

# 1. THE VICAR OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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## INDICATIONS FOR A PROCESS OF GROWTH IN SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

Some key points in the teaching of Fr Egidio Viganò

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Dear confreres,

In the month of September you were sent the obituary letter of Fr Egidio Viganò. In it, in addition to some biographical details, we recalled in a synthetic manner appropriate to such letters the areas of his commitment as Rector Major, his style of animation, and his traits of personality.

There is at present in process of preparation at the Generalate a collected edition of his sixty-four circular letters with a corresponding thematic index. The volume will form part of the series of the collected letters of his predecessors in office: Don Rua, Don Albera, Don Rinaldi, and Don Ricaldone. At the same time in another volume will be published the letters of Fr Luigi Ricceri, to whom fell the task of guiding the preparation and first period of renewal which followed Vatican II. Together with the Acts of the GC20, 21, 22, and 23, these volumes will provide a testimony and documentation available to everyone, of the reflections, challenges, guidelines and efforts at renewal which have characterized the period between the end of Vatican II and the coming GC24.

I thought it would be fitting as a sequel to the obituary letter to offer a rereading of some points which pervade the teaching of Fr Egidio Viganò. They are evidently not exhaustive, nor do they include all that could be considered the principal ones. Space precludes such a possibility. I have chosen only those which concern more closely and directly the aspect of the spirituality of the Salesian which occur, even if only in a brief reference, in the treatment of various themes and which were presented by him in an original way. But they are solidly linked together and, indeed, provide the elements of a physiognomy.

We shall not attempt to make a complete synthesis of each point - an impossible task - but only to provide a reminder of the substantial content.

The present period has been marked for us by the event of the Synod on the Consecrated Life, of which we are awaiting the concluding document but are already aware of its main concerns through the Working Paper and the discussions in the assembly. It prompts us to reflect on the expectations of the world and of the Church in respect of Religious and reminds us of Don Bosco's originality in bearing witness to the Gospel.

But the period through which we are living is marked also by the proximate organizational and spiritual preparation for the GC24. At this very moment the Precapitular Commission, appointed by the Rector Major, is at work at the Generalate: it has to draw up "the reports or schemata to be sent in good time to those taking part in the General Chapter" (R 113).

It is precisely in the light of this event that I invite you to review some key points of our spirituality as they have been put to us by Fr Viganò.

#### 1. The initiative of God (ASC 303, AGC 312, 334, 337, 342, 352)

"It is necessary to keep constantly in mind that at the basis of everything lies the fascinating mystery of the Trinity; in the words of the renewed Constitutions: We live as disciples of the Lord by the grace of the Father, who consecrates us through the gift of his Spirit and send us out to be apostles of the young" (1).

Characteristic of every Christian spirituality is the awareness of the gift, of the grace, by which God on his own initiative enters into our existence in the context of history. This constitutes a substantial difference with respect to all the rationalistic spiritualities which rely on personal effort alone, noble though it may be.

If one wishes to trace out realistically the spiritual journey of the Salesians in its vitality and characteristic elements, one cannot ignore this origin which is precisely the active presence of the Holy Spirit. And on their part its recognition and eager acceptance, and the will to correspond with it.

This presence can be perceived in three settings: In the first place in the Church: "Guiding the Church in the way of all truth", says Lumen Gentium, "and unifying her in communion and in the works of ministry, the Spirit bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her; and he adorns her with his fruits. By the power of the Gospel he permits the Church to keep the freshness of youth. Constantly he renews her and leads her to perfect unity with her Spouse" (2). It is the Spirit who gives life and manifests himself in history as unforeseen and transforming energy, especially through the prophets, saints, pastors, and courageous and inspired guides. Of this animation of the Church by the Spirit we have unequivocal signs even in our own times. There is the whole movement of reflection, of pastoral adaptation, of the spirituality provoked by the Council, which is still producing new and original manifestations even in our own day.

The presence and action of the Spirit extend beyond the confines of the visible Church. They fill all the earth. In the signs of the times the Church hearkens to his voice which re-echoes in human consciences and which appears especially in religious research, in noble and disinterested initiatives for man's spiritual growth, and in the moral sense (3). Taken as a whole the signs tell us that we are living at a privileged moment of the Spirit (4). One of the works realized by the Spirit in the course of history, by means of a thousand and one inspirations, is the consecrated life which, in the following of Christ, concentrates on the mystery of God and lovingly dedicates itself to the service of men. "Institutes did not begin with theories and systems worked out by a thinker: they began with particular events and experiences lived out in docility to the Holy Spirit" (5).

This must be said, in particular, of our charism and its realization by Don Bosco and by those who have succeeded him in the course of time as disciples attentive to the signs of the Spirit. And this is the second setting for observance and faith for the Salesians. "Our Father knew he was called by God to undertake a vast mission on behalf of the young; to achieve this he saw clearly that he was called to be a founder not simply of a religious institute but of a mighty spiritual and apostolic movement" (6). Spirituality and mission, in the service of the Church and the world, move in the direction of the Spirit, i.e. of man's opening up to recognition of God and communion with him.

The third setting in which we are called to welcome and accept the action of the Spirit is our own life. In it we perceive the gift of God who draws us to himself; we are attracted by Christ and induced to follow him in a radical manner. Almost spontaneously we experience the same feeling that Don Bosco had, and are led towards the mission for the young. This is the personal vocation of which art.22 of the Constitutions says: "Each one of us is called by God to form part of the Salesian Society. Because of this God gives him personal gifts, and by faithful correspondence he finds his way to complete fulfilment in Christ".

The awareness of the gift, our will to respond, the harmony with the salesian charism, the specific life project which we assume in consequence, are expressed publicly in the act of profession, and in particular of that of perpetual profession because of its definitive nature. It is "a sign of a loving encounter between the Lord who calls and the disciple who responds by giving himself totally to God and to his brothers and sisters" (C 23). It involves conscience and life and not only external membership. And it is again offered by God on his own initiative and not only an act of the person concerned. For this reason "the action of the Spirit is for the professed member a lasting source of grace and a support for his daily efforts to grow towards the perfect love of God and men" (C 25).

And so baptism, vocation, and profession mark the phases of our placement with ever greater attention and availability in the orbit of the Spirit who communicates the love of God to the world and moves it towards him.

Three consequences follow from this. The first is that we take "life in the Spirit", i.e. holiness, as the main

nucleus of our plan of existence (7). Holiness here is to be understood not only as moral rectitude or as an ascetic effort, but as a style and way of life in which shines forth in a special way the mystery of God, which is liberating and close to us. Without this there is no consecrated life, even if all the institutional elements are present. The replanning of holiness is therefore a decisive point of our renewal. It is the most valuable gift we can give to young people, and the most powerful and suitable means for fulfilling our mission. We hold too that it is the specific contribution that religious can make to culture and human advancement. Spirituality or holiness has, in fact, a temporal and secular value, not only because of works of charity for the benefit of the poor but also because of the sense, the message and the values it offers to human existence.

But there is a second consequence. We pursue this holiness following the model and path which the Spirit has manifested in Don Bosco. Constant reference to him, therefore, and to the experience which matured in following him, is indispensable both for the reproduction of traits in him that are already well known and for the discernment of new forms of such realization in the context of the present day. "The Lord has given us Don Bosco as father and teacher" (C 21).

These two consequences lead to a third: we choose as our pedagogical road to holiness the one we find in the Constitutions with its fundamental experiences (mission, evangelical counsels, community, prayer) lived in a human group which makes of them its code of life: the Salesian Congregation, with its spiritual tradition and in its present-day reality.

If it be true that "our living Rule is Jesus Christ, the Saviour announced in the Gospel, who is alive today in the Church, and whom we find present in Don Bosco who devoted his life to the young" (C 196), it is also true that we accept the Constitutions as Don Bosco's will and testament, as our book of life, on which we meditate in faith and which we commit ourselves to practise in a spiritual sense, because for us disciples of the Lord they are a secure way which leads to love (cf. *ibid*).

