

**WITNESSES  
OF THE  
LOVE OF GOD**

**Theological and Spiritual Reflections on the  
Preventive System of Don Bosco**



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**Theological and Spiritual Reflections on the  
Preventive System of Don Bosco**

**José Luis Plascencia Moncayo, SDB**



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## PRESENTATION

José Luis Plascencia's retreat talks to the 26<sup>th</sup> General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco are the most extraordinary theologico-spiritual reading of the Preventive System of Don Bosco I have come across. Repeatedly the preacher takes up well known themes – such as *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle* and “it is not enough to love” – and plumbs their theological depths in a manner that is entirely unexpected and delightful. In ways that Don Bosco intuited, in ways that he never even suspected, the guiding lines of the educative system he left us begin to reveal their potential and wealth. General Chapter members are not necessarily professional theologians – they tend to be a good reflection of the Congregation at large – but I remember very well the electric attention with which they followed Fr Plascencia as he gave his talks.

Ten years and another chapter have passed since GC26, and we have already begun preparing for GC28. Why pull out retreat talks from 2008, where ‘Rector Major’ means Fr. Pascual Chávez and the pope is Benedict XVI? My simple answer is that we are dealing here with a “permanently valid achievement,” one that deserves to be better known, and that belongs to the patrimony of the Congregation, along with the official documents of GC26. The intention of that Chapter was to invite Salesians to appropriate the ‘Salesian’ aspect of their identity and vocation, and it did that by asking us to revisit Don Bosco so as to discover in him the passion that animated his life. For me, Plascencia's reflections at the beginning of the Chapter are an essential element of that rediscovery. They have accompanied me in the years that followed the Chapter, and I am happy to present them, in their English version, to our confreres and to all those who share in the spirit and mission

of Don Bosco in the English-speaking world. As the Rector Major Fr. Pascual Chavez himself said, “The Retreat talks... gave us elements of important insights for a greater theological understanding of the charism, the mission and Salesian spirituality” (GC26, p.128). And in their own way, I believe Plascencia’s reflections will contribute to helping us answer the great question of GC28: “What kind of Salesians for the youth of today?”

Fr. José Luis Plascencia Moncayo, SDB one of our outstanding theologians, belongs to the province of “Cristo Re e Maria Ausiliatrice,” Guadalajara – Mexico. He did his doctorate on the unusual topic of the Christology of Dostoevsky, now published as *Nada más humano que Cristo: El misterio del hombre a la luz de Cristo en Fiodor M. Dostoyevski* (Rome: LAS, 2015). He was Rector and professor of fundamental and systematic theology at the Instituto Superior Salesiano, Tlaquepaque – Mexico, before being transferred to the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, where taught in the Faculty of Theology for several years. He is now back in Tlaquepaque, where he continues his ministry of teaching, while making himself available for Salesian animation and the preaching of retreats in various parts of the world.

I cannot end without a very special word of thanks to Fr. Ian Figueiredo, SDB, for his patient and painstaking work of preparing the English text for publication, as also to Fr. Banzelao Teixeira, SDB and Fr. Cyriac Malayil, SDB for help with the notes and quotes. And to all those involved in preparing the English translation of the text way back in 2008: thank you for your work and for this gift to the English-speaking Salesian world!

***Ivo Coelho, SDB***

**General Councillor for Formation**

**Rome, Feast of the Transfiguration, 6 August 2018**

# 1. MEDITATION ON HOPE

## 1. WHAT MAY WE HOPE FOR?

The Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa*, in which John Paul II takes up again the work and the conclusions of the Synod of Bishops in preparation for the Great Jubilee of 2000, says:

Throughout the Synod, a powerful impulse towards hope gradually became evident. While taking seriously the analyses of the complexity characterizing the Continent, the Synod Fathers saw that possibly the most urgent matter Europe faces, in both East and West, is a growing need for hope, a hope which will enable us to give meaning to life and history and to continue on our way together.<sup>1</sup>

The most recent papal magisterium has chosen hope as its central theme. Benedict XVI's Encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, offers us some precious elements to enrich our reflection on this theological virtue. Apparently, one of his main objectives is to offer a response, based on our Christian identity, to a universal and not just a European need. Suffice it to quote, for example, number 22, where he says:

Again, we find ourselves facing the question: what may we hope for? A self-critique of modernity is needed in dialogue with Christianity and its concept of hope. In this dialogue Christians too, in the context of their knowledge and experience, must learn anew in what their hope truly consists, what they have to offer to the world and what they cannot offer. Flowing into this self-critique of the

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<sup>1</sup>JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 4.

modern age there also has to be a self-critique of modern Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

As we glance at the Congregation worldwide, we have to admit that there is a “growing need for hope” in all our settings, albeit in a different way. Among the many factors that make it difficult for us to look at the future with enthusiasm are the shortage of vocations, except in some Salesian geographical regions; the fragile formation of the young generations; the problems of present-day youth, aggravated by external factors like violence, drug-trafficking, and old and new forms of poverty; and sometimes, on a deeper level, the waning of apostolic passion and the adoption of models of religious life far from the ideals of the Gospel. In various portions of his letter convoking the Chapter, the Rector Major presents as challenges some of the features of this disquieting situation of the Congregation (cf. AGC 394, pp. 9-11, 17-20, and passim).

In the run-up to GC26, a similar feeling has surfaced almost everywhere (perhaps with some exceptions). The very insistence of the Congregation on “starting afresh from Don Bosco to *reawaken* the heart of every Salesian” with regard to his *charismatic identity and apostolic zeal*, presupposes the existence of such a situation and calls us to be on the alert.

We know very well that hope is generated by faith, and sustains love. But, there can also be a situation in which faith, based as it is on a concrete historical reality, can paradoxically remain closed to hope, and shut itself up within the *pain of remembrance* (etymologically: *nostalgia*) and lamentation over the past.

I think we can see this situation clearly reflected in the biblical narrative of Gideon’s vocation:

As Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites, the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.”

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<sup>2</sup>BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Spe Salvi*, n. 22.

Gideon answered him, "But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian." Then the Lord turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you." He responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." The Lord said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them." (Judg 6, 11-16)

Undoubtedly, Gideon has faith; he is convinced of God's salvific intervention in favour of his people... but in the past; what he lacks is **hope**, the belief that God has not abandoned his people but continues to be the "God-with-us", inviting them to look to the future with confidence. The upshot is that Gideon is called to collaborate with God, and not just lament over his apparent "absence" or withdrawal of support.

We too can be like the People of God in exile, recalling the divine marvels of the past (and as they did, we too can perhaps forget all too easily our own responsibility):

We have heard with our ears, O God, our ancestors have told us, what deeds You performed in their days, in the days of old, You with Your own hand (...); yet now You have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies (...) All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, or been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from Your way (Ps 44, 2.10.18-19).

## 2. HOPE IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

There is no doubt that in the contemporary world, and especially in the existing "youth culture", hope has not become any easier.

Phenomenologically speaking, there are three fundamental characteristics of hope we can point to, in so far as it is a human disposition:

\* it tends by its very nature towards the **future**; in this way it reveals the inner dynamic of the human being as a forward movement: “while there’s life, there’s hope”. Without forgetting the myth of Pandora, we can say, with Aristotle: “Hope is the dream of a man ever on the alert”.

\* it is always lived within a **positive** outlook, for not everything that comes along is “worthy of hope”: it can be an object of fear or anxiety instead.

\* it includes a “passive” element (waiting), but also a positive disposition on the part of one who lives this period of waiting (**hope**).<sup>3</sup>

We have to recognize that, side by side with this inner movement towards the future embedded in the depths of the human being, there is also a danger of his not living *the present moment* in a positive way. In this connection, Pascal says:

We do not rest satisfied with the present. We anticipate the future as too slow in coming, as if in order to hasten its course; or we recall the past, to stop its too rapid flight. So imprudent are we that we wander in times which are not ours, and do not think of the only one which belongs to us; and so idle are we that we dream of those times which are no more, and thoughtlessly overlook that which alone exists.... We scarcely ever think of the present; and if we think of it, it is only to take light from it to arrange the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means; the future alone is our end. So we never

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<sup>3</sup>Most Western languages maintain this wait-hope duality: *aspettare-sperare, warten-hoffen, attendre-espérer, espera-esperanza*.

live, but we hope to live; and, as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be so.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the human experience of time has become particularly problematic in the postmodern era.

In a conference he gave the Superiors General, the Rector Major offered the following analysis:

The human being, although always living in the present (this is a self-evident truth), is a “being of the future” (E. Bloch, W. Pannenberg): By his very nature, he is faced with a utopia, something that has not as yet “happened” in our world and in history. This can be said, a fortiori, of the younger generation which carries this approach to the future in its very psychosomatic identity, written into the “humblest” cell.

This is why we see a tragedy in the postmodern situation: **the threat of the future** that weighs on humanity places us, especially our younger generation, before an existential contradiction: on the one hand, with the irresistible need for a future *horizon*, and on the other, with the lack of this horizon. If we add to this the rejection of the past on the part of today’s youth culture, we can understand the sensation of being “locked up” in the small space that the present provides, with no other solution than to try to “live the fleeting moment” (*l’attimo fuggente*).

This threat shows up in a double way: on the one hand, in what J. Moltmann called “the loss of atomic innocence” from Hiroshima onwards:<sup>5</sup> we know – and recent news items remind us – that for some decades, and for the first time in the history of the world and of mankind (from what we know), there exists the real possibility (depending

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967) 26-27.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, *La catastrofe atomica: e Dio, dov'è?* Urbino, Il Nuovo Leopardi, 1987, p. 11.

concretely on the decisions made by some) that could see the entire human race disappear as a consequence of a nuclear conflagration. The fact that the leaders of nations may reach some possible agreement in this regard does not eliminate the danger. As the same Moltmann said, we can never get back our lost innocence. “The era we live in, even if it were to last forever, is *the final era of mankind*... We are living in the end-times, that is, when each day could bring about the end”.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand – and not totally unconnected with what went before – we find this threat in the universal and irreversible ecological decline: from air pollution, the loss of drinkable water, and the destruction of forests to the giddy exploitation of unrenewable energy. As Moltmann again said, “We are all equal...faced with the ozone layer”.

This “*suppression from outside*” of future horizons is a typical fact of our times, and is fundamental to the understanding of our obsessive attachment to the present, and the need for immediate “satisfactions” which are characteristic of the postmodern era: since it is not the same to “want to live today” in the perspective of tomorrow, as having to anchor today, because maybe tomorrow will not exist... Some days ago a newspaper, writing about the review of a book by the Hungarian author Imre Kertész, Nobel Prize-winner for Literature, used this expression: “Is it possible to have children after Auschwitz?”, which recalls a famous sentence: “Is it possible to believe in God after Auschwitz?” It is a question that today so many young people ask when facing marriage and family: not with the hope of earlier times, but with anguish in the face of the future in which they will live: is it worth bringing new beings into the world?

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10, quoting Günther Anders.



Undoubtedly this “privation of the future”, in a totally different sense, also affects consecrated life, especially the new generations”.<sup>7</sup>

In this respect, modernity can be described as the disposition of someone who rejects the past, and projects himself towards the future wherein he lodges all his expectations; postmodernity, instead, in so far as it is a reaction to ingenuous *modern* optimism, is akin to “placing oneself” as serenely as possible in the present and living the “carpe diem”. A very “pertinent” text from the Bible is the witness given by the elderly man, Eleazar, during the Maccabean war:

“Such pretence is not worthy of our time of life,” he said, “for many of the young might suppose that Eleazar in his ninetieth year had gone over to an alien religion, and through my pretence, for the sake of living a brief moment longer, they would be led astray because of me, while I defile and disgrace my old age (...) Therefore, by bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws.” (2 Mac 6, 24-25. 27-28)

### 3. HOPE IN BIBLICAL REVELATION

In contrast with other conceptions of life and history, Israel’s experience, moulded in the Bible, presents God as a “God of exoduses”, an advocate of leaving the security of the present for a future that is **promising**, certain (in the fullest sense of the word, i.e., as *the object of a promise*) but always insecure because if there is no faith, all the talk of an exodus or a movement towards the future makes no sense. “If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had the opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a **better country**, that is, a heavenly one. **Therefore God is not**

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<sup>7</sup>PASCUAL CHÁVEZ, “Per una vita consacrata fedele. Sfide antropologiche alla formazione”, USG (maggio 2006), pp. 21-23.

**ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them**” (Heb 11, 15-16). Here, then, is a question to put to ourselves: can we say that our God, in like manner, is “not ashamed” to call himself our God?

Because of its faith in God, the whole of Israel’s history was a constant straining towards the future, clearly marked by a *confidence in the fulfilment of the promises made by a faithful God* (*fides – fiducia – fidelitas – spes: faith – confidence – faithfulness – hope*).

Similarly, the lack of faith turns into *despair* and *desperation*, the two sides of a coin, and results in a hankering after the past: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Ex 16, 3 and *passim*).

The entire history of God’s People is permeated by God’s promise. In spite of Israel’s infidelity and ingratitude, the pre-exilic prophets, and Jeremiah in particular, while threatening God’s punishment and the annulment of the Covenant because of this infidelity (cf. Jer 13; 19), always announced a **New Covenant**. (Jer 31, 31ff.; Ezek 36, 24ff.; Is 40-55)

In the extraordinary vision described in Ezekiel, the dry bones are an eloquent symbol: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and **our hope is lost**; we are cut off completely’. Therefore, prophesy, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and raise you up from your graves, O My people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.’” (Ezek 37, 11-12)

In the New Testament, more than a single text, it is the Christ-event in itself which is the definitive (eschatological) accomplishment of God’s promise. But, the death of Jesus shows us dramatically that *God’s thoughts are not man’s thoughts*. (cf. Is 55, 8ff.)

Instead, for the one who believes in the “God of Jesus Christ,”

**hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.** For while we were still sinners, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (...) God proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5, 5ff.). Therefore, “blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy **he Has given us a new birth into a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an **inheritance** that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Pet 1, 3-4)

It is noteworthy to find mention made of three periods of time: the past of faith, the future of hope, and the present of God’s faithfulness and our Christian commitment to *love* (cf. the following verses, 1 Pet 1, 6-9). Instead, as Benedict XVI points out: “Paul reminds the Ephesians that before their encounter with Christ they were ‘without hope and without God in the world’ (Eph 2, 12)”<sup>8</sup> This is probably the text most often quoted in the Encyclical: it appears also in numbers 3, 5, 23 and 27, in different contexts, obviously.

One of the books of the New Testament that clearly expresses the relationship between the three theological virtues is the *Letter to the Romans*. Here are some of its fundamental texts on hope:

+ In the first place, the Letter sets before us the figure of Abraham seen from this perspective: “**Hoping against hope, he believed** and so became the father of many nations” (Rom 4, 18).

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<sup>8</sup>BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, n. 2.

+ A second text presents, conversely, a string of characteristic Christian virtues: “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5, 3b-5).

+ A little further, in chapter 8, we are reminded that hope looks towards the future: “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom 8, 24-25).

+ Towards the end of the Letter, there are two notable texts in this regard: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15, 4). And the concluding words: “May **the God of hope** fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15, 13).

Another of the New Testament books that speaks eloquently of hope is the *Letter to the Hebrews*. The Pope dwells on this Letter too in his Encyclical, especially on two of its passages, Heb 10, 34 and 11, 1; he offers a broad, and even polemical, exegesis of the latter text.<sup>9</sup>

Let me conclude this short biblical reflection with a beautiful, albeit brief, expression of St. Paul: “Love **is patient** (...); [it] **hopes all things**” (1 Cor 13, 4.7). St. Paul is actually reminding us that love always goes beyond hope, precisely in order to hope for **everything and always**. In this sense, paraphrasing Hans Urs von Balthasar, we can say that “**love alone is worthy of hope**”.

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, nn. 7-9.

#### 4. DON BOSCO, MAN OF HOPE

It is important to note that, in our Rule of life, there is a *linguistic inclusion* which embraces our Constitutions in their entirety. Article 1 points out as a certainty of faith that our mission is not merely a human venture but comes from God, and constitutes “the support for our **hope**” (C 1). And the last article does not speak of God’s initiative, but of our collaboration with Him in the realization of the mission he entrusts to us: our fidelity is “for the poor and the little ones a pledge of **hope**” (C 196).

Even if it is not mentioned explicitly, hope is very much present in the sections of our Constitutions describing our identity and the Salesian spirit, especially articles 17-19. In the context of the evangelical counsels, their global presentation concludes with a phrase which embraces a vision of faith and a commitment: the Salesian is “an educator who proclaims to the young ‘*new heavens and a new earth*’, awakening in them **hope** and the dedication and joy to which it gives rise” (C 63).

In all this there is manifested our “sonship” of Don Bosco, a man who had an extraordinary “capacity for hope”, or to put it better, a man who was able to integrate to perfection the three aspects of a Christian’s relationship with God: faith, hope and charity.

Rather than remain on the level of generic or rhetorical statements, we shall mention, briefly and schematically, three aspects – the *temperamental*, the *educative*, and the *theological* – which describe how our Father, Don Bosco, lived the virtue of hope.

– Blending nature and grace (cf. C 21) and without forgetting that both are God’s gifts, we speak of a *temperamental disposition in him towards hope*: he showed an extraordinary ability to convert difficulties into challenges that motivated and urged him onward; he showed, till the last moment of his life, an enthusiasm and a hopefulness originating from

his passionate and apostolic love for the young. The times in which he lived were certainly not easy; yet he never bewailed them nor did he hark back nostalgically to the past (cf. C 17).

– Furthermore, hope was *an educative disposition* in Don Bosco. Whoever works with children and youth needs *hope* more than anything else; he must experience the truth expressed in Psalm 126: “Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall return with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (v. 6).

The only thing is that, in education, the “return” does not take place within a few days or months, but, in the best of cases, after many years. Therefore, *waiting* and *hoping* are indispensable in educative work.

In this field (of education), we again come across the relationship between hope and love: only the one who loves can *hope* (in the deepest sense of the word). Once more, we have here an echo of the Pauline phrase: “love... hopes all things” (1 Cor 13, 7). I would like to go deeper into it, using just one sentence which is not a simple play on words but an expression of a marvellous reality: **only the one who loves us, believes us to be better than we are, and can place his “hope” in us; however, we can be better than what we are, only if someone loves us... This is what Don Bosco incarnated in himself in an extraordinary manner.**

Finally, and it could not be otherwise in a saint like him, we find deep down in Don Bosco an attitude of *hope* which was not limited to this world and to this life. Hope, despite everything, did not prevent him from living the present moment intensely, keeping his gaze resolutely directed towards heaven and his feet firmly planted on the ground. The words uttered by the Servant of God, John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, seem to have taken their inspiration from Don Bosco: “We need to trust in God as if everything depended on

him and, at the same time, to work generously as if everything depended on us”.<sup>10</sup>

In his *Spiritual Testament*, Don Bosco wrote these moving words: “Adieu, dear children, adieu. I wait for you in heaven (...) I leave you here on earth, but only for a short time. I hope the infinite mercy of God will enable us all to meet one day in heaven. There I await you”. Here we also come across the **community** aspect, on which His Holiness insists a great deal: “Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too”.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. TO CONCLUDE: A PARABLE...

I came across a very simple but delightful and *suggestive* story which I would like to narrate to you. An elderly lady was very lucid as she approached the moment of her death. Her good friend asked her: “Have you any wish to be fulfilled after your death?” The old lady replied: “There’s one thing. I want to be buried with a fork in my hand.” “A fork?” asked her friend, surprised by the request. “Yes,” she repeated, “a fork! In all my years of attending dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, the fork was always kept because I knew that *something better was coming*... So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand, and I want them to wonder ‘What’s with the fork?’ Then I want you to tell them in my name: **“Because she well knew that the best is yet to come!”**

In reality, this is the deepest motivation of our life and our work – what Don Bosco called, in all his simplicity, a “piece of paradise” in the *Salesian garden*: “Death for the Salesian is made bright by the **hope** of entering into the joy of his Lord” (C 54).

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<sup>10</sup>JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 73.

<sup>11</sup>BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, n. 48.

The Office of Readings in Spanish for departed Salesians has a hymn that expresses this truth in a simple and inspiring way:

Think of what it will be:  
To leap ashore, and find you are in heaven!  
To pass from the storms of life  
to endless peace!  
To grasp an arm, and find, as you go along,  
that it is God's arm!  
To fill your lungs with pure air...  
a divine air!

Giddy with happiness to hear a cherub say:  
"This is never-ending joy!"  
To open your eyes and ask what's going on,  
and hear God say to you: "You've reached home!"

Oh! What immense delight  
to immerse myself in Your ocean!  
to close my eyes and begin to see;  
to stop my heart and start to love!



## *Prayer*

### **HOPE**

Mary, Mother of hope,  
Walk with us!  
Teach us to proclaim the living God,  
help us to witness to Jesus, the only Saviour;  
make us helpful to our neighbour,  
welcoming of the needy, agents of justice,  
passionate architects of a more just world;  
intercede for us as we work in history  
certain that the plans of the Father will be fulfilled.

Dawn of a new world,  
reveal yourself as the Mother of hope and watch over us!  
Above all, watch over all young people, the hope of the future,  
that they might respond generously to the call of Jesus.  
Watch over those responsible for the nations:  
that they might devote themselves to building up our common  
home,  
in which the dignity and the rights of every person will be  
respected.

We pray for our Congregation and for the Salesian Family:  
help us to be always the pledge of hope  
for the little ones and the poor,  
above all for young people most in need of God's Love.

Teach us to love them, as Don Bosco taught us to:  
Instil within us a firm hope of their response,  
even though very often we do not see the fruit of our hard  
work.

Mary, give us Jesus!  
Help us to follow and to love Him!

He is the Hope of the Church and of humanity.  
He lives with us, among us,  
in His Church.  
With you we say:  
“Come, Lord Jesus”:  
We pray that the hope of glory,  
infused in our hearts by Him  
will bear fruits of justice and of peace!

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## 2. THE SPIRITUALITY OF OUR CHARISM *DA MIHI ANIMAS*

At the beginning of his letter convoking the GC26, the Rector Major wrote: “For some time now the conviction has been growing on me that today the Congregation needs to reawaken in the heart of every confrere the passionate zeal of ‘Da mihi animas’” (AGC 394, p. 6). This will be the focus of our reflection.

