



**ROBERT
SCHIÉLÉ**

LECTIO DIVINA

WITH

DON BOSCO

EDITRICE ELLE DI CI

Original Title: *Prier 15 jours avec Don Bosco*

© 1991 Nouvelle Cité – 131 rue Castagnary, 75015 Paris

Translated into Italian by TERESIO BOSCO

At the SALESIAN CATECHETICAL CENTRE OF
LEUMANN (TURIN)

© 1992 Editrice Elle Di Ci – 10096 – Leumann (Torino)

ISBN 88-01-11150-9

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

John Bosco (1815-1888)

John Melchior Bosco was born immediately after the Napoleonic wars, on 16 August 1815, in the village of Becchi, in municipality of Castelnuovo d'Asti, near Turin, capital of the Sardinian States, at the height of the Restoration.

His father, a farmer, was called Francis, his mother Margaret Occhiena. John was the third son of the family. At the age of 33, Francis died of pneumonia. John had been alive for just twenty-one months.

Margaret worked: with her sickly mother-in-law, she had five mouths to feed. This was the kind of poverty that prevailed in the Bosco family.

At the age of nine, John has a dream that he will remember for the rest of his life: it concerned the education of young people. Unfortunately, his older half-brother opposed his priestly vocation. At the age of fourteen, he finally receives his first Latin lessons from the chaplain of his village, along with an initiation into the spiritual life. This distinguished benefactor of his, however, soon dies.

John would later be able to attend school regularly: the municipal school in Castelnuovo then the state school in Chieri. He took lodgings in this town and worked to pay for his tuition. At the age of twenty he became a ecclesiastical at the archbishop's seminary. On 5 June 1841, the cleric Bosco was ordained a priest in Turin. By now he was to be called: Don Bosco.

He perfected his pastoral skills at the St Francis of Assisi *Convitto Ecclesiastico* in Turin. His teacher in the seminary was his

fellow countryman Fr Joseph Cafasso (one day he would be proclaimed a saint), who also became his spiritual father and introduced him to prisons and prisoners.

On 8 December 1841, Don Bosco met an orphan about 16 years old, Bartholomew Garelli, the first of the young workers abandoned to their own devices and whom he began to gather in his Sunday ‘oratory,’ which he placed under the protection of St Francis de Sales.

On Easter 1846, his work found a permanent home in the Valdocco district on the outskirts of Turin. On 3 November of the same year, after a serious illness, his mother Margaret joined him and became his first ‘Cooperator,’ she was to be the mother of the poor boys of Valdocco, for ten years.

Don Bosco’s activities launched out in many directions: he ran a house, built a church, wrote catechetical, historical and religious works for the young and the general populace.

On 19 December 1859 he founded a congregation with the youngsters who were living with him, which he called ‘the Society of St Francis de Sales,’ ‘the Salesians.’ The previous year he had gone to Rome to consult Pius IX. The Pope had encouraged him. In 1872, he transformed a group of committed girls from Mornese (Alessandria) to form a women’s congregation, a sister of the Salesian congregation. The future Saint Maria Domenica Mazzarello was to be the first Superior General of these ‘Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.’

In 1875 the Salesians crossed borders: they started works in southern France and South America. The first Salesian missionary expedition left Turin on 11 November of that year.

When Don Bosco died in Turin, on 31 January 1888, his family was already flourishing: 774 men and 313 women religious,

spread over 107 works. Don Bosco was declared a “saint” by Pius XI on Easter 1934. In January 1989, John Paul II proclaimed him “Father and Teacher of Youth,” taking up the words of the liturgical oration for his feast day, celebrated on 31 January.

Sent by the Spirit of God

John Bosco is a gift of the Spirit given to the Church for the furthering of its mission. The Spirit of God sent him to announce the good news to the poor, the marginalised, the less fortunate, to bring them a little happiness. His formation was marked by masters like Alphonsus de Liguori, who had revealed to him a God who was intimate and full of tenderness and the significance of the Christian life as a pilgrimage to be made on a long road. Francis de Sales, whom he chose as patron of his work, communicated to him his gentleness and smiling goodness. Don Bosco’s aim was to spread goodness on earth, the goodness that liberates and builds up the whole man, and makes him a worthy child of God.

His writings bear witness to this, especially two little books that have provided me with the material for the meditations I offer here: *The Companion of Youth*, a book of popular devotions, published six years after his ordination to the priesthood and reissued dozens of times up to the eve of his death; and *The Month of May Consecrated to Mary Most Holy*, published in 1858, consisting of thirty small, vibrant and practical chapters, centred on Jesus Christ the Saviour and the Father’s Witness. For him, life was a march towards goodness in familiarity of God.

For these fifteen days of prayer in his company, the roadmap remains unchanged. Jesus Christ remains the centre of the reflection. He is “the way, the truth and the life,” the source of our happiness.

In his manner, Don Bosco proclaims the beatitudes (*first day*). Jesus reveals the Father, marvellous creator, his works and gifts; and delivers us from evil (*second day*). Jesus brings us together: he is our companion, our friend and our guide (*third day*). Jesus founded the Church, his most holy and fruitful mother; John Bosco is her affectionate son and intrepid servant (*fourth day*). Mary, the shepherdess of his first dream, is the immaculate, the all beautiful, help of Christians, the Lady with the great mantle that protects (*fifth day*). Jesus became man so that by following him we might become saints. John Bosco points out a living way of sanctity, he conceives it as a response of radical love that makes even the greyness of everyday life shine (*sixth day*).

Monotonous days are shot through with joy, which has its source in the heart of God (*seventh day*). Jesus worked with his hands in Nazareth; John Bosco experienced throughout his life the beneficial necessity of work (*eighth day*). Jesus captivated the crowds; John Bosco, who had the great gift of captivating people, reminds us that the road of life is made easier by the closeness of friends animated by the same faith (*day nine*). The God of Christians is a devouring fire that infiltrates every corner of the world; St John Bosco wrote: “Lord, give me souls, and take away everything else!” He makes the poor His privileged friends (*day ten*). Like Abraham, we walk down here in the presence of God through prayer (*day eleven*). Jesus took up his cross and invited us to follow him; John Bosco tirelessly reminds us: “There are no roses without thorns; if we suffer with Jesus Christ on earth, we will reign with

him in heaven” (*twelfth day*). Finally, along the path, there are means to renew our strength: divine forgiveness, the springtime of the heart (*thirteenth day*), and the bread of life, manna of the resurrection (*fourteenth day*). The pilgrimage ends in the house of our Father, in heaven. John Bosco invites us: let us go singing towards the house of the Lord (*fifteenth day*).

I want to pass on this message to you through these pages. When I was a child, I was enchanted by Don Bosco. I came to know him through my Salesian educators – including my novice master – who had met him during the last moments of the saint’s life. Those fortunate youngsters had met his penetrating gaze, they had responded to his smile, they had received sacramental forgiveness from him or heard a word that, in some way, had turned their lives upside down. He had told them: “Live cheerfully” – “Let nothing upset you!” – “Save your soul!” – “I love you because you are young!”

These words of yesterday resonate for us today. Let Don Bosco speak to us as he most likely would have spoken to us at the end of the 20th century. The words I will impart to him did not all come from his mouth or were written by his pen, absolutely not. But a very thorough knowledge of his thought and manner of expression has enabled me to make him speak, I hope, without betraying him. Each day we will first listen to him in a text he left us. Then he will give a rhythm to our prayer with three interventions for each day. Sometimes he will resort to dialogue, a way of communicating that was very familiar to him. Always, he will have a simple and direct tone like that of his ‘goodnights’ to his boys. And he would willingly resort to the Bible, the Word of the Lord.

Don Bosco will come back! Like the young people of the world sang during the centenary year of his death (1988), “Don Bosco, today, your smile is your hallmark!” May the Spirit make us the messengers of this joy to bear fruit where God has planted us!

BEATITUDES FOR THE JOURNEY

Remember, my dear friend, that God created you in his image, gave you an immortal body and soul. What is more, by Baptism, he made you one of his children. He has always loved you, and still loves you like a loving father. He created you so that you might love and be a friend of His in heaven. So, you are not on this earth to have fun, to earn money, to eat and sleep. God has given you his life for a wonderful destiny. He created you to love Him, to be His friend and to save joyfully save your soul.

The devil uses two deceptions to lead young people away from the path of true happiness. The first is to make them believe that being friendly, and a friend of the Lord will make them sad, joyless people, far from all enjoyment and pleasure. Not so, my dear friends. The other deception is to make you believe that we have plenty of time to think about serious things when we get old. Be careful, my friends, it is true that we have every hope of growing old, but that is no reason to waste and spoil our youth. Our whole life must be a perennial season in this world and the next.

(John Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*, 1847. From the introduction).

Life is a journey

Friends, I didn't discover that the Christian life was a journey through books but when I encountered the sadness of youngsters at the beginning of my priestly life in Turin. Those unemployed and marginalized boys landed on the streets without knowing where to go, and they were looking for someone to guide them to be their friend. I decided to become the friend they were looking for, to be the companion on their

journey, accompanying them through life. What is the life of a Christian?

It is above all a journey, a route. A road I would never forget: it was the road that stretched out for 40 kilometres; one that my mother and I trudged along from our village to the great city to establish our first house for abandoned boys. It was November 3, 1846. Those 40 kilometres would be the beginning of our adventure.

St Alphonsus de Liguori would keep repeating: “Life is a journey towards eternity.” A journey has its stops, its stages and its uncertainties. It winds its way through the ages of life, it accompanies our history, it runs together with the group of friends and relatives. It is a journey that takes us to the shores of life eternal. With graceful imagery, St Francis de Sales says: “We dwell in the boat that carries us through life: we must dwell in it willingly and joyfully.”

The journey is a pilgrimage

I had the joy of making many pilgrimages: to the shrines of Loreto, to Our Lady of the Lakes in Avigliana, to Our Lady of Crea and Oropa... It was to the latter that I took my youngsters when we were on our long autumn walks. A pilgrimage is the journey of a believer who sets himself a goal and strives to reach it. The pilgrim carries very little: he makes his way with the heart of a poor man, that is, with faith. He wants to meet God. Our life is a pilgrimage towards the promised land of Jesus, towards “the city of which God is the architect and the builder” (*Letter to the Hebrews* 11:10).

The journey is a war path

When I was a student, I had challenged a professional acrobat to a race that ran through the city of Chieri in ten minutes, at the speed of a train! I beat him, and my friends and I had a great feast to celebrate my victory. Life is also a race, or perhaps better a ‘war path,’ of the kind soldiers go through to prepare for battles. It is full of obstacles, and one has to be committed, to struggle to complete it. One must be a “good soldier of Christ” to deserve “the crown that never withers” (*2 Timothy* 4:78). I have often described to young people the armour of the true soldier of God. I

have prepared them for the combat of the Christian life. Life is a journey, a journey that demands strength, and one that always makes one stronger.

A path to happiness

These words from the Bible have always struck me: “Teach a young man how he should live, and even when he is old, he will remember the education he has received” (*Proverbs 22:6*). And I proposed to young people a path to happiness.

I still remember my walks under the arcades of Turin, through the squares that were swarming with young people. I would mingle with them, listen to their discussions, then invite some for a drink to the nearest bar, and we would discuss the meaning of life. I remember saying: “Friends, happiness is not found in gambling, money, wine or easy girls.” There were some houses of ill-repute in my neighbourhood of Valdocco. They offered easy pleasures, happiness that lasted only a few moments. Happiness is happiness if it lasts, if it does not fade away. When you attend a show, several times at the end you hear people shout: “Encore! Once More!”

So, what is happiness? Do you know the profound answer that St Augustine gave? “Happiness is the quiet and intense possession of all that we desire. It does not reside in the fading rose, it dwells instead in a heart that loves and hopes. It is a desire that is born in the heart and finds its satisfaction in God’s ultimate choice. It is conquered by strength and struggle, like scaling a steep peak, alone or in a team, like a true sportsman of God.

Happiness then flows like a pure spring. It is the beginning of a new world, of a new life, the Kingdom of God, the world of Jesus. The beatitudes are the key to this Kingdom, this new life.

I proclaimed them to the boys and girls of my time. On every page of the *Companion of Youth*, a book I wrote and placed in the hands of thousands of young people, I repeated: “Blessed are you. Happiness is with you. I repeat it today, gazing into your eyes, O my friends, young and old: “Happiness is yours, if you want it.”

Beatitudes for a journey

Blessed is he who knows how to tenderly love God who is Father and who saves us in Jesus Christ! He will make his life an “I love you,” and will walk confidently under the gaze of God who “is sufficient for his happiness.”

Blessed is he who discovers that God is the God of joy, a joy that gives of itself! He will make himself a sower of peace with his smile, his good humour and the serenity of his heart. He will proclaim: “The Lord is My light” (*Psalms* 84:12).

Blessed is he who watches over his health, balancing with wisdom work and relaxation, nourishment and sleep. He will be strong and healthy, “like a tree planted by the river, he will bear fruit in his time” (*Psalms* 1:3).

Blessed is he who knows how to transform himself into Jesus, to make his Baptism flourish, which is his “birth together with Christ.” His joy will be contagious and he will “awaken the dawn” (*Psalms* 57:9).

Blessed is the one who restores courage to a marginalised youngster, beaten down by failure and despair. His name will be written like a star in the sky.

Blessed is he who walks in the presence of God and opens his door with a child’s heart when “he knocks at his door” (*Revelation* 3:20). His gaze will be transfigured by the light, and he will say: “It is good to be near God” (*Psalms* 73:28).

Blessed is he who feeds on the bread of the Word, the Eucharist and the power of forgiveness! He will be “good bread” for his brothers, and a leaven of holiness.

Blessed is he who puts his hand in Mary’s hand every day. He will find in Her the source of all beauty and all peace.

Blessed is he who takes his share of suffering to proclaim the Gospel. He “will be able to face all difficulties because Christ gives him the strength” (*Letter to the Philippians* 4:13). And he will share, the paschal feast in heaven, the happiness of God’s friends.

Blessed is the servant of the Church, this most holy mother who has given us life and taught us the alphabet of God! He will have the heart of

an apostle, a witness to “our God who is a consuming fire” (*Letter to the Hebrews* 12:29).

