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**In those days Mary set out and went with haste... (Lk 1:39)**

**Spiritual experience is the soul of pastoral activity**

The first thing that Mary did

 after receiving the Angel’s message

 was to go “in haste” to the house of her cousin Elizabeth

in order to be of service to her (cf. *Lk* 1:39).

The Virgin’s initiative

 was one of genuine charity; it was humble and courageous,

motivated by her faith in God’s word,

 and by the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Those who love forget about themselves

 and place themselves at the service of their neighbour.

Here we have the image and model of the Church!

Every Ecclesial Community, like the Mother of Christ,

 is called to accept with total generosity

 the mystery of God who comes to dwell within her

 and guides her steps in the ways of love.

*Pope Benedict XVI*

25 March, 2006

My dear confreres,

I warmly greet you as I offer this reflection introducing the General Council’s ***Six-Year Project for 2025-2031.***

I would like to present this ***Project*** starting with a sentence from the Gospel that acts as a bridge between two significant experiences that are almost spontaneously linked: the Annunciation to Mary and her visit to Elizabeth to offer her service: “**Mary set out and went in haste**” (Lk 1:39).

My desire to comment on this sentence stems from what I am experiencing and feeling in these first months of my ministry as Rector Major. I see a parallel emerging more and more clearly between the experience of the Spirit that we had during GC29 and these first months of the six-year term. I seem to see a living icon in Mary’s dynamic experience that is very relevant for us, an icon that becomes light and a source of encouragement.

We experienced weeks where the main protagonist was the Holy Spirit of God. Many participants expressed the belief (or at least the perception) that his presence gave a different tone to the work of GC29. This presence was not only invoked in prayer, but was sought, felt and recognised through the various moments we experienced, the conversations we shared and the decisions we made together.

I would now like to comment on three attitudes that can help us live the choices we have proposed and the paths we want to follow well, and with pastoral intelligence. I trust that they will become ways of life so that our community life, together with our pastoral proposals, may become a reflection of God’s own initiative in us, for us and through us. I hope that our response will be the mature fruit of that continuous listening to God’s will that nourishes our being servants of young people. It is in this dynamic that our consecration finds its authentic identity.

I entrust you with these reflections of mine, these absolute convictions that I hold deep within my heart. Do not expect a theological or pedagogical treatise, I don’t intend to do this. It is more like a good night – a little longer but a family sharing. Let us help each other and help me to make them true, to live them together in the same spirit.

**LISTENING** – **AVAILABILITY** – **GENEROSITY**: these are the three attitudes on which I invite you to reflect and which I encourage you to prioritise. Three attitudes that must be rooted and cultivated in a free heart so that they may then mature within the Salesian educative and pastoral experience. Only in this way can the contribution of every Salesian of Don Bosco truly become a precious gift shared within our Educative and Pastoral Communities (EPCs) for the benefit of young people, especially the poorest.

1. **LISTENING**

In a culture that now seems to be focused and concentrated solely on seeing, on being fast and fleeting, our eyes darting from one place to another, we seek the call that brings the Good News with it to help us recover the dimension of listening. The ancients said that faith comes from listening. This remains absolutely true and valid even for us today. The testimony that communicates the gospel cannot be replaced by a video, a drawing, an outward appearance. If seeing is like standing in front of a window or a screen and everything happens in front of us, it may seem that today it is enough for us to see what is in front of us, allowing ourselves to be superficially impressed. And we delude ourselves that we can truly “know” things just because we have seen them once, and perhaps not even looked at them closely. Seeing alone is not enough; it only gives us facts and figures. We need to listen carefully, calmly and deeply. Without listening, we cannot “understand”, interpret or grasp the meaning of events and their call to action.

Mary, who set out and hastened to serve, first experienced listening. It is from this experience of listening that Mary holds a profound and divinely saving truth. Mary, listening to the Word, welcomes the Word.

Her attitude of listening asks Mary to take the path of discipleship, and thus becomes a participant in God’s plan. Her listening is synonymous with obeying – *ob-audire.* Mary allows herself to be attracted by the Word, accepting being involved, entering into the mystery that is revealed to her. In Mary, the truth that is revealed to her and the freedom that already marked her come together. Truth and freedom: and here, faith is born. Faith as a true relationship. Faith marked by the Word, as a relationship with itself, with God and with others.