### 1. “*DA MIHI ANIMAS*”: SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY AND ASCETICISM

In the same letter, a little further on, Fr. Pascual reminded us of an important text of our Salesian tradition:

Don Bosco’s motto is a summary of Salesian spirituality and asceticism, as expressed in the ‘dream of the ten diamonds’. Here two complementary perspectives are intertwined: that of the outward appearance of the Salesian, manifesting his daring, his courage, his faith and hope, his complete dedication to the mission, and that of the hidden heart of a consecrated person with an inner reality made up of deep convictions that lead him to follow Christ in his obedient, poor and chaste style of life” (p. 7); “the reason for his tireless work for ‘the glory of God and the salvation of souls.’ (p. 6)

Although we can distinguish between the two parts of Don Bosco’s motto, taken from Sacred Scripture (Gen 14, 21) – we have no intention here of entering into an exegetical discussion – we should not separate them: spirituality and asceticism cannot be understood apart from each other. In this connection, we have only to recall the image presented by the document *Fraternal Life in Community*: “A community that is not mystical (*communio*) has no soul, but a community that

is not ascetic (*common life*) has no body”.<sup>12</sup> We shall return later to this relationship between spirituality and asceticism as a total union of the two in what is their authentic point of departure, viz. **love**.

From the formal point of view, Don Bosco’s motto is first of all a **prayer**. “Precisely because it is a prayer, it enables us to understand that the mission does not consist only in pastoral initiatives and activities. The mission is a gift of God rather than an apostolic task; its fulfilment is a prayer in action” (AGC 394, p. 6). We have to remember the words of Jesus in his discourse on the Bread of life: “No one can come to Me unless drawn by the Father who sent Me (...) For this reason I have told you that no one can come to Me unless it is granted by the Father” (Jn 6, 44.65). From this point of view, then, the motto is a prayer of *petition*: we are asking God to give us the young people to be saved. Are we aware of what we *dare* to ask the Lord, of the enormous responsibility our motto entails? Do we realize that we are asking him nothing less than to entrust to us the young, “that part of human society which is so exposed and yet so rich in promise?” (C 1) Are we equal to the task?

## 2. “... THE GLORY OF GOD AND THE SALVATION OF SOULS...”

What are we really asking God for when we pray: *give me souls*? Doesn’t our request lead to a dichotomy, a spiritualistic mentality which cuts us off from the integral and historical situation of our young people?

This objection could have some legitimacy, but in our times, and especially in the light of the work accomplished by the Congregation in different parts of the world, it has become a purely theoretical question, having been discarded in actual practice. Asking the Lord for “souls” has always been

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<sup>12</sup>CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Fraternal Life in Community*, n. 23. The Congregation will henceforth be indicated as CICALSAL.

understood in the Congregation as a figure of speech for the integral person: in fact, each and every young person, in his bodily as well as spiritual reality, is a potential “target” of our mission. That is why our work is essentially educative and pastoral: it is the way in which our mission becomes concrete, “a sharing in [the mission] of the Church, which brings about the saving design of God, the coming of his Kingdom, by bringing to men the message of the Gospel which is closely tied in with the development of the temporal order.” (C 31)

I think that our problem is a different one. To put it in a nutshell: if the word “souls” is a figure of speech, then we remain without a satisfactory answer as to what it specifically means.

And we shall never have an answer if we forget that **salvation** was the final and definitive goal of the integral promotion Don Bosco sought for his boys at every moment. If this is not our goal too in our educative and pastoral work, we shall be nothing more than an efficient organization for the development of the young; but, this means that we shall no more be a *charismatic movement* with the sole mission of being “signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are poor” (C 2).

This is how I would put it in the form of a diagram:

Eternal damnation	<i>“Expressions” of perdition</i>	<b>CONCRETE SITUATION OF THE YOUNG</b>	<i>Mediations of salvation</i>	Eternal salvation
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Obviously, the central box represents the present-day situation of young people; the boxes at either end correspond to the “traditional” Christian outlook on the situation of man before God: everything is “played out” in terms of his eternal salvation and damnation. The intermediate boxes (with the texts in italics) depict a more “factual” picture of the situation; should this picture become exclusive, there is a risk

of forgetting the *novissimi* or “the last things”. The diagram in its entirety describes an integral outlook which alone animates and does full justice to our Salesian work.

Only when we “work for the salvation of the young” (cf. C 12) does our labour become an *experience of God*.

The glory of God and the salvation of souls were Don Bosco’s deepest interests. Working for God’s glory and the salvation of souls amounts to conforming one’s will to that of God, who communicates Himself as Love, thus showing His glory and immense love for men, all of whom He wants to be saved. There is a unique point in the ‘story of a soul’ (1854), where Don Bosco reveals the secret of the purpose of all his activity: ‘When I dedicated myself to this part of the sacred ministry, I intended to consecrate all my labours to the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls; to work to produce good citizens for this earth so that one day they might be worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to be able to continue until my last breath. Amen.’ (AGC 394, pp. 37-38)

It is well to clarify once again that “salvation” – to use an analogy – does not mean “just making it to heaven”. For Don Bosco, the ideal of Salesian education is **holiness**, the “high standard” the Holy Father, John Paul II presents to us in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*<sup>13</sup> as the goal and the programme of every undertaking in the entire Church.

To his boys, the majority of whom did not come from “privileged” (socio-economic or religious) environments, Don Bosco recommended a practical programme of spirituality for daily life. He was convinced that all are called to holiness, including the young who are capable of making a spiritual journey analogous to that of saintly adults. This journey, under the direction of a spiritual guide, leads to the joyous gift of oneself in everyday life; it draws its strength from the moments

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<sup>13</sup>JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, nn. 30-31.

of prayer, the sacraments and Marian devotion, and expresses itself in a love and concern for others marked by cheerfulness: “We make holiness consist in always being cheerful”.

To this end, he sought to render the traditional teaching of the Church more accessible by adapting it in a practical and convenient way to the young. Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco were examples of the youth spirituality of Don Bosco. Even if not all of them reached the holiness of the altars, they were certainly models of a Christian life lived to the full. By narrating the story of their life, and above all, their exemplary death, Don Bosco showed that he considered them to have entered the Kingdom of God, Paradise.

It is precisely the youngster whom we would least associate with the ideal of holiness, Michael Magone, who emerges as the model of a holy and virtuous life. Don Bosco writes of him: “We would have certainly wished for this model of virtue to have remained in the world until a ripe old age – either in the priesthood to which he felt a strong inclination, or in the lay state – because he would have done an immense good to his country and to religion”. Here, in all its clarity, was the human and Christian ideal of a young man, according to Don Bosco.

### **3. PASSION FOR HUMANITY, FOR CHRIST, FOR GOD...**

It is very interesting and significant to find the word “**passion**” in the Rector Major’s presentation of Don Bosco’s motto. No doubt, it is a word that has gradually entered into the language of our time. I would not be able to say if it has entered into our mentality as well. Barely a few years ago, it had a positive meaning only when it referred to the “passion of Christ”, and in this case, solely because it meant the suffering and death of Christ (cf. for example, Mel Gibson’s film). To the question: “When did Christ’s passion begin?” the unanimous and immediate answer was: “the day before he died”.

In this connection, a Russian author, D. Merezhkovsky, writes that “it is astonishing... that the church (which calls every ‘passion’ sinful and ‘lack of passion’ holy) has the courage to call its holy of holies ‘the passion.’”<sup>14</sup>

Let us analyze the word “*passion*” in three progressive steps: anthropological, Christological and theo-logical.

a) In the **anthropological** sense, passion (and the passions) were considered something negative because they were associated with sin or in any case with the imperfection of concupiscence; oftentimes, the model man was the person absolutely without any passions or at least who was able to control and keep them in balance as he strove for the “golden mean” (*aurea mediocritas*). The fact is that the word that was literally used to express this ideal, *apathy*, was far from acceptable. S. Kierkegaard comments on this mentality with some memorable, thought-provoking words: “It is a greater loss for one to lose his passion than to lose himself in his passion”.

I would like to refer to the subject of human love, and more concretely, to *eros*. Josef Pieper states in his excellent book, *On Love*, that *eros* has been the object of a campaign of defamation and calumny ever since it was considered a synonym of sexuality and sometimes even a morbid expression of the same. Probably this is not the case nowadays, not because *eros* has been rehabilitated but because it has benefited from the present-day positive appraisal of sexuality. We need to keep in mind however, that *eros* and sexuality are two completely different things. My impression is that Benedict XVI’s extraordinary Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, and his even bolder *Message for Lent 2007*, have not yet sufficiently penetrated Christian thinking.

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<sup>14</sup>Quoted by JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 1983) Chapter 2: Passion of God, note 6.



For us who are pastors and educators, it is indispensable that we be able to form passionate people, people who know how to love and to be loved. We ought to recall that one of the priorities of our human and Christian education, discerned by the GC23 in 1990, was precisely: **education to love and in love**. The need continues to be felt, today more than ever before.

b) From the Christian standpoint, to speak today of the “passion” of Jesus Christ in theological and spiritual language<sup>15</sup> is to refer to his *Love* as the ultimate motive of the gift of his life *for us*: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15, 13).

It is along these lines that we can say, without falling into a tautology, that **Jesus’ passion led to his passion**. Much progress has been made in trying to remove from Jesus, the Son of God made man, the “apathy” which over the centuries hindered a full understanding of his humanity and led instead to the spread of a veiled monophysitism. As the Rector Major says, “Don Bosco’s programme re-echoes the expression ‘I thirst’, pronounced by Jesus from the cross when he was giving up his own life in carrying out the Father’s will (Jn 19, 28). Whoever makes this prayer of Jesus his own, learns to share his apostolic passion to the very end” (AGC 394, p. 7).

However, if we were to pause here, it would be tantamount to stopping halfway, because we would get the impression that Jesus’ passion was only the consequence of his Incarnation, of his having “loved with a human heart”, as the Second Vatican Council puts it so beautifully.<sup>16</sup> But, we would not know anything about Jesus as God; the passion of Jesus, in this case, would be not so much a *revelation* as a *concealment* of God.

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<sup>15</sup>We may recall the recent (2004) Congress on Consecrated Life: “Passion for God, passion for humanity.”

<sup>16</sup>VATICAN COUNCIL II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

c) Therefore, the deepest meaning of the word “passion” lies on the **theo-logical** level. As J. Moltmann sums it up, “Christ’s passion reveals to us **the passion of a passionate God**”.

In the final analysis, the human ideal of “*apathy*” was a reflection of the yearning to “become like God”, to resemble him as much as possible. In no way was such a desire negative or sinful: we have been created in God’s image and likeness! St. Thomas Aquinas puts it beautifully: “*prius intelligitur deiformis quam homo*” (*The human being is to be understood first of all as a godlike being rather than as man*). The error has been the incorrect image of God, viz., the belief that God has no feelings or passions; that, in the final analysis, he is an “*apathetic God*”; and his Omnipotence has been understood as: “God there, in his heaven, enjoying perfect happiness, and I here on earth wishing to be like this God”.

In this regard, Moltmann again asserts:

Man develops his manhood always in relationship to the Godhead of his God. He experiences his existence in relationship to that which illuminates him as the supreme being. He orients his life on the ultimate value. His fundamental decisions are made in accordance with what unconditionally concerns him.... Theology and anthropology are involved in a reciprocal relationship.... In the ancient world, early Christianity encountered *apatheia* as a metaphysical axiom and an ethical ideal with irresistible force. On this concept were concentrated the worship of the divinity of God and the struggle for man’s freedom.<sup>17</sup>

The Rector Major too refers to the root of our apostolic passion when, speaking of formation, he points out that “it is necessary to *form passionate persons*. God has a passionate love for his people, and to this passionate God the consecrated life looks up intently. It must therefore, form persons who are

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<sup>17</sup>JÜRGEN MOLTMANN, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1979) 267.

passionate for God and like God” (AGC 394, pp. 27-28). In his *Message for Lent 2007*, Benedict XVI states that “Ezekiel, speaking of God’s relationship with the people of Israel, is not afraid to use strong and passionate language (cf. Ezekiel 16, 1-22). These biblical texts indicate that *eros* is part of God’s very heart: the Almighty awaits the ‘yes’ of his creatures as a young bridegroom that of his bride.”

#### 4. DON BOSCO’S APOSTOLIC PASSION

We shall try to render this “new image of God” more concrete in the Salesian context. It will undoubtedly be a particular enrichment from the theological point of view, but more especially from the perspective of proposing a practical way of carrying out our mission.

Certainly, it is not just a question of words; otherwise, we would run the risk of pouring new (and excellent!) wine into old wineskins. Instead, it must be said that genuine Christians – saintly men and women, in the first place – have instinctively grasped this point, perhaps without having the proper conceptual and linguistic categories to express it: after all, a genuine experience of the God of Jesus Christ cannot exhaust itself in ideas or words!

We can describe Don Bosco quite correctly as a **passionate** man, overflowing with the passion of Love, which in reality, from the Christian point of view, means that he was full of God, the God of Jesus Christ. But, over and above the beautiful description and so as not to remain on the purely rhetorical plane, we have to ask ourselves: What are the aspects that this new outlook can offer for a renewal – including a *theological* renewal – of Don Bosco’s **passion**?

\* In the first place, we can say that our Father, Don Bosco, *shared God’s passion for the salvation of mankind*, and more concretely, for the salvation of **young people**, particularly those who are “poor, abandoned and in danger” (C 26). This is what it would really mean to feel “compassion **with** God”. If we

do not take this point seriously, we fall back into theological apathy or into an exclusively inner-worldly preoccupation for the human promotion of the young. As we said before, to ask God to *give* us young people is a tremendously real way of saying that **for their sake** we want to collaborate with Him, feel with Him, suffer with Him...

\* In the second place, Don Bosco was particularly mindful that he had to *manifest* God's Love. "**It is not enough to love...**" was more than a marvellous expression emanating from his large heart and a formidable component of his work of education; it contained an extraordinary theological depth because, in the final analysis, God's entire plan of salvation can be summarized in just one word: **epiphany**, which consists not only in God loving us but in *manifesting His love for us in Christ* (cf. Rom 8, 39). We shall devote a subsequent reflection to this theme.

\* Don Bosco's educative and pastoral passion emphasizes, in a radical way, the **gratuitous nature** of his love as an expression of *God's Grace*, which is not a "thing" but God giving Himself totally to us in his Trinitarian reality, without any merit on our part. This will also be a subject of further reflection.

\* On the other hand, in Don Bosco's life and educative system, the young person's **response** occupies an important place. Even the phrase, "It is not enough to love..." points in this direction: "One who knows he is loved loves in return, and one who loves can obtain everything, especially from the young" (*Letter from Rome*, p. 259). Our hearts resonate with the words, "**Strive to make yourself loved...**", but perhaps we need to ask the question: does not such a response threaten the totally gratuitous nature of our love and the unconditional gift of ourselves?

Benedict XVI himself has something more to say about this fundamental aspect of love, when he speaks of God himself:

“In order to win back the love of His creature, He accepted to pay a very high price: the Blood of His Only Begotten Son (...) On the Cross, it is God Himself who begs the love of His creature: He is thirsty for the love of every one of us (...) In all truth, only the love that unites the free gift of oneself with the impassioned desire for reciprocity instills a joy which eases the heaviest of burdens”. (*Message for Lent 2007*)

In the background of this problem there has been the idea that love is more “pure” if it is totally gratuitous and receives no response, otherwise it would appear to be an “interested” love. We shall attempt an answer to this objection later when we analyze the experience of love as *agape* and *eros*; for the time being, taking the cue from a beautiful phrase of St. Paul, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another” (Rom 13, 8), I would like to emphasize that in a total and generous love, gratuitousness *does not disappear*; on the contrary, we find, so to speak, “an encounter between two gratuitous elements”.

This is a fascinating theme in the phenomenology of love. Since it cannot be treated here at length, we give a few aspects that can serve to throw some light on the subject. According to a sharp observation made by E. Jüngel, we have to distinguish between an *intentional* “*ut*” (I love *in order to* be loved) and a *consequential* ‘*ut*’ (where being loved is a consequence, not the purpose, of my love).<sup>18</sup> St. Bernard said this much earlier in a magnificent statement: “True love does not calculate, but it receives its reward all the same. As a matter of fact, it can receive its reward only if it does not calculate... The one who in loving seeks as a reward only the joy of loving, receives the joy of loving. The one instead who in loving seeks something other than love, loses love, and at the same time, the joy of loving”.<sup>19</sup> We can apply to love what Jesus said of the Kingdom of God:

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. EBERHARD JÜNGEL, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1983) 322.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted by JOSEF PIEPER, “*Amor*”, in: *Las Virtudes Fundamentales*, Madrid, Ed. RIALP, p. 514.

“Strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6, 33). Instead, the one who seeks “all these [other] things” while striving for the Kingdom, ends up without the Kingdom, without justice, and also without all the other things...

In the end, we have to go back to the ultimate Source of theology (and also of human life), to the acme of **theo-logical** reflection that is in no way a ‘third-degree abstraction’: the contemplation of the **Trinitarian God**. What theologians refer to as the *perichoresis* tells us that, in God, *to love* is just as divine as *to be loved*. And we bear a resemblance to **this** God, having been created in **His** image. What, then, God has united, man must not put asunder...

In the light of all that we have said, then, we could raise an important question, and even a dangerous one, if it is not properly understood: *can we speak of an erotic love in Don Bosco?* We can already anticipate the answer: **yes**, of course, since it is the matter of a love in the image of the love of God Himself, and, indeed, of the Love that **is** God. But this topic too requires a deeper and more incisive reflection later.

\* To conclude: I believe that the traditional expression “Don Bosco, **Father and Teacher of youth**” has still a lot to offer us. In particular, I would like to highlight **fatherhood**, which is one of the deepest expressions of being a man, and which Don Bosco lived to the full. Here again, to avoid getting caught up in rhetoric, let me point out two typical aspects of fatherhood (and apparently of motherhood as well, even though the nuances are different in each case).

- the love of a father or mother is the highest and most radical way of expressing the **unconditional nature** of God’s love: in every other human love, in fact, there is a prior *knowledge* of the person loved – except in this one: parents love their son / daughter, even before he or she

has a face or a name, even before they know whether it will be a boy or a girl...

- the love of a father or mother is not at all indifferent to the response of the son or daughter, but it *does not depend on the response*: in this way, it is a reflection of divine love which is good, even to those who are evil and unrighteous... (cf. Mt 5, 44-45).

Let us conclude with a phrase from our Constitutions, which has been turned into our prayer to Mary Immaculate, Help of Christians: **Mary, teach and help us to love as Don Bosco did!** (cf. C 84).

## *Prayer*

### “GIVE ME SOULS”

Lord God, our Father,  
You have called us to form part of the Salesian Congregation  
to entrust us with that portion of humanity,  
so exposed and yet so rich in promise:  
young people, in particular the most needy, abandoned and in  
danger,  
that we might be to them, signs and bearers of Your salvific  
love.

Fill our hearts and our lives with Your Spirit  
so that we might be faithful in carrying out this Mission,  
and that, through its generous and unconditional fulfilment,  
we might find the way to our holiness.

Grant that we might always have an experience of Your  
Fatherhood  
as we work untiringly for their salvation,  
following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd,  
just as our holy Father Don Bosco did.

Allow us to share the passion of Your Love  
as it was manifested in Your Son Jesus Christ,  
who loved us to the point of giving His life for all of us.

Free us from apathy and indifference,  
in the face of the dramatic situations in which our young  
people live every day,  
especially in the areas of greater poverty and alienation;  
Free us from the temptation to seek ways  
and to take decisions not in keeping with Your salvific Will.

Form in us, through the maternal intercession of Mary,  
a heart like that of Don Bosco,



that found the way to perfection and joy  
in the fulfilment, with complete fidelity, of the Mission You  
entrusted to him:

to be Father and Teacher of the Young.

At this decisive moment for our Congregation,  
at the beginning of the General Chapter, we ask you:  
Grant to all of us the light of Your Spirit  
so that we might know how to discern Your Will,  
and give us his strength, that we might put it into practice.

Give us the courage, even today,  
to say as Don Bosco did:

**Give me souls!**

Entrust young people to us,  
so that we might guide them along the path  
that leads to their true happiness and realization in Christ.  
Amen.

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### 3. THE ASCETICISM OF OUR CHARISM: *COETERA TOLLE...*

Continuing our previous reflection, let us consider the second part of Don Bosco's motto, "... *coetera tolle*", which, as the Rector Major says in his letter convoking GC 26, is a summary of Salesian "asceticism, as expressed in the 'dream of the ten diamonds'" (AGC 394, p. 7). A little later, he explains: "Coetera tolle' motivates the consecrated Salesian to keep away from the 'liberal model' of consecrated life depicted in the letter, 'You are my God. My happiness lies in you alone' (AGC 394, pp. 34-35; the letter mentioned is in AGC 283).

#### 1. CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM: EXPRESSION AND CONSEQUENCE OF LOVE

Let us try to take a broader view by starting out from some "human" considerations. They will help us to understand that asceticism is necessary not only for consecrated persons or for Christians alone, but for every human being to the extent to which he desires true happiness.

In the first quote he makes in his Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, mentions Friedrich Nietzsche, whose criticism of a certain type of asceticism bordering on the masochistic, is widely known: "They (the believers, above all the priests) called God that which contradicted and harmed them: and truly, there was much that was heroic in their worship!"<sup>20</sup> No doubt, we need to be humble and sincere in acknowledging the elements of truth to be found in these criticisms, which much of the time, were very few. Oftentimes, the model or ideal of Christian perfection was not really *Christian*, but drew on other sources, and even on the concept

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<sup>20</sup>FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1978) 115.

of a human being that had nothing to do with the Gospel. In the loving plan of a God who wants the good of His sons and daughters, it is not possible to separate the **objective** aspect (“perfection”) from the **subjective** aspect (“happiness”). We have to admit that in the not too distant past, the insistence on perfection without happiness led – like the swing of a pendulum – to the present situation, especially that of postmodern youth culture. Nowadays there is a quest – even obsessive at times – for happiness (or rather, for immediate pleasure), but without any objective reference-points (“perfection”).

When we spoke of love as the basis of the ‘*da mihi animas*’, we said that, just as it alone can give rise to an authentic Christian (and Salesian) spirituality, so too it alone is the source of an authentic asceticism. What’s more: there is no asceticism so radical as the one flowing from authentic love. That is why it is possible to assert that love **is the fountain head of Christian spirituality and asceticism**. Or to use evangelical terms: we can only have “life” and bear much fruit if, like the grain of wheat, we accept to fall into the earth and “die”. And all this, not because it is something “imposed” from the outside or “a price to be paid”, but because it flows from the very essence of love.

