

2.2 LIFE AS PRAYER

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In his Presentation of the documents of GC27, the Rector Major, Fr Angel Fernandes Artime, speaks of the “grace of unity”: it is “the way ahead in order to respond with generosity and be ourselves: consecrated Salesians, brothers at the service of the young. In welcoming this gift we encounter a characteristic feature of our spirituality – union with God; this fosters the unification of our life: prayer and work, action and contemplation, reflection and the apostolate” (CG27, p. 12). The Chapter itself chose the icon of “The vine and the branches” as a symbol of the deep unity between being mystics in the Spirit, prophets of fraternity, and servants of the young. We want to offer here a reflection that might help us on our journey towards the unification that transforms us into contemplatives in action (C 12), persons with a “closely-knit life project” like that of our father Don Bosco (C 21).

There is no doubt that Salesian life is characterized by tireless work, in fidelity to the motto “work and temperance”, but above all in imitation of Don Bosco. Work alone, however, can become a great risk, an obstacle to prayer. We are not referring here only to “prayers”, understood as “practices of piety”, but above all to that “union with God” that ought to characterize our whole life. Recalling the beautiful phrase of St Teresa of Jesus that “mental prayer is nothing but friendship, the willingness to spend much time in the company of someone who we know loves us”,² we could ask: how might our lives become an experience of God, a loving encounter with him? And how might our mission set the tenor of our whole life (C 3), in such a way that life becomes prayer?

² “Que no es otra cosa oración mental, a mi parecer, sino tratar de amistad, estando muchas veces tratando a solas con quien sabemos que nos ama.” St Teresa of Jesus, *Vida* 8, 5.

In the very first section on the fundamental identity of the Salesian, our Rule of Life says:

“As he works for the salvation of the young, the Salesian experiences the fatherhood of God and continually reminds himself of the divine dimension of his work: ‘Apart from me you can do nothing’ (Jn 15,5). He cultivates union with God, aware of the need to pray without ceasing in a simple heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ and with the Father, whom he feels close. Attentive to the presence of the Spirit and doing everything for God’s love, he becomes like Don Bosco a contemplative in action” (C 12).

How could we transform this ideal into reality? Clearly, we have no intention of downplaying the importance of the *practices* of piety and of the sacraments that give concrete shape to our dialogue with the Lord. We are asking, rather, about how our life and work might become experience of God.

“Life as prayer”: The distinguishing mark of Salesian prayer

To this question, which lies at the very core of our life as consecrated apostles, we have an extraordinarily rich response in our Constitutions. Article 95, which in fact bears the title “Life as prayer”, runs thus:

“Immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, the salesian learns to meet God through those to whom he is sent. Discovering the fruits of the Spirit in the lives of men, especially the young, he gives thanks for everything; as he shares their problems and sufferings, he invokes upon them the light and strength of God’s presence. He draws on the love of the Good Shepherd, whose witness he wants to be, and shares in the spiritual riches offered him by the community. His need of God, keenly felt in his apostolic commitment, leads him to celebrate the liturgy of life, attaining that ‘tireless industry, made holy by prayer and union with God’ that should be the characteristic of the sons of St John Bosco.”³

³ While union with God is the topic of C 12, C 95 on life as prayer occupies a very special place in the Constitutions, coming as it does at the very end not only of ch. VII: In Dialogue with the Lord, but also of the Second Part of our Constitutions: Sent to the

In order to highlight some of the elements of this beautiful text, I would like to compare it with the earlier version in the Constitutions approved *ad experimentum* by the Special General Chapter (1972). Interestingly, the text of 1972 speaks of the *problem* of the synthesis between prayer and life: “The Salesian immersed in the world and in the cares of the apostolate **may at times find it difficult to meet God freely and spontaneously.**” This observation certainly contains some truth, but at the same time it implies a certain *dichotomy*, which recurs once again towards the end of the article: “an interior need of God can lead us to live in him ‘the liturgy of life’, offering ourselves in our daily work ‘as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’ (Rom 12,1).” (C 67, 1972) This also is true, reflecting as it does the whole spiritual tradition of the Church; but we could ask ourselves: is this “offering of ourselves” not so generic that it could be applied to just any kind of work and to any kind of spirituality?

