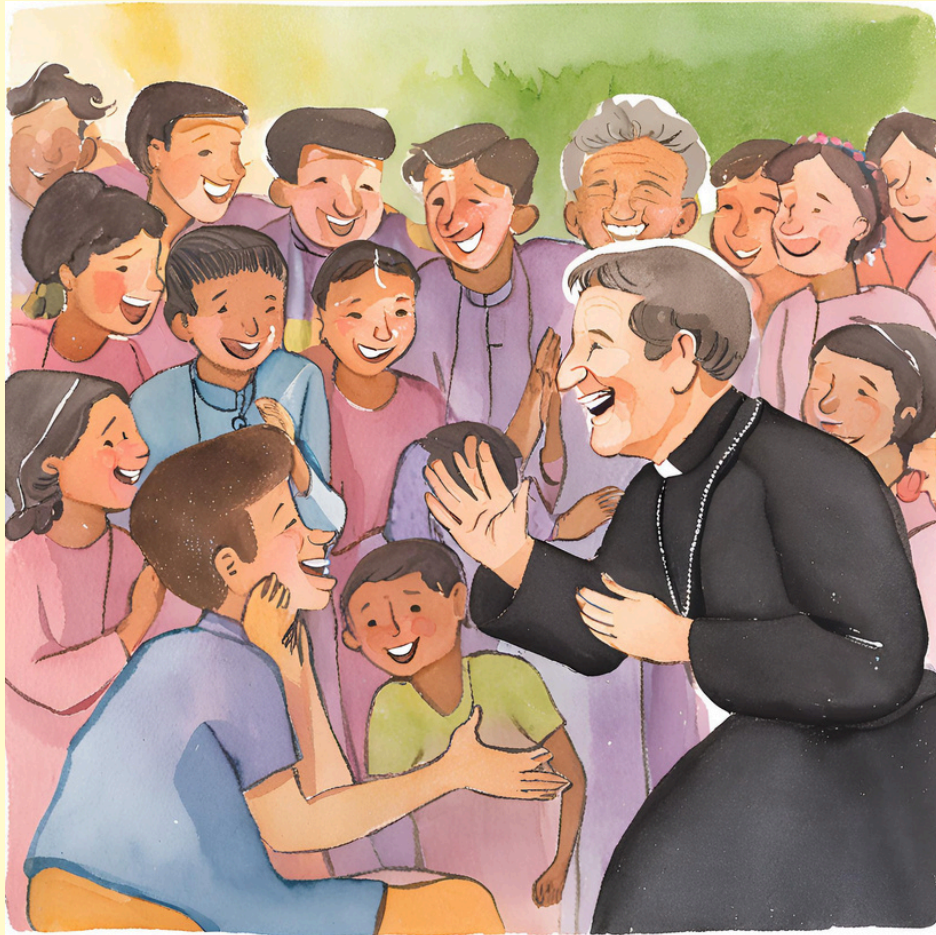


J.E. Vecchi

SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

BASIC THEMES



Background to this text These are reflections on Salesian spirituality that come from the wisdom and heart of Father Juan Edmundo Vecchi, the eighth successor of Don Bosco and Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation.

The central point of reflection is the value of Christ and faith in the current situation and therefore the awareness of the originality that Christians must acquire to be leaven in this world that is entering the third millennium: secular, technological, pluralist, free, unified yet divided.

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Introduction

I am placing these reflections on Salesian Spirituality within the context of three very significant events.

The first is the Jubilee of the Year 2000. It calls for personal conversion and focuses on the circumstances and ways to evangelise the world entering the third millennium: secular, technological, pluralistic, free, unified yet divided.

The central point of reflection is the value that Christ and faith can have in our current situation; and therefore the awareness of the originality that Christians must acquire, the transparency of their testimony, their presence as a leaven for the world. It is an invitation to rediscover our vocation in a world that needs signs, things to see and touch.

Within the more limited area of consecrated life there has been a deepening and an awareness, and this is the second event, regarding the specific contribution of religious consecration to ecclesial communion and culture. A message and a proposal of spirituality are expected from religious. In our age, marked by various expressions of religiosity and a quest for meaning, their role is to present examples and avenues for Christian spiritual life.

Much thought has been given to the specific nature of the Christian in today's secular context and of the consecrated person who proposes to follow Christ radically. The conclusion is that it is not the external signs, nor the apostolic or professional work that characterise the religious in the world, but the kind of life they propose to live, built on the recognition of the presence and action of God.

The 24th General Chapter (GC24) has taken place in the Congregation. The provinces first heard about it from those who took part in it. Later they received the document. Presumably they have not only read it but studied it in communities and during rectors' meetings. Today they have arrived at perhaps the most important moment in the process of assimilation and application: the Provincial Chapters.

GC24 aims to better use our God-given strengths to expand our educational and pastoral work. This, however, is conditional: it demands a greater religious, apostolic, and formative quality in individual Salesians and the communities. There is a misconception to dispel: that the possibility of animating the laity is all about our ability to coordinate and organise. GC24 was committed to our ability to communicate 'mysticism', enthusiasm for the educational mission and to share Salesian spirituality.

To these circumstances of new evangelisation: renewal of consecrated life, GC24, I add one that concerns you all in a very personal way. Your life today is characterised by a fact: you are called to animate a portion, albeit a minimal one, of the Congregation, with repercussions on a provincial and more remotely a national level. To you the Lord is entrusting the responsibility of giving fruitful orientation to the life of the Congregation in this part of the world.

The Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* has accustomed us to contemplating biblical icons. The main one is the icon of the Transfiguration, which is inexhaustible on two fronts: the contemplation of Christ as Messiah, Son of God and Redeemer through his passion and death; the apostles' experience of faith and of following Christ, and the experience of all believers.

In Christ's personal story, the Transfiguration took place at the conclusion of his preaching and before facing his passion. In the story of the disciples, it was positioned as a transition from their human adherence of sympathy in his regard, to one of robust faith that would be tested by the death

of Jesus. It was a singular moment of enlightenment connected to the first call to follow Jesus and to all the other gestures with which he reaffirmed this invitation.

What did this moment of grace consist of? First of all, in enjoying a special intimacy with Jesus. There are several things that speak of this particular trust: Jesus' gesture in choosing three from all the apostles, the lonely place in which it took place, prayer and the place itself: the top of a mountain.

In this intimate moment the apostles had a convincing vision of Jesus in the light of the religious experience of their own people, represented by Moses and Elijah, and of what they themselves had experienced. It was an illumination and a grace that came from the Father.

They felt enraptured, drawn to and caught up in this mystery. 'It is good to be here.' Let's stay here forever. It was a definitive moment for finding their place in life. After tasting what it meant to know and follow Christ, they attained the desire, the determination and the pleasure of being with him.

The apostles also had the authoritative confirmation that this attraction was authentic and full of real value, not pure fantasy or just feelings: it was therefore a definitive indication for the future: 'This is my beloved son, listen to him!'

They received a key, a light, to face daily life where the glorious Jesus was hidden beneath common appearances and even got lost beneath disfigured faces and disturbed lives.

'The disciples who have enjoyed this intimacy with the Master, surrounded for a moment by the splendour of the Trinitarian life,' says the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* 'are immediately brought back to daily reality where they see "Jesus only", in the lowliness of his human nature, and are invited to return to the valley, to share with him the toil of God's plan...'¹

For us too, as for the apostles, the Transfiguration is an invitation to contemplate Christ anew, to savour his word and his mystery, in order to then immerse ourselves in work, knowing how to discern his face everywhere.

The following story can be read in the literature of the Jewish Mystical Movement of Eastern Europe in the thirteenth century.

A rabbi had been imprisoned in St. Petersburg. One day, while waiting to appear before the court, the commander of the guards, who had become his friend, entered his cell and began to converse with him.

'Doesn't it seem strange to you,' he asked, 'that Almighty God asks Adam "Where are you?"'

'Do you believe,' replied the rabbi, 'that Scripture embraces all times, all generations and all individuals? Well then,' he concluded, 'in every time God questions every man and asks him, "Where are you?" Many of the days and years assigned to you have passed: in the meantime in your life and in your world, where are you? God is saying for example, "Behold, you have been alive for forty-six years. Where you are?"'

Hearing mention of his precise age, the commander barely controlled himself, put his hand on the rabbi's shoulder and said, 'Well done!' But his heart trembled.

Perhaps someone might hear this question as an accusation or a condemnation; in reality the Lord calls us to wisdom and responsibility, to a form of vigilant life so that we can exploit and enjoy the richness that it contains.

1 VC14.

1

Life in the Spirit

1. A fad or a sign?

There are a number of things that have inspired reflection on consecrated life over its history: to ensure the salvation of the soul, to flee the world, to imitate Jesus Christ in his lifestyle, to seek Christian perfection, to dedicate oneself totally to the Kingdom.

The documents that prepared for the Synod have two privileged references: charism and consecration. This can be seen in the formulation of the theme: ‘Consecrated life, charisms in the Church for the world.’ Religious are ‘charismatic’. They have a gift for the life of the Church and for its service to the world. They express it not through the exercise of authority but through testimony and free gift of self.

And they have this gift because they have been ‘consecrated’ by a particular presence of the Spirit and their life takes place under his inspiration and energy.

The awareness of the presence of the Spirit is like an explosion in this recent time of the Church. Proof of this is the movement of renewal in the Spirit, or the numerous charismatic groups and the references in almost all the documents of the Magisterium.

John Paul II brings together and develops this awareness in his Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*. It is a vision of human history on a journey toward its fulfilment, driven by an energy and an illumination that operate through human consciousness: the Spirit. One could call it a ‘spiritual interpretation’ of history just as others have provided an ‘economic’, ‘psychological’, ‘cultural’ interpretation. It says so in no. 2: ‘In this way the Church is also responding to certain deep desires which she believes she can discern in people’s hearts today: a fresh discovery of God in his transcendent reality as the infinite Spirit... the need to adore him “in spirit and truth”; the hope of finding in him the secret of love and the power of a “new creation”.’¹

The ‘deep desires’ which the text speaks of correspond to the situations that Christian life takes place in today.

First of all for human beings, and we see it in young people, there is the search for meaning in their lives. But at the same time it is difficult for the human being to perceive God from what is material, external to the person. Nature has been desacralised by scientific and technical knowledge. This offers resources to be exploited and phenomena to be studied, but it does not raise transcendent questions. History and traditions have been relativised. Social and religious institutions have lost their absolute authority. The secularised environment lacks signs, reasons, and encouragement to guide life towards a meaning that reflects the presence of God and our ultimate destiny.

Religious experience finds itself socially marginalised. Therefore, the individual seeks the traces of God in his or her inner experience, in what resonates in his or her mind and heart. *God is within as thought, consciousness, heart, psychological and ontological reality*. The human heart is the hidden place of the salvific encounter with the Holy Spirit, with the hidden God, and precisely here the Holy Spirit becomes a spring of water welling up to eternal life.²

1 Cf. Rom 8:22; Gal 6:15.

2 Cf. Jn 4:14.

We are in a time of the primacy of consciousness in the choices that concern one's life. It must be adapted in proportion to the great moral challenges of our time: the manipulation of life, the use of communication, the fair distribution of goods, respect for the dignity of each person, respect for nature and the environment.

To speak of spirituality is to speak of life according to the Spirit and at the service of the Spirit in the current context. This means three things: recognising and confessing God present in humanity; one's life inspired by charity; affirming in history the pre-eminence of the person and his or her values. In fact, we can see the action of the Spirit in this.

2. What the Spirit does

The Spirit gives us a sense of God. He establishes a mysterious communication between God and man and between man and God. Everything in the world that points to God, everything that explicitly or implicitly invokes the presence or intervention of God, everything that urges us in search of God has the Spirit as its hidden force.

The Spirit makes the divine perceived, even if only as a 'mystery' which one is unable to interpret. He provides a kind of harmony with God's presence and work. And more profoundly still, he makes us sense the relationship we have with God as creatures and as children: 'Those who are led by the Spirit are children of God.'³

Whoever perceives the world without God is not led by the Spirit. Not even someone who perceives God without the world is led by the Spirit. Whoever looks at the world and opens themselves up to adoration or even just to a question about God is moved by the Spirit. Faith therefore proclaims and confesses that God is Creator and Father. The Spirit is that light that illuminates the relationship between the person, the world and God.

But even more than this the Spirit is felt in human history, in the little story of a city or a neighbourhood, in the grand story of peoples and humanity as a whole. This reflection today is what moves the Church to discover the 'seeds of the word' in cultures, to understand what possible paths people may take towards salvation.

A text from 'Redemptoris Missio' says it well: 'his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time ...[the Spirit] is at the very source of man's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of his being.' He is 'at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history.'⁴

The believer's outlook therefore interprets any religious search, confused though it may be, or desire for dignity, noble initiatives as the presence of the Spirit.

This is clearly seen in the history of the chosen people which is a paradigm of the history of all peoples. There is a moment when God reveals himself personally, manifesting his name, his relationship with humankind and his project. This revelation of a personal God, benevolent towards people and different from the elements of the world, is, in human development, an event which is superior to the greatest technical discoveries. It brought about a quantum leap in human consciousness, thus freed from dependence on the stars and material elements. It overcame the fear of the unknown so that one felt protected by God. The Spirit gives the intelligence the ability to grasp the scope and meaning of the words and deeds with which God manifests himself, and suggests, as an answer, the relationship with God which we call *faith*.

³ Rom 8:14.

⁴ RM28.

To those who were able to accept the miracle of the loaves but did not understand the meaning of the miracle, Jesus says, 'It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless; the words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.'⁵ Those who are caught up in the physical aspects of tragic or extraordinary events are not being led by the Spirit; those who understand their significance are inspired by him. On the basis of this faith, the Spirit suggests a wisdom, a way of thinking and living that shapes a human community, enabling it to organise its entire private and public existence around the covenant with God: this is the people of Israel.

It experiences the Spirit as an energy that transforms human beings from within and makes them capable of exceptional gestures to liberate the people or to confirm them in their vocation and dignity. The Spirit manifests himself as inspiration, power, source of life, presence free from conditioning, which operates in an unpredictable way. The opposite of the Spirit is not matter or the body, but inertia, historical ineffectiveness, sterility, death, slavery. We say it in the Creed: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life.'

There are three spheres of action in which the Spirit operates, as a 'power' that moves:

- the messianic or salvation sphere that drives some people to undertakings of liberation; we can think of the Exodus, Gideon or Samson, who are said to have been 'caught up by the Spirit of God';
- the prophetic sphere of the enlightening and educating word: it is represented by the prophets and sages who kept the hope of the people alive and shed light on the meaning of historical facts;
- the priestly sphere, which encouraged religious experience, worship, prayer, service and the material reality of the temple.

Thus the Spirit, who opens us to communication with God, also inspires us how to live in the world and gives us the strength to achieve a type of life.

3. Jesus, an event of the Spirit

But if it is true that the Holy Spirit acts everywhere, it is equally true that those who have known and received Christ are aware of his presence and can interpret his signs.

In fact, the work of the Spirit reaches its culmination in the person of Christ. The evangelists interpret his entire existence as an event of the Spirit. They present him as the 'spiritual man' as opposed to the 'mortal or carnal' man. The Spirit even intervenes in the generating powers of Mary to form the body and soul of Jesus at the very moment of his conception: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.'⁶ The humanity of Jesus is therefore the work of the Spirit in making him the spiritual man totally open to God and totally at the service of his fellow human beings.

Before the birth and in preparation for it, the Spirit fills and enlightens the witnesses of the Incarnation. The more this event is hidden from the world, the more the Spirit reveals it to those who participate in it closely and inspires their confession: Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, Simeon. Even today, seeing the mystery of the incarnation in people, in historical events, is the work of the Spirit.

In Baptism, the Spirit makes it public that Jesus is the Son of God: 'Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are

⁵ Jn 6:63

⁶ Lk 1:35

my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”⁷ He therefore brings out the divine consciousness in Jesus’ human nature.

The same Spirit directs him towards the desert, the place of experience of God, covenant, trial, of faith. There he overcomes the typical temptations of human beings and the people of God: getting lost in immediate needs and establishing life independently of God, wanting to put God at his service, worshipping or becoming dependent on human desires or worldly powers.

His mission begins with the impulse of the Spirit. He carries it forward with the energy of the Spirit: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...’⁸ It is through the power of the Spirit that he casts our devils.⁹, but above all, his words and feelings come from the Spirit: ‘At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants...”’¹⁰.

The Spirit is the gift of resurrection. The disciples experienced the entire journey of spreading the gospel and establishing communities, confident in his presence. They also perceive this immediately as certainty, inner energy, convincing ability. He makes them effective witnesses and courageous heralds.

He is the Spirit of the word. The disciples no longer need the physical presence of the Lord. The Spirit will remind them of what Jesus taught. However, he will not be the Spirit of literal memory. He will help them understand the proclamation of Jesus in a new way in the light of new events and situations. He will help them to extract new riches and meanings from it. And this is so that the Gospel is not just a venerable or archaeological text, but a light for the present. He will not only be the Spirit of remembrance and new understanding, but also the Spirit of invention. He will suggest what you should say.

