

**He has reconciled us to himself and has given us
the ministry of Reconciliation¹**

1. Grace and mercy enfold our life – “*Mediante Christo*” – *Freely given love and salesian practice.* **2. Love leads to judgement** – *A merciful and just God – The sense of sin – The formation of conscience – Judgement and salesian life..* **3. Conversion and new life in the Spirit** – *The return to God – Salvation at the root of evil – Salesian implications.* **4. The sacrament of Reconciliation** – *A process of re-evaluation - The sacrament and salesian spirituality – The reconciled and the ministers of Reconciliation.* **Conclusion:** *crossing the threshold.*

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Solemnity of the Assumption of Our Lady

The Year 2000 must be seen not only as a turning point in the calendar, albeit a unique one, but rather as a cultural launching, with consequences for individuals and the whole human race that cannot be foreseen. It prompts us to look back and make an overall evaluation of what we have lived through in the century coming to an end and a reawakening of the hopes which now seem to lie ahead for human effort in the future and beyond it.

For us it is an invitation, almost a challenge, to do some rethinking as disciples of Christ in a complex transformation which approaches the vertiginous but within which is concealed a certain sense and direction. It is a kind of evolution in which we find ourselves involved in a vital way: not only as critical observers, but as sharing the responsibility for what has gone before and what is now to happen.

And so we want to accept willingly and fulfil as a community the principal obligation of the Jubilee, many times expressed by the Holy Father in the Bull of Indiction: “By its nature, the Holy Year is a time when we are called to conversion ...”². “May the two thousandth anniversary of the central mystery of the Christian faith be experienced as a journey of reconciliation and a sign of true hope for all who look to Christ and to his Church”.³

For us too it provides an unusual opportunity to relive the experience of Reconciliation as consecrated Salesians, linking together the theological dimension and those which are human and educative. Today we have an urgent need to understand how the salvation brought about by God in Christ is important for man who is living through the experience of division and suffering, of conflict and guilt. Christian revelation, in fact, must be able to teach man how to live rightly in the world from a human and divine standpoint.

¹ Cf. 2 Cor 5, 18

² *Inc.Myst*, 11

³ *Inc.Myst*, 4

We must therefore take up again and bring together the various aspects of Reconciliation, in line with different situations: return to God and union with our fellow men, interior harmony and the rebuilding of social relationships, serenity with oneself and commitment for justice, inner joy and the building of peace in the world, truth and charity, the unmasking of hidden evil and “renewal” in the Spirit, a sacramental gift and a style of life and action.

1. Grace and mercy enfold our life.

We could draw up a list of the personal and social wounds brought about by sin, emphasizing the extreme urgency of reconciliation which the world recognizes without managing to do anything about it. Various documents of the Church take this approach and you yourselves have followed it with young people.

But on this occasion, as we come to the end of the path which has led us to the year 2000, I prefer first to go back to the *source* which makes reconciliation possible and real. That source is *in the Trinity*, in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, i.e. total love which is self-communicating: in him is found the self-giving and unconditional acceptance of the other. This enables us to think of Reconciliation as something totally new, not determined by any fault of ours nor solely dependent on it; but as a reality which has its root in God and extends to all our human experience.

It is true that “reconciliation” immediately brings to mind the idea of some kind of “separation”, a preceding division or fault; but there is still greater truth in recalling that the basis for all forgiveness is the fact that God is in his very essence Love, Gratuitousness, Mercy, Tenderness, Altruism, Gift, or whatever other expression you wish to use.

The Trinitarian nature of God, who is communion, gives to “reconciliation” a meaning which is unconditionally positive. The “other”, person or thing, is valid for him according to its actual form of being. The “mercy” is that radical “*letting be*” on account of which all things are blessed as they come to be, are respected in their existence, and anticipated in view of their full realization.

If in God himself there are several Persons who have their origin in love and live in love, then God is capable of taking on himself the burden of every being, even that of sinful man, and of creating the conditions that make it possible for creation to be directed towards a real participation in his own life.

And so sin does not in any way succeed in breaking the unity of God’s plan or weakening the fatherly responsibility which God assumed by giving other freedoms to the world. In this way God showed that from the outset he is able to accept responsibility for possible rejection by his creature. In this connection Scripture has a reference to the “Lamb that was slain” from the foundation of the world;⁴ the unconditional love of God who offers his Son had foreseen and accepted the risk of freedom.

⁴ cf. Rev 13, 8

In brief, Creation is ordered to Covenant, our existence to communion with God: this is its aim and objective. Reconciliation is that predisposition through which God does not repent of his creation, but in every circumstance recreates it from within in order to attract it once again to himself.

This idea establishes on a truly solid basis both authentic love and gratuitousness: giving does not mean losing anything but becoming more fully realized; pardoning and being pardoned does not mean repairing or patching but recreating and being recreated in the Spirit in virtue of the “passion” which has led God to allow us to participate in his own life, and to share in our own existence.

The first step in our personal reflection and in the Gospel proclamation will be that of *understanding the Revelation of God, as it is manifested to us in Christ, who alone is able to represent the fullness of God and his universal will of salvation.*⁵

Using a language which avoids simplifications and ambiguity and allows us to be instructed by the light of the Gospel, maintaining certain tensions without exaggerating them or playing them down, should be the approach of every educator to the faith, so as to be able to guarantee for everyone *a joyful meeting with a reassuring God*, who is able to bring about every reconciliation, who after our own attempts and the recognition of our inadequacy can “comfort us in all our afflictions”,⁶ who can fulfil every good towards which we are strenuously striving,⁷ and who can finally “wipe away every tear”.⁸

“Mediante Christo”.⁹

This attitude of God towards man is revealed in the life of Jesus, who reflects it in his actions and enlightens it with his words. He reconciles in himself the human and the divine: he assumes manhood and fills it with God; he makes of all of us a single creature, breaks down the wall of every division¹⁰ and unites humanity which is heading towards its definitive fulfilment in a history of mixed fortunes. He sets up the possibility of a new kind of man and a new humanity, proposes it in his teaching, and begins it in the Spirit with his death and Resurrection.

And so he proclaims mercy, calls to conversion, works for reconciliation and consigns it to his Church as a gift and mission: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”.¹¹

The Gospel contains many scenes of reconciliation and pardon from which an attentive *lectio* can draw endless lessons. To us who like to contemplate Jesus as

⁵ cf. Col 2, 9

⁶ cf. 2 Cor 1, 4

⁷ cf. Mt 25

⁸ Rev 21, 4

⁹ cf. 2 Cor 5, 18

¹⁰ cf. Eph 2, 14

¹¹ 2 Cor 5, 18

the Good Shepherd these scenes are particularly striking, and we readily pause to examine their characteristics.

According to the Gospel accounts the initiative always comes from Jesus. It is never the other person, man or woman, who first seeks and asks for pardon; it is always Jesus who offers it. The other may indeed feel oppressed by a sense of guilt or of social ostracism. Often he is moved by concern for his own health, by curiosity or by a question which unexpectedly arises.

It is Jesus who makes the first approach to Levi;¹² Jesus who looks at Zaccheus and goes to call on him at his house.¹³ It is Jesus who comes to the defence of the sinful woman who washed his feet¹⁴ and of the woman taken in adultery.¹⁵ It is Jesus who proclaims the pardon of the paralytic who is let down through the roof in search of a cure.¹⁶ It is Jesus who looks at Peter, having already forgotten his lack of fidelity.¹⁷

The process of reconciliation – and this is another constant feature – does not begin with the declaration of guilt but with the feeling on the part of those concerned that they have been recognized as individuals, in a new and unexpected relationship freely offered, which brings light into their lives and makes them see at one and the same time their deformities and their possibilities. At the origin of the desire for reconciliation there is always the impact of a word or of a person who awakens us from the lethargy of an impoverished existence and recalls us to a fuller life.

We must therefore overcome the mentality which is fixated on offences or on the failure to keep resolutions as the principal element moving us to reconciliation. What is necessary is to face up to our relationship with God: whether he is important to us, whether we feel his presence and action in our life, whether we expect a great deal from him, whether we are greatly concerned about not losing him.

