

Conferences on the Salesian Spirit

Albert Caviglia

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CENTRO MARIANO SALESIANO - TORINO ISTITUTO
INTERNAZIONALE DON BOSCO - TORINO (1985)

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Presentation

Fr ALBERT CAVIGLIA was born in Turin on 10 January 1868. He was accepted at Valdocco at thirteen years of age and completed his secondary schooling there (1881–1884). As he often said later, these were the best years of his life. Endowed with a splendid soprano voice, he joined the choir at the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians directed by Maestro Dogliani, and often performed as a soloist. But his dearest memories were those bound up with his friendship with Don Bosco, his confessor during those years. He found him a sturdy support and an enlightened guide in overcoming the problems that resulted from his boisterous character, and for the proper development of the outstanding intellect and wit he was gifted with.

Fascinated by the Saint's personality and the serene and enthusiastic atmosphere that reigned at Valdocco, he decided to give his entire life to the Salesian mission.

As we follow his various movements with the aid of the *Elenco generale della Società di San Francesco di Sales*,¹ we find him at San Benigno Canavese, first as a novice (1884–1885) then as a student of philosophy (1885–1888). From 1888 to 1895 he was at the St Philip Neri College in Lanzo Torinese, where he studied theology while being teacher and assistant there at the same time. He was ordained priest on 17 December 1892 by Archbishop Riccardi in Turin, in the Archbishop's private chapel. Two years later he was transferred as a teacher to the Manfredini College at Este (1895–1896) and following that he worked first at Parma (1896–1900) then Borgo San Martino (1900–1903) as Prefect of Studies. He was the Catechist in Bronte (Catania) (1903–1905). Finally, he settled at the St John the Evangelist community in Turin which he belonged to until his death (1943).

In the first twenty years of Salesian activity and teaching and cultural involvement, the area he dedicated special care to was the study of Italian, Latin and Greek literature. The result of this work are his *Appunti di prosodia e metrica latina* (Notes on Latin Prosody and Metrics) and a *Trattato di metrica greca* (Treatise on Greek Metrics).

With his arrival in Turin in 1905, the thirty-seven-year-old Fr Caviglia was finally able to enrol at the University and thus complete, from an academic point of view, the cultural formation he had gained over long years of hard-earned personal study which would enable him to publish remarkable works of recognised value in the historical field. In 1906, on the occasion of the second edition of his *Appunti di prosodia e metrica latina*, he had the good fortune to hear his work widely praised by a university lecturer who was unaware that he had had the aforementioned author in his class as a student. Among the teachers he would always remember, with special gratitude for the methodological and academic guidance he received from him, was Prof. Pietro Fedele, who later became Minister of Education.

His doctoral thesis on Claudio di Seyssel (bishop of Turin from 1517 to 1520), extensively enriched and published, is still considered by specialists to be the definitive work and a compulsory reference regarding this individual. This work, followed by studies on Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy (published in 1928), opened the doors for him to the National History Delegation who sought his membership.

¹ Translator's note: what today we would call the Salesian Yearbook, though many would still simply refer to the "Elenco". Note also that since the original text had no footnotes, all footnotes in this text are a translator's note or reference.

Talent and versatility combined with methodical and patient study and the ability to wisely use every available moment of time, enabled him to combine the analysis of historical problems with a passionate study of Christian Archaeology and Sacred Art. He achieved such competence in these disciplines that he was awarded professorships at the Accademia Albertina, the Turin Seminary and the Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum.

His academic preparation and capacity for serious, methodical research, along with a sincere love for the one who had so attracted him in his youth, enabled him to tackle the critical edition of the *Scritti editi ed inediti* (Published and unpublished works) of Don Bosco, with enthusiasm and flattering results. Editions of the *Storia sacra* (Bible History), the *Storia ecclesiastica* (Church History), the *Vite dei papi* (The Lives of the Popes), the *Storia d'Italia* (History of Italy) and the *Vita di Savio Domenico* (The Life of Dominic Savio), were published between 1929 and 1943, accompanied by powerful and erudite studies from which his full stature as a scholar emerged. The voluminous set of manuscripts, neat and meticulous notes he left at his death would enable the work to be completed with the posthumous addition of critical editions of Don Bosco's lives of Louis Comollo, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco.

Alongside his commitment as a scholar and lecturer, Fr Alberto Caviglia also worked as a speaker, lecturer and preacher. "Anyone who had the good fortune to listen to him" his rector commented in the *Necrology* "will not easily forget the depth and genius of those conferences always intended to reproduce the genuine thought of Don Bosco and the pure Salesian spirit" (G. Zandonella). And this is precisely the context in which these *Conferences on the Salesian Spirit* are located.

As a priest, he was committed to the typically Salesian aspect of the moral and cultural education of young people (despite multiple assignments he would continue to teach at St John the Evangelist secondary school), maintained deep spiritual ties with the milieu of artists and scholars, and devoted part of his days to the ministry of confessions at St John's Church. Those who lived beside him for many years testify to how the vast ascetic culture that shone through his studies went far beyond academia and was revealed through spiritual direction and preaching, a profound inner life

that he assimilated with an equally methodical and hidden work of meditation and prayer (...). Beneath the appearances of his boisterous character, always ready for wit, spirituality, all kinds of jocularity, was a spirit that had learned the difficult science of the interior life at the school of Don Bosco (...). What he could not conceal, however, was his distinctly and typically Salesian character. A worker unaware of respite or vacation, a heart open to generosity, kindness to all, an optimistic outlook on life, a soul ready and open for any sacrifice, an awareness of his responsibilities, a high concept of the Salesian educational mission (...). Delicacy, reserve, strict practice of religious poverty, attachment to the Rule, admirable simplicity in his confidences; dear Fr Caviglia truly lived the Salesianity which he used to preach so effectively and competently about in Retreats. (G. Zandonella).

While at Bagnolo Piemonte (where professors and students from the Pontifical Salesian Athenaeum were displaced during the war) to teach a crash course in Christian Archaeology, on the evening of 25 October 1943 he suffered a stroke and lost the use of speech. The seizure lasted for a few days, but bronchial complications prevented him from overcoming it. He passed away at dawn on 3 November. He was seventy-five years old.

The *CONFERENCE ON THE SALESIAN SPIRIT* are but a very modest and fragmentary but effective presentation, alongside the work of the scholar, another side of Fr Caviglia the preacher which is difficult to document. This is a series of conferences² he gave during retreats to Salesian confreres.

2 The term 'conference' has been retained here for its historical value in the Salesian context, although the Italian *conferenza* translates more properly as 'lecture' (or similar) in English. And in fact, in the context in which they were delivered, as explained above, they were really 'instructions' given during a retreat.

They were transcribed in shorthand by some of his listeners and never reviewed by their author. They thus preserve the good-natured vivacity and spontaneity of his immediate oratorical style, peppered with witty expressions and snatches of dialect.

The first twelve conferences were given to the young Salesians from the Theological Studentate in Chieri during a retreat session (25 June–2 July 1938) that ended with religious professions and the ordination of twenty-one priests and twenty-four subdeacons. Following the pattern of the time there were two preachers: Fr Caviglia for the *instructions* and Fr Casale for the *meditations*. In this context we also understand the reason for the chosen themes and the tone of the exposition (the *instructions* were generally of a more discursive nature than the *meditations*).

From the topics and the succession of ideas expressed in the other seven conferences, we can infer that the notes and outline used by Fr Caviglia were the same. However, the emergence of a number of original insights led to the editors of the first edition deciding to present them in a more extended form. Conferences 13-16 are taken from the instructions given at the Gualdo Tadino retreat (August 1937), while the last three were preached during the Rome retreat (March 1938).

We find ourselves faced with a document of undoubted value and considerable interest that portrays the lively and profound spirit of a witness of the first Salesian generation, in all its freshness. It is, moreover, the testimony of someone who backed his experience of the origins and personal knowledge of Don Bosco with long years of passionate and competent study of the figure and works of the Saint.

Fr Caviglia's *Conferences*, typewritten and printed (lithographed) in the Theological Studentates at the Crocetta (1st ed. 1949; 2nd ed. 1953) and Bollengo (1949), have nurtured the reflection and meditation of many young Salesians who made it a point of reference for their spiritual identity. The presence in such Studentates of a considerable number of confreres from various nations fostered an international spread of the *Conferences*, especially in formation houses. We can therefore assume that they played a not insignificant role in consolidating a sense of belonging and in spreading and focusing common characteristic values in the Salesian Congregation.

The awareness of being faced with one of the earliest and most unique attempts to arrange the characteristic elements of the Salesian Spirit, and the difficulty in finding the old lithographed editions, has prompted the Salesian Marian Centre at Valdocco and the Don Bosco International Institute, the Crocetta, to edit this new edition and see to its printing. The document is respected in its originality with the simple addition, where it was deemed necessary, of the translation of Latin quotations.

We hope that a wider diffusion of the *Conferences* will foster a greater interest in the inalienable values of our spirit among the new Salesian generations, a growing practical enthusiasm and an ever-fresh creativity at the service of the educative and pastoral mission in the spirit of Don Bosco and his best disciples.

ALDO GIRAUDDO
Turin, 24 May 1985

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Part 1

CONFERENCES 1–12 (Chieri 25 June–2 July 1930)

Conference 1

Salesian Spirit

Quapropter magis satagite, ut per bona opera certam vestram vocationem et electionem faciatis. (Therefore, brothers, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. 2 Pt 1:10)

This is the text cited by Don Bosco as the basis of the instructions he gave to ordained clerics and those preparing for ordination at the Trofarello retreat in 1868 and which he repeated again at Trofarello in September the following year; and on a further occasion in his Latin circular on 08-12-1880. He complemented this same idea with another text: “*Maneamus in vocatione in qua vocati sumus*” (Let us remain steadfast in the vocation to which we have been called), which is an adaptation of the text taken from the First Letter to the Corinthians 7:20: “*Unusquisque in qua vocatione vocatus est, in ea permaneat*” (Let each and every one remain in the same calling to which he was called).

It is, therefore, a Scripture text dear to Don Bosco and one he quoted many times... but I, a poor Salesian speaking as a Salesian, am addressing these words to you because they are the spiritual instruction that should guide you as Salesians and as clerical students aspiring to the Priesthood. The topic I will deal with will be adapted to you and examined only for you, examined for religious, Salesian clerics close to the Priesthood, summing up everything in the unique concept of Salesianity.

We should look at all things according to Don Bosco. In my long life as a Salesian and in my personal studies I have been convinced that for us Salesians there should be no other direction in our spiritual life, no other text on which to base ourselves for guiding our thinking, other than the figure, the words and the traditions of Don Bosco. Don Bosco is not only an example to quote, but our model, our teacher, our exemplar; he must be our text, not simply because, being Salesians, we have St John Bosco as our founder, but because the Church, in canonising Don Bosco, has intended to canonise the spirit with which he became a saint: this form of life is precisely the one he has left us as our example and tradition and this spirit is our legacy, our guide. We do not have to go looking in libraries for any other kind: our series of volumes has only one name: Don Bosco! This is not fetishism, but duty and it has the infallible word of the Church. The author of the *Ami du Clergé* says that when it comes to Blesseds, you can discuss whether infallibility enters into the matter, but when it comes to canonisation, there is nothing more *ex cathedra* than that of St Peter; it is a categorical infallibility, the infallibility of the Church itself that says Don Bosco is a saint, our saint, because he lived this way. Therefore we have to live as he lived, living his tradition, his life itself, doing as he taught us. It is according to this “text” we live our vocation and we will be sure to become saints.

I said this because everything I say will have a kind of monotony about it by always referring to one and the same name; all our work must lie in our building up, perfecting or putting the finishing touches to our Salesianity, which consists in this simple theory: Don Bosco wanted it this way, he did it this way, he taught it this way, he lived it this way, and because I am a Salesian of Don Bosco, this is how I have to be. All our considerations will end with ‘*this is how it must be*’ or similar. My talks must be twelve ‘*this is how it must be*’s of Don Bosco and the last one will be: ‘*eja, eja... that’s how it is!*’³

³ ‘eja eja [...Alala]’ was a kind of war-cry in Greek mythology but brought into Italian by Gabriele d’Annunzio around 1917, so a well-known exclamation to a literary buff like Caviglia.

“*Quapropter magis satagite, ut per bona opera certam vestram vocationem et electionem faciatis*“ (So try to make your vocation and election⁴ more and more secure by good works). If Don Bosco were here in my place, he would take off his biretta, put it back on and begin this way: “This is how it is...” because this is his thinking for clerics approaching ordination, because Don Bosco’s idea is that our spiritual work must be aimed at securing our vocation and election through good works, through an upright and holy standard of living. Here is Don Bosco’s concept: “We Salesians have a vocation and an election” or in other words we all say we have a vocation, and we Salesians called to clerical life have a special vocation that goes beyond the one common to everyone. Hence the Scripture text can be understood such that it alludes to our generic and specific vocation which is a higher vocation and choice; we are chosen Salesians, we have something that distinguishes us. The work I intend to do in opening this up during this Retreat is also beginning to be felt in the use of texts. We do not have two vocations but one within the other, one supports the other: being priests is the pinnacle of Salesianity, and being Salesians is a practical means for being good priests. We cannot be good Salesians and bad priests, nor can we be good priests and bad Salesians. We cannot be, because our life is not just any kind of life but it is the life of a good Salesian. Our destiny is ordered to the destiny of priests. Don Bosco is a whole, all of a piece: he is a holy Salesian and priest, a priest and a Salesian.

It is indispensable to be good Salesians of the kind Don Bosco thought of and wanted us to be, and succeed as good priests as Don Bosco was and as he wanted us to be, just as on the other hand a priest cannot dispense himself from being a gentleman and a good Christian in the world.

The Salesian ten commandments

How did Don Bosco want his Salesians to be? Here it is:

A person who does not want to work is no Salesian.

One who is not moderate in eating and drinking (*temperante*) is no Salesian.

One who is not in reality poor is no Salesian.

One who is not kind-hearted is no Salesian.

One who is not pure is no Salesian.

One who is disobedient (*indocile*) is no Salesian.

One who is undisciplined (*libertino*) is no Salesian.

One who acts without the right intention is no Salesian.

One who does not possess a Eucharistic soul is no Salesian.

One who is not devoted to Mary is no Salesian.

Now rewrite these sentences as positive commands and you have the Salesian Decalogue.

Good Salesian spirit

Who is the Salesian of good spirit? This term “good spirit” helps us to distinguish true religious from those who work without passion in the convent and religious life. The true religious has good spirit, while the other is the kind that Gasquet and Maurin, the Benedictine, fight against. Good spirit distinguishes the good religious who deeply penetrates the spirit and tradition of his institute and does

⁴ Our being chosen.

not just look to the outer workings like the one who is there without passion, someone who might never break a rule but lets the house burn down!

Good spirit comes from the tradition of one's institute: spirit in the sense of tradition means working according to the spirit and tradition of the institute.

How does it show itself in our practice as poor Salesians? It shows itself in affection for, interest in the things of the Congregation, interest even in the external and material things. We take an interest in the things of the house, we all feel that we are Salesians in this precious spirit of solidarity for which Don Bosco wrote his unpublished letter of 1885. It shows itself in rightness of intention that seeks the good for the sake of good and not out of selfishness or a thirst for honour. It seeks only the glory of God (which is the first point in that famous circular).

It shows the disinterest and personal sacrifice that goes against "*quaerunt quae sua sunt*" (seeking our own interests). It doesn't stand out or try to please, does not work for career advantage, does not hold back or make excuses for doing nothing, but works zealously. The Pope says: a spirit of noble precision, commitment to work, spirit of work, taking care of work, looking for work. It refuses nothing, does not constantly whinge about things: the young teacher who ends up being a casualty of work after two hours in school does not have good spirit. Complaining too much is not Salesian spirit, while willing, simple, warm and non-fearful observance of the Rule is good spirit. Good spirit is simplicity of habits, practice of poverty in one's tenor of life, being content with everything, especially with arrangements at table. It is kindness and tolerance; it is "*obsecro vos ut digne ambuletis vocationem, in qua vocati estis, cum omni humilitate et mansuetudine, cum patientia, supportantes invicem in cantate, solliciti servare unitatem spiritus in v'inculo pacis*" (I ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace *Eph 4:1-3*).

It is the spirit of kindness, tolerance and union, as Don Bosco wrote in the second part of his letter. Fr Cagliero always insisted on this; docility, which is the opposite to murmuring; which is obedience, mortification, temperance, knowing how to live without so many things. Lack of good spirit is quite the opposite: the realm of idleness, gluttony, murmuring, personal selfishness, apathy, defeatism, seeing evil everywhere; disregard, discord, worldliness, wasting time; above all, the need for exceptions; when a Salesian continually needs exceptions (one could call him "Mr but he...") he has no good spirit. Cardinal Cagliero had this formula: "The good Salesian rarely goes out, lives detached, eats little, works a lot, gets up early, observes the rule, loves everyone, prays often, is sincere." The Salesian profile presented in terms of opposites is of the kind that no Order could attribute to itself. "The Salesian is austere yet cheerful; he is devout yet easy-going; he is exact yet free-spirited; hardworking yet detached; modest yet enterprising; chaste yet knows how to deal with people; prudent yet forthright; humble yet courageous; good-natured yet knows how to be heroic; poor yet charitable; loving to all yet dignified; temperate yet discreet; docile yet zealous; forthright yet respectful; studious yet versatile." 15 opposites that make the Salesian a very distinctive type envied by others. The Salesian is the negation of anything that is putting on airs, duplicity, covetousness, selfishness, well-being, comfort, gluttony, sloth. Don Bosco was born with 4 things in mind that were repugnant to him: idleness, intemperance, immodesty, murmuring. Three by nature and one gained by experience. A saying of Cardinal Cagliero's is very characteristic: "Idlers, gluttons, pig-headed types and phonies are not for Don Bosco and Don Bosco does not want them..."

I have dealt with the topic this way because the clerical student is in danger of forgetting the essential, practical life and living only for his studies and discipline, transporting everything into the world of his books and forgetting the rest, so that when he has to go back to work, he will have to do it all over again: so, let us do it again now!

Conferences on the Salesian Spirit

“Ut per bona opera certam vestram vocationem ed electionem faciatis” (Seek to make your vocation and election more and more secure by good works). To be priests like Don Bosco, let us study to be good Salesians as Don Bosco wanted us to be, and then we will make our vocation certain and make ourselves worthy of election.

Conference 2

Don Bosco the cleric

Emitte lucem tuam et veritatem tuam, ipsa me deduxerunt et adduxerunt in tabernacula tua. Et introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meam . (O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy. Ps 42(43):3-4).

This is the prayer of the young man called to the “holy hill” of the priesthood. His youth is illuminated by this radiant vision, this aspiration and protection of the spirit: to approach the holy hill, the God who gladdens his youth.

For us oldies it is a guardian of youthfulness in spirit, where we must never grow old; for you young people this idea is wonderfully adapted and should illuminate all your youth. In times of doubt and sadness especially, say: “*Emitte lucem tuam...*” (Send out your light...).

The young Salesian who is preparing to become a priest, whether that be soon or still some time away, cannot be uncertain about the path to follow. This light, this fidelity is already assigned to us because we are Salesians and we have a saint for a model, the saint destined precisely for him by divine Providence as guide and model. If Don Bosco is a guide, a model, a Master in the life of the spirit for all Salesians, then it is all the more the case for this young man and this period of life.

We should have a feeling for Don Bosco’s life here in Chieri, because he lived in this setting, walked these streets, so we should see cleric Bosco with his curly hair, walking with his friends: Comollo, Garigliano, Giacomelli. Having Don Bosco before him like this, every young Salesian cannot be uncertain about his life,. We must have only one aspiration: to become priests as Don Bosco was a priest, thus to be clerics as Don Bosco was a cleric.

Don Bosco was not a priest just at the last moment, giving himself to the priesthood after living another life, as was the case for many others. Don Bosco clearly felt and expressed his vocation already as a youngster: the call to be a priest to look after youth: “I would like to study to become a priest and do good for my friends. They are not bad, but they will become so if no one takes care of them” (MB, I).⁵ Preparing himself to be a good priest is the duty of every cleric; being priests like Don Bosco is the duty of every Salesian cleric.

All of Don Bosco’s youth was a determined, conscious and willing preparation for the priesthood. From his earliest days this boy had had an aspiration to be a priest and had ordered his entire moral approach to the idea of becoming a priest and devoting himself to youth. At 9 years of age he had a dream that implicitly included the idea that there was a need for a ministry to do good for those youngsters no matter how obscure the notion of priesthood was for him at the time.

From the time he began studying Latin, and all throughout his secondary schooling, where he did the regular public schooling from 3 November 1835 when he entered the seminary, until 25 May 1841, when he left for Turin for the retreat in preparation for being ordained a priest on 6 June, he had always been focused on one point: preparing himself to be a priest, and be a true and good priest.

⁵ BM 1, p. 34.

The life of the cleric, which must be a life of holiness, can and should take as a model this person who had thought of being a priest, but a Salesian priest who already had the seed of his Salesianity that would be integral to his entire life.

Don Bosco's holiness during the time he was a cleric was the holiness of someone who already showed signs of his future calling, because it was seen right from that time that he leaned towards youth and was a holy cleric. At the end of six years at the seminary (he was dispensed from the seventh because of his age), in the final scrutiny where the qualities of individuals are recorded and the verdict of which in his case was written in a register that still exists, it said: *A zealous and promising cleric*. Holiness was not what these records were about, so nothing more was said. It was his superiors and friends who would speak of him as a holy cleric.

In Vol 1 (pp. 516-517)⁶ of eleven testimonies, four speak of Don Bosco's holiness and perfection. On page 504⁷ we find the words of Fr Felix Giordano, who wrote the life of cleric Burzio, speaking of the pious priest Bosco Giovanni, who had written a letter to him about cleric Burzio. Giordano says: "he was unwittingly portraying himself."

Don Bosco recognised the good things he had received in the seminary, and insisted that a sense of gratitude is the best sign for understanding the soul of the young. After spending 6 years in the seminary, when he left he said, "This separation caused me much pain... I was leaving a place where I had spent six years of my life, learned discipline, acquired knowledge, and ecclesiastical spirit and had benefited from all the love and affection one could ever wish for" (MB I, 68-69).⁸

So he recognised that seminary life had given him something: a priestly education in the sciences, and what is known as the ecclesiastical spirit. Being able to recognise it meant that he had it. I am certain that all those of you who are listening to me will not let the year pass without a careful reading of these pages on Don Bosco as the cleric. Read them every month and believe what a humble Salesian is telling you: that reading will serve you better than all your retreats; you will learn what Bosco was like as a cleric.

The programme for the Salesian clerical student is to become a priest like Don Bosco, preparing himself by being like the cleric Don Bosco. And then you will have a feeling of what Don Bosco did.

On the day of his clerical clothing, which took place at Castelnuovo d'Asti, Mamma Margaret, who did not know how to read, called her son and gave him two pieces of advice: 1. It is not the habit that brings honour to your state in life, but only the practice of virtue. Should you ever come to doubt your vocation, for heaven's sake, never dishonour this cassock. 2. When you were born, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin; when you began your studies I told you to be devoted to our heavenly Mother; now I ask you to be hers entirely.

When he put on the cassock he made two resolutions: abandon all amusements and dissipation. Flee and abhor anything that could be a danger to chastity.

When he entered the seminary he found a spiritual director, Canon Ternavasio, and asked him: "What should I do to succeed as a seminarian?" "Just one thing," he replied, "fulfil your duties conscientiously." Don Bosco wrote it down and remembered it even 50 years later.

Don Bosco had another model: to imitate Fr Cafasso who had been ordained the year before (MB I, pp. 374-375).⁹

He said of Fr Cafasso: "The memory of his exemplary conduct still lingered in that holy place... all virtues he practised to an heroic degree." On 28 June 1860, in a panegyric he gave on Cafasso, which he

6 BM I, pp. 383-384.

7 BM I, p. 375.

8 This does not appear to be the correct reference for the MB. In the BM I it is p. 383.

9 BM I, p. 280.

later published, he said: “Cafasso’s extraordinary virtue was to practice the ordinary virtues constantly and with wonderful fidelity.”

This was the programme of all of St Francis de Sales’ asceticism and of all the great ascetics. This is what the Pope said on 09-06-1933, when speaking of the virtues of Dominic Savio: to live the Christian life with a spirit of noble precision. This was exactly Don Bosco’s spiritual theme in imitating Cafasso.

In his practical life as a seminarian he made choices of friendships. They set up a *foursome* of virtue between Garigliano, Giacomelli, Comollo and Bosco. Always speaking about Our Lady and God they vied with one another to be the best in zeal, study, and the careful use of time. Don Bosco was known for his use of time (keep well in mind that Don Bosco’s knowledge was all “stolen” knowledge, bought on the cheap. Salesian knowledge is all “stolen knowledge”. Don Bosco also had his regular schooling, yet how much he studied! Everyone marvels at Don Bosco’s ease in reciting facts and anecdotes, but Don Bosco had read the 30 volumes of Bercaudel and the history of Christianity).

The *foursome*’s programme was: sociability, cheerfulness, good-naturedness, being pleasant with everyone! And Don Bosco, meanwhile, was sewing shoes, attaching buttons, cutting hair, and everybody looked to him for those kinds of things.

He did not expect to get everything out of school for his study, and was not passive (anyone who says “that’s enough” will not understand: Don Bosco went deep into things and sought to assimilate them).

A characteristic feature of the four was their need for Communion. This was a struggle in seminaries of the time according to Jesuit custom; in the 32nd chapter of St Ignatius’ *Rule* it said that students should go to Communion only once a week so as not to lose time for their studies.

Another feature was their love for the young: in processions, John Bosco was looked upon by the people as the “curly-headed cleric” who loved their boys.

Between Comollo and Bosco, who lived three years together, there was a competition in virtue. Don Bosco said of Comollo that they competed in mortification, but he says that he also did not dare to follow him. There are numerous maxims that Don Bosco learned from Comollo that have passed into Salesian life custom: “The one who does little does much if he does what he must do” “Either speak well of people or keep completely silent about them.”

And their behaviour: the more serious Comollo taught Don Bosco how to behave outside. Don Bosco, on 03-12-1860 gave a conference to the clerics on the way they should behave outside in order to show the dignity of their vocation. The origin of this teaching was his friendship with Comollo.

The feeling about Communion was something that they both felt and encouraged each other with: Comollo was the more emotional one, and the pew he was in would shake with his emotion; Don Bosco was composed, balanced, prayerful. They helped each other to correct themselves and correct each other by pointing out their faults to each other. Don Bosco’s blood would easily boil. I knew Don Bosco when he was an elderly holy man, and yet I recall, in 1886, while he was speaking at the religious profession at San Benigno, he got so worked up but he kept an outward calm. It was because of his virtue. It was Comollo who taught him to reign in his anger.

Particular friendships are forbidden in the Congregation, but superiors will allow the union of two souls whose only intention is to progress in good.