Mary does not ask for “proof” at the angel’s announcement; she does not ask to be shown the “reasonableness” or the meaning so that she can first see, understand and possess. She follows the voice and sets out. She listens and obeys, and so the truth that is Christ in her occurs: the incarnation of Christ. The miracle occurs that causes the mother to move towards her cousin because listening makes the mother similar to her son. Listening becomes mission, dedication to brothers and sisters. Listening immediately leads to giving oneself for their good, to dying for them, to giving one’s life for the lives of others.

In contemplating this first point, dear brothers, let us make an effort to return to that listening which is the source of life. Listening as an attitude that we live and renew every day so that our encounter with the Word may have the power to give birth to a true journey. We acknowledge that this journey nourished by the Word is difficult because it invites us to set out, to be disciples, to detach ourselves from what makes us less free. A movement that does not expect to see immediate results, that does not seek false certainty about what will happen. A journey that does not leave us as passive spectators.

**Listening to God**

So, first of all, let’s start listening to God. His word is a creative word. It is not just a collection of sounds; there is no confusion or falsehood in the word of God. It is the pure power of the one who creates a new world and draws us into dialogue so that those who truly listen may share in the joy of their Lord.

It is the difficult path of discernment, of making room for a voice that blows softly like a gentle breeze and is often drowned out by the many voices and distractions of our daily lives. And this is a continuous temptation for us Salesians. Being caught up in so many concerns, just and generous ones, but which risk distancing us from the voice of the Master.

The voice of God’s messenger cannot be heard without training in silence and meditation. We do not have much information about Mary before Gabriel’s call, but tradition has always told us about a girl who, from an early age, was taught to listen to God. Presented at the temple as a young girl, she preserved the ability to leave space in her day for silence, which is not simply an absence of sound, but a vessel for God’s words. In this way, the angel can come forward and make himself heard in the space created by prayer.

Our father Don Bosco also struggled every day to find silence, despite the many trials and commitments that occupied him. Before and after Holy Mass, during meditation, he always sought silence because only then could he hear the voice of God and Mary urging him to carry on with his mission.

Here, then, is the importance of daily meditation for the Salesian. It is not so much a practice to be placed alongside all the others, that is, one of the various ways of praying that we can have and that we can replace with others that are more appropriate or more beautiful or more practical. Meditation is the soul of personal and communal prayer because it goes to the heart of prayer itself: it trains us to listen. God speaks always and continuously; the Word does not leave his disciples in silence, but always seeks a space that only listening can give.

**Listening to our neighbour**

So the other place of listening is our neighbour, in the awareness that every brother and sister is the image of Christ, his beloved members, the presence of the Son of God on earth.

So Mary sets out in haste because the Angel’s words urge her to continue, to go and listen to the words of those who need her most, because only in this way will she continue to listen to God. Then the Annunciation will not be an isolated event, experienced in an intimate way, but a journey that continues and fills an entire life, one’s own and that of the people one meets and serves.

Mary will do so with Elizabeth, but also in Cana and then with the disciples in the Upper Room. Mary will always be with the least among us, as her apparitions over the past two millennia prove. Mary is with the little ones, with those in need, because that is where she is with her Son, and that is how she continues to listen and to transmit his voice.

From this listening arises true and authentic discernment, which becomes spiritual practice lived in faith, because Christ, who is born in our hearts, continues to speak to us through the poor, through the most needy and abandoned young people. This is the reality that speaks of God and that shows us the mission today. Therefore, we need a community of believers who live by listening, a community that walks together, listening and responding to the cry of the poor – a *synodal Church.* In this experience, listening does not become mere sociological analysis, but an apostolic mission and a divine calling.

How urgent it is for all of us to realise that only if we listen to God, truly and sincerely, can we listen to our brothers and sisters, and can we respond in an educational and pastoral way that is full of compassion, hope and future.

**Listening has its challenges**

**Primacy of the Word over words**

The entire Scripture is permeated by the command to listen, because it is through listening that we enter into God’s life and, above all, allow God to enter into our lives, which is the only way for us to truly live. Listening, therefore, is the most appropriate way to relate to God, and it translates into prayer, which is its natural form of expression, and in which our authentic self, the truth about ourselves and our deepest vocation, is realised.

We will hear the cry of young people and listen to God’s plan for us only if we enter into the true dynamic of listening, which is not primarily investigation and study, but availability and openness. Listening therefore means discernment, vigilance, readiness, action.

Listening is always the beginning of a journey that, as it did for Mary, matures in a total opening of the heart, and precisely for this reason it does not hide the turmoil and the questions that it raises in her. Yet this turmoil does not preclude her availability to God, who chose her, freely accepting his plan. Pope Francis explains the true meaning of this call when he says that “We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence. [...] we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realise ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 264).