On the other hand, it is only when love flourishes and is genuinely manifested that the person attains his full self-realization because of the total integration of two aspects, the objective and the subjective: only in loving and in being loved does the human being find, *at one and the same time*, his fullness and his happiness.

## 2. THE TWO SIDES OF LOVE

The Argentinian poet Francisco Luis Bernárdez has written a beautiful poem in which he says that “*falling in love*” (the title of his poem) “es ignorar en qué consiste la diferencia entre la pena y la alegría (is ignoring the difference between joy and pain).”

St. Thomas had said the same thing earlier in a memorable statement: *Ex amore procedit et gaudium et tristitia* (S.Th. IIaIIae, q. 28, a.1): “From love proceed both joy and sadness”.

Writing along the same lines, Moltmann says:

But a man can suffer because he can love, even as a Narcissus, and he always suffers only to the degree that he loves. If he kills all love in himself, he no longer suffers. He becomes apathic.... A man who experiences helplessness, a man who suffers because he loves, a man who can die, is therefore a richer being than an omnipotent God who cannot suffer, cannot love and cannot die.<sup>21</sup>

This is not an absolutely new idea or a lack of respect for God. We find the same idea in Richard of St. Victor, and expressed still more audaciously: “If God were to prefer to selfishly reserve to Himself alone the abundance of His riches, when He could, if He wanted to, share it with others (...), He would be right to hide Himself from the angels and from everyone, and feel ashamed to be seen and recognized, because of His grave lack of benevolence.”<sup>22</sup>

The fact is that we are never more vulnerable than when we love... If, drawing on the “law of the grain of wheat”, love can be described as “a fullness and happiness ensuing from the total gift of oneself”, we see at once why it is not possible to separate spirituality from asceticism in any genuine experience of love. To put it concretely in “Salesian language”: *da mihi animas* and *coetera tolle* are the two inseparable sides of the mantle worn by the personage in the dream of the Ten Diamonds...

We find the same duality of love in another beautiful text belonging to our Salesian tradition: Don Bosco’s dream of the bower of roses. Those who follow Don Bosco, fascinated by

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<sup>21</sup>JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1979) 222-223.

<sup>22</sup>RICHARD OF ST VICTOR, *De Trinitate*, III, 4 (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1990) 130.

the possibility of walking on roses, soon discover that there are sharp thorns, and therefore feel cheated. The fact is that they forgot that there are no roses without thorns, that there is no love without suffering, or better, without *vulnerability*...

At least twice in the second chapter of our Constitutions on the identity of the Salesian, we come across this way of looking at asceticism as something intimately bound up with the experience of love. In article 14, under the heading, “Predilection for the young”, we read: “This love is an expression of pastoral charity and gives meaning to our whole life. For their welfare we give generously of our time, talents and health: ‘For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life’”. And, a little later, recalling the “second motto of the Congregation”, *work and temperance*, our Rule of Life says: “(The Salesian) accepts the daily demands and renunciations of the apostolic life. He is ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain whenever God’s glory and the salvation of souls require it.” (C 18)

### **3. THE “GOD WHO IS LOVE”: A POOR GOD**

Just as in the previous reflection we established the basis for our passion in the “da mihi animas”, so here too we have to go deeper and discover the basis for our evangelical and consecrated poverty, for our most radical asceticism, in the God we believe in, viz. the God who is Love.

We have normally sought this basis in the life of Jesus, for, as our Constitutions say, quoting our Father Don Bosco: “We are aware of the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ: though He was rich he made himself poor so that through his poverty we might become rich. We are called to a life closely modelled on the Gospel. We choose to follow ‘the Saviour *who was born in poverty, lived deprived of everything and died stripped on the cross*.’” (C 72)

Whether the example of the Son of God made man is a norm or not is something we do not wish to discuss here. But we wish to affirm the central theological concept, viz. that in the Man, Jesus of Nazareth, *God has revealed himself* in a definitive (= eschatological) way.

Without attempting to expand upon this last assertion, we limit ourselves to recalling the words of *Vita Consecrata* concerning the *Trinitarian basis of the evangelical counsels*: “The deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness.”<sup>23</sup> Because Jesus Christ is *the One who reveals God*, we can, *through him*, arrive at this Trinitarian basis. (I would not like to miss this opportunity to point out that, in my opinion, we have here one of the new and most important theological and spiritual insights of the Magisterium on consecrated life; unfortunately, it has hardly been developed).

Let me offer you on this point a personal reflection that I have very much at heart. In the Synoptic Gospels, e.g., in Luke 21, 1-4, we come across the moving example of a poor widow who, putting in two small coins, gave, according to Jesus, more than all the others: “all of them contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on”. I had always understood this text as a powerful *moral* teaching, motivating us to have full confidence in God, until one day I asked myself: Could not this Word of the Lord be also a remarkable **theological parable**? Is the God of Jesus Christ like one of those rich people who “contributed much” but out of their abundance, or is he not rather like the poor widow who gave everything for our sake, all that was dearest to Him, His only Son?

Understood in this way, the Incarnation as *kenosis* is a **Trinitarian act**, and, in fact, the supreme manifestation of the Trinitarian God.

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<sup>23</sup>JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 21.

But then, a question immediately arises: Does not God “change” by becoming man? Does not the Incarnation assail God’s radical *immutability*?

Without entering into theological disquisitions – which is not our concern – the first thing we should do is ask ourselves the deeper question of what immutability means – a concept that is more philosophical than theological. In any case, I would think that the positive content of this concept is taken and brought to completion, in *personal* terms, in **fidelity**, which is a typical characteristic of *love*, especially when we speak of God.

Calling to mind the interpretation of the Gospel parable mentioned above, let us allow Hans Urs von Balthasar to speak to us through this exceptional text:

What is at stake here, at least in the background, is an absolutely decisive transformation of the way we look at God: from His being ‘absolute power’ in the first place to His being *absolute ‘Love’*. His sovereignty is not manifested in His holding on to what belongs to him, but in His letting it go. His sovereignty is to be found on a plane distinct from what we call ‘power’ and ‘weakness’. **What God empties Himself of in the incarnation is ontologically possible because God empties Himself eternally in his tri-personal giving** (...) Concepts like ‘poverty’ and ‘riches’ become ambivalent. This does not mean that God’s essence in itself is (univocally) ‘kenotic’, as though the same concept could embrace the *kenosis* as well as the divine basis that makes it possible. What I want to say is that, as Hilary attempted to point out in his own way, God’s power is such that it can become a locus in Himself for a self-emptying like that of the incarnation and the cross, and that it can take this self-emptying to the furthest extent.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, “El misterio Pascual,” *Mysterium Salutis III/2* (Madrid: Ed. Cristianidad, 1975) 157.

Only a God like this is worthy, not only of our gratitude and appreciation, but also and above all, of our total and unconditional **love** which leads us too to a radical “emptying” of ourselves in order to be completely filled with His Love and become in this way its bearers to the young.

Later on, we shall reflect on the Incarnation of the Son of God as a *definitive manifestation* of God’s love, and also on the God who is Love. It is within this “positive” context that we shall attempt to integrate the aspect of **self-emptying**, viz. the **kenosis** of the Son of God made Man.

#### 4. LOVE AND POVERTY IN SALESIAN LIFE

Before presenting the last two of the Chapter themes in his letter convoking the GC26, the Rector Major states:

For Don Bosco, the second part of the motto, ‘*coetera tolle*’, means detachment from whatever can keep us away from God and from the young. For us at the present day this becomes concrete in evangelical poverty and in deliberately choosing to work for youngsters who are ‘poor, abandoned and in danger’, by being sensitive to the new forms of poverty and working on the new frontiers where they are in most need. (AGC 394, p. 41)

Here again, by taking apostolic love as our point of departure, after the image of the God of Jesus Christ, we shall be able to give it concrete form in an authentic and radical poverty.

In his solid but extraordinarily vibrant analysis of human life, Eberhard Jüngel expresses the relationship between love and poverty in this way:

What is then of great significance ontologically and theologically is that the fact that the loving I wants to have the beloved Thou and only then wants to have itself **transforms the structure of having**. For the beloved Thou is desired by the loving I only as one to whom it may *surrender* itself. Love is mutual surrender... The exchange of mutual



surrender means... that the loving I wants to have itself only in the form of being had by someone else. And it means at the same time that it wants to have the beloved Thou only as an I which also wants to be had.... **In love there is no having which does not arise out of surrender....** The loving I has itself only as though it did not have itself. It wants to be had by that very Thou that it wants to have. In order to have this Thou, it must surrender to it, that is, cease to have itself. This content is decisive for the understanding of love.<sup>25</sup>

To put it another way: a poverty that does not stem from love is not a poverty to be desired, nor does it give us a resemblance to God. The self-emptying of the Son of God (*kenosis*) is, in reality, an expression of his love drawing him to resemble us: *amor, aut similes invenit, aut similes facit*. Our “*insertion*” among the poor and marginalized, which leads us to share their life, is, in reality, a version of the *Incarnation*.

In this regard, we can also recall the words of St. Augustine in his commentary on the first letter of John:

Whence begins charity, brothers? Pay a little attention. You have heard how to arrive at perfection. The Lord in the Gospel has set before us the goal of perfection and the way to attain it: *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*. He, therefore, showed His perfection in the Gospel, and there too He recommended it to us. But you ask and say to yourselves: When will it be possible for us to have this charity? Do not despair too soon of yourselves: the charity in you is just born, not yet perfect; nourish it, so that it may not become weak. But you will say to me: how shall I know the degree of my love? We have heard how charity can be brought to perfection; let us now hear whence it begins. John continues and says: *How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?* Here then is where charity

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<sup>25</sup>EBERHARD JÜNGEL, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1983) 319-320.

has its beginning. If you are still not yet disposed to die for your brother, be at least disposed to give some of your goods to your brother (...) If you cannot give to your brother from what you have in excess, how can you give him your life?<sup>26</sup>

## 5. POVERTY AS AN ASPECT OF SALESIAN CONSECRATED LIFE

After the text quoted at the beginning of our meditation, the Rector Major continues in concrete terms:

Consecrated life in future years will be realized in its concentration on the radical following of the obedient, poor and chaste Christ. If all three of the evangelical counsels speak to us of our total offering of ourselves to God and dedication to the young, it is poverty that leads us to give ourselves without reserve or hesitation even to our last breath, as did Don Bosco. The practice of the evangelical counsels lets us give free rein to the utmost limits of our availability. (AGC 394, p. 41)

In my opinion, we Salesians have to find in the theology of the consecrated life, behind the obvious diversity of the evangelical counsels, a *harmonious and articulated unity* centred on **love**, which gives them meaning and leads them to the fullness of holiness. Seen this way, poverty must not be seen as a “part” or a section of our life, but as a transversal **aspect** cutting across the whole of our life, and particularly the evangelical counsels. I would even go so far as to say, with a little play on words, that the *poverty* involved in chastity and obedience is more radical than that required by the vow of poverty itself.

In the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* we read: “All those reborn in Christ are called to live out, with the strength which is the Spirit’s gift, the chastity appropriate to their state of life, obedience to God and to the Church, and a reasonable

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<sup>26</sup>AUGUSTINE, *In Ioannis Epistolam Tractatus 5,12*, Roma, Città Nuova Editrice, 1985, p. 1743.

detachment from material possessions: for all are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love”<sup>27</sup>

Analyzing this fundamental text, we find three statements closely linked with one another:

- every Christian is called to holiness;
- holiness consists in the perfection of love or charity;
- *therefore*, every Christian is called to live the *evangelical counsels* according to his state of life.

Here again we come across a completely new theological and spiritual insight concerning the meaning of the evangelical counsels, though it is to be found, in a way, in *Lumen Gentium*. What is being said here is that *the one and only* Christian perfection, which is that of **love**, essentially requires the practice of the “evangelical counsels”. The way in which they are mentioned shows that it is not required of all the baptized to “profess the vows”; hence we need a better formulation to avoid making the mistake of looking upon “normal” Christians as “second-tier members”, or else of broadening the concept of “consecrated life” so much that it includes everyone. We must not overlook the fact that every Christian is a consecrated person because of Baptism.

Now, if these evangelical “values” (which are not “optional”) are to apply to every Christian, they must have the greatest possible latitude and not limit themselves to this or that marginal aspect of human and Christian existence (which would be the case, for example, if chastity were understood solely in terms of sexuality, and obedience solely in terms of a command issued by a legitimate superior “by virtue of the vow”).

They must touch upon the fundamental aspects of the human being **before God**:

- in relation to “things”: *poverty*;

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<sup>27</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 30.

- in relation to persons: *chastity*;
- in relation to oneself: *obedience*.

We must remember the first and most important “commandment”, the first “word of life”, which Jesus pointed out to the doctor of the law: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mk 12, 29-31 and parallels) In the light of this “commandment”, we can understand the *threefold idolatry* which threatens the very foundation of our Christian (and religious) life, viz. absolutizing material things and adoring “money as a god”; finding in a person (or persons) the ultimate and definitive meaning of our life, and setting aside the primacy given to God; and finally, the most serious and radical temptation of all, putting ourselves in God’s place. Or what is even worse: instead of *servng God*, making use of God to *serve our purposes*.

Seen in a positive light, the striving for Christian holiness must consist in growing day by day in genuine love: we put God at the centre of our life as the ultimate and definitive recipient of our love; only in and because of Him we love our neighbour (“chastity”), we use the goods of this world in fraternal solidarity (“poverty”), and so we find our full realization in Christ (“obedience”). In this way, and as a service to our brothers and sisters, our consecrated life becomes a humble example and a “spiritual therapy”<sup>28</sup>: we *renounce the exercise* of certain values, not in order to induce other Christians to renounce them too, but in order to *relativize* them. This is our

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, nn. 87ff.

irreplaceable service, and that is why it is possible to speak of the “objective excellence of the consecrated life”.<sup>29</sup>

To be still more explicit: for a Christian, the “centrality of God”, together with the radical renunciation it entails, is translated into the **following and imitation of Jesus Christ**: “Whoever wants to come after me but does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be My disciple (...) None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” (Lk 14, 26-27. 33)

When our Constitutions speak of Salesian life as a *formative experience*, they invite the Salesian not only to accept the “spirituality” derived from living the values of his vocation but also “the *ascetical demands* [that vocation] makes on him” (C 98).

This brings us to a very interesting theme which I shall only enunciate for the time being, viz. the meaning of **renunciation**, and the **formation to renunciation**. It is a theme of great relevance today, especially, but not only, in the area of initial formation.

On this point, I would like to present another text drawn from the Rector Major’s conference to the Superiors General:

In the short Gospel parable of the merchant with the precious pearls (Mt 13, 45-46), we find some basic elements that allow us to describe the “phenomenology of renunciation”:

a) Precious pearls are renounced (“the merchant went and sold what he had”) *not because they are false*: they are authentic after all, and up till then made up the merchant’s wealth. Applying it to our reality, it is certainly not an appropriate method to try to diminish the value of what has to be renounced, to try to make it something easy to

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<sup>29</sup>Cf. PASCUAL CHAVEZ, “You are my God. My happiness lies in you alone”, in AGC 382, pp. 15ff., quoting *Vita Consecrata*, nn.18 and 32.

do. After all, renouncing “bad things” does not make for the most profound and complete human renunciation. How many times have we heard the request, as a resistance to what has to be renounced: “*What is bad about what I am doing?*” And one who says this is right: only that s/he has to understand that it is precisely *then* that the opportunity presents itself to take up renunciation in its most authentic sense.

b) Authentic pearls are renounced sorrowfully and at the same time cheerfully, because “*the*” *ultimate pearl has been found*, the one that has fulfilled the merchant’s vision and heart: and he understands that he cannot buy it unless he sells the others. If our consecrated life, centred on the following and the imitation of the Lord Jesus, is not **fascinating**, the renunciation it requires becomes unjust and dehumanizing... As *Potissimum Institutioni* puts it so splendidly: “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)”<sup>30</sup>

c) The joy of possessing the “precious pearl” never eliminates the fear that *it may not be authentic*: Where it turns out to be false, my decision will have been mistaken, and I will have ruined my life. This “risk” in Christian life, and even more so in consecrated life, is a direct consequence of **faith**: only in faith does our life have meaning: If what we believe in does not have truth, “we are more unfortunate than any person”, to paraphrase St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor 15, 19). The day when, in whatever aspect of consecrated life, we can say: “my life is fully satisfying, even if what I believe in is not true”, our Institute becomes

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<sup>30</sup>CICLSAL, *Potissimum Institutioni*, n. 9.

an NGO, with the further problem of demanding certain unacceptable requirements from its members...

I conclude with the practical considerations concerning poverty offered by the Rector Major in his letter:

We Salesians bear witness to poverty by tireless work and temperance, but also by the essentials of an austere and simple life, by sharing and solidarity, and by the responsible use of resources. Our poverty calls us to carry out an institutional reorganization of our work in a way that will avoid the risk of seeming to be in the educational business rather than being educators, or managers of educational enterprises rather than apostles through education. Anyone who has chosen to follow Jesus has also chosen to make his own Christ's style of life, to shun riches, to live the beatitude of poverty and of simplicity of heart, and to be on familiar terms with the poor. (AGC 294, pp. 41-42)

In the end, it is a matter of taking seriously Jesus' beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit", and living it conscientiously so as to share, already now itself, in the Kingdom of heaven.

## *Prayer*

### **“TAKE AWAY THE REST”**

Lord Jesus,  
You revealed to us the Mystery of God,  
whose sole Treasure is the fullness of Trinitarian Love,  
making Yourself poor for us,  
and inviting us to follow Your example  
so as to become Your true disciples.

Grant that, following You radically for the sake of love,  
we will be able to make You increasingly the Centre of our life,  
before any other person or thing,  
even before our own selves, our personal plans and projects,  
so that, like the grain of wheat,  
we will have the courage to die, to bear much fruit.

We want to learn, at the school of Your Love,  
that we can be happy only in the renunciation of our selfishness,  
to the extent of giving our life for our brothers and sisters,  
especially for the young that You entrust to us,  
to be genuine and credible signs of Your Love,  
and not only with words and fine speeches.

Teach us to know how to accept the renunciations that are part  
of our life  
like the person who wants to leave all his treasures with joy  
so as to possess the precious pearl that has conquered his heart  
and his life:  
that Treasure which only You Lord, can be.

In particular, help us to know how to renounce  
all that restrains us in the realization of the Mission  
that You have entrusted to us on behalf of young people most  
in need of Your Love,



just as our Father Don Bosco did, till the last moment of his life.

Grant us the courage, in this General Chapter,  
to assume the attitudes which will enable us to overcome  
the models and the patterns of life and work  
that are not in keeping with Your Will and the Mission  
entrusted to us,  
and help us to take those decisions  
that will make, more visible and radiant,  
Your predilection for boys and young people  
who are the poorest, abandoned and in danger.  
Amen.

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## 4. "IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO LOVE..." THE MANIFESTATION OF LOVE

"It is not enough to love". This meditation is centred on one of the fundamental themes of our charism and our Salesian spirituality. Among the many texts that form part of our tradition, we wish to recall the *Letter from Rome* dated 10 May 1884, in which Don Bosco articulated this essential trait of the Preventive System in a marvellous way. However, we run the risk of turning it into a superficial slogan, whereas, in actual fact, it possesses a tremendous depth not only from a pedagogical or spiritual point of view, but also from a theological perspective: it calls for deeper reflection since it has its roots in Christian Revelation itself.

Here too, as in our previous reflections, we shall take human experience as our point of departure, not because we wish to minimize the newness brought by the Christian faith, but because we are firmly convinced that there is no opposition between nature and grace, between Creation and Redemption.

### 1. LOVE NEEDS TO BE MANIFESTED

What St. John says of God can be applied analogously to the reality of love in human experience: "No one has ever seen love." Nevertheless, what the title of this section intends to convey is not only that love cannot be perceived if it is not manifested – this is obvious – but, more importantly, that love of its very nature tends to manifest itself and wants to be perceived by the person who is loved. Furthermore – and this needs to be clearly stated – love yearns for a response, but this will not be forthcoming if love does not manifest itself.

I feel that it is necessary to explore this experience, and that is why I wish to raise the question: *why* is the manifestation of love necessary on the part of one who loves? Obviously, because

he cannot avoid doing so; but also – and here is something which is not always taken into consideration – *because of what it implies for the person who is loved*: precisely because what I very much want is his happiness, I want him to *know that he is loved*.

Such an approach leads us to an aspect that the phenomenology of love often tends to forget, viz. that our starting-point is not “loving”, but “being” and “feeling loved”. This forgetfulness is often bolstered by the misunderstanding that “it is better to give than to receive”, with the result that occasionally no response is expected from the person loved, as though it were more noble to display a “disinterested” love. One might even go the extent of thinking that this is the way *we bear a greater resemblance* to God. In his Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, and especially in his *Message for Lent 2007*, the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, offers some extraordinarily fruitful considerations to dispel this misunderstanding at its very theological root. As we saw when speaking of gratuitousness and grace, the Pope writes: “The Almighty awaits the ‘yes’ of his creatures as a young bridegroom that of his bride (...) The response the Lord ardently desires of us is above all that we welcome His love and allow ourselves to be drawn to Him.”

Unfortunately, the misunderstanding also appears in the very conception of Christian life, when it is taken to mean “loving and serving God” in the hope that God will reciprocate our love and save us, instead of understanding and living our Christian life, with the joy arising out of gratitude, as a “**being loved by God**”. It is only such a faith-conviction that can give rise to our grateful and joyful response of love for Him.

To return to the point just mentioned, viz. the “passive” experience of *being loved*, we have some extraordinary pages written by the German Catholic thinker Josef Pieper. After quoting Jean-Paul Sartre, who affirms that “This is the basis for the joy of love...: we feel that our existence is justified,” Pieper goes on to say:

Here, however, the matter is seen, not from the lover's point of view, but from that of the beloved. Obviously, then, it does not suffice us simply to exist; we can do that "anyhow". What matters to us, beyond mere existence, is the explicit confirmation: **It is good that you exist; how wonderful that you are!** In other words, what we need over and above sheer existence is: to be loved by another person (...). But this seemingly astonishing fact is repeatedly confirmed by the most palpable experience, of the kind that everyone has day after day. We say that a person "**blossoms**" when undergoing the experience of being loved; that he becomes wholly himself for the first time; that a "**new life**" is beginning for him.<sup>31</sup>

I imagine that all of us have had such an experience with the young in our educative and pastoral work; it is one of those things that give us deep and authentic happiness. To put it another way: as long as we do not feel loved by anyone, 'we feel ashamed' to be in this world, as though we were at a feast to which we have not been invited; but, no sooner does a person love us than, as Sartre said, "we feel justified in existing", and in education, the change (even externally) can often be quite amazing.

