

THE SALESIAN BROTHER: HISTORY, PEDAGOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

Moving Towards the Bicentenary of Don Bosco's Birth

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Don Bosco proposed Work and Temperance as a means for us to be faithful to our mission on behalf of youth. Our upcoming General Chapter 27 invites us to reflect on how we are to be faithful to Don Bosco's apostolic project by reflecting on Work and Temperance Today. There are three approaches: Mystics of the Spirit: a gift from God and a personal plan of life; having a strong *spiritual experience*, taking up the way of life and action of Jesus obedient, poor and chaste and becoming seekers of God; prophets of Togetherness/Communion: building up *fraternity* in our communities of life and action; Servant of the Young: generously dedicating ourselves to the *mission*, walking side by side with the young so as to give hope to the world (Chavez 2012).

In this presentation, we shall look into the first approach only which is being Mystics of the Spirit. Hopefully, we will be able to make our spiritual plan of life that will lead to us being visible, credible and fruitful Salesian Brothers.

In article 12 of our Constitutions (Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales 1984), the article presents to us the topic of Union with God.

Union with God

As he works for the salvation of the young, the Salesian experiences the fatherhood of God and continually reminds himself of the divine dimension of his work: "Apart from me you can do nothing".¹

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. 1. Jn 15,5.

"The Rule invites us to "experience" God, i.e. not only to live an interior and spiritual life but to have a conscious awareness that we are in relationship with God in our daily life." We have Don Bosco as our example (The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco: A Guide to the Salesian Constitutions 1986).

He cultivates union with God

Who is God for me? What is He like? There is a need to form a correct image of God. We become like the God we adore. We become like the God we contemplate.

What is the God image of a Salesian? The late Fr Egidio Vigano in the article "The Christ whom we follow and contemplate" (Indications for a Process of Growth in Salesian Spirituality: Some key points in the teaching of Fr. Egidio Vigano, SDB 1995) presents to us three key ideas of who is Christ for a Salesian:

a. Christ, the Good Shepherd: It has a pedagogical and pastoral slant: it leads us to look up to him as the 'Good Shepherd' who created man and loves him as he is, who redeemed him and pardons his sins, and who makes him a new creature through his Spirit.

b. Christ, the friend of the young: To love the young as Christ loved them, the heart of the Salesian overflows with Christ. He looks up to Christ, the friend of the little ones and of the poor, and because of this, his dedication to the young and the working classes becomes more intense, more persevering, more genuine, more fruitful...

The Gospel reveals the various ways by which Jesus shows his special predilection for the young:

He loves them: Mk 10, 21. Jesus looked at him and loved him...

He wants them near him: Lk 18, 15-17. Let the little children come to me. Lk 9, 46-48. Whoever receives this child in my name receives me...

He heals them: Jn 4, 46-54. Go, your son will live.

He graciously pardons them: Lk 15, 11-32. The parable of the prodigal son.

He wants them to be his partner in the mission. Jn 15, 11-32. The boy with five loaves and two fishes.

c. Christ, the New Man: is the end goal to which our educational work tends; every young person is called to grow in him and after his image...Christ is the summit of the whole work of creation. In him, says the Council, the mystery of man truly becomes clear...He is the image of the invisible God; he is the Perfect Man...who in a certain way has united himself with each and every man...he is the firstborn of many brothers.

d. Christ, the heart of the world and the mystery at work in creation: In *Gadium et Spes 45 (1965)*, it says, Jesus Christ is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and of civilization, the centre of mankind, the joy of all hearts and the fulfilment of all their aspirations... Hence for us to evangelize means in the first place to proclaim the joyful and welcome news of Christ's Easter victory. Christ continues to create creation. We continue to be his co-creators.

Who am I for God? There is also a need to form a correct image of myself.

Our present Rector Major invites us to reflect upon what does it mean to be a Salesian today? What is the correct image of a Salesian? He says we have to be a *mystic: witness to God's absolute primacy* (John Paul II 2003); a *prophet: witness of that evangelical fraternity* (John Paul II 2003); a *servant: creativity in the care of those most in need* (John Paul II 2003); *all embracing*, because it places us in the presence of a God full of zeal who admits of no rivals and with an all-consuming presence; *unifying*, because it gathers together all aspects of life around the one thing that is important and necessary, the Absolute; and *dynamic*, because it gives

us “a new heart and a new spirit”; what one has to do, the law that has to be fulfilled, is not outside ourselves but within us; the Holy Spirit becomes in us the driving force in life (Chavez 2012).