The desire and will for holiness, Don Bosco as Father and Teacher, the Rule and salesian communion are the coordinates for the process of spiritual growth of a consecrated Salesian as his response to the call of the

Spirit. Without these it will be difficult for him to get very far.

## 2. Apostolic consecration (AGC 312, 337, 342, 346, 352)

When Fr Viganò, after the GC22, presented the "renewed text of our Rule of Life" (8), he indicated apostolic consecration (cf.C 3) as the general theme and the first among the principles giving inspiration to renewal.

The various elements, in fact, which characterize our spirituality as religious apostles find their *raison d'être* in consecration, and specifically in that original form of it that we call apostolic consecration.

This is one of the important new points in the process of the redefinition of our identity in the wake of the deeper studies that took place in the Church after Vatican II, and which have been re-echoed in insistent declarations in recent times.(9) "At the foundation of religious life lies the consecration". "The Church thinks of you in the first place as consecrated persons" (10).

A deeper understanding of consecration, in its biblical roots, in its theological and ecclesial dimensions, but also in the light of the practical experience of the Founder, is therefore a substantial element for the rediscovery and updating of the charism, so as to have a unified vision of the project of salesian life and consequently for the living and authentic expression of our spirituality.

Now it is precisely this effort at understanding which has led us to emphasize certain aspects. The first is the overall or total sense of the consecration. This indeed is not a particular element of salesian life to be expressed or one amongst others, but one that embraces everything. It includes not only the vows but the whole being and activity of the person, seen in a most singular relationship with God which marks our deepest pastoral experience and our work of education. A life which feels attracted towards God and is centered in him, whether he be sought in prayer, in silence and solitude, or whether the intention is to serve him in others through a service of charity even requiring a strong commitment.

It is clear therefore that when we speak of consecration we are not thinking only of a particular moment as, for example, that of the profession. We are referring to

the 'continuum' of the whole of life of which profession is the significant and almost sacramental moment. We are thinking of a personal and interior experience which begins before profession, when the Lord is gradually becoming the centre of our thoughts and the preferred object of our affections. Accepting this grace of the Spirit we declare it publicly before God and the Church in the act of profession. It is thereby given special recognition and incorporated in the life and mission of the People of God. It will then continue until death, becoming ever deeper and more total as an action of God, and as our response as its reality gradually penetrates into our being. It is evident that life becomes truly consecrated not only in virtue of the institutional, organizational or ritual elements that manifest it externally, but because of the vital relationship it establishes with God. In fact in every consecration the consecrating force is his presence. This existential and personal sense of consecration is particularly felt at the present day and is decisive.

From this arises another fundamental element of understanding, shown by the use of the verb in the passive voice: 'consecratur'. The consecration of a religious, on the basis of that of baptism, highlights the absolutely free and gratuitous initiative of God. This, as Fr Viganò puts it, is the "spark before the fire of love, the first dazzling indication of everything that is to follow, where passionate friendship explodes and the covenant is ratified between God who calls and man who responds" (11). Consecration is not primarily an effort on the part of man to reach God and be totally his. It is a visit, a gift, an invasion of our existence by his grace. It indicates primarily the action of God who, through the mediation of the Church, takes us completely for himself, committing himself to protect us and guide us.

But it is also true that this divine action is not extraneous to our deepest movements. That is where it is felt and receives our response, so that it becomes the "meeting of two loves": the Father draws us and we offer ourselves totally to him. "The initiative and even the very possibility of a covenant comes from God, but is confirmed by our own response: he it is who has called us and helped us to respond, but it is we who give ourselves; he it is who consecrates us and envelops us with his Spirit, who captures us for himself and makes us become entirely his, but it is we who centre ourselves on him, listen to him and keep our eyes on him. (12)

The rediscovery of the full sense of consecration as a covenant of love, continually challenges us, give to our vocation its dynamic quality and its d

But our Rule of life rightly emphasizes the peculiar character of the consecration which distinguishes us as Salesians. It is grounded, in fact, on the project inspired by God in Don Bosco the Founder, which is an apostolic project in which the mission at the service of the young is the aspect which characterizes our being wholly for God, linked intrinsically with the testimony of the gospel values and of fraternal communion.

There is neither separation nor lack of harmony between consecration and mission, but a "mutual and indivisible compenetration which makes us simultaneously and in a salesian sense apostles who are religious and religious who are apostles. Our consecration involves our entire life, and the mission qualifies all the witness we give".(13) Hence the mission, understood in its biblical significance which links it with that of Christ consecrated by the Father and sent to the world, appears as a constitutive aspect of our consecration itself. On the other hand our consecrated life is defined and made precise by the mission and must be projected and realized in it. This is what the Constitutions mean when they declare: "Our mission sets the tenor of our whole life; it specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families" (C 3).

All this goes to the very root of our identity as Salesians and becomes a concrete orientation for our life and spirituality, with consequences for our manner of working, praying and living together.

In the first place the awareness of being consecrated apostles gives its proper meaning to the mission, which is not simply external action or activity but is a gift of God. It inserts us in the Trinitarian mystery of the sending of the Son and of the Holy Spirit by the Father, and in the mission of the Church itself and of its specific task in history.

From this stems the special emphasis placed on the inner self as an essential condition for efficacious apostolic and missionary activity. Zest in the mission derives in fact from the mystery of God:(14) only if constantly united to this mystery can the Church and the Congregation confront the challenges of the new evangelization.



In this aspect we recognize an element typical of our spirituality as consecrated apostles: consecrated, and hence firmly rooted in Christ and in his Spirit, in an attitude of filial obedience to the Father who has called us - and at the same time "missionaries of the young", sent to communicate to them the Love that has no limits: this is our basic spiritual dynamism which situates us in the spirituality of active life.(15)

If we live it to the full, this is the road to our sanctification. Apostolic activity, and for us in practice this means the educative option, within the project of consecrated life, becomes the privileged place for meeting with God and hence the road to holiness, so that it can be said that the Salesian is called to sanctify himself by educating.(16) It is a matter of "making of the educational commitment the 'spiritual area' and the 'pastoral centre' of life, prayer, professional activity and daily living".(17)

Finally, it is interesting to recall that the very sufferings of the Salesian are exploited by his apostolic consecration. "Our active asceticism does not teach us to bypass or eliminate affliction; it accepts it and turns it to good account by transforming it into a means of salvation. Suffering accepted as a participation in the paschal mystery of Christ has an important apostolic value".(18)

3. The Christ whom we follow and contemplate (ASC 290, 296, AGC 324, 334, 337)

We are speaking of something that is taken for granted. "We belong to those followers of Christ who have by their religious profession made a bid for freedom that is truly unique: we have made the Risen Christ our permanent and radical choice. Christ is our fundamental option, and this conditions and orients all our other choices. The Salesians can only traverse the paths of history when they are first enlightened by the Paschal Mystery. Only in this spirit does our kind of life make sense. Christ is the reason we belong to the Church and take on work among the young and the working classes; he is the one who inspires our educational project, our activities and the distinctive way we carry them out.

Especially in these days it is important for us to be

well aware of this fundamental choice we have made; it must claim our total loyalty and be the inspiring force in all our convictions, all our living and all our dedicated labour".(19)

It is a matter of the total mystery of Christ and of his manifestation which is still in progress: Christ, Son of God and true Man, born of Mary, dead and risen again; consecrated and sent; Founder and Head of the Church, Prophet, Priest and King. We have access to him through listening to and meditating on the Word and especially the Gospel, through the celebration of the eucharistic mystery, through the task of conversion and the effort to configure ourselves to him; through participation in the life of the Church, and paying heed to the cries for salvation which rise up from the world and especially from the young.

But there are certain representations of Christ which attract our attention as Salesians in a particular way. We present them in the original words of Fr Egidio Viganò.