The most important thing for us and for our pastoral activity is to recognize, savour and proclaim God's mercy, and to concentrate our attention on him, the Father of Jesus and our Father too. The mercy of God rebuilds an otherwise fractured history, and continues to renew the covenant which in our weakness and forgetfulness we lose sight of.

For this reason the experience of reconciliation in the Gospel is always one of a superabundance of grace, joy and plenitude, beyond all bounds of reason. There is great rejoicing over one who is converted, to the scandal of 'respectable' people. There is the use of costly perfume, with objections from the thrifty. There is a banquet, with invitations given to everyone and complaints from the more serious-minded. There is the exoneration from guilt, without any guarantees and not

¹² cf. Lk 5, 27

¹³ cf. Lk 19, 5

¹⁴ cf. Lk 7, 48

¹⁵ cf. Jn 8, 10

¹⁶ cf. Lk 5, 20

¹⁷ cf. Lk 22, 61

justifiable in human eyes and a loving understanding of human traits, all of which seems naive.

The context of reconciliation is always one of praise and the action of grace. It reflects what we sing so frequently in the psalms: "Praise the Lord for he is good; because everlasting is his mercy".¹⁸ "Bless the Lord O my soul... He forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities".¹⁹

The chorus of motives which surrounds reconciliation, as the expression of relationships and of life rather than the fulfilment of a religious duty, is an illustration of what happens in the individual when he discovers his worth in the eyes of God, and that God loves him.

Freely given love and salesian practice.

The great means and instrument of reconciliation was and is Christ's humanity, which has destroyed all the barriers and distances between God and mankind. With it communication between God and ourselves has reached its peak.

This is a statement which has very practical applications in our life and pastoral work. It is difficult to arrive at the desire for reconciliation, without a human experience of being made welcome. Hence the pastoral praxis of the Good Shepherd suggests that we must be able to accept signs of affection which may be offered us with gratitude, and show patient consideration and esteem in listening to people. This is the way which leads to a re-examination of one's life and a desire to change it.

This indeed goes to show that the most striking aspects of our charism are already part of "reconciliation". The *preventive* characteristic of our pedagogy is an immediate reflection of the merciful heart of God²⁰ and hence an authentic human realization of the reconciliation which he is and which he offers: Christian revelation declares in fact that God anticipates not only insofar as he is Creator but also as Redeemer, because only through his intervention can man realistically desire his gifts.

The "gratitude to the Father for the gift of a divine vocation offered to all men",²¹ of which our Constitutions speak, is the mental attitude with which we approach every youngster no matter how poor he may be, in the certainty that he has within himself a longing for greater dignity, for a "heaven" which has not been lost to the extent that God cannot give it back again.

The *loving kindness* which marks our relationships is a discernible manifestation of God's plan and desire, especially for the difficult youngster who has lost every trace of a possible happy relationship with other people and with life itself.

¹⁸ Ps 106 (107)

¹⁹ Ps 102 (103)

²⁰ cf. C 20

²¹ C 11

Optimism is the recognition of the divine design of happiness never withdrawn, which is always present in even the smallest expression of good and most difficult to detect, but which can and must be reawakened by the simple offer of human sympathy, in which the divine and human become concrete and grow together: an expression of that “goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour”²² through which meeting the Lord was to see God.

The *practicality, lay and enterprising nature of our pastoral style* are finally the expression of the most radical conviction that the fatherhood and dominion of God are demonstrated and made credible in the liberation from evil and in the offering of a noble life for all. Wherever care is taken of a child, God is blessed; and so the clear fulfilment of our mission of evangelization, advancement and education comes to be a part of reconciliation, even where for countless reasons it is neither asked for nor wanted, and not even dreamed or thought of as such: reconciliation is like anticipatory grace, poured out “even while we were still sinners”.²³

The Kingdom is already present in the welcome given to the needy youngster, from Don Bosco’s “Can you whistle?” to a catechism lesson, without interruption, without barriers, without taking up opposing positions, without any jealousy.

An analogous reflection can be made with respect to the life of our communities and I hope you do in fact make it. The fact that in our relationships everything passes preferably through the *logic of the heart, the family spirit* and that of charity, mutual esteem and trust, is a reflection of God and a sign of human wisdom.²⁴

It is very true that reconciliation depends more on humility and courage in taking the first step than on waiting for the other to make the first move. And it is especially true that the ways of reconciliation pass through relationships in which the other person feels more encouraged than judged.

Deepening the family spirit with a view to improving ways of reconciliation will give us a practical indication of some things we should be concerned about, beyond the usual formalities: brotherly communication and silence, initiative and patience, sincerity and fraternal correction. More radically, after observing the situation in very many communities, we may ask ourselves: how much need do we have of imitating the anticipatory love of God and the kindness of the Good Shepherd in order to raise up again a confrere who is sad and disillusioned, wounded by life, feeling bad about the many wrongs he has done or suffered? How are we to give new life to someone who is so ‘mortified’ that he no longer sees in himself any hope for redemption?

2. Love leads to judgement

²² Tit 3, 4

²³ Rom 5, 8

²⁴ cf. C 95

The unconditional freely given love of God, the fact that “God is light and in him there is no darkness”,²⁵ prevents an interpretation of God's goodness which is simply reduced to the identifying of forgiveness as something of little importance, to a condoning of faults which does not really destroy the evil; to an understanding of pardon which is unconnected with justice, a way of thinking about justification which does not imply any judgement of our inclinations, attitudes and actions.

This is something which we need to continue to think over as time passes, but it should be clear at once that if forgiveness is something anticipatory, gratuitous, total and absolute, by that very fact it must make evil totally unacceptable.

Evil, especially in its more extreme form, i.e. sin, cannot in any way be integrated with love and donation, which our life makes clear and which we become aware of as we think of God. Evil is always destructive of harmony, and the realization of its wickedness will be the more clear the more it is the result of a profound experience of goodness.

And so reconciliation, the fact of being loved without reserve, does not take away *but is rather the basis of a judgement about our intentions and our deeds*. God's freely given love, both anticipatory and merciful, does not destroy nor diminish, nor contradict the need for man to act honestly; rather it provides a more sure and sound foundation, it makes it clear and gives it effect. It does not wipe out the aspect of human contradictions, but teaches how to unmask, control and overcome them.

The gift and knowledge of the life of God, precisely because with Jesus they have been given flesh, must become the life of man. Our desire for reconciliation and the appeal to God's mercy must not therefore be interpreted according to a purely subjective ethic, as though there were no means for distinguishing good from evil, nor according to that widespread *laissez-faire* attitude which makes it impossible to identify any element of good beyond the simple recognition of the existence, freedom and individuality of the other person.

The gratuitousness of God is not an overlooking or suspension of justice, nor is it simply non-judgemental friendship; for him “there is no kindness without justice”!

A merciful and just God.

This aspect too needs to be understood in the light of the Word in a millennium transition characterized by multiple images of God, often subjectively inspired. When God speaks to man he speaks to this particular man, he never speaks in abstract fashion. Revelation immediately becomes pedagogy: the clarification of reality, an offer of true life, a time of great patience, a loving acceptance on God's part of the hardness of our heart.

For this reason Scripture speaks a great deal of the *love* of God and equally of his *anger*; Yahweh is described as a God who is *tender* and *jealous*; he is *rich in grace* but also *slow to anger*. And so Jesus recounts the parables of the Kingdom

²⁵ 1 Jn 1,5

which are full of light, but also those of the rejection of the Kingdom with their darkness. For this reason Jesus is the absolutely *new reality*, and as a fulfilment, and so he *goes beyond the Old Law* and is the *Commandment* of Love. And so there exist an Old and New Testament, a tension between the pre- and post-paschal mystery; and so the Passion leads to the Resurrection.

To understand the ways of reconciliation *we must place these items in their proper order, not just eliminate them*. Our reflection and religious language must take equal care *to speak well of God* and *to address ourselves realistically to man*, proclaiming the divine unconditional *welcoming acceptance* and identifying the situations of human *rejection*, illustrating God's *deserving of our trust* and denouncing man's *incredulity*.

A proclamation or catechesis which is too 'optimistic' (i.e. which plays down man's responsibility) can be just as harmful as the opposing 'pessimistic' version. The offering of *pardon* must always be combined with the *need for repentance* before or afterwards, recognized or prompted as the case may be.

