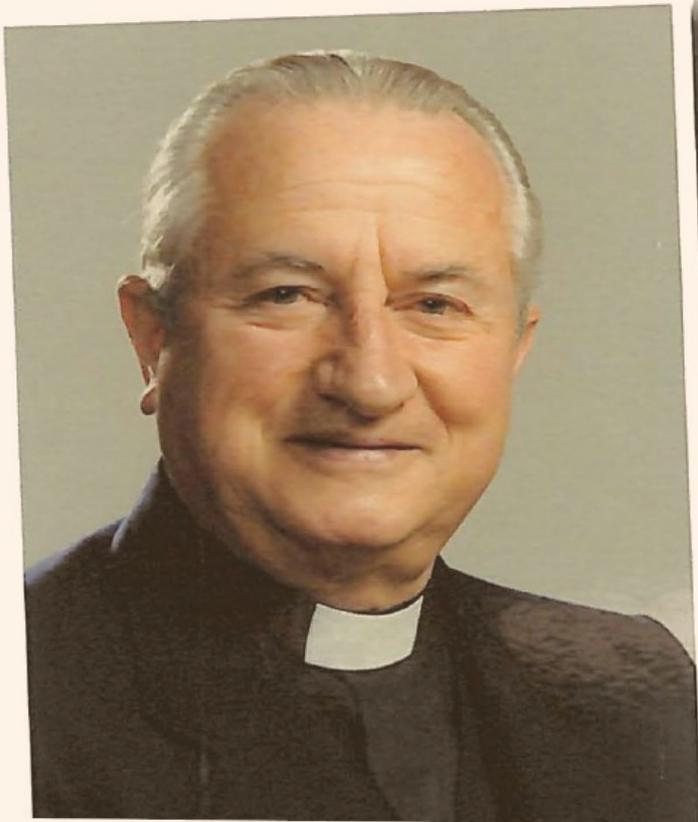


APOSTOLIC INTERIORITY



Reflections
on the
“grace of
unity” as
the source
of pastoral
charity

Background to this text

The text published in the following pages is an English translation of a series of retreat meditations offered by the then Rector Major, Fr Egidio Viganò, to confreres, and in particular rectors of communities at Fortin Mercedes, Argentina, in 1988.

The text was first published in Spanish in 1989 by *Ediciones Don Bosco Argentina*. It then appeared in an Italian edition in 1995, and finally in a new Italian edition by LAS, Rome, in 2020, with a Preface by Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, the 10th Successor of Don Bosco, and an Afterword by his predecessor, Fr Pascual Chávez Villanueva. The 2020 Italian edition also contained a contribution from the Rector Major who succeeded Fr Viganò, Fr Juan E. Vecchi.

English translation: 2023 by a member of the Australia-Pacific Province.

The translation was made from the original transcription of the Spanish which resulted in the 1989 Argentine publication. Therefore it does not contain the extra material referred to above in the 2020 Italian edition.

Text set in Tex Gyre Pagella (Palatino).

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Presentation

I have just received the corrected transcript of the recording of the Reflections on the GRACE OF UNITY as a source of pastoral charity, made by our dear Rector Major during the Spiritual Exercises held in Fortín Mercedes from February 21 to 27.

Thus we had, in the Provinces of Plata, the grace of the presence of the Successor of Don Bosco, who gave us this great gift at the beginning of the Centenary Year of the death of our Holy Founder.

We have prayed, meditated and fraternised, nourishing our lives with Salesian depth and wisdom.

Once again we thank Father Viganò for his enlightening presence among us, to help us concretely overcome the spiritual superficiality that permanently besets the spirituality of our active life.

The Province of Bahía Blanca, who so kindly attended to us, and Father Humberto Baratta, who transcribed all this material from the recorded tape, are also deserving of our gratitude.

May Mary our Mother help us to make good use of these reflections, in order to better imitate Don Bosco, experiencing the GRACE OF UNITY of our Salesian Vocation.

Fraternally,
Fr CARLOS TECHERA V.
Regional Councillor
Bernal,
4 November 1988.

Introduction

We have come together to meditate and pray. The Spiritual Exercises are a powerful opportunity for growing in our faith understanding of our own life experience and everything that moves around us.

Counteracting the danger of spiritual superficiality

We live in a time that loves the ephemeral, which has given importance to ideological fashions, admires the dynamic of efficiency, and is dazzled by the wonders of technology. All of our multi-faceted daily routine is constantly occupying our minds, leaving little room for reflections of faith. Looking at things and events (even with the seriousness of scientific observations), the presence of the Holy Spirit in history is not considered to be a true element of reality, and nor are the concrete effects of his initiatives and his power.

People think and live without regarding the divine component in human history. After the birth of Christ, his Passover and Pentecost, it is superficial and anti-historical to consider man only from a horizontal perspective. Through Christ's work Pentecost has brought a reality of divine presence and initiatives that become an inseparable part of the very fabric of the life of humanity, objectively influencing the course of its becoming.

We, who are disciples of the Lord Jesus, are witnesses of this higher dimension perceived directly through faith. We are to be for others "signs and bearers" of the real presence and power of the Spirit of the Lord in life. This requires that we practise looking in depth at things every day. All of consecrated life is enlivened by a penetrating contemplative dimension of various kinds according to the kind of vocation received.

Apostolic consecrated life has a mission of continuous activity at the service of humankind: it corresponds to a particular kind of contemplation that manages to transform activity into an expression of interiority. This is the "ecstasy of action" that Saint Francis de Sales spoke about, where apostolic ardour becomes the measure of authenticity and of the depth of our contemplation.

This was the case for the Apostles; this was the case for the great Saints, founders of institutes of active life (we can think of Saint Camillus de Lellis who went into ecstasy by carrying a sick and "repugnant" man on his shoulders); and this was the case for Saint John Bosco, who became a witness to and a particularly relevant teacher of apostolic interiority.

However, a spirituality of active life is not a simple thing; it requires special initiation and adequate ongoing formation. It is beset by particular dangers, the most radical of which is spiritual superficiality. Letting oneself be carried away by the current horizontalist perspective; accepting the influence of ideological fashions; immersing oneself in action for its own sake; wearing oneself out in the consideration of so many problems; concentrating exclusively on organisational, cultural, economic, political aspects, etc.; stirring up human affections; seeking rationalised justifications, distorting statements of Saints that have their true meaning only in a life of union with God – all this is to attack the essence of "life in the Spirit".

We know from experience that here, in *apostolic interiority*, we find the strategic point of our spiritual authenticity. We would like to explore its contents in the light of Don Bosco's testimony, and thus discover the secret of a genuine spirituality of active life. The proper name for this secret is the GRACE OF UNITY, as the source of pastoral charity.

The grave danger of spiritual superficiality is dispelled by increasing the "grace of unity".

1

The Grace of Unity

The driving force of all consecrated active life is pastoral charity. Through it we share in the mission of the Apostles, and we collaborate in their ministry as Pastors for the salvation of humankind.

Pastoral charity is characterised by its tension of “vital synthesis” directed simultaneously towards God and towards human beings: they are the two inseparable poles of the energy that it is. Moreover, in this tension of vital synthesis the unifying force comes from God, since in charity the love of God is the cause of love for human beings, but in such a concrete way that – as St John says – the love of God is not true if it is not made real through love for human beings: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 Jn 3:16-18).

So, the term “grace of unity” is understood to indicate precisely the energy of the mutual and dynamic correlation of inseparability between the two poles of pastoral charity: God and neighbour. Meditation on its rich contents shows the absolute need to bring together the values of our apostolic spirituality in a conscious and permanent synthesis of life. We feel the urgency for organic unity in the spiritual life of those engaged in the apostolate.

When the novitiates have learned to live the “grace of unity”, we can state that the religious initiation of active life is assured of its growth. But the very subject of the “grace of unity” is not simply an argument for novices: it encompasses the entire life of apostolic consecration, and constitutes the aspect of its vitality and effectiveness.

1. Why are we using this terminology?

After the Second Vatican Council, the Salesian Congregation gathered in a Special General Chapter to redefine the identity of its apostolic charism in the face of new times. It perceived the need to identify the source of the organic unity of its spirituality: living in vital unity, despite the multiplicity of activities, cultures and situations. Those who get lost in many things become superficial, even if they are competent in certain sectors, because they become fragmentary. Being able to concentrate all these many things in a vital synthesis is the secret of apostolic interiority.

“The Holy Spirit”, we read in the Acts of the SGC, “calls the Salesian to an option of Christian existence which is at the same time apostolic and religious. Thus he gives him *the grace of unity* to live the dynamism of apostolic action and the fullness of religious life in a single movement of charity towards God and his neighbour.

“This type of life is not something fixed and prefabricated, but it is a project in permanent construction. Its unity is not static but is a unity in extension, and in continual need of balance, of revision, of conversion and adaptation.”

This has been a decisive and providential indication for the reworking of our “identity card”: the Constitutions.

We find this same terminology used later by the Magisterium of the Church. When Cardinal Eduardo Pironio was Prefect of the Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes, some documents of importance for the conciliar renewal of religious life were drawn up. One of these

documents had the title *The contemplative dimension of religious life* (1980). In it, speaking of the mutual interpenetration between “action and contemplation”, it says the following: “The special characteristic of this activity [of the active religious] is that it is inspired by the love nourished in the heart of the religious, considered as the most intimate sanctuary of the person where *grace unifies* interior life and activity...”

From what we have reflected so far, we are already locating what the “grace of unity” means. We know that it is located at the centre of the heart of the religious apostle; it makes living in union with God and being dynamic in the apostolate a unified synthesis, a source of special spirituality. Certainly, there are also other spiritualities with different features and manifestations; but for us the grace of unity is at the very root of our identity, and as a consequence what makes it different from other vocations in the Church. We will look at the mechanisms that drive this grace of unity, and we will also try to indicate how those in charge can animate the confreres and the communities in order to raise the level of their spiritual depth.

2. Multiplicity of values that can lead to dispersion

I believe it would be useful to dwell briefly on the multiplicity of things and values that can dilute our individual vital synthesis, making it gradually, though almost unnoticeably, superficial. These are not in themselves bad things; on the contrary, they are generally values that we should appreciate but incorporate into the overall synthesis of our spirituality, which will thus be enriched existentially by them. But if we do not know how to incorporate them into our spirituality in a unified way, they will be responsible for dispersing our spirit in a multiplicity of interests and activities that will distract from our inner being (interiority): there will no longer be the deep ecstasy of action, but a simple escape from superficiality in activism.

Let's look at some of these things which can become a temptation to superficiality.

- *The plurality of cultures* is an expression of the richness of human nature, and of the different contributions that come from history and geography in human groups. It is beautiful to note this pluriformity, and it is important to adorn the unity of the Church, of the Congregation and of the consecrated person himself with its values. But if we begin to consider them only in themselves, as values superior to vocational identity itself, then, instead of helping to enrich and beautify our inner being, they can serve as a dangerous distraction from it. Let us not forget that many schisms have been the result of overvalued cultural differences in confrontation with faith or with the identity of one's proper charism.

- *The multiplicity of sciences* has been intensifying more and more, thus demonstrating the strength and sharpness of human intelligence. All of us have been initiated into some science or other, and we know specialists in various disciplines.

With each science, the more mature and advanced it is, the more sectoral it becomes: it is dedicated to knowing fragments of reality. The specialised scientist runs the risk of wanting to judge all reality from his area of knowledge. It is no accident that we talk about professional distortion. There can be great erudition in one discipline, along with real illiteracy in others or, above all, in a global view of human history. In particular, the problem of historical disciplines may be delicate in this respect because they should refer, in some way, to human life as a whole; but their scientific methodology cannot measure and evaluate the presence and interventions of the Holy Spirit; therefore, the historian may run the risk of not capturing the soul of the Church's history.

- *The history of a charism* since these are expressions of the “historical” vitality of the Spirit. And so, despite the interesting and all-important legacy of documentation and correlation of so many facts

(really essential for judging the past), there is a risk of falling into a learned superficiality, because the decisive element of salvation history is not captured as a mystery.

And sometimes these scientists' studies create an interpretive mentality in readers that is believed to be objective, while dangerously marginalising the massive presence of the Spirit of the Lord, ultimately rendering their judgements superficial.

- *The admirable advances in social communication* have made the world a kind of village where we know each other and communicate with each other. In addition, they are apt to provide us with a possibility of highly qualified and varied knowledge.

What usually happens, however, is that people are invited to spend a lot of time in the ephemeral, in the taste for certain fashions, in the plagiarism of judgements, in the renunciation of critical activity itself. Television, newspapers, magazines, cinema, music, the mass media as a whole, deal with everything, and are accustomed to a plurality of things that occupy the mind endlessly, but always on the surface; they please the imagination, the senses, people, day after day, without further in-depth investigation. They keep us busy browsing, but not dedicated to interiority.

- *The renewing thrust of the Second Vatican Council* has been an extraordinarily beneficial aspect, as a great ecclesial event of the presence of the Spirit. It has awakened us all, and forced us to measure our identity in the face of new times. However, there has also been quite some arbitrariness in the way it is interpreted, and a relativistic pluralism in the interpretation of its documents. If we read the Final report of the extraordinary Synod of 1985, we will see how, twenty years after the Council event, there has been a lack of systematic knowledge of its contents, a dangerous ignorance of some of its more fundamental documents (for example, the Constitution *Dei Verbum*), manipulation of some of its orientations, and not a few practical deviations of application in the liturgy, ecumenism, the "People of God" dimension, in ministries, in the role of the Magisterium, etc.

We note that some have read the Council documents only through journalistic presentation in the social communications media, more sensational than they are ecclesial. Therefore, the final Report of the Synod of 1985 clearly stated that it is essential to give maximum importance to the four great Constitutions of the Council, because the other documents are related to them; and, within these four, *Lumen Gentium* occupies the fundamental place. In addition, it urges training in a holistic interpretation of the Council documents, so as not to be victims of arbitrariness.

One of the documents that can help bring about such a holistic interpretation is the Constitution *Dei Verbum*, about the role of the Word of God, and about the link that the Word of God has with the living Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. Without this effort of fidelity to the Council, we run the risk of falling, even when quoting it, into erroneous interpretations which open the way to pastoral criteria of superficiality in de facto dissonance with what the Spirit wanted in the Council.

- *The evaluation of the moral conscience* is, in itself, a growth in human maturity which serves to translate the truth of the gospel into a testimony of life. But if the living Magisterium of the Church is dispensed with in this, an ethical relativism can be unleashed in very delicate areas of Christian behaviour. And, unfortunately, this has happened in no lesser realm than among the clergy, where true directors of conscience should abound. It has been said from on high, and with knowledge of the facts, that one of the areas of greatest crisis in theological reflection today is the area of morality. This is a very delicate area in which superficiality can cause havoc.

- Finally, *pastoral emergencies* represent the challenges that people's concrete situations present for the Church's mission. It is good that they become aware of their needs, and of the urgent need for better pastoral intervention. In particular for us, the youth situation challenges our pastoral capacity to determine priorities and plan our presences.

Youth ministry involves multiple activities, because it requires evangelising by educating; that is, also taking the various aspects of human promotion very seriously. These urgent needs makes us think,

naturally, about our privileged target group, poor and especially needy young people. It is a good thing that all this is shaking up the possible apostolic tranquillity of the past. However, this is no superficial challenge. It touches us deeply.

If we go ahead superficially we could fall into fashions and ideologies; we end up paying attention to one aspect (indeed, a real one); but we do not compare it with others (equally or even more important), which together constitute the essential components of a true pastoral intervention. We thus end up with a kind of unilateral perspective in favour of a certain aspect but in practice overlooking or dispensing with the others. Finally, instead of evangelising by educating, at times we simply do human promotion, letting ourselves be exploited by perhaps a socio-political kind of historical project. All of which would also be the result of superficiality.

We could go on with other examples; but the ones we have give are sufficient to realise that there is a multiplicity of good things and enriching values, which can become elements that lead to dispersion if one does not have an interiority capable of incorporating them into a vital synthesis.

Unfortunately, the new culture easily leads to losing the sense of how it all holds together, loses the overall, historical perspective, and leave us located in some sectoral area, important in itself but partial, which does not correspond to the integral demands of the mystery of Christ. We are interested here above all in the holistic sense of apostolic interiority.

3. Where can we seek the source of unity?

This holistic sense of apostolic interiority does not merge simply from a human concept, nor is it found in a mere reflection on being. It is located at a much higher level. If we want to penetrate its true nature, we must start by referring to the ultimate reality of God's life. There, in the supreme mystery, being is love and unity is communion. If philosophy speaks of "distinguishing in order to bring together", faith speaks of "loving in distinction." In the Trinity of Persons it is mutual love that distinguishes them, and that constitutes the unity of the one God. Unity that is communion: total self-giving on the part of each of the Persons, who are distinguished by the way they communicate with each other in the fullness of a single love.

In God, love is the supreme energy that fuses differences into unity. And it is this supreme energy of divine love that gives rise to Creation (an organically "ordered" multiplicity), to the Incarnation of the Word (a duality of nature "unified" in the person), to the history of the Church as the Body of Christ (a plurality of persons "united" in one mystical Body by the Spirit). Only with the gaze of faith can one transcend the sectoral nature of partial considerations; with it one participates in the divine vision which from on high demands a capacity for synthesis, a judgement of totality, a sense of the organic.

The supreme uncreated energy of God's love is shared, through the mystery of Christ, by human beings with a created gift, participation in divine love, which is called "charity". The Apostles and their collaborators, because they have the ministry of unity or communion in the Church, received, in special abundance, a gift of divine love called "pastoral charity".

This divine gift is the source of unity in them on two levels: in each individual for their apostolic interiority, and in their priestly ministry, in order to build up the Church.

In order to better meditate on this sublime consideration of divine love as the source of unity, we should dwell on some statements of the New Testament: the fourth Gospel states that Christ and the Father are one (cf. 311 8:14ff.); that in Christ we enter into unity with the Father (cf. Jn 14:20ff); that Christ prayed to the Father that we may all be one (cf. 311 17, 1ff). And in the first letter of John we read that someone who does not love has not known God, and that the love of God is demonstrated

in the love of neighbour (cf. 1 Jn, chaps. 3 and 4). It would be enough, moreover, to reread the *Hymn to Charity* in St Paul (cf. 1 Cor ch. 13).

4. The secret of a vital synthesis

We find ourselves, perhaps, in a sphere superior to ourselves and our human strengths: the sphere of the supreme reality which is vital unity in love.

The energy that goes out from God into the immensity of creation is love: not our love of human desires, but the love of God, the creator of good, which is at the origin of all things, and of that elevated dignity of having been created to live in the image of God. Through the mystery of Christ, the pastoral charity that is in us is a living participation in the very love of God, and it brings with it that energy from the source by which charity is, in itself, "GRACE OF UNITY." In fact, the love of God that is in it is the cause of the love of neighbour, which comes from it as an essential fruit of its divine authenticity.

It must be observed, however, that while love of neighbour proceeds from love for God, it is equally true that it is not true love for God to disregard loving others. There are priorities on both poles: a priority of interiority, and a priority of action. If there is no love of God in the heart first, how can there be true charity in it? However, if the apostle does not discover the face of God in his neighbour, how can he then say that he loves God? It is the gospel itself that asks this question. There is a mutual circular relationship between the two poles: both have their necessity, from different points of view. Both are therefore substantially important. If one were to serve one's neighbour without love of God, that would not be pastoral charity. And if one were to love God apart from one's neighbour, that too would not be pastoral charity.

The true God is inconceivable without his ineffable love for humankind; and the true neighbour is unthinkable, except as the image of God. If we consider the lives of those Saints who have been full of pastoral charity, we find in them the lived testimony of this communion and participation in the energy of divine love. We can focus our gaze on Don Bosco, and we will perceive in his life the meaning and the fruits of the abundance of the "grace of unity" which comes from his intense pastoral charity. Busy with a thousand things, generously given to the young, challenged by so many serious problems in the Church, he always showed that he had a strongly unified life project, showing at the same time and intensely that he was a man of God and a man of his people: "He was deeply human, rich in the qualities of his people, open to the realities of this earth; and he was just as deeply the man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and living 'as seeing him who is invisible'. These two aspects combined to create a closely-knit life project, the service of the young. He realized his aim with firmness, constancy and the sensitivity of a generous heart" (C. 21).

The secret of this vital synthesis for him lay in the exercise of "a single movement of love towards God and towards our brothers and sisters" (C. 3).

In order to understand this single movement of charity, we have a further explanation in the Salesian spirit lived and bequeathed to us by Don Bosco.

Pastoral charity is at the heart of our spirit, that "makes us seek souls and serve God alone" (C. 10). The motto that intuitively represents all this characteristic of apostolic spirituality is *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*. It expresses the unity between the two poles: God and works. They are two poles that mutually require each other. The inner dynamic of this mutual requirement is the circular interrelation of causality on different levels, which we have already briefly hinted at. The important thing is to contemplate the living testimony of this interrelation, which seems paradoxical in itself. We see it most clearly in the mystery of Christ: therein lies the secret of this vital synthesis.

He is the Good Shepherd: he became man in order to minister to us; he is the source of all pastoral charity. He had to live among us, become man, in order to invent pastoral ministry. The “grace of unity” came about with him. There is no pastoral charity that does not proceed from him. Therefore, our apostolic interiority refers to him and is rooted in him, from the first moment to the last. It is important to insist on this underlying truth: everything, everything in pastoral charity comes from Jesus Christ, and everything leads to him. Motivations other than the *Da mihi animas* lead to distortions. The day that the young, the poor, all those to whom we are sent become aware that we are with them for Christ, they will appreciate and listen to us all the more. They are hungry for God’s Word, even though unconsciously, and they want to see that we are independent from ideologies and socio-political projects.

Being “signs and bearers of God’s love” must be the only genuine presentation card.

Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, helps us in this, and has given us the example; he comes from God, and is among men: true God and true Man. With his pastoral charity, God and neighbour are simultaneously proclaimed: “Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (Jn 8:58); but also, “For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you gave me clothing... I was in prison and you visited me” (Mt 25:34ff).

Christ invented the Church’s pastoral ministry. Only from him and with him is it possible to live the unity of pastoral charity. Only from him and with him do we have the “grace of unity”, can preserve it and make it grow.

5. Christ forms the heart of Pastors

In particular, Christ enriches the Apostles and ministerial priests who, through the sacrament of Orders, are consecrated to the ecclesial task of Pastors in the ministry of the Word of God, of sanctification and of the coordination and animation of the community.

For priestly tasks, in fact, Christ wanted to infuse a special grace of unity in them. From it comes his special ministerial spirituality, which is apostolic interiority par excellence. The ministerial priest’s vital synthesis in his personification with Christ, is to cultivate a constant union with God which daily generates his active availability of service to others.

This has been seen in the Apostles, in Saint Paul, in the holy Bishops and priests who have continued Christ’s mission over the centuries, and have guided and spiritually encouraged so many people and groups that, without being consecrated by the sacrament of Holy Orders, have participated in the same spirituality, to collaborate in the saving work of the Lord.

6. Pastoral charity in Don Bosco

Among the Saints of apostolic spirituality, Don Bosco stands out as a very modern one. His spirit and holiness are rooted in his ministerial ordination; and his religious consecration strengthened his special ministry. All his formation and all his inner life were aimed at making him a generous minister of Christ. Whoever wants to discover in depth what the secret of his holiness was, should refer very carefully to this aspect. Truly, he was always a ministerial priest: at the altar, in the confessional, in the courtyard, in the work of education, in dealing with people, with politicians, with the rich, with the poor, in Turin and Florence, and so on. (Recall the meeting with Minister Bettino Ricasoli, in Florence, 1866.)

The grace of unity in him was intimately linked with the consecration of Holy Orders, and was communicated to others as an ardent pastoral longing that moved them to collaborate with the specific

mission left by Christ to the Apostles. Here we can understand why Don Bosco wanted ministerial spirituality to be the soul of how activities in his Congregation were carried out, and why pastoral charity was really at the living centre of his spirit (cf. C. 10); and for this he also wanted the services of animation and governance of the Salesian communities to be exercised by priests chosen for their pastoral zeal. It is a distinct institutional service that ensures the authenticity and identity of his charism in the Church, and makes the special apostolic interiority of his whole great Family grow.

This is the reason for the special spiritual and pastoral responsibility of the services of “authority” in our communities (cf. C. 121). Rector Major, Provincials and Rectors must take care and know how to promote the “grace of unity” in all their confreres (and in the members of the Salesian Family), intimately convinced that, if the Salesian spirit were not to have a clear awareness and continuous priestly encouragement, in the long run it would not be able to remain faithful to Don Bosco. One of the causes of spiritual superficiality among us is the deterioration of priestly authenticity; above all in those who have been designated to make the characteristic pastoral values of the sacrament of Holy Orders bear fruit in the animation and government of their confreres.

It is therefore not a whim or an anachronism that the exercise of authority among us is steeped in priestly charisms: there is a reason of apostolic interiority, there is a reason of mission, there is a reason of pastoral charism. This is not a lack of juridical parity, but a requirement of the apostolic common good. The “superior””, among us, has been conceived as a priest conscious of his ecclesial ministry, animated by concrete pastoral charity, deeply united with a God who gives himself to human beings, rich therefore in apostolic zeal, capable of pedagogically projecting common evangelising action, also competent in human values – above all, values of young people – in view of personal and social education inspired by the mystery of Christ.

Today, the word “pastoral” is used extensively, but the question remains as to whether it is understood in its true meaning. In any case, it is clear that the “Salesian superior” cannot be reduced simply to being an organiser, or cultural advisor, or builder, but all his activities and qualities must converge at the supreme and unifying apex of a pastoral vision. And this pastoral vision, considered from the responsibilities of the priestly ministry, is made concrete in three major complementary aspects which are: evangelisation, growth in conversion, and participation in ecclesial communion.

A short time ago, in a 1982 circular (cf. AGC, no. 306), I attempted to reflect on the priestly dimension of the Rector’s tasks. He must know how to promote these three pastoral aspects in a unified way, according to the gradualness required by a healthy pedagogy. Every day I am more convinced that, in the Congregation, the service of authority will effectively help to defeat spiritual superficiality if it is truly exercised with a priestly heart, with the prior purpose of promoting pastoral charity and the “grace of unity” in which all our apostolic interiority is rooted.

“The most precious gift that we can offer to the young” (C. 25) springs from this source of love that originates in the Heart of Christ. Therein lies the grace of unity that explains and makes pastoral charity fruitful!

2

The Unifying Presence of the Holy Spirit

The grace of unity comes from an abiding love of God. It is important to avoid the risk of regarding the grace of unity “as a thing,” something static that is within us like a gift in a closed package. Nor is it a limited and partial gift, on the margins of consciousness, but it is the source of a vital synthesis. It is the continuously flowing energy of a divine Person, the Holy Spirit. The grace of unity is love that permeates us from on high, and constructs a complete synthesis in us of the many elements that accompany pastoral charity. We cannot reflect on the grace of unity without thinking, first of all, of the Person of the Holy Spirit who lives in us, and who is present and active in history, as the soul of the Church.

1. The power of the Holy Spirit

The expression “power of the Holy Spirit” is typical of the Liturgy, which usually presents us with the revealed data in living language. If there is a theological style that brings us closer to an understanding of synthesis, it is the liturgical texts. Instead of leading us into fragmentary hermeneutics, which can cause us to lose the sense of what is organically revealed, it presents to us in living form the central data of the history of God’s love.

The Liturgy therefore speaks to us of the “power” of the Holy Spirit: power in the sense of an effective and conquering presence. It is gentle, penetrating, non-sensationalist: it touches people, passes through hearts, shuns violence and showiness; but it is effective and victorious.

The Church’s Magisterium assures us that this time of ours involves a special presence of the Holy Spirit. There are so many facts and figures (starting with the Second Vatican Council) which the Church notes with admiration. The world, with its power, would like to prevent the growth of good, and yet the presence of the Spirit moves smoothly and effectively, and grows stronger than the power of weapons, money, and the agencies of worldly opinion. It is curious to see how certain imperialist governments fear peoples rooted in religious values. They have preached for decades that faith is something external, a useless superstructure, and then they have great fear of a people who express their unity through manifestations inspired by religion.

Evangelii Nuntiandi — Paul VI’s beautiful Apostolic Letter — reminds us that the Church today is experiencing a special hour of the Holy Spirit. That is why we have to think that the grace of unity has become a topical issue; above all, for the bearers of a community charism in the People of God.

