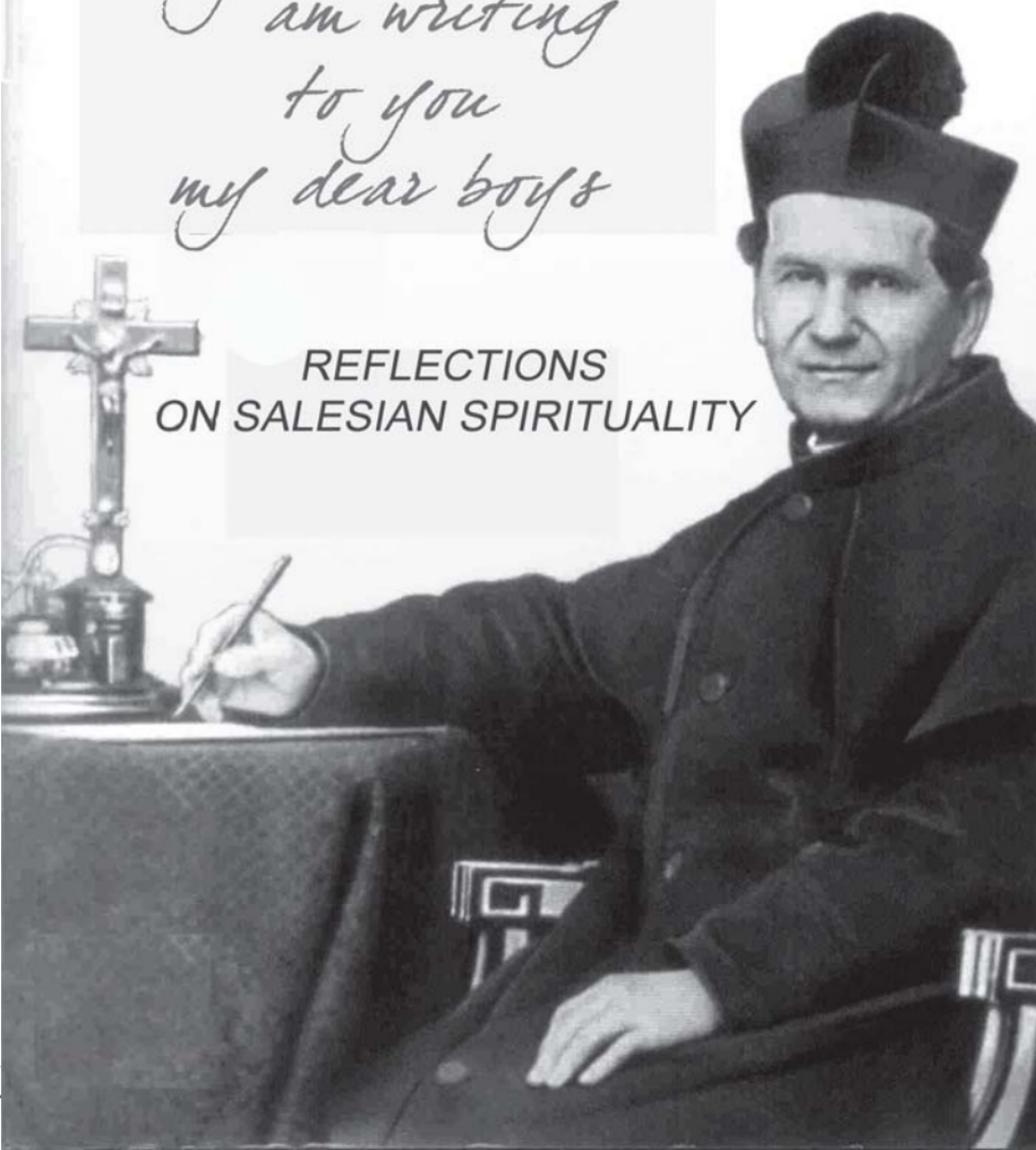


ALDO GIRAUDO

*I am writing
to you
my dear boys*

REFLECTIONS
ON SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY



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my dear young friends, You' are always in m

ALDO GIRAUDO

I am writing
to you...

**My
Young
Friends!**

Salesian Spirituality
for
Youngsters

Don Bosco has written much

He wrote, above all, for youngsters. His words and his style were typical of his time.

Today his texts have an old-world flavour but they are not outdated. We can read them as if they were meant for us today, because he writes from the depths of his heart, very sincerely. Because he's such an expert in the use of evocative language, his words leave a lasting impression on his readers. Since he is an excellent communicator he tells us the story of his life, his joys and his search for meaning. He stresses some important points like the inner yearnings of the human spirit and we realise that what he says rings so true for us even today. It seems as if he were writing exclusively to us.

In his letters we find a fascinating combination of various elements: his clarity, warmth, freedom and determination, his joy and his magnanimity. What he writes is charmingly real and suitable for everyone.

Don Bosco writes to you...

He writes about his adventures, relationships, affections, freedom, joys and commitments. He almost seems to want to seduce you.

What would your life be like if you fearlessly surrendered it to God who is calling you?

You cannot imagine what unutterable joy you

would feel if you freed yourself from the shackles that confined you and you decided to unburden yourself of all the clutter that you have accumulated within you over all this time?

Don't you think that it's a simple and easy step to take? Doesn't God's Spirit have the power to knock down the walls and blast his way into your heart and turn your desolate deserts into verdant oases?

So many youngsters have had confidence in Don Bosco. Even today, there are so many who are truly very happy only because they listened to his advice.

What about you? It all depends on whether you have the ability to listen and reflect on all that's deep in your heart.

A spiritual journey

Every letter, every book, every word of Don Bosco was aimed at awakening the best possibilities that God has placed in the heart of every youngster. He is not content to just thrill and inspire you. He wants you to raise your sights beyond the uncertainties of the present life to uncharted horizons of the future. He wants to give you all the essential information necessary for this spiritual journey.

Give him a hearing, open your heart. Don Bosco will speak to you about human freedom and the Christian life. He will teach you how beautiful and how simple it is to live the Gospel of Jesus in all its

fullness.

“I’m writing to you youngsters...”

Imagine that Don Bosco himself is writing you a letter in response to some fundamental questions you may have him.

What is the interior life?

How does one begin and sustain a spiritual journey? What are some of the unique suggestions that you would propose to the youth of today?

His answers may surprise you.

Some may seem a bit far-fetched and not in keeping with the sensibilities of today’s culture.

But the flavour of the Gospel values, their charm and fruitfulness, the educative tips, some of the values he proposes are typical to his region and his times and he invites you to read them and reflect on his words.

My dear boys'

I love you with all my heart and **it is enough for me to know you're young for me to love you** very much. I can assure you that you will find suggestions by people far more virtuous and far more learned than myself but you will hardly ever find anyone who loves you as much as I do in Christ Jesus and who wants nothing but your true happiness.

