rua wrote it in Latin: *evanuerunt in cogitationibus suis*, a quote from Romans 1:21.
- 6 Cf. Proverbs 13:4.
- 7 Cf. Mt 7:21. And the following words: "*Le parole quando sono senza le opere sono tante legna per l'inferno, diceva un Santo.*"
- 8 Translation: "Someone who, while he lives, casts away his bowels". Sirach 10:10 (in some translations). This somewhat incomprehensible proposition, which Fr Albera took from the Latin Vulgate, derives from the Greek text of Ecclesiasticus. The Jerusalem Bible corrects it according to the syro-hexaplar version. We read in 10:9: "Even in life, the human body decays".
- 9 "Ma sventuramente la grande malattia di molti addetti al servizio di Dio è l'agitazione e il troppo ardore con cui si occupano delle cose esteriori. Quanto è difficile trattenerne nei giusti limiti la nostra attività! - Se non ci mettiamo in guardia, corriamo il rischio di seguir l'andazzo del mondo, che si lascia involgere nel turbino degli affari, e cade vittima di quel morbo che già S. Bernardo chiamava sventramento dell'anima: *eviscerano mentis*. Essa esaurisce nello studio e nelle opere esteriori tutte le sue facoltà, la sua intelligenza, la sua memoria, la sua immaginazione, come già diceva il Savio, di chi tutto è assorto dalle occupazioni, *projecit in vita intima sua*. - Mai un momento per raccogliersi, per rientrare in se stesso, per sapere dove vada. Il mondo crede che queste tali camminino a gran passi nel via del bene, ma S. Agostino ci assicura che camminano fuori del retto sentiero: *magni passus, sed extra viam*. Essi lavorano molto, ma i loro lavori non servono *ad aeternitatem*. Oh! continuino i Salesiani a dar l'esempio di spirito d'iniziativa, di grande attività, ma sia essa sempre e in ogni cosa l'espansione d'uno zelo vero, prudente, costante e sostenuto da soda pietà." (Fr Albera, Circular to Salesians, 15 May 1911, L.C. pp. 37-38).
- 10 Cf. Fr Albera, Circular to Salesians, 19 March 1921. L.C. p. 402. "... questo secolo di agitazione, il quale ha veduto nascere un ideale nuovo: l'amore dell'azione per l'azione ..." At this point Fr Albera copied Dom Chautard.
- 11 According to E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, SEI, 1948, p. 96-97. Quotes from Fr Rinaldi: "Quest'anno sono ingolfato fino agli occhi. Dal primo dell'anno fino a ieri sera non mi fermai. Il lavoro cresce colla baracca." "Certi giorni ho tante cose per la testa che non mi danno tempo di pensare." "Mi trovo circondato da difficoltà più che mai. Ho bisogno d'orazioni e di consigli, ma neppure si sa come chiederli."
- 12 Paris, Félix Alcan, 1893, XXV, 496 pages.

- 13 Cf. *L'Action*, 5^{ème} partie, chap. 2 : “La valeur de la pratique littérale et les conditions de l'action religieuse”.
- 14 *L'Action*, p. 356.
- 15 *L'Action*, part 5, chap. 3 : “Le lien de la connaissance et de l'action dans l'être”.
- 16 RAL (Regulations of Apostolic Life) art. 16, 20, 22, 23, 30 and 44.
- 17 RAL Introduction 2, 3 ; art. 3, 5, 19, 23, 24, 40.
- 18 RAL art 30. “style of action”.
- 19 See his circular letters of April-June 1981, 5 December 1989 ; and of 15 August 1991.
- 20 It will be noted that St Francis here gave the word *action* a broader meaning than the one above.
- 21 *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales*, vol. V, p. 21, 27-28.
- 22 *Common Identity Card of the Salesian Family of Don Bosco*, art. 7.

Adoration (worship)

[Translator's note: we could often translate the French 'adoration' as 'worship', but for the purposes of this dictionary entry under 'A', the two can be regarded as interchangeable]

Adoration according to St Francis de Sales

In his efforts to return the Chablais to Catholicism Francis de Sales had a cross erected on the road from Annemasse to Geneva, at the very place where a "Philiberte Cross" had been pulled down by the Reformers in troubled times. On this occasion the Genevan minister Antoine de la Faye published a polemical pamphlet entitled *Brief Traitté de la vertu de la Croix et de la manière de l'honorer*.¹

Francis decided to reply to him three years later, in 1600, with a long *Défense de l'Estendart de la sainte Croix*.²

Among other things he expressed his thoughts on this "way of honouring him" which is called adoration.

Let's start by agreeing on the terms. In the most general sense, adoration or worship is "the act by which one renders the greatest respect and the deepest submission."³

This act manifests an awareness of inferiority, even dependence in the face of a more powerful being, whatever/whoever that may be. A rite of adoration of the pope is envisaged for the cardinals who have just elected him. This is not idolatry. In the religious sense, adoration is man's first duty to God, the fundamental expression of religion, that which inspires and informs other religious gestures such as thanksgiving, atonement or the prayer of petition.⁴

"*De l'adoration : que c'est*" (About adoration: what it is), Francis asked in turn as he began Chapter III of Book IV of the *Defense*. Let us not forget that he was writing in opposition to a minister who was indignant at the Catholic custom of "adoration of the Cross". He began, "Let us look at the opinion of the writer and consider the value of his arguments. My God, how crude this is; let us present the truth; it is enough by itself to overcome the lie." His refutation, based on quotations from the Bible, somewhat laboured to our liking was, after all, convincing. The visible gesture is not essential to

the act of adoration. “True worshippers worship in spirit and in truth” he said with St John⁵ to detractors of worship, who constantly uttered these words in their lessons to Catholics. His chapter ended with the victorious declaration: “we must undoubtedly conclude that the true and pure essence of adoration lies in the inner act of the will by which one subjects oneself to that which is adored.” Logically, in the act of worship, there is first the recognition of the being who is worshipped, then the voluntary act of submission, and the external act only comes at the end, which “follows the submission as its effect and dependence.” “The word worship”, he wrote a little further on, “from whence it has come, means nothing other than to offer reverence, either to God or to creatures, which common folk deem to be a word proper to the honour of God.”

Let’s stay with the common folk and the reverence due to God. One of the best ways to render him honour, Francis would explain one day in a sermon, consists in offering him “a sacrifice of praise”.⁶

His religious soul poured out in the commentary on these words:

Sacrificing a sacrifice of praise is nothing but praising and glorifying God for His mercies. To praise the Divine Majesty is an act which every man is obliged to do, and from which no one can exempt himself. There is no denying the duty of every one to praise God because of his blessings, nor can there be any denying that there is a God who creates and governs the world. The pagan philosophers have been compelled to confess it, even though they were not bathed in the light of truth. Cicero, like many others, freely recognised that there was a Divinity, and that no other than such could create man, nor govern and preserve this great universe. And Christian doctrine teaches us that we must praise God at all times: by drinking, by eating, by watching and sleeping, by day and by night, especially since in every way we feel the effects of his mercy. All good Christians do this when they attend services or go to churches to know God, praise and worship Him, and when, among their other occupations, they bless and invoke Him.⁷

In this finale we recognise the spirituality of daily life dear to Saint Francis. It is possible to worship God always and everywhere. Christians offer their “sacrifice of praise” to the church, but also in whatever comes their way in work and each day. Churches and statues are not essential for the one who worships God “in spirit and in truth.”

A gesture that has become difficult

The world has changed since Francis de Sales. He found room to worship God everywhere, while today God and the Holy Trinity have been exiled from people's daily life. We are far from the time when the psalmist saw God shake the mountains, open the waters beneath the feet of the Hebrews and be at the head of their armies. God no longer has a home in the modern world. The process of secularisation, which succeeds in freeing man from the hypothesis of God, renders the question of adoration useless. The word even tends to disappear from dictionaries, even theological ones.⁸

Contemporary culture prefers to speak of God rather than to speak to God in a context of prayer and worship. Therefore, in Catholicism, the real presence of the Son of God in the Eucharist alone preserves a space for adoration.

This is why it is enough for Salesian worshippers to be faithful to themselves. In their circular letters, successive Rectors Major have spoken only of adoration with regard to the Eucharist.⁹

The awareness of a living ongoing presence of Christ in the consecrated Host provoked an adoring response from Don Bosco. He certainly was a man of his time. Devotion to the real presence was characteristic of the Catholic piety of his century, especially in Turin, the city of the Blessed Sacrament.¹⁰

For the young people in his oratories, if Jesus was really living in their house, it was not permissible to forget him. They were convinced that He was there, near them, to be their friend. Don Bosco regularly invited those in his houses to go to him in his sacrament, to ask him for spiritual and material graces, to converse with him, to contemplate his sacrificial mystery, to remain with him for a few moments. "Remember, my children, that Jesus is in the Blessed Sacrament, rich in graces to be distributed to those who call on him."¹¹

Dominic Savio was unable to do without it. One day he missed "breakfast, class, until lunch itself." Don Bosco found him in the choir of the church of St Francis de Sales, "One foot was on top of the other, one hand resting on the reading lectern; his other hand was on his breast and his gaze was fixed immovably on the tabernacle. He called him but there was no response. He shook him, and he looked around at him saying: 'Oh, is Mass already over?' 'Look,' said his Rector, showing him his watch, 'it is two o'clock.'"¹²

This was a record! Michael Rua also distinguished himself for his zeal for adoration. As a priest and a superior, he regularly ended his day lost in silent prayer on the steps of the high altar in the church of Mary Help of Christians, gazing alternately at the door of the tabernacle or at the face of the Virgin. The sacristan did not wait for him so he could close the church. “He would have waited too long, Fr Rua had the key”, Fr Auffray wrote mischievously.¹³

At a time when the “salvation of the Blessed Sacrament” was reduced simply to Benediction, he instituted the half-hour of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament on the first Friday of each month. “He was very faithful to this practice which, once established at the house in Valdocco, was later extended to the main houses of the congregation...”¹⁴

This form of worship, adapted to an adult population, has endured in the Salesian Family. The Salesians feel in full agreement with a solemn declaration of *Mysterium Fidei*, which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has taken up:

The Catholic Church has always displayed and still displays this *latria* that ought to be paid to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, both during Mass and outside of it, by taking the greatest possible care of consecrated Hosts, by exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful, and by carrying them about in processions to the joy of great numbers of the people.¹⁵

At the dawn of the new century, at the foot of the tabernacle or during times of silent adoration of the Eucharistic species, the members of the Salesian Family willingly encounter God in silence.

The unbeliever might think they are asleep. Of course, the divine mystery is always veiled. The God who is near remains inaccessible. The exchange takes place “in spirit and in truth”. In a gradual purification of the knowledge born of union, man and God meet again, like the father and son in the parable of the prodigal son. They model the eternal embrace that will be the salvation of the humble creature who has become an adopted child of God the Father. This creature grows in secret union with the ineffable, with the elusive essence of the divine. It is by allowing ourselves to be educated in this silence of adoration that we can approach the divine presence, the Orientals tell us. At the summit of our knowledge and experience of God is his absolute transcendence. The prayerful assimilation of the liturgy and Scripture is the only way to achieve such a fusion. In a world that has become deaf and blind to the divine, Eucharistic adoration helps Christians to approach the thrice-holy God and allow themselves to be transfigured by Him...

This call to holiness can only be heard and followed in the silence of adoration before God's infinite transcendence. "We must confess that we all have need of this silence, filled with the presence of Him who is adored", wrote John Paul II: "in theology, so as to exploit fully its own sapiential and spiritual soul; in prayer, so that we may never forget that seeing God means coming down the mountain with a face so radiant that we are obliged to cover it with a veil [...] All, believers and non-believers alike, need to learn a silence that allows the Other to speak when and how he wishes, and allows us to understand his words."¹⁶

Silent adoration "in spirit and in truth" is a source of forgotten or unsuspected spiritual riches.

NOTES

- 1 *Brief Traitté de la vertu de la Croix et de la manière de l'honorer*, MDXCVII.
- 2 The complete title of the work is: *Defense de l'Estendart de la sainte Croix de nostre Sauveur Jesus-Christ. Divisée en quatre Livres. Par François de Sales, Prévost de l'Eglise Cathédrale de saint Pierre de Geneve. Contre un petit traicté, n'aguere sorti de la mesme ville de Geneve, faussement intitulé. De la vertu de la Croix et de la maniere de l'honorer*. A Lyon, par Jean Pillehotte, à l'enseigne du nom de Jesus, 1600. Avec permission, 326 pages.
- 3 Furetière, *Dictionnaire*, 1690 s.v.
- 4 See A. Dodin, "Adoration", in the *Dictionnaire des Religions*, P. Poupard dir., Paris, 1984, s.v.
- 5 John 4:23.
- 6 See Psalms 50, 14 and 23.
- 7 Sermon for the Feast of St Augustine, 28 August 1620; in *Oeuvres*, vol. IX, p. 329-330.
- 8 This is the case for the imposing *Nouveau dictionnaire de théologie*, published under the direction of Peter Eicher, in its French adaptation edited by Bernard Lauret (2nd revised and expanded edition, Paris, Cerf, 1996), whose first entry is *Amour*.
- 9 And again, only Fr Egidio Viganò in his letter of 8 December 1987 on "The Eucharist in the apostolic spirit of Don Bosco" (L.C., pp. 816-818).
- 10 Following a miracle in 1453, about which Don Bosco published a booklet in the *Catholic Readings* entitled *Notizie intorno al miracolo del SS.mo Sacramento avvenuto in Torino il 6giugno 1453 ...*, (Turin, P. De Agostini, 1853, 48 pp.).
- 11 "Ricordatevi, o figliuoli, che Gesù trovasi nel SS. Sacramento ricco di grazie da distribuirsi a chi lo implora." (G. Bosco, *Il Giovane provveduto*, Turin, 1847, p. 103.)
- 12 "(Il Direttore) entra in chiesa, va in coro e lo vede là fermo come un sasso. Egli teneva un piede sull'altro, una mano appoggiata sul leggio dell'antifonario, l'altra sul petto colla faccia fissa e rivolta verso il tabernacolo. Non moveva palpebra. Lo chiama, nulla risponde. Lo scuote, e allora gli volge lo sguardo, e dice: oh, è già finita la messa? Vedi, soggiunse il Direttore mostrandogli l'orologio, sono le due. Egli dimandò umile perdono della trasgressione delle regole di casa." (G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, Turin, 1880, chap. 20.)
- 13 A. Auffray, *Le premier successeur de Don Bosco*, Vitte, 1932, pp. 361-362.
- 14 "(Il Servo di Dio) institui l'Adorazione per mezz'ora del SS. Sacramento, esposto nel primo venerdì di ogni mese. Egli fu fedelissimo a questa pratica che, eretta nella Casa di Valdocco, venne poi estesa alle Case principali della Congregazione." (Gius. Vespignani, Ordinary Process for don Rua, ad 17^{um}, *Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, p. 329.)
- 15 Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, 3 September 1965, no. 56; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1378.
- 16 John Paul II, *Orientalis Lumen*, 2 May 1995, no. 16.

Angels

Was it necessary to introduce angels as part of the hundred entries in this dictionary of Salesian spirituality? From the time of Don Bosco, Fr Rua or Fr Albera to today, when we are entering the twenty-first century, their very existence, long affirmed on a daily basis, has gradually become so discreet that it is hard to make out their existence through official Salesian literature.

Don Bosco entitled one of his first pamphlets *The Devotee of the Guardian Angel*.¹

The reference on its cover to the “sodality canonically erected in the Church of St Francis of Assisi in Turin” leads us to connect this publication with his time at the *Convitto* (1841–1844) next to this church. It was essentially a preparatory novena for the feast of the holy guardian angels, comprising, for each day, an extended meditation, a very brief practice and an *esempio* (example). There was a tenth exercise for the feast day itself. The pamphlet was presumably intended for use by members of the Guardian Angel Sodality “canonically erected in the Church of St Francis of Assisi”, of which our saint may have been a member. The author wrote successively on the goodness of God who has given us holy guardian angels; on the love that the holy angels bring us for Jesus and Mary; on their daily benefits; on their special assistance during prayer, during temptations and in tribulations; on the tenderness of the holy angel towards the sinner, on their special assistance at the hour of death; on the comfort they provide for the soul in purgatory and on the tenderness of the faithful who love them in this way. To illustrate these pious considerations, Don Bosco borrowed examples from the history of the saints (Lydwine, Margaret of Cortona ...) and with accounts of various contemporary facts, according to which simple mortals had been saved by their guardian angels, all examples accepted and reproduced as they were and without the shadow of criticism. To make his point even clearer, the introduction of the booklet congratulated in advance those who would meditate on “the great merit of his angel” and mark his respect for him as would be indicated to him. This statement, unexpected by other generations, was immediately justified: “Among the signs of predestination, theologians and spiritual masters basing themselves on the authority of the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers, recognise tender and constant devotion shown to the holy guardian angels.”²

The Salesian tradition would focus devotion to the holy angels on the guardian angels alone.

Don Bosco had a deeply rooted devotion to the guardian angel. In 1847, when he began publishing the *Il Giovane provveduto*, a prayer book that would last a hundred years, he inserted among the “special exercises of Christian piety” the recommendation: “While dressing you could say, “Angel of the Lord, by his merciful providence you are my guardian. Watch over me through this day, enlighten my intellect, rule my affections, govern my feelings, so that I will not offend the Lord my God. Amen.”³

Consequently, until the middle of the twentieth century, the prayer to the guardian angel, *Angele Dei, qui custos es mei*, would be repeated endlessly every morning by students in Salesian houses throughout the world.

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians used Don Bosco’s example to encourage this devotion in their communities. A *Book of Prayers and Practices of Piety for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* published in Turin at the end of Fr Albera’s term as Rector Major was eloquent regarding this chapter. In the article on the Feast of the Guardian Angel and from a chapter from Fr Lemoyne’s *Memorie biografiche*,⁴ we read this revealing information:

The Venerable Don Bosco had a warm love and deep devotion to his Guardian Angel; he greeted him very often during the day; he sang hymns to him with a particular enthusiasm; he celebrated his feast every year; he often made it the subject of the advice he gave; he knew how to inculcate in the young people around him a great respect for his presence; he exhorted them all to dedicate themselves to him on the Tuesday of each week and on their birthday. Following the example of the Venerable Father, there will be none of the Houses of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, where 2 October or [another] day dedicated to the Guardian Angel is not especially set aside in some way; it is up to the superior to see what opportunity or possibility allows her to do.⁵

In this regard, the book contains a lengthy “Prayer to the Guardian Angel that can be used on this occasion”, that is to say, on the feast on 2 October. The Sisters’ full confidence in the protection and watchful assistance of their holy angels was evident.

After Don Bosco, the Rectors Major, Fr Rua and Fr Albera at the beginning of the twentieth century, encouraged devotion to the guardian angel. “... He had a great devotion to the Guardian Angels, especially to St Michael, whose name he bore”, we read in the process of beatification and canonisation of the former. “He reminded us of this devotion every evening of the Novena,⁶ and gave the panegyric at Foglizzo, where the church was dedicated to this saint.”⁷

Fr Rua also “enthusiastically approved and blessed the introduction of the Guardian Angels Sodality into various colleges in America for the little ones, in order to introduce them to the Christian life while there was still time.”⁸

As far as I am aware, this Guardian Angels Sodality was later established throughout the Salesian world in the first part of the century. In those days, devotion to the guardian angel was not reserved for small children. Fr Albera saw angels in the presence of Salesian provincials and rectors. Christ, our Redeemer, “entrusts an innumerable legion of angels with the care of watching over us continually and suggesting good inspirations as the means of triumphing over our enemies. Only when we are in possession of the eternal glory of heaven will it be given us to know how much we are indebted to these heavenly spirits, deputed to be our guides and teachers” he wrote to them on 20 April 1919.⁹

This, however, was the only reference to guardian angels in the official letters of this Rector Major.¹⁰

Catholicism had become discreet about them. Subsequently, a degree of silence reigned even in the Salesian Congregation. The indexes of the circular letters of Frs Rinaldi, Ricaldone, Ziggotti, Ricceri and Viganò, written between 1922 and 1995, ignore the term “guardian angels”. The recent Salesian Constitutions (1984) were silent on angels. Only the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians maintained the old tradition. A well-expressed and biblically-based article in their 1982 constitutions says “We will honour in a special way... the Angels who always contemplate the glory of the Lord and accompany us on our pilgrimage” (with references in notes to Matt. 18:10; Exodus 23:20; Tobias 12:15; Psalm 90:11 -12).¹¹

The Return of the Angels

By the mid-twentieth century, angels were forgotten. Certainly, many people continued to greet them. Salesian priests still celebrated the votive mass of the holy angels on Mondays (Tuesdays being now occupied by St John Bosco), when no feast or liturgical memorial prevented them from doing so. But “informed” Catholic opinion smiled as if it were outdated, even mythological. Modern critical exegesis ended up emptying heaven by demythologising Sacred Scripture and reducing angelic epiphanies to literary borrowings from the Assyrian-Babylonian pantheon. Some entrusted their future to them, others were reluctant to succumb to them, most of them couldn’t care less.

However, far from being retrograde, the Salesians, who had resisted the negative current, may well have prepared the future. “Angels are back”, it was announced in 1997.¹²

Books about angels were all the go. It is true that the new angels did not always resemble the angels of yesteryear, messengers of God, guides and guardians of human beings. Some personified energies took their place. The New Age celebrated them as such.¹³

And punctilious catechists were wary of their reappearance in any form whatsoever. A certain imagery was likely to arouse unease which sometimes led, by reaction, to complete silence, one of them noted. “In the meantime, new speculations are being developed on the ‘invisible’ beyond the real Christian references. To avoid the two extremes of silence and hype, it seems sufficient to respect the Bible and its language, which is open to poetry.” Biblical poetry is full of symbols to be decoded, the commentator explained. “At the centre of an apocalyptic biblical narrative, there is not the messenger, but the message.” So let’s learn to read it! “And to do that, it is better to be a poet than a scholar. One must accept that meaning is more important than things, and that words exchanged are more important than knowledge accumulated. It is difficult to read the Bible if you are allergic to its symbolic language, if you want to possess the truth rather than allowing yourself to be possessed by it. God’s work is infinitely beyond us. A Chinese proverb says: ‘The finger points at the moon and the fool looks at the finger.’”¹⁴

That is all very well! But does the moon exist only as a symbol? Are angels merely expressions of divine action? Over the same years, voices of authority have testified to their very real existence.

Of course, John Paul II, during Wednesday catecheses on “the creation of invisible beings” and “angels in the story of salvation”,¹⁵ and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,¹⁶ both not very inclined to be theologically progressive, clearly recognised the real existence of angels. “Angels are therefore not prominent creatures in the reality of revelation, yet they fully belong to it, so much so that at certain moments we see them performing fundamental tasks on behalf of God himself.”¹⁷

A witness from the field, also contrary to the pure symbolisation of angels, will be more convincing for some than more recognised official spokespersons. When he was Archbishop of Marseille, the future Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, under the title “Angels and us”, took a stand one day in a column in the diocesan magazine. “In addition to the visible world, God created a kingdom of invisible spirits” he wrote bluntly.

To seek to eliminate angels is untenable. The use of biblical texts may vary according to their literary genre, but the whole of sacred history is traversed by these beings who, far from being mere symbols, are, like every creature in the image of God, true individuals endowed with intelligence and freedom. It is fitting to speak of angels in moderate terms but clearly, as the Gospel does. Christ, the only true mediator, undoubtedly gives them a more unobtrusive place than the Old Testament, where their role was to serve as an intermediary between God and men: all their interventions are all focused on the story of the Saviour to bring out the most vivid aspects of the Annunciation to the Ascension... A Church that does not have the spiritual experience of angels would not be the Church of God.¹⁸

If he were still alive and to the greatest satisfaction of the Salesian Sisters,¹⁹ Fr Viganò would probably not speak a very different language. For the words of Cardinal Etchegaray are wholly consonant with the spirituality of St Francis de Sales, who said much about angels in general and guardian angels in particular,²⁰ and who advised Philothea: “Seek to be familiar with the Angels; learn to realise that they are continually present, although invisible. Specially love and revere the Guardian Angel of the Diocese in which you live, those of the friends who surround you, and your own. Commune with them frequently, join in their songs of praise, and seek their protection and help in all you do, spiritual or temporal.”

NOTES

- 1 *Il Divoto dell'Angelo Custode*, Turin, Paravia et comp., 1845, 72 pages.
- 2 “Felice chi meditando il gran merito del suo Angelo, praticherà gli ossequi suggeriti in questi fogli, e verrà ad esserne costantemente divoto, egli avrà con sè un non dubbio segno di sua eterna salute; giacché tra i segni di predestinazione riconoscono fondatamente i Teologi ed i Maestri di spirito sopra l'autorità delle divine Scritture, e de' santi Padri una tenera e costante divozione verso i santi Angeli Tutelari.” (*Il Divoto* pp. 4-5.)
- 3 “Mentre vi vestite potete dire: Angelo del Signore, che siete mio custode per ordine della sua pietosa provvidenza, custoditemi in questo giorno, illuminate il mio intelletto, reggete I miei affetti, governate i miei sentimenti, acciocché io non offenda il mio Signore Iddio. Così sia.” (*Il Giovane provveduto*, Turin, Paravia et comp., 1847, pp. 76-77.)
- 4 MB II, pp. 262-272, BM 204-2011. The prayer book gave a reference to the chapter in this volume.
- 5 *Livre de prières et de pratiques de piété à l'usage des Filles de Marie Auxiliatrice*, Lille, 1929 (Imprimatur, Turin, 1920), p. 188-189.
- 6 The Novena in preparation for the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel, 29 September
- 7 “... Aveva divozione grande agli Angeli Custodi, specialmente a S. Michele, di cui portava il nome. Ricordava a noi questa divozione tutte le sere della sua Novena, e ne faceva il panegirico a Foglizzo, dove la Chiesa era dedicata a questo Santo, come già sopra deposi.” (G. Barberis, Ordinary process of beatification and canonisation of Don Rua, in *Positio super virtutibus*, 1947, p. 287.)
- 8 “Approvò con entusiasmo e benedisse che in vari Collegi di America si istituisse per i giovanetti la Compagnia degli Angeli Custodi, affinché si iniziassero per tempo alla vita cristiana.” (G. Vespignani, Ordinary process... *ibid*, p. 331.)
- 9 “... Egli affida ad una legione innumerevole di angeli la cura di vegliare continuamente alla nostra custodia e di suggerirci con buone ispirazioni i mezzi per trionfare dei nostri nemici. Solo quando saremo al possesso della gloria eterna del paradiso, ci sarà dato conoscere di quanto andiamo debitori a questi spiriti celesti, deputati ad essere a noi guida e maestri.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesian Provincials and Rectors, 20 April 1919. L.C. pp. 285-286.)
- 10 At least according to the index of his collected letters.
- 11 “Onoreremo in modo speciale S. Giovanni Bosco, S. Maria D. Mazzarello e gli altri Santi della Famiglia Salesiana (...) e gli Angeli che sempre contemplano la gloria del Signore e ci accompagnano nel nostro peregrinare.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 45.)
- 12 Y. Roullièrè, “Le retour des anges. Un regard chrétien”, *Christus* 174, April 1997, pp. 242-250. Several expressions in the preceding paragraph were borrowed from this article.
- 13 Observations by A. Couture and N. Allaire, *Ces anges qui nous reviennent* (coll. Rencontres d'aujourd'hui 23), Saint-Laurent (Quebec), Fides, 1996, Chaps. 1 and 2.
- 14 Ph. Gruson, “L'Autre Monde”, *Catéchèse* 146, February 1997, p. 46-47.
- 15 General audiences on 9 July and 6 August 1986, in *Osservatore Romano*, 10 July and 7 August 1986.

- 16 See its subject Index.
- 17 John Paul II, 9 July 1986.
- 18 *L'Eglise aujourd'hui à Marseille*, 1 October 1978.
- 19 See, among other signs of this interest, the work by Maria Pia Giudici, FMA, *Gli angeli. Note esegetiche e spirituali*. Presentation by Joseph Aubry, Rome Città Nuova, 1984, 152 pages. (4th ed. in 1993).
- 20 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Two, Chap. XVI.

Apostolate

The apostolate and Salesian life

“Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table ... And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation’.” (Mark 16:14). Christ invited his first apostles to proclaim the Good News, or in other words the Gospel. Evangelisation was their privileged task as apostles, something that we translate into the apostolate. Essentially, we restrict the apostolate, a term that can have many meanings, to evangelisation alone.

The apostolate has a central place in the life of the Salesians and Salesian Sisters, and even more so by Salesians not bound by religious vows. Traditionally, the founders of Orders aim firstly at the personal sanctification of the members of their institutes and only secondly at the apostolate that they would like them to exercise, the Rector Major Fr Paul Albera a favourite son of Don Bosco, noted on one occasion. This is pure wisdom, given the purpose of religious life as it has always been conceived of in the Church of Jesus Christ. However, without forgetting that personal sanctification must precede the apostolate, and with his refined sense of modern thinking that finds it difficult to tolerate activities that are not essential to the professions to be practised, Don Bosco understood that with a little good will it was possible to combine personal sanctification with the apostolate. He had experienced this himself, and he asked his sons to imitate him. He even gave the apostolate such preference that superficial observers could believe that a society of priests and laity had been formed solely for the education of young people. And the first article of the Salesian Constitutions, as approved in 1874, seemed to prove them right when he declared: “... its members, while striving together for Christian perfection, undertake every kind of work of charity ...”.¹

Charitable works are therefore at the forefront of the Salesian scene. We return to the motto of the coat of arms: “*Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*”, an appeal to charity of a Don Bosco haunted by the apostolate. A desire of Fr Rua a few years after Don Bosco’s death allows this interpretation. “May the Lord”, he wrote, “always keep alive in our hearts that sacred fire which was kindled there when we heard Don Bosco utter the powerful cry: *Da mihi animas*, and we saw him consume his strength and his life in the exercise of charity.”²

The charity of the Salesians in the wake of Don Bosco is indeed eminently apostolic. Clerics, religious or lay people, the latter possibly past pupils or collaborators in Salesian works, each group in its own way, follows in the footsteps of the apostles “to proclaim to people that Christ is the Saviour of the world.” Of course, each has a different role. Let us read Vatican II:

Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling in His name and power. But the laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world. They exercise the apostolate in fact by their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification of men and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, their temporal activity openly bears witness to Christ and promotes the salvation of men.³

Consequently, no Christian is exempt. The whole spiritual family of Don Bosco: Salesians, Salesian Sisters, Volunteers of Don Bosco, Cooperators, can and even must, each in their own way, feel concerned about apostolic work which seeks to evangelise humanity, to sanctify people and to penetrate the temporal order with the spirit of the gospel.

The apostolate of the new evangelisation

The Salesian Family thus participates today in the major work of the apostolate which is the effort of evangelisation demanded by Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), and then in a powerful homily by John Paul II in Santo Domingo (25 January 1979) to which the Rector Major, Fr Viganò, a good theologian, devoted many interventions. The objectives of Vatican II, which closed ten years earlier, were summed up in one, wrote Paul VI: “to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century.” If they have heart and energy, today’s Salesians throw themselves into the adventure with the enthusiasm of the Rector Major from 1978-1995.⁴

Fr Viganò insisted on the new nature of contemporary evangelisation. Certainly, evangelisation has always been about bringing the gospel into the life of humanity, Paul VI recalled.

For the Church, evangelising means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new: ‘Now I am making the whole of creation new’ (Revelation 21:5). But there is no new humanity if there are not first of all new persons renewed by Baptism and by lives lived according to the Gospel. The purpose of evangelisation is therefore precisely this interior change, and if it had to be expressed in one sentence the best way of stating it would be to say that the Church evangelises when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs.⁵

From this point of view, evangelisation does not change from century to century. But the form it takes needs to differ from one era to another because cultures evolve and change.

The Gospel, and therefore evangelisation, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelisation are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.⁶

A new form of evangelisation is all the more urgent, as cultural transformation has become more profound. “The split between the Gospel and culture is undoubtedly the drama of our time” the pope said.⁷

The new evangelisation requires a pastoral conversion, concerned at the same time to adapt to new cultures, to maintain the integrity of doctrine and to remain in harmony with the Christian tradition under the guidance of the Apostles and their successors. This pastoral conversion simultaneously affects the content of evangelisation, the means of evangelisation, the evangelising workers and the recipients of evangelisation.⁸ Traditional Salesian life could only be affected by a message of this kind.

The demands of “new evangelisation” according to the Rector Major, Fr Viganò

In 1989, in a letter entirely devoted to the “new evangelisation”, the Rector Major, Fr Viganò drew the attention of the Salesian Family to its demands, which are the

“new frontiers”, the “new perspectives”, the “new doctrinal preconditions”, the “new method and language” and the “new workers”.⁹ Such were, at the end of the century, the particular guidelines given by authority to the Salesian apostolate.¹⁰

Fr Viganò’s “new frontiers” belonged to culture and cultures. The newly encompassed areas were, according to him (and he was not wrong): the dignity of the human person, the inviolable right to life, religious freedom, the family as the prime area of social engagement, solidarity at its various levels, the necessary political commitment to democracy, the complex economic-social problem and, finally, summing it all up, cultures. Evangelisation had to start, not from a text or even a proven tradition, but from man and his contemporary needs.

It is now necessary to look systematically at the future and try to figure out the meaning of history, the Rector Major taught. These are the “new perspectives” of evangelisation. The fundamental values of Christianity, such as tradition or observance, will therefore be re-expressed in view of the future. Giving priority to the future, illuminating this vision with new ideals, being creative and effective at the same time – all these tasks require a change in familiar ways of thinking. But they also open up exciting new horizons: instead of war and power, we will be talking about peace, justice, ecology and solidarity. Social models will be proposed. “It is as if we were giving humanity another springtime” exclaimed Fr Viganò at the time. (...) All in all, this is an exciting novelty in itself.”

But the Rector Major was not naive; he knew that on earth, utopias that will soon be obsolete abound, that the tomorrows that sing of our dreams often turn into genuine nightmares. Time is first and foremost the present, not the future. And this present time needs roots. As for the future, it is itself the result of the past. However, it should be borne in mind that Christianity is, by its very nature, forward-looking. And here, Don Bosco, who wisely re-read the past and practised forward-looking pastoral care, gives the Salesians a valuable lesson in historical sensitivity. The Spirit had raised up in him a “good prophet of the new times.” He is, for his followers, “the teacher of a new beginning in youth ministry.”

Christian doctrine must be rethought on the basis of “new prerequisites.” The contemporary evangeliser needs a renewed theology of creation, a theology of hope truly focused on the future, which is, for the Christian, eschatology, and finally a theology of the Church founded, following Vatican II, on the concept of a People of God in organic communion.¹¹

The new evangelisation requires a “renewal of methods and language”. Pedagogy, aided by biology, psychology and sociology, has made great strides, from which education in the faith must benefit. The new forms of pastoral approach and cultural dialogue are of “truly extraordinary importance” for the Salesian Family, said Fr Viganò. In particular, the apostle’s language deserves great attention. Our own mental formation and a certain lack of cultural flexibility can impair our ability to adapt. The evangeliser will need a language adapted to intellectuals, another to ordinary people, another for official communications, another for illiterates, in any case a language that takes into account both the integral truth of the contents and that allows communication with the simplest people. The multiplicity and variety of methods in accordance with the differences of ages, cultures, situations, are by no means weaknesses of evangelisation, but signs of pedagogical flexibility, and therefore of richness in communion. It is true that the adaptation of methods and languages is delicate. The education of the faith is a unique matter, as is Christian identity. In this case, techniques have value only insofar as they are really used for the transmission and education of the faith.

“New workers” are essential for contemporary evangelisation. All of God’s people are involved. To reserve evangelisation solely to clerics would be a mistake today. The laity are the natural evangelisers of their living and working environments. The missionary character of the laity was recognised and affirmed by Vatican II. This is a novelty. In this laity, the Salesian immediately distinguishes youth, his privileged field of apostolate. The Rector Major recommended that Salesians study carefully the paragraph on young people in the John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988). The Church reads in young people the future that awaits her. Their sensitivity is a profound perception of the values of justice, non-violence and peace. Their hearts are open to fraternity, friendship and solidarity. They do their utmost to support causes for the quality of life and the conservation of nature. These values prevent them from simply being “considered as an object of pastoral concern for the Church: in fact, young people are and ought to be encouraged to be active on behalf of the Church as leading characters in evangelisation and participants in the renewal of society.”¹² This courageous affirmation indicates the meaning of Salesian youth ministry. Many “young workers” should be involved in the new evangelisation. The typical Salesian work that is the oratory is not a simple geographical location. It should be an association and a movement at the service of a city, a Salesian province, even an entire country.

Thus, the Spirit of the risen Christ, who makes all things new again, will penetrate better into contemporary society. Because he is the “supreme novelty”, insisted the

Rector Major in a paragraph under this title. “The whole of the new evangelisation is based on the supreme event” which is the Lord’s Passover. We discover it in two privileged mediations: the Word of God and the Liturgy. The new evangelisation therefore needs a true School of the Word and a renewed liturgical experience. If they are faithful to Don Bosco, Salesians know these kinds of demands well.

The need for apostolic interiority

Members of the Salesian Family who content themselves with playing their role as evangelisers, as directors of works, teachers, catechists, preachers, educators of young people, organisers of events, without worrying about evangelising their own lives, would make mediocre ministers of Christ. Fr Albera was suspicious of the Salesian’s restless activity. Fr Viganò called for more “apostolic interiority”.¹³ The new evangelisation is also witness, Paul VI taught. The strength of evangelisation lies both in the truth proclaimed and in the conviction of the witness with which it is proposed. “For the Church, the first means of evangelisation is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbour with limitless zeal.”¹⁴

The evangeliser is naturally invited to live by the Holy Spirit.

Evangelisation will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descends on Jesus of Nazareth at the moment of His baptism when the voice of the Father – “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased” – manifests in an external way the election of Jesus and His mission. Jesus is “led by the Spirit” to experience in the desert the decisive combat and the supreme test before beginning this mission. It is “in the power of the Spirit” that He returns to Galilee and begins His preaching at Nazareth, applying to Himself the passage of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” And He proclaims: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled.” To the disciples whom He was about to send forth He says, breathing on them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵

Is the Spirit of the Lord upon you, the evangeliser, in some way part of the Salesian Family? “It is often said nowadays that the present century thirsts for authenticity. Especially in regard to young people it is said that they have a horror of the artificial or false and that they are searching above all for truth and honesty. The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching. Precisely because of this we are, to a certain extent, responsible for the progress of the Gospel

that we proclaim.” Evangelising zeal must spring from true holiness of life nourished by prayer and above all by love for the Eucharist. The preaching of the Gospel should make the preacher himself grow in holiness.¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 “... i soci mentre si sforzano di acquistare la perfezione cristiana, esercitino ogni opera di carità”... This introduction almost literally translates a paragraph entitled “Apostolato santificatore” from a letter by Fr Albera: “Don Bosco nostro modello”, 18 October 1920. L.C. p. 333.
- 2 “... conservare sempre vivo ne' nostri cuori quel fuoco sacro che vi si accese quando udimmo Don Bosco gettare quel grido potente: da mihi animas, e lo vedemmo consumare le sue forze e la sua vita nell'esercizio della carità...” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 29 January 1896, L.C.p. 142).
- 3 Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Laity), 2.
- 4 The term *Evangelizzazione* covers more than two pages in the Index of circulars by Fr Viganò.
- 5 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18.
- 6 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20.
- 7 “just as it was of other times”, he went on to say prudently. (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20 and following.)
- 8 These refer to the major headings in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.
- 9 With the official French translation of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, we prefer the term “ouvriers” here.
- 10 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 September 1989, L.C. pp 962-985. To these “new things” he added the “supreme newness” of Christ's Passover, and the “newness of the dangers” posed by the new pastoral approach.
- 11 These topics will be taken up again in the articles in this dictionary on the Church, Hope and the Laity.
- 12 *Christifideles Laici*, 46.
- 13 Letter of 8 September 1989, last paragraph.
- 14 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.
- 15 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 75.
- 16 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 76.

Asceticism

Spiritual asceticism

Christian asceticism, while real, does not necessarily have, as is still sometimes believed,¹ the harsh and dry features of Simeon the Stylite, the anchorite perched on his column, in an ongoing struggle for sixty-nine years to secure the possession of a holy, spiritual body capable of participating in the elevation of his spirit to heaven. When it is Salesian its model is Francis de Sales, the bishop with a normal outlook and benevolent gaze, who, however, bound himself to constant discipline in order to strive towards holiness.

Who talks about asceticism today? Yet it does exist, even if it refuses to recognise itself in this suspect, worn-out word. It is defined by a caricature. “A set of physical or moral exercises which tend to the emancipation of the mind by contempt for the body. By extension: deliberate and heroic deprivation. Antithesis: pleasure, enjoyment”, we read in a recent French dictionary (*Le Petit Robert*). The image has been pervasive in current spirituality. Widespread hedonism rejects it, even among religious people. It evokes effort, voluntary, sustained, rigorous application to subdue passions, bad desires, natural indulgence. It is necessary, one thinks, to impose a severe regime on oneself which covers all aspects of life: sleep, food, work, leisure, the use of time; and on all the “movements of the soul”: impatience, anger, sensuality, the taste for power, everything that is a natural claim of desire. This implacable control concerns external behaviour, but also internal, because asceticism must extend to the thoughts. The “perfect man” of classical spirituality is one who has rooted out his “self-love” i.e. attachment to self.

But this view of things is altogether simplistic. St Paul did not despise his body when he reduced it to servitude. The antithesis of asceticism is by no means “pleasure and enjoyment”. The death of desire does not define asceticism. Its possible reasons are varied. Look around you: asceticism is better than you imagined. The education of the will, dear to Jules Payot, requires serious ascetic effort. Many of our contemporaries have rediscovered asceticism since the AIDS epidemic no longer allows them to shrug it off and ignore it. Asceticism is blazing new paths in the easy leisure of mountains and sea. One cannot imagine conscientious athletes without asceticism. And what intellectual does not practice some form of asceticism? Here we shall call asceticism the effort of will that one imposes on oneself in order to acquire the moral energy, the strength and the

firmness of character of the holy and virtuous being. The end pursued is perfect charity. In the Christian, it presupposes faith in God the Father, who “subverts” purely human effort. Asceticism often (not always) takes the form of mortification, and costly exercise is always a feature of asceticism.²

Spiritual combat

The exercise of asceticism involves a struggle. Saint Francis de Sales and the Salesians of the first generations revered and pondered Lorenzo Scupoli’s treatise entitled *The Spiritual Combat*. “My dear daughter, read the 28th Chapter of the *Spiritual Combat*, which is a book dear to me, and which I carried in my pocket eighteen years ago”, Francis wrote to Jeanne de Chantal in 1607.³ Let’s take a look at this little forgotten book. The weapons proposed by Scupoli for spiritual combat were four in number: 1) self-confidence, 2) confidence in God, 3) exercise, and 4) prayer.

At the centre of the work he placed “exercise” which, out of a total of sixty-six, covered thirty-seven chapters (Chapters 7-43). We will remember here that the original meaning of the word asceticism is precisely “exercise”. In Scupoli’s work, the section on exercise dealt with the proper use of inner and external abilities to acquire virtue. As a fine psychologist, Scupoli organised the struggle and proposed not an imaginary, platonic struggle, but a Christian and interior one. The main point to be guaranteed was the strength of the personality: intelligence (Chaps. 7-9) and will (Chaps. 10-11), whose defects had to be corrected and whose activity had to be directed. The hardest struggle concerned the will. The forces at work were battling within the human being himself, where Scupoli discovered two wills at work: the superior (reason) and the inferior (appetites, senses, passions). The higher will was torn between two poles: above, the will of God who wanted to elevate man; below, the passions that attracted him to evil (Chapter 12). Scupoli drew up a strategy for the fight against passions, especially against disordered love of self, wherever it manifested or hid itself (Chaps. 13-18). The internal passions had their external allies in the sensitive appetite. Hence the need to struggle firmly against defects of the senses (impurity, laziness, idle talk), and to employ them as means to raise the mind to consider the divine attributes and the life of Christ (Chaps. 19-26). Scupoli recommended that one should always be on guard against the subtle and insidious tricks of the devil, “artifices” in his language, which he denounced (Chaps. 27-32). Care should be taken not to dissipate energy and efforts, but to concentrate attention on a particular vice or passion to be overcome, or on a particular

virtue to be acquired (Chaps. 33-35). It is very important never to cease the struggle, but to keep the desire for perfection forever alive, for the good soldier does not seek rest or the removal of difficulty, and the devil does not delude him by indiscreet zeal (Chaps. 36-43).⁴

This systematic “combat” makes us wonder a little because as it is presented it involves obvious risks. Christian asceticism is always an asceticism of response, fruit of the work of the Spirit in the individual. It is certainly a struggle, but a responsive struggle. And then, the moral theologian warns us to be careful to distinguish between asceticism and ethical deviance, which voluntarism represents. In itself asceticism must liberate the spiritual being. Rules, exercises, harsh and even restrictive practices have the function of undoing constraints that, at first, we do not even see, but which are, in truth, infinitely harsh: the law of the flesh, even the reign of Satan. But everything changes its meaning if the asceticism becomes forced, and if, instead of being precisely the ordered exercise of an art, a skill, it turns to pure repression, exercised by others but above all by oneself. The most dreadful distortions creep in: the persecution of self, forbidding knowledge of self as such, the stubborn fixation on an “ideal” which is a denial of reality, and so on. Too much tension can even lead to people becoming neurotic, obsessive compulsives, or to adopting insane penances with uncontrollable or sad compensations.

According to contemporary psychologists, who are not necessarily wrong, Scrupoli’s spiritual combat needs to be nuanced. In this case the strategy may become more flexible and change course. This reverses the attitude that seems to define asceticism: it is no longer a question of making an effort, but of letting go, in other words of not stiffening up, especially in relationships with others, of adopting and maintaining an attitude of welcome, acceptance, respect, non-possession, lack of tension, unravelling of pretensions. For example, letting someone talk. The cure imposes a renunciation of an illusory and rather deadly world, in order to find a more authentic personality. Is it easy? No, such a dialectic of control and mastery is ultimately very demanding. It calls on many virtues: humility, strength, temperance... It requires a great willingness to accept a new, sometimes surprising, self-image. It even seems that, in its purest forms, this attitude is the most difficult thing in the world. In cases of neurosis, the “reverse asceticism” of letting go allows the dismantling of the system in which the patient was trapped. It leads to the appearance of what was considered inadmissible: the eruption of desire. Where it was necessary to renounce oneself, there is the assertion of a self that demands, wants to go its own way. Where the slightest impatience had to be curbed, there is a beautiful aggressiveness. Where sensuality had to be pursued to the point of fantasies, there is the

demanding presence of sexuality, and so on. Spiritual combat can take many unexpected forms.⁵

The Salesian ascetic

Saint Francis de Sales, who spoke of self-denial, measuring perfection, of annihilation, the dream of holy souls always needing to be realised; of the perfect stripping of the soul united to God; of external and internal acts of mortification; or even of complete and continual renunciation, certainly did not preach that asceticism was easy.⁶

In his thinking, these concepts were regulated by what he called “holy indifference”, a notion ultimately dear to Don Bosco. Francis told the Visitation Sisters,

I have an extreme desire to engrave in your memory a maxim that is of unapologetic usefulness: Ask for nothing and refuse nothing. No, my dear daughters, ask for nothing and refuse nothing; receive what is given to you, and do not ask what is not presented to you or what is not wanted: in this practice you will find peace for your souls. Yes, my dear Sisters, hold your hearts in this holy indifference to receive all that will be given to you, and not to desire what will not be given to you. I mean, in a word, do not desire anything, leave yourself and all your affairs fully and perfectly in the care of Divine Providence; let me make you all just like children who let themselves be governed by their nannies.⁷

As for the Salesian ascetic considered here, which is in itself a didactic exposition on Salesian asceticism, it was once well represented in Don Bosco’s dream of diamonds (10 September 1881), which warned the saint against the disappearance of asceticism among his sons. Since then, the Rectors Major Fr Rinaldi in 1930⁸ and Fr Viganò in 1981⁹ have endeavoured to repeat the lessons in order to preserve the identity of the entire Salesian Family.

In a first scene, a figure in a sumptuous mantle adorned with ten sparkling diamonds: faith, hope, charity, work, temperance, obedience, poverty, chastity, reward and fasting, represented the Congregation as it should have been. Suddenly, after a time of darkness, he reappeared clothed in a mantle pierced, stained and torn: the Congregation as it became. Faith was replaced by sleep and laziness; hope by laughter and jest; charity by self-seeking; temperance by gluttony; work by sleep, theft, and idleness; obedience by a large hole; chastity by lust and pride of life; poverty by bed, drink, and money; reward by the goods of the earth; and fasting by another hole. A boy dressed in white delicately worked in gold and silver thread, expressed the lesson represented: “Servants and instruments of Almighty God, hark and take heed. Be strong and courageous. What

you have seen and heard is a message from heaven for you and your brethren. Pay attention to it and understand it well.” Don Bosco, who repeated it trembling, certainly made the message his own.¹⁰

Fr Rinaldi was struck by the richness it evoked.

The true Salesian is presented in the first place in all the splendour of his virtues, represented by the ten diamonds, all of which give rise to such meditations that it is thus possible to study the entire spirituality of Salesian life [...] But as excessive light sometimes makes you dizzy and prevents you from seeing, so neglect of divine things, idleness, greed, the pleasures of the senses, pride of life and attachment to the goods of the world can take away our sight of the model and blind us to the point of obscuring the light and throwing us into the deepest darkness [...] This is the opposite of the true Salesian and the risk we run of falling at any moment into such a deplorable state.¹¹

In this latter case, ascetic exercises were neglected or totally forgotten by Don Bosco’s disciple. He eats and drinks well, works little, enjoys life, has enough money to be comfortable, accepts only the orders that suit him and considers his deviations from chastity as peccadillos.

Asceticism of renunciation

Ascetic exercises are meant to bring order to a life of this kind. We will briefly classify them as renunciation exercises and acceptance exercises.

In generous souls, exercises often take the form of refusing certain satisfactions. If the satisfactions are sinful, the refusal is self-evident for the Christian, much more so for the follower of Don Bosco. He abstains, for example, from occasions that he knows are dangerous for his chastity.

But satisfactions can be legitimate. In this case, the exercises that suppress them usually receive the generic title of voluntary acts of mortification. But is it possible to reconcile acts of mortification and Salesian life? The average opinion seems to doubt it. Mortification is no longer fashionable. Yet an austere life is indispensable to the spiritual life, Fr Rua rightly taught.

If we do not care to economise, if we give too much to the body in menus, dress, travel, conveniences, how can we be fervent in our practices of piety? How can we be ready for the sacrifices inherent in Salesian life? All true progress in the

spiritual life becomes impossible, and it is impossible to be true sons of Don Bosco.¹²

He himself was a model of voluntary mortification. Witnesses to his canonisation process said so many times.

The Salesian must be capable of renunciation, Fr Albera reminded us. There are religious who refuse nothing to their senses. If they imagine themselves to be cold, they want to warm themselves; if they think they are hungry, they want to eat; if an entertainment crosses their minds, they lend themselves to it without further reflection, well resolved to satisfy all their fantasies. And their whole lives go off course. “Let us be very careful not to fall into such a fatal and miserable state,” he advised. “Let us practice, in imitation of our venerable father, a continual mortification of the senses, of the throat, of all the passions; let us make ourselves masters of our heart by moderating our affections of sympathy, sensitivity, anger or aversion, so as to keep them subject to right reason, and to direct them constantly to the greater glory of God and to the good of our neighbour.”¹³

The second part of Don Bosco’s motto, “Give me souls and take away the rest” implies mortification, the Rector Major Fr Viganò remarked. But this is the weak point of our spiritual recovery, he added in 1992. “There is no true life in the Spirit without concrete asceticism. Certainly the latter must be in harmony with the particular characteristics of our charism, but it must be there, every day and in abundance.” And he invited his religious to reread Saint Ignatius of Loyola: “greater mortification of self-love than abstention from meat; and more mortification of the passions than prayer; for a person who keeps his passions mortified a quarter of an hour should be sufficient for an encounter with God.”¹⁴

Acts of mortification associate the spiritual being with the mystery of Christ’s Passion. A complete Paschal spirituality includes the desired mortification. Without the cross, it remains shaky. Thus voluntary mortification is given a prominent place in the spirituality of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and is the subject of a special article in their renewed Constitutions.

Through an intimate participation in the Lord’s Paschal Mystery let her live with faith the mystery of the Cross, which touches every human life, and is the source of grace and true freedom. Let her learn how to use lovingly the opportunities for voluntary mortification, to make up in her own body all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his Mystical Body.¹⁵

Asceticism of acceptance

The true Salesian therefore practises the asceticism of renunciation. Without excess, because normally he does not have time to dwell on himself and measure his progress in this order of things. His asceticism is above all one of acceptance. The fulfilment of duty, obedience, and submission to life were an ascetic and purifying virtue for Don Bosco. His followers heard his lesson. We know his rather strong reply to Dominic Savio, who practised all kinds of harsh penances: “The penance that the Lord expects of you is obedience. Obey and that is enough for you.”¹⁶ Don Bosco recommended to his rectors only the austerities of everyday life: “Mortify yourself by diligently fulfilling your duty and putting up with the inconveniences of others.”¹⁷ And as he wrote to French correspondents, one of whom was old and the other suffering: “As for corporal penances, they are not appropriate for you. For the elderly, it is enough to endure the pains of old age for the love of God; for the sick, it is enough to endure their inconveniences gently for the love of God and to follow the advice of the doctor or family in a spirit of obedience; it is more pleasing to God to eat delicately with obedience than to fast against obedience.”¹⁸

The original Salesian Constitutions written by Don Bosco wanted every religious to be “ready to endure, when necessary, heat, cold, thirst, hunger, fatigue, contempt, whenever it serves the greater glory of God, the spiritual good of others and the salvation of his soul.”¹⁹ The Volunteers of Don Bosco produced an article in their 1990 Constitutions based on this formulation.²⁰ For them, poverty and obedience are “detachments” to be accepted in faith and abandonment to God.²¹

The Holy Spirit invites the Salesian to accept apostolic asceticism courageously, a contemporary spiritual author explained lucidly. Salesian asceticism is included in the dynamic of action. When it appears, it does so with a smiling face: it is the roses of the dream of the pergola, under which long thorns hide the bloodied feet of missionaries.²² Taken seriously, it takes on multiple aspects that converge in demanding renunciation. In particular for members of the Salesian Family it implies the refusal to believe and behave as if they own the mission, and the acceptance of being merely servants in God’s hands. Radical renunciation requires that we remain fully available to the great work of the Kingdom of God, without, therefore, gradually yielding to the desire for well-being and amenities, which are a direct threat to the faithfulness and generosity of the apostle. It asks us to accept the concrete and daily exercise of apostolic work: real presence with young people, preoccupations, feeling tired every evening, refusal to seek one’s own satisfaction and one’s own glory, struggle against the “world” and those who oppose the Kingdom; and also: self-centredness, acceptance of how the young are culturally different than the adult, confrontation with the crisis of adolescence which eventually

obliges the educator to discover immaturity within himself; and again: acceptance of the risks of service to the poor, respect and patience when faced with the slow progress of the young, continuous and exhausting effort to remain in contact with a changing reality, courageous acceptance of the necessary changes and the effort of ongoing formation. This is not achieved in a day. Underlying this programme of ascetic acceptance is “a terrifying demand for conversion.” Especially since Salesian asceticism is normally lived in joy. It should never be sad. But living joy in today’s world is not easy.²³

NOTES

- 1 As is the case for the *Encyclopédie des Religions* (dir. F. Lenoir et Y. T. Masquelier, Paris, 1997), vol. II, p. 2268.
- 2 See, for example, L. B. Geiger, *Philosophie et spiritualité*, t. II (coll. *Cogitatio fidei* 6), Cerf, 1963, p. 289-317 (“Esquisse d’une théologie de l’ascèse”).
- 3 Francis de Sales to Baronness de Chantal, Viuz-en-Sallaz, 24 July 1607; *Oeuvres*, vol. XIII, p. 304.
- 4 This paragraph on Lorenzo Scupoli is based on the analysis of *Le Combat spirituel*, in Bartolomeo Mas, “Scupoli”, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. XIV, 1990, col. 473-474, to which I owe the main divisions of the treatise.
- 5 These nuances added to Scupoli are inspired by Maurice Bellet’s article, “Si tu veux être perfect...”, *Christus*, 85, 1975, pp. 5-15, to which I have added a few remarks by Salesian Professor Xavier Thévenot.
- 6 See, in the Index to the *Oeuvres*, the words *Abnegation*, *Anéantissement*, *Dépouillement*, *Mortification* and *Renoncement*.
- 7 *Les Vrais Entretien spirituels*, VI; *Oeuvres*, vol. VI, p. 92. We find this idea of asking for nothing and refusing nothing in an article in Don Bosco’s Constitutions, Chapter 3 on Obedience: “3. Niuno diasi sollecitudine di domandare cosa alcuna nè di ricusarla. Qualora conoscesse che una cosa gli è nocevole o necessaria, la esponga rispettosamente al Superiore, che si darà massima cura di provveder a’ suoi bisogni.” (*Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, 1875, chap. 3, art. 3. See the 1923 edition, art. 46.)
- 8 Letter to Salesians, 24 December 1930, *Atti* 55.
- 9 Letter to Salesians, April-June 1981. *Atti* 300.
- 10 “Servi e strumenti di Dio onnipotente, ascoltate e tenete ben in mente. Fatevi animo e siate forti. Quanto avete veduto ed udito è avvertimento celeste che ora è fatto a voi e ai vostri fratelli: state attenti e comprendete le mie parole.” A handwritten version of this dream corrected by Don Bosco is found in ACS 132; it was published by C. Romero, *I sogni di don Bosco*, Leumann, 1978, p. 59-71.
- 11 “Il vero salesiano ci è presentato primieramente in tutto lo splendore delle sue virtù, raffigurate nei dieci diamanti, ognuno dei quali porge argomento a tali e tante meditazioni da potere studiare esaurientemente tutta la spiritualità della vita salesiana [...] Ma come la troppa luce dà talora le vertigini al capo e impedisce di vedere, così la negligenza delle cose divine, l’oziosità, l’ingordigia della gola, i piaceri del senso, la superbia della vita e l’attaccamento ai beni della terra possono toglierci di vista il modello e accecarci così da rendere buia la luce che era in noi e gettarci nelle più grandi tenebre. [...] Ecco il rovescio del vero salesiano e il pericolo che noi possiamo quandochessia cadere in uno stato così deplorabile!” (P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians, loc.cit.)
- 12 “Se non si cura l’economia, e troppo si concede al nostro corpo nel trattamento, nel vestiario, nei viaggi, nelle comodità, come mai aver fervore nelle pratiche di pietà? Come esser disposti a quei sacrifici che sono inerenti alla vita Salesiana? E’ impossibile ogni vero progresso nella perfezione, impossibile d’esser veri figli di Don Bosco.” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 31 January 1897. L.C. pp. 154-155).

- 13 “Guardiamoci dunque con ogni cura, miei cari sacerdoti, dal cadere in uno stato così miserando e fatale: pratichiamo, ad imitazione del nostro Ven. Padre, una continua mortificazione dei sensi, della gola, di tutte le passioni ; rendiamoci padroni del nostro cuore, moderando gli affetti di simpatia, di sensibilità, di collera, di avversione, in guisa da tenerli sempre soggetti alla retta ragione, e da indirizzarli costantemente alla maggior gloria di Dio e al bene del prossimo.” P. Albera, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L.C. pp. 430.431 (“Lo spirito di mortificazione”).
- 14 “C’è però, un aspetto spirituale che presenta tra noi delle deficienze : è quello dell’impegno ascetico. Non c’è vera vita nello Spirito senza concreta ascesi. Certamente l’ascesi deve essere in armonia con l’indole propria del nostro carisma, ma essa ci vuole sempre, quotidianamente, e in abbondanza. E’ questo, forse, il punto più debole della nostra ripresa spirituale. Eppure ogni forma di Vita consacrata è stata in ogni tempo un esercizio di ascesi. Ricordiamo ancora una volta l’affermazione di S. Ignazio di Loiola: “Più mortificazione di amor proprio che della carne; e più mortificazione delle passioni che preghiera: a un uomo che tiene mortificate le passioni, deve bastare un quarto d’ora per incontrare Dio.” (Egidio Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 September 1992, L.C. p. 1298).
- 15 “In intima partecipazione alla Pasqua del Signore, viva con fede il mistero della Croce, che segna ogni esistenza umana ed è sorgente di grazia e di libertà. Sappia cogliere con amore le occasioni di mortificazione volontaria, per completare nella sua carne quanto manca ai patimenti di Cristo a favore del suo Corpo Mistico.” (Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, art. 46.)
- 16 “La penitenza, che il Signore vuole da te, gli dissi, è l’ubbidienza. Ubbidisci, e a te basta.” (G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, chap. 15.)
- 17 “Le tue mortificazioni siano nella diligenza a’ tuoi doveri e nel sopportare le molestie altrui.” (G. Bosco, *Ricordi confidenziali*; see Amadei, MB X, p. 1041 BM 446-456).
- 18 Letter in French by J. Bosco to Mme et Mlle Lallemand, 5 February 1884; *Epistolario* Ceria, vol. IV, p. 422.
- 19 “ ... ciascuno sia preparato, quando la necessità lo richieda, a soffrire caldo, freddo, sete, fame, fatiche, disprezzi, qualora questo ridondi alla maggior gloria di Dio, ad utilità spirituale altrui, e alla salvezza dell’anima propria” (Salesian Constitutions, 1875, chap. XIII, art. 13.)
- 20 VDB Constitutions, art. 30.
- 21 VDB Constitutions, art. 28, 36.
- 22 See MB III, 32-35, BM 25-27.
- 23 This is inspired by a paragraph by Joseph Aubry entitled: “L’Esprit invite à accepter avec courage l’ascèse apostolique”, in *Avec Don Bosco vers l’an 2000*, Rome, 1990, pp. 162-165.

Beatitudes

The beatitudes with young people¹

The Gospel Beatitudes² are at the very heart of Salesian spirituality, as they are at the heart of all Christian spirituality. They are its “code of happiness”, according to the felicitous expression of the Rector Major Fr Juan Vecchi.³ Quite simply, Salesian spirituality has a preference for some of them: “Blessed are the meek”, “Blessed are the merciful”, “Blessed are the pure of heart”, while Franciscan spirituality prefers “Blessed are the poor” and Camillian spirituality “Blessed are those who mourn”. All the Beatitudes encourage Don Bosco’s followers to live according to the lifestyle of the perfect man, whom Jesus was. Don Bosco was sensitive to this idea. One day he had a book published by the Italian Dominican Domenico Cavalca (+ 1342), entitled *Specchio di Croce*, or Mirror of the Cross,⁴ a work he had probably read in the seminary.⁵ The last ten chapters (XL-XLIX) dealt expressly with the eight beatitudes and showed how Jesus himself had practised them.

The overall program is a demanding one. “We live the new life of the Beatitudes radically, proclaiming and bearing witness to young people, and with them, the Good News of God’s saving love”⁶ says an article in the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It reminds those who would forget the youthful nature of Salesian spirituality: the proclamation is made “to young people and with them”. Young people share the witness to the Good News with adults. Salesian spirituality is in fact a spirituality of young people,⁷ and the members of the Salesian Family, whatever their age or status, proclaim the eight gospel Beatitudes. At the very least, they strive to do so, to the insufficient extent of their fidelity to an ideal that attracts them, but which unfortunately often goes far beyond them.

Moreover, the adult-youth connection does not lessen the demands of the programme. Quite the opposite, in fact. The main characteristic of young people is generosity, an openness to the sublime and the difficult, a concrete and determined commitment to things that are worthwhile, both in human and natural terms.⁸ Young people are constantly searching. They are fascinated by the open sea. They move towards lofty ideals, in an attempt to find concrete answers to the questions of human existence

and spiritual life. Those who shares their life and passion will not get bogged down in the mire of mediocrity, which is repugnant to youth.

The eight Beatitudes proclaimed by the Salesian Family

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” The poor in heart are most open to God and to “God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11). They are poor because they are always ready to accept the gift from above, which comes from God himself. Poor, they live in the consciousness of having received everything freely from the hands of God and, like Don Bosco, never tire of repeating “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God!” The first characteristic of Don Bosco’s poverty was, in fact, “an unshakeable trust in Divine Providence.”⁹ Hearts open to God are thus open to other people, ready to give them effective help, to share what they possess, to welcome the defenceless unfortunate or the abandoned orphan. The true poor always find for a piece of bread for them in days of famine. Their poverty is generous and magnanimous. The “poor in spirit” are those who, if they lack earthly goods, know how to live the values of a spiritual poverty rich in God with dignity, and who, if they possess material goods, live the inner detachment and communion of goods with those who suffer from deprivation. After the Latin American Church, the Salesian Family adopted a preferential option, though neither exclusive nor exclusionary, for the poor, those who lack material and spiritual goods.¹⁰ Blessed are the “poor in spirit”, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs. We cannot promise more.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall win over people’s hearts! “Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart” Jesus said.¹¹ The gentle person is not a coward but a person who is solid in spirit, who faces a hard and hostile world, not with violence, but with kindness. “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love”, said Jesus told the very young John Bosco in the dream he had when he was nine.¹² The gentle person overcomes evil with kindness, seeks what unites and not what divides, the positive and not the negative. His task is to build a “civilisation of love” on earth. Is there a more exciting task in this world for those who remain young at heart?

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.” Let us give justice its biblical meaning. Jesus calls us all to justice, that is, to holiness, to the perfection that comes from listening to God’s Word. For those who hear it, holiness becomes a lifestyle, a way of behaving in society, a way of daily life. This is the justice which the Church wishes to promote among people through a social doctrine which we all have an interest in studying and then firmly applying. John Paul II gave us *Centesimus Annus*. Let us imitate

Fr Rua after *Rerum Novarum*! He studied it and taught it. The authentic Christian responsibly takes on the social demands that arise from his faith. The vision of the world and life that the gospel gives him and that Catholic social doctrine explains to him, urges constructive action more than any ideology, even if the latter seems more attractive. Courage! The Church guides us along paths that lead to “we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”¹³ It is a cause of our joy.

“Blessed are those who mourn!” How harsh this word may sound to the bedridden and, worse still, to those who lose their loved ones, parents or children sometimes murdered before their eyes.¹⁴ No wonder they come to doubt the very existence of a merciful God for the wretched of this world. Evil will always be a great mystery. But let us try to think about this calmly. Don Bosco and Fr Rua found peace in physical or moral adversity through submission to the will of God. They had “the spirit of sacrifice”: “Lord, if it be your good pleasure, let your will be done.” This is how Fr Rua commented on the “beatitude of suffering”. He wrote:

Whoever is fortunate enough to possess the spirit of sacrifice, in the most painful of sorrows and sufferings, far from mourning and moaning about it, stifles in his heart the natural repugnance for suffering and, raising his eyes resignedly to heaven, says generously: Lord, if it pleases you, let your will be done [...] It is on this virtue that the beatitude of suffering is based which Jesus Christ revealed to a world that knows nothing of it.¹⁵

Suffering is the human being’s destiny in some way. Born suffering, we spend our life in affliction, and reach our end, in eternity, through death, the great purification through which we must all pass. This is the will of our Creator; we must try to discover the Christian meaning of suffering. Pope John Paul II once tried to describe the frightening world of human suffering with its thousand faces and terrible consequences. With his gaze fixed on “all the crosses of contemporary man”, he affirmed that “in suffering there is concealed a particular power that draws a person interiorly close to Christ.”¹⁶ Those who mourn find some consoling in this belief.

In any case, young souls are not afraid of suffering. Always close to those who suffer, they are able to see in their own afflictions and in those of their brothers and sisters, the salvific value of pain and the evangelical power of all suffering. Paradoxically, the beatitude of those who mourn is part of their “code of happiness”.

“Blessed are the merciful!” Mercy is the very core of Revelation and the Covenant. It is the most authentic face of love and the fullness of justice. The love of mercy is

not pure compassion for those who suffer, but effective and affective solidarity with all those who are afflicted. Young people and adults with noble, generous and kind souls are distinguished by their sensitivity to the sufferings of others, to their misfortunes and to any evil that affects man. Mercy is not passivity, but determined action on behalf of one's neighbour, starting from faith. From the beginning, Salesian missionaries could only be men and women of mercy. Today, thanks be to God, mercy is widespread in our world, the Pope noted in 1985. How many young people joyfully dedicate themselves to the service of their brothers and sisters, on all sides and in the most difficult circumstances! Youth is service. The witness of service and fraternity they offer at the end of the twentieth century is "one of the most consoling and wonderful things in our world."¹⁷ To the merciful, the Lord offers joy and peace as a reward mercy itself.

"Blessed are the pure in heart!" Like angels, they will forever sing of the wonders of God and constantly see the face of the Father who is in heaven. Jesus assures us that those who practise this beatitude will see God. In fact, people with a pure and transparent soul already see God in this life, the Pope said in his address to young Peruvians. "They see in the light of the Gospel all the problems that require special purity, such as love and marriage." How important it is, then, to educate young people in "beautiful love", that priceless treasure, in order to keep them away from all the pitfalls that try to destroy it: drugs, violence, sin in general. Just as it is important to guide them on the path that leads to God: Christian marriage, the royal road to human fulfilment and sanctification for most men and women. And also, when Christ calls, to the radical self-giving required by a priestly or religious vocation.¹⁸

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake!" Those who are persecuted for justice are genuinely "poor in spirit." The Lord can therefore say that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The entire Salesian Family feels solidarity with victims of the poverty that affects the spiritual and social values of the person. Its youthful character, which makes it appreciate the value of freedom, enables it to understand well the suffering caused by the lack of religious freedom in particular. Throughout the world, there is always one or more who suffer in this way. These favourites of the Lord are the favourites of Jesus' friends.

"Blessed are the peacemakers" for they will be called children of God. In a century plagued (like the twentieth) by wars and revolutions, Don Bosco, unlike many of his fellow citizens, including the clergy, was a builder of peace. The Lord's blessings on those who seek peace in the family and social spheres, in the fields of work and politics, at national and international levels, could not but be his. The Salesian Family aspires to a

more just and supportive society, but not according to the discourse of false prophets for whom social injustices can only disappear through hatred among classes, or through recourse to violence, or through other anti-Christian means, because they are contrary to the Gospel. “Only the conversion of the heart can ensure a change of structures to lead to the building of a new world, a better world” the Pope said in Lima. And he repeated the teaching of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: “To put one’s trust in violent means in the hope of restoring more justice is to become the victim of a fatal illusion. violence begets violence and degrades man. It mocks the dignity of man in the person of the victims and it debases that same dignity among those who practice it.”¹⁹ “It is only by recourse to the ethical capacities of the person and to the continual necessity of interior conversion that we will obtain the social changes that will be truly at the service of man” the Conference of the Latin American Episcopate (CELAM) acknowledged at the assembly in Puebla.²⁰ The members of the Salesian Family are naturally peaceful. They make it a point of honour as children of God and brothers or sisters of Christ to contribute to building peace within the circle, small or otherwise, of their relationships and their influence. The spirit in which they live is a spirit of charity and unity, not of hatred and war. Blessed are the peacemakers!

The hour of the Beatitudes

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”²¹ Like him, the Gospel Beatitudes are eternal, their hour always rings from year to year and from century to century. Members of the Salesian Family who wish to practise this “code of happiness” humbly try, without too much noise, to build a world where holiness shines, a more fraternal and finally reconciled world, a much more just world, a world without violence, a world where honesty, truth and peace reign, a world finally more human, where the mystery of God, Father, Son and Spirit enlightens the mystery of each man and woman. This is a noble task to be repeated over and over again. The Beatitudes are the price.

NOTES

- 1 The Beatitudes were the subject of many reflections during the Salesian Family's 11th Spirituality Week, the proceedings of which were immediately published under the title *Le Beatitudini del Vangelo. Riflessioni per una spiritualità giovanile* (Roma, Editrice S.D.B., 1985, 286 p.) It contains, on pp. 215-222, the Italian translation of a speech given by John Paul II in Lima, Peru, which we have drawn from substantially.
- 2 Matthew 5:3-12.
- 3 "Anche oggi la fede è cambiamento di mentalità e orientamento nuovo della vita secondo il codice della felicità, proclamato da Gesù, le beatitudini: la povertà, la pace, la purezza del cuore, la giustizia, la misericordia." (J. Vecchi, "Le parole del giubileo. Accogliere", *Bollettino salesiano*, March 1997).
- 4 *Biblioteca della gioventù italiana*, Torino, tip. e libreria salesiana, 1878 ; 2nd ed. *ibid.*, 1885.
- 5 See MO Da Silva, p. 107.
- 6 Viviamo con radicalità la vita nuova delle beatitudini, annunciando e testimoniando alle giovani e con le giovani la Buona Novella della redenzione" (FMA Constitutions, art. 8).
- 7 See Salesian General Chapter 23 in 1990, nos. 158-159.
- 8 From this sentence to the end of the article, we make close use of the text of an address by John Paul II to young Peruvians in Lima on 2 February 1985, on the very theme of the beatitudes. The original Spanish text appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano* on 4 February 1985.
- 9 Salesian Special General Chapter, no. 596.
- 10 Salesian Special General Chapter, no. 181 : "Absolute priority of the 'poor'".
- 11 Mt 11:29.
- 12 "Non colle percosse, ma colla mansuetudine e colla carità dovrai guadagnare questi tuoi amici." (MO Da Silva, p. 35.)
- 13 2 Peter 3:13.
- 14 I am thinking of recent atrocities in Africa and Algeria.
- 15 "Chi ha la fortuna di possedere lo spirito di sacrificio, nelle pene e negli stessi patimenti più dolorosi, ben lungi dall'attristarsi o menarne lamento, soffoca in cuore la naturale ripugnanza al patire, e sollevando al cielo il volto rassegnato dice generosamente: Signore, se così a voi piace, sia fatta la vostra volontà: *ita, Pater, quoniam sic fuit placitum ante te.* - E' su di questa virtù che è fondata la beatitudine del dolore che G. C. ha svelata al mondo che non vorrebbe saperne." (M. Rua, Letter to provincials and rectors, 29 November 1899, L.C. p. 203).
- 16 Apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*, 11 February 1984.
- 17 Address in Lima, 2 February 1985.
- 18 Same address.
- 19 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith : "Instruction on certain aspects of the theology of liberation", Rome, 6 August 1984, § XI.

20 Puebla, Chap. IV, 3, 3.3.

21 Heb 13:8.

Bosco, John

Biographical milestones

Giovanni (John) Bosco, born to Francesco (Francis) and his wife Margherita (Margaret) Occhiena, on 16 August 1815, in the hamlet of Morialdo, in the municipality of Castelnuovo Piedmont, Kingdom of Sardinia, lost his father when he was twenty-one months old.¹ His family situation meant that he was only able to begin proper schooling in January 1831, at fifteen years of age, first of all in the district of his birth, then in the nearby city of Chieri (1831–1835). In 1835, he began his clerical studies at the seminary in the same town, leading to the priesthood in 1841. After that Don Bosco took three years of additional pastoral studies at the “ecclesiastical college” in Turin, and from then on began an apostolate on behalf of young boys, some of whom were delinquents or heading that way in Turin, in what he soon called the “Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales”. This work stabilised in 1846 in the suburban district known as Valdocco.

To get help, he gathered people of goodwill around him. With the youngest of them, in 1859 he created an embryonic religious society, the Pious Society of Saint Francis de Sales, while other associates remained attached to him in a group that he later named (in 1876) the Salesian Cooperators. However, the original oratory spread, Don Bosco became the author of pious books and took charge of a small magazine of popular apologetics entitled *Lecture cattoliche* (Catholic Readings). A large, beautiful church dedicated to Mary Help of Christians was built in Valdocco in 1868, attracting many pilgrims. His own reputation as a miracle worker helped to attract pilgrims. In 1872, Don Bosco added a female branch to his male Congregation, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and in 1874 he succeeded in having his Society approved by the Roman authorities.

The work which up till then was regional began to develop in Italy, France (1875) and overseas in Argentina (1875). The Salesians established vocational and agricultural schools, as well as boarding schools, preferably for the poor and abandoned. Their Congregation had become a missionary one. The last years of the saint’s life were marked above all by two great journeys which took on the appearance of a triumph, one to France (Paris and Lille 1883), and the other to Catalonia, Barcelona (1886). In 1884, an exhausted Don Bosco accepted a vicar with the right of succession in the person of his

very faithful follower Michael Rua. He died on 31 January 1888, was beatified in 1929 and canonised by Pius XI on 1 April 1934.

Don Bosco in the history of spirituality

In his nineteenth-century history of Italian spirituality, Massimo Petrocchi speaks of Don Bosco in the following terms:

Turin was grey and filthy in its buildings and urban planning. It was the Ottocento! But there were some great hearts living within! This is certainly the trait that immediately appears in the personality of St John Bosco (Castelnuovo d'Asti, today Castelnuovo Don Bosco 1815 – Turin 1888). His kindness and charity were neither instinctive nor “sentimental”; they were the richest products of his *charitas* and *pietas*.

He is perhaps the saint who best realised the identity of work with prayer in the nineteenth century, in the manner of Saint Paul. His practical activity led to transcendent solutions, so much so that it has been possible to speak of it as “ecstasy of action”. But was that all there was to it? Did his work coincide with prayer? We have rightly remarked that a taste for prayer was for him also a sign of perfection. As far as other mystical stages are concerned, while Don Bosco “does not provide us with his personal experiences of recollection and of a unitive life of presence (with God), and while he does not give us a theory on the prayer of union and contemplation, he is nonetheless prepared to describe certain stages of the spiritual life in people whose lives he shared as union and loving co-presence.”²

Was his work always “done” alongside prayer?

It is not necessary to recall here Don Bosco’s pedagogical thinking. We can only add that escaping from idleness is not enough, that it is necessary to be and feel surrounded by the familiarity of good people: “whoever wants to be loved must show show that he loves.”³ The child must be formed in his will, “the only source of true and pure love, of which sensibility is but a false image.” Virtue really does appeal to the child, but, “because it is repugnant to the weakness of his nature, he interprets this inner repugnance as a contrary will.”⁴

To understand his method of “providing for salvation”, the most notable text is his *Giovane provveduto* (Turin, 1847, reprinted). His surely austere method is at the same time optimistic: “I would like to teach you a kind of Christian life that will make you happy and contented. I want to show you what true enjoyment and pleasure is.”⁵ In his preventive system, including for tranquility of the heart,

the central point is the sacramental “method”. “Frequent Confession, frequent Communion, daily Mass⁶ are the pillars which must support an educational edifice from which one wishes to remove threat and the rod.”⁷

St John Bosco, Patron of eternal adolescence

He is one of those saints as they say “to whom one would give communion without confession”

(And I wouldn’t say the same about all the certified and voluntary members of the same profession...)

We see immediately that he is not only a saint but an honest man.

He is as clear as a morning in May and as round as an apple.

I love that thick curly hair on his forehead and this impression he gives of strength and agility.

Everywhere this Bosco lays his hand, you feel authority.

Authority and gentleness, love for God and all these fatherless children who belong to him.

Everywhere there are poor children, they belong to him:

This youthfulness, all this poverty with the morning star on their foreheads,

that was what he wished for in the Church.

A Church built with great sawing and hammering since it believes; working hard and singing at full volume:

And he stands in its midst like Moses; full of wisdom and orderliness, words of consolation and sacraments.

It’s up to him to rebuild the world, and he knows how:

Keep your theories yourself - your debates and your government matters.

Here I am surrounded by these growing children who learn about God along with me!

All these people learning alongside me how to read and use their fingers skilfully.

“My Father never ceases labouring together with Me”, says Jesus Christ Himself. “Listen carefully my children.”

Work is something where no one can do without others,

This task that involves us joining hands together in continuing creation - it belongs to us all.

“Come unto Me”, said our Lord Jesus Christ, “all ye that labour or are heavy burdened.”

The Cross! My body offered whenever you want it! There could be nothing better than this!

So when the day ends and the week ends and Sunday is near,

The worker stained with iron and oil washes himself and puts on a white shirt.

Full of claims taught to him which are like bread and water,

Like a child or as a son, he throws himself into the arms of Saint John Bosco.

Oh father! Here I am in your arms, full of simplicity, trust and skill

Tell me - will we all go to heaven? Will we possess the Republic?

Oh Father! Just because I can work now and have grown facial hair,

It doesn't mean that I'll ever stop being your little boy whilst in your embrace:

I open my heart; I open my mouth; you tell God Himself to give me daily bread,

And ensure justice for all our comrades simply because they're Christians:

We've started believing in God again. We've restarted following His Church – The One who's strongest.

We found an oath that binds life itself together until death parts us from it.

Just because we grow old doesn't mean we should stop being children;

Children, men, women – everything is interconnected.

Everyone stands firm together; both small yet immense at the same time.

Everything moves forward; everything strives to grow stronger together!

Pray for us, John Bosco – patron saint of eternal adolescence!

Paul Claudel

Feast of St John Bosco

31 January 1938⁸

NOTES

- 1 This article is of a general nature. The earlier *Introduction* provides an overview of Don Bosco's spiritual experience and spirituality.
- 2 P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II, Zurich, 1969, p. 345 and 478. References to Massimo Petrocchi's description are those of the Italian original.
- 3 According to a letter of Don Bosco's in 1884.
- 4 From P. Scotti, *La dottrina spirituale di Don Bosco*, Turin, 1939, p. 71-72.
- 5 G. Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica dei suoi doveri ...*, Turin, ed. 1931, p. 5.
- 6 G. Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, 1877.
- 7 "Una Torino grigia e squallida nelle sue strutture architettoniche ed urbanistiche, quella dell'Ottocento. Ma quali altri grandi cuori essa ha visto! Questo è certo il tratto che subito appare nella personalità di san Giovanni Bosco (Castelnuovo d'Asti, ora don Bosco, 1815-Torino, 1888). La sua bontà, la sua carità non sono qualcosa di istintivo, di "sentimentale", sono invece il prodotto più ricco della sua *charitas* e della sua *pietas*. A prima vista può sembrare che in don Bosco primeggi l'azione o un certo formalismo giuridico-canonistico; ma tutto va inserito nella sua fortissima vita interiore, nella sua stessa contemplazione. Forse è il santo che, nell'Ottocento, ha maggiormente attuata l'identità paolina del lavoro come orazione. Essendo la stessa attività pratica elevata globalmente a soluzioni trascendenti, si è potuto parlare, per don Bosco, di "estasi dell'azione". Ma è stato solo così? Il lavoro ha coinciso con la preghiera? È stato giustamente notato che per don Bosco il gusto della preghiera è manifestazione anche di perfezione; per quanto riguarda poi gli altri stadi mistici, se don Bosco "non ci confida sue personali esperienze di raccoglimento e di stato unitivo e presenziale, se anche non ci dà una teoria sulla orazione unitiva e sulla contemplazione, nondimeno ci si dimostra disposto a spiegare come unione e come compresenza amorosa certi stadi di vita spirituale riscontrati in persone con le quali convisse" (P. Stella). O il lavoro è stato "fatto" sempre accanto alla preghiera? Non c'è bisogno di ricordare qui il pensiero pedagogico di don Bosco. Solo va aggiunto che la fuga dell'ozio non basta, bisogna essere e sentirsi circondati dalla familiarità dei buoni: "chi vuole essere amato bisogna che faccia vedere che ama" (Da una lettera di don Bosco del 1884). Il fanciullo deve essere istruito nella volontà "unico sorgente del vero e puro amore, di cui la sensibilità non è che una falsa immagine". La virtù seduce sì il fanciullo, ma "poiché ripugna alla debolezza della sua natura, interpreta questa interna ripugnanza come una volontà contraria" (In P. Scotti, *La dottrina spirituale di Don Bosco*, Torino, 1939, p. 71-72.) Il testo più notevole di don Bosco per comprendere il suo metodo di "provvedere alla salvezza" è *Il giovane provveduto* (Torino, 1847 ed edizioni seguenti). Il suo metodo è sicuramente austero, ma al tempo stesso ottimistico: "io voglio insegnarvi un modo di vita cristiana, che possa nel tempo stesso rendervi allegri e contenti e mostrarvi quali sono i veri divertimenti e i veri piaceri" (G. Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica dei suoi doveri religiosi*, Torino, ed. 1931, p. 5.) Nel sistema preventivo, anche per la tranquillità del cuore, il metodo centrale è per don Bosco il "metodo" sacramentale: "la frequente Confessione", egli scriveva, "la frequente Comunione, la Messa quotidiana sono le colonne che devono reggere un edilizio educativo, da cui si vuole tener lontane la minaccia e la sferza" (G. Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, Torino, 1877.)" - M. Petrocchi, *Storia della spiritualità italiana* (secc. XIII-XX), Roma, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1984, pp. 513-516.

- 8 On the same day, Claudel wrote in his diary that he had written this poem “almost in a single go” without knowing that it was the saint’s feast day and the fiftieth anniversary of his death. This poem appeared in *La Vie intellectuelle*, 10 February 1938.

Celebration

Traditional Salesian celebration¹

The style of Salesian celebrations hardly changed during the first century of the Congregations founded by Don Bosco. They were simply adapted to the local resources. Because “Poverty is not vice!” Still essentially religious celebrations, they took place within the confines of the “oratories” and “houses”. The latter were usually boarding schools. Don Bosco had given them a purpose, a programme and a spirit at Valdocco in Turin, which his Salesians set out to reproduce, and which could be found in Spain, France and Belgium, as well as in South America, Poland and India.²

In those days, Salesian celebrations marked points during the school year for the various communities: young people, religious men and women, and friends of the work. On 8 December, the Immaculate Conception of Mary was celebrated. Then, on the 25th, came Christmas. At the end of January, St Francis de Sales arrived (the 29th), replaced by St John Bosco (the 31st) after his canonisation in 1934. Mardi Gras, with its fanciful festivities but also its expiatory prayers, fell in February or early March. Vocational schools celebrated St Joseph’s Day, the workers’ feast day (19 March). The month of May, illuminated by the smile of the Mother of God, culminated on the 24th in the feast of Mary Help of Christians. There was always some solemnity to be celebrated in the last days of June: St Aloysius Gonzaga (the 21st), St John the Baptist (the 24th) or Sts Peter and Paul (the 29th), and was often considered suitable for celebrating the local Rector or Provincial. The object of the Salesian celebrations most of the time, therefore, was the celebration of a saint. But these celestial beings also occasionally acted as patrons of flesh-and-blood characters who were then the real object of the celebration. People in Salesian institutions thus lived throughout the months in expectation, joy, and then with the memory of the celebrations that punctuated them.

Don Bosco had attached the greatest importance to the preparation, especially religious, of these feast days. This preparation became increasingly feverish as they approached. The whole community participated. Hymns in church, orchestral concerts, and theatrical performances required multiple rehearsals. The making of the actors’ costumes, the decoration of the various places, the improved menus, possibly the lighting, required a lot of ingenuity. And souls were to be readied for a pious and fruitful celebration. On the occasion of his “good nights”, the local Rector gave many

an exhortation to his community during the nine days (the novena) preceding the main feast days for the Immaculate, Christmas and Mary Help of Christians, and sometimes for St Francis de Sales and St Joseph. For those in charge, the success of the celebration would be measured (ideally) by their community's progress in virtue. As a general rule, the "spiritual bouquets" (*fioretti*), which were very practical, guided daily efforts. For example, Don Bosco would ask his boys to be extremely precise in the fulfilment of their duties of state one day, to be meticulous in their "modesty" (purity) on another, to give good advice to a friend on another, to behave well in church on another, and to obey their superiors perfectly on yet another...³ The paraliturgy that was the Christmas novena had a poetic form that was perfectly suited to the solemnity. In this way, the little world of each house entered into the mystery of the infant Jesus. Finally, on the eve of the feast, the Rector, faithful to Don Bosco, organised times for confession. Full freedom was left to each individual, but the dignified access to Eucharistic communion on the following day had to be facilitated. In those days, sacrileges by communicants in a state of mortal sin because they had not confessed properly were greatly feared.

The feast day itself would arrive. Whenever possible, religious celebrations in a highly ornate church or chapel would be long, vibrant, and sparkling with lights and colours. The programme was fixed: two Masses during the morning, one called the Communion Mass, the other sung; and, after lunch, Vespers, a sermon, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, sometimes also a procession. On this day, liturgical ornaments shone and an abundance of altar boys solemnised the ceremonies. Polyphony was usually the rule for hymns in church. The secular part of the day had to be carefully prepared. Don Bosco, who was no Pharisee, dedicated a chapter of his 1868 book on the consecration of his Church of Mary Help of Christians to the *pranzi* (meals). The music resounded in concert. The festivities could take on grandiose proportions. This was the case for St John the Baptist at Valdocco in Don Bosco's last years. John the Baptist was John Bosco's patron saint. At the end of June the weather was fine and it was starting to get hot. The event took place in the courtyard on a podium, with one or more armchairs for the guests, occasionally a canopy, a number of speeches, music and poetry for the occasion. The next day there would be theatre. The houses of the time usually had a theatre hall which, if necessary, was also a refectory or study room converted for the occasion. Dramas or comedies, interspersed with sketches and pieces of music, all performed by the local young people and Salesians. The whole festival was an action-packed affair.⁴ A firework display, always lively, noisy and brilliant, sometimes brought the festivities to a close.

Towards a Salesian spirituality of celebration

The traditional model did not survive the cultural transformations of the second half of the twentieth century. The setting and audience of the institutions had changed. Tastes were constantly evolving. New social models were emerging. The previous Salesian programme, especially the religious part, had become inapplicable. Traditional Salesian celebrations faded away and were transformed or even disappeared from most of the institutions.

However, a spirit remained which reappeared, among other things, during the Spanish *campobosco*,⁵ *confronto* or celebrations for the centenary of Don Bosco's death (1988), especially in Turin and Colle Don Bosco, solemnised by the presence of the pope and the beatification of Laura Vicuña, all full of life, light, song, dance and warmth.⁶ Is it worth noting here that the World Youth Days organised at the request of Pope John Paul II in the 1990s, which were long religious celebrations with original catecheses, songs from every continent, dances, games and, above all, liturgies that were at once magnificent, serious, pious and lively, would have fulfilled Don Bosco's wishes for a celebration as he saw it?

However, some Salesians have reflected on the Salesian celebration and its benefits.⁷ In the first place, they felt, celebration itself was a good thing. Going overboard is not essential to it. Not everyone on this earth automatically thinks that way. Those who worship work and production alone will never find the time to relax and enjoy themselves. For the relentless activist, relaxation is a betrayal of the cause. The truth is, there is a lot to be gained from celebrating.

Celebration is in perfect harmony with the youthful spirituality of the Salesian Family. The young people to whom the Salesians dedicate themselves are organisms that are "biologically festive", because they are overflowing with life, movement and joy. Don Bosco channelled these energies into festivity "which is typical of his spirituality". "Salesian youth spirituality is a spirituality of festivity and joy, based on an optimism that makes us appreciate everything human, that has confidence in mankind and in young people" (Morante).⁸

However, any celebration organised by the Salesians cannot be said for this reason alone to be a Salesian celebration in the proper sense, that is, according to the spirit of Don Bosco. The religious dimension is essential. Salesian celebration is a Christian celebration. At its centre is the liturgical celebration which gives it a sacramental character. Every celebration is evocative of God's action in the life of the world, and, in the person of the saints, when it comes to them. The celebration thus organised plays a highly didactic role. By it the faith is maintained and strengthened, the celebration

of which announces the mysteries, at the same time as it proclaims the teaching of the gospel. The various liturgical rites are especially valuable for their sacramental power and their effectiveness in nourishing Christian life. Let us remember what Don Bosco thought of the Eucharistic communion of his boys at the feast days in Valdocco.

The Salesian celebration is not only fun, it is educational. Don Bosco and his Salesians understood the educational power of feast days as not just religious, but joyful and sensitive. Values were transmitted and accepted through them. The participants, young and old, came out better than they went in. The true Salesian feast day filled them with joy. For this reason alone the atmosphere created was positive. One of Don Bosco's main goals as an educator were achieved. "Be joyful!" he told his boys. But you don't force people to be joyful. The celebration, a source of gladness, is a suitable instrument for immersing people in joy. It strengthens the whole person in body and soul. And Don Bosco, with no mistrust of the human, the all too human, welcomed this. The joy of the body in celebration, watching, singing, playing and eating, and of the soul at peace with itself and with God, giving itself for and with others in festive unanimity, puts young people in a state of euphoria. And that's just as well, because liveliness and joy invigorate, while sadness depresses. The joy of a predominantly religious context encourages virtuous behaviour. Through these celebrations, young Salesians lives received salutary impressions that would determine their (good) choices for the future.

Cleverly organised, the Salesian celebration helps people to grow. Society itself benefits. For communities it is a privileged moment of both human and religious growth whenever the latter dimension has not been neglected. Celebration intensifies interpersonal relations, reinforces collaboration and shared responsibility if, as is desirable, the participants feel that they are the real actors in the event. Hidden opportunities and abilities are revealed. In an atmosphere cultivated in the Salesian spirit, play and entertainment are spiritually constructive. Celebrations bring together those who are far apart. One of the Salesians consulted was even able to write: "Our (Salesian) celebration is an experience of profound solidarity with all people; it is a call to spread life, so that everyone can benefit from the joy of celebrating" (R. Tonelli).⁹

Why not give authentic celebration a central place in life? Of course, if celebration were to fill the whole of life, it would lose its exceptional character. Proponents of the "every day is a celebration" approach can forget it: a uniformly everyday life trivialises and evens out festivity. A celebration is an explosion of life that is usually contained. It is a summit reached by struggling in the ordinary course of each day. Such was Don Bosco's thinking.

NOTES

- 1 See, among others, C. Semeraro (ed.), *La festa nell'esperienza giovanile del mondo salesiano*, coll. *Colloqui sulla vita salesiana* 14, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1988, 280 pages.
- 2 In the collection mentioned, no. 1, see F. Desramaut, "La festa salesiana ai tempi di Don Bosco", pp. 79-99, R. Alberdi, "La festa nell'esperienza salesiana della Spagna (1881-1901)", pp. 100-129, N. Palmisano, "Festa e formazione. Dai "trulli" di Locorotondo all'aspirantato di Ivrea", pp. 130-145, L. Craeynest, "La festa nell'esperienza salesiana femminile del Belgio", pp. 146-149.
- 3 The *Memorie biografiche* contain multiple examples of these *fioretti*.
- 4 Its decline began between the two world wars when the cinema, which required no preparation but engendered passivity, replaced the theatre.
- 5 See Maria del Carmen Canales, fma, "Campobosco. Dall'incontro alla festa. Un'esperienza dei giovani in Spagna", in the already mentioned *La festa...*, pp. 150-157.
- 6 We can get an idea of these celebrations: *Confronto* 88, the pope's visit and beatification of Laura Vicuña, by reading the edition of the *Bolletino salesiano* (October 1988), entirely dedicated to them.
- 7 Consider some reflections, as well as comments of my own, borrowed freely from Salesian Professors Giuseppe Morante, "Per una catechesi sulla festa", in the work already mentioned, *La festa ...*", pp. 211-223, and Riccardo Tonelli, "Tra festa e croce. Una spiritualità della gioia o una spiritualità della vita dura", *ibidem*, pp. 165-181.
- 8 "La spiritualità giovanile salesiana è una spiritualità della festa e della gioia, basata su un ottimismo che porta ad apprezzare tutto ciò che è umano, ad avere fiducia nell'uomo e nel giovane." (G. Morante, "Per una catechesi sulla festa", in *La festa...*, p. 220).
- 9 "Per questo la nostra festa è una esperienza di profonda solidarietà con tutti gli uomini ed è una vocazione ad espandere la vita, perchè tutti siano restituiti alla gioia di far festa." (R. Tonelli, "Tra festa e croce... ", in *La festa ...*, p. 177).

Charism

A recent term in Salesian spirituality

Don Bosco and Fr Rua, who were not lacking in them, thank God, ignored charisms. So they never talked about them. Instead, they asked God for particular graces which they often obtained for themselves or for their Salesians, and which were in fact charisms. Don Bosco asked for the gift of speech on the day of his ordination to the priesthood. Right up to the end of his life, he charmed his listeners with this kind of charism. Since Vatican II, his successors have been pleased to recognise charisms in Salesian life. The Rector Major Fr Viganò has given charism a place of honour in the spirituality of the Salesian Family.¹

In the theology of St Paul, the word charism refers to an operation of the Holy Spirit relating to the life of the Church. Let us reread the passage of his First Letter to the Corinthians on these “spiritual gifts”.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. ... Strive for the greater gifts.²

The word charism has also taken on a secular meaning. Sociologists use it to designate the influence aroused by an exceptional personality. Following Saint Paul, we will call *charisms* the gifts of nature and grace placed at the service of the building of the Body of Christ.

The Fathers of Vatican II paid great attention to the charisms, as evidenced in particular by the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the People of God is described as a sanctifying mission accomplished, either by the sacraments and hierarchical ministries as usual means, or by the “special graces” that are the charisms, spiritual help “perfectly suited to and useful for the needs

of the Church.” The Council intended to give the most flexible extension to this word and to the reality it embodies. It applied it to various graces “distributed ... among the faithful of every rank”, “whether they be the more outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused.”³ All these supernatural interventions make up what can be called the “charismatic structure” of the Church, to distinguish it from that other structure that is the social and visible constitution of its hierarchical organisation. “The Church is a community of charisms” John Paul taught.⁴

The charism of Don Bosco the founder according to Fr Egidio Viganò

In this general context, the diversity of religious institutes is an ongoing sign, a public manifestation of the active assistance that the People of God receives from the Holy Spirit in the journey towards their destiny.⁵ The best way to safeguard their variety is to respect the “original inspiration” of which each institute has received the imprint. Therefore, the Council’s decree on religious life prescribed a “return to the roots” which maintains fidelity to this initial grace.⁶ The “initial inspiration” of religious institutes is obviously the charism of the founders, to which *Lumen Gentium* alludes implicitly by pointing out the presence of “special graces” which make those who receive them “fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church”, in the words of Saint Paul.⁷ “In the first place, there is the need for fidelity to the founding charism and subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute.”⁸

Since the Council, there has been much research on the “initial inspiration” of the Salesian Family, in other words, on the charism of its founder Don Bosco.⁹ For his part, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò endeavoured to describe this charism of Don Bosco the founder, an expression which, in his eyes, referred to the whole of the “Salesian patrimony”.¹⁰ He discovered this in the founding experience, which he considered to be the “new gift” of Valdocco. For him, the traditional phrases: “spirit of Don Bosco”, “spirit of Valdocco” or “Salesian spirit”, indicated “the varied aspects and the various components of the charismatic experience of Don Bosco the Founder.”¹¹ The broad term “Salesian patrimony” satisfied him and he would have contented himself with it. But we had to accept the language of the time. By Salesian patrimony, he meant “to refer to what today is generally called the charism of the founder.”¹² Let us therefore observe this charism of Don Bosco the founder with his guidance.

God raised up Don Bosco to begin a special experience of holiness and apostolate on behalf of youth. He was aware that he had been called to found something himself. The idea of joining an existing institute came to mind. Lanteri's Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Rosmini's Institute of Charity tempted him. He renounced them in order to conform to the divine will. His founding experience was difficult. The other founders of religious institutes had discovered already mature collaborators of virtue, knowledge and proven experience. Don Bosco had to start with some older teenagers (*ragazzi*, according to Fr Viganò). He had, it is true, an extraordinary collaborator in the person of Pius IX, whom he called "our co-founder". But this pope was rather a guide for him in his project to create a multifaceted spiritual family.

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit he infused an original character in this group of followers resulting, according to the Rector Major, from a "new synthesis" that was balanced, harmonious and, in its own way, organic, between the common elements of Christian holiness. The virtues and the means of sanctification are found there according to a proportion, symmetry and beauty that characterise them. The result is an "extraordinary" form of holiness and an energy that generates spiritual posterity. The constitutive elements of this Salesian patrimony would be, according to Fr Viganò, who drew inspiration from the observations of his predecessor Fr Ricceri, above all an original covenant with God which made Don Bosco a kind of "Patriarch" of a new spiritual family. Then, by God's will, the invitation to participate in an active and specialised way in the mission of the Church. And also, a specific style of mentality and spiritual life. The final component is a specific form of evangelical life. Don Bosco chose a religious way of life for his Salesians, in which obedience in view of the mission was a priority, and in which they lived and worked together in a "family" style.

Don Bosco was inspired from on high to want for us a specific form of evangelical life, flexible and adapted to the times, agile and available for mission among the young, a harmonious combination of religious authenticity and social citizenship, fidelity to the following of Christ and adaptability to the signs of the times [...] So it is part of the heritage inherited from Don Bosco the Founder for us SDBs and for you FMA also a special community project of evangelical life.¹³

This special community project of evangelical life belongs to the "patrimony inherited from Don Bosco the Founder" which was, in his terminology, his founding charism.

This charismatic heritage constitutes the ongoing charism of the Salesian Family. “Through the energy of his charism, Don Bosco brings together in unity in a single apostolic Family religious, lay people, married persons, widows and widowers, celibates and priests, all of them testifying in various ways to the spirit of the beatitudes.”¹⁴

The charism of the founder is “an experience of the Spirit, transmitted to the disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth... with its distinctive character [which] also involves a particular style of sanctification and apostolate.”¹⁵

The community of charisms

The Salesian Family is not lacking in the charisms that are prevalent in the ecclesial community. There are many spiritual gifts, that is, personal charisms, found in it. Their diversity is the strength of the whole. Normally, in the one Body of Christ, each one fulfils his or her role according to the charism received, which deserves to be respected and valued for the good of the whole Body. But this common good can suffer from the disorderly exploitation of personal charisms. This was the case in Corinth at the time of St Paul. A discernment is therefore needed, rendered more necessary by the renewed attraction of charisms – their *fascino* (fascination), wrote Fr Viganò¹⁶ – for the members of the communities of the Church. Painful clashes between charismatic freedom and institutional authority can occur. Don Bosco’s life testifies to this. Vatican II wisely wrote:

Extraordinary gifts are not to be sought after, nor are the fruits of apostolic labour to be presumptuously expected from their use; but judgement as to their genuineness and proper use belongs to those who are appointed leaders in the Church, to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good.¹⁷

Since St Paul, criteria of discernment have been formulated for charismatics. First of all, the opposition between charism and institution, dear to some, cannot be recommended by this apostle, who classified the functions of government among the “charisms”.¹⁸ The charism and its use serve the common good of the community on several conditions: a) Being in accord with the Church’s faith in Jesus Christ (1 John 4:2). b) Producing the “fruit of the Spirit”, consisting of love, joy and peace (Galatians

5:22). If a charism causes trouble and confusion, either it is not authentic or it is not being used in the right way. Without charity, the most extraordinary charisms are of no use at all (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). c) The golden rule is “let everything be done in such a way as to edify” (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Membership of ecclesial charismatic movements will be governed by the same principles. Clashes between charisms are possible. We will be judged by certain signs as to whether or not the participation of religious in movements is consistent with a profession which itself includes a sense of belonging, a spirituality and an apostolic style. Charisms will be welcomed to the extent that they make a real contribution to the life of the community, which is one of union with God and fraternal communion. This applies in particular to the gift of “prophecy”, which consists in speaking in the name of God. Often, in fact, the Holy Spirit inspires prophetic words intended to promote the development or reform of the Christian community. Harmony with authority can suffer. Mutual charity should regulate everything.¹⁹

Charisms are precious goods which should never be in contradiction with charity, a “way” which surpasses the “superior gifts”, taught Saint Paul. How could a Christian forget that in his Letter to the Corinthians, this apostle to the Corinthians followed Chapter 12 on charisms with the hymn to charity in Chapter 13: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing...”

NOTES

- 1 The term *Carisma*, still absent in the Index of the circular letters of the Rector Major Fr Ricceri (1965–1977), takes up nearly two pages (p. 1633-1634) in the Index regarding the letters of Fr Viganò (1978–1995). *Grazia*, on the other hand, has but a single reference.
- 2 I Corinthians, 12:7-11, 31.
- 3 *Lumen Gentium*, 12b.
- 4 See John Paul II, General audience 24 June 1992; *Osservatore Romano*, 25 June 1992.
- 5 See an article by M. Olphe-Gaillard, sj, "Le charisme des fondateurs religieux", in *Vie consacrée*, 1967, p. 338-352.
- 6 *Perfectae Caritatis* 2a.
- 7 *Lumen Gentium*, 12b.
- 8 John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, no. 36.
- 9 See in the first instance Mario Midali, *Il carisma permanente di don Bosco. Contributo per una teologia attuale*, Torino, LDC, 1970.
- 10 See, in particular his brochure, *Non secondo la carne, ma secondo lo spirito*, Rome, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1978, p. 81-87, and Letter to his confreres, 14 May 1981.
- 11 "Tali espressioni indicavano complessivamente i vari aspetti e le diverse componenti dell'esperienza carismatica di Don Bosco Fondatore" (Letter, 14 May 1981).
- 12 "... con essa (espressione ampia di patrimonio salesiano di don Bosco), però, intendo riferirmi a ciò che oggi si chiama globalmente 'carisma del Fondatore'." (Letter of 14 May 1981, loc. cit.)
- 13 "Don Bosco è stato ispirato dall'Alto a volere per noi una determinata forma di vita evangelica, duttile e adattata ai tempi, agile e disponibile per la missione tra la gioventù, di armoniosa permeazione tra autenticità religiosa e cittadinanza sociale, tra fedeltà alla sequela del Cristo e duttilità ai segni dei tempi. [...] Così fa parte del patrimonio ereditato da Don Bosco fondatore, per noi SDB e per voi FMA, anche uno speciale progetto comunitario di vita evangelica" (Letter of 14 May 1981).
- 14 "Con l'energia del suo carisma, Don Bosco unifica nell'armonia di un'unica famiglia apostolica il religioso, il laico, lo sposato, il vedovo, il celibe, il prete variamente testimoni dello spirito delle beatitudini." (*Carta di comunione*, art. 35.)
- 15 "Ed eccoci, così, a una visione teologale del 'carisma del Fondatore' 'un'esperienza dello Spirito, trasmessa ai propri discepoli per essere da questi vissuta, custodita, approfondita e costantemente sviluppata in sintonia con il Corpo di Cristo in perenne crescita ... con una indole propria che comporta anche uno stile particolare di santificazione e di apostolato.'" (Egidio Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 February 1995, citing *Mutuae Relationes* 11. L.C. p. 1557).
- 16 Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1991.
- 17 *Lumen Gentium*, 12 b.
- 18 See I Corinthians 12:28 ; Romans 12:8.

- 19 Paragraph inspired by the already quoted address of John Paul II, 24 June 1992, and by a note from Juan Vecchi, the Vicar of the Rector Major, "Salesiani e movimenti ecclesiali", *Atti* 338, October-December 1991. For relations between religious and charismatic movements, add the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, no. 56.

Charity

Love, friendship and charity

Don Bosco spoke of charity from the first article of his Constitutions.

The purpose of this society is to bring together its clerical and also lay members for the purpose of perfecting themselves by imitating the virtues of our Divine Saviour especially in charity towards poor young people.¹

For him, charity had the meaning St Paul himself gave it in his First Letter to the Corinthians. One day, when his faithful Fr Rua wanted to speak about fraternal charity, he naturally chose the elements in Chapter 13 of this letter, where we read, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”²

Charity, an outdated term nowadays, where it is equivalent to almsgiving, also translates for us the Greek *agapè* of First Corinthians. Let us reflect to better grasp the meaning of this inexhaustible reality. Charity (*agapè*), the totally free and unselfish gift of love to others for their own good, distinct from passionate love (*erôs*), which is love of self, and friendship (*philia*), which is a benevolent love, has no absolute model except in God. He alone can love in this way without any imperfection. “Before being a particular virtue, even the most excellent of virtues, charity is a ‘vision of the world’, and more than that because it makes us go beyond, transcend the world [...] Charity is first and foremost God, the God of Jesus Christ, the Most Holy Trinity, the living God, personal, intelligent and powerful, and infinite love. Charity is God loving Himself in the unity of the three divine Persons, and enjoying the unity of the three divine Persons, and in this ineffable love enjoying perfect beatitude.”³ The best earthly image of *agapè* is the image of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Humanity can only progress towards this unsurpassable horizon.

The charity of creatures really begins with their love of friendship towards God. It is this friendship itself, insofar as it sheds light on their whole lives and reflects on their

neighbours. St Francis de Sales concluded Book II of his *Treatise*, entitled *History of the Generation and Heavenly Birth of Divine Love* with,

Charity, then, is a love of friendship, a friendship of dilection, a dilection of preference, but a preference incomparable, sovereign, and supernatural, which is as a sun in the whole soul to enlighten it with its rays, in all the spiritual faculties to perfect them, in all the powers to moderate them, but in the will as on its throne, there to reside and to make it cherish and love its God above all things.⁴

The decisive shift from friendship to charity was well marked by St Thomas. Charity is a love of benevolence (a friendship) that extends beyond friendship itself, beyond its limits and its affective determination.

The friendship we have for a friend can be so great that because of him we love those who are related to him, even if they offend or hate us. It is in this way that our friendship of charity extends even to our enemies: we love them with charity, in reference to God, to whom our friendship in charity is principally directed.⁵

The love of enemies in itself excludes passionate love and friendship proper. It is something else, something beyond, without self-seeking, without the benevolence and can only be explained by love for God, Father and Creator. “If you want this faith, the first thing you must receive is the knowledge of the Father” we read in a fine Christian document from the second century... “When you have attained this knowledge, can you imagine what kind of joy you will be filled with? Think how much you will love this One who has first loved you so much! If you love him, then you will imitate his kindness.”⁶ Like divine goodness, charity is diffuse and limitless.

Certainly, charity can be accompanied by pleasure, happiness and joy; there is in itself no opposition between *erôs* and *agapè*, to the point that the one would exclude the other. In a couple, united by *erôs* and *philia*, *agapè* charity can be real. To love one’s neighbour in God never meant not to love that person in body and soul. Following Don Bosco, the member of the Salesian Family endeavours to make friends with the young people whom he or she intends to serve “charitably” and “for the love of God”. This is a perfectly legitimate source of happiness. “It is good and pleasant to live together” as brothers in a Salesian community which practises “fraternal charity” in accordance with Don Bosco’s wishes in a long paragraph of his Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions.

When fraternal charity reigns in the community, when all the confreres love one another, and each enjoys the good of the other as if it were his own good, then

this house becomes a paradise, and one touches with one's finger the correctness of the psalmist's words: '*Ecce quam bonum et iucundum habitare fratres in unum*' (Ps. 132:1)."

It is true that he added immediately,

But as soon as self-love dominates and discord and dissent arise among confreres, this house becomes rather like hell.⁷

Charity is first practised with one's nearest neighbour.

Salesian pastoral charity

In the thick of the Second World War, amidst the explosions of bombs and the suffering inflicted on tens of millions of unfortunates shared among rival nations, the Rector Major Fr Ricaldone recommended to the Salesians in a solemn letter in 1942: "Let us live intensely the life of charity. Charity towards God, loving him above all persons and things; charity towards our neighbour in thoughts, words, deeds."⁸ The member of the Salesian Family exercises this charity as a priority in his apostolic field, the same Rector Major had explained two years earlier. "Our Father (Don Bosco), with a heart overflowing with hard-working and self-sacrificing charity, proposed Francis de Sales, doctor and apostle of charity, who sacrificed himself for the salvation of his neighbour, as a model for himself: and he made this asceticism the norm of his and ours."⁹ The life of the apostle or, if you like, of the Salesian pastor, is moved and guided by charity. His fraternal charity with those around him can then be said to be pastoral.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Rector Major, Fr Viganò, a theologian, extolled this "pastoral charity" of the Salesians.¹⁰ Pastoral charity, the charity of Don Bosco's heart, is at the origin and is the core of the Salesian Family, he explained.¹¹ Salesian *agapè*, drawn from the heart of God, is diversified in a world of the young and the poor. The pastoral charity of the Salesian Family has two reference points: God and his "beneficiaries", the Rector Major taught. And these two reference points themselves have their own original dynamics.

Love of God is the source and cause of everything; love of our neighbour is the practical demonstration and sure yardstick for measuring true love of God, and the indispensable path along which the love of charity proceeds. There is a kind of common circulation between the two, a mutual causal relationship at

different levels, in which union with God has the interior priority while in the practice of our system priority is given to service to our neighbour. The true God is inconceivable without his love for man, and our neighbour cannot be authentically thought of except as an image of God. And so no dedication to the young is genuine unless it proceeds from the love of God, but it is equally true that for us there is no true love of God that prescind from a predilection for the young, and especially those in need. The craving for God is inseparable from a preoccupation for man: we live the great commandment of the Gospel in a single movement of charity. There is no disjunction between the two reference points of our pastoral charity.”¹²

“All Salesian spirituality is born of charity towards God and leads to pastoral charity.”¹³

John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (25 March 1992) delighted Fr Viganò.¹⁴ He commented for Salesians on the paragraphs dealing with the apostle’s configuration to Christ the Good Shepherd, “which constitutes precisely the ideal and soul of the Salesian spirit of Don Bosco.”¹⁵ He identified his favourite ideas on the relationship between consecration and mission, that is, between prayer and work, and above all an authorised presentation of “this famous pastoral charity”, which has as its model Christ the Good Shepherd “who reveals the love of God by witnessing to it to the last extreme by his self-donation in service, humility and the most generous solidarity.”¹⁶ Looking closely at the mystery of Christ, we clearly perceive that its essential content is the total gift of self in the mission, a gift without limits, a gift made with joy and cheerfulness, a gift that translates into empathy and kindness because the apostle loves with a heart that is new, generous and pure, with genuine self-detachment, with full, constant and faithful dedication, and at the same time with a kind of “divine jealousy” and even with a kind of maternal tenderness. Let us remember, observed the Rector Major in reference to Don Bosco, who said: “That you are young is enough to make me love you very much. For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life.”¹⁷ John Paul II’s exhortation provided the Rector Major with a brief outline of Salesian pastoral charity.

But this outline does not have the eloquence of the very life itself of the holy founder. It speaks to us of how he practised this “famous pastoral charity”, how he lived the “apostolic passion” which characterises this charity, according to the Salesian Common Identity Card of 1995.¹⁸ We discover him in his attention to the world, especially to poor youth, and his zeal in acting on this. Statements of intent – of which he was sparing – were never enough for him. The active and patient presence of young people

was essential to him. He involved the public authorities and various categories of the population, whether wealthy, middle class or poor in his social initiatives. He would have liked to provide society with “good Christians” or at least “good citizens”. Whatever the social movements, political systems and ideologies, he wanted to do good to all, without letting himself be embroiled in factions, by claiming what was due to him and keeping his hands free for the service of youth and ordinary folk. We recognise the member of the Salesian Family in every country around the world and whatever be the circle of his or her influence, effective gestures be they big or small, by the fact that they are marked by the qualities listed in Chapter 13 of First Corinthians: readiness to help, disinterestedness, unselfishness, kindness, generosity, thoughtfulness, gentleness, understanding, humility, patience, gratitude.

NOTES

- 1 “Lo scopo di questa società si è di riunire insieme i suoi membri ecclesiastici, chierici ed anche laici a fine di perfezionare se medesimi imitando le virtù del nostro Divin Salvatore specialmente nella carità verso i giovani poveri.” (Salesian Constitutions manuscript of 1862. Chap. *Scopo di questa società*, art. 1.)
- 2 I Cor 13: 4-7. We find Fr Rua’s sermon (unpublished) – commenting only on the propositions in Chapter 13 – in a series of occasional addresses entitled *Carità fraterna*, in FdB 2932, A3-9.
- 3 Irénée Hausherr, “La charité fraternelle”, in *Christus*, 31, 1961, p. 291-292.
- 4 *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book II, Chap. XXII.
- 5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, quest. 23, art. 1. The appeal to the authority of St Thomas Aquinas and St Francis de Sales is found in A. Comte-Sponville, *Petit traité des grandes vertus*, PUF, 1995, p. 370-371, whom we follow here in his considerations on the nature of the love of charity.
- 6 Letter to Diognetus, X, 1, 3.
- 7 Quando nelle comunità regna questo amor fraterno, tutti i soci si amano vicendevolmente ed ognuno gode del bene dell’altro come se fosse bene proprio, quella casa diventa un paradiso e si prova la giustizia di quelle parole del Salmista: *Ecce quam bonum et iucundum habitare fratres in unum* (Ps. 132:1). Ma appena vi domini l’amor proprio o vi siano rotture o dissapori tra’ soci, quella casa diventa l’inferno.” (Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions, dated 15 August 1875, § *Carità fraterna*. This paragraph, taken from the St Alphonsus Liguori’s *Vera sposa di Gesù Cristo*, only began to appear in the document with the 1877 edition.) See, on fraternal charity, the following article on *Community*.
- 8 Viviamo intensamente la vita della carità. Carità verso Dio, amandolo sopra tutte le persone e cose ; carità verso il prossimo nei pensieri, nelle parole, nelle opere.” *Atti* 107, September-October 1941.
- 9 “Il nostro Padre, dal cuore traboccante di carità operosa e sacrificata, si propose appunto a modello di asceti S. Francesco di Sales, dottore et apostolo della carità che s’immola a salvezza del prossimo : e di questa ascetica fattiva fece la norma della sua e nostra vita.” (*Atti* 93, May-June 1939).
- 10 In the Index of his circulars (p. 1634-1635), see the many references to the term *Carità/carità pastorale*.
- 11 Letter to Salesians 24 February 1982. L.C. pp 399-400; 406-407.
- 12 “L’amore di Dio è la sorgente e la causa di tutto ; l’amore del prossimo è la dimostrazione pratica e il metro sicuro per misurare il vero amore di Dio, la strada indispensabile su cui procede l’amore di carità. C’è come un flusso di ricircolazione tra i due, una mutua relazione causale a differente livello, per cui bisogna affermare la principalità interiore dell’unione con Dio e la priorità operativa e metodologica del servizio del prossimo. Il vero Dio è inconcepibile senza il suo amore all’uomo, e l’autentico prossimo è impensabile se non come immagine di Dio. Perciò’ non sarà autentica una dedizione ai giovani che non proceda dall’amore di Dio ; ma sarà ugualmente certo che non ci sarà per noi vero amore di Dio che prescindendo dalla predilezione per la gioventù, soprattutto bisognosa. La passione per Dio è inseparabile dalla passione per l’uomo : in un unico movimento di carità viviamo il grande comandamento del Vangelo. Non c’è alternativa tra i due poli della nostra carità pastorale.” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 24 May 1989. L.C. p. 946).

- 13 Letter to Salesians, 10 June 1990. L.C. p. 1071.
- 14 Letter to Salesians, 26 June 1992. L.C. pp. 1268-1271.
- 15 “Nei numeri 21 e seguenti il documento ci offre un prezioso e autorevole insegnamento sulla configurazione con Cristo-Pastore, che costituisce appunto l’ideale e l’anima dello spirito salesiano di Don Bosco.” (loc. cit.).
- 16 “... questa famosa carità pastorale” [...] .. rivelatore dell’amore di Dio testimoniato da Lui fino alle più estreme conseguenze con il dono totale di sé nel servizio, nell’umiltà e nella più generosa solidarietà.” (loc. cit.).
- 17 Basta che siate giovani perchè io vi ami assai. Io per voi studio, per voi lavoro, per voi vivo, per voi sono disposto anche a dare la vita.” See Salesian Constitutions, art. 14.
- 18 Art. 18.

Consecrated chastity

Don Bosco's consecrated celibacy

At the origin of consecrated celibacy in the Salesian Family is the spiritual experience of Don Bosco.¹ It was decisive, even if, over time, his sons began to speak less of it.

Don Bosco chose to live evangelical celibacy as an expression of his great love for God and with a view to his mission as a father and pastor of young people to which his priestly vocation called him. He left his mark as an educator. The total gift of himself to the Church and, in a special way, to young people, made him ingenious and fruitful in his initiatives and works. It inspired optimism and joy in his apostolic work and inspired his zeal with tireless enthusiasm.

His esteem for chastity is reflected in the warm and eloquent manner in which he spoke of it in public and in private. He understood purity not only as a virtue, but as a concrete form of love of God and as a lifestyle that involves and embraces all the virtues. "Holiness is purity" said the Rector Major Fr Ricaldone, as a Strenna (spiritual gift) for the year of his canonisation.² It is for this reason that he placed it at the very heart of his educational message. As founder, he considered purity to be a determining element of religious life: "It is through chastity" he said, "that the religious achieves his goal of being consecrated to God."³ He expected this testimony from his sons: "What must distinguish us from others," he taught, "what must be the hallmark of our Congregation, is the virtue of chastity. It must be the pivot upon which all our actions revolve... Simply by keeping chaste we shall obtain every good joy from heaven. Our chastity will be the triumph of our Congregation, the best thanks we can give to God for the many favours he has granted us."⁴ Reread from a perspective that goes beyond words and highlights their evangelical value, these lessons transmit a permanent teaching. "The supremely necessary virtue, the great virtue, the angelic virtue, to which all the other virtues are crowned, is chastity. To it can be applied the words of the Holy Spirit, who says: All goods are gathered around it."⁵ Don Bosco embodied these convictions in all his behaviour and thus testified to both their possibility and their effectiveness.

He was all the more a man of heart. Who could ever have imagined him dry and arid? He surrounded those he loved with extraordinary affection. His chastity embodied an immense love, first for the young, then for the unfortunate. First and foremost, he

himself practised the axiom he gave to his collaborators: “Young people must not only be loved, but they must know that they are loved!”⁶

Don Bosco’s immediate successors celebrated consecrated chastity in lyrical terms. Fr Rua warmly recommended it to the “vigilance” of his religious.⁷ Fr Albera dedicated an eloquent circular letter to it.⁸ This is “our most honourable title”, he said. In the year of Don Bosco’s canonisation, the Rector Major Fr Ricaldone wrote a circular letter on “purity”, which resembled a treatise on asceticism.⁹ Then there was less talk about it, much less. At the end of the twentieth century, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò’s Index of Circulars, so replete with information about pastoral charity and charisms, contained only three references to chastity.¹⁰ Don Bosco, a model of consecrated chastity, remained, but a gloomy era had begun where praise of chastity was concerned.

Vowed chastity within consecrated celibacy

Since Don Bosco’s death in 1888, attitudes have changed a great deal on this point, not only in the world, but also in Christianity.

The natural esteem for virginity has disappeared from the Western mind. Celibate chastity, which was incomprehensible to many at the time of Christ, is probably even more so at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Developments in the modern human and social sciences have increased awareness of the value of the human person at every level and in all its aspects, particularly where sexuality is concerned, which has had a profound effect on men and women in the new century. The Church itself has exalted the creative values of sex, love and marriage.

Vatican II has highlighted the positive aspects of the human body, which a dualistic spirituality might, at other times, have thoughtlessly devalued. The role of sexuality in the development, maturation and manifestation of the personality has been rightly recognised. God created the sexes and wanted them to complement each other in order to carry out the mission he entrusted to each of them: to preserve, propagate and protect life. He also gave men and women the means to manifest and realise a mutual and fruitful love. In the second half of the twentieth century, the values of femininity were increasingly recognised. As a result, what appears to frustrate sexuality, in particular vowed celibacy, seemed to be dictated by outdated theories, mutilating the person without sufficient reason. Moreover, the contemporary world has little faith in the real chastity of religious.

To understand vowed chastity, one has to admit that love is not only possible, but necessary. This involves a process of reflection that has become absolutely essential. Consecrated chastity in celibacy in no way means renouncing the capacity and enrichment of love. But it is important to go beyond the earthly horizon within which widespread secularism encloses us. Consecrated chastity introduces religious men and women and the Volunteers of Don Bosco into a deep and vital relationship of love of God. Far from diminishing and frustrating them, it can enrich them. In fact, it strengthens their relational dimension and their ability to communicate, it encourages people to go beyond the urges of sexuality to become part of and fruitful in the plan of love that surpasses all created love.

Recent Salesian documents insist on this. Chastity for the Kingdom of heaven is a “precious gift of divine grace given by the Father to certain souls.”¹¹ In a response of faith, the consecrated person welcomes this gift with gratitude and vows to live a life of perfect continence in celibacy.¹²

In this way, she surrenders all her powers of love to the Lord. With an undivided heart open to the love of God and her brothers and sisters, the religious makes herself fully available to the mission of his or her congregation or institute.¹³ The Volunteer of Don Bosco says that in this way she places all her energies at the service of her neighbour, with the liberty of one who gives oneself freely, available to our brothers and sisters in whom the Lord wishes to be loved. With an undivided heart, she participates in the spiritual and apostolic fruitfulness of the Church.¹⁴ The strength of the witness thus given has been well expressed by the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

We shall therefore practise this virtue [chastity] to an ‘eminent degree’, expressing it through Salesian loving-kindness, that allows God’s love to shine through us, and is a reflection of Mary’s motherly goodness. Thus it will enable us to welcome young people with that warm, sincere affection that gives them the joy of knowing that they are personally loved, and helps them to mature in unselfish love, through a purity that is radiant and liberating.¹⁵

Contrary to popular opinion, because a person is consecrated, he or she therefore gains in humanity and serves society by the very fact of a celibacy chosen so as to be only for God and his Kingdom. Consecrated celibacy is an effective means “by which religious dedicate themselves with undivided heart to the service of God and the works of the apostolate.”¹⁶ When he dies, the consecrated follower of Don Bosco can present his God with a life well-filled and of supernatural beauty.

The necessary maturity

However, the man or woman who opts for consecrated celibacy must be prepared for it. Otherwise, their lives may be disrupted. Children are not capable of making such a choice, which presupposes sufficient maturity.

Vatican II's teaching on the relationship between human values and vowed chastity emphasised the need for a slow and gradual effort to accompany the psychological process of personality development. The person then reaches a degree of maturity that allows him or her to freely prefer evangelical celibacy and then live it as a total gift to God and in full knowledge of the facts. This presupposes a serene esteem for sexuality and human love, as well as of women as collaborators with men in the mystery of salvation.

The General Chapters of Don Bosco's men have adopted the Church's recommendations in this regard. "The educational and pastoral demands of our mission, and the fact that the observance of perfect continence touches some of the deepest drives of human nature, requires of the Salesian psychological balance and affective maturity."¹⁷ In accordance with the wishes of the Council, they asked that candidates for consecrated life in celibacy be diligently formed to this state of life in which, renouncing conjugal life for the Kingdom of heaven, they will be able to cling to God with an undivided heart. Let them also have a proper knowledge of the duties and dignity of Christian marriage, the figure of Christ's union with the Church. Let them recognise, however, the surpassing excellence of virginity consecrated to Christ, so that with a maturely deliberate and generous choice they may consecrate themselves to the Lord by a complete gift of body and soul.¹⁸

In the light of the Gospel's motivations, celibacy chosen for the sake of the Kingdom thus appears to be an authentic life project, original and worthy of those who are called to it. Accepted and lived to the full, it is good for the integral development of the human person, and capable of leading him or her to "the measure befitting the full maturity of Jesus Christ."

It must be remembered, however, that to open oneself to the gift of celibacy means to take on a task that is never finished. To demand full maturity at the beginning of religious life would not be wise. Religious life itself helps the personality to mature. But there is always a risk that the edifice will collapse. Over time there are weaknesses that lurk in human nature. Vatican II therefore asked us not to neglect "the ascetical norms which have been proved by the experience of the Church and which are scarcely less necessary in the contemporary world."¹⁹

The Salesians of old untiringly recommended the use of natural and supernatural means to preserve chastity intact. Today's Salesians have not forgotten them. Among other things, we read in the Constitutions of the Salesian Sisters:

In order to strengthen the gift of chastity the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians will nourish the awareness of the presence of God. Let her draw strength from her intimate union with Christ by encountering him in the Word, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Reconciliation. Let her entrust herself lovingly to Mary, the Virgin Mother who gave Our Saviour to the world. In an attitude of humility and total detachment from all that is not God, let her be faithful to the Salesian commitment of “work and temperance”, practising mortification, and self-control, also exercising a balanced discipline in the use of the means of social communication. Let her also make use of those ordinary means that promote health of mind and body, and the formation of a well-balanced person.²⁰

The one who is called must be “accustomed to giving up willingly even those things which are permitted but are not expedient”²¹ and reject “by a certain spiritual instinct everything which endangers chastity.”²²

In order to reach the splendour of its maturity and newness, chastity must pass through the darkness of renunciation, suffering and liberating “death”, since “the observance of perfect continence touches intimately the deepest instincts of human nature.” “Those who are striving faithfully to observe the chastity they have professed”, and “trusting in God’s help”, must “not overestimate their own strength but practice mortification and custody of the senses.”²³ In spite of constant vigilance over oneself, and as the years go by, the urges of the sexual being can manifest itself in various forms. The consecrated person will face up to the tensions of the spirit in terms of faith and charity, and will appreciate their significance in relation to fidelity to a life choice that aims at reproducing the life of Christ on earth. Fidelity to preferential love for the Lord is indeed the fundamental law of chastity. “In moments of difficulty or trial let the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians contemplate Christ, who loved her even to death on the Cross, and endeavour to live confidently and with hope those renunciations required by her loving choice, secure in the knowledge that they are a source of new life.”²⁴

NOTES

- 1 With regard to the religious life and vowed chastity, we will follow very closely the studies of the 19th and 20th General Chapters of the Salesians. (GC19, IV, 4 and SGC, nos. 556-576), as well as the renewed Constitutions of the Salesians (art. 80-84), the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (art. 12-17), the Volunteers of Don Bosco (art. 21-25) and the Volunteers with Don Bosco (art. 18- 21). In fact, from a Salesian perspective, these documents wisely clarified a difficult issue. A distinction is made between the (female) Volunteers of Don Bosco (abbreviation : VDB), from the Volunteers (male) with Don Bosco (abbreviation: CDB).
- 2 See *Atti* 64, 8 December 1933, p. 117 and the commentary *Santità è purezza*, 31 January 1935, in *Atti* 61 bis.
- 3 “Con questa virtù [la castità] il religioso ottiene il suo scopo di essere tutto consacrato a Dio,” (Conference of Don Bosco’s, 30 May 1878 ; ed. MB XIII, p. 799, BM 617).
- 4 “Ciò che deve distinguerci fra gli altri, cioè’ che deve essere il carattere della nostra Congregazione è la virtù della castità ... Essa deve essere il perno di tutte le nostre azioni ... Ogni bene, ogni consolazione ci verrà dal cielo col mettere essa sola in pratica. Sarà questa il trionfo della Congregazione e il modo di ringraziare Iddio di tanti favori che ci ha concessi.” (Conference of Don Bosco’s, 4 June 1876, ed. MB XII, p. 224-225. BM 163-164)
- 5 “La virtù sommamente necessaria, virtù grande, virtù angelica, cui fanno corona tutte le altre virtù, è la castità. Ad essa possono applicarsi le parole dello Spirito Santo, che dice: Tutti i beni si raccolgono intorno a questa.” (Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions, ed. In 1875, § *Castità*, p. XXVII.)
- 6 “I giovani non solo siano amati, ma ... essi stessi conoscano di essere amati.” (Letter of 10 May 1884, MB XVII, p. 110, BM 90).
- 7 Letter to Salesians, 31 January 1908.
- 8 Letter to Salesians, 14 April 1916.
- 9 *Atti* 61 bis, 1935, mentioned further on, no. 2.
- 10 See E. Viganò, L. C., p. 1636.
- 11 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 42.
- 12 SDB Constitutions, art. 80. See also the VDB Constitutions, art. 21 and 22 and the CDB Constitutions, art. 19.
- 13 See the FMA Constitutions, art. 12.
- 14 VDB Constitutions, art. 21 and 22.
- 15 “Vivremo perciò ‘in grado eminente’ questa virtù e la esprimeremo nell’amorevolezza salesiana che ci consente di essere trasparenza dell’amore di Dio e riflesso della bontà materna di Maria. Saremo così capaci di accogliere le giovani con queiraffetto forte e sincero, che dà loro la gioia di sentirsi amate personalmente e le aiuta a maturare nell’amore oblativo, in una purezza irradiante e liberatrice.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 14.)
- 16 See Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 12.

- 17 “Le esigenze educative e pastorali della nostra missione e il fatto che l’osservanza della perfetta continenza tocca inclinazioni tra le più profonde della natura umana richiedono dal salesiano equilibrio psicologico e maturità affettiva” (SDB Constitutions, art. 82.)
- 18 See Vatican II, *Optatam Totius*, no. 10 a-b.
- 19 Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 16.
- 20 “Per potenziare il dono della castità la Figlia di Maria Ausiliatrice alimenti in sé il senso della presenza di Dio ; attinga forza dall’unione intima con Cristo incontrandolo nella Parola, nell’Eucaristia e nel sacramento della Riconciliazione ; si affidi filialmente a Maria, la Vergine Madre che ha dato al mondo il Salvatore. In atteggiamento di umiltà e di totale distacco da tutto ciò’ che non è Dio, sia fedele all’impegno salesiano di ‘lavoro e temperanza’, praticando la mortificazione e la vigilanza su se stessa con una saggia disciplina anche nell’uso degli strumenti di comunicazione sociale. Valorizzi inoltre i mezzi naturali che possono giovare alla salute fisica e mentale e all’equilibrio armonico della persona.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 17.) In the same spirit see the SDB Constitutions, art. 84, and the VDB Constitutions, art. 23.
- 21 Vatican II, *Optatam Totius*, no. 9.
- 22 Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 12.
- 23 Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 12 b-c.
- 24 See FMA Constitutions, art. 16.

Church

The Church according to Don Bosco

The image of the Church has changed enormously in the Salesian Family between the time of Don Bosco, which was the time of Vatican I, and the time of the Rector Major Fr Viganò which followed Vatican II.

For Don Bosco, the Roman Church, the sanctuary of the only authentic religion, was the unique ark of salvation on the ocean that is Earth. The prince of darkness, regent of the evil empire, was bent on destroying the unfortunate human race. The struggle was ongoing. Among his enemies Don Bosco denounced “heretical” and “schismatic” Christians. Luther and Calvin made him shudder. “We can find true religion only in the Roman Catholic Church, because it alone preserves the divine revelation intact” he said a hundred times over in the “Foundations of the Catholic Religion” (1st ed., 1850). “Can there be salvation outside the Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church?” he asked. Answer: “No, outside this Church no one can be saved. Just as those who did not enter Noah's ark perished in the flood, so inevitably the one who dies separated from the Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church, the only Church of Jesus Christ, which alone preserves the true religion will perish.”¹ For him, “Church” probably coincided with the Kingdom of God, which Jesus had established during his lifetime, although it seems that he never had the opportunity to express himself on this point.

Don Bosco saw the Church as an institutionalised society centred on the Roman Pontiff and strictly framed within Catholicity. Peter had been the foundation of the ecclesial edifice for centuries. This society had its invisible head, Jesus Christ “Truth and Life” personified, in heaven, and on earth his vicar, the pope, as its visible head. The pope, the obligatory channel of Christ's divine power, gave the Church its spiritual strength and infused it with his holy enlightenment. He governed it in the midst of incessant storms. The history of the Church bore witness, for Don Bosco, to the endemic war which the forces of evil and error had incessantly waged against it.² In a work intended to prepare minds for Vatican I, to explain and justify the primacy of the Supreme Pontiff, he resorted to a comparison, which fortunately illustrates for us his thinking about the Church of Christ.

In a regular army, he wrote, the king stands at the top of a perfect hierarchy. During battle, he can be found either at the head of his troops or in his palace, where he draws up plans and projects and had the appropriate orders dispatched to the field. In this latter case, at the site of the battle, the king is replaced by a general-in-chief, who has the various officers under his command. It is through them that the soldiers receive the chief's orders, know his wishes and are led into battle against the enemy. What happens in the military hierarchy is found much more admirably in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Jesus Christ, mighty King, is the supreme head of the whole Church as well as of its hierarchy. But, after having appeared in person for three years at the head of his followers, because he had to abandon this earth to return to his Heavenly Father, he chose a man, Saint Peter, to replace him in this world, which is the great battlefield. He ordered him to lead the army of his followers against the prince of darkness, against the enemies of souls, to lead to the conquest of the kingdom of heaven.³

Following Catholic apologists, Don Bosco had long since tried to demonstrate that only the Roman Church was one, holy and apostolic. One, unlike separate churches divided into a multitude of denominations. Holy, it was the only temple and the only receptacle of holiness; one could not pretend to seek it and find it elsewhere. Apostolic, she alone had preserved intact the sacred deposit of faith since the time of the Apostles.⁴

The spiritual consequences of this ecclesiology

This theology guided Don Bosco's spirituality and pastoral work. He imagined non-Catholics as being deprived of any spiritual gift because they were separated from the Pope, and therefore from Christ and from God Himself. For him, the service of Christ merged with service of the Church. His anti-Waldensian polemic of the 1850s was, in his eyes, a service to the Church and to God. Charity obliged him to remove the Catholics from the clutches of the reformed pastors whom these pastors were seducing and who were thus in danger of sinking into nothing less than hell. He certainly recruited clerics to help him in his apostolate among young people, but also, very often, for the diocesan churches. His missionaries set out to bring poor people with no religion, and therefore far from God, back to the Church. And he placed a very high value on submission to the doctrine and rites of the Roman Church.

The ecclesiology he professed focused his religious attention on the Pope. He did so all the more willingly because, until 1878, this Pope was Pius IX, a pontiff who was the victim of the progressive unification of Italy, the object of incessant attacks in the

press, reduced for the first time to fleeing from his capital, and then, after the capture of Rome, to locking himself up, like a voluntary prisoner, in his Vatican palace. But Pius IX had definitely charmed Don Bosco at their first meeting in Rome (1858). He felt a real passion for this Pope, all the more so because Pius IX showed him friendship and helped him in his endeavours. The definition of the primacy of the Supreme Pontiff by the First Vatican Council (1870) fulfilled him to a degree that is now unimaginable for us. Theological concepts and feelings of respect, affection and compassion were combined in Don Bosco to exalt the Pope of Rome, the privileged witness of God among men. “When we have the Pope’s approval, we have God’s approval.”⁵ For Don Bosco, there was no authentic devotion to the Church that was not first and foremost a devotion to the Pope, Christ’s vicar.

Don Bosco’s successors thought of the Church as he had done.⁶ “Let us remember,” Fr Albera wrote at the time of the modernist crisis, very critical of the pope who had signed the encyclical *Pascendi*, “that Don Bosco, walking in the footsteps of the saints, namely St Francis de Sales, was not content with an intellectual submission reduced to definitions *ex cathedra*. He wanted sincere submission to any teaching of the pope, in whatever form it was. Not only did he follow and carry out his orders, but considered and wanted his sons to consider as a law and a gentle commandment every warning, every counsel, and every desire of the Vicar of Jesus Christ.”⁷ This Rector Major entitled a paragraph in a circular for provincials: “Love of the Vicar of Jesus Christ”.⁸ Devotion to the Pope was therefore constantly preached in the Salesian Family of the first century. “May his voice (the pope’s) always be venerated among us as the voice of God”,⁹ wrote the Superior General at the time. To detach oneself from the Pope in the slightest was a great misfortune which jeopardised the salvation of the “schismatic”. It was necessary to listen to the Pope, the “Vicar of Jesus Christ”, to carry out his orders, to anticipate his wishes, to honour him and see that he was honoured, to pray for him, to love him, to bear witness in private and in public to one’s affection for him, to provide him with the means to achieve his goals and defend him to the best of one’s ability, either by word of mouth or in writing. In 1949, Fr Ricaldone, whose Index of Circulars would speak of the Church only as a building, offered the Salesians a Strenna: “Know, love and defend the Pope”. And the entry *Church* in the collection of *Atti* at the time Fr Ricceri was Rector Major (1965–1978) contained only one item, worded as follows: “To feel part of the Church, [subscribe to, read] *L’Osservatore Romano* weekly.”¹⁰ The Salesians and the Cooperators of that time served the Church of Christ, but in their own way.

The Church and the Salesian Common Identity Card (1995)

Beginning in 1965, Vatican II gradually transformed this perspective. Salesians learned to see the Church as more than a social institution governed by the Pope, but as the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit and the people of God. Service of the Church now began with the particular Church, from which religious communities could not isolate themselves. The Pope continues to be venerated by the Salesians, but within a sacred mystery imbued with the Holy Spirit. The people of God, for whom they worked, were no longer confined within the boundaries of Catholicity. The Holy Spirit hovered over all creation. Ecumenism, hitherto at best tolerated, was recommended. Dialogue replaced confrontation in relations with other religions. To one degree or another official acts: circulars from superiors, Constitutions and Regulations of the Salesians, Cooperators and Volunteers of Don Bosco were affected by this. The letters written by Fr Viganò (1978–1995) constantly referred, explicitly or implicitly, to the Council's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

The shift was initiated energetically by the Special General Chapter of the Salesians in the early 1970s. And at the end of the century, the 1995 Common Identity Card solemnly took note of the new face of the Church in contemporary Catholic Theology.

Deep and prolonged study of the Second Vatican Council has given pride of place to the reality of the Church-mystery which, in its dimension as the people of God, presents itself particularly as the centre of unity and communion. It builds this reality by accepting the gift of the Spirit and making of itself a practical response through the convergent commitment of all the baptized.¹¹

However, theological differences should not mislead us about the continuity of tradition. The accent had merely shifted. From the early generation to the post-conciliar generation, the same love of the Church inspired the Salesian Family. The Common Identity Card merely enlarged this Church from a privileged centre to its circumference of the forces working for the Kingdom, when it announced that “Don Bosco’s personal story, like his public, civil and religious history, reveals a typical trait of his spirit: love of the Church, the centre of unity and communion of all the forces working for the Kingdom”, and that it wanted to offer the proofs of this.¹²

Consequences of the new discourse on the Church

The consequences of the new Salesian discourse on the Church were numerous and important ones. Let's mention a few. "All the baptized" are involved in the response to the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Salesian Common Identity Card says. Even those of the Reformed Churches? In 1991, on the frontiers of Catholic society, the ecumenism launched by the Council implies a personal change of mentality, Fr Viganò could write in an obvious break with the old tradition. "It is a fundamental dimension of all the activities of the Church", he insisted. It requires deepening and rethinking the Gospel with a mind open to other Churches. What about pagans? According to the same Rector Major, "dialogue with other religions", another ecclesial novelty, requires us to identify the signs of the presence of the Word and the action of the Holy Spirit, while at the same time deepening our own identity in order to bear witness to the integrity of Revelation.¹³ The Salesian has therefore wisely renounced the Catholic monolithic approach of yesteryear.

The member of the Salesian Family now systematically serves the local Church. Since their Special General Chapter (1971–1972), Salesian religious have constantly recalled the requirements of this service. The first Regulations of the Salesian Cooperators did not say a word about this Church. According to their new *Regulations of Apostolic Life*, "the apostolic activity of the Cooperators has an ecclesial dimension". What does this mean? "By personal witness and through the various activities of the apostolate they contribute to the life of their own particular diocese and parish, and to their building up as communities of faith, of prayer, of brotherly love and missionary zeal."¹⁴ The 1995 Common Identity Card affirmed the "willing collaboration" of the various members of the Salesian Family "in the local Churches and in society" (art. 33), as well as their "esteem for other ecclesial forces" (art. 34).

The shift of emphasis towards the ecclesial periphery has not seriously dampened the love of the Salesian Family for the Supreme Pontiff, simply better situated it at the centre of the episcopal body. In 1985, Fr Viganò devoted an entire circular to Salesian "fidelity" "to Peter's Successor". This letter did not ignore the negative reactions of some religious, which it strongly denounced. The tensions aroused by various cultural novelties, a certain pseudo-scientific rationalism, or simple prejudices would all want to make an attitude of habitual critical reserve or leaving out of consideration the magisterium of the Pope appear to be a sign of a mature personality, wrote the Rector Major. "Anyone on the other hand showing sincere adherence can easily become considered as out of date." But no! The filial adherence of the Salesians to the Pope must feel itself rooted today in

a living tradition which is nourished at the crystal clear sources of faith but which move forward in “harmony” with the awareness of the Church in time.¹⁵

The Constitutions of the Volunteers of Don Bosco expressed themselves on this point with happy simplicity:

In our Institute every Volunteer, following the example of Don Bosco, looks upon the Pope with faith and love, and recognizes in him the Vicar of Christ, the “Pastor of the entire Church”, and the highest Superior of our Institute. To him, the Institute offers filial and unconditional fidelity, as to Christ Himself who assists him with his Spirit.¹⁶

The mystical conception of the Church has now penetrated the Salesian mentality without obliterating its traditional sense of the concrete. It is a very visible Church that the Salesian loves and serves. “The Church has received the Spirit of Jesus, she brings his gestures into the present, she advances his mission,” Fr Vecchi teaches the Salesian Family in preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000. Without boasting, they are among those Christians who can speak of the Church with affection, as of their own family and even their own mother. They know that in her and through her they have received the life of the Spirit. Perhaps they know her limitations, wrinkles and even the scandals. But they do not attach much importance to this. Instead they see the benefits of her presence for the individual and for humanity: the beneficial energies she diffuses, the experience of God revealed by the holiness she offers as an example, the wisdom that emanates from the Word of God, the love that brings people together and creates solidarity across national and continental borders, the meaning of life she proposes, the values she defends and the prospect of eternal life.¹⁷ The Salesian Family admires and loves the Church of Jesus Christ.

NOTES

- 1 “Noi possiamo solamente trovare la vera religione nella Chiesa Cattolica Romana, perchè essa sola conserva intatta la divina rivelazione.” “D. Fuori della Chiesa Cattolica, Apostolica, Romana, si può aver salute? - R. No : fuori di questa Chiesa niuno può salvarsi. Nella maniera, che quelli i quali non furono nell’arca di Noè, perirono nel diluvio, così perisce inevitabilmente colui che muore separato dalla Chiesa Cattolica, Apostolica, Romana, unica Chiesa di Gesù Cristo, sola conservatrice della vera religione.” ([G. Bosco,] *Avvisi ai Cattolici*, Torino, De-Agostini, 1853, pp. 11,16-17.) These *Avvisi ai Cattolici* were subsequently included in countless editions of the *Giovane provveduto*, including translations of it.
- 2 Early in his career, Don Bosco wrote a *Storia ecclesiastica* (1st ed. Torino, 1845).
- 3 G. Bosco, *La Chiesa cattolica e la sua gerarchia*, Torino, tip. dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1869, p. 70-72.
- 4 In particular see *Il Cattolico istruito* (Torino, 1853), which is an entire work of elementary apologetics.
- 5 “... perchè diceva [don Bosco], quando abbiamo l’approvazione del Papa, abbiamo l’approvazione di Dio; quando il Papa è contento di noi, lo è pure Iddio.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 10 February 1921).
- 6 See for example, in an unpublished notebook, Fr Rua’s retreat sermon notes of the Church, entitled “La chiesa di G. C.,” reproduced in FdB 2899 E8-11.
- 7 “Rammentiamo che Don Bosco premendo le orme dei santi, e nominatamente di San Francesco di Sales, non s’appagava di quella sottomissione d’intelletto che si restringe alle definizioni ex cathedra, ma voleva la sottomissione sincera a qualunque insegnamento del Papa e sotto qualunque forma impartito. Nè solamente ne seguiva e faceva seguire gli ordini, ma reputava e voleva che i suoi figli reputassero qual legge e qual dolce comando ogni avviso, ogni consiglio, ogni desiderio del Vicario di Gesù Cristo.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 21 November 1912, Appendice II: *Sommo Pontefice* L:C. p. 103).
- 8 “Amore al Vicario di Gesù Cristo”, in P. Albera, Letter to Salesian provincials 19July 1912. L.C. 80-81
- 9 “Da noi la sua voce sia sempre venerata come la voce di Dio” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 25 December 1911, L.C. p. 63).
- 10 “*Chiesa*. Per sentirsi nella C., l’Osservatore Romano settimanale.” *L’Indice degli Atti del Consiglio Superiore pubblicati durante il Rettorato di Don Luigi Ricceri*, *Atti* 288, October-December 1977, p. 46).
- 11 “La riflessione, profonda e prolungata, del Concilio Vaticano 2° ha posto al centro la realtà della Chiesa-mistero che, nella sua dimensione di popolo di Dio, si presenta particolarmente come centro di unità e di comunione. Essa costruisce questa realtà accogliendo il dono dello Spirito e facendosi risposta operativa attraverso l’impegno convergente di tutti i battezzati.” (*Carta di Comunione*, art. 27).
- 12 “La storia di Don Bosco, quella personale come quella pubblica, civile e religiosa, esprime un tratto tipico del suo spirito : l’amore alla Chiesa, centro di unità e comunione di tutte le forze che lavorano per il Regno.” (*Carta di Comunione*, art. 14.)

- 13 L'ecumenismo "è una dimensione fondamentale di tutte le attività della Chiesa". "In quanto al "dialogo con le altre religioni" si tratta di un atteggiamento simile a quello dell'ecumenismo". Thoughts developed in E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 24 February 1991, *Atti* 336, pp. 27-28.
- 14 "L'attività apostolica dei Cooperatori ha dimensione ecclesiale. Con la testimonianza personale e le diverse attività di apostolato essi contribuiscono alla vita della propria Chiesa particolare, diocesi e parrocchia, e alla sua edificazione come comunità di fede, di preghiera, di amore fraterno e di impegno missionario." (*Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 18, § 1.)
- 15 " ... antichi e nuovi pregiudizi vorrebbero far apparire come segno di personalità o maturazione l'atteggiarsi a un abituale distanziamento critico o il prescindere nella pratica dalla guida del magistero del Papa. Se qualcuno dimostra sincera adesione viene considerato facilmente come un arretrato." ... "Con Don Bosco e con i tempi ! La nostra filiale adesione al Papa deve oggi sentirsi radicata in ima Tradizione viva che si alimenta alle sorgenti cristalline della fede ma che progredisce in profonda sintonia con la crescita della coscienza stessa della Chiesa." (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 3 September 1985, *Atti* 315, p. 13-14). The Letter entitled "Our Fidelity to Peter's Successor", *ibidem*, pp. 3-33.
- 16 "Nel nostro Istituto ogni Volontaria, sull'esempio di don Bosco, guarda al Papa con fede e amore, e riconosce in lui il Vicario di Cristo, il "Pastore di tutta la Chiesa" e il Superiore supremo del nostro Istituto. A lui offre una filiale incondizionata fedeltà." (VDB Constitutions art. 67.)
- 17 From J. Vecchi, "Le parole del Giubileo. Chiesa", *Bollettino salesiano*, September 1997. We read in the subtitle of the article: "Adesione alla Chiesa, per conoscere Gesù ed essere dei suoi, giudicandola con affetto, quasi fosse una madre. La Chiesa ha ricevuto lo Spirito di Gesù, riattualizza oggi i suoi gesti, porta avanti la sua missione."

Civility

Civility and sociability

“Civil”, close to “civilised”, is substantially opposite to “coarse”, “boorish” and “dishonest”. Rude and dishonest behaviours, especially when systematic are now called incivilities. In the tough neighbourhoods of Western countries, despite all the initiatives taken by local councillors, juvenile delinquency has only increased and “signs of incivility” have spread, as we were told at the end of the twentieth century. The “development of incivilities” has become a crucial problem.¹ The antonym of incivility, which is civility (*civilité*), an old-fashioned but necessary word in French, means more than politeness, courtesy and decorum. It is concerned with the good quality of the various relationships in the human city. We could perhaps prefer sociability, which is the ability to live properly in society. At a time of growing impoverishment, when the civilisation of yesteryear is retreating and disappearing in urban spaces, we will keep to the old, but evocative term “civility”.

Don Bosco's evangelical civility

The term ‘civility’ appears in Salesian literature with a spiritual connotation from the time of Don Bosco, who published a book in 1848 under the title: “The Christian guided to virtue and civility according to the spirit of St Vincent de Paul”.² It is, he wrote, an evangelical civility. The introduction explained the author’s intention. On the one hand Saint Vincent, who had known all kinds of circumstances, had practised all the virtues in them. On the other hand, having had to deal with the highest and most refined class of society, he had always practised “the maxims and behaviours” which, “according to the civility and prudence of the Gospel”, “are appropriate to the Christian *cittadino* (*citizen*).”³ The former *contadino* (peasant) from Castelnuovo, apparently impressed by his association with the Turin aristocracy, was thus participating, in the name of the Gospel, in the “civilising activity” of the Italian people that the liberal bourgeoisie had included in the programme of the *Risorgimento*. The intention was good, but the result was somewhat disappointing. In his time, Vincent de Paul, who had polished his original rustic manners, had attended the court of the kings of France without notable hitch and

the Parisian salons had not found him ridiculous. But André-Joseph Ansart, author of the work which Don Bosco dutifully copied, had not thought fit to discuss his “civility.” In his own book, Don Bosco recommended only qualities by which one distinguishes the rough individual from the polite one, such as personal warmth or an “air of laughter and friendliness.”⁴ He taught that Christian civility demands that the disciple of Christ be “meek and humble of heart.”⁵ However, the title remained, a sign of his desire to preach civility, and therefore to practise it and see that it was practised.

Civility, good manners and correct dress, whatever the setting, were always close to his heart. This kind of virtue was part of his spiritual experience. Until the time of the Rector Major Fr Ricaldone (1932–1951), his Salesians were constantly reminded of it in their *galateo* [etiquette] classes.⁶ Towards the end of his mandate, in a circular to the Salesians entitled: “Don Bosco, our model”, Fr Albera was able to write a long paragraph on Don Bosco’s “school of good manners”.⁷ He showed that his courtesy, which was never affected and hypocritical as is usually believed of worldly civility, was rooted in authentic charity. His civility was virtuous. He respected others, no matter how poor or young they were, in whom he saw a creature and an image of God. A regular and loving reading of his life was, according to Fr Albera, “a continuous school of good manners” for each Salesian.⁸

This entire essay of the Rector Major’s is a lesson in Salesian spirituality, based on the example and spiritual experience of his master, that we will read here without being put off by the thoroughly edifying tone of his description.

For Don Bosco, a good education meant modesty, humility, self-control, a readiness for sacrifice, the exercise of mortification, and love of neighbour in the highest in the highest sense of the word. Love of neighbour made him polite and courteous to everyone, even those who insulted him; he showed respect for all by his words and deeds. He was always ready to sacrifice himself to do them good, and he forgot himself and his merits in order to recognise and highlight those of others. He gave up his own pleasures for the pleasure of others and, in order to join them, his own opinions. In short, he behaved in such a way as to always leave his neighbour edified and satisfied.⁹

In creatures he saw and loved the Creator. Consequently, he made no distinction between persons. He was not put off by faults, enmities, ingratitude or politics. Anyone who turned to him was never disappointed. His charity was truly like that of the Heavenly Father who causes the sun to rise and rain to fall on

sinners as well as on the righteous. If he had a predilection, besides his immense predilection for his boys, it went to the most miserable and the most needy.¹⁰

We have in him a particularly eloquent proof that holiness is not an enemy of urbanity and politeness, but on the contrary makes use of them to spread the fragrance of the choicest and most delicate virtues throughout society. Although born of poor peasants, he had an exquisite sense of personal cleanliness, dress and deportment, as well as of behaviour in church, in class, in his travels, in visits, at the table, when he was the guest of others, and so on. The ease with which he assimilated what he read or saw others do, made him from his earliest years a master of himself and extremely polite in his relationships with all categories of people, from the humblest to the highest, so that the patricians themselves wondered with astonishment where he had been able to learn such an exquisite urbanity. He saw in politeness the delicate heart of many virtues. His teaching on politeness gave valuable rules of conduct to those who knew how to take advantage of it. Those who seek to model their conduct on his will in turn benefit¹¹

Let us therefore endeavour, my dear friends, to also be, like our holy model, polite and well-educated in all our actions, even if we are alone or with people of inferior circumstances. Let us remember that a good education does not consist in a series of vain ceremonies and more or less graceful bows, nor in the facetiousness and tasteless witticisms which people of the world resort to in order to win people's favour, but in the sincere expression of feelings of humility, self-sacrifice and benevolence which we must nurture towards everyone.¹²

Doesn't this Christian way of life, the fruit of evangelical charity and attentive to the lessons of a polite society, suit a world that aspires, in principle at least, to ever greater human dignity? From this point of view, the Salesian Family possesses in Don Bosco a perhaps unexpected model, but, as Fr Albera remarked, certainly a "very eloquent" one.

NOTES

- 1 “Le sentiment d'impuissance des élus locaux” (The feeling of powerlessness among local elected representatives). *Le Monde*, 26-27 October 1997.
- 2 *Il cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di San Vincenzo de' Paoli*, Turin, Paravia, 1848, 288 pages.
- 3 “Si aggiungono quelle parole alla civiltà perchè egli tratto' colla più elevata e più ingentilita classe d'uomini, e con tutti seppe praticare quelle massime e quei tratti che a cittadino cristiano, secondo la civiltà e prudenza del Vangelo, si addicono” (op. cit., p. 3).
- 4 “Certe persone con aria ridente ed amabile contentano tutti” (op. cit., p. 93).
- 5 “... diceva (S. Vincenzo) la dolcezza e l'umiltà essere due sorelle, che si uniscono molto bene insieme ; Gesù Cristo averci insegnato ad unirle quando ha detto : Imparate da me che sono dolce ed umile di cuore (...) il Salvatore ha voluto avere de' discepoli grossolani e soggetti a vari difetti per insegnare a coloro che sono in dignità la maniera con cui devono trattare quelli di cui hanno la direzione” (op. cit., p. 90).
- 6 See the word “Galateo” in the general Index of the circulars of the Rectors Major.
- 7 P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, “Don Bosco nostro modello nell'acquisto della perfezione religiosa ...”, 18 October 1920. L.C. pp 346-348
- 8 “... una continua scuola di belle maniere” (op. cit., p. 346).
- 9 “La buona educazione in D. Bosco era modestia, umiltà, dominio di se stesso, prontezza al sacrificio, esercizio di mortificazione, amor del prossimo nel più alto senso della parola. L'amor del prossimo lo rendeva gentile e cortese con tutti, anche con cui l'ingiuriava ; a tutti mostrava la propria stima con le parole e con le opere ; era sempre pronto a sacrificarsi per far loro del bene, e dimenticava se stesso e i suoi meriti per riconoscere e mettere in rilievo quelli degli altri. Rinunziava ai propri comodi per vantaggio altrui ; alle proprie opinioni per associarsi alle altrui ; insomma si comportava col prossimo in modo da lasciarlo sempre edificato e contento di lui” (op. cit., p. 347).
- 10 “Egli nelle creature vedeva ed amava il Creatore ; quindi non faceva distinzione di persone, non guardava nè alle colpe, nè alle inimicizie, nè alle ingratitudini, nè al colore politico ; e chiunque ricorreva a lui non restava mai deluso. La sua carità era proprio simile a quella del Padre Celeste, che fa sorgere il sole e cadere la pioggia sui peccatori come sui giusti, e se una predilezione si può' dire che avesse, oltre a quella immensa per i suoi giovani, era per i più miserabili e bisognosi” (op. cit., p 347-348).
- 11 “In Don Bosco abbiamo una prova eloquentissima che la santità non è nemica dell'urbanità e del galateo, ma anzi se ne serve bellamente per effondere in una più vasta cerchia sociale il buon profumo delle più elette e delicate virtù. Benché nato da poveri contadini egli ebbe un senso squisito di quanto riguarda sia la pulizia personale, il vestire, il portamento, sia il contegno in chiesa, in scuola, nei viaggi, negli incontri, nelle visite, a mensa, come ospite in casa altrui, e via dicendo. La facilità con cui assimilava quanto leggeva o vedeva fare dagli altri, lo rese fin da' suoi primi anni padrone di sè e compitissimo nel trattare con ogni cetto di persone, dalle più umili alle più altolocate ; tanto che gli stessi patrizi si domandavano con meraviglia dov'egli avesse potuto apprendere una così' squisita urbanità. Nella buona creanza egli vedeva il fiore delicato di molte virtù ; la sua scuola di galateo formo' una

preziosa regola di condotta civile per quanti seppero approfittarne, e continuerà ad esserlo per quelli che si studieranno di modellare la loro condotta sulla sua vita” (op. cit., p. 346).

- 12 “Sforziamoci dunque, o miei cari, di essere anche noi, come il nostro santo modello, compiti e ben educati in ogni nostro atto, anche se fossimo soli o con gente di condizione inferiore. Ricordiamo che la buona educazione consiste non già in una serie di vane cerimonie e d'inchini più o meno aggraziati, e neppure nelle facezie e spiritosità di cattivo gusto che i mondani sogliono usare per attirarsi il favore degli uomini, ma nella sincera espressione esterna dei sensi di umiltà, di abnegazione, di benevolenza, che dobbiamo nutrire verso di tutti” (op. cit., p. 346-347).

Coadjutor

The first Salesian coadjutors

The Salesian coadjutors, or, in the terminology that now prevails, Salesian brothers, lay religious of the Society of St Francis de Sales, appeared in Don Bosco's Congregation from its earliest official lists. The first article of the Constitutions that had been drawn up announced that this society would bring together "ecclesiastics, clerics and also lay people."¹ There followed the signatures of the "confreres" who, on 11 June 1860, asked Archbishop Fransoni for approval of the "Rules of the Society of St Francis de Sales" and among whom were "Rossi Giuseppe Coadiutore" and "Gaja Giuseppe Coadiutore". And, among the first twenty-two professed on 14 May 1862, along with the six clerics already introduced into sacred orders (subdiaconate, diaconate or priesthood), it included the layman Giuseppe Gaja and Federico Oreglia. Rossi, Gaja and Oreglia, profoundly different individuals, give us some idea of the place held in the Salesian Society by the lay confrere who was immediately called a coadjutor.

Giuseppe Rossi (1835–1908) did not take his vows until 19 September 1864. He had the makings of an administrator. Don Bosco made him the procurator of his work, with the task of overseeing his general workshops. At the first General Chapter of the Congregation (1877) when it was necessary to deal with finances, he summoned him to Turin as a councillor. A trusted friend of Don Bosco, and later of Fr Rua, Rossi often disappeared on travels involving secret missions.

Giuseppe Gaja (1824–1892), who came from a peasant family in Monta Alba, Piedmont, was probably no intellectual luminary. His education was very elementary. But Don Bosco had an "extraordinary" affection for him, according to a well-informed witness (Giulio Barberis). He made Gaja a cook and never seems to have regretted it.²

His colleague in profession in 1862, Federico Oreglia di San Stefano (1830–1912), was nothing like him. He belonged to the small provincial aristocracy with whom Don Bosco liked to joke. In Oratory circles and the neighbourhood, he was known only by his noble title of "*Cavaliere*" (a Knight, therefore "Sir"). Federico Oreglia was a man of the world, comfortable in high society. He was whimsical and facetious and liked to play the minstrel or the Turin comic character Gianduia. He responded to jibes with spontaneous good humour. Don Bosco entrusted him with the printing

press and shop in his house. And when, after 1865, he had to establish and maintain relations in the major Italian cities, he turned to Oreglia. The *Cavaliere* was to render him great services through his brothers: Luigi (1828–1913) Nuncio then Cardinal, and Giuseppe (1823–1895), a Jesuit who published *La Civiltà Cattolica*. They were two useful reference persons during his stays in Rome.³

All three were members, in the full sense of this word, of the Society of St Francis de Sales, and therefore religious. Despite the respect in which the priesthood was held at the time, no one imagined placing them in some second order or in a subordinate category of society. Each, in his own way and to the best of his ability, participated in Don Bosco's mission in the world of his time.

The original model was not abused by Don Bosco's successors. Certainly, until Vatican II, priests systematically took precedence over coadjutors. Coadjutors were not always treated by priests with the respect they deserved. Clericalism prevailed in the Salesian Congregation as well as in the world. But tradition honoured the coadjutor and authority strove to value him. It has been the subject of several studies during the twentieth century.⁴ The Rectors Major Frs Albera, Rinaldi (assisted by Councillor for Professional Schools Giuseppe Vespignani) and Viganò sought to describe the characteristics of the coadjutor.⁵ Fr Rinaldi wrote solemnly:

The Salesian coadjutor is a brilliant creation of Don Bosco's great heart, inspired by the Help of Christians! He wanted him to be a perfect religious, even though he was not invested with the priestly dignity, because evangelical perfection is not a monopoly of any dignity: he wanted him, in the ascent up the holy mountain of perfection, to be equal to himself and to his sons elevated to the priestly dignity: the means, the provisions, the weapons, the support, the goal and the merits are identical for all, like the daily food. The Salesian Coadjutor is neither the second, nor the aid, nor the right hand of the priests his brothers in religion, but their equal who in perfection can precede and surpass them, as daily experience amply confirms.⁶

His insistence on equality between priests and coadjutors testifies to the existence of a different opinion within the Salesian ranks.

Complicating the issue by drawing a contrast with the cleric doesn't do much good. There is nothing mysterious about this type of religious, but the best presentation will always be the lives of exemplary coadjutors such as the Nazarene Simon Srugi (1877–1943), pharmacist to Muslim villages, or the Argentinian of Italian origin Artemides Zatti (1880–1951), "kinsman of all the poor".⁷

The coadjutor in the Salesian mission

Fr Vespignani, praised by Fr Rinaldi, had in mind the image of such men at a time when the institution was particularly flourishing. He based himself on Don Bosco's address to coadjutor novices at San Benigno Canavese in August 1883.⁸ Two points seemed to him to be particularly important: 1) the coadjutor is effectively involved in Don Bosco's mission, and 2) he must be an image of his master. Let's take up these ideas again.

The coadjutor participates in the Salesian mission in the world. To carry out the apostolate which Don Bosco had assigned to himself among poor and abandoned youth, in order to remove these boys from idleness and the street, inspire them with love and the habit of work, clerics and priests were not enough: he needed religious workers, or rather true workshop teachers or heads of departments. Salesian coadjutors would do what clerics and priests could not do. Don Bosco developed "this fundamental and characteristic concept of Salesian work in six points", wrote Fr Vespignani.

1. "I need many leaders and teachers."
2. "I need good coadjutors for every house and every college."
3. "I need a coadjutor who is the man of the house", that is, who looks after it.
4. "I need reliable (literally, men 'of confidence') and well-prepared coadjutors."
5. "You must be managers, teachers, responsible leaders in your work."
6. "This is my idea of the coadjutor and I need so many of them."

Don Bosco was above all anxious to have men for his mission in whom he could trust without fear. It is easy to understand, as Fr Vespignani does, that having not an outside, a lay person, a salaried employee, but a Salesian at the head of a department or workshop, a school or any other sector of the Salesian house, or in charge of the porter's office, the kitchen, the linen room, the infirmary... was a sure guarantee of the regularity, method, morality, religious character and good general running, and even the spirit of the institution and the happy results to be hoped for in the formation and perseverance of the pupils, as well as the prestige of the work itself.¹⁰

Don Bosco and his commentator had expressed themselves this in a period when the Salesians worked almost exclusively in schools, especially vocational ones, which were boarding schools. An article in the fundamental chapter of the Constitutions amended after the 1917 Code of Canon Law listed the "works of charity" on behalf of youth which they then devoted themselves to. These were oratories, if possible daily oratories, boarding houses with vocational and agricultural schools, houses for aspirants to the

priesthood, boarding and day schools with primary and secondary courses, and also all other works aimed at the salvation of youth.¹¹ The coadjutor worked in these various settings.

Then the world evolved and, with it, the mission of the coadjutor. The place of the laity in the Church and in the Congregation was re-evaluated. Out of necessity and a desire to collaborate with them, salaried workers, who had once been distrusted, entered Salesian house and occupied positions of “trust” which Don Bosco had reserved for his coadjutors. The street kid phenomenon was growing monstrously. The field of social communications was open to Salesians. In addition to young people, who continued to be the priority, the Salesian mission was increasingly extended to adults (to whom it had also been destined at the time of its foundation). As a result, the coadjutor’s mission changed. He was no longer found exclusively within the walls of the “house”, especially in mission countries. The youth hostel, called an oratory along with its ancillary associations, was preferred. At the end of the twentieth century, having taken a global view of the situation, when Fr Viganò sought to describe the categories of coadjutors of the time, he distinguished

1. coadjutors with educational, social, pastoral and training functions, engaged either in cultural and school activities, especially within technical and vocational schools; or in group initiatives, such as apostolic, sports, music or theatre groups; or in recreational services, in the social communications media, in preparation for the world of work, in social training...;
2. coadjutors in so-called tertiary activities, devoted to office work, finance, accounting: receptionists, secretaries, clerks, sacristans, heads of business enterprises...;
3. coadjutors in domestic services, generous collaborators around the house, often valuable factotums, ready for all the tasks for which they felt competent, for example the layout, order and cleanliness of the premises, farm work, the kitchen, the bakery, wardrobe... The coadjutors thus devoted themselves full-time to activities or services of all kinds which were a kind of profession for them.¹²

We must therefore be careful not to confine the Salesian coadjutor to tasks that are specified once and for all. He is faithful to his vocation if he participates in the Salesian mission in all its diversity.

However, his involvement must be effective. To live and act in the world according to the spirit of Don Bosco is at best to behave as a Cooperator, not as a Salesian coadjutor. The Salesian coadjutor “helps Don Bosco”, in other words his local or provincial

community, not from afar as a friend or sympathiser, but in real communion with his confreres in accordance with his physical and intellectual resources.

The coadjutor as an image of Don Bosco

The coadjutor is a religious who has renounced the world and has given himself to God, his Father. A public profession of the evangelical counsels, the first and greatest of which is the bond of chastity “for the Kingdom of heaven”, meant he was consecrated to his God. He chose to live this consecration following Christ, his brother, according to the charism proper to Don Bosco and in a form of common life defined by the Salesian Constitutions. His life was transfigured. He can say with the apostle, “For me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21). He has the conviction, the awareness or feeling that he belongs to his God. God is, for him, the first and only one who matters, not in the abstract and in general, for the world or for the human race, but for him. The coadjutor is centred in God. He seeks Him “from the dawn” (Psalm 62:2), that is to say, ceaselessly, as the source of meaning for his life and the world, as an interlocutor, as a companion and as a point of arrival. Hence a relationship which, if he is faithful to his vocation, fills him with light and peace, even psychologically. He is, with his religious brothers, the one who has placed God and religious value, that is, faith, at the centre of his existence. “The Lord is my portion” (Psalm 15:5). His spiritual progress requires that he become the creature of a single desire, that of living the mystery of God, not as a brief weekly or daily pause, for example at Mass or in prayer, but as a permanent state and relationship, such as to guide his options and all his ways of life.¹³

The spirit and educational methods of Don Bosco appeal to him, and he tried to draw inspiration from them. His Congregation assigns him a humble or glorious mission. The Virgin Mary is always present to him and the Holy Spirit never abandons him. He is thus, in his own way, an image of Don Bosco, who in his time, cheerfully leaving behind the comforts of life, followed the call he heard from Jesus and, until his last breath, lived in the presence of God, in a style that was his own, poor, chaste, and obedient in the service of a mission he had received as a child.

The coadjutor should therefore be a model of many virtues.¹⁴ Traditionally, Salesian coadjutors have distinguished themselves by their regular piety, self-sacrifice and hard work. But beware, if the salt were to lose its flavour ... Don Bosco and Fr Vespignani after him observed. They could no longer be counted on: good servants who had become useless would deserve the same fate.

The coadjutor, a religious in the full sense of the word, strives to reproduce Don Bosco in the world in which he lives. He does this as a baptised lay person.¹⁵ Now the layman, “by virtue of the secular character of their vocation, reflect the mystery of the Incarnate Word particularly insofar as he is the Alpha and the Omega of the world, the foundation and measure of the value of all created things.”¹⁶ He works for the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the world of the world of creation, which for him is first and foremost that of young people and workers. The renewed Constitutions of the Salesians have specified the task of the coadjutor by insisting on his secular character:

The Salesian brother brings to every field of education and pastoral activity the specific qualities of his lay status, which make him in a particular way of a witness of God’s Kingdom in the world, close as he is to the young and to the realities of working life.¹⁷

By tradition, like his master and model and model, whatever his situation, he is a hard worker, pious and extremely devoted.

NOTES

- 1 “Lo scopo di questa società si è di riunire insieme i suoi membri ecclesiastici, chierici ed anche laici a fine ..” (*Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, ms, cap. *Scopo di questa società*, art. 1.) This wording existed from the first draft of the “Regole” in 1858.
- 2 It should be added that one day his mind began to go. Towards the end of March 1876 he had to be treated and even locked him up in the psychiatric hospital next to the Valdocco oratory.
- 3 Federico Oreglia left the Salesians in 1869, became a Jesuit and was ordained priest. But this development – which annoyed Don Bosco it goes without saying – does not change the role he played in the emerging Congregation.
- 4 A list in Fr Viganò’s circular cited in the following note. L.C. pp. 223-224.
- 5 P. Albera, § “La missione del coadiutore salesiano”, in Letter to Salesians, 15 May 1921 ; (Giuseppe Vespignani), “Il coadiutore salesiano secondo la mente del Beato Don Bosco”, in *Atti*, 55, 24 October 1930, pp. 888-909 ; and E. Viganò, “La componente laicale della Comunità Salesiana”, in *Atti* 298, Oct.-Dec. 1980, pp. 3-50 or L.C. pp. 189-226. Over time, the second text was sometimes attributed to Fr Rinaldi, who was Rector Major at the time of its publication. This is a mistake. This unsigned piece appeared under the heading *Comunicazioni e Note*, and Fr Rinadi himself attributed it (praising it) to Councillor for Professional Schools Vespignani (issue quoted, p. 879).
- 6 “Il Coadiutore Salesiano è una geniale creazione del gran cuore di D. Bosco, ispirato dall’Ausiliatrice ! Egli l’ha voluto religioso perfetto, benché non insignito della dignità sacerdotale, perchè, la perfezione evangelica non è monopolio di alcuna dignità : egli l’ha voluto, nell’ascesa nel monte santo della perfezione, uguale a sè e ai suoi figli elevati alla dignità sacerdotale : i mezzi, le provvisioni, le armi, i sostegni, la mèta e i meriti sono identici per tutti, come il vitto quotidiano. Il Coadiutore Salesiano, non è nè il secondo, nè l’aiuto, nè il braccio destro dei sacerdoti suoi fratelli in religione, ma un loro uguale che nella perfezione li può precedere e superare, come l’esperienza quotidiana conferma ampiamente.” (P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians, *Atti* 40, 24 July 1927, p. 574.)
- 7 The process of beatification and canonisation of Srugi et de Zatti has been introduced. Srugi has been declared Venerable. There is a list of monographs on the coadjutors in Fr Viganò’s circular letter. L.C. pp. 217-218.
- 8 This outline (by no means a fully developed address) was published in *Atti*, 55, pp. 888-889.
- 9 “Ho bisogno di molti capi e maestri.” “Ho bisogno di buoni coadiutori per ogni casa o collegio.” “Ho bisogno del coadiutore uomo di casa.” “Ho bisogno di coadiutori ben preparati e di confidenza.” “Dovete essere capi, maestri, dirigenti nel vostro lavoro.” “Questa è la mia idea del coadiutore, ed io ho tanto bisogno di averne molti.” (Note cited in *Atti* 54, pp. 890-898.)
- 10 Note cited, p. 895.
- 11 Salesian Constitutions 1923, art. 3.
- 12 E. Viganò, “La componente laicale della congregazione salesiana” . L.C. pp. 193-194.
- 13 Thoughts taken from John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996.

- 14 Vespignani's note discussed the second part of Don Bosco's address to the coadjutors at San Benigno Canavese. It read: "Ora vi esporrò' il secondo pensiero. Dovendo venire così' in aiuto, in opere grandi e delicate, dovete procurarvi molte virtù, e dovendo presiedere agli altri, dovete prima di tutto dare buon esempio." He continued in this tone.
- 15 This is the theme of Fr Viganò's circular letter in 1980, entitled : "La componente laicale della Comunità Salesiana." See above, no. 5.
- 16 John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 16.
- 17 "Il salesiano coadiutore porta in tutti i campi educativi e pastorali il valore proprio della sua laicità, che lo rende in modo speciale testimone del Regno di Dio nel mondo, vicino ai giovani e alle realtà del lavoro" (SDB Constitutions, art. 45).

Communion

From common life to fraternal communion

From Vatican II, we are told, all the Institutes brought about the change that led from the community, understood above all as “common life”, to the communion experienced in community. “Living together” recalls the importance of structures that regulate conviviality: schedules, rules and meetings. “Communion” means welcoming and respecting people, sharing projects, deep communication, shared responsibility and friendship. The observance of the norms of living together cannot alone guarantee the authenticity of fraternal life, which living together is precisely intended to foster. We must move from simple common life to communion.¹ The necessary relationship between common life and fraternal life, if not communion properly speaking, was inscribed in the Salesian Constitutions from the very beginning in Don Bosco’s original text (1858), unfortunately soon weakened in the versions that followed. One article warned: “All the members lead a common life, bound only by fraternal charity and the simple vows that unite them so as to form one heart and one soul to serve God.”² In the mind of Don Bosco the legislator, fraternity and the observance of vows gave meaning to the common life; and this life was nourished by these.

In law, for Don Bosco, common life and therefore the community had an essentially religious purpose, which was the love and service of God. In the Salesian perspective this merges with “mission”, thus becoming, along with fraternal charity and the religious vows, instruments of unity in the community. And the apostolic community of Jerusalem, where all “were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions but everything they owned was held in common”,³ was proposed as a model to all the communities of the Congregation and the emerging family, whether they be made up of religious or consecrated lay people.