The Spirit of the word is also the Spirit of mission. He urges his disciples towards the pagan world, even going ahead of them. The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the centurion Cornelius, something many call ‘the pagan Pentecost’. The Holy Spirit came to this soldier’s home before Peter arrived there. Peter hesitates to go to him and eat food that is prohibited for a Jew. But after a vision and after seeing the Spirit come among those who listened to his speech, he had to give in. To justify himself before his Jewish community, he says, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’¹¹ ‘If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’¹² Thus the ‘prudent’ Church, which hesitated to detach itself from Judaism and was afraid of opening up to the world, was forced to take this step.

He is also the Spirit of communion. He inspires new ministries when the apostles alone fail to meet all the community’s demands. This is how deacons and priests came about. He enriches communities with new charisms. He moves them to carry out actions that will distinguish Jesus’ disciples: prayer, the breaking of bread, listening to the Word, brotherly love, sharing of goods. He gives them not only legal power, but a profoundly transforming power to reconcile man with God and with others: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit, those whose sins you will forgive will be forgiven...’

Thus the Church becomes not just another religious organisation, with its rites and sacred words, but the awareness of the history of salvation and a new force sent to transform the world through love.

7 Lk 3:21-22

8 Lk 4:18

9 Cf. Lk 11:20

10 Lk 10:21

11 Acts 10:47

12 Acts 11:17

We are witnesses that this presence continues even today. We can recount this through current events. We have focused on the past because time and evangelical experience are exemplary. But we can think of the Vatican Council, the Synods, ecclesial movements, religious life, the presence of holiness, the newness of the faith.

Lumen Gentium sums up the situation well in these words: ‘The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple. The Church, which the Spirit guides in way of all truth (cf. Jn 16:13) and which He unified in communion and in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits (cf. Eph 4:11-12; 1 Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22). By the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly He renews it and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse... Thus, the Church has been seen as ‘a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.’”¹³

4. Spirituality: living according to the Spirit

But perhaps it is the third area of new life, to which the Spirit gives rise in the individual, that has been most developed in Christian reflection. St Paul explains it through indwelling: ‘But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.’¹⁴ This concerns an authentic new personality built up, unified and structured in the believer in a totally original way. The Spirit creates a new consciousness in the believer: awareness of being a child of God, which was manifested in Jesus and which also emerges on a psychological level. Jesus, in the moment he was apparently most alone, said: ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’¹⁵ This makes it clear that Christ never had the feeling of being an orphan. Abandoned by all, he felt accepted by the Father. Thus the believer who develops this awareness feels and expresses trust in God at any moment. The Holy Spirit also generates a new kind of intelligence in the believer; it is the intelligence of faith that is capable of perceiving the mystery of God, discovering the meaning behind the world and historical events.

Often faith has been considered a wisdom that comes from the Spirit. Those who see their life and history without God are not animated by the Spirit. Those who see God in their own history and that of humanity are led by the Spirit, because God manifested himself in the main event of history which is the Jesus event.

The Spirit suggests a new human relationship, one which is superior to nationality, race, culture, religion, economic status: it is love, participation in God’s love; so there is no longer Greek and barbarian, believer and pagan, male and female... they are all one creature.¹⁶ It is the overcoming of discrimination, the spirit of conquest, the sense of superiority.

The Holy Spirit teaches us a new language that allows us to address God expressing filial sentiments and inspires what we have to say. He gives us the vocabulary for proclamation and opens us to its understanding. This is why there is so much talk about the Spirit in the context of evangelisation.¹⁷

In a nutshell, the Spirit recreates the inner structure of the person: he gives individuals a sense of their identity, the possibility of operating in the world with the beatitudes, of awaiting the great manifestation through which all creation will reach perfection.¹⁸

13 LG 4

14 Rom 8:8

15 Lk 23:46

16 cf. Gal 3:28

17 EN 75

18 Rom 8:19-22

But not everything has been said yet. Those born of the Spirit are called to develop according to a plan for their life. The individual has not just received some static qualities, almost as if they were jewellery or anniversary gifts. Instead, the individual has received a kind of genetic code, and grows in relation to it.

Christian life, like every life, has an internal law: a law of development. The seed is received in baptism and its final result comes at death. What is included between these two is entrusted to our will and ability to grow, as happens with our intelligence and our personality. There is a state of germination, there is a state of maturity: 'And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.'¹⁹ St Paul speaks of infants and adults, imperfect and perfect, ignorant and wise, carnal and spiritual.

We pass from immaturity to the adult state through gradual enlightenment and adherence to the truth. They help us to see the meaning of our life and the world, with ever greater conviction, in the light of the Christ event. Then there is the purification from addictions and slavery, selfishness, destructive passions, until achieving inner freedom. And yet the effort to conform our lives to Christ, by inserting ourselves into his mystery, leads us to maturity. The Italian Episcopal Conference Document (*Il Rinnovamento della Catechesi*), referring to the believer, says that the purpose of Christian initiation is 'to educate to Christ's way of thinking, to see history like him, to choose and love like him, to hope as he teaches, to live communion with the Father like him.'²⁰ It is, in other words, what St Paul expressed: 'It is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me.'²¹

Therefore the spiritual person is not someone who renounces, flees or ignores the bodily side of his life, but someone who takes up and orders everything in charity. Indeed, it is the charity that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us, investing the totality of the person, body and consciousness.

It is instructive to hear what St Paul says regarding the manifestations of the infantile phase of our life in the Spirit or of the 'carnal' level of our mentality. One of these is the inability to accept the gospel in the totality of its demands and in its originality. St Paul calls the Corinthians immature because they get lost in human eloquence and complicated explanations and do not grasp the simple wisdom, inspired by God, that is in the Christ event.²²

It is a sign of an infantile state to be driven by human motives such as jealousy, the desire to excel in the community with charisms that make us stand out. The same is true of thinking that freedom consists in getting our own way, or of being unable to overcome conflicts even if it means making sacrifices. Above all, it is the instability and fickleness of faith not firmly anchored to the Word of God that allows itself to be carried away by secular fashions, religious fantasies or fleeting doctrines.

Signs of maturity are first and foremost the security or evidence of God's love for us and therefore the peace and inner serenity that come from knowing that 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'²³

There is also generosity so that we do not limit ourselves to what the law obliges us to do, but give of ourselves with freedom and joy. There is radical and total commitment to the gospel. There is love of our brothers and sisters as a rule that operates in all circumstances above and beyond any calculations and conventions, above and beyond our rights and worship itself.

19 1 Cor 3:1-2

20 RdC 38

21 Gal 2:20

22 Cf. 1 Cor 2:1ff

23 Rom 8:38-39

When these dynamics and attitudes grow, we achieve the stature of Christ. The Spirit gives unity to thoughts, affections, desires, actions. And the mature fruits that manifest in the individual are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

5. For our reflection

What we have presented suggests some directions for personal meditation.

- The first is to try to see our life as Christians and religious in this current of energy that comes from God and which, through people's consciousness, directs humanity towards improvement and communion with God.
- Let us then try to interpret history, the smaller history of our own context, and the grander history of the country and the world, with the key of the Spirit: in its aspirations, its noble attempts, its small steps.
- Let us think of our task as educators at the service of this growth in the Spirit. The FMA Constitutions state that assistance should be seen as a collaboration with the Spirit a work in the heart of each person.²⁴
- And finally let us worship the Spirit in those who are becoming aware that they are children of God, who have the name of God written on their foreheads²⁵ and in their hearts, and who represent the highest point of humanity.

²⁴ Cf FMA Constitutions, 67.

²⁵ Rev 7:13

2

Don Bosco: type and model of our spirituality

Here, in schematic form, we are recalling article 21 of the Salesian Constitutions:

1. The Lord has given us Don Bosco

as father and teacher.

We study and imitate him
admiring in him

2. A splendid blending of nature and grace

- He was deeply human
- rich in the qualities of his people
- open to the realities of this earth
- and he was just as deeply the man of God
- filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit
- and living ‘as though he saw him who is invisible.’

3. These two aspects combined to create a closely-knit life project, the service of the young.

He realized his aim with

- firmness, constancy
- and the sensitivity of a generous heart
- in the midst of difficulties and fatigue.

‘He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young. Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls.’

4. ‘Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls.’

1. A necessary focus

We have spoken of consecration through the gift of the Spirit. What is typical of religious life is that it is focused on God. It seeks to be an experience, transparency and proclamation of him.

However, there are many kinds of consecration through which the Spirit places human beings in communication with God. History is complex: it requires many signs which are appropriate for different contexts. On the other hand, individuals have infinite possibilities for expression. St Paul tells us that there is a variety of graces and gifts.¹ Together they ensure that the Church is prepared to operate in any context and circumstance.

¹ Cf. Rom 12:6.

Some who are attracted by the mystery of God withdraw into solitude and give themselves over to study and prayer. The anchorites, struck by the transience of this life and the goods of eternal life, shut themselves away in cells. Others, on the other hand, feel the love of God as an impulse to intervene in history to save humanity.

The Spirit is at work in all these people and, through them, in all humanity. In this way he gives origin to different kinds of Christians or Christian personalities. These kinds do not depend on human will nor do they come from some religious doctrine conceived in a drawing room. They spring up in the Christian community like plants in fertile soil. In order to describe them it is better to talk about how they arose and how they developed rather than presenting their spiritual doctrine. This is why the loves of the saints have been a part of catechesis from the beginning.

How and why the Holy Spirit consecrates a Salesian is revealed to us historically in Don Bosco. Contemplating his figure is important because we discover our genetic code. What developed in him will also develop in us.

There have been many presentations of the spiritual figure of Don Bosco: brief, medium and long. Fr Caviglia attempted to sum up the spiritual and moral features of Don Bosco in a summary of 150 pages. There are artistic representations (pictures, sculptures) that seek to grasp what stands out in his personality. And then, each Salesian carries within himself an image of Don Bosco that is shaped throughout the years through his experiences, reading, meditation and choices. Sometimes these personal images exaggerate a fact to an excessive degree according to one's own preferences and leave others in the shadows, as documented by history. Some, for example, have exaggerated his figure as a friend of the young and almost do not recognise him as the 'Founder of a spiritual movement'.

The relationship between these two kinds of images, those that claim objectivity and those that are personal, is a dynamic one: they enrich and correct each other.

There is a profile of Don Bosco the 'consecrated apostle and spiritual man' which harmonises and blends them because it was produced by the community and is a legacy of the community. We find this in the second chapter of the Salesian Constitutions which seeks to describe the Salesian spirit in a holistic way: a chapter with a number of quotations from Don Bosco and frequent reference to his attitudes.

In conclusion, and almost by way of summary, an attempt is made to present his personality in twenty lines.²

The very form of the article is unusual: it has something of a hymn or a psalm about it. Its phrases are measured almost by poetic metre. Ideas are presented with expressions that are sometimes contrasting, sometimes parallel or in a studied crescendo. The structure of the whole is designed so that at calculated intervals two motifs follow one another: the multiple richness of his personality and its extraordinary unity.

Almost all the protagonists in the Salesian story appear in these few lines: the Lord, Don Bosco, the young, his people. There is also a sequence of his achievements: the formation of his personality, his life project, service of the young, his search for souls, founding an apostolic Family.

This is not the result of literary skill or effort. If it were, the artificiality of it all would be obvious. Instead, it is the result of the fascination and attraction that Don Bosco exerts on Salesians. In fact, at the origin of this text there was a lengthy period of community contemplation. Once formulated, it was re-studied three consecutive times over a period of 12 years by two hundred people, the number of members of the General Chapters. This is, therefore, the image of Don Bosco that the congregations carry in their community consciousness. It offers us some core areas for meditating on spirituality.

² Cf. SDB Constitution 21

2. Our relationship with Don Bosco

The first of these core areas concerns the special relationship each of us has with Don Bosco: 'The Lord has given us Don Bosco as father and teacher.' Our encounter with him has been providential and decisive for all of our spiritual life. We can recall how in fact it happened and the pleasure we took in our subsequent contact with him, how much he has enriched our plans, feelings, ideals and relationships through the different phases of our life: as candidates for Salesian life, as novices, throughout the formation journey that followed and the rethinking we have done as adults.

His inner company has always been inspiring. If today we were to renounce everything that we have received from him, very little would remain of our current spiritual life. He has therefore truly been a gift from God to us. It is true that if it hadn't been him, there would have been others. Yet life is not made up of hypotheticals, but real facts. Therefore, in the words we are commenting on, the pronoun 'us' does not have a collective meaning, but a distributive one: each of us, in a personal way, has been graced with the encounter and knowledge of Don Bosco.

'As father and teacher': our relationship with him is as sons and disciples. Don Bosco had and still has admirers, fans, collaborators, friends. Christ, too, had listeners, followers, friends, disciples and apostles. Each of these words points to a different kind of relationship. We are not just admirers, collaborators and friends.

The term that defines his relationship with us is 'Father'. It would be a mistake to think that this is merely an affectionate, devotional or rhetorical expression.

It concerns something that goes beyond the goodness of his character and our affection. It says that he is the initiator, founder who passes onto us the spiritual experience that is the Salesian charism. He can be located historically at the time and place of his birth. He leads us in following Christ for young people. Father, Abba, is a traditional name in religious life to designate someone who reveals the charism and helps it grow.

'Father' also reminds us of his ability to help poor youngsters have a sense of God as father: after his experience with them, fatherliness became a theme of his educational system and his style of authority. 'The rectors and assistants like loving fathers advise, serve as guides in all circumstances.' It reminds us that for the Salesians of yesterday and today, of all titles he preferred the one of Father; 'Always call me Father and I shall be happy!'³ And it also makes us think of the kind of relationship that his followers have with him: rather than boss, founder, charismatic leader, we know him as the Father. 'Never forget that here in Italy you have a father who loves you in the Lord.'⁴

We could go further still, examining his fatherly responsibility. 'He had everything a father would have: tender and strong love for his adopted children, putting up with fatigue and pain, the acute sense of responsibility the father of a family has, and the giving of self without limits which only has its equivalent in a mother's love' (Fr Caviglia).

Along with the reference to Father is the one that refers to teaching: 'Teacher'. Rather than the authority to impose a doctrine, it alludes to the art of teaching, of making oneself understood, of speaking with the language of the heart, of communicating through life. It points to the fact that we have followed him, letting ourselves be guided by his experience, and through him we have wanted to follow Jesus our Teacher. Teaching is a motif or theme that often recurs in his recommendations and comments. The figure of the Teacher (Mary) appears in the first dream. In his testament he says of Jesus: 'He will be our teacher, our guide and our model ...' This is linked to the theme of wisdom, which is central to his pedagogy, his mentality and his spiritual life.

³ BM XVII, 150

⁴ BM XI, 362

Father and Teacher is an expression that comes from the liturgical office. And the article of the Constitutions seems more like a liturgical text, a wise meditation, than a legal norm or a doctrinal passage.

Our reaction and attitude faced with this gift from God are: 'We study him and imitate him, admiring ...' Our possibilities for maturing are now linked to the vital relationship with him. In fact, we are developing spiritually within and with the substances of his charism, his community, his mission.

It says 'admiring': ours is not scientific and critical study, even though this should not be ruled out, but an affectionate approach and look at things. 'To admire' is a verb of contemplation, used by someone who is looking because attracted to something. We can understand him through love and natural instinct, rather than through analysis and the rigorous verification of historical data.

But this requires a commitment: 'study him'. Today there are some major difficulties in acquiring a useful knowledge of Don Bosco. One is the chronological distance, but above all the cultural distance that stands between us and him. The danger is that we forget him or are unable to interpret him. There was still some similarity in lifestyle between the generations before us and Don Bosco's time. There were but a few differences. Today, to understand the true meaning of what he thought and did, we need to mentally place ourselves in his context and him in ours. Then there are the difficulties of the limited time available for communication in the community. In the past, there was plenty of time for this: good nights, conferences, readings. 'Oral' communication had an impact. Today life scatters us much more and the few words we manage to say are lost in a sea of images and messages.

At the same time, and this is in our favour, today there is an authentic 'Salesian culture': a meditation on the life and charism of the Founders and their religious family that has accumulated over the generations. Especially in recent times a huge effort has been made by two of the Institutes (SDB and FMA) along three different lines: *spiritual*, and proof of this are the Acts of the General Chapters, letters of the Rectors Major and Mothers General; *historical*, a sign of which is the establishment of an historical institute, the organisation of the central archives and the willingness to study the history of the Congregations around the world; *pedagogical*: the abundant bibliography on the preventive system demonstrates the affection with which Salesians look at this legacy. All the book titles and articles concerning Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello and their charism are being collected. Today there are about 30,000 of them. Study becomes not only a spiritual journey, but a condition for being able to communicate and transmit the charism with fidelity and richness. Therefore it has been included in all the phases of formation.

3. Don Bosco's spiritual make-up

A second core theme to meditate on is the kind of person and Christian he was; Don Bosco's personality: a splendid blending of nature and grace.

We need first of all to grasp the import of the adjective 'splendid'. This is not about a modest, normal harmony that commonly blends together. It is something that makes a strong impact ... like an extraordinary panorama, a particularly successful painting, a vibrant piece of music. There are not a few scholars who have expressed this same feeling. 'One of the completest men that history has known' (Joergensen). 'Augustine, Francis, Catherine of Siena, Don Bosco is to be counted among the pinnacles of humanity' (Hertling).

