

DON BOSCO

PROFOUNDLY HUMAN
PROFOUNDLY HOLY

Pietro Brocardo

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STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

Published by the Institute of Spirituality, Theology Faculty, Pontifical Salesian University

PIETRO BROCARDO

DON BOSCO Profoundly human – Profoundly holy

LAS-ROME

"Only a saint in modern guise
not a Party
nor a worldview
will be the source
of the longed-for transformation of life."
(W. NIGG)

PRESENTATION

The contents of this book might seem to have a somewhat journalistic feel to them. But this is only a first impression.

In a crisp and fast-moving style, the author attempts to highlight some of the more characteristic features of Don Bosco's holiness. Those who expected a filial commemoration on the 50th anniversary of the canonisation (1934-1984) of the great 19th century educator, may be grateful to Fr Brocardo for offering it to us in this work.

However, it is not only the spiritual figure of the "profoundly human, profoundly holy" Don Bosco that is depicted here. We discover the thread of the essential components of all Christian holiness, which make it ever relevant in faithful and attentive adherence to God's call, no less than to the various situations in which individuals find themselves.

With good reason, then, we recognise a brief essay on spirituality in this work, a combination of intuition and experience, competence and love.

Pietro Brocardo offers us the result of a lifetime of work in this book, something that has matured over many years of study and reflection, observation and teaching in our Faculty of Theology. He has also been a much appreciated spiritual guide for many confreres preparing for the priesthood and Salesian life.

As an expression of dutiful gratitude, we wanted to include this stimulating booklet in the *Studi di Spiritualità* series.

Rome, 31 January 1985

JUAN PICCA

Director of the Spirituality Institute of the Faculty of Theology at the UPS

Foreword

These pages meet the wishes of friends who have insistently requested them.

They are addressed to members of the Salesian Family, but also to anyone who in some way feels attracted to the figure of Don Bosco.

The contents focus on the extraordinary humanity and holiness of Don Bosco, though given the modest size of the work, these are more hinted at than developed.

The text is in two parts: The first part takes into account certain features of him as a human being; the second points out some major dimensions of his holiness.

The compilation – because that is what it is – draws freely from many sources: the beatification and canonisation process, some archival material, official documents of the Salesian Society, and the vast literature on Don Bosco about which I separately offer a few pointers.

In order not to make the reader's job more difficult I have not included footnotes for any of Don Bosco's words or excerpts from other authors I have indicated. The reader should be aware, however, that everything referred to in inverted commas is faithfully reflected in the text. A few insignificant changes in style do not alter the meaning of the sentence: if anything, they make it clearer.

I hope that this book can bring some benefit, but above all stimulate direct access to more wide-ranging works for an in-depth and stimulating knowledge of Don Bosco, a character more alive than ever in the history of our times.

Introduction

Fifty years of sainthood

Half a century after this historical event, a reconsideration and re-reading of Don Bosco's life from the point of view of holiness seems not only opportune, but necessary.

In this age of transition, with its global dimension, an era characterised by a new vision of the human being, the world, history, processes of personalisation, socialisation, secularisation, liberation, a discourse on holiness would seem destined for a small audience. It continues to be difficult if we consider, as Egidio Viganò, the Rector Major of the Salesians, writes, that the very word holiness

can be easily misunderstood by a confused mentality that is fairly common nowadays and born of an environment which puts a kind of cultural blockage in the way of its genuine meaning and implications. It can become identified with a false kind of spirituality which veers away from practical things; with an asceticism attainable only by rare heroes; with a feeling of ecstasy that looks down on active life; with an outdated understanding of the values of the present turning point in the history of man. Such a caricature as this can only be deplored.

Yet, every time we come up against a genuine saint, this confused, distorted and even caricatured depiction completely dissolves. "The saints" wrote Pascal, "have their own kingdom, their own splendour, their victories and their majesty".

The mystery of the saints has such a fascination that it often imposes itself – as it did and does for Don Bosco – on the unbelieving themselves.

Much has been said and written about holiness. Leaving aside scholastic discussions let us say, quite simply, that holiness, a gift from God and the human being's commitment, is none other than life "conformed to the image of his

Son" (Rom 8:29) – the “only Holy One”, the “Holy One” of God (Mk 1:24) – through his Spirit and the power of the theological virtues. Holiness is the life of God who is Trinity in us, and of us in God. *Per se*, all baptised persons living in grace are, in their own right, ‘saints’, but not to the same degree and level.

When we say that Don Bosco is “holy” we mean to say that, distinct from the band of ordinary Christians, he lived his baptismal life with greater determination and intensity; that he achieved the goal that the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* points to for all the faithful: the “fullness of Christian life”, “charity, as the bond of perfection and the fullness of the law”, “perfect union with Christ” (nos. 40, 50).

Such fullness entails true martyrdom or Christian heroism, of which the Divine Martyr is the archetype. After Him and in communion with Him come the other martyrs, who by the shedding of their blood have given the supreme testimony of faith and charity.

However, according to concepts and criteria widely elaborated in the processes of beatification and canonisation, the faithful – think of Don Bosco – who practised, at least for a long period before their death, the theological and moral virtues to a supreme degree, that is, to a greater extent than the way ordinary Christians do, even in arduous and difficult situations, have also been recognised as heroes for centuries. Today it is recognised that the perfect, faithful and persevering practice of the duties inherent to one’s condition and status entails true heroism and is therefore a criterion of holiness. “Even the most common things can become extraordinary when carried out with the perfection of Christian virtue” (Pius XI). Don Bosco is a saint because his life was fully heroic.

Don Bosco’s second life

Canonisation is not only the supreme glory of a member of the faithful. It is also the beginning of that individual’s second life in the history of the Church and the world. In fact “by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society” (*Lumen Gentium* no. 40).

In reality, Don Bosco’s second life began immediately after his death, though not with the fullness and universality conferred on him by canonisation.

From then on, Don Bosco has been alive in worship. In fact, canonisation flows immediately into worship. "To the honour of the holy and indivisible Trinity" the formula of the canonisation recites, "... We decree and define Blessed John Bosco a Saint, and we include him among the number of the Saints, establishing that the universal Church shall honour his memory devoutly." True, not all saints are celebrated; only canonised saints are celebrated. The veneration of the saints – and therefore of Don Bosco – in the Church's thinking is more important than their example, because it helps us to live in mystical communion with them.

"Nor is it by the title of example only that we cherish the memory of those in heaven," Vatican II tells us, "but still more in order that the union of the whole Church may be strengthened in the Spirit by the practice of fraternal charity. For just as Christian communion among wayfarers brings us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the saints joins us to Christ, from Whom as from its Fountain and Head issues every grace and the very life of the people of God." (no. 50).

Since Easter 1934, then, Don Bosco has been alive in the liturgy of the Church which celebrates his universal memory: he is alive in the consciousness of those who, attracted by his charm and charism, pray to him, venerate him, call on him as a powerful intercessor with God. The feasts in his honour have wide resonance in many local churches. They are distinguished by the great turnout for the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, which Don Bosco inculcated so much. They are an authentic passage of the Lord into hearts.

They are characterised above all as "festive encounters of youth" who today, as they did yesterday, acclaim him and invoke him as "Teacher", "Guide", "Friend" and "Father". The tribute of love rendered to Don Bosco is always, ultimately, a tribute of love rendered to God. In the cult of the saints, every attestation of love in fact terminates in "Christ", "crown of all saints", and through him, in God (*Lumen Gentium* no. 50).

Don Bosco is alive as a model of Christian life. By canonising him, the Church officially recognised the exemplary nature of his earthly life and has proposed it as an "archetype" and "model" for imitation by the faithful.

The imitation of the saints has great importance for the Church because the saints personify an ideal of Christian life and show people by what means it can be achieved. Don Bosco's life is also, in its own way, a fifth gospel that stimulates the

desire to get as close to God as possible. It was said of many of the desert Fathers that their life was a "Word"; the same should be said of Don Bosco, whose life was truly a tangible "sign" of the wondrous transformations that the Holy Spirit works in people's hearts. A life, then, in which people today can recognise themselves; people for whom not words but deeds, witness are what counts. In fact, as Maritain pointed out, they "appeal to signs: they need facts, and above all sensible signs of the reality of divine things. Faith must be a living, real, practical faith. Believing in God must mean living in such a way that life could not be lived if God did not exist."

Don Bosco's holiness, his intact faith that seemed to create things from nothing, is a response to this call. Don Bosco lives more than ever, finally, in his mission and in the institutions in which he embodied himself. Undoubtedly, death had not stopped the marvellous expansion of Don Bosco's works, but he still lacked the seal of holiness. In the life of a religious Family, the canonisation of the founder has more ecclesial importance than the approval of the rules, because the founder acquires an incontestable authority.

The canonisation of Don Bosco, therefore, represents an event of extraordinary significance. Recognising the initiative of the Spirit of the Lord in his mission as a founder, the Church has officially included him as a chosen portion in the universal patrimony of the People of God; it has authenticated his validity; it has implored and implores from God that, beyond the coordinates of space and time, he continue his beneficial journey in history.

And, as Pius XI put it, this means "thousands and thousands of churches, chapels, hospices, schools, colleges, with thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands of souls brought closer to God, of youth gathered in safe places and called to the banquet of knowledge and early Christian education". It might sound like hyperbole, but today these words are simply true.

Representative of the "Turin school of holiness"

Holiness is not quantifiable: only God knows its depth and its secret. There are saints whose destiny seems to have been to remain somewhat in the shade and others who, for the great services they have rendered to the Church and society, have come to the attention of the faithful and continue to do so. Don Bosco is among these. Msgr Giuseppe De Luca, distinguished scholar and man of letters, a profound connoisseur of Italian religiosity, wrote about him: "In the history of

19th century Italy, John Bosco is no less to sanctity than Alessandro Manzoni is to literature or Camillo di Cavour is to politics: in other words *il supremo*."

We could debate this comparison, however it is still true that Don Bosco is one of the most representative figures of what has been called the "Turin school of holiness". This school, in the space of a century or little more, has seen the flourishing of more than sixty Saints, Blesseds, Servants of God who have been interdependent but different, and whose common yearning seems to be summed up in two words: pray and do. In the judgement of those who are competent to do so, this school has been characterised by its syncretism, the result of the pragmatism that is very much ingrained in the Piedmontese temperament. But also for its balanced practicality and common sense; for its prudence and political non-alignment. And for its traditionalism that does not exclude – especially in Don Bosco – full exposure for the courageous stance taken against the dominant liberal anticlericalism through creative daring, a great spirit of initiative, the ability to constructively open the frontiers of the new times to the needs of the Church. Most of the key figures in this school were priests. In his address for the Beatification of Leonard Murialdo, Paul VI drew up this lucid profile of the man:

The Turin school of holiness of the last century has given the Church a type of holy cleric, one very faithful to orthodox doctrine and canonical custom, a man of prayer and mortification, perfectly adherent to the habitual pattern of life prescribed for a priest. But precisely because of this generous and intimate adherence, one who felt new and powerful energies rising in his soul, and realised that serious and urgent needs around him demanded his intervention. We will not look for new ways of thinking in him, but will find new ways of acting instead. Action is what describes him. Driven from within his spirit, called outwardly by new vocations of charity, this ideal priest gave himself over to the practical problems of the good that was present to him; and so he began, without any other foresight than that of abandonment to Providence, the unthought-of adventure, the novelty of founding a new institute modelled according to the genius of his initial fidelity, and according to the indications of human needs he experienced, which love made evident and imploring. Thus we have Cottolengo and Cafasso, already

declared saints, as well as Lanteri and Allamano, who followed in their footsteps, and especially Don Bosco, whose great and representative figure we all know. And so now we have Murialdo.

The family atmosphere that one breathes in the Turin school, the many convergences that the servants of God have in common with one another, are not an indication of uniformity. Each saint has his own face, his own style, his own character, carries out his own mission, is both the same and different. Don Bosco, for example, is not Cafasso, both because of his personal and historical qualities and because he is a founder.

Being a founder entails a different configuration of holiness and a special charism. That is, a “new gift” to the Church consisting of a typical “experience of the Holy Spirit transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth” (*Mutuae Relationes* no. 11), which Cafasso did not have.

Memory and prophecy

Don Bosco is both a saint of the past and a living prophecy of what God wants in history. He must therefore be approached from both an historical and a prophetic perspective. From the point of view of history, because only an historical perspective is capable of resurrecting the past, as such, without distorting it. From this perspective, Don Bosco is and will always be a typical Piedmontese saint of Risorgimento Italy, just as Saint Ignatius Loyola is a typical Basque saint of 17th century Spain. Don Bosco was sensitive to the values of the emerging culture in need of evangelical leavening, sensitive to disvalues, ambiguities, evils to be fought, curbed, prevented; sensitive to the new needs of religious life and of the Church of his time, bitterly contested in its Head and its institutions. The approach to Don Bosco must arrive at a knowledge of the “total Don Bosco”, such as the seventy-two-and-a-half years of his life and the work he did on himself. It will then be understood, for example, how he was nourished by the theology and spirituality of his time, how he shared in the self-awareness that the Church had of itself under the pontificate of Pius IX, how certain of his attitudes were a reflection of his priestly formation at the time of the Restoration.

But memory is not archaeology; to be meaningful and faithful to the God of history it must also read the past in a prophetic key, as bearer of the future and of

everlasting and perennial values. These values include: God's ongoing intentions for his life, the essential elements of his character and spirit, dynamically open to the future, the vital and essential reality of his mission, the positive values of his century – the Church has always appropriated all that is good in the lives of peoples – relaunched as prophecy in our culture. “The human and Christian principles on which Don Bosco's educating wisdom is based carry values that do not grow old,” says Paul VI, because “such an incomparable example of Christian pedagogical humanism ... has its roots in the Gospel.”

Discerning what is memory and what is prophecy is not easy. It involves the authority of Don Bosco's successors and of General Chapters. The supreme guarantor, however, is always, in the final instance, the authority of the Church, the vigilant guardian of the charisms that God causes to blossom in her womb.

The following pages aim to highlight some perennial elements of Don Bosco's holiness, with particular emphasis on his apostolic energy and the “grace of unity” with which he was able to vitally unite prayer and action. Don Bosco in fact was undeniably an active saint.

An active saint

Years later we can see that Don Bosco is at the origin not only of a plentiful spiritual posterity but also of a true spiritual current in the Church which is permeating the world, and of an authentic school of spirituality, as current research is proving. An apostolic spirituality, however, or, as we prefer to say, a spirituality of action.

The spirituality of action in today's cultural context can lend itself to quite a few ambiguities. Indeed, there are many who think that action is the only category by which human beings interpret themselves and act upon themselves, others and the world. Praxis and orthopraxis are always a much debated issue in the theology of spirituality, which is the science of human action vivified by the Spirit.

The Church is not new to these problems as the history of great apostles of past centuries demonstrates. In a world that strongly emphasises words like praxis, work, action, Don Bosco's life, dominated, so to speak, by the vertigo of action, can be paradigmatic for those who want to constructively engage in the building of a world on a human scale leavened by the Gospel, their action being ineradicably bound to and dependent on God's saving activity. Action is a primary notion of existence: it cannot be circumscribed within a strict definition.

However, we can distinguish a twofold movement in it: the immanent movement that justifies and commands external actions and works, and movement directly aimed at transforming things. Only the former is truly perfective of the person and human values. Don Bosco is valid for what he did or caused to be done, but immensely more so for what he was and wanted. This is the correct way to consider him.

The fulcrum of his spiritual vitality

Today's Christian, tempted by the difficulty of combining being and action, love of God and love of neighbour, prayer and work, action and contemplation in a vital unity, will find a concrete model of spiritual unity in Don Bosco, one lived amid the usual turmoil of active life.

There was no dichotomy or inner division in his case, but a perfect "grace of unity": God was truly the sun, the fulcrum of his life. A saint of action, he certainly did not act like a muffler where prayer was concerned, but knew how to make action the habitual place of his encounter with God. He valued the perfective richness of prayer, but also considered action to be perfective. His sacramental way of being church consisted precisely in his commitment to "act as church". He knew that there is a constant dialectical relationship between prayer and work: one refers to the other; but he also knew that this relationship is governed by God's will, the supreme norm. We will speak of this in due course.

A saint forever

Because of his radical union with Christ who is of "yesterday, today and always", Don Bosco is also a timeless saint, a saint of all times. Undoubtedly, the saint of tomorrow will have unprecedented traits and modulations; tomorrow's saint will be different from the saint of the past. But one thing is absolutely certain: this diversity will never be one of substance. We can certainly say, with Cardinal De Lubac, that the saint of tomorrow, like the saint of yesterday, will be "poor, humble, devoid of self. These saints will have the spirit of the beatitudes. They will not curse or flatter. They will love and will take the Gospel literally, that is, rigorously. A touch of asceticism will have freed them from themselves. They will inherit all the faith of Israel, but will remember that it came through Jesus Christ. They will take upon themselves the cross of the Saviour and seek to follow Him."

Saints do not grow old, John Paul II said: “They are always men and women of tomorrow, people of the evangelical future of man and the Church, witnesses of the future world”. The fact that Don Bosco still captivates and powerfully attracts hosts of young people and the faithful to himself, proves that he possesses something within him that defies the centuries.

All those who live within his sphere of influence, or who in any case feel an eagerness to become familiar with him, can take up, without fear, the message of his simple and profound, captivating and likeable though also very demanding holiness. Don Bosco, who was so amiable and understanding, wants us to be “in the world, but not worldly; not aliens, but with our own particular identity; not relics of the past, but modern proclaimers of the eschatological reality of the paschal mystery; not blind followers of popular trends, but courageous promoters of a pressing renewal; not remaining aloof from human events, but protagonists of the history of salvation. In following Christ according to Don Bosco’s spirit we make use of all the circumstances, events, signs of the times, and even negative or unjust situations to promote our growth in holiness” (E. Viganò). The greatest gift we can give to others is our holiness.

PART 1 KEY FEATURES

Chapter 1 STRIVING TO BECOME A SAINT

What do we wish to know about a Blessed or a Saint?, asked Paul VI in his address, which we have already mentioned, for the beatification of Leonard Murialdo. And his answer:

If our mentality were that of outward curiosity, of a certain naive medieval devotion, we might propose searching for the extraordinary in someone exalted in such an extraordinary way: singular favours, [...] mystical phenomena and miracles; but today we are less greedy for these exceptional manifestations of Christian life. We like to get to know their human figure rather than their mystical or ascetic one: we want to discover in the saints what they have in common with us, rather than what distinguishes them from us; we want to bring them down to our level as people immersed in the not always edifying experience of this world; we want to find them to be brothers or sisters in our toil and perhaps even in our misery, to feel we relate to them and share a common, heavy human condition with them.

Don Bosco's life overflowed with the supernatural and the marvellous – as we shall see – but in the first instance we like to see him in his creatureliness, “a man like us”, almost one of us although immensely greater. Therefore, a man marked by the incompleteness of nature and its burdens, tempted by the world of sin and the evil one.

This perspective, in which human limitation and divine grace are compared, is already an encouragement to our weakness.

Don Bosco, like everyone else, was not born a saint; he became one by surrendering himself to the power of the Holy Spirit, and by denying himself he rose, step by step, to the heights of holiness.

Here we note just a few quick sequences of his endeavour to become a saint.

His was not an easy temperament

Although endowed with splendid human qualities, which we will see further on, Don Bosco was not by nature the patient, meek and gentle person we know. Of Mamma Margaret's two sons, Joseph and John, it could have been said that the former was the most Salesian, not the latter. Joseph was remembered as a meek, affectionate, docile and patient child and would remain such for the rest of his life. He rushed to meet guests, talked happily with them and was immediately liked. Some early accounts, on the other hand, describe young John as a rather serious child, somewhat taciturn, almost mistrustful; he did not grant familiarity to strangers easily, did not allow himself to be caressed, spoke little, and was already an attentive observer.

"Though I was still pretty small," he wrote in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, "I was studying my companion's characters. When I looked closely at someone, I could usually gauge what he was thinking."

In the dream he had when he was nine or ten years old, he certainly showed himself to already be reflective and generous, sensitive and zealous in defending God's rights, but he also revealed a fiery, impulsive and even violent temperament when he impetuously pounced on the little blasphemers to silence them with "my fists".

He also felt, as he himself confessed, "great repugnance in obeying, in submitting to others". By nature he tended to tenaciously defend his point of view because "I liked to do things my way and follow my own childish whims rather than listen to those who gave me advice or told me what to do."

His best qualities naturally led him to be proud: his strong willpower, superior intelligence, good memory, his physical energy, all qualities that meant he impressed his peers. His *Memoirs* record this smug statement regarding his school mates: "...all of them – including those older and bigger than I – respected my mettle and my strength".

The testimonies during the beatification and canonisation processes highlighted his fine qualities but also some underlying traits that were not entirely positive. His parish priest, Fr Cinzano, said he was "eccentric and stubborn". Cardinal Cagliero

recalled his “fiery and haughty” temperament, such that he was not “able to suffer resistance”. His friend Fr Giacomelli testified: “One could see how without virtue he would let himself be overcome by anger. None of our companions, and there were many of them, were as prone to this defect as he was.” “I believe it to be true,” confirmed Bishop Bertagna, a distinguished moralist and a great friend of Don Bosco’s, “that the Servant of God had a natural but rather prickly temperament and at the same time one that was very hard and not at all receptive... to the advice he was given when it did not conform to his plans and views.”

Fr Cerruti highlighted his “strong tendency to anger and affection... which led him to be proud.” “It’s useless,” Fr Cafasso would say in turn, “he wants to do it his way; yet you have to let him do it; even when a project would be ill-advised, Don Bosco succeeds.” Resentful at not having won him over to her cause, the Marchioness Barolo would accuse him of being “stubborn, obstinate, proud”.

Dr G. Albertotti, who looked after Don Bosco from 1872 until his death, also stressed, in his brief *Life of the Saint*, the “rather impetuous liveliness” of his client, his “ready and fiery” character and the “deep conviction of his ideas”.

Fr Girolamo Moretti, a pioneer of graphology that is becoming a branch of the human sciences, recognised in his well-known book: *I santi dalla scrittura*, that Don Bosco’s temperament was “a little difficult to define”. He was a saint who “needs to undergo many renunciations which his innate tendencies rebel against” in order to be moral. These tendencies want and demand unfettered action... “He is,” he concludes, “a leader, no doubt, who in order to do good needs to go against himself to the utmost degree in order to channel himself into righteousness of intentions and works”.

Of course, these testimonies do not give us a complete picture of Don Bosco. They leave out too many other aspects of his very rich personality. However, they do provide us with some basic elements: his inclination to anger and impetuosity; the tendency to autonomy, a strong sense of self, stubborn assertion of his own beliefs, etc. Had he not reined himself in he would have been a failed human being and saint. “If the Lord had not set me on this path [of the Oratories] I fear that I would have been in great danger of taking the wrong path.”

Yet without these strong inclinations we would not have the real depth of Don Bosco’s holiness. Natural inclinations, in themselves, are neither good nor bad; they are not vices, they are not virtues. The morality of acts depends in fact on

the individual's intentions, on the good or bad use one makes of one's energies. There is no doubt Don Bosco employed his native qualities to the best of his ability, but God alone knows at the cost of what effort and victorious struggle. It is this aspect that we now wish to emphasise.

The journey upward

It has been said of the life of St Francis de Sales that it appears to be a true masterpiece in how it developed, in its refinement and completion. A masterpiece on which the sculptor worked slowly, reflectively, in confidence and with joy until he achieved an intangible beauty such as only a few illustrious works of art can achieve.

The same can be said of Don Bosco: a sense of measure, gradualness and harmony are also characteristic of his path to holiness. But one must not overlook the hard road he travelled, the constant and attentive work on himself that he tackled tenaciously and perseveringly.

John learnt his first steps in virtue as a small boy at his mother's knees. She was illiterate but filled with divine wisdom. Mamma Margaret knew how to reach her son's heart with maternal delicacy, but also with unmoving firmness. She indulged his temperament in the best way she could; later, when she saw him busy doing good to his little friends, she was full of encouragement and help. But at appropriate moments, faced with his outbursts, she knew how to correct him with decisive but reasoned and faith-motivated interventions.

Love of God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary; the horror of sin, fear of eternal punishment and hope of paradise were all things that Don Bosco learnt from his mother's lips. Religion was something natural in the little home at the Becchi; evil was abhorred and good was loved – both by instinct. The recurring warning: "Remember that God sees you" was deeply etched on little John's very sensitive soul. And in turn, he would never tire of repeating these words to his youngsters. The maternal love that gladdened and educated his childhood remained one of the deep roots throughout his life that the Lord used to make him a saint. We owe it to the upbringing he received from his mother if Don Bosco's personality was able to expand in fullness without complexes or anxieties of any kind.

"In the thirty-five years I lived by his side," Cardinal Cagliero said "I never heard an expression of fear or doubt; I never saw him agitated by any anxiety about God's

goodness and mercy towards him. He never appeared troubled by anxieties of conscience.”

So, let us ask ourselves: when was young John converted to the path of holiness? When was it that he said to himself, like St Dominic Savio: "I want to be a saint, and soon"? That remains his secret. An ancient Salesian tradition, however, would see him as a saint at every stage of his life: a holy young man, cleric, priest, educator. He would end up teaching a way of “youthful holiness” that he had already tested and lived. His early youth, however, was exemplary: marked by a profound sense of the divine, and prayer, apostolic activity among his peers, the ability to control himself, courage in tackling the inconveniences of poverty, or his step-brother Anthony’s demands, or the humiliation he had to undergo for two years as a cowhand at the Moglio farm.

The Piedmontese phrase *'ndé da servito* has a negative feel to it. It evokes a scene of underpaid and excessive work, mistreatment and alienation from the family hearth and home. So many young boys and girls from poor families were forced to undergo this. We know that John Bosco was well treated by his masters, who were convinced Catholics, and that he was also admired for his virtues. But he makes no real mention of this period of his life in his *Memoirs*, perhaps out of respect for his mother. The years he spent with the Moglias, as Pietro Stella stresses, were

not useless, not a parenthesis, but a time during which the sense of God and contemplation took deeper root in him. He was able to introduce himself to this while alone or in conversation with God while working in the fields. They were years that can be described as years of pensive and prayerful expectation: waiting for God and for other human beings; years in which perhaps the most contemplative phase of his first five decades of life should be placed, a phase where his spirit must have been more disposed to the gifts of the mystical life flowing from the state of prayer and hope.

Under instruction from Fr Calosso (November 1829 – November 1830) John, who was by then a teenager, made new progress in virtue. This holy priest forbade him from adopting certain penances that were not suited to his age, but which did reveal a real leaning towards holiness; he initiated him into regular meditation,

brief though it may have been, and to spiritual reading; he encouraged him to make use of the sacraments. "From then on I began to savour the spiritual life" he wrote in his *Memoirs*. "Savour" does not mean just knowing God and divine things theoretically, but relishing them, having an experience of them; it is the result of the gift of wisdom, the most perfect of the gifts of the Holy Spirit because it perfects charity which is the sum of all virtues; it includes intelligence but especially love which goes beyond it and is greater than it. And for a fifteen or sixteen-year-old teenager, that is no small thing.

As a student at Chieri, John developed a strong friendship with Louis Comollo, a pearl of a young man and then a cleric who died prematurely, and about whom Don Bosco wrote a brief *Life*. The friendship with Comollo marked a shift in the saint's spiritual life. It marked the beginning of intense emulation, a genuine journey towards priestly holiness. One could truly say of them, along with Kahil Gibran: "No sunrise finds us where sunset left us." They were meant to integrate and complement each other; on a spiritual level first of all, but not only that.

"We needed each other" Don Bosco wrote. "I needed spiritual help; he needed a bodyguard." There were, in fact, some malicious students who took advantage of Comollo's shyness and goodness and mistreated him; John shook with rage. One day, some bullies gave poor Comollo's pale and frightened face two resounding slaps, and he suffered the affront without reacting, forgiving them in his heart. But Bosco was there, and faced with such a scene he could no longer stand it; his blood boiled, and mayhem resulted. Here is how he described it: "At that I forgot myself completely. Brute strength moved me, not reason. With no chair or stick within reach, I grabbed one of my fellow students by the shoulders and swung him round like a club to beat the others. I knocked down four of them; the rest took to their heels yelling for mercy."

His friend did not approve: "I'm amazed how strong you are," he said "but, believe me, God didn't give you strength to massacre your companions. His will is that we should love one another, forgive one another and return good for evil."

Comollo's influence on Don Bosco was remarkable, as we can draw from his *Memoirs*. He could only "wonder" at this "marvellous companion" and "model of virtue" from whom he had learned to "to live as a Christian", that is, to live a life with a strong sacramental and Marian focus, intense practice of charity, sense of duty and strong leaning towards the ideal of the priesthood. It was an ideal based

on the model of the priest of the Tridentine reform and restoration, more liturgist than apostle, more withdrawn than immersed in human reality, a man more of the eternal and less of the temporal. The priest is certainly all this, but more than this.

Yet Don Bosco would be a different kind of priest while always carrying with him the keen awareness of high priestly dignity and responsibility that was instilled in him in the seminary. He would always consider priesthood not as a privilege but as a risky ministry where one risks one's eternal destiny for the slightest neglect of one's duties. "Unfortunately, it is certain," Cafasso preached, "that some priests will go astray and each of us can run this grave danger if we are not on our guard."

In his own time Don Bosco would say that "The priest will either die of work or die of vice." And in his case he entered the seminary aiming to "radically" change his life: "The style of life I had lived up to then had to be radically reformed." Hence his resolution to "never again attend public festivals," or do "conjuring tricks... sleight of hand," since these things were "contrary to ecclesiastical dignity and spirit." He would live "a retiring life" and with "temperance in eating and drinking". He would combat "with all [his] strength" anything "contrary to the virtue of chastity". He would give himself to prayer and apostolate among his companions. In a word, he would go against even his legitimate tendencies, giving himself over, as Fr Stella put it, to continuous "ascetic effort that urged him along the path of fasting, abstinence and self-recrimination when he sometimes surprised himself by indulging in his former worldly skills, such as brilliant displays of agility or playing the violin. It was an ascetic tension that contributed to his friend Comollo's death and brought Don Bosco himself to the extreme limits of his endurance."