Among Don Bosco’s other companions was Giacomelli, later his confessor. He had entered the seminary a year after Don Bosco. He approached him, asked him how to behave: the name of Jesus and Our Lady saves everything was the reply. The idea of the group talking about God and Mary came from these two.

Thus Don Bosco completed his years of philosophy and theology. He went home for holidays and was regularly at the parish church in the village. Fr Cinzano, his parish priest at the time, wrote, “I saw

something extraordinary in this cleric.” He noted his diligence with regard to the ceremonies, in his piety and what St Thomas in IIa-IIae, 166, VII calls *studiositas*, the need to study, the endless thirst to learn, thinking of the future.

Don Bosco also nurtured secular culture: he knew all the Latin and Italian classics. After his 2nd year of philosophy he read the *Imitation of Christ* and understood the beauty of Church authors.

He began theology, which ran from 1837 to 1841, as someone mature of mind, with a rounded character, and who approached theological studies with a deep desire to assimilate them. On June 6, 1929, the Pope told students at the Crocetta, “No theology without asceticism, no asceticism without theology.”¹⁰ Don Bosco hated literalism.

During this period Don Bosco learned the secret of praying without distraction from Comollo: “How do you do it?” “The one who prays is like someone who comes before the king.” Don Bosco wrote it on a bookmark in his Breviary and kept it for the rest of his life.

There was an internal revolution in the studentate: in 1839 Fr Borel preached at Easter. The clerics were electrified; Don Bosco asked him, “How do we preserve the spirit of our vocation?” The priest replied, “One perseveres in his vocation and follows it more perfectly if he keeps aloof from the world and frequently receives Holy Communion.” A perfect programme for someone who is to receive Orders.

Comollo died in Don Bosco’s arms. Don Bosco was left with the terror of the moment of judgement, so much so that he was overcome with fear and had to be comforted on 15 occasions. Later a vision of Our Lady reassured him “It is alright. You have worked for my honour and will be saved.” Even in his last testament, Don Bosco still had the notion of God’s judgement before him.

In his final year he asked to be dispensed from the 4th and be given permission to take the exams. He studied during the holidays and prepared himself, while still being ready to replace anyone for preaching, yet he was still a subdeacon!

On return to the seminary he was made prefect. It was there that he met the cleric Burzio, who had made the fulfilment of duty his programme. Don Bosco called him “the perfect model of a cleric”.

He did everything promptly, gracefully, joyfully, just as the Pope described it: “Spirit of noble precision”. Don Bosco said that he did everything well, since he acted from awareness rather than out of habit, but did it all with perseverance and willingness, always happy to go to church. His piety had two aims: Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

¹⁰ Words to that effect. The Pope said, “May your theology be based on and inspired by an ascetic inspiration.”

Conference 3

Salesian spirituality

Huius rei gratia flecto genua mea ad Patrem Domini Nostri Iesu Christi, ex quo omnis paternitas in caelis et in terra nominatur, ut det vobis secundum divitias gloriae suae, virtute corroborari per spiritum eius in interiorem hominem; Christum habitare per fidem in cordibus vestris, in caritate radicati et fundati. (For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. Eph 3:14-17).

This passage, we can say, is the preamble to any study of mysticism. It is the most wonderful passage in the New Testament for souls who aspire to the discovery of the overwhelming knowledge of Christ's love, as we read in the Mass of St Francis de Sales.

Let us pick up the thoughts from yesterday evening, to keep everything connected and so that we can always keep Don Bosco present, so that, as Bl. Mazzarello said, "We may live in the presence of God and Don Bosco".

When writing his letter about the life of cleric Burzio, Don Bosco wrote that we could not have desired more of this cleric. This is an excellent programme for any cleric. This young man, from whom one could not wish for more, told Don Bosco, "I very much want to become a priest, but the catch is that before I become a priest I must become holy, become holy, become holy!" Here, then, is your programme, your coat of arms, your ideal preparation. The life you are leading now is a life of intellectual, academic preparation, the moral preparation of your will, virtue, spiritual training, so that you arrive at the priesthood prepared. Being priests, yes, but how? By becoming saints.

Allow me to play with this term: preparation is the topic of the address that Pius XI gave his seminarians in Rome on 17-06-1932, teaching them that "life must be preparation: of intelligence, know-how, understanding, moral and spiritual preparation, preparation of will and holiness". Why am I quoting this address on preparation? For in that address, to show his young clerics how they should prepare themselves for clerical life, to one day be priests and apostles of action, the Pope wanted to bring them no other example than our own Don Bosco. Two thirds of his address were dedicated to showing how Don Bosco did his own intellectual and academic preparation, how he prepared his intelligence and know-how, and especially how he prepared his will and spirit. And then he uttered some classic, terse words that should be etched in bronze and never forgotten. The Pope showed his clerics that to succeed as good priests one must learn the interior life from Don Bosco, must copy from Don Bosco what was most stupendous and wonderful in his soul, the habit of interior and continual union with God, assiduous prayer, being continually with God even in the midst of the whirlwind of daily affairs.

The Holy Father had been able to see Don Bosco close at hand, and see everything that not everyone had the pleasure of seeing, even among his sons (even then, many Salesians did not understand Don Bosco, and he was still alive!). He had seen his preparation for holiness, virtue, piety, his life at all moments that was a continuous giving of himself in charity, continuous recollection in

prayer. But what impressed him most was to see a man who was attentive to everything that was going on around him: there were people from all parts of Europe, China, India, and he stood firmly listening to everyone, grasping everything, responding to everyone, and always in deep recollection. One might have said that he was not attending to anything around him, that his thoughts were elsewhere: he was with God, in the spirit of union; but then, there he was, answering them all: what first surprised and then amazed people was this life of recollection that the saint led both day and night.

You have heard the Pope's words about Don Bosco, as he understood him. Don Bosco's spirit was elsewhere. This was the greatest wonder for those who studied Don Bosco for the canonisation process. What was most astonishing was the discovery of his incredible work of building the inner man. Cardinal Salotti, on 20-06-1914, in reference to the study he was then engaged in, told the Holy Father that "in studying the voluminous Turin processes, more than the external grandeur of his colossal work, [he] was struck by the inner life of the spirit, from which the whole prodigious apostolate of Ven. Don Bosco originated and was nourished." Many are only familiar with the external work that seems so impressive, but are largely ignorant of the wise, sublime edifice of Christian perfection that he had patiently erected in his soul by practising the virtue of his state every day, every hour.

We are dealing with spirituality, the interior life: now, external work exists only because the internal work is done. Let me tell you some other words of the Pope: if we succeed in putting them into practice we will be good Christians, Salesians and good priests: "Spirituality, the ideal view of life in continuous union with God, appeared as the secret of all the prodigious apostolic work carried out by Don Bosco". From the first to the last of his addresses, Pius XI always insisted on this sovereign characteristic of his holiness. These are the Pope's words: "The secret of all that marvellous work, of that extraordinary explosion, the grandiose success of his work, lies precisely in that continuous union with God which never ceased, which made his life a continuous prayer" (13-11-1933).

On 20-11-1927 he gave his first revealing address that gladdened the hearts of us Salesians who knew there were many people who did not love us. It was in that address that he said that Don Bosco's spirit was always elsewhere, always above where his ever-dominant and sovereign serenity, imperturbability, calmness lay, so that the great principle of Christian life was truly realised in him: "*qui laborat orat*" (Work is worship). Because of this kind of coexistence of two souls, the Pope pronounced the words that are quoted here on 17-06-1932, and at the same time in 1935, when he ratified the miracles, after having outlined the magnificence of Don Bosco's work and having summed up his extraordinary work and its wonderful success, he went on to seek the causes: "Whence all this?" and answered: "The key to this magnificent mystery lies in his incessant aspiration to God, in his continuous prayer, because he fully identified work and prayer."

This should not lead us to think that Don Bosco said Our Fathers and the Rosary while crossing the courtyard: I saw him, I kissed his hand many times, he often laid his hand on my head, I walked with him in the courtyard, and he never said the Rosary with those hundreds of boys around him! And yet his soul was up above. I knew him in those years when Fr Achilles Ratti also saw him, and yet you see what the Pope says: "Union with God is not being sanctimonious nor collar pulled up; instead it was incessant aspiration to God, it was continuous prayer, because he identified prayer with work. The whole secret, the whole reason for action, the characteristic of Don Bosco's holiness, lies in his inner life, in his spirituality." We also learn this reasons why things were as they were, and the fact that the Pope has proposed it as a model for his seminarians shows that this is the requirement, the elementary indispensable factor for every priest; to be good priests one must have this interior life. For us then it has a double value: as priests and as Salesians, because we must give our life the tone and form of Don Bosco.

Without true spirituality, without true interior life, we would never be what we want to be either as Salesians or as priests. Unfortunately, perhaps many people are persuaded that religious life consists

in superficiality or in practice like an automatic machine which produces its own external effects. The superior must scrupulously see to it that the external aspects are done: the visit, the examination of conscience, the Rosary... Most of us think that this mechanism is sufficient. This is the conduct of the soldier who is always at attention; it is too dangerous and superficial an idea of religious life; instead St Paul says: "*Flecto genua mea...*" (I bend my knee...). Let us be convinced that there can be no true apostolate, no man of action without seeking Jesus. A hundred years ago, Lacordaire, when considering that the French clergy did so much but achieved little, said, "Our clergy lack inner resources rather than knowledge of theological and social doctrine, which is why they do not achieve anything." Chautard says even worse. The Pope always insisted on this in his addresses on 09-07-1933 and 18-11-1934. Don Bosco, in tune with the thinking of the Pope and the ascetics, says in his humility: "To be useful to souls we must first work to make ourselves holy." Otherwise, the life of the religious or the lay person cannot exist. You became religious to save your soul, so how do you work? It is you who must work within, live with God. The aim of our life must be precisely this interior life. Now, the cause of failure of so many religious lies here, as we can see from their coarseness both of spirit and of action, from their absence of a spirit of sacrifice, from their dislike of everything, from their instinct of rebellion and revenge, from the poor results of so many religious practices: lit all lies here in the lack of interior life.

What is interior life?

Which author gives us a definition of interior life? No one. They all just presume it. We can say it is the life of faith reflected in consciousness. Or, with an easier definition, living and acting consciously by reason of faith, living because the soul lives with God, feeling God in the soul, continually having the thought and feeling of God's presence.

Interior life is possible and necessary for everyone

Someone might say, 'but this is all monastic stuff!' The day before I came to preach this retreat I sealed the envelope in which I had finished part of my work, which is the reconstruction of the spiritual life of the little shepherd boy from Argentera: Francis Besucco, who came to Don Bosco when he was only thirteen and a half years old.

This poor lad, guided by a good priest, showed quite sublime manifestations of interior life: "I always pray because when I pray I see the Lord... When I go to Communion I say: YOU speak!" So, the interior life is possible for everyone. It is the holy gift within us; it animates us all, makes us live for the Lord, makes us feel his presence continuously, as in Don Bosco: "He saw everything, did everything, but his spirit was elsewhere." Here is the secret of Don Bosco's split soul! If you succeed in doing this, you will also succeed in being holy. It is not mysticism, but life that St Paul gives for all Christians, who do not live according to the flesh (2 Cor 2:12-15).

Practical means

Let's come down from the generic to the positive. There are two great saints throughout history that I always recommend reading: St Paul and St Benedict. Paul wants to show that we must sanctify all actions in life: "*Omne quodcumque factis in verbo, aut in opere, omnia in nomine Domini Iesu Christi, gratias agentes Deo et Patri per ipsum*" (And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him Col 3:17). And in his unpublished circular of 1885, Don Bosco says: "The union between us must be the union of

spirits, just as it must also be the mechanical union of administration. Let us seek the glory of God in everything... even things commanded should be done not because they are commanded but always for the principle of the glory of God. I know very well that all these things are recommended by the Rule, but if we do not strive and agree to do them for a supernatural reason, all these things are lost.”

Faber, in his *Progresso dell'anima* (Torino, SEI, 1926; p. 24)¹¹ tells us that the spiritual life does not consist in gathering a certain number of devotions, but consists in elevating to the supernatural order what we do in common life. Don Bosco's praise of Cafasso coincides precisely with this passage.

How Don Bosco understood the interior life

Don Bosco understood the interior life in a very simple way: work, do everything for the Lord... think about saving your own soul... Think that you are a Salesian to save your soul (to Fr Tomatis). It is not an isolated life for him, a life in the shadows; it is not a grumpy life, nor false piety and sanctimoniousness: “Idlers, gluttons, pig-headed types and phonies are not for Don Bosco and Don Bosco does not want them.”

Spiritual life is not a kind of selfishness that wants to think only of itself by not working. Salesian spirituality is not what Gasquet and Faber say is the most fatal error of the interior life: wanting an entirely interior life. No, life is an external duty and therefore spirituality does not consist in certain devotions, but in elevating the common life to the supernatural order. So, not so much doing things, but the way of doing them.

The enemies of interior life

Opposite to the interior life is spiritual dissipation, worldliness; ways of speaking, conceiving of things, behaving that are secular. People who reason with the mentality of the newspaper; the point of honour, resentment... worldliness is diametrically opposed to spirituality. Furthermore, Don Bosco also sees an enemy in idleness and in wasted time, which he fights because they bring dissipation of thought, they take one away from the presence of God. Certain dissipated, pleasure-loving, overbearing, selfish, critical, petulant priests have no inner spirit, to say the least.

There are some specifically Salesian temptations that come from our active life itself. We must defend ourselves against four preconceptions that conflict with each other and with the spirituality of our lives.

1. False freedom of spirit, a false casualness that overlooks small actions without regard to intention, and lives without acknowledging God; its motto is: “We are easy-going!”
2. The conventual nature of a false life which follows the rules and is the habit of monks who work without passion, a habit of tired old Orders. The monk who follows the rules, while the man matters but little. How often you hear the monk in confession and not the man! The formula these ones have is: “The Rule is enough!” They represent the ones that had a talent but gave it back.
3. Focus on doing things.¹² A focus that looks just at success. These ones have as their motto: “It's enough to keep moving, enough to be doing something!” It is enough that we have the boys, enough that they get promoted to the next level, enough that they go to Communion. Chautard sees the cause of the lack of Christian formation as the fact that priests and educators lack a

¹¹ Frederick William Faber, *Growth in Holiness: Progress of the Spiritual Life*.

¹² An attempt to translate *faccendarismo*.

righteous intention, an inner life, so they can only generate superficial forms of piety without powerful ideals, without strong convictions. At exam time, you must not only account for the boys' exams, but also your own.

4. Secularism, activism, 'Americanism', the pursuit of external virtues, being outwardly correct and then neglecting the passive virtues of humility, mortification, obedience. The commercialism of Christian activity.

Conclusion

What disgusted St Francis and Don Bosco most was pietism, acting out of habit, ritualism in practising the virtues of religion. Don Bosco controlled piety with action; he asked if they were happy with table arrangements. He did not want smooth-talkers, malicious types, gluttons.

A principle of interior life is prayer. Work/prayer. Prayer is a need, be it mental or oral according to the situation. It is the heart that beats constantly in prayer. It is the molecular vibrations of the heart that manifest the need of the soul. When there is interior life, one feels the need for recollection, one speaks of God. How often do we talk to youngsters about sports and not about God, because He is not in our heart.

Don Bosco is a great saint, with an immense apostolate, but his secret lies in regular union with God, because he combined work and prayer. This way of acting of Don Bosco's is what will give meaning to our life as Salesian priests.

Conference 4

Austerity

Nos autem... sed in doctrina spiritus spiritualibus spiritualia comparantes. (And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. 1 Cor 2:13).

Introduction

We have spoken at length about spirituality and the need to be spiritual, of our willingness to live spiritually but cultivating our interior life. Everything in us must be led by the spirit of faith; we must live in such a way that those who see us and see our works must recognise Christ's stamp on us. Doing otherwise would make us mere animals who do not perceive heavenly things. It is clear that the spiritual man cannot be with the world. We must not form and conform with the world in our self-education. Papini called Christ the one who turned everything upside down when he proclaimed the 8 Beatitudes. Our whole life is a renunciation of the world and things in the world since, as St John says, the whole world is based on the evil one, is pride of the eyes, pride of the flesh, pride of life. We should not love the world which we have radically renounced in Baptism. How many things must be taken away and destroyed from what one has in the world! Faber told one woman: "You have to do as you would with a machine: take it apart piece by piece then put it back together again." In addition to the radical renunciation of Holy Baptism, we have made the legally recognised renunciation of Holy Vows; thus we no longer belong to the world. The word "world" occurs 40 times in the New Testament; it comes from Christ, and is always understood as a system of ideas, passions, judgements that are outside God, without God, against God, and serve to satisfy the flesh.

Salesian asceticism

Our topic is a strong one, the topic of austerity. Asceticism has renunciation of the world, anti-worldliness as its subject and the instrument of this anti-worldliness is mortification.

One cannot separate oneself from the world without making a gesture that rejects it, and this is precisely mortification. So mortification is the reason, the instrument of asceticism.

But we are Salesians! We have work to do, festive oratories, we have to work amongst young people, assist, do our own study, so don't come here and talk to us about asceticism. — But, you professed three vows so it is impossible not to talk about asceticism. But we are easy-going people and Don Bosco never wrote a book about asceticism, never gave a talk of this kind. No, Don Bosco had an asceticism, otherwise we would not be religious. It is just that his asceticism is a special one for the religious life of the Salesian. Other religious people, seeing the way we live, have always said that they would not feel like living our life despite all our smiles. Things are much better off in many convents. Don Bosco was a realist, someone who simplified asceticism: "A few elementary things, substantial facts." Would you like to hear an ascetic sentence that no one has ever known and in which all of Don Bosco's asceticism is contained? In the seventh chapter of Magone's life he writes: "Let us keep to easy things, but do

them with perseverance. Give it a try: put a pebble in your shoe; it is a small thing, but wear it always and you will notice.”

Alphonsian asceticism

We must make an essential parenthesis for you theologians who will soon have to direct others. In all these matters of austere asceticism, Don Bosco is a disciple of St Alphonsus. He does not stray one finger from the line he had drawn in his Guide for Confessors. Look for the third paragraph on spiritual direction and numbers 145-147 that deal with mortification, and you will literally find the words and ideas that Don Bosco spoke of and followed. So too does Scavini in Part I/II where he deals with sins in particular (ed. 1847) and there you will find the page that corresponds to the letter to what Don Bosco said and did. It was precisely Scavini who wrote the *Teologia Universale secondo la mente di S. Alfonso* (Universal Theology According to St Alphonsus' way of thinking).

Alphonsian asceticism is based on three basic points, recognised as his discovery.

1. The theory of detachment: not mortification but detachment; make use of this world as if it were not being used.
2. Temperance. In the broadest sense as temperance of the word; non-comfort, restraint, limitation of desires, moderation of our feelings.
3. Active piety. In other words interior life, self-correction, presence and union with God in work and by carrying out one's duties of state.

Alphonsian asceticism, then, is Bosconian asceticism or rather, Salesian asceticism as understood by Don Bosco.

The origins of Salesian asceticism

The idea of the priest and the religious, as Don Bosco wants him to be, is first and foremost an idea of austerity and mortification; an idea of reserve, withdrawal, temperance, work and patience. Don Bosco learned this while still a boy when he first saw Cafasso. He perfected it in the seminary sharing ideas with Louis Comollo, only Don Bosco threw in his own element, he inserted joy and kindness with regard to the young.

We must get the idea out of our mind that Don Bosco was easy-going, a man who let things slide, who was happy with the biggest things like avoiding mortal sin, which for him was generally reduced to the sin of impurity. Don Bosco was good, indulgent, charitable, but he was austere, otherwise he would not have been a founder. There are 12,800 pages of the *Biographical Memoirs* to prove it.

Salesian mortification

The principle of mortification in Don Bosco has two purposes in mind: 1. Defence and preservation of chastity. This is what all the negative means he proposed come down to and they are all means of mortification. 2. It aims at austerity in our tenor of life, de facto mortification through temperance, abstinence, sobriety, individual and collective poverty, anti-worldliness.

The whole life of the Salesian must be a life of mortification. In 1847 Don Bosco had a dream in which he saw a crowd of boys to be educated and he was separated from them by a field of roses. He tried to pass through without shoes but did not succeed; he immediately had to put on shoes because

there were thorns, that is, the dangers of sensitive affections, sympathies, antipathies, all things that distract the educator from his goals.

Don Bosco's thinking

In August 1846, while convalescing, he was discussing certain passages from the Gospel with Fr Cinzano. Fr Cinzano said: "*Qui vult venire post me abneget... tollat crucem suam et sequatur me*" (If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me). — Instead, Don Bosco insisted: "*Tollat crucem suam quotidie et sequatur me* (take up their cross daily and follow me *Lk 9:23*). — They went and looked and Fr Cinzano had to agree that Don Bosco was right. It was a question of daily and ongoing meditation.

At the Trofarello 1868 retreat he gave a conference on mortification to his clerics preparing for ordination and repeated Scavini's words. At the Lanzo retreat in 1875 he came up with five things to flee from, necessary for observing chastity. During the Christmas Novena in his conference to the clerics on protecting their vocation, he spoke of the means of mortification and brought out Foresti's famous saying: "*Subtrahere ligna foco, si vis extinguere flammam*" (Take the wood away from the fire if you wish to douse the flames). And in the famous Lanzo retreat in 1876 he gave a conference on holidays with the family. Holidays were a terror for him, a place of all evil.

At the Lanzo retreat in 1876 he insisted on preserving the traditional style of life: nothing should be changed! What was this tradition? Count Cays was in an attic and while it was snowing outside, he kept himself warm with a blanket. Don Bosco used to insist: The day that ease and comfort enter our Congregation, the Congregation will have run its course. And here is what this ease and comfort is:

Don Bosco went to S. Benigno and saw curtains in the windows: "This is luxury." "But aren't they needed for due decorum in the house?" "The Salesian's decorum is poverty!"

Fr Rua was stricter still. And when I see certain priests who come as new professors and need someone to sweep their room and make their bed, who are never content with anything, neither the furniture nor the table, I think that if the Congregation were to consist only of them it would certainly have run its course by now.

Knowing how to go without

In all that remains to us of Don Bosco's conferences, we can see that his dominant thought was mortification, exactly as in St Alphonsus. He never prescribed active or passive, afflictive or penitential mortification either to the young or to the confreres; instead, everywhere he essentially inculcated extensive, passive, negative mortification; not putting oneself in the occasion, or beating oneself, but he taught knowing how to do without something. Mortification of the senses, patience, temperance, putting up with each other, poverty. In Volume IV of the MB. When someone asked if he could do penances, he replied: "Look, you don't lack the means: heat, cold, illness, people, things, events... there are ways of living a life of mortification!"

He did not allow the young any positive penances; he only allowed Savio, Magone, Besuccho to occasionally go without a main course, a snack, or to limit what they had for breakfast and only on certain occasions.

He never commanded any disciplinary penances for his sons, but work, work, work: This is what Salesian mortification is!

Mortification and temperance

Temperance or the issue of gluttony is the key point. Our typical saying is: “Work and temperance will make the Congregation flourish.” This is an idiosyncrasy of Don Bosco’s, his hatred of the lack of mortification in eating. He never spoke or wrote about Salesian life, the future of the Congregation, the question of chastity, without insisting on avoiding gluttony. The quotations would be endless. In 1868 he wrote: “When I hear of someone looking to make big snacks, rejoicing at the thought of a nice bottle, I immediately begin to chew over it and foresee serious ruin for that soul.” On 03-04-1877 Fr Barberis wrote: “Every time Don Bosco speaks about this topic he becomes pensive and says: Be careful, when anyone lets himself be controlled by this vice, there is no resolution that will hold him back, it is too difficult to change and misery will come with it. St Jerome clearly says: ‘Wine and chastity do not go together’. I learned from Fr Cafasso and Fr Guala that those who allow themselves to be dominated by wine, even though they were to work miracles, we should not hope for any good from them.”

Linked to this is the whole question of chastity. Discussing the Rule, Don Bosco insisted much on the question of eating meat and drinking wine. And he said, “One of the first things, the most essential thing, is to be happy with arrangements at the table.” This is how he wrote about cleric Burzio, then Comollo, Savio, Magone, Besucco. In Vol. I, 381, we read: “At the seminary Don Bosco was well known for this virtue.”¹³

The example of the first Salesians

The chapter that runs from page 205-219 in Vol IV of the MB¹⁴ is the chapter on mortification. It is mind-boggling when one reads there: Mortification in food, room, clothing, hunger, thirst; heat, cold; ingenuity to avoid being helped. I wish I had time to comment on the quantity and incredibility of the penances, the hidden sacrifices practised by so many good Salesians, by good coadjutor brothers who knew how to habitually hide their penances. When Fr Fascie died, they found an iron hairshirt on him, a beautiful band of chrome-plated steel mesh 16 centimetres high, where each stitch corresponded to a sharp, protruding pin, and he had worn it for two consecutive months.

I am right when I would like to comment on the penances that each one knows how to do. For me, I cannot conceive of the life of a cleric who does not have his act of penance; every good Salesian must have his act of penance, his book, his devotion, otherwise he will not succeed in perfecting his soul. If Don Bosco’s spirit is preserved in the Congregation, if we see it progressing marvellously, it must be said that Don Bosco’s asceticism is in full bloom. And let us be proud of this.

¹³ BM I, p. 284.

¹⁴ BM IV, pp. 128-153. Love of Penance.

Conference 5

Observance

Conference plan

These two days are dedicated to the direct study of practical Salesianity, of our life as Salesian religious. Over the first two days we looked at our spiritual preparation. Over the final two we will study what concerns us in the practicalities of daily life.

The Rule – its origin

“*Regula dicitur ad hoc quod oboedientium dirigit mores*” (It is called “rule” because it guides the behaviour of those who obey). This is the motto St Benedict wrote beneath the title of his Rules. He who created Western religious life and gave us the concept of the common life, created the meaning of this word. *Regula* (rule) among the Latins means *riga* (ruler, in Italian); and the body of his rules he called *Regulae* (rules) precisely because they are to be like the ruler who guides the behaviours of those who obey him.

This conference should be called ‘Observance’, precisely because the rule will be spoken of in a special way. I am speaking as a Salesian to experienced confreres and not as a canonist. I am therefore leaving aside the usual catechesis on the nature of the vows, on the value of the Rule, because you all know what you hear repeated time and time again. Don Bosco taught us to be people of reality, and we leave catechesis to deal immediately with what matters to us: the spiritual aspect, the willingness to practise what the Rule says.

What really matters then is observance. Do not believe that this is a word taken from texts by monks; no, it is Don Bosco who uses it in his sermons and writings. In 1879 he ended the retreat saying, “I do not want to tell you many things, but only one: as long as the Congregation keeps to the observance of the Rules, it will flourish: it will decline when observance begins to weaken.”

A useful digression

Forgive me if I am insisting on Don Bosco, but it is because it will also happen to you that when you preach you forget you are Salesians, you will look for all the books in this world and forget Don Bosco.