“Everywhere people are trying to know Him better, as the Scripture reveals Him. They are happy to place themselves under His inspiration. They are gathering about Him; they want to let themselves be led by Him.” (EN 75). Well, the grace of unity that we would like to understand more deeply involves knowing the Holy Spirit better, letting ourselves be guided by him, relaunching the community charism given by him to the Founder.

We know of several charismatic movements today, which we think are the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is clear that the term “charismatic” has come to include contents and attitudes that do not seem to come from him. Good sense, or the sound judgement of faith, should help us to discern, and not to allow room for extravagance. But it would not be good sense and a healthy criterion of faith to hide behind this apology, to remain calm and passively immobile, as if this were not the hour of the Holy

Spirit. A dynamic and renewing hour; an hour in which fidelity to the Founder and docility to the Spirit become creative. Indeed, the power of the Spirit unites and enlivens old things and new things in a vital syntheses for the future.

Let us remember that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of “communion”, the living source of “unity”. The Liturgy speaks to us of “the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” of “the love of the Father,” and of “the communion of the Holy Spirit.” We know that in the mystery of the Trinity the Holy Spirit is the bond of unity between the Father and the Son. And this role of the Spirit has always been manifested throughout the history of salvation: it is he who in Mary builds the unity between the human nature and the divine nature in the incarnation of the Word, which is the foundation of all the work of unification in history. How much we should meditate on the meaning of the so-called “hypostatic union”, not so much in philosophical terms, but in experiential contemplation of the inseparability between man and God since Christ! It is a magnificent horizon, and one full of incredible consequences.

But in addition: in Mary herself the Holy Spirit has realised the ineffable unity between her motherhood and her virginity, between her littleness as a daughter of Zion and her universal help as the one Assumed into heaven; in the Church he continually brings about the building up of communion between the multiplicity of persons within the mystical Body of Christ; he is the source of the wonderful unifying energy of the Sacraments; it is he who continually enriches the Church with new charisms in which he is the cause of unity and communion in two respects: first of all, within each individual, in order to structure him or her spiritually according to the nature of the charism; and secondly, among the various members of the group who live the same charism, so that an organic communion may grow in them which is suitable for fostering the growth and apostolic effectiveness of the specific mission of their charism.

The grace of unity, then, is neither a static thing, nor a gift for just some part of the whole, but an encompassing energy which is expressed in the synthesis experienced between the many elements that make up the nature of a charism: it proceeds constantly from the power of the Spirit, always present in the Church and in us. It is the vital sap that nourishes and makes the pastoral charity grow that ensures the proper character of the mission, and gives our spiritual face its colour of good health.

The grace of unity is ultimately the fruit and the permanent presence of religious consecration in us.

2. Religious consecration is the life-giving presence of the Spirit

The unifying action of the Spirit has its generative beginning (for our Salesian life) at the moment of religious profession, when the Father consecrates us with a special outpouring of his Spirit (cf. C. 3).

We have been reflecting quite a lot in recent years on the properly theological meaning of this religious “consecration”; and *Lumen Gentium* has reminded us of it with a very brief but eloquent expression: the verb “consecratur” in the passive form has sufficed; it supposes, in fact, the direct action of God the Father (cf. LG 44).

The total giving of ourselves to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels is ratified by an active presence of the Holy Spirit, who envelops us with his unifying love and gives us life through his transforming power, so that we can perform the oath we have taken with generous fidelity.

This special presence of the Spirit becomes the living source of the pastoral charity described in the text of the Constitutions as the centre and soul of the evangelical project of the Institute’s charism.

The grace of unity, as we have seen, is the energy of love that, starting from the action of indissolubly linking the two poles of charity (God and neighbour), grows beyond this generative role

to unify the various elements of its “proper nature”, so that they are connatural expressions of the pastoral charity that enlivens the charism.

The Holy Spirit is present among us, and accompanies us daily, so that we are truly, in this hour of ecclesial renewal, “charismatic” witnesses of the Founder’s legacy; that is, consecrated men who show everyone in the People of God what the power of the Holy Spirit consists of and how it acts today, in response to the challenges of the times, and for the benefit of the recipients of the mission.

We are using the term “charismatics” here in the sense of apostolic interiority, very aware of the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of consecrated persons, of the centrality of pastoral charity in the entire project of life, and of the organic force of the grace of unity that vitally structures our personal nature, the object of religious profession.

3. The Spirit gives consistently to our “proper nature”

The so-called “proper nature” involves several elements that are distinct from each other, and that can in fact be found separately in other vocations. The grace of unity proper to the pastoral charity that specifies our vocation gives us the ability to unite these various elements in an holistically lived synthesis. It is the unifying work of the Spirit communicated through consecration in religious profession.

All these elements are described in the Constitutions. Living them in a holistic way is the result of grace.

As we have read in the SGC, this organic, holistic nature “is not something fixed and prefabricated, but is a project in continuous construction. Its unity is not static; it is rather a unity in tension, with a continual need of balance, of revision, of conversion and adaptation.” And what are these many elements that the Salesian brings together in vital synthesis with the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit?

They are the ones presented in the Constitutions.

These are not simply ascetic rules demanding corresponding “observance.” They are indications of the energy of life. For example, the following: the type of ecclesial mission; its various components; the apostolic approach to the practice of the evangelical counsels; the community project of life and action; the different purposes to which the Institute tends (cf. C. 6); responsibility for the animation and growth of the Salesian Family; the goals of formation; the fundamental institutional aspects at the service of the charism; the harmony between the different aspects of the Founder’s spirit; the methodology of action which requires knowing how to combine evangelisation and human promotion; the special spirituality of denying oneself, making oneself loved; an intrinsic harmony between contemplation and action, and so on.

The grace of unity of our consecration moves and brings together all these elements in an organic synthesis that constitutes the very nature of our witness in the Church. Here is the Salesian “charism” of Don Bosco: an organic whole of different elements lived as an expression of the unifying power of the Holy Spirit. Those who know how to live by witnessing to this type of apostolic consecration will be the genuinely “charismatic” ones among us!

It gives us pleasure to discover, meditating on the hundred years of history and travelling through the Salesian world, what the first article of the Constitutions state – that the evangelical project of our life is not something planned by human genius, but the result of God’s initiative, a genuine charism of the Holy Spirit. It produces enormous inner joy to see that our proper nature is constantly being forged in the Church by the love of the Holy Spirit, and it is not possible to understand how there are confreres who are inattentive to such a divine initiative, and who flee from home to seek the charismatic in other groups. This too is spiritual superficiality, all the more dangerous in that it serves

to favour a double belonging unfit for docility to the Spirit: the formal belonging to an institution that has its back to life (ignoring in fact the links of one's own consecration with its charismatic wealth), and the vital belonging to another movement subjectively chosen as a current charismatic fashion, as if the initiative of the Spirit had already finished giving life to the legacy left by the Founder himself.

Our proper nature is continually enriched by the Spirit including with the constant gift of new vocations. Each person who makes his profession brings several gifts of divine origin to the common charism. Obviously, we must know how to discern them; but our professions are an open door through which the love of the Spirit passes. The Constitutions recognise this many times. Let us consider some examples:

— They show us that God equips each new member with personal gifts and graces at the service of the common charism (C. 22);

— They remind us that each plays a part in responsibility for the common mission through his personal values (C. 45);

— They indicate that the community encourages and expects employment of the gifts of nature and grace proper to each one (C. 52);

— They emphasise that obedience involves the intelligent and generous use of one's freedom, equipped with the Lord's gifts (C. 67);

— They insist that each one, docile to the Holy Spirit, develops his skills and graces with a constant effort of conversion in favour of the spiritual and apostolic legacy left by the Founder (C. 99).

Our proper nature, then, is a living reality, always new because charismatic, and, for that very reason, always faithful to the origins. Truly, the unifying power of the Holy Spirit is the source of a pastoral charity that, through its grace of unity, is structuring the distinctiveness of our vocation in the Church.

4. The “charismatic” dimension of our origins

The Holy Spirit continually unites and gives life to the various elements of our vocation; but the hour of his most significant and defining intervention is the hour of the foundation.

It is an hour with which all subsequent times must compare themselves; in Don Bosco he built the ongoing model of a new charism in the Church. We know that the documents of the Magisterium have called “charism” a living experience of the Holy Spirit, and “Founder's charism” a living experience of the Holy Spirit that has been raised up to be transmitted, developed, defended and increased according to the growth of the Body of Christ which is the Church (cf. MR 11). Don Bosco's charism is precisely the spiritual and apostolic legacy that we have received from him, as a fruit of the presence and initiative of the Holy Spirit.

It is a source of inner joy and ecclesial personality to consider that in Don Bosco lies the very beginning of the grace of unity that has been structuring the character of our vocation for more than a century. It will help us to read some statements from the Constitutions which shed light on the meaning of our true charismatic dimension.

— “With a feeling of humble gratitude we believe that the Society of St Francis de Sales came into being not as a merely human venture but by the initiative of God. Through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth, “that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise” From this active presence of the Holy Spirit we draw strength for our fidelity and support for our hope” (C. 1);

— Don Bosco is presented as father and teacher, our model forged by the same Holy Spirit (C. 21);

— Therefore, “submissive to the bidding of the Spirit we are resolved to carry out the Founder’s apostolic plan in a specific form of religious life: to be in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially the poorest of them” (C. 2);

— The Constitutions describe our apostolic identity as an initiative “of the Father, who consecrated us through the gift of his Spirit, and sends us out to be apostles of the young” just as he did with Don Bosco (C. 3);

— They speak of the interiority of union with God, by which the Salesian “attentive to the presence of the Spirit and doing everything for God’s love, becomes like Don Bosco a contemplative in action” (C. 12);

— Dealing with radical practice of the evangelical counsels, they ensure that in this way, imitating Don Bosco, “we follow Jesus Christ..., and share more closely in his paschal mystery, in his self-emptying and in his life in the Spirit” (C. 60);

— They show that consecration is the ongoing source of grace: fidelity and perseverance are the fruit of the Holy Spirit (C. 95);

— They invite us to be “attentive to the signs that [the Holy Spirit] gives us in the events of each day”, just as Don Bosco was (C. 64);

— Recalling Don Bosco’s capacity for discernment, they state that the Salesian discovers “the fruits of the Spirit in the lives of people, especially the young” (C. 95).

The grace of unity has its initial explosion in the pastoral charity of Don Bosco, as the first and very intense spark of a youthful and popular mission.

Here we must know how to find the richness and timeliness of our charism.

5. The Spirit’s home is the heart

The Spirit is love, and the home of love is the heart. It is there, in the interior, where the grace of unity resides. This is where all the dynamics of pastoral charity come from. And pastoral charity is fire.

At Pentecost, the Spirit descended upon the Apostles and Mary in the form of tongues of fire. Love, in fact, is like fire that fuses differences into a single reality, and that develops an energetic power capable of transforming the world.

St. Augustine, so fond of interiority and contemplation, said that “all love is endowed with an energy of its own, and when it is in a heart in love, it cannot remain without operating: it necessarily drives to action.” (In Ps 121, 1; PL 37, 1618-1619.) apostolic industriousness is, above all, interiority.

We cannot distract ourselves or withdraw from this fundamental truth of every consecrated life. The Spirit dwells in hearts; pastoral charity vibrates there, hence all the strength of the grace of unity comes from there. It is within in order to go out.

But one can be outside without having come from within: this is the tragedy of superficiality.

The love of charity makes the person organically active; but not all activity makes the person organically grow: “it can be dispersive exteriority.

Reflection on the unifying presence of the Holy Spirit obliges us to be concerned with forming the heart.

We have already intuited that through the grace of unity there is no antithetical dualism between interiority and industriousness, but that the whole secret of the power of the Spirit lies precisely in pastoral charity, which with its fire of love fuses both aspects in the “apostolic interiority” which produces the ecstasy of action.

6. Current responsibility in docility to the Spirit

Those who have responsibility for animation and governance in the Congregation must rethink their ministry and their roles in light of the reflections we have been making.

If we are “charism” in the Church, what conclusions will be drawn from this? If we are experiencing a special hour of the Holy Spirit, with new phenomena of his presence and power, can we be visited and renewed by Him without anyone noticing? And how do we do so, not so much to make them realise it, but to bear witness to a real charism today?

I would like to play a part in awakening this responsibility today. The grace of unity – indissoluble harmony between interiority and industriousness – the fervour and inventiveness of pastoral charity, are not static realities without creativity. They renew the identity of our particular nature; they build the communion of a single heart and soul in the Congregation, with a family style. They offer us to the Church as a new gift from God, a charism renewed by the Spirit. At the 1987 Synod, when speaking of “Movements”, someone pointed out that there were *new* movements and *renewed* movements. Some have arisen today: others had come before and today are relaunched by the Council and by the signs of the times. In this respect the work of religious renewal can also give rise to true “movements.”

Article 5 of our Constitutions speaks of “a vast movement”; but the use of this word there does not have the same meaning. It simply seeks to indicate that, in addition to the groups of the Salesian Family, there are many other people who sympathise with Don Bosco, who admire his mission, who help in some way, without becoming an official part of the so-called Salesian Family. But here, with this term, we do not mean only an indication of greater extension in numbers: we are pointing to something new in terms of quality, to which the Synod alluded when talking about “ecclesial movement”.

What, then, is meant by “ecclesial movement”? It means the communion of many people, convinced of the same ideal, enthusiastic about a common mission, inspired by ideas – forces that give them spiritual depth, and a capacity for Christian witness in society and in the Church.

If so, why doesn't this apply to us? Why, as consecrated persons, can't we become the animating nucleus of many other people: of lay people, educators, young people? We have very clear ideas – forces that not only move us, but attract many other people around us. A “Salesian youth movement” has been launched in various parts of the world; it's fine, and it's growing. But to be authentic, communities of consecrated persons need to be overflowing with the “charismatic” renewal that we have described before, and which is true docility to the Holy Spirit. How much it costs to start an authentic ecclesial movement of young people, of lay people, of educators!

So, the ministry of animation and government must tend towards this goal, to testify that we believe in the Holy Spirit; that the grace of unity that he has given us is the energy of ecclesial communion.

In the growth of our Family, the same thing must be verified beforehand. Article 5 of the Constitutions assigns to our communities the responsibility of animation and dynamic coordination of the groups that constitute it. We have the advantage that there are consecrated groups already docile to the Holy Spirit, and first-class lay people who, more than once, have encouraged us to be authentic disciples of the Lord, moved by a special creative presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Pope insists on the Christian importance of some approaching dates: 2000, the beginning of the Third Millennium. The Holy Spirit is preparing the faithful for this, not as an apocalyptic date with cataclysmic dimensions, but as a new beginning that impels us to greater evangelical authenticity; above all, with young people. The new culture is changing the style of being human, so what will the new style of being a Christian be like? To know how to answer this we must, first of all, see to apostolic interiority, which makes us attentively docile to the Spirit of the Lord. This is essential: the energy of

the grace of unity comes, in fact, from a Person who is within us, and with whom we have to dialogue in friendship.

But, since the grace of unity comes from a God who sends us to our fellow human beings, we must know how to discern what the Holy Spirit is suggesting to us today. I believe that for the renewal of our industriousness we already have a response of the Spirit in the renewed Constitutions: the “Oratory criterion”.

It is a criterion that relaunches us among young people according to their demanding reality, as Don Bosco did in the city of Turin last century. The Oratory is the first initiative from which our hard-working institutions originate. We must begin to rethink things starting from needy youth. We are in new times, different from those of Don Bosco, but the criterion for intervention is the same: having an Oratorian heart.

To this “Oratorian charity” we must immediately add the apostolic criterion of collaboration from as many lay people as possible; first of all those belonging to the groups of the Salesian Family. There are places where the Cooperators run the Oratories, because they have grown and have been formed with the genuine spirit of Don Bosco. Spurred on by these two criteria of renewal, we can create an ecclesial movement for youth which manifests the timeliness and incisiveness of Don Bosco’s charism, renewed by the life-giving presence of the Spirit.

The Spirit of the Lord strongly invites us to renew the originality of Don Bosco’s charism. It is essential for this that those responsible for animation and government take more seriously and give absolute prior attention to the care of apostolic interiority, seeing in the grace of unity the energy that urges us to call the faithful together – lay people formed in the spirituality of our Founder.

We trust that the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians will also work with us, and strive to increase the number of lay people who follow the Holy Spirit as Don Bosco did. Then, a true ecclesial movement for and of the youth will grow from our Family.

The letter that the Pope wrote to us on 31 January requires a strong ability to communicate the charism. It is as if he were telling us, “Explain to parents, other educators and so many lay faithful why Don Bosco was so effective in the education of youth.”

3

Religious Profession as a Unified Project

We continue to reflect on the grace of unity as vital energy that comes to us from the Holy Spirit. We have seen that the creative initiative of the Spirit began with the Founder, in whom the grace of unity has structured a special unified project of evangelical life. We have thus verified the beginning of our “proper nature”, which manifests the particular contents of the Founder’s special charism.

Continuing this reflection along these lines, we now move on to analyse the personal act with which we join that charism, to continue witnessing and developing its riches in the Church. This act is when we make our Religious Profession.

1. Profession and “our proper nature”

Religious Profession is the free, conscious act in which, knowing the evangelical project structured by the grace of unity given to Don Bosco, each of us undertakes to live it, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit who infuses in us the strength to witness to it with integrity.

This is not a meditation on Religious Profession in generic terms. We are attempting to gain a deeper understanding of “Salesian” Profession itself, analysing its specific contents. Thus we will perceive how the energy of the grace of unity unites several elements in our consciousness and in our life, elements which are different in themselves but which are expressed in a harmonious vital synthesis in us. Our Profession is not simply identified with the profession of the three vows, but explicitly entails taking on the unified project of evangelical life which is authentically described in the Constitutions.

The formula of our Profession says it all: “I make the vow ... to live obedient, poor and chaste according to the way of the gospel set out in the Salesian Constitutions” (C. 24).

The “proper nature” of our charism has a very intimate link with our religious profession. There is a reason why, before making our Profession we have been carefully studying and carefully practising “the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales”; and there is a reason why every religious Profession involves a special ascetic pedagogy described in a certain Rule of life. Spiritual superficiality can also affect the central act of our Christian existence: religious profession. Who has not heard reductive comments such as the following: “I have taken a vow of chastity, and not a vow of community”; or “I have taken a vow of obedience, and not a vow of attendance”; or “I have taken a vow of poverty, and not a vow of request for permission”, etc. Or even the imprecise though common saying, “renewal of vows” instead of more correctly saying “renewal of Profession.”

In reality, it is necessary to meditate better, and in relation to the life project formulated by the Founder, on the “charismatic” meaning of the very concrete act of our religious Profession.

The Benedictine, the Franciscan, the Dominican, the Jesuit, etc., also promise by vow to practise the evangelical counsels; but they do not make the same religious profession identical to ours. Indeed, they do not live the very same “proper nature” as ours in their institutes.

There is, therefore, an inseparability of evangelical option between Profession and our “proper nature”.

2. The significant date of 14 May

Before identifying the fundamental elements that make up the very nature of our charism, it is worth recalling the historical context of the first Salesian Profession..., which all the members wish to bring to life with solemnity and spiritual fervour on this centenary of the death of Don Bosco.

The day of the first Salesian Profession was 14 May 1862: 22 young people made their profession together with the Founder (BM 7, 101). They made their profession in Turin, capital of a State that was becoming secularist and combatively anti-clerical: it persecuted and expelled religious orders from its territories, considered useless for society. Well, those boys, who on the other hand felt the cultural influence of their time (little sympathy for “the friars”; so much so, that John Cagliero decided to make his profession exclaiming, “Friar or no friar, I am staying with Don Bosco!”), had the courage to start a new religious Congregation, and make their Profession with extraordinary enthusiasm.

A life choice that meant being with Don Bosco, overcoming the serious difficulties of the social and also diocesan environment: thus they began a new evangelical path characterised by its own proper character, which did not coincide with the general pattern of the religious professions known at the time. They began the life of an unprecedented charism. The theology of religious life, in fact, teaches us that it is on a foundation of common values that the specific characteristics of the multiple charisms of consecrated life develop. We can say that, in fact, what exists concretely is not so much “the” religious life, as the charisms of the different Institutes (although there are common values on which a common theology can be constructed).

So, at that unfavourable historical juncture, when it seemed that everything ecclesial was falling apart together with the Papal States; these young people, full of faith and hope, consciously and courageously accept Don Bosco’s proposal presented as a project that came from God. That Profession historically marks a charismatic originality of pastoral charity in favour of youth. They were convinced that they could do well and persevere to the end, despite the strong adverse circumstances.

3. A supreme act of freedom

That May 14th makes us understand the Christian magnitude of Religious Profession. There is no more eloquent act for a life project of disciples of the Lord. The Constitutions tell us that it is a supreme act of freedom: “It is one of the most lofty choices a believer can consciously make, an act which recalls and endorses the mystery of his baptismal covenant by giving it a deeper and fuller expression” (C. 23).

It is the fundamental choice for Christ, determined by the very nature of the Founder’s charism, which gives a definitive orientation to future initiatives of one’s freedom. It is like launching into a space orbit: immense possibility for navigation, but in an ecclesial project inspired by God.

With Profession, the existential scope of the Sacrament of faith is renewed and determined, as if to say: “I want to live my Baptism according to this evangelical project; my way of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is to live the proper nature of this charism.” Religious profession implies a conscious and agenda-setting act of the future for locating one’s existence in the future of society and the Church: that of having found the meaning of one’s life in history, according to a special way of following Jesus Christ.

The word “profession” can have a double meaning for us. One, derived from the verb “profiteor,” as a public proclamation of the living testimony of one’s faith option. Another, in line with a certain common mentality (even if it is not its authentic meaning), is to think that with this liturgical act the religious choose a kind of social “profession” that distinguishes them from so many other human

professions. This means that they believe they qualify for a professionalism that demands competence in the things of Jesus Christ and in the mission of the Founder.

In either of the two meanings, it is a special witness of faith, where the grace of unity proper to charity infuses the capacity to organise the various elements of a charism into a vital synthesis.

Here too, reflection leads us to say that religious profession makes us “charismatic” in fidelity to a particular proper nature. The document *Mutuae Relationes* recalls some characteristic traits of a charism in the Church: fidelity to the Lord, intelligent pastoral attention to reality and to the signs of the times, communion with the Church, creative daring, constancy in giving, humility in setbacks, and experience of the mystery of the Cross; it states, moreover, that personal gifts (as we have already seen) serve to enrich and rejuvenate the Congregation in which one is incorporated, living them in harmony with the Founder’s project (cf. MR 12).

4. The originality of the content of our apostolic consecration

What are the fundamental elements of the nature proper to the Salesian Project? After three long General Chapters (about fifteen years of work), we have a clear answer focused in Article 3 of the new text of the Constitutions: “our apostolic consecration”.

How many discussions there were in the SGC between defenders of the primacy of “consecration” and those who privileged the existential incisiveness of the “mission”!

Some had the idea of a truly pre-conciliar and improper “consecration”: they identified it with the subjective act of those professing vows (= they consecrated themselves to God), or with the practice of the evangelical counsels themselves (= the vows are consecration); they excluded, in this interpretation that has now been superseded, both mission and community life. As can be seen, it was a dangerously reductive perspective which provoked countless discussions, and a non-unified structuring in the reworking of the constitutional text.

Finally, it was possible to come to an understanding of the famous statement of *Lumen Gentium*: “consecratur”, and it was possible to speak of “apostolic consecration”, which is constituted in organic form (because of the energy of the grace of unity which underpins it) by four fundamental elements: *God’s Covenant* (as an aspect of the grace of unity), the *Apostolic Mission* (as an overall character), *Fraternal Community* (as a style of life and action) and *Practice of the Evangelical Counsels* (as a radical structure of self-giving).

These four fundamental elements are lived in a single movement of love. Let us read the article : “We live as disciples of the Lord by the grace of the Father, who consecrates us with the gift of his Spirit, and sends us out to be apostles of the young (= Covenant).

“Through our religious profession we offer ourselves to God in order to follow Christ and work with him in building up the Kingdom.

Our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the inseparable elements of our consecration which we live in a single movement of love towards God and towards our brothers and sisters.

“Our mission sets the tenor of our whole life; it specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families.” I think it is quite enlightening here to quote the commentary offered by Cardinal Anastasio Ballestrero, archbishop of Turín and former Superior General of the Carmelites, when preaching to the provincials from Italy. It is known that Cardinal Ballestrero personally participated in the work of the Second Vatican Council; in particular, in the texts concerning consecrated life. Let me read it :

We are (in this Article 3 of yours) in a fully evangelical perspective. That life, however, is not presented as a choice that we make, but as a gift that is given to us. It is the grace of the Father: it is the Father who consecrates us.

Here we enter into the theology of consecration. Immediately after the publication of the Council's documents, *interpretations emerged around that "consecratur"*: was the verb reflexive or passive? Do religious consecrate themselves or are they consecrated?

Notwithstanding an explicit note from the doctrinal commission (of the Council), which had declared that the verb was passive, specifying *Deo*; certain theology has gone its own way, weakening the transcendent force of the *consecratur*, because it is one thing if I consecrate myself, but quite another if God consecrates me...

Consecrated through the gift of his Spirit and sent. Consecration includes the gift of the Spirit and being sent to the young. This is part of your charism. This inner bond between consecration by God and being sent to young people is a very significant element of your spiritual identity and your vocation. This double polarisation at the level of incarnation in a single grace : one which leads me to God in fidelity to consecration, and that sends me to the young, not as something different from that fidelity but as consistent with it.

There is no alternative movement: a little for the young, a little for God; but the grace to realise that the concrete way to move towards God, for you, is to go towards the young. Be faithful to the mission which, in your encounter with God, is continually repeated, continually recalled and continually enriched with graces, because you are not going in your own name, but because Someone has sent you. It is not simply a generous and courageous sense of purpose, but also a mysterious and gratuitous gift that obviously cannot be separated from purpose and commitment; but that, in any case, precedes the purpose in the dynamics of grace and holiness.

In order to follow Christ: a consecration, therefore, that does not enclose you within a niche, but sets you on a path. It is something that characterises the awareness of the nature of consecration that does not conclude something but initiates it: walking, following, moving; *sequela Christi*, the classic expression in religious consecration.

"Our apostolic mission" your Constitutions say, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the inseparable elements of our your consecration. I would like to make a comment about this text. In the current mentality, also post-conciliar, consecration is spoken of through the evangelical counsels, and then everything else follows. Here, on the other hand, we face a shift in perspective: consecration puts the apostolic mission, fraternal community, and then the practice of the evangelical counsels first as its content. I find this original placement of the elements constituting consecration particularly illuminating and significant. I find this to be extraordinarily rich in consequences in its way of characterising a vocation, a type of religious life, and also, fundamentally, a spirituality. (A. Ballestrero, *Don Bosco, prete per i giovani*, LDC, Torino, 1987, pp. 39-43.)

Actually, these reflections of Cardinal Ballestrero explicitly touch on our theme of the grace of unity.

It is interesting to note what the Constitutions propose in Article 3, in the form of an affirmative description of the contents of our apostolic consecration, are also presented in Article 24, but in the form of a prayerful giving for each member of the Congregation: this is the formula of Religious Profession:

"God my Father, you have consecrated me to yourself on the day of my baptism. *In response to the love of the Lord Jesus*, your Son, who calls me to follow him more closely, and led by the Holy Spirit who is light and strength (= *God who consecrates me*), with complete freedom I offer totally to you. I pledge myself to devote all my strength to those to whom you will send me, especially to young people who are poorest (= *mission*); to live in the Salesian Society in communion of spirit and (= *fraternal community*)... And so, in the presence of my brothers, I make the vow to live obedient, poor and chaste according to the way of the gospel set out in the Salesian Constitutions" (= *practice of the counsels*) (C 24).

We can also read another article that in indicating the bonds of unity in fraternal communion, again insists on the same elements: “God calls us to live in community, and entrusts us with brothers to love. *Brotherly love, our apostolic mission and the practice of the evangelical counsels* are the bonds which form us into one and constantly reinforce our communion. We become one heart *and* one soul to love and serve God, and to help one another” (C. 50).

It is the energy of the grace of unity, which through one’s own disposition continues to expand the influence of the unifying power of the Holy Spirit.

There is another argument, a very strong one, in favour of this reflection on the fundamental contents of our proper nature, and it is the consideration of the very structure of the constitutional text, contained in the first part of the “Commentary” on the Constitutions.