Dr Albertotti's testimony confirms the fact that the hardships he had imposed on himself in his seminary years were at least a cause of his physical breakdown and his eventual death. He wrote: "Having seen his impetuosity as an evil, he made such effort to correct himself, as he did in the past in his secondary school years, that, as he told his disciples from time to time, he was exhausted and ready to die."

This episode in Don Bosco's life gives us a measure of the tough, close contact struggle he undertook to rectify deviant tendencies of nature, to master himself, give himself completely to God and others, especially the young. "Every life fulfilled in beauty, O Lord, bears witness to Thee; but the testimony of the saint is as if torn with fiery pincers from the living body." Bernanos used this image,

recalling Dante's *Inferno*, to express a true law of Christian holiness. Don Bosco lived it in his own flesh.

In the three years he spent at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* of St Francis of Assisi (Pastoral Institute) in Turin (1841–1844), Don Bosco moulded and remoulded himself, his priesthood, along pastoral and practical lines: “Here one learnt to be a priest”. Fr Louis Guala and Fr Joseph Cafasso, “luminaries of the Turinese clergy”, along with Felix Golzio, who also worked there, were the “three models placed in my path by Divine Providence. It was just up to me to follow their example, their teaching, their virtues”.

Fr Cafasso became his confessor and spiritual director. Don Bosco wrote in his *Memoirs*: “If I have been able to do any good, I owe it to this worthy priest in whose hands I placed every decision I made, all my study, and every activity of my life.” “Tenacious and almost stubborn in his ideas as he was,” reports Bishop Bertagna, “he always obeyed Fr Cafasso without question.” It was “out of obedience to Fr Cafasso,” he would tell his sons, “that I remained in Turin, and with his advice and guidance began gathering urchins in the square to teach them catechism. It was through his support and assistance that I began to gather the most abandoned of them in the Oratory of St Francis de Sales so they could be kept from vice and formed in virtue. Remember that!”

Don Bosco's virtues as a young priest shone with new light in the foundation and running of the festive Oratory at the *Convitto* (1841–1844), then at the Refuge and finally in the permanent premises at Valdocco where he took up residence on 12 April 1846, Easter Sunday. And here the saint had to tackle huge difficulties of various kinds. Difficulties from outside: hardships of poverty, abandonment by his co-workers, harassment by the municipal authorities; difficulties from within brought about by the very different types and characters of the youngsters who came to the Oratory from the poorest parts of the city, or jobless wanderers, collarless young “puppies” who were intolerant of order and discipline. They required steady nerves and much, much patience.

We have an idea of what the Valdocco Oratory was like in those distant beginnings in this realistic, later recollection by Don Bosco.

When I think about the present times compared with past times,
I am overwhelmed. Thirty-five or thirty-six years ago, what was
there [here in Valdocco]? Nothing, absolutely nothing. I used

to run hither and thither after the most disorderly, dissipated youngsters; but they didn't want to know about order and discipline, they laughed at religious matters, of which they were ignorant, blaspheming the holy name of God, and I couldn't do anything about it. Those youngsters were really street and square types and there were stone fights and constant brawls. Things then were more at the level of ideas than deeds.

Later, splendid young men like Michael Rua, John Baptist Francesia, John Cagliero, Dominic Savio and others would "stay with Don Bosco", but how much violence he would have to impose on himself, dealing with obstinate and difficult elements, to remain faithful to the resolution he made at the time of his ordination: "The charity and gentleness of St Francis de Sales will guide me in all things."

It was one of his maxims that the Salesian must have "the gentleness of St Francis de Sales and the patience of Job". Not a lethargic or weak gentleness but one which is the result of pastoral charity that is "patient and kind ... bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things". To preserve it "means that much effort and sacrifice are needed to maintain such gentleness and that sometimes it can be preserved only by the shedding of one's blood". This is the admonition in the so-called Dream of the Sweets addressed to all Salesians and which had already been tested in Don Bosco's life experience.

One day, his friend Fr Giacomelli came to Valdocco while Don Bosco, red in the face, was chasing a group of boys who had sought to dodge the time for prayers: "This is the second time I have seen you all worked up," he told him. "These blessed kids!" was the only reply he got, but how eloquent it was. He had also surprised him as he was about to strike some boys who were arguing among themselves, but his hands remained steady, simply raised. He did not beat young people, even though a certain custom then led to this in many cases and he did not tolerate others behaving in this way. We know from the testimony of Fr Rua and Cardinal Cagliero that the occasional slap escaped Don Bosco's hands when he was still quite young. But these cases were just with the tips of the fingers of one hand and related to very particular situations. When it happened, however, he was not happy about it.

Instead, he knew how to be understanding, tolerant, patient even when he felt the blood "boiling" in his veins. Blasphemy, in particular, wounded him deeply as

this episode, which did not make it into the *Biographical Memoirs*, shows. Ambré Roda, a former friend of Dominic Savio's, when the Servant of God's heroic virtues were proclaimed, came to Rome and was received in audience by Pope Pius XI. They went back over old times. Roda, who was in his nineties by then, told the Holy Father about this little episode:

It was one day during recreation, and I'm sorry, Holy Father, but a very rude word escaped my lips. I put my hand over my mouth but it was too late. My friends had heard it. Dominic came up to me and said: "Have you forgotten our resolution not to use bad language? Go to Don Bosco immediately, and tell him what you did. He is so good, he will fix everything. Meanwhile I will go and pray for you." Without pulling a face, I went off straight away. But where to find Don Bosco? He was in the parlour, surrounded by some gentlemen. Rude as I was, I broke into the group. Surprised, Don Bosco said: "Look, I am very busy; can't you wait just a moment?" The people there thought I might have some urgent task so moved aside: "Hear him out, Don Bosco; we will wait." I then got up on tip-toes and whispered in our good Father's ear: "Savio sent me to you. I uttered a blasphemy." I was trembling like a leaf. Don Bosco didn't shout at me; but I saw such sorrow on his face! I understood the gravity of my error. His eyes pierced my heart. "Don't do it again, my child, don't ever do it again. It is an offence against God, you know! The Lord does not bless us for that. Go to the church and say many Our Fathers and make three signs of the cross with your tongue on the floor." I ran to the front of the altar, said the Our Fathers, dusted the floor, looked around me then promptly made the sign of the cross three times with my tongue on the floor. I ran out, feeling as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I forget the number of Our Fathers but I will never forget the three signs of the cross and Don Bosco's look. (*S. Giovanni Bosco nei ricordi e nella vita degli Ex-allievi*, Turin 1953).

This little story has all the flavour of those early times. It breathes the family atmosphere of the trust there was at Valdocco under Don Bosco's gaze. One also glimpses the acute suffering that an offence against God gave rise to in the saint's

soul. The rather special penance aimed at arousing disgust for sin and a sense of genuine reparation was of course an exceptional one in Don Bosco's usual practice.

It also costs me

In full maturity and old age, Don Bosco truly possessed a heroic and confident self-mastery: patience and calmness beyond all praise and an unparalleled gentleness of touch. He was the artist who had sketched out his masterpiece and finished it with care. But the "foundation laid down by nature", while mastered, was not extinguished, still had its rumblings: "I too know how much it costs" he said on the morning of 18 September 1876 to retreatants gathered at Lanzo Torinese. "Do you think that it is easy for me to keep calm when, after entrusting an important or urgent task to someone, I find that task not done or badly botched? Believe me, sometimes my blood boils and I am about to burst. But what good would that do? Things will still not get done, nor will my anger correct anyone."

He acted as he taught others to act: "Let us admonish, advise, and exhort, but always calmly," adding, "and even when circumstances call for a reprimand, let us give it, but let us first pause a moment and ask ourselves: How would St Francis de Sales act in this case? Be assured that this is the way we will obtain what the Holy Spirit promises: *In patientia vestra possidebitis animas vestras.*"

His first biographer made this penetrating observation in this regard: "When Don Bosco felt some anger stirring in him, it seemed that his nature was complaining, and his words took on such a gentle and affectionate tone that it could bend the listener to his will."

A reflection of his capacity for self-control was his numerous and varied correspondence. Someone who was not habitually united with God would hardly have resisted the temptation to respond in kind to certain provocative and insulting letters. Instead, he knew how to be conciliatory and gentle. It was his law not to answer when he felt moved by anger: he would pray, let hours and days pass until absolute calm returned to him.

"Several times yesterday I tried to answer," he wrote, for example, to Fr Valinotti regarding the painful dispute over the *Catholic Readings*, "but I was too agitated to do so. This morning, only after having celebrated the sacrifice of the Holy Mass

and having commended everything to the Lord, do I reply simply by presenting things as they really are...”

Cardinal Cagliero recalled an episode from the saint’s life during the canonical process that gives us an idea of his heroic ability to react calmly to negative moments. It was January 1875: Don Bosco was dining quietly with the confreres when Fr Rua came up to him and told him he needed to find L. 40,000 – a huge amount at that time – to endorse a promissory note signed in favour of a friend who had died suddenly and which the heirs refused to pay. And Don Bosco’s reaction? “He was having his soup” the witness noted. “I saw that between one spoonful and the next (it was January and the room was not heated) drops of sweat were falling from his forehead onto his plate, but he continued calmly and did not interrupt our simple meal.”

There is much truth in what Fr Ascanio Savio said: “He had so mastered his wilful nature as to appear phlegmatic; and so meek that he always acquiesced to his pupils, provided the glory of God or the good of souls were not at stake.”

The effort sustained by Don Bosco to become a saint was indeed great, though not overt and not always apparent. Referring to how complete his holiness was, in his address on 17 June 1932 to the students of the Pontifical Roman Seminaries, Pius XI summed it up in these powerful words:

His life at all times was continuous self-sacrificing charity, continuous prayerful recollection; this is the most vivid impression one had of his conversation... One would have said that he paid no attention to anything that was said about him; one would have said that his thoughts were elsewhere, and that was indeed so; he was elsewhere: he was with God in a spirit of union. But then there he was, answering everyone, and he had the right word for everything and himself, so much so that he made people amazed: first surprised and then amazed by him. The Blessed led this life of holiness and recollection, constant attention to prayer at night and amidst all the continuous and relentless occupations of his daytime hours.

Chapter 2: Profoundly human

Bossuet writes: “If God wants to make saints that are worthy of him, then he needs to turn them on all sides to mould them entirely in his way, and have only as much regard for their natural dispositions as needed in order not to do them violence.”

Where sanctity is concerned, it is all a gift from God, including the heroic response to his call. But God is infinitely respectful of the personality of the saints and more than Bossuet suggests. His grace, his divine action in us, takes place through nature and respects it, not limits it. Certainly God can achieve great things in limited creatures. This was the case, for example with St Joseph of Copertino; lacking though he was in basic human resources, God made him a vessel of choice that had no match in the Bollandists’ collections. But the great masterpieces of grace normally arise in very gifted creatures, as in the case of Don Bosco, whom Joergensen describes, with a touch of hyperbole, as: “one of the most complete and absolute men history has ever known”. And of course there is the strong impression recorded by Pius XI of the three days he spent at Valdocco with the saint (1883): “We saw him up close, over some time, in more than one conversation; a magnificent figure that his immense, unfathomable humility could not conceal ... a far more dominant and enthralling figure: a complete figure, one of those souls who would certainly leave his mark whichever direction he took, so magnificently equipped was he for life.”

Hertling too, a recognised Church historian, associates Don Bosco’s name with the more gifted spirits humanly speaking: “Augustine, Francis, Catherine of Siena, Don Bosco should be counted among the peaks and pinnacles of humanity.”

What struck one first about Don Bosco was the man before it was the saint. While his profound union with God was not immediately observable, his splendid human qualities, enriched and sublimated by grace, certainly were. And there were so many of them; distinct yet complementary, interlinked and harmoniously fused together.

It could be said of Don Bosco that he was, at one and the same time, someone who was joyful and austere, frank and respectful, a free yet exacting spirit, humble and magnanimous, tenacious and ductile, traditional and modern, optimistic and foresighted, diplomatic and sincere, poor and charitable; someone who cultivated friendship but did not play favourites, was quick to conceive ideas but prudent in executing them, loved things done well but was not a perfectionist, saw the big picture but had a genius for the concrete, was bold to the point of recklessness, went ahead with circumspection, knew how to make friends with an adversary without abandoning his principles, was dynamic though not extroverted, courageous not reckless, turned everything to his own ends but did not manipulate people, educated by preventing and prevented by educating, ran with the world – he sought to be in the vanguard of progress – but was not of the world.

These and other positive opposites give us an idea of Don Bosco's true greatness: "To measure the wingspan of an eagle, one must stretch out the wings and note the opposite ends, then one can judge their strength: the same happens with the virtues of the saints, whose greatness can only be assessed by noting the opposites." (H. Petitot).

The positive opposites that stand out in the human figure of Don Bosco, transfigured by pastoral charity, are a splendid accord of nature and grace. His human richness, it has been appropriately pointed out, was so integrated into holiness that it almost became its sacrament, and the gifts of grace, when they manifested themselves, were like a glorification of his humanity.

Nature is first and foremost the form that God has given to his grace and, when the human being corresponds, it also shines outwardly. "Everything is human in Don Bosco," said Daniel Rops, "and at the same time everything mysteriously gives off a supernatural light."

Among the positive opposites of his life we would like to briefly highlight three of them here: his indomitable yet flexible will; his paternal but demanding kindness; and his profound sensitivity combined with great fortitude of spirit.

Indomitable yet flexible will

In Huysmans' judgement, Don Bosco was "an unprecedented business agent of God" in his century. It is difficult not to agree with this judgement extolling the Saint's

talent for organisation and achievement and, by implication, his “indomitable and untameable” iron will (Pius XI). It is the trademark of people from Asti and Langa but something he had inherited to an uncommon degree.

He carried it, so to speak, in the vigour of his mind and muscles, in his innate capacity for action, in his strong self-confidence; a will that did not seem to know the word “impossible”. He had exercised it as a child in the rough work of the fields, in overcoming the obstacles that stood in the way of his studies and his vocation; he exercised it on a grand scale as an adult. Inclined to action, he shunned the abstractions of scholasticism. “Bishop,” he would say one day to the Bishop of Casale, Bishop Ferré, who wanted to engage him in a philosophical argument, “I do not have time to bother about these things because the field that God has assigned me is not one of ideas but works, and while it is true that right action come from right thinking, thinking and feeling with the Pope is sufficient for right action.”

Strong-willed as he was, he was slow to make a decision. He considered his plans at length, compared them with his experience, sought advice, questioned the Lord in constant prayer, but when he had taken a decision, no obstacle then seemed to stop him. “Don Bosco is not a man to stop halfway once he has put his hand to something” he said. And on another occasion: “When I encounter a difficulty, I do what someone who comes across a boulder on his path does. I first try to push it out of the way, but if I do not succeed then I climb over it or go around it. So, when I have set out to do something, if I find an obstacle in the way, I suspend what I am doing and put my hand to something else; but I always keep an eye on it. Meanwhile, time solves the problem [loquats ripen! the Italian says] and the difficulties are smoothed out.”

Being constantly inspired by the “criterion of the possible” does not mean that he was always the pure pragmatist and made pure practice his law of life. His activity could always be seen in the light of solid supernatural principles and well-considered religious convictions. His blunt optimism – another criterion of action – was based on higher motives. He knew and felt that God was with him.

Strong-willed to the utmost, Don Bosco was, however, also flexible and yielding, not only in pursuing the goals he set himself “in small steps”, but also in the very exercise of wanting or not wanting something. His “pedagogical system” is a masterpiece of “reason, loving-kindness and religion”. There is no room for the

will to commit, for the law of inflexibility. Reasons of kindness and the heart must prevail over the “coldness of regulation”.

For Don Bosco, education was a “matter of the heart”. He knew from tried and tested experience that the soul of the young “is a fortress always closed to rigour and harshness”. One only becomes its master through the ways of the heart and free consent.

There was nothing rough or tough about him, as his strong-willed temperament might make us think there was, but a paternal, loving approach capable of understanding and adapting to the tastes of children, to make them love the things that grown-ups love, even when they don't like them.

But, beyond what refers explicitly to the preventive system, there was the vast field of obedience that Don Bosco never refused religious authorities nor the legitimate prescriptions of civil authorities. Given his “resist or attack” kind of temperament, as someone described him as having, he was not naturally inclined to submission. By canonising him, the Church has proclaimed that his obedience was heroic, as demonstrated, for example, by his unconditional acceptance of the famous *Concordia* commissioned by the Holy See to settle misunderstandings that had been dragging on for years between him and his archbishop. The document imposed heavy and unjustified retractions on Don Bosco. When he read the text of the document to his Council there was general consternation: everyone, except Cagliero, advised him to take his time, to assert his good reasons. But Rome had spoken and for the Saint it was over: the *Concordia* was accepted and fully observed.

Later, Don Bosco would say that this act of obedience cost him a lot. The Supreme Pontiff had laid his hand on him because he knew he could count on his virtue. Inwardly, Don Bosco's will power and flexibility complemented one another.

Paternal but demanding kindness

“None of the great realities of human life” R. Guardini wrote, “have sprung from pure thought: they have all been from the heart and its love.”

It is not possible to think of Don Bosco and his work without evoking his gentle, paternal kindness, his great “oratorian heart”, the basis of his pedagogy.

Not the “monumental heart of the philanthropists,” Fr A. Caviglia explains, “made of marble and bronze”, but the heart in which “paternal kindness and maternal tenderness for the little ones and the poor among the little ones” beats. Don Bosco said, “These poor boys move me so much that if it were possible I would give them my heart in so many pieces.” This was the real image of what St Gregory of Nyssa called the “philanthropy of God”.

The liturgy salutes him as “Father and Teacher”; teacher because a father. This title was dear to him because it embraced a constant aspiration and preoccupation in his life: to build a family of “those without a family” around their father.

“More than a society,” Fr Philip Rinaldi, his third successor, said, “Don Bosco intended to form a family based almost uniquely on the gentle, loving, vigilant fatherhood of the superior and the filial, fraternal affection of his subjects; rather, while maintaining the principle of authority and respectful subordination, he did not want distinctions, but equality between everyone in everything.”

He enjoyed hearing himself called father: “Always call me father and I will be happy.” This sense of fatherhood and family was a feature of his time, which was also a time of paternalism. The central role of the father and the respect of his children were both a part of culture and an act of virtue.

The ideologies of our time, that have placed a heavy burden on the father figure, are in difficulty today. We are witnessing a shift towards the father, no longer a dark continent to be removed but a figure who is central and essential to the harmonious, balanced growth of the children, both through his presence and in new ways.

The father today is meant to be more authoritative than authoritarian, closer to a model than to a law, more brother and friend than a dominant personality. From this point of view Don Bosco, beyond certain modes of expression typical of his environment, reveals himself to be one of our contemporaries: so much so that his way of being a father is in tune with modern aspirations. He recommended that his rectors be “More than superiors; be fathers, brothers, friends.” Undoubtedly his way of being a father found its most essential *raison d’être* in the fatherliness of which St Paul often speaks (1 Thes 2:7-8,10-11). A fatherhood, however, that does not lack human splendour.

Despite losing his father at just two years of age, Don Bosco had everything a father should have, except of course, the fatherhood of flesh and blood: tender, strong love for his adopted children, resistance to the fatigue and pains a father must undergo, the acute sense of responsibility as head of the family, and the endless dedication of the kind found only in maternal heroism. His entire life was proof of it, as we find in sincere statements of the following kind: "On any day, at any hour, take advantage of me, but especially in matters of the soul. For my part I give you all of myself: it may be paltry, but when I give you everything it means that I reserve nothing for myself."

To the superiors and young people at the college in Lanzo he wrote, "Your letter, signed by 200 friendly and very dear hands has taken possession of all of this heart of mine. Nothing of it is left except the keen desire to love you all in the Lord, to do good for you, to save all your souls."

A sublime expression of fatherly tenderness is the famous letter from Rome in 1884 to his "most beloved children". We find in it an entire summary of his spirit, his pedagogical experience, his spirituality and, above all, his "heart". Let us mention just two sentences from it: "I feel the weight of being away from you and not seeing you, not hearing you, causes such a pain for me that you can hardly imagine." "He who wants to be loved has to show that he loves." How? through "familiarity", "gentleness", "charity", "confidence", "trust". A beautiful testimony of this "knowing how to make oneself loved" of his came from his young secretary at the time, cleric C. Viglietti.

Curiosity had led him to read certain confidential letters; he felt bad about it and told Don Bosco. And what was the saint's reaction? "He held me close to his heart, collected as many letters as he had on the table, confidential or not, and gave them all to me."

This "kindness set up as a system" went directly to the heart of the youngsters, and it left an indelible impression on the most sensitive of them.

St Leonard Murialdo was truthfully able to say: "The charity Don Bosco showed his youngsters meant that they also loved him with sincere affection and to such a degree that no other example could be found to compare."

Recalling the time he spent with Don Bosco, Fr Orione ventured to say: "I would walk on burning coals to see him just one more time and say thanks."

Fr Paul Albera, his second successor, offered this splendid testimony:

It needs to be said that Don Bosco loved us in his own unique way: it meant an irresistible fascination. I felt as if taken prisoner by an affective power that fuelled my thoughts, words and actions. I felt I was loved in a way I had never felt before, singularly, superior to any affection. He enveloped us all almost entirely in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness. Everything in him had the power of attraction; he acted on our young hearts like a magnet from which it was impossible to escape, and even if we could, we would not have done so for all the gold in the world, so happy were we with this singular ascendancy over us, which was the most natural thing in him without study and without any effort whatsoever; and it could not have been otherwise, because from his every word and deed emanated the holiness of union with God that is perfect charity. He drew us to himself by the fullness of the supernatural love that blazed in his heart. From this singular attraction sprang the conquering work of our hearts. In him, the manifold natural gifts were made supernatural by the holiness of his life.

“Always a father”, though Don Bosco was never a permissive or weak one; he never abandoned his responsibilities. The unpleasant parts he left to his co-workers. However, everyone knew that he was intransigent and firm, especially in cases of theft, blasphemy and scandal.

“Don Bosco“ he himself said, “is the kindest man on earth: ruin things, break things, get up to mischief, and he will have mercy on you; but do not ruin souls, because then he becomes inexorable.” Cardinal Cagliero tells us, “During my time as a cleric, a simple and innocent boy had been the victim of a scandalous act by an adult. As soon as Don Bosco came to know about it he felt extreme sorrow, was disturbed and began weeping in my presence. He repaired the betrayed innocence with fatherly kindness, but with equal firmness he saw that the culprit was immediately sent away.”

Even in such cases, however, his great fatherliness was not lacking. He did not chastise the offender but called him to come to him, made him realise the gravity of the evil done; he urged him to repent, then, always reluctantly, referred

him to relatives or benefactors; he still remained his friend. Willful, obstinate disobedience found him particularly severe. On the spur of the moment he disbanded the band, the pride of the Oratory, in 1859, because it had contravened his repeated and firm instructions; all but four members were sent away from the house.

He was fatherly but intransigent even with his closest co-workers, his Rectors. Fr Celestino Durando, the Councillor for Schools, went against one of his orders, changing the programme for the so-called “school of fire”; the weakest ones were discouraged and withdrew. Don Bosco was upset and showed his displeasure. “This disgrace would not have happened had you been obedient.” Fr Durando tried to clarify matters. “That is not the point” Don Bosco interrupted firmly. “The point is that we had agreed on things and obedience means they should have been carried out.” The saint demanded greater perfection of those who were obliged to be so.

It would be a never-ending task to explore the depth of Don Bosco’s paternal kindness, but if we did not find positive complementarity, gentleness and firmness, kindness and severity all combined in it, we would no longer be dealing with true fatherhood.

Sensitive and strong

We would now like to focus our attention on the third set of positive opposites. Don Bosco was a man of exquisite and profound sensitivity. He was easily given to emotion and affectionate intent, able to rejoice and suffer with others. His doctor confirmed that he was struck, in the intimate conversations he frequently had with Don Bosco, by his “extreme sensitivity proper to the most sublime geniuses” never separate from the “exceptional exquisiteness of moral sensitivity,” It was an innate sensitivity that had in it something tender and maternal drawn from his upbringing by Mamma Margaret, but also from the Blessed Virgin who was an ever-active presence in his life.

This sensitivity, which became more refined over his lifetime, was already clearly manifest in his youth.

All little boys cry easily enough but they soon forget it. Little John, instead, wept at the death of his little blackbird and suffered for days over it. Later, the sudden

death of Fr Calosso and then of his friend Comollo threw him into lasting and deep consternation. As a young priest he was deeply moved at the sight of neglected youngsters he met in the streets and squares of Turin, and behind bars in prison. He could not bear his mother's death throes and had to retire to pray in the neighbouring room. Later, reading her Life written by Fr Lemoyne, he could not hold back his tears. Even the simple memory of Dominic Savio moved him: "Every time I correct these drafts I have to pay the toll of tears."

He shared intensely in the suffering of his boys who were ill, at the death of relatives, and misfortunes. He was moved by the smallest shows of affection, the reception he received after lengthy absences from the Oratory, gestures of kindness from benefactors and friends.

This softness of heart became even stronger in old age. He was moved at the simple thought of his faraway missionaries: "You left and my heart was broken." Tears always welled up when he was told he had no need of prayers: "I very much have need of them!" He also wept during Fr Rua's sermon on the love of God.

Other than this natural tenderness, Don Bosco also had the spiritual "gift" of tears, as we read in the case of other saints. Today we are less sensitive to this aspect of Christian asceticism since humanity has become more "adult". Yet, if we think about it, the "gift" of tears, when they are real, points to real holiness. It comes from a soul filled with God when the soul feels awe at God's infinite greatness, contemplates his saving love, his mercy, his goodness and his justice; when it meditates on the Lord's passion, the seriousness of sin, on eternal damnation and, in general, on the mysteries of our faith.

Cardinal Cagliero, whose testimony is always very trustworthy, was able to say: "While Don Bosco preached on the love of God, the loss of souls, on the Passion of Jesus Christ on Good Friday, on the Blessed Eucharist, on a happy death and the hope of paradise, I and my companions often saw him shed tears, some of love, some of sorrow, some of joy; and some of holy rapture when he spoke of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her goodness and immaculate purity."

Don Bosco's sensitivity was so intense that it could have interfered with his delicate inner equilibrium had he not possessed, as a complementary virtue, the full command of his senses, his higher faculties and complete fortitude of soul.

Well-known in the case of certain very sensitive human beings is the extreme vulnerability of their self-love, their shifting moods, irritability and upset over trivial things, and the ease with which they can go overboard in things.

We have already mentioned how heroically Don Bosco was able to master and turn the more wayward aspects of his temperament to good, ones that might otherwise have doomed him and made him a failed saint. We will not repeat these but will recall only that without his deep sensitivity, we would not have had Salesian “loving-kindness”, which is the capacity to love and make oneself loved through visible signs, something essential. This would not have been possible without his flawless purity and the supreme respect he bore for the personality of the young. He did not caress or kiss young people as their mothers would.

When giving a reward or offering a sign of benevolence, he would simply place his hand on their head or over their shoulder or on their cheek for an instant, barely touching it with his fingers. “In acts of this kind” Fr Reviglio, said “there was something so pure, so chaste, so paternal that he seemed to infuse us with the spirit of his chastity to such an extent that we felt enraptured by it.”

Here too, “sensitivity” and “self-control”, “tenderness” and “strength” were complementary virtues: it is not possible to describe one without involving the other.

Chapter 3: Holy in every respect

When British journalist Douglas Hyde told Ignazio Silone of his resolve to write a life of Fr Orione, the novelist who has most contributed to an understanding of Italian literature in the world today, said as follows: “Whatever you do when you write about him, I beg you not to turn Fr Orione into some kind of Catholic Beveridge (a well-known British economist). It would diminish his stature. Certainly Fr Orione was involved in charitable works like many others, and also in social justice. His exceptional strength lies, however, in the fact that in everything he did, he relied solely and completely on God.”

We could not think of Don Bosco any differently. His life can be explained only with God; only in the light of his holiness both hidden and manifest.

Hidden holiness

During his earthly life, Don Bosco hid rather than manifested his holiness. Many passed by him without noticing it and even when his reputation as a “saint” had gone beyond the borders of Italy and Europe, were there those who, paradoxically, regarded him as more scheming than virtuous. “Don Bosco! Don Bosco is a liar” said Cardinal Ferrieri, “a fraud, a bully who wants to impose himself on the Sacred Congregations... But really, what does Don Bosco want? He is without knowledge and holiness. He would have been better following the directions of an Ordinary without persisting in founding a congregation.” He considered him too “shrewd”, too “stubborn” too “greedy for money”, too easily given to “speaking about himself and having others do so”.

The law of gravitation applies in the world of the saints: saints attract one another, and they immediately understand one another. Yet St Leonard Murialdo, who got to know Don Bosco around 1851, confessed that he struggled to believe in his holiness. He only changed his mind later when he “beganm to enter into confidence with him” when he realised that “his works, which revealed an extraordinary man” spoke in his favour.

His reputation for holiness had been established in the Oratory setting for a long time. The Commission set up to record any deeds or words of Don Bosco that revealed “something of the supernatural” about them went back to 1861 when he was little more than forty years old. But even for those who had lived with him from the outset, his life, as Cardinal Cagliero noted, “seemed as ordinary and commonplace as that of an exemplary priest”.

Eugene Ceria wrote that “Few people were so extraordinary beneath such ordinary appearances. In great matters as in small ones, there was always the same naturalness that at first glance revealed no more than a good priest.”

A “good priest” for sure, but not such that it would lead one to think of great holiness, canonisable holiness. “I saw and I knew” Fr Gresino said, “that Don Bosco was an excellent priest, that he worked only for us and was well loved by everyone. But the thought of likely canonical processes and sanctity never entered my mind.”

That is what Philip Rinaldi thought and so did others. The real essence of his holiness lay hidden by his simply, kindly and completely natural way of acting.

It was a desire not to reveal God’s secret to others, a deep sense of humility, but it was also natural. The Piedmontese temperament generally shuns intimate outbursts. When the husband addresses his wife, even today, he is unlikely to call her by name. He simply says ‘*t*’ to her. But a ‘*t*’ said in the Asti area or “up there in the Alta Langa,” writes F. Piccinelli, “means ‘listen’; it means real bonds of affection.”