Music has a theme which unfolds, musical motifs emerge, there are divertimenti, and then a final closure, but all achieved through tonality, despite modulations and gradations. If a passage is perfect and done properly it ends with a final concluding part and with the cadence proper to this tone. Now all our preaching, all our considerations all revolve around one theme: Don Bosco. This is our tone: Don Bosco’s thought and practice. The modulations and divertimenti are the things that are said, but even these, like the final closure, are always resolved in the same tone.

Our first rules

Don Bosco did not give us many rules. The first Salesians and I professed a much simpler and shorter rule; if you saw his drafts, the ones he dictated to be presented in Rome in 1864 and 1868, they are

something quite simple; but Don Bosco always advocated the observance of the Rules with vivid recommendations and even with his dreams. By his own virtue and his desire for mortification he himself practised poverty and wanted it practised by his Salesians; so Don Bosco wanted a warm, willing obedience. No despotic empires, no overbearing absolutism... He wanted obedience to be the fruit of conviction, persuasion, the fruit of goodwill. In this regard read his confidential reminders to rectors and the presentation of the Rules; everything has one stamp: *family discipline*. Rules in print always barely contain the necessary thinking, but the matter cannot be codified in its entirety, so the Rules provide only a summary idea. The application, commentary, the superior's injunctions surpass the letter of the Rules, so that alongside what the Rules say, we must also stand by tradition.

We need to banish one idea that is far too benign and dangerous: that in Don Bosco's time, when everything was not yet codified, when we didn't have all this system of hierarchies, all those 501s and 502s of the Code, there was very loose discipline, that things were very casual, as if things were going smoothly. No: Don Bosco was good-natured, he was holy, gentle, lovable, but his kindness and good-naturedness, once the Congregation was established by its approval in 1869, become strict in demanding things, theoretically rigid; all this is documented. Don Bosco is little known in this field despite the 18 volumes that tell us about him.

On 04-06-1879 a cleric wrote to him to ask him for some advice and Don Bosco replied: "I don't know how, with such obedience, keeping a few lire in your pocket, you can receive Communion." That's the story!

Don Bosco's idea

On this point Don Bosco had clear ideas as a theologian and canonist. In 1869 he gave the retreat for the clerics and a few confreres and aspirants at Trofarello. Since the Congregation's decree of approval had come out at the beginning of March, he was keen to demonstrate the grave obligation involving the vows: he explained who could command by virtue of the vow of obedience, and who could not; and his words coincide perfectly with the wording of today's Canon 501, 502. In the end he added that the Rules do not oblige *sub gravi*: "If someone" he said, "does not make their meditation, spiritual reading, examination of conscience, pray the Rosary, make a visit, observe the Friday fast... he would be deprived of the merit, but he would not commit a serious sin." Yet in spite of this we hear him insistently repeating, then fulminating against non-observance of the Rules and Regulations, because obedience for him was but one thing – for him it all came under the Fourth Commandment.

Sacred duty

We should not think that Don Bosco confused theology and asceticism, or spoke out of opportunistic necessity; no, Don Bosco had a clear idea of things, but if he insisted and fulminated during moral conferences, it was because of the responsibility he had for an entire educational edifice. The cause of scandal, disorder, disorganisation, common indiscipline all lies here: in non-observance. Even if in particular cases one cannot see anything greater than venial sin, we should not believe that we must not insist on it.

Can a holy founder authorise a regime of venial sin? A failure to observe the Rule that brings the Congregation to ruin? Don Bosco must insist, and insist out of a duty of conscience. And so when you see that your rector takes you aside and speaks sensitive words to you about a fault, when the superiors call you to order, you must never believe that they have anything against you or that they are rigourist, no; but they are being theologically scrupulous in carrying out all their duty, so that afterwards they no longer have anything against you and are as good as before. You teach me, with Tanquerey in hand and

all the theologians from the ancients to St Alphonsus, that a superior would be neglecting his duty if he failed to enforce the Rules, to repress light transgressions when they might become frequent; and I quote Schram's words, quoted in turn by Lugo: "It is a common verdict of theologians that the prelate gravely sins by neglecting to correct transgressors of the Rules when regular observance is relaxed due to this defect."

Don Bosco, therefore, had to insist, due to his conscience, in cracking down on non-observance, as it could become a seed of disorder and ruin.

Eloquent documents

During the conferences on 01-03-1869, the day following the decree of approval of the Congregation, he gathered the confreres at the Oratory together and said: "Now we are approved; it is up to us to be good religious; after the approval of the Rules, regularity in common life is required." A few days later he gave another conference on humility of purpose and regular observance.

While preparations were being made in Rome for the approval of the Rules in 1874, as early as 04-06 and 15-11-1873 and February 1874, Don Bosco promulgated three circulars to prepare the confreres. In the first circular he explained the Rules as having spiritual and religious value. In the second, being minutely practical, he spoke of discipline and the way of life in accordance with the Rules and customs of the institute. Discipline was not to be upheld in the institute by means of chastisements, but he insisted on the concept that the Rules are to be observed by everyone, both superiors and inferiors without privilege; the observance of this precept is such that the moral and academic benefit for the students or their ruin depended on it.

Not observance of the Rule for the Rule's sake, but for its purpose, because the Rule on its own makes the monk, but not the religious; what makes the Salesian is work. In the third part he spoke of the practical way of observing the Rules and preserving the beautiful virtue. On 3 February 1876, speaking to the rectors gathered together in Chapter, he said: "To correspond well to Providence, we must carry out the Rules well, stay firmly with the Code that the Church has given us; no longer just because the rector says so. If we want to spread our spirit in the world let us hold firmly to the Rules." Orestano¹⁵ says precisely that the greatest spiritual phenomenon of the century is the permeation of Salesianity in the world, and Don Bosco had said this in 1876. Our Father concluded his conference by stating that observance of the Rules is the only way for the Congregation to endure.

In 1884 he issued another circular on observance and recommended that we aim in everything at the purpose for which we are religious: the good of young people. When he then heard purely monastic reasoning he exclaimed: "Salesians are religious destined for work; work will make Salesians." And he concluded, "by retreating from the observance of our Regulations we are robbing the Lord, because we profane and trample underfoot what we have placed in his hands. But it costs effort! Yes, it costs effort if one does it unwillingly, but did we become religious to enjoy or to suffer and gain merit for ourselves? Not to command, but to obey; not for people's affection, but to exercise charity; not to live comfortably, but to practise the poverty of O.L.J.C." Don Bosco speaks clearly.

Obstacle: grumbling

Now we are interested in the opposite side; while keeping focused solidly on Don Bosco, we must consider the negative side, the obstacle to be fought. Don Bosco sees non-observance, the spirit of independence, indiscipline, the spirit of insubordination as the main cause of the Congregation's ruin.

¹⁵ Francesco Orestano, Italian philosopher 1873-1945.

He finds the origin of all this in what he calls the spirit of reform, that is, in grumbling¹⁶ which is identified with selfishness.

When he talks about grumbling he does not mean petty grievances or backbiting, but criticising the arrangements of the superiors, contempt for authority, constantly criticising what the superiors do. This is the grumbling, the spirit of reform that Don Bosco lashes out at and sees as a bogeyman for the life of the Congregation.

In a conversation on 14-08-1876, as Fr Vespignani tells us, Don Bosco said that there are three things that bring the Congregation down: idleness, sophistication¹⁷ and abundance of food and the spirit of reform or individual selfishness or grumbling.

The dream of the cart

During the retreat at Lanzo in 1873 he had the famous dream of the cart, which lasted four nights and was divided into four parts. Don Bosco saw a cart being driven by ugly beasts who had written on their teeth: Idleness, Gluttony. The cart carrying junk had four nails with as many signs bearing sentences: these are the four nails that afflict or kill the spirit of the Congregation.

1st nail: *Quorum Deus venter est* (Those whose stomach is their god).

2nd nail: *Quaerunt quae sua sunt* (Those who seek their own comforts).

3rd nail: *Venenum aspidis* (Viper's venom): Grumbling, malicious insinuation.

4th nail: *Cubiculum otiositatis* (Idleness room): the room of the priest who has so much to do and then does nothing; he has everything but books; he does everything but does nothing, because he does not do what he has to do.

In the middle of the cart is a 5th sign: *Latet anguis in herba* (the snake lurking in the grass): the true plague of the Congregation is slyness, being eternally discontented, creating discord, people out to destroy things in an underhand way.

The father's curse

The last circular he published in 1886 was about grumbling that was against charity, something hateful to God and damaging to the Congregation.

On 03-10-1886 Don Bosco, who was unwell and drained by illness, had wanted to come to S. Benigno for the professions and wanted to offer some reminders.

I was close by because I was acting as acolyte and I still remember the terrible anguish of it today. Don Bosco snapped, had a nightmare, and it was almost a curse for that poor sick man who could barely sit up with strength of will coming from deep within. With trembling hand he railed against the spirit of criticism that was ruining the Congregation... He was unable to continue because weeping cut off his words and I felt his whole being tremble as well as seeing the tears that cut off his words.

It was a scene we ourselves saw and it made a sorrowful impression on us. Never could we have believed that the saintly, gentle Don Bosco had the strength in him for such an outburst.

¹⁶ *mormorazione*. Literally, murmuring.

¹⁷ *Ricercatezza*

The dream of the phylloxera

Only this way can we understand the famous dream of the phylloxera that he had from 01/10-10-1876 during the third retreat shift at Lanzo. What is phylloxera? It is a plant lice carried by the wind and wherever it lands it destroys everything. The wind called grumbling carries the phylloxera of disobedience a great distance. Don Bosco asked his mentor: "Is there no remedy for it?" His guide's response was fearful: "Half measures are not enough. When there is the phylloxera of opposition to the instructions of superiors in a house, the phylloxera of supreme disregard of the Rules, of contempt for the obligations of common life, do not procrastinate. Reject it and do not be overcome by pernicious tolerance. People of this kind do not change, so any indulgence, all hope is useless." — The dream fully respects his sentiments.

From Fr Barberis' chronicle

On 03-04 the following year, Don Bosco gave Fr Barberis a similar kind of reasoning. Once grumbling enters the house it destroys everything, ruins everything nor is there almost any hope for more good. The only means is to sharply, abruptly nip the infected branch in the bud. We must gradually imitate other religious orders, sending away those who have flaws of this kind, without waiting any longer to correct them.

Comfort and a warning

Comfort yourselves that there are no cases of this to eradicate. I can guarantee you that I have travelled all over Italy in recent years. Before the Church we are one of the most disciplined and observant orders. The Church thinks of Salesians this way. And we older ones know that this is how it is. There can be some members we need to reject. You will find those kinds of people where once they come to a house, two months later nothing is going well. They are the ones who have set to work sowing discord in the midst of others by infiltrating a proud disregard of the Rule, contempt for the obligations of common life, non-observance and rebellion against the will of the superior.

It happened to me that preaching along these lines, a superior of the Chapter was there, and he came up to tell me, "Bravo, you have touched on a vital point; in this house there are two kinds of phylloxera, not just one, But we will manage to send all the phylloxera packing!"

Let us conclude on a higher note. We have faith in our Congregation, as we pass for one of the most observant and disciplined Congregations.

We have seen the development of the Congregation and we can say that things are going well, since in 1869 Don Bosco said "Our Congregation will flourish so long as discipline reigns, observance of the Rules." There were 3 houses then. In 1876 there were already 10, in 1886 almost a 100 and now there are 1273. If we continue going ahead, in 50 years we will have 10,000. Then there were 1040 confreres and now there are 12,000 of us. So discipline is flourishing, otherwise the Institute would have collapsed. Check it out with your history professor: flourishing monasteries have fallen to the ground in the very provinces around the Pope due to non-observance of the Rules; remember the defence of St Bernard against the monastery of Cluny.

No exception

Religious observance has to extend to all houses. On 31-12-1931 Cardinal Lépicié of the Servite Order, who is Dean of the Congregation of Regulars, issued an instruction for religious ordering that

young clerics and priests be assigned to the house where perfect observance was in force, especially with regard to common life and poverty. If we Salesians had these houses, we would be fresh! The Rules must be observed by everyone; Let there be no exceptions or privileges, otherwise woe betide. If the rector does not do his duty, fails to abide by the Rule, we should not be surprised then if everyone else does the same.

Willing observance

Don Bosco wanted there to be a supernatural reason for observance in religious life. He wanted our contribution; we must live divinely. Away with the pharisaic, servile spirit of the “professional” religious where we are concerned – who would observe a tonne of rules so as not to have an ounce of work to do. This is not our spirit.

Woe betide those who only want to abide by theology, because they would end up doing nothing. Contrary to all their theological reasons, when they had to go out of their magnificent convent, where they lived according the strictest observance of their rule, the Benedictines de Chatenaux (instead of walking, as it would be expected of poor monks) would drive, the simple monks in a two-horse coach and the abbot a four-horse coach. Does it make any sense to profess religious vows and then to live in this way?

So let us get rid of the idea that the Rule is sufficient. The Rule needs to be observed because it is an instrument of perfection and so, not an end in itself. The Rule makes us religious but not Salesian religious; we are not Salesians in order to be religious, but we are religious in order to be Salesians and what makes us Salesians is work. The rule makes monks of us but work makes Salesians of us. The Pope does not know how to conceive of the Salesians and the Daughters of M.H.C. if they do not work and work a lot.

Above all there has to be the spirit of charity that unites us in the bond of perfection and launches us into the ways of the apostolate, and we are religious precisely for the conquest of souls.

Conference 6

Poverty

“Beati pauperes spiritu...” (Blessed are the poor in spirit... Mt 5:3).

The spirit of poverty is what ensures heaven for us. The subject we are offering is the question of our poverty, of our Salesian poverty. We are not interested in catechesis on the vow or breaking the vow in a theological sense, but we are interested in the willingness to practise it. We must reawaken its spirit not only to avoid sin, which is not always serious, but to kindle in us a desire to be poor in the strict canonical sense of the word, according to the spirit of our Congregation. This poverty is explained not only in not possessing and not administering things, but above all in the willingness to be poor, in other words, wanting to live and behave as a poor person. Being personally poor, accepting seeking what is the effect of poverty, not loving it in the abstract but concretely.

On p. 16 of his confidential reminders to rectors, Don Bosco says, “Let us love poverty and the companions of poverty, because what does us the most harm are things in the abstract.” Everyone loves youth, but when they have 50 fleas between their feet they would send them... to those who love them most! The Gospel did not teach us to love humility, but our neighbour, the individual, particular person.

This is what Don Bosco wanted us to be like. Personally poor, accepting and seeking what is the effect of poverty, loving the standard of living poor, simplifying everything we need. This is how those who wish to live their Salesianity must be poor, in other words, like Don Bosco lived it.

Don Bosco's classic idea

Poverty has no intrinsic value in itself; the Lord instils it in us only insofar as it brings with it a detachment from wealth. Poverty therefore only has value for its spiritual content of mortification, detachment. All Don Bosco's asceticism following in the footsteps of St Alphonsus is an asceticism of detachment.

For Don Bosco, poverty is spiritual perfection. He began with nothing, continued throughout life in poverty, lived in an exemplary and heroic way in his personal poverty. Before she died, Mamma Margaret (it was precisely from her that he drew his perfection) gave him more recommendations on this point: “See that you show simplicity and poverty in your work... in the things that you do seek the glory of God, but beware that there are those around you who only want poverty for others and not for themselves.

Having it in our heart

There is a maxim of Don Bosco's from 1858 that is worth whole discussion on its own: “You need to have poverty in your heart in order to practise it.” The book that Fr Ricaldone wrote this year about it is magnificent, but despite everything he says and forbids it will come to nothing if we do not have it in our hearts.

Poverty

In 1859 Don Bosco told some confreres, “Being few and poor is not an impediment: indeed, poverty is a great enterprise: it is our good fortune, a blessing from God and we must pray to the Lord to keep us always in voluntary poverty.” After these words he reminded them how many religious orders have collapsed because they did not know how to preserve their primitive spirit of poverty, while those that kept it flourished wonderfully, e.g. the Capuchins. Whoever is poor thinks of God, almost by necessity. Is it not a beautiful thing to be obliged to think about God?

Pius IX’s recommendation

On the evening of 19-11-1863, the day the Roman Congregations approved our Congregation, Don Bosco was talking with Pius IX. Among other things the Pope told him, “See that you do not accept either the rich or the noble in your Congregation and always keep to poor and abandoned youth, the disinherited classes.”

Affluence

In an already mentioned conversation on 14-08-1876, Don Bosco reminded us of three things that lower the spirit of the Congregation: idleness, sophistication and abundance of food, selfishness and the spirit of reform or grumbling, and he added: “But I already see a frightening affluence entering among us.” Maybe someone had put a mat on the table, and two chairs instead of one, a curtain on the attic window, a pair of new shoes a month before throwing the old ones away... The year before he had said “At home there is already a tendency to comfort and by neglecting it bit by bit some serious impropriety or deplorable case will immediately arise.” A holy exaggeration! Yet all holy founders were like this.

In winter in 1880 he went to S. Benigno, and gave a conference to the personnel of the house, forbidding them from giving greatcoats to the clerics: “It costs too much; the cleric has to give himself some warmth.” With that cold, without heating and without a greatcoat, yet it was fine! That time some said to him, “Let’s put something on the windows” “This is acting like a lord.” “But a little decorum...!” “The decorum of the Salesians is poverty”, he replied tersely and when he answered tersely he was really blunt, because he had a squeaky voice and spoke through clenched teeth.

Charity and poverty

Don Bosco was almost ferocious when he was like that, yet towards the end he has two wonderful pages on how to treat the indisposed, the sick, those who have already worked a lot. He recommends very special consideration in their regard, as long as they do not come back “for an extra meal.” On the other hand, in 1885 when he wrote the circular, he had expressions like “one suit, a piece of bread must be enough for a religious.”

Poverty and Providence

Don Bosco always instilled in us that we work like poor people do, work to make ourselves worthy of Providence, make good use of the charity that the world offers us. This was a constant ideal for him, and in 1885 he urged poverty in these words: “Let us remember that the well-being of the Congregation and of our souls depends to a great extent on this observance. Divine Providence has helped us so far and we hope that it will continue to assist us through the intercession of the Most

Holy Mary who was always our good Mother; but we must show every diligence in making good and economical use of everything that is not strictly necessary.”

Furnishings

Don Bosco had a special fear above all others, that someone would say “such furniture is not in keeping with poverty; such a table, such a room does not suggest poverty.” In his last testament in 1886 he wrote: “Whoever gives cause for remarks of this kind brings disaster upon our Congregation which must be able to pride itself on its vow of poverty. Woe to us if those from whom we seek alms are able to say that we live an easier life than they do!” Yet they would be correct sometimes if they entered the room of some of our confreres.

Fr Rua was the embodiment of Salesian poverty, because he represented Don Bosco to the letter. In his 1885 circular and again in 1886 he also insists on the question of furniture and rooms that do not conform to the spirit of poverty.

After Don Bosco died, a priest caught up in his youth became a young gentleman, his room became a small living room. Fr Rua warned him, went and found him, looked, looked again, then shaking his head, said, “This is definitely not a poor person’s room, it is full of wealthy stuff, your room is not a poor man’s room.” Some days later he saw a wagon carrying a piano: “Where are you taking it to?” “To so-and-so’s room”. “Take it there for now, it will be useful for big celebrations when we have to sing romances.”¹⁸ And he assigned the individual to another house. After some time he visited the house, and as soon as he arrived he said, “Take me to your room, I would like to see it... So, even having moved you was not enough; look, these things don’t speak of poverty: throw this small table out...” and by dint of saying “no” and “throw it out” he stripped the room.

Don Bosco’s testimony

In his last will and testament his recommendation was: “Love poverty if you want the Congregation to flourish” (MB XVIII, 27).¹⁹ Further on he has another sentence: “When the desire for ease and comfort grows up amongst us our pious Society will have run its course. The world will always welcome us as long as our concern is for the under-developed peoples, for poor children, for members of society most in danger. This is our real wealth which no one will envy and no one will take from us.” This is his testament! Could we possibly forget it?

Knowing how to do without

What Don Bosco said in 1858 was great: “We need to have poverty in our heart to practise it; we need to keep it before us to understand all the secret of practising it.”

In practice we need many things for the exercise of perfection that is proper to our Institute; we do not belong to a mendicant Order and so we have different buildings and equipment. What is necessary or useful for the exercise of our perfection comes into the question of our poverty; Don Bosco even extends it to the matter of our age, to work, sickness; and this is already understood in the 2nd Letter of St Peter: “*Maxime qui laborat in verbo Domini...*” (Especially the one who works in the word of the

18 At that time “*la romanza*” was a musical genre much in vogue: it was a “cantata” of a poetic nature = fantastic/novel (*romanzo* = not strictly historical), sung on the occasion of *accademie, recite, teatrino* ... by a soloist accompanied by a pianist. Cagliari composed some of this kind, like “*Lo spazzacamino*” (the chimney sweep) which became very famous.

19 BM, XVII, p. 230ff.

Lord...), but in whatever position we find ourselves, the principle remains for us that it is the secret of our life: “Love for simplicity, for poor living standards: knowing how to go without.” This sentence would be enough for us to fully understand the spirit of our poverty.

Various aspects of poverty

There are six qualities of poverty: three good, three not so good:

1. The poverty inculcated by O.L.J.C;
2. The poverty of advice: If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all you possess;
3. The poverty of profession: which is none other than the advice practised in the religious state.

There are three aspects that are not so good, anti-religious, ruinous:

1. The forced poverty of someone who is never content, always whining, complaining, never has enough of anything; they want to be poor so long as they lack nothing.
2. Poverty belied through lack of mortification, with worldliness, looking for delicacies, abundant food. Poverty, but in a luxurious house that stands out, everything new and of the best quality.
3. Poverty mocked, a joke; the poverty of those who live in the Congregation and apply what St Paul says: “Unusquisque habet suum” (Each to his own), in other words keep money in their pockets; they take what the Congregation provides and then they round up their lives with all the comforts; they have money, they spend it and then tell you to your face: “I paid for this; this didn’t cost the Congregation anything because it was given to me as a gift.”

You only need a few of this kind to ruin not just a house but the whole Congregation: they are an affront to others and an invitation to do likewise. Unfortunately these bad examples come especially from priests. Be careful!

Salesian poverty

First of all we shun *epikeia*, the casuistry that leaves you with the rule and the rest goes. We need to shun this way of acting, because otherwise the brother keeps what he is given, the cleric what he gets from his relatives, the priest... Without virtue there is no poverty and Don Bosco makes no distinction between vow and virtue: we need to have the virtue of poverty in our heart; it covers everything in one go. Salesian poverty is such that if we need something we take the less beautiful one, the furniture item made of more common material... we choose the poorest of any two things, the one that costs less and is just as useful without having an air of elegance.

The life of a Salesian is life in third class; not just on the train but in all aspects of life. Once upon a time third class was a moving stable, now it is so much better, since that is what life today demands. We cannot live in the conventual uniformity of the religious of penitent life, but we must always live in the third class so that others also understand it. So away with luxury, away with refinement, worldliness, away with elegance, beauty, appearance: these things are only good in the church or in the guest room.

Exceptions

We should remove any distinctive traits from ourselves: there are those who do not want to submit to being like others. Generally they are just upstarts with money, peasants who want to be like lords, wheeler-dealers: these kinds are selfish: *quaerunt quae sua sunt* (they seek their own interests). There is

at least one per house. I ask if it is licit for there to be poor Salesians and pathetic Salesians.²⁰ Some do not want to be poor and so we have Salesians of first, second and third class. No, all third class! And let it not happen that a month after ordination the latent man bursts forth, the real man that does not adjust to common life, whose wardrobe and clothing is elegant, furniture and room likewise, and needs to be served – in a word, wants to move into second class. How awful! I will say no more.

Do not keep money

On pages 13-14 of his confidential reminders, Don Bosco speaks about keeping money on one's self: "The observance of this article will keep the most fatal plague for the Congregation far from us." Here are some testimonies: Fr Olivazzo, who lived in my time and then there was no question of whether or not it was lawful to receive Communion with more than half a lira in your pocket. We were created in the time of the half lira. To the cleric who asked if he could keep a few lire, Don Bosco replied that he didn't know how one could go to Communion with disobedience of that kind. Fr Ubaldi who received 40,000 Lire a year did not even have enough money for a tram in his pocket; and he came into being at the time of 10 *soldi*. Now, unfortunately, more money comes in and with money worldliness, the search for pleasure; selfishness, jealousy, one seeks things to eat and drink, inequality is born, venality enters: the one who pays gets all the services he wants; coming and going from the house; going to have fun, we hope... just having a beer.

Don Bosco put it very clearly: it is the ruin of the Congregation.

Conclusion

Our motto "*Work and temperance*" includes poverty, because the poor person needs to work and is self-controlled. This is why we made our sign of the cross thus: work, temperance; poverty, kindness, sacraments and Mary.

Our principle must be one of simplicity, of anti-worldliness. Everything that is refined, luxurious, special, must be excluded. For the rest we go ahead as our superiors teach, as we can, always remembering that when we travel in third class we always arrive earlier than those in second and first, because the carriages are closer to the locomotive, and because Jesus said: "*Beati pauperes spiritu*" (Blessed are the poor in spirit).

²⁰ *Salesiani poveri e dei poveri salesiani.*

Conference 7

Chastity

Let us keep ourselves chaste and pure before God (St J. Cafasso).

“*Let us keep ourselves chaste and pure before God*” are the words constantly used by St Joseph Cafasso in this matter, and Don Bosco inherited them, always using these words to indicate the spirit’s direction on this topic. It is a very delicate topic for our inner and individual life; as it is for our outward life, for our relationships with our neighbour and especially for what must be the subject of our work, educational material in our dealings with the young. It is a very delicate and demanding issue and not always definable with regard to the individual and his conscience. I am leaving aside the whole very delicate question of the ordinand faced with this matter and what is established for clerics in the dispositions of the Holy See and the Curias.

Don Bosco’s clearsightedness

I have said it is a demanding and not always definable matter, because in human consciousness there is a part unknowable even to the individual himself. Some, then, speak of man without considering that he has feet firmly planted on earth, while others deal with him as if his head were not in heaven.

The study of psychophysiology would be interesting, but we need to keep to the Salesian aspect of the topic, because if we look closely, this is the primordial issue of Salesianity. Don Bosco worked to hold youth back in matters concerning this subject. This is the central point of Don Bosco’s practical pedagogy. Reduced to its simplest terms it consists in preserving young people’s souls from sin and nurturing God’s grace in them (hence the Sacraments). Don Bosco feared almost nothing where young people were concerned, except the ugliness of sin. Our work to prevent sin must be reduced almost to preserving them from this kind of sin. Although Don Bosco was no clairvoyant or an exaggerator, therein lies the quintessence of his historical and educational value.

It is morally and scientifically correct to think this way. In fact the Church describes Don Bosco as “*The Father of adolescents, dedicated to the education of youth.*” For more than 40 years now, science has turned to the study of the tremendous psychophysiological, natural, spiritual problem of puberty in adolescence, how it takes place, what effects this phenomenon of rebirth of the human organism produces in character and temperament, in the habits, will, the psyche of the young. I could cite more than two thousand authors for you, scholars of this problem, though there are very few Catholics among them.