In all this we need to be very watchful over our reflections and our words. God's love and his anger are not on the same plane, just as neither are salvation and judgement, loosing and binding, remission and retention, accusing and forgiving, caresses and punishments. A mature personal reflection and a good choice of words of proclamation will make clear the terms of these contrasting elements in line with criteria of their coexistence and asymmetry. It will show how anger is an expression of love, how one can bind so as to be able to loose, how "no" can be a function of a greater "yes". And it will make clear that from this stems every success, every risk and every failure in the field of education, in heaven and on earth.

On the link between salvation and judgement, on the coexistence and asymmetry of the two terms, Christian doctrine is very instructive: it does not obscure the image of God by presenting him as an "objective and distant judge"; but neither does it take from man his responsibility.

All Christian teaching finds its nucleus in the Lord's Paschal Mystery, from which it follows that he is at the same time our Judge and our Redeemer! This is why Christians affirm the existence of both Paradise and hell. But they know also, on the authoritative declaration of the Church, that in the former there are many brothers and sisters, while they do not know for certain whether there is anyone in the second. No one leaves this world with marks of certain condemnation.

The universal salvific will and the possibility of total rejection are both asserted, but as asymmetrics: the one is the more stable reality which exists, the other a possibility which God does not wish on anybody; the one is something positive offered by God, the other an eventuality which he regretfully permits.

The sense of sin.

What we are saying has evident repercussions in our own life. Nothing is more powerful than love! The most serious thing that can happen, is to have wounded a truly great love and to become aware of it. And so to have harmed a

good person, to have made an innocent person suffer, to have falsified a truth, to have scorned something undoubtedly beautiful. These are things which give rise to the deepest feelings of guilt. "The same fire burns in paradise and in hell: the fire of the love of God" (Urs Von Balthasar), the love accepted in one case and rejected in the other.

An exposition of the love of God is necessary, but not sufficient by itself. To speak of reconciliation in a responsible manner one must take on board the contradictions of evil and of human guilt. If love is the ultimate horizon of the life of God and of man, what are the consequences of living with the burden of a rejected or unknown love, and what liberation can there be from such a situation?

Now this situation of rejection is perpetually renewed and weighs upon us all. Many are the conflicts it provokes in human hearts and life. We could draw up a long list of them in history or in our own communities at different levels of intensity.

Recent documents of the Church point out the more outstanding consequences of evil: violation of human dignity; racial, social and religious discrimination; the arrogance of political and economic power; warlike violence and aggression; exploitation of the poor, the unjust distribution of wealth; corruption in the administration of the common good. Division, confrontation and even hatred have taken root in consciences after previously unthinkable historical events which have nevertheless taken place.

Since the field of education comes natural to us, I limit myself to the youth sector but propose to dwell not so much on the well known phenomena which attract most comment, like the extreme forms of equivocation and subterfuge, unresolved social conflict or licentiousness, of which the destructive power is clear to all.

I want to refer rather to the more interior conflicts, which Jesus says are the root of others which are more evident. The youth scene presents a lot of clashes between possibilities and deficiencies. We are dealing in fact with generations torn between urgings in opposite directions which are contradictory and irreconcilable; today's young people are individualist but open to others, materialistic and idealists, rationalist and easygoing, divided between affective and effective elements, emotional feelings and responsibility, the aesthetic and the ethical. At closer quarters they are sensitive to themes of peace, but are less involved in matters of justice; they are well nigh submerged in information but weak in reflection; they have a keen sense of freedom, but are ever less capable of making decisions; they will eagerly talk about values, but are unresponsive when reminded of their incontrovertible obligations; they are open and apparently without inhibitions in their relationships, but find it very difficult to handle conflicts without harbouring grudges; they recognize the importance of their body, but then subject it to all sorts of indiscriminate experiments without any feeling of moral responsibility; they have no difficulty in admitting that there is a God, but they do not take him into account; they make him to their own specification.

At a more formal level they are still suffering from the modern consequences of the debate between law and freedom, between regulations and do-as-you-please,

between following the rules and spontaneity, soul and body, personal identity and cultural affiliation.

Some thing analogous can be said to happen to us as consecrated individuals and as communities. Contradictions, divisions between theory and practice, inconsistency between what is required and what is actually done, are everyday occurrences. Is not a lack of watchfulness in our evaluations obscuring perhaps the very experience of the love of God we have so clearly acknowledged and professed?

This is why *care in uniting and distinguishing between acceptance and responsibility, gift and duty*, is indeed an urgent cultural and pastoral indication: in this sense reconciliation means elaborating and giving back to the young *a wisdom than can unify the polarities of which life is made up, and heal the negative tensions which leave the mind divided*.

I do not think it necessary to comment at length on the relationship between this and the 'sense of sin', of which the disappearance is lamented at the present day, not without reason. "The re-establishing of a right sense of sin is the first item in addressing the spiritual crisis which weighs so heavily on modern man".²⁶

The maturity of judgement to which love leads consists specifically in perceiving the possibilities offered by life and the corresponding risks which accompany them. To be aware of only one of these dimensions results in a distorted view and ultimately in childishness. Every good element has its contradictory in the depth of our being and in the world that surrounds us: love and hate, commitment and indifference, rectitude and deceit etc. and fundamentally light and darkness, life and death.

The re-establishing of the sense of sin in ourselves and in those to whom our ministry is directed implies the recognition of the reference our actions and attitudes have to the love of God, and the incidence of our rapport with God on our fellow men and on the world; consequently it implies an understanding of the destructive potential attaching to evil, even in those actions nowadays considered private, and the acceptance of responsibility for its effects on ourselves and on the events, big and small, of history.

The formation of conscience.

The atmosphere in which we are immersed leads us almost unconsciously to a certain indifference in the face of moral evil, to a levelling down of judgement and hence to a lessening of guilt and watchfulness. The variety is enormous and little heed is paid to it. We have become accustomed to the fact that each one may choose his own way of life, provided he does not offend against the norms of social behaviour and the rights of others.

The present attitude as regards trends and behaviour is often founded on instinct: statistics, personal advantage, problematic situations. Cultural analysis has shown us how much norms we thought to be absolute are dependent on these elements. The sense of shame, respect for authority, a certain style of marriage, the

²⁶ *Reconciliatio et Poenitentia*, 18

expression of sexuality, have all been played down and considered changeable and not permanently binding.

The sense of God has become weak. His image has become obscured in many individual and social consciences, which makes it difficult to think that human actions have anything to do with God's will. We are more concerned about not falling out with our neighbours and not offending those with whom we deal.

The study of human behaviour attributes "feelings of guilt" to types of personality, education in the family, and social environment. It emphasizes the conditioning this causes and the need to be freed from it, rather than recall the underlying responsibility that may be present.

A divide is slowly developing between private and public morals, as a result of which many things, even of social importance, are already being left to personal choice: abortion, euthanasia, divorce, homosexuality, IVF. Of all these things, in the social and also the educational field, there is a growing knowledge but frequently only of the risks involved and the precautions to be taken; no sound ethical foundation is provided, and there is even less reference to any transcendent aspect.

All this has an effect on young people which is like that of a toxic cloud. It is not surprising that in them there appear many symptoms and reflections of the surrounding culture. Their moral formation is no more than fragmentary. They adopt their criteria and norms from various sources: school and family, magazines and TV, friends and as a result of their own reflections. Their choice is often dictated by personal preferences.

In the same way the environment can have an influence on adults, religious and educators, if they neglect the Word of God and are not vigilant in discernment. Their sensitivity can lose its edge, and in this way we pass in pendulum fashion from an earlier mentality which was severe and inculcated a guilty feeling to a quite contrary kind of indifference and 'do as you like'; from having seen sin in everything to not seeing it in anything or anybody; from having emphasized the penalties which sin merits to the presentation of a love of God without any responsibility on the part of man, the result of which would be the same, whatever response be given to God; from a serious effort to correct an erroneous conscience to a facile acceptance which does not form any conscience at all; from the learning by heart of the ten commandments to no longer teaching any kind of coherent Christian life.

To be "Christian adults", "true educators of the faith", realistic evangelizers, means: not misunderstanding or playing down the presence of evil in private and social life, and being aware of its destructive capabilities; knowing that Christ has conquered every evil and gives us every good; being able to recognize evil in its roots and manifestations, enlightened by God's Word; being aware that by his incarnation, passion, death and resurrection, Jesus shows us how to overcome it: by trust in God, vigilance, and intellectual, moral and spiritual combat.

