**SPIRITUAL EXERCISES 2025**

**29th General Chapter**

**THE MYSTICISM OF MISSION**

After yesterday’s reflection on the fundamental perspective of the Christian life, namely **faith in the love of God manifested in Christ**, which we contemplated as the *structural element*of the **mystical dimension** in our Christian life, today we begin to reflect on this perspective within the specific area of our Salesian *religious life*.

The first article of the SDB Constitutions 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**, ‘that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise’. The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving. ‘I have promised God that until my dying breath I would dedicate myself entirely to my poor boys.’ To ensure the continuation of this mission, the Spirit inspired him to initiate various apostolic endeavours, first among them our Society...”

(C. 1).

We recognise in this fundamental constitutional text, first of all *the initiative of God*; also *the purpose of our mission*: to be a sign and expression of God’s prevenient Love (cf. also GC22–23); then the *preferential beneficiaries* of this mission; finally, the *method* for achieving it: the *preventive system*. All this, viewed holistically, but also in each of these elements, recalls the **mystical** dimension of the mission, without ignoring the undeniable *asceticism* that it implies.

This first article is immediately followed by two other very important articles. Article 2 emphasises the primacy of the mission in our life: “We, the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB), 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**.” (C. 2) Article 3 also expresses the close link between the apostolic mission, fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels - “inseparable elements of our consecration which we live in a single movement of charity towards God and towards our brothers and sisters.” -; it concludes by saying: “**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.”**

**1. GOD WANTS TO HAVE A NEED FOR US**

I would like to start with this aspect, which in my opinion precedes the others, even though it may not be the most important one, precisely because we usually presume it. Ultimately, this means that God, the eternal and omnipotent God, **wants to have a need for us** to carry out his plan of salvation. Who are we, to be truly useful to God, indeed necessary? This simple statement should fill our hearts with immense joy, and also, why not? with legitimate pride.

It seems to me that this is the deepest meaning of the **da mihi animas** mentioned in Article 4 of the Constitutions which is the core of the “mysticism of our mission”, just as, on the other hand, the “cetera tolle” is the core of our Salesian asceticism.

Quoting a famous dream of Don Bosco’s, let me elaborate on the meaning of this biblical phrase (Gen 14:21), whose exegesis does not interest us here, by saying: “Don Bosco’s motto is the synthesis of Salesian *mysticism* and *asceticism*, as indicated in the *dream of the ten diamonds*. Two complementary perspectives intersect here: that of the visible face of the Salesian, which manifests his boldness, his valour, his faith, his hope, his charity as total dedication to the mission; and that of his hidden heart as a consecrated individual, constituted by the profound convictions that lead him to follow Jesus in his obedient, poor and chaste way of life.” Somehow, then, we can say that the *da mihi animas* constitutes the mysticism of our life and mission; and that the *cetera tolle* is the asceticism it necessarily implies.

Moreover, from a *formal* point of view, the “da mihi animas” is a **prayer**. Precisely because it is *prayer*, it makes one realise that mission does not simply coincide with educational, pastoral or social promotion initiatives. The mission is *a gift from God* who wants to invite us to collaborate with him; moreover: just as without him we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5), so I would venture to say that he *would not want to do anything without us.*

Again: it is a prayer of petition: “give me! ...” We are asking the Lord to give us young men and women *to save them*. Are we aware of what we *are risking* by asking God for souls? Are we aware of the tremendous responsibility that our motto implies? We are asking God no less to entrust us with “the most delicate and precious portion of human society: youth!” Do we live up to this demand? Let’s take an example: are we capable of asking a person to entrust us with all their jewellery because we feel confident that we can take care of it? It is only a pale image of the *risk* that our Mission entails when we ask God to trust us with young people, because we feel confident that we will not fail.

There are many other texts in our Constitutions that *presume* this belief, even if it is not made explicit. Let us now explore the *content* of this collaboration with God.

**2. DA MIHI *ANIMAS!***

This expression can give rise to misunderstandings if taken literally. Indeed, does it not reflect a dichotomy, as if we only want to “save the soul” and not the whole reality of the individual? This objection may be theoretically valid; but in the light of the work of the SDBs and also of the FMA throughout the history and geography of the Salesian charism, it is refuted by the work accomplished, always seeking the good of the individual as a whole and of all people, especially young men and women, especially the most needy. I do not think that there has been any Salesian community that has worked *only* for the salvation of souls, forgetting the integral promotion of our recipients: in this sense, we can say that the expression “*da mihi animas*” is intended to designate the person in his or her entirety.