I wish to insist on this aspect of experiencing love, because "*being loved*" spotlights the exceptional and irreplaceable uniqueness of the person loved, whereas the active aspect of "loving" does not always guarantee that uniqueness. It is enough to consider the oft-repeated phrase, "Do good; it doesn't matter to whom." Can we really speak here of "love" when – apart from whether it is possible or not – the anonymity of *the person loved* is what we desire? Moreover, will the person feel satisfied? One could be performing a "kindly deed", but it lacks an essential element to make it an authentic act of love.

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<sup>31</sup>JOSEF PIEPER, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1997) 174; cf. also 167 ff.

I think that here lies the root of *eros*, without which sexuality on the one hand, and *agape* on the other, can become “impersonal”. As we shall see in our meditation on Don Bosco, every boy for him was unique, even if those who received his love numbered in their hundreds or thousands!

## 2. THE EXPRESSION AND THE MANIFESTATION OF LOVE

In a bid to go deeper into the phenomenology of love so as to grasp what love is, it is important to distinguish between the *expression* of love and the *manifestation* of love. The *expression* of love flows more “immediately” from the nature of love itself: it is the consequence itself of loving, and is therefore more closely connected with the one who loves. The *manifestation* of love, instead, focuses more on the recipient: it *specifies* and *explains* the former (the expression of love), and for this reason, it is more closely connected with the *word*. Unfortunately, deceitfulness can enter here, as when the word does not correspond to the reality which, theoretically speaking, it seeks to *manifest*.

Let us try to trace the development of love in the form of a diagram:

### **reality – expression – manifestation – perception – response**

As we can glimpse, and shall clarify later, all this finds a remarkable application when it comes to the Salesian charism.

Reminding ourselves of the adage, “The proof of love lies in deeds and not in beautiful words,” we can say that deeds are the *expression* of love, whereas *manifestation* is all that enables us to understand the source of those deeds, viz. love. This manifestation is first of all the *word*, but other signs too are possible. We can apply to love (and its human reality) the words of the Second Vatican Council: “The plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, n. 2.

Two further observations need to be made regarding this analysis of human experience. On the one hand, with regard to the *newness* of the manifestation, it is possible to say, paradoxically, that it is new, and at the same time, that it isn't. It isn't new, because it manifests something that, in some way, already exists; but it is new, precisely because what already existed *had not yet been manifested*. The manifestation creates a new situation, and in this sense one can speak of the "*event of the Word*". To tell a person, "I love you", is to establish a new and wonderful reality.

On the other hand, the manifestation is, in a certain sense, "sacramental", in so far as a good part of love's efficaciousness lies in its *perceptibility*. When the sign is missing, perception does not ensue, even if there exists the reality that could make it possible; consequently, there is no possibility of a response on the part of the one who is indeed loved *but does not know it*.

The Spanish poet, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, had a beautiful way of expressing such a human experience:

A tear appeared in her eyes,  
and a word of pardon on my lips.  
Pride spoke and wiped away her tears,  
and the word on my lips expired.  
Today I go my way, and she by another;  
but when I think of our mutual love,  
I still ask myself: why was I silent that day?  
And she will ask: why did I not cry?<sup>33</sup>

To put it in a simple and *universal* way: how many times does it not happen, especially in married and family life, that, while love exists, and perhaps also its *expression* (in the form

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<sup>33</sup>"Asomaba a sus ojos una lágrima, / y a mi labio una frase de perdón.  
/ Habló el orgullo y se enjugó su rostro, / y la frase en mis labios expiró.  
/ Hoy voy por un camino; ella, por otro; / pero al pensar en nuestro  
mutuo amor, / yo digo aún: por qué callé aquel día? / Y ella dirá: por  
qué no lloré yo?"

of mutual service, commitment, and even sacrifice for those whom one loves), the *manifestation* which makes it possible for love to be perceived through those expressions is missing?

### 3. “...WE HAVE KNOWN THE LOVE GOD HAS FOR US...”

While commenting on the motto of our Congregation, “Da mihi animas, coetera tolle”, we reflected on some theological aspects of our charism. We shall now go deeper into them, taking as our starting point the Incarnation of the Son of God as the *definitive and once-and-for-all* (= *eschatological*) *manifestation* of God’s love.

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life – this Life **was made manifest**, and we saw it and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal Life that was with the Father and **was made manifest to us** – we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard. (1 Jn 1, 1-3a)

What we really want to say in a nutshell is that God’s entire plan of salvation for humanity, which is centred on the **Christ-event**, can be summarized in just one word: **EPIPHANY**, for its aim is that all human beings, of all times and places, should not only be the object of God’s love, but should be able to *perceive* it, *grasp* it in faith (= believe), and *respond to it in love*.

When we speak of the “Incarnation”, obviously we do not refer to a precise moment (“the 25<sup>th</sup> of March”) but to the total *experience* that the Son of God willed to live: that “becoming Man” (which, from a personalistic point of view would be, in a certain sense, the theological basis for life understood as an ongoing process of formation) that lasted all his earthly life and reached its culmination in his death and *resurrection*. In this sense, the word “*epiphany*” does not mean just a “sensible manifestation” (visual, for example); in such a case, it would imply that he only *appeared* (and that would be “docetism”).

“Epiphany” instead embraces the entire reality of the Person who gave himself totally in love “to the very end.” (Jn 13, 1ff)

Catholic theology, in a critical dialogue with the Protestant Reformation, has always maintained that the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is the same God the *Creator*, who makes himself present in *history*, and in particular, revealed himself as **Yahweh**, the God of Israel. This Catholic position has been definitively confirmed by the First Vatican Council on the basis of Romans 1, 20: “Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, has been clearly perceived in the things that He has made”.

Nevertheless, the same Council, speaking of this revelation of God, and in agreement with the Pauline text, makes mention of “his eternal power and wisdom”, but does not speak of His *Love*. Perhaps it was not the explicit intention of the Council to make this distinction, but I find the omission very significant. Here we are speaking of Creation and History as the *expression* of the true God (therefore, of the God who **is** Love); but, if it is *to be understood in this way*, this expression needs its **manifestation in Christ**. Without Him, we would never be able to understand that, over and above his infinite Power and his Wisdom, Creation and History speak to us of God’s **love**, or better still, of a God who **is Love**.

To return once more to human experience: how often it is difficult to *perceive* the attitude of a person who *expresses* his love but fails to *manifest* it (especially through the *word*, as we have said before) and therefore makes it hard to establish a relationship.

I would dare to say that, without the historical revelation of Jesus Christ, Creation and History (in the sense of universal history, and especially “my” history and that of every man and woman in the world) are *dumb in terms of manifesting agape*. Even if a little later we shall try to look at the important consequences which all this has for our charism, for the time being, from the “Salesian angle”, I would like to say only this:



God was not satisfied with loving us, but wanted to *manifest* his love by giving us what he held dearest to his heart, viz. his Son, Jesus Christ.

The definitive nature of God's revelation in Jesus Christ does not mean to say that God has already said everything he had to say in the past or that he will have nothing to say in the future. Actually speaking, God will continue to speak to us through (universal, particular, personal...) history, but *we shall not be able to understand* what he is telling us if we do not "read" it in the light of Jesus Christ.

All this has implications (which we cannot examine here) for interreligious dialogue. Without closing ourselves in any way to all the values we find outside of our faith, to all that is "good, noble and just..." (Phil 4,8) in every genuine search for God on the part of mankind in every time and place, the considerations we have made enable us to assert that Jesus Christ is the one universal Saviour of humanity. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ." (Tit 2, 11.13)

#### 4. THE INCARNATION OF THE SON OF GOD, *EPIPHANY OF DIVINE LOVE*

Nonetheless, we have still to arrive at the core of our theological reflection: in what sense is the Incarnation of the Son of God the definitive *manifestation* of His love so as to enable us to discover its *expression* in every moment and circumstance of our lives and in those of others, in particular and universal history? Especially since, by taking His self-emptying (*kenosis*) seriously, the Incarnation would seem, at first sight, to be a *concealment* of God rather than a *manifestation* of His Divinity. On the other hand, by not taking his **self-emptying** (*kenosis*) seriously, how would we be able to understand the definitive revelation of God through His "becoming man"?

A superficial reading of the Pauline text, 1 Corinthians 1,18-25, could give us the impression that, according to St. Paul, God, who is infinite Power and eternal Wisdom, manifested himself in Christ in a way opposite to what he is, viz. in the impotence and insanity of the Cross. This, for example, is how Luther understood and developed his *sub contrario* Christology. The fact is that St. Paul does not say this. The contrast he makes concludes with these words: “To those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, we preach a Christ, the **power** of God and the **wisdom** of God” (v. 24); and he adds a phrase which might appear to be merely a formal paradox, but is not so at all: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (v. 25). Since it is a matter of the power and the wisdom of God’s **love**, it appears to be weakness and insanity, according to purely human criteria, but it is stronger than human strength and wiser than human wisdom.

If we start out from a “theistic” description of God as infinite Power and Wisdom, we find ourselves confronted with an alternative that leads up a blind alley. The Son of God, in his Incarnation, either *keeps* these prerogatives or *empties himself* of them; in the first case, can we maintain that he truly “became man”? In the second case, his human reality is evident; but he would cease to be “true God”.

The real theological solution begins with the very statement of the problem, and that is: what is the authentic image of the God in whom we believe? God is not, first of all, Power or Wisdom; He is **Love**.

Let us go back to our human experience. All of us know that beautiful expression in Latin which holds that “*amor, aut similes invenit, aut similes facit*”: either love finds equals or makes equals. Let us apply this statement to God’s love. The difference between God and his creatures – here we mean human beings – is infinite. Nevertheless, the very source of this difference (“I am God, and not man”: Hos 11, 9) gives rise to the pursuit of equality: love does not pretend to ignore

differences, but neither does it allow itself to be separated by them, rather it seeks to **overcome them by embracing them**.

In a beautiful text belonging to the Oriental tradition, Nicolás Cabasilas says:

Men are distinct from God because of three things: because of their nature, because of their sin, and because of their death. However, the Redeemer brought about the disappearance of these obstacles which come in the way of a direct relationship. To this end, he eliminated the obstacles one by one: the first, by assuming human nature; the second, by dying on the cross; and the third, by rising from the dead, whereby he completely banished the tyranny of death over human nature.<sup>34</sup>

If love (or better: the one who loves) seeks to be equal to the one loved, the Son in His Incarnation emptied Himself of his Power and Wisdom, not in order to cease being God but for the opposite reason, viz. **to manifest Himself to us** more fully, in our likeness, as Love, and therefore as God (assuming that we take seriously our belief that “God is Love”).

In other words: because it was **love that prompted** the Son of God to empty Himself of His omnipotence and omniscience in order to be *truly man*, He manifested that love to the greatest possible extent – which is the same as saying that He manifested Himself fully **as God**.

Let me have recourse one more time to human experience. Unlike *expression*, *manifestation* has as its reference point not the person who loves, but those who perceive and receive that love. Therefore, since, in God, Love cannot be opposed to his Wisdom and Power – in fact, they are identical in the absolute simplicity of his perfection – but since *in our perception of love it is possible to see them opposed to each other*, God chose to “condescend” to our limited human understanding, emptying

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<sup>34</sup>N. CABASILAS, *De Vita in Christo III*, cited in HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, “El misterio Pascual,” *Mysterium Salutis III/2*, 151.

Himself of whatever could, even in the slightest degree, obscure or overshadow the full manifestation of His Love. **Never was God “so really” God** (or, to put it more exactly: never *did He manifest Himself to us so fully as God*) as when, out of love for our sake, He emptied Himself of his omnipotence and omniscience, viz. of whatever could hinder Him from being really and truly “**one of us**”.

This brings us to a tremendously paradoxical conclusion: any attempt to deny or diminish the radical humanity of Jesus Christ is an assault on His Divinity, and goes counter to His “desire” – and infinite power – to share fully in our human existence, starting out from His personal identity as the Son of God. (We can never forget, even for a moment, that it was God Himself who, in Christ, became one of us!)

Here we can again pick up what we said with regard to Grace, viz. that this marvellous plan of the *epiphany of God’s love* hopes for – rather, *longs for* – a response from each one of us. I would like to conclude with a statement that has a distinct “Salesian flavour” and is deliberately provocative: when the Father, through the work of the Holy Spirit, sent his Son into the world, He gave Him this injunction: **Strive to make Yourself loved!**

## 5. “IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO LOVE”: THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM

The article in the Constitutions on the Preventive System concludes with these words: “It permeates our approach to God, our personal relationships, and our manner of living in community through the exercise of a charity *that knows how to make itself loved.*” (C 20; cf. also C 15)

Before mentioning, at least in summary form, some of the aspects of this key feature of our charism, I would like to recall some paragraphs from the speech which the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Lucido Maria Parocchi, gave in 1884, on the occasion of the Don Bosco’s journey to Rome, at the time the construction

of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart was in progress. Our Rector Major quotes this passage (cf. AGC 394, pp. 35-36), saying that “apart from some obsolete terms, [it] could have come from the present day”:

I want to tell you what distinguishes your Congregation from the others ... Just as God confers to every man born into this world something that distinguishes him among all other men, so too does God confer something to every religious congregation that gives it a character, a mark of its own... You, Salesians, have a special mission that constitutes your characteristic... Your own Congregation seems to be akin to that of St. Francis in its poverty, yet your brand of poverty is not Franciscan. It would seem to be akin to the Order of St. Dominic, though you do not have to defend the faith against prevalent heresies..... Your principal mission consists in the education of the young. It would seem to be akin to the order of St. Ignatius in learning because of the extensive number of books you have published for the masses, and Don Bosco is a man of great genius and extensive knowledge, learned in many things. But do not take it amiss if I say that you have not invented the philosopher’s stone. So, what is there so special about the Salesian Congregation? If I have understood it properly, its physiognomy, its essential characteristic lies in the **charity it exercises in accordance with the requirements of our day and age**: *Nos credidimus caritati, Deus caritas est* (we have believed in love, God is Love), and it is revealed in Charity. The present age can only be won over and led to do good with love... Tell the men of this day and age that the souls now being lost must be saved, and the men of this world do not understand. We, therefore, have **to adapt ourselves to the days in which we live, and this is basically a material age**. God reveals Himself to the present generation through love: *nos credidimus caritati*. Tell this day and age that you are rescuing children from the streets that they may not be run over... that you are gathering them in classrooms to educate them, so that they

may not become a menace to society, and that they may not go to prison. Then the men of this age will understand and will begin to believe: *et nos cognovimus et credimus caritati, quam habet Deus in nobis* ('and we know and believe in the love that God has for us'). (BM XVII, 70-73)

Among other aspects, I would like to highlight the following:

1. In accomplishing the Salesian mission as signs and bearers of the love of God for poor and abandoned youth, Don Bosco was fully aware of the need for this love to be *expressed and manifested* in such a way as to be *perceived* by them as much as possible (even if he did not say this in these words). We see this clearly in the dream he recounted in his "Letter from Rome": Don Bosco's interlocutors did not complain that his collaborators had no love for the young or failed to *express* their love. As a matter of fact, Don Bosco argued with them: "Don't you see that they are martyrs to study and work, and how they burn out their young lives for those Divine Providence has entrusted to them?" What actually was lacking was the *manifestation* of that love, and that was why they were not perceived in that way: "*The best thing is missing*; that the youngsters should not only be loved, but that **they themselves know that they are loved** (...) Without familiarity, love cannot be **demonstrated**, and without this demonstration there can be no confidence". Further on, the same relationship between expression and manifestation comes up again: "By neglecting the lesser part they waste the *greater*, meaning all the work they put in".

2. Don Bosco gives us a motivation which not only comes from his pedagogical genius but is above all completely evangelical: "Jesus Christ made Himself little with the little ones and bore our weaknesses. He is our master in the matter of familiarity.... One who feels loved, loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young... Jesus Christ did not crush the bruised reed nor quench the

smouldering flax. **He is your model**". We have to "make ourselves fellow-companions" with our young people, as the risen Jesus did with the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24, 13-35).

As we contemplate Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, through the eyes of Don Bosco, we can say that the *expression* of his love is the untiring search for the lost sheep, the one for whom he has a predilection because of its situation of risk and abandonment; the *manifestation* of his love is his placing it lovingly on his shoulders...

Here undoubtedly we find in great measure the influence of Saint Francis de Sales, which led Don Bosco to take him as a model and patron right from the beginning of his mission, and particularly, from that memorable evening when the meeting that had been announced the previous day, the solemnity of Mary's Immaculate Conception, took place. On 9 December 1859, Don Bosco declared that "the moment had come for all... to state whether or not they wished to join this Pious Society which would be named – or would continue to be named – after St. Francis de Sales" (BM VI, 181). Don Bosco called together his first Salesians for the "practice of pastoral charity" towards "young people who are abandoned and at risk"... They were to practise "**loving-kindness**" as a manifestation of the salvific love of God (cf. C 15).

3. Cardinal Parocchi's words attributed the specific characteristic of Don Bosco's mission to the ability of Salesians to make God's love tangible by fully responding to the authentic and deepest needs of the young so that they felt themselves truly and efficaciously loved by God.

This means that, if we really want to be faithful to Don Bosco and to our mission, we must maintain a constant attitude of discernment, in keeping with our Constitutions: "**The needs of the young** and of working-class areas (...) **inspire and shape** our pastoral activity" (C 7); and again: "Our apostolic activity is carried out in a variety of ways, which *depend in the first place upon the actual needs of those for whom we are working*"

(C 41). It could happen that a type of activity or work, which is undoubtedly an expression of pastoral love, is no longer a *manifestation* of that same love and has become irrelevant from the point of view of the Salesian charism. What must now be said – I am speaking ironically here, without any intention of changing the meaning of Don Bosco’s maxim – is that “it is not enough to love”. Calling to mind what St. Paul asked of God for his dear Philippians, our love must be ever on the increase, in *discerning* and in being *perceived* (επιγνωσις – αισθησις: Phil 1, 9). On the other hand, there can also be the opposite danger of a *manifestation* of love not backed up by its expression, in which case it would be false (“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action”: 1 Jn 3, 18) or, at the very least, inefficacious (cf. James 2, 15-18).

4. As I recall GC25, I think that one of the great challenges for our Salesian life is to put into practice this fundamental trait of our Preventive System... **in our community life**. Too many times we forget that “God calls us to live in community and *entrusts us with brothers to love*” (C 50) and, of course, to be loved by them. By living in this way, our community becomes a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity, *we find in it “a response to the deep aspirations of the heart”* which are none other than those of loving and being loved, and “we become for the young, signs of love and unity” (C 49). No one can give what he does not have...

Furthermore: it is not enough to love our brothers in the community; we have to *manifest* our love to them in such a way that it is perceived and responded to. This challenge is all the more urgent and necessary because of the sometimes frenzied pace of our life in community, which makes us forget that our community is a meaningful reality, not because of the *quantity* of work it does but because of its *quality*. If this is missing, we cannot be *signs and bearers* of the love of a God who is, in himself, a community...



5. I conclude by highlighting a trait that we shall take up again when speaking of Don Bosco: the phrase, “**strive to make yourself loved**”, which is also a programme of life, brings perfect closure to the ellipse of love as it is lived in persons, in the community and in the mission. In this regard, we can quote a remarkable statement of Benedict XVI in his *Message for Lent 2007*: “In all truth, only the love that unites the free gift of oneself with the impassioned desire for reciprocity instils a joy which eases the heaviest of burdens”.

## Prayer

### MANIFESTATION OF LOVE

Lord, our God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit:  
How great You are!  
We contemplate with admiration and amazement  
the Mystery of Your Trinitarian Life:  
You are, from the beginning and for ever, perfect Love.

You willed that humankind, every woman and every man,  
should participate in Your Life and in Your Love  
so that, in the experience of being loved and learning to love,  
we might resemble You more and more,  
and thus, one day, live forever Your very Life.

Moreover:  
You willed to reveal Your Love to us, once and for all time,  
in Your Son, the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord.

He, who is God, emptied Himself becoming one of us,  
sharing fully our very life,  
to the extent of taking this love to its extreme: dying and rising  
for us.

You have entrusted to the Church the marvellous task  
of continuing the same mission of Your Son:  
to make present and visible, for men and women in every time  
and place,  
Your Love and your Salvation.

You raised up the Salesian Congregation  
as the animator of a great movement in the Church  
so that the full manifestation of Your predilection for the young,

above all for the poorest and most abandoned, might be perceived.

We pray you, Father,  
to give us not only the gift of an unconditional love for them,  
but also the knowledge of how to manifest this Love for them  
in ways and in works in which they can better experience it  
and believe in You, source of every love.

Grant that in our communities we may be able to live,  
in the unity of fraternal love,  
the Mystery of Trinitarian Unity.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

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## 5. GIFT - GRACE - EUCHARIST

This reflection will focus on one of the terms most frequently used in our Christian faith and theology: **GRACE**. It is one of those words which, like the other, *epiphany*, embraces the whole Christian mystery from a particular point of view. Unfortunately, it also happens to be a word that is much abused because we often forget that Grace is **Someone** (God Himself) and not something (as when we speak of “different graces”). Again, we forget the nature of Grace as a free gift, and consider our relationship with God to be something depending more on us than on Him (as when we speak of our “preserving” or “losing” grace). In reality, we can lose everything... except Grace, because Grace is the *gratuitous and unconditional love* with which God gives himself to us.

### 1. THE LOSS OF THE SENSE OF GIFT

After this theological and somewhat provocative lead-in, I would like to invite you to take the human reality of “giving freely” as our point of departure, but not because we intend to develop it “from below” and then “baptize” it to make it Christian. Actually, what takes place is just the opposite: it is only from the standpoint of faith that we are able to understand and discover the deeper significance, and the human meaning as well, of giving freely. For us Salesians, who want to live by the conviction that there is no separation between nature and grace, it would be appropriate that we examine the “anthropological infrastructure” of grace so as to become aware of the “lack of gratuitous giving” in our world today.

There are many signs pointing to this deficiency. I shall allude to three of them, as they are particularly significant for us:

1. In much of Western culture, the model of a “successful man” is someone who can say with pride: “Whatever I have achieved has been the result of my own efforts”; “I have not received anything from anyone as a gift...” This is why many persons who are able to make a success of their lives “starting from the bottom”, later become the fiercest opponents of advancement for the poor and needy, because they think (perhaps in a Pelagian sort of way) that “all have the same opportunities: if some didn’t know how to make use of those opportunities, worse for them; why should anything be ‘gifted’ to them?” With such a mentality, gratuitous giving makes no sense; it is not even considered a virtue. Unfortunately, this natural tendency of human beings, mostly limited to economic or material productivity, is fast becoming a paradigm of “human fulfilment” today.