Judgement and salesian life.

From the standpoint of our charism, I will only recall the striking quality of the personal, pastoral and pedagogical level-headedness of Don Bosco, whom we are called upon to reproduce in ourselves. He educated with the word in the ear and attention to the particular setting, with personal affection and an orderly way of life; he was a priest of whom every individual thought he was the favourite; he was a master at putting across and getting understood and observed the requirements of community life and of the mission, wise in his judgements and full of enterprising energy.

With respect to reconciliation, we can see in Don Bosco the intuition he had of the innate expansive quality of goodness, and his keen perception of the disaster produced by sin, even to the extent of it causing him physical suffering! Noteworthy regarding the contrasting elements we have called coexistence and asymmetry between grace and judgement, is the fact that whenever Don Bosco refers to good he does so directly, whereas his references to evil are always figurative (dreams, elephants, monsters, images, signs and hints, etc.); in this way he asserts the wisdom of every good work and the inexcusable nature of anything wicked. On the other hand he also gave his followers particular advice about expressing themselves in the same manner.

Logic of the heart does not dispense from the duty of responsibility, and family spirit does not eliminate the service of authority but if anything rather supports it. On the one hand one of the fruits of the family spirit is that of fostering sincerity in correction and openness to it; and on the other, abdication of authority leads to insufferable tensions and frequently makes it impossible to remedy certain kinds of evil which are individual, defeatist and regressive.

The service of authority, like the capability to guide, remind and correct demands sacrifice, but a sacrifice for the benefit of the common good; it is governed by a realistic view of things, and is indispensable in every situation which calls for persuasion, or when other means have been tried and proved ineffective.

This thought is prompted by a consideration of the tensions which are found in our communities because of difficulties in collaboration or incompatibility across the age range gaps: sometimes one seems to see a perfect obedience, devoid however of any affection and tantamount to outright disobedience without evident consequences. In other words, it is often hard to harmonise justice and kindness.

Now clarity as regards one's own position with respect to vocation and the community, and rectitude in the exercise of one's own role form the premise for a better spiritual discernment, and hence for better and more just process of reconciliation.

3. Conversion and new life in the Spirit.

We may now bring together in this third section the two preceding points, anticipating this time too what we want to suggest: *reconciliation implies discernment* in two senses: a re-examination of the past, to discover the traces of the love of God and of the good he has placed within us and to reject all that there

has been on our part in the way of lack of belief, ingratitude, hardness, fear and violence; and a looking forward to the future as entrusting ourselves to the renewing force of the Spirit, recognizing and accepting that greater contribution of love, communion and forgiveness – now enveloped, accompanied and awaited by divine love – that life asks of us, as an appeal to our freedom, acknowledging what we have been in the past.

When I speak of 'discernment' I am not thinking only of its intellectual aspect, but of the 'biblical' heart, the centre of the soul at the moment it makes the decision, the resolution, when it definitively opts for good before itself and its companions, and ultimately before God.

'Reconciliation' is a word with a totally positive meaning, but which implies the overcoming of something negative. Man has always been the destroyer of the covenant of love, and hence human love has always been accompanied by a reconciliation. With respect to man Christians are neither pessimists nor optimists: they simply look at the wealth of past history, not least because that is where God reveals himself: they think therefore of an original goodness of man in real terms, limited as he is and off the track; they think of original sin as continually reactivated in its effects by personal sin, despite the shedding of Christ's blood.

There are considerable advantages to such an understanding, because there is a great difference between being in the world thinking that everyone is good and everything must function well (and so life becomes filled with a thousand and one disappointments), and being in the world knowing that it will go as it will, but trying as far as possible to bring about the miracle of love (and so life becomes the place for pleasant surprises!).

Rightly therefore do we insist on education to love. But educating to love means teaching how to give due weight to forgiveness, making up, and reconciliation as ways in which love is made possible and practical.

Similarly to educate and be educated to the faith means not only acquiring or communicating the knowledge that God is a Father to us, but that we return to him. The act of faith is the overcoming of unbelief, whatever the theoretical or existential form this may have taken. There is already here a gap to be filled to accept God's coming. It is not just by chance that preparing ourselves to receive the joyful message is indicated by Jesus rather surprisingly when you come to think about it: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent, and believe* in the gospel".²⁷ Conversion opens the door to faith.

The proclamation of the loving fatherliness of God can only be made in the form of an invitation to turn back. This may seem hard, but it is in fact both encouraging, and more especially it is evangelical, because it means that no one is ever debarred from the divine fatherhood: all are expected and can still attain to its total enjoyment.

The return to God.

²⁷ Mk 1, 15

The extraordinary occasion of the Jubilee for the beginning of the new millennium is an invitation to us to reflect more deeply and not be merely superficial. Following on from the text chosen for next year's Strenna, St Paul makes the appeal: "Let yourselves be reconciled",²⁸ thus indicating that reconciliation is a response to an initiative of God.

We may ask: why is Reconciliation something that man cannot find by himself, but is essentially a work of God? Why is faith the task of man, i.e. to enter into and accept a pardon which is offered, to correspond with an initiative of God? What have we done, what have we ruined, that we have made it so difficult, indeed impossible, to bring about communion with God and our fellow men, relying only on our own efforts? Why is it that the history of salvation shows God's desire to make a covenant with mankind and thus attain to mutual love, and yet this must be always offered again by God's persistent love? In still more radical terms: why is the new and eternal covenant sealed by the solitude of Jesus on the cross? What happens to the dynamism of human freedom following upon sin? And why does this seem to have given rise, even through God's doing, to something like sin, i.e. suspicion, rejection, pride, self-sufficiency, lack of belief?

A first element in a reply is this: the staggering speed with which evil happens is the result of the desire for our good! *Reconciliation is a sensitive issue because every division stems from a certain perception and expectation of good.* Not just by chance did Jesus teach us to pray by putting on our lips the invocation "lead us not into temptation",²⁹ i.e. do not let the appreciation of your very gifts make us forget the bond with You who are the Giver.

This perilous insecurity is indicated in Scripture in the suggestion of the tempter: "You will be like God":³⁰ it is a subtle temptation because it is part of God's plan to create us as his children, and place us in the world with true freedom. The fact that in a certain way man wants everything is something that God himself has placed in his heart, but the interpretation of this that springs immediately to mind is that of "having everything" rather than as "receiving everything"; to be followed at once by the idea of freedom as pure autonomy instead of as a gift: in the first case it gives rise to a disengagement, and in the second to thanksgiving; in the first case life is solitude, and in the second gratitude. The tree of good and evil suggests precisely this desire to have without receiving, this being without belonging, this judging without any real point of reference.

And there is a second element in the reply to the question about the difficulty of man being reconciled: the ban on the fruit of the tree is in God's mind the *hint of the difference between Creator and creature.* This is a positive element because it guarantees and preserves the original features of the creature; the latter is called to establish a relationship, to enter into a dialogue with someone who wanted him so much as to bring him into existence. The serpent suggests however that this takes away an important measure of freedom and happiness, and this manages to obscure

²⁸ 2 Cor 5, 20

²⁹ Mt 6,13

³⁰ Gen 3, 5

all the "good things of God" which man has at his disposal, and leads to suspicion, indifference, incredulity about God's power and the falsifying of God's image.

It is against all this that every religion, Christianity included, has continually to struggle. But while every other religion is objectively marked by this reality, Christianity is excluded from it. Jesus is the man free from unbelief, the Son, the synthesis of all freedom and belonging. This is already indicated in Genesis 3, where is foreshadowed the future victory that will come through descent from the woman,³¹ rightly called the '*Proto-evangelium*' because it foretells the heart of salvation, "the work we must do" to gain salvation: have faith, reproduce in our humanity trust in God and, to the extent of that trust, the very "faith of Jesus".³²

The parable of the merciful father describes the two possible modes of reconciliation starting from the two distortions of faith: ungrateful self-sufficiency and resentful dissatisfaction, flight and slavery, remoteness and aridity of heart, in both cases a fatherliness misunderstood. Who would deny that there is something here for us?