Our present article, instead, tries to overcome this dichotomy at its very root. It proposes to us a *Salesian way of understanding* the relationship between our work and union with God. We might add here that it was not easy to arrive at the formulation of this article, which is a true jewel of Salesian spirituality: only towards the very end, in the final draft, did the Chapter hit upon this wonderful and illuminating synthesis. This can be seen from the very first words of the article, which stand in sharp and explicit contrast to the earlier text: “Immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, **the salesian learns to meet God through those to whom he is sent.**” And the same thing is highlighted at the end: “His need of God, **keenly felt in his apostolic commitment...**”

I would like to invite you to an attentive and careful reading of this article in order to discover in it precious elements that constitute a set of **criteria** that can not only help us discern whether

Young – in Communities – following Christ. GC22 was extremely attentive to the structure of the Constitutions, and the position of C 95 makes it a kind of summary not only of our life of prayer but of our whole life. It deals, precisely, with life as prayer.

our activity is becoming prayer, experience of God, but can also suggest the *conditions of possibility* for moving towards such prayer and experience.

1. In the first place, we find an element that is essential and indispensable: *being in the midst of young people and with them*. This “active and friendly presence” (C 39) that we call “**assistance**” has nothing to do with a police kind of presence that is interested solely in keeping order. But neither is it merely something on the basis of which we then go on to do other, more important things. Our mission does not consist in “doing things”; it consists in being like Jesus and in him, epiphany, revelation, the Face of the Father; it consists in being signs and bearers of his love (C 2). Salesian presence is a concrete mediation of the presence of “God-with-us”; and in some way we can say that it is an anticipation of Jesus’ prayer to the Father for all of us: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am” (Jn 17, 24). This “being-with” constitutes the heart and essence of eternal life: being with God and with all our brothers and sisters.⁴ This is one of the aspects in which all of us are called to grow: all of us, and not only our young confreres, are called by vocation to be “assistants”.

2. Salesian presence is marked by a very clear characteristic: *the consciousness of mission*. The text of the Constitutions speaks not just about “people”, and not even merely about “young people”, but explicitly about “*those to whom he is sent*.” No matter how much good will we have, we will not find the Lord

⁴ It is worth dwelling on Salesian presence as an anticipation of eternal life, and as essentially a being with God and with all our brothers and sisters. On the former point, see J. Ratzinger, “My Joy is to Be in Thy Presence: On the Christian Belief in Eternal Life”, in J. Ratzinger, *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003). On the latter, see the pregnant suggestion of J. Alison that “the joy that was set before him [Jesus]” (Heb 12, 2) was precisely “the possibility of delighting forever in a huge celebration along with a huge multitude of us human beings, people who are good, bad, creative, depressive, but humans and, for that reason, loved.” J. Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York, Crossroad, 1996), 189. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6, 21). The heart of Jesus is certainly set upon his Father and upon us, his brothers and sisters.

if we do not search for him in those to whom he himself sends us. This is one of the essential elements of Salesian obedience, understood as the constant and passionate search for the will of God, after the example of Jesus: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me” (Jn 4,34). This is not always easy, especially when the work is not “gratifying”.

3. In this movement towards the young people to whom we are sent, we find an interesting dialectic: God waits for us in these recipients of our mission, but at the same time we are called to bring them His saving Love. This is a dialectic which, in certain sense, we also find in the words of Jesus in Mt 25, 31-46. This seems to me the central element if Salesian life is to become prayer. It can be summed up in the phrase “leaving God for God”, provided we understand it well and not just as a convenient excuse either to abandon ‘prayer’ for ‘work’ or the other way around.

4. The educational and pastoral work for young people presupposes an *analysis of reality* on the basis of faith and the Salesian mission. It means *looking at the youth situation through the eyes of Jesus, the Good Shepherd*, in the style of Don Bosco. Such a “reading” determines whether a particular action is really Salesian, or whether we are reduced to being, as Pope Francis repeatedly says, a mere NGO working for the welfare of youth. This “pastoral look” – and the “serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next” (*Laudato Si’* 226) – will enable us to discern the evangelical priorities in our work, and at the same time recognize “the work of the Spirit” in the lives of young people: otherwise we run the risk of working a lot, but leaving aside the *mission* – a very real danger, given the complexity of the youth situation.

5. A feature of Salesian prayer, emphasized from the beginning in our Rule of Life, is the inseparable relationship with life, following the example of Don Bosco who “lived an experience of humble, trusting and apostolic prayer in which praying and living

were spontaneously united” (C 86). Article 86 ends by stating that Salesian prayer “is drawn from life experience and flows back into it”: it is both *source and summit*, as the Second Vatican Council says, speaking of the Eucharist.