The way in which the constitutional text has been structured admirably highlights the organic nature of our proper nature. If you compare the structure of the current Constitutions with those of Don Bosco, or with those of 1921, with those of the SCG, you will find a qualitative difference. In GC22 (1984), the very structure of the Constitutions was studied, discussed and voted on seriously and carefully, as they have no small importance for the presentation of our identity. There it was seen that a new order had to be given to the chapters and the parts.

A summary “first part” presents our identity in the Church in germinal form: Article 3 and Article 24 are in this part. It is clearly established who we are in the Church, what is the vital energy that animates us, in what our apostolic consecration and our peculiar spirit consist, how each one personally assumes the common nature in full freedom, through religious profession. This first part is an overall description of our charism.

Then comes the “second part”, which, for its breadth was called (by Chapter members) a “maxi-part”, as indicated by the complexity of its title: “Sent to the young, in communities, following Christ.” We did not want to separate the constituent elements of our proper nature into several parts, because it is not the single mission, nor the single community, nor only the counsels that identify us, but always the three together: each within the other two. This was intended to underline the famous energy of the grace of unity.

Sometimes we hear sermons in retreats about chastity, the mission, or about the community as if they were elements “on their own”, which could be preached about by a Jesuit or by a Benedictine without distinction. This can also be useful; but in this case there is no insistence on the proper nature of our charism, but on values common to every consecrated life.

Finally, we have the other two “parts” in the text, which, in their own way, confirm the same.

5. The internal dynamics of the four elements indicated

Considering what the Constitutions say about our apostolic consecration (C. 3) and our proper nature, we can detect a dynamic within them that revolves around two poles. Awareness of this dynamic helps to strengthen the grace of unity, and to make its fruits grow in consecrated life.

The first pole is the special Covenant with God. It involves two actions that converge in vital synthesis: the action of God our Father, who consecrates by infusing the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and the action of the one who professes, offering himself totally to God in order to follow Christ and work for the Kingdom. This is a dynamic of friendship that requires an ongoing awareness, daily dialogue and a personal attitude of love. It is from this pole of intimate Covenant that the “single movement” comes, with which to live the pastoral charity that is at the centre of our whole spirit.

The second pole is the Apostolic mission that “specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families” (C. 3). If the first pole is an aspect of unity, this second pole is a

defining element of identity. The two poles are in mutual tension, complement each other inseparably, and enliven each other at different levels.

God's initiative is perceived in a renewed theological vision of the concept of consecration in the Covenant pole.

We discover the contribution of evolving reality with the continuous youth challenges that call for pastoral inventiveness in the Mission pole. Giving attention to only one of the two poles would break the identity of our proper nature.

Covenant and Mission do not exclude the other two elements (Communion and Counsels), but shed a specific light on them, and energise them with the creative newness of the Spirit and with the new evolution of the signs of the times.

Certainly, the strengthening of this dynamic will be extremely beneficial in the formation of people: both in initial and ongoing formation.

I believe that there is no true formation if the organic secret of our grace of unity is not perceived. To proceed materially by the sum of elements, however precious each of them may be, is not the intelligence of faith, and does not, in the final analysis, ensure the overcoming of the danger of our spiritual superficiality.

6. Urgency of a Salesian re-reading of profession

For several years already, and for several others in the near future, the delicate task of animation and governance demands from those responsible a careful Salesian re-reading of religious Profession. It is urgent that we dedicate ourselves to exploring its nature, originality, its grace of unity, its spiritual energy.

Leaders should reflect, read, study, and pray. It is a matter of leading the confreres towards a real change of mentality, valuing the fundamental choice of Profession, setting a theological wisdom in motion through the channels of community meditation that shed light on our specific religious consecration.

There is no lack of special home-grown help for this: the Acts of the last three General Chapters, various letters of the Rector Major, the "Ratio Institutionis", the Commentary on the Constitutions, etc.

It is not by chance that I speak of "home-grown" help; not only because it is a matter of reflecting on "our" proper nature, but also because the Spirit of the Lord and Our Lady have privileged us with attention and gifts in these post-conciliar years. It is a true wealth of grace. Generally, to learn something new you have to leave home; here you have to enter it. I invite you to appreciate the beautiful and profound things we have. This makes us feel grateful, and gives us hope and confidence. The Spirit of the Lord has visited us, and has shown us his love. It would be ungrateful of us not to take advantage of this. And it would be negligence in the priestly ministry of those responsible not to go deeper and not to communicate the truth of the Word of God about our consecrated life.

4

The Covenant as an aspect of the Grace of Unity

“We live as disciples of the Lord by the grace of the Father, who consecrates us through the gift of his Spirit” (C. 3). The Second Vatican Council, with a single word restored to its theological depth - the term “consecration”— has revolutionised the approach to religious profession, and has restored to us the secret of THE GRACE OF UNITY. We are now going to begin to reflect on the four constituent elements of our proper nature. Let us begin with the first element: *the Covenant as an aspect of consecrated life*.

1. God's initiative

The Father's consecrating action is the source of the grace of unity, because it is the first source of love. His initiative involves the presence of the Holy Spirit, who, with his transforming and unifying power, builds a particular Covenant with Don Bosco and with each of his followers.

The first consideration to be made is that the life project to which we bear witness is not primarily our own initiative, but a gift and a call that are God's initiative, his love of gratuitous predilection. It is his initiative that gives meaning to and moves our special way of life. Let's read some biblical texts that have been placed as introductory inspiration to the chapters of the Constitutions. They have been very well chosen, and offer very effective opportunities for reflection and meditation.

For example, the Psalm which introduces the concluding and synthetic vision of the Constitutions as a way that leads to Love, says: “I will run the way of your commands; you will give freedom to my heart” (Ps. 119:32) (C. “Conclusion”). Our way of life, our grace of unity, the project of our proper nature, the constitutive elements of our religious profession are to be seen as rooted in God's initiative: it is not I who began running, but it is the Lord who enlarged my heart, healed my lungs and strengthened the muscles of my legs, so that I could run this way.

Another text, placed at the end of the famous “maxi-part”, recalls the indispensability of dialogue with Jesus Christ. It is a quote from the Epistle to the Colossians: “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Col 3:16-17). This points to the climate in which Salesian life becomes possible, as a life of union with God, in constant dialogue with Jesus Christ, as a daily exercise of faith, hope and charity.

God's initiative calls each one of us by name, and invites us to personally establish a strong friendship with Him. The Constitutions, moreover, insist on the divine initiative in our consecrated life. “Religious profession” says Article 23, “is a sign of a loving encounter between the Lord who calls, and the disciple who responds by giving himself totally to God and to his brothers and sisters.”

In describing the Salesian spirit, the Constitutions indicate union with God as a fundamental characteristic: “As he works for the salvation of the young” says Article 12, “the Salesian experiences the fatherhood of God and continually reminds himself of the divine dimension of his work: *Apart from me you can do nothing*. He cultivates union with God, aware of the need to pray without ceasing

in a simple heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ and with the Father, whom he feels close at hand. Attentive to the presence of the Spirit and doing everything for God's love he becomes, like Don Bosco, a contemplative in action."

And, speaking explicitly of our community prayer as dialogue with the Lord, they say: "The community expresses in a visible manner the mystery of the Church, which is not born of any human will but is the fruit of the Lord's death and resurrection. In the same way God brings our community together and keeps it united by his call, his Word, his love. In praying, the Salesian community responds to this call; it deepens its awareness of its intimate and living relationship with God, and of its saving mission, making its own Don Bosco's prayer: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*" (C. 85).

I think it is already clear – although there are few citations on this – that the aspect of our grace of unity is God's initiative. Here it is pointless playing with the words: this is the source, the root; this is the source of the whole Salesian vocation. This is where our charism comes from, and our reason for being a sign of Christ's love for young people. Unless every Salesian bears witness to his special friendship with Jesus Christ, he will be nothing in the Church. It will be easy to diagnose the cancer of superficiality in him.

It is curious: one of the accusations that have been repeated in recent months about Don Bosco (as during his canonisation process), is this: "So much work, so much movement, so many concerns, but prayer? And his union with God?" We, on the other hand, know that he was an exceptional model of a particular way of being united with God. All those who lived with him, or who approached him with spiritual restlessness, were perfectly aware of this. Fr Achille Ratti, who spent three days with him, resolved the famous objection, as pope, in his canonisation process: "Try to prove when Don Bosco did not pray!"

We know that our Founder wanted the practices of piety to be performed well; but this is not the main way to discover his deep union with God. In him it is a permanent attitude of life which is not measured simply by the observance of certain practices. The famous study by Fr Eugenio Ceria: *Don Bosco with God*, is a classic study in this area, although it dates back more than fifty years ago (SEI, Torino, 1929).

It is difficult to find a book that penetrates Don Bosco's apostolic interiority with greater intuition and truth. Our Founder bore witness to a permanent union with God in his daily life, *in his activities and reactions, in his style of work and relationships*. Everything that happened in him and around him was always interpreted in the light of faith; he even went so far as to say, about his own apostolic activity that, had he had more faith, he could have done much more. He often spoke of the Virgin's intervention as a presence that guided and moved him.

Don Bosco's educational system was undoubtedly the most revealing expression of his personality. His pedagogy at the service of popular youth, poor *and* at risk, is, in short, a pedagogy of youthful holiness. Tell me if someone could have invented a system of education to holiness who was not full of it.

His entire Preventive System is the result of a strong grace of unity, not only in the vital synthesis of his personality as a Saint, but also in his pastoral methodology. In effect, it makes human values work simultaneously, the contributions of the heart in familiar coexistence, and the great religious principles. The pillars of his pedagogy are Christ *and* Mary: Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist and in the sacrament of Reconciliation, and Mary in a very concrete filial devotion.

Another aspect that manifests his union with God is *his sense of Church*. It was not simply an adherence to the Magisterium of the Pope and the Pastors, but an affection that characterised his apostolic interiority.

When Leo XIII asked him to build the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, Don Bosco had debts to pay; he could not travel, because he was in poor health, old and almost exhausted, and yet he

accepted because it was the Pope who asked him. His own men told him, “But, no; this is not possible.” And Don Bosco convinced them otherwise.

What advantage did he get from all this? It was the spirit of faith that moved him; he sent out letters, stirred up half of Europe, and finished the construction. This fact is proof of an extraordinary interiority. (What was of more value: telling the Pope “I will pray a lot for someone who will build it”, or personally committing himself to it despite all the difficulties?) This beautiful example of his love for the Church I have indicated here very quickly; but it would be good to analyse what it actually cost him in his long-suffering old age.

Another attitude that speaks to us of union with God is *his strength of spirit*. We have many examples of this in his life: the tranquillity he was able to preserve in the midst of adversity, opposition and persecution.

To this we can also add *an intense practice of humility*: he lived with true simplicity even in the midst of miracles. You know numerous examples of true heroism in this field.

Another attitude, the result of interiority, is *his struggle against sin*. We can recall as an example his trip to Bergamo, to preach to seminarians. He sat down, said he would speak of sin, and began to weep without being able to say a word. It was a more effective testimony than a sermon. In his mission with young people he did everything to instil the sense of sin and the fight against it.

Also *his priestly kindness* is a manifestation of interiority. It is not that Don Bosco was born with an easy and calm character. We know this from what he himself has confessed. If there is one thing that stood out in him, and that everyone who knew him recognised, it was this ability to be kind, to make himself loved. We need to meditate on what it means in Salesian spirituality to “make oneself loved”: it is the result of a lengthy asceticism, and deep interiority is needed for this.

At work he was always united to God. There it became perfectly clear that for him, daily activity was “ecstasy of action”. It is interesting to recall his words to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: “Not Martha alone, not Mary alone, but the two together, as Saint Teresa the Great also taught.”

An irrefutable demonstration of interiority was *his acceptance of physical and moral suffering*, with regard to his moral sufferings we recall, as an example, the famous conflict with Archbishop Gastaldi: it touched his heart in its very depths, until he came to tears, when the Archbishop suspended him “a divinis”. He had to leave Turin, so as not to show that he could not hear confessions, because the sacrament of Reconciliation was one of his daily ways of carrying out his pedagogy of Christian formation. Let us not forget that during the First General Chapter, Don Bosco heard confessions six hours a day.

With regard to his physical sufferings we must say that they were an almost sacramental manifestation of the presence of Christ in him. This is particularly striking when one considers his last years and the final days of his final illness, where the many sufferings he endured in his life are also evident. In the central archives, there is a small pamphlet typed by a doctor. In 150 pages he examines the various ailments Don Bosco had. In all these situations of pain, and despite the enormous task at hand, Don Bosco never asked to be healed. Remember that there were people who offered their lives for him. But Don Bosco said, humbly: “If I knew that with I could make this illness go away with a brief prayer I would not say it, because Jesus Christ suffered much more, he suffered for me, he suffered for the sins of mankind.”

He had this great adherence to God’s plan. We usually think of Don Bosco as if he had always been in vigorous health; but we should consider, for example, the last four years of his life, to see the extent to which his interiority reached. Naturally, this aspect is for the elderly. We cannot present it like this any more to young people. One of our historians (Fr Francis Desramaut) is writing the life of Don Bosco starting from his last years. I think it is a method that allows us to discover in depth the true personality of Don Bosco, because it starts from the apex he reached in his maturity.

In addition to that, we need to add *his sense of mortification*, which, as we know, was something constant from his years as a young man.

In a word, his way of life appears to be one of continuous dialogue with the Lord, with Jesus and Mary. Let us think of the fervour with which he participated in and administered the Sacraments. If there are two Sacraments that Don Bosco favoured, as it were, as a preferential place for conversing with God, it was the Eucharist and Reconciliation, which made him one of the most competent, ardent and fervent ministers of the Church.

It is this kind of apostolic interiority that we must speak of.

Our covenant with God is also based on fidelity to certain practices, because it requires a pedagogy, especially when it comes to community. But I will not be dwelling on this here: my conversation is not one about exhorting people to observance (which is important), but about the vital convictions, so that our leaders know which values of interiority are the ones that we must help function among the confreres. Otherwise, everything else will not function because the root of our apostolic life lies precisely there.

2. The liturgy of life

The expressions of apostolic interiority that we have presented in Don Bosco make us think spontaneously of what is called the “liturgy of life”. With profound intuition and as an expression of his experience in the Spirit, the Apostle Paul speaks to us of this living liturgy: “I appeal to you” he writes to the Romans, “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1); and to the Colossians: “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).

It is the offering of himself to the Father; the contribution of personal participation in the celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, as the liturgical text itself says: “May he transform us into a permanent offering pleasing to you” (3rd Eucharistic Prayer).

This is explicitly underlined in the Constitutions. Each confrere, because he is a consecrated apostle, “draws on the love of the Good Shepherd, whose witness he wants to be... His need of God, keenly felt in his apostolic commitment, leads him to celebrate the liturgy of life, attaining that ‘tireless industry made holy by prayer and union with God that should be the characteristic of the sons of Don Bosco’” (C. 95).

Only from this perspective is the grace of unity perceived and strengthened which, in the true apostle, indissolubly unites work and prayer. This is how we can understand the famous expression of Fr E. Ceria: “The specific difference of Salesian piety (insofar as it is apostolic) lies in knowing how to make prayer out of work.”

Special help to achieve this is offered by the praying community itself.

The community of apostolic consecrated life is a group of people who share the same ideals, and who participate in a common pedagogy of prayer. Whoever avoids being in prayer with the community will hardly achieve the liturgy of life.

But community is not enough. If the person doesn’t work, the community won’t work. “We can form praying communities”, the Constitutions say, “only if individually we become men of prayer” (C. 93). Here, no one escapes by blaming others; I am the one here. “Each one needs to express his own personal way of being a son of God, expressing his gratitude, telling him about his yearnings and his concerns in the apostolate” (C. 93).

When a confrere says, “I have done the practices of piety in common, and that is enough” this kind of observance makes me afraid. Community practices are not enough: personal commitment

to prayer is required; not necessarily in the chapel: anywhere; but the individual's activity, each one's conscience must vitally perceive the covenant he has with God who has called him, gives him the power of his Spirit to live in the unity of love. Without prayerful individuals, a prayerful community is not built.

An indispensable form of personal prayer is mental prayer. This is not to be simply identified with the daily half hour of meditation, which is undoubtedly particularly formative; rather, it is a habit of each individual who gets used to contemplating and discerning in the light of faith; to which he adds expressions of love that are the fruit of pastoral charity.

This personal attitude of intimacy with God "saves us from routine, keeps our heart free and fosters our dedication to others. For Don Bosco it is a guarantee of joyous perseverance in our vocation" (C. 93). It is in this style of interiority, both personal and communal at the same time, that apostolic activity becomes prayer.

Here I would like to insist on the interiority of each individual. Machines (previously it was mules) work all day; but their work is not prayer. Unfortunately, how much human work is also not prayer! We ourselves can become "people of change" in the Church but not witnesses of God. It is not that the Lord needs muscles and perspiration: he looks at our hearts. Man's work is action; actions belong to people, and are clothed in their intentions and qualities; and individual's work will be apostolically effective and become prayer if that person lives in intimacy with God. Apostolic interiority is not authentic if it does not intrinsically tend to action; but the action of the apostle is not prayer unless it comes from his conscious covenant with God.

A Salesian who prays a lot but works little does not have the interiority of the *Da mihi animas*. But a Salesian who has burnout from work and prays little neglects union with God, has no apostolic interiority, and weakens his covenant with God. It is not a question of setting up antitheses, but of ensuring the grace of unity.

Apostolic interiority is a liturgy of life that leads simultaneously to God and to action. Cardinal Ballestrero pointed this out when speaking of our apostolic consecration: while God consecrates us, he sends us. This cannot be separated, because it is deep within, in the very make-up of our consecration.

3. The driving force of the Eucharist

The source and nourishment of a liturgy of life is, without a doubt, the Paschal mystery of the Eucharist.

In the Mass we have the re-enactment of Christ's supreme hour, the contribution of the love of believers to his sacrifice, and the launching of the energy of his resurrection into history.

— The love of Christ, the Good Shepherd, had its supreme intensity in the passion, death and resurrection: it is Easter! What Christ thought, accomplished, and perpetuated is the redeeming love of the Cross. This attitude of ineffable human solidarity remains definitively in him who, risen from the dead, is present before the Father to intercede continually on behalf of mankind. There lies the true psychology of the Lord's heart. It is there that we know what pastoral charity consists of, and it is there that we learn to love. The Mass makes that aspect of salvation present here and now.

— And not only does it make it present, but it brings to it (incorporating everything into the one true sacrifice of the New Covenant) the actions, initiatives and expressions of love of his followers over the centuries, as a spiritual host.

— In addition, through sacramental communion the Mass launches the energy of Christ's resurrection into the ecclesial mission among men: the Flesh and Blood of the Lord build his Mystical Body which, as the People of God (gathered from all races), becomes the leaven and sacrament of the salvation of the human race.

We must actually recognise that the Eucharist is the driving force of all Christian life: the source and summit of its inexhaustible riches. Therefore, we must know how to recover the values of its mystery with all our strength today.

But not, I repeat, out of a concern for observance, but properly as a central constituent of the apostolic mentality, of interiority, of union with God, of the centrality of the covenant and its pedagogical consequences.

There was a reason why, at the beginning of this famous year 1988 (and at the request of several confreres), I dedicated myself to writing a circular on the Eucharist, convinced that it touched a central point of our depth. Leaders and preachers will find abundant and valuable material in it for conferences and retreats.

The Eucharist is a formidable mystery: it took a God made Man to invent such an ineffable reality: uniting the simplest with the most sublime. It is the testament that Jesus Christ has left us. He himself presented it to our faith as a newness of saving presence; whoever lives it, reaches the depths. Suffice it to consider that with the Eucharist we become the “Body of Christ”, that we are his members, that we continue his mission in history, that we build a new world with him, that we are bearers of eschatology to rejuvenate the world, that we make history the civilisation of love; that is, that we make it a liturgy for the praise of the Father and for a coexistence of love.

The experience of this mystery begins inside each individual. It is born inside the hearts of our boys. How could a pedagogy that does not take this driving force into account be defended among Christians? Hasn't the importance of the Eucharist for the interiority of consecrated people, its fundamental significance for the discernment of the signs of the times and its pedagogical projection in the education of youth, been lost in this famous cultural crisis?

I am speaking so that every day we live of Christ, and so that our young people realise that without the Eucharist they will not be able to be true Christians and authentic human beings, because the explanation and the source of the whole mystery of the New Covenant lies within it. The Church is born there in the Eucharist; it is not born from below, according to sociological categories: the Church is born daily from Christ, really, through the Eucharist. That is why it is the Church's greatest treasure. Eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ builds an organic and hierarchical communion, animated by the Holy Spirit.

It is in the Eucharist that we find all the great elements for the building up of the Church, and the capacity for direct and personal dialogue with Jesus Christ; above all, for consecrated apostles who are radical disciples of Jesus Christ for the good of others. Those who are priests are called by a special sacramental service to make the common priesthood of all Christians work, that is, to make life a Eucharist.

That is where apostolic interiority carries out its dialogue with Christ. It is urgent, urgent, urgent, my good friends, to regain ground in favour of the Eucharist, both in our personal and community life and in our apostolate, to build life convictions: “Without Me” says the Lord, “you can do nothing” (Jn 15:1-7).

4. The wisdom and pedagogy of conversion

Apostolic interiority is continually beset by our weaknesses and by sin. The intelligence of faith leads to dialogue about this personally with Christ. Everyone needs reconciliation and penance.

The mystery of reconciliation leads us to contemplate the infinite mercy of the Father: “So if anyone is in Christ” says St Paul, “there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:17-18).

It is a matter of concentrating attention, above all, on God himself, rich in mercy. The liturgical texts fully remind us that the Father manifests his greatness and his omnipotence above all “*parcendo et miserando*” (forgiving and having mercy). In the Bible the subject of the Covenant is a damaged and forgotten reality on humankind’s part, but continually sought and rebuilt on God’s part. Interiority requires often focusing on this mystery. Also because in a world that has marginalised the sense of sin, it is urgent to relaunch the prophecy of mercy in catechesis and pedagogy. It should be familiar to reflect on the gravity and malice of sin, if the infinite mercy of the Father has willed to re-establish man’s covenant with Him through the passion and death of His own Son on the Cross. This mystery of reconciliation requires a whole process of conversion from human beings, which is also called penance.

And here it is necessary to rediscover the Christian dignity of the “penitent”. What does it mean to be penitent? The analysis of the penitent heart shows two mutually interpenetrating elements: the penitent’s acts (sorrow, confession, purpose, and reparation), and the therapeutic grace of Christ that gives the strength to personally participate in the paschal events. God’s Word calls us to continual conversion. All apostolic interiority is steeped in conversion psychology.

“Aware of our weakness” the Constitutions say, “we respond by vigilance and sincere repentance, brotherly correction, mutual forgiveness and the calm acceptance of our daily cross” (C. 90). As can be seen, conversion has social projections that translate into community and apostolic life. The elements that we have just indicated involve a true spiritual program in our concrete lifestyle. And the sacrament of Penance brings this program of conversion to its fullness: “It gives us the joy of the Father’s pardon, rebuilds brotherly communion and purifies our apostolic intentions” (C. 90). By going out of himself in order to be converted, the consecrated apostle not only recovers and strengthens his covenant with God, but also gives a more authentic aspect to his whole activity: he assures the genuineness of his apostolic interiority.

The special times of community life offer a concrete opportunity to intensify the covenant: “These times of grace restore to our spirit a deep unity in the Lord Jesus and keep alive in us the expectation of his return” (C. 91). If the proper nature of our grace of unity is to keep its characteristic vigour alive, it is necessary to ensure a daily path of conversion that leads to frequent reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

5. Convinced participation in ecclesial prayer

The Church, the bride of Christ, has official expressions of praise and supplication to the Father: all in Christ, with Christ, and for Christ. Participating willingly in them and being faithful to their demands is another way of living and nurturing the Covenant as a source of the grace of unity. It is about living the mystery of Christ in time with the rhythm of the Church itself.

In the circular on the Eucharist I have indicated the link between the liturgy of the hours and the Eucharistic mystery. What covenantal value does the saying of the Breviary have for each of us? The rationalisations with which we might try to justify easily dispensing ourselves from it are certainly not expressions of depth and interiority. “The Liturgy of the Hours extends the grace of the Eucharistic mystery throughout the day” the Constitutions say; and then they add “The commemoration of the mysteries of the Lord, as they occur in the liturgical year, makes of our life a time of salvation in hope” (C. 89).

If priests, in particular, do not take this ministry of ecclesial prayer seriously, they nourish the doubt that that they are showing one of the causes of decline in apostolic interiority and the risk of spiritual superficiality. They are the servants of the Covenant, and sometimes they devote themselves to other things, leaving the most crucial part to pastoral work. “It is not right” we read in the Acts of

the Apostles, “that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables... We, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word” (Acts 6:2 and 4).

How much community responsibility in the priests who leave their responsibilities in order to disguise themselves in other functions! It would be a historic disgrace in the Congregation if ministerial priests did not dedicate themselves, first and foremost, to making the Covenant work for everyone. One of the causes of this lack of awareness on the part of so many priests (especially those who are superiors) is the fact that they do not give themselves carefully to the ministry of confessions: they become accustomed to no longer penetrating the personal hearts of those to whom they have been sent. Don Bosco was a confessor precisely as an educator and superior.

Fr Philip Rinaldi, who was his faithful disciple, has often recalled that the place where true “spiritual fatherhood” is learned is the confessional, where the priest becomes very concretely a minister of the Father’s mercy, dispenser of therapeutic graces, and guide in the growth of faith and in vocational discernment. By neglecting the exercise of this ministry, the disease of superficiality is dangerously fostered in the environment. Why did the holy Curé of Ars become famous? Why did Don Bosco know how to develop a pedagogy of youthful holiness?

The meaning of “spiritual fatherhood” can be perceived, for example, in the attitude of a true Salesian superior: if he has to confront a scandalous confrere only in the context of the norms of the Rule of Life, with juridical fidelity to its requirements, he will make mere legal decisions (sometimes essential ones), without touching his confrere’s heart, but rather exasperating him; but if he were to hear his confession (Father, I ask the Lord’s forgiveness, I have seriously offended, etc. What can I do now?), certainly the attitude and the decision to be taken would take on a “paternal” dimension, and the decision would involve the two hearts. Where does this different attitude come from? From the exercise of the ministry of mercy! It represents the goodness of God the Father, and he experiences the dignity of a penitent, which has grown in his confrere by a special grace of the Lord.

Don Bosco always combined the fatherhood of the superior with the fatherhood of the confessor; a superior who never hears confessions (and there are so many people who ask!), risks distorting his ecclesial role as leader and guide of the personal Covenant with God.

6. Personal intimacy

I have become more and more convinced every year that we must insist a lot on personal prayer. I have already alluded to it. The person is the primary source of love. All communion is based on people’s initiatives. This is particularly true in the realm of the covenant with God. The power of the Spirit of the Lord passes through every heart: mine, yours. Any process of spiritual renewal has its secret there. The service of animation/leadership aims to move and motivate people. Religious Profession is freely made by each individual. Prayer, including communal and liturgical prayer, is unthinkable without the interest and contribution of individuals. The whole faith of the New Covenant is founded on a characteristic spiritual personalism.

“We can form praying communities only if individually we become men of prayer” the Constitutions recognise. “Each one needs to express his own personal way of being a son of God, expressing his gratitude, telling him about his yearnings and his concerns in the apostolate” (C. 93).

The evangelist Matthew finds a fundamental remedy for hypocrisy in personal interiority : “But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:6). To stop praying personally means to weaken the grace of unity that sustains and nourishes pastoral charity. Instead, the first and most powerful remedy for spiritual superficiality lies in the care we give to personal prayer.

The covenant of Religious Profession requires a constant exercise of personal prayer, which daily expresses the friendship of filiation (sonship) and the awareness of one's commitment to the mission. How could one speak of union with God in Don Bosco, if one did not consider the constant personal attitude of his heart?

7. Obstacles to the grace of unity

We can use the term "mysticism" when alluding to Don Bosco's apostolic interiority. Yes, it is true mysticism, because it is a deep life in the Spirit that leads to the ecstasy of action. It would be, if you like, a simple, realistic, ministerial mysticism; but it is a true fullness of faith, hope and charity. Fr Ceria describes it quoting a French scholar, De Montmorand: "True mystics are practical people of action, not of reasoning and theories. They have a sense of organisation, the gift of guidance, and are endowed with optimal qualities for achievements. The works founded by them are vital and lasting; in conceiving and directing their initiatives they show prudence and boldness, and that accurate vision of possibilities which is the mark of good sense. Indeed, good sense seems to be their predominant endowment: a good sense undisturbed by morbid exaltations or disordered imaginations, and combined with a rare capacity for discernment."