Don Bosco always had a lot to say about his plans, his works and always confided in his sons with great simplicity. “I have no secrets with you”, but his own intimate life he displayed to no one. “His autobiographical pages,” P. Stella writes, “his personal recollections are not like those of St Teresa of Avila, nor like those of St Thérèse of Lisieux. Most came later and very rarely – only fleetingly – do we manage to catch Don Bosco expressing intimate religious feelings, the motivations for his actions.”

This was not only temperament playing its part: those who looked at Don Bosco from the outside were impressed more by his incessant activity than by his genuine holiness, at first glance; by his talent for organising things and the impressive nature of his works. The outer façade could thus conceal the inner

depths, as E. Ceria well points out. “We could say that during the years of his greatest activity not everyone noticed what a man of prayer Don Bosco was; and would we venture to say that not even those who had been asked to recount the great things he did, and who wrote about them, had penetrated to the intimate depths of his spirit of prayer.”

The apparent lack of order that reigned in Don Bosco’s houses during their difficult beginnings was another factor that did not seem to testify to his holiness. Anyone who did not know the family spirit that was experienced at Valdocco, where superiors fraternised with students, where fear of God and gospel charity reigned supreme, or anyone who had other educational models in mind, could also have doubted that the approach adopted by the saint could truly be a valid and formative one. “Had Don Bosco really had a spirit of prayer,” the future Cardinal Parocchi said to himself when upset by the noise the boys were making in the sacristy, “he would have put a stop to such disturbances.”

Archbishop Tortone, the official representative of the Holy See with the Government, in his report on how the Oratory was going sent on 6 August 1868 to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, could not hide his “sorry impression” of clerics and youngsters “running, playing, jumping and even being involved in a few escapades” during recreation, “some with little decorum, others with little or no respect. The good Don Bosco, content that the clerics were recollected in church, takes little care to form their hearts to the true ecclesiastical spirit.”

Certainly Don Bosco liked things to be well done, but he was never a perfectionist. He kindly and patiently tolerated the youthful exuberance of his co-workers so long as he could see a true spirit of piety, love for work, well-proven morality in them. No one was more convinced than he that things are neither born perfect nor adult; they only become so with time.

His maxim was that “God’s works are ordinarily brought to fulfilment only gradually.” Facts proved him right: his undertakings generally began with a degree of disorder. but ended up in an orderly way.

In 1875 he said:

In the early days of the Oratory there were quite a few outward disturbances [...]. I saw those disturbances, warned those who

needed it, but let them go on as they could, because it was not an offence against God. If I had wanted to remove the various inconveniences at once, I would have had to send all the young men away and close the Oratory, because the clerics would not have adapted to a new regime. There was always a certain air of independence that made all fetters disappear.

Fr Bonetti would have liked everything in his college to be done to perfection. Don Bosco wrote to him: "We seek the best" but he added realistically, "Unfortunately we have to content ourselves with the mediocre amid so many things that are wrong." His reply to Cafasso who insisted that "What is good must be done well" was a convinced "Sometimes it is enough to do as best you can amid so many difficulties."

His regular statement, "The good is the enemy of the best" really does interpret one of the most firmly-rooted convictions in his life. The urge for perfection never paralysed his charitable undertakings. He always considered it more useful for the cause of the Kingdom to do good even if it was the best one could do, instead of putting it off in view of some hypothetical future "better". Passable lemonade could still be made from a lemon well past its use-by date. The saint knew how to work miracles with half personalities.

Finally, we could say that some of the saint's witty and casual mannerisms, his very way of presenting himself to the public, were not of the kind to give us a precise idea of his holiness.

Madame Beaulieu from Nice, who had known the saintly Curé of Ars, was convinced that she had a fair idea about holiness. She was surprised when, as part of a dinner in honour of Don Bosco, she saw him stand up with glass in hand and happily offer a toast in honour of the guests. "Is this a saint?" she thought to herself. She changed her mind when she heard him say, benevolently, "Whether you eat or drink, do everything in the name of the Lord."

When the Benedictine Mocquereau saw him before him "unshaven, uncut and dishevelled hair going in all directions, and then his worn out clothes ..." he felt rather disappointed: "That was my first, purely natural impression."

However, for anyone who had not been led astray by first impressions and observed him more carefully, especially in the final period of his life, it would not

have been difficult to see “the stamp of a man created by God for something” in his face. “What strikes one about him is his refined smile, his shrewd gaze and an air of great kindness and indomitable will.” (Saint Genert, a correspondent for *Le Figaro*).

Manifest holiness

Hidden and manifest holiness at the same time; here is another of the many paradoxes of Don Bosco’s life. By temperament and a deliberate spirit of humility he was led to hide his inner world and cover up the best of himself, but holiness, flashing in his eyes, filtered like light through alabaster from his whole being, could be discerned in his behaviour as a whole. Just as the artist leaves his imprint on his works, so Don Bosco had left the imprint of his holiness in what he had thought, said, written and done. The goodness of the tree is judged by the fruits; holiness by the works of holiness. They are so many glimpses through which the Church enters into the souls of the saints and evaluates their gospel heroism.

The thousands of pages of the acts of the canonical processes are an uplifting hymn to Don Bosco’s virtues. While studying the Cause, consultors and judges did not take long to become aware that while his life seemed to be apparently spread across a thousand outward activities, in reality it was only God, God alone who was his supreme centre of gravity. What Paul Albera wrote about Don Bosco is true: “If working until death is the first article of the Salesian code, then he [Don Bosco] wrote more through example than by pen. Throwing himself into God’s arms and never leaving him was his most perfect act.”

It was clear that at the roots of his multifaceted activity there were only supernatural motives: his total adhesion to Christ, to his Spirit, to the Church. And it was also evident that the richness of his intimacy with God had known no respite, having intensified to the point of invading his entire existence in a more absolute and transparent form.

It has been said that all saints are, in general terms, children of the Gothic period: filled with infinite aspiration on high, where the sufficient is never sufficient. Don Bosco was such. “I am happy,” Cardinal Vives y Tuto, the proponent of the Cause, wrote “that I have had to study Don Bosco’s life in depth, because I have been able to get to know that he is a great saint. I have touched him by hand: what treasures of virtue! A love for Our Lady that equals that of the greatest saints; a

love for the Passion that suffused his being and, as an infallible sign of holiness, the extraordinary in the ordinary, so that nothing transpired outwardly in ordinary life. You see, I have studied Don Bosco's life a great deal and to me his figure appears to be ever more providential."

"I have leafed through so many processes to do with Causes," he went on to say, "but I have never found one so overflowing with the supernatural."

The Promoter of the Faith, the future Cardinal Salotti, having deepened his knowledge of Don Bosco, confessed that he was struck not so much by his "prodigious apostolate" as by "the wise and sublime edifice of his Christian perfection," adding, as he addressed St Pius X: "Holy Father, if everyone had an intimate and complete understanding of this other side of the figure of Don Bosco, how much more appreciated this man, who enjoys such deep and universal esteem, would be."

"Awesome is God in his sanctuary" says Psalm 68:35. More awesome and varied still, however, is the church he builds with the living and chosen stones that are the saints. Don Bosco is one of these stones, indeed a corner stone for his role as founder and progenitor of a great spiritual e capostipite di una grande discendenza spirituale lineage. "To trace another figure of the same proportions as Don Bosco," said Cardinal Schuster, "we need to go back centuries in the history of the Church to the holy founders of the great Religious Orders."

Chapter 4: Miracle worker who did not create fear

The reputation as a miracle worker that accompanied Don Bosco, especially in the last years of his life, was justified. He was a priest who could read the secrets of a conscience, had prophetic dreams and visions, knew of hidden matters and acted at a distance, had the gift of healing and miracles, experienced diabolical activity, and at the end of his life experienced ecstatic phenomena.

Even though a certain aura of legend may have amplified some episodes, while others were not sufficiently ascertained, no one can question the overwhelming amount of critically certain preternatural facts with which Don Bosco's life abounded.

Just because human beings today, by comparison with the Middle Ages, are over-suspicious of anything that smacks of the extraordinary, this is not sufficient reason not to talk about it. There is room for respectful verification somewhere between naive incredulity and systematic disbelief. Paul VI said that "If the Church is often cautious and wary of the possible spiritual illusions of those who envisage singular phenomena, she is and wants to be extremely respectful of the supernatural experiences granted to certain souls, or of the prodigious facts that God sometimes deigns to miraculously insert into the fabric of natural events."

Therefore, any *a priori* distrust of the "marvellous" that overflowed in Don Bosco's life is unjustified. For sure, we cannot confuse miracles, prophecies and other extraordinary deeds with sanctity, which is the heroic dynamic of theological life and an entirely inner fact. But these gifts, which essentially work to the Church's benefit, can make it manifest and encourage it.

Now, the miracle worker is a saint who generally inspires reverence and even fear, because of their closeness to God and the divine power that acts through them. For the most part, this kind of saint seems to be a reserved, priestly and serious

figure. This type of representation does not at all suit Don Bosco, the “miracle worker who did not create fear”.

The extraordinary – with lesser splendour

Divine power broke silently, almost unseen, into his life, to the point that not everyone noticed it. “He manifested the extraordinary” wrote GB Lemoine, “with such simplicity that it almost seemed a lesser splendour, less intrusive to our poor nature.”

For example, if the consecrated hosts seemed to multiply in his hands, then only he knew about it. If bread rolls multiplied in their hundreds for breakfast, the only one who noticed it was Francesco Dalmazzo who was hidden behind the saint, suspecting the miracle. If, in order to make his children happy, he multiplied chestnuts or hazelnuts – delicacies of the time – he did so with the natural ease of the ancient conjurer who pulls one thing after another out of his sleeve. And if news of some extraordinary deed spread, or one of the boys in all simplicity asked him how he did it, then the saint would deal with it somewhere between the serious and the facetious, make a quick joke about it and deflect the conversation elsewhere.

Though he possessed the gift of healing to an uncommon degree, he was easily able to convince people that the true worker of miracles was Mary and her alone. “She is the miracle worker,” he would say, “the worker of graces and miracles through the power she has obtained from her Divine Son.” He was so convinced of this that he did not hesitate to publish graces obtained in her name.

Quite a number of these, by their very nature, were destined to remain shrouded in oblivion. One thinks of the manifestation of sins, the reading of hidden thoughts, certain prophecies meant for individuals. Thus one could live for years with Don Bosco and not hear of them. Such was the case for Angelo Savio, professed since 1860, who declared at the canonical processes: “Some of my confreres assure me that Don Bosco had special gifts from God: the scrutiny of hearts, the gift of prophecies: I am not in a position to pronounce on these facts.”

Bishop Bertagna said the same: “I have never had a sure reason to believe these things.”

Don Bosco was endowed with penetrating psychological intuition, so it was not always easy to draw the boundary between charisma and nature. Was it the charismatic or just the man speaking in his surprising statement to Dr Giuive me a youngster under fourteen years of age and I will be able to do what I wish with him.” It was probably both.

His “dreams” need separate treatment. It is known that the dream is the realm of the unbridled imagination, the product of the unconscious. Dreaming is essential to the total life of a human being: it is not possible to live without dreaming. Like everyone else, Don Bosco dreamed every night, but some dreams were different from ordinary dreams.

Sometimes, as he himself said, “fables” or “stories” or “allegories” were “invented” in his mind that he happily told his boys and his Salesians for their moral and formative content. “The little story I am about to tell you will also teach us something”.

Other dreams were not only characterised by perfect logic, but anticipated future events, shone light his destiny as a founder, heralded imminent deaths and so on. At first he “did not put faith in them”, exorcised them as subtle tricks of the devil, but in the end he had to give in, because these dreams came true. In his later years he did not hesitate to call them “supernatural”.

Dream-visions, then, coloured by the background of his peasant life and then his Valdocco experience; dreams with strange representations, but always with dense moral and spiritual content which the saintly educator skilfully used to keep God’s offence away from his home, to extol the beauty of the life of grace and friendship with God and enkindle the enthusiasm of those who had believed his word about the glorious future of his work.

Alongside these dreams that we could describe as minor ones, since they mostly involved life at the Oratory, worth recalling are the larger frescoes of his major dreams related to the origins and development of the Congregation. examples are the dream at nine years of age in its various versions, dreams about the missions, the Salesian charism and spirit such as the dream of the “Pergola of roses”, or the “Ten diamonds”, or the dream of the “Devils convention” to devise the most suitable means to destroy Salesian work, and so on. There are not many of these major dreams but their importance is difficult to estimate, because under the veil

of symbol and vision they are very real concentrations of asceticism and Salesian spirit.

Our tradition has never ceased referring to them as a source of primary importance.

It is curious, though, that while on the one hand Don Bosco attaches the greatest importance to his dreams in general, on the other hand he seems, once again, to resort to the image of the dream to conceal his charisms. He seems to say, and in fact did say that “dreams come about while sleeping”, they are only “dreams”; nevertheless they can teach us many things. “Do not make of this dream anything other than you would make of similar kinds of things.” “This is my dream: let each one interpret it as he wishes, but always know how to give it the weight that a dream deserves.”

So a miracle worker, you can see, who looks as if he is not, and who knows how to cleverly conceal the fact.

Correct evaluation

The extraordinary, the preternatural, takes up quite some space in Don Bosco's life. It is a question of giving it its correct value, neither exaggerating nor undervaluing it. We should not exaggerate it because Don Bosco, as A. Caviglia said, “is not a saint for whom miracles slip through his fingers like St Joseph of Cupertino or Francis of Paola, nor is he a Cottolengo, who, trusting in Providence, follows his heart case by case.”

What counted in his life were not the miracles, prophecies or visions, but the heroic nature of his virtues, the arduous daily effort to uplift, both humanly and spiritually, countless hosts of poor young people and ordinary folk; his unwavering commitment to the advent of the Kingdom and his constant industriousness as if everything depended on him while relying only on God, convinced as he was that “Providence wants to be helped by our immense efforts”.

And we should not undervalue it. “The extraordinary permeated the religiousness of Don Bosco and his environment and was the stimulus for a type of asceticism and apostolic action.” (P. Stella). Above all, it significantly marked his work as a founder.

For example, when the approval of the Salesian Constitutions encountered insurmountable difficulties in Rome, Don Bosco worked two immediate cures which were without explanation, humanly speaking. He cured Cardinal Berardi's nephew, and Cardinal Antonelli, who had been forced to remain in his chair due to serious ailments. His intervention on behalf of these two prelates was decisive for the success of his cause.

"Tell me," he confided to his sons one day, "what could poor Don Bosco do unless some special help did not come from heaven at every moment?"

Seeing the success of his undertakings, he said, "Here we see the finger of God, Our Lady's protection." He was so convinced he lived under the special influence of the divine that he could say, "The Congregation took no step forward without some supernatural deed advising it; there was no change or refinement or expansion that was not preceded by an order from the Lord."

We could ask ourselves: what was his inner reaction to the supernatural that ran through his life? A blameless, deeply humble reaction. The reaction of the faithful servant who felt he was an instrument, only an instrument in God's hands, that God was the only hero of his miracles: "I am but the humble instrument of these works." "It is Our Lord who does everything... If he had found a poorer, meaner, more unqualified priest in the archdiocese of Turin," he confided to Fr Felice Giordano of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, "he would have chosen him and not others to be the instrument of those works you speak to me about; and he would have left poor Don Bosco aside."

We find this timely recommendation in his Spiritual Testament: "I strongly advise all my sons to be vigilant, both in speaking and writing, never to say or assert that Don Bosco has obtained graces from God or has in any way worked miracles. He would be committing a harmful error. Although God's goodness has been generous towards me, nevertheless I have never claimed to know or work supernatural things."

The backlash of the marvellous in his personal life brought about a twofold reaction. One of the prophet dismayed at the divine power invested in him: "These things make Don Bosco's responsibility before God grow in a frightening way." "When I think of my responsibility for the position I find myself in I tremble all over. The things I see."

And the reaction of Mary who magnified the Lord for the great things done in her. Within the circle of his intimate friends or benefactors Don Bosco did not hesitate to humbly recount the supernatural facts that punctuated his life as educator and founder, guided by the principle that "It is necessary for God's works to be manifested." He felt that his life was inextricably linked to that of the Congregation, so let us speak about it: "I see that Don Bosco's life is all mixed up in the life of the Congregation: and so let us talk about it. It is necessary for the greater glory of God, for the salvation of souls and the greater increase of the Congregation, that many things be made known."

The things that need to be made known are the *magnalia Dei*: the miracles, prophetic dreams, prodigious healings that accompanied his life as educator and founder, which wrung expressions from him that were filled with trust and abandonment in God: "God is with us!"; "It is his work that is done and is being done"; "God does his works with magnificence"; "Our Congregation is led by God and protected by Mary Help of Christians."

Chapter 5 A HOLY FOUNDER

Don Bosco belongs to the group of holy founders and is the father of a great spiritual posterity. The Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators were directly founded by him; other groups, raised up by the Holy Spirit, live his spirit and carry out his mission through different specific functions, thus giving origin to the Salesian Family. They are all heirs of his charism as founder, that is, of his typical and original “experience of the Holy Spirit” that he “transmitted to [his] disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth” (*Mutuae Relationes* no. 11).

This experience, a gift of the Spirit for a more radiant configuration to Christ the servant and for the edification of the Church, is marked by the classic light–darkness contrast that characterises every mystical vision or higher calling. In this set of opposites, the consciousness of being under special pressure from the divine in view of a mission that surpasses the forces of nature and that of feeling a mere lowly instrument in the hands of the Lord clash and combine. The need for absolute docility to the Spirit, which is inexhaustible creativity, and the need to know how to overcome the resistance and opposition that every novelty entails; the clarity that rains down from above and the darkness that rises from below.

This apparent paradox gives form and substance to Don Bosco’s holiness. The ups and downs of his life show us how he “found no other way to realise his vocation and holiness than that of being a founder” (E. Viganò).

The action of the Holy Spirit in his life as a founder was constant, we could say. God inspired him and spoke to him, normally indirectly, through the signs of the times, through people and things. He spoke to him directly through inner illumination, prophetic lights, dreams and visions.

His vocation

We can ask ourselves: When did he sense the action of the Holy Spirit in his life? When did he perceive, albeit vaguely, that he was called and sent to be a sign and bearer of Christ's love for the young?

For Francis of Assisi this moment coincided with the "revelation" that urged him to "live under the form of the holy Gospel". For Don Bosco it was the dream he had at home around nine or ten years of age. He confirmed this in a confession he made later: "Things began for us in an extraordinary way from when I was nine or ten years old. I thought I saw very many boys in the farmyard near the house. Then a person said to me, 'Why don't you go and instruct them?' 'Because I don't know how.' 'Go, go! I am sending you.' I was so happy after that, that everybody noticed."

The dream is well known but it would not hurt to recall it again. Young John dreamt that he was in front of a multitude of youngsters who were yelling and screaming. Some were cursing. He sought to silence them with "words" and "fists".

A "dignified man" appeared and called him "by name" (= his *vocation*), commanded him to "take charge of these children" (= his *mission*) and win them over "not by blows but by gentleness and love" (= his *method*), and teach them "about the ugliness of sin and the value of virtue" (= *the essential content of his message*).

The youngster felt he was not up to the task: he was not capable, didn't have the knowledge, but the Man in the dream came to his aid: "I will give you a teacher. Under her guidance you will become wise. Without her, all wisdom is foolishness." And it was here that a "Lady of stately appearance" entered the scene. She took him "kindly by the hand" and indicating a "large number of goats... and other animals" she told him: "This is the field of your work. Make yourself humble, strong and energetic. and what you will see happening to these animals in a moment is what you must do for my children." John looked: "where before I saw wild animals, I now saw gentle lambs" who were all jumping or bleating as if to welcome that man and lady. He wanted to know more; he was upset and began to cry. Then the Lady "placed her hand on my head and said, 'in good time you will understand everything.'"

The dream ended here. But we believe we are not exaggerating if we say that this was the greatest moment in Don Bosco's life. It was a unique, unrepeatable moment because that night the Lord's hand was laid upon him and brought about the most profound transformation of his life. From then on it became a mysterious giving on God's part and a mysterious giving on Don Bosco's part.

"The dream at nine years of age conditioned Don Bosco's entire way of living and thinking. And in particular, the way he thought about God's presence in everyone's life and in the history of the world." (P. Stella). The saint never forgot it: "The dream stayed with me for the rest of my life."

The architecture of the dream is perfect: when, after an order from Pius IX Don Bosco consigned it to his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, he was close to sixty years old and could recall it in the light of its fulfilment. But at nine years of age, no. The inspiration filtering down from above still has, in reality, all the depth and mystery of a natural dream. It is a light in a shadowy state that is at the root of the indelible presentiment of a superior sacred mission yet to be defined and verified. The dream, which then repeats itself with slight variations, instils confidence and hope in its main character, but not so much as to remove the uncertainty, anxiety and doubt about his future that tormented his early years.

This explains the "crisis of vocation", as Fr Ceria calls it, that he had just as he was about to enter the seminary. This was not about his call to the priestly state to which he was strongly inclined. It was a question of the choice between being a secular or a religious priest. At that moment his preference was more in the direction of religious life: he decided to become a Franciscan and was duly accepted into the Order. The advice of prudent individuals and a dream that he described as "very strange", induced him to desist from his intention and enter the seminary. "The Lord is preparing another place, another harvest for you" he was told.

We have already said that the year at the seminary were decisive for his holiness. But more decisive for his life as a founder were the years he spent at the *Convitto* and beyond.

The young people in the dream

The first impact the city of Turin made on him affected him deeply.

The spectacle of misery and abandonment of so many youth marginalised by the construction and demographic expansion in the city's suburbs, or the youngsters who had migrated from the province in search of work and were left to their own devices challenged him in an acute and new way. The Spirit that had come upon him now spoke to him through the imploring voice of so many "poor, at risk and abandoned" youth and urged him to action, made him realise that these were the young people seen in the dream at nine years of age and to whom he was sent.

We need to do something for these poor young people, Don Bosco thought, and we need to do it quickly. He was just waiting for the auspicious occasion to offer itself for "attempting a project on behalf of young men wandering through the city streets, especially those who have just come out of prison."

God's hour struck on 8 December 1841, feast of the Immaculate Conception, when he met Bartholomew Garelli, apparently by a stroke of luck, in the sacristy of St Francis of Assisi church. It was the first catechism lesson, the first seed of the Festive Oratory.

It did not take long for other young men to join the bricklayer's rouseabout. He invited them. Don Bosco wrote that they were just a "small army of bricklayers, stonemasons, cobblestone cutters and squarers" but destined to grow.

It was the humble beginning of a grand work that Don Bosco had not the least idea about at the time. He was not even sure what direction his priestly ministry would take. God guided his steps, but like Abraham "he did not know where he was going".

The idea of religious life kept coming back to him and this time he thought about the Oblates of the Blessed Virgin founded by Lanteri, another great figure of Turin's school of holiness. He was also strongly attracted to the missionary ideal and began studying languages with this in mind. Fr Cafasso's clear "no" saw him abandon that idea.

Meanwhile, the three years at the *Convitto* were coming to an end and it was time for him, too, to be part of one of the pastoral activities of the archdiocese. He was offered three possible roles: tutor at the *Convitto*, assistant parish priest in Buttigliera, Rector of the Little Hospital of St Philomena, founded by Marchioness Barolo, as well as being assistant to Dr Borelli at the Refuge. He preferred not to make the decision but that Fr Cafasso decide for him. "My inclination is to work

with young people,” he said, “so do with me what you want: I shall know the Lord’s will in whatever you advise.” And to his confessor’s question, “At the moment, what’s the wish nearest your heart? What’s on your mind?” he replied without the least hesitation: “At this moment I see myself in the midst of a multitude of boys appealing to me for help.”

As a prudent man, Fr Cafasso wanted to think more about it. He finally called his disciple and told him without any hesitation: “Pack your bag and go with Dr Borelli... Meanwhile God will show you what you have to do for the young.”

Of the three suggestions, this was the one that went most against his natural inclinations. In the end, however, it was the most providential. The Oratory which had begun at the *Convitto* was able to move to the Refuge, continue and develop.

So two years passed, full of unforeseen events and adventures for the Oratory, whose young people, having grown in number, kept Don Bosco seriously occupied and forced to work on two fronts: the young people and the work of the Refuge. This situation could not last, though. Marchioness Barolo, authoritarian as she was, did not take long to confront the saint with the dilemma that seemed to have no solution: “Give up either the work for the boys or the work at the Refuge.” Don Bosco did not hesitate in choosing his boys: he was dismissed and sent off somewhat brusquely.

“I accepted my dismissal, abandoning myself to whatever God’s plans for me might be.”

From then on, Don Bosco would give himself completely to abandoned youth. He would be fully and ultimately comforted by the dream at nine years of age that was repeated in great detail. As before he saw himself at the head of a “strange flock” of animals when again “a lady dressed as a shepherdess signalled me to follow her and accompany that strange flock while she went ahead.” While doing so many of the animals turned into lambs, and many of the lambs, in turn, became young shepherds together with Don Bosco. The final stage of the journey was the fixed location of the Oratory. The Shepherdess gave him a glimpse of future development: buildings, poticoes, clerics and priests and finally, a “wondrously big church” inside which hung a white banner on which was written: “*hic domus mea, inde gloria mea*. Here is my house from which my glory will go out.”

This view from above on his life and work, this foresight into the future, did not remove Don Bosco from the hard uncertainties of daily life, nor did it mean that these clarifications from above were not also accompanied by states of inner darkness.

For example, on Palm Sunday – 5 April 1846 – Don Bosco went through one of the most bitter “nights of the senses and spirit” of his life. Evicted by the Filippi brothers who had rented him a field for his Oratory, abandoned by his co-workers, exhausted in strength, weak in health, he felt terribly lonely. He no longer knew where to gather his boys the following Sunday, which was Easter. An infinite sadness assailed him; he withdrew to a corner of the field and broke into tears. From his heart, this simple prayer went up to God: “My God, why don’t you show me where you want me to gather these children? Oh, let me know! Oh! Show me what I must do.” The Lord heard him.

The rental of the Pinardi shed – immediately transformed into a chapel – and the purchase of an adjacent strip of land, were the first stable core of the Oratory. Through painful ways, Providence had led him to the place indicated to him by dreams, and there he was to fulfil his mission. That his awareness of being a founder had become clearer is clearly proven by these confidences he shared with his rectors in 1876: “I vaguely hoped to do poor boys some good in that very spot. The thought haunted me, and I had no idea how to carry it out. Nevertheless, it kept haunting me and determined every step and action of mine. I wanted to do a lot of good, and I wanted to do it here. That poor priest’s hope seemed but a dream then, yet God made it come true and fulfilled that poor priest’s desire.”

Luminous darkness

How these “desires” came true, and how the work grew in his hands, the saint was unable to explain. “How did He do that? I can hardly say how myself.” God’s ways are always mysterious, and were doubly so for Don Bosco the founder. The goal that “never began from me” was clear: do good for abandoned youth and do it there, in the fields at Valdocco.

But the saint was not the only priest concerned about poor young people: there were other institutions with which, perhaps, he could have joined and ensured the future of his Oratory more easily. It was not just a fleeting idea that occupied his mind and prompted him to check it out. But however much he looked around,

however much he compared himself to others, he did not recognise himself in any of the existing institutions. His “Oratory” experience was too typical, too different from the others: to remain faithful to his original inspiration he would have to carry it forward – alone, with the Lord’s help; he would have to develop it, bring it to maturity slowly, laboriously.

The Holy Spirit, who led him along both ancient and new paths, made him realise that, unlike other founders, who could count on “tried and tested members” he would have to rely solely on young people whom he himself “had to choose, instruct, form”. This is what we learn from a very interesting testimony of his, in 1847, when he had recently taken possession of the Pinardi Chapel.

In a vision the Virgin Mary had indicated the field I had to work in. I therefore possessed the premeditated, complete outline of a plan from which I could not and absolutely would not detach myself. I was absolutely responsible if this were to succeed.

I clearly saw the strings I had to pull, the means I had to adopt to succeed in the undertaking; so I was not able to expose myself to risk of having such a plan thwarted by submitting it to the judgement and will of others. Despite this, in the same year 1847 I wished to observe more diligently whether any Institution existed in which I could be sure of fulfilling my mandate, but I was not long in realising that there was not. No matter how holy was the spirit that animated them and the purpose they aimed at, they did not correspond to my ends. These were the reasons that kept me from joining some Order or Congregation of religious. So I ended up being alone, and instead of bringing in members who were already tried and tested in community life and practised in the various works of the apostolic ministry, I had to go in search, according to what had been indicated to me in my dreams, of young companions whom I myself was to choose, instruct, and form.

We see in these words the certainty of a founder who feels he is called and sent by God to fulfil an unmistakable mission in the Church: he has the awareness of someone who, as the bearer of a special experience of the Holy Spirit to be transmitted to posterity, feels he “absolutely responsible” for its success.

This invincible certainty might make one think of a visionary rushing towards the goal confident, safe from all practical doubts, all existential uncertainty.

It was not like that. As happens with the mystics, in his dreams – some with worldwide dimensions, such as the ones about the missions – Don Bosco is lifted above himself and brought to summary visions that impress themselves strongly in the deepest core of his being. But they are like flashes in the night: suddenly the panorama is illuminated, then everything plunges back into darkness. The seer must then resort to his ordinary faculties to remember, recount, describe what he has seen. And this would not be an easy task, as the tormented editing of Don Bosco's handwritten pages, retouches, erasures, word substitutions prove. F. Ciarli has done well to write,

The transition from inspiration to its realisation in a given religious family involves a translation into structural terms of which the founder is unaware. He has seen the fundamental contents from which a new way of presence in the Church must “take on a body”, but he does not yet know the shape that such a “body” will acquire. Sometimes it is not even clear to him to what extent what he has been shown is to be translated into a specific religious institute. Only the gradual unfolding of the work in its various and gradual realisations will bring to light, in the eyes of the founder himself, all the riches inherent in the inspiration.

Don Bosco's life fits this description perfectly.

“I always went ahead as the Lord inspired and circumstances demanded.” Unpredictable, uncertain, difficult circumstances that forced the saint, from time to time, into a long and patient work of spiritual discernment. The most accurate idea of Don Bosco is therefore that of Jacob struggling with God, of a man who always lived with his feet firmly planted on the ground grappling with unpredictable daily difficulties.