'We have seen this figure, closely, and not for a brief moment, nor was Ours a passing conversation. He was a magnificent figure, and his immeasurable and unfathomable humility could not disguise it. He was a magnificent figure, and although he mingled with other men and moved about the house as though he were its humblest boarder, the last of the invited guests (he, who had organized everything),

everyone recognized at first glance, as soon as they approached him, his outstanding, enthralling personality. He was a complete figure; he was one of those souls who, no matter what path they might have chosen, they would have left inevitably a lasting mark for themselves, so magnificently equipped was he for life' (Pius XI).⁵

'Paul the Apostle, Augustine of Hippo, Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul and John Bosco were clearly exceptional creatures in terms of their human qualities and resources' (Wackenheim).

Our aim is not to write a eulogy or panegyric, but to discover the 'type' of person and spirituality: harmony between a deep instinct for life and openness to God, passion for everything that is human and of spiritual depth. 'Blending or harmony' says more than unity. Unity is achieved sometimes by welding the parts, sometimes by sacrificing aspects: it gives the image of something attained. Harmony speaks of fullness that becomes resplendent in the play of tensions: nothing lost in favour of the other or of tranquillity. His human nature, tender and affectionate, sensitive to friendship, became the transparent sign of the experience of God. This in turn produced an ever greater refinement of his humanity.

We see this humanity in him: tenderness and austerity, intelligence and practicality, righteousness and cunning, holiness and ease in the world. We also see it in his spirituality: work and contemplation, God and neighbour, charity and professionalism, obedience and freedom. And we see it too in his pedagogy: discipline and familiarity, reasonableness and spontaneity, demanding and kind.

These are the same kind of tensions that we feel. This is why in recent times his main characteristic has been emphasised: the grace of unity.

Dimensions of Don Bosco's personality

Linked to this harmony and unity is another core theme: the basic dimensions of his personality expect in perfect parallel. 'He was just as deeply the man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and living as though he saw him who is invisible.'

The first thing that struck people was his *humanity*. It was a manifestation of his holiness, and this appeared as the splendour of his humanity. 'Everything about Don Bosco is human and everything mysteriously radiates a supernatural light.'

His humanity showed itself in his capacity for intense and personal affection. This became his usual form of relationship; never formal, bureaucratic or administrative, but always close and enveloping the person in an atmosphere of respect. We see it in the oratory, but also in audiences, on journeys, in the street. He was inclined to affection by temperament, but it became his way of imitating Christ. In his memoirs he recalls that as a boy he had caught a blackbird and put it in a cage. He looked after it and fed it as you would a friend. One day the cat approached the cage and killed it. He was heartbroken and began to cry. His mother said to him: 'Why are you crying? There are many birds in the woods.' But all the others didn't mean as much to him as the one he had grown fond of. On that occasion he made a resolution never to attach his heart to any creature.⁶ Fortunately – one author commented – this was a resolution he did not keep.

This way of relating personally and with intensity of affection was the secret of his educational practice. There is a whole collection of anecdotes that remind us of this: from what he told Gastini: 'I am a poor priest, but I love you so much that if one day I had only a loaf of bread I would share it with you'; to Fr Albera's emotional memory of him: 'it needs to be said that Don Bosco loved us in his own unique way: it meant an irresistible fascination. I felt as if taken prisoner by an affective power that

⁵ BM XIX, 68.

⁶ BM I, 90-91.

fuelled my thoughts, words and actions. I felt I was loved in a way I had never felt before, singularly, superior to any affection. He enveloped us all almost entirely in an atmosphere of contentment and happiness. Everything in him had the power of attraction; he acted on our young hearts like a magnet from which it was impossible to escape, and even if we could, we would not have done so for all the gold in the world, so happy were we with this singular ascendancy over us, which was the most natural thing in him without study and without any effort whatsoever; and it could not have been otherwise, because from his every word and deed emanated the holiness of union with God that is perfect charity. He drew us to himself by the fullness of the supernatural love that blazed in his heart. From this singular attraction sprang the conquering work of our hearts. In him, the manifold natural gifts were made supernatural by the holiness of his life..⁷

To affection, as a human trait, we must add the capacity for friendship. How many different kinds of friends he had in his early years of life, then in his youth, in then his mature years! The joy of sharing, of being and working together was a characteristic of his temperament. He was a friend to his brother Giuseppe, with whom he shared fun and confidences; a friend to the children of the village, to whom he told stories and for whom he organised entertainment (today they are remembered with a beautiful monument at Colle Don Bosco); then his schoolmates in Chieri with whom he founded the ‘Società dell’Allegria’ (Society for a Good Time). He was a friend of his fellow seminarian Comollo, with whom he established a pact beyond death; a friend of Jewish children who were discriminated against. Especially of one of them, Giacomo Levi, nicknamed Jonah, whom he would remember with these words: ‘He was remarkably good-looking and had an exceptionally fine singing voice. He was a good billiards player too. I liked him a lot and he was very attached to me. Every spare minute he had he spent in my room. We sang together, played the piano or read. He liked to hear the thousand little stories I liked to tell.’⁸

This trait continued in his mature years, when he nurtured friendship with priests, religious, cooperators and young people, writers, people who were persecuted, politicians, authorities. He documented this in a series of recommendations along the following lines: ‘See to it that all with whom you come in contact become your friends.’⁹ Friendship would be a theme of his pedagogy. As proof just read the chapter on friendship between Dominic Savio and Camillo Gavio.¹⁰

Another aspect of his humanity is recalled in the words ‘rich in the qualities of his people, open to realities of this earth.’ It is not very important to clarify what the qualities of his people are. There is a booklet that accompanies this article and tries to define them.¹¹ There is certainly magnanimity in his projects, idealism and practicality, tenacity and at the same time flexibility, the ability to work and a sense of reality.

Someone described him as: lucid in planning, strong in will, slow in deliberating, moderate in proceeding. He recognised it himself: ‘Don Bosco is not a man who likes to remain halfway when he has set his hand to a task.’

This style can be seen in all his endeavours: the oratory starts small, with what was possible, but immediately and without delay: at the beginning it only attracts a few boys but it continues to grow. This growth gives rise to new projects that reach the dimensions he had dreamt of. This is what happens with the missions. It starts with an intuition. Some men are prepared. Useful contacts are sought patiently and over many years. Everything that can be foreseen is prepared as well as possible,

7 P. BROCARDO, *Don Bosco: Profoundly Human - Profoundly Holy*, p. 37 of the English translation of *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Roma 1985, available on SDL.

8 JOHN BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, 2010, New Rochelle, p. 62.

9 BM X, 445.

10 DON BOSCO, *Life of Dominic Savio*, Chap XVIII.

11 Cf. N. CERRATO, *Don Bosco e le virtù della sua gente*, LAS, Roma 1985.

but many things remain uncertain. However, they set off. The same thing would happen with the other educational institutions. The organisation of vocational schools occupied Don Bosco's whole life and their 'model' matured over the course of twenty years.

Holiness universalises values

A comment is appropriate here: holiness universalises certain values experienced by a particular community or context, values that have already been long developed by Christianity. Certainly, something of Piedmont and Italy was passed on to the world through Don Bosco, just as something of Judaism and of Greek and Latin culture was passed on to the Christian community.

But this rich humanity, so sensitive, concrete, practical, able to mix with the problems of his time, was ultimately the result of a generous response to grace: 'Man of God, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.' This dimension was partly hidden by his temperament. In fact, although Don Bosco was inclined to communicate his feelings about the person he was talking to, he was not so inclined to express his inner experience. His writings and letters reveal little of his deepest feelings.

Don Bosco did not leave a 'Story of the Soul', like little Therese or John XXIII. He left the story of the Oratory. He did not write a 'Spiritual Diary', but a book of pedagogical experiences. This makes us think of our spiritual style, made up of restraint in the expression of emotions and feelings and moderate introspection.

But his spiritual depth was partly hidden beneath his style of action. 'Too stubborn and cunning, too greedy for money and too glib', one cardinal found him to be (Card. Ferreri). He was criticised for the apparent disorder and the real limitations of his educational work, which was to help poor children to grow, and therefore did not have the 'merits' of exemplary educational work. 'If Don Bosco really had a spirit of piety, he should prevent certain disorders in his house,' said another cardinal who was not impressed by the not totally regulated spontaneity of Valdocco.

Yet it was clearly manifested above all through his faith in God and charity towards his neighbour. 'I have read through many causes: but I have not found one so overflowing with the supernatural' (Card. Vives).

'In order to trace a figure of the same proportions, it is necessary to go back centuries in the history of the Church and reach the holy founders of the great religious orders' (Card. Schuster).

Another aspect of his spiritual dimension is the *richness of the gifts of the Spirit*: prudence, fortitude, wisdom. They all concern action, reading the signs, understanding people and events.

One trait can be stressed above all: 'he lived as though he saw him who is invisible.' This is taken from the Letter to the Hebrews. The sacred author is describing the faith of the Patriarchs who lived in precariousness, undergoing harsh trials in the firm hope that God's promises would be fulfilled. Coming to Moses, we remember his exploits and the difficulties they involved. And it is said that he was able to accomplish everything because 'he walked through this world as if he saw the Invisible'. Literally: 'By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible.'¹² It is a comparison that suits Don Bosco well, a man with great dreams for the salvation of young people from material or moral misery and for the spread of the gospel. It aptly describes his way of facing the things of this world and historical events as if he could see the presence of God at work in them. It is in line with the liturgical reading that emphasises his faith and magnanimity.

¹² Heb 11:27

4. His life project

One last core theme to consider: the fusion point of all his natural vitality and inspirations of grace: a closely-knit life project, the service of young people. The text dedicates a long commentary to it, with a crescendo of expressions that highlight Don Bosco's efforts to realise it, the difficulties overcome for this total gift of self and the full use of his physical, intellectual and spiritual energies. The project, and no longer the 'dream', undertaken with the sensitivity of a generous heart and carried forward with firmness and constancy, ended up moulding his personality, and became the historical place of his maturation as an original saint.

The Salesian Constitutions say that our consecration includes community life, the *sequela Christi* and the mission to the young – all of this at the same time. But it is this which gives us our tenor of life.¹³ It is what distinguishes us and shapes us. It is the place where the Salesian virtues are both required and practised, and where the Salesian is obliged to reproduce the splendid harmony between humanity and the sense of God.

5. Conclusion

It is difficult to understand Salesian spirituality and progress in it as individuals and communities if we do not constantly return to its source and origin. A real danger is that we interpret it according to our spontaneous tendencies.

In community life, love for Don Bosco has so far been expressed without embarrassment and is a guarantee of unity and pastoral enthusiasm. This belongs to our spirit. Fr Stella has written a book about the formation of the image of Don Bosco as a person who was fascinating for young people, accepted in the world and sensitive to the promotion of the lowliest. Among the characteristic elements of our spirit, therefore, is a filial love for Don Bosco, accompanied by feelings of fidelity and admiration. Whereas distance and coldness have produced negative effects.

Now, however, a change of language and attitude is being imposed: we are moving from a naive and laudatory account to in-depth knowledge, to placing facts and sayings in their context, to the effort of rethinking their meaning in our situation and culture. And this requires just as much affection and attention, and patient and enlightened discernment in addition to that.

¹³ Salesian Constitutions, 3

3

The Lord consecrates us through the gift of his Spirit

1. The basis of our spirituality: consecration

The Spirit moves human history towards its fulfilment and communion with God. He does so from within the conscience of each person, says John Paul II: ‘The Spirit increasingly [enters] history through the heart of man.’¹ But he does so in a special way through those individuals and communities that become aware of his presence, follow his suggestions, allow themselves be led by his inspirations.

An example of this in biblical history is Abraham: beginning with him, the knowledge of one God and faith become the patrimony of a people.

Other examples are the prophets: from their gestures and their words came hope, light and support for all.

In contemporary history, examples of this action of the Spirit through people and communities are the Churches, saints and charismatics, religious thinkers, pastors: they are a kind of focus or points from which the energy of the Spirit expands.

We too, Christians, religious and priests, are among these people: we have been grafted into Christ through baptism and we have chosen to follow him through our profession of the evangelical counsels. Our life takes place under the guidance of the Spirit that Jesus gives to his disciples. It is important to be aware of this and that this awareness does not diminish over the years.

One of the most impressive traits in Don Bosco’s life is his conviction that he was chosen by God for a mission. It is the theme of the first dream, which then constitutes the plot of his *Memoirs of the Oratory*. But the same awareness is shown when he summarises the history of the congregations.

Fr Pietro Stella expresses it in a handful of words: ‘The conviction of being impelled by a very singular divine urging dominated Don Bosco’s life. It lay at the root of his boldest resolves, ready to burst out in uncommon acts [...] It gave rise in him to the religious attitude of the biblical servant of God, the prophet who cannot evade God’s wishes.’²

For him, therefore, working for the poorest young people was not only following a spontaneous tendency or giving in to a particular social sensitivity, but the fulfilment of a task that he considered he had received from God.

This awareness is the basis of any development of our Salesian spirituality.

2. Our consecration

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* insists strongly that religious are consecrated persons. Two of its numbers explicitly bear this indication in their title: ‘In Spiritu: consecrated by the Holy Spirit.’³

1 JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter ‘Dominum et Vivificantem’ no. 67.

2 P. STELLA, *Don Bosco, Religious Outlook and Spirituality* Vol. II, Salesiana Publishers, New Rochelle, New York, 1996. pp. 17-18.

3 VC no. 19

When speaking of the Father, ‘God’s initiative’ is emphasised;⁴ when speaking of the Son, the need to follow him ‘in the footsteps of Christ’ is highlighted.⁵ However, it is clearly stated that both are made possible because the Spirit animates us inwardly. ‘Consecrated like Christ for the Kingdom of God’⁶ is the title of the other number that explicitly speaks of consecration.

There is also no. 32 of the Apostolic Exhortation which focuses on ‘The special value of the consecrated life.’

Not everyone was happy this insistence, especially because of the fear that religious would once again be thought of, in the socio-cultural sphere, as sacred individuals. Today’s mentality, in fact, leads us to think of ourselves as citizens like everyone else, who have made a choice for God.

No one should worry or be apprehensive, neither the Parliament nor the Minister of the Interior ... This choice lies in the context of personal choices, even if we then express them in the community. However, the thought that this might once again point to certain socially sacred people made some defensive.

Even in the Church, some suspicions have arisen that consecrated persons might think of themselves, or that others might think of them, as having a degree of superiority (the ‘objective excellence’ of consecrated life). The mistrust, therefore, about the insistence on consecration came from the fear that consecrated persons, socially, could be considered special and sacred persons, and in the Church, in contrast to the current perspective of the Church, as superior individuals.

Language, of course, has the limitations inherent to it, but neither of these things can be derived from the meaning of the term consecration. However, there is one truth that must be understood.

The insistence of the Apostolic Exhortation on consecration as specific and distinctive of religious is something we also encounter in our Constitutions. The similarity found in the two texts should not be overlooked. The Constitutions suggest this when they say that we have been consecrated with the gift of the Spirit. ‘The Father consecrates us through the gift of his Spirit and sends us out to be apostles of the young’⁷ say the Salesian Constitutions. ‘The Father calls us to live our baptism fully and consecrates us through the gift of the Spirit’,⁸ we find in the FMA Constitutions.

The similarity between these words and the ones Luke uses in reference to Jesus should not escape us either: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; ... because he has anointed me ... He has sent me...’⁹ This indicates a strong awareness of a fact of life that has taken place in us and that we certainly do not deny, indeed we feel particularly loved by God.

Reading the entire text of the Constitutions carefully, we realise that this theme or motif is presented very frequently, almost excessively. This means that it is the foundation of our entire life project. Other similar terms are also used to express this: vocation, covenant with God, total gift of self, love of predilection, radical choice. All of them speak of one thing only: a very particular relationship with God that marks our personal experience and our educational work.¹⁰

But in addition to this insistence, the use of the verb in the passive is striking. We do not say ‘we consecrate ourselves’ but ‘we are consecrated’: we are consecrated not by a person, a rite or a human or divine institution, but by the Spirit: ‘God consecrates us through the gift of the Spirit.’

Consecration is not our effort to reach a certain degree of virtue or God himself, and be completely his. It is a visitation, a gift, his coming to us, an irruption of his grace into our lives. This can be seen

4 VC no. 17

5 VC no. 18

6 VC no. 22

7 SDB Constitutions C 3.

8 FMA Constitutions C 5

9 Lk 4:18

10 There is a group currently reflecting on the specific contribution that the religious gives to the work of education.

well in prophetic vocations. They are sudden and unpredictable. It is not the prophet who goes in search of God, but it is God who invests him, takes him over. Amos says that he was looking after the flock when he heard God's voice.¹¹

A few years ago the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a document on 'Some Aspects of Christian Meditation' (15 October 1989). The reason for this was the spread of Eastern meditation practices and methods. When we read it, the differences between a natural and rationalistic spirituality and Christian spirituality can be well understood. The former appears as something which is our conquest: the individual achieves enlightenment through an effort of intellectual research and mastery of instincts. The Christian spiritual life, on the other hand, is conceived as a gift of the Spirit. It is about being open to listening, responding, allowing oneself to be taken over, accepting. This is grace. The initiative and the possibilities are not to be found within ourselves.