#### Christ the Good Shepherd

"He is the living and existential centre of our consecrated life. All consecrated persons are centred on Christ, but our specific witness is characterized by the pedagogical and pastoral standpoint from which we see Christ as the 'Good Shepherd', who created man and loves his attributes, who redeemed him and pardons his sins, and who makes him a new creature through his Spirit. This central position of Christ, the Good Shepherd, must shine like the sun in our environments through a new eucharistic enthusiasm and a host of initiatives expressing a daily manner of living and educating which 'permeates our approach to God, our personal relationships, and our manner of living in community through the exercise of a charity that knows how to make itself loved' (C 20). The emphasis on Christ as the Good Shepherd certainly implies dedication to the young even to the cross, but also points to the attitude that conquers by gentleness and self-giving, by kindness...".(20)

#### Christ, friend of the young

"The Gospel manifests the love of Jesus Christ for the young in various ways: He loves them (Mk 10,21: Jesus looked at him and loved him); he wants them near him (Mt 19,14-15; Mk 10,13-16; Lk 18,15-17: Let the children come to me; Lk 9,46-48: Whoever receives this child in my name receives

me); he invites them to follow him (Mt 19,16-26: the rich young man); he heals them (Jn 4,46-54: Go, your son will live; he raises them to life (Lk 7,11-15: Young man, I say to you arise; Mk 5,21-23; Lk 8,40-45: the daughter of Jairus; he frees them from diabolical possession (Mk 17,14-18; Lk 9,37-43: the boy was cured instantly; Mt 15,21-28; Mk 7,24-30 (the Canaanite woman's daughter; he pardoned them (Lk 15,11-32: parable of the prodigal son); he used them in working miracles (Jn 6,1-15): the boy with five loaves and two fishes). Don Bosco's radical predilection for the young cannot be explained without Jesus Christ; in the following of Christ is found the surging source of its origin and vitality".(21)

"The heart of the Salesian must be so overflowing with Christ as to love youngsters as he loved them. We look to Christ, friend of the poor and insignificant; through Christ our earnest efforts for the young and the working classes become more intense, more persevering, more genuine, more fruitful.

In an era of identity-seeking, personal and collective, the first and foremost task is to be absolutely sure of the exact significance of our religious profession which incorporates us in a community that has made the fundamental choice of Christ, our Saviour and Shepherd and friend of the young".(22)

Christ, the new Man

"We discover without too much difficulty that God's real masterpiece is Man, made in his own image, the living synthesis of cosmic wonders, free and enterprising, who thinks, who makes judgements, who creates, who loves, and who is therefore destined to be the minister of all created things, the voice of praise, the mediator of glory in joyful dialogue with the Creator himself.

And it is precisely in our own history that when the fullness of time had come God raised up the New Man, his definitive masterpiece.

He is the culmination of the whole work of creation. In him, says the Council, "the mystery of man truly becomes clear... He is the image of the invisible God, of the perfect man... who in a certain way has united himself with each and every man... the firstborn of many brothers. In his life on earth he felt himself solid with every man of every century, from the first Adam (his progenitor) to the last of

his brothers born at the end of time. Solid with them in good and evil, he has overcome sin by the power of his great love, to which he bore witness by giving his own life in the supreme event of his death and resurrection".(23)

"The end or goal to which educational work tends is Christ, the 'New Man'; every young person is called to mature in him and in his image...

It is not a case of entering into polemics, but of being convinced that the Christ-event is not simply the expression of a 'religious' formulation, but an objective fact in human history which has a concrete reference to every member of the species and gives a definitive sense to history itself. Every person needs Christ and tends towards him, even if he is unaware of the fact. Everyone has the existential right to be able to reach him, and to put obstacles in the way is in fact to trample upon a human right. The tendency towards Christ, be it conscious or unconscious, clear or confused, is intrinsic to human nature, created objectively in the supernatural order in which the project-man has been conceived in view of the mystery of Christ, and not vice-versa".(24). Christ, the heart of the world and the mystery working in history.

"When we qualify culture as new we are simply referring to what is emerging with the passing of time, even though it may call for a careful and renewed form of pastoral approach; but when referred to the mystery of Christ on the other hand, 'new' indicates the fullness of the true and definitive novelty. It is new not because we never heard of it before, or because it is being challenged by problems that previously we did not know to exist, but because it is the wonderful vertex of all human affairs; it proclaims in fact the supreme goal of history and the source of all hope in every century...

To 'evangelize' means in the first place to be able to proclaim the happy and pleasing news of Christ's Easter victory, which upsets and disperses the fleeting attraction of evolving novelties which soon become transformed into that boring monotony which usually characterizes the dreary existence of a civilization that is merely horizontal".(25).

"Rightly therefore does the Council declare that Jesus Christ 'is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the centre of mankind, the joy of all hearts and the fulfilment of all aspirations...' (GS 45).

I think it important, dear confreres, to come back continually on this synthesis of faith... so as to convince ourselves that it is not possible to prescind from Christ in the promotion of man and in the development of a true salesian pedagogy".(26)

#### 4. Pastoral charity

(ASC 304, AGC 312, 326, 332, 334, 335, 337, 338)

The article of the Constitutions which introduces the salesian spirit says that "it is summed up and centred in pastoral charity, characterized by that youthful dynamism which was revealed so strongly in our Founder and at the beginnings of our Society" (C 10).

This is a serious statement. It is not indeed a matter of one more element to be put alongside others, but of the very source of our spiritual and pastoral identity. From it flows that unifying energy which imprints on us a particular physiognomy, prompts us to self-donation, and unites us in communion.

We need therefore to return to it frequently to clarify its nature, deepen our knowledge of its content and specify the practical consequences which follow from it, without being satisfied with generic perspectives or the spontaneous reaction which such perspectives produce in us. The privileged starting point, as for all aspects of the charism, is the experience of the Founder and the life of the group of his first disciples in the very early days. "The Salesian Family came into being because Don Bosco loved the young. His was a love of predilection that permeated his every inclination and talent; but basically it was a special gift from God, a 'salvation-strategy' for modern times. It welled up in him because of his utter enthusiasm and total allegiance to Christ".(27)

The first spark of the salesian vocation is the intense love of God, well defined and directed towards poor and abandoned youth. In Don Bosco it gradually became a plan of life. He became aware that this was a singular grace. "The Lord has sent me for young people, and so I need to leave other things aside and preserve my health for them". He realized this project in the radical following of Christ, contemplated in his anxiety to give dignity and salvation to persons, especially the lowly and those most in need.

The source, the launching and the energy of development

of the salesian charism therefore are found in a love with two inseparable poles, God and the young; in total self-donation to God in the mission to youth, and in a corresponding total self-donation to the young in a movement towards God. It was along this line that the holiness of Don Bosco matured. To follow up this ideal he called together those young people whom he found to be suitable and willing. This it was that gave its original image to the newly born Congregation.

Charity is the foundation and energy of all spiritual life, the first and most radical of all commandments and the highest of them as regards the objective to be attained, the substance and best of charisms, the distinctive mark of every Christian state or vocation. So it was for Jesus, for St Paul (cf. 1 Cor 13-14), for our Patron St Francis de Sales who sang its praises even from a human standpoint. So it was also for Don Bosco who extolled every form of charity as a sublime characteristic of the Christian heart. In the dream of the ten diamonds the one place on the front of the garment and precisely over the heart was charity. It is that love which had its greatest manifestation in Jesus Christ, Son of the Father and Redeemer of mankind, and which the Holy Spirit pours into our heart at the moment in which through faith and baptism we become inserted into Christ.

It is precisely through the richness of Christ, through the creativity of the Spirit, and through the expressive possibilities of the human person that there exist innumerable "kinds" or historical actualizations of charity.

What lies at the centre of the salesian spirit is qualified as 'pastoral'. The word immediately brings to mind the image of God as Shepherd, who brings his people out of slavery, guides them in the desert, leads them into green pastures, reveals to them his plan, and makes a covenant with them. It recalls also and principally the figure of Christ the Good Shepherd who walks the highways, meets the people, heals the sick, reveals the Kingdom, dies on the cross, and rises again to life so that men may have life in abundance.