Everything is clear for Don Bosco yet everything was shrouded in mist. This luminous ignorance is the objective proof that the plan was in God's hands; is proof that the path would not develop along a very short straight line, but by trial and error, with courageous steps forward, and with appropriate adjustments to the route.

Taking possession of the Pinardi house was the landing in the promised land, but it did not coincide with the purchase of property, nor with the short-term fulfilment of dreams.

He was therefore always amid the anguish of finding how to survive in Turin, and despite the poverty of means, trusting in God, in Fr Cafasso and in his circle of friends. He found himself at odds with his colleagues in the priestly apostolate such as he had never experienced before, a victim of misunderstandings, of blows dictated more by the passion of the moment than by calculated malice, because others also felt – and in many respects they were not wrong – their cause to be a matter of life and death for themselves and for the work of the Oratories. He was also at odds with the parish priests (P. Stella).

Even later on Don Bosco never had an easy life. One day he confided to Fr Barberis: “You could say that everyone is against us and that we have to fight against everyone. The legal world is absolutely against us; even certain religious Orders, seeing themselves in decline and us in continual progress, look at us like this. The wind blows against us in the curias, in families, in society. If it were not God who wants it, it would be impossible to do what we do.”

But he was comforted by the thought that “the Master of [his] works is God, God is the sustainer, and Don Bosco is no more than the instrument.” This luminous certainty made him rock solid in the face of the difficulties and obstacles that blocked his path: “This is the reason why in adversity, in persecution, in the midst of the greatest obstacles I never let myself be intimidated, and the Lord was always with us.”

Amidst difficulties of all kinds, an original “experience of the Spirit” had really blossomed at Valdocco in less than a decade, a new educational and pastoral model whose consequences went far beyond what Don Bosco thought. The best young men were also involved in this experience, including St Dominic Savio.

On 25 March 1855, in Don Bosco’s little room, without witnesses, without fuss, Cleric Rua pronounced his first annual vows into Don Bosco’s hands at the age of sixteen. At various intervals, other vows were placed in the hands of the Saint. His institution did not take long to establish itself rapidly; first in Piedmont, then in Italy and around the world. Don Bosco’s concern now became less that of cultivating

his charism with infinite patience, and more one of securing it for history, having it approved and authenticated by the Church. A task that took him decades.

He had the idea of a Congregation

It is not our task to write the history of the approval of the Salesian Society, its Rule, its privileges. But it was a history with all the shape of prolonged martyrdom: “If I had known beforehand how much pain, toil, opposition and contradiction it costs to found a religious Society, perhaps I would not have had the courage to set out on the task.”

His ideas did not always coincide with those of the Church authorities, as can be seen from the extensive written reports sent to the relevant authorities.

Up until 1874, the year the Rule was approved by the Holy See, it does not appear that Don Bosco had any plans to found a Congregation as it in fact turned out. On 18 October 1878 he said, “I went along with three-year vows because my original plan was to found a Congregation which would assist the bishops. Since this was not possible and I was forced to do otherwise, a three-year commitment is now more of a hindrance than a help.” He expressed the same opinion to rectors gathered at Alassio a year later: “When we introduced the triennial profession my idea of the Congregation was quite different. I intended to found something far different from what we have today, but I was forced to do things this way, and so be it.”

Should we say that the Church distorted Don Bosco’s charism? It would be a grave error to think so, because her task, as *Lumen Gentium* says, is “not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good.” The Spirit who gives birth to charisms is, let us not forget, the soul of the Church; the Spirit does not contradict himself. By bringing Don Bosco’s institution back into the fold of the classic Congregations, the Holy See placed it in a position to expand as best it could while still remaining itself. Under the pressure of events and the indications of the Church the saint clarified and specified aspects that were not yet well defined.

It is in fact the unfolding of events which are the bearers of grace that “shaped the Congregation not as he would have wanted it, or as he believed it should become. And this does not mean that he did not want it as it came to be, nor that he was dissatisfied with it” (P. Stella). Nor does it mean that the Congregation as it came

to be has not preserved its originality and modernity, or that it does not reflect the true face and thought of Don Bosco. The following reflections by Fr Filippo Rinaldi, the saint's third successor, are very significant in this regard.

He had conceived of a pious society that, while being a true religious congregation, did not have the traditional outward appearance of one. It was enough for him that there be a religious spirit, the only factor in the perfection of the evangelical counsels. For the rest, he believed he could very well bend to the needs of the times. This elasticity of adaptation to all the forms of good that are continually arising in the bosom of humanity is the proper spirit of our Constitutions, and the day that any variation contrary to this spirit were introduced, our Pious Society would be finished.

The concept that our Venerable Founder had in creating his Religious Society has not yet been fully illustrated. He injected an ingenious modernity into it that, while rigidly preserving the substantial spirit of his educational method, would at the same time prevent it from becoming fossilised in secondary matters that are subject to change with the passage of time.

Our Constitutions are pervaded by a breath of the perennial vitality that emanates from the holy Fifth Angel who is, precisely for this reason, the angel of all times and ever rich in new sources of life.

His "I was forced to do things this way, and so be it", therefore, was not an act of bitter resignation, but the joyful *Amen* of the prophet who has reached the end of his race. Proof of this is the solemn declaration with which he opened his "Introduction" to the Salesian Constitutions: "Our Constitutions, O beloved sons in Jesus Christ, were definitively approved by the Holy See on 3 April 1874. This fact must be hailed by us as one of the most glorious of our Society, as that which assures us that in the observance of our Rules we rest on a stable, secure and we can even say infallible basis, since the judgement of the Supreme Head of the Church who sanctioned them is infallible."

The Constitutions were not only the "steady" way that leads to love for the saint, but also the seal of approval of his charism and spirit, a living and dynamic and constantly growing reality. This is the only way to explain his recurring

recommendation on the importance and practice of the Constitutions. "Let every point of the Rule be a reminder of me"; "The only means of propagating the spirit of the Congregation is the observance of the Rules"; "Let no good thing be done contrary to them".

Only at the end of his long journey could Abraham grasp the breadth and depth of God's will in his regard.

The same must be said of Don Bosco, comparatively speaking. Celebrating Mass in the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, in May 1887 just a few months before his death, his eyes were filled with tears fifteen times. It was as if he were taken up into a far away world: he saw himself again in the little house at the Becchi and the words of his first dream came back to him: "In good time you will understand everything."

Chapter 6 AN ASTUTE SAINT

The Italian terms *furbo* or *furberia* (shrewd, astute, cunning...) can have a pejorative sense in current usage. And this was the sense implied by the *Gazzetta operaia* in a malicious article on 15 October 1887 entitled: *Furbo Don Bosco*, presented him as a priest of intrigue and cunning, someone capable of twisting everything to his own advantage.

But there is also a positive connotation. Astuteness “can in fact be an expression of intelligent common sense, of sharp prudence in taking sane and healthy advantage of situations” (E. Viganò). Foresighted, shrewd individuals who know how to extricate themselves from difficulties by playing smart are exercising astuteness, as are those who do not allow themselves to be fooled and know how to achieve their goals using honest, even unpredictable means.

This is how we should look at Don Bosco’s astuteness, not forgetting that, since he is a saint, it refers to the gift of “understanding”, the property of which is to perfect, under the illuminating action of the Holy Spirit, the virtue of faith, which leads one to judge righteously about created things in their relationship with God, but in a manner superior to that of the ordinary Christian.

Playing at being simple – but not really

Don Bosco had practically always had the reputation of holy astuteness. G.B. Lemoyne writes that “we have heard strangers, other than those who knew him, often say ‘he is really special: this man gets it right all the time. What a crafty old devil!’” There was always the old cunning of the conjurer in him, enchanting his small audience; something of the refined peasant wisdom that can defend its own interests so well.

He loved the Piedmontese proverb *fé 'l bonom sensa eslo*. One day he said to one of his priests, “Do you know what it means to be astute? Pretending to be simple! That’s what I do: I let everything be said, I listen, I pay attention to the

words, but finally in deciding I take everything into account and come to know everything perfectly.”

The house in Nice went through a period of serious economic difficulty. The Rector, Fr Ronchail, no longer dared to turn to benefactors who felt harrassed by his frequent requests for help. “Play it smart,” Don Bosco told him, “the money is for your children; the mortifications are yours.”

What he was really saying was “Don’t give up; insist, but do so with holy cunning.” To do good, A Caviglia, noted, his kind of good, he needed everyone, “be they Guelphs or Ghibellines”. His skill lay precisely in “benefitting from what they don’t realise and the good side – we don’t want to be overly pessimistic – in every person, even when they are devoted to a party that seems to have little good in it.”

To release the good in the heart of every individual, his first biographer noted, he was able, by honest means, to ally himself with each one’s self-love. When he had to deal with people who were hostile, ill-disposed, when “he realised that motives of convenience, charity or duty would have come to nothing, with refined skill and without a shadow of flattery or falsehood he made their self-love his ally and was able to pluck this chord in such a way as to get them to respond to the note he had in mind. A word of praise, an honourable remembrance, an act and a word of esteem, confidence, respect, meant that most of the time all difficulties or dislike would disappear.”

He did the same with those closer to him, always abounding in praise with benefactors and everyone else. When he could make a mother feel she was her daughter’s age, or praise his parish priest friend’s stingy housekeeper, he knew he was paying welcome compliments from which only good came, and that is what he wanted.

His prophecies regarding the Royal House, “funerals at court”, raised the ire of the Count General d’ Angrognna. The latter hastened to Valdocco, and seriously threatened Don Bosco with insults. The saint reacted very calmly, appealed to the man of arms’ honour – that he could not strike down someone who was defenceless, praised his courage and valour and made a friend of him. The two toasted one another.

The telegraph-style letter in which he thanked Countess Girolama Uguccioni who gave him what he needed for his trip from Florence to Rome, shows how gracefully

and shrewdly he knew how to win over his benefactors. "My good mamma. Our journey stupendous; excellent chicken stupendous service. Excellent wine: bottle entirely empty."

He could not be fooled

Given his holy cunning, Don Bosco was not a man to let himself be fooled or to be told fibs. He did not let people set traps for him. Writing to Fr Dalmazzo, he told him "The Cardinal was waiting to make a court jester of you. We will also get out of this [situation]."

The Foreign Minister promised him the moon (*mari e monti*, oceans and mountains) for his missionaries' voyage: "Let's see," he wrote, "leaving the ocean and mountains to him, if he will give me something to get over them."

The construction of the Sacred Heart Church in Rome swallowed up huge sums of money that gave poor Don Bosco no respite; too many people were involved and everything became complicated. So the saint took a short cut and wrote to Fr Dalmazzo: "I think it essential that the Cardinal Vicar not be bothered about material matters and leave the handling of affairs to the one priest who pays for things." "Instead of complaining about what we are building in Rome, I would like certain gentlemen to give us some money."

When the national industry Exhibition was held in Turin in 1884, Don Bosco took part in it in a big way with the best printing press that was then on the market, the "queen of all machines", as it was immediately called. Visitors could watch the transformation of strips into paper, from paper to printing, from printing to bookbinding. Everyone, experts and visitors alike, considered Don Bosco deserving of the first prize. Instead, the anti-clerical and Masonic commission only awarded him the silver medal. The saint refused to accept it, proudly but with dignity: He also imposed press silence. In his letter of protest he declared, among other things: "It is enough for me to have been able to contribute with my work to this grandiose exhibition of Italian ingenuity and industry and to have thus demonstrated the concern that I have always given, over more than 40 years, to promoting the true progress of science and the arts together with the moral and material wellbeing of poor and abandoned youth, the true progress of science and the arts."

Cunning without guile

Don Bosco's cunning was also expressed in simple, almost irrelevant gestures but ones that had their own significance. In order to show his gratitude to the Archbishop of Buenos Aires he had him sent two boxes of specially chosen wines from Italy: Bordeaux, Malaga, Grignolino, etc. But the bottles had to have the appearance of being very old wines. So what did Don Bosco do? He wrote to his secretary to sprinkle some dust over the bottles "to ennoble the birth of the wine and give it a rather ancient existence". A little bit of cunning that would make the gift more pleasing.

In order to show his gratitude to his most distinguished benefactors, he made efforts to obtain both ecclesiastical and civil honours for them. "If there are expenses," he wrote to Fr Dalmazzo in Rome, "they will be paid, but I want to pay them in such a way that I can say that it is a gift, which will be much more profitable." He then wished that, as far as possible, the awarding of certificates should take place solemnly, going into details that in our changed cultural climate might even make one smile, but that had a certain psychological effectiveness at the time.

Writing to Fr Cagliero he said, "After receiving the brief for Mr. Benitez and the certificate for Father Ceccarelli, make plans with Father Fagnano. Bring everything in person. Invite the school committee and the friends of both concerned. Have Father Tomatis neatly write a dialogue to be recited by some boys. Two boys should carry the brief bestowing the title of Commendatore and the diploma, each on a salver; you and Father Fagnano will accompany the pupils, however, and personally present the certificates. These things must be given the importance they deserve."

His shrewdness – he also called them "holy ploys" – was not just euphemistically "holy". It had nothing devious or murky about it and did not become slyness; it was sound practical sense that moved him to use every lawful means to draw attention to his work for the "the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls".

He also wanted his youngsters to be shrewd in this holy way. "In the world," he told them, making his own the words of St Philip Neri, "there are many fools and many clever people. The clever ones are those who toil and suffer a little to gain paradise; the foolish ones are those who go to eternal damnation."

Having spoken of the “wiles” used by St Athanasius to foil the snares of his enemies, he ended his sermon with this convinced exhortation: “I would like you all to become saints of this sort. Yes, my dear boys, seek earnestly to become saints but saints who know how to seek the means, do not fear persecution, do not spare effort when it is a question of doing good – shrewd saints who prudently seek all the ways to succeed in their intent.”

Astuteness, yes, but as a way to holiness. This was Don Bosco.

Chapter 7 HOLY CHEERFULNESS

“The first aspect that strikes us in Don Bosco’s holiness (in fact it would seem designed to hide the remarkably intense presence of the Spirit) is his simplicity and cheerfulness, it made what was difficult and supernatural appear easy and natural.” (E. Viganò).

Joy, of which cheerfulness is the external manifestation or outburst, is part of Christian holiness. It is indeed, as Paul VI expresses it in his Exhortation on Joy, *Gaudete in Domino*, “spiritual sharing in the unfathomable joy, both divine and human, which is in the heart of Jesus Christ ... [it] can only spring from the simultaneous celebration of the death and resurrection of the Lord.”

It is the joy that the Holy Spirit poured into Our Blessed Lady, her cousin Elizabeth, Simeon, Jesus. There are no sad saints, they would be sad saint, St Francis de Sales said. And Don Bosco in turn said that “The devil is afraid of cheerful people.”

But not all saints manifested their cheerfulness in the same way. The lives of St Thomas More, St Philip Neri, Don Bosco were so overflowing with joy that they could offer material for a “theology of joy”.

Whether he was joking, or speaking of serious things or praying, Don Dosco gave colour to life and spread cheerfulness. You could read the joy in his bright, deep-set eyes, on his face which was “invariably smiling, attractive and unforgettable” (P. Albera). One could grasp it in his retorts full of wit and good humour. After the shot that almost killed him he exclaimed, “Poor cassock, you were the one that paid for it.”

He would say: “Go as you wish, as long as you go well.” “As soon as we find an ox without a master I want us to be chherful.” And he would often say, “*Lietare et benefacere* and let the sparrows sing.”

He told a barefooted boy, “Come to Turin and I will get you to mend your shoes.” He did not disappoint even on his deathbed: “Viglietti, give me some iced coffeee, but make it very hot.”

The expansive and deep joy that filtered from Don Bosco was, as E. Viganò wrote acutely, many things at once:

This was Don Bosco's *joie de vivre* in daily evidence; it was his acceptance of events as the hard and practical road leading to hope; it was his intuitive understanding of people, their talents and their limitations, with a view to forming a family; it was his acute and practical sense of goodness with its conviction that in man's past and present history good prevails over evil; it was his predilection for the young that opened his heart and imagination to the future, and engendered a creative adaptability capable of facing up to the values of the new generations with equilibrium; it was the affection of a friend who could make himself loved, and build up an educative confidence and dialogue that led to Christ; it was his bed of roses that he trod with a smile and a song - though well shod with boots as some protection against the innumerable thorns.

Youth feels the yearning for happiness with greater freshness. Don Bosco had understood this, ever since, as a juggler and improvised acrobat, he knew how to keep his young friends happy in order to make them feel better.

As a student in Chieri he founded the "Society for a Good Time". Its aim: to keep sadness away and always be cheerful, and "exactness in the performance of scholastic and religious duties". Every Oratory or institute of his would become a "Society for a Good Time" and at every gathering he himself would take the lead in being cheerful. He would greet his friends with a "be cheerful!" which made them jump with delight.

"Not a day passed, one can say," writes G.B. Lemoyne, "without his witty ways or amusing stories arousing amusement, either in public gatherings or in his talks to his pupils or in the groups that his Salesians and young people formed around him, in his travels, in citizens' homes or buildings, in short, wherever he appeared."

Although we can be sure that his life was a silent martyrdom, he always put on a happy face. The more he suffered, the happier he looked.

The eleventh commandment

Cheerfulness is “the eleventh commandment of Salesian houses” (A. Caviglia). It is one of the great secrets of the preventive system. Just like St Philip Neri, Don Bosco never tired of telling his boys, “Always be cheerful”; “serve the Lord in gladness”; “Live as happily as you can so long as you do not sin.”

Guided by experience and sure pedagogical intuition, he knew that to grow well, in spirit as well as in body, young people need joy just like they needed bread.

Fr Braido writes that “Don Bosco, who was much more understanding and intuitive than many parents, knew and understood that a boy was a boy and allowed him, indeed wanted him to be such. He knew that a boy’s way of life is about joy, freedom, games, the ‘Society for a Good Time’. He knew that for normal and profound educational impact the boy must be respected and loved in his naturalness, and that does not permit oppression, coercion, violence.”

Paul VI, in his exhortation to joy, says that Christian joy presupposes a person capable of natural joy: “There is also needed a patient effort to teach people, or teach them once more, how to savor in a simple way the many human joys that the Creator places in our path: the elating joy of existence and of life... the joy and satisfaction of duty performed; the transparent joy of purity, service and sharing; the demanding joy of sacrifice. The Christian will be able to purify, complete and sublimate these joys; he will not be able to disdain them.”

Don Bosco can be found in these statements. He always did his utmost to ensure that young people did not lack the ringing joy of noisy recreations, sport, outings, music, singing, theatre, gymnastics. As long as his strength allowed him, when he was at home he was himself the soul of entertainment. The last running challenge he took part in was in 1868; he was fifty-three years old, his legs were already swollen but still impressively fast.

On Carnival day, people went mad with joy at the Oratory. Fr Ruffino’s chronicle describes how the day went: Holy Mass in the early morning, then breakfast

followed by an hour and a half of games; special lunch with wine and fruit; in the afternoon recreation with the classic *rottura delle pignate* (breaking open a container filled with sweets, chocolates etc.), class by class. Vespers followed, cheered up by the hilarious dialogue between Dr Borelli and Fr Cagliero, and Benediction. Theatre and special dinner closed the day. After evening prayers and Don Bosco's fatherly word, dead tired, but with their souls filled with joy, the youngsters went to rest.

Unlike Canon Allamano, who did not allow any levity during Carnival, Don Bosco liked to teach by deed that one could have fun in a cheerful way without offending the Lord.

By indulging the young in the things they liked, Don Bosco succeeded in making them love those things which they were not naturally inclined to, such as study, work, fulfilment of duty, piety. He was convinced that a human being's destiny is played out in youth and said, in *The Companion of Youth*, "A young man according to his way—even when he is old, he will not depart from it; in other words, if we lead a good life when we are young, we shall be good when we are old." "Remember that you are in the springtime of life at your age. Anyone not accustomed to working at a young age will become lazy and ignorant in old age."

He wanted them to be hard-working, quick off the mark, active, always busy. He didn't leave lazy ones in peace. He was able to educate the young to savour the satisfaction and joy felt when duty was well done, and to see the truth of the three words he often gave them: cheerfulness, study/work, piety. Three great values inseparably linked in his pedagogy. He did not believe in piety that did not lead to commitment, nor in commitment divorced from piety. He placed the source of happiness in this synthesis: "Piety, study and cheerfulness will give you many satisfactions as sweet as honey."

"If you want to be good," we read in the Life of Francis Besucco, "practise just three things and all will go well... They are: cheerfulness, study and piety. This is the great programme, and by practising it you can live happily and do much good to your soul."

Francesco Orestano truthfully wrote: "If St Francis sanctified nature and poverty, St John Bosco sanctified work and joy. He is the saint of Christian euphoria, of hardworking and happy Christian life."

He wanted Christian euphoria to bear the same imprint of practices of prayer, relationship with God. He therefore banished the monotonous and repetitive drudgery that generates tedium and rejection in young people. Even the time spent in church had to resolve itself into “an hour of joy”, of “celebration”. “Easy things,” he wrote, “that do not frighten, do not tire – no lengthy prayers.” He wanted the practices of piety “to be like air, which does not oppress, never tires, although we carry a very heavy amount of it on our shoulders.”

The school year was studded with liturgical feasts, devotional exercises, triduums, novenas, but one did not feel the burden. Don Bosco knew how to prepare young people for the “feast”; he knew how to have them experience it as a joyful sacramental encounter with Christ. He knew how to have them savour it as a prelude to eternal happiness through the magic of song, the splendour of ceremonies and rites. The celebrations that took place at Valdocco became, over time, a true centre of attraction for the faithful of the city of Turin.

From the church, joy overflowed into life, into carefree recreation, and the merriment of an abundant meal. Don Bosco, who never admitted dichotomies between soul and body, wanted “the body to be cheerful too”; melancholy was to be banished. “The clashing of bowls and glasses” was to form “a beautiful harmony”. All the positive elements not destroyed by sin were, as can be seen, optimistically taken up in his educational method.

Cheerfulness: a way of holiness

When Don Bosco wrote that “Only religion and grace can make a man happy”, or, as we already read in the first edition of *The Companion of Youth*, “those who live in God’s grace are always cheerful and have a contented heart even in affliction”, while “those who give themselves over to pleasures, experience anger... are more and more unhappy”, he wanted to get the youngsters to understand that their earthly and eternal happiness depend on their relationship with God.

So there is but one way to achieve happiness and joy: the way that passes through the religion of love and salvation; through friendship and intimacy with Christ and his Spirit.

Don Bosco’s pedagogy would therefore be “radically and essentially a spiritual pedagogy of souls” (A. Caviglia); a pedagogy, that is, of the life of grace, of growth and maturity in Christ or put briefly, a “pedagogy of holiness and joy”, since joy

is the constitutive element of holiness. The Turin school believed in the universal vocation to holiness. St Joseph Cafasso spoke of his “hanged saints”; St Leonard Murialdo also urged the wayward girls at the “Good Shepherd Retreat” to holiness; Don Bosco proposed it as the highest of goals to his “urchins” and “rabble”, as well as to his better boys. A “youth-friendly” but demanding and also heroic holiness.

When Roman processes considered the cause of beatification and canonisation of young people impracticable, on the assumption that only an adult could practise virtue to a heroic degree, the saint stated, alluding to Dominic Savio: “I can assure you we will have boys from the house elevated to the honours of the altars.” The Church has proved him right.

It is certainly of no small worth that he believed in youthful holiness, but it is more worthy still that he presented it to young people from the encouraging perspective of cheerfulness, not an obstacle but a way to holiness.

“I am happy that you have fun, that you play, that you are cheerful. This is a way to become saints like St Aloysius, so long as you see that you do not commit sin.”

After the famous sermon on holiness (1855), of which we only know the trenchant words: “It is God’s will that we all become saints; it is so easy to become saints; a great reward is prepared in heaven for those who become saints”, Dominic Savio presented himself to Don Bosco and told him: “I didn’t think I could become a saint so easily, but now that I realise that this can be done even while being cheerful, I absolutely want and need to become a saint.”

Carried away by his adolescent fantasy, he would have liked to imitate the great ascetics, with strict fasts and devoting himself to long prayers. The teacher praised his intention to become a saint, but restrained his excessive idealism, realistically tracing out for him a programme of holiness suited to his age and circumstance: “First” he suggested “constant and moderate cheerfulness” then the exact fulfilment “of his duties of piety and study”, “recreation with his companions”, “striving to gain souls for God, because there is no holier thing in the world”.

This is the advice he developed in his biographical notes on Savio, Magone and Besucco, a clear effort to show how the lives of these main characters were, from beginning to end, a gradual and progressive journey towards the fullness of holiness.

Everything, once again, can be summed up in those three insistent words: cheerfulness, study/work, piety. That “here we make holiness consist in always being cheerful” which Dominic Savio told his friend Camillo Gavio, is a profound conviction, a touch of the Spirit: “a divine treasure, therefore, clothed in simplicity and joy as if to conceal the wonder” (E. Viganò).

This is because the holiness that Don Bosco proposed has nothing complicated, arcane, or extraordinary about it. It was the holiness of the everyday, of customary gestures lived uncommonly, as did Dominic Savio, whose holiness the saint praises “his exemplary life and steady progress in virtue which could hardly have been surpassed”.

The proposal of holiness contained in those three words we have mentioned does not exclude but clearly implies the other Christian virtues that the holy educator always inculcated. The importance that obedience and purity have in the young person’s life leads him to emphasise them more strongly. “The foundation of every virtue in a young person is obedience.” Addressing his pupils familiarly, he asked them to let their heads be cut off, to let themselves be guided almost blindly, to give the key to their hearts to those who knew and loved them.

When he spoke about purity he became the poet and enchanted the boys. What Scripture says about Wisdom he happily applied to purity: *Et venerunt omnia bona pariter cum illa*. All good things come from the virtue of purity.

When we speak of the great holiness that flourished at Valdocco as the most beautiful fruit of the preventive system, we immediately think of the action of the Holy Spirit, the author of holiness. However, we cannot forget that the Spirit made use of the delicate and discreet action of his faithful servant Don Bosco, of his extraordinary ability as spiritual director of young souls. One of the greatest of all time.

The criteria and guidelines that inspired him in his mission as spiritual guide and accompanier we are told by A. Caviglia, in a delightful synthesis that is worth recording: “Freedom of spirit and movement, respect for the freedom of grace, sanctifying practice of duty, attention to God, orientation towards Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and Mary, mortification of life: at the head of it all, trust in God, serenity, joy, cheerfulness, without fearful terrors and grumpiness, but with a view to Paradise: everything with love and for love, inside and outside.” It is not all of Don Bosco, but Don Bosco it certainly is.

Let us add, finally, that the proposal of holiness made by Don Bosco was never separated from the idea of the “reward”, heaven. “A great reward is prepared in heaven for the one who becomes a saint.”. On the firmament of Valdocco “Paradise always appeared, by day and by night, with clouds or without clouds” (E. Viganò). The saint often spoke about heaven: “A piee of Paradise agguts everything”; “In hardship and suffering, never forget that we have a grand prize prepared in heaven”; “Bread, work and Paradise”. For three consecutive nights, on 3-4-5 April 1861, he dreamed he was on an outing with his boys in Paradise. What he liked to stress in the Lives he wrote of his boys, as they lay dying, was the expectation of Paradise they felt, more than the horror of death.

The thought of Paradise is one of the fruits of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and Don Bosco was a “soul of the Holy Spirit”. He walked on this earth but his heart and mind were turned to heaven.

Chapter 8 A SAINT WITH SOME BLEMISHES?

The rigour of the Beatification and Canonisation processes is such that it would be enough for any deliberate error committed during life to compromise the cause for any candidate to the glory of the altars.

Yet the Church does not demand absolute perfection of Saints or Blesseds, something that clearly belongs to God alone. Perfection on this earth, even of the most elevated kind, always carries with it “something incomplete, lacking, even precarious; something yet unfinished” according to J. De Guibert.

There are some practical consequences that must be borne in mind, as a result, for the imitation of the saints. De Guibert goes on to say that when the Church

proposes the lives of the saints and blessed as an example to be imitated, it in no way intends to sanction the perfection of every act of theirs, and even less so their imitability, their formative value. Only the totality of their lives is proposed as a model, together with one or other aspect emphasised by the pontifical decrees, one or other virtue particularly highlighted in them. These saints, we know, have had slight weaknesses from which no one is exempt. Even after giving themselves to God, they did not suddenly reach the summit. In many of them we notice “holy foibles” that are admirable when judged according to the spirit that determined them, but hardly imitable without a very extraordinary inspiration of grace.

Some slight imperfections

These considerations should be kept in mind when speaking about Don Bosco offered as a life model. A few small imperfections in a picture of pristine beauty, when immediately redeemed by acts of intense charity, do not hurt. St Jerome

criticised St Paula's obstinate attachment to penance; St Bernard was judged to be excessively rigorous with his monks; St Vincent de Paul found traces of fault in de Chantal. It is no wonder that slight blemishes of unwonted fragility are also found in Don Bosco's life.

The future Cardinal Salotti, the Promoter of the Faith in Don Bosco's Cause, wrote that "Though we find some blemishes in such an extraordinary man, which of course makes them stand out, that does not obscure the splendid light that emanates from his many virtues or from his holy actions."

Bishop Bertagna, authoritative supporter of Don Bosco's holiness, testified in turn: "If I look at some parts of his life, at the tenacity with which he sometimes tried to succeed, I think I see some humanity in him. Thus, at first glance he sometimes seemed rather importunate in asking for donations, a bit over zealous, and more than agreeable to receiving them, even to the point of being too ready to promise rewards from the Lord to those who gave them. He could leave people afraid that nothing would go well for them if donations were denied him. Likewise, he sometimes seemed too reluctant to abandon his own opinions." But the witness did recognise that the saint's intentions were upright and the means he used to achieve his goals were impeachably correct. In fact he had a very delicate conscience.

One February evening in 1879, while reminiscing with a few confreres at Alassio about his many vicissitudes, he made them realize how much he had suffered then because of obstructed audiences, intercepted letters, secret and open opposition on several sides, harsh and humiliating words.... But, suddenly, Don Bosco stopped talking, remained pensive a moment, and then said in front of them all: 'I have talked too much.' That same evening he made his confession to Father Rocca.