We need to learn to internalise, to take time to listen and not immediately try to take action. Action is sometimes overrated. The first step in acting is silence and listening. Only in this way does the seed bear fruit. If not, every action leaves only frustration and inner emptiness. We need to give time to listening, we need to persevere in it, fighting against the temptations of haste, of wanting everything immediately, where the Word is stifled.

**Regular, systematic, “systemic” frequency**

Material and environmental difficulties will always be present: noise, lack of silence, a place not conducive to contemplation. In addition, there is the danger of entering a vicious circle that gradually encourages overestimation of action, giving rise to the feeling that time spent in silence and listening is wasted.

In this situation, we lose sight of the truth that mission is not just about taking action, but first and foremost about nurturing a dynamic spiritual identity that responds to the vocation we have received. In the absence of such conviction, various concerns, distractions, and ultimately fatigue and disillusionment take over. It is important to understand the roots and reasons behind the fatigue that many of us experience after a period of frenetic activism. We need to take a fresh look at those choices that have underestimated or even rejected the space for silence and prayer.

1. **AVAILABILITY AND OPENNESS OF THE HEART**

Listening, then, moves the heart. Like sound waves, it widens and opens up new horizons. It asks for a space for resonance which, before immediately becoming action, is emptying of the heart and openness to obedience, just like a handkerchief in God’s hands, a recurring image in spiritual life.

Firstly, then, availability means leaving it up to God to take the initiative to create a space within our hearts that he can possess. Availability is emptying oneself, it is passivity, it is the path of *kenosis* of the person, who must imitate his Lord precisely in leaving all initiative to the Father.

Charity is so similar to Jesus, not because it is a specific action, but because it is pure imitation of Christ’s own willingness, who did not consider anything of his own person a treasure to jealously guard. Christ emptied himself so that he could act as the Risen One.

So Mary must learn to put aside her own desires and dreams and go to Elizabeth with complete openness, that is, with a heart empty of herself. Filled with Christ, Mary thus flows into the charity of the *Magnificat*. She must help Elizabeth not simply on her own initiative, nor out of a sense of duty to her relative or out of simple kindness, but because she forgets herself and allows her actions to be dictated by someone other than herself, by that Jesus whom she already carries within her.

When faced with the angel’s announcement, Mary does not negotiate or ask for confirmation, nor does she ask what her task will be or what her role will be. Mary is not worried about her “doing”. She gives her whole heart and her whole self, without conditions. She submits herself in an act of faith and humility, offering her willingness to participate in the plan of salvation. Mary opens her “womb” in total trust, welcoming the Word, thus becoming a divine instrument for the future events of the history of salvation.

With her consent, Mary accepted the dignity and honour of Divine Motherhood, but also the sufferings and sacrifices associated with it. She accepted that her identity was in the hands of the Son, unconditionally. As a handmaid, she places herself in a position of total availability to her Lord, putting him before any claim or right for herself.

Mary understood the greatness of God and our human “nothingness”. Because of her humility, she was rightly surprised to hear the angel’s praise: “Greetings, favoured one,” and with the same humility she would accept whatever life would bring her, even the dramatic events of the cross. Thus, the sword that would pierce her soul is nothing other than the culmination of her *kenosis*, of her journey of self-emptying in imitation of her Son. It is not simply the suffering of a mother who sees her Son die, but the co-suffering of the Virgin who finds her definition in being wholly Mother of the Crucified Christ and nothing else.

**First towards the Other, then towards the other**

Only this path of total openness to God leads to true charity towards others. Although it is often said that loving others is like loving Christ, and although the Gospel affirms this in a decisive and peremptory manner, this passage identifying the poor with Christ is not at all easy.

The great saints of charity are aware that charity is not simply love for humanity, but sharing in the very life of God, or even more, God dwelling in our lives. The life of Saint Teresa of Calcutta is an example of this: the most famous contemporary saint of charity towards the poor maintained her strong dedication to others thanks to incessant prayer, consisting of long daily adoration and constant union with God.

Don Bosco’s love for young people had no other cause than his being “consecrated” for them. The nine-year-old’s dream is a journey of re-centring young John’s charity, shifting not only from blows to gentleness, but above all from carrying out charitable acts for his peers in a way that emphasises personal initiative, to embracing Christ’s charity, learned precisely from the Teacher he provided for him.