"Pastoral" applies to life, food, dignity, orientation, from the most elementary to the highest level. Pastoral charity is sparked off in the contemplation of the mystery of God who intervenes in history to bring salvation. It is manifested in the desire to take part in his work of salvation, to place oneself at his disposal so as to act in

union with him.

Its content is total self-giving, in intention and in fact. "It is not just what we do but our gift of self which manifests Christ's love for his flock. Pastoral charity determines our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people".(28)

The gift of self in pastoral charity is directed towards the Church, and through the Church towards humanity. It is marked by a will to serve that has no limits, "marked as it is by the same apostolic and missionary zeal of Christ" (ibid.). The Council and subsequent documents refer to it at length in connection with priests and pastors who are charged with the care of the people of God.

Pastoral, therefore, is the kind of love which is inserted in the mission of the Church and builds there an ever broader and deeper communion. Pastoral is that love which contemplates the total salvation of persons in Christ and everything else in function of this. Pastoral is that love which puts its trust in the saving energies established by Christ the Pastor: the word, faith, grace, ecclesial communion.

Salesian pastoral charity has had from the outset a further distinguishing mark. It has been shaped as educative charity. Moved by apostolic zeal Don Bosco chose as his particular field of work youngsters who did not know to what parish they belonged. He took on the task of being for them not only priest and pastor but also father and guide in life: shaping their human growth, accompanying them in the field of work, inculcating culture and animating their free time. Against this background he translated into daily activity the love which sought so intensely the salvation of his youngsters. It all gave rise to a physiognomy and a praxis: the preventive system.

This was the line of approach chosen by John Paul II, when he said of Don Bosco that he realized his own personal holiness through an educative commitment lived with zeal and an apostolic heart; and that it is precisely in the interchange between education and holiness that are to be found the characteristic aspects of his figure. He was a holy educator.(30)

"This", says Fr Viganò, "was Don Bosco's 'first charism'. There is no question of natural inclinations or preferences: Don Bosco's choice was most certainly dictated

from a higher level. We are beyond the frontiers of what we are pleased to call 'the normal'; it is more than existence in as much as existence itself possesses something greater still... like the Damascus Road incident in the soul of Paul (Tillard). Predilection for the young holds pride of place in Don Bosco's vocation, and hence in his artistic intuition as an educator and in his spiritual originality as a saint". (31)

5. "Da mihi animas"  
(AGC 332, 334, 336, 353)

Fr Viganò writes: "I am convinced that there is no synthetic expression which better qualifies the salesian spirit than this one, chosen by Don Bosco himself: Da mihi animas".

The great Institutes and currents of spirituality have expressed the quintessence of their particular charism in a brief summarizing phrase. We may recall the "peace and good" of the Franciscans, or the "prayer and work" of the Benedictines, or the "ad maiorem Dei gloriam" of the Jesuits.

Witnesses of the early times and subsequent reflection in the Congregation have led to the conviction that the expression which best expresses the pastoral charity of the Salesians of Don Bosco is precisely "da mihi animas". It was found frequently on the lips of Don Bosco and had a decisive influence on his spiritual physiognomy. It was the slogan that struck Dominic Savio in Don Bosco's office when the latter was still a young priest (34 years), and prompted him to make the comment that has become well known: "I understand; here you do not deal in money, but in souls". (32) He immediately grasped the point that Don Bosco was offering him not only food, a home and schooling, but above all an opportunity to know Jesus and grow spiritually. The central position given to "souls" has been reaffirmed by successive Rector Majors. Don Rua, Don Albera, and Don Rinaldi all commented on it, and it has also been absorbed into the liturgy: "Inspire us with that same apostolic charity, to seek the salvation of our neighbour and so serve you, the one and only good". We need therefore to go more deeply into the significance of this expression.

The spiritual interpretation of the Bible provides a basis for the extraction of a valid nucleus of content: the distinction between persons and things. The presence of



Melchisedech and the blessing he pronounced on Abraham confer on the passage concerned a particular religious and messianic sense, traditionally accepted. But it would be misleading to want to preserve or abolish Don Bosco's slogan and programme only on the basis of a correct interpretation of the Bible. The word of God, in fact, is heavy with meaning in history, and especially in the history of sanctity. And this is not the only example.

What is important is Don Bosco's personal interpretation, against the religious and cultural background of his time, and the fact that on it he had modelled his life and experience of God. In this vision 'soul' indicates man's spiritual dimension, the centre of his freedom and root of his dignity, the privileged area of his opening to God, where the spirit makes his presence felt.

The interweaving of the two meanings, the biblical one and the one developed in modern culture, suggests some very concrete options of life and action.

In the first place, love or pastoral charity considers primarily the person, and to the person is primarily addressed: it has an intuition of his value, especially in the light of the love of God the Father, of the redemptive work of Jesus, and of the presence of the Spirit. The 'things' come afterwards; they are of less value and have less importance in the educative process.

And so the salvation which pastoral charity seeks and offers is one that is full and definitive. Everything else is ordered to it: beneficence is ordered to education; the latter to religious and Christian initiation; religious initiation to the life of grace and communion with God.

In other words, we may say that in the existence of the person we give the primacy to the religious dimension. The same is true in education and advancement, not for motives of proselytizing but because we are convinced that it constitutes the deepest source of growth and happiness. We foster its depth and its correct development and expression. In a period of secularism and confused religious beliefs and practices, this line of approach is not without its significance but neither is it easy of realization.

The slogan contains also an indication of a method for action: in the formation or regeneration of the individual

one must build on his spiritual resources: his moral conscience, his openness to God, the thought of his eternal destiny. The pedagogy of Don Bosco is a pedagogy of the soul, of grace, of the supernatural. Once this energy has been activated, the more profitable work of education begins. The remainder, though valid in itself, is preliminary and contributory to this which transcends it.

From this follows a priority in life and pastoral activity for anyone who takes up the "da mihi animas", which has an ascetic consequence: "Leave the rest". One must renounce a great deal so as to be able to dedicate all one's strength to what has been chosen by preference, whatever in fact is purely personal inclination, and even lawful fields of activity which would take away time and resources. Many activities can be entrusted to others and even be left aside altogether so as to have the time and availability for opening young people to God.

"Anyone going through the life of Don Bosco, following his mental schemes and exploring the lines of his thought, finds a matrix: salvation in the Catholic Church, the sole depositary of the means of salvation. There arises the instinctive feeling that the challenge of abandoned youngsters, poor and homeless, awakened in him the urgent educative need to promote the insertion of these youngsters in the world and in the Church through methods of gentleness and charity; but with a tension stemming from the desire of the eternal salvation of the young".(33).

We may wonder what "da mihi animas" implies in daily life. It indicates in the first place a pastoral 'heart': the willingness, the impulse, the desire to work, a taste for pastoral enterprises, availability, joyful self-donation, a feeling of attraction to those in greatest need, the feeling that all the work is well worth while, the ability to overcome easily little setbacks and hold on, to take risks and difficulties in one's stride. Its contrary is indifference and the facing of pastoral tasks as though they were an obligation to be fulfilled as rapidly as possible.

But in addition to the 'heart' aspect, "da mihi animas" presupposes a pastoral sense. The pastoral sense, like an artistic sense or business sense, is almost a flair, a spontaneous movement, a manner of rapidly sizing up a situation from the perspective and side of the one we are concerned about.

It consists in being able to guide matters from the standpoint of the salvation of the person concerned, in taking a pastoral view of events, of using criteria, key facts and points of reference that are valid for thinking out or setting up an activity, in such a way that those involved grow from a human aspect and succeed in becoming aware of the presence of God the Father in their existence.