The classic work by Mendousse: *The Soul of the Adolescent* reduces the entire question of morality in adolescence to this problem of puberty, the psychophysiological factor and issue.

Don Bosco had understood it 50 years earlier: in order to work among adolescents, we need to bear in mind the state they find themselves in: puberty. And since this physical rebirth brings certain features with it, Don Bosco directs all his study and work to preserving the soul of young people from sin, and by sin he considers nothing but this. It is not an exaggeration, because after 50 years, science has come to prove him right. So, if you study Don Bosco he begins to become great! Isn’t that right?

Even in the environment of Salesian religious and educational life, it is one of the three pivots on which the whole spiritual system revolves. It is one of Don Bosco's three natural idiosyncrasies: idleness, intemperance, immodesty, to which he adds a fourth from experience: grumbling; just as Proverbs says: "Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up..." (Pr 30:21-23).

A mistaken interpretation

As I have said, Don Bosco had a natural repugnance for immodesty since he was a child, so much so that we, his young devout Salesian followers have misunderstood and misinterpreted the tradition. We almost think of that as being the only sin, and not only in young people where there is much to discuss about responsibility and gravity, but also for ourselves. Once we have overcome that, we no longer pay attention to anything else, have no moral sensitivity regarding justice, honesty, sincerity, charity, responsibility. These become just ordinary little things for us. No, we have misunderstood a tradition and thus spoilt our sense of what is moral; we are cold in certain matters, but amoral for all the rest.

Something essential

Don Bosco knew his theology somewhat better, and if we see him insisting so much on this point it is because it is a central one for the life of an adolescent and for the very special circumstance in the life of education in which he must form his sons, since their reason for being priests is to work for youth. Given this, he must form them according to his central idea, and so he insists very much on this matter. We see it in the text of the Rules: "*Whoever has no well-founded hope...*", and elsewhere: "Whoever has no well-founded hope of morally avoiding these sins had better not become a priest or cleric." And when dealing with this matter Don Bosco does not raise theological questions or questions of conscience. Theologians discuss how far we can go without serious sin...; poor Heart of Jesus: we put up so many frameworks and then measure how far we can go, to the millimetre, without killing you!

Terminology

Don Bosco totally refuses to confuse things in this matter. He even refuses to use the usual terms; for him there are no specific terms, only the common ones like virtue, modesty, innocence and the virtue par excellence; thus Don Bosco says "He who can understand understands, and he who does not know, does not understand and so much the better." So for the opposite he uses terms like sin, fall, disgrace, dishonesty, all words that do not upset people yet make those who need to understand.

A practical aspect

Instead of entering into questions of theology or conscience, Don Bosco always makes it a question of God's grace: to have God's grace and not offend God, not fall into sin. He does not enter into theoretical pedagogical issues, how to educate to a moral life. Don Bosco's system on this point lies here: prevent sin; this is the true pedagogy of living a moral life! This is why Don Bosco is called the "Father of adolescents", and let us always remember: at the core of adolescence is what is called puberty.

Don Bosco's greatness

We see how Don Bosco considered the individual and his environment. For him the cleric was still an adolescent, and indeed he said that this state lasts until we are 30. Now, because it is an objective fact that the Salesian lives among the young, and can have individual, subjective impressions, and has particular responsibilities, Don Bosco provides some special norms on how to deal with young people, how to preserve them from evil or in other words, educate them to a moral life. This is what I cannot develop in conferences on Salesian pedagogy, because I ordinarily lack an environment that understands this.

This is the true greatness of Don Bosco, his concept of morality, or the pedagogy for living a moral life: we work among young people in order to prevent sin. Let us keep this well in mind: Don Bosco puts the “chastity of pedagogy” above and before, in order of ideas and time; the “pedagogy of chastity”, indeed, he puts as the supreme means of this pedagogy, that is, the chastity of the individual who educates in language, manners and person. It is useless to speak of lilies at the altar if you are an artichoke. “*Nemo dat quod non habet*” (No one gives what he does not have). Here is one of the great things about Don Bosco!

In all of the prurient world of productions on purity that have come out over these last 30 years, including by Catholics, there is the claim to be teaching young people how they should be okay: but they do not observe our rule, they have such language that if one does not know, one ends up learning to go in that direction. They forget the “chastity of pedagogy”. These books are all mistaken, and in all of these books... not all truths can be said! To be Salesians closer to Don Bosco, to be completely “Bosconian”, let us keep this in mind!

Preserving ourselves – defending ourselves

Let us come to some specifics about this matter. In 1876 Don Bosco told someone who was completely led astray: “Look, let’s leave theology aside, morals, mysticism, asceticism; everything comes down to this: keeping ourselves pure and holy before God.” These are precisely the words of St Joseph Cafasso and Don Bosco following in the footsteps of his Master. He always teaches what to do to keep ourselves chaste. Preserving ourselves, preserving chastity is always what he speaks about, brought to completion by the idea of defence: preserving ourselves and defending ourselves. There is a classic case in a chapter of Magone’s life where the latter lines up the seven *carabinieri* who place themselves at the feet of the Madonna to defend and preserve chastity. It is nothing more than a popular idea of the seven means of keeping oneself chaste.

You will find saints who have written so many ideas on this topic; most aim high theologically and mystically, speaking of the love of God: whoever loves God does not love creatures, is detached from them; now all purity is love of God, it is not going after creatures; those who love God do not love themselves, do not follow their own inclinations. Don Bosco is much more practical; realistic and positive, he knew that while speaking of the love of God one could remain as before, so he merely pointed out the negative means in preference to the positive, to defend oneself, to preserve oneself. All other reasoning he knew, yet this is the way he reasoned for his young men, clerics, priests!

The means he used

During the 1868 retreat at Trofarello he gave a sermon exclusively on mortification, and its theme was: As the body corrupts it aggravates the soul, and tells us about mortification of the eyes and taste. The following year he gave a conference on preservation of chastity and developed that idea that “*Subtrahere*

ligna foco si vis extinguere flammam” (Remove the wood from the fire if you want to douse the flames). Again during the retreat at Trofarello in 1869, speaking of the three vows he outlined the positive and negative means for keeping oneself chaste. This conference was poorly summarised, but luckily the following year he repeated it during the retreat at Lanzo at which Fr Barberis was present and took diligent note of everything, so we know what Don Bosco meant when he spoke of the defence of virtue. While speaking at the retreat at Lanzo in 1870 he said this sentence that must not be forgotten: “Youth is a very dangerous weapon of the devil against persons consecrated to the Lord. This is a professional danger for us who work in this matter. Finally, at the Lanzo retreat in 1875 he explained the negative means: *“Accipe fugam si vis parare victoriam”* (Flee if you want to prepare for victory). And he listed the 5 things to flee from as found in Scavini (I, 1 Chap. 2: *“Dei peccati in specie”*).

Five things to avoid

1) *Avoid people of the other sex.* — Spend little time with them, don’t try to be familiar, playful. A cleric should never joke with them; don’t be boorish, but don’t be playful either: we do not play with fire! When leaving the house, restrain the freedom of your eyes, don’t look around the street... idly, pointlessly.²¹ Years before, speaking to some young men on 05-08-1867, Don Bosco warned them that there was no need to dilly-dally at length in the parlour, but see that people of the opposite sex leave as soon as possible, even if they are relatives. He told the clerics: “Here we have a cleric at home who finds his sister-in-law, sister, cousin – and the devil, who knows how to put two and two together and make abstractions, removes the word ‘sister-in-law’, ‘sister’, ‘cousin’, and leaves just the word ‘woman’; he removes the word ‘religious sister’ and leaves us with ‘spinster’, ‘young woman’... And then what happens?”

2) *Avoid worldly conversations and mixing with people of the world.* Now there are Catholics, people from the world coming to us for formation, so the problem changes aspect, but it still remains.

3) *Avoid visits* — If they come to visit, hurry it up, says Don Bosco, and be prudent and vigilant, because visits to the parlour are one of the greatest dangers; it is not uncommon for the parlour to become the antechamber of the town hall.

4) *Avoid [certain] friendships* — Among ourselves and the young people, among confreres; flee from friendships that are too intimate and tender. Never coarseness, familiarity, laying hands on each other. It is not uncommon for it to happen between lay people and clerics, between clerics and lay people, between those who are no longer just clerics and clerics. Between young and old clerics. No wonder it happens sometimes: there are 15 thousand of us and therefore 15 thousand males.²² It can happen that as a cleric you find someone along the way, older, of higher status, who loses his head around you, and you start to lose your own, parting your hair in some special way, and you end up losing your vocation. You begin acting in particular ways, that little curl in the hair *tira basin* (attracts kisses!); remember the proverb: *“Omo porsei semper son bei”* (dirty old men are always handsome). So watch out, my dear young priest, you can find stumbling blocks in those who love you as one should not love between men, between males on this earth. When I have seen certain hairdos I have said, “I see you are playing the pharmacist...”²³ I saw that this excessive concern for the way one looks even increased after I offered advice; they kept on doing it, and I said no more because it was already too late.

5) *Avoid young people* — I foresee the objection immediately: but aren’t we meant to be amidst the young? My reply is: be amidst the young, yes; but not one-on-one, alone, not spending more time

21 Don Bosco’s (or is it Caviglia’s?) figurative expression is *“...se le rondini hanno il becco”* (looking around to see if swallows have beaks”)!

22 This is a reference to the overall Salesian ‘population’ of the time across all the houses (Salesians and boys).

23 Why pharmacist? Possibly because in Caviglia’s day this profession was well paid and well dressed!

with one than with another, not behind closed doors. In this regard Don Bosco comes out with an anguishing few words: “The downfall of certain Congregations dedicated to the education of the youth must be attributed to this: to not having fled youth. Evil people exaggerate things and even invent calumnies, but without well-founded and in many cases successful suspicion these enemies would not have dared to insinuate exaggerations and calumnies” — and then he illustrated this by saying: “I came of age (1865) without knowing about this danger, but since then I have had to see and unfortunately convince myself that this very serious danger exists, and not only does it exist but it exists at all times and such that we must be on our guard.”

Some shocking scandal must have happened, one which ruined the institution and the religious belonging to it. Don Bosco understood from this what the risk was, and immediately spoke of it to put us on our guard. Fr Barberis also came to the conclusion: “Never kiss or caress or touch their faces”, even more so now that they are dressed... as if in an earthly paradise. No particular friendships with young people, especially if they are good looking, because it gets people talking and ends up worse. Do not write letters that are overly sentimental, or make overly expressive eyes at them: do not give especially risky gifts and not even for a good reason bring a young person into your room and speak in confidence behind closed doors.

Other documents

These are precepts that Don Bosco always repeated. In 1876 he spoke to the clerics at the Oratory about chastity and preserving their vocation and he recommended that they show:

1. Exact observance of their duties in accordance with the Rules;
2. Punctuality in being at recreation and keeping an eye on the idlers in the playground, because idleness in recreation is the source of all evil. Don Bosco insisted that the Salesians must all be in the playground; that they should not think of amusing themselves but playing with the boys, their eyes roving over everything: keeping a watch over everything. In 1868 he said that “the good that a cleric can do is huge, scaling a ladder, looking into some hidden spot, making a surprise visit somewhere during recreation.”
3. Observing the evening timetable; not indulging in conversations.
4. Punctuality in getting out of bed. “I stayed half an hour longer in bed and nothing happened to me.” — “Say instead that the Lord worked a great miracle to keep you safe.”
5. Mortification: “*Hoc genus daemoniorum non eicitur nisi per orationem et ieiunium*” (This kind of devil cannot be driven out except by prayer and fasting”), and Don Bosco stressed the tendency of clerics to engage in lengthy snacks, drinks and general merriment with friends, etc.
6. Fall asleep immediately, with a prayer.
7. Attend quickly to bodily functions.
8. Do not overlook your practices of piety. And he concludes: “Chastity and purity are such beautiful virtues that without them a cleric, a priest is nothing. If he possesses them he is everything.”

Uncontaminated

In his report to the Pope in 1879 Don Bosco was able to say: “So far I can testify that there has been no case of a Salesian, forgetting himself, giving cause for scandal.” And afterwards? Actually, two years earlier, 18-11-1877, he had already told the assembled rectors something very serious and then added: “They are saying to me: but don’t make your priests work so hard!”

And he replied: “The priest either dies from work, or dies from vice.” Consider how he must have been feeling that evening.

Be vigilant

Don Bosco foresaw that with the growth of the Congregation problems could arise, so he insisted on accepting candidates and after that year, he insisted even more in Chapter. He gave seven rules for acceptance into the Novitiate, for admission to vows and orders. I will not list them all, but he has several that stand out.

Rules for admitting to the first period of trial. "Let those who have a history of dubious morality or a chain of events not be admitted to the first period of trial, unless it is an isolated matter. Young men who are troublesome in their own town should definitely not be admitted, because they may restrain themselves in the novitiate but then resume."

Establishing the rule for admission to vows: "If it is a question of thoughts, readings, words, fatal inclinations, one can suspend judgement; if, on the other hand, they are contrary acts and done out of habit, one needs greater severity, unless they are mistakes due to pure frailty. If it is a case of faults committed with others, then it is very difficult for one to change; this will occur even when the individual is consecrated to the Lord."

All up, one must be rigorous in admission to novitiate and extra rigorous in admission to vows.

Degenerates

Consider this phenomenon: the degenerate type does not correct himself. Sensitivity, fragility is explained and corrected by the will, over time, with God's help, but the degenerate type who seeks out his fellow man is not corrected; dress him up as you wish, anoint him even with pepper oil. You will find such individuals everywhere: it is the worst kind of danger in the closed life of a college, seminary, local district, prison or ship; and this sort of sin is almost incorrigible despite all shows of piety, tears, mysticism and emotional outbursts in prayers; indeed, it is characteristic of pietists, mystics and sanctimonious types to have a tendency to this sort of thing. This is not only painful history, but psychological science.

Duty of example

I should deal with our demeanour in the midst of the young, but it is a bit late. Just remember what Don Bosco says: "A look, a smile, a careless word can be misinterpreted by young people who are already victims of human passions." In our way of life, in our external demeanour, the way we speak, smile, look, walk, we sons of Don Bosco must have that something indefinable that is called reserve; in short, to have a demeanour that imposes the pedagogy of chastity on the young. We educate young people above all by our example.

Don Bosco reminded us of this in his Circular on 05-11-74: "The morality of pupils depends on those who teach them, those who direct them. If, therefore, we want to promote morality and virtue among them, we must possess it ourselves and make it shine in our works, in what we say, in our whole life." And again in the same Circular he ended with these words that must become a reminder from this retreat: "The Salesian must combine the poverty of living with an exemplary observance of the Constitutions and the splendour of his purity."

This is a complete programme of life: If we are pure of heart we will communicate this to our young people, just as Don Bosco instilled his angelic virtue in everyone.

Conference 8

Obedience

Before speaking about obedience I suggest you read the Rule of St Benedict; there you will find the true spiritual life and personality. You need to read it not only because a good Salesian needs to know the basics in every branch of science and put them to good use, but especially because the most recent Benedictine is Don Bosco, and St Benedict was the first Don Bosco!²⁴ And before I plunge into obedience for you, or in other words tell you how Don Bosco wanted it to be for us, first let me offer three consolations:

1. In terms of morality, it is rare for failures in obedience to reach the extent of the seriousness of mortal sin; this would require disobedience in canonical form or categorically breaking the vow. All of our escapades in this matter are schoolboy stuff, bits of mischief, even if our hair has already turned white.
2. St Anselm says clearly that there is no need to despair of a religious as long as he does not break his vows; he then reasons according to the Benedictine mentality: whereby the only vow is the vow of obedience that binds one to the convent; therefore, so long as he doesn't run away!
3. There is one fact we can console ourselves with: among all the active Congregations that stand out in the Church for their discipline, the Salesian Congregation is on a par with the Jesuits, i.e. in the forefront. (We are saying the Jesuits, because we have to say so). The experience I have of life leads me to the feeling: there is no other Congregation that has such patience, such discipline, such awe, such a spirit of obedience as the Salesian Congregation. We are even miraculous, because other Orders have an obedience from which there is no escape, because they have taught every step of it and the superior cannot command more than what is in the book. Those who enter must practise the Rule, one track and one track only. We, on the other hand, always depend on the local superior, and changing the rector means changing everything. Yet here we still are and endure.

In the apostolic process for Don Bosco, Fr Rua was able to testify that both before and after his death no schisms ever took place among houses, no rebellions, no attempts at reform. This deposition was presented in 1908, twenty years after Don Bosco's death, or in other words after the black decade prophesied in the dream of 1871.

And say if we are not what we are. Do you see that I am 150% Salesian?

Not even one a year

A true canonical disobedience, i.e., that the superior vested with the power of canon 501 should be given the answer "no" – out of 12,800 Salesians, I don't believe one of these happens every year in the entire Congregation.

²⁴ Fr Gianni Caputa SDB makes an interesting comment regarding this: "What strikes me is Caviglia's way of connecting Don Bosco and St Benedict, based on the fact that Don Bosco not only knew Benedict's Rule, but that he wanted his Salesians to be/act as Benedictines not inside the convent but 'out in the modern world', fully committed to both *ora et labora*. I remember that I came across the same idea around 40 years ago, when editing Montini's (Paul VI's) addresses to the Salesian Family, and commenting (in dialogue with Braidò) on '*stidia di farti amare se vuoi farti temere*', which comes from Benedict's recommendations to the abbot." We will find later, in Conference 17, that Caviglia himself recognises this.

Independent types can be found everywhere, even those that wear chevrons on their uniforms. Bad moments, moments of nerves there are, we have all experienced some. There are also mistakes made by superiors, and it is not rebellion to say that there are superiors who err: there are 1,200 people who exercise authority in the Congregation, as many rectors as there are houses; it would be something divine if not one of them erred...

Even the Holy Roman Church sometimes makes mistakes in choosing its bishops, and then has to retire them and support them. Now, in almost all cases we are very disciplined: let the superiors ramp and rage, let them preach learned sermons and throw all of St Thomas and asceticism at you, let them say, they must do it. In practice, however, we are a good crowd.

The danger of legality

Let me come to our life in practical terms. Everyone knows canon 501 about executive power and in whom it resides. Everyone else instead, prefect, catechist, councillor, only command representatively but does not have executive power. Similarly, except for the Rector Major, the superiors of the Chapter only command collegially. (In 1869 Don Bosco explained all this to the clerical aspirants and novices and so I believe I can now tell it to theologians). Reasoning by virtue of the canons it seems that one must only obey when the force of the vow enters, and then, being stubborn, rebellious, whimsical, "*the way I want to do it*", one continues receiving Communion every day because one has not fallen into mortal sin and so we end up with the spectacle of these permanently stubborn types imperturbably receiving daily Communion.

This was not Don Bosco's idea of things. If someone acted like this he called him aside and asked, "How can you go to Communion with this sort of behaviour?" And he was right, because the Lord lets everyone come in, but then he looks around to see who is wearing their wedding garment. Had we gone ahead according to detailed canons and Constitutions, the Congregation would be still in Via Cottolengo 32, would not be a citadel inside Turin but would still be the Pinardi house.

I'll go

There are some concepts of obedience that nullify spirituality. Take Chap. VI, 1, 36 of St Ignatius' Rule: "*Perinde ac cadaver, ac baculus*" (As if one were a lifeless body). This is a rigid, cold obedience that nullifies the personality. It is not made for us: we are Salesians and we make our vows according to the Constitutions of St Francis de Sales and not according to the Rules and Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. This principle which is reported in and glorified by all the books on asceticism is not ours. We should not be like puppets without our own mind. There is also a paralysing, defeatist, conventualist theory that insinuates itself and is unknowingly inculcated and leads to serious consequences. Let us be careful. We have another spirit that is summed up in the Salesian motto: "*I'll go*". I do not know how many days of indulgence it is worth, but it is certainly a greater triumph for the Congregation, which has grown to the extent that it has with the "I'll go" attitude, yes, by dint of sacrifices: this is the only way to explain the missions; because Holy Mother Church only comes later to organise and regulate what is the fruit of the sacrifices of those who have said: "*I'll go*".

Heresy and the Salesian swearword

But there is also the other side of the medal that is a Salesian heresy, expressed as "the rule, that's enough". There is one of these knockers and laggards in every house: there is so much work to do and they always make excuses: "No one told me!"

Similar to this heresy but even worse is the Salesian swearword: “*It’s not up to me.*” The house is burning down: “It’s not up to me”; a tap is leaking: “It’s not up to me” ... and you can keep on going along these lines. Poor Congregation. It would not have got far if it had too many of this kind!

To describe our spirit well we can define ourselves as follows: “A Congregation in which all actions, activities, personal initiatives are framed within an organisation governed by obedience.” Thus our concept is quite different from that of other Orders.

Example

Allow me a parenthesis: we need to be aware of our status as priests. The priest is always a priest. The brothers, the clerics look to him, and therefore by virtue of our priesthood we are obliged to set a good example; sometimes it costs a little, but it is also up to us to run the machine because we are the main wheel in the mechanism that will be called Lanzo, Cuorgnè, Chieri... For others, disobedience is just a schoolboy’s escapade, but for us it is conscious, premeditated; and this undermines the compactness of common discipline: we must remember that we have a sacrosanct obligation to show others that we are more solicitous in obeying: it is an obligation inherent to our condition.

Our obedience

Even where obedience is concerned we need to make some distinctions: there is the question of principle and one of form. The unwavering principle is this: necessity and duty to obey. The form, on the other hand, consists in the special concept of obedience in the Salesian regime, i.e. in the way the principle is implemented.

So let us look at this form. Don Bosco’s idea on this point is the idea of a family style of obedience and discipline. In his famous letter of 10.05.1884 he is having a go at superiors who want to be regarded as superiors and no longer as fathers and friends: they are feared and not loved. But why substitute the rigid coldness of a regulation for the principle of charity, of tender and loving obedience? Loving in principle, loving in form?

The community regime is only of interest when one feels that one is in a family; only in such an environment is everyone concerned for the common good. Everyone obeys the boss and father, but the father must be father and friend. For other common interests, an end must hold us together, a higher motive, and not that of earning money, but the good, the conquest of souls, the salvation of the youth we have at home.

So not just legally-based discipline which avoids canonical sanction, but everyone’s willing cooperation for the job: that is why we have as our coat of arms: *Work and Temperance*. This is why Don Bosco wanted every house to be a family under a common father, and although fathers are not all the same, you still love them.

I insist on this idea, because if it enters the houses the superiors will not be displeased and the Congregation will move forward all the better.

A father and not an office manager

Don Bosco wanted obedience to have unity, so obey someone in order to be united. He told the rectors gathered on 03.02.1876: “If one priest has done so many things with nothing, what will 330 united and strong individuals do?” (There were 330 Salesians at the time).

Unity, yes; but the unity of sons and brothers with their father and not a union of employees with the office manager; therefore let the father be the father and not the knight or commander who commands all the employees. If the father regards his subjects as employees, then the subjects will also regard him as the boss and not as the father of the family.

In his confidential reminders to rectors, Don Bosco spends at least 16 pages teaching them how to be a father.

A stroke of genius

In the unpublished Circular at the end of April 1885 in which he convinces us that everything must be done for the glory of God, he adds: "We must obey not because it is commanded, but for a higher reason, for the glory of God." He insists on the same concept in his 1884 handwritten set of rules for rectors. Unity in obedience for the glory of God is Don Bosco's motto. Here then is the fundamental principle of Salesian life: "To work entirely with family discipline in unity for the greater glory of God and in order to achieve the collective end which is the salvation of souls." This is the concept Don Bosco spread through all his writings and speeches. Remember his cry of anguish: "But now superiors want to be superiors and are no longer fathers, brothers, friends; they are feared and not loved." And another outburst: "But why do they want to substitute the principle of charity with the coldness of a regulation?"

Let's get on with it

Let us study Don Bosco, otherwise we will continue working by the rules and forgetting the basic principle of the Congregation which is kindness. This must be the guiding principle of the preventive system also for the superiors. Let us publish spiritual reading books especially for us, dictated by our spirit, as was prescribed in the General Chapter 35 years ago, otherwise we go on reading other books and lose our spirit. Our text is Don Bosco and not someone else... and they do not want to understand it.

Question of principle

Don Bosco comes across as rather severe, rigid, I would say intransigent, in terms of observance and austerity. In fact in 1885 he says some very strong things to the rectors: "Until now, obedience among us was more personal than religious. Let us avoid this drawback. We do not obey because one commands, but we obey for a higher motive, because the one who commands is God, then commands through whom he will." On 03-10-1886, when I was there present, and on that famous occasion of his outburst against grumbling, against the spirit of criticism, it was then that he said: "It is a sacrilege to make the vow of obedience and then carry on like all those who obey only when it pleases them." And on another occasion he said: "By holding back from our vows we steal from the Lord, because we take back what we have placed in His hands."

Once Don Bosco sent an order to someone who was reputed to be and was called a saint and liked this description, but he did not bow to the command. He sent him a second one but with the same result. He sent the same order a third time through someone but the individual still did not comply. Don Bosco then said, "He acts like a saint but he doesn't even obey Don Bosco... Consult the Martyrology and you will see that there is no Saint Stubborn there yet."

A chain... but of gold

I have been familiar with life under obedience for 54 years and I can tell you and others as much biographically as historically, that it is a life of sacrifice, but the most meritorious act of all of life because it includes the sacrifice of our personality; it is a sacrifice of our will and therefore it is hardest of all for those who are not aboulic²⁵ or unaware. It is a sacrifice when one has to operate on a track that goes to a dead end or worse. It is a sacrifice when one has to be with someone who commands without being worthy of it, or commands unworthily or with a personal set against you; it is a sacrifice when the one who commands has nothing else good about him but the cassock he is wearing, but you must see God also and above all in these cases. You will find people who are incapable, there are superiors wrongly chosen, you will find some of whom Leopardi says “Disciples of such as I would be ashamed to be master of.”²⁶ People who have got to where they have got to by devious means..., you can find the holiest person proposed by some meddler who has it in for you, and you can’t do anything right. St Benedict already foresaw this in the seventh chapter of his *Rule* speaking of humility: “The fourth degree of humility”, he says, “is knowing how to act in this situation.”²⁷ And there are some of these. A distinguished Salesian who wore a hairshirt (Fr Fascie) spent five years with such a superior.

Conclusion

The subject of obedience for us sons of Don Bosco is not a matter of casuistry and canons, but it is humility in sentiments, internal sacrifice of the will, of judgement and sometimes even external sacrifice. It is charity towards the superior.

With this spirit that has made the Congregation triumph in the world, let us remember it well: the rays of our halo, the four principles that make us glorious before the Church and history are: *Work, Temperance, Poverty* and *Discipline*.

25 Aboulia is the inability (usually pathological) to make or act on decisions.

26 Giacomo Leopardi, 1798–1837, Italian poet, philosopher, philologist and writer.

27 From the *Rule*, “The fourth degree of humility is that he hold fast to patience with a silent mind when in this obedience he meets with difficulties and contradictions and even any kind of injustice, enduring all without growing weary or running away.” So, obeying without complaint.