**Contemplating, not just analysing**

It is consecration that establishes the apostolate, because it is our identity as consecrated persons that allows Christ’s charity to take hold of us and make us ‘in the Church It is consecration that establishes the apostolate, because it is our identity as consecrated persons that allows Christ's charity to take hold of us and make us “in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially the poorest of them.” (C. 2)

Thus, our projects are not so much the result of strategy, observation of reality, or generous impulses for the good of others, but above all the fruit of contemplation, that is, of taking God’s point of view regarding ourselves, others, and the world.

Contemplation comes from true personal and communal prayer, from a mature discernment of God’s will in order to understand what he calls us to be and to do for the good of others.

Thus, pastoral action for the good of others, like Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, springs from intimate prayer, a “cor ad cor loquitur” – the heart speaking to the heart (St Francis de Sales). Action, then, is the continuation of the relationship that is founded on and flows from faith and love. It is breathing the Holy Spirit, it is coming out of oneself to enter into a Trinitarian relationship in which God himself speaks to our hearts and inspires our actions towards others.

At its deepest root, therefore, every pastoral project, every act of charity that we wish to carry out would be superficial if it were not the fruit of a vocation, of a call from the Father, which causes the Son to empty himself and thus gives space to the action of the Spirit within us and through us. It is essential to foster the genuine movement that drives our proposals and processes, a movement that begins with our love for God as a response, “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts” (Rom 5:5).

Contemplation and knowledge of God, meditation and pastoral planning, therefore, mean seeking the face of God and seeking it in our brothers and sisters, in those we meet, in those who call us to help, in those who cry out with their need. Contemplation, then, is to take on God’s gaze, to see as God sees, and thus to have the same feelings as Jesus, the only one who sees and knows the Father, and always does his will. Can the disciple perhaps be more than the Master, living other ways of making the Kingdom grow?

How frequent and painful it is to see the danger of pastoral commitment that is not rooted in a life of prayer and in welcoming the Spirit of Jesus into our hearts. We know very well that when this happens, that is, when we stop listening to God, we end up in a labyrinth of relentless activism.

**Transcending boundaries**

Such openness **transcends boundaries**: geographical, cultural, psychological and religious. True availability is always an “exodus”, a departure from oneself, from one’s own patterns, from one’s own spiritual language. It does not fear difference, but rather seeks it out and welcomes it, because it recognises in others a brother or sister.

Mary must leave her home to “make true” the announcement she believed in and to which she gave herself. One could almost say that not only did the announcement she received prompt her to go to Elizabeth, but in a certain sense, if she had not gone to her cousin, the announcement would not have been completely true because the grace she received would not have been fully fruitful.

Charity makes us go beyond ourselves and thus breaks down barriers and distances. The charity that moves us does not “adapt” to our culture, but purifies it and creates a new one. If it is true that no charism, no power of faith can exist unless it is embodied in a culture, it is also true that no culture can limit the power of God’s call and his charity. Indeed, it is faith itself that purifies our worldview, our categories, our visions, and creates new ones.

This is why a Congregation such as ours finds its unity in its charism and sees diversity within and outside itself as an opportunity for greater unity, because it is God’s diversity and unity that make us what we are.

Every view we have of the world is limited and limiting. Each of us has a limit beyond which we do not want to go or beyond which we see only negativity, hostility, danger, uncertainty, futility and threats. Only God’s call to total availability, only contemplating the world through the eyes of the Spirit, makes even the unknown “our home”.

Every “beyond” that sometimes seems impossible to reach is nothing more than a home we have not yet visited, and every stranger who appears on the horizon is nothing more than a brother or sister we have not yet met. There is no place or person in the universe where God is not present, where God does not sustain us and call us to share God’s own charity as one family and one Church.

This applies both in space and in fraternal relationships, as well as in time: there is no future that is not in God’s hands, and any attachment to the past is a betrayal of the availability we have vowed to give to God.

So I cannot stand still, but must push ahead even to the extent of recklessness (a word we Salesians know well because it was the style of our Founder, and also of various confreres who were pioneers and prophets), and do what God is asking of me. The heart cannot stop beating if it understands that God is calling it and that Mary has that grace ready for us, which may open up new horizons, as Patagonia did at the beginning. These are horizons that we cannot ignore.

Borders are broken down and we can leave to go to the other side of the world because the prompting that comes from within has no limits and has no half measures. It is not enough to go only as far as our strength, measured by earthly standards, promises to take us, but we must plan what is incomprehensible by human standards and go as far as God’s urging demands.