According to this description, we can say that Don Bosco is a "mystic of the apostolate". Looking at his historical figure, and considering the aspects which the present religious crisis sets against his mysticism, we can identify the following as serious obstacles to the interiority of the Covenant: neglect of God's initiative and of the power of the Spirit in our life; practical distraction from the daily consideration of the mystery of the Church proclaimed in the Council; neglect of the centrality of the Eucharist; the loss of the sense of sin and of the essential need for conversion; decline in personal prayer; and, in short, ignorance of the very nature of religious Profession as a unified project of covenant encounter. All this causes the fundamental treasure of the liturgy of life to be lost, and work to become horizontal, far from its intrinsic apostolic dimension.

This is no small matter.

That is what spiritual superficiality leads to.

We urgently need to relaunch all the richness of the Covenant as a fruitful source of our grace of unity.

5

Apostolic Mission as an Overall Characteristic

We are talking about Mission from the perspective of the grace of unity. We are considering Mission as the second pole of our apostolic consecration, which “sets the tenor of our whole life; it specifies the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families” (C. 3). As we said, if the pole of the Covenant is one side of unity, this other side is a defining aspect of identity.

We will keep within the time limit allowed, because in itself this topic could occupy a week of reflection.

1. Theological dimension of Mission

The first fundamental observation that interests us here is that Mission is an intrinsic element of apostolic consecration. The divine action with which the Father consecrates us in itself contains the apostolic sending to our target group. We are consecrated to be apostles: there is no antithesis or mutual holding back, for us, between being religious and being a missionary to the young. On the contrary, both aspects enrich and strengthen each other. No more dualism between consecration and mission. One cannot consider the former only at the theological level, and the latter only at the sociological level; one internal and ecclesial, the other external and social; one of contemplation, the other of action; one primary, the other secondary.

Not at all! It is the same grace of unity that makes us apostles because we are religious, and that makes us religious because God wants us to be apostles. It is a duality of tension in a single grace.

The pre-conciliar Constitutions spoke, with respect to our Salesian life, of a “primary end” and of a “secondary end.” With the SGC that rather philosophical terminology was happily abandoned, replacing it with the biblical terminology of “mission” and “consecration.” This is how it came about, after much reflection and discussion on *Lumen Gentium*’s “consecratur” and on no. 8 of *Perfectae Caritatis* on the organic vision and vitally synthetic nomenclature of the term “apostolic consecration”.

Our mission, in fact, is a conscious and responsible participation in the mystery of the Church in history, and goes back to nothing less than the missions of the Word and the Holy Spirit which are proper to the Trinitarian mystery. Only from there can its genuine and ecclesial nature be grasped. Christ has told us, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21). The mission depends entirely on the Father’s initiative, has its typical expression in the saving work of Christ, is animated and incarnated among men by the Pentecostal vitality of the Spirit, and is carried out in the Church and with the Church as a universal Sacrament which collaborates in the building up, through the centuries, of the Kingdom of God.

Therefore, the Mission “can never consist solely in the activity of the exterior life, since apostolic commitment cannot in the absolute be reduced to mere human promotion, however efficacious it be, because every pastoral and missionary initiative is rooted in participation in the mystery of the Church. And, in fact, the Church’s mission is by its very nature nothing else than the mission of Christ

continued in the history of the world. It consists principally in the co-participation in the obedience of he (cf. Heb 5:8) who offered Himself to the Father for the life of the world” (MR 15).

From this emerges a whole apostolic interiority, which brings with it the explicit and permanent awareness of the presence of the Father who consecrates and sends, and the operative availability to be docile bearers of the project of his love for those to whom we are sent.

The mission, in its operational aspect, fills the contemplative dimension of the consecrated individual with historical concreteness. This union with God brings with it the ardour of the *Da mihi animas*, in the untiring style of Don Bosco. As the Constitutions say: “Reading the gospel, we become more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord: gratitude to the Father for the gift of a divine vocation offered to everyone; predilection for the little ones and the poor; zeal in preaching, healing and saving, because of the urgency of the coming of the Kingdom; the preoccupation of the Good Shepherd who wins hearts by gentleness and self-giving; the desire to gather his disciples into the unity of brotherly communion” (C. 11).

Thus the grace of unity acquires the living aspect of “pastoral charity”.

2. Mission and ministry

Mission follows, in Christ and with Christ, the law of the Incarnation; it is present in the multitude of peoples and in the variety of cultures. It never changes in nature, but takes on different practical forms, depending on geography and history.

Here the important distinction between “Mission” and “Ministry” is immediately apparent, since Ministry is the practical realisation of Mission. The Mission is one, immutable in time and in situations. Ministry is manifold, adapted to specific cultures and real needs. In this way, there is a true oneness of Mission, even if it is realised in a multiplicity of pastoral approaches. What matters is that the Mission is enfolded, and that the different pastoral ministries truly translate the entire identity of the mission into practice.

This is a very delicate task, which measures the vitality of the grace of unity. On the one hand, it becomes essential – above all, in a period of accelerated socio-cultural transformation such as ours – to be attentive to the signs of the times, to the Council’s renewal, and to guidelines from our Pastors. The ardour of pastoral charity presupposes and requires apostolic inventiveness, docility to the Creator Spirit, understanding of needs and urgencies, discernment of reality, reconsideration of criteria, courage of decision and humility of review.

The consecrating action of the Father, while enriching us with so many gifts of his Spirit, also takes into account and assumes our individual gifts of intelligence, imagination, courage, intuition, balance, daring, common sense; that is, it counts on our concrete historical responsibility.

This opens up a stimulating panorama of apostolic spirituality which, in order to be preserved in the authenticity of consecration, needs to sense that it is continually rooted in the grace of unity of its proper nature.

3. Multiplicity of aspects in our proper nature

The mission of the SDBs is clear and well-defined; the contents cannot be misrepresented. Before listing the various aspects that it comprises, it is advisable to grasp its overall purpose well. The divine sending is “to be apostles of the young” (C. 3); “to be in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people” (C. 2); “Faithful to the commitments Don Bosco has passed on to us, we are evangelizers of the young, especially the poorest of them” (C. 6). Indeed, “Through the motherly

intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth, ‘that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise’ (C. 1). Each Salesian, in his religious Profession, commits himself “to devote all [his] strength to those to whom [God] will send [him], especially to young people who are poorest” (C. 24).

The power of the Spirit that envelops the Salesian in his apostolic consecration, his radical following of Christ and his historical dedication to the building of the Kingdom, are focused on this mission in operational terms. It is here that “inspired by the goodness and zeal of Saint Francis de Sales, Don Bosco called us *Salesians*, and gave us a programme of life in the motto *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*” (C. 4).

In the Acts of the SGC there are several issues dedicated to the subject of mission which highlight its theological density: its nature, objectives, spirituality and its ecclesial meaning (cf. SCG nos. 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28). But this theological aspect of the mission, which underlines its being rooted in the grace of unity, is necessarily linked to its actual practice, just as it was in the mission of the incarnate Word. From there, in Christ’s ultimate grace of unity (called “hypostatic union”), the divine mission cannot be separated from historical praxis; this is not anthropocentrism, but an original anthropological novelty in Christ’s apostolic activity. It is, in fact, a mission that is necessarily clothed in a dimension of human practicality that has its target group, its specific task and its criteria for action.

That is why there is a multiplicity of aspects in the Salesian mission that must be known and promoted, avoiding any temptation to reductionism, one-sidedness, consideration or exaggeration of some of its components to the detriment of the others.

Reading the Constitutions, we will see what the main aspects are: they are known, and have been put into practice for more than a century, without too many anatomical examinations. This is how we go ahead in everyday life as well: poor us, if before doing anything we had to examine the functioning of all the organs of the body! Life does not need a continuous examination; but medicine does need attentive knowledge, not just of the anatomy but of the functions and make-up of all the organs. Even in these special moments for the spirit, it is useful to analyse the mission more thoroughly, in order to ensure that we do not set out on a path of failure or infidelity.

Let me begin by reading from GC21: The mission of the Salesian “is not characterized solely in terms of his charges and by the typical community manner in which it is carried out, but also by the particular organization of its contents and objectives, and by the style of his work among youth” (GC 21, no. 80). This is a highly valuable statement and of special relevance, because interpretations have emerged that have accentuated some aspects, leaving others in the shadows, thus disfiguring the very identity of the mission.

What, then, are the aspects on which we should concentrate our attention, so that it can function in our pastoral work? The Constitutions indicate the following:

— *Those to whom our mission is directed* (C. 26-30): It is as clear as the sun that it is young people, with preferential priority for those most in need, those from popular environments, the world of work, those who offer vocational possibilities.

It is clear, then – I repeat – that our target group is “young people”. They cannot, therefore, be replaced with just “the people”; this term is repeated today with a messianic accent in some circles: the people as the protagonist of history, the popular project, the popularisation of everything... There are those who would like to present the people as the first subject of our mission. This easily results in ideological expressions that lead to something else, and take the Salesian mission away from what is its specific authenticity. Our preferential love always goes to young people; to the most needy young people, to young people in the world of work, to young people with vocational possibilities.

You understand that by emphasising this last aspect in particular, we are broadening the horizons of the young people with whom we must work. It is an important task for us to discover and form

the Christian vocations of ministerial priests, religious men and women, lay faithful in the workforce, parents, politicians who work for the poor, and so on. It is important to dedicate ourselves to the poor, yet avoiding a certain pro-poor fashion which becomes demagoguery without concrete social effects for the future.

— Another aspect of our mission is *the task of evangelisation through concrete commitment to education* (Art. 31 to 37): "Educating by evangelising, evangelising by educating". If we were among those to whom we are sent without evangelising by educating, we would not fulfil the Salesian mission. The Constitutions indicate the various facets of this: integral formation, personal promotion, the social dimension, ecclesial responsibility and awareness, initiation into liturgical life, vocational guidance.

Among these articles it is worth remembering 33, because it expresses an attitude of courage and balance that are not easy; above all, in certain situations: it refers to the social dimension. We must take the current process of liberation (especially in certain regions) seriously, because it is one of the great signs of the times, which is currently growing rapidly.

The signs of the times are also a kind of invitation from the Holy Spirit, who encourages us to wake up and seek an answer to so many urgent challenges. The process of liberation, for example, brought a preferential option to Medellín and Puebla on the part of the Latin American episcopate in favour of a profoundly renewed pastoral care; that is, a whole action of the Church in favour of the poor, to open horizons of dignity to them, and to help them change situations of injustice, guided by Christian criteria.

Parallel to this pastoral renewal, an interpretative research has come from some thinkers, which is called "liberation theology". It is a term that applies to different essays, some of which (perhaps, the best known and followed) have shown really dangerous deviations for the whole mission of the Church. This has been creating a very delicate situation in which the Magisterium of the Church has had to intervene. Naturally, the article of the Constitutions does not enter into this debate; but it underlines some very enlightening aspects which characterise the social dimension of our type of apostolic activity.

Don Bosco saw the social scope of his work very clearly; he founded us, no less, to help improve civil society; he asks us not to be afraid to open ourselves to temporal values, to the secular and social; such openness is very clear in Don Bosco. It is remarkable to see today how the same secularists, those who look at the saints from a rather worldly point of view, are enthusiastic about Don Bosco, and even prepare celebrations for him and mint medals, as if to say: "This Saint understood things"!

Our article explicitly states: "We work in poor areas and for poor young people. We work with them, educating them to assume their moral, professional and social responsibilities, and favouring their involvement in groups and in the larger community. In a way *appropriate to religious*, we share in the witness and commitment of the Church to justice and peace. While *not getting involved* in ideologies and party politics, we reject everything that encourages deprivation, injustice and violence. We cooperate with all who are trying to build a society more worthy of human dignity. The advancement to which we dedicate ourselves in the spirit of the gospel makes tangible the love of Christ which sets us free, and is a sign that the Kingdom of God is among us.

Obviously, it is very little to simply read the article; but now that the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* has come out, we find in it a very concrete description of the social doctrine of the Church: it is a part of moral theology and therefore it becomes one of the essential sectors of our educational evangelisation. Don Bosco studied Moral theology a lot, to bring faith towards praxis. Moral theology plays an extraordinarily important role in the educational task. Unfortunately, today Moral theology is in crisis; but we must acquire due competence, to become valid educators for tomorrow.

— Our mission also includes another element: “*a special educational method*” (C. 38 and 39). The Holy Father’s January 31 Letter has done us an inestimable favour, by exploring precisely this aspect. The grace of unity also resonates within the “Preventive System”. In fact, it always presents itself – and the Pope says it very well – with the three core values indicated by Don Bosco: reason, religion and loving-kindness. These are three core values that come into tension “together”, and not each on its own. Not simple human values (horizontalism); neither are they merely religious values (spiritualism); nor only values of kindness (sentimentality); but the three together, within a climate of kindness, work, joy and sincerity which ensures the functioning of the grace of unity in educational activity.

— Another aspect is the *ongoing criterion of renewal*: a precious criterion for a time of cultural and social transition such as the present. This is the “Oratorian heart” as a permanent pastoral criterion for Salesians (C. 40). We will talk about this in more detail later.

— Another aspect is *our many kinds of activity* (C. 41 and 43). We are not enemies of any structure; but, yes, we must not keep the structures that no longer serve the mission. What matters is that the structure – whatever it is, depending on the possibilities – really serves the mission. The articles cited offer different possibilities. The current Constitutions have avoided including what the previous text had, that is, the list of works, precisely because we are at a time of change, and because certain works no longer have the apostolic value they had before; in addition, they should be classified according to an order of priority for the mission. That is why they have passed to the Regulations, which are subject to adaptation and adjustment in each General Chapter.

But here, in these articles, it is important to stress that our apostolic activity is carried out in so many different ways. Thus, drawing up a project that is embodied in a single form would be reductive (unless it has to be adapted to some political force): only parishes, or only youth centres, or only schools, or only geographical insertion, or only ideals without works (the latter becomes a real cancer of the mission, because it suppresses concrete commitment): it is not taking the plurality of forms seriously. They must be determined, first of all, by the needs of those to whom we are sent.

— Another delicate aspect is *the community project or plan* (C. 44 and 47). “The apostolic mandate which the Church entrusts to us, is taken up and put into effect in the first place by the provincial and local communities. The members have complementary functions and each one of their tasks is important. They are aware that pastoral objectives are achieved through unity and joint brotherly responsibility” (C. 44).

We Salesians carry out the mission in a community style. It is true that the myth of community and the democratisation of the dispensation of authority must be avoided; but for us the community (guided by the Superior and energised by shared responsibility) is the first subject of the mission. This simultaneously requires community convergence and personal initiative. A little like we said for prayer: the praying community is fundamental, but personal prayer is absolutely indispensable.

Therefore, the common project is required in the mission, and the inventiveness and dedication of each one: to promote community spirit, and to know how to use imagination and creativity. The community cannot be a prison for people: Don Bosco, they say, left a lot of air around the vow of obedience. But it is clear that there has to be a convergence of communion at a working level and a project that is drawn up together, since we form this community in order to share responsibility for its concrete pastoral purpose.

The project requires a degree of pastoral planning, determination of objectives, times of review and evaluation; a set of intelligent pastoral concerns that bring the members of the community together to think together and apostolically about what is appropriate to do in each place and situation. Experience teaches us that this commitment is very fruitful, both for the accomplishment of the mission and for the renewal of the community. Indeed, pretending to create community without

mission is a naive artifice, which invites us to repeat the famous expression: “*Mea maxima poenitentia, vita communis*”. Certainly, our community life has its ascetic demands; but its centre is mission, and its beauty is to feel like members of a family that lives and realises the same apostolic ideal.

— And finally, there is another important aspect in our mission, which consists in having and applying a clear “awareness of Church” to what we do: “The community lives and expresses its apostolic commitment within the particular Church. We become part of its pastoral action which has the Bishop at its head¹ and the directives of the Bishops’ Conference as a springboard for action on a wider scale. We offer the particular Church the contribution of our work and Salesian pedagogy, and we receive from it direction and support” (C. 48).

It is an aspect that brings with it many practical demands, as can already be perceived in the words of the article. We are not going to go into its contents now. Here we are interested in showing what are the various aspects that we must consider in the mission if we want to live it according to the grace of unity of our proper nature. The holistic care of the various aspects helps to avoid the dangers of reductionism which, in the long run (under the pretext of being more authentic in the mission), ruin the identity of our apostolic interiority and the balance of its activity.

4. The oratory criterion

Among the aspects of our mission that we have just listed is the “Oratory” as an original style of pastoral fulfilment. Its historical priority is so important that it has become a permanent criterion for the renewal of Salesian pastoral work (C. 40). More than the very structure of any Oratory (even at its origins), one looks at Don Bosco’s “Oratorian heart”; that is, at his pastoral criteria, his choice for young people, his realism in considering their concrete needs, his methodology called “preventive”, his spirituality and asceticism of “making oneself loved”, his daily concern for integral education. Today, after more than a century, this criterion requires that we review many presences and the whole style of apostolic commitment.

It is not a question of closing works, but of rethinking them; and it also forces new initiatives and, more than once, a demanding social relocation. We can say that the first Oratory at Valdocco is like the “theological place” of our charism : from there all of Don Bosco’s youth ministry was born. We will never be able to meditate sufficiently on the meaning and prophetic perspective of the first pastoral spark of Don Bosco’s Apostolic Family; it is there that the great fire began; it is there that we must establish the point of view of his entire apostolic perspective.

This Oratory is not anti-institutional, although it requires a revision of the current institutions; it is, rather, the source and measure of any institution on behalf of youth. When, in any presence, that pattern no longer has the possibility of application, it will be advisable to leave or radically rethink that work.

After more than a hundred years of existence, it will not be surprising if we have to do what happened to other Congregations and Orders in history. We are called to do so in the light of the Oratory criterion. It is a pastoral perspective that – according to the Constitutions – comprises four key values: “home”, with a family spirit; “parish”, for the faith to grow; “school”, for cultural advancement, and “playground” (that is, a spacious playground), for youthful joy, friendship and creativity.

The values symbolised by these four must be taken into account “together”, and not separately. This is where the consequences of our grace of unity come in. A Salesian presence that is only a “home” where people live together does not fulfil the Oratory criterion; nor does one that is only a “parish”, or only a “school”, or only a “playground”. Unfortunately, there are several cases of dangerous Salesian pastoral inconsistency.

It may also be useful to note that, in this criterion, three of the four poles indicate aspects of directly human values (“home, school, playground”); only one is directly focused on the most characteristic task of the mission, which is the transcendence of faith (“parish”).

This seems to me to mean two things: first, that in each of these value sets or poles the vision of faith must be present in the appreciation and development of human values linked to the education of young people; second, that the presence and importance of evangelisation are not materially judged by the number of pious practices, by the hours of religion or catechesis, and by other initiatives of a spiritual and apostolic nature, but by their quality, their influence, by their impact on the formation of Christian convictions. It is clear that if we add the activities that refer to “home, school, playground”, we obtain a range of things materially superior to those of the “parish”; but the latter must have such a vital and permanent quality, that they give their qualified and global meaning to the whole process, transforming all oratory activity into “pastoral activity”.

Today, I consider it urgent to apply this criterion of renewal to all our apostolic works, so that they may be a true fulfilment of Don Bosco’s mission.

5. The Gospel from within

This qualitative and permeating modality of faith in the Oratory apostolic activity is described in a beautiful page of the Letter that the Holy Father has written for the Centenary of Don Bosco; we can also see in it an allusion to the grace of unity that is at the centre of our reflections. The Holy Father says that Don Bosco managed to give himself to young people in such an elevated and fruitful way, “because of a singular and intense charity”, i.e. an interior vitality that united in him in an inseparable manner love of God and love of his neighbour. In this way, he was able to establish a synthesis between evangelising activity and educational work.

His concern for the evangelisation of his boys was not limited to catechesis alone, nor to liturgy alone, nor to those religious practices, which call for an explicit exercise of faith and lead to it, but covered the whole vast sector of the youth condition. It forms an integral part therefore of the process of human formation, not losing sight of defects but at the same time optimistic about progressive maturing, in the conviction that the word of the Gospel must be sown in the reality of their daily living so as to lead the boys to a generous commitment of themselves in life. Since they are living through a period of particular importance for their education, the saving message of the Gospel must sustain them throughout the educational process, and faith must become the unifying and enlightening element of their personality.... The educator will also be concerned to direct the whole educational process to the religious objective of salvation. All this requires a lot more than the insertion in the educational curriculum of a few periods reserved for religious instruction and ritual expression; it implies the very much deeper obligation of helping the pupils to open their minds to absolute values and interpret life and history in accordance with the depth and riches of the Mystery” (*Juvenum Patris* 15).

This beautiful quote is more than enough to shed light on an aspect that is so characteristic of Don Bosco’s youth ministry. It is also so natural for “preventive” pedagogy to focus efforts on giving growth to what is good. The Oratory criterion favours the art of educating in a positive way, proposing and highlighting values that attract the attention and ideals of young people; that is to say, the art of making the gospel grow in young people “from within”, stirring their freedom, enlightening their intelligence and enthusing their hearts.

6. Pastoral challenges and discernment of identity

Our mission is communion and participation in the larger mission of the Church. It follows that our pastoral ministry must also be one of communion and participation in the pastoral ministry of the particular Churches in which we operate. This means that, in fact, the pastoral ministry care of the Church in each local area will have a broad outreach and outlook in which the youth ministry of our presences will need to be inserted. All this requires constant attention to the pastoral challenges that arise in each local area, following the guidelines and taking into account the priorities indicated by the responsible Pastors, and at the same time the ability of an intelligent discernment of identity, to help respond to the challenges according to the demands of our renewed charism, in these post-conciliar years, along with the worldwide reflection of the entire Institute. Sometimes there are people who interfere without being qualified for it, or there are also internal pressure groups that are guided more by fashionable interpretations than by competence in what is our proper nature.

Here I simply name some pastoral challenges to remind you that we are challenged, and that we must know how to face them in a Salesian way (even if I cannot dwell on them at length), in order to awaken the responsibility of a serious discernment of identity (we are not lacking, thank God, in materials to help us in this), and thus avoid naively falling into deviant fashions.

Here, for example, are four topics which are a pastoral challenge: “option for the poor”, “insertion”, “inculturation”, “popularisation”. In fact, each one usually also comprises the other three, changing the type of perspective but retaining the same underlying hermeneutical vision.

Certainly, the Salesian mission is called to give a timely response to these pastoral emergencies, but not necessarily in the way presented by some hasty thinkers and who are not exempt from ideologies.

Let’s take a look: what Puebla called “the preferential option for the poor” is presented by some as a sociological interpretation linked to the kind of “liberation theology” which has been criticised and corrected by no fewer than two Instructions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In turn, so-called “insertion” within marginal populations is described in a reductive and generic approach, so much so that it becomes the praxis of decoding the current religious lifestyle, and the indispensable condition of a new mode of formation in consecrated life. Not so much as an initiative for social relocation, but as a new perspective for interpreting consecration and mission in a different way.

“Inculturation” is also presented with a non-objective concept of culture, which makes us forget how Christ, in becoming incarnate and inculturated, had to confront so many cultural aspects of his time as to include nothing less than persecution, passion and death in his process of incarnation.

Finally, by “popularisation”, some tend to speak of the “people” as the protagonists of history, with their own project of liberation and a messianic sensibility regarding their future. It is a nebulous and ideological vision that does not take into account the current complexity of society, and the need for mutual collaboration of all the strata that in reality make up the people of a country.

Well, we are not dealing with these pastoral challenges here (which are complex and demanding, and which we must take very much into account), but, developing the theme of the grace of unity, we are reflecting on the contribution of mission in the living synthesis of our apostolic consecration. We have sought to indicate some fashionable dangers in order to insist on the importance that the constant discernment of our identity must acquire today. But it would be a misrepresentation of its nature if this discernment were exercised only to criticise the dangers, and not to respond to the challenges, even if they are sometimes presented in questionable garb.

Certainly, the Salesian mission is natively linked to a true preferential option for the poor, to a concern for social placement among them, to a cultural flexibility of profound consonance, and to a popular dimension that distinguishes us existentially in the Church from other vocations of a

(somewhat) aristocratic type: our extraction, our presence and our action have always been qualified as being inserted in youth and popular environments in a very concrete sense, not coloured by ideologies.

7. Light and guidance from Pastors

Mission translates into pastoral ministry. Pastoral ministry is guided by Pastors. Jesus Christ is the inventor of pastoral ministry; he instituted the Pastors, and continually accompanies them with his Spirit of truth. In today's accelerating cultural changes, the guidance and direction of Pastors is needed more than ever. Indeed, a truly worrying intellectual and moral (personal and social) disorientation has spread. For this reason, the Magisterium of the Pastors has intensified from Council to Synods, from Conferences to pastoral letters, from papal allocutions to the pastoral trips of the Holy Father around the world. There is a wealth and concreteness of orientations; unfortunately, there is not always enough attention and attunement to these among various pastoral workers. Don Bosco teaches us, instead, to be constantly guided by the qualified directives of the Pastors. This is an essential feature of our way of carrying out the mission. Let us never forget that the grace of unity is constitutively linked to the explicit and concrete dimension of "ecclesiality" in the fulfilment of our mission: a single Body founded on Peter and the Apostles, and on their successors.

6

Fraternal Community as a Style of Life and Action

The way of reflecting on fraternal community changes in accordance with the perspective of the grace of unity: not so much about the classic themes (which, of course, retain their value and always demand careful consideration), but in view of the search for the dynamics that must build and strengthen communion in everything that refers to our proper charism. Among us we do not think of community in terms of a monastery, but think of it as a component of the vital synthesis of our proper nature; that is, as a living aspect of a broader organic reality which affects the same community dimension in multiple ways (and vice versa).

We are going to pull together some observations in this regard : the community seen as the fruit and defence of the grace of unity.

1. A style of living and working together

We live the Covenant and Mission in fraternal community. The grace of unity projects its energies into building an environment conducive to sharing in communion the values of the Covenant and Mission. According to our apostolic consecration, the religious authenticity of the community is measured by the ability to put and live in common the elements that come from the two poles that energise our proper nature from within: the friendship of the covenant, and pastoral activity as a concrete determination of the mission. Fraternity grows by breathing these values “together”. Communion is lived, manifested and transmitted in the community, a concrete form of aggregation, built up through visible and stable relationships.

— Starting from the pole of the Covenant, the absolute centrality of charity is immediately perceived: we form one heart and one soul, not by flesh or blood, but by the power of the Spirit of the Lord. Therefore, without continuous reference to God on everyone’s part, there is a risk (more than once verified) of dispensing with fraternal communion. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Col 3:16-17).

— And starting from the Mission pole, it is immediately clear what form the community will have to take: not a monastery or a convent (however valuable they may be for other Institutes of consecrated life), but an apostolic community characterised by its commitment to a youthful and popular mission. “To live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation. This is why we come together in communities, where our love for each other leads us to share all we have in a family spirit, and so create communion between person and person” (C. 49).

The renewal of our awareness in the mission and of our pastoral creativity has one of its secrets of success in revitalising our community dimension at the level of depth in the Covenant, and at the level of pastoral responsibility in the Mission.

— But the community aspect also touches in depth and vitally affects the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels. The three vows are living and daily dynamics within our fraternal communion,

and are characterised existentially by the proper nature of Don Bosco's charism. This means that they are linked in a special way with the two poles of the Covenant and the Mission that inwardly drive our apostolic consecration. The grace of unity touches them too, giving them a typically Salesian face.

The same order with which the Constitutions and the Profession refer to the three counsels, giving priority to obedience (as distinct from the usual way of listing them), is not simply a detail of fidelity to Don Bosco's own usage, but a profound indication of the special apostolic spirit proper to our consecration: obedience underlines, in fact, the intensity of the union with the Father in the Covenant, and the concrete and total availability to the Mission. As in Jesus Christ, Apostle of the Father, the central thing is the intimacy of his sonship and docility to the Father's salvific plan.

All our consecration is first and foremost an interiority of covenant, and it is the generous activity and responsible creativity of obedient children.