Being Real Before God

Relationship with God-or, indeed, with anyone-grows only when we can be “real” before him. Being as “real” as one can before God is an essential requirement for prayer. It doesn’t matter what one’s response to God is, as long as it is real. Even the fears, the anger, the disappointments that people always find embarrassing to admit, are real; responding to God honestly keeps the relationship alive, and opens one to God’s further revelation.

On the other hand, we notice time and time again how prayer – and relationship – collapse when people try to behave differently from how they really feel. For example, a religious sister told of how boring and painful she found prayer, until she finally admitted to God that she was angry with Him for the death of her closest friend years before.

Yet God loves real people, as they are, warts, carbuncles and all. Relationship thrives on reality and openness. Some of the best advice about prayer I’ve ever heard is to “Pray as you are, not as you’re not; and to “Pray as you can, not as you can’t!”

What happens as people become more and more real before God? In the first place, God himself becomes more real to them; more tangible, though also more awesome, more loving, and certainly, more challenging. They discover a God whose desire for them far outweighs all of their desire for him. So much so that this God knows them and loves them as they are, with all their dark places, all their unworthiness. The living Lord Jesus looks on them with the same love that He showed the sinful woman sitting at His feet, the rich young man, and Peter after his betrayal. When we have experienced this great love that God has for us, our prayer relationship with God goes ahead in leaps and bounds. I have heard people ask “why pray?” the answer isn’t exactly “why not?” but, if I really want God, then “how could I not?” There are many ways of praying: what all the different ways have in common is that they are all ways of responding to God. Sometimes, too, people say “why do I need to tell God what I’m thinking or feelings? – God knows surely.” Yes, God knows-but maybe our telling God is not for God’s sake! Why do lovers keep telling each other of their love? In any relationship we are serious about, time needs to be taken to be together, to share life’s experience, to wait, to listen, to ask, to say thank you... “how could we not?” We need to (Gallagher 1990).

Only then can there be a healthy relationship between God and me.

“The Rule invites us to “experience” God, i.e. not only to live an interior and spiritual life but to have a conscious awareness that we are in relationship with God in our daily life.” We have Don Bosco as our example. (The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco: A Guide to the Salesian Constitutions 1986)

We are called to be Seekers of God. Our Rector Major quotes Pope Benedict XVI (Assembly of the USG (Union of Superiors General) and of the UISG (International Union of Women Superiors General, in the Clementine Hall in the Vatican, on 26 November 2010) “You are seekers of God by vocation. You devote the best energies of your lives to this research. You move from what is secondary to what is really essential to what is really important: seeking God, keeping your gaze fixed on him.” (Chavez 2012)

And furthermore, Pope Benedict XVI (*cf.* [Address at the Collège des Bernardins](#), Paris, 12 September 2008). “Seek God in the confreres or sisters he has given you, with whom you share the same life and mission. Seek him in the men and women of our time, to whom you are sent to offer the gift of the Gospel with your life and your words. Seek him particularly in the poor, the first to whom the Good News is addressed (*cf.* Lk 4:18). Seek him in the Church, where the Lord makes himself present, especially in the Eucharist and in the other sacraments, and in his word, which is the main road for seeking God. It introduces us into conversation with him and reveals to us his true Face. May you always be enthusiastic seekers and witnesses of God!.” (Chavez 2012)

St. Augustine: “God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you.”

St. Thomas Aquinas: “God alone satisfies.”

St. Teresa of Avila: “God alone suffices.”

Aware of the need to pray without ceasing

- Prayer is the place of encounter and of transformation
- Imagination, Heart, Action
- Simple and continuous
- Based on the Word of God and the Sacraments especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation
- Constitutional text 1864, Don Bosco had already said that the Salesian is prevented from making mental prayer by some urgent call of the sacred ministry “will make up for the deficiency by more frequent quick or little prayers, and by directing to God with fervour and devotion those particular labours which are thus hindering him from the ordinary exercises of piety (Lemoyne, Amadei and Ceria n.d.).”

In a simple heart to heart colloquy

- “God sees you!” This was how Mama Margaret raised John. She taught John how to be in union with God by constantly being aware that he is in God’s presence. That prayer is not an activity that one does. Prayer is not a place where one goes. Prayer is also not a schedule which one sets. Rather, prayer is relationship. It is all living.
- First draft of the Constitutions of 1858 until 1972:
“The active life towards which the Society more especially tends, renders its members unable to perform many exercises of piety in common. They shall therefore supply for these by giving one another good example, and by fulfilling perfectly the general duties of a good Christian (Lemoyne, Amadei and Ceria n.d.).”

