**SPIRITUAL EXERCISES 2025**

**29th General Chapter**

**THE MYSTICISM OF THE ENCOUNTER WITH GOD**

**INTRODUCTION**

The *mystical*  perspective of all the dimensions of our Christian and Salesian life finds its fullness in the explicit encounter with our God, that is, in our prayer life, although this does not mean that it is the only, or exclusive one; indeed, sometimes not even the most relevant.

Without this explicit relationship with the Lord, we run the risk of losing our *charismatic identity*, reducing the fulfilment of our Mission only to works and activities of human promotion, and even forgetting that in our giving to others, especially to the neediest youth, we are ultimately loving and serving Jesus, as he himself states (cf. Mt. 25:31ff). “By carrying out this mission we find our own way to holiness.” (C.2), as the first articles of Don Bosco’s Constitutions say.

**1. FILIAL-CHRISTOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER**

 In order to fully experience our relationship with God, we have only one Teacher: Jesus, the Son of God made Man. The deepest and most radical expression of his divine sonship is undoubtedly his **prayerful** attitude. The Gospels bear unanimous witness to this, in particular Luke (4:42; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18.28; 10:21; 11:1ff.; cf. 2:41ff.); John also presents Jesus with words and attitudes of dialogue with the Father, especially the extraordinary **“priestly prayer”** in chapter 17.

 According to Joseph Ratzinger, Jesus’ prayer is the key to his Mystery; he states, “Christology is fully expressed in prayer; otherwise, nowhere.” If we do not start from the prayer of Jesus, from an inner understanding of it, we do not enter into the deeper reality of the person of Jesus; rather, we merely stop at the multiplicity of data (miracles, parables, discussions, even death on the cross) without internal unity. *Precisely because prayer is central to the person of Jesus, participation in his prayer is the prerequisite for knowing and understanding Jesus.*[[1]](#footnote-2)

 This *mystery* of the person of the Lord, which is the foundation of his deeper identity as the Son of the Father, is also manifested in the *personal* (not individualistic!) nature of his prayer. The union of Jesus with the Father in the Holy Spirit becomes explicit and concrete at times when he withdraws into the fruitful solitude of this prayer, which is *indispensable for Jesus.* In this regard Hans Urs von Balthasar says:

A continual tendency to withdraw into the solitude of prayer, into a depth and silence that is hidden from all view (...) Only if we start from this absolute and immediate relationship with the Father (even in the darkness of abandonment on the cross) can Jesus ‘explain’ his existence as the total incarnation, as the full realisation of the loving will of the Father towards the world; only in this way can he -according to Karl Barth's expression - becoming ‘the man **for** others’, unlike us, who as creatures can only become ‘men **with** others’. *If Jesus had not gone off into such deep solitude with God, he would never have been able to penetrate so deeply into the human community*.

 A very beautiful text (though rarely reflected upon from this perspective) is found in Mt 11:25ff; Lk 10:21-22).

* It is a prayer of *thanksgiving* from Jesus to the Father;
* It has a *Trinitarian dimension*: *the Son to the Father* ***in the Holy Spirit***;
* The context is totally paradoxical: after experiencing *failure* in his preaching (in the cities where he had worked the most!).

Would that we too could, *by contemplating Jesus in prayer*, live out our educational and apostolic failures in this way!

**2. *TRINITARIAN* IDENTITY OF OUR PRAYER**

Imitating Jesus, and *with* Jesus, the Christian’s prayer has a fundamental identity: it is not directed at, and is not in relation simply to “God”; the God of Jesus Christ, the God in whom we believe, is *Community, Family,* ***Trinitarian Love***. Here once more we discover, in all its fullness, the **mystical**  dimension that is the perspective of this Retreat.

 Interestingly, *the Christian mystical experience* is, in its culminating expressions, Trinitarian mysticism. St Angela of Foligno says, “I believe that I have been in the heart of the Trinity.”

 St. Teresa of Jesus, in describing the experience of God in the seventh “mansion,” seeks to express the ineffable:

But now He acts differently Our pitiful God removes the scales from its eyes, letting it see and understand somewhat of the grace received in a strange and wonderful manner in this mansion by means of intellectual vision.

By some mysterious manifestation of the truth, the three Persons of the most Blessed Trinity reveal themselves, preceded by an illumination which shines on the spirit like a most dazzling cloud of light. The three Persons are distinct from one another; a sublime knowledge is infused into the soul, imbuing it with a certainty of the truth that the Three are of one substance, power, and knowledge and are one God.

Thus that which we hold as a doctrine of faith, the soul now, so to speak, *understands by sight*, though it beholds the Blessed Trinity neither by the eyes of the body nor of the soul, this being no imaginary vision.