Obviously, this characteristic radical approach of ours is expressed in a particular form of community life typical of consecrated apostles: it values shared responsibility in the pastoral project, and recognises the importance of the service of authority, in an atmosphere of family spirit. Thus, in our community "The service of authority and the willingness to obey are the principles of cohesion in the Congregation, and guarantee its permanence" (C. 65). Everyone obeys - even the Superior - performing different functions, because everyone seeks together, with a religious spirit, the most effective accomplishment of the mission.

Each one places his abilities and talents at the service of the common mission. The superior, with the help of the community, has a special responsibility for the discernment of these gifts, and for promoting their development and right use" (C. 69). It is therefore clear how important a radical attitude of obedient sonship is for fraternal communion.

Poverty and chastity are also conceived in consecration as powerful dynamics of apostolic community life.

Poverty is demanded by the Covenant and by the Mission "as a detachment of the heart" in relation to earthly goods, to participate "with a spirit of enterprise in the mission of the Church" (C. 73). We thus bear witness to the genuine spirit of the Gospel: "After the example of the first Christians, we share together our material goods... In the community the good of each individual becomes the good of all" (C. 76). And all this, not to have a good time, but to dedicate oneself more generously to youth in need: "The spirit of poverty leads us to be one with the poor and to love them in Christ" (C. 79).

Finally, chastity gives the tone of sympathy and attraction to a familial and pedagogical love which should characterise us as brothers who live in joy, and as friends and fathers of the young, without concessions to the thousand suggestions of concupiscence: "Our tradition has always considered chastity a resplendent virtue, bearing a special message for the education of youth" (C. 81).

The community is considered as the home where each one concentrates his affection for otherness, and where he multiplies his apostolic ardour in order to launch his love (vivified by the grace of unity) in a type of pedagogical apostolate in which it is necessary to "make oneself loved" in order to make Christ grow in others: Consecrated chastity, a 'sign and stimulus of love', frees and enables us to become all things to all people. It develops in us a Christian sense of personal relationships, encourages true friendships, and helps to make the community a family" (C. 83).

Thus the authenticity of the community dimension becomes, in fact, a yardstick of life in chastity, which in gospel terms entails a true growth in the capacity to love: the love of the apostle is a chaste love. "The Salesian house becomes a family when affection is mutual and when all, both confreres and young people, feel welcome and responsible for the common good. In an atmosphere of mutual trust and daily forgiveness, the need and joy of sharing everything is experienced" (C. 16).

The practice of the evangelical Counsels, then, strongly helps to live the Covenant and the Mission in deep fraternal communion within a daily prayerful and creatively pastoral community. It is,

therefore, an original style of coexistence and activity which ensures and increases apostolic interiority, with an attentive concern to know how to respond evangelically, with Don Bosco, to the continuous challenges of the times.

2. Complementarity of communion

The community is composed of different members with personal gifts (cf. C. 22; 69), functions (cf. CO 55, rector; 178, local council), vocational characteristics (priest or brother: cf. C. 44, 45), age groups (cf. C. 46), sensitivity and formation. Being young or old, being a rector or in charge of the economy, being a practical trainee, priest or brother, etc., involves an important element and a task that needs “complementarity”.

Differences are interpreted according to communion. From this point of view there is no risk of individualism, but an enrichment of the community and, therefore, of everyone.

Individual and community, initiative and obedience, individual responsibility and common project, priestly ministry and baptismal priesthood, priestly spirituality and lay spirituality inter-penetrate each other in the “Salesian spirit” as a shared climate and mentality of the whole community. Obviously, this does not happen magically. It requires the intelligence, effort and perseverance of each one, of the leader and of everyone together, without being discouraged by the failures due to resistance by some.

The community is never completely achieved: it is always under construction. Fundamental initiation formation that is very sensitive to the community dimension is required, as well as adequate ongoing formation that insists on this. Today we have all the Council ecclesiology that has fully relaunched the aspect of “communion”. It is urgent that we practise this; above all in communities of consecrated persons who should present among the People of God as “experts in communion”. Our grace of unity flourishes in the community: Brotherly love, our apostolic mission and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the bonds which form us into one and constantly reinforce our communion. We thus become one heart and one soul to love and serve God, and to help one another” (C. 50).

The biblical expression “one heart and one soul” has special application in the complementarity between priest members, brothers or lay Salesians, and practical trainees. The importance and special significance of the Brothers lie not only in the fact that in any religious community there are many tasks of a temporal order that can be performed by lay members, but in the very characteristic of the Salesian mission which is simultaneously human promotion and evangelisation, education and growth in the faith, introduction to the world of work and ecclesial shared responsibility. Salesian pastoral ministry, in fact, must ensure that the Gospel grows from within personal and social maturity. The subject that must carry out this pastoral ministry is the community, and therefore, there must be different competencies within it, lay and priestly mentalities that complement each other in the very heart and soul of each member, in view of a specifically “pastoral” activity. The Salesian priest must have a natural harmony with the competence and mentality of his brother colleague; and the latter, in turn, must know how to harmonise inwardly with the competence and mentality of his priest confrere. In this way, the unified pastoral approach (“evangelising by educating”) that is characteristic of the Salesian apostolate grows in the same spirit.

All this has a particular importance for initial formation in the community dimension, even if it implies a different formation of specific competences and the individual’s spiritual sensitivity. Because he is a member of a community with a particular mission, the priest must sense and cultivate in himself the lay dimension of the brother as a proper aspect of his Salesian being; and vice versa, the brother

must sense and cultivate pastoral concern in himself as a complementary aspect of his competence in Salesian work.

I repeat : it is not that all this can be delivered as a finished product; it is a task in continuous construction. It seems to me that this is being done; the more each of us feels a spirit of simplicity, fraternity, shared responsibility in the same mission, the greater the communion there will be.

So, in each community there are vocational, personal and functional differences: communion consists in being able to make all differences complementary. Vital complexity is the characteristic of an organism that is all the more perfect, the more differentiated it is; that is what enables it to achieve many things.

Communion is not meant to flatten and make things one-dimensional, but to enable the greatest number of values to circulate. This is the great task: getting gifts, functions and vocations to circulate.

We need to strive in this area to bring the essential values of the Covenant with God into circulation: this is the community in dialogue with Christ. And in addition, we must continually put into circulation the values of the Mission made concrete in the pastoral project and experienced in everyday events.

We know that apostolic activity sets the tone for everything, and that is why communion must focus, above all, on what constitutes and develops it. I know communities that meet once a week to carry out pastoral work in communion: these well-prepared and led meetings gives vitality to the community dimension. This very fruitful initiative is recent, and it should be intensified and improved.

3. The community dimension: living synthesis of consecration

Through the grace of unity, each of the elements that make up religious consecration contains the other three within it: thus the special Covenant, thus the special Mission, and thus the characteristic Practice of the Evangelical Councils, and thus, in particular, a fraternal community.

In this light, the community dimension is presented, for our apostolic life, as the living and overall synthesis of consecration. It is not authentic unless it is at the same time an expression of the Covenant, the Mission and the Practice of the Counsels. It is an overall perspective that measures the Salesian genuineness of each element of our Profession: from there prayer, pastoral ministry, the pedagogical method, the practice of each of the vows, the Salesian sincerity of each vocation, the effectiveness of formation, the renewal of the charism are judged: a concrete witness of pastoral charity that “is a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity” (C. 49); “inspires every moment of its life: work and prayer, meals and recreation, meetings and other encounters” (C. 51).

That is why it will be a priority and very useful task to dedicate oneself to daily increasing this dimension : each “confrere pledges himself to build up the community in which he lives. He loves it, despite its imperfections, and knows that in it he finds the presence of Christ” (C. 52).

While it is true that the mission gives it its special tone, the community cannot be reduced to a simple “work team”: this way it would not understand the other values of the great aspects of our consecration. I once asked a confrere, “How many are there in your community?” “There are seven of us; but some of us are very old; they do nothing.” “Look at the answer! As if they were a burden! This time will come to you too! The sufferings of the elderly and the sick must become an apostolic treasure.

Obviously, we are in community to work, because it is a community on mission. But it is, above all, a communion of charity; it is a family, made up of those who are healthy, those who are sick, those who are young, those who are old: those who cooperate with their suffering, with their inability to act

immediately, and offer an invaluable contribution to pastoral care. We know that for Christ suffering was the ultimate expression of redemption.

It is important not to reduce the community to just a work team. There must be joy, fraternity, understanding, mutual help, exquisite sensitivity towards the sick: Don Bosco said of them that they are the blessing of our Houses. The intelligence of the Rector and the working confreres consists in involving the confreres who can no longer act directly in the same apostolic task.

This is a testimony of high pastoral effectiveness. Moreover, the essence of our community is apostolic communion. In it, all its members must agree, although in a differentiated manner. The community option is a charismatic note of our identity in the Church.

4. Creative core of ministry

We have already considered the distinction between “mission” and “pastoral activity”. Pastoral pluriformity is directly linked to local communities: the provincial (or provincial) community, which is local in the sense that it brings together a group of apostolic presences in the same region or country, and the local house community, located in a defined territory with a specific pastoral purpose (oratory, youth centre, school, parish, etc.). It is the provincial and local community that constitute (in mutual harmony) the generating core of pastoral adaptations in response to the concrete challenges of each local area. It is the provincial with his council, and it is the rector with the confreres in his house, who are called to formulate an educative and pastoral project that translates the mission into an apostolic praxis appropriate to the place, the specific recipients, their culture and their socio-political situation. It is here that the apostolic interiority and the authenticity of Don Bosco’s spirit are measured. In fact, the local community has been sent to a certain area with a special type of apostolic presence, to become a dynamic core group capable of creating pastoral activity.

Its members, by virtue of their very consecration, must carry out a constant and qualified pastoral discernment. This implies getting the community dimension to function apostolically, bringing together the forces of intelligence and faith, pastoral analyses of the real situation, knowledge of challenges, urgent needs and priorities, the concrete possibilities and capabilities of the personnel according to the purpose of the presence, the elaboration of an educative and pastoral project as a methodological projection of the mission. As can be seen, pastoral discernment requires acuteness of apostolic observation, inventiveness in programming responses, ardour of Covenant and operational enthusiasm in fidelity to our Mission.

Thus invigorating our community dimension is doing a fundamental work of renewal. Communities [in the past] had sat back, with an attitude of rote repetition that did not adequately respond to the requirements of youth. The urgency of a new evangelisation comes to awaken each apostolic community, to give a new evangelising meaning to its fraternal communion, as a revitalisation of its religious profession.

5. Open and animating community

The missionary renewal of the community brings with it a whole fruitful animating task for its members which opens the community to broader apostolic horizons.

Being a creative core of pastoral ministry entails for the community, as a natural consequence, the need to be an “animator”.

Animating who? Others who are not simply its members. Suffice it to think of the “educative community”, which includes so many co-workers in the various different educative and pastoral

tasks; it does not seem that this aspect has yet achieved a satisfactory functioning. Think of the Salesian Family (cf. C. 5), towards whose groups the community has special responsibilities: Galileo would perhaps say “*eppur si muove*”; but the task that remains to be done – above all, with regard to the faithful – lay people (if they move at all)— is only in its infancy (and this, unfortunately, not everywhere). We are awaiting the papal document on the theme of the last Synod of Bishops (1987): it will help us to improve and intensify our animation.

What is important to perceive here is that this animation is a vital part of our apostolic communion; that is to say that without it the community does not make its grace of unity bear fruit in the fulfilment of the mission. It is not simply an article of the Regulations or Constitutions, but a vital aspect of Salesian consecration.

Our community dimension is not enclosed at home, because it comes from a grace of unity that enriches us with a pastoral charity that is the ability to summon, communicate, to involve others. It has always been this way, since the time of Don Bosco. There has been a period of too much school institutionalisation or parochial genericism, which has reduced the sense of communion (in the same Covenant and same Mission), and has slowed down apostolic shared responsibility in the youth and popular mission, leaving the Cooperator Association and Past Pupils to languish. And to think that the Salesian mission is so great as to become impossible without an incalculable number of collaborators. Don Bosco felt as if he had been invested by the Lord with a universal mission for all young people in need. He was magnanimous, a dreamer, a tireless seeker of vocations and collaborators. We cannot remain calm, as if religious community meant we could do without the concrete animation of the educative community, the Salesian Family, and so many lay faithful. We must know how to spiritually inspire people and offer apostolic perspectives to so many people who have good will and are waiting for someone to invite them to work and show them concrete fields of action.

There are those who defend themselves from this serious and urgent stimulus by lamenting that they lack personnel. There is no doubt that there are not enough people today; but what is lacking, in truth, is apostolic interiority and the inventive ardour of pastoral charity.

I would not say – as someone has dared to say – that today the lack of personnel is like a grace of God to awaken sleeping consecrated people (for some this may also be the case), but it is like a call from the Lord to take seriously the ecclesiology of the Council according to which the faithful – lay people – are not the secret weapon in case of failure of the clergy and religious, but key players together with them in bringing about the world of the mission of the People of God.

For this to occur, however, the animating community must renew its rhythm of life, review its pastoral capacities, acquire or deepen competences of spiritual and apostolic formation for so many actors whom the Spirit of the Lord makes available as a vast new vocational sector of following Christ and apostolic shared responsibility.

It is urgent to rework the educative and pastoral project in this sense. Has the restructuring of the works (at the provincial and local level) taken this call into account? And there are so many clear indications from the General Chapters and the Rector Major (for example, AGC, nos. 317, 318 and 321).

Who are usually appointed as delegates for the animation of the Cooperators? And who (someone different), to do the same for the Past Pupils? In fact the two groups have different paths to travel. We have almost a thousand parishes around the world; but go and see what kind of associations you have; the charismatic aspects of our proper nature have not been revitalised. And where there are the right delegates, what participation and support is there from the community itself? And yet, this is the first subject of our covenant and mission. Here we find ourselves with a real challenge for the identity of our apostolic community.

So, an “open” Salesian community; open to collaborators, to the Salesian Family, to the lay faithful; open also to the signs of the times and to society. In particular, each local community open to the provincial community, where the first direct responsibility for pastoral activity resides. In each Province there is an overall plan for each of the works in its manifold possibilities of intervention; thus, in each work the link with the overall plan is necessary in order to be able to carry it out and continuously adapt to changing situations. Moreover, our community of origin is precisely the Province. By our religious profession we join the Congregation (as we tell the Rector Major in the formula) through, in fact, a provincial community.

Talking once with a Benedictine priest, he said to me:

“We have the vow of stability, we are definitively linked to a monastery; to change monasteries we need a permit from the Apostolic See.”

“We, on the other hand” I added smiling, “have rather a kind of vow of mobility; our obedience is like this: we do not enter a local house, but a wider community, that of the province, in order to be part of the world community; the provincial can change us from one house to another, and the Superior General, from one province to another; obedience makes us available to the mission with flexibility of destination.

This openness is no fairy tale, and it is very interesting; it demands an interiority that gives a very concrete meaning to fraternal communion.

6. The organic and ecclesial nature of the community dimension

Fraternal communion implies equal dignity, and mutual esteem and understanding among each of its members; the basis of this equality is the common form of religious profession. The family spirit gives a sense of home and mutual warmth to our shared life and all expressions of communion. This beautiful and joyful fraternity does not translate into a false kind of democracy unaware of the organic mediations necessary for community life. What we have reflected on the complementary nature of functions has its application here. In particular, the first animator of the community, who is the Rector, plays a truly vital role (one of concrete interpretation of the grace of unity and the demands of pastoral charity):

He animates and governs! The main secret of growth in fraternal communion lies in his function of service. He must have a pastoral heart, animating competence, an acute sense of the concrete mission of the work, knowledge of and friendship with his confreres as individuals, concern for the educative community, for the Salesian Family, for the promotion of Cooperators and Past Pupils, constantly renewed sensitivity to the pastoral reality of the local Church. He must know how to encourage and drive fraternal communion in all directions; above all, the characteristic of ecclesiality must stand out in him, so that it is lived by all his confreres as Don Bosco lived it.

Indeed, the community must be open, above all, to the local Church, where the concrete pastoral activity in the local area is worked out. Our mission is, by definition, participation in the very mission of the Church. Therefore, each of our apostolic presences must be thought of as a Salesian way of participating in the pastoral task of the particular Church in which a work is inserted, as a bearer of the charism of Don Bosco.

And since, in the Church, the aspect of “particularity” is inseparable from that of “universality” (two aspects always united in any part of the Church: there does not exist nor ever existed a universal Church that was not also particular, and vice versa), it is up to us to bear witness in each place to some specific elements which emphasise the universality of the Church: in particular, the fundamental Petrine ministry, and the worldwide communion beyond local cultures.

None of this is abstract, but is embodied in certain pastoral aspects that are characteristic of Don Bosco's apostolic methodology, such as the convinced adherence to the Successor of Peter, the guiding importance given to the magisterium of the Pastors, the ecclesial aspect of devotion to Mary, the availability for intercultural initiatives.

These are all things that indicate the openness of a Salesian community, in which the animation of fraternal communion must always acquire more authentically ecclesial characteristics, in full harmony with the two aspects of the particular Church and the universal Church.

7. The Rector of the Community

To reflect on the Rector's service from the perspective of the fraternal community is to accurately focus on his pastoral function. The grace of unity requires this service at the level of the community, so that the values of the Covenant, the Mission and the Evangelical Counsels circulate within the fraternal community. Pastoral activity should result as a fruit of this communion, in response to the real challenges. The Rector "is a father, teacher and spiritual guide"; he is dedicated to animating an apostolic community; he follows each confrere in his vocational and pastoral commitment; he "represents Christ who unites his followers in the service of the Father..., extends his concern to the young and to our colleagues, so that they may share in the community's mission with increasing responsibility" (C. 55).

The Provincial and his council helps and supports him in his role. The Constitutions clearly state that "The provincial and the rector, as animators of dialogue and teamwork, guide the community in pastoral discernment, so that it may accomplish its apostolic plan in unity and fidelity" (C. 44).

The function of the first animator of the community is therefore a very important one; it is rooted in the very constitution of the proper nature of the community, because it is at the service of the functioning of one of the aspects of apostolic consecration itself: the vitality of fraternal communion. The Rector is a special servant of the grace of unity at his level of pastoral practice. He cannot be a factotum of the community, involved in all the tasks (although he is certainly a servant), but must have the intelligence to get his confreres to function pastorally, awaken the "Oratorian heart" in them all, and guide them in the drawing up and realisation of the educative and pastoral plan.

To do this he must also reflect and study, know the current guidelines of the Magisterium and the Congregation, get involved in certain meetings of pastoral concern.

In particular, among ourselves, he must cultivate and develop a true priestly interiority. In fact, Don Bosco wanted the apostolic community among us (as we have seen) to be animated and guided by someone who intensely lives the grace and charisms of priestly ordination. "Authority, in the Congregation" say the Constitutions, is exercised "in imitation of Christ and in his name... According to our tradition, communities are guided by a member who is a priest and who by the grace of his priestly ministry and pastoral experience sustains and directs the spirit and activity of his brothers" (C. 121).

Thus the triple pastoral concern of the "ministry of the Word", of the "care of sanctification" and of the "responsibility of leadership" enters into the role of the first animator, so that the communion of confreres truly becomes a generating core of youth and popular pastoral concern. May Mary, who guided Don Bosco in his particular pastoral way of carrying out the mission, obtain light and energy to renew the role of the Rector in Salesian communities!

Only in this way will fraternal communion be a true expression of our profession.

The community is, in fact, a constitutive element of our consecration: it is not a simple pedagogical objective of observance. Its characteristic is the communion that circulates the great values of our proper nature; it is the home in which the grace of unity is inserted, lives and develops.

7

The Practice of the Evangelical Counsels as total Self-Gift

We have come to the consideration of the fourth element of our apostolic consecration: the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels (C. 3). It is improper to say that it comes last; it is as important as the other elements, and must be lived in tune with them: not in a generic way, but as Don Bosco lived it.

The Practice of the Counsels consists in the total giving of oneself to Christ through radical obedience, poverty and chastity, according to the evangelical project of Don Bosco.

We think of this Practice as the supporting structure that gives strength, sustains and defends the grace of unity with its fruits. It is a constitutive element of consecration itself.

Naturally, here we are not reflecting on each of the vows in particular, but we will try to give an overview of them in the overall framework of our apostolic interiority.

Let us begin by recalling the words of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians: “I regard them (independence, wealth, marriage) as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him” (Phil 3:8-12).

These explosive words touch on the central point of our life choice: we have radically opted for Jesus Christ. The Practice of the Counsels leads us securely along the path of the following the Lord. We began on this path in Baptism, and we have taken it to its fullest expression in Religious Profession. The profession of vows according to the Constitutions ensures the growth of the grace of unity, removing the obstacles that can hinder the perfection of charity. We want to do everything “from Christ”!

1. The immense contribution of the Practice of the Counsels

The first observation that arises spontaneously from the consideration of this element is that the others live and grow in it. It is a very beneficial fruit of the grace of unity. It is this grace that ensures that each of the four elements is contained in the others, each one strengthens and characterises the others from its specificity, each one has concrete meaning in intercommunication with the others.

In this regard, the Practice of the Counsels brings vitality and special riches. It is, in fact, the permanent, visible and radical existential testimony of the option for Christ. It involves a lifestyle that can only be explained by his mystery. It gives a special tone, that is, one that is very original and different from any other human motivation (parental, affective, cultural, political, humanitarian, etc.), because it judges, projects and acts always starting from Christ, assimilating his truth, sharing his vision and imitating his way of intervening.

— The Practice of the Counsels immensely enriches the entire scope of the Covenant: obedience deepens the intimacy of sonship, poverty develops the sense of transcendence of trust and availability, chastity ensures the authenticity of love and generosity of heart. Thus union with God, fruit of the Covenant, becomes existentially continuous, and makes the consecrated person say victoriously: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

— The Practice of the Counsels also enriches the Mission: obedience specifies the scope of apostolic activity, committing the initiatives of a freedom totally dedicated to it; poverty orients us to the service of the poor, and develops solidarity with them, and chastity invests our pedagogical and pastoral method of kindness with attraction and sympathy. Thus pastoral activity, the fruit of the Mission, becomes generous and creative dedication to those to whom we are sent, realistic concern for the most needy, and saving dialogue in our family way of living together: “The evangelical counsels render our pastoral charity solicitous and fruitful by fostering purification of the heart and spiritual freedom: the obedient, poor and chaste Salesian is quick to love and serve those to whom the Lord sends him, especially poor youth” (C. 61).

— Finally, the Practice of the Counsels vitally enriches the fraternal community: obedience sustains how it holds together apostolically, and creates a climate of sharing in carrying out the educative and pastoral plan; poverty facilitates the total communion of goods and the joy of equality, and chastity banishes individualism, and calls us to be a family with one heart and one soul. In this way family life, the fruit of fraternal communion, and community cohesion in pastoral activity are greatly strengthened. “The profession of the counsels helps us to live a life of communion with our brothers in the religious community as in a family which enjoys the presence of the Lord” the Constitutions assure us (C. 61).

The Constitutions specify in more detail the invaluable contribution of the Practice of the Counsels.

It brings with it a special participation in the paschal event of Christ, which is the centre of salvation history: “we share more closely in his paschal mystery, his self-emptying and his life in the Spirit” (C. 60).

It makes the work of evangelisation more convincing and incisive: “In a world tempted by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possessions and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love, the urge to possess, and the freedom to control one’s whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour” (C. 62).

The Practice of the Counsels also makes the consecrated person become “a sign of the power of the resurrection” (C. 63); that is, a witness and a leaven of Christian eschatology which inspires hope to continuously improve and transform the conditions of the temporal order with the commitment and horizon of a Christian form of energy which seeks the ultimate Kingdom of God: “The evangelical counsels, fashioning his heart entirely for the Kingdom, help him to discern and welcome God’s action in history; in the simplicity and hard work of daily life they transform him into an educator who proclaims to the young ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ awakening in them hope and the dedication and joy to which it gives rise” (C. 63).

2. Gospel response relevant for today

The Practice of the Evangelical Counsels within consecration serves as a way to live out and communicate values that inspire and challenge the surrounding world. When considering the way of life and the quality of action in a consecrated community, any observer is compelled to seek an explanation for a phenomenon that seems so out of sync with human instincts; and those among whom the community lives will sooner or later raise the question of the mystery of Christ.

The grace of unity flourishes in such a way that it becomes an apostolic consecration which becomes a provocation and leaven in people’s lives, in their culture, their daily life, and in the discernment of positive and negative that accompany the signs of the times. Unfortunately, indeed, a number of negative values become fashionable, and they distort the valid growth in humanity brought

about by these signs of the times; the evangelical counsels then appear to be a peaceful and formidable response, touching the deepest springs of the human inclinations that promote the circulation of negative values.

if the three vows of consecrated individuals (who number in the hundreds of thousands) were not an evangelical response, what else would be a response in Christianity? So, the grace of unity, through this practice, instils the courage to respond wisely and therapeutically to deviations and sinful fashions in the environments of today's society; especially where young people are concerned.

Current socio-cultural processes bring an abundance of new problems. They are driven by the signs of the times which need careful discernment because they bring both positive and negative values. Because each of them is ambivalent, in practice they entail no lack of deviations for sociocultural life.

We can review the main ones:

The process of secularisation develops critical maturity and scientific capacity; but it lapses into very harmful and blind secularism, because it does not recognise the presence and intervention of the Holy Spirit in history; in short, it denies the importance of Jesus Christ. This leads to a whole host of deviations, which call for nothing less than a whole new evangelisation. In such a climate, the Evangelical Counsels are a very concrete response to the world.

The process of personalisation, driven by the progress of anthropological sciences, highlights so many positive elements: the importance of the person, the deep Self, things that trigger freedom, ways of maturing, etc.; but it encourages the growth of anthropocentrism that makes the human person an absolute; thus it deviates from the Christian interpretation of the nature of man and his freedom; personal fulfilment is seen only in terms of human inclinations; and thus Jesus Christ cannot be understood when he says, "Not my will be done, but yours." And, instead, it is precisely this attitude of freedom that is at the heart of the Practice of the Counsels. This is very important to remember – especially in the formative years; to make our young people, who re immersed in the surrounding climate, understand that the evangelical response of the vows ennobles freedom, develops the person in love, and opens him to the service of good for others.

The process of socialisation speaks to us of participation, communion, shared responsibility, taking action: blessed be God that this process of greater participation and communion has arrived. But we must be careful with democratic or collectivist interpretations, that is, ideological ones. It is enough for us to look at the two opposite poles of the ideologies that guide today's great societies: conflict increases, and mystery ends. The religious community can end up becoming like a corporation or small "horizontal" democracy, without complementary functions, without hierarchy, without organisation. That is not in tune with the mystery of the Church. And it is especially not a correct interpretation of the small cell in that mystery of the Church that is our religious community, focused entirely on the obedience of faith. The evangelical counsels are a response to such an ideological mentality, while they extol communion and participation in another, deeper, more lasting and more incisive way.

The process of liberation awakens peoples who are in situations of dependence, injustice, to bring them to a level of worldwide fraternity and participation in the goods that God has created for all. We see, however, that there are interpretations of a non-Christian type and atheistic sign, which exclude God and despise the methodology of the Gospel; the engine of history would be the opposite of what Jesus Christ said: not love, but hatred, violent struggle, war. Furthermore, the political-economic aspect would be the supreme value for judging activities and choices. The Practice of the Counsels, while promoting so many values of this process, is a gospel response its dangerous deviations.

The process of inculturation opens great positive horizons in favour of what is authentically human in the tradition of each people; but it has the danger of absolutising cultures as they are. Culture is not an absolute: culture is the result of human activity and obviously the older it is

the less of the Gospel it has, and also the less sensitive it is to the signs of the times. There is no culture without defects and without errors; absolutising it means adapting to everything without discernment, enclosing oneself in it as in a cage. That cannot be true inculturation. If someone practises the evangelical counsels, he realises that in the culture where he lives he must discern: take up everything positive; but, in addition, he brings the light of Jesus Christ to it to purify, sow, develop it.

The evangelical response of the counsels is important and relevant, then, in the face of accepting the signs of the times on the one hand, and on the other, for criticising the deviations that accompany them.

As we have seen, the Practice of the Counsels is a sign of the energy of the resurrection, the fruit of the Passover in us. With them we can proclaim the presence of the Holy Spirit, and build concrete prophecies of renewal for young people.

