**SPIRITUAL EXERCISES 2025**

**29th General Chapter**

**THE MYSTICISM OF CHRISTIAN LIFE**

1. MOTIVATION

Taking up the Chapter theme “Passionate about Jesus Christ” we see that we cannot achieve this being passionate without an experience of God that fills our lives with enthusiasm and joy. This is why all the remaining topics of the Salesian/religious life: this is the perspective of *mysticism*.

It is a very rich and fascinating word, but precisely because of this, it can be understood in very different ways, between the *maximalism* of *mystical experience* in the strict sense, and the *minimalism* of “mysticism of sport”, or the “mysticism of work”, etc. In a book published ten years ago (2014) in our Salesian University in Rome, we find contributions with titles such as “Mystics in Education”, “Mysticism and Corporeality”, “Mystics in Politics Today”, “Mysticism and the Internet”... Clearly there is not only diversity but even confusion.

Trying to focus on what we mean by this word, rather than “define” it, I would like to emphasise two essential elements: firstly, it refers in some way to our **experience of God**; more concretely, **the God of Jesus Christ, the God who is Love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit**. Secondly, by stressing the **“exciting”** nature of this experience, which fills the heart with *joy* and *meaning*; moreover, it fills us with *God himself,* which is the etymological sense of the word “enthusiasm”. On the other hand, it corresponds to the *ascetic* aspect of life.

The motivation for this theological and anthropological perspective is very simple: too often we live our Christian and religious being in an exemplary and undeniably radical way, but we do not always *radiate* the happiness that must arise from this form of life. Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous critique continues to be a stinging challenge for us: “**I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed.**” Do Christians really have the “face of the redeemed”?

From the very beginning of his pontificate, particularly in his first Apostolic Exhortations, Pope Francis significantly uses almost synonymous terms in their respective titles: “*Evangelii* ***gaudium***”, “*Veritatis* ***gaudium***” and *“Amoris* ***laetitia***”: always along these lines as if he wanted to respond to Nietzsche’s challenge. Article 17 of our Constitutions says it clearly: “The Salesian does not give way to discouragement in face of difficulties, because he has complete trust in the Father. ‘*Let nothing upset you*’, Don Bosco used to say. Inspired by the humanism of St Francis de Sales, he believes in man’s natural and supernatural resources without losing sight of his weakness. He is able to make his own what is good in the world and does not bewail his own times; he accepts all that is good, especially if it appeals to the young. Because he is a herald of the Good News he is *always cheerful*. He radiates this joy and is able to educate to the happiness of Christian life and a sense of celebration: ‘*Let us serve the Lord in holy joy*.’”

However, we cannot reduce this to a joy that is merely a secondary element of our Christian life as something “added”, or as a characteristic of our more or less “optimistic” temperament, or as a consequence of a “rewarding” human situation, and even less, a “propaganda-like” image to gain followers. It must arise from the depths of our Christian experience.

**2. FUNDAMENTAL PERSPECTIVE**

Too often we understand being Christian as something that, having been accepted (usually without realising it, since we receive Baptism as soon as we are born), it is something we must endure throughout our lives; an obligation that is translated into the acceptance of certain truths, the observance of certain moral norms, and the fulfilment of certain rites and celebrations. In the end, something that ***we* have to do** (and that does not always become enjoyable).

The Traditional Catechism, which many of us have studied (and even memorised), taught us:

*Question*. - *Why did God create man?*

*Response*. - *To love and serve God in this life, and then to see him and enjoy him in the other life forever*.

Instead, the word of God tells us:

**We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us (1 Jn 3:16).**

**God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him** (1 Jn 4:9).

**In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins** (1 Jn 4:10).

**We love because he first loved us** (1 Jn 4:19).

Obviously, it is not only a question of “Johannine theology” (and even less so, only of his first letter): the entire testimony of the New Testament is oriented in this direction: **knowing and feeling loved by God**, in an unconditional and *personal* way: this is the foundation of the *“mysticism” of the Christian life.* It would be inconceivable that those who truly had this conviction could live without joy; on the contrary, it is a joy that nothing can take away from us... As St Paul says: “*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*.” (Rom 8:38 -39).

This Christian foundational experience is very closely related to the fundamental human experience: in life we do not begin *by loving*, but **by being loved**. And this is so important, that those who have not felt loved, accepted, welcomed from the beginning of their existence, will hardly learn to love authentically. Many times, and all too easily, we judge people as “selfish”, incapable of loving and getting out of themselves, without asking ourselves whether they have been loved, and above all, whether they *have felt* that way!