At the origin of the long and painful conflict that pitted two great men and formerly close friends, Archbishop Gastaldi and Don Bosco, against each other for a decade, were errors of calculation on Don Bosco's part and over-confidence in human ability. By intervening with Pius IX so that then Bishop Gastaldi would be transferred from the diocese of Saluzzo to the Archdiocese of Turin, he hoped to be able to count on his help. Instead, it was the beginning of a painful Way of the Cross: he humbly recognised that "trusting too much in a man" like that "did

not please the Lord.” He bore the consequences with strength of soul and heroic obedience, but nature claimed its rights.

Fr Rua attested to having seen him “weep for the pain he felt at being in conflict with his superior,” and of having heard him exclaim: “There would be so much good we could do and I am so disturbed that I cannot do it.” Weeping and bitter words whispered more to himself than to his Archbishop, whom he respected and loved, were the result, at times, of extreme anguish. “A resounding slap in the face could not have mortified me more”; “By dint of accumulated distaste... the poor stomach breaks down.”

One could say that he had spoken in too human a way, but Don Bosco never succumbed to the impulse of resentment or rebellion; these outbursts only took place in a very close circle of intimates. He suffered, he kept silent, he continued to do good.

To those who one day reproached him for not having used the same weapons as his adversary, he calmly replied: “It is the Lord who has guided everything.”

The Argentine Consul in Savona, Comm. Gazzolo, claimed that he was a benefactor of the Salesians. But in fact he only sought his own interests. “Comm. Gazzolo,” Don Bosco wrote to Fr Cagliero in America, “after a week of calculations and chatter has reduced his request to 60,000 lire for his 700 metres of land... As you can see, he paid 19 and he gives it to us at 60,000 lire to make a profit. Ah! *Rogna, roгна!*” A subtly ironic but strong Piedmontese expression on the saint’s lips.

Apart from the theoretical errors common to every age, no one is exempt from unforeseen, unintended, inculpable practical errors. They are part of the human condition and Don Bosco was not exempt.

The accounts did not always add up: it happened that the trust placed in some of his collaborators was betrayed, or that works begun with so much hope had to be abandoned. It also happened that certain projects “after long, complicated and tedious paperwork to the point of losing my mind” fell apart. For example, his patient effort to put order into the Institute of the “Hospitaler Brothers of Mary Immaculate”, known as the *Concettini*, who were going through a period of great difficulty, went awry. Don Bosco had gladly accepted the difficult assignment because it was a wish of the Pontiff and, perhaps, also because he thought of

incorporating the Institute into his work in some way. But the undertaking failed. And then there were those who put him in a bad light with the Pope as we can see from this letter from Cardinal Bilio, his sincere admirer.

Dear and Very Rev. Don Bosco... I am sorry to have to tell you that the Holy Father does not seem as well disposed as last year. Unless I am mistaken there are two main reasons for this: 1. The Concettini affair; 2. That you are taking on too many things at once. I have endeavoured to remove any less favourable impression of you from the Pope's mind. I do not know if I succeeded."

The saint was certainly the victim of insinuation and slander; but it must also be said that the choice of Fr Giuseppe Schiappini as his representative had not been the most judicious.

As we have said, Don Bosco was certainly a great charismatic: he read hearts, he made prophecies, but he could also be wrong. One day one of his young men reminded him of a prediction that did not come true. The saint became serious; then joking and smiling he said: "And even if it didn't come true, what does it matter?" and diverted the conversation elsewhere.

The Bulls of Beatification and Canonisation recognised his extraordinary charism of healing. But it did not always happen. Fr Rua was able to assert that Don Bosco "gladly recounted certain events where the result contrary to the wishes of those who implored his blessing was obtained."

Fr Guanella, future founder of the Servants of Charity and the Daughters of Our Lady of Providence, now Saint, became a Salesian after he was ordained a priest. But God directed him back to the diocese. Don Bosco did everything to retain him. He wrote to him saying "Anyone who is bound by religious vows must relinquish all counsellors and all endeavours which are alien to the substance of his vows and have not been approved by his superior, if he is to take his vocation seriously."

This letter and others of the same tone were "a serious thorn" in Fr Guanella's delicate soul, but he decided, nonetheless, to leave Don Bosco. Two saints compared: the Spirit who guides them gives one enlightened understanding that he does not give the other. History is full of similar examples.

Propagandist hyperbole

We will note once more that not even the saints were exempt from certain harmless anomalies, little quirks, holy cunning that make holiness more human and closer to our nature.

St Francis of Assisi sometimes accompanied himself in his singing by tapping a piece of wood like children do; St Catherine of Siena kissed children in the streets and sent bouquets of flowers made with her own hands to friends; St Philip Neri had an old pet cat with red hair and a dog called “Capriccio”, and expressed his joy in leaps and bounds (literally!). Don Bosco’s life also offers aspects that do not easily fit into our current ways of thinking.

As practical and realistic as he was, when speaking of his projects and works Don Bosco would indulge in exaggeration to impress his hearers and win them over more easily to his cause: “All of Italy and political and religious Europe are talking about our plans for Patagonia.”

When he described his abilities as a conjurer in his *Memoirs*, he must have even smiled to himself when he made the following statement, for example: “People sat wide-eyed at the sight of an endless stream of balls coming out of a little box too small to even hold one, or eggs tumbling out of a little bag. But when they saw me producing balls from bystanders’ noses... they began to whisper that I was a sorcerer.”

This modern saint instinctively understood the importance that propaganda was assuming in the new society and used it in a big way through newspapers, books, pamphlets and conferences. “It is the only means,” he said, “to make good works known and to support them: today’s world has become material, so it is necessary to work and make known the good that one does.” He also adopted the language and approach of propaganda, without compromising his conscience.

Ever engulfed in debt and on the verge of bankruptcy, when addressing his benefactors or public opinion, he considered the use of hyperbolic language not only to be permissible but proper. “Hyperbole,” he said, “is a rhetorical figure, and this means we are not forbidden to make use of it.”

His prophetic dreams and “his big picture way of acting that quickly led him to grandiose plans of worldwide dimensions that were no sooner conceived

than they were unhesitatingly implemented" (F. Orestano) probably led him to exaggerate.

Don Bosco also had a strong tendency to inflate numbers of his works and of his young people. "It's amazing!" he told Fr Barberis alluding to the "twenty" foundations in 1878 alone. In reality, the twenty foundations were the houses that the official catalogue listed for 1878, three more than the previous year. In his report to the Holy See in 1880, he was keen to assure Leo XIII that his five thousand young people were praying for him; a few years later the figure rose to two hundred and fifty thousand, to three hundred thousand...

Fr Ceria comments that "Don Bosco was not subtle in his calculations, indulging in modern forms of publicity commonly in vogue that proclaim even three times as much so that half as much is understood." Fr Stella is more subtle: "His propagandist hyperbole is explained by the atmosphere of enthusiasm, wit, facetiousness and cunning involving the familiar and the popular that prevailed at Valdocco and in the various cycles within which Don Bosco moved."

But this was still Don Bosco.

Yet we can never forget that he always remained someone immensely greater than we are; a masterpiece of the Holy Spirit who translated the Gospel into action. His life was governed by laws superior to our common experience; a saint who had the glory of God and the salvation of souls as his sole aim in everything he said or did.

PART TWO ESSENTIAL DIMENSIONS

NB. There are certainly many of the most defining aspects (or essential dimensions) of Don Bosco's holiness, so rich and complex was his personality. We have chosen to examine just a few of them.

Chapter 1 THE MYSTICISM OF THE “DA MIHI ANIMAS”

The words that the king of Sodom addressed to Abraham, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, give me the people and take away the rest, sounded as follows in the interpretation that Don Bosco gave it as taken from long tradition: “O Lord, give me souls and take away the rest”.

In this version “the key term is the word *animas*, i.e. the term which for centuries in Christian language designated the spiritual element of man, placed in time but immortal, between salvation and eternal ruin, sin and grace, Jerusalem and Babylon, God and Satan” (P. Stella).

“If you save your soul,” Don Bosco wrote, “all is well and you will have eternal joy; but if you fail, you will lose your soul and body, God and Paradise; you will be damned forever.”

Today we have a more all-encompassing view of human destiny and ultimate realities. However, Don Bosco, in the language of his time, indicated the right direction to look. He insisted that the human being is not made for the earth, but is a witness to the yearning and hope for the future that awaits us. We can listen to him with confidence. It is true when they say that his deepest aspiration, his most ardent prayer was for “souls to be saved” and secured for the Kingdom.

Always and completely the priest

Da mihi animas was his motto, his obsession, his form of mysticism.

It was a mysticism focused on God and Christ, but also the direct consequence of his being a priest, called essentially to collaborate with Christ in the ministry of Redemption. It is not possible to think of Don Bosco as anything other than a priest.

For what was his youth if not a conscious, deliberate, assiduous preparation for the priesthood? “Te be a priest soon,” he said to himself, “to be among young people, to help them.” And what was his life if not the fulfilment of this vow made in his youth?

He wanted to be the most perfect image possible of Christ the priest, the one and only Mediator between God and man, the most transparent sacramental mediation. Awareness of his unfailing priestly responsibility was never missing: always the priest, completely the priest and nothing but the priest.

“A priest,” he said “is always a priest” and this must be seen in his every word”; “Let whoever becomes a priest be a holy priest.”

The word *prete*, ‘priest’ – an uncomfortable term at the time when good mothers in Turin taught their children not to say *prete*, a term of disrepute, but *sacerdote* – occurs seven times in the brief period that opens the historic conversation with Minister Bettino Ricasoli in Florence in December 1866: “Your Excellency, I want you to know that Don Bosco is a priest at the altar, a priest in the confessional, a priest among his boys, a priest in Turin, and a priest in Florence. He is a priest in the house of the poor and a priest in the palace of the king!”

When the idea of the secluded priest closed within his world and his church still prevailed, Don Bosco revealed himself to be a forerunner, showing himself by his deeds to be a priest wholly dedicated to the mission, open to the historic breath of the Spirit, focused on the social sphere and his neighbour, open to the service of all, but especially of the young and the least. There was no opposition for him between spiritual life and pastoral life.

The profound conviction that the priest is not sanctified and not saved except in the exercise of his ministry and his specific mission, transpires in some of his stronger and more evocative statements: “The priest’s reward is souls and nothing more”; “The priest does not go to hell or heaven alone but always accompanied by souls lost or saved by him.”

“Every word of the priest must be the salt of eternal life everywhere and with everyone. Whoever approaches a priest must always draw some truth from him that benefits their soul.” “The priest must have no other interests than those of Jesus Christ.”

The “interests of Jesus Christ,” Revealer and Adorer of the Father, Redeemer of humanity, are, in sum, the “glory of God,” “the salvation of mankind”. And these were precisely the supreme interests that Don Bosco pursued throughout his life. Saving and sanctifying souls was the overpowering yearning of his heart.

John Paul II reminded the members of the 22nd General Chapter on April 1984: “It is important to emphasise and always bear in mind that Don Bosco’s pedagogy had an extremely ‘eschatological’ value and perspective: it is essential – as Jesus repeatedly says in the Gospel – to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Entering the Kingdom means entering into final salvation. “Saving souls” and cooperating in the “salvation of souls” were terms that Don Bosco constantly repeated to the youngsters, Salesians, people from the humblest as well as the highest classes. “I recommend the salvation of souls to you.”

In a set of draft regulations back in 1854 that were never printed, he quotes those notable words from John’s Gospel, *Ut filios Dei qui erant dispersi congregaret in unum* commenting that “It seems to me that the words of the Holy Gospel, which tell us that our divine Saviour come down from heaven to earth to gather together all the children of God scattered all over the world, could be applied literally to the young people of our times.”

The image of Jesus the Good Shepherd, who had come to gather and save the scattered children of God, spurred Don Bosco to do all he could for the youth of his time, especially the poorest, most wayward, most exposed to the danger of being lost.

The thought of the salvation of souls – all of them, but especially those entrusted to him by God – was truly at the heart of Don Bosco’s heart; it was “the essential and irresistible core, the deepest root of his interior activity, of his dialogue with God, of his work on himself, and of his labours as an apostle who knew he was called and born for the salvation of poor and abandoned youth” (P. Stella). The motto Dominic Savio read in his office: “*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*: “O Lord, give me souls and take away the rest”, was the strong emphasis of the resolutions he made during his retreat in preparation for his priestly ordination: “Suffer, act and accept humiliations in everything and always if it is a case of saving souls.” Truly his heart “always beat with the impulse of the ‘Da mihi animas’” (E. Viganò).

The unifying ideal

This was the unifying ideal of his entire life: he lived only by it and for it, as evidenced by his labours as a teacher, pastor, catechist, writer and founder, and as evidenced by his most convinced and recurring statements: “Our young people” he said, “come to the Oratory: their relatives and benefactors entrust them to us with the intention that they be educated... but the Lord sends them to us so that we may take an interest in their souls and so they may find here the way to eternal salvation. Therefore everything else must be regarded by us as a means and our supreme end is to make them good, to save them eternally.”

“All skills are important, but the skill of all skills, the only work that counts, is the salvation of the soul”; “Every expense, every effort, every trouble, every sacrifice is little when it contributes to gaining souls for God.”

He prayed: “O Lord, give us crosses, thorns, persecutions of all kinds so that we may save souls and our own among others.”

“My affection [for you],” he explained to the trade students at Valdocco, “is founded on the desire I have to save your souls, which were all redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, and you love me because I seek to lead you along the path of eternal salvation.”

Even on his deathbed, assailed by nightmares, he suddenly shook himself up and clapped his hands together, shouting, “Run, run quick to save those boys! ...

Mary Most Holy, help them! ... Oh! Mother, Mother!” He went so far as to say: “If I were as solicitous for the good of my own soul as for the good of another’s soul, I would be sure to save it.”

Just as the artist feels the torment of not being able to express in human terms the dazzling intuition he carries within, so Don Bosco regretted not being able to express to others his thoughts about the salvation of the soul just as he felt it: “Oh! if I could tell you how I feel about it! But I lack the words, so important and sublime is the matter.”

His efforts, his institutions, the founding of the Salesian Society, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Cooperators, were all in view of this supreme aim. “The sole aim of the Oratory is to save souls”. “The purpose of this Society, in so far as it concerns its members, is to offer them an opportunity

to unite in spirit in order to work for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. We find inspiration in the words of St. Augustine: *Divinorum divinissimum est in lucrum animarum operari.*” He then added, “This is the noblest aim one can imagine”; this must be “what every Salesian continuously breathes”.

With absolute truth Fr Rua was able to state during the process that “He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young. He let others accumulate wealth, seek pleasures, go after honours; truly, the only concern of his heart was for souls: he said, in deed not just in words, *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle.*”

Fr Albera, who had a long association with Don Bosco, also attested that “The animating concept of his entire life was to work for souls to the point of total self-immolation... Saving souls... was the only reason for his existence.”

In the solemn audience granted on 3 April 1934 in St Peter’s Basilica to the whole Salesian Family, in which he wished to emphasise the connection between the auspicious event of canonisation and the values of the Holy Year of Redemption, Pius XI spoke these very true words:

Don Bosco is telling us today: “Live the Christian life as I have practised and taught you.” Yet We believe that for you, his own sons, Don Bosco has something more to add... He is teaching you a secret of primary importance [which is] love for Jesus Christ, for Jesus Christ the Redeemer!

We might say that such a love was one of the thoughts, one of the feelings, which dominated Don Bosco’s whole life. He revealed it to us in his watchword: *Da mihi animas*. This is a love which is continuously, uninterruptedly concerned with what souls are, not as seen in themselves only, but as seen in the thought, in the work, in the Blood and Death of our Redeemer. And the love of the Redeemer becomes love of Redeemed souls, which according to his way of thinking and evaluating, appears not to have been bought at too high a price, if they are bought with His Blood...

The great religious Orders and Institutes have condensed aspects of the spiritual life which are paradigmatic for their charism into very concise phrases: think

of the *Ora et labora* ("Pray and work") of the Benedictines; the *Contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere* ("Contemplate and transmit to others the things contemplated") of the Dominicans; the *Ad majorem Dei gloriam et ad salutem animarum* of the Society of Jesus ("To the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls").

Fr Viganò wrote that "My conviction is that there is no other summary expression that better describes the Salesian spirit than this choice of Don Bosco himself: *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle.*" It indicates an ardent union with God that enables us to penetrate the mystery of his Trinitarian life manifested historically in the missions of the Son and the Spirit as infinite Love *ad hominum salutem intentus*.

But what we take from this motto and from the energy of pastoral charity embodied in the gift of predilection for the young and characterised by "kindness" does not fully reproduce the authentic aspect of Don Bosco's holiness.

All this attention and predilection for souls to be saved should not lead us to think that the soul was all that the human being was for Don Bosco or that it was the soul disconnected from the body. No. "Man is endowed with a body and a soul" and if the soul, free and immortal, is the "divine breath" that reflects the "image and likeness" of God, the body too is a "gift". In Don Bosco's *Month of May* we read that "God created the body with the beautiful qualities that we admire in it." Don Bosco always extolled the values of the body and our creatureliness, even though he warned against the danger that the body, through the failures of sin, can pose to the soul. In *The Companion of Youth* he warns: "If anyone tells you that it is of no use to chastise your body, tell him that he who does not suffer with Jesus Christ upon earth will not rejoice with Jesus Christ in heaven." But when he speaks of the salvation of souls he always has in mind, beyond the dualistic conception he shares with the spirituality of the time, the concrete young person. Salvation of the whole young person, of every young person, and, through them, salvation of the whole of society.

"Realistic as he is, Don Bosco takes the young person in all his concreteness as an individual destined for heaven, but who has a mission to fulfil on earth: as a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem, a member of the pilgrim People of God moving towards the homeland, and as a citizen of the earthly city, with all his needs of growth, physical, affective and cultural development and gradual involvement in society." (C. Colli).

Don Bosco's efforts as priest, educator and pastor were all realistically aimed at three practical objectives.

First: satisfying the material and basic needs of the poorest and most marginalised young people, offering them "shelter, food and clothing", making them "capable of earning an honest living" by means of a trade, a profession. As he wrote to Count Solaro della Margherita, "If I deny a morsel of bread to these at risk and risky young people, I expose them to grave risk of soul and body."

Second: helping them, through patient educational activity, to become themselves, to mature and grow into men on a human and social level and to making "upright citizens" of them. Every self-respecting educator true to their cause "must be ready" he said, "to face every trouble, every effort to achieve their goal, which is the civil, moral, systematic education of their pupils in knowledge."

Third: Christian education. That is, to initiate young people into a convinced and robust practice of the Faith. "Without religion," he said, "it is impossible to educate the young." Education in the life of grace, to friendship with Christ, was pushed to the heights of true holiness.

Don Bosco, we have already recalled, has the great merit of having "inserted holiness into the world of education" in the sense that he made "Christian pedagogy mature to the point of becoming a source of youthful holiness" (E. Viganò). For the first time in the history of the Church and as a fruit of the pedagogical method, a young man, Dominic Savio, was canonised as a confessor.

Let us add, as Fr Braido rightly points out, that these three objectives which were all a real and simultaneous part of Don Bosco's educational activity, were "a single supreme, religious and moral, supernatural end which included earthly individual and social influences." It was nothing but that. The mysticism of the *Da mihi animas* thus indissolubly links human and superantural advancement, with a particular insistence on the religious aspect. This intrinsic link is reaffirmed today by the Council: "the Church must be concerned with the whole of man's life, even the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on his heavenly calling" (*Gravissimum Educationis*, with reference to *Gaudium et Spes*).

Chapter 2 HIS COLOSSAL WORKLOAD

The importance that the subject of work has assumed in our time is demonstrated by the impressive literature that has dissected all its aspects and values. Even if disfigured by certain ideologies, work is indeed a central value in today's society and culture. It brings out one aspect of man's mission in the world: that of mastering nature in order to humanise it and put it at the service of the human person.

In recent years, there has been talk of a "theology of work". Theological reflection has focused on two main elements of the mystery of salvation: creation and redemption. God the Father who creates the world; God the Father who sends Jesus Christ to save it.

In his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II traced the outlines of a spirituality of work that exalts its value, but demythologises any idolatry in this regard. Work, in fact, is not an end in itself, it is not an absolute. Instead, "it is an important way of expressing the human being as 'co-creator', 'co-redeemer' on earth and in time. For us, it becomes a witness to the spiritual triad of faith, hope, charity. In this sense, it is not so much the quality of the work that makes the person great, but the motivations and the heart with which it is done, that is, the measure of the love of charity that permeates it" (E. Viganò).

Don Bosco made work his banner, he sanctified himself by working and working hard. Let us see him in action.

Relentless activity

Italian academic Francesco Orestano, writing about Don Bosco, continues in the following terms after emphasising his moral greatness and strength of will:

However important the characteristics of the man and his work may be, the originality of Don Bosco does not lie there.

Educational and social needs, profoundly grasped in perfect relation to the new times, led him to discover the great law of educating through work and to work. With regard to work as an educative tool, Don Bosco felt the extraordinary edifying power of the human personality in all senses and moments. Work, an eminent way of ennobling the spirit: "I do not recommend penances and discipline but work, work."

And even on his deathbed, he recommended it to all Salesians. He wanted them to be like a social militia not committed to ascetic practices, but fully imbued with the needs of modern life. He did not value work just as an educational tool, but as the content of life. He fully appreciated the dignity of work even in its most modest manual applications, all of which he sought to learn and practise in an exemplary manner and thus ennoble work. He never considered work to be a way of becoming rich. On the contrary, and like his saintly mother, he thought of that as a misfortune. Work for him was fullness, health and a holy life.

The quotation is pertinent because it captures, with penetrating clarity, perhaps the most original aspect of his pedagogy and holiness, which is that of the elevation of the human being and Christian through work and with work. On one condition, however, that the word "work" be understood with the range of meaning it had for Don Bosco for whom it was, at different times, synonymous with all kinds of activity: craft, technical and professional; intellectual, school, study, culture; apostolic, catechesis, evangelisation, pastoral zeal; priestly, liturgical action, sacraments; charitable work in its various forms; duty of one's state in life. "By work is meant the fulfilment of the duties of one's state."

Hence it becomes the context that will give us the meaning intended by Don Bosco when he speaks of work.

The “mystical ladder” of work

Don Bosco understood how great hard work was as a sanctifying virtue and for its apostolic, charitable and humanising value, and he did not hesitate to use it as his “mystical ladder” for reaching God.

He did not separate work from prayer: “If there has been a saint in modern times who has so marvellously united and embodied in himself the two elements of the Benedictine tradition ‘praying and working’, it was precisely Don Bosco” (Cardinal C. Salotti). But it was not prayer or his habit which distinguished him. “What the world saw was his intense and disinterested work. Don Bosco was an extremely concrete saint: to put it crudely but truly, he did not believe in piety that is not expressed in life and does not become action, active charity, or that does not translate into relentless work for the love of God and neighbour” (C. Colli).

Let us add that in the 19th century, prayer was still so strongly embedded within Christian behaviour that Don Bosco did not see fit to insist on it as he probably would have done in a different situation. Instead, it was urgent to sanctify work and divinise action. This was his charism.

He felt inspired and drawn to this. He knew that words are not persuasive except when they become action, and he wanted action to become words, his ideas to have hands, as in fact they did.

He was a man of action by temperament, a successful operator, an organisational wizard. Work was second nature to him. “God,” he said, “gave me the grace that work and effort would always be a relief to me instead of being a burden.”

But he was attracted above all by the example of Jesus, the divine worker of the little house in Nazareth, the friend of children and the humble, the apostle of the Father continually at work for our salvation: “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (Jn 5:17); “all that Jesus did and taught” (Acts 1:1). This is the model he proposed to his sons when he wrote the Constitutions.

“Jesus Christ began to do and to teach” we read in the second article; “likewise shall the members begin by perfecting themselves through the practice of interior and exterior virtues.”

When Don Bosco quoted the Word of God, which he was thoroughly nourished by, he showed a marked preference for texts that highlight the action category, like proclamation, evangelisation. Quotations relating to prayer were less frequent. Strange as it may seem, quotations relating to prayer in his collections of letters, where mentions of prayer are almost constant, are entirely lacking. Only beginning with the first missionary expedition does he quote Jesus' words, “*Rogemus Dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam*” (Mt 9:38): “therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest”.

In the almost three thousand letters in the collection, the most quoted lines are those that came from his heart most naturally because they were the ones he most lived, words like “*Opus facite evangelistae*” (2 Tim 4:5): “Do the work of an evangelist”; “*Tu vero praedica Verbum opportune et importune*” (2 Tim 4:2): “proclaim the message... whether the time is favourable or unfavourable”; “*Opera Dei revelare et confiteri honorificum est*” (Tob 12:7): “It is good... to reveal the works of God”.

He was not a pragmatist in the sense that he did not elevate praxis to a criterion of truth: he always put both the doctrine of the faith and the Magisterium above everything else. But he was “God’s business agent”, the realist who instinctively put the practical before the theoretical, the lived before the abstract, deeds before words. He did not believe in faith without works, nor in a Gospel that was not incorporated into life. Only “those who do what is true come to the light” (Jn 3:21).

Only the language of facts and deeds seemed credible enough to him.

“Today’s world has become material, so it is necessary to work and make known the good that one does” he said. “One might work miracles by praying day and night in one’s cell, but the world does not care and does not believe it any more. The world needs to see and touch. The world today wants to see the works, wants to see the clergy working ...”

At a time when religious were looked upon as idle people, useless to the progress of society, he wanted his institution founded on the great law of work and said, not without a touch humour, his Salesians’ habit would be “shirtsleeves”.

Statements regarding work

The bold statements other saints made in praise of prayer, Don Bosco made in praise of work

“Ninety percent of his addresses to the confreres” wrote Fr Caviglia “were about work, temperance, poverty.” He then added with a touch of wit, “Here is the scandal of a saint! An ‘American’ saint who said ‘Let’s work’ more often than he said ‘Let’s pray.’”

Eugene Ceria said: “It would be difficult to find another saint who conjugated the word work to the extent that Don Bosco did.”

He wanted his Salesians to be happy, poor, frugal but above all hardworking: “Work, work work!” he would say, “This is what the aim and glory of priests should be. Never tire of working. How many souls would be saved!”

He wanted work to be as constant as breathing: “Always working... This must be the aim of every Salesian and his continual breathing.”

The idea of toil was not meant to be a restraining thought, but to serve as an incentive to do more. “We don’t want money, we want effort.”

“We need to take on work that seems beyond our strength and, who knows, we might even end up doing as much as can be done.”

Laziness and idleness inspired horror in him. He went so far as to say that “The priest either dies of work or dies of vice.”

Other Institutions had penances and lengthy fasts but Don Bosco had work: “I do not recommend penances and discipline, but work, work, work!”

It gave him great pleasure to see the great work his sons were doing. “When I go to the houses and I hear that there is a lot of work, I am at peace. Where there is work there is no devil.” “It is true,” he added, “that your work is beyond your strength, but no one is dismayed, and it seems that after material nourishment comes the nourishment of toil.”

He was convinced that “Times have never been so difficult since the time of St Peter,” but “instead of whinging and complaining” he wanted the reaction to be more work: “More work than you could ever talk about”.

Pius IX told him, "I consider that a religious house where there is not so much prayer but much work is done is in better condition than another one where there is a lot of prayer but little work is done." On another occasion he told him: "Do not put the novices in the sacristy where they become idle, but keep them busy with work, work!"

This is what Don Bosco always did, arousing questions and mistrust in other religious and even among ecclesiastical authorities.

He was criticised, for example, for sacrificing the "ascetic novitiate" and "traditional" methods of formation by recklessly committing young brothers to apostolic activities that others thought were a form of dissipation and beyond their capabilities.

In his defence Don Bosco said that "Thirty-three years of experience have taught us that these regular occupations are an impregnable bulwark of morality. And I have observed that the busiest and the most industrious ones are better mindful of what life was like before, enjoy good health, are more virtuous, and once ordained have a much more fruitful sacred ministry."

Confirmation of how good this approach was also came to him from the mysterious dreams that marked the decisive turning points in his life.

In the "Lanzo dream" (1876), for example, the guide accompanying him showed him the vast field of Salesian activity and told him emphatically, "Take heed: you must have these words engraved on your coat-of-arms as your watchword, your badge. Note them well: Work and temperance will make the Salesian Congregation flourish. Have these words explained repeatedly and insistently."

Extraordinary importance has always been attached in the Salesian tradition to the dream of the "Ten diamonds", or the ten virtues which shine with dazzling light on the mantle of the person who personifies the "model of the true Salesian". Two of these diamonds bear the inscription: "Work", "Temperance". They are placed on the right and left shoulder respectively, almost as if to silhouette the figure of the Salesian.

Finally, let us recall what might have been the greatest words of his lifetime, written in his Spiritual Testament. "When it happens that a Salesian yields up his life whilst working for souls, you can say that our Congregation has registered a great

triumph and that on it will descend in abundance the blessings of heaven.” Twice on his deathbed he told Bishop Cagliero: “Please tell all the Salesians to work zealously and fervently. Work, work.”

His life a testimony

But higher than words is the testimony of his life. A life, as Pius XI called it, “which was indeed a true, genuine martyrdom. His was a life of colossal work, which impressed everyone who saw the Servant of God.”

It is hard to believe that one man could work so hard and attend to so many things at once. Fr Caviglia said that several people seemed to be at work simultaneously in Don Bosco:

Educator and pedagogue, father of orphans and gatherer of abandoned children, founder of religious congregations, propagator of devotion to Mary Help of Christians, instigator of lay unions extended throughout the world, and instigator of practical charity, proclaimer of distant missions, popular writer of book on morals and religious apologies, proponent of an honest and Catholic press, creator of Christian workshops and bookshops, a man of religious piety and charity, and a man of human affairs or public interest, all at work and advancing together as if they were so many individuals born or destined for that alone, and merging into the one person of the simple priest. His serene and simple appearance remained undisturbed by grand gestures or grand rhetoric.”

Yet these many facets were unified, deep down, by the one notion that dominated his life. And that, as we have seen, was the salvation of souls.

Providence had tempered Don Bosco by work, right from the stunted, poor years of his boyhood. We know that he did everything, having been herdsman, rural worker, servant, tailor, blacksmith, coffee maker, confectioner, acrobat, tutor, student, sacristan, barber; he went from one master to another, experiencing how much other people’s bread “tastes like salt”.