This is why a son of 19th-century peasant farmers like Don Bosco kept a globe on his desk and used it to measure the scope of his projects: because he had to go as far as God’s charity went, he had to go to “die”, to give his life for all those to whom Christ first gave his.

**As a response from the depths**

Mary, then, cannot stay at home. There is a kind of inner force that drives her to action, which arises precisely from contemplation and openness: Mary has no doubts, she does not put up obstacles: it is from the depths of her being, from the place where her conscience encounters God’s call, that she feels that everything is urging her forward on her journey.

As was the case for Don Bosco (who could not remain in the home he had worked so hard to acquire), so it is for us too, and within us, the grace we have received takes the form of a divine gift, certainly free, but no less binding for that.

God’s grace, the vocational call, the request for complete availability is made by God to bind us to himself. Not the kind of bond that prevents freedom from existing, but the kind that guarantees freedom can function properly. He asks us to be available to one another, being made for the gift, that is, for a gratuitousness that binds us to him, freeing us and opening up space for faith, which alone can fill the empty heart of those who obey God.

**Availability and openness have their challenges**

**A reduced view of reality**

In a circular letter in 1885, Don Bosco wrote that Salesians must obey not because they are commanded to do so, but for a higher reason: the greater glory of God. This is the spirit that underpins our obedience, availability and openness of heart. It is not a bureaucratic issue, made up of rules and regulations, and it cannot be resolved by simply applying them precisely. And that is why it is even more demanding. It requires a genuine adherence of the heart to the heart of the superior and, through him and the Congregation, to the very heart of God.

Thus, the family atmosphere, far from being a simple outward affection, is a binding bond of the heart and will, in total self-giving, that is, in renouncing the control of our own selves in order to allow ourselves to be truly and freely controlled by the One who has taken possession of our lives because we have believed in Him.

However, today availability is challenged on several fronts. The unavailable “I” presses to impose its own view of the world, of itself and of life, and it does so from its narrow point of observation, believing that this is the place from which the whole truth can be seen or revealed. But the whole truth, as the Gospel reminds us, cannot be seen unless one is filled with the Holy Spirit, and one cannot be filled with the Spirit unless one is empty of oneself.

And so the unavailable person has a narrow view of reality, thinks he knows the truth about things, and plans his life and pastoral action by limiting it to his partial perspective. He fails to realise that there is much more beyond his horizon, reducing everything to what he can see, measure and plan within the limits of his personal experience.

When we stop believing that there is a “beyond” and we stop letting ourselves be led out of ourselves by the charity that moves us, we lose the tension of waiting for the Son, and our missionary work becomes just something to be managed.

One cannot go to Patagonia unless one allows God to open or widen one’s eyes. But not going and not wanting to see distorts who we are and prevents the branch from bearing fruit because it is disconnected from the vine that nourishes it and gives it the strength to grow beyond its wildest dreams. And this is a project that is completely out of reach with our own resources alone.

The six-year project, like our houses’ and provinces’ SEPP, is not a bureaucratic document describing what we could do according to our ideas, but a tool for sharing and community discernment to see beyond and obey God’s will.

**Self-referentiality and individualism**

We are facing challenges which, if not addressed, risk consolidating a distorted view of reality. We often delude ourselves that in our spiritual life and in the mission entrusted to us, we must first look to ourselves and only then to others, as if they were merely customers to whom we give what is ours. If we are used to measuring ourselves only by what we do, think or achieve, we end up fixating on ourselves or looking down on ourselves, deluding ourselves into thinking that we know ourselves better and see more of ourselves. Instead, we are called to look up and go towards the other.

Mary does not stop to reflect, she does not give herself time to understand what has happened, what she has become, what the consequences are. Mary quickly sets off and refocuses her whole life on Elizabeth’s need.

If we defend our image and prioritise our beliefs with the tenacity of a fighter, we end up fighting for nothing, achieving nothing. We base our security on the belief that we are doing what “we want”, whereas it is much safer for us to try to do what the Other wants.

The “mission” is not a private good that we share among ourselves. The mission is by definition communal because it is Trinitarian, that is, it belongs to God, not to our ideas and plans. We are not together because it is easier or more convenient, but we are together because I can only be myself by giving myself radically to the other, emptying myself for the community, being communion and thus making communion with everyone.

True availability is consecration, self-expropriation rooted in the courage to question oneself, to renounce oneself, even when this appears to be a loss. It is the dynamic of *kenosis* that bears fruit, of setting off quickly for the mountains even though perhaps I myself would need someone’s help to understand who I am and what will become of me.