All the Three Persons here communicate Themselves to the soul, speak to it and make it understand the words of our Lord in the Gospel that He and the
Father and the Holy Ghost will come and make their abode with the soul which loves Him and keeps His commandments.

O my God, how different from merely hearing and believing these words is it to realize their truth in this way! Day by day a growing astonishment takes possession of this soul, for the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity seem never to depart; It sees with certainty, in the way I have described, that They dwell far within its own centre and depths; though for want of learning it cannot describe how, it is conscious of the indwelling of these divine Companions.

 We can continue with quotations from St John of the Cross, Mary of the Incarnation, Elizabeth of the Trinity... But we do not want to refer only to the great saints and holy men and women who received this mystical experience as a gift. Karl Rahner said in a famous text that “the Christian of the future will either be a *mystic* (i.e., a believer who *experiences* God, the God of Jesus Christ, Father, Son and Holy Spirit), or he will not be a Christian.”

 First of all, it is not a matter of seeking mystical experience in the strict sense, nor is it a matter of “preparing” ourselves to receive it: there is no such preparation, since it is a totally free gift from God. What is more important is to grow in this *Trinitarian identity* in our prayer life: we are not before a faceless “God” but in the presence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The liturgy, habitually, always invites us to do so in the euchological texts, beginning with the *doxology* that we proclaim every day. I think that, the more we grow in the *simplicity* of our prayer, the easier it will become to live prayer, as St Teresa says, as **friendship**, as a dialogue of love with the One who, being Love, invites us to enter into their *Trinitarian intimacy*. This is why it would be very helpful for us to “breathe with both lungs,” as St John Paul II said, that is, with the theology and spirituality of the Eastern Church and those of the Western Church.

**3. PERSONAL DIMENSION: MEDITATION**

 If we live prayer as *love-friendship*, the *personal encounter* with this God-Communion is indispensable. Meditation is not, first and foremost, a *practice* or simply a period of time devoted to delving into biblical themes or even texts, but an opportunity to manifest ourselves before him as his children, with our full, unique and inalienable personal reality. In this sense, meditation is, first and foremost, a *right* that the community must offer us.

 The article of the Constitutions that presents us with this is very beautiful, first of all, because of the ample motivation it offers: “We can form praying communities only if individually we become men of prayer. **Each one needs to express his own personal way of being a son of God**, expressing his gratitude, telling him about his yearnings and his concerns in the apostolate. For us mental prayer is essential. It strengthens our intimate union with God, saves us from routine, keeps our heart free and fosters our dedication to others. **For Don Bosco it is a guarantee of joyous perseverance in our vocation**” (93).

In this regard, it is worth remembering that meditation is a **dialogue**, not a monologue; and in addition: this dialogue is not initiated by us, but by the Lord. Hence the importance of *listening to him*, through his Word. An effective and time-tested method is *lectio divina*, which should not *replace* meditation, but *enrich it*. Fostering the community dimension, especially in the fraternal sharing of what the Lord wants to tell us, is one of the aspects that can most profoundly enhance our communion and communication; but it should never eliminate the *personal* moment of this encounter, precisely as the above-mentioned article says: “Each one *needs* to express his own personal way of being a son of God” (C. 93).

**4. COMMUNITY DIMENSION OF PRAYER**

In this regardI think it is necessary to clear up a misunderstanding, as if community prayer could be limited to certain moments of the “timetable”. Rather, we must emphasise that community life is, in itself, *experience of God*, and as a consequence it has a **mystical dimension** that is *expressed* in prayer, and at the same time, is nourished by it. VC has a very beautiful text: “The consecrated life can certainly be credited with having effectively helped to keep alive in the Church the obligation of fraternity as a form of *witness to the Trinity* (...) In this way it speaks to people both of the beauty of fraternal communion and of the ways which actually lead to it. Consecrated persons live ‘**for**’ God and ‘**of**’ God” (VC, 41). If this does not become a reality in our prayer, it is reduced merely to a collection of individuals praying, each one, to “his” God.

This dimension of prayer is quite explicit in the Constitutions. For example, the opening article of the chapter on prayer tells us: “*The community expresses in a visible manner the mystery of the Church*, which is not born of any human will but is the fruit of the Lord’s death and resurrection. In the same way God brings our community together and keeps it united by his call, his Word, his love**. In praying, the Salesian community responds to this call; it deepens its awareness of its intimate and living relationship with God, and of its saving mission, making its own Don Bosco’s prayer: “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle***.” (C. 85)

**5. CENTRALITY OF THE EUCHARIST**

Here, too, we must avoid the reduction to a “celebration”, even if it is the most important one in Christian life. It is much more: it is an **encounter**, an encounter with the One who constitutes the *centre* and the *meaning* of our life. Therefore, it embraces the Eucharistic celebration, but also the practice - so important in our Salesian tradition - of **visiting** the Lord.