This experience would leave an indelible mark on him. He would forever be as sensitive to the problems of poor and marginalised youth as he was to those of

the humble working classes and he would forever be a formidable worker and achiever: "Things are not going just at the speed of steam," he wrote to Countess Uguccioni in 1878, "but like the telegraph. In one year, with God's help and the charity of our benefactors, we were able to open twenty houses. You see how your family has grown?"

Faithful to one of his old resolutions, he did not allow more than five hours per night for sleep in his older age. Bishop Bertagna deposed during the Process "that he spent half the nights working: and I heard him say several times that, when he was healthier, he would sometimes spend even two nights at his desk writing. Nevertheless, in the morning he was in the sacristy to say Mass and hear confessions for several hours." Under certain circumstances he would also hear confessions for 10, 12 and up to 18 hours a day.

He wrote as many as 250 letters in a day with surprising speed. "I have some work in hand... I have acquired such speed that I don't know if I could do it any faster." On occasions he would sit at the desk at two o'clock in the afternoon and remain there until eight o'clock, only to resume later. "For several months now I have sat at the desk at two in the afternoon and got up at half past eight to go to dinner."

The "mortal fatigue" his daily worries brought him leaked out from his letters in sudden outbursts, and we are moved by them: "Work makes me crazy"; "I find myself so tired that I can't take it any more"; "I am very tired."

And it was true. It can be said that he knew no other rest than the grave. Bishop Cagliero testified at the Process, "I do not remember him ever taking a day off in his life for pleasure or to rest, and whenever he found us tired and fatigued from work he would say 'Courage, courage, let us work, let us always work because we will have eternal rest later above.'"

He died broken by overwork, a martyr – and not just metaphorically speaking – of toil that knew no rest. His "exaggerated night work and material labours," we read in the brief but interesting biography of the doctor who looked after him, "wore his life down. After about 1880 [eight years before his death] it can be said that his body was almost reduced to being a walking medical chest, but his ever-active mind anxious to reach its glorious goal still shone brightly."

"He is consumed by too much work," confirmed Prof. Fissore of the University of Turin. He is not dying of illness, but is like a little lamp that goes out for lack of oil."

The hard work of this “elderly priest”, this “philanthropist of the 19th century”, this “most intransigent Catholic” seemed, to the people of his time, to be both incredible and legendary. At Don Bosco’s death, the newspapers of the day described his hard work and effort as “prodigious” (*L’Illustrazione popolare*), “huge” (*La Patrie*); “enormous and of the highest degree” (*La Perseveranza*), “phenomenal” (*Il Fanfulla*). The same newspaper said that “Had Don Bosco been Minister of Finance, Italy would economically be the leading nation in the world.” The Promoter of the Faith at the Apostolic Proces did not hesitate to say that he was one of the greatest apostles of the Church in the 19th century: “The multiplicity and fruitfulness of his works is prodigious: his zeal for the salvation of souls and for the spread of Christ’s Kingdom on earth was so intense and continuous that history rightly proclaims him the greatest – “*maximum*” – apostle of the 19th century.”

Chapter 3 HIS PRAYER LIFE

In its document on *The contemplative dimension of religious life* (August 1980), the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes wrote that “Prayer is the indispensable breath of every contemplative dimension” (no. 5). Vatican II described it as the effort “by which they fix their minds and hearts on Him” (*Perfectae caritatis* no. 5).

The contemplative dimension is expressed in liturgy, listening to the Word, prayer, but also, according to the 1980 document, in the “the constant desire for God and the search for his will in events and people; by the conscious participation in his salvific mission; by self-giving to others for the coming of the Kingdom” (no. 1). Its field is as vast as is Christian life.

Let us now consider Don Bosco’s prayerful contemplation, by which we mean his “formal” prayer or his practice of prayer, which means breaking off from other kinds of activity – praying like this is to do nothing else – and his attitude of prayer, prayer spread throughout his activities. However, we cannot avoid a preliminary question: could Don Bosco have prayed?

This is no mere rhetorical question. It derives directly from what we have just said about his multifaceted and pretty much constant activity which seemed to keep him from the explicit kind of prayer found in the lives of all the saints. He caused a scandal at a time when there were not a few who considered work as time taken away from prayer.

His cause for beatification did in fact come up against the difficulty of there not being much prayer evident in his life. Explicit prayer is an essential part of Christian life, and a demanding one. If we consider prayer, on a subjective and psychological level, as “being lifted up to God”, as “listening to”, “dialogue or conversation” with God. Or if we consider it on an objective level as spiritual “adherence” to the salvific plan and to the Kingdom of God already present on earth, then practical prayer demands suspension from all external activity. It

means concentration, recollection, a suitable place and time; all things that in a life dominated and devoured by action like Don Bosco's, seemed impossible.

Don Bosco had prayed, certainly, but, the objection was, not enough. We must recognise that it was not easy to judge Don Bosco by the traditional yardstick. In the way he acted he really was very different from the other saints. "It is well known," we read in one testimony at the Process, "that the Servant of God continually asked on all sides for the means to develop his works. I believe that the Servant of God proved to be quite different from the actions of other saints in this matter, in that others would have worked miracles to ensure they did not receive legacies: St Philip Neri, for example. But Don Bosco would have worked miracles so he could have legacies so he could provide for the needs of the Oratory."

We must also remember that those were years when Dom Chautard, in his book *The Soul of The Apostolate*, vigorously denounced the delirium of action. This author's assertion that "prayer is the soul of the apostolate" lent itself to underestimating the importance of action. Chautard looks at works with a certain distrust and seems far from assuming that it is equally true that apostolic activity, under the right conditions, is itself the soul of union with God. *Lumen Gentium* says that "by the sacraments, especially holy Eucharist, that charity toward God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and nourished" (no. 33).

In practice, the following accusations were levelled at Don Bosco: "To achieve his aims," the Censors objected, "Don Bosco counted a great deal on his own shrewdness, initiative and activity and made use of all human means far and wide. Rather than relying on divine help he sought human support with inexplicable diligence day and night, to the limits of his strength (*usque ad extremam fatigationem*"), to the point that he was no longer able to attend to the duties of piety."

According to another censor, prayer would have had almost no relevance in Don Bosco's life: "On the subject of prayer properly so called, which all the founders of new congregations have made the most of, I find, it can be said, nothing: *Nihil vel fere nihil reperio*." And he concluded: "How can someone who has been so deficient in the practice of vocal prayer be called heroic? *Poteritne heroicus in pietate dici qui adeo deficiens in oratione vocali apparet?*"

The situation was aggravated by the fact that Don Bosco, not only because of a persistent eye complaint from which he had been suffering since 1843, but also in

view of his extreme business, had obtained a dispensation from the recitation of the breviary from Pius IX: first *viva voce*, then by regular rescript from the Sacred Penitentiary (19.11.1864).

Nothing of a similar kind had ever happened in the history of the Apostolic Processes: "*numquam de aliis sanctis viris auditum est!*"

We must agree that the ideal of holiness that has imposed itself on the Christian conscience is something so pure and lofty that even a mild accusation is enough to lower its halo. Following the Council of Trent and under the influence of the French school, the idea that one had of the priest was predominantly the man of worship and prayer. Don Bosco deviated, unwisely, from the traditional model of other saints even considering just those from Turin, such as Cafasso his teacher and Murialdo, who took up to four hours in preparing for the Holy Mass, celebrating it and giving thanks.

It is a fact that we would look in vain for manifestations of outward prayer in Don Bosco of the kind found in saints of his own era like the Curé d' Ars, St Anthony Maria Claret, a great apostle. Fr Ceria wrote that Don Bosco "did not dedicate a lot of time, like other saints, did, to meditation."

But having one's own way of praying is not the same as not praying or praying too little. It was not, in fact, difficult to overcome this difficulty either by better verifying the depositions of the texts cited or by judging his prayer as a whole. A decisive contribution to Don Bosco's cause came from Fr Philip Rinaldi. On 29 September 1926, writing to the Cardinal Prefect of Rites, he attested among other things:

And here, Your Eminence, allow me to add that it is my profound conviction that the Venerable was indeed a man of God, continually united with God in prayer. In his final years, after the mornings spent in receiving people of every class and social condition who flocked to him from all parts for advice and to receive his blessing, he used to retire to his room every day from 2 to 3 p.m. and the Superiors did not allow him to be disturbed at that time. But since, from 1883 until the death of the Servant of God, I was in charge of a house for the formation of aspirants to the priesthood, and since he had told me to come and see him whenever I needed to, perhaps indiscreetly, but certainly so that I could approach him more comfortably, I broke

that rule several times, not just at the Oratory, but also at Lanzo, San Benigno where he went often enough, and also at Mathi and at the House of St John the Evangelist in Turin. I went there precisely during those hours to see him. And at that hour, everywhere and always, I caught him every time, recollected, with folded hands, meditating.

Don Bosco a "man of prayer"

As different in amount and quality as it was from that of other saints, however, Don Bosco's prayer was no less true and profound when tested by the facts. The testimonies at the Processes gradually revealed an unsuspected and exhilarating activity of prayer in Don Bosco. There was a lack of external shows, of grand gestures, but prayer burst forth everywhere.

"You could say," Fr Barberis said, "that he was always praying; I saw him, I could say, hundreds of times climbing up and down the stairs always praying. Even on the road he prayed. On journeys, when he was not proofreading, I would always see him in prayer." He used to tell us "Never be idle on the train, but say the breviary, the Rosary, or read some good book."

Whenever he was asked for spiritual advice, he had it ready "as if he were in conversation with God at that moment."

Even though dispensed from saying the Breviary, he actually said it almost always and with great devotion. Prevented from doing so by force majeure, he made up for it, as is clear from this formal and heroic promise of his, "by not doing anything or uttering any word that was not aimed at the glory of God".

Unimpeachable testimonies say that when he prayed he "had the look of an angel". "He prayed on his knees with his head slightly bowed, he had a smile on his face. Those around him could not help but pray well too. Brother Peter Enria said, "I lived with him for 35 years and I always saw him praying like this."

He saw prayer as God's voluntary sharing of his omnipotence with human weakness and gave it absolute priority: "Prayer, that's the first thing." "One does not begin well," he said, "except by starting from heaven."

For him, prayer was "the work of works," because prayer "obtains everything and triumphs over everything." It is what "water is to the fish, air to the bird, a spring to

the deer, heat to the body," "the sword to the soldier". "Prayer breaks into God's heart."

Fr Ceria was able to write with absolute truth: "The spirit of prayer in Don Bosco was what the martial spirit is in the good captain, or the spirit of observation in the good artist or scientist: a habitual disposition of the soul, practised with ease, constancy and great delight."

Even night time was to be an occasion for prayer. "When the hour of rest has come, lie down with hands folded on your breast. Pray until we have fallen asleep, and, if we wake up during the night, pray again; say brief prayers, kiss the habit, or the crucifix, or the medal you wear. Have some holy water in your cell. Make the sign of the Holy Cross with faith."

One could say that these are pious gestures outdated by time; yet they are simply acts rooted in Christian piety, alive in the life and practice of simple souls even today. Why not allow the Spirit the freedom to breathe as he wills and where he wills?

His institution was founded on prayer: "I gave the name Oratory to this house, to clearly indicate how prayer is the only power we can rely on."

Prayer and the spirit of prayer were in the very air people breathed at Valdocco. It could be read on the faces of its inhabitants, many of whom would form the first Salesian generation: Fr Ceria wrote that

We got to know them: men so different in intelligence and culture, so different in their habits: in all of them, however, certain common traits stood out, which were almost a list of their features of origin. Serene calmness in saying and doing; paternal manners and expressions, but especially a piety that they understood to be their *ubi consistam*, the core of Salesian life.

They prayed a lot and they prayed very devoutly. They were so concerned that we prayed and prayed well.

It seemed that they could not utter four words in public or in private without prayer entering somehow. And yet... those men did not show that they possessed extraordinary graces of prayer: in fact we saw them do nothing more than the practices required

by the Rule or as a result of our customs, and they did it in all simplicity.

Don Bosco's prayer, which was the prayer of an apostle and educator, had its own characteristics and originality in every way; authentic and complete in its substance, direct and very simple in its forms, popular in its content, cheerful and festive in its expressions, it was truly a prayer within the reach of everyone, children and ordinary folk in particular.

Above all it was the prayer of the faithful of active life, the prayer of apostles intrinsically ordered to action and bound to it. A prayer, therefore, that was never disengagement and escape from the world, but prayer to be transformed according to God's plan, or by people to be won over to Christ. Don Bosco's expression, *Da mihi animas coetera tolle*, "O Lord, give me souls and take away the rest", was always his most ardent prayer long before it became his motto. It was prayer of an apostolic nature because every kind of prayer is marked by a particular vocation and mission.

As is the case for every genuine apostle, explicit prayer preceded, accompanied – in appropriate forms – and followed Don Bosco's actions as an indispensable and necessary factor.

It preceded them because Don Bosco thought of his activity prayerfully in God and according to God, and finalised it to his will and glory. It accompanied his activity in brief meditative pauses, or as a request for grace, imploring help in times of weariness and trial: "Let us not lose heart in dangers and difficulties. Let us pray with confidence and God will give us his help." And it followed activity as thanksgiving: "How good is the Lord!"; "God does his works with magnificence."

Don Bosco's prayer did not live in the limbo of good intentions: it took shape in what he called the "practices of piety". "Don Bosco did not establish any special form of practice or prayer or devotion such as the Salve Regina, the Rosary, the Retreat, the Way of the Cross and so on. He was indifferent to formulas and, in a certain sense, even to forms; he was a realist and a simplifier and looked to substance" (A. Caviglia).

Even as a founder, he felt no need to impose any other community practices on his disciples than those of the "good Christian" and the "good priest" if they were priests.

He demanded, essentially, what was practised in the boarding school from the priest: devout celebration of the Holy Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, meditation, spiritual reading, but not separate from the “practices” and “devotions” of the good Christian. What these “practices of the good Christian” were is not difficult to say.

These were the prayers and acts of piety – but also things that are not prayers, such as, for example, the seven corporal and spiritual works of mercy, the ten commandments, etc. – as found in the catechism of the diocese, which remained unchanged in Don Bosco’s time, or contained in the “regulations of life” proposed by spiritual authors. To this were added the other daily, weekly, monthly, annual practices common to Christian custom such as: frequent confession and communion, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, the monthly Happy Death recollection, the annual Retreat, revived in Turin at the beginning of the century. In these devotional practices that flourished in the 19th century alongside liturgical action and often within the liturgy itself – think of the way people participated in Holy Mass – Don Bosco saw the concrete and we can also say ideal outline of the life of prayer. It was in fact the path of prayer proposed by the Church, and the Church never proposes inadequate means of holiness.

By focusing on the “general duties of the good Christian” Don Bosco was therefore aiming high. In terms of quantity, because he left an overwhelming number of “practices” or “exercises” to personal initiative. One only has to glance through *The Companion of Youth*, which was the prayer manual Don Bosco proposed for the young, to realise this. And in terms of quality, because Don Bosco knew how to give his youngsters the “taste” for prayer and the “spirit of noble precision” which Pius XI spoke of.

“Let genuflections and signs of the cross be done well,” he insisted, as an incentive to prayer. If, in tune with the spirit of his century, Don Bosco emphasised devotional practices, it must also be said that he did not tolerate exaggeration or dangerous intimism. The criterion that guided him was practical and authentically supernatural.

We cannot ignore the fact that his school of prayer has produced saintly and heroic young people. Nor can we fault him for presenting the life of prayer as being predominantly ascetic, as was the custom at the time. The “*Laus Deo*”, the “mystical dimension of the liturgy” were still the pillars of Christian life, but devotionalism reigned and it is not certain that it did not produce good fruits.

Devotional practices, Don Bosco used to say, “are the food, the support, the balm of virtue”.

However, we can say with absolute certainty, so faithful to the dispositions of the Church and the Pope as he was, that he would enthusiastically welcome the directions and guidelines for liturgical renewal proposed today by Vatican II.

Let us not forget that, in his own way and in his own time, he appeared to be an innovator in liturgy for young people. In fact, he wanted it to be rich in participation and involvement, full of spontaneity and initiative, varied and festive, adherent to life yet aimed at eternity.

“Brief prayers”

We read in the early draft of the Constitutions (1858-1859) that “The active life to which our society is committed deprives its members of the opportunity of engaging in many practices in common.”

Implicitly he was saying that many other forms of personal prayer are possible and recommendable. Among these, following the teaching at the *Convitto*, Don Bosco always gave great importance to brief prayerful utterances.

“*Oratio iaculatoria*” is the “pure” and “brief” prayer of monastic tradition that prolongs prayer in choir throughout the day. The ancients considered it to be the most beautiful fruit of *Lectio divina* and meditation. St Augustine spoke of it as “rapid messages to God.”

Don Bosco thought the same. He saw these prayers as focusing the vocal and mental prayer in the morning: “These brief prayers,” he he said, “summarise vocal and mental prayer... they start from the heart and go to God. They are fiery darts that send the affections of the heart to God and wound temptations and vices, the enemies of the soul.”

For the saint, they could replace meditation when necessary. “Every day each one, besides [offering] vocal prayers, shall devote no less than half-an-hour to mental prayer, unless one is prevented [from doing so] by the calls of the sacred ministry. In that case he shall make up [for such failure] by ejaculatory prayers, as frequent as possible, and by offering to God with greater fervor and love those labours that keep him from the prescribed exercises of piety.” He called this substitution the

meditation of the merchants: “I recommend mental prayer. For whoever cannot do regular meditation because of travel or some engagement or business that does not allow delay, let him at least do the meditation that I call the meditation of the merchants. These people think about buying goods, reselling them at profit, or of the loss they might make and how to repair it, or of the gains they have made and the greater ones they might make, and so on.”

This kind of prayer, an essential, secret, easy prayer, always within reach, served him wonderfully to keep his thoughts on God. The fervour with which they burst forth from his heart in old age shows how deeply rooted this prayer was in his life.

An attitude of prayer

The “Practices of piety”, “short prayers” were not all of Don Bosco’s prayer. There was another kind of prayer that was prevalent and pretty much constant for him, a form of general prayer that we prefer to call the “prayer of life” today, “prayer on the spot”, an attitude of prayer. It is conscious presence and attention to God in the sequences of daily life.

This is true prayer – praise, adoration, offering, etc. – because it is walking with Christ within the human situation and living in Him, With Him and for Him. True, Leoncius of Grandmaison would say, because “it unites us to God, makes us flexible, and docile to His inspirations, tunes us in with His will, and because, although it supposes a certain number of positive acts, it perseveres afterwards, for a long time, and informs our lives far beyond the few moments dedicated to such acts.” It is the Christian lifestyle, the Liturgy of Life by which the faithful “offer themselves in loving service to God and mankind by adhering to the action of Christ” (*Laudis Canticum*). It is the only practical way to realise the Gospel injunction: “Pray always.”

From Origen onwards, the Christian tradition applies these words to explicit prayer, or the prayer of “good works” or “good life”. Someone who prays every day and while being active, or who does nothing but good works in accordance with God’s will, is praying always.

St Augustine said, “*Non tantum lingua canta sed etiam assumpto bonorum operum psalterio*, sing to God not only with the tongue, but also by taking the psalter of good works in hand.” Led by the Spirit, Don Bosco fitted perfectly into this perspective.

It is very significant that in drafting the Constitutions for his Salesians, he puts these two articles which refer more to “good works” than to prayer properly speaking in the chapter on “Practices of piety”: “The active life to which our society is committed deprives its members of the opportunity of engaging in many practices in common. They shall [accordingly] endeavour to make up [for this lack] by mutual good example and by the perfect fulfillment of the general duties of a Christian.” “Personal composure [*compostezza della persona*], a clear, devout, distinct pronunciation of the words of the divine offices, modesty in speech, looks and gait both inside and outside the house, ought to be the distinctive characteristics of our gathered-members [*congregati*].”

We are in line with St Paul’s teaching: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17). The Apostle is even clearer: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (I Cor 10:31).

The language of prayer (giving glory to God) is used about the Christian way of life. Whether one prays or works, a real relationship and indestructible union with God is possible. So thought Don Bosco when he exhorted – “and he did so thousands and thousands of times” (Cardinal Cagliero) – to work for the “glory of God”, adhering deeply to his will.

He told the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to make active and contemplative life walk “hand in hand,” to portray “Martha and Mary, the life of the apostles and that of the angels” in themselves. But contemplation and action were not two opposing movements for the saint, but rather two ways of being, a single personal attitude, aroused in our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the dynamics of faith, hope and charity, which is the essence of Christian identity.

It is the love of charity, the synthesis of the theological life, that gives consistency and unity to life. Action and contemplation, work and prayer are but two moments of the same love. A perfect relationship of identity, then, exists between prayer and work.

In this sense, but only in this sense, can it be said that work is prayer. And this, according to Fr Ceria, was Don Bosco’s great secret, his most characteristic trait: “The specific difference of Salesian piety is in knowing how to make work prayer.” Pius XI gave solemn confirmation of this:

This, as a matter of fact, was one of his more beautiful features: he was always present for everything; he was involved in a multitude of works, always pressured by problems, always engaged in checking on requests and in consultations, and yet his spirit was always elsewhere: always on high, where the weather was always clear, where calmness reigned supreme, and he was always in control. This is the way by which in Don Bosco's work was indeed effective as prayer. This is the way Don Bosco carried out the great principle of Christian life: *qui laborat, orat*.

There are no saints without extraordinary prayer and such was Don Bosco's prayer. An intimate, heartfelt prayer without cracks, hidden beneath a serene face and a spontaneous manner, which one had to know how to discover.

He was a formidable worker, but also a great man of prayer. He prayed a lot by himself, silently, and almost furtively, because he hated to be noticed. He prayed with his young people "always", as long as his occupations allowed him to do so. He prayed before preaching, before exercising his ministry, before approaching important people, before dealing with delicate and difficult situations. He prayed most intensely at the time of the most severe trials in his life.

As an educator, he did not tire of instilling love for prayer in the souls of young people. He knew how to make it pleasing, made to the measure of the young.

Fr Albera, who understood his spirit profoundly, says: "He wanted the practices of piety to be more spontaneous than prescribed."

During the day, when he would see a good number of young people spontaneously going to church to pray, he would gasp with joy: "This is the greatest of consolations for me."

Given his delicate conscience he felt the need to leave the following in his Spiritual Testament: "I must also apologise if some people observed that on several occasions I made too brief a preparation for or too brief a thanksgiving after Holy Mass. I was in a certain way obliged to do so because of the crowds of people who surrounded me in the sacristy and prevented me from praying either before or after Holy Mass."

This humble confession alone speaks volumes about the importance he attached to prayer. It is not without reason that the Church proposes him, today as yesterday, as a model of prayer to all the faithful who are tempted in their prayer life by secularist materialism and the apparent silence of God in history.

Chapter 4 THE ASCESIS OF TEMPERANCE AND MORTIFICATION

The rejection of Christian asceticism in today's hedonistic and permissive society in the name of absolute freedom that rejects all obligations, opting instead for the spontaneity of nature and ideologies that consider it an alienating neurosis, is a consequence of the rejection of God. For if asceticism has meaning, justification, fruitfulness, it can only be found in fidelity to the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, within the horizon of sin and the divine judgement on it. In other words, through participation in the Lord's asceticism and the mystery of his cross. Asceticism enters as an inescapable element in the plan of salvation and follows the Christian just people are followed by their shadow.

However, its external manifestations, commensurate with the different socio-cultural contexts, are not unique: they vary from one era to the next as history teaches us. It is therefore not appropriate to discredit the forms of penance practised in past centuries or the rough and Spartan style of life lived by Don Bosco in the mid 19th century.

"What justifies one epoch of history over another," Romano Guardini wrote, "does not lie in the fact that it is better, but that it comes in its own time."

Unchangeable in its substance, today's asceticism must adapt, as in the past, to the new cultural context. And this means that it must "take into account the deeper concept of man, the discoveries acquired by the anthropological sciences – especially psychology, the characteristics of our bodily reality, the profound value of sexuality, the process of personalisation, the situation of pluralism, the importance of the community dimension, the needs of socialisation" (E. Viganò).

Therefore, an asceticism that takes into account the harmonious integration of soul and body that is not a gift of nature; that opens the person to self-giving love, to availability to others; an asceticism capable of Christianly addressing the alienations to which modern life forces us to live, such as: nervousness,

the monotony of the repetitiveness of work, the stresses of modern life, the superficiality of relationships and living together; an asceticism of silence in the “civilisation of noise” so as not to lose oneself, to understand better, not to speak except what to say what means something; an asceticism that knows how to discipline the use of the media, sleep, necessary entertainment, food, one’s senses, etc.

Taking into account the cultural shift underway, the Church has mitigated certain penances of the past such as fasting, but has not silenced the rigour of traditional asceticism, made more urgent by the increased demands of charity. Because, as P. Plé well expresses it, “the fruitfulness of mortifications is not measured by the suffering of the renunciation or the intensity of the effort, but by its efficacy, that is, from a gospel perspective, by the progress in charity it fosters, as much through the ‘imitation of Christ’ as through the removal of whatever hinders growth in charity.”

The reconsideration of Don Bosco’s ascetic experience undoubtedly presents aspects that have been overtaken by time, modes of expression that are no longer current. However, when we go to the root of things beyond the contingencies of history, to the evangelical spirit that animated him, to certain lucid precursory insights that make him our contemporary, we must agree that even today the asceticism taught and lived by Don Bosco still has much to say to our Christian sense. This is what we want to briefly note.

Temperance

Don Bosco’s asceticism was always expressed through the inseparable pair: work and temperance. This is the legacy he left to his sons: “Work and temperance will make the Salesian Congregation flourish”; “they are two weapons with which we will succeed in overcoming everything and everyone”. They are the two diamonds that give polish to his friendly and smiling face.

Work, as we have seen, was already in itself the continuous asceticism of Don Bosco. But he always deliberately associated the broader and more specific notion of temperance, mortification, austere sense of life to the asceticism of work.

In the life of a Christian, temperance is, of course, self-control, moderation of inclinations and passions, concern for what is reasonable, a certain escape from

the world, but, more profoundly, it is an “underlying attitude”, an “existential linchpin” that entails the presence of several other virtues. The Rector Major, Fr Egidio Viganò, has provided the following list that one must bear in mind when speaking about of Don Bosco’s temperance:

Temperance is the first and foremost among the moderating virtues, revolving like satellites around it: continence against the tendencies of lust, humility against the tendencies of pride, meekness against the outbursts of anger, clemency against the inclinations to vengeance, modesty against the vanity of bodily display, sobriety and abstinence against the excesses of drink and food, economy and simplicity against the excesses of waste and luxury, austerity in the standard of living against the temptations of comfort.

This temperance, that is, this set of virtues, was seen and lived by Don Bosco above all in terms of pastoral and pedagogical charity, growth in love that is not limited to loving, but, much more difficult still, “knowing how to make oneself loved”. Those who have practice in educating young people know from experience what and how much self-mastery is needed, at all levels of the individual, so that attitudes and behaviour marked by goodness, justice and uprightness will triumph.

Don Bosco’s example is paradigmatic. He was an educator who loved deeply and knew how to “make himself loved” by practising temperance to an heroic degree. Firm in his principles, he applied them with reasonableness and good sense. He balanced the demands of authority with those of the freedom and spontaneity of the young. He knew how to adapt to the demands of the fickleness of the young without falling into permissiveness. He took everything into account, but he also knew how to prudently and shrewdly conceal his emotions. He curbed the impetus of passions in order to guard his heart, which he modelled and shaped on the pastoral charity of Christ. Also the result of his inner temperance were his constant attitude of conversion, self-mastery, and the meekness and gentleness that won him hearts.

Christian temperance, then, is the defence of the great theological values of faith, hope and charity in which it is founded. And Don Bosco reminded his sons of this: “The devil tempts the untempered by preference.” He wanted temperance and moderation in everything, even in the apostolic work that was immensely close

to his heart: "Work, work hard," he would say "but also make sure that you can work for a long time."

He recommended to missionaries: "Look after your health. Work, but only as much as your strength allows."

In the thinking of Don Bosco and the Salesian tradition, temperance is not, first and foremost, the sum of renunciations (mortification), but "growth in the practice of pastoral and pedagogical charity". This is authoritatively affirmed by Fr Egidio Viganò, Don Bosco's seventh successor:

Before and beyond mortification, temperance is a methodological discipline of education to self-giving in love. It teaches us to train ourselves to love and be loved, not primarily to chastise ourselves. This is not the time for pruning, although the time will come to do that. It is the time for the development of love: if I give myself to God, I must try to make the capacity for self-giving grow in me, knowing how to curb everything that may be a hidden taking back of my gift of self.

In other words, for Don Bosco temperance is first and always in function of the mysticism of the *Da mihi animas*: Lord, make me save youth through the gift of temperance. That is why he never tired of repeating: "The Congregation will last as long as the members love work and temperance."

Moderation and continence

These two satellite virtues of temperance, understood as a basic existential attitude, shine a special light on Don Bosco. His moderation in the use of food and drink was proverbial.

Like all the priests who came out of the *Convitto* he strictly observed the abstinences prescribed by the Church. He fasted one day a week, first on Saturday, then on Friday, but nothing exceptional was noticeable in him.

All the testimonies during the Processes agreed in saying that extraordinary penances and fasts were never noticed in him: but they all stressed his uncommon moderation and habitual temperance. In the early days of the Oratory, the table was very frugal, no different from that of the lowly peasants and workers. Bread

and soup, a main course of legumes, though not always, some watered-down wine: that was all. "He was a rare example of temperance" Bishop Bertagna attested. "He never looked for comforts in his house; and in fact it seems he could have allowed himself and others some improvement."

Later the food improved because not everyone who decided to "stay" with him could adapt to his table. His natural good sense suggested that the earlier rigour had to be tempered, but in his heart there always remained a secret yearning for the old practice.

He said more than once that "I thought everyone in my house would be content with just soup and bread, and most a legume dish. I see, however, that I was wrong [... Many reasons pushed me little by little to follow the example of all the other religious orders. Yet even now it seems to me that one could live as I lived in the early days of the Oratory."

While adapting to the necessary improvements, he nevertheless remained faithful to his former ideal. As long as his health allowed him to he always kept to the common repast; he never ate outside of meals, and ate everything before him; nobody knew what his favourite tastes were.