Blessed shall you be, my friends, if every day you follow this path. Happiness will sing in your hearts, for “the Kingdom of God is in your midst” (*Luke* 17:21). One day, it will shine in the eternal spring of Paradise.

God walks with us

The believer knows that God precedes and accompanies him.

God led Israel. He made the way with the children of Israel. “He walked before us on the way” (*Deuteronomy* 1:33). And here is the sign: the shining cloud, the presence of the faithful God, who “watches over the path of his friends” (*Proverbs* 2:8).

God revealed himself in Jesus. In Bethlehem, Jesus makes the Almighty visible. His star guides the Magi. His Word reveals the presence of the Father: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” He proclaims the living way: “I am the Truth, the Way and the Life.” He says: “Come to me! Become my disciples!” “I will be with you always, all days, until the end of the world” (*Matthew* 28:19). People, seeing the first Christians, called their way of life, the young Church born at Pentecost, “way.” Jesus was for them the only way to happiness.

God accompanies our history. In writing my recollections for my dear children, following the suggestion of Pope Pius IX, I made this observation: “God himself has guided everything at all times” (Ed. Cella, p. 16). God has made our history. I read his signs in important events in which he revealed his presence: my dream at the age of nine, our installation in the Pinardi House on Easter 1846, the approval of our Rules on 3 April 1874.

I recognised it in certain encounters: that of Garelli and the first orphans I took in; that of Comollo, the invaluable companion I had at school and in the seminary; that of Dominic Savio, the boy in love with God, the apostle with a heart of fire; and also, in ‘Grigio,’ the providential dog who saved my life more than once. I discovered it in trials: for me, it was the disastrous death of Fr Calosso, my revered teacher; and

the death of my saintly mother Margaret. I felt it on the day of my First Communion, my Confirmation at the age of 18, my priestly ordination and my first Mass in the village where I was born. He was with us at the first departure of our missionaries to Argentina, when our family crossed the sea. It was 11 November 1875.

God himself has guided everything at all times, together with Mary, that faithful mother who accompanied our history step by step.

Friends, now you're on the way. Set out to conquer true happiness. St Augustine's call retains all its freshness and strength: "Walk and sing! Sing and walk!" The happiness is within you.

GOD IS OUR FATHER

I want to speak to you of the great dignity you acquired when, through Baptism, you were received into the bosom of our great mother, the Church. Baptism opened the door of the Church to you and freed you from the Evil One. At the moment of your Baptism, God bestowed his wonderful love upon you. In your heart, he placed faith, hope and charity. Having become a Christian, you were able to lift your eyes to heaven and cry out: "The God of heaven and earth is also my father. He is my dad and he loves me and asks me to call him using this name: "Our Father who art in heaven."

Jesus the Saviour calls me his brother, and as his brother I belong to him. His passion, His death, His glorious resurrection, His dignity, His merits are also mine. He wants to give me God himself for my father, the Church for my mother, and his Word as my guide.

(John Bosco, *The month of May*, 1858, from the ninth day).

"I created the world for you"

I didn't know my father. My first memories were not a sense of surprise at getting a new toy or that of a kiss, but the words of my mother who, weeping bitterly took me to the bedside where my father had just passed away: "My little Johnny, you no longer have a dad!" I was just 21 months old. This memory would remain with me for the rest of my life. When I took in Bartholomew Garelli and all the other orphans in Turin, I could understand their suffering. Being with them, I turned, like their elder brother, to Our Father in heaven, our creator, the One who watches over us with extreme tenderness. Today we will use a dialogue form of prayer meditation; between the Father in heaven and his son, the Christian.

The Father – Look around you, my son, and see what's going on in the skies and on the earth. The sun, the moon, the stars, the air, the water, the fire are all things that once did not exist. With my omnipotence I brought

them out of nothing, *I* created them: therefore, I am the ‘Creator.’ It was I who said, ‘Let there be light!’ and it illumined the universe. It was I who marked the boundaries of the earth, peopled the sea with fish, and made the green forests grow. When I said, “Let them be!” the sun, moon and stars lit up the sky. And I saw that all this was good.

The Son - Father, your works are good, beautiful and great!

The Father - But creation was not finished. I created man. I wanted to establish him as king of creation, a king full of gifts. The plant lives, grows and multiplies; the animal feels, but does not speak. Man alone, reasons, expresses himself in speech and is capable of love. I gave him a soul, a soul created in my image, a soul that reflects and desires good, an immortal soul that desires a happiness that never ends: this desire finds its satisfaction in me alone. And I saw that this was good.

The Son - Father, your gifts are wonderful. But how did you associate the human person with your creation?

The Father – My son, the universe, I created is for you, but I also wanted to create it together *with* you. In creation, man is not a spectator, but an operator. I have given him the power; I have charged him to fill and dominate the earth. Do you understand, my son? I have given the body of man and woman the power to give life in an act of love. This mystery is so great that no one can fully understand it. The human person can transmit life and communicate my love. It is a great responsibility.

Moreover, I am always close to you, my son. It’s my voice that speaks through your consciousness. My hand has drawn the curve of the rainbow in the sky. If you discover my footprints in creation, they will speak to you of me.

My son, walk in my presence like Abraham.

“You are the son whom I love”

The Son – The human person is awesome Lord! the work of your hands! But tell me, Father: how did I become your son, I, a mere creature?

The Father – I have travelled a long way to enter human history, a journey in stages. Love took the first steps....

I chose Israel. First of all, I chose Israel as my people. Through the mouth of the prophet Hosea, I said: “It was I who taught him to walk, supporting him with my arms. I guided him with love, weaving with him bonds of tenderness. I have treated him like a child holding him in my arms” (chap. 11). Then, when the time was fulfilled, I revealed myself in Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit I begot my Son from the womb of the Virgin Mary. At Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, I let my voice be heard: “You are my Son, whom I love” (*Mark* 1:11). And Jesus said: “I and the Father are one” (*John* 10:30). And he confided to his friends his prayer, which is now yours too: “Our Father who art in heaven.” Finally, I have called you into the Church. The Church was born from the pierced heart from which flowed blood and water, the figures of Baptism and the Eucharist that generate and nourish the children of God.

That is why, my son, at your baptism you became “my son whom I love.” At that instant I took possession of your heart; from that instant I dwelt near you with the Spirit who ‘makes all things new’; from that instant your soul created in my image took on my physiognomy, the ‘features of my face.’ Then you raised your eyes to heaven, to me, your creator, and made this prayer: “I believe in you, my God. You love me, you are my Father, you have made me ‘your son,’ and I invoke you ‘my Father’.”

The son – Baptism has given me new life, but I remain a sinner. Why, my God, so much evil in me, so much unhappiness in the world?

“I free you from evil”

The Father – By entrusting the keys of Paradise to a human person, I had offered him happiness. I had created man and woman, free and capable of transforming the world and giving life. They had everything to be happy, when the drama erupted: the drama of the human person’s freedom and free choice.

There were three in Eden. In its picturesque language, the Bible specifies: Adam, Eve and the serpent. I had forbidden them to eat the fruit of the tree, but the serpent whispered his temptation to disobedience. Evil slipped into creation; guilt entered it. Evil was the Evil One, the

tempting serpent. Evil was the refusal to use freedom to choose good. Evil was innocence lost.

Unhappiness entered the world. Unhappiness was the suspicion and doubt that entered along with guilt, the wound of the origin – original sin – that began to be transmitted from generation to generation. Sin was there, like a worm in the fruit. Man turned his back on his Creator, on his friend. He said, “I have the right to be free. I do what I want. I am my own master.”

In the face of these failures, I wanted to make everything new, to create a new world, a second creation, to offer a new choice to humanity. Jesus, the new Adam, began this new era where love finally triumphs. A new man is born in Jesus. I loved you, my son, and I proved my love to you by giving my son to break your chains and free you from all evil. And I saw that all this was good.

The Son - Glory be to you, our Father in Heaven. Glory to you, Jesus our Saviour. Glory to you, Spirit, who renews our earth.

My friends, this is the holy story of the love of God our Father. Let us read this simple prayer together.

*Our Father who art in heaven
who has made us your children,
be praised for your beauty,
be praised for your tenderness,
be praised for your faithfulness.
Put into our hands the bread that feeds us
and in our hearts the bread of holiness.
Help us to take the first step
to build peace every day.
Make us people who unite
and not individuals who create separation,
so that ours may be a path of brothers.
Make us strong against the evil one who tempts us,
You who our rock, thou our shield,
You our sun. Forevermore. Amen.*

JESUS IS OUR FRIEND AND OUR GUIDE

Whatever our Saviour did, he did with extreme and generous kindness. He never even harshly turned away even the greatest of sinners. He showed great tenderness for those who harmed him. Peter denied him three times but He looked at him with compassion, brought him to his senses, and re-admitted him into his love.

Imagine, with how much love and tenderness, God embraces the one who has strayed and then returns to him. Just try to recall the parable of the lost sheep. The good shepherd finds her, puts her on his shoulders, takes her home and says to his friends: "Rejoice with me; for I have found the sheep I had lost." In the parable of the prodigal son, the merciful father represents God. It is he who waits for the return of the son who has gone away; he runs to meet him, and, before he can even speak, embraces him, smothers him with kisses and speaks words of kindness and tenderness; how consoling for the prodigal son!

(John Bosco, *Devotions to the mercy of God*. Turin 1846. From the fourth meditation).

"COME AND SEE"

Two disciples of John the Baptist followed Jesus to find out where he lived. Jesus said to them: "Come and see." They went, saw where he lived and stayed with him that day.

Take some time to be with Jesus 'all of today.' Let's look at him, and silently listen to Him. Two images will inspire our contemplation: the "good shepherd" and the "pierced heart."

In the Gospel, the good shepherd's gestures are numerous: towards the sick, to weeping widows, to the hungry folk who came to listen to him and to all those on the fringes of society. What we shall meditate on is the Saviour's gentleness towards children and youngsters. Look, here is Jesus arriving at a village square in Galilee with his apostles. The children all rush towards him. He throws out his arms and welcomes them, he smiles and hugs the little children, looking into their clear eyes.

His words fall on the ears of astonished listeners: “Their angels see the face of my Father!” “Whoever makes himself little, like them, will be great in the Kingdom of Heaven.” “Whoever welcomes one of these little ones in my name, welcomes me.”

According to Jesus, childhood announces a new world. Not only does he welcome the young, he heals the son of the Roman centurion, gives life back the son of the widow of Nain, her son had fallen asleep in death. He looks with deep affection at the rich young man, he accepts the five loaves and two fish of that little boy and makes it sufficient to feed five thousand people.

Jesus loves young people: “They are God’s delight.”

Jesus’ “pierced heart” challenges us. The *Imitation of Christ* declares: “If you enter even once into the heart of Jesus, you will come to know something of his burning love.” The heart of Jesus tells us: “Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest” (*Matthew* 11:28). “Come to me, all you poor, outcasts, you who have no voice, you who are oppressed, you whose hearts are bleeding and whose bodies are broken. Come!” He tells us: “There’s no one I treat harshly. I’m kind to everyone.” I will not blow out the flickering flame, I won’t crush the broken reed. I will get down and wash the feet of my disciples and in coax them to do the same for their sisters and brothers.”

What sweetness, humility, what tenderness! These actions and words of Jesus, inspired my attitude towards youngsters. His loving kindness became for me an educative programme. My educational method has its source in the heart of Jesus.

“Become my disciple”

Jesus is very clear. After baring his soul to his disciples, he invites them to join his school: “Accept my words, learn from me” (*Matthew* 11:29). The Master invites his friends to imitate him. Imitating him does not mean blindly reproducing a model, but being profoundly inspired by him. To imitate Jesus means to be deeply rooted in the invisible, to be bearers of the Father’s love. Jesus is a living witness of the Father.

In the profile of the Christian that I sketched in *The Key to Paradise*, I wrote: “No one can boast of belonging to Jesus Christ, unless he commits himself to imitating him. One must find the life and actions of Jesus Christ in the life and actions of a Christian.”

Like Jesus, we love young people. Here is my proposal of friendship to young people found in *The Companion of Youth*: “My dear young people, see how much the Lord loves you! Youth is that most precious part of society. All our hopes for a better future are based on it.... My dear boys, I love you with all my heart, and it enough that you are young for me to love you very much. You will find holier people than I and wiser people than I, but you will not easily find a friend who loves you in the Lord Jesus as I do and so desperately desires your happiness.

Like Jesus, we keep our word. Let us be faithful to our commitments like “good soldiers of Jesus Christ.” On the feast of Pentecost 1867, I wrote this letter to my dear boys of Turin: “The Lord says: “Whoever wants to be my disciple, follow me with prayer, with penance and especially deny yourself, take up your cross of daily difficulties and follow me. How far must I follow him? Till you die, and if necessary, till you die on a cross. This, in our society is done by the one who gets wares out his strength in his mission, as a priest, as a teacher, till he dies, even may be a violent death, maybe in prison, in exile, in a fire, or water.... Until you have suffered and died with Jesus raised up above the earth, you will never enjoy Heaven with him” (*Correspondence*, Letter 559). It is through the cross that one reaches glory.

We remain strong while we suffer, like Jesus. I sent this note to a missionary in Argentina: “Work, but work out of love for Jesus. Endure everything, but never break charity” (never be uncharitable). A few days before his death, Dominic said to the doctor who was trying to heal him through bloodlettings: “What are these small cuts compared to the nails that were driven into the hands and feet of the Lord?” When he was in primary school, Dominic was falsely accused by some of his classmates, of being lightheaded and he was punished. When the truth came out, he told the teacher: “I thought of our Saviour Jesus, unjustly slandered.”

To imitate Jesus Christ in all the trials of our apostolate, is to suffer with him and for him.

I will be rewarded by Jesus. The true Christian says with the Apostle Paul: "It's no longer I who live, Christ lives in me." His reward is being glorified with Jesus. One always ends up being transformed by the One whom he loves. Imitation of Jesus becomes transfiguration. I will become perfect in the vision of Paradise.