It is not a question, therefore, of leaving our pastoral projects, enthusiasms and disappointments “at the door of the chapel”. What kind of person is he who is entering into dialogue with God if we do that, we could ask: an empty person, without identity or history, without *reasons* for meeting the Lord... As we have seen already, article 95 speaks explicitly of “the need of God, **keenly felt in his apostolic commitment...**”

6. Trying to make this point even more concrete, the same article indicates, in a way that is brief but very important, how different “**forms**” of prayer arise from *the life situation of our young people*: “discovering the fruits of the Spirit in the lives of men, especially the young, he gives thanks for everything;⁵ as he shares their problems and sufferings, he invokes upon them the light and strength of God’s presence.” The prayer of *praise* and *thanksgiving* arises from the contemplation of the work of the Spirit in our youth (here again we need the look of faith of the Good Shepherd: we must remember that Jesus praises and gives thanks to the Father even after the failure of his preaching in the cities of the Lake: Mt 11,25-30). The prayer of *petition* arises from the sharing in their problems and difficulties. I would like to add a form of prayer typical of the mediator-apostle that is too often forgotten: that of *intercession* (“so that the design of the Father may be fulfilled in each of them” – C 86) and even *reparation* in its truest sense.

7. Finally, among many other aspects, I want to underline the **community dimension** of our prayer: “(the Salesian) shares in the spiritual riches offered him by the community”. In the light of all that we have been saying, could we not understand this also as

⁵ The article cites *Eph 5,20*; I would add *Phil 4,6* (the Pauline text in the Mass of Don Bosco).

a *community sharing of the experience of God of every confrere*? How wonderful it would be if, in the community, we could talk about and share the way in which each of us “finds God” in those to whom we are sent! I think of the icon of Emmaus: between those who stayed behind in Jerusalem, and those who went to the village, there is an exchange of encounters with the risen Lord that culminates in the presence of the Lord himself (Cf. Lk 24, 33-35).

Concretely...

What we have been talking about is certainly an ideal, a goal that we do not always reach in our daily lives. On the other hand, it remains true that it is a key element in our spirituality: the “grace of unity”, the call to become “mystics in the Spirit” and “contemplatives in action.” This, I think, is also the goal of life understood as *ongoing formation*, and so I would like to emphasize a key word that I have deliberately avoided up to now: “the Salesian **learns** to meet God...” This word indicates that we need a period of learning, an apprenticeship, in which personal effort is certainly called for, but also time, accompaniment, and experiences that facilitate such learning. We should not assume that every encounter and work with young people automatically becomes prayer and encounter with God. In other words, having reflected on the “*what*”, we need to insist also on the “*how*.”

Before going on, however, I would like to note that the “what” that we have been outlining above is itself eminently practical, and in that sense already a “how.” “We are as we come to see and as that seeing becomes enduring in our intentionality. We do not come to see, however, just by looking but by training our vision through the metaphors and symbols that constitute our central convictions.”⁶ In any effort to change our lives, acquiring

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 2.

a right vision is far more important than diligently exercising will power. Jesus, we might remember, used images. "Willpower is a notoriously sputtery engine on which to rely for internal energy, but a right image silently and inexorably pulls us into its field of reality, which is also a field of energy."⁷ Moving towards life as encounter with God, or, better still, *union* with him, involves a training of our vision that cannot be underestimated.

It is up to every province and every local community to find ways and means to this end. But we could also go back to the "criteria" proposed above that are also at the same time "conditions of possibility" for moving towards life as prayer.

The *first* criterion is a necessary (though not sufficient!) condition: unless we take the trouble to be with the young, there is no possibility of discovering the working of grace in their lives. We note today, in different parts of our congregation, a certain "distancing" on the part of our confreres, both young and old, from young people, and, above all, a certain downplaying of assistance, as if we had "more important things to do". We run the risk of failing to meet real youth (often very difficult to handle), taking refuge instead in virtual encounters through the many modern means of communication – though sometimes we might go to the extent even of "offering these to God"! But this is not the way to become "good shepherds of the young", after the example of Don Bosco. It is, instead, essential to offer our young confreres the **experience** of being with youth, educating them – and this is indispensable! – to the true meaning of Salesian assistance, which of course is to be done not merely by words but by example.