Conference 9

Piety

Exerce autem te ipsum ad pietatem. Pietas autem ad omnia utilis est, promissionem habens vitae quae nunc est et futurae. (Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 1 Tim 4:8).

Habentes speciem quidem pietatis, virtutem autem eius abnegantes. (... holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. 2 Tim 3:5).

Our life of action and apostolate as Salesian priests and educators rests on two foundations which are the main factors of our formation, the soul and motive of action itself, namely prayer inspired by piety and personal sacrifice. Action, prayer, sacrifice; let us be perfect Catholics: let us remember that action is an external externality, but the factors must be prayer inspired by piety and personal sacrifice according to the words of Pius XI on 09-06-1933 in the address he gave for the cause of Dominic Savio.

I have introduced this notion because of the authority of the one who expressed it and for the profound truth it contains, but also for its unique expression: prayer inspired by piety [godliness] and I am making this the topic of the few words I intend to address to you this morning.

Piety and prayer

The formal act of prayer presupposes the elements that inspire it: piety. In this sense, piety is something more intimate and profound than the mere idea of prayer: it is the soul that permeates it. It is not a passing act, not a liturgical or extra-liturgical gesture but an organic uninterrupted union with God. It is life itself that is expressed and made extrinsic through a particular action. One thing is the gesture and another is the life without which it would not operate. One thing is prayer, however well done, another is the life that must permeate the whole person and that precedes the formal external act of prayer. This is the sense in which the topic must be understood. We are not looking at particular and obligatory practices, but we look to being pious, religious, devout.

What is this piety without which prayer does not have the impactful efficacy to be the driving force of the apostolate? Meditating on things without breaking them down, looking at the clock without breaking it down, otherwise we cannot see the time, we can say that piety is the feeling that leads us towards God, it is the presence of God felt in the soul. If God's presence is not felt in this way, everything is just outward mechanics and worth little.

Prayer without piety

Let us remember well that as long as we pray with all our external apparatus as a physical demonstration of recollection, but without speaking to God, we are reciting formulas, saying words, But it is not all about multiplying prayers if these then leave you spiritually empty. The prayers will be of value for a Mass intention and nothing else. In the second part of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, where

he is dealing with mental and oral prayer, St Francis de Sales supports precisely this mental prayer: St Bernard's pious sense of it. Also Don Bosco hints at this in an unpublished Circular: "All these things are prescribed by the Rule. But if we do not attempt to do them for a higher motive they fall into disuse and are no longer needed." Often those who say many prayers externally are not the most virtuous people, because they lack an inner life. Faber puts it well for us in the second part of his *Progress of the Spiritual Life*. Don Bosco who knew this even better, told the seminarians in Turin who were with him: "Acquire the spirit of prayer. For a cleric who has to become a priest and work for souls it is like a soldier acquiring a sword."

Our piety

Let us see how Salesian piety is understood. We have our own formula that is not "*Work and prayer*" as adapted for poetry or wherever sung or spoken, but "*Work and Temperance*". Don Bosco left this to us in a dozen documents. Now it happens that nobody thinks about the religiosity of the words in this motto. Instead the Pope explained it to us: "The principle of Christian life is realised in Don Bosco: *Qui laborat, orat* (The one who works, prays), so long as this is understood spiritually." Here is the motto of the Salesian worker: work and temperance, because we are workers for the Lord and not for employers who are about to enjoy the biscuits and chocolates of piety. We belong to the saints, with sleeves rolled up. We are God's workers, as St Paul says: "*Dei enim sumus adiutores*" (For we are God's servants, *1 Cor 3:9*). And so we send a Cooperator's certificate to St Paul too, who says: "*Exerce teipsum ad pietatem... Pietas enim ad omnia utilis est*" (Train yourself in godliness ... for while physical training is of some value ... godliness is valuable in every way). That is, what is really needed is piety [godliness], while mere busyness accomplishes very little.

Why is so much of our work successful? Because everything we do is done with an inner spirit, in this life of holiness, of religiosity of the soul that turns towards God. As the Pope expressed it when speaking to representatives of the Catholic press on 13 March 1934: "All this Catholic action and press will not change the world if those who write are not holy and pious." Working hard without possessing this inner spirit changes who we are; since we are a cooperative of workers, if we do not make ourselves producers, we become labourers and pull the cart; piety on the other hand makes us producers of good rather than labourers. Hence the need to cultivate this point.

Our piety – the prayers of the good Christian

Don Bosco, who as usual is realistic and practical, taught asceticism without writing it down. Unlike the holy founders of ecclesiastical and educational institutes, he did not leave any special formula of piety, he did not invent any characteristic devotions, neither Rosaries, nor Stations of the Cross, 40 hours, Sacred Heart... he only has the devotion to Mary Help of Christians which "is nothing but one of the many titles under which Our Lady is honoured", therefore only a guideline piety and nothing more. So for us there are no special formulas, just the prayers of the good Christian, of the good priest. Yet Don Bosco wanted piety.

Practical aspects

Don Bosco's notion on this point, like all his asceticism, is a practical and realistic one. First of all he inculcates the horror of mortal sin and even the exclusion of voluntary failure. Then he inculcates the right use of the sacraments as a means of self-correction, of self-education. So not a ritualistic use, but a spiritual and operative use. Eucharistic life and devotion to Our Lady are two poles on which the

Salesian devotional axis rests, which includes the practices of the good Christian, the good priest and “virtues lived” as the Pope said on 09-07-1933, “in a spirit of noble precision”, that is, fulfilling our duties with scrupulous precision, consciously and lovingly.

This is the basis of all of Don Bosco’s asceticism: *Let us keep to easy things, but do them with perseverance*, as he says in the Seventh Chapter of the Life of Magone. And he said the same for mortification as for piety, and this was how he made saints. Read the Twentieth Chapter of the Life of Dominic Savio and you will see this idea developed in the first paragraph.

All this is piety according to Don Bosco. Indeed, to indicate the spiritual life, asceticism, the soul’s progress towards perfection, he used no other word than this: piety. It therefore combines perfectly with the Pope and St Paul.

The animating spirit

Regulatory practices can change, for there was no Order that did not double its pious practices after 100 years. So ours too will become longer, but let us remember well that all prayers, even if multiplied, will be of no use without piety, if one does not speak to Him with feeling and love. Being pious is not at odds with the industrious life required and commanded by the needs of the institute and by obedience; indeed, not only does it not hinder us but it is a relief as Gasquet well reminds us.

Work - Work - Work

Some make piety consist in praying a lot; Instead Don Bosco seems to us to be at the opposite end; he has what is almost a strange idea, and yet it is that of Pius IX and Pius XI, and of St Paul himself. In 1874 Don Bosco went to Rome and spoke to Pius IX about the Novitiate. Pius IX replied to him: “Go ahead. The devil is more afraid of the houses where one works than of houses where one prays.” Already in 1859 he had expressed a similar concept: “I believe that a religious house where they pray just a little but do a lot of work is in a better state than one where they pray a lot but do little work.” So it was no accident that Don Bosco left us as a motto: “*Work and Temperance*”.

The touchstone

On 02-02-1876 he brought the rectors together in chapter and expressed his feelings: “I see that the new Salesians acquire an extremely good spirit, a love, indeed an ardour for work and sacrifice, such that I do not know if it can be surpassed by others. I am amazed.” So Don Bosco was consoled not because we pray a lot but because we work a lot. And the next day he said, “At last I see the idea being realised which I proposed when I was looking for individuals to help me work for souls; I see our confreres have such a good spirit, such a spirit of self-denial, sacrifice and obedience that just thinking about them moves me.” He does not say that the confreres were praying but that their work moves him; yet Don Bosco always said to pray.

This is how Don Bosco expressed things in 1878: “True religious piety consists in performing all duties in time and in place and only for the love of God.” He does not say gladly being in church and praying all day, but doing all our duty out of love for God. Words, formality, being pietistic, outward attitudes did not work for Don Bosco.

He wants piety to be accompanied by doing our duty, and our good behaviour. This is the criterion for judging true virtue.

Frequent Communion

In 1875 Fr Barberis consulted Don Bosco about a cleric at the Oratory who was not so well behaved, but showed he was devout and frequently went to Communion. (At that time there was no custom of regular daily Communion, because it did not exist in Don Bosco's practice; he did not inculcate it, but only wanted it for those who were capable of it; clerics were free to go or not to go, and Don Bosco insisted on this even in his later years; he therefore spoke only of frequency). Let's return to the cleric who was not behaving so well, but received Communion more frequently than the Rules required because the Rules only required it on feast days and possibly occasionally a week, which ordinarily was on Thursdays; such were the Rules those days. Don Bosco told Fr Barberis: "Look, mere frequency of the sacraments is not an indicator of goodness; there are those who, although they do not commit a sacrilege, go to Communion lightly and are lukewarm about it, indeed their frivolous attitude does not allow them to understand the full importance of the Sacrament they are receiving. Those who go to Communion with an empty heart and do not throw themselves generously into the arms of Jesus do not receive the fruits that are recognised theologically as the effect of Holy Communion."

The need for external practices

In spite of all that was said, Don Bosco did not exclude positive and regulatory practices; indeed he wanted them to be practised faithfully and we know how he insisted on observance, on obedience. He insisted that these practices should also be done alone, if it was not possible to do them in common; but he also reminded us to do them in such a way that we felt they were necessary for our spiritual life.

Frequent use of the sacraments

In practice, he insisted on few practices of piety: frequent use of the sacraments was recommended for the boys, but even more so for clerics and the confreres. All his circulars, his testament and everything he said regarding vocation, preserving chastity and morality – it was precisely to clerics, clergy and lay religious that he inculcated the frequency of the Sacraments.

Today there is no such freedom; does a poor assistant cleric in a boarding school where the boys go almost daily to Communion really have the moral freedom that comes from the environment of "what would the boys say?" It happened to me at Lanzo that since I was already a deacon, the young men would see me go with some frequency... as a good Christian; then I was ordained a priest and celebrated Mass wherever I could, not the mass for the community and the boys: — Look how bad Fr Caviglia has become; he doesn't go to communion any more! — When recommending the Sacraments, Don Bosco insisted on correct use: Confession with good resolutions; frequent Communion, but well considered; then he recommended the Exercise for a Happy Death and I assure you that it was done carefully and regularly back then because we knew how Don Bosco cared about it. In fact he wrote to America: "Let me know if they regularly make the Exercise for a Happy Death in the houses." He often urged the piety of trust that carries with it the firm hope of obtaining what is asked at the feet of Jesus and Mary. Another aspect of piety Don Bosco instilled in us was the piety of petition and charity: "Do you have a favour to obtain? Do some mortification; do you have some faults to correct? Make some special prayer."

Finally, let us remember that Don Bosco always aimed at individual piety. Don Bosco recommends the use of brief prayers (which, you teach me, is an ascetic novelty imported from St Francis de Sales: you can read the value of these brief prayers in the Life of Magone), he recommends making visits individually and not in a regulatory sense: frequent visits, but personal ones, that is, that we all have

the desire and know how to be alone with God for at least a minute a day. Therefore do not let a day pass without entering the chapel on your own, so that you can say a word of your own, which is true prayer done with piety. One minute alone with Jesus and all sorrows and tantrums immediately pass.

Conclusion

Piety or prayer inspired by piety is a personal achievement that comes from building the inner life. Don Bosco worked on building up his inner life every day, every hour, every moment. For us who are directed to work, piety is everything: “*Pietas ad omnia utilis est*”, because it contains the resources we need for the moment. Don Bosco understood this so well that he told the clerics: “For a cleric to acquire the spirit of prayer is like the soldier having his sword.”

Our life, which is work and temperance, must be understood as Don Bosco understood it and as Pius XI interpreted it: “Don Bosco’s life consisted in identifying work with prayer through union with God, through the implementation of the great principle of Christian life: *Qui laborat orat.*”

Conference 10

Confession

Benedicam Domino in omni tempore qui tribuit mihi intellectum. (I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. Ps 15:7).

We need to deal precisely with the understanding and light of conscience. Can one speak about confession to theologians? Most would worry about it; I would not, because my topic is not merely theological, in fact it is not theological at all, because it is a pedagogical theme in the spiritual sense of our life as educators, and of the personal work we do for our spiritual and interior formation.

It is the most Salesian topic of all when considered this way: both etymologically, that is to say, deriving from St Francis de Sales, and in the sense that we agree belongs to Don Bosco. But first an explanation: in terms of his ideas, Don Bosco clearly draws from St Francis de Sales, because he brings the concept into his pedagogical understanding as an instrument of self-formation. Instead, with regard to the ministry of Confession, Don Bosco keeps strictly to Alphonsian praxis.

So we can say that his idea is taken from St Francis de Sales but his praxis is taken from St Alphonsus. As Salesians where praxis is concerned, there may be some minor changes for as theology unfolds, but regarding the foundation of the idea, we must stick strictly to Don Bosco's concept.

The idea of St Francis de Sales

In the practice of the Sacraments and in particular of Confession, St Francis is the enemy of ritualism and certain practices, that is, of devotees who consider the Sacrament to be a simple ceremony, an automatic distributor of grace, like some magical gesture: once the gesture is made, the effect is obtained; like some anaesthetic for the soul that works by itself. No, St Francis does not admit of this way of thinking and considering Confession to be a flick of a sponge that wipes everything away. His doctrine is contained in his Letters and in part in *The Introduction to the Devout Life*.

Naturally St Francis, who knew his catechism better than we do, was very well aware of the value of the Sacraments *ex opere operato*, as the efficient cause of grace and when he discusses this he has us feel how by receiving the Sacraments of the dead without attachment to sin, to mortal sin, we infallibly receive sanctifying grace. But since he was not attempting to formulate a theological doctrine but to direct souls, here it was asceticism that was his interest and therefore he has this idea that the Sacraments, and particularly Confession, must be psychological movements that educate the will, cultivate the will and act on conscience, increasing personal energies.

So he considers the Sacraments insofar as they act *ex opere operantis*. This idea is clearly expressed in *The Introduction to the Devout Life* (2,19).

Following in St Francis de Sales' footsteps, Don Bosco saw a force for inhibition, for light, for study of self in the Sacraments, and made them the focus of his pedagogical work, both in the spiritual and educational sense, because the whole secret of Don Bosco's pedagogy lies in the pedagogical efficacy of the two Sacraments of Confession and Communion.

In Chapter 19 of the Life of Besucco he expressly states: “You can say what you like about various systems of education, but I have not found any other firm basis for education than frequent Confession and Communion; and I believe that I am not exaggerating if I assert that morality is endangered when these two elements are missing.”

Just as St Francis wanted regular Confession as a means of education and self-control so did Don Bosco urge a regular frequency and the Exercise for a happy death as a way of being able to control our soul.

Alphonsian praxis

Don Bosco’s praxis as confessor, though, is Alphonsian in the strict sense of the word, not only with regard to the frequency of the Sacraments but also in everything else; it is enough to read: “*La prassi dei confessori* (Chap. VI 71-75): *De recidivis in venialibus*” (Recidivists in venial sin). And regarding frequent Communion, the very famous Chap IX, 149-155. And so we have Scavini, Frassinetti in his Compendium of Alphonsian Theology; Alalia and Stuardi whom Don Bosco studied during the holidays in the year he jumped a full academic year ahead. All these authors and Don Bosco are the same, so to understand Don Bosco we must bear in mind these orders of ideas.

In going to confession and hearing confessions, Don Bosco had two cornerstones: making a good resolution and knowing our faults.

Resolution

With Don Bosco, one could not confess the same fault three times without being called to order: “Are you making a good resolution? Because you have already told me the same things several times.” He wants the one who is confessing their sins to have the willingness to correct themselves and he wants the confessor to educate him to have this practical willingness with concrete intentions, and positive actions. In fact, in his circular in 1884 to those who remarked: “Don’t you see how frequent the sacraments are?” he replied: “It is true, there is a great frequency of confessions, but what is radically lacking in so many young people who go to confession is a stable intention; they confess the same failings, the same near occasions, the same bad habits, the same disobedience, the same neglect of duties; and so it goes on for months and months and even for years.”

At Alassio he said: “When someone confesses the same small things every week, we have little trust in them.” Note that he said this to rectors and did so slowly so that it would be written down. It was not just some phrase that escaped his lips. In 1884 a young 5th grade boy called Albert Caviglia went to confession to Don Bosco; after listening to him Don Bosco said: “And did you make a good resolution? This is the third time you’ve told me this.” I attached it here (pointing to his ear). In 1876 he said: “Spend the time you would take to go to confession two or three times a week on making a good resolution and this way you will be more certain of the Sacrament being worthwhile.”

And on another occasion: “If someone is not able to keep his conscience in such a state as to be able to receive Communion every day, I cannot allow him to do so.” And in 1879: “Those who go to confession every week and repeatedly accuse themselves of the same thing are to be watched closely and not to be trusted.”

Is this not our usual practice? Yet Don Bosco did not allow it.

Small faults

Don Bosco’s other cornerstone, besides a good resolution, concerns not just faults regarding the commandments and mortal sins, but also the usual failures to fulfil our duties, backbiting, idleness,

criticism, rebelliousness and also failures in small things; on 30-05-1865 there was his dream of the flowers brought to Mary and among these were thorns, that is, venial sins.²⁸ When asked if it is a sin to fail to observe the Rules of the House, he replied, "I am not saying whether it is a grave or venial sin, I am just saying that it is not good."

Similarly for the story of the one with money in his pocket: "I don't know how such disobedience can allow you to approach Communion." All the invectives against the phylloxera; all the quasi-curses against the grumblers are a confirmation of this principle. Thus: "*Latet anguis in erba*" (The snake lurking in the grass), the famous 4 nails! So was Don Bosco strict? He was an Alphonsian.

Now, therefore, we can act differently from him insofar as in practice we must follow the 1905 Decree which says it is possible to receive Communion even with venial sin, whereas before, Communion attendance was measured according to the progress or regression one made in virtue.

What is it for?

At this point we are presented with three essential questions:

1. What is Confession for?
2. How do we make use of it?
3. How do we make Confession work for our spiritual direction?

As for the first question, we can answer that Confession is essentially for us to know ourselves, correct ourselves, to educate us.

It helps us to know ourselves and study ourselves by means of the examination of conscience, both theologically in terms of the greater or lesser gravity of the fault, and morally if it concerns our practical willingness to follow our good resolutions and if it considers the benefits we have gained from previous Confessions; and psychologically if it concerns our character and asks: why did I do this? St Francis de Sales wants us not only to tell our sins but to study the reasons why they were committed.

It helps us correct ourselves and for this to happen a concrete, practical, i.e. serious and volitional intention is needed. The confessor's guidance is necessary for this; this is one of Don Bosco's strong points. In fact he insists a lot on having a stable confessor; and even in his writings he emphasises the idea of the stable confessor, because only he can help guide the personal work of the will.

Finally, Confession serves to educate us in the horrors of sin, escape from faults, it strengthens the will with the spiritual direction of the confessor.

How do we make our confession?

Let us look at the second question. In his conferences, Faber poses the question: "Why does frequent confession bear so little fruit?" In truth, we confess 52 times a year and, like almost all devout and spiritual people, we see almost no results; what is the cause? The cause is the ritualism with which we treat confession as if it were an automatic act. One of the main causes is that we only confess shortcomings in devout practices, the small external incidents, instead of paying attention to the morality of our actions in practice.

We religiously confess the monk and forget the man, we confess the shortcomings of the Rule, the deficiencies of piety, the mistakes and failings of common life; this is pharisaical, because these are

²⁸ This dream can be found in BM VIII pp 73-76.

all things that can be said even in the external forum during our *rendiconti*,²⁹ and instead we do not confess the man, we have no delicacy of conscience, we do not confess character. Hypocrisy is never confessed: it is impossible for a hypocrite to confess that he is one, because from the moment he says so, he is no longer one.

Bad will is not confessed; the injustice of not having done our duty when we should; insincerity of words and deeds is not confessed; jealousy, ambition; low actions dictated by jealousy, certain misdirected sympathies, antipathies and enmities that end up becoming hatred, mistreatment, in a word hatred that seeks every opportunity to tear others down. There are some individuals who work only to harm people; where ever they go they sow evil. None of this is confessed.

False zeal against those who hinder us, or because you do not have a good spirit, you have ruined a class, have screwed up your entire duty as prefect, catechist, councillor because of your points of view – non of this is confessed! None of these duties exist when it comes to applying them to yourself: so there is no charity, which is the first precept, no justice, no other virtues; and after 52 Confessions and 350 Communions a year we are always the same because we do not confess the main sin. Disasters happen in our colleges.... Yet that fellow went to confession regularly. One Communion makes a saint. 350 Communions do not move a finger if adherence of the spirit is lacking. St Francis was quite right to demand that we go to the sources.

We run the serious risk of deluding our conscience. We consider that we are exclusively responsible for venial sins; other than the sixth commandment, every sin is a venial sin. That is wrong! Can we say that failures against charity are only venial sins? In 1861 while Don Bosco was climbing the stairs with cleric Albera he said: “Dear Paolino, You will come cross some real beauties in your time; you will see everyone together at the same communion rail, next to each other in meditation, saying the Rosary together, and combining hate, Sacraments, prayers and sins: all in one!”

Does it seem to you that all this can be considered to be just venial sin? When there is a work of long preparation against an individual, when there is hatred that lasts for years I say it is a sin, and a grave sin, because hatred is hatred and it is always a sin.

Let us examine our conscience better. Regarding the rest I will leave that for now because of lack of time...

Confession and direction

Now we also need to consider Confession as an element in spiritual direction. It is true that we have the *rendiconto* and while we are clerics this is fairly well seen to, but the rectors in the houses often have other things to think about. So sometimes your only remedy will be Confession; unfortunately this is how things are.

First of all let us consider the confessor not just as a common priest who gives absolution like any other one at the point of death, but let us consider him as a man of trust in whose hands we place our soul so that he may guide it, help it to advance, educate it.

If we think of the confessor as a washing machine we will never have any spiritual education, but in practice this is what it is like. Let us remember that Don Bosco wanted a stable confessor precisely for spiritual direction. Therefore, when you have to change house, look at the confessor this way, first make a general confession or a good chat about everything and this way you will find a guide. Don Bosco insisted on weekly Confession and going back over things monthly precisely because of this control.

29 At one stage translated in English as “manifestation”. These days the friendly talk with the superior.

Confession

No less essential than direction is our subjection, our obedience to the confessor. You are the one who has to give him the authority, otherwise you will achieve nothing. I bless the time in my youth when the rector of the house was the confessor. Holy Church has forbidden this for every practical reason, but the fact remains that now the confessor no longer has the authority for Salesian penitents that he should have. You are the one who has to let yourself be guided, and don't be stubborn about it. Only if you do as he says does Confession become enlightening and corrective, become educational in the sense St Francis wanted it to be and then taken up by Don Bosco, making it the entire focus of his pedagogical system. All this has been said for those who feel they cannot fully reveal their conscience to the rector in the *rendiconto*. So that if he feels he can do this then he can return to the integral practice of Don Bosco's system, having one guide who is his Father and Master, even if by the Church's decision he ceases to be a judge in the court of Penance.

Conference 11

Ecclesiastical spirit

Quis ascendit in montem Domini aut quis stabit in loco sancto eius? (Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD, who shall stand in his holy place? Ps 23(24):3).

Sollicite cura teipsum probabilem exhibere Deo, operarium inconfusibilem, recte tractantem verbum veritatis: profana autem et vaniloquia devita: multum enim proficiunt ad impietatem. (Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety. 2 Tim 2:15-16).

“All the Letters to Timothy and Titus are a *Vademecum* for the good priest”, Don Bosco told Fr Cagliero; and when he spoke to priests he always brought in the verses of St Paul.

Now we too must draw inspiration from these texts to deal with our strictly priestly theme, of the ecclesiastical spirit, that is, the idea of the true priest; the line of conduct of the good priest. We must all have no other mission than that of Don Bosco: to succeed as good priests. To achieve this, we all need to work hard, because on the day of consecration we do nothing more than withdraw the stock deposited in the Bank of God through the work of our formation. And the Lord does nothing but cut the vouchers (stubs).

Our whole life has to be a preparation for the priesthood. And woe to the one who has not aimed to be a worthy priest. This is why we need not just an automatic preparation that lets the years pass, but a preparation of a “pneumatic” man, i.e. a spiritual man, hence conscious, rational, systematic preparation, as St Paul says: “*Sollicite cura teipsum... ut perfectus sis homo Dei, ad omne opus bonum instructus*” (Do your best to present yourself ... so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work, 2 Tim 2:15, 3:17).

Our model

In the Pope’s Encyclical 23-12-1937 “*Ad catholici sacerdotii*” and in his address to Roman seminarians on 17-06-1932, he presents Don Bosco as a model for them all. So we can and must seek to reproduce his virtues in ourselves. This will be the best way for a Salesian to be good priest and for a priest to be a good Salesian.

The need for ecclesiastical spirit

I have already reminded you of Don Bosco’s words regarding the time he left the seminary: “ So you can imagine how sad was the parting from that place where I had lived for six years, where I received education, knowledge, an ecclesiastical spirit and all the tokens of kindness and affection one could desire.” Now, these words of Don Bosco reported in the *Memorie biografiche* tell us that he had understood he had learned the priestly spirit so he would be a truly good priest. And I bless the circumstance that obliged the Congregation to keep its clerics in a seminary regime for 4 years so that

they would learn a bit more about being priests. Don Bosco sought to instil this in his first priests and really the first ones were more successful as priests than those who followed. Unfortunately later there was a lack of formation, but it was a time of crisis, yet Don Bosco wanted at least a year spent in an institute for some formation to be done.

The priest is always a priest. We need to remind ourselves that our profession is not about being professors, engineers, running workshops, being a business leader, but being priests, so whatever role we have that is what we need to be. Don Bosco did a bit of everything, even industry, having set up a paper mill at the International Book Fair, and yet he was always the priest. Orestano noted this during his address: "Don Bosco wanted to be a perfect Christian," he said, "and a perfect priest, nothing else and nothing more." Here was the true idea of Don Bosco and the ecclesiastical spirit formulated by a man who was not a priest, but who had read everything that had been written about Don Bosco. And he had added: "Throughout his life he had a keen and acute awareness of an unfailing priestly responsibility." Look in any book and you will not find a similar definition, yet it is one that corresponds to Don Bosco's idea: "A priest is always a priest and must show himself to be such in every one of his words. Being a priest means having the obligation to be constantly looking to God's greater interests, to the salvation of souls. A priest must see that anyone who approaches him does not leave without having heard some thought about his eternal salvation." He repeated this in 1880 to a wayward priest; in 1881 to the clerics of St Sulpice; in 1882 at Pinerolo; in 1885 he told a group of priests: "A priest will not go alone to Heaven or Hell, but the souls he has saved or scandalised will be with him."