"I'm walking with you"

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus walked with two of his friends. He still walks our roads today. He goes before us, he accompanies us, he walks with us.

Magdalene Martini, at the age of 24, left her wealthy family to join the novitiate of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. I wrote to her: "1) One does not attain glory except through great efforts. 2) We are not alone: we have Jesus with us, and St Paul says that with Jesus' help we can do everything in him who gives us strength. 3) He who abandons his country, relatives and friends to follow the divine Master, secures for himself a treasure in Heaven that no one will ever steal from him. 4) The great reward prepared for us in Heaven must encourage us to endure every sorrow in this world.

Therefore, have courage, Jesus is with us. When you have thorns, put them together with those of Jesus' crown."

Jesus walks with us to lead us to the eternal light. Listen to the last words of Dominic Savio: "He who has Jesus for a friend and companion, is not afraid to die." Six years later, Francis Besucco, looking at me from his sick bed, told me with eyes full of light: "Jesus is my friend and my companion, I have nothing to fear. I hope for everything from his mercy."

Jesus walks with us. My friends, every day I have leaned on Him. Every day he has been my help and my guide. May He be your strength and your joy. We will be everything in Him who makes us strong. St Paul's words are a song of hope: "Remember Jesus Christ who rose from the dead. If we die with Him, we shall reign with Him" (2 *Timothy* 2: 8-12).

THE CHURCH IS YOUR FAMILY

The Church is like a mother full of tenderness and affection, who at all times and in all places wants to receive all those who wish to take refuge in her motherly bosom, and is always visible to everyone. That is why the Gospel compares her to a pillar against which all the assaults of the enemies of souls are shattered. She is also likened to a rock, upon which rests a great edifice that must last until the end of time. She is also compared to a kingdom, a city, a family.... The Church is called catholic, i.e., universal, because she welcomes all, and possesses all the doctrine taught by Jesus Christ and preached by the Apostles. She is called holy, because her founder is the source of all holiness. She is called apostolic, because her Bishops are the successors of the Apostles.

(John Bosco, *The month of May*, 1858, from the fourth day).

I believe in One Church

With the heart of a son, I would like today to reaffirm my faith in this one, holy and apostolic Church, which for me is the harbour of salvation.

The Church is one because it is a family. In the Gospel, this family is compared to a kingdom, a city, a stronghold. We are citizens of the kingdom, members of the family, defenders of the stronghold. Have you seen the inscription that is displayed on the baptistery of the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome? It reads: “At this spring, the Church, our mother gave birth to the children she conceived in her virginal womb by the Spirit of God.” Do we not recognize in these words the place and the act of our new birth? The unity of all Christ’s followers is accomplished in the Church. One faith, one baptism, one Church. As St Cyprian and St Augustine, emphatically stated: “He cannot have God for a father who does not have the Church for a mother.” The Church is one because its visible head is Christ, the living person of the Holy Trinity.

She is one because she is founded on Peter, the ‘rock.’ With tradition I can say: “There is Peter, there is the Church.” She is one around the Pope.

The Church is one around the Pope, the vicar of Jesus Christ, the successor of Peter. I met two popes: Pius IX and Leo XIII. I confided my plans to them and asked for their help when I was founding my religious family, composed of the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Salesian Cooperators. I implored their blessing on my youngsters and my missionaries. I wanted my collaborators at all times to be devoted children of the Pope. “Holy Father,” I wrote to Pius IX during his episcopal jubilee, “our work is your work. All the Salesians are yours. All of them are ready to work where you wish. We are happy, if need be, we have to give our lives of that God whose vicar you are on this earth. Bless your children, then, and may this blessing make them strong in battle, intrepid in suffering, constant in their work, so that they may one day gather around you to sing and eternally bless the mercies of the Lord;” One shepherd, one fold and one family.

I believe the Church is holy

The Church is holy, because God is holy. He is the source of all holiness, and He communicates it like sap to His children in the Church through the Sacraments and the Word for, we are like the branches of the true vine that is Christ. The Church is holy, but it is not a Church ‘of saints.’ I have witnessed the blindness and harshness of so many Christians in the face of the misery of the young and the poor, begging at their doors for bread for the body and for the bread of truth and justice. I have known the criticism and slander of some priests in the face of my initiatives and my foundations in favour of youth. I have seen Christians shunning non-Christians, especially Jews. Yet I have also found active co-operators among them, and I have happened to welcome their children into our institutes.

I faced sects. Our confrontations were tough. One day, while I was teaching catechism in a classroom, a rifle shot through a window tore through my soutane between my left arm and my chest and the bullet imbedded itself in the wall behind me. There was a prize for anyone who could get rid of me.

I also had disagreements with men of God, genuine men of God like my archbishop Monsignor Lorenzo Gastaldi. Our temperaments and methods were very different. He formed zealous and fervent networks according to the princes at the Council of Trent; I prepared active religious, committed to education. The long *Way of the Cross* lasted eleven long years. Pope Leo XIII proposed an ‘agreement.’ I agreed, and begged “the Monsignor’s forgiveness” in a letter written on 2 July 1882.

Our Church is not a Church of saints, but a holy Church, sometimes poor in its sinfulness yet magnificent in its liturgies. Beneath her wrinkles, I have always found the majestic and radiant face of my holy mother, the Church of Jesus Christ, who sanctifies her children at all times and in all places.

I believe the Church Apostolic

The Church is apostolic. The Pope, the Holy Father, is the direct successor of Peter, the head of the apostles. The Pope, according to the expression of St Ignatius of Loyola, is the ‘teacher of all Christ’s people,’ the cornerstone of unity. Whoever is united to the Pope is united to Jesus Christ, whoever breaks this bond is shipwrecked.

Closely united with the Pope, I was actively involved as a priest of the Turin diocese in this part of our mother Church. To a newly ordained Bishop I recommended: “Take special care of the sick, the old and poor children. Do not make any sudden changes, treat people who were given positions by your predecessor with great gentleness. Do all you can to gain the esteem and affection of the most distinguished priests of the diocese who, while you have been chosen to be Bishop, perhaps have the impression that they have been forgotten.”

“Seek souls, and not money or positions,” I recommended to my first missionaries when they embarked for faraway Argentina. “Take special care of the sick, the children, the old, the poor, and you will earn the blessing of God and the goodwill of men. Be respectful towards all civil and religious authorities. Take care of your health. Work, but only as much as your strength allows. Love one another, advise one another, correct one another, but never harbour envy or rancour for one another.

On the contrary, let the good of one be the good of all. Let the pains and sufferings of one become the pains and sufferings of all, and let each try to remove them or at least mitigate them.

Shortly before leaving this earth, I wrote to a missionary in Patagonia: “These may be the last words of the friend of your soul. Remember well that you must always respond to the growing appeals of your mother: ‘Your mother who is the Church’, as St Jerome writes.”

And here, my friends, is Don Bosco’s prayer to this most holy mother: “Praised be the Church, this great mother on whose lap I learnt God’s alphabet, first spelling out each letter, and then forming the words of life that have inspired all my work: goodness, loving-kindness, confidence, joy, gentleness, boldness, holiness.

Praised be this fruitful mother who gives us life in the sacraments of Christ the Saviour. Praised be the living bread, the forgiveness that makes new sap grow in us for the springtime of the heart.

Praised be the men and women saints of heaven and earth, for Mary Mother of the Church, Queen of Apostles, Help of Christians, attentive shepherdess who has watched over my work and made saints grow among my young people.

The Church, universal mother, with her great mantle open to all, to the small as well as the great, to the ignorant as well as the wise, to the marginalised and to people of every race and colour. Patient Mother who always begins again, without being exhausted, her work of slow education, and picks up one by one the threads of unity that her children tear apart. Ardent Mother who sends witnesses across the earth, who sustained the faith of our first missionaries in the frozen pampas of Patagonia. Strong Mother who urges us to fight for justice and truth, and sustains our courage against the Evil One who “prowls around like a hungry lion seeking to devour us” (*1 Peter* 5:8).

Praised be you, you who are loved by the creator of the universe, who has confided his secrets to you. You, through whom our night is illumined by light. You who give us, each day, Him who renews our youth. Holy Mother! Mother of God's family, be praised forever!”

MARY IS YOUR SWEETEST MOTHER

In this sanctuary of Oropa I thought of my dear sons of Turin, and said to myself: "If I could have them all here, with me, to lead them all to the feet of Mary, offer them to Her, place them under Her powerful protection, make them all Dominic Savio and as many St Aloysius." So, I made this prayer before the miraculous image of Mary: "Bless our whole house, banish from the hearts of our young people even the shadow of sin; be their guide, be for them the seat of true Wisdom. Let them all be yours, always yours; have them always for your children, and keep them always among your devotees."

(From the letter of Don Bosco to his boys from the Marian Shrine of Oropa, 6 August 1863; Ep. I, lett. 318).

Mary, the loving shepherdess

On the evening of the day of my first Mass in Castelnuovo, 10 June 1841, my mother and I were walking towards our village of Becchi. At a bend in the road, we saw our house huddled in the green. Staring at the place where I had had my nine-year-old dream, I could not hold back my tears, and said: "How wonderful are the designs of Providence! God has truly chosen from among the humble a poor boy and placed him among the greats of his people."

You may have noticed: I took those words from the Magnificat, Our Lady's song. Today I would like to continue that hymn, and celebrate her who has been for me and for my work the initiator, the vigilant shepherdess, the immaculate all pure lady with the great mantle, my helper.

Be blessed, Lord, through Mary our sweetest and all good mother, faithful shepherdess who counsels and consoles. Interviewed during my stay in Paris about the formation we give young people, I replied (12 May 1883) to the journalist from *Le Pèlerin*: "Our formation can be summed up in two points: loving kindness in everything and a church

that is always open, offering every facility for confession and communion.

Loving-kindness, not weakness or mushiness; meekness, the virtue of the strong “who will possess the earth”; gentleness that radiates goodness and peace. I did not discover my method in the pages of wise books, but picked it up from the very lips of the mysterious character and lady of the dream at the age of nine. I told it one day to Pius IX and, at his command, transcribed it for my children.

“I felt like I was in a very large courtyard, where a large number of boys were having fun. Some were swearing and cursing. On hearing those things, I sprang into their midst. I tried to silence them using my fists. At that moment a majestic man, nobly dressed, appeared. He called me by name and said: “You will have to make friends of them with kindness and charity, not by blows. I asked him who he was. “Ask my mother my name.” At that moment I saw near him a majestic woman, clothed in a mantle that shone like the sun. With great kindness she took me by the hand, and said: “Look.” I realised that those boys had all disappeared. In their place was a multitude of kids, dogs, cats, bears and several other animals. The majestic woman said to me: “Here is your field. Be humble, strong and robust, and what you see happen to these animals, you shall do for my children.” I looked again, and behold, in the place of ferocious animals there appeared as many tame lambs, prancing, running, bleating delightfully around that man and that lady. She placed her hand on my head and said: “In due time, you will understand everything.” This dream left a deep impression on me for the rest of my life.”

The two characters had given me advice: ‘Not violence, but goodness, charity, humility and strength.’ The lady had taken me by the hand “with great kindness”; she had shown me my field of action “among boys”; and she had predicted: “In due time, you will understand everything.” The dream was repeated when I became a priest. The lady had become a shepherdess, and the lambs became shepherds. As I wrote in my Memoirs: “I understood everything as events unfolded. Indeed, that dream, together with another, served me later as a blueprint for my decisions.”

The lady with the resplendent mantle gently entered the story of my work, and gently led me.

Mary Immaculate

Blessed be You, Lord, through Mary most pure, most holy and the unhesitating humble servant of Your will transfigured by the Saviour She gave us.

On 8 December 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed in Rome ‘Mary immaculate from her conception.’ To my children, most of whom were already scarred in body and soul, I presented Mary as a witness of true love. Friends, she is the all pure and the all beautiful. She resembles the sun, the moon and the brightest stars. The angel greets her as ‘full of grace’ telling us that, from the beginning of her existence, she was without original stain, and lived without sin until death.

Today I make this prayer: “Mary, wonderful young woman, you refused God nothing. Your yes was without hesitation. You consecrated yourself totally to your mission. That is why God chose your virginal heart to dwell among us and transfigured you with his presence. O Mary, let our hearts grow in pure love.”

A boy of thirteen, who had just arrived at my school, had a pure heart. His name was Dominic Savio. He took part in the novena that prepared us for 8 December with tense fervour. On the evening of the feast, he went to the altar of Mary. He renewed the promises of his First Communion; then he repeated several times, literally, these words: “Mary, I give you my heart. Let it always be yours. Jesus and Mary, may you always be my friends. But for God’s sake, let me die rather than have the misfortune committing even a single sin.” And from that moment his life was transformed. He opened up and put himself at the service of others.

Three months later, during a Lenten homily, I made an appeal for holiness. Dominic replied: “Present!” He wanted to become a saint, a young and courageous saint. The Immaculate had taken him, and was beginning to lead him to the heights.

The Lady with the great mantle

Blessed be You O Lord for Our Lady’s great mantle that welcomes, comforts and protects. May she be our succour and guide to paradise!

In the Month of May I wrote: “We are Mary’s adopted children, that is why she loves and protects us. Let us contemplate the cross where Jesus is about to die. Looking at John, he says to Mary: “Mother, behold your son.” And looking at Mary, he says to John: “Behold your mother.” Yes, before he left us, Jesus wanted Mary to be our mother and for us to be her children.”

So, I say to you, my friends: let us receive this most holy Mother, her into our home and into our hearts,

I had a great basilica built and dedicated it to Mary Help of Christians, Queen of Battles. I can truly say, every stone, is a grace from our mother. On the wall behind the altar, a large painting depicts Our Lady holding the baby Jesus in her arms, crowned with light and surrounded by the Apostles. “She is our queen. Her help also manifested itself in the foundation of the female branch of the Salesian Family. The beginnings of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (1871) were very humble: a small, modest house in the country with a young village girl acting as mother, Maria Domenica Mazzarello. But the tree grew and bore fruit very quickly.