And then there is pastoral ability: this is a specific professional preparation required by "da mihi animas", through which we have learned to motivate, instruct, animate and sanctify. We make ourselves capable of understanding a context, drawing up a plan to meet its needs, and to carry it out, keeping in mind also the invisible and imponderable elements that are always present in work for souls.

Finally we must also include in the list pastoral creativity, i.e. the mental and practical attitude which leads to the finding of original solutions to new problems and situations. Don Bosco thought up a plan for street-boys while the parishes were continuing with the regular catechism classes. Shortly afterwards, when he saw that the youngsters were neither prepared for work nor protected in it, he thought out a simple and homely solution which later grew considerably: work contracts, workshops, trade schools. And similarly for other needs relating to the house, instruction, etc.

Don Ceria considers this trait as characteristic of the salesian spirit: "The first feature which strikes everyone is a prodigious activity, both individual and collective".  
(34)

6. "Study how to make yourself loved": The pedagogy of kindness (ASC 290, 310; AGC 326, 332)

When there was a question of choosing a charismatic expression to attach to the cross of the Good Shepherd, the symbol of profession, i.e. of the project of salesian life, Fr Viganò chose Don Bosco's phrase: "Study how to make yourself loved".

In our literature there are countless expressions like pedagogical love, kindness erected into a system, the gentleness of St Francis de Sales, the pedagogy of the heart. All of them lead back to the preventive system, and in particular to the ensemble of attitudes and practical indications which are linked with loving kindness. At the root there is always the charity which seeks the salvation

of the young person, manifested through a recognizable affection tempered by common sense.

Salesian pastoral charity is moulded "in contact with the young", in the effort to help them to use life to advantage by involving them in responsibility for their own personal growth. It must therefore set up an educative relationship not only of respect and reasonable discipline, but of friendship and filial trust and confidence. This is true especially in the case of youngsters who have been sorely tried, in difficult situations, where such a relationship must be set up again from scratch and rendered credible once again. In this way loving kindness became the substantial form of the charity of Don Bosco. It consists in provoking a correspondence which reacts on the educative process itself and on the dynamism of growth in the youngster. In this way, in fact, the educative process becomes something trustworthy and dependable and the youngsters are led to voluntarily give of their best.

Don Bosco's recommendation "study how to make yourself loved" has therefore a strategic value in pedagogy but is also a characteristic element of the salesian spirit. It gives an original physiognomy to the whole Congregation which appears enriched by its ability to approach the young, to talk to them on their own wavelength, to involve them willingly in their human growth, and draw them towards God and the Church.

If we look more deeply into this sort of kindness we find that it goes beyond gestures of sympathy. It presents an extremely robust system of convictions, attitudes and practices which call for the commitment of the whole personality.

In the order of deep attitudes it implies an identification with the kindness of the Father "who provides in advance for all his creatures" (C 20). It is nourished by the contemplation of Christ the Good Shepherd who wins over hearts by his meekness and comes close to the humble and the needy, inclining to their immediate needs and accepting their imperfect requests to open them to riches of a higher order. We observe the motherly attitude of Mary, eager to sustain and foster the growth of the humanity of Christ so that divinity may have an adequate mediation in history.

All this means that the general view of man and of his possibilities and realizations is a good one. It leads to

the discovery in culture and history of the seeds of good elements and to their cultivation with confidence. It is a view which applies specifically to the resources of every youngster. No one is definitively lost. Whatever the prevailing circumstances he has within him energies which, if suitably awakened and nourished, can prompt the will to build himself as a person. Every youngster, in fact, has within him the mark of the design of salvation in which there is the promise of a full and happy life for each one. "In every boy, and even in the most wretched of them", Don Bosco used to say, "there is some point which, if the educator can discover and stimulate it, reacts with generosity".

But in addition to attitudes concerning realities and persons, kindness suggests behaviour in the practice of education which long experience has shown to generate correspondence. This was developed at length in the letter of 1884, from which we may recall three points.

In the first place there is the ability to make the first opening, the ready welcome and familiar approach. The contrary would be remaining aloof, keeping at a distance, lack of communication, keeping away altogether. It has been emphasized that herein lay the art of Don Bosco: making the first contact, eliminating the barriers, provoking the desire for further encounters.

\This kind of practice of educative charity brings to mind two phenomena of the present day: the physical distance of so many young people, and the psychological distance of others who, although geographically close, are separated from us by themes of interest, language, tastes and associations. And it gives us the idea that there is something mystical and ascetical involved in getting into dialogue with them.

The second manifestation of kindness is patient dedication to the building of an environment which is rich in humanity, a family where one feels at home and is helped, and where there is space for self-expression while one gradually and happily assimilates the values put forward. The Salesians, like Don Bosco, learn to approach youngsters in widely differing situations; but they also spend time and energy in animating a youth community, characterized by certain traits, able to welcome any who want to join in and to offer them a positive experience of living with each other, of responsibility and commitment. It is an

environment in which kindness becomes a system because it gives rise to organization, atmosphere, rules and roles.

From the welcoming and familiar approach is born a deep friendship between educators and youngsters. This in turn engenders trust and confidence, and creates an enduring personal and educative relationship which is what really helps growth. This is a stimulus to us to reflect on our present practice and to submit it to close scrutiny to see to what extent we are reaching the individual.

The concrete expression used is assistance. It is understood in the sense of a desire to be with the young and to share their life. At the same time it implies physical presence wherever the youngsters are to be found and exchange ideas and plans, and a moral influence able to animate, stimulate and revive interest. It includes the double aspect of prevention: it protects from untimely negative experiences and at the same time develops the potentialities of the individual by means of positive suggestions. It stimulates with motives inspired by reason (an upright life, an attractive sense of existence) and by faith, while strengthening in the youngsters the ability to make an autonomous response to the appeal of values.

This assistance and friendship leads automatically to another unique manifestation of the educative relationship that is born of kindness: fatherliness. This is more than friendship. It is an affectionate and authoritative responsibility which offers guidance and vital teaching and demands discipline and commitment. It is both love and authority.

It is manifested above all in the ability to speak to the heart, in a personal and personalizing way, so as to reach those questions which really fill the life and mind of the youngsters; the ability to speak to them in appropriate language so as to touch their conscience and form in them the wisdom they need to face up to present and future problems. In a word, fatherliness is revealed in teaching the art of living in a Christian sense.

#### 7. The ecstasy of action (AGC 332, 338)

This is the interior aspect of *da mihi animas*. It leads us to understand more deeply its intensely prayerful element. (35) It defines the setting and style of salesian contemplation, the culminating moment of our union with God.

The expression goes back to St Francis de Sales. He understood ecstasy as the goal which mental prayer should reach: to lead us out of ourselves, quite peacefully, but in such a way that God attracts us and raises us to himself. He calls it ecstasy because by this means we are raised above ourselves, as it were. He lists three kinds of ecstasy: "one concerns the intellect; a second the affective faculty; a third action", "the ecstasy of life and action" is the crown of the other two which, without it, would remain incomplete. "There has never been a saint who has not experienced the ecstasy or the rapture of life and action, overcoming himself and his natural inclinations".(36)

To this kind of contemplation, which is at the foundation of prayer and through the fulfilment of God's will, Don Bosco and his successors have frequently made reference with various other expressions: union with God, the constant sense of his presence, interior life, activity sanctified by prayer.

But it fell to Don Rinaldi to retrieve and highlight the expression of St Francis de Sales. In the Strenna for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians of the year 1931, on the interior life of Don Bosco, he exhorted them to realize in themselves a vital synthesis between the activity of Martha and the contemplation of Mary. It was a case, he said, of a "simple, evangelical, practical and laborious life". "Don Bosco", he explained, "united in the most perfect degree his tireless and absorbing external activity, so far flung and laden with responsibility, with an interior life which began with the sense of the presence of God... which gradually became actual, living and persistent, so as to be a perfect union with God. In this way he realized in himself the most perfect state, operative contemplation, the ecstasy of action, in which he was consumed to the very end, with ecstatic tranquility, for the salvation of souls".(37)

This would be the salesian interpretation of "contemplative in action", a phrase of Jesuit origin, quoted in art.12 of the Constitutions.