From this perspective, we can say that basic Christian education does not begin by learning to make the sign of the cross, or how to pray, etc., but by advocating that from birth (or rather: before, from the womb) every human being feels welcome, well-received and well-liked. In God’s marvellous plan, the human environment that welcomes each newborn child should be the optimum, including from the deepest point of view: that he or she is welcomed by others who share in the *same flesh and blood*... But we must also say: if this basic experience is lacking, it is very difficult for it to be replaced: people carry a *structural deficiency* with them on occasions throughout their life, that will also manifest itself consciously, but above all in an unconscious and implicit form, and for this reason, paradoxically, with far greater impact. It would be very enriching to ask ourselves: What was my basic experience? And what were the consequences for my life?

**3. ENLIGHTENMENT: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND LOVE**

In the end, I invite you to ask yourself: how do I conceive of my Christian (and Salesian/religious) life: as something that *I* “**must do**”, or primarily as something that the Triune God **has done, and will continue to do** for me and in me? Do I have an obligation to “earn” God’s love, or rather do I have to (and want to) correspond to God’s Love “with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my strength, with all my being”? They are two different paths, which carry many consequences with them, including from the psychological point of view; and unfortunately, many Christian brothers and sisters live their faith more with the anguish of having to “deserve” the Love of God and eternal salvation (even, sometimes, considering them two separate things)...

Pope Benedict XVI, in his final Lenten Message (2013), a true spiritual testament, sheds light in an extraordinary way on this reality, through an expression that may seem, superficially, a simple play on words, but it is not. He states that, in our Christian experience, **the *primacy* belongs to *charity*, but *faith* has the *priority***.

Setting out from Saint John’s fundamental assertion: “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us” (1 Jn 4:16) I observed that “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction … Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere ‘command’; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us” (*Deus Caritas Est, 1).* Faith is this personal adherence – which involves all our faculties – to the revelation of God’s gratuitous and “passionate” love for us, fully revealed in Jesus Christ. The encounter with God who is Love engages not only the heart but also the intellect: “Acknowledgement of the living God is one path towards love, and the ‘yes’ of our will to his will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love. But this process is always open-ended; love is never ‘finished’ and complete” (*ibid.,* 17).

Hence, for all Christians, and especially for “charity workers”, there is a need for faith, for “that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others. As a result, love of neighbour will no longer be for them a commandment imposed, so to speak, from without, but a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love” (*ibid., 31*). **Christians are people who have been conquered by Christ’s love and accordingly, under the influence of that love – “*Caritas Christi urget nos*” (2 Cor 5:14) – – they are profoundly open to loving their neighbour in concrete ways** (cf. *ibid.,* 33). This attitude arises primarily from the consciousness of being loved, forgiven, and even served by the Lord, who bends down to wash the feet of the Apostles and offers himself on the Cross to draw humanity into God’s love.

...All this helps us to understand that the principal distinguishing mark of Christians is precisely “love grounded in and shaped by faith” (*ibid.,* 7).

***The entire Christian life is a response to God’s love.*** The first response is precisely faith as the acceptance, filled with wonder and gratitude, of the unprecedented divine initiative that precedes us and summons us. And the “yes” of faith marks the beginning of a radiant story of friendship with the Lord, which fills and gives full meaning to our whole life. But it is not enough for God that we simply accept his gratuitous love. Not only does he love us, but he wants to draw us to himself, to transform us in such a profound way as to bring us to say with Saint Paul: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (cf. *Gal* 2:20).

When we make room for the love of God, then we become like him, sharing in his own charity. If we open ourselves to his love, we allow him to live in us and to bring us to love with him, in him and like him; only then does our faith become truly “active through love” (*Gal* 5:6); only then does he abide in us (cf. *1 Jn* 4:12).

The Christian life consists in continuously scaling the mountain to meet God and then coming back down, bearing the love and strength drawn from him, so as to serve our brothers and sisters with God’s own love. In sacred Scripture, we see how the zeal of the Apostles to proclaim the Gospel and awaken people’s faith is closely related to their charitable concern to be of service to the poor (cf. *Acts* 6:1-4). In the Church, contemplation and action, symbolized in some way by the Gospel figures of Mary and Martha, have to coexist and complement each other (cf. *Lk* 10:38-42).