Let me thank this Mother of ours who is always ready to help us. I thank her for her inspirations in the decisive hour of choosing my vocation. I was about to enter the Franciscans and was already enrolled in their register of postulants in Chieri, but I was not at peace. A fervent novena made together with my friend Luigi Comolli, brought me peace. I entered the seminary confidently.

I thank her for her comfort at the death of my mother Margaret. On the morning of that day, I went in the company of a young man to the nearby shrine of the Consolata. I celebrated Mass and said this prayer: ‘Now my boys and I are without mother. A family like mine cannot live without a mother. You be our mother. I entrust all my boys to you. Watch over them and over me. Watch over our souls, now and always.’ That morning, Our Lady took my mother Margaret’s place. Her great mantle opened, like two immense wings, to tenderly protect all the poor boys of Valdocco.

Finally, I give thanks for Mary’s presence at the hour of death of several of the young men in our house. I witnessed the death of Michael Magone, that whimsical ringleader with a heart of gold, conquered, after his arrival

among us, by Mary the Seat of Wisdom. I witnessed his last moments. I asked him what comforted him most at that supreme moment. He replied: “What consoles me most is the little I have done to honour Mary!”

Magnificat! This is the poem I sing with you, my friends. “Whoever loves Mary will never perish,” said St Alphonsus, my teacher. Strive to be such faithful lovers! Every day put one hand in that of Jesus and the other in that of Mary. And joyfully make your way towards Paradise.

HOLINESS IS FOR YOU

“Become a saint!” you say. One would have to have time to be constantly in prayer, in church. One would have to be rich to be able to give large alms. One would have to be literate to be able to understand, to study or to reason.

Big mistake, my good friends! To make us saints, it is not necessary to be masters of our time, nor to be rich or literate. Lack of preoccupation makes one idle. Riches often make misers. And science often makes proud. To make us saints, one must first and foremost want to.

Jesus tells us: “You who labour under the weight of fatigue or of suffering, if you want an inexhaustible source of sanctification, if you want to be happy, be saints!”

(John Bosco, *The life of St Isidore of St Zita*, Turin 1853, preface).

Holiness is a response of love

For Isidore who was a peasant and for Zita who was a house help, holiness was a path to happiness. They said ‘Yes’ to the Lord who was calling them.

My friends, are you ready to imitate them? The Apostle Paul exhorts us: “Offer yourselves as instruments of goodness in the service of God” (*Romans* 6:13). I have known many people in my life who have offered themselves to God with a yes without expecting anything in return. My mother, Margaret Occhiena, who left her village at the age of 58 to come to Turin with me to serve the poor, she belongs to this category. She was a queen in her country house and became a servant to the most abandoned boys. The priest Joseph Cafasso, my countryman and friend, was of the same temperament. With his advice and examples, he became my role model. If I did anything good, I owed it to him. He often told me: “I believe that there can be saints among the young people we welcome into our oratories. They are twelve, fifteen, twenty years old, and they are generous and spontaneous. Some are sick in body, wounded in heart, but they are fervent

and of good will. So why not call them decisively to holiness?" I believed him, and I dared.

It was a Sunday in Lent in 1855. The boys were rushing into our church. Some were schoolchildren, others apprentices, most were staying in our house. At the time of the homily, I prayed very powerfully to the Holy Spirit. I quoted St Paul: "God wants you to be holy," and I began: "God's great plan for you, my friends, is holiness! I announce this good news to you today. Holiness is not a personal endeavour, it is an adventure for two, it is cooperation between God and us. It is not a matter of carving one's own statue to place it in a niche, but of responding to a friend who extends his hand to us. It all began on the day of our baptism, when our Father in heaven said: "You are my son. I love you always. Be holy as I am holy." Are you ready to respond now? The adventure is worth it. Set out on the journey. Holiness is heaven in your midst today."

The message went out. One boy received it. His life was transformed. Dominic Savio was 13 years old. A spark ignited his heart that day. I met him a few days later. He told me: "I feel in me the need to become a saint. I realised that I can get there by being joyful. I want to give myself to the Lord forever. God wants me to be holy, and I must make it." Our dialogue was long. I invited him to remain serene: everything that disturbs us does not come from God. And I invited him to perform all his daily duties well.

I made the same appeal to other youngsters afterwards. Michael Magone was a small gang leader I met by chance during a train stop at Carmagnola station. His parish priest described him to me as a 'universal troublemaker, reckless and overbearing.' He lived 16 months with us. The Lord changed his life and called him when he was just 14 years old. I also admired Francis Besucco, a small shepherd boy from the Alps, a soul as clear as an Alpine spring, a heart burning with fervour. His death was, in the eyes of those who witnessed it, a true transfiguration: his face radiated light. He too had said 'yes' to God.

Holiness begins every day

St Francis de Sales, wisely wrote to the Frances de Chantal: “Let us not forget the teaching of the saints. They taught us that every day we must believe that we are beginning our advance towards God. We must always begin again and again with good will.” I too told Dominic that his journey with the Lord had to begin again every day. He set out immediately, and his was a radical choice. I had his first Communion resolutions before my eyes: “1) I will go to confession often and receive Communion as often as the confessor gives me permission. 2) I want to make feast days holy. 3) My friends will be Jesus and Mary. 4) Death but not sin.” These resolutions, which he repeated very often, were, so to speak, ruled his actions until the end of his life.

At the age of 13, on 8 December 1854, the day Pope Pius IX proclaimed Mary “immaculate from the moment of her conception,” he renewed his decision: “Mary, I give you my heart, let it always be yours. Jesus and Mary, always be my friends.” This consecration prepared him to receive, three months later, the call to holiness. The seed would find good soil. It would quickly bear good fruit.

I told Dominic: “To be a saint, always be cheerful.” On his arrival at the Oratory, he was restless. But a contagious smile soon brightened his face. He confided to a newcomer, named Camillo Gavio: “Here we make holiness consist of being very cheerful. We only try to avoid the sin that robs us of God’s grace and peace of heart. I also told him: “To be holy, be faithful to your duties. Keep to the timetable, be diligent, play with gusto in the yard, devote time to others, be fervent in your prayer.” I still told him: “To be a saint, accept all the hardships of daily life.” He wanted to put splinters of wood in his bed and sleep in the winter with a light blanket. “Cover yourself well,” I commanded him. Put on gloves to avoid chilblains on your hands. Endure with patience the heat, the cold, the wind, the rain, the fatigue, and all the difficulties of health that the Lord will be pleased to send you. Do you know what penance Jesus wants from you? It is obedience. Obey and it is enough for you. This is the secret of peace.”

Thus, Dominic progressed from day to day, faithful to his duty which he offered to God as a response of love.

Holiness is contagious

“Our God is a consuming fire” (*Letter to the Ephesians* 12:29). God wants us to be “contagious” apostles. This is the path I proposed to Dominic Savio.

Be an apostle. The first thing I advised him to do to become a saint was to work with all his strength to win souls for God, because there is nothing more holy in this world than to cooperate for the good of souls that Jesus redeemed by shedding his blood to the last drop.

Be of service. Give a little of your time to others, be attentive to their needs and sufferings. Give them the flower of a smile. Dominic went to the room we had set up as an infirmary to render his services. He would tutor his classmates in need. He spontaneously helped his comrades in the small necessities of daily life: polishing shoes, brushing clothes... “Everyone does what he can,” he repeated. “I am not capable of doing great things, but what I can I want to do for love of the Lord. I hope that in his infinite goodness, God will accept the poor actions that I offer him.”

Be a peacemaker. One day, two boys after a violent dispute decided to fight a duel with stones. They met on a meadow. Dominic followed them. “Throw your first stone at me,” he said to the angrier, while showing him the small crucifix he wore around his neck. The two duellists lowered their arms. Another time, he called to order a little rascal who was throwing snowballs at some youngsters warming themselves around a stove. Offended, the little rascal lunged at Dominic and scratched him in the face. Dominic, who was older than him, did not say a word. He turned red from the effort he made to contain himself, but continued to watch him calmly.

Trust in Jesus and Mary. To be strong, one must maintain, indeed increase one’s strength. After his arrival at the Oratory, I told Dominic: “Receive communion and go and meet Jesus in the tabernacle. And trust in Mary.” The Eucharist became his strength. He said, and his eyes

shone: “I lack only one thing to be happy: to contemplate face to face the One whom I now see by faith and adore in the tabernacle.”

Be one who unites. Finally, I showed him the path of the apostolate. “Unite your friends. Be apostles together. Unite, be a group. Unity is strength. A triple thread breaks with more difficulty.” On 8 June 1856 he gathered his best friends, about fifteen of them, and they founded the “Sodality of the Immaculate,” a dynamic group of generous and ardent young men. Those first members of the group became the Salesians. Dominic had been their inspiration.

He wanted to be a missionary, but his frail health shattered his dream. He died at the age of fifteen. With all his strength he had set out to follow Jesus, trying to reach him, because Christ was his life, and to die for him was gain (*Letter to the Philippians* 1:21). Holiness is therefore possible at every age. Yesterday as today, saints exist and are very alive. To be one, it is enough to love.

LIVE IN JOY

When I was a young priest, I wrote on a card that I kept in my Breviary these words: "I have convinced myself that the best thing for man is to be serene and do good in life." I found this golden rule in Holy Scripture (Sirach 3:12) and I have never left it since. When, after my homily on holiness, Dominic came to see me to ask for some advice, I told him quite clearly: "Be cheerful and be an apostle." Today, my friends, I want to invite you to discover the "perfect joy" that Jesus left us. For he said to his Apostles: "May my joy be yours also, and may your joy be perfect" (John 15:11).

Come, let us shout with joy

The Psalms let the joy of life shine through. "Boys and girls, old men and children, clap your hands, dance, sing, shout, take your harps, lyres, drums, and praise the name of the Lord!" (*Psalms* 148 and 149). Creation joins in this concert. This simple joy harmonised in me with a happy character, which I believe I inherited from my mother. One evening, a few hours after we had settled into our very poor house in Valdocco, always in a good mood my mother began to sing: "*Woe to the world if it hears us strangers with nothing!*"

I had an easy smile, and I almost always found the words that made people smile. I would sometimes sign Letters to my friends like this: 'John the goon,' 'John the chief of the brats, who always loves you.' After a long absence, I was in a hurry to be among 'my finches' or 'my black-birds.' When someone came to press me with his needs, I would tell him: "Gently, gently, let things not crush things!" My passion was cheerfulness, the joy that makes life beautiful. I had observed, in my childhood, the ruffled games of kittens and dogs, and listened to the song of the jackdaw. To play is to recreate oneself.

I often accompanied my mother to the markets, and spied the skits of conjurers and acrobats. Can you believe that? When I was twelve years

old, I used to perform magic tricks, the somersault, the swallow game. I used to run on my hands, walk on a rope like a professional acrobat.

Play is a relaxation for the body, a joy for the spirit, a source of balance and good health. Very often I have made my own the words of St Philip Neri, apostle of youth: “Run, jump and play. It is enough for me that you do not sin.” And I would repeat: “Run, jump and breathe pure air!” Walks and hikes, music, theatre, puppet shows fascinated my youngsters. Everyone felt so at home in Valdocco. Joy united us, and opened hearts like gems in the April sunshine.

“Always be joyful”

“Always be glad, for you belong to the Lord. I repeat, always be glad” (*Letter to the Philippians* 4:4). St Paul indicates the reason for perfect joy: because we belong to the Lord. The joy that has its source in the heart of God cannot be ephemeral. It is he who gives it to us to make our lives flourish. Our joy comes from him, from the assurance that we are his.

Joy is born of God. Think, friends, of how God's joy entered the world. At Christmas, this joy sings the birth of the Saviour; joy of the angels and shepherds, joy of Mary in her Magnificat, joy of Simeon welcoming the child. Joy of believing in and celebrating Emmanuel, “God with us.” Before leaving his own, Jesus said: “You are my friends... I have told you this so that my joy may be yours also, and your joy may be complete” (*John* 15:11). Let us welcome this complete joy that comes to us from God. In *The Companion of Youth* I wrote: “Our God is the God of joy.”

Joy is wonder. On clear autumn evenings during my childhood, I would gaze spellbound at the snow-capped Alps silhouetted against the setting sun. They were a marvel of God!

Joy is peaceful. Fr Cafasso used to repeat: “Let nothing upset you!” His face was radiant and peaceful. He breathed the joy of God. Dominic Savio said one day: “True joy comes from peace of heart and tranquillity of soul.” Are not joy and peace gifts of the Spirit? “Be joyful,” I wrote one day to a young man on holiday, “but let your joy be genuine, let its source be a conscience pure free from all sin. And to a young Salesian: “Get over your depression by singing with St Paul: “Only he who fights will be rewarded.”

Sing like the Little Poor Man of Assisi: “So great is the good that I expect, that every sorrow is delightful to me.” Joy and peace are sisters, God gives them together. The joy of the heart is the heart of joy, the peace of the heart is the heart of peace.

Joy is friendship. Two friendships brightened my life as a student. Luigi Comollo, a fellow seminary student, had a different temperament from mine. He was meek. I can say that I learnt from him how to live as a Christian. I admired his fervour, his mortifications and his goodness. He left us at the age of 23. Jonah, a young Jew, used to visit me after school at the café where I was a waiter. He was a musician. God fascinated him, he received Christian baptism and it was a great celebration. He remained my friend, a light in my life.

Joy is celebration. The history of our work has been written, I might say, from feast to feast. The feast brings together and recreates. Secular feasts with theatre, songs and music: a children’s home without music is a body without a soul. Liturgical feasts in honour of the Lord, Mary and the saints, prepared with fervent novenas, celebrated in the pomp of sacred ceremonies. Nothing is too good for God! I cannot forget the feast of St John, 24 June: it was Father’s Day and Children’s Day. One 24 June, Gastini, our clown, ginned up a compliment written on a roll of paper more than a hundred metres long. No less was needed for Don Bosco’s feast day!

“Serve the Lord in joy”

In *The Companion of Youth* I combined joy with the service of the Lord, with loving-kindness. St Paul’s hymn to charity is, for the Christian, a hymn of joy in everyday life (see *First Letter to the Corinthians*, Chapter 13).