The *second*, *third* and *fourth* criteria involve, in fact, a training of our vision: the consciousness of mission, the awareness of the dialectic between God who awaits us in the young and our

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans / Leominster: Gracewing, 1992) 6.

vocation as epiphany, the “pastoral look.” Merely “being with the young” is not enough: it has to be done with a sense of mission, which derives directly from obedience understood as a search for and fulfilment of God’s will. We need to discover strategies and lines of action to strengthen this “sense of faith” in working with youth, avoiding any kind of individualism or “purely personal choice” in educative and pastoral action. It is not enough to merely “do good things”, or even to “find God in people”. We are called to find God precisely in youth who are “poor, abandoned and in danger” (C 26), “primarily boys and young men” (R 3), and not just in any people at all.

The *fifth* condition is the dialectic between “prayer” and life: there is a vital relationship between our “practices of piety” – community as well as personal – and life. Jesus himself felt the need to spend long moments in prayer. Love is first and foremost a state rather than an act, but it needs the acts, the special moments that declare, affirm, celebrate, share and strengthen it. It is of vital importance to overcome a dichotomous attitude. The God we discover in those to whom we are sent is also the God before whom we stand and whom we invoke and celebrate and thank in our formal and informal moments of prayer. The Salesian *needs* to take time out of his busy day to look back, relive, give thanks, intercede. He cannot afford to neglect the quiet moments that are built into the structure of community life. Such practices and moments are important elements in the dialectic by which we move towards the loving union that is life as prayer. Our life and our work enters into these moments, our intentions are purified (C 90, 91), our eyes are sharpened and our vision cleared, so that we can see the work of God in the lives of those to whom he sends us. It is time to pay heed to the call of our recent General Chapters and to give special attention to personal prayer and meditation, where each of us expresses our own personal and heartfelt way of being son of God, giving thanks to the Father and telling him about our yearnings and concerns in the apostolate, and recalling that for Don Bosco mental prayer was “a guarantee

of joyous participation in our vocation”, strengthening our intimate union with God, saving us from routine, keeping our hearts free, drawing energy and endurance, and fostering our dedication to those to whom we are sent (C 93, 88). As provincial and local communities, we need to also give renewed attention to our monthly recollections and annual retreats, which are “privileged moments for listening to the Word of God, discerning his will and purifying our hearts”, and which “restore to our spirit a deep unity in the Lord Jesus and keep alive in us the expectation of his return” (C 91). To this we need to add the spiritual guidance that ‘trains’ our eyes, that helps us develop the contemplative intelligence that is the ability to discern the presence of God and the working of grace in our own lives and in the lives of those to whom we are sent (see GC27 67.2), as well as pastoral accompaniment in the early years of ministry – and here novice masters, Rectors and spiritual guides of postnovices, practical trainees and young confreres in specific formation have a very special responsibility. In the early years of formation, especially, we learn and are helped to remind ourselves of the divine dimension of our work. We become aware “of the need to pray without ceasing in a simple heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ and with the Father”, we learn to attend to the presence of the Spirit and to do everything for God’s love (C 12).

The *sixth* condition, the “forms” of prayer, needs no further comment. The *seventh*, the community dimension, is worth dwelling upon, because of the way it makes sense of the insistence of our recent general chapters on common forms of prayer, both new and old. One of the difficulties with regard to community prayer is fraternal sharing, in particular of our experience of God. It is not easy to “re-educate” ourselves in this sense. It is, of course, much easier to do this with young people who are beginning their Salesian life, but even with them it cannot be taken for granted. It is important to find suitable moments of community sharing (including *lectio divina*) in order to educate them (and ourselves) to pray together on the basis of our educative and

pastoral experiences: prayers of thanksgiving, petition, intercession, reparation... Such experiences strengthen and deepen fraternal life in an extraordinary manner, so as to become almost a thermometer of it: where there is no deep communication, community life is very superficial, and sometimes even inexistent.

I invite the Rector of each community, after having studied and reflected personally on this letter, to help each confrere do the same, and to make possible a moment of community sharing and dialogue, with the help of these or similar questions: What aspects of this letter raise an echo in me? Where would I/we need to grow? What steps could I/we take in this direction?

In a special manner, I invite novice masters, Rectors and spiritual guides at all levels of initial formation to work out ways of accompanying our young confreres, as individuals and as community, in their journey towards life as prayer.

Let us, dear confreres, invoke together the assistance of Our Lady, “model of prayer and pastoral love” (C 92) and “Mother and Teacher” (C 98) and of St Joseph, “master of the interior life”, of our father Don Bosco and of a host of confreres, great and small, among whom Blessed Artemide Zatti and Ven. Simaan Srugi, who lived the grace of unity and now intercede for us.