 “The hearing of the Word finds its privileged place in the celebration of the Eucharist. Each day this is the central act of every Salesian community; it calls for joyful participation in a living liturgy.[[2]](#footnote-3) There the community celebrates the paschal mystery and unites itself to the immolated body of Christ, which it receives so as to build itself in him into a fraternal communion and renew its apostolic commitment. (…) For us sons of Don Bosco the Eucharistic presence in our houses is a reason for frequent encounters with Christ. From him we draw energy and endurance in our work for the young” (C 88).

 In this regard, a little-known document of St John Paul II, which is like his “spiritual testament”, says to men and women religious: “*Consecrated men and women*, called by that very consecration to more prolonged contemplation: never forget that Jesus in the tabernacle wants you to be at his side, so that he can fill your hearts with the experience of his friendship, which alone gives meaning and fulfilment to your lives.” (MND, 30).

**6. THE *MYSTICAL* EXPERIENCE OF GOD’S FORGIVENESS**

 The title is intentionally provocative, but it has its reason for being so. If the fact of being *loved* by God (and of *feeling* loved), the theme of our first reflection, is thrilling, and this love of God is absolutely *gratuitous and undeserved*, this experience adds something even stronger: we are **unworthy** of this Love. And because of this all the characteristics of his Divinity shine more brightly. I invite you to reread, from this perspective, the beautiful parable of the good father and his two sons (Lk 15:11-32): we can say that only when the younger son experienced his father’s love *in spite of everything*, did he experience in a *new and full* way the goodness and love of his father. Something similar can be said of the repentant sinner’s encounter with Jesus in Lk 7:36-50.

 I would like to establish a relationship between the *prevenient/preventive dimension* of our Salesian charism and the spiritual experience of St Therese of the Child Jesus, in a text that is a little long, but extraordinary and even moving:

I fully realised that without Him I should have fallen as low as St. Mary Magdalene, and the Divine Master’s words re-echoed sweetly in my soul. Yes, I know that “*He to whom less is forgiven loves less,*”, but I also know that Our Lord *has forgiven me more than St Mary Magdalene* since *he forgave me in advance*, by preventing me from falling. Ah! I wish I could explain what I fee!... Here is an example which will express my thoughts at least a little. Suppose a clever physician’s child meets with a stone in his path which causes him to fall and break a limb. His father comes to him immediately, picks him up lovingly, takes care of this hurt, using all the resources of his profession for this. His child, completely cured, shows his gratitude. But I am going to make another comparison. The father, knowing there is a stone in his child’s way, hastens ahead of him and removes it but without anyone’s seeing him do it. Certainly, this child, the object of his father’s tender foresight, but *unaware* of the misfortune from which he was delivered by him, will not thank him and *will love him less* than if he had been cured by him. But if he should come to learn the danger from which he escaped, *will he not* love *his father more?* Well, I am this child, the object of the foreseeing love of a *Father* who has not sent His Word to save the *just*, but *sinners*. He wants me to *love Him* because He has *forgiven* me not much but ***all.*** He has not expected me *to love Him much* like Mary Magdalene, but He has willed that I KNOW how He has loved me with a love of *unspeakable foresight* in order that now I may love Him unto *folly!* I have heard it said that *one cannot meet a pure soul who loves more than a repentant soul*; ah! how I would wish to give lie to this statement!

 The article of the Constitutions implicitly evokes the text of Luke’s Gospel, presenting Reconciliation as an *encounter with the merciful Father*: “The Word of God calls us to continual conversion. Aware of our weakness, we respond by vigilance and sincere repentance, brotherly correction, mutual forgiveness and the calm acceptance of our daily cross. This commitment to conversion on the part of each member and of the whole community is brought to its fulfilment by the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Prepared by the daily examination of conscience and received frequently according to the Church’s directives, **this sacrament gives us the joy of the Father’s pardon, rebuilds brotherly communion and purifies our apostolic intentions**” (C. 90).

**7. LIFE AS PRAYER**

The Rector Major, Fr Ángel, presenting GC27, refers to the “Grace of unity” as “the way to respond with generosity and to be ourselves: Salesian consecrated persons, brothers at the service of young people. By accepting this gift, we will rediscover a characteristic trait of our spirituality, which is *union with God*; which fosters the unification of life: prayer and work, action and contemplation, reflection and apostolate. Here we will find the *ecstasy of action.* The testimony to which we are called does not refer to partial aspects of our lives; to be authentic, it must be all-encompassing” (GC27, p. 14).”