But really, doesn’t the word “soul” mean anything more? It seems to me that it could mean something else; otherwise, instead of answering the question, we would be evading it. If it only meant the *promotion* of the whole person, we would be no different from many other institutions working in the same direction. As I wrote in one of my first letters and as Pope Francis also said, we would only end up being an NGO.

The answer can be found in Article 5 of our Constitutions, although it can sometimes go unnoticed. We read: “Don Bosco inspired the start of a vast movement of persons who in different ways work for the salvation of the young.” The word “*animas*”, rather than designating a part of the person, rather indicates the **perspective** according to which we work, or the ultimate purpose of our educational and evangelising mission. We find this conviction in many other texts of the Constitutions. This word implies the *gift of “predilection” for the young* and commits us to be for them, in the school of Mary, a sign and mediation of the love of Christ the Good Shepherd through a Christian project of integral education in the style of the Preventive System. Only when we work for the salvation of youth does our work become an *experience of God* and take on a *mystical dimension*. Don Bosco, in one of the few texts where he “opens his heart” and expresses his spiritual experience, says: “When I gave myself to this part of the sacred ministry I intended to dedicate all my efforts to the greater glory of God and to the salvation of souls. I intended to work to make good citizens on this earth, so that they might one day be worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me so that I may thus continue until my life’s last breath. Amen.”

There is no need to remind ourselves that **salvation** does not mean arriving in Paradise with difficulty and with the minimum. In this sense, the ideal of our educational and evangelising work is **holiness**; indeed, **the divinisation** of our children, the “high standard” of which St John Paul II speaks in *Novo Millenio Ineunte* (nos. 30-31) as the goal and programme of all the Church’s action.

This seems to me very clear and indisputable in the experience of Don Bosco and all the original Salesians. The boys they took in were in no sense from “privileged’ backgrounds. Salesian education starts from a conviction: we are all called to holiness, which is the fullness of love for God and neighbour; and we must have the courage to offer this ideal also to adolescents and young people who can embark on a spiritual journey similar to that of adult saints. This journey, led by a spiritual guide, leads to the oblative [sacrificial] and joyful acceptance of self in daily life, and finds its moments of strength in prayer, the sacraments and Marian devotion; it is expressed in charitable attention to one’s neighbour, in a cheerful and dynamic way of life: “we make *holiness* consist in always being happy.”

**3. SIGNS AND BEARERS OF GOD’S PREVENIENT/PREVENTIVE LOVE (C. 2)**

Delving deeper into our Mission, we find three fundamental words which might seem synonymous: **expression - manifestation - experience;** this last word, which has multiple meanings, seems to me to be understood here as *being perceived/understood*).

We can similarly apply the words of John to the human experience of love: “No one has ever seen God (as such)” (John 1:18). Therefore, love *tends to manifest itself*; this is not only because if it does not manifest itself it is not perceived, but above all because of *the good it represents for the beloved* (and precisely because we love them, we want all the good possible for them); furthermore, because a response of love cannot be given if it is not perceived.

This approach leads us to a *phenomenology of love* that is often forgotten or at least to which we give no importance: it is a matter of placing ourselves not so much from the perspective of *loving* (active voice), but, as we said before, in the perspective of **being/feeling loved**(passive voice**)**. This misunderstanding is also present in the Christian life, precisely because often this is experienced more as *loving God*, rather than as **being loved by him**. As of now we can state the central point of our reflection: **God loves all human beings and loves each one as if this person were the only one; the problem is that we do not all know this**. In particular, because of our *charismatic sensitivity*, we suffer because of so many girls and boys who do not feel loved by God, mainly because of the *structural situation* in which they live, as “*poor, abandoned and at risk*”. While the “qualifier” is socio-economic, the perspective is *theological*: *their salvation is at risk*. Isn’t it really fascinating to be able to say to a young person: **Rejoice, God *loves you*!** In a way, this is the typical aspect of the **mysticism of our Charism**.