3. Unobtrusive supporting structure

The Practice of the Counsels is inherent in every form of religious life as a radical following of Christ. It involves a whole ascetic methodology which characterises communities of consecrated persons; they are totally focused on God, “whom [they] love above all else”, committing themselves “to a form of life based entirely on gospel values” (C. 60). They leave everything for Christ’s sake (cf. Mk 10:28). They follow him as the only essential Master (cf. Mt 19:21; Lk 10:42), and listen attentively to his word (cf. Lk 10:39), and dedicate themselves generously to the Lord’s tasks (cf. 1 Cor 7:32).

All this reinforces the primacy of apostolic interiority that springs from the grace of unity. Clearly the ascetic aspect of renunciation in the vows plays a significant role in the lifestyle. But we will discuss this separately.

The Second Vatican Council explicitly says that “the profession of the evangelical counsels, though entailing the renunciation of certain values which are to be undoubtedly esteemed, does not detract from a genuine development of the human persons, but rather by its very nature is most beneficial to that development. Indeed the counsels, voluntarily undertaken according to each one’s personal vocation, contribute a great deal to the purification of heart and spiritual liberty. They continually stir up the fervour of charity. But especially they are able to more fully mould the Christian man to that type of chaste and detached life, which Christ the Lord chose for Himself and which His Mother also embraced. Let no one think that religious have become strangers to their fellowmen or useless citizens of this earthly city by their consecration” (LG 46).

The aspect of renunciation is undoubtedly effective and demanding; but it is energised by something very positive, which is the very object of such a radical testimony.

And here comes a particularly interesting reflection that Don Bosco himself offers us. The grace of unity in our proper nature requires that the practice of the vows truly be a strong supporting structure of our consecration; it is a structure, not a facade, but rather an almost hidden support, like the skeleton that supports our body. We don’t flaunt our renunciation, but we do practise it. What we are called to flaunt, display, is our faith, hope and charity, work and temperance. In the centenary commemoration of the dream of the ten diamonds I had to preach to the FMA General Chapter; they asked me to comment on the dream; a book came out of it, and I think it is useful for all of us.

We know that we have to exercise some discernment regarding Don Bosco’s dreams; but not a few of them, in fact, have enlightening and prophetic messages. For example, the missionary dreams; I have been able to prove their mysterious validity when moving around the world. Freud’s or some other scholars’ explanations of dreams are not enough; we must think about the meaning of the biblical dreams. Regarding this dream in particular, I say that it has a special value for the interpretation of our spirit; Don Bosco was convinced of it, and uses it to tell us how we must consider our spiritual

life. If it were a simple conference instead of being a dream, it would be equally important; but it is a “dream” of Don Bosco, one which interested him and the first generations very much.

Father Rinaldi has given us a profound explanation, with special perspectives for our interiority. The Practice of the Evangelical Counsels (from the perspective of renunciation) is not placed, so to speak, on the frontispiece of our consecrated life for all to see. What should be written on the front of our Houses is: here live good, generous people, hardworking friends of young people; here live people dedicated to love and to service. What must shine out for the world are the diamonds on the chest of the character in the dream: “faith”, “hope” and “charity”, along with a lot of “work and temperance”. The supporting structure of the vows must, above all, make the diamond of charity shine over the heart; the light that illuminates and attracts must be projected by pastoral charity. This vision is beautiful; it describes our “social” face. Our apostolic witness needs young people and the people in general to see us as normal, attractive people full of love and excited about Christ, who give themselves to others, who work all day; people who know how to master their passions, are enthusiastic about the evangelisation and education of youth.

We have seen that the grace of unity is intimately linked with pastoral charity. What is put in the showcase (for this dream), if we can say it this way, are the diamonds of the theological virtues accompanied by much apostolic activity and self-control. Of course, the other diamonds are also absolutely indispensable; if we were to believe that they become secondary because not displayed on the face, then we would be mistaken. Without them, in fact, the light of love does not exist or is not lasting; they are a supporting structure, although they play their essential role in a discreet, but fully evangelical and effective way.

This is an original feature of Don Bosco’s dream. In the arrangement of the diamonds placed on the back, you see a quadrilateral that looks like a fortress: it secures and defends the totality of the vision. A quadrilateral that has obedience in the centre, like a guiding diamond towards which the rays of the others converge. It was said that Don Bosco had an obsession with chastity; see, instead, how Don Bosco puts obedience at the centre of the supporting structure.

In a recent and powerful work by von Balthasar on the states of the Christian life, there is a valuable doctrinal justification for the centrality of obedience in Christ, an explanation of all its filial psychology.

In the quadrilateral in the dream, obedience is accompanied by chastity and poverty, together with mortification and fasting; that is, an entire ascetic behaviour that implies the daily and practical care of love; a set of renunciations and initiatives of mastery of the passions that ensure the vitality of the theological virtues.

In addition, in the dream, the daily awareness of the reward is added to these aspects: we know that also in Don Bosco’s pedagogy the eschatological vision of Paradise was particularly familiar in a mentality of faith capable of transcending earthly realities (cf. Egidio Viganó, *Un progetto evangelico di vita attiva*, Torino, LDC, 1982).

I am going to give each of you a copy of this book. In the meantime, I will read you a brief page, to make you better understand in what sense we talk about the vows as a supporting and discrete structure: “We were born in the Church not to look like friars or monks (NB: as the mentality of the people at the time would have thought. This is one of our original features) but to be a group of publicly consecrated individuals in the Church, with characteristics inserted in a society in the process of advanced secularisation Consider the words that Pius IX spoke to Don Bosco, when he guided him in the founding work of our Salesian Society; they are found in volume XIII of the *Biographical Memoirs*, pp. 62: “I believe that it is a secret I am disclosing to you. I am convinced that God has raised your Congregation in these times to reveal His power. I am certain that God has deliberately kept this important secret hidden until the present, a secret unknown to ages past and to many a bygone

congregation. Your Congregation is the first of a new kind of religious order, born in this age, whose style makes it possible for it to be both religious and secular. It has the vow of poverty and keeps personal ownership at one and the same time; it shares both world and monastery, and its members are both religious and lay, cloistered yet free citizens. It has been raised up so that all may see that there is a way of giving to God that which is God's and to Caesar that which is Caesar's."(E. Viganó, op. cit., p. 46.)

These are words spoken in the last century, and which must be re-read today within the new framework of the Council, but which express at the same time the essential nature of the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels, and a truly new style of bearing witness to it in the current socio-cultural development.

4. A radicalism totally steeped in pastoral charity

Our particular way of practising the evangelical counsels is not easy in itself: it requires a concrete and constant methodology of fidelity, which is coupled with robust interiority.

The reflections we are making on the grace of unity lead us fully to emphasise the fruitful inner recirculation between pastoral charity, which positively energises the vows, and the practice of them, which strengthens pastoral charity and makes it concrete, and vitally concentrates it on the mystery of Christ. Without pastoral charity, our vows are not an expression of apostolic consecration; and without vows, our pastoral charity is neither authentic nor will it persevere in us.

The various aspects of our consecration cannot be separated from each other (as we have already seen); but the action of the Spirit, which is the permanent source of the grace of unity, has a particular manifestation in the mutual interpenetration between Covenant and Practice of the Counsels, between Mission and Practice of the Counsels, between Fraternal Communion and Practice of the Counsels. The love of charity is the soul of everything: it motivates the profession of vows; its implementation leads to the intensification of love (cf. LG 44). Love is the fulfilling of the law of the law (cf. Rom 13:10) and the bond of perfection (cf. Col 3:14); it is through love that we pass from death to life (cf. Jn 3:14). The Council decree on the renewal of religious life says that "the pursuit of perfect charity through the evangelical counsels draws its origin from the doctrine and example of the Divine Master and reveals itself as a splendid sign of the heavenly kingdom" (PC 1).

What conclusion should we draw? Since the Practice of the Counsels is a very concrete and daily thing, it follows that we can measure the intensity of our pastoral charity by the authenticity of our evangelical practice of obedience, poverty and chastity. If the truth of our love lies in the following of Christ, it is clear that the radical nature of the Counsels measures the path we walk with Him day by day. And the ultimate expression of love proclaimed by the Epistle to the Philippians is paradoxical: Christ "being found in human form humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8).

The explanation of the vows as renunciation and self-emptying is the ultimate affirmation of true Christian love: obedience is filial love, poverty is fraternal love, chastity is the love of an undivided heart. The Practice of the Evangelical Counsels is the maximum manifestation of pastoral charity: the more the awareness of this charity intensifies, the more the apostolic consecration becomes coherent. Here is the true secret of that annihilation that the world does not understand: the Covenant is all the deeper the greater is the filial love it expresses; the Mission is all the more generous the more it is animated by obedient love; the fraternal community favours communion all the more, the more it dispenses with flesh and blood.

Frankly, the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels testifies, in the most exalted way after martyrdom, "the precious gift of divine grace, given by the Father to certain souls (cf. Mt 19:11; 1 Cor 7: 7), whereby

they may devote themselves to God alone the more easily, due to an undivided heart (cf. 1 Cor 7:32-34) in virginity or celibacy” (LG 42). It is, therefore, all about love; and more specifically, about the pastoral charity that Don Bosco summed up in the words that are so expressive and so often repeated by Saint Francis de Sales: *Da mihi animas, caetera tolle*.

5. Risks of weakening the practice of the counsels

We live in a time of intense cultural changes, which have a profound impact on lifestyle. Among the things that are changing is also the ascetic methodology of consecrated persons; but the disciples of Christ will never be able to dispense, in any new anthropological perspective, with the central mystery of the Cross. The annihilation that is love has no other way.

A crisis has arisen, and not a few have considered many practices of mortification and renunciation obsolete. Certainly, this aspect of Christian praxis must be reviewed. But everything that weakens the authenticity of the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels is to the detriment of love, and restrains and damages the fruitfulness of pastoral charity. Those who are called to encourage others in their apostolic consecration must ensure an accurate view of the Practice of the Counsels: any decrease in obedience, poverty and chastity wounds the grace of unity at its very roots.

I believe that it is urgent today to face the dangers of destabilisation in this respect more courageously, because if the Practice of the Counsels does not work, the grace of unity is resisted and we fall into superficiality. Some elements may remain – at first glance, more striking – but the charism of Don Bosco will not be fruitful or lasting. Weakening and lack of authenticity in the practice of the vows seriously affect pastoral charity, and mortally damages consecration.

What are the dangers? Let me point out some that I have seen, and about which I have thought:

Above all, no importance given to religious discipline: Religious life does not involve a barracks style discipline, but a discipline of conviction in following Christ. Would obedience without discipline, poverty without discipline, chastity without discipline be possible? Let’s not delude ourselves.

Another danger is the illusion of certain ideological fads: More prominence is being given to certain human values that overshadow the panorama of the Evangelical Counsels, as if they were obsolete. For example, when talking about justice and liberation, a demand of so many poor people, what interest can obedience and chastity continue to have in the face of the seriousness of the social challenge? Without us realising it, ideological fads lead to giving importance to the “horizontal” problems that guide public opinion or group opinion, and not to what Jesus Christ has given importance to, who became incarnate and taught us what the permanent values for all centuries are. In this way one does not think seriously about the praxis of the Church, for which consecrated life has always been a praxis of asceticism in the following of Christ, not to turn disciples into fakirs but to teach them to live a life of true love.

Another current danger is the democratising interpretation of religious fraternity: Fraternal communion would dispense with religious authority, and thus with the special obedience of religious life. This has damaged several institutes, to the point of believing that the presence of the Superior in a local community is useless. And that, be it on the part of the confreres who in fact dispense with their function, or be it on the part of the “Superior” himself, who considers himself like any one among the others. But what about the responsibility of his role?

We run the risk of losing the pastoral structure and organisation of the community and a strengthening of the spiritual aspect of communion. With such a criterion, the Rector would no longer worry about studying and discerning; he would not pray in the particular way his role demands; he would not investigate the problems; he would not look for ways to make the community grow in

pastoral charity; he would not encourage ongoing formation; the drawing up, implementation and revision of the educative and pastoral plan would not be given importance.

I consider that a quite special danger lies in intellectual pride. To follow Christ by means of the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels it is necessary to live in humility, because the Evangelical Counsels lead is along the path of self-emptying, in reference to certain basic attitudes of human tendencies. The one who (even if unconsciously) cultivates attitudes of intellectual arrogance, locked in his way of seeing (which he calls conscience); the one who makes so-called “conscientious objection” the law and the norm of all his actions, without suspecting that conscience has to be right within the scope of the Rule of life itself; the one who dispenses with and even despises the living Magisterium of the Church, gradually excludes the very concept of religious consecration (cf. SCG nos. 640-641).

Another danger is concessions to desires of the flesh. Obviously, we all have defects in this area, and that is why we go to confession; but when these concessions become habits and grow; when concupiscence is strengthened by intellectual pride (thus adding the concupiscence of the flesh to the concupiscence of the spirit); when there is no serious personal review, and things are left to run, and the Rector is so naive or carefree that he does not realise anything is happening, and is not able, as a friend and brother, to draw attention to this; then, the flesh wreaks havoc. Considering the pattern of defections in the major crisis of the past decades, we can find several motivations; but the current departures that continue to occur today mostly involve concupiscence of the flesh. The loss of the custody of the heart in this area is the cause of painful betrayals.

Another serious danger is the neglect of prayer, the loss of mystical enthusiasm, the neglect of the Covenant with God: it is both cause and effect of so many irreparable crises.

In short, comfort, seeking a better lifestyle and laziness (that is, the forgetfulness of temperance and work) are a true cancer that affects the grace of unity. We Salesians believe that we are great workers in the Church; but when we look at how many lay people work, we see how small we are by comparison. We don't think of ourselves as the great heroes of work, although we should be. There are people who work harder than us. Let us always consider work and temperance, those two famous diamonds of Don Bosco's dream, to be indispensable: without them the mantle falls apart, along with all the other diamonds. As you can see, destabilisation in the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels ruins our entire apostolic consecration.

We all know the objection that is usually made today to the detriment of the active religious life: the activities it carries out can be carried out without any special consecration; dedicating oneself to young people, educating, defending the faith of the people, etc., the radical nature of the vows is not necessary. This is false! Certainly, the lay faithful have enormous importance in the mission of the Church; moreover, their time has come today, and we must promote their active role. But the ecclesial importance of active religious life, the deep meaning and scope of its mission, is not judged simply by the external substance of its action, but by its apostolic interiority. It is a real treasure for the Church. Without it, the level of authenticity of pastoral charity declines, and the path towards a more secular and superficial approach opens up little by little.

Thus, for example, how would the spirit of Don Bosco and the apostolic level of all the groups of the Salesian Family remain authentic without a large animating and energising core of consecrated persons who leaven the whole, and guide it in the genuine youth and popular mission assigned by the Spirit to the Founder?

Blessed be the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels by consecrated persons, which assure the whole great Family of Don Bosco of the treasures of the Covenant, of the Mission and of Communion! In truth, the Evangelical Counsels, because they encourage purification of the heart and freedom of spirit, make everyone's pastoral charity attentive and fruitful.

6. A praxis witnessed to by appropriate means

The Practice of the Evangelical Counsels becomes impossible without a special daily methodology of life. It is necessary to form habits and attitudes, and use means that ensure their right development in the person.

We can apply to the three Counsels, considered as a whole, what the Constitutions say with respect to chastity: they are “not a conquest made once for all time. [They have their] moments of peace and moments of trial. [They are] a gift which, because of human weakness, demand a daily pledge of fidelity.” (cf. C. 84). They are, therefore, a living reality in continuous development, linked to the lifespan of individuals, their age, the situation in which they live, the circumstances that change, the position they occupy, the people with whom they deal, the difficulties that arise, their ongoing inclinations and weaknesses, the obstacles that intervene, and so on. It is a “treasure in clay jars” (2 Cor 4:7), which involves a task that is never finished.

They are not a kind of closed package on the day of profession, but a task that lasts a lifetime. Only pastoral charity gives reason for this; in fact, the practice of the vows is “a way that leads to Love” (cf. C. 196).

Fidelity to this practice “is a response which we continually renew to the special covenant that the Lord has made with us. Our perseverance is founded entirely on the fidelity of God who loved us first, and is nourished by the grace of his consecration. It is sustained too by love for the young to whom we are sent, and is expressed in gratitude to the Lord for the gifts that Salesian life offers us (C. 195).

These constitutional statements indicate to us, in a condensed and succinct form, the methodology to follow.

Here it is useful to recall, albeit briefly, what aspects to take care of, to ensure our lifestyle as consecrated apostles.

Above all, union with Christ as a living source of pastoral charity and daily nourishment of the grace of unity. This attitude grows with listening to the Word of God, with daily participation in the mystery of the Eucharist, with frequent purification through the sacrament of Reconciliation, with personal and community prayer.

In addition, the constant concern for the problems of youth, direct contact with poor young people, and their human and Christian promotion; the effort to form an upright conscience in them in the light of the sense of sin according to the gospel; the practical giving of oneself and one’s own gifts and skills in a constant attitude of work and temperance which leaves no room for seeking a comfortable lifestyle; the personal and community discernment of the challenges that come concretely from the place in which one is located; the constant review of the pastoral aspect of one’s activity; the preventive system as a way of living and acting; the constantly fixed gaze on Don Bosco, who “took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young” (C. 21).

The constant care of fraternal communion also ensures, day after day, the dynamics of love with regard to affections and relationships: the contribution to fraternity through concrete services and attention, intelligence of understanding, capacity for forgiveness, sharing of vocational values, pastoral dialogue extended to the various apostolic workers, dialogue with the Rector, community spiritual direction, daily concern for the common good, are all practical means which affect the lifestyle of the consecrated person.

To this must be added the specific determinations of religious discipline explicitly indicated in the Rule of Life: observance is not the soul of consecration, but it is an effective means, intimately linked to it, according to the spirit of the Institute itself.

The Constitutions also speak of the practice of mortification (it has not gone out of fashion, dear confreres!), of the guardianship of the senses, of discretion and prudence in the use of the social communication media, and of the care of the natural means that encourage physical and mental health.

Our Founder insisted, furthermore, on cultivating a strong Marian devotion, capable of establishing intense relationships with the Mother of God, similar to those with a living and present person. The Salesian, in fact, “turns with filial trust to Mary, the Immaculate Help of Christians, who helps him to love as Don Bosco did” (C. 84).

7. The task of the animators/leaders

Leaders of the apostolic religious community – particular the Rectors – are called to continuously study the great values of the Evangelical Counsels and fight courageously against the dangers that threaten their being put into practice.

What would be the urgent needs today to which you must dedicate your service of guidance and direction of the confreres more carefully? Let me recall the most fundamental ones:

First: There is an urgent need to renew doctrinal understanding of the Evangelical Counsels. There has been interesting progress in this area following the Second Vatican Council One of the areas of spiritual doctrine that has advanced the most in the theology of religious life is that of apostolic consecration. There is a new bibliography and very good writings on the subject; some of general value, insofar as they deal with the fundamental reality of following Christ, and others more specific, which show a greater understanding of the nature of the Founder. Well, there is a need to meditate on this and enter into the thinking of the Council. Someone has already insisted that each Rector cannot do without a study table and a prie-dieu (kneeler). I understand that there is much to do in the apostolate; but this reflection by the leader/ animator is in order to be able to work more and better, encouraging the confreres to attend to the vital centres of the grace of unity.

Second: The Rector must be clearly aware that his first duty is to promote community spiritual direction; that is, to exercise the ministry of the Word within his community. This does not mean giving conferences every day, which is impossible; but it requires knowing how to create a climate where there is a wealth of spiritual values, and where the confreres share so many ecclesial, congregational and community orientations that come from the Spirit of the Lord.

He is also responsible for giving priority in the community to the intensification of the dynamics of the covenant; that is, in particular, community prayer, the Eucharist, Reconciliation.

There are communities whose members cannot be together every day in the celebration of the Eucharist (I am not talking about formation communities); but they must look for a way to make it the centre of their common life; for example, setting one day a week to stress the Eucharistic and fraternal dimension of their life together.

It is also very important to make good use of “intense times”, for a review of life regarding the Covenant or the Mission or Fraternal Communion or the Vows or the observance of our Rule of life.

Third: Experience shows that it is particularly useful to focus the community’s attention on the specifically pastoral aspect of the educative and pastoral plan: its drawing up, application, revision. The authentically pastoral perspective requires a deepening of a concrete and lived synthesis of one’s apostolic religious identity, thus ensuring the vitality of the grace of unity.

The ideal of every animator/leader is to know how to promote and energise our apostolic consecration.

8

Asceticism, Essential Companion of Profession

Religious consecration without asceticism would become a utopia. There is no gospel radicalism without the Cross: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34) St Paul says, “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24).

Don Bosco tells us, We became religious “to practice charity toward our neighbour solely for the love of God, in order that we might not become attached to His creatures. We did not intend to live a life of ease, but to be poor with Jesus Christ and to suffer here on earth with Jesus Christ, in order to become worthy of His glory in Heaven” (BM 17, 3); “When comforts and ease will rise among us, then our pious Society will have run its course” (BM 10, 297, note 2).

These are severe words; a warning to secure the future. Even if we have vocations, if we dispense with the Cross there will be no future. This is not a masochistic statement, but deeply an evangelical one. It is the paradox of the mystery proclaimed by the Apostle: “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1:23-25).

1. The gift of martyrdom

The grace of unity is love; love flourishes in witness, and witness finds its full expression in martyrdom. There is an underlying continuity between witness and martyrdom. And to speak of authentic martyrdom we must always refer to Christ: He is “the cause and model of all martyrdom” (Liturgy). In him and with him martyrdom is the ultimate proof of the love of charity.

The Council affirms that martyrdom is an exceptional gift, and not a personal program (cf. LG 42), but which arises in every baptised person as a martyr’s instinct inherent in the commitment to proclaim their faith. Thus there is a kind of witness that is usually called “bloodless martyrdom”; Don Bosco called it “martyrdom of charity and sacrifice for the good of others”. In his spiritual testament, our Father wrote a sentence that has become famous: “Whenever it may happen that a Salesian succumbs and dies while working for souls, then you will say that our Congregation has gained deservedly a great triumph and the blessings of Heaven will abundantly fall on it” (BM XVII, 250, but also quoted in slightly different wording in the appendices to the Constitutions and Regulations).

What excels in martyrdom is not “action” but “passion.” It is clear that what best characterises witness does not consist solely of the intensity of apostolic work, but its deep-rootedness in a conscious interior availability to the designs of the Father; therefore, alongside action, creativity, continuous activity, there will also be an important place for suffering, misunderstandings, illnesses, periods of inactivity, mortification, and passion. Don Bosco also consciously accepted and experienced this second mysterious aspect extensively.

Since the grace of unity is rooted in pastoral charity, and since pastoral charity involves emptying oneself in order to authentically carry out the Salesian mission, continuous asceticism is essential to attempt to shed one's self. If we look at the martyrdom, for example, of our confreres Bishop Versiglia and Fr Caravario as the supreme expression of pastoral charity, we will see with absolute clarity that love of neighbour entails the gift of self that extends to the total gift of our life. It is good to remember that the choice of Baptism, the sacramental beginning of faith, is a choice for Christ that grows in us to the point of being a radical choice. Baptism, for the Christian, means a natural inclination to martyrdom. It becomes an extraordinary gift for some, and for others it becomes a style of witness that lasts a lifetime. Holy confessors are, in fact, bloodless martyrs. Indeed, to live one's Baptism, in the words of St Paul, means to deny oneself "until Christ lives in me: *Mibi vivere Christus est.*" This is not, I repeat, a kind of masochism; it is quite the reverse: it is about having such great enthusiasm and love for the person of Christ, that our own being is forgotten.

And since it is not so easy to say who we are is forgotten, we need to have a way and a process for this to be so. We call this ASCETICISM: an intelligent approach or adequate formation to be faithful to pastoral charity.

Some have accused Don Bosco of not having fully witnessed the mystery of the Cross; but it turns out that they do not know much about his life or his demanding spirituality. Living with young people joyfully and sympathetically requires daily many hidden renunciations, and exercising difficult social virtues opposed to selfishness.

His severe statement that "When comforts or ease shall begin to be present among us, then our Pious Society will have run its course" means, in practice, that the grace of unity will be dying. Don Bosco included the practical approach to fidelity to our vocation as part of the ascetic attitude. He wants us to be bloodless martyrs through our ongoing witness to the charism that the Spirit of the Lord has given us.

2. Work and temperance

A first aspect of Salesian asceticism is expressed (as we have already indicated) in the motto "work and temperance": an inseparable pair for us, which accompanies, defends and translates into practice the vitality of the grace of unity.

It is a type of original asceticism, particularly linked to the active life; it becomes an expression of pastoral charity, inherent in our apostolic consecration. Don Bosco witnessed to it in a heroic way; we cannot speak of his holiness without this aspect. He was convinced that, when this aspect declines in a confrere or in a community, the vitality of the Covenant, Mission, Communion and the Practice of the Counsels is lost. Let us take another look at the dream of the ten diamonds.

Fr Rinaldi points out the privileged place of the diamonds of Work and Temperance. The other diamonds are hanging from a mantle held by these two; that is to say, if the asceticism of work and temperance is finished among us, everything is finished.

— Work. We said, speaking of prayer, that work is prayer, but that depends on the interiority of a person united with God. Which means that it is work ordered to the fulfilment of the mission. Don Bosco told the young people who wanted to stay with him: "You enter the Salesian Congregation to work: the lazy are not for our novitiates." This is very clearly attested to throughout our tradition, and is one of the elements that have kept us (in these years of crisis) from becoming ideologues, and from dividing into groups of polemical fanaticism. If you work hard and apostolically, I am not saying that there is no time to think, but there is no time to invent ideologies, or get excited about any of them.

Our work, which has no measure: or, if you like, is measured by zealous apostolic good sense; work that is not limited to a bureaucratic schedule. In particular, for the Salesian, Saturday and Sunday (that

is, the famous weekend) are days of special apostolic intensity because pastoral care has special demands on those days. The same goes for holidays: Don Bosco said that we will have them in paradise, and that you rest by changing your job. And what he said for children has unfortunately become applicable today also for religious: that the holidays are “the devil’s harvest”. Who does not know someone “alive” who disappears from his community in the summer, and if he can get a car at his disposal, travels the length and breadth of the Continent?

So, above all, an asceticism of intense apostolic work, ordered to the fulfilment of the mission, and to things useful for the life of the community and the work. This continued asceticism entails the formation of the person in the spirit of sacrifice, in the gift of self to others in a practical and daily way, in the ability to engage in concrete opportunities for service.

— Temperance This is about ongoing self-control, not simply reduced to drinking little or eating moderately (obviously, without excluding them). Temperance is a cardinal virtue that refers, above all, to the guarding of the heart, to mastering the passions, inclinations and instincts that we all have. It is, in particular, mastery of concupiscence and capacity for balance in reactions, that is, a kind of asceticism that vitally helps the activities of pastoral charity on an ongoing basis. It is not easy to master self-love in the midst of young people who can easily make one lose patience, without reacting in an uncontrolled way, and being able, in any case, to go back and humbly confess one’s excesses.

Temperance requires many virtues that constantly influence behaviour, those we work with a personality that makes itself loved: Temperance ensures observance in the life of personal and community prayer; it always accompanies activity as an expression of apostolic balance; it strengthens fraternity in the life of the community; it exercises continuous mastery over the passions in the practice of vows. It helps, in particular, in daily renewing the authenticity of fraternal life, so that there is really only one heart and soul in the community, because it favours the contribution of “an atmosphere of mutual trust and daily forgiveness”, promoting the family spirit that “enkindles in the young the desire to get to know and to follow the Salesian vocation” (C. 16).

We have said that community is not “our ultimate penance”; but we know that any prolonged coexistence with people of different temperaments, ages, and backgrounds requires intelligent and virtuous care of everyday relationships.

Temperance is intimately linked with humility and rooted in it; it is the self-control that guides the daily journey on the path of emptying selfishness and reactions of pride.

“Work and temperance”, then, which “will make the Congregation flourish” (BM 12, 338), and which, as Don Bosco has taught, make the Salesian “ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain whenever God’s glory and the salvation of souls require it” (C. 18).

The secret of all this asceticism is the love that manifests itself in the apostolic ecstasy of the active life. “Salesian life considered in its activity” Fr Rinaldi says, “is work and temperance enlivened by charity of the heart.” We must never forget that the Salesian “Sent to young people by the God who is all charity, is open and friendly, ready to make the first approach and to welcome others with unflinching kindness, respect and patience” (C. 15).