In order to obtain donations, he had to accept lunches in his honour offered to him by benefactors: he took part in them in all simplicity but, it would be said, hardly noticed the food offered to him, intent as he was on keeping the diners' attention with his light-hearted jokes and edifying words.

Following his illness at Varazze (1871-1872) that brought him to the brink of death, doctor's orders meant he had to take a little unwatered wine that the Duchess of Montmorency sent him each month. He drank it so sparingly that a bottle lasted him an entire week, while the remainder accumulated in the cellar and served long after his death. He gladly offered it to friends and benefactors when he invited them to his table: "Let us be merry," he said, "let us drink the ducal wine!"

He wanted his sons to be, like him, models of moderation and temperance. "Flee idleness, quarrels; great moderation in food, drink and rest." "I do not say to you that you must fast; but one thing I recommend to you: temperance." "When the desire for ease and comfort grows up amongst us, our pious Society will have run its course."

With ascetics of all times, he too emphasised the indissoluble link between bodily mortification and prayer: “He who does not mortify his body is not even capable of good prayer.”

Moderation and temperance play a big role in his pedagogy. “Give me,” he would often say, “a young man who is temperate in eating, drinking and sleeping, and you will see him virtuous, assiduous in his duties, always ready when it comes to doing good, and a lover of all virtues. On the contrary, if a young man is gluttonous, a lover of wine, a sleeper, little by little he will have all the vices.”

Purity and continence against the tendencies of the flesh also shine a special light on Don Bosco’s life. St Therese of Lisieux regretted that she had no temptations against chastity, as if something had been missing from the fullness of her love. But God’s gifts are not a brake on virtue and this was not on the saint’s mind. Don Bosco did not have this privilege, which is also very rare in the lives of saints; he knew temptation, was not exempt from the molestations of the flesh and its instincts: he spoke of this with his closest friends.

Fr Rua testified that “With regard to temptations against this virtue [chastity] I believe he did feel them, revealing it through some words he was heard to say when recommending that we be temperate in drinking.” This testimony agrees with the testimony of Fr Lemoyne: “That he had temptations against purity he once confided to members of the chapter, among whom I myself was present, explaining why he preferred legumes to meat.”

So Don Bosco was a man exposed to the wind of temptation, no different from us. But what emerges instead was the victorious struggle he kept up on this front, his complete docility to the Spirit’s suggestions, and his heroic practice of chastity.

At first glance, this heroism might seem more more taken for granted than demonstrated, so secret and personal is the virtue of chastity. However when it is practised and lived in an extraordinary manner it ends up imposing itself even externally through a range of signs and messages that Christian sense recognises. That Don Bosco led an unblemished life from childhood, and always from then on, is unanimously affirmed by the texts examined at the canonical processes.

They say that Don Bosco had erected an edifice of rock-solid chastity in defence of his acute sensitivity and his emotional capacity to “make himself loved”.

They attribute much of the irresistible charm he exercised among the young to the splendour of this virtue. In his presence, disturbing thoughts and fantasies dissipated like mist in the the sun. "It seems to me," Fr Cerruti testified, "that the secret of his Christian greatness lies in the great purity of mind, heart and body that he observed with a delicacy more unique than rare. His demeanour, his gaze, his very gait, his words, his features never had even a shadow of something that could be called contrary to beautiful virtue, as he called it."

His manner with the young people was very delicate, always respectful of their little personalities. He would gladly let them kiss his hand, sometimes placing it fleetingly on their head and taking the opportunity to whisper one of those magic "words" of his in their ear, that went straight to their heart. It also happened that he would give a young man a touch or a light caress with two fingers of his hand, but how supernatural that paternal gesture was! Fr Reviglio said that "there was something pure, chaste and paternal in these touches, which infused the spirit of his chastity." Attitudes of antipathy or sensitive preferences were never noticed in him. Never did the malicious insinuations of the press so often opposed to him dare attack him on this point.

It was all too evident that Don Bosco lived at a higher level and that the confidence he granted his young people was solely for the purpose of doing good.

"In the spirit of Don Bosco," Fr Viganò says, "there is a strong message of purity; Salesian tradition and the testimony of the origins confirm this abundantly. It is a special message that we can call 'sympathy for purity'. This sympathy is a constant in his life, a characteristic trait of his spirit. He stated it repeatedly: 'What must distinguish our Congregation is chastity, just as poverty distinguishes the sons of St Francis of Assisi and obedience distinguishes the sons of St Ignatius.'"

Mortification

Christian mortification, both internal and external, covers a very wide field. According to the Bible in various places it indicates "detachment" from external goods (Lk 5:11), the "denial" of self (Lk 9:23), the "stripping away" of the old man with his lusts (Col 3:9), the "crucifixion" of the flesh (Gal 5:24), "struggle" (2 Tim 4:7), a kind of "death" and burial with Christ (Col 3:3).

These and similar expressions indicate how for the Christian, a fallen and wounded being, there is no possibility of salvation without participation in the

mystery of Christ's death and cross. Not out of a kind of sorrow or suffering desired as an end in itself, but rather out of an irrepressible need for love and fidelity to Christ our salvation. In this too Don Bosco reveals himself to be an excellent model and guide.

We have said of him that he was a cheerful and likeable saint, capable of loving and "being loved", always active, always in the midst of youth, the springtime and joy of the world. That he was a saint who seemed to lead an enviable life which nevertheless did not lack the stinging thorns of mortification. The life of Don Bosco and of those who walk in his footsteps is clearly foreshadowed in the dream of the "pergola of roses".

Let us recall its essential content. The "Blessed Virgin herself" as he recounts, urged him to walk through a long arbour filled with beautiful roses hanging from above, from the sides, rising from below: "This is the path you must take." A delightful and inviting road in appearance, but one that concealed sharp thorns. "All those, and there were many of them," we read in the dream, "those who were watching me walk under that bower—and they were a crowd—passed comments, such as, 'How lucky Don Bosco is! His path is forever strewn with roses! He hasn't a worry in the world. No troubles at all!' . But they couldn't see the thorns that were piercing my poor legs. I called on many priests, clerics, and laymen to follow me, and they did so joyfully, enthralled by the beauty of the flowers. When, however, they discovered that they had to walk over sharp thorns and that there was no way to avoid them, they loudly began complaining, 'We have been fooled!' I answered: "If you are out for a nice time, you had better go back. If not, follow me.'

Eventually Don Bosco had the dream explained to him by Our Lady. "The Blessed Virgin, who had been my guide all along, now asked me: 'Do you grasp the meaning of what you now see and of what you saw before?' 'No,' I said. 'Please explain it to me.' She replied: 'The path strewn with roses and thorns is an image of your mission among boys. You must wear shoes, a symbol of mortification. The thorns on the ground stand for sensible affections, human likes and dislikes which distract the educator from his true goal, weaken and halt him in his mission, and hinder his progress and heavenly harvest The roses symbolize the burning charity which must be your distinguishing trait and that of your fellow workers. The other thorns stand for the obstacles, sufferings and disappointments you will experience. But you must not lose heart. Charity and

mortification will enable you to overcome all difficulties and lead you to roses without thorns.”

Like temperance, mortification, which Don Bosco called “the ABC of perfection”, is also considered primarily from a pedagogical and pastoral perspective. The mystery of the cross plays an important part at the centre of the “pedagogy of joy”, at the centre of the attractive spirit of Salesian life. Those who looked at Don Bosco from afar, those who considered the unstoppable expansion of his work, his successes, could also believe that the path he travelled was an easy one. Yet his path, as Fr Ceria indicates in his beautiful pages on *Don Bosco with God*, was sown with the thorns of mortification. Thorns in the family: the poverty and opposition that first barred him from, then made the path to the priesthood a tough one, obliging him to take up hard and humiliating labours. Thorns in the founding of the Oratory: he was shouted down on all sides by private individuals, parish priests, municipal, school and political authorities. Thorns and worse because of his *Catholic Readings*. Thorns from lack of means: having so many young people and so much work on his shoulders and not having secure means of subsistence. Thorns from his own men: the sacrifices needed to train them, as well as painful desertions. Tribulations and thorns from the diocesan authority: misunderstandings, opposition, endless disagreements. The founding of the Salesian Society was a Calvary.

There were thorns of a different kind, but no less prickly, due to illness and health disorders. Don Bosco was of a healthy constitution and uncommon physical vigour. He descended from sturdy peasant stock and long-living ancestors. One could not otherwise explain his resistance to work and how he was able to survive three fatal illnesses. Yet the list of infirmities that plagued him throughout his life is incredibly long: spitting blood, persistent pain in his eyes and the loss, ultimately, of the right one; swelling in his legs and feet – his “daily cross” as he called it, persistent headaches, poor digestion, intermittent fevers with skin rashes, and towards the end of his life weakening of the back with difficulty breathing, and more. Pius XI described his life as “a true and great martyrdom... A true and continuous martyrdom in the hardness of a mortified, fragile life that seemed to be the result of continuous fasting.”

It was a martyrdom accepted out of love of the crucified Christ and souls. “If I knew,” he was heard to say, “that a single prayer was enough to make me well, I would not say it”. It was a martyrdom disguised by imperturbable peace and

joy that seemed to become more radiant, according to reliable testimonies, the heavier were the crosses that afflicted him.

Only a soul deeply rooted in God could have come this far.

Don Bosco's life was truly characterised by enormous and uninterrupted ascetic efforts. But his asceticism was not the spectacular classical asceticism of other saints. It was the asceticism of the everyday, of the little things, of the no less hard and continuous mortifications imposed by the fulfilment of one's duty, one's work, of concrete situations, of human coexistence. "There is no lack of means to copy in oneself the sufferings of Our Lord" he said: "heat, cold, illness, things, people, events... There are ways to live mortified!"

We read in his *Spiritual Testament*, "I do not recommend any special penances or mortifications to you; you will gain great merit and give glory to the Congregation if you are able to bear the sufferings and annoyances of life with Christian resignation."

"Let your mortifications," he advised the Rectors, "be in the diligence of your duties and in putting up with others..." He did not underestimate the importance of voluntary mortification, but preferred ones imposed by obedience. "Instead of doing works of penance do those of obedience," he said. "Look, a good breakfast made out of obedience is worth more than any mortification made of your own whim."

For Don Bosco too, the fundamental motivation for mortification was, of course, the need to follow Christ, the victim of our sins, and to share, in faithful awareness, in the mystery of his death and cross: "The Lord invites us to deny ourselves, to carry our cross"; "Whoever does not want to suffer with Jesus Christ on earth, will not be able to enjoy Jesus Christ in heaven."

He used to say: "There are bitternesses to be suffered everywhere, which are called mortification of the senses; and from these we will emerge victorious by taking a look at Jesus Crucified."

The devotion to Jesus Crucified was dear to him. When Mamma Margaret, contrite and tired, had decided to return to the Becchi, Don Bosco said nothing, but pointed to the Crucifix hanging on the wall.

When one of his small volumes of the *Catholic Readings* was to be put on the Index, he suffered terribly. Looking at the Crucifix he was heard to exclaim: "O my Jesus! You know that I wrote this book for a good purpose... Thy will be done."

He knew that the charity that saves souls is crucified charity; charity that starts from the cross: "O Lord, give us crosses, thorns and persecutions of every kind, so long as we can save souls and, among others, save our own."

Chapter 5 WORKING AS A PAIR

Don Bosco, a saint filled with God was, at the same time a saint filled with Mary. After God and in dependence on God, his whole life in fact revolved around her. Mary was already a living presence in his life before his dream at nine years of age, thanks to his holy earthly mother: “John... when you came into the world I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin.” And Jesus told him, “I am the Son of She whom your mother taught you to greet three times a day.”

But Our Lady did not just pass through Mamma Margaret’s mediation. She burst directly into the life of the little shepherd boy of the Becchi, as a light from above, first in that dream at nine years of age and then in the other Marian dreams.

Don Bosco saw Mary with his own eyes. “But now that we are all together alone, I am going to tell you not just another dream, but something that Our Lady herself graciously showed me. I am doing this that each of us may be convinced that it is Our Lady Herself who wants our Congregation” he told his boys in the famous dream of the Pergola of Roses which he had in 1847 but only told in 1864. “She wants us to place all our trust in Her.” We read sentences in the dream like: “The Blessed Virgin said to me”; “She replied”; “as soon as the Mother of God finished speaking”.

Witnesses said that devotion to Our Lady was at the forefront of his thinking. It seemed that he lived only for Her.

“How good Our Lady is,” he said, “how much she loves us.” Don Bosco perceived God’s initiative in his life as a founder with increasing clarity, but he also had the certainty of being led and guided in everything by the hand of Mary. “Mary most holy is the foundress and will be the sustainer of our work.” And again, “Mary is the mother and sustainer of the Congregation.”

At the Trofarello Retreat (1868) he said that of all religious congregations Mary “can be said to be the foundress and the Mother, from the Upper Room to the

present day”. But he also added that “Of all the Congregations and Religious Orders, perhaps ours was the one that most had the word of God.”

Nothing was to be done at the Oratory except in the name of Mary “the holiest, most lovable of creatures, the great Mother of God, always pure and immaculate”.

Mary was “the omnipotence *supplex* ever present in his life.” She was Teacher, Guide, Shepherdess, The Lady and Queen of his dreams; she was his Beggar, his Miracle worker and many other things besides but she would always be for him, above all the Mother of the Saviour and the Church. She was the Immaculate, pure and full of grace, the powerful Helper of Christians.

Mother, Immaculate, Help of Christians was this Madonna whom Don Bosco placed at the top of his pedagogy, his priestly, apostolic and missionary activity.

Don Bosco’s devotion to the Mother of God can be seen from different angles: here we would like to emphasise the importance that the presence of Mary Help of Christians had in his life, of whom he was unquestionably the greatest apostle. We know that he passed through different Marian experiences: he was a devotee of Our Lady of the Castle (Castelnuovo), Our Lady of Sorrows (Cascina Moglia), Our Lady of La Scala, the Holy Rosary, the Immaculate Conception (Chieri), and the Consolata (Turin). For reasons that, on the one hand, were linked to the beginning of the Work of the Oratories (8 December 1841) and, on the other, to the Marian movement in honour of the Immaculate Conception that would lead to the dogmatic definition of 1854, his preferences soon turned to devotion to the Immaculate Conception.

The feast of 8 December remained central to his pastoral and pedagogical methodology. “For everything,” he reminded his disciples, “we are indebted to Mary: all our greatest works began on the day of the Immaculate Conception.”

However, it was only around 1862, when he was close to fifty, that he came to devotion to and preference for Mary Help of Christians, for a number of reasons that we will not go into here. Let us only mention reasons of a practical order, as we can see from what he confided to Paul Albera when he was a cleric: “There were a lot of confessions tonight but truthfully I hardly know what I said or did, because all the time I had something on my mind which totally absorbed me. I kept thinking: Our church is too small. We have to pack in our boys like sardines. We must build a larger, more imposing one under the title of Mary, Help of Christians.” And reasons

of a pastoral or apologetic order, as we learn from this testimony by Cagliero: “Our Lady wants us to honour her under the title of Mary Help of Christians: times are so sad that we really need the Blessed Virgin to help us preserve and defend the Christian faith.” The apparitions of Mary Help of Christians that took place near Spoleto (March 1862), and other historical contingencies and heavenly illustrations were not unrelated.

The Help of Christians a living presence

There is certainly no lack of evidence of the presence of Mary Help of Christians in Don Bosco’s life even earlier, but the decisive preference for devotion to her has a precise point of reference: 1861-1863.

“And this,” writes Fr Viganò “would remain the definitive Marian choice: the point of arrival of a ceaseless vocational growth and the centre of expansion of his charism as a founder. In the Help of Christians Don Bosco finally saw the face of the Lady who initiated his vocation and was and always would be his Inspirer and Teacher.”

But this point of arrival was also a point of departure. We are in the last 25 years of Don Bosco’s life; the years of his full human and spiritual maturity, which coincide with the affirmation and definitive establishment of the Congregation and its worldwide and missionary expansion. These are above all the years in which Don Bosco feels increasingly involved in and part of the current, often dramatic, situation of the Church and the new Italian situation, as an educator priest and as an apostle. This great period in Don Bosco’s history is marked by a more lively, more impending presence of Mary, the “most loving Mother” and the “powerful Immaculate”, as he never tired of saying, but this time venerated and felt, in an almost total manner, in her function of Help of Christians, both of individuals and of the entire community of Christian faith: *Maria Auxilium Christianorum*. And this, beyond what was implicit and explicit that had led him to the preferential choice of this title, for two basic reasons above all.

First: because of his theological and historical awareness of the relevance of the cult of Mary Help of Christians in the Church of his time.

Second: because of the incalculable importance in Salesian history of the construction and existence of the Church of Mary Help of Christians at Valdocco.

Relevance of devotion to Mary Help of Christians

Regarding the first point, our information comes from the introduction that Don Bosco gave, taken from A. Nicolas, to his booklet: *Maraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice*. We read that “The title of *Auxilium Christianorum* attributed to the august Mother of the Saviour is not something new in the Church of Jesus Christ.”

In the sacred books of the old testament Mary is called Queen, standing at the right hand of her divine Son clothed in gold... In this sense Mary was hailed as the help of Christians from the earliest times of Christianity.

Recourse to Mary Help of Christians became necessary because of the extraordinary difficulties in which the Church finds itself. “A very special reason why the Church in recent times wants to signal the title of ‘Auxilium Christianorum’ is the one given by Bishop Parisi in the following words: ‘Almost always when humankind has found itself amid extraordinary crises, to escape from them it was always found a worthy fact to recognise and bless some new perfection in this admirable creature, Mary most Holy who is the most magnificent reflection here below of the Creator’s perfections.’ Today’s universally felt need to invoke Mary is not particular, but general; there are no longer just lukewarm people to be inflamed, sinners to be converted, innocents to be preserved. These things are always useful in every place, with every person. But it is the Catholic Church itself that is assailed. It is assailed in its functions, in its sacred institutions, in its Head, in its doctrine, in its discipline; it is assailed as the Catholic Church, as the centre of truth, as the teacher of all the faithful. And it is precisely in order to merit special protection from Heaven that recourse is made to Mary, as the common Mother, the special Helper of Kings and of Catholic peoples, Catholics throughout the world.”

Further on in the booklet Don Bosco did not hesitate to write: “The experience of eighteen centuries makes us see in a most luminous way that Mary continued her

mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians that she had begun on earth, from heaven, and with the greatest success.”

Hence, “Don Bosco perceived, with painful attention, the special and growing difficulties that had arisen for the Church: the serious problems of the relationship between faith and politics, the fall (after more than a millennium) of the papal states, the delicate situation of the Pope and the bishoprics, the urgent need for a new type of pastoral care and new relationships between hierarchy and laity, the incipient mass ideologies, etc.” (E. Viganò).

This harsh reality engaged his zeal for the cause of faith and the Church and revived his recourse to Mary Help of Christians.

We read in the *Biographical Memoirs* that “In publicizing Our Lady’s wonders, he not only gave vent to his boundless love for the Mother of God, but aimed at doing good to others. He wished to spark the whole world with unlimited confidence in Her who, amid the anxieties, tribulations, errors and perils of this, our poor mortal life, was and would always be a loving, ever ready, powerful helper.”

Strengthened by this confidence in Mary Help of Christians, in his famous dream about the future of the Church and Europe (2 February 1872) Don Bosco did not hesitate to write to the Supreme Pontiff Pius IX, in the name of heaven: “The great Queen will be your help and as in past times so for the future she will always be *magnum et singulare in Ecclesia praesidium*.”

Mary built this house

And yet all this would not have made him the great apostle of Mary Help of Christians, if he had not gone through the supernatural experience of building the Mary's church in Valdocco, and if this church had not become the heart and centre of the Congregation, the "Mother Church".

It is almost impossible to say what the church at Valdocco represented in Don Bosco's intimate life or what it represented and still represents in the history of the Congregation and – through the members of the Salesian Family – in the Marian piety of the universal Church.

Unlike what we read in the history of other famous sanctuaries, most of which originated from sensational apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary – think of Lourdes, Fatima, La Salette, etc. – Valdocco's was born out of a wise pastoral pedagogical calculation, concrete needs, even if there was no lack of supernatural intervention.

What surprised Don Bosco first, and then the world, however, was the fact that Mary practically built her "house" against all human expectations: *Aedificavit sibi domum Maria*.

This is the miracle that Fr Margotti did not feel like denying: "They say that Don Bosco performs miracles and I don't believe it, but there is one here that I cannot deny and it is this sumptuous church that cost millions – today we would be in the order of billions – and it was built in three years with only the spontaneous offerings of the faithful."

Don Bosco was guided from above, but he walked with his feet firmly planted on earth and being the practical man that he was, he had done his calculations well before starting the work. He had secured the financial support of influential and wealthy people; but when it came down to it he was left alone. The truth is this: "When it came to starting the work I had not a penny to spend on it." And here follows one of those arguments that only saints know how to make: "On the one

hand there was certainty that that building was to the greater glory of God, on the other hand it contrasted with the absolute lack of means.”

It would have been called a dilemma without solution, but Don Bosco measured things by higher standards. What was his conclusion? Here it is: “Then it became clear that the Queen of heaven did not want moral bodies (the support of the city authorities, etc.), but real bodies, that is, Mary’s true devotees... and she herself wanted to put her hand in and make it known that, being her own work, she herself wanted to construct it: *Aedificavit sibi domum Maria.*”

Work began from scratch. Don Bosco did not spare himself: but someone in the shadows worked with him and for him. This someone was Mary Help of Christians. This is how their “working as a pair” between Don Bosco and Mary Help of Christians, their “doing things together”, their “mysterious cooperation” had now become stronger and irresistible since its origins going back to the first dream. The material construction of the church was enriched each day by portentous events that left Don Bosco himself surprised and almost dismayed, so much so that he felt the need to consult with Bishop Bertagna, who in a valuable testimony at the Ordinary Process made the following statement:

I believe it is true that Don Bosco had the supernatural gift of healing the sick. I heard this from him himself when we were both at the Retreat at the Sanctuary of San Ignazio sopra Lanzo. He told me this in order to have advice regarding continuing to bless the sick with the images of Mary Help of Christians and the Saviour, because, he said, there was such a stir regarding many healings that happened and that looked miraculous, following blessings he had given. And I believe that Don Bosco was telling the truth. For better or for worse, I believed I advised Don Bosco to continue his blessings.

Don Bosco went back more serenely continuing to do as before. He imparted the blessing of Mary Help of Christians, exhorted devotees to honour her with their holiness of life, some donations for her church, and Mary listened to him: the sick were healed, knotty problems were solved, spiritual healings multiplied. It was evident that Mary Help of Christians was giving credit to her faithful servant.

“If I wanted to expound the multitude of deeds [extraordinary and miraculous ones he is talking about] I would have to make not just a small booklet, but large volumes.”

Don Bosco is truthful when he concludes, “We have gone about constructing this majestic building of ours with an astonishing amount of effort without anyone ever organising a collection of any kind. Who could believe it? One sixth of the expenditure was covered by donations from devout people; the rest were all donations made for graces received.”

The popular conscience was not long in discovering this wonderful understanding between Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco, the inseparable link that united them: Don Bosco was truly the “Saint of Mary Help of Christians”, and Mary Help of Christians was truly the “Don Bosco’s Madonna”. This term which has come from the believers' intuition of faith is now entrusted to history.

In his humility, Don Bosco never ceased to say that he had nothing to do with it: it was Mary Help of Christians who did everything: “I am not the author of the great things that you see; it is the Lord, it is Mary Most Holy who deigned to use a poor priest to carry out such works. Of my own I put nothing into it. *Aedificavit sibi domum Maria*. Every stone, every ornament signals a grace.” “Mary raised it up by dint of miracles!”

The painting created by Don Bosco

“Don Bosco’s Madonna” has its classical expression in Lorenzoni’s painting above the high altar. This is the Madonna that well expresses Don Bosco’s intimate feeling and the state of mind of struggling Catholics in need of security, as well as the position of “Mary Queen and Mother of the Church”.

In his mind, Don Bosco was yearning for something more splendid and grandiose. When he spoke of it to the painter as something he had long contemplated, he astounded everyone with the boldness of his aim.

He expressed his thoughts as follows: “Above, the Most Holy Mary among the choirs of Angels; around Her, closer, the Apostles, then the choirs of Prophets, Virgins and Confessors. Below, the emblems of Mary’s great victories and the peoples of the various parts of the world in the act of raising their hands to Her asking for help.”

His concept of salvation history led him to place the Church at the heart of the world, and at the heart of the Church he contemplated Mary Help of Christians – the blossoming of the Church before the Church began – the almighty Mother, the victor over evil. The picture was reduced to sensible proportions, but the inspiring idea remained.

Oh! Mother! Mother!

He wanted to propagate devotion to Mary Help of Christians in every possible way: he wrote six popular books in her honour, dedicated the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to her, founded the Archconfraternity of her devotees [ADMA], spread the Blessing of Mary Help of Christians, her Novena, her image, her medals; he never tired of saying, “Trust in Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and in Mary Help of Christians in everything, and you will see what miracles are.”

Don Bosco teaches us that Our Lady must have a special place in our heart: if she did not have it, it would mean that there is something profoundly wrong in us. He teaches us that devotion to Mary must start from within, from what is most essential and profound, namely the intimate relationship with the living person of Mary, felt, loved, served as Mother of God, Mother of the Church, Mother and Help of all.

In his personal piety, Don Bosco respected and celebrated all the prerogatives and titles with which the Church honours the Mother of God. But we know that his favourite titles were the Immaculate and Help of Christians.

All this was but the mediation through which he nourished his existential, personal, intimate relationship with Mary. The deepest core of his Marian devotion always began from there. The whole of his life proves this, and it is still confirmed by the moving invocations that appeared on his lips in his final hour, essential and without further qualification: “Jesus... Jesus... Mary... Mary... Oh! Mother, Mother. Open the gates of paradise to me.”

The Marian revival advocated by the Holy Father must focus on the essential, without ever dissociating the Mother from the Son and the Spirit that leads us to the adulthood of Christ, and thus into intimacy with the Father.

Chapter 6 WORKING “WITH FAITH, HOPE AND CHARITY”

Baptism radically changes our way of being and living: it makes us partakers of the divine nature, it incorporates us into Christ and the Church, it makes us children of God, it makes us new creatures. And for this “newness of life” to be possible, the Holy Spirit infuses in us, through his gifts, the powerful energy of faith, hope and charity which imply an involvement of all reality in God.

The theological virtues, we know, constitute holiness in real and dynamic terms and are the very essence of the inner life. It is not enough to call them “virtues” or “habits” when they are instead the way Christian life is structured. They are the total dimension of Christian life. It is the whole human being alive in Christ and the Holy Spirit through them. For Abraham as for Mary, to believe meant giving oneself, full of hope, to a person who is supremely loved.

Let us add that in the Bible, faith, hope and charity are always presented in “vital unity” as “different aspects of a complex but unique spiritual attitude” (J. Duplacy). Charity does not exist without faith and hope; faith and hope are only alive when informed by charity.

It is important to make separate acts of the individual theological virtues but more important still to live them “together”, jointly, summed up in charity.

Don Bosco did not theorise his experience of faith, hope and charity, but lived it intensively in the midst of the most diverse activities.

Indicative in this regard may be the sermon he gave at Trofarello on 18 September 1869 and the first part of the so-called “dream of the ten diamonds”. We have a handwritten outline of the sermon which he delivered at the end of the Retreat. Don Bosco develops the theme: “Working with faith, hope and charity”.

Related to this theme is the dream of the “diamonds” or “virtues” that shine on the mantle of the personage in which we can see the personification of Don Bosco.

Five are placed on the breast and draw the face of the Salesian as he must appear before the world; five are placed on the back and are destined to remain rather hidden. The diamonds that sparkle on the breast are those of “faith, hope and charity”. Charity is placed on the heart. On the right and left shoulder are the diamonds of “work” and “temperance”, which make up the Salesian coat of arms: they are systematically connected with the previous ones.

“Salesian life,” Fr Philip Rinaldi wrote, “considered in its activity is work and temperance, enlivened by the charity of the heart in the ever brighter light of faith and hope.”

In this very elaborate dream, Don Bosco finds no better way to define the face of the Salesian than to refer to the theological triad, the synthesis and substance of the Christian life.

That Don Bosco like every other saint preferred the theological virtues above everything else is shown, for example, by the biographies of his little heroes. For example, he praises “The liveliness of his faith, his constant hope, his tireless zeal in doing good and helping others” of Dominic Savio. Let us clarify the Saint’s thinking.

Let us work with faith

Don Bosco explained: not for human aims, not to be “applauded with a bravo! good!”, but “to do something pleasing to the Lord”, to “aspire to the reward that awaits us”. For the saint, faith was his charter from heaven, the global view from above on his life, his plans, his actions, on all the things he was immerxsed in. Faith infused him with an intimate awareness of his Christian identity; it led him to see, judge, act according to the perspective of God, of Christ and His Spirit. Faith was truly the reason for all his work: “Faith,” he said, “is what does everything”; without “the fire of faith, man’s work is nothing”.

Faith led him to evaluate everyday realities with a critical eye and supernatural discernment, to face them with “liveliness” and “greatness of faith”. “In the midst of the hardest trials, one needs great faith in God” he asserted. He exhorted, with St Paul, that in the hour of trial we should “take the shield of faith” (Eph 6:16).

Although he had more than reason to console himself for the good he had done, he looked at what remained to be done and regretted that he had not had enough

faith and had not done more. "Had I had a hundred times more faith I would have done a hundred times more than what I did." Yet he was a formidable believer: he lived, worked and prayed "as though he saw him who is invisible" (Heb 11:27). In audiences, when asked for advice, he did not answer immediately; he raised his eyes to heaven as someone who seeks the necessary light from God, and then he gave answers full of faith.

His whole life, wrote Fr Ceria, was an exercise in living faith: "Thoughts, affections, endeavours, daring, pain, sacrifices, pious practices, and the spirit of prayer were all flames released by faith."

Although his trust in God was boundless, he often repeated, "If the work is yours, Lord, you will sustain it; if the work is mine, I am happy for it to fall."

The Vatican Council made this important affirmation: "Only by the light of faith and by meditation on the word of God can one always and everywhere recognize God in Whom 'we live, and move, and have our being', seek His will in every event, see Christ in everyone whether he be a relative or a stranger, and make correct judgments about the true meaning and value of temporal things both in themselves and in their relation to man's final goal." (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* no. 4). Don Bosco could not have known these words, but Christian sense guided him to practise them fully, under the influence of the Spirit.