Taking up this perspective, i.e. the “passive” experience of being/feeling loved, none other than Jean-Paul Sartre says: “This is the core of the joy of love: we feel justified in existing”. Josef Pieper comments: “It is therefore evident that it is not enough for us to simply exist: what is important for us, beyond this simple fact, is *the explicit confirmation*: ‘**It is good that you exist, how wonderful that *you* are!** (...)’ We say: a person ‘blooms’, ‘blossoms’, when he happens to be loved; only then does he become completely himself, a ‘new life’ begins for him.”

All of us, I think, have had this experience with boys and girls in our educational and pastoral work; and this is one of the deepest and most authentic joys. Put another way: while we do not feel loved by anyone we “feel ashamed” to be in this world, as if we were at a party to which we were not invited; but, as soon as someone loves us, as Sartre said, “we feel our existence justified”; and in the pedagogical experience, the change (even external) very often is an extraordinary one.

If we want to go deeper into the phenomenology of love, we need to take up the difference between *expression* and *manifestation*. ***Expression*** springs immediately from love itself, and therefore is more related to the one who loves; ***manifestation***, on the other hand, concerns mainly the one who receives love, adapting itself to him or her, and *“explains”, makes expression precise*, being more related to the *word*.

We can make a little diagram regarding these *dynamics of love*:

**reality - expression - manifestation - reception - response**.

All this has an extraordinary application in our Charism, and precisely in the realisation of our Mission, as we can well imagine.

If we want to relate this to our faith, we can say that everything God has created, starting with ourselves and the life he gives us, and everything we find around us, this wonderful world, everything is *an unquestionable and eloquent expression* of his Love for us. However, the decisive question is: can we really understand creation, our life, our history, as *an expression of God’s Love?*

Returning to the human experience, how difficult it becomes *to perceive* an attitude of the other as *an expression* of his or her love, if the *manifestation* (firstly, as we said before, through the *word*) that allows this dynamic relationship to be established is missing!

I would venture to say that Creation and History (understood as universal history, but also as **my** history, that of every human being in the world) are merely an *expression* that does not speak to us so much of God’s Love, but of his Almightiness and infinite Wisdom

This is why - and I insist - “in a Salesian key” this has great relevance for our Charism: God was not content to *love us*, but wanted to **manifest** his Love to us not *“by giving us things”*, but ***by giving us himself in his Son, Jesus Christ***.

Therefore our Triune God, perfect Love, was not satisfied with loving us, nor even with the expression of his Love; we can apply the “***it is not enough to love***” theologically, in the first place, to God himself; he has *manifested* this infinite Love to us by becoming One of us, Jesus. Exaggerating a little, I would say that when the Father sends his Son into the world as the supreme expression of his Love, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he gives him this task: **Strive to make yourself loved**!

All this can be found with clarity, albeit in completely different words, in Don Bosco's famous “*Letter from Rome*” of 10 May 1884. The past pupils from the early days of Valdocco do not accuse the Salesians of that time of a lack of love, or even of the absence of the expression of this educative and pastoral love; Don Bosco himself strongly defends them: “Don't you see how they are martyrs of study and work? How do they consume their youthful years for those whom Divine Providence entrusted to them?” “I see, I know, but the best is missing: that the young **not only be loved, but that they themselves know that they are loved**”.

In all this lies the centrality of the Preventive System, according to which we resemble a God who did not wait for our love, but who “loved us first” (1 John 4:19). Ultimately this system has its roots in **God** himself: the *prevenient/preventive nature* of his Love can be summed up in a wonderful word (even if too often minimised, and even misunderstood):  **GRACE**. In this sense, we can understand the title given to Mary, the young woman of Nazareth, in Luke’s gospel: “**full of Grace”** (**κεχαριτωμενη**) as one who has received in fullness this love of the Triune God. In Mary Immaculate Help of Christians, it has been said very beautifully, we find “**the most perfect fruit of God's Preventive System**”.

***To conclude:***

The mission, participation in the mission of Christ who has called and sent us, has always been considered as an element of identity of consecrated life and is always something that belongs to the community. “He called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message and to have authority to cast out demons” (*Mk* 3:13-15). Indeed, in the eyes of the world, the mission is what makes religious life relevant and effective.