3. Mortification of the senses

In the Church we are pedagogues; that is, religious who are experts in methodology. The care and development of the grace of unity asks us to follow a special method of consecrated life.

That is why Don Bosco, in addition to work and temperance, speaks to us and gives us examples of explicit mortification of the senses.

Mortification differs from temperance in that to self-control, balance and social maturity it adds a whole exercise of renunciation and sacrifice according to reason, which not only makes the former

possible and strengthens them, but projects them further in the generosity of a love that seeks to participate more and more in the saving passion of Christ, that is, in the way of martyrdom.

Let us consider that Jesus Christ himself, before beginning his public life, dedicated himself to a lengthy period of fast.

It is, in this field, above all about personal, intelligent, rather hidden initiatives which involve the deprivation of some things or putting up with others, without being on show, or rather – as the Gospel says – putting on perfume.

It is true that our Father counselled a degree of prudence where health is concerned; but in his famous dream, which we have recalled, he attaches importance to a special diamond, called “Fasting.”

These are pedagogical kinds of mortification at the service of a spirituality of the one who makes himself loved; they accompany the attitude of an apostle who “Because he is a herald of the Good News ... is always cheerful. He radiates this joy and is able to educate to the happiness of Christian life and a sense of celebration: ‘Let us serve the Lord in holy joy’” (C. 17).

We must not forget either of the two aspects: that we must witness to the joy of faith, but that we do so with a constant training in a genuine spirit of mortification.

Don Bosco's life and the Salesian tradition present an enormous wealth in this field: no cultural change can reduce or marginalise it, under penalty of a spiritual superficiality that dangerously damages our methodology for interiority. We know very fine and worthy confreres (missionaries and superiors), who have left extraordinary testimonies in this field. I can, for example, recall two: Bishop Versiglia – missionary martyr – wore a hairshirt in certain situations and difficulties of his day; Fr Fascie – a cultured superior – did so too: I was at his funeral as a student of philosophy at Rebaudengo; Fr Alberto Caviglia gave a very solemn eulogy in the basilica at Valdocco; at a certain point, to everyone's surprise, he revealed this hidden spirit of mortification of Fr Fascie.

In March 1874 Don Bosco asked all the confreres for three days of “rigorous fasting” for the famous approval of our Rule, and “those acts of mortification that each one judges compatible with his strength and with the duties of his own state” (MB X, 763. this is not reported in the English translation of the BM).

The diamond of Fasting extends, according to Fr Rinaldi's interpretation, to the entire area of mortification of the senses. And observing that this diamond is placed below the diamond of Chastity (which in our spirit shines with a very particular light, and attracts the eyes of young people as a magnet attracts iron), it suggests that the most necessary kind of mortification is the kind which refers to the dangers of concupiscence. Our asceticism, then, like that of every consecrated person, will not be able to do without constant initiatives in this regard.

4. The discipline of the Rule of life

Religious life has always been a concrete practice of following Christ; it is a freely assumed daily conduct, but professed with seriousness and publicly proclaimed personal commitment. It would be a contradiction to profess to want to be a “disciple” of a Founder and then to dispense, in practice, with a “discipline” that indicates the individual and community way of living, in practice, the methodology authentically proposed in the Rule to achieve the professed purpose.

The evangelical project of a religious Institute is appropriately called “Rule of life” because it contains not only the description of one's spiritual and apostolic identity, but also the practical regulations of religious conduct, that is, a concrete method of disciplined life for following the Lord in daily practice.

In the crisis that has occurred in recent decades, the clearly evangelical meaning and the pedagogical indispensability of a way of life guided by a discipline steeped in Christian tradition has been losing value in the awareness of many religious individuals. Too much value has been placed on the process of personalisation, without paying attention and taking into account the ambiguities that accompany it and the secularist deviations that tend to follow it, practically marginalising the mystery of the Cross.

Our asceticism obviously demands that we take the Rule of Life seriously. I have already spoken about this in some circulars.

Here it suffices to recall, first of all, the statements of four Successors of Peter who insist on the life values of reasonable ecclesial and religious discipline:

Pope Pius XI, speaking of shared and collaboration, says that “in unity is strength, but it is discipline that makes unity possible”;

Paul VI said to the members of a General Chapter: “May the love of discipline, which a changed understanding of this term at the present day would present as a limitation rather than a guarantee and backing for the apostolate, sustain like an unshakeable rock the ideals of prayer, of religious life, of formation and ministerial activity”;

John Paul I, in his inaugural address to the cardinals and also in an address to the clergy of Rome, spoke, not of a “small discipline” of formality, but of the Church’s “great discipline”: it “exists – only if external observance is the fruit of deep convictions and the free and joyful projection of a life lived deeply with God. The ‘great’ discipline requires a suitable atmosphere”;

And the current Pope John Paul II, in his first radio message, insists on this same concept: “Faithfulness implies also respect for the great discipline of the Church. Discipline in fact is not aimed at mortification, but is a guarantee of the correct ordering proper to the Mystical Body; it assures the customary and natural relationship among all the members who make up that Body.” (cf. AGC, “Religious discipline”, no. 293, July-September 1979).

In my circular on “Replanning our holiness together” I recalled Don Bosco’s style and the tradition constantly lived in the Salesian tradition, indicating the main articles of the Constitutions and the General Regulations that ask us for certain observances (cf. AGC, no. 303, January-March 1982, pp. 25-26).

It is a concrete discipline, revised in the last General Chapters, and therefore obviously valid for these new times.

A process of internalisation is required is required to accompany the sincerity of our profession. To do without this would be to dismantle the ascetic defences of the grace of unity. Our love of the Rule of Life cannot remain merely at the level of emotions: it must lead to practical everyday conduct. This sincerity of conduct is part of the same covenant of profession; it is a lived expression of the total offering of self according to the constitutional project, which makes us true disciples of Christ according to our own nature.

The Constitutions explicitly state that “The life and activity of communities and confreres are regulated by the universal law of the Church and the particular law of the Society. The latter is expressed in the Constitutions, which represent our basic code, the General Regulations, the deliberations of the General Chapter, the general and provincial directories, and in other decisions made by competent authorities” (C. 191).

This article should not be read only from a legal perspective, to determine what our “particular law” is, but it should be meditated on spiritually, to know how to better guide our behaviour.

5. A new anthropology?

Certainly, a correct asceticism must not dispense with genuine advances in anthropology. A certain type of mortification and renunciation has become obsolete, and does not correspond to our spirit.

But the mystery of the Cross remains central, and will always inspire every consecrated life.

Going around the world and listening to so many confreres – especially in Team Visits – I have sometimes perceived very delicate losses in this area. In recent years, the crisis of religious life has torn down the defences of asceticism. A certain justification can be accepted in part: the vision of man has changed; it is obvious that in a Platonic anthropology, in which the body (let us say) is considered as a prison of the soul, asceticism could present a now superseded style of punishing the body. But who still thinks so today?

We no longer punish the body. But the collapse of asceticism is a backward step. Anthropology may change, the view of who man is may change, but what does not change is the mystery of the Cross, the absolute need for asceticism for any baptised person. Nor does religious discipline change, because precisely what always characterises an Institute of consecrated life in the history of holiness is to offer an ascetic methodology to its members.

The first time I read the Rules of Saint Benedict, expecting to find very sublime theological reflections, I saw that it also focused on specific rules of conduct, specifying small things proposed as a way of observance.

The disintegration of this specific discipline of life, under the pretext that it is just minor trivialities, brings spiritual apathy and a decline in profession. A religious Institute whose members become accustomed to dispensing with an ascetic methodology will never flourish. A new anthropology may demand a change of style, but never a suppression of asceticism.

6. Profession of the Counsels

Asceticism plays a very special role in the practice of the vows. The Counsels are, as we have seen, a testimony of evangelical response that transcends natural inclinations, and requires a special methodology. Let us briefly look at some requirements of our Rule of Life in this regard.

— Obedience: “Instead of doing works of penance”, Don Bosco tells us, “do works of obedience.” Obedience is not only when the Superior assigns us, from time to time, to a particular place. Obedience is everyday behaviour. I was given this role: I have to be creative in it, because it is my concrete duty. Instead of putting beans (raw!) in my shoes, I will see how my specific task can best be accomplished. “Sometimes obedience will clash with our own selfish attitudes and desires for independence, or may really test our love. This is the moment to look to Christ, who was obedient even unto death: ‘Father, if this [cup] cannot pass from me unless I drink it, your will be done’” The mystery of his death and resurrection teaches us how fruitful it is for us to obey: the grain of wheat which dies in the obscurity of the earth bears much fruit” (C. 71).

And the Regulations recall, in this regard, the frequent conversation with the Superior in view of the growth of the individual’s spiritual life, and the improvement of pastoral commitment (R. 49); and also, the rule of asking for the appropriate permissions in specific cases (R. 50).

— Poverty: “Each one of us bears prime responsibility for his own poverty, daily living out by the frugality of his life the detachment he has promised. He accepts his dependence on the superior and community in the use of temporal goods, but he knows too that permission does not dispense him from being poor in spirit and in fact.” The virtue is not simply in asking permission, although it is already a good precedent; but that is not enough. The Salesian “is careful not to give way gradually to a desire for a comfortable and easy life, which poses a direct threat to fidelity and to apostolic generosity.

When his state of poverty causes him some inconvenience or suffering, he is glad to be able to share in the blessings promised by the Lord to the poor in spirit“ (C. 75).

Among the indications of the Regulations I draw attention, by way of example, to the following: “Every member lives out his poverty by temperance in the use of food and drink, simplicity in dress and moderate use of holidays and amusements. He furnishes his room in a simple manner, taking care not to make it a refuge which keeps him separated from his confreres and from young people.” This determination was made famous in the General Chapter by a member (who is now a Bishop), who was worried because in some of the rooms there were birds, kittens, television, and so on. It is a concrete discipline not to have a room that feeds the desire to take refuge there like a little middle-class type.

And the Regulations add: The Salesian “is watchful so as not to become a slave to any habit opposed to the spirit of poverty. Faithful to a constant tradition he abstains from smoking as a form of Salesian temperance and as a witness in his personal work of education” (R. 55). Not smoking is a sign that has a particular spiritual and pedagogical value in our tradition. Medicine and doctors recommend abstaining from it today as well; as good educators and in fidelity to a constant ascetic tradition, we should safeguard this testimony.

The Regulations give specific provisions also with regard to the use of money (R. 56), and use of means of transport (R. 63).

In addition, they remind us that “With a sense of economy and in keeping with our family spirit, domestic work and services should as far as possible be done by the confreres. They will try to acquire the relevant basic skills especially during the period of initial formation” (R. 64).

— Chastity: Its practice, as we have already seen, “is not a conquest made once for all time. It has its moments of peace and moments of trial. It is a gift which because of human weakness demands a daily pledge of fidelity. For this reason the Salesian, faithful to the Constitutions, lives a life of work and temperance, practices mortification and the custody of the senses, makes discreet and prudent use of the means of social communication, and does not neglect the natural means which contribute to physical and mental health” (C. 84).

The Regulations speak of austerity, prudence in visits and participation in shows (R. 66), in taking on female staff (R. 67), in relations with outsiders (R. 68). “Following the example of our Founder and aware of the austerity demanded by religious life and the obligations arising from our work, the superior and every member of the community should keep their conscience alert to their moral obligations in the choice of reading matter, film and stage presentations, and in the use of communications media” (R. 44). This article cannot be there without consequences: it must be the subject of personal and community reflection. I know, unfortunately, that there are abuses. It is a most delicate area for our perseverance.

There are also other articles that I will not quote now, but whose spirit is sufficiently clarified given what has been said so far.

7. Contemplation and asceticism

I think it is very important for the task of animating the confreres and communities to insist on the mystery of Christ’s passion.

We must take every opportunity to insist on the profound reasons for observance, becoming contemplatives of the paradox of the Cross. Advent, Lent (the traditional practice of the Way of the Cross: cf. R. 73), Holy Week, the intense times of the Churches Liturgy.

There is also another moment when communities are invited to think about the death of Christ: mourning the death of a confrere or someone close to us; this is a time of God’s grace which affects our hearts, and asks us to remember the immense significance of his Cross. If we become more and more

familiar with the events of the Passion of Christ, we will understand better and better that asceticism is not only the “shield” of our consecration, but also its “stimulus”, whose true purpose is to fully understand what pastoral charity is, in order to live it ever more intensely. It is not reductive mutilation, nor flight from values, but an option for the best, a source of energy and light for the development of the grace of unity, for an ever clearer witness of the Salesian spirit, which “reveals the unique worth of the beatitudes and is the most precious gift we can offer to the young” (C. 25).

Holy Week, for example, has become a holiday week in certain places, while for the whole Church it is the week of greatest intensity of participation in the mystery of Christ. A Salesian community should not miss this extraordinary opportunity for contemplation. It should live the Liturgy in depth, and, above all, it should live it together with our young people. It is the only week that is called “Holy” in liturgical time; it offers us a set of spiritual and pedagogical elements that vitally immerse us in the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ.

One Lenten practice – in our tradition of piety – is the exercise of the Way of the Cross: it is a valid pedagogy to prepare oneself to do it well; not in a routine way, but coming to reflect with great attention on the fact that God, in order to forgive us, has had to walk this path. This makes us think how the infinite mercy of the Father is so great that he wanted to forgive us out of justice, even if it seems a contradiction: he placed a Man, our brother, in solidarity with us, with a divine personality, who gives infinite meaning to atonement, and thus the Father forgives us also out of justice. This is what God has willed because of his infinite mercy. It is a practice that helps to reflect on sin: the sins of today, of our society, of our young people. We have seen how the sense of sin is being lost with the new culture; but if the sense of sin is lost, the mystery of Christ, necessary for salvation, is annulled.

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8. Promoting the disciple’s beliefs

I think it is very important, today, to insist on the values of asceticism, and to encourage practical initiatives for it to happen.

This should be intelligently privileged among the tasks of animators and leaders: organising the life of the community in this regard, knowing how to choose certain readings, insisting on certain practices, ensuring community and personal awareness. Everything that revolves around the mystery of Penance must occupy an important place in our spiritual life; there is, in fact, no apostolic interiority or pastoral efficacy without an adequate participation in the mystery of the Cross. Without continual conversion we are not disciples.

Don Bosco said that the devil tempts the intemperate by preference, and wreaks havoc among those who lose the sense of sin. An indispensable element in the animation of this vast area is the constant care of the celebration (personal and community) of the sacrament of Penance as the supreme expression of a convergent practice of initiatives and awareness which give daily conduct a convinced revitalisation of the virtue of Penance.

The achievement of such an atmosphere depends very much on the animation of each of those responsible.

Never forget in the communities what the Apostle proclaims: “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Gal 5:24-25). All true conversion, in the end, is not primarily the expression of a human decision, but an act of obedience, of faith. It is, in truth, a capacity to respond to God’s call, accepting the offer of his initiative. It will therefore be essential to make the Word of God that calls us to penance resonate abundantly and in timely fashion: “Repent and believe in the Gospel!”

Some Challenges for the Grace of Unity

We are coming to an end of our reflections on apostolic interiority, founded on the grace of unity. With what has been said so far, we have a concrete frame of reference to respond to the multiple dangers of “spiritual superficiality”.

1. Our frame of reference

The answer to today’s challenges is measured by its grounding in mystery.

The frame of reference of such a grounding rests on three pillars: the mystery of Christ, the sacramentality of the Church and the holiness of Don Bosco.

CHRIST is God’s masterpiece in history: in Him shines the fullness of the grace of unity, raised to the uncreated grace of the Eternal Word, who becomes Man.

By the “hypostatic union”, one of us : Jesus, descendant of Adam and in solidarity with the whole human race, can judge, love, work, smile, cry, suffer and die as God. The grace of unity, in him, preserves the fullness of the divine nature, enhances the possibilities of human nature, brings about the discovery of the goodness of all creation, prepares the transformation of the world towards a new creation. It reveals to man his own mystery, his finitude and sin, his active role in the history of salvation, proclaiming the profound inseparability between the human and the divine, between the temporal and the eternal, between culture and the Gospel.

The CHURCH in history is the mystical Bride of Christ: she extends the mystery of unity begun with the incarnation of the Word through the centuries. She is an organic communion of disciples that becomes, in all generations, a “universal sacrament” of salvation. From the Eucharist a true “Body of Christ” with a cosmic scope is built up. She unites the divine and the human; overcomes sin, leads to holiness; she transforms everything that is positively human into a sign and an effective means of communion of the divine. She incorporates the baptised, their good activities and all their true love, into her own sacramentality. In her and with her, we ourselves become signs and bearers of Christ’s love for human beings; especially, for young people. Just think of the Eucharist (cf. AGC, no. 324), to measure the extent and grandeur of this sacramentality with its ineffable construction of unity.

DON BOSCO, with his particular experience of the Holy Spirit, has left us an ecclesial charism, sprung from a special grace of unity that comes from Christ and from the Church, especially for the benefit of young people. It bears witness to a grace of unity launched in apostolic activity with a characteristic pedagogical dimension. From this stems the very nature of our identity of consecration in the People of God, as we have been reflecting.

In this frame of reference we must concentrate our eagerness to defeat spiritual superficiality, knowing how to account for our apostolic interiority, both in the area of the Covenant and the Mission, Communion, our Radical approach and Asceticism. These are the inseparable elements of our proper nature. We must know how to take care of their mutual and daily intercommunion.

Rather than developing each point thoroughly, we are going to off a a long list of tasks for the House. It is essential to intensify the awareness of its simultaneity in the “vital synthesis” of our interiority. Here is the great overall challenge, rooted in the pastoral charity that constitutes the

“centre” and the “synthesis” of Don Bosco’s Salesian spirit (cf. C. 11). What we have pondered so far will give us reasons to shed light on the various challenges in each of the areas of our proper nature.

2. Challenges to Covenant

Entering into the realm of the Covenant, we immediately see the possibility of several challenges which stem from the duality of the two poles of charity: God and neighbour. An problematic and unbalanced polarisation can lead to a divided dualism. By unilaterally valuing one pole, it leaves the other in the shade and weakens it. A notion of God that facilitates passive intimacy does not favour apostolic interiority. And dedication to one’s neighbour that is exhausted in short-term activism, renders true pastoral charity unfruitful.

At the root of this polarisation is the practical denial that love of neighbour is the fruit of God’s love, in continuous and mutual intercommunion.

The challenges that arise from here not only have a practical aspect, but also hide a doctrinal confusion.

Just think of some of the alternatives presented almost as a dilemma between opposites, in order to choose one to the detriment of the other:

- Contemplation and action; — Payer and work;
- Interiority and industriousness ;
- Consecration (on God’s part) and self-giving;
- Salvific truth (Word of God Tradition - Magisterium) and a realistic viewpoint; etc.

In practice, those who take the side of a certain intimism justify their actions with rather abstract arguments and a rather timeless consideration of their covenantal pact, easily forgetting the indispensable link between union with God and the other existential elements of their proper nature. Which, on the other hand, is polarised by focusing on activity in favour of others, privileges the choice of immediate participation in historical projects that favour a mentality that focuses on the transient.

3. Challenges to Mission

Mission necessarily involves a historical dimension with the changing pluralisms of historicity. Here the grace of unity moves at the different levels proper to the sacramentality of the Church. How does one sublimate a human reality into a sign and mediation? There is always the possibility of ambiguities: is the created reality only an object of knowledge and possession, or is it also an intercommunication of people and an expression of love? The one sent is always the bearer of Christ’s plan of salvation, which the Spirit continually adapts to the needs of times and places. It is all too easy to strip the sacramental element of its indispensable “sign” value and its “mediating” function. On the other hand, it is also possible to impoverish the proper level of the sign, not adapting it to cultural variants, thus neutralising its proper function with anachronisms that make pastoral care obsolete. Vatican II came about precisely to renew the pastoral relevance of the Church’s mission.

Challenges of a doctrinal kind and practical scope thus arise here too. We can indicate a few areas where the distinction needs to be clarified, in order to bring them together:

- Plan of salvation and historical projects;
- Apostolate and temporal activity; — Evangelisation and education; — Pastoral ministry and politics;
- Gospel option for the poor and social commitment;

— Charismatic identity and insertion; — Holiness and human promotion; — Conservation and renewal; — Faith and religiosity;
— Orthodoxy and praxis; etc.

Neither the fundamentalist nor the progressive mentality help to clarify the distinctions between the two aspects, to strengthen the balance of unity.

The mission, which belongs to the mystery of the Church, is embodied in human tasks, not to be confused with them, but to leaven them with the love of Christ. Without apostolic interiority, it is easy to let oneself be grasped primarily by current historical projects (formulated, more than once, in the light of some ideology presented perhaps as scientific), or by the complexity and urgency of human situations, forgetting the vital core of the sending received from Christ with his perspective and methodology.

4. Challenges to Communion

The Council has explored the aspect of “Communion” as a substantial value of the Church - Sacrament. This is particularly related, today, to two signs of the times : the process of personalisation and the process of socialisation. From this point of view, the aspect of Communion involves forms of renewal in the Church which require special attention and interiority. It is easy not only to dispense with these cultural novelties, but also to consider them separately, as if they expressed antagonistic values. Thus, by favouring the process of personalisation, one can fall into a unilateral vision of subjectivity, favouring a life of Communion that is only formal; or, by favouring the process of socialisation, one can open oneself to a style of fraternal life that introduces into the Church and religious life a kind of democratisation that suppresses the roles of mystical form of organic structure.

Certainly, as we have seen, Communion requires participation and shared responsibility; but no, neither individualism nor collectivism. In addition, it requires, for religious, a community open to wider horizons: to the local Church, to the laity, to the spiritual family, which is inspired by the Founder himself.

Communion truly opens up new horizons, and requires a change in the mentality of a certain lifestyle.

Therefore, several challenges arise from it that require a profound revision of one's own identity, both as a perspective on Covenant and as practice of the Mission. Let me indicate some:

- Person and community;
- service of authority and shared responsibility;
- Ministerial priesthood and secularity; — Initiative and complementarity;
- Individual capability and the common pastoral project;
- The core group of consecrated persons and the educative community;
- The religious community and the spiritual family;
- The charism of the Founder and the local area; — Congregation and local Church; — The gospel testimony of consecrated persons and their role as leaven in society; etc.

The grace of unity demands that the Covenant and the Mission be witnessed to by experts in Communion.

5. Challenges to the radical nature of the gospel

The Practice of the Counsels acquires extraordinary prophetic value in a secularised society which, with increasingly sophisticated attitudes is forgetting how essential is the mystery of Christ and the

Church. The current social changes, so profound and accelerated, bring with them the delicate and complex urgency of a new inculturation, enlightened by a renewed theology.

But progress in the human sciences and an anthropocentric conception of history played a major role in shaping the emerging culture. On the other hand, theological reflections that should shed light on the process of inculturation concentrate, above all, on general aspects, common to all Institutes of consecration, or to the very life of the Church in its global foundation.

This can lead to deviations in the consideration of one's own nature, falling into anthropocentric reductionism or into genericism that is ignorant of our proper charism. The new cultural reductionism damages the evangelical nature of the vows, and theological genericism can obfuscate the identity of the special experience of the Holy Spirit transmitted by the Founder.

A number of challenges arise, therefore, which require us not to be superficial or caught up in fashions in our awareness and witness to the charism of the Institute.

All the work of the General Chapters after the Council has focused squarely on giving adequate answers to multiple questions about the practice of the three vows.

Let us recall some challenges of particular significance:

- Freedom and renunciation;
- Personal initiative and obedience;
- Magnanimity and poverty;
- Love and chastity;
- Service to people and flight from the world;
- Apostolic demands and temperance of radicalism;
- Vows and the Rule of life; etc.

These challenges must be clarified in the simultaneous light of the Covenant, Mission, and Communion.

6. Challenges to Asceticism

In addition to reflecting on the four constitutive elements of our particular consecration, according to the description of the important Article 3 of the Constitutions, we have also thought it essential to dwell on the methodology of asceticism that accompanies each of these elements.

This is an absolutely essential pedagogy of consecration. But, as we have observed, this methodology of life must be subject to what is positive in the human maturing of the signs of the times, not in order to suppress it as antiquated asceticism, but in order to seriously adapt it to a more adult and more supportive concept of the human being. This is no easy task. It is clear that without asceticism there is no perseverance in consecration; but the concrete search for a way more appropriate to the very growth of human beings in their personal and social dimension remains open. In this process of human growth to maturity, asceticism becomes more demanding, more authentic, more current and significant. Without it, the evangelical response which is central to the saving work of Christ can collapse.

The challenges that arise from this are placed at the very basis of the renewal of religious life. Let us look at some of them:

- Personalisation and gift of self;
- Anthropological values and the cross;
- Sense of sin and redemption;
- Human context and the power of the Spirit;

- Great ideals and the way to achieve them;
- Action and passion;
- Human love and creative charity;
- Sincerity of ideals and fidelity of method;
- The new man and the following of Christ;
- Gospel freedom and response to the spirit of the world; etc.

The words of the Lord will never pass away: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels” (Lk: 9:23-26).

7. All from Christ

The consideration of the challenges that the present time presents to our grace of unity makes us perceive even more clearly that the topic proposed for our reflection obliges us to a great inner clarity, which enables us not to be afraid of the tensions that have been growing in this profound change of human coexistence. Without apostolic interiority, we become victims of spiritual superficiality, blown from side to side by the winds of changing fashions. The strength of our identity lies in the understanding of religious consecration with its vigorous grace of unity, expressed simultaneously in the Covenant, in the Mission, in Communion, in the radical approach of the Gospel, supported by the pedagogical help of a concrete and constant method of Asceticism.

This understanding of our consecration requires, on the one hand, the conviction and confidence to feel involved in the power of the Spirit of the Lord (nourished “by the grace of his consecration” C. 195), and, on the other, and, on the other hand, the continuous deeper understanding of the right doctrine, which enlightens the charism received: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:31 -32).

Today it has become particularly urgent to have very clear ideas about truth regarding salvation. There are too many distortions concerned more with a certain rationality than with genuine adherence to revelation. Pope John Paul II said in Puebla: “Being watchful over the purity of doctrine is as important as evangelising” (Initial Allocution, 1, 1).

The claim made by the John the Evangelist to “act on the truth” does not mean that the truth is born of praxis, but properly that it is embodied in it, that is, that it is necessary to put into practice the truth proclaimed in revelation. Thus true orthodoxy does not depend on historical praxis, although it is called orthopraxis, but authentic orthopraxis is the embodiment and lived testimony of revealed doctrine. It is dangerously ambiguous to claim that it is with a commitment to transform the world that one knows (above all) the saving truth, but rather that it is by knowing the Word of God well and integrally that one can transform the world.

Some thinkers would like us to believe that the human rationality of some current historical projects finally reveals the authenticity of the gospel; which would later also apply to the pastoral care of the Church and the decoding of traditional religious life. A new cultural and political understanding would have been born today that would force us to change the understanding of the paschal mystery.

For what concerns us here, in order to ensure the authenticity of the doctrine that should enlighten us in the responses that we must give to the challenges expressed, we must look with great attention

to the frame of reference that we indicated at the beginning: Everything from Christ, in the sacred mentality of the Church, according to the spirit of Don Bosco, based on the validity of a constant ascetic method!

I think it convenient to insist on the demanding meaning of “all from Christ.”

It’s not a formula; it is the mindset of the Christian faith. This is the fundamental perspective of the Church’s pastoral care, and the unique viewpoint of someone who is consecrated.

We know that it is necessary to “see” and “judge” in order to “act.” But from what perspective do we see and judge?

In Puebla, the Bishops did not accept (in the first part of their Document) a view of the continental situation based on a simply rational perspective; they reformed the text, giving it the title “Pastoral Vision of Latin American Reality”. The adjective “pastoral” implies a way of “seeing” and “judging” that starts from Christ the Redeemer. The light that sees and judges reality assumes and is based on a vision of faith. In the beginning, there is the mystery of Christ, his Word, his Gospel, his vision of history, his sense of human sin, his methodology of redemption, his message of salvation.

A reading of reality that starts first from human rationality runs the risk of exploiting faith and politicising the message. A reading of reality that starts first from human rationality runs the risk of exploiting faith and politicising the message.

The soul of everything is therefore the light of Christ, in which the supreme global perspective is concentrated to discern human history, to interpret its multiple situations, and to suggest the methodological criteria of redemptive love.