He seemed to be submerged in endless business and activities, but his faith was the soul of everything. He knew how to grasp the invisible in the visible, how to collaborate, as few do, with the divine Risen One in spreading the Kingdom, in saving souls. Fr Viganò has said, "Don Bosco perceived almost spontaneously the historical depth of the Christian faith. Even as a scholar and as a writer he was enthusiastic about the concrete aspects of salvation history. In fact, more than a thinker, he is a narrator of God; a narrator of bible history, a narrator of the lives of the saints, of the history of the Church."

He always strove for his sons to have a "working" and "dynamic" faith as St James wants (Jas 2:17). A faith that was "alive" and able to "move mountains". He was an extreme defender of the faith, for which he repeatedly put his life at risk; an incomparable "educator of the faith" of generations of young people.

His exhortation to "work with faith" was not just a conviction rooted in his soul: it was the expression of his experience, a synthesis of his existence.

Work with hope

Don Bosco comments: "When we are tired, when we have tribulations, let us raise our eyes to heaven; a great reward awaits us in life, in death, in eternity." This was his typical way of thinking and reasoning. His mind did not fixate on the past, it did not close itself in the present moment, it reached out, as if by instinct, towards the ultimate realities.

The man who seemed to be completely absorbed in earthly activities actually gravitated towards the eternal. He said: "Walk with your feet on the ground," which was his realism - "but with your heart dwell in heaven." This was his hope.

The intelligence of faith, which opened him up to the evil in the world to be healed and prevented, and to the immense possibilities of good to be made to grow, powerfully stimulated the energy of his hope and launched him into action.

He often said, "Courage, let's work, let's always work, because we will find our eternal rest beyond."

"Always work" could, in the abstract, mean many things; in concrete terms it meant feeling involved in the plan of salvation and committed to God's cause.

Hope was an ever present attitude in Don Bosco's life, as much as faith and charity. Hope was the expectation of future goods, the certainty of God "before him", unlimited confidence in the rescuing power of the Father, Jesus and Mary. It was the Holy Spirit's voice of courage that launched him into daring, unprecedented and definitely not risk-free undertakings. Scripture teaches that hope, even if winged, is not exempt from obscurity and temptation, it is not always triumphant; it involves struggle, combat, trial: "For some weeks," he wrote to Marchioness M. Assunta Frassati, "I have been living in hope and affliction." Even from this point of view Don Bosco revealed himself to be a great man of hope, because he was capable of "hoping against hope" and of attempting the humanly impossible by trusting in God's strength.

He often said, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). "There will be nothing of this in heaven." "Courage! Hope sustains us when patience would fail." "What sustains patience must be the hope of the reward." And again, "Sometimes we find ourselves exhausted, overwhelmed by some

inconvenience: but let us take courage: up there we will rest.” And, as he was wont to do, he raised his right hand towards heaven, indicating his full trust in the Lord.

St Paul’s words, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18) were his recurring motivation. Let us say again that his hope was firm and unshakable because it was anchored in the ‘already’ of the Lord’s Easter, Pentecost, the reality of the Church, the sacraments, the first fruits of the Holy Spirit, which are given to us as a seed. This elating “already” was also matched in him by the consciousness of the “not yet”, of lack, negation, limitation, never separated from the positive awareness of the need for development and growth of the good disseminated in history and of the divine life cast in time.

The “not yet” of hope is in fact inseparable from its “already”; it is included in it like vitality in the seed. Now, whoever looks at Don Bosco’s life perceives that his hope was lived as the practical and daily planning of a tireless work of personal sanctification and his efforts at saving everyone. “*Salve, salvando, salvati*” was a common greeting of his. A hope nourished by the “already” and the “not yet”.

Among the most beautiful fruits of hope in Don Bosco’s life were the overwhelming “joy” inherent in the certainty of the “already” of faith; the unalterable “patience” in trials, linked to the demands of the “not yet”; his “pedagogical sensitivity”, in which daring, magnanimity, shrewdness and holy cunning played a large part, virtues typical of those who believe and firmly hope that their future “does not disappoint”.

When he exhorted his disciples to “work with hope”, Don Bosco was inviting them to look to the paradise for which we were made; to trust in the almighty help of the heavenly Father, and Mary; to commit themselves deeply to fighting the seeds of evil that infest the world, and to develop, optimistically, the seeds of good to build a better future for the Church and the world. For him, this meant “working with hope”.

Work with charity

This was Don Bosco’s most insistent recommendation. Charity is an attitude of love towards people who are either God himself or his image, human beings. It is the fullness of Christian life, the form of all the virtues. The Gospel command says to love God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves. God always comes first: his love alone is the cause and source of our love for our neighbour.

If one does not love God one cannot divinely love others: "First of all God gives us the capacity to love Him; and it is onto this gift that love of neighbour is grafted" (Catechism for Adults). In his brief notes on his sermon on "Working with faith, hope and charity", Don Bosco dwelt at length on the exercise of charity towards our neighbour, but gave absolute precedence to the love of God. His short note, as concise as it is profound, begins precisely with these words: "Work with charity towards God. He alone is worthy to be loved and served, the true rewarder of every little thing we do for Him. He loves us as a most loving Father. *Charitate perpetua dilexi te ... (Jer 31:3)*".

Don Bosco's view of God was never separate from the certainty that God loves us with infinite tenderness – like a father – and from the idea of the reward he reserves for his chosen ones. God, he said, is "infinitely rich and of infinite generosity. As a rich man he can give us ample reward for everything we do out of love for him; as a Father of infinite generosity he pays with abundant measure every smallest thing we do out of love."

"Do things out of love", "work for love" was his whole life, his great recommendation. Everything in our being must vibrate for God: "The eyes must see for God, the feet walk for God, the hands work for God, the heart beat for God, our whole body serve for God."

These recommendations were a reflection of his life in which the love of God reigned supreme. This is proven by this testimony of Cardinal Cagliero, chosen from among many others: "Divine love shone from his face, from his whole person, from all the words that flowed from his heart when he spoke of God in the pulpit, in the confessional, in private and public conferences and in family conversations. This love was the only longing, the only sigh, the most ardent desire of his entire life."

Don Bosco was certainly someone who loved God immensely, even if he was able to cleverly conceal it. But no less strong was his love for his neighbour in whom he grasped the permanent manifestation of the Lord.

The energy of his charity towards his neighbour, especially towards the most abandoned young people, drove him, as we have recalled, to manifestations of maternal delicacy, attitudes of brotherliness, goodness, understanding and sacrifice that are higher than any praise. His charity, however, essentially had

its own face: it was “pastoral” and “pedagogical” charity. Pastoral charity was his intimate participation in the salvific concern of Christ the Good Shepherd, apostle of the Father, consumed by the zeal of his home. “It is a priestly love,” Fr Viganò writes, “enlightened by faith and that deeply enlivens the dynamic of hope, to fight against evil, to help one’s neighbour, especially the young, in the work of salvation.”

Pastoral charity explains the mysticism of the *Da mihi animas*, the immense effort sustained for the spread of the Kingdom of God. “The Lord,” he said, “has put us in the world for others.” “Let each one endeavour to arm his heart with that charity that gives his life to save souls.”

Work with pastoral charity and pedagogical charity at the same time: the two forms are similar, but pedagogical charity is inspired by the Preventive System, by its methodology based on reason, religion, loving-kindness, of which supernatural charity is the most complete expression. The practice of this system “is all based”, writes Don Bosco in his little treatise on the Preventive System, on the words of St. Paul: *Charitas benigna est, patiens est, ... omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet*. Love is kind, and patient; it puts up with all things, but hopes all things and endures any disturbance. (I Cor 13:4,7).” The charity of the Preventive System is unmistakable, “kindness erected as a system”, and has something of the tender and strong love that Jesus showed to the little ones and the least. “The Preventive System,” Don Bosco said, “is charity, the holy fear of God infused into hearts”. The education of the young “is a matter of the heart”, and “charity is the bond that binds hearts”. Those who wish to work fruitfully among the young “must keep charity in their hearts and practise patience with their work.” And since Salesian work is mainly resolved in a prolonged educational relationship, he wanted it to be closely united with other virtues such as humility and integrity of heart: “Charity, chastity, humility are three queens that always go together: one cannot exist without the others.”

As a practical model of life to propose to his sons he found no better than the gentle kindness of St Francis de Sales, the gentleness of his mild and patient charity. It did not matter to Don Bosco, the son of humble peasants, that Francis was a saint from his homeland – Savoy-Piedmont – and an aristocrat, the son of princes. What mattered to him was his meekness, his gentleness that made him a living image of the Saviour. He wrote to his procurator: “Dear Fr Dalmazzo, work, but always with the gentleness of St Francis de Sales and the patience of Job.”

Our culture exalts work to the point of making a myth out of it. But it is, for the most part, a one-dimensional work, aimed at the welfare society, lived with an activist and horizontalist perspective, an end in itself. Don Bosco also exalted the dignity of work, but he did not make it an absolute, he did not put it before the dignity of the person; he made it a living expression of charity, at the service of humankind.

He conceived of it and lived it in a Christian manner, as a practical exercise of the triad of faith, hope and charity: a decidedly supernatural, sanctifying work. The enthusiasm he showed for work is rooted the depths of the theological life, in union with God.

Chapter 7 ACTION AS THE SPIRITUAL “PLACE OF ENCOUNTER” WITH GOD

Don Bosco’s life – we have noted – is traversed by prayer like the river bed by its waters. But prayer was not the only mediation by which the Saint lived in intimacy with God. Alongside the union of prayer he came to know and practise, to an equally heroic degree, what, with Libermann, we can also call “practical” or “active” union with God, which takes place in and through action. We have this description of practical action: “it is an intimate union with the Spirit in the heart of the active life, thanks to a permanent state of availability and attention to God that should lead us to think, love, will, act only under the exclusive influence of the One who has become like the soul of our soul.”

“Practical union” is, essentially, participation, in different degrees, in God’s creative and salvific action. We can distinguish three levels: apostolic, charitable, secular, which Don Bosco used as mediations to go to God and make his multifaceted activity the habitual place of his encounter with the Lord. Let us look at it briefly.

Union through apostolic activities

Don Bosco’s apostolate activities, understood in the strict sense, are distinguished from any other form of charitable activity because they were the continuation and extension of Christ’s own redemptive activity, spreading his message of salvation and communicating divine life. In this type of activity, Don Bosco worked “in persona Christi”. He was his “instrument” by virtue of his priestly ordination. This means that not only were his intentions spiritual, but spiritual was the very structure of his actions, insofar as they were a direct extension of the salvific and actual action of Christ the Saviour.

Apostolic activity thus greatly facilitates union with God. “It is enough for the apostle, so to speak, to adhere seriously to his apostolic activity so that he penetrates the supernatural order and participates in the outpouring of grace” (Ch. Bernard). All that is needed is to come out of oneself (= ecstasy) and intensely unite oneself to the action by which the risen Christ continues to accomplish the salvation of the world, in order to become attuned to Him and progressively conform to Him.

This is what the Council recommends to priests. For them to attain holiness “in their own way” it is sufficient that they exercise their proper functions “in the Spirit of Christ... sincerely and indefatigably” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* no. 13).

That the intense exercise of his apostolate – evangelisation, sacraments, prayer, etc. – was one of the great means by which Don Bosco lived intensely his union with God is beyond doubt. We have already mentioned how his priesthood was the unifying principle of his entire life. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine an apostle more identified with his mission, more present to his Lord in the exercise of his ministry.

The “friend of the young” and of the “working class”, the “forerunner of the new times” was always, first and foremost, a minister of the Lord, a conscious instrument united with divinity, a prophet of God who worked and acted in his name. Others marvelled at his works, his daring undertakings; more modestly, he considered himself to be no more than a humble instrument in the hands of the divine craftsman: “It is up to the craftsman and not the instrument to provide the means to continue them and bring them to a good end; it is up to me only to show myself docile and pliable in his hands.”

In the faithful fulfilment of his priestly duties Don Bosco lived in deep recollection with God. Everyone could see this; for example, from the way he celebrated Holy Mass and administered the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or from his way of praying.

Charitable activities

We have just mentioned the ease with which Don Bosco, a man of active life, could be united with God through apostolic action; let us add that another privileged way to live in communion with God was charitable activities. They fill the twenty volumes of the *Biographical Memoirs*. It is not our task to review them. Nor do

we intend to repeat the discourse on the dynamic charity that gave sense and substance to his efforts. We only want to mention, fleetingly, how the practice of fraternal charity was, in turn, a privileged mediation of his continuous union with God.

The fact that in the exercise of his pastoral and pedagogical charity, Don Bosco was no longer the direct extension of Christ's saving activity as in the apostolate, takes nothing away from the depth of his charity and his capacity for intimacy with God. For two essential reasons above all.

The first is to be found in the fact that every positive action towards one's neighbour, every relationship of true fraternity, is always sanctifying because it is a participation in the very action of God, who is infinite charity.

The second, because every exercise of charity is the fulfilment of Jesus' new commandment: "Love one another" (Jn 13:34).

The essence of perfection lies in charity that does not separate one's neighbour from God, the supreme source of all love.

The Christian tradition, from St Augustine to St Gregory, to St Bernard, to the modern saints, has never separated the Christian life from the commitment to charity. When faced with a choice between prayer and a certain duty of charity everyone says that the duty of charity is more urgent, because it responds to a clearer will of God (cf. Mt 25:31-46). Don Bosco always moved within this perspective. He loved God in his neighbour and his neighbour in God. He used to say: "Whoever wants to work fruitfully must have charity in his heart"; "It is the bonds of charity that hold us everywhere in the Lord". He was convinced that young people are the "delight and pupil of the divine eye" and he favoured them with boundless love: "It is precisely my life to be with you". For them he gave his "substance and life". But what moved him to love them was not just an innate tendency – which he had to a great extent – but the pastoral love of Christ that drove him to see in them the privileged place of divine love. And the closer the young people were to the Saviour through their poverty and abandonment, the more they stimulated his industrious charity. One would have said that he had the almost physical impression of seeing and touching the face of the Lord in them.

Don Bosco literally gave himself for his neighbour, but we also need to say that his neighbour – especially the young – were the sacrament in which he met the Lord

daily. It was a mutual giving and receiving that filled him with profound satisfaction: “Oh! what consolation one feels when one arrives at evening tired and exhausted of strength, having spent the whole day for the glory of God and the salvation of souls!”

Union through “secular activities”

Don Bosco made a place for his encounter with God, the way to Him even with predominantly secular activities in which his life abounded – normal and professional work, school, press, culture, etc.

First and foremost, because every activity of even a creaturely kind, as long as it is upright, is always a participation in God’s action, in his benevolent will written in things and regulating events. Christian tradition has always seen God present through his first revelation in the universe. Even professional, social, technical endeavour, being cooperation with God’s creative intention, is in itself good and can be transfigured and recapitulated in the mystery of incarnation and redemption.

We know that Don Bosco sanctified secular activities by intentionally directing them to God. The right intention was of great importance in his spirituality, in sanctified work. “It is enough sanctify work with a right intention, with acts of union with the Lord and Our Lady and by doing it as well as you can” he would say.

Everything in his life, as we have already seen, was motivated and aimed at the glory of God and the salvation of souls. This is clear, as Fr Braido points out, “from the diagnosis and judgement he formulated of his times and their needs. It is not the judgement of the peqagogue, the sociologist or the politician, but of the priest who sees everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, the glory of God and the salvation of souls.” Don Bosco did not contradict himself: even where his work seemed marked by the profane, his motivations were elevated. The interests of the Kingdom and of souls dominated everything. “Let the men of the world say that the time of the religious is past,” he confided to his Salesians, “that convents are in ruins everywhere; we want to cooperate with the Lord at any cost for the salvation of souls.” And he complained that in Paris, as in St Petersburg, London, Florence, only “armies, wars, conquests, finances” were discussed and debated. The loftiness of his intentions gave new substance to things.

The divinisation of work through the value of intention, says Teilhard de Chardin, "infuses all our actions with a precious soul". The right intention, the will to serve God alone, "is truly the golden key that opens our inner world to the presence of God. It energetically expresses the substantial value of the divine will."

Intention is a very positive value of life in the Spirit; we will be judged by the intentions of our actions. There is therefore no justification for criticism of intention, unless it is confused with a vague and unrealistic aspiration to God based on a vacuum. In his healthy realism Don Bosco did not dissociate good intentions from good works. He preferred not-so-perfect work to the good intentions which hell is paved with. He demanded that "things be done", and added: "the best possible" but he was also content with what was only possible.

Right intention was not, however, the only means by which Don Bosco sanctified secular activities. In fact he systematically took them on and experienced them as a "duty of state", an unquestionable requirement of a clear divine disposition.

Today there is a tendency to silence everything that smacks of imposition and duty. The "spirituality of duty" was very much in vogue at the time of Don Bosco. Beyond possible false interpretations, let us remember that this is a value that has lost neither its bite nor its relevance.

Indeed, it is rightly assumed that the present situation, even the profane, contains the will of God. D. Caussade writes: "God's order is the fullness of all our moments; it expresses itself under a thousand different appearances that necessarily become our present duty, and form, make the new man grow in us to the fullness that divine Wisdom has established for us."

The more the gaze of faith, hope and love discerns God's presence in things, the easier it will be to surrender to his will in the present moment. Don Bosco lived in and from this perspective. In fact he considered duty well done as the surest and easiest mediation to achieve practical union with God.

Hence his proverbial and almost continuous insistence to disciples and young people that "God sees you", his insistence on the need to live and work "in" the presence of God: "This thought of God's presence [here and now] must accompany us at all times, in every place, in every action." "Let each one perform the duties of his office in the presence of God."

Don Bosco's spirituality was definitely, if not exclusively, a spirituality of duty. This is authoritatively affirmed by Fr Caviglia: “Precision in duty is, for Don Bosco, the first article of all holiness, the first postulate of spirituality... Those who know the holy Educator more closely know that this concept was at the basis of all his educational work, as much in the setting of ordinary life as in the spiritual. He did not believe in displays of piety unless they were confirmed by the diligent and conscientious observance of their respective duties.”

At this point we can go a step further and ask the question: did Don Bosco, who gave so much importance to work and activity in general, give them an internal value, regardless of the upright intention and the will to perform a specific duty? In other words, did he perceive that even profane activities can orient themselves to God from within – as long as they are upright ones – because of their consistency and relative autonomy? These are modern perspectives that traditional spirituality did not pose. But insofar as it is true that those who are guided only by “good intentions” hardly avoid a certain dichotomy or separation between spiritual life on the one hand and active life on the other, we should find some trace of this division in Don Bosco.

Saints such as Augustine, Gregory the Great and many others, including Cafasso himself, always felt, at the height of their activity, a strong nostalgia for time devoted to prayer. Nothing similar can be found in Don Bosco's life. When at night, with Mamma Margaret, he mended the rips in the clothes that the youngsters had made during the day, he did not regret other more priestly work, he did not appear torn between prayer and action, he did not feel a longing to be elsewhere. He accepted the profane and transfigures it, with what Fr Viganò happily calls “the grace of unity”, which is a single movement of charity towards God and towards neighbour.

“In this grace of unity,” explains this authoritative interpreter of the saint's thought, “we find the strategic element of the Salesian interior life. Unity between what? Unity between his gaze on God – adoration, listening, prayer – and the commitment to salvation that he launches among the young, in such a way, however, that this commitment is not a distraction from that gaze, and that the gaze is not an evasion from the commitment, but that the one nourishes the other; the one is the support, the moment of search and reference for the other. It is easier said than practised, we are all convinced of that; but Don Bosco lived it this way.”

The "grace of unity" can be said to be the core of his spirituality. A spirituality that does not sacrifice prayer to action and action to prayer. However, between an apostolic, charitable and humanising urgency and prolonged prayer, Don Bosco's charism led him to choose action, in which he saw a precise divine will. But it must also be said that he was so united to God in action that he did not regret prayer; and he was so united to God in prayer that he did not regret action. Action and prayer were truly lived as converging moments of an intense theological life of which pastoral charity was the synthesis. Don Bosco showed that he was at ease in the city of God and in the city of man because he lived his immersion in God in both.

Let us repeat: it is not the quantity of prayer that decides holiness, just as it is not the quantity of action, but the degree of intensity of faith, hope and charity, a degree subordinated to God's will, the supreme rule of our praying and acting. When God's will calls to prayer we must pray, when it calls to action we must act.

Chapter 8 SUPERIOR GIFTS

To speak of Don Bosco's mystical life is an extremely demanding undertaking that exceeds the limits of this work. We limit ourselves to a few brief tentative suggestions that we hope will not be in vain, even if, in some respects, they are debatable.

Ecstasy of action

In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, St Francis de Sales takes up the classical distinction of the three ecstasies: "as to sacred ecstasies, they are of three kinds; the one of them belongs to the understanding, another to the affection, and the third to action. The one is in splendour, the other in fervour, the third in works: the one is made by admiration, the other by devotion, and the third by operation". The first two do not have the solidity of the third because they can be falsified and end up turning us in the wrong direction.

"When therefore we see a soul that has raptures in prayer, by which she goes out from and mounts above herself in God, and yet has no ecstasy in her life, that is, leads not a life elevated and united to God... it is a true mark that such raptures and ecstasies are but operations and deceits of the evil spirit."

Unfortunately, the saint does not go into the explanation of the "ecstasy of action" but clearly expresses his thoughts in this description that is considered classic. Let us read it while keeping our eye fixed on Don Bosco.

Not to steal, not to lie, not to commit impurity, to pray to God, not to swear in vain, to love and honour one's father, not to kill, —is to live according to man's natural reason: but to forsake all our goods, to love poverty, to call her and to consider her a most delightful mistress, to repute reproaches, contempts, abjections, persecutions, martyrdoms, as felicities and beatitudes, to contain oneself within the terms of a most absolute chastity, and in fine to live, amidst the world and in this mortal life, contrary to all

the opinions and maxims of the world, and against the current of the river of this life, by habitual resignations, renunciations, and abnegation of ourselves;—this is not to live in ourselves, but out of and above ourselves; and because no one is able to go out of himself in this manner above himself unless the eternal Father draw him, hence it is that this kind of life is a perpetual rapture, and a continual ecstasy of action and operation. “You are dead,” said the great Apostle to the Colossians, “and your life is hid with Christ in God.”

As we can see, “the ecstasy of action” or “of life” is nothing less than Christian existence perfectly in accordance with the law of the Gospel, charity lived in its fullness; supreme detachment from self and full absorption in God; life that, by divine virtue, is elevated above itself and lived to the highest possible perfection, far beyond what the ordinary Christian does.

The term “ecstasy of action” is not found in Don Bosco’s vocabulary. It is doubtful that he encountered it; and if he did, it left no trace in his mind. St Francis’ name does not appear in the list of authors he read in the seminary. Whether or how much he read about him in the *Convitto* is unknown. Yet the Bishop of Geneva’s description of the “ecstasy of action” finds full adherence in his life. It is remarkable that two of his successors, Fr Philip Rinaldi and Fr Egidio Viganò, saw a typical expression of the “spirituality of Don Bosco” in this doctrine of St Francis de Sales.

And this both because the pastoral charity which animated him, led him continually to “come out of himself” and identify with the Redeemer’s saving love, and because his whole life was truly the faithful expression of what St Francis de Sales has to say about the ecstasy of action. What in fact was that heroic self-denial, continuous dominion of his passions, radical adhesion to and the following of the chaste, humble, poor Christ, that slow consuming of himself in his work to save souls and constant search for God’s will and glory, if not the “superhuman” and “ecstatic” life to which the Father raises the souls he prefers, because they live “all absorbed and as if absorbed in God?” This “ecstasy of life”, per se, does not involve ecstatic manifestations of which Don Bosco’s life was, however, not entirely exempt.

Ecstatic phenomena

These phenomena are characterised by a strong absorption in God and by lengthy, intense suspension of the external senses that seem to be powerless to deal with the irruption of the divine. Don Bosco's strong character led him to dominate the fire of love burning inside him and not to let his feelings seep out.

But in his later years, as reliable testimony shows, he also experienced ecstatic phenomena that usually accompany the highest degrees of prayer. They could be glimpsed in moments of deepest recollection. Fr Cerruti testified at the information process that

when his head ached and his distraught chest and half-dull eyes no longer allowed him to keep himself busy, it was a painful and comforting sight to see him spend long hours sitting on his poor sofa, in a sometimes semi-dark place because his eyes did not suffer light, yet he was always calm and smiling, rosary in hand, prayer on his lips and his hands raised from time to time in a silent language that manifested his union and entire conformity to the will of God. He was too tired to express it in words. I am intimately convinced that his life, in his last years especially, was one continuous prayer to God.

Moments of true ecstasy seized Don Bosco when he celebrated Holy Mass or while he was alone in the quiet of his room. In the winter of 1878 the two young men who were serving Mass in the chapel near his room at the elevation "noticed", we read in the *Biographical Memoirs*,

Don Bosco was in ecstasy, his face suffused with a heavenly expression which seemed to flood the whole chapel with light. By degrees Don Bosco's feet left the altar platform, so that he remained suspended in air for some ten minutes. The two altar boys could not reach up to his chasuble. In utter bewilderment Garrone dashed out to call Father Berto but could not find him. On coming back he saw that Don Bosco was just descending, so that his feet once more touched the floor, but a heavenly aura still seemed to hover about the altar.

Sometimes his body was transfigured and became luminous, as we read of many saints. For three late evenings, Fr Lemoyne saw Don Bosco's face gradually light up until it took on a luminous transparency: the whole face had a strong, transparent radiance.

As we said, these paramystical phenomena usually accompany the mystical state, infused contemplation. Don Bosco had this gift, but was it "the feeling of entering, not by virtue of an effort, but of an appeal, into immediate contact, without image, without speech, but not without light, with an infinite Goodness?" (Leoncius of Grandmaison)

It is not easy to answer with a hasty yes or no given the almost total absence of any description by Don Bosco of his inner states. Fr Ceria believes it and tries to prove it in the chapter of his *Don Bosco with God* entitled "The Gift of prayer". Fr Stella, although more nuanced and reticent, comes to the same conclusion when he writes

Although Don Bosco does not entrust us with his personal experiences of recollection and a unitive state of prayer, and although he does not offer us a theory on unitive prayer and contemplation, nevertheless he shows himself willing to explain certain states of spiritual life found in people with whom he lived as union and loving presence.

We can think, for example, of St Dominic Savio endowed with "'graces" that Don Bosco did not hesitate to define as "special", and of "extraordinary" facts that have "full resemblance to facts recorded in the Bible and in the lives of the saints". Don Bosco associates them with mystical graces when he says, "The innocence of his life, his love of God and great desire for the things of God so developed Dominic's mind that he came to be habitually united with God." What is said here of the disciple applies, with more reason, to the master

A mystic of action

Was Don Bosco a mystic in his multifaceted activity in the strong sense of the word? Mysticism has a long history and does not always have unambiguous definitions. Objectively it designates the hidden reality of the Christian mystery; subjectively it indicates the totally gratuitous and infused experience of the divine life within us.

Traditionally, the mystical life culminates in the grace of infused prayer, or contemplation in the narrow sense. However, it is recognised that the typology of mystical life is more extensive. In fact, one can also speak of “apostolic mysticism”, which is “less well known because the ‘apostolic’ mystics did not make a theology of their inner life. It tends towards action and the perception of God’s presence in the historical world” (Ch. Bernard).

In this precise and formal sense we say that Don Bosco is a mystic, because his life was spent under the habitual regime of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: he is a mystic of apostolic action, because the gifts of the Holy Spirit that take the upper hand in him are those ordered to action – the gift of counsel, fortitude, piety and the fear of God. The prevalence of these gifts over the others, which are not excluded, only means that grace adapts to nature, respects its temperament and vocations.

Unlike contemplative, intellectual or affective mystics who lose themselves in God found in the depths of their soul and experience divine action, Don Bosco, an active mystic, grasped and experienced God not only in certain moments of explicit prayer, but in the very exercise of apostolic, charitable, humanising action; he touched and felt him while he participated and collaborated in the implementation of his saving plan.

Don Bosco knew that redemption is an ongoing event: God is at work, at every moment, in the heart of human beings and history: humanity lives in God’s today. This reality was not only what he believed, but what he intensely experienced and lived. What the mystics call the divine “touches” the “visits” of the Word who comes and goes, were Don Bosco’s great perspectives, the sudden flashes of inspiration that enlightened him regarding the coming of the Kingdom and committed him to ever greater and humanly impossible undertakings.

Because it was mystical – that is, the result of the prevalence of divine action – Don Bosco’s actions transcended the strengths and capacities of his person. His works astounded the world and confounded the wise because there was no apparent relationship between cause and effect; Don Bosco, moved and possessed by God, went beyond the human.

There was the boldness and daring of the saint in him who surpasses himself through strength from the power of God. Just as Jesus rejoiced in the prayer of jubilation, so Don Bosco thrilled with mystical consolation when he contemplated God at work in the hearts of the young and the world.

We have seen how humbly he experienced the knowledge that he was but the passive/active instrument in the hands of God and his Mother: "God does everything; Our Lady does everything." What "could poor Don Bosco do if some special help did not come from heaven at every moment?"

These and similar expressions are like a cross-section of his great soul: they say much more than they let one glimpse in their good-natured simplicity.

The mysticism of action passes, naturally, through pain; it lives from crucified charity and knows the "nights of the senses and the spirit."

CONCLUSION

What is not surprising in Don Bosco is that the interpenetration of the divine took place in a life marked more by action than by explicit prayer.

An action, however, that does not get lost in the alienation of efficiency and horizontalism, because it has God as its beginning, content and end, and in Don Bosco's hands it becomes a *scala paradisi*, a mystical ladder for ascending to the divine.

Christians of our time happily recognise themselves in Don Bosco, just as they happily recognise themselves in St Francis of Assisi, St Ignatius and the other giants of holiness.

As reported by Walter Nigg, Michael Baumgarten wrote: "There are times when speeches and writings are no longer sufficient to make the necessary truth generally comprehensible. In such times, the actions and sufferings of the saints must create a new alphabet to reveal the secret of truth anew. The present is such a time."

The alphabet created by Don Bosco, we are convinced, is undoubtedly a valid signal and message for human beings today.