**Horizontal reading and interpretation of the mission**

We cannot afford to reduce our mission to the educational and promotional tasks of an NGO or non-profit organisation. The mission that is offered to us as our vocation is the continuation of the mission of the Saviour sent by the Father, and its horizon is Paradise, as Don Bosco often reminded his boys and represented iconically in the painting of Mary Help of Christians in the Basilica at Valdocco.

Our educational task cannot be limited to a social service or a purely human project, however worthy, valuable and essential these may be. We are educators and evangelisers, always, if not always in action, then in our intentions, in what animates and sustains us. The unique and indispensable source of all our work of education and evangelisation springs from a personal encounter with Christ. For this reason, from the very beginning, every educational process must draw inspiration from the Gospel, and evangelisation must adapt to the evolving condition of young people. With a distinctive formula that is not just a play on words, we educate by evangelising and evangelise by educating: understanding and living this is a guarantee that we are working within the Church.

We are aware that we are called to educate and evangelise mindsets, languages, customs and institutions, and this is only possible if we are enlightened by the Gospel, called by grace and driven by the Spirit. Only with a clear evangelical and charismatic identity can we encounter young people, all young people, “at their present stage of freedom” (C. 38).

Mary does not go to Elizabeth simply because she believes that her elderly cousin needs her help, given her particular condition, but because everything in her is real and takes shape within a vision of charity, that is, of dedication to others, with Christ as her example, the Spirit as her vision and the Father as her ultimate destination. The visitation is not a gesture of kindness, but a decision that anticipates the way of being of the Son, who is already acting in the womb to conform his Mother to himself.

Even in the dream at age 9: the mission comes from Jesus and the form comes from Mary. The knowledge and obedience that young John must put into practice are not in relation to the needs of humanity, but rather an obedient response to God’s will, that is, to his mission of salvation for humanity.

**Conditional on results**

Finally, there is a very subtle but ever-present temptation: that of making availability conditional on results. We remain open as long as there are answers, results and recognition. But the availability of the heart cannot be a performance. If the root of availability is a *kenosis* on the part of the disciple, we must always remember that the measure of the mission and its success is that of the cross and not of worldly triumph.

Availability is a gift that must be cherished, exercised and invoked. It is a form of love that understands that one must die to save one’s own life and the lives of others. The gospel cannot be considered something superfluous, like spiritual make-up or a beautiful ornament, which, in the end, we could do without. On the other hand, success can only be understood through the lens of the Paschal Mystery. Bread must always be broken before it becomes nourishment for the way of the world.

So even our mission cannot be based only on statistics, numbers, quantities of all kinds. The Salesian is called to give his life, and this is not just a figure of speech. Availability empties oneself even from oneself, and death can only be defeated by sharing in the same death as Christ. Once again, a sword must pierce the heart of the Virgin Mother, because her identity and mission cannot be different from those of the Son she carries in her womb.

Don Bosco’s closeness to God and the intense love for his neighbour that flowed from it cannot be explained without reference to a profound asceticism characterised by sacrifice, detachment, self-forgetfulness and patience.

Far beyond the facile triumphalism that often distorts his image, the saint shows his true face as an authentic disciple of the Crucified One, bent under the weight of unheard-of crosses that tear his heart apart. Don Bosco’s life, Fr Ceria says, “was entirely strewn with sharp thorns”: misunderstandings, conflicts, persecution, even assassination attempts, financial hardship; and then physical ailments so serious that his doctor said that “after about 1880, his body was almost reduced to a walking pathology cabinet.”

Yet, “he never lost his serenity; indeed, it seemed that precisely in times of tribulation he acquired greater courage, since he was seen as more cheerful and jovial than usual.” Nor did he ask to be freed from his ills. The reason for such disconcerting behaviour, Fr Ceria explains, is relatively simple: “Physical sufferings accepted with such perfect conformity to God’s will are acts of great divine love and voluntary penance”, and “souls who feel strongly drawn to God give themselves to mortification almost out of an irresistible instinct of love” (Ceria, E., *Don Bosco con Dio*, Chapter I, VIII and XX).

This is confirmed by the fruits of so much toil, by the saints and martyrs of our Family, and by the many confreres who have lived a truly sacrificial existence for the good of youth.

1. **GENEROSITY AND GIFT OF SELF**

Generosity is not just an occasional act or an impulsive response to a situation of need, due to the spontaneity of a beautiful soul. It is, rather, a deep inner disposition, rooted in a person’s identity. It does not arise from calculation or from an external moral duty, but springs from an understanding of one’s place in the world: that of being a gift and a meaningful presence for others.