On 3-09-1886 he told Minister Ricasoli: "Excellency, you know that Don Bosco is a priest at the altar, in the confessional, among young people; he is a priest in Turin and also in Florence; he is a priest in the house of the poor, a priest in the houses of Kings and Ministers." An all-embracing idea therefore that embraces Don Bosco's whole being: to be a priest and a holy priest. Do not forget the words that impressed him as spoken by cleric Giuseppe Burzio: "I wish to be a priest, but the catch is that before being a priest one must become holy, holy." This is precisely the ecclesiastical spirit, the all-embracing concept of the priest's life, a life dedicated to his responsibility. However, remember that in saying ecclesiastical spirit we are not saying a monastic, conventual, anchorite spirit. No. The priest has his own role as a totally different moral and juridical figure. St Thomas says: "The priest is not made for himself, but for the Church."

Being a priest in everything

Being a priest means living, thinking, reasoning as a priest, showing oneself to be a priest everywhere and always, therefore the idea of the priest is very different from that of the businessperson and the farmer, though unfortunately many confuse these things.

Even in one's deeds one must show oneself to be a priest, feel oneself to be a minister of God, and therefore also in private life keep a demeanour that reveals an awareness of who one is. We are of Christ and for Christ, and therefore we must show some dignity. It is necessary to insist on this also with the Salesians, because it seems that even among us there are quite a few priests who lose time [not being the priest]: excellent professors, prefects, but they have very little of the priestly side, because they do not exercise their ministry, have never preached a sermon, have never given absolution. So why did you become a priest? Is the oil they put on your hands just for seasoning peppers?

From the outset I have had to react against the tendency of wanting to everything else except the priest. Tomorrow we will be entrusted with many other things by the Church, and by obedience too, but let us remember that we are still priests. St Callistus, St Lawrence were administrators, Cardinal Rampolla was an able politician, yet they were saints. On the contrary, there are coarse, clumsy priests,

who run schools like pagans; there are those who act badly in society, villains who treat everyone badly, heartless people, Ishmaelite priests who rebel against everyone, whose venom is as poisonous as a snake's. Let us beware of them and not imitate them.

Two of Don Bosco's sermons

Let us end this cycle of spiritual conferences as we began them: If Don Bosco were here he would give us this sermon. So we will end precisely with two of his sermons, realising that we lack his halo of holiness for his words to strike us properly, but we hope that the message is still efficacious. Regarding Don Bosco's thoughts about priestly behaviour we have two documents, two of his talks. The first one he gave at the retreat at Trofarello in September 1868 to clerics preparing for ordination, taking the theme of the passage that everyone knows: 1 Tim 4:16: "*Attende Ubi et doctrinae, insta in illis. Hoc enim faciens et teipsum salvum facies et eos qui te audiunt*" (Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers). He developed the moral and dogmatic part around this, but then insisted on exemplary conduct as we find it in 1 Tim 4:12: "*Exemplum esto fidelium in verbo, in conversatione, in caritate, in fide, in castitate*" (Set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity). He then completed this explanation with the Epistle to Titus 2:7 which develops the same thoughts: "*In omnibus teipsum praebe exemplum bonorum operum, in doctrina, in integritate, in gravitate*" (but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity). This is how, in a single sermon, Don Bosco covered all the virtues of a good priest.

Better still was a similar sermon in 1869 where he clearly proclaimed his concept and explained it more completely, taking 2 Cor 6:3-10, which is the most comprehensive definition of ecclesiastical spirit, the best type of priest: "*Nemini dantes ullam offensionem ut non vituperetur ministerium nostrum: sed in omnibus exhibeamus nosmetipsos sicut Dei ministros, in angustiis, in plagis, in carceribus, in ieiuniis, in castitate, in scientia, in longanimitate, in Spiritu Sancto, in caritate non ficta, in verbo veritatis, in virtute Dei, per arma justitiae a dextris et a sinistris per gloriam et ignobilitatem, per infamiam et bonam famam: ut seductores et veraces, sicut qui ignoti et cogniti: quasi morientes et ecce vivimus; ut castigati et non mortificati; quasi tristes semper autem gaudentes; sicut egentes multos autem locupletantes; tamquam nihil habentes et omnia possidentes*" (We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything).

In the original text this passage is presented as an autobiographical feature, but the Vulgate, by changing the grammatical value of certain words, made it an exhortation and Don Bosco uses it in the sense given to it by the Church. Continuing with his sermon, Don Bosco reminds us that the priest is called to cooperate with and imitate Christ: "*Dei enim adiutores sumus*" (For we are God's servants, working together, 1 Cor 3:9). And therefore he is given a special grace that he must treasure: "*Noli negligere gratiam, quae in te est, quae data est tibi per prophetiam cum impositione manuum presbyterii*" (Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders, 1 Tim 4:14); and he invites him to correspond to his vocation, quoting Isaiah 49:8: "*Ecce mine tempus acceptabile*" (Now is the favourable time) and saying "so now is the time to be saints and become good priests."

He then ends by returning to the concept and responsibility of example, necessary for the priest to preserve his dignity. Now if we examine these autobiographical notes of St Paul step by step we see that they fit Don Bosco marvellously; only in prison he was not, but that was close; so here is the model of him presented to his future priests: the type St Paul provides, passed on through Don Bosco.

This is the best way to be Salesians and priests. He has given us the example: "*Permane in his quae didicisti et credita sunt tibi: sciens a quo didiceris* (But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 2 *Tim* 3:14); remain within Don Bosco's holiness.

Conference 12

Don Bosco's Pedagogy

Da mihi animas, coetera tolle... (Give me souls, take away the rest...).

In 1884 [*Da mihi animas...*] was placed beneath the Salesian coat of arms in the Sacred Heart Basilica in Rome. Some wanted: “*Work and temperance*”; but Don Bosco did not want it, because he said: “From the time I entered the Oratory there has been a placard in my room which says: “*Da mihi animas, coetera tolle!*” — And I want this to be passed on.”

If we do not keep this text in mind we will not have a substantial understanding of Don Bosco’s work. All his spirit is summed up here, the reason for his work. On 03-06-1929 in the St Damasus courtyard, the Pope spoke to all the Salesians gathered there, the superiors, missionaries, sisters, young people pupils and cooperators, and telling them about Don Bosco’s greatness, he said: “You have a great responsibility: Don Bosco’s earthly glory is in your hands, and it will become so much greater, the more and the better you understand his spirit, the more and the better you know how to continue his work, just as he wanted it.”

Now keep well in mind that he never thought of us as just any kind of workers, but workers for souls among youth. Hence his motto: “*Da mihi...*” He lived this idea, he lived to complete it in his works; the reason for his existence is this apostolate of souls. And how did Don Bosco want us? As he himself was: apostles of the souls of youth.

Don Bosco’s holiness

Don Bosco’s holiness was clearly established by Providence as an educative holiness and we have proof of this in the dream at the nine years of age, because when the Lord is thinking of taking a saint and launching him into the world, he reveals himself to him, outlines his mission and grants him holiness in relation to that mission. And Don Bosco’s holiness is forged as an educative holiness. Don Bosco does not stand out in history as an organising missionary, but as the discoverer of the preventive system. This system was in his hands and must be for us a means taught by Providence to save the souls of the young.

The true aspect of the preventive system

When dealing with Don Bosco’s system we must not reason as we do with the public to whom we must present the human aspect of the system. For ourselves who need to know what Don Bosco’s work is, if we do not understand that it must aim at saving souls we have not understood who Don Bosco is. What we cannot tell the world is truly the secret of universal penetration, the truth, the originality, the sanctity of his system.

Dominic Savio practised virtue to an heroic degree. The proclamation of his heroism of virtue was the supreme judgement of the Holy See regarding Don Bosco’s pedagogy being capable of bearing such fruit. In this sense, we must understand our system as a builder of truly Christian souls, suitable for everyone and capable of forming saints.

Our raison d'être

We must practise the same pedagogy and this is precisely what the world is waiting for from us. When they call on us they are calling on Don Bosco. They do not look to us as teachers or religious but as Salesians, because we have a special educative system. This is why the Congregation came into being, and we run the risk of forgetting why we exist: Don Bosco had his Oratory: he needed assistants to work with his system and thus the Congregation came about: so in historical terms, from the system comes the work and from the work the Congregation. We therefore exist for this reason, our historical and social personality before the world is all here: educators of a special educational system tried out by Don Bosco and called the preventive system. All the rest of the colossal work of the Salesian Congregation is not our speciality. Other religious can also be called for the rest, because there are many other preachers, but the educational system is ours, exclusively ours. These are Don Bosco's words in his letter of 10-08-1885 to Fr Giacomo Costamagna in America: "It is all ours, the rest is not ours."

We must become so clear and detailed in understanding what is ours that we feel and appreciate their full value. I have spent all my time studying these things and I come to realise that it was not in vain, because we can assert that all of Don Bosco is in seeking, defending, protecting souls; he only lived to prevent sin, to prevent it. This is the whole of his system: to place the youngster in the impossibility of committing sin. He himself said it: 11-11-1869: "We work among the young to prevent sin." Our existence and that of our homes is just for that and not for them to stand in line [on parade], for them to click their heels. If we understand this, we will change our way of life.

The school is just like the magician's drum to attract the people: that is the secret of our Salesian "Freemasonry". We make the school to attract the birds, and once they are in it, we feed them, save their souls. Let me repeat: our boarding schools do not exist for the boys to obey the bell, for brilliant schools to have 24 presented, 27 promoted; not even, and less so to make a lot of money to send to the Provincial. Our houses, whatever address they have, must exist solely to save souls; if we forget this we do not know who Don Bosco was.

The basis of the system

In Don Bosco's idea that emerges from the documents, the system practically has three points which are like three centres of as many intersecting circles in which the circumferences touch the centre of the other two: discipline, frequenting the Sacraments, life in the courtyard/playground.

Discipline

Generally speaking in Don Bosco's concept discipline is what he wants for us Salesians who have the vow [obedience]: family discipline, family order and above all the use of kindness, persuasion, the rejection of chastisements and above all vigilance, vigilance. On 18-08-1883 he told Fr Provera: "Work and vigilance, vigilance and work... discipline must come of itself, when one knows how to make oneself loved in order to be obeyed, when there is trust between superiors and pupils, when both the educator and the pupil have a religious sense of duty." Here is the crux of our deviation, our estrangement from Don Bosco.

If there is one thing that my superiors have expressly recommended to me over the past few years, it is that I insist in the on these things in the retreat; in June 1933 I was told: "Insist, dear Fr Albert, insist on the preventive system because certain people, to make the college run well are sacrificing the preventive system and overlooking Salesian traditions." It is something that Don Bosco already complained about in his 10-05-1884 letter from Rome: "Why do people want to replace love with cold

rules? Why do the superiors move away from the observance of the rules Don Bosco has given them? Why the replacement little by little of loving and watchful prevention by a system which consists in framing laws? Such laws either have to be sustained through punishment and so create hatred and cause unhappiness or if they are not enforced, cause the superiors to be despised.”

Unfortunately some colleges are ruined this way: whoever does not do such and such will receive such and such... it is a penal code that Don Bosco does not want and what's more it is anti-Salesian, and if Don Bosco were there he would be angry, returning to that almost instinctive basic energy long kept under guard by self-control but still smouldering beneath the ashes.³⁰

It happened that the one in charge in America, Fr Costamagna, was a rather stiff and rigid type, famously so as a cleric, so just imagine afterwards. (In parentheses: if you have to keep silent during the retreat, it is thanks to him). So he had regulated the houses rigidly; now, Fr Vespignani went over there, and he had been won over by our system and wrote to Don Bosco: “The superior does it this way and that way; in Turin he saw it done quite differently.” And Don Bosco replied with three letters: one to Fr Cagliari on 05-08 to tell him he was writing to Fr Costamagna: “I am preparing a letter for Fr Costamagna and for your guidance it will particularly touch on the Salesian spirit, which we want to introduce into the houses in America: Let me tell you – Charity, gentleness, patience; never degrading rebukes, never punishments; do good to those you can and evil to none – And this applies to the Salesians among themselves and to the pupils both inside and outside.”

On 10-08 he wrote the second one to Fr Costamagna: “..., I would like to give a sermon as if I were at the retreat, or better still a conference on the Salesian spirit which ought to inspire and guide our actions, and every word we say. The preventive system is truly ours; no humiliating punishments, no punishments for their own sake, no severe dressings-down in the presence of others. Instead gentle, kind patient words. Never biting, humiliating words, never blows, heavy or light; use should be made of negative punishments, and always in a way that those who have been warned become even more our friends than before... There should be no grumbling about the decisions of the superiors... every Salesian should become each one's friend; never recall anything that has already been forgiven... gentleness in words, in reminding, advising. This will be the line you and the others who will share the preaching of the forthcoming retreats will follow.”

This letter made such an impact that Fr Costamagna replied, thanking him and, as we know from Fr Vespignani to whom Don Bosco wrote the third letter on 14.08, many wrote promising to scrupulously practise the preventive system, recognising there were failures and sensing the great difficulty in being charitable, some obliged themselves with vows: the fourth Salesian vow.

Sacraments

A family-style discipline is necessary, But the entire system is based on Confession and Communion. All our work would fail if it did not have its basis, its vital principle in the internal action that is the function of the sacraments. Without these neither does morality exist. All Don Bosco's writings have this idea: we work with souls through the Sacraments of Confession and Communion, but not in the sense of dragging youngsters to the Sacraments; this is not directing a soul.

The Sacraments work *ex opere operato* unless we hinder them from doing so, but in educational and psychological terms they don't. It is therefore necessary to remember to take things with a certain

30 The original is “*perché quando era toccato, ritrovava i suoi merli*”, clearly a figurative statement. A number of commentators, none of whom could identify the precise usage of “*ritrovava i suoi merli*” (once more found his blackbirds), have proposed that Caviglia is referring to the younger Bosco's fiery character (e.g. his reaction as a nine-year-old in the dream when boys were fighting and swearing; his violent reaction in coming to the aid of the more timid Comollo who was being bullied by others).

common sense. All that Don Bosco wrote and said in good nights, in directing souls, all flows together here: to be serious in the use of the Sacraments, if we want the educational concept to be involved then we need good resolution, Confession as correction, frequent Communion, but all freely approached and well prepared.

Don Bosco did not like certain Communions “on parade” [where everyone was expected to go]. On 19-01-1876, during the novena to St Francis, he said: “I hope that you all receive Communion on St Francis’ day.” He did not say that everyone should go to Communion, but he hoped that all would do so, and he spoke similarly during the novenas for St Aloysius and the Immaculate.

With Belasio he was pleased to have a considerable number of boys at the Oratory who could receive daily Communion. Don Bosco was all powerful in transforming his young people even though he lacked everything, people, schools, even though he had boys placed there in by the police, rough and coarse types... and yet he did something with them, he educated them. But how did he educate them? With kindness, gentleness, loving-kindness: he shaped them by hearing their confessions and taking an interest always and above all in their souls.

Courtyard/playground

We come to the third centre that is so important and indispensable: *the life of the courtyard or playground*. This is a term I created and put into use. If we don’t understand this idea, the whole of Don Bosco’s system collapses, the whole Salesian system becomes just chatter, a boast.

Let us take his letter of 10-05-1884, which deals with nothing else other than the life of the Salesians during recreation. The boys are corrupted, there is lack of order among the confreres, because everything depended on the life of the courtyard. This life as it is in the festive Oratories, where it constitutes the outward essence of the work, is what gave Don Bosco the hearts of the young. Everything comes from the life of the courtyard, that is, where the young person is freed from rules and restrictions. So Don Bosco and the authentic Salesians must be seen not huddled in corners, with the air of the school councillor, but with the boys in the middle of the courtyard. This is the great secret, because the boy will forget everything – school, explanations, but he will not forget what he said and did in the courtyard, all the kindness, brotherhood, the heart to heart. There are many teachers in the world, but few superiors who are in the midst of the young in this world and the young no longer forget them. Don Bosco wanted us to live with the young and he cannot imagine Salesians being elsewhere while the young are enjoying their freedom. All of the staff, beginning with the Rector must be among the young; in a note on the preventive system he says: “The Rector is found among the young people...”. He wanted us to be in the courtyard with the young, not as caretakers, prison guards, but as brothers, treating them with familiarity, because only this brings affection and confidence; he wants young people not only to be loved, but to know that they are truly loved. In 1875 he wrote: “Let our eye be like the eye of certain animals who see everywhere: the Salesian must not play just for himself; there are some in the courtyard who think of enjoying themselves and pay no attention to others Keep an eye everywhere, on the ones not enjoying themselves, on cliques.” He doesn’t want anyone to ask, when looking at a recreation: “Where are the Salesians?” and elsewhere he said: “The rector, the catechist, the councillor, the priests, the teachers, the clerics, where are they?” The superiors must all be there in the courtyard, even those who have no degrees: the people in cassocks do not walk alone in the courtyard.

Unfortunately one has matters of faith on his mind, another has knowledge, the teacher has pages to correct... and all recreation is entrusted to two or three young clerics.

Here is Don Bosco again: “Others supervised from afar. Not noticing whether anyone was doing something wrong. Some did take notice... in a threatening manner.” Instead Don Bosco wants them to

be in the midst of the young as fathers, brothers, friends, he wants them not to be considered superiors. “The teacher who is seen only in the classroom is a teacher and nothing more; but if he joins in the pupils’ recreation he becomes their brother ... This confidence creates an electric current between the youngsters and their superiors.”

The Rector who saw two confreres standing together and scolded them did well. We need the barrier of indifference that the devil has erected between the young and confreres to fall. The day of forbearance and love for Jesus must dawn, the day of hearts open to true correspondence, the day when all Salesians do as Don Bosco did who, as the Pope pointed out, in the midst of all his work, found time to come down to the courtyard to tell stories, to joke with the youngest and the youngest of the young.

Let me finish with a recommendation: it would be painful if, while everyone is seeking out the Salesians for their system, we were the first to abandon it.

For true Salesians, the preventive system must be the fourth vow! The “this is how it is done” of the preventive system can be defined as the truest and most “this is how it is done” of Don Bosco because it is his personality before history and before the Church.

Part 2

CONFERENCES 13–16
(Gualdo Tadino, August 1937)

CONFERENCES 17–19
(Rome, March 1938)

Conference 13

Good spirit

I usually introduce myself with a greeting: once as a compliment, now in the name of Don Bosco. I knew him for three years; at S. Benigno Canavese I made the retreat with him. He was present, he knew everyone, and that half-word he said to us, putting his hand on our heads, was worth a whole retreat.

I am especially addressing the priests and brothers: the clerics are in a life of purgatory so they can move to the paradise of priesthood. Sister Mary Mazzarello used say: “We are living in the presence of God and Don Bosco.” These are the words of a poor woman who learned to write at 34 years of age, but who had understood Don Bosco’s spirit. And so it is for us at this retreat. I am here with the programme and to develop a programme: “To live in the presence of Don Bosco and to look at Salesian life as Don Bosco wanted.”

I will develop this over these conferences. My studies but mainly my years have convinced me that there should be no other theme of a retreat for Salesians than “SALESIANITY”, following Don Bosco, studying Don Bosco for our life. We need to convince ourselves that the text of our Salesianity can be none other than Don Bosco just as Jesus Christ is for every Christian. Allow me to explain my terms. We are not to make adjectives based on Don Bosco like “*boschiano*”, “*boschianità*”, “*boschianamente*” because “*salesianità*”, “*salesianamente*”, “*salesiano*” means Don Bosco: the spirit, example and tradition of Don Bosco.

So when you hear these terms, you can translate them.

There is an almost infallible reason for following Salesianity, because it comes from the magisterium of the Church. Salesianity was canonised by canonising Don Bosco, not only his personal holiness. We are certain that we can become saints by doing what Don Bosco did, and indeed we must become saints this way if our vocation is not to be something just stuck on. This is not my thinking; these are well-founded words of Pius XI: “*Filii sanctorum estis et heredes sanctorum*” (You are the sons of saints and heirs of saints). It is magnificent praise that carries great responsibility with it.

Pius XI also said: “The most beautiful glory of Don Bosco on this earth is in your hands, it depends on you if you know how to continue his work exactly as he wanted it. One cannot imagine a Salesian or a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians who does not work” (June 1929, St Damasus courtyard).

In 1927 in one of the 5 great addresses he gave on Don Bosco, Pius XI said: “Don Bosco continues to be everyone’s real rector, not a distant father. Don Bosco is here present.” This is extraordinary praise. The Pope told us that Don Bosco continues to be in the Congregation which is still on the right track, despite a good French historian saying that “no congregation after 50 years still follows the founder’s guidelines in everything.”

We have our guideline; so let us not look at any others! There are some who do not know Don Bosco. I wish that historian were here, that that angel Fr Castano, would write a life of Don Bosco just for us (Salesians). Those who have lived in the Congregation for 53 years can say that some do not remember, do not know Don Bosco. The Holy Father does not want Don Bosco’s poem to be restricted to education alone; this is why he gave us the “Communion”³¹ of the Mass: “*Contra, spem in spem credidit ut fieret pater multarum gentium, secundum quod dictum est ei*” (Against hope, he

31 Today we would say the Communion antiphon.

believed in hope; that he might be made the father of many nations, according to that which was said to him). A proper and worthy thought from a Pope!

We will learn his spirit and tradition from Don Bosco. The Rule is to be interpreted according to tradition, because a Rule can serve for all Congregations, except for a few words. So said Leo XIII to Don Bosco and invited him to have someone collect many of the things that were not written down or if they were written down, would not be understood properly. And Don Bosco told his sons some time later: "Traditions are distinguished from Rules in that they teach us how to practise the Rules themselves." Don Bosco commissioned Fr Rua to collect the Traditions.

Salesianity does not consist of the letter but of the spirit of the tradition; not in the canonical status of the Rules: the Salesian soul may be lacking by just doing what the Rules impose. The phrase "the Rules are enough to be a Salesian" must be interpreted according to the tradition of Don Bosco, otherwise we are just a machine, matter... I like to quote a pleasant example. In one house there was a shortage of bread for breakfast, and sometimes they had four sardines to divide among five, and yet they were cheerful, and resigned themselves to saying that they would eat on other day... The Salesian of tradition eats when there is something; if there isn't anything, he does not eat: whereas a Salesian of the letter would say that they were not observing the Rules. It can all be summed up in this sentence: "Don Bosco wants it this way." I will be saying ten "this way"s, as many as the number of conferences I will give.

Salesianity is difficult to define, being a tradition, a sum of facts, guidelines that have not been formulated by a philosopher or a pedagogue, but are lived facts. I have known coadjutors [brothers] and priests who lived just as Don Bosco taught. Don Bosco was enthusiastic about this core group of children he had educated. On 1 January 1886 in a conversation he exclaimed: "Our members are acquiring such an extraordinarily good spirit that I am amazed", and Don Bosco had seen some great things! A month later (February 1876) he added: "I see in them a spirit of selflessness that moves me." (I saw them as they were, they were my teachers and superiors).

And Don Bosco went on to say: "I see the ideal of the people I sought for my work realised. So far we have made great strides and more will be made if we keep to the past. In 50 years time if we go on like this we will be 10,000 and scattered all over the world." Indeed: after 50 years, in 1932, we were 10,123, and now 13,000.

The Salesianity that has permeated the world is due to this "this way", if we go on "this way". Orestano (Italian philosopher, academician) said in his address in Cagliari: "There is no spiritual phenomenon in the entire modern age as impressive as the Salesian penetration accepted by the world. Contemporary society is permeated by the spirit of Don Bosco," Note that Orestano is a scholar and does not mince words. We need to make our hearts expand during the retreat, since the pebbles during the year make us forget. "There is no Congregation so sure of being wanted by God as ours", said Don Bosco (Ceria, vol. XII, 69 that contains the majority of Don Bosco's teachings). And Don Bosco went on to say: "Other congregations had a few things happen at the beginning, while among us there was no change without God's command." Bishop Costamagna used say that of all Religious Congregations and Orders, our is the one which has received most the word of God (vol. XVII, 305).³² May they know that on their own they are nothing, but together they are something in the Church. "In a 100 or 500 years, oh if I could keep just 50 of the Salesians I have now! We will be masters of everything in the world if we are faithful."

The sun will not set on our empire.

32 BM XVII, P. 281.

Conference 14

Interior life

Our programme proposes to implement Salesianity according to Don Bosco's guidelines. We have set out to look at Don Bosco's "this way", and the first and most important one is interior life.

When Cardinal Salotti reported to Pius XI in 1910 about the steps taken of Don Bosco's cause he confessed that he had admired the interiority of Don Bosco's life which unfortunately the world does not know about. As Don Bosco's process proceeded they realised more and more that the interior life was the secret, the motive for everything he did. In every discourse on Don Bosco Pius XI emphasised his inner life. On 20-11-1927 he had said that Don Bosco's spirit was always elsewhere, where calm always reigned; thus the Salesian formula was realised: *The one who works, prays*.

And in December 1932, speaking to Roman seminarians, Pius XI said: "It could be said that Don Bosco was elsewhere." And again the Holy Father, in the masterpiece he gave us on Don Bosco in his address in 1933, burst into these words: "The reason for this mystery lies in union with God." Therefore the supreme cause of Don Bosco's holiness is his interior life. He was always with God within, despite his work. This is the first and the profoundest of the "*this way*"s. These things as you hear them now were not told to you in the novitiate. The poor novice masters have barely a year at their disposal, and they have to know your character, teach and instil our spirit in such a short time. When they begin to see the first fruits, you are already taken away from them because the novitiate is over.

Without a true interior life we will never be what we should be either as religious or as priests; we will be at most sacristans who know a few more ceremonies than others.

Perhaps we have got the wrong idea about the interior life, as if it were something mechanical, like taking a pill or an aspirin. Don Bosco did not think like that. If we want to do something for ourselves and for others we will achieve nothing if we do not have God with us, if we do not convince ourselves that those who work, pray. Now without this we are not true religious, but traders in life, armchair conventuals, as can sometimes happen in certain old Orders on the eve of their suppression.

The cause of so many losses of Salesians, the poor result of so many sacraments, lies in the lack or or deficiency in interior life. If we had lived the interior life well after the novitiate, we would have made enormous progress in a few years; interior life, the definition of which you will never find in ascetic books, although they always speak of it. Interior life: living by faith for higher reasons. In the First Letter to Corinthians 2:12-15 St Paul wrote: "*Non spiritum huius mundi accepimus, sed spiritum qui ex Deo est... animalis autem homo non percipit ea quae sunt spiritus Dei, spiritalis autem iudicat omnia et ipse a nemine iudicatur*" (Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God... Those who are unspiritual... are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned... Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. *1 Cor 12-15*). We know how to see things in the spirit. The spiritual man places everything in its proper place.

Elsewhere St Paul invites us to do everything with obedience, united by the common good. Don Bosco agrees marvellously with St Paul. We can immediately send St Paul a Cooperator's certificate. These are not the high-flown things of mysticism, but are practical things that earned Don Bosco his canonisation. Continuous work should make us better and sanctify our actions, not out of ambition, not for human benefit. The interior life does not consist in certain practices, but in the elevation of

ordinary works to an extraordinary degree of love of God. There is no need to flagellate yourself or put pebbles in your shoes, no need to perform miracles. The outward things, getting things done, is of value up to a certain point; what is of value is the interior life, precision. Don Bosco never mentioned interior life with this word, nor did he write about it.