But having explained the origin and sense of the expression we may ask what is its practical importance. It covers four aspects: a journey of prayer, a form of activity, a force unifying both of these, and a typical moment of contemplation.

Union with God is the true objective of prayer. The latter, as well as being a periodic dialogue, tends to give root in us to the love which gives us a feeling and desire for God. Union with God has many degrees; at the beginning it is fragile and inadequate but it grows little by little, like the light gradually increasing with the dawn of the day.(38) It is a goal to be achieved, certainly not by human effort alone but one which requires the ever more lucid and conscious response of a gift.

Because it is a goal, it presupposes a journey. Generosity in activity does not by itself either produce it or substitute for it. Hence the conviction that salesian prayer, like every other form, "demands its own elbow-room, distinct from that of ordinary working activity and dedicated entirely to direct conversation with God", (39) in ways appropriate to our life as indicated in the Constitutions. It is a simple prayer, but one that is persevering and intense: its expressions are taken from the liturgy and popular devotion. It has no spectacular nor strongly emotive traits - which may disappoint some people; it concentrates on identification with the saving will of God. All its expressions converge into a single fundamental attitude: hearkening to the word of God who is Jesus Christ, seen by us as the Good Shepherd. His light, his heart, his mystery meet in us the invocations of the world, the trials of the young, the demands of salvation. The culminating point of this meeting is the "memorial" of Jesus which recalls and makes actual his love for the Father and his dedication for the world: the Eucharist. While its consequence is the desire for conversion so as to be configured to Christ who gives his life for men.

Action, on the other hand, is not just any kind of activity supported by generosity alone or also by good intentions. Like contemplation, into which it is grafted, it does not consist in a sequence of subjective thoughts of a religious kind, but of grasping the action of God in the world and in life, helped by historical meditation. It is along this line that evangelical prayer leads, and especially the Magnificat. For the Salesian therefore it is a matter of action of an educative and pastoral nature, certainly belonging to the domain of charity with an infinite multiplicity of forms and people addressed.

But that is not sufficient. Action involves our whole person; it is not something external to it. Hence there is a quality of action which is rooted in the very heart of the



one who acts; it is being and feeling ourselves to be in Christ like branches in the vine. He is aware that his activity is a participation and collaboration in the mysterious activity of the Father under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It takes on therefore the practical criteria of Christ as regards method, objective and priority.

Between the style of prayer and the kind of action there is a mutual compenetration, though each maintains its specific times and forms. Prayer pervades all the activity. The latter comes into prayer as gratitude, intercession, desire of salvation, suffering. This is how it appears in the priestly prayer of Christ. It is this mutual compenetration which is referred to in art.95 of the Constitutions: "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".

And the unifying point of both is specifically the intensity of a love which spends itself for the salvation of others following the path indicated by the Father for the following of Christ.

All this brings it about that the typical moment of contemplation, of the ecstasy in which God draws us to himself with greater force, is when we act in collaboration with him.

The GC23 expresses it like this: "For the salesian, educating youth to t He is aware that by committing himself to the salvation of the young he is ex God 'who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their them'. Don Bosco has taught us to recognize God's operative presence in our w light and love"... "We believe that God is awaiting us in the young to offer dispose us to serve him in them, recognizing their dignity and educating them our work of education becomes the preeminent context in which to meet him".(4

We rejoice with the youngster who overcomes himself, we give thanks when we meet with generous resolutions, we are astonished at the progress grace has brought about in others, we suffer with those who are sorely tried. Every situation touches us as it touched Jesus: He had compassion..., he looked at him and said..., he stretched out his hand.

In the very activity, therefore, we break out into invocations - not always formal ones - like Jesus did: "In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes" (Lk 10,21).

8. The grace of unity (AGC 312, 330, 332, 334, 337, 342, 346, 352)

The 'grace of unity' was a theme frequently chosen by Fr Viganò as a synthesis when preaching retreats.(41). It remains one of the decisive key points for the complete and harmonious interpretation and realization of the physiognomy of salesian spirituality and life. The expression comes from the SGC20 where it was used to resolve the polarity between the demands of communal religious life and those of the mission expressed in open and creative pastoral action. "The Holy Spirit calls the Salesian to an option of Christian existence which is at the same time apostolic and religious. Thus he gives him the grace of unity to live the dynamism of apostolic action and the fullness of religious life in a single movement of charity towards God and his neighbour". (42)

Other tensions can be met with in the life of the Salesian which are natural to his project of evangelical existence: work and contemplation, professional educational practice and pastoral mentality, correct lay behaviour in environments in which he is working and effort at evangelization, insertion in the world and asceticism, individual creativity and communal planning, closeness to the young and bearing witness to values, collaboration in the Church and membership of a charismatic community.

The mirror in which such tensions can be seen reflected, with also the ways to harmonize them without undue mortifications, is Don Bosco. The Constitutions (cf. C 21) describe him as deeply human and at the same time deeply a man of God, open to the realities of this earth and filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, capable of moving amidst the vicissitudes of this world and living "as seeing him who is invisible". And they present to us, with growing emphasis, the accord between nature and grace, the harmony which is progressively created between the two healthy tensions and finally the fusion of it all in a strongly unified project of life.

Unity is a grace included in the call to the salesian life which implies, as does every form of life, a unified development. The Holy Spirit infuses the desire, the taste and the energy to live the salesian vocation in its totality as a manner of expressing our divine filiation and that of our young people.

But unity is also the response of the Salesian, of the communities, and of the Congregation itself. It calls for attention, discernment, a radical approach, revision and conversion. It is a matter of making everything converge on the project: intelligence, relationships, plans of action, time, qualifications, affections, and the holding in check of any tendency to dispersion. Unity, in fact, is not something prefabricated but a human and spiritual reality in conscious and ongoing construction for the giving of greater richness to the individual, the community, and to the apostolic project.

Let us look back over the various circumstances in which we have already experienced this grace, and we shall see the continual need for it because new challenges are always arising.

The grace of unity gives orientation to the renewal of our Congregation through the return to the charismatic sources as well as to the material historical events of the origins. The Spirit who made himself present yesterday in Don Bosco is the same Spirit who speaks to docile and attentive Salesians at the present day. Whoever is called to take part in discernment processes must adopt this criterion for the understanding of what the Spirit is saying today in every religious Institute.

In the Church and in religious Institutes the grace of unity precedes the blending of the institutional with the prophetic element. It acts as a bridge between these two aspects which cannot be opposed to each other either in the life of the Church or of the Congregation, or in the existence of the individual Salesian. It is in fact the same Spirit who inspires the essential structures for the life of the Church and who exposes them, so to speak, to the impact of prophecy so as to maintain their ability to be open to what is new and to restructure itself from within like a living body.

Cleavages, lacerations, destructive opposing positions,

are all evidence that a gift of God which should be continually exploited has in fact not been accepted.

In the Spirit too and with the grace of unity are settled the tensions that can arise between charism and authority, and between obedience and communion in the Church and in the religious community. This grace, in fact, nourishes in us a sincere concern for ecclesial unity; it leads us to feel that our charismatic and pastoral originality is a gift for the Church, to foster communion with the bishops and with Peter's successor, to hearken to the guidelines and life of the Church, to be opened by human values to an encounter with every well inspired religious experience, and to try every means to attain truth in charity also at the level of human experience.

Finally, in the life of individual Salesians and communities the grace of unity leads to the positive overcoming, in advance and from above, of the tensions to which their existence is a prey. As John Paul II said in the course of the GC23 "it ensures the vital inseparability between union with God and dedication to one's neighbour, between depth of interior evangelical meditation and apostolic activity, between a praying heart and busy hands". (43)

And so there is no authentic love of God which does not become translated through intimate loving necessity into generous love for man. Nor is there any true love for man which does not prompt the lifting of one's gaze towards God to appeal to his strength for the fulfilment of all communion and every desire.