At the other end of the legislative chain, when it was about to enter the twenty-first century and while benefiting from the contributions of reflection in the meantime, the Salesian Family remained faithful to the orientations of its founder and father. According to their renewed Constitutions, the particular religious societies in the strict sense of the term, as well as those not subject to life in common, were intended to be authentic fraternities grounded essentially in God.

Let's take a look at these small ideal societies as these documents sketched them. Many difficult things are wished for. The distance between the model proposed, if not imposed, by the constitutional texts, and the flesh-and-blood copyist asked to transpose it into his own life, may seem great. Be that as it may, the picture drawn, with its touches of shadow, an integral part of the life of these societies, constantly calls on them to reform and gives meaning to their community reforms.

The fraternal life of Salesian religious communities

As is natural, consecrated Salesian religious who live in common according to their Rule, strongly highlight the demands of community life. The Salesian Constitutions, as is the case also for the Salesian Sisters, dedicate a chapter to it: both begin this chapter with "Living and working together in the name of the Lord is an essential element of our vocation."⁴

The religious community is grounded in God who is Trinity. It is God who establishes it and serves as its model. "God calls us to live in community and entrusts us with brothers to love."⁵ "The community is a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity."⁶ "Our community, gathered by the Father, is founded on the presence of the Risen Christ."⁷ Prayer in common,, the Eucharist especially are (or should be) the greatest moments of community life. The community, then, is united in God. It turns to him, invokes him, listens to his guidance (in the Word of God), and shares the feelings that these guidelines arouse in its members, asks for the assistance of the Holy Spirit, remembers Christ, the Son of God made man especially in his death and resurrection, and is nourished by him in what is so aptly called Eucharistic "communion".⁸

Fraternal communion, which presupposes and demands sharing, affection and even spiritual union, appears from the first lines of the Salesian constitutional texts on the community. "This is why we come together in communities, where our love for each other leads us to share all we have in a family spirit, and so create communion between person and person" the Salesians say.⁹ And the Salesian Sisters say, "Let it [our community] seek to form 'one heart and one soul' (...) rooted in faith, hope, and charity, it also responds to the deepest needs of the human heart and makes it ready for apostolic self-giving."¹⁰ In a community of Salesian religious, communion should never remain a mere pious wish. A spiritual atmosphere called "family spirit", which is, the Salesian Sisters recall, the "creative outpouring of Don Bosco's heart",¹¹ systematically encourages it. Serenity and mutual trust characterise this atmosphere. The manifest

affection of the members for each other and their mutual attentions nourish it. Ideally, everyone brings their own touch to each other's happiness. The rector (or superior), the first personal factor in the common unity, is the one first responsible. He or she represents Christ, who unites his people in the service of the Father. Salesians call him "father, teacher and spiritual guide."¹²

But personalities are different and can sometimes clash. Their paths diverge, some temperaments are difficult. The friendship demanded by communion then suffers and can disappear. Differences turn to opposition and community cohesion, undermined by criticism, weakens. Here the Salesians invoke the authority of Saint Paul in his letter to the Colossians: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other."¹³ The Salesian Sisters insist on the value of people and the loving testimonies of daily life.

In community, the Sisters are welcomed with respect, esteem and understanding in an attitude of open and family-like dialogue of goodwill and true sisterly friendship. The members of the community strive to highlight what each brings to it and seek to give everyone the best of themselves. "In humble, joyful simplicity", they would like to think of others before thinking of themselves, even if it means personally choosing the most difficult part. Fraternal love should be lived, "not only on great occasions, but more especially in the circumstances of everyday life."¹⁴ Thus Salesian fraternity does not remain an empty formula.

Communion means sharing and communication. Systematic self-absorption is suspect in Salesian communities: they should be preserved from the "wave of individualism" that spread through the religious world at the end of the twentieth century.¹⁵ "In an atmosphere of brotherly friendship we share our joys and sorrows, and we are partners in our apostolic plans and experiences."¹⁶ The person is formed in community dialogue. The community is the natural place for the spiritual growth of its members. The Salesian Sisters note that "It is the task of the whole community to help the Sisters, especially those who are younger, to become part of the community, and to further the maturing of each person's vocation, directing all efforts toward the mission."¹⁷ Such a program presupposes organised meetings where everyone can express themselves freely. Community exchanges aimed at reaching "the best decisions" are strong moments of Salesian shared responsibility.¹⁸

Community building is the business of each of its members. Of course, the community can suffer from more or less serious deficiencies. Perfection is not of this

world. Don Bosco strongly deplored the critical spirit in the communities of his time. “What harms religious communities greatly is the critical spirit which is directly contrary to charity.”¹⁹ The Salesian religious loves his community, even if it is imperfect, sure of finding the presence of Christ in it. Don Bosco’s followers accept fraternal correction, combat what they discover in themselves to be against community life, and participate generously in common life and work. They thank God for being among brothers who encourage and help them. Because the community provides for the needs of everyone and supports them in their moments of difficulty, doubt, fatigue and illness. “The helps we are given are to help us stand firm along our way”, explained Saint Francis de Sales to his Visitation Sisters, “to prevent us from falling, or if we do fall, to help us get up again.”²⁰ “When one falls, the other lifts him up”, wrote Don Bosco simply, quoting Ecclesiastes.²¹

Salesian communities, real communities but not closed in on themselves as small fortresses in the midst of their dioceses, deliberately seek to be welcoming. In the image of the first community of Mornese, Salesian Sisters seek to make each of their communities a “house of the love of God where the young people will feel themselves welcomed, and where daily life, lived in love and joy, becomes a continuation of Mary’s Magnificat.”²²

Being welcoming, however, should never be detrimental to the quality of community family life. Excessive openness kills the community and, at worst, the society. It becomes a hotel. Fraternal communion then disappears. Its members go outside to find the atmosphere that it no longer gives them. The community itself falls apart. It is in awareness of this risk that Salesian communities work in communion with their particular Church. Open to the world’s values and attentive to the cultural milieu in which they carry out their apostolic work, they are at one with those among whom they live and cultivates good relations with all.²³

The mistake would be to believe that the mission suffers from the care given to fraternal life. On the contrary, the John Paul II’s Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* forcefully reiterated the indispensable value of fraternal life for the renewal and effectiveness of the mission. Religious life will be all the more committed to the apostolate the more personal their dedication to the Lord Jesus is, the more fraternal their community life, and the more ardent their involvement in the Institute’s specific mission.²⁴

Communion sought by other members of the Salesian Family

The Don Bosco Volunteers, male (CDB) and female (VDB), have also written a constitutional chapter on “fraternal communion”. Their communion has, they write, an evangelical meaning, a secular dimension and a Salesian perspective.²⁵

The Gospel signifies to them that God is the communion of three divine persons and that he calls all human beings to communion with him. And also that Christ gathered his disciples so that they might remain with him and that he entrusted to them the continuation and fulfilment of his mission. The Church founded by God is a sacrament, “that is, a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.” Aware of their supernatural strengths, the members of these Institutes feel supported in the realisation of common spiritual unity, and in the construction of a Church “of fellowship and communion”. Because they are secular, they do not live in communities. However, they experience communion through active participation in the life and mission of the Institute, the region and the group which they are part of. Communion advances among the Volunteers of Don Bosco by improving their relations as they advance in their vocation, including fraternal correction. The instruments of communion in their Institutes are prayer, periodic meetings in groups, fraternal relations of welcome and mutual help, interpersonal dialogue and various communications. In their eyes, secular communion extends to all those with whom they feel solidarity in work, share the difficulties of life and the conquest of the dignity of free persons.

All members of the Salesian Family, religious in community or seculars in the world, including Cooperators, must develop a spirituality of communion among themselves, “where the learning and practice of unity, reconciliation, solidarity and dialogue become an experience of God.”²⁶

NOTES

- 1 According to J. Vecchi, "Fraternal life in community", § 2, in *CG24 et Vie consacrée*, Paris, 27-28 December 1997, taking up the document of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *Congregavit nos in unum*, 2 February 1994, n.o 3.
- 2 "1° Tutti i congregati tengono vita comune stretti solamente dalla fraterna carità e dai voti semplici che li stringono a formare un cuor solo ed un'anima sola per amare e servire Iddio". (early Constitutions, ms ACS 022 (1), chap. *Forma*, art. 1.) See the text in Constitutions 1966, art. 12.
- 3 Acts 4:32.
- 4 "Vivere e lavorare insieme nel nome del Signore è un elemento essenziale della nostra vocazione" (FMA Constitutions, art. 49 a). See: "Vivere e lavorare insieme è per noi salesiani una esigenza fondamentale e una via sicura per realizzare la nostra vocazione" (SDB Constitutions, art. 49 a).
- 5 "Dio ci chiama a vivere in comunità, affidandoci dei fratelli da amare" (SDB Constitutions art. 50).
- 6 "Nella comunità si riflette il mistero della Trinità" (SDB Constitutions, art. 49 c):
- 7 "La nostra comunità, adunata dal Padre, fondata sulla presenza di Cristo Risorto" (FMA Constitutions, art. 49 b).
- 8 See the SDB Constitutions, art. 88 b.
- 9 "Ci riuniamo in comunità, nelle quali ci amiamo fino a condividere tutto in spirito di famiglia e costruiamo la comunione delle persone" (SDB Constitutions, art. 49 b).
- 10 "(La nostra comunità) cerca di formare "un cuor solo e un'anima sola" [...] Questa comunione di vita, radicata nella fede, nella speranza e nella carità, diventa anche risposta alle intime esigenze del cuore umano e lo dispone alla donazione apostolica" (FMA Constitutions, art. 49 c, d).
- 11 FMA Constitutions, 50a.
- 12 SDB Constitutions, art. 55 e.
- 13 "San Paolo ci esorta : 'Rivestitevi, come eletti di Dio, santi e amati, di sentimenti di misericordia, di bontà, di umiltà, di mansuetudine, di pazienza, sopportandovi a vicenda e perdonandovi scambievolmente.'" (SDB Constitutions, art. 51 a.)
- 14 "Ognuna di noi perciò' cerchi di accogliere sempre le sorelle con rispetto, stima e comprensione, in atteggiamento di dialogo aperto e familiare, di benevolenza, di vera e fraterna amicizia. Valorizzi quanto esse apportano alla comunità e dia il meglio di se stessa. Sia disposta a preferire il loro bene al proprio, a scegliere per sé la parte più faticosa e a compierla con umile e gioiosa semplicità, vivendo l'amore fraterno non solo nelle grandi occasioni, ma anche e soprattutto nelle circostanze ordinarie della vita." (FMA Constitutions art. 50 b, c.)
- 15 According to the Roman instruction quoted above, *Congregavit nos in unum*, 2 February 1994, n. 39.
- 16 "In clima di fraterna amicizia ci comunichiamo gioie e dolori e condividiamo corresponsabilmente esperienze e progetti apostolici." (SDB Constitutions, art. 51 c.)

- 17 “É compito dell’intera comunità favorire l’inserimento delle sorelle - soprattutto delle più giovani - e promuovere la maturazione vocazionale di tutte, orientando le forze verso la missione”. (FMA Constitutions art. 82 b.)
- 18 “Vivremo le diverse forme di partecipazione come momenti forti di coresponsabilità, daremo al dialogo comunitario il nostro contributo per le scelte migliori” (FMA Constitutions, art. 35.)
- 19 “La cosa che più nuoce nelle comunità religiose è la mormorazione direttamente contraria alla carità.” (Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions 1877 edition, § *Carità fraterna.*)
- 20 *Les vrays entretiens spirituels* (Spiritual Conferences), III ; in *Oeuvres*, vol. VI, p. 42.
- 21 SDB Constitutions , art. 52 a, c, d ; and “Si unus ceciderit ab altero fulcietur” Qohelet 4:10) in the Introduction to the 1877 Constitutions, § *Vantaggi spirituali.*
- 22 “fare della nostra comunità la ‘casa dell’amor di Dio’, dove le giovani si sentano accolte, e dove la vita di ogni giorno, vissuta nella carità e nella gioia, continui il Magnificat di Maria” (FMA Constitutions, art. 62.)
- 23 See SDB Constitutions, art. 56 and 57.
- 24 *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, no. 72.
- 25 VDB Constitutions, art. 38-40 ; CDB Constitutions, art. 30-32.VDB Constitutions, art. 38-40 ; CDB Constitutions, art. 30-32.
- 26 J. Vecchi, “Fraternal Life in Community” conference mentioned above, no. 1.

Consecration

The different meanings of the word consecration

The possible meanings of the word consecration have preoccupied Salesian theologians, since the use of the verb *consecratur* (is consecrated) in the Vatican II Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (no. 44). The expression “consecrated life” has become widespread in the Catholic Church to mean a life dedicated to God.

Let us consult the linguists first of all. They are sensitive to the etymology of the term. In its true sense, they say, this word comes from the Latin *consecratio*, meaning the action of consecrating, meaning dedicating to the divinity. As often happens, the word has lost its force in more recent usage. God is no longer the end point of the offering. Consecration then becomes the action of dedicating something, as in the consecration of a building for public use or the consecration of a person to noble tasks; or, even further from the origins, the action of sanctioning, or making something last, as in the consecration of time, custom, success, glory or a theory. God is completely forgotten in these usages.¹

Salesian consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus (1900) and to Mary Help of Christians (1918)

During the first part of the twentieth century, at a time when speaking about Salesian life as consecrated life was unusual, the spiritual leaders of the Congregation stopped at the primary meaning given by linguists. For them, to consecrate was to offer, to give, to dedicate to God. Consecration was tantamount to a sacrificial offering; they preached and practised consecration to the Sacred Heart and consecration to Mary Help of Christians.

Pope Leo XIII, in an encyclical on 25 May 1899, had ordered Catholics to consecrate themselves to the heart of Jesus and had given them the approach for doing so. On 21 November of the following year, the Rector Major Fr Rua ordered an act of this kind for the entire Salesian Congregation at the beginning of the twentieth century.

He explained that for a long time and from many different sides he had been urged to consecrate his Pious Society to the Sacred Heart of Jesus “by a solemn and decisive act (*perentorio*)”. And he announced

My dear confreres, the time has arrived for the great moment to make our consecration and that of our whole Pious Society to the Divine Heart of Jesus public and solemn; the moment has arrived to issue the external and decisive act, so desired, by which we declare that we and the Congregation remain sacred to the Divine Heart.²

The letter invoked the meaning of consecration:

Jesus, we are already yours by right, since you have redeemed us by your most precious blood, but we also want to be yours by choice and by spontaneous, absolute consecration; our houses are already yours by right, since you are the master of each of them, but we want them to be yours, and yours alone; by our spontaneous will we also consecrate them to you; our Pious Society is already yours by right, since you inspired it, you founded it, you have, so to speak, brought it out of your very heart; well, we want to confirm this right; we want it, by the offering we make, to become like a temple in the midst of which we can say in truth that our Saviour Jesus Christ lives there as Lord, Master and King! Yes, Jesus, triumph over all difficulties, reign, command among us; you have the right, you deserve it, we want it.³

At the same time, Fr Rua disseminated the text of general consecration which, on the night of 31 December 1900 leading to 1 January 1901, he himself would use in Turin, surrounded by the superiors of his Chapter. It began:

O our most sweet Lord Jesus, we, superiors of the Pious Society of St Francis de Sales, on this solemn occasion at the end of a century and the beginning of a new one, kneel before You, as if seized with stupor and moved by the memory of the innumerable benefits distributed from all time by Your goodness to ourselves in particular and to our Pious Society in general, and in view of the extraordinary help which would be necessary for us so that our whole Pious Society, now and always, corresponds to the purpose for which it was founded, we intend to consecrate, and we do consecrate to Your most adorable heart, at this moment, our persons, each of our houses, all our works, the Pious Society as such, the Institute of the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, the Pious Union of Salesian Cooperators, and all the youth entrusted to us.⁴

The commentary on the letter and the text itself showed the nature of consecration in Fr Rua's thinking. It was an offering in the hope of special help from the Almighty. This offering, which had the appearance of a sacrifice, implied a total surrender to the Lord of persons, of goods, of the Salesian Family. The wish was that this all be part of the Kingdom of God, with no turning back.

In the last year of the First World War, the consecration of Don Bosco's Work to Mary Help of Christians by the Rector Major Fr Albera took part in the same spirit. It marked the fiftieth anniversary of the consecration, in 1868, of the Church of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. The texts of the two consecrations, the one to the Sacred Heart and the one to Mary Help of Christians, were akin. Some lines from Fr Albera's consecration will bear witness to this:

... O Mary Help of Christians, the Work of Don Bosco is Yours, entirely Yours; it belongs to you by right; but we, in our very keen desire to show you our filial gratitude, want it to be Yours by a unanimous, absolute and irrevocable consecration. We want our spirit consecrated to you, our heart consecrated, our strength and all the faculties of our souls consecrated every moment of our lives, because, if we are the sons of Don Bosco, it is thanks to you. O most tender Mother, collectively and individually, today, therefore, we consecrate ourselves to You, with the firm desire to always be, by Your help, more effective apostles of charity in every part of the world.⁵

A "consecration to Mary Help of Christians" ended the daily meditation of the Salesians. But we seem to have gradually forgotten the "consecrating" meaning. When, in the 1980s, its formulation was adapted to post-conciliar spirituality, the proposition "we consecrate ourselves entirely to you" was replaced by "we entrust ourselves entirely to you". Entrustment took the place of consecration.

The apostolic consecration of Salesians after Vatican II

Following Vatican II, various theologians of religious life reinforced the proper meaning of the word consecration. The consequences were far-reaching. No one could any longer, as had been previously believed, *consecrate himself* to God without abusing the term, whether by vows or by simple promises. It was God alone who consecrated. Father Aubry, who carefully distinguished the two actions, entitled one of his paragraphs on the problem: "God *consecrates*, the one called *vows himself* to him."⁶ And, shortly before his death, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò, in a circular entitled: "Reading the Founder's

charism again at the present day”, dwelt at length on the fact that “the term ‘consecration’ emphasised especially the initiative on God’s part.”⁷

The document in which he had most clearly stated his position, entitled “An invitation to bear greater witness to our consecration”, had been written in 1992. We read the following little dissertation:

“*Consecration*”. Vatican II brought about a real upheaval in the manner of interpreting “consecrated life”. The terminology now in use stems from the Latin term *consecratur* used by *Lumen Gentium*. By whom is this life “consecrated?” The answer is to be found precisely in that word, used in the passive voice; it proclaims that God is the protagonist, through the ministry of the Church, of a special consecration: it is not a sacramental anointing, but a “solemn blessing” (to use the term from the Rite of Religious Profession) which ensures a special gift and assistance from the Holy Spirit. From this point of view, the adjective “consecrated” appears to be the element certifying the ecclesial nature of such life. The divine act of “consecrating” inserts, in line with what happens in Baptism and Confirmation, a special “presence” of the Holy Spirit: by it he commits himself to involvement with those who profess the evangelical counsels, to be their guide, support and food. Consecration, seen as a “particular presence of the Spirit”, becomes a living source of hope and thus shows forth an aspect of the life-giving role of the Spirit as “soul” of the Church. ...”⁸

The “Salesian apostolic consecration” which this Rector Major championed, must be understood from there. The consecration “inherent in our profession” as religious, he taught, is a charismatic consecration, indissolubly linked to the Salesian mission. It is an apostolic consecration. By a “grace of unity”, in the very profession of the Salesian, God confers it with the mission, which “sends” the religious for a particular service. “Strive to make yourself loved”, Don Bosco’s dying message to Fr Rua repeated today to every Salesian, gives an original face to the consecration of the Salesian apostle.⁹

With these end-of-century letters, we have moved away from Salesian consecration to the Sacred Heart (in 1900) and to Mary Help of Christians (in 1918). The human gift of self is replaced by a charism of divine origin. In questions of this kind, one can only try to understand by context what speakers hide beneath the words they use. The Salesian will read Frs Rua, Albera and Egidio Viganò, taking into account the scope they wanted to give to the term ‘consecrated’ in their writings, one of the key words in each of their discourses. For Fr Rua was as keen on consecration to the Sacred Heart as Fr Albera was to the consecration to Mary Help of Christians, and Fr Viganò to the apostolic consecration of the Salesians.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 According to *Le Grand Robert de la langue française* (vol. 2, p. 835), s.v. *Consécration*.
- 2 “Da lungo tempo e da molte parti mi fui chiesto con grande insistenza di consacrare la nostra Pia Società al Sacro Cuore di Gesù, con atto solenne e perentorio. [...] É giunto pertanto, o carissimi, il gran momento di rendere pubblica la consacrazione nostra e di tutta la nostra Pia Società al divin Cuore di Gesù ; è giunto il momento di emettere l'atto esterno e perentorio, tanto desiderato, con cui dichiariamo, che noi e la Congregazione restiamo cosa sacra al Divin Cuore.” (M. Rua to Salesian confreres, 21 November 1900. L. C. pp. 222-225).
- 3 “Noi, Gesù, siamo già vostri per diritto, avendoci Voi comperati col vostro preziosissimo Sangue, ma vogliamo anche essere vostri per elezione e per consacrazione spontanea, assoluta ; le nostre Case son già vostre per diritto, essendo Voi padrone d'ogni casa, ma noi vogliamo che esse siano vostre, e di Voi solo, anche per nostra spontanea volontà ; a Voi le consacriamo ; la nostra Pia Società già è vostra per diritto, perchè Voi l'avete ispirata, Voi l'avete fondata, Voi l'avete fatta uscire, per dir così', dal vostro Cuore medesimo, ebbene, noi vogliamo confermare questo vostro diritto, vogliamo che essa, mercè l'offerta che ve ne facciamo, diventi come un tempio, in mezzo al quale possiam dire con verità, che abita signore, padrone e re il Salvatore nostro Gesù Cristo! Sì, Gesù, vincete ogni difficoltà, regnate, imperate in mezzo a noi, voi ne avete diritto, voi lo meritate, noi lo vogliamo.” (M. Rua to the Salesians, 20 November 1900. L.C. 224).
- 4 “O dolcissimo nostro Signore Gesù, noi, superiori della Pia Società di San Francesco di Sales in questa solenne occasione del terminar del secolo e del cominciamento del nuovo, prostrati avanti a Voi, compresi come da stupore, e commossi al ricordo degli innumerevoli benefizi elargiti in ogni tempo dalla vostra bontà a noi in particolare ed alla nostra Pia Società in generale, ed in vista degli aiuti straordinari, che ci occorrono perchè possiamo guidare le cose in modo, che questa nostra Pia Società tutta intiera ora e sempre in avvenire abbia a corrispondere allo scopo per cui venne fondata, intendiamo di consacrare, e consacriamo al vostro adorabilissimo Cuore, in questo istante, le nostre persone, le singole nostre case, tutte le nostre opere, la Pia Società Salesiana tutta quanta, l'Istituto delle Suore di Maria Ausiliatrice, la Pia Unione dei Cooperatori Salesiani, e tutta la gioventù a noi affidata.” The formula that the Rector Major would adopt can be read in L.C. Rua, pp. 255-257
- 5 “O Maria Ausiliatrice, l'Opera di Don Bosco è vostra, interamente Vostra ; Vi appartiene per diritto ; ma noi, nella vivissima brama di mostrarvi la nostra filiale riconoscenza, vogliamo che sia vostra per unanime, assoluta, irrevocabile consacrazione. Vogliamo a Voi consacrata la mente, consacrato il cuore, consacrate le forze e le facoltà tutte dell'anima nostra, consacrato ogni istante della vita, perchè se siamo figli di D. Bosco e figli vostri, è grazia Vostra. A Voi quindi, o Madre tenerissima, collettivamente e individualmente oggi ci consacriamo, col fermo proposito di essere sempre, col Vostro aiuto, più operosi apostoli di carità in ogni parte della terra....” (*Consacrazione dell'Opera di Don Bosco a Maria Ausiliatrice*, Appendix to the letter by Paul Albera to Salesians, 31 March 1918, L.C. p. 274).
- 6 Joseph Aubry, who was a specialist in the theology of religious life, had given a great deal of thought to this vocabulary. His conclusions can be found in chapter 6: “La consécration apostolique salésienne”, of his book *Avec Don Bosco vers l'an 2000*, Rome, ed. SDB, 1990, p.124-141.

- 7 “Per noi il termine ‘consacrazione’ sottolineava soprattutto l’iniziativa di Dio: è Lui che consacra!” (Letter to Salesians, 8 February 1995, in *Atti* 352, April-June 1995, pp. 14-19. See L.C. pp. 1555-1558).
- 8 “*Consacrazione*. Il Vaticano II ha provocato un vero capovolgimento nella maniera d’interpretare la Vita consacrata. Questa stessa terminologia, ora in uso, procede dal consecratur della Lumen Gentium. Da chi è consacrata questa vita? La risposta si trova appunto in quel verbo, usato al passivo ; esso proclama Dio protagonista - attraverso il ministero della Chiesa - di una speciale consacrazione : non è un’unzione sacramentale, ma una “solenne benedizione”, come dice il Rituale della Professione, che assicura uno speciale dono e assistenza dello Spirito Santo. Da questo punto di vista, il qualificativo “consacrata” appare l’elemento che fonda l’ecclesialità di tale vita. L’atto divino del “consacrare” inserisce - nella linea del Battesimo e della Cresima - una speciale “presenza” dello Spirito Santo : con essa Egli s’impegna a coinvolgere, guidare, sostenere e alimentare coloro che professano i consigli evangelici. La consacrazione, vista come “particolare presenza dello Spirito”, diviene fonte viva di speranza e dimostra così un aspetto del ruolo vivificante dello Spirito in quanto “anima” della Chiesa.” (E Viganò to Salesian confreres, 8 September 1992, in *Atti*, 342, October-December 1992, p. 17-18. See L.C. pp. 1289-1290).
- 9 Precise references in the Index to the collection of Fr Viganò’s circulars, under the title “La nostra consacrazione apostolica”.
- 10 We will look at religious consecration in the article further on, on Religious.

Contemplation

Contemplation

A proposal of Vatican II, according to which “it is necessary therefore that the members of every community, seeking God solely and before everything else, should join contemplation, by which they fix their minds and hearts on Him, with apostolic love, by which they strive to be associated with the work of redemption and to spread the kingdom of God”,¹ could arouse some perplexity in Salesian ranks. Does Don Bosco, an active priest if ever there was one, and especially those who follow his example, show any contemplative traits? If so, what are they? Some general comments on contemplation and a diversion through Saint Francis de Sales will help us to answer a question that has long plagued Salesian spirituality.

Contemplation is usually nothing more than a “peaceful attention” to the mystery of things or the human being, as is the case in the spiritual tradition of China, and especially in Taoism and also in Buddhism.² All contemplation requires an inner attitude of peace and deep recollection. It implies that all attention is focused and not dispersed. Having reached this state of mere attentive presence, the contemplative transcends appearances to enter into communion with the mystery of things, of God and of the person, mysteries that reveal themselves as the contemplation becomes deeper. Simple attention to the object also brings the individual out of the shadows, thus becoming aware of his or her own depth.

Religious contemplation, active or passive, is God-centred. The soul looks at him in his unfathomable mysteries, and, if Christian, preferably through Christ, the Word of God. For He alone knows the Father and reveals Him to whom the Father wills to reveal Himself (Matthew 11:27). Passive contemplation is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Contemplation according to St Francis de Sales

“Theotimus, contemplation is no other thing than a loving, simple and permanent attention of the spirit to divine things.” St Francis de Sales commented on this statement at length. Contemplation is the daughter of love of God and crowns it. The movement between love and contemplation is indeed circular. The one, born of the other, enriches

it. Love makes the beauty of the person loved more beautiful, and the sight of that person makes love even more loving and delectable. This is what happens in the soul's journey towards its God.³

St Francis used images, analogies, to distinguish contemplation from meditation, its mother, where knowledge predominates. "Meditation is the mother, and Contemplation the daughter of love."⁴ "Meditation considers in detail, and as it were piece by piece, the objects calculated to move us, but contemplation takes a very simple and collected view of the object which it loves,"⁵ Unlike meditation, "contemplation is without labour."⁶ During a sermon, he observed that "four actions belong to our understanding: simple thought, study, meditation and contemplation", and that this fourth action "is nothing but pleasing to the good of Him whom we have conceived in meditation and that we have loved by means of this knowledge."⁷

Whoever contemplates has chosen the best part, said Francis, making the lesson of the evangelist his own. However, the lover of his God would be wrong to imitate Mary alone and give up everything to indulge in contemplation. He explained himself rather unexpectedly in a sermon on the *Song of Songs*, based on a comment of St Bernard on the phrase: *Meliora sunt ubera tua vino* (your breasts are better than wine). Let us read:

"Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth", said this lover to her Beloved; a kiss which, according to this great Saint, means nothing other than the sweet repose of contemplation, where the soul, through a loving affection, disengaged from all earthly things, occupies itself with considering and contemplating the beauties of its celestial Spouse, without remembering to assist its neighbour and help him in his needs; to which end this divine Spouse, who wants charity to be well ordered, replies: You wish, my sister and my beloved, that I bless you with a kiss from my mouth in order to unite you to me in contemplation. Surely, you are right, it is a very good thing, very excellent and desirable thing that you are asking for; but it is not enough, because breasts are better than wine, that is to say, it is better to assist one's neighbour and to bring the milk of holy exhortation to the weak and ignorant than to be always contemplating, so that sometimes it is necessary to leave the one for the other. I am not saying that one should not meditate and contemplate; certainly not, [...], but I am saying that you have to do the one to make yourself more capable of the other, especially when the office and the task to which one is called oblige one to do so. In short that is to say that one should meditate and contemplate only as much as is required to do well to do one's duty properly, each according to one's vocation.⁸

This sets us on the path of contemplation in Don Bosco's Salesian Family. Contemplation and action are intertwined.

Salesians are contemplatives in action

The members of the Salesian Family faithful to Don Bosco are, like the Jesuits, contemplatives in action. According to Jérôme Nadal, Ignatius Loyola felt "the presence of God and the taste for spiritual things in all things, actions and conversations: he was a contemplative in action, which he himself explained by saying that 'we must find God in all things'."⁹ The Salesians belong to the same spiritual vein.

Fr Rinaldi insisted on this by preaching union with God in apostolic action. Like Martha in the time of Christ, the sons and daughters of Don Bosco are too carried away with activity. The saintly Rector Major taught the Salesian Sisters that

Martha was not a nun, but a simple housewife; a virgin, if you will, but a housewife. Yet Jesus rebuked her because she was too busy with her own affairs and didn't give due importance to the things of the spirit. We should therefore say to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who are too anxiously caught up in material matters, that our religious life seeks union with God just as Don Bosco did.¹⁰

And he explained how Don Bosco practised this union.

For Don Bosco lived in the presence of God. His prayer was constant. Faced with any problem, he turned to his God, to Christ and to his Blessed Mother. People sometimes wondered when he prayed. Those who best understood his soul have replied that he always prayed and therefore lived in a habitual state of contemplation, translated, as soon as the opportunity presented itself, into contemplative actions properly so called.

This behaviour is not automatic. The master's lesson persists for the disciples of Don Bosco. They seem to have a great need for it. "The interior life, which seems foreign to us, is, on the contrary, the true religious life because it is the life of the spirit" (Fr Rinaldi).¹¹ We must "recover" the primacy of the contemplative dimension in the spiritual life, Fr Viganò taught us. This is achieved through meditation, the necessary step towards contemplation. In fact, Salesian contemplation which, incidentally, is by no means reserved for a privileged few,¹² "means increasing our charity in our relations with God: listening to his Word, meditating on the mystery of salvation, pondering his loving mercy, his amazing and heroic sacrifice, admiring his kindly firmness, rejoicing at

his generosity and enthusing over his gratuitous love.”¹³ “The contemplative dimension of pastoral charity must be nourished by the Word of God, spiritual direction and communion with Christ in the liturgy” said Rector Major Fr Juan Vecchi.¹⁴

For Fr Viganò, the way we “see God” in “Salesian contemplation” presents particular features, which he lovingly highlighted. Don Bosco’s heart burning with apostolic zeal which finds in the contemplation of God its secret foundation and the stimulus that animates all its holiness, the *da mihi animas*.” He explained that

No one will ever understand Don Bosco unless he is first immersed in the mystery of the Trinity, to marvel at the infinite love of the Father who creates the world, gives everything to man and pardons him; the infinite love of the Son who becomes man in order to be like one of us, solid with us in everything (even suffering and death) and thus setting sinful man free, beginning with the poor and the humble; and finally the infinite love of the Holy Spirit who enters history, knocking on the heart of every individual and guiding the Church for the transformation of man, of society and of the world, and so offering to the Father a Kingdom of justice, peace and joy. The Father is the God of mercy, the Son the God of liberation, the Holy Spirit the God of sanctification: one only God who is Love, a love wholly addressed to Man. The contemplation of God seen in this fashion prompts the person who prays to collaborate fully and generously in the saving mission of Christ and of the Church.¹⁵

The Volunteers of Don Bosco understand their spirituality in this way. Their Constitutions are explicit:

We seek to make our life a continuous dialogue with the Lord. Contemplatives in daily life, we learn to recognise the presence of God in the world and in history; we discover his love above all in mankind; we read earthly realities through gospel values and we offer to God our total availability.¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5 d.
- 2 This paragraph repeats a part of the article by Y. Raguin, "Contemplation", in the *Dictionnaire des Religions*, ed. P. Poupard, Paris, PUF, 1984, p. 317-318. Y. Raguin is also author of the book *Chemins de la contemplation*, Paris, 1970.
- 3 *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* (Treatise on the Love of God), livre VI, chap. III.
- 4 *Ibidem*, chap. III.
- 5 *Ibidem*, chap. V.
- 6 *Ibidem*, chap. VI.
- 7 *Sermons recueillis* (Collected Sermons), VII: For the third Sunday of Lent; *Oeuvres*, vol. IX, p. 47, 49.
- 8 *Sermons recueillis* (Collected Sermons), XLII: On the first verse of the Song of Songs; *Oeuvres*, vol. IX, pp. 464-466.
- 9 From M. Fédou, "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et Karl Rahner", *Christus* 159, h. s., 1993, p. 60.
- 10 "Maria non era una religiosa, ma una semplice signora di casa ; vergine, se volete, ma signora di casa. Eppure Gesù la riprese, perchè si agitava troppo nelle faccende esteriori e non dava l'importanza dovuta alle cose dello spirito. Quindi, alle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, che si occupassero troppo affanosamente in cose materiali, bisognerebbe dire che la nostra vita religiosa, vuole, come l'aveva Don Bosco, l'unione con Dio." (From E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, SEI, 1948, p. 422.
- 11 "La vita interiore, che sembra straniera per noi, è invece la vera vita religiosa, poiché è la vita dello spirito". From E. Ceria, op cit., p. 440.)
- 12 Comment by E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1991; *Atti* 338, October-December 1991, p. 14. L.C. p. 1183.
- 13 "Il ricupero del primato della 'dimensione contemplativa' implica l'esercizio e lo sviluppo della carità nei nostri rapporti con Dio : l'ascolto della sua parola, la considerazione del suo mistero di salvezza, la meditazione della sua misericordia, lo stupore per l'eroismo del suo sacrificio, l'ammirazione per la benignità e la fermezza del suo comportamento, la gioia per la generosità dei suoi doni, l'entusiasmo per la gratuità del suo amore." (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1979, *Atti* 295, January-March 1980, p. 28-29. L.C. p. 131).
- 14 J. Vecchi, conference "Spiritualité", in *CG24 et Vie consacrée*, Paris, December 1997.
- 15 "Non comprenderà mai Don Bosco chi non sa sommergersi nel mistero trinitario per ammirare l'infinito amore del Padre che crea il mondo e dona tutto all'uomo e gli perdona; l'infinito amore del Figlio che si fa uomo per essere uno di noi, solidale in tutto (anche nel dolore e nella morte), e così liberare l'uomo peccatore partendo dai piccoli e dai poveri ; infine, l'infinito amore dello Spirito Santo che si inserisce nella storia bussando al cuore di ogni persona e guidando la Chiesa per trasformare l'uomo, la società e il mondo, e offrire così' al Padre un Regno di giustizia, di pace e di gioia. Il Padre è Dio di misericordia, il Figlio è Dio di liberazione, lo Spirito Santo è Dio di santificazione : un solo Dio, che è Amore tutto rivolto all'Uomo. La contemplazione di questo Volto di Dio spinge l'orante a una

collaborazione generosa e piena alla missione salvifica ...” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 7 June 1987, § *Il volto di Dio nella contemplazione salesiana*, *Atti 322*, July-September 1987, p. 15-16. L.C. p. 779).

- 16 “Cerchiamo di fare della nostra vita un continuo dialogo con il Signore. Contemplative nel quotidiano, impariamo a riconoscere la presenza di Dio nel mondo e nella storia ; scopriamo il suo amore soprattutto nell'uomo ; leggiamo le realtà terrestri in chiave evangelica e offriamo al Padre la nostra disponibilità totale.” (VDB Constitutions, art. 45).

Cooperator (Salesian)

Don Bosco's Cooperators

Don Bosco hesitated a great deal before settling on the name “Salesian Cooperators” to designate helpers who were not Religious.¹ The term only appeared at the end of a long line of other foundations. He dated the early embryo of his work back in 1841, yet the Salesian Congregation came into being in 1859. He hesitated for some thirty years over the title of this category of collaborators. To say the least, the Cooperators were successively referred to by him as promoters of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, external members of the Congregation (or Society) of St Francis de Sales, associates of the Congregation of St Francis de Sales, Salesian associates, members of the Christian Union, members of the Salesian Association, members of the Association of Good Works. It was not until 1876 that they became “Salesian Cooperators” in the pious union that brought them together.

In Don Bosco's mind at the time, the term had several connotations: members of a union, members of a Salesian union and members of an operational Salesian union. At the heart of the word “cooperators”, there was the term *operators*. Following the prefix “co” marking their union (with the religious society), it certainly suited Don Bosco. The associates were brought together for a specific action or operation. The introduction to the text of regulations published in Albenga in 1876 opened with the words, “To the reader: The Work of the Oratories had scarcely begun in 1841, when pious and zealous priests and lay people came to help cultivate the harvest which from then on promised to be abundant among the class of children at risk. These collaborators or cooperators have always been the support of the pious works that Divine Providence placed in our hands...”² Don Bosco's cooperators “collaborated” in the Italian sense of this word: they worked with him. Idle admirers were not enough for him. “In the difficult times” he was going through in the 1870s, the preface to the 1876 booklet explained, he considered this collaboration indispensable, especially to “eliminate or at least diminish the evils that are destroying the morals of growing youth, in whose hands the fate of civil society lies.” “It is to respond to such that cooperators are sought.”³ All in all, in Don Bosco's mind, the term “cooperator” implied a threefold notion: association, association with the Salesian Congregation, and a Salesian association for a specific apostolic activity.

He had long sought to closely link these cooperators to his religious society. Up until just prior to their approval, a chapter of his Salesian Constitutions was dedicated to the “extern” members of the Society. In its first version (around 1860) it said,

1. Any person even living at home within their own family can belong to our society. 2. He shall not make any vows; but he shall endeavour to put into practice that part of the present regulations which is compatible with his age and condition. 3. In order to share in the spiritual goods of the Society, he must make at least a promise to the Rector to use his wealth and his strength in such a way as he judges to be to the greater glory of God. 4. Such a promise does not oblige under penalty of even venial sin.⁴

We are beginning to see that Don Bosco’s aim was not just altruistic and social. The “fundamental goal” that he assigned to his association involved, beyond working for others, the very person of the cooperator. It was a question of imitating the early Christians, so that with one heart and soul, the Cooperator could succeed in “the important matter, the great project of the eternal salvation of [one’s] soul.”⁵ “The fundamental aim of the Salesian Cooperators is to do good to oneself by a way of life as similar as possible to that of common life”, proclaimed its 1876 regulations.⁶ Don Bosco saw people only on the way to salvation, that is, their encounter with the God of holiness. For him, Salesian cooperation had an essential purpose, which to some degree assimilated it to religious life, the *fuga mundi* included. He sometimes wrote:

Many faithful Christians, the better to attain perfection and ensure their salvation, would leave the world to avoid the dangers of perdition, to enjoy peace of heart and thus spend their lives in the solitude and charity of Our Lord Jesus Christ. But not everyone is called to this state. Many are absolutely prevented by age, many by condition, many by health, many for lack of a vocation. It is to respond to this widespread desire that we propose the pious association of St Francis de Sales.⁷

Faithful to the main idea of the chapter on the “externs”, which he had vainly sought to insert into his Constitutions, Don Bosco made his Cooperators religious in the world. His Salesian Family would also have, like the Friars Minor of Saint Francis, a kind of third order.

The Salesian Cooperators after Vatican II

Despite adjustments by the Superiors, up until the Second World War, the Cooperators were too much like simple benefactors of the Salesian Congregation. “Salesian Cooperators are those who wish to engage in charitable works not in general but in particular, in accordance with the spirit of the Congregation of St. Francis Sales” Salesian Rectors were told in 1926. “The Cooperators are therefore different from simple benefactors; nor should they be regarded as a confraternity or a religious association.”⁸ A turnaround began to take shape during the reign of Pius XII, who addressed an important programme to the Cooperators (12 September 1952). The Union was then included among the movements for the apostolate of the laity. Then Vatican II prompted a revision of its Regulations, which had not been touched since Don Bosco. One attempt, circulated in 1974, seemed too dry. Finally, as a result of multiple and meticulous revisions, a “Regulation of Apostolic Life of the Association of Salesian Cooperators”, after having been approved by the Holy See on 9 May 1986, was promulgated by the Rector Major Fr Viganò on the following 24 May. It presents a renewed image of the Salesian Cooperator at the dawn of the twenty-first century, with their identity, spirit, mission and the organisation of their association.⁹

Cooperators are Catholics who, while living their faith within the framework of their own secular condition, draw their inspiration from Don Bosco’s apostolic project: by committing themselves to the same mission (6) among the young and the poor, in partnership and a brotherly way, in close communion with the other members of the Salesian Family, working for the good of the Church and of society, to the best of their ability.¹⁰

The authors of this article wanted to reflect Don Bosco’s original intentions, according to which the Cooperator is a true Salesian in the world, in other words a Christian, layperson or priest, who without being bound by religious vows, realises his or her own vocation to holiness in the service of a mission among youth and the people according to the spirit of Don Bosco. The identity of the Cooperator thus profiled has three characteristic features: it is Christian and Catholic, it is secular, and it is Salesian. A Protestant or a Jew can sympathise and collaborate with a group of Cooperators, but they cannot become members of a public ecclesial association.

It is a mistake to restrict Salesian cooperation to lay people. “Don Bosco conceived the Cooperators’ Association as open to both the laity and the secular clergy. The lay Cooperators fulfil their commitment and live the Salesian spirit in the normal situations

of their life and work, according to their lay state, and spread their values in their environment. The Cooperator who is a secular priest or deacon carries out his own specific ministry, drawing inspiration from Don Bosco – an eminent model of priestly life. In his pastoral work he gives preference to the young and working-class areas, and in this way enriches the Church in which he works.”¹¹

The Cooperators’ commitment is an apostolic one. A promise to undertake “to live the evangelical project of the Association of Salesian Cooperators” endorses this for members who are fully integrated into the association.¹² Commitment is exercised in the Cooperator’s world and in his or her daily life. Generally speaking, Cooperators, “Salesians in the world”, “want to follow Jesus Christ, the perfect Man, sent by the Father to serve men in the world. For this reason they aim at putting into practice, in the ordinary conditions of life, the gospel ideal of love of God and of neighbour.”¹³ In their family, they would like to make it what Vatican II called a “domestic Church”.¹⁴ “Married Cooperators find in the sacrament of love the strength to live with enthusiasm their mission as spouse and parent.”¹⁵

It is understood that the Cooperators are lay Salesians duly inserted in the world.¹⁶ In their work, studies and leisure time, Salesian Cooperators know that they are the continuation of God’s creative work and a witness to Christ. They prove this by their uprightness, activity and coherent lifestyle, by a serious sense of professionalism, by fraternal sharing of the joys, sufferings and just aspirations of their community and, in every circumstance, by their generous openness to the service of their neighbour.¹⁷ Because they are faithful to the gospel and to the indications of the Church, the Cooperators are aware of their social responsibilities in the world of culture, economics and politics. They reject everything that feeds injustice and oppression, exclusion and violence, and act courageously to eliminate their causes. They are committed to healing and renewing mentalities and customs, laws and structures in the environments in which they live, to bring them more into line with the gospel’s demands for freedom, justice and fraternity. In order to make their actions more effective, and according to their abilities and availability, they take part as fully as possible in cultural, social, political and trade-union activities.¹⁸

Cooperators are everywhere concerned with educating and evangelising, which Don Bosco summed up in the words: “to form upright citizens and good Christians and eventually fortunate inhabitants of heaven.” They share with young people their zest for real values such as truth, freedom, justice, sense of the common good and service. They train young people to meet the risen Christ in faith and the sacraments. so as to find in

him the meaning of life and grow as “new men”.¹⁹ Typical activities of Cooperators are: catechesis and Christian formation; animation of youth groups and movements, and families; collaborating with educational and scholastic centres; social service to the poor; working in social communication to create culture and spread models of life among the people; cooperation in vocation ministry and promoting the Cooperators Association; missionary work and collaboration in ecumenical dialogue.²⁰

The Salesian Congregation patronises and supports the organisation of the Cooperators Association. At the explicit desire of the Founder (5), the Salesian Rector Major is the Superior of the Association and carries out the functions of supreme Moderator in its regard. He is the guarantor of fidelity to the project of the Founder and promotes its growth. With the assistance of the Councillor for the Salesian Family he fosters the internal unity of the Association and its relationship with the other Groups of the Salesian Family. In the exercise of his ministry he makes use of the World Consultative Body of the Cooperators, especially for the animation of the entire Association and its activities. Salesian provincials, because of the specific responsibilities of the Society of St Francis de Sales, substitute for the Rector Major at local level and guarantee, with the collaboration of the rectors, the bonds of unity and communion and provide spiritual assistance to the individual centres.²¹

The Salesian Cooperators Association, a way to holiness

An authentically Salesian spirit is what animates the Cooperator. One leaflet expresses why various contemporaries opt for this lifestyle: “I love young people, their aspirations challenge me, I have chosen to be close to them. I need modern teaching methods and a spirituality that enriches me. I often meet up with other lay people, Salesian religious and Salesian Sisters within the Salesian Family, a place for exchange, sharing, reflection, work and prayer.”²²

Like Don Bosco’s Cooperator, today’s Cooperator aims high. “In choosing these Regulations of Apostolic Life the Cooperators discover a Gospel way of self-fulfilment and so set themselves on a path that leads to holiness” the 1986 Regulations of Apostolic Life tell us.

“The Association of Cooperators,“ Don Bosco tells us, “has been founded to shake up Christians from the apathy in which so many of them live, and to spread the driving force of charity.” In choosing these Regulations of Apostolic Life the Cooperators discover a Gospel way of self-fulfilment and so set themselves

on a path that leads to holiness. The Lord bestows abundant graces on all those who work in the spirit of “*da mihi animas*”, doing good to the young, i.e. by preparing good Christians for the Church and upright citizens for society.²³

NOTES

- 1 Regarding the origins of the Salesian Cooperators Union see my article "Don Bosco fondatore dei cooperatori salesiani", in *Don Bosco fondatore della Famiglia salesiana*. Atti del simposio Roma-Salesianum, 22-26 January 1989, ed. M. Midali, Rome, Department of the Salesian Family, s.d., pp. 325-360.
- 2 "Appena s'incominciò l'Opera degli Oratorii nel 1841 tosto alcuni pii e zelanti sacerdoti e laici vennero in aiuto a coltivare la messe che fin d'allora si presentava copiosa nella classe de' giovanetti pericolanti. Questi Collaboratori o Cooperatori furono in ogni tempo il sostegno delle Opere Pie che la Divina Provvidenza ci poneva tra mano." (*Cooperatori salesiani ossia un modo pratico per giovare al buon costume e alla civile società*, Albenga, 1876, p. 3.)
- 3 "Noi cristiani dobbiamo unirici in questi difficili tempi per promuovere lo spirito di preghiera, di carità con tutti i mezzi, che la Religione somministra e così rimuovere o almeno mitigare questi mali, che mettono a repentaglio il buon costume della crescente gioventù, nelle cui mani stanno i destini della civile società". "Egli è per accorrere a tante necessità che si cercano Cooperatori." (*Cooperatori salesiani...*, same edition pp. 26 and 27).
- 4 "1. Qualunque persona anche vivendo nella propria casa in seno alla propria famiglia può appartenere alla nostra società. - 2. Egli non fa alcun voto; ma procurerà di mettere in pratica quella parte del presente regolamento che è compatibile colla sua età e condizione. - 3. Per partecipare dei beni spirituali della Società bisogna che faccia almeno una promessa al Rettore di impiegare le sue sostanze e le sue forze nel modo che egli giudicherà tornare a maggior gloria di Dio. - 4. Tale promessa non obbliga sotto pena di colpa nemmeno veniale." (Salesian Constitutions, ms ACS 022 (3), chap. *Esterni*).
- 5 "Uniti, siccome facevano i primi cristiani, in un cuor solo ed in un'anima sola, per riuscire nell'importante affare, nel grande progetto della eterna salvezza dell'anima nostra. È questo il fine della Associazione Salesiana." (*Unione cristiana*, 1874, p. 1).
- 6 "Scopo fondamentale de' Cooperatori Salesiani si è di fere del bene a se stessi mercè un tenore di vita, per quanto si può, simile a quello che si tiene nella vita comune." (*Cooperatori salesiani...*, ed. cit, § III).
- 7 "Molti fedeli cristiani per vie meglio giungere alla perfezione ed assicurarsi la loro salvezza [si] allontanerebbero assai volentieri dal mondo per evitare i pericoli della perdizione, goder la pace del cuore e così passare la vita nella solitudine, nella carità di N. S. G. C. Ma non tutti sono chiamati a questo stato. Molti per età, molti per condizione, molti per sanità, moltissimi per difetto di vocazione ne sono assolutamente impediti. Egli è per soddisfare a questo generale desiderio che si propone la pia associazione di S. Francesco di Sales." (*Associazione alla Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales*, ms, circa 1873, beginning).
- 8 "Dicansi Cooperatori Salesiani coloro che desiderano occuparsi di opere caritatevoli non in generale, ma in specie, d'accordo e secondo lo spirito della Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales. I Cooperatori perciò differiscono dai semplici benefattori; e neanche debbono considerarsi come una Confraternité o un' Associazione religiosa." (*Resoconto dei Congressi tenuti dai Direttori Salesiani a Valsalice nell'estate del 1926*, in *Atti* 36, 24 September 1926, pp. 514-515).

- 9 *Associazione Cooperatori Salesiani, Regolamento di vita apostolica*, Rome, ed. S.D.B., 1986, 146 pages. This document has been commented on several times authoritatively: E. Viganò, “L’Associazione dei Cooperatori Salesiani”, *Atti* 318, July-September 1986, pp. 3-42 ; J. Aubry, *Guida di lettura al Regolamento di vita apostolica dell’Associazione Cooperatori Salesiani*, Rome, ed. Cooperatori, 1987, 152 pages; Dicastero per la Famiglia salesiana, *Regolamento di vita apostolica. Commento ufficiale*, Rome, ed. S.D.B., 1990, 464 pages. The abbreviation of *Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*: RVA.
- 10 “Il Cooperatore è un cattolico che vive la sua fede ispirandosi, entro la propria realtà secolare, al progetto apostolico di Don Bosco : si impegna nella stessa missione giovanile e popolare, in forma fraterna e associata ; sente viva la comunione con gli altri membri della Famiglia salesiana ; opera per il bene della Chiesa e della società ; in modo adatto alla propria condizione e alle sue concrete possibilità.” (RVA, art 3.) In his commentary, Fr. Aubry explains that the final proposition: “in modo adatto ... proprie possibilità”, applies not only to the one that comes before it, but to all of the Cooperator’s involvement that follows “si impegna”.
- 11 “Don Bosco ha concepito l’Associazione dei Cooperatori aperta sia ai laici che al clero secolare. Il Cooperatore laico attua il suo impegno e vive lo spirito salesiano nelle ordinarie situazioni di vita e di lavoro, con sensibilità e caratteristiche laicali, e ne diffonde i valori nel proprio ambiente. Il Cooperatore sacerdote o diacono secolare attua il proprio ministero ispirandosi a Don Bosco, modello eminente di vita sacerdotale. Nelle scelte pastorali privilegia I giovani e gli ambienti popolari, arricchendo in questo modo la Chiesa nella quale opera.” (RVA, art. 4.)
- 12 “Prometto di impegnarmi a vivere il Progetto evangelico dell’Associazione dei Cooperatori Salesiani”, the wording of the Promise says in RVA, art 40.
- 13 “Egli vuole seguire Gesù Cristo, Uomo perfetto, inviato dal Padre a servire gli uomini nel mondo. Per questo tende ad attuare, nelle ordinarie condizioni di vita, l’ideale evangelico dell’amore a Dio e al prossimo.” (RVA, art. 7.)
- 14 See *Lumen Gentium*, 11; and RVA, art. 8.
- 15 RVA, art. 9.
- 16 See N. Nicastro, “I cooperatori sono salesiani laici inseriti nel mondo”, in *La dimensione sociale della carità*. Atti della XIV settimana di spiritualità della Famiglia salesiana, Rome, ed. S.D.B., 1991, pp. 109-112.
- 17 RVA, art. 10.
- 18 RVA, art. 11.
- 19 RVA, art. 14.
- 20 RVA, art 16. We can find a list of “fields of activity for Salesian cooperation”, at least for Italy in the 1980, in the article by E. Manno “Il Cooperatore Salesiano”, in *Le vocazioni nella Famiglia salesiana*. IX settimana di spiritualità della Famiglia salesiana, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1982, pp. 139-140.
- 21 RVA, art 23.
- 22 “Qui suis-je Je suis salésien coopérateur de don Bosco”, leaflet Paris, ed. Don Bosco, around 1997.

- 23 “L’Associazione dei Cooperatori - ci dice Don Bosco - “è fetta per scuotere dal languore nel quale giacciono tanti cristiani, e diffondere l’energia della carità”. Scegliere questo Regolamento di vita apostolica è trovare un modo evangelico di realizzare se stessi, incamminandosi per una via che porta alla santità. Il Signore accompagna con l’abbondanza delle sue grazie tutti coloro che operano nello spirito del “da mihi animas”, facendo del bene alla gioventù, preparando cioè buoni cristiani alla Chiesa e onesti cittadini alla società.” (RVA, art. 50).

Courage

Selfish courage and altruistic courage

After humility, courage was the second quality that the Lady of his dream at nine years of age advised him to have for the success of his apostolic work. The historicity of this statement is not in question. Only the lesson to those who followed him, which is very clear, is important. “Make yourself humble, strong and energetic”, according to the didactic reconstruction of the dream.¹ The “strength” he was advised to have could have been both physical and moral. But the adjective “energetic” which followed and undoubtedly meant good health and physical strength, excluded this latter from the other adjective. “Strong” was used to describe fortitude, in other words courage, the ability to overcome fear, in the most common meaning of the term. Like his master, courage should be one of the most important qualities of Don Bosco’s disciple.

Not all courage satisfied this master. Salesian courage is altruistic. Of course, courage of any kind is admirable, and cowardice and pusillanimity, its opposite, are universally despised. But there is a kind of courage that is closed in on itself, “selfish” if you like, such as bathing in icy water. On the other hand, throwing oneself into the water at the risk of one’s life to save an unfortunate person about to drown is a selfless act of courage. “Courage is only truly morally respectable when it is placed, at least in part, at the service of others, when it avoids, more or less, immediate self-interest”, says a contemporary philosopher, perhaps correctly.² The fortitude of Don Bosco’s disciple, generously placed at the service of others, especially young people, is rooted in his charity. He does not sacrifice his joy for all that. Charity is gratifying, even when it goes unrecognised. It gives the ego some pleasure. It is no less virtuous for that. “Finding pleasure in the service of others, finding well-being in generous action, far from challenging altruism is its very definition and the principle of virtue.”³ Don Bosco spent his life courageously and to the point of exhaustion for his children, his sons and daughters, his religious and his cooperators. In 1886, before his trip to Barcelona, one of his close friends said that he had the body of a hundred-year-old, even though he was only seventy. But giving of himself had always made him happy.

Two courageous Rectors Major: Fr Rua and Fr Rinaldi

His Salesians followed in his footsteps. Let us choose from among the most illustrious Salesians whose courage will always be exemplary for the members of the Salesian Family.

In 1888, Fr Rua was given the very difficult task of succeeding Don Bosco. He had to face a mountain of difficulties. Well then, if we follow one of his biographers,

discouragement never penetrated this life – which was a long one, almost three quarters of a century. Certain trials crushed his soul, flooded his heart with sadness, but his will, always calm and resolute, never slackened in the work he had begun. He remembered Don Bosco who, through the worst storms never stopped working incessantly. A small but significant fact reveals the energy of this soul. In his final days he could no longer write a single line, since his hand trembled with exhaustion and fever. Yet he still wanted to write his own personal letters. So to keep his pen steady, he would place a brick or a piece of wood on his wrist, which, by compressing it firmly, reduced some of his convulsions of nerves.⁴

Fr Rinaldi's private secretary, Fr Vacca, gave a moving account of his courage.

The illness that finally destroyed him demanded an heroic exercise of courage (*fortezza*) and resistance of him, particularly in his final years. Well aware of his condition and the dangerous state of his heart, even during his final two years he subjected himself to tiring journeys to bring the comfort of his smile to even the farthest corners of the world. ... Everywhere it was a triumph and filial emotion, but who can speak of his efforts? As I watched him, I could see his weakness and fatigue. But without ever backing down, he always belonged to everyone, whether it was giving audiences, being the subject of festive events or celebrating religious ceremonies. And he never let the smile on his face fade, nor did he let his tiredness or discontent show... And he never talked about it. He adapted to his illness with such serenity that recourse to help from others seemed to him more an act of fatherly confidence rather than an inescapable necessity...⁵

Both were a living lesson for the Salesian Family of their time. Successive generations will benefit from meditating on their example.

Fortitude, a gift of the Holy Spirit

“Be strong”, while maintaining the right balance in your daring, the Rector Major Fr Ricaldone taught the Salesians. May your “holy courage make you intractable against

evil. Be persevering in your duty. Be persistent in your duty. In the face of suffering, know how to endure, but also how to look after yourself properly. Stoicism is not a Christian virtue. But when the honour of God and the good of souls demand it, be capable, like our missionaries, of walking courageously to the point of martyrdom.”⁶ Fr Rinaldi had the opportunity to praise the courage of Bishop Louis Versiglia and Fr Callistus Caravario, who died victims of Chinese pirates, enemies of the Christian faith, for having protected the honour of defenceless women.⁷ In any case, the “new evangelisation” requires apostolic daring, said Fr Viganò.⁸

Fortitude, altruistic courage is essential for the Salesian apostle. Fortitude, altruistic courage, is indispensable to the Salesian apostle, who is neither a dreamer nor a sleeper. His love for others is, ideally at least, energetic and effective. Action in the service of others requires reserves of courage. The follower of Don Bosco needs a strong God. The gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of fortitude, “is love encouraging and animating the heart, to put in execution that which counsel has determined should be done”, explained Saint Francis de Sales.⁹ “It means courage, constancy, tenacity, inner strength, resilience in efforts, in suffering, persistence in purpose”, recalled the Rector Major Fr Vecchi.¹⁰ This is the gift that best appeared on the day of Pentecost, he said, when the apostles became direct in their expression, ready to face up to the risks, with no detours when faced with the people and the authorities. This gift requires educators to be neither hesitant nor ambiguous, but clear and explicit in their assessments and proposals. He tells us not to give in to the surrounding conformism, but to form people to resist it justly, to teach that results require long effort, that “change” does not always resolve doubts and misgivings, that long-term fidelity brings with it new and powerful joys.¹¹

The spirit of initiative, a sign of apostolic courage, is essential to the Salesian spirit. The Common Identity Card of the Salesian Family teaches this. And it explains at length this sign of fidelity to the Church. The Church, guardian of the deposit of the Word of God, from which the principles of the moral and religious order derive, even if it does not always provide the solution to every particular question, wishes to combine the light of Revelation with the competence of everyone, in order to shed light on the path which humanity has recently embarked on. Courageous search and apostolic creativity are required of all Christians, but especially of apostles. In a society characterised by mobility, haste and speed, the loss of the sense and spirit of pastoral initiative would be fatal to the members of the Salesian Family. Fr Rinaldi warned the Salesians: “This elasticity in adaptation to pall the forms of good that continually arise among humanity

is the particular spirit of our Constitutions; and if the day should come when there is introduced a variation contrary to this spirit, our Society will be finished.”¹²

Courageous strength, the source of willpower, the enemy of lazy capitulation, energises all the virtues of the Salesian.

NOTES

- 1 “Renditi umile, forte, robusto” MO Da Silva, p. 36, and in English (Daniel Lyons translation) it is “Make yourself humble, strong and energetic”.
- 2 I have taken my inspiration from A. Comte-Sponville, *Petit traité des grandes vertus*, PUF, 1995: “Le courage”, pp. 59-79.
- 3 A. Comte-Sponville, loc. cit., p. 63.
- 4 A. Auffray, *Le premier successeur de Don Bosco*, Lyon, Vitte, 1932, p. 347.
- 5 “Esercizio eroico di forza e di resistenza, negli ultimi anni particolarmente, gli fu offerto dal male, che poi l’annientò. Pur conoscendo il suo stato e la condizione pericolosa del suo cuore, anche nell’ultimo biennio si sottopose a viaggi faticosi, per portare, anche lontano, il conforto del suo sorriso ... Ovunque era un trionfo ed una emozione filiale, ma chi può dire lo sforzo suo? Io che lo sorvegliavo, mi accorgevo della sua depressione e fatica, ma lui era sempre per tutti, sia per dare udienza, ricevere manifestazioni festose, celebrare funzioni, senza darsi vinto; e non mai che il suo sorriso si modificasse sul suo volto e lasciasse trasparire stanchezza o intolleranza ... E non ne parlava mai, agendo con uno spirito di adattamento al suo male così serenamente che il ricorso dell’aiuto altrui sembrava piuttosto da parte sua un atto di patema confidenza che non un bisogno inderogabile ...” (Informative process for the beatification and canonisation of Fr Rinaldi, *Summarium*, p. 255; in L. Fiora, *Informatio super virtutibus*, Rome, 1983, p. 139.)
- 6 P. Ricaldone, *Le virtù cardinali* (coll. *Formazione salesiana*), Torino-Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1965, pp. 225-288.
- 7 P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians 24 April 1930, *Atti* 53, pp. 852-864.
- 8 Letter to Salesians, 4 March 1992, in *Atti* 340, pp. 13-15. L.C. pp. 1238-1239.
- 9 *Treatise on the Love of God*, book XI, chap. XV; *Oeuvres*, vol. V, p. 292.
- 10 “Significa coraggio, costanza, tenacia, forza interiore, capacità di tenuta, resistenza allo sforzo, alla sofferenza, persistenza nei propositi.” (J. Vecchi, “La strenna per il 1998”, in *Atti delle XX giornate di spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana*, Rome, 1998, p.169.)
- 11 J. Vecchi, *ibid.*, pp. 168-169.
- 12 “Don Filippo Rinaldi ricorda con forza ai salesiani : “Questa elasticità di adattamento a tutte le forme di bene che vanno di continuo sorgendo nel seno dell’umanità è lo spirito proprio delle nostre Costituzioni; e il giorno in cui si introducesse una variazione contraria a questo spirito, per la nostra Società, sarebbe finito.” (*Carta di comunione*, 1995, art. 25.)

Cross

“Passion” in Salesian spirituality

Salesians love holiness achieved through work.¹ All members of the Salesian Family are called to a life as apostles. They admire Don Bosco the hard-working man. Formed in this spiritual climate, it can be useful for them to deal with action, which is connatural to their vocation, and with passion, its opposite, which at first glance seems foreign to it.

On the contrary, the history of Christianity shows that apostolate and martyrdom are intimately linked. Are not all the twelve “apostles” of Jesus presented as martyrs? The two Salesian confreres, Louis Versiglia and Callistus Caravario, beatified by John Paul II on 15 May 1983, bore outstanding witness by their martyrdom in China (25 February 1930) of the values and spirit of an authentic Salesian vocation.

Among the group of Salesian Servants of God, the case of Venerable Andrea Beltrami (1870–897), who died at 27 years of age after twelve years of illness, both surprises and even disconcerts us.² Beginning from when he was eighteen years of age, his illness gradually condemned him to a life of constant suffering. He could only devote himself to the apostolate of the pen. He wrote a drama and several edifying biographies. His tenacity of will and thirst for holiness consumed his life in pain and work. “The mission that God has entrusted to me”, he said, “is to pray and to suffer.” “He said that his apostolate was the apostolate of suffering and prayer”, according to his Rector during the process of beatification and canonisation.³ “Neither to recover nor to die, but to live in order to suffer” was his motto. Although isolated, he observed the Rule meticulously, opened up to his superiors in a filial way and showed a very ardent love for Don Bosco and his Salesian Congregation.⁴

The members of the Salesian Family, normally immersed in the flurry of the apostolate, taking work for granted, accustomed to fatigue, driven to endless pastoral inventiveness, could be tempted to forget the values of “passion”. Yet according to the logic of the *da mihi animas*, the Salesian spirit is open to the mystery of suffering to the point of martyrdom. Among the phrases attributed to Don Bosco, we find “We all have to carry the cross like Jesus, and our cross is the sufferings we all endure in our lives!”⁵ And also, “Whoever does not want to suffer with Jesus Christ on earth, will not rejoice with

him in heaven!”⁶ A few theological considerations will shed light on this interpenetration of action and passion.

Jesus lived his divine sonship in full availability to his Father’s purposes from the time of his apostolic labours until his death on Calvary. In “action” as in “passion”, his fundamental attitude was identical: the complete availability of filial love, both in “action” and in “suffering”. Our situation as adopted sons of God must also keep us in the double readiness for action and passion. The offering of self for the realisation of the divine plans is paramount. As it is with Christ, the essential filial attitude is expressed for the Salesian either by the gift of self in action for the building up of the Kingdom of God, or by the gift of one’s life in passion, in order to give pride of place to the “action of the Father” according to his unfathomable plans. The apostle’s mission is not just action, as Christ testifies as he accomplishes his salvific mission for humanity both in action and in passion, two gestures that are linked to each other and absolutely inseparable from each other. The apostolic mission is possible only through the gift of self to the Father for the fulfilment of his plan of salvation. It is not just activity, inventiveness, planning and energy, but also suffering, passion and death in accordance with God’s will.

The filial availability experienced in passion helps us to understand that charity, the driving force of both apostolic and contemplative life, always tends, as if towards its supreme summit, to the total gift of self in participation in the mystery of Jesus Christ. The fullness of love is found beyond forms of active or contemplative life, because both tend towards the total gift of self for the Kingdom of Christ and of God. Every spirituality of action includes constant openness to passion, as if to affirm that “absolute freedom” resides only in the Father. The member of the Salesian Family therefore remembers that even when plunged into suffering, illness, old age, disability, agony or death, he or she is not excluded from the apostolate, but enriches it and brings it to fulfilment. The most important grace to be asked for is not to no longer suffer, but to remain fully available to the Father, so that we can repeat with the Letter to the Colossians, “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Colossians 1:24) . The simple desire to suffer and die could indicate some pathological deviation. But to feel called to share in the passion and death of the Redeemer is a sublime gift from God and an indispensable essential to man’s salvation, concluded the Rector Major Fr Viganò as he celebrated “the sublimity of Christian martyrdom.”⁷

The spirit of sacrifice

In keeping with a long tradition, let us unashamedly call sacrifice the sublime and loving gift of oneself and one's resources, which constitutes the passion of Christ and the Christian.⁸ It presupposes a spirit that is usually disposed to costly offering, the "spirit of sacrifice" to the praise of God the Father. This spirit is indispensable for religious, especially Salesian priests, Fr Rua once wrote to provincials and rectors.

The spirit of sacrifice is "that virtue whereby in the most difficult moments a religious does not allow himself to be dominated by imagination, sentiment or passions, but by letting reason, enlightened and engendered by faith, prevail, he persuades himself that everything unpleasant that happens to him will turn to his spiritual advantage."⁹ This virtue, Fr Rua rightly believed, was companionship with Jesus throughout his life, so much so that Saint Paul was able to sum it up as "*Christus non sibi placuit*" (Romans 15:3), in other words: "Christ did not please himself". "Our Founder", he continued, "walked in his footsteps, he whose life was one of continual sacrifice, so that without a spirit of self-sacrifice we could not call ourselves his sons."¹⁰ He who is devoid of the spirit of sacrifice will not have the strength to practise poverty, will expose himself to the risk of ruining his chastity and will cast great doubts on his perseverance in his vocation. Addressing his priests, the men of the sacrifice of praise, Fr Rua exclaimed,

Oh! if there is anyone who should practise the spirit of sacrifice it is the priest, in whose hands the divine Lamb is sacrificed daily on our altars. In imitation of him, let us put ourselves in his hands in the attitude of victims ready for the sacrifice when and as it pleases Him. [...] At the hour of our death it will not be the pleasures we have experienced or honours (accumulated) that will console us and inspire us with confidence, but the sacrifices we have made by suffering for Jesus.¹¹

In the same spirit, the Salesian Cooperators who live united with Jesus Christ "transform their lives into a liturgy of praise: their work, relaxation, apostolic initiatives, joys and suffering are thus lived in the spirit of the Lord and become a gift pleasing to him and a 'hymn to his glory'."¹²

A Salesian "victimal" Salesian spirituality

It is easy to see why the "victimal spirituality" of Salesian Luigi Variara (1875–1923), apostle of the lepers, and Founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts

of Jesus and Mary, which he founded in Colombia, was able to find its place in the spirituality of the Salesian Family without any major problems.¹³ Offering oneself as a victim is an act of loving charity for God and mankind, according to the example set by Christ on Calvary. It is, therefore, part of the mystery of redemptive suffering and the salvation of the world.¹⁴ For Fr Variara's Sisters, dedicated to the service of the sick and possibly lepers themselves, suffering is transformed into an invitation to join in the redemptive work of Christ and into the possibility of participating more deeply in his "self-sacrificial" love, as one of them, who is particularly qualified, explains to us.¹⁵

Physical or moral suffering, that mystery that we stumble over when we think of God as a very good creator, does indeed have salvific value. However, to admit this, we need to look at the Crucified One.

We know that the value of man's existence on earth is conditioned by the solution to the problem of suffering. We know that, to a certain extent, this coincides with the problem of evil, whose presence in the world is so difficult to accept. The Cross of Christ – the Passion – throws a completely new light on this problem by giving another meaning to human suffering in general.¹⁶

For "The mystery of the Redemption of the world is in an amazing way rooted in suffering, and this suffering in turn finds in the mystery of the Redemption its supreme and surest point of reference."¹⁷ "Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful."¹⁸

NOTES

- 1 In the following lines I adapt the circular letter by the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò (24 February 1983) entitled “Martyrdom and passion the apostolic spirit of Don Bosco” in *Atti* 308, pp. 3-21.
- 2 Andrea (Andrew) Beltrami, born in Omegna (province of Novara, Italy) on 24 June 1870, made his perpetual profession as a Salesian on 20 October 1887, was ordained priest on 8 January 1893, died at Valsalice in Turin on 30 December 1897, and was declared Venerable by Paul VI on 5 December 1966. Regarding him, see the *Positio super virtutibus* (Rome, 1955), in his process of beatification and canonisation; and E. Ceria, *Il Servo di Dio Don Andrea Beltrami*, Torino, SEI, 1930, 252 pages.
- 3 Egli diceva che il suo apostolato era l'apostolato dei patimenti e della preghiera (L. Piscetta, the Informative process of beatification and canonisation, ad 17^{um}, in *Positio super virtutibus*, p. 386).
- 4 E. Valentini, “Beltrami, Andrea”, *Dizionario biografico dei Salesiani*, p.p 35-36.
- 5 “Tutti dobbiamo portare la croce come Gesù, e la nostra croce sono le sofferenze che tutti incontriamo nella vita!” (Don Bosco to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, in MB X, 648).
- 6 One of his favourite sayings which he generally quoted in Latin: “*Qui non vult pati cum Christo, non potest gaudere cum Christo.*” See, for example, his notes for a sermon on mortification, in MB IX, 998.
- 7 E. Viganò, Letter of 24 February 1983, loc. cit., pp. 7-11.
- 8 The term *sacrifice*, though very traditional, has become suspect in the world of Christian theologians, apparently because of its pagan origins. Christ was not a “victim” intended to appease the wrath of the Father. See, for example, G. Mathon, “Sacrifice”, in *Catholicisme, hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, vol. 13, Paris, 1993, col. 375-425. Maybe, but the offering of love and praise to God, which we translate as sacrifice, remains!
- 9 “... dallo spirito di sacrificio, che è quella virtù per cui nei momenti più difficili un religioso non si lascia dominare dall'immaginazione, dal sentimento o dalle passioni, ma facendo prevalere la ragione illuminata e ingagliardita dalla fede, si persuade che tutto ciò che gli succede di spiacevole, tornerà a suo vantaggio spirituale.” (M. Rua, Circular to provincials and rectors, 29 November 1899, L.C., pp. 203-204.)
- 10 “E sulle sue trecce camminò il nostro Fondatore, la cui vita può definirsi un continuo sacrificio, sicché senza spirito di abnegazione noi non potremmo chiamarci suoi figli.” ‘M. Rua, *ibidem*.
- 11 “Oh ! se v'ha qualcheduno che debba praticare lo spirito di sacrificio, si è bene il sacerdote, nelle cui mani è sacrificato ogni giorno il Divin Agnello sui nostri altari. A sua imitazione mettiamoci noi pure nelle sue mani nello stato di altrettante vittime, pronte ad essere sacrificate quando e come a Lui piaccia. [...] Al punto di nostra morte non saranno i piaceri goduti, gli onori, le ricchezze che ci consoleranno e ci ispireranno fiducia, bensì que' sacrifici che avremo fatti soffrendo per Gesù.” (M. Rua, *ibidem*.)
- 12 “Trasforma la sua vita in una liturgia di lode : il lavoro, il sollievo, le iniziative apostoliche, le gioie e le sofferenze sono così vissute nel Signore e diventano un dono a Lui gradito e un inno alla sua gloria.” (*Regolamento di vita apostolica*, art 32, § 3.)

- 13 Luigi Variata, born in Viarigi (province of Asti, Italy) on 15 January 1875, made his Salesian profession in Turin on 2 October 1892, was ordained priest in Bogota, Colombia on 24 April 1898, and died in Cucuta (Colombia) on 1 February 1923. His cause of beatification and canonisation was introduced in 1959. The religious congregation he founded has been integrated into the Salesian Family.
- 14 See G. Manzoni, “Vittimale (Spiritualité)” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. 16, 1994, col. 531-545.
- 15 Eulalia Marin Rueda, *La espiritualidad propuesta por el P. Luis Variara*, Rome, U.P.S., 1997, pp. 212-214.
- 16 John Paul II, “The meaning of suffering in the light of the Passion”, general audience of 9 November 1988, in *Osservatore romano*, 10 November 1988.
- 17 John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, 11 February 1984, no. 31.
- 18 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians¹

The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, commonly known as the Salesian Sisters, was actually founded on 29 January 1872, when a group of pious young women from a village in southern Piedmont (Mornese, in the diocese of Acqui) elected their Superior Council by virtue of the Constitutions that Don Bosco had given them on that day. Don Bosco wanted to create a religious society for girls, under his responsibility and under his direction, a religious society similar to that of his Salesians for boys. The *raison d'être* of the two societies, as formulated in their respective Constitutions, was identical. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians should not only look after their own spiritual “perfection” but also contribute to the salvation of their neighbours by giving girls from the common folk a moral and religious education. On 5 August the following year, they took their first religious vows in Mornese. Maria (Mary) Domenica Mazzarello, an intelligent, skilful and perceptive holy woman, who was the superior, imbued the fledgling community with a style from which the Institute would never depart.

The tiny community of 1872 grew quickly and soon spread. By the last days of 1877, the first Salesian missionaries were already embarking for South America. In 1879, the centre was moved from Mornese to a location (Nizza Monferrato) closer to Turin and therefore to Don Bosco. It was here that Mary Domenica Mazzarello died prematurely (14 May 1881), leaving 139 sisters and 50 novices, distributed across 26 centres. The vigour of the young society continued unabated. The Institute continued to expand. New houses were founded in Italy, France, the rest of Western Europe and also, of course, in South America. When Don Bosco died in 1888, sixteen years after the foundation of the institute, there were already 390 professed Sisters in 50 centres, plus 99 novices.

The most serious episode for the first generation of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was their legal separation from the Salesians. The connection between the two institutes, just as Don Bosco had wanted it, was close. The Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians said:

The Institute is under the immediate dependence of the Superior General of the Society of St Francis de Sales, to whom [the Sisters] give the name of Major

Superior. In each house he may be represented by a priest with the title of Director of the Sisters. The Director General will be a member of the Superior Chapter of the Salesian Congregation.²

And these titles were not merely honorary. For about thirty years, this was the way things were. Then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a Roman decree³ prohibited this kind of union within the Catholic Church. The Salesians tried in vain to obtain an exemption. It was not to their liking. In 1906, the Rector Major, Fr Rua, had to ratify the reform of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: the Salesians would only look after the Sisters if required to do so by the local Ordinaries.⁴ However, the Salesian superiors, who were not resigned to the split, finally obtained in 1917 that the Salesian Rector Major, as apostolic delegate – i.e. of the Holy See – to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would, while preserving their administrative autonomy, be responsible for ensuring that the spirit of the founder was maintained among them, as well as their “spiritual, moral and scientific progress”.⁵ The links between the two institutes, both strongly attached to Don Bosco’s heritage, were strengthened once again.

And the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians continued to grow until the crisis of the 1960s which affected it along with all the other Congregations of active life. At the time, it was the second largest Catholic religious society of women in the world.

With the strengthening of the Salesian Family from 1971, the connection between the Society of Saint Francis de Sales and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians became more and more authentic. This was demanded by their common origin. Don Bosco and Mary Domenica Mazzarello had begun an experience of unity and collaboration, the demands of which the Salesians wanted to take on more and more. When the sharing of gifts of each of the two institutes proved to be real, the positive experiences gladdened hearts and led to mutual enrichment. The Jubilee Year 2000 was, in the words of the Rector Major and the Mother General, a call to live with “renewed enthusiasm the gift of communion inscribed in (their common) vocation.”⁶

The spirit of Mornese

The Second Vatican Council asked religious societies to re-read the spirit of their origins in order to renew themselves. The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

set out in the 1970s to define the spirit of their original community, Mornese, when it was led by St Mary Domenica Mazzarello. For their part, the Salesians reflected on the question with the help of the Sisters' observations.⁷ As a conclusion to these studies, on the occasion of the centenary of the Saint's death (1981), the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò, dedicated a long circular letter to the Superior General and all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians on "Rediscovering the spirit of Mornese".⁸

The very strict and demanding spirit of Mother Mazzarello's community must first be seen in the context of its time. The harshness of the social situation and the poverty that was common in Piedmont at the time imposed a heroic lifestyle in terms of accommodation, food and daily routine, the consequences of which seem to us to have been catastrophic. All too often, the Sisters of the first generation died before the age of thirty.⁹ So there can be no question of adopting this model as it stands. But it does contain a certain number of values which must remain exemplary for future generations.

The Rector Major, guided by the Sisters' own studies, therefore tried to identify the permanent values of the spirit of the Mornese community. Its features were classified by him under five headings.¹⁰

First of all was *a spirit of faith*, animated by fervent, simple and practical piety, and leading to a constant concern for union with God, a particular fervour for the Eucharist, the certainty of the help of Providence, a keen sense of paradise and a special devotion to the Virgin Mary, St Joseph and the Guardian Angel. The second characteristic was *an energetic break with worldly tastes*, brought about by a courageous participation in the cross of Christ, heroic poverty, a sense of mortification, and a delicate purity based on constant control of the sensibility and movements of the heart, strong self-denial and ongoing temperance. The third characteristic was *simplicity of life*, evidenced by habitual common sense, sound judgement, a natural inclination towards humility, constant and joyful activity, a flexible and easy-going family spirit, instinctive shared responsibility, great obedience sustained by warm trust in authority, and filial respect for Don Bosco and his superiors who represented him. Then came the fourth characteristic, *ardent zeal for the salvation of young girls* in the spirit of Don Bosco's preventive system, i.e. a maternal love for them that was both tender and strong, an impartial love capable of adapting to the weaknesses of each individual, a missionary availability derived from a generous sense of the Church, devout adherence to the guidelines of the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops, and magnanimity in apostolic initiatives, which made the sisters ready to accept the demands of the cultural preparation required, even at the price of sacrifice. Finally, the fifth and last characteristic of the spirit of Mornese noted by Fr

Viganò: *a sincere attachment to the religious consecration* proper to the Institute, a clear and enthusiastic awareness of the choices involved in profession and a keen sense of belonging to the Congregation, a desire to know, value and practise its Constitutions, and a constant concern for personal formation and concern for the new vocations that were pouring in.

All this made up the great spiritual richness of the first community of Mornese, outwardly so poor, so small and so young. All the Sisters there were involved in the formation and growth of the common good. But the one who inspired, created, encouraged, guided and set an example was Mary Domenica Mazzarello. She was the main creator and the first model of the spirit of Mornese. As an individual she strongly reflected each and all the characteristics we have just mentioned. Mary Domenica Mazzarello embodied the spirit of Mornese.¹¹

NOTES

- 1 Regarding the Institute, from its origins until Don Bosco's death, see: G. Capetti, *Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice. Cronistoria*, Rome, Scuola tipografica privata FMA, 1974-1978, 5 vols.
- 2 "L'Istituto è sotto l'immediata dipendenza del Superiore Generale della Società di S. Francesco di Sales, cui danno il nome di Superiore Maggiore. In ciascuna Casa egli potrà farsi rappresentare da un Sacerdote col titolo di Direttore delle Suore. Direttore Generale sarà un membro del Capitolo Superiore della Congregazione Salesiana." (*Regole o Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria SS. Ausiliatrice aggregate alla Società Salesiana*, Turin, tipografia e libreria salesiana, 1878, Part II, art. 1).
- 3 Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, *Normae Secundum Quas*, 28 June 1901.
- 4 M. Rua, Letter to provincials and rectors, 21 November 1906 ; L.C., pp. 357-359. The story of this affair in E. Ceria, *Annali della Società salesiana*, vol. III, Turin, 1946, pp. 645-671.
- 5 Roman decree of 19 June 1917, commented on by Fr P. Albera, Letter to provincials, 20 February 1921 ; L. C., pp. 374-387. This "faculty" of the Rector Major, initially for five years, was made definitive following its inclusion in the "Salesian Privileges" granted by Pope Pius XII (decree of 24 April 1940).
- 6 "Il Dio della vita ci chiama - all'inizio del terzo millennio - a vivere con rinnovato entusiasmo il dono di comunione, inscritto nella nostra vocazione" (Communication of the Rector Major and the Mother General to the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: "Per un cammino di collaborazione", Rome 24 July 1998, in *Atti* 365, October-December 1998, pp. 88-93.)
- 7 At the beginning of their 1982 General Regulations, the Salesian Sisters brought together three texts which, in their view, are significant in terms of "lo spirito delle origini vissuto a Mornese". "Spirito primitivo: grande obbedienza, semplicità, esattezza alla Santa Regola ; ammirabile raccoglimento e silenzio; spirito di orazione e di mortificazione; candore ed innocenza ; amore fraterno nel conversare, gioia e allegria così serena che pareva un ambiente di Paradiso. Non si pensava, né si parlava che di Dio e del suo santo amore, di amare Maria, S. Giuseppe e l'Angelo Custode, e si lavorava sempre sotto i loro dolcissimi sguardi, come fossero lì presenti e non si avevano altre mire. Come era bella la vita !" (Madre Enrichetta Sorbone, *Memorie private*.) "Mornese fu sempre la casa del fervore, dello zelo per la salute delle anime, dello spirito di sacrificio, della perfetta obbedienza, del santo silenzio e dell'angelica semplicità e allegria." (Mgr Giacomo Costamagna, *Scritti di vita e di spiritualità salesiana*, a cura di E. Valentini, Rome, 1979, p. 204.) " ... vivere poveramente, lavorare molto e pregare con fervore erano sempre le tre note predominanti nella Casa" (E. Ceria, *Memorie biografiche*, vol XII, p. 283).
- 8 E. Viganò, *Riscoprire lo spirito di Mornese* . Letter of the Rector Major Fr E. Viganò for the centenary of the death of St Mary Mazzarello, Rome, Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, 1981, 64 pages. In a circular to the Salesians published simultaneously in *Atti* 301, p. 3-69, the Rector, Major, after a brief introduction, copied verbatim his letter to the Salesian Sisters. Our paragraph, which makes no claim to originality, reproduces some of its elements.
- 9 In an official list of members of the Congregation, the sixteen necrologies of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for the years 1879-1880 all concern women born in the 1850s, i.e. who died between the ages of twenty and thirty. (From the second part of the *Elenco generale delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, 1881, p. 15-48.)

- 10 As expressed in Italian: “Spirito di fede, Energica rottura con i gusti mondani, Semplicità di vita, Zelo ardente per la salvezza delle giovani, Sincero attaccamento alla propria consacrazione religiosa.” (Letter cited of 14 May 1981, in Atti 301, pp. 48-50.)
- 11 Article 2 of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians approved by the Holy See on 24 June 1982, solemnly states: “Together with our first Sisters she lived our founder’s project in creative fidelity, thus giving rise to the ‘Spirit of Mornese’ that must characterise the lifestyle of our communities today.” See, further on, the entry *Mazzarello, Mary Domenica*.

Death

Talking about death

“Never has death been so concealed as it is today, and certainly never better concealed. While it is true that we always die alone (despite our ‘entourage’), never has death taken more the form of solitude (without an ‘entourage’). Today’s dying person must be discreet, and his or her corpse disposed of. Solitude has become isolation, and isolation desolation. Death has ceased to be respectable.”¹ Such news would have seemed very strange to the Salesians of yesteryear, who made a point of accompanying their dying to the very end, and who were invited to think, on a daily and monthly basis, about the fate of the one among them to be the first to die. The thought of death, familiar even to children, in no way traumatised them.² People experienced death without any problem.

However, as has happened at other times to many preachers wishing to arouse salutary terror in their congregations, the early Salesians were really talking about “life”. Thus, after having entitled a retreat sermon “Death”, Fr Rua preached at length on the indispensable detachment from the things of this world.³ The real lessons on death came in the form of stories, which were lovingly passed on. With what care, in a circular letter to the Salesians did Rua himself recount the passing of Giovanni Bonetti, Spiritual Director of the Congregation, before his very eyes! It was said that never before had anyone died so gently and with such an expression of “divine love”.⁴ Exemplary deaths were the order of the day in Salesian literature.

Exemplary deaths from the past

Since we have to choose, let us recall the deaths that preceded Don Bosco’s death in 1888: Luigi Comollo in 1839, Dominic Savio in 1857, Michael Magone in 1859 and Mary Domenica Mazzarello in 1881, all carefully noted by attentive observers and quickly published throughout the Salesian world. These accounts of deaths, described at the time as “precious”, won the admiration and edification of Salesians of the past. The seemingly naive words of the dying and their witnesses may surprise us, for our culture is different. Their dualistic anthropology leaves us perplexed, and that’s our right. In any

case, these spiritual experiences constituted the most authentic, if not the only authentic, teaching on the Salesian “beautiful death” of our origins.⁵

Seminarian John Bosco had just seen his friend, cleric Luigi Comollo, die on 2 April 1839 at the age of 22 at the seminary in Chieri, when he decided to write down the story of his illness and death in a small notebook (which has been preserved). It was a death which he considered to be admirable. Some years later, this account was included in biography of the young man, which was widely distributed in Salesian circles. Towards the end of the book, Don Bosco recounted the final twelve hours of the young man’s life, as he was standing by him at the time.

On 1 April, Luigi went to bed in his room and was visited by his parents, whom he recognised perfectly. “You must resign yourself to God’s will. Pray for me for me” he urged them. From time to time, he began to sing the Miserere, the litanies of the Blessed Virgin, the Ave Maris Stella or some other hymn. He sang them correctly, you’d have thought he was in good health. But singing made him tired, those present observed. To stop him, they would suggest prayers, which the patient was quick to repeat. As his condition worsened, at 7 o’clock in the evening the seminary’s spiritual director gave him the last rites, and at half past eleven, as a cold sweat began to cover his livid face, the rector gave him the papal blessing. During these two ceremonies, the dying man responded exactly to the liturgical prayers. He was now at rest.

Fully conscious, his mind at ease, even “*tutto allegro*” (all joyful, according to Don Bosco), he uttered short, fervent invocations to the crucified Jesus, Mary or the saints. At one o’clock in the morning: “How much longer?” he asked someone standing by. The reply was: “Half an hour to go!” “Half an hour more” he was told. “More!” observed the patient. “Yes” resumed the other, thinking he was delirious: “another half-hour, and it will be a rehearsal.” “Eh” said Comollo, “a fine rehearsal! Quite different from a rehearsal!” He was panting, but still found the strength to put together and say aloud a prayer to Mary, all of which is included in Don Bosco’s account. Convinced that the end was imminent, Bosco suggested the invocations that came to mind. And Comollo, very attentive and with a smile on his face and lips, perfectly still, his eyes fixed on the crucifix that he held between his hands clasped to his chest, tried to repeat every word suggested to him. Ten minutes before he died, he called each of those standing around him by name and said, “If you want something for eternity, I ..., goodbye, I’m going.” These were his last words. Because his lips and tongue had stiffened he was unable to vocalise the brief prayers we whispered to him, but he mouthed them with his lips.

Finally, his face was serene and a smile played about it “as if he was seeing something marvellous.” Luigi Comollo died at two o’clock in the morning on 2 April 1839.⁶

On the last evening of his life (9 March 1857), at the family home in Mondonio, fourteen-year-old Dominic Savio received a visit from his village priest. About an hour and a half before he died the parish priest came to visit him and was quite amazed to hear the brief prayers with which he so calmly and constantly recommended his soul to God. All the phrases expressed his great desire to go quickly to heaven. “In the circumstances the priest was somewhat perplexed as to what way he might help. He could only remind him of Jesus’ passion. Dominic fell asleep and rested for half an hour. Then he woke up and looked his parents. “Father, dear father, it’s time. Take my book and read me the prayers for a happy death.” Dominic’s mother could not resist, she burst into tears and left the room. His father braced himself. With each verse of the litany, the child wanted to say the invocation: “Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me!” by himself. Then came the verse saying, “When at last my soul shall appear before you, and see for the first time the immortal splendour of Your Majesty, do not cast me away from your presence, but deign to welcome me into the loving embrace of your mercy, so that I may sing your praises for ever.” “Yes,” he continued, “that is what I want. Ah, my dear father, I want to sing the praises of the Lord forever!” He dropped off to sleep again, but it was like he was reflecting on things of great importance. He awoke after a short while. Then in a clear voice he said: “Goodbye, dad, goodbye . . . what was it the parish priest suggested to me . . . I don’t seem to remember Oh, what wonderful things I see ...” And so saying, with a beautiful smile on his face, and his hands joined on his breast he gave up his soul to God without any struggle. Dominic’s immortal soul has left his mortal remains, said those present..⁷

On the evening of 21 January 1859, in the Salesian oratory at Valdocco, Michael Magone, thirteen years old, stricken with pulmonary congestion, was also awaiting death. The end seemed imminent, and Don Bosco was called to his bedside. A priest administered the sacrament of the sick. At each anointing, the child wanted to say something. For example, at the anointing of the hands: “How many times I have punched my friends with these hands! My God, forgive me for these sins and help my companions to be better than me!” Afterwards, Don Bosco asked him if he wished to call his mother who had gone to rest in a neighbouring room as she was convinced that the illness was not so serious. “No,” replied Michael, “it is better not to call her. Poor Mum! She loves me so much that witnessing my death would deeply disturb her. Poor Mum! When I’m in heaven I’ll pray much for her.” Those present wept. Don Bosco pulled

himself together, asked the child a few questions and decided to entrust him with some errands for the afterlife. Among other things, he said: “When you are in heaven and you see the Blessed Virgin, give her our humble and respectful good wishes, from me and from everyone in this House. Beg Her to give us all Her blessing, to take us all under Her powerful protection. Beg her to make sure that none of us who are in this House at present or anyone that Providence will send us in the future will lose their soul.” “And what else?” “For the moment, nothing; rest a little.” It seemed as if he wanted to have a sleep. He appeared quite calm although his weakening pulse signalled his imminent death. For this reason they began to recite the *Profisciscere*; towards the middle of the prayer he awoke as if from a deep sleep and, with a smile on his lips, said: “Within a short time now I will deliver your message. I’ll do my best to make a good job of it. Tell my companions I await them all in heaven.” He took the crucifix in his hands, kissed it three times and then uttered his final words. “Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I place my soul in your hands.” He parted his lips as if to smile and gently fell back in death..⁸

At the end of March 1881, Mary Domenica Mazzarello, Superior General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, had returned to her home in Nizza Monferrato from a trip to France to visit her communities. At Saint-Cyr, she had been bedridden for forty days with pleuritis. The respite was short-lived. On 15 April, the illness returned with a vengeance and Mother Mazzarello received Extreme Unction. The thought of purgatory tormented her. “O my God!” she exclaimed, “make me do my Purgatory here. Give me much to suffer here; but there, in that prison, I don’t want to go at all! Let it be according to your justice! But, if I must go, let my suffering now serve as suffrage for the souls who have gone before me!”⁹ The Sisters lovingly took her advice. She herself remained attentive to their concerns and sometimes found the strength to sing a verse of a hymn. “I will die on a Saturday” she predicted.

Her final night, from Friday 13 to Saturday 14 May, was a difficult one. She was suffering in silence, when suddenly she turned to the Sisters who were assisting her and, looking joyful, said to them: “Let us sing!” In a confident voice, she sang a hymn to Mary with enough force to awaken those who were dozing in a neighbouring room. “*Bel patire! bel godere!*” (It is beautiful to suffer! It is beautiful to rejoice), she repeated when urged to remain calm. A final battle was being waged in her soul. Mary feared for her life. The anguish painted on her face was pitiful. She rose to her feet with authority, as if she had wanted to impose herself on someone. She gesticulated and shouted: “A disgrace! A disgrace! Come on! courage, courage!” “Mother, who are you talking to?” someone would ask her. “I know to whom I am speaking.” She stared at the image of Mary at the

foot of her bed, and exclaimed, "Why be afraid! Courage! Courage!" We tried to calm her down, but she said, "I have to think of myself and that's enough!" And then "Why so much fear? What's all this? Who has ever confided in vain in Our Lady? Shame! Come on, cheer up, Sister Maria. Aren't you a Daughter of Our Lady? And who has ever ever confided in Our Lady and been confounded? Come on, come on, have courage! The novena of Mary Help of Christians begins tomorrow, sing the hymns of your Mother in the Passion of the Lord."¹⁰ Finally, she gathered her strength and sang, "*Chi ama Maria, contento sarà!*" The battle was over.

Mary regained her composure and seemed to fall asleep. It was three a.m. and her pulse was beating at one hundred and forty. The two Salesian spiritual directors Frs Lemoyne and Cagliero gave her final absolution. "*Oh, Padre! Addio, me ne vo*" (Oh, Father! Adieu, I'm going away), said the dying woman. Then, raising her hand as if to greet him and with a gentle smile, "*A Dio, a Dio! Arrivederci in Cielo*" (To God, to God! We shall see each other in Heaven!) She was wonderfully calm. She gazed at the crucifix and said again, "*Gesù, Giuseppe, Maria, vi raccomando l'anima mia!*" (Jesus, Mary, Joseph I commend my soul to you), then, separating the words "*Gesù ... Giuseppe ... Maria ...*" she fell silent. Her pulse had stopped beating.¹¹

These exemplary deaths had been passages, admittedly painful at times but always planned, conscious and serene, from one world to another, from this earth to "paradise", until the ardently desired encounter with God. No one stole death from these holy people. The dying person, surrounded by praying friends, confreres and relatives, waited anxiously but full of hope for the supreme moment, convinced that their soul would soon leave their suffering bodies and enter a world of tenderness and light. Several sang, and breathed their last with a smile.

The renewed Salesian Constitutions continue to dream of similar deaths for religious. Death is their Passover, the decisive passage after a time of Good Friday. Their confreres help them to participate fully in the Passover of Christ. For them, death is illuminated by the hope of entering into the joy of the Lord..¹²

The exercise for a happy death

Like Dominic Savio and his followers, we still need to be ready for the resurrection. "Our whole life, my dear young people" Don Bosco told the readers of his *Il Giovane provveduto*, "must be a preparation for a good death. To achieve this important goal, it is very important to practise what is known as the exercise for a happy death, which

consists, one day each month, in putting all our spiritual and temporal affairs in order, as if we were really to die on that day.”¹³ He had become acquainted with this spiritual exercise widespread in Catholicism at the time, at the *Convitto ecclesiastico* in Turin (1841–1844). It was necessary to learn the *ars moriendi* (lit. the art of dying). People prepared for death by means of general rehearsals, for which the spiritual masters of the seventeenth century had developed more or less refined methods. The practice for a happy death was one such method.

Don Bosco’s spiritual director, St Joseph Cafasso, was a very faithful to it. The eight points of his programme – which were in Don Bosco’s hands – probably deserve to be highlighted

1. The first Sunday of each month.
2. Above all, go to confession as if it were to be the last of your life.
3. Mass celebrated in the same spirit, and communion as if it were a viaticum.
4. Prayer at the foot of the crucifix, meditating on the feelings of a dying person and as if receiving extreme unction.
5. Recitation of the prayers at the final moment of life.
6. Imagine yourself kissing the crucifix for the last time as you breathe your last.
7. Suppose that the Virgin Mary obtains an extra month of life in order to be better prepared for death.
8. Decide to spend the coming month as if it were to be your last.¹⁴

Fr Cafasso’s programme was not a happy one, but it cast aside the supposedly morbid phrases to which the exercise’s detractors now like to reduce it.

For a century, the Salesian Constitutions laid down the rules for the practice of this exercise by Salesian religious. “Whoever neglects such an effective means of our salvation cannot truly call himself a Salesian”, taught the Rector Major Fr Rua in 1909.¹⁵ On the last day of the month, everyone, leaving aside their temporal affairs as far as possible, would recollect themselves, practise a happy death and put his spiritual and temporal affairs in order, as if he were to leave this world and enter eternity. In addition to the usual meditation there would be, in community, a second meditation of half an hour or a conference on a moral subject. For at least half an hour, there would be an examination of the progress made “in virtue” during the past month. Confession on this day would be particularly meticulous, and communion would be received as viaticum. The planned prayers would be recited and the Constitutions read in part or in full.¹⁶

In their regular recollections, the Salesian Sisters have retained some of the elements of this exercise.

Let these valuable occasions for reviewing one's life be planned in a manner similar to that of the annual retreat, creating the same conditions of silence and recollection. Let our personal evaluation in the examination of conscience of at least half an hour, the Prayers for a Happy Death, and the renewal of our profession in common be valued as efficacious means of re-enkindling our determination to grow in holiness.¹⁷

This was the feeling of Don Bosco, who considered the exercise for a happy death essential to the spiritual health of his Salesians. Is not the whole of life a preparation for death?

NOTES

- 1 O. Boulnois, “Les vivants et les morts”, in *Communio*, March-April 1995, p. 9.
- 2 Opinion – which for a long time disapproved of Salesian customs in this area – seemed to be changing on this point towards the end of the century. “Adults don’t like talking to children about death” began an article on “Children and death” at the end of 1999 (*Le Monde*, 9 November 1999). “Wrongly”, continued the journalist, “in the opinion of many psychologists. The biannual journal *Etudes sur la mort*, founded in 1966 by the Société de thanatologie, tackles certain preconceived ideas in its latest issue devoted to “childhood bereavement” (issue 115, 1999, PUF)”.
- 3 “La morte. Memorare novissima tua et in aeternum non peccabis”, in an unpublished Retreat series in quaderno II, pp. 5-20 ; FdB 2939 E8 to 2940 A12. Judging by the cancellations and additions, this sermon was delivered several times.
- 4 M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 14 June 1891, L. C., pp. 55-61.
- 5 I have reproduced the descriptions as they were imprinted on the collective memory, without engaging in any discussion of the historicity of their details, in particular those attributed to the actors. That’s not our problem, we will stick to the stories of yesteryear.
- 6 From (G. Bosco), *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo morto nel seminario di Chieri ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù, scritti da un suo collega*, Torino, Speirani e Ferrero 1844, pp. 65-71. From the Italian original: “In questo frattempo fui visitato da suoi genitori, i quali conobbe appieno, e raccomandò loro a rassegnarsi alla divina volontà.” “Un’ora dopo la mezzanotte del 2 aprile, dimandò ad uno degli astanti, quanto tempo v’era ancora ; gli fu risposto : v’è ancor mezz’ora. C’è ancora di più, soggiunse l’infermo. Sì, ripigliò l’altro credendo che vaneggiasse ; ancor mezz’ora, poi andremo alla ripetizione. Eh, ripigliò l’infermo sorridendo, bella ripetizione ! ... v’è altro che ripetizione.” “Circa dieci minuti prima del suo spirare, chiamò uno degli astanti, se vuoi gli disse, qualche cosa per l’eternità, io ... addio me ne parto.”
- 7 From G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, Torino, Paravia, 1859, chap. XXIV. From the Italian original: “Quale cosa suggerire per raccomandar l’anima ad agonizzanti di questa fatta ?” “Mio caro papà, è tempo ; prendete il mio Giovane provveduto e leggetemi le preghiere della buona morte.” “Misericordioso Gesù, abbiate pietà di me.” “Giunto alle parole : Quando finalmente l’anima mia comparirà davanti a voi, e vedrà per la prima volta lo splendore immortale della vostra maestà, non la rigettate dal vostro cospetto; ma degnatevi di ricevermi nel seno amoroso della vostra misericordia, affinché io canti eternamente le vostre lodi. Ebbene, soggiunse, questo è appunto quello che io desidero. Oh caro papà, cantare eternamente le lodi del Signore !” “ ... con voce chiara e ridente : addio, caro papà, addio ; il prevosto voleva ancora dirmi altro, ed io non posso più ricordarmi ... Oh ! che bella cosa io vedo mai... Così dicendo e ridendo con aria di paradiso spirò ...”
- 8 From G. Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, Paravia, 1861, chap. XV. From the Italian original: “All’unzione delle mani aggiunse : Quanti pugni ho dati a’ miei compagni con queste mani ; mio Dio, perdonatemi questi peccati, ed aiutate i miei compagni ad essere più buoni di me.” “No, rispose ; è meglio non chiamarla ... Povera mia madre ! che il Signore la benedica ! quando sarò in Paradiso pregherò molto Iddio per lei.” “Quando sarai in Paradiso e avrai veduta la grande Vergine Maria, falle un umile e rispettoso saluto da parte mia

- e da parte di quelli che sono in questa casa. Pregala che si degni di darci la sua santa benedizione ; che ci accolga tutti sotto la potente sua protezione, e ci aiuti in modo che niuno di quelli che sono, o che la divina provvidenza manderà in questa casa abbia a perdersi. - ... ed altre cose ? - Per ora niente altro, riposati un poco.” “Di qui a pochi momenti farò la vostra commissione ; procurerò di farla esattamente ; dite a’ miei compagni che io li attendo tutti in Paradiso.” “Pocia proferi queste sue ultime parole : Gesù, Giuseppe e Maria io metto nelle vostre mani l’anima mia.”
- 9 “ ... ora, sul letto del dolore, ripeteva : “O mio Dio, fatemi far qui il mio Purgatorio. Datemi qui tanto da patire ; ma là, in quel carcere, non voglio proprio andare ! Sia fatto però secondo la vostra giustizia ! Ma se ci devo andare, valga la presente mia tribulazione, in suffragio di quelle anime che mi hanno preceduta.” (F. Maccono, *Suor Maria Mazzarello ...* , Torino, Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1934, p. 638). This conscientious biographer had at his disposal, among others, the account by Fr Lemoyne, a direct witness, entitled: “Malattia e morte di Suor Maria Mazzarello, prima Superiora generale delle figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice”, in *Documenti per scrivere la storia di D. Giovanni Bosco ...* , chap. XLIII, pp. 419-431, which was republished in the work by P. Cavaglià and Anna Costa (a cura), *Orme di vita*, Roma, LAS, 1996, pp. 328-343.
- 10 “Vergogna , vergogna ! Su, coraggio, coraggio.” ... “Lo so ben io a chi parlo” ... “Perchè temere?” ... “Coraggio, coraggio !” ... “Io debbo pensare a me e basta.” ... “Perchè tanto timore ? E che cosa è mai questo ? Chi ha mai confidato invano nella Madonna ? Vergogna ! Su, coraggio, Suor Maria. Non sei tu Figlia della Madonna ! E chi mai ha confidato in Maria ed è restato confuso ? Su, su ; coraggio, coraggio ! Domani incomincia la novena di Maria Ausiliatrice, canta le lodi della tua Madre nella Passione del Signore.” (F. Maccono, op. cit., pp. 650-651).
- 11 F. Maccono, op. cit., pp. 651-652.
- 12 SDB Constitutions, art. 55.
- 13 “Tutta la nostra vita, o miei cari giovani, deve essere una preparazione a fare una buona morte. Per conseguire questo fine importantissimo giova assai praticare il così detto Esercizio della buona morte, il quale consiste nel disporre in un giorno di ogni mese tutti i nostri affari spirituali e temporali, come se in quel di dovessimo realmente morire.” (G. Bosco, *Il Giovane provveduto ...*, 1885 ed., p. 184.) This is followed by the prayers for the exercise.
- 14 From G. Bosco, *Biografia del sacerdote Giuseppe Caffasso ...* , Torino, 1860, pp. 110-111.
- 15 “Ond’è che non può dirsi veramente Salesiano colui che trascura un mezzo così efficace ad ottenere la nostra salvezza.” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 31 January 1909, L. C., p. 405).
- 16 Salesian Constitutions, 1923 edition, art. 156-157. In 1965, a General Chapter rejected article 157, the detailed programme, in the General Regulations, art. 23. Then, in 1984, this article disappeared from both the Constitutions and the revised Regulations.
- 17 “Ciascuna comunità dedichi al ritiro spirituale o “Esercizio di buona morte”: mezza giornata ogni mese, una giornata intera ogni trimestre. A questi momenti forti di revisione della propria vita si dia una impostazione analoga a quella degli esercizi spirituali, creando le stesse condizioni di silenzio e di raccoglimento. La verifica personale nell’esame di coscienza, di almeno mezz’ora, le “preghiere per ottenere una buona morte” e la rinnovazione in comune dei voti siano valorizzati come mezzi efficaci per una ripresa nella via della santità.” (FMA Regulations, art. 34.)

Devotion

Devotion according to St Francis de Sales

In 1609 Francis de Sales published the work that would make him best known. His *Introduction to the Devout Life* would make him the Doctor of devotion in the modern era.¹ In the very first chapter of this *Introduction*, in questioning the nature of “true and living devotion”, Francis referred to it as the highest love of God. For, he said, true devotion is nothing other than a true love of God, but not a love as such. Insofar as divine love embellishes the soul, it is called grace and makes us pleasing to the Divine Majesty; insofar as it gives us the strength to do well, it is called charity; but, “when it attains its fullest perfection, in which it not only leads us to do well, but to act carefully, diligently, and promptly, then it is called Devotion.” He was fond of animal comparisons to illustrate his point.

The ostrich never flies, the hen rises with difficulty, and achieves but a brief and rare flight, but the eagle, the dove, and the swallow, are continually on the wing, and soar high. Even so sinners do not rise towards God, for all their movements are earthly and earthbound. Well-meaning people, who have not as yet attained a true devotion, attempt a manner of flight by means of their good actions, but rarely, slowly and heavily; while really devout men rise up to God frequently, and with a swift and soaring wing. In short, devotion is simply a spiritual activity and liveliness by means of which Divine Love works in us, and causes us to work briskly and lovingly; and just as charity leads us to a general practice of all God’s Commandments, so devotion leads us to practise them readily and diligently. Devotion not only makes prompt, active and diligent in observing all God’s commandments, And inasmuch as devotion consists in a high degree of real love, it not only makes us ready, active, and diligent in following all God’s Commands, but it also excites us to be ready and loving in performing as many good works as possible, even such as are not enjoined upon us, but are only matters of counsel or inspiration.²

Devotion, explained Francis, which is not a matter of sentiment or consolation, and which it would be wrong to reserve for women alone, is therefore the perfection of the virtues. It is acquired and developed through prayer, recollection, participation in the

Eucharist, confession and docility to the Word of God. Contrary to common opinion, it can be practised in the world.³

Love of God, rooted in God himself, and love of neighbour are inseparable. So Salesian devotion itself bears witness to two essential characteristics: the gift to God in charity which is unconditional, permanent and rapid, and sustained by the grace and life of God in man; and the openness of the soul to our neighbour out of fidelity to God as much as out of religion due to the presence of God in human beings.

Traditional devotions of the Salesian Family

From Saint Francis' century onwards, the meaning of the term "devotion" began to evolve. This word, which should have designated the whole act of charity, became confused with the fervour that surrounded it. Above all, devotions were devotional practices based around saints, places or objects chosen by the piety of the faithful. The cross, for example, (rightly) held a special place among the devotions of the Christian people. There was the sign of the cross, the image of the cross with the Crucified One or without him, Calvary, the Way of the Cross and, in some spiritual writers, the "mysticism of the cross". Particular "devotions", concrete mediations which gave prayer, adoration and sacrifice an image, a form and a body, served as a conduit for the religious person's devotion. They encouraged personal devotion and prevented it from evaporating into false sentiments or sterile ideologies. Don Bosco's Salesian Family came into existence in this context.

The *Il Giovane provveduto* or Companion of Youth entitled the third part of Don Bosco's manual "Devotions and Practices of Piety". A clear distinction was made there between devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, devotion to the Blessed Virgin, devotion to the Holy Guardian Angel, devotion to the Holy Spirit, Devotion to Saint Joseph, Devotion to Saint Francis de Sales and Devotion to Saint Alosius Gonazaga, each with its own chapter.⁴

Catholics of the time gave the impression of a somewhat paradoxical preference in their prayer for everything that was not the official liturgy of the Church. The liturgical year bore the brunt of this. Particular devotions abounded, each with its own set of prayers, rosaries and novenas. Of the liturgical cycle, the books of piety of the time only seemed to remember Lent and the Masses of the fifty-two Sundays, with commentaries on the Epistles and Gospels. On the other hand, the "months" devoted to various devotions flourished throughout the year. The Salesians were part of the

general movement. Their religious feasts were systematically preceded by novenas. They cultivated the month of March dedicated to Saint Joseph, the month of May dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and the month of June dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and October dedicated to the Holy Rosary. In 1848, Don Bosco even published a book for the month of July dedicated to Saint Vincent de Paul, who is celebrated on 19 July.⁵

The fervent Salesians of the first generation had their own particular devotions. Andrea Beltrami (1870–1897) showed “devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, St Joseph, St Andrew, St Francis de Sales, St Francis of Assisi and his Guardian Angel”, we learn from his process for his beatification and canonisation.⁶ In the Salesian Family at that time there were devotions to be preferred, such as to St Aloysius Gonzaga. “I sincerely hope that devotion to this glorious Patron Saint of youth will always be maintained in our hearts and in the hearts of our students”, Fr Rua recommended at the beginning of his mandate.⁷

This saintly Rector Major especially preached devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, dedicating a detailed instruction in this regard in 1900. To nurture this “queen of devotions”, a whole series of practices flourishing at the time were recommended: the Nine First Fridays, the Guard of Honour, the Holy Hour, the exposition of the image of the Sacred Heart and the Apostleship of Prayer. Fr Rua concluded: “I hope that devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, understood as I have said above and practised by means of some of the principal exercises indicated, will produce the good fruits that we have a right to expect from it. It must indeed be considered as the queen of devotions.”⁸

In the aftermath of the First World War, Fr Albera believed that out of fidelity to Don Bosco he felt he had to refocus Salesian devotion on the Eucharist and Mary Help of Christians. At a time when evil was spreading more and more, he taught, the Sacred Host and the Help of Christians were the two fundamental pillars, the two privileged means of salvation for Christian society. And he commented: “Those who look at things superficially will perhaps object that these two devotions belong to all times and to all founders of religious societies and that, consequently, it is an exaggeration to present them as belonging, so to speak, only to the work of Don Bosco.” “It is true,” he replied, “yes, they do belong to all times, but the way in which our good Father spread them and made them loved, a way that he left as an inheritance to his sons, has belonged and still belongs to us alone.”⁹ The preferences of this Rector Major for the Eucharist and Mary Help of Christians were obviously not exclusive. On the fiftieth anniversary of Pius IX’s proclamation of St Joseph as Patron Saint of the Church, he told the Salesians: “To all of us, who nurture a tender devotion to this great Saint, whom D. Bosco wanted

as one of the heavenly protectors of our Pious Society, this solemn anniversary must be most welcome.”¹⁰ Following in the footsteps of his two predecessors, Fr Rinaldi had, as his biographer tells us, two main devotions, one to Mary and the other to the Sacred Heart.¹¹

At that time, the 24th of each month was “a propitious day” for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians “to renew themselves in the fervour of their spirit, and, as far as possible, to surround the altars of Mary Help of Christians with a greater number of souls.”¹² The mid-twentieth century brought a halt to this trend. The liturgical revival was shaking up private devotions. Devotees seemed to belong to another century. Publishers of Salesian booklets similar to *Il Giovane provveduto* no longer dared to use the word “devotion”. The term became rare in the collections of Constitutions and/or Regulations of the various groups of the Salesian Family: Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Volunteers of Don Bosco or Salesian Cooperators, written at that time. For many contemporaries, “devotion” had become synonymous with practices from another age, or even with bigotry, and no longer received good press.

The rehabilitation of particular devotions

Devotions deserved to be rehabilitated. The Salesian Family did not fail to do so. They have always existed in the Church of Jesus Christ, as in virtually all religions. And some of them, such as the rosary, the Way of the Cross, praying before the Blessed Sacrament, the Angelus and pilgrimages, remained very popular among various families, parishes and countries. Here and there, towards the end of the century, there was even a revival of interest in several of them in regions that had supposedly been “liberated”. How many young baptised Europeans now claimed to be “pilgrims” much rather than “churchgoers”!

To benefit from this, it was necessary to rediscover the richness of devotions. The human mind is usually unable to contemplate the infinite wealth of revelation in a single glance, including the action of God miraculously perpetuated in time. The Christian, at the risk of grasping nothing, can only retain one aspect of the total mystery for his meditation and as a support for his conscious religious life. The choice he makes corresponds to his vocation and his temperament. It is a necessity for him. Particular devotion harmonised with his affinities. Thus devotion to Dominic Savio naturally appeals to children, and celebrating Saint John Bosco delights members of the Salesian Family.

Of course, private devotions cannot replace the celebration of the sacraments and participation in Sunday Mass. But neither do they compete with them either, whatever various “wise men of Israel” may think. “Alongside liturgical prayer, devotional prayer is not only legitimate, but necessary and recommended” the Seventeenth General Chapter of the Salesian Sisters reminded us.

It expresses the spirituality of a person, a community or an Institute. The devotional prayer of our religious family unites us, distinguishes us and characterises us. It is a richness that is entirely our own. It is not opposed to liturgical prayer, but is inspired by it, to express in Salesian spontaneity above all our love for the Eucharist, for the Help of Christians, and our concern for the salvation of young people.¹³

In the deepest sense of the term, the worship rendered to God by the Church in the context of the liturgy is also “devotion”, and indeed it is devotion par excellence. While the liturgy publicly expresses the worship of God by the entire Christian community, private devotions, offered rather than imposed, are intended to express the prayer, piety and fervour of each individual’s inner life. In complete freedom.

In 1986, the Regulations of Apostolic Life for Salesian Cooperators had no qualms about devoting a long article to the “privileged devotions” of the association. This article testified to the peaceful rehabilitation of devotions in Don Bosco’s family. Here it is:

1. Like Don Bosco, the Cooperators cultivate strong and filial devotion to Mary Immaculate, “Mother of the Church and Help of Christians”, the special guide of the Salesian Family. Convinced of her living presence they invoke her frequently, celebrate her feasts with fervour, and make her known and loved.
2. They turn with particular affection to St. Joseph, Patron of the universal Church. They have recourse with trust to the intercession of St. John Bosco, our father and teacher, the special protector of the young; they are also convinced that a way of honouring him is to acquire a deeper knowledge of his life and holiness.
3. Among the Saints, models of apostolic life, they venerate particularly St. Francis de Sales, St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello, St. Dominic Savio and the other canonized and beatified members of the Salesian Family.¹⁴

In 1988, the centenary of Don Bosco’s death was the occasion for countless manifestations of devotion to him throughout the world. The “land” of devotions smacks of the soil, folklore, Christian people who work, live and pray to honour God, Christ or the saints using their own words and familiar gestures, a people of popular religion to which the Salesian Family faithful to its origins, naturally belongs. So no time

is wasted in the land of devotions. The simplest and most popular of them invite us to follow paths, some of them very ancient, to unite ourselves to God with all our heart. Isn't that what spirituality is all about?¹⁵

Through the liturgy, and through the admittedly lower level of "devotions" members of the Salesian Family can rise to "devotion" in the strong sense, which according to the teaching of Saint Francis de Sales, is the love of God that can make us "ready and loving in performing as many good works as possible."

NOTES

- 1 To all of us, who nurture a tender devotion to this great Saint, whom D. Bosco wanted as one of the heavenly protectors of our Pious Society, this solemn anniversary must be most welcome. The history of this word since antiquity and the Middle Ages, with the Latin *devotio*, is as rich as it is complicated.
- 2 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Book 1 Chapter 1; *Oeuvres*, vol. 3, pp. 14-16.
- 3 Precise references to the word *Devotion*, in the doctrinal Index of the *Oeuvres*, p. 39.
- 4 *La Jeunesse Instruite de la pratique de ses devoirs et des exercices de la piété chrétienne*, par Don Bosco, Liège, Oeuvre de Don Bosco, 1923, pp. 283-375.
- 5 The full title of the work: *Il Cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di San Vincenzo de' Paoli. Opera che può servire a consacrare il mese di luglio in onore del medesimo santo*, Torino, Paravia, MDCCCXL VIII.
- 6 L. Piscetta, ad 17; *Positio super virtutibus*, 1955, p. 387.
- 7 “Desidero vivamente che si mantenga sempre, nei nostri cuori ed in quello dei nostri allievi, la divozione verso questo glorioso Patrono della gioventù” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 29 June 1891; L.C., p. 63).
- 8 “Io spero che la divozione al Sacro Cuore di Gesù, intesa come sopra vi ho espresso, e praticata con alcuni di questi esercizi principali indicativi, produrrà quei buoni frutti che si ha diritto di aspettare da essa; poiché è da considerarsi come la regina delle divozioni.” (M. Rua, Instruction on Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, 21 November 1900; L. C., pp. 228-254).
- 9 “Chi guarda la cosa superficialmente, potrà forse obiettare che queste due divozioni sono di tutti i tempi e di tutti i fondatori di società religiose, e che perciò si esagera nel presentarle come proprie quasi soltanto dell'opera di Don Bosco. E' vero, sì, sono di tutti i tempi, ma il modo usato dal nostro buon Padre per diffonderle e per farle amare, e da lui lasciato in retaggio a' suoi figli, è nuovo e proprio tutto nostro.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 19 March 1921; L.C., p. 426).
- 10 “A tutti noi, che nutriamo una tenera divozione a questo gran Santo, che D. Bosco volle come uno dei celesti protettori della nostra Pia Società, deve tornare quanto mai gradita questa solenne ricorrenza.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 10 February 1921; L.C., p. 372).
- 11 E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, chap. “Le due divozioni di Don Rinaldi”, SEI, 1948, pp. 307-330.
- 12 “Le 24 du mois consacré à Marie auxiliatrice”, in the *Livre de prières et de pratiques de piété à l'usage des Filles de Marie Auxiliatrice* (Imprimerie Turin, 1920), Lille, 1929, pp. 124-125.
- 13 “Accanto alla preghiera liturgica, la preghiera devozionale non solo è legittima, ma necessaria e raccomandata. Essa esprime con intonazioni e modalità caratteristiche la spiritualità della singola persona, di una comunità, di un Istituto. La preghiera devozionale della nostra famiglia religiosa ci unisce, ci distingue, ci caratterizza. E' una ricchezza tutta nostra. Non si oppone alla preghiera liturgica, ma si ispira ad essa per esprimere nella spontaneità salesiana soprattutto il nostro amore all'Eucaristia, all'Ausiliatrice e la nostra ansia per la salvezza della gioventù.” (Istituto FMA, Capitolo Generale XVII. *Atti*, Rome, 1982, p. 64.)

- 14 “§ 1. Come Don Bosco, il Cooperatore nutre una devozione filiale e forte a Maria Immacolata, “Madre della Chiesa e Ausiliatrice dei cristiani”, guida speciale della Famigl a salesiana. Convinto della sua presenza viva, la invoca frequentemente, celebra con fervore le sue feste, la & conoscere e amare. - § 2. Si rivolge con particolare affetto a San Giuseppe, Patrono della Chiesa universale. Ricorre con fiducia all’intercessione di San Giovanni Bosco, padre e maestro, protettore speciale dei giovani ; è anche convinto che un modo di onorarlo è approfondire la conoscenza della sua vita e santità. - § 3. Tra i Santi, modelli di vita apostolica, venera con predilezione san Francesco di Sales, santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello, san Domenico Savio e gli altri Santi e Beati della Famiglia salesiana.” (RVA, art. 35.) We can find a list of Salesian devotions in their Regulations art 27-32.
- 15 Considerations on the lasting nature of devotions in “Au pays des dévotions”, Fêtes et Saisons, n° 487, August-September 1994. See related developments, above, on the term “Angel,” and, further on, on the terms “Mary”, “Popular religion”, “Rosary”, “Sacred Heart”, “Saints”.

Discipline

Discipline according to Don Bosco

“Give them every opportunity to jump, run and shout as much as they can... Do whatever you want,” said the great friend of youth, Saint Philip Neri, “it is enough for me that you commit no sin”, we read in Don Bosco’s little treatise on the preventive system.¹ Never hinder the holy freedom of God’s children, whatever their age. In reality, the holy man was not afraid to talk about discipline and to demand it from his sons. Not only did he not bless their every whim, but he also wrote detailed rules for the use of young and old alike, and was keen to see them applied.

For him, discipline had the common meaning of a rule of conduct common to the members of a community, a rule designed to ensure that good order and regularity reigned. “By discipline, I mean neither correction, nor punishment, nor whipping, which must never be used among us”, he once wrote to the Salesians. “Nor do I mean cunning or being overbearing in any area. By discipline, I mean a way of life that conforms to the rules and customs of an institution. It follows that in order to benefit from the good effects of discipline, the rules must all be observed and by everyone.”²

Under his flexible smiling guidance discipline was real, whether he was dealing with children or religious. From the very beginning of his work, he took the trouble to draw up rules for the young people and their adult supervisors. In the mid-1850s, the rules governing his small boarding school already carefully defined the duties of the various people in charge, from the prefect or vice-rector to the cook and porter. For the boys, he laid down precise rules of conduct on piety, work, “modesty”, behaviour with their superiors and peers, both inside and outside the house. Of course, detailed rules would be drawn up for his religious men and women at the same time as their institutes came into being. The first General Chapters would add to them. Don Bosco had discipline at heart, the body of rules that maintains personal and community order for the general good.

Salesian religious discipline

Don Bosco, and following him the Rectors Major Albera, Ricaldone and Viganò, all preached religious discipline. They did so in accordance with the ideology in vogue at the time.

Fr Albera (Rector Major from 1910 to 1921) wrote his letter on religious discipline before the victorious rise of “personality development”, which, according to Fr Viganò, was be one of the signs of the times in the second half of the twentieth century.³ His considerations were affected by this. He imagined the Salesian houses to be “disciplined”, that is to say, according to him, like orderly and silent monasteries, with movements regulated by the bell. Often, during the day, no one would suspect there were many people there. Canonical laws, constitutions, internal regulations and the particular prescriptions of superiors were meticulously observed. Subordinates saw the image of God in the person of the superiors and, in their orders, the manifestation of the divine will. The good religious submitted to his superior with the simplicity of a child. He was convinced that whether he was offering him a warning, reproaching him, or refusing him a favour, he never acted out of whim but solely out of a sense of duty and to obey his conscience. Well observed, the Rector Major felt, there were many advantages for the member of the society. He was repeating St Bernard, who said that religious discipline overcame greed, restrained evil desires and lust, contained anger, tamed intemperance, levity and the various disordered appetites. While religious were happy in a disciplined community, in a house that was less so, or not at all so, they were restless and anxious. At the heart of modernism, which exalted the freedom of the individual, this Rector Major consciously rowed against the current of his century. “It is our duty to warn against the spirit of independence that permeates contemporary society and even manages to penetrate the sanctuary and walled gardens of religious congregations.”⁴ Fr Albera called for religious discipline in the name of the serenity of souls and community peace.

Twenty-five years later, Fr Pietro Ricaldone dedicated forty-five pages of his instruction on “fidelity to Saint John Bosco” to religious discipline.⁵ His was the mystique of a leader. Religious discipline is required by obedience, the perfect model of which is Jesus Christ, he concluded. About to drink his chalice of his suffering to the dregs, Jesus said “Father, not my will but your will be done!” We must imitate him, Fr Ricaldone wrote to his religious. Even if our will is “good”, in other words if we want what is good, perhaps even the best, let us sacrifice it for the sake of discipline, like Jesus on the altar of obedience. Let us prefer the divine will and it will become our our own will. The religious accepts his own crucifixion. Fr Ricaldone preached discipline in the name of absolute submission to the Rule, the expression of the divine will.

One of the first circulars of Fr Viganò as Rector Major (1978–1995) was entitled “New aspects of commitment to religious discipline”.⁶ Religious discipline was going through a period of turbulence. Rather than the lack of fidelity, it seemed to him, it was the big changes now taking place that seem to have contributed to a temporary eclipse among religious of a deep gospel sense of a concrete discipline of life, almost like a reaction to a kind of too formal moral system, to a lack of sensitivity to the new process of personality development and the great movements of social reform. Certain signs of the times were over-valued, without perceiving their ambiguities or worrying about the serious troubles caused by a secularism from whose horizon the cross had disappeared. In short, discipline had capitulated to the onslaught of personal freedom.

The celebration of submission to a rule, even one willed by God, was no longer in season. Fr Viganò was attached to the original meaning of the word discipline, which he sought to distinguish from pure observance. For a Salesian, practising religious discipline is to be a disciple of Don Bosco.

In the last analysis, the fundamental meaning of discipline (which goes beyond the etymology of the word) is linked to the concept of “disciple”. Our religious discipline belongs on the one hand to our root quality of followers of Christ, and on the other to the historical fact, freely and publicly entered into by our act of profession, that we chose to stay with Don Bosco, according to the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales.⁷

Under Fr Viganò’s pen, discipline took on a resolutely active meaning. It was the pedagogy of a freedom committed to a “covenant love” with Christ. Observance without love is lifeless; love without observance is false. Balanced discipline, freely consented to, strengthens the communion of the social body and increases its effectiveness in a world torn between the extremes of totalitarianism and anarchy. It preserves us from the obscure evil of individualism, that canker produced by indiscipline which nullifies at its roots the very possibility of a renewal of religious life. Gentrification (*imborghesimento*) and individualistic dissolution of the community result from the absence of discipline combined with forgetfulness of the Paschal mystery.

Acceptance of discipline, the common rule of the Salesian institution, acceptance duly freed from mere observance was, for Fr Viganò, a very active response to God’s gesture of love in religious consecration. He situated religious discipline within the service of apostolic charity. Although their motivations varied, from Don Bosco to the end of the twentieth century the leaders of the Salesian Family have maintained their demands for a minimum of discipline in the community.

NOTES

- 1 “Si dia ampia facoltà di saltare, correre, schiamazzate a piacimento. ... Fate tutto quello che volete, diceva il grande amico della gioventù S. Filippo Neri, a me basta che non facciate peccati.” (*Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, § II).
- 2 “Per disciplina non intendo la correzione, il castigo o la sferza, cose tra noi da non mai parlarne ; nemmeno l’artificio o la maestria di una cosa qualunque ; per disciplina io intendo un modo di vivere conforme alle regole e costumanze di un istituto. Laonde per ottenere buoni effetti della disciplina prima di tutto è mestieri che le regole siano tutte e da tutti osservate.” (J. Bosco, Letter to Salesians, 15 November 1873; *Epistolario* Ceria, vol. II p. 319).
- 3 P. Albera, Letter to Salesians “sulla disciplina religiosa”, 25 December 1911; in L.C., pp. 53-77. This letter so pleased Salesian Fr Luigi Variara, founder of the *Hermanas de los Sagrados Corazones de Jesus y de Maria*, a Congregation belonging to the Salesian Family, that in 1919 he included it in its entirety in his own circular to the Sisters “on religious discipline” (See Eulalia Marin Rueda, *La espiritualidad propuesta por el P. Luis Variara*, Roma, UPS, 1997, pp. 123-155).
- 4 “È parimenti nostro dovere metterci in guardia contro lo spirito d’indipendenza che serpeggia nell’odierna società e riuscì perfino a penetrare nel santuario e negli stessi giardini chiusi che sono le congregazioni religiose.” (P. Albera, above-mentioned letter, in L.C., p. 68).
- 5 P. Ricaldone, “Fedeltà a Don Bosco santo”, *Atti* 74, 24 March 1936, pp. 127-173.
- 6 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, Vigil of Pentecost 1979, in *Atti* 293, pp. 3-13, a letter completed by a note from the Vicar of the Rector Major Fr Gaetano Scrivo: “I contenuti della disciplina religiosa”, *ibid.*, pp. 13-22. The title: “Nuovo impegno nella disciplina religiosa” is the collection of circular letters by Fr Viganò, p. 86.
- 7 “In definitiva, carissimi, il significato profondo (non solo etimologico) della disciplina è legato al concetto di “discepolo”. La nostra disciplina religiosa appartiene, da una parte, al proposito radicale di sequela del Cristo, e, dall’altra, al progetto storico assunto liberamente e pubblicamente con l’atto della professione, per cui abbiamo scelto di “restare con Don Bosco”, secondo le Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales.” (Letter cited, p. 9).

Duty

Duties of the Christian¹

When he began his life as an apostle, Don Bosco called his extraordinarily successful manual of piety “The young man instructed in the practice of his duties.”² A young person could read there what he was obliged to do and what was good for him to do.

Then in July 1858, after a *Mese di Maria* (Month of Mary), which was much more than a series of eulogies of the Mother of Jesus but instead a compendium of Christian instruction for each day of the month of May, Don Bosco published a small booklet in the *Letture cattoliche* of which he was the editor, that was a kind of corollary to this. It concerned the duties of the faithful Christian, literally entitled “Take it with you, Christian, or important advice on the duties of the Christian so that each one can succeed in his salvation in the state in which he finds himself.”³ He had signed his name after the introduction, but it was “advice” drawn from all sides of the treasure trove of Christianity in modern times, from the Bible, and from the lives and works of some of the saints he had a preference for. This *vademecum* or handbook envisaged the Christian within the family and domestic unit: father, sons, mother, daughters and domestics, to tell each of them what their duties were. The idea was always there, and the word “duty” recurred again and again in subheadings, whether it concerned the duties of heads of family towards their wives, their duties towards their children, their duties towards their domestic staff, how they ran the home, their conduct in public affairs or their private conduct; the duties of young people towards their parents, their duties towards their brothers, sisters and other family members; their duties towards people outside the family or their “particular conduct”; the duties of girls towards their parents, brothers, sisters and other family members, or their “personal conduct”. At little cost and under the exclusive banner of obligation, Don Bosco had produced a little treatise on domestic morality.

It is easy to understand why, in his advice to his boys, to his pupils, he often spoke of their “duties”. He was happy to do this through examples worth admiring, notably Dominic Savio, whose Life he published for the edification of his boys. “Particularly admirable” had been the attention Dominic showed in elementary school to the most minute obligations of the Christian schoolboy, and especially his astonishing regularity

in coming to class to the point that, despite his poor health, he had over two miles to walk four times a day between coming and going.⁴ When Dominic entered Don Bosco's house in Turin to follow courses in the city, "for a time his life was quite ordinary. He studied very hard and was very faithful in carrying out the school rules."⁵ On the way to school, the boys, his classmates, took liberties. One day, he was asked to go for a walk without permission, another time he was asked to miss class to go and have fun, but he always said no. "I enjoy myself most in doing what is expected of me," he would reply (according to Don Bosco), "and, if you are really my friends, you will help me to do this and not the opposite."⁶ The speech given by his humanities teacher the day after his death (he was not yet fifteen) naturally celebrated "his diligence" and "exactitude in the fulfilment of all his duties."⁷ Through the simple account of Savio's life, Don Bosco was teaching his boys to be meticulous in fulfilment of their duty and tasks.

Naturally, the faithful disciples followed the master. Fr Rua, the most outstanding of them all, distinguished himself by his fervour in doing his duty, as witnesses at the process for his beatification and canonisation were quick to point out. "He considered it disrespectful to God to carry out his duties negligently", declared one.⁸ "Constant and exceptional" was his zeal "in carrying out his duties solely out of love for God", said another.⁹ While a third celebrated "the care he took to perform his duty with the utmost accuracy, avoiding the smallest details that might offend the Lord."¹⁰

For the Salesian world of that other century, "doing one's duty" was a recognised means of spiritual perfection. On the back of holy pictures he gave to new candidates from Spain, Fr Rinaldi wrote Don Bosco's words "*solecitud en los deberes*" in between "the beautiful virtue", "obedience", "frequent communion" and "good works".¹¹ When they insisted on being exact in the performance of their duties, Don Bosco and his sons were in line with the spirituality of mid-19th century Italy. "In practice, the means of living as Christians and progressing towards holiness," says a qualified historian of the country's spirituality from 1814-1860, "boil down to the perfect fulfilment of the duties of state, rooted in charity, even heroic charity."¹² Marked by this spirituality and unlike that of the eighteenth century, the Church of the twentieth century would see the sign of heroic virtue in the faithful and persevering fulfilment of one's duty of state.¹³

Strict duty

Unconsciously following in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant, that period glorified duty, laborious submission to an internalised law.¹⁴ Of course, religious minds related this law

to the God of the Ten Commandments and the Christ of the Gospel,, not only when the Bible dictated “Thou shalt not kill! Thou shalt not lie!” or “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s”, but also when its origin was merely human. All authority derives its legitimacy from God, and the superior interprets his will. Guided by these principles, Don Bosco fulfilled his his “duty” as a citizen in a world that had become anticlerical, sometimes even even anti-religious. But ordinary people ignore this relationship with divine authority. What’s more, they sometimes forget that the good or happiness of the individual and the community are also the source of “duties”, which they imagine are imposed by sheer force. Some men and women who are said to be “duty-bound” understand the fulfilment of duty only in terms of the application of the rule for tithing, or of a specific mission. The rest, what is left over, does not concern them.

In 1917, Fr Albera vigorously denounced this flaw in the Salesian in a letter entitled “Against a reprehensible legality”.¹⁵ Strict observance of duty is not enough. We must combat systematic mediocrity veiled by virtuous appearances. Some people believe they are liberated simply by fulfilling their duty. It is impossible for them to deviate from the task set by the programme or simply to broaden it. To each his own. What a pity! So long as they don’t do anything serious or scandalous, they do not care about making daily progress in perfection in their state. These servants of God, docile to his voice if he commands them as he did at Sinai in thunder and lightning, remain deaf and unmoved when he presents himself to them as a brother and a friend and appeals to their love. Such behaviour, which might be tolerable for a Christian immersed in the world, is not tolerable for a religious, said Fr Albera. “Legality”, which makes good use of generosity, is harmful to souls. It is a very poor response to divine generosity.

Fr Albera was particularly upset with those who limited their pious practices to the minimum required by the regulations, only too happy to cut them short whenever the opportunity arose. But God expects something else from his religious. *Estote perfecti sicut Pater vester coelestis perfectus est*, Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect! No less, my dear friends! He who does not make daily progress towards perfection does not correspond to the grace of his vocation! And then, he who does not advance goes backwards and is very likely to fall. Legality in the fulfilment of his duties, in other words “mediocre virtue”, is not enough to save a Salesian religious. When the danger worsens, the abyss lies in wait and he plunges into it.

Duc in altum, push your boat out to sea, he continued. The Lord exhorts you: “Launch yourselves ardently into the vast field of perfection. Do not limit your labours

to what is strictly necessary, be grandiose in your aspirations when it is a question of the glory of God and the salvation of souls; leave the shore that narrows your horizons, and you will see how abundant will be the fishing for souls and what consolation will fill your heart.”¹⁶ This Rector Major was careful not to diminish the “duty to be” of his religious. “Only the Salesian priest can bring Don Bosco back to life in all the fullness of his personality”, he said a few weeks before his death.¹⁷ When inspired by the love of God, the desire for a better good for oneself or for others endlessly reinforces the sense of “duty”. The Salesian confrere is “punctual in his duties, not only by virtue of the order given to him, but for the glory of God which he intends to promote” Don Bosco once wrote.¹⁸

The twilight of duty

How many unfortunate people were mortally wounded simply for “doing their duty” during the wars that bloodied the twentieth century! The phrase was repeated over and over again. Since then, the word duty has become rare in discourse, even within the Salesian world. The Analytical Index of Fr Viganò’s circulars to Salesians, published in 1996, contains only one reference to the word *dovere*, and that was in a letter at the beginning of his mandate. If you study the regulations of the Salesian Family at that time, you will see that duty, used as a noun or as a verb, was most often avoided and replaced by subjunctives of exhortation or by present and future indicatives in first person plural, *Let us...*

The slogan “*Il est interdit d’interdire*” (“It’s forbidden to forbid”) was very popular. The liberated person had a lot of rights, and we hesitated to ask them for duties. Individualism reigned in the West. “For the first time in history the individual being, equal to all others, perceives himself as the ultimate end, conceives of himself in isolation and acquires the right to free self-determination” someone wrote sententiously at the time.¹⁹ According to another title of the author to whom we owe this brief comment, the “twilight of duty”²⁰ had begun.

Had people started to satisfy all their desires in the same way? Had the era of generalised permissiveness, marked by the disappearance of all duty, begun? We thought so, but rather wrongly, as this second book explains. All we have to do is review the various areas of individual and social life. After the “twilight of duty”, instead of an opaque night, ethics, or in other words duties in the broadest sense of the term, reappears in our world and under new motivations, values that have not precisely changed. The

attentive sociologist notes the return to fidelity in love, the trend towards harmony in family life, the fight against tobacco, alcohol and drugs, efficient and profitable work, and esteem for the values of honesty and responsibility. At the end of the twentieth century, the world has been swept by impulses that have led many individualists to volunteer or contribute their own money to all sorts of works and actions that touched their sensibilities, mainly thanks to the media. However, this return to ethics is not a return to “Duty” in its abrupt sense. Let us read what follows to understand this:

While appeals to responsibility cannot be separated from the idea of moral obligation, they are characterised by the fact that they no longer preach the abdication of self on the altar of higher ideals: our ethic of responsibility is a ‘reasonable’ ethic, driven not by the imperative of extricating oneself from one’s own ends, but by an effort to reconcile values and interests between the principle of individual rights and the constraints of social, economic and scientific life.²¹

The ego remains the only absolute, but it has become aware that it lives in a world and that it must find a compromise between imposing itself on it and adapting to it. More or less consciously, Salesian literature at the end of the century took account of this dual trend that Fr Viganò called “personalisation” and “socialisation”.²²

NOTES

- 1 For a better understanding of this article it would be well to bear in mind the history of the concept of duty, a fundamental category of practical philosophy. We can find it intelligently summarised by Lukas K. Sosoe, "Devoir", in the *Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophe morale*, ed. M. Canto-Sperber, Paris, PUF, 1996, pp. 403-413.
- 2 *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri...*, Torino, Paravia, 1847.
- 3 *Porta teco, Cristiano, ovvero Avvisi importanti intorno ai doveri del Cristiano, acciocché ciascuno possa conseguire la propria salvezza nello stato in cui si trova* (*Lectures cattoliche*, ann. VI, fasc. 5 (July), Turin, G.B. Paravia, 1858, 72 pages).
- 4 *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico...*, chap. 5.
- 5 "Nè altro in esso ammiravasi, che un'esatta osservanza delle regole della casa. Si applicò con impegno allo studio. Attendeva con ardore a tutti i suoi doveri." (*Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico* chap. 8).
- 6 "Un giorno fu invitato ad andare a far una passeggiata senza permesso ; un'altra volta, venne consigliato ad omettere la scuola per andarsi a divertire, ma egli seppe sempre rispondere con un rifiuto. Il mio divertimento più bello, loro rispondeva, è l'adempimento de' miei doveri ; e se voi siete veri amici, dovete consigliarmi ad adempirli con esattezza e non mai trasgredirli." (*Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico...*, chap. 9).
- 7 "Io altro non dirò se non che sempre si rese commendevole pel suo contegno e per la sua tranquillità nella scuola, per la sua diligenza ed esattezza nell'adempimento di ogni suo dovere." (*Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, chap. 26).
- 8 "... riteveva mancanza di rispetto a Dio il compiere i propri doveri con negligenza." (A. Amadei, ad 20^{um}, *Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, p. 555).
- 9 "... lo zelo costante ed eccezionale nel compiere tutto il suo dovere unicamente per amore di Dio" (Gius. De Magistris, ad 20^{um}, *ibid.*, p. 551).
- 10 "... l'attenzione che metteva nel praticare con tutta esattezza il suo dovere evitando qualunque anche più piccola cosa che potesse offendere il Signore" (Lorenzo Saluzzo, ad 20^{um}, *ibid.*, p. 552).
- 11 "Bella virtud, Obediencía, Solecitud en los deberes, Comunion frecuente, Obras buenas" in E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Filippo Rinaldi*, SEI, 1948, p. 100.
- 12 P. Stella, "Italie. Période contemporaine", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 7, Part Two, 1971, col. 2280.
- 13 See the decree on the heroic virtue of Jean-Népomucène Neumann, 11 December 1921, in AAS, vol. 14, 1922, pp. 23-26. Benedict XIV, theorist of canonisable holiness, had hardly spoken of the duty of state. On this question, see A. de Bonhome, "Héroïcité des vertus", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 7, Part One, 1969, col. 341-342.
- 14 E. Kant, in his *Critique of practical reason*. Analysis, chap. 1 and 3. See L. K. Sosoe, art. cited, p. 407.
- 15 "Contro una riprovevole 'legalità'", P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 25 June 1917, L.C., pp. 231-241.

- 16 “Slanciatevi con ardore nel vasto campo della perfezione, non limitate le vostre fatiche a ciò ch'è strettamente necessario, siate grandiosi nelle vostre aspirazioni, quando si tratta della gloria di Dio e della salvezza delle anime ; allontanatevi dalla spiaggia che tanto restringe i vostri orizzonti, e vedrete quanto abbondante sarà la pesca delle anime, e quanta consolazione verrà a provarne il vostro cuore.” (Loc. cit, p. 239.)
- 17 “Quindi solo il prete salesiano può far rivivere in sè D. Bosco in tutta la pienezza della sua personalità [...] Ma [...], oltre all'avere la possibilità, egli ne ha lo stretto dovere.” (P. Albera, Circular to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L. C., p. 389).
- 18 “Questa deliberazione induce il confratello ad essere puntuale ne' suoi doveri non solo pel comando che gli è fatto, ma per la gloria di Dio che egli intende promuovere.” (J. Bosco, Letter to Salesians, end of April 1868, *Epistolario* Motto, vol II pp. 529-530).
- 19 G. Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, p. 104.
- 20 G. Lipovetsky, *Le crépuscule du devoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.
- 21 *Le crépuscule du devoir*, p. 215.
- 22 See the Introduction to this book.

Eucharist

Christ in the Eucharist at the centre of Christian life

Francis de Sales had written in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*,

So far I have said nothing concerning the Sun of all spiritual exercises, even the most holy, sacred and Sovereign Sacrifice and Sacrament of the Eucharist, the very centre point of our Christian religion, the heart of all devotion, the soul of piety; that Ineffable Mystery which embraces the whole depth of Divine Love, by which God, giving Himself really to us, conveys all His Graces and favours to men with royal magnificence.¹

In keeping with the prevailing spirit of the Counter-Reformation, Don Bosco and his immediate successors concentrated the Salesian spirituality of the Eucharist on this aspect of the “ineffable mystery” that was the “real presence”. Through the Eucharist, Christ, the Son of God and God himself, made “really” present to the Christian faithful, “magnificently communicates” his graces and favours to them. The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist fascinated our masters. The consecration, which “transubstantiated” the bread and wine on the altar into the body and blood of Christ, summed up the whole Mass for them. The prayers, readings and offerings that preceded the Mass prepared the way for it, and communion and the final prayers followed in its wake. For the faithful who were worthy, true participation in the Mass meant communion with the real body of Christ, an inexhaustible source of graces. Nine times out of ten, when Don Bosco spoke of the Eucharist, he meant communion alone. For the young people in the Salesian houses at the time, Mass was simply an opportunity to pray and receive communion.

The Eucharistic encounter with Jesus

Don Bosco and his immediate followers were therefore inclined to reduce the Eucharist to the living presence of Christ. In so doing, they unconsciously recovered an aspect of the Christological mystery that had been forgotten. The Eucharistic Christ whom they adored was the Risen Christ, present since his Pasch to all generations and all places. Whereas the following century would speak of the “Risen Jesus”, Don Bosco spoke of

“Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament”, that is to say, of the Risen One mysteriously present in the Eucharistic bread. The Eucharist allowed him to think of Christ not only as an historical figure who lived and died centuries ago in Palestine, but as a person who was real and close to him. The Eucharistic banquet and the tabernacle were, were, for the first generations of Salesians, places where the faithful could have real, living, vital encounters with him today.²

Communion is a real encounter with an incomparable friend with marvellous spiritual effects. For the faithful, it is first and foremost a support in the daily struggle. It is a source of strength for the Christian life, symbolised by the bread. Don Bosco and the first Salesian generations were convinced that the Eucharist is the bread of strength, food for the weak so that by nourishing themselves with it they become strong.³

Communion is an act of sacramental union with Jesus. The heart must belong to Jesus, be entirely his. The union through eating, which arouses in the believing soul a very special joy, that of a friend conversing with his friend, gradually focuses on Jesus himself who then, bit by bit becomes the centre of his life. Fr Rua, filled with this idea, could conclude a sermon on “the Eucharist, the centre of our life”:

May Jesus dwell in our minds, may Jesus reign in our hearts, let our words breathe our love for Jesus, may our actions be an expression of our love and imitation of Jesus. We must revolve around Jesus as the earth revolves around the sun. It is set on him as on its centre, and never departs from him to turn towards other stars. Let Jesus therefore be the centre of our exercises of piety, the centre of our occupations, the centre of our thoughts and affections.⁴

Taken seriously, the Eucharist “Christianises” the Christian.

“When you cannot have the blessing of actual Communion, at least communicate in heart and mind, uniting yourself by ardent desire to the Life-giving Body of the Saviour”, St Francis de Sales recommended.⁵ In accordance with the doctrine of the Church, for the early Salesians the real presence of Christ remained after the liturgy. The “communication of divine favours” continued through spiritual contact with the “most holy sacrament” of the altar. The Salesians of the past always recommended spiritual communion during “visits to the Blessed Sacrament”. Visits to the Blessed sacrament was one of their favourite exercises of piety. At the end of the century, a valiant witness in the Salesian house in Liège in the 1920s could write, not without some nostalgia: “I remember that when we left the refectory after lunch, during the whole of lunchtime the entire school population, pupils, Salesians, teachers spontaneously made their way

to the door of the chapel or rood screen of the parish church, which, according to the good Salesian tradition, was always easily accessible from the playground. In this way to pray before Jesus in the tabernacle.”⁶ Whatever the age, child, adult or elderly, whatever his status in society, Don Bosco’s Salesian placed Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament at the centre of his life.

The Mass of the Salesian priest of the past

In the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Salesian priest of the past showed himself to be extremely sensitive to the real presence of Christ. Fr Albera reminded him that

The Mass is the immolation of a God who in a certain way places himself in our hands; it is a God who adores, a God who gives thanks, a God who appeases, a God who implores. [...] The divine victim that we offer to God gives his flesh as food to our souls and becomes, as it were, one with us, communicating his very life to us. It is God who takes possession of our being, to substitute his perfections for our imperfections and our miseries.”⁷

The consequences had to be drawn. According to this understanding the divine presence, which arouses in the priest feelings and behaviours of “calm”, “recollection” and “reverential awe”, gave meaning to the liturgical action. After the consecration, the priest’s constant thought “must be that he is face to face with God in intimate union with Jesus, priest and victim.” The recommendations to Salesian priests regarding their Eucharistic celebrations were written by Fr Albera, who was clearly wary of eccentricities. With religious attention the celebrant had to observe the most minute rubrics: distinct and intelligible pronunciation of all the words, especially those in the canon; simple gravity imbued with piety; calm composure in the prescribed gestures, necessary in particular for lively and quick temperaments; no peculiarities of attitude, tone of voice, pronunciation of words, the movements; no half-genuflections, no curious and distracted glances, no half-signs of the cross, no exclamations, no sighs.⁸

The Eucharist, Sacrament of the Covenant between God and man

Over the years, the Eucharist kept its central place in the spirituality of Don Bosco’s Salesians. Piety towards the Eucharist remained the foundation of Salesian asceticism, recalled Fr Ricaldone on the eve of the Second World War.⁹ But perspectives were

broadening. And, at the end of the twentieth century, the Salesian Family rediscovered the breadth of this sacrament, which had long been narrowed by a theology that was too weak. Based on the teaching of Vatican II, it had a better grasp of the primary and principal character of the Mass and, much more than Don Bosco and his first followers had done, based communion and Eucharistic devotion on it.¹⁰

In fact, the Eucharist is not just the presence of Christ, it is the action par excellence of Christ present and the celebration of his entire Passover. Through the Eucharist, the community “celebrates the paschal mystery and unites itself to the immolated body of Christ”, as the renewed Salesian Constitutions state.¹¹ For the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, “the source and culmination of our prayer is the Eucharist, the paschal sacrifice, from which the whole life of the Church springs.”¹² It is “Christ’s incomparable Paschal work”, the sacrament of the continual renewal of the covenant that God the Father accomplishes with the family of his converted sons and daughters through the intermediary of his incarnate Son, who died and rose from the dead. Through this masterpiece, God the Father makes Christ the heart of the world, explained Fr Viganò.¹³

From now on, the faithful are invited to participate in this action from beginning to end. The Liturgy of the Word is not just an introduction to the celebration, it is an essential part of it. Anyone wishing to enter into the mystery of the covenant must begin by listening to the Word of God. God never ceases to explain his plan to us. The second part, with the Eucharistic prayer and the consecration, celebrates the filial love with which Christ gave himself on the cross to obey his Father and save his lost sheep. The Mass is the memorial of his passion and bloody death. Finally, the third part of the Liturgy, communion, celebrates the rebuilding of the community in prayer and the union of each person with God the Father for better service.

Christ, the only priest and the only sacrificial victim, is present in several ways in the Eucharistic celebration: there is the risen body of Jesus and also his mystical body. The spiritual consequences of this are immense. The real and substantial presence of the risen body of Christ has the effect of assimilating the faithful into the banquet that is communion. And there, through communion with the body and blood of Christ, the Holy Spirit unites Christians into a single body. Eating and drinking sacramentally involves a process of assimilation, a vital incorporation into Christ, to form a single body with him. Through participation in the body and blood of Christ we are changed into what we absorb, explained Pope Saint Leo.¹⁴

Salesian requirements for a Eucharistic spirituality

But as theological reflection deepened, the new flexibility of rites and the progress of secularisation tended to trivialise the Eucharist. Strangely enough, the sacrament lost its meaning and its sacred character. Priests forgot the divinity of Jesus. The whole of spiritual life could suffer. Those in charge became alarmed. Salesian communities must grow in holiness around the altar and draw on the riches associated with Emmanuel's dwelling within us, said Fr Viganò. Christ is not only the great personage of our ideals, but also the Friend who lives in our house with us and for us. We continually look to him in the supreme expression of his Passover. The central place of Christ is lived, in our spirit, with an unusual sensitivity as regards contemplation and friendship towards the Eucharist. "Each day this is the central act of every Salesian community; it calls for joyful participation in a living liturgy".¹⁵ This presumes a particular delicacy and studious respect for its humble sacramental dimension. It should be embellished by art, by dignified liturgical vestments, by an elegance of devotion which rejects oversights, bad taste, coarseness and the decay of its inherent symbolic messages. Everything about the Eucharist seems almost insignificant: the person of the priest (one of us), a piece of bread, a little wine, some words of prayer. If we do not raise these elements to the much higher and dignified level of the ecclesial part they play through their sacramental expression, if we present the persons of the celebrants as just ordinary people, if we trivialise the rite of the Mass, if we carelessly change the liturgical Prayer to suit our arbitrary and passing fancy, we deprive the sacrament of its mystery, that is to say, its essence.¹⁶

True participation in the Eucharist occurs in six stages, Fr Viganò taught:

1. conversion: those who have no sense of sin will never understand the central role of Christ in their lives;
2. the illumination of the Word: only the light of the Gospel offers valid answers to the burning problems of life;
3. awareness of the "real presence" of Christ in the New Covenant: we can never go too deeply into the marvels of the "sacramentality" of the Church in the Eucharistic celebration;
4. living incorporation into Christ: sacramental communion is the cradle of the new man;

5. mission: being the body of Christ in the world requires a commitment to participate in his saving activity;
6. finally, friendship in adoration: the closeness of Emmanuel (God with us) provides each of us with a strategic place for victorious renewal in life.¹⁷

The tabernacle embodies this strategic place. This is where we visit the Lord. “Jesus present in the Tabernacle will be the heart of the house for us and for the young people” say the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. “In the community Visit and in frequent, spontaneous, personal visits, that characterise our tradition, let us remain before him with loving confidence, listening and thanking him, allowing ourselves to be drawn into his desire for our salvation, and learning the secret of authentic dialogue with our neighbour.”¹⁸

NOTES

- 1 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Two, chap. XIV; *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p. 100.
- 2 Observations by J. Aubry, *Avec Don Bosco vers l'an 2000*, p. 219.
- 3 This can be deduced from the considerations in MB VI, p. 340.
- 4 “G. dimori nella ns mente, G. regni nei ns cuori, le ns par. spirino am. a G., le ns op. siano l'espressione dell'am., dell'imit di G. Dobb. fine att a G. corne la terra att. al sole che sempre la rig. come suo centro, nè mai (?) da lui scosti per rivolg. ad altro astro. Sia adunque G. il centro dei nostri eserc. di pietà, centro delle ns occup., centro dei ns pens. ed aff.” (M. Rua, “Eucaristia centro della nostra vita”, in undated ms, pp. 1-14. The document was reproduced in FdB 2896 C5-D1; the quoted passage is in DI).
- 5 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Two, chap. XXI; *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p. 121.
- 6 Léon Widart sdb, Farnières (Belgium), 17 February 1998.
- 7 “[La Messa] è l'immolazione di un Dio, che in certo modo si mette fia le nostre mani; è un Dio che adora, un Dio che ringrazia, un Dio che placa, un Dio che implora. [...] La Vittima divina che offriamo a Dio dà la sua carne all'anima nostra, e si fa per così dire una sola cosa con noi, comunicandoci la sua vita medesima. È Dio che prende possesso del nostro essere, per sostituirvi le sue perfezioni alle imperfezioni e miserie nostre.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921; L.C., p. 410).
- 8 “Durante la celebrazione non pensiamo più ad altro che a mantenerci nelle disposizioni più sante possibili: calma, raccoglimento, timore riverenziale. Dopo la consecrazione, il pensiero costante che ci troviamo faccia a feccia con Dio e siamo in unione intima con Gesù Sacerdote e Vittima, ecciti in noi il fervore della preghiera e una santa avidità di approfittare di quegli'istanti così preziosi...” (P. Albera, Letter mentioned above, p. 412).
- 9 P. Ricaldone, Letter to Salesians, 24 April 1939; *Atti* 93, p. 207.
- 10 Fr Viganò tackled this delicate problem energetically: “Nella Chiesa, dopo il Concilio Vaticano II, c'è un autentico salto di qualità ecclesiologica nella dottrina, fortemente organica, del mistero pasquale (di cui l'Eucaristia è Sacramento) e in tutto il culto liturgico. C'è un nuovo approfondimento dei concetti di Pasqua, di Nuova Alleanza, di Sacerdozio, di Presenza reale, di Corpo di Cristo, di Comunione e Missione, in una parola, di “Sacramento” che rilancia tutto il culto eucaristico in un'ottica di liturgia e di pietà fortemente rinnovate.” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians on the Eucharist, 8 December 1987, in *Atti* 324, p. 13).
- 11 “La comunità vi celebra il mistero pasquale e comunica al corpo di Cristo immolato.” (SDB Constitutions, art 88).
- 12 “Sorgente e culmine della nostra preghiera è l'Eucaristia, sacrificio pasquale, da cui scaturisce tutta la vita della Chiesa” (FMA Constitutions, art 40).
- 13 See E. Viganò, “La prospettiva eucaristica del Concilio Vaticano II” and “L'insuperabile opera pasquale di Cristo”, in the already mentioned letter on the Eucharist; in *Atti* 324, pp. 13-31.
- 14 Teaching of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 26; taken up by Fr Viganò in the already mentioned letter pp. 29-31.

- 15 “Essa è l’atto centrale quotidiano di ogni comunità salesiana, vissuto come una festa in una liturgia viva;” (SDB Constitutions, art 88).
- 16 In E. Viganò, “Alcune esigenze della pedagogia eucaristica di Don Bosco”, in the above-mentioned letter of 8 December 1987, in *Atti* 324, pp. 39-40.
- 17 Same letter, pp. 44-45.
- 18 “Gesù presente nel tabernacolo sarà per noi e per le giovani il cuore della casa. Nella visita comunitaria e nelle visite individuali frequenti e spontanee - caratteristica della nostra tradizione -osteremo davanti a Lui con amore confidente per ascoltarlo e ringraziarlo, per lasciarci coinvolgere dalla sua volontà di salvezza e imparare il segreto di un autentico dialogo con il prossimo.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 40).

Examination of conscience

General examination

Up until the 1960s, we read in the official Salesian manual of piety, in the chapter on evening prayer which was common to both confreres and young people, “Let us pause a few moments to consider the state of our conscience (short pause). And if we find ourselves guilty of any sin, let us make a heartfelt act of contrition, promising to confess it as soon as possible.”¹ This invitation had appeared more or less in the same terms as in 1847 in the earliest edition (pp. 81-82) of Don Bosco’s *Il Giovane provveduto*.

It was an oversimplification of an exercise that had become traditional in Christian spirituality. Lorenzo Scupoli’s *Spiritual Combat* had said: “In the examination of conscience, consider three things: 1) The faults committed on the particular day. 2) The occasions of these faults. 3) Your need of alacrity in amending those faults and acquiring the contrary virtues.”² The daily general examination of conscience therefore focused on the day’s sinfulness, not, of course, to wallow in it, but to evolve. We build our spiritual edifice from good resolutions taken to uproot the vices in ourselves, explained Fr Rua in a retreat sermon. The examination of conscience, which identifies the vices, is the weeder (*sarchiello*) of the weeds in our inner gardens.³

In this case it was a thorough examination of conscience of the kind that normally precedes sacramental confession. In a circular to Salesians in 1900, Fr Rua took the trouble to detail the outline of this exercise in a day at the Salesian novitiate. The examination lasts at least a quarter of an hour and consists of five stages designated by Latin terms, he taught:

1. *Gratias age* (Give thanks), thank God for having preserved you since the last examination and for having showered you with his favours;
2. *Pete lumen* (Ask for light) to recognise your faults;
3. *Discute mentem* (Examine your conscience) about your thoughts, words, deeds, duties...;
4. *Dole* (Regret) the faults you have committed;
5. *Propone* (Propose), make good resolutions for the future.⁴

Supposedly faithful to these instructions, the Salesian broadened the scope of his meditation and deliberately placed it under God's gaze. He reflected on himself in religious contemplation, transforming an introspection that might otherwise have been sterile or even unhealthy into prayer.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was felt that this exercise was essential for Salesian religious. "The Fathers and Doctors of the Church" deemed it necessary "for all Christians who wish to live in the grace of God and to work out their salvation", proclaimed the Rector Major, Fr Albera, in a sentence that was, moreover, imprudently general. It is all the more so for those who have "embraced the state of the evangelical counsels".⁵ For the examination to be truly profitable, he continued, it must be daily, it must not be dispensed with under any pretext, and it must be carried out correctly, that is, sinful acts must be scrutinised right down to their first roots, at the birth of their "ideas".⁶

For a long time, Salesians were invited to examine their conscience during their evening prayers. Then, at the end of the 1960s, the introduction of daily Vespers was fatal to this little exercise in its communal form. When they stated that the sacrament of reconciliation is "prepared by the daily examination of conscience", the constitutional texts nevertheless continued, albeit indirectly, to impose it on religious.⁷ That was it. Among the Salesian Sisters, where the practice remained communal,⁸ the relationship with sacramental reconciliation was identical. Their Constitutions required each religious to prepare for this reconciliation "by the daily examination of conscience".⁹ Volunteers of Don Bosco were careful not to forget the examination of conscience, through which "she learns to evaluate her daily fidelity."¹⁰

Fortunately, the 1985 Salesian *Ratio Fundamentalis* moved away from this rather narrow description of the exercise, when, partly echoing Fr Rua, it stated that "in the daily examination of conscience, we discover before Him (God), helped by His light, the reality of our situation, praising Him for the gifts we have received and invoking His mercy and forgiveness."¹¹

The particular examination

By "particular examination" we usually mean a spiritual exercise that focuses the ascetic struggle on a specific point. This exercise is a methodical one; it is based essentially on daily examination and aims to place the soul in a state of underlying and ongoing

vigilance in view of the chosen goal. This concept of an examination that focuses ascetic work can be traced back to Saint Ignatius of Loyola.¹²

Along with the general examination, our Salesian teachers from the past recommended this so-called particular examination. “The former concerns all the faults committed during the day, the latter concerns a single type of fault” Fr Albera explained in a little study he devoted to it.¹³

Fr Rua, for his part, preferred to speak of “examining the dominant passion.”¹⁴ The aim of this particular examination is to uproot this “passion”, in other words, this “bad habit” (*cattiva consuetudine*), as Fr Albera taught. “To identify it,” he explained, “we begin by invoking the light of the Holy Spirit. Then carefully and repeatedly examine the object of our habitual thoughts, what comes spontaneously to mind in the morning, the theme of our dreams in moments of solitude, the most common source of our joys and sorrows, the cause of our weariness in moments of discouragement, what determines how we act and what usually inspires our behaviour, the origin of our faults, and so on.” Identification is followed by uprooting it (*sradicarla*). Fr Albera judged the particular examination to be extremely useful to the religious in his “progress in perfection”. As for the method to be followed and the organisation of the exercise, he advised that each person should adapt the examination to his personal needs. The adaptation will almost always consist in simplifying the search as progress is made in self-knowledge, and in focusing one’s thoughts, affections, actions and tendencies on a single point. It will most often be a matter of coming to know God’s will at a *given* moment, in a *given* situation, in the face of a *given* work, a *given* difficulty, after a *given* fall, with a *given* temperament...¹⁵ (which, incidentally, we find more suitable than “eradicating the dominant passion”).

Over time, the Salesian world more or less forgot about this exercise. The “eradication of the dominant passion”, the *raison d’être* of the particular examination according to Fr Albera, did not sit well with the development of the person, which was becoming an increasingly uncontested dogma in the surrounding world. From 1923, it is true, the rules for the Society’s novitiate required novices to undertake a “particular examination of conscience”, following a second ten-minute spiritual reading shortly before midday.¹⁶ But it is not clear what the drafters of this regulation were hiding behind these words. The other official documents of the twentieth century: Constitutions, Regulations, Ratios, etc. did not breathe a word about the “particular examination”, as distinct from the general examination.

The monthly examination of conscience

The renewed General Regulations of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians ask that, during the monthly community recollections, the “personal evaluation in the examination of conscience” should last at least “half an hour”.¹⁷ For a long time, a similar provision appeared in the Salesian Constitutions. Then, at the 1965 General Chapter, the article detailing the elements of the monthly exercise of good death was transferred to the General Regulations. Its second point provided for an examination of conscience lasting “at least half an hour” on the progress or setbacks “in virtue” during the previous month.¹⁸ At the origins of the Salesian Congregation, each confrere chose the half-hour at his convenience from his personal timetable. As early as his term as provincial in France (1881–1892), the future Rector Major Fr Albera gave the exercise a community form guided by a series of questions. And the idea caught on. A “formula for the examination of conscience” integrated into the exercise for a happy death thus entered the official manual of Salesian piety published for the first time during his term of office.¹⁹ Opening with a prayer to the Holy Spirit and an invitation to place oneself in the presence of God, the examination, which was long and very detailed, dealt successively with the practices of piety, “progress in perfection”, the practice of poverty, chastity and obedience, common life, care of one’s particular duty, humility, fraternal charity and mortification. “For the faults I have found in myself I will make an act of contrition and endeavour to correct them during the coming month. I will pray to Mary Help of Christians to strengthen my resolutions and make them effective”, the questionnaire read.²⁰

Over the years, the language of many of the questions in this text had become outdated or inappropriate. Religious life was changing, the Constitutions were about to be transformed. The 1965 Salesian General Chapter sought to remedy the deficiencies. In 1966, Fr Ricceri made a point of demonstrating the progress achieved.²¹ Finally, in 1989, under the heading “Guidelines for personal and community reflection on the commitments of religious profession”, the guide to Salesian prayer recommended a very detailed plan for the examination of conscience based on the Constitutions and wording from the New Testament, which was perfectly adapted to the spiritual and institutional renewal following Vatican II.²²

The benefits of examining one's conscience under God's gaze

The last quarter of the twentieth century scorned and even rejected self-examination. In the opinion of various spiritual teachers, it did not fit in well with the spontaneity of the soul that allows itself to be led by the Spirit. Systematic introspection seemed more or less unhealthy. Besides, busy people do not have much time to indulge in it. "It is the first exercise a religious abandons", one wrote at the time.²³

Some other spiritual teachers reacted. To remove its inquisitorial appearance, they suggested that it should no longer be called an "examination", but a "re-reading". The "review of life" recommended in certain ecclesiastical circles was akin to a collective examination of conscience.²⁴ It is not simply a matter of listing the faults committed, but a spiritual exercise, including thanksgiving for the blessings received, and transformed into prayer.²⁵ Properly conducted, whether daily or monthly, general or particular, the examination is beneficial to the spiritual life of the member of the Salesian Family.

It takes place under God's gaze, in a conversation with him, and thus leads to the sanctifying union in which God comes first and which the human being must personally desire. It is a constant attitude of total availability in awareness of who we are and what we have to live and do. Following this path, the free response to God's will mobilises all our energies in the fight against evil. Faithfulness to the moment God gives us to live prepares for being faithful tomorrow. Everything is simplified and unified in the faith constantly demanded by examination. The spiritual person becomes attentive and vigilant, because they are in the presence of his God and intend to serve him and his Church humbly and effectively. The conversation brings God close to us. The closeness has its strong points, but it is to become a continual and open attention to God. In prayer, this examination makes the spiritual person feel his or her poverty as a creature and the infinite richness of God. Thus conceived, it leads to love for God's work and encourages action. It is a personal spiritual exercise in which the soul seeks to respond to what God wants of it, to his graces and gifts. It delivers the person, purified and free, to the divine will, which alone is sought.²⁶ You who (humbly) claim to be holy – can you think of a better programme?

NOTES

- 1 “Fermiamoci alcuni istanti a considerare lo stato di nostra coscienza (breve pausa). E se ci troviamo colpevoli di qualche peccato, facciamo di cuore un atto di dolore, promettendo di confessarcene al più presto possibile.” (“Pratiche di pietà comuni per confratelli e giovani”, in *Pratiche di pietà in uso nelle case salesiane*. Edizione per sacerdoti, Torino, Scuola tipografica salesiana, 1948, p. 22.)
- 2 *Spiritual Combat*, chap. LX.
- 3 M. Rua, “Dell’esame di coscienza”, in *Prediche per esercizi*, quaderno primo, unpublished ms, pp. 18-21, FdB 2893 E2-5.
- 4 M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 5 August 1900, L.C., p. 213.
- 5 “Perciò i Padri e i Dottori della Chiesa, e quanti hanno aperto scuole di cristiana perfezione, dai più antichi ai più recenti, inculcarono sempre l’esame di coscienza quotidiano [...] a tutti i cristiani che vogliono vivere in grazia di Dio e salvarsi ; e non solo a quelli, che sono chiamati ad abbracciare lo stato dei consigli evangelici.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L.C., pp. 421-422).
- 6 *Ibidem*, p. 423.
- 7 “Preparato dall’esame di coscienza quotidiano e ricevuto frequentemente ... ” (SDB Constitutions, art 90 d.) The only item mentioning examination of conscience in the 1984 index of the SDB Constitutions and Regulations.
- 8 In the FMA Regulations, art. 24.
- 9 “Lo prepari con il quotidiano esame di coscienza” (FMA Constitutions, art. 41).
- 10 “Con l’esame di coscienza impara a valutare la sua fedeltà quotidiana ... ” (VDB Regulations, art 13 c).
- 11 “ ... quando nell’esame di coscienza quotidiano scopriamo davanti a Lui, aiutati dalla sua luce, la realtà della nostra situazione, lodandoLo per i doni ricevuti e invocando la sua misericordia e il suo perdono”. (*La formazione dei Salesiani di Don Bosco. Ratio fundamentalis institutionis et studiorum*, 1985, § 111, pp. 103-104).
- 12 A. Liuima and A. Derville, “Examen particulier”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, t. IV, Part Two, Paris, 1961, col. 1838, 1840.
- 13 “Il primo riguarda tutti i mancamenti commessi nella giornata, il secondo una sola specie di essi.” (P. Albera, § Soprattutto l’esame particolare, letter already mentioned, 19 March 1921 ; L.C., p. 423). And he went on to quote Saint Ignatius.
- 14 M. Rua, Schema: “Esame della passione predominante”, in an unpaginated collection of manuscripts entitled *Prediche*, in FdB 2907 D3.
- 15 P. Albera, the above-mentioned letter L. C., pp. 424-425.
- 16 “Vi sarà altra lettura spirituale di circa dieci minuti prima di mezzogiorno, seguita [...] e dall’esame particolare di coscienza” (*Regolamenti della Società Salesiana*, 1923, art. 295,2°.)
- 17 “La verifica personale nell’esame di coscienza, di almeno mezz’ora ... ” (FMA Regulations, art 34.)

- 18 “II. Ognuno pensi almeno per mezz’ora al progresso o regresso fritto nella virtù durante il mese precedente, soprattutto quanto ai proponimenti fritti negli esercizi spirituali e all’osservanza delle Regole ; e prenda ferme risoluzioni di vita migliore.” (SDB Constitutions 1923, art 157 § II). The 1965 Chapter decided to transfer this article to the General Regulations of the time, art. 23.
- 19 Put together first by the Provincial of Belgium, Francesco Scaloni, then redrafted, it became one of general use under Fr Albera for the *Pratiche di pietà in uso nelle case salesiane*, Turin, 1916.
- 20 “Dei difetti che ho trovato in me farò un atto di pentimento, e mi sforzerò di correggerli durante il mese venturo. Pregherò Maria SS. Ausiliatrice perchè renda stabili ed efficaci i miei proponimenti.” (“Formulario per l’esame di coscienza”, in the *Pratiche di pietà in uso nelle case salesiane*, Turin, 1948, pp. 66-72).
- 21 L. Ricceri, “L’esame di coscienza nelle nuove Pratiche di pietà”. *Atti* 246 (September 1966), pp. 9-11.
- 22 “Tracce di riflessione personale e comunitaria sopra gli impegni della professione religiosa”, *In dialogo con il Signore. Guida alla comunità salesiana in preghiera*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1989, pp. 789-799. The initial wording for the two main parts: “A. Il Vangelo e la Regola: via sicura per vivere la nostra chiamata alla santità” and “B. Dio è carità e ci chiama alla perfezione della carità”, expressed well the evangelical spirit of this examination of conscience.
- 23 G. Aschenbrenner, “L’examen de conscience spirituel”, in *Vie consacrée*, 1980, pp. 283-297.
- 24 See the paragraph on *Révision de vie et examen de conscience*, in J. Bréheret, “Révision de vie”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, t XIII, 1988, col. 495.
- 25 Sylvie Robert, “Aux sources de la relecture: l’examen de conscience”, *Christus* 174, April 1997, pp. 230-241.
- 26 Ideas partly borrowed from A. Delchard, “Examen de conscience. Conclusion spirituelle”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, t IV, Part Two, 1961, col. 1831-1838.

Example

Example – an embodied value open to imitation

Don Bosco, the archetype of Salesian spirituality, believed infinitely more in the convincing power of example than he did in theoretical argument. He was not interested in philosophical discussions. For him, who opened his first work with the significant consideration: “Since the example of virtuous actions is worth much more than any elegant discourse...”,¹ spiritual biography was, without his knowing it, a “theology”.² Without ever writing a treatise on the virtues, he constantly taught them by example in stories such as the lives of Dominic Savio and the various saints in the histories he wrote. In education, the quality of the example set by teachers and fellow students was close to his heart. On his instructions, associations of boys were created around him to be sources of “good example”.

In fact, Don Bosco’s spirituality (as taught) was not “closed” but “open” in the Bergsonian sense of the adjective.

While the former is all the more pure and perfect in that it is reduced to impersonal formulas, the latter, to be fully itself, must be embodied in a privileged personality who becomes an example. The generality of the former lies in universal acceptance of a law, that of the latter in the common imitation of a model.³

The example is a model to be imitated. Living examples, those whose power is “other”, according to a spokesman for Pierre Corneille, are certainly the “best”. Yet we have been wary of them in a time – our time – of forced individualism. Wasn’t it necessary to be oneself, and only oneself, and therefore not to allow oneself to be taken in and imposed upon by foreign “models”? Enlightened opinion believed that the dialectic of master and slave applied to the case of the imitated model. The difference escaped them. The difference eluded them. The leader influences the subordinate by means of authority or command. The model says something quite different. The model acts by the radiant force of his personality and therefore does not impose the “value”, which comes alive only through him. Max Scheler (whom we are following here) has defined the model as “the value embodied in a person, an ideal figure constantly present to the soul of the

individual or group, so that it gradually acquires its features and is transformed in it: its being, its life, its acts, consciously or unconsciously, are regulated by it, either so that the subject has to congratulate himself for following his model, or so that he has to reproach himself for not imitating it.”⁴

But isn't it strange to act at the instigation of another and to conform to a being who, in the moral order, occupies a particular position different from our own? The answer to this objection, it seems, is that the disciple does not have to slavishly copy his model, nor to become what he is. What happens in him is not, under the influence of the model, a copy, but a modification, better still a “conversion”. He becomes imbued with the model's spirit. “In this way, we learn to will and act in the way that the model wills and acts, not to will and do what it wills and does.”⁵ Literal and slavish reproduction is, in fact, the worst form of influence of one person on another. It tends to deny the very destiny that it is designed to call to itself and liberate. “The moral rectitude of action requires the personal recovery of moral intention, the internalisation of spiritual motivation, the invention of a personal response to the ever new and unique call of value.”⁶ The individual therefore converts the values of his model by making them his own.

Don Bosco, the model of the Salesian

The first Salesian generation was forged spiritually by imitating Don Bosco. Their enthusiasm for Don Bosco led them very far – perhaps too far, because there was a degree of servility – in this modelling. Fr Albera confided to the Salesians:

During these years in particular – the years 1858–1872 close to the master – and also afterwards, on the ever-desired occasions I had to be with him or accompany him on his travels, I convinced myself that the only way to become his worthy son was to imitate him in everything. Consequently, following the example of many of my former confreres, who were already reproducing in themselves their Father's way of thinking, speaking and acting, I tried to do the same myself.⁷

Don Bosco's immediate successor, Fr Rua, imposed this “programme” of imitation on all the Salesians. Two months after the master's death, he wrote to them:

Our concern must be to support and, on occasion, to develop ever more fully the works undertaken by him, to follow faithfully the methods he practised and taught, and, in our way of speaking and acting, to imitate the model that, in his

goodness, the Lord has given us in himself. This, my dearest sons, will be the programme that I will follow in my role, and may it also be the aim of every Salesian.⁸

According to the testimony of his contemporaries, he succeeded in modelling himself admirably on Don Bosco.⁹

After Fr Rua, the invitation to imitate Don Bosco would be a leitmotiv for Superior Generals, addressed to both Salesian women and men. Fr Albera, author of the letter we have just quoted on “Don Bosco, model of the Salesian priest”, asked Salesian provincials to “encourage (the sisters) to copy Don Bosco more and more in themselves, so that not only their ‘inner’ but also their outward behaviour, their attitudes and their words, always reflect the delicacy, the amiable reserve and the naturalness of our venerable Father.”¹⁰ “Authentic” Salesian men and women modelled themselves on Don Bosco, an example that, faithful to their vocation, they constantly kept in mind.