The younger son feels the longing to have his own share: the older son works conscientiously in his father's house. But why does the younger son interpret staying at home as devoid of happiness and the older son as harmful to his freedom? Why has the younger one never thought of the inheritance which was most surely awaiting him in the heart and house of the Father, and the older one never given a thought to the kid he could have had whenever he wanted ("all I have is yours"³³)? What will it cost, how easy or difficult will reconciliation be for a heart which is mistrustful or resentful? Jesus suggests that it is so far from easy that the Father must once again take the initiative and exercise his preventive love: the younger one "he ran out and embraced",³⁴ in the case of the elder one "the father went out to plead with him".³⁵

In this way Jesus suggests that it is indeed all quite easy: if the initiative is the Father's, our task is only that of "letting ourselves be reconciled", of entering into God's forgiveness. But a continuing twofold dimension of the drama has been brought to our notice which we shall have to meet from time to time: the inability of the younger son to make on his own account the transition from remorse to repentance, and the consequence of the attitude of the elder brother which will be the condemning of Jesus to death.

Salvation at the root of evil.

The dynamics which trigger every division in the life of people are precisely those described in Genesis 3 and Luke 15. Lack of belief and the evil relationships that follow, the conviction that happiness must be seized upon and not just accepted, that rather than trust someone else it is better to go it alone, that the motives for love

³¹ cf. Gen 3, 15

³² Jn 6, 28-38

³³ Lk 15, 31

³⁴ Lk 15, 20

³⁵ Lk 15, 28

are not as genuine as they seemed, are all consequences of evil shaping our hearts and our relationships.

All young children reach a point when, after having been given everything, they hear for the first time the word "no". For them that word "no" marks a crisis to be coped with, for their parents it is simply a modification of "yes", which is right for them here and now. But for the parents it is a risk and for the little ones a dramatic crossroads: it is a moment which can make doubtful and unreliable the figure of the father or make it clear and reliable, a moment for saying: "he is doing it for my own good" or for saying: "he is deliberately making me unhappy".

In a similar way all young children make the painful discovery that they are not the one and only exclusive centre of attention and affection. But why does such a discovery appear as a sign of jealousy and privation rather than of joy? Why does it suddenly become hard to be welcoming and generous? Why do psychologists find that altruism, while initially containing some weak element, is in reality worth pursuing?

It is clear that all this is already the task of reconciliation: it is a matter of learning to live in the world against a background of love rather than of selfishness, rather in the style of the sharing of gifts rather than of hoarding them. But how many external experiences and how many interior decisions must be made by a child, a young person or an adult before they become convinced that love unites and does not divide, that love finds space for others without losing any of what it had before, that love excludes all fear because in true love no one is too poor and no one is too rich!

If this is the temptation, a fundamental fact of life already within us, it is made strong and difficult to overcome by its more evident and widespread forms: there are parents who are objectively untrustworthy, there are broken families, friends who betray each other; there are bonds forged for selfish motives, and errors made in good faith; there is the experience of being misunderstood, or of not understanding others; there are some really frightening things in the world; there is the saying "to be trusting is good, not to be is better", there are evil feelings and actions, there are hatred and vendettas, the hoarding of goods and the exploitation of the weak, murders and genocides.

Reconciliation, taken here in its broadest sense, is difficult, because it cannot be a regressive desire to return to the womb, withdrawal to a tranquil oasis, but must come to grips realistically with the obligation of justice, with rightful claims, with denouncing evil, with defence of the poor and innocent, with the control of the domineering, with the patient work of building peace and solidarity.

Salesian implications.

Among the possible salesian aspects I think it is of capital importance to read in the light of these reflections on the difficult task of reconciliation, the profound wisdom of Don Bosco's "It is not sufficient simply to love"; the "extra" that love calls for in our charism is motivated specifically by the fact that a wounded heart, as for instance of a poor boy or a sorely tried confrere, cannot easily begin to build up in

itself that trust which prompts a response; the love, therefore, of the educator or a confrere tries to overcome every suspicion with the reassuring offering of affection so evident and freely given as to overcome all reserve.

The surprising thing is that every sympathetic contact of the kind shown by Don Bosco with his boys rapidly puts paid to any hardness of heart. From this we can learn two things: the first is that reconciliation is so much desired that when it is spontaneously and generously offered, rather than given in response to a request, it is immediately productive! And the second is that the educator who would use the power of affection in an exploitive manner would produce only disenchantment, cynicism, and unparalleled violence. No experience in fact is uglier than that of a betrayal of trust, because it is the destruction of a deep personal relationship, diffidently built up with much hard work.

It is only too easy to imagine how much pedagogical commitment is required of today's educators to oppose the affective self-indulgence which tends to entrap hearts through friendship, warmth, understanding, dialogue, as though it were all a game, without any responsibility or life commitment.

In what concerns the *communities*, we need to identify better the great themes of our spirituality. We need to make the effort to work harder and with greater cooperation on those elements that come between the general outlines of a project and the particular details that crop up in the course of its realization and need to be further examined.

The best premise for all reconciliation is the proclamation and experience of its *gratuitous nature*: the courage of forgiveness can stem only from the rediscovery that the world is not founded on calculation but on donation! And there are no catechetical programs, school lessons or recreational activities that cannot provide an opportunity for bringing home to youngsters how much exists in the world through pure gift.

Along these lines Don Bosco used to say that the finest flower that can flourish in the heart of a boy is gratitude: to help the boys (and the confreres!) to be aware of their gifts, to show gratitude, to say 'thank you', to reflect this attitude in their way of life, these are the best ways of establishing education on a sound dynamic basis.

A second premise making reconciliation possible is a *welcoming approach*, which is also freely given, because it is this attitude that ensures that the gift will not fail in its purpose, will not be cut off at its source, and so will not be prematurely and disappointingly withdrawn but will achieve its "human" purpose.

A welcoming reception functions both in anticipation and retrospectively: it takes the first step and can also remedy a possible initial mistake by apologizing. The reception shows that love leaves elbow-room for the other person, and gives meaning to that phrase: "It is not sufficient simply to love", by being sympathetic and welcoming, listening in an attentive manner, making the other feel important and worthy of consideration, without prejudgement or any judgement at all, showing understanding for the other's point of view and his good intentions, letting him go

ahead and even make mistakes without feeling too embarrassed or even criticized beyond what is evident even to himself.

Nowadays it is pedagogically and spiritually crucial to adopt a wise praxis which enshrines the great commandment of love in a practical and understandable manner for daily application. For instance, so many reconciliations do not take place, and so much love is wasted, because our spiritual approach is out of focus, because our "education", our history of sin, have made it difficult for us to distinguish between reserve and putting up the shutters, between frankness and rudeness, between eagerness and haste, between love of truth and dogmatism, between the gentleness of charity and simple weakness.

These examples apply prevalently to the area of personal relationships, but by extending our reflections it would not be difficult to draw up a scheme for reconciliation at community, ecclesial, and even a broader social level.

Our questions should follow more or less the following line: what makes people in general and my confreres in particular feel happy and successful in their self-giving? What makes them feel humiliated? What is unavoidable for reasons of justice, of the institutional order, of reasonable organization? On the other hand what *can* be avoided and, if eliminated, would contribute to lessening the extent of indifference, marginalization, lack of motivation, conflict, quarrels, etc.? What will foster or hamper the other person continuing to appear an adversary, a rival, a stranger?

A third premise for reconciliation is *patience*, in the sense of forgetfulness of self and putting oneself in the other person's shoes, as a preliminary to understanding and forgiveness, with the constant aim of doing good, with the general and humble recognition that we are all weak, fallible and sinners.

The introduction of a pedagogical process in which pardon is shown to be the normal condition rather than something only occasional and extreme, an honour rather than a burden, something positive rather than negative, would lead both confreres and youngsters to a better understanding of God's heart and to make their own heart more open to others.

In this sense anyone who is involved in the care of souls, and of his own in the first place, knows very well how difficult this is, but knows also how much fruit derives from an education to the humble and divine understanding of the first step, to the ability to forget the web of wrongs done and suffered and to try to love in an unconditional manner.