May the Lord be with you and I am sure that by practicing these suggestions you will reach the heights of sanctity, the salvation of your soul and give glory to God. That is the sole purpose of this booklet

Be very happy and the Lord be with you.

Most affectionately in Jesus Christ,

Fr. John Bosco.

1

MADE FOR GOD

You ask me: what is the spiritual life? We embark on the spiritual life when we begin to realize that our relationship with God is something that is really important to us.

I wanted all youngsters, even those on the streets during the early days of the Oratory, to understand this. I wanted to invite them to see their lives from a spiritual perspective. I tried to elevate their thoughts so that they could become aware that religion ought to be first and foremost a joyful relationship with God.

It was precisely for them that I wrote a book of meditations and prayers called *The Companion of Youth* – in which I sought to lay out the essential steps of the spiritual life simply and meaningfully so that it may transform their lives and they may begin to become aware of themselves.

To take their **first steps on this spiritual journey** it was first necessary to shake off the lethargy of

an inherited faith that is sometimes superficial or vague. You must open your eyes, look around and learn to perceive beyond mere appearances. Look around in order to discover the profound beauty that exists. When you do this you will want to make some progress, you will want to grow.

I told the boys: "Raise your eyes and see all that exists in the skies above and on the earth below." If you raise your eyes, you will become aware of the reality that is within you and around you. If you look beyond all that is superficial you will find that everything speaks to you about God and about his great love for you. Everything speaks to you of your profound dignity. *The entire universe was created for you and you are made for God.* You are made in order to enter into a relationship of intimacy and friendship with him not only in the eternity to come but already here and now, at every moment of your day even as you are about to venture on this adventure called life.

On the one hand, it is not easy to grasp all this if you constantly stop at external things, feelings, appearances and you don't learn to go beneath the surface. On the other hand, when you begin to contemplate and meditate on the Word of God, you gradually come out of this hibernation and these distractions and you enter more deeply into this awareness.

Become aware of God's love for you and the great plans he has for you. Begin to chat with him and respond to his promptings. Your life will have new horizons and you will be touched and guided by His Spirit.

Certainly, you will first need to **overcome a series of prejudices.**

Above all let's get rid of the idea that *the spiritual life is sad and boring.* That's not true! I taught young Christians that the Christian life is cheerful and active. I told them several times: Serve the Lord and you will always be happy. *Serve the Lord with gladness.* (Ps. 100: 2)

The one who takes care of his interior life attains deep peace, joy and a love for life that he will never find anywhere else.

Another common fallacy is the hope that you will live a long life: "We are young, so let's have fun. We will repent when we're old!" History teaches us that several of those who had such thoughts have been ruined. I know for a fact, how true that saying of Scripture is: *"Teach a youngster how he should live and he will remember it all his life"* (Proverbs 22, 6). That means: if you start living well while you are young, when you have grown old you will continue to grow in virtue and the interior life. Conversely, if you accumulate bad habits while you are young they will continue to dominate your entire life till the day you

die.

I am convinced that it is very easy to be happy, to realize your full potential and to succeed in being loved and respected by everyone but first you need to trust someone to guide you wisely, someone who will teach you to reflect, to become aware of yourself, to help you go into the depths of your heart and to listen to its yearnings. This process takes daily and faithful practice.

Without a careful and profound perception, without a desire and a determination to improve you will remain incomplete and unable to attain the heights to which you aspire.

Courage! My dear friend, give yourself the opportunity to grow in virtue and I assure you that you will always be happy and come to realize how good it is to serve the Lord.

Points for Reflection and Discussion

''

To begin a lively "spiritual" journey is to pass from a sleepy faith to the awareness of being a child of God.

- *What habits and experiences do you think will help you to take this step?*
- *Do you want to begin this adventure with God?*
- *Does your heart really want this?*

2 A TASTE FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

My life's story has some important events that marked my entry and my progress in the spiritual life.

Even as a child I was prepared with great fervour to meet Jesus in Confession and Holy Communion. For an adult as also for a youngster it means creating the ideal conditions: there needs to be an atmosphere of recollection; one needs to be aware of what is happening around him, to put himself deliberately into the presence of the God who is gives himself completely to us.

When one is young the role of parents and educators is essential. Later, our ability to reflect depends entirely on us.

I remember how my mother prepared me for **my First Confession**. She taught me *to pass from a sense of shame* (a psychological fact) to *the sense of sin* (a spiritual and Christian point of view). She took

me to church. She went to Confession herself and then introduced me to the confessor. Later she helped with my thanksgiving. She continued to do this till she judged me capable of managing on my own.

I will never forget the great care and attention that she took to prepare me for **my First Communion**. I was eleven. Even on the day of my First Communion I was in the midst of a crowd of children and it was easy to get distracted but my mother followed me carefully.

During the season of Lent she took me thrice for Confession. Several times she whispered words that served to help me realize the importance of a deep relationship with God, *"My dear John, God is preparing a great gift for you. Strive to prepare yourself well. Make a good Confession. Be truly sorry and don't hold anything back from the priest. Promise God that you will try to be better in the future."* Her dedicated assistance really helped me. At home she made me spend time in prayer, reading a good book and she gave me some good advice.

On the morning of the feast she did not allow me to speak to anyone. She walked with me to the altar. She helped me with my preparation and my thanksgiving. On that day she created a special atmosphere at home, with moments of meditation, reading and prayer. Finally she said some words that would remain in my heart forever: *"My dear son, this*

was a great day for you. I am convinced that God has truly taken possession of your heart. Now promise him that you will remain good throughout your life..."

That intense spiritual experience had a positive effect on me and helped me mature. I became aware of many things and I was able to evaluate many things around me. There was a visible improvement in my behaviour and my relationships.

But the defining moment of my interior life took place when I was almost fifteen years old. It happened when I had the good fortune **to meet a great teacher** who opened my mind: **Fr. Giovanni Calosso**.

It is to him that I owe my movement from a generic and superficial faith to a serious spiritual life. That good priest generously agreed to take me under his tutelage and help me to solve the problems I faced with my studies. I felt his love for me and which encouraged me to trust him.

It was a new and intense adventure. I realized what it means to have a good friend a loving father who was deeply spiritual. Therefore **I put myself into his hands**. I told him everything about myself, every thought, word and action. That was how he was able to teach and guide me.

He first introduced me to an unexpected dimension of my life. He made me encounter the Lord in the inner chamber of my soul. From then on *I began to savour the spiritual life*. Earlier I was inclined to act impulsively, like a machine without any thought or reason.

I experienced a stable and faithful friend meant for my soul. Before this I had none. Fr. Calosso not only corrected some of the defects in my way of thinking but he also encouraged me to make good and regular Confessions. He instructed me to approach the holy Eucharist profitably and joyfully.