However, as time passed, the model gradually lost its appeal. The Second World War, which coincided with the gradual disappearance of the last direct witnesses to the saint, brought about a change in mentality. The fascination of Don Bosco diminished. But the lesson endured. Although with less insistence, the image of the founder continued to be imitated.

And from him, we moved on to live community models. The renewed Constitutions recalled that, while “the early Salesians found their sure guide in Don Bosco” and that “living at the very heart of his community in action they learned to model their own lives on his”,¹¹ this formative process should remain a standard for Salesians of other times. The ideal to be lived was embodied in concrete models that facilitated personal identification; the common life provided (in principle) the necessary points of reference.¹²

A narrative spirituality

Don Bosco and his followers systematically practised telling edifying stories filled with exemplary characters. In his first book, Don Bosco proposed Luigi Comollo as an example “to the seminarians of Chieri”, that is to say, to the seminarians who had succeeded him there.¹³ He had barely begun his apostolate among the boys in Turin when one of his pamphlets already proposed the imitation of St Aloysius Gonzaga.¹⁴ In this pamphlet Aloysius was given as a model for, one after the other, his regret for

his faults, his mortification, his purity, his detachment, his fraternal charity, his love of God, his gift of self to God, his spirit of prayer and finally on the day of his death. These pages, destined to be reproduced in a manual of piety, would repeat the lesson to the countless users of *Il Giovane provveduto*. A few years after Aloysius Gonzaga, with *Il Cristiano guidato alla virtù ...* (1848), it was the turn of Vincent de Paul, offered as a model to adults for his impressive number of virtues. At least if we are to go by the titles of the chapters alone, these were his fraternal charity, gentleness, equality of temperament, humility, faith, spirit of mortification, patience, prudence, purity, gratitude, simplicity, trust in God, zeal and detachment from earthly goods.¹⁵ Don Bosco's most widespread works, apart from the manual of piety *Il Giovane provveduto*, were biographies of model youngsters: Dominic Savio, Louis Comollo, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, and histories: a *Bible History* and a *Church History*, which were intended as historical catecheses. It would be easy to show that Don Bosco's *History of Italy* also had moralising intentions. Portraits of individuals abounded, conveying clear or suggested lessons. Don Bosco's spiritual catechesis during his "good nights" was eminently narrative. Think of his "dreams". The words and behaviour of historical or imaginary characters expressed his ideas on Christian and religious life. They were examples and counter-examples.

In his writings, Don Bosco practised the oratorical genre known as exemplum, a brief narrative that medieval preachers recounted to edify their listeners. The instructions for his novena in honour of the Guardian Angel (1845) and for the thirty-one days of his *Mese di Maggio* (1858) were all followed by an *esempio*. Early Salesian spirituality (as taught) was a narrative spirituality. It would remain so for a long time, when the stories drawn from the life and words of Don Bosco were endlessly repeated for didactic purposes.

Salesians may not realise it, but over time, the method – which is as old as the Gospel – has become widespread in Christian pastoral work. The context was right. Exemplary destinies were all the rage in the modern world. What didn't news stories teach us? Contemporary pastoral care has focused on slices of life. At the end of the twentieth century, there was a "historical" theology, morality and spirituality which did not lack pretensions. In 1997, Fr Vecchi pointed to "a trend that is now firmly established in pastoral work, for which the purely doctrinal, moral, liturgical and catechetical discourse seems to be outdated, and which does not aim to stimulate, enlighten and support an experience in which the person is involved in the totality of his faculties. Stories attract, experiences are highlighted, witnesses are presented... We have proof of this at every congress or world event. Spirituality lived and narrated reveals itself as the only one capable of making ethical proposal credible, freely and meaningfully bringing it to life, going beyond simple catechetical initiation in pastoral work."¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 “Siccome l'esempio delle azioni virtuose vale assai più di un qualunque elegante discorso ...” (*Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo scritti da un suo Collega*, Turin, Speirani e Ferrerò, 1844, p. 3.)
- 2 A reference to J. W. Mac Clendon, *Biography as Theology. How Life Stories can remake Today's Theology*, New York, 1974, a work that has particularly inspired this article.
- 3 H. Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, 4th ed., Paris, 1932, p. 29. Bergson, who spoke not of spirituality but of morality, is adapted here.
- 4 M. Scheler, *Le saint, le génie, le héros*, French translation by E. Marrny, Lyon-Paris, 1958, p. 27.
- 5 M. Scheler, *Le formalisme en éthique et l'éthique matérielle des valeurs*, French translation by M. de Gandillac, Paris, 1955, p. 579.
- 6 E. Barbotin, *Le témoignage spirituel*, Paris, 1964, pp. 145-146.
- 7 “Durante quegli anni principalmente, ed anche in seguito, nelle sempre desiderate occasioni che ebbi di stargli insieme o di accompagnarlo ne' suoi viaggi, mi persuasi che l'unica cosa necessaria per divenire suo degno figlio era d'imitarlo in tutto : perciò, sull'esempio dei numerosi fratelli anziani, i quali già riproducevano in se stessi il modo di pensare, di parlare e di agire del Padre, mi sforzai di fare anch'io altrettanto.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 18 October 1920, L.C., p. 331).
- 8 “... nostra sollecitudine dev'essere di sostenere e a suo tempo sviluppare ognora più le opere da lui iniziate, seguire fedelmente i metodi da lui praticati ed insegnati, e nel nostro modo di parlare e di operare cercare di imitare il modello che il Signore nella sua bontà ci ha in lui somministrato. Questo, o Figli carissimi, sarà il programma che io seguirò nella mia carica; questo pure sia la mira e lo studio di ciascuno dei Salesiani.” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 19 March 1888, L.C., pp. 18-19).
- 9 Repeated in all the biographies of Fr Rua. See, for example, the chapter by A. Amadei: “E' un altro Don Bosco!”, in *Il Servo di Dio Michele Rua*, vol. 1, Turin, SEI, 1931, pp. 487-511.
- 10 “... incitarle a ricopiare sempre meglio D. Bosco in se stesse, cosicché non solo il loro intemo, ma anche il portamento esterno, gli atteggiamenti, le parole, rispecchino sempre il delicato sentire, il riserbo amabile e pieno di naturalezza del nostro Ven. Padre.” (P. Albera, Circular to Salesian Provincials, 20 February 1921, L. C., p. 381). See also, among others, P. Albera to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, entitled: “Don Bosco modello del Sacerdote Salesiano”, L.C., pp. 388-433; and the lengthy item by Fr. Ricaldone, “Fedeltà a Don Bosco Santo”, *Atti* 74, 24 March 1936, 195 pages.
- 11 “I primi salesiani trovarono in Don Bosco la loro guida sicura. Inseriti nel vivo della sua comunità in azione, impararono a modellare la propria vita sulla sua.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 97).
- 12 Observation in *La Formazione dei Salesiani di Don Bosco. Ratio fundamentalis...*, 1985 edition, § 155.
- 13 “Ai signori seminaristi di Chieri”, introduction to the *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo* Turin, Speirani e Ferrero, 1844, p. 3.
- 14 *Le sei domeniche e la novena di san Luigi Gonzaga con un cenno sulla vita del santo*, Turin, Speirani e Ferrero, 1846.

- 15 *Il Cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di san Vincenzo de' Paoli*, Turin, Paravia e comp., 1848.
- 16 J. Vecchi, Conférence IV: Spiritualité (in *CG24 et Vie consacrée*, Paris, December 1997, handout), p. 3-4.

Faith

The “true faith” in the age of modernism

Under the Salesian Rectors Major Frs Rua (1888–1910) and Albera (1910–1921), the modernist wave suddenly brought faith to the forefront of Salesian spirituality.

Until then, the camps had been clearly demarcated. Within each, faith was not a problem. Catholics believed in the direct revelation from God to his prophets; in the perfect veracity of the Holy Scriptures, the word of a God who could neither deceive himself nor them; in the accuracy of the lives of Jesus based on a literal interpretation of the Gospels; the truth of the stories of the early Church; the institution by Jesus Christ of the seven sacraments as they were administered around them in the nineteenth century; the apostolicity and dogmas of their Church; the durability of the teaching of the “catechism” and many other elements of their religion, despite being challenged by rationalists who were necessarily non-believers. These Catholics shared the “true faith”, their faith was “firm”. Opposed to them were unbelievers of varying kinds and degrees: Protestants, freethinkers, rationalists, atheists and pagans of all stripes who did not adhere to the “truths” guaranteed by the Roman Church. These people had little or no faith, a faith seen as something to be taught, received and accepted in order to live by it.

Then, from around 1890, the doctrinal foundation of Catholicism seemed to tremble and waver. A few daring professors with a passion for scholarly “criticism” wanted to adapt the Church to the culture of their time. A fraction of the young clergy, guided by them, began to question the role of the prophets in the transmission of the message, the traditional interpretation of the Bible, the biography of Jesus, the primitive history of the Church as taught in seminaries, the formation of the seven sacraments from apostolic times, scholastic theology deemed outdated, and the birth of dogmas, which they considered to be dependent on the general laws of evolution, and, as a result, the contemporary teaching of the hierarchy, pope and bishops. The Salesian world was not insensitive to new ideas. Modernism entered our houses with books and magazines, deplored Fr Rua in 1906; certain confreres speak badly of the Church and its august head, of theology and of Holy Scripture.¹

The feeling of ecclesiastical authority, and therefore of the Rectors Major, was that these “modernists”, as they began to be called, undermined the true faith, the basis of true religion. In other words, the proponents of the new doctrines were tending towards heresy, which separates them from Christ and from God himself. The salvation of souls was at stake. Pope Pius X’s Encyclical *Pascendi* (1907) had only the harshest words regarding the modernists. A witness at his canonisation process, Fr Rua said: “The Lord has called us to the true religion: Let us show him our gratitude by the firmness of our faith. Let us not be misled by today’s false doctrines. Let us fight against modernism which would like to undermine the foundations of our holy religion and which courts the rationalists and Protestants, whose errors they would have us embrace. Do not be surprised: the Church has always been fought against, but she has always won, and we must cooperate in her victories.”²

The true faith demanded that the members of the Salesian Family take part the struggle to defend it, to adhere to all the articles of the Creed, to oppose the errors of the modernists and to vigorously profess the truths denied by them...

The life of faith according to Fr Albera (1912)

Faith was adherence to revealed truths. Under the title “On faith”, in a series of sermon outlines, Fr Rua commented simply on the main articles of the Creed: I believe in God, I believe in God the Father, I believe in God the Father Almighty, I believe in the Creator of the earth, I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, I believe in him who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. I believe in the Jesus Christ, risen....³

In 1912, in his search for a subject for a circular that would meet the needs of the moment, Fr Albera had the impression of hearing a voice in his heart that was telling him, “Demonstrate the need for every Salesian to live a true life of faith.”⁴ Inspiration led him to write along these lines. And he wrote a long letter with three significant appendices: 1) The sacred liturgy, 2) The Supreme Pontiff, 3) Newspapers. The anti-Modernist reaction was in full swing.

We have three lives, the Rector Major explained: the life of the senses, the life of reason and the life of faith. The life of faith, in which reason, “enlightened by the truths revealed to us by God himself, rises above human things, comes to a better knowledge of the divine perfections and (thanks to which) the soul, though still a pilgrim in this world, becomes capable of a life similar to that of the happy inhabitants of heaven”, a

life which is obviously the noblest of the three.⁵ He applied Peter's words to those who live by faith: "They become participants in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), and Paul's "and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).⁶

There are many degrees possible in the life of faith, he then taught. A multitude of believers believe firmly in the truths of the faith. This is essential, but there is more. Fr Albera delighted in recalling saints who had adhered to it to the point of heroism. When he meditated on hell and the appalling torments of the damned, Saint Francis Borgia would tremble to the point of making his cell tremble. Saint Teresa of Avila was so frightened by the eternity of hell's punishments that she would go through the corridors of her monastery repeating to the nuns she met: "*Quam longa! Quant terribilis aeternitas!*" (How long, how terrible is eternity!). St Stanislaus Kostka was so enthusiastic about the Virgin Mary's prerogatives that his face would flush and his eyes fill with tears at the thought of Mary when he passed a church dedicated to her, and even at the mere mention of her name. Alphonsus Liguori's burning faith in the Real Presence liquefied his soul (*la cui anima si liquefaceva*) when he prayed before a tabernacle. Don Bosco's certainty in Divine Providence's watchfulness over his creatures was without equal. And so little did he doubt the divinising excellence of cooperating with God in the salvation of humanity that he would have wanted, at the price of any sacrifice, to destroy sin everywhere and save souls throughout the world.

The Lord has the right to demand of Salesians, wrote the Rector Major, not only that they believe in all revealed truths – otherwise they would have the misfortune of sinking into heresy – but to adhere to them with all the strength of their minds and the most intense affection of their hearts.⁷

The life of faith for the Salesian at the end of the twentieth century

The difficulty of adhering to the truths of faith increased for Westerners as the culture reviled by religious fundamentalism took hold of twentieth-century believers. It shook the peaceful faith of the elders. A reversal was taking place in ageing Western society where unbelief was becoming a massive and quiet fact. Entire and often culturally dominant settings were developing outside any religious reference. Being a believer or a non-believer made no appreciable difference to most professional activities or extra-professional commitments. As a result, this change of mindset affected even the believer. He found it increasingly difficult to agree with his elders that a non-believer was

a man or a woman who lacked something to make them completely themselves. Instead, it was the believer who was increasingly seen as abnormal. Faith vanished quietly.⁸

The Salesians, whose mission was to form people in the faith, were rightly concerned. In 1990, a General Chapter held on the theme of “Educating young people in the faith” expressed their opinion.⁹ The previous apologetic approach was no longer convincing. People were no longer attached to ideas received from elsewhere which in themselves were meant to be the *object* of faith. Personality, the whole personality, is built in and through relationships, as the personalist philosophers reminded us. Personal experience moves minds and hearts, while reasoning, be it subtle or otherwise, leaves them indifferent. Faith is born or reborn from experience. Experience, then, offers the education of faith its “overall objective” (*meta globale*). The *object* of faith is the very person of Christ who, by a grace from the Father, gives rise to this faith.

For the person who believes, the aim of education in the faith is to be configured to Christ, the perfect man. The Gospel is the guide for this. It takes Christ as a “point of reference” “in his mentality and in his life.” The truths of the faith, thought to have been forgotten, reappear. The more explicit and better internalised reference to Christ helps people to see history as Christ sees it, to judge life as he does, to choose and love as he does, to hope as he teaches, and to live in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Through the mysterious fruitfulness of this reference, individuals find an existential unity. They take up their responsibilities and seek the ultimate meaning of their lives. Within the community of believers they live their faith intensely, proclaiming it and celebrating it joyfully in everyday life.

Faith transforms the life of the believer. Behaviours that open people up to the truth, that make them respect and love others, that encourage them to freely give of themselves and serve others, mature within them and become part of their mature. Faith and life are mutually integrated, in accordance with the wishes of the “new evangelisation” of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II. This was the life of faith that the Salesian world at the end of the century wanted to help grow in the contemporary world.¹⁰

To achieve this, a “new education” is essential, said Fr Viganò. Salesian evangelising communities must be “signs of faith”, “schools of faith”, “centres of communion and participation”.¹¹ As for the Salesian Cooperator, the Regulations of Apostolic Life state that they educate young people to encounter Christ in faith and that they believe in the educational value of the “experience of faith”.¹² The inspiration for these various documents from the last quarter of the twentieth century did not change. The *object* of faith was always Christ Jesus.

NOTES

- 1 M. Rua, Letter to provincials and rectors, Novemer 1906 ; L.C., pp. 352-353.
- 2 “Il Signore ci ha chiamati alla vera religione : dimostriamogli la nostra riconoscenza colla fermezza nella fede. Non lasciamoci travolgere dalle false dottrine attuali. Combattiamo il modernismo, che vorrebbe scalzare la nostra Santa Religione dalle fondamenta e che accarezza i razionalisti e protestanti, dei quali vorrebbe farci abbracciare gli errori; e non meravigliatevi: la Chiesa è sempre stata combattuta, ma ha sempre vinto e noi dobbiamo cooperare alle sue vittorie.” (A. Amadei, Ordinary process of Fr Rua, ad 18^{um}; in the *Positio super virtutibus, Summarium*, Rome, 1947, p. 373).
- 3 Here are the headings of the paragraphs in their original wording: 1) Credo in Deum, 2) Credo in Deum Patrem, 3) Omnipotentem, 4) Sopra la parola terrae, 5) ed in Gesù Cristo suo figliuolo unico Signor nostro, 6) Qui conceptus est de Spirita Sancto, natus de Maria Virgine, 7) Varie apparizioni del Salvatore dopo la sua risurrezione. (In M. Rua, Handwritten notebook *Appunti di Prediche*, N. 9, pp. 18-23, in FdB 2898 C9-D3).
- 4 “Mi rivolsi al Signore chiedendogli d’ispirarmi quell’argomento che meglio rispondeva ai nostri bisogni attuali. Mi sembrò di sentire in cuore una voce che mi dicesse per tema del tao dire prendi a dimostrare esser necessario che la vita d’ogni salesiano sia veramente vita di fede.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians “sulla vita di fede”, 21 November 1912, L.C., pp. 82-106. Quote on p. 82).
- 5 “Per mezzo di essa la ragione illuminata dalle verità che Dio stesso ci ha rivelate, si eleva al di sopra delle cose umane, assorbe a una maggior conoscenza delle perfezioni di Dio, e pur rimanendo ancora pellegrina in questo mondo, l’anima nostra diventa capace d’una vita somigliante a quella dei felici abitanti del Cielo” (Above-mentioned Letter, pp. 83-84).
- 6 Op. cit., p. 84.
- 7 “I gradi della fede”, op. cit., pp. 86-87.
- 8 Regarding this phenomenon see the issue of *Vie spirituelle*, 614, May-June 1976.
- 9 GC23 “Educare i giovani alla fede”, Rome 4 March- 5 May 1990, *Atti* 333, May 1990, 268 pages.
- 10 These paragraphs are based on the article in the 23rd General Chapter entitled “La meta globale”, in *Atti* 333, pp. 74-77
- 11 See the Letters of E. Viganò to Salesians, 15 August 1990, in *Atti* 334, pp. 38-43; and 19 May 1991, in *Atti* 337, pp. 6-11.
- 12 RVA, art. 14 and 15.

Family

From the patriarchal to the conjugal family

Until the end of the twentieth century, Salesian tradition had relatively little to say about family spirituality, which is the subject of this entry, except in the case of Fr Ricaldone,¹ lamenting the decline of the modern family, and, in general, on the occasion of certain biographical accounts, e.g. the story of Margherita Bosco (Mamma Margaret), by Fr Lemoyne entitled: *Moral family scenes*.² A narrative family catechesis for the popular readership of the Salesian magazine *Letture cattoliche*.

However, apart from the documents relating to the Cooperators, we discover at both ends of the chain, at the time of the birth of the Salesian Congregation and under the governance of Don Bosco's seventh successor, three documents dedicated directly to the family and, therefore, more or less to family spirituality: Don Bosco's *Porta teco, Cristiano* (1858) and the circular letters of Fr Egidio Viganò, *Appelli del Sinodo 80* (Appeals from Synod 80) (1980) and *Nell'anno della famiglia* (In the year of the family) (1994). Don Bosco's *Porta teco*, built around the question of duties within the family, successively set out the duties of fathers of the family, the duties of the children and the duties of the mothers and daughters of the family, and did not forget the duties of domestic servants. Fr Viganò's participation in 1980 at the Roman Synod of Bishops on the theme of the family prompted him to share his discoveries and impressions with the Salesians. And when 1994 was declared the UN International Year of the Family, Fr Viganò returned to this issue, which was dear to the Pope at the time, and which the Rector Major particularly revered. Ideas on spirituality abound in these three items.³

However, the exhortations differed greatly from the oldest to the most recent ones. Between 1858 and 1980, the image of the family had changed dramatically around the world. From the patriarchal family, with its household dominated by the father, twentieth-century Western society had moved on to the conjugal family, increasingly single-parent families,⁴ imbued with sexual permissiveness, where, in any case the father no longer ruled as "head of the family".⁵

The disorders deplored in the conjugal family of the late twentieth century bore little resemblance to those of the patriarchal family of the nineteenth. In 1858, fathers were advised "not to treat their children as slaves" and "to allow them honourable freedom";⁶

not to squander their wives' dowries and other property, and never to force them to dispose of it. They had to keep them informed about the affairs of the house, but with the significant proviso: "whenever it was for the benefit of the family."⁷ Gender equality was a subversive idea at the time. Paternal control extended to domesticity. The father had to watch over their good morals and ensure that they fulfilled all the duties of a good Christian life.⁸ One hundred and forty years later, according to Fr Viganò, the situation of the family had become "very sad", "especially if we remember", he wrote, "our families of yesterday, filled with Christian love, overflowing with life and witnesses to simple wisdom."⁹

The marriage bond had loosened, fathers were increasingly vulnerable, contraception and abortion, authorised by the general mentality, made the mother the owner of the child, and advances in bioethics, meaning that fathers were no longer indispensable in the sexual act, tended to oust them from the family. The birth rate was becoming alarmingly low, the number of "orphans of living parents" was rising steadily, the legal recognition of homosexual couples was approaching, and the whole institution of the family was becoming more precarious.¹⁰ In short, its identity had become blurred. At this rate, it would soon no longer be considered "the fundamental unit of society".¹¹

A family spirituality for new times

Fr Viganò's two letters on the family offered religious some broad outlines of a family spirituality derived from Vatican II, the Roman Synod of 1980 and documents of John Paul II, in particular his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981) and his *Letter to Families* (2 February 1994). The Rector Major focused this spirituality on love, a term he obviously understood in its noblest sense of a personal fusion of mind and body for the greater good of each individual and for that of the couple, which has become a home and therefore a source of life. "Love and life", he lamented, "have been wrenched apart and the result is that both are degraded. People no longer give a thought to love's capacity for suffering and its indispensable historical link with sacrifice; they no longer look to the Cross as the highest expression of love. When love is reduced to mere gratification..."¹² Love, which implies the gift of self, can never be purely selfish; pleasure, which it certainly does not reject, cannot be confused with it. But contemporary culture, which is systematically hedonistic, has nothing to do with this. In fidelity to love and to the life that love calls for, the family may therefore be obliged to choose a style that runs counter to current culture and mentality, as well as to

common attitudes to sexuality, individual freedom and material goods. As a “domestic church”,¹³ the Christian family is in the world without being of the world.

The Rector Major noted with interest two “Proposals” made by the bishops to the Pope at the Synod of 1980. They summarised the ideas of the Synod Fathers on the nature of family spirituality and the conditions for its development.¹⁴ Family spirituality is a spirituality of creation, of the covenant, of the cross and the resurrection. Spouses are, in fact, creators of life. They choose life, not nothingness. Their union builds a living community for which they take responsibility. This community should be the place of their personal growth. Through their covenant, they become one flesh, destined to bear fruit both in terms of the flesh and, above all, spiritually. This covenant implies a mutual gift which the child seals. In imitation of Jesus, family spirituality consists in the mutual gift of life. This gift, which is permanent, passes, as Jesus teaches us, through the cross. It is never without renunciation and sacrifice. Through trials, a spirituality of resurrection requires spouses to always begin again, to forgive, to forget injustices and, in spite of everything, to cultivate the joy of rebirth.

In this spirit, the Synod continued, the Christian couple cultivates knowledge and affection for one other. Family relationships awaken and nurture knowledge and affection. Both spouses respect each other and, through dialogue, share in the authority of the family. Austerity, sobriety, simplicity and a climate of purity should characterise their home in the face of the surrounding consumer society, which is violently eroticised.

What can we do to at least come close to this ideal? First of all, faithfully carry out the tasks proper to any family, in particular the education of children. Then pray as a family. The possible forms of this are varied: evening prayer together, reading and meditating on the Word of God, preparing to receive the sacraments as a family, saying the rosary, and also participation by the family as a whole during the main liturgical seasons and on the occasion of the most important events in family life.¹⁵

Family spirituality in the Regulations of Apostolic Life

The new Regulations for the Salesian Cooperators (1986), an association made up primarily of lay people, has addressed the question of the family in the light of spirituality in two articles that need only be briefly presented and commented on here, one on the state of marriage, sacrament of love and foundation of the family home (art. 9), the other on the family as such, which should be, we are repeatedly told, a “domestic church” (art. 8).¹⁶

The married Cooperator finds in the sacrament of love the ability to live his or her mission as husband and parent enthusiastically. As a witness to the faith, they commit themselves to building a profound conjugal communion. The couple strives to communicate spiritually, warmly, physically and in action. They help each other even in their Christian growth. As “cooperators in the love of God the Creator”, Salesian Cooperators are responsible and generous in welcoming and transmitting life. They therefore give a positive response to their call. Far from refusing and fearing it, they take it on and welcome it, convinced of the beauty and greatness of this mission. Knowing that parents are the first and principal educators of their children, they see to their growth by word and example, according to the method of kindness that is proper to the Preventive System. And they help them to discover and follow their own vocation by directing them towards apostolic activity.

Cooperators are well aware of the values of the family. Their ideal would be to give it a completely Christian form and turn it into a “domestic church”, that is to say, “a sort of domestic sanctuary of the Church”, “a holy place where God is present, adored and served, whose members truly love each other in sincerity and serenity.”¹⁷ It therefore contributes to the human and Christian growth of its members through dialogue, mutual affection and common prayer, a common prayer that is sadly lacking in so many Christian families” laments the commentator on the article.

The love that fills this married and family life is eminently sacrificial in nature. It therefore rejects all forms of selfishness, not only personal, but also collective. Cooperators look after all their relatives, starting with those closest to them, with particular attention to the youngest and the oldest. Generous and hospitable, they come to the aid of those in need and offer to collaborate with other families.

Who can fail to see the possibilities for the Cooperator to be a Salesian apostle within their own family? Let us just think of the Becchi home, which was the seed of the Salesian spirit, rightly called “family spirit”, imbued with mutual affection, true religion, courageous self-sacrifice and warm simplicity, which has now spread throughout the world.

NOTES

- 1 P. Ricaldone, § “La famiglia, la scuola, il tempo”, in his Letter to Salesians, 24 December 1939, *Atti* 96, p. 14ff.
- 2 G. B. Lemoyne, *Scene morali di famiglia esposte nella vita di Margherita Bosco*, Turin, tipografia e libreria salesiana, 1886, VIII-190 pages.
- 3 *Porta teco, Cristiano, ovvero Avvisi importanti intorno ai doveri del Cristiano, acciocché ciascuno possa conseguire la propria salvezza nello stato in cui si trova*, Turin, Paravia, 1858; E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1980, *Atti* 299, January-March 1981, pp. 3-30; Letter to Salesians 10 June 1994, *Atti* 349, July-September 1994, pp. 3-32.
- 4 In almost all cases, these are fatherless families. The statistics on this subject are sobering. In the United States, the Population Council estimates that 24% of households with dependent children are headed by a single parent, most often the mother. In the black community, the proportion is traditionally higher: 57% of children grow up in a single-parent home. But today, the upward trend in the percentage of single-parent families now affects the whole population, especially the poorest sections of the population. On the European continent, according to Eurostat figures for 1995 the proportion of single-parent families has risen by between 25-50% in most European countries since the early 1980s. Single-parents today represent around 18% of all families. The countries are Norway, Finland, the UK, Belgium and Austria. In France alone, Evelyne Sullerot estimated in 1993 that there were two and a half million children living with their mother alone. (According to J.-Cl. Guillebaud, “Refaire fermile”, in *La tyrannie du plaisir*, Paris, Seuil, 1998, pp. 356-357).
- 5 A very significant change: from the law of 4 June 1970, the husband was no longer referred to in the French Civil Code (art 213) as the “head of the family”.
- 6 “Non tenga i figliuoli come schiavi, ma dia loro onorata libertà” (*Porta teco*, p. 17).
- 7 “Non iscialacquare le doti od altri loro averi ; nè costringerle a forza di acconsentirne l’alienazione. Mettetele a parte degli affari della casa, tutte le volte che tal cosa può tornare vantaggiosa per la famiglia.” (*Porta teco*, p. 23).
- 8 *Porta teco*, p. 28.
- 9 “La crisi ci colpisce di più se riandiamo con la memoria alle nostre famiglie di ieri ripiene di amore cristiano, traboccanti di vita e testimoni di saggezza nella semplicità. Certamente sono cambiati i tempi.” (Letter of 10 June 1994, loc. cit., p. 6),
- 10 A note on marriage in contemporary France. In 1997, 284,000 civil marriages were celebrated. In 1960, 320,000 civil unions were registered. Today, marriage is no longer the founding act of a couple: 87% of couples lived together before getting married, compared with only 15% in 1960. In the 1970s, cohabitation appeared to be a trial marriage, since two years after they started living together, half of all couples married. In 1990, 9% of couples married after one year together, 30% after five years, but 48% remained cohabiting. In 1996, 118,000 divorces were granted, 36% of them to couples without small children. 4.2 million of the 29.4 million people living with a partner in 1994 were not married. In 1995, 35.6% of children were born to unmarried parents, compared with 11.4% in 1980. Today, more than half of first children are born outside marriage (according to *Le Monde*, 15 September 1998).

- 11 E. Viganò, Letter of 10 June 1994, loc. cit, pp. 6-7.
- 12 “L’amore è stato disgiunto dalla vita e, perciò stesso, degradato. Non si considerano più le sue risorse di martirio e il suo indispensabile legame storico con il sacrificio; non si guarda più alla croce come alla massima espressione dell’amore. Se amare è solo sinonimo di sperimentare un piacere...” (Letter of 8 December 1980, loc. cit., p. 14).
- 13 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11.
- 14 “La teologia del matrimonio e la indiscussa vocazione dei coniugi alla santità, hanno mosso i padri sinodali a trattare con singolare cura il tema di una spiritualità della famiglia.” (Same letter of 8 December 1980, loc. cit., p. 22).
- 15 All of these are in Propositions 36 and 37 of the 1980 Synod.
- 16 Authoritative commentary on these articles in J. Aubry, *Guida di lettura al Regolamento di vita apostolica dell’Associazione Cooperatori Salesiani ...*, Rome, ed. Cooperatori, 1987, pp. 35-40.
- 17 “Come il santuario domestico della Chiesa, un luogo santo, dove Dio è presente ed è adorato e servito, dove i membri si vogliono veramente bene, con sincerità e serenità.” (J. Aubry, *Guida di lettura ...*, p. 36, inspired here by Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 11).

Francis de Sales

The life of Francis de Sales¹

The man who would one day give his name to the sons of Don Bosco lived in the then independent Duchy of Savoy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, in other words when the so-called religious wars were raging in France. We know that the Edict of Nantes, which put an end to them, was dated 13 April 1598, and that the peacemaking King, Henri IV, was assassinated in 1610.

Francis de Sales was born on 21 August 1567 at the Château de Sales in Thorens, Savoie (Savoy) and studied first in his Savoyard homeland, then in Paris with the Jesuits at the Collège de Clermont, and finally in Padua, where he undertook the study of law and theology, which he had begun in Paris. It was in Padua that he discovered the *Spiritual Combat* by the Theatine Lorenzo Scupoli, a small book which was published at the time (1589) and which he always carried in his “pocket”. Returning to Savoy, Francis accepted the Provost’s office at St Peter’s of Geneva, which his father had unwittingly asked the Pope to grant him. It made him the second most important person in the diocese of Geneva. The bishop, Claude de Granier, whom the Calvinist reform forced to remain in Annecy, conferred the priesthood on him on 18 December 1593.

As Provost of Geneva, Francis devoted himself zealously to the duties of his office: he preached and heard confessions, not only in Annecy, but in the parishes of the surrounding countryside, and later in the Chablais region. History would remember above all his activity around the town of Thonon. Forcibly converted by the Bernese Calvinists (1536), it had just been returned to Savoy (1593). The civil and religious authorities were keen to return its fifty-two parishes to the Catholic faith. Francis and one of his cousins, a canon of Geneva, set to work from September 1594, initially alone and in the midst of all kinds of difficulties and great dangers. Francis gained converts and albeit unsuccessfully, managed to meet Théodore de Bèze, who had succeeded John Calvin, in Geneva. Other preachers came to help these first apostles. And the solution was not long in coming: by 1598, the return of the Chablais to Catholicism was considered a foregone conclusion.

In 1599, on a business trip to Rome, Francis de Sales was praised by the Pope for his apostolate in the Chablais region and appointed Coadjutor Bishop of the diocese of

Geneva. Back in Savoy, he did his best to help Bishop de Granier. In 1602, Bishop de Granier sent him to Paris to negotiate a difficult dispute over the property of Catholics in the Pays de Gex, a territory that had previously been French but had just been incorporated into Savoy. This property had been usurped by the Calvinists and was to be returned to them. It was during his return journey that he learned of the death of Bishop de Granier. This automatically made him Bishop of Geneva. Francis was ordained bishop on 8 December 1602 in the church of Saint-Maurice in Thorens, where he had been baptised.

From now on, Francis de Sales would be entirely devoted to the administration of his diocese: confirmations, parish visits, ordinations, mandates, synods, reform of religious orders, settlement of a dispute between the cathedral chapter of Geneva and the collegiate chapter of Notre-Dame de Liesse. He also spent long hours hearing confessions and catechising children. This exemplary pastor agreed to preach outside his diocese and added to his many activities the task of directing the souls he met by correspondence. His letters would fill eleven volumes in the Annecy edition. He also wrote to publish. And he took the initiative in setting up a particular religious congregation. In 1604, during the Lenten series he was preaching at Sainte-Chapelle in Dijon, a young widow, the Baroness Jeanne de Chantal, was introduced to him and he immediately became her regular spiritual director. The Order of the Visitation came about through this meeting. The inspiration to create a new order for generous Christian women unable to physically bear the austerities of the Poor Clares and Carmelites seems to have germinated in Francis' mind from this meeting with Jeanne de Chantal. His intention was to use the girls thus "congregated" to assist the poor and sick of Annecy. However, in 1605, the project was not yet up and running.

It was necessary to prepare the foundress and give her time to see to the early education of her four children. Francis de Sales' spiritual direction during these years of waiting was a masterpiece of its kind. He helped the Baroness to discover and choose, when God willed, God's plan. He encouraged her to attend the newly founded Carmelite convent in Dijon, reserving the right to monitor and sometimes qualify the spiritual instruction she received there; he urged her to learn the ways of God and the customs of religious life. Finally, on 4 June 1607, after experiencing the "profound indifference" to which her direction had led her, Francis told her "very simply" of his plans for the institute. It would take another three years for the project to come to fruition, during which time Francis, who was writing and revising the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, read up on religious life. Finally, on 6 June 1610, Jeanne de Chantal and

two companions began their life together in a small house in Annecy. The Visitation of Saint Mary, otherwise known as the Order of the Visitation, was born.

Francis de Sales died in Lyon on 28 December 1622.

Treatises on the spiritual life

Francis de Sales began his life as a publicist in the Chablais years with religious propaganda tracts, which were eventually collected under the title of the *Controversies*. His *Defence of the Standard of the Holy Cross of our Saviour Jesus Christ* (published in 1600), a plea in favour of devotion to the Cross, is linked to his apostolate in the Chablais.² After Francis' death, his simple yet profound conferences to the Visitation Sisters, which had been noted by his attentive listeners would be published under the curious title of *Vrais Entretiens spirituels* [literally the True Spiritual Conferences, but in English now simply known as The Spiritual Conferences].³

Over the last four centuries, two treatises have made Saint Francis de Sales one of the foremost writers on the spiritual life. The first has remained one of the most widespread religious books in Christendom. The *Introduction to the Devout Life*,⁴ dedicated to Philothea (friend of God), is in fact addressed to every Christian living in the world and wishing to correspond to the demands of their baptism by striving, according to the Lord's command, for "perfection". Francis prefers to call this perfection "devotion".⁵ In the first part, he establishes its excellence, proves that it is just for religious alone and that, in order to progress in it, it is necessary to have a good spiritual director. It is first a question of purging oneself of mortal sin, then of all affection for venial sin, and finally all affection for things that are harmful and dangerous, as well as all evil inclinations. In the second part, Francis endeavours to convince Philothea of the necessity of prayer, proposes a method for prayer, hearing Mass, receiving the sacraments, listening to the word of God... The third part of the Introduction contains, according to its title, "counsels concerning the practice of virtue." Francis first gives rules on the choice of virtues to practise and insists on humility and meekness, Salesian virtues par excellence. This is followed by chapters devoted to the virtues proper to religious, but which people of the world are not exempt from practising according to their situation; others on specific issues, such as friendships, respect for people in thoughts and conversations, hobbies, etc.; and finally advice addressed to married people, widows and virgins. The fourth part deals with temptations. Its remarkable Chapters 11 and 12 on worry and sadness are typically Salesian. Finally, the fifth and last part, said by the author to contain

“counsels and practices for renewing and confirming the soul in devotion”, is a kind of postscript which justifies one or other position taken in the work.

The Treatise on the Love of God, published in 1616 by Pierre Rigaud in Lyon, is longer and more learned and for this reason, more difficult to read than the *Introduction to the Devout Life*. However, it is the same author, who fills his theological dissertations with comparisons drawn from nature and stories from the lives of the saints. Despite the loftiness of the subject, Francis refused to impress through the depth of his analyses. This pastor’s sole aim was to instruct and, to that end, to appeal to his reader. He wrote in his preface:

“Truly my intention is only to represent simply and naïvely, without art, still more without false colours, the history of the birth, progress, decay, operations, properties, advantages and excellences of divine love.” Then smiling, in order to avoid the reproach of useless length, he added for the benefit of the reader, who he calls Theotimus (the one who honours God) “And if besides this you find other things, these are but excrescences which it is almost impossible for such as me who write amidst many distractions to avoid. But still I think that there will be nothing without some utility. Nature herself, who is so skilful a workwoman, intending to produce grapes, produces at the same time, as by a prudent inadvertence, such an abundance of leaves and branches that there are very few vines which have not in their season to be pruned of leaves and shoots.” The vine of the theologian Francis, grown in fertile soil and well exposed to the divine sun, is indeed abundant, though always accessible to the prepared mind.

The work comprises twelve books. After a sort of general preparation on the government of the faculties of the soul by the will (Book I), Francis traces the history of divine love in the faithful soul, from its birth to its eventual decay (Books II, II, IV). The two “principal exercises” of this sacred love are through complacency and benevolence (Book V). Books VI and VII admirably describe mystical prayer, which ideally leads to perfect union, to the “liquefaction” of the soul in God, to the “wound of love” and even to the “death of love”, as happened to the “glorious Virgin” Mary. We then come down from Sinai for less sublime considerations on “the love of conformity, by which we unite our will to the will of God, signified to us by his commandments, counsels and inspirations” (Book VIII) and on the “love of submission by which our will is united to God’s good pleasure” (Book IX). We still have to recognise the extent of God’s love. God has commanded us to love him above all things (Book X), and, if all the virtues are pleasing to him, sacred love has “sovereign authority” over each of them (Book XI). However, love is never without its hazards. Delightful chapters on fear of love, which can

be natural, servile or mercenary, and on sadness “almost always useless, but contrary to the service of holy love”, warn us of this. At the end of his work, Francis seems, in Book XII, to regret having neglected many common situations. No, progress in holy love does not depend on our natural complexion; no, legitimate occupations do not prevent us from living divine love. We must make use of every ordinary opportunity to practise it, and therefore take care to perform our actions “very perfectly”. In any case, love is demanding. Let’s put it this way: “Mount Calvary is the academy of love”, according to the title of the final chapter.

A spiritual method for everyday life

A reading of the treatises, letters and sermons of Francois de Sales reveals a “Salesian method of spirituality”, which is a spirituality of everyday life.⁶

Generally speaking, the disciple of Francis de Sales aims principally to please God, as the *Treatise on the Love of God* says over and over again. Is God not always present to him? To achieve this, he “purges” himself of his imperfections and seeks to do nothing out of compulsion, and everything out of love. In principle, he is strong and dominates the situations life throws at him. He lives in a spirit of freedom, joyful and peaceful. He goes on his way “all beautifully”, with gentle diligence, thinks only of today, asks for nothing, refuses nothing and tirelessly carries on with his his daily task.

It is trust in God that gives him this beautiful serenity. “You must have great fidelity”, Francis explained to his Sisters, “but without anxiety or haste; use the means given to us according to our vocation, and then relax for all the rest; for God, under whose guidance we have embarked, will always be careful to provide us with what we need. When we lack everything, then God will take care of us, and we will not lack anything, since we will have God who must be our everything.”⁷ And he wrote to a young novice: “My third commandment is that you act like little children: while they feel their mother holding them by the cuffs, they go boldly and run all around, and are not surprised by the little things that their weak legs make them do Thus, while you see that God is holding you by the goodwill and resolution he has given you to serve him, go boldly, and don’t be surprised at these little jolts and bumps you feel; and do not be upset, provided that at certain intervals you throw yourself into his arms and kiss him with the kiss of charity. Go joyfully and open-heartedly as much as you can; and if you do not always go joyfully, always go courageously and confidentially.”⁸

Francis himself lived in this way in frequently troubled times, calm, peaceful and smiling under the gaze of his God.

Francis de Sales, Don Bosco and the Salesians⁹

What Don Bosco knew and admired in Francis de Sales, a saintly fellow Savoyard who was solemnly celebrated on 29 January each year with a panegyric in his seminary in Chieri, was much more than a spiritual theologian, of whom he was hardly aware. He saw him as a figure of an apostle filled with gentle and kind charity in everyday life.

His fourth resolution in preparation for his ordination to the priesthood read: “May the charity and gentleness of Saint Francis de Sales guide me in all things.”¹⁰ In his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, he himself explained how he had been led to Francis as his patron saint and model. In 1844, the room in the building where the boys from his fledgling oratory met was adorned with a painting of Saint Francis, so he chapel first and then the oratory took the title “Saint Francis de Sales”. The second reason was, he wrote,

because we had put our own ministry, which called for great calm and meekness, under the protection of this saint in the hope that he might obtain for us from God the grace of being able to imitate him in his extraordinary meekness and in winning souls.

He added to these motives an additional reason, which had probably only occurred to him a few years later, around 1848–1850, when the “Protestant” Waldensians had begun propaganda that he considered a danger to the faith of the people. Don Bosco had undertaken to reproduce in Turin what Francis de Sales had done during his mission in Chablais.

We had a further reason for placing ourselves under the protection of this saint: that from heaven he might help us to imitate him in combating errors against religion, especially Protestantism, which was beginning to gain ground in our provinces, and more especially in the city of Turin.¹¹

Always imitation, and nothing but imitation!

The title of Don Bosco’s first work “of Saint Francis de Sales”, was to last and expand. The Valdocco oratory, the mother house of the work, would be called “the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales” or “Salesian oratory”; the religious society founded by Don Bosco in 1859 was called the “Society of Saint Francis de Sales” and its members were gradually

and naturally also called “Salesians”. Francis de Sales was to be the patron saint of the Congregation founded by Don Bosco. As the years went by, Francis de Sales became increasingly involved in the devotion, imitation and, one thing leading to another, in the very study of the members of Don Bosco’s “Salesian” family. They found in Francis de Sales a “spirituality of ordinary daily life, of joy and optimism” which suited them perfectly, as we learn from a study of the Twenty-Third General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco.¹²

NOTES

- 1 In order to write this first paragraph, I have mainly made use of the excellent piece by Pierre Sérouet, “François de Sales”, in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, t. V, 1964, col. 1057-1097. For the saint’s writings, we refer here and elsewhere to the edition published by the Visitation Sisters, Annecy: *Oeuvres de saint François de Sales évêque de Genève et docteur de l’Eglise*, Annecy, J. Niérat, 1892-1964, 27 volumes, cited as *Oeuvres*.
- 2 Regarding this huge work, see above, the article on *Adoration*.
- 3 For there were “false Conferences”. In May 1628, an anonymous Cordelier pre-empted Mother de Chantal by publishing in Toumon *Les Entretiens et Colloques spirituels du Bien-Heureux François de Sales, Evêque et Prince de Geneve, Fondateur des dames de la Visitation*. The holy woman protested that the Cordelier had distorted Francis’ talks. And she had them published in 1629, in Lyon, by Coeurssilly, as *Les Vrais Entretiens spirituels du Bien-Heureux François de Sales, Evêque et Prince de Geneve, Instituteur, et Fondateur de l’Ordre des Religieuses de la Visitation Ste Marie*, the title that then remained.
- 4 First edition in 1608, published by Pierre Rigaud, Lyon; final edition while Francis was still alive, in 1619, J. Cottureau, Paris.
- 5 See above the article on *Devotion*.
- 6 Here I follow the “Salesian Method of Spirituality” in the Analytical List of the Works of Saint Francis de Sales by P. Alphonse Denis (Annecy, 1964), p. 67.
- 7 Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Lent, in *Oeuvres*, vol. X, p. 102.
- 8 Francis de Sales to Sister de Soulfour, 16 January 1603, in *Oeuvres*, vol. 12, pp. 168-169.
- 9 On this, see the work *San Francesco di Sales e i Salesiani di Don Bosco* (a cura di J. Picca e J. Strus), Rome, LAS, 1986, in particular pp. 139-159, the contribution by P. Stella, “Don Bosco e S. Francesco di Sales: incontro fortuito o identità spirituale?”
- 10 “La carità e la dolcezza di S. Francesco di Sales mi guidino in ogni cosa.” (*Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6*, p. 4-5).
- 11 “2° Perché la parte di quel nostro ministero esigendo grande calma e mansuetudine, ci eravamo messi sotto alla protezione di questo Santo, affinché ci ottenesse da Dio la grazia di poterlo imitare nella sua straordinaria mansuetudine e nel guadagno delle anime. Altra ragione era quella di metterci sotto alla protezione di questo santo, affinché ci aiutasse dal cielo ad imitarlo nel combattere gli errori contro alla religione specialmente il protestantismo, che cominciava insidioso ad insinuarsi nei nostri paesi e specialmente nella città di Torino.” (MO Da Silva, p. 133).
- 12 See the first two headings: “Spiritualità del quotidiano” and “Spiritualità della gioia e dell’ottimismo” of the Chapter article entitled: “La spiritualità giovanile salesiana” (GC23, nos. 162-166). To avoid any doubt, it should be noted here that this is a parallelism not mentioned in the General Chapter

Fraternal correction

Fraternal correction

Fraternal correction is first of all an act of natural charity. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12) is not specifically Christian. The ancient philosophers knew it: “A good man delights in receiving advice: all the worst men are the most impatient of guidance” wrote Seneca.¹ The Jews of Jesus’ time practised it: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, “Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye”, when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?” (Luke 6:41-42). As for Jesus himself, he recommended: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” (Matthew 18:15). St Paul echoed him: “if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted” (Galatians 6:1). The Desert Fathers had a thousand ways of correcting each other: in secret, in public, by a friend, by a superior, by a third party, orally, by note, by example, as a community, alone. Often very harsh in their observations, they were also surprisingly gentle.

From the ancient philosophers to the Christian spiritual masters, the motive, the need and the scope of the intervention have changed. The benevolence of the Christian friend has deeper roots. His supernatural charity seeks to remove the sin, the opportunity for sin and the obstacle to his ascent to God from his brother’s soul. The Christian does not only intervene to correct a vice, but also to help his friend to approach the perfection towards which his baptised status obliges him to strive: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Those who feel responsible for their brother’s soul do not shy away from any objections. His generosity towards his brother is born of his faith.

Friendly fraternal correction

In earlier days friendly fraternal correction was a widespread custom in the Salesian Family.

Spiritual friendship, as Don Bosco conceived it and recommended it, called for mutual adjustments. It was simple: the teacher would point out his friend's faults and urge him to do better. He himself, in his youth, had been called to order by his friend Comollo. When he became a priest, he was happy to assign a monitor to some of his boys. On his advice, the teenagers in his works practised mutual correction among themselves. They were given the example of Savio and Massaglia's relationship at the Valdocco oratory. At the end of a retreat, they had wanted to show themselves to be "true friends" and, to this end, to be each other's monitor in everything that could contribute to their spiritual progress. "Whenever you notice me doing anything I should not," Dominic is said to have told his friend Massaglia, "or if you see there is some good I can do and I am not doing, please point it out."²

Fr Rua said that in his youth he had greatly appreciated the custom of the "secret monitor" as a way of freeing oneself from faults and making progress in virtue. When preaching a retreat in 1899 for Salesian aspirants and novices, he admitted that he had benefited greatly from this practice himself.³ "Mutual correction of faults was practised" at Philip Rinaldi's initiative, we are told, between 1884 and 1889 in spiritual circles at the St John the Evangelist late vocations institute in Turin.⁴ Fraternal correction comes naturally to friends of the heart who share the same spiritual tastes and desires. True friendship, according to Saint Francis de Sales and Don Bosco, includes fraternal correction.

Official fraternal correction

Fr Rua went on to say, in 1899, that the practice of the private monitor had not survived in the Salesian world of his time. Correction was now carried out only by *ex officio* monitors, i.e. by responsible superiors, and occasionally by companions concerned with the common good. In these cases, the spiritual problem is twofold: it is passive from the point of view of the subordinate who receives the correction, and active from the point of view of the one offering correction.

In his ninth *Spiritual Conference* to the Sisters of the Visitation, Saint Francis de Sales discussed correction almost exclusively from this passive point of view. The question posed: "You want to know how we should receive correction without letting remain in us any sensitiveness or bitterness of heart?" he asked. He began by stating that it was impossible "to prevent the feeling of anger from stirring within us and to keep the blood from showing itself in our face." "There is nobody who is not averse

to correction.” In order not to lose one’s temper and regain composure, he advised people to simply humble themselves before God and talk to him about something else. “Humble yourselves with a gentle and peaceful humility, and not with a chagrined and troubled humility.” The one “corrected” will be careful not to feed their natural resentment and will strive to profit from the remarks heard.⁵

In his 1899 instruction to the Salesian novices, Fr Rua began by speaking of the need for correction. The human being is prone to committing a great many faults as a result of his passions and the clouding of his intelligence. Somebody has to come in and put things in order. The untended garden is covered with weeds. Instead of producing flowers and fruit, it can only serve as pasture for animals. The same goes for the garden of our souls. If the weeds are not pulled out, dirt takes over and it runs the risk of becoming a den of devils, even though God intended it to be his favourite dwelling place. Such hearts are doubly dangerous for their communities. First of all they grow roots that contaminate others around them, to the great detriment of religious communities. And then, because they criticise everything that is done in spite of themselves, they are a source of bitterness, disputes and dissension. Don Bosco therefore asked that they be removed as quickly as possible.

Fr Rua’s advice to those who have been reprimanded resembled St Francis’ advice. “As soon as the mouth opens in reproach, the heart rebels and wants to revolt” he said. “But let’s keep calm. When the one making the correction has finished his comments, we express our gratitude.

Do you want to show great perfection? Pray for the one who corrected you. Excuses will flood into your mind to exonerate yourself. The best thing to do is to say nothing, even if you think the one correcting you has made a mistake. Besides, if the superior had to put up with a discussion every time he had to make a remark, he would soon tire of it. On the contrary, in order to be better prepared to receive correction, let us go and ask our superior ourselves to make the remarks necessary to correct our faults. Ah! let us not allow our superior imagine that we do not welcome correction!⁶

Frs Rua and Albera dealt with official fraternal correction in their circulars but only from an active point of view – the superior responsible for his confreres. Such correction is by no means optional, they observed. It involves the conscience of the superior in a serious way. “Do not neglect fraternal correction when you see the need for it”, Fr Rua recommended to Salesian rectors and provincials. “Don’t wait for the evil to get worse, but in due course, *in spiritu lenitatis* (gently), exhort the lukewarm, correct the guilty, the

deficient, shake up the negligent. Also make the hesitant understand the seriousness of the fault of those who abandon their religious profession and the ingratitude of rejecting the vocation that God in his goodness has given them.”⁷

Fr Albera showed himself to be particularly sensitive to the duty of correction in his superiors. He returned to it twice in his circulars. “Whatever his office, the superior must not fail to correct the faults of his subordinates” he wrote in 1911.

According to St Bonaventure, the Superior who is unfaithful to the duty of correction sins against God whose authority he profanes, against the confreres whom he allows to fall into irregularity and laxity, against his own conscience, which will be burdened not only with his own faults, but those of others. What a terrible responsibility would that superior take on if, in order to gain popularity, he allowed his subjects to do what the Constitutions prohibit or what is contrary to what the Major Superiors command!⁸

He would later feel the need to explain how to offer correction. Correction should be made in good time, never on the spot. It should not be done in public, especially when angry. The Salesian avoids harsh and violent reproaches. Correction should take place calmly. “This is what Saint Francis de Sales taught, and this is how our most gentle Don Bosco acted”⁹ Where it happens also matters – the rector’s office during a friendly conversation, with the possibility of explanations to a superior filled with indulgence is the ideal place for fraternal correction.¹⁰

Whether it comes from a friend or a superior, fraternal correction is marked by frankness, but also by kindness and gentleness.

Fraternal correction, confession and the friendly talk

The aim of fraternal correction is to eradicate faults and make progress in the spiritual life. In many ways, therefore, it is confused with spiritual direction which, traditionally, is exercised in the Salesian world during confession and during the friendly talk. The Salesian spiritual director (or confessor) is a true monitor of the spiritual life. From a circular of Fr Rua’s to provincials and rectors in 1899, to Fr Viganò in 1983 during the tenth Salesian Family Spirituality Week, Salesian leaders have insisted on this.¹¹ Let’s take just one example.

The task of the spiritual director is to make known to us what God wants of us, the virtues we must practise, the means to which we must have recourse, the

dangers we must guard against in order not to fail in our Salesian vocation. It is he who must energise us when we are relaxed, and moderate our indiscreet zeal; it is he who must restrain our imagination, and show us the right measure to take in the practice of virtue, the choice of reading material, our relationships with our neighbour, the true nature of temptations and the most appropriate means for combating them. It is he who must instruct us in the best means to eradicate faults and acquire virtues; who must measure our faithfulness to the practices of piety, in observing the rules and in the fulfilment of the duties that belong to our vocation. Now we cannot have these things except from a stable guide who is filled with the Salesian spirit.¹²

Assumed not to be reduced to its negative side alone, spiritual direction covers everything that we mean by fraternal correction in the Salesian world.

Fraternal correction and review of life

However, this friendly fraternal correction no longer has good press in the liberal society of the contemporary West. People do not appreciate others interfering in their personal affairs. Insofar as today's working religious often isolates himself (wrongly so) in his community, he tends to do what he wants and how he wants to do it. Remarks about his private life are therefore unwelcome. Moreover, attempts at personal perfection are not to the taste of those who live for their apostolate alone. Therefore it is common, even among Salesian religious today, for the evangelical counsel of correction to be relatively little practised. All the more so as they are not familiar with the "chapter of faults" found in monasteries (with accusations, it should be noted, only of external breaches of the Rule, Constitutions and customs of the Congregation),¹³ which could go some way to making up for this deficiency. There is, no doubt, a lack courage to offer the correction and the humility to receive it.

But there are some encouraging signs. Apostolic concern keeps the fervent members of the Salesian Family on their toes. According to Fr Juan Vecchi, "the groups of the Salesian Family are asking not just for chaplains, but for spiritual directors. The communities and lay groups often find at least one Salesian who, in addition to the pedagogical part, is also able to follow their life of faith."¹⁴ If they succeed in overcoming inattention, laziness, routine and even human respect, they will be interested in fraternal correction itself. A good way to overcome the obstacles seems to be the practice adapted from the community revision of life that Catholic Action movements have introduced into contemporary spirituality. Many Salesians have been and still are involved in these.

Focused on the “event”, it is not necessarily suitable for all situations. But its method is instructive for all those who believe in the usefulness of questioning ourselves as a community.¹⁵

The schematic approaches to the review of life boil down to six stages, all of which are worth knowing.

1. A sharing of facts, in which each person brings forward an event that has struck them, in which they feel directly or indirectly involved. The group chooses one of these events, either because of its interest for the group as a whole, or above all because of its human dimension, which makes it an event.
2. Analysing the event. We analyse who is involved, the causes and consequences, the reactions of individuals and groups, and the transformations that are taking place.
3. The search for meaning. We reflect on the motivations shown by the people, the meaning they gave to their action, in much the same way as Jesus in the Gospel emphasised the attitude of Zacchaeus, the sinner, the Cananite woman, the Samaritan woman, the widow and Bartimaeus. This third stage is essential for revision, because the meaning of faith can only be grafted onto how human beings think today and find meaning.
4. Deepening the faith. For this stage, we refer to the Word of God, not necessarily to one or other passage, but to the general dynamic of this Word, to the guidelines that run through the whole Bible, especially the Gospels. The Word of God questions and purifies our choices and actions.
5. Listening to and sharing what we are called to. Everyone is invited to allow themselves to be challenged by this reflection in the depths of their being. Events have become the bearers of a call that is felt to be from the Saviour himself.
6. A time for prayer and celebration. This happens throughout the review of life, punctuated by moments of contemplative silence. A period of silence or a community celebration extends it. A Eucharistic celebration, a celebration of God’s forgiveness, a call to the Spirit or personal prayer can be the normal conclusion to the review of life.¹⁶

Review of life is a path of conversion to the God of Jesus Christ. Like mutual correction, it does not lead primarily to moral conversion, to a new ethic, but to a conversion of a theological nature which becomes an encounter with God the Saviour in today’s world. This path of ecclesial life enables us to become aware of the Church’s mission and to participate effectively in it. It opens us up to the meaning of sin, by seeing

where it is hiding and bringing it out into the open. Different from fraternal correction, it leads to similar results in the consciences of those who accept to be questioned by the community. So why not adapt it in the course of shared reflection that is not purely apostolic?

NOTES

- 1 *De ira*, lib. 3, chap. 36. The overall considerations on fraternal correction have been taken from the article by Marius Nepper, "Correction fraternelle", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t 2, 1953, col. 2404-2414.
- 2 "Se tu scorgerai in me qualche difetto, dimmelo tosto, affinché me ne possa emendare, oppure se vedrai qualche cosa di bene che io possa fare, non mancare di suggerirmelo." (G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 1859, chap. XVIII).
- 3 "Così nelle relig. vi è generalm. il monit. secr. ed anche nell'Orat ns. era una volta in uso tale bella prat. ed io st posso conì, che gr. fu il vant. ricev. dagli avvisi del monit. Secr. che aveva quando anc. era secol." (M. Rua, *Della correzione fraterna*, in *Retreat instructions*, Lanzo, 1899, ms, unpublished, p. 42-44, FdB 2895 El 1-12.)
- 4 E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, SEI, 1948, p. 61.
- 5 The complete title of the conference: "Auquel est traité de la modestie, de la façon de recevoir les corrections et du moyen d'affermir tellement son esprit en Dieu que rien ne l'en puisse détourner" *Vrays Entretien spirituels*, IX ; in *Oeuvres*, vol. VI, p. 131-156. On the topic of correction, p. 143-147.
- 6 "Ah! non permett. che il Sup. abbia a form. di noi l'idea che non ricev. volent, la correz." (M. Rua, *Della correzione fraterna*, loc. cit, p. 44-48.) Another sermon with the title *Correzione fraterna* appears in an unpaginated manuscript *d'Esercizi spirituali* of Fr Rua. It is reproduced in FdB 2945 D6-11 and doesn't seem to contain anything original.
- 7 "Non omettete la correzione fraterna quando ne scorgete il bisogno; non lasciate che il male si aggravi, ma in tempo opportuno in spirito lenitatis esortate il tiepido, correggete il colpevole, il difettoso, animate il negligente. Fate pur comprendere ai dubbiosi quale grave colpa sia il defezionare dalla propria religiosa professione e quale ingratitudine sia il rigettare quella vocazione che Dio per sua bontà ha loro data." (M. Rua, Circular to provincials and rectors, 29 November 1899, in L.C., p. 197).
- 8 "... Nè il Superiore, qualunque sia la sua carica, deve trascurare l'obbligo di correggere i difetti de' suoi dipendenti. Secondo S. Bonaventura il Superiore infedele al dovere della correzione pecca contro Dio, di cui profana l'autorità, contro i confratelli che lascia cadere nell'irregolarità e rilassatezza, contro la propria coscienza che sarà onerata non solo dei proprii falli, ma ancora di quelli degli altri. Quale terribile responsabilità assumerebbe quel superiore che per acquistarsi popolarità, permettesse a' suoi sudditi ciò che vietano le Costituzioni o che fosse contrario a quanto comandano i Superiori Maggiori ! ..." (P. Albera, Circular to Salesians, 25 December 1911, in L.C., p. 67).
- 9 "Questo insegnava San Francesco di Sales, e così operava il nostro dolcissimo Don Bosco." (P. Albera, Circular to provincials and rectors, 23 April 1917, § *Correzione*, L.C., p. 225).
- 10 The entire paragraph *Correzione*, in the above-mentioned circular pp. 224-226.
- 11 M. Rua, Circular to provincials and rectors, 29 November 1899, in L.C., pp. 195-200; *La direzione spirituale nella Famiglia Salesiana. Atti della X Settimana di spiritualità nella Famiglia Salesiana*, Rome, ed. SDB, 1983. See further on the entries *Spiritual direction* and *Penance*.

- 12 “... Il compito del direttore spirituale è quello di farci conoscere quello che Dio vuole da noi, le virtù che dobbiamo praticare, i mezzi a cui dobbiamo ricorrere, i pericoli contro cui dobbiamo premunirci per non venir meno alla nostra vocazione salesiana. E' lui che deve eccitarci quando siamo rilassati, e moderarci negli ardori indiscreti ; è lui che deve frenare la nostra immaginazione, e additarci la giusta misura da tenere nella pratica della virtù, nella scelta delle letture, e nelle relazioni col prossimo, la vera natura delle tentazioni e le armi più opportune per combatterle. E' lui che deve istruirci sui mezzi migliori per sradicare i difetti e acquistare le virtù ; che deve misurare la nostra esattezza nelle pratiche di pietà, nell'osservanza delle regole e nell'adempimento dei doveri inerenti alla vocazione. Ora queste cose non possiamo avere se non da una guida stabile e tutta ripiena dello spirito salesiano.” (P. Albera, Circular to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921; L.C., p. 420).
- 13 See Ph. Schmitz, “Chapitre des coupes”, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 2, 1953, col. 483-488.
- 14 J. Vecchi, “Spiritualité”, p. 12, in the session on *CG24 et Vie consacrée*, Paris, December 1997.
- 15 J. Bréheret, “Révision de vie”, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 13, 1988, col. 493-500.
- 16 In J. Bréheret, loc. cit., col. 495-496.

Free time

The price of time

What is time? We don't know what is closest and most familiar to us. But doesn't the very fact of asking the question testify to our awareness that we are not totally immersed in it and that we are participating in the time that is eternity, in other words that we think of ourselves as standing on the boundary between time and eternity? Salesian spiritual teachers of the past did not dwell on such considerations. They simply never joked about the price of God's extraordinary gift to his creature that is time.¹

Francis de Sales was sensitive to the priceless value of time. Time is slipping away, fleeing from us. "My God, how deceptive this life is, Madame, my very dear Cousin, and how short its consolations!" he cried one day. "They appear one moment, and another moment takes them away, and, were it not for the holy eternity to which all our days lead, we would be foolish to blame our human condition."² Every minute of this fleeting time, which prepares us for the promised eternity, is (or should be) a treasure. Francis' wish for a Sister of the Visitation: "We shall measure our years, our months, our weeks, our days, our hours, even our moments, so well that all of them, being used according to the love of God, will be profitable to us in eternal life to reign with the Saints."³ "Let us not think that it is a small thing to remain unfaithful for eight days and to delay our perfection for any little thing; on the contrary it is a great evil, all the more so as moments are very precious to us and must be very dear to us", he taught on the eve of his death in a sermon for the feast of the Apostle Saint Thomas.⁴ At the end of December 1609 this bishop, perpetually busy with holy tasks, had written to the Baroness de Chantal, "Alas! When I think of how I have used God's time, I regret that he may not want to give me eternity, since he only wants to give it to those who will use his time well."⁵ Indeed, "this time is given to us only for that (eternity)."⁶

Don Bosco and his immediate followers thought no differently. Idleness, a term that (wrongly) translated as wasted time in their minds, was the great enemy in their eyes. Don Bosco had the following sentence posted on the walls of the original oratory: "*Ogni momento di tempo è un tesoro*" (Every moment is a treasure).⁷ In 1878, at the end of the retreat at Mornese, he made the following remark to Mother Mazzarello and the Salesian Sisters in a semi-circle outside the door of their chapel: "I would like to see two posters

under this door saying: ‘Mortification is the ABC of perfection’ and ‘Every moment is worth a treasure.’”⁸ He had not left Mornese, we are told, before the two posters had already been affixed. The Salesian Sisters, who, as we can imagine, were well aware of this, had found another another holy reason for never neglecting precious time.

The Salesians and Salesian Sisters of the past were determined never to waste a moment, “lest the devil take it.” For idleness is the mother of all vices. In Fr Rua’s notebooks we find a sermon (two in fact) entitled “On idleness”. It was very much developed and reworked, a sign that it was delivered several times.⁹ Zeal would willingly have eliminated any “dead time” from the lives of this first generation. For the most ardent, avoiding wasting time seemed to become an obsession. At the beginning of his priesthood, Fr Rua devoted an entire sermon to the “price of time” (and probably, judging by his corrections, repeated it several times afterwards).¹⁰ He had accumulated testimonies in it taken from the elders and the Church’s tradition. Among a dozen pagan and Christian authorities, he quoted Virgil: “*Fugit irreparabile tempus*” (time flees without remedy), but also a paradoxical proposition by St Bernadine of Siena: “*Tantum valet tempus, quantum Deus*”, which he translated dispassionately as “A parcel of time is worth as much as God.”¹¹ His words on the price of time ended with a combination of Ecclesiasticus and the Book of Proverbs: “My son,” the Holy Spirit tells us, “preserve time and time will preserve you”, a sentence that Fr Rua interpreted as: “My son, use your time jealously, and time well spent will keep you happy for all eternity.”¹² Time well spent is a guarantee of eternal happiness, he taught. The day after his death, a Salesian (Fr Paolo Ubaldi) facetiously claimed that when he arrived in heaven, Fr Rua had gone immediately to Don Bosco and asked him, “What are you giving me to do?”¹³

Free time, forced time and leisure time

Celebrations, games, performances and holidays occupied a large number of hours and days in the lives of the Salesians of the past, who were less stressed than we might imagine. These entertainments were part of their very precious time. A brief vocabulary study can do justice to their spirituality. Without using an expression they wished to ignore, they cultivated “free time”. Here, as is so often the case, words make it easier to analyse and thus understand ideas and customs.

Over the last two centuries, the increase in free time has been one of the most important phenomena in industrialised countries. It has contributed greatly to the evolution of their cultures. The civilisation of work familiar to Don Bosco has, a century

after him, been joined by another civilisation, known as the civilisation of “free time” or “leisure”.¹⁴ And this culture has encroached on its counterpart. On average, it has been calculated that over a lifetime a French person now has around 150,000 hours of free time, compared with around 25,000 in 1800. The trend towards more free time, aggravated by unemployment and early retirement, accelerated in the last third of the 20th century.¹⁵ What’s more, the richness (or density) of free time has grown over time. Cultural and sporting activities have intensified, with a greater percentage of people taking part in a wide range of activities, while at the same time the activities themselves were renewed, stimulated by cultural activity and technological innovations.

However, *free time* does not automatically mean *leisure time*. First of all, free time taken as a whole is not the same thing as *forced time*, which includes time spent on personal care, time spent at work or for certain obligations (or at school for younger people), time spent travelling to and from work, and time spent on family responsibilities and housework. The consensus now seems to be that *leisure* is “a dynamic process, guided by the primary (and not for profit) pursuit of personal satisfaction and fulfilment.”¹⁶ Leisure activities (including non-activity, i.e. rest and idleness) are practised in what is known as leisure time, which in turn is part of the leisure process. This is because free time includes other times that concern non-obligatory activities, but which – unlike leisure time – correspond to institutional commitments. These include religious, political, civic and trade union activities. As a result, for many generous people leisure time, nibbled away in a hundred different ways, is shrinking.

So let’s do our best to distinguish between “free time” and “leisure time” in the strict sense of these terms. Contrary to an approximate view of things, a mother who is a stay-at-home mother, with no paid employment and apparently free to manage her time as she pleases, may have very little “free time” and, if she is pious and socially committed, no “leisure time” at all. Around 1850, Sunday, the only day of freedom and therefore of “free time” for an apprentice in Don Bosco’s original oratory, whose internal rules required him to attend Mass in the morning, take part in a catechism class and a religious ceremony in the afternoon, and sometimes also in various music or other lessons, was only partially and, in some cases, in no way “leisure time” for him! To equate the traditional Salesian oratory with a “leisure” centre – which seems to have been a frequent occurrence – would be a mistake.

The use of free time

The fact remains that, for the contemporary Salesian, “free time”, never “empty time”, necessarily evokes “leisure time” and the activities that fill it. Leisure, we are told, has three essential functions: relaxation, entertainment, the development and fulfilment of the personality. In fact, the first two functions are linked to the third and articulated around it, to the point of being interpreted as its preconditions. Relaxation leads to the essential recuperation of the self, and the forms of entertainment offer as many places, and therefore mediations, through which the end pursued in leisure, i.e. human fulfilment, can be achieved.¹⁷ Leisure conceived in this way does not necessarily exclude the essential gestures demanded by asceticism, the cross and mortification from the life of a Christian. It is all a question of balance.

In the tradition inherited from Don Bosco, leisure activities oriented in this direction are first and foremost games, sport, music, performances and excursions, a word that can legitimately be translated as travel.¹⁸ The disciple of Saint Francis de Sales has good reason to add dancing, which the saint allowed his *Introduction to the Devout Life* in a century that was still strict in terms of entertainment.¹⁹ But he avoids getting bogged down in things that are prefabricated, for leisure implies freedom. And in the plural, leisure uniformly refers to activities chosen, in a constantly changing world, depending on individual tastes and activities. At the end of the century French people spent an average of three hours a day watching television. But at the same time, their youth was successively infatuated with rock, football, techno and rap. And there was an unprecedented boom. The range of leisure activities, which depends on the motivations of each individual, is virtually unlimited.

A Jansenist mistrust of leisure activities does not suit Salesian spirituality. Moreover, Vatican II was careful to talk about its personal and social benefits.

May this leisure be used properly to relax, to fortify the health of soul and body through spontaneous study and activity, through tourism which refines man's character and enriches him with understanding of others, through sports activity which helps to preserve equilibrium of spirit even in the community, and to establish fraternal relations among men of all conditions, nations and races. Let Christians cooperate so that the cultural manifestations and collective activity characteristic of our time may be imbued with a human and a Christian spirit.²⁰

Sensitive to these lessons, the Salesian spiritual person makes intelligent use of his “precious” free time or leisure time. “Free time ... must not be time wasted”, said Fr Ricceri said.²¹ If he has social or political responsibilities, he makes every effort to ensure that this time is filled by those for whom he is responsible, young unemployed people in particular. He keeps himself in good physical condition through appropriate exercise. At the same time, he prevents intellectual decline which would spoil his retirement and old age. The ability to keep learning remains important at all ages, and while sport is necessary to keep the body flexible, the brain also needs exercise, and it knows this (or should know this). Salesian Family members therefore remains curious, with the discretion circumstances dictate. Their memory, which would rust with inaction, continues to work. Anxious not to let disinterest gradually take hold of them, they are systematically interested in their surroundings. As far as possible, they combine their professional activities with self-employment. As generous individuals they welcome voluntary work from all sides. Of course, when they retire, assuming they are still in good condition and free to organise their time – which is not necessarily the case for religious people! – they will devote themselves wholeheartedly to it. In the West, voluntary work covers a wide range of fields: literacy work, giving a voice to the voiceless (recording cassettes for the blind), library assistance, tutoring, technical aid to the Third World, visiting the sick, helping the unemployed, fighting poverty, correspondence teaching, and taking part in humanitarian movements. Associations need the experience that people have acquired over the years. And then, Don Bosco’s followers – whom we assume are also free to move about as they please – are not afraid to combine the pleasant with the useful. They visit their country, stroll through museums and take part in excursions in their region. Why not take an interest in the exhibitions, shows and concerts organised in their town or near where they live? Their time is precious, as their elders have told them time and time again. They spend it by using it wisely. “For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven” (Eccles 3:1).

The Salesians educate young people to develop a critical, aesthetic and moral sense. They encourage musical and dramatic activity, as well as reading and cinema clubs, their Regulations say.²² The Salesian Sister is formed to make judicious use of free time.²³ And the rules of her institute tell us that “The Volunteer (of Don Bosco) considers culture, the possibilities of leisure time, the mass media, as values and makes use of them both for an apostolic purpose and as a means of autoformation, education, and of healthy entertainment, being guided by the criteria of prudence and discretion.”²⁴

This last warning should not be overlooked by anyone. “All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial’... So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:23, 31). Prudence and discretion have always been honoured in the world of Don Bosco’s sons, who, like their father and teacher, work on the on the playground and in the theatre, as well as in the chapel, during the school year and during their holidays, always and everywhere “for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.” It is worth rereading the precise considerations Fr Ricceri gave on the excessively “bourgeois” holidays of his religious: reading which dulls the moral sense, long and costly journeys, somewhat ambiguous company and entertainment sometimes unworthy of a Christian, female relationships that lead to humiliating falls.²⁵

NOTES

- 1 See G. Aubry et alii, *Tempo libero*, coll. Cantiere VI, Turin, Centro Gioventù salesiana, 1965, 2 vols 370 and 302 pages.
- 2 Letter to Madame de Murat de la Croix, 28 September 1613; *Oeuvres*, vol. XVI, p. 78.
- 3 Letter to a Visitation Sister, 2 January 1620; *Oeuvres*, vol. XIX, p. 98.
- 4 Sermon for the Feast of Saint Thomas, 21 December 1622; *Oeuvres*, vol. X, p. 406.
- 5 Letter to Baroness de Chantal, 29 December 1609; *Oeuvres*, vol. XIV, p. 234.
- 6 Letter to Mother de Chantal, end of April-May 1613; *Oeuvres*, vol. XV, p. 376.
- 7 MB III, p. 550.
- 8 “Mi piacerebbe che sotto questo porticato ci fossero due cartelli con le scritte: La mortificazione è l’Abbici della perfezione e Ogni minuto di tempo vale un tesoro” (MB XII, p. 210).
- 9 “Dell’ozio”, in a series of notebooks known as *Prediche*, pp. 1-29. The first sermon pp. 1-16 and the second pp. 17-29. See FdB 2907 E6 to 2908 B10. In Italian, *Ozio* can also imply leisure time but Fr Rua was not interested in this meaning of the word.
- 10 “Preziosità del tempo”, in a notebook, *Appunti di prediche*, pp. 20-24, FdB 2898 EI to 2899 A3.
- 11 “Un momento di tempo vale quanto Dio”, loc. cit., p. 21.
- 12 “Fili, ci dice lo Spirito Santo, conserva tempus et tempus conservabit te; figlio accondisci gelosamente il tempo, e il tempo così ben impiegato ti conserverà felice per tutta l’eternità.” (Loc. cit., p. 24. See Eccl. 4:23 and Proverbs 4:6).
- 13 In A. Auffray, *Le premier successeur de Don Bosco*, Lyon, Vitte, 1932, p. 354.
- 14 See the question by J. Dumazedier, *Vers une civilisation de loisir?*, Paris, 1962, the author who will guide us from here on.
- 15 In N. Samuel, “Le loisir, temps social”, in the magazine *Projet* 229, spring 1992, p. 7.
- 16 In J. Dumazedier, “Loisir, valeurs résiduelles ou existentielles?”, in *Histoire des moeurs. Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*, Paris, 1991, pp. 1186-1307.
- 17 In J. Dumazedier, *Vers une civilisation du loisir?*, mentioned above, taken up by F. Libessart and G. Mathon, “Loisirs”, in *Catholicisme*, t. VII, 1975, col. 1029, whose words are reproduced here.
- 18 We can read, in this sense, P. Braido, *Prevenire, non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*, Roma, LAS, 1999, pp. 324-337.
- 19 See the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Three, Chap. XXXIII and XXXIV, and the letter to President Brulart, ca. 20 April 1610, in *Oeuvres*, vl. XIV, p. 279.
- 20 *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 61.
- 21 “Il tempo libero non sia tempo perso”. (L. Ricceri, “Lavoro e temperanza contro l’imborghesimento”, Letter to Salesians, October 1974, *Atti* 276, pp. 44-47).
- 22 SDB Regulations, art. 32.

- 23 “Attente a una caratteristica dimensione salesiana nell’educazione all’uso del tempo libero, valorizzeremo il teatro e l’arte espressiva in genere come risposta al bisogno di comunicazione della gioventù. Daremo spazio a proposte e ad iniziative culturali, artistiche, musicali, sportive, facendone momenti di incontro formativo.” (FMA Regulations, art. 62.)
- 24 “La Volontaria considera la cultura, le possibilità del tempo libero, i mass media come valori e li usa sia a scopo apostolico sia come mezzi di autoformazione, di educazione e di sano svago, ispirandosi a criteri di prudenza e di discrezione.” (VDB Regulations, art. 4).
- 25 L. Ricceri, “Lavoro e temperanza contro l’imborghesimento “, mentioned above, pp. 45-46.

Friendship

St Francis de Sales and “real friendships”

“Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter: whoever finds one has found a treasure. Faithful friends are beyond price; no amount can balance their worth. Faithful friends are life-saving medicine; and those who fear the Lord will find them.”¹

These sentences in the Wisdom of Ben Sira, applied to true friendships, deeply touched the soul of Francis de Sales, who celebrated them with such fervour in his Introduction to the Devout Life.² Communication, which is the foundation of all forms of friendship, makes the necessary distinctions between friendships. For the goods communicated can be false, vain, good or excellent. Therefore, there are bad friendships, vain friendships, good friendships and excellent friendships. Real friendships are at least good and, if possible, excellent. A rural comparison, drawn from Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, illustrated his thinking.

That honey is best which is culled from the choicest flowers, and so friendship built upon the highest and purest intercommunion is the best. And just as a certain kind of honey brought from Pontus is poisonous, being made from aconite, so that those who eat it lose their senses, so the friendship which is based on unreal or evil grounds will itself be hollow and worthless.³

False friendships are dangerous, frivolous and superficial friendships are vain and foolish, love affairs are dangerous. The sensible man cultivates only “real friendships.”

Francis dedicated an entire chapter to these “real friendships” which, however affectionate they may be, can be eminently spiritual.⁴ Real friends communicate virtuous things to each other. Communicating your knowledge is laudable. But it is better to communicate virtues. He listed prudence, discretion, strength, and justice. The summit is reached in the communication of charity. “If the bond of your mutual liking be charity, devotion and Christian perfection, God knows how very precious a friendship it is!” Precious because it comes from God, because it tends to God, because God is the link that binds you, because it will last for ever in Him. “Truly it is a blessed thing to love on earth as we hope to love in Heaven, and to begin that friendship here which is to endure for ever there.”

Friendship is not contemptible because it is “particular”! Oh, no! Friendship is a virtue, writes St Thomas. Christ had friends: Saint John, Lazarus’ family ... And Francis knew many saints bound by friendship. But it was always a question of spiritual friendship, “which binds souls together, leading them to share devotions and spiritual interests, so as to have but one mind between them.” Philothea was invited to be friends only with people who could communicate virtuous things. The more exquisite the virtues in this exchange, the more perfect the friendship will be. Such friendship is a source of happiness. “Such as these may well cry out, ‘Behold, how good and joyful a thing it is, brethren, to dwell together in unity!’” All other friendships are only a shadow of the value of this one!

John Bosco’s friendships

In his youth Don Bosco had heartfelt friends, special friends. The best known were Paolo Braja, Jonah and Luigi Comollo.

The feelings experienced and the goods communicated (to use Francis de Sales’ terms) in these friendships emerge from the description that he has himself left us of his relationships with the last two. John Bosco loved Jonah and Luigi, and he was very much loved by them. The friendship which united them was not a sensual *eros*, but a *philia*, in the sense given by Aristotle to this word in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁵ or a love of benevolence, as St Thomas translates it in the *Summa Theologica*.⁶ Each wanted the good of the other and received happiness from him, without which there is no friendship properly speaking.

The words of the older Don Bosco about his friendship with Jonah, this handsome boy with an admirable voice, are significant:

When I was still a humanities student lodging at Pianta’s café, I got to know a Jewish youngster called Jonah. He was about eighteen, was remarkably good-looking and had an exceptionally fine singing voice. He was a good billiards player too. We met at Elijah’s Bookstore, and he would always ask for me as soon as he came into the shop. I liked him a lot, and he was very attached to me. Every spare minute he had, he spent in my room: we sang together, played the piano, or read. He liked to hear the thousand little stories I used to tell.⁷

Concerned about Jonah’s salvation, John would lead him to be instructed in Christianity and be baptised. The description immerses us in the most authentic

friendship. It did not have the character of *eros*, passionate love. Apparently there was no fault, no anguish, jealousy or suffering that disturbed the relationship between Jonas and John. Their friendship was community, sharing and fidelity all at once and for both of them useful, pleasant and good. It was also, and above all else a spiritual friendship. These two friends rejoiced in each other and in their very friendship. Jonas and John's friendship was the joy of loving and being loved, of caring for each other, of shared life, of making choices in mutual pleasure and trust. How can such a true friendship not be described as a virtue?⁸

The description of the bond between Comollo and Bosco spread over a good number of pages in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, is less telling, but evokes the same sentiments.⁹ Bosco could not detach himself from his friend Comollo; he followed him everywhere, even in the chapel at the seminary and its confessionals. They admired each other, though for different reasons. Comollo's lessons were faithfully heeded and practised by Bosco. To please his friend, Bosco agreed to develop spiritually. Their mutual trust, based on friendship was, according to a word of our narrator, "unlimited".¹⁰ Don Bosco wrote in his *Memoirs*:

As long as God preserved the life of this incomparable companion, we were always very close to each other. During the holidays we often corresponded and visited back and forth. In him I saw a holy youth, and I loved him for his rare virtue. He loved me for the help I gave him with his studies. When I was with him, I modelled myself on his conduct.¹¹

The love between them was mutual and profound. Finally, Comollo's untimely death so struck Don Bosco that he decided not to give his heart to anyone "except God".¹² In this friendship, which Saint Francis would have called excellent, the sharing, which excluded nothing, neither the physical defence of the weakest by the strongest, nor his assistance in studies, was predominantly spiritual, entirely geared to the "mutual improvement" of the two friends.¹³ We have here two examples of particular friendships of high quality.

Dominic Savio's friendships as seen by Don Bosco

Don Bosco devoted two chapters of his life of Dominic Savio to "his close friends", Camillo Gavio and Giovanni Massaglia.¹⁴ For Dominic Savio also had heartfelt friends who loved him and were loved by him. The Immaculate Conception Sodality, of which

he had probably been the inspiration, could be described as a “*colleganza di amicizie spirituali*”.¹⁵

Savio was naturally likeable. He had earned the friendship or at least the respect of everyone.¹⁶ This flexible attitude enabled him to get on well with everyone in his class and at the Valdocco oratory. But he didn’t just stick to generic friendship, woven of cheap smiles and insignificant words, which would attract the good graces of those around him. Dominic had his “private friends”, enrolled in the Immaculate Conception Sodality. They were “in close contact” with him.¹⁷ They all loved each other. Two of these “special friends” of Dominic, Gavio and Massaglia, liked to talk about the spiritual life. In his initial conversation with Savio, Don Bosco attributed the following exchange to Gavio:

Savio: “Anyone who only wants God’s will has a real desire to become a saint, do you want to become a saint?”

Gavio. “Oh yes; I want that more than anything else.”

Savio. “That’s great; you can be one of our special group, if you like, and share completely what we do together to help us to live for Jesus and Mary.”¹⁸

This is an “excellent” friendship, according to the categories of Francis de Sales, based on spiritual goods. Mutual affection was certainly not absent. Savio didn’t leave his memoirs. We will never know the nuances and strength of the friendship between Gavio and Savio. Let us merely read, as Don Bosco constructed it, his farewell to the friend who died so shortly after this conversation:

Goodbye Camillo; I am sure you have gone straight to heaven – get a place ready for me there also. I will always be your friend as long as I live. I will pray for the repose of your soul.¹⁹

The two friends separated by death still shared the goods that remained to them: prayer and remembrance.

Friendship in the Salesian tradition after Don Bosco

Don Bosco was not afraid to speak of friendship between the Salesians and their students. He himself, at first contact with a young person, often asked him if he wanted to be his “friend”.²⁰ He signed his letters to those close to him: “*Aff.mo amico*”, that is to say: “Most affectionate friend”. Friendship, based on mutual benevolence and trust, seemed to him essential to his preventive system. *Amorevolezza*, that is, mutual affection,

was one of its pillars. The preventive system “makes the student feel affectionate towards his educator.” “The pupil will always be the friend of his educator and will remember with pleasure all his life the direction he has received”, we read in his *Little Treatise on the Preventive System*.²¹

Over time, the Salesians soon began to avoid these terms or carefully sweetened them. The boarding school has undeniable drawbacks. Erotic friendships, where genitality predominates, occur too easily. Don Bosco was already suspicious of it in 1863. “If you find that one of them (the assistants) makes a particular friendship with a student... you will change his job ...” he wrote to Fr Rua, the new Rector at Mirabello.²² For a century, the traditional Salesian house was the boarding school carefully closed in on itself. Don Bosco’s official biographer, Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, aware of their moral dangers, made every effort in his accounts to remove anything that would have appeared to be encouraging particular friendships of teachers with their pupils and of pupils among themselves.²³ And, after Don Bosco, Salesian authorities were inclined to exclude “particular friendships” altogether, classifying them (silently) under the infamous heading of erotic friendships. The indexes of circulars from the Superiors General, from Fr Rua to Fr Ricaldone, knew little else until Vatican Council II.²⁴

It was not until Fr Viganò in 1996 that the term friendship appeared in his circulars without any negative connotations. Friendship with young people is essential to the preventive system, we read.²⁵ The 19th General Chapter of the Salesians had, it is true, praised friendship between young people as early as 1965 by assigning a “positive value” to it.²⁶ It was an isolated voice. Simultaneously, throughout the Salesian Family, new regulations accepted speaking about friendship between confreres and sisters or between teachers and pupils, but in a weak sense. In 1971, the Special General Chapter of the Salesians called for communities of “genuine friendship”.²⁷ “In an atmosphere of brotherly friendship, we share our joys and sorrows and we are partners in our apostolic plans and experiences” the 1984 Constitutions would say.²⁸ The Salesian Sisters adopted a similar language: “We will always welcome our sisters with respect, esteem and understanding, in a spirit of open and cordial dialogue, of benevolence, of true and maternal friendship.” The sisters will offer young people their “friendly presence” at “moments of recreation and relaxation”.²⁹ As for the Volunteers of Don Bosco, they strive to create around them “a family climate and friendly relations.”³⁰ In all these documents it is a question, certainly, of a real friendship but of quite a general and everyday kind, the kind which the members of a close-knit family show each other, but never any particular friendship which is essentially a strong friendship. The term still

seems to frighten people. The social context prevents the use of the Francis de Sales' terminology, who happily characterised friendship this way when it is "authentic".

Open works, which are the rule almost everywhere today, will make it possible to rediscover Don Bosco's teaching on real friendships, which he himself had profited so much from in his youth, and which he later fearlessly praised in his *Lives of Comollo and Savio*. Within the religious fraternity, the affinity of points of view and, more generally, the legitimate warmth that creates affectivity, create friendship to varying degrees. This is accepted "without scandal", said the Rector Major Fr Vecchi at the end of the twentieth century.³¹

NOTES

- 1 Ecclesiasticus 6:14-16.
- 2 The six chapters on friendship in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Three, Chaps XVII-XXII.
- 3 Op. cit., Chap. XVII.
- 4 Op. cit., Chap. XIX : “Of real Friendship”.
- 5 Books VIII and IX.
- 6 Amor benevolentiae sive amicitiae, Summa Theologica, Ia IIae, quest. 26, art. 4.
- 7 “L’anno di umanità, dimorando nel caffè dell’amico Giovanni Pianta contrassi relazione con un giovanetto ebreo di nome Giona. Esso era sui diciotto anni, di bellissimo aspetto ; cantava con una voce rara fra le più belle. Giuocava assai bene al bigliardo, ed esseodoci già conosciuti presso al libraio Elia, appena giungeva in bottega, dimandava tosto di me. [Io] gli portava grande affetto, egli poi era folle per amicizia verso di me. Ogni momento libero egli veniva a passarlo in mia camera ; ci trattenevamo a cantare, a suonare il piano, a leggere, ascoltando volentieri mille storielle, che gli andava raccontando.” (MO Da Silva, p. 73.)
- 8 I have drawn my inspiration from Aristotle’s description of *philia* in his *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII.
- 9 MO Da Silva, p. 65-70, 100-104.
- 10 MO Da Silva, p. 103.
- 11 “Finché Dio conservo’ in vita questo incomparabile compagno, ci fili sempre in intima relazione. Nelle vacanze più volte io andava da lui, più volte egli veniva da me. Frequenti erano le lettere che ci indirizzavamo. Io vedeva in lui un santo giovanetto ; lo amava per le sue rare virtù ; egli amava me perchè l’aiutava negli studi scolastici, e poi quando era con lui mi sforzava di imitarlo in qualche cosa.” (MO Da Silva, p. 100.)
- 12 A confidence collected in the early '60s by Domenico Ruffino, *Cronache 1861-62-63*, p. 111. Used in MB I, 119.
- 13 Another confidence to Ruffino, also used in MB I, 119.
- 14 *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, Turin, 1880, ch. 18 (“Sue amicizie particolari. Sue relazioni col giovane Gavio Camillo”) and 19 (“Sue relazioni col giovane Massaglia Giovanni”).
- 15 The French translation – it might have been inevitable – “collège d’amitiés spirituelles” is too solemn and poorly translates the familiarity of the Italian “colleganza”. The word is found in A. Caviglia, *Savio Domenico e Don Bosco*. Studio, Torino, 1943, p. 460.
- 16 *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, same edition, Chap. 18, beginning.
- 17 “Trattarono molto con lui”, *ibid.*
- 18 “... sicché con tutta confidenza (Savio) continuò così: chi desidera fare la volontà di Dio, desidera di santificare se stesso ; hai dunque volontà di farti santo ? - Questa volontà in me è grande. - Bene : accresceremo il numero dei nostri amici, e tu sarai uno di quelli che prenderanno parte a quanto facciamo noi per farci santi.”

- 19 “... mirandolo estinto, commosso gli diceva : Addio, o Gavio, tu sei volato al cielo; prepara anche un posto per me. Io ti sarò sempre amico, e finché il Signore mi lascerà in vita, pregherò pel riposo dell’anima tua.”
- 20 See for example the first meeting between Don Bosco and the young Philip Rinaldi: “Contavo allora poco più di 10 anni. Il buon Padre era in refettorio, dopo il suo pranzo, e ancora seduto a mensa. Con grande amorevolezza s’informò delle mie cose, mi parlò all’orecchio, e, dopo avermi chiesto se volevo essere suo amico, soggiunse subito, quasi per chiedermi una prova della mia corrispondenza, che al mattino andassi a confessarmi.” (F. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians in *Atti*, 26 April 1931, pp. 940-941.)
- 21 “L’allievo sarà sempre amico dell’educatore e ricorderà gnor con piacere la direzione avuta.” (*Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*”, Turin, 1877, § III.)
- 22 “Accorgendoti che taluno di essi (gli assistenti) contragga amicizia particolare con qualche allievo ... lo cangerai d’ufficio ...” (G. Bosco to M. Rua, s. 1., s. d., *Epistolario* Motto, I, p. 615.)
- 23 For example, at the beginning of a talk by Don Bosco on the evening of 5 September 1867, he deliberately suppressed the words : “Dice la Sacra Scrittura che chi trova un vero amico trova un tesoro”, that we find in the immediate source in *Documenti* X, 295. See MB VIII 930/1-32.
- 24 “Amicizie particolari, fuggirle”, the index of circulars by Fr Rua says by way of summary. And the index of Fr Ricaldone’s circulars says : “Amicizie, fuga delle amicizie particolari”.
- 25 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1978 .
- 26 “L’amicizia tra i ragazzi richiede la vigile attenzione dell’educatore, perchè non degeneri in ‘amicizia particolare’. Resta comunque di per se stessa un valore positivo. Ben guidata essa offre una delle risorse più vive per formare il giovane all’apertura e al dono generoso di sè, soprattutto nell’età della grande adolescenza.” (Acts of GC XIX, in *Atti* 244, p. 196.)
- 27 This was a *fraternal* friendship, by no means a particular kind, described as follows. “... l’amicizia fraterna, che si fonda sulla lealtà, onestà, collaborazione, corresponsabilità, generosità, capacità di rinuncia, volontà di fare équipe ... deve essere considerata una meta della vita comunitaria ...” (§ Comunità di amicizia autentica, CGS no. 487).
- 28 Art. 51.
- 29 “Ognuna di noi perciò cerchi di accogliere sempre le sorelle con rispetto, stima e comprensione, in atteggiamento di dialogo aperto e familiare, di benevolenza, di vera e fraterna amicizia.” “Notevole incidenza sulla vita personale e comunitaria hanno i momenti di ricreazione e di distensione [...] Condivideremo con le giovani particolari momenti di festa [...] e parteciperemo alle loro ricreazioni con quella presenza amica che suscita affetto e confidenza” (FMA Constitutions, art. 50 and 55.)
- 30 “La castità ci aiuta ad aprire il cuore [...]], creando intorno a noi un clima di famiglia e rapporti di amicizia” (VDB Constitutions, art. 25).
- 31 J. Vecchi, Conference “La vie fraternelle en communauté”, Paris, 26-29 December 1997, p. 9.

Gentleness

The exemplary gentleness of Saint Francis de Sales

Gentleness did not come naturally to John Bosco, who awoke from the “dream” he had when he was nine years old with his fists aching from the blows given to the boys who were swearing¹ and who, at least at the beginning of his clerical training, was considered to be the seminarian at the seminary in Chieri most given to anger.² Then he learned to control himself. The panegyrics of Saint Francis de Sales, which as a rule were preached on 29 January each year, gave him food for thought. According to his Spiritual Testament the fourth resolution he took in preparation for his ordination to the priesthood was “May the charity and gentleness of St Francis de Sales be my guide in all things.”³ From then on, it would be agreed that he was very gentle, or, almost synonymously with this, very meek and mild, especially in his dealings with young people and in accordance with the recommendation of the Lady in the Dream: “You will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love”.⁴ And we come back to Saint Francis de Sales, who gave his name his name to the new Valdocco Oratory in Turin. According to Don Bosco, the second reason for this choice was that “because we had put our own ministry, which called for great calm and meekness, under the protection of this saint in the hope that he might obtain for us from God the grace of being able to imitate him in his extraordinary meekness and in winning souls.”⁵ From the outset, the image of Don Bosco’s spirituality reflected the conquering gentleness of the apostle of the Chablais.

Gentleness, the virtue “rarer than perfect chastity”, is “the flower of charity” and charity put into practice, Francis had taught.⁶ “I recommend to you above all the spirit of gentleness, which is the one that delights hearts and stirs souls”, he wrote to a young abbe.⁷ Don Bosco, who was passionate about apostolic effectiveness and remembering that, as Francis said over and over again, that a spoonful of honey was more effective than a barrel of vinegar, was very sensitive to this. Gentleness adds a veneer to apostolic charity, a virtue highly recommended to those who follow Don Bosco. Unfortunately, however, this follower sometimes neglects both the virtue and its veneer.

This virtue so pleasing to others

At the end of a war which for four long years had, to say the least, ignored and scorned gentleness in the relationships between peoples, the Rector Major Fr Albera devoted an entire circular letter to it, intended solely for Salesian superiors, i.e. provincials and directors.⁸ Harshness had penetrated social relationships, including in the Salesian world. “For many, the exercise of authority is unfortunately an opportunity to lack charity”, he lamented. He wanted to persuade these people, whose (relative) prestige made them seem a little too imposing at the time, “to show their subordinates not only charity, but also respect for others, which is like its flower and perfection.”⁹

Gentleness is the opposite of violence, the hallmark of war. Gentleness is peace. The spirit imbued with it, like a reef battered by ocean waves, remains firm and equal be it in honour or contempt, in joy or suffering” Fr Albera wrote.¹⁰ He compared this image of serenity with the image of the Salesian superior who is not so concerned about imitating Don Bosco, and reprimanding a subordinate with a stern look on his face, a “grim” eye filled with anger and looking indignantly upon the unfortunate man sitting opposite him.¹¹ How little this person resembles Jesus, who said: “Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart!” (Matthew 11:29). For gentleness is a Gospel virtue, my good friends!

The virtue of gentleness requires us to control the liveliness of our character, to repress any movement of impatience and to forbid our tongue from uttering a single word offensive to the person with whom we are dealing. It requires the refusal of any form of violence in attitude, words or actions. For Fr Albera, in his depiction of gentleness, it seemed impossible to forget “the serene gaze filled with kindness, the true and clear reflection of a spirit that is sincerely gentle and only wishes to make those who approach him happy.”¹²

Gentle does not mean soft-spoken or soft-hearted, its sly caricatures. Gentleness is not weakness either. Don Bosco combined gentleness and firmness. The Letter to the Galatians associates these fruits of the Spirit, which are “gentleness” and “self-control” (Galatians 5:23). This latter, taken from Greek philosophical ethics, suggests that human beings should exercise voluntary control over their passions. In this way, Christian gentleness distances itself from anything that might resemble cowardice. It appeals to the Spirit of strength that delivers us from self-slavery and introduces us to freedom. As we can see from Fr Albera’s circular, the effect is the opposite to power based on the destruction of others. This strength, like Christ’s, is exercised “in weakness”. It rejects

facile arguments such as the brilliance of language and the aplomb of presence. Humble, it offers the “language of the cross” which is “the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18), a free shift in approach to those for whom it is intended. Brutality closes hearts, while gentleness makes them open to the Gospel. The disciple of Don Bosco has so many reasons to prefer smiling, persuasive gentleness to harsh, thundering violence.¹³

NOTES

- 1 MO Da Silva, p. 36.
- 2 See *Don Bosco en son temps*, p. 120.
- 3 “4° La carità e la dolcezza di S. Francesco di Sales mi guidino in ogni cosa.” *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6*, ms, pp. 4-5).
- 4 “Non colle percosse ma colla mansuetudine e colla carità dovrai guadagnare questi tuoi amici” (MO Da Silva, p. 35).
- 5 “2° Perché la parte di quel nostro ministero esigendo grande calma e mansuetudine, ci eravamo messi sotto alla protezione di questo Santo, affinché ci ottenesse da Dio la grazia di poterlo imitare nella sua straordinaria mansuetudine e nel guadagno delle anime.” (MO Da Silva, p. 133.)
- 6 See the *Table analytique* of his *Oeuvres*, s.v. *Douceur*, p. 40.
- 7 Francis de Sales to Madame Bourgeois, 3 May 1604, in *Oeuvres*, vol. XII, p. 272.
- 8 . Albera, Letter to provincials and rectors “sulla dolcezza”, 20 April 1920, L.C., pp. 280-294.
- 9 “Per molti l'esercizio dell'autorità è purtroppo occasione di mancare di carità (...) per animarli ad usare verso i loro dipendenti non solo la carità, ma la dolcezza, che ne è come il fiore e la perfezione” (Above-mentioned letter, p. 280).
- 10 Op. cit p. 281.
- 11 Non si creda che sia uno zelo lodevole, quello che in tali circostanze ci suggerisce forti ed aspri rimproveri, che ci fa creder necessario di prendere un contegno severo, di guardare con occhio torvo e pieno di sdegno il colpevole che ci sta dinanzi” (Op. cit. p. 284).
- 12 “... un cenno di quello sguardo sereno e pieno di bontà, che è il vero e limpido specchio di un animo sinceramente dolce e unicamente desideroso di rendere felice chiunque ravvicina.” (Op. cit., p. 281).
- 13 Evocative remarks on “la douceur” in A. Comte-Sponville, *Petit traité des grandes vertus*, PUF, 1995, pp. 243-255.

God

God our Creator and Father

The spiritual life is essentially about the relationship between God and his creature. The mediating image of this relationship conditions it. The individual's idea of God is therefore decisive for the Salesian spiritual life. Like spirituality as a whole, this idea may have varied over the course of its history. Let's begin from both ends of the Salesian experience.

In 1858, Don Bosco began his *Mese di maggio* (which was a small treatise on spirituality) with an instruction on "God our Creator", whose extraordinary majesty he invited us to consider. It was only a moderately successful effort in our view. The picture he painted was taken too literally from the first chapter of Genesis, the symbolism of which eluded our theologian, who historicised creation. Don Bosco risked appearing to forget any distinction between first and second causes, going so far as to state that God "sustains and moves the formidable weight of immensity."¹ Like the Psalmist, he had no problem mixing physics and metaphysics. But let us endeavour to find his meaning beyond the images, which is basically quite accurate – an all-powerful and good Creator.

If we open our eyes, he said, we cannot but recognise the existence, the power and the wisdom of God by whom all things were created. God exists, because every house needs an architect and every watch a watchmaker.

It was God who said let there be light, and there was light. The light was separated from the darkness, and immediately it spread throughout the vast spaces of heaven and earth. At the word of Almighty God, the sea was enclosed within certain limits, the earth was covered with grass and trees. At his voice, birds, fish and other animals populated the heavens, the earth and the waters.² To all things he said: I made you: *ego sum*, I am. These words, which every man can and must understand, express his power and divinity.³

Don Bosco was astounded by the goodness of the Creator. Everything we admire in the universe was created for man, he exclaimed: the sun, the moon, the stars, the air he breathes, the fire that warms him, the earth that bears him fruit, everything was made by God for him.

So, on the one hand, God exists and, on the other, he is Providence. What gratitude, respect and love we should feel towards so great and so good a God! And what can we do to correspond to his immense goodness? At the very least, concluded Don Bosco, it is important to follow the precepts of his Law. Man gains much by doing so. For this infinitely just and merciful God will cover those who have served him by their good deeds with glory, while he will subject those who rebel against his holy Law to terrible punishment.⁴

A hundred and forty years later, the preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000 led Don Bosco's eighth successor to talk about the most common images of God around him. The stern judge had faded under the wave of tolerance and the loss of a sense of sin. For many, God was reduced to a tailor-made construct, a vague reality, a shadow without a face or signs of life; and, in the best of cases, a recourse in times of trouble. The quality of faith was at stake, he remarked. And, through the teachings and story of Jesus, he summed up his own thoughts on God, in whom he saw first and foremost a Father.

Who he was and what his relationship with man was, was the object of God's revelation to Abraham and Moses. The believer seeks the face of God in Scripture, especially in the Gospel. The God to whom he entrusts himself is the one who revealed himself in Christ and whom Jesus taught us to know and to love. It is God, the source of life, who gives life to mankind in abundance. He wants the happiness of each person; but he hands it over to that person's freedom and responsibility. He is providential: he clothes the lilies of the field, he feeds the birds of the air, but above all he goes in search of the poor, like the Good Shepherd, creating new opportunities for grace for each one. He bestows gifts of intelligence and will and wants man to make use of them. He has arranged a future of peace for us, but asks that we participate in building it. He does not remove the crosses, but invites us to consider their mystery positively. He reminds us that sin destroys man. He redeemed us from it through the death and resurrection of Christ in whom he offers the image of the new and perfect man, the way to him, the truth and principle of new life.⁵

Over time, religious sentiments have necessarily varied in the Salesian world in terms of the most common representations of God.

The fear of God

In the beginning, there is fear in man's heart before his God. The Bible says that "The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). "The Fear of the Lord is

the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10).⁶ This salutary fear was in vogue in the world at the time of the young Bosco’s priestly training. The archbishop, who promulgated the rules of the house where he entered in 1835, wanted “piety and the fear of God to be the first qualities of those who wish to live in our seminary.”⁷ His reminder, which gradually disappeared in the course of the twentieth century – Fr Viganò’s circulars seem to have ignored it – was a frequent feature of the early Salesian tradition. However, its meaning could vary. For, depending on its origin, fear of God takes different forms in the heart of his creatures.

First of all, it is a reverential fear arising from a sense of the Lord’s almighty greatness. Francis de Sales dwelt on this in one of his pamphlets. Reverence, he wrote “is nothing other than a certain lively apprehension and just fear of not behaving well, and lacking honour and respect towards God and divine things.” Sacred reverence threw Daniel and the other prophets “half dead” before the majesty of God. It makes the Seraphim veil their eyes and their feet as unworthy to look at the Lord and to be near him. This reverence would persist for centuries without end. The “inestimable esteem” shown by the saints for divine excellence means that they eternally revere the divine Majesty. A “pleasant and loving apprehension of his greatness” gives them a perpetually attentive concern to properly exalt the divine Goodness. This is the fear of which it is said that “the powers tremble” before the divine Majesty. As much as God’s goodness assures the saints that he will never fail them, so much more does “his majesty provoke them to attention and care and reverence.”⁸ Prostration best expresses reverential awe before God the Creator.

Probably, Don Bosco sometimes preached more or less this reverential fear of the Lord. Thus, when he wrote to a young cleric: “Always remember that in this world the greatest wealth is the holy fear of God.”⁹ But, for reasons of pedagogical effectiveness, in his addresses to young people, he usually knew only one other form of fear of God, which Francis de Sales called “servile”, if it was fear of punishment (hell), or “mercenary”, if it stemmed from regret for a lost reward (paradise). For Don Bosco never forgot that God would be for each of us, at the hour of our death, a judge that the reading of his *Mese di maggio* obliges us to describe as pitiless.¹⁰ One of his teachers was the Jesuit Giampietro Pinamonti, author of a book entitled *True Wisdom*, subtitled *Very Useful Considerations for the Acquisition of the Holy Fear of God*, which, as you can imagine, placed more emphasis on the “holy fear of God” than on his love.¹¹ He therefore cultivated a certain kind of pastoral fear. The proud, he said, do not fear the Lord and sink into vice, whereas, according to Scripture, the beginning of all wisdom is the fear of God.¹² His biographer

rightly wrote that “the holy fear of God, inspired by the words of Don Bosco, was both a guide and a brake for the boys’ conduct.”¹³ Don Bosco was “moved only by an ardent desire to save souls and to infuse hearts with the holy fear of God”, as Fr Albera affirmed. “God sees you”, said the inscriptions on the walls of the Oratory, in other words: “He is watching you.”¹⁴ God, the creator and judge, remained close to his creature in the early Salesian world.

The reverential fear of God reappeared at the end of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Let us rediscover the fear of God, which “is the sense of God’s greatness and holiness”, recommended the Rector Major Fr Vecchi at the Salesian Spirituality Days in 1998. “God is a Father and good. But he is also powerful, sovereign creator and Lord. He is transcendent.” While he always forgives, he must also be taken taken seriously. He is our Father, not some good-luck fetish we turn to in times of trouble. He is at the origin of every being, of every gift, of every grace. “As well as respecting and recognising God as he is, the fear of God reminds us that we are not the masters of good and evil, and that we must therefore look to him as the foundation of life and values.” Salesians, let us educate in the fear of God and through the fear of God. Let us always speak well of God, never caricature him, never ridicule him.¹⁶

Serving the glory of God

“For the greater glory of God”, a phrase dear to the Ignatian tradition, was a recurring theme in Don Bosco’s writings. The glory of God was one of the beacons of his life. In his opinion, did it not illuminate the path of the holy souls he described in his books and sermons? Saint Paul, who “desired nothing more ardently than to promote the greater glory of God”; Saint Philip Neri, who, “moved by the desire for the glory of God”, had given up everything he loved to undertake a difficult apostolate in sixteenth-century Rome; Saint Francis de Sales, who had died “after a life entirely devoted to the greater glory of God”; or Dominic Savio, who is said to have said, “I am not capable of doing much, but what I can, I want to do for the greater glory of God”? In fact, he said, “the virtues and actions of the saints are all directed towards the same end, which is the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.”¹⁷

The glory of God, or in other words the brilliance of divine perfection, is reflected in creation.¹⁸ Do not the heavens “tell” of this (Ps 19:1)? As for human beings, they increase or make it “greater” through the physical or moral improvement of the world as it has come “from the hands of the Lord”. This is only made possible by submission to

his will or divine plan. A more united, more beautiful, more just and healthier universe will testify to the greater glory of God. The Psalmist sang with meaningful combinations of words: “Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky” (Ps 85 10ff).

This is why the members of the Salesian Family who wish to be at the best service of the world, have the task of “working for the greater glory” of the Creator. Fr Rua wrote an entire sermon under this title, intended for a retreat by his religious.¹⁹ He began by quoting 1 Cor 10:31: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” In addition to daily work, he said, food, entertainment and rest itself should be used for the glory of God. It is not essential to do a lot, the important thing is to do it well.²⁰ At the beginning of his mandate, he asked his provincials to do their utmost to ensure the smooth running of Salesian houses “for the glory of God and the good of souls, to which all our aspirations and solicitude must be directed.”²¹ Shortly afterwards, using the words from Matthew 5:16: “*ut videant opera vestra bona et glorificent Patrem vestrum qui in coelis est*”, he wanted the Salesians to devote themselves “so that our confreres and others, edified by your good works, may give glory to your Father in heaven.”²²

As the years went by, perhaps because the sense of God as creator had become dulled in people’s minds and, in keeping with the spirit of the times, the ultimate end of the world became more and more man himself, this religious purpose was no longer recalled with the same insistence. The words were self-evident, although we don’t necessarily know why. But it remained. Through their prayer and consecration to Mary Help of Christians, Salesian men and women promised daily to “work always for the greater glory of God”.²³ As for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, according to their renewed Constitutions of 1982, they proclaim “our will to live for the glory of God by our service for the evangelisation of young people, walking with them on the path to holiness.”²⁴ Indeed, a world won over to the Gospel will always give greater glory to the God of Jesus Christ.

The word of God to be spoken and heard

Dominic Savio “was already convinced that the word of God was a sure guide along the road to heaven.”²⁵ Salesian spirituality gives pride of place to the Word of God understood in all its breadth.

For the Christian, and therefore for the follower of Don Bosco, the Word of God is essential. God reveals himself in it. Through it, men and women gain access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and are made participants in the divine nature. The invisible God speaks to people as if they were friends. He talks with them to invite them to share his own life. God, who creates and preserves all things through the Word, gives people unceasing testimony about himself in created things. Creation is an expression of the Word. Countless are those who endure and must always be content with that. Wishing to open the way to a higher salvation, God manifested himself at the very origin of the human race. After the initial fall, with the promise of salvation he raised them up and took constant care to give eternal life to all those who, by faithfulness in the good seek this salvation, consciously or unconsciously. In his own time he called Abraham to make a great people of him. Following in the footsteps of the Patriarchs, he formed this people through Moses and the prophets, so that they would acknowledge him as the only living and true God, provident father and just judge, and to wait for the promised Saviour. In this way, over the centuries, these people prepared the way for the Gospel. With Jesus, the eternal Word became flesh. To see him was to see the Father. Through all his presence, through the words and deeds that made him manifest, through signs and wonders, and especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead, and finally by the sending of the Spirit of truth, he completed and confirmed revelation by attesting that God himself is with us to rescue us from the darkness of sin and death and to raise us up to eternal life.²⁶ This revelation has been handed down to us through the Bible. Since the apostles, the Church has used it as a precious treasure, because nothing can sustain the life of the Spirit in the soul of a faithful Christian better than this heavenly food.

Zeal for the study of the Word of God has always been part of Salesian history. Don Bosco, in particular, thanks to a duly published and several times republished *Bible History*,²⁷ and Fr Rua, through numerous sermons and talks, traces of which remain in the Salesian archives,²⁸ commented on divine revelation to his contemporaries. Then, also eloquently, Frs Albera and Rinaldi encouraged their sons to take up the sapiential reading of the holy books. We will forgive the former, who lived at a time when the anti-modernist movement was in full swing, for his mistrust of literary and historical criticism of the Bible. But the message was clear.

The study of the Holy Bible (...) must take precedence over all others, because, in the words of the Apostle, ‘all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’ (2 Timothy 3:16). The Holy Fathers were formed on the Holy Bible; and the great founders of religious orders have always asked their followers to read a passage from it every day [...] Let the holy books, then, be our daily food. Let us read them, not out of curiosity, as a mere scholar or a pure historian, but with deep religious reverence, as an emotional meditation rather than a mere study, striving to penetrate their luminous and profound expressions, and even learning by heart the verses that can best serve us in our in our meditations and in the exercise of our ministry. Happy would we be if we could build up an all-Biblical language! Then it would no longer be us speaking, but the Holy Spirit would speak through us, he who does what he says, *ipse dixit, et facta sunt* (Psalm 32:9), he whose word is light, life, remedy, and has a very special efficacy on minds and hearts.²⁹

For his part, Fr Rinaldi insisted on a loving study of the Gospel. Anyone who builds up a treasure of the words of Jesus and, like Mary, imprints them on his heart, will possess the true religious and Salesian spirit and will naturally communicate it to those he approaches in the apostolate.³⁰

The exhortation, orchestrated by a powerful biblical movement and by Vatican II, was repeated, heard and assimilated in the Salesian world throughout the twentieth century. Salesian Cooperators, faithful to their Regulations of Apostolic Life, read and meditate on the Word of God. In their concern for ongoing formation, they study the Holy Scriptures in depth. In this way their life becomes more and more evangelical.³¹ “Valuing the Word of God is a powerful help in overcoming moments of weakening of faith and difficulties” inherent in life, said the 1982 General Chapter of the Salesian Sisters. It summed up its lesson on the benefits of ongoing contact with the Word nicely, reminding us that it is found entirely in the Word, the fountain of life and wisdom.

Listening to and meditating on the Word of God is a daily encounter with the supreme knowledge of Jesus Christ. In a Church that is rejuvenating and rediscovering its sources in *lectio divina*, we must allow ourselves individually and as a community to be enlightened, guided and challenged by the Word. To the extent that the Word of God has its rightful place in our listening, welcoming and celebrating community, the community will be renewed in communion and impelled to its evangelising mission. The Word of God comes to us laden with concrete provocations: to read it with veneration, to penetrate it with the Holy

Spirit, to interiorise it – to pray the Word of God – is to accept its solicitations for a sincere and radical conversion.³²

For the follower of Don Bosco the Word of God is a privileged instrument of sanctification. To immerse oneself in it is to allow oneself to be transformed by it. Insofar as it deals with spiritual things, the concerns of the soul become spiritual and divine. The Word of God expels that which does not come from it and, at the same time, communicates the true knowledge of the heart, that which can only be truly learned by becoming a disciple of the Word.

Conformity with God's will

For the believer, God, the all-pure Will, is the secret will of all beings, by which each of them exists and is different from all the others. Two desires meet in the believer: God's will and the believer's own free will. It is important to adhere to God's will in order to embrace and follow it. This was the constant concern of the first generation of Salesian spiritual masters, who strove to discover what God expected of them, to do what seemed to them to be in accordance with his will and to submit to his often inscrutable designs. Significant features abound. At random, let's mention an exchange from the exemplary Life of Dominic Savio: "You would like to be completely better soon, wouldn't you?" Dominic asked his seriously ill young friend Gavio. "No, not so much. I only want to do God's will." These last words made Dominic realise that Gavio was a boy of more than ordinary piety, and his heart warmed to him", Don Bosco noted.³³ Or Fr Rua's words to the members of the Salesian Family in the circular announcing Don Bosco's death on 31 January 1888: "Nothing consoles us in these moments except that God willed it this way, he who is infinitely good and who does nothing except what is just, wise and holy. Let us, therefore, bow our heads in resignation and adore his profound designs."³⁴

Francis de Sales had often broached this subject at a time when discussions on the relationship between God's will and man's freedom were intense. How can they be reconciled if God is "the supreme reason for everything"? By what signs can we recognise this will, which is the great teacher of our lives, the rule of all goodness and the principle of the value of our actions? Let's leave aside the first question, which is not as interesting today as it was before. God's will is signified, wrote Francis, by the Lord's explicit commandments, by his evangelical counsels and by good inspirations. Precepts, counsels and salutary inspirations are signs of the Lord's will.

Charity encourages the Christian to conform his will not only to the commands, but also to the counsels of the Almighty. “A Commandment testifies a most entire and absolute will in him who gives it, but counsel only represents a will of desire: a commandment obliges us, counsel only invites us; a commandment makes the transgressors thereof culpable; counsel only makes such as do not follow it less worthy of praise.”³⁵ Commandments and counsels come to us through intermediaries: the Ten Commandments, the Gospel, but also God’s representatives on earth. Don Bosco could say that “Everyone knows that the Rule is the will of God, so whoever opposes the Rules is opposed to the superior and to God himself.”³⁶ This is understood (with a few nuances, of course), but we must also conform to the divine will signified by good inspirations. This is more delicate. “The rays of the sun enlighten while heating and heat while enlightening. Inspiration is a heavenly ray which brings into our hearts a light full of heat, by which it makes us see the good and inflames us with a desire to pursue it.”³⁷ Let us remember this point: God’s will is expressed by the good to be sought. Finally, God’s will is frequently signified by events, which can be occasions for sadness as well as joy. The soul then conforms to God’s “good pleasure”, teaches Francis, “either by holy resignation or by holy indifference.”³⁸

Each person’s destiny is therefore inscribed in the “will of God” which we decipher in particular with the help of “good inspirations”. In reality, despite appearances, our God’s authentic plan, which these “good inspirations” invite us to take up again, is not to be confused with the plan of an all-powerful God who sees all, knows all, before whom human history unfolds like an unsurprising spectacle, waiting for us to take our place as extras where he has planned it from all eternity. Don Bosco was very sensitive to man’s active freedom in the conduct of his life. Unlike other, less enterprising saints, he strongly qualified his abandonment to Providence. In 1848, he published a “month” (July) of Saint Vincent de Paul, whose thirty-one daily readings ended with a *frutto* (spiritual bouquet). The readings were copied from a French work, only the *frutti* were original. Now, we note that to close the meditation on day 24, entitled “On trusting in God”, extolling this virtue in Vincent de Paul, he rather unexpectedly advised: “*Frutto*. Trust in God does not exclude cooperation, so let’s do what we can on our side, and the Lord, with his grace, will do what we cannot do ourselves.”³⁹ The spirit of the true disciple of Don Bosco will always be a spirit of initiative. God’s will does not hinder his freedom, but strengthens it in the search for the greater good.

God’s plan is not, as is easily supposed, the determination of a sovereignly free divine will, but a plan of salvation expressing a self-giving love. God, because he loves his

creatures, wants only their happiness. “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will” (Ephesians 1:4-5). Conformity to God’s will has no other reason than to try to fit in as well as possible with this salvific plan. “The God before whom we stand is not, therefore, a super-powerful computer capable of programming and storing in its memory billions of individual destinies and whom we should question with fear and trembling about our future. It is love that has taken the risk of calling us to life, in order to offer us covenant and communion.” Conversion to this face of God is essential if we are to place ourselves in truth before the divine will. God’s will is a call to loving creation on the part of the creature. More than being expressed as a rule of life, inspirations speak of God’s desire, his expectation and his hope that we will gradually invent our own response. Discerning God’s will for your life means asking yourself about your place in the Body of Christ, not the place assigned to you from all eternity, but the place you can take and the place you want to take. There are many dwellings in the Father’s house. God is waiting for us to build our own, and he is at work with us.⁴⁰

On closer examination, the apostolic achievements of Don Bosco, here as always a model for the Salesian, were more than just responses to requests received in a dream, as is often imagined, were the result of an attentive search for a better good for Christian society as a whole and, in particular, for his own work of service to young people. His project-filled life teaches us that serving God is the ideal way to fulfil his holy will. His sons have never forgotten the lesson. God wants every person to be happy, but leaves it to their freedom and responsibility; he distributes gifts of intelligence and will in profusion, but wants us to use them. He wants us to make a contribution for the future of peace that he wishes to secure for us, Fr Vecchi rightly recalled in his description of God our Father.

NOTES

- 1 “Egli è che sostiene e fe muovere il peso formidabile dell’immensità.” (*Il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata ad uso del popolo*, per cura del Sacerdote Bosco Giovanni, Torino, Paravia, 1858, Primo giorno di maggio, “Dio nostro Creatore”, p. 20).
- 2 “Egli è Dio che ha detto : si faccia la luce, e la luce fu fetta Fu separata la luce dalle tenebre, in sull’istante si sparse nei vasti spazii del cielo e della terra. Alla parola di Dio onnipotente il mare fu rinchiuso in certi limiti, la terra si copri’ di erbe, di alberi ... Alla sua voce gli uccelli, i pesci e gli altri animali hanno popolato il cielo, la terra e le acque.” (Ibidem, p. 20).
- 3 “A tutte le cose egli dice: son io che ti ho fetto: ego sum. E in questa parola, che ogni uomo può e deve comprendere, si esprime la sua potenza e la sua divinità” (Ibidem, p. 20-21).
- 4 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
- 5 “Chi era lui e quale il suo rapporto con l’uomo, fu l’oggetto della rivelazione di Dio ad Abramo e a Mosè. Il credente cerca il volto di Dio nella Scrittura, soprattutto nel Vangelo. Il Dio al quale si affida è colui che si è rivelato in Cristo e che Gesù ci ha insegnato a conoscere e ad amare. E’ il Dio, fonte della vita, che la dona agli uomini con abbondanza. Vuole la felicità di ogni persona; ma la consegna alla sua libertà e responsabilità. E’ provvidente: veste i gigli del campo, dà da mangiare agli uccelli del cielo, ma soprattutto va alla ricerca dei poveri, come il Buon Pastore, creando per ciascuno nuove opportunità di grazia. Elargisce doni di intelligenza e volontà e vuole che l’uomo se ne serva. Ha disposto per noi un futuro di pace, ma chiede che partecipiamo a costruirlo. Non toglie le croci, ma invita a considerarne positivamente il mistero. Ricorda che il peccato distrugge l’uomo. Da esso ci ha redento con la morte e risurrezione di Cristo nel quale d offre l’immagine dell’uomo nuovo e perfetto, via verso di lui, verità e principio di nuova vita.” (Juan E. Vecchi, “Le parole del giubileo. Padre nostro”, *Bollettino salesiano*, May 1997.) The Rector Major dedicated his Strenna to God the Father for 1999. Read the commentary in: J. Vecchi, “*Benedetto sia Dio, Padre del nostro Gesù Cristo*”, Roma, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1998. The Salesian Family Spirituality Days that followed (Barcelona, Marti-Codolar, 15-17 January 1999), were given the title “L’esperienza di Dio Padre nella spiritualità salesiana”.
- 6 See also Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 15: 33; Job 28:28; Sirach 1:14.
- 7 The text continues: “... so that, sowing deep roots in their tender hearts, they may later produce good fruits of virtue for the common edification of our diocese.” (Regulations promulgated by Archbishop Franson, chap. I, art. 1.)
- 8 Francis de Sales, *Fragments sur les vertus cardinales et morales*, in *Oeuvres*, vol. XXVI, pp. 56-57.
- 9 “Ricordati sempre che la più grande ricchezza di questo mondo è il santo timore di Dio” (G. Bosco to D. Ruffino, 13 July 1857, ed. in MB V, 712, BM V 470).
- 10 See day sixteen: “Giudizio particolare”, in *Il mese di maggio ...*, Turin, 1858, pp. 95-100.
- 11 G. Pinamonti, *La vera sapienza. Considerazioni utilissime all’acquisto del timor santo di Dio*, Italian ed. around 1677. (See the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, t. 12, col. 1764.) Pinamonti is quoted in Don Bosco’s life of Comollo and in his Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions.

- 12 In a proposal on 8 November 1868, reproduced in MB IX, 404.
- 13 “E il santo timor di Dio, ispirato dalle parole di Don Bosco, era guida e freno alla condotta dei giovani.” (MB VI, 76, BM VI 41.).
- 14 “... mosso unicamente dall'ardente sua brama di salvar le anime e d'infondere nei cuori il santo timor di Dio” (P. Albera to Salesians, 18 October 1920, L.C., p.342). On *Dio ti vede*, see *ibid.*, p. 343.
- 15 “Rientra per noi, di nuovo, nel tema della religione”, J. Vecchi said in “La strenna per il 1998”, in *Riscopriamo con i giovani...*, Rome, 1998, p. 170.
- 16 “E' (il timor di Dio) il senso della grandezza e della santità di Dio (...) Dio è padre e buono. Ma è anche potente, sovrano, creatore e Signore. E' trascendente (...) Perdona sempre, ma 'non va preso in giro' (cfr Gal. 6,7). E' nostro Padre, ma non un 'jolly' per i momenti opportuni (...) E' all'origine di ogni essere, di ogni dono, di ogni grazia (...) Oltre a rispetto e riconoscimento di quello che Dio è, il timor di Dio ci ricorda che non siamo i padroni del bene e del male ; dunque dobbiamo cercare in Lui il fondamento della Vita e dei Valori. (...) il timore di Dio ci porta anche a parlare bene di Dio (...) Non sfigurare la sua immagine (...) non fame delle caricature o delle macchiette”. The paragraph began with the exhortation: “Educhiamo col timor di Dio e al timor di Dio”. (J. Vecchi, “La strenna per il 1998”, loc. cit., pp. 170-171).
- 17 “Ma Saulo aveva già superato ogni rispetto umano ; egli nulla più desiderava che promuovere la gloria di Dio e riparare lo scandalo dato” (G. Bosco, *Vita di S. Paolo ...* , 2nd ed. Turin, 1878, chap. 2, p. 12) ; “Ascoltate un curioso episodio. E' di un giovanetto (Filippo Neri) che appena in sui vent'anni di età, mosso dal desiderio della gloria di Dio, abbandona I propri genitori, di cui era unico figlio ... ” (Panegyric for St Philip Neri, 1868, ed. In MB IX, 215) ; Francis de Sales died “dopo ima vita tutta consumata alla maggior gloria di Dio” (*Storia ecclesiastica*, new ed. Turin, 1870, fifth era, chap. 4, p. 302) ; “Io non sono capace di far cose grandi, ma quello che posso, voglio farlo a maggior gloria di Dio; e spero che Iddio nella sua infinita bontà vorrà gradire queste miserabili mie offerte.” (*Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ..*, 6th ed., 1880, p. 71) ; “Sebbene le virtù e le azioni dei Santi siano tutte indirizzate allo stesso fine che è la maggior gloria di Dio e la salvezza delle anime” (Panegyric for Saint Philip Neri, ed. cit, p. 214). Finally, we find on Don Bosco's use of “the glory of God” a series of quotations followed by an attempt at interpretation in my book *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, Paris, 1967, pp. 222-230.
- 18 “A key concept in the study of a religious system, divine ‘glory’ is nevertheless difficult to define. To the notion of light there is always added a sense of splendour, of brilliance, which allows this light to appear, to manifest itself in a qualitatively different way from ordinary light, and thereby to manifest the presence and action of someone to whom we give ‘glory’ or ‘grace’.” (M. Delahoutre, “Gloire”, in the *Dictionnaire des Religions*, ed. P. Poupard, Paris, PUF, 1984, p. 641).
- 19 “Lavorar alla Maggior Gloria di Dio (Servibile per chiusa di Esercizi)”, in an undated and unpublished manuscript of *Prediche per esercizi spirituali*, pp. 31-39. (See FdB DI 1-E7.) It was partly a collection of anecdotes or ideas taken from the lives of the saints.
- 20 Here is the beginning of this unpublished document, where the abbreviations have been respected: “Ci siamo consacr. a Dio per mezzo della prof. rei. Il che vuol dire che abb. consacr. o meglio destin, al serv. di Dio la ns vol., il ns cuore, il ns intell., tutte le ns facoltà, il ns tempo, le ns fatiche, le ns sostanze.

Vuol dire che non dobb. più lav. per altro fine che per serv. a Dio, comp. la sua santa vol., promuov. i suoi inter., cercar in ogni cosa il suo beneplac., non più lav. che per amor di Lui, per fer piacere a Lui, per la sua gloria, mettere in prat. il detto di S. Paolo Sive manducatis, etc., il che signif. che non solo le op. di pietà, le pregh. ecc. dobb. fere a maggior gloria di Dio, ma anche io (mot peu lisible), la ricreaz., il rip. ecc., perchè consacrriamo ad altro una parte del ns tempo, delle ns forze” (Notebook mentioned earlier p. 31).

- 21 “... fine quanto possiamo pel buon andamento di tutte le nostre Case, affinchè abbia a risulturne la gloria di Dio ed il vantaggio delle anime, al che devono mirare tutte le nostre aspirazioni e sollecitudini.” (M. Rua, Norms for Salesian provincials, s. d. (1891), L.C., p. 69.)
- 22 “... perchè si verifichi fia noi il detto del nostro Divin Salvatore: ut videant opera vestra bona et glorificent Patrem vestrum qui in coelis est (Matt. 5,16), affinchè i Confratelli ed anche gli altri, edificati dalle vostre opere buone, ne diano gloria al Padre vostro che è nei cieli” (M. Rua, Edifying letter 1 to Salesians, 29 January 1893 ; L.C., p. 426).
- 23 “We promise to work always for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls” according to the original wording which was not substantially altered later.
- 24 “Professiamo così di voler vivere per la gloria di Dio in un servizio di evangelizzazione alle giovani, camminando con loro nella via della santità” (FMA Constitutions, art 5.)
- 25 “Aveva radicato nel cuore che la parola di Dio è la guida dell'uomo per la strada del cielo.” (G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, chap 8). - On the theme of the Word of God and the Salesian Family, see: *Associazione Biblica Salesiana, Parola di Dio e spirito salesiano. Ricerca sulla dimensione biblica delle Costituzioni della Famiglia Salesiana*, a cura di Juan Bartolomé e Fausto Perrenchio, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1996, 336 pages.
- 26 All from the Vatican II Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 1-4.
- 27 *Storia sacra per uso delle scuole, utile ad ogni stato di persone, arricchita di analoghe incisioni*, compilata dal Sacerdote Giovanni Bosco, Turin, Speirani e Ferrero, 1847. (Sixteen editions while Don Bosco was still alive). He added a *Maniera facile per imparare la Storia Sacra...*, Turin, Paravia, 1855. (Sixth edition in 1882)
- 28 Between 1869 and 1889, Fr Rua regularly preached on bible history in the church of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. See A. Amadei, Informative process of canonisation, ad 15^{um}; in *Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, pp. 345-346.
- 29 “Lo studio della Sacra Bibbia [...] deve avere la precedenza su tutti gli altri, perchè, al dire dell'Apostolo, "essa è utile a insegnare, a convincere, a correggere, a formare alla giustizia" (2 Tim. 3, 16). I Santi Padri si formarono sulla Sacra Bibbia ; e sempre i grandi fondatori di Ordini religiosi si diedero per regola ai loro seguaci di leggerne ogni giorno qualche tratto [...] Siano dunque i santi libri nostro pascolo quotidiano : legghiamoli non come farebbe un curioso, un semplice letterato od un semplice storico, ma con profondo rispetto religioso, in forma di meditazione affettiva più che per semplice studio, sforzandoci di penetrarne bene quelle espressioni così luminose e profonde, e magari imparando a memoria quei versetti che meglio ci possono servire nelle meditazioni e nell'esercizio del ministero. Noi fortunati se potessimo formarci un linguaggio tutto scritturale ! Allora non saremmo più noi a parlare, ma per mezzo nostro parlerebbe lo Spirito Santo, il quale opera quello che dice: *ipse*

dixit, et facta sunt (Ps. 32, 9), e la cui parola è luce, vita, medicina, ed ha un'efficacia tutta particolare sulle menti e sui cuori ..." (P. Albera, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921; L.C., pp. 394-395). His reservations regarding biblical criticism can be read in the preceding pages.

- 30 P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians 24 September 1928, in *Atti* 46, pp. 694-695.
- 31 Regulations of Apostolic Life, 1986, art 33, § 2; art 37, § 2.
- 32 "Valorizzare la Parola di Dio è un forte aiuto a superare le situazioni di indebolimento della fede e di difficoltà a ricostruire il clima di certezze soprannaturali caratteristico di Mornese. L'ascolto e la meditazione della Parola di Dio sono il quotidiano incontro con 'la sovraeminente scienza di Gesù Cristo'. In una Chiesa che ringiovanisce e ritrova le sue sorgenti nella lectio divina dobbiamo, individualmente e comunitariamente, lasciarci illuminare, guidare, interpellare dalla Parola. Nella misura in cui essa avrà il suo giusto posto di ascolto, di accoglienza e di celebrazione nella comunità, questa si rinnoverà nella comunione e nello slancio per la sua missione evangelizzatrice. La Parola di Dio arriva a noi carica di provocazioni concrete : leggerla con venerazione, penetrarla nello Spirito Santo, interiorizzarla - "pregare la Parola di Dio" - è accettare le sue sollecitudini ad una conversione sincera e radicale." (Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, *Capitolo Generale XVII. Atti*, Roma, 1982, pp. 67-68).
- 33 "Desideri di guarire, non è vero. - Non tanto: desidero di fare la volontà di Dio. Queste ultime parole fecero conoscere il Gavio per un giovane di non ordinaria pietà" (*Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, 1859, chap. 17, p. 86.)
- 34 "Nulla ci conforta in questi istanti fuorché il pensiero che così volle Iddio, il quale infinitamente buono nulla fa che non sia giusto, sapiente e santo. Quindi rassegnati chiniamo riverenti la fronte e adoriamo i suoi alti consigli." (M. Rua, Circular, Turin, 31 January 1888; L.C., p. 1).
- 35 *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book VIII, chap. VI; *Oeuvres*, vol. V, p. 74.
- 36 "Tutti sanno che la Regola è la volontà di Dio e chi si oppone alle Regole, si oppone al Superiore e a Dio stesso" (Conference of 3 February 1876, in MB XII, 81).
- 37 *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book VIII, chap. X; *Oeuvres*, vol. V, p. 89.
- 38 *Ibidem*, Book IX, chap. IV; *Oeuvres*, vol. V, p. 119.
- 39 "Frutto. La confidenza in Dio non esclude la nostra cooperazione, perciò facciamo quanto dal nostro canto possiamo, e il Signore farà colla sua grazia quello che noi non possiamo." (*Il Cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà ...*, Turin, Paravia, 1848, p. 227).
- 40 Words borrowed from M. Rondet, "Dieu a-t-il sur chacun de nous une volonté particulière ?" , in *Christus* 144, October 1989, pp. 392-399.

Holiness

Sanctity or holiness

Like many other terms, sanctity or holiness has many sides to it.¹ In the common understanding it is the state of being a saint, recognised as such by the Catholic Church. For a long time, hagiographers were careful to avoid this term in their writings before the official announcement of the canonisation of their heroes. To speak of their sanctity seemed to initiate a cult, at the risk of delaying the procedure. But for twentieth-century Catholics, another meaning has also entered the vernacular under the influence of biblical studies. Strictly speaking, God alone is holy. Holiness is therefore equivalent to being divine; holiness is the state that belongs to God. The New Testament knows only this meaning. A brief idea of Christian holiness emerges. The holiness of Christians requires them to break with sin and pagan ways (1 Thessalonians 4:3). They must act “not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God” (2 Corinthians 1:12). The Christian, “seized by Christ”, endeavours to share in his sufferings “by becoming like him in his death if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-14). The Salesian tradition has been successively marked by both meanings of the word holiness.

Make oneself a saint

In the spring of 1855, Dominic Savio, who had resolved (seriously) to “prefer death to sin”, and whose “friends” were (seriously) “Jesus and Mary”, was ready for a programme of holiness.² Extremely generous, he would push the ideal to the highest level, in imitation of canonised saints such as Aloysius Gonzaga or Philip Neri, whom he often heard people talking about. A pupil at the oratory of St Francis de Sales in Turin for six months, he was about to turn thirteen. One Sunday in March, the preacher of the day developed three ideas which, according to his biographer, made a deep impression on him. “It is God’s will that we all become saints; it is very easy to achieve this; a great reward in heaven awaits the person who succeeds in making himself a saint.”³ The first part of that statement clearly reproduced the verse from Saint Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians: *Haec est enim voluntas Dei sanctificatio vestra*, which appeared at the time

in the epistle for the second Sunday in Lent. For Dominic, this sermon was, so to speak, the “spark” that ignited his heart with love for God, as Don Bosco tells us. He went to find the master of his soul to tell him (in essence!): “I feel the desire and the need to make myself a saint; I didn’t think it was so easy; but now that I’ve understood that you can do it even while remaining joyful, I’m absolutely determined to do it, and I absolutely need to make myself a saint. So tell me how I should go about it.”⁴

In fact, the preacher on that Sunday, who was Don Bosco, had developed an essential thesis of his spirituality and religious pedagogy. Sanctity, which opinion reserves for a few miracle-producing phenomena, is possible for everyone. “God wants us all to be saved, that we all become saints”, he wrote in his *Porta teco Cristiano*, behind which we can suspect the verse from Thessalonians as he understood it.⁵ God wants universal holiness. If we can judge from a later conversation of Dominic’s, as recorded in his biography, Don Bosco heard him say “Anyone who only wants God’s will has a real desire to become a saint, do you want to become a saint?” to one of his friends.⁶ Holiness in itself is not complicated, Don Bosco told him, it’s even easy. Let’s not imagine that it is the result of fasts, vigils, hairshirts and other painful actions which make for a long face. Holiness is not sadness and the rejection of pleasure. A sad saint is a sad saint indeed! “For us here” that is, in Don Bosco’s house, “it means making holiness consist in being happy” Dominic continued telling his friend, in full agreement with the spirituality of his master.⁷

God alone is holy, he is the only source of holiness. Don Bosco and his followers were well aware of this, even if their phrase “to make oneself a saint” gave off a vaguely Pelagian odour. It is God who, by his will, makes saints. Dominic noted with satisfaction that his first name placed him in the domain of “the Lord”. Don Bosco’s world expected everything from him in prayer and the sacraments, especially Penance and the Eucharist. However, master and disciples were at least as convinced that sanctity is not for the faint-hearted, the sleepy, the merely merry, and even less for those given to vice. Holiness, they thought, requires vigorous effort, which generates the virtues. The plan of the biographies written by Don Bosco on lives given as models said it clearly. Thus, regarding his pupil Michael Magone, he praised “his exemplary concern for the practices of piety”, his “punctuality in performing his duties”, his “devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary”, his vigilance in “preserving the virtue of purity” and his charity towards his neighbour.⁸ As is only natural, among the virtues that sanctify, charity, especially apostolic charity, took precedence. Let’s go back to Dominic Savio. The first thing he was advised to do to become a saint, wrote Don Bosco, “was to work to win souls for God. because there is

no holier work in this life than to work for the good of souls for whom Jesus Christ shed the last drop of his blood.”⁹ With God’s grace, one “becomes a saint” through virtue.

Don Bosco’s immediate successors seem to have been reluctant to discuss sanctity, the common ideal of Christians. Of course, the lesson had not been forgotten. In 1896, Andrea Beltrami published a little book entitled “*Il vero volere è potere, ossia chi vuole si fa santo*”.¹⁰ But the Rectors Major seemed to reserve sanctity for canonised saints. They strongly recommended the search for perfection, which was required by their state, and left it at that. Moreover, in their minds religious perfection was more or less equivalent to asceticism. The universal call to holiness, so dear to Don Bosco, seemed to have faded away in Salesian memory.¹¹ The year of Don Bosco’s canonisation (1 April 1934), an obvious model of Salesian sanctity, Fr Ricaldone rediscovered the full meaning of the word sanctity, at least the word itself, in the conclusion of his commentary on the Strenna for 1935, entitled “Fidelity to Don Bosco the Saint”. But it was still a question of religious “perfection”, the opposite of spiritual lukewarmness.¹² It would take the lessons of Vatican II to once again hear Salesian invitations to holiness for all.

The universal call to holiness according to Vatican II

Vatican II dealt at length with Christian holiness for its own sake and (more or less) in the sense that Don Bosco had given to the term. One of the eight chapters of its Constitution on the Church, entitled “The universal call to holiness in the Church”,¹³ referred right from the introduction to the verse from the First Letter to the Thessalonians (4:3), which had been particularly dear to him: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.”¹⁴ It is true that the Council moved on from the legally canonisable holiness of Don Bosco to the holiness of the New Testament.

In the world of God’s children, holiness, which originated in God the Father and was taught by Jesus, his Son, is not reserved for the few, the Council affirmed. Master and model of all perfection, Jesus proposed to each and every one of his disciples, whatever their condition, that same holiness of life of which he is both the source and the fulfilment. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). In all of them he has sent his Spirit to move them inwardly to love God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind and with all their strength (cf. Mark 12:30), and also to love one another as Christ has loved them (cf. John 13:34; 15:12). Called by God, not on account of their works, but on account of his loving plan and his grace, in other words by his loving will, Christ’s disciples have truly become, through the baptism of

faith, sons of God, sharers in the divine nature and, consequently, truly holy. They must respond to this gift if they listen to his voice. For they must, by a virtuous life, preserve and complete this sanctification. Saint Paul exhorts them to live “as is proper among saints” (Ephesians 5:3), and “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Colossians 3:12), and to bear in themselves the fruits of the Spirit for their sanctification (cf. Galatians 5,22; Romans 6:22). However, nothing is ever to be taken for granted in this world, and as human beings are at fault in many ways (cf. James 3:2), they are in constant need of God’s mercy, and must repeat this daily in their prayers to God their Father: “Forgive us our trespasses” (Matthew 6:12).

It is clear, then, that the call to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity is addressed to all those who believe in Christ, whatever their state or rank, the Council went on to say. The world benefits, because holiness helps to promote a more human existence on earth. Christians must, according to the measure of Christ’s gift, apply the strength they have received to achieve this perfection of charity. In this way, following in the footsteps of Jesus and becoming conformed to his image, fulfilling in everything the will of the Father, they will be entirely dedicated to the glory of God and the service of their neighbour.

The Council insisted. Anyone who imagined that sanctity was the preserve of specialists, monks and nuns, men and women religious, would be mistaken. There is only one holiness in the family of God. All those led by the Spirit of God, who obey the voice of the Father and adore him in spirit and in truth, walk in the footsteps of the poor, humble and cross-bearing Christ, so that they may deserve to share in his glory. In the end, the road to virtue is the same for everyone. Each person must resolutely advance, according to his or her own gifts and spiritual resources, along the path of a living faith that stimulates hope and acts through charity. The Council’s Constitution envisaged preaching holiness to each of the different categories in the Church: shepherds of souls, priests, other clerics (called ministers), Christian spouses and parents, the poor and the unfortunate. “Finally” it concluded, “all Christ’s faithful, whatever be the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives—and indeed through all these, will daily increase in holiness, if they receive all things with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father and if they cooperate with the divine will. In this temporal service, they will manifest to all men the love with which God loved the world.”¹⁵

Could there be a better commentary on the holiness that Don Bosco demanded of his sons and daughters in their practice of charity “for the greater glory of God and the good of souls”?

The holiness recommended to the Salesian Family at the end of the century

From this point of view too, Vatican II bore fruit in the Salesian world. The exhortations to holiness, admittedly a holiness more ordinary than the canonisable ideal dreamed of by Dominic Savio, became more frequent as the twentieth century drew to a close. Fr Viganò (1978–1995) was responsible for this, holding that Salesian sanctity is the sanctity of a man or woman of action dedicated first and foremost to the salvation of young people.

Salesian pedagogy is a “realistic pedagogy of holiness”, and Don Bosco summed up his educational programme in the words “health, wisdom and holiness” (*sanità, sagesza, santità*), he recalled in his second circular letter as Rector Major.¹⁶ The “sanctity” of Don Bosco and Dominic Savio “can be seen as a kind of lesson in integral pedagogy dictated by the Holy Spirit”, he ventured to claim on the basis of their history.¹⁷ In a letter devoted entirely to the problem of holiness, he soon asked his confreres for a “common project” in this area. “Certainly,” he wrote, referring to various campaigns underway at the time, “there is urgent need to revise our community dimension, to re-establish the true image of the Rector, to assimilate and apply the Ratio, to formulate our pastoral and educational plan, to broaden the perspectives of the Salesian Family, to be generous in our missionary commitment. But underlying all this, as its source and moving spirit we have to replan the way to make ourselves holy both individually and as a community.” Consequently, he asked his followers for a new common project (lit.: a re-project) of holiness, both personal and communal.¹⁸ In his eyes, success was not guaranteed. A long investigation around the world had taught him that the “recovery of holiness” was the great Salesian problem that had yet to be solved.¹⁹

To turn the tide, he felt it was necessary to focus on two fundamental elements of Salesian holiness: intimacy with Christ, the indispensable source of pastoral charity, and the ascetic commitment essential to kindness in education. Without a true friendship with Christ felt by each individual and lived in community, and without serious asceticism, the members of the family will never succeed in being, in accordance with their vocation, “signs and bearers of God’s love” for young people. The saint is the one who opens himself fully to God’s love in order to give it to others. The love of God can

only be nurtured and intensified by a daily encounter with Christ. This is the alpha and omega of pastoral charity, the Rector Major taught. Of course, this encounter takes place through ongoing friendship with Christ. But Fr Viganò was thinking above all of the key moments of prayer, the food of holiness: meditation, personal prayer, the liturgical hours and the Eucharist. The sacrament of the Paschal memorial must become, once again, the driving force of every member of the Salesian Family and the heart of its communities. The Salesian community is sanctified by prayer. In the Rector Major's opinion, one of the most dreadful evils that had affected religious life during the crisis had been the disintegration of asceticism, understood as "a loss of the methodical effort" to eliminate with the help of God's grace whatever may be opposed to growth of life in Christ and to a rugged determination "to face up to the sacrifices involved."²⁰ It requires self-denial, renunciation, acceptance of suffering, struggle and spiritual combat. Without asceticism holiness fades away. Asceticism forces us to row against the current. Contemporary anthropology has exalted the values of freedom, the body, personal development and self-realisation. Society applauds the triumph of the Johannine "concupiscences" which are power, well-being, the flesh and the pride of life (see 1 John 2:16). Our weaknesses are obvious. As long as the baptismal water of Christ's Passover has not purified our values and passions, they remain pagan and can degenerate into self-centredness. Baptism into Christ is a baptism of conversion, necessarily ascetic.²¹

The approach of the fiftieth anniversary of Don Bosco's canonisation prompted the Fr Viganò to return to the subject of holiness at the end of 1983, which he had come to confuse with spirituality, if not with the rules of a good religious education. In a letter entitled *Don Bosco santo* (Don Bosco is a saint), he set out what he called were "the great values of Salesian holiness." These were: to serve the Lord in simplicity and joy, to bear witness to an "Oratorian heart" (i.e. similar to that of Don Bosco in the 1840s), to know how to make oneself loved, to be a daily ascetic, to live in intimacy with Jesus the Redeemer. And he stigmatised two of the most harmful enemies of Salesian holiness as conceived in this way which, according to him, were "the abandonment of our pastoral distinctiveness" and "the breakdown of religious discipline."²²

This Rector Major saw the Salesian Constitutions as "our covenant with God", "our distinctive way of holiness."²³ He told his people that the Rector of the community is "master and guide in holiness",²⁴ that the fact that Vatican II thought of the Church as a "mystery" encouraged holiness,²⁵ that the Salesian "sanctifies himself by educating",²⁶ that the new evangelisation proclaimed by the Pope in Santo Domingo gave great importance to holiness²⁷ and also that the 1994 Synod of Bishops on Religious Life

showed that at the most intimate level of the Church's life, there is a call to holiness.²⁸ The holiness of his own people was very close to his heart.

The Regulations of Apostolic Life, written in Fr Viganò's spirit, provides the Salesian Cooperators, this document said, with "a Gospel way of self-fulfilment and so set themselves on a path that leads to holiness."²⁹

NOTES

- 1 See J Ries and G. Mathon, “Sainteté (théologie)”, in *Catholicisme*, fase. 61, 1992, col. 655-709.
- 2 Here we return to Chapter X “Sua deliberazione di farsi santo”, of Don Bosco’s book, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, 1859, pp. 50-52. The Italian *farsi santo*, translated here as *make oneself a saint*, conveys personal effort well, but is unusual in French [and also in English!]. In French we do not usually say “se faire saint”, but “devenir un saint” [In English we do not usually say “make oneself a saint” but “become a saint”]
- 3 “E’ volontà di Dio che ci facciamo tutti santi ; è assai facile di riuscirvi: è un gran premio preparato in cielo a chi si fa santo.” (*Vita ...*, p. 50).
- 4 “Mi sento un desiderio ed un bisogno di farmi santo ; io non pensava di potermi far santo con tanta facilità ; ma ora ho capito potersi ciò effettuare anche stando allegro, io voglio assolutamente, ed io ho assolutamente bisogno di farmi santo. Mi dica adunque come debbo regolarsi per incominciare tale impresa.” (*Vita...*, pp. 50-51).
- 5 “Dio ci vuole tutti salvi, anzi è sua volontà che ci facciamo tutti santi.” (G. Bosco, *Porta teco, cristiano ...*, Turin, 1858, p. 7).
- 6 “Chi desidera di fare la volontà di Dio, desidera di santificare se stesso; hai dunque volontà di farti santo ?” (*Vita...*, p. 86).
- 7 “Ma sappi che noi qui facciamo consistere la santità nello star molto allegri.” (*Vita ...*, *ibid.*).
- 8 “Sua esemplare sollecitudine per le pratiche di pietà”, “Puntualità ne’ suoi doveri”, “Sua divozione verso la B. Vergine Maria”, “Sua sollecitudine e sue pratiche per conservare la virtù della purità”, “Bei tratti di carità verso il prossimo” (G. Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele ...*, Turin, 1861, chap. 6-10, titles).
- 9 “La prima cosa che gli venne consigliata per farsi santo fu di adoprarsi per guadagnar anime a Dio ; perciocché non avvi cosa più santa al mondo, che cooperare al bene delle anime, per la cui salvezza Gesù Cristo sparse fin l’ultima goccia del prezioso suo sangue.” (*Vita ...*, p. 53).
- 10 A. Beltrami, *Il vero volere è potere, ossia chi vuole si fa santo ...*, coll. *Lecture cattoliche*, 1896.
- 11 The most we find, together with *Perfezione*, is the entry *Santificazione* in the index of circulars by Fr Rua, Fr Albera and Fr Rinaldi, but never *Santità*, which abounds in the index of circulars of Fr Viganò.
- 12 At the beginning of his final article “La Perfezione” and under the heading “Siate Santi” (Be saints), he urged his religious not to be content with a spiritually lukewarm life. (P. Ricaldone, *Fedeltà a Don Bosco santo*, in *Atti* 74, 24 March 1936, pp. 173-179).
- 13 “De universali vocatione ad sanctitatem in Ecclesia” (*Lumen Gentium*, Chap. V).
- 14 “Haec est voluntas Dei sanctificatio vestra” (*Lumen Gentium*, on. 39).
- 15 *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 40-41, *passim*.
- 16 “Nella Chiesa e in faccia al mondo il Sistema Preventivo è la pedagogia realista della santità.” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians 15 August 1978, *Atti* 290, p. 33).

- 17 “La loro santità può essere considerata così come una specie di lezione di pedagogia integrale dettata dallo Spirito Santo” (Same letter of 15 August 1978, p. 27).
- 18 “Ma alla base di questo, come sorgente e anima del tutto, c’è da riprogettare insieme la nostra santità, sia personale che comunitaria.” (E. Viganò, “Riprogettiamo insieme la santità”, Letter to Salesians, 12 December 1981, *Atti* 303, p. 10).
- 19 “E’ quello del ricupero della santità” (Letter mentioned above, 12 December 1981, p. 12).
- 20 “... sforzo metodico inteso ad eliminare, con l’aiuto della grazia, quanto si oppone alla crescita della vita in Cristo e ad affrontare virilmente i sacrifici che essa impone” (Same letter, 12 December 1981, p. 19).
- 21 Same letter, 12 December 1981, pp. 13-23.
- 22 “I due più dannosi nemici della nostra santità [...] sono, primo, lo svuotamento dell’originalità pastorale, e, poi, lo smantellamento della disciplina religiosa”. All of this, under the title “I grandi valori della santità salesiana”, in E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 24 September 1983, *Atti* 310, pp. 8-19.
- 23 “Le Costituzioni, patto della nostra alleanza con Dio”, “il nostro itinerario concreto di santità” (Letter of 1 May 1982, *Atti* 305, pp. 14-16).
- 24 “Maestro e guida di santificazione” (Letter of 16 July 1982, *Atti* 306, pp. 20-26).
- 25 Letter of 8 December 1985, *Atti* 316, p. 20.
- 26 Letter of 19 May 1991, *Atti* 337, p. 36.
- 27 Letter of 12 December 1992, *Atti* 343, p. 30.
- 28 Letter of 8 December 1994, *Atti* 351, p. 31.
- 29 “Scegliere questo Regolamento di vita apostolica è trovare un modo evangelico di realizzare se stessi, incamminandosi per una via che porta alla santità” (*Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 50).

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit in Salesian consecrated life

We had to wait until the last quarter of the twentieth century for the Holy Spirit to appear in the indexes of the official proceedings of the Salesian Family. Until then the constitutions of institutes of consecrated life were of an exclusively juridical form. And in their exhortations, successive Rectors Major, certainly convinced of the action of the Holy Spirit in the work inherited from Don Bosco, did not speak of him. Fr Rua regretted the Salesian silence on “devotion to the Holy Spirit”. “We think too little of him”, he is said to have told one of his close friends.¹ Don Bosco and his successors lived by the Spirit, but were silent about his presence and action.

Then, the theology of the time led the Salesians to emphasise the Trinitarian nature of their spirituality. Fr Viganò proclaimed in his 1978 keynote address that, if the Word is the revelation of the Father, the Holy Spirit is the “gift”. “His is a mission of love, which immerses us in Jesus Christ, incorporates us in Him, makes us become members of His Mystical Body, makes us grow in the Catholic Church, makes us understand and explore the revealed word, finally gives us the enthusiasm of docility, of listening, of contemplating, of meditating.”²

The renewed Constitutions of the three Salesian institutes of consecrated life immediately recognised the place of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The first article of the 1984 Salesian Constitutions, in which the Holy Spirit is mentioned, was particularly eloquent. It says:

With a feeling of humble gratitude we believe that the Society of St Francis de Sales came into being not as a merely human venture but by the initiative of God [...], Through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth [...] The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving [...] To ensure the continuation of this mission, the Spirit inspired him to initiate various apostolic endeavours, first among them our Society. The Church has recognised God's action in this [...] From this active presence of the Spirit, we draw strength for our fidelity and support for our hope.³

For their part, at the beginning of their own Constitutions, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians did not go into great detail about the content of the “gift of the Holy Spirit”, which was at the origin of their Congregation. The first article simply said “Through a gift of the Holy Spirit and with the direct intervention of Mary, St. John Bosco founded our Institute as a response of salvation to the profound hopes of girls and young women.”⁴

However, this gap by comparison with their Salesian brothers was soon bridged in the following articles. Certainly the Salesian Constitutions in which the religious, described as “submissive” or “docile” to the Spirit according to words repeated without much discernment,⁵ see in their founder Don Bosco a man of God “filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit” (art. 21) and recognise the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in their life (art. 12, 25), their formation (art. 96, 99) and an apostolate which they exercise “through the gift of his Spirit” (art. 3) in a world where they perceive “the fruits of the Spirit” (art. 95). At their General Chapters, the Salesians recognise the “guidance of the Spirit of the Lord” (art. 146).

The articles of the Salesian Sisters’ Constitutions emphasise the role of the Holy Spirit in all aspects and at all stages of the life of the Sister with an almost anxious insistence and by means of regularly chosen formulas. At her profession, the Father consecrates her “with the gift of the Spirit.”⁶ According to the formula of profession, God the Father, to whom she addresses herself, calls her, “by the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁷ She gives herself “through the grace of the Holy Spirit” to God whom she loves “above all else.”⁸ Her three vows are pronounced under the influence of the Spirit: she will be chaste because she is “docile to the action of the Spirit”,⁹ poor because she is “moved by the Holy Spirit”,¹⁰ and, in obedience, “strengthened by the Holy Spirit”, she will freely offer her “will as the sacrifice” of herself to God.¹¹ When they pray, because grace makes them adoptive children of God the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians believe that the Holy Spirit “prays in us.”¹² In the silence of their whole being, the Word of Truth permeates them “by the power of the Spirit.”¹³ Their educational system “collaborates with the Holy Spirit”,¹⁴ who they are confident “is already at work in our world.”¹⁵ Salesian assistance, required by the preventive system, makes them “attentive to the Holy Spirit at work at work in each person.”¹⁶ The community animator is “first in docility to the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ Moreover, every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians called to the service of authority must live it in an attitude of inner poverty and “openness to the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ The formation of the religious, which is “above all ... the work of the Holy Spirit Spirit”,¹⁹ finds its foundation in the plan of the Father who,

through the Spirit, renders her “conformed to the image of his Son.”²⁰ During the second novitiate preparation for perpetual profession, the religious “reviews her life in the light of the Holy Spirit.”²¹ Thereafter, in her concern for ongoing formation, “in docility to the Holy Spirit”, she will be “attentive to discern and make use of every occasion for vocational growth.”²² The renewed Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians thus pay a sort of multiple homage to the work of the Holy Spirit in their institute.

The Constitutions of the Volunteers of Don Bosco, approved by the Holy See in 1990, were also very attentive to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enlightened their founder, Fr Philip Rinaldi (art. 1). They themselves are consecrated by God through the Holy Spirit (art. 3). Docile to the Spirit (art. 28, 33), they hope, through this gesture, to participate in a “new life according to the Spirit” (art. 20). The Holy Spirit, who works and prays in them (art. 42), challenges the Volunteer (art. 35, 55). Finally, God forms her through him (art. 57).²³

On the eve of the Jubilee Year 2000, the Holy Spirit, life and energy of the Church, was certainly no longer the “great unknown” in the world of the consecrated members of the Salesian Family.

The Holy Spirit among the Salesian Cooperators

The Salesian Cooperators’ Regulations of Apostolic Life, promulgated in 1986, were written from the same Trinitarian perspective. They begin solemnly with “1. To contribute to the salvation of the young, ‘that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise’, the Holy Spirit, through the motherly intervention of Mary, raised up St. John Bosco. The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher capable of total self-giving, and inspired in him a method of education entirely filled with the charity of the Good Shepherd. 2. For the furtherance of this mission, the Holy Spirit led him to give life to various apostolic enterprises, the Salesian Cooperators among them.”²⁴ The Holy Spirit, the Regulations continue to say, accompanies the Cooperator throughout his or her life. The choice to become a Cooperator has matured under the action of the Holy Spirit (art. 36). Formation calls for docility to the Holy Spirit (art. 38), and they live in intimate unity with the Holy Spirit (art. 27). From Christ they receive the Spirit who enlightens them and gives them strength (art. 32). The pastoral charity of the Cooperator is, for the world, the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit who is the fire that renews the face of the earth (art. 28). The fidelity of the Cooperator to their mission

presupposes the “strength of your Spirit” which is asked for in the Promise when they make their commitment.²⁵

“The primacy of life in the Spirit”,²⁶ words with a mystical twist, is now recognised in Salesian spirituality, even though we are aware of this spirituality’s almost immoderate taste for active charity. Under this title, an article in the Salesian Family Common Identity Card (1995) states that “In seeking the Spirit of the Resurrection and Pentecost we must strive for the renewal requested by the Church for all groups and communities.” It then continues, “Every moment of the life of a believer is marked by the sign of the Spirit. Fraternity is the fruit of interior strength; it is an initiative of the Spirit. When we interiorize our lives we make ourselves available to God’s call [...] We become new creatures and walk in the Spirit with love, and the fruits of love become our standard. From pastoral charity there flows that union and fusion that is the fruit of the power of the Holy Spirit; and the sure result of this is the vital inseparability between union with God and dedication to our neighbour, interior Gospel attachment and the active apostolate, the praying heart and toiling hands.”²⁷ Devotion to the Holy Spirit now permeates the entire Salesian world. “Let us rediscover with young people the presence of the Spirit in the Church and in the world”, proclaimed proclaimed Fr Vecchi in his *Strenna* for the year 1998.²⁸

NOTES

- 1 According to Fr Giulio Barberis : “ ... Insisteva sulla maggior divozione allo Spirito Santo, dicendo che questa divozione era un pò trascurata dai Cristiani. Ne faceva in particolare la Novena e l’Ottavario e l’udii dire : E’ lo Spirito Santo la fonte di ogni santità, e noi pensiamo troppo poco a Lui... “ (G. Barberis, Ordinary process for the canonisation of Fr Rua, ad 17^{um}, in *Positio super virtutibus*, Rome, 1947, p. 286.) Of course, on occasion, members of the Salesian Family gave the Holy Spirit his rightful place, as witnessed, for example, in the little book by J. Aubry sdb, *Le Saint Esprit et notre vie spirituelle*, coll. *Feuillets de vie spirituelle* 30, Paris, Fleurus, 1956.
- 2 “Lo Spirito Santo è dono. La sua è una missione di amore, che ci immerge in Gesù Cristo, ci incorpora in Lui, ci fa diventare membra del suo Corpo mistico, ci fa crescere nella Chiesa cattolica, ci fa capire e approfondire la parola rivelata, ci dona infine l’entusiasmo della docilità, dell’ascolto, del contemplare, del meditare.” (E. Viganò, *Non secondo la carne, ma nello Spirito*, Rome, 1978, p. 26).
- 3 “Con senso di umile gratitudine crediamo che la Società di san Francesco di Sales è nata non da solo progetto umano, ma per iniziativa di Dio. Per contribuire alla salvezza della gioventù, “questa porzione la più delicata e la più preziosa dell’umana società”, lo Spirito Santo suscitò, con l’intervento materno di Maria, san Giovanni Bosco. Formò in lui un cuore di padre e di maestro, capace di una dedizione totale [...] Per prolungare nel tempo la sua missione lo guidò nel dar vita a varie forze apostoliche, prima di tutte la nostra Società. La Chiesa ha riconosciuto in questo l’azione di Dio [...] Da questa presenza attiva dello Spirito attingiamo l’energia per la nostra Società e il sostegno della nostra speranza.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 1).
- 4 “Per un dono dello Spirito Santo e con l’intervento diretto di Maria, san Giovanni Bosco ha fondato il nostro Istituto come risposta di salvezza alle attese profonde delle giovani.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 1).
- 5 SDB Constitutions, art. 2,64, 99.
- 6 “ ... consacra col dono dello Spirito” (FMA Constitutions, art. 5).
- 7 “ ... con la forza del tuo Spirito” (ibidem, art. 10).
- 8 “Nella grazia dello Spirito Santo ci doniamo a Dio sommamente amato” (ibidem, art. 8).
- 9 “Docile all’azione dello Spirito... “ (ibidem, art. 13).
- 10 “ ... mosse dallo Spirito Santo” (ibidem, art. 18).
- 11 “Con la forza dello Spirito Santo offriamo liberamente la nostra volontà come sacrificio di noi stesse a Dio” (ibidem, art. 29).
- 12 “Per la grazia della nostra adozione a figli lo Spirito Santo prega in noi” (ibidem, art. 37).
- 13 “Nel silenzio di tutto il nostro essere, come Maria, ‘la Vergine in ascolto’, ci lasceremo pervadere dalla forza dello Spirito” (ibidem, art. 39). See also article, “il silenzio che si fa attenzione allo Spirito”.
- 14 “ ... cerca di collaborare con lo Spirito Santo” (ibidem, art. 7).
- 15 “ ... sicura che lo Spirito opera già in questo mondo” (ibidem, art. 49).
- 16 “ ... si fa attenzione allo Spirito Santo che opera in ogni persona (ibidem, art. 67).

- 17 “Docile per prima allo Spirito Santo...” (ibidem, art. 52).
- 18 “ ... viva in atteggiamento di povertà interiore e di apertura allo Spirito” (ibidem, art. 114).
- 19 “La formazione è anzitutto opera dello Spirito Santo...” (ibidem, art. 79).
- 20 “ ... che, per lo Spirito, vuole renderci conformi all’immagine del Figlio suo” (ibidem, art 77).
- 21 “ ... riveda la propria vita alla luce dello Spirito Santo” (ibidem, art 98).
- 22 “ ... docile allo Spirito Santo, sarà attenta a discernere e a valorizzare ogni occasione di maturazione vocazionale” (ibidem, art. 100).
- 23 *The Constitutions of the Volunteers With Don Bosco* (Rome, 1995), written in the spirit of the Constitutions of the Volunteers of Don Bosco, contain article 40 which speaks of “Docilità allo Spirito Santo”.
- 24 “§ 1. Per contribuire alla salvezza della gioventù, “porzione la più delicata e la più preziosa dell’umana società”, lo Spirito Santo suscitò, con l’intervento materno di Maria, san Giovanni Bosco. Formò in lui un cuore di padre e di maestro, capace di una dedizione totale, e gli ispirò un metodo educativo tutto permeato dalla carità del Buon Pastore. - § 2. Lo stesso Spirito, al fine di continuare ed estendere questa missione, lo guidò nel dar vita a varie forze apostoliche, tra cui i Cooperatori salesiani.” (RVA, art. 1).
- 25 “Donami, o Padre, la forza del tuo Spirito, perchè io sappia essere fedele a questo proposito di vita” (RVA, art 40).
- 26 “Il primato della vita nello Spirito” (Carta di comunione, art 29, heading).
- 27 “ ... Il rinnovamento voluto dalla Chiesa per tutti i gruppi e le comunità riconduce allo Spirito della Risurrezione e della Pentecoste. Tutta la vita del credente è sotto il segno dello Spirito. La fraternità è il frutto del rafforzamento dell’uomo interiore, è iniziativa dello Spirito. L’uomo interiore è quello che si rende disponibile a Dio [...]. E’ l’uomo nuovo che cammina nello Spirito con il criterio e i frutti dell’amore. La forza di sintesi unitiva che sgorga dalla carità pastorale è frutto della potenza dello Spirito che assicura l’inseparabilità vitale tra unione con Dio e dedizione al prossimo, tra interiorità evangelica e azione apostolica, tra cuore orante e mani operanti.” (*Carta di comunione*, art. 29.)
- 28 *Nella speranza siamo stati salvati : riscopriamo con i giovani la presenza dello Spirito nella Chiesa e nel mondo, per vivere e operare con fiducia nella prospettiva del Regno*. Strenna 1998. Commentary of Fr Juan Edmundo Vecchi, Roma, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1998.

Hope

Natural hope in Salesian spirituality

Their teacher in spirituality and the world they live in make Don Bosco's disciples men and women of human and theological hope.¹

Francis de Sales, an optimistic saint, was a man of hope.² His humanism gave him confidence in the human creature destined to be a worthy child of God. Rather than it being an ascetic virtue, hope took on a “mystical” form in his life and writings. It permeated his spiritual being. The whole of Christian life seemed to him to be filled with God's love for his humble creature. Christ the Redeemer, the head of the mystical body, died out of love for his Father. God, who is present in human life, calls man to unite himself to him in love, in other words God destines him to beatitude in eternal life. The person thus called upon can only (or should only) respond confidently to God's immense love. Such a person must freely choose the greatest good in the greatest love imaginable. Francis' optimism was rooted in these certainties. Human weaknesses, which he disapproved of, gave rise to his indulgent gaze. He showed a quiet confidence in the spiritual development of all those who agreed to enter into a “devout life”.

Don Bosco's follower is repeatedly told that Salesian spirituality is a “youthful spirituality”. The mission he took on involved him in the hope that is natural to youth. To be able to walk, talk, grow, learn and know implies an innate hope for the future in the youngster. What will I not do when I grow up? The young lad sees himself with helmet on, all strapped up and riding a big motorbike with his girlfriend behind him. The young girl imagines herself starring in a big film and her photograph adorning magazine covers. Youth is a time of naïve and slightly crazy hopes. The future will bring her happiness, she knows it, she believes it, she is convinced of it. The forces within them keep telling them so. Adolescents also come up against their environment and themselves. They learn the hard way that disappointment is a fact of life. Sometimes they are tempted to commit suicide, lose all hope and succumb. But then there are so many questions in the face of such an incomprehensible act! Youth should only be a time for hope.

The patronage of Saint Francis de Sales and a “youthful mentality” combine to imbue the spirituality of the Salesian Family with theological and human hope.

Joyful confidence that generates initiative

Ideally, the disciple of Don Bosco, resolutely optimistic and confident in God, does not let himself be defeated by life's difficulties. "Let nothing disturb you", Don Bosco used to say over and over again. The disciple believes in the human being's natural and supernatural resources, without ignoring the weaknesses. He holds on to everything that is good, especially when it appeals to young people. Because he proclaims the Good News, he is always joyful and spreads joy around him. "Let us serve the Lord with holy joy", Don Bosco recommended to the readers of his *Il Giovane provveduto*.³

Salesian Family members are not afraid of new commitments that require confidence in the future. They have, by now, learned to link the expectation of the Kingdom of God in theological hope and the expectation of the necessary establishment – admittedly always precarious and imperfect, because it is temporal – of greater justice and peace on earth, the object of the aspirations and hope of all peoples. They know that the spiritual energies of the Kingdom have an illuminating and life-giving effect on the promotion of human values. Theological hope purifies, strengthens and sustains human hope. Aware of the gift of hope, members of the Salesian Family know that they are called upon to carry out the urgent tasks of building the city, and, according to their status as cleric or lay, they contribute to this as best they can.⁴

Salesian Family members, with their practical sense, are attentive to the "signs of the times", convinced that the Lord also manifests his will through the urgent needs of time and place. Their spirit of initiative stems from this. By no means timid, Don Bosco sought to be "daring" when the good of helpless youth or the salvation of souls were at stake. He once confided to one of his one of his friends, "In those things which are for the benefit of young people in danger or which serve to win souls for God, I push ahead even to the extent of recklessness."⁵ Timely responses to the needs they encounter lead his disciples to follow the course of history and tackle them with the creativity and balance of the Founder by periodically evaluating their work.⁶

The paths of hope

Members of the Salesian Family would like to be sowers of hope. Salesians set out to find a method for this difficult art. In 1994, they concluded a week of reflection with a series of considerations. Here we offer a slightly reorganised selection.

To spread hope, we must first be women and men of hope ourselves. The gaze of believers who live in hope goes beyond the visible to reach the mystery. They recognise the mystery of salvation and love in which they find themselves immersed. Life has meaning for them. The Spirit of the Risen Christ, in whom all is summed up, gives believers hope and enables them to overcome death. Disorder in oneself is harmful to hope; spiritual solidity encourages it. Theological hope, like human hope, presupposes recognising all of life's vital energies, whether personal or collective: today builds tomorrow. Those who close themselves off in their own world, who think and live selfishly, are incapable of feelings of solidarity with their immediate neighbours, or with those who are far away. They won't expect much from society. On the contrary, those who share their time, resources and knowledge with others, if only through friendly dialogue, will think and behave differently.

The man or woman of hope fights against the surrounding defeatism, in the conviction that hope is often born in the desert, and also develops in difficult conditions. As Salesians, persons of hope strive to be present to the world, in particular to the young people they want to form and educate. Salesians are concerned about the quality of their presence, because some presences are hopeless. Attentive to the positive values of others, in their relationships with others, with a concern for communion in spirit, they strive to bridge the distance that language often creates. For the follower of Don Bosco, the privileged path of hope is a path of kindness, indeed of loving-kindness.⁷

But evil exists; terrible, universal evil. In nature, suddenly hostile, and in humankind above all. The world's future, supposedly made radiant by soothing speeches is, for many on this earth, filled with flames and corpses. Wickedness and determined hatred overwhelm families, towns and entire populations. No matter how hard they try, from a human point of view the situation can and must be described as utterly hopeless. What hope is there in the horror of untold destruction and death? In times of terror, unfortunate humanity has always turned to the divinity, invoking its help. "God, we are perishing!" Their only recourse is to God or his representatives. Fervent Christians, though, look to the cross. They tell themselves that Christ gasping for life on the cross shows them the way to resurrection and eternity. Their hope, which now rests solely in God, has been purified. "Thy will be done, Lord!" The disciple of Saint Francis de Sales now hopes only for "eternal life" if God his Father is willing to receive him into his bosom.

NOTES

- 1 The Department for the Salesian Family organised a week of study on hope in Salesian spirituality at the General House in Rome, between 24 and 29 January 1994. The results were immediately published under the title *I Sentieri della speranza nella spiritualità salesiana*, Rome, ed. SDB, 1994, 314 pages.
- 2 See the article by Valentin Viguera, “Speranza e ottimismo in san Francesco di Sales. Selezione di testi e presentazione’ in *I Sentieri della speranza ..*, pp. 151-161’. His conclusions are taken up here.
- 3 Here I am adapting the words of article 17 of the Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco.
- 4 See Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 48 and *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39.
- 5 “Nelle cose che tornano a vantaggio della pericolante gioventù o servono a guadagnare anime a Dio, io corro avanti fino alla temerità.” (J. Bosco to Carlo Vespignani, Turin, 11 April 1877.)
- 6 According to the SDB Constitutions, art 19.
- 7 The considerations in this paragraph are taken from a table entitled: “La spiritualità salesiana dalla parte della speranza”, in *I Sentieri della speranza...*, op. cit., pp. 308-309, bringing together the conclusions of the Week of Spirituality on Hope.

Human promotion

Human promotion/progress/advancement

Like several other key words in Salesian spirituality, such as such as charism, consecration and inculturation, the term “progress/promotion/advancement”, most often preceded by the adjective “human”, made its appearance in the official vocabulary of the Salesian Family in the early 1970s. Some time earlier, Vatican II had introduced it into the everyday language of the Church.

The immediate context of the Council’s expression helps us to avoid wondering too much about the meaning to be given to it. What, in fact, is meant by “progress/promotion”, a term used by many for either academic or commercial purposes? The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* states, in a paragraph on “human activity” (*humana navitas*):

Just as it proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man. For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. A man is more precious for what he is than for what he has.¹ Similarly, all that men do to obtain greater justice, wider brotherhood, a more humane disposition of social relationships has greater worth than technical advances. For these advances can supply the material for human progress, but of themselves alone they can never actually bring it about.²

Let us assume from this that, according to the Council, the progress (or growth) of man as such, with his qualities of mind and body thus developed (what he is) is quite different from the gradual accumulation of his wealth and his techniques (what he has or has available to him). So translating “promotion” as “progress” seems fair. The man of “human promotion” is not the whole human species, but the individual within humanity, and working for “human promotion” means contributing to the “progress of people as people” in the world.

But what is education, the primary task of the Salesian, if not helping people to grow and progress? Human advancement is a concern of both the Salesian apostolate and Salesian spirituality.

Integral human promotion/progress/advancement

In 1971, the Special General Chapter of the Salesians considered how to express the “Salesian mission of salvation” to young people. After hesitating before the word “evangelisation”, which, it noted, took on the narrow meaning of announcing to awaken the first act of faith, it finally opted for two complementary expressions. The Salesian mission of salvation takes a twofold form, it judged, which is of “integral Christian promotion” and “liberating Christian education”. And it commented on the first of these in the following terms. “1) ‘Integral Christian promotion’. ‘Promotion’ indicates the development of the person; ‘integral’ indicates the whole range of this process, right up to divine filiation and sanctity; ‘Christian’ indicates that the source or energy that will animate the whole process is the same love of Christ.”³ Don Bosco’s axiom, “Give me souls and take away the rest” might have led us to fear that his education system was geared solely towards “eternal salvation”. It would have neglected the human, the all too human. This is not the case, the Chapter teaches. The “process of personal development” that his Salesians took on was “integral” as well as “Christian”. The intentions of Don Bosco who, in his time, had wanted to form “good Christians and upright citizens”, had simultaneously wished his young people “*sanità, sagesza, santità*” (the three S’s, though not in English: health, wisdom, holiness) and had proposed to them a style of life combining “joy, wisdom and holiness”, were respected by the term “integral promotion”, especially when combined with “liberating education”, which appropriately shed light on it.”⁴ The 1984 Constitutions were thus able to concentrate the Salesian apostolic programme in the single phrase “total human well being” [Note: this is the revised translation. It formerly said “total well-being of man”], now well understood.”⁵

The entire Salesian educational method takes careful account of this. The school “promotes the total development of the young person.”⁶ The works and activities seek to “make possible the human” as well as the “Christian” education of young people.”⁷ These young people are approached as they are, “at their present stage of freedom.” And their educators accompany them as they develop solid convictions, so that they can “gradually assume responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and in the faith.”⁸ Salesian educators train young workers in their centres for a decent future and, at the same time, make them aware of the “role they can play in the Christian transformation of social life”, in other words, in the progress or promotion of this social life according to the Gospel.”⁹

The Salesian concern for human advancement, which is by no means restricted to young people is also extended to adults, especially those from working-class backgrounds to whom Salesians are also dedicated. According to the new Regulations, Salesian parishes, not absorbed by the “spiritual” alone, “see that evangelisation is linked with human advancement”¹⁰ And the renewed Salesian Constitutions have led Salesians on this difficult path, at least when it is taken seriously. We read:

Our priority commitment to young people who are poor fits in well with pastoral involvement among poor people in general.. We recognise the gospel values which they stand for, and the need they have of support in their efforts at human advancement and growth in the faith. We also give our attention to the lay people responsible for evangelization of their local area, and to the family where different generations come together and build the future of humankind.¹¹

The consequences of such “support” in the effort to promote the human development of ordinary folk can be serious for religious in the Third and Fourth Worlds. Where “religion” was clearly a factor of resignation to the order of things, it now appears as a factor of insurrection against the “established disorder” and a driving force for transforming the structures that produce underdevelopment and poverty. “Religion” is no longer identified with resignation, but with “liberation”. By defending the weak, even out of charity, religious, including Salesian religious, alienate the powerful and risk their security, if not their very lives. Brazil’s contemporary history (the agrarian question, the Indian question) and Chile (after the coup against Salvador Allende) bear witness to this.