2. Within the environment of the family, the treatment we give to the elderly and the sick, i.e., to those persons who cannot “produce” any more, is a matter of great importance. Unlike ancestral cultures, which valued the elderly person as a pivot of the family grouping and as a “wise person” whose word served as the norm of conduct and irreversible judgment, present-day culture unfortunately sees such a one all too often as a nuisance and, in the best of cases, despatches him or her to an old people’s residence or a nursing home. Should these institutional resources be unavailable, nothing remains but to “put up” with this person at home. Should the criteria for judging a person’s worth be more human and less consumer-oriented, such a one would be appreciated for what he or she gave or could still give; but that is not usually the case. Unfortunately, at times, such situations exist also in religious life.

3. At world level, the situation of inequality between the countries of the so-called “first world” and the “third world” is unacceptable, and in some aspects continues to grow. The idea of “cancelling the debts” contracted by poor countries has, with

some honourable exceptions, still some way to go; it should be added that frequently this matter (the cancellation of debts) is not so much a question of economic interests (which of course it is, and considerably so) as a question of maintaining the status quo of the *dependence* arising out of the debt. As for the concept of “justice” in terms of “giving to each one what belongs to him”, it leaves no space for gratuitous giving; however, many things would certainly improve in our world if there were *at least* this type of justice, if the norm of conduct between persons and nations were...*the law of retribution*. All this points to the fact that there is still a long way to go before arriving at a “civilization of love”, and practically speaking, such a goal will be impossible if no attempts are made to reawaken and develop a sense and **a culture of giving freely**.

## **2. GIVING FREELY: A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN REALITY**

After what has been said, one could consider moving immediately to the Christian and theological viewpoint, leaving a total void on the anthropological level and giving the impression that the faith-proposal is the only response to an insoluble human problem. It may be so in reality, but it is important not to overlook the “intermediate space” in which *every human being* (including non-Christians!) can and must “experience gratuitousness” that will enable the Christian faith to develop all its richness, as the fullness of something every human being lives and yearns for.

*Gratuitousness* is intimately connected with the idea of a *gift*. However, it has slightly different connotations. Gratuitousness emphasizes the *absence of merits* on the part of the one who receives a gift: otherwise, it is not gratuitous. The stipend a worker receives at the end of the week is earned by the sweat of his brow: he does not receive it as a *free gift*.

Instead, a gift emphasizes the *positive* nature of what is given. Giving someone a blow without his deserving it, is absolutely

no *gift* at all. However, ordinarily and without our being aware of it, we tend to add yet another characteristic to a gift: we are inclined to see it as something *selective*, in the sense that it is given to some and not to others (at least, not to everyone). A “universal gift” would seem to be something contradictory: it would not seem to be a gift any more.<sup>35</sup>

In the light of these clarifications, let us analyze, still at the human level, the two fundamental experiences of **giving freely**.

1. The misunderstanding we alluded to just now often prevents us from perceiving that, at the very basis of our existence, there is a *gift*, the gift of **life** – a *gratuitous, positive and universal* gift. It is a gift par excellence, for two reasons:

- no one can do anything *to deserve it*, because, to deserve something one must first exist to be able to obtain it;
- every other gift we receive is *subsequent* in so far as it *presupposes* the gift of life itself.

Finally, it would be important to underline the *universality* of the gift of life, because it is lacking only to those who are not alive.

For all these reasons, a lot depends on the attitude we assume towards a question that is frequently prompted by certain exceptionally negative situations in the world: are there persons who do *not deserve to live*? I imagine that our unanimous answer is: no! And it is the correct answer, but perhaps for a reason that is different from the one we are used to thinking about. The answer to the question is no, not because all of us have the right to live, but because, really speaking, *no one ‘deserves’ to live*, and therefore no one can dispose of the life of another person... Perhaps in the case of ‘a right’, a person could lose it; but in the opposite case?

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<sup>35</sup>From this point of view, it would perhaps be possible to include the core of the theological discussion of the 1950s on the *supernatural*, a central theme of Catholic theology.

Therefore, at the basis of *every* human being, without exception, we find a *gift* par excellence. Another question – more pressing for us, Christians and Salesians – is whether every human being perceives his own life as a *gift*, i.e., as something *positive*. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, beginning with many young people who, for different reasons, do not have a purpose in life, perhaps because they do not feel loved by anyone...

2. This brings us to the second experience of *gratuitousness*. If *life* is a gratuitous gift par excellence, it is so as a *foundation* and not as *fullness* because there is another question to be answered: *why* do I have this gift? What can give meaning to my life? And here the reply is immediate and universal: **love**. Let us allow St. Thomas to offer us a remarkable and concise statement: “The reason for every gratuitous donation is love: if we give something freely to someone, it is because we want something good for him. Hence, it is clear that love is the gratuitous gift par excellence, because of which every other gratuitous gift is given” (a triple pleonasm!).<sup>36</sup> Josef Pieper places this statement as the epigraph to his excellent book on love.<sup>37</sup>

The gratuitousness of love is an inexhaustible theme, even from a human point of view. In the first place, gratuitousness could be confused with a *lack of motivation*, and therefore, with its *incomprehensibility*. Why do I love *this* person? It is a question that always remains without an answer (and just as well, because if there were an answer, it would perhaps not be authentic love anymore). Montaigne put it brilliantly when, to describe his friendship with Étienne de La Boétie, he wrote:

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<sup>36</sup>S.Th., I, q. 38, a. 2, resp. The original text is: “Ratio autem gratuita donationis est amor: ideo enim damus gratis alicui aliquid, quia volumus ei bonum. Primum ergo quod damus ei, est amor quo volumus ei bonum. Unde manifestum est quod amor habet rationem primi doni, per quod omnia dona gratuita donantur.”

<sup>37</sup>JOSEF PIEPER, *Faith, Hope, Love* 139.



“If I am forced to give a reason why I loved him, I feel that it could not be expressed otherwise than by saying, ‘Because it was he, because it was I’” (“Si on me presse de dire pourquoi je l’aimais, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer qu’ en répondant: Parceque c’était lui, parceque c’était moi”).<sup>38</sup>

A second characteristic of the experience of love is its *unconditional nature*. There are forms of interpersonal relationship that base themselves on different qualities like physical beauty, intelligence and abilities (at times, strangely and inexplicably, they base themselves also on other factors which are practically the opposite of these). But authentic love, while not being insensitive or indifferent to all these *conditions* (“*Ubi amor, ibi oculus!*” Richard of St. Victor used to say), transcends them all.

Nevertheless, like every human experience, love is not without ambiguity: it can lead either to an unconditional acceptance of the other person, typical of true love, or to an “emptying” of the person loved by making the relationship depend on his qualities, and so ending up with a caricature of love: in fact, the one who “loves” in this way does not truly love, and the other person does not feel loved *as a person*. In many cases, it could be a subtle ploy of egoism. In a way, it could be what St. Augustine describes in his *Confessions*: “I loved not yet, yet I loved to love”: *Nondum amabam, et amare amabam*.<sup>39</sup>

We could continue with this analysis. Instead, as we did with the theme of *manifestation*, it seems appropriate at this point to clarify the other pole of the ellipse of love. Till now, we were following the usual approach, viz. examining the attitude of the *one who loves*. But now it is time to ask: How is the experience of love lived “from the other side”?

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<sup>38</sup>Cited in MORAND WIRTH, *François de Sales et l'éducation* (Paris: Éditions Don Bosco, 2005) 92.

<sup>39</sup>AUGUSTINE, *Confessions III/1*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960) 77.

And here we come across something tremendously paradoxical. The Rector Major, in his Letter on the Eucharist, alludes to it (AGC 398, p.14). What he says (and we shall return to it at the end) can be enriched, according to me, with some anthropological considerations.

At first sight, it is evident that all of us want to be loved, and above all, to be loved in a *gratuitous* and *unconditional manner*. Still, things are not that simple. Let me allow J. Pieper to speak to us once again:

At bottom all love is undeserved. We can neither earn it nor promote it; it is always pure gift (...) But there seems to be in man something like an aversion for receiving gifts. No one is wholly unfamiliar with the thought: I don't want anything for nothing! And this emotion comes uncannily close to the other: I don't want to be "loved" (...) C. S. Lewis says that absolutely undeserved love is certainly what we need but not at all the kind of love we want. 'We want to be loved for our cleverness, beauty, generosity, fairness, usefulness'.<sup>40</sup>

Here again we come across the ambiguity we alluded to earlier, but this time from the side of the passive experience of "being loved". The person loved could very well ask himself: "In this experience of being loved, do I want to allow myself to be 'emptied' (apparently, at least) of everything that makes me a unique and irreplaceable 'I'?" "If someone were to say to me: 'I love you, just as you are: it doesn't matter to me what you are like', would that be an expression of unconditional acceptance, or of disinterestedness and indifference? Imagine saying to a confrere of your community: "You are the special object of my *agape*" – it would be a subtle and hurtful way of offending him. We find it very difficult indeed to allow ourselves to be loved unconditionally by others, even by God himself...

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<sup>40</sup>JOSEF PIEPER, *Faith, Hope, Love* 179-180. The quote from Lewis is found in C.S. LEWIS, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960) 181.

In addition to the afore-mentioned misunderstanding, there is yet another reason which perhaps explains, to some extent, this refusal to be loved *unconditionally*, and it is the apparent uselessness of the response of the person who is loved. It could seem that it does not matter to the person who loves whether we respond or not to his love; and this puts us in an obvious position of *inferiority*. Nietzsche did have a point when he said that “the one who is accustomed only to giving, has calluses forming on his hands and in his heart”. We must state it clearly: the essence of loving requires a giving...and a receiving, even in God. This statement will form the subject of an ensuing reflection.

### 3. “...GRACE AND TRUTH CAME THROUGH JESUS CHRIST” (Jn 1, 17b)

If we recall the difference we explained earlier between expression and manifestation, then it becomes easier to point out that all we have said so far, in the life of every human being, is the *expression of God’s gratuitous love*. However, in order *to be perceived* as such, the *manifestation* in Jesus Christ is necessary.

Basing ourselves on this distinction, we can point out three fundamental characteristics of God’s *gratuitous Love*:

\* **Universality**: “God desires everyone to be saved” (1 Tim 2, 4). From here arises the *missionary* character of the Church in the strict sense and, within it, the Salesian mission with its particular traits. Personally, I believe that one of the elements that can best help to understand the “need” of belonging to the Church for one’s salvation is its *communitarian* nature. The fact is that, outside the *actual* Church, a full experience of *salvation* is missing because what is lacking is the concrete, perceptible and *historical manifestation* of God’s love in Jesus Christ, as lived in “God’s Family”, the Church.

\* **God's initiative:** "It is not that we loved God but that he loved us first" (1 Jn 4, 10). Grace, as the gratuitous expression of God's love, is always precedent: it always precedes the human response which, in a certain way, is also a gift from God, but never excludes human freedom. In this sense, Don Bosco's Preventive System has its roots in the core of our faith: "Don Bosco lived (...) a spiritual and educational experience which he called the 'Preventive System'. For him it was a love that gave **gratuitously, inspired by the love of a God who provides in advance for all his creatures**" (C 20). I think that the word, **in advance** ('pre-venire'), has a twofold meaning: it refers to 'a precedence' and to the pre-occupation of forestalling anything negative. The first meaning refers to *love*, which always *precedes*; the second meaning refers to the *concern* 'to prevent' the experience of estranging oneself from God through sin. (This is why both terms can be used, precedent and preventive.)

\* **Unconditional:** God's love, in so far as it is Grace, does not allow prior conditions to be placed on his love, but – here is something that baffles us, human beings – goes to the extent of showing a predilection for the one who is not "*lovable*", for the one who "has no right" to demand to be loved. "For sinners are beautiful because they are loved; they are not loved because they are beautiful."<sup>41</sup>

I cannot resist the temptation to quote a beautiful text of Dostoevsky, placed on the lips of that terribly ambiguous figure, Marmeladov the drunkard:

And He will judge all and will forgive them, the good and the bad, the wise and the meek. And when He has done with all of them, He will say unto us, 'Come forth ye, too! Come forth, all ye who are drunk! Come forth, all ye who know no shame!' And we shall all come forth without being ashamed,

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<sup>41</sup>J. MOLTMANN, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1979) 214.

and we shall stand before Him. (...) And the wise men will say, and the learned men will say: 'Lord, why dost Thou receive them?' And He will say unto them, 'I receive them, O wise men, I receive them, O learned men, because not one of them ever thought himself worthy of it.' And He will stretch forth His arm to us, and we shall fall down before Him and we shall weep. And we shall understand all.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4. THE LOVE OF GOD, AGAPE AND EROS

Man's experience of love, even of the Love of God, is a *human* experience. As such, therefore, it cannot escape the ambiguity inherent in every perception of love. And, unfortunately, this is what happens: God's universal love can be seen as something *generic*, God's prior initiative in loving can be so distant as to pass *unnoticed*, and God's unconditional love can be confused with *indifference*. Precisely, therefore, because their task is to proclaim the *manifestation* of God's love, evangelization and catechesis must help to dissipate these misunderstandings so as to enable his love to be perceived in all its beauty and efficacy in the life of each one of us and of the young people the Lord entrusts to us.

From among all these misunderstandings, there is one I would like to look into as it is practically unexplored territory. From what I know, the only person who has been bold enough to examine it has been Joseph Ratzinger, and it is a great comfort that he has done it as Supreme Pastor of the Universal Church.

It is indeed unfortunate that the authors of great treatises have taken for granted that God's love is different from human love because it has, among other traits, a total and absolute *gratuitousness* that *expects* nothing in return. J. Pieper asserts, without feeling the need to prove it, that "one would have to be God in order to be capable of loving without being dependent

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<sup>42</sup>F. M. DOSTOYEVSKY, *Crime and Punishment* (Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1978) 40.

on being loved in return.”<sup>43</sup> And C. S. Lewis writes: “God is Love (...) This primal love is Gift-love. In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give (...) The Need-loves, so far as I have been able to see, have no resemblance to the Love which God is.”<sup>44</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI contradicts these authors almost literally, in his *Message for Lent 2007*, using unusual theological terms: “The Almighty awaits the ‘yes’ of his creatures as a young bridegroom that of his bride (...) On the Cross, it is God Himself who begs the love of His creature: He is thirsty for the love of every one of us.”

Continuing our effort to “learn” what is Love, and contemplating its full and definitive manifestation in Jesus Christ, we ask: In the experience of love, what is the “**best example**” of *giving freely*?

Responding schematically, we can identify different possibilities:

– *One loves without expecting any response* from the person loved: this is clearly not the “best example” of love (even though Jüngel seems a little inclined to consider it that way when he says: “Clearly one cannot exclude the possibility that the essence of love will emerge with greater hermeneutic sharpness where the beloved Thou does *not* love the loving.”<sup>45</sup>)

– *One loves in order to receive a response*: here too it is evident that we do not have the “best example” (and perhaps not even an example of true love, but a hidden egoism).

– *One loves in a disinterested manner, expecting a response from the person he loves, for the sake of that person’s own good*: in other words, I am keen that the other person should respond to my love, not for my good, but for his: in so far as

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<sup>43</sup> JOSEF PIEPER, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 184.

<sup>44</sup>C.S. LEWIS, *The Four Loves*, 175-176.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. EBERHARD JÜNGEL, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 317 note 11.

his response will enable him to come out of himself and realize himself as a person, in love. This is a “noble” stance, but if we are sincere with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that it is not humanly satisfying.

– *One loves in a disinterested manner, expecting a response from the person loved, for the sake of that person’s own good, insofar as the beloved responds to **the one who loves him**.* This is apparently similar to the preceding example, but there is one essential difference, viz. the firm belief that the person who is loved will find his happiness only in the “one who loves him”. This example is not acceptable in human relations (“Who do you think you are?”). But, curiously, it would seem to be typical of our relationship with God. We are talking here about *salvation*, properly understood: *only* God can be the happiness of the one who responds to His love.

– Still, this is **not** the “best example”. In the light of all that has been previously seen, we have to add that man’s response to God’s love makes for the full happiness of the beloved... and **also of the One who loves him, viz. God himself**. If we take this point seriously, then I think it will give us some incredible glimpses into the Mystery of God who is Love revealed in Christ....

Dostoevsky himself has a marvellous text, in which he describes a young mother making the sign of the cross on her newly-born child who smiles at her for the first time. This is how the simple woman explains her gesture: “Just as a mother rejoices seeing her baby’s first smile, so does God rejoice every time He beholds from above a sinner kneeling down before Him to say his prayers with all his heart”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>F.M. DOSTOYEVSKY, *The Idiot* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978) 253.

## 5. “DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME”: THE GIFT OF THE EUCHARIST

All the foregoing gives us a better understanding of what the Rector Major says in his Letter on the Eucharist:

The Eucharist is a mystery because in it is revealed so much love (cf. Jn 15, 13), a love so divine that, going far beyond our capabilities overwhelms us and leaves us astonished. Even though we are not always aware of it, usually we find it difficult to accept the gift of the Eucharist, the love of God manifested in the gift of the body of Christ (cf. Jn 3,16), which exceeds our capacity and challenges our freedom; God is always greater than our heart and reaches those places beyond our wildest desires (...) A love so profound frightens us revealing the radical poverty of our being: the deep need to love does not leave us the time nor the energy to let ourselves be loved. And so we prefer to be busy, hiding ourselves behind ‘doing’ so much for others and giving them so much of ourselves, and we deprive ourselves of *the wonder of knowing that we are so much loved by God*. (AGC 398, pp. 13-14)

Obviously, the Rector Major is re-echoing some of the contents and expressions of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, which all of us, undoubtedly, know and have meditated upon.

Among the many possible reflections, I would like to concentrate first of all on the very root of the word, *Eucharistia*. We are taken back once again to  $\chi\alpha\rho\iota\varsigma$ , which lays great emphasis on gratuitousness in so far as it is not “a” gift of God but *God himself who becomes a Gift*. The Pope’s initial statement in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*: “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”<sup>47</sup> becomes concrete in the Eucharist<sup>48</sup>: “Jesus continues, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, to love us ‘to the end,’ even to offering us His body and His blood. What amazement must the Apostles have felt in witnessing what the Lord did and said during that Supper! What wonder must the Eucharistic mystery also awaken in our own hearts!”<sup>49</sup>

In the second place, it is well to recall that the *Last Supper*, as such, was preceded by many others (otherwise, we would not speak of it as the “last”). The Rector Major evokes the meaning of the “banquet” of the Eucharist by taking as his point of departure Jesus’ “eating together”, particularly with sinners. Among many Gospel texts, suffice it to recall Mt 9, 9-13; Lk 5, 29-30; 15, 1ff. (cf. AGC 398, pp. 33-35)

At this point, there arises an interesting question: in which Sacrament is the “Christological foundation” of the Church to be found more fully: in the Eucharist or in Reconciliation? I think that the answer ought to be: both, inseparably. We must not forget that pardon is a central element in the life and mission of Jesus, and a privileged way for God to show His merciful Love. Furthermore: only in love can pardon have its authentic foundation. We see this also in the etymological analysis of the word. At least in Western languages, the root of the word “pardon” is simple: to *give*, to donate, preceded by the intensive prefix, *per* (in Anglo-saxon languages: forgive, *ver-geben*) as though to say that there is nothing greater to “give” than for-giveness. We may recall St. Thomas’ phrase about there being no authentic *forgiveness* except that which is born of *love*.

All this has many practical applications, but there is one that refers to our community life. “There the community celebrates the paschal mystery and unites itself to the immolated body

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<sup>47</sup>BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1.

<sup>48</sup>BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, nn. 86ff.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, n. 1.

of Christ, which it receives so as to *build itself in Him into a fraternal communion and renew its apostolic commitment*” (C 88). Taking the Eucharist seriously leads to an increase in fraternal communion (including the daily reality of *forgiveness*) and in an acceptance of Jesus’ *command*: “Do this in memory of Me”, which implies that we too become the body that is given and the blood that is poured out for the salvation of our young people.

Finally, I would like to invite you to contemplate the Blessed Virgin Mary. We do not need to invent “apocryphal” presences of Mary at the Last Supper (or appearances of Jesus to her after his Resurrection). John Paul II points out that “the account of the institution of the Eucharist on the night of Holy Thursday makes no mention of Mary”. There is no need to do so because “in addition to her sharing in the Eucharistic banquet (...), *Mary is a “woman of the Eucharist” in her whole life*”.<sup>50</sup> “From Mary we must learn to become men and women of the Eucharist and of the Church”.<sup>51</sup>

After explicitly stating this with the help of various New Testament texts, John Paul II, concludes: “The *Magnificat* expresses Mary’s spirituality, and there is nothing greater than this spirituality for helping us to experience the mystery of the Eucharist. The Eucharist has been given to us so that our life, like that of Mary, may become completely a *Magnificat*!”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 53.

<sup>51</sup>BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 96.

<sup>52</sup>JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 58.

## *Prayer*

### **GIFT – GRACE – EUCHARIST**

Lord God, our Father,  
You exist from time immemorial and for ever,  
with the Son and the Holy Spirit  
in the fulness of Love and mutual self-gift.  
You willed to create the human person  
in Your image and likeness.

In Your marvellous plan of salvation,  
You have willed that every woman and man  
should have an experience of Your Love  
from the first moment of their existence,  
learning in this way to love You and neighbour.  
Unfortunately, we human beings refused Your Love,  
right from the beginning of history,  
and consequently have become enemies, even among ourselves.

Notwithstanding everything, You did not abandon us,  
and in Jesus Christ, Your Son, without any merit on our part,  
You offer us Your free and unconditional Love.  
Jesus Himself desired to remain forever with us,  
to perpetuate His Love and the gift of Himself until death,  
in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Help us to be able to contemplate, with the heart of a child  
that never tires of admiring and thanking,  
this unfathomable Mystery of Your Love,  
so that even we can become Eucharist  
for our brothers, and for the young whom You entrust to us.

We pray: in this world, closed to Your Love and to Your Grace,  
help us to know how to build a culture of Gratuitousness,  
that will help relationships of fraternity and of love to grow  
among all people,

so that feeling ourselves loved by You as true sons and daughters, in Christ,  
we may thus return Your Love,  
and find, in this response, our joy and our salvation.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

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## 6. THE SALESIAN MISSION: “POOR AND ABANDONED BOYS”

“You should honour John Bosco, who took care of poor youngsters and created schools for them”. It is said that Mao Tse-Tung wrote these words in his famous *Red Book*. Whether this is true or not, there is no doubt that St. John Bosco is known and loved beyond the frontiers of the Congregation and the Salesian Family, and even beyond the Church herself, because of his predilection for boys and young people, especially the poor and abandoned.