With the Living Christ and with the Father, whom he feel close at hand

- Father: Trust in Divine Providence: The special predilection of God.
- Jesus the Good Shepherd: Realized in the Incarnate Word
- Pastoral Charity: Lived by Don Bosco.
- Loving Kindness: Expressed in gentleness and kindness
- Assistance: Made visible

Attentive to the presence of the Spirit

When we are aware of God’s presence in us and we are present to Him, how he relates with each one of us and how we relate to him, how he works in our lives. Only then shall we be able to develop an:

- Interior attitude (Interiority - Attentiveness)
- Discerning attitude (Finding God’s will in everything; Seeking the more loving thing)
- Contemplative attitude (We become Christ in the World and for the World)

And doing everything for God’s love

- What is the more loving thing to do? Charity! Charity is the soul of every apostolate and the apostolate becomes the soul of the Salesian’s prayer.

He becomes like Don Bosco

- Example of Don Bosco of what it means to be a contemplative in action.

A Contemplative in Action

- Lived experience
- Living out the *Da Mihi Animas, Cetera Tolle*.

Give me Souls - Mysticism - Work

We understand that the one-sided emphasis on work, as confirmed by the isolated quotations from Don Bosco, could be used to justify the not infrequent behaviour of confreres excessively concentrated on their “own” work or who make work, even apostolic, the only factor in their consecrated life. This is not Don Bosco’s way of thinking. He associated work with “union with God” and an uninterrupted tradition from the first generations of Salesians coined the expression “sanctified work.” (Vecchi 2001) Work is the “apostolic mission.” If one loses sight of who is the One who sends and supports with the strength of his Spirit, and what is the purpose of the mission, one runs the risk of turning work into an “idol”. Not any kind of work therefore is apostolic work. (Chavez 2012)

Take away the rest - Asceticism - Temperance

Temperance gives him the strength to control his heart, to master himself and remain even-tempered. He does not look for unusual penances but accepts the daily demands and renunciations of the apostolic life. He is ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain whenever God's glory and the salvation of souls require it: » (Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales 1984) (Chavez 2012)).

A Christian asceticism therefore which takes into account the harmonious integration of soul and body; which makes people open to oblation love; The value of asceticism is not measured by the suffering caused by giving things up or by the amount of effort made but rather by the progress made in exercising charity or by its gospel-style effectiveness. Like the ascetics of all times, Don Bosco underlined the essential connection between mortification of the body and prayer: “He who does not mortify his body cannot pray!” Temperance is indispensable for holiness, precisely because it produces that freedom of spirit that makes us ready to love even to the extreme (Chavez 2012).

Da Mihi Animas, Cetera Tolle is our - Mysticism and Asceticism - It is our Salesian Spirituality

Ecstasy in Action (Indications for a Process of Growth in Salesian Spirituality: Some key points in the teaching of Fr. Egidio Vigano, SDB 1995)

- a. Prayer is necessary for union with God. Hence, we have to create certain spaces in our lives for prayer. The invitation for us is to live our Salesian life in a contemplative way and not a compulsive way. When we live

contemplative lives, we have enough space in-between prayer and action for reflection, creativity, freedom, and love. On the other hand, when we live compulsive lives, the space between prayer and action becomes very narrow and limited. We become reactive and work driven. There is no space for God to enter our lives and our work.

b. Action is not simply any activity. In one's work, one is aware of being in Christ like a branch in the vine, and therefore applies the criteria of Christ in all that he does. There is a sense of sharing in God's mysterious activity.

c. Between prayer and action there is a mutual compenetration. And what unites the two is intense love.

d. Our typical moment of contemplation, then, is the moment when we act in collaboration with him, i.e. in our very work among the young.

Point for Reflection: How do we develop these attitudes in ourselves so we can develop them in others?

a. an interior attitude - attentiveness, reflection, interiority

b. discerning attitude - finding God and His will

c. contemplative attitude - live in the presence of God, see everything the way God sees things

Saint John Bosco, *Father and Teacher of youth,
docile to the gifts of the Spirit and open to the reality of your times
you were for the young, especially the little ones and the poor,
a sign of the love and the special care of God.*

Be our guide as we walk the path of friendship with the Lord Jesus,
*so that we may discover in Him and in his Gospel the meaning of our lives
and the source of true happiness.*

Help us to respond with generosity *to the vocation we have received from
God,
so that in daily life we may be builders of communion,
and may collaborate with enthusiasm, and in communion with the whole Church,
in creating a civilisation of love.*

Obtain for us the grace of perseverance *in living a high standard of Christian
life,
according to the spirit of the beatitudes; and grant that, guided by Mary Help of
Christians,*

we may one day be with you in the great family of heaven. Amen

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