I think that it is important also for our own happiness (and as educators to the faith, so that we do not fail to practise what we preach) to exercise reconciliation in all its most spontaneous forms, and together *find ways of reconciliation and penance which are most expressive, well regulated and celebrated*. The question I would like you to think about is this: is it possible, in fidelity to our tradition that in the matter of reconciliation we lean a good deal on the figure of the Rector, to foster forms of reconciliation that are shared to a greater extent, less reserved but more communal, perhaps less formal but more sincere? Is it possible to enter more lucidly into the

wave of communion which is nowadays marking the life and conscience of the Church? Is it possible likewise to take from sacramental Reconciliation the notion that its purpose is solely "to put one's own conscience in order"?

There are frequently offered in the context of spiritual retreats *specific moments of truth and reconciliation* (brief exchanges between two persons for apologizing, clearing up a misunderstanding, saying 'thank you', giving and asking for correction, etc.) always greatly appreciated by those involved, especially young people. Such moments represent in many cases a golden opportunity. In fact one can live for quite a time with a feeling of coldness or a mistaken impression regarding another person – not about anything of earthshaking importance – but if an opportunity occurs in a suitable situation and atmosphere a humble opening becomes possible, a sincere clarification, with the acceptance of correction and the courage of the truth. One thought badly of the other, and a few words have sufficed to defuse the situation. The moral is perhaps that it is not always sufficient to appeal to good will and to what the Constitutions say about family spirit: some values need to be expressed in ritual form.

The same must be said of penitential processes: we could only benefit from a community commitment to more courageous outward signs without immediately objecting about differences of customs, health, advancing years, common sense and extreme radical ideas, but facing the question directly and sincerely! An example might be: What could a community do to ask pardon of the poor during the jubilee year, after recognizing that it has become middle-class in its style of life? How could such reconciliation be made apparent?

The Appendix to our Constitutions carries Don Bosco's words about "five faults to be avoided".³⁶ It is a legacy of practical wisdom, not generic but linked directly with our charism, which we may have accepted at one time with all the rest, but have since forgotten. In these few paragraphs Don Bosco homes in on all the points of the Constitutions with which as Salesians we must immediately come to grips: reconciliation will therefore mean before all else a review of our own personal self-centredness in a consideration of items and problems we meet in the daily life of the community, in our membership of the Province and the Congregation, and in the fulfilment of the mission.

Following the same line of thought we can consider today some lines for an indispensable reformulation of life in the present context, in the sense of a return to the Gospel and the roots of our vocation, by reflecting on specific elements of salesian religious experience in which we feel we are defective: how lively is the expression of the love of Christ which was at the beginning and must be at the centre of our consecrated life? What is to be said of our desire and the effort we make to give effect to the preventive system for the young in the circumstances of our time? Has the salesian mission not been frequently thought about and carried out beneath the signs of selfishness, timidity and narrow views? Has brotherly communion, a sign of the Lord's presence and an element of reconciliation in the environment, been sufficiently real and visibly expressed? Has the communication of our charism and spirituality to lay people been carried out with hope and urgency, indicating the grace it represents?

³⁶ Constitutions, English edition, pp. 244-245

4. The sacrament of Reconciliation.

What we have been saying is expressed and realized for us as individuals, the Christian community, and world-dwellers in the sacrament of Penance. It is the event of salvation which God in his infinite love makes available for all of us today. Flowing from the heart of Christ in the fullness of the Paschal mystery, it prompts the desire for and brings about reconciliation, pardon, and the possibility of being created anew as children of God by the strength of the Spirit.

It is one of the powers, mandates, services or mission – whatever name you give it – that Jesus entrusted to the Church in the clearest and most solemn form: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you". When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained".³⁷

The scene is the Cenacle on the day of the Resurrection, where the disciples have come together and Jesus is showing them the signs of his death and Resurrection.

St Paul will later illustrate in words that have no need of comment the connection between God in Christ and all of us: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us".³⁸

In the Church's mission and in our personal Christian experience reconciliation is a substantial element for a possible new humanity. The Church takes it up, proposes it, preaches it and gives it its full effect: in the individual, in the community of believers, in the world; with God, between men, with reality, history and events, because the Spirit makes everything new. It is proclaimed in various ways: through the Word, prayer, charity, acceptance of suffering, penance and the Eucharist.

The effect is brought about in line with the nature of the sacrament through a visible and human sign productive through faith of saving grace. Of this in the course of the centuries the Church has clarified the conditions so that it leads to a real encounter with God and the grace reaches to the hidden wounds of the individual and the community.

The sign is in fact efficacious also because it is pedagogical: because it implies man's freedom and educates it. The point is an important one because it conveys the idea of the sacrament not just as a rite of purification, but as an event, a human meeting between God and the individual in the community, a meeting in

³⁷ Jn 20, 21-23

³⁸ 2 Cor 5, 17-19

which God, the individual and the community are all totally and seriously involved: God through the offering of his pardon, the individual through his sincere repentance, and the community that welcomes him back.

To think otherwise, i.e. that God pardons without man's awareness and repentance, would mean thinking that the sacrament functions automatically (when you are ready, press the button!), without any participation by the human conscience, and would be reduced in practice to a magical rite; and similarly if the sacrament were no more than an indication of human repentance without God's intervention, it would be reduced to a mere ceremony without any guarantee of efficacy.

In the first case, because he is exploited, biased to our own time and purpose, the omnipotence of God is denied; in the second case he is reduced to one who fundamentally does not love, because he is not involved effectively in our affairs. In both cases the Church, which must be the mediatrix, continuation and actualization of the mystery and ministry of Christ, would be reduced to a mere "agency for religious services".

Catechesis, but earlier still our adult understanding of sacramental Reconciliation, must accept and carry out the actions which reflect the mind of God and those which express the dispositions of man. In the sacrament in fact is played out and resolved in the light of God's Word the tragic experience of the baptized person's sin and guilt.

A process of re-evaluation

I will not dwell on the effort of the Church to preserve in their genuine and integral form the components of the sacramental "sign", so as to prevent man from getting a facile free-for-all idea and to make clear the theological, historical and anthropological dimensions contained in reconciliation.

The sacramental sign is better located in the communal context of the Family of God, the pain inflicted on the filial rapport with him, the examination of conscience leading to an acceptance of responsibility in the light of God's Word for the evils we harbour within us and which through our collaboration, small though it may be, end up by becoming colossal in the world; the resolution we made to be converted to the Gospel and work for a humanity in accordance with the Father's heart in whatever setting we may find ourselves; "penance" seen as an attitude and practice which passes from the sacrament into life and vice versa, as a desire to repeat the daily gestures of love, of gospel vigilance and of participation in the communion of saints.

I will not dwell either on an analysis of the general causes of a certain regrettable neglect of the sacrament: you will have no difficulty in identifying them for yourselves. Think of the weakening of our relationship with God; think of the obscuring of the sense of sin and the difficulty in recognizing the mediation of the Church; think of the neglect of the spiritual life starting with prayer and the individualization of conscience, so that each one applies his own norms as regard guilt and remorse; think of the kind of catechesis which is sadly deficient and the neglect by many priests of the ministry.

I will not even dwell on the merit of the reasoning, often put forward even by religious and persons engaged in pastoral work, of the inability of the man of today to make a personal and not just a generic confession of his own sins. I am sure that as educators and pastors you are well acquainted with the theological and pedagogical reasons underlying the components of the sacramental sign, and that you are ready also to put forward effective reasons for them to both young people and adults.

I want rather to offer you some broader reflections on the whole topic.

If the Resurrection is the outcome of the Passion, we have to admit that our heart is not only something beautiful, (i.e. the seat of aspirations and possibilities) nor only fragile and limited, but is also prone to sin, and so to "save" it and make it new³⁹ is no mean undertaking.

The Christian faith does not speak of a God who is kind in a general kind of way, nor of man as essentially limited or unstable. It speaks of a God who has loved us so much as to shed all his blood for us, and of man whose guilt is so great that salvation is indeed a serious undertaking.

Mature spiritual experience and good evangelization must not whittle down the paschal mystery to a universal and abstract salvific "will", but will recall that it is a matter of a "salvific" will fulfilled in a "crucified" way. In the story of Christ there is an intrinsic link between incarnation and passion, between "he became man" and "he suffered, died and was buried"; just as in man's pilgrimage there is an intrinsic link between redemption and glorification, between being rescued and freed and becoming a son of God.