Joy is attentive. My mother was a master in the art of doing things to please the young. I can still hear their questions: “Mummy, an apple! Mummy, I have lost my handkerchief! I ripped my trousers.” Smiling, discreet, she was always ready. I remember the breakfasts at the feast of St Anne, patron saint of small masons. Together with my superior at the boarding school, we would set the tables and welcome the boys. There

was coffee, chocolate, croutons, sandwiches and many varieties of sweets. They were enchanted. I always had a reserve of sweets, medals, holy pictures in my pockets. Small gifts are a pleasure: a few bottles of vermouth for my benefactors in Toulon, for the Colle family, a bunch of grapes ripened on my balcony for my visitors. The words of the Lord are true: “There is more joy in giving than in receiving.”

Joy is patient. At the age of 58, convalescing from a serious illness, I wrote to a Cooperator: “The doctors have given me this news: for the right eye there is little hope; the left eye can remain as it is, provided I stop reading and writing. So: eat well, drink well, sleep, take walks, etc. Only in this way will I be able to move forward.” One must move forward patiently towards the end of life. In my last illness, semi-paralysed, I still composed a kind of poem in Piedmontese, to encourage my poor legs that no longer wanted to support me! (see *Biographical Memoirs* 18, p. 478).

Joy is trusting. My infirmities worsened in my old age. “Don't worry if I don't write to you,” I confided to a missionary in Argentina. “I am almost blind and practically incapable of moving, writing or speaking. What do you want? I am old and God's will be done. But every day I pray for you, for all my children, and I want them all to serve the Lord willingly with holy joy! The cross gives birth to pure joy, it announces the dawn of Easter!

Joy transcends death. Listen to these last words of Dominic Savio, as his father related them to me: “Now I am happy. It is true that I have to make the long journey to Heaven, but with Jesus in my company I have nothing to fear. Tell everyone: he who has Jesus for a companion and friend, does not even fear death.” He died serenely. It was 9 March 1857. He was 15 years old.

Friends, let us serve the Lord in joy. One day we will see him, in the eternal feast of the blessed. Jesus promised us: “I will see you again, and you will rejoice, and no one will be able to take away your joy” (*John* 16: 22). This joy is within us. We know how to make it flourish. It is the joy that endures.

WORKING YOUR FIELD

Dear young people, laziness is the main trap the Tempter uses. It is the mother of all vices. Be well persuaded that man was born for work; if he does not work, he puts himself out of life. It is not a question of being busy from morning till night without any relaxation, no. It is a matter of believing that time is a treasure. We do not know whether we will live long and have time to earn merit for heaven. The Bible says: "The path a man has taken in his youth, he will continue in his old age" (Proverbs 22: 6) . This means: if we seek true joy in our youth, we will also seek it in our old age in the friendship of the Lord.

(John Bosco, *Companion of Youth*, Turin 1847, introduction).

Sowing your field

Here you had to work for a living. My mother led by example. I can still hear her words hammered out in Piedmontese: 'A bad laundress can never find a good stone for washing.' "He who does not work, does not eat." She was as active as a bee, and we imitated her. My first field was our Becchi land. I sowed, reaped, pruned the vines, harvested the grapes and made wine. I also worked as a stable boy for two years at the Moglia farmstead.

For ten years I studied, and I did it hard. At the same time, I had to earn a living. I was a bartender, a tailor's assistant, I was a shoemaker. During holidays from the seminary, I made tables and chairs, repaired farm tools and made clogs. Having made and my hands skilful at every job helped me a lot in life, especially at the beginning of my work, when there was everything to do.

As a priest, while perfecting my studies, I visited prisons with my friend and teacher Fr Cafasso. I was chaplain of a small hospital for girls. At the same time, I visited young people at their work sites, talked to employers, and defended the rights of young people by demanding apprenticeship contracts for them. Then there was the oratory, with

hundreds and hundreds of young people, and the house in the centre of the oratory, where I housed the neediest boys.

Work became the “badge and pride” of my sons and daughters, and a path to holiness. I told the Salesians: “Work and temperance will make our congregation flourish. The pursuit of comfort will mark its end.” “I want the Salesians to work for the Church until their last breath.” “When a Salesian dies from overwork, our congregation will have achieved a great victory.”

I vigorously urged the youngsters to be courageous sowers.

You, Mary Mazzarello, “organise a workshop with your companions, in your village, and who take in young girls in difficulty, work with ardour. You will be blessed by God. The small seed of your work will become a big tree!”

You, Dominic Savio, “do your duties well. Do you want to become a saint, and quickly? Use your time well. Work under the gaze of God. You will find peace of heart and the joy of serving.”

You, Octavius, who are a tailor, “be committed to your duties. Trust your helpers. Work together for the joy of all. Work for Paradise.”

You, Emmanuel, preparing for your first communion, “I recommend: 1) obedience to parents and superiors; 2) exactitude in your special school duties, without ever having to beg you to fulfil them.”

You, Joseph, young educator, do not discourage your pupils. “Remain faithful to your task. Always try to encourage them. Never humiliate. Praise when they deserve it, never despise anyone. At most, express displeasure when it serves as punishment.” Be good sowers all of you. “Whatever you do, do it willingly, for the Lord's sake and not for the sake of men” (*Letter to the Colossians 3:23*).

Live your time

The Book of Wisdom in the Bible reads: “In the life of man there is a time for everything. Time to be born, time to die; time to plant, time to uproot; time to weep, time to laugh; time to be silent, time to speak ...” (Sirach 3:14). “Every minute is a treasure,” Fr Cafasso used to repeat with

his kind smile. There is therefore a time for everything. Let us use our time well. It is worth gold! It is a currency to buy eternity. Listen, my friends.

“There is a time to grow and a time to make grow.” During my childhood, in the springtime, I used to enjoy watching the green stalks of wheat grow and slowly harden as summer approached. Here is my parable about the grain of wheat: the grain, thrown into the earth in the autumn, is but a small seed lost among the clods. Small, fragile, it nevertheless already carries within itself the heavy, golden ear of the coming harvest. To mature, it will need the long sleep of winter: dying in the earth to release the thin green stem. The grain is not yet the ear, yet the ear is already there. Rain and sun, light and warmth help the growth. It takes time to grow, it takes time to make the ear.”

A maturing ear of corn is like a boy growing towards the Kingdom of God. Man is already in the boy. Dying to his selfishness and his fears, tomorrow he will be a man, capable of giving a hundred per cent too. The parable explains the great reality of education: a time to sow, a time to help growth in gentleness and confidence, a time to become strong in faith and courage.

“There is a time to live and a time to die.” When I arrived at the seminary, my curiosity was piqued by the sundial that hung over the courtyard. It read: “The hours pass slowly for those who are depressed, they pass quickly for those who are cheerful.” So, I said to a friend of mine: “Here is our programme: let us be cheerful, and time will pass quickly!” I put joy at the centre of education: the joy of play, the joy of celebration, the joy of existing and living together.

But just as the shadow cast on the sundial slowly bends as the day moves towards evening, our life each day bends a little more towards its evening. The hour of death draws nearer little by little. Let us keep our lamp lit while waiting for the dawn, for the Master will come to meet us!

Be a labourer for the harvest

Sometimes “one sows and another reaps the harvest.” However, we are all hired by God to work to prepare the harvest. And we shall all be rewarded by him with “eternal life” (*John* 4: 36-37).

The labourer deserves his wages. St Paul emphasises this, Jesus emphasises this in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Everyone receives a silver coin, those of the last hour as well as those who have endured the whole day’s toil. Wages ensure daily bread, those who do not work have no right to eat.

Work is prayer. Mary Domenica Mazzarello used to repeat to her companions: “Let every needlepoint be an act of love for God.” A love that is an offering. To a young Salesian missionary in Buenos Aires, I wrote: “Work! But work for love of Jesus. Suffer everything rather than break charity!” And to Fr Rua I made this recommendation: “Remind the Salesians that for love of our Master, each one must work, obey, abandon what he possesses in the world.”

Work is a path to holiness. Holiness is expressed through the constant desire to be an apostle. It is lived in fully assuming our responsibilities in the Church. If we are joyful workers for the building of the Kingdom of God, we will attract other workers to the same construction. Holiness is contagious.

My friends, let us work our field, the field where God has placed us so that we may bring him flowers and fruit. When I founded the Salesian Cooperators, I told them the words of St Paul: “You are the field that God cultivates, the house that he builds. You are God's cooperators” (*First Corinthians* 3:9). Let us be God's co-operators, full of imagination and boldness.

ONE HEART, ONE FAMILY

To Don Rua and my other beloved sons of St Francis de Sales living in Turin:

Our Society will perhaps soon be definitively approved, and therefore I would need to speak to my beloved children frequently. Since I will not always be able to do this in person, I will try to do it at least by letter (...).

Oh! if our brothers enter the Society to love and to serve Jesus Christ to their last breath, our homes will certainly become a true earthly paradise. Peace and concord will reign among the individuals of each family, and charity will be the daily garment of those who command obedience and respect will precede the steps, the deeds even the thoughts of superiors. In short, there will be a family of brothers gathered around their father to promote the glory of God above the earth and then one day to love and praise Him in the immense glory of the blessed in Heaven.

May God fill you and your labours with blessings, and may the grace of the Lord sanctify your actions and help you to persevere in the good.

*(Sac. Giovanni Bosco, Torino 9 giugno 1867, *Giorno della Pentecoste*).*

You are the apple of my eye

I never knew my father's gaze. Perhaps that is why I looked for other gazes that would give me courage and manifest me love.

When I was a teenager, I sought the gaze of my parish priest and his vicar. I often met them in the street. I would greet them from afar, but they, very withdrawn, would only return my greeting and continue on their way. I used to complain to my mother, saying: 'If I become a priest, I will approach the boys to say a good word to them.' I was looking for a gaze...

I found brothers. In the letter from the only son of a widow, who was one of our Co-operators, I read a great trust, and I replied to him: 'You write to me that Mum's state of health is very serious. Whatever happens, you know very well that Don Bosco has promised, you and

your mum, that I want to help you like a father, especially for the good of your soul. For the feast of Christmas 1864, I wrote to my dear children at Mirabello boarding school in Piedmont, “I thank you for writing to me that you are my friends. You are the apple of my eye. I want you to give me your heart so that every day I can offer it to God in the Holy Mass.” I replied to the New Year greetings sent to me by the students of the Lanzo boarding school: “When I came to visit you, you enchanted me with your goodness and cheerfulness. You stole my soul when I heard you pray. I was still left with this poor heart, whose affection you had already stolen. Now your letter, signed by two hundred friendly and very dear hands, has taken possession of all this heart of which nothing is left but a lively desire to love you in the Lord, to do you good and to save your souls.”

You are a single swarm

At the beginning of our family in Valdocco, a tradition was born: the little chat in the evening, known as ‘good night.’ A simple and cordial meeting at which the father says a few words to his children so that they feel at home.

The little chat on an evening in February 1864 was written down by one of my listeners, and could be entitled: the parable of the swarm. Here it is.

“My friends, let us go with our imagination to one of our towns in spring. There are meadows covered with flowers, shining in the sun’s rays. Here is a swarm of bees, teeming with life, at work. Each bee has its task. Workers fly and collect pollen from flower to flower; other bees at the hive keep watch, build the cells, feed the larvae. Each one works for the good of all. Each one collaborates in the production of honey, the daily nourishment of this large family. Each one obeys the rules of the hive. Let us imitate the bees. Each one plays his part well, and obeys the rules of the house. Without obedience, it is not possible to live together. Disorder and criticism make life in the house impossible. Honey nourishes, but it is the fruit of the work of all the bees. For us, honey is your commitment to study, your diligent work in the workshop, it is your joy at recreation, at

feast days, it is your fervour in prayer, it is the peace that makes us feel good in the family.”

When our family swarmed off to Argentina, it pained me to think that I would never see those dear children of mine again. How could we support one family, on both sides of the ocean? To one of those who had left, I wrote one day: “I would like to come and give you a talk on the Salesian spirit that must animate and guide our actions, and make us feel like one family. Not being able to leave, I tell you at least this: never humiliating words, never severe reproaches in the presence of others. Let the words that resound in every schoolroom be gentleness, charity, and patience. Let every Salesian be a friend to all, never seek revenge, be ready to forgive. Gentleness in words, in actions, in the corrections one has to make, allows one to gain everything and everyone.”

You are rooted in love

You ask me where the affection that makes education possible, come from. Affection comes from the very heart of God who is infinite love. This love is given to us through Baptism. It is a sap that grows and nourishes us. It makes us willing to welcome and love. “If the root of a tree is consecrated to God, so are the branches. It is not you that bear the root, but the root bears you” (*Epistle to the Romans* 11:16-24). We are grafted into Christ, we are “rooted in love.”

The secret of education is in loving-kindness, which “is patient and generous, is respectful, does not give way to anger, forgets wrongs, forgives everything, trusts everyone, endures everything, never loses hope” (*First Letter to the Corinthians* 13:47). I expressed this in two very simple principles.

First of all, without affection there is no trust. I used to tell my boys: “You are young. It is enough that you are young for me to love you. You will hardly find anyone who, more than me, loves you in the Lord Jesus, and who desires your happiness.” I said again: “Be assured that I am all yours, at your disposal day and night, morning and evening, every

moment. I have no other aim but your wellbeing. I think of you, I work for you, I live for you and I am ready to give my life for you.”

Young people have understood this well. One only grows well when one is loved well. When a young person in difficulty meets a man or woman who is ready to give their life for him, he or she begins to trust them, and trusts them to help him or her grow. Love creates trust.

Consequently, without trust there is no education. My mother helped me with her trust when I was a teenager. To buy the materials needed for my acrobatic shows, I needed money. I collected mushrooms, medicinal herbs, etc. to sell them. You will ask me: did your mother see these traits of yours, this time spent being a charlatan? I will answer that she only wanted my good. I had boundless trust in her: I told her everything, I hid nothing, and she let me. Without her permission, I would not have moved a foot. Close to my mother I learnt to live the principles that I would later formulate, and which are the basis of our family spirit: reason, religion, loving-kindness.

One heart, my friends, one family! One path of goodness offered to all, because “those who put their hope in the Lord always find strength” (Isaiah).