This means that generosity, as a gift of oneself to others *toto corde*, has its roots in taking on the very form of Christ, the very form of God. The openness that made our hearts capable of containing the form of Christ now becomes action and responsibility.

The grace received from the experience of *kenosis* thus becomes a personal capacity for self-giving, a daily response and a way of life. This is what happens at Pentecost: the community of disciples, having abandoned their sinful humanity and their attachment to the Law, is made new by the gift of the Spirit of the Risen One. This community – which remains the same in the people who make it up – now “becomes something else”, changes its life and becomes the herald of something that transcends it: the Word of salvation that is the root of all generosity and every gift.

Being generous and having the strength to perform one’s daily service is not limited to an act of will or kindness, but comes directly from the union with God that consecration has made possible. Don Bosco’s love for young people did not come solely from his spontaneous sensitivity, but stemmed directly from his vocation as a priest: a priest is always a priest, and this must be evident in everything he says. Now, being a priest means having, as a duty (or better still, as a vocation), the great interest of souls, the great interest of God, constantly before one’s eyes.

**Non-objective dimension and expression**

Those who live according to the logic of self-giving do not act in order to receive recognition or gratitude in return, but to respond to a vocation that calls them to responsibility. Generosity is not a task or a goal to be achieved; it is a fundamental aspect of our identity, the way in which that identity is expressed and characterised.

Often silent, everyday, hidden, and precisely for this reason even more fruitful, generosity is our defining characteristic in the sense that it is part of the definition of our identity, both as individuals and as a community. Since it is our mission that defines our identity and our place in the Church and in the world, generosity does not come later, it is not added to daily life from outside, it is not “something to be done”. Our mission is our suitability in action, and it is radically generosity, self-giving, the gift of one's life for the salvation of the world and especially of young people.

Article 21 of our Constitutions comments on Don Bosco’s “generous heart” in a very vivid way: “The Lord has given us Don Bosco as father and teacher. We study and imitate him, admiring in him a splendid blending of nature and grace... (this) closely-knit life project... He realized his aim with firmness, constancy and the sensitivity of a generous heart, in the midst of difficulties and fatigue.”

**Response to a call**

Our vocation is marked by a special gift from God, a preference for young people: “That you are young is enough to make me love you very much.” This love is an expression of pastoral charity and gives meaning to our whole life (C. 14).

This vocation does not overlap with our identity at a later stage, nor does it intervene afterwards as something added to our lives. Our vocation is our life, it is our identity. We are radically called to be ourselves in total obedience and availability. Having already experienced our generosity at the beginning of the response, we respond in complete freedom and with full involvement.

Everyone called by Jesus has the opportunity to become fruitful through his service in the Kingdom, but only if all the contingent things he does and offers spring from an unlimited availability. Mary, in her total and immediate openness to the angel and to her brothers and sisters (her cousin Elizabeth), teaches us that the only way a person can respond to God is through unlimited availability. This gesture is the unity of faith, hope and love. It is the yes that God demands of the believer because it is the yes that God spoke in our regard. Only in this sense of absolute generosity does God plant the seed of his Word and his missionary mandate.

This is why Jesus’ demands when he welcomes the disciples he has called concern the very identity of the apostles, to the point of changing their names (from Simon to Peter). Because the disciple allows himself to be changed by the master in order to identify with him. And this is the guarantee that this same name, this new identity of self-giving, will be written in the Kingdom of Heaven.

This must be strongly emphasised, because today limited and conditional “yeses”, subject to personal clauses, often paralyse vocations. What God can use according to the intentions of his Kingdom is only a total gift that does not impose any conditions.

**Free and liberating**

Deep generosity is never imposed, yet it is always binding in its original calling. Thanks to the unifying and all-encompassing nature of God’s plan for each of us, our response is similar to the experience we know well, that of being or becoming “a beautiful garment for the Lord”.

Generosity in responding to the call and obedience to it as a consequence become a clear sign of the desire to be oneself.

For Mary, being the handmaid of the Lord was not a limitation of her desires and goals in life, but rather an open door to the full fulfilment of her freedom and identity: precisely, “of the Lord”.

Mary is the fully realised woman, in complete freedom and self-determination. All this movement is nourished and guided by the bond with God, with his Son, and with the brothers and sisters she finds beside her (from Elizabeth, to the wedding couple at Cana, to the disciples themselves, to us).