It is only from Christ that the demands of the grace of unity can be identified.

John the Evangelist say, Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (Jn 15:3-7).

Let us ask, then, that the teachings of Christ abide in us. In Him, with Him, and through Him, we will be able to face and clarify all challenges. It is beautiful to feel invited by the gospel not to be superficial, not even with pseudo-scientific camouflage.

Let us read carefully what the Constitutions tell us: “Our living rule is Jesus Christ, the Savior announced in the Gospel, who is alive today in the Church and in the world, and whom we find present in Don Bosco, who devoted his life to the young. In response to the predilection of the Lord Jesus who has called us by name, and led by Mary, we willingly accept the Constitutions as Don Bosco’s will and testament, for us our book of life and for the poor and the little ones a pledge of hope. We meditate on them with faith and ledge ourselves to put them into practice; they are, for us, the Lord’s disciples, a way that leads to Love” (C. 196).

10

Guided by Mary, Mother of the Church and Help of Christians

We cannot conclude these Spiritual Exercises without referring to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

The grace of unity that we live in the Salesian vocation has its inspiration and teacher in her. Don Bosco tells us that Mary is at the origins, growth and authenticity of our vocation and mission. “Under the guidance of Mary”, as we have read in the Constitutions, we welcome the legacy of the Founder, and we become, by our religious profession, a true gift of God for youth. She is the Star of the New Evangelisation, leading us into the third millennium.

The Holy Father John Paul II said, in 1983, during a beautiful homily delivered in Honduras, that “every time the Church is born in a country, the presence of the Mother is a guarantee of fraternity and acceptance of the Holy Spirit.” I think that not only every time the Church is born in a country, but every time a true charism is born for the universal Church, Mary’s motherhood plays a special role there. Don Bosco assures us of this for our charism. But other religious families also recognise and appreciate the presence of the Virgin in the birth and in the increase of their special vocation in the Church.

A study on this would be very interesting. It would make us note Mary’s concrete intervention in the special initiatives of the Holy Spirit over the centuries.

1. Mary and the grace of unity

The gospel calls Mary “full of grace.” She is Immaculate; she has not known the slightest rupture caused by sin. Her great faith (“She who believed”) was always enlivened by the fullness of charity: she grew daily in the unity of love throughout her life as a human being. In her womb the supreme grace of unity with the incarnation of the Word has been realised. The power of the Spirit has made her simultaneously Virgin and Mother: a special consecration, which is the model of all religious consecrations.

The grace of unity, in her, has made her not only “Theotokos”, but Mother of all human beings: the “second Eve”, type and prophecy of the Church itself; it has made her experience a permanent motherhood. In Mary, contemplation and mission are the single soul of her apostolic interiority, which continually issues the most conscious “Yes” to the Father’s initiatives.

She is the Ark of the new Covenant, the Queen of the Apostles, the heart of all Communion, the joy of the most perfect Radicality. If we want to have a concrete idea of how the grace of unity can grow and bear fruit in history, we must look to her as an unsurpassed model, together with Christ, “the second Adam”.

Mary’s greatness comes from the fullness of her grace of unity in Christ; and her motherhood is dedicated to guiding us in following her Son the Lord, so that the charity that comes from the mystery of the incarnation and redemption may grow in everyone.

Thus the grace of unity, in us, has an indispensable Marian aspect which shed light on our apostolic interiority and accompanies it in its growth. It would lack objectivity if we were to reflect on the grace

of unity of our religious consecration without focusing on the inner fullness and motherhood of Mary.

2. Happy inclusion of the Marian dimension in the constitutional text

We must thank the last General Chapter (GC22, 1984) for having enriched our fundamental Code with an indispensable Marian dimension, which makes them more faithful to the spirit of the Founder.

Before, due to technical requirements (cf. Introduction to the “Commentary”), it had not been possible to express this aspect in the text; and also the reworking by the SGC had not developed it satisfactorily. With the contribution of many suggestions from the Provinces, it has finally been possible to fill this gap. Several constitutional articles now present this in a restrained but solid and meaningful way.

We can divide them into two groups:

- a) Those that refer to Mary at the foundation and in the life of the Congregation;
- b) Those that refer to Mary in the Salesian’s activity. (Cf. the beautiful study by A. Van Luyn, *Maria nel carisma salesiano*, LAS, Rome, 1987.)

In the first group we have five articles that tell us about the “motherly intervention of Mary” in the foundation (C. 1); of her living presence in the life of the Congregation, and of the dedication of the Salesians to her (C. 8); of her constant interest as the main Patroness (C. 9); of her enlightenment and guidance in the Preventive System (C. 20), and of her special intercession for the practice of our religious profession (C. 24).

In the second group, several articles indicate her presence and importance in the work of evangelisation and catechesis (C. 34); the indispensability of devotion to her to grow in chastity (C. 84); her example in listening to the Word of God (C. 87); the relevant place she occupies in the prayer of the Salesian (C. 92); her help in the formative experience (C. 98), and her constant accompaniment on the way that leads to Love (C. 196).

As can be seen, Salesian consecration is deeply linked to Mary. This means that the awareness and care of our grace of unity cannot do without a strong and convinced Marian devotion. It is not a simple appreciation at the level of sympathy and feelings, but a historical observation: be it, in general, for who Mary is historically in Christianity (“Mary, Mother of God, holds a unique place in the history of salvation”: C. 92); be it, in particular, for the historical origin of our vocation (“The Virgin Mary showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young and was the constant guide and support of his work, especially in the foundation of our Society”: C. 8); be it in her motherly task in heaven, alive with Christ always interceding and intervening in human affairs and in the life of the Congregation (“We believe that Mary is present among us and continues her ‘mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians’”: C. 8).

It is one of the great characteristics of Don Bosco’s Marian devotion to consider Mary, not only as “alive”, but as truly “present” in our Houses and in our apostolic activity.

That is why “we have given ourselves” and “we give ourselves” to her (cf. AGC, no. 309, July-September 1983) with a filial attitude, and with our active commitment to live faithful to our Covenant, our Mission, our style of Communion, and our evangelical witness of Radicality. It is worthwhile meditating once more on the formula of our “Act of Commitment” solemnly pronounced at the beginning of GC 22 (January 14, 1984): “Help of God, Mother of the Church, we, Salesians of Don Bosco, surrender ourselves, personally and as a community, to your goodness and intercession. To you we entrust the precious treasure of our Constitutions, the pledge of our fidelity and unity in

the Congregation, the sanctification of its members, the work of each one of them offered in a spirit of living worship, the pledge too of vocational fruitfulness, of serious commitment in the work of formation, of boldness and generosity in our missionary endeavour, of our animation of the Salesian Family, but most of all our tireless work of predilection for the young. We proclaim, joyfully, that you are the Teacher and Guide of our Congregation” (cf. formula of the Official Act of Entrustment).

3. A great model of apostolic interiority

Mary is historically at the centre of Christ’s mission: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman” (Gal 4:4). It is in her that the great event of the Lord’s Passover begins. The realisation of this supreme salvific event (“*id quo maius fieri nequit*”, that is, there can be no other salvific event greater than this), which constitutes the very mission of Christ, has been gradually built up in history starting with Mary (Immaculate Conception; Annunciation; Christmas; etc.), and continuing with her personal and motherly participation. The Evangelist says that Mary “treasured all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51).

Her faith – the greatest of all centuries – was an attentive interiority that contemplated the events of Christ’s mission on a daily basis. It was a simple and realistic interiority; it was not nourished by ideological reflections; it contemplated the concrete events of salvation; it did not follow the so-called “historical project” with which its contemporaries imagined the Messiah, but tried to penetrate what was happening in her and in Christ as an expression of an ineffable and mysterious plan that came directly from God, whose ways are not the ways of philosophers and politicians. She was convinced, because she had experienced it and was experiencing it continuously – albeit obscurely – that the Spirit of the Almighty truly intervenes in human history; life and human becoming objectively contain an active presence of God, without the consideration of which the analysis of reality is dangerously reductive. Her song of the Magnificat is an objective reading of human history: “His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1:50-53).

Our apostolic interiority must imitate Mary’s faith. The mission of the Church (and the participation in it of our youth ministry) is, like that of Christ, a reality that belongs to the Mystery, and needs a contemplation and an interpretation that transcends the rationality of human projects, not to ignore them or to despise them but to incorporate them, with critical intelligence, in God’s salvific plan, even if it always appears surrounded by obscure light. But such is the paradoxical reflection of faith. Maria gives us the highest example in this regard: light and darkness, but a thousand difficulties do not make a doubt!

When we spoke of “pastoral vision” distinct from “rational analysis,” we wanted to fully indicate this perspective of the believer.

Either we reflect “pastorally” – believing like Mary – in the light of the active presence of the Holy Spirit and following the divine plan of salvation history, or we will not be able to truly carry out the mission of the Church.

The grace of unity grows and bears fruit only in a deep contemplation of faith. Without it, we will fall into spiritual superficiality, even if it appears in rational garb.

4. Marian enlightenment for religious consecration

Religious consecration is not “sacramental.” It is an initiative of God that builds a special covenant with people, marking them with the seal of his Spirit and enveloping them in his mysterious power.

We have seen how the Second Vatican Council has proclaimed this fundamental aspect of religious life. It is a special grace: the “grace of His consecration” (cf. C. 195).

The supreme example of this initiative of God is Mary, “full of grace” from the first instant of her conception.

In her the grace of unity was born without limitations and without the obstacles of sin; that is why it grew vigorously until the “Yes” of the Annunciation, to reach the fullness of Calvary, Pentecost and the Assumption. The power of the Holy Spirit dwelt within her, and united her virginity with the greatest maternity: that of Christ and the Church. If we want to try to delve into the meaning of feeling enveloped in the Spirit, we must look to Mary.

With this Marian enlightenment we can re-read what the Constitutions tell us: “We live as disciples of the Lord by the grace of the Father, who consecrates us through the gift of his Spirit and sends us out to be apostles of the young” (C. 3); “The action of the Spirit is for the professed member a lasting source of grace and a support for his daily efforts to grow towards the perfect love of God and human beings” (C. 25); “Fidelity to the commitment made at our religious profession is a response which we continually renew to the special covenant that the Lord has made with us. Our perseverance is founded entirely on the fidelity of God who loved us first, and is nourished by the grace of his consecration” (C. 195).

The mystery of Mary cannot be understood without her consecration by God the Father in the Spirit.

In this way, she enlightens our entire apostolic interiority; she tells us what its root is, what its secret of growth is, and what its dynamics of action are. Only by looking at Mary and imitating her interiority, can we give rise to the springs of the grace of unity, and definitively defeat spiritual superficiality. It is urgent to know how to consider the events of our life, “treasuring in our hearts” all that we find in them of God’s presence. Religious consecration lives and perseveres in an indispensable contemplation of faith.

“Docile to the Holy Spirit, Don Bosco lived an experience of humble, trusting and apostolic prayer in which praying and living were spontaneously united” (C. 86); “Immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, the Salesian learns to meet God through those to whom he is sent. Discovering the fruits of the Spirit in the lives of people, especially the young, he gives thanks for everything; as he shares their problems and sufferings, he invokes upon them the light and strength of God’s presence. He draws on the love of the Good Shepherd, whose witness he wants to be, and shares in the spiritual riches offered him by the community. His need of God, keenly felt in his apostolic commitment, leads him to celebrate the liturgy of life” (C. 95); for him, Mary “is a model of prayer and pastoral love, the teacher of wisdom and the guide of our Family” (C. 92).

5. Don Bosco’s Marian testimony

Don Bosco always considered Mary as his “Teacher and Guide” in the vocation of Founder of the Salesian Family. “She has done everything!” was a conviction that came from his childhood (the dream at nine years of age), and that grew constantly in the awareness of his apostolic interiority. From her he learned some characteristic features which he bequeathed to his school of pastoral spirituality. The following stand out:

- The intimate union between contemplation and action, between prayer and work;
- The inseparability between evangelisation and education;
- The concurrence of “reason, religion and loving-kindness”;
- The synthesis of evangelical radicalism in obedience;

- Harmony between personal initiative and community complementarity;
- The mutual interpenetration between the universal Church and the particular Church;
- The embodiment of the realism of faith in honesty and social responsibility; etc.

That is, a capacity for personal and apostolic synthesis that represents a concrete projection of the grace of unity.

In Christ and in Mary the reconstruction of the unity and harmony of creation in personal, social and ecclesial life has begun.

It is not an easy task. There are so many imbalances and so many fractures in human evolution. Mary's motherhood prolongs and helps the unifying riches of the mystery of the Incarnation to grow.

The Second Vatican Council came to highlight a pastoral renewal that takes greater account of the unifying role of the mystery of Christ. Don Bosco's spirituality and pastoral criteria are prophetically located in this sphere of reunification: creation and redemption, secularism and ecclesiality, culture and the gospel, social responsibility and the life of faith, human promotion and growth in grace, personal initiative and trust in God, sympathy and asceticism, pedagogy and pastoral care, civil status and religious consecration, operative magnanimity and evangelical poverty, joy and the cross, perspective on the future and permanent values, historical realism and eschatological courage.

A grace of unity that grows with perspectives so easily in tension, is a kind of miracle of holiness. It can be real only if it is rooted in the motherhood of Mary, who begot the unity of Christ, and who favours and accompanies his growth in all generations.

Don Bosco's Marian witness is undoubtedly expressed in his particular devotion to the Virgin; but it consists, above all, in having modelled the vital synthesis of his spirituality and the pastoral criteria of his action on the originality of the mystery of Christ, which shines in Mary with the ineffable simplicity of her motherhood. The reconstruction of unity for the salvation of the world needs, more than difficult and complex theories, the maternal function of generation, the wisdom of the common sense of faith, and docility to the initiatives of the Spirit of the Lord. It is thus, as in Mary, that God does "great things."

In particular, Don Bosco's Marian witness was manifested in his extraordinary sense of the Church, which is the living organism – the mystical Body of Christ – a great sign and historical bearer of the Lord's unifying task for all peoples. Inspired by Mary, Don Bosco strongly loved the Church that is on a pilgrimage through time. This is why his devotion to her matured (back in the 1860s, when he had reached his ministerial maturity) in the consideration of Mary as Mother of the Church and Helper of Christians.

6. The picture of the Help of Christians in Valdocco

I consider it particularly significant for us to reflect on the meaning that Don Bosco gave to the mystery of Mary in the history of salvation. The title of "Mother of the Church and Help of Christians" (Don Bosco, *Maraviglie della Madre di Dio*, Turin, 1868, p. 45; CE XX, 237) is already significant as an ecclesial devotion of historical concreteness. There are interesting studies in this regard from the Salesian Marian Academy (I myself wrote a little book years ago – before the Council: *Maria, Auxilio de los Cristianos*, Salesian Editorial, Santiago de Chile, 1962); and gaining a deeper understanding of this is, without a doubt, an element that helps to overcome the danger of spiritual superficiality. But here I would like to contemplate, together with you, the doctrinal scope of the painting that Don Bosco had painted for his basilica in Valdocco.

We all have some print on hand to follow the reflection. It is a painting of high ecclesiological content, which reminds us of the energy of the grace of unity in the Church itself over the centuries.

What did Don Bosco ask the painter Thomas Lorenzone to do? (Cf. BM VIII, 2-3; IX, 110-111). That it be a significant painting was one of his great concerns, before the completion of the construction of the church: he wanted the doctrinal purpose of devotion to Mary Help of Christians to be clearly expressed.

He explained his idea to the artist: he asked him to depict the Virgin at the centre; then, at the top, the saving love of the Triune God, the choirs of angels with the Assumption of Mary; near her, the Church in Heaven: the Apostles, the martyrs, the prophets, the virgins and the confessors; below, the pilgrim Church with the emblems of the great victories of the Virgin in the history of humanity, the peoples of the various continents with their hands raised, asking for help. The artist replied: "There is no place huge enough for this job. I'd have to make Piazza Castello my studio."

Don Bosco wanted historical facts, missionary breadth, a sense of universal Church, active and permanent motherhood towards all the peoples of the Earth. The idea was clear; but it asked too much for a painting. The artist worked for three years; it was a work of 7 by 4, with the most expressive of what the Saint wanted.

What is highlighted in the picture? Above all, there is the eye of God the Father, rich in mercy, looking towards human history, and proceeding from Him, the power of the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove. From the "eye" and the "dove" a bright light emanates that illuminates the Virgin crowned with stars; she holds the Child Jesus, Saviour of the world, in her arms as a mother, indicating that all the benevolence and mercy of the Father and all the power of the Holy Spirit fill the Virgin with grace for a permanent motherhood destined to beget Christ in all human beings. The Virgin is surrounded by a choir of angels who tell us about her being raised and her assumption. She shows a sceptre in her right hand, indicating her power of intercession and her constant solicitude for the life of the Church.

Let's pause for a moment to reflect on this area of the painting. It is a description of the grace of unity for the whole Church. This grace comes "from above", that is, from the great Mystery where the ineffable unity that is the Love of God exists and from whence it spreads. Everything descends from the fullness of the Trinity. There the Father is such, because he is eternally begetting the Son; and the Word is the Son who is eternally restoring himself to the Father with a total and perfect "Yes"; and this exhaustive communion of the two is personified in the Holy Spirit, as an ineffable expression of the unity of the Father and the Son. Thus, in this intimacy of the mystery, all selfishness that generates disunity is excluded. The Father is totally "self-giving," excluding nothing from communion; the Son also does not keep anything to himself, and the Spirit is totally and simultaneously of the Father and the Son. The love of God is so perfectly open in each of the Three, that it constitutes in Them the unity of the divine nature. The Spirit is like the ecstasy of this Love in history, so prodigiously fruitful in Mary, made Mother of the Word, opening herself through her Son Jesus Christ to the entire universe. The Resurrection, wrought by the power of the Spirit, will make Christ and Mary the "new Adam" and the "new Eve" for the history of human salvation. This first area of the painting, then, focuses devotion to the Help of Christians on the very mystery of the Love of God, source of all charity and of all grace of unity.

In a second area we contemplate the fifteen main collaborators of Christ in the foundation of the Church: the twelve Apostles, St Paul and the Evangelists Mark and Luke; they gave themselves generously to their mission until the total gift of self (as shown, in several of them, by the symbol of martyrdom). Among them, the four Evangelists stand out, special builders of the unity of the Church through their Gospels. In the midst of them stand St Peter and St Paul. The former recalls the fundamental importance of the Petrine ministry for the life and growth of the Church, and therefore shows in Peter's hand the power of the keys. The latter makes one think of the effectiveness of evangelisation that proclaims the Word of Christ as a double-edged sword that penetrates the hearts of people and the cultures of peoples; St Paul looks at Mary as if she were repeating "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Gal 4:4).

This part of the painting shows with special evidence Mary's maternal initiative in favour of all apostolic activity, and, in particular, of the magisterium and ministry of the Pastors in the Church of Christ. The great mission of evangelising and guiding the disciples of the Lord has Mary as its great protector; she is continuously concerned in the history of the growth and unity of the Church.

To propagate devotion to the Help of Christians means, for Don Bosco, to dedicate oneself to a tireless "ecclesiogenesis" in fidelity to Peter, the Apostles and the Evangelists; to build the unity of the human family through the Passover of Christ with the power of his Spirit.

And there is a third area in the painting, in a smaller form and in perspective, which presents the Marian Basilica of Valdocco, in Turin, as a centre of ecclesial activity, especially through the charism of evangelisation and promotion of youth: *Haec domus mea, inde gloria mea!* Mary, who carries out her permanent motherhood in a Church that privileges youth ministry. As the Pope tells us in his beautiful letter *Iuvenum Patris*: By your work, dear educators, you are sharing in a wondrous manner in the motherly function of the Church; I am well aware, worthy educators, of the difficulties you meet with and of the disappointments you experience at times. Do not be discouraged as you follow the privileged way of love that is education. Be strengthened by the inexhaustible patience of God in his pedagogy towards humanity, the unfailing exercise of fatherhood revealed in the mission of Christ, teacher and shepherd, and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, sent to transform the world" (IP 20).

These are some of the doctrinal content of the painting. They are a pictorial representation of a demanding program on our way to the third millennium. The mystery of the Love of the triune God, the missions of Christ and the Spirit, the permanent motherhood of Mary, the heroic witness of the Apostles and Evangelists, are not an alienation from history. Valdocco's painting represents them as a project of love and grace of unity for the history of mankind.. Mary Help of Christians clearly suggests cultivating in the heart a truly committed faith, a dynamic hope of industriousness, a pastoral charity translated daily into apostolic praxis.

The Virgin herself, when she sang in the Magnificat of her most intimate feelings, spoke of history. This is attested to by the Apostles and Evangelists of the picture ecstatically turned towards her, as if to indicate to us that, in order to advance with Christian boldness and to create a future of faith everywhere, tireless apostolic activity is required. The Mother of God protects us, accompanies us, helps us, enlightens us, guides us, and assures us of the accomplishment of "great things."

The future of the faith is not born spontaneously with human becoming: it must be built with sweat, day after day, so that it becomes an invaluable heritage of humanity.

The painting of the Help of Christians in Valdocco thus speaks to us of the laborious unity between glory and history. The *Inde gloria mea* is a demanding task for us.

7. Difficult times

Don Bosco's Marian devotion grew to become the doctrine of the Help of Christians, because, as he himself indicated, "times were difficult". He said this one day in 1862 to the young John Cagliero: "The Madonna wishes us to honour Her under the title of Mary, Help of Christians. The times are so bad that we sadly need Her help to preserve and safeguard our faith" (BM VII,197); She will be the extraordinary help, "against our enemies both internal and external (of the Church)" (MB 13, 320).

It is worthwhile, in this Marian Year, to reflect on this aspect of "the Virgin of difficult times", starting from the profound encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* that the Pope has given us. The common thread of this document is the meditation on the faith of Mary: of "She who believed". Her help comes from the greatness she achieved through her immense faith. She demonstrated the fullness of her grace of unity in the heroic experience of faith.

A first aspect that we must note is that Mary witnessed and grew in faith, courageously accepting the darkness; perhaps not all of us can clearly grasp how difficult it was for the Virgin to believe. Let us think, for example, of the Annunciation: the Virgin was a girl about fifteen years old: how many things were terribly obscure for her! Also later, when the teenage Child stayed in Jerusalem and replied that he should follow his vocation: "I have to be about my Father's business" But, above all, on Calvary: what enormous darkness for the Virgin! Her Son was an extraordinary gift from God to her, and now she sees him die with the worst of condemnations. The Virgin lived surrounded by darkness and obscurity that accompanied her throughout her life on Earth; but at no time did the security of her faith, her confidence, her full adherence to God, the absolute certainty of the intervention of the Holy Spirit diminish. If there is one person in history who is absolutely certain that the Holy Spirit intervenes, it is Mary. She has experienced it in her motherhood. She doesn't even bother to explain herself to Joseph. And later, in the terrible hour of death, clarified only after three days by the great light of the Resurrection. And then, when she accompanies the Apostles in the preparation of the coming of the Spirit for a Church that was to encompass the whole world. When we pray the Angelus, we should reaffirm for ourselves this assurance of Mary in the action of the Holy Spirit: "The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived of the Holy Spirit. And the Word was made flesh."

We are convinced that the grace of unity comes from the Holy Spirit: it is the energy of the triune Love. God has called us, he has consecrated us, he has us enveloped us in the power of the Spirit. And we do not recognise that. Mary's attitude reminds us admirably of this.

A characteristic that accompanies the action of the Holy Spirit is "fruitfulness." Mary found that the Holy Spirit has very effective initiatives for good. Mary appears to us as a Bride impregnated by the Holy Spirit, and who continually trusts in His power.

Even after her Assumption, the great initiatives of the Holy Spirit in the Church have a characteristic Marian aspect. Not because some philosophy demands that it be so; history is not the conclusion of some metaphysical principles; history is constituted by facts, by events, by people who are like that because Someone wanted them to be like that, because God wanted salvation history to be written like that.

The Second Vatican Council has presented us with the figure of Mary as a type, model of the Church; as the anticipated prophecy of what the Church is and will be: Mary's motherhood by the initiative of the Spirit is the model and type of the Church's motherhood throughout the centuries, that is, of a continuous intervention of the power of the Spirit.

By her faith, by her trust, by her certainty of the intervention of the Spirit, by her permanent motherhood, Mary becomes our "Help". Mary's charity made her care for others. As soon as she was overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit, she was concerned to go and help her cousin Elizabeth. Mary's whole life is a life of help, of collaboration with her Son Jesus Christ and throughout history she is the one who helps the Church and the faithful to grow in faith, and to be fruitful in charity. Don Bosco underlines this characteristic of Mary in history. There is no difficulty that surpasses the power of the Spirit. Difficult times do not suppress the strength and fruitfulness of faith.

It is up to us, then, not only to meditate on and live this Marian aspect of our grace of unity, but to be apostles who make the Virgin known and loved under the characteristics that Don Bosco taught us. In our difficult times there are two aspects that are considered as a privileged sector of Mary's intervention and motherly help.

The first is that of vocations. We have an urgent need for vocations, because young people in need are constantly growing, and we want to work with them until it becomes impossible. For this we need vocations. A vocation comes from God: it requires, then, a lot of prayer. This is not enough alone, but it is required, and a lot of it: the harvest is great but the workers are few: "send us labourers for the

harvest”. But, in addition, devotion to the Help of Christians requires awakening pastoral initiatives with particular dedication to vocations; above all, among young people.

The second aspect is that of fidelity and perseverance in vocation. Times have become difficult, and not a few have given up. Fidelity is linked to the Practice of the Evangelical Counsels, and, among them, in particular, to chastity. Caring for this practical aspect of devotion to Mary will help to bear witness to the consecration that is so much a bearer of authentic love.

Don Bosco lived through difficulties, external and internal; but he triumphed: “for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (1 Jn 4:5).

Mary in all times, as difficult as they are, helps us. Let us give great importance in our experience of the grace of unity to devotion to her.

Conclusion

So let me conclude. We have been meditating on the values and secrets of our apostolic interiority. We have focused on the consideration of the grace of unity. Thus we have discovered the importance, presence and power of the Holy Spirit, who envelops us in the unity of Love, filling us with pastoral charity.

In the light of this divine consecration, we have been able to deepen our religious profession as a unified project of evangelical life in the following of Christ. We have become convinced that, without our personal and community effort of asceticism, we will not be able to respond victoriously to the multiple and unprecedented challenges that come from the new times. We were happy to see that in all this task of faith Mary, the Mother of God, accompanies us, guides us and helps us.

We have to take seriously, for ourselves and for our confreres, the rich evangelical heritage of our charism. To this end we will cherish our grace of unity by participating in the mission of Christ and the Spirit, who have been sent into the world by the Father, that we may all be one: "I in them and you (Father) in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:23).

1. The divine plan of unity

St Paul begins the Epistle to the Ephesians with a song of praise and thanksgiving to God, for the ineffable plan of unification invented by his Love: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..., he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ; as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:3-10).

It is beautiful to contemplate our vocation as an active participation in this planning of uncreated Love, to overcome and destroy all division within each person, in the complexity of social life and in the final restructuring of the world itself.

2. The unifying power of the Spirit, "Dominum et Vivificantem"

We have an enlightening encyclical by John Paul II on the unifying mission of the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer, of the Church and of the world: *Dominum et Vivificantem*. He gave it to us on the Solemnity of Pentecost in 1986. It should become the concluding meditation of this retreat: it is a task for everyone at home. I consider it to be an essential document to further develop the theme of the grace of unity. But just one observation that serves as a qualified conclusion to the reflections we have made.

The Holy Spirit works "within", and "from" the human heart and conscience; He makes the human being grow from within, healing his inner discord, and leading him to overcome all materialism (which influences so many aspects of today's culture): "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Gal 5:16). The heart of human beings "is the hidden place of the salvific encounter with the Holy Spirit, with the hidden God, and precisely here the Holy Spirit becomes 'a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'" (Jn 4:14). He comes here as the Spirit of truth and as the

Paraclete, as he was promised by Christ. From here he acts as Counsellor, Intercessor, Advocate ... The Holy Spirit does not cease to be the guardian of hope in the human heart: the hope of all human creatures, and especially of those who 'have the first fruits of the Spirit' and 'wait for the redemption of their bodies' (Rm 8:23). The Holy Spirit, in his mysterious bond of divine communion with the Redeemer of man, is the one who brings about the continuity of his work: he takes from Christ and transmits to all, unceasingly entering into the history of the world through the heart of man.