He taught me to dedicate *a little time every day in meditation* with the help of some spiritual reading. I would visit him often and spend several hours in his company. Meditation, reading the Word of God, the works of the spiritual masters and conversations with Fr. Calosso opened my eyes and increased my awareness. He introduced me to a deeper understanding of things. He taught me to research things, to identify the roots of evil in my mind and to get rid of them in order to experience an inner freedom. This was a thrilling and decisive experience.

Points for Reflection and Discussion'

The boy Johnny Bosco moved from a superficial faith to the spiritual life thanks to Fr. Calosso, his guide.

- *Have you had some "powerful" spiritual experiences in your life?*
- *Who is the one who influences, or has influenced your spiritual growth?*
- *What do you think the expression "to experience the spiritual life" means?*

3

THE NEED OF A GUIDE

As you make progress in your spiritual life you need a guide. This is a fact of which I am convinced. Even if you are lucky enough to be educated and well informed, should you want to reach a higher spiritual level you need this special personal relationship.

In my life I have realised that **without any sense of spiritual direction you will never achieve anything good**. I have tested this with the best youngsters that God placed in my charge.

When I spoke to **Dominic Savio** for the very first time I sensed that he was a boy who had been endowed with the Spirit of the Lord and I was surprised by the way grace had already worked in him at such a tender age. He had wonderful parents, great teachers. He grew up in a healthy environment. He also displayed a maturity of judgment and reflection beyond his years.

He immersed himself enthusiastically into the community of the Oratory and its activities. These positive stimuli were given a fertile environment in which to blossom.

Reading and meditating on the Word of God had refined his interior life until one day he heard some words in a sermon that touched him deeply and fanned into flame his love for God. This was an overwhelming inner experience that was intense and truly spiritual. He felt compelled to surrender everything to God forever.

Yet, despite this deeply spiritual experience, he would have made little progress without a spiritual guide.

Spiritual direction helped Dominic *to achieve a balance between interiority and a life of action, between prayer and service, between love for God and love for his companions, between contemplation and action.* It was thus that he became a model that would motivate so many youngsters, becoming an important point of reference for the spirituality of young apostles and leaders.

Perhaps you will tell me that it is not easy to find a spiritual director. That's true. But I don't believe that you need to be sure about the results in order to know how good a guide is. It is your inner attitude of humility, trust, docility and obedience that allows the Holy Spirit to work effectively in you.

Along with this you need a strong desire and a firm determination to embark on this spiritual journey.

That was how it was for Dominic Savio. He confided entirely in me from the first time we met. It was the same for Francis Besucco, the simple shepherd boy from in the mountains of Cuneo, who came to join the community of the Oratory. He came to me and said: "Since I want to put my soul into your hands, I would like to tell you all that is on my conscience so that you may know me better and will be able to give me the best advice to save my soul."

This confidence and obedience, this humble disclosure, according to the great spiritual masters is an essential prerequisite for spiritual progress.

In fact, when there are such attitudes, the Holy Spirit, who is the real architect of our interior life, also uses persons who are simple and humble to give us just the right advice.

I myself have had this experience. While studying in the public schools of Chieri, I was really helped by my confessor to avoid some humiliating experiences and grow spiritually. **But I received much more valuable advice from a companion who was younger than I, his name was Louis Comollo.** His habits and his Christian conviction were more effective than any sermon. I learned from him how to live as a Christian. Thanks to his advice I was able

to overcome all the doubts I had about my vocation.

Subsequently, in my work as an educator I **often collaborated in helping to care for youngsters** *by assisting them and personally guiding some of their dissipated companions.* I chose some bright youngsters who were openly Christian in their behaviour. They were generous, attentive and careful to avoid compromise and mediocrity and they were veritable spiritual guides, achieving results that I would have thought impossible for me.

Points for Reflection and Discussion'

- *Don Bosco says it is indispensable to find a guide in order to progress in the spiritual life; what do you think? Why should one possess the attitudes of humility, trust, openness, transparency along with the strong desire to progress spiritually?*
- *Do you have a spiritual director? Have you looked for one?*
- *Will you pray that the Lord helps you to meet a "spiritual director?"*

4

CONDITIONS FOR BEGINNING THE PROCESS

I realized much later how right my mother was when she said at my First Communion: *"I am convinced that God has taken hold of your heart."*

At the age of eleven I was old enough to understand the step I would be taking and so I began to prepare myself to receive the the Holy Sacrament. Above all, I learned how I ought to correspond to the grace of God. I would make a good Confession and sincerely repent of all my sins. I was determined to improve myself by subduing my pride which was one of my dominant defects.

I took this first step in my spiritual life because I opened my heart to God. In fact, it was only when I opened my heart that he could enter and clean its interior in order to take possession of it. His grace began to work within me. I seemed to experience an improvement especially in the practice of obedience and docility. That was the first thing people noticed.

Before this they disliked me because of my pride.

The very yearning for the spiritual life that I experienced between the ages of fourteen and fifteen while I was under the guidance of Fr. Calosso came because of my decision to let God play a greater role in my life, to trust him more fully and to obey my spiritual director more completely.

Both these (my first Confession and Communion) were very important events in my spiritual life.

These changes took place in different ways at different stages of my life. My experience taught me that these changes can happen to very young girls or boys, youngsters, adolescents, and even to adults. I think it is one of the most beautiful adventures that you can experience as a youngster. It is something very personal. It can happen suddenly, like God interrupting your life, but that is rare. Usually this intervention occurs gradually like the process of gradual maturation or a kind of progressive inner enlightenment for someone who intends to take his Christian life more seriously.

Fidelity to daily prayer, meditation on the Word of God, the daily examination of conscience in order to help control one's weaknesses, regular Confession, the deliberate effort to avoid sin, a continued work on oneself in order to develop Christian attitudes and virtues, contact and insertion into a happy and healthy community, one that is animated by charity, active participation in Church

services and retreats, friendship with exciting and exemplary individuals, spiritual direction and an eagerness to be of service in the family and the neighbourhood ... **These are all useful means to help prepare the ground.**

Gradually, these elements, this climate of commitment, this fervent lifestyle, kindles a **desire to strengthen one's interior life** and increases one's **real love for God** and for those around us. These traits will bring joy and a **sense of inner security** in the midst of the difficulties and pitfalls that will now no longer disturb you.

At this point it is necessary to respond to God's call without fear, to listen to the promptings of his Spirit and to follow the path he is gradually revealing to you.

However, not all paths are the same.

For **Dominic Savio**, who, from his early childhood had been trained to a certain way of life, an attitude of dedication and a taste for the interior life were conditions that created in him habits of a commitment to regular daily duties, prayer and service towards his companions. It was in such a state of refinement of these virtues, that Dominic was stirred by a powerful sermon that he heard. It was a mystical experience and his heart instantly felt drawn irresistibly by the love of God.