Human advancement through formation in values

The educator faithful to Don Bosco forms people in moral “values” which adorn the free human being whose human development has been successful.¹² In a speech delivered at the Salesian University in Rome, after recalling that ecclesiastical universities have the mission of “formulating a vital synthesis between the sciences and practices on the one hand, and religious values on the other, so that the whole of culture is imbued and unified by them”, John Paul II went on to say

I would like to point out to you that your university is in a particularly privileged position when faced with such a task. In fact, its distinctive feature is that it benefits from the charisma of Saint John Bosco, the promotion of the integral

human being, in other words the intellectual, moral and social formation of young people, carried out in the light of the Gospel.¹³

A verse from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians proposed as the first reading for the Eucharist for the liturgical feast of Saint John Bosco lists some of these values: "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." And the text continues "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me."¹⁴ The Salesian educator promotes the child and adolescents, if possible to great heights. The integral human promotion that he seeks to implement seeks to build well-balanced, strong and free personalities who love what is true, noble, pure and just. The follower of St John Bosco teaches a love of truth, loyalty, respect for all people, a sense of justice, fidelity to one's word, true compassion, coherence and balance in judgement and behaviour. Young people's emotional maturity is the result of education to true and responsible love.¹⁵

It is a difficult undertaking, John Paul II agreed on the occasion of the centenary of Don Bosco's death.

The kind of education which, according to Don Bosco's method, fosters an original interaction between evangelisation and human advancement, calls for precise attention to certain points from the heart and mind of the educator: the acquiring of a pedagogical sensitivity, the adopting of an attitude which is both motherly and fatherly, the effort to assess what is happening in the growth of the individual and the group in the light of a formative plan which brings together in wise and vigorous unity the educational purpose itself and the will to find the most suitable means for attaining it.¹⁶

Human promotion and "new evangelisation"

Pope John Paul II's campaign for a "new evangelisation" at the end of the century had an impact on the Salesian programme of "human promotion" especially in Latin America. In 1992, Fr Viganò drew some conclusions from his participation in the episcopal assembly in Santo Domingo convened by the Pope on the new evangelisation, where human promotion was very much in the spotlight (12-28 October 1992).¹⁷

"A new evangelisation for a new culture" was the theme initially planned for the assembly. "The Pope," explained the Rector Major, "had the title changed to include

human promotion. It eventually became: ‘New Evangelisation. Human promotion. Christian culture: Jesus Christ yesterday, today and always (Hebrews 13:8).’ At the same time, the new evangelisation “catechises”, “promotes” and “fosters inculturation”. In other words, the apostle is invited to evangelise not only “by catechising”, “by fostering inculturation”, but also “by promoting”, a phrase that resonated well with the Salesian who has been invited for several years to “educate by evangelising” and “evangelise by educating”. The direction taken by Christ and the Church is decidedly not the anonymous or abstract human being, but the situated human being who experiences problems, situated in a culture and place. If the new evangelisation, which the contemporary Church talks so much about, were not about human promotion and inculturation in the name of Christ, it would be inauthentic and would fail to make faith an driving force of history.

The work of promotion faces a series of challenges in Latin America, the Santo Domingo assembly estimates, summarising them under ten headings: human rights, ecology, the earth as a gift from God, impoverishment and solidarity, work, human mobility, the democratic order, the new economic order, Latin American integration, and finally the family and life. These problems need to be seen in the light of the gospel, it declared. Fr Viganò listed the challenges without commenting on them.¹⁸ According to the final document, “human promotion is a privileged dimension of the new evangelisation.”¹⁹ It noted: “The lack of coherence between professed faith and daily life is one of the many causes of poverty in our countries, because Christians have not been able to find in their faith the necessary strength to inscribe it in the criteria and decisions of the sectors responsible for the spiritual guidance and organisation of the social, economic and political life of our peoples.”²⁰ The Salesian apostles of the continent (and elsewhere) were invited to reflect on their responsibilities.

During the assembly, the Education Committee (of which the Rector Major was a member) pointed out that the concrete path of this evangelisation is education, “a methodological mediation for the evangelisation of culture”;²¹ but also lifelong education, as an instrument of human promotion. For education is not just a problem for children and young people; it requires constant updating on the part of adults given the many novelties of the times. Under these conditions, the priorities defined in Santo Domingo were three in number, the first on catechesis, the second on inculturation and the third on promotion. And this third priority called for “an evangelization projected into an integral advancement of people, starting from the poor and for the poor, at the service of life and the family.”²²

The Rector Major made the assembly's pastoral guidelines his own, particularly in the education sector, and extended them to the entire Salesian Family. These included care for the emotional growth and spiritual guidance of youngsters to bring about a meeting between faith and life to promote justice, solidarity and a "new culture of life", and a renewed celebration of the faith, opening up spaces for young people to participate in the life of the Church.²³ In this way, the members of the Salesian Family will contribute, as far as they are able, to the integral human promotion of young people and the world.

NOTES

- 1 “Magis valet homo propter id quod est quam propter id quod habet” (Paul VI, Allocution to the Diplomatic Corps, 7 January 1965; in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 57 (1965), p. 232).
- 2 *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 35, § 1.
- 3 “Promozione integrale cristiana”. “Promozione” indica il processo di sviluppo della persona ; “integrale” indica tutto l’arco di questo processo, fino alla figliolanza divina e alla santità ; “cristiana” indica che la fonte e l’energia che animerà tutto il processo è la stessa carità di Cristo”. (CGS, no. 61.)
- 4 Observations of GC21, no. 81 ; and of E. Viganò, “Il progetto educativo salesiano”, Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1978, in *Atti*, 290, p. 27.
- 5 “Educiamo ed evangelizziamo secondo un progetto di promozione integrale dell’uomo, orientato a Cristo, uomo perfetto.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 31).
- 6 “La scuola salesiana promuove lo sviluppo integrale del giovane” (SDB General Regulations, art. 13) .
- 7 “ ... attraverso attività e opere in cui ci è possibile promuovere l’educazione umana e cristiana dei giovani”. (SDB Constitutions, art 42).
- 8 “Li accompagniamo perchè maturino solide convinzioni e siano progressivamente responsabili nel delicato processo di crescita della loro umanità nella fede.” (SDB Constitutions art. 38).
- 9 “... renderli idonei ad occupare con dignità il loro posto nella società e nella Chiesa e a prendere coscienza del loro ruolo in vista della trasformazione cristiana della vita sociale” (SDB Constitutions, art. 27).
- 10 “Curi l’integrazione di evangelizzazione e promozione umana.” (SDB Regulations, art. 26).
- 11 “L’impegno prioritario per i giovani poveri si armonizza con l’azione pastorale verso i ceti popolari. Riconosciamo i valori evangelici di cui sono portatori e il bisogno che hanno di essere accompagnati nello sforzo di promozione umana e di crescita nella fede. Li sosteniamo quindi con tutti quei mezzi che la carità cristiana ispira.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 29).
- 12 We are at the centre of his preventive system, Fr Viganò taught in a Strenna for the Family just before he died. See his commentary *Chiamati alla libertà (Gal. 5, 13), riscopriamo il sistema preventivo educando i giovani ai valori*”. Strenna 1995, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 31 December 1994.
- 13 John Paul II to the Pontifical Salesian University, 31 January 1981, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 2-3 February 1981
- 14 Philippians, 4: 8-9.
- 15 Observations partially borrowed from John Paul II, *Pastorem Dabo Vobis*, 25 March 1992, nos. 43-44, in a paragraph on “human formation, the foundation of all priestly formation.”
- 16 John Paul II, letter for the centenary of Don Bosco’s death, *Iuvenum Patris*, 31 January 1988, no. 17.
- 17 E. Viganò, “Un messaggio ecclesiale di nuova evangelizzazione”, Letter to Salesians, 12 December 1992, *Atti* 343, pp. 3-33.
- 18 E. Viganò, above-mentioned letter, p. 13.
- 19 Santo Domingo assembly, concluding document Chap. II title of Part One.

- 20 Concluding document, no. 161.
- 21 Concluding document, no. 271.
- 22 E. Viganò, above-mentioned letter, p. 19.
- 23 E. Viganò, above-mentioned letter, pp. 22-24.

Humanism

The devout humanism of Francis de Sales

The term *humanism*, which originally sounded rather less than Catholic, only appeared in official Salesian documents after Vatican II. Don Bosco “has given us an incomparable example of pedagogical and Christian humanism”, remarked Pope Paul VI.¹ The Twenty-Third Salesian General Chapter (1990) stated that the conscience of young people spontaneously accepts the “new humanism” and its values, which include a sense of freedom, the absolute dignity of the person, the sense of a personal life project, the need for authenticity and autonomy, all of which, it said, “open on to the Gospel.”² By “humanism” was meant a doctrine that takes the human person and his or her self-fulfilment as its goal, while avoiding to be closed in on itself. The Salesians in 1990 probably referred to “old humanism” as a form of paganism, either the humanism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Renaissance who were fascinated by Greco-Roman culture, or, perhaps, the “pure humanism” of Ernest Renan, “i.e. the cult of all that is human, the whole of life sanctified and elevated to a moral value.”³

Under this name, the disciple of Saint Francis de Sales discovered familiar territory. Francis in fact practised what is known today as “devout” humanism. The expression “devout humanism” as applied to the spirituality of St Francis de Sales was coined by Henri Bremond in 1916 for the first volume of his *Histoire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion*.⁴ If there is an eternal humanism which does not believe man to be contemptible, which “always and cordially takes the side of our nature” and shows “an unshakeable confidence in the fundamental goodness of man”, this humanism takes different forms depending on the philosophies to which it is linked. Christian humanism, of which devout humanism is a variant, prefers to emphasise redemption, which elevated nature, rather than original sin, which vitiated it.

The devout humanism of Saint Francis de Sales is an exaltation of the marvel of grace and even of nature that is man, he went on to say. If original sin (a “*felix culpa*”!) has left a tendency to rebellion in the lower part of the soul, these resistances are good and maintain humility and strength. Fortunately, man has retained “the holy inclination to love God above all things.” For Francis, humanism is a way of being in the world, with his fellow human beings and with God. This way of being colours everything he is and

everything he wrote. His sense of nature, philosophy and culture, moral and religious life, his public works as well as his private letters, are constantly marked by this humanism that integrates the whole person. Francis de Sales wanted the human person to be fully integrated into the economy of salvation. Let us reread a page from the *Introduction to the Devout Life*.⁵ Upon her “conversion”, Philothea, “after remembering that in (her) Baptism (she was) so solemnly and happily dedicated to God as his child... (she) desire(s), intend(s) and deliberately resolve(s) to serve and love Him now and eternally, devoting (her) mind and all its faculties, (her) soul and all its powers, (her) heart with all its affections, ...” Note the insistent repetition of the word “all”. The author of this sentence intended to leave nothing out. Devout humanism rehabilitates art, through which God is praised, the pleasure of writing, poetry, “natural delights” and “eutrapelia”, or in other words, the “honest cheerfulness” of good conversation, recommended by Francis to his Philothea.⁶ How pleasant it all is!

Salesian humanism based on charity

At the end of the twentieth century, the correspondences between the humanism of Saint Francis de Sales and what had come to be known as Don Bosco’s humanism were carefully noted in the Salesian world. “Before being action, the apostolate is a personal relationship of charity, and any activity not imbued with love is ultimately doomed to failure” we find written (admittedly, somewhat excessively). The author continued more convincingly:

This conviction dictated to both Francis de Sales and John Bosco a series of behaviours that were typically ‘Salesian’. It is first of all what has been called their humanism, or their optimism, their radical confidence in man and his natural and supernatural capacities. Both, as connoisseurs of the human being, glorified “human” values and virtues, and gave pride of place to affection, joy, culture and the striving for progress. They believed fundamentally in the usefulness and value of action. Convinced that every human being can be educated, they made the greatest possible use of their inner powers, intelligence, freedom, heart, faith... with the patience that knows how to wait, hope and begin again.⁷

The entire Salesian Family is part of the great “Salesian current of humanism” the 1995 Common Identity Card said. The authors of this document explained.

For Don Bosco Salesian humanism means the exploitation of everything positive found rooted in the lives of individuals, in things and in history. This Salesian

humanistic inspiration led him to appreciate worldly vales, especially if they were pleasing to the young, and also to get into the changing culture and human development of his own time, promoting what was good and not merely decrying evils. It led him to seek the cooperation of many people, convinced that each one had his own talents, perhaps as yet undiscovered; to believe in the value of education which animates and sustains the change and growth of youngsters towards becoming upright citizens and good Christians; to entrust himself unwaveringly to the providence of God, perceived and loved as his Father.⁸

The proclaimed humanism of Don Bosco's Salesian Family now had a very official content.

Salesian humanism and women

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the progress of feminism led the Salesian Family, in particular the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to reflect on the value of women in our world. This appreciation was, after all, included in the humanist profession of the Salesians. How can we imagine for a moment that the pompously celebrated "exploitation" of "everything positive found rooted in the lives of individuals" does not primarily concern the better half of humanity? Don Bosco's followers, therefore, set out to exploit the specific nature and culture of the feminine universe.

Up to and including Fr Ricceri's term of office (1965–1977), the indexes of the letters of the Salesian Superiors General did not include the word *donna* (woman).⁹ The 1980 Roman Synod of Bishops on the "Christian family" convinced Fr Viganò (1978–1995) to shake things up. The problem of women concerns the whole of human culture, he said. Our scientific and technical civilisation is a unilaterally "masculine" civilisation. Women have a special ability to humanise and personalise relationships and environments. For this reason, she is a bearer of hope in the Church and in society. The Synod put forward very concrete proposals for the liberation and social enhancement of women's specific mission. The advancement of women in no way entails their "masculinisation", as if their liberation were to reduce them to the level of men. Rather, this liberation consists in the full development and maturation of her femininity.¹⁰ John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988) could only encourage evolution. The Rector Major would return to the identity and promotion of women, particularly religious women on several occasions in 1993–1994, during the preparation

for the Roman Synod of Bishops on “Consecrated Life” (1994), a synod in which he played a major role.¹¹

Throughout this period, the Salesian Sisters were increasingly active and intelligent in their reflection on femininity. In 1981, for the centenary of the death of Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello, a Salesian Family Spirituality Week chose as its theme: “Women in the Salesian charism.”¹² Not surprisingly, the Sisters were at the forefront. At the end of the century, the General Chapters of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were entitled: “Educating girls. Contribution of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to new evangelisation in the various socio-cultural contexts” and “FMA. Communities of women rooted in Christ and called to an intercultural educational mission towards the third millennium.”¹³ It is through education that Salesian women work for the dignity and true identity of women. At the same time, the Auxilium, the Roman University Faculty of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, openly made the promotion of women in the Church and the world its favourite subject. Two major congresses organised by this Faculty, one in 1988 in Frascati: “Towards the education of women today”, the other in 1997 in Collevalenza (province of Perugia): “Women and the humanisation of culture on the threshold of the third millennium”, bear witness to this.¹⁴

The Salesian Sisters specifically rejected any condescension where women were concerned in relation to men. Between masculine and feminine, their feminism called for a shift from difference to “reciprocity”. “Freedom and responsibility for fullness of life”, they demanded. Science is now making us realise that humanity is not an irreducible dichotomy but lies rather in the distinction and integration of the masculine and feminine, without either of these dimensions claiming exclusivity, hegemony or superiority. Anthropology, biology and psychology show us, in their current state, the reciprocity that exists between the masculine and the feminine, the extent to which one is present and active in the other, what influence one has on the other, how one cannot be understood without the other.

Salesian humanism has thus progressed with the century. The new women’s new self-awareness is now helping men, including Salesians of course, to review their mental patterns, their way of understanding themselves, of situating themselves in history and of interpreting it, of organising social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life. For her part, to fulfil her vocation, the Church has the greatest need of charisms that are properly feminine, where nature and grace are mutually fulfilling. For the mystery of covenant in which the Church lives has a feminine dimension of listening,

welcoming and inner care which takes precedence over decision-making, commitment and organisation, tasks in which men take pleasure and which they think it natural to reserve for themselves. Women play a unique and undoubtedly decisive role in the evolution of the world. It is up to them to promote a “new feminism” which, “without succumbing to the temptation of following ‘male’ models, knows how to recognise and express the true feminine genius in all aspects of life in society, working to overcome all forms of discrimination, violence and exploitation.”¹⁵ On the threshold of the twenty-first century, Salesian humanism was contributing to the “humanisation of culture”, in accordance with the wishes of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in their 1997 Congress.

NOTES

- 1 Address at the Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum in Rome, 29 October 1966.
- 2 “La coscienza giovanile recepisce, in forma spontanea, il “nuovo umanesimo” e i suoi valori ; il senso della libertà, l’assoluta dignità della persona, il senso del proprio progetto di vita, il bisogno di autenticità e di autonomia. Sono istanze queste che si aprono al Vangelo.” (CG23, no. 184).
- 3 E. Renan, *L’Avenir de la science, Oeuvres*, vol. III, p. 809.
- 4 See pp. 1-17 and 68-127 of this fine book, some of which is repeated here.
- 5 Part I, Chap. 20.
- 6 Part Three, Chap. 28.
- 7 J. Aubry, *Les saints de la famille*, Rome, ed. SDB, 1996, p. 34.
- 8 “Ci inseriamo come Famiglia di Don Bosco nella più grande corrente salesiana dell’umanesimo, offrendo alla Chiesa un contributo di originalità sia nell’ambito educativo che nel lavoro pastorale. Per Don Bosco umanesimo salesiano significa valorizzazione di tutto il positivo presente e radicato nella vita delle persone, nelle cose, nella storia. Questa ispirazione umanistica salesiana lo porta a cogliere i valori del mondo, specie se graditi ai giovani; a inserirsi nel flusso della cultura e dello sviluppo umano del proprio tempo, stimolando il bene e non accontentandosi di gemere sui mali ; a ricercare la cooperazione di molti, convinto che ciascuno ha un suo dono evidente o da scoprire ; a credere nella forza dell’educazione che anima e sostiene il cambiamento e la crescita del giovane verso l’onesto cittadino e il buon cristiano; ad affidarsi senza tentennamenti alla provvidenza di Dio, avvertito e amato come Padre.” (*Carta di comunione*, art. 8.)
- 9 The word appears in the *Atti del Capitolo Superiore* in Fr Rinaldi’s time (1922-1931), with the warning: “Precauzioni da osservare” (Precautions to be taken), other than a note from the Congregation’s “Spiritual Director General”.
- 10 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1980, *Atti 299*, January-March 1981, p. 23.
- 11 E. Viganò, Letters to Salesians, 8 December 1993, *Atti 347*, p. 27; 15 August 1994, *Atti 350*, p. 27 (“... la novità culturale collegata con l’identità e dignità della donna, tanto a livello ecclesiale, quanto a livello civile e secolare”); 8 December 1994, *Atti 351*, pp. 16-19 (§ La donna consacrata).
- 12 *La donna nel carisma salesiano. Apporto della donna e in particolare di S. Maria Domenica Mozzarella al carisma salesiano. Ottava Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana*. Roma, 25-31 January 1981, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1981, 288 pages.
- 13 “Educare le giovani: apporto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice a una nuova evangelizzazione nei diversi contesti socio-culturali” and “FMA: Comunità di donne radicate in Cristo chiamate a una missione educativa interculturale verso il Terzo Millennio”.
- 14 *Verso l’educazione della donna oggi*, Rome, LAS, 1989; “Donna e umanizzazione della cultura alle soglie del terzo millennio. La via dell’educazione”, report by Enrica Rosanna, in *Rivista di scienze dell’educazione*, ann. XXXV, 1997, pp. 441-452.
- 15 Ideas partially borrowed from John-Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, nos. 57 and 58.

Humility

The Salesian Society of humble origins

Don Bosco was a humble man, not only because he was born poor and unknown, but because throughout his life, even and especially in front of his crowds of admirers, his sense of self was a lowly one. The lesson of the Lady in his dream at nine years of age, as he repeated it, “Be humble, strong and energetic”,¹ was one he never forgot. In his eyes, the Moglia’s former cowherd persisted beneath the cassock of the priest from Turin receiving the adulation of the crowd. His correspondence abounded in expressions like “my poor person” which, to those who could read, did not mean that he was penniless, but were a reminder of his unflinching modesty.² He did not despise himself, but he but was determined never to boast of his talent. The “feeling that a person has of his weakness, his inadequacy, and which drives him to lower himself voluntarily by repressing his pride”, as lexicographers today define humility, was born and reborn in him without pretence.³

The religious Societies that Don Bosco founded inherited his modesty. When his successor Fr Rua was asked to present the Congregation for which he was responsible, the epithet “humble” (or its synonyms) almost automatically flowed from his pen. Thus, in his circulars to the Salesians for 1893–1896, he wrote on 29 January 1893: “... The very wise Leo XIII also loves also our humble Society”⁴ and on 29 January 1894: “There is no doubt that our humble Congregation is doing civil society a great deal of good by providing a haven shelter to so many poor children .”⁵ In 1895, at the Salesian Congress in Bologna, he admitted that he had witnessed a “sublime spectacle of faith, zeal, charity and, let’s say it, sympathy for our humble Society.” This congress had “highlighted the goodness of the Lord towards the humble sons of Don Bosco.” Great, then, was the world’s “esteem for the poor sons of Don Bosco.”⁶ A few months passed and he exclaimed: “Divine Providence, by a particular trait of its goodness, disposed that our humble Congregation, in a very short period of time, should develop in such a way that it seems to hold something of the prodigious.”⁷ Fr Rua’s modesty about his religious Congregation was profound and genuine. Vanity, pride, boasting, pretentiousness and triumphalism were normally foreign to Don Bosco’s disciples of the time, who were supposed to be faithful to their masters. Having opted for collective humility, they were lucid in recognising their obvious successes, but that did not mean they believed it. Didn’t they belong to the “humble Salesian Congregation”?

Humility preached to the Salesians by Frs Rua and Albera

However, nothing can be taken for granted in this order of things. Humility had to be preached to the Salesians. “Let us imitate him (Don Bosco) in his lowly (*basso*) sense of self” Fr Rua advised them, reminding them that “while he was praised and admired by people of all languages, all categories and all conditions, that was the price of his profound humility.”⁸

A sermon “on humility” opened a series of his retreat instructions to Salesians on “the great edifice of holiness.” “The first part of any building are its foundations” he said. Now, the foundation of sanctity is humility. He invoked the authority of St Cyprian, St Jerome and St Augustine. He had been attracted by an evocative image of the latter: “*Magnus esse vis? A minimo incipe.* (You want to be great? Start at the bottom).” “Do you dream of building the top of a tall building? Think first of the foundations, in other words humility.” And he concluded that there was general agreement among spiritual writers that humility was the foundation of holiness.⁹ He went on to show in his sermon that humility is indispensable for the correct practice of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, as well as for the practice of the three religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Condescending vanity lurks among Salesian superiors. Humility, which maintains fervour, regulates the mood, inspires gentleness and charity which keeps them in obedience, is all the more necessary for them. *Deus ... humilibus dat gratiam* (God gives his grace to the humble), he opined.¹⁰

The concern for the primordial role of humility in the spiritual life reappeared in Fr Albera’s “Strenna” to the Salesians for 1921: “Convinced that humility is the foundation of perfection, we will strive to practise it as best we can in our thoughts, our words and our behaviour.”¹¹ Like his predecessors, this Rector Major was fond of the epithet *humble* to describe himself and his Congregation. He repeated “my humble person” and “our humble society” in his letters, terms which would no longer appear in the circulars of Rectors Major,¹² let it be said straight away, from Fr Ricaldone’s time as Rector Major from 1932 to 1951.

After Fr Rua, Fr Albera also saw fit to preach humility to his regional and local superiors. They must show themselves to be “fathers” to their subordinates. But what’s the point of advising them to be fathers if they do not strive to be humble! Someone who is full of himself will always be devoid of patience and warmth towards his neighbour. The “good superior”, because aware of his own incapacity, does not aspire to office. When, despite this, he is elevated to some dignity, far from enjoying it and recognising it

as a reward for merits, he sees it only as “the punishment for his sins” (sic: *un castigo per i suoi peccati*). The genuinely humble person never enjoys his pre-eminence and does not like the honours that are attributed to him for the position he occupies. He endures them as the inevitable requirements of a well-ordered community and signs of the goodness of his subordinates, as if he had done nothing to deserve them. There is no danger that he will ramble on about himself, that in conversation he will complacently talk about *my*: “my work, my home, my college, my province”, accustomed as he is to thinking of himself as a member of the family, bound only by his duty to occupy the first place. One cannot detect a shadow of jealousy in him for the achievements of others under his governance. He is not impressed by articles in the press praising him, convinced, as he must be, that they add nothing to his merits before the Lord...¹³

Frs Rua and Albera therefore extolled the virtue of humility (somewhat simplistically, it is true) and demanded it of Don Bosco’s sons, especially when circumstances might have led them to forget or neglect it.

A less and less celebrated virtue

Blessed Philip Rinaldi, whose time as Rector Major (1922–1931) followed Fr Albera’s was, according to the unanimous opinion of observers, a model of humility. His biography and the procedures of his canonisation process bear witness to this. Witnesses even tended to reproach him with an excessive taste for obscurity. How much he would have liked, in 1928, to be relieved of the burden of being Rector Major!

However, from his time in office onwards, recommendations on the virtue of humility became rare in official Salesian documents. And they more or less disappeared in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Although there were still humble people in the Salesian ranks, some of whom, quite unwisely, did not hesitate to proclaim themselves as such, those in charge no longer thought to encourage them to continue in their “little way”. Why this virtual silence? Did pride and contemporary triumphalism gradually contaminate the spirituality inherited from Don Bosco?

Humility is an “ambiguous” term, if we may use this adjective which was very much in vogue in Church circles. Depending on the person, it covers an area of very diverse quality. Not all humble people are called Don Bosco, Fr Rua, Fr Rinaldi, Mother Mazzarello or Mother Morano, those energetic men and women with dazzling achievements. So-called humble people use their patronage to justify their guilty resignations. Under its cover they nurture softness, laziness, cowardice, pusillanimity,

villainy, what else? It is said that their “over-reaching grand designs” offend their “inner selves”. As a result, they are sad adult parasites on the human community. In spite of their gifts they have given up trying to be productive, and vegetate reclusively in their rooms with a dog or cat to keep them company. Concepts of this kind have been extended to entire social categories, and there have regularly been foolish, unaware or clever people, occasionally men of the Church, to encourage them to do so. Under the pretext of humility, the “damned of the earth” would continue to walk bent towards the ground – humbly so. They would never straighten up. By congenital humility, such would be their fate. Poverty would be the lot that Providence assigns to an eternal humility, the humility of class or race.

This sort of language did not sit well with the powerful movements of “personalisation” and “liberation” which, in the course of the twentieth century, triumphed in Western consciousness.¹⁵ The distortion of humility condones the abuses of the powerful and the baseness of the weak, proclaimed these movements. Liberation theology did not mix well with the humility of the poor and the rich. Were not the preachers of humility teaching the poor to accept a pathetic resignation? Many saw Christian discourse as the great obstacle to people’s desire for liberation. They rejected a suspect heritage out of hand. Not only would humility be part of a vast enterprise of spiritual mystification that was more or less consciously demobilising, but, from the point of view of psychologists, it was fed by the worst sources of powerlessness and resentment. Depth psychology, the cult of strength and a so-called “shock” Christianity all came together to refuse to introduce humility into a renewed Catholic spirituality. Humility seemed to have been forgotten. It was no longer talked about, no longer dared to be talked about. No doubt too much had been said about it in the past, and often very badly. The word itself was banned from Paul Eicher’s *Nouveau dictionnaire de théologie*.¹⁶ The author probably preferred not to say anything about a concept that was a trap. The sense of perversion of humility could not help but influence, even unwittingly, contemporary Salesian leaders in their discourse on the spiritual life. Especially when, as was the case with Fr Viganò, they were preaching extensively about enterprising action and personal fulfilment.

Humility, a permanent Salesian virtue

And yet, the model remained. Beyond Don Bosco, there was and always will be Jesus himself, who humbled himself to the point of death. Following in his footsteps, to believe means to humble oneself before God the Father. Here, as it so often does, Islam

offers Christians a valuable lesson. Humility is not the pale virtue of the weak who would cunningly take advantage of their weakness to do as they please with the strong. Nor does it have anything to do with self-contempt or powerlessness. Authentic humility has nothing in common with resignation. It is a decision to be taken again and again, when you are a believer in Jesus Christ: that of a man who wants to place himself in truth before God, with God and in God. It is in this sense that it is said over and over again (without fully understanding it) that “humility is truth”. Humility is a disposition of the conscience, which knows itself to be dependent. Do you believe in creation? Belief “means accepting from another that which depends only on oneself.”¹⁷

Humility moderates presumption and pride. It is self-denial, a self-imposed or accepted renunciation. It can also be an attribute of freedom that matures in tension and conflict. Humility eliminates tendencies towards idolatrous self-importance. It creates an inner disposition of thanksgiving to God, of trusting abandonment to God, of docility to the Spirit of the Lord, and also of balanced self-awareness.

We come across Don Bosco and Francis de Sales, two very humble but also very well-balanced individuals who did not despise themselves and were not whining weaklings. Francis de Sales reconciled humility and magnanimity, the greatness of the generous soul that is a kind of counterweight. Pusillanimity, baseness and meanness make humility a detestable vice. “Humility” Francis told the Visitation Sisters, “is nothing other than a perfect recognition that we are nothing but pure nothingness, and it makes us hold ourselves in high esteem.” However, it does not prevent us from esteeming ourselves, it even enjoins us to esteem ourselves highly “because of the goods which are in us, and not of us, which are faith, hope, love of God, if we have any, and also a certain capacity which God has given us to unite ourselves to him by means of grace.” This esteem is “the foundation of generosity of spirit.” Humility does not consist only in “defying ourselves but also in trusting in God; and defiance of ourselves and of our own strength produces confidence in God, and from this confidence arises generosity of spirit.”¹⁸ The virtuous humble person is free, generous and magnanimous.

Contemporary Salesians preach humility to the next generations. “To bring humility in the third millennium is to ensure all the other virtues” said the *Bollettino* in 1999. Humility is the spur that prevents us from becoming self-indulgent, from closing in on ourselves. It is refusing to exist apart from God. “I found God the day I lost sight of myself” Saint Thérèse used to say. All the virtues are knocking at the door of the year 2000, and humility opens it. Be humble and you will find yourself strong and energetic.”¹⁹ A century earlier, Fr Rua was not saying anything different.

NOTES

- 1 “Renditi umile, forte, robusto” (MO Da Silva, p. 36).
- 2 The editor of the second volume of his *Epistolario* for the years 1864–868 (Rome, 1996) recorded, on p. 683, his “povera mia persona” and his “povera anima mia” over that period.
- 3 See *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, s.v. Humilité.
- 4 “... il sapientissimo Leone XIII ama pure l’umile nostra Società” (M. Rua, L.C., p. 430).
- 5 “Non v’ha dubbio, l’umile nostra Congregazione fa un gran bene alla civile società col procurare un asilo a tanti poveri giovanetti...” (M. Rua, L.C., p. 437).
- 6 In Bologna, Fr Rua had been witness “ad un sì sublime spettacolo, di fede, di zelo, di carità e, diciamolo pure, di simpatia verso l’umile nostra Società” (...) “... questo Congresso fa vie maggiormente risaltare la bontà del Signore verso gli umili figli di Don Bosco” (...) “... stima verso i poveri figli di Don Bosco” (M. Rua, Circular to Salesians, 30 April 1895, L.C., p. 130, 131, 132).
- 7 “La Divina Provvidenza per tratto particolare di sua bontà dispose, che l’umile nostra Congregazione in brevissimo lasso di tempo prendesse uno sviluppo tale che sembra tenere del prodigioso” (M. Rua, Circular to Salesians, 29 January 1896, L. C., p. 137).
- 8 “Imitiamolo soprattutto nel basso sentir di noi stessi ricordando che, se egli è lodato ed ammirato da gente d’ogni lingua, d’ogni cetto e condizione, questo è il premio della sua profonda umiltà” (M. Rua, Circular to Salesians, 20 January 1898, L.C., p. 174).
- 9 Here are the notes quoted from this unpublished handwritten sermon: “... dovrò limit. Ad indie, solo le parti più essenz. del grande edifiz. della nostra santific. Prima parte di un edif. qualunque sono le fondant. Ora il fondamento della santità è l’umiltà (...) S. Agost spieg. Più diffusant, questa bella idea. Soggiung. magnus esse vis? A minimo incipe. Cogitas maga. Fabr. consti, celsitud? De fundam. prius cogita humilitatis.” (M. Rua, “Sull’umiltà”, Collection of undated *Prediche*, FdB 2900 A2.)
- 10 M. Rua, Circular to provincials and rectors of America, 24 August 1894, L.C., p. 112.
- 11 “Intanto, eccovi la mia Strenna per il nuovo armo. Per i Salesiani. Persuasi che l’umiltà è il fondamento della perfezione, ci studieremo di praticarla meglio che ci sia possibile, nei pensieri, nelle parole, nel portamento.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 24 December 1920, L.C., p. 363).
- 12 See his first circular to Salesians: “... Ma voi così buoni e indulgenti verso l’umile mia persona.” “... Il Vicario di Gesù Cristo si fece vedere ben informato di quanto riguarda l’umile nostra Società...” “... i disegni di Dio sulla nostra umile Congregazione” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 25 January 1911, L.C., p. 7, 15, 19-20). And one circular letter in 1915: “... il sapientissimo novello Pontefice Benedetto XV ama pure grandemente l’umile nostra Società.” “Altro motivo di conforto per noi tutti si è la stima che gode l’umile nostra Società in Roma” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 29 January 1915, L.C., pp. 161, 162).
- 13 Sentences translated more or less literally from the paragraphe on *Umiltà* in Fr Albera letter to provincials and rectors (21 April 1917), entitled: *Consigli ed avvisi per conservare lo spirito di D. Bosco in tutte le Case*, L. C., pp. 227-228.

- 14 There are two secondary references in Fr Ricaldone's time (193--1951), none for that of Fr Ziggotti (1952--1965), only one for Fr Ricceri (1965--1977), and only one for Fr Viganò (1978--1995), all of which concern Fr Rinaldi's humility.
- 15 We know that Fr Viganò saw them as levers for the transformation of Salesian spirituality. See our Introduction, above.
- 16 2nd ed., Paris, Cerf, 1996. The term *Humilité* is ignored, not only in the corpus, but, the last straw for a dictionary of Christian theology, in the copious thematic index of this volume. Less enslaved to contemporary currents, the *Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophie morale* (ed. M. Canto-Sperber, Paris, PUF, 1996), for its part recognised *Humilité chrétienne* in its *Index rerum* (p. 1706).
- 17 In part borrowed from the issue entitled "L'humilité des croyants", *Christus* 104, October 1979.
- 18 Francis de Sales, *Spiritual Conferences*, 5: "On generosity", in *Oeuvres*, vol. VI, pp. 74-77, passim.
- 19 "Portare nel terzo millennio l'umiltà è assicurarsi tutte le altre virtù. L'umiltà è un puntigliene che impedisce all'uomo di compiacersi, di fermarsi. E' il rifiuto di esistere all'infuori di Dio. "Ho trovato Dio il giorno che ho perso di vista me stessa", ripete santa Teresa. A bussare alla porta del 2000 sono tutte le virtù, ad aprirla è l'umiltà. Renditi umile e ti troverai forte e robusto per tutte le traversie che la vita ti presenta." (Carlo Terraneo, "Lettera ai giovani. Abitare il 3° millennio in umiltà", in *Bollettino salesiano*, January 1999, p. 19).

Inculturation

A recent term of relative precision

“Having appeared in the vocabulary of Christian missiology around 1975 and, since 1977, in the official texts of the Catholic Church, the term responds to missionaries’ concern to take into account the specific nature of local cultures instead of imposing the ecclesial model of European communities on them” we read in an independent encyclopaedia.¹ The theological specialists who invented it have endeavoured to agree on the meaning of the word since its creation, with varying degrees of success.

The problem is how to get the Christian message, confused with the Gospel, into cultures that do not know it. There can be no question, we are assured, of “adaptation” (insufficient), “indigenisation” (offensive), or “contextualisation” (too weak) of the Church of Christ in this or that region, but rather (according to the perhaps bold definition of the 1983 Salesian Congress), “the insertion of the Christian life and message into a concrete cultural area, so that this life and this message are not only expressed in the elements proper to the culture in question, but also have an inspiring, normative and unifying function which transforms and recreates that culture, giving rise to a new creation.”²

Where inculturation is taken literally, the traditional meaning of the mission is reversed. In a homily on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his Church (1978), Bishop Anselme T. Sanon, Bishop of Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina-Faso) remarked: “We are not celebrating the departure of the missionaries; we are celebrating the death of the mission that came from over there. The mission is over. We are celebrating the mission that is born here as springing up from our own heart, from our own land.”³ Inculturation then leads to what John Paul II did not shy away from – the “Africanisation” of the Church.

Is this presentation entirely satisfactory? There is no point dreaming about a Christian message that never existed. If we consider only the first millennium of Christianity, Christ and his message have always been brought to the nations by a culture, be it Jewish, Syriac, Greek or Roman, from Jerusalem to Antioch, from Antioch to Corinth, from Corinth to Rome and Byzantium, from Byzantium to Jerusalem, Byzantium to Kiev (towards Moscow), Rome to Lutetia, Canterbury and

Aachen... Mission necessarily implies an encounter between cultures which produces acculturation (*ad* = to go towards), a word used by ethnologists to describe the “process by which a human group assimilates all or part of the cultural values of another human group”, as happened to the Native Americans in the United States.⁴ At the end of the century, after having “strongly affirmed that inculturation is a permanent work for the fruitfulness of the Gospel in every culture: the Gospel must bear fruit in every culture”, a theologian cautiously added as a footnote to his article: “In saying this, we wish to distance ourselves from the illusory tendency that would like to introduce the Gospel message into African culture as if it were purely graspable by us. Our perspective therefore opens up towards acculturation, which has the advantage of establishing the difference between cultures from the outset.”⁵ In the name of the inculturation of faith, the young Churches of Asia or Africa would willingly reject the Greek or Latin philosophical heritage into which the Christian message has been cast.⁶ And they would be wrong. It is pointless to forget the necessarily “acculturating” part of evangelisation.

In any case, the word inculturation began to enter the official Salesian vocabulary in 1971 under pressure from the representatives of India (Bangalore), during the Special General Chapter and in the distant preparation of Article 7 of the 1984 Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales. Entitled “Our Society in the contemporary world”, it would say that “Our vocation calls us to be deeply united with the world and its history. Open to the cultural values of the lands in which we work, we try to understand them and make them our own, so as to incarnate in them the message of the gospel”⁷ From the time of Fr Viganò’s term of office and the birth of the Congregation’s Project Africa (1978), the term inculturation came into common use in the Salesian world.⁸

But here we come up against a related difficulty. The word inculturation refers to a concept of culture that we need to agree on. It should not be confined to “culture” meaning “literary” culture, the culture of fine minds. Culture, according to the 1985 Salesian *Ratio fundamentalis*,

is the complex totality that embraces notions, beliefs, arts, habits and all kinds of abilities and constant activities proper to man as a member of society. It is the life of a people. It is the set of values that animate it, the counter-values that diminish it and which, shared by the multitude of its members, unite it in a single ‘collective consciousness’. Culture is also the forms in which these values or counter-values are expressed and shaped such as customs, language, institutions and the structures of social life, when other when other dominant cultures do not repress or stifle them.⁹

As we can see, and as the article quoted from the Constitutions makes clear, in the work of inculturation, Salesians at the end of the twentieth century were particularly interested in cultural “values” and “counter-values”.

Understanding and embracing cultural values

The Salesian efforts at inculturation of the Church are aimed at inscribing the Gospel in the cultural values of today’s world. This is its wish. Helped by John Paul II’s addresses to Africans at the start of his mandate, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò wanted to show his Salesians the path to follow in their apostolate across this continent, at least in its sub-Saharan part.¹⁰ His description is a kind of model of Salesian inculturation in the various forms of society. Fr Viganò did not hide the difficulties of the enterprise, because “inculturation... is a delicate and difficult task and demands continual attentive and discerning reflection.”¹¹ Goodwill is therefore not enough for evangelisers. Knowing, understanding and embracing local cultural values is essential to their attempts at inculturation.

“The kingdom that the Gospel proclaims is lived by people who are deeply linked to a culture” John Paul II told the bishops of Zaire at the time.

Construction of the kingdom of God cannot do without borrowing elements from human cultures. In fact, evangelisation must help these cultures to bring out of their own living traditions original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought. It is therefore important to carry out a thorough investigation of the cultural traditions of the various populations, and of the philosophical data that underlie them, in order to detect in them those elements that are not in contradiction with the Christian religion and those contributions that are likely to enrich theological reflection.¹²

Inculturation imposes, with a sharpened Christian sense, an attitude of humility that is not natural to those who believe they possess the Truth. In the ethical field, the Pope also recommended, various resources of the African soul are like stones ready to build Christianity upon. Paul VI had already mentioned them in his message to Africa on 29 October 1967. They include the spiritual vision of life, the sense of family and children, and community life.¹³

For his part, the Rector Major Fr Viganò sought to compile a collection of these African values for Salesians, based on the papal speeches from 1980. It was, he wrote, their kind-heartedness, their wisdom, their respect for man, their sense of God, their

strong sense of community in the various groups that make up their social structure, their innate propensity for dialogue, their spontaneous joy evinced in their celebrations, their respect for life. Their undeniable cultural unity has preserved intact the widest variety of customs, they have a conception of the world in which the sacred holds pride of place, a profound awareness of the bond between nature and its Creator, a spontaneity and joie-de-vivre that express themselves in poetry, song and dance, a culture rich in an all embracing spiritual dimension.¹⁴ Africa is a reserve of authentic human values, a heritage that must be safeguarded and harmoniously developed.

This effort to understand, the necessary prelude to inculturation, cannot be reserved for recently evangelised peoples, remarked some Salesians at the time. Salesians, in contact with the new cultures of young people in every country, should make themselves capable of “perceiving the positive signs of the cultural innovations” and “the values of human growth proclaimed and witnessed to by today’s youth”, said Fr Viganò in preparation for a General Chapter on educating young people in the Christian faith.¹⁵ The Father’s creation, “from which flows all good”, acts on the perpetual unfolding of history, our theological Rector major recalled. The sanctification by the Spirit, which is transforming power, works incessantly in hearts and communities. We must humbly discern the beneficial results of heavenly action, he recommended.¹⁶

Inculturation and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

For their part, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were thinking hard about the impact of inculturation on their mission as educators and apostles.

Without using the word, their renewed Constitutions showed an understanding of its scope when they said

We work among people who have not yet received the good news of the Word so that they may find in Christ the deep meaning of their aspirations and of their cultural values. We make the Church present by helping these our sisters and brothers, especially young people to grow in their experience of God’s personal love for them. This can awaken the desire within them to receive the Gospel and to become witnesses and apostles.¹⁷

Appeal to the values of particular cultures, acculturation through contact, creating a desire for the Gospel with a view to evangelisation proper, there was nothing lacking in formal inculturation of the kind that ecclesiastical circles had begun to outline.

Then, at a General Chapter in 1990, the Salesian Sisters undertook to develop their ideas on the relationship between inculturation and evangelisation in two paragraphs entitled “Inculturation, an expression today of fidelity to the charism for the new evangelisation” and “Inculturation, a fundamental condition of the new evangelisation.”¹⁸ Let us glean a few proposals from them which illustrate the Salesian concept of inculturation.

Inculturation is, as we understand it from the Incarnation, entry into a culture. In Jesus Christ, God became incarnate in a specific culture in a specific time and place. To save humanity, he entered into the history and culture of his time. According to the logic of this mystery the Church takes charge of men and women in their concrete realities for their full humanisation. Inculturation thus leads, through the gradual insertion of the Gospel message into the wisdom of peoples, to the original reinterpretation and re-expression of this message. Culture and cultures must be evangelised in depth. Every culture contains values that can be enriched in the light of Revelation. Thus conceived, “inculturation is a way we must commit ourselves more responsibly to if we are to take seriously a New Evangelisation that allows the Christian message to penetrate the heart of humanity and the very structures of social life.”¹⁹

Consecrated life is a force made up of persons, communities, charisms and institutions without which it is impossible to understand “the insertion of the Gospel into every human situation.” The confidence of the Church encourages the Salesian Sisters to re-appropriate their own charism and “inculturate” it in a more conscious way.²⁰

Dialogue is the normal instrument of cultural enrichment. The work of inculturation consists above all in fostering dialogue between cultures and peoples and the Gospel. Salesians, as missionaries and educators, find their *terra apostolica* here. Salesian education helps peoples, ethnic groups and social categories to become aware of the autonomy of their own cultures, to open up to other cultures and thus to enter into dialogue with the Gospel. In non-Christian contexts, an education that is open to dialogue with the various religions contributes to the discernment of the “seeds of the Word” (*i semi del Verbo*) that they contain, and thus to the “transformation” (a term that we can probably translate here as acculturation) of socio-culture.²¹

All dialogue requires the use of appropriate language. Inculturation requires language. In his time, Don Bosco used popular culture and its language to communicate with his young people, especially the poorest of them. He succeeded in drawing them in by his presence and by the witness of his life. Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, with the

wisdom that characterised them, entered fully into the culture of their time, seeking to respond to the needs of boys and girls. The style of the “oratories”, the novelty of their method, the educational climate of their classes and workshops, and the evangelising dedication of the missions expressed this embodiment in concrete terms. Don Bosco’s entry into dialogue with the young people was carried out using typically Salesian methods: the “good night”, the word in the ear, games, walks, celebrations, “dreams”, music, theatre and the press. These “languages” continue to allow the followers of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello to create educational relationships that are welcoming and transforming.²²

Salesian inculturation takes many forms, the main one being language, as can be seen, for example, with the Bororo, Xavantes and Yanomami peoples in South America.²³ In principle, they all lead from near, far or even very far, to the discovery of the Christ of the Gospel.

NOTES

- 1 *Thesaurus de l'Encyclopaedia universalis*, Paris, 1990, p. 1716. On the meaning given to the word, see the articles by A.A. Roest Crolius, S.J., "Inculturazione", in the *Dizionario di missiologia*, Bologna, Ed. Dehoniane, 1993, pp. 281-286, and by preference, by G. Collet, "Inculturation", in the *Nouveau dictionnaire de théologie* (ed. P. Eicher), 2nd ed., Paris, Cerf, 1996, pp. 424-430, where the history of the word is described in greater detail.
- 2 "L'inculturazione è, dunque, "l'inserzione della vita e del messaggio in una concreta area culturale, in modo tale che questa vita e questo messaggio non solo riescano ad esprimersi negli elementi propri della cultura in questione, ma abbiano una funzione ispiratrice, normativa e unificante, che trasforma e ricrea questa cultura, dando origine ad una nuova creazione." (Quotation of Z. Alszeghy, S.J., "Il problema teologico dell'inculturazione del cristianesimo", in the acts of the Congress on *Inculturazione e formazione salesiana*, Roma, 12-17 September 1983, Roma, Direzione Generale SDB, 1984, pp. 15-39).
- 3 In *Alléluia africain*, Bobo-Dioulasso, no. 17-18, February-March 1978, pp. 18-19.
- 4 At the beginning of the 1990s, current French lexicography still knew only acculturation. Moreover, it seems that John Paul II equates inculturation with acculturation. (A. Amato, in the acts of the Congress on *Inculturazione e formazione salesiana*, p. 413).
- 5 J. Diouf, "L'Eglise en Afrique", in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, t. 120, 1998, p. 255.
- 6 John Paul II, a vigorous apostle of inculturation from the beginning of his pontificate, began to seriously lament this distancing in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (15 October 1998) : "To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history" (no. 72).
- 7 "La nostra vocazione ci chiede di essere intimamente solidali con il mondo e con la sua storia. Aperti alle culture dei paesi in cui lavoriamo, cerchiamo di comprenderle e ne accogliamo i valori, per incarnare in esse il messaggio evangelico". (SDB Constitutions, art. 7).
- 8 See the Index of Fr Viganò's circulars, pp. 1678-1679, where there are eleven references to the word *Inculturazione*.
- 9 "Cultura è la totalità complessa che abbraccia nozioni, credenze, arti, abitudini e tutti gli altri tipi di capacità e di costanti attività che sono propri dell'uomo come membro della società. E' la vita di un popolo. E' l'insieme dei valori che lo animano, dei disvalori che lo debilitano e che, essendo condivisi dalla moltitudine dei membri, lo riuniscono in base a una stessa "coscienza collettiva" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 8). Sono cultura anche le forme attraverso le quali questi valori o disvalori si esprimono e si configurano, cioè i costumi, la lingua, le istituzioni e le strutture della convivenza sociale, quando non sono impediti e repressi da altre culture dominanti." (*La formazione dei Salesiani di Don Bosco. Ratio fundamentalis institutionis et studiorum*, Rome 1985, no. 15).
- 10 E. Viganò, "Il nostro impegno africano", Letter to Salesians, 24 June 1980, *Atti 297*, pp. 3-29.
- 11 "L'argomento dell'inculturazione del Vangelo ... è un tema delicato e difficile, che esige continuamente una riflessione acuta e un discernimento sempre attento" (Above-mentioned letter, 24 June 1980, p. 13).

- 12 John Paul II to the bishops of Zaïre, 3 May 1980, address (in French), *Osservatore Romano*, 4 May 1980.
- 13 Same address to the bishops of Zaire.
- 14 E. Viganò, above-mentioned letter, 24 June 1980, p. 11.
- 15 “Vorrei insistere, in modo particolare, sulla capacità di percepire i segni positivi della novità culturale in cui viviamo e i valori di crescita umana testimoniati e proclamati dai giovani d’oggi.” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 6 August 1988, *Atti* 327, p. 22.)
- 16 *Ibidem*.
- 17 “Lavoriamo tra le popolazioni a cui non è ancora giunto l’annuncio della Parola, perchè possano trovare in Cristo il significato profondo delle loro aspirazioni e dei loro valori culturali. Facendoci presenza di Chiesa, contribuiamo a maturare in questi nostri fratelli - specialmente nei giovani - l’esperienza dell’amore personale di Dio, che potrà far nascere in loro il desiderio di accogliere il Vangelo e di essere a loro volta testimoni e apostoli, offrendo loro l’accoglienza propria del nostro spirito di famiglia.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 75).
- 18 “L’inculturazione, espressione di fedeltà al carisma, oggi, per la nuova evangelizzazione” et “L’inculturazione, condizione fondamentale per la nuova evangelizzazione”, in Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, *Atti del Capitolo generale XIX*, 19 September -17 November 1990, pp. 43-45 and 55-56, to which we add pp. 57-59, with a paragraph on “language” which follows on from the previous one.
- 19 “L’inculturazione è una via da assumere più responsabilmente se vogliamo attuare una Nuova Evangelizzazione che permetta al messaggio cristiano di penetrare nel cuore dell’umanità e nelle strutture stesse della vita sociale.” (*Atti del...*, p. 55-56.)
- 20 *Atti del...*, p. 44.
- 21 *Atti del...*, p. 56.
- 22 *Atti del...*, p. 43-44, 57.
- 23 There are some interesting notes on this point in the article by Ervino Martinuz, “Inculturazione: parola chiave”, *Bollettino salesiano*, February 1998, pp. 18-20, which outlines the history of recent and laborious attempts at inculturation among these peoples.

Jesus Christ

For Don Bosco, Christ was a teacher and a model¹

At the end of his life, when Don Bosco referred to Christ in his spiritual testament for the Salesians, he spontaneously noted: “Our true Superior, Jesus Christ, will never die. He will always be our Master, our guide, our model. But remember that he, in his own time, will also be our judge and the one who rewards our faithfulness in His service.”² He saw Christ through the eyes of a nineteenth-century Latin less familiar with the glorious Christ, head of the Church and unifying principle of the present and future world, than the historical Christ, teacher and model of Christian life, Christ the Redeemer, made incarnate to take away the sins of the world, but also its judge at the end of time, and finally Christ in the Eucharist, who gives souls the strength and life of God.

The living Christ was a friend and companion on the way for Don Bosco’s young saints, Dominic Savio and Francis Besucco, who preferred to follow him on his way to the cross. For Don Bosco himself, this friend was a teacher of wisdom. To the question: “What did Jesus Christ say about himself? he replied: “He said of himself that he was the only son of God and the Saviour promised to men, come from heaven to earth to teach them the way of salvation.”³ This Saviour was a teacher. It is not surprising to note that half of a doctrinal chapter in Don Bosco’s *Mese di maggio*, entitled: *The Redemption*, summarised evangelical morality.⁴ For, regarding Christ the teacher, he preferred to read the moral lessons on “penance, forgiveness of insults, contempt for riches, self-denial.”⁵ And when he decided to devote a chapter of his *Bible History* to parables, he chose the lost sheep, the prodigal son, the ten virgins, Lazarus and the wicked rich man, stories whose moral lessons were immediately applicable.⁶

In Don Bosco’s eyes, the simple life of Christ was a teaching for his followers. He wrote, “The model that every Christian must copy is Jesus Christ. No one can boast of belonging to Jesus Christ if he does not strive to imitate him. In the life and actions of the Christian, we must therefore find the life and actions of Jesus Christ himself. The Christian must pray as Jesus did on the mountain with humility and trust. The Christian must...”⁷ As was normal, certain features of Jesus appeal “We work among people who have not yet received the good news of the Word so that they may find in Christ the deep meaning of their aspirations and of their cultural values. We make the Church present by

helping these our sisters and brothers, especially young people to grow in their experience of God's personal love for them. This can awaken the desire within them to receive the Gospel and to become witnesses and apostles."⁸ d to him more than others. When the subjects lent themselves to it, he pointed out to his Salesians or his boys the obedience of Jesus, his extreme humility and his constant poverty from the crib to the cross. The spirit of the age focused on the penitent Christ bent under the sins of the world. Such was what readers gained from his *Mese di maggio*, which ended on 1 June with this picture. But when, in his maturity and old age, Don Bosco indulged his tastes, he found above all the gentle and good Christ, searching for the lost sheep or stroking children's hair. "Meekness is a virtue much beloved of Jesus Christ", said the Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions.⁹ Moreover, "all those who who have read the Gospel know that Jesus Christ was born of a Virgin whose name was Mary, by the sole operation of the Holy Spirit; that he was born in a stable, that he lived by the work of his hands and that all the virtues, especially kindness and gentleness, formed his character."¹⁰ Don Bosco's Christ, the teacher of wisdom, was therefore not only the understanding friend, but above all the suffering, gentle and kind teacher, an attitude that he reconciled perfectly with zeal for the greater glory of his heavenly Father, a quality that our saint liked to emphasise wherever he encountered it.

For Don Bosco, Christ was the source of life

Don Bosco also saw Christ as the mediator of divine life. His doctrine of redemptive incarnation was somewhat negative. He thought that the Son of God became incarnate "to destroy sin", or that "he came into the world to save sinners" and "to free all men by his death from the slavery of the devil". He defined the redeemer in these terms in a dictionary: "Name given par excellence to Jesus Christ who redeemed us from sin, death and the slavery of the devil."¹¹ More positively, he wrote, in the Life of Dominic Savio, that "Jesus Christ shed all his blood to deliver [our] soul from hell and take it with him to paradise."¹² Nevertheless, the life-giving role of Christ was relatively unimportant in Don Bosco's teaching on the Incarnate Word.

We have to look elsewhere for our ideas about Jesus, the new life of believers. In general terms, he said that "Jesus Christ (...) is holiness in essence", "the source of all holiness",¹³ and that his holiness generates strength: "We are not alone, Jesus is with us, and Saint Paul tells us that with his help we become all-powerful."¹⁴ Christ, the principle of supernatural life, is found in the Church which, through the bishops and

the Pope, according to the ecclesiology professed by Don Bosco, unites Catholics to their invisible head, Christ. He resides particularly in the Eucharist, his most sacred mystery, where the Saviour is tangibly present. When, in a brief presentation of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, Don Bosco had to choose two mysteries of Christ for the edification of his young readers, he chose Jesus crucified and Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, the passion and the Eucharist.¹⁵ His young heroes sanctified themselves through their sacramental or spiritual communions with the bread of life. Where we would expect the Lord or the Saviour, Don Bosco sometimes and perhaps often spoke of the sacramental Christ, that is, the Christ of the tabernacle.

It is not possible to understand why Don Bosco recommended the virtues of gentleness and understanding on the one hand, and the sacraments of penance and Eucharist on the other, if we ignore the extent to which his clearly Christocentric spirituality made Christ “meek and humble of heart” both his guide and his support in his endeavours as a man and a priest.

Jesus in the Constitutions following the Council

The Salesians remained faithful to their master’s favourite ideas on Christology. However, the evolution of Catholic spirituality during the last quarter of the twentieth century could only accentuate certain features of the face of Christ and blur others. Henceforth the liberating “mission” took precedence in the Church. In the renewed Salesian spirituality, the Risen Lord of Easter most often replaced the sacrificial Victim of Calvary. He who wipes away the sins of the world became the Sanctifier of humanity. There was no more talk of the Judge of the last moments. The universal Model was also and first of all the Living One in the Spirit, the Apostle or Missionary of the Father who works today to bring about the Kingdom of God. Don Bosco’s followers tried never to forget the Son’s permanent relationship with his Father and the Holy Spirit. The Constitutions of the two religious societies, the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, recast after Vatican II, bear witness to these concerns.¹⁶

The Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales rightly made religious life a *sequela Christi*, literally a following of Jesus Christ, and endeavoured to draw out the consequences of this. The principle was laid down in Article 3: “Through our religious profession we offer ourselves to God in order to follow Christ and work with him in building up the Kingdom.” It found its echo in the formula of profession. The Salesian’s offering to God the Father is made “In response to the love of the Lord Jesus your Son,

who calls me to follow him more closely” (art. 24). And as a necessary consequence: “The Salesian spirit finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father” (art. 11). To live and act in a Salesian spirit means taking Jesus as an example and being flooded with his grace.

The requirements of the *sequela Christi* are developed in the initial article on the religious vows: “We follow Jesus Christ, who ‘chaste and poor, redeemed and sanctified men through obedience,’ and we share more closely in his paschal mystery, in his self-emptying and in his life in the Spirit.” (art. 60). Each vow is an incentive to imitate Jesus. “By professing obedience we offer our will to God and by carrying out the mission entrusted to us we relive Christ’s own obedience in the Church and in the Congregation.” (art. 64). “We are called to a life closely modelled on the gospel. We choose to follow ‘the Saviour who was born in poverty, lived deprived of everything and died stripped on the cross.’” (art. 72). Through consecrated chastity, “We follow Jesus Christ closely choosing an intensely evangelical way of loving God and our neighbour with an undivided heart. Thus, with a specific vocation we take our place in the Mystery of the Church, which is totally united to Christ, and sharing in its fruitfulness we dedicate ourselves to our mission” (art. 80).

These fundamental facts have an impact on Salesian meditation and action. To be Christ’s disciple and his herald presupposes that we know him intimately. “Our highest knowledge therefore is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery” (art. 34). The Salesian, consistent with his vocation, spreads the mystery of Jesus and reproduces his image. “We give practical expression to the redeeming love of Christ” (art. 41). His chastity makes him a witness to “the predilection of Christ for the young” (art. 81). “The Salesian priest or deacon brings to the common work of promoting human development and of educating in the faith the specific quality of his ministry, which makes him a sign of Christ the Good Shepherd, especially by preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments” (art. 45). “Following the example of the Son of God, who made himself in all things like us, the Salesian missionary makes his own the values of these people and shares their hopes and anxieties” (art. 30).¹⁷ Whereas Christ had intervened only sparingly in the previous Constitutions of the Salesian Congregation, which had a juridical form as it should have at the time, his presence was imposed at every step of the renewed Constitutions.

From a brief examination of the articles of the new Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, it quickly becomes clear that the person and mystery of Jesus Christ hold a central place.¹⁸ The references to Christ reflect the continual progress of

the self-awareness of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the course of their history. He appears under the most diverse titles, but all inspired by the New Testament. Christ, Lord and Son of God, is the sent by the Father, the Redeemer, the Servant, the Risen One, the Word of Truth, the Life, the Bread and the Word, the Good Shepherd, the Apostle and Adorer of the Father. The Jesus of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is not a static figure, frozen in the past. He is alive and dynamic. He is the Jesus of yesterday, today and always. The “following of Christ” is conceived within the mystery of the Trinity. The Father is the origin and source of the religious vocation, the Son its foundation and centre, the Spirit its strength and guide. “Heavenly Father, you consecrated me in baptism, and now, through the power of the Holy Spirit you call me to follow Jesus Christ more closely.”¹⁹ The whole life of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, whether in prayer, community, apostolic mission or formation, is centred on Christ.

The Salesian Sister’s life of prayer is a participation in the prayer of the “Son of God” who, “by his incarnation ... entered into history, making every hour a time of salvation” (art. 42). Their meditation is an “inner dialogue” with the Son of God, the Word of Truth and Life, who “constantly challenges us, as individuals and communities” (art. 39). Their fraternal life, “an essential element of our vocation”, consists in “living and working together in the name of the Lord” Jesus. Their community, “gathered by the Father, is founded on the presence of the risen Christ and nourished by Him, Word and Body” (art. 49). The mission of the Institute is participation in the saving mission of Christ in his Church. By virtue of their baptism, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians participate in the prophetic, priestly and kingly ministry of Christ (art. 63). “The heart of our work of evangelisation is proclaiming Christ” (art. 70). “Salesian assistance, a typical expression of the Preventive System (which is theirs) is an indispensable education need, resulting from our communion with Christ” (art. 67). The formation of the Salesian Sisters has a Christological dimension. “The aim of formation is the maturing of the whole person in a gradual, progressive configuration to Christ, apostle of the Father” (art. 78). Lastly, authority in the Institute is conceived as a service. In fact, “it is based on the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ, who came to serve and to give his life for his sisters and brothers in order to lead them to the Father” (art. 108).²⁰

The Institute has thus moved on, the Sisters note today, from the category of imitation to that of the *sequela*, from the concept of exemplarity to that of insertion, configuration and participation. The Council’s call to a twofold fidelity: to the Gospel and to the founders, has increasingly enriched the reflection on the identity of the

Institute from 1969 onwards. The resulting constitutional text, the fruit of lengthy reflection, is richer in content than its predecessor and better a better articulation of the elements expressing the central place of Christ in the life of religious women.

Salesian icons of Jesus at the dawn of the twenty-first century

Don Bosco's followers have continued to read the gospel as he himself had done. But their thinking had deepened. In 1997, in a spiritual inaugural address to the Salesian Family, which read as follows, "With our gaze fixed on Jesus, the first-born of a multitude of brethren, let us help young people to welcome him in faith",²¹ the Rector Major, Fr Juan Vecchi, devoted a paragraph to "Salesian icons of Jesus."²² Certain representations of Christ particularly attract the attention of the members of the Salesian Family, he noted. They inspire their spirituality and determine their pedagogy. The Rector Major discerned four of them: the Good Shepherd, the Lover of Humanity, the Friend of Youth and the Type of the New Man.

The main Salesian icon of Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Fr Viganò insisted on this. All consecrated persons have Christ at the heart of their meditation. The members of the Salesian Family prefer to see him as the "Good Shepherd" who created man and loves his qualities, who redeemed him and forgave him, and who, through the Holy Spirit, transforms him into a new creature. Preferring Christ the Good Shepherd implies for Salesians a generous dedication to young people, "winning them over" through gentleness, self-giving, kindness, affection and friendship, all qualities that we like to admire in Jesus, the good and tender shepherd of his flock.²³ For his part, after quoting his predecessor, Fr Vecchi seemed more particularly interested in the images of the Shepherd in the Old Testament. "The Shepherd of the Bible" he explained, "is God who frees his people from slavery and guides them through the desert, leads them to still waters and green pastures; who corrects them, but has them experience his love and closeness, purifies them and draws them to himself, making them a human community dedicated to him, capable of accepting and passing on His promises, and finally urges them to higher levels of wisdom."

The Salesian then contemplates in Christ the love that opens the door to the Father and seeks to give everyone, near and far, wise and ignorant, the fullness of life. This love reaches out to each person in his or her uniqueness and, to this end, gives all of itself in the daily life of the mission and in the offering of the cross. He sees that his own people hear his voice, prays to the Father for them with trust and affection, and teaches them to

pray in words that are just and tender. The Salesian mission to young people is inspired by this loving Christ in the patient practice of the Preventive System.

The Salesian naturally connects the image of Christ the friend of young people with this. Don Bosco often recalled the gesture of Christ welcoming and blessing children. Fr Vecchi wrote that John Paul II commented masterfully on this image on 31 March 1985, in his letter to the boys and girls of the world. He painted a picture of Jesus in his dialogue with the young man about eternal life. As for Fr Viganò, he carefully noted the many passages in the Gospel that show Jesus' predilection for children. Jesus loves them, he wants them by his side, he invites them to follow him, he heals them, he raises them from the dead, he frees them from the devil, he gives them preferential treatment in forgiveness, he asks for their collaboration in accomplishing wonders. The Salesian heart filled with Christ loves young people as he loves them.

Finally, the Salesian sees the New Man in Christ. The Second Vatican Council reminded him of this icon. It is in Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God that the mystery of man is illuminated. He is the image of the invisible God, the perfect man, united in a certain way with all people and the first-born of a multitude of brethren. In today's world of unlimited technical and humanistic ambitions, constantly seeking new ways to dominate matter and life, Salesian educational activity is guided by an image of the human being inspired above all by the person of Jesus, who perfectly realised communion with God and solidarity with others all his human brothers and sisters within himself. Christ had both a sense of justice and a sense of love; he combined self-awareness and self-giving in his person; he served both the world's present and its definitive future.

In their work as evangelisers and educators, members of the Salesian Family, whether they are Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Cooperators, Volunteers of Don Bosco or members of one of the many associated Congregations,²⁴ look at these icons of Christ Jesus for a better promotion of human beings which can only bring them closer to God.

NOTES

- 1 Here in the paragraphs on the Christ of Don Bosco, I am repeating the substance of the pages in my book *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle* (Paris, Beauchesne, 1967, pp. 94-99), dedicated to this topic, and where you will find all the references to the texts quoted here.
- 2 “Ma il nostro vero superiore Cristo Gesù, non morrà. Egli sarà sempre nostro maestro, nostra guida, nostro modello; ma ritenete che a suo tempo egli stesso sarà nostro giudice e remuneratore della nostra fedeltà nel suo servizio.” (G. Bosco, *Memorie dal 1841 ...*, ms, p. 30-31.)
- 3 “D. Quali cose G. C. diceva di se medesimo ? - R. Di se medesimo egli diceva che era il figliuolo unico di Dio, e il Salvatore promesso agli uomini, venuto dal cielo in terra per insegnar loro la strada della salute.” (G. Bosco, *Maniera facile per imparare la storia sacra ...*, 2nd ed., Turin, Paravia, 1855, § XX).
- 4 G. Bosco, *Il Mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata ...*, Turin, Paravia, 1858, day three: *La Redenzione*, pp. 28-32.
- 5 “Con luminosissime prove faceva a tutti conoscere che egli era quel Redentore tanto sospirato da’ Patriarchi e tante volte annunziato da’ Profeti. In ogni luogo predicava la penitenza, il perdono delle ingiurie, il disprezzo delle ricchezze, l’annegazione a ciascuno di se medesimo.” (G. Bosco, *Storia sacra ...*, 3rd ed. expanded, Turin, Tip. Oratorio di S Francesco di Sales, 1863, seventh era, chap. 4.) We prefer to use here the third edition of this *Sacra storia*, which is much improved on the first, published by Speirani e Ferrero in 1847.
- 6 G. Bosco, *Storia sacra ...*, ed. quoted, seventh era, chap. 6.
- 7 Il modello che ogni Cristiano deve copiare è Gesù Cristo. Niuno può vantarsi di appartenere a G. C. se non si adopera per imitarlo. Perciò nella vita e nelle azioni di un Cristiano devonsi trovare la vita e le azioni di Gesù Cristo medesimo. Il Cristiano deve pregare, siccome pregò Gesù sopra la montagna con raccoglimento, con umiltà, con confidenza. Il Cristiano deve ...” (G. Bosco), *La Chiave del paradiso...*, Turin, Paravia, 1856, p 20).
- 8 “Lavoriamo tra le popolazioni a cui non è ancora giunto l’annuncio della Parola, perchè possano trovare in Cristo il significato profondo delle loro aspirazioni e dei loro valori culturali. Facendoci presenza di Chiesa, contribuiamo a maturare in questi nostri fratelli - specialmente nei giovani - l’esperienza dell’amore personale di Dio, che potrà far nascere in loro il desiderio di accogliere il Vangelo e di essere a loro volta testimoni e apostoli, offrendo loro l’accoglienza propria del nostro spirito di famiglia.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 75).
- 9 “La mansuetudine è virtù molto diletta da Gesù Cristo” (Introduction to the *Regole o Costituzioni...*, 1877 ed., p. 35).
- 10 “Tutti quelli che hanno letto il Vangelo sanno che G. C. nacque da una Vergine il cui nome era Maria, per sola opera dello Spirito Santo ; che nacque in una stalla, visse del lavoro di sue mani, e che tutte le virtù, soprattutto la bontà e la dolcezza, formarono il suo carattere.” (G. Bosco, *Storia sacra...*, quoted edition, *Introduzione a la Storia sacra del Nuovo Testamento*).
- 11 “Gesù Cristo erasi fette Uomo per distruggere il peccato.” (*Storia sacra ...*, ed. cited, seventh era, chap. III) ; “Gesù Cristo era venute al mondo per salvare i peccatori” (ibidem, chap. VI) ; “ ... avvicinandosi poi l’ora in cui doveva [...] colla sua morte liberare tutti gli uomini dalla schiavitù del demonio”

- (ibidem, chap. VII) ; “Redentore. Nome dato per eccellenza a G. C. che ci ha ricomprati dal peccato, dalla morte e dalla schiavitù del demonio” (ibidem, *Dizionario dei vocaboli*, s. v.).
- 12 “Gesù Cristo ha sparso tutte le sue viscere per liberarla dall’inferno e condurla seco lui al paradiso” (G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, Turin, 1859, chap. XXI, p. 106..)
 - 13 “Gesù Cristo essendo la santità per essenza”, “sorgente di ogni santità” ... (G. Bosco, *Il Cattolico nel secolo*, Turin, typ. e libr. salesiana, 1883, p. 146).
 - 14 “Non siamo soli ma Gesù è con noi e S. Paolo dice che coll’aiuto di Gesù noi diventiamo onnipotenti.” (G. Bosco to Sister Maddalena Martini, s.d. (August 1875), *Epistolario* Ceria, t. II, p. 492).
 - 15 G. Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto ...*, Turin, 1847: *Le sei domeniche ...*, Sixth Sunday, p. 65. These lines appeared in the *Giovane Provveduto* throughout Don Bosco’s life.
 - 16 Here I draw mainly on contributions from a Salesian spirituality week dedicated in 1997 to “Jesus Christ”. See Dicastero per la Famiglia salesiana, *Gesù Cristo. Appunti per una spiritualità ispirata al carisma salesiano. Atti della XIX Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana*, a cura di A. Martinelli, Roma, ed. S.D.B., 1997, 435 pages.
 - 17 Italian wording for the quoted passages. “Con la professione religiosa offriamo a Dio noi stessi per camminare al seguito di Cristo e lavorare con Lui alla costruzione del Regno” (art. 3). “Dio Padre [...] in risposta all’amore del Signore Gesù tuo Figlio, che mi chiama a seguirlo più da vicino, e condotte dallo Spirito Santo [...] mi offre totalmente a Te” (art. 24). “Lo spirito salesiano trova il suo modello e la sua sorgente nel cuore stesso di Cristo, apostolo del Padre” (art. 11). “Seguiamo Gesù Cristo il quale, caste e povero, redense e santificò gli uomini con la sua obbedienza e partecipiamo più strettamente al mistero della sua Pasqua, al suo annientamento e alla sua vita nello Spirito” (art. 60). “Con la professione di obbedienza offriamo a Dio la nostra volontà e riviviamo nella Chiesa e nella Congregazione l’obbedienza di Cristo, compiendo la missione che ci è affidata” (art. 64). “Chiamati ad una vita intensamente evangelica, scegliamo di seguire il Salvatore che nacque nella povertà, visse nella privazione di tutte le cose e morì nudo in croce” (art. 72). “Seguiamo da vicino Gesù Cristo, scegliendo un modo intensamente evangelico di amare Dio e i fratelli senza divisione del cuore. Ci inseriamo così con una vocazione specifica nel mistero della Chiesa, totalmente unita a Cristo e, partecipando alla sua fecondità, ci doniamo alla nostra missione” (art. 80). “La nostra scienza più eminente è quindi conoscere Gesù Cristo e la gioia più profonda è rivelare a tutti le insondabili ricchezze del suo mistero” (art. 34). “Attuiamo la carità salvifica di Cristo, organizzando attività e opere a scopo educativo pastorale, attenti ai bisogni dell’ambiente e della Chiesa” (art. 41). “Essa (la castità) ci fa testimoni della predilezione di Cristo per i giovani” (art. 81). “Il salesiano presbitero o diacono apporta al comune lavoro di promozione e di educazione alla fede la specificità del suo ministero, che lo rende segno di Cristo pastore, particolarmente con la predicazione del Vangelo e l’azione sacramentale” (art. 45). “Sull’esempio del Figlio di Dio che si è fatto in tutto simile ai suoi fratelli, il missionario salesiano assume i valori di questi popoli e condivide le loro angosce e speranze” (art. 30).
 - 18 Here I take up some of the conclusions of the well-documented article by Salesian Sister Ko Ha Fong Maria, under the title “Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice. Gesù Cristo nelle costituzioni” in the collection cited *Gesù Cristo...*, pp. 91-109.

- 19 “Dio Padre, tu mi hai consacrata nel battesimo e mi chiami ora, con la forza dello Spirito a seguire Gesù Cristo più da vicino...” (art 10).
- 20 Italian wording for the quoted articles. “Il Figlio di Dio con la sua incarnazione è entrato nella storia, facendo di ogni ora un tempo di salvezza” (art 42). “Dio ci ha tanto amati da mandare il suo Figlio, Parola di Verità e di Vita, che ci interpella costantemente come persone e come comunità ed esige una risposta concreta. Momento forte di questo dialogo interiore è la meditazione” (art 39). “Vivere e lavorare insieme nel nome del Signore è un elemento essenziale della nostra vocazione. La nostra comunità, adunata dal Padre, fondata sulla presenza di Cristo Risorto e nutrita di lui, Parola e Pane ...” (art. 49). “La nostra missione nasce dall’iniziativa salvifica del Padre che ci chiama a partecipare nella Chiesa - come comunità apostolica salesiana - al ministero profetico, sacerdotale, regale di Cristo” (art. 63). “Cuore della nostra azione evangelizzatrice è l’annuncio di Cristo” (art. 70). “L’assistenza salesiana, tipica espressione del Sistema Preventivo, nasce come esigenza educativa dalla nostra comunione con Cristo” (art. 67). “Scopo della formazione è quindi la maturazione integrale della persona in una progressiva configurazione a Cristo, Apostolo del Padre” (art 78). “ (L’autorità) si fonda sul mistero dell’Incarnazione di Cristo, venuto a servire e a dare la vita per i fratelli allo scopo di condurli al Padre” (art. 108).
- 21 Con lo sguardo fisso in Gesù primogenito di molti fratelli, aiutiamo i giovani ad accoglierlo nella fede”. See the above-mentioned collection *Gesù Cristo ...*, p. 403.
- 22 J. Vecchi, “La strenna per il 1997”, in *Gesù Cristo...*, op. cit., pp. 421-424.
- 23 See E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1990, *Atti* 334, p. 34.
- 24 Here are the titles of the twelve groups which, along with the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, made a point of mentioning the place of Jesus in their Constitutions or Statutes during the 1997 Spirituality Days in Rome: the Association of Salesian Cooperators, the Volunteers of Don Bosco, the World Confederation of Past Pupils of Don Bosco, the World Confederation of Past Pupils of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Association of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Oblates of the Sacred Heart, the Apostles of the Holy Family, the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the Caritas Sisters, the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, the Sisters of Mary Immaculate and the Daughters of the Queenship of Mary Immaculate. (See the already mentioned *Gesù Cristo...* , pp. 110-205.)

Joy

Joy, cheerfulness, pleasure and happiness

“The (Salesian) Cooperators cultivate in themselves a deep and untroubled joy, and spread it around them, testifying to the fact that the God of love is always with us. ‘Let us serve the Lord in holy joy!’”¹ Is the Cooperator necessarily a nice guy, a “jolly fellow”, the one “who always has something to laugh about”?

Let’s try to get rid of the vagueness in the interpretation of a word that has been used frequently in Salesian spirituality since Francis de Sales himself. Certain confusions of language have an impact on the spiritual life. In an article by a Salesian author on “You and happiness”, we find the following observation:

The modern world offers our young people many pleasures and diversions, but little joy. The educator can consider that he has taken a great step forward in his educational work when he has made the young person understand and experience even better the difference between pleasure and joy.²

Here, as always, we need to distinguish in order to gain a better understanding. For us, in this entry, joy will not in principle be synonymous with happiness, cheerfulness or pleasure, which it is easily confused with. In accordance with the explanations of lexicographers, the term joy (*gioia, joie, allegria, Freude*) will preferably evoke “an exhilarating feeling felt by the whole consciousness”, a feeling that gives rise to “a pleasant and profound emotion.”³ Emphasis is on the epithet profound. Conceived in this way joy is distinct from pleasure. “There is a pleasure of the senses (...), but it cannot be transformed into true joy if it is not accompanied by a kind of ‘rapture’, a central satisfaction of being.”⁴ It does not have the same character of fullness and duration as happiness, which is assimilated to beatitude, the state of a fully satisfied consciousness. As for cheerfulness, we commonly think of it as a pleasant first stage of existence, whereas joy is a more penetrating feeling.

“God is the God of joy”, wrote Saint Francis de Sales.⁵ This prepares us to admit that, for him, true joy was fundamentally “serious and grave”. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” After repeating this verse from the Letter to the Philippians in a letter to Mother Angélique Amauld, he announced a book full of “very important

maxims” to this Sister, the contents of which soon brought a reaction. “If it seems to you that it is leading you away from the holy joy that I so strongly advise you to have, believe me that this is not the intention, but only to make this joy serious and grave, as it must be. And when I say serious, I do not mean dull, or affected, or gloomy, or disdainful, or haughty, but I mean holy and charitable.”⁶ Sensitive to all these distinctions, the Salesian spiritual writer quoted earlier would like the educator to help the young person “to perceive what profound and holy joy is to be found in living adherence to the crucified and risen Christ, in service, renunciation, prayer, and above all in the Eucharist.”⁷ Who would confuse such intimate, secret joy with pleasure, cheerfulness or even happiness?

Joy in the Salesian Constitutions

Salesians and Salesian Sisters cannot be faulted for confusing the senses and instinctively adding cheerfulness and a good dose of pleasure to their joys. This was the case for members of schoolboy Bosco’s *Society for a Good Time* (*Società d’allegria*), a title that suited him very well as he would explain. They were strictly obliged to look for books, tell stories and find entertainment that would “make you happy” (*stare allegri*). On the other hand, they had to banish from their conversations anything that might lead to “melancholy”.⁸ When they flaunt the trinomial Work, Piety and Joy, which, in their opinion, sums up their spirituality in a nutshell, it does not occur to the Salesians to strip its third element of all cheerfulness and pleasure. And it was similarly the case when Don Bosco encouraged them with a “*Sto allegro!*” (Be joyful!) after their confession, or if he found them a little sad. The “*joie de vivre*” which, unlike a certain “spirituality of a tough life” is what characterises them, according to one interpreter, can only be imagined as pleasant and gratifying.⁹ Their ideas on joy in the literal sense of this article can only be found in carefully expressed texts. Their Constitutions, which are careful in their precision, and in which the words joy and joyful have a place of honour, teach us about this beautiful Salesian sentiment.¹⁰

The lives of the Salesian Sisters are woven with holy joy. The Volunteers of Don Bosco who, on the day of their vows, offer their lives to the Father in a response that is “conscious, free and joyful”,¹¹ say that they systematically cultivate an entirely religious joy, feeling that they are daughters of God the Father and, as such, sisters of Jesus.¹² For their part, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians intend to imbue “every moment” of their lives with joy. “We transform every moment of our lives into a joyous hymn

of adoration and praise” to God. They believe to reflect on earth “a sign of the eternal values” (to be signs of it), including, therefore their ineffable joys.¹³

According to their constitutional texts, the members of the two Congregations (Salesians SDB and the Salesian Sisters FMA) live their religious life in a spirit of joy and find joy in their apostolic activities. Joy and optimism characterise their spirit, as the Salesian Constitutions state in an article under this title. Let us meditate on the four paragraphs. Ideally at least, a Salesian is not someone always complaining. Because they have full confidence in God the Father, difficulties do not discourage them. Don Bosco’s exhortation “Let nothing upset you!” (which, incidentally, we know he didn’t invent), remains imprinted in the Salesian’s memory. Don Bosco was inspired by the humanism of Saint Francis de Sales, and believed in the natural and supernatural resources of man, without ignoring his weaknesses. The world had its values, and he took account of them and drew from them what seemed good to him, especially when it appeals to young people. Because he proclaims the Good News he is always cheerful (*lieto*) and radiates joy (*questa gioia*) around him.¹⁴

At the heart of the Salesians and Salesian Sisters, the practice of the evangelical counsels, ideally at least we must add here again, exudes joy. The fraternal atmosphere of the community helps (the Salesians) to live celibacy “because of the Kingdom with joy.”¹⁵ By accepting the precious gift of chastity for the sake of the Kingdom, the Salesian Sisters “respond gratefully and joyously” to the Lord, offering their capacity to love.¹⁶ The obedience of the Salesian is practised “readily and sincerely, ‘with cheerfulness and humility’.”¹⁷ In the same way the Salesian Sisters declare that “we will obey in a spirit of faith, cheerfully and humbly.”¹⁸ They added that “requests” by the superiors would be carried out “promptly and joyfully.”¹⁹ When his state of poverty brings him discomfort and suffering, (the Salesian) rejoices in being able to share in the blessings promised by the Lord to the “poor in spirit”.²⁰ For her part, the Salesian Sister, “keeping in mind the teaching of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello”, affirms her desire to adopt “a way of life that is moderate and unpretentious, according to the Salesian style of temperance, joy and simplicity.”²¹ Naturally, joy in its various forms, permeates all Salesian prayer.²²

Salesians, missionaries of joy, want to build a world of joy wherever Providence directs them, as Don Bosco had done in his first work. The original oratory was “for the youngsters a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a school that prepared them for life,” and at the same time “a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves.” This model, they assure us, provides them with “the lasting criterion for

discernment and renewal in all our activities and works.”²³ We see them dreaming of creating *societies for a good time* everywhere!

The Salesian’s “perfect joy”

In the midst of moral or physical difficulties, the good Salesian, like Andrea Beltrami, who suffered incessantly, remains joyful. One of his friends testified that “when he came into his room, he was always found as if immersed in the deepest meditation, but with a cheerful and serene face, as (he himself) had often been able to verify.”²⁴ Beltrami’s Salesian joy was a joy of the heart. “A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken”, we read in the book of Proverbs (Proverbs 15:13 and 17:22).

The Gospel is an invitation to joy and an experience of true, profound joy. “Greetings, favoured one”, says the Angel at the Annunciation (Luke 1:8.) In his farewell address to the apostles, Jesus, according to the Gospel told them, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). This “perfect joy” is the delight given by properly spiritual goods. Insofar as he is a spiritual being created by God and for God, man can only find rest and therefore “perfect joy” in union his Creator.²⁵ In this case, joy, the “fruit of the Holy Spirit” along with love and peace (Galatians 5:22), always and ideally emerges from a serene soul. The active charity of the Salesian man and woman has brought together all the tendencies, aspirations and strengths of the personality and structured them in happy harmony. Joy bursts forth in them, the fruit and sign, as Bergson put it, of people at ease with themselves and of a successful and fruitful life, because marvellously productive.²⁶

NOTES

- 1 “Il Cooperatore nutre in sé una gioia profonda e serena e la diffonde per testimoniare che il Signore lo accompagna in ogni momento col suo amore: Serviamo il Signore in santa allegria.” (Regolamento di Vita Apostolica, art. 31, § 1.)
- 2 J. Aubry, *Avec Don Bosco vers l’an 2000*, Rome, SDB General House, 1990, pp. 79-80.
- 3 *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, t. 5, p. 821.
- 4 Jean Maisonneuve, *Les sentiments*, pp. 59-60, ibidem.
- 5 Letter to President Brulart, Annecy, ca. 18 February 1605, in *Oeuvres*, vol. XVIII p. 16.
- 6 Letter to Madame Angélique Amauld, Abbess of the Port-Royal in Maubuisson, Paris, ca. 15-20 June 1619, in *Oeuvres*, vol. XVIII, pp. 389-390.
- 7 J. Aubry, op. cit., p. 80.
- 8 MO Da Silva, p. 61.
- 9 See R. Tonelli, “Tra festa e croce. Una spiritualità della gioia di vivere o una spiritualità della vita dura”, in *La festa nell’esperienza giovanile del mondo salesiano*, a cura di C. Semeraro (Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1988), pp. 165-181.
- 10 See here, regarding the Salesians SDB, in *Parola di Dio e spirito salesiano* (a cura di Juan Bartolomé e Fausto Perrenchio, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1996, pp. 283-296), the article by Andrea Strus, “Ottimismo e gioia”, which in fact deals, from beginning to end, with optimism and joy in the Constitutions of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales.
- 11 “... rispondiamo in modo cosciente, libero e gioioso” (VDB Constitutions, art. 8b).
- 12 “... Lo Spirito Santo [...] ci porta ad affidarci al Padre per compiere la sua volontà, nella gioia di sentirci figlie sue nel Figlio”. (VDB Constitutions, art. 42a).
- 13 “Collaborando così nella Chiesa con nuovo e speciale titolo per l’avvento del Regno, trasformiamo ogni istante della nostra esistenza in un gioioso inno di adorazione e di lode e diveniamo segno dei beni celesti già presenti in questo mondo.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 8d).
- 14 SDB Constitutions, art. 17: Ottimismo e gioia.
- 15 “Il clima fraterno della comunità ci aiuta a vivere nella gioia il celibato per il Regno” (SDB Constitutions, art.83).
- 16 “... diamo una risposta riconoscente e gioiosa con la donazione delle nostre forze d’amore” (FMA Constitutions, art. 12).
- 17 “... con un’obbedienza schietta, pronta e fatta con animo ilare e con umiltà” (SDB Constitutions, art. 65c).
- 18 “Obbediremo in spirito di fede, con animo ilare et con umiltà” (FMA Constitutions, art. 32).
- 19 “...con spontanea e gioiosa adesione nell’eseguire” (FMA Constitutions, art 33b).
- 20 “E quando il suo stato di povertà gli è causa di qualche incomodo e sofferenza, si rallegra di poter partecipare alla beatitudine promessa dal Signore ai poveri in spirito.” (SDB Constitutions, art 75d).

- 21 “Tenendo presente l’insegnamento di don Bosco e di madre Mazzarello adotteremo un tenore di vita sobrio e austero, nello stile salesiano di temperanza, gioia e semplicità” (FMA Constitutions, art 23b).
- 22 SDB Constitutions, art. 86,89, 90, 92 and 93.
- 23 “Don Bosco visse una tipica esperienza pastorale nel suo primo oratorio, che fu per i giovani casa che accoglie, parrocchia che evangelizza, scuola che avvia alla vita e cortile per incontrarsi da amici e vivere in allegria. - Nel compiere oggi la nostra missione, l’esperienza di Valdocco rimane criterio permanente di discernimento e rinnovamento di ogni attività e opera.” (SDB Constitutions, art 40).
- 24 “Entrando in sua camera lo si trovava sempre come intento alla più profonda meditazione, però col volto lieto e sereno, come io stesso ebbi più volte a constatare.” (G. Barberis, Ordinary process of canonisation of Andrea Beltrami, Novara, ad 17^{um}; *Positio super virtutibus*, 1955, p. 274).
- 25 Observation by F. Bussini, “Joie”, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. 8, 1974, col. 1236.
- 26 Observation by J. Aubry, *Avec don Bosco vers l’an 2000*, p. 165.

Kindness

True and false kindness

Times past were not tender, but our own times – despite some progress – have incomparable ferocity. It is urgent to bring or return kindness to them. Unfortunately, kindness often seems to be overly soft, weak, or downright suspicious. It is therefore necessary to clarify our understanding of this issue.

There are false kindnesses that are downright bad: the aggressive desire to do good, the refusal to recognise real conflicts, the craving to be liked, and so on. There is the respectable kindness of the “good guy” which makes social life easier but doesn’t go very far. Finally, there is great kindness which, at its core, derives from love for humanity. It is merciful, like the tenderness that softens and humanises social relationships. It seeks justice, but a justice for which cold reason is not enough. It is a very humble love that gives others the right to be and to grow. Genuine kindness puts charity into action, without ever forgetting justice. Its greatness and humility must be recognised.¹

Kindness, filled with tenderness, on the one hand implies respect for others, and a refusal to use external or psychological coercive means, such as force, threats, manipulation of the mind and feelings. On the other hand, it is a challenge to freedom: an appeal to the spiritual strengths and resources of the other person.

Saint Francis de Sales thought of things this way. From the perspective of Christ raising up the son of the widow of Naim, he taught that goodness, kindness is just and merciful and is intended to be shown. The merciful person has a tender heart. “The infinite goodness of our God has two hands; one is his mercy, the other his justice. All that his mercy and his justice proceeds from his goodness, for he is as sovereignly good when he exercises his justice as when he shows mercy. There can be no justice or mercy where there is no goodness. He is goodness itself, so he is always just and merciful.”

Kindness, of itself, is “communicative” he added. It offers and it gives. And in this it exercises both mercy and justice: “the former to do good, and the latter to punish and remove what prevents us from feeling the effects of this goodness of our God whose mercy is his justice, and whose justice is mercy. Mercy makes us embrace good, justice makes us flee from evil, and the kindness of Our Lord is communicated by these two

attributes, especially since he remains equally good by exercising both. Therefore, driven by this one kindness by which he does all things, he raised up this young teenager, without being moved or urged on by any other reason, as we have said, for no one asked him to do it.”² Kindness is also unselfish.

The fatherly and indulgent kindness of the Salesian

As witnessed by his life, Don Bosco was the image of indulgent kindness while at the same time being just, generous and merciful. He never dazzled anyone. Those who witnessed his adult years recall a smiling, simple man of exquisite kindness. By this we mean a rare warmth and friendliness which is “the habitual desire to delight one’s neighbour, preventing him from being sad.”³ His words charmed many of his witnesses. To his sons, the Salesians, to his co-workers, both lay and clerical, and to his boys, he showed countless kindnesses, signs of the tenderness of his heart: selfless acts, small gifts, kind letters, gestures of attention, soothing words the mere memory of which soothed hearts. “All those who had the good fortune to live at his side”, wrote Fr Albera, “attest to the fact that his gaze was full of charity and tenderness and that, because of this, he exerted an irresistible attraction on young people.”⁴ The goodness of his heart drove Don Bosco to offer and to give.

In 1917, the same Rector Major Fr Albera, in a circular letter of “counsel and advice to preserve the spirit of Don Bosco in all the houses” of the Society, wished for his correspondents, superiors of provinces or communities, the fatherly kindness of Don Bosco.

Let us also imagine seeing our Venerable Father saying to us, with his face constantly imbued with kindness: “Be indulgent!” Oh, fortunate are we if instead of being accused of being too harsh and severe, we deserved the praise of having been patient and gentle like Don Bosco in directing our confreres. This, of course, does not prevent us from being firm in our resolve to uphold the Constitutions and discipline. - May the Lord also grant us that balance of character so that our confreres, in whatever case, having recourse to us, will always be received with affection, or never find us restless and agitated, so that they may suppose that their presence and conversation would bother us. Who among the sons of D. Bosco would like to boast to be more feared than loved?⁵

By all accounts, Don Bosco’s third successor, Fr Philip Rinaldi, embodied the fatherly kindness of his master and model. “His time as Rector Major”, said Fr C.

Marchisio, a witness at his process of beatification and canonisation, “was characterised by great fatherliness and a marked spirituality. The confreres agree that Fr Rinaldi was a man of kindness and fatherhood; this is how I myself knew him. At the end of a talk with him we always came out comforted with the satisfaction of having been able to express all of our sorrows, all of our situations. He was never in a hurry. He received everyone, even a young boy, and he received him as a very important person.”⁶ His biographer, Luigi Càstano, invited to testify to the heroic virtues of Fr Rinaldi during the process, replied:

If we were now to characterise the heroic virtues of the Servant of God, we should say that it was fatherliness and the spirit of paternal kindness that Fr Rinaldi drew from the Gospel, from Saint Francis de Sales and Don Bosco. In his last circulars, Fr Rinaldi inculcated Salesian fatherliness towards confreres and young people in the human relationship of governance and in spiritual direction. Before teaching it to others, he had practised it for a long time himself. He had imbued his soul with it until it became second nature or, if you will, the fundamental norm of his life. From his years in Spain, his confreres testified: “Don Rinaldi breathes more the affection of a Father than the authority of a Superior.” As Rector Major, he wrote to a recently appointed provincial: “Be a father: with fatherliness you will work miracles.”⁷

The Rector Major, Fr Viganò, saw in Don Bosco a “prophet of kindness”⁸ and, following Fr Alberto Caviglia, he saw a “system of kindness”⁹ in his preventive system of education.

The method of kindness

Kindness should therefore always characterise the disciple of Don Bosco for reasons that are not of mere convenience. The relationships of the members of the Salesian Family among themselves and with others are normally marked by merciful kindness. Kindness is required by the spirituality of the preventive system in which reason, religion and loving-kindness are essential. The Salesian educator is kind. The Salesian seeks to persuade, not to impose. He relies on others’ values for them to gradually assume responsibility for their growth. He believes in the invisible action of grace in the heart of every individual and in the educational value of the experience of faith. He trusts in the transformative force of love, seeks to get to the heart and endeavours to make himself loved. The Salesian faithful to Don Bosco is fundamentally kind. Without being naive, he even establishes kindness as a method in social relationships.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 See "Amour et Vérité se rencontrent Ps 85", *Christus* 128, 1985.
- 2 Sermon for Thursday after the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 10 March 1622; *Oeuvres*, vol. X, pp. 312-313.
- 3 H.-D. Noble, "Bonté", in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. I, col. 1861.
- 4 "Quanti ebbero la bella sorte di vivere al suo fianco, attestano che il suo sguardo era pieno di carità e di tenerezza, e che appunto per questo esercitava sui giovani un'attrattiva irresistibile." (Letter to Salesians, 20 April 1919; L.C., p. 289).
- 5 "Immaginiamo ancora di vedere il nostro Venerabile Padre, che con il suo volto costantemente atteggiato a bontà vi dica: "sii indulgente!" Oh! fortunati noi, se invece di essere tacciati di troppa fierezza e severità, meriteremo la lode di essere stati pazienti e dolci come D. Bosco nel dirigere i confratelli. S'intende, ciò non vieta d'essere fermi nel proposito di far osservare le Costituzioni e la disciplina. - Voglia il Signore concedere anche a noi quella eguaglianza di carattere per cui i nostri confratelli, in qualunque caso, ricorrendo a noi, siano sempre accolti con affetto, nè mai abbiano a trovarci inquieti e agitati, sicché possano supporre che la loro presenza e la loro conversazione ci dia noia. Chi tra i figli di D. Bosco vorrà vantarsi di essere più temuto che amato" (P. Albera, Letter to Provincials and Rectors, 23 April 1917; "Quanti ebbero la bella sorte di vivere al suo fianco, attestano che il suo sguardo era pieno di carità e di tenerezza, e che appunto per questo esercitava sui giovani un'attrattiva irresistibile." (Letter to Salesians, 20 April 1919; L.C., p. 289).
- 6 "Il suo Rettorato fu caratterizzato da una grande paternità e da una accentuata spiritualità. Per comune affermazione dei confratelli Don Rinaldi fu l'uomo della bontà e della paternità, e così lo conobbi io. Quando si parlava con lui si usciva sempre confortati con la soddisfazione di aver potuto esprimere ogni pena, ogni situazione. Egli non aveva mai fretta. Riceveva qualsiasi persona, anche un ragazzo, e lo riceveva come se fosse una persona molto importante" (*Summarium*, p. 408, n. 1395.)
- 7 "Se si volesse ora caratterizzare l'abito eroico delle virtù del Servo di Dio, si dovrebbe dire che fu la paternità e lo spirito di paterna bontà che Don Rinaldi attinse dal Vangelo, da S. Francesco di Sales e da Don Bosco. Nelle sue ultime circolari Don Rinaldi inculcò la paternità salesiana verso confratelli e giovani, nel rapporto umano di governo e nella guida spirituale. Prima però di insegnarla agli altri egli l'aveva praticata a lungo, se ne era permeata l'anima fino a farne una seconda natura o se si vuole la norma fondamentale della vita. Fin dagli anni trascorsi nella Spagna i confratelli attestavano: 'Don Rinaldi sente più affetto di Padre che autorità di Superiore'. A un ispettore di recente nomina scriveva da Rettor Maggiore: 'Sii padre: con la paternità farai miracoli.'" (*Summarium*, p. 508, n. 1758.) Witness statements collected by Fr L. Fiora, *Informano super virtutibus* [Phil. Rinaldi], Rome, 1983, p. 107 and 108.
- 8 Letter to Salesians, 24 February 1989; L. C., p. 916.
- 9 Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1978; L. C., p. 36.
- 10 Considerations taken from the *Regulations of Apostolic Life* of the Salesian Cooperators, art. 15 : "Method of kindness". By the end of the century, Salesian kindness had become widespread. The *Common Identity Card* of 1995 goes so far as to entitle its art. 23: "The ascesis of kindness".

Last things

Meditation on the last things in the early Salesian tradition

For a century, from Don Bosco to the Rector Major, Fr Ricaldone (+ 1951), meditation on the last things (*novissimi*) was one of the constant, if not favourite, themes of the Salesians, especially during their days of recollection and spiritual retreats. They constantly returned to thoughts of death, judgement, hell and heaven.

Don Bosco, whom his immediate disciples carefully followed, had only to let himself be carried along by the spirit of the times to judge this kind of reflection to be very salutary for the spiritual life. Saint Francis de Sales had recommended to Philothea as an introduction to ten chapters on the last things, “you must use the following meditations carefully; for if you practise them steadfastly, they (by God’s Grace) will root out both sin and its affections from your heart.”¹ Don Bosco’s spirituality was fuelled by Alphonsus de Liguori’s anxious dissertations – his own salvation preoccupied him, sin tormented him and God’s judgement haunted him. The axiom *In omnibus respice finem* (In all things consider the end) guided his daily life. From at least the time of his seminary days he had heard the invitation of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) ringing in his ears: “*Fili, memorare novissima tua et in aeternum non peccabis* (Sir 7:36), which he translated: “Son, in all you do, remember the end of your life and you will not sin.” He tirelessly repeated the message to his sons, as we can see from the rather terrifying instructions in the manual of piety, *Il Giovane provveduto* (The Companion of Youth) and in *Il Mese di maggio* (The Month of May).

The “Seven considerations for each day of the week” in *The Companion of Youth* invited young people to meditate successively on the end of man, mortal sin, death, judgement, hell, the eternity of hell’s punishments, and finally paradise, topics which, it should be noted, were offered to anyone among them who did not have a book for spiritual reading, in other words, to a great many people.² Out of a total of thirty-one, nine instructions entitled: the end of man, the salvation of the soul of the soul, sin, death, particular judgement, universal judgement, the punishments of hell, the eternity of the punishments of hell, and paradise respectively, developed the same ideas in *Il Mese di maggio* intended for “the people”.³

Books were not enough for our saint's zeal. Whether willingly or not, Don Bosco often meditated on the last things. Let us choose two examples at random. One year, out of twelve spiritual bouquets (*fioretti*) offered to young people during the preparatory days for the feasts of Saint Francis de Sales and the Purification of Mary, five dealt with death as a moment of irrevocable decision for eternal salvation and, in another year, the nine *fioretti* for the novena in preparation for the feast of St Joseph also concerned death, eternity and paradise.⁴ In a genre that might seem remote from it, a panegyric for Saint Philip Neri brought Don Bosco back to his favourite theme. Before an assembly of priests he exclaimed: "... But what must absolutely impel us to fulfil this office with zeal is the very strict account that we, ministers of Jesus Christ, will have to render to his Divine Tribunal for the souls entrusted to us [...]. This supreme moment will come for all Christians, but let us not delude ourselves, it will also come for us priests. As soon as we are released from the bonds of our bodies, the moment we appear before the Divine Judge, we will see clearly what the obligations of our state have been and what our negligence has been. The immense glory of God prepared for his faithful will appear before our eyes..." And the description of the judgement continued.⁵

For Don Bosco and his followers, meditating on the last things had an ascetic purpose: to help them avoid sin and practise virtue. If people thought about their salvation, their whole life would be upright they believed. Through their sermons on death, judgement, hell and heaven, Salesian preachers encouraged the youngsters not to waste their time and, on the other hand, their teachers devoted themselves to the souls entrusted to them by God. Holiness consists in heroically practising the virtues, especially charity. The reminder of the *novissimi* encouraged the best boys, such as Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, to progress in holiness, so that on the last day they could appear before God's judgement in the most favourable conditions.

A different mentality

That was in another century. Times changed. By the middle of the twentieth century there was a certain silence on the subject of the last things. Less and less and even not at all did Salesian sermons and goodnights evoke the sinner's terror at the announcement of the sentence that would precipitate him into eternal torment. A practice that was dear to Don Bosco soon bore the brunt of this change in mentality.

In 1947, on the occasion of the canonisation of Saint Joseph Cafasso, Don Bosco's spiritual director, Fr Ricaldone, objected to the replacement of the term "Exercise for a happy death" with "Monthly recollection", which worried him because it seemed oblivious of the last things,

Because while the expression Monthly Recollection may remind us of the first part of Article 156 of the Constitutions: "Each individual, freeing himself as far as possible from his temporal tasks, will look within himself", it is quite insufficient to remind us of the second part, which is much more important and more indispensable: "... and will make the exercise for a happy death, and put his spiritual and temporal affairs in order, as if he were about to leave this world and depart for eternity." ... May the new Saint Joseph Cafasso obtain for all the members of the Salesian Family the grace to make the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death faithfully so that, by following his example and through his intercession, they may live a holy life that ends in a holy death.⁶

But the cause was (apparently and temporarily?) lost. The opponents of attention to the last things had prevailed in the minds of the new age, not only for those who considered eternal life to be an unfounded hypothesis or were convinced that everything stops at death, but for those for whom it is harmful or simply impossible. "We must never think of death", Voltaire wrote to Madame du Deffand on 18 November 1761. "This thought is only good for poisoning life."⁷ This was now the common opinion in the West, especially among young people, the Salesian preacher's usual audience. Even Don Bosco's Salesians were abandoning both the term and the content of the "Exercise for a happy death".

In 1984, the renewed Constitutions and Regulations of the Salesians ignored this practice, which was definitively supplanted by the *ritiro mensile* (monthly recollection).⁸ At the same time, the Salesian Sisters considered the two to be equivalent: "Let each community set aside for the spiritual retreat or Exercise for a Happy Death a half day each month; a full day each quarter." their General Regulations decreed.⁹ [Translator's note: though it has to be acknowledged that the English translation of the FMA Regulation is ambiguous here, since 'Spiritual retreat' could imply the annual retreat, whereas '*ritiro mensile*' is explicitly monthly]. From then on, preachers at Salesian retreats no longer spoke, or hardly spoke, of the last things. In fact they preferred "eschatology", a more general and less frightening concept.

“I believe in life everlasting”

The Salesian Family simply shared the Church’s faith in this eschatology: death, judgement, heaven, hell, the “new heavens” and the “new earth”, the Catholic Church taught in 1992 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, based on a rereading of the Bible. Its preachers no longer explained it to frighten their listeners with the possibility of eternal damnation, but rather with hope, by describing a future entrusted to a loving God.

“I believe in life everlasting”, says an article of the Creed. Death puts an end to man’s life as a time open to accepting or rejecting divine grace manifested in Christ. From then on, each person’s immortal soul receives a particular judgement that refers his life to Christ, either through purification, or to enter immediately into heavenly bliss – or to be immediately damned forever.

Those who die in God’s grace and friendship, and are perfectly purified, live forever with Christ. They are forever like God, because they see Him “as he is” (1 John 3:2), face to face. This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity, this communion of life and love with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed is called “heaven”, as the Catechism explains. Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of man’s deepest aspirations, the state of supreme and definitive happiness. In the glory of heaven, the blessed continue to joyfully accomplish God’s will in relation to others and to the whole of creation. They already reign with Christ; with Him “they shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 22:5).

Those who die in the grace and friendship of God, but imperfectly purified, though assured of their eternal salvation, suffer a purification after their death in order to obtain the holiness necessary to enter into the joy of heaven. The Church calls this final purification of the elect Purgatory, which is quite distinct from the punishment of the damned. Its teaching is based in particular on the practice of praying for the dead already mentioned in the second book of Maccabees. “Therefore he (Judas Maccabeus) made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin” (2 Maccabees 12:45). From the earliest times, the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered suffrages on their behalf.

We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin grievously against him, our neighbour and ourselves: “All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them” (1 John 3:15). To die in a state of mortal sin without repenting of it

and without accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. It is this state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and with the blessed that we call "hell". God does not predestine anyone to go to hell; what is required is a wilful aversion to God (a mortal sin), and one that is persistent to the end. In its Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of the Christian the Church implores the mercy of God: "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

The resurrection of all the dead, "both the righteous and the unrighteous" (Acts 24:15), will precede the Last Judgement. "For the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:28-29). Then Christ will come "in his glory, all the angels with him (...). All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left (...). And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25:31, 32, 46). The last judgement will reveal in all its consequences what each person has done or failed to do during their earthly lives.

At the end of time, the Kingdom of God will reach its fullness. After the judgement, the righteous will reign forever with Christ, glorified in body and soul, and the universe itself will be renewed. The Bible calls this mysterious world the "new heavens and the new earth" (2 Peter 3:13). It will be the definitive fulfilment of God's plan to "gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). In this place of "all things new" (Revelation 21:5), the heavenly Jerusalem, God will dwell among men. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

For mankind, this consummation will be the realisation of the unity of the human race of which the pilgrim Church is "like a sacrament", as *Lumen Gentium* puts it.¹⁰ Those who are united to Christ will form the community of the redeemed, the Holy City of God, the "Bride of the Lamb" (Revelation 21:9). The beatific vision, in which God will open himself inexhaustibly to the elect, will be the inexhaustible source of happiness, peace and mutual communion. As for the cosmos, the Bible affirms the profound community of destiny between the material world and mankind. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God (...) in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay (...) We know that the

whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:19-23). The visible world too, then, is destined to be transformed, “so that the world itself, restored to its former state, may serve the righteous without any hindrance to the service of the just”,¹¹ sharing in their glorification in Jesus Christ the Risen One.¹²

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Salesian Family expressed the teaching of Saint Francis de Sales and Don Bosco on the last ends in new words and with more systematic recourse to the Bible. The perspective has become much broader for them. Christians no longer hope only for their own individual salvation, but also for the salvation of the whole of humanity and even of the universe in its immensity.

NOTES

- 1 St Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part I, Chapter VIII. A series of meditations follow, some of them on the last things, which cover Chapters IX-XVIII.
- 2 “Sette considerazioni per ciascun giorno della settimana”, in *Il Giovane provveduto*, Turin, 1847, pp. 31-50. We read in the introduction: “Siccome io desidero grandemente che ogni giorno facciate qualche poco di lettura spirituale, per cui non tutti potranno avere i libri convenienti, così io vi presento sette brevi considerazioni, distribuite per ciascun giorno della settimana, le quali saranno di comodità per quelli che non possono avere libri opportuni.” (Op. cit., pp. 31-32).
- 3 G. Bosco, *Il Mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata ad uso del popolo*, Turin, Paravia, 1858, pp. 75-118 for the eight first set of instructions, and pp. 159-164 for instructions on “paradise”, separated from the others.
- 4 These lists, for 1866 and 1869, in MB VIII 292 and IX, 567.
- 5 Ma ciò che ci deve assolutamente spingere a compiere con zelo quest’ufficio si è il conto strettissimo che noi, come ministri di G.C., dovremo rendere al suo Divin Tribunale delle anime a noi affidate. [...] Quel momento supremo verrà per tutti i Cristiani, ma, non facciamoci illusione, verrà anche per noi sacerdoti. Appena saremo svincolati dai lacci del corpo e compariremo davanti al Divin Giudice, vedremo in modo chiaro quali fossero gli obblighi del nostro stato, e quale sia stata la negligenza. Davanti agli occhi apparirà l’immensa gloria di Dio preparata ai suoi fedeli...” (Panegyric for saint Philip Neri, Alba, May 1868, MB IX, 220).
- 6 Ora l’espressione Ritiro mensile, se può richiamare a noi la prima parte dell’articolo 156 delle Costituzioni: “Ognuno, liberandosi per quanto gli sarà possibile dalle cure temporali, si raccoglierà in se stesso”, è affatto insufficiente a inculcarci la seconda parte, ben più importante e indispensabile : “e farà l’esercizio della buona morte, disponendo le cose spirituali e temporali come se fosse per lasciare il mondo e partire per l’eternità.” Il novello Santo Giuseppe Cafasso ottenga a tutti i membri della Famiglia Salesiana la grazia di compiere con fedeltà ed esattezza l’Esercizio mensile della Buona Morte, in modo da potere, sul suo esempio e mediante la sua intercessione, vivere una santa vita, cui tenga dietro una santa morte.” (P. Ricaldone, Letter to Salesians, 24 April 1947, *Atti* 140, p. 11).
- 7 Voltaire, *Correspondance*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, vol. VI, p. 686.
- 8 SDB Constitutions, art. 91; SDB Regulations, art. 72.
- 9 “Ciascuna comunità dedichi al ritiro mensile o “Esercizio di buona morte” mezza giornata ogni mese, una giornata intera ogni trimestre.” (FMA General Regulations, art. 34).
- 10 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1.
- 11 Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus haereses*, Book 4, Chap. 32.
- 12 This paragraph follows the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992 ed., nos. 1020-1065, passim.

Layperson

The word lay, with its Salesian origins

The word *lay* appeared in Don Bosco's writings from the very beginnings of the Salesians, not only to describe his non-priestly collaborators, later called Cooperators, but also in his Constitutions to designate a category of his religious society: "It is the purpose of this society to gather together members, priests, clerics and laymen too, for the purpose of aspiring to perfection through the imitation of the virtues of our Divine Saviour" in 1858, in the first constitutional text to be preserved, the one that was copied by the young Michael Rua.¹ In 1921, on the eve of the complete revision which following the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, a derivative article still read: "*Haec autem Societas constat ex presbyteris, clericis atque laicis*" i.e.: "This society is made up of priests, clerics and lay people."² Were these the "extern" Salesians, those who would later be called Cooperators, whom Don Bosco would have liked to integrate fully into his religious Congregation? In fact, he had borrowed the list of members of his society from parallel articles from the Constitutions of the Vincentians, Redemptorists and above all the Congregation of the Cavanis brothers, known as the Secular Priests of the Schools of Charity, where the word "lay" was used to designate the *fratres laici*, or "lay brothers" who have since been categorised as religious in the strict sense of the term.³ And he probably meant nothing else. But the "lay character", rendered by the term "secular" has persisted, no doubt with good reason, in this third element of the society of St Francis de Sales. Salesian theorists have asserted the "secular nature" of the coadjutor or brother. "The Salesian coadjutor brother brings to every field of education and pastoral activity the specific qualities of his lay status",⁴ say the renewed Constitutions of 1984, which do not hesitate to call them "lay Salesians".⁵ A Salesian community without its "lay component", because it had no coadjutors, would lose its originality and authenticity. In 1980, the Rector Major Fr Viganò dedicated a circular letter to "the lay component of the Salesian community".⁶ In his view, the secular nature of the Salesian coadjutor is analogous to that of a member of a "lay institute" of consecrated life, whose proper function "does not imply the exercise of a sacred order", in the words of the Code of Canon Law of 1983 (can. 588 and 589).

Lay Christians and their mission

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council took a stand on the meaning of the term layperson, which had long been the subject of controversy among theologians.⁷ The identity of the layperson is defined first of all by exclusion: the layperson is neither a cleric nor a religious. “The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church”, we read. The rest of the text is fortunately positive. It explains that the layperson is a baptised person, therefore an adopted child of God the Father, a brother or sister of Jesus, who lives of the Holy Spirit, with all the rights and duties of such a dignity.

These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.⁸

This mission has its own form. The particular character of the lay person compared to priests and religious, is secularity.⁹ The drafters of the Council’s Constitution happily set out to determine the “secular” mission of the laity, based among other things on the *Letter to Diognetus*, that beautiful document from the second century.

The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.¹⁰

The Salesian Family at the end of the twentieth century obviously did not have a better programme to propose to its lay members.

Don Bosco and the spiritual life of the layperson

Mention of the layperson could, without any great problems, refer to Don Bosco's activity rather than his theory. Far from being content with an apostolate to youth, he also preached to lay adults throughout his priestly life. His publications suffice to bear witness to this. Through the book (copied, incidentally, from a French author), which he entitled *Il cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di San Vincenzo de' Paoli*,¹¹ using a narrative approach he exhorted the Catholic layman to a number of virtues: fraternal charity, gentleness, equal temperament, humility, faith, a spirit of mortification, patience, prudence, purity, gratitude, simplicity, trust in God, zeal, detachment from earthly goods...¹² The monthly *Letture cattoliche*, which he founded with Bishop Moreno in 1853, was explicitly aimed at the laity. It opened with a large work of popular apologetics bearing an evocative title. It was entitled "*The Catholic instructed in his religion*. A father talks to his sons according to the needs of the times, presented by the Father John Bosco",¹³ a work that would become *The Catholic in the World*¹⁴ at the end of his life. In those early days of 1850, to protect the faith of the simple folk, he was fighting with the Waldensians and "Protestants" in his pamphlets. Shortly afterwards, he published the devotional manual *The Key to Paradise for Catholics practising their duties as good Christians*¹⁵ and the small handbook *Porta teco, cristiano (Take it with you, Christian)*,¹⁶ the first of its kind, both of which were clearly intended to nourish the spiritual life of the laity. The biographies of young people from this period, such as his *Life of Dominic Savio* (1859), instructed lay people of all ages. In 1868, *The Catholic instructed in his practices of piety with the necessary instructions according to the needs of the time*¹⁷ was adapted from the *Il Giovane provveduto* for children to adults. The very much hagiographic *Lives of the Popes* of the first three centuries (published from 1857) and, at the time of Vatican I (1869-1870), Don Bosco's pamphlets on the Council, the Roman Pontiff and the Church of Christ, which did not forget the priests, were aimed primarily at the Catholic laity. Throughout his life as an apostle, Don Bosco never ceased to speak to lay Christians and to write for them.

This pious literature is not always of great value. However, from his books and, even more so, from Don Bosco's charitable work, some principles of lay spirituality emerge.¹⁸ His oft-repeated educational programme: to form good Christians and upright citizens, condenses them fairly faithfully.¹⁹

In Don Bosco's theology, the "good Christian" was the one who "achieves his salvation", in other words, who succeeds in life. It was not primarily (logically) the baptised person loyal to the Church who conscientiously fulfils his religious duties, but

the person who, by behaving in accordance with God's will prepares for this salvation. The ultimate goal of all human life being "eternal salvation", the "good Christian" was the one who, through the grace of God sanctioning his good works, would one day be "saved". Submission to God's will, which Don Bosco confused with God's commandments, had to be active, free, conscious, in a word: virtuous. His type of "good Christian" was, above and beyond the ordinary, the saint with heroic moral virtues, in human terms a valiant person. Don Bosco ignored supernaturalism which projects perfection and "sanctity" into the realm of the inaccessible. "If him, why not me?" he would have his boys ask when confronted with Dominic Savio, a prodigiously virtuous young man. In the phrase "good Christian", goodness had an ethical value. Don Bosco's exemplary biographies described the progression of his heroes from virtue to virtue. The story of his pupil Michael Magone (1861) was, from chapter to chapter, the story of this boy's moral reform (Chap. 4), his piety (Chap. 6), his fidelity to duty (chap. 7, beginning), his zeal for work (chap. 7, continued), his devotion to Mary (Chap. 8), his chastity (Chap. 9) and finally his fraternal charity (Chap. 10). Don Bosco's "good Christian" was always a person of action. By contrast, his "bad Christian" was a person of vice who is the other side of the coin, which is the opposite of virtue. By vice we mean the lazy, the selfish, the thief, the impure and the godless, such as in one of his stories (1866), the unfortunate Valentino, who was led by a certain Mari and had abandoned himself "to all sorts of vices".

Don Bosco combined the individual purpose of the education he wanted to give – forming "good Christians" – with a social purpose to which not enough attention is always paid. He also wanted to form "upright citizens". He liked and often repeated both terms or their equivalents. Past Pupil priests gathered to celebrate him once heard him say, "You must help Don Bosco to more easily and broadly achieve the noble goal he has set himself: the benefit of religion and the well-being of civil society through the cultivation of poor youth."²⁰ Don Bosco's citizen was a person of civil society. He placed his "uprightness" as a citizen at the service of that society. The twofold "good Christian and upright citizen" does not therefore seem to have been, in Don Bosco's language, a synthesis between tradition (the believer) and the new order (the citizen), as is sometimes said. The believer and the citizen were both a person of their time and of the moment, facing their destiny on the one hand, and among their fellow human beings on the other. The citizen, who belongs to the city, can either hinder or serve the society in which they live. The immoral citizen is a burden, the upright citizen a help.

Don Bosco's exemplary layman, both a "good Christian" and an "upright citizen", was the conscientious member of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul (introduced in Turin in 1850), such as the Piedmontese Carlo Cays or the Frenchman Léon Harmel, two men he loved and venerated. Count Carlo Cays (1813–1882), "remarkable for his piety, talents and knowledge", put his "long life at the service of the poor", according to Don Bosco.²¹ Widowed at the age of 32, he devoted himself to society, in particular to the benefit of Don Bosco, whose boys he catechised. Elected for one term as a deputy to the parliament of the Sardinian States, he was for a long time president of the Turin Conferences. Finally, ordained a Salesian priest at the age of 65, he ended his life in humility and poverty.²² Léon Harmel (1829–1915), the "Good Father" of the Val des Bois factory near Reims, much admired by Don Bosco for his social work, stopped off in Turin with his pilgrimages of workers to Rome and the Pope to greet him, and later his successor Fr Rua.²³ The portraits of these two Christians, men of faith and men of action, virtuous men if ever there were, provide a useful illustration of Don Bosco's ideas on the spiritual life of the layperson.

Lay people and Salesian communities

For a long time, the Salesian Family did not believe that it needed to reflect on the laity as such. It recommended charity and kindness to its lay Cooperators, and was more or less content to repeat the lessons of Saint Francis de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. The religious communities sought to maintain their homogeneity as much as possible and therefore exclude the laity from their life. Things changed in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The Salesians came into line with the Church that emerged from Vatican II. Highlights of this were the 1986 Spirituality Week on "The Laity in the Salesian Family",²⁴ the circular of the Rector Major Fr Viganò of the same year on "the advancement of the lay person in the Salesian Family"²⁵ and the Twenty-Fourth General Chapter of the Salesians held in Rome in 1996, which took as its theme "Salesians and lay people. Communion and sharing in the spirit and in the mission of Don Bosco."²⁶

There was a need "to renew the Salesian identity card" said Fr Viganò at the time. The Salesians needed to shake things up, he thought. But how? In any case, "One thing is quite certain: if Don Bosco were alive at the present day, with the vast horizons of Vatican II available to him, he would immediately set about involving a multitude of the laity in his working plans."²⁷ The new ecclesial mentality imposed on the Salesians (and the Salesian Sisters) to stop turning in on themselves, but to accept the demands of

“communion” with the laity in their apostolic endeavours. And he drew up a programme for them.

1. A more organic knowledge of Vatican II on the vocation and mission of the laity.
2. To develop an awareness in the laity of being truly committed Catholics, witnesses to their baptism.
3. To direct the interest of lay collaborators towards the integral promotion of youth and the demands of evangelisation in working-class areas.
4. To intensify in the laity a spirit of generosity and invention in their daily lives and especially during leisure time.
5. To make the evangelical patrimony of Don Bosco known and loved.²⁸

The relationship between Salesians and lay people concerns “communion, mission and spirituality” as Fr Vecchi taught at the beginning of his term of office. Let the Salesians enter into a spiritual relationship with the laity in educative and pastoral communities which bring them together to educate young people; and then within the Salesian Family, made up of groups recognised by the Church and united by a common Salesian spirit; finally, within a “Salesian movement” made up of individuals and informal groups, brought together by “affection and a certain degree of participation in the values and intentions of the Salesian mission.”²⁹ Let this be increasingly true! As far as the laity is concerned it is a Salesian programme for the twenty-first century. Too ambitious? The future will tell.

NOTES

- 1 “Lo scopo di questa congregazione si è di riunire insieme i suoi membri ecclesiastici, chierici ed anche laici a fine di perfezionare se medesimi imitando per quanto è possibile le virtù del nostro Divin Salvatore.” (Congregazione di s. Francesco di Sales, cap. “Scopo di questa congregazione”, art 1, without later corrections).
- 2 SDB Constitutions 1921, cap. *Finis*, art 1.
- 3 Don Bosco’s immediate model said: “Haec Congregatio Scholarum Charitatis est societas Presbyterorum et Clericorum Soecularium una cum Laicis fiatribus inservientibus qui omnes communem vitam ducunt ... ” (*Constitutiones congregations Sacerdotum saecularium scholarum charitatis*, Venise, Andreolo, 1837, chap. I, art. 1).
- 4 “Il salesiano coadiutore porta in tutti i campi educativi e pastorali il valore proprio della sua laicità.” (SDB Constitutions 1984, art 45).
- 5 See: “La formazione iniziale dei salesiani laici, dei futuri sacerdoti ... ” (SDB Constitutions 1984, art 106).
- 6 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians “La componente laicale della Comunità Salesiana”, *Atti* 298, Oct-Dec 1980, pp. 3-50.
- 7 In general terms regarding these controversies, see the studies by Fr Yves Congar, the results of which were summarised in his article “Laïc et laïcat”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. IX, 1976, col. 79-108.
- 8 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.
- 9 See the word *Secularity*, later in this dictionary.
- 10 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.
- 11 *Il Cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di san Vincenzo de’ Paoli. Opera che può servire a consecrare il mese di luglio in onore del medesimo santo*, Turin, Paravia, 1848, was a partial copy of a book with a similar title by André-Joseph Ansart.
- 12 See previous entry *Example*.
- 13 *Il Cattolico istruito nella sua Religione. Trattenimenti di un padre di famiglia co’ suoi figliuoli secondo i bisogni del tempo, epilogati dal Sac. Bosco Giovanni*, Turin, 1853.
- 14 *Il Cattolico nel secolo*, Turin, 1883.
- 15 *La Chiave del Paradiso in mano al cattolico che pratica i doveri di buon cristiano*, Turin, 1856.
- 16 Turin, 1856.
- 17 *Il Cattolico provveduto per le pratiche di pietà con analoghe istruzioni secondo il bisogno dei tempi ...*, Turin, 1868.
- 18 See P. Braido, “Laicità e laici nel progetto operativo di don Bosco”, in his article on *Laici nella Famiglia Salesiana*, pp. 17-34. See below fn 24.
- 19 See P. Braido, same article, pp. 23-25.

- 20 “Voi dovete venire in aiuto a D. Bosco, a fine di conseguire più facilmente e più largamente il nobile scopo, che si è proposto, il vantaggio cioè della Religione, il benessere della civile società, mediante la cultura della povera gioventù.” From this address as edited in the *Bollettino salesiano*, September 1880, p. 11.
- 21 “... si tratta di una persona molto distinta per pietà, per talenti, per dottrina, per vita lunga ed operosa in servizio di Dio...” (G. Bosco to the Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, 18 June 1878, *Epistolario Ceria*, vol. III, p. 364).
- 22 L. Terrone, *Il conte Cays, sacerdote salesiano. Memorie*, Colle Don Bosco, L.D.C., 1947.
- 23 Regarding him see the biography by G. Guitton, *Léon Harmel, 1829-1915*, Paris, Spes, 1927, 2 vols.
- 24 *Laici nella Famiglia Salesiana. Atti della XII Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana*, Roma, ed. S.D.B. 1986.
- 25 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 24 February 1986, *Atti* 317, pp. 3-22.
- 26 *Salesiani e laici. Comunione e condivisione nello spirito e nella missione di don Bosco*. Document of the 24th General Chapter of the Society of St Francis de Sales, *Atti* 356, May 1996, 358 pages.
- 27 “Una cosa è certa : se Don Bosco fosse vivo oggi avendo a sua disposizione I grandi orizzonti del Vaticano II, si lancerebbe a coinvolgere tanti Laici nel suo progetto operativo.” (Letter of 24 February 1986, § “Un invito a rinnovare la nostra carta d’identità”, loc. cit., p. 4.)
- 28 Same letter of 24 February 1986, § “Quali obiettivi ci proponiamo?”, loc. cit., pp. 15-20.
- 29 J. Vecchi, “De la vie fraternelle en communauté”, in *CG 24 et vie consacrée*, conferences in Paris, December 1997, II, pp. 6-8.

Liguori, Alphonsus

Alphonsus Liguori's influence on 19th century Catholicism

In the beginning, while Francis de Sales, to whom they owe their name, was the model for Don Bosco and his followers, another more recent saint, the Neapolitan Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787), a renowned moralist and founder of the Redemptorists, passed on to them an ascetic and pastoral doctrine that would leave its mark on the Salesian Family for a long time.¹

Prepared for the priesthood by rigorous teaching, Alphonsus abandoned this teaching after seeing the damage done to his own soul and that of others by an inhuman and anti-gospel doctrine which made it impossible to use the sacraments, especially Penance and the Eucharist. In the then heated (and since forgotten) question of probabilism,² for the rest of his life he maintained the liberating principle that a truly dubious law is not binding in conscience. His mind and his solutions had always remained reasonable and merciful.

After his death, the influence of this Neapolitan apostle spread throughout Italy and even, it could be said, to the whole of Catholicism. During the first half of the nineteenth century, at the time of Don Bosco's priestly formation, his moral works, in particular his vast *Theologia moralis* (four volumes in the Gaudé edition), gradually freed seminary teaching and the whole penitential and sacramental practice of the Christian people from rigorism. But Alphonsus Liguori was not just a doctor of morals. Many of his books on spirituality (thanks to the Redemptorists among others) exerted an extraordinary influence on the thinking and behaviour of Christians. With *The Great Means of Salvation and Perfection* (1759), he was the doctor of prayer for them. He was also the doctor of the Eucharist with his little book *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin* (1768), first and more explicitly entitled *Devotional thoughts and affections for visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the ever immaculate Virgin Mary, for each day of the month* (1745), which met with such success in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that it has sometimes been compared to the success of the *Imitation of Christ*. His *The Glories of Mary* (1750) was a milestone in Mariology and was published in countless editions and translations. It was a paraphrase of the *Salve Regina* and a series of discourses on the seven principal feasts, on each of the seven sorrows and on the virtues of the Blessed Virgin. Alphonsus said that Mary is queen, mother, life,

hope, help, mediatrix, advocate, guardian and perpetual associate of her Son in the work of redemption of mankind. According to his first biographer (Tannoja), his *Preparation for Death*,³ with its thirty-six “considerations”, first on the “eternal truths”, then on the six great means of salvation: prayer, perseverance, trust in Mary, love of God, the Eucharist, conformity to God’s will, had produced, on its publication in the kingdom of Naples, “the effect of a general mission.” In the nineteenth century, it continued to make Christians concerned about their final destiny. Finally, Sisters and also, despite the title, male religious were influenced by *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ or the Holy Nun*.⁴

Alphonsus, who was beatified in 1816 and canonised in 1839, and given the prestigious title of Doctor of the Church in 1871, had become, in Don Bosco’s time, both directly and, more often, indirectly, a highly regarded spiritual advisor for very devout Catholics.

St Alphonsus and Don Bosco

Don Bosco got to know about Alphonsus Liguori at the *Convitto ecclesiastico* in Turin, where he lived from 1841 to 1844. The *Convitto* priests were prepared through lectures on morality and guided solutions of conscience. The “lecturers” Luigi Guala and the future saint Joseph Cafasso, whom Don Bosco as a young priest revered, amended the basic text that was obligatory in the diocese (Alasia) which was rather rigorous, and based themselves on the teachings of Alphonsus Liguori, whom they openly championed. Their pastoral lessons on confession were based on Alphonsus’ *Homo apostolicus* (The Apostle), a Latin translation of a “Practical Instruction for Confessors”, a particularly successful summary of moral theology. Alphonsus had attached a *Praxis confessarii* (Confessors’ Practice), subtitled “To serve as a supplement to the Instruction for Confessors”. This is invaluable for anyone wishing to grasp his concept of the minister of the sacrament of penance. The teachers at the *Convitto* thus rid their pupils of the traces of a rather brutal “Jansenist” spirit, still alive in the country at the time.⁵ They discussed the theses of the probabilists and probabiliorists. The probabiliorists, among whom the *Convitto* listed the author imposed by the diocese, were rigid; the probabilists, at the head of whom was St Alphonsus, were less so. The Director Fr Guala, taking “the charity of Our Lord Jesus Christ” as his guide, fell between the two parties, in Don Bosco’s opinion. Thanks to him, “Saint Alphonsus became our theological patron. This was a salutary step, long desired, and now we are reaping its benefits.”⁶

As a priest, John Bosco, confessor and director of conscience, was always faithful to the lessons of Saint Alphonsus as he had learned them at the *Convitto* from the lips of

his teachers Guala and Cafasso. His immediate disciples followed him. By 1875, Saint Alphonsus was the official moral (and ascetical) writer for the Salesians.⁷

When Don Bosco and his sons began writing booklets on spirituality, Alphonsus Liguori was naturally one of their preferred sources. Don Bosco used at least the following titles: “Preparation for death” (*Apparecchio alla morte*), “Visits to the Blessed Sacrament” (*Visite al Santissimo Sacramento*), “Considerations on the Eternal Maxims” (*Massime eterne*), “The Holy Nun” (*la Monaco Santa*), “The Glories of Mary” (*le Glorie di Maria*) and “The Discernment of Vocation” (*Avvisi spettanti la vocazione*).

The ascetic part of his *Il Giovane provveduto* (1847) was expanded to include extracts from the “Considerations on the Eternal Maxims” and the “Preparation for Death”. It is easy to see that one of his very first books, the tiny “Exercise of devotion on the mercy of God” (circa 1846) depends on this “Preparation for death” by Saint Alphonsus. Likewise certain chapters of the *Mesi di maggio* (1858). “The Glories of Mary” was one of the sources of Don Bosco’s brochure on the Novena to Our Lady Help of Christians (1870). The “Acts of devotion to be made before the Blessed Sacrament”, which appeared in his issue of *Letture cattoliche* on the Eucharistic miracle of Turin (1853), were explicitly borrowed from the famous work by Alphonsus Liguori on “Visits to the Blessed Sacrament”. Finally, sometimes assisted by his novice master Giulio Barberis, Don Bosco copied his spiritual master in his explanations of religious life, an area in which he initially had very little mastery. His introduction to the Constitutions for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1st ed., 1875) adapted long extracts from the “Holy Nun” and “The Discernment of Vocation”. The “Holy Nun” had already literally inspired the retreat preached by Don Bosco to the Salesians in 1869, the day after his Congregation was approved by Rome. He spoke of the religious life in the words of Saint Alphonsus. For at least a century this asceticism, which was consistent with the “mission” (to use a word absent from his vocabulary), but was sometimes problematic, was taught to the spiritual sons of Don Bosco.⁸ While they thought they were hearing only Don Bosco, the Salesian religious (and Salesian Sisters) often heard especially the voice of St Alphonsus.

It is true that the compiler remains the master of his choices. The originality of Saint Alphonsus himself, who belonged to the lineage of Saint Francis de Sales and depended, through certain Jesuits (Saint-Juré, Nepveu), on the first Ignatian school, was itself relative. When he took up Saint Alphonsus, Don Bosco was simply part of one of the forms of modern spirituality with all its positives and also its faults, that prevailed until Vatican II.

NOTES

- 1 On this saint, see the work by Redemptorist Théodule Rey-Mermet, *Le saint du siècle des Lumières, Alfonso de Liguori (1696-1787)*, 2nd ed. Paris, Nouvelle Cité, 1987, 717 pages. The Italian translation has the advantage of rendering the titles in the original language.
- 2 In observance of a religious precept, can we in conscience follow the probabilists in their opinion that is only *probabilis* (“probable”), or is it absolutely necessary to conform to an opinion that is a *probabilior* (“more probable”) opinion, like the severe moralists known as probabiliorists?
- 3 *Apparecchio alla morte*, 1758.
- 4 *La vera sposa di Gesù Cristo o la Monaco santa*, 1760.
- 5 Don Bosco wrote in his *Memoirs* regarding the *Convitto*: “(Il Teologo Guala) fondò quel meraviglioso semenzaio, da cui provenne molto bene alla Chiesa specialmente a sbarbare alcune radici di giansenismo che tuttora si conservava tra noi” (MO Da Silva, p. 117.)
- 6 “... mercè il T. Guala S. Alfonso divenne il maestro delle nostre scuole con quel vantaggio che hi lungo tempo desiderato, e che oggidi se ne provano i salutari effetti.” (MO Da Silva, p. 118).
- 7 According to the report Don Bosco drew up for the Holy See, *Cenno storico sulla congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales e relativi schiarimenti*, Rome, 1874, p. 15.
- 8 See the collection of works derived from his circular letters, which Fr Pietro Ricaldone entitled *Formazione salesiana* in the 1940s (ed. L.D.C.).

Liturgical celebration

Liturgy and liturgical rites

Long-standing Salesian tradition called for the greatest attention possible to the instructions of the hierarchical Church and the dignity of worship.

From the first draft of the chapter of the Salesian Constitutions on “the practices of piety”, among the characteristics of the Salesian confreres it included “the clear, pious and distinct pronunciation of the words of the divine offices.”¹ Then, at the turn of the two centuries, the tradition endeavoured to promote Gregorian Chant in accordance with the instructions of the Church of that time. Fr Rua was almost obsessive in his careful observance of the rubrics. Fr Albera placed a great deal of importance on conduct during prayers, both at services and throughout the day. As provincial in France from 1882 to 1892 this future Rector Major said he was scandalised by the attitude of some of his priests, including Rectors, during the prayers that punctuated their days.²

However, at that time in Salesian studentates, the course on liturgy was still reduced to the study of ecclesiastical ceremonies, in other words rites and ceremonials. As an appendix to a circular letter “on the life of faith” and under the title “*Sacra Liturgia*” (Sacred Liturgy), the Rector Major Fr Albera focused from the outset on “liturgical laws”. He began: “We know that the first author of the liturgical laws was God himself, who dictated to Moses, clearly and distinctly, the principal acts by which he wished to be honoured by the Jewish people.” He went on to say that, “in the New Testament Jesus Christ determined the principal rites, those which belong to the essence of the sacrifice of the Holy Mass and the sacraments, leaving it to the Church to establish the others.”³ Under the term *Liturgia Sacra*, the Index of letters of this Rector Major only mentioned: “Origin and purpose of ceremonies, observe them exactly, study them.” An attempt at organised participation in Mass in the novitiates and studentates advocated from 1905, especially at the initiative of Frs Giulio Barberis, Giovanni Battista Grosso and Eusebio Vismara, finally failed in 1916 under the pressure of earlier habits.⁴ It was necessary to follow the services with the youngsters and like the youngsters.

We were in the midst of modernism. The human sciences were beginning their victorious rise. A better knowledge of history was sweeping aside ill-founded allegations about the birth of rites. The critics said that Christian rites originated in Babylonian

mythology or had been borrowed from mystery religions contemporary with the birth of Christianity. Moreover, all religions have their own rites, which are part of their particular folklore. The liturgy is therefore of little importance.

Fortunately, however, other sciences, especially theology, were also involved. It would soon no longer be possible to confuse rites and liturgy. Liturgy is something else. The liturgical movement which came into being at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century led to the Vatican II Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in 1963. Without ever neglecting the rites, on the contrary, it emphasised the sacred action par excellence, which is the sacred liturgy. Since this Council, all the main Salesian documents have taken into account theological and historical insights of contemporary science. The Salesian tradition has been singularly enriched.

Fr Ricaldone's instructions in 1939

On the eve of the Second World War, we see the evolution of this tradition in a letter from the Rector Major Fr Peter Ricaldone for the canonical visitation to the houses of the society.⁵ The paragraph was clearly entitled “Liturgical Movement”, a movement essentially understood as an effort to participate in liturgical action.

Now widespread, although still unknown to the popular masses, it is strongly encouraged by the popes, noted the Rector Major. Therefore, “our houses and our institutes” must be at the forefront. After stating that St John Bosco, insofar as his time allowed, had shown himself to be in the vanguard in this field through his encouragement of Eucharistic piety, by establishing an Altar Boys Society, music, Gregorian chant and the introduction in *Il Giovane provveduto* of the manner of attending Mass and following the solemn ceremonies (sung Mass and Vespers), the letter listed and commented on what it considered to be the “three points” of the liturgical movement: 1) liturgical instruction: feasts, ceremonies, formulas, personnel, books, objects, etc. 2) education in the liturgical sense and formation in liturgical piety, 3) conscious, direct and active participation in ecclesiastical ceremonies. Salesians cannot be satisfied with the minimum formation necessary in liturgical matters. The confreres, especially priests, must cultivate a liturgical spirit. Participation in ceremonies can only have various applications and manifestations, depending on the age, education or nature of the participants: young people or adults, academic students or artisans, etc.; and depending on the circumstances. It can be reduced to participation in the singing and public acts of these ceremonies, or it can lead to an intimate and direct union with the

celebrant, depending on the stages of the service, the prayers, formulas, rites and gestures of each ceremony, particularly Holy Mass. In the implementation of this programme, it will be necessary to take into account the settings and actual circumstances of the participants. The Rector Major was pleased that the movement had already entered the houses of formation (novitiates, philosophy and theology studentates), where Mass was sung on Sundays and feast days and where daily Mass was celebrated using a personal missal. The Salesian Family, which had gone back to old habits some twenty years earlier, therefore now tried to follow the liturgical movement correctly. However, as this programme shows, it was still very much about understanding the rites and following them as far as possible. In-depth knowledge of the sacred action remained limited to a few groups of theologians. But after Pius XII's *Mediator Dei* and, above all, Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it made steady progress, and habits began to change.

Worship, a symbolic sacred action

Let's try to look at things from a more elevated position. We must try to understand why Christ occupies such a great place in rethought and renewed Christian worship. Religious anthropology will help. Worship of the deity is a symbolic act in all religions. The symbolised sign refers to a reality hidden within. The flag symbolises the nation. Life requires endless symbolic acts. Let us think of the gestures that signify two people meeting: the greeting of the head, the handshake, the hug or kiss, facial movements, the words used. In this case, gestures and language most often symbolise mutual recognition, respect, sympathy, sometimes affection and love. Meals together are not just about absorbing food. Eating them involves things and people. A whole symbolism of conviviality is sketched out, to say the least. At the table, in addition to the nature of the food and drink, gestures that are incongruous, considerate or hostile, services rendered or refused, sharp or friendly conversations, transform food into a social gesture that brings people together, unites them or divides them, becomes a source of love, hostility or hatred. The symbolism of gestures and is read and translated by the guests.

Religious action is also a symbolic encounter. But, unlike human encounters, the interlocutor is the divinity. During the religious celebration, regardless of their religion the group encounters God. The God who is encountered is perceived as creator and provident to some degree. Cosmic religions do not encounter God otherwise. The symbolic gestures of religious action: prayers, songs, dances, mimes, narratives, gifts, sacrifices, etc. express respect, submission, gratitude, offering, request ... to the Almighty

God. This is the liturgy of the group, which goes, for the most part, from the bottom up. To this vertical dimension is added, as in any common action, a horizontal dimension. God is encountered through others. Songs, dances, offerings, sacrifices collectively express submission, desires, joys, regrets, recognition of the members of the group. Symbolism is community.

The Liturgy, Celebration of the Religion of the Covenant

The Judeo-Christian liturgy is worship, therefore an encounter. But instead of addressing only the Creator God, it is an encounter with God in the history of a “salvation” of which God is the origin. God made a covenant with his people. This differentiates the Judeo-Christian religious act from the religious act of cosmic religions.

Let us summarise in a few words what is normally the subject of an entire treatise. According to the Bible, the Almighty originally turned to his creatures and made a covenant with them. A union between heaven and earth appeared, symbolised by the rainbow. The covenant of the Creator with his creature was sketched out in the Old Testament. The Word of God bore the covenant and wove it “symbolically” by its very language. The people of Israel benefited. Then came the time of incarnation. Within it, the covenant then took on a fuller character with Christ, true God and true man. In the most holy person of Jesus, humanity has united itself with divinity. There can be no closer union than hypostatic union, that of the divine nature and the human nature in the person of the Son of God. The Paschal Christ, the first-born of the human “multitude”, offered humanity to his Father at his sacrificial death. In him, the whole creation approached God. The covenant of the origins was sealed by the blood of the sacrificial Lamb. The cross was the altar of the most sublime religious encounter imaginable.

Let’s return to the Christian celebration. Christians, like every religious being, turn to the Creator whom they call God the Father. They pray to him, they offer him their goods and their persons, they thank him for his benefits, they petition him for things, etc. They must know that in their religious activity, whether they think of it or not, they have only one mediator: Christ himself. Christian prayer should end with the invocation of the great intercessor: “through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The liturgical celebration proper of Christians differs from other religious gestures: it celebrates salvation within the Covenant concluded by God the Father in his son Jesus.

God comes first. He is the origin of the Covenant. This immediately gives the celebration a sacred character. God is thrice holy or he is not. He has come, and continues to come to humanity in the glorious Christ. He thus brings salvation. The celebration is essentially the encounter of God coming to man in the person of Jesus, who is himself the new and eternal covenant. This encounter passes, like any encounter, through a network of symbols, at the forefront of which we recognise the Word of God. But this is far from being the only thing. The whole history of salvation can be symbolised. The Jews symbolise the Exodus, inaugurated by the Passover, and the crossing of the Desert. Then they were saved. Christians focus their symbolism on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the climax of salvation. Words and other signs of the Christian celebration show the action of God in the salvific history of yesterday and today.

The liturgical year took the form of a broad celebration of the history of salvation. Advent is the time of recollection and preparation which corresponds to the Old Testament. The time of Incarnation begins with Christmas. Christ manifests himself at the Epiphany. His public life and salutary preaching covered the following period. We then prepare ourselves, through Lent, for the central celebration which is that of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Holy Week is the great week for Christians, which ends with the repetition of the good news: Christ is risen. The time of Easter continues until Pentecost, which opens the time of the saving Church, destined to lead to the evocation of the return of Christ and the end of time. The cycle is complete, sacred history has been symbolised from the origins to the end, from the alpha to the omega.

From God the Saviour, let us now turn to his saved creature. If there is an encounter, there is an answer from this creature, which is the human response, assuming it is also symbolised. This is done through words and gestures. Prayer will be of homage, offering, petition or thanksgiving. This symbolism of the response takes into account the dignity of the transcendent God, whom one seeks to encounter, the necessary mediation of Jesus and the salutary action symbolised on the divine side. But this glorified Jesus can no longer be attained in himself except in today's world, in the Church, a necessary mediation both from God to man and from man to God. The Christian liturgy, the communal encounter of God with human beings, thus takes on a vertical dimension, first of all from top to bottom; in response, it functions from bottom to top while, like every communal gesture, it takes into account a necessary horizontal dimension among the participants. Here we are at the origin of all the sacraments and, in particular, of the highest of all which is the Eucharist. These sacraments are the places of the symbolic Christian encounter between God the Saviour and his saved creature.

Celebration and spiritual life according to recent Salesian tradition

The Constitutions of the two Salesian Congregations, renewed from 1971 onwards, henceforth speak very well of the nature, conditions and benefits of the Christian liturgical celebration, giving the mystery of salvation crowned by the Paschal Christ all the importance it deserves.⁶

From this point of view, the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are remarkable for the accuracy of their movement. Everything comes from God in history, they insist, and gives rise to a concrete response through the dead and risen Christ. The worship service thus designed is an authentic religious Christian encounter. “God loved us so much that he sent his Son, the Word of Truth and Life, who continually challenges us, as individuals and communities, requiring our practical response” (art. 39). “By his incarnation the Son of God entered into history, making every hour a time of salvation. In union with him the Church continues his praise, thanksgiving, and supplication to the Father.” “In the course of the year the Church, a pilgrim in time, celebrates the perennial presence of Christ in history, and renews the work of salvation by means of the liturgical cycle which has its culmination in Easter, and is expressed each week in a particular way on the Lord’s Day.” The main celebration of the community is the Eucharist, “the source and culmination of our prayer” because it is “the paschal sacrifice” and “the offering of Jesus, adorer of the Father”(art. 40). The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a “trustful encounter with the faithfulness and mercy of the Father” and “renews our participation in the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection” (art. 41). When the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians inspires young people to “live the liturgy”, it will naturally be “as transforming encounters with Christ”, especially in the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation, “and active participation in the ecclesial community”(art. 71).⁷

In fact, the liturgical celebration “transforms” Christians. It sustains their spiritual life, that of the ministers as well as that of the faithful. Focused on God in his Son Jesus, it promotes and purifies their faith, hope and charity. It gives meaning to their life, which is normally a journey towards Christ, with Christ and for Christ. This journey is enlightened by the word of God duly explained in the full celebration and by the contemplation of Christ the Saviour symbolised in the ceremony. By no means confined to the interior of the heart, on the contrary it leads to daily life, which is a practical application of the Gospel continuously recalled in the liturgy.

NOTES

- 1 “... a clear, devout, distinct pronounciation of the words of the divine offices.” (Early manuscripts of the Constitutions, Chap. *Pratiche di pietà*, art. 2.)
- 2 P. Albera, handwritten circular letter to Rectors, Marseille, 4 November 1885; ed. “Paolo Albera, premier provincial de France”, *Cahiers salésiens* 36, 1996, p. 65-66.
- 3 “Noi sappiamo che il primo autore delle leggi liturgiche fu lo stesso Iddio, avendo Egli dettato a Mosè, distintamente e chiaramente, i principali atti coi quali voleva lo onorasse il popolo giudaico. - Nel Nuovo Testamento Gesù Cristo determina i principali riti, quelli cioè che appartengono all'essenza del sacrificio della S. Messa e dei Sacramenti, lasciando alla Chiesa il compito di stabilire gli altri.” (Letter to Salesians, 21 November 1912, Appendix).
- 4 See my article “Salésiens et renouveau liturgique des origines au milieu du vingtième siècle”, in *Liturgia e musica nella formazione salesiana*. European meeting of teachers and experts in liturgy and music promoted by the Department for Salesian Formation, ed. Manlio Sodi, sdb, Rome, 1984, pp. 189-236.
- 5 “La visita canonica alle case salesiane”, § 71, *Atti* 94, July-August 1939, pp. 156-159.
- 6 For the Salesians SDB, see the Constitutions, art. 88 and 89.
- 7 The corresponding Italian texts of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: “Dio ci ha tanto amati da mandare il suo Figlio, Parola di Verità e di Vita, che ci interpella costantemente come persone e come comunità ed esige una risposta concreta” (art. 39). “Il Figlio di Dio con la sua incarnazione è entrato nella storia, facendo di ogni ora un tempo di salvezza. Unita a Lui la Chiesa ne prolunga la lode, il ringraziamento e la supplica al Padre” (art. 42). “Nello svolgersi dell'anno la Chiesa, pellegrina nel tempo, celebra la perenne presenza di Cristo nella storia e riattualizza l'opera della salvezza anche attraverso il ciclo liturgico che ha il suo vertice nella Pasqua e si esprime in modo particolare ogni settimana nel giorno del Signore”(art.43). “Sorgente e culmine della nostra preghiera è l'Eucaristia, sacrificio pasquale, da cui scaturisce tutta la vita della Chiesa. Vi parteciperemo ogni giorno per unirci all'offerta di Gesù adoratore del Padre” (art. 40). “Il sacramento della Riconciliazione, fiducioso incontro con la fedeltà e la misericordia del Padre, rinnova il nostro inserimento nel mistero di morte e risurrezione di Cristo” (art. 41). “Le educaremo (le giovani) a vivere la liturgia come incontro trasformante con Cristo, - specialmente nei sacramenti dell'Eucaristia e della Riconciliazione - e come inserimento attivo nella comunità ecclesiale” (art. 71).

Love

N. B. Here we are dealing only with love in the mystical sense, that which the soul has for God, with its social consequences.

The love of God according to Saint Francis de Sales

The *Treatise on the Love of God*, which Francis de Sales published for the first time in twelve “books” at Lyon, with Pierre Rigaud’s, in 1616, is “the complete revelation” of his mind and heart “at the height of his genius and holiness”, announced Dom Mackey, when he introduced the edition of the *Treatise* in the *Oeuvres* of the Visitation in Annecy. Francis unveiled his simple and learned concepts about the love that a Christian with a lofty soul, Theotimus in his language, can bring to his God.¹

Love, he wrote, is “the complacency and the movement towards, or effusion of the will upon, the thing beloved.”² We will observe the exclusive place of the will in this description of love. Sensibility is only associated with it and never comes first. But this desire, which seems stiff and hard to us, goes very far, even to the effusion of love. “The end then of love is no other thing than the union of the lover and the thing loved.”³ Here, the first lover is God Himself. Divine love is born of God. It is “begotten” by God.⁴ God is love, out of love he calls us into existence and gives us his own Son as Redeemer. In exchange for this love, he wants us to love him and provoke us to love him, while respecting our freedom. It is God’s love that invites us to faith, hope, penance, contrition, and finally triumphs by taking possession of the soul of the converted sinner.

In this way, charity invades the creature. It is, then,

a love of friendship, a friendship of dilection, a dilection of preference, but a preference incomparable, sovereign, and supernatural, which is as a sun in the whole soul to enlighten it with its rays, in all the spiritual faculties to perfect them, in all the powers to moderate them, but in the will as on its throne, there to reside and to make it cherish and love its God above all things.⁵

Growth in God’s love

The “two principal exercises of holy love ... consist in complacency and benevolence,”⁶ Francis himself explained. If we approve of the good we see in God and rejoice in it, “we

make the act of love called complacency.” So much for complacency. Benevolence, which is the “will to good”, is more difficult to understand in context, for no good can be desired of God, whose goodness is infinitely more perfect than we can desire or even think of. These desires for benevolence, “imaginary and conditional” if we think only of God, become more real when we consider ourselves, to make ever greater the complacency we have in his goodness.⁷

Love brings about the union of the soul with God in prayer, which leads to contemplation.⁸ Loving contemplation fuses the soul with its God. The holy union prompts it to conform fully to it. Through the love of conformity, the soul unites its will with that of God, who is signified by his commandments, his counsels and his inspirations. Because true love is never ungrateful, it tries to please the one in whom it delights. Loving “benevolence” desires from God all the honour, glory and gratitude that can be bestowed upon Him.⁹

The lover’s conformity to God’s will is established chiefly in the tribulations of life. The wholly loving soul attains a “holy indifference” when it always gives reason to God and accepts from him all that he sends. It “has nothing except for the sake of the will of God.” A comparison helps Francis to describe this “holy indifference”.

The indifferent heart is as a ball of wax in the hands of its God, receiving with equal readiness all the impressions of the Divine pleasure; it is a heart without choice, equally disposed for everything, having no other object of its will than the will of its God, and placing its affection not upon the things that God wills, but upon the will of God who wills them. Wherefore, when God’s will is in various things, it chooses, at any cost, that in which it appears most.¹⁰

Progress is not necessarily along a straight line. The faithful must be careful not to become complacent in their love for their God. That would be to mistake the object. From God, one would pass to oneself. Trials help in this purification. They make love extremely pure and clear. The soul, being deprived of all pleasure by which it can be attached to its God, unites itself to him immediately, “will to will, heart to heart.” In the depths of the night, the soul “has no strength except to let its will die in the hands of the will of God.” This summit is like “a death of our will” in the hands of God’s will. The soul is then “in such a general expectation”, “indifferent to whatever may please the divine will to ordain.”¹¹

Having reached the summit, Francis would bring his great work to a close with three books of observations which are a kind of long epilogue.¹² He calms our concerns.

Having one's heart set on God does not prevent people from loving him in different ways. The similarity is only in the expression; everyone experiences him in their own way. And loving God above all else in no way prevents us from truly loving his creatures. Human hearts can be simultaneously all things to God, all things to their father, all things to their mother, all things to their prince, all things to the republic, all things to their children and all things to their friends. No love takes the heart away from God except that which is contrary to him.¹³ But we must love God above all else, we insist. It is enough to love God as God, says Francis. The object loved transfigures the love that is shown for him. However, there are degrees of progression in God. Perfection (which, in the end, Francis found only in the Virgin Mary) consists in loving others for themselves, of course, but in loving them in God, that is to say, in perfect submission to his divine will and in total loving conformity to his intentions.¹⁴

Love of God and love of neighbour

In this long epilogue, the Salesian of Don Bosco will be particularly struck by the title: "How holy charity produces the love of our neighbour".¹⁵ Love for God begets love for one's neighbour. Francis demonstrated this by a digression taken from the Bible. The second commandment is, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Man is created in the image and in the likeness of God. "And whereas all men are endowed with the same dignity, we love them also as ourselves, that is, as being holy and living images of the divinity." The cause for which we love God is still God Himself. We belong to God by so strict an alliance and so sweet a dependence of love, that he makes no difficulty to call himself our father. "It is on that account that we receive his grace, that our spirits are associated to his most Holy Spirit." Thus the same charity that produces the acts of God's love simultaneously produces the love of neighbour. "Jacob" Francis wrote, "saw that one same ladder touched heaven and earth, serving the angels both for descending and ascending, so we know that one same charity extends itself to both the love of God and our neighbour, raising us to the union of our spirit with God, and bringing us back again to a loving society with our neighbours." Always, however, on the understanding that we love our neighbour as being after the image and likeness of God, to enjoy his glory.

Francis translated his sentiments eloquently:

Ah! then, Theotimus, when we see a neighbour who is created to the image and likeness of God, ought we not to say one to another: Observe and see this

creature, how he resembles the Creator? Might we not cast ourselves upon his neck, to caress him and weep over him with love? Should we not bless him a thousand and a thousand times? And why? For the love of him? No verily: for we know not whether he be worthy of love or hatred in himself; but wherefore then? O Theotimus! for the love of God, who has made him to his own image and likeness, and consequently capable of participating in his goodness, in grace and in glory. For the love of God, I say, from whom he is, whose he is, by whom he is, in whom he is, for whom he is, and whom he resembles in a most particular manner. Wherefore the love of God not only oftentimes commands the love of our neighbour, but itself produces this love and pours it into man's heart, as its resemblance and image: for even as man is the image of God, so the sacred love of man towards man, is the true image of the heavenly love of man towards God.¹⁶

The primacy of love in Salesian spirituality

Love comes first in Salesian spirituality, both that of Saint Francis de Sales and that of Don Bosco. The inclination of the hearts of both led them to discover the face of love in God.

Not that they misunderstood the role of the fear of God in the spiritual life. It is the needle that pulls the thread of divine love, wrote Francis beautifully. "Yet the needle is not put into the satin to be left there, but only to draw in after it and make way for, the silk, silver, and gold: so that when these are once laid upon their grounds, the needle is drawn out and taken away."¹⁷ And Don Bosco frightened his listeners with his descriptions of the hour of judgement. The God of love then disappeared behind the God of justice, if not of revenge.

But, for both of them, it was above all necessary to love God by conformity to his holy will. If Francis' distinctions between the love of complacency and the love of benevolence seem very complicated, he ended up simplifying everything: "The perfection of Christian life consists in the conformity of our will with that of our good God."¹⁸ And we know that the will was, in his understanding, the faculty of love.

NOTES

- 1 For this entry my preference has been to use the beautiful article by Pierre Sérout, “François de Sales”, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 5, 1964, col. 1057-1097.
- 2 *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book I, Chap. VII.
- 3 Book I, Chap. IX.
- 4 At this point we follow Book II of the *Treatise*, entitled: “The History of the Generation and Heavenly Birth of Divine Love”.
- 5 Book II, Chap. 22.
- 6 Book V, title.
- 7 Book V, *passim*.
- 8 Amply described and justified in Books VI and VII.
- 9 Book VIII, *passim*.
- 10 Book IX, Chap. 4.
- 11 Book IX, *passim*.
- 12 Books X-XII.
- 13 Book X, Chap. III.
- 14 Book X, Chaps IV and V.
- 15 Book X, Chap. XI.
- 16 Book X, Chap. XI (*Oeuvres*, vol. V, p. 204-206).
- 17 Book XI, Chap. XVI.
- 18 Opuscule VI (*Oeuvres*, vol. XXXVI, p. 185).

Mary

Mary in Don Bosco's world

In the nineteenth century, Mary was everywhere around the Piedmontese John Bosco. And he discovered her at his side, a spotless mother, benevolent and strong throughout his life as a priest.¹ This was the religious experience of Mary that he bequeathed to his spiritual family.

He soon heard her name on his mother's lips while he was an infant as she had him recite three Angeluses and at least one Rosary a day. The village of his early years celebrated her motherhood in October as its patronal feast. As a schoolboy and a seminarian, he spent as much time as possible with boys attached to veneration of Mary. Turin, the place of his ministry, with its traditional shrine of the *Consolata*, was a city of Mary. His main spiritual author, Alphonsus Liguori, had written *The Glories of Mary*, a work that was extremely famous in devout circles.

The Marian devotion – which was certainly exceptional – of his friend Luigi Comollo, as he himself described it in his first book (1844) and gave as a model to “the seminarians of Chieri” seems characteristic of the atmosphere in Piedmont at the time. As a child, Luigi unreservedly recognised the power of Mary, whom along with Jesus he loved “tenderly”.² Lengthy and demanding practices showed his affection for her. It was clear that talking about “Our Lady” delighted him. Luigi said his rosary every day and, when his schedule left him some free time, the little office of the Blessed Virgin “with his usual companion”, who was our John Bosco. A day of rigorous fasting in honour of Mary preceded his communions and, out of love for her, he fasted systematically on Saturday (Marian day) of each week. Finally, after he believed he saw Mary on his deathbed, he expired, according to Don Bosco who was watching him, uttering “the names of Jesus and Mary.” Comollo was about to turn twenty-two.

From the time of the Marian dream when he was nine years old, Mary was always a very beautiful, very holy, very strong and very good mother for Don Bosco himself. She showed him the paths to follow, and supported him in his apostolic endeavours. And he would say of Mary – or at least in similar words, as the exact wording is not very certain – “She did everything!”³

Mary, Immaculate Mother and Help of Christians

Pius IX's proclamation of the Immaculate Conception of Mary encouraged Don Bosco to see in her the marvellous symbol of purity, beauty and holiness. His explanations in the *Mese di maggio* and the *Life of Dominic Savio*, a boy who lived in Turin under Don Bosco's eyes and his enthusiasm on the day of the definition, 8 December 1854, bear witness to this. The contemplation of the Immaculate was to make Dominic, as well as his imitators, uncompromising with regard to his weaknesses and hungry for heroic holiness. This demanding spirit can be found in the last article of the Regulations of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception created shortly afterwards in the Valdocco Oratory with Don Bosco's blessing:

The society is placed under the aegis of the Immaculate Conception, from whence it draws its name and whose medal we will devoutly carry. A sincere, filial and limitless confidence in Mary, a constant devotion and loving affection for her, will make us overcome all obstacles, clinging tenaciously to our resolutions, be firm with ourselves, gentle and kindly towards others, exact in everything.⁴

The relative inflexibility of such an attitude was corrected in Don Bosco by contemplation of Mary, mother of God and therefore mother of mankind. Having been redeemed by Jesus Christ, we become his children and the brothers of his divine son. "For when she became the mother of Jesus true God and true man, she also became our mother. Jesus Christ in his great mercy wished to call us his brothers, and by that name he constitutes us all adopted children of Mary."⁵

For a long time in his sermons and books, Don Bosco ignored the title of "Help of Christians" among Mary's titles. His first edition of his *Church History* did not yet mention the victory at Lepanto, considered to be the Help of Christians' victory. Then, in 1862, a miraculous image called Mary Help of Christians by the local archbishop, was discovered in the diocese of Spoleto, in a manner sensational enough to set off a pilgrimage. The crisis in the Papal States (of which Spoleto was a part) seemed to have no remedy. Peter's Church seemed to be tottering and crying out for miraculous assistance. In Paris, the growing archconfraternity of *Notre-Dame des Victoires* (Our Lady of Victories) founded by Abbé Dufriche-Desgenettes, preached resistance to evil by turning to the *Virgo potens* (powerful Virgin). Don Bosco decided to give the title *Auxiliatrix* to the church he was planning to build in Turin. The epithet suited him all the better as the people of Turin had known about the Confraternity of Mary Help of Christians in Munich since at least the eighteenth century and, if we are to believe

him, Pius IX, when consulted about the appropriate title for the church, was in favour of it. This was all Don Bosco needed. In June 1868, a large “Church of Mary Help of Christians” was consecrated in Valdocco.

From then on, Don Bosco invoked the Help of Christians, mother and queen of Christians and of the Church with predilection. The female Congregation he founded in 1872 was called the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. A large picture, painted on his instructions above the high altar in his sanctuary in Turin, showed how he pictured Mary enjoying this prerogative:

Mary stands in a sea of light and majesty, seated on a throne of clouds and crowned with stars together with the diadem that proclaims her queen of heaven and earth. A group of angels circle around her and pay her their respects as if to their queen. In her right hand she holds the sceptre, the symbol of her power...⁶

Don Bosco’s Help of Christians was a glorious queen dominating the world and the Church, the latter represented in the painting by the apostles and the evangelists Luke and Mark.

In addition to the new church, between 1868 and 1879, six small booklets by Don Bosco went on to explain, comment on and magnify this title. This literature places us within the struggles of Christianity. The Church attributes the rout of heresies to Mary Help of Christians, it tells us. The Help of Christians was the queen of the glorious battles against the Turks at Lepanto in 1571 and at Vienna in 1683, and also saved Pius VII from captivity at Fontainebleau in 1814. She was and remains the “protector of armies fighting for the faith.”⁷ When a need arises for Christians, the Blessed Virgin intervenes at once, bringing them her powerful help. Mary’s help seemed to Don Bosco to be more necessary than ever in the century where he propagated devotion to her, for “it is no longer lukewarm people to inspire, sinners to convert, innocents to preserve. The Catholic Church itself is assailed.”⁸ A real crusading atmosphere!

Mary, powerful, wise and good mother, celebrated by Frs Rua and Albera

Don Bosco’s immediate successors, Michael Rua (Rector Major between 1888 and 1910) and Paul Albera (Rector Major between 1910 and 1921), carefully adopted his language and ideas about Mary. For them, as for him, she was the most holy mother and the powerful and helpful queen of the *Salve Regina*.

“*Noi siamo figli di Maria*”, “We are the sons of Mary.” Fr Rua liked to celebrate this title in October, on the liturgical feast of the Motherhood of Mary. What a joy to remember that our mother is the mother of Jesus, the Son of God! Our mother is “the most noble (*augusta*), the most holy, the most beautiful that ever came from the hands of the Creator.” She is the *Mater admirabilis* (admirable mother), whose *mirabilia* (wonders) no one will ever be able to recount with dignity.⁹

Mary is the most holy and wise mother of God, rightly called the “mother of good counsel” he said on another occasion. To demonstrate this he placed Mary in the Trinitarian world. We need guides in our lives. How can we not have recourse to Mary “mother of good counsel”, *Stella maris*, the most faithful “star” on the universal sea, she who participates in the “counsels of the Most High”?¹⁰ Her sons must love her and be “devout” towards her. Love for her and imitation of her virtues are a “fountain” of graces, which makes it possible to reach a high degree of virtue.¹¹ A love that is purely sentimental and without imitation would be sterile; “devotion to Mary must be fruitful.”¹²

Finally, the member of the Salesian Family wishes above all to invoke her as the “Helper” or “Help of Christians”. While accompanying Don Bosco on one of his last trips, Fr Rua used the invocation *Maria auxilium christianorum, ora pro nobis* in two conferences that he gave which he had taken the trouble to write down in French.¹³ As Don Bosco had done, he justified the title by referring to Mary’s deeds (or those attributed to her) over the history of the Church, from apostolic times to the nineteenth century. Persecutors, heretics, the slave-owning Turks and Lepanto came and went. Fr Rua came to the Church of Mary Help of Christians, completed in Turin in record time a few years earlier, saying that “every stone, every brick in this sanctuary is a sign of a blessing, a grace from Mary.” Since its construction, he continued, Mary has increased her favours as faith, trust and devotion to her invoked under the title of Help of Christians have grown. Moreover, as Don Bosco repeated, the extraordinary development of the Salesian work must be attributed entirely to Mary Help of Christians. She is the *Virgo potens*, who never fails to come to the aid of Christians in unfortunate times. It was Fr Rua who (in 1894) introduced into the Salesian Congregation the recitation of a “consecration to Mary Help of Christians” after the daily community meditation.

Fr Albera took up similar positions or ideas in his circulars to the Salesians. All of Don Bosco’s work has its origin in Mary, he taught, Let us be grateful to her, let us love her, let us honour her and let us spread devotion to her under the title of Help of

Christians. We are responsible for this, because we are her children. “This is, and must be, the foundation of our special love for Mary Help of Christians, and the mark that must distinguish our devotion to her from the devotion we might have towards the Blessed Virgin honoured under any other title. Mary Help of Christians is our mother.”¹⁴

He himself loved this devotion. In 1918, on the fiftieth anniversary of the consecration of the Church of Mary Help of Christians in Turin, he personally and very solemnly consecrated the work of Don Bosco throughout the world to Mary Help of Christians, with a long and very elaborate formula which the Salesians were invited to repeat everywhere. Mary, “mother of Jesus”, “most loving mother” of the Salesian Family, “powerful helper of the Christian people”, she who had inspired Don Bosco to “dedicate himself to the instruction and education of the new generations growing up in new times”, was begged to continue her helpful action for the benefit of his sons and successors.¹⁵ The letter to the Salesians announcing the event reminded them of Don Bosco’s words: *Ad Jesum per Maria* (to Jesus through Mary). Fr Albera commented on it. We must not only cherish Mary, but imitate her in order to go to Jesus. A devotion to Mary that was not a school of holiness, that did not give the strength to overcome the enemies of the soul and to “walk in the footsteps of her divine son”, would be “in vain”.¹⁶

Fr Albera strove to situate Salesian Marian piety in relation to the one and only mediator of salvation, which in sound theology is Jesus Christ.

Salesian devotion to Mary at the end of the twentieth century

In his first circular as Rector Major, Egidio Viganò (1978–1995) wanted from the outset to make Mary the one who would renew the Salesian Family.¹⁷ He proposed four directives to his members:

1. a serious doctrinal formation, so that their initiatives of piety and action would be enlightened by an authentic faith;
2. devotion and piety towards Mary revised according to the criteria of Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (2 February 1974);
3. resolute commitment to the interests and activities of the local and universal Church;
4. genuine concern for vocations, recalling that Don Bosco had established a Work of Mary Help of Christians in 1876 to support adult vocations.

The Christian context of the time justified these instructions, in particular the first, but also the second and third. Fr Viganò's letter was written in a religious world very different from that of Frs Rua and Albera, a world whose evolution helps us to understand the new Marian teaching. Instead of being systematically situated in a "divine" sphere in the company of Christ, Mary was then contemplated preferably in the Church of the redeemed, where, moreover, she held by far the first place.¹⁸ Let us take a closer look at this evolution.

The nineteenth century saw a resurgence of Marian piety in the Catholic Church, encouraged by an abundance of popular literature, some of it Salesian. In 1950, after the seventeenth century, a new "Marian century" (from 1850 to 1950), framed by papal definitions of the Immaculate Conception and Mary's Assumption came to an end. During the preceding decades there had been constant competition between piety and the dogmatic reflection of scholars. The phenomenon of Marian apparitions had grown. Marian fervour played a major role in the pastoral care of popular religion. For Christianity, Mary was the model of the woman, and of the mother in particular. The messages of her apparitions spoke louder than many doctrinal sermons. Liturgists and theologians worked ever harder, as Alphonsus Liguori had done in his time with "The Glories of Mary". Rome encouraged them and introduced new feasts of Mary. Congresses multiplied, combining popular events and spiritual conferences. They were often the occasion for the progress of Marian doctrine: dogmatic definitions of the Assumption, Mary's universal mediation and her co-redemption. The societies for Marian studies founded from 1935 onwards aimed to glorify the Blessed Virgin and deepen understanding of her mystery. In 1942, Pius XII consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and, above all, in 1950, defined her glorious Assumption.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) marked a turning point in the doctrinal, spiritual and pastoral consideration of Mary. A number of Council Fathers expected the assembly at least to proclaim new titles for Mary. It was necessary, they said, to "add new precious stones to her crown." But another tendency was emerging, reticent about what it saw as "Marian inflation". The tendency to assimilate Mary as closely as possible to Christ (known as the Christotypical tendency) was countered, in the interests of both doctrinal balance and ecumenical openness, by the tendency to reintroduce Mary into the Church on the side of the redeemed (known as the ecclesiatypical tendency). This trend won the day (not by much). Instead of dedicating a separate document to the Virgin Mary, it introduced the Marian theme in a chapter of the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*. The outline prepared earlier was rewritten with the deliberate

intention of placing “Mary in the mystery of Christ and the Church.” The text thus elaborated became the last chapter of *Lumen Gentium*.

This chapter, which is entirely inspired by Scripture and Patristic texts, covers the economy of salvation, from the slow preparation for the coming of Christ to the glorification of Mary, following the course of her life and starting from the prophetic announcements concerning her. The document took up the content of the dogmas acquired up to that point. But it deliberately fell short of the themes discussed by the Mariology of the first part of the century. The role of Mary in incarnation and redemption was presented as that of an “associate” and a “humble handmaid”, whom God’s grace had enabled to “cooperate” in salvation by her obedience, the pilgrimage of faith, hope and charity, from the *fiat* of the Annunciation to the “consent” of the Cross. Mary, said the Council, is the “figure” (more precisely the “type”) of the Church, its most eminent member, and she plays a maternal role in it. For his part, the Pope of the time, Paul VI, insisted, on his own authority and independently of the Council, on proclaiming Mary “Mother of the Church, that is to say of all the people of God, both the faithful and the pastors.” The Salesian Family was grateful to hear this.

Under the pressure of Vatican II, the reflection of specialists in Mariology immediately began to move globally from a Mary-Queen theology to a Mary-Servant theology. Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (2 February 1974) explained the change. The model of Mary as a woman, as constructed by previous centuries, had been modified according to the demands of contemporary theology and anthropology. Nevertheless, John Paul II, a fervent apostle of Marian devotion, introduced some nuances to the Council’s Constitution *Lumen Gentium* in the third part of his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (25 March 1987), a section devoted to Mary’s “maternal mediation”. While the Council had deliberately marginalised the term “mediatrix”, using it only once in a series of expressions qualifying Mary’s intercession, the papal document saw the expression “maternal mediation” as an important concept in Marian theology. But, it taught, this “mediation” of Mary, this “maternal mediation” exercised in intercession, was “participatory” and “subordinate”, and therefore in no way of the same order as that of Christ, which Protestants fiercely reject (and with good reason).

Fr Viganò, a well-informed theologian, took account of these movements of thinking. On 14 January 1984, in a solemn act known as the *atto di affidamento* (act of entrustment), in which he systematically combined the two titles, he entrusted the Salesian Congregation to “Mary Help of Christians, Mother of the Church”.¹⁹ He explained that it is

very much a community affair, involving the Congregation insofar as it is a worldwide community and a single communion of souls with one identical spirit and mission in all provinces and houses. This great gathering we intend to confide to the motherly guardianship of Mary, to her care, to the undertakings she is concerned with, to her powerful intercession, to her maternal competence for leading all to Christ.²⁰

It was, in an adapted form, the repetition of the consecration to Mary Help of Christians, prayed every day in the Salesian Family and celebrated with solemnity by Fr Albera in 1918.

The lesson persists. The Salesian Constitutions renewed in 1984 took this into account.²¹ And, in 1995, the Salesian Family Common Identity Card could say: “(The title of Help of Christians) is a reminder of Mary’s universal maternity,” “Moreover Don Bosco has permanently bound his Marian devotion to the sense of Church, to the ministry of Peter, to the simple faith of the People of God, and to the urgent needs of youth.”²² The title of Mother was preferred to that of Queen.

Mary Help of Christians, mother and model for Salesian women

Women within the Salesian Family, especially the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, have special reasons for turning to Mary.

The Volunteers of Don Bosco see Mary of Nazareth as an “icon” of “secular consecrated life”.

Accepting with faith the mystery of Christ in daily life, she lived her consecration to God with nothing that distinguished her from the women of her time; she found in work a way of life and of sanctification. Attentive to the needs of others, she loved justice and was faithful even in difficult moments. On Calvary she accepted the spiritual maternity that made her the Mother of Humanity. We find in her the help of a motherly presence; with her we want to acknowledge the wonders worked by the Father.²³

Her simplicity and humility in ordinary work, her attention to others, her contemplation of God in things, people and events, and her participation and cooperation in the redemptive work of the Son of God make Mary a sublime model for the Volunteers With Don Bosco.²⁴

For the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Mary is a mother who wanted their Institute and did not abandon it. Mary Immaculate and Help of Christians is a model of the “woman who is a helper”, in whom they recognise the fullness of the gift of self to God and to people. The term *auxilium* took on this particular meaning for them. Royalty has been replaced by motherhood.

Their Constitutions say:

Mary Most Holy inspired our Institute, and continues to be its mother and teacher. We are, therefore, “a religious Family that belongs entirely to Mary.” Don Bosco wanted us to be a living monument of his gratitude to Mary Help of Christians, and asks us to extend his thanks throughout all time. Let us be aware of Mary’s presence in our lives and entrust ourselves entirely to her. We strive to make her dispositions of faith, hope and charity, and her perfect union with Christ, our own. Let us open our hearts to the joyous humility of her Magnificat to be helpers, like her, especially among young people.²⁵

A programme of religious life grew out of their contemplation of Mary the Immaculate Help of Christians. They make themselves available to the Word of the Lord and live the beatitude of “those who believe” in order to “devote [themselves] to apostolic action that inspires hope.”²⁶

Their 1982 General Chapter said:

In the Institute, Our Lady is a living, active presence, the presence of a Mother who loves, of a Mistress who enlightens and guides, concerned for salvation: Help of Christians! Devotion to Mary helps us to enter into the dynamic of love. With her, let us make our life a Magnificat to the Lord. At her school, let us learn to be open to God and to put ourselves at the service of young people.²⁷

In Don Bosco’s world, devotion to Mary does not numb energies. On the contrary, it is a principle for bringing about action.