GO OUT TO THE OTHERS

Fr Cafasso invited me to accompany him to the prisons. That was why I learnt very early what a degrading level the malice and misery of man can reach. The sight of those youngsters from twelve to eighteen years old, healthy, robust, with alert minds, forced into idleness, tormented by insects, was something horrible to me. What amazed me was that many, who came out of prison with the decision to change their lives, returned a few days later. “Who knows,” I thought to myself, “if these young men had a friend on the outside who would take an interest in them, assist them and educate them, wouldn’t they really change their lives? I decided to become that friend”.

I confided my thoughts to Fr Cafasso and, having received his approval, I began to think about the realisation of this project, entrusting its success totally to the goodness of the Lord.

*(John Bosco, *The Memoirs of the Oratory of St Francis of Sales*).*

“Lord, give me souls and take away the rest.”

This was the motto I chose for my priestly ordination when I was just 26. According to the Bible, these were the words of the king of Sodom to Abraham at the time of the conquest of Canaan: “Give me the people, the goods take them for yourself” (*Genesis 14:21*). I have made a prayer out of it, with a slight variation: “Lord, give me souls and take away the rest.” That is: help me to save souls, to do good to people, men and women of every condition, of every age, of every race; rich and poor, healthy and sick, especially the young, those who succeed and those who are discarded and the less gifted. I want souls, Lord, not for me, but for You. You entrust them to me, and I will protect them, serve them, bring them to know You and love You. Everything else, health, comfort, personal interests, I consider nothing. It is but “rubbish.” I seek You alone.

This motto was written on a placard in my office. Dominic Savio noticed it when he arrived at the Oratory. Reflecting on it, he said: “I

understand. Here one does not try to earn money, but to earn souls for the Lord. I get it. I hope that my soul will also be gained for the Lord.” Shortly afterwards, following one of my homilies on holiness, he begged me: “Help me to become a saint, and quickly!” My reply was uncomplicated: “Be cheerful and help others. All the others.” He truly took his companions to heart. I heard him repeat several times: “Oh, if I could win all my companions for the Lord!” He took an interest in the most isolated ones, those who had the most difficulty at school. He kept them cheerful with his laughter, and helped them to do their duty. When someone was sick, they would ask to have him as their nurse. Dominic would say: “I want to become a missionary.” Every day he prayed for missionaries, every week he received Communion for missionaries. One day I heard him say: “How many people in England are waiting for our help. If I had the strength and the ability, I would like to go there now, and win those souls for the Lord by preaching and giving good example.”

Sensing that his end was approaching, Dominic confided to his friends: “I must run, otherwise death will surprise me on the road.” If we think about it, these are the words that came from the lips of Jesus: “Walk while you have light, before darkness surprises you” (*John* 12:35).

Lord, help us to save souls. I reminded our missionaries: “Seek souls and not money nor honours nor dignity.” For my grandniece Rosina, a young Salesian missionary aged seventeen, I wrote these lines to Monsignor Cagliero: “You will tell her to take care of her health, and that she should take care not to go alone to Paradise. Let her go there, but accompanied by all the souls she will have gained for the Lord.”

The poor are my friends

It is not always easy to help the poor. Fr Cafasso invited me one day to accompany him to witness an execution in Alexandria. In the course of his life, he assisted, it seems, sixty-seven people sentenced to death. I, on the other hand, I am ashamed to say, could not stand the sight, and that one time I fainted. I was too sensitive.

But I visited prisoners in their prisons for many years. In Paris, in the Magdalena church, I told the people listening to me: “It was in the prisons

of Turin that I understood the need for my work.” And today I add: it was there that my mission was revealed to me.

In 1841, Turin had approximately 130,000 inhabitants, half of whom were illiterate. How much misery, how many urgent needs! I listened to the cry of the poorest. On one of the bookmarks of my Breviary I wrote the words of the Bible: “My son, do not deny the poor alms and do not turn your gaze away from the poor” (*Sirach* 4:4). My gaze has always been on poor young people, whom I have welcomed as friends and brothers. In them I have seen the face of the Lord.

Bartholomew Garelli, the orphan with no education and no family whom I met in a Turin sacristy, was Him. The abandoned boy, shivering with cold and penniless, who wet with rain knocked at my door one day in March 1847, and whom my mother and I took into our home, was He. Michael Magone, the intrepid and pure-hearted ringleader, who was taken into our Oratory and died like a little saint, was He. And those straggling boys whom my mother and I took in one evening, and who disappeared at dawn stealing our blankets, was still Him.

It was Jesus who suffered in those young prisoners in the *Generala*, the Turin reformatory. It was He who greeted me in those little bricklayers I visited on building sites. It was He who I met in the sickly boys at the Cottolengo or in the young girls at the little hospital in the *Refuge* where I was chaplain for two years. He was there on my path and would ask me: “So, what are you going to do with your life?” I swore to him to consecrate myself to the poor. And when the Marchioness Barolo invited me to choose between her ‘daughters’ and my ‘vagabonds,’ I did not hesitate for a moment. I wrote to a friend one day: ‘In things that concern perilous youth or that serve to win souls for God, I run ahead to the point of recklessness.’

Let us cooperate with God

I was familiar with these words attributed to St Augustine: “Of all divine things, the most divine is to cooperate with God in the salvation of souls.”

I had the gift of knowing how to “gather people.” Still as big as a pound of cheese, I was already attracting an audience of people of all ages by telling my stories, for hours at a time in the stables of our village. And all my life, I gathered young people and people of all backgrounds. I have educated, and by educating I have founded. The families of my sons and daughters were born on the very field of my mission. I invented a type of lay religious, the Salesian coadjutors. I founded a kind of third order, the Salesian Cooperators: lay people and priests who live the Gospel in the spirit of our Salesian family.

All together in the service of the Church, we have become “God’s co-operators.” For ‘we are God’s field, the house He builds. In this way I saw an educational, financial and spiritual cooperation spring up around me, which included the sick and those isolated in suffering, who offered prayer and suffering. I myself participated in the sufferings of Christ, knowing that one must “suffer with Him in order to rejoice with Him in Paradise.” I knew abandonment during the political and social upheavals of 1848.

One day I found myself alone with four hundred youngsters. All my co-workers had abandoned me. I had been slandered, made to look crazy. Two senior priests came to take me to the asylum and have me treated at their expense! With a daring prank I locked them in the carriage they had brought for me, and sent them to the asylum in my place! I faced real killers. I have escaped ambushes and assassination attempts some fifteen times. Without my dear *Grigio*, the providential dog, I would have been clubbed to death. I have suffered police searches and surveillance. I have known sleepless nights, uncomfortable journeys, long waits in the antechambers of the powerful to obtain justice or to exonerate myself of guilt never committed. I have endured infirmity and illness, and all the thorns of life. Jesus and his holy mother have helped me. I have fought the good fight, and, like the Apostle Paul, “I have hoped for the crown” from the hands of the One who “has overcome the world.”

My friends, I see again in my office in Valdocco the small globe, which is still there. I am often moved as I stare at it, and hold it in my hands. With my eyes on the crucifix, I prayed: “If we could, in the outburst of

our charity, embrace the whole world to take it to the Lord!” Love
“believes all things, hopes all things... Love will never cease!”

WALK IN MY PRESENCE

The Word of God is called Light, because it enlightens man and directs him in believing, acting and loving. It is Light because, if understood well, it shows man the path he must follow to arrive at happiness. It is Light because it calms human passions, which can cause darkness for the soul, dark and dangerous, impossible to dispel except through the word of God. It is Light because, if preached well, it spreads the clarity of divine grace in the hearts of the hearers, and makes known to them the truths of faith.

(John Bosco, *The Catholic in the Century*, Turin 1883)

“Speak Lord, your servant hears”

God spoke to Abraham, the father of those who believe. He said to him: “I am God Almighty: walk in my presence and act justly” (*Genesis 17:12*). Abraham asked for no explanations. “Obedient to the voice, he set out without knowing where he was going” (*Letter to the Hebrews 11:8*). He believed. The Word was light on his path. My friends, may this light be an encounter with God for all of you today.

On the occasion of a retreat, when I had been a priest for six years, I jotted down this reflection: “Prayer is to the priest what water is to the fish, air to the bird, and a spring to the deer. The one who prays is like the one who seeks an audience with the king.” To pray is to go and meet the King of kings, to contemplate his face, to welcome his advice, to confide to him one’s plans, one’s problems, and to place oneself at his service.” Thus, Samuel met the Lord. Three times the voice of God resounded in the night and three times the boy stood up. And he answered: “Speak Lord, your servant hears” (*1 Samuel 3:10-12*). Let us imitate him, my friends. Let us be like him, attentive, faithful and humble servants.

The servant is attentive to the king's words and gestures. Samuel hears the word of the Lord, wakes up and raises his voice in prayer: “Speak, Lord!” On one of the bookmarks in my Breviary, I copied a thought attributed to St Bernard: “Without tiring yourself, read the Word of God. Through

it you will know the path to follow and the dangers to avoid.” The Word of God is light and food. It is not only contained in the Bible, but is revealed through catechism, homilies, the teaching of the Church, the lives of the saints and all God's witnesses. Through it, God speaks to us and invites us to pray. “I stand at your door and knock” (*Revelation* 3:20).

The servant is faithful. Like Samuel, he answers his divine King without reserve, without hesitation: “Here I am!” This faithfulness to prayer has marked some important stages in my life. When I was fourteen, a good priest showed me the way to make a short meditation, or rather a short spiritual reading, every day. It was a great help to me. At the age of twenty, when I received the clerical habit, I promised to do a little meditation and some spiritual reading every day. Then, at my ordination to the priesthood, I decided to dedicate a certain amount of time each day to meditation, spiritual reading and visiting Jesus in the Eucharist. I decided to prepare for Mass with a quarter of an hour of prayer, and to spend a quarter of an hour of thanksgiving after Mass. Throughout my life, as far as I have been able, I have been faithful to these resolutions.

The servant is humble. Like Samuel, he makes himself available to his king to serve him and offer him his humble daily work. Do you know the “meditation of merchants”? I explained it to my boys during a retreat. Those who cannot make meditation at fixed times, methodically, because of travel, a commitment, or business which cannot be avoided, should at least make the meditation I call “of merchants.” Merchants, wherever they are, are always thinking about their business. They think of buying goods, of reselling them at a good profit, of the losses they might have, of the losses they have already incurred, and of the proper means of getting back the money they have lost. They think of the gains they have made and those they could make. Such meditation is thus an examination of conscience. In the evening, before we go to bed, we examine whether we have put into practice the resolutions we made on this or that commitment, whether before God

we are in the black or in the red. We make, in short, a kind of spiritual balance sheet.

“Like a child has rest in its mother’s arms, so is my soul, at peace with the Lord” (*Psalms* 131)

Jesus says: “Unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (*Matthew* 18:3). And I add: “and you will not know how to pray.” “To be like a child” is not a matter of age, but of freshness of heart, of conversion of intelligence. Then the qualities of the child become the qualities of our prayer. This prayer is confident and generous.

A child’s prayer is trusting. I experienced a pivotal moment at the beginning of my work, the day I found myself alone with my boys on the field of the Philippi brothers. They had evicted us, and we did not know where to go next. I made this prayer: “My God, why don’t you make me understand where you want me to gather my boys? Make me understand, tell me what to do.” And immediately my saviour, Pancrazio Soave, arrived and offered me a shed on rent.

The child’s prayer is generous. On the day I donned the clerical habit (it was 25 October 1835), as my parish priest clothed me in the holy robe, I made this prayer to God: “Of how many old things must I be stripped, Lord! Help me to destroy all my bad habits.” And I continued moved: “My God, grant that I may at once begin a new life, all according to your will. Let faithfulness and holiness be the constant object of my thoughts, words and deeds. So be it! Mary, be the sunshine of my soul!”

Do we have a child’s heart to praise, to give thanks, to ask forgiveness and to set out again in life “singing of the wonders of our God”?

“O God you are my God, from dawn I seek you” (*Psalms* 62,2)

Jesus wanted his friends to be vigilant. In the Garden of Olives, during his agony, he invited his apostles to keep watch with him. He calls his own to “watch and pray at all times.” He makes every Christian an ardent witness of prayer at every hour, during every activity.

In *the Companion of Youth’s* Prayer of the day, I proposed to young people the prayers of the day. In the morning I indicate what could be called

“a wink to the Lord”: “I adore you, O my God, and I love you with all my heart. I thank You for having created me. I offer you the actions of my day.” In the evening, a filial abandonment into the arms of God: “My God, forgive me, the wrongs I have committed, and accept the little good I have been able to do.” I proposed this rhythm of time with God to a French Cooperator, Claire Louvet: “A few things, but observe them carefully. Every year: an examination of conscience on the progress and regression of the past year. Every month: a good exercise for a happy death with confession and communion as if they were the last in your life. Every week: a fervent confession. Much effort to remember the advice of the confessor. Every day, Holy Communion and if one can make it, meditation and examination of conscience. And consider each day as the last day of life.”

I reminded a nun of a simple and practical means to remain united with God: “If you want matches to set off sparks of love, you will find them in the very short prayers that are called “invocations.”

The path of our prayer is this: a response of love to the Lord who walks with us towards the homeland where true happiness awaits us.

Have you noticed, friends, that Moses descending from the mountain where he had spoken with God, did not know that the skin of his face had started glowing. (*Exodus 34:29*) Perhaps it will happen to you too: after a time of prayer, going back to your brothers, someone will discover in the light of your face that you have spoken with God.

“TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME”

My dear Bonetti,

as soon as you receive this letter, go quickly to Fr Rua and tell him frankly what will make you happy. Let the Breviary rest until Easter: you are forbidden to recite it. Say your Mass slowly without tiring yourself. All fasting, all mortification in food is forbidden. In short, the Lord is preparing work for you, but he does not want you to begin it until you are in perfect health, and especially not to cough. Do this and you will do what pleases the Lord. You can compensate for everything with fervent prayers, with offerings to the Lord of your inconveniences, with your good example. I forgot one thing. Carry a mattress to your bed, adjust it as one would a first-class armchair; cover yourself well in bed.