Michael Magone, on the other hand, was a simple and lively boy. He grew up in the company

of street urchins and those rough and ill-mannered companions were familiar with vice. But he was deeply touched by grace as he entered the ambient of the Oratory. He willingly accepted its basic rules and soon made friends with boys who had very different habits. He soon realized his own mediocrity and his attachment to bad habits. It was a shocking realization which triggered within him a crisis that discouraged him except for the fact that he was helped out of this situation very constructively.

Points for Reflection' and Discussion

- *Your spiritual journey begins when you create favourable conditions, those that you think are most useful for your personal growth.*

5 BEGIN WITH A CONVERSION OF HEART

Each step towards inner conversion requires a response, a gift given in love to the God who has first loved us. Since the Lord loves us so much should it not be our firm intention to try to do all we can to avoid whatever might displease him?

This process is a movement in two stages: **conversion and surrender to God**. At the end of the meditations on the meaning of life and death I always invited the boys of the Oratory to turn to God and to tell him fervently and from the depths of their hearts: *"From this moment, my Lord, I am turning my life over to you. I love you and I want to serve you with joy to the end of my days. Holy Virgin, my Mother, help me always to be faithful."*

First of all, we must truthfully reflect on ourselves. This may happen at various times and may take various forms.

For me, it took place very clearly and effec-

tively when I was twenty years old. I must admit that before that time I was rather dissipated, boastful, given in to fun and games, busy entertaining myself with other things that cheered me up for the moment but nothing that really satisfied me deeply. Basically, I was very self-centred as happens to most young people.

It was only at the end of my high school that I seriously got to grips with questions about my future. I realized that the dreams I had cultivated thus far were very vague. It was true that I felt a certain inclination towards the priesthood so that I could take care of young people, but I had also to be realistic. My way of life, certain habits that I possessed and a total lack of the virtues necessary to become a priest made it difficult for me to decide. I had to spend more time in reflection. At first I tried to do this by myself. I began reading spiritual books and visiting some religious communities around Chieri. I felt called to the contemplative way of life. I even thought of entering a monastery with the hope that it would help to quell my passions, especially my pride that was deeply rooted in my heart.

But I was trying to build a future based on my limited view and my own fears without taking into account the plans God had for me. Although I had been accepted by the Franciscans my plans ran aground. I was then advised by Comollo my most

trusted friend. He made me understand what state of mind I needed to be in: a complete willingness to do the Lord's will - an unconditional surrender. I had to trust God completely with utmost confidence and without any fear.

After all, every Christian vocation is not simply the result of a decision that one makes to give oneself completely to God. It begins from a radical change of heart. Therefore one should be able to say like the young Samuel: *"Speak Lord, your servant is listening,"* or like Mary: *"Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word."*

I prayed a lot, I began a novena that was preceded by a good Confession and in the meantime Louis had written a letter to his uncle priest - who already knew me - and he explained to him my problem.

On the last day of the novena I made my Confession again, attended Holy Mass and received Communion. Finally, I was now willing to do whatever the Lord wanted of me because I had decided to give God everything I was and possessed. Nothing else remained in my heart except to be a good Christian, at God's service wherever he calls me. I realized later my conversion was true and final.

That very same day I received a reply from Louis' uncle. He advised me to drop my previous choice and he invited me to join the seminary be-

cause during the course of my studies I would better understand God's plans. I should not be afraid of making a mistake if I kept a watch over my heart, practiced recollection and prayer because these would help me overcome all my difficulties.

I did what he suggested. I applied myself seriously to prepare for that step. I went home for the holidays, I stopped doing acrobatics (how vain and proud I was, yearning for the praise of the audience through those shows!). I read some good books, which hitherto I had neglected. I continued to take care of youngsters, telling them stories, spending time with them in their games and singing. Many of them were totally ignorant about the truths of the faith. I tried to teach them the truths of the Faith and introduce them to prayer.

Points for Reflection and Discussion

- *What elements of conversion can you identify in this section?*
- *Why are conversion and the surrender of oneself to God complementary aspects of the same spiritual disposition?*

6

TOTAL SURRENDER TO GOD

I reached the spiritual summit of my youth **the day when I was given the clerical habit**. That summer I prepared myself with a strong inner determination. I asked my friends to pray for me. True, it was a formal ceremony, but I wanted it to be a definitive shift from one style of life to another.

It was as if on that day I knowingly and wholeheartedly renewed my baptismal vows.

The parish priest who presided over the function asked me to remove my jacket saying the words that Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "The Lord removes the old man and his deeds." And so from the bottom of my heart I said very sincerely: "**Oh, how much old stuff** there is to remove! My God, destroy all the bad habits that are in me." Then, handing me the clerical collar he continued: "*The Lord invests you with the new man, created according to the image of God in justice and in the righteousness of truth.*" I was quite moved and I

added to myself with great determination, "Yes, O my God, **make me, at this moment a new man like this habit.** *That is, I want to begin a new life from now on, according to your will and in justice and holiness. Let it be the constant object of my thoughts words and deeds, Amen. O Mary, help me.*" It was such a well-prepared and intense event and so it marked a turning point in my life. **I finally had the courage to "give myself" to God!** Within myself, I felt that I could no longer live in a coarse and superficial manner.

I knew myself, and I knew that I would find it difficult to keep these promises, **so I made a programme of life,** just so that I would not forget. I wrote down the resolutions, keeping in mind my character and lifestyle. To have these sentiments engraved deep within me I went to an image of the Madonna and read them out and after a prayer I made a formal promise to observe them at the cost of any sacrifice.

You might think this is meant only for those who intend to embrace a special vocation. Let me tell you that **this is the attitude required of every Christian:** *faith implies the gift of oneself to God, the conversion of one's heart to him, embracing joyfully the demands of a life of a disciple of the risen Christ. That is what Baptism actually means.*

St. Francis de Sales taught this to all the laity,

plunged into the vortex of daily commitments and business. It is possible to live the life of a Christian with joyful dedication in any life situation, at any age, once you absolutely and generously surrender yourself to God after a careful process of purification of the heart. Only by effectively distancing your heart from sin and evil and keeping away from any selfish desires can you think of making any progress in the spiritual life.

In my work as an educator and a priest, I have tried to lead young people and children along this same path. I have always believed that everyone, even the smallest and the poorest among us **are called to be good Christians and saints**: it is possible and it is easy. I have seen such results, such generosity, such enthusiasm and joy when a young man decides to follow God completely. It is not important if the past has been mediocre or worse, strewn with negative experiences... When one turns to God, the powerful grace of Christ works wonders and makes him into a new creature.