NOTES

- 1 I am taking these paragraphs on Mary from the third chapter of my book *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle* (Paris, 1967, pp. 100-105).
- 2 “... i SS. nomi di Gesù e di Maria, gli furono ognor l’oggetto di sua tenerezza.” (*Cenni sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo ...*, Turin, 1844, p. 5).
- 3 “E’ convinzione profonda ed irremovibile di Don Bosco : ‘Ella ha fatto tutto’ “(*Carta di comunione*, art. 17.)
- 4 “La società è posta sotto gli auspizii dell’Immacolata Concezione, di cui avremo il titolo, e porteremo una divota medaglia. Una sincera, filiale, illimitata fiducia in Maria, una tenerezza singolare verso di lei ; una devozione costante ci renderanno superiori ad ogni ostacolo, tenaci nelle risoluzioni, rigidi verso di noi, amorevoli col nostro prossimo, ed esatti in tutto.” (*Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, 1859, p. 81).
- 5 “Perciocché divenendo ella madre di Gesù vero Dio e vero uomo, divenne eziandio madre nostra. Gesù Cristo nella sua grande misericordia volle chiamarci suoi fratelli, e con tal nome ci costituisce tutti figliuoli adottivi di Maria.” (*Il Mese di maggio ...*, 1858, p. 14).
- 6 “Maria SS. vi campeggia in un mare di luce e di maestà, assisa sopra di un trono di nubi e coronata di stelle nonché del diadema con cui è proclamata Regina del cielo e della terra. Una schiera di angeli, facendole corona, le pongono ossequio come a loro Regina. Colla destra ella tiene lo scettro, simbolo della sua potenza...” (G. Bosco, *Maria Ausiliatrice col racconto di alcune grazie ...*, Turin, 1875, p. 54-55.)
- 7 “... alcuni fatti che riguardano alla speciale protezione che la santa Vergine ha costantemente prestato agli eserciti che combattono per la fede” (G. Bosco, *Maraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il nome di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Turin, 1868, p. 61).
- 8 “... non sono più tiepidi da infervorare, peccatori da convertire, innocenti da conservare. Queste cose sono sempre utili in ogni luogo, presso qual siasi persona. Ma è la stessa Chiesa Cattolica che è assalita.” (G. Bosco, *Maraviglie...*, op. cit., p. 6-7).
- 9 Considerations in a sermon by Fr Rua “Per la festa della Maternità di Maria SS.”, in a handwritten document *Prediche per esercizi*, quad. 2°, p. 48-49, FdB 2895 C3-4.
- 10 “Essa mer(ita) veram(ente) il titolo di M(adre) del B(uon) Consiglio). Chi mai fra le creat(ure) fu più di Lei addentro ai consigli) dell’Altiss(imo) ?” (M. Rua, “Maria Santissima”, in *Prediche per esercizi*, quaderno 1°, p. 29, ms reproduced in FdB 2894 A1).
- 11 “L’amore a Maria e l’imitazione delle sue virtù sono sempre una fonte alla quale attingendo...” “ Etc (M. Rua, inc. a four-page handwritten sermon leaflet, reproduced in FdB 2101 C12-D3).
- 12 M. Rua, “La divozione a Maria SS.ma deve essere fruttuosa”, Sermon in allograph manuscript, in a notebook of *Prediche*, inc. *La Concezione*, FdB 2912 B8-C4.
- 13 “Maria, Auxilium Christianorum”, a page under this title, FdB 2919 E11 to 2920 A3.
- 14 Questo è e deve essere il fondamento dell’amor nostro speciale a Maria SS. Ausiliatrice, e il contrassegno che deve distinguere la nostra divozione verso di Lei, da quella che potremmo avere verso la SS. Vergine

- onorata sotto qualsiasi titolo. Maria SS. Ausiliatrice è la nostra Madre.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 24 April 1921, L.C., p. 437).
- 15 “O Maria, Ausiliatrice potente del popolo cristiano [...], maternamente sollecita dei bisogni morali e religiosi delle generazioni crescenti nei tempi nuovi, Voi ispiraste al Ven. Don Bosco di consacrarsi alla loro istruzione ed educazione [...], o Madre di Gesù e Madre nostra amabilissima, accogliete con l’usata bontà questa offerta ...” (“Consacrazione dell’Opera di Don Bosco a Maria Ausiliatrice”, appendix to P. Albera, Letter to Salesians “Sul Cinquantenario della Consacrazione del Santuario di Maria Ausiliatrice in Valdocco”, 31 May 1918, L.C., pp. 273-274).
 - 16 “... ad Jesum per Mariam, volendo (don Bosco) così insegnarci che è vana la nostra divozione a Maria, se non ci guida a Gesù, se non ci ottiene la forza necessaria per vincere i nemici dell’anima nostra, a camminare sulle traccie del Divino suo Figlio.” (Letter quoted above, p. 266).
 - 17 E. Viganò, “Maria rinnova la Famiglia salesiana di Don Bosco”, letter to Salesians, 25 March 1978, *Atti* 289, pp. 3-35.
 - 18 I am basing myself for this history on the careful study by the Groupe des Dombes, *Marie dans le dessein de Dieu et la communion des saints* (Paris, Centurion, 1997), nos. 89-103.
 - 19 E. Viganò, “Atto di affidamento della Congregazione a Maria Ausiliatrice, Madre della Chiesa”, letter to Salesians, 31 May 1983, *Atti* 309, p. 3-21.
 - 20 “Intendiamo consegnare alla custodia materna della Madonna, alla sua cura, alle sue premurose iniziative, alla sua potenza d’intercessione, alla sua privilegiata e materna capacità di condurre a Cristo, tutta la Congregazione in quanto comunità mondiale, quale comunione nell’identità dello spirito e della missione in tutte le Ispettorie e Case.” (Above-mentioned letter, p. 8).
 - 21 See in particular, A. Van Luyn, *Maria nel carisma salesiano. Studio sulle costituzioni della Società di San Francesco di Sales*, Roma, LAS, 1987.
 - 22 “E’ invece il richiamo alla maternità universale di Maria”. “Don Bosco ha legato, inoltre, in maniera indissolubile la sua devozione mariana al senso della Chiesa, al ministero di Pietro, alla fede semplice del Popolo di Dio, all’urgenza dei bisogni della gioventù.” (*Carta di comunione*, art. 17).
 - 23 “Accogliendo con fede il mistero di Cristo nel quotidiano, visse la sua consacrazione a Dio senza che nulla la distinguesse dalle donne del suo tempo, e trovò nel lavoro un mezzo di vita e di santificazione. Attenta alle necessità degli altri, amò la giustizia, fu fedele anche nei momenti difficili, accettò sul Calvario la maternità spirituale che la rese Madre di tutti gli uomini. In Lei troviamo l’aiuto di una presenza materna, con Lei vogliamo riconoscere le meraviglie operate dal Padre.” (VDB Constitutions, art. 11).
 - 24 Nicely-worded formulas borrowed from the Constitutions of the Volunteers With Don Bosco, art 21.
 - 25 “Maria Santissima è stata l’ispiratrice del nostro Istituto e continua ad esserne la Maestra e la Madre. Siamo perciò “una Famiglia religiosa che è tutta di Maria”. Don Bosco ci ha volute “monumento vivo” della sua riconoscenza all’Ausiliatrice e ci chiede di essere il suo “grazie” prolungato nel tempo. Noi sentiamo Maria presente nella nostra vita e ci affidiamo totalmente a lei. Cerchiamo di fere nostro il suo atteggiamento di fede, di speranza, di carità e di perfetta unione con Cristo, e di aprirci

all'umiltà gioiosa del "Magnificat" per essere come lei "ausiliatrici", soprattutto fra le giovani." (FMA Constitutions, art 4).

- 26 "Nella Vergine Immacolata Ausiliatrice contempleremo la pienezza della donazione a Dio e al prossimo. Imiteremo la sua disponibilità alla Parola del Signore, per poter vivere come lei la beatitudine dei "credenti" e dedicarci ad un'azione apostolica apportatrice di speranza." (FMA Constitutions, art 44).
- 27 "La Madonna nell'Istituto è una presenza viva, operante, presenza di Madre che ama, di Maestra che illumina e guida, sollecita della salvezza: Ausiliatrice I La devozione a Maria ci fa entrare nella dinamica dell'amore. Con Lei facciamo della nostra vita un Magnificat al Signore. Alla sua scuola impariamo ad essere aperte a Dio ed a metterci a servizio delle giovani." (Istituto FMA, *Capitolo Generale XVII. Atti*, Roma, 1982, p. 68-69.)

Mazzarello, Mary Domenica

Teenage years (1837–1854)

Maria (Mary) Domenica Mazzarello, Don Bosco's main collaborator in the consolidation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and its first Superior General, was born on 9 May 1837 in a very rural hamlet in the Piedmontese village of Mornese, known as the Mazzarelli, the eldest of a large and solid family, one that prized hard work, healthy and open relationships, a strong faith and sincere piety.¹ When she was eleven, her family moved far away from the village to the solitude of the Valponasca.

Mary Domenica had no shortage of gifts. She was ardent and energetic, stubborn, totally sincere and open to reality. Her heart was kind and sensitive, her intelligence clear and deep, even if local conditions deprived her of any schooling. Her father taught her to read and count on her fingers. This wise and admired man, whose beloved daughter quickly became his right-hand, instilled in her a sense of hard work, sound judgement, a taste for authenticity, the courage to recognise her faults and correct them, and a growing capacity for reflection and discernment, a sense of adoration and obedience to God, all qualities that would definitively characterise her spirituality. Mary Domenica, a hard-working woman, was a contemplative, but also someone who would one day accuse herself of having spent a quarter of an hour without thinking about God.

A good spiritual director, Fr Pestarino, guided her from 1849 when she was preparing for her First Holy Communion. Domenico Pestarino (1817–1874), a native of Mornese and a remarkable priest in touch with the most educated Genoese clergy of the time, had left Genoa two years earlier to work alongside the parish priest at the service of the people of Mornese. He was to renew the spiritual life of the parish through intense and attractive religious instruction, an urgent invitation to approach the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist frequently, and the creation (or promotion) of pious associations for children, mothers, men and young people, boys and girls. In Fr Pestarino's confessional, the teenage Mary Domenica purified herself and learn to correct her faults. Indeed, she had them: greedy, like all girls of her age, a tendency towards pride and domination over others, impatience... Fr Pestarino, firm and demanding, mortified her and forced her to moderate her excessive liveliness and always be welcoming to others.

Mary Domenica was admitted to First Holy Communion at the age of thirteen, in April 1850. As the parish registers show, she was allowed to take communion three times in the following year, five times in 1852, but daily from 1853 onwards when she was fifteen or sixteen. We know that when she was about fifteen, she secretly took a vow of perpetual virginity on one of these occasions. She had not asked anyone for advice, but saw it as the most natural expression of her love for her one and only Lord. Mary Domenica had found her vital centre. Jesus, the living one, was her All, to whom she had given all of herself, body, heart and soul. An intense Eucharistic life, Mass and Communion were now the high point of her days. In the early hours of the morning – before she had eaten anything, because, in those days, you had to take communion on an empty stomach – usually alone, whether it was dark, raining or freezing, from her isolated Valponasca she would take half an hour to reach the parish church along a steep path that sloped downhill, then climbed back up to the main road. “The secret of this heroic fidelity?” Fr Aubry wondered. And his answer: “That of the bride in the Song of Songs, who runs through the night in search of her beloved.” He then commented: “Mad love for Jesus: there has never been any other genuine formula for Christian holiness.”²

Daughter of the Immaculate (1854–1872)

In 1852, a remarkable twenty-two-year-old girl, Angela Maccagno (1832–1891), was inspired to set up an association in Mornese of young girls consecrated to God in the world and dedicated to the parish apostolate among women. Angela had drawn up a draft Rule, which she sought to have approved by the ecclesiastical authorities.³ In 1854, Mary Domenica joined the fledgling association. On 9 December 1855, the first group of Daughters of the Immaculate was officially constituted on the basis of a revised Rule. There were five of them who consecrated their lives to God in the presence of Fr Pestarino, through the mediation of the Immaculate Conception.

Joining this group highlighted two features of Mary Domenica’s spiritual life. Firstly, it strengthened her heart’s attachment to the presence of Mary, whose daughter she wanted to be. “Mary was to be the climate in which she united herself to Jesus.”⁴ In fidelity to her Rule, she endeavoured to spread love and devotion to Mary around her. The Immaculate, a perfect model of life dedicated to God and his plans, was a source of great admiration. Then, Mary Domenica’s membership of the Daughters of the Immaculate channelled her energies into the exercise of charity and service to others. Encouraged by Fr Pestarino, a priest with a Salesian soul, Mary Domenica, who had been

rather reserved until then, became bolder, broadened her relationships and took care of a group of young mothers and, even more so, young girls on whom she lavished affection and advice.

In 1860, a health crisis transformed Mary Domenica's life. During the summer she contracted typhus, received the last sacraments, and although she was able to begin a long convalescence on 7 October, the feast of the Rosary, the disease had now robbed her of her former physical vigour. Between 1861 and 1863, she took initiatives with a close friend and confidante (Petronilla Mazzarello, fifteen months younger than herself and who had also become a Daughter of the Immaculate) that would decide her future. The two of them decided to learn sewing with a tailor in the village, with a view to setting up their own workshop and school. Girls would learn to sew and become good Christians at the same time. Their workshop opened in May 1862 in the house of a friend and was soon transferred, because the house was not large enough, to the house belonging to the brother of the superior of the Daughters of the Immaculate, Angela Maccagno. They then set up an embryonic boarding school. The following year they received two orphan girls, forcing them to rent two new rooms in the Bodrato house. The family was growing. As a third initiative, in 1863 Mary Domenica and Petronilla started a Sunday oratory, following the example of Don Bosco in Turin. It should be noted that Fr Pestarino had become close to Don Bosco, that he had become an "extern" Salesian, and that he brought a message of encouragement to the team.

Then, on 7 October 1864, Don Bosco himself passed through Mornese during a joyful and noisy autumn walk for his young people. Fr Pestarino introduced him to the group of Daughters of the Immaculate. Mary Domenica was enraptured by this meeting. According to the Institute's *Cronistoria*, which is undoubtedly based on her often-repeated testimony, "it seemed to her that Don Bosco's words were like the echo of a language that she heard deep inside herself without being able to express it."⁵ From then on, Don Bosco would be the focus for Mary Domenica's soul. Her loyalty to him would be unconditional. However, during his four visits to Mornese over the next seven years (in 1867, 1869, 1870 and 1871), the holy man always spoke to the Daughters of Mary Immaculate gathered around Fr Pestarino. He never had private conversations with Mary Domenica, not even during her vows in 1872. He influenced her by his behaviour, by the warmth and simplicity of his words and by some of his writings, in short by his transparent holiness.

In the autumn of 1867, Fr Pestarino moved his home to a school for boys which he had built with the help of the village, and offered Mary Domenica's small group

the house he occupied near the parish church, which thus became the “House of the Immaculate Conception”. Mary Domenica then left her family and came to live in this house with her three friends: Petronilla, Teresa Pampuro and Giovanna Ferrettino. The group would live there together and devote themselves to the apostolate. The house became a sewing workshop, a small orphanage and an oratory. And Mary Domenica was naturally recognised as the one in charge. Don Bosco watched over this humble apostolic centre. On the occasion of a visit to Mornese in April 1869, he left a written “timetable and programme” and some advice that the small community was quick to follow to the letter. The Daughters of the Immaculate in Mornese were now divided into two groups, the women who continued to live with their respective families, and those simply called “*Figlie*” (Daughters), headed by Mary Domenica Mazzarello, who had been living in the House of the Immaculate for two years. A foundation, which Mary Domenica had no notion of, was slowly germinating in Don Bosco’s mind.

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1872–1881)

It took shape in the spring of 1871. On 24 April of that year, Don Bosco sent an annotated copy of the Salesian Constitutions to a Sister in Turin, Superior General of the Sisters of Saint Anne of Providence, asking her to check to what extent they might be suitable for an institute of Sisters. At the same time (or more or less), he was talking to Fr Pestarino about his project for a women’s institute based on the Mornese association of the Daughters of the Immaculate.⁶ The priest was invited to share with him the reactions of his members. During 1871, Don Bosco’s Constitutions were adapted by the combined efforts of the Sisters of Saint Anne and Fr Pestarino.

Mary Domenica, who was immediately elected “Superior General” by her companions, categorically refused this dignity, unless she had to accept it out of obedience. Fr Pestarino’s report, clumsily expressed but the only reliable link in this episode of her life, says:

When she heard this result, Mary Mazzarello rose to her feet and asked to be excused; she made it clear that she was grateful to all (her companions), but that she did not feel able to bear such a burden. (...) She persisted in saying that she did not feel (capable) and that she would continue to refuse unless she was absolutely forced to do so out of obedience. A few more remarks were made, and the Director (understand Fr Pestarino) himself added that he would not make up his mind until he had heard Don Bosco’s opinion. Mary Mazzarello herself

suggested that Don Bosco be left in charge of choosing the first superior, that it would be good in every way, and they all approved. So they told her that she would remain First Assistant with the title of Vicar according to the rules...⁷

Mary Domenica's refusal was in no way formal and was intended to exalt her modesty. (She remained vicar for two years and, in 1874, Don Bosco recognised her as Superior General).

This had two consequences during this decisive year. On evening of 23 May, the Daughters of the House of the Immaculate moved to Borgo-Alto, in the premises of the now disused school Fr Pestarino was living at. And on 5 August, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, now religious in the eyes of the Church, professed their first public vows in the presence of Don Bosco and into the hands of the Bishop of Acqui.

“Together with our first Sisters she lived our founder's project in creative fidelity, thus giving rise to the ‘Spirit of Mornese’ that must characterise the lifestyle of our communities today....”, say the renewed Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.⁸

Mary Domenica, superior of the primitive community of Mornese, wanted to be faithful to Don Bosco, whom she considered to be the “Superior General” of her institute, in accordance with his Constitutions. And Don Bosco, who considered Mornese to be a house of his own Congregation, seconded John Cagliero to Mornese as “his most enterprising disciple”. With his help it was Mary Domenica's task to adapt the masculine spirit of Valdocco in Turin to the community of women in Mornese. The “Salesian charism” thus received a feminine face, embodied by Mary Domenica.⁹

She took Don Bosco's motto “Work and Temperance” very seriously and led her daughters along tough paths that demanded unusual courage. There was a lot of self-mortification at Mornese. Work was a “decisive element” in Mary Domenica's life plan.¹⁰ “The first Salesian Sisters did not wear a hairshirt, but they arrived every evening exhausted with fatigue”, remarked Fr Aubry.¹¹ They literally worked themselves to death: many died before the age of thirty! All of them lived in poverty, very sensitive to the words that Don Bosco would have said to them on the day of their first professions: “Yes, I can assure you that the Institute will have a great future if you keep yourselves simple, poor and mortified.”¹² Food, clothing, housing, lifestyle were really poor at Mornese. Obedience, practised in a spirit of faith, was rigorous. Mary Domenica herself had to struggle in this area, for her will was strong and she had the right ideas, sometimes more right than those of the one giving her orders. Religious chastity at Mornese was, on

the one hand, uninhibited and, on the other, without sentimentality or possessiveness. Mary Domenica

understood very well that, in an exclusively feminine environment, the *amorevolezza* of Don Bosco's system required a serious balance: to love truly, in a personal way, but to remain master of one's own heart, to avoid any inappropriate familiarity or hurtful discrimination.¹³

Cagliero brought an extraordinary energy and missionary spirit from Valdocco to Mornese. After just two years the Institute spread and began to open foundations in Northern Italy and then in France. This Salesian, whom Don Bosco would place at the head of his first missionary expedition to South America, helped to create a surge of love, dreams and generosity in this centre for the inhabitants of these regions. So much so that the second local director, Giacomo Costamagna, chosen by Don Bosco as head of the third Salesian missionary expedition, accompanied the valiant Sisters of the first women's expedition to America at the end of 1877. These Salesian girls were barely out of their teens: the leader of the expedition, Angela Vailese, was twenty-four, and the average age of the group was twenty-two. Mary Domenica agreed, despite the pain of definitive separations, to see them set off to face enormous responsibilities. In any case, they were not crushed. For their saintly Mother instilled courage in her daughters. She immersed the Mornese community in an atmosphere of simplicity, fraternal love and joy born of the presence, for her, of God and Mary.

However, the growth of the Institute meant that in 1879 the Mornese house, which had become inadequate, had to be abandoned and the mother community moved to Nizza Monferrato, near Turin. Mary Domenica had planted and strengthened the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. From the humble beginnings of the sewing workshop, the tree of the Congregation founded by Don Bosco from that seed had grown vigorously.

Mary Domenica contracted pneumonia at the beginning of 1881 and died on 14 May. She was only forty-four years old. Her years as superior had been so fruitful that, only nine years after its creation, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, of which she was the founder, and which she had courageously directed, already numbered one hundred and thirty-nine Sisters and fifty novices, distributed across twenty-six communities.

Mary Domenica Mazzarello was beatified by Pius XI on 20 November 1938 and canonised by Pius XII on 24 June 1951.

NOTES

- 1 Mary Domenica's life is well known. We are making use of the acts of her canonisation process: Sacra Rituum Congregatione. *Aquen. Beatificationis et canonizationis servae Dei Mariae Dominicae Mazzarello, primae antistitae Instituti Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis. Positio super virtutibus*, Rome, typ. Guerra e Belli, 1934, 1 vol., completed by a volume of *Novae animadversiones* (1934) and *Novissima Positio super virtutibus* (1935). Her best biography seems to be the one by F. Maccono, *Suor Maria Mazzarello, prima superiora generale delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino, Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1934, re-ed. The first three volumes of the *Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, Cronistoria*, a cura di G. Capetti, Rome, tip. FMA, 1974-1977, are interesting. See also M E. Posada, A. Costa, P. Cavaglià, *La sapienza della vita. Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 3rd ed., Torino, SEI, 1994, and various notes by Maria Ester Posada, a careful and scrupulous historian. In addition, this article will take up a number of welcome thoughts from J. Aubry, "La cofondatrice des Filles de Marie Auxiliatrice, sainte Marie-Dominique Mazzarello", in his work *Les saints de la famille*, Rome, Salesian General House, 1996, pp. 81-101. Hopefully we won't be surprised to find them repeated here, sometimes in inverted commas, sometimes not.
- 2 J. Aubry, *Les saints de la famille*, p. 86.
- 3 The *Regolamento delle Figlie dell'Immacolata* of 1853 was published as an appendix in the *Cronistoria*, vol I, pp. 321-323. The *raison d'être* of this association was purely devotional.
- 4 J. Aubry, *Les saints de la famille*, p. 87.
- 5 "Le pareva che la parola di don Bosco fosse come l'eco di un linguaggio che sentiva in cuore senza saperlo esprimere" (*Cronistoria*, 11, p. 149).
- 6 The text of the draft constitutions of 29 January, entitled: "Costituzioni-Regole dell'Istituto delle Figlie dell'Immacolata e di Maria Ausiliatrice sotto la protezione di S. Giuseppe, di S. Francesco di Sales e di S. Teresa", was published as an appendix to the *Cronistoria*, vol I pp. 336-353. The editor has noted that, in this title, the words "delle Figlie dell'Immacolata", were added by Fr Alpestrine and would therefore be foreign to the original project. However, we would like to know the precise date of this addition. Was it before or after 29 January? It seems normal that at the meeting on that day, attended by all the Daughters of the Immaculate, including their president Angela Maccagno, the chaplain insisted that the association's official title should not be changed. In fact, it was the right title, since Angela Maccagno was elected "vicar" for those in the village.
- 7 "... Restava perciò Superiora Maria Mazzarello: udito questo risultato la stessa Maria Mazzarello si alzò pregando a dispensarla e dicendo chiaro che essa ringraziava tutte, ma non se ne credeva capace a reggere un tal peso. Alcune dissero che se le avevano dato i voti, doveva accettare, altrimenti lo stesso avrebbero fatto altre: essa continuò sempre a dire che non si sentiva, che sempre avrebbe rifiutato finché assolutamente non fosse obbligata a fare l'ubbidienza. Si fece ancora qualche osservazione, e il Direttore stesso soggiunse che da per se non si pronunziava finché non avesse sentito il parere di D. Bosco. Allora la stessa Maria Mazzarello suggerì le pareva lasciar nelle mani di D. Bosco la scelta della prima Superiora, era bene per tutti i fini: tutte acconsentirono. Allora dissero restasse prima Assistente col nome di Vicaria secondo le regole, e si passò alla votazione della seconda Assistente ..." (*Memoria di don Domenico Pestarino*, in C. Romero, *Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Rome, LAS, 1983,

- p. 50.) According to this document, she also elected on that day “per Vicaria, o Vicesuperiora per quelle del paese, la Maestra Maccagno”. A temporary solution for the separation would quickly be established.
- 8 “Con le nostre prime sorelle essa ha vissuto in fedeltà creativa il progetto del Fondatore, dando origine allo “spirito di Momese” che deve caratterizzare anche oggi il volto di ogni nostra comunità” (FMA Constitutions, art. 2.) On the “spirit of Mornese”, see the entry *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*.
 - 9 The second part of the Salesian Spirituality Week in 1981, which had as its theme *La donna nel carisma salesiano* (Leumann, 1981, pp. 59-172), was entitled “Presenza della Mazzarello nel carisma salesiano”.
 - 10 As noted by all observers, including Margherita Maderni, “Maria Domenica Mazzarello interpella la donna d’oggi”, in the above-mentioned work *La donna nel carisma salesiano*, Leumann, 1981, pp. 130-134.
 - 11 J. Aubry, *Les saints de la famille*, p. 97.
 - 12 “Sì, io vi posso assicurare che l’Istituto avrà un grande avvenire, se vi manterrete semplici, povere, mortificate.” (*Cronistoria*, vol. 1, p. 306).
 - 13 J. Aubry, *Les saints de la famille*, p. 98.

Meditation

Religious meditation

To meditate is to think deeply. Religious meditation is traditionally understood in the West as a time of deep reflection with a religious purpose. Medieval monks described it as a *ruminatio* or *masticatio* of the Word of God. Modern people have sought appropriate techniques. From the fifteenth century onwards, with the *Devotio moderna*, sometimes complicated methods were proposed to Christians for meditating fruitfully. Then, for ordinary people, charitable action seemed to take precedence over a practice whose meaning was being lost. By the middle of the twentieth century there was little talk of meditation, which had often degenerated into less-than-rigorous, less-than-effective mental strolls, verging on gratuitous daydreaming. Meditation itself had fallen into somnolence. It was then that the word came back from the East to designate a completely different attitude of mind.¹

St Francis de Sales' method

Meditation is a way of praying. It takes place in the presence of God, whose word we hear and who thus enters into conversation with us. Hence the importance, for authentic Christian meditation, of being “in the presence of God”.

Saint Francis de Sales presented his method of meditation, which was “simple and brief”, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*.² Saint Francis' form of meditation had three parts and a conclusion. The first part, a time of preparation, consisted of at least two points: “the first is to placing yourself in the presence of God, and the second, asking his aid.” Francis listed several elementary ways of placing oneself in the presence of God, an act that he judged to be essential for meditation: considering that God is in everything, that he is particularly in our hearts, that the Word in his humanity is watching us and that Christ is close to us (Chapter 2). In addition to these two “ordinary points” of preparation, Francis pointed out a third, known as the “local representation” or “interior picture”, which, he said, was not “necessary” to all meditations. It was a question of settling down in spirit in the mystery to be meditated on, by way of taking up residence there (Chapter 4).

Philothea thus entered the second part of the meditation, that of the “considerations” of the intelligence, which was its body. “After this exercise of the imagination,” Francis wrote, “we come to that of the understanding: for meditations, properly so called, are certain considerations by which we raise the affections to God and heavenly things.” Francis saw in this particular meaning given to meditation the difference between meditating and studying (Chapter 5). The third part, that of “affections and resolutions”, had already begun. The term “affection” needs to be properly understood here. Sensibility, although not excluded, was not directly involved in Francis de Sales’ “affections”, movements of the will in which “you must pour out your soul.” To give an idea of this, he listed: love of God and neighbour, the desire for heaven and the glory of the elect, zeal for the salvation of souls, the imitation of Christ, compassion, admiration or delight in contemplating him, etc. Affections trigger precise and practical resolutions. Francis insisted on the necessity and concreteness of these resolutions (Chap. 6). Finally, he asked us to conclude our meditation with three “acts”: an act of thanksgiving, an act of offering and an act of petition to God to give his blessing to the “affections” and “resolutions” generated by the exercise (Chapter 7).

The Salesian teaching on prayer cannot be reduced to these chapters of the *Introduction*. Firstly, Francis freed the meditator from any servility to his method (Chapter 8). Then, in one of his *Spiritual Conferences* with the Visitation Sisters, at the same time as he recommended that his listeners conform to a method he recognised that “there are souls who cannot stop or occupy their minds with any mystery, being drawn to a certain gentle simplicity which keeps them in great tranquillity before God, with no other consideration than that of knowing that they are before him and that he is all their good.”³ And he found that very good. Meditation is only the first stage of prayer, says the *Treatise on the Love of God* (Book VI, Chap. 2), before analysing the successive stages of contemplation (Book VII). As we shall see, Fr Albera did not think any differently about the mystical life.

Salesian meditation under Fr Rua and Fr Albera

“In addition to vocal prayers, each person should devote at least half an hour a day to mental prayer” read the Salesian Constitutions approved in 1874.⁴ Don Bosco does not seem to have given much thought to the method to be followed during this half-hour of meditation. For him, the exercise was more like meditating on spiritual reading. This was not the case with his successors, Fr Rua and Fr Albera, who opted for a

“Salesian” adaptation of the method known as the “three powers” that Ignatius of Loyola recommended during the first week of his Spiritual Exercises. There he invited the retreatant to apply his memory, his intelligence and his will to the realities of sin, death and hell, which were linked together and meditated on in the light of the saving Cross. For the rest, from the introduction to the conclusion, the Salesian Rectors Major proposed to their religious of the time the outline in St Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Moreover, Francis was familiar with this so-called Ignatian method.

Fr Rua dedicated a special sermon to meditation, “*Della meditazione*” in his unpublished Retreat talks.⁵ Meditation is important, he said. If you don’t meditate, you can’t see Christ. Meditation is not a simple duty, but a means of progressing in “perfection”, of overcoming one’s “passions” and resisting “temptations”. How do you organise your meditation time? asked our preacher. Methods vary. Some people meditate without a book, others with one. Some people prepare their meditation the evening before, others as soon as they get up. And so on. Fr Rua detailed his own method. Meditation consists of three parts: preparation, argument and conclusion. Being in the presence of God is essential to the preparation. The argument of meditation is the part “in which we (must) involve the three powers: memory, intelligence and will.”⁶ Reading is not in itself meditation. The conscientious meditator stops to apply to himself the sentences he has read or heard, to note the faults to be detested and the virtues to be practised. Neither the mind nor the heart should be idle during meditation. Moments of deep reflection give rise to “affections”, understood by Fr Rua in the manner of Saint Francis de Sales. As for the conclusion of meditation, he taught, it includes resolutions and thanksgiving. So yes, we don’t waste our time meditating.

The whole method was to be taught to young Salesians. Fr Rua recommended that their leaders initiate the novices into “affections” and “resolutions”, together with recourse to the three duly named powers.⁷

The manual “Practices of piety in use in Salesian houses”, published by Fr Albera in 1916 for both boys and Salesians, contained an imperative article entitled “Meditation” “for Salesians”, which applied Fr Rua’s method. Community meditation began with an invocation to the Holy Spirit. Then came the very Salesian instruction: “Let us place ourselves in God’s presence, ask him for forgiveness for our sins and for the grace to make this meditation well”, followed by a prayer to this effect. The meditation read in community was to be divided into two or three points. An invitation to resolutions and to give thanks to the Lord for the “lights” received, concluded the exercise.”⁸

Fr Albera's recommendations

In a circular letter to Salesian priests, Fr Albera developed his ideas on the “method for praying well”.⁹ He drew inspiration from the lessons current at the time from “masters of the spiritual life.” Discursive prayer is necessary for beginners, he said. And how many are beginners their whole lives! A soul still absorbed in worries and external occupations needs a great deal of reflection and consideration to raise its mind and heart to God and to determine its will to make “strong and holy resolutions”. Fr Albera was afraid of complications. Perhaps he was thinking of the Ignatian “preludes”. Divisions and subdivisions, he wrote, “hinder the work of the Holy Spirit, deprive the soul of the freedom of movement necessary for its elevation to God.”¹⁰ However, he continued, for the benefit of dreamers, let our meditation be active, let it be a real work of the powers of the soul which does not degenerate into arid speculation. The activity of intelligence must be limited to the considerations necessary to arouse supernatural movements in the will.

And he saw fit to encourage his religious not to be content with discursive prayer. Affective prayer and unitive prayer are not reserved for monks and cloistered nuns. It would be a mistake to forbid them to Salesians. All prayer is first and foremost a prayer that leads us to God. The meditator seeks to become one with Him. Salesian meditation, therefore, is unitive in some way. Some may feel that Salesians should not aim so high, that Don Bosco did not want this kind of elevation in his sons, and that he did not even impose methodical community meditation on them in the beginning. “But I can assure you,” said Fr Albera, “that his desire was always to see his sons rise through meditation to that intimate union with God that he had so admirably achieved in himself. He never tired of urging us on whenever the right opportunity presented itself.”¹¹

Salesian meditation at the end of the twentieth century

The lessons of Fr Rua and Fr Albera on Salesian meditation, perhaps too voluntaristic, were somewhat lost as the twentieth century passed. The precept remained, well set out in the renewed Constitutions (1982) of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Meditation is a time for dialogue with Christ, they rightly said.

God loved us so much that he sent his Son, the Word of Truth and Life, who continually challenges us, as individuals and communities, requiring our practical response. Meditation is a high point of this inner dialogue. Each of us

will attend to it with special diligence for half an hour each day. In the silence of our whole being like Mary, “the listening Virgin”, we will allow ourselves to be permeated by the power of the Holy Spirit who leads us gradually to put on Christ, strengthens sisterly communion, and renews apostolic zeal.¹²

By now, however, there was little interest in meditation methods. Reading the Salesian Guide to Prayer, only the previous community framework really persisted. “Making meditation together and concluding it with a prayer of consecration to Mary” is “a characteristic of the Salesian tradition”, it said, opening a series of considerations on the method to be followed.¹³ This colloquy with God follows a specific process. Its ordinary structure includes: an introductory prayer with an invocation of the Holy Spirit, a reading, a personal meditation, a resolution (*proposito*) and a concluding prayer. The first and last of these sections emphasise the community nature of the exercise (implying that the common reading is no longer obligatory as was the case at other times). The Guide soon added that meditation could possibly take the form of a community celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, by a celebration of the Word, a recitation of Lauds, interspersed with a long period of personal reflection, and also a similar celebration of the Eucharist.

According to our Guide, in its traditional form (several forms are proposed) the introductory prayer to the meditation begins with the sign of the cross and the *Veni, Creator spiritus*, followed by the prayer: “O God, you who through the gift of the Holy Spirit guide believers towards the full light of truth, give us to receive true wisdom through your Spirit and to benefit always from his support. Through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.” As for the conclusion, it consists, if we read the first formula chosen, in “Blessed is he who hears the Word of God”, with the responsory: “... and lives by it day after day”, followed immediately by the prayer of consecration to Mary Help of Christians. To nourish meditation, the Guide gave preference to Holy Scripture, from which it drew up a list of passages, followed by extracts from the writings of Don Bosco, the Salesian Constitutions, Vatican II, classics of Christian spirituality such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila and St Francis de Sales, and also prayers that the manual gave as adapted from St Augustine, St Anselm, St Thomas Aquinas, Cardinal Newman, John XXIII, Karl Rahner, F. Cromphout and Fr Stanislas Lyonnet. It should be noted that these were always prayers, not spiritual dissertations. The meditator never left the genre of *prayer*. And that was fortunate.

Eastern forms of meditation

In the last third of the twentieth century, under the influence of Eastern religious theories, in addition to the traditional Christian conception which sees meditation as a time for deepening the knowledge of revealed truth under the guidance of the Spirit and with the help of appropriate spiritual exercises, other somewhat different concepts have increasingly asserted themselves.

For its proponents, meditation was “methodical training in immersion in the human Self.” Let’s try to understand this. It was 1) an experience of meaning, with the emphasis on the two terms *experience*, or adherence without any repercussions for existence; and *the meaning of life in its totality*, and not just of the day-to-day contingencies of that life 2) exercise and method, where exercise can be seen (as it is in some Zen schools) as the whole of meditation; 3) and finally, it is about going beyond the realm of the ‘I’ to the Self, from the letter to the spiritual meaning, and from *we* to the individual person.¹⁴ Understood in this way, “meditation” is a direct plunge into the sources of thought and being, into silence, into the suspension of the faculties, into the subtle zones of consciousness.

But, from a Christian point of view, “meditation” has changed its meaning. It is true that certain physical or psychophysical exercises automatically produce sensations of calm and relaxation, gratifying feelings, even phenomena of light and warmth that resemble spiritual well-being. Appropriate techniques are designed to generate spiritual experiences similar to those described in the writings of certain Catholic mystics.¹⁵ Used for the sole purpose of psychophysical preparation for truly Christian contemplation, these methods are highly legitimate. However, it is easy to slip surreptitiously from method to content of the prayer and thus fall into a form of modern “gnosis” which confuses the knowledge of the true God with the illumination of the spirit sought in a kind of Nirvana. Be that as it may, to confuse these exercises with meditation proper, which involves the discursive exploration of an aspect of a divine, philosophical or personal reality, is a mistake. The word has persisted, but the object has changed.

Some followers of “oriental meditations” go further and are not afraid of the Buddhist theory of the absolute without images or concepts, on the same level as the Almighty in his majesty, who rises above finite reality, as revealed in Christ. They deny that the realities of the world can be a trace that points to the infinity of God. Consequently, they propose abandoning not only meditation on the saving works of the God of the Old and New Covenants, but the very idea of a one and triune God

who is love, in favour of immersion in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity. This is a departure, not just from Christian meditation, but from Christianity itself.¹⁶

Let's get back to the essentials. The Christian spiritual life is a gift of the Spirit, said Fr Vecchi. It is about being open to listening, responding, letting yourself be occupied, and welcoming. It is a grace, the initiative and possibilities of which are not within us.

In some forms of Eastern spirituality, the main path is self-awareness, the asceticism that gives confidence in one's own ability and satisfaction in the successes achieved, and the struggle against oneself. In Christian spirituality, the main path is love. It is about feeling a presence that has made us the object of its predilection, and responding with love. It is based entirely on relationship: it is not a struggle against oneself, but first and foremost a struggle for God.¹⁷

Here we find the authenticity of Salesian prayer, which is a conversation with Christ...

NOTES

- 1 A brief history of Christian meditation since the Bible by several authors in the article “Méditation”, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. 10, 1980, col. 906-927.
- 2 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Two, Chaps. 1-8. Description in M. Sauvage, “Méditation dans les écoles de spiritualité”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, loc. cit., col. 923-924.
- 3 *Entretien XVIII, Oeuvres*, vol. VI., pp. 349-350.
- 4 “Singulis diebus unusquisque praeter orationes vocales saltem per dimidium horae orationi mentali vacabit.” (Cap. *Pietatis exercitia*, art 3).
- 5 “Della meditazione”, in M. Rua, *Prediche per Esercizi*, quad. primo, p. 13-17; reproduced in FdB 2893 D9 to EI.
- 6 “La 3a parte è lo svolgim. dell’arg. e questa è la parte a cui devon concurr. le tre pot mem, intell. e voi. (in che modo).” M. Rua, quaderno primo, p. 15.
- 7 “Addestri i novizi all’esercizio della memoria, dell’intelletto e della volontà, proponga i punti da svolgere e suggerisca gli affetti da eccitare e le risoluzioni da prendere”. (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 5 August 1900, L.C., p. 213).
- 8 *Pratiche di pietà in uso nelle case salesiane*, Torino, S.E.I, 1921, pp. 36-37.
- 9 P. Albera, “Metodo per far bene l’orazione”, in “Don Bosco modello del Sacerdote Salesiano”, letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L. C. pp. 406-408.
- 10 “Queste cose intralciano l’opera dello Spirito Santo, e tolgono all’anima la libertà di movimenti che le è necessaria per elevarsi a Dio” (loc. cit., p. 406).
- 11 “Qualcuno forse penserà che un Salesiano non debba mirare tant’alto, e che D. Bosco non abbia voluto questo dai suoi figli, giacché da principio egli non impose loro neanche la meditazione metodica in comune. Ma io posso assicurarvi che fu sempre suo desiderio di vedere i suoi figli elevarsi, per mezzo della meditazione a queirintima unione con Dio ch’egli aveva così mirabilmente attuata in se stesso, e a questo non si stancò mai d’incitarci in ogni occasione propizia.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L. C., pp. 406-407).
- 12 “Dio ci ha tanto amati da mandare il suo Figlio, Parola di Verità e di Vita, che ci interPELLA costantemente come persone e come comunità ed esige una risposta concreta. Momento forte di questo dialogo interiore è la meditazione. Ognuna di noi vi attenderà con particolare impegno ogni giorno per lo spazio di mezz’ora. Nel silenzio di tutto il nostro essere come Maria, “la Vergine in ascolto”, ci lasceremo pervadere dalla forza dello Spirito che guida gradualmente alla configurazione a Cristo, rinsalda la comunione fraterna e ravviva lo slancio apostolico.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 39).
- 13 “Fare la meditazione riuniti insieme e concluderla con una preghiera quotidiana di consacrazione o affidamento a Maria è caratteristica della tradizione salesiana”. (*In dialogo con il Signore. Guida alla comunità salesiana in preghiera*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1989, p. 49). The article “La meditazione del salesiano” covers pp. 49-67.
- 14 In Josef Sudbrack, “La méditation aujourd’hui”, in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, 110, 1980, col. 927-928. Sudbrack is the author of *Meditation: Theorie und Praxis*, Wurtzburg-Stuttgart, 1971.

- 15 See in particular the “favours” described by Teresa of Avila in her *Life* written by herself. We read, for example, in Chapter X: “The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be entirely outside itself. The will loves. Memory seems lost. The understanding does not speak, in my opinion, but it is not lost. However, I repeat, it does not act by reasoning; it is as if appalled by what it sees.”
- 16 Description of Eastern methods based on that of Cardinal Ratzinger, “Some aspects of Christian meditation”, letter to the bishops, 15 October 1989.
- 17 J. Vecchi, *CG24 et vie consacrée*, conference in Paris, 27 December 1997.

Mission

“Mission” enters the Salesian vocabulary

Mission is translated as “sending”. In Don Bosco’s time, and until recently, the term “mission”, most often used in the plural, only meant, in everyday language and therefore in the Salesian vocabulary, the work of evangelisation of non-baptised peoples, and even people who were strangers to Catholic Church. The Apostolic See “sent” its missionaries to them. The future Archbishop of Turin, Lorenzo Gastaldi, a contemporary of Don Bosco and a Rosminian religious at the beginning of his priestly ministry, was for a time a very official “missionary” in England, even though it was a Christian country. Until the reform of the Salesian Constitutions in 1971–1972, its index was limited to “foreign missions”. The “mission” as such was ignored. And then, suddenly, the Salesian world began to offer it a prominent place in its most official teaching. “Our mission sets the tenor of our whole life; it specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families”, announced the 1984 Salesian Constitutions.¹ And the first article of the renewed Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians declares that their Institute “within the Church... shares in the salvific mission of Christ, through Christian education according to the Preventive System.”²

The Salesian Family thus conformed to the best orientations of the Church of the time. In the course of the twentieth century, the Latin term *missio* came to dominate the major areas of Christian theology, from the Trinity to the Last Things. Christ was sent by the Father, and he himself sends the Spirit. There was therefore a “mission” of Christ and a “mission” of the Holy Spirit. And, as we have often remarked, Christ, through the Spirit, has given the whole Church a “mission” of salvation.

Vatican II (1962–1965) never ceased to speak of the mission of the Church as understood in this way. For example, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* states: “Ecclesia cum, divina sua missione innixa, omnibus hominibus Evangelium praedicat et thesauros gratiae elargitur”, which is translated: “Since, *in virtue of her mission received from God*, the Church preaches the Gospel to all men and dispenses the treasures of grace...”³ And the main Council documents described the content of this “divine mission”. The Church received the mission entrusted the apostles to proclaim the kingdom of Christ and the mystery of God, to enlighten the world with the

Gospel message, and to manifest and communicate God's love to all men and to all nations.⁴ This mission, which is at once apostolic, evangelical, universal, spiritual and not political, economic or social, nor linked to any culture or political system, transcends any particularism of race or nation. It takes place at the heart of the world and must correspond to its particular conditions, which vary from one era to the next. Because it is both religious and human, it concerns the salvation of man in the spiritual order and also in the temporal order, in particular through the unification of the universe and the building of a better world in truth and justice.⁵

After 1965, the mission and missions of the Salesian Family were naturally integrated into the mission of the Church as Vatican II had just described it.

The Salesian mission in the Church

In 1971, the General Chapter of the Salesians was keen to justify the use of the word "mission" when introducing it for the first time in the description of the Salesian "identity". Why, it asked, the word "mission" rather than "end"? It replied:

The Church uses this term speaking of her mystery; this means that, in the extension of the same mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit, she (and every true body she contains) does not of her own accord fix the end to be reached, but receives it from God the Father, and therefore as something of obligation which she seeks with more urgency and zeal. Besides, this term implies also those to whom the Church is sent to attain its end: men to be saved.⁶

The Special General Chapter then briefly defines the Salesian mission:

To speak of the mission of the Salesians is therefore from the start a sense of their "vocation" and of their presence in the Church. God "calls" them and "sends" them to perform a particular service in the Church: to cooperate directly in the salvation of youth, especially the poor."⁷

The considerations that followed showed, however, that it was not correct to reduce the beneficiaries of the Salesian mission to young people alone, since in fact it is also addressed to adults as well.⁸

In the Salesian world of the time, the concept of "mission", which covered evangelising action, seemed for a time to be at odds, in the definition of religious life, with the word and concept of "consecration", understood in an essentialist way, which

simultaneously penetrated the language of the Congregation. Then the debate died down. Both are the fruits of a single grace which comes from God, the theorists of religious life said, giving, in the wake of Vatican II, an active meaning to “consecration”, which, like mission, is of divine origin.⁹

We have sometimes ventured to try and draw an exact picture, in terms of its purpose and content, of the Salesian mission, even if it means declaring oneself disappointed by the survey.¹⁰ But, we must recognise that Don Bosco’s orientations, which have been taken up by the renewed Constitutions, make it impossible to attribute clearly defined boundaries to it, whether in terms of its beneficiaries or its methods. The targets of the Salesian mission are, first and foremost, poor and abandoned young people; and its spirit is that of Don Bosco, as it appears principally in the Little Treatise of 1877 on the preventive system in the education of youth. The question must be considered at a higher level. The Salesian Family has no mission other than that of the Church; its mission is necessarily part of the very mission of the Church. This family would rightly declare:

We form a single body with a single end and therefore a single mission. God calls us all in the Church, through the Church and with the Church to save humanity. However, in the Church, while the mission is unique there are many vocations and ministries. The mission is therefore single, but with specialised functions.¹¹

The renewed Constitutions of the Salesians and Salesian Sisters, those of the Volunteers of Don Bosco, as well as the Regulations of Apostolic Life the Cooperators, have endeavoured to describe the functions of each of these groups in the Salesian Family and in the Church of Christ, as they appear to result from their particular mission.

We will only mention here their more general articles dealing explicitly with “mission”. According to their 1984 Constitutions, the Salesians “form a community of the baptized. Submissive to the bidding of the Spirit we are resolved to carry out the Founder’s apostolic plan in a specific form of religious life: to be in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially the poorest of them.” They go on to say that mission that they find their “own way to holiness.”¹²

The Salesian Sisters have included, as an apposite quotation for their constitutional chapter entitled “Our Mission”, the sentence “Sent for young people in the spirit of the *da mihi animas*”,¹³ which clearly states its meaning. The first article carefully inserts this mission into that of the Church.

Our mission comes from the saving initiative of the Father who calls us to participate as an apostolic Salesian community in the Church, to share the

prophetic, priestly and kingly ministry of Christ, by witnessing, proclaiming the Word and rejoicing in salvation. It implies a preternatural love for young people and commits us to become for them, in the school of Mary, sign and mediations of the love of Christ the Good Shepherd, through the Christian education of the whole person according to the Preventive System.¹⁴

For their part “The Volunteers are Christians who, called to follow Christ more closely, intend to live in deep harmony their consecration, secularity, and Salesianity. Thus they fulfil their mission in the Church and in the world.”¹⁵ And the Cooperators, who came about through Don Bosco’s invitation to “cooperate in his mission of salvation of the young, especially the poor and abandoned”, “collaborate actively... and in the name of the Church” in the “mission of the Society of St. Francis de Sales.”¹⁶

When it speaks of it, the recent (1995) Common Identity Card of the Salesian Family identifies just the recipients of the mission. Under the title “The mission to the young and to the common people”, it simply states “Don Bosco’s disciples acquire experience of God through those to whom they are sent: the young and the common people.”¹⁷

The Salesian mission is therefore, in the spirit and methods of Don Bosco, a mission of salvation, primarily among young people, especially the poor.

Salesian Family and mission *ad gentes*

In 1875, Don Bosco sent his first missionaries to the Argentinian Pampas. The first Salesian missionaries arrived in this country in the beginning of 1878. Since then, both Congregations have been explicitly missionary. Encouraged by their Superiors General, every year new “expeditions” of Salesians have left Turin for the “missions”. However, the transformation of thinking in the Church and the world over the course of the twentieth century gradually led Don Bosco’s followers to give a rather different content to an activity that was still called “missionary activity”.¹⁸

Don Bosco expected his missionaries to bring the light of the Gospel to peoples who did not know it, in order to “save” them, and thus to bring them into the Roman Catholic Church, the one and only ark of salvation.¹⁹ Their mission was properly evangelising and, if necessary, civilising. Those evangelised had to renounce their false religions. Baptism, the sign of integration into the Church, bore witness to the success of the mission. Churches were thus created.

At the same time, peoples regarded as “savages” were given a culture that “civilised” them, in other words, Westernised them. For mission is at the same time “a work of humanity and a work of faith”, it was taught. It “rescues savages” from their “age-old barbarism”, wrote Don Bosco.²⁰ For a century, in South America, Africa and Asia, Salesian missionaries carried out this programme with admirable self-sacrifice, often in difficult conditions. How many gave their lives! The biographical profiles that have been compiled of one hundred and fifty-five Salesian missionaries and fifty-one Salesian Sisters, missionaries who left before the Second World War, speak of the heroism of many of these valiant people.²¹

Then, in the middle of the twentieth century, a better theological and anthropological perspective changed perspectives. The Spirit of God has always been and still is at work in the world, the Word has never abandoned mankind, Vatican II declared. All cultures are respectable, and evangelisation is also about them. The conscience of human beings has always been able to point them in the direction of the Good, the path that God, in his Providence, wants them to choose. As we have seen above, the Church’s “mission”, of which missionaries are the agents, affects not only the spiritual order, but also the temporal order. It concerns justice and peace in a world whose unity in love she promotes as a duty received from God. The Kingdom of God, which is the missionary horizon, is built in many ways. Evangelisation had to take account of these factors, which it had been able to neglect until then.²² The Salesian evangelising mission therefore remained, but its methods and stages inevitably differed from those at the beginning of the century. The Salesian missionary was “invited to renew himself without deviating”, observed Fr Viganò in the wake of the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*.²³

The “missionary dimension” of the Salesian Family

The whole Salesian Family has a missionary soul. “Attentive to the needs and changes of ones environment,” the Volunteer of Don Bosco, who “works responsibly with creativity and flexibility which are characteristics of the Salesian spirit”,²⁴ naturally seizes opportunities to work, for short or long periods, in the direct service of the “missions”. And the Regulations of Apostolic Life of the Salesian Cooperators expressly indicate, among the forms of apostolate to be preferred, “missionary work and collaboration in ecumenical dialogue.”²⁵ Moreover because of their baptism, all lay Christians are “missionaries”.²⁶

Above all, the “missionary dimension” of the two religious societies founded by Don Bosco was carefully affirmed in their renewed Constitutions. And in their descriptions of the activities involved, those who drafted them have sought to respect the achievements of Vatican II.

On the part of the Salesians SDB we read,

People still awaiting the gospel message were the special object of Don Bosco’s concern and apostolic effort. They continue to stimulate our zeal and keep it alive. We look upon missionary work as an essential feature of our Congregation. Through our missionary activity we carry out a patient work of evangelisation by founding the Church within a group of people. This work mobilizes all the educational and pastoral commitments proper to our charism. Following the example of the Son of God, who made himself in all things like us, the Salesian missionary makes his own the values of these people and shares their hopes and anxieties.²⁷

The same Salesian Constitutions highlighted the place of “human advancement” in missionary promotion in missionary pastoral work:

In parishes and mission residences we contribute to the spreading of the gospel and to the advancement of the people. We collaborate in the pastoral programme of the particular Church out of the riches of our specific vocation.²⁸

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to whom a narrow conception of evangelisation (reduced to the explicit proclamation of the Word) could have denied them a missionary vocation in the strict sense, have limited their articles to this question. Better than the Salesians, they have brought together under the same title the whole of evangelising work, whatever its geographical location. One general article says

Striving to keep alive the missionary fervour of our origins, let us work for the spreading of God’s Kingdom in Christian countries, in those not yet evangelised, and in those in need of re-evangelisation; paying particular attention to the signs of the times and the needs of the local Church.²⁹

The article dealing directly with the missions bears witness to an acute sense of the inculturation called for by the contemporary Church in the work of evangelisation.

The missionary dimension, an essential element of the identity of the Institute and the expression of its universality, has been part of our history since its very beginning. We work among people who have not yet received the good news of

the Word so that they may find in Christ the deep meaning of their aspirations and of their cultural values. We make the Church present by helping these our sisters and brothers, especially young people to grow in their experience of God's personal love for them. This can awaken the desire within them to receive the Gospel and to become witnesses and apostles.³⁰

In this way, the Salesian Family has carefully re-expressed a missionary spirit received from Don Bosco.

Consecrated life and mission *ad gentes*

However, changes in the world and ideological transformations have led some to believe that the time for missions was over. Couldn't all religions lead to God? Does not the proselytising inherent in traditional missionary action, which leads to conversion, offend freedom of conscience?

The Church disagrees. The proclamation of the dead and risen Christ remains essential to any successful missionary endeavour. However, there are many paths to evangelisation. Because of their own commitment to a consecrated life, Salesians and Volunteers of Don Bosco are today encouraged to participate in the missionary apostolate. The Church expects "the greatest possible commitment" from them. If faith is strengthened when it is given, mission strengthens consecrated life, giving it new enthusiasm and new motivation. We know that preaching the Gospel transforms a priest's faith. But it has to be said that the mission *ad gentes* offers Salesian Brothers, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Volunteers of Don Bosco privileged opportunities to exercise apostolic action. Through their presence in various areas of the lay vocation, they can accomplish a valuable work of evangelisation of the environments, structures and even laws that regulate life in society. They can also bear witness to gospel values with people who do not yet know Jesus and thus make an authentic contribution to the mission. We know that missionary work begins with witness. In countries where non-Christian religions have taken root, their educational, charitable and cultural activities are of "enormous importance" from a strictly missionary point of view, as Pope John Paul II taught.³¹

NOTES

- 1 “La missione dà a tutta la nostra esistenza il suo tono concreto, specifica il compito che abbiamo nella Chiesa e determina il posto che occupiamo tra le famiglie religiose.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 3).
- 2 “Partecipa nella Chiesa alla missione salvifica di Cristo, realizzando il progetto di educazione cristiana proprio del Sistema Preventivo.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 1 b).
- 3 *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 89.
- 4 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 5, 20; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 41, 92, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 10.
- 5 See in particular *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 30, 33, 36, 42, 65; *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 11, 42, 55, 58, 76, 89; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, nos. 5, 6; *Ad Gentes*, nos. 6, 8, 10; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nos. 14, 17.
- 6 “Perchè la parola “missione” piuttosto che “fine”? - La Chiesa adopera questo termine trattando del suo mistero; ciò significa che, nel prolungamento della missione del Figlio e dello Spirito Santo, essa (e ogni organismo autentico in essa) non pone da sè il fine da raggiungere, ma lo riceve da Dio Padre e quindi si sente obbligata a ricercarlo con maggiore urgenza e zelo. Inoltre questo termine richiama anche coloro verso i quali la Chiesa è mandata per realizzare un tale scopo : gli uomini da salvare.” (CGS, n. 23.)
- 7 “Parlare della “missione dei Salesiani” significa dunque evidenziare fin dall’inizio il senso della loro vocazione e della loro presenza nella Chiesa. Dio li “chiama” e li “invia” per rendere un servizio specifico nella Chiesa : cooperare direttamente alla salvezza integrale dei giovani, soprattutto poveri.” (CGS, *ibidem*).
- 8 See CGS/SCG, nos. 53-57.
- 9 Fr Egidio Viganò is very interested in this problem. See, in his circular letter of 8 February 1995, the section “Dalla missione alla riscoperta del carisma”, *Atti* 352, pp. 13-19.
- 10 See P. Braido, “La missione salesiana oggi”, in the acts of the Salesian Family Spirituality Week as it em riflette sulla sua vocazione nella Chiesa di oggi, Torino-Leumann, 1973, pp. 107-122.
- 11 “Formiamo un solo corpo con un solo fine con la stessa missione. Iddio ci chiama nella Chiesa, attraverso la Chiesa, con la Chiesa a salvare l’umanità. Partecipiamo, dunque, dell’unica missione della Chiesa. Nella Chiesa c’è una sola missione e molti ministeri, molte vocazioni ; quindi una sola missione con funzioni specializzate.” (Observations by E. Viganò, in the panel presentation “La missione salesiana oggi”, in *La Famiglia salesiana ...*, p. 123).
- 12 “ ... intendono realizzare in una specifica forma di vita religiosa il progetto apostolico del Fondatore : essere nella Chiesa segni e portatori dell’amore di Dio ai giovani, specialmente ai più poveri. Nel compiere questa missione, troviamo la via della nostra santificazione.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 2).
- 13 “Mandate per le giovani nello spirito del “da mihi animas” (FMA Constitutions FMA, Part One, Chap. 3).
- 14 “La nostra missione nasce dall’iniziativa salvifica del Padre, che ci chiama a partecipare nella Chiesa - come comunità apostolica salesiana - al ministero profetico, sacerdotale e regale di Cristo, con la testimonianza, l’annuncio della Parola e la celebrazione della salvezza. Essa implica il dono della “predilezione” per le giovani e ci impegna a farci per loro, alla scuola di Maria, segno e mediazione della

- carità di Cristo Buon Pastore, attraverso un progetto cristiano di educazione integrale nello stile del Sistema Preventivo.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 63).
- 15 “Le Volontarie sono cristiane che, chiamate a seguire Cristo più da vicino, intendono vivere in profonda armonia consacrazione, secolarità, salesianità. Attuano così la loro missione nella Chiesa e nel mondo ... “ (VDB Constitutions, art. 2).
 - 16 “invito di cooperare alla sua missione di salvezza dei giovani, soprattutto di quelli poveri e abbandonati” (RVA, Prologue, art. 1). “ ... collaborano attivamente alla sua missione in nome della Chiesa” (RVA, art. 6, § 1).
 - 17 “La missione giovanile e popolare” ... “I discepoli di Don Bosco fanno esperienza di Dio attraverso quelli cui sono mandati: i giovani e il ceto popolare.” (*Carta di comunione*, art. 21).
 - 18 Interesting information on the problem in the collection of articles *La Famiglia Salesiana, famiglia missionaria. Settimana di spiritualità nel centenario delle Missioni Salesiane*, Leumann (Torino), Elle Di Ci, 1977. See in particular the contributions of Agostino Favaie and Juan Ezquerda Biffe!
 - 19 One quote stands out among others. Don Bosco wrote on 12 January 1876: “Vi sono milioni e milioni di creature ragionevoli, che, tuttora sepolte nelle tenebre dell’errore, dall’orlo della perdizione levano loro voci dicendo : Signore, mandateci operai Evangelici, che ci vengano a portare il lume della verità, e ci additino quella strada, che sola può condurre a salvamento.” (G. Bosco, *Lettere circolari*, Torino, 1896, p. 10).
 - 20 G. Bosco, Letter to Cooperators, 15 October 1886, in *Lettere circolari*, p. 9.
 - 21 E. Valentini (ed), *Profili di missionari salesiani e figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Roma, LAS, 1975, XVI 623 pages.
 - 22 Main Church documents: Vatican II, decree *Ad Gentes*, on the Church’s missionary activity; the decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, on ecumenism; the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, on religious liberty; the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, on the Church’s relationships with non-Christian religions; John Paul II, encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, 7 December 1990, on the ongoing value of the missionary precept; the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, 14 September 1995, on evangelisation in Africa.
 - 23 “Il missionario è invitato a rinnovarsi senza deviare.” (Letter to Salesians, 24 February 1991, *Atti* 336, p. 21.) It should be noted that, in its necessary brevity, this entry of ours is only intended to touch on the immense problem of this renewal... Some additions, above, in the entry on *Inculturation*.
 - 24 “Attenta ai bisogni e ai mutamenti dell’ambiente in cui vive, opera responsabilmente con la creatività e la flessibilità proprie dello spirito salesiano” (VDB Regulations art. 1b).
 - 25 “Ai Cooperatori sono aperte tutte le forme di apostolato. Tra queste, seguendo Don Bosco, si preferiscono [...] il lavoro missionario e la collaborazione al dialogo ecumenico” (RVA, art. 16, § 1).
 - 26 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 71.
 - 27 “I popoli non ancora evangelizzati sono stati oggetto speciale della premura e dello slancio apostolico di Don Bosco. Essi continuano a sollecitare e a mantenere vivo il nostro zelo: ravvisiamo nel lavoro missionario un lineamento essenziale della nostra Congregazione. Con l’azione missionaria compiamo un’opera di paziente evangelizzazione e fondazione della Chiesa in un gruppo umano. Questa opera

mobilita tutti gli impegni educativi e pastorali propri del nostro carisma. Sull'esempio del Figlio di Dio che si è fatto in tutto simile ai suoi fratelli, il missionario salesiano assume i valori di questi popoli e condivide le loro angosce e speranze." (SDB Constitutions, art. 30).

- 28 "Nelle parrocchie e residenze missionarie contribuiamo alla diffusione del Vangelo e alla promozione del popolo, collaborando alla pastorale della Chiesa particolare con le ricchezze di una vocazione specifica." (SDB Constitutions, art. 42 b).
- 29 "Cercando di mantenere vivo lo slancio missionario delle origini, lavoriamo per il Regno di Dio nei paesi cristiani e in quelli non ancora evangelizzati o scristianizzati, con vigile attenzione alle esigenze dei tempi e alle urgenze delle Chiese particolari." (FMA Constitutions, art. 6c).
- 30 "La dimensione missionaria - elemento essenziale dell'identità dell'Istituto ed espressione della sua universalità - è presente nella nostra storia fin dalle origini. Lavoriamo tra le popolazioni a cui non è ancora giunto l'annuncio della Parola, perchè possano trovare in Cristo il significato profondo delle loro aspirazioni e dei valori culturali. Facendoci presenza di Chiesa, contribuiamo a maturare in questi nostri fratelli - specialmente nei giovani - l'esperienza dell'amore personale di Dio, che potrà far nascere in loro il desiderio di accogliere il Vangelo e di esserne a loro volta testimoni e apostoli." (FMA Constitutions, art. 75).
- 31 This paragraph is a free adaptation of the Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, no. 78.

Morano, Madeleine Caterina

Village teacher

Maddalena (Madeleine) Caterina Morano (1847–1908) was a talented educator throughout her working life.¹ She was fourteen and a half when the parish priest of Buttigliera, the Piedmontese village where her family lived, opened an infant school which did not require a qualified teacher. She was recognised as having wisdom for her age. The parish priest did not hesitate to offer her the post of teacher of his little school. Madeleine's mother accepted all the more readily, all the more so because it would mean a steady income for the home. Since the death of her husband, soon followed by that of her eldest daughter, the poor woman and her children had been reduced to a state bordering on extreme poverty.

Madeleine put all her heart and talent into the task. A good Piedmontese woman with an energetic character, she had a practical sense of things and a passion for work. She was a complete success. The children adored her, and the mothers were delighted. At the same time, she was preparing for the official teachers certificate which she began preparing for when she was nineteen. She then became the local teacher in the village of Montaldo Torinese, near Buttigliera. Here too, after a somewhat difficult start, her competent dedication, unflagging kindness and patience with everyone won her the hearts first of her pupils and then of the local population. So much so that, in 1872, this vigorous twenty-five year old was entrusted with the local boys school run by a priest up until then. And it seems that the men and boys of the village held her in even greater esteem and reverence than the priest and mayor themselves.

Her influence extended far beyond the walls of the school. Madeleine was the most active parishioner and the most valuable collaborator of the parish priest of Montaldo: attending all the services, teaching catechism, spreading devotion to the Sacred Heart and to Mary, promoting an association of Daughters of the Immaculate, visiting the sick and the poor, and improving the Christian education of her former pupils. All this presupposed a Christian life of the highest quality, fostered by a certain austerity and nourished daily by prayer. Every day she received communion, said the rosary and even made a self-imposed Way of the Cross; and she refused all worldly pastimes and frivolous reading. But the years went by. Madeleine was now thirty, and her savings enabled her

to buy her mother a small house with a garden and a small part of a vineyard. Her long-standing desire to devote herself to God was growing stronger and stronger.

Daughter of Mary Help of Christians

On 15 August 1878, Madeleine entered Mornese, where the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had been founded six years earlier by Mary Domenica Mazzarello. This place was full of evangelical fervour. Her postulancy lasted four months and, on 8 December, Madeleine took the habit and began her novitiate. After another two months, she continued her novitiate in the new motherhouse of the Institute in Nizza Monferrato. There, placed entirely in the hands of Mother Mazzarello and willing to make any sacrifice to become an authentic religious, she undertook to eradicate all traces of pride of pride, self-seeking and resistance to the calls of grace from her temperament and her heart. Her *Thoughts and reflections*, which come to us in a notebook written at the time, are indicative of the sharpness and vigour of her struggle. She wrote, for example,

It is hard to do violence to oneself, to hate oneself, to deprive oneself of all that is pleasing to nature, to tame one's own freedom, to subdue one's body, to deny one's heart, to bring down without pity the idol of self-love and to break it under the blows of the beneficent hammer of humility. But these painful blows are a masterpiece of grace in your soul ... Not one of your sufferings does not serve to annihilate the old man and form the sublime image of Jesus crucified, your adorable model in you. Everything passes, everything is for the best, Paradise awaits us.

On the eve of her profession (4 September 1879), she heard Mother Mazzarello say to her,

Let us love him, Sister Madeleine! Let us love Jesus, let us work for him without a thought to ourselves. Let him be our only confidant...²

As a young professed Sister, Madeleine spent two years teaching at Nizza. Her lessons were simple and clear, provoking interest and emulation. The most meticulous and well-attended were her catechism classes, in which her love of God and her enthusiasm for goodness shone through. As a teacher she was kind and firm, rigorously impartial, and if she showed any preference it was for the least noticed and least gifted pupils. At the end of her first year, she was already admitted to perpetual profession (2 September

1880). Her resolutions set out her programme as a Sister definitively given to God. For example: “O my soul, take care to do nothing that is not worthy of being offered to God ... When that accursed ‘I’ of self-love is completely dead in you, then Jesus Christ will live fully in you... Be a wise and industrious bee, that is, draw some profit for your soul from the smallest things that happen to you.”³ It was during her second year as a teacher at Nizza that she had the sorrow of witnessing Mother Mazzarello’s final days. She died in that house on 14 May 1881.

An extraordinarily fruitful apostolate in Sicily

In the autumn of 1881, Madeleine was appointed headmistress of a small boarding school at Trecastagni, between Mount Etna and the sea, in remote Sicily. Sicily would be her new home.

The boarding school, which had been in decline, recovered. Sister Madeleine was everywhere: a headmistress who was very attentive to the life of her community, she was also a teacher, assistant and nurse to her little people. The work grew: a Sunday oratory was opened, followed by a vocational school for day students. The small town of Trecastagni was in awe. Young girls who had seen and understood Sister Madeleine and her Sisters came knocking at the door, asking to “live like them”. And Sister Madeleine added mistress of the postulants and novices to her duties. This role lasted four years.

In 1885, it seemed appropriate to entrust the educational institute of the Salesian Sisters close to Valdocco to her. There, as at Trecastagni, she was a headmistress who was admired and loved by the sisters and the children. But, as the Sister who had replaced her in Sicily had to return to Turin to care for her weakened health, this mandate only lasted one school year. And so Sister Madeleine returned to Trecastagni and Sicily, with the added responsibility of being the “Visitor”, in fact “Provincial” of the works of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians throughout the island.

She was now Mother Madeleine. Mother Madeleine was to prove an extremely active founder. Over twenty-two years she founded seventeen centres, several of them very important. In particular, in 1896 she founded a boarding school in Catania, to which she transferred her headquarters, now called the Provincial headquarters, in 1902. Almost all of these works began in extreme poverty: cramped and rickety buildings, just like in Valdocco and Mornese. Mother Madeleine embarked on a whole series of consolidations, extensions and completely new buildings. And money was needed! The Visitor had to travel a lot to visit her communities, running to the bedsides of sick

or dying Sisters, meeting religious and civil authorities, and taking part in celebrations and important public events. In 1903, she travelled as far as Tunisia, dressed in civilian clothes, to visit the first two works founded in that country by the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The teaching of catechism not only within the works, but in the parishes of the towns and villages where the Sisters were present, was of great concern to her. She set up catechism schools, sending the Sisters there and even giving practical lessons to the teachers herself.

As Provincial, she was first and foremost the teacher of her Sisters. She followed each of them attentively, helping them to correct themselves and perfect their pedagogical practice. Bringing communities together she gave lectures on the method followed by Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. We still have some of these which are, according to Fr Aubry, “masterpieces of wisdom, precision and Salesian fervour.”⁴ The best lesson in pedagogy, however, was her witness, her way of acting. Her strong personality impressed everyone, adults and children alike. But this sense of presence did not get in the way of things. She attracted people’s interest because she always appeared serene and smiling. This educator had acquired the art of talking to children and young people who were never bored by her captivating and practical talks or lessons. She demanded cleanliness, politeness, good order and punctuality. But she always did so with perfect calm and kindly manners. Her keen psychological sense made her understand young people and their exuberance. Salesian *amorevolezza* overflowed with kindness in her, a virtue rooted in her deep maternal instinct.

As a Superior, Mother Madeleine proved herself a worthy heir to Mother Mazzarello. Thanks to a human and practical sense that were equally remarkable, she impressed people with her intelligence, authority, wisdom and business acumen. She succeeded in getting her views accepted and in resolving the most difficult issues. She knew how to choose new superiors and followed them up closely, keeping them informed, supporting their authority and helping them, if needs be, in their conflicts with administration. Her contact with the Sisters was “a marvel”, according to Fr Aubry.⁵ She devoted her time to each of the Sisters during her visits. “I feel I love them all and I always take great pleasure in talking to them”, she once remarked to a postulant. She presided over the retreats, privileged moments for personal contacts and wise directives. Patient with everyone, she did not see herself as the fierce guardian of a rule that had to be observed at all costs, but as the educator of consciences that had to be led little by little to lovingly put into practice all that was possible. Her way of governing was liberating.

This holy Sister was completely devoted to God. One day she wrote to a Sister: “Jesus is your spouse! Forever. Everything is there. Everything else no longer exists for us.”⁶ And, to another Sister: “How sad you make me when I learn that you are not yet firmly established in the habit of doing everything by looking to God alone and to creatures for him alone!”⁷ And again, to another Sister: “Do not be discouraged by what you feel and what you experience (...) When when you find yourself like this, don’t look at yourself, look at Him and say to Him with confidence, “Thank you, Good Jesus, who little by little are making me feel who I am and understand who you are!”⁸ In her examinations of conscience and retreat resolutions – the text of which has been preserved – the first point always concerned “union with God” or “piety”, which she defined as “not reading many devotional books or saying many prayers, but thinking, speaking and acting for God in a way that is pleasing to him.”⁹ Union with God was something she nurtured through a keen sense of the mystery of the Eucharist and the habitual contemplation of Christ crucified.

In May 1900, an intestinal tumour confined Mother Madeleine to bed for three months. She recovered, but her strength was affected. At the beginning of 1908, she foresaw her death and, at the beginning of March, she gave her last talk to the Sisters at the Provincial House in an unusually warm tone. On Sunday 22nd, shaken by a high fever, she wrote another moving letter to the Mother General, who was thinking of entrusting her with new responsibilities, and went to bed. On the 24th she was relieved of her duties at the Provincial House in Catania and immediately went back to bed in violent pain. And on 26 March, after receiving the last sacraments, she died of acute peritonitis.

Maria Maddalena Caterina Morano was declared “Blessed” by John Paul II in Catania on 5 November 1994. “If we turn to her to read her spiritual testimony, portrayed in a laborious existence of apostolic charity, it will help us to make practical and efficacious resolutions to improve our own Salesian qualities” Fr Viganò wrote at the time.¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 This article depends on the notice, mostly copied, by J. Aubry, “Une femme au grand coeur : la bienheureuse Madeleine Morano, FMA (1847-1908)”, in *Les saints de la famille*, Rome, Salesian General House 1996, pp. 243-264, a notice which itself depends on the biography by Fr Domenico Gameri, *Suor Maddalena Morano*, San Benigno Canavese, 1926, 263 pages., and which we also refer to here for any quotations from it. The copiously annotated critical edition of Fr Gameri's work by the Sacra Congregatio pro Causis Sanctorum. Officium historicum, *Catanen. Béatifications et Canonizations Servae Dei Magdalenae Catharinae Morano, sororis Instituti Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis (+ 1908). Summarium historicum additionale ex officio concinnatum*, Rome, 1975, is witness to the substantial nature of this historical work.
- 2 “E’ penoso farsi violenza, odiare se stessi, privarsi di tutto quello che piace alla natura, incatenare la propria libertà, mettere in soggezione il corpo, negare tante cose al cuore, abbattere senza pietà l’idolo dell’amor proprio e frantumarlo sotto i colpi del salutare martello dell’umiltà. Ma questi colpi dolorosi operano un capolavoro della grazia nell’anima tua (...) non uno dei tuoi dolori che non serva ad annichilire l’uomo vecchio per formare in te l’immagine sublime di Gesù crocifisso, tuo adorabile modello! Tutto passa - tutto pel meglio – il Paradiso ci aspetta!” (D. Gameri, *Suor Maddalena Morano*, p. 26.) “Amiamolo, neh! Sr. Maddalena, amiamolo Gesù, lavoriamo solo per Lui senza alcun riguardo a noi stesse. Sia Egli solo il nostro confidente ...” (Ibidem, p. 27).
- 3 “Procura, o anima mia, di non far nulla di esser indegno di essere offer Suor Maddalena Morano to a Dio ... Quando sarà interamente morto in te il maledetto io dell’amor proprio, allora vivrà pienamente in te G. C. ... Sii saggia e industriosa ape, cioè da tutte le minime cose che ti accadono cavane qualche prò per l’anima tua.” (D. Gameri, *Suor Maddalena Morano*, p. 35).
- 4 J. Aubry, “Une femme au grand coeur...”, p. 257.
- 5 J. Aubry, “Une femme au grand coeur...”, p. 259.
- 6 “Gesù è tuo sposo !! per sempre : ecco tutto ! il resto ... non è più per noi.” (D. Gameri, *Suor Maddalena Morano*, p. 225).
- 7 “Che pena mi fai non saperti ancora stabile nel fare le cose guardando Dio solo e le creature per Lui solo.” (D. Gameri, *Suor Maddalena Morano*, p. 240).
- 8 “Non ti scoraggiare - scriveva ad una che sentiva sconforto per le proprie miserie - di quanto senti e di quanto provi (...) Quando ti senti così, non guardare te, ma guarda Lui e digli con fiducia : - Grazie, Gesù Buono, che tratto tratto mi fate sentire chi son io e conoscere chi siete voi !” (D. Gameri, *Suor Maddalena Morano*, p. 245.)
- 9 “Questa non consiste in leggere molti libri devoti o nel dire molte preghiere, ma nel pensare, parlare, operare per Dio e nel modo che a Lui è gradito.” (D. Gameri, *Suor Maddalena Morano*, p. 248.)
- 10 “Lo sguardo rivolto a lei per leggerne la testimonianza spirituale, trasmessa in una laboriosa esistenza di carità apostolica, ci aiuterà a dare validità operativa ai nostri propositi di miglior qualità salesiana.” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1994, *Atti* 351, p. 5).

Music

Music and the early Salesians¹

Anyone who knows Don Bosco well knows how much importance he placed on music in his works, whether in terms of singing or instruments. Didn't he boast that he was the first in Turin to organise group music lessons in his original oratory? In his 1877 address on "the preventive system in the education of youth" he said that "Gymnastics" (we would say sport), "music, recitation, theatre and walks are very powerful means of obtaining discipline, morality and health."² Music figured prominently in his list of educational tools. An Oratory without music is a body without a soul he remarked to a teacher in Marseille, who had just told him about its advantages. When the same teacher then went on to the dangers of introducing young people to music, because once they have been trained, musicians go off to sing or play in theatres, cafes, balls and political demonstrations, and God knows where else, Don Bosco was content to reply, "What would you prefer: to be or not to be? An oratory without music is a body without a soul!"³ Among the ten Salesians on the first missionary expedition to Argentina (1875), was Brother Bartolomeo Molinari, with the title, as Don Bosco wrote, of "teacher of vocal and instrumental music."⁴ "The main reason [for Don Bosco's interest in music] must be sought in what he regarded as the salutary effect it had on the hearts and imaginations of young people in order to refine them, uplift them and make them better."⁵ During the first Salesian century, it was unthinkable to have a school or an oratory without a choir, band or orchestra.

Salesian educators were keen to foster a certain number of good feelings, especially religious ones, in the hearts of their young people. Music contributed greatly to this. The boys in their houses received their guests to the sound of their brass band to express their joy and gratitude at meeting them. When, by chance, these same boys entered a church, they would sing a hymn to the Lord or the Virgin Mary, the group would express its feelings of veneration and adoration which its members, if left to themselves, would have been perfectly incapable of arousing. In Salesian houses masses and polyphonic "greetings", afternoon concerts systematically infused religious feast days with a joy that the educators considered eminently formative. Moreover, in many places, daily music rehearsals had the gift of spreading an atmosphere of happiness, not only in the house but also in the neighbourhood.

Despite his fondness for romantic music, Don Bosco preferred simple pieces of Gregorian chant for the church. Frs Rua and Albera had identical tastes, and even more so. A refined religious sense made them seek God within themselves and in contemplation. Instinctively, they felt it necessary to detach themselves from the noises of the world, in the midst of which the soul is scattered, to return to themselves, purify themselves and thus gradually rise to the encounter with God, the goal of all prayer. The highly religious inspiration of Gregorian chant, which goes in this direction, suited them. They liked Gregorian chant and wanted their pupils to be systematically introduced to it.⁶ Moreover, they were following the contemporary directives of the Holy See in this regard.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, interest in music, particularly religious and Gregorian music, did not wane among Salesian ranks. In 1942, Fr Ricaldone devoted a thick issue of the *Atti del Capitolo Superiore* to Gregorian chant, as well as to sacred and recreational music. A very detailed programme of musical training for young Salesians accompanied the circular. It even included a precise curriculum for music teachers.⁷

Salesians and religious music after Vatican II

However, by the end of the Second World War, a crisis was brewing. The “paraliturgies” were undermining the monopoly of the official liturgy. Vatican II revolutionised traditional religious singing. The liturgy no longer had the solemnity of the rite as its immediate goal, as had previously been thought. The mystery celebrated by the believing community took centre stage. This community found (or had to find) gestures in music and song that were to express their faith. Latin disappeared from church ceremonies and with it Gregorian chant, or very nearly so. “For many people (including Salesians) it felt like the end of the world”, said an Italian Salesian rapporteur at a 1984 congress on music and liturgy.⁸ Moreover, the number of Salesian boarding schools was falling sharply in many countries. The singing classes and instrumental music rehearsals no longer fitted in easily with the demands of the day school timetable. What should be done with Don Bosco’s legacy?

The Salesians, in Italy at least, quickly got their act together. The popular religion they had to serve was something that was theirs. Hadn’t Don Bosco written hymns for his youngsters? Deliberately leaving their own world (their houses and oratories), they set about composing and publishing for the Christian people. They had guessed right. Their collection of hymns *Nella casa del Padre*, published in 1968, was a runaway success.⁹

The 1984 report concluded: “We think that Don Bosco is satisfied with the work that his Salesians have done over the years in the field of music and with the way they have carried out their work, involving everyone and showing particular sensitivity to the needs of young people.” But, it went on to say, it was important to train “capable and enthusiastic musical operators.”¹⁰

Music is a “very important” subject for Salesian pedagogy and Fr Viganò remarked at a later congress on “Salesians and music today” (1987): “Travelling around the world, when we find places where there is a choir, where there is a band or some initiative like that, we immediately realise that Salesian life is much more intense and is more sympathetic to the social context in which it lives.”¹¹ One of the rapporteurs of this congress of music teachers from the Salesian Family ended with an address on music and the apostolate. “Music and singing, in your hands, are a beautiful means of apostolate. Others devote themselves to catechesis. You do catechesis and apostolate with music. It is a typically Salesian way of doing catechesis and apostolate. Music is the language of love, of celebration, of praise, of prayer, a language that everyone understands.” “With music and singing, you not only make your brothers sing better, but you also help your brothers mature in their faith.”¹²

Music and culture in a new era

What music, what songs? The culture of the new generations was becoming increasingly musical, and Salesian spirituality could not but take this into account.¹³ Dance was a natural accompaniment to music. Musical genres varied: rock, punk, pop, trance, techno, grunge and so on. We could now speak of “rock generations”, “rap generations” or “techno generations”. Music provided young people with a language, feelings, ideas, models and myths. Bodies became highly expressive signs and symbols. The concerts and, even more so, the musical days of the idols of the time, orchestras or singers, were authentic celebrations for young people. Those who were lucky enough to take part in them lived with music and for music. They relived themselves through sounds, words, gestures and refrains. Music became a factor of identification and shared emotion. Through rhythm, hearts were united, the joy of being together permeated them, and a shared energy was transmitted from the artists to the audience.

The force thus released formed and informed characters, particularly of young people. One study found that the primary instrument of nihilist groups such as the neo-Nazis, was song and its rhythms. Rap, with its “free style”, was at the centre of a

pacifist movement in France in 1999 called “Stop the Violence”. Whoever they were, their favourite songs were helping young people to live. They were at one with their “spirituality”, infinitely more than with church hymns. Of course, the message was very mixed. While some songs extolled the values of solidarity, kindness and generosity, and sometimes true piety, many songs glorified drugs, sex, violence, nihilism and pleasure at any price, which sometimes and often, took up the entire sound space. Whatever the case, the spiritual life of many depended heavily on music and dance associated with it.

It was important for educators, and therefore for Salesians, if they wanted to provide a spiritual service to new generations, to be aware of this cultural phenomenon and to enter into dialogue with young people on this issue. For young people, music and dance constitute a language and an instrument of communication. So educators need to listen to what they have to say. They know, or have learned, that young people use music and dance to escape a difficult existence. These natural therapies can “be formidable instruments of education”, we are told. “Music and dance are rhythm, harmony, silence, space, time, colour, sensation, stimulation, soothing, narrative, provocation, accusation, etc. They are allies of free and creative spirits who know how to look optimistically to the future.”¹⁴

NOTES

- 1 One can consult the brief study by Antonio Fant, “La musica in Don Bosco e nella tradizione salesiana”, in Manlio Sodi (a cura), *Liturgia e musica nella formazione salesiana. Incontro europeo di docenti ed esperti di liturgia e musica promosso dal Dicastero per la Famiglia salesiana*, Roma, 1984, pp. 38-52.
- 2 “La ginnastica, la musica, la declamazione, il teatrino, le passeggiate sono mezzi efficacissimi per ottenere la disciplina, giovare alla moralità ed alla sanità.” (G. Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, § II, n. 3).
- 3 “E’ meglio l’essere o il non essere? Un Oratorio senza musica è un corpo senz’anima.” In MB V, p. 347, this anecdote, which certainly came from Don Bosco himself, was apparently borrowed by his biographer Lemoyne from the memoirs of secretary Berto. The rather pedantic question: “E’ meglio l’essere o il non essere?” was probably an addition by the biographer.
- 4 Handwritten sheet by Don Bosco entitled: “Nomi dei Salesiani che oggi partono da Genova per la Repubblica Argentina”, ACS 132.
- 5 “La ragione precipua va ricercata nella salutare efficacia che egli attribuiva sul cuore e sull’immaginazione dei giovani allo scopo d’ingentilirli, elevarli e renderli migliori.” (E. Ceria, *Annali della società salesiana Turin*, SEI, 1941, p. 691).
- 6 See some notes on this in MB III, p. 151; IV, p. 385. BM III, 103; IV 265, 312.
- 7 “Il canto gregoriano. La musica sacra e ricreativa”, *Atti* 111, May-June 1942, 47 pages.
- 8 “Sul piano concreto per molti (anche salesiani) sembrò la fine del mondo.” (Dusan Stefani, “La musica salesiana : esperienze storiche negli ultimi 40 anni”, in *Liturgia e musica ...*, op. cit., p. 56).
- 9 The booklet of texts from this collection published by Elle Di Ci had sold “millions”, as early as 1984.
- 10 “Pensiamo che D. Bosco sia contento del lavoro che i suoi Salesiani hanno fatto nel campo musicale in questi anni e del come si è lavorato, collaborando con tutti e avendo una particolare sensibilità verso le esigenze dei giovani. Pur senza la pretesa di creare dei super-specialisti, è necessario e urgente formare degli operatori musicali, capaci (anche sul piano teorico e culturale) ed entusiasti.” Music and singing are, in your hands, a beautiful means of apostolate. Others devote themselves to catechesis. You do catechesis and apostolate with music. It is a typically Salesian way of doing catechesis and apostolate. Music is the language of love, of celebration, of praise, of prayer, a language that everyone understands.” “With music and singing, you not only make your brothers sing better, but you also help your brothers mature in their faith.” (D. Stefani, “La musica salesiana...”, loc. cit., p. 58.) In the same 1984 document see, regarding formation, R Frattallone, “Orientamenti per la formazione musicale”, pp. 136-144.
- 11 “Devo dirvi : è una cosa importantissima la musica nella pedagogia salesiana e nella pastorale salesiana. Girando il mondo, quando troviamo posti dove funziona una corale, un coro, dove c’è una banda o un’iniziativa, ci accorgiamo subito che la vita salesiana è molto più intensa ed è più simpatica nel contorno sociale in cui vive.” (E. Viganò, Intervention, in *Salesiani e musica oggi. Atti del I convegno dei musicisti salesiani europei*, Roma, ed. S. D. B., 1987, p. 119.)

- 12 “La musica e il canto sono, nelle vostre mani, un mezzo bellissimo di apostolato. Altri si dedicano alla catechesi. Voi fate catechesi e apostolato con la musica. E’ un modo tipicamente salesiano di fare catechesi e apostolato. La musica è il linguaggio dell’amore, della festa, della lode, della preghiera, un linguaggio che capiscono tutti.” “Con la musica e il canto, non soltanto fate cantare meglio, ma aiutate a maturare la fede dei vostri fratelli.” (J. Aldazabal, “Musica e liturgia”, in *Salesiani e musica oggi*, op. cit., pp. 144-145).
- 13 This paragraph is inspired by two lessons from Fr Fabio Pasqualetti in 1998 to the Faculty of Sciences of Social Communication at the Salesian University in Rome, entitled: 1) “Musica, giovani e ballo. Consigli per chi desidera dialogare con questi universi”, 2) “La musica dei giovani come simbolo, rito e mito. Rabbdomanti dello Spirito accompagnando i giovani”. A “rabbdomante” (in English: diviner) is a water diviner.
- 14 “Spesso dietro il vorticoso consumo di musica e il frenetico ballare c’è la fuga da un’esistenza difficile. La musica e la danza, come più volte dimostrato, sono delle terapie naturali per lo spirito e quindi possono essere degli strumenti formidabili per l’educazione. La musica e la danza sono ritmo, armonia, silenzio, spazio, tempo, colore, sensazione, stimolo, calmante, narrazione, provocazione, accusa, ecc. Sono alleate degli spiriti liberi e creatori che sanno guardare con ottimismo al futuro.” These observations come from Fabio Pasqualetti in *Musica, giovani e ballo*, op. cit.

Obedience

Salesian religious obedience according to Don Bosco

Conceptions of religious obedience have evolved in the Salesian world over the course of the twentieth century. The submission always demanded of religious to legitimate authority, which was originally apparently more or less blind obedience, has now become systematically consensual. The friendly style of relationships between confreres of the kind that Don Bosco had given rise to, also greatly facilitated a transformation that was often insensitive to those concerned.

The draft Constitutions drawn up by Don Bosco gave obedience precedence over poverty and chastity. The version approved in 1874 placed them in order as the vow of obedience (Chap. III), the vow of poverty (Chap. IV) and the vow of chastity (Chap. V).¹ This was a way of making it clear how much Don Bosco took the obedience of his disciples to heart. The vow was for him an incentive to the virtue of obedience, which was essential in his eyes. In its original wording (circa 1860), the first article of the chapter on the vow of obedience expressed his fundamental idea of the virtue of obedience under the guise of the vow.² “The prophet David prayed to God to enlighten him to do his holy will. The divine Saviour assured us that he had not come to do his own will, but that of his heavenly Father. It is to assure ourselves of doing God’s holy will that we take a vow of obedience.”³ The obedient person accomplishes God’s will, the programme of all spiritual life. The vow, which channels his intentionality, offers the Salesian a privileged means of conforming to the divine will.

Don Bosco’s Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions and their chapter on the vow of obedience developed his ideas on this virtue.⁴ Obedience, which encourages and preserves all the virtues, is essential in spirituality. But for this to happen obedience must conform to the divine will, that is to say, it must be in the image of Jesus who practised it to the point of death on the cross. The Salesian must obey his superior “*con animo ilare e con umiltà*” (with a joyful and humble heart), without hesitation or delay, convinced that God’s own will is made manifest in what has been commanded. The truly obedient do not resist, neither in word, nor in deed, nor “*col cuore*” (which has been translated: nor in judgement), wrote Don Bosco. Of course, obedience that goes against one’s “love of self” is costly, but it is also more meritorious, he judged. One of the

articles of the Constitutions reiterated the somewhat disturbing words of Saint Francis de Sales: “Ask for nothing, refuse nothing.” Don Bosco’s obedient members were not, however, silent members left to the whims of their leaders. The counterbalance came immediately. “The Salesian systematically converses with them in complete confidence”, expressing his needs, pains and worries. “Let everyone have the utmost confidence in his superior.”⁵ This was a principle that Don Bosco held dear. And he imagined only loving trust. The subordinate sees the superior who gives him orders as a “*padre amoroso*” (a loving father)! These ideas reappeared in his exhortations following the elections at the Fourth General Chapter (1886).⁶

Religious obedience according to Don Bosco’s immediate successors

Don Bosco’s immediate successors tried to be faithful to him in their theory of religious obedience. Fr Rua stated in 1897 that Don Bosco’s Introduction to the Constitutions condensed “into a little less than three short pages what the masters of the spiritual life teach best about obedience”, an assessment that Fr Ricaldone repeated word for word in 1936 in his letter on “fidelity to Don Bosco”.⁷ They preached perfect obedience, which consists “in renouncing one’s own will and one’s own judgement.”⁸ Teresa of Avila, a master of spirituality, said no different. “Let our soul decide to stop pleading and thinking about its cause, let it fix itself on this word of the Lord: He who listens to you listens to me, and let it then no longer concern itself with its own will. Our Lord highly esteems this abandonment, and rightly so.”⁹

In his (unpublished) retreat sermons on obedience, Fr Rua followed the “Exercise of Perfection and the Christian Virtues” by Alphonsus Rodriguez, in order to explain 1) the necessity of this virtue, 2) what is called complete obedience and finally 3) that one must obey one’s superior as one would obey Christ in person.¹⁰ In line with this spiritual teacher, he did not hide the rigour of religious obedience, to say the least. This virtue is the one that costs man the most, he taught. To have to renounce one’s own will and one’s own judgement, to have to depend on others not only in what one does but also in thought and judgement, in large and small matters, even in what concerns the salvation of one’s soul, these are sacrifices much harder than the practice of the most austere penances. Obedience strikes a man in the most intimate part of himself, in the noblest part of his being, in the fibre of his will.¹¹

The West found it hard to accept such self-sacrifice. A spirit of independence had insinuated itself among the men of the time. In 1914, the desperate thirst for autonomy

that penetrated society decided Fr Albera to devote a long circular letter to obedience. In the world, the aversion to everything concerning authority and command seems irresistible, he lamented. People today feel an almost irresistible need to shake all the yokes off their shoulders. The winds of independence threaten even religious, who are not protected by the walls of their houses. And Fr Albera reminded Salesians that obedience is the vow par excellence, that Christ, who was “*obediens usque ad mortem*”, is an unsurpassable model for them, that the close “commerce between God and his creatures means that the respect and obedience shown to superiors are to God himself (for “*qui vos audit me audit, qui vos spernit me spernit*”) and finally that obedience entails the sacrifice of both will and intellect. It is a “holocaust” that we must know how to offer, not in sadness, but in joy.¹²

Well convinced that obedience pushed to this point is not an easy thing, the same Rector Major reminded his superiors directly and bluntly how they should behave when exercising authority. Subordinates see their superiors as a “loving father” (*padre amoroso*), wrote Don Bosco in his Constitutions. The Salesian superior should meditate on this formula and apply it to himself! He will make the execution of orders as painless as possible. Not “I want it, so I am ordering it.” Not “I’m the superior, so shut up”, or “When I’ve said something, I don’t repeat it.” A master should not even say such things to a servant! All the more so a religious superior towards a confrere. When he commands, the tone of the Salesian superior who is faithful to Don Bosco is more one of request than of command. He avoids ordering several things at once and imposing tasks on his subordinates that are beyond their strength. He is satisfied with the results and, at the very least, has appreciated their goodwill. How lacking in the spirit of Don Bosco are these managers who only think what they have done themselves is done well! These people are a blight on themselves and others! Let them reread Don Bosco’s Instructions to rectors!¹³

Salesian obedience at the end of the twentieth century

Did the Salesians of the first century follow the directives of their Rectors Major on obedience in every respect? From Don Bosco’s time onwards, this was not obvious. In the didactic dream called “The dream of the diamonds” (10 September 1881), we learn that the diamond on the Salesian mantle symbolised obedience, a virtue that an explanatory ray described as “*Totius aedificii fundamentum et sanctitatis compendium*” (the foundation of the whole edifice and a compendium of holiness), was soon replaced

by a large hole.¹⁴ The rest of the Salesian story casts doubt on the usual obedience of judgement, as advocated by Frs Rua and Albera. Moreover, as the years went by, the general spirit became more and more reluctant to involve the deliberate sacrifice of “love of self”, translated into blind renunciation of personal autonomy. We rejected the psychological degradation caused by servile submission in a certain number of religious men and women. “The intelligence, the heart and the will of the obedient religious were invested by faith in an adherence to God recognised as present and manifested by the will of the superior, no matter how poor or even counterfeit the relationship with the one who spoke and governed in God’s name. It is clear that this situation has been the terrain in which diminished or bullied people have stagnated and suffered too much.”¹⁵

In the middle of the twentieth century and after Vatican II, tensions increased among congregations of Sisters. Opposition did not spare the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who, since Mary Domenica Mazzarello, had made the breaking down of “self-love” one of the conditions of an authentic religious life, as we learn from the novitiate recollections of Blessed Madeleine Morano, among others.¹⁶ The survey prior to their seventeenth General Chapter (1982) recorded the following with regard to obedience: “demands for respect for personality, freedom and rights; difficulties in recognising the mediation of authority and, on the other hand, shortcomings in the exercise of this authority.” The survey prior to their Seventeenth General Chapter (1982) recorded, on the subject of obedience, “presumed claims of respect for the person, her freedom, her rights; difficulties in recognising the mediation of authority and, on the other hand, shortcomings in the exercise of the same; little commitment to discerning the will of God in community choices, to the demands of the mission,”¹⁷ God’s will, as expressed in the demands of the mission was apparently no longer (sufficiently) respected, even though community authority was supposed to translate it. The “shortcomings” denounced were indicative of a “certain type of authority”, in other words, a somewhat frequent authoritarianism. The Chapter noted an increased desire on the part of the Sisters for participation, collaboration and shared responsibility. They wanted to act more out of conviction than out of passive submission to superiors’ orders.

The lessons of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello could put things right, the Chapter said with a great deal of wisdom. Kindness, sisterly relationships, community dialogue, and the desire to serve Christ whatever the cost would correct the deficiencies that had been identified. It explained this to both the Sisters who were called to obey and to the superiors who were to command them.¹⁸ The Sisters’ renewed Constitutions on “evangelical obedience” came as a result of this.¹⁹ The old rigour did not weaken. Religious obedience remained a holocaust. “Strengthened by the Holy

Spirit we freely offer our will as the sacrifice of ourselves to God”, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would say.²⁰ They made a public commitment to submit to their legitimate superiors as “God’s representatives” in all that they prescribe in conformity with the Constitutions.²¹ And a similar article, under the heading of witness to communion, brought together the complementary relationships of consensual obedience and authority as service, which, far from diminishing obedient persons (as their detractors claim) on the contrary strengthens their human dignity.

Obedience and authority are complementary aspects of our participation in Christ’s offering. They imply the mutual desire for communion so that together we may serve ‘God’s loving designs’. In our Institute, this relationship is lived according to the Family Spirit, in which requests are made with discretion and kindness and are carried out promptly and joyfully. In a world wounded by pride and egoism, the community witnesses to the possibility of exercising authority as service, and obedience as sisterly collaboration and this contributes to the fulfilment of one’s human dignity.²²

The subsequent Constitutions of the Volunteers of Don Bosco (1990), and then the Volunteers with Don Bosco (1995), were written in the same very Salesian spirit. Obedience, which requires conformity to Christ, has evangelical value, they said. It requires the Volunteers to take up their temporal responsibilities and to collaborate fraternally within the Institute with those who exercise responsibilities. It is an instrument of ascetic purification and personal growth. The Salesian style of obedience and authority is imbued with a family spirit of mutual trust and esteem.²³

For their part, the Salesians had taken up the very measured teachings of Don Bosco once more for their renewed Constitutions (1984) on obedience, enriched by some considerations from Vatican II in *Perfectae Caritatis*.²⁴ The sensitive article on the “Salesian style of obedience and authority” said:

In Salesian tradition, obedience and authority are practised in a family spirit of love which inspires relationships of mutual esteem and trust. The superior directs, guides and encourages, making discreet use of his authority. All the confreres collaborate by obeying readily and sincerely, ‘with cheerfulness and humility.’ The service of authority and the willingness to obey are the principles of cohesion in the Congregation, and guarantee its permanence; for the Salesian they are the path to holiness and the source of energy in his work, of joy and of peace.²⁵

The transition from the blind obedience of judgement imposed at the beginning of the century took place smoothly in daily practice.

NOTES

- 1 In 1923, the reform following the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law distributed the chapters of the vows in the classic order: poverty, chastity and obedience. Then, in a voluntary return to Don Bosco, in the renewed Constitutions of 1984 the chapter on obedience was again placed before the ones on poverty and chastity. For their part, the Salesian Sisters opted in their 1982 Constitutions (art. 11-35) for: 1) chastity, 2) poverty and 3) obedience.
- 2 The reviewers criticised him (rightly) for his confusion and turned his chapter upside down.
- 3 “Il profeta Davide pregava Iddio che lo illuminasse per fare la sua santa volontà. Il Divin Salvatore ci assicurò che egli non è venuto per fare la sua volontà, ma quella del suo celeste Padre. Egli è per assicurarci di fare la santa volontà di Dio che si fa il voto di obbedienza.” (“Del voto di Obbedienza”, art. 1, in *Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, ms in 1860).
- 4 *Regole o Costituzioni...*, 1875, pp. XX-XXII and 8-9.
- 5 “Ognuno abbia somma confidenza nel suo superiore ...” Etc. (*Del voto di ubbidienza*, art. 4).
- 6 G. Bosco, Letter to Salesians, 21 November 1886; L. C., pp. 41-42.
- 7 “... dopo aver condensate in poco men di tre paginette quanto di meglio i maestri della vita spirituale insegnano sull’ubbidienza” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 31 January 1897; L. C., p. 151.). See P. Ricaldone, “Fedeltà a Don Bosco santo”, *Atti* 74, 24 March 1936, p. 102.
- 8 ... nell’annegazione della propria volontà e del proprio giudizio” (M. Rua, Letter above, 31 January 1897, L. C., p. 151).
- 9 Theresa of Avila, *Libro de las Fundaciones*, Chap. V. See the whole of this chapter.
- 10 M. Rua, “Dell’Obbedienza”, in *Esercizi spirituali*, quaderno VII, pp. 25-27; FdB 2945 A 2-4. Also see in this Rector major’s manuscripts, “Pregio della virtù dell’obbedienza”, same quaderno, pp. 34-37, FdB 2945 AIO to B2; and in a series of unnumbered pages of *Prediche*, the sermon “Dell’Obbedienza”, FdB 2900 A10 to B6.
- 11 More or less literal translation of a passage in M. Rua, Letter to provincials and rectors, 29 November 1899, L. C., p. 201.
- 12 P. Albera, Letter to Salesians on “religious discipline”, 25 December 1911, L. C., p. 68. Letter to Salesians “Sull’ubbidienza”, 31 January 1914, L.C., pp. 134-153.
- 13 P. Albera, Letter to provincials and rectors, 23 April 1917, L. C., p. 224. The *Ricordi confidenziali ai Direttori* (edited by F. Motto, Rome, LAS, 1984) contain advice on how to command similar to that of Fr Albera.
- 14 This dream in MB XV, pp. 183-187.
- 15 E. Pousset, s.j., “Vie religieuse et mutations actuelles”, *Vie consacrée*, 1976, p. 30.
- 16 “E’ penoso farsi violenza, odiare se stessi, privarsi di tutto quello che piace alla natura, incatenare la propria libertà, mettere in soggezione il corpo, negare tante cose al cuore, abbattere senza pietà l’idolo dell’amor proprio e frantumarlo sotto i colpi del salutare martello dell’umiltà.” (Maddalena Morano,

Riflessioni e pensieri, notebook quoted by D. Gameri, *Suor Maddalena Morano*, S. Benigno Canavese, Scuola tipografica Don Bosco, 1923, p. 24).

- 17 “Nei riguardi dell’obbedienza : presunte rivendicazioni del rispetto della persona, della sua libertà, dei suoi diritti ; difficoltà nel riconoscere la mediazione dell’autorità e, d’altra parte, carenze nell’esercizio della medesima ; scarso impegno nel discernere la volontà di Dio nelle scelte comunitarie ; poca disponibilità, come comunità, alle esigenze della missione.” (Istituto F.M.A., *Capitolo generale XVII. Atti*, Roma, 1982, p. 33).
- 18 Excellent pages in *Capitolo generale XVII*, pp. 48-53.
- 19 FMA Constitutions, art 29-33.
- 20 “Con la forza dello Spirito Santo offriamo liberamente la nostra volontà come sacrificio di noi stesse a Dio” (FMA Constitutions, art. 29).
- 21 “La Figlia di Maria Ausiliatrice si impegna pubblicamente a sottomettersi alle legittime Superiori quali “rappresentanti di Dio”, in ciò che dispongono secondo le Costituzioni.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 31).
- 22 “L’obbedienza e l’autorità sono aspetti complementari di una medesima partecipazione all’offerta di Cristo e comportano reciproca volontà di comunione, perchè si possa servire insieme il disegno d’amore del Padre. Nel nostro Istituto questo rapporto si vive in spirito di famiglia, con discrezione e bontà nel richiedere e con spontanea e gioiosa adesione nell’eseguire. In un mondo ferito dall’orgoglio e dall’egoismo la comunità testimonia in tal modo che è possibile esercitare l’autorità come servizio e l’obbedienza come fraterna collaborazione, e che questo contribuisce alla realizzazione della propria dignità umana.” (FMA Constitutions art. 33).
- 23 VDB Constitutions, art. 31-37; CDB Constitutions, art. 26-29.
- 24 SDB Constitutions, art. 64-71.
- 25 “Nella tradizione salesiana obbedienza e autorità vengono esercitate in quello spirito di famiglia e di carità, che ispira le relazioni a stima e a fiducia reciproca. - Il superiore orienta, guida e incoraggia, facendo un uso discreto della sua autorità. Tutti i confratelli collaborano con un’obbedienza schietta, pronta e fatta “con animo ilare e con umiltà”. - Il servizio dell’autorità e la disponibilità nell’obbedienza sono principio di coesione e garanzia della continuità della Congregazione ; per il salesiano sono via di santità, fonte di energia nel lavoro, di gioia e di pace.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 65).

Penance

Don Bosco, Fr Rua and the sacrament of Penance

Father Auffray devoted an entire chapter of his widely read biography to Don Bosco “Au Tribunal de la Pénitence”.¹ “It has been said of the Curé d’Ars that he was the greatest confessor of his century; of Saint John Bosco it will be said that he was the greatest confessor of youth in his time”, he stated with his customary fearlessness. So be it! Don Bosco heard very many confessions, and he attached extreme importance to the sacrament of penance which he called “the Sacrament of Confession”. And his successor Fr Rua repeated the theology and method of his teacher Don Bosco in his preaching and pastoral practice.²

For him, it was the clearest proof of God’s merciful kindness towards human beings, who are in great danger of sinking into hell without “confession”. A single mortal sin is enough to plunge a Christian into hell. “Confession” is the only adequate means of obtaining forgiveness. Let us reread one of the instructions in his *Mese di maggio*. “We have in the Sacrament of Confession a great sign of God’s mercy to sinners. If God had said to forgive us our sins only through Baptism, and not those committed after receiving this sacrament, how many Christians would have gone to their ruin! But God, who who knows our great misery, has established another sacrament by which we are forgiven the sins committed after baptism. It is the Sacrament of Confession.”³ But where does the Gospel ever speak of the confession of sins? Don Bosco replied that Christ had instituted this sacrament when, appearing to his disciples eight days after his resurrection, he breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit; those whose sins you forgive, their sins will be forgiven them; those whose sins you retain, their sins will be retained.” There could be no doubt, he interpreted, that the terms “retain” and “not retain” meant not to give or really to give absolution following confession.⁴

Despite appearances, neither Fr Rua nor Don Bosco reduced the “sacrament of confession” to confession and absolution. They saw it as a privileged moment of encounter with Christ, represented by a priest, for Christians struggling to convert and move towards God. The mystery of grace realised in the sacrament between God himself and one of his creatures takes place through a human dialogue, which must be of a very special quality. Don Bosco’s confessor forgot the functions of judge and

even doctor, which had been preferred in the previous century, and behaved towards his penitent like a father or a friend. “He is a father who is eager to do you all the good he can, and who seeks to keep evil in all its forms away from you”, he used to say to young people.⁵ This father is a guide: Don Bosco’s confessor naturally became a director of souls. And the penitent reacted with the attitudes that were aroused by the climate of freedom and affection created by his confessor. The confidence he felt facilitated his complete sincerity. Don Bosco insisted on total openness, without which the educational work would be compromised. Would the dialogue necessarily be lengthy and emotion-filled? Not necessarily. With some exceptions, it could and even should, in Don Bosco’s opinion, be brief and to the point.

Don Bosco and Fr Rua never stopped repeating that confession requires interior dispositions of regret for faults committed and a desire for spiritual progress expressed in “resolutions”. They had a dynamic vision of the spiritual life that the sacrament of penance is called upon to heal. Of course, this sacrament forgives sins, but it also and above all encourages continuous effort to grow. Don Bosco’s exhortations to make frequent confessions can perhaps be explained by this. He said one evening in 1876, in a context admittedly far removed from the one that prevailed a century later: “If you care but little for your soul, go once a month; if you want to save your soul but are not too eager about it, go every other week; if you want to aim at perfection, go every week.”⁶

The sacrament of reconciliation

The Christian God whom sin “offends” (a verb that used to be commonplace, but that the transformation of social relations makes it a little awkward here) is not a frowning Master but a most loving Father. The sinner, who voluntarily distanced himself from him, responded to his persistent love with contempt. Don Bosco’s preferred image of the “Sacrament of Confession” was less, a century after him but in perfect conformity with his ideas, one of the magistrate who punishes or absolves, than it was the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who is “reconciled” with his sinful son. The “sacrament of penance”, a formula retained by the new Code of Canon Law (canons 959-997), has become commonly known as the “sacrament of reconciliation”, including in the legislative documents of the Salesians. “Reconciliation” is rooted “in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, i.e total love that is self-communicating”, Fr Vecchi taught in a circular dedicated to the subject.⁷ And a more informed theology would remind us that this reconciliation of human beings with their God was always achieved, at root, by the

gesture of absolute love of Christ who died on the cross. He alone was able to bring sinful humanity closer to God, to “reconcile” it with God the Father. Sinners are only forgiven “through the Passion of Jesus Christ our Lord.” His reconciliation is the work of the Holy Spirit. And the sinner rises again “resurrected with Christ.”

A new *Ordo paenitentiae*⁸ helped us to understand this better. It proposed four types of celebration of the sacrament of penance:

1. a rite of individual reconciliation, corresponding to the traditional confession,
2. a rite of reconciliation for several penitents with individual absolution,
3. a rite of reconciliation for several penitents with confession and collective absolution,
4. a rite of penitential celebration.

In each type, an integral role was given to the Word of God. The new ritual included a time for listening to the Word, even in the case of individual reconciliation. Whatever the rite, while the traditional formulas of absolution remained unchanged, they were inserted into a broader prayer aimed at making explicit the richness of salvation in Jesus Christ. The preliminary notes of the ritual presented it as follows:

It indicates that the penitent’s reconciliation comes from the Father’s mercy; it shows the link between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it highlights the function of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; and finally, it highlights the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament, since reconciliation with God is granted is through the ministry of the Church.⁹

Despite a sharp decline in practice in the Church, this sacrament continued to be one of the pillars of moral and spiritual growth for the Salesian Family. The Preventive System, “in its most genuine expression, will always be based on pastoral charity supported by the two great columns of the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist”, declared Fr Viganò in 1987.¹⁰ In fact, “The Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation celebrated with care are means of exceptional value for education to Christian liberty, to conversion of heart and to a spirit of sharing and service in the ecclesial community”, said the renewed Constitutions of the Salesians.¹¹ As for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, they happily expressed the meaning and scope for the spiritual growth of the members of their Institute in a careful constitutional article: “The sacrament of Reconciliation is a trustful encounter with the faithfulness and mercy of the Father. It renews our participation in the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection, and reconciles us with our sisters and brothers in the Church. It helps

us to peacefully accept our poverty and to accomplish our journey towards freedom from sin. Let each of us approach this sacrament in a humble attitude of faith, with the regularity and frequency asked by the Church, recognising its importance for personal and community growth in Christ.”¹²

NOTES

- 1 A. Auffray, *Un grand éducateur Saint Jean Bosco*, 4th ed., Lyon-Paris, E. Vitte, 1937, Chap. XV, pp. 363-387.
- 2 On Don Bosco and the sacrament of penance, see the article “La confessione” by P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II Stella, Roma, LAS, 1981, pp. 310-319. The only way to find out about Fr Rua’s ideas on the subject is to study his as yet unpublished sermons: “Della confessione”, in *Prediche per esercizi*, quaderno I, pp. 22-28 (FdB 2893 E6-12); especially in the series of talks: 1) “Della salvezza dell’anima”, 2) “Della confessione. Esame per la Conf(essione) gen(erale) ed esami particolari” 3) “Dolore e proponimento” and 4) “Della confessione ossia accusa”, in *Prediche per esercizi*, quaderno II, pp. 1-19 (FdB 2894 E6 to 2895 A8). Note the significant sequence: On the salvation of the soul, then on confession. Despite its title “Il Sacramento della Penitenza”, the circular letter of 29 November 1899 (L.C. p. 190-205) is disappointing for us here.
- 3 “Un tratto grande della misericordia di Dio verso i peccatori abbiamo nel Sacramento della Confessione. Se Dio avesse detto di perdonarci i nostri peccati solamente col Battesimo, e non più quelli che per disgrazia si sarebbero commessi dopo aver ricevuto questo Sacramento, oh quanti cristiani certo se ne andrebbero alla perdizione ! ma Iddio conoscendo la nostra grande miseria stabilì un altro Sacramento, con cui ci sono rimessi i peccati commessi dopo il Battesimo. E’ questo il Sacramento della Confessione.” (G. Bosco, “La confessione”, in *Il mese di maggio ...*, Turin, 1858, p. 124).
- 4 G. Bosco, *Il mese di maggio...*, pp. 124-125.
- 5 “Giovani miei, ricordatevi che il confessore è un padre, il quale desidera ardentemente di fervi tutto il bene possibile, e cerca di allontanare da voi ogni sorta di male.” (G. Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele ...*, Turin, Paravia, 1861, chap. V, p. 25).
- 6 “Ora chi vuol poco pensare alla sua anima, vada una volta al mese ; chi vuol salvarla, ma non si sente tanto ardente, vada ogni quindici giorni ; chi poi volesse arrivare alla perfezione, vada ogni settimana. Di più no, eccettochè uno avesse qualche cosa che gli pesasse sulla coscienza.” (Goodnight of 2 November 1876; MB XII, p. 566 or BM XII, p 415).
- 7 “Essa (fonte della riconciliazione) è nella Trinità, in Dio che è Padre, Figlio e Spirito Santo, cioè amore totale che si comunica”. (J. Vecchi, “Ci ha riconciliati con sé ed ha affidato a noi il ministero della Riconciliazione”, letter to Salesians, 15 August 1999, *Atti* 369, p. 5.) This lengthy circular (pp. 3-47) was intended to prepare people for the Jubilee Year 2000.
- 8 Promulgated by Paul VI on 2 December 1973.
- 9 *Praenotanda*, n. 19, of the *Ordo paenitentiae*, Vatican 1974.
- 10 “Il Sistema Preventivo, nella sua espressione più genuina, si appoggerà sempre sulla carità pastorale sostenuta dai due grandi poli sacramentali della Riconciliazione e dell’Eucaristia.” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1987, *Atti* 324, p. 39.)
- 11 “L’Eucaristia e la Riconciliazione, celebrate assiduamente, offrono risorse di eccezionale valore per l’educatione alla libertà cristiana, alla conversione del cuore e allo spirito di condivisione e di servizio nella comunità ecclesiale.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 36).

- 12 “Il sacramento della Riconciliazione, fiducioso incontro con la fedeltà e la misericordia del Padre, rinnova il nostro inserimento nel mistero di morte e risurrezione di Cristo, ci riconcilia con i fratelli nella Chiesa, ci aiuta ad accettare nella pace la nostra povertà e a compiere il nostro cammino di liberazione dal peccato. Ognuna di noi si accosti a questo sacramento in umile atteggiamento di fede, con la regolarità e la frequenza richieste dalla Chiesa, riconoscendone l'importanza per la crescita personale e comunitaria in Cristo.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 41).

Piety

Piety according to Fr Albera

Piety in the religious sense of the word is the only sense that will be used in this entry – an attitude of the person, characterised by a fervent attachment to the service of God.¹ The Rector Major Fr Albera (1910–1921), himself very pious, never tired of the Christian meaning of piety at the beginning of a letter that is the only systematic statement by Salesian Superiors General.²

Piety makes us honour God not only as creator, but also as the most gentle Father who *voluntarie genuit nos verbo veritatis*, voluntarily gave us life by the almighty omnipotence of his word, which is the word of truth. It is because of our piety that we are not content with the quasi-official worship, I would say, that religion imposes on us, but that we feel it our duty to serve God with the most tender affection, with the most attentive delicacy, deepest devotion which is the essence of religion, one of the most precious gifts of the Holy of the Holy Spirit and, according to Saint Paul, the source of every grace and blessing for the present and the life to come.³

To illustrate his point, he repeated the words of Bishop de Ségur, who said that “Christian piety is the union of our thoughts, our affections and our whole life with the thoughts, feelings and spirit of Jesus. It is Jesus living with us”,⁴ a formula that has the advantage of not reducing piety to sentiment alone. For genuine piety informs the whole person, heart and body. “Truly pious souls have wings to lift them up to God in prayer, and feet to walk among men in the course of a kind and holy life,” Fr Albera wrote, quoting Saint Francis de Sales.⁵ It encompasses the entire Christian life in all its fullness. Far from being a secondary or accessory quality, it has been remarked, or even less an evasion, it is an essential note of Christianity. For, in Christ, man is called to offer “spiritual worship” in the Church, filial homage to God of “what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1-2).⁶

Fr Albera, fascinated by practical piety, preferred to call this filial homage of the disciple of Don Bosco a “spirit of piety”. He explained: the spirit of piety must be considered as the goal; the exercises of piety are only the means to obtain and preserve it. Blessed is he who possesses it, for in all things he will seek God alone, strive to love

him ever more ardently and will never claim to do anything but please him. On the contrary, the state of someone who lacks it is very sad. He may multiply the gestures of piety required by the regulations, but the unfortunate person will never be more than a mockery or shadow of true piety. A properly cultivated spirit of piety maintains a person's union with God. It imparts an intimately religious character to each of his acts, even worldly ones. His life becomes, in the mystery, a beginning of the bliss enjoyed by the elect.⁷

Don Bosco, model of Salesian piety

Twenty-five years after Fr Albera, in his circular letter on “the formation of Salesian personnel”, Fr Ricaldone proclaimed with his usual authority: “The piety that we must teach and inculcate in our aspirants is the piety of Don Bosco: a piety that is natural, simple, spontaneous, but at the same time profound and fervent.”⁸ In this way, he pointed to Don Bosco as the model and to the qualities of Salesian piety.

Naturalness and simplicity were the hallmarks of the Italian spiritual tradition chosen (somewhat consciously) by Don Bosco for himself and his followers. In this way, he distinguished himself from modern Flemish, French or Spanish spiritual teachers, and even Francis de Sales. Italian spirituality at its height rejected unnecessary constraints. “The temperament of the Italian Renaissance does not take kindly to anything that is complicated or restrictive. It needs space, air. Anything that hinders movement is unbearable to it” it has been said.⁹ Don Bosco belonged to this way of thinking. The scheme for meditation as advocated by Francis in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* does not seem to have ever seriously interested him. His well-known sermons on prayer make no allusion to it. Nor do his writings contain any trace of learned examinations of conscience. Ease in spiritual matters seemed to be something very good to him. He prided himself on the freedom of his boys when they went to confession and approached the altar. Spiritual direction, which he was far from unaware of, did not have the completed form for him that it had received both in the work of Saint Francis de Sales and in the Ignatian tradition. He lived in the presence of God. In other words he was purely and simply pious.

Let us consult witnesses to his life. They recognised a kind of continuous prayer, an uninterrupted union with God in him. The unalterable even-temperedness of his ever-smiling face bore witness to this. When they turned to him for advice, Don Bosco seemed to interrupt his conversation with God. And God himself seemed to inspire his

ideas and encouragement. “What edification it was for us to hear him recite the *Pater* or the *Angelus*! The impression he made on me when he gave the blessing of Mary Help of Christians to the sick will never fade from my memory” said Fr Albera, who lived with him for many years. “As he pronounced the *Ave Maria* and the words of blessing, it was as if his face was transfigured, his eyes filled with tears and his voice trembled on his lips. For me, these were signs that a *virtus de illo exibat*.¹⁰ The miraculous effects that followed: the afflicted consoled, the sick cured, did not surprise me.”¹¹

Salesian forms of practices of piety

By the will of the founder, a fixed and uniform framework of formulas for “practices” or “exercises” had long supported the piety of the Salesian Family. Don Bosco had scarcely set up his local work in Turin when he published *Il Giovane provveduto* (1847), intended to help his boys with their “exercises in Christian piety.”¹² Then, during his lifetime, to provide the same services for services to adult laymen, then to girls, *Il Cattolico provveduto* (1868) for the former and *La Figlia cristiana provveduta* (1879) for the latter. The translations of *Il Giovane provveduto* into various languages (French, Spanish, English, etc.) began systematically as the Salesians entered new countries. And the prayer of the religious depended on *Il Giovane provveduto*. For decades, the members of the Salesian Society and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians knew only these forms to guide them in their “practices of piety”.

One would have to enter this world of formulas to know and understand the kind of piety of the Salesian Family at the beginnings. Their characteristics will necessarily reappear in the entry further on, on *popular religion*, which they illustrate very well. Traditional Salesian piety was in fact a “young” and “popular” piety, i.e. concrete, pictorial, gestural, active, using simple language and focusing more on the Virgin Mary and the saints than on the Paschal Mystery. Let us just list the main titles of the part of *Il Giovane provveduto* of 1885 entitled “Particular exercises of piety”. These were: Morning and evening prayers, Successful attendance at holy mass, The sacrament of Confession, Holy Communion, Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Rosary of the Virgin Mary, Litanies of the Blessed Virgin, Saint Francis de Sales, Chaplet of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Immaculate Conception of Mary, Month of Mary and novena in honour of Mary Help of Christians, Devotion to the Guardian Angel, Brief method of the Way of the Cross, Exercise for a Happy Death, Devotion to

Saint Joseph.¹³ The sacraments and the saints figured prominently in these formulas of Salesian piety of the time.

Religious practices of piety

Don Bosco had not included a chapter on the “practices of piety” in his draft of the Salesian Constitutions (1858). The *Il Giovane provveduto* was sufficient, he probably thought. But we have, in Fr Rua’s original manuscript as an appendix and in his own hand, the articles under this title which he added very early on. The first two show his very accurate sense of piety, not to be confused with the virtue of religion. Because they were very busy, his Salesians would have few regulatory practices, would generally distinguish themselves by their Christian behaviour, and, more specifically, by their modesty of expression, gaze and gait, as well as by the care with which they pronounced the “divine office”. Don Bosco’s other articles prescribed: a daily period of mental and vocal prayer, the daily recitation of the rosary, fasting on Fridays, the monthly practice for a happy death, and masses of suffrage on the death of a confrere or a confrere’s relative.¹⁴ In 1878, Chapter XI of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, entitled “*Particolari pratiche di pietà*” (Particular practices of piety), of a more classical style and quite different from that of the Salesians, indicated for the Sisters the recitation of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin on Sundays and feast days, weekly confession, three-weekly communion (daily with the confessor’s permission), the celebration of the feasts of Saint Joseph, St Francis de Sales, St Teresa and St Angela Merici, the solemnisation of the feasts of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and Mary Help of Christians, and the Saturday fast in honour of the Blessed Virgin.¹⁵

Fidelity to Don Bosco’s schemes and formulas persisted into the twentieth century, not only for the young people, but also for the religious. The *Il Giovane provveduto* continued to be used. A number of its practices were to be found in the manual entitled “Practices of piety in use in Salesian houses” published by order of Fr Albera from 1916 onwards.¹⁶ After modifications made firstly under Fr Rinaldi in 1929, and then, at the time of Fr Ricaldone, by the will of the General Chapter in 1947 it became the little book “for priests”¹⁷ in 1948, destined to survive until the upheavals of 1960s.¹⁸

Over time, however, the distinction between the devotional practices of young people and those of religious had become increasingly clear in Fr Albera’s manual for Salesians. The revised edition of 1948 contained, in addition to the “Practices of piety common to confreres and young people”, which had been reduced to relatively few

items, the “Practices of piety special to Salesians”, which included meditation, spiritual reading, prayers before and after confreres’ meetings, grace at mealtimes, the exercise for a happy death and the form for the examination of conscience, as well as a directory on spiritual exercises and a ritual for clothing and religious profession.¹⁹ Devotion to the saints persisted, but lost some of its importance in Salesian devotional practices.

Modern writers on spirituality, alerted since the seventeenth century by the then proliferating *tartuffes* (religious hypocrites with over-affected piety), have often gone to war against a twofold danger of pious practices inherent in their materiality and already denounced by the Gospel: taking a predominant place at the risk of appearing to be the essence of piety; providing a supposedly edifying mask out of self-love, ambition, or even a life that is anything but virtuous.²⁰ Did this danger ever really threaten the early Salesians of Don Bosco, who were much more inclined to restlessness than to contemplation? In any case, their Superiors General do not seem to have been concerned. Be that as it may, when Frs Rua, Albera, Rinaldi or Ricaldone discussed the practices of piety in their circulars, it was to ask their religious to respect them, in other words not to omit them, not to shorten them and not to mangle them.²¹

Here again, in 1911, the most eloquent was Fr Albera, who knew his world and his immoderate taste for action. He felt that a number of Salesians left a lot to be desired in terms of devotional exercises. “They would no longer be taken for the sons of Don Bosco, those who consider religious practices an unbearable burden, seek to be exempted from them by all means, and give a sad spectacle of slackness and indifference everywhere.” “What a strange contradiction! They live in a religious house, follow their community in many ways, perhaps also work according to our rules, but in reality they are no longer religious, no longer progressing and, at the end of their lives, will find themselves empty-handed.”²² For there is much at risk in breaking away from practice. And failing to practise your religion exposes you to the danger of gradually sinking into laxity. Woe to you if the fountain of devotion runs dry in your heart! So what else can we expect from you, the Rector Major asked. He continued with his complaint at length and concluded: “After such reflections, will there still be some among us who go begging for excuses to evade one or other of the prescribed practices? Is it possible that we do not find time to fulfil our duties of piety in order to attend to our studies? How far from fulfilling their duty well are those who shun any exercise in common!”²³

The gift of piety in Salesian spirituality

The practices of piety (or devotion), however important they may be or appear to be, should never allow us to forget that they are only crutches for piety itself, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught us invocation, praise and conversation with the Father, recalled the Rector Major Fr Vecchi in an article in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000, in which he joined his predecessor Fr Albera in defining piety. The prayer of Jesus, on which his disciples must model themselves, is a constant attitude which manifests itself in spontaneous expressions of joy, thanksgiving, invocation, availability or reflection, but always based on the same word, which is which is “Father.”²⁴ Wasn’t this a presentation of the gift of the Holy Spirit, known as piety?

In a sermon for the feast of Pentecost, after dwelling at length on the gift of the “fear of God”, which “makes us fear God as our Lord and our Judge, and therefore leads us to shun evil and all that we know to be which we know to be disagreeable to him”, Saint Francis de Sales followed it with the Salesian counterweight of piety. “Let us move on to the gift of piety, which is the second”, he would say. “Piety is nothing other than a filial fear, which no longer makes us look to God as our Judge, but as our Father, whom we fear to displease and desire to please.”²⁵ The gift of piety makes us say in truth to our God: “Father”, and consequently encourages us to behave towards him as very respectful and very loving sons.

NOTES

- 1 It does not seem necessary to deal here with the secular meaning of piety - towards one's parents, one's country - nor with the differences between piety and religion or between piety and devotion, two words which are often interchangeable. See, above, the entry on *Devotion*. Anyone wishing to learn more about the meaning of the word piety from the Latin *pietas*, the equivalent of the Greek *eusebeia*, to the present day should consult the copious article "Piété" by André Méhat, Aimé Solignac and Irénée Noyé, in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol XII, Part Two, 1986, col. 1694-1743.
- 2 P. Albera, "Sullo spirito di pietà", Letter to Salesians 15 May 1911, in L. C., pp. 24-40.
- 3 "La pietà ci fa onorare Iddio non solo come Creatore, ma ancora come dolcissimo Padre, che volontarie genuit nos verbo veritatis, volontariamente ci diede la vita con l'onnipotenza della sua parola, che è parola di verità. Si è in forza della pietà che noi non ci teniamo più paghi di quel culto, direi quasi ufficiale, che la religione c'impone, ma sentiamo il dovere di servire Iddio con quel tenerissimo affetto, con quella premurosa delicatezza, con quella profonda devozione, che è l'essenza della religione, uno dei più preziosi doni dello Spirito Santo, e, secondo S. Paolo, la sorgente di ogni grazia e benedizione per la vita presente e per la futura." (P. Albera, "Sullo spirito di pietà", Letter as mentioned above, in L. C., p. 27).
- 4 Same letter, in L. C., p. 28.
- 5 Fr Albera said, *ibid*, p. 28, borrowing this image from Saint Francis de Sales, which is certainly in keeping with the saint's genius, but I have not found it in his writings.
- 6 See Irénée Noyé, in the cited article in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, col. 1741.
- 7 Considerations taken more or less literally from the quoted letter of Fr Albera, pp. 28-30.
- 8 "La pietà che noi dobbiamo insegnare e di cui dobbiamo imbeverare i nostri aspiranti è la pietà di Don Bosco : pietà naturale, semplice, spontanea, ma nello stesso tempo profonda e fervente." (P. Ricaldone, "Formazione del personale salesiano", *Atti* 78, 24 November 1936, p. 76.)
- 9 P. Pourrai, *La spiritualité chrétienne*, vol. III, Paris, 1923, p. 392.
- 10 "Virtue came out from him." Allusion to Lk 6:19.
- 11 "Che edificazione per noi l'udirlo recitare il Pater, l'Angelus Domini! Non si scancellerà mai dalla mia memoria l'impressione che mi faceva nell'atto che dava la benedizione di Maria Ausiliatrice agl'infermi. Mentre pronunziava l'Ave Maria e le parole della benedizione, si sarebbe detto che il suo volto si trasfigurasse ; i suoi occhi si riempivano di lacrime e gli tremava la voce sul labbro. Per me erano indizi che virtus de ilio exibat ; perciò non mi maravigliava degli effetti miracolosi che ne seguivano, se cioè erano consolati gli afflitti, risanati gl'infermi." (P. Albera, letter quoted, p. 34).
- 12 The complete title: *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri, degli esercizi di cristiana pietà, per la recita dell'Uffizio della Beata Vergine e de' principali vespri dell'anno, coll'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre, ecc.*
- 13 Table of contents, G. Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto ...*, Turin, Tipografia e libreria salesiana, 1885, pp. 508-510.

- 14 This text in F. Motto, *Costituzioni ...*, pp. 223-224. Chapter XII of the 1966 Salesian Constitutions was still very much in line with Don Bosco's original plan.
- 15 *Regole o Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice aggregate alla Società Salesiana*, Turin, Tipografia e libreria Salesiana, 1878, pp. 27-29.
- 16 See *Pratiche di pietà in uso nelle case salesiane*, Turin, Società Editrice Intemazionale, 1921, 350 pages.
- 17 *Pratiche di pietà in uso nelle case salesiane. Edizione per sacerdoti*, Torino, Scuola tipografica salesiana, 1948, 240 pages
- 18 The Salesian Sisters made us of a similar manual in this era, the first edition of which was published by Fr Rua in 1889. It bore the title *Libro delle preghiere e delle pratiche di pietà ad uso delle F. M. A.*, Torino, Scuola tip. salesiana, 1920. (Presentation by Fr Albera "Alle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice", dated 24 February 1920). The programme of practices, especially the *Pratiche di pietà giornaliera*, including among other things the seven joys or the seven sorrows of Mary distributed according to the hours of the day, was much more complete than for the male world.
- 19 *Pratiche di pietà ...*, 1948, pp. 43-93, 131-158.
- 20 See Irénée Noyé, art. cited in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. XII, col. 1737.
- 21 The items *Pietà* and *Pratiche di pietà* disappeared from the Index of the official letters of the Rectors Major after the death of Fr Ricaldone in 1951. The liturgists condemned the multiplicity of "pious practices" to the detriment of the official liturgy. As a sign of their offensive, after the 1965 General Chapter, the chapter of the Salesian Regulations on devotional practices was given the significant title: "Liturgia e pratiche di pietà". The rout came in 1971, when prayer life took up all the space previously given to devotional practices in the Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St Francis de Sales.
- 22 "Più non si direbbero figli di D. Bosco certuni, che le pratiche religiose considerano quale un peso insopportabile, adoperano ogni industria per esentarsene, e danno ovunque il triste spettacolo della loro rilassatezza e indifferenza." "Che strana contraddizione! Vivono in casa religiosa, seguono in molte cose la comunità, lavorano forse anche secondo I nostri regolamenti, ma intanto in realtà più non sono religiosi, non fanno un passo nella perfezione, e in fine di vita si troveranno a mani vuote." (P. Albera, "Sullo spirito di pietà", above-mentioned letter, p. 30).
- 23 "Dopo tali riflessioni vi sarà ancora fra noi che vada mendicando pretesti per sottrarsi a questa o a quella delle pratiche prescritte?... Possibile che per attendere allo studio non si trovi il tempo di soddisfare ai nostri doveri di pietà !... Quanto sono lungi dal compiere bene il loro dovere quelli, che rifuggono da ogni esercizio in comune!" (P. Albera, above-mentioned letter, p. 36).
- 24 Juan E. Vecchi, "Verso il giubileo : parlare con il Padre", in *Bollettino salesiano*, April 1999, p. 2.
- 25 St Francis de Sales, Sermon for the Feast of Pentecost, 7 June 1620, in *Oeuvres*, vol. IX, pp. 318-319.

Popular religion

Don Bosco, preacher and writer for the people

We won't get bogged down in the sometimes contradictory definitions of "popular religion", a recent expression in religious sociology on which the opinions of specialists differ. Let us simply note that the clergy themselves are now reluctant to make it the religion of the simple, the ignorant and the superstitious, as they had become accustomed to doing. In this entry, popular religion will be taken to mean the religion that Don Bosco allowed to be practised by the "ordinary people", or saw that they practised. He respected the "elites" and occasionally spoke to them, but he did not believe that he was destined for them. Following in his footsteps, the Salesians, who, like their master and model, sought to remain close to young people and the common people, willingly cultivated forms of religiosity that were often referred to as "popular".

As a seminarian on holiday, John Bosco had received a pastoral lesson from a parish priest at whose church he had just preached an erudite sermon for the feast of the Rosary, and it was a lesson that would guide him throughout his life. It was beautiful, and the congregation was delighted, but, apart from another priest, the brother of the parish priest and himself, his kind listeners had hardly understood a word of it. "What do you advise me to do?" the novice preacher asked, a little worried. "Give up your high-sounding language and stick to dialect where possible" the parish priest replied, "and when you use Italian, speak the language of the people, the people, the people. Instead of speculations, use examples, analogies and simple, practical illustrations."¹ In his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, he remarked at the age of sixty that this observation had been fruitful for him "for the sermons, catechism classes, instructions and in the writing" to which he had devoted himself since then.²

As a young priest, he repeated this remark in writing to his collaborators at the original Oratory. The handwritten rules of the Oratory advised oratory preachers to fill their sermons with examples taken from the Bible or the history of the Church, as well as comparisons and analogies, in Piedmontese if possible. Don Bosco ended his chapter by "warmly requesting [these preachers] to be as clear and popular [=aimed at the people] as possible."³ The preacher must be easily understood by the people. "Remember," he once wrote to his followers one day, "that Saint Augustine, who had become a bishop,

although an eloquent orator, preferred the improprieties of language and the lack of style to the risk of not being understood by the people.”⁴

He was not content to simply trumpet the principle. His published writings appeared in what he called a “popular” style, i.e. simple, concrete and colourful. As long as she lived, his mother, to whom he read them, was able to verify their pleasantness and ease of comprehension. An examination of his works as a whole shows that he had these kinds of qualities, whether they be books of piety, the *Letture cattolice* preferably intended for the people of the countryside, edifying biographies or even historical accounts. Don Bosco’s religious literature was amenable to the “common sense” of the country folk, with a reduced vocabulary, completely foreign to the learned world without a shadow of scholastic reasoning, and which only looked upon theologians and the powerful of the world from a distance. “Popular religion”, as Don Bosco understood it, was perhaps first and foremost a matter of language, among other things.

Places, images, medals and gestures of popular devotion to Mary Help of Christians

During his last thirty-five years, Don Bosco preached, encouraged and developed popular devotion to Mary Help of Christians. His popular religion was a Marian religion.⁵ Devotion to *Notre-Dame des Victoires* (Our Lady of Victories), launched in Paris by Abbé Dufrique-Desgenettes, was spreading in Italy at the time, may have given him some ideas. In Turin, he provided Mary Help of Christians with a blessed place, images, medals and a rite.

There is no lack of similarities between his Church of Mary Help of Christians in Turin and various shrines of Marian apparitions, which have become centres of popular pilgrimage. Don Bosco created devotion to Mary Help of Christians in a place that seemed to him to have been chosen by the Virgin Mary herself. “*Hic domus mea, hinc gloria mea*” (Here is my house, from here my glory goes forth), Our Lady had said to him, according to his interpretation, pointing to an empty plot of land, the very spot where the church would later rise.⁶ There was something marvellous about this place. The construction of the church in record time was, according to him, a continuous miracle, which he made known through appropriate publications from the year of its consecration (1868).⁷ Appeals to the Help of Christians had been followed by astonishing events, especially healings, which he considered miraculous. He generously circulated the accounts in pamphlets, which, incidentally, resulted in irritating his archbishop.

Mary kept watch in this church through the statue erected at the top of a tower and above all by the painting glorifying her above the main altar. Popular devotion is nourished by the exceptional. It readily attaches itself to a place where it venerates an image. In Turin, Don Bosco offered both the place and the image. The details of the painting of Mary Help of Christians expressed her power. The images of Mary Help of Christians and medals bearing her effigy multiplied in the Valdocco storerooms. In Don Bosco's hands, images and medals of the Help of Christians became the preferred instruments for devotion to Mary Help of Christians. We know how much popular religion reveres relics and images, which give devotees access to spiritual powers. In the Italy of the time, the images were those of the *santini* that people kept with them. It would be a great mistake to see them as supports for idolatrous worship. For the people who seek them out, the world of images is a close, well-populated universe. The Virgin and the saints live there. Popular devotion treats the image as a living person. Devotees maintain a pious relationship with images in human form. No more than a relic, then, is an image a mere object. Fully embodied it is the source, refuge, weapon, comfort, protection and hope of its devotees. The faithful conversed with Mary Help of Christians in and through images and medals which Don Bosco distributed in Turin or during his trips to France and Spain. The medal of the Help of Christians worn around someone's neck was a sign of belonging to Mary's family and kingdom, an "effective weapon" against the enemy, the devil, Fr Albera insisted.⁸ The power came from elsewhere. All the "efficacy" or, in other words, the "power" of these medals depended on Mary herself, Don Bosco explained.⁹

Like all popular devotion, devotion to Mary Help of Christians was expressed in gestures. Pilgrims flocked to the shrine in Turin on 24 May for the feast of Mary Help of Christians. Often, they had initially struggled with this gesture of Marian piety. At the end of the pilgrimage, the Salesians gave Mary's faithful the opportunity to approach the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist sacred gestures if ever there were. On 24 May, the procession was the pinnacle of the physical gestures of Turin's popular religion. Through this act souls and bodies were immersed in the collective belief in Mary's presence. The prayer addressed to her would elicit her beneficent response. The momentum in her direction was charged with confidence, hope and the concentration of the deepest forces of being.

The blessing of Mary Help of Christians, through which Don Bosco wanted to pass on the power (*la virtù*) of Mary, rewarded the devotees. Fr Albera described his gesture with emotion.

The impression he made on me when he gave the blessing of Mary Help of Christians to the sick will never fade from my memory. As he pronounced the Ave Maria and the words of blessing, it was as if his face was transfigured, his eyes filled with tears and his voice trembled on his lips. For me, these were signs that a *virtus de illo exibat*. The miraculous effects that followed: the afflicted consoled, the sick cured, did not surprise me.¹⁰

Clearly, Don Bosco himself and those who sought his blessing believed in the immanent action of supernatural forces, Mary above all. Prayers, rites and practices presupposed this kind of faith, characteristic of popular religion. God, the Virgin Mary and the saints intervene as omnipotent key players in the everyday world. Popular worship flourished on the feast day of Mary Help of Christians, on 24 May. Don Bosco wanted the sumptuousness of his church with its bright lights, marble and brass, to exude the power of worship. Responding to the people's need for worship, the festival glorified the extraordinary, the holy, the fervent, the miraculous, the escape from everyday life. The people were delighted.

Recognition of popular religiosity in the contemporary world

The clergy in the modern era have traditionally fought against popular religiosity, which in their eyes was guilty of magic, superstition and even idolatry. Then, at the end of the twentieth century, reflection on the fundamental attitudes led to a certain disavowal of anathemas. The ecumenical spirit, followed by a Council committed to valuing "all that is good, pure and holy" in the relationship with God changed perspectives. The Manichaeism that had been the rule for several centuries began to fade. The clergy worked to give new meaning to the sacramentals: oil, water, candles, etc. Since the CELAM meeting in Medellin in 1968, and especially since the Puebla meeting in 1979, which recognised the authentic values of Latin American religiosity, Latin American clerics have been concerned to adapt their pastoral care to the realities of the people.¹¹ They have thus more or less taken the missionary step of accompanying their people in their spirituality. To remove the signs that underpin a real faith runs the risk, they remarked, of leading to a disintegration of the religious personality of this people. The images of churches and domestic altars are for them a permanent reference to everyday religious life. Gestures of respect underline and strengthen it. Processions celebrate beliefs that are hidden in the culture. Popular religion in the multiplicity of forms it takes, is the direct testimony of the consciousness of a group, the story of its changing

relationship with divine powers. It is the embodiment of a collective experience of faith which is expressed in perfect symbiosis with its socio-cultural environment.

Pope John Paul II has strongly supported popular piety during his travels and his continental meetings with the various episcopates. In an apostolic exhortation from Mexico City in January 1999, he declared that “A distinctive feature of America is an intense popular piety, deeply rooted in the various nations” and that “it has special importance as a place of encounter with Christ for all those who in poverty of spirit and humility of heart are sincerely searching for God.” Many manifestations of popular piety have taken on “indigenous religious forms” in America, he continued. “We must not underestimate the fact that, prudently considered, it too can provide valid cues for a more complete inculturation of the Gospel.” We must ensure that “the seeds of the Word, found in their culture, may come to their fullness in Christ.”¹²

A member of the Salesian Family, a follower of Don Bosco who was committed in his time and for his country to promoting a popular religious language and popular devotion to Mary Help of Christians, feels very naturally in tune with such statements.¹³

NOTES

- 1 “Che adunque mi consiglia di fare ? - Abbandonare la lingua e l’orditura dei classici, parlare in volgare dove si può, od anche in lingua italiana, ma popolarmente, popolarmente, popolarmente. Invece poi di ragionamenti tenetevi agli esempi, alle similitudini, ad apologi semplici e pratici.” (MO Da Silva, p. 97).
- 2 “... nelle prediche, nei catechismi, nelle istruzioni e nello scrivere, cui mi era fin da quel tempo applicato” (Ibid., p. 98).
- 3 “5. Quelli che si degneranno di venire in quest’Oratorio a spiegare la parola di Dio sono caldamente pregati di essere chiari e popolari quanto è possibile.” (*Piano di Regolamento dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales in Valdocco*, handwritten ms, p. 24).
- 4 “... rammentatevi che S. Agostino, divenuto Vescovo, benché esimio maestro di belle lettere ed oratore eloquente, preferiva le improprietà di lingua et la niuna eleganza di stile, al rischio di non essere inteso dal popolo.” (G. Bosco, Letter to Salesians, 19 March 1885, L. C., p. 29).
- 5 I am borrowing the following reflections on popular religion from various studies published on the subject since 1970, in particular *Le christianisme populaire*, published by B. Plongeron and R. Pannet, Paris, 1976; *La religion populaire*. Acts of the International Colloquium of CNRS in October 1977, Paris, 1980; A. Dupront, “Religion populaire”, in the *Dictionnaire des Religions*, ed. P. Poupard, pp. 1428-1434; Michel Meslin, *L’expérience humaine du divin*, coll. *Cogitatio fidei* 150, Paris, Cerf, 1988, pp. 260-291.
- 6 See MB XVII, p. 30 (BM XVII, p. 15).
- 7 *Maraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice, raccolte dal Sacerdote Giovanni Bosco*, Turin, tip. e libreria dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1868; *Rimembranza di una solennità in onore di Maria Ausiliatrice*, pel Sacerdote Giovanni Bosco, Turin, tip. e libreria dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1868.
- 8 “Per lui [Don Bosco] questa immagine [la medaglia di Maria Ausiliatrice], divotamente tenuta sul petto, doveva essere una prova del nostro amore a Maria, un rinoscimento della sua qualità di nostra Madre e Regina, un’arma potentissima per mettere in fuga il nemico infernale, un dolce ricordo della nostra appartenenza ad un Istituto da Lei prediletto e manifestamente destinato a farla conoscere ed onorare dappertutto sotto il glorioso titolo di Aiuto dei Cristiani.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 31 March 1918, L.C., pp. 267-268).
- 9 He wrote to Duchess Maria Melzi d’Eril, in January 1868 : “Ecco le medagline che nella sua bontà compiacquesi richiedermi. Queste dozzine che costano un’ Ave Maria. Chi poi volesse fare qualche cosa di materiale mandi quanto il cuore gli inspira per la chiesa di Maria Ausiliatrice da cui dipende tutta l’efficacia di queste medaglie.” (*Epistolario* Motto, II, p. 468.)
- 10 “Non si scancellerà mai dalla mia memoria l’impressione che mi faceva nell’atto che dava la benedizione di Maria Ausiliatrice agli infermi. Mentre pronunziava l’Ave Maria e le parole della benedizione, si sarebbe detto che il suo volto si trasfigurasse ; i suoi occhi si riempivano di lacrime e gli tremava la voce sul labbra. Per me erano indizi che virtus de illo exibat; perciò non mi maravigliava degli effetti miracolosi che ne seguivano, se cioè erano consolati gli afflitti, risanati gl’infermi.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 15 May 1911; L.C., p. 34).

- 11 Helcion Ribeiro, *Religiosidad popular na Teologia Latino-Americana*, São Paulo, 1984.
- 12 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 22 January 1999. Text available online on the Vatican website).
- 13 The importance of devotion to the Sacred Heart practices in the manner of Margaret Mary Alacoque, in the Salesian Family under Frs Rua and Albera, is another sign of the propensity of Don Bosco's followers for popular religion. See further on the entry, *Sacred Heart*.

Poverty

The poor and poverty

The meaning of the terms “poor” and “poverty” is one that everyone thinks they know, but on closer examination turns out to be rather flexible.

At first glance, the poor are men or women in need and therefore in a precarious situation, people for whom tomorrow is always uncertain. The word has, if not synonyms, at least numerous equivalents. For example: indigent, miserable, wretched, unfortunate, working-class or starving. The poor are said to lack the necessities of life. The difficulty begins with describing this “need” and “necessity” which depend on a multitude of factors. Entire populations do not feel the “need” for two or three meals a day or a mattress to rest on at night, which are essential for most others. One meal or a mat is enough. We are told that times of scarcity, i.e. real poverty, are necessary for them to reduce themselves to one meal every two days. In fact, the environment determines cultural needs, which vary from century to century and from region to region. By poor, then, we mean very diverse social types. “Historically, geographically and socially the condition of the poor, which is essentially relative, comprises degrees separated by economic, biological and social thresholds.”¹ The “standards” and “thresholds” that determine relative poverty vary from one country to another and from one century to the next. Someone who is poor at home will be (more or less) rich elsewhere. This has far-reaching implications for religious societies spread across the world and destined to survive the centuries.

As for poverty, we are told that it is the state of someone who is poor, who lives in indigence and destitution. This brings us back to the relativity of the concept and term “poor”. So be it! Poverty is therefore an evil, at least economically speaking, from which we must free ourselves. But, as the sages point out, this is only from the point of view of “having” For there is also and above all “being” and its good. When, for ascetic reasons, people deprive themselves of or detach themselves from material goods, when they renounce them and share in the condition of the poor in order to gain access to spiritual goods, this “evil” changes meaning and takes the form of a virtue (not necessarily religious or Christian, we hasten to add). Christ said to the rich young man “If you wish

to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21).

This virtuous poverty recommended by Christ, which is the renunciation of earthly goods in accordance with his spirit, is called “evangelical poverty”. The contemporary Church has made a point of clarifying its scope for those within its midst who claim to practise it officially in a religious institute.

The evangelical counsel of poverty in imitation of Christ who, although he was rich, was made poor for us, entails, besides a life which is poor in fact and in spirit and is to be led productively in moderation and foreign to earthly riches, a dependence and limitation in the use and disposition of goods according to the norm of the proper law of each institute.²

Poverty at the Salesian beginnings

Don Bosco was not just another Francis of Assisi, a fellow countryman who only ever had one Lady, apart from the Virgin Mary: Poverty, a “royal” virtue that he imposed on his Salesians in his will. But it was in the world of the poor that Don Bosco deliberately chose an apostolic clientele and a lifestyle for himself and his followers.

Born poor, he voluntarily spent his life in poverty. His mother could not have tolerated having a wealthy priest for a son. He renounced all lucrative positions and made a point of living modestly like the people of his birthplace. The scene he displayed for his visitors at Valdocco in his final weeks was eloquent. One of them, a Belgian, whom he agreed to receive on 23 December 1887, recounted:

I cast a rapid glance around the most poorly, indeed wretchedly furnished room that I could have imagined, and then perceived, not without emotion, the venerable old man sitting on a battered sofa, bent by age and the labours of a long apostolate.³

For his contemporaries, Don Bosco was a poor man.

Evangelical poverty was to be the lot of his Salesians. The detachment from possessions, which it implies, should have taken pride of place in his constitutional chapter on the vow of poverty. In 1864, Don Bosco sent a text to Rome stating: “The observance of the vow of poverty in our Congregation consists essentially in detachment from all earthly goods, which we will practise by living together...”⁴ This detachment was

to be evident even in the cells of the religious themselves. The version was modified by higher authority, concerned about the canonical meaning of the vow, which rejected its consideration of detachment, at the end of the chapter, considering it to be characteristic only of the virtue of poverty. But, in his Introduction to the Rules, Don Bosco took up the same idea in the opening lines of the article on “poverty”. “If we do not leave the world out of love, one day we will have to leave it by force. On the other hand those who, during their mortal life, abandon it spontaneously will have a hundredfold in eternal life ...”⁵ This poverty was a “poverty of heart”, one might say. However, it consisted first and foremost of an obvious material poverty. Like any working man, the Salesian, who did not beg as Franciscans did, would earn his bread by his work. An income earner, even a retired one, will never make a good Salesian. What’s more, Don Bosco never imagined the poverty of his confreres without rigorous economy and simplicity of life.

A similar and perhaps even more demanding poverty marked the origins of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. One of the constitutional articles on the “principal virtues” to be practised imposed a “rigorous observance of poverty” on them.⁶ This was not an empty phrase in Mornese and Nizza at the time of Mother Mazzarello. “Poverty has been a constant in our history from the very origins. It is the most beautiful glory of Mornese’s early years”, it was written.⁷ The first Sisters, poor but joyful, naturally combined poverty and mortification. Mother Mazzarello, who insisted on detachment from the world and its vanities, kept them in a climate of real poverty. The Sisters insisted on uniformity in food, clothing and permissions. They worked to earn their living. At Mornese, they had to waste nothing, take care of their equipment and be careful not to damage anything. Mother Mazzarello taught them to practise poverty casually, without “blowing their trumpet”. One day, we learn, at Nizza, all that was left was a little soup. “Today, my dear daughters” the Mother said, “we must be happy to feel that we are really poor, and we won’t even let on that we have had the opportunity to mortify ourselves.”

In short, through their example and exhortations, Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello maintained institutions in the world of the poor founded primarily for this.⁸

The demands of Salesian poverty

When the opportunity arises, people have little hesitation in escaping the world of the poor. Religious of the twentieth century were tempted to amass and enjoy money in order to live comfortably, build beautiful houses and look like *bon vivants*. The leaders

of the Salesian spirit were deeply concerned. Six Rectors Major (Rua, Albera, Ricaldone, Ricceri, Viganò and Vecchi) expressed their apprehensions in elaborate documents.

The first of them, Fr Rua, himself a man of legendary austerity,⁹ did so in a circular dated 31 January 1907, in which he celebrated the excellence and demanding practice of the virtue of poverty, that is to say, poverty voluntarily embraced for the love of God.¹⁰

Poverty, the first advice given by the gospel to those who claim to be “perfect”, which is the goal of all religious life, implies detachment from earthly goods. This detachment brings undeniable supernatural benefits. Poverty helps us to prefer God and his goods above all else, in other words, to practice love for him. Nothing is more useful, Fr Rua remarked, to the conscientious worker for the Kingdom of Heaven. He thought of his missionaries in Brazil, Argentina or Colombia, remarking: “It will certainly not be the Salesians who want to lead a comfortable life who undertake truly fruitful works and will go among the savages of Mato Grosso or Tierra del Fuego, or put themselves at the service of poor lepers. This will always be the prerogative of those who generously practise poverty.”¹¹

The Salesians had to practise the virtue of poverty. The renunciation which is essential to vowed poverty begins for the religious on the day of his profession, whatever solution he prefers for the management of his goods.¹² But slackness comes easily. Many “*miseri*” (unhappy people) try to take back with one hand what they have given with the other. They make up for their overall sacrifice in small ways. Out of fear of losing the necessities of life, they cling to everything they can get their hands on, finding a thousand excuses to keep it for themselves, and invent new needs as they please. Small deprivations frighten them. In short, they pretend to possess nothing and to have everything, even the extras which their benefactors have done without to help them live. The most effective remedy for this evil, said the Rector Major, was a genuine communal life, in line with the directives of the Constitutions. The Salesian then becomes “one thing” with his community. If the community has everything, he has nothing. Common life destroys any spirit of illusions about poverty and eliminates the pretexts imagined by “self-love” to avoid observing the Constitutions. We will therefore exclude all that is sought-after and superfluous in food and clothing. And community money must not be misappropriated for personal use, which would amount to theft.

Fr Rua concluded his letter with three recommendations designed to restore the poor face to his Congregation that it was beginning to lose. a) The good Salesian is not satisfied with merely respecting the requirements of the vow of poverty; he wants to practise the virtue of poverty, b) The true son of Don Bosco is content with what is and

never attaches himself to anything superfluous. The monthly exercise for a happy death allows him to carry out the essential checks, c) The fervent religious accepts the hardships and inconveniences of community life wholeheartedly and in a spirit of penance. Let Salesians remember the “heroic times” of their Congregation!¹³

In the years following Fr Rua’s death (1910), it was up to his successor, Fr Albera, to condemn various abuses in the area of poverty. Luxury was to be banned from Salesian communities.

When permitting the construction or repair of houses, great rigour should be used to prevent luxury, magnificence and elegance. From the moment that affluence begins to appear in persons, rooms or houses, the decadence of our Congregation begins at the same time.¹⁴

Noting that responsibility for the lack of poverty lay more with leaders than with subordinates, he devoted a long paragraph to poverty in a letter just to provincials and rectors, “to preserve the spirit of Don Bosco in all the houses.” “In all the communities” he lamented, there are poor religious who think and behave more or less like people of the world in terms of poverty. “Almost without realising it, they have created innumerable needs for themselves, claim amenities from their superiors which would not even be appropriate for opulent families, and lose peace of heart when they are denied what they so eagerly desire.” Regional or local superiors must not fall into such a trap themselves! That would be an assured downfall. They are in no way the “*padroni*” (masters) of the money and goods they handle, but simply their “*amministratori*” (administrators), obliged to account to their own superiors for what passes through their hands.¹⁵

Don Bosco’s immediate successors were therefore concerned about the Salesians’ manifestly austere lifestyle, even though, in their opinion, the latter were (already) breaking away from it far too often.¹⁶

Salesian poverty in a consumer society

In the West, during the last third of the twentieth century, society increasingly imposed its “consumer” ideology on the world and on the Church. The Salesian practice of “poverty” was affected by this and to varying degrees it provoked reactions from Frs Ricceri, Viganò and Vecchi.

Fr Luigi Ricceri, writing in the hustle and bustle of 1968, was the most virulent.¹⁷ He denounced the mentality and behaviour of Salesians as being “bourgeois”: no worries,

a certain comfort. To what extent can we call ourselves poor, he exclaimed, especially when the tone and style of our lives are not clear “signs” of our poverty? A preoccupation with well-being means that we eat well, take long and very pleasant holidays, and go on expensive tourist trips. And what can we say about certain apartments, which, far from presenting a dignified and simple functionality, are, in their furniture and décor, of a luxury that especially nowadays, provokes reactions and comments that are anything but well-meaning?

Let us be fraternally frank: today the wellbeing virus is penetrating our communities, life is becoming gentrified and people are looking for justifications which are by no means convincing. Even by those who should be watching over, intervening and providing!¹⁸

Twenty-five years after Fr Ricceri, Fr Viganò would repeat that, in a “world of well-being”, the Salesian “witness” of poverty “in life and action” is not optional.¹⁹

Fr Vecchi, sensitive to the “drama of humanity” that poverty was now unleashing on a global scale, took up the argument again shortly afterwards, developing it in depth and from an educational point of view.²⁰ This new phenomenon stood out in the context of a richer world. He described it carefully and sought its origins. The poverty of young people, of which there are many forms, should, in accordance with their vocation, concern the members of the Salesian Family above all else.

And to outline a Salesian programme for a new culture it was necessary, as the Salesians had begun to do, to care more and more for poor young people. This meant reaching out to children living on the streets, working in urban areas of widespread poverty, trying to solve the problem of school drop-outs through alternative educational pathways, helping young people in prison, and working with drug addicts through prevention, reception and support for detoxification. Taking the problem in hand, the Rector Major outlined his philosophy of Christian action against the consumer society and its perverse effects. The effort to combat marginalisation, he believed, is all the more effective the more it penetrates and transforms the set of perceptions and feelings that frame the thinking and behaviour of a society and the forces that drive it. Aid and assistance to individuals, however important, are not enough. It is a question of promoting a culture of the other, of sobriety in lifestyle and consumption, of willingness to share freely, of social justice, understood as attention to everyone’s right to dignity of life and, more directly, of encouraging people and institutions to work together to provide comprehensive prevention, welcome and support for those in need.

The Salesian, an educator of the poor, is poor himself, Fr Vecchi taught. He is detached from material goods. These goods are only functional and secondary to him. He maintains a simple and even austere lifestyle for himself, without giving in to the desire for unlimited possession of the goods and comforts of life. He recalled Don Bosco's advice to his first missionaries: "Let the world know that you are poor in clothes, in food, in dwellings, and you will be rich in the face of God and become masters of men's hearts."²¹ When acting, the Salesian Family member places trust in the poor means of friendship and relationships rather than in organisation. This poor man's spirituality helps him to rely on Providence. Don Bosco's poverty was serene, attentive to the Kingdom of God and its justice, and at the same time industrious in serving young people. He knew how to start small, encourage collaboration and channel money directly to educational purposes. He asked and waited, but never got bogged down in the search for resources.

The redefinition of Salesian evangelical poverty

From Fr Rua to Fr Vecchi, the model has spanned the century. In the last two decades, the renewed Constitutions of the Salesians and the Salesian Sisters have been able to define an "evangelical poverty" that is very faithful to Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello without revolutionising their religious.²²

The constitutions of the Salesians SDB, who claimed to be "called to an intensely evangelical life", took up a sentence of Don Bosco's in his Introduction of 1875. The Salesians "choose to follow the Saviour who was born in poverty, lived deprived of everything and died stripped on the cross."²³ Their poverty was not Franciscan. "Unremitting and self-sacrificing work is a characteristic left us by Don Bosco, and is a concrete expression of our poverty", said the Salesian Constitutions.²⁴ And, for their part, an article of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians' Constitutions stated: "Diligent, creative, and responsible work is an essential aspect of our poverty [...] Let us generously submit to the common law of work, thus sharing in the lot of the poor who must labour in order to earn their daily bread."²⁵ The Constitutions of both the male and female Volunteers, who were also "poor", that is to say, as one article explained, detached from earthly goods and free from the selfish desire to possess, were inspired by the directives of Fr Rinaldi, always anxious himself to conform to Don Bosco.²⁶ As for the Regulations of Apostolic Life, the Cooperators "in the spirit of poverty outlined in the Gospel ... administer their possessions with simplicity and a generous sharing; they reject all outward show and think of them in the Christian light of the common good", adapting Salesian spirituality to the contemporary teaching of the Holy See on

the problem of poverty.²⁷ Like Don Bosco, all the Salesians, Volunteers and Cooperators wanted to remain poor by detaching themselves from earthly goods.

The affluent society that surrounded them tempted them and, according to several Rectors Major, religious easily succumbed to its charms. In any case, the rapid flow of time and the transformation of customs made everyone's task difficult. Nevertheless, they managed to interpret a new world in the light of the old teachings of their master from another century, Don Bosco.

NOTES

- 1 M. Mollat du Jourdin, "Histoire des pauvres", *Encyclopaedia universalis*, vol. 11, Paris, 1990, p. 497.
- 2 C.I.C., canon 600.
- 3 Article from the Gazette de Liège at the time, reproduced in MB XVIII, document 85, p. 797-798 (BM XVIII, p. 747).
- 4 "L'osservanza del voto di povertà nella nostra Congregazione consiste essenzialmente nel distacco da ogni bene terreno, il che noi praticheremo colla vita comune ..." (*Società di San Francesco di Sales*, 1864, cap. "Del voto di povertà", art. 1. See F. Motto, *Costituzioni...*, p. 100).
- 5 "Se non lasciamo il mondo per amore, dovremo un dì lasciarlo per forza. Coloro che nel corso del vivere mortale lo abbandonano con atto spontaneo avranno il centuplo nella vita eterna ..." (Introduction to the *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, 1875, p. xxiii).
- 6 *Regole o Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria SS. Ausiliatrice ...*, Turin, 1878, tit. IX, art.2.
- 7 "La povertà è una costante della nostra storia a partire dalle origini. E' la gloria più bella dei primi anni di Mornese." (Sr Piera Cavaglià, *Povertà e solidarietà a Mornese*, Report presented to the Salesian Economers, Rome, 1998, mimeo, p. 11). The rest of our paragraph depends on this careful study.
- 8 On the Salesian priority for the poor, especially the poorest of young people. See further on, the entry on *Youth*.
- 9 Fr Rua was poor in his clothing and personal furnishings. "He wore his cassock for as long as he could, until the fabric wore out. As for his hat, the least we can say is that it had become famous for its green tint. All this, however, remained in perfect condition, without a single stain or tear. Fr Rua was a stickler for cleanliness. His office was just as tidy. When he was Don Bosco's second-in-command, his furniture consisted exclusively of a small table, three white wooden chairs and two pious pictures fixed to the wall, one in front of him, the other behind him, by a pin. When he succeeded Don Bosco, he insisted that nothing be changed in this sacred room, where he was to live for twenty-two years. Just as he had found it, poor and deprived of everything, he wanted to keep it that way. During one of his long journeys, a bursar who thought he was clever had the old pink sandstone floor removed and replaced with shiny tiles that were easy to clean. On his return, when Fr Rua no longer found the porous, half-demolished bricks that Don Bosco's foot had trodden on for thirty-five years, his grief was profound: history had been destroyed and the spirit of poverty offended. [...] His love of thrift went so far as to make him collect all the little pieces of white paper he could get his hands on..." (A. Auffray, *Le premier successeur of Don Bosco*, Lyon, Vitte, 1932, pp. 356-357).
- 10 M. Rua, "La Povertà", Letter to Salesians, 31 January 1907 in L. C., pp. 360-377.
- 11 "Non sono certamente i Salesiani desiderosi di menar una vita comoda, che intraprenderanno opere veramente fruttuose, che andranno in mezzo ai selvaggi del Matto Grosso o della Terra del Fuoco, o si metteranno al servizio dei poveri lebbrosi. Questo sarà sempre il vanto di coloro che osserveranno generosamente la povertà." (Previously mentioned letter, p. 369).
- 12 Because, by the will of Don Bosco, Salesians and Salesian Sisters can retain basic ownership.

- 13 At that time, in winter, in order to wash up when he got up – around 4 o'clock, perhaps – he himself had to clear the snow from his attic's gutters!
- 14 “Nel permettere costruzioni o riparazioni di case si usi gran rigore nello impedire il lusso, la magnificenza, la eleganza. Dal momento che comincerà apparire agiatezza nella persona, nelle camere o nelle case, comincia nel tempo stesso la decadenza della nostra Congregazione.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 29 January 1915, L. C., pp. 159-160).
- 15 “Quasi senza avvedersene si son creati innumerevoli bisogni, pretendono dai loro Superiori tali agiatezze che non converrebbero neppure alle famiglie doviziose, e perdono la pace del cuore, se vien loro negato ciò che tanto avidamente desiderano”, etc. (P. Albera, Letter to provincials and rectors: “Consigli ed avvisi per conservare lo spirito di D. Bosco in tutte le Case”, 23 April 1917, § *Povertà*, L. C., pp. 219-221).
- 16 Fr Ricaldone in the 1930s would repeat the lessons of Don Bosco, Fr Rua and Fr Albera, justifying them by appealing to the spiritual tradition of the Church. This was P. Ricaldone, Commentary on Strenna on “la povertà”, *Atti* 82, 24 July 1937, 260 pages, a circular included in: *I voti. I. Introduzione. Povertà*, coll. *Formazione salesiana*, Colle Don Bosco (Asti), Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, 1943.
- 17 L. Ricceri, “La nostra povertà oggi”, Letter to Salesians, *Atti* 253, November 1968, pp. 3-63.
- 18 “Diciamolo con fraterna franchezza : oggi il virus del benessere entra per molte vie nelle nostre comunità, la vita si imborghedisce e si cercano giustificazioni che però non convincono : e questo anche da parte di chi dovrebbe vigilare, intervenire e provvedere.” (Letter cited above pp. 20-21).
- 19 E. Viganò, “E Maria lo depose in una mangiatoia”, Letter to Salesians, 24 May 1993, *Atti* 345, pp. 3-49.
- 20 J. Vecchi, “Si commosse per loro”, Letter to Salesians, 30 March 1997, *Atti* 359, April-June 1997, pp. 3-36; “Mandati ad annunciare ai poveri un lieto messaggio”, Letter to Salesians, 25 March 1999, *Atti* 367, April-June 1999, pp. 3-38.
- 21 “Fate che il mondo conosca che siete poveri negli abiti, nel vitto, nelle abitazioni e voi sarete ricchi in faccia a Dio e diverrete padroni del cuore degli uomini.” (See J. Borrego, *Recuerdos de San Juan Bosco a los primeros misioneros*, Roma, LAS, 1984, p.44.)
- 22 SDB Constitutions, art. 72-79; FMA Constitutions, art. 18-28.
- 23 “Chiamati ad una vita intensamente evangelica, scegliamo di seguire “il Salvatore che nacque nella povertà, visse nella privazione di tutte le cose, e morì nudo in croce”. *Introduzione*, 1875, p. XXIV.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 72).
- 24 “Il lavoro assiduo e sacrificato è ima caratteristica lasciataci da Don Bosco ed è espressione concreta della nostra povertà” (SDB Constitutions, art. 78).
- 25 “Un aspetto essenziale della nostra povertà è l’operosità assidua, industriosa e responsabile [...] Ci sottometeremo con generosità alla comune legge del lavoro, condividendo anche in questo la sorte dei poveri che devono faticare per guadagnare il pane.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 24).
- 26 VDB Constitutions, art. 26-30; CDB Constitutions, art. 22-25.
- 27 “ ... in spirito di povertà evangelica amministra i beni con criteri di semplicità e di generosa condivisione, rifuggendo da ogni forma di ostentazione, e considerandoli nella luce cristiana del bene comune” (RVA, art. 12.).

Prayer

On the need for prayer

"We cannot speak enough of prayer, since it is the most important action in the whole life of Christians", we read in the writings of Jean-Jacques Olier.¹ But those were other times. What is the opinion of today's disciple of Don Bosco, for whom action apparently takes precedence over the "interior life" so dear to the founder of the Society of Saint Sulpice, the author of this sentence? Doesn't feverish action dispense with prayer? Busy people whose industrious charity fills their days, are ready to believe so. They have no time to pray. Fr Viganò, the herald of Salesian pastoral action, wanted to set the record straight. Without prayer he declared, not without emphasis, in a letter warning against certain charismatic excesses, no synthesis is possible between faith and life. And without it, we Salesians can have no (active!) "reciprocal relationship" between evangelisation and education, no unity between consecration and professional work, no correspondence between interior disposition and external activity. In less abstract terms, without the interior breath of prayer, work does not sanctify, human competence does not bear witness to the Gospel, educational commitments have no pastoral effect and daily life is not religious. These statements may seem excessive, continued the Rector Major, "but they touch a sore point" of Don Bosco's disciple in a secularised world. For "in the secular world, prayer is belittled, activity leads to a forgetting of the essential."²

To exhort his Salesians to prayer, Fr Viganò invoked the authority of Don Bosco in his 1885 Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions:

The history of the Church teaches us that all religious Orders and Congregations have flourished and brought good as long as piety has remained in force; and that, on the contrary, we have seen many of them decline and others cease to exist. But when, you may ask? When the spirit of piety weakened and each member began to "think of his own affairs, not of those of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 2:21), as Saint Paul already lamented among some Christians.³

Prayer, which associates Christ, the being of prayer, with the action of the creature, giving God the Father his rightful place, should permeate the entire day of Don Bosco's disciple.

The spirit of prayer, vital prayer and the liturgy of life

The Salesian Sisters open the chapter of their Constitutions on “Our Prayer” with the consideration that “Through the grace of our adoption as daughters and sons, the Holy Spirit prays in us, ‘intercedes insistently for us’ (cf. Rom 8:26) and invites us to make room so that through our voice the Father may be praised and invoked for the salvation of the world.”⁴ The “spirit of prayer”, fruit of divine grace, attitude of the soul habitually turned towards God and united to Him, that experiences the taste and desire to pray in this way, is natural to the true follower of Don Bosco. Don Bosco himself had admired it to a rare degree, first in Aloysius Gonzaga, then in his pupils Dominic Savio and Francis Besucco.⁵ Of Dominic Savio, the spiritual model for his boys, he noted that “The innocence of his life, his love of God and great desire for the things of God so developed Dominic’s mind that he came to be habitually united with God.”⁶ His pious lifting of his mind in the course of the day established this state of permanent prayer, transforming every act produced for the love of the Lord into prayer. Francis de Sales called this type of behaviour “vital prayer”: “All the actions of those who live in the fear of God are continual prayers, and this is called vital prayer.” And he gave as examples: mortified abstinence, almsgiving, visiting the sick and “all such good works.”⁷

Spirit of prayer or vital prayer, it doesn’t matter: the disciple of Francis de Sales and of Don Bosco, who lives like them in faith and charity, combines habitual prayer and daily action. Docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, he “perseveres in prayer”, as the Virgin Mary did, in order to intensify his union with God and to welcome Christ present “in our sisters and brothers and in every reality”, as the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians invite him to do.⁸ He practices the “liturgy of life”, according to an expression that appeared in the Salesian world with the Special General Chapter of 1971–1972.⁹ For their part, the Salesian Sisters affirm that their “commitment to the *da mihi animas*, source of ever-new energies, a silence that is conducive to attentive listening to the Holy Spirit, and frequent short prayers make of our day a liturgy lived in simplicity and joy, as an ‘unending hymn of praise’ to the Father.”¹⁰

Prayer of the body

The original Salesian prayer which nourished this “spirit” was exclusively vocal. In the oratories and boarding schools of the Society of St Francis de Sales and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, morning and evening prayers were obligatory for all, students and religious alike, as were the daily rosary, the prayers before and

after the principal actions of the day, the *Angelus* three times a day, the prayers for the exercise of a happy death, and a few others. The *Il Giovane provveduto* or the *La Figlia provveduta* provided the formulas, including, at least for the Italian language, those for the hymns that were endlessly repeated. Don Bosco's Salesians struggled with mental prayer alone. This saintly founder of religious congregations, who did not say a word about it in his early Constitutions, practised meditative spiritual reading under the title of "meditation". But look at him praying on his knees, his body straight, with no support for his elbows. Or imagine Fr Rua, his emulator, in thanksgiving after Mass, a handkerchief over his tired eyes, loudly conversing with the Lord. Their prayer was clearly both interior and corporal. For them, vocal prayer and body posture expressed or fed the secret prayer of the soul.

The contemporary reader of St Athanasius' treatise on the harmony and order of our bodily functions learns, probably with some surprise, that we have been given hands, not only "to do what needs to be done", but also "to stretch them out towards God in prayer."¹¹ Christian prayer in Don Bosco's time was, particularly in his own part of the world, very gestural. Christians would bend down, sign themselves with holy water, touch the shrines of saints, hands joined, drop to their knees, turn their eyes to heaven, sing hymns, speak aloud to God and Mary, and sometimes prostrated themselves on the ground. In colourful and occasionally dramatic processions they carried their favourite statues and banners around the towns and countryside. These were their bodily prayers. Genuflecting and kneeling expressed their respect for the sacred and their adoration of God, the signs of the cross their membership of Christian society, the touching their veneration of images and relics, the joined hands and lit candles their offerings, their desires and their petitions, the raised eyes their attention to God, their heads bowed their faith in the Real Presence during the celebration of the Eucharist; and Eucharistic celebration... Bodies prayed, and did so well enough.

"This people honours God with its hands and lips, but their heart is far from Him" various wise men who had read the Bible thought. Yet those who meditate on these gestures should first remember the ever-present intention in the attitudes, stereotyped formulas and the mechanised songs of these Christians. Now, intention comes from the heart. More often than not, the poor of this world have no other instruments with which to try to rise towards God. What right do we have to condemn them?

Salesian prayer, simple and of the people, continued to link the heart and the body. It is not hard to imagine the forms it has legitimately taken in the cultures where it has been used. The natural reserve of Nordic countries is hardly appropriate for the dance-loving

people of Black Africa, or the demonstrative populations of Latin America. Each people has its own charisms, their own way of using them, including in Salesian prayer.

Desirable formation in prayer

In any case, the Salesian Family adapts its prayer to a changing world.¹² This prayer is no longer afraid of creativity, as long as it remains appropriate. At the end of the twentieth century, the prayer of the religious has become much more “liturgical” than in the days of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. They no longer simply attend Mass and say their rosary, they participate in it. Their regular prayer continues to take the form of a number of “exercises” that punctuate their days, weeks and even months: daily meditation and spiritual reading, the rosary, the Eucharist, the examination of conscience, the sacrament of penance, the monthly recollection, the annual retreat, and possibly a few others.¹³ But the constitutional reform that followed Vatican II introduced an important novelty with a “Liturgy of the Hours” that had been hitherto unknown to Salesian Brothers and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, with the exception of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. The Liturgy of the Hours sanctifies their days as a community and replaces the morning and evening prayers that used to be shared with the youngsters and their teachers. The Salesian communities associate themselves in this way with the prayer of the Holy Church. Their prayer has gained in quality. The Salesian Sisters, who previously followed a rather curious method of sanctifying time,¹⁴ now remark: “By his incarnation the Son of God entered into history, making every hour a time of salvation. In union with him the Church continues his praise, thanksgiving, and supplication to the Father. Sharing in this prayer by which, in Christ, we become the voice of humankind, we shall celebrate morning and evening prayer in community. They are the high points of the Liturgy of the Hours, that sanctify the entire day and nourish our personal and community prayer.”¹⁵

It is true that this liturgical prayer is not the simplest. But the Salesian remembers that, as a gift from God, Christian prayer is also an apprenticeship. The supreme teacher is certainly the Holy Spirit, present in us and who, from the depths of our hearts, cries out “Abba! Father!”¹⁶ However, the Spirit requires us, as free people, to make our own efforts, and so a pedagogy is very useful here. A slightly more advanced training in prayer requires an introduction either to its fundamental elements, such as the Bible, the liturgy, theology or spirituality, or above all to certain decisive conditions, such as purification of the heart, self-denial, inner peace and especially “silence of the whole being”, which is

not the simple absence of noise and words, but the need to progress in the intimacy of God who is sovereignly loved.

But let's not complicate what is essentially a very simple process. The member of the Salesian Family cultivates, with the spirit of prayer, prayer itself, made up not of cogitations of the mind, but of communion of the heart. Prayer is a dialogue of love with someone we know loves us. It consists of placing ourselves, with united faith, in the presence of God the Father or the risen Christ to listen to their word, to allow it to penetrate us, to seek the Lord's will in order to conform ourselves ever more closely to it. More or less profound reflections, stereotyped or elaborate formulas and traditional or non-traditional gestures of prayer have, in the end, no other reason to exist. No prayer will ever prevail over the Our Father that Jesus taught us.¹⁷

NOTES

- 1 J. J. Olier, *Catéchisme chrétien pour la vie intérieure*, 1656, quoted by G. Chaillot, *Monsieur Olier*, coll. *Cahiers sur l'oraison, Troussures*, Editions du Feu nouveau, 1998, p. 5.
- 2 “Nella città secolare la preghiera è svalutata, l'agire porta a dimenticare l'essere” (E. Viganò. “Carisma e preghiera”, Letter to Salesians, 15 August 1991, in *Atti* 338, pp. 3-37).
- 3 “La storia ecclesiastica ci ammaestra che tutti gli Ordini e tutte le Congregazioni religiose fiorirono e promossero il bene della religione fino tanto che la pietà si mantenne in vigore tra loro ; e al contrario ne abbiamo veduti non pochi a decadere, altri a cessare di esistere, ma quando ? Quando si rallentò lo spirito di pietà, e ciascun membro si diede a “pensare alle cose sue, non a quelle di Gesù Cristo” (Fil 2, 21), come di alcuni cristiani già lamentava San Paolo.” (“Introduzione” to the *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, 1885).
- 4 “Per la grazia della nostra adozione a figli lo Spirito Santo prega in noi, intercede con insistenza per noi (cfr Rom. 8, 26) e ci invita a dargli spazio perchè possa - attraverso la nostra voce - lodare il Padre e invocarlo per la salvezza del mondo.” (FMA Constitutions, Chap. “La nostra preghiera”, art. 37).
- 5 See the part of the chapter involving his “spirito di preghiera”, in G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, Turin, 1859, chap. 13, p. 62; and *II Pastorello delle Alpi ...*, Turin, 1864, chap. 22, pp. 113-119.
- 6 “L'innocenza della vita, l'amor verso Dio, il desiderio delle cose celesti avevano portato la mente di Domenico a tale stato che si poteva dire abitualmente assorto in Dio”. (G. Bosco, *Vita ...* p. 97).
- 7 St Francis de Sales, Sermon for Passion Sunday, 5 April 1615, in *Oeuvres*, vol. IX, pp. 61-62.
- 8 See FMA Constitutions, art. 37.
- 9 Cf. CGS/SCG, nos. 532-537.
- 10 “L'impegno del “Da mihi animas”, fonte di sempre nuove energie, il silenzio che si & attenzione allo Spirito, le invocazioni brevi e frequenti faranno della nostra giornata una liturgia vissuta in semplicità e letizia come “lode pereime” al Padre.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 48).
- 11 Cf. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Oratio ad gentes*, 4. These two paragraphs are inspired by the article by Simon Tugwell, op, “Le corps dans la prière”, in *La Vie spirituelle*, n. 605, Nov.-Dec. 1974, pp. 879-886. This author provided me with the quotation from Saint Athanasius.
- 12 The approach of the Salesian Special general Chapter. See “La preghiera in un mondo che cambia”, CGS/SCG, no. 517.
- 13 This dictionary provides an opportunity to discuss (modestly) almost all of these exercises. See the corresponding terms.
- 14 See their *Libro delle preghiere e delle pratiche di pietà ad uso delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino, Tipografia Scuole Profess. Salesiane, 1932, pp. 5-64.
- 15 “Il Figlio di Dio con la sua incarnazione è entrato nella storia, facendo di ogni ora un tempo di salvezza. Unita a Lui la Chiesa ne prolunga la lode, il ringraziamento e la supplica al Padre. Partecipi di questa preghiera, che in Cristo ci fa la voce di tutta l'umanità, celebriamo insieme la preghiera di Lodi e di

Vespro, momenti forti della Liturgia delle Ore, che santifica l'intera giornata e diviene alimento della preghiera personale e comunitaria.” (FMA Constitutions art. 42).