As we reflect on this theme, which is central to our Salesian charism since it refers to those *to whom our mission is primarily directed* and our approach to them, we shall find in it a point of convergence of themes previously dealt with; that is why we have placed this topic towards the end of this Retreat.

### 1. “...HIS PREDILECTION FOR THE LITTLE ONES AND THE POOR...”

As we know very well, the Salesian mission has its roots in the life, teaching and example of Jesus Christ. The Second Vatican Council points out that every charism *observes* the Son of God made Man from different angles.<sup>53</sup> Our Constitutions assert that we are “more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord” (C 11). We do not have to demonstrate that the “predilection for the little ones and the poor” was one of the clearest, surest and, I would say, “most human” characteristics of the Lord Jesus. There are innumerable Gospel texts to prove it. However, I believe that some clarifications are necessary.

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<sup>53</sup>Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 46.

In the first place, the word used by our Constitutions is significant: to speak of *predilection* is to speak of **love** – of a “greater”, *preferential* love, but at the same time, a love that is not exclusive and *does not exclude* anyone. I think it is a more appropriate word than “option”, which, as such, has no connotation of love, and can even insinuate a certain discrimination. Jesus never rejected anyone; but, within his universal love, he had certain *predilections*.

And so, we can ask ourselves: *who were the people* for whom Jesus had a predilection? Faithful to the Gospel, our Constitutions point to “the little ones and the poor”. Are we equating the two groups of persons here? Or are we using a ‘*hendiadys*’ that unifies the two groups without eliminating the differences?

For an answer we can turn to the **Beatitudes**: the first one refers to the “poor” (Lk 6, 20) or the “poor in spirit” (Mt 5, 3). In both texts, the “poor” are promised “the Kingdom of heaven” / “the Kingdom of God”.

This would be the place to clarify Jesus’ concept of “poverty”. Without ignoring the complexity of the question or even the ambiguity of the very word “poverty”, the term designates a negative situation, one of sin and human egoism, and at the same time a human and Christian ideal, one that is even “sanctioned” by a vow in consecrated life.

This clarification is simple and easy to understand if we go back to the Lord Jesus and his concrete situation (*Sitz im Leben*). Even at the risk of seeming tautological, we can say: **the poor man is the person for whom the Gospel is “Good News”**. Such a description does not automatically equate poverty with a social and economic situation but establishes a very close relationship with it; at the same time, it does not automatically condemn the “possession of things” but points to the real danger it entails. Furthermore, the description reminds us that the person of Jesus and his message were not “good news” *for everyone*, and that different kinds of obstacles

can prevent a person from accepting him: among them can certainly be socio-economic considerations (cf. the rich young man in Mk 10, 17-22 and parallels), but they need not be the only ones and perhaps not even the ones which, in the final analysis, determine this refusal.

In the words of the Blessed Virgin Mary's canticle, the *Magnificat*, the human attitude of self-sufficiency appears to be the opposite of "poverty" and leads to a rejection of the "Good News" of the Gospel and, finally, of Jesus himself; it shows itself in three forms: pride – power – money. "He has scattered the proud – He has brought down the powerful – He has sent the rich away empty." (Lk 1, 51-53)

Let us recall the text of Prov 30, 8-9:

Give me neither poverty nor riches;  
feed me with the food that I need,  
lest I be full, and deny You,  
and say, 'Who is the LORD?'  
or lest I be poor, and steal,  
and profane the name of my God.

He who has everything is tempted to say, (if not with words, then with his attitude): "Who is God? Why do I need Him if I can manage by myself?" At the same time, we cannot ignore the difficulty a person faces in believing in God's love when he does not have even what is indispensable for himself and his family in order to live a life worthy of human beings, as sons and daughters of God.

As for the "little ones", who are closer to our charism, we need to clarify this central aspect of Jesus' mission. We are well aware of His opinion of the "*little ones*" when we hear Him inviting us to become like them so as not to be excluded from the Kingdom of God.

However, it is not an easy task to identify *the characteristics of infants* (the little ones) that the Lord has in mind, for there are several typical aspects of infancy that certainly would not

be referred to. The fact of the matter is that Jesus himself does give us the answer, but it often goes unnoticed. In Mark's text, which is the more ancient among the Gospels, Jesus clearly states: "Whoever does not **receive** the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mk 10, 15). The key-word here is the verb "receive" (in the original Greek: δεξιηται), and it prompts the question: *How do children receive* what is given to them? The answer is simple and clear: *with joy and gratitude*, precisely because they have not "merited" what they receive.

Unfortunately, as we saw in another reflection, the more we advance in years, the more we lose the sense of *giving* and receiving as well as the joy and *gratitude* that go with it: "that simplicity... the *simplicitas* of the New Testament, was at bottom nothing but 'trusting to love.'"<sup>54</sup>

In this sense, it is worth giving serious consideration to the **religious** character of Jesus' mission. It will lead us to delineate a profile of His most radical, and undoubtedly most "scandalous", predilection which, without forgetting or minimizing His unlimited compassion and total *solidarity* with the poor, the sick and the marginalized, was His predilection for sinners, for those furthest away from God and therefore most in need of His love and forgiveness. Moreover, they were the ones most disposed to receive, with the joy and gratitude of a child, what was offered them as a *gift*, viz. God's mercy and salvation (call to mind the "exemplary" case of Zacchaeus in Lk 19, 1-10).

Obviously, in a theocratic society like that of Israel, being a sinner also entailed a "social" stigma, but we would be plucking out the very heart of Jesus' mission if we were to place "sinners" in the social category of the "marginalized". It was **not** because they were socially marginalized that Jesus showed His predilection for sinners, but because they were in danger of losing themselves. When Christianity ignores this,

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<sup>54</sup>JOSEF PIEPER, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1997) 179, quoting Stanislaus, S.J., Count of Dunin-Borkowski.



it becomes a social movement which, especially in our time, means an NGO, often irrelevant and obsolete. And much the same can be said of a Salesian presence when it does not aim at bringing about and manifesting this marvellous synthesis of the pursuit of salvation and integral promotion.

It is quite likely that all this is accepted in principle, but it does not always become a **criterion of action** and a “**strategy**”, including a **social strategy**. Actually it is the way in which the Church offers an *irreplaceable* service, beginning from her innermost identity and leading to the transformation of society, especially in the face of injustice and the idolatry of power and money, which seem to be vastly on the increase.

All this corresponds to the convictions the Christian has learned from his Master, viz. that the evil He seeks to combat does not, in the last analysis, come from social, political or economic structures, but from the **heart of man** (cf. Mk 7, 20). He is convinced that “only love is capable of radically transforming the relationships that men maintain among themselves”.<sup>55</sup>

## 2. “...WITH DON BOSCO WE REAFFIRM OUR PREFERENCE FOR THE YOUNG WHO ARE POOR...”

What we have said does not in any way eliminate our preference in the light of our Salesian charism, but rather *illumines* it and leads us to reiterate the typically Salesian convictions about our mission: on the one hand, we share in the universal mission of the Church (cf. C 3), which is fundamentally *religious* in nature, and on the other hand, we confront and offer practical responses to the social and economic problems of our world. We need to clearly reconfirm that those for whom we work are “**the young, especially those who are poorer**” (C 26), “in the first place youngsters who because of economic, social

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<sup>55</sup>PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 4.

and cultural poverty, sometimes of an extreme nature, have no possibility of success in life” (R 1).

The fusion of the two aspects defines our Salesian identity in the accomplishment of our mission: our charism clearly defines *the type of poverty* we are concerned with, and at the same time explains *why we dedicate ourselves* to the young who live in this situation. On this second point, the same article of the Constitutions (in addition to a brief statement in R 1) declares: “Young people are at the age when they must make basic life-choices which affect the future of society and of the Church. With Don Bosco we reaffirm our preference for the young who are ‘*poor, abandoned and in danger*’, **those who have greater need of love and evangelization**, and we work especially in areas of greatest poverty” (C 26; bold and italics mine).

The Rector Major comments on this essential trait of our charism:

We do need to note that the predilection in Don Bosco stems not only from the magnanimity of his fatherly heart, “great as the sands of the seashore”, nor from the calamitous situation of the young people of his time – much like that of our own – and much less from a social or political agenda. At the base of it there is a God-given *mission*: “The Lord made clear to Don Bosco that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young, especially to those who are poorer” (C 26). And it is well to recall that this took place “through the motherly intervention of Mary” (C 1); she it was, in fact, who “showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young and was the constant guide and support of his work” (C 8). “Normative” in this sense, and not simply anecdotal, is the attitude adopted by Don Bosco at a decisive moment of his priestly life before the Marchioness of Barolo and her offer, certainly holy and apostolic as it was, to collaborate in her works and abandon his ragamuffins: “You have money and will have no trouble finding as many priests as you

want for your institutions. It's not the same with the poor youngsters..." (AGC 384, p. 19)

In these words, Don Bosco adds a motivation which is not only affective and pedagogical but also *theological*: "**My poor boys have only me...**" It is a simple but profound statement of his awareness of being a *mediator*, an *epiphany* of God's love for them; without him, all of those who are the "least" would be lacking a *manifestation* of God's love and, consequently, an *experience of God as Father*. To use a biblical expression, without him, they would find themselves like *sheep without a shepherd*. "As (Jesus) went ashore, He saw a great crowd; and He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk 6, 34; Mt. 9, 36 adds: "harassed and helpless ...").

### 3. "POOR, ABANDONED AND IN DANGER..."

Again, in the same Letter quoted above, Fr. Pascual says:

It would be very interesting to go more deeply into the typical characteristics of those to whom our mission is preferentially addressed: '*the young who are poor, abandoned and in danger*'. Even though we speak nowadays of 'new forms of poverty' among young people, *poverty* directly refers to their social and economic situation; *abandonment* recalls the 'theological note' of lack of support through *the absence of adequate mediation of God's love*; and *danger* refers back to a determining phase of life, adolescence, the time of decision after which habits and attitudes formed can be changed only with great difficulty. A deeper study of this kind serves as a starting point for deciding in each Province (cf. R 1) and community, who are those to whom our mission is directed here and now, in the light of the criteria we have just mentioned. (AGC 384, p. 20)

As in the other themes, we find here once again Don Bosco's exceptional insight and his ability to bring together in an underlying unity a harrowing socio-economic problem,

an exceptional pedagogical vision and an unshakable faith in God's love towards everyone, particularly to those in need. Let us contemplate this "marvel of God's grace", our Father, Don Bosco. (We shall dedicate the next reflection to him.) And let us consider the three expressions, "poor, abandoned and in danger", as *aspects* of a global description of those to whom our work is chiefly directed, enabling us, in our educative and pastoral work with them, to *make more specific* the mission God entrusts us with.

At the same time, we have to remember that *our mission does not depend on those for whom we work*, as though it were optional, fortuitous or dependent on circumstances to be or not to be **signs and bearers of God's love!** The mission is not something "negotiable". All of us must be convinced that the Salesian mission will never be impossible or irrelevant, and it should be our endeavour to be faithful to it, and through it, to God and to the young...

What happens often is that the situation of those for whom we work, while not taking precedence over the Mission, does not **take precedence over our activities and works** either. If we were to make use of a diagram, we would say that sometimes our discernment and our decisions are not the most appropriate ones because we proceed in the following order:

*Mission – activities and works – those for whom we work*

Whereas in fidelity to the Lord's will, the correct order should be:

**Mission – those for whom we work – activities and works**

It is not a matter of our going in search of those who *can* fill up our activities and works (many times, unfortunately, they are not the ones who *should come!*); rather, we ought to ask: for the sake of those to whom the Lord sends us as a priority, what are the activities and works we need to carry out here and now?

Previously we alluded to a “global description” encompassing three aspects of those for whom we work. Perhaps we could summarize it like this: **following the example of Jesus and with a view to putting his universal mission into action, Don Bosco was “charismatically touched” by the danger that could obstruct the temporal and eternal happiness (“salvation”) of his boys, viz. their situation of abandonment in relation to God and others, provoked by their state of poverty, at times extreme.**

If, at the beginning, we spoke of poverty as a *value* endorsed by a *vow* in consecrated life, we ought not to forget that the word “poverty” is ambiguous and also denotes a socio-economic situation that goes counter to God’s loving plan, making it difficult and often impossible for someone living in such a situation to feel himself / herself a son / daughter of God, personally loved by Him. How can one speak of God’s love to a person who does not have the basic necessities of life for himself and his family?

I think it would be interesting to examine the response Don Bosco gave (or better: felt called by God to give) when confronted with the youth situation of his time; that response would be *normative* for us too. Apparently Don Bosco was not the only one to perceive the problem of abandoned youth in Turin and in the big cities: it was, in some respects, a completely new situation, and many important personalities took various stands according to their different viewpoints. There was, for example, a whole current in literature that *denounced* the situation: recall if you will, among other books representative of this school, Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. Karl Marx, for his part, sought to overturn the unjust situation by starting out from an atheistic position and offering his own solution. Dostoevsky too was so intensely moved by the suffering of innocent people, especially children, that it became *the strongest argument for his not believing in God*. Don Bosco was not less sensitive than all the others, but he did not stop to

adopt a theoretical position, be it in atheism or in theodicy; *in the name of the God of Jesus Christ and His Love*, He gave His life completely for the integral – that is, the temporal and eternal – good of a *proletariat comprising children and young people*.

To conclude this section, I would like to add a personal reflection. In connection with those to whom our work is primarily directed, I would like to use a word which, even if not drawn from the Gospels, contains a great richness from the etymological point of view. I am referring to the word “**insignificant**”. The usual semantics of the word tends to identify it with something “small”; but its etymology leads in a different direction. Let us take an example: a Salesian work which is *significant* (because of the presence of Salesians, because of their closeness to the boys which enables them to know each one personally, and because of the quality of education and Christian formation imparted) can run the risk of developing to such an extent that it becomes *insignificant*, that is to say: it does not “signify” any more, it is no more a *sign* of what it ought to convey.

Playing around with words, we could say: we shall be a **sign** of God’s salvific love, the more **insignificant**, from the human point of view, are those for whom we work. As the Rector Major states, in his Letter on the Eucharist, with regard to the banquet and its connection with poverty: “The invitation is not addressed to friends or relatives (cf. Lk 14, 12-13; Mt 5, 46-47), which wouldn’t be a bad thing; but which wouldn’t be an ‘evangelical sign’, nor produce a salutary shock, because Jesus recognizes that ‘the Gentiles do the same’ (Mt 5, 47).” Instead, “the invitation [is] to take part in this ‘banquet of the Kingdom,’ with an evangelical predilection, that is the option of the revealed God, for the poorest and the abandoned, for the marginalized, for the sinners, for all those, in human terms, insignificant” (AGC 398, p.35).

#### 4. “OUR MISSION SETS THE TENOR OF OUR WHOLE LIFE ...” (C 3)

In GC22, the then Rector Major, Fr. Egidio Viganò, clarified the theological meaning of *consecration* in [Salesian] religious life, recalling that, in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, this consecration has two characteristics: *it is God’s work* (He alone *consecrates* us; we do not “consecrate” ourselves to Him) and it is *all-embracing*: it does not regard only a “sector” of our life (such as the profession of the evangelical counsels), but takes in all aspects. From this viewpoint, *consecration and mission* are not two “sides” but the “**whole**” of our life seen from two different angles. In a way, *everything is consecration and everything is mission*. Otherwise, the title of this section would be in contradiction with lived reality.

To come down to practical considerations, I think it best to link the *predilection for poor youth* with the important aspects we have developed in the course of this Retreat.

1. In the first place, *giving freely*: I believe that this fundamental trait of love is totally beyond question, but it can be endangered to the extent to which we move away from our “charismatic predilection”. At the same time, it is worth emphasizing once more that giving freely (because of its very nature) does not exclude but expects and “requires” a response. Such a response is full, in the case of a poor and abandoned boy, because, having “*nothing*” to give in return, he makes his response of love by *giving himself* completely.

Among the many anecdotes in the life of our Father, Don Bosco, I like to choose an episode which is particularly eloquent and charming in its simplicity. It refers to a young boy during the early years of the Oratory who

was returning from shopping. Besides other provisions, he was holding a jar filled with vinegar and a bottle of olive oil. At the sight of Don Bosco, the young boy jumped with joy and called out: ‘Viva Don Bosco!’ [Long live Don Bosco].

Laughing, Don Bosco asked: “Can you do what I am doing?” and clapped his hands. Overcome with joy, the boy put the bottle under his arm and clapped his hands, as again he shouted: ‘Viva Don Bosco!’ Naturally, as he did so, both jar and bottle fell to the ground in pieces. Stunned, he began to whimper that his mother would beat him when he got home. (BM II, 74)

Everything was happily resolved, thanks to the generosity of the shopkeeper.

2. From this perspective too, we have to emphasize the importance of *the expression and the manifestation* of love. The Salesian mission assumes that those to whom our service is primarily directed and who are the privileged object of God’s love *have not had an experience of love manifested to them*; that is why, in their case more than in any other, we need to ensure that they *perceive* it in the most concrete way possible. As Fr. Pascual Chavez says, “It is a matter of giving the most to those to whom unfortunately life has given the least”. And undoubtedly, a fundamental element is the effective possibility of their integral promotion through education; otherwise, all that remain are beautiful words or pious desires.

3. However, there is another aspect which seems to me particularly important and delicate, especially in our times, and it is the need for the manifestation of God’s love to be perceived through the (paternal-maternal-fraternal) manifestation of our *agape-eros*... the way Don Bosco did. This, we must immediately add, has nothing to do with sexuality, and is completely the opposite of a risky deviation.

There is a text in the *Ratio 2000* – more precisely, in the booklet on *Criteria and Norms for Salesian Vocation Discernment* – which summarizes this trait very nicely. It alludes to the danger that this love, shown in a Salesian way, can be confused with its radical *falsification*, or more explicitly, with a homosexual contra-indication. We know that, for subtle psychological reasons, this inclination intensifies especially



when dealing with fragile and “defenceless” youngsters who, as such, are the typical recipients of our educative and pastoral activity.

The text says: “However, on account of its particular characteristics this vocation [to Salesian consecrated life] implies special requirements with regard to homosexuality. It is a question in fact of a vocation-mission that is lived in male communities, that leads to constant contact *with poor youth, preferentially male, in need of attention and affection, in a family style and an educational method, which is expressed through loving-kindness, the ability to make oneself loved and to show love*” (*Criteria and Norms*, n. 77, p. 57).

Today more than ever, we have to guard against every type of deviation in this field (which, on the other hand, is more dangerous today); but we must not, for fear of such a deviation, renounce the specific and essential trait of our charism! It is the authentic identity of our consecrated chastity that enables us to “bear witness to the predilection of Christ for the young; it allows us to love them in an open and uncomplicated way, so that they ‘*know they are loved*’, and it enables us to educate them to love and to purity.” (C 81)

4. There is another very important and practical consideration, and the Rector Major chose to emphasize it in his Strenna for 2008, viz. the promotion of human rights, in particular the rights of juveniles, as the Salesian way of promoting a culture of life and a change of structures: “The Preventive System of Don Bosco has a great social outreach (...). **“Education to human rights, in particular to the rights of juveniles,** is the privileged way to implement in various contexts this commitment to prevention, to integrated human development, to the construction of a world that is more fair, more just, more healthy. The language of human rights also allows us to dialogue and to introduce our pedagogy into the different cultures of the world.”

I would like to conclude by recalling once more the last sentence in the section on Chastity in our Constitutions: “(The Salesian) **turns with filial trust to Mary, the Immaculate Help of Christians, who helps him to love as Don Bosco did.**”  
(C 84)

## *Prayer*

### **POOR AND ABANDONED YOUTH**

Lord Jesus,  
You who invite us to share in Your Mission of the Good Shepherd,  
to care for that part of human society, so precious and fragile,  
the poorest and most abandoned youngsters,  
as our Father and Founder Don Bosco did,  
help us to be faithful to this mission,  
in the fulfilment of which we will find the path to our holiness.

Help us to show a loving and efficacious concern  
for the most needy and emarginated youth,  
so that, as Good Shepherds,  
we will be able to know and call them by name,  
helping them to experience the dignity of human beings,  
in the knowledge that they are loved by You with predilection.  
Help us to offer them an integral formation  
that will enable them to become honest citizens and good Christians,  
so that, following Your example,  
we might be able to offer them all our time, all our energies,  
and even our life,  
in disinterested and generous service.

Give us, Lord, during this General Chapter,  
the light and strength of Your Spirit,  
so that we might make an appropriate assessment of the  
situation of our beneficiaries  
and discern their deeper human and Christian needs,  
so that we can thus realize the Salesian Mission  
in the variety of situations in which we work as a Congregation,  
to be, in this way,

faithful to You and to the young, just as Don Bosco always was.

Give us the ability to place all our facilities and our works,  
beginning from our very selves,  
at the service of most needy young people,  
with the unshakeable certainty of faith,  
with the joy of hope  
and the radicalism of love,  
so that, as mediators of Your salvific presence among them,  
“they might have life, and have it in abundance”.  
Amen.

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## **7. “STARTING AFRESH FROM DON BOSCO”**

Towards the end of our Spiritual Retreat, in an atmosphere of prayer and encounter with God, we wish to live the fundamental objective of our Chapter, which is: “starting afresh from Don Bosco, to reawaken the heart of every Salesian to return to the young with a renewed Salesian identity and a more ardent apostolic passion” (cf. Letter of the Rector Major, AGC 394).

### **1. “THE LORD HAS GIVEN US DON BOSCO AS FATHER AND TEACHER...” (C 21)**

It is evident that “starting afresh from Don Bosco” does not mean “a return of the prodigal son to his father’s house” because, in truth, we have never left our House, our Charism. Nonetheless, there are objective elements that invite us to renew our fidelity to Don Bosco and to our Salesian Charism in the face of the new challenges emerging in our history and in the lives of the young. In his letter convoking the General Chapter, the Rector Major tells us:

Today more than yesterday, and tomorrow more than today, the risk grows greater of breaking the living bonds that keep us united to Don Bosco. More than a hundred years have now gone by since his death. The generations of Salesians who were in contact with him and knew him close at hand are dead. The chronological, geographic and cultural distance from the founder is increasing. The spiritual climate and the psychological closeness which prompted spontaneous reference to Don Bosco and his spirit, are beginning to disappear. (AGC 394, p. 9)

Obviously, my reflection has no intention whatsoever of producing a “synthesis” of Don Bosco: apart from the objective impossibility of accomplishing such a feat for a colossal figure like him, I would be the last person suitable for the job. All of us know our Father, Don Bosco, too well for me to pretend to say “new” things about him.