It is simply a question of putting into practice the first commandment: to place God at the centre, above all things and to love him with all of ourselves. To experience his deep and effective grace is a deep need in all of us.

Points for Reflection and Discussion

- *“Giving oneself totally to God” - what inner reactions arise in you when you hear this expression of Don Bosco?*
- *What do you think are the most common obstacles and difficulties that you would encounter as you try to launch out on this adventure?*

7 DAILY TRANSFIGURATION

Once we open our hearts to the love of God, our whole being lights up from within. Because of the power of the Spirit we are born anew.

I want to tell you what happened to **Michael Magone**. After his “conversion” he appeared to be completely transformed.

One day his teacher confided to me: *“I am profoundly amazed at the total change, both in his physical and moral behaviour. He has become a mature young man without losing his sense of serenity and joy and the irrepressible vitality that is so typical of him. His aspect and his face reveal an interior disposition that has been mastered. His behaviour has become exemplary in every aspect. I could point him out as a model of virtue to his companions. I believe that this external change comes from a spiritual transformation.”*

I followed him through his crisis and I was aware of this transformation. When he was accepted

into our setting he did not seem to have a propensity for anything except recreation. Singing, shouting, running, jumping and cackling were the only things that seemed to assuage his fiery and lively temperament. But when the companion who had been placed to look after him told him: "Michael, the bell is calling us to study, to school...prayer...", giving one forlorn look at the fun he was having, without any difficulty he would make his way to where duty called him. In fact, he was preoccupied about doing everything perfectly. But it was great fun to see him when the bell announced the break for the recreation! He seemed to emerge out of the mouth of a cannon. He flew to all the corners of the playground all at once. Every kind of physical sport or activity seemed to delight him. *Barrarotta* was his favourite game. His days were spent merging scholastic and recreational activities.

After positively overcoming his interior crisis he changed the way in which he saw things. Everything acquired a new significance for Michael. If at first he seemed like an unbridled horse who was unable to withstand the daily grind, intolerant towards any kind of discipline, restless at church services, now he seemed to enter a new dimension. Because of his very affectionate nature, his fiery temperament and his uncontrolled imagination he naturally tended to be more enthusiastic. However, in due course, he

began to restrain himself. Recreation was still his first love but as soon as he heard the bell he would break away from his games and make his way to study or school, to rest, to the dining hall or to the church. He would first do his duty.

What had happened to him? His life had a new unifying centre and a new sense of purpose that was fueled by an inner flame of faith in God – it was a faith that introduced him to transcendence and freedom.

He was determined to imitate Jesus and accept with great love all the experiences that he encountered and also to accept his companions with their various moods and characteristics. He saw everything in the light of God's Divine Will and he fulfilled his daily duties and accepted the daily rhythms of life with great love. He directed all his actions to a higher purpose.

I am deeply convinced that an authentic spiritual life makes us free and fervent in whatever we do: we become more diligent in our studies, more attentive at class, more obedient to our parents and superiors. We become stronger and happier to be able to endure all the hassles of life and we are able to overcome the regular frustrations of everyday, accepting them for the love of God.

I have always recommended a strict performance of one's daily duties, not as a religious directive, but as an expression of a sense of responsibility,

as we read in the life of the incarnate Son of God who emptied himself, taking a form of a slave out of love for us.

Points for Reflection and Discussion

- *Don Bosco inextricably links the spiritual life to everyday life: why?*
- *What do you understand by the term "Daily Transfiguration"?*

8

ATTENTIVELY WORKING ON YOURSELF

Enthusiasm easily runs out in youngsters. It is therefore necessary to translate these impulses into permanent attitudes and intentions in the form of acquired virtues.

Those who wish to grow spiritually should carefully **keep an eye on exercising their interior dispositions with much effort**. In fact, it is difficult to get rid of our shortcomings once and for all; they tend to resurface periodically. The heart must be purified, the will strengthened to control the passions, assisting in the growth of virtue in a spirit of charity.

Don't try and fool yourself. **Effectively but gently, be very demanding with yourself**. Jesus taught us that the road to life is narrow and difficult. The one who wishes to be his disciple should embrace his cross and follow him with love.

Every athlete knows he can not achieve suc-

cess without daily exercise and discipline. But the goals toward which he aspires will not be achieved unless he battles his fatigue, pain and sense of sacrifice with joy and determination.

The attractiveness of the goal to which you aspire, the awareness of what you are called to be, what you really can become and the firm resolve with which you embrace the Christian life with all your heart, are enough to support your commitment.

It is not a burden, but a joy to live the Christian life when it is fuelled by the love of God.

After I had received the clerical habit I had to struggle to subdue my restless nature.

I had to liberate my heart, purify it of anything that would deter me from directing everything towards God. Reading the *Memoirs of the Oratory* some might be surprised and even think that I exaggerated my ascetical practices during my seminary years when I completely renounced all kinds of entertainment.

I assure you, that I needed to radically reform my life. It was rather late, but I reached complete freedom of spirit and the ability to align my will to that of God. It would help me immensely in my mission with youngsters, helping me to achieve the goals of educating and training them. You cannot imagine how pastorally effective games, sports, hikes, walks, gatherings, feasts, music, theatre, art, science and lit-

erature are when they take place with a superior motive and are mentally and emotionally devoid of any consumerist attitude. It is then that they work towards a more profound assimilation and enhancement of one's Christian life.

There are several means for a clarification and growth in these areas.

I have drawn much benefit from a daily examination of conscience, from systematically taking resolutions to overcome certain unruly passions, by frequent and regular confessions, from spiritual direction and from fraternal correction. I have been sustained by daily prayer both in community and personally, by meditation, the Eucharist and the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, by Marian devotion, monthly and annual retreats. I was spurred on by good friends, by good and wholesome reading...

I later taught youngsters to do the same, each according to their own particular sensibilities, inclinations and personal needs. Above all, I insisted that they keep in check their senses, face with fortitude their daily difficulties and remain faithful to the resolutions they have taken to celebrate the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. I urged them that, in addition to the usual morning and night prayers, they get into the habit of reading some spiritual authors but especially the Word of God on which they should lovingly meditate.

To avoid the risk of confusing a psychological state of mind with an authentic spiritual life, I tried to suggest to each one to draw up a personalized programme of life.

To Michael Magone I proposed regularity in prayer and in the performance his daily duties. I urged him to be vigilant about his irrepressible sensuality by guarding his senses, especially his eyes and his appetite. He should develop a certain austerity of life and take care to avoid reading, entertainment and company that could be frivolous or dangerous. But I wanted to encourage an assiduous commitment towards loving his companions, being attentive towards them and daily helping everyone around him.