He always praised devotion, true piety. Let us understand a magnificent sentence by Pius XI in his discourse on Dominic Savio: “Prayer inspired by piety.” With all the piling up of prayers, if there is no corroboration of piety, everything remains words. True piety does not consist in the accumulation of prayers. The spirit of prayer is the spirit of piety; and when Don Bosco speaks of piety he does not mean mechanical prayers. He thought of us as workers for good: “*ut sint lumbi vestri praecincti et lucernae ardentes in manibus vestris*” (Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit. *Lk 12:35*), meaning, roll up your sleeves and hold the lamp in your hands.

Every one has his part in the Congregation; we are not pieces of a machine but active and living cells. Work and temperance almost sounds like an American motto: Don Bosco did not invent any devotion, not the Rosary, or the Forty Hours, or devotion to Our Lady (all he did was promote her under another name).

His spiritual daughter who translated Don Bosco’s spirit for girls, said very well that piety “consists in doing what must be done well”. Goodbye *Pater noster* and prayers! There is not need to go on “paternostering” like certain old women who then turn cantankerous at the first mishap.

Pius IX said: “I prefer a religious house where they work more and pray less to one where they only pray.” Members of the Curia in Rome did not understand Don Bosco when he did not want to the novitiate to be reduced to an armchair under the guise of the spiritual. Don Bosco wanted:

1. Horror at sin;
2. Detachment from venality;³³
3. Correct use of the Sacraments;
4. Proper duties of the Christian and the religious.

Don Bosco was cunning and could not be fooled.

Don Bosco did not believe in the piety of “hardheaded types, gluttons and lazybones.”

Don Bosco believed in the piety of those who were obedient, temperate, hard-working; in these cases there can be no false piety. Don Bosco measured everything by these three points: okay? So this is piety.

In Chapter 6³⁴ of his *Life of Michael Magone* Don Bosco says: “Let us keep to easy things but let us persevere in them”. Don Bosco wanted the things imposed by the Rules to be done, but what he would have wanted us to do always, even far away and alone, was meditation, visiting the Blessed Sacrament and saying the Rosary. He was terrified of false piety. It looks like piety, it has the appearance of it, but piety is not there: just as St Paul, who is a Salesian, said. Don Bosco wanted:

1. Frequenting and making correct use of the Sacraments;
2. The Exercise for a happy death.

In 1885 he wrote to Fr Tomatis in America: “Let me know if they are observing the Rules; secondly, how the exercise for a happy death is made.”

As for Communion, Don Bosco admitted people according to their desire to make themselves better. What I would like to remind my dear confreres of briefly, but nervously, is that we go to

³³ Using our talents for some reward.

³⁴ Chapter 9, at least in the English edition.

Communion 363 times a year and 54 Confessions: and which of us is a saint? Why are we still like this? And yet sometimes big things happen, yet up to the day before, we quietly went to Communion. Formalism takes over and Confession and Communion become formalities. Generally, all the commandments are reduced to the Sixth: if this is not involved, everything is okay.

Are you sure that is not a grave sin? Those moments of dislike, those repetitions (relapses)? Don Bosco said to Fr Albera who was helping him take off his greatcoat "You'll see some serious things: two making their meditation together, going to Communion together and pray next to each other... yet they can't look eye-to-eye, and they hate each other!" He made Fr Barberis understand that greater attendance at the sacraments is not a sign of greater goodness. If Don Bosco saw that someone after a long time (from 1st to 5th year secondary) was not correcting himself and was always the same, he would say that he was not making good confessions because he was not well before God. To young Albert Caviglia (from the 5th year of secondary school), who went to confession to Don Bosco, he said: "And are you making a resolution?" "Yes, I mean the act of contrition..." "But are you really making a resolution? Because this is already the third time you have told me the same things."

Don Bosco educated us "this way". And I attached this one here (pointing to his right ear). Confession must not become a habit like changing your shirt on Saturdays.

Don Bosco was severe and would even seem gruff: instead he was so kind..., but austere and demanding: he wanted holiness.

Conference 15

Kindness

It is said that most Jesuits, as well as their ordinary vows, make a fourth vow: the leadership is chosen from among these: the Ignatians. We *salesianetti*, humbler, also have this. But not in order to be superiors. Indeed we have three fourth vows. According to various aspects: kindness, work, the preventive system. Here is the programme we have left. Let us therefore deal with the first fourth vow, which is kindness.

I am giving you two texts: Gal 6:2: “*Alter alterius onera portate et sic adimplebitis legem Christi*” (Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ).

Eph 4:1-4: “*Obsecro itaque vos ut digne ambuletis vocatione qua vocati estis, cum omni humilitate et mansuetudine, cum patientia, supportantes invicem in caritate, solliciti servare unitatem spiritus, in vinculo pacis. Unum corpus et unus spiritus, sicut vocati estis in una spe vocationis vestrae*” (I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling).

Did you listen to these solemn words? This is the most Salesian text. It speaks of unity, charity, patience aimed at unity. I want to emphasise this passage, because in this matter Don Bosco and his interpreter, Bishop Cagliero, never used any other words. The code of fraternal charity is this, together with Chapter 12 of the Letter to the Romans.

We come now to the precious topic indicated to us by St Paul’s magnificent Salesian text. Our theme of kindness contains a principle no less vital than the others, which forms the principal outline of the historical and moral figure of Don Bosco. Don Bosco wrapped and permeated the world with kindness: he launched education through kindness into the world. Kindness is a characteristic trait. Kindness could be seen, it shone through Don Bosco, it was the first impression you had. Don Bosco is great in history and in the Church because he was a man of faith (*Communio* of the Mass), but Don Bosco is also great in the gratitude of God and men for him because he had a heart, he showed kindness to everyone, especially the poor. Don Bosco’s canonisation process has brought out facts, gifts, charisms, that have astounded the world.

But this would have been for nothing if he had not had kindness; this is what the revelation in St Paul says: “*Si linguis hominum loquar et angelorum, caritatem autem non habuero, factus sum tamquam cymbalus tiniens... nihil sum*” (If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... I am nothing).

Don Bosco had kindness, and then everything he did was worth something. The world has sympathy for Don Bosco because our style, our way of doing things shows kindness. They call for us everywhere because we have kindness, even though sometimes the tiles are not clean, the furniture is poorly maintained: the Brothers of the Christian schools [De La Salle Brothers] surpass us in presentation.

So then we must make this fourth vow: the Salesian without kindness is not a Salesian even though he observes the Rules. At the Last Judgement the Lord will divide people into two categories, not looking to see if they lack buttons on their shirt or have dirty shoes: people with heart among the elect; people without a heart, damned. People have tried to define kindness, but have failed: kindness

is a feeling, not an idea, and feelings are difficult to define. Kindness is felt when it is lacking, just as we feel there is air when it is lacking: it is a negative concrete. The important thing is that we know what it is, leaving aside the definition.

See: I am using the word kindness and not the divine word “charity”: and I am doing this so you can understand it better. This is because people using this concept have crippled it, and charity today is a cerebral idea devoid of feeling.

Let us come to the practice that Don Bosco suggests. Don Bosco wanted to understand life in his houses based on this goodness and loving-kindness. Every house must be a family, and every family proceeds from a single stock. Don Bosco was distressed to see small hearts with resentments: there is not the same familiarity everywhere in the Salesian world. His understanding of family is not that of a “clique” nor that of the “camorra”.³⁵ The thing Don Bosco cared most about is unity: “*Unum corpus et unus spiritus*” (One body, one spirit). This must be our concern. On 27-11-1870 Don Bosco said: “In the houses they would rather do more work with just a few than have more people but who do not get on well.”

Pius IX insisted that we be “one for all and all for one” (MB IX, 565).³⁶ And he pointed to the Jesuits as an example. Woe to the one who touches a Jesuit! All the Jesuits would be against him! Are we Salesians like that? We are famous scissors makers;³⁷ we would win first prize in the Paris Exhibition.

Don Bosco was against cliques (5 or 6, always the same ones – MB IX, 576).³⁸ Already in 1870 he regretted that there were two factions in the Oratory, and this did not please Don Bosco.

But unfortunately in large houses there can be two factions. This is the second nail: “*Quaerunt quae sua sunt*” (They look to their own interests), selfishness. And all this selfishness does not create unity, just as a lot of stones heaped together do not make a house because they lack mortar. This gives rise to the third nail, namely grumbling (viper’s venom), and the fifth nail, namely seemingly friendly only, phonies (the snake lurks in the grass); and meanwhile a confrere is ruined, a poor prefect can no longer command. What is this? What has happened? These are the snakes that ruin everything. Don Bosco always remembered Comollo’s saying: “You either speak well of your neighbour or you keep completely silent.” This is to achieve unity and charity.

Let us hammer these nails into our minds, not our own nails. Don Bosco in his testament to the Salesians insists on mutual understanding and forgiveness: “*responsio mollis frangit iram*” (A friendly response dampens anger). “*Charitas benigna est...*” (Charity is kind...). Talk to each other, explain yourselves and you will understand each other without breaking Christian charity, to the detriment of the congregation. Do not sulk too long, or you will get a long nose. “Let the sun never set on your anger” and never remember the offences you have forgiven. Let us always say in a heartfelt way “Forgive us our trespasses ultimately forgetting everything that has caused us outrage in the past. And just as St Paul says, crowning it with this recommendation: “Let us love one another with brotherly love.” And this is said for those in authority. Even with young people, once a fault has passed and it has been recognised, stop and call it a day. Don’t come back to it. At other times when I knew my St Paul better and was not as bumbling as I am now, I would quote St Paul’s texts more: “brotherly love” I say, and not “monkish love”,³⁹ because while monks might respect each other they do not always love each other. Let us remember that Don Bosco quoted St Paul’s passages to describe trust among confreres, which must be that of St Paul’s first Christians.

35 The Neapolitan Camorra, Italy’s oldest and largest criminal organisation, dates back to the 17th century.

36 MB IX p. 262.

37 Does he mean “cutting remarks” about one another?

38 MB IX p. 271.

39 “*amore di fratelli*” and not “*amore di frati*”.

St Paul understood that there can also be insincere love (*A charity that is not fiction... a love without falsehood*): do not make a comedy out of loving each other. Sometimes you have to live with people who treat you with kid gloves but don't love you. Sincere love! Let me insist on this Salesian prerogative: even among the churchy types and religious we can find people who are poor and obedient, because they are aboulic;⁴⁰ chaste because they have no blood in their veins, but then they are heartless! "This," Faber says, "makes devotion unpleasant: sinless people, but who are not loved because they love no one." They are the Jansenists of feeling.

Can you see that the Rule is not enough? That we need to interpret it according to the Tradition?

There is also anti-charity: two disruptors of brotherhood and kindness are:

1. Ambition and careerism;
2. The instinct for revenge.

They came among us a few years ago (20 or 30 years ago). The desire to appear to cut a good figure makes us envious, jealous, detractors of evil and silent about the good of others.

Careerism: The desire for high status and not being just an ordinary priest, and ambition, have spread among us. Already St Paul recommended not to do harm in order to gain small positions. We criticise the one who overshadows us, we secretly damage him:⁴¹ we court our superiors with favours... for that position... we hold a grudge and then... we quietly receive Communion.

The old Salesians were tougher. They might get upset, but they did not hold grudges, they did not take revenge. I knew them all. The new generations are less familiar with the law of forgiveness and pardon. We do not talk to each other, we give low grades or fail the pupils of the confreres we do not love, we spite each other. Those who lived 40 years ago among schoolchildren can tell you something. St Albert has wonderful words: "Some say they do not hate each other but show the signs of hatred in their actions and feelings. They believe they are doing something great by hoping that their opponent will not go to hell."

Let us look at the photograph of the good-natured Don Bosco. He exudes kindness: Don Bosco, like St Paul, can say: "*Imitatores mei estote sicut et ego Christi*" (Be imitators of me as I am of Christ).

⁴⁰ See footnote 13.

⁴¹ *gli si fa la forza*.

Conference 16

Work

“Sint lumbi vestri praecincti et lucernae ardentes in manibus vestris”. (Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Lk 12:35).

“Qui laborat orat” (The one who works, prays). “Work and temperance will make the Salesian Society flourish (Dream of Don Bosco).

There are many of the dreams but they all say the same about Salesian work. Work was not put into our coat of arms, which was created to place it in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome. It is not the motto, but it is the coat of arms itself, Don Bosco’s legacy. He was taught in the dream of 1876: “Do you know under what conditions the achievements you have seen are to be reached? (*Work and temperance will make the Salesian Congregation flourish*)... Compile and print a handbook that will clearly explain that work and temperance are the legacy you are bequeathing to the Congregation... Tell them that as long as they live by it, they will have followers from the South, the North, the East and the West.” (MB XII, 446).⁴²

Never mind what Pius IX said: “I prefer a house where one works a lot, than a house where one only prays, because idleness can reign there” (X, 799; IX, 566).⁴³

What Don Bosco wrote in 1879 in the report on the Salesian Society, which he made in Rome, enlarges our hearts: and I am sure that if Don Bosco were writing now, he would not change a syllable. “Although our work exceeds both the strength and the size of our membership, no one is fainthearted and work seems to nourish their spirit” (XIV. 218).⁴⁴ In that report Don Bosco with full consciousness and historical fidelity, gives the most beautiful eulogy of the Salesian Congregation. Orestano, who is one of those who spoke best about Don Bosco, because he does not engage in rhetoric, but thinks and studies, states that “educational and social needs intuited in the spirit of the times, made him discover the spirit of educating with work and for work; this is the true originality of Don Bosco.”

Until the very end, Don Bosco always said “Zeal for work”. To those who went to kiss his hand in silence when he was close to death, like Septimius Severus, the indefatigable emperor of Leptis Magna, he repeated: “*Laboremus!*” (Let us work!). We are true proletarians of the Church, workers in the noble sense of the word: “Anyone who is not a worker will not look comfortable in the ranks of the Salesians” (MB XIX, 157).⁴⁵ The words of Pope Pius XI on 3 June 1929. Again in 1933 he said: “Anyone who is not a worker will not look comfortable in the ranks of the Salesians: work is the mark and identity card of this providentially created army” (MB XIX, 235).⁴⁶ And already in 1922 he had granted us the “*Porziuncola salesiana*”, the indulgence of work (Do we earn it? Between parentheses). Here is the scandal of a saint, of an, “American” saint we might say: he said *let us work* many more times than he said *let us pray* (it is easy to say *let us pray* when the table is set, but it is more difficult to prepare for it).

42 BM XII, p. 338.

43 BM IX, p. 264.

44 BM XIV, p. 158.

45 BM XIX, p. 143.

46 BM XIX, p. 216.

Don Bosco recommended work; but this presupposes our spirituality of work, that work is prayer! I am not giving an academic lecture, so we need to see the spiritual side of work.

Salesian work is soul work, our soul, it is the spirituality that we put into our work. Here is the second definition I am giving you: *“The Salesian leaves the world to associate religiously with a group of people organised under a leader for profitable work for Christian society and the glory of God.”* In short, we are saints with our sleeves rolled up: this is typically Salesian. If I were to paint Don Bosco among us Salesians, I would make them all with their sleeves rolled up. No longer should it be said in mortuary letters: “Despite much work he became a saint.” How come? Don’t they understand anything? It is by your work you that become a saint, not “in spite of” your work....

When you hear reading in the refectory, bang on the table and if the glass breaks it will be in honour of Don Bosco, who did not write books on asceticism, but recommended work. Not learned books, not magnificent collections; we are seen as workers in the world, people who produce, not parasites on society. The work of someone who wants to be a good worker in Don Bosco has its own qualities: “Alacrity, the desire to work.” The true Salesian does not seek rest, he always says: give me some work. The true holiday consists in changing work. The true Salesian needs to work. You never see him standing still.... We must be like children who never know how to stand still. Spontaneity. It is the *“I’ll go”*, the opposite to *“it’s not up to me.”* Not being told things, but finding work. Woe to those who say: I just do my classroom. You are not a Salesian, you are lazy.

Without measuring the amount of work said Pius XI (MB XIX, 157).⁴⁷

Look at Don Bosco. He is a unique personality in history. He looked for work in all fields. And he was a genius of activity and organisation in Salesian activity. Don Bosco pointed out the good a cleric could do by walking around the corridors and hidden places. Everything is done among everyone. Helping others, working together. Don Bosco goes down a street, sees a carter pushing his cart in vain, and without making any distinctions and without fear of falling over, together gives him a hand to push it. “Collective consciousness” that one must work and work one must. This is how it is done in many houses. When one works, there is no time for sin, and the devil leaves us. An inner awareness which leads us to do our work well; do the task properly, and not let the macaroni escape. Practise your sermons...

“The true Salesian does not measure the amount of work”. What beautiful words Pius XI spoke! For goodness sake, never listen to the sleeping pills, which are in every house. “Don’t get too tired, eat more, work less, etc.” Stop it – you have to work. Not work for a career, but to please God. The Salesian must make himself fit for work, because we form a cooperative enterprise. Our income is sold in heaven and the profit is divided among us.

“With love”: working with love is the secret of our pedagogical and professional success, it is the glory of past Italian craftsmanship (look at the museums...), doing one’s job well.

“Courage and daring”: this is a quality we must not forget. This is how the old Salesians were formed; school does not teach everything you need to know. If you don’t know, adjust, find out, dare. They give you a class [to teach]. “But I don’t know...” Try, do what you can, study. Pay no attention to defeatists: but what about health? God will help.

Knowing how to do more than one trade: the real value of a coadjutor (brother) is that he does not know how to do just one thing. We are fortunate in our houses when we have coadjutors who know how to do everything, and if they don’t know, they go to work to learn. One rector told Fr Rua: “There is Guaschino (a coadjutor) who works from mornings to evenings and has no time to catch his breath. He needs help. Do us the favour of sending someone else.” And Fr Rua replied: “Does he work a lot? Take it into account for his biography.”

⁴⁷ BM XIX, p. 143.

For the priest it is a duty of conscience to be knowledgeable: but already in modern life that little bit of theology is no longer enough; culture [learning] must be formed. No one in the world knows Don Bosco's erudition like I do; in a book in which there is no quotation — "*La Storia d'Italia*" — I have discovered many from 80 different books. There is Muratori, the Bollandists, etc. Don Bosco gathered this learning little by little.

Don Bosco's first coadjutors always had a book in their hands in their spare moments; perfecting their craft... There were revelations, no one would have expected so much knowledge from that Salesian.

(Fr Caviglia became an erudite historian; a professor of sacred art, so much so that he amazed the ecclesiastical authorities and a chair of sacred art was founded for him at the Turin Polytechnic, the only one in the entire Kingdom! And this was the result of education, procured by himself, through study and personal initiative. In St John the Evangelist's in Turin, one can admire Don Bosco's altar, if I am not mistaken, called a jewel of art, and a large and artistic chandelier of pure style, also conceived and designed by him; ed. 1949).

Now a glorious saying: "When it happens that a Salesian yields up his life while working for souls, you can say that our Congregation has won a great triumph and that on it will descend in abundance the blessings of heaven" (MB XII, 381-383).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ BM XII, pp. 274-276, though in fact these precise words are to be found in Don Bosco's Spiritual Testament (see also the appendix to the Constitutions and Regulations, final paragraph in the "Writings of Don Bosco").

Conference 17

Character

“Donec occurramus omnes in unitatem fidei et agnitionem Filii Dei, in virum perfectum, in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi; ut iam non simus parvuli fluctuantes et circumferentes omni vento doctrinae in nequitia hominum, in astutia ad circumventionem erroris.” (Until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. Eph 4:13-14).

St Paul’s idea was the the Christian should be the complete man, well-considered in will and ideas.

The topic is “character. Is this not a human topic? Perhaps you will say that this is not a topic for the Retreat. I am simply saying that the question of character is necessary for us religious, as an indispensable factor in perfecting our lives: is it a pointer to our formation; that is why we are distinguished from children, that is why we are men.

The Christian is the complete, perfected man, he is the perfection of the human being; and the religious man is the apex of the human being. The Lord does not destroy nature, but perfects it. We must reach the stature of the human being which is the stature of Christ; as we grow we must become measured, imitators of the stature of Jesus. Every word of St Paul is wonderful; we feel the moral magnificence of man. When we say character, we mean the implementation of the human and natural virtues. We must not always mean only the virtues of mysticism: the realisation of the natural virtues is also an indispensable thing. The Christian is man, he is the perfected and finished man, and the religious is the perfection of the Christian: one cannot be a good religious without the perfection of the human being. This is not secular thinking. Take the least secular of saints, St Benedict, in the Prologue of his Rule: (I wish everyone had the text of St Benedict’s Rule: it is the most Salesian text, because 1500 years ago Don Bosco was the one we call St Benedict and St Benedict in 1854 was the one we call Don Bosco): “em Discat abbas prius amari quam timeri” (Let the abbot strive to be loved before he is feared). And in the third Pericope he wants to show that without possessing the natural life one does not go to Paradise, and he recites the whole of Psalm 14(15): “... Domine, quis habitabit in tabernaculo tuo et requievit in monte sancto tuo?” (O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?). There the natural virtues are listed (justice, not having hatred, etc.): with this one goes to Paradise. And Don Bosco on the eve of his ordination turns to Psalm 23(24), which says the same: “Hic accipiet misericordiam a Domino...” (They will receive blessing from the LORD...). You see, therefore, that it is not a secular discourse, but a Scriptural one, and therefore it is the word of God.

The Rule of St Benedict itself specifies the concept of what the path of religious life should be (Chap. 4).

By what means do we produce the life of our perfection? Chapter One: the Ten Commandments, which are given by God and are the natural law. Let us take an ascetic, our master, our Patron Saint. On the very first page of *The Introduction to the Devout Life* where he wants to give a description of true devotion, he shows that it is useless to speak of it when one lacks the most elementary natural

virtues, and he personifies his idea in one of his characters called Aurelius, who wants to be devout, and he makes one think about it.

When we speak of perfection, we are not talking about making the pews shake with devotion, as some of my companions did who then left the Congregation. It is a life of moral work in acquiring the ordinary virtues of the Christian life, a slow work, a work of forming moral habits. This is how St Francis de Sales, St Alphonsus, St Benedict, Don Bosco think. Lacordaire says that a true Christian must be a complete man, a scrupulous follower of the natural virtues: natural honesty without which piety is all a mask destined to cover the most horrible deformities of the soul. You see, I do not do secularism. One must first be a man and reason like a Christian man.

Character is a prime factor in our daily practical life. "*Probatur a contrariis*" (This is demonstrated by its opposite). A lack of character or a bad character ruins the noblest undertakings, makes the noblest intentions in vain, ruins the apostolate. A priest of odd character ruins your parish, a teacher of impossible character ruins the boys. I have seen missionaries who had good will, but possessed a bad character, and accomplished nothing. What makes obedience difficult is not obedience but having to put up with bad characters. A rector of bad character is a ruin. The good performance of the community is the fulfilment of the ordinary virtues, so says a Benedictine who was later a cardinal. The preventive system is nothing but the practice of self-mastery and the exercise of the natural virtues. It is necessary for us to work on character to understand our moral structure. I do not know the definition of character. Scholars have struggled to give its true definition. We look to constructing stability, the attainment of the volitional habits that form the moral soul, something opposite to temperament, that is, the empirical character that pulls us in the opposite direction. The sense of character is the constant will to do good.

Don Bosco did not forget this element. This has nothing to do with external piety, because this can be a mask. You can have a monk who is punctual and sanctimonious, but a difficult type. The Salesian type is open, upright, simple; the virtues that make a Salesian sympathetic are the natural virtues that make us sympathetic to the world. I do not deny that one must have recourse to God and Mary and to benefactors. How do you explain the Salesian permeation in the world? (Orestano): It is the Salesian virtues.

The Salesians who did the most good were those who had character, those of whom people said: "It's a pleasure to deal with him."

There are good characters, unhappy characters and perverse characters. I begin with the bad and perverse characters: there are disastrous characters and it is a disaster not to have any character at all: lightness, fickleness, coarseness, foolishness: we must not say that we have to be coarse to be popular: no. There are cantankerous, intractable characters, little matchsticks already on fire before you strike them. There are hard characters, heartless, apathetic, stubborn, closed types, grumpy, you don't know what they think, they don't have a moment of expansiveness, they are not capable of giving a person a hand. There are dangerous characters (I do not speak of vice), haughty, ambitious, vain, selfish characters who always want to think of themselves; there are malicious characters, amoral types (not morality in the sense of the 6th commandment, but someone who has no love of being honest) who do good and then evil with the same tranquillity, or do something without being aware of whether they are doing good or evil; those who seem to love you and then ruin you behind your back. Gasquet speaks of the baseness of character of those who are capable of groveling to obtain their own ends: absence of dignity, of humility, incompatible characters who think of enjoying themselves and nothing more.

Coming from certain classes can influence this, but we must react and make up for the lack of education. True character is honesty, it is being gentlemen, brothers with brothers and men with men: the saints were gentlemen first.

Let me come to another aspect: we must form character and correct character. Hear a word from a Salesian who has been one for more than half a century. Look, you are destined to carry out an elevated and penetrating apostolate. If you leave here after being ordained a priest and have not formed a character, if you will have a crooked character and you will not have corrected yourselves, you will be bad confreres, and you will be priests without a following, you will be doing a null apostolate. It is a work of self-education and willingness, slow but steady work.

In 1850 Don Bosco took in the first clerics from the seminary that had been closed: Don Bosco worked on their character and insisted that they watch and attend to the manifestations of their own character. One cannot become a saint in four days, but one can want to be one, always: he insisted on this point even in the little notes he gave. In one he said: “*Semper dico vigila*” (I keep telling you: be vigilant!). It is not about the beautiful virtue, but about character; universal work that concerns everyone. Faber, the great ascetic of the 19th century, defines this work as working patiently on oneself.

It is knowing how to be willing [to be saints]. Saints are not born saints, but are made saints: everyone is born with original sin. Saints are made with the will: without it nothing is done. I am not talking about Schopenhauer, the Pelagians and neo-Pelagians. It is the will that does it, not so much a withdrawn life; it takes exercise; you must never say this is beyond me and I can't do it: that is psychological and spiritual heresy.

Fr Lemoyne, vol. I, 94-95,⁴⁹ says: “John was by nature at once quick to flare up and rather inflexible...; he had a serious disposition. He talked little but noticed everything...; warm of heart and of lively intelligence.” And on p. 365:⁵⁰ “John was very active, full of initiative but cautious and deliberate; he had a brilliant mind and fluent speech but was not talkative, especially with superiors.” He was cheerful, lively, and we saw him measured and thoughtful: Don Bosco wanted this and was effective in achieving it.

Now let's take things from another angle. How do we know our character? 99% we do not know it ourselves, but others tell us. *The Imitation of Christ*, I, 3, instructs us thus: “Look at what irritates you most in others, and this is what you have.”