16 Galatians 4:6.

17 These two paragraphs, sometimes translated word for word, contain several sentences from the paragraph of the Salesian General Chapter of 1971-1972 entitled “Formazione alla preghiera” (CGS nos. 551-552). - Abundant considerations by Fr Egidio Viganò on the “renewal” of Salesian prayer in his letter cited above. “Carisma e preghiera”, 15 August 1991, *Atti* 338, pp. 20-34.

Preventive System

“The preventive system in the education of youth” (1877)

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Western lawyers, doctors and politicians were happy to discuss the advantages of social prevention. For his part, Don Bosco, through advice and appropriate institutions, began to “prevent” youth suffering the hazards of life.¹ Isn’t true education in some way preventive? But let’s be clear, for some thirty years he did not claim to apply, or to have applied any “preventive system” in his institutions. Until 1877, the expression never appeared in any of Don Bosco’s known texts or statements. The opposition he was supposed to have established in 1854 between the “preventive system” and the “repressive system” in the course of an apparently historic exchange with Urbano Rattazzi is the result of a much later reconstruction of this conversation (around 1882).

Then, in 1877, the expression unexpectedly appeared in his vocabulary as an appendix to a booklet published on the opening of his work in Nice. This brief item entitled “On the preventive system in the education of youth” had been written by him during the second half of March in the Salesian houses where he had successively stopped on his way back from Nice (12 March) on his way to Turin. The expression itself had probably occurred to him in Nice, where his benefactors were asking him about his pedagogy in the youth work they had just entrusted to him (1875). The booklet was clearly intended for them. Some criminal lawyer (Ernest Michel, the first to bring the Salesians to Nice?) had perhaps one day remarked to Don Bosco that he used a kind of constructive preventive action in his works, as opposed to police or military repression. In any case, and according to what he presented, he was invited to express “some thoughts” on this subject, and consequently wrote down “what the preventive system consists of and why it should be preferred” (§ I), “the application of the preventive system” (§ II), “the usefulness of the system” (§ III) and ended with “a word on punishments”.²

It is very instructive to read these few pages, the only ones in which Don Bosco outlines a theory of his educational method. But we must be convinced that far from being reduced to considerations on the so-called preventive system, this treatise was in fact a rather loose series of reflections on Don Bosco’s pedagogical method as a whole.

His followers were not careful enough when they only discovered “prevention”. In fact, the expression “preventive system” in the 1877 brochure applied to Don Bosco’s entire educational system, based, as he himself stated in his short talk, on “reason, religion and loving-kindness”, and therefore characterised by many elements other than prevention alone, unless the meaning of the latter concept were to be stretched too far.³

A reductive interpretation of the preventive system

In addition, concentrating the system on prevention alone, especially as Don Bosco defined it in his writings, could lead to a dangerous impasse. In fact, Don Bosco stated that his preventive system consisted of making young people aware of the rules of the institution, then monitoring them constantly, advising them, guiding them and correcting them, in other words, as he awkwardly concluded, “putting them in a situation where they cannot do wrong.”⁴ The translator of the original bilingual Italian-French edition reacted immediately to this worrying formulation. He transformed and softened the statement that was supposed to define the entire system. On the parallel page we read: “... and even by correcting them, which is, strictly speaking, the true means of keeping children from easily doing wrong.”⁵ This inaccurate translation, which was promptly overlooked and forgotten, respected the true intentions of Don Bosco the educator. For there is quite a distance between “keeping children from easily doing wrong” – which is what Bosco certainly wanted – and the apparent bullying that consisted of placing them “in a situation where they cannot do wrong.”

But the damage was done. If taken literally, Don Bosco’s preventive system, under the guise of a good education, would stifle freedom. The consequences were all the more serious because, under the word “*mancanze*” (failings, faults), we read “*peccati*” (sins). The relationship with God was at stake. According to this reductive interpretation, which sometimes (or often?) prevailed, Don Bosco’s preventive system consisted of “making it morally impossible for children to commit sin.” One example will suffice. In 1917, a circular from the Rector Major Paul Albera to Salesian provincials and rectors deplored the consequences of the excessive optimism of certain rectors who refused to believe in faults against purity in their institutes. He taught: “Secondly, this optimism may also be the cause of not using all the vigilance with the pupils suggested by the preventive system, to put them in the moral impossibility of offending God.”⁶ Other similar statements on the purpose of the preventive system, coming from people who are even very well informed, but prisoners of an unfortunate definition, could be produced.

For those who know them, they explain the positions taken by Fr Viganò on Salesian assistance and freedom in education in the “new preventive system” that he began to preach at the end of the century.

A spiritual outline of the “preventive system”

Let us therefore try to restore the true scope of Don Bosco’s “system”. Various notions of religious education, scattered throughout his words or in his behaviour, are naturally grafted onto the data from the Little Treatise in 1877. It would seem legitimate to give an overview of this “preventive system”, which has become the Salesian system, since it is now generally accepted to refer to his educational system in this way.⁷ In doing so, we shall endeavour to explain briefly the meaning of the main terms used in the description.

First of all, we are talking about a “system”, i.e. a set of interrelated elements, where if one element changes, all the others are affected. This system is called “preventive” as opposed to “repressive”. Rather than repressing them, the educator tries to prevent experiences that are destabilising for the young person and to develop his or her potential to the full. The love of God the Creator and Father, whose instrument the educator should know himself to be, runs through the whole system. “The practice of this system is based entirely on the words of Saint Paul: Love is kind, and patient, it puts up with all things, but hopes all things and endures all things” wrote Don Bosco.⁸ Its inner dynamic is to help people live in the footsteps of Jesus in the love of God. Don Bosco’s aim was to shape good Christians and upright citizens. For the one who is being educated, it is a question of taking a responsible place in social life (being an “upright citizen”) and becoming “holy” in the friendship with Jesus (being a “good Christian” according to today’s prevailing understanding of “holiness”). The kind of presence the educator has among those being educated, which is a friendly, enriching and beneficial *assistance* and not a more or less oppressive *surveillance*, is essential to the system. According to Don Bosco, the assistant is materially and spiritually close to the person he is trying to educate: he talks to him, takes an interest in his joys and sorrows, shows himself capable of working and even playing with him. “The preventive system makes a friend of the student, who sees a benefactor in the assistant who gives him good advice, wants to make him good...”⁹ And the world of education, however small, is governed by laws. The person being educated must know the rules of his institution, said Don Bosco, even if it means discussing its application. We can deduce from this that education in the

preventive system is governed simultaneously by trust and by law, which, as we shall see in a moment, is subjected to the scrutiny of rational discernment.

In fact, Don Bosco based the entire educational edifice on reason, religion and loving-kindness,¹⁰ three terms that need to be clearly understood. For him, “reason” meant rejecting authoritarianism and unhealthy persuasion. The educator systematically appeals to the other’s capacity for discernment.¹¹ By “religion”, Don Bosco meant Christian religious teaching and the practice of the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist. In non-Christian environments, recourse to religion will legitimately take the form of addressing the metaphysical questions of those being educated and eventually leading them to the good news of Christianity.¹² As for “affection”, a term that attempts to render – perhaps insufficiently – the Italian *amorevolezza*, which contains the word “love”,¹³ is the affectionate kindness thanks to which the young person knows he is loved. The obvious affection of Don Bosco’s teacher was necessarily regulated by the virtue of chastity [Tr note: Desramaut translates *amorevolezza* as *affection* in French, whereas in English we translate it as loving-kindness].¹⁴ Furthermore, the educator’s affection corrects his aggressiveness, because assistance according to Don Bosco is imbued with gentleness. The “Salesian” assistant has the “gentle” Saint Francis de Sales as his model Don Bosco used to say over and over again.

The “new preventive system”

In itself, Don Bosco’s preventive system did not require any adjustments. However, a few months before his death, Fr Egidio Viganò felt authorised to preach a “new preventive system”. In so doing, he was not claiming to invent another system, but to renovate Don Bosco’s system. “I believe I am the first to use the expression ‘the new Preventive System’, as I have not heard it used by others. I rejoice in this primacy, which I place in parallel with the ‘new evangelisation’ and the ‘new education’, novelties of permanent values.”¹⁵ Significantly, he presented this “new system” during a eulogy of evangelical freedom. The Strenna he commented on said “Called to freedom (Galatians 5:13), let us rediscover the Preventive System by educating young people in values.”¹⁶ The Preventive System forms (or should form) truly free people.¹⁷

Perhaps his disciples had sometimes forgotten it. The Rector Major regretted a certain lack of awareness among them of the positive side of assistance in education. “We need to change our notion of assistance, which is more important than it used to be before”, he remarked, rereading John Paul II’s letter *luvenum Patris* in 1988.¹⁸ In

his heart of hearts, he obviously felt that sticking to the negative aspect of assistance: “making it impossible for the one being educated to do wrong”, was totally inadequate. His spiritual “gift” [the meaning of the word *strenna*] to them was: “We are rediscovering the Preventive System by educating young people in values.” What does that mean? he asked. It means patiently forging beliefs in young people’s minds. These values are goodness, righteousness, courage, generosity, respect and self-giving. They will find them in service, in solidarity, voluntary work, within their family or group. The nobility and beauty of these values make them attractive. Experiencing them is more profitable than discussing them. In this way, the ones being educated are freed from pernicious ideologies, gain a better understanding of the need for upright conduct, and learn to overcome their individualistic behaviour and indifference to social life.

The new preventive system has mastered the art of making young people grow “from the inside”, by relying on their personal freedom, and the art of winning their hearts and leading them joyfully towards what is good. It prepares them for life by solid formation of character. This pedagogical message presupposes the conviction in the educator that in every young person, however marginal or deviant, there are energies which, if properly awakened, can make them prefer faith and uprightness over indifference and doing wrong.¹⁹

The preventive system lived as a path to holiness

Whatever their situation in the world, whether religious or lay, single or married, the follower of Don Bosco can find a “path to holiness” in the practice of the preventive system.²⁰

The preventive system, which should not be confined to the few pages of 1877, is in fact Don Bosco’s personal style, in other words, an organic whole of attitudes, convictions, actions, means, interventions, methods and structures which gradually created a characteristic way of being and acting, both personally and as a community. It is centred on the person of the educator and that of the young person, attentive to their particular situations. Confident in the intelligence and basic goodwill of the human being it strives for his or her full advancement. The “prevention” in the formula will therefore consist of intelligently nurturing the seeds of goodness within the individual and the community, while sparing them the distorting experiences of evil. This system, which sees *amorevolezza* as one of its principles, is founded on charity, which it seeks to develop in both the teacher and the pupil. It is not content with sublime thoughts.

The translation of the teachings of religion and school into action is necessary. The preventive system as lived by Don Bosco in his relationships with young people and with his confreres, and also in the world he lived in, made him a saint. In a Christian context, such a system effectively brings both the teacher who applies it and the pupil who benefits from it closer to goodness and, consequently, to Christ and the God of goodness. The preventive system can be a path to sanctification and even holiness.²¹

NOTES

- 1 *Il sistema preventivo*. See, for example, P. Braidò, “Il sistema preventivo di don Bosco alle origini (1841-1862). Il cammino del “preventivo” nella realtà e nei documenti”, *RSS XIV* (1995), pp. 255-320.
- 2 I. “In che cosa consiste il Sistema Preventivo e perchè debbasi preferire”. II. “Applicazione del Sistema Preventivo”. IH. “Utilità del Sistema Preventivo”. “Una parola sui castighi”. (“Il Sistema Preventivo nella educazione della gioventù”, in *Inaugurazione del Patronato di S. Pietro in Nizza a Mare. Scopo del medesimo esposto dal Sacerdote Giovanni Bosco, con appendice sul sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, Torino, Tipografia e libreria salesiana, Il sistema preventivo 1877, bilingual edition pp. 44-65.)
- 3 Classic work on the “preventive system” is by Pietro Braidò entitled in its third edition as: *Prevenire, non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*, Rome, LAS, 1999, 439 pages.
- 4 “Esso consiste nel far conoscere le prescrizioni e i regolamenti di un Istituto e poi sorvegliare in guisa, che gli allievi abbiano sempre sopra di loro l’occhio vigile del Direttore o degli assistenti, che come padri amorosi parlino, servano di guida ad ogni evenienza, diano consigli ed amorevolmente correggano, che è quanto dire : mettere gli allievi nella impossibilità di commettere mancanze.” (*Il Sistema Preventivo ...*, § I.)
- 5 Bilingual Edition, p. 49.
- 6 “In secondo luogo quest’ottimismo può ancora essere causa che non si usi con gli alunni tutta quella vigilanza che suggerisce il sistema preventivo, affine di metterli nella morale impossibilità di offendere Iddio.” (P. Albera, Letter to provincials and rectors, 23 April 1917, L. C. p. 222).
- 7 Our starting point is an insightful outline by Xavier Thévenot, “Une vision globale du système préventif système préventif”, in the collection *Eduquer à la suite de don Bosco*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1996, pp. 109-111, which highlights the spiritual and theological basis of the system.
- 8 “La pratica di questo sistema è tutta appoggiata sopra le parole di S. Paolo che dice: Charitas benigna est, patiens est; omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet.” (*Il sistema preventivo*, § II.)
- 9 “Il sistema preventivo rende amico l’allievo, che nell’assistente ravvisa un benefattore che lo avvisa, vuol farlo buono ... “ (*Il sistema preventivo*, § I.)
- 10 “Questo sistema si appoggia tutto sopra la ragione, la religione, e sopra l’amorevolezza” (*Il sistema preventivo*, § I.)
- 11 See M. Pellerey, “La via della ragione. Rileggendo le parole e le azioni di don Bosco”, in *Orientamenti pedagogici* 35 (1988), pp. 383-396; and further on see the entry on *Reason*.
- 12 The inclusion of religion in the preventive system poses a difficult problem for the educator who wants to apply it in the pluralist universe that has become ours. Those wishing to explore this issue in greater depth should read Xavier Thévenot’s article, “Le système préventif face au pluralisme des croyances. Point de vue d’un théologien moraliste” in *Eduquer à la suite de don Bosco*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1996, pp. 155-172.

- 13 The translator in 1877 (*Inaugurazione*, p. 49) opted here for “Charity”, a word that has become rather colourless for us when applied to human relationships. “Affection”, which has been preferred, usefully calls for “affectivity”.
- 14 Regarding this word, see Albino Ronco, “L’amorevolezza, principio metodologico dell’educazione salesiana alla luce dei contributi della psicologia contemporanea”, in *Il sistema educativo di Don Bosco tra pedagogia antica e nuova*, Torino-Leumann, LDC, 1974, pp. 75-85; and especially Xavier Thévenot, “L’affectivité en éducation”, in *Education et pédagogie chez don Bosco*, Paris, Fleurus, 1989, pp. 233-254.
- 15 “Credo di essere il primo che usa l’espressione “il nuovo Sistema Preventivo”. Io non l’ho mai sentito da altri. Mi rallegro di questo primato, che metto in consonanza con “nuova evangelizzazione” e “nuova educazione”: la novità di valori permanenti.” (E. Viganò, *Strenna 1995. Commento*, Rome, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1995, p. 9).
- 16 “Chiamati alla libertà (Gal. 5, 13) riscopriamo il Sistema Preventivo educando I giovani ai valori”. See the cover of the *Strenna 1995* brochure.
- 17 The adaptation of the preventive system to the contemporary world was the subject of a Salesian Family Spirituality Week in 1995, the proceedings of which have been published: A. Martinelli and G. Chérubin (a cura), *Il sistema preventivo verso il terzo millennio. Atti della XVIII Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia salesiana*, Rome, Editrice S.D.B., 1995, 305 pages.
- 18 “Dobbiamo cambiare il concetto di “assistenza” che è più importante di prima” (*Strenna 1995*, p. 10).
- 19 These considerations, which are either Fr Viganò’s own or copied by him from John Paul II’s letter *luvenum Patris*, appear in *Strenna 1995*, as cited, pp. 10-13.
- 20 This idea was developed in 1980 during a Salesian Spirituality Week, the proceedings of which were published under the title: *Il sistema preventivo vissuto come cammino di santità*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1981, 215 pages.
- 21 See the testimony of Professor Francesco Brugnaro in the collection cited in footnote 20, a Salesian past pupil who became a university professor and secondary school headmaster : “Come vivere da laico cristiano la trilogia del sistema di Don Bosco” (*Il sistema preventivo ...*, pp. 165-169).

Priest

“The Salesian priest must be another Don Bosco”

In the aftermath of the First World War, Fr Albera felt it was time to write a long circular letter to the priests of his society under the title: “Don Bosco, model of the Salesian priest”.¹ The Salesian priest must be “another Don Bosco” he began. All those who enter the Salesian Society assume the obligation to live according to the spirit, examples and lessons of Don Bosco. However, this obligation does not have the same scope for all positions in this Society – superiors, priests, clerics or lay people. In fact, thought the Rector Major, only the Salesian priest can revive Don Bosco in himself in the fullness of his personality, because, he wrote, “only the priest can copy another priest completely. Consequently he did not think it an exaggeration to say to every priest in his society: “The Salesian priest must always be another Don Bosco in everything!”²

What exactly is meant by this resemblance if the priestly “character” is so decisive for him? As questions about priestly identity have multiplied over the years, the main Salesian leaders have been pressed to define their understanding of the priest. We will listen to two of them in succession, who were separated by Vatican II: Fr Albera and Fr Viganò.

The priest according to Fr Albera: one who sacrifices and purifies

In 1921, Fr Albera’s doctrine on the priesthood, obviously Tridentine and based on the “priestly character”, was very firm. On the day of his ordination, when, by the laying on of hands, the consecrating bishop infused him with the “blessings of the Holy Spirit and the grace of the priesthood”, the Salesian priest received a “tenacious, indelible, perpetual, incorruptible” imprint that made him “another man”. This indelible character, which deeply penetrated every fibre of his being, gave him “the right to treat and handle holy things, to hold in his hands the divine Victim and to offer it to the Eternal Father; and, at the same time, confers on him the power to judge and purify souls.”³ In simpler terms and according to the common formula used in the catechisms of the time, the sacrament of Holy Orders imbues the priest with a character that gives him the power to celebrate the Eucharist and hear confessions.

Don Bosco wanted his priest sons to understand the greatness and sublimity of the priestly character and the functions that derive from it, Fr Albera went on to say. The “true action of the priest”, the one for which he was made a priest through the sacrament of Holy Orders, “is the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass”, the eminent grandeur of which the Rector Major never tired of celebrating. All the holiest actions performed or to be performed, all the most ardent prayers, and not only of the Church militant, but also of the Church triumphant, all taken together are not worth as much as a single Mass.”⁴ It sums up the ancient sacrifices that brought humanity closer to the true God: the burnt offering, the peace offering and the sin offering. The Mass is the sacrifice of the Cross, perpetually renewed for us; it is the immolation of God, who places himself in a certain way in the hands of the priest; it is a God who adores, a God who gives thanks, a God who appeases, a God who implores. And priests are in this way the instruments of a multitude of marvels. Between God and them the Eucharistic sacrifice creates ‘a union that can be said to be unique of its kind’, for it has nothing like it other than the hypostatic union in Jesus, and of Mary with the Incarnate Word.⁵

In the course of his letter, Fr Albera also dwelt, but only from the penitent’s point of view, on the “power to judge and purify souls”, in other words, on the sacrament of penance and the purifying power of the priest.⁶ And he did not fail to mention its extraordinary power. For this sacrament conveys the imprint of God’s work par excellence in its deepest depths, which is that of redemption. It is therefore marvellous both in itself and in its effectiveness. Let us meditate, he wrote, “on the infinite goodness and mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives to men this marvellous fount of all holiness, and who communicates to us priests his very authority in the order of the remission of sins, by associating us so intimately with his redemptive work.”⁷ Let’s summarise Fr Albera’s thinking: the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance, which the priestly character makes possible for him, transport the priest to God’s side, in the image of Don Bosco.

The main purpose of the Rector Major’s letter was to remind his confreres of the intellectual and moral demands of such an extraordinary dignity. He detailed and commented on them at length, coming to what was closest to his heart. The spiritual life of the Salesian priest should be built, first and foremost, on the foundation of the “Christian virtues”, which he conscientiously enumerated, without claiming to be exhaustive: “faith, hope, love of God and neighbour, religion, humility, mortification, poverty, chastity, obedience, justice, and others besides.” Hearing these words, he wrote, should trigger in every Salesian priest the memory of the exhortations and

encouragements he received in other times to practise them with a clear conscience. Fr Albera exclaimed to his priests: “*Santificiamoci*” (let us sanctify ourselves) like Don Bosco.⁸ Throughout the letter, his vision of priestly spirituality remained very intimate.

The priest of Vatican II's *Menti Nostrae*

The Church's teaching on the priesthood deepened over the course of the century. Pius XII's Apostolic Exhortation *Menti Nostrae* to the clergy of the Catholic world on “the sanctity of the priestly life” (23 September 1950) preferred to repeat the same lessons as Fr Albera, starting from the very origin of the priestly “character”. The priest, who shares in Christ's unique and eternal priesthood of Christ, represents him on earth and distributes to mankind the benefits of his redemption. “The priest is like ‘another Christ’”, we read in this document. The priest represents Christ who said: “As the Father sent me, I also send you” (John 20:21). “He who hears you, hears me” (Luke 10:16). Prepared by the divine call for this most holy ministry, “he is appointed for men in the things pertaining to God, that he may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Hebrews 5:1). It is to him, then, that those who wish to live the life of the divine Redeemer and receive strength, relief and nourishment for their souls must go; and from him the salutary medicine must be sought by anyone who wishes to rise from sin and lead a good life.”⁹ The Eucharist and Penance were thus well situated within a priestly ministry rooted in the person of Jesus. And the spirituality of this ministry flowed from its excellence and its demands.

Then the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) took a critical look at the image of the priest as exclusively a man of the sacraments, in fact of the Eucharist and Penance, as portrayed by Fr Albera and many others. The priestly ministry is essentially pastoral and linked to the episcopal pastoral ministry. Let us glean some ideas on the sacrament of Holy Orders, on formation and finally on the spirituality of the priest after Vatican II from a very rich teaching scattered over several documents. *Lumen Gentium* defines the “power of the sacrament of Holy Orders” received by the priest and, in a very studied order, the duties that flow from it.

Priests, although they do not possess the highest degree of the priesthood, and although they are dependent on the bishops in the exercise of their power, nevertheless they are united with the bishops in sacerdotal dignity. By the power of the sacrament of Orders, in the image of Christ the eternal high Priest, they

are consecrated to preach the Gospel and shepherd the faithful and to celebrate divine worship, so that they are true priests of the New Testament.

The text immediately returned to this threefold ministry. Priests, “Partakers of the function of Christ the sole Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), announce the divine Word to all.” Then, “Exercising within the limits of their authority the function of Christ as Shepherd and Head, they gather together God’s family as a brotherhood all of one mind, and lead them in the Spirit, through Christ, to God the Father.”¹⁰

The complete education of the priest thus conceived, the subject of *Optatam Totius*, tends to make him a true “pastor of souls” after the example of Jesus, teacher, priest and pastor. The future priest is therefore prepared both for the ministry of the word, in order to understand God’s revealed word better and better, to possess it through meditation, and to express it orally and morally; for the ministry of worship and sanctification, in order to accomplish the work of salvation through the Eucharistic sacrifice and by the sacraments; and for the ministry of pastor, to make present to men Christ, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45; and see John 13:12-17), and, having become the servant of all, to win over all the more.¹¹ As for the lifestyle and therefore the spirituality of priests, as presented in the same spirit in the Council document on their “ministry” and “life”, it could, as has been written, be summed up in three key formulas. “Priests are the living instruments (*viva instrumenta*) of Christ the Eternal Priest”; “they acquire holiness in their own measure by exercising their offices sincerely and tirelessly in the Spirit of Christ”; and they thus practise “the asceticism befitting the shepherd of souls.” This was a way of designating “pastoral charity”, which goes hand in hand with obedient humility (in order to be a living instrument), chastity (in order to be in close friendship with Christ) and poverty (to be free like the Good Shepherd and to discern the signs of God’s will). This lifestyle obviously requires recourse to known and tested means of striving for holiness.¹²

The Salesian priest at the end of the century according to Fr Viganò

The Salesians have “*molti sacerdoti, ma poco sacerdozio*” (many priests, but little priesthood), as malicious types claimed after Vatican II. As for Fr Viganò (1978–1995), steeped in the teachings of the Council, he noted as soon as he began his term of office that although there were indeed “many priests” in his Congregation, the priesthood did not always “function as it should.”¹³ And yet, he noted, the Preventive System is permeated with a “priestly spirit.”¹⁴ And the priestly ministry was central to Don Bosco’s

work, as John Paul II liked to emphasise at Valdocco on the centenary of his death.¹⁵ This Rector Major therefore tried to show his confreres how to make a priesthood that was not sufficiently productive “function” properly.

The office that enables a Salesian priest to exercise his priestly ministry is that of the rector of the community he explained at length, thus expressing his concept of the priesthood, dominated by the “pastoral” function.¹⁶ “The service of the Rector of the community and of the local Salesian Family is a type of priestly ministry which has its origin in the grace and pastoral charisms of the sacrament of Holy Orders.”¹⁷ This sacrament links the priest to Christ and enables him to act “in persona Christi”, especially when he celebrates the Eucharist and administers the sacraments. God has consecrated him to live and carry out in the Church the mission and ministry of Christ himself. The risen Christ is the shepherd of his people, leading them to salvation. The originality of the ministry of the priest of the New Covenant, whose function is to represent him, lies in its “pastoral” dimension. “For those who are priests of Christ, everything should be seen and guided by this value, by pastoral concern.”¹⁸

The priest-pastor, minister of the Church, man of communion, leader of the community of believers, has a sense of the Church. He proves it by discharging a triple ministerial function, as defined by Vatican II. As Fr Viganò explained in the words that were familiar to him,

in the first place, in the priest's service of the Word he lives the values of God's revelation and makes known their saving truth; in the second place, in his service of sanctification he concerns himself with the liturgy, the sources of grace, victory over sin, and growth in charity; finally, in his service of community leadership he coordinates pastoral activities, fosters communion and carries out the spiritual government of the community.¹⁹

And the Rector Major goes on to develop his ideas on this triple function in the case of the Salesian rector.

The priest is a prophet of saving truth. As such, he translates the word of God into today's “message” for his brothers and sisters, according to social and political events, their cultural needs, and perhaps their ideological disorientations. This presupposes an effort on his part to meditate on life and real people, with their virtues and their faults. Reflection, reading, meditating, contemplating and praying are all demanding. The two channels of the prophetic function of the Salesian priest are, according to the Rector Major, the magisterium of the Church and the spiritual heritage of Don Bosco's charism.

It is in the light of the magisterium and by reading the specific character of the charism, that the priest of Don Bosco translates the Gospel into a message.²⁰ The priest is the master and guide in holiness. There are basically two fountains of resurrection that enrich and energise life: the Eucharist and Penance. The Salesian priest-rector must pay particular attention to the sacrament of the Eucharist, a Eucharist that is by no means reduced to the sacramental celebration but which fills the whole of community life.

The Eucharist brings together and offers to God all that we are and all that we do – our feelings, our sorrows, our work, our labours, our successes and our setbacks. The rector must also take care, and very much so, of the sacrament of Penance. Self-criticism is essential for any community to discover its real shortcomings and the causes of its failings. And it is necessary to give back to its members the meaning of sin and its existence.²¹ The third aspect of the priestly ministry is that of caring for communion and pastoral coordination. There is much much to say about the particular role of the priest-rector in this area. The Rector Major developed his ideas on this subject in two directions: involvement in the local Church and the animation of the Salesian Family.²²

In 1990, a synod of bishops on the formation of priests and the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Don Bosco's ordination to the priesthood (1841) saw him return to the problem of the Salesian priest, in particular the “delicate theme” of the “religious priest” and his formation.²³ And he repeated his doctrine on the ordained ministry, instituted by Christ when he chose and consecrated the Twelve Apostles. Priests, by virtue of their ordination as collaborators with the episcopate, serve the community in two complementary activities. They act “in the very person of Christ the Head through the ministry of the word, through the sacramental ritualisation of the one Paschal sacrifice in the Eucharist, and finally by administering the sacraments of salvation. They also act “in the person of the Church”, whom they represent before God and to whom to whom they dedicate themselves for the service of his children.²⁴

Whatever his field of apostolate, at the end of the century the priest of the Salesian Family found in the now century-old teaching of its successive Rectors Major, which under Fr Albera was “intimate”, while under Fr Viganò it was distinctly “active” and “pastoral”, the encouragement to reproduce, in a changing world and according to one's own charisms, Don Bosco, saintly shepherd of souls and therefore “an eminent model of priestly life.”²⁵ Giuseppe Quadrio (1921–1963) was an example of this.²⁶

NOTES

- 1 P. Albera, “Don Bosco modello del Sacerdote Salesiano”, Letter to the “Confratelli Sacerdoti”, 19 March 1921, L.C., pp. 388-433.
- 2 “Il sacerdote salesiano dev’essere in tutto e sempre un altro Don Bosco !” (Above-mentioned letter p. 389).
- 3 “Il carattere sacerdotale, lo sappiamo, non è solo una cosa santa e salutare, ma è tenace, incancellabile, perpetuo, incorruttibile, come il nostro spirito nel quale è impresso.” “Questo carattere indelebile ci dà il diritto di trattare e maneggiare le cose sante, di tenere tra le mani la Vittima divina e di offrirla all’Eterno Padre ; e, insieme ci conferisce il potere di giudicare e purificare le anime.” (Above-mentioned letter, pp. 389-390).
- 4 “L’azione vera del sacerdote, quella per la quale è costituito dal Sacramento dell’Ordine, voi ben lo sapete, o miei cari, è la celebrazione del S. Sacrificio della Messa. Tutte le azioni più sante che si son compiute o si compiranno in avvenire, tutte le più ardenti e serafiche preghiere non solo della Chiesa militante, ma anche di quella trionfante, tutte queste cose prese insieme non valgono una sola Messa” (Above-mentioned letter, p. 410).
- 5 “... stabiliscono fra Dio e noi una unione che direi unica nel suo genere, e che trova il suo riscontro solo nell’unione ipostatica e in quella di Maria col Verbo incarnato.” (Above-mentioned letter, p. 410).
- 6 Paragraph on “Il Sacramento della Confessione”, same letter pp. 413-417.
- 7 “... ci persuaderemo sempre meglio dell’infinita bontà e misericordia di N. S. Gesù Cristo nel donare agli uomini questa fonte meravigliosa di ogni santità, e nel comunicare a noi sacerdoti la sua stessa autorità in ordine alla remissione dei peccati, associandoci così intimamente alla sua opera redentrice.” (Same letter p. 413).
- 8 Same letter, pp. 401-431.
- 9 Pius XII, *Menti Nostrae*, Introduction.
- 10 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 28.
- 11 *Optatam Totius*, no. 4.
- 12 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nos. 12, 13, 15-17, 18. Based on a reading of the document by J. Ezquerda Bifet, “Presbytérat”, in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol XII, Part Two, 1986, col. 2098.
- 13 “not...as it should”. “In Congregazione c’è una pericolosa “crisi di sacerdozio” ; essa può portare a rovinare l’identità del nostro patrimonio carismatico [...] Anche se in Congregazione ci sono molti preti, non sempre funziona a sufficienza il sacerdozio.” (Letter of 1982 – cited further on in footnote 16-, p. 7).
- 14 “Soffio sacerdotale”. E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians 15 August 1978, in *Atti* 290, p. 25.
- 15 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1988, in *Atti* 328, p. 14.
- 16 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 16 July 1982, *Atti* 306, pp. 5-30.
- 17 “... il servizio ... è un tipo di ministero sacerdotale originato e nutrito dalla grazia e dai carismi pastorali del sacramento dell’Ordine” (Same letter, p. 8).

- 18 “Per chi è sacerdote di Cristo tutto dovrebbe essere visto e guidato da questo valore, dalla preoccupazione “pastorale.” (Same letter, p. 9).
- 19 “In primo luogo, il servizio della Parola, la percezione dei valori della Rivelazione di Dio e la manifestazione della loro verità salvifica. In secondo luogo, il servizio della Santificazione : la liturgia, le fonti della grazia, il superamento del peccato, la crescita nella carità. Infine, il servizio della Conduzione comunitaria : il coordinamento pastorale, la cura della comunione, il governo spirituale della Comunità.” (Same letter, p. 13).
- 20 Same letter pp. 14-20.
- 21 Same letter, pp. 20-26.
- 22 Same letter, pp. 26-28.
- 23 E. Viganò, “Ci sta a cuore il Prete del Duemila”, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1990, in *Atti* 335, pp. 3-40.
- 24 Same letter as just quoted, p. 17. A few years earlier, the Salesian *Ratio fundamentalis* had described the Society’s priest in the spirit of Fr Viganò. The Salesian priest, it taught, is an educator and a pastor, who considers his priesthood to be indispensable to his mission, who lives apostolic communion in his Congregation, who bears witness to the evangelical counsels, who is part of the particular Church and the universal Church, who demonstrates pastoral charity in the service of young people and ordinary people, and who strives to adapt to an ever-changing context. (*La formazione dei Salesiani di Don Bosco. Ratio fundamentalis institutionis et studiorum*, Rome, 1985, n. 45-50, pp. 62-63.)
- 25 “Il Cooperatore sacerdote o diacono secolare attua il proprio ministero ispirandosi a Don Bosco, modello eminente di vita sacerdotale” (*Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 4, § 3). - To develop the question of the spirituality of priests after Vatican II, see the work of the Salesian Agostino Favale, *I Presbiteri. Identità, missione, spiritualità e formazione permanente*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1999, especially Part Three (pp.243-340), rightly entitled: Spiritualità.
- 26 E. Valentini, *Don Giuseppe Quadrio, modello di spirito sacerdotale* (coll. *Spirito e vita*, 6), Rome, LAS, 1980; M. Codi, *Il prete dal sorriso di fanciullo. Vita del Servo di Dio don Giuseppe Quadrio, Sacerdote Salesiano (1921-1963)*, Rome, LAS, 1998.

Reason

Reason in early Salesian spirituality

The inclusion of “reason” in Salesian ideology may seem, at first glance, to be rather unexpected, to say the least. Don Bosco and his first followers were hardly interested (not interested enough?) in philosophy. When it came to religious matters, they were wary of conceited reason. The modernism of the early twentieth century did not tempt them. Don Bosco never hesitated for a second between the “reasons” of the scientists and the claims of the Catholic faith, which he believed to be dictated by the Bible. He was indifferent to the objections of astronomers and physicists to Joshua’s stopping the sun’s course or to Elijah’s abduction into heaven in a chariot drawn by horses of fire. It was written in the book of Joshua: “And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies” (Joshua 10:13); and in the second book of Kings: “As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11). These sentences were enough for him. Let human “reason” bow to the word of God! A miracle is all the more worthy of Him the more it crushes human reason.¹ Don Bosco was therefore the opposite of a “rationalist”, in the sense theologians give (or have given) to this word. For a long time, common Salesian opinion held to a very fideist ideology. In 1946, Fr Eugenio Ceria, despite being a highly educated person, continued to see Don Bosco’s *Bible History* as an excellent textbook.²

But these considerations do not do justice to the concept of “reason” in Salesian thinking. In human affairs, as a good and wise Piedmontese, Don Bosco always tried to plan his projects carefully. His way of understanding the education of young people could – rationally – adapt to the fashions of the time. He was cautious in defining his objectives, seeking the most appropriate means of achieving them, and implemented them with a perseverance that often bordered on stubbornness. He never deviated from the course he had reasonably set himself. He needed help, and money was short: he set up classes for young recruits and organised successful lotteries or fundraising through his benefactors. His foundations, from local charities to religious societies destined to go global, showed his organisational skills. Humanly speaking, his conduct was rational, throughout his lifetime.

Reason in community relationships

And then, in human relationships with adults and children alike Don Bosco and his followers called for “reason”. “Reason” was one of the three pillars of their “preventive system”. “This system is based entirely on reason, religion and loving-kindness”,³ Don Bosco wrote in his treatise on the Preventive System in education. However, the term “reason” used here, rich in its overtones for us, is in itself rather awkward to interpret.⁴ According to a first approach, the “reason” he was recommending was equivalent to being “reasonable”, the characteristic of man created in the image of God. In human relationships especially in educational relationships, the disciple of Don Bosco, faithful to his origins, appeals to the “conscience” of those involved, his own and that of the person or persons he is addressing. “For Don Bosco, reason appears as a fundamental means of education in that the use of reason, the reasonableness of discourse, the method of persuasion must prevail over violent imposition, unquestioning acceptance, blind obedience.”⁵

Commentators have seized upon the word and, in their own way, have thus enriched Salesian spirituality. Let’s listen to the most authoritative of them. “The term ‘reason’”, wrote Pope John Paul II in his letter *Iuvenum Patris* for the centenary of Don Bosco’s death, “emphasizes, in line with the authentic view of Christian humanism, the value of the individual, of conscience, of human nature, of culture, of the world of work, of social living, or in other words of that vast set of values which may be considered the necessary equipment of man in his family, civil and political life.”⁶ In Don Bosco’s language, the word “reason” directly evokes *ragionevolezza* (reasonableness), that is to say, room for understanding, dialogue and unalterable patience, which is necessary for the inconvenient exercise of rationality in social relationships.

Every disciple of Christ should believe in man. In his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, the Pope recalled that “Jesus Christ is the chief way for the Church... and is the way to each man.”⁷ In his time, Don Bosco, with his appeal to “reason”, also attributed importance to the human aspects and to the historical condition of those he was dealing with. In an atmosphere of joy and generous self-giving, his education appealed to the pupil’s freedom, preparing him for life, for the exercise of a profession and for the assumption of civil responsibilities. These objectives were expressed by him using simple words such as “joy”, “study”, “devotion”, “wisdom”, “work” and “humanity”. Moderation and realism characterised his educational ideal. In education, he harmoniously combined the essential, which is permanent, with the historical, which is contingent. The felicitous and evocative phrase “An upright citizen, because a good

Christian”, summed up the simple yet demanding programme of life that he proposed “rationally” to his disciples.

In short, the Pope thought he could say, “reason”, that gift of God to which the educator must have recourse, is what “indicates the values of what is good, and also the objectives to be aimed at and the means and manner of using them.”⁸ “Reason” invites the young to an attitude of sharing in values they have understood and accepted. He called it also “reasonableness” because of its necessary accompaniment by the understanding, dialogue and unfailing patience through which the far from easy practice of reasoning finds expression. The Pope’s benevolent interpretation saw reason as the support for the direction of education according to Don Bosco.

The path of reason⁹

Reason was not always sufficiently honoured in Salesian spirituality. And from now on, it is thought, it should be exploited to its full potential.

A Rector Major as respected as Fr Albera ventured to recommend a pastoral approach to the Salesians in 1911 based on a kind of servile fear, which led to blind subjection to the superior. “The discipline-observant Salesian” he wrote to the confreres, “will never be numbered among those who, in order to submit to a superior order, want to know the reasons for it, as if they had the right to judge whether they are serious enough to justify their decision. On the contrary, he, as soon as he knows the will of those directing him, hastens, or rather flies, to carry it out.”¹⁰ Fr Albera’s very much military-style discipline, therefore, required them to ignore the “reasons” for obeying. Now, “these penetrating teachers of Port-Royal in the seventeenth century, gave a reason for everything, even to children, and they imposed nothing on them by authority.”¹¹ “Even to children”, dear Father.

On the contrary, the appeal to “reason” presupposes constant recourse to dialogue, which this Rector Major seemed to systematically avoid. Dialogue is a means of searching for the truth, it makes people grow and aims for communion between people. Don Bosco, who was keen to win the trust of young people and his collaborators, fortunately showed great aptitude for dialogue. In this way he gave responsibility to his own people, however young they were. Let’s not forget that most of his original collaborators were not even twenty years old. Through dialogue, the actions of the group are harmonised, and the diverse abilities of the individuals complement each other. Don Bosco endeavoured to entrust each of his people with the work that suited their

character, intelligence and training. He would have liked to find them all at ease in his communities. This meant meeting regularly and trusting in these meetings.¹²

The use of reason in Salesian pedagogy in a world with a completely different mentality from that of the century Don Bosco lived in, needs to be developed further.¹³ This is because modernity has changed the status of those being educated and of all subjects in the Western world as a result of what has been called, here too, a “Copernican revolution”. Reflection and practice have transformed the relationship between young people and adults. Attention to children, to their exuberant energies, and hence to their centrality in the work of education, has become paramount. The autonomy of those being educated is recognised, and their intellectual and spiritual maturation is encouraged. As a result, access to adult status has been brought forward. Community relationships, whatever they may be, are thought to be liberating and personalising. Don Bosco did not experience this revolution. In his pedagogical system, the educators kept everything under control: the goals, the content, the methods and the means, whereas he advocated a rationality in education that in today’s eyes imposes a certain sharing of responsibilities in order to build autonomous personalities.

Reason, we are rightly told these days, must regain its full meaning in education and, we might add here, in the whole relational system of Salesian spirituality.¹⁴ This is only one form of reappropriation of the original charism. The clarification of the concept and a reappraisal of what it means are all the more necessary for the preventive education claimed by Salesians, in that young people and adults are now subject to strong pressures: the arrival of technological rationality, the education needed to control the world of desires, the need to escape into the emotional world of the moment, the power of the imagination, the arrival on the scene of soft thinking and, at the same time, the need for critical thinking in the multicultural juggle. At the same time, the Church exalts conscience, “the centre of personality, the heart of man, the sanctuary of his identity.”¹⁵ But isn’t conscience the force of reason? The spiritual tradition born of Don Bosco appeals not to constraints, but to the resources of the intelligence. The Salesian does not impose, he awakens or reawakens the inner forces and the living sources of reason. “Here we are at the heart of Don Bosco’s spiritual intuition”, we are told today.¹⁶ Fear of research is a bad counsellor. The remedy for the weaknesses now deplored could therefore be found in new ways, in a better harmony between instructing and educating, and above all in the reappropriation of the fullness of the functions of reason among the diverse potentialities of the person. Should not Don Bosco’s followers rely on a judiciously enlightened reason?

NOTES

- 1 The rest of our paragraph sets out the Pope's development without attempting to translate it. See G. Bosco, *Storia sacra per uso delle scuole ...*, Turin, Speirani e Ferrero, 1847, p. 70, 100. Of course, Don Bosco thought in the same way as most of the Christians around him. The rational objections of the Enlightenment, Voltaire for example, did not bother them.
- 2 *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, ed. E. Ceria, Turin, SEI, E. Ceria, 1946 p. 185, note.
- 3 "Questo sistema si appoggia tutto sopra la ragione, la religione, e sopra l'amorevolezza", in *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, § I.
- 4 It has been the subject, directly or indirectly, of various observations in the world of education specialists at the Salesian University in Rome. See in particular M. Pellerey, "La via della ragione. Rileggendo le parole e le azioni di don Bosco", in *Orientamenti pedagogici* 35 (1988), pp. 383-396. Interesting reflections by Pietro Braido, who leans towards the "relational unity" of the three pillars: reason, religion and loving-kindness, in his book *Prevenire, non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*, Roma, LAS, 1999, pp. 288-304.
- 5 "In Don Bosco la ragione appare come un fondamentale mezzo educativo in quanto l'uso della ragione, la ragionevolezza dei discorsi, il metodo della persuasione devono avere la meglio sull'imposizione violenta, sull'accettazione indiscussa, sull'obbedienza cieca." (M. Pellerey, "La via della ragione..." , art. quoted p. 391).
- 6 "Il termine "ragione" sottolinea, secondo l'autentica visione dell'umanesimo cristiano, il valore della persona, della coscienza, della natura umana, della cultura, del mondo del lavoro, del vivere sociale, ossia di quel vasto quadro di valori che è come il necessario corredo dell'uomo nella sua vita familiare, civile e politica." (*Juvenum Patris*, 31 January 1988, no. 10.) The rest of our paragraph sets out the Pope's development without attempting to translate it.
- 7 *Redemptor Hominis*, 4 March 1979, nos. 13, 14.
- 8 "In sintesi la "ragione", a cui Don Bosco crede come dono di Dio e come compito inderogabile dell'educatore, indica i valori del bene, nonché gli obiettivi da perseguire, i mezzi e i modi da usare." (*Juvenum Patris*, no. 10).
- 9 I am borrowing this heading from the cited article by Michele Pellerey.
- 10 "Il salesiano osservante della disciplina non sarà mai nel numero di coloro che, per sottomettersi a un ordine superiore, vogliono conoscerne le ragioni, quasi loro spettasse il diritto di giudicare se esse siano abbastanza gravi da giustificare la presa determinazione. Egli invece, appena conosciuta la volontà di chi dirige, si affretta, anzi vola a eseguirla." (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 25 December 1911, L.C., p. 68).
- 11 J. Payot, *L'apprentissage de l'art d'écrire*, 8th ed Paris, 1938, pp. 9-10.
- 12 These thoughts on dialogue can be found in article 13 of the Common Identity Card of the Salesian family, entitled: "Uniti in un cuor solo si farà dieci volte tanto" (United in one heart you will do tenfold).

- 13 I am basing myself here on the cited article by M. Pellerey and on the last chapter: “Verso il domani” by P. Braido, *Prevenire, non reprimere*, cit, pp. 377-404.
- 14 The following is partially inspired by A. Martinelli, “Riformulazione della spiritualità a partire della dimensione della laicità”, in *I laici nella Famiglia salesiana*, Roma, 1986, pp. 147-152; and by M. Pellerey, art. cit., pp. 383-384, 395-396.
- 15 Words of Fr Viganò, in a homily at the Salesian University in Rome, 15 October 1993; found in *Don Egidio Viganò all'Università Salesiana*, Roma, 1996, p. 180.
- 16 “Non imporre, ma risvegliare le forze interiori e le sorgenti vive della ragione. Siamo nel cuore dell'intuizione spirituale di don Bosco” (A. Martinelli, “Riformulazione della spiritualità ...”, art. cit., p. 149.

Rector/Director

The Salesian Rector, first in responsibility for the community

For the Franciscan Friars Minor, the superior of the local religious community is called a guardian; in the Society of Jesus, he is called a rector; among the Salesians of Don Bosco, the title of *direttore* is used [translated as “Director” or “Rector” depending in which part of the Salesian English-speaking world one is in. It is “Rector” in the translation of the Constitutions], and *direttrice* [but translated as “animator” in English] for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. “The superior of each local community is called the rector”, say the recent Salesian Constitutions.¹ “The provincial with the consent of her council as per the norms of art. 152 will appoint a perpetually professed Sister as animator of each community”² In human society, the title is never indifferent to the function exercised. A director/rector is expected to lead.

This role has always preoccupied the higher authorities of both Congregations, particularly the Salesian Congregation, in which there has been an apparently unstoppable tendency in various places, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, to reduce it to the management of works of social charity.³ The spiritual life of the communities has certainly suffered as a result. A fellow priest, a victim of this state of affairs, wrote to me one day, saying

I can no longer find any instance of fraternal sharing in the broadest and deepest sense: no more confessors who are formators of spirituality; no more directors with the qualities of leaders, of spiritual guides. It is true that the distinction between the work and the community, which is established here and there, could facilitate a return to the tradition of the origins, too often forgotten or more simply ignored, despite repeated instructions from Salesian general authority, in particular from Frs Rua, Albera, Ricaldone and Viganò, who insisted on the responsibility of the director in matters of religious life.⁴

The rector has authority over the community, his title reminds us. However, egalitarian “personalisation” and “socialisation”, to use Fr Viganò’s language on the signs of contemporary times,⁵ now make him the preferred “first in order of responsibility” in Salesian communities, where all the members “share responsibility”. If we read the Constitutions of the two religious institutes renewed following Vatican II the trend has

been more marked among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians than among the Salesians. In an obvious concern for participation and equality, they have not given the same emphasis as the Salesians to the authority of the local superior. Both have entitled their chapter of the Constitutions “The service of authority in the local community”.⁶ In the article that opens this section, the Salesians, in accordance with Canon Law (can. 608), defined this local community as a group of confreres living a common life in unity of spirit “under the authority of the superior” and sharing responsibility for the apostolic mission;⁷ whereas the Salesian Sisters, in their description of this same community, pointed out that each of them is “assembled in the Lord’s name through his loving design for our salvation” with the Sisters fulfilling their apostolic commitment in a co-responsible manner and where the provincial will “appoint a perpetually professed Sisters as animator of the community.”⁸ In other chapters in the Constitutions we learn that the rector is “a brother among brothers”, but among brothers “who recognise his responsibility and authority”;⁹ whereas in the case of the Sisters, the animator is a “sister among her Sisters”, “with the specific responsibility for animating and guiding them”,¹⁰ and we understand that she “will carry out her service of authority” following other services, in particular that of being “a bond of unity among her sisters”, among whom she is considered to have “the primary responsibility of ensuring that the religious life of the community, its apostolic activities, and the administration of its goods are in fidelity to the spirit of the Institute.”¹¹ The insistence on unity is, moreover, in line with the ancient Salesian tradition, as we shall see in a moment.

The rector, centre of the religious community

Don Bosco wanted the rector to always be the unifying principle of his community and the guarantor of its Salesian character. On 3 February 1876, on the occasion of a general meeting of rectors, he said, apparently without much fear of the centralism reviled in other times and places:

Among us, let the superior be our all. Let everyone help the Rector Major, upholding and assisting him in every way: let everyone rally around him as the sole focal point. The Rector Major has the Rule as his guide: let him never stray from it; otherwise instead of a single focal point there will be two: the Rule and his own will. Instead, the Rule should be almost embodied in the Rector Major; the Rule and the Rector Major should be one and the same. And what we have said about the Rector Major in reference to the whole Congregation applies also to each rector in his own house. He must be united to the Rector Major, and

all the members of his house must be united to him. He too must embody the Rule.¹²

The local community is responsible for giving concrete form to the Salesian mission. If we follow Don Bosco, “the rector is the one who provides the official link between the community in mission on the one hand, and, the major superiors (and, through them, the entire Salesian society), the hierarchical Church and God himself, of whom he is the delegate and representative. The director is the first one responsible for the Salesian authenticity of the community, for its fidelity to the Salesian charism.” The Salesian rector is the centre of unity of the “house”, confreres and young people, community and work taken as a whole.¹³

This centre, which is by no means passive, is alive and well with the threefold title of “Father, Teacher and Superior”, according to the minutes of congresses held under Fr Rinaldi.¹⁴ This multiple role requires him to be a constant presence in the community. A rector who is often absent, even under honourable pretexts and, even more so, without them, would thereby impair the functioning of the whole. That would be a serious mistake. Here we come back to Fr Rua. “The rector must be the centre of the driving force behind everything” he told the provincials and rectors.¹⁵ The Salesian Constitutions summarise his tasks in the phrase “He is first in order of responsibility for its religious life, its apostolic activities and the administration of its goods.”¹⁶ All three are important, but, wrote Fr Rua, if there is an order to be established between them,

The most important point to be inculcated in the directors is that their special care must be to direct the confreres and priests and clerics and lay people well [...] The great drawback produced by the lack of suitable personnel is that, at times, the rectors themselves begin to work directly with the young people [...] and in the meantime there is no time to cultivate the confreres, to receive their manifestations [*rendiconti*] to give them the necessary conferences, to see if they need anything, to direct them, to form them. This is a grave mistake and therefore a great ruin for the Congregation. [...] the director must, as a rule, influence the students indirectly, that is, through his staff, and influence the staff directly.¹⁷

It should be pointed out that in speaking in this way, Fr Rua was in no way thinking of prohibiting the relationships, which were certainly very direct for him as for Don Bosco, of the Salesian rector with his pupils in the playground and during the Goodnight. These relationships, which involve a constant presence, have always been

essential in Salesian education.¹⁸ We will consider here only the religious function of the Salesian rector.

The spiritual function of the Salesian rector within his community

In the traditional Salesian house, the community extends to all personnel, Salesian or not, as well as the students. To avoid going too far let's concentrate here on the religious community itself. The rector is primarily responsible for the religious life of its members. The rector, or the Sisters' animator, fulfils this mission primarily through the example he or she sets for their brothers and sisters. This was self-evident for Fr Rua and Fr Albera, according to whom the rector, in order to be a true teacher had to be a role model.

No matter how eloquent our words may seem, no matter how great the enthusiasm it seems to arouse in our listeners, it would remain a dead letter if those who hear us were to repeat the well-known reproach: *Medice, cura teipsum* *Medice, cura teipsum*, Physician, heal thyself! Or *Qui alias doces, teipsum non doces*, You who teach others, you teach yourself nothing! The former wrote to provincials and rectors of America (...) What a misfortune it would be if, in our desire to help our subordinates uproot the weeds from their hearts, we were to let our own faults take deep root in our own hearts and our hearts become like fields of sloth! May God not allow us who are continually occupied with encouraging others on the path of virtue, to forget the strict obligation contracted on the day of the taking of our holy vows, to progress unceasingly in perfection! Oh, let us be convinced that the more a rector strives to progress in virtue himself, the more fruitful his priestly ministry will be, and the more abundant will be the spiritual fruits of his wise guidance.¹⁹

Then, as we have read, the rector "guides" and "animates" (verbs that an age of "shared responsibility" and "non-directiveness" has preferred to "directs") the spiritual life of his confreres. Among the Salesians, he does this with the priestly charisma that is today an obligatory part of the function.²⁰ "The superior directs, guides and encourages, making discreet use of his authority" say the renewed Constitutions.²¹ The Salesian rector is "master and guide in holiness", wrote Fr Viganò.²² According to the 1982 Constitutions of the Salesian Sisters, in the community "the animator is a sister among her Sisters with the specific responsibility for animating and guiding them."²³ In this proposal, the not unimportant qualification "specific" means that animating and guiding are proper to the function of the community animator. For the Salesians, the rector's "first task is to animate the community so that it may live faithful to

the Constitutions and grow in unity.” But looking after the whole was not enough. According to their Constitutions the rector also has “a direct responsibility towards each confrere.” This responsibility consists of helping him to “realise his own personal vocation and carry out the work entrusted to him.”²⁴

Fr Rua cared deeply about the quality of the spiritual life of the religious.

Let us remember that our dear confreres became Salesians first and foremost for their own sanctification, as stated in the Holy Rule, which gives as the primary end of our Pious Society the sanctification of its members. Consequently, the first, the very first obligation of a rector is precisely to take great care of the Salesian personnel.²⁵

The Salesian rector must therefore promote a life of community prayer and ensure that everyone is correct in their devotional practices. The practice of the vows by his members falls, in a way, under his responsibility. Consequently, it is his duty to advise and correct, albeit always with a great sense of fatherliness, without bitterness and never in public. His role of spiritual promoter is to be understood in a profound sense, as the dynamic of God’s love tending towards “perfection”. The rector offers himself to each person as an intimate guide for spiritual direction, with respect for each one’s conscience, but, if possible, to the point of an open heart, in accordance with Don Bosco’s desire, for whom “the rector was the natural confessor of those who belonged to the Congregation.”²⁶

The Rector’s spiritual friendly talk with his confreres

In ancient Salesian tradition, spiritual direction was called *rendiconto*, i.e. the rendering of an account or a report.²⁷ The word and its content date back to Don Bosco’s second edition (1877) of his Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions. It stated that the *rendiconto* should be “at least monthly” and that “the main points” to be covered would be:

1. Health.
2. Studies.
3. Whether one can carry out one’s occupations well and how diligently one does so.
4. Whether one can carry out one’s religious practices conveniently and how diligently one does so.
5. How one behaves during prayers and meditations.
6. How often and with what devotion one approaches the sacraments.
7. Whether one observes the vows and if one has doubts about his vocation.

But it should be noted that the *rendiconto* relates only to the external

forum, that it is not a matter of (matter for) confession, unless the confrere does so for his spiritual good. 8. Whether one experiences distress or inner turmoil, or even aversion towards someone. 9. Whether one is aware of some disorder that needs to be remedied, especially if it is a question of preventing an offence against God.²⁸

The monthly regularity and pattern of the exchange, which was soon laid down in a constitutional provision, were binding until the day after Vatican II, as article 48 of the 1966 Constitutions still testified. Then the rule was considerably relaxed. In the revised Constitutions of 1984, the monthly report was to take place “frequently” and be a “friendly talk” between the religious and his rector. In it, the religious spoke in confidence about his life and activities, and, if it suited him his “the state of his conscience.”²⁹ The Regulations recuperated the old prescriptions as best they could, saying,

In an atmosphere of mutual trust every confrere should frequently see his rector to let him know the state of his health, how his apostolic activity is proceeding, the difficulties he faces in religious life and fraternal charity, and everything that may contribute to the welfare of the individual members and of the community.³⁰

At the time of shared responsibility, the director role took a back seat to the guide, and the friendly talk supplanted the *rendiconto* to the religious superior.

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have dedicated a fervent constitutional article to this, well rooted in the tradition of their institute. It states its usefulness and clearly decrees that it should be held every month.

An especially favoured occasion for strengthening communion, discovering God's will, and deepening the spirit of the Institute at a practical level, is the personal encounter that each Sister will have with the community animator. This encounter will take place monthly, in an atmosphere of faith and charity, mutual trust, loyalty, and secrecy. Thus practised, it will become, as Don Bosco desired, an irreplaceable means of personal and community growth in our identity as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.³¹

Vatican II's exhortation to superiors: “They should exercise their authority out of a spirit of service to the brethren, expressing in this way the love with which God loves their subjects” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 14), was recorded in the Salesian world, where, incidentally, all the rector had to do to hear it was to follow Don Bosco's wise advice.³²

He presented himself to his confreres, much more than as superior and master, “with the simplicity and affection of a brother and a friend”, to use Fr Albera’s words when he took up his post as Rector Major.³³ His leadership was not paternalistic. It requires a fine collection of qualities. The good Salesian rector is a man of God, humble, detached, capable of putting up with, forgiving and encouraging others, in short, capable of being loved.³⁴

NOTES

- 1 “Il superiore di ciascuna comunità locale prende il nome di direttore” (SDB Constitutions, art. 176.) In France, in Salesian schools, he is given (perhaps improperly) the title “supérieur”, to avoid any confusion with the one in charge of the schools who is officially known as the “directeur”.
- 2 “Ad ogni comunità è preposta una professa di voti perpetui come Direttrice” (FMA Constitutions, art. 163).
- 3 The Salesians’ 21st General Chapter regretted this again in 1978, when it recommended that this management be maintained in fourth and last place, after the service of unity and Salesian identity, the pastoral guidance of the Salesian mission, the orientation of the tasks of education and promotion, etc. (CG21, nos. 52-53).
- 4 In particular see the Don Bosco’s *Ricordi confidenziali ai direttori*, Fr Rua’s circulars, 24 August 1894, 25 April 1901, 19 March 1902 and 1 November 1906; Fr Paul Albera’s *Manuale del Direttore* (1915); Fr Albera’s circular letter dated 23 April 1917 to provincials and rectors; the *Resoconto dei Convegni tenuti dai Direttori Salesiani a Valsalice nell'estate del 1926* (under the presidency of Fr Rinaldi), in *Atti* 36, 24 September 1926, pp. 484-495; Fr Egidio Viganò’s letter regarding “l’animazione del direttore salesiano”, in *Atti* 306, October-December 1982, pp. 3-30; the booklet presented by Fr Egidio Viganò, *Il Direttore salesiano. Un ministero per l’animazione e il governo della comunità locale* (Rome, ed. S.D.B., 1986); and, following this, studies on “le directeur salésien selon don Bosco et notre tradition” and “le directeur animateur de la communauté” of Joseph Aubry, in *Avec Don Bosco vers l’an 2000* (Rome, 1990), pp. 300-334.
- 5 See the Introduction to this dictionary, p. 24.
- 6 “Servizio dell’autorità nella comunità locale” (SDB Constitutions SDB, art. 175-186); “Il servizio di autorità nella comunità locale” (FMA Constitutions, art. 163-170).
- 7 “La comunità locale è composta da confratelli che abitano in una casa legittimamente eretta e fanno in essa vita comune in unità di spirito sotto l’autorità del superiore, operando corresponsabilmente per la missione apostolica” (SDB Constitutions, art. 175).
- 8 “Ogni nostra comunità è adunata nel nome del Signore per un disegno di amore e di salvezza. Vive in una casa legittimamente costituita e si organizza secondo le Costituzioni e le esigenze della missione. Le suore che vi sono chiamate dall’obbedienza svolgono corresponsabilmente l’impegno apostolico ricevuto dall’Istituto a servizio delle giovani nella Chiesa particolare. Ad ogni comunità è preposta una professa di voti perpetui come Direttrice.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 163).
- 9 “E’ al centro della comunità, fratello tra fratelli, che riconoscono la sua responsabilità e autorità” (SDB Constitutions, art. 55).
- 10 See “La Direttrice è nella comunità sorella tra le sorelle, con una specifica responsabilità di animazione e di guida” (FMA Constitutions, art. 52).
- 11 “La Direttrice è vincolo di unione fra le sorelle e favorisce l’apertura della comunità all’ispettoria, all’Istituto e alla Chiesa. E’ la prima responsabile della vita religiosa, delle opere apostoliche e dell’amministrazione dei beni nella fedeltà allo spirito dell’Istituto. Esercita il servizio di autorità secondo le Costituzioni ...” (FMA Constitutions art. 164).

- 12 “Tra di noi il Superiore sia tutto. Tutti diano mano al Rettor Maggiore, lo sostengano, lo aiutino in ogni modo, si faccia da tutti un centro unico intorno a lui. Il Rettor Maggiore poi ha le Regole ; da esse non si diparta mai, altrimenti il centro non resta più unico, ma duplice, cioè il centro delle Regole e quello della sua volontà. Bisogna invece che nel Rettor Maggiore quasi s’incarnino le Regole : che le Regole ed il Rettor Maggiore siano come la stessa cosa. Ciò che avviene pel Rettor Maggiore riguardo a tutta la Società, bisogna che avvenga pel Direttore in ciascuna casa. Essa deve fere una cosa sola col Rettor Maggiore e tutti i membri della sua casa devono fare una cosa sola con lui. In lui ancora devono essere come incarnate le Regole.” (MB XII, 81, BM XII, p. 62).
- 13 J. Aubry, *Avec Don Bosco vers l’an 2000*, p. 303.
- 14 Idea developed in the second theme of the *Resoconto dei Convegni* of Salesian directors in 1926, in *Atti* 36, pp. 484-495.
- 15 “Il direttore deve essere il centro di tutto, il motore da cui parte ogni forza” (M. Rua, Letter to provincials and rectors, 25 April 1901; L. C., p. 266).
- 16 “Egli è il primo responsabile della vita religiosa, delle attività apostoliche e dell’amministrazione dei beni.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 176).
- 17 “Il punto più culminante da inculcarsi ai direttori si è che la cura loro speciale dev’essere d’indirizzare bene i confratelli e preti e chierici e laici [...] Il grande inconveniente prodotto dalla mancanza di personale adatto è che, alle volte, i direttori medesimi si mettono a lavorare direttamente coi giovani [...] e intanto non si trova il tempo per coltivare i confratelli, ricevere i rendiconti, far loro le debite conferenze, vedere se abbisognino di qualche cosa, dirigerli, formarli. Questo è un grave sbaglio e perciò una grande rovina per la Congregazione. [...] il direttore deve per regola ordinaria influire sugli allievi indirettamente, cioè per mezzo del suo personale ed influire direttamente sul personale.” (M. Rua, Letter to provincials, 25 December 1902, L.C. pp. 301-303).
- 18 See the entries on *Religious education* and the *Preventive System*.
- 19 “Per quanto eloquente potesse parere la nostra parola, per quanto entusiasmo paresse eccitare ne’ nostri uditori, ella rimarrebbe infruttuosa, se coloro che ci ascoltano potessero ripeterci il noto rimprovero : *Medice, cura teipsum*, o quelle altre parole : *Qui alios doces, teipsum non doces!* (...) Che sventura per noi se, intenti ad aiutare i nostri dipendenti a sradicare dal loro cuore le erbe cattive, noi lasciassimo che i nostri difetti mettessero profonde radici, che il nostro cuore divenisse simile al campo del pigro ! Dio non permetta che, occupati continuamente a spingere innanzi gli altri nel sentiero della virtù, dimentichiamo la stretta obbligazione, contratta nel giorno in cui emettemmo i santi voti, di avanzarci ognora nella perfezione. Oh ! persuadiamoci bene che più un Direttore si studia di progredire egli stesso nella virtù, più sarà fecondo il suo ministero sacerdotale, e più saranno abbondanti i frutti spirituali della sua saggia direzione.” (M. Rua, Letter to provincials and rectors of America, 24 August 1894; L. C., p. 110). For Fr Albera, see the letter of 23 April 1917 to provincials and rectors entitled: “Consigli ed avvisi per conservare lo spirito di D. Bosco in tutte le Case” where the first subheading is: “Modelli e Maestri”, in P. Albera, L. C., p. 215.
- 20 SDB Constitutions, art. 177. Fr Egidio Viganò devoted his letter to the Salesians of 16 July 1982 to the priestly charism of the rector, L. C., pp. 443-465.

- 21 “Il superiore orienta, guida e incoraggia, facendo un uso discreto della sua autorità” (SDB Constitutions, art. 65).
- 22 “Maestro e guida di santificazione”, in Letter to Salesians, 16 July 1982 ; L.C., pp. 457-462.
- 23 See fn 10 above.
- 24 “Suo primo compito è animare la comunità perchè viva nella fedeltà alle Costituzioni e cresca nell'unità. Coordina gli sforzi di tutti tenendo conto dei diritti, doveri e capacità di ciascuno. Ha responsabilità diretta anche verso ogni confratello: lo aiuta a realizzare la sua personale vocazione e lo sostiene nel lavoro che gli è affidato” (SDB Constitutions, art. 55).
- 25 “Ricordiamoci che i nostri cari Confratelli si sono fatti salesiani anzitutto per conseguire la propria santificazione, come si esprime la santa Regola, che pone come fine primario di nostra Pia Società la santificazione de' suoi membri. Perciò il primo, il primissimo obbligo di un Direttore è appunto questo, di aver molta cura del personale salesiano.” (M. Rua, Letter to provincials and rectors, 25 April 1901 ; L.C., p. 260).
- 26 According to a memoir by Fr Lemoyne on the retreat in 1873, reproduced in MB X, 1094. We know that a Roman decree of 1901 forbade religious superiors to hear the confessions of their subjects.
- 27 The French term “rendement de compte” is an Italianism. On the traditional *rendiconto*, see especially the lengthy circular by Pietro Ricaldone, 24 July 1947, in *Atti* 142, 112 pages.
- 28 “I punti principali su cui devono versare i rendiconti sono questi: 1. Sanità. 2. Studii. 3. Se si possono disimpegnar bene le proprie occupazioni e qual diligenza si mette in esse. 4. Se s'abbia comodità d'adempiere le pratiche religiose e qual diligenza si pone in eseguirle. 5. Come si diporti nelle orazioni e nelle Meditazioni. 6. Con qual frequenza e divozioni si vada ai Sacramenti. 7. Come si osservano i voti, e se non vi siano dubbi in fatto di vocazione. Ma si noti bene che il rendiconto si raggira solamente in cose esterne e non di confessione, a meno che il socio ne facesse egli stesso argomento per suo spirituale vantaggio. 8. Se abbia dei dispiaceri o perturbazioni interne, od astio per qualcuno. 9. Se conosce qualche disordine cui porre rimedio specialmente quando si tratta d'impedire l'offesa di Dio.” (*Regole o Costituzioni ...*, 1877, p. 24).
- 29 “Fedele alla raccomandazione di Don Bosco, ogni confratello s'incontra frequentemente con il proprio superiore in un colloquio fraterno. E' un momento privilegiato di dialogo per il bene proprio e per il buon andamento della comunità. In esso parla con confidenza della sua vita e attività e, se lo desidera, anche della sua situazione di coscienza.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 70).
- 30 “In un clima di fiducia ogni confratello si incontra frequentemente con il direttore e gli manifesti lo stato della propria salute, l'andamento del lavoro apostolico, le difficoltà che trova nella vita religiosa e nella carità fraterna, e tutto ciò che può contribuire al bene dei singoli e della comunità” (SDB Regolamenti, 1984, art. 49).
- 31 “Momento privilegiato per rafforzare la comunione, scoprire la volontà di Dio e approfondire nella vita pratica lo spirito dell'Istituto, è il colloquio personale che ognuna di noi avrà con la sua Superiora. Questo incontro si svolgerà mensilmente, in un clima di fede e di carità, di reciproca fiducia, lealtà e segretezza. Così attuato il colloquio diverrà - secondo il pensiero di don Bosco - elemento insostituibile per la crescita personale e comunitaria nella nostra identità di Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 34.) See also: “Si dedichi (la direttrice) con particolare sollecitudine agli incontri

personali e promuova nella comunità validi rapporti fraterni. Orienti e stimoli le sorelle per una risposta sempre più consapevole alla vocazione” (ibidem, art. 52).

- 32 See his *Ricordi confidenziali ai direttori* which, in their first version, were intended solely for Fr Rua, the first rector of a house outside Valdocco.
- 33 “Io mi presento a voi non già col linguaggio d'un superiore e di un maestro, bensì colla semplicità e coll'affetto d'un fratello e di un amico”. (P. Albera, Letter to Salaesians, 25 January 1911 ; L.C., p. 8).
- 34 This is one of the conclusions of J. Aubry in *Avec don Bosco vers l'an 2000*, p. 314.

Religious education

Traditional religious education in the Salesian world¹

Following Don Bosco and for about a century, the official methods of religious education of young people, who were expected to belong uniformly to homogeneous Catholic environments and therefore to nurture a Christian faith, hardly varied in the Salesian world. The boys and girls had to be prepared to live their best moral lives in the Catholic Church so that, at the moment of death, they could carry out the great work of their salvation in eternal life. Every day, during their evening prayers, in accordance with a recommendation dating back to Don Bosco, the Salesian communities (the young people, but also the religious in charge of them) repeated the serious invocation three times: “Dear Mother Mary ever Virgin, help me to save my soul.”² If the salvation obtained at death was, as it happened for Dominic Savio, that of a saint, the educational success was total.

Traditional teaching of religion

The regularity of the moral life, the guarantor of the state of grace, itself a condition of salvation, implied exact submission to God’s will, manifested in his Word, that is, in general, in the teaching of the Church. Logically, therefore, religious education or formation consisted first of all in making the Church’s teaching known, and then in putting it into practice, as set out in the catechism. In this way, the “good Christian” was created, one whose salvation was according to Don Bosco’s most cherished wishes.

In 1939, echoing a Roman document, the Rector Major Fr Pietro Ricaldone denounced religious ignorance as “the greatest plague” of our time and modest consequences for – we emphasise – people’s salvation. It is necessary, he wrote, to communicate to men “the heavenly wisdom necessary for eternal salvation through the teaching of the catechism, by which the substance of what concerns God himself, Jesus Christ and his teaching is proposed and explained to the hearer, according to the age, ability and condition of each.”³ Catechesis by question and answer, taught in class and the subject of competitions strongly encouraged by the authorities, focused essentially, as was the case throughout the Catholic world, on the great Christian mysteries of

the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Redemption summarised in the Creed; on the commandments of God (the Decalogue) and of the Church, as well as on the cardinal sins; and finally on grace and the sacraments. Following in the footsteps of Don Bosco and Fr Rua, Salesian catechists illustrated their catechism teaching with the history of the Bible and the history of the Church.

However, Salesian works (oratories and schools) willingly followed a slightly different plan of Christian doctrine, better adapted to the historical and eschatological perspective which was naturally theirs, in their daily goodnights, Sunday instructions or sermons during retreats and the exercises for a happy death. We read this plan – very much dated, as we can easily agree – in the catechetical series unexpectedly resulting from Don Bosco's *Mese di maggio*. It must be borne in mind if we are to understand the nature of Salesian religious education at that time.

In his thirty-one daily meditations, Don Bosco accompanied man in his happy or unhappy destiny, from his origins to his glorification. Created by God, he must fulfil exactly the precepts of his holy law. But his immortal soul can neglect them. Since Adam and Eve committed the foolishness of disobeying the Lord, he had the extreme goodness to promise, then to send a redeemer to guilty mankind, so that they can be saved. The Redeemer created a Church within which man can find salvation. This Church has a supreme head, the Pope, and pastors, the bishops, to whom we must absolutely be linked. The unifying relationship with the Church and with God is established in faith within this Church. To support Christians on life's journey, Jesus Christ instituted seven sacraments, "visible signs established by God to give our souls the graces that are necessary to save us."⁴ The Christian thus has God as his father, Jesus Christ as his brother, the Church as his mother and the Word of God to guide him along the way to salvation. Unfortunately, however, on earth he often fails in his supernatural dignity and thus compromises this salvation. The time given to him to make use of created goods and save his soul takes place under the gaze of an ever-present God. In the end, he must imagine a salvation which risks being missed without remedy. Sin, disobedience to God's holy law, offends his divine majesty and can only be remedied by divine forgiveness. Don Bosco vigorously denounced the sin of dishonesty and human respect. Fortunately, in his infinite mercy, Christ instituted the sacrament of "confession" where the confessor, "in the name of God", forgives man's sins. On earth, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the best thing that can be done for the greater glory of God and the greater benefit of souls, especially if it is accompanied (for the faithful) by Holy Communion. Death will be the dreaded moment that separates the time of mercy from the time of justice,

as the particular judgement and the general judgement unambiguously signify. Hell and its eternal punishments are the lot of the sinner, while the promise of paradise infuses energy and hope into the faithful Christian. The practice of charity is highly recommended. Don Bosco's month proper ended with considerations on salvation through the intercession of Mary, Mary's protection during life and at the fateful hour of death.

Our catechist had thus marked out for his listeners a path of life directed towards personal salvation. He had pointed out the dangers; he had described the help that God was offering along the way; finally, he had announced the happy or unhappy end to which the passage of time would necessarily lead him.⁵

Traditional religious practice

The Word of God must be practised. The official instructions of the religious practices in the first century were preferably aligned with those of the Salesian world. Under the explicit heading of "religious formation", Fr Ricaldone's instructions were particularly detailed.⁶ In opening the chapter, he recalled the "marvellous sequence" (*mirabile concatenamento*) of feasts and devotions that Don Bosco had instituted throughout the year in his works. As a sign of the times, Fr Ricaldone was only moderately concerned about the liturgical year. First of all, at the end of each month, there was the exercise for a happy death, to which the greatest importance was attached. Then, the patronal feast of Saint Francis de Sales (29 January) was followed by Shrove Tuesday (*mardi gras*), the "sanctified carnival" (by which is meant prayers of reparation), the seven Sundays in preparation for the feast of Saint Joseph and the feast of this saint (19 March), the annual retreat, the offices of Holy Week, the washing of the feet and the visit to the "sepulchres" on Maundy Thursday. Then came the month of Mary (in May), the Forty Hours, the six preparatory Sundays and the feast of St Aloysius Gonzaga (21 June); finally, once the holidays were over, the feast of the Holy Rosary (7 October), the Immaculate Conception of Mary (8 December) and, to round things off in style, the Christmas novena and Midnight Mass.⁷

Religious practices were an integral part of Salesian life in the past. Morning and evening prayers, the rosary and daily mass were the rule. Invocations framed the day's work and meals. The number of services increased still further on Sundays and religious feast days. In order to get rid of sin and keep young people in God's grace, "without which things could not go well, the primary method of educating well is to have good

confessions and good communions”, Fr Ricaldone taught.⁸ Add to this a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Salesian educational practice at the time was mainly sacramental. Fr Ricaldone also felt that religious sodalities, including the conferences of St Vincent de Paul, made the best contribution to the Christian formation of young people in the Salesian world. In short, from morning to night and from 1 January to 31 December, these young people were bathed in a pious atmosphere that was constantly renewed and kept them in a state of “religion”.

The official instructions did not necessarily mention this, but the whole of Don Bosco’s history bears witness to it: religious festivals and celebrations should be matched by a life that was not only regular but, as far as possible, an authentically virtuous life, because it was completely in accordance with the divine law taught to them. The life of Dominic Savio proved it. This boy’s submission to the word of God had enabled him to lead an increasingly virtuous life, so exemplary that it could “hardly be surpassed”, wrote Don Bosco, his biographer. Let’s read the whole passage, which clearly links doctrine and life: “He always listened to talks and sermons with great joy. He was already convinced that the word of God was a sure guide along the road to heaven. He was not worried if sometimes they were a bit long. If there was anything he did not understand, he never hesitated to ask for further explanations. This was the root and source of his exemplary life and steady progress in virtue which could hardly have been surpassed.”⁹ The Word of God, then, not only nourished Dominic’s spirit of prayer and penance, his concern for the sacraments and his devotion to Mary. It determined him to “make himself a saint”, that is, to bring to the highest possible point a little of every natural and supernatural virtue that his story celebrated: kindness, gentleness, courage and charity towards others in all its forms. On the day he died, this boy had fully succeeded in a life that had been a triumphant march towards heaven.

In the Salesian world of yesteryear, religious education therefore involved three stages: teaching, celebration and living practice.

Education to the faith according to General Chapter 1990

The moments of traditional Salesian education: knowledge, celebration and practice, would continue to exist, albeit more closely interwoven with less concern for celebration, in the world that took shape in the second half of the twentieth century. The Salesians continued to try to shape “good Christians”. But their outlook was changing. According to those who taught them pastoral ministry, the aim of evangelisation was no longer so

much to “save souls” as to help them “encounter Christ” and live by Him. Without in any way giving up traditional mass evangelisation wherever and whenever it was still possible, Salesian pastors reflected on personal education in the faith, which had become essential in a different environment.

The world is changing fast, Fr Viganò said at the start of his term of office. Henceforth, in society, religions were mixing, religious relativism was spreading, belief in God became increasingly problematic and the very meaning of life was becoming obscured in officially Christian minds. The Salesian Family, born of a “simple catechism lesson” and therefore essentially religious education, had to plan the religious education of young people in a culturally new world.¹⁰ The Salesian General Chapter of 1990 took up this challenge and tried to present a “Salesian journey of education in the faith.”¹¹ Let us try to mark the stages.

For the Salesian, educating young people in the faith is “work and prayer”. In his work for the salvation of young people, he has experienced the fatherhood of God, “who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side, and gives his life to save them.”¹² In their various situations, therefore, they recognise the action of a God who loves young people. To lead them to authentic faith, the educator begins by reaching out to them. He meets them where they are, in order to develop them intelligently and patiently in an educational environment. The proposal of faith will emerge in the course of a process of formation and within a twofold process: the maturing of the personality and the call of Christ, who encourages them to build their faith according to the revelation manifested in himself. The path is thus mapped out.

You have to keep in mind what you want to achieve. “We educate and evangelise according to a plan for total human well being, directed to Christ, the perfect Man. Faithful to the intentions of our Founder, our purpose is to form “upright citizens and good Christians”, say the Salesian Constitutions.¹³ Faith and life are integrated into the Salesian project of the concurrent formation of the Christian and the citizen. It is a project for the maturing of human behaviour that encourages sincere openness to truth, respect and love for others, the free gift of self and service to others. The exercise of faith, hope and charity, in other words Christian practice, thus becomes a lifestyle.

Christian growth to maturity concerns four areas: human growth towards a life that must be taken up as a “religious experience”; the encounter with Jesus Christ, the perfect Man, who makes us discover the meaning of our individual and social existence; gradual integration into the community of believers, both a sign and an instrument of the salvation of humanity; and finally commitment to transforming the

world. To encourage this growth the educator will cultivate attitudes and subject them to frequent verification; he or she will identify the knowledge that is essential to a proper understanding of the Christian life; and will choose experiences capable of fostering appropriate attitudes and knowledge. Teaching and Christian practice therefore go hand in hand in Salesian religious education.

Knowledge and wisdom are necessary for the educator to lead the young person to human maturity, where faith and life are mutually supportive. To mature, young people must welcome life, open up to others, identify their deepest aspirations with their inevitable limitations, try to discover the meaning of their existence and move towards the transcendent. In this the request and the search for meaning become an “invocation”, a desire for an answer, a horizon or a perspective that will enable us to resolve the problems posed by life, its origin and its end, and to determine the task of the person wishing to fulfil it.

The service of faith education cannot stop at human growth, no matter how Christian-inspired it is. Human life reaches its fullness only in Christ Jesus. “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Education seeks to prepare for effective contact with him, to offer him, and then to deepen it so that it becomes an authentic encounter in faith. A vague sympathy for Christ, which many people are content with, is not enough. The problem facing the educator is which aspects of the mystery of Christ should be emphasised to bring the young person into a deep relationship with Him. Bridging signs are essential. Young people will find them in the people of the community, in the attitudes that the memory of Christ awakens in them, in Christian worship and also in the style of the educative and pastoral institution, in the relationships between the people who make it up, in the religious meaning that emerges from the objects, places and gestures inspired by faith. Signs have their own language and transmit messages. Pedagogy chooses, prepares and presents them so that they speak powerfully to the sensibilities of young people.

From the testimony of the signs, we must move on to the explicit proclamation by the apostle and the discovery of the person of Christ by the believer. The believer’s life will be transformed by a robust and dynamic faith. It will become part of the Church which the Christian feels part of. The need for friendship and interpersonal relationships, the energy of the group. They have faith in the mystery of the Church. The mystery is realised in prayer, in listening to the Word and in celebrating salvation. His faith makes the believer understand that the Church is a mediator in the encounter with God.

Finally, the Christian life implies a commitment to the Kingdom of God. It is a vocation. The teacher helps the young person to discern the place he or she can take in building this kingdom. To do this, they first help them to recognise the resources they possess within themselves. Having gifts and potential is not enough. They still have to live happily. What a joy it is to be able to communicate this to them and to really do so! In this way, under the spiritual guidance of their teacher and according to their own vocation, young people will contribute to the progress of the kingdom of God.

Spiritual accompaniment is the continuation and completion of the long process of education in the faith, conceived at the end of the twentieth century as a human journey to a personal encounter with Christ.

An open question

Salesian thinking seems to be incomplete here. Religious education in this thinking boils down to a process of socialisation in the Catholic Church. However, in the pluralistic world of the twenty-first century, this approach has become insufficient. “Religion” and “religious” touch on the transcendent dimension of human existence. In their radical sense, “religiosity” and “religious experience” refer to essential human problems, such as the meaning of life, the consistency of values, the origin and absolute future of the world, openness to the totally Other, etc. Religious education therefore becomes a process and development of this kind of experience. The person being educated learns to take seriously the religious problematic of their existence. The Salesian system can no longer ignore this aspect of things.¹⁴

NOTES

- 1 On Salesian education in general, see the entry *Preventive System*.
- 2 Don Bosco had written on the final day of his *Mese di maggio*: "Ma vi raccomando di dire ogni sera prima di coricarvi tre volte la seguente giaculatoria : Cara Madre Vergine Maria, fate che io salvi l'anima mia." (G. Bosco, *Il Mese di maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata*, Torino, 1858, p. 182).
- 3 "... la sapienza celeste, necessaria all'eterna salute, mediante l'insegnamento del Catechismo, per mezzo del quale viene, a chi ascolta, proposta e spiegata, secondo l'età, la capacità e la condizione di ciascuno, la sostanza di quanto riguarda Dio stesso, Gesù Cristo, la sua dottrina e il suo insegnamento." (P. Ricaldone, "Oratorio festivo, Catechismo, Formazione religiosa", *Atti* 96, November-December 1939, p. 22). He quoted the Decree of the S. Congregation of the Council *Provido sane consiglio*, 12 January 1935.
- 4 "Questi sacramenti sono altrettanti segni sensibili stabiliti da Dio per dare alle anime nostre le grazie che sono necessarie per salvarci" (*Il Mese di Maggio ...*, Torino, 1858, p. 56).
- 5 *Il Mese di maggio ...*, Torino, 1858, *passim*.
- 6 P. Ricaldone, "La Formazione religiosa", in the already-mentioned document *Oratorio festivo ...*, in *Atti* 96, pp. 149-170.
- 7 P. Ricaldone, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
- 8 "Bisogna che teniamo lontano il peccato dalla casa e che i nostri giovani si mettano tutti in grazia di Dio ; senza di questo le cose non possono andar bene. Ricordatevi che il primo metodo per educare bene è il fare buone confessioni e buone Comunioni." (P. Ricaldone, *op. cit.*, p. 154).
- 9 "Ascoltava con delizia le prediche. Aveva radicato nel cuore che la parola di Dio è la guida dell'uomo per la strada del cielo ; perciò ogni massima udita in una predica era per lui un ricordo invariabile cui più non dimenticava. Ogni discorso morale, ogni catechismo, ogni predica, quantunque prolungata, era sempre per lui una delizia. (...) Di qui ebbe cominciamento quell'esemplare tenore di vita, quel continuo progredire di virtù in virtù, quell'esattezza nell'adempimento de' suoi doveri, oltre cui non si può andare." (*Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, Torino, 1859, chap. VIII, pp. 38-39).
- 10 On the development of ideas and terms, see the article by a competent Salesian E. Alberich, "L'educazione religiosa oggi: verso un chiarimento concettuale e terminologico", in *Orientamenti pedagogici*, ann. XLIV, n. 2, March-April 1997, pp. 311-334.
- 11 "Educare i giovani alla fede. Documenti del Capitolo Generale 23 della Società di San Francesco di Sales, Roma, 4 marzo - 5 maggio 1990", in *Atti* 333, May 1990, 268 pages. In this, see, pp. 66-96 : "Il cammino di educazione alla fede", which is summed up here.
- 12 "... attingendo alla carità di Dio che previene ogni creatura con In their various situations, therefore, they recognise the action of a God who loves young people. To lead them to authentic faith, the educator begins by reaching out to them. He meets them where they are, in order to develop them intelligently and patiently in an educational environment. The proposal of faith will emerge in the course of a process of formation and within a twofold process: the maturing of the personality and the call of Christ, who encourages them to build their faith according to the revelation manifested in

himself. The path is thus mapped out. *la sua Provvidenza, l'accompagna con la sua presenza e la salva donando la vita.*" (SDB Constitutions, art. 20.)

- 13 "Educhiamo ed evangelizziamo secondo un progetto di promozione integrale dell'uomo, orientato a Cristo, uomo perfetto. Fedeli alle intenzioni del nostro Fondatore, miriamo a formare onesti cittadini e buoni cristiani." (SDB Constitutions, art. 31).
- 14 See the article by Emilio Alberich on this, mentioned in fn. 10, in particular pp. 321-324, the paragraph "Nuovi orizzonti per l'educazione religiosa". In his own work, the author is fully aware of the inadequacy of his considerations. Religious education cannot be reduced to education in the Christian faith. The conscientious educator cannot ignore those who will very probably never come to an explicit faith, such as a Muslim or a convinced atheist. What should be done in such cases?

Religious experience

Experience in spirituality

Experience translates here as “the practice one has of something, considered as a lesson.” In Molière’s time, doctors still sometimes discussed diseases according to scholastic logic. In the nineteenth century, Claude Bernard, after a series of studies on the chemistry and physiology of digestion and the experimental severing of nerves, definitively swept away this logic in medicine in favour of experimentation with his *Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale* (1865). A similar phenomenon occurred in spirituality. The Fathers of Antiquity and the medieval monks practised and taught a spirituality based on both Revelation and experience. Deductive logic alone then dried up spiritual theology. For our contemporaries, the in-depth study of mystics, such as Saint John of the Cross¹ or Saint Teresa of Avila,² has led to a preference for religious experience over theological deduction.

Religious experience is the act – or the set of acts – by which a person grasps his or her relationship with God in their environment.³ In religious experience, the “something” of any experience merges with the encompassing mediations which no religious act, which is necessarily relational, can dispense with. Of course, God, who is something else entirely, cannot be reduced to an object available for experience. The very “object” of the religious act therefore remains inaccessible to experience. But the objectifiable intermediary religious environment is a possible place of experience. Habits, powers of inclination and transformation, are a fund of spiritual dispositions that open or close the door to the Infinite. The “something” of religious experience will therefore be a gesture, an internal or external attitude, but also their ecclesial mediating extensions: an image, a sacrament, a community, etc., which support a person’s relationship with God. The middle term of the relationship, which has been objectified, is the place of religious experience.

A (Salesian) historian of catechesis assures us:

The complexity of religion today requires us to focus our attention on what constitutes its vital core, i.e. the religious experience in its anthropological and cultural significance. It could be said that religious research today is concentrating more and more on experience, moving gradually from what is

professed to the very source of the religious invocation and proclamation. There can therefore be no truly serious approach to religion if, beyond the historical and phenomenological manifestations of religion, we do not penetrate to the very heart of religious behaviour, to religious experience as an in-depth reading of lived experience, to the encounter with the problem of meaning, to openness to the transcendent, to invocation and proclamation.⁴ We are even told that, from now on, “there can be no truly theological discourse if the liturgical, sacramental, ascetic and mystical experience of the whole Church does not nourish and extend it.”⁵

Salesian spirituality is largely based on religious experience, starting with that of St John Bosco, which was its foundation.⁶ Reading about the Salesian spiritual experience is, in itself, a lesson in spirituality.

The values of Salesian religious experience

The spiritual experience of the member of the Salesian Family is based on a fund of dispositions that open him or her to the Infinite. Let us consider the Salesian men and women consecrated by vows. Their spiritual experience is based (ideally) on a set of lived “values”, which the *Ratio Fundamentalis* of the Salesians of Don Bosco (1985) sets out in detail, based primarily on the Constitutions of the Congregation. Here, expressed very freely, are some of the main points of this document.

Don Bosco’s religious experience was above all, it tells us, an experience of God’s action in him and through him. The Salesian experience is essentially a theological experience. Like Don Bosco, the Salesian therefore lives the *sequela Christi* with a view to building the Kingdom of God. He goes on his spiritual journey in union with God the Father, who consecrates and sends him, and in docility to the Holy Spirit, the source of his sanctification and spiritual renewal. The principal “value” of his experience is love rooted in God himself, that is to say, divine charity, which, however, should not be unduly isolated. Christ, the Father’s mediator, is encountered in the Church, his Body, and under the aegis of his Mother Mary, Jesus’ first cooperator in the work of salvation. However immediate and personal, each person’s work of love is accomplished in the world of the communion of saints. All this is the backdrop to the Salesian religious experience.

The word “love” automatically conjures up images of affection and the fusion of beings. But it deceives us when it comes to the love of God. Reducing this love to the

affectionate feelings it arouses is insufficient. Love comes from God and is addressed to a creature. In the gesture of love, the essence of this can only be self-denial, of which Christian death is the translation into earthly terms. The risen Son, the ineffable model of love, no longer suffers, it is true. He no less entrusts himself totally to his Father and does his will no less than he did on the cross. The filial experience, which is our experience, is substantially identical, whether in trials or in joys. The important thing is not how we feel, to which many would willingly reduce religious experience, especially that of love, but to allow oneself to be seized and transformed by God through doing his will. “Thy will be done” is the right response to God’s loving offer. The whole life of the disciple is involved. It is at the price of the exact accomplishment of this will that we become like Christ and that we “know” the Father.

Authentic religious experience leads Salesians to practical commitment, in other words, to *praxis*. Because of its orientation, praxis is a value of experience. To “know God the Father”, in the most purely biblical sense, is to obey him, to put his will into practice, to give one’s life in a concrete way. The term “to do” in all its forms (“my works”, “the works of the Father”) runs through every page of the gospel. For Saint John, there is no such thing as “knowledge” of God, no true experience of God, without concrete love of others. For a Salesian, the experience of God cannot be reduced to intellectual contemplation and emotional acceptance of his liberating presence in this world. A purely conceptual or affective assent does not bring him closer to God according to his apostolic vocation.⁷

It is through action that Salesians progress in their experience of communion with Christ, who accompanies them and communicates his strength and love.

Prayer is a natural part of a Salesian’s religious experience. For him, the encounter with God’s love gives rise first and foremost to adoration. The religious, for whom “God is God and there is no other”, bows or prostrates himself before God in an attitude of profound respect. By his language, worship and life, a religious seeks to recognise him as such, to “give him glory”, to use a biblical expression. For the religious, God is always the God whose glory is the inalienable good. The Salesian remembers that Don Bosco founded his work firstly “for the greater glory of God”, and secondly “for the salvation of souls”, even if “saving souls” was for him the means par excellence of serving the glory of God. He therefore endeavoured to proclaim with conviction the adoring invocation of God the Trinity: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit”, which opens each of his liturgical prayers. Without adoration the experience becomes trivialised and secularised. Authentic religious experience is filled with adoration.⁸

Salesian prayer is largely one of petition and thanksgiving. For the creature suffers from his poverty and weakness, and recognises them. The Psalms interpret these feelings well. Whatever its form, prayer establishes the disciple in dialogue with his Lord. Meditation takes the form of a conversation. In the Salesian tradition, the texts, methods and times of prayer impose a prayer intimately linked to action. Salesians have the religious experience of personal or community prayer as an integral part of everyday life.

Finally, Salesians share a common experience of God that brings them together and unites them through the same vocation, through his Word and through his love. There is no experience of God in Jesus that does not involve the sacrament of personal and communal neighbourliness. Poverty, chastity and obedience give a particular colour to this common life. Salesians celebrate their experience through the Eucharist, during which the community renews its apostolic commitment and rebuilds itself in Christ as fraternal communion.

Along with action and prayer, community life is (or should be) for Salesians the place of their religious experience.

The religious experience of the Salesian Cooperator

The Salesian Cooperators' Regulations of Apostolic Life contain an article on their religious experience, of committed faith (*esperienza di fede impegnata*), which fortunately presents the religious experience of the Salesian who is not a religious.

1. The Cooperators share in the spiritual experience of Don Bosco, which he lived with particular intensity among the boys of the first Oratory at Valdocco.

2. They feel God to be their Father and the Love who saves. They meet in Jesus Christ, the only Son and perfect Apostle of the Father, the Good Shepherd full of concern for the suffering and the young and needy, the Risen One who will be with us "all days" as the Lord of history. They live in intimate union with the Holy Spirit, the Animator of the People of God in the world. In Mary they venerate her who "cooperated in a unique way in the work of the Saviour" and never ceases to cooperate as Mother and Helper of Christian people. They feel themselves a living part of the Church, the Body of Christ, the centre of communion of all the forces working for salvation.

3. In this way they become aware of the most profound aspect of their vocation: to be a true "cooperator of God" in the realization of his design for our salvation: "The most divine of all divine things is to cooperate with God in the saving of souls." [As Don Bosco said and wrote].⁹

NOTES

- 1 Jean Baruzi, *Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l'expérience mystique*, 2nd ed, Paris, Alcan, 1931.
- 2 E. Renault, *Sainte Thérèse d'Avila et l'expérience mystique*, Paris, 1970.
- 3 See the Introduction, pp. 12-13.
- 4 "La complessità del fatto religioso chiede oggi di mettere al centro dell'attenzione ciò che ne costituisce il nucleo vitale, vale a dire l'esperienza religiosa nel suo significato antropologico e culturale. Si può dire che oggi la ricerca religiosa si concentra preferentemente sull'esperienza, trasferendosi man mano dal dato confessionale al sorgere stesso dell'invocazione e del presagio religioso. Non si potrà essere perciò un approccio veramente impegnativo e serio al fatto religioso se, al di là delle manifestazioni storiche e fenomenologiche della religione, non si va al cuore stesso dell'atteggiamento religioso, all'esperienza religiosa in quanto lettura in profondità del vissuto, incontro col problema del senso, apertura al trascendente, invocazione e presagio." (E. Alberici), "L'educazione religiosa oggi", in *Orientamenti pedagogici* 44 (1997), p. 326).
- 5 J. Duchesne, "L'épreuve de l'amour", *Communio* I, no 8, November 1976, p. 3.
- 6 In the Introduction, see "The origins of Don Bosco's religious experience".
- 7 *La formazione dei Salesiani di Don Bosco. Principi e Norme. Ratio fundamentalis institutionis et studiorum*, 2nd ed., Rome, Ed. SDB, 1985, nos. 67-111, pp. 75-104. Only "spiritual values" are taken into consideration at this point in the Ratio.
- 8 See on this a Jesuit point of view, P. Arrupe, "L'expérience de Dieu dans la vie religieuse", *Vie consacrée*, 1977, p. 338.
- 9 "§ 1. Il Cooperatore partecipa all'esperienza spirituale di Don Bosco, vissuta con particolare intensità tra i giovani del primo Oratorio in Valdocco. - § 2. Sente Dio come Padre e Amore che salva. Incontra in Gesù Cristo l'Unigenito Figlio e l'Apostolo perfetto del Padre, Buon Pastore pieno di sollecitudine per i piccoli e i bisognosi, il Risorto che sta con noi "tutti I giorni" come Signore della storia. Vive in intimità con lo Spirito Santo, l'Animatore del Popolo di Dio nel mondo. In Maria venera colei che "ha cooperato in modo assolutamente unico all'opera del Salvatore" e non cessa di cooperare come Madre e Ausiliatrice del popolo cristiano. Si sente parte viva della Chiesa, Corpo di Cristo, centro di comunione di tutte le forze che operano per la salvezza. - § 3. Scopre così l'aspetto più profondo della sua vocazione : essere vero "cooperatore di Dio" nella realizzazione del suo disegno di salvezza : Delle cose divine, la più divina è quella di cooperare con Dio a salvare le anime." *Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 27).

Religion

Don Bosco and the true religion

Our collection of key words deals throughout with religion and its place in Salesian pedagogy and spirituality. The term appears here in the plural. In this entry, we are talking about religions, not religion, that pillar of the “preventive system” in the company of “reason” and “loving-kindness”.

His followers may have forgotten it but in Turin in the 1850s the young Don Bosco was a vigorous apologist for the “true religion” against those who, in his opinion, preached a “false” one: the Waldensian evangelists, whom he classed as Protestants, and all those who resembled them. In this way, he intended to serve the pure truth that was being abused by his opponents. The apostle’s faith and energy may be edifying, but his doctrine is surprising to many people today. A twenty-four page booklet, the *Avvisi* and a four hundred and fifty-one page popular apologetics book developed his arguments.¹ The *Avvisi*, in the form of questions and answers in the manner of a catechism, were immediately and for a long time (until the middle of the twentieth century) a great authority due to their inclusion, before a selection of hymns, and under the title *Foundations of the Catholic religion*, of the *Il Giovane provveduto* and *La Figlia cristiana provveduta*, devotional manuals systematically distributed throughout the world to young people in Salesian institutions. Despite their humble construction, they were the official Salesian teaching on true and false religions.

The first article of the *Foundations* attempted to define religion: “A virtue or series of good deeds, by which man renders to God the homage and honour that is due to him”, and then went on to say how it is practised: “... by believing the truths revealed by God and by observing his holy law, that is to say, the commandments of God and of the Church established by God.”² The offensive began with the second article, on “true religion”:

Q. Can the various religions practised in the world be equally true? - A. No, certainly not, because the truth is always one. - Q. There are the Mohammedans, the Protestants, that is to say the Calvinists and the Lutherans, and there is the Roman Catholic Church; in which of these societies can we find with certainty the true religion? - A. We can only find the true religion in the Roman Catholic

Church, because it alone preserves divine revelation intact, because it alone was founded by Jesus Christ true God and true man, propagated by the Apostles and their successors to the present day, for which reason it alone presents the true characteristics of the divinity.”³

In the contemporary world, we are told that the word Religion expresses three ideas: 1) an affirmation or a set of speculative affirmations, 2) a set of ritual acts and 3) a direct and moral relationship between the soul and God.⁴ And, if it designates the institution or system of beliefs and practices that puts a group in relationship with the divine, the word applies to that particular group, known as a “religion”. In the name of the oneness of truth, Don Bosco recognised only one institution capable of establishing a direct and moral relationship with God: a religion that was not only Christian, but also Roman Catholic. The other institutions that claimed the title were simply false religions. For him, Christ, the only mediator between God and man, had as his indispensable intermediary on earth the Pope of Rome, his Vicar, from whom non-Catholics, and even more so non-Christians, were separated.

The consequences were serious for Salesian spirituality and pastoral work, if its proponents adhered to Don Bosco’s principles as espoused in his *Foundations of the Catholic Religion*. Barring miracles, because God’s mercy is fortunately infinite, they considered that salvation and, *a fortiori*, sanctification and genuine holiness were impossible for non-Catholics, pagans or Jews, Muslims or Protestants, Calvinists or Lutherans. “Can there be salvation outside the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church? asked Don Bosco in his *Foundations of the Catholic Religion*. The answer was merciless: “No: outside this Church no one can be saved. Just as those who were not in Noah’s ark perished in the flood, so too will those who die separated from the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church, the one and only Church of Jesus Christ, the only preserver of the true religion.”⁵ The only excuse Don Bosco and his followers had for such a severe teaching was that the average Catholic, however enlightened he or she was, thought as they did.

Vatican II and non-Christian religions

It was not until Vatican II that this far too simplistic doctrine on the truth of religion was swept away. Why, in a world entirely created by God the Father, saved by the sacrifice of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, should we not seek to perceive spiritual riches that are often of great value? The Council has presented non-Catholic Christians, on the

one hand, and followers of other religions, on the other, in an infinitely less distressing light. Only its teachings make it possible to understand the Salesian development of understanding in their regard.

The Church, the ark of salvation, is a sacred mystery of communion in the Holy Spirit. The only sheepfold of God, a sign held up to the nations, the Church puts the gospel of peace at the service of the whole human race and makes its pilgrimage in hope towards the heavenly homeland. Over the centuries, splits and serious dissensions have separated considerable numbers of Christians from full communion with the Catholic Church. Those born today in such communities and who live by faith in Christ cannot be accused of the sin of division. The Catholic Church surrounds them with fraternal respect and charity. Whoever believes in Christ and has been validly baptised is in a certain, albeit imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church. Justified by the faith received at baptism, incorporated into Christ, such a person rightly bears the name of Christian. The member of the Catholic Church rightly recognises these people as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Many spiritual goods exist outside the limits of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God, the life of grace, faith hope and charity, as well as other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit and other visible elements. All that comes from Christ and leads to him, belongs by right to the one Church of Christ. The sacred actions performed by the “separated brethren” of catholicity are by no means devoid of meaning and value in the mystery of salvation. The Spirit of Christ certainly does not refuse to make use of them as means of salvation, and their power derives from the fullness of grace and truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church.

The “separated brethren”, either individually, or their communities or Churches, do not enjoy the unity that Jesus Christ wished to bestow upon those whom he regenerated and quickened to form one body for a new life. The fullness of the means of salvation is assured only in the Catholic Church. It is in fact to the apostolic college alone, with Peter as its head, that all the riches of the New Covenant have been entrusted, in order to constitute one Body of Christ on earth, to which all those who, in some way, already belong to the people of God must be fully incorporated. The faithful of Christ cannot but aspire to the disappearance of separations harmful to the spiritual growth of all.⁶

Men and women look to the various religions of the world for answers to the hidden riddles of the human condition, which, then as now, deeply trouble the human heart, the Council also explained. What is this ultimate and ineffable mystery that surrounds their existence, from which they draw their origin and towards which they are moving? There is a certain sensitivity among peoples to this hidden force present in the course

of things and in the events of human life. They sometimes recognise in it a supreme divinity or even the Father. This sensitivity and this knowledge imbue their lives with a meaning that can only be described as religious. The religions, linked to the progress of culture, try to answer the same questions with more refined concepts and more elaborate language. They try to respond to the anxieties of the human heart by proposing ways, that is, doctrines, rules of life and sacred rites. Nothing that is true and holy in these religions can be rejected. The Christian looks with sincere respect on these ways of acting and living, these rules and these doctrines, which often carry a ray of the Truth that enlightens all humankind.

In the world of religion, the Church looks with esteem on Muslims, who worship the one God, living and subsisting, merciful and all-powerful, creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to mankind. Muslims seek to submit to God's decrees, even if they are hidden. This is what Abraham did, to whom they readily refer. Although they do not recognise Jesus as God, they venerate him as a prophet; they honour his virginal Mother, Mary, and sometimes invoke her piously. Last but not least, the Council recalled the link that spiritually unites the people of the New Testament, the Church itself, with the lineage of Abraham, that is, with the Jewish religion. The Church of Christ recognises that the first fruits of her faith and election are to be found, according to the divine mystery of salvation, in the Patriarchs, Moses and the Prophets. She believes that Christ, our peace, has reconciled Jews and Gentiles by his cross and in himself. He made the two peoples into one. The words of the apostle Paul about those of his race, to whom "belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to [whom] belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah" (Romans 9:4-5), the son of the Virgin Mary, cannot be forgotten or neglected. In short, the Church of the twentieth century, while acknowledging its obligation to constantly proclaim Christ, who is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), in whom human beings must find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things (cf. 2 Corinthians 5,:18-19), has exhorted us to recognise, preserve and promote the spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values found in those who profess other religions.⁷

Dialogue among religions in the Salesian Family

The Salesian Family has received this teaching with joy and gratitude, without believing itself to be unfaithful to its founder. The Special General Chapter in 1971–1972 did not

deny Don Bosco's polemical attitude, the evidence of which it recognised. However, it enthusiastically welcomed ecumenism. The ecumenism of the Salesians, it judged, adds new elements to their father's concern to serve the truth, elements that were absent from his outlook for the simple reason that they were unknown in the Church of his time. Their gaze was no longer limited to the truth expressed in the Creed, but embraced all the valid aspects of the confessions of faith of their separated brethren. The change in relation to Don Bosco is real, but in a context of dynamic fidelity to his religious intention. The ecumenically-minded Salesians carry out the apostolic intention of their father with nuances that develop and perfect it.⁸

The desire to inculturate the gospel, characteristic of the new evangelisation according to Paul VI and John Paul II, preached with insistence by Fr Egidio Viganò, changed many aspects of the way the Salesians and Salesian Sisters looked at non-Christian religions. The International Theological Commission encouraged them to do so.⁹ With prudence and charity, through dialogue and collaboration with those who follow other religions, while at the same time witnessing to Christian faith and life, Salesian men and women, especially missionaries, have undertaken to recognise, preserve and develop the values of these religions. In their contacts with Muslims, they strive (or should strive) to promote mutual understanding and to serve social justice, moral values, peace and freedom for the benefit of all people. The common spiritual heritage of Christians and Jews is, for the Salesian in contact with them, a place of ever-increasing knowledge and esteem, the result of biblical and theological studies as well as fraternal dialogue.¹⁰

Salesian centres for spirituality and dialogue between religions sprang up in the last years of the century. The aim was to "communicate the Spirit to followers of other religions."¹¹ "The first step is dialogue", we used to say.¹² Religious education should be given in this spirit within a clearly pluralist world.¹³ The relationship between Salesians and religions has therefore changed completely since Don Bosco's time. But to cry disloyalty of the disciple to his master would be very unseemly here.

NOTES

- 1 *Avvisi ai cattolici*, Turin, P. De Agostini, 1853; *Il Cattolico istruito nella sua religione*. Trattenimenti di un padre di famiglia co' suoi figliuoli secondo i bisogni del tempo, epilogati dal Sac. Bosco Giovanni, Turin, P. De Agostini, 1853. The *Avvisi* was a revised edition of the tract entitled *La Chiesa cattolica-apostolica-romana è la sola vera Chiesa di Gesù Cristo*. *Avvisi ai cattolici*, Turin, Speirani e Ferrero, 1850; and *Il Cattolico istruito* was the result of a series of issues published in 1853 in *Letture cattoliche*.
- 2 “Per religione s'intende una virtù ovvero una serie di azioni buone, con cui l'uomo rende a Dio l'ossequio e l'onore a lui dovuto.” “L'uomo deve praticare questa religione col credere le verità da Dio rivelate, e coll'osservare la sua santa legge : cioè coll'osservanza de' Comandamenti di Dio e della Chiesa dal medesimo Iddio stabilita.” (*Avvisi ...*, p. 9).
- 3 “D. Le varie religioni, che si praticano nel mondo, possono essere egualmente vere ? - R No certamente, perchè la verità è sempre una sola. - D. Ci sono i Maomettani, i Protestanti, cioè i Calvinisti ed i Luterani, ed hawi la Chiesa Cattolica Romana ; in quale di queste società noi possiamo con certezza trovare la vera religione ? - R. Noi possiamo solamente trovare la vera religione nella Chiesa Cattolica Romana, perchè essa sola conserva intatta la divina rivelazione, essa sola fu fondata da Gesù Cristo vero Dio e vero Uomo, propagata dagli Apostoli, e dai loro successori sino ai nostri giorni ; motivo per cui essa sola presenta i veri caratteri della divinità.” (*Avvisi...*, pp. 10-11).
- 4 From J. Lachelier, in André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, s.v. Religion.
- 5 “D. Fuori della Chiesa Cattolica, Apostolica, Romana, si può aver salute ? - R. No : fuori di questa Chiesa ninno può salvarsi. Nella maniera, che quelli i quali non furono nell'arca di Noè, perirono nel diluvio, così perisce inevitabilmente colui che muore separato dalla Chiesa Cattolica, Apostolica, Romana, unica Chiesa di Gesù Cristo, sola conservatrice della vera religione.” (*Avvisi ...* , pp. 16-17). We don't need to retrace here the actual pastoral implications for the Salesian apostles and missionaries who were perhaps rarely content with these theories.
- 6 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, nos. 2 and 3.
- 7 *Nostra Aetate*, nos. 1-4.
- 8 CGS/SCG, nos. 268-269.
- 9 International Theological Commission, *Christianity and Religions*. Document approved in October 1996. The original Spanish text, translated into French, was published, and presented by J. Doré, a member of this commission (Paris, Centurion and Cerf, 1997).
- 10 According to *Nostra Aetate*, nos. 2, 3, 4, passim.
- 11 Title of an address by Cyril D'Souza to the Salesian Family Spirituality Days, Rome, 16-18 January 1998.
- 12 See the article by Maria Antonia Chinello “Un centro per il dialogo religioso”, *Bollettino salesiano*, April 1997, pp. 30-32, on a Centre of spirituality and dialogue between religions in Madras, India, with the daughters of Mary Help of Christians, including Sister Rosalia Doss, herself Indian.
- 13 See on this, Salesian Fr C. Nanni, “Per ima didattica interculturale della religione”, in Istituto di Catechetica (UPS), *Insegnare religione nel pluralismo*, Leumann, LDC, 1996.

Religious life

Religious life and consecrated life

In the past, anyone who made profession in a monastery, order or congregation entered “religion”. The life they led could be called “religious life”. The vocabulary has evolved. The expression “religious life” here refers to what in the Catholic Church at the end of the twentieth century and in accordance with the Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1983, we now commonly understand as consecrated life.

We read:

The life consecrated through the profession of the evangelical counsels is a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having been dedicated by a new and special title to His honour, to the building up of the Church, and to the salvation of the world, they strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the Church, foretell the heavenly glory (can. 573).

Secular institutes, such as the Volunteers of Don Bosco for example, fall into the ecclesiastical category of consecrated life.

Community life distinguishes the two types of institute of consecrated life: religious institutes and secular institutes. This entry on “religious life” will comment – very modestly – on the “consecrated life” spirituality of the Salesian and Salesian Sisters “religious institutes” alone. Here again, let us start by agreeing on the terms.

“A religious institute is a society in which, in accordance with their own law, the members pronounce public vows and live a fraternal life in common” (can. 607, § 2). In other words the expression “religious life” designates, in what follows, only the “consecrated life” of the two “*religious* institutes” founded by Don Bosco.¹

Don Bosco and religious life

Don Bosco, a secular priest, was in no way prepared to found a religious institute. Then, when he was in his forties, necessity determined that he seek a style of religious life

in keeping with the religious life of the priest-educators he was thinking of bringing together in a particular Congregation. This style did not emerge from his brain. By virtue of his formation and the environment in which he had evolved up to that time, he was inclined, not towards monks or “mendicant orders”, but towards regular clerics and societies of priests. He therefore drew inspiration from the lessons of the Jesuits, the Redemptorists, Fr Lanteri’s Oblates of the Virgin Mary, the Rosminians, the Vincentians and, in particular, from a tiny Venetian institute known as the Secular Priests of the Schools of Charity, which provided him with ready-made texts for his early Constitutions.² Don Bosco was therefore only really interested in the active religious, who separated themselves from the world without fleeing it, who neither fasted nor prayed any more than the fervent layperson, who simply practised the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience in communities and tried to harmonise the quest for “perfection” required by their consecrated state with the needs of the apostolate to which they were dedicated.

To avoid any misunderstanding, let us say straight away that Don Bosco wanted his Salesians to be true religious. Prudence and expediency were the only reasons that advised him to avoid using the titles like Father, Superior, Provincial, postulants or novices, which would have brought back the smell of the convent to nostrils around him that had become allergic to *padri*, *frati* and *monache*. For the same reasons he banished the words “constitutions” and “novitiate” from his vocabulary, replacing them with “rules” and “probation”. Officially, his Society of St Francis de Sales was a charitable society. On rereading his notes from 1869–1875, he proposed to his spiritual sons a style of life which, away from the dangers of the world, would offer them well-armed weapons against the “threefold concupiscence” and would help them to sanctify themselves.³ For him, “religion” was a defined community, which he contrasted with the “world of the Enemy” and compared to an ark governed by a good captain or “a fortress guarded by the Lord”.⁴ At least initially, far from emphasising the harshness of religious life, he celebrated its spiritual and material advantages. Did the Salesian religious ever lack the necessities of life? They leave behind a small family to join a huge one! In his 1875 Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions, Don Bosco went on at length about the spiritual benefits of the religious state. The words of Bernard of Clairvaux on the happiness of the religious among his brothers, throughout his life, in the face of death, transported to purgatory and finally into the glory of heaven, seemed admirable to him. With the help of Alphonsus Liguori, he savoured and commented on the Latin expression.⁵ The primary purpose of religious life is to sanctify the Salesian, he felt.

As he envisaged it, Salesian religious life was specified simultaneously by the vows, the practice of the Constitutions and common life. The Constitutions, “those rules which our holy mother, the Church, has deigned to approve to guide us, for the good of our souls and for the spiritual and temporal benefit of our beloved pupils”,⁶ defined the modes of religious observance. The true religious is observant. In his final years, Don Bosco no longer voiced the ascetic rigour of religious observance. His sons had not become religious “*per godere, ma per patire*” (not to enjoy, but to suffer); they had “consecrated themselves to God” not to command, but to obey, not to be attached to creatures, but to practise charity towards their neighbour, whoever this might be; not to lead a bourgeois life, but to be poor with Jesus Christ, to suffer with Him on earth, so as to reign with Him in heaven.⁷

Vows and constitutions keep the religious in a common life, which Don Bosco liked to imagine on the model of the Church of Jerusalem where all goods were held in common, where the resources of each contributed to the happiness of all, where, in a word, according to a formula that had become familiar to him, the faithful were but “one heart and one soul”. “The members of the society lead a common life in everything, for food and clothing.”⁸ In this way, they help each other to grow in perfection. “*Vae soli*” (Woe to he who is alone), while, guided by superiors to whom he willingly entrusts himself, the observant religious hears and applies the advice that is appropriate for his own sanctification and the success of his apostolic work. According to Don Bosco, communal life was to temper the harshness of the vows. Despite an asceticism that was never forgotten, nothing in the saint’s ideal was more pleasant than the joyful company of his disciples. At the time of the foundation, he congratulated himself on the happiness he promised them.

If our confreres enter into these dispositions, our houses will certainly become a true earthly paradise (...) In short, we will have a family of brothers gathered around their father to serve the glory of God on earth and then one day go to love and praise him in the immense glory of the blessed in heaven.⁹

Let us reread these sentences, which tell us the meaning of religious life according to Don Bosco. If all goes well, religious life guarantees the happiness on earth for the religious and, in the afterlife, eternal salvation, perhaps even sanctity.

Salesian religious life after Vatican II

Don Bosco's lessons on religious life, handed down from generation to generation through his Introduction to the Constitutions, expressed the common doctrine of the Salesians until the reform that followed Vatican II. Fr Rua continued to celebrate the value and happiness of religious life, as Don Bosco had understood it.¹⁰ The good religious character of this perfect disciple was distinguished by the "complete, constant and fervent" observance of his vows and the rules of the Institute, as they were explained to him.¹¹

Then, after Vatican II, without changing the substance, certain values of religious life were highlighted, while others fell into semi-darkness.¹² The considerations of the renewed Salesian Constitutions, for the most part borrowed from the Council, were given a clearly theological formulation, whether they concerned the meaning or the conduct of religious life.

The meaning of Salesian religious life

The meaning of religious life was redefined on the basis of the commitment to a particular group of Don Bosco's followers. It is one of consecration to the service of God. Because God the Father calls them, religious respond by the self-offering implied by the three vows. "Religious profession is a sign of a loving encounter between the Lord who calls and the disciple who responds by giving himself totally to God and to his brothers and sisters", taught the new Salesian Constitutions.¹³ And the Salesian Sisters said that "We live our vocation as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as a response to the Father who, in Christ, consecrates, unites, and sends us forth."¹⁴ Profession is thus, from the religious' point of view, a free gesture of gift and offering to the Lord.

In their interpretation of the consecrated life, the Salesians avoided, at least in their official texts, the weak meaning of the verb "to consecrate" and retained its active aspect. "Consecration" is in itself, they said, necessarily of divine origin, for God alone is holy. It must be preferably understood in the strong sense of "God's work". Religious consecration, Fr Viganò said, is properly speaking a divine act which concerns each and every member of the Salesian world. One of his last circulars to the Salesians invited them at length to "bear better witness to their consecration understood in this way."¹⁵ The action of the Holy Spirit as consecrator is for each professed member a permanent source of grace and a support in the daily effort to grow in the perfect love of God and human

beings.¹⁶ This is the charismatic aspect of the Salesian vocation. “It is very important that we reactivate and bring up to date the charismatic dimension of our vocation”, wrote Fr Viganò, so that it becomes clear to everyone that we are truly a gift “for the whole People of God” and that we really and constantly renewing “the desire to work with the Church.”¹⁷

Religious consecration in the weak sense (“I consecrate myself to the service of God”) did not change the social status of the new religious, whereas religious consecration in the strong sense of a work of God (“God consecrates me”) apparently made him a new way of being, because he was “consecrated” among the baptised who were not. Many theologians protested against this novelty, all the more incongruous, they felt, because it emanated from a school that had banished “perfection” from the vocabulary of religious. “This option and this insistence did not please everyone” remarked Fr Vecchi in Paris in 1997.

From what I have heard at meetings of religious and superiors general, some feared that we were returning to considering religious as people who are publicly ‘sacred’ and in a different socio-cultural state. This concept is now foreign to today’s mentality and has become indigestible. It is totally excluded in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (which defines the Church’s position on the question). Our option for God grants us neither prerogatives nor particular signs of status.¹⁸

Duly noted, at least for us here.

The conduct of Salesian religious life

After Vatican II, the way in which Salesian religious life was exercised took a clearly Christocentric turn. The “Christian perfection” of the first article of Don Bosco’s Constitutions on the “purpose” of his Congregation was certainly perfection “according to Christ” as described in his response to the rich young man when he observed: “If you wish to be perfect,” Jesus said to him, “go, sell what you possess, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). Post-conciliar Salesian teaching on religious life developed the idea. Only in Christ Jesus is the human being authentically “perfect”. The *sequela Christi*, implying the desire to inscribe all the values of the Gospel in one’s life, henceforth summed up the Salesian practice of the evangelical counsels. The Salesian Sisters, who are “following Christ more

closely in his mission of salvation”¹⁹, said that they were “sharing in the mystery of Christ, chaste, poor and obedient.”²⁰

Religious life, the Salesians are reminded, is a baptised life lived radically according to the gospel, “following the obedient, poor and chaste Christ”. The first article of the chapter of their Constitutions on religious life announced:

By religious profession we mean to live the grace of our baptism radically and more fully. We follow Jesus Christ, who ‘chaste and poor, redeemed and sanctified men through obedience’, and we share more closely in his paschal mystery, in his self-emptying and in his life in the Spirit. Surrendering ourselves totally to God whom we love above all else, we commit ourselves to a form of life based entirely on gospel values.²¹

Going beyond mere imitation, ascetic renunciation, which goes as far as the “annihilation” of the cross and thus martyrdom, and the very participation in the mystery of Christ took their place in this *sequela Christi*.

At a time when they were being vigorously pushed into action, Salesians and Salesian Sisters tried to reconcile religious community life and apostolic mission. A “grace of unity”, in the words of Fr Viganò, helped them to achieve this. Religious consecration favours the apostolate, they remarked. The offering to God of the capacity to love, of the desire to possess, and of the possibility of organising one’s life builds up a precious inner freedom in the religious. The evangelical counsels, which contribute to the purification of the heart and spiritual freedom, make the apostle’s charity active and fruitful. Because they are obedient, poor and chaste, Salesians are ready to love and serve all those to whom the Lord sends them, especially poor young people. They make present Christ’s love for them. The practice of the evangelical counsels, which configure their hearts to the demands of the beatitudes of the Kingdom, helps them to discern the Lord’s action in human history. Their simple life of daily labour transforms them into educators capable of announcing to young people the “new heavens” and the “new earth” of the resurrection.

The witness of Don Bosco’s religious is in itself evangelising. They ostensibly and radically live the new life of the beatitudes, thus announcing to the world, starting with young people, the Good News of the redemption, of which they want to be witnesses. In a world tempted by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possessions and power, their way of life bears witness to the fact that God exists, that his love can fill a life, and that the need to love, the thirst to possess and the freedom to decide one’s own life are given a

higher meaning in Christ the Saviour. The offering of his freedom in obedience, his spirit of evangelical poverty and his love for others, which chastity translates into selfless giving, make the Salesian a sign of the power of the Holy Spirit in this world. The religious habit itself is (or should be) an outward sign of this witness and service. The Salesian Sisters rightly affirm that, through their religious profession, they collaborate in a special and new way in the coming of the Kingdom of God and become “signs of the eternal values already present in this world.”²²

The service of holiness

At the end of the century, Fr Vecchi would reflect on the text of John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation on religious life entitled *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), which had been prepared in 1994 by a synod of bishops on religious life, which Fr Viganò had followed passionately at the end of his life.²³ The doctrine of this document seemed to him to be in perfect consonance with ordinary Salesian teaching since Vatican II. He drew from it three “important consequences” for the spiritual life of his sons, which deserve to be briefly and freely commented on here.²⁴

1. Consecrated persons are in the world, for believers and non-believers alike, the women and men of religious sense. In daily life, individuals and societies take into account a constellation of values (a term that the Rector Major took in an extremely broad sense) that are more or less accepted by everyone. He cited: “respect for others, work, health, honesty, social responsibility”. Individuals, for their part, give a major place in their lives to the “values” they prefer and, for all they know, organise everything around them. Religious consecration requires consecrated persons to focus on religious values. It is on this basis that they judge (or should judge) other values in order to include them in their lives. Ideally, the religious value justifies and permeates everything they do. By virtue of this choice, they take on education, caring for the sick, research work, etc. All branches of human activity are open to consecrated persons, provided that their inspiration and motivation remain those of people who have made God their main option. Whatever their situation, Salesian men and women because they are religious, embody the “religious sense” for the world to see.
2. Consecrated persons present themselves as experts in the experience of God. They are the natural partners of all those in the world who are searching for God. They offer Christians the possibility of accompanying them in a religious experience, and

to accompany others in their search for God. Their consecration is a charismatic reality of ecclesial significance, Fr Viganò taught. Consecrated persons, reminders of God for Christians and non-Christians alike, are – always in an ideal to be hoped for – a support for those who wish to seek, feel and taste the presence of God. This is their social function. No “value” survives in society without a group of people dedicated to its permanence and development. “Without the medical profession and the organisation of hospitals, health would be impossible; without artists and the corresponding institutions, the artistic sense of the population would deteriorate” Fr Vecchi wrote. Consecrated religious are the body of mystics capable of helping others to read their existence in the light of the absolute and to experience this absolute in their own lives. Salesians strive, as part of their “religious” vocation, to have a personal experience of God and to share this experience with those who come into contact with them, starting with young people.

3. Finally, consecrated persons take on holiness as their main project in life. Holiness – the “perfection” of earlier times – is not just moral rectitude or ascetic effort. Consecrated persons choose a style of life and relationships where the mystery of God can be read in one form or another. Christ should be able to shine through them. Their presence is very necessary in a secular and libertarian context. Holiness is the original contribution they make to culture and human advancement. For holiness has a temporal value, not only in the works of charity it inspires, but also in the meaning and dignity it instils in humanity. The Salesians and Salesian Sisters, who, on the day of their profession, opted for a life as close as possible to Christ, rightly called a life of holiness, will always remember that therein lies their witness to an authentically *religious life*.

NOTES

- 1 In the new Code of Canon Law, the first section of the third part of Book II, which deals with "Institutes of Consecrated Life" (can. 573-730), after a heading of Common Norms (can. 573-606), it deals successively with Religious Institutes (can. 607-709) and Secular Institutes (can. 710-730). Further on, the entry *Volunteers of Don Bosco* will discuss the "consecrated life" of this secular institute.
- 2 See the history of the early constitutions, for example in *Don Bosco en son temps*, pp. 573-580.
- 3 See the handwritten notes of lectures on religious life published in G. B. Lemoyne, *Memorie biografiche*, vol IX, appendix A, pp. 986-987; and Don Bosco's Introduction to the *Regole o Costituzioni...*, Turin, 1875, pp. VI-IX, on the "Entrata in religione".
- 4 "Il religioso è simile a colui che monta sopra un bastimento, e tutto affidandosi alle cure di valente capitano riposa tranquillo anche in mezzo alle burrasche. Il religioso trovasi in una fortezza custodita dal Signore." (Introduction as cited p. VIII).
- 5 "Homo vivit purius, cadit rarius, surgit velocius, incedit t cautius, irroratur frequentius, quiescit securius, moritur confidentius, purgatur citius, remuneratur copiosius. Diamone breve spiegazione." Etc. (Introduction cited, p. XII-XVII).
- 6 "Osservare le nostre regole, queste regole che la Santa Madre Chiesa si degnò approvare per nostra guida e per bene dell'anima nostra e per vantaggio spirituale e temporale de' nostri amati allievi" (G. Bosco, Letter to Salesians, 6 January 1884; *Epistolario* Ceria, vol IV, p. 249),
- 7 Same letter of 6 January 1884, loc. cit., p. 250, repeated almost literally. Did Don Bosco write this unusually toned letter himself, or did he entrust its drafting to one of his assistants, such as Fr Rua? In any case, he signed it.
- 8 "... sit vita quoquoersum communis in his, quae ad victum et vestem pertinent" (*Constitutiones Societatis S. Francisci Salesii*, Turin, 1874, chap. IV, art. 7).
- 9 "Se i nostri fratelli entreranno in società con queste disposizioni le nostre case diventeranno certamente un vero paradiso terrestre. (...) Si avrà insomma ima famiglia di fratelli raccolti intorno al loro padre per promuovere la gloria di Dio sopra la terra, per andare poi un giorno ad amarlo e lodarlo nell'immensa gloria dei beati in cielo" (G. Bosco, Letter to Salesians, 9 June 1867; *Epistolario* Motto, t II, p. 387).
- 10 M. Rua, Sermons "Felicità della vita religiosa" and "Pregi della vita religiosa", in *Prediche per esercizi*, quaderno primo, pp. 35-44 and 66-79, FdB 2894 A7-B4 and D2-11. It should be noted that the original versions of these sermons, which were probably repeated, predate Don Bosco's death.
- 11 "... rinnovamento di fervore nella vita religiosa, specialmente con la completa, costante, fervorosa osservanza dei nostri voti, e di tutte e singole le nostre regole" ("Istruzione sulla divozione al Sacro Cuore di Gesù", accompanying the letter of M. Rua to Salesians, 21 November 1900, L.C., p. 246-247).
- 12 At the behest of the General Chapter, the edition of the Salesian Constitutions and Regulations approved in 1984 reproduced in an appendix the paragraphs of Don Bosco's Introduction to his *Regole o Costituzioni* concerning the vows, fraternal charity, devotional practices, *rendiconti* and "the

five defects to avoid", but not the 1875 titles *Entrata in religione*, *Vantaggi temporali* and *Vantaggi spirituali* – mentioned above – which consequently disappeared from the official teaching.

- 13 “La professione religiosa è un segno dell’incontro di amore tra il Signore che chiama e il discepolo che risponde donandosi totalmente a Lui e ai fratelli” (SDB Constitutions, art. 23).
- 14 “Viviamo la nostra vocazione di Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice come risposta al Padre che in Cristo ci consacra, ci raduna e ci manda.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 8).
- 15 E. Viganò, “Invitati a testimoniare meglio la nostra consacrazione”, 8 December 1992, *Atti* 342, pp. 3-40.
- 16 SDB Constitutions, art. 25.
- 17 “E’ assai importante riattualizzare la dimensione carismatica della nostra vocazione affinché appaia a tutti che siamo davvero un dono “per l’intero Popolo di Dio” e che rinnoviamo di fatto e costantemente “la volontà di agire con la Chiesa” (E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1986, *Atti* 320, p. 24).
- 18 J. Vecchi, “Notre vie consacrée”, conference to Salesians, handout, Paris, 26-29 December 1997.
- 19 “Nella grazia dello Spirito Santo ci doniamo a Dio sommamente amato, seguendo Cristo più da vicino nella sua missione di salvezza” (FMA Constitutions, art. 8).
- 20 “Inserite nel mistero di Cristo casto, povero, obbediente”, title of the first chapter of the section of the FMA Constitutions dealing with “La nostra vocazione di Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice.” The *sequela Christi* implies participation in the mystery of Christ for them.
- 21 “Con la professione religiosa intendiamo vivere la grazia battesimale con maggior pienezza e radicalità. Seguiamo Gesù Cristo il quale, “casto e povero, redense e santificò gli uomini con la sua obbedienza” (PC 1) e partecipiamo più strettamente al mistero della sua Pasqua, al suo annientamento e alla sua vita nello Spirito. Aderendo in modo totale a Dio, amato sopra ogni cosa, ci impegniamo in una forma di vita che si fonda interamente sui valori del Vangelo”. (SDB Constitutions, art. 60, first article of the chapter “Al seguito di Cristo obbediente povero casto”). This article is closely linked to *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 1.
- 22 “... diveniamo segno dei beni celesti già presenti in questo mondo” (FMA Costituzioni, art. 8). These last two paragraphs take up various considerations from the SDB Constitutions, art. 61-63, and the FMA Constitutions, art. 8 and 11.
- 23 See his letters to Salesians, “Il convegno dei Superiori Generali su La Vita consécrala oggi”, 8 December 1993, in *Atti* 347 and “Il Sinodo sulla vita consécrala”, 8 December 1994, in *Atti* 351.
- 24 We have freely adapted here the concluding pages of Fr Juan Vecchi’s mimeographed report (Notre vie consacrée) “Our Consecrated Life”, presented (in French) to the Salesians in Paris, 26-29 December 1997. The titles of the “consequences” are indeed Fr Vecchi’s, the wording of their comments is partly our own.

Rinaldi, Philip

Philip Rinaldi, Salesian priest

Two holy Rectors Major contributed to the development of the Salesian Congregation in the half-century following Don Bosco's death: Michael Rua from 1888 to 1910 and Philip Rinaldi from 1922 to 1931. Both of them were living models of Salesian spirituality. The holiness of Fr Rua, "a saint formed by another saint", according to the title of his biography by Fr Auffray,¹ has always been self-evident. Placing Fr Rinaldi alongside him does not seem so obvious. The Salesians who were contemporaries of this priest, given his simple programme of studies, average educational background, without any particular sense of presence, rather self-effacing, simply pious and good, hardly envisaged any posthumous glorification for him.² However, in the run-up to his beatification by John Paul II (29 April 1990), the then Rector Major, Fr Egidio Viganò was able to write a spiritual eulogy under the eloquent title *Fr Philip Rinaldi, authentic witness and interpreter of the Salesian spirit*.³ Philip Rinaldi was an exceptional witness to Salesian spirituality.

He was born on 28 May 1856 in Lu Monferrato, a town in Piedmont, where one day in October 1861, the noisy troupe of Don Bosco's young boys arrived. When the question of secondary education arose, Philip found himself naturally drawn to the school that Don Bosco had recently opened in the region, at Mirabello. But for various reasons – a disagreement with an assistant, eye problems – he returned home after just one year. There was no shortage of work on the family farm. However, Don Bosco, to whom he had gone to confession twice, had made an impression on him and never let him out of his sight. So much so that at the age of twenty-one (1877) Philip decided to join his Congregation and resumed his studies at the Salesian centre for adult vocations at Sampierdarena, near Genoa. From then on, everything happened very quickly: two years of Latin, a year of novitiate followed by perpetual religious profession (13 August 1880), three years of theology and, finally, ordination to the priesthood (23 December 1882). Five years had been enough to turn the peasant from Lu, just out of primary school, into a Salesian priest.

As a Salesian priest, Fr Rinaldi always took on the responsibilities of "superior". The day after his ordination, he was appointed rector of a house for "late vocations",

first at Mathi near Turin, then at San Giovanni Evangelista in Turin itself (1883–1889). This rector was kindness personified. “The first time I was introduced to him as rector, I remember that he treated me with such a dignified and fatherly warmth that I was deeply moved and inclined to open my heart to him completely: no one else until then had made such a deep impression on me”, said one of his former students at the time.⁴ This excellent man had no problem adapting to colleagues of a different character. So when, in 1889, it was necessary to provide for the management of the distant and important house of Sarrià (Barcelona), Turin called on Fr Rinaldi. The task was not an easy one. He had to change country, learn a new language, immerse himself in a different culture and establish relationships with strangers. Fr Rinaldi, who was not an intellectual, gave himself generously to the study of Spanish and became a Spaniard with the Spaniards. Success soon followed. After only three years, the development of the Salesian work in the peninsula, due among other things to the activity of the rector of Sarrià, who formed novices on the spot and increased his direct or correspondence contacts with the Salesian Cooperators, meant that Fr Rua decided to create a province there, with Sarrià as its centre and our Fr Rinaldi as its Provincial (1892). He held this position for nine years (1892–1901). The province of Spain and Portugal was prosperous for the Salesians. Fr Rinaldi built a novitiate house and took particular care of the novices, who were arriving in large numbers.

During his term of office he opened at least sixteen houses,⁵ willingly taking on the financial and administrative worries that such foundations entailed. After him, four provinces were established in the Iberian Peninsula. His work extended to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, then incorporated into the Salesian Congregation by the will of Don Bosco. It was necessary to visit them, advise them, help them spiritually and temporally, in order to maintain their regularity and enable them to fulfil their mission quietly and fruitfully. When he arrived in Barcelona, there were four Sisters and three novices, and when he left, the number of Sisters had risen to sixty-three and the number of novices thirty-one.⁶ It was in Spain that Fr Rinaldi began a very active mission among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, a mission which, as time went by, grew in scope and lasted until his death. As we can see, this simple man, a lacklustre orator, but of incomparable zeal, wisdom and charity, was a man of action and creation. Spain would be Fr Rinaldi’s second home.

Fr Rinaldi, Prefect General then Rector Major of the Salesians

In 1901, when the Salesian Prefect General died unexpectedly, Fr Rua, certainly impressed by Fr Rinaldi's apostolic success, appointed him to this post, number two in the Congregation. Ever obedient, he returned to Turin. As Prefect, the overall administration fell to him. Fr Rinaldi set to work with quiet strength. His sound judgement enabled him to resolve complicated problems in the twinkling of an eye. This placid-looking priest, who never imposed himself on anyone, reminds us of Angelo Roncalli, his compatriot of the next generation. He too, with the same good-natured wisdom, listened to people, let them speak and calmly outclassed the clever and powerful. He worked tirelessly. Far from confining himself to a position of high responsibility, he heard confessions preached and helped to educate young people. His spiritual direction was greatly appreciated. The Prefect General, Fr Rinaldi, devoted his energies to the oratory for girls at Valdocco, entrusted to the Salesian Sisters. It was his oratory. He looked after the past pupils of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. As Prefect General of the Congregation, Fr Rinaldi had immediate responsibility for three General Chapters (1901, 1904 and 1910). The second and third were particularly particularly onerous.

However, he took many initiatives to benefit women. The most remarkable of these, following a wish expressed in 1911 by fourteen former pupils of the Salesian Sisters at the first congress of their association, was the drafting of a seven-point set of statutes (3 October 1916), then the setting up on 20 May 1917 of an association of "zealots of Mary Help of Christians", true Sisters in the world, an association destined to become the secular institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco.⁷ As Prefect General, Fr Rinaldi reorganised the Cooperators, for whom nine international congresses were held between 1903 and 1930; and he gave a systematic basis to the association of Past Pupils of the Salesians. The list is very much incomplete, for Fr Rinaldi was tireless, constantly imagining and organising things.

"There was no lack of superficial observers among the Salesians who did not hold Fr Rinaldi in the esteem he deserved", wrote an excellent witness when recounting his election to the post of Rector Major.⁸ Fr Rinaldi was a humble man who systematically took a back seat. Besides, "what (good) can be expected from a late vocation?" some people said.⁹ He himself thought no differently. *Eppure!* (and yet!)... at the General Chapter following Fr Albera's death, Philip Rinaldi was elected to the post on the first ballot, by fifty votes out of the sixty-four that were cast (24 April 1922). With unfeigned humility, the new Rector Major immediately expressed his "embarrassment".

“This election is a confusion for me and for you”, he declared. “It gives the impression that the Lord wants to mortify the Congregation or that Our Lady wants to make it appear that she alone is at work among us. I assure you that it is a great mortification for me. Pray to the Lord that we do not spoil what Don Bosco and his successors have done.”¹⁰ In fact, his humility brought him very close to the founder, that modest man who never boasted. Giovanni Battista Francesia, a survivor of the very first Salesian generation, is said to have noted at the time: “Fr Rinaldi lacks only Don Bosco’s voice: he has everything else.”¹¹ During the nine years of his term of office, Don Bosco’s Congregation and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians resumed a development that had been slowed down. This Rector Major, with his somewhat basic education, had at heart the organisation of communities and study centres for his own people in his Congregation. The Salesian Congregation grew and spread. The number of houses increased during the decade 1922–1931 from 404 to 644 and the number of confreres from 4,788 to 8,836. Fr Rinaldi sent the first Salesians to Czechoslovakia, Holland, Sweden, Guatemala, Australia and Morocco. The missions, dear to the heart of the then Pope Pius XI, benefited from his impetus. It has been calculated that between 18 August 1922 and 22 October 1931, 1,868 Salesians and 613 Daughters of Mary Help of Christians left for “mission lands”. Under Fr Rinaldi’s mandate, Don Bosco’s cause led to his beatification by the Pope on 2 June 1929. Never one to sit down at his desk, the Rector Major visited the houses of his Congregation and continued to create associations such as the “Don Bosco Teachers’ Union” in 1921.¹²

However, his humble sense of self increased still further with the infirmities that began to overwhelm him. How he would have loved to be exonerated from his office by the General Chapter of 1928! But his resignation was never accepted. Stoic and serene, he continued to carry his cross. He was admired. His kindness and piety gave him the reputation of a saint, especially among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, many of whom he directed spiritually. They would soon attribute miracles of healing to his prayers. Fr Philip Rinaldi died in Turin on 5 December 1931.

An authentic witness of Salesian spirituality

Fr Rinaldi did not write much. But his testimony is enough to place him among the masters of Salesian spirituality. His life alone was a teaching even if his lessons are not immediately apparent. In fact, according to an observation made by Fr Viganò, who admitted that he discovered him himself only belatedly, he “succeeded in concealing

behind a dense mantle of humility a whole set of spiritual riches, apostolic creativity, bold initiatives, flexibility in line with the needs of the day..."¹³ Let us listen to this other master who, unlike his predecessor, did not spare his pen.

This spiritual man was a man of action and enterprise, who wanted to be faithful in everything to Don Bosco. The course of his life demonstrates this at every step, when he was the Rector of the late vocations in Turin, when he was appointed Provincial in Spain, when he became Prefect General, and finally when he was elected Rector Major. Don Bosco's words and example were sacred instructions for him. As the last Rector Major to have heard Don Bosco's advice in person, he did not tolerate any deviation from his guidelines. This is how he cultivated "Salesianity".

Fr Viganò appreciated above all what he called Fr Rinaldi's "apostolic interiority", that is to say, in accordance with the lessons of Dom Chautard in *The Soul of the Apostolate*, an intense interior life combined with vigorous apostolic action. Fr Rinaldi did not suffer from the disease of superficiality which Fr Viganò tirelessly deplored in his own people. Don Bosco, he said, had managed to lose everything in God. From this marvellous union, he had thrown himself towards souls with the ardour of the charity of the Redeemer in person, to the point where he no longer lived or breathed except for them.¹⁴ In his thirst for "souls", Fr Rinaldi lived Don Bosco's "da mihi animas" to the full. Doing good to "souls", in other words helping people, especially those who confided in him, to find their way to God in accordance with their charisms, to make progress through virtue and the support of the sacraments, and to straighten up if necessary, had become a passion for Fr Rinaldi. We devote ourselves to souls through "sanctified work", i.e. work in union with God. The members of the Salesian Family would thus be "more active every day, and at the same time better united to the Lord."¹⁵ Only the sanctified person produces work that is prayer, he reminded those who were casual about things. Prayer sanctifies. One day, Fr Rinaldi brought some of his confreres together to explore with them the essential characteristic of the Salesian spirit. He concluded that "Tireless industry sanctified by prayer and by union with God" characterises it very well.¹⁶

Fr Rinaldi was a "pattern of pastoral kindness", said Fr Viganò. He was a true father to souls. "He had the look, the gesture, the words and above all the heart of a father" said the bishop who delivered his eulogy. On approaching him, one immediately felt the fascination of a superiority that does not deter but attracts; one would have surrendered oneself with filial confidence into his strong arms, stretched out in greeting, even in moments of the greatest despondency; his gaze, always serene, gave courage; everyone

knew that he would always find truth on his lips, as on those of a father, but also charity.”¹⁷

He had a fondness for hard-working youth. His kindly fatherliness was particularly evident in the sacrament of Penance. He was deeply saddened to see that Salesian rectors had abandoned confession for all young people because of an (overly) strict interpretation of the Roman decisions at the beginning of the century.¹⁸ He naturally cultivated a family spirit among his brothers and sisters. Finally, in order to always be kind, he constantly controlled himself. Self-control is necessary for anyone who wants to be loved. His temperance was nourished by humility. It soon became clear from his behaviour that this superior saw himself as the servant of all.¹⁹ However – and this is just an observation by the writer of these lines – this was before the lessons of the Second Vatican Council!

These were the reflections of Fr Viganò as he saluted Fr Rinaldi as an admirable witness to Salesian spirituality.²⁰

NOTES

- 1 Lyon, Vitte, 1932.
- 2 Regarding Fr Rinaldi, see his circular letters to Salesians in *Atti del Capitolo Superiore* between 1922 and 1931; Taurinen. *Beatificationis et canonizationis Servi Dei Philippi Rinaldi, sacerdotis professi ac rectoris maioris Societatis Sancti Francisci Salesii*, read through the collection by L. Fiora, *Informatio super virtutibus*, Rome, 1983; E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio sac. Filippo Rinaldi, terzo successore di S. Giovanni Bosco*, Turin, SEI, s. d. (1951); L. Càstano, *Don Rinaldi*, Leumann, LDC, 1980; Stefano Maggio, *Lo spirito di Don Bosco nel cuore del beato Don Rinaldi*, Turin, SEI, 1990.
- 3 E. Viganò, “Don Filippo Rinaldi, genuino testimone e interprete dello spirito salesiano”, letter to Salesians, 5 December 1989, *Atti* 332, pp. 3-65.
- 4 “La prima volta che venni presentato a lui come mio Direttore, ricordo che mi trattò con tanta dignitosa affabilità, che mi sentii tutto sollevato e portato ad aprirgli sempre tutto il mio cuore : nessun altro guardandolo mi aveva fino allora lasciato così profonda impressione.” (Giovanni Zolin, letter to Fr Ceria, 5 February 1947, in E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio...*, p. 64).
- 5 Sixteen according to Fr Ceria. Twenty-one houses founded according to Fr Pietro Ricaldone in the canonisation process, as presented by Fr Viganò, “Don Filippo Rinaldi ...”, letter cited p. 20.
- 6 In L. Càstano, *Don Rinaldi*, as mentioned, pp. 78-79.
- 7 In L. Càstano, *Don Rinaldi*, p. 118ff. Fr Ceria’s timeline differs somewhat from that of Fr Càstano, who is in principle better informed on this particular issue.
- 8 “Tra i Salesiani non mancarono osservatori superficiali, che non avevano del valore di Don Rinaldi la meritata stima”. (E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio ...*, p. 272)
- 9 “Che cosa può venir fuori da un Figlio di Maria ?” (ibidem).
- 10 “Questa elezione è una confusione per me e per voi. Essa fa credere che il Signore voglia mortificare la Congregazione o che la Madonna voglia far vedere che è Essa sola che opera in mezzo a noi. Assieme che è per me una grande mortificazione. Pregate il Signore, perchè possiamo non guastare ciò che han fatto Don Bosco e i suoi successori.” (In E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio.....* p. 273).
- 11 “A don Rinaldi manca solo la voce di don Bosco : tutto il resto l’ha.” (In E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio ...*, p. 5).
- 12 See the chapter “La Unione Don Bosco fra Insegnanti”, in E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio ...*, pp. 331-340.
- 13 “In vita egli aveva saputo ricoprire con un denso manto di umiltà un insieme di ricchezze spirituali, di creatività apostolica, di audaci iniziative, di duttilità con i tempi, di preveggenza e persino di sviluppo del carisma ...” (E. Viganò, “Don Filippo Rinaldi...”, letter cited above, p. 7).
- 14 In P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians, 6 April 1929, *Atti* 48, pp. 734-735.
- 15 “... li aiutasse ad essere ogni giorno più attivi e nel medesimo tempo più uniti al Signore ...” (P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians 24 June 1922, *Atti* 15, p. 16).

- 16 “Operosità instancabile santificata dalla preghiera e dalla unione con Dio”, in E. Viganò, “Don Filippo Rinaldi...”, letter cited, p. 46.
- 17 “Della paternità Egli aveva l’aspetto, il gesto, la parola e specialmente il cuore. Avvicinandosi a Lui si subiva il fascino di una superiorità che non ferma ma attrae; tra le sue solide braccia, tese al saluto, uno si sarebbe abbandonato con fiducia filiale anche nei momenti di maggiore sconforto ; sulle sue labbra ciascuno sapeva di trovare, come sulla labbra di un padre, sempre la verità, ma anche sempre la carità.” (Evasio Colli, Bishop of Acireale, *Don Filippo Rinaldi. Elogio funebre*, Turin, SEI, 1932, p. 6.)
- 18 P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians, 26 April 1931, Atti 56, pp. 940-942.
- 19 Testimony of Fr Pietro Ricaldone at the canonisation process, in Egidio Viganò, “Don Filippo Rinaldi...”, letter as cited, p. 58.
- 20 E. Viganò, “Don Filippo Rinaldi...”, letter as cited, p. 59.

Rosary

A traditional practice

In 1982, in their renewed Constitutions, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians announced: “let us turn to her [Mary] in simplicity and confidence, celebrating her liturgical feast, and honouring her in those forms of prayer proper to the Church and Salesian tradition, especially the daily praying of the Rosary, in which we relive, together with her, the mysteries of our Redemption.”¹ In this way, they were unashamedly and accurately part of a long history. Indeed, the family born of Don Bosco has always said its Rosary (a total of one hundred and fifty Hail Marys, distributed in decades, all begun with the Our Father and closed by the Glory be), a repetitive practice rooted in popular Catholic religion since the Middle Ages. At the Becchi, like most mothers in the region, Margaret Bosco imposed the complete Rosary (15 mysteries spread across three occasions) on her three sons every day. And, if the Salesian Family kept to the instructions in their manuals of piety, of which Don Bosco’s *Il Giovane provveduto* was the prototype, they meditated on the fifteen well-defined “mysteries” of the lives of Mary and Jesus, all of which were “mysteries of our redemption”. These were, in groups of five, the “joyful mysteries” of the Annunciation, the Visitation, Birth of Jesus, the Presentation and Jesus as a child in the Temple, followed by the “sorrowful mysteries” of Gethsemane, the Scourging, the Crowning with Thorns, the Way of the Cross and the Crucifixion; finally, the “glorious mysteries” of the Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost the Assumption of Mary and her Coronation into Heaven.² The decades of Hail Marys were accompanied in thought, ideally at least, by embryonic religious meditations on the main salvific events of the Redemption accomplished in Christ.

Vindication of the Rosary after Vatican II

Did the liturgical movement of the twentieth century, which led to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of Vatican II, eliminate the Rosary from Catholic prayer? Many thought so. The official liturgy was infinitely better than particular devotions such as the Rosary. In fact, in Salesian houses, liturgical progress soon led to the suppression of the traditional praying of the Rosary during the daily celebration of the Eucharist, a custom authorised

by Saint Francis de Sales,³ established by Don Bosco himself among his own people, still imposed by the Rector Major Fr Ricaldone in 1939⁴ and still in force in the early 1960s. But the Council then adopted a balanced position on the matter, urging the promotion, alongside liturgical worship, of other forms of Marian piety, especially those recommended by the Magisterium, foremost among which was the Rosary.⁵ And the supporters of the Rosary, the Dominicans in particular, defended it vigorously and successfully.

The Rosary, they said, is first and foremost a gospel-based prayer.⁶ It draws its principal formulas and the statement of the mysteries that accompany its recitation from the gospel. It takes its inspiration from this by beginning with the Angel's joyful greeting and Mary's acceptance, thus suggesting the Incarnation to the believer's mind, the fundamental mystery of the gospel. And this evangelical prayer, centred on the redemptive Incarnation, harmoniously develops its implications. It reflects the very way in which the Divine Word brought about the Redemption, by inserting himself into human history. In the form it has taken in modern times, the Rosary considers, successively and in order, the events of the Redemption from the virginal conception of Jesus and the time of his infancy to the hours of the Pasch and their effects on the fledgling Church and on Mary, who was taken body and soul to heaven. Just as in the primitive preaching to which the hymn in the Letter to the Philippians⁷ bears witness, the faithful as they pray the Rosary go in thought from the abasement of the Son of God to his death, then to the exaltation of the Incarnate Word.

The orientation of this evangelical prayer, which is wrongly accused of being Mariolatry, is clearly Christological. The litany-like repetition of the Hail Mary is an unceasing praise of Christ, the ultimate object of the Angel's announcement and the greeting of John the Baptist's mother: "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb."⁸ The contemplation – because the recitation of the Rosary is normally a time for contemplation – brings the person praying this prayer into the presence of the Son of God and of the Virgin as he is successively born in a cave in Bethlehem, presented in the Temple by his Mother, showing zeal for his Father's business, as the Redeemer in agony in the Garden of Olives, scourged and crowned with thorns, burdened with a cross and dying on Calvary, raised from the dead and ascended to his Father, finally in glory to bring about the outpouring of the Spirit he had promised. The spiritual riches of the Rosary are many.

The elements of the Rosary: contemplation of the mysteries of salvation, the Our Father, which is the Lord's Prayer, the litany of the Hail Mary, the Trinitarian doxology

of the Glory be, each with its own character, are integrated into its ideal practice. Prayer thus takes on a serious character in the Lord's Prayer, lyrical and full of praise in the Hail Mary, contemplative in the meditation on the mysteries, petitionary in the supplication "Pray for us sinners", and full of adoration in the doxology which closes each of the decades.

The Rosary can be a laudable individual and private practice, but its communal practice in public is preferable. In *Marialis Cultus* (1974), Paul VI exhorted Christians to say the Rosary in common. The members of the Salesian Family, whatever their situation in the world, can only but be sensitive to this invitation, since the Rosary has long been essentially a community practice for them. Paul VI said: "But there is no doubt that, after the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, the high point which family prayer can reach, the Rosary should be considered as one of the best and most efficacious prayers in common that the Christian family is invited to recite. We like to think, and sincerely hope, that when the family gathering becomes a time of prayer, the Rosary is a frequent and favoured manner of praying." Along these lines the apostolic movement, known as the Rosary Teams, is giving thought to the astonishing potential of this prayer. Created in 1955 by a Dominican friar, they involve the laity in a new type of evangelisation, by creating places of prayer in the homes of lay people and under their responsibility, open to all, practising or not, baptised or not, where the Rosary is a prayer, a bond of unity and a proclamation of the Gospel.⁹

However, the Pope recommended that there should be no inappropriate exclusivity. The Constitutions of the Salesians and Volunteers With Don Bosco ask them to say the Rosary every day.¹⁰ All freedom is left to the other members of the Salesian Family. "The Rosary is an excellent prayer, but the faithful should feel serenely free in its regard. They should be drawn to its calm recitation by its intrinsic appeal."¹¹

Blessed Jozef Kowalski, Salesian priest and martyr of the Rosary

Don Bosco used to end his spiritual lessons with an *esempio*. (example) An *esempio* taken from the Salesian history of the twentieth century is appropriate for this article on the Rosary.

The Rosary was the last support of the holy Salesian priest Jozef Kowalski, beatified as a martyr by John Paul II on 13 June 1999. He was murdered. Along with eleven other Polish Salesians, he had been arrested on 23 May 1941 and soon interned in Auschwitz. On 3 June 1942, Commandant Palitzsch was reviewing the sixty prisoner priests on

parade, designated for Dachau. “What’s that?” Palitzsch asked him. The priest remained silent. The officer struck his wrist violently: a Rosary fell to the ground. “Stamp on it” shouted Palitzsch. Kowalski refused. Furious, Palitzsch immediately extracted him from the group intended for the Birkenau extermination camp. On the night of 3 to 4 July Palitzsch and Kapo Mitas (who would later boast about it) killed Jozef Kowalski with their own hands. Kowalski and, to complete their crime, threw his body into a barrel of excrement. He was thirty-one years old.¹²

NOTES

- 1 “Ricorreremo a lei con semplicità e fiducia celebrando le sue feste liturgiche e onorandola con le forme di preghiera proprie della Chiesa e della tradizione salesiana, specialmente con il Rosario quotidiano in cui si rivivono - in comunione con lei - i misteri della nostra Redenzione.” (Constitutions FMA, art. 44.) A similar consideration, but expressed only incidentally, in the renewed Regulations of the Salesians, art. 74: “Oltre al rosario, in cui Maria insegna ai suoi figli come unirsi ai misteri di Cristo ...”
- 2 Don Bosco taught this method to his boys. See the “Formola di recitare I quindici misteri del Rosario della SS. Vergine”, in the *Giovane provveduto*, Turin, 1847, pp. 109-111.
- 3 “At Mass, I advise you rather to say your Rosary than any other vocal prayer; and, saying it, you can break it when it is necessary to observe the points I have marked for you, at the Gospel, the Creed and the Elevation, and then pick up where you left off. ...” (Letter to Mme Bourgeois, 9 October 1604, in *Oeuvres*, vol. XII, p. 334).
- 4 P. Ricaldone, “Oratorio festivo, catechismo, formazione religiosa”, *Atti* 96, Nov-Dec 1939, p. 162. This was obligatory even for Salesian seminarians.
- 5 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 67.
- 6 From here on we follow Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, 2 February 1974, nos. 42-55, a presentation devoted solely to the Rosary, which brought together the results of various congresses on the subject.
- 7 Philippians 2:6-11.
- 8 Luke 1:42.
- 9 See J. Eyquem, “Rosaire”, *Catholicisme*, vol. 13, 1993, col. 107-109.
- 10 “Recitiamo quotidianamente il rosario”, say the SDB Constitutions, art. 92. “Recita quotidiana del Rosario”, according to the CDB Constitutions, art. 37. For the Sisters, see above fn. 1.
- 11 *Marialis Cultus*, nos. 54 and 55.
- 12 According to the notice of the beatification and canonisation process of the “Servo di Dio Jozef Kowalski (1911-1942) sacerdos professus Societatis S. Francisci Salesii”.

Rua, Michael

The formation of a disciple (1837–1860)

Michael Rua, eight years old (he was born in Turin on 9 June 1837), met Don Bosco for the first time in Turin among the boys of his oratory of St Francis de Sales, one Sunday in September 1845. It was probably at the Dora Mills, the oratory's very precarious base since the previous July.¹ At the time, the boy was attending the school run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools (De La Salle Brothers). His mother would not allow him to go regularly to Don Bosco's oratory, which was being established at Valdocco. Michael was not able to become his pupil until 1850 when at that time, having difficulty finding helpers for his youth work, Don Bosco undertook to run his secondary courses in town. But it was mainly when he managed to enrol Rua among the few boarders at the "house attached to the Oratory" (24 September 1852). A fortnight later, he clothed him in a cassock in his chapel at the Becchi.

At the age of fifteen, Michael Rua officially joined the group of disciples of the apostle of Valdocco, who would involve him more and more closely with his undertaking. On 26 January 1854, Don Bosco gathered four of his young assistants in his room, including Michael, to explain to them a project for a religious association whose members would be bound by a promise of "charity". On 25 March 1855, Rua took private vows at the hands of Don Bosco. This was the time Dominic Savio, soon to become a friend of Michael Rua, was there. Between 1855 and 1860, while Rua was studying theology at the seminary in Turin and, from the end of 1856, working on Sundays with young people in the difficult Vanchiglia district, the Constitutions were drafted to be presented to Pope Pius IX. Rua wrote the document out by hand and accompanied Don Bosco on his long journey to Rome (22 February – 14 April 1858). He stood out among his companions. On 18 December 1859, at the founding meeting of the Congregation of St Francis de Sales, the assembly elected him as spiritual director. He was twenty-two years old and had been ordained a subdeacon only the day before. Finally, on 29 July 1860, a bishop delegated by Archbishop Fransoni of Turin (in exile) conferred the priesthood on him. And on the following Sunday, the Valdocco oratory, which had been joined by the boys from the oratory at Vanchiglia, whose hearts the cleric Rua had managed to win over, celebrated the new priest with indescribable enthusiasm.

Don Bosco's right-hand man (1860–1888)

As a priest, Fr Rua set to work with great enthusiasm. Increasingly heavy responsibilities were to fall to him. At the start of the new school year in October 1860, he was entrusted with the general direction of the classes at the Valdocco oratory and the spiritual responsibility of the entire house (around 300 students and 150 apprentices, a figure that would increase over the years). By way of a break, he spent Sundays at the oratory in Vanchiglia, from where he returned exhausted but happy. On the evening of 14 May 1862, the first 22 Salesians officially made their temporary religious profession in Don Bosco's room. Fr Rua proclaimed the long formula phrase by phrase and the kneeling group repeated it. In October 1863, when the Salesian Congregation, which was beginning to spread, was given responsibility for a minor seminary at Mirabello in the Alessandria region, its direction fell to Fr Rua. The school immediately became another Valdocco and vocations began to flourish.

Two years passed. Don Bosco, who had just seen the Prefect (in other words, vice-superior) of his Congregation die, turned to Rua to replace him. Fr Rua came back to Turin. On 29 October 1865, he was appointed Prefect of the Society of St Francis de Sales and of the house of the Oratory. His first task (certainly a thankless one) was to see to the discipline and good administration of Valdocco, which had been rather lax under his predecessor. Over the years, as the Salesian Society grew, Fr Rua's mission as Prefect became increasingly important. He had to supervise the formation and observance of a world of young Salesians who were certainly devoted to their work, but who knew almost nothing about religious discipline and were accustomed only to the prayer forms followed by their pupils. Between 1869, when the Congregation of St Francis de Sales was approved by the Holy See, and 1874, when its Constitutions were approved, Fr Rua had to take charge of the formation of the *ascritti*, i.e. novices. The official visits to the houses (already six in 1872), a very delicate matter, was also his responsibility. For good measure, when John Cagliero left for Argentina in 1875, he was invited to succeed him as "Director General of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians". "See Don Rua", was the phrase that echoed around Valdocco. No matter how simple or complicated, every case ended up to his desk. Fr Rua was the chief cogwheel in Don Bosco's Congregation. In the shadow and wake of a revered master, he tirelessly organised, formed, readjusted or repaired.

So when Pope Leo XIII asked Don Bosco to think about a vicar general given that he was worn out before his time, Fr Rua was naturally appointed for the job (1884).

Don Bosco's first successor (1888–1910)

Don Bosco died on 31 January 1888. And Fr Rua, frightened by the responsibility that fell upon him, took over. Nineteen years later he described for his confreres:

... the day when, in order not to resist the clear will of God, I was forced to bow my head and assume the government of our Pious Society. Caught under a weight that seemed bound to crush me, what could I do but throw myself like a little child into the arms of our venerable father and ask him for the strength I felt I was lacking? Kneeling before his corpse, I wept and prayed for a long time. I spoke to him with the deep certainty that he was listening to me; I confided all my anguish to him, as I had done a thousand times when he was still living among us and I had the good fortune to live by his side...²

The new Rector Major was to be constantly listening to Don Bosco. And Don Bosco lived again in him. The entire Salesian Family recognised him and breathed again. The downfall of the work, which the prophets of doom had foretold would occur in the period following the disappearance of its creator, did not happen.

On the contrary, Fr Rua's term of office (1888–1910) was a time of rapid expansion for its projects, foundations and achievements. According to statistics, between 1888 and 1910, the number of Salesians increased from 773 to 4000, the number of houses from 57 to 345, the number of provinces from 6 to 34, and the number of countries in which they were established from 9 to 38. Fr Rua presided over no fewer than thirty missionary expeditions to Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Colombia, China, India, Mozambique and elsewhere. He vigorously promoted the Salesian Cooperator movement. Their congress in Bologna (1895) amazed him with the enthusiasm it aroused, and other generally successful congresses followed in Europe and America. The Salesian structures were strengthened under his leadership. The General Chapters of 1901 and 1904 were among the most decisive of the Society's first century. Fr Rua travelled a great deal, certainly not for personal pleasure, but in order to get to know the works and confreres, the Salesian Sisters and Cooperators on the spot, and to maintain the unity and spirit of Don Bosco everywhere. He also acted through innumerable private letters and circulars, which show us the strength of his thinking and spirituality. For Fr Rua was intelligent. The main concern of this perfect disciple was to imitate his model Don Bosco as closely as possible.³ A keen sense of judgement prevented him from copying him indiscriminately. While imitating him, he was also creative.

But he also faced hardship. The general government of the Church inflicted two of them on him in sensitive areas of the tradition inherited from Don Bosco: spiritual direction and the link with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. For Don Bosco, the rector of a house was eminently a director of souls. However, a double Roman decree (5 July 1899 and 24 April 1901), aimed at safeguarding the freedom of penitents, formally forbade superiors to hear the confession of any person living in their residence. Caught between two loyalties, Fr Rua tried to approach the Holy Office, which told him to submit. Which he did, with a heavy heart. Another Roman decision 1901, confirmed in 1906, demanded a complete separation between the Society of Saint Francis de Sales and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, which Don Bosco had carefully integrated into his Congregation. Here too, all resistance was in vain. Fr Rua had to give in and humbly inform the Salesians of the new situation of the two societies. The hardest test for him was the “Varazze affair” a small town on the Gulf of Genoa, where Don Bosco had opened a school in 1872. In July 1907, the Salesians there were suddenly accused of extravagant abuses including black masses (the Salesian questioned “confessed”, believing they were celebrating masses for the dead in black vestments). Searches, interrogations, imprisonment, closure of the college, nothing was spared. Worse still, a campaign of appalling slander orchestrated by street demonstrations, spread across Italy against the Congregation. What an amount of suffering for Fr Rua, who vowed to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land if the emotion died down. His prayer was answered. It soon became clear that the whole thing was a set-up based on the diary of a fifteen-year-old boy by despicable adults. Once the facts had been clarified, public sympathy was returned to the Salesians and the college was reopened. True to his commitment, in 1908 the elderly priest made the arduous journey by land to Palestine, Nazareth and Jerusalem. For his body was failing, and his poor legs would soon be nothing but wounds.

In February 1910, Fr Rua had to take to his bed for good. On the evening of 5 April he exclaimed once more, before going into the final death throes: “Don Bosco, I too am coming to you, yes, I’m coming to you!”⁴ Don Bosco had loved him since childhood, and he was going to find him again. The next morning, he passed away, serenely, at the age of 73.

The glorification of Don Bosco’s disciple

Fr Rua was a saint. For his contemporaries, this was self-evident. His cause for beatification and canonisation was opened in Turin in 1922, but progress was slow.

Finally, on 29 October 1972, Paul VI proclaimed him Blessed. And the Pope's homily happily celebrated his work as a faithful disciple of Don Bosco. Fidelity was the source of his apostolic fruitfulness and of his now officially recognised holiness.

Fr Rua is beatified and glorified precisely because he was Don Bosco's successor, that is to say, his continuator: son, disciple, imitator. He made [...] the saint's example into a school, his personal work into an institution spread throughout the world, his life a history, his rule a spirit, his holiness a type, a model; he turned the fount into a current, a river [...] The prodigious fruitfulness of the Salesian Family, one of the major and most significant phenomena of the Church in the last century and in our century, had its origin in Don Bosco, its continuity in Fr Rua [...] He served the Salesian work in its potential for expansion, he understood the value of the formula and developed it with exact consistency, but always with shrewd novelty. Fr Rua was the most faithful and, for this reason, the most humble and the most valiant of Don Bosco's sons [...] He inaugurated a tradition [...]. He taught Salesians to remain Salesians, ever faithful sons of their founder.⁵

Dynamic fidelity to Don Bosco is, for the member of the Salesian Family, a sure path to holiness.⁶

NOTES

- 1 The date of his meeting was provided by Fr Rua himself at Don Bosco's canonisation process. The best biography of Fr Rua would appear to be by E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Don Michele Rua*, Turin, SEI, 1946. The enormous work by Angelo Amadei, *Il Servo di Dio Michèle Rua*, Turin, SEI, 1931-1934, 3 vol., 2350 pages, perfectly uncritical, is difficult to use. For my part, I have borrowed a number of words from Joseph Aubry's fervent commentary on Fr Rua in *Les saints de la famille* (Rome, Salesian General House, 1996), pp. 103-131. On his spirituality, in addition to his instructions, most of which are unpublished, but some of which were published by Fr Amadei as an appendix to the third volume (pp. 703-751) of his work, see the collection of *Lettere circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, Torino, Tip. S.A.I.D. "Buona Stampa", 1910.
- 2 " ... giorno in cui, per non resistere alla manifesta volontà di Dio, mi fu giocoforza piegar la fronte ed assumere il governo della nostra Pia Società. Oppresso da un peso che sembrava dovesse schiacciarmi, che poteva io fare di meglio, che gettarmi come un bambino nelle braccia del nostro venerato Padre D. Bosco e chiedergli quella forza che sentiva mancarmi ? Prostrato infatti davanti la fredda sua salma, piansi e pregai lungamente. Gli parlai colla intima persuasione ch'egli mi ascoltasse, gli confidai tutte le mie ambascie, come le mille volte aveva fatto quando egli ancora in vita dimorava fra noi ed io aveva la bella sorte di vivere al suo fianco ... " (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 31 January 1907, L. C., p. 360).
- 3 Underlined with pleasure by his successor Paul Albera in his circular letters. See P. Albera, *Lettere circolari*, Turin, SEI, 1922, pp. 22, 178, 293, 301, 496.
- 4 "Sì! Don Bosco ... anch'io vengo a te! ... Don Bosco, io vengo a te! ..." (In A. Amadei, *Il Servo di Dio Michele Rua*, vol. III, p. 607).
- 5 The Italian text of the entire homily of Paul VI can be found in the *Bollettino salesiano*, December 1972.
- 6 Fr Aubry drew the same conclusion from Paul VI's homily on Fr Rua.

Rule of life

The Rules of life of religious families

The expression Rule of Life (implied: according to the Spirit), originally ignored in official Salesian literature, did not become commonplace there until the second half of the twentieth century, notably in the writings of Fr Viganò.¹ However, the very existence of such a Rule, in the sense of the expression, must be recognised as being as old as the Salesian Family, when Don Bosco was endeavouring to trace out a path of spiritual perfection.

We read in the Vatican II Constitution on the Church that religious families

give their members the support of a more firm stability in their way of life and a proven doctrine of acquiring perfection. They further offer their members the support of fraternal association in the militia of Christ and of liberty strengthened by obedience. Thus these religious are able to tranquilly fulfil and faithfully observe their religious profession and so spiritually rejoicing make progress on the road of charity.²

The “Rules of life” of religious families codify these helpful supports, in particular the “doctrine for attaining perfection”, which is proposed to their members. Two words must be clearly understood here. The “perfection” in question exists only in God the Father (Matthew 5:48) and, for this world, in his incarnate son Jesus Christ. The disciple’s search for it will consist in ever more closely following Christ in the love of God and of his brothers and sisters. And, very concretely “doctrine” is translated as “teaching to be lived out in daily reality”.

Any Rule of life normally has two sections: spiritual guidelines and practical provisions. The spiritual guidelines, the major elements of the Rule of Life, are intended to provide a habitual structure for the spiritual life. They explain and realise various aspects of the mystery of Jesus in the spirit of the Beatitudes. The necessary horizon is union with God in charity. This spiritual charter outlines a way of seeking God according to a particular spirituality. It translates evangelical calls, most often felt by a saint when it comes to the rules of religious life. The practical provisions concern the discipline of life and, possibly, apostolate. The rhythm and form of prayer also have their place. The

purpose of these provisions is above all to broaden the field of obedience to God and to his authorised witnesses. They tend to protect personal generosity from the risks of arbitrariness, presumption and lazy dullness. In itself, submitting to a rule of life means to agree to enter into a way of life determined by the concern for detachment from one's own will. The formulas of profession by which the religious commit themselves to a particular society by declaring their desire to observe the constitutions, express this submission.³ Unlike the project which may be purely personal, in the language adopted here the rule of life always comes from someone else. Those who do not resolve to follow it may be nurturing a "life project", but they are not opting for a "rule of life".

The rules governing the life of religious families can change. They therefore naturally have a history. Originally, the primary aim of religious codification was to express the means essential to a life driven by love of God and humankind. Then, down through the ages, the authors of the codified reforms sought to rediscover these means. The adaptations that changes in the world have sometimes made necessary should only be secondary for a code or a rule of life.⁴

The Rules of life in the first century of the Salesian Family

The old and new Constitutions of the Salesians and of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, as well as the Rules of the Salesian Cooperators, clearly proposed rules for the spiritual life. The first article of Don Bosco's Constitutions, the doctrine of which remained in force until the 1966 edition, stated in its original form:

It is the purpose of this society to gather together members, priests, clerics and laymen too, for the purpose of aspiring to perfection through the imitation of the virtues of our Divine Savior, especially in (the exercise of) charity toward poor young people.⁵

The two ends: perfection and active charity, here again subordinate, were certainly quickly coordinated by an "and" or similar. But, in Don Bosco's mind, the subordination subsisted beneath the coordination. There is no lack of evidence that for him, his disciples approached "perfection" (or "holiness") through active charity in following Christ. Charitable action contributed to progress in spiritual perfection. This perfection was sought in a *sequela Christi* of a particular form, which was active charity, mainly in the service of young people, a characteristic of our saint's spirituality. The parallel article of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, built on the model

of the one of Don Bosco – that is, with two coordinated ends – repeated more or less the same teaching:

The aim of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is to seek personal perfection and to contribute to the salvation of others, in particular by providing a Christian education for the daughters of the people.⁶

And we note that the aim of the Salesian Cooperators, the third branch of the original Salesian Family, was none other than the search for spiritual perfection through charity. Don Bosco wrote:

This Association is considered to be a Third Order like the old ones, with the difference that in those the aim was Christian *perfection in the exercise of piety*, whereas here the main aim is *the active life in the exercise of charity towards one's neighbour* and especially towards youth at risk.⁷

Don Bosco's idea, devoid of any ambiguity, was clear: instead of "perfection through piety", the Cooperators would cultivate "perfection through charity".

In accordance with the ideal outline of any Rule of Life, the chapters of the constitutional texts then set out the fundamental spiritual orientation of these religious societies and the provisions designed to ensure that it is respected, be it in terms of vows, "practices of piety", conditions of admission, the formation of members and how they are governed. And the General Regulations, originally called "Deliberations" in the Society of St Francis de Sales, (to include: "Deliberations of the general chapters of the institute"), because they were intended to enforce the Constitutions, completed the "rules of life" in the sense understood by Fr Viganò.

Fr Rua confirmed the "rule of life" nature of the Constitutions of his Society. "The Rule must be considered by us", he once wrote to the Salesians, "as the book of life, the marrow of the Gospel, the hope of our salvation, the measure of our perfection, the key to paradise. Let us venerate it as the most beautiful and the most precious relic of our beloved Don Bosco."⁸ Observance of the Rule makes the religious another Don Bosco, Fr Rinaldi assured us.⁹ The goal sought by every rule of life was thus achieved. The Salesian Family did not have to wait for Vatican II to have real "rules of life". However, we must recognise that, compared for example with the *Regula* of Saint Benedict, the standard rule in Western Christianity, theirs were very sketchy.

The fundamental Codes reformed following Vatican II

The reforms that followed Vatican II were bound to improve the Rules of Life contained in the various statutes of the Salesian Family. By the will of the Roman Congregations, and lastly the obligation to adapt the Constitutions to the 1917 Code of Canon Law, until then they had been primarily legislative texts, rather unsuited to meditation according to the Spirit. The legal provisions suffocated spiritual orientations that were certainly, but barely, sketched out and never developed. Salesians fell back on Don Bosco's Introduction to their Constitutions, which spoke much more to their hearts. The Council Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* (28 October 1965) on the renewal and adaptation of religious life and its subsequent implementing regulations in *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (6 August 1966) and *Renovationis Causam* (6 January 1969), decided on the changes that were desirable.

It was necessary, in the renewed fundamental codes of Religious Congregations, what we call here their Rules of Life, to unite as closely as possible the spiritual principles inspiring the life and actions of individuals with the requirements arising from these principles, both in terms of action and behaviour, whether individual or collective. Consequently, the fundamental code should above all define the spirituality of the institute and its apostolate. This would be followed by the requirements of the evangelical counsels, life in common and the life of prayer, requirements which the institute considers to be fundamental by virtue of its own charism. Finally, the norms on formation, government, administration of goods and separation from the institute should be determined. All the members of the Congregations represented by their Chapters dealing with the Constitutions would be interested in the undertaking.

In the Salesian world, extraordinary General Chapters, themselves prepared for by Provincial Chapters, undertook this difficult task and brought it to a successful conclusion during the 1970s and 1980s. The result was the Constitutions and Regulations of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1982, then of the Salesians in 1984. The Cooperators and Volunteers of Don Bosco then benefited from these experiences for the Regulations of Apostolic Life of the former, approved in 1986 and the Constitutions and Regulations of the latter, drawn up and approved in 1990. In the meantime, the Salesians published a *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis et studiorum* (Rome, 1985), considered by the Rector Major, Fr Viganò as a "vital element" of their Rule of Life.¹⁰

The Constitutions of the two Salesian Congregations had certainly gained in quality. Their fundamental theological inspiration was clearly Trinitarian and Christological. Spiritual guidelines were wrapped up in practical directives that were carefully checked and sometimes modified.