*Yours affectionately in Jesus Christ,
Fr John Bosco. Turin 1864.*

Let us carry the cross everyday

Jesus' teaching is clear: “If anyone wishes to come after me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me” (*Luke 9:23*).

John Bonetti, a young priest, had just arrived at my recently founded work in Lanzo, Piedmont. Passing by I found him suffering. On my return to Turin, like a good physician of soul and body, I addressed this letter to him, with the order to do whatever was necessary to recover his health. First of all, avoid anything that could be a source of tension or fatigue: no Breviary for four months, until Easter. No fasting (in those days people really fasted during Lent!) and food deprivation, and not even anxiety about celebrating Mass. Then, compensate for these with short prayers, with the offering to the Lord of one's inconveniences and with good example. Not forgetting the means to sleep well and heal quickly. All in an atmosphere of joy, trust and peace of heart.

You will say to me: “But, Don Bosco, Jesus commands us to carry our cross every day and to walk with him. Where is the cross in his recommendations?” I reply that the cross is everywhere, in the spirit of availability and service. The cross does not only mean mortifications and austerities. It is balance of life, self-mastery, caring for the health of the body in order to be ready to serve others. It is a loving response to the One who was lifted up for us on the cross, committing ourselves to follow Him every day, with patience, courage, faithfulness that submits to discipline. To sum up, I would say that the important thing is not to do, but to be available, to let God do. Like Jesus, we can say: “As you will it, Father.” For me, this is the meaning of the cross of each day, which we must carry after Jesus.

To Michael Rua, when he was a young rector at the age of 26, I gave this advice, very similar to what I wrote to John Bonetti: “Let nothing upset you. Avoid austerities in food. Mortify yourself through the diligent fulfilment of your duty and the endurance of the displeasures that others will give you. Take seven hours of sleep every day.”

Dominic Savio was looking for exceptional penances; he wanted to put splinters of wood in his bed. I told him: “The penances that the Lord wants from you are: to bear with patience the heat, the cold, the wind, the rain, the fatigue and all the difficulties of health that it will please Him to send you. I said the same things to the Salesians in their regulations. Eulalia, my niece, was about to take her vows as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, and I wrote to her: “Know that religious life is a life of continual sacrifice, but that every sacrifice is amply rewarded by Our Lord. Obedience, observance of the rules, with the hope of the reward that awaits us: this is our only comfort during this mortal life.” The vows are a daily cross, but also a path of hope and holiness!

“Become new men”

The Apostle Paul writes: “Your old life, ruined and deceived by lust, you must put it away, just as you put away an old garment; and instead, you must allow your hearts and spirits to be renewed, to become new men, created like God, to live in righteousness, holiness, and truth”

(*Epistle to the Ephesians* 4:22-24). I experienced this transformation on two occasions early in my life.

My clerical vestition was a kind of “putting away an old garment.” I was twenty years old and preparing to enter the seminary in Chieri. I felt the need to change my life. On 25 October 1835, in the parish church of Castelnuovo, my relatives and friends looked at me with admiration. They knew me, they had applauded my exploits as a sportsman, a conjurer, a musician, an acrobat. The service began. The parish priest, Fr Cinzano, blessed the black robe and handed it to me. I mentally said this prayer: “Lord, how many old things I have to put away! Help me to become a new man, to begin a new life, all according to your will.”

After this day, to give myself a rule of life, I wrote down some resolutions. The first two marked a break with the past, a radical choice: 1) Never again would I attend public performances at fairs and markets. 2) Never again would I be a conjurer, an acrobat, or go hunting. All this I found contrary to good grace and the priestly spirit. Then, four other resolutions pointed to moderation in drinking and eating, the guarding of the affections and senses, prayer with meditation and personal spiritual reading.

I read those resolutions before an image of Our Lady, determined to fulfil them at any price. God only knows if I was faithful. What I can say is that that event freed me from unnecessary burdens, from my ‘old life.’ It made me, in a way, a new man and set me on the path of service.

Six years later, on 5 June 1841, in Turin, with my priestly ordination I became a priest of Jesus Christ, an apostle entirely consecrated to his mission. To be a ‘good soldier’ of Christ, I felt a discipline of the spirit was necessary. In my notes, written during the preparation retreat, I recalled that the priest does not go to heaven alone. “If he acts well, he will go to heaven with the souls he will have saved by his good example.”

The motto of my life already sang within me: “Lord, give me souls and take away the rest.” I wrote nine resolutions; the third and fourth were the decisive ones: “Patience, to humble myself in everything and always when it comes to saving souls”; and “The charity and gentleness of St Francis de Sales will guide me in everything.” The others concerned temperance, time

for sleep (five hours per night), work, controlling the affections and prayer: meditation, spiritual reading and a daily visit to Jesus in the Eucharist.

As a working tactic, I wrote these words of St Bernard on a bookmark in my Breviary: “If you discover something bad in yourself, correct it. Keep what is good. What is deformed, repair. That which is beautiful embellish. Preserve that which is healthy. That which is sick, heal. Read the Word of God without ever growing weary: it will teach you what you must flee from and what you must follow. Thus, it seems to me, the new man grew in me.

We await our joyful hope

Christian discipline (which specialists call ‘asceticism’) is not sterile, but a bearer of hope. The Apostle Paul says this to Titus, his friend and disciple. We must live “looking forward to the joyful hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who taught us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live soberly, righteously and godly in this world” (*Letter to Titus* 2:12-13).

Our hope is a person who gives meaning to the journey of life. Here is my last message to three hundred Salesian religious gathered for a retreat: there you will find the essence of the spirituality of the cross that I was trying to convey. To each one, after handing over a crucifix, I said these words: “I recommend that you carry your cross, not the one we choose, but the one God’s will assigns to us; and to carry it cheerfully out of love. Let us therefore say: “O blessed cross! Now, you weigh a little, but this time will be short and this cross will be the one that will earn us a crown of roses for eternity.” Yes, my children, let us bear the cross with love, and let us not make it weigh on others. On the contrary, let us help others to carry theirs. Often say to yourselves: “Of course, I am a cross for others, just as others are often a cross for me; but I want to carry my cross without being a cross for others. Also tell yourself: “This trial, this work, this illness, even if light, also constitutes a cross. I carry it cheerfully and willingly because it is the cross that the Lord sends me.” Always work for the glory of the Lord... Be joyful, my dear

children, be healthy and holy, and always live in agreement with one another! In the cross is the joy and hope of living with Jesus Christ forever.”

CHOOSE A GUIDE FOR YOUR JOURNEY

Confession is an admirable sign of God's mercy towards sinners. If God had wanted to forgive us sinners only through Baptism, how many Christians would be lost! But, knowing our great weakness, God wanted to establish another sacrament to forgive our sins committed after Baptism. This sacrament is confession (..). The confessor is a loving father who has no other aim than our salvation; he is a doctor who heals all the wounds of our soul.

(John Bosco, The Month of May, Turin 1858, 21st and 22nd day).

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you” (Luke 15:18)

The parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father highlights God's tenderness. The father is God, rich in mercy. The representative of the father is the priest, who gives forgiveness in his name, welcomes, restores trust and brings peace to the heart. I insistently reminded my brother priests: “The friend of the soul inspires trust and not fear!”

Dominic Savio was eleven and a half years old, and he first met me in the company of his father. I took him aside, and immediately we fully trusted one another, he with me and I with him. He asked me without mincing words: “So, will you take me to Turin to study?” I answered him: “I think you have good stuff in you.” “Well, I am the cloth, you be the tailor!” Our friendship sprang up in that instant, like living water from a spring. Through that friendship I helped Dominic to become a saint.

A friend of the soul welcomes the penitent with the gentleness of Jesus. “Confessors,” I told the priests many times, “welcome all your penitents with patience and gentleness, but especially the boys. Help them to open their consciences; insist that they come regularly to confession. Use kindness and persuasion so that they put your advice into practice. If you have to reprimand them, do it with kindness, never scold them.

If you scold them, they will not come again, or they will keep silent about the faults for which you scolded them.”

I have repeatedly told youngsters that it is good to choose a stable/regular confessor. One does not change a friend like one changes one’s clothes: “A faithful friend is a sure refuge; he who has found him has found a treasure,” says the Bible (*Sirach* 6:14). I happened to say to tell little Joseph, a third-grade student in Turin: “Do you remember the pact we made? We want to be friends, and to be united in the love of God, in serving him as one heart, one soul.”

“Believe me, my son, your sins are forgiven” (*Matthew* 9:2)

When healing a sick man who had been brought to him on a stretcher, Jesus, amazed by the faith of the sick man and his bearers, forgave him his sins. He healed his heart before healing his body. And what gentleness in his words: “Believe me, my son, your sins are forgiven!”

The confessor is the physician who brings healing. I myself healed the soul of Michael Magone, whom life had already wounded. His parish priest had presented him to me with these words: “Fatherless. His mother works. He got kicked out of school and spends his time on the streets. He has a keen intelligence, but his inconstancy and fickleness make him unable to study. At catechism school he is the universal troublemaker.” I welcomed him to Turin. Within a month, his unrestrained desire to play and make noise suddenly ended. His face bespoke a sad look. He cried often. I approached him, spoke to him. I asked him to let me take charge of his heart for a moment and to tell me the reason for his sadness. He burst into sobs.

“I have a guilty conscience,” he told me in despair. I then told him seriously and simply: “You can easily put everything right. Come and see me in confession, and tell me you want to review something in your past life. I will ask you some questions, and all you have to do is answer a few yes and a few no. And peace will return.” He came to confession that same evening. He received God’s forgiveness and his life was transfigured with

joy. A year later he was attacked by acute appendicitis, which was impossible to operate on in those days. He died a saintly death at the age of fourteen. Another Dominic Savio.

In the face of Michael, I see many other faces of penitents of all ages and qualities, whose confessions I heard and whom I counselled in the forty-six years of my priestly ministry. God's forgiveness transformed them. You will ask me: "Don Bosco, what advice did he normally give to his penitents?" My advice was short, simple and practical, in line with the life and character of each one.

One of my children kept some words I said to him in confession: "Think often of Jesus in the Eucharist. Ask Mary to obtain from her Son the grace of fervour, and live in peace." "Today we begin the Novena of the Immaculate Conception and we are still at the beginning of the school year. Put your whole heart into starting the novena well and living your year well, placing everything you do under Mary's protection. You will see how she will come to your aid! Go in peace." At the beginning of a retreat, I called him and said: "We know each other, we are friends. I have prayed a lot for you. I will do all I can to do you good. Prepare your confession well. Examine well the essential points of your life."

I also used to invite my penitents to emphasise their spirit of penance through concrete gestures. During the month of May, I proposed some personal efforts. For example: "I will forgive someone who has offended me. I will watch over my eyes. I will give away that object I care so much about. I will contemplate the cross of the Lord."

A good confession has its proof in the improvement of our life.

"Get up and walk!"

Jesus forgave the paralytic's sins, and then restored him to health. "Now, my friend, get up and walk. Return to your home, you are a new man!" (*Matthew 9:4*). The crowd, spellbound, gave glory to God who

had given Jesus such power. This power, Jesus passed on to his brothers, his priests. In his name, they can forgive; in his name, they can be spiritual guides. I myself have been guided and counselled all my life.

Be blessed, Lord, for the counsels of my wonderful mother Margaret. In the decisive stages of my childhood: my first confession and first communion, she spoke powerful words to me that increased my faith in God and my trust in Mary.

Be blessed, Lord, for Fr Calosso, the chaplain of my village. In his smile, in his goodness, in his wisdom I met your heart, Lord. He advised me to make a short daily meditation; and thus, I began to understand what spiritual life is. Happy the teenager who finds a wise priest to whom he can open his heart and with whom he can chart a good Christian path.

Be blessed, Lord, for the friend, the teacher, the holy priest Joseph Caffasso whom you placed on my path! The Holy Spirit advised, encouraged and directed me through his words. He was my confessor and spiritual father for nineteen years. If I have done anything good in my life, I owe it to this exceptional priest, into whose hands I placed all my concerns and all the choices of my life.

Be blessed, Lord, for the young people and all the people to whom I have been able to give advice and comfort. Through the sacrament of forgiveness, I have had proof of the efficacy of your grace in hearts.

Be blessed, Lord, for Dominic Savio, Michael Magone, Francis Besucco and all the others! Their stay among us was very short. But the grain thrown into the earth sprouted before our eyes, and produced a hundred per cent. Numerous vocations followed the bright path that You traced out for them.

You are truly, Lord, the God of mercy. The grace of your forgiveness is a path of holiness, hope and peace; it is a springtime of the heart. You are the God of love always ready to say to us: “Rise up and walk!”

RECEIVE THAT BREAD EVERYDAY

What tenderness there is in the love of Jesus for humankind! In his infinite goodness, he wanted to establish with each of us the bonds of a sublime friendship. He comes to dwell in our hearts with his body, soul and divinity. What a wonderful gift! Jesus' love has no limits. We form one body with him.

Jesus could have limited his presence to the celebration of the Mass alone. But no. He wanted to take up permanent residence among us. In the tabernacle night and day, he waits for us, and offers himself to us at every hour. Like a tender mother he opens his arms to us. He is there to generously distribute his gifts to us. He is there to draw us to him and take us with him to Paradise. Let us visit him often!

(John Bosco, *Novena in honour of Mary Help of Christian*, Turin 1870, fifth and eighth day).

“He who eats me will have the life of grace through me” (*John 6,37*)

The Eucharist is communion. When I was in the seminary, I went every day to visit Jesus in the Eucharist. I did not take any books with me, but once I found the *Imitation of Christ* in a pew, and I read with interest a few chapters on the Eucharist. That truly golden little book won me over, and I never left it again. I was inspired by its pages and wrote a dialogue between the Lord and his disciple.

The disciple - Jesus, I listen to your voice that says: “I stand at the door and knock.” Yes, you call me by name as you called Mary Magdalene in the garden on Easter morning. Like Zacchaeus, I want to open my heart and my home to you. Come, I hunger for you. Sick, I await my healer. Poor, I receive my king. Lonely, I welcome my friend. Come, my door is open. May I be with you and you with me.