You thus see the paramount importance of the *rendiconto* for us religious: it must reveal our faults. St Benedict has a special chapter for confession before the abbot and the other brothers: it is the *rendiconto*. When there is a willingness to be good, there are two spiritual means:

1. Practical meditation: not the formal one, but the study of oneself in the examination of conscience;
2. Confession used pedagogically for a self-applied pedagogy: Don Bosco used it as the secret of his system. The exercise of the intention; the whole secret of Don Bosco's system is the pedagogy of Confession.

We are bewildered as far as Confession and meditation are concerned. Regulatory piety, the mechanism makes us believe we are good people and instead... nothing is accomplished. Matters of character we never confess: that is why we are bewildered in the pedagogy of Confession. It is our duty to correct our character: everything is possible to the will. The greatest rascal in the world can become a saint: only one thing cannot be corrected, because it is not character, but congenital malice: “hypocrisy and pretence”. The one thing Jesus never wanted to forgive: this vice cannot be corrected.

We, the sons of Don Bosco, have an open character: Don Bosco was a saint because he formed a perfect character of man, of Christian, of the saint.

⁴⁹ BM I, p. 72.

⁵⁰ BM I, p. 273.

Conference 18

Study

“Ut perfectus sit homo Dei, ad omne opus bonum instructus”. (so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work).

“Attende tibi et doctrinae”. (Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching).

The work to which student clerics attend must be according to the thinking of the Pope. Pius XI, speaking to his seminarians on this subject, said: “This work is twofold: a) Preparation of the intelligence, b) and preparation of the will. Two inseparable and indispensable things otherwise there will be no preparation or action.” (Oss. Rom., 17-06-1933).

In his circular of 08-10-1893, Fr Rua quotes St Francis de Sales’ saying that sacred knowledge [theological formation] is the eighth sacrament of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Pius XI insisted on the essential necessity and mutual interplay of the two factors: knowledge and piety. “Study without piety is a vain and dangerous, however praiseworthy, activity.” One senses that the Pope wants to talk about learning, but he does not want to displace piety. Priestly virtue needs learning in order for it to be a conscious virtue, which knows what it must be; because piety without study soon becomes insufficient for everything: piety and study must form a single figure. St Gregory the Great in his *“Moralia”*, book 1 p. 32, says: *“Nulla est scientia si utilitatem pietatis non habeat, et valde inutilis est pietas si scientiae discretionem careat”* (Knowledge is naught if it does not have the use of piety . . . and piety is very useless if it lacks the discernment of knowledge).

Then the Pope in that address, giving his seminarians a medal of Don Bosco, commented on his words with the example of our Saint. He presented him as a model of priestly preparation, life and activity. Here, after solemn, profound sentences which can be quoted about his interior life, he comes to point out Don Bosco’s intellectual life. “Unfortunately it escapes many how much preparation this man gave to study, and there are many who have no idea what Don Bosco gave to study: he continued for a long time to study intensely.” I am giving you the Pope’s words to give authority to what I will say. I could refer to half an Encyclical *“Ad catholici sacerdotii”*.

We ask ourselves and propose this question:

1. What are Don Bosco's directions in matters of study?
2. What did Don Bosco do in matters of study?
3. How do we regulate ourselves in this regard?

It is a theme made specifically for Salesian students. Don Bosco loved and cultivated studies and study. A distinction must be made because there is a difference between study and studies. “He loved study” means he took pleasure in studying; “he loved studies”, on the other hand, means the love for one or other study.

He also wanted his clerics to love it. If there was one thing Don Bosco recommended alongside spiritual formation, it was love of study. In 1849–1850, he took in a good number of clerics from the seminary that had been closed that year of the revolution and crammed them into the rooms of the Oratory, and educated them as if they were his own. And he encouraged them in their studies. Ascanio

Savio (vol. III 614-616)⁵¹ says that Don Bosco told them to save as many souls as they could by a holy life and a sound theological formation. And this is the same thinking as Pius XI.

And he was not only thinking about theological formation, but also about other disciplines. Don Bosco wanted his Salesians to be more complete educators and that better priests would know everything. Don Bosco was the first to send his priests to the state university, although his peers, who did not understand the times, criticised him (vol. VI, 346).⁵² The first who imitated him was Bishop Moreno, Bishop of Ivrea, so that his priests with their respective titles were able to do schooling and take charge of the youth. Unfortunately for a long time he was the only imitator of Don Bosco in this field.

Pius XI in this regard, both in that address and in his Encyclical “*Ad catholici sacerdotii*”, offers a threatening notice. “*Quia tu scientiam repulisti, repellam te ne sacerdotio fungaris mihi*” (because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. *Hos 4:6*). The Pope made such a formal notice to his clerics so that they would know the value of study for the priest. You see the intensity of Don Bosco’s and Pius XI’s thinking, which corresponds to that of St Gregory.

To those at the Crocetta on 06-06-1929, the Pope gave an address about the study of theology and the direction of Salesian study: “May your theology be based on and inspired by an ascetic inspiration.” (MB XIX, 161).⁵³ You must not give yourself over to such vapid piety that has no basis in theology.

What is to be studied by the priest and the Salesian? They both answer, the Pope and Don Bosco: “The sacred sciences and human culture”. The Pope’s words in the Encyclical “*Ad catholici sacerdotii*”: He insists that the priest be clothed with the heritage of doctrine common to the learned of his time. He insists that clerics should not be content with the work that was perhaps sufficient in other times. The Pope does not want the priest to look like an *ignoramus*. The priest must have a general education (high school may be sufficient) that allows him to devote himself later to a particular branch of study. The Pope would have wanted seminaries to give not only scholastic studies, but also scientific study, the culture of the professional. This is the Pope’s idea. Scholasticism does not help when catching a train. And so Pius XI wanted to raise the encyclopaedic man of the 13th century, Albert the Great, to the honours of the altars. In my lectures on art, I have shown that in the 13th and 14th centuries, art was in correspondence with the encyclopaedia of the time; and we have the exquisite bas-reliefs in the cathedrals of France. And Dante in the *Comedia* reports all the knowledge of his time; nor can we forget Giotto.

Don Bosco is humble and smiling, but when you look closely at him he is a colossus. When you scrutinise his writings in one work you find 80 books of bibliography and big books at that; it is mind-boggling. The Church has attributed St Paul’s exhortation to him: “*De cetero, fratres, quaecumque sunt vera, quaecumque pudica, quaecumque iusta, quaecumque sancta, quaecumque amabilia, quaecumque bonae famae, si qua virtus, si qua laus disciplinae, haec cogitate*” (Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. *Phil 4:8*).

The Church in its liturgy consecrates the universality of Don Bosco. According to Don Bosco the Salesian must know every branch. Our specific work as educators means that study has a practical and utilitarian purpose for us. None of us should study anything that does not serve some purpose. Don Bosco wants this, he recommends it to his clerics: to save souls as much as possible. We must study to be equipped for every kind of good.

51 BM III, p. 430.

52 BM VI, p. 190.

53 BM XIX, p. 148.

And how did Don Bosco do it? If we are to self-educate ourselves along the lines of Don Bosco, let us take him as an example. In this he has given us the most shining example. I could bring you five passages from Pius XI to show you how the Pope understood Don Bosco's knowledge. If there is a human sympathy in Pius XI for Don Bosco it is for this: for study. The Pope, a bookworm, understood that Don Bosco could have been a good librarian. A large part of Don Bosco's culture is even unknown. One must examine the *Storia ecclesiastica* (Church History), the *Storia sacra* (Bible History), the *Vite dei Papi* (The Lives of the Popes), the *Storia d'Italia* (History of Italy). Don Bosco was the forerunner of that general and in some branches specialised culture of which not all priests have understood the need. Fifteen days ago, discussing amiably with someone, and discussing how to order Bible History and the Bible in our studentates, I said: read this volume of Don Bosco's life, you will see how he thought; there was no need to decide: Don Bosco had already thought about it.

Let me also tell you all the studies Don Bosco did. He had to study dogmatic theology with seminary texts where the study of St Thomas was imposed from 1720 by law of Prince Amadeus II. Piedmont was Thomist. He studied Scripture on his own: he read Calmet. He learned Bible History from the Bible, and read Josephus Flavius' *Antiquitates Iudaicae* for himself. There was no special course on Patristics in the seminary; he did, however, make special studies of St Augustine and St Jerome. Hagiography he learned from Croiset, and the Bollandists. As a young priest he read one volume a month, and so all 45 volumes. He learned Apologetics from Bergier, the best apologist of the time (some passages are provided in the *Storia d'Italia*). For Church History which was his favourite subject, he read Fleury who is anti-Roman and in reaction gained a greater attachment to Rome. Just for his *Storia ecclesiastica* alone, I discovered 80 different sources he had used. Likewise for the *Storia d'Italia*, which is a popular book...: yet that man handled 80 volumes! Muratori went through it all.

Everyone is amazed to hear this and asks: How did he discover so many things?... Don Bosco knew Latin, Greek, Hebrew; he knew Horace and Virgil by heart; he knew all the classics of Italy in small volumes from the Silvestrini collection in Milan, which he borrowed for a few pence. He knew Dante, Petrarch and Tasso by heart. He knew geography and made it a support for history. In this he was an innovator.

He felt powerfully the need for human culture. What is most astonishing about Don Bosco is that the greatest part of his knowledge came from his personal work. The ease with which he spoke to all classes of people came from his enormous culture. Don Bosco always made a good impression in every branch.

Now we come to us. In what spirit should we study? Don Bosco had to study himself because of the circumstances of the time and his passion for knowledge, in order to then be able to act. This is in keeping with holiness. You must not leave these things to history, but you must make them your own, you must learn the passion of knowledge, the Salesian spirit of knowledge from Don Bosco. I would like you to know how many nights I stayed up until I was 35 years old, so that with my personal hard work I was able to teach art at the university. And no one had taught me. This is how the Salesian must be. Every well-bred Salesian must multiply his knowledge to multiply the good he can do. Art also served me to bring the word of God to the Academy of Fine Arts. One must, like Don Bosco, occupy one's time, and like him, be ingenious. We must not rely on manuals, for that is the "consumption" [disease] of culture, but we must consult the sources. We need to study by ourselves, to be self-taught. We must, with St Thomas (II.II, 166-167), have the virtue of "*studiositas*" especially the spirit of study, which is what interests us.

With what spirit and intention should one study? First of all with the spirit of knowledge; this and piety are to be united; and then with a utilitarian spirit. But above all "*ut perfectus sit homo Dei*" (so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient), not amateurism. Let me recall Don Bosco's thoughts out of a fear and disillusionment of his own.

His fear — In the dream of 01-12-1884, when Don Bosco saw the meeting of the devils to destroy the Salesian Congregation, it was not with intemperance or riches that the insidiousness was approved, but with the subtle stunt of a little devil who said “Convince them that their main glory should consist in their learning” (MB XVII, 387).⁵⁴ Study so you can cut a fine figure! When we all want to be learned, goodbye festive oratory, goodbye catechism classes, educating poor youngsters; no more hours spent in the confessional; only rare preaching, a display of their pride. “*Evangelizare pauperibus*” (Evangelise the poor and not young rich Catholic girls but those who smell of onions). This devil’s suggestion was hailed by applause.

Don Bosco trembled to think that one day it might be that the Salesians would make the good of the Congregation consist in knowledge and learning. I say this to you who attend the University, so that in due time and place you can descend from there.

Disillusionment — In 1885 in Marseilles, Don Bosco told one of his friends and benefactors that he had done all he could to form Christian schools and that he would die not sufficiently understood. Don Bosco saw that the one he was talking to did not understand him: “My ideal has always been to reform education on a strictly Christian basis! Now that I am old and decrepit I die with the regret of seeing that I was not properly understood” (MB XVII, 442).⁵⁵ And he didn’t say this to a Salesian but to a lay person.

We have learnt from Don Bosco that we must study everything to do good for souls, for practical knowledge. We must be ready for the Christian apostolate, embracing all that can be embraced in knowledge and for which the Church with the words of the Epistle to the Philippians is encouraging us.

⁵⁴ BM VII, p. 356.

⁵⁵ BM XVII, p. 408

Conference 19

Don Bosco in the liturgy for his feast day⁵⁶

“Sapientiam eius enarrant gentes et laudem eius annuntiavit Ecclesia.” (Nations will speak of his wisdom, and the congregation will proclaim his praise. Sirach 39:10).

All our considerations that we have come to make of Salesian spirituality must have the words and examples of Don Bosco as a norm and model. Don Bosco is the saint of holiness and life to which our vocation calls us.

I know someone was asked which text we follow, and he could not answer. I will answer: Don Bosco is our text; we must see Don Bosco in everything. By following Don Bosco we correspond to the intentions of the Church, because in the official formulation of the apostolic magisterium of the liturgy – which is the official prayer of the Church – the Church has canonised our Salesianity. Today we will especially consider the words of the Church in the liturgy as confirmation of Salesianity.

You know that the liturgy of Don Bosco, in the sacred rite, has a common part, that Confessors; but it has several parts of its own. The part for the second nocturn for the the fourth and eighth day is taken from Pius XI’s homily for Don Bosco’s canonisation.

Dominant concepts in the office of St. John Bosco: THE FIGURE OF THE SAINTLY EDUCATOR AND HIS EDUCATING MISSION AMONG POOR AND ABANDONED YOUTH.

St Matthew’s Gospel (18:1-5) suggests the thought that is wonderfully developed in the homily LX of St John Chrysostom. The text differs in several places because Fr Ubaldi compiled the critical edition from the Greek. What interests us, the figure of the saintly educator and the care of the poor and abandoned youth, is also expressed in the lesson of St John Chrysostom, III Nocturne of the Feast: *“Ne itaque dixeris: Aerarius est Me, aut calceorum sutor, agricola, insipiens, ut ideo despicias illum”* (Do not say: this is a boilermaker, a shoemaker, a peasant, a fool, and so you can despise him). *“Qui suscepit unum parvulum in nomine meo...”* (The one who welcomes a child in my name...), shows us the solicitude of Our Lord Jesus Christ for those that St John Chrysostom calls the *“parvula qui repertus est”*, for the “no-name people of the city”, for the little ones, the forgotten ones. Here is the concept of lesson VII that shows how the humble must be treated. This solicitude must be understood to save souls from danger and is precisely the *“animas quaerere”* (seeking souls).

“Non loquor hic de sensibili periculo: hoc parat diabolus” (I do not speak here of a sensitive danger: this is prepared by the devil). The treatise of St John Chrysostom is a true profile of the solicitude Don Bosco had for abandoned and at-risk youth. *“Quare, obsecro, primo dilucido cum a domo exierimus, hunc unum scopum habeamus et hanc praecipuam sollicitudinem, ut periclitantem eripiamus”* (Therefore, please, at dawn when we leave home let us have this one purpose and this special solicitude to save the one who is at risk). Here we hear Don Bosco: we see him going out in the mornings to provide, to seek, to console his poor boys in distress. Hear how the Church took this thought to refer to Don Bosco.

56 Given that this final conference comes well before Vatican II, there will be liturgical terminology that may be quite unfamiliar to today’s reader.

Lesson VIII exposes us to the pedagogy of moral redemption of the misled: “*Improbis, inquis, difficile tolleratur. Atque ideo debes amore jungi, ut eum a vitio emoveas, ut convertas et ad virtutem reducas*” (You will tell me: a villain you can hardly tolerate. Indeed, for this very reason you must approach him with love to remove him from vice, to convert him and lead him back to virtue.). Young people are bad, sometimes, but they can be brought back by patient kindness, by love. This is the secret of Don Bosco’s pedagogy: waiting with kindness, persuasion. Don Bosco, in the liturgy, is reconstructed in his moral wholeness.

“*At non obtemperat, inquis, nec consilium admittit. Unde hoc nosti? An exortatus es et emendare studisti? Hortatus saepe sum, inquis. Quoties? Saepius: semel et iterum. Inde saepius vocas? etiamsi per totam vitam hic fecisses, nec deficere nec desperare oportebat*” (But he does not obey, you say, nor does he take advice. How do you know this? Have you tried to correct him? I have urged him often, you will answer. How many times? Often enough: once or twice. And you call this often enough? Even if I had done it all my life, one should neither stop nor despair). It sounds like Don Bosco talking, but we have gone back to the time of St John Chrysostom: “*nec deficere, nec desperare oportebat!*” (One should neither stop nor despair!).

Lesson IX brings us another aspect of Don Bosco’s magisterium and ministry. He is the greatest modern teacher of Christian pedagogy. St John Chrysostom speaks of the necessity of education of the spirit for value and ability.

He contrasts the harm of calculation, avarice to the detriment and disregard of knowledge and education. “*Verum omnia pervertit et deiecit pecuniarum amor... idcirco et filiorum et nostram negligimus salutem*” (In truth, the love of money has perverted and destroyed everything... that is why we neglect the salvation of our children and our own salvation). He then elevates his thought and has that magnificent expression that should be taught in all normal schools: “*Quid per illi arti, quae dirigendae animae et efformandae juvenis menti et indoli incubit? Qui tali instructus est facultate, plus diligentiae exhibeat oportet, quam quivis pictor aut statuarius*” (What can be equal to that art which is dedicated to directing a soul and forming the mind and character of the young? He who is well instructed in this skill must show greater diligence than any painter or sculptor). The work of education is more noble than the work of painter and sculptor.

Lesson VII and VIII on the fourth day of the octave discusses charity and the way we must be small and humble to do good to children. “*Est quicumque susceperit unum parvulum talem in nomine meo me suscipit. Non solum enim, inquit, si tales fueritis, mercedem magnani recipietis, sed etiam si alios similes propter me onoraveritis, regnum vobis in mercedem tribuo*” (Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me. For it says not only: if you are such you will receive a great reward, but also: if you honour those like him because of me, I will give you the kingdom as a reward).

Pius XI, in the second nocturn of the fourth and eighth day of the octave, made a moral commentary on the figure of Don Bosco in homily at the canonisation.

The “*Benedictus*” antiphon shows us Don Bosco’s love for children; it reminds us of the three virtues that are the pivot on which our system must be based:

1. MEEKNESS: “*Beati mites*” (Blessed are the meek);
2. INDULGENCE: “*Beati misericordes*” (Blessed are the merciful);
3. PURITY: “*Beati mundo corde*” (Blessed are the pure in heart).

The MASS is a true masterpiece of the twofold concept that makes us understand the figure of Don Bosco. The Mass is proper and contains two concepts: 1) the exaltation of Don Bosco’s greatness; 2) the typical nature of Don Bosco’s mission.

Let me explain myself by referring to the various texts.

The prelude heralding this double conception, desired by the Pontiff himself, is the exaltation of Don Bosco's Wisdom, Prudence and immensity of heart. I know very well that the word "*cor*" in the Holy Scripture signifies the thought, not the feeling. For sentiment the Jews thought of the kidneys. But we Latins take the words as they are. "*Dedit illi Deus sapientiam et prudentiam multam nimis et latitudinem cordis quasi arenam quae est in litore maris*" (God gave to him wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart as the sand that is on the sea shore).

It is a lofty and vast concept. So our thoughts naturally go to the field of his work: youth. "*Laudate pueri Dominimi, laudate nomen Domini*" (Praise the LORD, you children, praise the name of the LORD). Here is the agreement with the verse.

The Epistle is St Paul's most Salesian passage in the letter to the Philippians (4:4-8). If at other times we have other texts, here we find the imprint, the spirit, the style of the Salesian.

We are offered what is the lovable contentment of the gift of Salesian life. Orestano wrote that Don Bosco sanctified the joy of living and St Paul says: "*Gaudete in Domino semper, iterum dico gaudete*" (Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice). The text is Salesian because it expresses amiability, which is the characteristic trait of the Salesian. It is because of this characteristic trait that the world loves us, approaches us. "*Nihil solliciti estis: sed in omni oratione et obsecratione, cum gratiarum actione petitiones vestrae innotescant apud Deum*" (Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God). This is how complete abandonment into the hands of Providence must be.

Don Bosco lived by trust in God. He did not have a penny in his pocket and created a world within the world. Don Bosco taught us to act not according to the calculations of political economy, but according to the calculations of prayer. Then it is about the serene peace that comes from trust in God: "*Et pax Dei quae exuperat omnem sensum custodiat corda vestra et intelligentias vestra in corde Iesu*" (And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus).

Then another note of Salesian activity is the universality, the modernity of the understanding of work, the modernity of all that we must embrace. We reject no enterprise, no initiative, and in this we want to be in the vanguard of progress, as Don Bosco says to the young priest Achille Ratti. And St Paul tells us: "*de coetero fratres quaecumque sunt vera, quaecumque pudica, quaecumque iusta, quaecumque sancta, quaecumque amabilis, quaecumque bonae famae, si qua virtus si qua laus disciplinae, haec cogitate*" (Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things).

Whatever is good, as long as it is not bad, take it all. That is how St Paul is Salesian. St Paul says: "All that I have instilled in you, taught, imitate it." The style of Salesianity is to have Don Bosco as a teacher; to do as he taught, to do as Don Bosco did: it must be the norm of Salesianity. Well, St Paul tells us: "*Quae didicistis et accepistis et audistis in me, haec agite*" (Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me).

This passage is the page in the New Testament that repeats the whole spirit of Salesian life. This is how Don Bosco was and this is how we must be.

The choice of passages in the Gradual, Alleluia and Tract emphasise the activity, the breadth of Salesian life and the work of God in its development. They illustrate the Salesian flourishing. The words of Easter time remind us of trust in God, reminding us that everything is God's work. This is what Don Bosco, who expected everything from God, said. On 3 February 1869 he told the Congregation's rectors in Turin that no Congregation had as many words from God as ours. Not a step was taken without God's command. Don Bosco wanted the story of his principles to be always inculcated. "*Filii qui nascentur et exurgent et narrabunt filiis suis ut ponant in Deo spem suam et non*

obliviscantur operam Dei et mandata eius exquirant” (The children that will be born and are to come will tell their children about it, so that they will put their hope in God and not forget God's work and seek his laws).

The Gradual and Verse for the time outside Easter mean that everything Don Bosco is, everything he did, was inspired by God. Other religious orders have had one miracle, at most two, but nothing has been created by us that has not been inspired by God. The words given us by Don Bosco in his first dream are the same as in the Gradual: “*Intellectum tibi dabo et instruam te in via hac, qua gradieris: firmabo super te oculos meos. Laetamini in Domini et exultate iusti, et gloriamini omnes recti corde*” (I will give you understanding and instruct you in the way in which you shall walk: I will fix my eyes upon you. Let us rejoice in the LORD, let us exult, O you righteous, and let us glorify him, all upright in heart). Before such a revelation we feel the beauty and greatness of our lives.

The words of the Tract for the time of Septuagint are wonderful. They are a scriptural play on Don Bosco's name. They remind us that holiness is like the synthesis, the vital principle of Salesian expression. It is the wood that flourishes, that cannot suffer winter. We remember the “wood” in the Salesian coat of arms. “*In lege Domini, fuit voluntas eius, et in lege eius meditabitur die ac nocte. Tamquam lignum quod plantatum est secus decursus aquarum: quod fructum suum dabit in tempore suo. Et folium eius non defluet et omnia quaecumque faciet semper prosperabuntur*” (His will was the law of the LORD and on his law he meditated day and night. Like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in due season. And its leaves will never wither and in all that it does it prospers).

He waters the roots of his plant with justice and holiness.

Don Bosco is photographed in the liturgy: it is all an idea; the signs of his character, the programme we must follow in his practice and style of action... It is all depicted. This work of ours must make itself small with the little ones: knowing how to lower ourselves to show love. This is why the passage from St Matthew, the Gospel of kindness, was chosen. Jesus says clearly:

“*Nisi conversi fueritis et efficiamini sicut parvuli, non intrabitis in regnum Caelorum*” (unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven). Humbling oneself to do good. We move on to humility and virtue to go to Heaven. But Jesus first founded the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. “*Quicumque ergo humiliaverit se sicut parvulus iste, hic est maior in regno Coelorum. Et qui susceperit unum parvulum talem in nomine meo me suscipit*” (Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. *Mt 18:1-5*).

Think of mission pedagogy: a concept I developed in 1932. Everything is based on this: becoming small with the small. Extending the kingdom of God is all about sacrifice. The style of our life, the direction of our programmes requires the complete dedication of all our faculties. Our programme is to teach the fear of God. Well, the Offertory antiphon reminds us of this: “*Venite filii, audite me: timorem Domini docebo vos*” (Come, O children, listen to me, I will teach you the fear of the LORD). This is our aim. All of Don Bosco's work boils down to teaching the fear of God to the youth, or as Don Bosco says, to make good Christians. This work requires sacrifice, generosity, radical personal selflessness, as far as we are concerned (*Col 3:7*). This is the spirit of the Secret: “*Suscipe, Domine, oblationem, in gloriae tuae laudem vivere mereamur*” (Receive, O Lord, the pure oblation of the saving Victim and grant that, loving You in and above all things, we may deserve to live for the praise of Your glory). In all our work we must keep God's glory in mind. This word of the liturgy, the prayer of the Church, is repeated in Heaven by the blessed, because everything the Church does is confirmed in Heaven. The Salesian permeation of the world, as Orestano says, who was able to discover so many aspects of the figure of Don Bosco, the filial filiation brought about by Don Bosco came about because Don Bosco is a man of faith.

The Pope who wanted to give the prelude, wanted to provide the conclusion with the *Communio*: “*Contra spem in spem credidit ut fieret pater multarum gentium secundum quod dictum est ei*” (Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said). He takes it from the Epistle to the Romans, but recalls the altar of Abraham. He believed, he trusted in God, and because he believed in the word of God, he became the spiritual father of an infinite number of souls.

Let us therefore give thanks to the Lord for the effectiveness of Don Bosco’s propagation in the world; this is the prayer of the *Postcommunio*: “*Corporis et sanguinis tui, Domine, mysterium satiati, concede quaesumus, ut intercedente Beato Ioanne confessore tuo in gratiarum semper actione maneamus*” (Nourished with the mystery of Your Body and Blood, we beseech You, O Lord: grant us, that through the intercession of St John, your confessor, we may ever continue to give thanks to You.).

I have left aside the main *Oremus* [Collect] which was composed to pray to God through the intercession of Don Bosco. It summarises and raises our feeling before God with a prayer of invocation: it tells us who Don Bosco is in the life and history of the Church. Who he must be before us. With Mary’s help he created any number of institutions, he is remembered as inflamed with charity and is called a “seeker of souls”.

The prayer is written especially for us: “*Ut eodem charitatis igne succensi, animus quaerere tibi que soli servire valeamus...*” (that enkindled with the same fire of charity, we may be able to seek after souls and to serve You alone). This prayer brings us back to the concept we started from. It is the thought with which I have only ever spoken and with which I want to end, wishing you and the Congregation may serve him in everything. The Salesian way of life led with God: it is the way that leads to heaven.

“*Et Deus pacis erit vobiscum*” (And may the God of peace be with you). My desire and my fond wish is that you spend the rest of your life following Don Bosco’s “*that’s how it is*”.