The Constitutions are the authoritative presentation of a project of evangelical life; they indicate the fundamental principles of our way of following Christ, its ecclesial dimension, its charismatic originality enshrining the spirit of the Founder, its healthy traditions and its effective service-structures.¹¹

The Salesian Sisters preceded their Rules with a preamble on the “characteristic features of the FMA” outlined by Don Bosco in their first Constitutions. “It is this ever-present spirituality of our origins that we find authentic and alive in the articles of the renewed Constitutions”, wrote Mother General Rosetta Marchese in her presentation of the new constitutional text.¹²

The insistent references in the Constitutions to Don Bosco (and to Mother Mazzarello in the case of the Salesian Sisters) are impressive. Fr Viganò particularly liked his Society’s chapter on the “Salesian spirit”, a “value that is a constituent factor of our identity” he said, something which related to him from beginning to end.¹³ Moreover, according to him, the entire text of the Constitutions, from the preamble to the last article, brought to life the heart of Don Bosco, his charisma, his spirit, his mission, his pastoral inventiveness, his capacity for communion, his religious witness, the style of his union with God, his pedagogy of formation, his organisational genius, his fatherly way of leading and governing. Don Bosco remained with his Salesians, as the sentence on the first page of the 1984 text puts it. The spirit of Don Bosco was deeply imbued in the renewed Salesian Rule of Evangelical Life.¹⁴ Little had changed in the traditional practical guidelines of the two Congregations. The most notable changes concerned prayer life, which had become much more liturgical.

At the end of the twentieth century, the conditions necessary for solid Rules of Life seemed perfectly assured in Salesian spirituality. Fr Albera had written:

The Rule is the official counsellor that the Lord gives us to guide us in all the details of our life; it prevents us from straying to the right and left of the straight and narrow path, and leads us infallibly to our goal.¹⁵

Systematic recourse to Don Bosco and to a rethought theology, together with a concern for greater harmony with a changing mentality, had further improved both the spiritual orientations of the Rule of Salesian life and the structures carefully related to them.

NOTES

- 1 See the Index of his circular letters, s. v. *Regola di vita*.
- 2 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 43.
- 3 These lines adapt an article by Jean-Claude Sagne (“Règlement de vie”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, t. XIII, 1988, col. 284-285), which, however, only concerns individual rules of life.
- 4 See Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 29 June 1971, no. 37.
- 5 “Lo scopo di questa congregazione si è di riunire insieme i suoi membri ecclesiastici, chierici ed anche laici a fine di perfezionare se medesimi imitando le virtù del nostro Divin Salvatore, specialmente nella carità verso i giovani poveri.” (First draft of the Salesian Constitutions (1858?), with corrections by Don Bosco, cap. *Scopo*, art. 1.)
- 6 “Lo scopo dell’Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice è di attendere alla propria perfezione, e di coadiuvare alla salute del prossimo, specialmente col dare alle fanciulle del popolo una cristiana educazione.” (*Regole o Costituzioni dell’Istituto delle Figlie di Maria SS. Ausiliatrice*, Torino, tipograf. e libreria salesiana, 1878, tit. I “Scopo dell’Istitutto”, a. 1.)
- 7 “... questa Associazione è considerata come un Terz’Ordine degli antichi, colla differenza, che in quelli si proponeva la perfezione cristiana nell’esercizio della pietà, qui si ha per fine principale la vita attiva nell’esercizio della carità verso il prossimo e specialmente verso la gioventù pericolante.” (*Cooperatori salesiani, ossia un modo pratico per giovare al buon costume e alla civile società*, Albenga, 1876, § II, p. 27-28.)
- 8 “... la qual Regola dev’essere da noi considerata come il libro della vita, il midollo del Vangelo, la speranza di nostra salvezza, la misura della nostra perfezione, la chiave del Paradiso. Veneriamola come il più bel ricordo e la più preziosa reliquia del nostro amatissimo Don Bosco.” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 1 January 1895, L. C., p. 123.) This teaching reappeared almost word for word in his circular to provincials and rectors, 1 December 1909, L. C. p. 410.
- 9 “Il Salesiano che osserva puntualmente la Regola, diviene quasi senza avvedersene un altro Don Bosco; intorno a lui si diffonde un’atmosfera tutta speciale che gli attira et gli affeziona la gioventù, e gli concilia la benevolenza dei buoni, e la deferente tolleranza dei cattivi”. (P. Rinaldi, according to A. Candela, Process of canonisation of Fr Rinaldi, in L. Fiora, *Informatio super virtutibus*, Roma, 1983, p. 185).
- 10 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 8 December 1990, *Atti* 335, p. 33.
- 11 “Le Costituzioni sono la presentazione autorevole di un progetto di vita evangelica; indicano i principi fondamentali della nostra sequela del Christo, la sua dimensione ecclesiale, la sua originalità carismatica secondo lo spirito del Fondatore, le sane tradizioni e le strutture adeguate di servizio” (E. Viganò, “Il testo rinnovato della nostra Regola di vita”, Letter to Salesians, 29 October 1984, *Atti* 312, pp. 8-9). The whole of this letter comments on the text of the Salesian Constitutions (explicitly known as the Rule of Life), which had just been drafted.
- 12 “E’ questa la spiritualità sempre attuale delle nostre origini, che ritroviamo autentica e viva negli articoli delle Costituzioni rinnovate” (Mother Rosetta Marchese, Rome, 5 August 1982).
- 13 Cited letter of 29 October 1984, p. 10.

- 14 On the *Regolamento di Vita Apostolica* of the Cooperators, see the entry *Cooperators*; on the Constitutions of the Volunteers of Don Bosco, see the entry on *Volunteers of Don Bosco*.
- 15 “La Regola è la consigliera ufficiale che il Signore ci dà per guidarci in tutti I particolari della nostra vita ; essa impedisce che noi andiamo vagando a dritta e a sinistra fuori del retto cammino, e ci mena infallibilmente alla nostra mèta.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 25 December 1911, L.C., p. 64).

Sacred Heart

The Sacred Heart of Salesian origins

“Let us make every effort to instil in the hearts of our children a true devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to our good Mother Mary Help of Christians”, as Fr Albera, then Provincial in France, once recommended in hesitant French, in a handwritten circular to the rectors in his circumscription.¹ It was one of his watchwords. Between 1870 and 1950, but especially under the terms of office of Fr Rua and Fr Albera (1888–1921), devotion to the Sacred Heart flourished in the Salesian Family, as it did in the Catholic world. The building and financing by Don Bosco of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome in 1880–1887 could only encourage this among the Salesians. At the consecration of this church in May 1887, Provincial Albera had the following written: “Long live the Sacred Heart! The Sacred Heart” at the top of his French handwritten circulars.²

At that time, Salesian devotion to the Sacred Heart always referred to the image of the visions of Margaret Mary Alacoque. The *Il Giovane provveduto* from of Don Bosco’s lifetime explained what he believed to be the “origin” and “motives” of devotion to the Sacred Heart.³ The Christian practises this devotion, we read among other things, because Jesus presented his heart as the seat of his affections, because this heart symbolises his immense charity, first demonstrated by the wound from the spear, and also because the sight of it encourages us to meditate on Christ’s sufferings and express our gratitude to him.

To comment on devotion to the Sacred Heart in Salesian origins, let us consider two sermons by Fr Rua: an instruction from around 1876 on “the Sacred Heart of Jesus”, during a spiritual retreat probably intended for young lay people,⁴ and an exhortation entitled *Ignem veni mittere in terram*, delivered to Salesians in the last years of the century.⁵ Fr Rua’s Sacred Heart was a very simple one, like that of the contemporary *Il Giovane provveduto*, the subject of the apparition at Paray-le-Monial to Margaret Mary Alacoque, i.e. an open and pierced heart crowned with thorns and surmounted by a cross, from which came a bush of flames, in other words, a heart of suffering and love.⁶ The preacher insisted: this Jesus himself had revealed his heart in this attitude. And he recounted the apparition to Margaret Mary on 27 December 1674 in her Visitation

monastery, while she was in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Before her eyes, rays of light streamed from the heart of Jesus crystal-clear, and the lance wound of the crucifixion was clearly visible.

Fr Rua drew some lessons from this picture in his own way. The unquenchable furnace of the heart invited the retreatants to soften their own hearts in order to make them love Jesus. He interpreted the crown of thorns encircling the heart. It was, he said, the mass of affronts to him by “infidels”, “heretics” and “especially bad Christians” through their disobedience, anger, evil thoughts, attachment to riches and honours, their criticism (*mormorazioni*), deception, theft and their failure to observe Friday abstinence. He distinguished two thorns pointed out by Mary to the shepherds at La Salette “thirty years before”: blasphemy and the profanation of feast days. The two bars of the cross meant indifference towards Jesus and sacrilegious communion. The lance had been driven through the heart by the scandal-mongers. The preacher marvelled at the extraordinary radiance of the heart of Jesus, a sign of his goodness and immense generosity. Delighted, he contemplated the flames of love that burst forth from it.

Ah, how good you are, Lord. Oh, most how kind you are! So, in spite of my unworthiness, in spite of the thorns with which we wounded your heart, despite the cross, despite the spear, you still want to shower us with gifts, to spread the benefits of your charity! Ah! My dear friends, let us resolve not only never again to torment (this heart), but to love it ardently, to place our hope in it and to compensate for scandals by our utmost zeal to set good example.⁷

Fr Rua’s sermon certainly did not ignore the love of God, symbolised by the heart. But he clearly emphasised the suffering of that heart. Forty years later, the Rector Major who succeeded him did not interpret the Sacred Heart of Margaret Mary any differently. Fr Albera wrote to his Salesian confreres,

By appearing to Blessed Margaret Alcoque, the divine Saviour wants to show her his heart surrounded by the instruments of his most sorrowful passion. The lance wound, from which came the last drops of his most precious blood mingled with a few drops of water, symbolises the mortal sins that pierced his heart in such great number and, according to Saint Paul, renewed the torments of the crucifixion, *rursum crucifigentes Filium Dei*. But in addition to this we also see on the image of the Sacred Heart a crown of very sharp thorns. What do they represent? According to what the good Jesus himself taught the Blessed, the thorns that crown his heart symbolise souls that are consecrated to his holy

service and committed by vow not to commit serious faults, yet do not show the desired care to correct their faults and fall back into them with great ease.⁸

Fr Rua's listener and Fr Albera's reader were ready to recite the "Chaplet of the Sacred Heart of Jesus" (*Corona al Sacro Cuore di Gesù*) intended, according to a formula of the time, to "console (this heart) for the outrages it receives in the Holy Eucharist from infidels, heretics and bad Christians",⁹ a prayer that had always been included in the *Il Giovane provveduto* as one of the practices for the visit to the Blessed Sacrament. It was to reappear in the booklet of Salesian prayers published in 1916 at the behest of Fr Albera and remained in force until the middle of the twentieth century.

The "fire" of Fr Rua's *Ignem veni mittere in terram* also emanated from the heart of Jesus, as it had appeared to Margaret Mary herself. Jesus came to bring to the world the fire of God's love and charity towards his neighbour" said our speaker. This fire inflamed the apostles, the martyrs, confessors and virgins. The prodigies of charity of all times are its effects. It also inflamed Don Bosco. At first glance, the difficulties he encountered seemed likely to extinguish it. But the flames of the heart of Jesus are not easily extinguished. To prove this, Fr Rua briefly retraced the stages in the history of his Congregation, when the fire of Salesian charity had spread throughout the world.¹⁰

In the spirit of Fr Rua, who had become Rector Major, the consecration to the Sacred Heart on the first day of the twentieth century (31 December 1900 – 1 January 1901) was to place the entire Salesian work in the most loving heart of Christ.¹¹ It was his and would take this into account more and more at its centre and wherever it was implanted. This was the image that the first century Salesians commonly had of the Sacred Heart of Jesus based on the vision of Paray-le-Monial: a radiant focus of God's saving love and a painful symbol of the attacks inflicted on it by sinners.

The instruction of 1900

The image won over simple hearts, which doubted neither the supernatural authenticity of this private revelation, nor the interpretation that was presented to them. Certainly, most members of the Salesian Family were content with it. But some would undoubtedly have liked stronger sustenance. Fr Rua tried to satisfy them. On the eve of his religious family's consecration to the Sacred Heart, when he invited every rector of every house throughout the world to imitate him, he enclosed a brief theological study (which he did

not sign) with the letter announcing the decision, entitled “Instruction on devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus”.¹²

The rather heavy “instruction” sought to demonstrate that devotion to the Sacred Heart, called non-traditional by its detractors, had existed since the birth of Christianity, that it was “the most sublime” of all devotions, that it was particularly useful to Christians, especially religious, and that the consecration announced by the rector could only produce abundant spiritual fruits. It ended with a brief presentation of the “practices” then recommended in honour of the Sacred Heart: the Nine Offices (First Fridays), the Guard of Honour, the Holy Hour, the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart and the Apostleship of Prayer.

The overall tone was scholastic. The author, with his gaze fixed on the vision of Paray-le-Monial, demonstrated the sublimity of devotion to the Sacred Heart through its object, its end and its motives. The object discerned was threefold: material, spiritual and “final”. Materially, it was the human heart of Jesus (the bodily organ) united necessarily with the divinity of the Word and, as such, adorable; on the spiritual level, the love of the heart of Jesus for mankind; and, finally, the very person of Jesus adored in his human heart. The fruits of this worship were obvious. The devotion to the heart of Jesus leads the faithful to return love for love. Their love is at once homage to Jesus, consolation of Jesus through good works and an imitation of the affections and sentiments of Jesus. The very love breathed out by the heart of Jesus, the desire of Jesus to teach and recommend it (allusion to Margaret Mary’s vision), the favours and graces that flow from it, and finally its relevance and timeliness in a time of religious coldness and indifference, could not but encourage the Christian to practise this devotion, the instruction of 1900 taught.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart in new times

Things took a turn for the worse in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the West at least, the rising generations of the mid-twentieth century found themselves uncomfortable with devotion to the Sacred Heart, as they then heard it preached. Those who were barely believers ridiculed it. For the fervent, the Sacred Heart of Paray-le-Monial filled them with hesitation. This devotion complicated things unnecessarily and was a barrier to approaching Christ. “We have no use for a sentimental, mawkish form of piety, good for Margaret Mary and perhaps for her time”, they exclaimed. In any case we are not bound to hold to the visions and revelations granted to a nun, however holy she may have been. The risks of the devotion she spread were

not lacking, as young people and adults of the time remarked: individualism, disguised self-seeking, the cultivation of facile nice feelings, a flagging of energies harmful to strong and optimistic action. Add to this representations that offended not only aesthetic sense, but simple good taste and, even more, the image that an enlightened faith has of the Son of God: statues and images of rare blandness, with a Christ with languid eyes, incomprehensible representations of an isolated bodily organ. The preaching that accompanied this devotion was maudlin. They presented a Christ who complains, but does our risen Jesus really need to be consoled?¹³

In such a context, the enthusiasm of devotees of the Sacred Heart inevitably waned, even within the Salesian Family. In the second half of the twentieth century, Salesian Superiors General no longer spoke about the Sacred Heart of Jesus. According to the index of his circulars, Fr Viganò was only interested in the Salesian and Roman church under this name, the centenary of which he marked in 1987. For him, this church was simply a sign of Don Bosco's love for the Pope.¹⁴ He therefore had nothing to say about the devotion that the church glorified.

It now fell within the common domain of the Church, where theologians were better able to place it. From the wounded heart girded with thorns contemplated by Margaret Mary outside the breast of Jesus, it moved, for the Salesian Family as for Catholicism, towards its source which is the pierced heart of Christ on the cross. To its advantage, devotion to the Sacred Heart, without denying Paray-le-Monial, became more purely gospel-based. It led to direct contemplation of the twin "mystery" of the water and blood that gushed forth from the wounded heart of the crucified Christ.¹⁵

Pius XII's encyclical *Haurietis Aquas in Gaudio* (15 May 1956) skilfully developed the theology of devotion to the heart of Christ as seen in this way. "Not until we have made a profound study of the primary and loftier nature of this devotion with the aid of the light of the divinely revealed truth," wrote the Pope, "can we rightly and fully appreciate its incomparable excellence and the inexhaustible abundance of its heavenly favours." The heart of Christ was the seat of his love, and it remains for us the most eloquent image of that love. To understand with all the saints "the breadth, the height and the depth" of the love of the Word towards his heavenly Father and towards men infected with the taint of their sins, we must remember that this love was not only spiritual, but also of the flesh. For at the moment of his Incarnation, the Word took on a real body with a real physical heart. The heart of Jesus was primarily involved in the Redeemer's mission of salvation which found its fulfilment on the cross when Jesus announced: "It is finished!" The ultimate image of this saving love, symbolised by the

heart, was and remains for us the wound opened in his side by the soldier's lance. The sight of the pierced heart of the Saviour naturally led people to honour this love that embraces the whole human race with ever greater ardour. The words of the prophet Zechariah, applied by John the Evangelist to Jesus crucified. "They will look on the one whom they have pierced" (Zechariah 12:10; John 19:37), are addressed to Christians of all times. They respond with a sincere love for mankind, their brothers and sisters who have also been redeemed on the cross.¹⁶ The message of Christ's wounded heart is therefore one of love, unity and peace.

In this spirit, at the end of the century John Paul II, himself a great devotee of the heart of Christ – in 1986, he made a pilgrimage to Paray-le-Monial – solemnly invited "all the faithful to piously pursue their devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, adapting it to our times," he said, "so that they may never cease to welcome its unfathomable riches, that they may respond to them joyfully by their brothers and sisters, thereby finding peace, entering into a process of reconciliation, and strengthening their hope of one day living in fullness with God in the company of all the saints." This Pope would have liked to pass on to future generations the desire to meet the Lord in their turn, to fix their gaze on Him, in order to respond to the common call to holiness and to discover their specific mission in the Church and in the world. He was reminded of Pius XII's encyclical. "This divine charity is the most precious gift of the Heart of Christ and of His Spirit" he said, and "is communicated to people so that they in turn may be witnesses of God's love."¹⁷

The consuming fire of Jesus' heart is a fire that gives rise to apostles. Devotion to the heart of Christ remained fruitful in the Church in times very different from those of Don Bosco, Fr Rua or Fr Albera. The Salesian Family, which rediscovered some of Fr Viganò's lessons on pastoral charity, over and above the very dated and long-forgotten explanations of another century, could once again be sensitive to devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

NOTES

- 1 Paul Albera, Circular to rectors, Marseille, 31 October 1886. Letter published in “Paolo Albera, premier provincial de France”, *Cahiers salésiens* 36, May 1996, p. 70.
- 2 See circulars on 5 and 17 May 1887, published *ibidem*, p. 81 and 84.
- 3 See, in Giovanni Bosco, *Opere edite XXXV*, the 1885 edition of the *Il Giovane provveduto*, pp. 119-120.
- 4 M. Rua, “Il S. Cuor di Gesù”, in a series of *Prediche per Esercizi*, quaderno 3, pp. 2-12, FdB 2895 C9 to D7, a sermon that makes reference to the apparition to Marie à La Salette “trent’anni or sono” dating back to 1876.
- 5 Under the opening sentence *Ignem veni mittere in terram*, outline of a sermon by Fr Rua, unpaginated folio, FdB 2912 C7-10. In it Fr Rua refers to Fr Giovanni Bonetti (+ 1891), which seems to place it in the 1890s.
- 6 Fr Rua began his instruction in 1876 thus: “Facciam la festa del S. Cuore di G. Bisognerà che ci tratteniamo a contemplarlo. Ognuno di voi vedendone l’imag. Lo riconosce tosto : viene sempre rappresentato sotto questa forma : un cuore che mette vampe di fiamme, circondato da una corona di spine, sormontato da una croce, squarciato da un lato per una cruda ferita.” (“Il S. Cuor di Gesù”, as cited, p. 2).
- 7 “Ah! quanto siete buono, o Signore, oh! quanto siete amab. O cuore dolciss. dunque malgrado la nostra indegn., malgr. le spine con cui abb. ferito il vs cuore, la croce, la lancia, voi voi. anc. ricolmarci di doni, sparg. i benef. eff. dalla vs car.! Ah! risolv., o cari, di non più angust. in ness. modo in awen., non solo, ma di amarlo ardentem., di riporre in 1. ns fid. e di compensarlo degli scandali dati con zelo viviss. di dar buon esempio ... ” (“Il S. Cuor di Gesù”, as cited, p. 12).
- 8 “Il Divin Salvatore apparendo alla Beata Margherita Alacoque, volle mostrarle il suo Sacro Cuore adorno degli strumenti della sua dolorosissima Passione. La ferita della lancia, da cui uscirono le ultime gocce del suo preziosissimo Sangue, miste ad alcune stille di acqua, è il simbolo dei peccati mortali che così numerosi trafiggono il suo Cuore, rinnovandogli, come afferma San Paolo, i tormenti della crocifissione, rursum crucifigentes Filium Dei. Ma oltre a questa larga ferita, noi vediamo ancora nell’immagine del Sacro Cuore una corona di pungentissime spine. E queste che cosa rappresentano ? Secondo ciò che il buon Gesù ha insegnato alla Beata, le spine ond’è coronato il suo Cuore sono il simbolo di quelle anime le quali, quantunque siasi consacrate al suo santo servizio, e impegnate con voto a non commettere gravi mancanze, non mostrano tuttavia la dovuta premura nel correggersi dei loro difetti, e vi ricadono perciò con molta facilità.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 25 June 1917, Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus L.C., p. 232).
- 9 “Intendete di recitar questa Corona al Divin Cuore di Gesù Cristo per risarcirlo degli oltraggi, che riceve nella SS. Eucaristia dagli infedeli, dagli eretici e dai cattivi Cristiani”, said the *Giovane provveduto*, 1885 ed., p. 120.
- 10 “Il S. Cuor di Gesù”, loc. cit., pp. 2-12.
- 11 See, on this, the entry on *Consecration*.

- 12 “Istruzione sulla divozione al Sacro Cuore di Gesù”, published after M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 21 November 1900, in L.C., pp. 228-254.
- 13 These observations have been taken literally from the small contemporary work by Salesian Joseph Aubry, *Le mystère du coeur transpercé*, Paris, Fleuras, 1961, pp. 12-14, which itself referred to various surveys carried out among young Christians at the time.
- 14 See E. Viganò, Letters to Salesians, 3 September 1985, *Atti* 315, p. 8; and 7 June 1981, *Atti* 322, p. 27.
- 15 “*Le mystère du sang qui jaillit du Coeur blessé*”, “*Le mystère de l'eau vive qui jaillit du Coeur blessé*”, titles of the two main chapters of the fervent work by Fr Joseph Aubry, cited above no. 13.
- 16 Pius XII, *Haurietis Aquas in Gaudio*, passim.
- 17 John Paul II, Message to Archbishop Louis-Marie Billé for the centenary of the consecration of humankind to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, 4 June 1999. The Pope borrowed his final observation from *Haurietis Aquas*, no. III.

Saints

A world of heroes “made according to God's heart”

Don Bosco's spiritual world was populated by saints, in whom he undoubtedly saw powerful intercessors, but also, and probably above all, models to be reproduced by Christians concerned about their progress in perfection.¹

The saints point to heaven and Christ. They say that God is wonderful. The most extraordinary of them, “made according to God's heart, bring together such a world of virtues, knowledge, courage and heroic deeds that they clearly show us how marvellous God is in his saints. *Mirabilis Deus in sanctis suis* [God is wonderful in his saints]”, Don Bosco once exclaimed in the introduction of a panegyric for Philip Neri delivered before an audience of priests.² Christians find in them heroes of every age and condition, whom they can imitate in all their states of life. Admiration for the saints, God's masterpieces, must be transformed into a desire to imitate them. *Si ille, cur non ego?*³ For the edification of his readers, Don Bosco wrote or presented works on Luigi Comollo, St Vincent de Paul, St Martin, Blessed Mary of the Angels, Blessed Catherine of Racconigi, and so on. Edification even dominates his biographies, which one might think were more doctrinal, such as those of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. At the end of the latter, Don Bosco candidly admitted:

There is no need to speak of his (Saint Paul's) virtues, given that everything we have presented so far is nothing but a collection of heroic virtues which he made shine forth in every place, at every time and with every kind of person...⁴

Finally, there is what he said in his preface to the life of Mary of the Angels:

In short, you will find, reader, in the life of Blessed Mary of the Angels a perfect model of virtue and holiness, suitable nevertheless for imitation by every Christian according to his own state. With all this in mind, we thought it appropriate to publish in the *Letture cattoliche* the present summary of the life of this remarkable spouse of Jesus Christ, to provide our readers with an opportune means of deriving spiritual benefit from it.⁵

This conclusion applies to a whole series of talks and books by Don Bosco, uniformly intended – whether we like it or not – for the edification of their listeners and readers.

The lives of the saints help us to reproduce in ourselves the holiness of God, which we manifest to the world. We understand this as the gospel.

Saint Francis de Sales once asked an archbishop friend of his, “Can we not make use of the stories of the Saints? But, my God, is there anything so useful, anything so beautiful? But also, what is the life of the Saints other than the Gospel put into practice? There is no more difference between the written Gospel and the lives of the Saints than between notated music and sung music.”⁶

In this respect too, the great disciples followed their masters and lived and taught in the light and imitation of the saints. Fr Rua left at least seventeen sermon outlines, most of them panegyrics, on the saints: Saint Joseph, for whom he felt a real predilection, Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, Saint George, Saint Benedict, Saint Augustine, Saint Cecilia and Saint Fortunata.⁷

On the day of his first Mass (24 December 1882), Fr Philip Rinaldi resolved never to let a year go by without reading a life of a saint.⁸ As Rector Major, he insisted on celebrating an “Aloysian” year (1926–1927) for the second centenary of the canonisation of Aloysius Gonzaga.⁹ He himself placed each day of his week under the protection of a saint from the Salesian Family: on Sunday Don Bosco, Monday Fr Rua, Tuesday Dominic Savio, Wednesday Mother Mary Mazzarello, Thursday Andrea Beltrami, Friday Augustus Czartoryski, and Saturday Sister Teresa Valsé.¹⁰

The enduring devotion to the saints

Devotion to the saints, starting with those of the Salesian Family, did not wane in any way during the second century of the Salesian Family. Far from it. Following the canonisations of Mother Mary Mazzarello (1951) and Dominic Savio (1954), the beatifications of Fr Michael Rua (1972), Bishop Louis Versiglia and Fr Callistus Caravario (1983), of Laura Vicuña (1988), of Fr Philip Rinaldi (1990), Mother Mary Maddalena Morano (1994) and the Polish martyr Jozef Kowalski (1999) have encouraged it.¹¹ The celebrations marking the centenary of his death (1988) strengthened devotion to Don Bosco, as Fr Viganò remarked at the end of the celebrations.¹² In 1995, the Common Identity Card of the Salesian Family devoted a long article to “the memory of the saints of our Family and recourse to them”, which in itself is a short essay on devotion to the saints. “A wealth of inspiration is to be found in our Saints... priests, layfolk and consecrated members; those committed to education,

and evangelization; those battling to build a better society – and even heroic martyrs, find in our saints a rich inspiration”, it states among other things.¹³

Previously, various abuses had been detrimental to the veneration of the saints. An insufficiently enlightened devotion had allowed them to unduly invade the calendar of the Catholic Church to the detriment of worship of the true God and the one Lord Jesus Christ. The authorities remedied the disorder by severe pruning. But shortly afterwards, John Paul II proceeded with a multitude of beatifications and canonisations which, at least in the local calendars, filled in some of the gaps. In so doing, the Pope was once again encouraging devotion to the saints, which many would gladly have got rid of. For their part, with the canonisation procedure having been simplified, the individual Churches discovered martyrs, confessors and virgins in their spiritual heritage whom they could more easily glorify.

At the same time, the Council’s thinking explained and justified devotion to the saints. The saints are intercessors for the living, it taught. The inhabitants of heaven help to strengthen the whole Church in holiness. Admitted to the heavenly homeland and present before the Lord (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:8), through Him, with Him and in Him, the saints never cease to intercede for the living before God the Father. The saints offer the merits acquired on earth through Christ Jesus, the only mediator between God and men (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5). They serve the Lord in all things and complete in their flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ on behalf of his body, the Church (cf. Colossians 1:24). Their solicitude is of the greatest help to the weakness of human beings. The Church therefore fervently honours them and confidently seeks the help of their intercession.

The Church distinguishes between saints who chose to more closely emulate the virginity and poverty of Christ, and other saints whose brilliant exercise of Christian virtues and graces from God has recommended them to the devotion and imitation of the faithful. The Church takes great pleasure in exalting each one of them in the eyes of the living. The saints, moulded by the gospel, bear witness to its power. Contemplating the lives of people who have faithfully followed Christ encourages us to seek the City to come (cf. Hebrews 13:14 and 11:10) and teaches us to know the secure way among the vicissitudes of this world to perfect union with Christ. In this way God, who manifests his face and presence in them through a bright light, speaks to human beings and offers them a sign of his kingdom to which we are strongly drawn, having so great a cloud of witnesses over us (cf. Hebrews 12:1).¹⁴ The story of the saints, these “masterpieces of God”, is “fascinating”, wrote Fr Vecchi. The members of the Salesian Family continue

to meditate on them. Their eminent holiness is a gift of the Holy Spirit to all the baptised, which they need to develop within themselves.¹⁵

Finally, love of the saints is beneficial to the living. Communion with them unites us to Christ, from whom flows, as from their source and head, all grace and the very life of the people of God. It is therefore infinitely recommendable to love these friends and co-heirs of Jesus Christ, these brothers and sisters and these worthy benefactors, the saints of heaven. It is good “to invoke them ardently, to have recourse to their prayers, their help and their assistance, to obtain from God, through his Son Jesus Christ the only Redeemer and Saviour, the benefits we need.”¹⁶ Every genuine testimony of love shown by us to those in heaven is directed towards Christ, the “crown of all the saints”, and through him to God, who is wonderful in his saints and is magnified in them. Visiting the saints who dwell in heaven, if it is conceived in the full light of faith, far from diminishing the adoration rendered to God the Father through Christ and in the Spirit, enriches it generously.¹⁷

The saints, brothers and sisters of humanity¹⁸

Don Bosco dreamed of the day when his pupil Dominic Savio would be canonised. He did not systematically place the saints in inaccessible heights. When he published his biography, this teenager was spiritually alive, as he had been in the past, in his humble school in Turin. Dominic Savio gave the idea to Michael Magone, who came to the school after his death.

At the dawn of the third millennium, we like to turn saints into fellow travellers, companions on the way. The saints we love the most and invoke today have opened up spiritual paths that are paths of humanity. Commemorating their history is an opportunity to give new impetus to the living, to deepen their faith in a way that is consistent with their lives. The witnesses to God that the new times are looking for are people like Don Bosco, Dominic Savio, Mother Mazzarello, in other words, people who are familiar with the Spirit of Christ in the ordinary world.¹⁹ Instinctively, our contemporaries see them as discreet prophets of a new humanity, who announce in simplicity the world to come. The saints, these adventurers of God, have found the extraordinary in the ordinary. The fact that they have made gold out of lead, light out of the dullness of the day, love out of the routine of week after week of repeated tasks – all of this makes them, in our eyes, true alchemists of the everyday. Their existence is a call to emerge from mediocrity and rediscover the youthful spirit of the beginnings. As

with Don Bosco and Francis de Sales, the saints we love tell us that the Gospel is not pure utopia. Martyrs such as Father Jozef Kowalski, after years of ordinary life, proclaimed it in the most dramatic circumstances.²⁰

NOTES

- 1 Here I am repeating a number of considerations on “les saints modèles de perfection” borrowed from my book *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, Paris, 1967, pp. 105-107.
- 2 “Ve ne sono poi alcuni, fatti secondo il cuor di Dio, i quali racchiudono tale un complesso di virtù, di scienza, di coraggio e di eroiche operazioni, che ci fanno altamente palese quanto Iddio sia meraviglioso nei santi suoi: Mirabilis Deus in sanctis suis.” (Sermon at Alba, 1868, in G.B. Lemoyne, MB., vol. IX, p. 214).
- 3 “If him, why not me?” See G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico ...*, Turin, 1859, p. 9.
- 4 “Non occorre dire alcuna cosa delle virtù di lui, giacché quel tanto che abbiamo finora esposto non è altro che una tessitura delle virtù eroiche, le quali in ogni luogo, in ogni tempo, e con ogni genere di persona egli fece risplendere.” (G. Bosco, *Vita di S. Paolo apostolo ...*, Turin, Paravia, 1857, p. 163).
- 5 “Tu insomma, o lettore, troverai nella vita della Beata Maria degli Angeli un perfetto modello di virtù e di santità, tale nondimeno da potersi imitare da ogni cristiano secondo il proprio stato. Ed è in vista di tutto ciò, che si è stimato di pubblicare eziandio nelle Letture cattoliche il presente compendio della vita di questa inclita sposa di Gesù Cristo, per così porgere ai nostri lettori il mezzo opportuno di trame spirituale vantaggio” (G. Bosco, Anonymous Preface, *Vita della Beata Maria degli Angeli, carmelitana scalza*, Turin, tip. Dell’Oratorio di S. Franc, di Sales, 1865, p. 4-5.)
- 6 Francis de Sales, letter to Archbishop André Frémyot, archbishop of Bourges, Sales, 5 October 1604, in *Oeuvres*, vol. XII, p. 306.
- 7 Sermons identified after a cursory investigation in the notebooks or papers of Fr Rua reproduced in FdB 2897 E 5 to 2898 B3 ; 2901 A3-C1; 2908 C11-E2; 2909 C12 to 2910 A12 (ten outlines on Saint Joseph); 2910 DH to 2911 C8; 2933 B4-7; 2937 A3-8.
- 8 See E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Sac. Filippo Rinaldi...*, SEI, 1948, p. 43.
- 9 Philip Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians, 24 September 1926, Atti 36, pp. 473-475.
- 10 From a handwritten prayer dated Turin, October 1926, and beginning with the words: “Voi tutti, benedetti e privilegiati del Paradiso, vegliate sopra l’Istituto e sopra il povero Superiore, e degnatevi di stare alla loro custodia”, that Fr Zerbino reproduced in the acts of his informative canonisation process, ad XV^{um}, *Summarium*, p. 420.
- 11 The appalling martyrdom of Father Jozef Kowalski (at the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration and extermination camps in 1943) gave Fr Juan Vecchi the opportunity to write a letter on holiness in the Salesian family: “Santità e martirio all’alba del terzo millenio”, 29 June 1999, Atti 368, pp. 3-36.
- 12 “La devozione a don Bosco santo”, in E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 24 May 1989, Atti 330, pp. 40-42.
- 13 “... Sacerdoti, laici e consacrati, giovani ed adulti della Famiglia, membri impegnati in educazione e in evangelizzazione, costruttori del quotidiano e apostoli chiamati all’eroismo del martirio trovano ricchezza di ispirazione tra i nostri Santi...” (“La memoria e il ricorso ai Santi della Famiglia”, *Carta di comunione*, art. 38).
- 14 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 49-50.

- 15 Juan Vecchi, "I Santi, capolavori di Dio", in the *Bollettino salesiano*, March 1998, pp. 2-3.
- 16 Pius XII, encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (29 June 1943), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 35 (1943), p. 216.
- 17 Ideas taken mainly from *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 50-51.
- 18 Title of the magazine *Christus* 172, October 1996. The thoughts here are partially borrowed from the editorial in this issue.
- 19 See Teresio Bosco, *Famiglia salesiana, Famiglia di santi. Profili dei Santi, Beati, Venerabili e Servi di Dio della Famiglia Salesiana*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1997.
- 20 See, in the previously quoted letter of Fr Vecchi "Santità e martirio ...", pp. 20-27, the story of Father Jozef Kowalski's final year...

Salesian Family

The Salesian Family at the origins¹

Don Bosco always believed and stated that the “Salesian Family” came about with his work in Turin around 1844, some fifteen years before his male religious society (1859). According to him, it was already “a sort of congregation”, whose members, without taking vows, helped each other and promised to work under his guidance in the work.² Admittedly, in so saying, he was foreshadowing a very unstructured association. Nevertheless, here we are at the birth of the reality of the “Salesian Family”, an organised community linked to him and his successors.

In the 1840s and 1850s, Don Bosco was surrounded by clergy and lay people, men and women alike, who took part in his apostolate to a greater or lesser extent in his apostolic work among the young Piedmontese in his suburban house. Don Bosco had hired the most dedicated ones for evening classes (reading, writing, singing, basic arithmetic and the Italian language); or to teach catechism, usually around midday during the winter. The women sewed, washed, patched and provided linen and clothing to boys that were often dirty and in rags.³ Then, in 1859, “the congregation was divided into two categories, or rather into two families”, Don Bosco explained. Those who were free and decided to live together at Valdocco in Turin; while the others, the “externs”, remained at home, while maintaining links with the “work of the oratories”.⁴ From then on, there would be, on the one hand, the Congregation of Salesian religious and, on the other, what would soon be called the Union of Salesian Cooperators. The “Salesian Family” was beginning to evolve.

The Salesian Family born of the Special General Chapter (1971)

Successively, the Salesian Family saw the emergence of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1872, in 1876 the Union of Salesian Cooperators, in 1908 the association of Past Pupils of Don Bosco, and in 1916 the society destined to become the Volunteers of Don Bosco. In the course of the twentieth century, religious societies were created. Because Salesian priests or bishops had created them, they claimed to be in the Salesian spirit of Don Bosco. A Salesian Family was alive and well, albeit unrecognised. For its boundaries remained unclear. Should it include “past pupils of the Salesians” and

various small Congregations in the wake of Don Bosco? And Salesian opinion lost interest. Most religious doubted the mere existence of a Salesian Family. Moreover, there was no defined structure between its members. The effectiveness of the whole suffered. In the aftermath of Vatican II, attention to the mission turned people's minds to this family, whose members, without knowing each other, were working in the same direction. What did they make of Don Bosco's principle, according to which a rope with many threads is always stronger than a single one?

In 1971, the General Chapter convened in the wake of Vatican II began to remedy an increasingly obvious deficiency. It devoted a special study to the Salesian Family. "The Salesian Family has been a fact since Don Bosco", it began. As early as 1841, his very consistent intention was to bring together all those who agreed to work with him in a vast group. Family unity is the result of the same baptismal consecration, a common mission, a common Salesian spirit and an authentic fraternity. Communion in the same basic vocation requires a minimum of institutional unity, which favours intercommunication and collaboration between the various groups making up this family⁵ A statute was thus sketched out, which would soon be incorporated into an article of the Constitutions. It was then that the Salesian Family was officially born, as Fr Vecchi noted twenty-five years later.⁶

The usual scepticism about its vitality faded. A special department watched over the Salesian Family in the Salesian General Council in Rome. Every year since 1973, a week of spirituality, most often organised by this department was devoted to the study of a family issue: the preventive system, young people, women, vocations, spiritual direction, spiritual exercises, the laity, social commitment, education for love... A common way of thinking was taking shape. We were getting used to working together. The Salesian Constitutions, renewed in 1984, recalled that Don Bosco was the source of a vast movement of people working in various ways for the salvation of young people, that the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Association of Salesian Cooperators, founded by him, pursued his mission according to their particular vocations, and that other groups had joined after his death. All of this, the document acknowledged, constituted the "Salesian Family".⁷ It was no longer possible to ignore its reality.

The Salesian Family in Fr Viganò's time

The Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò (1978–1995), whose first circular was entitled, significantly, "Mary renews the Salesian Family",⁸ immediately placed the Salesian

Family at the heart of his concerns. He devoted an entire letter to it, saying that it was a precious legacy from Don Bosco, that this legacy required fidelity on the part of his religious sons, that Don Bosco had established a spiritual family unified and enlivened by his charisma, and finally that there was no question of resting on the glorious past of the male Congregation.⁹ Fr Viganò never missed an opportunity to talk about the Salesian Family in his letters, whether it was the Strenna on the promotion of the laity (1986) or on communion in the family (1987), the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello (1987), the celebration of the centenary of the death of Don Bosco (1988), the beatification of Fr Rinaldi (1990), the message from the Synod of Bishops on Consecrated Life (1994), etc.... He kept coming back to it.¹⁰

However, the Salesian Family was extended by the affiliation of various societies founded by Salesians: the Hijas de los Sagrados Corazones de Jesús y de María in 1981, the Salesiane Oblate del Sacro Cuore in 1983, the Apostole della Sacra Famiglia in 1984, the Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki in 1986, the Missionary Sisters of Mary Help of Christians in 1986, and six more between between 1987 and 1992. Applicants were required to meet certain membership criteria. They had to demonstrate a certain number of values: a Salesian vocation signified by adherence to Don Bosco's charism, participation in the Salesian mission among young people and the general public, sharing the spirit and method of education proper to the Salesian Family, an evangelical life nourished by the "Salesian" spirit, as well as a clear desire to be part of the family and to live in fraternity and collaboration, recognising the Salesian Rector Major as the father and centre of unity.¹¹

The Common Identity Card (1995)

Finally, the overall set of Statutes of the Salesian Family, which was still lacking, saw the light of day, the results of a long process of collaboration between its various groups. The emphasis was placed on "communion". Shortly before his death, on 31 January 1995 Fr Viganò, presented this document entitled, in Italian "*Carta di Comunione nella Famiglia Salesiana di Don Bosco*".¹²

"The Holy Spirit" said the charter, "has raised up the Salesian Family, through Don Bosco, so that it may the better carry out the mission with which it has been entrusted." And it briefly defined it: "The Salesian Family is a collection of baptised and consecrated persons which, through the unique nature of its particular gift, places itself at the service of the mission of the Church, the Body of Christ, the universal sacrament

of salvation.”¹³ Communion, the reciprocal exchange of gifts, was the justification for the existence of this family. Indeed, in a Church which is a communion, the Salesian family manifests “one heart and one soul”, realising experiences of fraternal and apostolic communion in the service of the mission and for the mutual enrichment of groups and individuals” of which it is made up.¹⁴

The charter had thirty-eight articles divided into five chapters: 1) The grace of communion in the Salesian Family, 2) Participation in the Salesian Family, 3) Characteristic traits of the Salesian countenance, 4) Formation of an active fraternity, 5) Services of communion.

Spiritual considerations abounded in this charter. One article, in which some of Fr Viganò’s convictions came to the fore, spoke of the central place of Don Bosco in family spirituality (art. 7). Don Bosco, it said, was “a giant of the spirit” (*gigante dello spirito*), who left as his legacy a rich and well-defined spiritual heritage. He was the initiator of a genuine school of apostolic spirituality. He is an essential point of reference for those who, through a particular impulse of the Spirit, feel called to share his destiny and mission in different states of life, each at its own level. Belonging is built around a unifying centre, which is a person, a criterion and a style. The person is Don Bosco. The Salesian Family is inspired by the humanism of Saint Francis de Sales, lived out in a particular way by Don Bosco. “What binds the different Groups and their members into a kind of spiritual kinship is Don Bosco, who is truly the Father of all.”¹⁵ The third chapter of this charter, with a commented series of particularly significant “words” of Don Bosco and a series of “characteristic traits” of the common spirit, was in its own way a compendium of Salesian spirituality.¹⁶

The union in the family is not only spiritual, but also juridical. It is not enough to invoke the patronage of Don Bosco to live in family unity. Belonging to a group made up of many groups, while respecting their originality and autonomy, requires a vital centre capable of maintain a relationship with the founder, the common spirit and the same mission. The guaranteeing unity was, in Don Bosco’s mind, the Rector Major of the Salesians. All the groups of the Salesian Family therefore recognise that the Rector Major who succeeds him has a threefold ministry of unity: the Rector Major is Don Bosco’s successor, the Father of all, and the centre of unity in the family.¹⁷

NOTES

- 1 Some general problems of the “Salesian Family” (its early history, its emergence at the time of the special General Chapter of the Salesians, fundamental traits of the spirit, the place of the Rector Major in the family) were studied at a colloquium devoted to it in Luxembourg in 1973. See: *La Famiglia salesiana*, coll. *Colloqui sulla vita salesiana* 5, Torino-Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1974, 351 pages.
- 2 “... Onde per conservare l’unità di spirito e disciplina, da cui dipende il buon esito degli oratorii, fin dall’anno 1844 alcuni ecclesiastici si radunarono a formare una specie di congregazione aiutandosi a vicenda e coll’esempio e coll’istruzione (...) Essi non fecero alcun voto propriamente detto ; tutto si limitò di fere una semplice promessa di non occuparsi se non in quelle cose che il loro superiore giudicava di maggior gloria di Dio e vantaggio dell’anima propria. Riconoscevano il loro superiore nella persona del Sac. Bosco Giovanni.” (*Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales*, unpublished ms, around 1858, p. 5).
- 3 See, for example, Don Bosco’s account entitled: *Storia dei Cooperatori Salesiani*, published in the proceedings of the *La Famiglia salesiana* symposium, pp. 341-343, which was published in *Bibliofilo Cattolico o Bollettino Salesiano mensuale*, ann. III, n. 6 [September 1877].
- 4 “ ... ma in quell’anno [1858] la Congr. fu divisa in due categorie o piuttosto in due famiglie. Coloro che erano liberi di se stessi e ne sentivano vocazione, si raccolsero in vita comune, dimorando nell’edificio che fu sempre avuto per casa madre e centro della pia associazione [...]. Gli altri ovvero gli esterni continuarono a vivere in mezzo al secolo in seno alle proprie famiglie, ma proseguirono a promuovere l’opera degli Oratorii ...” (*Cooperatori Salesiani*, handwritten ms by Don Bosco, published by E. Ceria, MB XI, pp. 85-86).
- 5 “Le prospettive della “famiglia” salesiana oggi”, in CGS/SCG nos. 151-177.
- 6 Juan Edmundo Vecchi, “La Famiglia Salesiana compie venticinque anni”, *Atti* 358, January-March 1997, pp. 3-41.
- 7 Here is the article as finally formulated in 1984 : “Da Don Bosco trae origine un vasto movimento di persone che, in vari modi, operano per la salvezza della gioventù. Egli stesso, oltre la Società di san Francesco di Sales, fondò l’Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice e l’Associazione dei Cooperatori salesiani che, vivendo nel medesimo spirito e in comunione fra loro, continuano la missione da lui iniziata, con vocazioni specifiche diverse. Insieme a questi gruppi e ad altri nati in seguito formiamo la Famiglia salesiana. In essa, per volontà del Fondatore, abbiamo particolari responsabilità : mantenere l’unità dello spirito e stimolare il dialogo e la collaborazione fraterna per un reciproco arricchimento e una maggiore fecondità apostolica. Gli Exallievi ne fanno parte per l’educazione ricevuta. La loro appartenenza diviene più stretta quando si impegnano a partecipare alla missione salesiana nel mondo.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 5).
- 8 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, “Maria rinnova la Famiglia salesiana”, 25 March 1978, *Atti* 289, January-June 1978, pp. 3-35.
- 9 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians, 24 February 1982, *Atti* 304, April-June 1982, pp. 5-20.
- 10 See, in the Index of his circulars, the entry *Famiglia salesiana*, pp. 1667-1668.

- 11 See G. Nicolussi, “Riconoscimento di appartenenza alla Famiglia Salesiana”, *Atti* 363, April-June 1998, pp. 50-57.
- 12 *Carta di comunione nella Famiglia salesiana di Don Bosco*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1996, 50 pages. The French translation printed in Rome (ed. SDB) in April 1996 includes an appendix with a well-documented list of Salesian Family groups, updated in October 1995. [Tr note: the English translation of the title was poor: “Common Identity Card”. At the very least it should have been called a “Charter”].
- 13 “Lo Spirito Santo ha suscitato la Famiglia salesiana, attraverso Don Bosco, affinché meglio si compisse la missione a lui affidata. La Famiglia salesiana è un insieme di battezzati e di consacrati che, con l’originalità del proprio dono, si pongono al servizio della missione della Chiesa, Corpo di Cristo, sacramento universale di salvezza.” (*Carta di comunione*, art. 4).
- 14 *Carta di comunione*, art 6.
- 15 “La Famiglia salesiana si ispira all’umanesimo di San Francesco di Sales, rivissuto in modo peculiare da Don Bosco. Ciò che lega i differenti gruppi e i loro membri in una Famiglia è una specie di parentela spirituale in Don Bosco, che è veramente il Padre di tutti.” (*Carta di comunione*, art. 7).
- 16 This chapter, entitled “Characteristic traits of the Salesian countenance”, has two sections : “A. “Parole” particolarmente significative di Don Bosco”, “B. Elementi portanti del comune spirito” (Op. cit., pp. 18-34)
- 17 *Carta di comunione*, art. 9.

Salesian spirit

The meaning of this expression

First of all, we need to agree on the meaning given here to the expression “Salesian spirit”. ‘Salesian’ derives from the word ‘Sales’, the second element of the compound name Francis de Sales. The Salesian spirit can therefore quite legitimately refer to the spirit of Saint Francis de Sales, as expressed, for example, in the work *L'Esprit de Bienheureux François de Sales* published between 1639 and 1641 under the name of the bishop of Belley, Jean-Pierre Camus. In fact, for us it is something quite different.¹

We are moving from the individual to the group. By “general spirit” we mean “social spirit”, or “national spirit”, the fund of ideas and feelings that predominate in a given society. It comes to the fore in times of nationalist exaltation, whether of sporting or warlike origin. In these circumstances, not all the inhabitants of the nation concerned necessarily share the same ideas and feelings. Some may condemn them but the mass (or the group that manipulates it) imposes them. Fundamentally, particular societies usually have specific aims. The spirit tends to “inform” members’ behaviour and give it meaning. This is the “company spirit” which can evolve and which the senior managers usually strive to maintain. Finally, created for very specific reasons with models, rules, spiritualities, structures and ritual gestures handed down from generation to generation, religious societies necessarily have very distinctive “spirits”. Experience shows this to be true. The spirit of Benedictine communities differs from the spirit of Dominican communities, the spirit of Capuchin communities differs from that of Carthusian communities and the spirit of monasteries of Poor Clares differs from that of communities of Daughters of Charity. If it has remained what it is, the world that has come from Don Bosco can only have, like other religious societies, a spirit of its own. Because the societies of men, women and cooperators are called Salesian, this spirit has been called the “Salesian spirit”. The expression “Salesian spirit”, therefore, does not as one might think, refer to a mentality dependent on Saint Francis de Sales, but the “fund of ideas and feelings” which gives a form of its own to the organic community of Don Bosco’s followers, with the religious societies of Salesians and Salesian Sisters at its centre.

The exhortations of Fr Rua and Fr Albera

The Salesian spirit existed before language, which is always inadequate, took hold of it. It was first and foremost the spirit of Don Bosco, transmitted by osmosis rather than by speech. In the Salesian world, the spirit was always considered a precious deposit. Loyalty to the original communities (Valdocco or Mornese) made up for long explanations. Under Don Bosco's immediate successors, an extensive information network (personal letters and circulars, *Bollettino Salesiano*) enabled the centres to guide and redirect the confreres according to the Salesian spirit.

But mistakes, weaknesses, the pressure of circumstances and influences inevitably changed the spirit of the society that resulted from Don Bosco. It could not only evolve, but change. During his lifetime, Don Bosco had already regretted certain deviations in the application of his educational system. A number of schools were no longer called anything more than "Don Bosco houses". Eight years after the founder's death, Fr Rua also became concerned. He reminded his religious what fidelity to the spirit demanded of them:

Each of us has the strict duty to possess the spirit [of the congregation] and to live the Salesian life... Let us devote all our efforts and care to giving our way of thinking, speaking and acting a truly Salesian form. Let us beg Mary Help of Christians and Saint Francis de Sales to obtain for us the grace that whoever visits our houses will immediately notice that they breathe a distinctly Salesian atmosphere and that wherever we are, we are immediately recognised as sons of Don Bosco.²

Without using the expression, he wanted every centre and every member of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales to allow themselves to be totally "informed" (in thought, word and deed) by a spirit that we call "Salesian". This was to be perceptible at first sight to the visitor.

Fr Rua briefly explained to the religious how to develop this spirit within themselves. Living Salesian lives, he wrote in the same letter, consists of working, particularly in the service of young people, in the spirit and according to the system of Don Bosco, who was "imbued with gentleness and kindness." Whoever often speaks of Don Bosco and recounts the edifying features of his "life, so beautiful, so active and so holy", bears witness to an authentically Salesian interior life. The Salesian at heart reads and publicises the publications of his society, especially the *Bollettino Salesiano*; and he promotes the

associations created by Don Bosco.³ In Fr Rua's opinion, the Salesian spirit was forged in communities and in individuals through action as well as study.

At the end of his life, Fr Albera summed up in a few lines the characteristics of the Salesian spirit as he saw it. To the Salesians he wrote:

Let us always strive to preserve in ourselves in our communities and throughout our Institute, the spirit of work and zeal for the good of youth, the spirit of discipline and piety that is the bulwark of our vocation, the spirit of charity and gentleness which should cement ever more the cordial union between us and encourage other souls to generously join our ranks under the banner of Don Bosco.⁴

And we read under his signature or, at least, under his responsibility, in a contemporary series of Norms for Provincials on the Spiritual Direction of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians:

Let him (the Provincial) promote in every way the spirit of the Institute, which is a spirit of sacrifice, piety, holy cheerfulness, always preserving virtue and religious perfection. [...] (True moral progress) will be clearly manifested in the untiring, humble and disinterested activity on behalf of the children of the people, in the love of poverty and in the spirit of sacrifice which will be seen to flourish in all the communities of the good Sisters.⁵

The Salesian spirit defined at the end of the twentieth century

After the Vatican Council, religious were asked to define their identity clearly. Who were they? Until then, the Salesians had been content to describe themselves as members of a Congregation founded by Don Bosco. This was not enough. They set off in search of the spirit that set them apart from the rest of the congregational world. The Special General Chapter of 1971–1972 applied itself to this task, and not without pleasure, when it said that “our own style of thought and feeling, of living and activity, in putting into operation the specific vocation and mission that the Spirit does not cease to give us”; or, “the complex of the elements and values of the world of men and of the Christian mystery (before all else, the Gospel, the Church, the Kingdom of God ...), to which the sons of Don Bosco, gathering the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and by reason of their mission, are particularly sensitive, as much in their interior disposition as in their outward behaviour.”⁶

The new Salesian Constitutions, first *ad experimentum* (1972), then definitive (1984) sought to express the characteristics of this spirit in a special chapter entitled “The Salesian Spirit”. This chapter began by equating the spirit of the society with a “style of life and action” lived and transmitted by Don Bosco, characterised by pastoral charity and an apostolic impetus to seek souls and serve God alone (art. 10).⁷ The Salesian has Christ as his model (art. 11). They live in habitual union with God (art. 12), and love the Church “the people of God, the centre of unity and communion of all the forces working for the Kingdom” (art. 13).⁸ In the Salesian world, the predilection for young people (art. 14), loving-kindness (*amorevolezza*), a family spirit, optimism, an intense appetite for work, “temperance”, creativity and flexibility in action (art. 15-19). The immediate model for the Salesian is Don Bosco, who lived a spiritual and educational experience he called the Preventive System, a way of living and working that the Salesians adopted after him (art. 20-21).

The result seems average. Spirituality as such occupied an inordinate place in this description of a spirit of identity. An official commentary on this chapter of the Constitutions ingenuously admitted as much in a book printed in Rome in 1986.⁹ It may therefore be permissible to prefer the first – “certainly incomplete” – list of characteristics noted by the *Ratio fundamentalis* of 1985 after re-reading the Special General Chapter. These are:

the profound link between commitment to evangelisation and human promotion; preferential attention to poor young people and the working classes; a spirit of adaptation and creativity; catechetical sensitivity and simple, concrete piety; a particularly embodied presence, attentive to the human and religious values of local culture; a human and easy contact marked by evangelical optimism, which arouses sympathy and exerts a particular attraction for our proposal.¹⁰

These descriptions lack a unifying principle. Would it not be, in the tradition of Saint Francis de Sales, the master and model, a particular kind of “devout humanism” peculiar to a group of people devoted to the education of young people?

NOTES

- 1 Among the studies on the Salesian spirit, understood as the spirit of the Salesian Family, we can refer to the article by one of those involved in the Special General Chapter, who sought to define it in 1971: R. Frattallone, "I tratti fondamentali dello spirito salesiano elemento di unità nella Famiglia salesiana", in *La Famiglia salesiana*, Luxembourg 26-30 August 1973, *Colloqui sulla vita salesiana* 5, Torino-Leumann, Elle di Ci, 1974, pp. 223-266.
- 2 " ... Di qui ne viene per ciascun di noi di possederne (della congregazione) lo spirito e di vivere di vita Salesiana ... Rivolgiamo tutti i nostri sforzi ed i nostri studi a dare al nostro modo di pensare, di parlare e di operare una forma veramente Salesiana. Supplichiamo Maria Ausiliatrice e S. Francesco di Sales di ottenerci la grazia che chiunque visiti le nostre Case subito si avveda che in esse si respira un'atmosfera prettamente Salesiana, e che ovunque noi ci troviamo, subito siamo riconosciuti quali figli di Don Bosco." (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 29 January 1896 ; L.C., pp. 144-145).
- 3 " ... E' indizio di vita Salesiana il parlare soventi volte di Don Bosco, raccontando tratti edificanti della sua vita si bella, operosa e santa. E' vivere da Salesiano l'interessarsi di tutto quanto concerne la nostra Pia Società, il leggere con affetto e direi quasi con avidità le notizie che ne dà il Bollettino, e specialmente ascoltare con attenzione la lettura delle circolari dei Superiori colle spiegazioni e commenti che i Direttori si devono dar premura di farvi", etc. (M. Rua, *ibidem*, p. 144).
- 4 " ... Studiamoci di conservare sempre in noi, nelle nostre comunità, in tutto il nostro Istituto lo spirito di lavoro e di zelo per il bene della gioventù, lo spirito di disciplina e di pietà che è il baluardo della nostra vocazione, lo spirito di carità e di dolcezza che deve cementare ognor più la cordiale unione tra di noi, e attrarre altre anime a unirsi generosamente alle nostre file sotto la bandiera di D. Bosco." (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 10 February 1921; L.C., p. 371).
- 5 "Promuova (l'Ispettore) in ogni maniera lo spirito dell'Istituto, che è spirito di sacrificio, di pietà, di santa gioialità, salva sempre la virtù e la perfezione religiosa. [...] (Il vero progresso morale) si manifesterà chiaramente nell'attività instancabile, umile e disinteressata a prò delle fanciulle del popolo, nell'amore della povertà e nello spirito di sacrificio, che si vedranno fiorire in tutte le Comunità delle buone Suore." (P. Albera, Circular to Provincials. "Norme per la Direzione spirituale dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice", 20 February 1921; L.C., pp. 381, 385).
- 6 " ... il proprio stile di pensiero e di sentimento, di vita et di azione, nel mettere in opera la vocazione specifica e la missione che lo Spirito non cessa di darci." "Lo spirito salesiano è il complesso degli aspetti e dei valori del mondo umano e del mistero cristiano (Vangelo anzitutto, Chiesa, Regno di Dio ...) ai quali i figli di Don Bosco, accogliendo l'ispirazione dello Spirito Santo e in forza della loro missione, sono particolarmente sensibili, tanto nell'atteggiamento interiore quanto nel comportamento esteriore." (CGS/SCG, no. 86.)
- 7 "Don Bosco ha vissuto e ci ha trasmesso, sotto l'ispirazione di Dio, uno stile originale di vita e di azione: lo spirito salesiano", etc. (SDB Constitutions, art. 10).
- 8 "Dal nostro amore per Cristo nasce inseparabilmente l'amore per la sua Chiesa, popolo di Dio, centro di unità e comunione di tutte le forze che lavorano per il Regno". (SDB Constitutions, art 13).

- 9 “Parlare di “spirito” di un Istituto religioso significa appunto riferirsi a quell’insieme di valori e di aspetti evangelici ed ecclesiali a cui i membri dell’Istituto, sull’esempio del loro Fondatore e accogliendo l’ispirazione dello Spirito Santo, sono particolarmente sensibili tanto nell’atteggiamento interiore quanto nel comportamento esteriore.” (*Il progetto di vita dei Salesiani di Don Bosco*, Roma, ed. SDB, 1986, p. 143.) But isn’t the world of religious values to be integrated or the world of Salesian spirituality in all its objectivity to be highlighted?
- 10 “Il legame profondo tra impegno di evangelizzazione e promozione umana; l’attenzione preferenziale ai giovani poveri e alle classi popolari ; lo spirito di adattamento e creatività ; la sensibilità catechistica e la pietà semplice e concreta ; una presenza particolarmente incarnata e attenta ai valori umani e religiosi della cultura locale ; un approccio umano facile, marcato di ottimismo evangelico, che suscita simpatia ed esercita una particolare attrattiva per la nostra proposta.” (*La formazione dei Salesiani di Don Bosco*, Rome, ed. SDB, 1985, no. 75.) The following list of characteristics of this Ratio, given as “more profound”, appears to be directly inspired by the chapter of the Constitutions.

Salvation

True salvation according to Don Bosco

“The fundamental theme of Don Bosco’s spirituality is the salvation of souls.”¹ Don Bosco constantly said that he worked only “for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls”, his own and that of others. One saves one’s soul, one saves other souls: the complement of the word is essential for those who wish to enter into his thinking. Salvation, by which we mean the salvation of the soul, was the main keyword of Salesian spirituality over a lengthy period.²

When Don Bosco used the word “soul” it had a precise meaning that should not be watered down. Humans sail in flotillas on the sea of the world, and storms and reefs threaten them. Consciously or unconsciously, they seek a port. Their souls “make their salvation”, in other words “they save themselves”, as Don Bosco put it if, at the hour of divine judgement following death, they appear worthy of an eternity of happiness (possibly deferred after a period of purgatory). Otherwise, unworthy of this eternity, “they are lost”. There are therefore two destinies open to them at the end of life’s journey: “eternal salvation” or “eternal loss”. An accurate understanding of Don Bosco’s language requires us to mentally add the adjective “eternal” to the expression “salvation of souls”. For him, the only true salvation was that of eternity.

In his eyes, destiny depended entirely on the fatal hour. The *Il Giovane provveduto* and the *Mese di maggio* gave Don Bosco’s readers a terrifying description of the particular judgement. Even the mention of the moment of that judgement filled him with dread. One day in April 1868, according to a letter from a witness, the emotion that gripped him forced him to interrupt a sermon to his young people on this terrible judgement.³

The question of salvation was compounded by the conditions for its success. Good conduct, guaranteed by an upright conscience, was not enough. Faith in the word of Christ and membership of the Roman Catholic Church were then, according to the theology commonly repeated, absolutely necessary for salvation. The Turin diocesan catechism taught:

Question. Can one be saved outside Apostolic and Roman Catholic Church? - Answer. No one can be saved, just as no one could be saved outside Noah's ark, a figure of this Church.⁴

And Don Bosco wrote bluntly,

Whoever separates himself from the Catholic Church, however good his life, will never possess eternal life, but the wrath of God will fall upon him for the sole offence of having separated himself from the unity of Jesus Christ. Goodness and probity not subject to the Church are subtle and pernicious hypocrisy (St Augustine).⁵

He affirmed that after Pentecost, salvation was no longer possible for the members of the chosen people themselves. "When the Gospel began to be preached in various parts of the world, no Jew could be saved any longer without believing in Jesus Christ and receiving baptism."⁶

Because he loved people, starting with children, Don Bosco could not but wish with all his strength for the salvation of their souls, thus conceived. "You will do me the dearest thing in the world, if you help me to save your soul", he told his Salesians in twilight of his life.⁷ We must also "persuade young people that we want nothing more than the salvation of their souls, which after God we love above all else."⁸ Luigi De Sanctis had left the Roman Church to join the Waldensian and Protestant world, where he worked as a pastor. Don Bosco tried to convert him, but in vain. The fundamental reason for his approach appears in a letter he addressed to him:

Now, I will tell you clearly that I desire and desire with all my heart the salvation of your soul and that I am ready to make all spiritual and temporal sacrifices to help you achieve this. All that remains is for Your Lordship to tell me if it seems to him that he is at peace and can be saved, if he considers that a Catholic or a dissident has better guarantees of salvation...⁹

In his eyes, Luigi De Sanctis' adherence to a Church other than the Roman Church seriously compromised his eternal salvation. It has been rightly rightly written that "saving one's soul, something that Saint Alphonsus and many spiritual writers of his time present as *the one thing necessary*, also appears to be the essential and indispensable core, the deepest root of his interior activity, his dialogue with God, his work on himself, his action as an apostle convinced that he had been called and born for the salvation of poor and abandoned youth."¹⁰

The silent development of a word

After Don Bosco, it seemed excessive to remain with this extreme meaning of the word “salvation”, especially in formulating the Salesian vocation as being “for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls”. His successor Fr Rua’s ideas on salvation were very much those of Don Bosco. “As for the salvation of the soul, there is no middle way” he preached to retreatants. “Either you save yourself forever, or you are damned forever; eternal bliss, or eternal torment.”¹¹ His unshakeable conviction remained. “Don Bosco took no step, said no word, took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young... Truly, the only concern of his heart was for souls.”¹² Nevertheless, this very faithful man sometimes avoided the term and silently extended it to the “good” or “advantage” of these souls.

This spiritual good – by which I mean salvation – was not just eternal but also temporal. The act of convocation to the General Chapter of 1892 would allow his confreres, he wrote to them, “to study what would seem preferable for the glory of God and the advantage of the souls of our Pious Society.”¹³ On the day he announced its results, he considered that this Chapter “could present the most considerable advantages for our Pious Society, for the glory of God and for the good of souls.”¹⁴ In his later letter to the Provincials and Rectors of America, he recommended that they “always seek the glory of God and the good of souls, never personal honour and glory.”¹⁵ Under his pen, the word “good” had significantly replaced the word “salvation”.

Following Fr Rua, Fr Albera was careful not to forget the passionate desire of Don Bosco. “Save souls was the motto he wanted printed on the coat of arms of his Congregation, its sole *raison d’être*, so to speak. In other words, to save his own soul first, and then that of others. Helping him to save our souls was the most precious gift we could give him...”¹⁶ But one precision appeared. Fr Albera explained that salvation requires constant work of “sanctification”. Indeed, to save one’s soul is to “sanctify oneself.”¹⁷ The work of salvation, which culminates in a crucial moment, lasts a lifetime.

A better understanding of Christian salvation

Over the years, the term “salvation” lost its former force and became curiously rarefied in the official literature of the Salesians. Certainly, until Vatican II, the pupils and teachers in Salesian houses never stopped praying every evening: “Dear Mother Mary ever Virgin, help me to save my soul”, and the sermons on the exercises for a happy death continued

to threaten those guilty of mortal sin with eternal perdition. The base did not forget the “salvation of souls”. But the index of the circulars of Rectors Major Frs Rinaldi, Ricaldone, Ziggiotti, Ricceri and Viganò ignored the term *Salvezza* (or *Salute*). “Let us save young people” Fr Ricaldone recommended simply, “their salvation lies in the festive oratory.”¹⁸ Was usury threatening the term? Along with “redemption”, “sacrifice”, “trinity” or “hell”, common catechesis was perhaps more or less consciously placing the term “salvation” among the religious words (temporarily?) in crisis. Colourless and abstract, it no longer spontaneously evoked the essential experience it should have signified.¹⁹

Be that as it may, the theologians of the time were deepening its meaning. The question of salvation can never be dismissed. The question of salvation remains one of the most fundamental questions that runs through and affects each individual’s personal existence, as well as the whole of human history. Christianity is both the proclamation and the path to salvation. From the outset, the Christian creed has specified that everything it professes is proposed to be believed “for us men and for our salvation.” Christian salvation, which is simultaneously redemption, liberation and reconciliation, rescues humanity from a situation of peril, under a threat that is implacable and inescapable.²⁰

The threat comes from the human condition. The peril comes from humanity’s sin but also and above all from its finite nature. Man needs salvation by the very fact of his situation as a created being and independently of any sin. Because he is a creature, there is an insurmountable distance between his finite being and God, at least on his side. But, fashioned “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26), a vocation dwells within him: to know God, to see him and to share in his life. “We will be like him because we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Saint Augustine experienced this. “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (*Confessions* I, 1). “The root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God”, we read in Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 19.) Salvation as understood by Christians is essentially the realisation by each person, here below and above all in eternity, of a final state in conformity to God’s salvific will. Man’s destiny is to be what God, in His love and wisdom, has freely willed him to be: his friend. Salvation for him lies in his communion with God in this world and the next.²¹

This salvation has a divine history. God, the Lord of history directs the history of salvation. His plan, absolutely free and mysterious, consisted, through filial adoption, in raising human beings to the communion of life in himself. The Son, mediator of

the perfect Covenant, fulfils it. The Church, of which he is the head is the “universal sacrament of salvation”.²² This plan, fully realised by the action of the Holy Spirit, is addressed to all people and concerns temporal realities.

Christ’s redemptive enterprise, in other words his plan of salvation, covers the whole of human history. In the twentieth century the temporal order has been more and more clearly associated with spiritual salvation. Vatican II tells us:

Christ’s redemptive work, while essentially concerned with the salvation of men, includes also the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence the mission of the Church is not only to bring the message and grace of Christ to men but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel. In fulfilling this mission of the Church, the Christian laity exercise their apostolate both in the Church and in the world, in both the spiritual and the temporal orders. These orders, although distinct, are so connected in the singular plan of God that He Himself intends to raise up the whole world again in Christ and to make it a new creation, initially on earth and completely on the last day.²³

In its breadth, the one divine plan can rightly be called a plan of salvation.

The Salesian Family for the salvation of the world

Official Salesian documents from the end of the century gave the word salvation its rightful place and true dimension by extending it to the whole world. Significantly, in the prayer to Mary Help of Christians that follows their daily meditation, the Salesians promised to “work always for the greater glory of God and for salvation of the world.”²⁴ Note: no longer for the salvation of souls, but of the world.

Considerations of salvation were now starting from the top. All salvation comes from God the Trinity. “Mary, Mother of God, holds a unique place in the history of salvation.”²⁵ The mission of the Salesian Sisters “comes from the saving initiative of the Father”, who calls them to “participate ... in the prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministry of Christ”²⁶ Their Institute is “a response of salvation to the profound hopes of girls and young women.”²⁷ The renewed Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians clearly express the nature of their contribution to the work of salvation. “The response of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello to the salvific will of God can be seen in their concern to form young people as, ‘good Christians and honest citizens.’”²⁸ The entire life of young people is affected by the divine plan of salvation.

The salvation for which the Salesians work, consummated only in eternity, begins here below in the Church. By contributing to the “salvation of youth, ‘that part of human society which is so exposed yet so rich in potential’”,²⁹ they participate in her work, so that she may appear to the world as the “universal sacrament of salvation.”³⁰ Salesian communities should be “a sign revealing Christ and his saving presence among us.”³¹ Very broad, this salvation integrates evangelisation and the development of the temporal order. The Salesian mission contributes in the Church to the realisation of the “saving design of God”, say their Constitutions, in other words “the coming of his Kingdom the coming of his Kingdom”, “by bringing people the message of the gospel which is closely tied in with the development of the temporal order.”³²

The Volunteers of Don Bosco have included as an epigraph to the first chapter of their Regulations, Paul VI’s lesson to the Secular Institutes on their “mission of salvation” in the world:

Remember that you, especially because you are members of Secular Institutes, have a mission of salvation to fulfil for the people of our times; today the world has need of you living in the world, to open to the world the paths of Christian salvation.³³

The scope of their work of salvation is therefore unlimited.

For their part, Salesian Cooperators have the following essential vocation to be, in the Church – that “centre of communion of all the forces working for salvation” – “true cooperators with God in the realisation of his design for our salvation.”³⁴ On the day they join the association, Cooperators solemnly promise to “work especially for the advancement and salvation of the young.”³⁵

Finally, the centenary of Don Bosco’s death led Pope John Paul II, in his letter *luvenum Patris* and in perfect consonance with the fundamental aim of our saint, to remind Christian educators of the obligation to direct the educational process to the “religious objective of salvation”, which they must therefore know and keep in mind.

All this requires a lot more than the insertion in the educational curriculum of a few periods reserved for religious instruction and ritual expression; it implies the very much deeper obligation of helping the pupils to open their minds to absolute values and interpret life and history in accordance with the depth and riches of the Mystery. The educator, therefore, must be clearly conscious of the ultimate objective, because in the art of education the ends aimed at play a decisive part. If they are not completely clear or are mistaken or even

forgotten, a unilateral approach or deviations will result, as well as being a sign of incompetence.³⁶

The Pope was echoing the meaning that Don Bosco naturally attributed to the word salvation. Whether we know it or not, it is always a question of the destiny, successful or not, of human beings and of the world. There are many paths that lead to it. God's plan for salvation indicates the end. The mission of the Salesian Family is to accompany humanity as best we can on this decisive journey.

NOTES

- 1 “Il tema fondamentale della spiritualità di Don Bosco (...) è la salvezza delle anime” (F. Motto, in his *I sentieri della speranza nella spiritualità salesiana*, Rome, Ed. S. D. B. 1994, p. 70).
- 2 On the meaning of the word “soul” see the entry *soul*.
- 3 According to a letter of Giovanni Francesia to “cavaliere” Federico Oreglia, Turin, 8 April 1868, reproduced in MB IX, pp. 124-125. BM IX, p. 66.
- 4 “D. Si può esser salvo fuori della Chiesa Cattolica Apostolica Romana? - R. Non si può essere salvo, come niuno potè salvarsi fuori dell’arca di Noè, che fu figura di questa Chiesa.” (*Compendio della dottrina cristiana ad uso della diocesi di Torino*, Turin, Paravia, s.d. (1844), p. 72).
- 5 “Chiunque si separa dalla Chiesa Cattolica, sia pur buona la vita di lui, non possederà mai la vita eterna, ma la collera di Dio verrà sopra di lui pel solo delitto di essere separato dall’unità di Gesù Cristo. Questa bontà e proibità, che non è sommessa alla Chiesa, è un’ipocrisia sottile e pernicioso (S. Agostino)” (*Il Giovane provveduto*, Turin, 1851, p. 332). Note that in the case of Protestants, infants who died before the age of reason and adults acting in good faith, some nuances will fortunately appear in the 1863 edition of this work (p. 392).
- 6 “Quando comincì a predicarsi il Vangelo nelle varie parti del mondo, niuno degli Ebrei più potè salvarsi senza credere in Gesù Cristo, e ricevere il battesimo” (G. Bosco, *Il Cattolico istruito*, Turin, 1853, p. 60).
- 7 “Voi mi farete la cosa più cara del mondo, se mi aiuterete a salvare l’anima vostra.” (G. Bosco, Circular to Salesians, Turin, 6 January 1884, L. C., p. 21).
- 8 “... persuadere i giovani che non si vuole altro, fuorché la salute delle anime loro, che noi dopo Dio amiamo sovra ogni altra cosa” (G. Bosco, Circular to Salesians 1 November 1884, L. C., p. 17).
- 9 “Ora le dirò schiettamente che desidero e desidero di tutto cuore la salvezza dell’anima di V. S. e che sono disposto a fare tutti i sacrifici spirituali e temporali per coadiuvarla. Resta solo che V. S. mi dica se le pare di essere tranquilla e di potersi salvare; se giudica avere maggiori garanzie di salvezza un cattolico o un dissidente.” (G. Bosco to L. De Sanctis, 26 May 1855, in Epistolario Motto, I, p. 254).
- 10 “Il salvarsi l’anima, quello che S. Alfonso e molti scrittori spirituali del suo tempo indicano come l’uno necessario, appare essere anche il nucleo essenziale e irrinunciabile, la radice più profonda della sua attività interiore, del suo dialogo con Dio, del lavoro su se stesso, della sua operosità di apostolo, conosciutosi come chiamato e nato per la salvezza della gioventù povera ed abbandonata.” (P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II, Roma, 1981, p. 15).
- 11 “Riguardo alla salvezza dell’anima non vi è via di mezzo, o che si salva per sempre, o che si dannava per sempre; o eterna felicità o eterni tormenti” (M. Rua, “Salvezza dell’anima”, in *Esercizi spirituali*, quaderno I, p. 12, in FdB 2938 E3.) A retreat sermon entitled “Della salvezza dell’anima”, reproduced in FdB 2894 D12-E5, repeated this teaching.
- 12 “Non diede passo, non pronunciò parola, non mise mano ad impresa che non avesse di mira la salvezza della gioventù... Realmente non ebbe a cuore altro che le anime.” (M. Rua, Letter to provincials and rectors of America, 24 August 1894, L. C., p. 109).

- 13 “... possiate studiare quanto si credesse meglio a gloria di Dio, a vantaggio delle anime della Pia nostra Società...” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 19 March 1892, L. C., p. 80).
- 14 “... potrà riuscire fecondo de’ più considerevoli vantaggi per la nostra Pia Società, per la gloria di Dio e pel bene delle anime” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 11 November 1892, L.C., p. 86).
- 15 “... sempre avendo in mira la gloria di Dio ed il bene delle anime, giammai l’onore e la gloria propria” (Letter of 24 August 1894, L.C., p. 112).
- 16 “*Salvar le anime!* fu la parola d’ordine ch’egli volle impressa sullo stemma della sua Congregazione, fu, si può dire, l’unica sua ragione d’esistere: s’intende salvare prima l’anima propria e poi quella degli altri. Aiutarlo a salvar l’anima nostra era il regalo più prezioso che potessimo fargli...” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 18 October 1920, L. C., p. 343).
- 17 Don Bosco “ci chiede continuamente che lo aiutiamo a salvare l’anima nostra, cioè a santificarci” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L. C., p. 451).
- 18 “La sua salvezza sta nell’oratorio festivo” (P. Ricaldone, “Oratorio festivo, catechismo, formazione religiosa”. Letter to Salesians, 24 December 1939, *Atti* 96, pp. 20, 43).
- 19 Observation by M. Rondet, “Dire le salut”, *Catéchèse* 146, January 1997, pp. 15-16.
- 20 See J. Doré, “Salut”, in the *Dictionnaire des Religions*, ed. Paul Poupard, Paris, 1984, pp. 1514-1523.
- 21 Doctrine constantly repeated. See, for example, B. Sesboué, “Salut”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. XIV, 1990, col. 253.
- 22 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 48.
- 23 Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 5. These two paragraphs constitute a collection of proposals taken from Vatican II.
- 24 The formula of consecration to Mary Help of Christians: “Vi promettiamo di sempre operare alla maggior gloria di Dio e alla salute delle anime” became the “preghiera di affidamento” (prayer of entrustment): “Ti promettiamo di voler sempre operare, fedeli alla vocazione salesiana, alla maggior gloria di Dio e alla salvezza del mondo”.
- 25 “Maria, Madre di Dio, occupa un posto singolare nella storia della salvezza” (SDB Constitutions, art. 92).
- 26 “La nostra missione nasce dall’iniziativa salvifica del Padre, che ci chiama a partecipare nella Chiesa (...) al ministero profetico, sacerdotale e regale di Cristo ...” (FMA Constitutions, art. 63).
- 27 “... San Giovanni Bosco ha fondato il nostro Istituto come risposta di salvezza alle attese profonde delle giovani” (FMA Constitutions, art. 1).
- 28 “La risposta di don Bosco e di Madre Mazzarello alla volontà salvifica di Dio si manifesta nell’impegno di rendere i giovani buoni cristiani ed onesti cittadini.” (FMA Constitutions art. 69).
- 29 “Per contribuire alla salvezza della gioventù, questa porzione la più delicata e la più preziosa dell’umana società...” (SDB Constitutions SDB, art. 1).
- 30 SDB Constitutions, art. 6.
- 31 “... segno rivelatore di Cristo e della sua salvezza presente fra gli uomini” (SDB Constitutions, art. 57).

- 32 “ ... portando agli uomini il messaggio del Vangelo intimamente unito allo sviluppo dell’ordine temporale” (SDB Constitutions, art. 31).
- 33 “Ricordate che voi, proprio come appartenenti ad Istituti Secolari, avete una missione di salvezza da compiere per gli uomini del nostro tempo ; oggi il mondo ha bisogno di voi, viventi nel mondo per aprire al mondo i sentieri della salvezza cristiana.” Paul VI, *Gli Istituti secolari*, Roma, 1981, no. 13. (VDB Regolamenti, 1990, p. 93).
- 34 “Si sente parte viva della Chiesa, Corpo di Cristo, centro di comunione di tutte le forze che operano per la salvezza. - Scopre così l’aspetto più profondo della sua vocazione: essere vero ‘cooperatore di Dio’ nella realizzazione del suo disegno di salvezza.” (*Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 27, § 2 and 3.)
- 35 “Prometto di lavorare per la promozione e la salvezza dei giovani” (*Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 40).
- 36 John Paul II, *luvenum Patris*, 31 January 1988, nos. 15-16.

Savio, Dominic

The saint's early childhood (1842–1854)

The life of Dominico Savio (1842–1857), published by Don Bosco two years after his death, based on first-hand documentation and under the critical eye of his classmates, is well known to us.¹

Dominic Savio was born into a very pious family in Don Bosco's region of Piedmont on 2 April 1842. A taste for the things of God germinated in this extraordinary child with the first development of his faculties. Virtue was "born with him", Don Bosco would one day assure us.² According to family tradition, at the age of four he was saying all his morning and evening prayers by himself, at a time when the Piedmontese – like all conscientious Catholics – didn't think they were getting off scot-free with a *Pater* or an *Ave*. The three priests who taught him as a child were won over by his spiritual qualities. Giovanni Zucca, Morialdo's chaplain, recalled: "In the early days of my arrival in the hamlet of Morialdo, I often saw a child about five years old come with his mother to pray on the steps of the church, with a recollection that was rare for that age." He was told that this was Brigida Savio and her son Dominic, known as *Minot*.³ A rare privilege at the time, Dominic was admitted to the Eucharist from the age of seven. At his first communion (Easter 1849), he made four resolutions, the last two of which were: "My friends will be Jesus and Mary", and⁴ He would be all for God. My name (Dominic) itself bears witness to this, I am "of the Lord", I belong "to the Lord."⁵

As a child, Dominic attended one elementary class after another at schools in the villages (Morialdo, Castelnuovo and Mondonio), where the necessities of life forced his parents to move in turn. He won the admiration of his teachers for his unusual intelligence, his love of learning and, quite simply, as his teacher Fr Allora wrote for Castelnuovo, his "virtue".⁶ The distance (four kilometres four times a day) made his attendance at the local school all the more commendable. "Despite his rather poor health," remarked the teacher, "he made the journey with an equally marvellous tranquillity of soul and serenity of countenance, even in the inclemency of winter, in extreme cold, rain or snow."⁷ As for his teacher Fr Cugliero, he would testify for Mondonio: "In truth, I can say that in the twenty years I have been teaching boys, I

have never had one who equalled him in piety and who, even as a young man, was as level-headed as Dominic Savio.”⁸

It was this wise priest who referred Dominic to Don Bosco. Savio had just turned twelve. Fr Cugliero providentially had the idea of talking to Don Bosco in Turin about him. “Here, in your house,” he told him, “there may be children who are worth it, but you will be hard pressed to find a more capable and virtuous child. Give him a try, you will discover a Saint Aloysius.”⁹

Dominic as a pupil in Turin (1854–1857)

At the beginning of October 1854, Don Bosco’s “discovery” of the new Aloysius Gonzaga was immediately conclusive.¹⁰ Only four weeks passed and Dominic became a boarder at the house of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, which was still just a hostel for apprentices and schoolchildren attending classes in the city.

The rudiments of Latin at the Mondonio school enabled him to enter immediately into the “fourth” class (second year of secondary school in the system at the time) taught by Carlo Bonznino. It wasn’t long before Dominic’s human qualities soon surprised teacher and pupils alike. Bonzanino would later claim that he could not remember a more attentive, docile and respectful pupil than little Savio. “A model in everything,” he said. Clothing and hair without particular care, however he was clean, well-mannered and polite, so much so that the boys from higher social classes who attended this rather upmarket school sought him out, not only because of his knowledge and piety, but also because of his excellent education and pleasant manner. Later, his fellow students at Valdocco would unanimously acknowledge Dominic’s “great courtesy and friendliness.” It was a pleasure to live with him. Needless to say, those who liked to get into mischief had no chance of involving young Savio. They were immediately met with a polite and unambiguous refusal.

When the first school year came to an end, Dominic had no trouble passing the entrance exam for the third year of the Bonzanino course. But his already poor health advised that during the following year (1855–1856) he should have private tuition at the Oratory itself, with a young Salesian teacher (Francesia). Then, as his condition seemed to improve, he was sent for a year of “humanities” (equivalent to the second year) (1856–1857), to Professor Matteo Picco, another city course for the upper classes.

During the three years in Turin, Don Bosco had the opportunity to watch Dominic living in his house. His biography describes a boy who “carried out all his duties zealously.” In his case, and unlike the light-headed children of his age, public lessons were never wasted. If Don Bosco is to be believed,

instructions, catechism lessons, the sermons, however long they were, were always a pleasure for him. If there was anything he did not understand, he never hesitated to ask for further explanations. This was the root and source of his exemplary life and steady progress in virtue which could hardly have been surpassed.¹¹

At Valdocco, as kind as he was virtuous, Dominic was irreproachable in everything. He was a friend to the most neglected, spreading joy to others around him. Smiling, he gave service without burdening others. Don Bosco also took in rough boys. Dominic was not put off by the language and gestures of rude friends, and was inclined to respond simply to evil with good. His kindly goodness won him sympathy from everyone. When he prayed, you would have taken him for a little angel. Church ceremonies never bored him, on the contrary. His modesty, which would seem implausible in infinitely freer times, was rooted in a profound devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Dominic systematically mortified his senses: eyes, tongue, taste, touch. He even exaggerated in his desire to share the sufferings of the crucified Christ. And Don Bosco made him understand this.

During the humanities year, Dominic’s life was already coming to an end. Death prevented him from completing his third school year in Turin. He died a holy death in Mondonio, at his parents’ home, on 9 March 1857.

Dominic’s intended and actual holiness¹²

In fact, in Salesian spirituality, Dominic Savio presents the very interesting case of a boy who, in his fierce desire to “make himself a saint” (as he put it) found in Don Bosco a clear-sighted guide for his unique project.

One day in March 1855, Dominic appeared less cheerful than usual. Was he unwell? “I am suffering from something good” the child is said to have replied to Don Bosco who asked him. “I feel that I must become a saint. I never saw before that it was both possible and easy. Now that I see it, I can have no peace inside until I really begin to do so. Please will you help me?”¹³

At the beginning of a chapter in his biography, Don Bosco summarised the programme of holiness that he proposed to Dominic. He had to follow Christ the Saviour and to do some win souls for him. In other words, he traced for him a programme of apostolic activity. “The first advice Dominic was given to help him become a saint was to set out to win souls for God, because there is no holier work in this life than to work for the good of souls for whom Jesus Christ shed the last drop of his blood.”¹⁴ This is a fundamental principle of Salesian spirituality. Direct apostolic activity is the surest path to holiness, even for a thirteen-year-old. Don Bosco’s statement that the life of an apostle sanctifies him because he cooperates in the redemptive act of Christ on the cross, should not be overlooked.

Dominic showed great ingenuity and creativity in his apostolic zeal among his one hundred and fifty or so companions at Valdocco. The boy’s individual apostolate took place in humble settings: the courtyard, refectory or infirmary of the house, with classmates who were often older and physically stronger than he was. He managed to win them over by making himself loved through his simplicity, his finesse and his courtesy, his joy and his liveliness, preferring to go to those who were suffering: newcomers, the isolated or the sick. Dominic made himself loved in order to make people love God, seeking either to prevent evil: blasphemy, bad example, unhealthy language, brawls, disputes or criticism, or to edify his companions in a positive way through words, good advice and skilful invitations to approach the sacraments and Mary’s altar in the local chapel. Seemingly confined within a boarding school, this boy was open to the great horizons of the Catholic Church of his time and the world to be evangelised. His love for the Pope, his daily prayer for the salvation of all sinners, his interest in the work of the missionaries and his concern for the conversion of the “Protestants” in England.¹⁵ At Valdocco, Dominic Savio was able to live in unison with the Church, just as Thérèse of the Child Jesus would do a generation later in her Carmelite convent in Lisieux.

The greatest originality of Dominic’s zeal is probably to be found in his contribution to the organised apostolate of the Immaculate Conception Sodality, which took shape in the house at the Oratory in June 1856, partly under his inspiration. This has been called, not without reason, “the culminating point” (A. Caviglia) of his life and of his personality as a saint. In this original Salesian house, the Immaculate Conception Sodality was a practical school of deep friendship, with true affection and kind fraternal correction; a practical school of holiness, with a perfectly followed programme of piety, work and joy; a practical school of apostolate adapted to an environment where Don Bosco reigned; and even a school of religious life, since the rules of this society of young

boys anticipated the fundamental requirements of the Salesian Constitutions drafted two years later.

Dominic's sanctity was officially recognised by the Church. Declared venerable in 1933, Pius XII beatified him on 5 March 1950 and canonised him on 12 June 1954.

NOTES

- 1 G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*, Turin, Paravia et Comp., 1859. Re-published while Don Bosco was still alive: 1860², 1861³, 1866⁴, 1878⁵, 1880⁶ From hereon cited as: *Vita*. An observation by a colleague (Giuseppe Zucca) led him to qualify a passage in his account from the second edition of the work. The preserved sources of this biography were published following the testimonies of the informative process of Dominic's canonisation, in *Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, Rome, 1913. Henceforth cited as: *Summarium*. A good study of Dominic's spirituality is A. Caviglia, *Savio Domenico e Don Bosco*. Studio, Turin, SEI, 1943.
- 2 Preface to the *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, Turin, 1861, p. 5.
- 3 "Nei primi giorni che io fili a Muor vedeva spesso un figliuolino di forse 5 anni venir in compagnia della madre a pregare sul limite della cappella, con un raccoglimento veramente raro all'età ... Nell'andata o ritorno soventi incontrandomi mi salutava rispettosamente talché da meraviglia compreso e da rispetto era ansioso di sapere chi egli si fosse, e mi si disse essere figlio del ferraio Savio, per nome Minot." Letter of Fr Giovanni Zuccato Don Bosco, Murialdo, 5 May 1857, in *Summarium*, p. 207. This letter, partially torn, was adapted – in inverted commas – by Don Bosco in his biography, chap. II, p. 14.
- 4 "Ricordi fatti da me Savio Domenico l'anno 1849 quando ho fatta la prima comunione essendo di 7 anni. 1° Mi confesserò molto sovente e farò la comunione tutte le volte che il confessore mi dà licenza. 2° Voglio santificare i giorni festivi. 3° I miei amici saranno Gesù e Maria. 4° La morte ma non peccati." According to how they were transcribed in *Vita* ..., chap. III p. 20, by Don Bosco, who wrote them without having the text in his hands.
- 5 Reference to the Latin *Dominus*, Lord. See *Vita*, chap. X.
- 6 "Questo felice risultato del di lui studio non è solo da attribuirsi all'ingegno distinto da cui egli era fornito, ma eziandio al grandissimo suo amore allo studio ed alla virtù." (Alessandro Allora, "Cenni biografici intorno Savio Domenico alunno di 2.a classe nel Comune di Castelnuovo d'Asti", in *Summarium*, p. 210).
- 7 "Cenni biografici..." , loc. cit., p. 211.
- 8 "In verità posso dire che in 20 anni dacché attendo ad istruire ragazzi, mai ne ebbi alcuno che lo pareggiasse in pietà e che sebben giovine fosse assennato al pari di Domenico Savio." (Giuseppe Cugliero, "Cenni storici sulla vita del giovane Domenico Savio, nativo di Riva di Chieri, finzione borgata di S. Giovanni", in *Summarium*, p. 213.)
- 9 "Qui in sua casa, egli diceva, può aver giovani uguali, ma difficilmente avrà chi lo superi in talento e virtù. Ne faccia la prova e troverà un S. Luigi." (*Vita*..., chap. VII, p. 34).
- 10 *Vita* ... , chap. VII, pp. 34-37. For this paragraph on Dominic in Turin, we are following Don Bosco's account.
- 11 "Ogni discorso morale, ogni catechismo, ogni predica, quantunque prolungata, era sempre per lui una delizia. Udendo qualche cosa che non avesse ben intesa tosto facevasi a dimandarne la spiegazione. Di qui ebbe a cominciamento quell'esemplare tenore di vita, quel continuo progredire di virtù in virtù, quell'esattezza nell'adempimento de' suoi doveri, oltre cui non si può andare." (*Vita*..., chap. VIII, p. 39).

- 12 Here I am repeating almost word for word regarding Dominic's holiness words that I find very appropriate in J. Aubry, in his *Les saints de la famille*, Rome, Salesian General House, 1996, pp. 72-79.
- 13 “Anzi, mi rispose, patisco qualche bene. (...) Mi sento un desiderio ed un bisogno di farmi santo ; io non pensava di potermi far santo con tanta facilità ; ma ora che ho capito potersi ciò effettuare anche stando allegro, io voglio assolutamente, ed ho assolutamente bisogno di farmi santo. Mi dica adunque come debbo regolarmi per incominciare tale impresa.” (*Vita ...*, chap. X, p. 50-51.) Of course, we should be wary of taking literally, here and elsewhere, all the statements attributed by Don Bosco to Dominic Savio.
- 14 “La prima cosa che gli venne consigliata per farsi santo fu di adoprarsi per guadagnar anime a Dio ; perciocché non avvi cosa più santa al mondo, che cooperare al bene delle anime, per la cui salvezza Gesù Cristo sparse fin l'ultima goccia del prezioso sangue.” (*Vita ...*, chap. XI, p. 53).
- 15 One hundred and fifty years later, this detail seems surprising. But in the 1850s, there was a lot of talk about the English movement towards Catholicism. And Don Bosco was personally in contact with the Rosminian Lorenzo Gastaldi, his future archbishop, who was then a “missionary” in England.

Secularity

A newcomer that needs to be interpreted correctly

The introduction of the word *secularity* among the key words of Salesian spirituality would have come as a great surprise to Don Bosco and his first Salesians. Was not “secular”, the world, something they had little sympathy for? A very unfortunate connotation for them, they equated “secularity” with “worldliness”. But, as in so many other cases, the language has changed since 1850. Within the Salesian world, the term took on a more favourable connotation in the second half of the twentieth century when the Volunteers of Don Bosco began to use it to designate one of the characteristics of their charism. At the same time, Vatican II was preaching to religious that they should be open to the world and therefore to the “secular”, the Salesian Cooperators were making it clear that they had not left it, and Salesian Brothers were reminding us that, as “lay people”, they too belonged in some way to the secular. The conclusion was that Salesian spirituality is by no means devoid of a “secular dimension”.¹

However, to avoid getting into a dangerous impasse, we need to clarify the meaning of our terms. Secularity is not secularisation, still less secularism. “Secularisation” and “secularism” both imply movement. “Secularity” is a state, unrelated to any movement towards secularisation.

“Secularisation” is a process that is, to say the least, ambiguous in the eyes of the believer, and refers to a movement of separation, rupture and emancipation of humankind on earth. For the average interpreter, it means moving from a social or individual state characterised by a rather strong hold of the “sacred”, to another state where the sacred is no longer, or hardly ever, a factor. Man as such assumes all his responsibilities in the construction of the “secular city”, to use Harvey Cox’s title.²

The related term “secularism” is applied to the radicalisation of the secularisation movement. Systematically destructive, secularism strives for the total elimination of the sacred from the world stage. Self-consistent secularism first endeavours to confine the sacred to the smallest possible spaces, and its second step is to drive God out of everyday life. The Soviet system that emerged from the revolution of 1917 practised secularism (with varying degrees of success).

Secularisation, insofar as it makes man the centre of the world and the protagonist of his own history, could constitute legitimate progress. “You formed man in your own image and set humanity over the whole world in all its wonder, to rule in your name over all you have made and for ever praise you in your mighty works, through Christ our Lord”, confesses one of the Sunday prefaces of today’s Roman liturgy. Understood in this way secularisation corresponds to God’s plan. But contemporary secularisation goes much further. It is silently dragging humanity into a world without God. The Christian God has no more depth to him than the Ra of the Egyptians, the Zeus of the Greeks and the Jupiter of the Romans. He no longer exists. The secularising movement frees us from the tutelage of the cleric, the specialist in the sacred. However, if pushed too far, it also results in God becoming an eternal absentee, a prospect unacceptable to the religious mind. For the religious spirit accepts the liberation of the creature only on condition that God remains transcendent, at the origin of everything, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Man, king of the world, recognises his Creator and Father in himself. The desacralising process of secularisation therefore unfortunately presents a permanent challenge to every being turned towards God, the source of the sacred. Secularisation constantly challenges our spirituality, especially in prayer, remarked Fr Viganò.³ As for secularism, which is atheistic by vocation, it is a terrible abuse, which deprives man of his religious dimension, the only thing capable of raising him above himself.⁴

Unlike secularisation or secularism, secularity does not imply change, whether beneficial or threatening. It is the state or situation of those who know that they have in no way abandoned the “secular” in which they were born. The secular clergy live their secularity very officially, even though they see themselves as agents of the sacred in the world. The Salesian Cooperator, whether cleric or lay, is naturally secular. And the Volunteer of/with Don Bosco, who aims to bring the Christian dynamic to society and refuses, for apostolic reasons, to live in a religious community, displays his or her secularity in an officially “secular” institute.

Salesian secularity in action

The Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco has reflected on its secularity especially since the *Approbamus* decree (21 July 1978), which placed it among the “secular institutes” of pontifical right. The Volunteers are committed to this secularity. When they make their vows, personal consecration does not elevate the Volunteer to a

particular sector of the Church, presumed to be superior in essence. These consecrated members of the People of God remain lay, and therefore secular.⁵

The Volunteers Constitutions have attempted to describe this essential secularity and its consequences on the basis of Vatican II's considerations on the laity.⁶ Volunteers maintain their secularity both in ordinary life in the accomplishment of their "mission" and in their relationships of communion both among themselves and within the Salesian Family. Under the title "*Secularity*", they state:

The Volunteers are lay women who, through vocational choice, live in the world to whose sanctification they contribute from within 'in the manner of leaven'. The specific quality of their vocation is secularity which characterizes the manner of living their consecration, of fulfilling their mission, of expressing fraternal communion, and of belonging to the Salesian Family.⁷

Their mission in the Church is secular.

The Volunteers, urged by the love of Christ, wish to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. 'They participate in the evangelizing task of the Church' which sends them. Following Christ who became man and to divinize him, they transform their whole life into an Apostolate, placing every gift they have received at the service of the kingdom.⁸

Without needing to leave the world, they find a "path of perfection" in lived secularity, which others follow in religious life.

We Volunteers, conscious of the mission that comes from Baptism and faithful to the charisms that the Holy Spirit grants to each one for the common good, live our consecration in secularity both as a path to Christian perfection and as a way to fulfill our apostolate. Thus our life itself is a mission, and our living chaste, poor, and obedient becomes the more effective way of being salt, light, and leaven in the world.⁹

Salesian Brothers and Salesian Cooperators, also lay people, apply the same principles, albeit in their own way, in their Constitutions and Regulations.

Today's leaders (Fr Viganò), in keeping with Don Bosco's thinking, attribute secularity to the Salesian Brothers, who are nevertheless authentic religious.¹⁰ While the Salesian Brother continues to belong the world of work, it must be clearly understood that common life differentiates him from the Cooperator.

The way of life proper to Brothers and Cooperators reproduces to some degree that of the laity in the world. Both follow Christ in the service of the Kingdom of God. Salt of the earth, light of the world in the sector assigned to them by Providence, they work to bring the “world” closer to the Father in heaven. In the image of Jesus, they try to show themselves to be virtuous and thus progress along the path of Christian perfection. Secularity offers them a programme for life, including the spiritual life, which is essentially that of every baptised person, an adopted child of God the Father.

NOTES

- 1 M. Midali, *Dimensione “secolare” dello spirito salesiano*, coll. *Idee*, Roma, ed. S.D.B, 1981, a work in which “spirit” is used to include “spirituality”.
- 2 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, New York, 1965. On the relationship between secularisation and the spiritual life, we can look at, for example, Johann Figi, “Sécularisation”, in the *Nouveau dictionnaire de théologie*, ed. P. Eicher, 2nd ed. Française, Cerf, 1996, pp. 899-904; L. Debarge, “Sécularisation”, in *Catholicisme*, vol. XIII, Letouzey et Ané, 1993, col. 1010-1024, with its carefully compiled bibliography.
- 3 E. Viganò, “Carisma e preghiera”, letter to Salesians, 15 August 1991, *Atti* 338, p. 7.
- 4 The fact remains that the Church cannot and must not escape from the earthly city, and that she is within a progressively secularised and secularising civilisation, which influences her.
- 5 The Constitutions of the parallel institute, the Volunteers With Don Bosco (CDB) adapt what is said of the female Volunteers of Don Bosco (VDB) in their Constitutions to the men.
- 6 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31
- 7 “Le Volontarie sono laiche che per scelta vocazionale vivono nel mondo, alla cui santificazione contribuiscono dal di dentro “a modo di fermento”. Nota specifica della loro vocazione è la secolarità che caratterizza il modo di vivere la consacrazione, di attuare la missione, di esprimere la comunione fraterna e di essere all’interno della Famiglia Salesiana” (VDB Constitutions, art 4).
- 8 “Le Volontarie, spinte dall’amore di Cristo, vogliono essere sale della terra e luce del mondo ; “partecipano della finizione evangelizzatrice della Chiesa” (Codex Juris Canonici, canon 713, §2) che le invia. Seguendo Cristo che s’incarnò nell’umano per divinizzarlo, traducono tutta la vita in apostolato mettendo a servizio del Regno ogni dono ricevuto.” (VDB Constitutions, art. 6).
- 9 “Noi Volontarie, consapevoli della missione che deriva dal Battesimo e fedeli ai carismi che lo Spirito Santo concede a ciascuno per l’utilità comune, viviamo la nostra consacrazione nella secolarità sia come cammino di perfezione cristiana sia come modo di svolgere l’apostolato. Così la vita stessa è missione, e il vivere caste, povere e obbedienti diventa la via più efficace per essere nel mondo sale, luce e fermento.” (VDB Constitutions, art. 12, under the heading “Seculars”.)
- 10 See Fr Viganò’s letter, 24 August 1980, on the “componente laicale della comunità salesiana”, with his paragraph on the “coscienza di un’apertura secolare della Congregazione”, *Atti* 298, pp. 3-58.

Sin

Sin in the spirituality of Don Bosco and Fr Rua

Don Bosco and, consequently, his *alter ego*, Fr Rua, constantly denounced sin in their preaching on the spiritual life in the world. In other times, this would come as a surprise not only to unbelievers insensitive to the existence of God whom sin offends, but also the Christians of another era, formed in a culture very different from their own.¹ Sin has become incomprehensible to them, we are repeatedly told.

The idea they had of God and of the life of man explained the repulsion that the Salesians of the first generation felt for this “horrible monster” which Fr Rua saw circulating “in the streets of the cities and throughout the countryside”, haunting “the houses of the rich and the cottages of the poor” and thus “corrupting the whole world.”²

“Sin,” Fr Rua reminded us in one of his spiritual exercises, “you already know without my telling you, is disobedience to God’s commandments; sin is an offence against his divine Majesty. So when man sins, what does he do? He turns his back on God the Creator, to this God of goodness who has showered him with blessings; he despises his grace and his friendship. He says to his Lord: ‘Go away from me, O God; I no longer wish to serve you, I no longer wish to acknowledge you as my God. *Non serviam.*’”³ It will be objected: “We have committed sins, but we have never said that to God.” Fr Rua chose three or four commandments from the Decalogue. When they had disobeyed their parents and mistreated them, had not the sinners in fact spoken this language to God, knowing full well that his will was that they should obey their parents? Had they not refused to serve their God when, knowing full well that he commanded them not to touch the property of others unjustly, they had appropriated it for themselves? In the same way, knowing that he commanded them to forgive their enemies, they had indeed taken revenge! Had they not alienated the most holy God from their hearts when they introduced the sin of impurity? The Lord condemned this sin, and yet they had committed it all the same. Fr Rua’s audience had in mind the list of God’s commandments and were convinced of the Creator’s permanent presence. God sees you! One day he will judge you.

For Don Bosco and Fr Rua, human beings, in the course of their lives, under the Creator’s gaze, progressed along a road strewn with pitfalls that, at the moment of death,

would necessarily lead them to his tribunal. A divine judgement would then decide their salvation, in other words their eternal fate. They translated the pitfalls along the way into opportunities to disobey God or, equivalently, to do evil, temptations that are innumerable in this world. The downfalls, which these often unfortunately caused, were called sins. Forgivable wounds, known as venial wounds, which Fr Rua vigorously condemned, only resulted in purification, either here below or in purgatory. But, except for God's forgiveness, normally granted through absolution by a priest, falls or serious sins known as mortal sins, true refusals of God, "horrible monsters to behold", triggered irremediable and therefore eternal reprobation at the judgement.

It is easy to see why, in their love for young people, the Salesians of the first generation did everything in their power to oppose sin in their lives and, if they had the misfortune to fall, they never stopped trying to pick them up again through the sacrament of reconciliation. "Death, but not sin" said Dominic Savio. Don Bosco adopted the maxim of Saint Philip Neri: "Live joyfully. I don't want any scruples or melancholy; it is enough for me that you don't commit sins."⁴ When it came to education, he gave young people a lot of freedom and only feared sin. "Let them jump, run and shout to their heart's content. Gymnastics, music, recitals, theatre and walks are very effective for achieving discipline, promoting morality and good health ... Do whatever you want," said the great friend of youth Saint Philip Neri, "it is enough for me that you do not sin."⁵

Sin at the end of the twentieth century

This doctrine often seemed simplistic in the century that followed that of Don Bosco's. After having occupied a great deal of space, sin disappeared from common preaching, except in the case of social sins, which were generally the sins of others. Personal sins were hardly ever discussed. The Church reacted forcefully. Sin exists and must be fought. Sin, an offence against God, is a universal reality. "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (Romans 11:32). Sin is "a word, an act or a desire contrary to the eternal law." In so doing, it sets itself up against God's love for his human creatures and turns their hearts away from him. Like the first sin, known as original sin, it is disobedience, a rebellion against God the Creator. The sinner knows God's will, and opposes it and pushes "self-love to the point of contempt for God."⁶ The proud exaltation of the person makes sin the exact opposite of Jesus' obedience, through which salvation is accomplished.

“To choose deliberately – that is, both knowing it and willing it – something gravely contrary to the divine law and to the ultimate end of man is to commit a mortal sin.” This sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. Now, without charity, eternal beatitude is impossible. Venial sin constitutes a moral disorder that is reparable by charity, which it allows to subsist in us.⁷

The Council’s Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on “The Church in the Modern World” confronted the reality of sin in the world. Its personal and social consequences are serious for humanity, it taught. Sin diminishes man by preventing him from reaching his full potential. Wounded by sin, he feels within himself the revolts of the body. Sin darkens and weakens his intelligence. The habit it creates blinds his conscience.⁸ It has distorted the face of the world, which has fallen under its slavery.⁹ Wherever the order of things has been vitiated by the consequences of this sin, man finds new incentives to sin again. For sin breeds vices. Its permanent seduction leads to errors and evils that are always serious. Human freedom is wounded, and human activity deteriorates. Man’s will, wounded by sin, makes it difficult for the most precious good, peace, to come to earth.¹⁰

We must accept that, as a result of the interpenetration of the earthly city and the heavenly city, “it remains a mystery of human history, which sin will keep in great disarray until the splendour of God’s sons, is fully revealed.”¹¹

NOTES

- 1 On sin according to Don Bosco, see P. Stella, “Il peccato”, in *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, II, Roma, 1981, pp. 43-57. Fr Rua’s ideas on sin are well reflected in his unpublished sermons: “Sul peccato”, the *Prediche*, a series in FdB 2909 A10-B8; “Del peccato veniale”, in the occasional *Discorsi* series in FdB 2931 EII to 2932 A2; “Malizia del peccato”, in the *Esercizi spirituali* series, quaderno I, p. 25-32, in FdB 2939 A4-11; “La malizia del peccato”, same series, quaderno I, p. 61-72 and quaderno II, pp. 1-5, in FdB 2939 D4-E7; and “I proprii peccati”, in *Esercizi spirituali*, quaderno V, p. 27-46, in FdB 2943 B8-D3.
- 2 “Un mostro orribile io veggo percorrere le vie delle città e le campagne, un mostro orribile io veggo (...) nelle case dei ricchi e nei tugurii dei poveri, un mostro orribile io veggo ammorbare tutto il mondo ...” (M. Rua, “La malizia del peccato”, loc. cit., p. 61).
- 3 “Il peccato, senza che io ve lo dica già lo sapete, il peccato è una disubbidienza contro i comandamenti di Dio, il peccato è una offesa che si fa contro sua divina Maestà. Quando l’uomo pecca che fa egli mai ? Egli volge le spalle a Dio creatore, a quel Dio di bontà che lo ha colmato di benefizii e disprezza la sua grazia e la sua amicizia. Egli dice col fatto al Signore: andate, o Dio, lontano da me; io non vi voglio più servire, io non voglio più riconoscere per mio Dio. Non serviam.” Etc. (M. Rua, “Malizia del peccato”, loc. cit., p. 25).
- 4 “State allegramente: non voglio scrupoli, né malinconie: mi basta che non facciate peccati” (G. Bosco, *Porta teo, cristiano*, Turin, 1858, p. 34).
- 5 “Si dia ampia facoltà di saltare, correre, schiamazzare a piacimento. La ginnastica, la musica, la declamazione, il teatrino, le passeggiate, sono mezzi efficacissimi per ottenere la disciplina, giovare alla moralità ed alla sanità ... Fate quello che volete, diceva il grande amico della gioventù S. Filippo Neri, a me basta che non facciate peccati.” (“Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù”, §II, n. III; in *Inaugurazione del Patronato di S. Pietro in Nizza a mare*, bilingual ed., Turin, 1877, p. 54).
- 6 According to Saint Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 14, 28.
- 7 These two paragraphs depend, pretty much literally, on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992 ed., nos. 1846-1876.
- 8 *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 13, 14, 15, 16.
- 9 *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 2 and 39.
- 10 *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 17, 25, 37, 58, 78.
- 11 *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 40 §3.

Social commitment

Social commitment by Salesians

At the end of the Second World War, social commitment became one of the watchwords in the West for intellectuals and artists of the time. They renounced their position as mere spectators and put their thinking or their art in the service of a cause. Some members of the Church followed suit. They too had to “get involved”. During the 1970s, the term *impegno* (commitment), which one would look for in vain in this sense in earlier official documents, crept into Salesian texts. The Special General Chapter of the Salesians in 1971–1972 devoted a long article to “the Salesian commitment to justice in the world”. The entire Salesian Family discovered that it was “committed”. In 1975, an international colloquium on Salesian life held in Germany took as its theme “The Salesian Family’s commitment to justice”.¹

Of course, Don Bosco’s world had never been content to watch society and let it run its course. The “salvation of souls” required them to work hard. “Good Christians” and “upright citizens” are not formed by dreaming about the future. Providing orphans with bread, a roof over their heads and an education means a lot of sweat. The ways in which they “committed themselves” may have varied, but from the outset the Salesians and their Cooperators were systematically “committed” to a practice at the service of society.

Don Bosco’s social action

Don Bosco was certainly not a pioneer in social matters.² Unlike his contemporaries Lamennais, Proudhon and Saint-Simon, he did not blaze any path. His glory was different. He was of great service to the society of his time, especially through the education of the poor and the underprivileged. He was guided by a relatively clear-cut social project, and his charisma enabled him to develop a number of means to facilitate its execution.

He based this project on a model of society that was necessarily dated, which was that of the liberal, pyramidal and not very rationalised world with which he was familiar. The theology that inspired it ignored – with good reason! – contemporary secularity;

it therefore gave religious and moral values a prominent place in social life itself, and accommodated a flourishing clericalism. Finally, he had recourse to the means that were in vogue around him, which were associations (especially religiously motivated associations such as the Salesian Congregation, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians or the Union of Salesian Cooperators), the Catholic school, of which the “oratory” as he thought of it was a happy variant, and finally “good press” and missionary preaching. So he did not opt for the more modern instruments of the trade union, the party, the movement, the Catholic Action organisation or the prophetic gestures echoed by the mass media to the four corners of the planet. In the name of charity and efficiency he avoided fierce combat and persuasive explanation and systematically chose gentleness and understanding. In principle, he refused political involvement for himself and his family. The reality of the class struggle did not impose itself on him. He did not claim to revolutionise society, or even to reform it. All he wanted to do – and this was already a huge deal – was to renew or restore a “Christian city”.

Salesian commitment in a new world

This generous utopia was becoming impractical in an age of progressive globalisation and widespread social pluralism. Short of losing its soul, Salesian commitment had to remain Christian. But repeating the works conceived by Don Bosco for his century and in his spirit, that is, according to his model of society, could only prove risky, perhaps even suicidal, in the second half of the twentieth century. Salesian social commitment had to be adapted to ever-changing times, as indeed he himself had done himself. “*Con don Bosco e coi tempi*” (with Don Bosco and with the times) became a slogan for general assemblies of the Salesian Family, a slogan that was easier to declaim than to apply. The Christian commitment of the Salesians in society took on a meaning hitherto somewhat unknown.³

We are in the era of Paul VI’s bold encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967). To the best of their ability, the sons and daughters of Don Bosco would take part in building, not just a Christian city, but a more humane world. The social doctrine of the Church would serve as a beacon. The recipients of their social commitment would not change: they would always be young people, especially the most disadvantaged, as well as the working classes. But the educational perspectives would no longer be exactly the same. Henceforth, as in the so-called mission countries, those the Salesians would be working

with would no longer be assumed to be Christians, but only “Christianisable”, and often to a degree far removed from a professed faith in the Christian God. A good Muslim would seem preferable to an amoral Christian with no convictions. The most important thing is to accept God’s loving plan, which merges with the true good. The Salesian’s mission is to help people achieve this. The Gospel will inspire his endeavours for human advancement. According to a formula the Salesians were fond of, they would educate by evangelising and evangelise by educating. The communities of religious and the groups of Cooperators and of Volunteers of Don Bosco would aim their works in this direction, whether they be youth centres (oratories), schools, leisure centres, centres for evangelisation or charity centres, humanitarian associations, social communication through the mass media, and even simple meaningful presences. Without catechising people, they would spread the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who is the Spirit of God, creator and sanctifier. And they would do so in Don Bosco’s manner.

In their renewed Constitutions, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have expressed this educational programme very clearly:

The goal towards which all our pastoral work must be directed is the education of young people to discern God’s plan for them in their lives and to accept this as their mission. Open to the particular perspective of the vocation of the woman in the Church, we shall help young women to become aware of the important issues of our times, and to be capable of contributing with competence and a Gospel spirit to the building of a society more in keeping with the aspirations of the human person.⁴

Salesian commitment to justice

The documents of the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate (Medellin, 22 August – 6 September 1968) influenced Salesian reflection in the years that followed. Let’s not forget that the Salesians were and still are very much present in South America. Medellin constantly described the situation there in terms of “injustice that can be described as institutionalised violence.” “We must not abuse the patience of a people who have endured for years a condition that people with a better awareness of human rights would find difficult to accept.” In the opinion of the average Salesian at the time, all conditions of injustice deserved to be denounced in the same way. The Special General Chapter of 1971–1972 therefore called for “the commitment of Salesians to justice in the world.”⁵ Echoes of liberation theology can be discerned in these statements. “The

problem of justice in the world is one of the most vast, grave and urgent of contemporary society” it began. Therefore, in the spirit of the evangelical beatitudes, the Salesians are committed to an intensely educational action in which they will be both witnesses to and promoters of justice in the world. This work will be carried out with young people and adults responsible for the liberation of the poor. It must be effective for the advent of justice, but in harmony with the guidelines of the local Churches and the Salesian Congregation. And the Chapter then went on to proclaim: “We choose the line of ‘the progress of peoples’”, “We refuse any compromise with any form of social injustice and all collusion with riches and power”, “We collaborate for the promotion of the world of the workers and emigrants”, “We adopt a poor style of life”, “We make some prophetic gestures some prophetic gestures.”⁶ The Chapter also highlighted a spirituality of social commitment to justice. It had, it said, as its source and living soul the charity of Christ the Saviour; it has as motivation the demands of the gospel and the desire of helping Christ himself in the poor: “I was hungry and you gave me food” (Matthew 25:35); it has as object the cooperation in the mission of the Church which aims at animating the temporal order with an evangelical spirit; it has as immediate effect the cooperation in the manifestation of a particular aspect of the love of Christ and of his work of salvation, and lastly, its style is that of Don Bosco, which is imbued with a kindness that promotes dialogue and uses reason, religion and loving-kindness.⁷ Shortly after this Chapter, when the Salesian Cooperators drew up a (provisional) “new set of regulations”, they drafted an article in the same spirit on “personal commitment for justice”.⁸ The programme, probably a little naive for active religious obliged to take account of “money” and “power”, was at least generous.

Salesian social commitment at the end of the twentieth century

The Special General Chapter of the Salesians had led them to reform structures of society, a reform for which they did not really feel destined. The revolutionary violence implied by the programme were repugnant and frightening to them. They wanted both justice and peace. And then, what became of their primary mission as educators? The directives of the last quarter of the century gradually brought their attention to culture and the promotion of people in society.

Was politics, in which Don Bosco had asked them not to become involved, still forbidden to the Salesian Family? Until the time of Fr Ricaldone (+ 1951), the prohibition had been formal. But things had changed with the advent of democracy, at

least in Western countries. For all citizens, politics (a word then given a capital P by Fr Viganò) became synonymous with the pursuit and service of the common good. At this level, no citizen can evade it and refuse to do his or her bit, usually through the ballot paper. The Church as such does not, apart from some exceptions, have to assume this power. Clerics and ecclesial movements therefore have no place in it. The responsibility for power belongs to the laity and the organisations that bring them together. Every member of the Salesian Family must be interested in the first level of politics. The exercise of politics – the second level – even indirectly through political parties, must be left to the non-religious.⁹

The renewed Constitutions of the Salesian religious (1984) included a careful article on their social commitment. Without denying the 1971 principles, they softened them with calls for peace and gave them a less abrupt form. The article began with a reminder:

We work in poor areas and for poor young people. We work with them, educating them to assume their moral, professional and social responsibilities, and favouring their involvement in groups and in the larger community.

Having said that, it moved on to the now inevitable question of commitment to justice, but did so within the Church and by systematically associating peace, the enemy of violence. With it:

In a way appropriate to religious, we share in the witness and commitment of the Church to justice and peace. While not getting involved in ideologies or party politics, we reject everything that encourages deprivation, injustice and violence. We cooperate with all who are trying to build a society more worthy of human dignity.¹⁰

The Salesians did not feel inclined to reform the structures of society. On the other hand, they felt that “culture”, about which much was being said around them, fell within their apostolic remit. The Rector Major of the time gave a precise meaning to this eminently elastic term. He gave it the broadest understanding of the term, one that encompassed all acquired forms of human behaviour, when he taught that culture, in the “anthropological” sense of the word, is a “dimension of man.” “It is a way of being a man (or woman!) in society.”¹¹ And he stated: “We consider culture to be the homeland of our mission.”¹² For education is fundamental to any culture. If we want people to have a culture, we need an educational process (initial and ongoing) that guarantees its quality and development” he continued, addressing the entire Salesian Family. We must not be allowed to forget that Don Bosco chose this path for our mission. Consequently,

initiatives that distance us from the field of cultural education are suspect in our eyes and may constitute a real deviation.¹³ Conversely, the now predominant educational tool of social communications media deserves the full attention of Don Bosco's sons. The Rector Major shook things up a bit. The saint's Salesians could no longer barricade themselves in their colleges. A new frontier has opened up for our work with young people and the general public, he remarked.

We should feel urged to get involved and avoid locking ourselves into a single sector of educational works. We need to say here that we need to be alert, creative, have a strong sense of the problem and know how to collaborate with the local Church which may already have initiatives in this area.¹⁴

Encouraged by a tradition on the move, the authors of the Regulations of Apostolic Life for Cooperators (1986) sought to define "*nella realtà sociale*" (in social reality) the ways in which Salesian non-religious (in this sense – and by stretching things a bit because they can be priests – as lay people) become involved. They do not intend to neglect anything of the temporal order. They are involved in culture, the economy and politics. Cooperators, "faithful to the Gospel and the guidance of the Church" "form a correct conscience about their own responsibility and participation in social life, in the cultural, economic or political fields." The Regulations specify the necessary refusals and desirable actions. "(The Salesian Cooperators) reject everything that provokes and foments injustice and oppression, deprivation and violence, and take courageous action to remove the causes." They also undertake to heal and renew the mentalities, customs, laws and structures of the neighbourhood in which they live and work so as to bring it more in line with the demands of freedom, justice and brotherhood. The Cooperator recognises the power of associations to bring about social change. Individual action doesn't get you very far. To make their actions more effective, they become involved, according to their abilities and availability, in cultural, trade union and socio-political structures.

In the same article, the Regulations of Apostolic Life took a position on the forms of commitment of the Cooperators Association itself, which is an institution of the Church.

The Association as such remains above all party politics, because of its ecclesial nature and in conformity with Don Bosco's wish. Nevertheless it intervenes courageously, following the directives of the local Church, to promote and defend human and Christian values. It enlightens and encourages individual Cooperators to fulfil their duties in society in a responsible manner. Through competent Cooperators the Association is present in apostolic movements and

civil and social organizations which aim especially at service to youth and to the family, developing peoples and the promotion of justice and peace.¹⁵

This was the programme of social commitment that the Salesian Family set itself for the century about to begin.

NOTES

- 1 CGS/SCG 67-77; acts of the Jünkerath colloquium published in the collection *L'impegno della Famiglia salesiana per la giustizia* (coll. *Colloqui sulla vita salesiana* 7), Leumann, LDC, 1976.
- 2 Here I am picking up some conclusions in my article "L'azione sociale dei cattolici del secolo XIX e quella di don Bosco", in *L'impegno della Famiglia salesiana per la giustizia*, op. cit., p. 21-87.
- 3 See, from this point of view, the growing awareness of a new world in Salesian General Chapters in 1965, 1971-1972 and 1990, and of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1969, 1975 and 1990, described by Mario Midali "Educazione alla fede e impegno sociale. La progressiva consapevolezza della Famiglia Salesiana postconciliare", in *La dottrina sociale della Chiesa strumento necessario di educazione alla fede. Atti della XV Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana*, Rome, ed. SDB, 1992, pp. 93-139.
- 4 "La mèta a cui deve tendere la nostra azione pastorale è educare le giovani a discernere il disegno di Dio sulla propria vita e ad assumerlo come una missione. Aperte alle particolari prospettive della vocazione della donna nella Chiesa, cercheremo di renderle sensibili ai grandi problemi dell'oggi e capaci di contribuire con competenza e spirito evangelico all'edificazione di una società più rispondente alle aspirazioni della persona umana." (FMA Constitutions, art. 72).
- 5 CGS/SCG 67-77.
- 6 "1) Scegliamo la linea del progresso dei popoli. 2) Rifutiamo ogni compromesso con qualsiasi forma di ingiustizia sociale e ogni collusione con la ricchezza e la potenza. 3) Collaboriamo per la promozione del mondo operaio e degli emigranti. 4) Adottiamo uno stile di vita povera. 5) Poniamo alcuni gesti profetici." (CGS 72-76).
- 7 CGS/SCG 77.
- 8 New Regulations of the Salesian Cooperators, Rome, ed. SDB, 1974, art 10.
- 9 In E. Viganò, "La nuova evangelizzazione impegna ad approfondire e a testimoniare la dimensione sociale della carità", in *La dimensione sociale della carità. Atti della XTV Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana*, Rome, ed. SDB, 1991, p. 285.
- 10 "Lavoriamo in ambienti popolari e per i giovani poveri. Li educiamo alle responsabilità morali, professionali e sociali, collaborando con loro. [...] Partecipiamo in qualità di religiosi alla testimonianza e all'impegno della Chiesa per la giustizia e la pace. Rimanendo indipendenti da ogni ideologia e politica di partito, rifiutiamo tutto ciò che favorisce la miseria, l'ingiustizia e la violenza, e cooperiamo con quanti costruiscono una società più degna dell'uomo [...]" (SDB Constitutions, art 33).
- 11 See Fr Viganò's explanation: "Un altro settore importante: la cultura. Don Bosco è stato un promotore della cultura popolare. Allora era assai diffuso l'analfabetismo, e la cultura aveva un significato "illuminista"; era privilegio di alcune persone di alta società o di particolari studi. Oggi, invece, la cultura ha un senso "antropologico", si riferisce alla crescita della coscienza sociale di tutto il popolo; è una maniera di essere uomini in società; ha come elemento fondamentale l'educazione, qual settore primario della cultura." ("La nuova evangelizzazione...", art. cit., p. 273). See the entry *Inculturation*.

- 12 “Noi consideriamo la cultura come la patria della nostra missione.” (E. Viganò, “La nuova evangelizzazione ...”, art. cit., p. 286).
- 13 “Non è lecito mai dimenticare che Don Bosco ha scelto questa via per la nostra missione. Perciò il tipo di iniziative che ci allontana dall’ambito educativo culturale rimane per noi sospetto e può essere vocazionalmente deviante.” (E. Viganò, art. cit., ibidem).
- 14 “Ci dovremmo sentire stimolati a impegnarci e ad evitare di rinchiuderci su un solo settore di opere educative. Qui bisogna dire che dobbiamo svegliarci bene, saper essere creativi, sentire vivamente il problema e saper collaborare con la Chiesa locale che magari ha già delle iniziative al riguardo.” (E. Viganò, art. cit., p. 287).
- 15 Here is the complete article: “§ 1. Il Cooperatore, fedele al Vangelo e alle indicazioni della Chiesa, - si forma una coscienza retta della propria responsabilità e partecipazione alla vita sociale negli ambiti della cultura, dell’economia, della politica ; - rifiuta tutto ciò che provoca e alimenta l’ingiustizia e l’oppressione, l’emarginazione e la violenza, e agisce coraggiosamente per rimuoverne le cause ; - si impegna a risanare e a rinnovare le mentalità e i costumi, le leggi e le strutture degli ambienti in cui vive e opera per renderle più conformi alle esigenze evangeliche di libertà, di giustizia e di fraternità ; - per dare più efficacia al suo intervento, si inserisce, secondo le proprie capacità e disponibilità, nelle strutture culturali, sindacali, socio-politiche. § 2. L’Associazione in quanto tale rimane estranea ad ogni politica di partito, per la sua natura ecclesiale e secondo il pensiero di Don Bosco. Tuttavia interviene coraggiosamente, seguendo le direttive della Chiesa locale, per promuovere e per difendere I valori umani e cristiani. Illumina e stimola i singoli Cooperatori ad assumere responsabilmente I propri impegni nella società. Per mezzo di Cooperatori qualificati, si rende presente in movimenti apostolici e in organismi che si prefiggono specialmente il servizio alla gioventù e alla famiglia, la solidarietà con i popoli in via di sviluppo e la promozione della giustizia e della pace.” (*Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 11).

Soul

The Salesian coat of arms

On 12 September 1884, Fr Sala presented the Salesian Superior Chapter with the proposed coat of arms for the Society: a shield divided in two by an anchor. On the right side there was a bust of Saint Francis de Sales, on the left a burning heart; at the top, a star; below the anchor, a wood against the background of high mountains. From the bottom, a palm and laurel branch intertwined at the base, reaching halfway up either side of the shield. The problem of the inscription to be placed at the foot of the coat of arms arose and was discussed. Don Bosco solved the problem. The motto, he explained, has existed since the beginning of the Oratory, at the time of the *Convitto* when he visited the prisons. It is *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*, in other words: *Give me souls and take away the rest.*¹

The soul of Salesian tradition

Salesian spirituality, be it of Francis de Sales as well as of Don Bosco, has always had great regard for the soul. And it has given this word a meaning which we need to explore, even if it is more or less problematic at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis opened his chapter *On Death* with a series of questions on the soul's 'exit' from the body.² And when Don Bosco described the death of Dominic Savio, he did not think of it in terms that were any different.³ Dominic's soul had left his body. It was therefore quite distinct from it. Traditional Salesian anthropology was dualistic.

Without in any way despising the body, it professed the greatest admiration for the soul. God "created the body with the beautiful qualities that we admire in it", wrote Don Bosco in one of the instructions for his *Mese di maggio*, rightly dedicated to the soul. "To this body he united a soul, which is far more precious than the body and all the things we see in the world. Its preciousness comes from its resemblance to God, who gave it life with the breath of his mouth." Don Bosco described this soul, whether consciously or not, in terms resembling the opening of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. "God has given us a soul, in other words, he gave us this invisible being that we feel within us, and which

which continually tends to rise towards God; this intelligent being which thinks and reasons, and which cannot find its happiness on earth, and consequently among riches themselves and any earthly pleasures, and is always anxious until it rests in God, for God alone can make it happy.” The soul is at the origin of ideas. “We have through it the faculty of creating ideas, of combining them, of producing masterpieces, which elevate man above all other creatures, and which prove (...) that the soul is the symbol or imprint of God’s intelligence.”

The soul is immortal and free. An inner voice, Don Bosco wrote, told the man that his soul “cannot be annihilated and will live forever.” Another eminent faculty, freedom, understood by him in a moral sense. God gave freedom to our soul, “that is, the faculty of choosing good or evil.” He guarantees it reward if it does good, he threatens it with chastisement if it chooses evil.⁴

It has a strong propensity to evil, said Fr Rua, thinking of his Salesian sons, recipients of his letter. The soul, like the body, is subject to many grave infirmities which are, to indicate some, inclination to anger, sensual pleasures, special friendships, melancholy, and lukewarmness.⁵

These weaknesses are especially regrettable because they compromise salvation, which is (exclusively?) the salvation of the soul. Don Bosco ended his instruction in the *Mese di maggio* on the soul with an urgent exhortation:

Christian, you who also have an immortal soul, think that if you save it, all is saved, but if you lose it, all is lost. You only have one soul, one sin can make you lose it. What would happen to us and our souls if God called us at this moment to His Divine tribunal? You who read think of your soul, and I who write will think seriously of mine.⁶

This concern for the salvation of the soul was at the centre of his life, explained the Rector Major, Fr Albera.

Save souls! This was the slogan which he wished to have imprinted on the coat of arms of his Congregation; this was, so to speak, his sole *raison d’être*. To be clear: first save your own soul, then that of others.⁷

A term that has become problematic

The world is changing in a thousand ways, Fr Egidio Viganò remarked. Ideas themselves evolve, along with the vocabulary that supports them. In theology, in catechesis and

therefore in spirituality, there are words like hell, sin, sacrifice, trinity... which have become problematic. Soul is one of the less favoured ones. The authors of specialised dictionaries prefer not to say anything about it or, at the very least, not to tackle a difficult problem head-on. Paul Poupard's *Dictionnaire des Religions* dodges the obstacle with an article on the soul in the Bible alone. The *Nouveau Dictionnaire de Théologie* by Peter Eicher, in its 1996 edition, and the *Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophie morale* published in the same year under the direction of Monique Canto-Sperber, deal only incidentally with it, by implication, in the chapter on Augustinism or on Descartes. While Peter Eicher devotes ten pages to *Antisemitism*, he does not even devote half a page to the soul. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the soul had evaporated from the dominant philosophy and theology.

This brutal evolution, with so many consequences for spirituality, can be explained. Contemporary culture, as we know,⁸ rejects all dualism, all opposition between body and soul. It condemns the idea, embedded in the West by Hellenistic thought, of the union on earth of the spirit, principle of good and promotion, and of the flesh, principle of evil and decay. Immortality is possible only to the mind, therefore to the soul. There would be two substances in man, one good, which must be served and improved, the other bad, which must be repelled, suppressed if not even destroyed. Of course, Christianity immediately revised this idea. The body, created by God and with the promise of resurrection, is good in itself, Revelation explains. Man is one, both flesh and spirit, Christian philosophy has repeatedly said. But duality with its underlying concepts has remained, cry the catechists. Let us be aware that this soul/body dualism still permeates our thoughts and is responsible for a double devaluation. The devaluation of the present, of history, human relations, which are only a transitional phase intended to give way to the true world, that of the spirit. The devaluation of Christian hope, reduced to belief in the immortality of the soul and deprived of all its cosmic dimension.⁹

So be it! But personalism, found everywhere in theology today, allows the Christian to exit the impasse on which he stumbles. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* keeps the soul united with the human body.¹⁰ It is the person created in the image and likeness of God that unifies the human creature. Silently in traditional Salesian spirituality, the doctrine of the soul is rethought according to the person. The Index of Circulars of Rectors Major from Fr Rinaldi in 1922 to Fr Ricceri in 1978 ignored the word *Soul*. As for the Index of Fr Viganò's circulars, which goes up to 1995, the term appears only in the Latin formula: *Da mihi animas*.

Moreover, everyday word usage lends itself to the transformation of meaning. Whenever it does not receive a specific meaning and is not opposed to that of body, the word soul, the ultimate principle of the individual, designates the person. The part is then taken for the whole. “You could not see a living soul” they say of a deserted place where there is no one. Voltaire jokingly wrote of Russia: “Including women, you will find nearly twenty million souls.” We read in a fable of La Fontaine’s: “There is no living soul that does not err in this.” And who would want to imagine a soul on the move stripped of its body? “To have charge of the soul” is to have responsibility for a person, especially on the moral level.¹¹ Is it certain that, in the Church, the *cura animarum* is reduced to caring only for the spiritual good of a population when history shows us so many exemplary bishops and parish priests at the entire service of their flock? In all these cases there is no difference between the soul and the person.

Man’s death thus takes on a renewed meaning.

The doctrine of the separation of soul and body is frequently understood in a dualistic way, as if they were two parts of man, each capable of existing completely independently of the other. In contrast to this it must be said that neither is the body only the envelope of the soul, nor the soul ever completely incorporeal. In so far as the secret of life after death is and remains God’s secret, we hope, with confidence in faith, that new life with God with God is related to the way in which one lives one’s earthly life, with the person’s identity and continuity. This continuity of the person in death is made possible by the fact that man’s self, his very being, the core of his person, remains.¹²

“Give me souls”

In the language of Don Bosco and his successors, the term soul has sometimes oscillated between the two senses: the soul distinct from the body, with its particular faculties, it alone promised to meet God after death, and the person with his or her daily worries, both spiritual and material. However, despite the Bible, from which it is taken and where the Hebrew word thus translated clearly designates persons,¹³ the formula *Da mihi animas* was traditionally much more marked by the former meaning than by the latter. The soul is, in the child and in the man, the principle to educate correctly, to value, save, sanctify, divinise. From Dominic Savio’s elliptical reflection upon entering Valdocco in 1854 to the commentary by Juan Vecchi in 1996, the authorised texts only suggest a slight inflexion *in extremis*.

In his life of Dominic Savio Don Bosco wrote:

As soon as he arrived at the Oratory, he came immediately to my room in order to put himself, as he used say, completely in my hands. Almost immediately his gaze fell on the wall where a piece of cardboard displayed in large letters a saying which I often used: *Da mihi animas caetera tolle*. He looked at them attentively and I helped him to translate them as follows: “Give me souls, and take away everything else.” He thought for a moment and then said: “I understand; here you do business not with money, but with souls; I hope that my soul will have its share in this business.”¹⁴

Let’s understand this “commercial” image, which is more refined than one might think. Dominic placed his soul in the hands of Don Bosco, who had become a banker for the occasion, in order to make the most of this spiritual capital. The soul in fact grows through virtue and holiness. And the spiritual director helps him in this growth.

Seventy years later, a General Councillor for Schools in the Salesian Congregation interpreted the *Da mihi animas* as follows:

For us, the school is part of the Salesian program of life which is summed up in Don Bosco’s motto *Da mihi animas caetera tolle*. It is a means of winning over souls to God, and they can only be won over to God by making them Christian. Our school was indeed established to make good Christians and, to achieve this, it must be done in a Christian way and not otherwise.¹⁵

According to his rough translation of the “conquest” for God, the souls of the gift claimed by the *Da mihi animas* were the souls to be saved, while the bodies, promised to the grave, are left on the lower plane.

During the second half of the twentieth century, this interpretation of the word soul in the *Da mihi animas* became troublesome. It is an antiquated expression, the Rector Major Fr Viganò once wrote. And he then said. “The term ‘soul’, in our tradition, emphasises the more significant and valid traits of the human person and his social environment.”¹⁶ On 31 December, 1995, that is to say, the day after Fr Viganò’s death and on the eve of his own election as head of the Salesian Congregation, it was up to Juan Vecchi to present the Salesian Family with the traditional Strenna. The wording was dictated by the late Rector Major. It was: “*Da mihi animas* is the gift of self that enlivens all existence: that of activity and that of patience.”¹⁷ The commentator was obliged to speak about the meaning and harmonics of the wording on the Salesian coat of arms. Faithful to the original formulation and meaning, however, he leaned towards a broader

understanding of the notion of “soul”, surreptitiously expanding its meaning at the end by simple quotation marks. He recalled a sentence of Fr Rua's about Don Bosco: “Truly, the only concern of his heart was for souls.”¹⁸ The souls in this sentence were the spiritual beings to be established in divine grace and prepared to meet God in eternity. Then he commented on the *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle* in Don Bosco's life, pointing to

- 1) the sense of the fatherhood of God and trust in the grace of Christ the Redeemer, who has a beautiful project of life for each young person, already inscribed in his existence, even if it is so often covered over by negative experiences;
- 2) an ardent desire to make this possibility known and experienced by young people, so that they may have a happy life, enlightened in this world by faith and saved for all eternity;
- 3) the employment of all his strength and means to this end, even if it involved just one young person, a single “soul”.¹⁹

This final comparison cannot pass unnoticed. The philosopher, sensitive to the exact meaning of the terms, did not resist contemporary pressure. Quietly, the soul of the *Da mihi animas* has become a “young person”.²⁰

NOTES

- 1 Since then, the *Da mihi animas* has been an integral part of the Salesian coat of arms, and the word “Soul” belongs to the most specific vocabulary of Don Bosco’s family.
- 2 *Introduction à la vie devote*, première partie, chap. XIII; *Oeuvres*, vol. III, p. 43-44.
- 3 “Va pure, anima fedele al tuo Creatore. Il cielo ti è aperto, gli angeli ed i santi ti hanno preparata una grande festa; quel Gesù che tanto amasti t’invita e ti chiama dicendo: Vieni, servo buono e fedele, vieni, tu hai combattuto, hai riportato vittoria, ora vieni al possesso di un gaudio che non ti mancherà mai più: intra in gaudium Domini tui.” (G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, Turin, 1880, chap. 25.)
- 4 “Dio non solo è Creatore di tutte le cose che nel cielo e nella terra si contengono, ma è eziandio Creatore di noi medesimi. Egli creò il corpo con quelle belle qualità che noi in essi rimiriamo; a questo corpo ha unito un’anima che è di gran lunga più preziosa del corpo e di tutte le altre cose che noi vediamo nel mondo. Dio ci ha donato un’anima, cioè ci ha donato quell’essere invisibile che sentiamo in noi, e che tende continuamente ad elevarsi a Dio; quell’essere intelligente che pensa e ragiona, e che non può trovare la sua felicità sopra la terra, e che perciò in mezzo alle stesse ricchezze e in mezzo a qualsiasi piacere della terra ella è sempre inquieta finché non riposi in Dio, perciocché Dio solo può renderla felice. (...) Questo (l’immortalità) sentiamo in noi stessi in quella voce interna che a tutti parla nel cuore e dice: l’anima tua non potrà essere annichilita e vivrà in eterno. (...) Per mezzo dell’anima noi abbiamo la facoltà di crearci delle idee, di combinarle, di produrre certi capolavori, che sollevano l’uomo sopra tutte le altre creature, e che provano, come è difatti, che l’anima è il simbolo ovvero il contrassegno dell’intelligenza di Dio. Dio diede all’anima nostra la libertà, cioè la facoltà di scegliere il bene e il male, assicurandole un premio se fa bene, minacciando un castigo qualora scelga il male.” (G. Bosco, *Il Mese di maggio ...*, 1858, second day: “The soul”).
- 5 “L’anima, non altrimenti che il corpo, va soggetta a molte e gravi infermità, quali sono, per accennarne alcune, l’inclinazione alla collera, ai piaceri sensuali, alle amicizie particolari, alla malinconia ed alla tiepidezza.” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesian Provincials and Rectors, 1 November 1906)
- 6 “O cristiano, che pure hai un’anima immortale, pensa che se la salvi, tutto è salvato, ma se la perdi, tutto è perduto. Hai un’anima sola, un solo peccato te la può far perdere. Che sarebbe di noi e dell’anima nostra se in questo momento Iddio ci chiamasse al suo Divin tribunale? Tu che leggi pensa all’anima tua, ed io che scrivo penserò seriamente per la mia.” (G. Bosco, *Il Mese di maggio ...*, loc. cit.)
- 7 “Salvar le anime! fu la parola d’ordine ch’egli volle impressa sullo stemma della sua Congregazione, fu, si può dire, l’unica sua ragione d’esistere: s’intende salvare prima l’anima propria e poi quella degli altri.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 18 October 1920).
- 8 See the Introduction.
- 9 Michel Rondet, “Dire le salut”, *Catéchèse* 146, February 1997, pp. 23-24.
- 10 We read there: In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. God, in his almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 997.

- 11 Quotes from the *Grand Robert de la langue française*, 1.1, p. 304.
- 12 German Episcopal Conference, *Unsere Sorge um die Toten und die Hinterbliebenen. Bestattungskultur und Begleitung von Trauernden aus christlicher Sicht*, Bonn, 22 November 1994.
- 13 The Jerusalem Bible translates the passage from the Vulgate, *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*, in the following way: "The king of Sodom said to Abraham: 'Give me the people and keep the spoils for yourself'" (Genesis 14:21).
- 14 "Venuto nella casa dell'oratorio, si reco' in mia camera, per darsi, come egli diceva, intieramente nelle mani de' suoi superiori. Il suo sguardo si porto' subito su di un cartello sopra cui a grossi caratteri sono scritte le seguenti parole che soleva ripetere S. Francesco di Sales : da mihi animas, caetera tolle. Fecesi a leggerle attentamente ; ed io desiderava che ne capisse il significato ; perciò l'invitai, anzi l'aiutai a tradurle e cavar questo senso : O Signore, datemi anime e prendetevi tutte le altre cose. Egli penso' un momento e poi soggiunse : Ho capito : qui non avvi negozio di danaro, ma negozio di anime ; ho capito : spero che l'anima mia farà anche parte di questo commercio." (G. Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, Turin, 1880, chap. 8.)
- 15 "La scuola per noi fa parte del programma della vita salesiana, che è riassunta nel motto di Don Bosco : Da mihi animas coetera tolle. E' un mezzo per conquistare anime a Dio, e le anime si conquistano a Dio in modo solo, facendole cristiane. - La nostra scuola è adunque istiuita per far dei buoni cristiani ; e per riuscirvi dev'essere fatta cristianamente e non altrimenti." (Il Consigliere scolastico, in *Atti* 26, 24 October 1924, p. 319.) In 1924, the General Councillor for Schools was Bartolomeo Fascie (1861–1937).
- 16 "Il termine 'anima', nella nostra tradizione, sottolinea i tratti più significativi e validi della persona umana e del suo contorno sociale." (Letter to Salesians, 5 December 1989; *Atti* 332, p. 39.)
- 17 "Il 'Da mihi animas' è il dono di sè che vivifica tutta l'esistenza: quella dell'attività e quella della pazienza."
- 18 "Realmente non ebbe a cuore altro che le anime" (Reproduced in the 1984 Salesian Constitutions, art. 21)
- 19 "Ma il commento migliore al significato del da mihi animas non è un florilegio di citazioni o aneddoti, ma la vita di don Bosco in cui emergono: - il senso della paternità di Dio e la fiducia nella grazia di Cristo Redentore che ha un bel progetto di vita per ciascun giovane, iscritto già nella sua esistenza, anche se tante volte coperto da esperienze negative; - un ardente desiderio di far conoscere e gustare ai giovani questa loro possibilità, affinché avessero una vita felice, illuminata dalla fede in questo mondo e "salva" per tutta l'eternità; - il darsi da fare, l'impiegare tutte le proprie forze e mezzi in questo proposito, anche quando si trattasse di un sol giovane, una sola 'anima'."(J. Vecchi, Il "da mihi animas" è il dono di sé che vivifica tutta l'esistenza, quella dell'attività e quella della pazienza. *Strenna* 1996, Rome, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1996).
- 20 The motto *Da mihi animas coetera tolle* has been interpreted by Francesco Motto, in *I sentieri della speranza nella spiritualità salesiana*, Rome, 1994, p. 69-70.

Spiritual direction

The spiritual direction of adults in the Salesian Family

By vocation, Don Bosco's followers dedicate themselves to the education of the young. The spiritual direction of the young is therefore their responsibility. They could have worked out that the spiritual direction of adults did not concern them. If so, they were mistaken, for among their ranks there was no shortage of models – simple, if you like, but authentic ones – of adult spiritual direction. Moreover, it was necessary to direct religious men and women in their spiritual life.¹ Little by little, since Fr Rua and Fr Albera, but especially since Vatican II and under Fr Viganò's leadership, reflection on the necessity, or at least the desirability, of spiritual direction for the Christian development of individuals and communities, how it is to be done and who is responsible for it, was understood more deeply. In 1983, in Rome and at the Salesian Generalate, a week of spirituality was dedicated to "Spiritual Direction in the Salesian Family".² The theme came from Fr Viganò's Strenna for that year, which was formulated as follows: "Let us promote the Christian maturity of individuals and communities by renewing and intensifying the formative experience of Spiritual Direction in a Salesian style."³ Some convictions on the definition of spiritual direction, on its Salesian style, on its content and on the person of the director, emerged from these successive studies.

An attempt to define spiritual direction

The Salesian Family is not afraid of the expression "spiritual direction", which many around it have read, or still read, as a threat to the freedom of those being "directed". The figure of the spiritual director or teacher in fact conceals something contradictory. Apparently this individual suffocates the person he or she claims to help to live better. What is more, to opponents of it any kind of direction seems suspect. They rightly criticise various traditional forms of leadership which, by demanding total submission to the director, engender an intolerable heteronomy in a world, our world, which glorifies initiative, creativity and the free development of personality. Consider that the docility imposed on those being directed has gone as far as vowing obedience to the director.

But Salesian spiritual direction does not believe it should be concerned by these contradictions. At least where Don Bosco's method is applied, the necessarily friendly and therefore rather egalitarian relationship between director and directee allow us to translate "spiritual direction" mentally and without any problem by "spiritual accompaniment", an expression that met with a great deal of approval at the end of the twentieth century.⁴ Don Bosco did not claim to be the father of his Salesian sons, although he really was. More than a father and a teacher, the Salesian rector/director was, like the assistant, a brother and a friendly guide. "Some people wonder," wrote a monk of the 1968 generation, "shouldn't the master give up being the parental type and adopt a fraternal type?"⁵ The abbots of Benedictine monasteries would remain fathers, to whom the monks would continue to surrender themselves with the confidence of sons, in the certainty that the tender and demanding fatherhood of God is manifested in them. But there are many houses in Christ's Church. For its part, the Salesian tradition encourages a positive response to the monk from 1968. Fraternal accompaniment, which in no way hinders the personal development of the directee and preserves his freedom, is very popular. Better still, it contributes to this development. The Salesian tradition rejects authoritarianism and dictatorial systems. Even if it has its own flavour, it therefore maintains, along with many others, an expression borrowed from the Christian tradition. In a changing world, where the "director" is increasingly taking a back seat to the "adviser", it has much less reason than in the past to fear authoritarian interpretations.⁶

Our common reflection has led the Salesian Family to attempt a definition of spiritual direction, referred to here as accompaniment in trust and friendship. It is a sacred mediation of help, originating in the Holy Spirit.⁷ Since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit of the Father and of the Son animates and guides the whole Church, the Body of Christ, in two ways, linked together in perfect harmony: directly through his interior inspirations and movements, and indirectly through the hierarchical bodies and the ecclesial communities. The Holy Spirit "dwells" in every Christian and "leads" that person (Romans 8:14; 1 Corinthians 3:16). The Holy Spirit is the only spiritual director in the full sense of the expression. Attention and docility to the Spirit are therefore fundamental to Christian maturity and fruitfulness, the benefits expected from genuine direction. But the Spirit does not guide the Christian only from within. In the Church as a whole, which is the "universal sacrament of salvation" and in connection with the overall guidance of the hierarchy, the Spirit also enlightens and supports the Christian through the community in which this person is inserted and by their brothers and sisters who, either by virtue of their function or their personal charism are able to help them

“live by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16). The spiritual director, by his or her instrumental function of assistance within the Mother Church, is situated in this intermediate context. This function makes him or her a humble servant and collaborator of the Spirit. The community environment can certainly contribute to a soul’s progress towards God, and spiritual friendships naturally encourage this.⁸ However, the group, even if it is well-intentioned, will have difficulty in solving the problems of personal growth that the soul faces. Although not indispensable, spiritual direction is at least very useful in this case. Fr Rua considered it necessary for religious who were bound by vocation to advance on the road to perfection and to work towards their sanctification. Very few would bother, he felt, if they were not encouraged and supported by their own superiors, in other words by their appointed spiritual directors. Regular confession is not enough, he insisted on another occasion. And neither age nor priesthood exempt religious from accountability, which has all the features of spiritual direction.⁹

On the basis of these certainties, Salesian spiritual direction could be defined as “The action of a competent Christian who, in the name of God and the Church, through personal dialogue, helps a confrere in a useful way by bringing him the light and the impetus which he cannot find sufficiently in himself or in his environment to enable him to discern God’s will for him and to conform to it, in order to grow securely in personal holiness and ecclesial effectiveness.”¹⁰

The Salesian style of spiritual direction

Don Bosco was an outstanding spiritual master, not only of young people, but of his sons and confreres. All his pastoral work was aimed at preparing souls to meet Christ. To this end, he presented himself as a “friend of the soul”, which he guided above all through confession. We learn from him: the practical need of regular spiritual direction, the privileged role of the priest and the superior in this in this direction, as well as a method of direction that was simple, practical, solid and “Salesian” loving-kindness which was later applied by various faithful disciples, such as Frs Rua and Rinaldi. It will be recalled that for him, the monthly rendering of accountability of his religious to their rectors constituted genuine spiritual direction. Mary Domenica Mazzarello, youth educator, then Superior General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, took on the profound education of her Sisters through true spiritual direction. The Holy Spirit favoured her with the gift of discernment of spirits. Her strong personal experience enabled her to become the “initiator” of her Sisters on the path of Salesian holiness. From

the trust she instilled in them, she helped them to discover the truth about themselves and thus grow in joy and charity.

The work of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello in their particular settings, the former at Valdocco and the latter at Mornese, shows that traditional Salesian spiritual direction must, if it is to be properly appreciated, be seen as part of a series of community formative interventions, particularly liturgical and devotional ones, of which it becomes in some way, if not, as is sometimes said, “the synthesis and the summit”, then at least the occasion for very timely reminders.¹¹

Like that of the old religious orders the spiritual direction of the early Salesians was simple, without techniques, based on friendship, trust and mutual freedom. It was also a little ingenuous, like the prose of M. Jourdain who wrote prose without knowing it. However, models have begun to emerge. One of the best is Blessed Philip Rinaldi. Maria Lanzio, the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, testified from personal experience:

His spiritual direction was simple, balanced, Salesian in the full sense of the word, gentle and strong at the same time, clear. A few minutes were enough to clarify the situation of the conscience, which spontaneously opened up to the sound of his easy and kind words: not only could you hide nothing from him, but you were willing and able to tell him everything. His advice was brief, but always appropriate; it was translated into a practical and sure resolution, always aimed at solidly shaping what needed to be shaped and rooting out what needed to be rooted out. More than your deficiencies, he gave great importance to the habitual attitude of your soul, helping to repair its weaknesses and advising the means that would strengthen it: mortification, humility, the sacraments, meditation and good reading.¹²

The aim of spiritual direction

“Spiritual direction, my dear priests,” wrote Fr Albera to the Salesian priests in 1921, “must not be an occasional and changeable thing, but a single and constant system of conduct, theoretical and practical at the same time, capable of guiding us to holiness.” And he drew up a plan of direction for Salesians as the spiritual directors of their confreres: “The task of the spiritual director is to make known to us what God wants us, the virtues we must practise, the means we must resort to, the dangers we must guard against so as not to fail in our Salesian vocation.”¹³

Perfect, but also a bit quick on the uptake for psychologists at the end of a century that has become very concerned with human maturity. The director is now expected to help a person achieve holiness. Spiritual direction must be an act of creative and liberating assistance to the person being directed. The method of direction is therefore evolving compared to the past. The aim is still to promote a process of growth in one's relationship with God. But, to achieve the desired fullness of Christian life, it is necessary to mobilise all the available strengths of the person being led, through dialogue. This implies a greater awareness of the individual's spiritual resources, the deficiencies that condition them, their needs, as well as the values to which they aspire and which form the basis of their reasons for acting. The process of growth must develop not only the will, or only the intelligence, or only the heart, or only action, but all the psycho-affective and spiritual functions of the individual and gradually demand of him all that he can give. The spiritual director must therefore:

1. welcome and listen to the person being led. A climate of trust maximises the effectiveness of direction;
2. facilitate personal self-exploration on the part of the directee, and the calm updating and understanding of his inner reactions;
3. give responsibility to the person being directed, who often tends to explain his inner world in terms of the environment and circumstances;
4. urge commitment, and, to do this, define with the individual the goals to be achieved and the paths to be taken.¹⁴

and, The 1983 Spirituality Week deduced from this that "spiritual direction" is not just an organised intervention in the problems of a person's "interior life", but that it considers that person in his totality and concrete situation, albeit from the point of view of his behaviour as a "new man" and as a son of God guided by the Spirit.

The conclusions of the Week were the fruit of a variety of reflections on spiritual direction in the past and present, and also listed the "principal contents" of this direction. We read that it is "better self-knowledge and acceptance, development of the theological life, education in listening to the Word and prayer, eradication of defects and obstacles to charity, discernment of God's will in the various situations and difficulties of life, discernment of one's vocation and formation in a specific type of Christian life, education in the authentic meaning of the apostolate, overcoming and utilising any crises, temptations, doubts, the right response to any special calls of the spirit."¹⁵ What a collection! But it creates a complication that is only apparent. For underneath

this collection of ideas we find Fr Rinaldi's simple behaviour with his mentees, or Fr Joseph Cafasso's questions to Don Bosco, whose spiritual director he was between his ordination to the priesthood in 1841 and Fr Cafasso's death in 1860. The direction given by Fr Cafasso certainly did not concern only the "interior life" of those he directed. Don Bosco wrote:

Fr Cafasso was my spiritual director, and if I have been able to do any good, I owe it to this worthy priest in whose hands I have placed every decision I made, all my study and every activity of my life.¹⁶

His biography bears witness to this: guided by a prudent director, he sought to respond as best he could to God's will according to his capacities, his dispositions and his tastes.

The skills needed by a spiritual director

It remains to say a few words about the qualities and skills required for a spiritual director. At the 1983 Spirituality Week, an attempt was made to determine these, before concluding with the formation that the director should receive.¹⁷ Because the Salesian Family needs spiritual directors. Do not the Regulations of Apostolic Life for Salesian Cooperators state that "the Cooperators themselves bear the first and principal responsibility for their own formation," and that this calls for "docility to the Holy Spirit" and that "they give importance to the life of prayer and to spiritual direction?"¹⁸ Where to find this direction? Of course, the collective subconscious focuses on figures such as psychologists or gurus, the reverential awe that we once had of certain masters. So it's a bit of a wild goose chase. But, asked the Rector Major Fr Vecchi with some anxiety in 1998, "if someone, especially a young person, was interested in our spirituality and wanted to know about it, are Salesian educators capable of orienting them, of serving as their guides, pointing out its features, steps and stages with the freedom, but also with the effectiveness and clarity required?"¹⁹ The Salesian Family must create its own spiritual directors.

It would be wise not to exaggerate the difficulties of a role which, on closer inspection, not only belongs to the priest who is rector of a Salesian community, responsible for receiving what used to be called the *rendiconto* or manifestation, but also to the superior (animator) of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the local leader of the Don Bosco Volunteers.²⁰ The priestly monopoly on leadership, which was

once the rule, is now being challenged. The Volunteers' Regulations ask the local leaders to listen to their companions in a "fraternal talk", intended to verify "their fidelity to the Constitutions on what regards witness of life", and to "discern together the will of God, to contribute to the good of the Group, and to receive comfort and orientation with regard to fidelity to one's vocation."²¹ Now the "vocation" is eminently a call to holiness in following Christ.²² And, if we follow Fr Albera, the wise spiritual director does no more than work with the directee to find out God's will for the person to guide them the wise spiritual director works only with the person concerned to find out God's will for them and to guide them in their somewhat arduous journey towards Him. The local leader of the Volunteers is therefore very similar to the classic Salesian spiritual director.

It is important to reassure those who are hesitant, as their duties require them to lead others. Leading souls, this "art of arts", is above all a matter of wisdom, which is a gift of the Spirit. Extensive knowledge is certainly desirable. But the history of the Salesians soon points out that the Holy Spirit dispensed Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello from this, who was still almost illiterate when she took responsibility for her fledgling community. She had a strong personal spirituality and great interior virtues. She formed people more by what she was than by what she said or knew. Experience infuses wisdom into directors who have a well-born soul. Saint Vincent de Paul set things straight:

It is spiritual people who live by the spirit, who live in a spiritual way, who must know how to discern false light from true light, both for their own benefit and for the consolation of their neighbour; for, having received the light which the Holy Spirit communicates to those who give themselves to him, these people feel that they have the light and even the experience to help souls who are inclined to do things that lead them to their ruin.²³

These directors refine their intimate experience through an appropriate culture, kept up to date and above all by an "art" (skill) in dialogue, taught to them by observation and reflection. In most cases, the knowledge and handling of investigative and remedial techniques, although useful, are not essential.²⁴

The loving gaze of the spiritual Salesian welcomes those who come to him in all that they are. Man or woman, they are there in their body. The attentive director senses their deep affectivity, and realises that they already have a long history, a life of relationships, a spiritual desire that has brought them to him. For them to be open to growth, they need to be fully recognised as they are. They need to be trusted. Do they not have resources

of their own own? This is where they will draw the energy for their progress. Nothing is built on fantasy.

We must avoid allowing ourselves to be fascinated by the paradoxical statement of Saint de Sales, according to whom the spiritual director must be chosen from among ten thousand, rather than from among a thousand candidates.²⁵ The Holy Spirit is generous in the distribution of his charisms. The spiritual director prays to him and remembers that he is only his instrument.

NOTES

- 1 See the entry on the *Rector/Director*.
- 2 On spiritual direction among the Salesians, see especially Paul Albera, “Necessità della direzione spirituale”, in his letter to Salesian priests, 15 March 1921, in L.C., pp. 418-420; Luigi Ricceri’s letter, “Abbiamo bisogno di esperti di Dio”, in *Atti* 281, January-March 1976, pp. 3-51; an international Salesian colloquium held on spiritual direction in August 1982, whose proceedings were published under the title *La Direzione spirituale (Colloqui sulla vita salesiana* 11, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1983, 280 pages.); and the proceedings of the tenth spirituality week of the Salesian Family, Rome, 23-29 January 1983, under the title *La Direzione spirituale nella Famiglia salesiana* (Rome, ed. S.D.B., 1983, 400 pages).
- 3 “Promoviamo la maturazione cristiana delle persone e delle comunità rinnovando e intensificando con stile salesiano l’esperienza formativa della Direzione Spirituale”. See *La Direzione spirituale nella Famiglia salesiana*, p. 9.
- 4 The special issue of the Jesuit magazine for priests, *Christus*, on spiritual direction (153, h.s., February 1992) is entitled: *Accompagnement spirituel*. Salesian Professor J. M. Garcia published his work around the theme of “spiritual accompaniment”: *I giovani nello Spirito*, Roma, LAS, 1998.
- 5 Jacques Rouse, monk of Wisques, “Réflexions sur le maître spirituel”, *La Vie spirituelle*, n° 589, March-April 1972, p. 173.
- 6 See, among others, for the Jesuits, Joseph Stierli, s.j., “L’art de la direction spirituelle”, in *Christus*, issue already cited, pp. 39-55; and, for the Salesians, Luciano Cian, “Le critiche mosse alla direzione spirituale salesiana dalla psicologia contemporanea. Contestazioni e orientamenti”, in *La Direzione spirituale*, pp. 181-218.
- 7 Here we are following *La Direzione spirituale nella Famiglia salesiana*, pp. 371-382.
- 8 See the entries *Friendship* and *Fraternal correction*.
- 9 M. Rua, Letter to Salesian provincials and rectors, 29 November 1899, L.C., pp. 195-200; Letter to Salesians, 5 August 1900, L.C., pp. 218-219; Letter to Salesian provincials and rectors, 25 April 1901, L.C., pp. 261-262.
- 10 “E’ l’azione di un cristiano competente che, a nome di Dio e della Chiesa, attraverso il dialogo personale, porta a un fratello l’aiuto opportuno di illuminazione e di spinta che questo non trova in modo sufficiente né in se stesso, né nell’ambiente, per permettergli di discernere la volontà di Dio su di lui e di se.” This definition of the week’s conclusions was borrowed by the Congress from the report by Fr Aubry, *ibid.*, p. 295.
- 11 Carlo Colli, “La Direzione spirituale nella prassi e nel pensiero di don Bosco: memoria e profezia” in *La Direzione spirituale nella Famiglia salesiana*, pp. 53-77; Maria Ester Posada, “Il carisma della Direzione spirituale personale di S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello”, *ibidem*, pp. 85-104; Lutgardis Craeynest, “Madre Mazzarello direttrice spirituale”, in *La Direzione spirituale*, pp. 92-104; Francis Desramaut, “San Giovanni Bosco direttore d’anime”, *ibidem*, pp. 41-91.

- 12 “La sua direzione spirituale, semplice, piana, salesiana in tutto il senso della parola, soave e forte nello stesso tempo, chiara. Pochi minuti bastavano a chiarire la situazione della coscienza che si apriva spontaneamente al tocco della sua parola facile e buona: non si poteva nascondergli nulla, non solo, ma si voleva e si poteva dirgli tutto. I suoi consigli erano brevi, ma sempre appropriati, si traducevano in un proposito pratico e sicuro, sempre diretto a formare sodamente e ad estirpare quanto doveva essere tolto. Più che alle mancanze dava molto importanza all’atteggiamento abituale dell’anima, e ne aiutava a sostenere la parte più débole e consigliava i mezzi per irrobustirla. Mortificazione, umiltà, sacramenti, meditazione, buone letture.” (Maria Lanzio, *fin*” “Alcuni ricordi edificanti del compianto Don Filippo Rinaldi”, in E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, SEI, 1948, pp. 504-505.) See also Ramòn Alberdi, “Don Filippo Rinaldi direttore spirituale, secondo il processo della sua beatificazione e canonizzazione”, in *La Direzione spirituale*, pp. 105-127.
- 13 “Ma la direzione spirituale, miei cari sacerdoti, non dev’essere una cosa saltuaria e mutevole, ma un sistema unico e costante di condotta, teorico e pratico insieme, atto a guidarci alla santità. - Il compito del direttore spirituale è quello di farci conoscere quello che Dio vuole da noi, le virtù che dobbiamo praticare, i mezzi a cui dobbiamo ricorrere, i pericoli contro cui dobbiamo premunirci per non venir meno alla nostra vocazione salesiana.” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921; L.C., p. 420).
- 14 According to Luciano Cian, “I metodi della direzione spirituale alla luce delle moderne scienze dell’uomo. Cenni sulla direzione spirituale salesiana” in *La Direzione spirituale nella Famiglia salesiana*, pp. 151-184.
- 15 “Di conseguenza i contenuti principali della direzione spirituale sono : una migliore conoscenza e accettazione di sé, lo sviluppo della vita teologale, l’educazione all’ascolto della Parola ed alla preghiera, lo sradicamento dei difetti e ostacoli alla carità, il discernimento della volontà di Dio nelle diverse situazioni e difficoltà della vita, il discernimento della propria vocazione e la formazione a un determinato tipo di vita cristiana, l’educazione al senso autentico dell’apostolato, il superamento e l’utilizzazione delle eventuali crisi, tentazioni, dubbi, la risposta giusta ad eventuali chiamate particolari dello spirito.” (“Conclusioni della settimana”, n. 12, in *La Direzione spirituale nella Famiglia salesiana*, p. 375).
- 16 “Don Caffasso, che da sei anni era mia guida, fu eziandio mio Direttore spirituale, e se ho fatto qualche cosa di bene lo debbo a questo degno ecclesiastico nelle cui mani riposi ogni mia deliberazione, ogni studio, ogni azione della mia vita.” (MO Da Silva, p. 119).
- 17 J. Aubry, “Identità, qualità e formazione del direttore spirituale”, in *La Direzione spirituale nella Famiglia salesiana*, pp. 291-330.
- 18 “Il Cooperatore è il primo e principale responsabile della propria formazione. Convinto che essa richiede docilità allo Spirito Santo, dà importanza alla vita di preghiera e alla direzione spirituale”. (*Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art 38 § 1).
- 19 “Se qualcuno, specialmente giovane, intuisse la nostra spiritualità e ne volesse percepire il cammino, gli educatori ed educatrici salesiani sono capaci di orientarlo, di servirgli di guida, di indicarne aspetti, passi e tappe con la libertà, ma anche con l’efficacia e chiarezza che si richiede?” (J. Vecchi, “La strenna per il 1998”, in *Atti delle XX. giornate di spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana*, Rome, 1998, p. 174.)

- 20 Regarding the FMA leader, see the entry *Rector/Director*.
- 21 “La Volontaria fa con la Responsabile Locale un fraterno colloquio formativo, possibilmente mensile, sulla fedeltà alle Costituzioni in ciò che riguarda la testimonianza di vita. Questo incontro [...] sarà un momento di dialogo fraterno animato dalla carità, per cercare insieme la volontà di Dio, per contribuire al bene del Gruppo, per ricevere conforto ed orientamento circa la fedeltà alla vocazione.” (VDB *Regolamenti*, art. 10).
- 22 “Le Volontarie sono cristiane che, chiamate a seguire Cristo più da vicino ...” (VDB Constitutions, art. 2.) The same is found in the Constitutions of the Volunteers with Don Bosco, art. 2.
- 23 Saint Vincent de Paul, *Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. P. Coste, Paris, 1920-1925, t. XII, p. 343.
- 24 All this is developed in J. Aubry, art. cit., pp. 309-323. See also M. Quartier, “La formazione della guida spirituale salesiana”, in *La Direzione spirituale*, pp. 221-237.
- 25 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Book I, chap. IV.

Spiritual reading

Recommendations of St Francis de Sales

“You should always have some good, devout book at hand, such as the writings of Saint Bonaventure, Gerson, Denis le Chartreux, Louys Blosius ... (understand: Louis de Blois),” said Saint Francis to his Philothea. And he lined up nine other names of spiritual writers in vogue at the time. Then he exhorted her: “And daily read some small portion attentively, as though you were reading letters sent by the Saints from Paradise, to teach you the way thither and encourage you to follow them.” As well as devotional books, he recommended the stories and lives of the saints. She would see in them the “portrait” of the Christian life and could profit from their actions according to her personal vocation. Of course, some of the stories of the saints are more interesting than others. Francis had a soft spot for Thérèse of Jesus, the early Jesuits, Charles Borromeo, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, and the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. However, the stories in which “they are more the subjects of our admiring wonder than of imitation”, such as Simeon the Stylite, Mary the Egyptian, the two Catherines (of Siena and of Genoa), Angela of Foligno and others just as marvellous, which tend to be neglected because they are too extraordinary, at least they “tend to kindle a great love of God in our hearts.”¹ In the end, the devout soul seeks nothing else.

It is about union with God. And daily reading of books of this kind encourages this. “I wish that not a day would go by without you giving half an hour or an hour to the reading of some spiritual book, for it will serve you as well as preaching”, Francis wrote to one of his most faithful followers. And he ended his paragraph with a significant conclusion: “These are the principal means of being well united with God.”²

Occasionally, Francis would guide his correspondents with a wealth of detail. On the eve of his consecration as Bishop of Dol, Antoine de Revol (1548–1629) received numerous instructions from Francis on his pious reading. The bishop had temporal responsibilities, for which de Revol should consult specialist works. But, as an ecclesiastic, he had to start with “monastic life”, “before coming to economic and political matters.” Many names of writers, very much forgotten nowadays, appeared beneath Francis’ pen. One of them seemed to stand out. He would have liked Louis de Grenade (1504–1588) to be the new bishop’s “second breviary”. Louis de Grenade

would “train” his mind in the love of “true devotion and all the spiritual exercises” that he needed. And he indicated in what order and rhythm Antoine de Revol should read the works of this Spanish Dominican. For this reading to be fruitful, he advised him not to hurry. The chapters read “with reverence and devotion” should be “weighed up”, “considered”, “ruminated upon”, and applied to the soul with “many considerations” and prayers to God.³

Some time later, in the same vein, he advised Baroness de Chantal: “Read a little at a time, but with attention and devotion, and if you find something to console you, lift up your spirit, bless God who inspired the writer.”⁴

“Retain your mind well in God; read as often as you can, but little at a time and with devotion.”⁵ Saint Francis de Sales wanted the spiritual person to read methodically and enjoy the authors or stories he recommended. Superficial reading without attention to God would not be of much benefit. Well-conducted spiritual reading helps people to confess their sins properly, to meditate on the life and death of the Saviour, in short, to make steady progress along the path of a fully Christian life.

Lectio divina

Contemporary Salesian Regulations require religious to spend a certain amount of time each day in a period of communal “spiritual reading”, which “usually is of fifteen minutes duration”, according to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.⁶ In addition, the Salesians’ renewed Constitutions of 1984 state that “With the Sacred Scriptures daily in hand, we welcome the Word as Mary did and ponder it in our heart, so that it will bear fruit and we may proclaim it with zeal.”⁷ This new daily exercise can be called, without twisting things too much, a *lectio divina*.

Strictly speaking, *lectio divina* is not “spiritual reading”, even if the reading carried out in the way St Francis de Sales intended ends up resembling it.⁸ The monks who created the expression *Lectio divina* explain its exact meaning to us.⁹

The primary object of *Lectio divina* is the Word of God, hence the adjective *divina*, meaning “divine” or “of God”, which follows the word *lectio*, “reading”. The *lectio divina* is the reading of the Word of God, in itself or through its commentators. But there is reading and there is reading. The reader or listener of *Lectio divina* does not seek to engage in exegesis or theology, even if the text lends itself to it and they have the means to do so. He devotes himself to free and peaceful reading, even though it requires an

effort of reflection, which he calls “meditation”, and leading, as it were, to prayer, known as “*oratio*”. For him, the Bible is a meeting place. Slow, admiring, free of curiosity, his reading, which is not a purely intellectual activity, has no scientific purpose.

However, the reader of the Word does not leave his reading to chance or caprice. It requires training (a “grammar”) and a method. The medieval monk already drew on the resources of philology and was rightly concerned about the context of the verses he discovered. What’s more, because he believed in the unity of Scripture and reread the Old Testament in the light of Christ, he was able to step back and understand the text in its entirety, within the movement of salvation history, and therefore ultimately in relation to the Incarnation and the return of Christ. Assumed to be serious, modern *lectio divina* conforms to these principles. Today’s readers benefit from the contribution of scientific exegesis, which enables them to better understand the meaning and scope of the letter of the Word of God.

Lectio divina takes place in an atmosphere of prayer, understood in the general sense of meditation and attention to God. Before and during *lectio*, the reader asks for light and desires God. The reading itself awakens and encourages prayer. The impulse to turn towards God, which comes at the end of the reading, increases the reader’s availability to the Holy Spirit who in fact retains the entire initiative for the encounter. *Meditatio* is a natural extension of *lectio*.

Like spiritual reading according to Saint Francis de Sales, the aim of *lectio divina* is to seek Christ in the letter of the text in order to discover God’s love, taste it and unite with it. Saint Bernard recommended “savouring” the “marrow of the Scriptures”, the “honey” that the spiritual interpretation makes “drip” from the letters. This “taste” is both a means and a result, for the more we penetrate it, the more we delight in it. The food becomes both more consistent and sweeter, leading to an authentic mystical experience. This experience is certainly not, with God’s grace, beyond the reach of the disciple of Saint Francis de Sales and Saint John Bosco, even when immersed in a very active life.

NOTES

- 1 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Two, chap. XVII.
- 2 Letter to President Brûlait, Annecy, 3 May 1604, *Oeuvres*, vol. 12, p. 269.
- 3 Letter to Antoine de Revol, Annecy, 3 June 1603, *Oeuvres*, vol. 12, pp. 189-190.
- 4 Letter to Jeanne de Chantal, s. d. (1605-1607), *Oeuvres*, vol. 21, p. 142.
- 5 Letter to Madame de la Croix d'Autherin, Annecy, 23 June 1615, *Oeuvres*, vol. 17, p. 13.
- 6 SDB Regulations, art. 71; FMA Regulations, art. 24 and 25.
- 7 “Avendo quotidianamente in mano la Sacra Scrittura, come Maria accogliamo la Parola e la meditiamo nel nostro cuore per feria fruttificare e annunziarla con zelo” (SDB Constitutions, art 87c.)
- 8 Des moines du Moyen-âge aux religieux de vie active de l'époque moderne, on est passé de la lectio divina à la “lecture spirituelle”. Sur cette question, voir A. Boland, “Lectio divina et lecture spirituelle”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. IX, 1976, col. 470-510, comprising three articles with telling titles : 1) La lectio divina, 2) De la lectio divina à la lecture spirituelle, 3) La lecture spirituelle à l'époque moderne.
- 9 For what follows I have drawn freely from the article by Csterkien Jean-Albert Vinel, “La lectio divina”, published in *Vie consacrée*, 1982, pp. 288-303.

Spiritual retreat

The meaning of the Salesian spiritual retreat

“We cannot conceive of a religious life, perhaps not even a true Christian life, without spiritual exercises. But we, who are devoted to the active life have a special need for this time of holy retreat”, Fr Philip Rinaldi once wrote to the Salesians.¹ All right, but what exactly is meant by this “holy retreat”, which we are told is essential to Salesian life?

If the form of the Salesian retreat has varied since the time of Don Bosco, its meaning, never complicated, has remained stable.² Don Bosco was familiar with the Jesuit spiritual retreat centre at Sant’Ignazio sopra Lanzo. When it came to retreats, the first Salesians explicitly referred to the Ignatian tradition.³ Recounting the history of the spiritual exercises in the Church, Fr Rua explained to retreatants that “in the sixteenth century, as faith and charity cooled in the world, the Lord inspired his servant Saint Ignatius with this excellent practice to rekindle the spirit of religion and piety among Christians.”⁴ In very general terms, then, for the Salesian of the origins, the retreat is a time to recover from lukewarmness or spiritual abandonment. But what else, since an idea of separation underlies this word? A Jesuit author defined it as “a spiritual exercise involving a break with the ordinary regime of life, a more or less isolated, silent and peaceful setting, with a view to facilitating an encounter with God within a somewhat intense spiritual experience.”⁵

Let’s move on a little. For Fr Rua, the encounter with God occurred in the course of a life understood as a journey towards Him. “For what purpose have we come together?” he asked as he opened a retreat instruction. “To do the spiritual exercises”, he replied. “And what are the spiritual spiritual exercises?” He continued: “To search diligently in peace, far from daily occupations, for the faults which mar our souls, the virtues of which we find ourselves lacking, and to stir ourselves to fervour in order to combat some things and acquire others. In a word, we have come together to advance in the building up of our perfection.”⁶ On another occasion, he remarked that the presence of Christ, assured where two or three are gathered in his name, is essential to the Salesian retreat. The retreatants place themselves in the school of Jesus, welcoming him and expecting from him the graces they need.⁷ The retreatants seek to be converted, purified and to progress in virtue. They listen to God in order to discern his will for them.

In line with these lessons, the Salesian Constitutions *ad experimentum* of 1972 saw the exercises as a time of “renewal” of the “will to conversion”. They are the “synthesis of our entire prayer life. They restore our spirit to profound unity in the Lord Jesus. For each Salesian and for the community they are privileged moments of listening to the Word of God, of discernment of his will and of purification of our hearts.”⁸ After which the definitive Constitutions (1984) would state soberly that, for Salesians, the “will to conversion” is renewed in the annual retreat, a time of “spiritual renewal”, considered by Don Bosco to be “the fundamental part and the synthesis of all the practices of piety.”⁹ A little more explicit and more positive in their reference to holiness, the Salesian Sisters said that, along with the monthly recollection, the annual retreat is a “particular effective time of spiritual renewal”, considered by Don Bosco to be “of great importance in giving new impetus to our journey towards holiness.”¹⁰

In itself, then, a Salesian retreat is a break with everyday life, a spiritual activity to identify more closely with Christ, a path to holiness. Silence and peace are essential. It is not a time for study or community reflection, let alone a holiday or a get-together with friends. It is always best not to confuse the two.

The former structure of the Salesian retreat

During the first Salesian century, the form of the spiritual exercises was carefully defined and strictly observed.¹¹ Essentially, the retreatant submitted to five or six consecutive days of prayer in common and sermons, known as meditations in the morning and evening and instructions during the day. The Regulations for the Spiritual Exercises, prepared by Fr Rua and revised at the third General Chapter (1883), and finally revised and corrected by Don Bosco, explained the conditions.