Hence action includes the contemplative dimension and the latter unites in a harmonious manner prayer, pastoral commitment and apostolic suffering. "Prayer, action and affliction", wrote Fr Viganò, "are together referred in vital fashion to two poles: never God without man; never man without God". (44)

Where such grace is not operative, the desire of prayer can lead to intimism, separation from community or from pastoral service; apostolic thrust leads to actions that are individualistic and disorganized; evangelization is limited to selected groups and rigidly religious content; professional educational expertise leads to the faith lacking expression.

Don Bosco, noted Fr Viganò, "looked always at God as

being the one most in love with man. And the grace of unity emphasizes the profound unity deriving to the heart and action of the apostle from the contemplation of God in love with man".(45)

#### 9. Educating by evangelizing, evangelizing by educating (ASC 290, 296, AGC337, 343)

The grace of unity remedies the risk of a break between the heart and life of the Salesian, of which dichotomies of various kinds are a sign. But it also serves to respond to another danger impending at the present time: that of a separation between evangelization and education. The theme is an important one. The education of the young, in fact, is not only not linked with evangelization but in some people's opinion should be positively separated from it, because they consider it a cultural sector with autonomous development. In consequence there are also those who look for results in evangelization but tend to reduce the latter to the catechetical sector and addressed only to reduced groups. What is necessary on the other hand is to promote by educating, to educate by evangelizing, to sanctify by educating.

That salesian activity includes two aspects, education and evangelization, which contemplate both humanist and supernatural horizons; that it is a synthesis of processes of human advancement and at the same time of a deeper knowledge of Christian life, had been repeatedly asserted by the GC21.(46) Of these two dimensions it had pursued reciprocal internal leavening to the point of constituting a single project with different objectives and methods applicable to individuals. To describe such unity the same Chapter coined such expressions as "Christian integral development", "integral salesian humanism", "Christian liberating education".(47) Or, taking up once again Don Bosco's simple formulas, it proposed to form the good Christian and upright citizen through growth in health, wisdom and holiness. The GC23 followed the same line, integrating into a single process the human experiences of the youngster and the evangelical sense, making of them a typical style of youthful holiness.

To succeed in making this intention operative in every initiative and context, there is needed not only a professional approach and technology, but spirituality as well. "In fact in the mind of Don Bosco and in the salesian tradition, the preventive system tends to identify itself

increasingly with the salesian spirit: it is at the same time pedagogy, apostolate, spirituality which brings together in a single dynamic experience both educators (as individuals and community) and pupils, contents and methods, with clearly characterized attitudes and behaviour".(48)

The distinction, interrelation, and existential fusion of the two dimensions present demands at various levels.

A first level is that of the mentality of the educators. At the root of their educational outlook there must be several convictions at work: the exemplary figure of Christ who assumes the human into the divine person and transforms it, the vocation of every man harmoniously and undividedly a son of God and a son of man, the need of grace for the full realization of one's own humanity; revelation as the unveiling of the sense of human existence because it throws light on man's origin and destiny and supports him on his pilgrimage. And on the other hand the value of human experience, the appeal hidden in the questions of the young and in the events of history, the theological importance of educative processes through which normally passes the grace of redemption which generates the new man.

If on the one hand we give explicit recognition to the substantial contribution made by grace to the growth of man, on the other we must be alert to the situation of those for whom we are working, to find the ways of daily patience, and of the gradual approach which realizes it must move at the pace of the youngster.

Then there is a second level, that of the personal experience of the educator. There takes place in his mind first of all a synthesis between culture and Gospel, when he puts before himself existential facts and cultural currents and evaluates them in line with evangelical criteria, accepting what is positive, challenging what is ambiguous, and correcting what is negative. In his own existence is taking place an integration between faith and life with the exploitation of all that is human, good and noble, and at the same time with openness to unusual perspectives of Christ.

A third level is that of educative and pastoral praxis, where the processes of education and evangelization are neither juxtaposed nor does either of them dominate as successive processes which are mutually exclusive. They are not delegated as distinct and incommunicable

responsibilities. One simply educates, but as a believer. One evangelizes, but as an educator according to the situation of the youngsters. The two things take place individually and in common, because it is a matter of communication of life rather than of roles and didactic tasks. The two dimensions come together in free and variable ways because they involve the witness of the educator, the promptings of the environment, what has been learned from listening to the youngsters' questions, and availability for dialogue. Similarly in the other case, that of evangelization, there are put forward without any rigid order the proclamation of the Gospel, the suggestion of faith, the catechetical process, the life of grace, commitment and spirituality.

Finally there is the level of organization which, along the same lines, must also aim at ensuring the Christian identity and educative character of structure and projects. It does not matter if this identity cannot yet be put forward in complete and explicit form (as in countries where the majority of the youngsters are of different religions), or is expressed only in the simplest of elements (as in many forms of rescue and salvaging). What is important is that it not be only formal or institutional but becomes practical and able to reach the heart of the individuals, throwing light on questions of life and culture. Only in this way, in fact, does the Gospel become prophecy and a source of joy and energy.

In his letter on the Educative and Pastoral Project, Fr Egidio Viganò, in order to preserve the evangelizing identity of educative initiatives, recommended that the ultimate objective of education in Don Bosco's style be kept very clear. Every intermediate objective in the mind of the Salesian is ordered to the achievement of the youngster's calling, which is the knowledge of God and communion with him. For this reason the whole educative process must be positively oriented to Christ, searching in the significance of human experiences and shedding on them the light of the Gospel. It helps therefore to generate a critical conscience with regard to values and current lines of thought, at a time of pluralism like the present. At the same time, to ensure the educative style needed in our work of evangelization, he said there must be positive concern for cultural areas, initiatives and institutions. These, while offering us at the present day a possibility of evangelization different from the past, place us on fertile human ground which is naturally open to the word of God. The

Gospel will have to be deeply linked with culture and, we may add, the faith with life's problems and vice versa. And it is precisely this which demands a realistic sense of the gradual and practical nature of the educative mediations like the community, the plan of activities, and the word and witness of the educators.

10. The Immaculate Help of Christians (ASC 289, 309, AGC 322)

Every time a charism is born, as in all initiatives of the Holy Spirit, the motherhood of Mary is involved. But our own experience shows this to be true in a particular way, to such an extent that the formation of our pastoral praxis is inconceivable without the presence of Mary, nor could our spirituality mature without the contemplation of her figure. The devotion to the Help of Christians is an integral factor of the salesian phenomenon; it forms a vital part of its totality so that it would be absurd to isolate one from the other. There is a strict and vital interchange, an intimate linkage, a deep relationship with both the salesian mission and the spirit of our charism.(49) If by grace she is at the beginning of Don Bosco's pilgrimage, she is also the arrival point of his process of growth, the maturing of his whole vast apostolic project, the concrete synthesis of the various components of its spirituality and the life-giving source of its dynamism and fruitfulness.(50)

All this has its ultimate basis in the event of Christ and in our membership through faith of his community, the Church. In fact it is from the height of the paschal mystery and the perspective of the resurrection that we look at our relationship with the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. From the moment of the Annunciation there was created between Mary and Jesus a relationship of mother and son which endures for ever, but was transfigured at the moment when he took up his mission and suffered death. In this way the motherhood of Mary acquires new meanings at the redemptive moment par excellence, in the life of the Church and in her assumption into heaven. "Belief in the resurrection and the affirmation that Christ has ascended and Mary has been assumed into heaven, does not mean that they now live on some distant planet and are within reach of the earth only by some kind of extraordinary astronomic flight; it means rather that they are very much alive for us, present and active in our world through the new paschal reality of the Resurrection". (51)



The revelation of this mystery is mediated for us by the spiritual experience of Don Bosco and by the events which are at the origin of our salesian charism. In them Mary appears as an emerging presence perceived and hearkened to, like a constant maternal mediation, even to becoming indicated as the "Mistress" of our educative praxis and of our spiritual life.