With Francis Besucco, who was more timid and shy, I insisted that he participate more cheerfully in the recreations with his companions, carefully nurture his relations with them. He was to use his study time more carefully and assiduously fulfill his daily duties. These he should perform diligently and prayerfully. I invited him to overcome any anxiety he might have and serenely trust in God.

To Dominic Savio, who was overwhelmed with an aspiration to holiness, the need for recollection and greater heights of sanctity, I had to check his excesses in fervour. I asked him to maintain a moderate and balanced sense of joy and cheerfulness,

to persevere in his daily duties, to always actively participate in the recreations with his companions. I proposed to him that he should become an apostle among his companions, seeking out and accompanying those who were distracted. I asked him to animate a group and urge them to improve the quality of their lives, in short, to be a positive influence among his companions. I urged him to actively participate in the educative and pastoral mission of the Oratory.

Points for Reflection and Discussion

- *Can we say that asceticism and vigilance are necessary for the Christian life even today? What would be the objectives of a commitment to asceticism and self-control?*
- *What would be the most suitable means for you to do this work of purification and growth?*
- *Why do you think it is necessary to draw up a customized spiritual programme?*

9

A FERVENT AND INTENSE LIFE

The saints always believed that obedience and humility are virtues that identify them most closely with our Lord and Master. I too have the same opinion. Perhaps the most deeply rooted passions in us are pride and arrogance. They are the source of several bad habits, particularly presumption, discord, abuse and the inability to reason correctly.

In *The Companion of Youth*, a book on spirituality for the youngsters of the Oratory, I wrote that **obedience is the first virtue that a youngster should develop**. I mentioned the example of Jesus who, though omnipotent, learned to obey in everything and was submissive in all things to his mother Mary and St. Joseph. He worked as a carpenter and then in obedience to his heavenly Father he died a painful death on the cross.

I thank my mother who taught me a generous and loving obedience that was always sustained

with reason and faith. This made me submissive to the will of God because of which I was able to make wise decisions. I was able to grow in the virtues that characterized my personality.

In the dream I had when I was nine I was urged to prepare myself for my mission of teaching and saving youngsters by leading them along the same path. "*By obedience you will achieve knowledge,*" the mysterious personage said. I then became aware that my vocation was under the guidance of Mary, my teacher of the Christian life and the model of every vocation. I received a clearly defined programme from her which I was invited to follow: "*Make yourself humble, strong and robust.*"

Years later I was able to verify the efficacy of that first admonition. I wish everyone understood that *subduing oneself, guarding one's heart and committing oneself to an ascetical discipline* - which I mentioned above - *are a prerequisite of a pattern of life that is exciting, dynamic and daring.* I was able to accomplish nothing without these pillars. Still less would I have been able to forge a strong personality that was balanced, loving and capable of fervent faith and courageous hope.

That was the same programme that I proposed to the youngsters of my Oratory. As good Christians and honest citizens that I wanted them to cultivate within themselves virtues characterized by

loyalty and consistent hard work that is fuelled by an inner vitality and a brilliant and lively spirit of joy. I have never liked cynics, pessimists, the lazy or the pedantic.

I dream of fervent women and men who are enthusiastic, positive and constructive, competent and creative. The Oratory that I founded was a volcano of novelty and activity, a workshop for creative expression, an environment of joy and optimism, a place to form a lively and remarkable personality. I wanted to create within it a micro-climate that would be ideal to nurture a fresh generation of youngsters who were courageous and strong, open to collaboration and cordiality, prompt and generous to meet the needs of society in these present times.

I dreamed of a world in which the joyful Christian would be able to bring to the problems of the moment the yeast of transformation. I was cultivating a utopia driven by new persons who live in the Spirit.

This goal of the interior life that I have outlined is very demanding. That is why **I always encourage young people to look up and beyond.** I encourage them to hope and to work with courage and daring.

Keeping this in mind I warned them against mediocrity and sin; it is the worm that destroys fervour, mortification, depletes the spirit, obscures

the mind, coarsens the heart and finally imprisons the soul.

Whoever does not grasp the vastness of my model of an ideal human being and Christian is unable to understand and share my insistence on these passive virtues: humility, obedience and the mortification of the senses.

Above all, one needs to see the importance that I have placed on the **virtue of chastity**. I love to call it "*the beautiful virtue*", the "*queen of the virtues*," because I wanted you to notice how radiant it looks. I never presented it simply as continence or the ability to control or orientate one's sexuality. I have lived it and so I proposed it as a **a free and enlightened life entirely directed towards God**, animated by a love that is generous and joyful, like a synthesis and an amalgamation of all the other virtues. I have sought to illustrate its transforming effects on the souls of youngsters alluding to the fascination that youngsters have to be successful and chaste personalities.

It is not easy to speak of this, but I do not cease to present it to youngsters. Dominic Savio summarized this way of life thus, when he told a companion: "*Do you know? Here we make holiness consist in being very cheerful. The only thing we worry about is how to avoid sin because that is the greatest enemy that robs us of the grace of God and our peace of soul. We try to fulfill*

our daily duties to the best of our ability and pray fervently. Begin already today to do your duties well and pray fervently. Begin already now to note down and remember: "Serve the Lord with holy joy"

Points for Reflection and Discussion

- *Why does Don Bosco propose obedience, humility, the subduing of the self and the custody of the senses (the passive virtues) in order to live an exciting, industrious and cheerful life?*
- *What kind of ideals and models did Don Bosco have in mind when he proposed them as ideals of the virtue of Chastity?*
- *Are you willing to fight against mediocrity and sin?*

10

A FRIENDLY CHAT WITH GOD

I am convinced that **prayer is indispensable for a Christian.** *When we cut ourselves off from the sources of the spiritual life we become easy prey to dissipation and temptation.*

How should one pray? **To pray is to raise your heart to God.** It means spending time with him through holy thoughts and emotions. So, every thought of God and any gaze in his direction is prayer.

Those who meditate on the Lord or on his infinite perfection and through these thoughts experience great love, joy, reverence or admiration - they pray. Those who consider the many graces and gifts received from the Creator and so are brimming over with gratitude, they pray. Anyone who is in danger, aware of his weakness and implores the Lord for his help, he prays. Finally, those who, in repentance, turn to God recalling how they have insulted the Father

himself and how they have lost the greatest good and now beg forgiveness and earnestly seek to make amends, they pray.

Prayer is such an easy thing. **Anyone can pray anywhere and at any time by raising his heart to God.**

Thinking of prayer in this way is what the *tradition of the Church* taught. It is a very simple spirituality, but very intense, requiring continuous effort to let it pervade one's thinking and behaving. Those who can "**sense God**" are able to see not only themselves, their lives, their destiny, their daily work, their affections and relationships, their desires and their problems but also their sins and their shortcomings under the loving gaze of God.