(…) Essentially, everything proceeds from Love and tends towards Love. God’s gratuitous love is made known to us through the proclamation of the Gospel. If we welcome it with faith, we receive the first and indispensable contact with the Divine, capable of making us “fall in love with Love”, and then we dwell within this Love, we grow in it and we joyfully communicate it to others.

(…) Faith, as gift and response, causes us to know the truth of Christ as Love incarnate and crucified, as full and perfect obedience to the Father’s will and infinite divine mercy towards neighbour; faith implants in hearts and minds the firm conviction that only this Love is able to conquer evil and death. Faith invites us to look towards the future with the virtue of hope, in the confident expectation that the victory of Christ’s love will come to its fullness. For its part, charity ushers us into the love of God manifested in Christ and joins us in a personal and existential way to the total and unconditional self-giving of Jesus to the Father and to his brothers and sisters. By filling our hearts with his love, the Holy Spirit makes us sharers in Jesus’ filial devotion to God and fraternal devotion to every man (cf. Rom 5:5).

The relationship between these two virtues resembles that between the two fundamental sacraments of the Church: Baptism and Eucharist. Baptism (*sacramentum fidei*) precedes the Eucharist (*sacramentum caritatis*), but is ordered to it, the Eucharist being the fullness of the Christian journey. In a similar way, faith precedes charity, but faith is genuine only if crowned by charity. Everything begins from the humble acceptance of faith (“knowing that one is loved by God”), but has to arrive at the truth of charity (“knowing how to love God and neighbour”), which remains for ever, as the fulfilment of all the virtues (cf. *1 Cor* 13:13).

Dear brothers and sisters, ... I express my wish that all of you may spend this precious time rekindling your faith in Jesus Christ, so as to enter with him into the dynamic of love for the Father and for every brother and sister that we encounter in our lives.” (Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2013*).

**4. CONCLUSION**

Here we have precious elements for our personal reflection, and for our prayer and dialogue of love with the Lord. I did not wish to develop a topic here that arises spontaneously: *our consecrated life*, as an expression of this encounter of love between God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit with each one of us. Undoubtedly, if we see it from this perspective, we will find many elements in the Constitutions that can help us make this experience of *knowing/feeling loved by God* concrete. It would suffice to recall - even explicitly - the texts of our Rule of Life where the word “response” (or similar) appears in this context, particularly in the *prayer* of Profession: “God my Father, you consecrated me to yourself on the day of my baptism **In response to the love of the Lord Jesus your Son...**” (C. 24).

*Appendix*

For your personal meditation I offer you a very beautiful text of a document of the Church on the formation of religious:

At the origin of the religious consecration there is a call of God **for which there is no explanation apart from the love** which he bears for the person whom he calls. This love is absolutely 1gratuitous, personal, and unique. It embraces the person to the extent that one no longer pertains to oneself, but to Christ It thus reflects the character of an alliance. The glance which Jesus turned towards the rich young man has this characteristic: “Looking on him, he loved him” *(Mk* 10:21). (no. 8).

The call of Christ, which is the expression of a redemptive love, “embraces the whole person, soul and body, whether man or woman, in that person’s unique and unrepeatable personal ‘I’.” It “assumes, in the soul of the person called, the actual form of the profession of the evangelical counsels.” Under this form, those who are called by God give a response of love in their turn to Christ their Redeemer: a love which is given entirely and without reserve, and which loses itself in the offering of the whole person as “a loving sacrifice, holy, pleasing unto God” (*Rom* 12:1). . Only this love, which is of a nuptial character and engages all the affectivity of one’s person, can motivate and support the privations and trials which one who wishes “to lose his life” necessarily encounters for Christ and for the Gospel (cf.  *Mk 8:35).* This personal response is an integrating part of the religious consecration. (*Potissimum Institutioni*, no. 9).

I would like to invite you to ask yourself a question that can help you personally apply what we have said, reading your whole life in the light of faith; a very simple, but decisive question: **Do I feel personally loved by God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as if I were the only person in the world? Can I “discover” this Love of God throughout my life?** And as a consequence of this: **I am convinced that God the Trinity/Love says to my heart: “*I need you to be happy”*?**

**Should these words seem exaggerated to us, we need only reread the Parable par excellence of mercy presented to us by Luke (15:11-32)), in which we read:**

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. **21**Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son”. **22** But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet; **23** And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; **24** for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate. **25** Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. **27** He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” **28** Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. **29** But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” **31** Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”