Therefore, in Eastern spirituality the main way is through self-awareness, asceticism that gives confidence in one's own ability and satisfaction with the successes achieved. In Christian spirituality the main way is through *charity*. It is about feeling a presence that has made us the object of his predilection and responding with love. It is all about relationship. And it is not so much the sense of one's own worth that prevails, but one of thanksgiving. The Christian is a grateful being: 'We give you thanks you for your immense glory.'

There is still a detail to be grasped in the words of the Constitutions: the total meaning given to the word. Consecration is not 'one' element of Salesian life, but includes 'all of it'. It doesn't include just our vows; it is the whole of our being and actions throughout our life that are marked by this choice of God.¹²

Here we need to grasp the difference between a good nurse, even one who is friendly and solicitous, and a Sister who is a nurse. The issue is not based on the quality of service or not even on charitable approaches, because there are nurses who are outstanding in this regard. The Sister's quality lies elsewhere, in certain values that are part of who she has become, which she must try to express through charity.

The foundation and specific character of religious life is placed within this reality and awareness of consecration, after a period of reflection and discussion : a life that feels drawn towards God and is centred on him, whether seeking him in prayer, in silence and solitude, or proposing to serve him in others through charity.

The Synod's reflection emphasises that no other element can give religious life its identity in today's world: not educational or social work, not voluntary service in poor countries, not struggles for great human causes; only the fact that one recognises the primacy of God in the orientation and organisation of one's own life. Today more than ever, religious life requires transparency.

From this we can see the weakness of a vocation whose only motivation is youth work or missionary endeavour. These motivations are soon exhausted if they do not have roots in other more solid and definitive ones.

3. Consecration, God's gift and personal experience

It is clear that when we speak about consecration we think of a personal and inner experience rather than outward, social, organisational, ritual elements that would situate people within some special circumstance in society or the Christian community.

When we speak of our consecration we think about three facts in our lives.

¹¹ Am 1:1

¹² Cf. SDB Constitutions C 3.

The first is pure grace, gift, inspiration, call, initiative, God's invasion in our lives. He made himself felt in our lives to the point of totally enveloping it and becoming its main 'reason'. He is the one we listen to the most, and with the most attention and pleasure. This attraction or falling in love with God is a fact and an experience that we can relive retrospectively.

Certainly we can recall when and how we made a decision for him, just like a couple can remember when they met and were attracted to one another. For some it may have been a sudden and dazzling moment of enlightenment during a particularly intense spiritual moment, for example, a retreat. For just about everybody it happened gradually: a first taste due to contact with settings or people linked to religion, in which a particular value was learnt. Then, little by little, the source from which these values came was discovered; we took part in the experience of those who impressed us, through friendship, collaboration and confidences. Finally, we felt we were 'made his own', according to the expression of St Paul: 'because Christ Jesus has made me his own.'¹³ It is the biblical experience of belonging to God and not being able to detach oneself from him: 'O Lord you have enticed me and I was enticed ... within me there is something like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.'¹⁴

We then become increasingly convinced that we have received God's attention and love, not in general, like someone in a crowd, but personally: 'I have called you by name'¹⁵; 'I have loved you with an everlasting love'¹⁶; 'He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.'¹⁷ Scripture is full of expressions of this kind when it describes God's attitude towards us. God introduced himself into our life, he made space in our heart and we said: this convinces me, this is my way.

At the same time we have evidence that it is a grace, something that we neither deserved nor sought, but that came to us, that entered our lives. Sometimes we hear these personal stories in youth meetings, when some young professed individual tells their companions how and why he decided to enter religious life.

In 1993 the Poor Clares celebrated their ninth centenary. The TV interviewed some of them! The question that most intrigued the journalists was what reasons or facts could have led to the decision to take on such a kind of life. The answers varied greatly in terms of anecdotes and circumstances. But they all followed the same pattern: after an initial glimpse of the value of Christ, of God the Father, in their own lives, reflection had led them to choose them as the 'love' of their life, preferring them to all other things and to other possible human experiences.

This experience does not diminish with the passage of time or by taking root as habit, but matures and should fill our life. If it were to fall away, religious life would lose its motivation and would descend into functionalism, that is, into the correct fulfilment of one's duties.

When this tension is lost, what happens to us is what happens to tired couples who continue to live together peacefully but are no longer in love with each other and for whom life no longer holds much attraction.

Consecration does not consist principally in a decree, in a set of external signs, in a social status or in a separation from the world but above all in the fact that God has entered into the life of an individual and has taken the principal place there, dwelling there and becoming the individual's interlocutor and partner. This is not, therefore, something that is exclusive to religious, nor even to Christians. Wherever God intervenes, creating or saving, he consecrates through the presence of his love and

13 Phil 3:12

14 Jer 20:7-9

15 Is 43:1

16 Jer 31:3

17 Eph 1:4-5

provides inviolable dignity. The first consecration is human life: it is the first act of love that establishes the intangible character of the individual and his or her superiority over everything.

Through faith and baptism, which are God's self-communication through the ministry of the Church, our belonging to him becomes conscious and is transformed into a principle of personal development. We have explained this to young people many times when speaking of the consecration of baptism that makes us children of God, members of his people, temples of the Spirit.

The unique thing about a religious is that they feel all this is the main element, an essential part of their development. God's initiative reaches such a person when they are planning their life: through the gift of the Spirit this individual is radically and exclusively drawn to God. He may not become a religious and the Church may not include this fact of his life in its mission and visible communion, but the fact would exist all the same. Of course with less force and meaning. Joining a Congregation is also a public manifestation of adherence to a life project. It is a preference and an appropriate way to go. However, consecration is first and foremost the place that God has taken in someone's life, in their mind, their heart, etc. This is to stress that we are far from the idea that we are socially sacred people ... we don't even think about that!

4. A choice and life project

From this first fact, and God is the protagonist there, a second one derives: our life choice. The conviction, the awareness or the feeling that we are his matures in us, the conviction that 'in him we live and move and have our being',¹⁸ that he is the first and only important thing, not in the abstract and in general, for the world or for the human race, but for us. We come together in him. We seek him 'from the dawn',¹⁹ that is, continuously.

From this comes a relationship that fills us with meaning and peace, also psychologically, and characterises us before the world. The consecrated person is the one who has put God and religious values (faith) at the centre of his or her existence.

'The Lord is my chosen portion.'²⁰ These individuals then give of themselves, give of themselves totally, consecrate themselves according to the analogical meaning given to this word. Their endeavour is to become a creature with a single desire, to live the love of God or the mystery of God, not as a brief weekly or daily pause, for example, during mass or prayer, but as a permanent state and relationship on which all their choices are based.

Many people do not understand the reasons or the sense of this choice. But they do understand its internal coherence. They admire those who are able to express it through their life and work, and instead criticise those who, after having made this choice, put values that are incompatible or extraneous to it at the centre of their life.

We take on a concrete project, a visible form of life that bears the mark of God. We become part of a community that already recognises itself in the same choice and has prepared a path to develop it. This kind of life is also 'consecrated' not by virtue of a material separation from the world, or of external signs or practices (this perspective would be foreign to the Christian faith), but because it is set up and organised in the light of the transforming relationship with God and his Kingdom.

It is often the imitation of Christ, expressed through the vows, that is emphasised. Two other requirements must be added. First, intimacy with Christ. It would not be enough just to take on his preferences and attitudes regarding our actions. A relationship is needed. Jesus is a living person with

18 Acts 17:28

19 Ps 63:2, though some translations may also omit this.

20 Ps 16:5

whom to meet and in whom to live. A deep relationship is established between the consecrated person and him. The life of the disciples teaches us this. Jesus had listeners, admirers, followers, disciples and some who were particularly close and friends: 'You are my friends.'²¹

Today, when all institutional elements seem weak and all formalised solidarity seems 'transitory', this evangelical expression of faithfulness and love can teach us many things.

A comment is in order here: it is good to give space to affective manifestations of friendship with Christ in addition to effective ones. Two extremes must be avoided: converting love into superficial feeling, a simple movement of sensitivity almost like an adolescent; and, at the other extreme, making our heart dry up with a certain intellectualism. If the will is so often held back in love of God it is because our human sensitivity has become atrophied. Until faith or the thought of God reaches our feelings, it remains marginal and inoperative. There were saints who showed their love for God through tenderness. We can recall St Francis of Assisi, but no less so, although in a different style, was St Francis de Sales, whose spirituality we draw inspiration from.

Beyond imitation and intimacy there is active participation in his cause, that is, devoting oneself to what he worked and suffered for.

We express these three things through our profession. The most ancient formulas are concise and essential. Modern ones are rather long and analytical. However, they all emphasise that the object of consecration is not things, activities or moral obligations, but the person; that the reason is the perceived love of God and the desire to correspond to it. The demands of consecration are therefore total, exclusive and perpetual: everything, solely, forever. For a certain period of time the words 'until death' prevailed. It wasn't a determination of time but of intensity: until consummation.

Profession has a unique importance in the organisation and development of our spiritual life. This is why the liturgy values it today with an enriched celebration. The presence of many from the community gives it social importance. The period of immediate preparation emphasises its unique character. In fact it is both public recognition by the ecclesial community of this irruption of God in an individual's life, of this individual's loving response to God's invitation, and the undertaking of a concrete life project. Life will be built on the commitment that is made.

It is not a passing act, a signature on a document, but the beginning of a long-lasting relationship, like marriage. From this relationship will flow attitudes, actions and words. It is therefore not only a resolve for sanctification but also a source of grace, like the initial promise of mutual belonging is for spouses.

5. Some important consequences

We can draw some reflections for our life from what has been said.

Consecrated persons:

- *Consecrated persons are men and women of religious significance*, and this is recognised by everyone, believers and non-believers alike. Personal and communal life is based on a constellation of values that we all embrace: respect for others, work, health, honesty, and social responsibility. By saying 'constellation' we are indicating that there is an organisation and a hierarchy among them, allowing us to see them as a system. Each of us places certain values at the centre according to our preference and organises everything else in coherence with them.

Consecrated individuals focus on religious values, and from this they project themselves towards other values, always returning to the former as the justification and foundation of

²¹ Jn 15:14

everything they do. Because of this, they engage in education, care for the sick, and dedicate themselves to research. Every field of human action is open to consecrated individuals, provided that the inspiration and motivation come from someone who has made God their primary choice. There is a great difference between an upright and professionally capable educator and a religious educator.

An anomaly appears when another dimension takes over and the religious significance is marginalised. Particularly in congregations dedicated to education or other services, there can be an imbalance between the professional role and religious testimony. Tillard says that religious meaning is to the consecrated person what hygiene is to the doctor. A lack of cleanliness is tolerable in any individual, but it is a serious shortcoming in a surgeon.

- *Consecrated persons are professionals in the experience of God.* Not only do they choose the path of spirituality as their particular path; they also offer themselves as interlocutors for all those in the world who are searching for God. To those who are already Christians they offer the possibility of having a religious experience in their company, and to those who are not Christians, they stand by them on their journey of discovery. Religious experience is at the root of their vocation. The life project they undertake tends to nurture it and prioritise it in terms of time and activities.

On the other hand, all Christians should and would like to have some experience of God; but they can only dedicate themselves to this at certain times and in less favourable circumstances of life, so they risk neglecting it.

Consecrated individuals are both a reminder of God for Christians and non-Christians, and a support for those who wish to seek, perceive and enjoy his presence.

In life there is a law that applies in all areas: no value remains in society without a group of people who are completely dedicated to developing and supporting it. Without the medical profession and the organisation of hospitals, healthcare would be impossible. Without artists and the corresponding institutions, the artistic sense of the population would decline. The same happens with the sense of God: religious, be they contemplatives or otherwise, are that group of mystics capable of helping others, at least those close to them, to interpret their own life in the light of the absolute and to experience it.

This is one of the essential purposes of religious life. Therefore the Founders placed the sense of God above all other activities and aspects. Believers and non-believers alike see religious mediocrity in consecrated persons as a deformity. The religious themselves feel an unbridgeable void when this dimension disappears. Crises then begin to brew and develop.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* saw religious life as a privileged space for dialogue between the great religions,²² because at its origin there is a choice which, in general terms, is shared by all deeply religious people.

The Salesian Constitutions recall this in article 62: ‘In a world tempted by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possessions and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely.’

A manifestation of our professional profile is our personal experience of God – perceived, made conscious, deepened, sought after, and matured in adulthood. It is also the competence to initiate others, especially young people, into the experience of God.

22 Cf. VC nos.101-102.

At least out of curiosity or as a fleeting sensation, they want to have some spiritual time. This is demonstrated by retreat houses. However, in many of them, Salesians are more occupied with administration than with guiding young people to discover God and feel his presence in their lives

- *Consecrated persons take holiness to be their main purpose in life.* This is not understood just as moral correctness or as ascetic effort, but as a style of life and relationship in which the mystery of God shines through in some form, liberating and close to us.

The saints have been called the transparency of Christ today. Saint Vincent de Paul said: 'Jesus must have been very good if Bishop Francis de Sales is so lovable.'

The Constitutions say that holiness is the most precious gift we can give to young people. It is difficult for them to build their humanity. They receive many different messages and suggestions from the outside world and find it difficult to discern and choose.

It is not easy for young people to see transcendence in a secular context, and the climate of libertarianism makes it difficult for them to develop moral criteria; nor is it easy for them to believe that Christ is alive today and is not just an edifying story from the past.

We can add that holiness is also the contribution of religious to culture and human development. In fact, holiness also has a temporal value, not only for the works of charity to help the poor, but also for the sense of dignity that it brings to human coexistence.

Congar wrote: 'The greatest novelty of the Council is this: if the Church is in the world and problems are found in the world, holiness is a phenomenon that affects culture. It may seem a debatable concept, but a central point of the Council's insights is that holiness has to do with history. With the Incarnation, the history of man is the place where God's love is expressed; holiness is not born, therefore, from an escape or rejection of the world, because it is to the extent that I immerse myself in the world to save it that I find God's great gift.'²³

23 Radio Vaticana, 20-2-84; *Avvenire*, 22-2-84.

4

Pastoral charity

So far we have seen what kind of spiritual person Don Bosco was: profoundly human and completely open to God. We have seen how the harmony between these two dimensions was built through a life project pursued decisively: service of the young. The following comment highlights this: ‘He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young.’¹

But if we examine this project for young people, we see that it has a ‘heart’, something that gives it meaning and originality: ‘Truly, the only concern of his heart was for souls.’²

There is therefore a further and more precise explanation of the unity of his life: through his dedication to young people, he wanted to communicate the experience of God to them. His was not only generosity, but pastoral charity. The Salesian spirit was ‘summed up and centred’ in this.³ ‘Summed up and centred’ is a challenging statement. It is easier to list various traits, even fundamental ones, of our spirituality, without committing ourselves to establishing a relationship or hierarchy between them, than to select one as the main one. In this case we need to enter into the soul of Don Bosco or of the Salesian and discover what explains his style.

To understand what pastoral charity includes, let’s take three steps: first let’s reflect on charity, then on the specific pastoral nature of this, and finally on Salesian pastoral charity.

1. Charity

There is an expression of St Francis de Sales, where he says, ‘The person is the perfection of the universe; love is the perfection of the person; charity is the perfection of love.’⁴

This is a universal perspective that places four ways of existing on an ascending scale: being, being a person, love as a form superior to any other form, conscience and human relationships, charity as the greatest expression of love.

Love is the optimal point of maturity reachable by any person, Christian or not. Education aims to lead people to a point of being able to give of themselves, to a love of benevolence.

Psychologists, and not only Jesus Christ say that a complete and happy personality is capable of generosity and selflessness. This is not the love of mere concupiscence, that is, love for one’s own satisfaction of being loved. Various forms of neurosis or personality disturbance derive from being self-centred. And therapies related to this all tend to open and decentralise towards others.

Charity is also the main proposal in every spirituality: it is not only the first and main commandment, and therefore the main programme for the spiritual journey, but also the source of energy for any progress. There is abundant reflection on this, especially in St Paul⁵ and St John.⁶

Let’s take just a few points.

1 SDB Constitutions, C 21.)

2 SDB Constitutions, C 21.

3 SDB Constitutions, C 10.

4 ST FRANCIS DE SALES, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Vol II, Book X, Chap 1.

5 2 Cor 12:13-14

6 1 Jn 4

What kindles charity in us is a mystery and a grace; it doesn't come from human initiative but is participation in divine life and the effect of the presence of the Spirit.

We could not love God if he had not loved us first, making us feel it and giving us the desire and the intelligence to correspond to it. We could not even love our neighbour and see the image of God in them if we did not have the personal experience of God's love.

'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.'⁷ On the other hand, even human love has no rational explanation, and for this reason it is said to be blind. No one can say exactly why one person falls in love with another. By its very nature, as a participation in the divine life and a mysterious communion with God, charity makes us capable of discovering and experiencing God: religion without charity distances us from God. Authentic love, even if only human, brings those who are far away towards faith and the religious environment. The parable of the Good Samaritan focuses on the relationship between religion and charity, to the advantage of the latter.