When, with a little daily effort, we get used to the idea of being personally loved by God, there opens a wide horizon within us that leads us to live in freedom, purity and peace. In fact, we are led to "transcend" and always go beyond ourselves to understand that there is a supernatural vision and meaning for our lives. When thoughts and feelings are directed towards God then we seek him even in the smallest things.

I have witnessed in my own life, in the lives of my boys and in the people I have encountered, **the efficacy of prayer.** *It is not just getting what we need, it is moving into a realm of spiritual transformation.*

Among the gifts with which God endowed **Dominic Savio**, the most preeminent was his fervour in prayer. He was so accustomed to converse with God, that wherever he was, even in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the playground he could recollect his thoughts and emotions and lift his heart to God.

To achieve this requires a **spiritual journey** beginning from the purification of one's mind so that one is able to experience a habitual union with God that allows one easily to recollect oneself in prayer.

- First, one should cultivate *a control of oneself, purifying one's thoughts and sentiments*, shaking off the mentality of "this world," so heavy and cumbersome with its affections and passions or else it will not be possible to grow in one's intimacy with God.
- *It is necessary to rectify one's affections, one's intentions and the motives for which one's decisions are made in the way we relate and communicate with people. The heart must be educated, evangelized, "raised to God."*

The result is prayer that is primarily internal, not formal, cold or intellectual but fervent, warm, with a yearning to "see God" and sense his presence, of doing everything for him and seeing everything with reference to living consciously in his presence.

"God sees you" is an expression that I heard several times as a child from the lips of my mother.

I've often repeated this to the boys, I even had it painted onto placards and hung around the Oratory in Valdocco.

It was not intended only to warn them but so that, at all times, their conduct may be worthy of **the presence of God who is at the same time a merciful but a just father**. I wanted to help them to cultivate an awareness of God's divine love that constantly surrounds us. We exist because God thinks of loving us. We live because we are sustained by his grace and mercy and we are called to realize the fulfilment of our personal vocation to holiness.

The thought of God *encourages us and strengthens us in difficulty. It heaves us out of our moments of weakness and laziness. It defends us in moments of temptation, helps us to find our way back when we are lost, elevates us from the banality and the restlessness of everyday life raising us up to broader and brighter horizons to which we can direct our aspirations.*

When this thought becomes familiar and spontaneous we make our way to a steady and intimate relationship with the Lord, a more intimate conversation with him. **We begin moving into a totally spiritual climate, a state that is constantly fervent.**

Therefore, every moment can be consciously lived *in Him, with him and for Him*. The intentions with which we act, feel, think deeply and whatever we

say, cannot but be done continually in the presence of God. All this is constantly purified and rectified by him and so we are spurred on to grow in virtue, in perfection and holiness which allows us to go out of ourselves in generous and selfless charity.

The little mountaineer **Francis Besucco**, in the simplicity of his fourteen years, had already reached a fairly mature spiritual life. He was so fond of prayer and so accustomed to it that whenever he seemed to be unoccupied even for a few moments, he would immediately begin a conversation with the Lord. At the same time during recreation he would often begin to pray as if by some involuntary behaviour pattern. He would say the name of some game or whisper some ejaculation. While on the one hand, these things were a source of laughter among his friends, on the other hand, it demonstrated what joy he derived from prayer and how he had mastered the art of being recollected in prayer in order to raise his mind to the Lord. According to the spiritual masters, this behaviour reveals a high degree of perfection rarely achieved except by people of great virtue.

Points for Reflection and Discussion

- *Prayer that was lived and taught by Don Bosco meant*

raising one's thoughts and affections to God. It meant cultivating an awareness of the presence of the God of life: What would this mean for your personal and community prayer?

- *How can you revolutionize the vision of yourself and the world through this type of prayer?*

11

WITH MARY'S HELP

I taught young people that the Mother of Jesus has a crucial role to play in one's spiritual life and true devotion to Mary is expressed mainly by living a virtuous life. "If you remain devoted to her" I wrote to the boys in *The Companion of Youth*, "not only will she bless you in this world but you will be with her in Paradise."

Mary is our model of being a believer. She is our teacher in the art of listening and putting into practice the Word of God, remaining in union with Jesus and growing to be perfectly like him.

From her we learn *to be sensitive to the needs and sensitivities of others, of humble and practical service, fidelity to our duty, fortitude in difficulty, trust and hope in God even in the sufferings of Calvary.*

The Mother of Jesus invites us to open our minds, without any hesitation to the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit.

She encourages us to persevere steadfastly in our vocation as believers and witnesses of the Gospel, actively spreading the faith and combating within and without all kinds of evil, to love the Church and to work in its service.

Mary was a felt presence in my life, loving, active and stimulating. I felt her close to me. *I entrusted myself to her. I let her direct, guide and encourage me* along the path of my vocation, in my mission and to assist me in striving for holiness. Without her I would have been unable to do anything.

I have always believed that there is a close link between Marian devotion, union with God, spiritual fervour, a virtuous life, active charity, educative and pastoral zeal and apostolic fruitfulness.

I liked to suggest to my friends this prayer in the form of a rhyme:

*At the thought of God,
May our lips, hearts and minds,
Virtuously follow you,
O great Virgin Mary, mother mine!*

To follow the way of virtue, to live the fullness of your human and Christian vocation, I encourage you to go to the school of her wisdom, invoke her with faith and entrust yourself to her. Mary is an example of total dedication to the Lord, of solicitude

for the needy, fidelity at the moment of the cross, of spiritual joy, of courage and service towards others.

I beg you to have a devotion to her that is childlike and strong, that is founded on prayer and strives to imitate her with conviction.

The spiritual heights that have been achieved by my best youngsters are in direct relation to their love for Mary. It was not sentimentality, despite the romantic tendency of the period in which they lived.

On the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, **Dominic Savio** went to the altar of Mary and renewed the promises that he made at his First Communion and then over and over again he repeated these precise words: *“Mary, I give you my heart, make it completely yours. Jesus and Mary always be my friends. For pity’s sake never let me have the misfortune of committing a single sin.”* That is how you should make Mary the mainstay of your spiritual life. Dominic’s moral conduct appeared to be so edifying and infused with such acts of virtue, that ever since I began to notice them I could never get them out of my mind.

The Virgin Mary has, in fact, been given to us by Jesus while he was dying on the cross and she is very active in our lives. She accompanies us, sustains us, guides us and inspires us along our spiritual journey.

Let me repeat to you what I was told in the

dream at the age of nine: *"I will give you a teacher, under whose guidance you will become wise and without whom all wisdom is folly."*

Points for Reflection and Discussion

- *Who is Mary for you? What place does she have in your life as a believer?*
- *What were the real consequences that came out of the Marian devotion that Don Bosco had?*
- *Why does he deem it essential for the Christian life?*

12 REVERENCE AND LOVE FOR THE EUCHARIST

I insisted very much that young people learn to participate in the Eucharist with faith, attention and much love. At Valdocco we put in place all the means possible to make our Masses beautiful and fruitful: an atmosphere of recollection and active participation, hymns and prayers, preoccupation about the atmosphere and the organization of the liturgy.