However, I would like to set out from the extraordinary greatness of Don Bosco, which fills our hearts with legitimate pride, but is not without its risks. One of these, for instance, would be to lose ourselves in the complex multiplicity of his traits, and so to be unable to grasp the essential elements of his person and his charism, which the Holy Spirit has bestowed on the Church and on humanity through him. As the proverb says, there are times when “we cannot see the wood for the trees”. Suffice it to recall the several professions and activities that have Don Bosco for their patron, all of them giving prominence, no doubt, in a superficial and simplistic way, to the many-sided richness of his personality.

Speaking of St. Francis of Assisi, the genial English writer, G. K. Chesterton, remarked that the profile of his sanctity has been interpreted, on occasion, in the most diverse ways – from iconoclast to patron of ecology – forgetting the most important thing which gave meaning to all the other aspects, viz. his love for Christ. And, with his habitual irony, he adds that these interpreters are like the person who wishes to write a biography of Roald Amundsen with only one constraint, viz. that no mention be made of the North or the South Pole. Perhaps a more contemporary comparison would be writing a biography of Pele or Maradona in which everything can be spoken of, except one: football.

In the same letter referred to above, Fr. Pascual gives us a sharp reminder:

At the foundation of everything, as the source of the fruitful results of his action and actuality, there is something we may often overlook: his deep spiritual experience, what we might

call his ‘familiarity’ with God. Maybe this is precisely the best thing he has left us in which to invoke and imitate him, and set ourselves to follow him so as to make contact with Christ and bring Christ into contact with the young. (AGC 394, p. 12)

An illustration of these words of the Rector Major is the following not-so-familiar testimony found in the *Biographical Memoirs*:

On one occasion when Don Bosco was visiting the seminary at Grenoble, in France, “at the hour of spiritual reading that immediately preceded dinner (...), he joined the seminarians for the pious exercise; on that occasion the reading was replaced by an exhortation of Father Rua who chose as his theme God’s love for us. A witness testifies that ‘his fervent words revealed a heart burning with divine love. It was contemplation rather than meditation, but it became ecstasy for Don Bosco. Big tears ran down his cheeks and as the superior noticed this, he remarked out loud with his warm loving voice: *Don Bosco is weeping*. It would be impossible to describe the effect those simple words had on us. The Saint’s tears were even more influential than Father Rua’s fiery words. We all felt deeply moved and recognized Don Bosco’s holiness in his love, and we no longer needed any miracles to lead us to display our veneration for the Saint.’ (BM XVIII, 99-100)

In this sense, “starting afresh from Don Bosco” is nothing else but growing in what constitutes our Christian identity, viz. *the centrality of God in our lives* – something that our Founder wrote in the first article of the Constitutions: “The purpose of the Salesian Society is that its members, *while striving after Christian perfection, shall be engaged in the various works of charity, spiritual and temporal, on behalf of the young, especially those who are poor*”. It is the continual effort to attain that “high standard” of Christian and consecrated life, viz. **holiness**, by

experiencing the threefold God-centred attitude which enables us to live as he lived, “**as seeing him who is invisible.**” (C 21)

In this regard, the canonization of *our Founder*, Don Bosco, as we know very well, has a significance that goes beyond the simple recognition of his heroic virtues or the proof of God’s extraordinary intervention in the miracles he worked. It is what *Vita Consecrata* states in all clarity: “When the Church approves a form of consecrated life or an Institute, she **confirms** that in its spiritual and apostolic charism are found all the objective requisites for achieving personal and communal perfection according to the Gospel”.<sup>56</sup> The statement found in the first article of our Constitutions echoes the same idea: “The Church has acknowledged God’s hand in this, especially by approving our Constitutions and *by proclaiming our Founder a saint.*” (C 1)

“Dear Salesians, **be saints,**” was the Rector Major’s invitation to us in his first letter in which he listed the characteristics of *Salesian sanctity* (cf. AGC 379, pp. 8–10). The entire letter was an invitation to take up this challenge, for “our sanctification is ‘the essential task’ of our life, in the words of the Pope. If we attain this, we shall have attained everything; if we fail to do so, all is lost, as is said of charity (cf. 1 Cor 13, 1-8), the very essence of holiness.” (ibid. p. 11)

Don Bosco calls us, in the first place, to become **saints** in such a way that the mission itself becomes an expression and a consequence of this holiness, and at the same time a path to grow in it. “The witness of such holiness, achieved within the Salesian mission, reveals the unique worth of the beatitudes and **is the most precious gift we can offer to the young.**” (C 25)

A second point I would like to make is drawn from the *Prologue* of the book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, written by the Pope or, as he himself says, by Joseph Ratzinger. What I shall say here does not intend to be anything more than a simple analogy.

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<sup>56</sup>JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, n. 93.



There is no doubt that we have at our disposal today many more tools from the various scientific disciplines (history, linguistics, psychology, sociology...) to study Don Bosco, and for this we must thank so many Salesian confreres, some of whom are present here, for dedicating their lives to this study and communicating the results of their qualified research. Still, it is possible to run the risk the Holy Father points to, concerning the use of the historical-critical method. To use a simple (perhaps too simple) but meaningful example: we may oftentimes content ourselves with, or attach great importance to, an “*x-ray*” of Don Bosco rather than to his living and actual *countenance*. When a surgeon has to perform an operation on his mother, the photographs he has of her are of little or no use: what he needs instead are the most specialized studies available. But, in his office or on his writing-desk, he generally does not place an x-ray but the most faithful and “live” photograph he has of his mother.

As a Congregation, and still more, as a Salesian Family, we must always strive for a synthesis which makes it possible for us to know the authentic Don Bosco in a dynamic way, because, as we said in the title of this section, he has been given to us by God as our *Father and Teacher*.

## **2. “...WE STUDY AND IMITATE HIM, ADMIRING IN HIM A SPLENDID BLENDING OF NATURE AND GRACE” (C 21)**

In our previous reflections, we sought to “put into practice” this blending of nature and grace. I shall now take up once more some of the elements – among many others – that we have meditated upon and that were marvellously blended in Don Bosco, whose personality manifests an extraordinary integration. On the one hand, as we have said before, he was gifted with an extraordinary richness: “deeply human, rich in the qualities of his people, open to the realities of this earth, just as deeply the man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy

Spirit". On the other hand, he was capable not only of a "splendid blending" but a *fusion in his closely-knit life project, the service of the young*. Seen from this "formal" angle, the Salesian too is equally gifted (of course, not in the same measure) with gifts of nature and grace, and is called to be *a man of synthesis, equilibrium and good sense*, someone who does not inflate or deflate any of his basic qualities. The Salesian must be, in the best sense of the word, a normal man – if we are to go by the description given by Cardinal Pironio at the inauguration of GC 22; not "mediocre" but just the opposite: a person who is on fire with a passion of love for the young and seeks their highest good, their *salvation*.

1. We spoke of *gratuitous giving* – which in the faith-context is understood as *grace*– as the atmosphere surrounding every person, be he Christian or not; an expression of God's loving presence. Don Bosco was extraordinarily sensitive to this "sense of gratuitous giving". We have drawn attention to it at different moments, especially when we spoke of our predilection for the most "insignificant".

Let us recall what the Rector Major writes in his letter, "Looking at Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco". It concerns Don Bosco's lived experience with the pupils of the Jesuits:

As a student of philosophy John Bosco had assisted some boys of well-to-do families at a summer camp of the Jesuits near Turin, to which they had sent some of the boarders from their schools during an epidemic. Although he had no difficulty in relating to them – indeed some of them were friends who loved and respected him – he became convinced that his 'method' was not compatible with a system of 'mutual payment'. At Montaldo (...) he came to know that he could not exercise over boys of this social class that influence without which it is impossible to help them spiritually. Then, he became convinced that his field of work was not among the children of the wealthy. (AGC 384, p. 17)

I would like to examine the topic further, using an example which seems quite relevant. We saw that life, every human life, is a *gift* par excellence in so far as all of us possess it and also in so far as it is the basis for all the other gifts “of nature and grace”. It would be rhetorical to say that Don Bosco too felt the same way. But there is something more: I think that, in this matter, we come across an *extraordinary gift* of God in his life.

Though all of us know that life is a gift, we do not always *experience* it that way. As the proverb says, “nadie sabe el bien que tiene, hasta que lo ve perdido” (“no one appreciates what he has, until he has lost it”... or is in danger of losing it). We do not need to demonstrate the fact that, whoever has seen his life *threatened by death* and survived, has learned to appreciate it immeasurably. There is a classical description of this experience in the life of Dostoevsky, in connection with a situation that Stefan Zweig calls “one of the crucial moments of humanity”. Here is how the Russian novelist describes it, in the third person:

It seemed to him then that he had only five more minutes to live. He told me that those five minutes were like an eternity to him, riches beyond the dreams of avarice (....) He was dying at twenty-seven, a strong and healthy man (....) he said that the thing that was most unbearable to him at the time was the constant thought, “What if I had not had to die! What if I could return to life – oh, what an eternity! And all that would be mine! I should turn every minute into an age, I should lose nothing, I should count every minute separately and waste none!”<sup>57</sup>

We are all acquainted with the inspiring text of the *Biographical Memoirs* narrating Don Bosco’s mortal illness, but I cannot resist transcribing some of its paragraphs:

Don Bosco wrote the following comment on his illness: “I think I was fully prepared to die at that moment. I was sorry

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<sup>57</sup>F.M. DOSTOYEVSKY, *The Idiot*, 87-88.

to leave my boys, but I was glad to end my days knowing that the oratory now had a permanent base". This certainty of his flowed from the conviction that God and the Blessed Mother had wanted and founded the oratory (...) Early in the week, as the sad news of his sickness spread, the oratory boys were overwhelmed by indescribable grief and anxiety (...) Touching scenes would take place. "Just let me take a peek at him," one would ask. "I won't make him talk", insisted another (...) "If Don Bosco knew I were here, he'd let me in", said a third (...) Don Bosco could hear them talking to the nurse and was very much affected (...) Realizing that there was little hope for him in human remedies, they appealed to heaven with admirable fervour (...) It was a Saturday in July, a day sacred to the Holy Mother of God.

We know the outcome of this decisive moment, a real watershed in Don Bosco's life. Invited by the theologian Borel to say at least a little prayer for his own recovery, Don Bosco, with great difficulty, finally said: "*Yes, Lord, if it pleases you, let me be cured*". "That morning the two doctors, Botta and Cafasso, came to see him, fearing to find him dead, but when they felt his pulse, they told him: 'Don Bosco, you have good reason to go to La Consolata and thank the Madonna'"

No pen can describe the scene when the beloved father returned among his sons. "The reception was a scene easier imagined than described (...) Don Bosco addressed a few words to them. Among other things, he said: 'I want to thank you for the love you have shown me during my illness. I want to thank you for the prayers you said for my recovery. I am convinced that **God granted me an extension of my life in answer to your prayers. Therefore, gratitude demands that I spend it all for your temporal and spiritual welfare. This I promise to do as long as the Lord will permit me to remain in this world; on your part, help me to keep my promise**'" (BM II, 385-386)

I believe that our Rector Major had a similar experience, and curiously, around the same age as Don Bosco, at 31. Most of us will probably never have such an experience. The most important thing is that we be convinced that, if God has called us to life, and to this life as Salesians, it is in order that we might say, like Don Bosco: “For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life” (C 14).

2. When we mentioned earlier that the key to understanding the entire life of Don Bosco lay in the *centrality of God* in his life, we presupposed something that we now need to make explicit, viz. faith in God is inseparable from *following and imitating Jesus Christ*. For our Father, Don Bosco, to speak of religion was to speak of Christianity. In the social, cultural and religious context of his time, this was obvious and beyond dispute. Today, Don Bosco would certainly be the first one to invite us to take an active part in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue because of his conviction that Jesus Christ is – in the words of the Magisterium and present-day theology – “the one universal Saviour of all humanity.”

It was Jesus Christ who guided and directed all of Don Bosco’s actions, from the first years of his life. It was Jesus Christ who, in the dream he had at the age of nine, pointed out to him his mission and made him understand that his whole life would be determined by this vocation and mission, and that he would receive a *Teacher*, “without whom, all wisdom is foolishness.”<sup>58</sup> It was Jesus Christ whom he discovered, loved and served in every person whom he encountered in his life, above all poor and abandoned youth, taking seriously the word of the Lord in Mt. 25, 31ff. It was Jesus Christ whom he sought to “form” in them, following a path in which education and catechesis were fully integrated:

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<sup>58</sup>JOHN BOSCO, *Memorie dell’Oratorio* (Rome: LAS, 1991) 36 = *Salesian Sources. 1. Don Bosco and his Work. Collected Works* (Rome: LAS / Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2017) 1330.

Like Don Bosco, we are all called to be educators to the faith at every opportunity. Our highest knowledge therefore is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all peoples the unfathomable riches of his mystery. We walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Lord, and so to discover in him and in his Gospel the deepest meaning of their own existence, and thus grow into new men. (C 34)

For Don Bosco, holiness was not an ethical ideal but the fullness of **friendship** with a Person, Jesus Christ.

In giving the first place in his life to the Lord Jesus, he was led by a certain *charismatic instinct* to accentuate some aspects of the inexhaustible figure of Christ (cf. C 11). Among these, as the Rector Major reminded us some years ago, there was the image of the **Apostle of the Father** and of the Good Shepherd. In his contemplation of Jesus Christ, the **Good Shepherd**, Don Bosco “learned” – and all of us, Salesians, are called to the same apprenticeship – the Preventive System, viz. gratitude, the preoccupation for those on the margins, love in the form of loving-kindness, a personal knowledge (“the Good Shepherd knows his sheep and calls each one by name”), and above all, the need of giving oneself and everything to the point of “giving one’s own life for the sheep” (cf. AGC 384, pp. 26-28).

3. The figure of the Good Shepherd and his concern for each of his sheep, together with his amazing predilection for the lost one, prompts us, towards the close of our Retreat, to examine more closely a particular theme that we had only mentioned during the first days, viz. the unity of *agape* and *eros* in the life and activity of our Father, Don Bosco.

Confronted by the traditional semantics of the word *eros* which is wrongly taken to be a synonym of “sexuality” (and often, “morbid” sexuality), and provoked by the thinking of some twentieth-century Protestant theologians (especially in Northern Europe) who saw a radical opposition between *eros* and *agape*, Pope Benedict XVI, in his highest teaching post

in the universal Church, has had the merit of restoring the human, Christian and – why not say it? – theological value of *eros*, capping in this way a whole current of humanistic thinking in this direction.

We can say very briefly that “we know what *eros* is *not*”; but, *what is it?* Even after an attentive reading of Benedict XVI’s Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, and especially his *Message for Lent 2007*, we can remain with the impression that there is no clarity in the matter and that there even remains some difference of opinion. For instance, if, in the light of the Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, we take *agape* to mean “descending love” and *eros* “ascending love”,<sup>59</sup> can we speak of *God’s eros* toward man? Similarly, what other kind of love can man have for God, if not the “ascending” type, and therefore, only *erotic love*? In my opinion, it is possible to find at least five or six descriptions of *eros* in these documents of the Pope: ascending love – a response of love – an “ecstatic” feeling or emotion – a possession of what is lacking to one who loves – a yearning for union... In actual fact, all these descriptions are not *alternatives*, but various *attempts*, from different points of view, to define what is in itself indefinable, in as much as true *love* lies beyond logical human understanding. St. Anselm’s words are applicable here: “*rationabiliter comprehendit... incomprehensibile esse*” (we understand with our reason that love is beyond reason itself). But this *incomprehensibility* does not mean to say that it is *impenetrable*, but only that it is *inexhaustible* when it comes to knowing what it is.

The path I would like to suggest sets out from the two elements I have already mentioned. On the one hand, the Holy Father gives us to understand that *eros* is indispensable, even for the realization of *agape* (cf. among other texts, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 7); on the other hand, we have insisted on the need to examine love from both sides of the experience – of loving, certainly, but also of being loved. In both these

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<sup>59</sup>BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 7.

aspects we discover an essential *factor* which is so evident that it paradoxically risks being passed over without our noticing it: we refer to the *uniqueness* of the person loved. Without it, *agape* itself (and, paradoxically, at the other extreme, sexuality!) becomes *impersonal*; without it, the person cannot feel himself loved in the depths of his being. I think that the description – a babbling description, of course – of *eros* must be bound up with the recognition of the person loved as *unique*. And this must occur in the entire gamut of love – from *sexuality* which must become true human love by being *personalized* in this way, to *agape* which *also needs to be personalized by eros*<sup>60</sup> lest it turn into a narcissistic egoism in which one hides behind the mask, saying, “I love everyone”, when, in reality, he loves no one.

With this *explanation*, we can perfectly understand what we called the various “attempts” to define *eros* in the documents of Benedict XVI, including feelings and emotions which are doubtless essential not only in the experience of love in general, but especially in the *amazement* arising from the face-to-face encounter with a person in all its uniqueness, and which is expressed in the simple words: **How wonderful it is that you are!**

The Good Shepherd, who left the ninety-nine sheep in the sheepfold (or on the mountains! cf. Mt. 18, 12) to go in search of the lost sheep, understood this to perfection (cf. also AGC 384, p. 27). So did our holy Father, Don Bosco: it was so evident in him, and I would add, *it fires us with enthusiasm*. To be still more precise, I would say that the *structure* and *orientation* of his love was his *agape*, while the *content* and *dynamics* of that same love was his *eros*. In realizing himself through love, Don Bosco did not look out for those who fascinated

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<sup>60</sup>Cf. The extraordinary text (unfortunately, placed in a note which has been lost, at the bottom of the page!) of EBERHARD JÜNGEL, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 319 note 15. (I must, however, clarify that I am not totally in agreement with the language he uses.)



him or “gave him fulfilment”, but for those who had a greater need of his *agape*-love. But this love was totally *personal and affective* (obviously, *effective* too) so that every boy felt himself personally loved by him, and even considered himself to be the object of his *predilection*, as though he were the only one whom Don Bosco loved. How the words of those street-boys at the door of a beloved dying man resound in our ears and in our hearts: **“If Don Bosco knew I were here, he’d let me in!”**

Thanks to this *agape-love which became an intimate affection* – “entrañable”, we say in Spanish, using a psycho-somatic expression – his boys felt loved by God to such an extent that, as Fr. Giacomelli testifies,

they “loved him dearly and held him in such veneration that all he had to do was express a mere wish to be instantly obeyed. They avoided also whatever might displease him, but there was not a trace of servile fear in their obedience; it stemmed from their filial affection for him. Indeed, some boys avoided wrongdoing more out of regard for him than for fear of offending God. When he would come to know of this, he would reprimand them severely, reminding them that, *God is much more than Don Bosco!*” (BM III, 411) And towards the end of his life, the theologian Piano said to him: “We still feel the love we felt for you then (...) Was it not here at the Oratory that the majority of us were fed and clothed when we were destitute? (...) This heart of mine will beat no more, before it ceases to love you. **We hold that loving you is a symbol of the love of God.**” (BM XVIII, 311-312)

On another occasion, also in the last years, he said to a group of past-pupil priests and lay people: “Now it is my turn to say who it is I love the most. Tell me. This is my hand; which of my five fingers do I love the most? Which of these could I do without? Certainly, I would not do without any of them because all five of them are equally dear and necessary to me. Therefore, I can only say that I love you all, all of you without any difference in degree or measure.” (BM XVIII, 124-125)

I believe that the most daring statement of Benedict XVI (he himself makes us understand it is so) is the one he makes towards the end of his *Message for Lent 2007*, and it can be applied, analogically, to Don Bosco: “One could rightly say that **the revelation of God’s eros toward man** (in the cross of Christ) is, in reality, the supreme expression of his agape”. Not surprisingly, the great Origen went against a great part of the Church’s Tradition with his interpretation of a beautiful expression of St. Ignatius of Antioch (“**My Eros has been crucified**”). He wrote: “At least I remember that one of the saints, by the name of Ignatius, said about Christ: ‘My *Eros* has been crucified’, and I do not think he deserved to be censured because of that” (Commentary on the Song of Songs, *Prologue*).

All this enables us to discover once more the deep meaning of Don Bosco’s invitation: “**Strive to make yourself loved!**” Desire, and even the longing for a response, is in no way opposed to the totally gratuitous nature of love; much less is it an expression of a disguised egoism. When it is authentic, love implies a most radical *kenosis*, viz. the total emptying of ourselves so that Jesus Christ may live in us (cf. Gal. 2, 19-20) and be the one who *loves* and *is loved* through our personal love. Would that each of us could hear from our youngsters the very same words Don Bosco heard: “**We hold that loving you is to us a symbol of the love of God!**”

Once again I wish to wind up this section by quoting the synthesis Benedict XVI gives us: “**In all truth, only the love that unites the free gift of oneself with the impassioned desire for reciprocity instils a joy which eases the heaviest of burdens.**”

### 3. “...WE TOO FIND IN HIM OUR MODEL” (C 97)

To conclude, I find it necessary to add a word of clarification about our relationship with Don Bosco, our Father, Teacher and Model. No doubt, we have often heard statements of disappointment or even reproach from persons who do

not belong to the Salesian Family because of the way we remember, venerate and strive to imitate Don Bosco. Some even go so far as to say that we put Don Bosco in the place of Jesus Christ. Obviously, these judgments are unfair but they point to something we ought to reflect upon, because *our relationship with Don Bosco, our Founder, is not the same as the relationship that other Orders and Congregations have with their Founders*. This ought not to worry us, much less make us feel ashamed. But, it is possible that we can fall into the danger of calling ourselves “sons of Don Bosco” without being so in reality (cf. Lk 3, 8; Jn 8, 39.42), and this for different reasons. For example, because we can confuse *fidelity* with nostalgically hanging on to the past, or because we can “invent” Don Bosco for ourselves, with each one attempting his own answer to the question: “What would Don Bosco do *here, today?*”

I think that the article of our Constitutions from which I have drawn the phrase which I placed at the beginning of this section, offers us a precious response. On the one hand, it reminds us that at the beginning of our Congregation (not only in time but also with regard to our charism), “the first Salesians found their sure guide in Don Bosco. Living at the very heart of his community in action, they learned to model their lives on his. We too find in him our model”. But, on the other hand, “the religious and apostolic nature of the Salesian calling dictates the specific direction our formation must take, a direction **necessary for the life and unity of the Congregation.**” (C 97)

Leaving aside the context of this article (which is about life as formation), we are called to forge a synthesis or an underlying unity between the concrete figure of Don Bosco and the nature of our charism. Dispensing with the second element can lead us to a nostalgic repetition of anecdotes about Don Bosco, and he himself would be the first one to reprove us for this. But the contrary position can lead us to concentrate on a collection of ideas and concepts of a theological, pedagogical and spiritual

nature, and forget that all this is part of a charism which God gave to the Church and to humanity, above all to the young, in a concrete person called John Bosco.