The retreatants were guided by the daily timetable. It was literally. 5:30 am. Rise. 6 am. Morning prayers [according to the *Il Giovane provveduto*]. *Veni Creator*. Meditation. Community Mass. Prime and Tierce [from the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin], Breakfast in silence. 9 am. Sext and None. Reading for about ten minutes. Instruction. Singing of a hymn. Reflection in room. 11:30 am. Visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Examination of conscience. Angelus. 12:00 midday. Lunch. Grace, followed by the psalm *Miserere*, if possible, as far as the chapel. Moderate recreation. 2 pm. Litany of the Saints, then rest. 3 pm Vespers and Compline. Instruction. Singing of a hymn. Silent recreation. 5:30 pm. Matins and Lauds. *Veni Creator*. Meditation. Reflection for a few minutes. Rosary. *Ave Maris Stella*, *Tantum ergo*. Benediction of the Blessed

Sacrament. Dinner and moderate recreation. 9 pm. Evening prayers [according to the formula of the *Giovane provveduto*] and rest.¹² This timetable was applied to the letter until the time of Vatican II.

Some aspects of this programme would escape the notice of readers from another period. Above all, they should be aware that the “meditations” were usually concerned with the great truths and the “instructions” with the obligations of religious life. For example, a series of notebooks by Fr Rua entitled *Esercizi spirituali*, with sermons on the end of man, salvation, death, judgement, hell and eternity, were obviously intended for meditation.¹³ And, also by Fr Rua, a collection of spiritual exercises for Sisters, consisting of sermons entitled “perfection”, “The goods of the religious state”, “On confession”, “Conditions for a good confession”, “On religious poverty”, “On prayer” and “On charity”, certainly intended for instructions.¹⁴

For a long time, this approach gave full satisfaction. Let us mention at random the retreat for two hundred and fifty Brothers at Valsalice, near the tomb of Don Bosco, in August 1928. Fr Rinaldi, who described it shortly after its closure, never tired of praising it. The retreatants’ trust in their superiors had been complete, their personal self-denial remarkable, their mutual charity perfect, that “divine bond of perfection”, according to the letter to the Colossians (Col. 3:14). “These were days of true Salesian life, simple, tranquil, serene, perfectly relaxed, without any particular practices or mortifications, in short the true life so well taught by Jesus in his holy Gospel and so dear to our venerable Father Don Bosco.”¹⁵

However, some of its peculiarities were soon to shock informed minds. Hours of freedom were rare in this programme, and recollection was almost constant. The priests celebrated mass in private and, in most cases read their office alone, as concelebration was unknown in those days and the breviary was always read individually. No one found it strange to recite Matins and Lauds in the evening on the eve of the appointed day, an anomaly which at the time was recommended to priests. In addition, retreatants more or less willingly complied with the *Miserere* at the end of meals and the Litany of the Saints before siesta time. Specialists in liturgy and the spiritual life judged this rather cumbersome daily jumble of disparate discourses and practices with some severity.

The reform of the spiritual exercises at the 19th General Chapter (1965)

Vatican II approved their main criticisms. And the Nineteenth General Chapter, meeting in Rome in 1965 in the aftermath of the Council, undermined the traditional structure of Salesian retreats.¹⁶

The Chapter's total adherence to the principles of the Council, in particular to its *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, declared a "fundamental document of Salesian piety",¹⁷ was bound to shake old habits. The renewal of the Spiritual Exercises should be inspired by a spirituality that is more biblical, more liturgical, more ecclesial, more personalised and more existential, recommended the Chapter Commission. The Salesian retreat should be refocused on the Divine Office and the Eucharistic sacrifice. The mortgage of history would no longer weigh on it. It would be modernised in line with the Council's perspective and in accordance with the aspirations of the confreres addressed to the Moderator of the Chapter. A shorter timetable would allow more time for free meditation. The number of sermons would be reduced from four to three. The common visit to the Blessed Sacrament, the *Miserere* after meals, the litanies of the saints, the rosary in common, would all disappear from the daily programme. We would pray according to the canonical hours, and Bible readings would replace the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin. The Eucharist, the high point of the day, would normally be concelebrated. Silence, apparently rather difficult for Salesians to observe, is essential for everyone to meditate.

"Retreat" had to be given its full meaning. The Rector Major praised Spain, which had instituted retreats in complete silence. The Chapter noted that only one province had asked for "*circoli di studio*" (study groups) to be incorporated into Salesian retreats. For its part, the commission responsible for the matter declared that it was inappropriate to organise conferences on aggiornamento and discussions of any kind. In its opinion, such meetings dangerously transform the exercises. Silence is too delicate a commodity which is quickly wasted. The provincial could organise a retreat for his men in complete silence. If meetings seem useful, let them take place before or after the retreat.

Rigid uniformity was a thing of the past. The regulations were amended accordingly and new timetables were introduced. From then on, they could only be proposed, as local needs determined the retreat schedule. The exercises took on a new face in the Salesian world. The Salesian Sisters followed developments in parallel with the Salesians. While recognising themselves as following "the traditional line", they had no trouble adapting to the new times. They also lightened their spiritual exercises. In addition to the homily at

Mass, the Sisters now heard only two sermons a day, and their devotional practices were reorganised. More time was left for reflection and personal prayer. They appreciated the custom, introduced in some places, of exposing the Blessed Sacrament in the afternoon. The Sisters enjoyed the silence and contemplation of the retreats. However, most of them preferred the exercises during which silence was interrupted after lunch and dinner. Because, “after the intimate encounter with God, it is beautiful and fruitful for the Sisters to meet, which also cements the union of the provincial community.”¹⁸

At first, the changes caused some disorientation among among Salesians. Consultations were held (Ariccia, 1967; Camaldoli, 1969). Recommendations were issued: It is advisable, it was said, to unify the themes developed by the preachers in their talks. The retreatant must make a personal commitment. Not content with attending a retreat, they should “do” this spiritual exercise in a friendly relationship with God, which makes them available to listen to him in prayer and in action. At the Special General Chapter of 1971, a balance seemed to have finally been found. The Salesian retreat had been modernised.¹⁹

The meaning of a reform

According to their rules, the various groups of the Salesian Family, Salesians, Don Bosco Volunteers, both male and female, Cooperators, are invited to take part in retreats organised for them. The VDB Regulations state that every year the Volunteer “makes a retreat organized by the Institute.”²⁰ For the Salesian Cooperators, “retreats are offered annually by the Association as a particular opportunity for conversion and renewal.”²¹

Insofar as the post-conciliar evolution had borne fruit, for these groups, in the ideal if not in the necessarily somewhat disappointing reality, the spirituality “lessons” that had previously been part of the rule became more or less experiences of spiritual life. Let us briefly explain the meaning of a desired reform in the Salesian Family after Vatican II. In the model, referred to here as the “lessons”, the person of the preacher, the truths communicated, the regulations practised, the docility of the retreatant in submitting to the rules of the game, letting themselves be taken in, etc., count enormously. The second model, that of spiritual exercises, has a different ambition. In his case, the exercises are a story, a life, a spiritual event or a dynamic reality which implies creativity and invention. They are a personal encounter with Christ. This is an idea dear to Fr Rua. This encounter does not take place around the retreatant in order to grasp him in his intelligence alone, but in his heart, in his “I”, where the Holy Spirit penetrates. The aim of the retreat

is to bring about a spiritual operation in the retreatant. It calls on his docility to the Holy Spirit, his obedience to the Word and his spiritual experience of God. In this case, the preacher-guide is simply the minister and servant of the Spirit, the Word and the retreatant.

However, care must be taken not to distort this reformed exercise. The experience is carried out within a framework, which there is no question of abandoning. Prayer, assent to the Word of God, and the discernment of one's own will, remain the fundamental work of the retreatant. They make the retreat a time of exercise, just as recourse to the Holy Spirit guarantees its spiritual nature. In addition, the exercises must retain their Salesian character. The Salesian retreat is marked by simplicity, with little room for complicated introspection, a sense of concreteness, and a familiar and paternal style, albeit peaceful and silent. New retreat formulas, in vogue here and there, should not break the vital contact with Don Bosco. Without repeating him mechanically, we will remain, like him and in our own way, docile to the voice of the Holy Spirit, who alone is capable of rejuvenating and spiritually renewing the members of his Salesian Family.²²

However, had the spirit of reformed spiritual practice penetrated Salesian customs at the dawn of the third millennium? Had not the model of the "lessons" imposed itself once again, albeit in a less rigid form than in the past, on family members who agreed to take part in the annual community retreats? Was the framework kept perfectly silent? Easy solutions always please those who fear complications.

NOTES

- 1 “... Non si può concepire la vita religiosa, e forse neanche una vera vita cristiana, senza esercizi spirituali; ma noi che siamo dediti alla vita attiva, abbiamo un bisogno affatto speciale di questo periodo di sacro ritiro.” (P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians, 24 June 1926, *Atti* 35, p. 457).
- 2 On the question of the retreat or spiritual exercises, see, in general terms, the documented collection published in 1975 of a Salesian Family meeting, *Il rinnovamento degli esercizi spirituali. Simposio salesiano europeo*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1975.
- 3 Remark by P. Brocardo, “Gli esercizi spirituali nell’esperienza di D. Bosco e della vita salesiana”, in the above-mentioned collection, *Il rinnovamento ...*, pp. 57-62.
- 4 “Nel decimo sesto, rafiredandosi nel mondo la fede e la carità, per ravvivare nei cristiani lo spirito di religione e di pietà, il Signore ispirò al suo servo S. Ignazio questa eccellente pratica di fere gli esercizi” (M. Rua, “Introduzione agli esercizi spirituali”, ms *Esercizi spirituali*, pp. 1-24, document reproduced in FdB 2942 E7 to 2943 B7). We should note here that if, as Fr Brocardo observed, art. cit., p. 44, “gli interventi [stampati!] di Don Rua sugli esercizi non sono molti”, on the other hand, the unpublished manuscript documentation, mainly sermons, filed in the Salesian archives in Rome under the heading *Esercizi spirituali*, is copious and illuminating.
- 5 Manuel Ruiz Jurado, “Retraites spirituelles”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, t. XIII, 1988, col. 423.
- 6 “Ci siamo radunati a che fine ? Per fare gli exerc. spir. Or. che prò questi esercizi spirit ? Per cercare diligentem. nella quiete, lont dalle quotid. occupaz. i dif. da cui è deturpata l’anima nostra, le virtù di cui ci trov. mane, ed eccitarci al fervore per combatt. gli uni ed acq. Le altre ; in ima par. ci siam. radun. per isping. avanti l’edif. della nostra perfez.” (M. Rua, “Sull’umiltà”, unnumbered sheet, reproduced in FdB 2900 A2).
- 7 Observation by Fr Rua, in “Introduzione agli esercizi spirituali”, document as cited, p. 3.
- 8 “... sintesi di tutta la nostra vita di preghiera. Essi ridonano al nostro spirito profonda unità nel Signore Gesù. Per ogni salesiano e per la comunità sono momenti privilegiati di ascolto della Parola di Dio, di discernimento della sua volontà e di purificazione del nostro cuore.” (SDB Constitutions *ad experimentum*, art. 63).
- 9 “La nostra volontà di conversione si rinnova nel ritiro mensile e negli esercizi spirituali di ogni anno. Sono tempi di ripresa spirituale che Don Bosco considerava come la parte fondamentale e la sintesi di tutte le pratiche di pietà.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 91).
- 10 “Momenti di particolare rinnovamento [...] saranno il ritiro mensile e gli esercizi spirituali annuali, che don Bosco considerava di grande importanza per un rilancio nel cammino della santità” (FMA Constitutions, art. 46).
- 11 On the history of the form of the Salesian spiritual exercises, see the article by P. Brocardo “Gli esercizi nella esperienza di D. Bosco e nella vita salesiana”, in the previously mentioned collection *Il rinnovamento ...*, pp. 23-79.
- 12 According to the *Regolamento degli esercizi nelle case della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, published in the above-mentioned collection *Il Rinnovamento degli esercizi spirituali*, pp. 79-85.

- 13 See, in FdB 2938 D3 to 2945 E8, under the title *Esercizi spirituali*, at least the first 3 of 9 notebooks numbered 1 to 8 (with a 7a), totalling approximately 430 pages.
- 14 “Del desiderio della perfezione”, “Dei beni dello stato religioso”, “Sulla confessione”, “Condizioni per una buona confessione”, “Della povertà religiosa”, “Sulla preghiera”, “Della carità” (Notebook *Esercizi spirituali per monache*, in FdB 2912 E12 to 2913 B9).
- 15 “Furono giorni di vera vita salesiana, semplice, tranquilla, serena, senza ombra di costrizione e aliena da pratiche e mortificazioni speciali ; insomma la vera vita tanto inculcata da Gesù nel suo Santo Vangelo e così cara al nostro Ven. Padre D. Bosco.” (P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians, 24 September 1928, *Atti* 46, p. 689).
- 16 Notes on this in the mentioned article by P. Brocardo, “Gli esercizi spirituali...”, pp. 67-74.
- 17 GC19 chap. VII, p. 92.
- 18 “Dopo incontro intimo con Dio, è bello e fruttuoso incontrarsi con le sorelle; questo cementa anche l’unione della Comunità ispettoriale.” Our paragraph is based on the Gruppo Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice’s report on their Institute at the 1975 symposium on the renewal of the spiritual exercises in the Salesian Family (*Il rinnovamento degli esercizi spirituali*, pp. 270-272).
- 19 See P. Brocardo, “Gli esercizi spirituali...”, pp. 70-74.
- 20 “... ogni anno a un corso di Esercizi Spirituali proposto dall’Istituto” (VDB *Regolamenti*, art. 13.) The same idea is in the CDB Constitutions, art. 36.
- 21 “... gli esercizi spirituali vengono offerti annualmente dall’Associazione come occasione privilegiata di conversione e di ripresa”. (RVA, art. 34, § 2).
- 22 Reflections borrowed for the most part from the cited article by P. Brocardo “Gli esercizi spirituali...”, pp. 74-77.

Temperance

A term that has become obsolete and meaningless?

You won't find the word *Temperance* in any version of the "*Nouveau Dictionnaire de théologie*" published during the last years of the twentieth century.¹ Justice, freedom and liberation, copiously served up in this thick volume, seem to have got the better of the august cardinal virtue known as temperance. Perhaps even more curiously, in 1974 the Salesian spiritual theologian Domenico Bertetto, certainly not a moderniser, did not even mention it in the thematic index of his thousand pages of meditations on Salesian spirituality.² The *sophrosunè* of the Greek philosophers, which required them to moderate their desires, seems to have been forgotten by these new theologians. The word, which has fallen into disuse, is said to have become "insignificant".

It is true that, under the onslaught of a culture that is now invading the whole world, it is up against strong opposition. The emphasis on wealth, profit and success has resulted in a rejection of all words implying deprivation, selflessness or limitation. Everyone is attracted by things, the number of things, especially if they provide facilities and advantages for everyday life. Our world seems to have entered the post-modern or post-industrial period, marked by the primacy of the tried and tested, the felt and the spontaneous demand for everything straight away. This hardly encourages us to defer or control our desires. Incentives to live in the present and submit to the demands of the environment counteract the thoughtful, long-term management of desire imposed by the traditional practice of the virtue of temperance. The culture of the consumer society seems to have got the better of temperance.³

Another explanation for its absence from a work on Salesian spirituality could well be a certain risk of ambiguity about the meaning of the word. Contemporary lexicographers distinguish between a somewhat technical meaning and the one that has become commonplace. Since Plato, the "fourth cardinal virtue" has imposed the practice of moderation in desires of all kinds, while in common parlance and for the North American "Temperance Societies", temperance, as opposed to intemperance, simply implies moderation in the use of food and especially alcoholic beverages.

A word firmly rooted in Salesian tradition

The early Salesian tradition, far from fearing it, made abundant use of the term *Temperance*. Don Bosco introduced it almost systematically into the formulas that condensed the spirituality proposed to his people. Over the course of the volumes, readers of his biography learn from his mouth or from his pen that “work and temperance will make the Salesian Congregation flourish”; that the “motto” it adopted proclaims “Work and temperance”; that “work and temperance are two weapons with which we can prevail over everything and everyone”; that “temperance and work are the two best guardians of virtue”; or that “Salesians will achieve everything through humility, work and temperance.”⁴ Fr Rua, an authoritative interpreter if ever there was one, solemnly placed temperance at the top of the list of the great Salesian virtues. “Don Bosco wrote: Temperance, Prayer and Work on his banner, the one he left us”, he said the day after the saint’s death.⁵ In a letter addressed to the Salesian priests a few months before his death, Fr Albera reminded them of the warning Don Bosco had received one night in a dream, when he had asked his interlocutor if his Congregation would last long. “Your Congregation will last as long as its members love work and temperance. If one of these two pillars fails, your building will collapse, crushing superiors, inferiors and disciples alike. Let work and temperance therefore be your daily mortification.”⁶ This is worth pondering, remarked this Rector Major. Let’s face it: temperance had a special place in Salesian spirituality of the past.

The temperance in question then referred preferably to moderation in food and drink. The ordinary Salesian public imagined nothing else regarding this word. However, in Don Bosco’s version of a dream from 1876 we learn “that one can sin through intemperance, when one eats and drinks more than one should; that one commits intemperance in sleep or when one gives one’s body more than is needed, more than is necessary.”⁷ The whole body with its five senses (sensuality included!) would therefore be interested in the virtue of temperance recommended by Don Bosco to the members of his family.

This was the thesis of the classical moralists, found for example, in St Francis de Sales.⁸ We must “moderate” our “complacency” towards things through the “five bodily senses”, Francis taught, “in order to keep ourselves capable of attachment to higher and spiritual things.” Let us remember this primary purpose of temperance according to the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Two senses “more coarse, brutal and impetuous in their acts”, “touch and taste”, are more particularly concerned, he continued. Temperance does not combat them, it moderates them. It “moderates them,

because our nature, made up of heart and soul, having need of sensitive pleasures, either for the particular preservation of each person, or for the preservation of the species and human race, it would also be a denial of reason and a violation of its laws to wish to be sensual by applying oneself excessively to the pleasures of the senses.”⁹ Temperance was synonymous with “moderation”. The balanced wisdom of Saint Francis shines through in these words.

Temperance in the second Salesian century

The thread of tradition, Work and Temperance, has not been broken over the years. The particular models that the Church proposed to the Salesians in the wake of Don Bosco: Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello, Blessed Michael Rua, Philip Rinaldi and Madeleine Morano had practised the virtue of temperance with surprising rigour. During their canonisation processes, witnesses abounded about their never-tiring control of their senses and desires. And, concerned to maintain intact the spiritual heritage in their care, two recent Rectors Major devoted themselves to giving their sons more or less detailed lessons on Salesian temperance.

Fr Pietro Ricaldone, in his 1937 letter on poverty, and especially in a relatively detailed study of the “fourth cardinal virtue” in the collection *Formazione salesiana*, showed that this virtue demanded moderation in everything, including “curiosity”, but particularly in sexuality and food.¹⁰ In this case, it was not just alcoholics undergoing detoxification who were the only ones concerned. The Rector Major also singled out a species of intemperate slaves to their compulsive desires, some of whom he seemed to have known.

One or other of these people, who allow themselves to be carried away by such unbridled inclinations and desires, ends up becoming unmanageable and truly painful for themselves and for others, to the point of making community life impossible. It then happens that there are the unfailingly wrinkled faces, the scrutinising and malignant glances, the rude and disdainful gestures, the criticisms, the rebukes, and sometimes the incompetent outbursts that disturb the serene brotherhood and peace.¹¹

Temperance should have corrected these people. The formula “Work and temperance” requires Don Bosco’s disciple to be a “model of frugality”, as Fr Ricceri recalled.¹²

At the end of the century, in a section entitled “Work and temperance” of a 1999 circular entitled “Sent to bring good news to the poor”, Fr Vecchi sought to sketch out

for his Salesians the image of a specifically Salesian temperance which would be (in fact) less marked than in the beginning by the privation imposed on the senses.¹³ The virtue of temperance applies to all of the behaviour of the member of the Salesian Family, who is essentially an apostle with a deep interior life. His temperance is therefore that of a mystical master of youth. Each institute has an ascetic tradition consistent with its own spiritual style. For us Salesians, the formula that sums it up is “*coetera tolle*”; leave aside the rest, order the rest to the primary objective, i.e. to the “*da mihi animas*”, to the possibility of interior life and expressing love for the young, taking them away from situations which are an obstacle to life.¹⁴ For him, Salesian temperance is the daily expression of *coetera tolle*.

Fr Vecchi took pains to identify the characteristics of this virtue in his people. From a general point of view, temperance is the cardinal virtue that moderates impulses, words and actions according to reason and the demands of the Christian life. It is accompanied by continence, humility, sobriety, simplicity and austerity. Now these same realities are included in the “reason” of the preventive system, in the proper sense of the word. Its manifestations in daily life are: balance, i.e. measure in all things, the right discipline, the ability to cooperate, inner and outer calm and, with all the people we meet, but especially with the young people, serene and responsible relationships. The temperate person is a spiritual and apostolic “athlete”, ready to make any request on behalf of young people, who makes and keeps himself free from overly restrictive conditioning, and therefore from the tastes and needs that bind him too tightly. “Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one” (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:25).

The Salesian is temperate in his work, observed the Rector Major. His temperance shows him the order to be respected in his actions according to their purpose and priorities. Personal ambitions and “apostolic” ambitions are thus regulated in this way. The temperate Salesian’s demands on others do not exceed fair measure. He does not impose anything excessive on them or that is solely in his own interest. His work does not interfere with his prayer or the quality of his fraternal relationships. He tries to remain temperate in his movements, his outings, his pursuit of money, his business ventures, so as not to find himself caught up in some uncontrolled spiral. Temperance also applies to fraternal life, a prerequisite for good community relations. For brotherly love involves looking after oneself, caring for others, controlling spontaneous feelings, resolving conflicts and understanding the suffering of others. This requires stepping outside oneself and changing one’s personal approach. It requires showing warmth in

order to draw it out from others. And then, concluded the Rector Major, temperance affects personal life, that is to say relationships, which should be reduced to the sole demands of the mission: the possession and use of consumer goods (cars, furnishings, and holidays) and also, he said, to the interior life, which requires interior watchfulness and purification.

Since the difficulties of life do not (or should not) make them lose their joy, Salesians (the Rector Major is speaking to both male and female here) seem to be walking on “rose petals”. The thorns do not make them lose their joy. Temperance, which is also simplicity, is the ability to make the best of a situation, without fuss and bother. The Gospel says: “When you fast, do not look dismal, but anoint your head and wash your face.”

On closer examination, Fr Vecchi was asking the members of the Salesian Family to apply the virtue of temperance to every moment of their lives. However, this does not mean that he glorified softness and mediocrity. His ideal could not be the damping of desires and passions. Temperance means first and foremost self-control. Salesian temperance limits only excess in desire or passion, its measure being left to prudence and wisdom. Thank God, there was no shortage of strong personalities with powerful desires in Don Bosco’s posterity, this enterprising man who was advised by wise contemporary clerics to “temper” projects that they judged to be a little, or even completely, crazy. True Salesian temperance, the kind their Don Bosco had, was not theirs.

NOTES

- 1 *Le Nouveau Dictionnaire de théologie*, under the direction of Peter Eicher, 2nd ed., Paris, Cerf, 1996, ignores the word *Tempérance*, including in its large thematic index.
- 2 Domenico Bertetto, *Spiritualità salesiana. Meditazioni per tutti i giorni dell'anno*, coll. *Spirito e vita*, Rome, LAS, 1974.
- 3 I am copying the disillusioned reflections of P. Daubercies, “Tempérance”, in *Catholicisme*, t. XIV, 1996, col. 877-880.
- 4 “Il lavoro e la temperanza faranno fiorire la Congregazione Salesiana” (MB, vol XII, p. 466. BM XII 338) “Ma tu ricorda sempre a tutti i nostri Salesiani il monogramma da noi adottato: Labor et temperantia. Sono due armi con cui noi riusciremo a vincere tutti e tutto” (MB, vol. XIII, p. 326.) “La temperanza e il lavoro sono i due migliori custodi della virtù” (MB, vol. XV, p. 460. BM XV, 383) “I Salesiani riusciranno a tutto colla umiltà, col lavoro, colla temperanza.” (MB, vol. XVII, p. 301).
- 5 “Ci lasciò scritto sulla sua e nostra bandiera: Temperanza, Preghiera e Lavoro”, in M. Rua, *Relazione del sesto Capitolo Generale*, 11 November 1892, in L. C., p. 91.
- 6 “La Congregazione vostra durerà fino a che i soci ameranno il lavoro e la temperanza. Mancando una di queste due colonne, il vostro edilizio ruinerà, schiacciando superiori e inferiori ed i loro seguaci. Lavoro e temperanza siano dunque la vostra quotidiana mortificazione.” (P. Albera, “Don Bosco modello del Sacerdote Salesiano”, 19 March 1921, L. C., p. 431).
- 7 “Hai da sapere che si può peccare d'intemperanza, quando anche a tavola si mangia o si beve più del bisognevole ; si commette intemperanza nel dormire o quando si fa qualsiasi cosa riguardo al corpo che sia oltre il bisogno, che non sia necessaria.” (MB, vol XII, p. 355).
- 8 The meticulous analyses of Saint Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologica*, Ila Ilae, questions 141-170, probably still constitute the best exposition of the cardinal virtue of temperance. I note that André Comte Sponville, *Petit traité des grandes vertus* (Paris, PUF, 1995, pp. 52-56) refers to it in the chapter entitled “la tempérance”.
- 9 “De la tempérance ou modération”, in *Opuscules de saint François de Sales*, t. 5, in *Oeuvres*, vol. XXVI, pp. 78-80.
- 10 “La temperanza cristiana”, in P. Ricaldone, “La povertà”, letter to Salesians, *Atti* 82, 24 July 1937, pp. 114ff.; and P. Ricaldone, *Le virtù cardinali*, Torino-Leumann, Elle Di Ci, pp. 289-362.
- 11 “Si avverta inoltre che se taluno si lascia trascinare a coteste voghe e sfrenati desiderii finisce per rendersi incontentabile e di vero peso a sè e agli altri, rendendo impossibile la vita di comunità. Avviene allora che alla mensa, si hanno le faccie immancabilmente corrugate, gli sguardi scrutatori e maligni, i gesti scortesii e sdegnosi, le critiche, i rimbrotti, e talvolta gli scatti incomposti che turbano la serena fratellanza e la pace.” (“La povertà”, letter mentioned earlier, pp. 119-120.)
- 12 In his letter of 1974 with the promising title “Lavoro e temperanza, contro l'imborghesimento” (*Atti* 276, October-December 1974, pp. 3-47), Fr Ricceri offers little more than an observation (p. 9) on the temperance required of Salesians.

- 13 J. Vecchi, “Mandati ad annunziare ai poveri un lieto messaggio”, 25 March 1999, in *Atti* 367, pp. 12-14 (§ “Lavoro e temperanza”).
- 14 “Ordina il resto all’obiettivo primario, cioè al da mihi animas, alla possibilità di vivere interiormente ed esprimere l’amore ai giovani, togliendoli dalle situazioni che impediscono loro di vivere” (“Mandati ad annunziare ...”, letter as mentioned above, pp. 12-13).

Union with God

Union with God and spiritual life

Union with God is the alpha and omega of all spiritual life. The most sublime aspect of human dignity is found in man's vocation to be in communion with God. The invitation to dialogue, the prelude to communion, begins with human existence. If man exists, it is because God created him and, out of love, never ceases to give him being. Man can only live fully if he freely acknowledges this love and surrenders himself to his Creator.¹ The initiative for this union of love necessarily rests with God, who offers his creature the unimaginable wonder of his loving covenant. The life of spiritual man is guided by God, informed by his Spirit, nourished by his grace, leading ultimately to full communion with him. Union with God conceived in this way takes many forms, from the fundamental option of the spiritual person for the Good, who consciously or unconsciously engages in a process of union with God, to the beatific vision, where the infinite distance separating the Creator from a creature who has become his child in and through Christ is finally bridged.² This is the "interior life" of the spiritual person.

Union with God according to Salesian spiritual teachers

Recollection, the "soul of all interior life", is an "indispensable condition for the fruitful exercise of virtue", according to Fr Albera, who, guided by Saint Francis de Sales, dwelt at length on this chapter.³ Recollection consists in closing one's heart, as far as possible, to the occupations and noise of the world, in order to open it to the aspirations of heaven. The Salesian spiritual person avoids dissipation and lives habitually in the presence of God, for which a minimum of good will is all that is needed, our Rector Major thought. Even if he is overloaded with occupations, as long as he organises his time well, he can spare himself moments of calm and peace. The Master foresaw the objections of readers who had in no way opted for the monastic life. But without playing the cenobite, the Salesian can set aside periods of tranquillity. While some days do not leave a single minute at his disposal, others allow him a little freedom. At this point, the Rector Major asked him to reread with him some pages of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* on "spiritual retirement".⁴ It was clear that Saint Francis de Sales' thoughts on recollection in God delighted him.

The Salesian spiritual masters of the twentieth century lived, described and recommended this union in its conscious form in action and prayer. For them, union with God was equivalent to spiritual interiority, i.e. the capacity for an intimate and desired encounter with the Lord. After Don Bosco, “union with God personified”, explained Fr Ceria,⁵ his successors recommended and, especially in the cases of Blessed Michael Rua and Philip Rinaldi, clearly experienced a union with God that they could not imagine outside the mediation of Christ. Forgetfulness and neglect of God in the details of life seemed to them to be signs of rupture with Him.

Recommendations and testimonies about union with God therefore abounded in Salesian literature of the time. A few features will suffice to demonstrate this. Fr Rua was a man of prayer and meditation. “I always noticed in him a continual union with God, even in the midst of his many occupations”, testified his confrere John Cagliero.⁶ For her part, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians testified: “He recommended prayer and meditation and, in particular, to learn to converse with God and thus to live in permanent union with Him, without which the work would not be sanctified and the spirit of Don Bosco would not live in us.”⁷ His “continual union with God” meant that he “adored God’s most holy will for every event, whether sad or joyful, and diligently sought to know God’s will so as to conform to it exactly in all his undertakings”, explained another of his confreres.⁸

Blessed Philip Rinaldi’s exhortations on union with God were countless. For example, he advised a Salesian Sister to be always present and united to the Lord living within her: “union with God in work and recreation, as well as in prayer and before the Eucharist; union day and night, in wakefulness and in sleep; union to accomplish the Lord’s will in suffering and humiliation as well as in exuberant joy.”⁹ He deplored among the Salesians, his sons, a certain lack of understanding of Don Bosco’s true face. They are too ignorant of his interior life. We should speak of Don Bosco as an apostle, according to Dom Chautard, “who lives united to God and only for souls.”¹⁰ At the time of his process for canonisation, the postulator of the cause summed up: “The testimonies were unanimous about the union with God that gave him a supernatural serenity.”¹¹ One of the witnesses at the apostolic process said: “Fr Rinaldi gave the observer the impression of a man in continual union with God. Perhaps it was this profound interior life that infused him with the serene, gentle and peaceful calm that made him always balanced, always wholesomely optimistic like Don Bosco.”¹²

Fr Rua and Fr Rinaldi, outstanding witnesses to Salesian spirituality, preached constant union with God in many ways.

The lessons of Fr Viganò

At the end of the century, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò, a theologian by trade, devoted himself to deepening the notion of union with God among his Salesians. It is easy to understand the importance for every consecrated person of “a permanent attitude of union with God”, he wrote. And he commented. With this attitude, the Salesian experienced “God’s fatherhood”. Always “in a simple and heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ and with the Father to whom he feels close”, he remains attentive to the presence of the Spirit. Because he does all things for love of God, he becomes, like Don Bosco, a “contemplative in action.”¹³ In union, his contemplation is not that of an amorphous, faceless God, but of a God with a well-defined physiognomy in a very concrete historical perspective. The Salesian does not contemplate his God in order to escape from reality, but to discover him in it in his transcendence. He adores the infinite Love that created and redeemed the world. The God with whom he communes is a Father “rich in mercy”, a Son incarnate among us and our “Redeemer”, a Spirit inserted into the human adventure with his sanctifying power, in short a God literally immersed in the whole reality of man. This permanent contemplative union makes him celebrate, through his work and his whole existence, the “liturgy of life”.¹⁴

The beatification of Fr Rinaldi (1990) led this Rector Major to place great emphasis on the union with God that is essential to Salesian spirituality. Union with God gave true meaning to the interior life of the new Blessed. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had heard his explanations in a Strenna that he had written for them for 1931. Fr Viganò repeated these.

And in the special Strenna for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for the year 1931 on the interior life of Don Bosco, while exhorting the Sisters to realise in themselves, as the Founder had earlier told them, the activity of Martha and the contemplation of Mary, he said that they were speaking of “an interior life that is simple, evangelical, practical and hard-working;” Don Bosco, one reads in the Strenna, “unified to perfection his external activity, tireless, absorbing, and wide-ranging as it was with such great responsibility, with an interior life which took its rise from the sense of the presence of God.”¹⁵

Fr Viganò commented: “And so the secret of our spirit is union with God which surpasses everything.”¹⁶ And he analysed three consequences of this union for the disciple of Don Bosco: passion for souls, apostolic work without respite and daily fidelity to prayer. Union with the Lord introduces us into the heart of God the Father, rich in

infinite love for “souls”, that is to say for people, for their evangelisation and salvation. Don Bosco, he wrote, echoing Fr Rinaldi’s words, had succeeded in losing himself completely in God, in Our Lord Jesus Christ and from that wonderful union he set out in search of souls with the burning love of the divine Redeemer, so that he lived and breathed for no other purpose than to save souls. The Salesians should make their love for God and Our Lord Jesus Christ grow day by day, minute by minute, until they reach the “blessed union” that Jesus taught. Then souls for us will be Jesus Himself, and we shall be one with Him for souls, following the example of our Father Don Bosco.

Prayer is essential to this process of union. Fr Rinaldi once asked himself how to characterise the Salesian spirit. He replied: “Tireless industry sanctified by prayer and by union with God.”¹⁷ The prayer in question, explained Fr Viganò, is that indispensable amount of time that is explicitly dedicated to dialogue with the Lord through the practices of piety of the Salesian life: meditation on the Word of God, recital of the liturgy of the hours, spiritual reading, celebration of the Eucharist, the exercise of conversion in the sacrament of Reconciliation, etc. This daily effort, mornings and evenings, has its high points each month and each year, during recollections and spiritual retreats. In this way, Fr Rinaldi “stands out” (*si erge*) in the Salesian Family as the most authentic and authoritative interpreter of the interior dimension proper to Don Bosco’s spirit” said Fr Viganò.¹⁸

Union with God in the constitutional texts

The recent constitutional texts of the Salesian Family are imbued with union with God. Describing the “spirit” of their Congregation, the Salesians state that they “cultivate union with God”, convinced as they are that they must pray unceasingly in dialogue with Christ and his heavenly Father. Their tireless activity is sanctified by prayer and “union with God”.¹⁹ Docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians “persevere in prayer with and like Mary to intensify our communion with God.” The first stage of their formation seeks to strengthen in them “the life of union with God”. As the conclusion of a life of union with Lord, death is for them the moment of “total communion with God”.²⁰ The Volunteer’s “deep union” with the Blessed Trinity “is realised in our daily prayer”, particularly in the Eucharist.²¹ As for the Salesian Cooperators, their activity is rooted in “union with God”. Without union with Jesus Christ they can do nothing. They therefore work generously, “growing in union with God”.²²

Finally, a long article in the 1995 Common Identity Card, entitled “Union with God and style of prayer”, was devoted to this union with God. Fr Viganò’s teaching on union with God in prayer and action is summarised.

Don Bosco has been defined as “union with God”. It is a reality which the Salesian Family intends to study more deeply so as to fully understand the intensity of the *Da mihi animas* which is the prayer of our holy Founder. The ultimate objective of prayer was, for St Francis de Sales and for Don Bosco, union with God in the new life so as to be able to repeat with truth those words of Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”(Galatians 2:20). In this way prayer leads into charity. It helps an individual to go out of himself to realize union with God. It is a process of being taken up into God, of ecstasy of life and activity. It is an interior attitude of charity leading of its nature to apostolic activity in which it is made concrete, becomes manifest, grows and is perfected.²³

NOTES

- 1 From Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 19.
- 2 For an initial idea of the modes of union with God and the progression in this union, consult the summary article by M. Dupuy, “Union à Dieu”, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. XVI, 1994, col. 40-61.
- 3 “Altra condizione indispensabile per il fruttuoso esercizio della virtù è il raccoglimento, che è l’anima d’ogni vita interiore.” (P. Albera, “Don Bosco modello del Sacerdote Salesiano”, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L. C., p. 428).
- 4 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Two, chap. XII-XIII, passim.
- 5 E. Ceria, *Don Bosco con Dio*, Turin, 1929. Revised and expanded edition for the *Formazione salesiana*, Colle Don Bosco, Asti, 1947.
- 6 “Notai in lui sempre un’Unione continua con Dio anche in mezzo alle sue molteplici occupazioni” (G. Cagliero, Ordinary process of Fr Rua, ad 16^{um}, in *Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, p. 315).
- 7 “Raccomandava molto a noi la preghiera e la meditazione e più particolarmente di imparare a conversare familiarmente con Dio e a vivere così di una continua unione con Dio senza che il lavoro non restava santificato e non viveva in noi lo spirito di D. Bosco.” (Enrica Soibone, Ordinary process of Fr Rua, ad 15^{um}-17^{um}, in *Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, p. 381).
- 8 “Questa continua unione con Dio faceva sì che egli ne adorasse i santissimi voleri in ogni avvenimento o lieto o triste, e che cercasse con ogni diligenza di conoscere la volontà di Dio per uniformarsi ad essa esattamente in tutte le sue imprese ed azioni.” (G. Barberis, Ordinary process of Fr Rua, ad 20^{um}, in *Positio super virtutibus. Summarium*, p. 545).
- 9 “Unione con Dio nel lavoro e nella ricreazione come nella preghiera, come davanti all’eucaristia, unione di giorno come di notte, vegliando e dormendo ; unione facendo sempre la volontà del Signore nelle sofferenze e nelle umiliazioni come nella esuberanza dell’allegria”. (Letter of P Rinaldi to a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, in E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, Turin, SEI, 1948, p. 329).
- 10 Conversation of 3 March 1930 before E. Ceria, reproduced by him in *Vita ...*, as cited, pp. 441-442. Fr Rinaldi was alluding to the then famous book by Jean-Baptiste Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate*.
- 11 “Sulla unione che dava serenità soprannaturale alla sua persona sono unanimi le deposizioni” (L. Fiora, *Informatio super virtutibus*, Roma, 1983, p. 71).
- 12 “Don Rinaldi a chi lo osservava dava l’impressione di un uomo in continua unione con Dio. Forse è questa sua profonda vita interiore che gli alimentava quella calma serena, dolce e mansueta, che lo rendeva sempre uguale a se stesso, sempre sanamente ottimista come Don Bosco.” (P. Zerbino, Apostolic process of Fr Rinaldi, ad 15^{um}, *Summarium*, p. 418).
- 13 “Si comprende la straordinaria importanza che ha per ogni “consacrato” l’atteggiamento permanente di unione con Dio. Questo atteggiamento porta il salesiano a fare “esperienza della paternità di Dio”. Egli è sempre “in dialogo semplice e cordiale con il Cristo vivo e con il Padre che sente vicino. Attento alla presenza dello Spirito e compiendo tutto per amore di Dio, diventa, come Don Bosco,

contemplativo nell'azione." (E. Viganò, "Il testo rinnovato della nostra Regola di vita", Letter to Salesians, 29 October 1984, *Atti* 312, p. 24)

- 14 Letter as above, same page.
- 15 "Ha immedesimato alla massima perfezione la sua attività esterna, indefessa, assorbente, vastissima, piena di responsabilità, con una vita interiore che ebbe principio dal senso della presenza di Dio (...) e che, un po' per volta, diviene attuale, persistente e viva così da essere perfetta unione con Dio." (E. Viganò, "Don Filippo Rinaldi genuino testimone e interprete dello spirito salesiano", Letter to Salesians, 5 December 1989, *Atti* 332, p.p 37-38).
- 16 "Dunque il segreto del nostro spirito è l'unione con Dio a fondamento e al di sopra di tutto." (Same letter of Fr Viganò, p. 38).
- 17 "Operosità instancabile santificata dalla preghiera e dalla unione con Dio" (Same letter of Fr Viganò, p. 46).
- 18 Same letter of Fr Viganò, p. 48.
- 19 SDB Constitutions, art. 12 and 95.
- 20 They say they are "perseveranti nella preghiera con Maria e come Maria per intensificare la nostra comunione con Dio". "La fedeltà vissuta in pienezza ha il suo compimento nella morte, supremo sigillo della professione religiosa, momento dell'unione totale con Dio." (FMA Constitutions, art. 37, 96 and 107.)
- 21 "Questa unione profonda con la SS. Trinità si attua nella preghiera quotidiana". (VDB Constitutions, art. 42).
- 22 *Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 30, 32, 37.
- 23 "L'unione con Dio e lo stile di preghiera", *Carta di comunione*, art. 20.

Vicuña, Laura

Laura as a pupil of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

A Salesian work was founded in 1893 in the village of Junin de los Andes (in the south of Argentina, near Valdivia in neighbouring Chile, on the other side of the Andes). One day in February 1900, Mercedes Pino introduced her daughters Amanda, aged almost 8 (born on 22 May 1892) and Laura, aged almost 9 (born on 5 April 1891 and baptised the following 24 May in Santiago de Chile) to Fr Augusto Crestanello, who was standing in as the Rector, and to Salesian Sister Angela Piai, Superior of the women's section.¹ The two girls were quite dissimilar. Laura Vicuña, named after her Chilean father (who died the year she was born), was quiet and thoughtful. She had a round, slightly rosy face and large dark eyes, but a restrained smile, abundant black hair always combed, and was of fragile health. She was the physical and moral opposite of her younger sister Amanda, dark and strong with a determined face, lively and mischievous, a prankster who loved to laugh. Amanda was intelligent, but a little "vague", which prevented her from quickly realising the tragedies taking place in her family. Pointing to Laura, Mercedes said to Sister Angela Piai: "She never caused me any sorrow. Ever since she was a little girl, she has been docile and courageous." In fact, as with Dominic Savio half a century earlier, "virtue was born" with Laura.

The house, known as the "college", was more like a small, miserable shack. The cramped buildings could only accommodate around fifteen boarders, to which twenty or so day students were added during the school year. It was all managed by a staff of eight Salesian Sisters in 1900 (five sisters, two postulants and one aspirant). The educational team was young, enthusiastic and ready for every kind of dedication. Laura drew lessons from the gospel as it was lived in this world of poverty and generous love, where religious vocations sprang up spontaneously.

The two sisters, who had everything to learn, entered the first year of elementary school. Among the subjects taught were sewing, singing (Laura had a beautiful voice) and, above all, catechism, where Laura, spiritually predisposed, found her delight. After the lesson she savoured its content and tried to apply it to her life. It was probably during 1900 that she realised her mother's irregular situation. Mercedes had agreed more or less to cohabitation with a wealthy manager (*arrendatario*) of a huge cattle-breeding

and crofting station. He was Manuel Mora, who gave her work on one of his *estancias* and paid for the boarding of the two girls. Sister Rosa Azocar, who taught catechism, said: “The first time I had to explain the sacrament of marriage, Laura fainted, no doubt because she then discovered that her mum was living in a guilty state.” It was a first shock, heralding the drama of the child’s life.

The summer holidays (January–February 1901) at the *rancho* where their mother lived, some fifteen kilometres from Junin, were not a happy time for the especially sensitive and pious Laura. The atmosphere: no chapel, no friendships, contact with rather rude employees, and above all the intermittent presence of Manuel Mora, was diametrically different from the atmosphere at the school. Mercedes got to know the humiliations and brutalities of her boss, a man without religion or scruples, a violent despot, boastful and arrogant, brimming with insults and coarse language, although he did have occasional romantic outbursts of gallantry and generosity. He was the typical Argentine *gaucho* of the time. The locals called him “the hawk”.² To Laura’s great sadness, the poor woman seemed to have given up praying. She used to say to her daughters: “You pray, but when Manuel Mora is around, do it in secret, otherwise he’ll get angry.”

Finally, on 1 March, Laura and Amanda returned to school, “my paradise”, said Laura. Two events of great spiritual significance were to mark their school year: Laura’s First Holy Communion on 1 May and her entry into the Children of Mary group on 8 December. Laura was admitted to First communion at the age of ten, whereas she would usually be given communion at the age of twelve. “She made her First Holy Communion, and that explains everything”, wrote her spiritual father, Fr Crestanello, in his biography.³ But the child’s immense happiness was compounded by the immense disappointment of not seeing her mother receive communion with her. On the evening of that day, she wrote four resolutions in her notebook, certainly inspired by those of Dominic Savio, whose biography written by Don Bosco was well known in Junin: “O my God, I want to love you and serve you alone: I give you my heart, my soul, my whole being. - I want to die rather than offend you with mortal sin. - I will do everything I can to make you known and loved, and to make reparation for the serious offences you receive every day from men and especially from the members of my family. - My God, give me a life of love and sacrifice.” Laura’s “life of love and sacrifice” had begun. To help her carry out this serious programme, she joined the Children of Mary group on 8 December. From then on, the Children of Mary Manual became her rule of life and her bedside book. Laura was well aware of what was meant by the words of the rite of admission:

“Virgin conceived without sin, I choose you as my mother and my protector... I want to live as your child in the sanctity of life.” The certainty of Mary’s familiar presence and the desire to resemble and please her were the two typical features of the holy child’s Marian devotion. The twofold living love of Christ and his Mother thus became the focal point of her Christian experience and the means of overcoming the instability of her early adolescence.

Two months of rather difficult holidays followed. And, towards the end, “the hawk”, to torment the mother,⁴ told her: “I’ve decided not to give you any more money for the college. Your two daughters will stay here and work. On being informed, the school’s superior told Mercedes: “Let Laura come back! We will take her for free.” She would pay her board by helping more with the housework and becoming a “house girl” in some way.

Laura’s offering and sacrifice

Laura was only eleven years old. Yet 1902 was to be the year of her offering, the prelude to the sacrifice of her life. Like one of her close friends, she felt herself called to religious life. But the school superior dissuaded her from considering postulancy because of “a certain impediment” (almost certainly her “illegitimate” birth).⁵ This refusal hurt her, but she resigned herself. Another cause for sadness was that on 29 March, the day of her confirmation (by Bishop Cagliari), her mother, who was present, did not take communion. Strengthened by the Holy Spirit at her confirmation, Laura decided to offer herself entirely to her God and to direct her sacrifice towards Mercedes’ conversion.

Fr Crestanello, who was in charge of her soul, recounted the steps she took. She was not admitted to religious life. She prayed: “O Jesus, I offer myself to You and I want to be yours, even if I have to stay in the world.”⁶ Then, instructed by her confessor on the meaning of the vows, around the middle of the year, it seems, she obtained permission from him to take private vows. Finally, angered by her mother’s behaviour, since she did not change her life in spite of her prayers and sacrifices, she went to her confessor and said: “Father, allow me to offer my life to the Lord and to Mary for the sake of my mother’s conversion!” Fr Crestanello, after asking for time to think and pray, finally agreed. “Then,” he wrote, “she ran to kneel at the foot of the altar, shedding tears of joy, she offered herself as a holocaust to Jesus and his dear Mother Mary.”⁷ And her health began to give cause for serious concern.

The rest of the school year passed without any major external events. Then came the holidays (January–February 1903), which Laura was allowed to spend with the Sisters. And then another school year began. Laura was living out her secret drama, ignored by all her companions, except her dear friend Merceditas. She was more than ever faithful to her humble domestic tasks, kind and helpful to everyone obliging to all, recollected in God. At the age of twelve, Laura, who was one of the tallest in the school, put her strength at the service of the little ones. Her great happiness was to be the sacristan. People made fun of the “little saint”. She was scolded for her advice: She was scolded for her advice: “Go for a walk! You smell bad!” (She was afflicted with urinary incontinence). Laura put up with everything without complaint.

Pain in her side and a nasty cough set in. Winter (June–August) is harsh in Junin, at an altitude of 800m, and this year (1903) it was marked by floods and persistent damp cold. A relentless cough shook Laura, who was pale and emaciated. She was excused from certain tasks. She had to be separated from her companions. Her death was approaching, the little girl thought. In early September, she had the grace to take part in the annual retreat preached by Fr Crestanello. On 15 September, Mercedes, having been warned of her illness, came and took her to her *estancia* for treatment. But there were very few resources. The interval, painful in every way for the sick girl, fortunately only lasted about fifty days. With Mora’s permission, Mercedes rented a two-room cottage in Junin and moved in with her two daughters in the early days of November.

Laura returned to the school as a day pupil, but only intermittently and to the extent her strength would allow. It failed her completely in mid-January 1904. On the 16th of that month she went to bed, never to get up again. But one or two days later, Mora reappeared. “You’re trying to trick me! Tomorrow morning we leave for Quilquihué (the *estancia*), and I intend to spend the night here!” The scene was recounted with the utmost great care. Laura begged her mother to send the man away. Frightened, Mercedes hesitated. “If he stays, I’ll go to the Sisters”, said Laura. She got up and, barely able to stand, headed for the door. Her mother stopped her and, losing her head, went so far as to hit her. No doubt impressed, Mora turned and walked away. Laura had won, but those minutes of fear and intense emotion had exhausted her.

On 22 January, her last day, she made her confession to Fr Genghini, received extreme unction, received the viaticum and, at about five o’clock in the evening, called her mother. In the presence of her confessor, she revealed her offering and her sacrifice. We can only repeat what the witness said. “I am going to die, Mother. I asked Jesus myself. Two years ago, I offered him my life so that you would come back

to Him. ... Oh, Mummy, if, before that I could have the joy of knowing that you are at peace with the Lord!" Mercedes collapsed in shock. "So it's me who has been the cause of your troubles! Oh, Laura, I promise you, I swear, I'll do anything you ask." Laura kissed her crucifix and her Child of Mary medal. "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Mary! Now I die happy." And she expired peacefully. It was 6pm. In the evening, Mora made a furtive visit to the cottage. "Poor little thing," he said to Laura dressed in white. "How I regret her death"; and he paid in advance for the expenses. The next day, Mercedes went to confession to Fr Genghini, and then took Communion at Laura's funeral Mass. She had had the strength to keep her promise.

Mora, who wanted to take Mercedes back to the estancia, going so far as to threaten her with his gun, had not given up on her. Fr Genghini intervened. Mercedes hid out with friends and fled, in disguise, to return with Amanda to Chile, her homeland. She would return to Junin when she learned that Mora was no more.⁸

Laura's glorification

Thanks to a few admiring witnesses, the memory of the heroic little girl persisted in Chile and Argentina. On 3 September 1988, at Colle Don Bosco, John Paul II beatified Laura Vicuña, "the Eucharistic flower of Junin de los Andes, whose life was a poem of purity, sacrifice and filial love", as he said in his homily, repeating the inscription on her tombstone.⁹ "Despite her youth, Laura Vicuña understood perfectly well that the meaning of life is to know and love Christ. She also understood", the Pope continued, "that, what counts is life itself, and that all that is in the world and that everything in the world and of the world passes away inexorably." Finally, the Pope expressed the wish that "the gentle figure of Blessed Laura, the most pure glory of Argentina and Chile (...), may teach everyone that, with the help of grace, evil can be triumphed over, and that the ideal of innocence and love, however much it may be denigrated and attacked, can never fail to shine forth and enlighten hearts." Laura's light was now spreading around the world.

NOTES

- 1 The story of Laura Vicuña is summarised here according to Ciro Brugna, *Aportes para el conocimiento de Laura Vicuña*, Buenos Aires, 1990, which contains an exact reproduction of *la Vida de Laura Vicuña, alumno de las Hijas de Maria Auxiliadora e Hija de Maria Immaculada*, Santiago, Escuela tip. “Gratitud Nacional”, 1911, 96 pages, the work of Fr Augusto Crestanello, her confessor; Luigi Castaño, *Santità e martirio di Laura Vicuña*, Rome, ed. FMA, 1990; and Joseph Aubry, “Une rose des Andes : la bienheureuse Laure Vicuña”, in *Les saints de la famille*, Rome, ed. S.D.B., 1996, pp. 219-242, several passages of which have been reproduced verbatim for this entry.
- 2 Detailed description of the personality and family of Manuel Mora in Ciro Brugna, *Aportes ...*, cited, pp. 59-81.
- 3 “Hizo santamente su primera Comuni3n y esto lo explica todo.” (A. Crestanello, *Vida* cited, p. 22).
- 4 There seems to be evidence that Mercedes, in other circumstances, was tied to a post and whipped, and probably branded once.
- 5 “... Esto era su sueño dorado. Trabajar por el bien de las niñas. Mas habia algo que impedia su santa aspiraci3n. Qu3 dolor para su tierno coraz3n”, wrote A. Crestanello, *Vida...*, chap. IV, p. 24. Was it just the mother’s illegal status? Or rather the illegitimate birth of the child? Fr Castaño defended the legitimacy of this birth at length in *Santità e martirio*, pp. 134-138. But his argument, even based on extensive documentation, is by no means convincing. Ciro Brugna’s argument, based on the non-existence of Mercedes Pino’s marriage to Domingo Vicuña (*Aportes ...*, pp. 161-172), is much more convincing. Apart from this illegitimacy, it is hard to imagine what “impediment” the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians could have invoked to refuse the child admission to their institute. This was also Fr Aubry’s feeling in his article.
- 6 “Oh Jes3s, aun cuando no pueda ser recibida entre aquellas que se consagran a Ti en la Congregaci3n, no obstante à Ti me ofrezco, quiero ser toda tuya, aunque tenga que permanecer en el mundo” (A. Crestanello, *Vida...*, chap. IV, p. 25).
- 7 “La pequeña Laura no esper3 más. Corri3 luego à arrojarse à los pies de Jes3s, y bañada en lágrimas de gozo, y con la esperanza de ser atendida por Dios, se ofreció en holocausto à Jes3s y a su querida Madre Maria.” (A. Crestanello, *Vida...*, chap. XIV, pp. 75-76).
- 8 Manuel Mora was murdered on 18 September 1908. (According to the Death Certificate of the Justice of the Peace of Bariloche, Rio Negro, reproduced in C. Brugna, *Aportes...*, p. 75).
- 9 The Italian text of John Paul II’s homily at Colle Don Bosco was published in the *L’Osservatore romano* 4 September 1988, its French translation in *Documentation catholique*, n° 1972, 20 November 1988, pp. 1090-1092.

Virtue

Virtue humanises people and society

Virtue, a word that did not appear in the indexes of the circulars of Frs Luigi Ricceri (1965–1977) and Egidio Viganò (1978–1995), resurfaced at the end of the century.

Today, with the continuing ecumenical and secular dialogue in our pluralistic societies, Catholic theologians are discovering neglected aspects of the renewal of morality since the Council: virtue, the formation of the person as character, the construction of self, the importance of narrativity and narrative in the structuring of moral norms. Virtue, in this new theological trend, is not only to be seen as a quality for the perfection of our human life, but must have social and political consequences....¹

Virtues were thus reappearing in religious discourse; and the edifying biographies that describe them, reviled yesterday, could bud and blossom again at the start of another millennium.²

But what exactly is virtue? In the old Salesian world, this word often referred to purity of morals alone. The virtue of purity enveloped the whole person. The common spirituality of the Catholics of the time encouraged this. A witness to Blessed Philip Rinaldi in Spain, for example, said of him:

His piety was exquisite, his words exuded a sweet perfume of virtue, they encouraged us to become better, by avoiding shortcomings and correcting faults. By means of holy and attractive ploys, he made the path of virtue easier for us and led us into it, so to speak, without our noticing it.³

The first generations of Salesians, however, were careful not to leave it at that. Virtue is a *habitus* of thinking well and doing well. Virtue makes us grow. All virtues interested these educators by vocation.

Let us distinguish between virtue and virtues. Virtue is the quality of being virtuous. Salesians have confidence in human nature. Insofar as they are not not perverted, human beings, whether believers or not, harbour within themselves a tendency to be virtuous. In the richest sense of the word, virtuous means: being strong within, having a big heart,

being rich in the highest sentiments, bold in the truth, courageous in freedom, constant in responsibility, generous in love, invincible in hope. However, the happiness of being fully male or female can only be achieved through sacrifice: virtue is costly. Acquiring perishable goods does not make you a better person. A virtuous person does not look outside for what is to be found inside. People like this do not expect from others what they themselves can and are called to be or do.⁴ In his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul outlined for his correspondents a path of personal and social virtue: “Hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; ... rejoice in your hope, ... practise hospitality.... Bless.... Live in harmony with one another ... associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:9-21). How pleasant, though highly improbable, would be a society in which “virtue” was a fact of life for all its members!

And then there are the virtues. Saint Francis de Sales advised Philothea to choose them carefully, when she tried to cultivate them in herself. He entitled the first chapter of a long essay on this theme: “How to select that which we should chiefly practise.”⁵ There are certainly virtues of universal account. We do not very often come across opportunities for exercising strength, magnanimity, or magnificence; but gentleness, temperance, modesty, and humility, are graces “which ought to colour everything we do”. Asked to choose, Francis continued, it is well to choose that which is most according to our duty, rather than most according to our taste. “Those required of a prelate, a prince, or a soldier, are quite different; so are those beseeching a wife or a widow.” Each person will therefore devote himself particularly to the virtues required by his type of life. In addition, we must take into account our propensity to do wrong, what in other times were called passions. If a vice overwhelms us, we must, as far as possible, opt for the practice of the opposite virtue, Francis recommended. This is a way of defeating the enemy and meanwhile make progress in all virtue. “Thus, if I am beset with pride or anger, I must above all else strive to cultivate humility and gentleness, and I must turn all my religious exercises — prayer, sacraments, prudence, constancy, moderation, to the same object.” And Saint Francis goes on at length about a series of virtues that we don’t think much about: patience, humility, gentleness, obedience, chastity, poverty of spirit, friendship, mortification, propriety, honesty of words and deeds, and finally fidelity.⁶

These were very “natural” virtues. On the subject of virtues, in a letter of exhortation to his followers on “Don Bosco, the model of the Salesian priest”, Fr Albera, a good disciple of Saint Francis de Sales, remarked: “We must certainly not neglect the so-called human or natural virtues, which form the basis of our life. certainly not neglect the

so-called human or natural virtues, which form man in the true sense of the word, the man of heart and character: such as goodness, uprightness, generosity, constancy, etc.”⁷ Natural virtues, in other words virtues of nature, beautify the human being and improve human society.

Virtues civilise a world perpetually tempted by its latent savagery. Don Bosco demonstrated this in one of his first important books, in which Christian refinement appeared in the title alongside virtue. It was (in English translation) *Virtue and Christian refinement according to the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul*, in which he successively celebrated charity, gentleness, equality of temperament, humility, faith, mortification, patience, poverty, prudence, purity, a spirit of gratitude, respect for authorities, simplicity, trust in God, zeal and, finally, detachment from earthly things.⁸

The practice of virtue by Salesian spiritual masters

The Salesian spiritual masters of the past could not but encourage their disciples to practise virtue. In their houses, the *fioretti* (spiritual bouquets) during the nine days leading up to religious feasts were often simply invitations to practise this or that virtue. As it was for the author of *The Imitation of Christ*, the disciples had to learn, above all through generous and faithful practice, to appreciate the value and fruitfulness of virtue. In their case, “Christian virtue” was not self-control or know-how, nor was it a safeguard against being led astray by the “passions”. It was a way of being and acting according to Christ. The “Christian virtue” of these masters was made up above all of the gospel attitudes of humility, compunction, self-denial and, above all, charity. Charity had a special place among the Salesian virtues.

The lists of virtues are instructive, telling us about the virtues specific to Don Bosco’s disciples. “Let us practise exactly the virtues that make up a good religious” wrote Fr Michael Rua; “let us be obedient for reasons of faith ; let us be chaste, because chastity must be the most resplendent pearl in the Salesian crown. Let us be charitable, patient and gentle towards our neighbours, especially towards young people, so many of whom the good Lord directs to our houses every year...”⁹ Under the title “The virtues of the Salesian”, a circular from this Rector Major spoke only of fraternal charity.¹⁰

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians open their new Constitutions with a four-point list of the virtues that, according to Don Bosco’s advice in their First Constitutions, they must practise. These virtues, the text emphasises, must be “well tested and well rooted” (*molto provate e radicate*) in them. They are as follows:

1. Patient and zealous charity, not only towards children but also towards young women and everyone without exception, with the aim of doing as much good as possible for souls. 2. Simplicity and reserve combined with cheerfulness, a spirit of mortification both interior and exterior; strict observance of poverty. 3. Obedience of will and judgement, humility in accepting, willingly and without comment, the advice and corrections given, and the work entrusted to them. 4. A spirit of prayer that helps the Sisters to carry out their practices of piety willingly, to remain in the presence of God, and to abandon themselves to Divine Providence.¹¹

These were and are the “evangelical virtues” of the Salesian Sisters, which, well assimilated by the world of Mother Mazzarello, created the climate known as the “spirit of Mornese”, which they seek to revive in all their communities. It has been summed up in these terms: “It is a context of simple living, where, permeated by evangelical charity, austerity and joy, silence and an apostolic drive that is essentially missionary, the spirit of hard work and of tireless prayer.”¹²

Fr Albera, concerned about the interior life of his Salesians, recommended to them a series of virtues that he called “Christian”, i.e. those demanded by the example and lessons of Christ, which constituted, he said, the “rock-solid foundation of (their) spiritual life.”¹³ He listed faith, hope, love of God and neighbour, religion, humility, mortification, poverty, chastity, obedience and justice. In this area especially, virtue, he taught, is a conquest, requiring perseverance and attention to God. Inconstancy, which is unfortunately frequent in the continuous, if not “dizzying” activity of the Salesians of the time, was detrimental to the quality of their virtues. Being fickle, the diligence of youth does not persist over the years. They become dissipated and sluggish. Along with courage and generosity, fervour diminishes and vanishes. The fickle, after having struggled for a while against their faults, return to the old ruts where the virtues soon get bogged down... The spirit of the Lord, who recalls what Christ taught, could bring them back to the right path.

The whole of Salesian spirituality, both that of St Francis de Sales and that of St John Bosco, is a spirituality of apostolic action, from the personalist perspective of Fr Albera. The individualistic and subjective mentality, which some would willingly denounce as the origin of his words, can disappoint the demands and the concern for action of a modern mind. For the profound meaning of the spiritual life is not to be found in interiority alone. But the reminder is timely for the Salesian spiritual master who would willingly abandon the practice of the vertical dimension of spirituality, leaving it to

monks, in favour of the horizontal dimension alone. The one who, at the end of the century, prided himself on being a “contemplative in action” has good reason to ponder these reflections of the spiritual masters of the past. A life of virtue according to the Holy Spirit, the only authentically spiritual life for a Christian, is necessarily a life of union with God. Don Bosco provides a remarkable model of a life of active and virtuous union with the Lord.

NOTES

- 1 G. Médevielle, “Arrivés après la bataille”, *Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale*, n° 200, March 1997, p. 123.
- 2 In spite of the sarcasm of a few well-heeled columnists (Roger Pol-Droit), oblivious to the examples of Plato, Epictetus, Plutarch and Montaigne, André Comte-Sponville's *Petit traité des grandes vertus* (Paris: PUF, 1995) immediately became a bestseller.
- 3 “Era squisita la sua pietà, le sue parole spiravano soave fragranza di virtù, infondevano coraggio a farsi migliori, evitando le mancanze e correggendosi degli difetti. Con sante e attraenti industrie ci facilitava il cammino della virtù e vi ci faceva entrare, per così dire, senza che ce ne accorgessimo.” (Testimony of Salesian Gregorio Ferro providing the following lines on la Purissima, in E. Ceria, *Vita del Servo di Dio Sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, SEI, 1948, p. 80).
- 4 Words borrowed from John Paul II, Homily at Camagüey (Cuba), 23 January 1998. The following quotation from Saint Paul was also copied from this homily.
- 5 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Three, Chap. I.
- 6 *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part Three, Chap. III-XLI.
- 7 “... non sono certo da trascurare quelle [virtù] dette umane o naturali, che formano l'uomo nel senso genuino della parola, l'uomo di cuore e di carattere: come la bontà, la rettitudine, la generosità, la costanza, etc.” (P. Albera, “Don Bosco modello del Sacerdote Salesiano”, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L. C., p. 428).
- 8 *Il Cristiano guidato alla virtù ed alla civiltà secondo lo spirito di San Vincenzo de' Paoli*, Turin, Paravia et Comp., 1848.8. “... non sono certo da trascurare quelle [virtù] dette umane o naturali, che formano l'uomo nel senso genuino della parola, l'uomo di cuore e di carattere: come la bontà, la rettitudine, la generosità, la costanza, etc.” (P. Albera, “Don Bosco modello del Sacerdote Salesiano”, Letter to Salesian priests, 19 March 1921, L.C., p. 428).
- 9 “Praticiamo con esattezza le virtù che formano un buon religioso; siamo obbedienti per motivo di fede; siamo casti, perchè la castità deve essere la gemma più splendida nella corona dei Salesiani; siamo caritatevoli, pazienti, mansueti verso il prossimo, specialmente verso la gioventù, che ogni anno il buon Dio così numerosa invia alle nostre case...” (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 6 June 1890, L.C., p. 48).
- 10 The title, “Le virtù del Salesiano” of Fr Rua's edifying letter no. 9 (Turin, 24 June 1907) is hardly appropriate for its content. After a paragraph on fraternal charity, Fr Rua communicated only a few news items.
- 11 “1. Carità paziente e zelante non solo verso l'infanzia, ma ancora verso le giovani e verso qualsiasi persona allo scopo di fare il maggior bene possibile alle anime. - 2. Semplicità e modestia con santa allegrezza; spirito di mortifica rione interna ed esterna; rigorosa osservanza di povertà. - 3. Obbedienza di volontà e di giudizio ed umiltà nell'accettare volentieri e senza osservazione gli avvisi e correzioni, e quegli uffici che vengono affidati. - 4. Spirito di orazione col quale le suore attendano di buon grado alle opere di pietà, si tengano alla presenza di Dio ed abbandonate alla sua dolce Provvidenza.” (Profile of the FMA as outlined by Don Bosco in the first Constitutions, in *FMA Constitutions*, 1982, bilingual italo-française ed, pp. 20-21; English edition p.11).

- 12 “Esso è un contesto di vita semplice, nel quale, animati dalla carità evangelica, spiccano senza contrasti l’austerità e la letizia, il silenzio e lo slancio apostolico essenzialmente missionario, lo spirito di laboriosità e di instancabile preghiera.” (Maria Ester Posada, “Elementi caratteristici della spiritualità delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice”, in *Spiritualità dell’azione* (a cura di M Midali), Roma, LAS, 1977, p. 293).
- 13 “Ma la base granitica della nostra vita spirituale dev’essere costituita dalle virtù cristiane” (P. Albera, “Don Bosco modello del Sacerdote Salesiano”, cit, p. 428).

Vocation

The call and those called

In the religious sense used here alone, the word vocation is used in two different meanings. First and foremost, it refers to God's call (in Latin: *vocatio*) to a person or a people, to tell them what meaning they should give to their lives. God calls without ever forcing the person called, who is always free to accept or reject his invitation. The Bible provides us with countless examples of vocations. The story of Abraham is a typical example. "Now the Lord said to Abram: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him'" (Genesis 12:1-4.) At the time of Jesus, the Gospel of Saint Matthew briefly the vocation of the first four disciples. "Follow me," Jesus said to them, "and I will make you fish for people." All four accepted this invitation at once. Leaving their nets, their boats and, in the case of the last two, their fathers, they followed Jesus (Matthew 4:18-22). A vocation is essentially a divine call.

In disregard of the natural etymology of the term, ecclesiastical usage has readily transposed the word of the call to the objects of the call, those called. Those called (potentially or in fact) by God have thus been called "vocations". Two out of three times, Salesian documents use the word "vocation" only in this second sense, which is far from being peculiar to them. The decree of the Second Vatican Council on the renewal and adaptation of religious life said: "Priests and Christian educators should make serious efforts to foster religious vocations (*yocationibus religiosis*) suitably and carefully chosen."¹ In this passage, the word "vocations" refers not to immaterial calls, but to people of flesh and blood.

Vocation according to Don Bosco

"In his eternal decrees," Don Bosco explained to his young people in their prayer book, "God has destined each one of us in particular to a state of life with special (corresponding) graces. As in every circumstance, in this one, which is of the utmost importance, the Christian must seek the divine will, imitating Jesus who said he had come to fulfil the will of his Eternal Father. It is therefore of the utmost importance

for you, my son, to take this step carefully, so that you do not become involved in occupations for which the Lord has not destined you.”² The problem of vocation was thus posed to every teenager. The individual call exists in God from all eternity; it is up to the individual to decipher it so as not to go astray and follow a dangerous path for which he or she was not made.

When he had succeeded in having the Constitutions of his new religious society approved by Rome, in the second edition (1877) of the introduction he gave to their Italian translation, Don Bosco inserted, regarding the problem of vocation to religious life, an identical development borrowed from a pamphlet by St Alphonsus Liguori entitled *Avvisi spettanti alla vocazione* (Advice on Vocation). St Alphonsus had written that corresponding to a vocation was simply an application of the formula of the Our Father: Thy will be done. The Liguorian pamphlet began by recalling the obligation to “conform oneself to God’s designs in the choice of any state” (§ I), with, as its first consequence, the “misfortune to which one exposes oneself by not corresponding to them” (§II, 1), and, as its second consequence: “One must obey God’s voice without delay” (§ II,2). 2). He then listed the means of preserving the religious vocation in the world, which are discretion, prayer and recollection (§ III), as well as the dispositions required for entry into religion, namely: detachment from the comforts of life, detachment from parents, detachment from self-love and detachment from one’s own will (§ IV); and finally the trials which the candidate must expect in the religious life, with an indication of two sovereign remedies for overcoming them: recourse to God and recourse to superiors (§ V).

Don Bosco repeated the principles of Saint Alphonsus on the obligation of each one to seek, accept and follow the particular destiny that God has planned for them, in other words, their personal vocation. For, as the reader of his Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions learns,

the Lord, who is full of mercy and infinitely rich in graces, in the very creation of man fixes a path for him. If man follows it, he can easily achieve his eternal salvation. Whoever sets out on this path and follows it accomplishes God’s will without great difficulty and finds peace. On the other hand, if he does not resolve to do so, he exposes himself to the grave danger of no longer having the graces necessary to save himself.³

It is particularly serious, he continued, to neglect “God’s call to a more perfect life” (*la chiamata divina a vita più perfetta*), in other words to the religious state, a call which in itself is a very special grace. The desire to enter religion, a “sublime and truly

angelic state” (*stato sublime e veramente angelico*), will therefore be submitted to without hesitation, because such a desire can only come from God. The recipient of a vocation of this kind will guard it with as much care as the precious pearl of the Gospel. Discretion, prayer and recollection are essential for those who do not wish to “lose” their vocation as a religious.⁴ As we can see, Don Bosco was not concerned with the secret vocation, the divine call that is felt in the heart of the person called, as had happened to the biblical Samuel.

This teaching regarding God’s call-vocation, based on predestination which the person called must interpret and follow in order to guarantee his or her eternal salvation was the official one in the Salesian world until the end of the 1960s. Don Bosco himself authenticated it at the beginning of the book of Constitutions given to each religious.

A deeper understanding of the Salesian teaching on vocation

Throughout the twentieth century, however, the Catholic Church did not cease to reflect on the problem of the priestly or religious vocation. And the Salesians took note of its teaching.

Studies proliferated, first in the 1910s and then in the wake of Vatican II, in order to exploit its ideas or intuitions.⁵ The first series of reflections was triggered in 1909 by the Lahitton-Branchereau controversy. Canon Lahitton made the call of the hierarchy (the bishop) the only true source of the priestly vocation, while his opponent, the Sulpician Branchereau, favoured the inner call of divine origin: “I have a vocation, I know it, I feel it.” The Holy See, invited to settle the dispute, did so in 1912 with three propositions:

- a) No one is ever entitled to ordination prior to election by the bishop,
- b) The condition to be examined on the part of the ordinand, which is called priestly vocation, does not consist, at least not necessarily and as a rule, in a certain inner attraction of the individual or in invitations of the Holy Spirit to embrace the ecclesiastical state,
- c) On the contrary, for the ordinand to be regularly called by the bishop, nothing more is required of him than right intention combined with suitability.⁶

Fr Albera, aware of the impact of the discussion on Salesian life, wrote a long letter “on vocations” shortly before his death, which took into account of both the Roman judgement and the Salesian experience.⁷ Generally speaking, he taught, a vocation – that is, the choice of a particular state of life – comes from God, who, as the author of all

creation, inspires each reasonable soul with the path it must follow to reach its end. But, as a rule, he does not communicate this inspiration by extraordinary means. The person called must not therefore expect signs that leave him in any doubt as to his choice. God deposits, as it were, the seed of the vocation in the natural gifts he bestows on souls in varying degrees. In creating each person in his own image and likeness and for the same purpose, he attributes to them, according to his will, different personal qualities that incline them to one state or another. Providence generally provides an environment adapted to the full development of these qualities, so that each person is gradually led to embrace the state of life most suited to his personality, the one in which he will be able to achieve his eternal salvation with the greatest ease and security. This is, as a rule, God's role in the vocation of his creatures. Embracing one state in preference to another depends on their free choice. Grace, which is never lacking to those who strive not to fall short, helps them in their choice. In addition, there are those responsible for the development and education of individuals.

During the 1950s, the discussion, in which Salesians (such as Fr Eugenio Valentini) took part, focused on the obligation to follow one's vocation, as explained by St Alphonsus and Don Bosco.

Then the exchanges calmed down on this subject with a new presentation of things. The Second Vatican Council included the problem of religious and priestly vocations in its vision of the Church as the "universal sacrament of salvation".⁸ As such, the Church (*ekklésia*, assembly by convocation) is essentially "calling". It is the Father who, through his Son and in the Spirit, calls creatures into this sacramental Church. Everyone must work for personal and collective salvation, the Church's own task. All vocations, whether particular or not, which contribute to this enterprise, come from God in the Church. All those called have a duty to respond to the divine call thus transmitted, whatever it may be, internal or external, according to their capacities and the needs of the world to be saved. according to their abilities and the needs of the world to be saved. Now, the Church moves through time. Vocations, instead of being situated in a timeless predestination, are part of the long term. Vocations are calls to charity today. The parable of the talents sufficiently expresses the obligation to comply with these challenges. As for the provisions necessary to respond to particular vocations, such as the priesthood or the religious life, these can only be determined by the Church herself, the sole judge in these matters.

A good contemporary synthesis of particular vocations in relation to general vocations can be found in the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II,

which concluded the synod of bishops on the priest (October 1990).⁹ Fr Viganò greatly appreciated this letter from the Pope. After insisting on the situation of every vocation: “Each Christian vocation comes from God and is God’s gift. However, it is never bestowed outside of or independently of the Church. Instead it always comes about in the Church and through the Church.” The Pope showed that vocation takes shape in an exchange in which God’s initiative and man’s response are interwoven.

The history of every priestly vocation, as indeed of every Christian vocation, is the history of an inexpressible dialogue between God and human beings, between the love of God who calls and the freedom of individuals who respond lovingly to him. These two indivisible aspects of vocation, God’s gratuitous gift and the responsible freedom of human beings, are reflected in a splendid and very effective way in the brief words with which the evangelist Mark presents the calling of the Twelve: Jesus “went up into the hills, and called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him” (Mark 3:13).¹⁰

The culture of vocations and spiritual life

Salesians have shown themselves to be particularly sensitive to the “pastoral care of vocations”, as outlined by the Roman Synod.¹¹

Since Don Bosco, his sons have been convinced that they are fulfilling their mission of the Church when they lead Christians, especially young people, to discover and live their own vocations in freedom and to bring them to fulfilment, especially in priestly ordination and religious profession. They know they are not alone, with the family often playing a leading role in this birth and growth to mature decision. In their place, Salesian men and women strive to awaken in children, teenagers and young adults the desire and will to follow Jesus Christ in everything and closely. Their educational work, while concerning communities as such, is addressed to each individual in particular. God, through his call, reaches the heart of each person, and the Holy Spirit, who dwells in each disciple (cf. 1 John 3:24), gives himself to each one each with his or her different charisms and particular manifestations. Each individual therefore deserves to be helped to receive the gift entrusted to them individually, as a unique and irreplaceable person. For this reason, each person deserves to be helped to listen to the words that the Spirit of God speaks to him or her.

According to a tradition inherited from Don Bosco as confessor, concern for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life is reflected in a firm and persuasive

proposal for spiritual direction. A vocation is rooted in a spiritual experience that needs to be built on. Children, teenagers and young adults should be invited to discover and appreciate the gift of spiritual direction, to seek it out, to experience it and to ask their educators for it with confidence.¹²

Priests should be the first to devote time and energy to this work of education and personal spiritual support, said the Pope. In this way, they collaborate with the Spirit of God to enlighten and guide those who are called. Let them present the mystery of Christ as a central historical value, accessible to everyone in a life inspired by the Gospel values of love, service, austerity and universality, Fr Viganò taught. Then let them experience the attraction of a fraternal experience of group life, through which they are introduced to ecclesial life. They should teach them to appreciate generous ideals, such as the preferential option for the poor, a passion for justice, the courage of non-violence, initiatives in favour of peace, and so on. Let them inspire a desire for commitment and responsibility in socially useful projects. All this should lead to concrete experiences of voluntary work, with the inherent demands of sacrifice and organisation of life.¹³

NOTES

- 1 *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 24.
- 2 “Ne’ suoi eterni consigli Iddio ha destinato a ciascheduno una condizione di vita e le grazie relative. Come in ogni altra circostanza, il Cristiano deve anche in questa, che è capitalissima, cercare la divina volontà, imitando Gesù Cristo, che protestava di essere venuto a compiere i voleri del suo Eterno Padre. Importa adunque moltissimo, o giovane mio, accertare questo passo, per non impegnarti in occupazioni, a cui il Signore non ti elesse.” (“Il giovane nella scelta dello stato”, *Il Giovane provveduto*, 10th ed., Turin, 1885, pp. 73-74).
- 3 “Iddio misericordioso infinitamente ricco di grazie nella stessa creazione dell’uomo stabilisce a ciascuno una via la quale percorrendo egli può con molta facilità conseguire la sua eterna salvezza. L’uomo che si mette in quella via e per quella cammina con poca fatica fa adunque la volontà di Dio, trova la sua pace, che se non si mettesse per quella via corre grave pericolo di non avere poi le grazie necessarie per salvarsi” (G. Bosco, “Ai soci salesiani ...” *Regole o Costituzioni...*, 1877, p. 5).
- 4 G. Bosco, “Ai soci salesiani...”, *Regole o Costituzioni...*, 1877, pp. 5-14.
- 5 See the article by M. Sauvage, “Vocation”, in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. XVI, 1994, col. 1092-1158.
- 6 Letter of the Secretary of State to the Bishop of Aire and Dax, 15 July 1912, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 4, p. 485.
- 7 P. Albera, “Sulle vocazioni”, Letter to Salesians, 15 May 1921, L. C., pp. 439-499.
- 8 “Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race ...”(Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1.)
- 9 Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (25 March 1992), nos. 35-41.
- 10 *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, nos. 35 and 36.
- 11 E. Viganò, “C’è ancora terreno buono per i semi”, Letter to Salesians, 8 Decemer 1991, *Atti* 339, pp. 3-37.
- 12 According to *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 41.
- 13 E. Viganò, “C’è ancora...”, as cited, *Atti* 339, pp. 17-18. Also see, “La preghiera per le vocazioni”, Letter to Salesians, 26 June 1992, *Atti* 341, pp. 3-30.

Volunteers of Don Bosco

The institution of the Volunteers of Don Bosco¹

The birth of the association of Don Bosco Volunteers, originally known as the Zealots of Mary Help of Christians, then for a time as the Oblate Cooperators of Saint John Bosco, dates back to the time of Fr Philip Rinaldi, when he was Prefect of the Salesian Congregation. Fr Rinaldi attached great importance to ministry to the Sisters in Turin running the oratories. He watched over their spiritual progress. The idea of grouping together girls who wished to sanctify themselves through vows without, however, belonging to a Congregation with a community life, came about at a meeting of past pupils of the Salesian Sisters, held in Turin in 1911. It took shape on 20 May 1917 with three young Children of Mary from the Valdocco girl's oratory, who from then on had their regular meetings with Fr Rinaldi as Zealots of Mary Help of Christians. On 26 October 1919, the group was strengthened with the first professions of these zealous women. On that day, in the chapel in Don Bosco's *camerette* at Valdocco, in the presence of Cardinal Cagliero, Fr Philip Rinaldi, director of the association, and a representative of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, seven zealous women professed the evangelical counsels. They inaugurated a new experience of Salesian consecration, as Fr Egidio Viganò has explained.²

The association thus founded continued without much fanfare until just after the Second World War. The Church's recognition of secular institutes with the Apostolic Constitution of Pius XII *Provida Mater* (2 February 1947), infused it with vigour. The association read its own aims and its own spirit into this. At the same time, the prohibition of religious Congregations in countries under Communist rule favoured the development of this association of women who were duly consecrated, but who had no community life.

The ecclesiastical institutionalisation of the Volunteers association took place in two stages. On 5 December 1970, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes granted its *Nihil obstat* for the erection of the association of the Volunteers of Don Bosco as a Secular Institute of diocesan right.³ The way was now officially clear. The second step was taken in 1978. On 21 July 1978, Paul VI signed his agreement for the erection of the Secular Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco (VDB) as a secular

institute of pontifical right with approval of its Constitutions. The subsequent decree of the Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes was dated 7 August 1978.⁴ Finally, the VDB Constitutions, revised and corrected, were definitively approved by the Sacred Congregation on 14 June 1990. On 24 June, Gianna Martinelli, President General of the Institute, was able to present to her sisters the booklet containing this essential document. Following the decrees, it contained two parts: 1) the Constitutions, 2) the Regulations, and ended with a well-compiled Index.⁵ The Volunteers submitted themselves scrupulously to the general laws of the Church on the form of consecrated life which is that of Secular Institutes.⁶ “A secular institute is an institute of consecrated life in which the Christian faithful, living in the world, strive for the perfection of charity and seek to contribute to the sanctification of the world, especially from within”, says the new Code of Canon Law.⁷

The identity of the Volunteers of Don Bosco

The Volunteers of Don Bosco, who are not nuns and proclaim themselves to be laywomen, take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, while continuing to participate in the life of the world. They have always faced problems of identity. This, incidentally, is the case for almost all members of secular institutes, who are obliged to harmoniously combine values in apparent contradiction. Who can we obey outside established communities? How can you be poor if you have to work and earn your keep? Is the apparently doomed solitude of the eternally single woman bearable throughout a woman’s life?⁸ Let us stay preferably with facts from their Constitutions, which obviously do not claim to solve the existential problems of each of the Volunteers.

They tell us that the Volunteers of Don Bosco are part of the Church’s spiritual and apostolic heritage of Saint John Bosco. spiritual and apostolic heritage of Saint John Bosco, as passed on to them by Blessed Philip Rinaldi.⁹ This holy priest tried an evangelical experience with a group of young women, destined to be a leaven of Christian life. This vocation would be a path to holiness for them. Fr Rinaldi was director and leader of the group from its birth in 1917 until 24 May 1922, when, having become Rector Major of the Salesians, he had to entrust his office to a delegate. Certainly, thirty years before *Provida Mater*, Fr Rinaldi did not fully appreciate the richness and fruitfulness of consecrated secularity. He did, however, insist on certain typically secular values, such as commitment to the social fabric of the time or the obligation not to distinguish oneself from one’s environment (assumed to be good and upright). His

observations on dress and lifestyle, which varied according to the social position and function of each person, but which were respectful of an authentic evangelical spirit, were in line with this. “The VDB consider Fr Rinaldi to be their true founder” said Anna Marocco.¹⁰

The Church having recognised their association as a secular institute of pontifical right, the Volunteers of Don Bosco can, since this recognition, be presented as Christians who are called to follow Christ as closely as possible, and seek to harmonise three essential characteristics perfectly within themselves: consecration, secularity and Salesianity. Thus, without a common life or works of their own, united simply by fraternal communion and membership of an approved Institute, they intend to carry out their mission in the Church and become a sign of Christ’s love to the world.

Let us look at these three characteristics. Volunteers are first and foremost consecrated women. The adjective must be given its full canonical force. By his loving initiative, God calls them and consecrates them to Him in Christ and according to the Holy Spirit, to send them into the world to evangelise it in the manner of Don Bosco. In response to this call, the Volunteers offer themselves totally to God by professing the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, so as to live fully the covenant made with him at their baptism.

Volunteers are also secular women. Remaining lay, their vocational choice means that they live in the world. Volunteers of Don Bosco contribute to the sanctification of this world from within, in the manner of leaven. Secularity is what makes their vocation specific, distinguishes them from religious sisters. It is in secularity that they live out their consecration, that they carry out their mission, that they express their fraternal communion and, finally, that they participate in the life of the Salesian Family.

Very sensitive to the Gospel images of salt and yeast, the Volunteers fulfil their mission in the Church in this way. They evangelise the world like salt in food and yeast in dough. Following in the footsteps of Christ who became incarnate in human beings in order to make them divine, they place all the gifts they may have shared at the service of the Kingdom of God. In this way, their whole life is transformed into a true apostolate.

Finally, the third characteristic of the Volunteers is that they are Salesian. The charism that they claim “qualifies” them in the Church and in the world. As a result, pastoral charity, which is at the heart of Don Bosco’s spirit, makes them particularly open to the human and evangelical values that the saint discovered in the heart of Christ. Volunteers prefer to direct their apostolic action along the lines of Don Bosco’s own

mission. Like Don Bosco they entrust themselves totally to Mary, convinced that the Virgin Mary continues her mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians.

With regard to their autonomy and their own specific characteristics, the Institute of Volunteers of Don Bosco recognises itself as a living part of the family. It benefits from its spiritual heritage by living in harmony with the various groups that make it up, and brings to it the richness and originality of their particular vocation. The benefits are mutual enrichment, apostolic fruitfulness and shared responsibility for safeguarding and developing the Salesian charism for the benefit of the Church and the world.

To sum up, the Volunteers of Don Bosco are women consecrated by the Lord in the Salesian Family, who give themselves entirely to the Lord through the evangelical counsels, serve the Kingdom with the humility of leaven in the dough and, finally, hold firmly to their true secularity and their authentic Salesianity.

The living spirit of a consecrated secular and Salesian woman

The full consecration of a life according to the evangelical counsels and the true responsibility to be present in the world and to act in a transformative way to shape, perfect and sanctify it, subjects the Volunteer to demanding daily obligations. They presuppose and demand a solid vocation and a great deal of perseverance. Let us listen to a member of the Institute particularly qualified to express them.¹¹

The Volunteer, she has us understand, is first and foremost a believer who lives in intense union with God the Father. This love of the Father made Don Bosco an exceptional father. From his faith stems an unflinching trust in Providence, even to the point of recklessness. True participation in the celebration of the Eucharist and a lively devotion to Mary Help of Christians nourish this faith.

The Volunteer's specific mission opens her up to authentic human values. She has chosen to remain in this world to respond to a higher call, which she has accepted and nurtured within herself, because it is a vocation in the truest sense of the word. The Volunteer cannot therefore withdraw from the world, become a mere spectator or reject it out of total condemnation. She wants to imitate Jesus, who was so interested in creation that he became incarnate in it. "Being in the world, that is, being committed to secular values, is your way of being Church and making it present, of saving and proclaiming salvation", said Paul VI.¹² The fact of living, by vocational choice, in secular structures, always active and aware of having to relate everything to God, obliges her to

bear witness that it is possible to be a woman, a perfect citizen and, at the same time an authentic Christian. The integral human being is built on principles. It is in the name of her secular consecration that the Volunteer is called to denounce the deviations that evil introduces into nature and the counter-values that sinful man insinuates into society in order to pervert it. She then protests and fights with all her strength, seeking the collaboration of the “good”, so that things and structures are recognised and used according to justice, peace and human advancement.

The secular condition of the Volunteer, rooted in her consecration, allows her to live the value of work, a characteristic of the Salesian spirit. Her activity is tireless. She recognises that work is the objective of human nature. For her, it is a work of intelligence and conscience. However, she does not see it as the human being’s only activity. There is more to life than work. Work is not, or should not be for her the field of selfish personal interests, but of improving the human city for the betterment of the human community. The Volunteer is thus encouraged, according to her possibilities and capacity, to take on responsibilities and develop her skills.

Then, wherever she is, the Volunteer strives to create an atmosphere of family and Christian joy. She maintains this above all with the sisters of her Institute. Volunteers can find themselves exposed to very serious trials. The communion between Volunteers, truly lived and shared in, can then be a real support. In some cases, Fr Rinaldi wisely advised the “zealots” to live together for mutual support. The “family spirit” of the Institute calls for a deep sense of belonging which, in mutual respect, goes far beyond organisation and structures. Ideally, the Volunteer has a smile on her face. Those who approach her feel loved and understand that life is an immense good, worth giving. Even in the insecurity of life and the precariousness of work, she shares in human joys and the goodness of things. She knows how to appreciate and value the progress, however small, of the Kingdom of God. The poverty of the creature is then transformed into true wealth.

Finally, the Volunteer is a loving daughter of Christ’s Church. Her Institute is animated by the spirit of Don Bosco, a faithful servant of the Church, who left this legacy of filial devotion to his sons. It feels responsible for the mission of the Church in the evangelisation and salvation of the world. Two specific elements characterise the Institute’s mission: consecrated secularity and Salesianity. For the Church, Volunteers are elements that the Pope knows he can count on at any time and in all kinds of settings: the family, the workplace, civil and ecclesial society, wherever the need arises.

NOTES

- 1 This entry only concerns the female Volunteers, the Volunteers of Don Bosco (abbrev: VDB). This is because there is a male association called Volunteers With Don Bosco (abbrev: CDB), whose idea was first conceived in Caracas (Venezuela) at the end of 1987 by a group of former Salesian students. (Full details of the CDBs can be found in the Salesian Family Department, *7 Volontari con Don Bosco. Associazione pubblica di fedeli laici. Un cammino di vita salesiana* (Roma, ed. S.D.B., 1998, 306 pages.) In September 1992, Luis Bello made his private consecration and, in 1994, Antonio Franco followed suit. At the same time, from May 1991 onwards, similar groups were being formed in Malta, Paraguay and Italy. The Department for the Salesian Family quickly took charge. A draft of the statutes was published in 1995, presented by Fr Antonio Martinelli: *Costituzioni dei Volontari Con Don Bosco (CDB). Istituto secolare maschile salesiano* (Roma, Dicastero per la Famiglia Salesiana, 1995). On 24 May 1998, Ignacio Velasco, Archbishop of Caracas (Venezuela), the diocese of the first Volunteers, signed the decree of diocesan approval of the Volunteers With Don Bosco as a Public Association of the Lay Faithful in the Church. In May 1999, the *Bollettino Salesiano* listed the male Volunteers present in eight countries: Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Italy, Malta, Paraguay, Peru, the Czech Republic and Venezuela.
- 2 See E. Viganò, Letter to the Volunteers of Don Bosco, 26 October 1979, § “60 anni di consacrazione”, in *Atti* 295, January-March 1980, pp. 53-55.
- 3 Letter to Cardinal Michele Pellegrino, Archbishop of Turin, 5 December 1970, pub. in *Atti* 263, March 1971, pp. 35-36.
- 4 See *Atti* 290, July-December 1978, p. 44. The 7 August date contradicting the *Atti*, which preferred 5 August, is provided by the decree of 14 June 1990, which will be mentioned later.
- 5 *Istituto secolare Volontarie di don Bosco*, Roma, Stampa Esse Gi Esse, 1990, 170 pages.
- 6 *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 710-730.
- 7 *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 710.
- 8 This problem was once again highlighted at the opening of the *Convegno mondiale assistenti. Volontarie di Don Bosco. Volontari Con Don Bosco*, held at Roma-Pisana from 6 to 13 December 1999, with a keynote speech by Gianna Martinelli, the President General of the VDB, entitled *Identità delle VDB*.
- 9 This paragraph on identity is taken from the address by Anna Marocco, President General of the VDB, “Originalità e attualità della vocazione della Volontaria di Don Bosco nella Famiglia salesiana”, after the Salesian family Spirituality Week 1981, published in *La donna nel carisma salesiano*, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1981, pp. 175-195; and from the first part of the renewed Constitutions of the VDB, entitled *The Institute of the Volunteers of Don Bosco in the Church* (VDB Constitutions, art 1-7).
- 10 “A pieno diritto quindi le VDB guardano a don Rinaldi come al loro vero fondatore” (Anna Marocco, “Originalità e attualità...”, intervention cited, loc. cit., p. 182).
- 11 Here are some words from Anna Marocco’s address, “Originalità e attualità...”, loc. cit., pp. 184-188.
- 12 “Essere nel mondo, cioè essere impegnati nei valori secolari, è il vostro modo di essere Chiesa e di renderla presente, di salvarvi e di annunciare la salvezza” (Paul VI, 20 September 1972, quoted by Anna Marocco, loc. cit., p. 184).

Vows

The vows at the Salesian origins

In 1858, Don Bosco travelled to Rome, accompanied by the cleric Michael Rua, to submit his plan for a religious Congregation to the Pope. He had a great deal of hesitation about this creation. The most important thing for him was the future of a Turin-based work, wondering what would happen to when he disappeared. In the political context of Piedmont at the time, founding a Congregation seemed risky. The political rulers were intent on banishing monks, nuns and their ilk from the land because they were of no use to society as a whole. It was imperative to distance oneself from them. Don Bosco had therefore resolved to create a “charitable society” for the world to see, which, for the Church, would be a real religious Congregation. Vows would be taken in good form, but for the public they would simply be promises. For Don Bosco, these self-offerings to God had the great advantage of establishing helpers around him who were otherwise too volatile and easily inclined to seek their fortune elsewhere.

Pope Pius IX encouraged him along this path, he explained in his Introduction to the Salesian Constitutions. Pius IX saw an additional benefit for the Church, as the vows brought religious closer to the sovereign pontiff, from whom Christians at the time easily distanced themselves at the risk of losing themselves. A society of this kind placed itself at the service of the Church and therefore of the Pope.

In a congregation or religious society, the vows are necessary in order to keep all its members bound to their superior, and so that the superior keeps himself and his followers bound to the Head of the Church and thus to God himself. Our vows can be compared to so many spiritual bonds, by which we consecrate ourselves to the Lord and hand over to the power of our superior our will, our possessions, our physical and moral strength, in order to form one heart and one soul to promote the greater glory of God according to our Constitutions, as the Church rightly invites us to do in one of her prayers: *ut una sit fides mentium et pietas actionum* [that the faith of the spirits and the piety of the works may be maintained in union faith of the spirit and piety of the works].¹

“Great is the spiritual good procured by the vows”, Don Bosco continued, He was repeating a classic teaching of the time on the increase of “merit” through vows. “Vows

are a heroic offering that greatly increases the merit of our works. Saint Anselm teaches that a good work without a vow is like the fruit of a tree. Whoever accomplishes it by vow offers to God the tree with the fruit. Saint Bonaventure equates a work done without a vow with the offering of income, not the capital. By vowing one offers to God both the income and the whole of the capital.”²

In his preaching at Salesian retreats, Fr Rua sometimes took up and developed some of Don Bosco’s ideas on religious vows. The vows, he explained to the Salesians, are “sweet” bonds that are most useful to the religious who make them and to the Church that receives them.³ From the very beginning, the Church has benefited from the presence in its midst of associations that serve it. But how, our preacher asked, to keep their members together so that these armies of religion present a “compact” front? Vows (“a word that frightens some people”, said Fr Rua significantly)⁴ constitute an ideal bond. A great and beautiful thing! The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience free us from the major embarrassments and perils of Christian life. Poverty removes the great obstacle of wealth, chastity curbs the passion for pleasures, and obedience rectifies the inconstancy (*volubilità*) that is all too natural to human nature. The vows maintain us in what is called a “state of perfection”, in other words, conformity to the counsels of the Gospel. As for the non-religious, perhaps more perfect than the religious next door, they do not benefit from this “state”. One day he may want to, and the next day he may change his mind. The vows are a constant reminder to the religious who took them. Their threefold thread, which is not easily broken, keeps him on the path of Christ.

Following Don Bosco, Fr Rua also explained how the vows, this generous “offering” to the Lord, increase the “merit” of the work. The good deeds in virtue of a vow offer God the tree with the fruit, the capital with the interest. Vows restore baptismal innocence to the professed. Religious are martyrs in their own way. Happy are those who die after professing their religious vows! And Fr Rua concluded that the whole Church benefits from having religious orders, armies of the Lord kept compact by the “soft and strong bonds” of the vows.⁵

The Salesian religious vows after Vatican II

Vatican II took it upon itself to clearly define the Catholic doctrine on religious vows often misunderstood by the separated Reformed churches. The vows of poverty chastity and obedience, which respond to the evangelical counsels, are an offering. The Council compared them, as Fr Rua had done, to firm and stable bonds which, however, bind the

religious directly to Christ, without any mention of the mediation of the superior. The Council carefully placed the vows in relation to baptism, which the Reformed churches said was sufficient for every Christian. Consecration to the Lord through the vows is “more intimate” than through baptism. The vows “ordain” the religious to the service of the Lord “in a new title”. For all institutes, whether contemplative or active, their ultimate reason is the love of God, served each in their own way (according to their charism). We should meditate on the carefully formulated phrases of *Lumen Gentium*.

The faithful of Christ bind themselves to the three aforesaid counsels [that is, poverty, chastity, obedience] either by vows, or by other sacred bonds, which are like vows in their purpose. By such a bond, a person is totally dedicated to God, loved beyond all things. In this way, that person is ordained to the honour and service of God under a new and special title. Indeed through Baptism a person dies to sin and is consecrated to God. However, in order that he may be capable of deriving more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace, he intends, by the profession of the evangelical counsels in the Church, to free himself from those obstacles, which might draw him away from the fervour of charity and the perfection of divine worship. By his profession of the evangelical counsels, then, he is more intimately consecrated to divine service. This consecration will be the more perfect, in as much as the indissoluble bond of the union of Christ and His bride, the Church, is represented by firm and more stable bonds.⁶

The Salesians and Salesian Sisters highlight the difference that distinguishes from them monks and nuns dedicated to the service of prayer. Through their religious profession following in the footsteps of Don Bosco, they “free themselves from those obstacles” in the search for “the fervour of charity”, in other words for a better exercise of their mission of charity.

In their new Constitutions, Don Bosco’s disciples have their related their religious profession to baptism. “By religious profession we mean to live the grace of our baptism radically and more fully”, say the Salesians.⁷ And the Salesian Sisters: “God our Father calls us to live our baptismal consecration wholeheartedly consecrating us by the gift of the Spirit.”⁸ As for the Volunteers, they state that “we live in a more radical way the grace of our baptism to be witnesses and prophets of salvation in the world.”⁹ They all placed their three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in relation to the sequela Christi and the lived values of the Gospel.¹⁰ And they did their utmost to show how much the Salesian religious profession contributes to the success of their apostolic mission, that is to say, in the words of the Salesian Sisters, “to making the love of Christ present to young people.”¹¹

The Volunteers of Don Bosco, who have no community life, are essentially distinguished by their three vows of religion. They have carefully set out in their Constitutions the Christocentric spirituality implied by them.

Christ, the perfect consecrated One, is the supreme reason for our life. Attracted by Him, we want to grow in love with an undivided heart, giving up the married life, making evangelical use of material things, and entrusting to the Father our free will. Through the vows we aim for the perfection of charity, and we express our fundamental option for Christ whom we follow as the only One necessary, the only Love, and the only Lord. Adhering to the redemptive sacrifice of the cross, we want to live for Him, with Him, and in Him, and we reawaken the hope of participating in the new life of the Spirit.¹²

The formulas of profession of consecrated life

Those who drafted the new formulas for the religious profession of Salesians, Salesian Sisters and Volunteers of Don Bosco have carefully taken into account the particularities of the vows of religion according to Vatican II. They also include its rethinking of ideas on the vocation to consecrated life. Here are these three texts in almost their entirety. “The formula of our religious profession is as follows”, say the Salesian Sisters.

Heavenly Father, you consecrated me in baptism and now, through the power of the Holy Spirit you call me to follow Jesus Christ more closely, in order to share more intimately in his saving mission in the Church. In response to your love I bind myself to live the Beatitudes of the Kingdom radically, in communion with my Sisters, proclaiming Christ to young people according to the spirit of St. John Bosco and St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Today, before the community and all here present, I freely and entirely give myself to you. I make the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience ... in the hands of.... according to the evangelical way traced out by the Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.¹³

And for the Salesians: “Our formula of profession is the following”:

God my Father, you consecrated me to yourself on the day of my baptism. In response to the love of the Lord Jesus your Son, who calls me to follow him more closely, and led by the Holy Spirit who is light and strength, with complete freedom I, ... offer myself totally to you. I pledge myself to devote all my strength to those to whom you will send me, especially to young people who are poorer; to

live in the Salesian Society in communion of spirit and action with my brothers; and in this way to share in the life and mission of your Church. And so, in the presence of my brothers, and before Fr ... I make the vow for ever to live obedient, poor and chaste according to the way of the gospel set out in the Salesian Constitutions.”¹⁴

The profession of the Volunteers of Don Bosco is also a gesture of total self-offering in a life of apostolate.

O God my Father, who have consecrated me to Yourself in Baptism, in response to the love of Christ Your Son and invoking the Holy Spirit who is light and strength, after the example of the Virgin Mary, I ..., with your grace and with complete freedom, offer myself totally to you. I pledge myself to fulfill my apostolic vocation in the Church, in communion with my sisters, living the Gospel fully in the midst of the world with the Salesian spirit. Therefore, I make the vow of chastity, poverty, and obedience according to the Constitutions of the Volunteers of Don Bosco Volunteers in your presence ... (or ... representing the President General of the Institute) and in the presence of the Sisters here present.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 “In una congregazione o società religiosa sono necessari i voti, affinché tutti i membri siano da un vincolo di coscienza legati col superiore, e il superiore tenga sé e i suoi legati col Capo della Chiesa, e per conseguenza con Dio medesimo. I nostri voti pertanto si possono chiamare altrettante funicelle spirituali, con cui ci consacrriamo al Signore, e mettiamo in potere del superiore la propria volontà, le sostanze, le nostre forze fisiche e morali, affinché tra tutti facciamo un cuor solo ed un’anima sola per promuovere la maggior gloria di Dio, secondo le nostre costituzioni, come appunto c’invita la Chiesa quando dice nelle sue preghiere: *ut una sit fides mentium, et pietas actionum.*” (Introduction to the *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, 1875 edition, § *I voti*, pp. XVII-XVIII).
- 2 “1 voti son un’offerta eroica con cui moltissimo si accresce il merito delle opere nostre. S. Anseimo insegna che un’opera buona senza voto è come il frutto d’una pianta. Chi la fa con voto, col frutto offre a Dio la stessa pianta. S. Bonaventura rassomiglia l’opera fatta senza voto a chi offre il reddito, ma non il capitale. Col voto poi si offre a Dio e reddito e capitale intiero.” (Introduction, p. XVIII-XIX).
- 3 M. Rua, Sermon “Sulla vita religiosa”, in a series of *Prediche per Esercizi*, quaderno III, p. 20-28, FdB, 2895 D8-E2.
- 4 “Parola che a quale, reca spavento”, in “Sulla vita religiosa”, quaderno cited, p. 25.
- 5 “Eccovi adunque che cosa sono gli ord. relig. Essi sono gli eserciti del Sign. Mand. in socc. della Ch. Ed eccovi che cosa sono i voti: i dolci e forti legami che tengono compatte le schiere di questi eserciti.” (“Sulla vita religiosa”, quaderno cited, p. 28.) Another retreat sermon of Fr Rua’s, entitled “Dei voti della religione”, in the series of *Esercizi spirituali*, quaderno VII, p 22-24, FdB E11 to 2945 A1, said : 1) that the vows are an offering, 2) that they are of great value, 3) in what esteem the saints held them.
- 6 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 44.
- 7 “Con la professione religiosa intendiamo vivere la grazia battesimale con maggior pienezza e radicalità” (SDB Constitutions, art. 60).
- 8 “Il Padre ci chiama a vivere con maggior pienezza il nostro battesimo e ci consacra col dono dello Spirito.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 5).
- 9 “Viviamo in modo radicale la grazia del Battesimo per essere nel mondo testimoni e profeti di salvezza.” (VDB Constitutions, art. 8).
- 10 SDB Constitutions, art. 60; FMA Constitutions, art. 5, 11.
- 11 SDB Constitutions, art. 61 and 62; and “a rendere presente l’amore di Cristo stesso per i giovani” (FMA Constitutions, art. 11).
- 12 “Cristo, il Consacrato perfetto, è la ragione suprema della nostra vita. Attratte da Lui, vogliamo crescere nell’amore con cuore indiviso rinunciando alla vita coniugale, facendo uso evangelico dei beni materiali e affidando al Padre la nostra Ubera volontà. Per mezzo dei voti tendiamo alla perfezione della carità ed esprimiamo l’opzione fondamentale per Cristo che seguiamo come l’Unico Necessario, l’Unico Amore e il Solo Signore. Aderendo al sacrificio redentore della croce, intendiamo vivere per Lui, con Lui, in Lui e ravviviamo la speranza di partecipare alla vita nuova secondo lo Spirito.” (VDB Constitutions, art. 20).

- 13 “La formula della nostra professione religiosa è la seguente: Dio Padre, tu mi hai consacrata nel Battesimo e mi chiami ora, con la forza del tuo Spirito, a seguire Gesù Cristo più da vicino per partecipare più intimamente alla sua missione salvifica nella Chiesa. In risposta al tuo amore io mi impegno a vivere con radicalità le beatitudini del Regno, in comunione con le sorelle, annunciando Cristo alle giovani secondo lo spirito di San Giovanni Bosco e di Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Oggi, davanti alla comunità e ai fratelli qui presenti, io Suor ... in piena libertà mi dono interamente a te, faccio voto di castità, povertà e obbedienza nelle mani di ... , secondo la via evangelica tracciata nelle Costituzioni dell’Istituto delle Fighe di Maria Ausiliatrice.” (FMA Constitutions, art. 10).
- 14 “La formula della nostra professione è la seguente: Dio Padre, Tu mi hai consacrato a Te nel giorno del Battesimo. In risposta all’amore del Signore Gesù tuo Figlio, che mi chiama a seguirlo più da vicino, e condotto dallo Spirito Santo che è luce e forza, io N.N., in piena libertà mi offro totalmente a Te, impegnandomi a nella Società salesiana in fraterna comunione di spirito e di azione, e a partecipare indonare tutte le mie forze a quelli a cui mi manderai, specialmente ai giovani più poveri, a vivere questo modo alla vita e alla missione della tua Chiesa. Per questo, alla presenza dei miei fratelli, davanti a N N., Rettor Maggiore della Società di san Francesco di Sales (oppure : davanti a ... che fa le veci del Rettor Maggiore della Società di san Francesco di Sales), faccio voto per sempre di vivere obbediente, povero e casto, secondo la via evangelica tracciata nelle Costituzioni salesiane.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 24).
- 15 “O Dio Padre, che mi hai consacrato a Te nel Battesimo, in risposta all’amore di Cristo tuo Figlio, invocando lo Spirito Santo che è luce e forza, sull’esempio della Vergine Maria, io ... con la tua grazia e in piena libertà, mi offro totalmente a Te. Mi impegno a realizzare la mia vocazione apostolica nella Chiesa, in comunione con le sorelle, vivendo integralmente il Vangelo in mezzo al mondo con spirito salesiano. Per questo faccio voto di castità, povertà e obbedienza secondo le Costituzioni delle Volontarie di don Bosco davanti a te ... Responsabile Maggiore dell’Istituto (oppure : rappresentante della Responsabile Maggiore dell’Istituto) e alle sorelle qui presenti.” (VDB Constitutions, art. 9). We can note that the formula of profession of the Volunteers With Don Bosco (CDB Constitutions, art. 16) is more or less identical to this.

Witness

Christian witness

As such, “Christian witness” (we will try to keep to this precise concept in this entry) shows that the person belongs to Christ. In the middle of the twentieth century, the “witness” of so-called committed Christians regularly took the form of noisy manifestos. Their taste for challenge and polemic led them to engage in major writing and discourse. For their part, in the world of the time, the members of the Salesian Family, traditionally rather reserved, “bore witness” simply by their testimony of faith, as Don Bosco had done and as has been done in the Church since apostolic times.¹

Let’s look at the Acts of the Apostles. Before leaving them, Jesus had entrusted his people with a mission of witness to the whole world: “You shall be my witnesses (...) to the ends of the earth.” And to this end, in accordance with his promise, guaranteed them the assistance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; cf. Luke 24:48 and Matthew 10:19-20). Strengthened by the Spirit of Pentecost, the apostles presented themselves publicly as “witnesses” to Jesus’ death and resurrection (Acts 2:32; 3:15; etc.); and they proclaimed that, by doing so, Jesus had become “Christ and Lord”, “Saviour” and “Judge for the living and for the dead” (Acts 2:36; 4:12; 10:42). In the Church of the first century those who received and accepted this testimony “embraced the faith” and constituted the community of believers. (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 11, 21; 13:48; etc.).

The believing attestation commits witnesses body and soul to what they proclaims. Their own person guarantees and backs up their word. The apostles Peter and John did not hesitate to defy the threats of the Sanhedrin and, risking imprisonment, retort: “We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Even more courageously, Stephen sealed his confession of faith with the testimony of blood (Acts 6: 55-60). He was, in the words of Revelation, the first of those “who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given” (Revelation 6:9). The testimony par excellence, that of blood, known as “martyrdom” (from the Greek: “*marturia*”, the action of bearing witness) was now the perfect guarantee of the believing attestation of the Christians. In the early Church, Christian witnesses confessed their faith; their gesture was a testimony of faith.

The Church of the twentieth century spoke no different language. Vatican II, said John Paul II, “explicitly emphasises that witness consists in adherence to faith and the profession of faith, that is to say, in the acceptance of the testimony of God himself, and at the same time in responding to it with man’s own testimony. In this presentation, we find the fundamental dynamic of the dialogue of salvation.”² Let us glean a few proposals in the texts of the Council itself. At the origin of all Christian witness is the witness of Christ, who “confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal.”³ Consequently, every Christian, whatever his or her position in the Church, is obliged to bear personal witness. “Bishops should dedicate themselves to their apostolic office as witness of Christ before all men.”⁴ Priests “must bear witness to the truth and life.”⁵ And “Each individual layman must stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus.”⁶ The witness par excellence is martyrdom. *Lumen Gentium* recalled that martyrdom is “esteemed by the Church as an exceptional gift and as the fullest proof of love” and that “Though few are presented such an opportunity, nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men.”⁷

Witness and evangelisation

The Christian witness of a member of the Salesian Family, an apostle by vocation and therefore bearer of the Gospel, is by its very nature an instrument of evangelisation.

It is (or should be) first and foremost authentically Christian. Let us return to this idea. Witnessing as a Christian essentially means attesting on the basis of a certainty, the fruit in some way of personal experience, that Christ is alive today. The true Christian is or should be constitutionally, not the late disciple of an old doctrine alien to the reality of life, or the mediocre repeater of faded formulas, but the convinced and tenacious champion of the unceasing newness of the Gospel of a contemporary Christ. The true Christian is a “living Gospel”.

In the world of catechesis, the world of many members of the Salesian Family, producing “testimonies” has sometimes meant bringing in colourful characters to recount the turbulent ups and downs of their lives. But a witness is not someone who tells the story of their own life; their words and actions refer to someone else; the index finger pointing to another characterises the witness. As a Christian, the witness expresses himself as if seized by Christ. To be relevant, this testimony must therefore be binding on the person who utters it, demonstrating consistency between

the words (or behaviour) and the practice of the person, or community, who utters it. Witnesses are not just talkers, they do not mince words. When Christians suggest, even modestly, that their lives are truly informed or transformed by the Gospel, their words “get through”. However, we must recognise that the advertising environment demands that the witness of the Church not neglect the media in spreading its testimony. The disciple of Don Bosco learned from his master the importance of social communications media in apostolic practice. The evangelising impact of certain testimonies is indefinitely increased and multiplied by radio or television.

For the Gospel must be proclaimed first and foremost through witness. To apply this to the Salesian Family, let’s highlight an Apostolic Exhortation by Paul VI on the evangelisation of the world. Here are Cooperators, Volunteers, a small community (perhaps a large one, why not?) of religious men and women who, within their own world, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their communion of life and destiny with others, their solidarity in everyone’s efforts for everything that is noble and good. What’s more, they radiate their faith in a very simple and spontaneous way, in values that go beyond the ordinary, and their hope in something we cannot see, something we wouldn’t dare dream of. Through this wordless testimony, these sons and daughters of Don Bosco raise irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see them live: Why are they like this? Why do they live this way? What – or who – inspires them? Why are they there? Such a testimony is already a silent but very powerful and effective proclamation of the Good News. It is an initial gesture of evangelisation. These questions will be perhaps the first questions that many non-Christians will ask themselves, whether they be people to whom Christ has never been proclaimed, baptised non-practising people, people who live as Christians but according to principles that are not at all Christian, or people who are searching, not without suffering, for something or Someone they can guess but cannot name. Other questions will arise, deeper and more engaging ones provoked by this witness which involves presence, participation, solidarity and which is an essential element, generally the very first, in evangelisation. All Christians are called to this witness and, from this point of view, can be true evangelisers. How could the members of St John Bosco’s family not be concerned about this?⁸

The witness of life is particularly important for preachers of the Gospel. They are asked silently or loudly: “Do you really believe in what you preach? Do you live what you believe? Do you really live what you preach? More than ever, in a world of plural beliefs the witness of life has become an essential condition for the profound effectiveness

of preaching. Men of the Church have their share of responsibility for the progress or retreat of the Gospel they proclaim.

Martyrdom, witness in the strongest sense

The twentieth century was a century of martyrs, those sublime witnesses in Christian language. Christians experienced a long era of persecution which produced many martyrs, including Salesians and some of their students. In 1983, he Rectors Major commented for their sons and daughters on the beatifications of the Salesian martyrs Louis Versiglia and Callistus Caravario in 1983, and Jozef Kowalski and five young men from the oratory in Poznan, Poland, in 1999.⁹

The Christian martyr cannot be reduced to the stature of a hero, said Fr Viganò. Martyrs do not simply show personality, greatness of soul or altruism. The martyr is humble and full of love. There is no hatred in him. When he dies, he forgives. He seeks neither glory nor reputation. He does not pretend to give lessons in bravery; perhaps he is not even courageous. He doesn't defend ideologies or turn himself into a monument. This is neither a Socrates, nor a soldier, known or unknown. The Christian martyr does not die for an idea, even the most sublime idea such as human dignity, freedom or solidarity with the oppressed (though these ideas may be clear to him and have a part in his martyrdom). He dies for Someone who has previously died for him. His faith, hope and charity lead him to bear witness, even to the point of bloodshed, that, for him, to live is Christ and that his baptism leads him to allow himself to be crucified with Christ.¹⁰

A few years later, imitating John Paul II when he announced the Jubilee Year 2000, Fr Vecchi confronted all his sons with the possibility of bearing the witness of martyrdom.

Martyrdom is the participation in a real and living way in the sacrifice of Christ, almost a Eucharist. It expresses in an extreme manner an innate and necessary dimension of the Christian life which we must all understand, accept and take up: the offering of life itself. And so the Christian life is permanently open to the possibility of martyrdom, which appears however as a grace we meet with, rather than as a goal to be desired, achieved or sought after. Furthermore it represents the most direct prophetic encounter between the Spirit, grace, and the aims and style of life proposed by Christ and that which belongs to the world, understood as the ensemble of the powers of evil.¹¹

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Joseph Aubry, *La nostra testimonianza cristiana e salesiana*, coll. Idee 6, Rome, Editrice S.D.B., 1977. The “particular aspects of Salesian witness”, he writes, pp. 21-29, are the witness of prayer, the witness of resistance[*endurance*] and the witness of joy.
- 2 *Angelus*, 3 November 1985, Italian text in the *l'Osservatore Romano*, 4-5 November 1985.
- 3 Vatican II *Dei Verbum*, no. 4.
- 4 *Christus Dominus*, no. 11.
- 5 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 28.
- 6 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 38.
- 7 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 42.
- 8 Adaptation of Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, no. 21.
- 9 E. Viganò, “Martirio e passione nello spirito apostolico di Don Bosco”, 24 February 1983, *Atti* 308, pp. 3-22; J. Vecchi, “Santità e martirio all'alba del terzo millennio”, 29 June 1999, *Atti* 368, pp. 3-36.
- 10 E. Viganò, “Martirio e passione...”, loc. cit., p. 13.
- 11 “Il martirio è la partecipazione in forma viva e reale al sacrificio di Cristo, quasi una Eucaristia. Esprime in forma estrema una dimensione connaturale e necessaria della vita cristiana che tutti dobbiamo capire, accettare e assumere: l'offerta della vita. Perciò resistenza cristiana è permanentemente aperta all'eventualità del martirio, che si presenta però come una grazia che ci viene incontro, piuttosto che come un traguardo da desiderare, conquistare o proporsi. Rappresenta inoltre lo scontro profetico più frontale tra lo Spirito, la grazia, le intenzioni e lo stile di vita proposto da Cristo e ciò che è del mondo, inteso come insieme di potenze maligne.” (J. Vecchi, “Santità e martirio ...”, loc. cit., p. 7.)

Work

The Salesian meaning of work

The Salesian Family was born in the West in the age of work and in a region that abhorred idleness and laziness. The religion of work flourished. Its moral code made work the primary virtue. Its preferred motto cautiously piled up: work, perseverance, probity and savings. But what exactly do we mean by this word? Let's not complicate things. Don Bosco, who occasionally attributed to the word *lavoro* (work) without the definite article the meaning of manual work as opposed to *studio* (study), meant by this word any productive action, whether immediate or long-term, whether manual, intellectual or apostolic. He distinguished it from play and prayer and extended it to all kinds of *operosità* (activity).

Along with their master, the early Salesians had simple ideas about the meaning of work, borrowed from the Book of Genesis. Man is born to work. Adam was placed in the earthly paradise to cultivate it.¹ At the beginning, work was not a “pain”, a misfortune or a calamity for him, as those who are lazy by nature believe. For, in order to teach us to avoid idleness, they thought, God had ordered Adam to work, but only for fun and without any entertainment and without painful fatigue. Don Bosco's disciples could not confuse all work with salaried activity. By the word “work”, the master explained to his boys, “one must understand the fulfilment of the duties of one's state, be it study or an art and trade.”² A man born to work must earn his bread; work is necessary for his survival. This is the primary *raison d'être* of human work. Don Bosco's people were fond of repeating the local axiom: “*Chi dorme non prende pesci*” (He who sleeps, catches no fish) and, more seriously, the sentence from a letter of Saint Paul (2 Thessalonians 3:10): “*Si quis non vult operari, nec manducet*” (If someone does not want to work, let him not eat either).³ Secondly, work makes people grow and enables them to serve their fellow human beings. The Regulations for Salesian Houses state that, “through work”, students could make themselves “*benemeriti*” (well deserving) towards society and religion and contribute to their own spiritual good. On the contrary, anyone who is required to and does not work is stealing from God and his superiors. Moreover, “whoever does not accustom himself to work in his youth is likely to remain idle into his old age, to the dishonour of his country and his parents and perhaps to the irreparable

harm of his soul.”⁴ Finally, the story of the Bible had taught Don Bosco and his sons that God offered creation to the original man, who thus became its king. His *Storia Sacra* summed up Genesis 1:26-31 in the sentence: “When all things in heaven and on earth had been created, God said, ‘Let us make man in our image and let him have dominion over the earth.’”⁵ In accordance with the Gospel parable, man values his mastery of the world through the use of his “talents”. According to this vision of things, whatever the particular end given to work, everything comes from the person and everything returns to the person.

Let us bring together the Salesian meaning of work that emerges from these initial observations. It is fairly close to the aims of work according to John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. Through work “man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same family.”⁶

Work glorified by Don Bosco

Don Bosco, for his part, honoured work, which he put at the top of the programme for his Salesians in the battle of life. “Always remind all our Salesians of the motto we have adopted: *Labor et temperantia*. With these two weapons we will overcome everything and everyone”, he wrote to one of his assistants.⁷ The connection was intentional in Don Bosco’s writings, as work also functioned, in his opinion, as “a remedy for concupiscence.”⁸

He was convinced that work is a service, often painful, but always necessary to human society. The peasants of Piedmont, who earned their bread by the strength of their arms and the sweat of their brows, were hard at work. In their eyes, the Creator had written work into the destiny of every one of his creatures. And John Bosco was born among them. His childhood and adolescence had taught him how hard the rural man of the time had to work to earn a living. This toil had its beauty. As a priest, because he was a man of that kind of people, he wanted to create communities of hard-working people, whom, in his discussions with liberal rulers, he readily contrasted with the groups of *frati*, whom they considered idle, unproductive and therefore useless to society. His people worked themselves to death, and he prided himself on it. His century, that of the first industrial age, therefore looked with sympathy on these religious who were close to the destitute. The nobles held them in high esteem, because they helped to calm an

increasingly militant populace, while the other social classes – the bourgeoisie, craftsmen and rural dwellers – appreciated the virtues they themselves cherished in them.

Don Bosco loved work. Without making a religion of it, he ignored another culture, for which the right to rest is as sacred as the right to work, and whose golden rule is that you must work to live and not live to work. In his view, the idle man degrades himself, while the hard-working man ennobles himself. He saw proof of this, on the one hand, in the stories of Hannibal bogged down in the delights of Capua, and of Antony seduced by Cleopatra; on the other, in the stories of Augustus who continued to educate himself while emperor, or Muratori, one of the most learned and industrious men of whom Italy is proud, and so many courageous characters whom he so willingly presented in his history books for young people. Time and again, he deplored the evils of dreamy inactivity. In a series of *Instructions for a boy who wishes to spend his holidays well*, an anonymous leaflet the gist of which came from him, we find this sentence, which has since fallen out of use: “Your greatest enemy is idleness, fight it tenaciously.”⁹ Moving from the individual to humanity, he likened the world to a beehive, where everyone must perform a task determined by Providence. Who breaks free of it or neglects it is a parasite or a very repugnant thief. Last but not least, work must serve God. The true disciple of the Lord is a good servant who expects his wages from his master.

A spirituality of work for different times

“Work and temperance” is an axiom that will not be forgotten. Formed by Don Bosco, the members of the original Salesian Family displayed great activity, that is to say in their language, a great capacity for work. The humble nature of the task mattered little to them. Whether Salesians or Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, they worked. “May the Lord deign to bless and preserve this marvellous activity and this holy indifference, which, for our houses, is the safeguard of morality and the irrefutable proof that the Salesians do not cease to be the sons of the tireless worker that Don Bosco always was”, exclaimed his successor Fr Rua in 1906, himself a great worker before the Lord. “It is our fervent wish that this kind of well-understood activity should not be the privilege of a few, but the virtue of each and every member of the Salesian Family.”¹⁰ Of course, it was work “sanctified” by prayer and union with God, according to the repeated wish of Fr Rinaldi, who was concerned by the feverish activity of some of his confreres who were drowning in work that had become a kind of drug for them.¹¹

But, a hundred years after Don Bosco, times have changed and in a world that has shifted from an industrial era to a so-called post-industrial era, where a civilisation of leisure (and even pleasure) was now competing with a civilisation of work that was in retreat everywhere, while with the spread of unemployment and precarious work, salaried employment was becoming a rare commodity in industrialised countries, could the Salesian Family continue to place work at the top of one of its preferred mottos?

It did so in keeping with a tradition of hard work and with reference to the poverty demanded by consecrated life. Besides, there is always something to do in life. He who seeks, finds. Work associated the member of the Salesian Family with the Lord's creative and redemptive work.¹² The Salesian General Chapter of 1971–1972 maintained that “the first predominating element of the Salesian spirit is its prodigious activity, both collective and individual.”¹³ The life programme left by Don Bosco to his sons remains: Work and temperance.¹⁴ For the Salesian, who is a religious “*in maniche rimboccate*” (with rolled-up sleeves), it taught, work is at once mysticism, asceticism and the requirement of a free and joyful consecration to God in chastity, poverty and obedience. The search for a quiet and cosy well-being would be his death. The Salesian gives himself (or should give himself) to his mission with tireless dedication. Work is his asceticism, because he accepts its harsh demands and is ready to endure everything, heat and cold, thirst and hunger, fatigue and contempt, whenever the glory of God and the salvation of souls are at stake. “This attitude”, observed the Chapter, “puts him in sympathy with modern man who is conscious of being ‘homo faber’, transformer of the world and actor in history.”¹⁵

Moreover, in accordance with the directives of the Council,¹⁶ this Chapter saw work as a requirement of the vow or promise of poverty. “Living by one's own work is today a form of life that is especially expressive of real witness to poverty in a generous service” it said. Bound by the common law of work, religious bear witness to its human meaning and use it as a means to earn their living and to help the poor in a practical way.¹⁷ Aware of Don Bosco's admonition: “Today, we need to work and work hard”, the Salesian effectively practises poverty through a genuine commitment to his work, remembering that the rich man is precisely the one who does not need to exert himself in order to live.¹⁸ The Chapter concluded an article on poverty with the observation: “Don Bosco has left us Salesians a whole programme of life: Work and Temperance. Like him in offering a service of tireless work and a life of joyful temperance will be giving to all who come in contact with us a witness that cannot be contradicted.”¹⁹

The Chapter therefore invited the Salesians to renew themselves in the spirit of assiduous and enterprising work taught by Don Bosco as an expression of evangelical poverty. Everyone should feel obliged to work hours that are no fewer than those of the working poor. Better still, in periods of emergency, everyone must be prepared to work overtime to become better qualified.²⁰ Above all, there should be no gentrification (*imborghesimento*), as Fr Ricceri wished in 1974!²¹ The confreres in formation should be taught to adopt a lifestyle of sacrifice through generous contributions to the manual labour required by communal life. This would be for them both a witness to poverty and an experience of the difficulties of “real life”.²²

The Constitutions of the Salesians, Salesian Sisters and Volunteers of Don Bosco were drafted in this spirit. The three groups bring together only hard-working people. For them, work is a way of putting into practice their commitments to a life of poverty.²³ “Diligent, creative and responsible work is an essential aspect of our poverty”, said the Salesian Sisters. In this way, they submitted to the common law of work, sharing the fate of the poor who must earn their bread by the sweat of their brows.²⁴ For their part, the Volunteers of Don Bosco said they wanted to share men’s suffering through work. They saw work as a means of pursuing God’s creative and redemptive action in history, as well as an instrument of personal growth. For them, it was the natural place for meeting God and their brothers and sisters.²⁵ The Salesian axiom: Work and temperance was for them an incentive to live courageously, albeit prudently, and always ready for sacrifice.²⁶

Don Bosco was a practical and enterprising man, a tireless and creative worker, animated by a permanent and profound interior life, the Salesian Cooperators were soon reminded. And they too heard the axiom: Work and temperance. As a result, the Cooperator is able to face life’s hardships and difficulties with equanimity.²⁷ In its simplicity, the original programme had not changed.

NOTES

- 1 We can find some of Don Bosco's ideas on the meaning of work in Chapter V, "Del lavoro", art. 1 and 3, of his *Regolamento per le case della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, tipografia salesiana, 1877, p. 68.
- 2 "Per lavoro s'intende l'adempimento dei doveri del proprio stato, sia di studio, sia di arte o mestiere." (*Regolamento per le case*, Chapter cited, art. 2.)
- 3 See, among, others, the sermons of Fr Rua to the boys on idleness in a notebook *Prediche*, inc. "Dell'ozio", p. 1-29, in FdB 2907 E6 to 2908 B10.
- 4 "Chi non si abitua al lavoro in tempo della gioventù per lo più sarà sempre un poltrone sino alla vecchiaia, con disonore della patria e dei parenti, e forse con danno irreparabile dell'anima propria" (*Regolamento per le case*, chap. cited, art. 6).
- 5 "Quando furono create tutte le cose che nel cielo e nella terra si contengono, disse Iddio : Facciamo l'uomo a nostra immagine, ed abbia dominio su tutta la terra." (G. Bosco, *Storia sacra*, Turin, Speirani e Ferrero, 1847, pp. 13-14).
- 6 These aims of work are expressed at the beginning of John Paul II's encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, 14 September 1981.
- 7 "Ma tu ricorda sempre a tutti i nostri Salesiani il monogramma da noi adottato: Labor et temperantia. Sono due armi con cui noi riusciremo a vincere tutti e tutto." (Letter to G. Fagnano, 14 November 1877, in the *Epistolario* Ceria, vol. III, p. 236).
- 8 "Remedium concupiscentiae", in the "dream of the diamonds" (MB XV, p. 184, BM XV 149).
- 9 "L'ozio è il più grande nemico che devi costantemente combattere" (*Ricordi per un giovanetto che desidera passar bene le vacanze*, Turin, 1874, p. 2).
- 10 "Facciamo caldi voti, perchè tale ben intesa operosità non sia il privilegio di alcuni ma la virtù d'ogni membro della famiglia salesiana." (M. Rua, Letter to Salesians, 2 July 1906, L.C., pp. 511-512).
- 11 See P. Rinaldi, Letter to Salesians, 24 June 1922, *Atti* 15, pp. 14-20.
- 12 Well emphasised by the renewed Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, art. 24.
- 13 "Il primo elemento dominante dello spirito salesiano è la prodigiosa attività sia collettiva che individuale" (CGS/SCG, no. 97).
- 14 CGS/SCG, no. 541.
- 15 CGS/SCG, no. 97.
- 16 *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 13.
- 17 CGS/SCG, no. 593.
- 18 "Oggi bisogna operare, intensamente operare". We read this in CGS/SCG, no. 602, here picking up a teaching of Fr Ricceri in *Atti* 253, November 1968, pp. 44-45.

- 19 “Il motto lasciatoci da Don Bosco “Lavoro e Temperanza” sintetizza programmaticamente la povertà salesiana che nel servizio di un lavoro instancabile e nella vita di gioiosa temperanza rende testimonianza indiscussa davanti a tutti”. (CGS/SCG, no. 607).
- 20 CGS/SCG, no. 621.
- 21 L. Ricceri, “Lavoro e temperanza, contro l’imborghesimento”, *Atti* 276, October 1974, pp. 3-47.
- 22 CGS/SCG, no. 679, e.
- 23 See SDB Constitutions, art. 18, 78, 84.
- 24 “Un aspetto essenziale della nostra povertà è l’operosità assidua, industriosa e responsabile” (FMA Constitutions, art. 24).
- 25 VDB Constitutions, art. 14,15, 29, 30.
- 26 VDB Constitutions, art. 16.
- 27 *Regolamento di Vita Apostolica*, art. 30.

World

The world of the first Salesians

When the first Salesians spoke of the “world” in their spiritual discussions or talks, the term for them did not refer to the environment in which human beings live, or to the whole formed by the Earth and the visible stars, or to the whole of everything that exists, in other words the universe. Rather than thinking of humankind or society, they usually gave this word the meaning it had in the language of St Paul and Saint John.

These apostles were themselves part of a story. For the Greeks, the cosmos, with its laws, its beauty, its perpetuity, its eternal exchange, expressed the ideal of an order closed in on itself, which included man and encompassed even the gods.¹ The thinking of Christ’s disciples, shaped by the Bible, identified the excellent creature of God in this cosmos, relating it to him in religious terms. “He saw that it was good”, the Genesis account repeats at every stage of creation. God made the world through his Word (John 1:3,10), said Saint John. This world continues to bear witness to God, cried Saint Paul (Acts 14:17; Romans 1:19ff). The world was therefore in itself beautiful and good.

But the ambiguity of the world is considerable, as the Bible also says. The creature was quick to reject the order its Creator intended. In this way, the world became sinful. He even gave himself over to the Creator’s antagonist. In its present state, united with sinful man, the world is in Satan’s power. Sin entered the world at the beginning of history and, through sin, death (Romans 5:12). Its most visible element is man, who sets his rebellious will against God and against Christ (John 3:18; 7:7); 15:18 ; 17:9, 14 ...) Behind them looms an invisible ruler: Satan, the prince of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4). This world of darkness, ruled by the spirits of evil (Ephesians 6:12), is a world of deceit (Galatians 4:3, 9; Colossians 2:8, 15), whose spirit is incapable of tasting the secrets and gifts of God (Galatians 4:3, 9; Colossians 2:8, 15), is opposed to the Spirit of God, just like the spirit of the Antichrist, who is at work in the world (1 John 4:3). The world of Saint Paul and Saint John, the empire of Satan, was therefore false and obscure. Since their writings, the spirituality of Christianity has insisted on the “sin of the world”, which redemption had nevertheless, it acknowledged, “wiped out”.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the term “world” was rather rare in official Salesian literature. When it did appear, it was, as in Saint Paul and Saint John, with a negative connotation. It referred to the city of evil, opposed by the city of good which was the Church or religious life. Salesian spiritual teachers did not think much of the world, even if the Rectors Major were not complacent in their condemnation of it.

In the Introduction he gave to his Constitutions, in the article on “entry into religion”, Don Bosco quoted St John: “All that is in the world,” says the apostle Saint John, “is concupiscence of the flesh, concupiscence of the eyes and pride of life.” Then he asked: “How then can we free ourselves from these dangerous chains with which with which the devil is constantly trying to bind us and lead us to perdition?” The answer came: “When he embraces the religious state, the Christian breaks these chains to pieces in one fell swoop.” And he concluded: “For this reason, whoever abandons the world to enter religion is compared to those who, at the time of the flood, saved themselves in Noah’s ark.” Moreover, he continued, again quoting Saint John: “The world, says the Saviour, is all wrapped in evil: *et mundus totus in maligno positus est.*”²

Fr Albera agreed. The world, with the creatures who make it up, is an ocean of perils in which we risk drowning. The religious keeps himself safe “against the temptations of the devil, against the seductions of a corrupt and corrupting world....”³ “... In the eyes of our faith, as one day in the desert to Saint Anthony, abbot, the world appears like an immense field strewn with traps which the devil sets to prevent us from walking the path of virtue. And creatures, for their part, seek to seduce us and draw us into the love of pleasures, honours and riches by a thousand cunning devices...”⁴ The “world” was an evil empire.

The virulence of the condemnation seems to have lessened as the twentieth century passed. In the index of the Acts of the Superior Chapter published at the time of Fr Ricaldone (1932–1951), the entry “*Mondo*”, with a single reference, simply refers to the Rector Major’s observation in his letter on poverty: “It is well known that even the men of the world have sometimes ridiculed religious who are slaves to worldly vanities.”⁵

However, rejection persisted, and the Salesians, like most spiritual people of the time, recommended a certain *fuga mundi*. The relationship with the world through social communications media were carefully carefully filtered and controlled. The arrangements made for radio in Fr Rinaldi’s time are significant. To obviate the spiritual dangers faced by the Salesians, this Rector Major, though measured, established in 1926:

- 1) that the confreres be strictly forbidden to keep, acquire and manufacture radio sets for their own use in their rooms or cells, as well as in classrooms and workshops;
- 2) that, where one of these devices is necessary, permission be sought from the Provincial to keep or acquire it; and that it be kept under the personal responsibility of the Rector who will determine when it is to be used, and it will only be allowed to be listened to by the community only on very rare and extraordinary occasions, according to a schedule appropriate to a religious house.⁶

The new view of the world in the Salesian vocabulary

Then, in the middle of the century, as a result of a new way of looking at earthly realities and their undeniable values, the world came back into the vocabulary of the Salesians in a much more positive rather than negative light. The most resounding document of Vatican II, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* “de Ecclesia in mundo huius temporis”, i.e. on the Church in the modern world, encouraged them to do so. The sin of the world no longer imposed itself with the same insistence. For them, the world was first and foremost, as it was for the Council, the universe created by God according to Genesis, or rather undifferentiated human society, often contradistinguished from the Church, a world that, for reasons of truth and pastoral effectiveness, could not or could no longer be ignored or despised. Before speaking ill of it, it was necessary to know this world as it was.

The Special General Chapter of the Salesians (1971–1972) therefore gave itself over to a careful description of the “world today”, which was, it said, a world in the process of secularisation, a world in a situation of injustice and a world seeking unity in plurality.⁷ And it called loud and clear for “openness” to this world, in other words, and let’s be clear about this:

- 1) recognition of its “values”,
- 2) a systematic closeness to the people who make it up and
- 3) an ongoing evangelising “dialogue” with them.⁸

The Constitutions of Don Bosco’s disciples were to be rewritten in this spirit.

The Salesian mission in the world

The world, though imperfect, is, in any case, the place of the Salesian mission, recalled the renewed Salesian Constitutions on several occasions. The General Council of the Congregation must ensure the “fulfilment” (*attuare*) of “the Salesian mission in the world” (SDB Constitutions, art. 130 b). If it functions correctly, this mission will contribute to the salvific mission of the Church. “We contribute to building up the Church as the Body of Christ, so that also through us she may appear to the world as the ‘universal sacrament of salvation’” (art. 6). This salvation is itself the result of the transformation of the world in which Salesians are invited to participate. Salesian pastoral activity is directed “towards bringing about a more just world and one of fellowship in Christ” (art. 7). The Salesians lead groups and movements for formation and apostolic and social action, in order to initiate young people “to the transformation of the world and to the life of the Church” (art. 35). Sin tempts the world, which inclines to evil... The Salesian’s mission is to redirect it towards God by bearing witness to a life lived according to the evangelical counsels. “In a world tempted by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possessions and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love, the urge to possess, and the freedom to control one’s whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour” (art. 62). The Salesian shares in the destiny of the world in which he is “immersed”; he learns to encounter God “through those to whom he is sent” (art. 95). Refusing to be separated from them, he expressly wish to show “solidarity with the needs (*nécessità*) ... of the world” (art. 76 c).

The renewed Salesian Constitutions therefore persistently recommended that Salesians have a degree of “immersion” in the world, that is to say, the opposite of a separation, which until then had been the rule.

Openness to the world

Immersion in the world even became “opening up” to it officially. The Special Salesian General Chapter had adopted the principle of “openness to the world”, which, at the time, was commonly adopted by religious (in active life at least). The renewed Salesian Constitutions, the Constitutions of the Volunteers of Don Bosco and with Don Bosco, as well as the Regulations of Apostolic Life of the Cooperators, applied it serenely to their associations, while the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, without rejecting it, avoided formally integrating it into their Constitutions.

Let us begin with this Institute. The “world” is “wounded by pride and egoism”, it noted in one of the rare uses of the term.⁹ However, the humanism of Saint Francis de Sales encouraged the disciple of Saint John Bosco to believe in man’s natural and supernatural resources. The Salesian Sister was “confident that the Holy Spirit is already at work in our world.” This is why she is ready to “work with optimism and solicitude for the Kingdom of God.”¹⁰ In accordance with the recommendations of the Preventive System, she is present to the young people in its institutions, including at certain times of celebration and family life. She also takes part in their recreation as a friend.¹¹ Because they see Christ in everyone, the communities of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians welcome all those who come to them with the simple and eager warmth and friendliness typical of the Salesian spirit. If the need arises, they offer hospitality “with delicate attention and wise prudence.”¹² The Salesian Sisters carry out their mission in the unity of their charism, but also “in the plurality of socio-cultural situations, with adaptability, courage and creativity that impelled Don Bosco to go out to meet young people.” Consequently, they seek to respond according to their possibilities “to the needs of the local Church and the area” in which they find themselves, possibly through “other forms of presence”, “always in fidelity to the character of the Institute.”¹³

On the contrary, the principle of openness to the world appeared very explicitly in the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales. The Salesian recognises the “values of the world” and refuses to bewail the times. On the contrary, with reference to Philippians 3:1, he gathers from it “all that is good”, especially if it appeals to young people (SDB Constitutions, art. 17 b, c). The practice of the Preventive System leads him to empathise with the “world of the young” and to remain in contact with it. His presence in it ensures that the Salesian has a “true understanding” of this world and leads him to unite with them “in all the healthy aspects of their restless energy” (art. 39). By virtue of his “lay status”, the Salesian Brother is a “witness to God’s Kingdom in the world, close as he is to young people and the realities of working life” (art. 45). Generally speaking, insertion into the world is the responsibility of the local Salesian community “in communion with the particular Church.” Each community is “open to the world’s values and attentive to the cultural milieu in which it carries out its apostolic work.” It is therefore “at one with those among whom it lives”, it cultivates “good relations with all” (art. 57).

This openness to the world reappears in similar terms in the Constitutions of Volunteers of Don Bosco, both male and female, and in the Regulations of Apostolic Life of the Salesian Cooperators. The Volunteers of Don Bosco are “open to all the

authentic values of the world, with respect to the just autonomy of every created thing.”¹⁴ They want to “open the Church to the world and the world to the Church.”¹⁵ The Male Volunteers go one step further. Not only did their “Salesian optimism” towards the world enable them to pick out the positive aspects it contained,¹⁶ but they actually loved the world and the people of their time, “with their problems, hopes, desires and expectations.”¹⁷ Cooperators, on the other hand, “identify with the world in which they live and in which they are called to be light and leaven. They believe in man’s interior resources; they share the positive values of his culture; they accept its novelties with a critical christian sense, integrating into their own life ‘everything that is good’, especially if it is to the liking of the young.”¹⁸

Bringing a concept back into balance

Was optimism about the “world” still in vogue when these constitutions were drafted in the spirit of the 1960s? It is doubtful, because ideas evolved among Christians in the latter part of the century.

The index of Acts of Fr Viganò, a reflection of the prevailing mentality in Salesian spirituality in those years, contains only three references to “openness to the world” under the entry *Mondo*.¹⁹ He feared the effects of secularisation. Wouldn’t the “secular”, another name for the world, be rushing into the breach thus opened up? And what are we to think of the “values” of a profoundly hedonistic consumer society that now reigned in Western lifestyles?

What’s more, after the close of Vatican II the “sin of the world” had a new place among Christian spiritual thinkers. Liberation theology was not lost in sighs of admiration for a society it would gladly have got rid of. The CELAM conference in Puebla (1979) denounced sin, not only in human beings, but also in the structures of society. The world of sin continued to exist and to ravage human existence. It would only disappear with the establishment of a world that was entirely just and fraternal. This was far from the case in the last third of the twentieth century. Social sin oppresses the poor: they are in a good position to talk about it and we must listen to them, the South American episcopate repeated. repeated the South American episcopate. In 1980, Salesian Raul Silva Henriquez, Cardinal Archbishop of Santiago de Chile, denounced “in its social dimension, the sin that permeates structures, institutions and cultures.” And he used the language of the most virulent prophets of the Old Testament to condemn those who profited from it.²⁰ For his part, Pope John Paul II showed himself

to be very reluctant to bless contemporary society and the world in every way. He too saw social sin alongside personal sin. “To understand the sin of the world,” he said in 1986, “we must take into consideration not only the personal dimension of sin, but also its social dimension.” Thus the world “becomes in a specific way that negative spiritual environment to which Sacred Scripture refers when it speaks of the ‘sin of the world’.”²¹ The old principle of Romans 12:2: *Nolite conformari huic saeculo*, “Do not submit to the present age”, was repeated. In 1993, an international symposium organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture²² reminded us that “Christians are fundamentally resilient.” And when the century was about to come to an end, Archbishop Louis-Marie Billié, President of the French Bishops’ Conference, remarked to an assembly of priests in their thirties gathered in Lourdes:

Some of our perspectives, which have been fruitful for us – I am thinking, for example, of the orientation to openness to the world – no longer correspond entirely to what your experience and your history have been. This does not mean that you can close yourself off from the world.²³

At the very least, Salesian openness to the world, which there was no question of denying, had to remain highly critical.

NOTES

- 1 In these two paragraphs I am drawing from the article “Monde” in the *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*, 4th ed., Ceri, 1977, col. 784-791.
- 2 “Omne quod est in mundo, dice l’apostolo s. Giovanni, concupiscentia carnis est, et concupiscentia oculorum, et superbia vitae. Come mai liberarci da queste pericolose catene, con cui incessantemente il demonio tenta di legarci e strascinarci alla perdizione ?(...) Il cristiano (...) abbracciando lo stato religioso, con un colpo riduce in pezzi queste catene (...) Per questo motivo, chi lascia il mondo per entrare in religione, viene paragonato a coloro che in tempo del diluvio si salvarono nell’arca di Noè. (...) Il mondo, dice il Salvatore, è tutto posto nella malignità: et mundus totus in maligno positus est.” (G. Bosco, Introduction to the *Regole o Costituzioni...*, Turin, 1875, pp. VII-VIII.)
- 3 “... a metterci al sicuro contro le tentazioni del demonio, contro le seduzioni d’un mondo corrotto e corruttore ...” (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 21 November 1912, L. C., p. 89).
- 4 “ ... Agli occhi della nostra fede, come un giorno nel deserto a S. Antonio Abbate, il mondo appare come un campo vastissimo, tutto seminato di lacci, che il demonio tende per impedirci di camminare nel sentiero della virtù. I mondani dal canto loro con mille arti subdole cercano di sedurci e di trascinarci all’amore dei piaceri, degli onori e delle ricchezze ...” (P. Albera, Letter to provincials and rectors, 20 April 1919, L. C., p. 285).
- 5 “E’ risaputo che gli stessi uomini di mondo fecero talvolta oggetto di derisione e di beffe i religiosi schiavi di mondane vanità” (P. Ricaldone, “Povertà”, *Atti* 82, 24 July 1937, p. 108).
- 6 “1) che si proibisca rigorosamente ai confratelli di tenere, di acquistare o di prepararsi apparecchi radiotelefonici per conto proprio nelle loro stanze o celle, e anche nelle scuole o nei laboratori 2) che dove uno di tali apparecchi sia necessario, si chieda all’Ispettore il permesso di tenerlo o di fame acquisto; e l’apparecchio sia custodito sotto la personale responsabilità del Direttore, il quale determinerà quando si debba fare uso, e solo in rarissime e straordinarie occasioni ne permetterà l’audizione alla comunità, con orario e programma convenienti a una casa religiosa.” (*Convegni dei Direttori*, in *Atti* 36, 24 September 1926, pp. 488-489).
- 7 CGS/SCG, nos. 31-33.
- 8 CGS/SCG, nos. 102, 133-136, 297-300, 665, 679.
- 9 “In un mondo ferito dall’orgoglio e dall’egoismo” (FMA Constitutions, art. 33).
- 10 “La nostra comunità ... è chiamata ... a lavorare con ottimismo e sollecitudine per il Regno di Dio, sicura che lo Spirito opera già in questo mondo” (FMA Constitutions, art. 49 b).
- 11 FMA Constitutions, art. 55.
- 12 “ ... quando occorre, praticheremo l’ospitalità con delicata attenzione e intelligente prudenza” (FMA Constitutions, art. 56).
- 13 “Svolgiamo la nostra missione nell’unità del carisma e nella pluralità delle situation! socioculturali con quella adattabilità, audacia e creatività che spingeva don Bosco ad andare incontro ai giovani. [...] Rispondiamo alle necessità della Chiesa particolare e dell’ambiente anche con altre forme di presenza,

- secondo le nostre possibilità e sempre nella fedeltà all'indole dell'Istituto." (FMA Constitutions, art. 76).
- 14 "Per realizzare la nostra missione siamo aperte a tutti i valori autentici del mondo, nel rispetto della giusta autonomia d'ogni cosa creata." (VDB Constitutions, art. 14, entitled "Aperte ai valori del mondo").
 - 15 "Consapevoli di aver scelto il secolo come luogo privilegiato della nostra azione apostolica, vogliamo aprire la Chiesa al mondo e il mondo alla Chiesa ..." (VDB Constitutions, art. 10).
 - 16 "L'atteggiamento di ottimismo salesiano verso il mondo ci aiuterà a cogliere gli aspetti positivi che in esso ci sono e che non contrastano col Vangelo, preoccupati di "salvare e non condannare" (Gv 12,47)." (CDB Constitutions, art. 8.)
 - 17 "...amiamo il mondo e gli uomini del nostro tempo, con i loro problemi e le speranze, i desideri e le aspettative" (CDB Constitutions, art. 7).
 - 18 Il Cooperatore si sente 'intimamente solidale' con il mondo in cui vive e nel quale è chiamato ad essere luce e lievito. Crede nelle risorse interiori dell'uomo; condivide i valori della propria cultura ; accetta le novità con senso critico cristiano, integrando nella sua vita 'tutto ciò che è buono', specie se gradito ai giovani." (RVA, art. 29, § 1, article entitled: "Presenza salesiana nel mondo").
 - 19 E. Viganò, *Lettere circolari*, p. 1689.
 - 20 "Preferential option for the poor", a message published in Spanish in DOCLA, n° 54, sept.-oct. 1980 ; n° 55, nov.-dec. 1980.
 - 21 John Paul II General Audience, 5 November 1986, in *Documentation catholique*, 1987, p. 37.
 - 22 We can read two addresses from this colloquium in *Documentation catholique*, 1993, pp. 688-693.
 - 23 Lourdes, 4 November 1999 (*Documentation catholique*, 1999, p. 1033).

Youth

Don Bosco's apostolic priority

The dream at nine years of age was unequivocal. John Bosco saw a field where a multitude of children were having fun. Some were laughing, others were playing, many were swearing. A majestic Lady –the Virgin Mary in his interpretation – appeared to him resplendent in light. “Look” she said to him. The children had fled. A large number of goats, dogs, cats, bears and other beasts had taken their place. “This is the field of your work”, the Lady continued.¹ And the excited animals had turned into gentle lambs, who gambolled and ran around her as if to celebrate. John Bosco’s “field” of apostolate, in other words, his chosen area, would be youth.

The lesson of the dream remained with him throughout his life. When he founded two religious Congregations, the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, it was first and foremost for “the salvation of youth”. According to the first chapter of its Constitutions, approved in 1874, the aim of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, otherwise known as the Salesians, was, in addition to the “perfection” of its members, since they were religious, “every kind of work of charity both spiritual and corporal, toward young people, especially if they be poor; and also the education of young seminarians.”² Similarly, the first Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians stated that the Salesian Sisters had as their “goal”, along with their “own perfection”, participation in the salvation of their neighbour, “especially through the Christian education of the daughters of the people.”³

The first chapter of Don Bosco’s Constitutions detailed the three forms taken by this Salesian activity in the service of young people, in fact those he himself had opted for at that time. The first consisted of taking in “poor and abandoned children to teach them the holy Catholic religion, especially on [religious!] feast days.”⁴ But, as the state of abandonment of some of them would render any educational work pointless if they were not provided with shelter, a second form of Salesian activity was to open houses where, with food and board, they could receive both a religious and vocational education.⁵ The third form of activity concerned young aspirants to the clerical state, or to be more precise, young people, who, because they were both of good character and intellectually capable of undertaking secondary studies, gave some hope of one

day becoming priests. Don Bosco offered them a morally and religiously favourable environment.⁶ Only then, after these three articles on young people, did the last two articles of the chapter envisage Salesian activity in the world of adults through preaching and the press.⁷ Youth was truly a priority for Don Bosco from the outset.

The day it was invited to reflect on its mission at the Special General Chapter of 1971–1972, the Salesian Congregation reiterated the “absolute priority” that it gave to young people, including poor and abandoned young people. This double priority was clear to the Congregation in the life, words and dreams of Don Bosco, in the Constitutions it professed and in the awareness of the confreres of the time. It only wondered about the meaning of the word “young”. The liturgy, it noted, calls Don Bosco “father and teacher of adolescents”. The Salesians concluded from this that they believed they had been sent specifically to pre-adolescents, adolescents and young adults according to the age that, in the various countries and cultures, corresponds to this decisive stage in human life. Taking care of children seemed to them to be only an occasional task, seen as preparation for the next stage.⁸ The Salesian Sisters of the time did not feel obliged to follow this line of argument.

The poor and abandoned

The Special General Chapter of the Salesians, which thus gave priority among the recipients of their mission to the “poor and abandoned”, also wished to comment on the meaning of these two adjectives. The word poor, it said, for us means those who are victims of some form of poverty. Either economic poverty, the source of a host of other forms of deprivation and, for this reason, at the forefront of Salesian concerns, or social and cultural poverty, which is experienced as frustration and alienation; or emotional poverty (being an orphan, or a child not easily accepted by his or her own family), moral and spiritual poverty (due to ignorance of values and especially of the true God).

In his instructions, Don Bosco spoke of the “poorest and most abandoned”. For the Salesian, helping the most needy is therefore a priority among priorities. This is the case, continued the Special General Chapter, when one or other form of poverty reaches a high degree of severity. We are talking about young people living in poverty who are hungry, illiterate and, if they are not and, if they don't get help, have no hope of a normal life; young people tormented by religious and moral problems; and also marginalised young people on the road to delinquency, or just out of prison, or desperate, or lawless, or even drug addicts. The various forms of poverty often accumulate in Third World

countries and in the large cities in developed countries: working class and even less fortunate youth in shantytown slums, young immigrants, the Fourth World. Many Salesian confreres, the Chapter noted at the time, think that even where the State intervenes in a general way to achieve greater social justice, there are still young people and the poor who are not reached by its reforms. The task of the sons of Don Bosco is to reach out to those who have no one to help them and to bear witness in this way to the fact that God loves and wants to save “the most lost.”⁹

Young people, boys and girls

By the 1970s, it was no longer enough to specify the age and social category of the young people for whom the Salesian apostolate was intended. In Don Bosco’s mind, Salesians were destined to educate boys and Salesian Sisters to educate girls. Their respective Constitutions used the term “young people” to refer only to young men or women. But attitudes in the West changed considerably in the second half of the twentieth century. Coeducation, once the exception, was gradually becoming the rule in young people’s lives, at school and everywhere else. In 1965, the Nineteenth General Chapter of the Salesians stated that “coeducation is becoming a fact to be acknowledged.”¹⁰

As a result of coeducation, girls and boys mingled in schools. The Salesians, and especially the Salesian Sisters, found this difficult to resolve. Under the heading “girls”, a paragraph in the Special General Chapter of the Salesians nevertheless stated the advantages of coeducation for the education of boys:

There arises, therefore, the need for an integrated education for our young people. In this education all the values of life (love, beauty, etc.) seen in the light of the divine plan, will be precious elements for the maturing of their personality.¹¹

The Seventeenth General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1981) underlined the urgency of the problem of the coeducation of girls and boys. The Italian Episcopal Conference had just taken a stand. Boys and girls must undertake to get to know each other, to listen to each other, to learn from each other, to overcome the inevitable difficulties that arise from being in each other’s presence, and thus prepare for the tasks of life. The aim of coeducation is to put boys and girls in the best possible conditions for a positive and serene encounter that will enable them to enter into a constructive dialogue.¹² The anomaly that existed previously was considered the norm

in today's world. The Salesian Sisters concluded that, as educators they too had a duty to "assume a balanced position and prepare themselves, like all modern educators, to work for boys too where this was required for pastoral reasons."¹³ For their part, in 1984, the Salesians, who still refused to make young people in general (i.e. boys and girls alike) as the target of their mission,¹⁴ officially adopted a similar position: their pupils could very well be girls.¹⁵

At the end of the century, in the West at least, mixed schooling seemed normal to Salesian men and women.¹⁶ In 1996, the two Salesian schools at Valdocco in Turin, one reserved for boys and the other for girls, typical for the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, adopted coeducation by mutual agreement.

It is true that this made educational activity all the more complicated, especially for Salesians traditionally unprepared for the education of girls. Coeducation is a "delicate problem", remarked Fr Viganò in one of his last circulars. On the one hand, he thought, people must be formed according to the specific requirements of their sex, and, on the other, a type of reciprocity must be cultivated in them that strengthens and makes possible their sexual growth in accordance with their own dignity.¹⁷

Salesian Youth Spirituality

Normally, boys and girls receive a spiritual formation from the Salesian world. Don Bosco designed a spirituality for them, "a method of life" as he put it, that bears his stamp. The young people in his first "oratory" were invited to choose certain values, to adopt certain behaviours, to organise their lives as believers in a certain way – in short, to live according to a spirituality. This spirituality was simple, no doubt, but it was also capable of leading them to great heights. The moral lessons in the devotional manual *Il Giovane provveduto* (1st ed., 1847) and the *Regolamento della casa annessa all'Oratorio* (which remained in manuscript form), those scattered throughout the biography of Luigi Comollo (1st ed., 1844), the *Storia Ecclesiastica* (1st ed., 1845) or the *Storia Sacra* (1st ed., 1847) by Don Bosco, contributed during the 1850s to the spiritual progress of the young generation of Dominic Savio and Michael Rua. Little by little, a youth spirituality – mainly narrative: the lives of Dominic Savio, Francis Besucco and Michael Magone, with their descriptions of paths to holiness – was thus transmitted to the Salesians during the first century of their history. The increasingly rapid evolution of ideas and customs meant that this spirituality had to be more or less adapted to the new times. The Special General Chapter (1971), and then the Twenty-First General

Chapter (1977) of the Salesians, took up this challenge. Finally, the Twenty-Third General Chapter (1990), which had taken as its theme “educating young people in the faith”, thought itself in a position to characterise its risks and dangers in a long article entitled precisely: “Salesian Youth Spirituality”.¹⁸

This spirituality was grouped around five “cores ideas”, which we will content ourselves with presenting schematically here, along with a few lines of comment in an introductory summary. According to the Chapter, Salesian spirituality is

1. essentially a “spirituality of everyday life”. For daily life, like the life of Jesus in Nazareth, is the place where young people recognise the active presence of God and experience their own personal fulfilment.
2. a “spirituality of joy and optimism”. The young person lives everyday life in a joyful atmosphere without, however, giving up concrete commitments and responsibilities.
3. a “spirituality of friendship with the Lord Jesus”. The Easter Christ re-creates everyday life. In this way, young people discover the reasons for their hope, the life into which they are introduced conceals a fullness of meaning.
4. a “spirituality of communion in the Church”. For young people experience their daily life in the Church, the natural environment for the growth of their faith through the sacraments. There they find Mary, the first believer, who precedes them, accompanies them and inspires them.
5. a “spirituality of responsible service”. Daily life is offered to young people in the form of service, which, whether ordinary or extraordinary, must in any case be generous.¹⁹

That same year, 1990, the main elements of this spirituality for young people were set out in a book published by the General House in Rome for members of the Salesian Family. Don Bosco, wrote the author, based on rereading the first part of his *Il Giovane provveduto*, proposed a path to happiness for young people which is a path to holiness. A series of “beatitudes” marked out this path, from which emerged a programme of “youthful” holiness.²⁰

1. “Blessed are you young people, for God has a special love for you and has destined you for happiness!” “Teenagers are greatly loved by God” we read in *Il Giovane provveduto*.²¹
2. “Blessed are you who choose and serve God, because you choose life to the full!” To receive this happiness that God offers out of love, we must accept him and want “to

serve him”, that is, to do his will with love, “to do what pleases him in all things”, to practise the Christian virtues in imitation of Christ.

3. “Blessed are you who choose God without delay, because you choose fullness of life, a peaceful death, a happy eternity!” Not to be faithful to the fundamental religious option, not to give oneself to God in the time of one’s youth, is to risk never giving oneself and missing out on both the present and the future life.
4. “Blessed are you who seize the means to do the Lord’s will!” If you want to stay on the road to happiness, you need support. Happy are you if your teachers show you the means necessary to serve God and remain in his joy! Consequently, you accept the demands of daily duty, you seek to know God through instruction and meditation, you mortify yourself, pray, purify yourself in confession, meet Christ in Holy Communion, entrust yourself to the Virgin Mary. At the same time, you have the courage to overcome the attractions of evil and to accept the painful situations demanded by fidelity to your conscience and your God.
5. “Blessed are you who make these various choices, for you are on the road to holiness!” “Serving the Lord with holy gladness” is an easy method, but enough to lead someone to holiness. Don Bosco firmly believed in the holiness of young people, in the potential holiness of those who “give themselves promptly to the Lord”. For him, Christian holiness was not linked to a person’s bio-psychological maturity, nor, for that matter, to prolonged prayer, austere practices, miracles and ecstasies, but only to the assiduous fulfilment of daily duties and the generous offering of daily difficulties, out of love. “Let us keep to the easy things, but let them be done with perseverance”, he wrote in Michael Magone’s biography.²²

We find in these lines the “spirituality of everyday life” of the General Chapter.

NOTES

- 1 “Ecco il tuo campo, ecco dove devi lavorare.” (MO Da Silva, p. 36).
- 2 “... ogni opera di carità spirituale e corporale verso dei giovani, specialmente poveri, ed anche l'educazione del giovane Clero.” (*Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, 1875, chap. 1, art 1).
- 3 “Lo scopo dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice è di attendere alla propria perfezione, e di coadiuvare alla salute del prossimo, specialmente col dare alle fanciulle del popolo una cristiana educazione.” (*Regole o Costituzioni dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria SS. Ausiliatrice*, Torino, 1878, Chapter I, art. 1).
- 4 “Il primo esercizio di carità sarà di raccogliere giovanetti poveri ed abbandonati per istruirli nella santa Cattolica religione, particolarmente ne' giorni festivi” (*Regole o Costituzioni ...*, cited ed. chap. I, art. 3).
- 5 *Regole o Costituzioni...*, ibid., art. 4.
- 6 *Regole o Costituzioni...*, ibid., art 5.
- 7 *Regole o Costituzioni...*, ibid., art. 6 and 7.
- 8 CGS/SCG, nos. 45-46.
- 9 CGS/SCG, nos. 47-48.
- 10 “La convivenza mista sta diventando un'esperienza di cui bisogna prendere atto.” (CG XIX, doc. XIX, chap. V).
- 11 “Sorge dunque l'esigenza pedagogica di un'educazione integrale dei nostri giovani. In essa tutti i valori della vita (amore, bellezza, ecc.), visti alla luce del disegno divino, saranno elementi preziosi per maturare la personalità del giovane.” (CGS, no. 51: “Le giovani”).
- 12 Italian Episcopal Conference, *Educazione sessuale nella scuola. Orientamenti pastorali* (Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1980), no. 26.
- 13 “... come educatrici, dobbiamo assumere una posizione di equilibrio e prepararci come ogni educatrice moderna a prestare il nostro ministero in favore anche dei ragazzi, là dove ragioni pastorali lo richiedono.” (Istituto FMA. *Capitolo generale XVII*. Roma, 15 September 1981 - 28 February 1982, *Atti*, p. 112).
- 14 See the SDB Constitutions in Italian, art. 25. Note that, in their collections of revised Constitutions the word “young people” has always been systematically used in the masculine form (*i giovani*) by the Salesians and almost always in the feminine (*le giovani*) for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.
- 15 SDB Regulations, art. 3.
- 16 On this point, see the proceedings of the 1992 International Salesian Colloquium, published under the title *Coeducazione e presenza salesiana*, ed. Cosimo Semeraro, Leumann, Elle Di Ci, 1993, 234 pp.
- 17 E. Viganò, Letter to Salesians “Nell'anno della famiglia”, 10 June 1994, *Atti* 349, p. 22.
- 18 “La spiritualità giovanile salesiana”, CG23, *Atti* 333, May 1990, pp. 97-112. The term “youth spirituality”, which is strange in French where one would expect “spiritualité de la jeunesse”, does however allow this spirituality to be applied to adults as well, in line with the idea of the article's editors.

- 19 Here is the Italian wording of the text of the Chapter, which is too abstract for our taste and has not been translated literally above. “1. Spiritualità del quotidiano. Il quotidiano ispirato a Gesù di Nazareth (cf. Cost. 12) è il luogo in cui il giovane riconosce la presenza operosa di Dio e vive la sua realizzazione personale. - 2. Spiritualità ella gioia e dell’ottimismo. Il quotidiano va vissuto nella gioia e nell’ottimismo, senza rinunciare per questo all’impegno e alla responsabilità (cf. Cost. 17 e 18). - 3. Spiritualità dell’amicizia con il Signore Gesù. Il quotidiano è ricreato dal Cristo della Pasqua (cf. Cost 34) che dà le ragioni della speranza e introduce in una vita che trova in Lui la pienezza di senso. - 4. Spiritualità di comunione ecclesiale. Il quotidiano si sperimenta nella Chiesa (cf. Cost 13 e 35), ambiente naturale per la crescita nella fede attraverso i sacramenti. Nella Chiesa troviamo Maria (cf. Cost. 20 e 34), prima credente, che precede, accompagna e ispira. - 5. Spiritualità di servizio responsabile. Il quotidiano viene consegnato ai giovani in un servizio (cf. Cost 31) generoso, ordinario e straordinario.”(I nuclei fondamentali”, in the item “La spiritualità giovanile sa lesiana”, loc. cit, p. 100).
- 20 J. Aubry, “Foi et bonheur. Don Bosco propose à ses jeunes les Béatitudes évangéliques”, in *Avec Don Bosco vers l’an 2000. Vingt conférences salésiennes*, Rome, General House, 1990, pp. 52-83. The wording for the fourth beatitude has been adapted below.
- 21 I giovanetti sono grandemente amati da Dio” (*Il Giovane provveduto ...*, 1847, pp.10-11).
- 22 “Teniamoci alle cose facili, ma si facciamo con perseveranza.” (G. Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele...*, Turin, Paravia, 1861, p. 47).

Zeal

Don Bosco “a giant of apostolic zeal”

John’s Gospel tells us that when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he discovered an animal market in the Temple. Outraged by the disorder, he whipped the animals out of the way, scattered the money-changers’ coins, overturned their tables and called out to the pigeon dealers: “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!” His disciples then remembered the verse from Scripture: “It is zeal for your house that has consumed me.”¹ The Greek *zelos* translates as ardour, emulation, jealousy. In the religious sense preferred here, zeal is a strong, fierce and readily jealous ardour to serve God’s cause.

Don Bosco’s zeal was recognised and celebrated throughout his life. In 1841, the year in which he was ordained to the priesthood, the register at the diocesan seminary in Turin already noted in his regard: “*Zelante e di buona riuscita*” (zealous and successful).² The following year, the young priest Bosco carefully summarised Jesuit Minini’s instruction on the sixth day of his retreat at Sant’Ignazio (June 1842), when he commented on the axiom: “The priest is filled with zeal for the salvation of souls.”³

The panegyric for Saint Philip Neri that Don Bosco delivered in Alba in 1868 reflected his own priestly zeal, as his priest colleagues immediately noticed. He announced

I shall confine myself to giving you a glimpse of what is, so to speak, the pivot around which his other virtues were ordered: zeal for the salvation of souls. This is the zeal recommended by the divine Saviour when he said: I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish that it were already kindled. Philip is convinced that no sacrifice is as pleasing to God as zeal for the salvation of souls ... At the sight of the evils [of Rome] which were ever increasing, Philip, following the example of the divine Saviour who, at the beginning of his preaching, possessed nothing in the world but that great fire of divine charity which impelled him to come from heaven to earth... [Philip] makes himself all things to all people.⁴

Don Bosco’s religious zeal stemmed from that “great fire of divine charity” which is his love for “souls”, that is to say for people, especially young people. He saw them on the road of life, preparing their future, only to end up one day, in arrangements that

worried him, meeting the judge after their final moment on earth. It was the crucial hour of destiny: either endless happiness or eternal loss. Don Bosco certainly wanted the temporal good of men and women and devoted himself to bringing it about. There are countless obstacles to living well. They had to be prevented or removed. He was delighted by people's joy, and saddened by their distress. But it was above all their salvation, made problematic by sin, that preoccupied him. What wouldn't he have done to keep them away from sin or to remove them from it! Always as a result of the "great fire of divine charity" that burned in him. "When love therefore is fervent, and is come to that height that it would take away, remove and divert, what is opposite to the thing beloved, it is termed zeal" wrote Francis de Sales. "So that, to describe it properly, zeal is no other thing than love in its ardour, or rather the ardour that is in love. And therefore, such as the love is, such is the zeal, which is its ardour. If the love be good its zeal is good, if the love be bad its zeal is bad."⁵ The fervour that animated Don Bosco with an almost haunting ardour "for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls" was what we call his zeal.

This was no small thing. Throughout his life he admirably applied the lesson of preacher Minini. A few months before his death, Fr Albertario's Milan weekly concluded a long article on him, brimming with admiration, with the sentence: "He is a veritable powerhouse, even though he is very humble and very affable; he is a giant of charity and zeal, any praise is inferior to his merit."⁶ Don Bosco was therefore not only, as others have said and written, "a giant of charity", but also a "giant of zeal"!

The lessons of Fr Rua and Fr Albera on Salesian zeal

The true disciples of such a master had to be themselves zealous, that is, generous and devoted to serving God's cause. "Among the virtues that shone most brightly in the life of our Venerable Father and Master (Don Bosco)," wrote the new Rector Major Fr Albera in his letter of presentation of the circulars of his predecessor Fr Rua,

the late Fr Rua said that none had struck him as much as the indefatigable zeal with which his heart always seemed inflamed at all times, and this zeal seemed to be his special aim to copy in himself; therefore, his thoughts were directed to procure the glory of God everywhere and always, to save as many souls as possible, and all his words were directed to this, and his actions dedicated to it. This was the sole end, the sole aspiration of his entire laborious life. Even during

his long and painful illness, this unquenchable thirst for souls never ceased to torment him.⁷

It is true that the enthusiasm of the early days could have died down. Fr Albera lamented this on the eve of the First World War. “I am afraid”, he wrote, “that the ardent zeal of our first missionaries is waning among us, and that we do not fully correspond to God’s plans for our humble Congregation. Unfortunately, I see the requests to go to the missions diminishing every day, and therefore the words *tene quod habes* (lit.: hold on to what you have) echo in my mind.”⁸

Zeal therefore featured prominently among the “advice and opinions” of this Rector Major during the 1914–1918 war “to preserve the spirit of Don Bosco in all the houses” of the Salesian Society. His piece on Zelo (zeal) teaches us not only about the aims, admittedly dated in expression, that he proposed for Salesian zeal of the time, but also and above all about the connection that he established, as Don Bosco had done, between zeal and love, either of God or of ones neighbour.⁹ A zealous Salesian is a loving Salesian who shows true love.

More than any other son of Don Bosco, the rector, he wrote, must meditate on the motto *Da mihi animas* of the Salesian Society. He knows that nothing can be more pleasing to the Heart of Jesus (we would say: a more obvious sign of our love for God) than to work zealously for the salvation of souls redeemed by him with his own blood. This is the best way to show our desire to make reparation for the wrongs we may have committed in the past, and to console the Congregation bereaved by the death in war of so many confreres and, even more so, by the defection of a number of others. The zealous rector will therefore endeavour to help his confreres persevere in their vocation and make daily progress “*nel sentiero della perfezione*” (on the path of perfection). He will leave no stone unturned to keep sin, especially impurity, away from his institution. He will love young people with a strong and holy love. The Lord entrusts them to him: *Accipe puerum et nutri mihi. Custodi innocentiam* (Take this child and feed him for me. Watch over his innocence). He doesn’t think he has done his job when he has given the pupils of his school a certain level of education; he knows he has to turn them into upright citizens and, above all, good and fervent Christians. He doesn’t just love his pupils for the few years they spend in his school: he loves them for eternity. When they leave, he certainly expresses his hope that he will see them again on this earth, but above all that he will see them again in heaven around Don Bosco. He endeavours to bring them together in the local Past Pupils Association, so that he can help them faithfully uphold the good principles he had instilled in them. His zeal, “*ispirato dalla carità*” (inspired by charity)

and guided by prudence, prevents him from accepting tasks that are outside his own duties in his institution. On the contrary, he will try to oppose, by word and example the tendency of some of his confreres to prefer duties that detach them from the education of their young people.

Finally, the Rector Major urged his rectors to look for recruits for his society. The zealous rector, he wrote, considers it “*una grave sventura*” (a great misfortune) to see a school year end without presenting any vocations to the Salesian Society, “even if he has to wrest this grace from the Heart of Jesus by many prayers and sacrifices.”¹⁰ He also seeks to increase daily the number of Cooperators, who, participating in the spirit of Don Bosco, make themselves its material and spiritual promoters.

A term that has sometimes become problematic

“Nothing is more degraded than the word ‘zeal’ when it is emptied of its theological substance” wrote Jean Daniélou.¹¹ It is sometimes fashionable to leave its meaning to the unsympathetic “zealots” of the time of Jesus and the activists of contemporary militias. One might say that zeal gets in the way and borders on fanaticism. And zealots are quick to cross the border. Encouraging them is therefore dangerous. Cold wisdom calms the always clumsy excessive. But, oh censor, think for a moment. Fanaticism is a caricature of virtuous zeal, which remains prudent and wise. If love is good, so is zeal, as we have seen Saint Francis de Sales say. The truly zealous, people of faith and authentic charity, are of this saint’s kind. The fervour of their zeal does not prevent them from being discreet.

Don Bosco’s disciples remain convinced that it is part of the holiness of their master and model to have accepted the service of the Kingdom of God with enthusiasm and joy, happy to place all his strength at the Lord’s disposal, ready to accept any hardship, because he had understood the divine greatness of this call. Salesian service to young people is carried out with zeal, a Salesian spiritual writer at the end of the century explained, “with a fiery energy because the earthly and eternal happiness of so many young people is at stake. It is something so beautiful and so serious.” The disciple of Don Bosco remains struck by having heard him say so many times that “cooperating with God in the salvation of souls” through the work of education is the “holiest thing in the world.” It is something divine, or better still, “the most divine of divine things”, a strange concept at first sight since, by definition, in God everything is divine. Can there be any one thing more divine in God than the others? But we can easily understand that the author of this sentence wants to show the sublimity of a gesture that surpasses all

else. His ardent zeal is expressed in this way. Don Bosco wanted nothing more than to participate in the fiery zeal of Jesus the Saviour for the benefit of young people and all those whom God wanted to send him.¹² Don Bosco's disciple, a member of the Salesian Family, humbly tries to imitate him.

NOTES

- 1 John 2:14-17; Psalm 69:9.
- 2 Revealed by Bishop Bertagna during Don Bosco's canonisation process (Ordinary informative process, *Summarium*, p. 78).
- 3 Don Bosco's handwritten manuscript *Esercizi spirituali fatti nel Santuario di S. Ignazio ...*, unpublished, reproduced in FdB 84 A9-B3.
- 4 "Io mi limiterò a dirvi solamente un cenno di quello che è come il cardine intorno a cui si compierono, per così dire, tutte le altre sue virtù, cioè lo zelo per la salvezza delle anime. Questo è lo zelo raccomandato dal Divin Salvatore quando disse : Io son venuto a portare un fuoco sopra la terra, e che cosa io voglio se non che si accenda ! ... Filippo è persuaso che niun sacrificio è tanto grato a Dio quanto lo zelo per la salvezza delle anime ... Alla vista di que' mali ognor crescenti, Filippo, ad esempio del Divin Redentore che, quando diede principio alla sua predicazione, altro non possedeva nel mondo se non quel gran fuoco di divina carità che lo spinse a venire dal Cielo in terra... Filippo si fa tutto a tutti..." (MB IX, pp. 215-217. Not recorded in the English edition of the BM.)
- 5 Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book X, Chap. XII, in *Oeuvres*, vol. V, p. 207.
- 6 "Egli è una vera potenza, sebbene umilissimo e affabilissimo; egli è un gigante di carità e di zelo, ed ogni encomio è inferiore al suo merito." (*Leonardo da Vinci*, 13 February 1887. See MB XVII, p. 289.)
- 7 "Fra le virtù che brillarono di vivissima luce nella vita del nostro Venerabile Padre e Maestro, il compianto sig D. Rua ebbe a dire che nessuna lo aveva colpito quanto lo zelo instancabile onde apparve ognora infiammato il cuore di lui, e questo zelo sembrò proporsi in modo speciale di ricopiare in se stesso ; quindi a procurare ovunque e sempre la gloria di Dio, a salvare il maggior numero possibile di anime erano rivolti i suoi pensieri, a ciò erano indirizzate tutte le sue parole, e consacrate le sue azioni. Questo fu l'unico fine, la sola aspirazione di tutta la sua laboriosissima vita. Anche durante la lunga e penosa sua malattia, non cessò di tormentarlo questa inestinguibile sete di anime." (P. Albera, Presentation of the *Lettere circolari di don Michaele Rua ai salesiani* Torino, tip. S.A.I.D. "Buona Stampa", 1910, p. V).
- 8 "... mi sorprende il timore che venga meno fra noi lo zelo ardente dei nostri primi missionari, e che noi non corrispondiamo completamente ai disegni di Dio sulla nostra umile Congregazione. Vedo purtroppo ogni giorno diminuire le domande di andare nelle missioni, e perciò mi si ripercuotono nella mente quasi colpi di martello le parole: tene quod habes." (P. Albera, Letter to Salesians, 25 January 1911, L.C., pp. 19-20).
- 9 P. Albera, "Consigli ed avvisi per conservare lo spirito di D. Bosco in tutte le Case", Letter to provincials and rectors, 23 April 1917, L.C., pp. 228-229.
- 10 "... dovesse pure strappar questa grazia al Cuor di Gesù con molti sacrifici e preghiere". (Letter previously cited, p. 229).
- 11 Essay on the mystery of history, re-pub., Paris, 1982, p. 306.
- 12 In J. Aubry, *Avec Don Bosco vers l'an 2000*, Rome, General House, 1990, pp. 38-39.