The overcoming of a mentality and a catechesis excessively concentrated on sin must not remove the recollection that the death of Jesus was necessary for pardon to become a real possibility.⁴⁰ The sacrament takes us back also to the heart of this reality and frees us from any lightness of approach and religious consumerism.

And I will add a second reflection. The history of cultures bears witness to the realization that we do not escape from sin and evil by our own efforts. Disgust with oneself, the balanced or excessive sense of guilt, do not provide by themselves a way out of the evil. They are only evidence of the existence of a trauma.

More problematic still is the question whether it is possible for us to truly recognize ourselves as sinners without this leading to self-condemnation. To this question man cannot find a response by his own efforts alone. The holiness of God and the wickedness of man represent two abysses which are difficult to penetrate. Overemphasis on one's own self-condemnation leads to skepticism or desperation; but to accuse or ignore God is to lose the one intermediary for possible salvation. Much has been written in recent years about this dilemma.

³⁹ cf. Ps 50 (51)

⁴⁰ cf. 1 Pet 2, 24-25

On the other hand if true pardon is guaranteed, man by his own efforts has never understood it: this is the greatest problem of every culture and every religion. The reason is simple: since in the question of guilt man is both judge and accused, he cannot grant himself pardon on his own account.

In other words pardon must come from without: it must be an intervention, not a deduction from principles, a reflexive repentance or wishful thinking. Either it comes from without, therefore, or it does not exist at all; either it is a gift (pardon = "per dono") or it can have no pretence to existence.

Two consequences follow: The first places "Christian" pardon, and the sacrament which signifies it, as a highpoint in universal religious experience, at a moment in history characterized by plurireligious experiences. Suspension of judgement about the pardon of guilt characterizes religions which in this way display intellectual and moral honesty. The clearest in this respect is the Jewish religion. In the psalms is heard the sigh of one who knows he is guilty before God, is repentant and trusts himself to God's mercy. But the response which guarantees certain pardon is heard only in individual cases through the lips of a prophet.⁴¹

It is precisely in this point that Christianity is of universal interest, because it proclaims the possibility of liberation offered by God and at the same time worthy of man. In fact Christian salvation, far from being a kind of decree of amnesty is the intervention of the Son of God who on the cross is both the *Innocent* one (a sign of how much evil is wrought by sin), and the *Guilty* one (now he is the "despised" one, struck down by God⁴²), the *Judge* (by his death the Spirit "will convince the world of sin"⁴³), and *Judge in the surprising form of Redeemer*: the judgement of condemnation falls on him instead of on us; he was "made sin"⁴⁴ in our place! In this way he does not just condone sin but takes it away completely, he uproots it from the world.

The second consequence relates to the personal appeal which the sacrament implies and its insertion in a process, effort and style of life in Christ. The liberation from evil and its uprooting cannot be simply a decree on the part of God. If God does not succeed in persuading us internally about the aspect of good, order in the world would be established only in the manner of a police-state, and it would no longer be a world of love. And God wants only *this* world!

And so the sacramental sign brings the event of reconciliation to the last and most personal of man's wounds. Among the many forms of evil in the world, it is both strange yet understandable that our attention flies immediately to those which are inevitable (diseases, earthquakes, wars or calamities for which we have no direct responsibility). It is symptomatic that such attention is ultimately transformed for many persons into suspicion and doubts about the effective power and goodness of God. Why are we not more scandalized by the evil that stems from freedom which is not avoided despite it being easy to do so? Is it really worthy of us to make

⁴¹ cf. 2 Sam 12, 13

⁴² cf. Is 52-53

⁴³ Jn 16, 8

⁴⁴ cf. 2 Cor 5, 21

accusations *before* recognizing the evil in the production and multiplication of which we have played our part? Why, in all human and Christian honesty, do we not make ourselves aware of the drama that is taking place within us, i.e. the fact that we are beset by evil as well as by good desires, the contradiction between doing the evil we do not want and not doing the good we do want, instead of trying to justify ourselves?

Or why, once again as Christians, instead of making empty demands, do we not study with greater attention the Revelation of Jesus who, in the name of the Father and the strength of the Spirit, has accomplished those actions which have freed us from evil and those alone? And why are we not much more concerned about avoiding evil and preventing it in our fellow men?

The sacrament and salesian spirituality.

The salesian connection with this theme is well-nigh inexhaustible. It takes in Don Bosco's spiritual experience, the central place he gave to the sacrament of penance in his pedagogy for the young, the sacramental world in which the whole of salesian spirituality is developed and, not least, the singular story of Don Bosco as a confessor of the young which we are called upon to continue.

The uninterrupted practice of Don Bosco from the first years of his adolescence, during his student years at the seminary, as a young priest and as a famous man, is summed up by Fr Eugene Ceria in the following passage: "Don Bosco grew fond of confession from his tenderest years, and no change of circumstances could weaken him in his loving frequent use of it... When he was a student at Chieri and quite free to make his own arrangements he thought immediately of finding a regular confessor... As a priest at Turin he made his weekly confession to Blessed Cafasso, and after the death of the latter he had recourse to the ministry of a holy priest who had been one of his fellow-students and who went every Monday morning to hear confessions in the sacristy of the Church of Mary Help of Christians, and who afterwards asked Don Bosco to hear his own confession.

When he was travelling and his usual confessor was not available, he remained faithful to his custom, having recourse to a Salesian or others as opportunity offered. During his stay in Rome, for instance, for a period of two months in 1867, he made his weekly confession to Fr Vasco, a Jesuit he had known at Turin.

His sons were at first hesitant to do so, but he replied: "Come now; please do Don Bosco this kindness and let him make his confession".⁴⁵

Between the time of Don Bosco and our own there have certainly been changes in the organization of the spiritual life and sacramental practice. But it would not be historically correct to think that Don Bosco was merely following a devotional habit. Every word of his (and they are indeed many!) has something to teach us: it manifests the sense of the living encounter with God implied by Reconciliation, the conviction of the need for and rich nature of the mediation of the Church, and the function of the sacrament in the process of a serene, joyful and constant growth.

⁴⁵ CERIA E., *Don Bosco con Dio*, Rome 1988, pp. 162-163

On the influence attributed by Don Bosco to sacramental Reconciliation in the education of the young we now have available documented studies which give the sacrament its proper place in the overall program of human and Christian growth.⁴⁶ In the catechesis of Don Bosco emphasis has been frequently placed on Reconciliation and confession in both words and formal practice, i.e. by arranging matters and opportunities so that the young would be encouraged to approach the sacrament a first time and then make it a constant practice.

Don Lemoyne wrote: "every phrase of Don Bosco was an incitement to confession",⁴⁷ a hyperbolic expression of which the meaning is clear. One cannot miss the frequency, insistence and variety with which Don Bosco returned to this point in sermons and good-nights, biographies and stories, prayer-books⁴⁸ and in recounting his dreams.

In each of the biographies of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, there is a chapter on confession. In that of Dominic Savio, which is first in the order of time (1859), the two sacraments of penance and the eucharist are combined.⁴⁹ In that of Michael Magone on the other hand there are two chapters, the fourth and fifth, dedicated to confession alone, the one in narrative style and the other in didactic form, addressed to youngsters and to educators.

Under the guise of a biography Don Bosco sets out a pedagogy to help the young to overcome their lower inclinations, to grow in humanity and come nearer to God through penance.

Fr Albert Caviglia, who made a deep study of Don Bosco, holds that chapter 5 of the biography of Michael Magone is one of the most important and valuable items in the literature and pedagogy of Don Bosco, a document outstanding for its spiritual guidance.⁵⁰

More original than its insistence on our Founder's catechesis on penance, reconciliation and confession is the assessment of the educative influence of penance which does not take the place of but is rooted in its "sacramental" nature, of the efficacious sign of grace offered through the ministry of the Church and received in faith. It harmonises well with the idea of the growth of the youngster as a child of God, "human" growth in the best sense of the word, in need of continuous relationship with the mystery which is heard in the conscience.