Jesus - If anyone hears my voice, my son, and opens the door, I will come in to him, I will sit with him and he with me. Listen to my voice. I am the bread of love, the bread I give is the bread of my love. I have loved you to the point of breaking this bread with you, I have loved you completely. I had to walk a long way to come to you. Faithful to my covenant, I fed the children of Israel in the wilderness with daily manna. I became flesh in the womb of Mary, tabernacle of beauty and purity. I multiplied bread for the hungry crowds. But I wanted to love even more.

Before I left my friends, I gathered them together on the eve of my death, and said to them: "Friends, I am not about to leave you; take this bread, it is my body; drink this wine, it is my blood. And repeat these gestures, repeat these words. For love, I remain with you until the end of the world."

Receive the bread of my love, my son. Let your heart beat to the rhythm of my heart, and learn to love. To love is to give, it is to share, it is to exchange what you have. Be good bread for your family at home, for everyone in your place of work, in your neighbourhood. Be nourishing bread.

He who eats me shall have life through me, for my love is eternal. But beyond this, I am the living bread, my son. In the desert, the bread gave strength and life to a whole people on their way. On Easter morning, like a bud swollen with sap, I exited my tomb. The Holy Spirit woke me from death, and I am the Risen One and the Living One forever. I am the living bread. My bread makes you a living being forever. I give you my life as new energy. I give you my joy, the joy of the eternal Easter. Receive me as bread, and you will live for me.

Disciple – My Lord and my God, I adore you in silence. Make me, in my turn, bread broken for my brothers, for a new world, for your glory, Jesus.

"Behold, the dwelling place of God among men" (*Revelation 21,3*)

Jesus – The Eucharist, my son, is also the place of adoration. After speaking to my people in the burning bush, after giving them bread in the desert, I pitched my tent among men. It is no longer the tent under which I met with Moses, but the tabernacle of my divine presence, of my

permanent dwelling. I am the friend who watches, who welcomes, night and day, and who says: “Come to me, all you who are weary with labour and trouble, and I will give you rest” (*Matthew* 11:28).

The disciple – Your presence is wonderful, Lord. I adore you with the fervour of Dominic Savio who used to spend whole hours in your company talking to you as to a friend. A witness picked up his words in front of the tabernacle: “Yes, my God, I tell you and I repeat: I love you with all my heart and I want to love you even unto death.” It is the same cry that sprang from the heart and mouth of St John on the lake when he saw you: “Yes, it is the Lord King!” One day Dominic said: “What I lack to be happy is only to be able to see face to face the One whom I now see by faith and whom I adore on the altar.” And he gladly repeated this prayer:

“Lord, I give you all my freedom,
Here are my powers, my body,
All I give to you, for all is yours, O God,
And to your Will I surrender myself”.

Jesus – I have placed my dwelling within you, my son. And so, I am present in your neighbourhood, in your school, in your community. Do you understand these words? You are my living tabernacle. The last words I said to my Apostles are: “I will be with you all days, until the end of the world.” Every day I am in the tabernacle and I am within you: this presence of mine prolongs the Eucharistic Sacrifice of the altar. I said: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.” Present in the tabernacle, present within you, I continue to draw everyone to the good, to God.

The disciple – With my eyes on the cross and the tabernacle, I entrust myself entirely to you. I want to be your living tabernacle.

Take my eyes, my unhealthy and blindly selfish gazes; give me your eyes to look at people and things as you look at them, that they may be alight with wonder for good.

Take my hands so often lazy and quarrelsome; give me your hands to share and serve, to work and build, your hands pierced by nails to offer myself to the Father, with you.

Take my gluttonous and spiteful lips; give me your lips to be silent and to pray, to bless and to thank, to smile and to sing.

Take my heart with its hardness and anger; give me your heart, a peaceful heart to make peace, a magnificent heart to give without calculating, a humble and sweet heart to recognise you in the most impoverished brother.

Lord, I adore you by repeating the words of the ancient hymn: “O memorial of the Lord's death, living bread that gives life to man, grant that my soul may live on you and always experience the sweetness of your presence!”

“I have given you an example”

Jesus – Adoration, my son, leads to imitation. Imitation transforms and engages. Have you meditated on the gesture of my last supper with my Apostles? I tied a towel to my waist and washed their feet and I dried them, those of Peter, those of Judas. Then the supper continued. I said: “I have given you an example that you also should do what I have done for you” (*John* 13:15). Then I broke bread among them, thus showing that the breaking of bread was also linked to a service: the Eucharistic liturgy to the liturgy of life. He who receives communion becomes a servant of others like me.

The disciple – The words of the Apostle John resonate in my heart: “Jesus gave his life for us; we, in turn, must give it for our brothers.” The first Christians lived this invitation very strongly. They were assiduous in the breaking of bread, they shared their goods among themselves, they manifested their faith with gestures of friendship and reconciliation. But today, Lord, how should we interpret the gesture that accompanied the first Eucharist? How should we live the example that you have given us?

Jesus – I gave you the example, my son, first of all to remind human beings that the first quality of service is its gratuitousness. Contemporary

society has multiplied services of all kinds. But service has often become synonymous with power, might and money. The servant of others, according to the Gospel, is selfless. He who has received much, must share, he who rules must be he who serves. Be selfless servants. I have given you an example so that you should “wash each other’s feet” in all humility. The servant according to the Gospel is humble.

Humility does not consist in being small or poor, but in making oneself small and poor in heart, in lowering oneself and becoming condescending out of love. He who loves is the greater, the smaller he makes himself until he makes the total gift of himself, until the cross. It speaks of the “humility of God.” The servant after my own heart hears my words: “Learn from me, who am meek and lowly in heart.” Service is the source of all virtues, because it is true, concrete love.

Having loved my own, I loved them to the end, to the point of washing their feet, to the point of making myself bread, to the point of giving my life. I gave you the example so that you too might do this: service inaugurates the kingdom of heaven before our eyes.

The disciple – Lord, give me the strength to imitate your example, to realise it in my life.

I AWAIT YOU ALL IN PARADISE

My dear and beloved children in Jesus Christ.

I leave you here on earth, but only for a little while. I hope that God's infinite mercy will ensure that we may all one day find ourselves in blissful eternity. There I await you (..).

Continue to love me through the exact observance of our constitutions. Your first Superior is dead. But our true Superior, Christ Jesus, will not die. He will always be our Master, our guide, our model.

Farewell, O dear children, farewell. I await you in heaven. There we will speak of God, of Mary, mother and support of our Congregation; there we will eternally bless this Congregation of ours, in which obedience to the rules contributed powerfully and effectively to saving us...

(John Bosco, *Spiritual testament*, Turin 1884).

“He will place us beside Jesus together with you.”

At the beginning of these meditations, I told you, my friends, the beatitudes are a path of happiness. You will be happy if you live each day of your journey in freedom and joy. The kingdom of God is within you; but I told you, it will one day shine in the eternal springtime of paradise. This is possible - as the Apostle Paul says - because “he who raised Jesus from the dead will raise us up and place us with him” (2 *Corinthians* 14). Thus, the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us on the last day and place us beside Him forever.

This is the endless happiness and joy of Paradise. It is here that I am with the living God, it is here that I await you all. For here where I am, there you will also be: your place is reserved. I repeat: the secret of your happiness is the success of your life, the success of your vocation, whatever your age or condition. So, walk in hope, your eyes raised towards your homeland!

I await you, parents and educators. Today, as yesterday, your task is a “ministry,” an irreplaceable mission in the eyes of God and society. It is a fight for dignity, justice, the good of the Christian and the citizen, a fight against marginalisation and fanaticism of all kinds. Education is an affair of the heart.

Love your children and pupils more than yourselves; they are created in the image and likeness of God, they are tenderly loved by the Father, saved in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit dwells in them to guide and strengthen them in virtue. He is the educator, the wonderful counsellor who inspires and gives peace.

Love the young with the heart of God, with his patience, his tenderness, his humility and his gentleness. My whole method is born of the Gospel. Like Jesus, we know how to forgive, how to reconcile, how to gather, how to give confidence and how to sow joy that is not ephemeral. Like him, we know how to say and repeat: “Get up and walk!” Let us love young people not as inferiors, but as people full of promise. The educator is not the one who knows, but the one who humbly walks the path of improvement, of holiness.

Love what young people love, but also admit that they like things that you do not like. Because education, like loving like a couple, allows for differences, passes through renunciations, and is built up through failures and successes. There is no education without training, there is no education without renunciation, fortified by God's grace. Love the young, and with predilection the poorest, the excluded, those who are marked by defeat, those who escape into drugs, often because they are badly loved or rejected. The Lord's warning is serious: the poor, the little one, is me! Yes, friends, it is a privileged place to personally encounter the risen Christ: “Whoever gives a simple glass of water,” “Whoever welcomes one of these little ones welcomes me” (*Matthew 18:5*).

Education is also a matter of reason, dialogue and the formation of the capacity to judge. We must remember this in this century of the image. We have trust. I have often said: “Without affection there is no trust, without trust there is no education.” Today, the child is often

over-protected; every effort is avoided; everything is within his reach, without effort, without initiative. Let us train them in responsibility. I have taught young people to commit themselves to the service of their brothers, to cooperate with God; I have trained them to be apostles.

Good success, like true love, requires going out to others. This is your task, parents and educators. Courage! Education, a path to God, leads to Paradise. It is there that I await you all. I also look forward to this meeting with you, my sick and isolated friends, “suffering members of Christ the Saviour.” And you who have been on this “path of prayer with Don Bosco” up to now, be animated by a single hope: “The glory of God is the living person, the life of man is the vision of God” (St Irenaeus).

“We will go to the house of the Lord” (*Psalm 122.1*)

The words of the “psalm of ascent” towards the sanctuary of Jerusalem stimulates our journey towards Paradise. It is there that I await you, friends, priests, religious, lay people committed to the Church in the service of its mission. All of you are God’s co-operators, all of you are responsible in your diocesan and parish communities and in your movements. Be faithful and selfless servants, builders of peace and unity, joyful in your faith, following the example of the first Christians. I myself, a priest of the diocese of Turin and a religious, committed together with lay people, have been insistently reminded of this all my life.

Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead: he remains your model, your guide, your teacher. Like Saint Paul to Timothy, I say to priests: “Revive the gift of God laid on you by the laying on of hands” (*2 Timothy 1:6*). It is the grace of your ordination, to choose God every day, and to love him above all else. Break the bread of the Eucharist that makes the Church, and invites people to break it. Experience God's forgiveness, a spring of the spirit and recharge of love.

Be passionate about the Gospel, proclaim it to the young and especially to the less gifted, the excluded, the physically and mentally handicapped. Be God's witnesses among them. With your smile and your joy, you will raise up vocations of apostles and saints. Men and women religious,

preserve as a treasure the spirit of your congregations, remain faithful to your holy vows: do not take back what you have given to God.

All of you be loving children of the Church our mother, bearers of the riches revealed to us by the Second Vatican Council, open to the renewal of prayer, liturgy and the human and theological sciences. Live under the gaze and under the mantle of Mary, our sweetest and kindest mother. Have confidence in her help and you will see what miracles are.

Awaken Christians from their “sleep” so that they may await the arrival of the Lord. Restore to the faithful the familiarity, the nostalgia and the sense of the heavenly homeland. The afterlife is not an alienation, but an Easter, a passage towards the Light. It is “our hope, the splendour of the manifestation of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ” (*Titus* 2:13). This is the way to our happiness. I await you all in the peace of God.

“To him be glory and honour for all eternity” (*Daniel* 3:57)

Finally, I look forward to you, young people of every country, of all races, and “the delight of God's heart.” You will build the world of tomorrow in this 21st century, and you will be the protagonists of a new society at the dawn of the third millennium.

Tell yourselves with gestures of friendship the joy of believing in the living Christ.

I had promised God that my life, until my last breath, would be for young people. I believe I have kept my word. I loved you and tried to make you feel that I loved you. I always tried to understand and love what you loved. I have told all young people and their educators: there must be trust and friendship between you, always. Without each other you can achieve nothing.

I have always wanted your happiness. Always be joyful, and seek peace of heart every day. Run, jump, shout, sing, make music. Be fully free; live as sons and daughters of God; and may Mary, our Helper, always help you to faithfully preserve the friendship of Jesus, who has been the very heart of my life. I await you all in paradise, my friends! As at the

altar, I say to you: “Lift up your hearts!” Our God is the God of joy! To him be glory and thanksgiving. Hallelujah!

Before leaving, I invite you to pray with me:

*"Holy Spirit, give us a universal heart, to remain attentive,
every day, to the appeals of every misery.*

*Give us clarity of gaze,
the smiling peace to reveal to each person
the wealth they carry in their hearts.*

*Give us tireless zeal
to make our life a response of love
in the service of those who are defenceless and without resources.*

*Make us, under the gaze of Mary
our sweetest mother
faithful servants of the kingdom of God,
pilgrims of hope on the road to paradise.
Amen.*

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INDEX

Before we begin	4
1. Beatitudes for the journey	10
2. God is our Father	16
3. Jesus is our Friend and our Guide	20
4. The Church is your Family	24
5. Mary is your most sweet mother	28
6. Holiness is for you	33
7. Live in joy	38
8. Work your field	42
9. Only one heart, only one family	46
10. Go out to the others	50
11. Walk in my presence	55
12. “Take up your cross and follow me.”	59
13. Choose a guide for your journey	64
14. Receive that bread everyday	68
15. Awaiting you all in Paradise	73

Biographical References.

LECTIO DIVINA WITH DON BOSCO

In these pages it is Don Bosco himself who speaks on fifteen fundamental topics of the Christian life: God the creator and father, Jesus, friend and guide, the Church as family, Mary our sweetest mother, possible holiness, joy, work, the apostolate, suffering, divine forgiveness, the Eucharist... Each topic is structured as follows: a passage taken from Don Bosco's works and three reflections on it proposed in the words Don Bosco himself used and would use today.

It is a useful aid for a period of 15 or more days of reflection and prayer guided by the "father and teacher of youth". An aid also valid for adults, parents and educators in particular.

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