Saint John summarises it: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.'⁸ The meaning of the verb 'to know' is 'to have an experience of', rather than to have exact knowledge: whoever loves has a certain experience of God.

Since charity is the faculty that allows us to know God through experience, it is also that which enables us to enjoy him: 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.'⁹

Therefore it is not only a particular virtue, but the form and substance of all the virtues and of everything that builds up the person: 'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels . . . And if I have prophetic powers ... If I give away all my possessions ... but do not have love, I gain nothing.'¹⁰

This is why charity and what comes from it are realities that endure, resisting the passage of time: 'Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.'¹¹ This applies not only to life, but to our history. What is built on love lasts and builds up our person, our community, our society. Whereas what is based on hatred and selfishness is consumed.

Charity, then, is the greatest charism and root of all the charisms through which the Church is built up and operates. Just after explaining the purpose and use of the different charisms, St Paul introduces the subject of charity with these words: 'But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.'¹²

It is the main charism even when it is expressed in everyday actions and is not at all extraordinary or showy: 'Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.'¹³

For Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, as for all the saints, charity was central. It was the main focus of their life. It is worth knowing this and saying it. Every now and then, in fact, some Salesian experiences it, discovers the importance of charity in an ecclesial movement, after many years of life in

7 Rom 5:5

8 1 Jn 4:7-8

9 1 Cor 13:12.

10 1 Cor 13:1-3.

11 1 Cor 13:8-10.

12 1 Cor 12:31.

13 1 Cor 13:4-6.

the Congregation. It seems that he had not heard it spoken of effectively enough in the Congregation and had not been able to live it with intensity.

In the dream of the ten diamonds – which is a parable of the Salesian spirit – charity is placed in front of and right on the heart of the person: ‘Three of the diamonds he wore on his chest ... and the third over his heart bore the word *Charity*’.¹⁴ We know that what is placed in front in this dream or parable is the fundamental part of our spirit.

Furthermore, charity is recommended by our founders in many forms: as the basis of community life, as a pedagogical principle, as a source of piety, a condition for balance and personal happiness, a practice of specific virtues such as friendship, good manners, and the renunciation of our own interests.

In our Constitutions too, learning to love is the purpose of religious life itself: ‘A way that leads to love.’¹⁵ All these practices and disciplines, rules and spiritual teachings, have one purpose: to enable us to accept others and to serve them generously.

2. Pastoral charity

Charity can manifest in many ways: a mother’s love, conjugal love, charitable donations, compassion. In the history of sanctity there have been expressions of it that cover every area of human life.

The Salesians (SDB) and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) speak of ‘pastoral’ charity.

This term often appears in their Constitutions, documents and talks. The Council clearly explains what pastoral charity means when, referring to those who see to educating in the faith, it says ‘This perfect duty of pastoral charity is exercised in every form of episcopal care and service, prayer, sacrifice and preaching. By this same sacramental grace, they are given the courage necessary to lay down their lives for their sheep.’¹⁶

The word indicates a form of charity. Mentally it brings to mind the figure of Jesus the Good Shepherd.¹⁷ But not only in the way he acted: kindness, searching for those who had lost their way, dialogue, forgiveness. But also and above all in the substance of his ministry: revealing God to every man and woman.

The difference with other forms of charity that give preferential attention to particular human needs (health, food, work) is more than evident.

The typical element of pastoral charity is the proclamation of the gospel, education to the faith, the formation of the Christian community, the evangelical leavening of the environment. It therefore requires total availability and dedication to the salvation of humankind, as envisaged by Jesus: of all human beings, of every human being, even just one.

Don Bosco, and after him the Salesians, express this charity in a single sentence: *Da mihi animas, coetera talle*.

The great institutes and the great spiritual currents have condensed the heart of their charism into a short phrase. ‘For the greater glory of God’ say the Jesuits; ‘Peace and all good wishes’ is the greeting of the Franciscans; ‘Prayer and work’ is the programme of the Benedictines; ‘Contemplate and hand on to others the things you have contemplated’ is the rule the Dominicans follow.

14 BM XIV, 148.

15 SDB Constitutions, C 196.

16 LG 41.

17 Cf. Jn 10.

The witnesses of the early days and the subsequent reflection of the Congregation have led to the conviction that the expression that summarises Salesian spirituality is precisely *Da mihi animas*.

Certainly these words often came from Don Bosco's lips and influenced his kind of spirituality.

It was the maxim that impressed Dominic Savio in Don Bosco's office when the latter was still a young priest (34 years old), and moved him to a comment that has remained famous: 'I understand; here you do business not with money, but with souls; I hope that my soul will have its share in this business.'¹⁸ For this young man it was clear that Don Bosco was not only offering him an education and a home, but above all an opportunity for spiritual growth.

The expression was included in the Liturgy: 'Awaken in us the same apostolic charity which urges us to seek souls in order to serve you, the only and supreme good.' It was right that this should be the case, given that Don Bosco had had it as a permanent intention in the foundation of his associations: 'The purpose of this society, if we consider it in terms of its members, is nothing more than an invitation to unite, inspired by the words of St Augustine: "*divinorum divinissimum est in lucrum animarum operare*".'¹⁹

In our Salesian history we read: 'On the evening of January 26, 1854, we gathered in Don Bosco's room... Don Bosco suggested that, with the help of the Lord and St Francis de Sales, we should first test ourselves by performing deeds of charity toward our neighbour, ... From that evening on, those who agreed – or would later agree – to this were called "Salesians".'²⁰

After Don Bosco, the individual Rectors Major, as authoritative witnesses, reaffirmed the same belief. It is interesting to note that they all took care to emphasise this with a convergence that leaves no room for doubt.

'Fr Rua was able to say during the process: He let others accumulate goods... and run after honours; Don Bosco really had nothing but souls at heart: he said with his actions, not only with words: *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*.'

Fr Albera too, who had a long association with Don Bosco, testifies: 'The animating concept of his whole life was to work for souls to the point of total self-sacrifice ... Saving souls ... was, one could say, the only reason for his existence.'²¹ More incisively, also because he focuses on the deep motivations of Don Bosco's actions, Fr Philip Rinaldi sees in the motto '*Da mihi animas*', the secret of his love, the strength, the ardour of his charity.

With regard to current awareness after the rethinking of Salesian life in the light of the Council, the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò expressed himself as follows: 'My conviction is that there is no expression that better sums up and describes the Salesian spirit than Don Bosco's own choice: *Da mihi animas, coetera tolle*.'

'It indicates an ardent union with God that enables us to penetrate the mystery of his Trinitarian life manifested historically in the missions of the Son and the Spirit as infinite Love *ad hominum salutem intentus*.'²²

Where does this expression or motto come from and what is its precise meaning today? I say today, because the word 'soul' does not express or evoke what it did in previous eras.

18 J. BOSCO, *Life of St Dominic Savio*, Chap 8.

19 MB VII, p. 622 (omitted in the English translation of the BM).

20 BM V, 8.

21 P. BROCARDO, *Don Bosco Profoundly Human - Profoundly Holy*, p. 91 in the English translation of *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Roma 1985, found on SDL.

22 P. BROCARDO, *Don Bosco Profoundly Human - Profoundly Holy*, p. 92 in the English translation of *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Roma 1985, to be found on SDL.

The expression is found in Genesis, chapter 14. Four allied kings wage war on five others, including the king of Sodom. During the sacking of the city, Lot, Abraham's nephew, is taken prisoner with his family. Abraham is warned. He sets out with his tribe, after arming the men. He defeats the predators, recovers the loot and ransoms the people. Then the king of Sodom, who is grateful, says to him: 'Give me the people, the rest is for you.' The presence of Melchizedek, a priest of unknown origin, gives a particular religious and messianic meaning to the passage, especially for the blessing he pronounces on Abraham. So it is anything but a 'spiritual' situation. However, in the king's request there is a clear distinction between people and 'stuff', things.

Don Bosco gives the expression a personal interpretation within the religious and cultural perspective of his century. 'Soul' indicates the spiritual element of man, the centre of his freedom and the reason for his dignity, the space of his openness to God.

The interweaving of the two meanings, the biblical one and the one given by Don Bosco, indicates very concrete choices when brought closer to our culture.

Firstly, pastoral charity takes the person into consideration and addresses the whole person; first and foremost it is interested in the person, in developing his or her resources. Giving 'things' comes later; providing a service is a function of the growth of consciousness and meaning of one's own dignity.

Moreover, charity that looks above all to the person is guided by a 'stance' regarding that person. People do not live by bread alone; they have immediate needs, but also infinite aspirations. They desire material goods, but also spiritual values. According to Augustine's expression, 'they are made for God, thirsting for him.'

Therefore the salvation that pastoral charity seeks and offers is one of full and definitive salvation. Everything else is ordered to it: charity to education; education to religious initiation; religious initiation to the life of grace and communion with God.

In other words, it can be said that in our education or work of human development we give primacy to the religious dimension. Not to proselytise, but because we are convinced that it is the deepest source of a person's growth. In a time of secularism, this orientation is not easy to achieve.

The maxim also contains an indication of method: in the formation or regeneration of the person we must strengthen and revive the individual's spiritual energies, moral conscience, openness to God, the thought of their eternal destiny. Don Bosco's pedagogy is a pedagogy of the soul, of the supernatural. When we get to this point, the real work of education begins. The other is preparatory.

Don Bosco states this clearly in his life of Michael Magone. Magone goes from the street to the oratory. He feels happy and is, humanly speaking, a good boy: he is spontaneous and sincere, he plays, studies, makes friends. There is one thing he lacks: understanding the life of grace, his relationship with God, and how to undertake it. He is either religiously ignorant or distracted. He has a crying fit when he compares himself with his companions and realises that he is lacking this. So Don Bosco talks to him. From that moment on, the educational journey described in the story begins: from the awareness and assumption of his own Christian religious dimension.

There is therefore a choice and an asceticism for those who are moved by pastoral charity: 'Coetera tolle', 'Leave everything else aside'. We need to renounce many things in order to save the main thing; we can entrust them to others and also leave aside many other activities in order to have time and availability to open young people to God. And this not only in personal life but also through programmes and apostolic works.

'Examining the life of Don Bosco by probing his mental constructs and his thought processes, one finds this core idea: redemptive salvation in the Catholic Church, the sole depository of the means of salvation. One notes that the call of poor and abandoned youth, of young people at loose ends, aroused

an educational response in him. He would try to promote their integration into the world and the Church by means of gentleness and charity. Yet there was a certain element of tension involved in this effort because he was anxious about the eternal salvation of the young people.²³

3. Guidelines for reflection

By way of summary, let's go over what has been the main thread of our reflection.

- Ours is an apostolic spirituality: it is expressed and grows in pastoral work.
- In order for the apostolate to be 'spirituality' and not be a consumption of energy with all its likely wear and tear, it must have a soul: this is charity. It gives us ease, confidence, joy in pastoral work.
- Charity brings unity to the life of the Salesian. It resolves the tensions that arise between action and prayer, community life and mission, education and pastoral activity, professionalism and the apostolate.
- The whole effort of our spiritual life consists in reviving, purifying and intensifying it: '*Ama et fac quod vis.*'

23 P. STELLA, *Don Bosco, Religious Outlook and Spirituality* Vol II, p. xi.

5

The community: place, sign and school of Salesian spirituality

1. Urgent need for “fraternal” life

The place of our experience as consecrated persons and of our daily commitment as educators is the *community*: the religious community, the educational community and the wider human community to which we dedicate our care. When the community works, everything else falls into place. When we are ‘educated’ *in* and *by* the community, the benefit has repercussions on our consecration and mission.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* dedicates the second of its three parts to fraternity and community life, and shows its essential character. ‘The fraternal life plays a fundamental role in the spiritual journey of consecrated persons, both for their constant renewal and for the full accomplishment of their mission in the world. This is evident from the theological motivations which sustain it, and is amply confirmed by experience. I therefore exhort consecrated men and women to commit themselves to strengthening their fraternal life, following the example of the first Christians in Jerusalem who were assiduous in accepting the teaching of the Apostles, in common prayer, in celebrating the Eucharist, and in sharing whatever goods of nature and grace they had (cf. Acts 2: 42-47).’¹

All forms of religious life, therefore, have an essential element in the community. Each, however, realises this in its own, different way. It is said that the different forms of community are inspired by three evangelical models.

- *The first model is Nazareth*, the Holy Family: the emphasis is on intense, loving relationships based on a sense of God, like the one between Mary, Joseph and Jesus.
- *The second is the community of believers*, as described in the Acts of the Apostles: the emphasis is on praying together, sharing everything in common, and bearing witness to evangelical values.
- *The third model is the community of Jesus with the apostles*: it emphasises being with Jesus, preacher of the Kingdom, and serving people with him.

Our community life is inspired above all by the model of Jesus with the apostles: it is a community for the kingdom, for the gospel, for the service of people.

In fact, the mission gives our whole life its concrete tenor and orientation. Ours are communities on a mission and for the mission, without minimising any aspect of brotherhood. If the sense of mission were to fall away, in our case, brotherhood itself would lose colour and strength.

On the other hand, ours is not a mission of individual insertion, whereby one returns to the community only to pray and rest, or every so often, but one shares life: ‘To live and work together is for us Salesians a fundamental requirement’.²

1 VC 45.

2 SDB Constitutions, C 49.

The Salesian mission is communal by its very nature. The Constitutions state this very clearly, by virtue of a definition: 'it is given to a community'.³

This is because the very methodology of the preventive system requires a family environment and therefore a network of relationships. We are not private tutors, nor are we isolated educators: we operate *in* and *through* a community and we try to establish large youth settings.

Even the combination of content and experiences that the preventive system recognises as adequate for human growth and growth in faith, requires a convergent synergy of interventions that cannot be brought about by one person alone.

We would add that young people must be guided towards maturity in their relationships and in social life with all that this implies, and that the journey of faith that we propose aims to lead young people towards an experience of the Church and therefore of the Christian community lived according to its characteristic dimensions.

The previous General Chapters have formulated a series of interesting proposals regarding the education of young people in the faith and the communication of the Salesian spirit to lay people. They presuppose that other equally interesting guidelines have been put in place: the formation of the educative and pastoral community, its animation by the group of Salesians, an educative and pastoral project that places the growth of young people in the faith at the centre.

By carefully reading these guidelines, we discover that achieving them is based on a factor that is supposed to be solid and functional: the Salesian community. The community is invited to read the challenges that come from young people. The community is asked to think about the path to propose for their faith to mature. The community should live and communicate a spirituality without which all the efforts to bring young people into contact with the mystery of Jesus and all the plans to gather the laity together would be useless.

The community is omnipresent in the proposals even if it is not always the explicit theme. We talk to it, rather than about it.

Which community does the text refer to? The local community, the provincial community, the worldwide community? The three levels are understood to operate together and in an intercommunicating manner as indicated in articles 58 and 59 of the Constitutions.

However, on closer examination of the deliberations, it can be seen that the focal point, the point from which we start and to which we return, is the local and provincial community. The local community is entrusted with the most numerous and decisive tasks. The provincial community is responsible for ensuring the conditions for the local communities to function, for planning the mission in the territory, for animating, giving support and encouragement and establishing an enriching exchange of communication between the local communities.

The central concern is not the health or updating of the Congregational body as a whole, as when we discussed the nature of the Salesian mission, religious life or the structures of government.

What is focused on today is the capacity to react, the vitality of what we can call the cells and organs of this great body: the local communities and, in relation to them, the provincial communities.

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for this. It is these communities that come into contact with young people and with the people. They are the ones who feel the difficulties first hand in helping them to follow a journey of faith, and they are the ones who must think of initiatives to respond to these difficulties. Therefore, it is in the local community that we can try out the operational indications and evaluate their validity and practicability in our current circumstances.

³ SDB Constitutions, C 44; FMA Constitutions C 51.

There is another reason. Only by involving local communities can we engage all, or at least the greatest number of confreres, in the effort to rethink a pedagogy of faith and a new community dynamic. It is well known that only a few confreres are involved at provincial and world levels, even though their initiatives are far-reaching and influential.

2. The fraternal community today

Recently there has been a lot of reflection on the consecrated community, on two levels:

- *its internal development*, i.e. new needs, living conditions and possibilities for self-expression that manifest themselves in the community as a consequence of the culture in which it lives, ecclesial renewal and the current sensitivities of individuals;
- *the outward movement of the community*: this is a new dimension much emphasised today following the understanding of the Church as a mystery of communion.

The first aspect is developed at length in the document *Fraternal Life in Community* (1994). The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* devotes a lot of space to the second aspect.

In this reflection we will make some considerations regarding the first aspect.

Looking at and examining the internal life of a religious community today is not easy. There are many aspects that need to be focused on and resolved according to the criteria of faith, but also in a practical way: the service of authority, shared responsibility and participation, interpersonal relationships, the relationship between life and work or between the religious community and the management of the work, the balance between the community project and personal charism, privacy, communication between generations.

It is not easy to address them all in a single conversation because they require different levels of depth. On the other hand, theoretical study is not enough to manage them maturely.