However, a clear distinction must be made between mission and the specific purposes of religious life. The mission is not about doing things, however dazzling, but is essentially about being signs of God’s love in the world. The specific purposes, on the other hand, are identified with the pastoral, educational or human promotion activity that religious carry out in the various fields of human life. *Therefore, being is not identified with doing, and doing must be an expression and consequence of being*.

Indeed ***the mission is nothing other than the historical expression of God’s saving love made concrete in the sending of the Son, in Jesus’ sending of his Spirit, in the sending of the Holy Spirit to the apostles***. The awareness of being sent warns us against the temptation of wanting to take possession of the mission, its content, its methods, its specific recipients, and to dispose of it instead of being available for it.

Precisely because we proclaim Another and offer his salvation, we cannot proclaim ourselves and our own plans. Our task is to make God’s salvation present, to be his witnesses. This mission involves our entire existence and frees us from the unimagined risk of functionalism, activism and Prometheism.

The Gospel of John expresses the love of God in the mission of the Son in an incomparable way when, following Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus, he states that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (*Jn* 3:17). The Gospel of Mark for its part concludes the passage of the apostles’ dispute over the problem of authority with the key reading that Jesus gives of his human life: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (*Mk* 10:45).

This is Jesus’ mission and also the mission of Salesian consecrated life on behalf of young people, especially the ones who are poorest, abandoned and at risk. This is the gospel and this is the good news that we are called to proclaim and embody to fill the world with hope.

It is evident that, to the extent that we can live our Salesian Mission, not only will we make our girls and boys feel happy, but that we too will live this **mysticism of the Mission** to the full, and can become, like our Founding Saints and so many saints in our Family, **holy and happy.**

For your reading, reflection, prayer and life review, I offer you this text by Fr Egidio Viganò:

***Mission to the young***

Another component of our charism is the mission to the young, that is, our participation in the mission of the Church for the salvation of the world.  
Don Bosco used to say: “It is enough for me to know that you are young to love you.”  
Our covenant with God and the Salesian spirit are lived out in the practice of the mission to the young; the Salesian’s heart is made in such a way that he feels within himself a kind of inner passion, an inclination, a taste, a joy, an enthusiasm, a capacity for sacrifice that continually drives him among the young. Fr Albera described it magnificently in one of his last circulars in 1920 with the expression “the gift of predilection for the young”.

Mission, before having a place to operate, recipients to serve, is first and foremost an inner attitude whereby that spirit, that covenant with God of which we spoke, is embodied in us like a holy passion.

It is a “gift” of the Holy Spirit and not just a natural inclination!  
Listen to what Fr Albera says: “It is not enough to feel a certain natural attraction for them, but one really has to prefer them. This predilection, in its initial state, is a gift from God, it is the Salesian vocation itself, but it is up to our intelligence and heart to develop and perfect it.” Such a predilection leads to devoting oneself fully to young people, almost without having time to deal with other things.  
In an interview in Turin a few months ago, Messori asked me: “What are you doing in Chile with Pinochet or in Poland with Gierek? Are you not raising your voice? Are you not asserting human rights?”

The first thing we do - I immediately said - is to love young people so much that we avoid being alienated from them: to be able to educate them, to build with them the capacity to love and to defend human rights. What do we gain by giving a nice “epistolary” speech[[1]](#footnote-2) that appears in the newspapers, if we then get kicked out? If the time comes when this is necessary, it will also be done; however, it is often quite easy to make cheap prophecy and then leave young people adrift. We must try to do everything realistically possible to save the youth. And that is why we act like Don Bosco: we cannot have teachers without teaching certificates? So let’s get these teaching certificates. We will go to University. Is the University anti-clerical? Never mind, we’ll send the best. And if we lose someone? Patience (E. Viganò, *Non secondo la carne ma nello Spirito*, pro manoscritto, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, Roma 1978, 95-96).

1. pistolòtto n. masc. [der. of epistola, pìstola]. – 1. in jest. Letter or, more often a moral exhortation or chiding someone: *m’ha fatto un p. che non finiva più.*[You have given me an endless telling off] More generically, a rhetorical discourse or passage from such: p. finale. 2. In the language of the theatre the declamatory piece that provokes open applause. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)