His vocation was revealed to Don Bosco through the intervention and word of Mary. She showed him the field of his mission, its objective and its method. His work for the young began on the feast of the Immaculate Conception and its growth was marked by coincidences and events of Marian significance which took place within the Oratory and in the greater space of the Church outside. The oratory experience blossomed into the Salesian Congregation, Valdocco had its culmination in the Sanctuary: reference to Mary Immaculate was enriched by that to the Help of Christians. Don Bosco, who saw it all at first hand, discerned the connecting link between the various phases: "Mary has done it all". And he was certain also that for the future: "The Holy Virgin will continue to protect our Congregation and our salesian works, if we confirm our faith in her and continue to promote devotion to her". (52)

Don Bosco's experience led him to fix his gaze on the living person of Mary by means of two representations or titles in which we see reflected particulars which are significant. Mary Immaculate speaks of the fertilizing presence of the Spirit, of availability for God's design, of the breakage with sin and with all the forces that sustain it, of the totality of consecration. At the Oratory it inspired openness to the supernatural, the pedagogy of grace, delicacy of conscience, and the motherly aspects of educational accompaniment. It left its mark in the feast and Sosality of the Immaculate Conception - a kind of trial ground for the Salesian Congregation, in the kind of holiness of Dominic Savio, which appears today as the forerunner of salesian youthful spirituality.

Another ensemble of meanings is centered around Mary Help of Christians. It recalls the motherhood of Mary with respect to Christ and the Church, the support of Mary for the people of God in the vicissitudes of history, her collaboration in the work of salvation and, in consequence, her function in the incarnation of the Gospel among the peoples ("Star of evangelization") (53), and her mediation of grace for every Christian and community.

She imbues us with the sense of the Church, enthusiasm for the mission, apostolic courage which was manifested in the building of the Sanctuary and in the missionary expeditions, the ability to gather together forces for the Kingdom, as evidenced by the springing up of the Salesian Family.

Both these images, that of Mary Immaculate and that of the Help of Christians stimulating us to pastoral charity and to interior apostolic conviction. Mary's mission, in fact, begins with an openness to the Spirit, moves by faith and is nourished, as appears in the Magnificat, by the contemplation of the events of salvation. It is then expressed and developed in an unconditioned service to the growth of Christ, of the Christian community, and of the world. For us therefore it is a reminder and stimulus to develop the two dimensions in strict unity and mutual communication.

She, in fact, united virginity with maternity; in her womb the divine joined the human; becoming the mother of Jesus as man, she became also the Mother of God. Educating Jesus meant creating the necessary human conditions for the Word to have full temporal expression and be rooted in humanity. In her therefore contemplation and action were not only parallel but consciously fused together. Her 'yes' to the Father is always a 'yes' for the salvation of the world. "The grace of unity in us has an indispensable Marian aspect, which enlightens our apostolic interior and accompanies its growth. We should be lacking in objectivity were we to reflect on our religious consecration without fixing our attention on the interior fullness and motherhood of Mary". (54)

The facts of salvation and charismatic happenings, therefore, place each Salesian in a setting where Mary is already present as Mother. How do we express our awareness of this, and our acceptance of the fact?

We do so in the first place by cultivating a personal relationship with her, founded on meditation on the events of salvation and their significance: the Annunciation, Cana, Calvary, the Resurrection, the Cenacle; it is nourished by attention to ecclesial life, where her presence is felt; it is expressed in the filial attitude which inspires the various Marian practices. As our Constitutions say in this connection: "We develop a strong filial devotion to her" (C 92)

But the personal relationship reflects back on the educative commitment and gives to it its salesian tone. From the standpoint of the educative plan it directs attention to the life of faith and grace, to which Mary generates every youngster; it prompts the initiation of the young to filial relationships with God manifested in the prompt response to his inspirations and in the sense of sin; it induces trust in the mercy of the Father and in the redeeming strength of Christ.

From the standpoint of method, Mary suggests the full assistance of understanding, the support of a life in process of growth, the ability to cultivate initial movements and hope. The fusion of both constitutes the preventive system, which was born and grows at the spiritual school of Mary: "Under the guidance of Mary his teacher, Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first Oratory a spiritual and educational experience which he called the preventive system" (C 20).

Finally there is the field of pastoral work among the ordinary people. It involves attention to religious experience, the care of Marian piety, and listening to the appeals of the people of God, understood in a wide sense. In the first place we must be able to perceive their hopes and anxieties, to arouse and then sustain their faith through expressions inborn in their culture. In the context of the poorer classes the Salesians educate youth, commit themselves to evangelization, support their advancement and collaborate in their culture. They therefore promote devotion to Mary, with four perspectives in mind: exploiting the patrimony of popular devotion, and the human and Christian values which they contain; they take up today's cultural turnabout which prompts enlightenment on the new questions affecting the individual, on the role of women, on the foundation and functions of faith, and on similar problems; they draw inspiration from the guidelines of Vatican II, which proclaims in the context of the present day the evangelical message on Mary; and they launch mediations of a catechetical, cultural and celebrational kind to get the sense of the presence of Mary rooted in the people.

There are three symbolizations of the synthesis we have set out. The first is a fact of history, the building of the Basilica; the second is a pictorial representation, the picture of Mary Help of Christians above the high altar, of which the details were suggested by Don Bosco himself; the

third is the prayer of entrustment which we recite every day: Mary Immaculate Help of Christians, Mother of the Church.

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The spirituality which results from these interacting forces, is concentrated by Fr Viganò in the expression "oratorian heart". It is attributed to Don Bosco, who dedicated himself to the education of the young "with firmness and constancy, in the midst of difficulties and fatigue: he took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young".(55) It recalls his original pastoral experience, essential to the charism, not so much in its material aspect as in its spirit. It recalls the praxis to which it gave origin and what it implies in the person of the educators.

The same expression is applicable also to the individual Salesian of every age, in reflecting predilection of the young as his field of work; he feels himself sent to them by God; he is able to make himself loved through kindness, he puts persons at the centre of his projects, and is creative in responding to the needs and demands of the young.(56)

The oratorian heart is manifested in the burning desire to reveal Jesus a thirst and enjoyment of his grace, to open people to vocations of commitment, It also includes an interior enthusiasm for Christ the Shepherd, an internal unite oneself with God and to see him in the young.

In a word, the oratorian heart assumes the traits of the generous response to of an interior pastoral approach, of the *da mihi animas*, of the study how to unity', of the love of Mary Help of Christians, Mother of the young. It represents the Salesian in action, in his typical environment, in his tensions and foundations also in its moving vivacity. "It is the salesian *sine qua non* from first prof

In our language heart, rather than indicating only a physical part of the body, takes on the total sense it has in the Bible. The heart of man is the source of his conscious personality, intelligent and free, where have their origin - often in a mysterious way - and mature his decisive options, where lurks his goodness or malice (cf. Lk 6,45), where resounds the unwritten law and the action of God is felt; where Mary preserved the Word and meditated on it (Lk 1,19; 2,51). And so it is said that man sees the appearances, but God knows what is hidden in the heart; that man needs a new heart to listen to God and follow him, and God promises to change a heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

The adjective oratorian covers the charism, the personal vocation and the historical salesian experience lived out with dynamic fidelity.

To this nucleus of our spirituality we are brought back by the practical commitments we have assumed and by those we are about to develop in the near future. We are reminded of this by the "Instrumentum laboris" of the Synod: "It is hoped that there will be a revival of spirituality, especially in the active apostolic life, not only to make the mission more incisive, but also to make possible consecrated life itself in a world which seems to be becoming impervious to the work of evangelization and which has need of solid spiritual personalities to evangelize with the fervour of saints" (58)

That too is the message of Fr Viganò. I entrust it to you once again with confidence, and greet you in the Lord, asking for a prayer for the coming GC24.

Fr Juan E. Vecchi.