I made sure above all that each one was aware of what was happening and was able to participate actively in the Eucharistic celebration, bringing his entire life to the table of the Word and the Bread of Life.

I wanted them to sense that **the Eucharist was the Heart and the Source** of the Oratory family. Everyone should feel that Communion with the body and the blood of Jesus, received in faith, was sufficient to allow the Holy Spirit to build an atmosphere of love and communion within the hearts and minds

of all those present.

I invited the boys to open their hearts completely to the presence of Jesus, Master and obedient Servant out of love. I encouraged them to ask for his help in freeing them from all their sins and from every evil and so that they remain faithful to God's law. I encouraged them to respond to the love of the Father by offering themselves with total surrender. To overcome the difficulty understanding the rite completely (because at that time everything was in Latin), I drew up an outline that allowed them to participate in the praise, offertory and the Communion in the prayer book of the boys. Every part of the Mass was described, its meaning explained and translated into prayer so that everyone could completely understand each part and with much concentration and actively participate in the Mass. In particular, **I tried to help them to listen fruitfully to the proclamation and the explanation of the Word of God.** I suggested that they prepare themselves for the first reading with the invocation: *"Inflame O Lord, my heart with your holy Love so that I may love and serve you all the days of my life."* Before the proclamation of the Gospel I proposed this prayer: *"I am ready, O Lord, to witness to my faith in the Gospel at the cost of my life, professing the great truths that they contain. Give me the grace and the strength to do your Holy Will and to flee from occasions of sin."* I believe that this is the appropriate response to

make us fruitful of listeners of the Word.

I wanted, above all, that Holy Communion be not a formal action or worse a sacrilege. I educated the boys, including the children, **to cultivate an ardent desire to receive Jesus into their hearts** *by a life that is exemplary and dignified*. In this connection, I invited them to follow a path of inner purification through the sacrament of penance received regularly. This would help them to commit themselves to a life of growth in virtue.

I was not afraid of stirring up their emotions and affections.

While preparing themselves for Communion I proposed to them: *“Stop for a moment and consider who you are receiving: Jesus Christ, the God of infinite greatness, majesty and mercy. He is coming to us, poor creatures, sinners and he comes to be our father, brother, friend and the spouse of our souls. He wants to be our physician, teacher and our food.”*

For their thanksgiving and adoration I suggested sentiments and thoughts that would unite their participation in the Eucharist with a better Christian life: *“My dear and good Jesus, I thank you so very much for such a great gift. I praise you, I bless you from the depths of my being. Henceforth you will always be my hope and my comfort. I wish I could give you all the praise and glory that the saints give you in heaven. Since I cannot do as much, I offer you myself: my will that wants no one else but you. I*

offer you my hands, my feet, my eyes, my tongue, my mouth, my mind, and my heart. I offer them all to you. Guard me because every thought and every action should have no other objective but to live in your friendship and fulfil your plans of love."

With the help of these suggestions many youngsters effectively learned to build their personalities and drew closer to Jesus and reached the summit of the Christian life.

- This was the source of the inner joy that shone in all the actions of Dominic Savio and others who were able to correspond with love to the gift of the Eucharist.

- It was from here that they drew all the help they needed. That was why they were often found rapt in adoration before the tabernacle.

- Here were also born many generous and courageous vocations that carried the gospel of salvation all over the world and sanctified many youngsters.

Points for Reflection and Discussion

- *Don Bosco points out some terms and conditions for an active and fruitful participation in the Eucharist: Do you think they are possible today?*
- *Why does he closely link Eucharistic Communion with a certain way of life?*

“I’M WAITING FOR YOU IN PARADISE”

My dear youngsters, the Lord calls you to friendship and a perfect communion of love with him. I want you to share in the fullness of his joy now and throughout eternity.

Each day we walk in the joyful hope of definitively encountering Him. This thought will enlighten and sustain all our choices, making us faithful in our duties and following him fervently and with perseverance, so that we may be able to build up his kingdom day by day.

You know that you are free and responsible: the world and its history, your life and the life of your brothers, human relations and social justice, the arts, the sciences, and the progress of thought, nature and environmental resources, cultures and values ... God has put all this into your hands because he trusts you.

It's up to you to accept this responsibility generously and intelligently, with commitment and

integrity. You will be judged by God for this. There is a possibility that you could be scared by all this but be strong and step out with courage. Trust and look up towards ever wider horizons.

I invite you to always be good Christians, honest, useful and honourable citizens. Work with commitment in the civil society and in the Church to be builders of a new world by educating and training the younger generations. Avoid unnecessary gossip and despise discord and selfishness. Strive to build a community of peace in joy and optimism.

Look up. Be vigilant with your loins girded and your lamps burning. The future quality of life of humanity depends on you: listen to the Lord's call.

Discern carefully his will for your vocation today and for the cause of history.

Take up the specific mission that has been reserved for you.

Be generous and strong: learn to take risks for these great ideals. The grace of the Lord will make you strong in faith, in charity so that you can give yourself to Him and to others. Mary, Help of Christians will accompany you on your journey. You will see wonderful things.

Many educators have shared my convictions and two out of three youngsters at least once in their lives desired to devote themselves completely to God.

Christian vocations are many and fascinating.

Open the doors of your heart to Christ who is calling you. Let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Hurry to the vineyard of the Lord and bring in his harvest.

We will meet in Paradise, hands full of fruit, along with several of our beloved brothers and sisters whom we have taught, rescued and saved. We will stand before the Father with Jesus and Mary and the saints in joy without end!

Points to Reflection and Discussion

- *We are called to the “blessed hope” of Paradise, says Don Bosco, and he encourages us to this historic commitment in the light of God’s judgment. What do we need to do to achieve self-fulfillment and our own vocation in area of responsibility?*
- *Have you ever thought about your specific vocation as a worker in the vineyard of the Lord?*
- *What reasons and fears leave you uncertain?*

This booklet offers some aspects of Don Bosco's spirituality. I have sometimes used his own words, reconstructing and interpreting his thought though each interpretation risks being arbitrary at times. I have imagined Don Bosco speaking to us personally. He has a charming personality which is deeply spiritual, complete, rich and varied. It would be presumptuous to pretend to lock him up in these few pages.

I thought it useful to share with you something of what I understood from reading his most personal writings. It should arouse in you the desire to get to know him more intimately and to follow his spiritual suggestions in your educative and pastoral ministry at this troubled yet fascinating period of history.

y thoughts...my dear young friends, You' are a