Very different people interact in the community. Sometimes, therefore, the 'group' must find its own balance in a process of common reflection rather than in general advice useful to individuals. Generous attitudes and patient efforts are required so that those who have, know or can do more, sometimes make up for the inevitable limitations of others: it is the effort of love that adapts, accompanies, is patient, offers possibilities, waits for the favourable personal moment, guides. Human knowledge and religious approaches are useful, but not all can be solutions of general application. The profession of brotherly love is the basis of everything.

Some changes have certainly modified the life of the community and will do so in the future.

First, the makeup of the community: the number of confreres per community is decreasing and in some cases it is at the limit. In addition to being few in number, the confreres mostly belong to different generations; indeed, sometimes there is a preponderance of rather elderly people. This is obviously not a bad thing, especially if it is seen in a positive light: as an opportunity for greater individual responsibility, given the small number of members; and as a sign of affection and solidarity between the generations in a life lived according to the charism, in the case of the preponderant presence of the elderly. However, this composition certainly requires a new ability to relate and particular attitudes.

A second change concerns the relationship between the community and apostolic work. Nowadays, the work is no longer the exclusive responsibility of the religious community and not all members are involved in it; increasingly, some or many are involved while others have already retired. There is a feeling that the religious personnel is disproportionate to the size of the work. The work was built up when there were many confreres. As a result, there is an abundance of interchange between still active

religious and lay people who hold responsibilities in the works and in many cases are overloaded (the religious, that is) with functions that distance the confreres from the community.

A third change is the greater involvement of the community in the dynamics of the Church and a greater opening to the context. Consecrated life is seen not as a 'withdrawal', but as a way of being involved with a contribution and for a mission. Consequently there is a multiplication of relationships and exchanges with the outside world. The community has less time and is less secluded and protected, and more affected by the complexity of life and stimuli from the environment.

The most important change that has taken place, however, concerns *the transition from an emphasis on communal life to an emphasis on fraternal life in community*.

I believe that the two expressions, *common life* and *fraternal life in community*, immediately convey the idea and therefore distinguish the different scope. *Common life* means doing the same things at the same time (gathering, praying, eating, working, etc.). For community life, it was important that everyone be together at the same time and in the same place. *Fraternal life in community* means accepting each person for who he is, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and the active participation of everyone in the life of the group. Today we pay more attention to the unity of people, to fraternal relationships, to mutual help and support, and to shared goals. This corresponds to the cultural climate and the new awareness of people, who require recognition, appreciation and an active role.

The document *Fraternal Life in Community* refers to the evolution that took place at the beginning of the conciliar renewal: too much in the name of spontaneity and improvisation.

After describing this evolution, it states that a balance must be found: not pure communion of spirits in such a way as to devalue the manifestations of common life; not so much legal insistence on common life as to put the more substantial aspects of fraternity in Christ in second place: 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'⁴

The two, therefore, must be balanced, ordered: the secondary to the primary. 'It is clear that "fraternal life" will not automatically be achieved by observance of the norms which regulate common life; but it is evident that common life is designed to favour fraternal life greatly.'⁵

Our Constitutions help us to understand and achieve this balance. They tell us that we have things in common: these, however, tend to create a mature relationship between us, open to communication, collaboration, sharing and participation, to accepting people as they are.

The proper organisation and balance of the two elements fulfils the desire and the need to form new communities tailored to the conditions and aspirations of the person, as the FMA wrote in their last General Chapter: 'New communities, be they small, medium or large, which are to animate traditional works or are inserted in a more lively way among the people, but always capable of helping people grow in human and religious terms, of expressing more transparently what they believe and communicate, and of communicating religious values more effectively and of awakening the desire to belong to them, that is, communities with vocational capacity.'

This, as we have said, springs from a vision of faith. We are convinced that our brothers and sisters gathered in the name of the Lord enjoy his presence: 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'⁶ Likewise, we are convinced that living as brothers and sisters in the name of the Lord is the secret of effective evangelisation.

⁴ Jn 13:34-35.

⁵ CONGREGATION FOR THE INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Fraternal Life in Community*, no. 3.

⁶ Mt 18:20.

Beyond the vision of faith, which must always be deepened, the desire to form a true family among adults requires a new way of conceiving and implementing personal relationships: finding the basis on which to establish them, the ways to renew them before they ultimately wear out, to make them satisfying for the individuals.

I believe that *two issues* are *urgent* in fraternal life: *relationships* and *communication*. They are like great community dynamics that gather and make possible others around them to which we give great importance such as shared responsibility, planning, discernment and the like.

Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relationships are one of the tests or parameters of a person's maturity; perhaps even the main indicator where the qualities and limitations of individuals are reflected. So today we pay particular attention to them in formation; and not only from a formal point of view, but looking at the substantial and inner aspect of the matter. The possibility of a peaceful life with his confreres and of fruitful pastoral activity depends to a large extent on the individual's capacity for interpersonal relationships.

Optatam Totius, speaking of candidates for the priesthood, says that a certain human maturity must be demanded of them.⁷ And it lists the traits or signs of this.

- *A stable state of mind*, which protects against unexpected and unjustified mood swings or variations in one's behaviour, convictions and life plans, and in one's criteria for evaluation. We've all had experiences with unstable people, particularly among teenagers. And the fact that they are so common among teenagers says something.
- *The ability to evaluate* events and people with considered thought: the maturity of judgement that takes into account all aspects of an issue according to their importance, protects against the excessive influence of one's own subjectivity and avoids being hasty; above all, this ability is best placed within the perspective of the good of people, love and the Kingdom.
- *Relationships*: the ability to establish deep and self-sacrificing relationships; relationships that are long-lasting, that value people, that is, relationships based on selfless generosity and open to the good of others, based on non-selfish motivations. There are some specifications to underline in this regard.

We are talking about *lasting and faithful relationships* capable of overcoming trials and tribulations. These are always present in relationships. Couples have them. As pastors and counsellors, we have often had to warn them that after a time of happiness, there will also be difficulties, that they must learn to overcome tiredness and routine, that relationships need to be revived and renewed because they wear out and become exhausted. Trials also happen between friends. We have often seen how boys and girls who were very close for a certain period of time, then become mutually unpleasant or antagonistic to one another. We have to learn to be willing to overcome these things. As in love, the first attraction can be just a spontaneous feeling. Fidelity, on the other hand, is a virtue.

But it is insisted that these relationships be *inner and profound*, not merely geared to work, but capable of maturing into friendships. We do not become friends with everyone. Even within a religious fraternity, the affinity of viewpoints and, more generally, that inexplicable dimension of affection that is legitimate sympathy lead to different degrees of friendship. This reality – that we are brothers to all but 'friends' with those with whom it is possible – is accepted without scandal, as something beneficial both to the individual and to the community. An article from Constitution 9 of the Salesians of Don

⁷ Cf. Council Decree *Optatam Totius*, no. 11.

Bosco states that fraternity must be capable of fostering a friendship open to all, which then manifests in varying degrees and measures, according to temperaments, backgrounds, affinities, circumstances of collaboration or working together, and shared spiritual experiences.

It is a common opinion among observers of groups and communities that most internal difficulties that seem to be about work or ideas are actually problems of interpersonal relationships that have work or ideas as their field of conflict. It is about personalities that tend to impose themselves, to focus everything on themselves: on the other side there are those who feel little or no recognition or appreciation. And those involved don't always realise this. Often, relationships between individuals and between individuals and the group can be described quite simply as 'poorly established relationships'.

For example, sometimes expectations are cultivated and then frustrated; this can happen to those who arrive in a community with certain expectations and promises and then bitterly realise that the community does not meet these expectations; perhaps because the expectations of those joining the community were too high.

There are also the expectations of the community, or of particular individuals within it regarding new arrivals; and even in this case things don't always go as expected. A rector may think that new arrivals could help them achieve a particular goal or even support them in the running of the community; instead it can happen that the newcomer is unable to fulfil the role for which he was intended.

Furthermore, we mustn't forget the power of first impressions, which can create difficulties if they are not put into perspective, scaled down and overcome. Sometimes there are already established groups within the community that don't make it easy for new members to join. New members have to adapt and perhaps necessarily fit into a certain mentality, a certain way of acting and a certain style of relationships. There is a tendency to defend and influence in these groups. And this is all the more burdensome, the more authoritative the people who form the group are in terms of age, knowledge and role. This is then noticed in conversation, daily life and even in community meetings or gatherings.

Those who suffer from this conditioning may also have the intention of not opening up: 'I will keep to myself, I won't expose myself.' None of this implies subjective guilt. On the contrary, those who adopt certain attitudes do so for reasons of 'conscience'. What escapes them is the human and personal universe; that is, they don't realise what the objective significance of such an attitude is for themselves, for others and for the group.

Poorly established relationships, as I was saying. I would add: *not positively resolved when conflicts arise*. For example, when for whatever reason someone believes they have suffered a lack of consideration or did not feel listened to and understood, or the person who spoke to them was not clear about things they thought were clear or did not support them, or did not give them enough time to make their decision.

These are all causes of conflict, whether declared or unspoken, resolved or ignored. They can happen to anyone, even to those most incapable of causing them or most willing to avoid them. In any case, however, the relationship must be rebuilt if one wants an outcome in accordance with the Word of the Lord.

I often experienced this as Vicar of the Rector Major. When dealing with very difficult situations, when faced with someone entrenched in their positions and reasoning, I had to arm myself with a great deal of calm and give them the chance to explain, to digress, to resume the discussion. It takes time to be able to tell someone else the truth about certain things, but even more to clarify them for oneself and to untangle the arguments built solely for self-defence. One must then, calmly, encourage critical attitudes and postpone the discussion to a later time.

Conflicts that are not properly resolved or healed, that is, that are not followed by reconciliation (making contact again, explaining, restoring trust or, if the situation calls for it, making light of the whole thing), have an inner impact, blocking the growth process and creating difficulties in the peaceful and joyful giving of oneself to one's mission and to God. Sadness and uneasiness are harmful in every sense.

Internal bitterness is debilitating; this is why a great ministry of charity is to help dissolve it, to clarify its roots, to accept it as a personal limitation and to face it calmly, without remaining fixated on it. How many of our confreres and sisters do we find fixated on a conflict they had and did not resolve! Reconciliation is truly a sign of wisdom and a source of peace.

On the other hand, no one can expect (this goes for everyone!) to just be received in the community as if it were already complete, existing before or independently of them, and offered like a warm nest ready to welcome them. The community is the result, not only of God's grace but also of everyone's efforts to create an atmosphere and a network of relationships. Those who hold back or remain on the sidelines miss out on the benefits that circulate within it.

It is more than likely that some gets a response from the community in line with the 'signs' he has shown. If he gives, he receives; if he shows himself willing to help, he is supported; if he makes moves to fit in, he is involved. And vice versa!

The line to follow, therefore, is *to educate individuals continuously and in different ways to relationships*, with a word, a sign of support, an encouragement.

At the same time, we must *make up for the shortcomings* that some show, with a greater capacity on our part to give, to reach out, to start again with those who do not show themselves willing. In communities there are often limits to communication, shyness, and excessive reserve that hold familiarity back. Blessed are those confreres or sisters faced with this, who are willing to engage in a little more conversation, joy, and closeness so that the level of community life, in terms of mutual affection and the family environment, does not decline.

It is also necessary to *encourage relationships*. This is an aspect of the 'Charity' of the Rector and the Provincials with which they build the unity of the community. Even those who have difficulties manage to overcome them and grow if they are offered opportunities and the ease to express themselves without feeling anxious and without condemnation from others.

The Acts of the 24th General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco speak of a relational spirituality;⁸ a spirituality, that is, that is charitable, attentive, concerned, capable and willing to create, heal, restore and multiply relationships. Such charity is 'pastoral' when it is exercised in the ministry of guiding and directing an ecclesial community.

Communication

Related to the question of relationships is the matter of communication: the willingness and ability to communicate and to communicate with each other. We are not referring to the expressive, professional or theatrical communication of TV stars but to the more everyday kind, where we easily offer our experience and receive the same from those who live with us.

It is important for everyone to make the most of it in the right way, to understand its strengths and weaknesses without getting bogged down in technicalities, but especially for those who have to create a suitable platform for it. This requires:

⁸ Cf. GC24, nos. 91-93.

- *working out the directions* along which communication that counts must flow: not only vertically from those in authority towards others and from the latter towards the former, but circular and multidirectional, that is to say, among everyone;
- *ensuring a generous distribution* of the active 'roles' in communication: not just a few who work on communication while others are only 'recipients' who are also complacent;
- *leading to a satisfactory level of communication*: what are we communicating about? To what extent do we involve ourselves in the communication?

Communication is characterised by relaxed dialogue, free and peaceful discussion at set times, spontaneous communication of feelings, ideas, projects and preferences, fluid coordination of shared responsibilities, joint reviews, the 'friendly talk', spiritual dialogue.

It is immediately apparent that the levels of communication are different.

- There is a level that is negative, that is, below zero: it is absence, *lack of communication* that can lead to silent aggression, consisting of ignoring the other's existence, even if they live under the same roof and eat at the same table: 'To me, you're as if you didn't exist!' Sometimes we have heard it from an angry or annoyed confrere who says he will not discuss the matter, will not try to come to an agreement or reconcile with his confrere; he will behave towards his confrere as if they lived in two different worlds. Often, however, it happens without prior declaration: not letting someone speak, avoiding them, limiting oneself to merely answering. There is also a less dramatic form of non-communication, a more accepted and benevolent kind. Think of many family situations today where people live side by side. They don't attack each other, they don't interfere with each other's ideas, tastes and plans, but they also don't have the intention of sharing what is important to them. Lack of communication, as you know, is one of the vices of the age of mass communication. Even mass communicators suffer from being personally lacking in communication. A few suicides, a few downfalls of famous people are proof of this.
- Then there is a level of minimal positivity, above zero: this is *superficial communication*. We talk about the most trivial, indifferent or distant things just to keep from being silent; it's always better than silence and absence of communication because at least we want to be together, in peace, not be 'rude', make our company happy: we comment on the weather, events broadcast on TV, personalities, sports. It is an acceptable platform for good neighbourliness, at least a first step. But we also talk about all these things with any 'stranger' sitting next to us on the train or plane.
- There can be, and sometimes we may not go beyond, a *functional communication* among us regarding work: how we do it, how it should be improved, how to redistribute time, roles, tasks. It is a sign of shared responsibility and in general it is done correctly. But there is the risk of remaining there in our relationship with our confreres and young people. One of the most recurrent corrections suggested to the communities is that they should not consider themselves or let themselves be seen from the outside as just 'work teams'.
- At the highest level is personal communication, in which we share the experience of our vocation. We exchange evaluations, needs, and insights concerning our life in Christ and our way of understanding the charism. This is what the review of life, our community evaluation, the interchange in prayer, and the discernment of projects or events often call us to.

Our present time has made communication more necessary in religious communities and has changed the criteria and methods. The complexity of life requires that we discuss trends, criteria and family events and facts external to it: either we are able to understand and interpret them, or we remain increasingly out of touch with life and how the world is moving.

So we need to establish the habit of evaluating and drawing up common criteria for evaluation. Often this requires a journey that involves exploration and testing. We must be willing to express ourselves in simple ways, show that we are always ready to modify judgements and positions, even if only for the purpose of fraternal and practical convergence: mediating always benefits the community when essential values are not compromised.

Communication is also necessary because of the positive pluralism of views and gifts that exist in the community: there is a wealth of intelligence, spirit, imagination and practical skills to be communicated. Furthermore, there are many topics on which to communicate profitably in consecrated life: the apostolic project, spiritual experience, the challenges of the mission, directions from the Congregation, where the Church is heading.

Communication requires learning, practice and also animation. We are talking about spiritual learning even more than technical learning. When you communicate at certain levels you expose yourself. My experience tells me that not everyone has the courage to expose themselves. They think: 'Who knows if I speak well, if my ideas will be accepted, if I make a bad impression, if they'll label me in some way.' Learning is also needed to receive communication without judging the person, without placing them in some ultimate position based on what they have said.

There is also a certain modesty to overcome, where we don't want to reveal ourselves; there is still trust in the other to be consolidated, which reassures me that they will accept what I say maturely and positively.

In addition to learning, there is the need for *practice*. The ability to communicate, if neglected, becomes rusty. Desire and training are lost. Practice leads to an understanding of the different languages appropriate to situations, ranging from silence and gestures to the written word. And all inspired by charity and not by technical calculation. Remember Don Bosco with his hand on his head, smiling, looking, whispering in someone's ear, saying goodnight, maintaining a conversation like the one with Dominic Savio, asking for opinions, discussing. Even our appearance can change. 'At a certain age we are responsible for this', a comedian once said. 'Learn to smile', some of our rectors have advised. It is the effort, so typical of the preventive system, to make affection expressive, to free it from a generic attitude or one that is enclosed in cold inwardness.

So there is a need for learning and practice on the part of each individual, but also *animation* by those in charge in order to create the right atmosphere for sincere and relaxed communication. Provide opportunities to communicate; have a management style that makes it easy to express opinions, to request and provoke such opinions, to enjoy the many contributions, to make it clear that the individual will not be judged for what he says in a moment of confrontation.