Penance awakens the awareness of oneself and one's particular state, leads the way into an environment of holiness and grace, and prompts an internal building up of the person. It makes the upright citizen and good Christian grow from within

⁴⁶ cf. BRAIDO P., *Il Sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, PAS Verlag 1964, part III, ch. III, p. 274-285; SCHEPENS J., *Penitence et Eucharistie dans la methode educative et pastoral de Don Bosco*, Rome 1986

⁴⁷ cf. CERIA E., *Don Bosco con Dio*, p.164

⁴⁸ cf. *The Companion of Youth*

⁴⁹ cf BOSCO G., *Life of Dominic Savio*, ch.14

⁵⁰ cf. CAVIGLIA A., *Magone Michele*, p.461

and this is clearly seen in life. This would seem to be the message of the three well-known biographies.

It was precisely this "educative" vision that determined a pastoral practice quite sui generis: penance was not reduced to or isolated in a moment of ritual: it was led up to by a conducive environment and by a relationship of friendship and trust with the educators, and in particular with the principal educator – the Rector. There was a continuity between reconciliation in life and in the moment of the sacrament. The youngster at the oratory felt himself welcome and esteemed, in a family atmosphere of trust and confidence, prompted to communication with others and urged to make progress with relationships which led and provoked him to self-realization. That was the story exemplified in the biography of Michael Magone. It frequently happened that youngsters passed naturally from friendly conversation with Don Bosco in the playground to the confessional in church.

Reconciliation, particularly on special occasions, was surrounded by an atmosphere of gospel festivity: the eucharistic celebration, followed by something special at table, play-time, some musical or artistic presentation accompanied and surrounded, so to speak, the pardon obtained. The youngsters were always able to count on all the conditions being favourable: time, place, persons, encouragement.

Maybe today, rather than repeat literally the statement that penance and the eucharist are the pillars of education what is more urgently needed is to reflect on and recover their original pedagogical application.

Don Bosco's educative experience led him to become an extraordinary confessor of the young; outstanding for the quantity of his penitents, for the time he gave to them and for the wisdom he acquired and expressed in observations full of pastoral significance; outstanding for the joy he felt in reconciling youngsters with God and with life; outstanding also because of the effect that his sensitive priestly approach produced in so many youngsters who later left it on record.

There is a photograph of Don Bosco which has gone round the world. It shows him hearing the confessions of his boys. One of them, Paul Albera, is whispering into Don Bosco's ear as though confessing his sins, while other clerics and a big group of youngsters stand around the kneeler awaiting their turn.⁵¹

This photograph was not taken at random. It is one of the first (1861) that Don Bosco wanted with the intention of demonstrating his way of thinking, "almost a legacy for his Family. He liked it and wanted it enlarged".⁵² It is a poster, a manifesto, a proclamation, almost an advertisement billboard before its time. The scenario took a lot of preparation because the exposure time for the camera had to be rather long. The youngsters had to be brought together and arranged and the words Don Bosco said to the small Paul Albera, chosen to be the penitent, are still remembered.

That was the image of how Don Bosco wanted to be known: among his boys and hearing confessions.

⁵¹ cf. SOLDA G., *Don Bosco nella fotografia dell'800*, pp. 84-89

⁵² cf. *ibid.*

In this way he practised what he had always said and written: "Experience has shown that the most valid supports of the young are the sacraments of confession and communion. Give me a youngster who frequents these sacraments and you will see him grow in youthful development, reach man's estate, and if it be God's will attain to a ripe old age through behaviour which provides an example for all who know him. This a maxim already understood by youngsters who practise it; it should be understood also by those engaged in their education so that they can inculcate it".⁵³

The photograph also reveals a point of particular interest; it seems to have been taken in an open space with a group of boys around. Don Bosco's educative and filial understanding of penance freed him from all rigidity concerning the place and the celebration of the rite. He heard confessions in the playground, he heard them in the parlour; he even heard them in carriages and trains. Nowadays emphasis is laid on communal and ritual signs of the sacrament for a celebration that appeals to feelings, imagination and conscience; what is evident is Don Bosco's ability to link the substance of the sacrament with the effort to encourage its use by placing it in a youthful and educational context.

It was precisely in this context that salesian confessors of the young multiplied and had such a great influence on vocational results among both boys and girls.

The reconciled and the ministers of Reconciliation.

In what I have written above I have deliberately combined Don Bosco's personal experience of reconciliation with his pastoral educative practice. How could he have imagined what the restoration of interior peace means to a boy, if he himself had not been first aware of the need? And how could he have reproduced in himself the welcoming attitude of God if he had not first felt and savoured it? And how could he have had such confidence in the sacrament for the process of growth in holiness if he had not experienced it directly? Where did he get the understanding, the patience, stimulus and enthusiasm, to communicate to his family and collaborators?

The apostle St Paul himself seems to combine the two elements when he declares: "God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation".⁵⁴

Personal grace and ministry! Reconciliation, more than an occasional practice of piety or a priestly service, is a new area in which is set the whole of life, all that Jesus meant when he said "Be converted". It has in the sacrament its efficacious focal point because like baptism it is grafted into the death and Resurrection of Christ and the whole Church shares in it.

This is also true in our own case. Through the grace of unity, personal experience of Reconciliation and pedagogical and pastoral practice mutually strengthen each other. Reconciled ourselves, we become craftsmen and mediators of reconciliation.

⁵³ BOSCO G., *Life of Dominic Savio*, ch. 14

⁵⁴ 2 Cor 5, 18

And so our spirituality project, expressed in the Constitutions, when dealing with our mission states that "With the young we celebrate the encounter with Christ in word, prayer and sacraments".⁵⁵ "With" certainly refers to the material circumstances of time and place, but much more to the constant living out of a life in the light of the Gospel and of our consecration.

In this sense the whole of life comes to be seen as a process of "continual conversion"⁵⁶ which includes many aspects such as the daily and ever more generous commitment to our mission, watchfulness, mutual forgiveness, acceptance of the daily cross,⁵⁷ prayer and moments of review of life,⁵⁸ and has in the sacrament its highpoint and fulfilment: "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".⁵⁹

From our matured and continuous experience stem the desire and the energy to create educative situations which promote reconciliation and lead the young to find the point of unity and harmony which their life needs. From this stems also the ability to find and follow paths of reconciliation in the many conflicting circumstances multiplicity of our world.

With regard to the sacrament of penance in the world of youth and in Christian communities, we are today witnessing a threefold phenomenon: the first is the abandoning of the sacrament by many people, the second is its mechanical use by a certain number, and the third (more positive) is indeed the request for spiritual direction by a small group looking for better spiritual quality of life.

The response to this varied situation consists in following with the majority the educative process from a welcoming reception to the proclamation of the fatherly kindness of God and his desire to have us as his children; in helping the second group with educative advice proportionate to their ability to concentrate their still imperfect efforts; and finally in becoming capable and available ministers of reconciliation for those who have already consciously set out on the path of the spiritual life.

Always and in every case it will be our task to put young people in contact with the life of grace - made up of inspirations, celebrations and experiences - with the Eucharistic Mystery as the summit. This is an efficacious and living memorial, the source of perennial Reconciliation

⁵⁵ C 36

⁵⁶ C 90

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ cf. C 91

⁵⁹ C 90

brought about by the Cross. It leads to Reconciliation and is at the same time its supreme and greatest expression, because by uniting ourselves to Christ we enter into the Trinitarian communion of God and ecclesial unity with our fellow men.

Conclusion: crossing the threshold.⁶⁰

On the night between 24 and 25 December this coming Christmas we are invited to pass through the Holy Door: "Crossing its threshold, the Pope will show to the Church and to the world the Holy Gospel, the wellspring of life and hope for the coming Third Millennium".⁶¹ It is a sign of the entry of Christ into the human family. For us it is an invitation to enter into a new setting and to relocate our life in an environment more clearly enlightened by the love of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, marked by unconditional fellowship and enrichment between individuals, characterized by openness of mind and heart to the aspirations and expectations of humanity made possible by the presence of Christ in time, by a greater sensitivity in listening to the voice of the young and greater courage in meeting their needs.

"To pass through that door means to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; it is to strengthen faith in him in order to live the new life which he has given us. It is a decision which presumes freedom to choose and also the courage to leave something behind...".⁶²

In the hope that we may find ourselves together, spiritually united, in passing through that 'door' which admits to the fullness of time which is Christ, I send you my cordial greetings and impart to you the blessing of Mary Help of Christians.

⁶⁰ cf *Incarnationis Mysterium*, 8

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*