 Among the essential traits of the Salesian, in the contemplation, following and imitation of Jesus Christ, our Rule of Life immediately places **union with God in a Trinitarian vein** “As he works for the salvation of the young, the Salesian *experiences the fatherhood of God* and continually reminds himself of the divine dimension of his work: ‘Apart from me you can do nothing’. He cultivates union with God, aware of the need to pray without ceasing in a simple heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ and with the Father, whom he feels close at hand. Attentive to the presence of the Spirit and doing everything for God’s love he becomes, like Don Bosco, a *contemplative in action*” (C. 12).

 To live this *mysticism of Salesian life as prayer*, in this Salesian “ecstasy of action”, I think we have an extraordinary guide in Article 95:

“Immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, the Salesian **learns to meet God through those to whom he is sent**. Discovering the fruits of the Spirit1 in the lives of people, especially the young, he gives thanks for everything; as he shares their problems and sufferings, he invokes upon them the light and strength of God’s presence. He draws on the love of the Good Shepherd, whose witness he wants to be, and shares in the spiritual riches offered him by the community. *His need of God, keenly felt in his apostolic commitment, leads him to celebrate the liturgy of life, attaining that “tireless industry made holy by prayer and union with God that should be the characteristic of the sons of Don Bosco.*”

***Appendix***

**As a complementary reflection of this meditation on the “mysticism of prayer”, I would like to offer a comment on this beautiful Art. 95 of the Constitutions, a true spiritual masterpiece which seems to me to be enlightening and stimulating.**

95.- ***Life as Prayer***

This article, one of the most successful and beautiful of the Salesian Constitutions reworked and approved in GC22 (1984), is a worthy conclusion to the whole of the great Second Part of the Constitutions, and in particular to the theme of our prayer life, in the most typically Salesian vein: **life as prayer**.

The 1972 article started from an observation and sought to respond to it; the Salesian’s difficulty in encountering God in prayer, being immersed in the world and the concerns of apostolic life, made it necessary for the community to intervene; even though it already emphasised the characteristic of our charism in this field: that of living “***the liturgy of life***”.

The very fact that the current formulation begins with the same words paradoxically accentuates the radical change: it is no longer presented in terms of a difficulty, let alone as an alternative, but as a **synthesis**: precisely because we are immersed in that situation, **we begin to encounter God in those to whom the Salesian is sent**.

We can highlight three aspects, in addition to this radical change:

a) the “secret” that allowed Don Bosco, and allows the Salesian, to make his whole life a prayer: the ability to **encounter God in those to whom we are sent**;

b) one word indicates that it is a process, not always easy, and never “automatic”: **learns**..;

c) it is not simply a matter of “meeting God in others”, but **in those to whom we are sent**: *without mission awareness, this ideal will not be easy for the Salesian*, and perhaps not even possible.

This is why the second paragraph is totally new, and presents us, in an overly concise formulation, with the “motives” of the Salesian’s prayer: thanksgiving, request, intercession, derived from the realisation of our **mission**, from *being with the young*.

Art. 86 already presented the relationship between **prayer and life** in an inclusive way (at the beginning and at the end): “Don Bosco lived an experience of humble, trusting and apostolic prayer, in which **praying and living** were spontaneously united (...) Salesian prayer is joyful and creative, simple and profound. It lends itself to community participation, **is drawn from life experience and flows back into it.”**

In the last paragraph there is a very small, but significant novelty consistent with the above: we no longer speak of *“inner need”* for God on the part of the Salesian, but of a need for God **experienced in apostolic commitment**.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that each text, in making some options, leaves aside other elements: not everything can be included. The first reformulation of the Chapter suggested modifying the community’s contribution, adding the (undoubtedly essential) appropriateness of *communicating to our brothers the joys and labours of their apostolic life*.

I would like to highlight two final aspects that, although small, are significant:

+ in the current text, the element of **pastoral charity** has been enriched by deriving it from the **Good Shepherd**;

+ community action is characterised for each brother, not so much itas something that this *gives*, but as something that **offers**: a term that appeals more to the initiative of the individual.

1. Quoted from: GABINO ULIBARRI BILBAO SJ, *La Mística de Jesús*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Translator’s note: C. 88 was regarded as one of the poorly translated articles that needed revision, a revision which took place with the Rector Major’s encouragement and approval in 2023 but has yet to appear in print. The revised version is what appears here (the current print version reads: *This is the central act of every salesian community: it is a daily festive celebration in a living liturgy*). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)