Let there be no fear that expressing an idea or an unfavourable opinion about work, the community, or the Congregation will be held against someone, when often it is simply a moment in discussion, an impression one wishes to verify.

I often make a point of clarifying this: 'What I'm saying – let me emphasise – is just an idea that I'm trying to develop; if you have other perspectives, please share them with me: in this way, together, we can develop it.'

Therefore, a leadership style is needed – one that also expands tolerance and receptivity. We must get used to hearing unexpected and unusual ideas and perspectives.

Some communities may be held back in their spontaneous communication by superiors, but also by venerable confreres with a lot of authority in the community, but who accept only their own formation and mentality. They may only accept information concerning health and work, purchasing something, etc. and not the profound things that concern life. Or they think that we should only talk about important or spiritual things such as pious practices and the apostolate, as if the religious exhausted his feelings and possibilities at these official levels. They are either too managerial or too

spiritual, while communication today is more diverse and varied. Accepting this means accepting the person as they are according to their history, their current situation, their skills and their role in the community and at work.

3. Relationships and communication in order to grow

Relationships and communication help us not only to feel good, but also to grow; they enrich us from a cultural, psychological, social and even spiritual point of view.

There is a *cultural* growth, because by listening to others we receive information, points of view, data and insights into various things. You only need to think about how much we are sought after and how much we benefit from relationships and communication with competent people. There are also competent people among the confreres and sisters who live in our communities; in fact, probably everyone has something to offer.

There is *psychological* growth, because affectivity, the ability to welcome other people and open-mindedness are developed; one becomes more capable of giving, of overcoming frustrations and internal blocks, fixations on oneself or one's own success.

There is *social* growth, because the ability to fit into work groups, participation teams and various environments, with freedom and openness, is strengthened; social anxiety is mastered, that initial feeling of strangeness and unease that assails us when we find ourselves in an unknown or unfamiliar context or group.

Finally, and at the top of the list, there is *spiritual* or overall growth, because the attitudes and aptitudes mentioned above are part of an effort to respond to the Lord in accordance with the charism and a qualification for carrying out the mission.

All this is required and practised in the educational community as well. There is a second broad field of exercise of pastoral charity as regards relationships and communication, with decisive consequences for education and evangelisation. But we will not be developing this here, only because it would require an entirely new conversation.

Ongoing formation

Let's look at one aspect of the religious community that has changed a lot, precisely because of the importance that is recognised where relationships and communication are concerned: ongoing formation.

The early experiences of ongoing formation, carried out far from one's own community, produced benefits such as rethinking, a new synthesis, doctrinal updating, a new vocational enthusiasm; but when one immersed oneself again in the community and in daily life, that renewed vision of life and work glimpsed in extraordinary circumstances of time and place, was difficult to translate into practice. The usual rhythms took over and the 'ordinary' and common human context diluted the exemplary experiences of prayer, interchange and study. The ongoing formation course thus remained detached from life.

The idea was then to perfect the concept and the initiatives. Four variations were introduced into the concept of ongoing formation. They regard the place, the time, the subject and the methodology.

- The preferential *place* for ongoing formation is the local community. The extraordinary place is where long courses are held. The former is more real, because it is there that one learns to manage life and to react as a Salesian religious in the face of everyday life.
- The most suitable and continuous *time* for ongoing formation is not separate and free time, but the time marked by the alternation of work, study, discussion and meeting with people. Separate time is useful as recovery and support.
- *The subject or content*: it is true that a systematic exposition on the Church, Jesus Christ, the community, is beneficial because it motivates, enlightens and reorients. However, all this is then spread out and fragmented, and almost diluted, in everyday life. The community, in which one must be able to interpret some treatise that was explained in real terms, are those four or five brothers or sisters with whom one lives side by side, who have their own ideas, are marked by their own past, have their limitations, even if they also have a great deal of richness that one must know how to discover and accept. The same can be said about ecclesiology when it is listened to, youth ministry when it is explained, the preventive system when it is studied in depth: they are useful frames of reference because they are illuminating. But they must then be applied to the concrete details of an ecclesial community and its circumstances, to the field of pastoral work and the young people I find in it, to the Salesian setting in which the preventive system we have heard explained should be applied. This concrete way of applying points of view, frames of reference or treatises to particular cases, is the proper subject of the ongoing formation that takes place in the local community. There, we submit it to reflection and verification to see what our current response is to the demands of our vocation and work. I would say that ongoing formation is more like the model of practical training well done than the model of the studentate.
- Last but not least, and related to what has been said previously, we must mention the most effective *means* or way for continuous formation: it is not lessons heard, but fraternal communication: calmly listening to each other, carefully noting and summarising, developing evaluations and criteria, and making considered decisions. This of course must be supported and relaunched with so-called 'special moments'.

Relationships and communication therefore put processes of formation and growth into place. At the moment not everyone understands this. We don't blame anyone because in previous formation practices communication did not have the same weight or the same possibilities as it does now. While we don't blame anyone, we must know how to create and multiply opportunities for communication, examine the question of relationships, be aware of the platform they require and see to it as a way of practising pastoral charity with confreres and communities.

6

Salesian spirituality in daily life

Salesian spirituality has been summarised in a few short formulas, like those Don Bosco used with his boys. It's a family habit: to simplify, unite, help remember. The mystical summary is summarised in the motto: *Da mihi animas*. The pedagogical summary of our spirituality is: reason, religion, loving-kindness. It concerns not only the relationship with young people but the way the apostolic educator builds himself. The devotional formula is Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, Mary Help of Christians and the Pope.

What is the practical programme to live every day and in the long term? Work, prayer, temperance.

These three words, popular, almost working class ones, correspond to the three dimensions that *Vita Consecrata* indicates as indispensable in every spirituality: contemplative, apostolic, ascetic.

We must therefore explore their traditional and current meaning for our own benefit and as a practical 'compass' for community leadership.

Let's look at them one by one.

1. Contemplatives in action

According to *Vita Consecrata*, contemplation is needed always and by everyone: by theologians in order to fully appreciate the sapiential and spiritual soul of their science; by those who give themselves to prayer so that they don't forget that to see God means to come down from the mountain with a face so radiant that one is forced to cover it with a veil; by those who strive not to close themselves off in a struggle without love and forgiveness.¹ This means that contemplation does not coincide with the study of sacred things, even if it benefits from it.

It means that it includes prayer but goes beyond it: contemplation, what we traditionally called 'union with God', the sense and joy of his presence, a filial relationship with him.

There are many questions to be explored in this regard: what does contemplation mean, the different forms of contemplation, the appropriate places and which to prefer according to different spiritual experiences. I have had the opportunity to discuss these concepts with 'contemplatives' regarding our spirituality of action. I realise that some explanations are necessary to understand what our form is and to guide us towards a convincing practice.

Two places are to be treated as a unit, almost as if they were connected, to realise the definition of contemplative in action: prayer and action.

Prayer

One of the most serious questions that arises when spirituality is proposed concerns prayer. Today a series of phenomena make it emerge not only as an expression of the Christian faith but also as the satisfaction of a human need. There are many people of different faiths, and even without any, who seek a certain kind of prayer in oriental techniques or in new forms of religiosity.

¹ VC 38.

Prayer schools have become popular in the Church, led by bishops or priests. People gather once a month or weekly during Lent and Advent to read the Scriptures, recite the psalms, and pray in silence. The renewal in the Spirit movement has made prayer its distinctive point; and the 'Taizè' movement invites young people to experience contemplation.

'Monastery' days are offered everywhere. The monastery is considered a social place for reflection and artistic events linked to the spiritual. The interreligious (Christian, Jewish, Muslim) 'prayer meetings' for great causes such as peace have been widely followed on TV. Almost all celebrations connected to religious events include a prayer vigil. In short, it seems that the world or the individual feels an urgent need to get in touch with realities other than computers, machines, the stock market, budgets, production, accounts and the like.

The same trend, at the same time significant and ambiguous, also appears in the religiosity of young people. There are groups of young people who seek depth in prayer and teachers to guide them. Places of prayer for them are multiplying: oases, retreat houses, 'huts'.

Some try it out, a fleeting experience that doesn't take root. Perhaps they are looking for personal satisfaction; they want to try something 'different', something unusual. But there is always a certain desire for 'meaning', or a stabilising and reassuring element, for their life.

Salesians and prayer

Our youth ministry has also taken care to respond to the demands of young people. Updated paths of prayer have been proposed for them. Today there is a rebirth of an abundant production of meditation and prayer books for all circumstances (celebrations, camps, meetings, sports, moments of joy and also for moments of suffering). In particular, ecclesial movements have developed their own style of prayer with related texts and collections of hymns: all under the banner of 'personalisation', biblical quality and participation.

These facts challenge us first and foremost as religious. In the popular mentality, a religious is someone who practises and enjoys prayer, who knows how to pray and prays.

They challenge us even more as educators and evangelisers. It is up to us to introduce young people to that very Christian attitude called *piety*. If we don't want to reduce the Gospel to a religious theory, an intellectual explanation of God, we must instil attitudes of affection towards the Father with the corresponding expressions.

The Salesians in general have favourably accepted the stimuli that came from the environment and the Church: many things have improved in community prayer. And there are admirable examples of prayer: I am thinking of the sick and the elderly.

On the other hand, the attitude and practice of regular and committed prayer is difficult for those who are fully involved in their responsibilities. In fact, their lifestyle does not lead to prayer nor is it designed for it. It seems to be oriented rather towards secular activities, schools, youth settings, social relationships, organisation.

All this exposes them to unforeseen events, to an accumulation of commitments that do not favour calm and regularity.

This type of life reproduces Don Bosco's life: his multiform and continuous activity seemed to remove him from the abundant explicit prayer found in all the biographies of saints: 'With regard to prayer properly so-called,' said the Promoter of the Faith at the beatification process, 'which all founders of new congregations have taken special care with, in Don Bosco one can say that there is

nothing to be found. How can someone who was so lacking in the practice of vocal prayer be described as heroic? Nothing like this had been seen before in the lives of the saints.²

Added to this is the intrinsic difficulty of prayer, which not only consists of concentrating, going within or speaking to an invisible interlocutor who does not respond, but also in the fact that prayer is the mirror of lived faith and of the attention that God receives in our life. 'Prayer is the synthesis of our relationship with God. We can say that we are what we pray and how we pray. The level of our faith is the level of our prayer; the strength of our hope is the strength of our prayer: the ardour of our charity is the ardour of our prayer.'³

Someone can immediately tell the degree of trust we have with a person from the way we speak. We talk to a friend about anything and everything with ease. We can't find the words or topics to talk about when we are in front of a stranger. The same thing happens when we find ourselves in front of God.

Some then feel that Salesians have not been introduced to prayer, that no one has introduced them to or guided them in its practice. So we see them fleeing to groups and movements that offer prayer in a more emotional and participatory way.

It is therefore legitimate to ask what the prayer of the Salesian, a man dedicated to educational and pastoral activities, is like.

He has two models for understanding what his prayer should be like: Jesus, Shepherd and preacher of the Kingdom, and Don Bosco.

Jesus' prayer

Saint Luke talks to us at length about Jesus praying and his teachings on the subject. But even before presenting Jesus in an attitude of prayer, he wraps the whole story of his life in an atmosphere of invocation, praise, thanksgiving and petition. His birth and childhood are framed by four songs of joy, hope and praise: Elizabeth, Mary, the Angels and Simeon. Death inspires Christ to pray: 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'⁴

'Father, Into your hands I commend my spirit.'⁵

This is an indication of how to look at and experience the events of salvation. Those who pray are able to see the significance of events that for others do not go beyond the ordinary or hold a negative meaning.

The main moments of Jesus' mission are explicitly marked by prayer.

In prayer, during his baptism, he publicly receives the Father's investiture and approval: 'and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son..."'⁶

A long period of prayer accompanied by fasting in the desert gives him a sense of his work and the strength to resist the temptation to direct it in a way other than what the Father wants.⁷

2 P. BROCARDO, *Don Bosco: Profoundly Human - Profoundly Holy*, p. 107 in the English translation of *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Roma 1985.

3 Cf. C. CARRETTO, *Lettere dal deserto*, La Scuola Editrice, Brescia 1964, p. 47.

4 Lk 23:34.

5 Luke 23:46.

6 Lk 3:21 -22.

7 Cf. Lk 4.

Before choosing his disciples, he places the decision and those he will choose in the Father's hands: 'Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them...'⁸

His prayer obtains Peter's confession from the Father... and sustains him in moments of trial: 'I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail.'⁹

The transfiguration takes place in a moment of intense conversation with the Father. And in this attitude his humanity appears to the apostles as it really was.¹⁰

Many miracles are preceded or accompanied by a prayerful gesture: the multiplication of the loaves, the healing of the man born blind, the casting out of demons, the resurrection of Lazarus.

The last great prayer is a testament, a look back on his life: it gathers together the reasons for his life and his death:¹¹ His critical position towards the world, his total availability for the Father's plan, his love for his own, his concern for the unity and perseverance of all those who participate in his work of salvation, his intention to remain faithful.

The prayer in the garden and on the cross is the acceptance of facts as coming from the will of God rather than from the malice of men. With it he places his life in the hands of the Lord.

Jesus' prayer thus appears as a constant, inner attitude which manifests itself in spontaneous expressions of joy,¹² thanksgiving,¹³ invocation, availability, reflection. Underlying all these expressions is a single word: Father. 'I thank you Father.'¹⁴ There are also times and places suitable for quiet conversation with the Father: the mountains, the desert, the night, solitary places, the company of a few friends.

But the true prayer is the life that unwinds according to the Father's will and in the service of humankind.¹⁵ Therefore his teaching to his disciples is focused on four recommendations, the unity of which not everyone understands:

- pray always, without ceasing:¹⁶ it is not a question of always saying prayers, but of making every moment of life an invocation to the Father;
- when you pray, 'do not heap up empty phrases' ...¹⁷ This is typical of pagans. They believe that the gods can only know our problems and feelings if we tell them;¹⁸
- in the substance and depth of every word and choice there is always a word, a sentiment: 'Father'. When you pray, say 'Our Father in heaven . . .'¹⁹ The value and foundation of every word is the relationship and the place we give to God in our lives;
- we must pray 'in Spiritu et veritate' ...²⁰ the intensity and authenticity of prayer are manifested in a life placed at the service of God and our brothers and sisters.

8 Lk 6:12-13.

9 Lk 22:32.

10 Lk 9:28-29.

11 Cf. Jn 17.

12 Mt 11:25-26;

13 Jn 11:41-42.

14 Mt 11:25.

15 Cf. Mt 7:21.

16 Cf. Lk 21:36.

17 Mt 6:7.

18 Cf. Mt 6:7.

19 Mt 6:9.

20 Jn 4:23.

Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello adopted this method from Jesus the Good Shepherd. They discovered the prayer-like nature of apostolic and charitable work when it is carried out according to God's will and in his presence. This, on the other hand, was already known to the mystics.

According to *St Teresa*: 'Prayer is a friendly conversation with God ...'; it includes the whole of life, whatever the occupation of the moment; one can talk to him or work for him; think of him or suffer for him.

Therefore, again according to Saint Teresa, prayer prepares the encounter with God in action: 'Mental prayer is nothing other than practising friendship by frequently meeting with the one you love... not to enjoy but to gather energy to serve'. This is why action advantageously replaces it at certain moments: 'He is pleased when we stop being alone with him to dedicate ourselves to one of these two things (acting and suffering).'

Don Bosco at prayer

However, it must be said that the Salesians know little about Don Bosco's prayer life. It is often said that 'it was union with God'. But if we were to ask each Salesian if Don Bosco was a teacher of prayer for him as he was, for example, of pedagogy, perhaps many would answer in the negative. The path that Don Bosco followed to progress in active prayer is certainly less well known and less commented on than the one that led him to develop the preventive system. We know and spread anecdotes and maxims about the latter, but we have a rather generic image of the former.

Biographies give ample space to his creative genius and add a few exemplary pages about his morning times for prayer.

There is a 'classic' of Salesian literature that makes an effort to observe Don Bosco's mystical life more accurately. This book bears the title *Don Bosco con Dio (Don Bosco with God)* by Fr Eugene Ceria. We can see from it that he often insisted on the need for Salesians to pray mentally and vocally: 'Prayer ... that's the first thing. You cannot start well if not from heaven. It is what "water is to the fish, air to the bird, a spring to the deer, heat to the body," "the sword to the soldier"'.²¹

It would be wrong to imagine Don Bosco always saying prayers out loud, just as it would be wrong to imagine that he had no external expressions of piety. What was most admired, however, was what Fr Ceria commented on: 'The spirit of prayer in Don Bosco was what the martial spirit is in a good soldier, what taste is in a good artist and the spirit of observation in a scientist : a habitual disposition of the soul that is carried out with ease, constancy and great delight'.²²

Therefore there was a *natural and serene fusion of action and prayer* for Don Bosco. Life was not divided between the one and the other. Love was expressed in both: 'The specific difference of Salesian piety consists in knowing how to make work a prayer ... This is one of Don Bosco's most beautiful characteristics'.²³

Following these two 'models', the Salesian should become 'a man of prayer' like any other religious. But he must do so 'immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life',²⁴ 'in tireless industry made holy by prayer and union with God'.²⁵

21 P. BROCARDO, *Don Bosco: Profoundly Human - Profoundly Holy*, pp. 108-109 in the English translation of *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Rome 1985, found on SDL.