The synthesis we seek, I would make bold to say, is to be found in Don Bosco himself: “If you have loved me in the past, continue to love me in the future by the exact observance of our Constitutions” (Constitutions: Foreword). “We willingly accept the Constitutions as Don Bosco’s will and testament, for us our book of life and for the poor and the little ones a pledge of hope” (C 196).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As we approach the end of our Retreat, I would like to offer you two concluding reflections.

If I were to describe Don Bosco’s personality in a few words, I would say: by putting God and the following of Jesus Christ at the centre of his life, and by spending his whole life for the young for whom he had a passion by virtue of the charism he had received, our Founder and Father showed himself to be, *simultaneously and inseparably*, **a holy and a happy man**. He united perfectly in himself the two aspects of his personal fulfilment in Christ: the “objective” aspect = perfection, holiness; and the “subjective” aspect = happiness. The old adage, often applied to him (and also to St. Francis de Sales, his patron and ours) was not just a play on words: “A sad saint is a sorry saint”.

Our second reflection is, in a certain way, a closing synthesis. In our various reflections, we sought to “put into practice” the blending of nature and grace which is typical of Don Bosco (cf. C 21). In a way, all we really did was to go deeper into nothing else but ... **the Preventive System**. In fact, for our “theme” and main content we took **loving-kindness**, understood as *an expression and a manifestation of love*, set between the two poles of **reason** (*human experience*) and **religion** (*theological reflection*). It was the shortest and most profound synthesis we could make...

## *Prayer*

### TO DON BOSCO

Don Bosco,  
You were raised up by the Holy Spirit,  
through the maternal intervention of Mary,  
to contribute to the salvation of youth.

You were given to us by the Lord as Father and Teacher,  
and have entrusted to us a fascinating program of life  
in the maxim “Give me souls, take away the rest”.

You promised us, under God’s inspiration,  
an original spirit of life and action,  
whose core and synthesis is pastoral charity.

Inflame our heart  
with ardent zeal and with an evangelizing impetus  
that makes us credible signs of God’s love to the young.

Teach us to accept with serenity and joy  
the daily tasks and renunciations of an apostolic life  
for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

As an Assembly that represents the Congregation throughout  
the world,

We pray you:

Grant from God, our Father,  
through the intercession of Mary, Mother and Teacher,  
that this General Chapter may help us  
to strengthen our charismatic identity  
and reawaken our apostolic passion  
so that we can take back to our Provinces, communities and works  
a renewed breath of the Holy Spirit.

Through Christ, Good Shepherd and our Lord.

Amen.

## 8. MARY, MOTHER AND TEACHER

### 1. INTRODUCTION

At the conclusion of the Instruction, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, the Church invites us to “look upon Mary, Mother and Teacher of all. She, the **first consecrated person**, lived the fullness of charity. Fervent in the Spirit, she served the Lord, joyful in hope, strong in trial, persevering in prayer; she intercedes for us (cf. *Rom* 12:11-13). She reflects all the aspects of the Gospel; all the charisms of consecrated life are mirrored and renewed in her.”<sup>61</sup>

We shall use this text to organize our reflection. Obviously, we have no intention of turning Mary Most Holy into the “first religious” – that would be something totally anachronistic. But, we do want to discover in her “all the charisms of consecrated life”, not quantitatively (“all”), but in their “originating nucleus”, viz. her living *the fullness of charity* or love. There is a parallel example in St. Thomas Aquinas who shows how all the perfections of creation are found in an absolutely *simple* way in God.<sup>62</sup>

Yet another example is found in St. Therese of Lisieux who reflects on the diversity of vocations she discovers in herself:

I sense other vocations in myself. I sense the vocation of the soldier, the priest, the apostle, the doctor, the martyr; in short, I feel the need, the desire to accomplish for you, Jesus, all the most heroic deeds... I feel in my soul the courage of a crusader, of a papal knight: I would like to die on the battlefield in defence of the Church (...) How can I recognize these contrasts? How can I realize the desires of

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<sup>61</sup>CICLSAL, *Starting afresh from Christ: A renewed commitment to Consecrated Life in the third millenium*, n. 46.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. S.Th., I, q. 4, a. 2, *Utrum in Deo sint perfectiones omnium rerum*.

my poor little soul? (...) During prayer, my desires made me suffer a true and proper martyrdom. I opened the Letter of St. Paul to find some answers (...) I read... that not everyone can be an apostle, prophet, doctor, etc.; that the Church is made up of different members, and that the eye cannot be the hand at one and the same time... The answer was clear, but it did not assuage my desires, it did not give me peace (...) Without becoming discouraged, I kept reading and this sentence struck me: “You zealously seek the most perfect gifts, but I will show you one more excellent still.” And the apostle explains how all the most perfect gifts are nothing compared with LOVE (...) Finally, I had found the answer! (...) Charity gave me the key to my vocation (...) I understood that only LOVE made the members of the Church do what they do: that if Love should die out, the apostles would no longer announce the Gospel, the martyrs would refuse to spill their blood... I understood that LOVE embraces all vocations, that Love was everything, that love embraced all times and every place...In brief, that love is eternal! Well then, in the fullness of my delirious joy I cried out: Oh Jesus, my Love! I have finally found my vocation! ... My vocation is LOVE!

In this our final meditation, let me to invite you to “contemplate” Mary, the Immaculate Help of Christians, our Mother and Teacher. In particular, let us fix our filial gaze on a transcendental moment of our Salesian tradition: Don Bosco praying together with Bartholomew Garelli. Borrowing a well-known example from modern physics, we could say that that “**Hail Mary**” was the “heavy and complex atom” which, in the *big bang* of 8 December 1841 caused a “charismatic explosion” which even today continues to expand throughout the world, making God’s love present for the young, especially the poor and abandoned.

Let us therefore meditate on what we say every day in the Hail Mary to the Mother of God and our Mother...

## 2. "... FULL OF GRACE"

The archangel Gabriel's greeting to Mary is extraordinarily loaded with meaning: no translation can exhaust the richness of the original word: *κεχαριτωμενη*. To get a glimpse of the depth of theological significance of this expression, we need to emphasize in the first place its *gratuitous character*. "Full of grace", in this first sense, is the highest expression of gratuitous giving. It manifests in an incomparable manner the gratuitous nature of God's love which precedes every human action, which itself is always a response to God's initiative. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us first" (1 Jn 4, 10). This applies to each one of us, but it holds true of Mary in the very first place.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit down the centuries, the unanimous tradition of the Church and its interpretation reached a culmination in the dogmatic declaration of Blessed Pius IX in 1854 when he proclaimed Mary's **Immaculate Conception**. At times, however, we run the risk of forgetting that this dogma of faith does not speak in the first place of what Mary did, but of what **God did in her** for our sake. It is also possible to misunderstand our Constitutions, if we fail to pay attention to God's initiative in Mary from the first moment of her existence. "Mary Immaculate, Help of Christians, leads us to the fullness of our offering to the Lord and gives us courage for the service of our brethren" (C 92). We must not forget that *consecration* is always God's work, not ours; and so, when we contemplate Mary *Immaculate*, we contemplate *the most perfect fruit of God's "preventive system"*.

In this sense, we can understand theology's insistence, reflected in the liturgy, on having recourse to the allegorical meaning of Old Testament readings such as Proverbs 8, 22-36 and Sirach 24, 3-22 in order to place in relief the "predestination" of the Mother of God. But this must not *separate* her from the rest of humanity because the fact is that **all of us** have been *predestined* by God "before the foundation of



the world, to be **holy and blameless before him in love**. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1, 4-5). Mary was the predestined one *par excellence*, but not *exclusively* so.

### 3. “THE LORD IS WITH YOU...”

This simple phrase, which forms part of the angel’s greeting, is *the most compact summary of the Covenant* that we can find. It is a statement of what the Lord guarantees to those whom he calls to His service. (Let us call to mind, in a particular way, the case of Jeremiah). In the deepest sense of the word, “full of grace” means “**full of GOD**”. Grace, in fact, is not “something” but “Someone” – the One and Triune God, the God who, being love, gives himself to us freely in Christ, in a total and irreversible (*eschatological*) manner. It is well to point out that, in various texts of the Old Testament, this presence of God in the midst of His people elicits joy in the very first place. Unfortunately, in almost all languages, this nuance of St. Luke’s text, χαίρε, **Rejoice!** has been lost. Let us recall one text among many others, viz. that of Zephaniah:

*Sing aloud*, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel!  
*Rejoice and exult* with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!  
The king of Israel, *the LORD, is in your midst*;  
you shall fear disaster no more.  
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
“Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak!  
*The LORD, your God, is in your midst*, a warrior who gives  
victory;  
*he will rejoice over you with gladness*, he will renew you in  
his love;  
*he will exult over you with loud singing* as on a day of festival”  
(Zeph 3, 14-18).

This unique presence of God in Mary is the fundamental basis of her **being-consecrated**, since it is not brought about by any creature but by “God who sets his dwelling-place in

her”. Here lies a radical difference in the concept of *holiness*: whereas in other cultures and religions, the *Sacred* consists in a separate, “untouchable” and inaccessible reality, for us, the thrice-holy God makes sharing in His holiness possible by Himself drawing near to us out of love, a nearness which, in Mary, because of the Incarnation, becomes full, even on the “physical” plane. For this reason, we can proclaim her, in this sense too, the “Consecrated one” par excellence, without forgetting that this does not separate her from us but, on the contrary, is an invitation to follow her example.

Finally, there is a *third meaning* of the greeting “*full of grace*” that we would like to point out, and it concerns God’s total presence in her, making her “**the Graced One**” beyond compare (in Spanish: “*Agraciada*”), **the All-beautiful One** (*Tota Pulchra*), the One who will say in the canticle of the *Magnificat*: “From now on all generations will call me *blessed*; for the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name” (Lk 1, 48-49).

#### 4. “LET IT BE DONE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD”

The emphasis on God’s free and gratuitous initiative and on consecration as a divine action ought not to make us forget that He *wanted* a human response. This can be seen in the biblical models of the Old and New Testaments, and it could not be otherwise in the supreme example of human collaboration with God, viz. **Mary’s divine motherhood**. As St. Augustine says, she “conceived the Son of God first in her heart through her free obedience before conceiving Him in her virginal womb”.

Nonetheless, a doubt could arise at this point: can we really speak of Mary’s **freedom** prior to all these events? What sense would it make to speak of the Immaculate Conception, of the fullness of grace, etc. if everything depended on a human **yes** after it had all taken place? On the other hand, if we were to

deny the freedom of acceptance on the part of the young girl of Nazareth, we would not only separate her completely from the rest of humanity, but we would end up with an absurdity: we would be maintaining that the human collaboration with God at its peak moment was not really *human*, i.e., it lacked awareness and freedom.

I think we can find a marvellous answer to this question if we care to go deeper into a typical aspect of our charism. When Don Bosco spoke of placing his boys “in the moral impossibility of committing sin”, he did not mean to restrict their freedom – which, after all, would have been impossible – but he sought to **strengthen their faith-motivations and their love for the Lord** by appealing not only to their rational and logical intelligence (which the *repressive system* did as well), but above all to their *heart*. For him, education at the human level and also at the level of education to and in the faith “is a matter of the heart”.

In other words, Don Bosco was convinced – and it is a conviction that touches the very core of Christian anthropology and morality – that the more we experience God’s love as the greatest (and only) source of our authentic happiness, the more difficult (“morally impossible”) will it be for us, without sacrificing our freedom, to want to go away from Him. For Don Bosco, this reinforcement called for personal contact, the creation of a wholesome **environment** abounding in human and Christian values, and an authentic Salesian **assistance**, which, far from being that of a policeman who guarantees “order” is instead a *visible mediation of God’s love*. This “**formative ecology**”, as the Rector Major calls it, is one of the fundamental elements of the Oratory as a Salesian *criterion*: “As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience is still the *lasting criterion* for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works” (C 40).

All this stems from the nature of love, at the human level itself. With all the more reason, therefore, God’s love does

not take freedom away from us or leave us “neutral”; on the contrary, it *reinvigorates* us, making us capable of reciprocating the love we receive with our own *free response* of love. Only in this way can we understand the deep meaning of our obedience, which “leads to maturity by extending the freedom of the sons of God” (C 67).

Seen from this angle, Mary’s question, “*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*” (Lk 1, 34), does not express a doubt or place any conditions; rather, it is a question on the part of someone who, because of her unconditional faith, wants to collaborate in the *freest and most conscious* way possible. That is why the angel’s reply is *not a response*: in actual fact, what Gabriel says is: “I am talking of God and his plan... **Are you willing to trust Him?**” Also the “proof” that the angel gives Mary, viz. Elizabeth’s pregnancy, which is something that Mary cannot “verify” at the moment, is more of a motivation to visit and help her, as we are immediately told in the Gospel. It is not a “theoretical” proof, therefore, to satisfy Mary’s curiosity or simply to inform her, but a “*proof leading to action*”, impelling her to set out to keep company with and serve her cousin Elizabeth.

And so, Mary’s faith is translated into **unconditional obedience**. She accepts, paradoxically, with full freedom, to become the slave of the Lord: “**Let it be done to me according to your Word**”.

## 5. “BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG WOMEN...”

This fullness of consecration in Mary leads to her *mission*: in the first place, that of being the Mother of the Son of God made man; but then, inseparably too, that of giving Him up for the salvation of the world, thus *imitating in a human way*, so to say, what the Father did: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...” (Jn 3, 16): and all this, “through the work of the Holy Spirit”. By *leading to God* those to whom He sends

us is the way we give concrete expression to our consecration, following Mary's example. She "leads us to the fullness of our offering to the Lord and gives us courage for the service of our brethren" (C 92).

For this reason, we cannot separate the *Visitation* from the Annunciation: "Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country" (Lk 1, 39). The presence of Mary, who brings the Saviour with her, is the source of overwhelming joy, the same joy with which the angel greeted her, and which she now bestows on the baby John the Baptist, while he is still in the womb of his mother! Elizabeth reiterates the promise of joy to Mary, attributing it to her **faith**. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Lk 1, 45).

It is interesting to note that here we have the *first "beatitude"* of the Gospel; the last beatitude, which will marvellously dovetail with this one, will also revolve around the same theme of **faith**: "...Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe!" (Jn 20, 29) Without the perspective of faith, we shall not be able to understand or accept the "other" beatitudes presented by Jesus (Mt 5, 3-12; Lk 6, 20-23). However, there is still something I would like to say on this point: prior to the proclamation of the resurrection of her Son, Jesus, Mary was among those who "without seeing, believed". There is no Gospel text that narrates an "apparition" of the risen Jesus to his most holy Mother; and I think that, instead of inventing apparitions or having recourse to apocryphal texts of the past or the present (which are also there), it is far more inspiring for us to take note of this consoling absence as it places Mary by our side and invites us too to be "**happy because we have believed**".

Finally, Elizabeth "exclaimed with a loud cry, '**Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!**'" (Lk 1, 42). How are we to understand this double benediction, if not as proceeding from faith? We have to recognize that,

humanly speaking, neither Mary's election, vocation and mission, nor the realization of her plans, made life any easier for her. Quite the opposite... To accept God's will in our life does not mean that things automatically become easier or more tolerable. As we see in the lives of Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and **Mary**, the Lord guarantees us only one thing: "**I shall be with you**". "Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8, 39).

The marvellous scene of the Visitation reaches its climax in the *Magnificat*: Mary praises God for what he has done in her life, "because he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant" (Lk 1, 48). She sets God's choice of her within the context of his *fidelity*, and therefore, as *the fulfilment of his promises* (cf. Lk 1, 54-55): he is a **holy** God, who receives the humble, the poor and the hungry, but can do nothing when confronted with the self-sufficiency of the rich, the powerful and the proud! In the end, what we find here, in a beautiful synthesis, is the core of the evangelical counsels: the primacy of God and the desire for union with Him by fully carrying out His Will (obedience), as an expression of love (chastity), in a total emptying of oneself (poverty). Mary is truly **the first consecrated person!**

## **6. MARY IMMACULATE, HELP OF CHRISTIANS IN OUR SALESIAN CHARISM**

Undoubtedly, this is a central theme of our charism, but one that is impossible to deal with in all its aspects. I shall therefore limit myself to underlining those texts of our Constitutions which make explicit mention of Mary and our charism.

We are aware that there are two articles in our Constitutions that are totally dedicated to Mary: article 8 (introduced for the first time in the definitive text of 1984) and article 92. The articles appear in very different contexts: the first, within a description of our basic Salesian identity, and this makes its content even more significant; the second, in the section

concerning our life of prayer, which is presented as a “dialogue with the Lord”.

In art. 8, Mary’s intervention in the life of our Father and Founder is highlighted with the help of three verbs: “(she) **showed** Don Bosco his field of labour among the young – **guided** him constantly – **supported** his work, especially in the foundation of our Society”. All this, evidently, was part of God’s plan, as the first article of our Rule of Life says: “*Through the motherly intervention of Mary*, the Holy Spirit raised up St. John Bosco” (C 1).

In much the same way, “we believe that Mary is present among us and **continues** her ‘mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians’”. If we are fully convinced of this, we have perhaps to ask our eyes and our hearts whether we too allow Mary Most Holy to show us our field of labour, to guide and support us.

Within the context of our Salesian mission, Mary educates us through the three theological virtues. Clearly referring to the Magnificat, “we entrust ourselves to her, the humble servant in whom the Lord has done great things, that we may become witnesses to the young of her Son’s boundless **love**” (C 8); “we make her known and loved as the one who **believed**, who helps and who infuses **hope**” (C 34).

Art. 92, instead, within the context of prayer, presents Mary to us in the first place as a model to *contemplate* and *imitate*, particularly in the offering of ourselves inseparably to God and to the young: “Mary Immaculate, Help of Christians, leads us to the fullness of our offering to the Lord and gives us courage for the service of our brethren”.

Finally, in the context of the Salesian’s entire life understood as a *permanent formation experience* and therefore as an unending process, we come across a simple title bearing within itself a tremendous depth of meaning: **Mary, Mother and Teacher** (C 98). In the context of this article we are invited to act like “sons in the Son”, allowing Mary to give each of us a

body and a heart like that of Christ, so that, as we said before, she might teach us **to love**, as she taught Don Bosco (cf. C 84), or better still, as **she taught and educated Jesus**.

I would like to conclude by spelling out in concrete terms the presence of Our Lady in our charism, starting from an observation that has been implicit in all that has been said above.

No doubt, the Mother of the Lord has a particular importance in our charism; it is enough to recall Don Bosco's assertion: "She did everything". But, does this importance – I would almost make bold to say: does this *central position* [of Mary], belong only to Don Bosco's personal experience, and therefore bound up with his time and situation, or is it an integral part of our Salesian identity?

I think that all of us are convinced that it is not just a fortuitous element or a simple vestige of our Father's personal devotion. Among the many possible elements of a response, I would like to pick one which stems precisely from the very source of our charism. Let us consider, first of all, those to whom our mission is primarily directed, viz. to **boys and young men who are poor, abandoned and in danger**. In other words, it is aimed at those youngsters who, humanly speaking, are of little or no "value", and precisely for this reason *God has a predilection for them* because – as we have seen these days – his love is unconditional and always takes the initiative. God does not love us because we are *lovable*, but we are *lovable*, that is, we are worthy of being loved because He loves us. As St. Augustine put it in his own genial way, "Quia amasti me, Domine, fecisti me amabilem" ("Because you have loved me, Lord, you have made me lovable").

Well, isn't it the typically *feminine-maternal* characteristic of love to be *unconditional* in much the same way as the corresponding male-fatherly characteristic is to be *demanding* (properly understood)? The person who, even though he truly loves those for whom he works as a priority in the Mission, does



not begin to love them unconditionally, or better, **maternally**, will not have grasped anything, and will not be able to share in their situation. His failure to take this matter seriously would be a sign that he has lost sight of our *charismatic predilection*. Certainly, in our love and in our educative and pastoral work, there are some young people with whom we do not need to begin with a maternal, unconditional love. But that is just the point: are these the ones for whom we ought to work as a *priority*? It is especially with the “last ones” that we are to be “*maternal fathers*”.

I think that it is at this juncture that we can situate the *theological* significance of Mary Immaculate, Help of Christians in our charism, viz. as “**the maternal countenance of God’s love**”.

In the conclusion of his letter, “*You are my God, my happiness lies in You alone*”, the Rector Major issues this invitation: “Let us ask her [Mary] to teach us to be open to the transforming and sanctifying action of the Spirit. Let us entrust to her our Salesian vocation so that she may make of us ‘signs and bearers of God’s love for the young’” (AGC 382, p. 28).

In this very special moment for our Congregation, we entrust our General Chapter to her so that she may obtain from God our Father for all of us and all our brothers in the Congregation spread throughout the world, the grace of a profound renewal in our Salesian identity and our apostolic passion, for the salvation of all our dear young people!

## *Prayer*

### MARY, MOTHER AND TEACHER

Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary,  
we look up to you, “full of Grace”,  
and join you in thanking the Father  
who has worked the marvels of His Love in you.

At this General Chapter  
we want to renew our “yes” to His plan of salvation  
for which He has consecrated us  
with the Salesian vocation,  
as signs and bearers of His love for the young,  
especially the poorest, most abandoned and in danger.

You who were the Teacher of Don Bosco,  
teach us to imitate his virtues:  
particularly his union with God,  
his life of chastity, humility and poverty,  
his love for work and for temperance,  
his kindness and his whole-hearted service of others,  
his fidelity to the Pope and to the Bishops of the Church.

You indicated to Don Bosco his field of action,  
you guided and sustained him always in his work.  
We entrust ourselves to You, humble servant,  
in whom the Lord has done great things,  
that we might become among young people  
witnesses of the boundless love of your Son.

Guide and sustain us too,  
at this period of history and of our Congregation,  
so that through this General Chapter,  
we may grow in love and in fidelity  
to the Lord and to the young people  
that He wishes to entrust to us.

Amen.

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