**Generosity and gift of self have their challenges**

**Look for fruits more than sowing “seeds”**

The path of generosity is not without obstacles. One of the most insidious is the search for immediate results: living with the expectation of seeing the results of one’s actions and processes immediately. This leads to discouragement, disappointment or even subtle forms of wounded pride. True generosity, however, is measured by the ability to sow even without seeing the harvest, to let time and grace do the rest of the work.

In a world that rewards those who show concrete, rapid and visible results, it is difficult to accept the idea that sowing is already a complete and sufficient gesture. Yet it is precisely here that the authenticity and beauty of those who give themselves are revealed: in their ability to “surrender” their desire for control, to trust in the strength of the seed that has been sown, even if it remains hidden beneath the earth for a long time, during the silent winters.

**Seeking to establish oneself as a successful person**

Another obstacle to generosity is the constant drive to establish ourselves as successful people. The dominant message today is clear: “All that matters is what makes you stand out, what sets you apart, what makes you look better than others”: the symptom of the “like”! In this context, the free gift of oneself risks being perceived as weakness, as a waste of time or as a renunciation of one’s potential.

Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely in the gift of self that a person finds their fullest fulfilment. It is not a question of denying or erasing one’s identity, but of relating it to others, of building oneself not against others but together with others. A life given is not a life sacrificed, but a life multiplied.

**Efficiency rather than effectiveness**

We live in a society dominated by the logic of efficiency: everything must be measurable, optimised, productive. Even in relationships, we sometimes risk evaluating our commitment based on the “results” obtained, as if people were projects to be completed. A mindset that rejects those who do not conform to pre-established rules, leaving no room for the gradual progress that varies from person to person. Instead, true human effectiveness is not measured by numbers or graphs, but by the ability to transform internally, to touch the lives of others, and to build lasting and authentic relationships.

This challenge lies in our ability to “be” with young people, to “waste” time listening, to believe in the gift of compassion that recognises questions and humbly accepts that we do not always have the answers. A presence capable of glimpsing those invisible signs of potential growth and giving them the time they need.

**Seeking results more than initiating processes**

I believe that a reflection Pope Francis made at the beginning of his pontificate helps us here: “Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces.... What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 223)

Here we have the foundation of the project that the EPC carries out. A project that recognises and promotes a journey through the diversity of pastoral proposals. The goal is not a preconceived target to be achieved at all costs. Rather, it is the focus on promoting growth processes in which the community always plays a leading role, experiencing and testing the project itself.

Those engaging in the youth ministry field should be aware of the journey they are undertaking, where they are to begin from and the goal they are aiming at. They should acquire familiarity with the entire process of education that comes into play in concrete terms. Planning is an attitude of the mind and heart, before being something we do concretely. Planning is a process more than a result; planning is an aspect of ministry more than one of its activities along the way; planning is a process of involving and unifying strengths.” (*Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference*, p. 144, 20143).

**CONCLUSION**

I conclude with a reflection by Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini that sums up the challenge we face.

The primacy of the Word is therefore matched by faith. If the Word does not find a response in faith, it reverberates in the air, it has no effect. When the Word is received in man through an attitude of faith, it exerts its effectiveness. The effectiveness that the Word accepted in faith by human beings exerts is charity. The seed is the **Word**; **faith** is the womb, the soil of man that receives the seed; **charity** is the fruit that comes from the seed.

From this very simple structure of the salvific process, we can draw some very important conclusions for our pastoral life. Do we want to grow in charity? Let us expand the roots of faith by opening ourselves to listen to the Word. It would be futile to expect more charity in the community if there is no growth in faith, and it is futile to expect more faith if there is no profound listening to the Word. The process – Word, faith, charity – constitutes the organic reality of all pastoral ministry.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

***Word***, ***faith*** and ***charity***: a trinity that, in the logic of ***listening***, ***availability*** and ***generosity***, impels us to live our calling today to be people who generate hope for the good of young people. Together with many co-workers who live and share the Salesian mission with us, the centrality of the Word testifies to the recovery of what is essential: for us, a person, Jesus Christ, Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary.

Mary is the woman who experienced this profound and radical dynamic in its fullness. With humility she welcomed the *Word* and with *faith she set out in haste* to give to others what she had received. Her “setting out in haste” conveys the gesture of *charity* that reflects a free and liberating heart. This is our calling, which we strive to live with the help of “She who has done everything”!

1. C.M. MARTINI, *La scuola della Parola*, Bompani – Milano, 2018, p. 470-471. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)