22 Ibid. p. 99.

23 Ibid. p. 105.

24 SDB Constitutions, C 95.

25 SDB Constitutions, C 95.

We use two expressions in our vocabulary to point to this: *being contemplatives in action, celebrating the liturgy of life*.

Contemplatives in action

Being a contemplative in action is a classic expression of Ignatian spirituality, applied to Don Bosco by Fr Rinaldi. In other words, it says what we commented on in the meditation on the figure of Don Bosco: 'living as seeing him who is invisible'.

But how do we 'contemplate' in action? Here are some suggestions. In our work, let's keep alive the awareness that *we are an instrument of God's action on behalf of young people*. The Lord uses our efforts, our gestures of service, our words to make himself felt in the lives of young people and to awaken in them the desire to be 'more'. We don't reach their hearts and their consciences. But our presence, our voice, are the door through which God communicates with them.

Let's get used to *discovering the presence of the Spirit in people's lives*, especially young people. Let's join in the work that God is carrying out, giving thanks, enjoying it, interceding. If our distractions concern the problems and hopes of people, we can incorporate them into our prayers. According to little Teresa, distractions are like children who disturb their parents during Mass. All you have to do is join their little hands together and make them look towards the altar.

Again: *let's give ourselves fully to the service of young people*, accepting their daily needs following the example of the good Shepherd; in this way we will participate in God's fatherhood, working like him in favour of life from the most basic forms (food, home, education) to the highest (revelation of the Gospel, life of faith).

Celebrating the liturgy of life

The other concise expression of the Salesian prayer is: *celebrating the liturgy of life*. In the document from which the Apostolic Constitution *Laudis Canticum* was taken, it refers to all Christians who offer their lives to God and to mankind, incorporating it into the existence of Christ the priest. It is one of the most beautiful and truest presentations of Christian worship that goes beyond ritual and ceremony; and makes man the temple of God and his existence the adoration and praise of the Lord.

It can be meditated upon and explored in depth in many ways: 'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'²⁶

'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'²⁷

The liturgy of life has been adopted as the 'rule' of prayer by the Constitutions of the two Institutes of the SDB and the FMA.²⁸ It is in fact particularly applicable in 'educational' situations.

Work and prayer are fused in the total sacrament of a life oriented towards God and moved by charity. Union of prayer and union of life with God are two movements of the same heart. Each has its own rhythm and form.

²⁶ Rom 12:1.

²⁷ Col 3:17.

²⁸ Cf. SDB Constitutions C 95; FMA Constitutions C 48.

‘The union of prayer that is celebrated interrupts relationships with creatures in order to focus all attention directly on the light and inner life of God. The practical union is realised in the very heart of everyday life, in the fabric of human relationships’.²⁹

Contemplatives in educational action

There is continuity without interruption between the two (prayer and action) in the Preventive System, indeed, the two are united at a further point of conjunction: charity. And for our type of educational and pastoral charity, the moment of action is the main one in terms of motivation and manifestation. This is why Fr Egidio Viganò preferred the expression of St Francis de Sales: ‘the ecstasy of action’.

A text by Salesians expresses it: ‘For the Salesian, educating youth to the faith means “work and prayer”. He is aware that by committing himself to the salvation of the young he is experiencing something of the fatherhood of God . (...) Don Bosco has taught us to recognize God’s operative presence in our work of education, and to experience it as light and love (. . .) We believe that God is awaiting us in the young to offer us the grace of meeting with him and to dispose us to serve him in them, recognizing their dignity and educating them to the fullness of life. In this way our work of education becomes the preeminent context in which to meet him’³⁰ and of the contemplation of his work in human life.

It is precisely in the faith that glimpses God’s action, in the hope that awaits his manifestation in the life of young people, and in the charity that makes itself available to the young person, that the educational moments of joy, expectation, pain, effort, and apparent failure are experienced as prayer and feelings are developed. We give thanks, we rejoice, we complain, we intercede, we wish, we invoke.

The liturgical celebration has a Kyrie, a Gloria, a Credo, an offering, a symbolic space, a community, times of penitence and of exultation. In the same way, the liturgy of life has moments of gratifying results and of disappointment, of initiative and of waiting, of solitude and of companionship. There is a space (a playground, a school, a neighbourhood!) and there are people to love and with whom to collaborate wholeheartedly (the educating community).

All of this, experienced in the light of the active presence of God, becomes *contemplation*. It happens like communication between people who know each other well: a feeling can be expressed with words, with a gesture, with a gift, with a look, with silence, with a visit, with a message by telephone or fax.

It is a question – as St Augustine would say – of ‘taking up the psalter of good works and singing the praises of the Lord with it.’

Constant attitude of prayer

However, there is a relationship between a continuous attitude of prayer and the exercise of prayer, between prayer and word and prayer and life, between explicit prayer and prayer throughout the day, between celebrated liturgy and the liturgy of life.

Perhaps it is in this relationship that the Salesian finds both the difficulties and the richness. And therefore the fundamental point of his spiritual and apostolic formation.

29 P. BROCARDI, “Don Bosco profeta di santità per la nuova cultura”, in M. MIDALI (ed.), *Spiritualità dell’azione*, LAS, Roma 1977, p. 197.

30 GC23; SDB 94-95.

The two elements or aspects are important: each is important for the other; both are important for the stability and fullness of consecrated life. Whoever leaves one aside, loses the other.

The relationship between them is different according to the 'type' of life.

Right from the very origin of our institutes it was said that 'The active life to which society tends means that its members cannot have many practices of piety in common. They will endeavour to make up for it by their good example and the perfect fulfilment of the duties of a good Christian.'³¹ This text must be interpreted in the context of its own 'time'.

What it suggests requires learning and special periods of concentration. 'Many believe that prayer will come of its own accord and want nothing to do with the practice, but they are wrong.'³²

Prayer must spring forth 'naturally', some say; but everything we do very naturally is the result of lengthy exercise: playing, walking, playing music. Regular personal practice and participation in community practice are indispensable.

There is a need for a calm and gradual initiation into the different forms of prayer: vocal, mental, reading, silence, contemplation, formulas, creativity. They must be practised in different times and situations until they permeate life so that prayer enters and comes out of us in many ways and in many forms.

Exercise establishes the habit: regularity is crucial; all the important things in our life have a time, a reserved time; if one day we can't do them at the usual time, we immediately find another time. The same goes for eating, sleeping, washing.

Community mediation is essential for us: the places, the times, the forms, the community. I say 'for us', for those for whom the community style covers all aspects of life. For other religious it may be different.

However, personal application is also required. The result and the method of this application are different. Everyone has their own way of praying, just as they have their own way of speaking, walking and looking. In this sense, the greater or lesser emotionality, distractions, preferences for reflection or formulas, and periods of tiredness must be interpreted.

But prayer is a gift. Christ is the only one who prays. He incorporates us into his prayer in the Spirit. We know neither what to say nor how to say it. The Spirit puts on our lips what is appropriate to ask for. 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.'³³

Our life needs to integrate reflection and practice, study and activity, silence and encounter, even though for us this is not linked to a rigid alternation of times. And this in the current conditions of life in which one is more exposed to multiplicity, to wear and tear, to pressing commitments.

2. Work

The importance of work in our lives can be easily understood from a series of facts of both real and symbolic significance: Don Bosco's farming roots and early experiences, the key persons and tenor of the original experiences, the vow of poverty, the working class to which we dedicate our preferential care.

31 SDB Constitutions 1858.

32 R. GUARDINI, *Lettere su autoformazione*, p. 91.

33 Rom 8:26-27.

Work is the main content of our education programmes in vocational and technical schools; it is the characteristic of one of the roles of the Salesian Brother; it is our way of fitting into society and culture. It is almost the fundamental trait of the Salesian: the Salesian is a worker. Fr Cagliero put it in very strong terms: 'He who does not work is not a Salesian'. Two facts summarise this: the mention of work in the coat of arms, where only 'two' words had to be chosen, and Don Bosco's last words: 'I recommend that you work, work, work'.

Some clarification, however, is not out of place. For Don Bosco, work is not simply occupying time in any activity, even if it is tiring. It is *dedication to the mission with all one's abilities and full time*. In this sense it includes not only manual work, but also intellectual and apostolic work. The writer works, the confessor works, the preacher works, the student works, the housekeeper works. Work is characterised by obedience, pastoral charity, right intention and a sense of community. Therefore, not agitation, being on the move because we can't keep still, but purpose, choice, organised activity. It must also be said that the word 'work' strongly refers to manual skills and practicality. The Salesian learns to work with his hands and also feels comfortable doing 'humble' jobs: domestic, manual ones. But it is true that the great 'work' is to dedicate oneself to the 'Christian' education of the young.

The pastoral charity that guides our work can manifest itself in spontaneous and generous impulses. But more commonly it must engage in long-term, patient, daily work to help people grow and animate communities.

Rather than an attitude of kindness or some gesture of sympathy, it is *a praxis*: a constant way of acting competently in some field, similar to those who work in the political, social, medical field. They all involve coherent, thoughtful and targeted action. This requires certain attitudes and ongoing abilities from us. And it is this work that ends up shaping the spiritual nature of the person.

The *taste for work* is, first and foremost, something which is heartfelt: the desire, the enthusiasm, the wish to work, finding pleasure in pastoral endeavours, being willing, giving of oneself as someone who enjoys what he is doing, considering all efforts as proportionate, feeling attracted to those most in need, overcoming small frustrations easily, not giving up, facing risks and difficulties as if they were trivial. The opposite is indifference, pastoral laziness, approaching pastoral moments and tasks as if they were painful or an obligation to be dealt with as quickly as possible.

But in addition to the 'heart', work, guided by charity, postulates and develops a *pastoral sense*. Pastoral sense is like artistic or business sense. It is almost a flair, a way of quickly assessing a situation. Visiting our schools or oratories one immediately perceives whether the community has a pastoral 'sense' by noting the activities and the tone of relationships. In some, it is the financial, organisational or disciplinary sense that appears in the foreground.

Pastoral sense consists of stopping to evaluate things from the point of view of the salvation of the individual. It consists of orienting oneself well in how events are interpreted, in having valid criteria, keys or points of reference for thinking through and setting up an activity in such a way that people grow as human beings and become aware of the presence of God the Father in their life.

Our work leads us to acquire and develop pastoral skills: it is a specific professional preparation, required by pastoral charity, through which we learn and improve our ability to motivate, instruct, sanctify and encourage. We make ourselves capable of understanding a context, of developing a project that responds to its needs and of achieving it, including taking into account the invisible and imponderable element that is always present in pastoral work.

Finally, it includes pastoral creativity: the mental and practical attitude that leads to finding original solutions to new problems and situations. Don Bosco conceived of a project for street children while the parishes continued with 'regular' catechism. Soon after, when he realised that the boys were neither prepared for work nor protected in it, he came up with a 'small' and 'home-made' solution

that then grew: work contracts, workshops, vocational schools. And so on for other needs, such as housing, education.

Fr Ceria indicates this trait as characteristic of the Salesian spirit: 'The first trait, the one that most jumps out at everyone is a prodigious level of both individual and group activity.'³⁴

The same trait has also been included in the Constitutions: 'Pastoral charity ... characterised by that youthful dynamism which was revealed so strongly in our Founder ...'³⁵

Work means making the best use of time and resources, paying attention to our development in all its possibilities, being prudent in our choices, and being fully dedicated.

3. Temperance

Spirituality also has an *ascetic dimension*, involving resistance or spiritual combat, which the Apostolic Exhortation represents with the image of Jacob wrestling with the Angel. 'Asceticism, by helping to master and correct the inclinations of human nature wounded by sin, is truly indispensable if consecrated persons are to remain faithful to their own vocation and follow Jesus on the way of the Cross.'³⁶

It is linked to the penitential dimension that is essential to Christian maturity. Without it, both the beginning and the continuation of the journey of conversion is impossible: this consists in taking on something and leaving many other things, choosing and cutting, destroying old or useless things or habits and allowing oneself to be rebuilt. This is the sense in which the stories of Abraham and the apostles speak to us.

This is not a very congenial aspect for current sensibilities that tend to satisfy desires and justify them. Each Institute has an ascetic tradition consistent with its own spiritual style. In our Institute, the formula that summarises it is 'coetera tolle': leave the rest, order the rest to this, that is, to the 'da mihi animas', to the possibility of living interiorly and expressing love for young people, removing them from situations that prevent them from living. These are two related aspects.

An important aspect of this asceticism is to give unity to the person, integrating into the project of life in God some tendencies, developed autonomously, that compromise the quality of the spiritual experience and aims of the mission: an exasperating search for efficiency and professionalism separated from pastoral aims, the secularisation of mentality and lifestyle, the forms, including hidden ones, of excessive affirmation of cultural specialness.³⁷

The 'coetera tolle', take away the rest, is expressed daily, and not only, in 'Salesian' temperance. I say 'Salesian' because in our history and in our texts it carries some very characteristic references.

Temperance is the cardinal virtue that moderates impulses, words and actions according to reason and the demands of Christian life. It is surrounded by continence, humility, sobriety, simplicity, austerity. The same things are included in reasonableness in the preventive system. Its manifestations in daily life are balance, meaning moderation in everything, suitable discipline, the ability to collaborate, inward and outward calm, a serene and authoritative relationship with everyone, but especially with young people.

Temperance is above all a permanent 'athletic state' for any request on behalf of young people; becoming and remaining free from overly conditioning ties, from the weight of personal tastes and needs that create dependencies: 'Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a

³⁴ *Annali*, chap. CXVII, p. 722.

³⁵ Cf. SDB Constitutions C 10 and 19.

³⁶ VC 38.

³⁷ Cf. VC 38.

perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air...³⁸

Temperance applies to work: it is the order whereby actions are motivated by goals and prioritised; personal ambitions and ‘apostolic’ ambitions are both controlled and balanced. We ask for what is right from others and not for what is excessive or would only serve our own convenience. We make sure that work does not eliminate prayer or fraternal relationships. We must be temperate in our movements, in our outings, in our search for money, in our desire to finish one thing in order to start another; in the control of our actions, if only to avoid ending up like a cog in a wheel.

Temperance applies to fraternal life: indeed, without it, a good community relationship is not possible.³⁹ Fraternal love implies self-control, an effort to pay attention, control of spontaneous feelings, overcoming conflicts, understanding the sufferings of others. It is all an exercise in going out of oneself and changing one’s orientation. For us there is also the commitment to demonstrate it in an understandable way: an affection that knows how to provoke reciprocity for the good of the other.

Temperance applies to personal lifestyle: relationships commensurate with the mission; use and practice of consumer goods (cars, appliances); relaxation time and holidays; a vigilant and purified interiority.

Temperance also applies to prayer and contemplation: it is faith that does not demand to see or feel; and when it does ‘feel’, it does not cling to pleasure. The authors speak of an excessive desire for ‘consolation’.

All this may seem too ordinary as an ascetic dimension, and almost cheerful in the face of the seriousness of the call to conversion and a radical lifestyle. Don Bosco expressed this apparent contradiction with the dream of the pergola of roses. The Salesians walk on petals. Everyone thinks they are ‘happy-go-lucky’. In fact they are ‘happy’. Pricked by thorns, they don’t lose their joy. This too is asceticism: simplicity, putting on a good face, not making a ‘scene’. It responds to gospel’s advice: when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face.⁴⁰

38 1 Cor 9:25-27.

39 SDB Constitutions C 90.

40 Mt 6:16-17.

7

Salesian spirituality in pastoral practice: the Preventive System

I. PASTORAL CHARITY AND PEDAGOGICAL CHARITY

1. An original form of pastoral charity

Pastoral charity includes all of the Church's service to humankind: proclaiming the gospel, promoting people, animating the community, carrying out corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

The Council proposes it as a way of sanctification for those who intend to involve themselves intensely in the mission of the Church: bishops, priests, religious of active life, committed lay people.

Salesian pastoral charity has another, more precise definition that does not restrict it, but defines it better: it is *pedagogical charity*. It is love that knows how to establish an educational relationship: it is expressed in relation to the adolescent and the poor adolescent in particular who must be helped to open up, to discover the richness of life, to grow.

For these poor teenagers, who sometimes lack courage, manners, words and thought, the charity of the Salesian must become a clear sign of God's love. It is therefore a charity that knows how to reach the least, the most humble, those who have the most difficulties.

Some of my confreres who work in marginalised areas have told me that one of the greatest difficulties that the young people in these environments have at the beginning is precisely that of expressing themselves in front of adults who are strangers to them, in front of institutions and those who represent them, including the Church. For them, the institutions are the image of the very organised world from which they feel excluded. The love of the Salesians, who would like to be an instrument of salvation for the poorest, must be capable of gestures that help them to face their own development with joy and hope, to open themselves to trust and dialogue, even in the context of a life that is impoverished and conditioned.

This reproduces the gesture of charity that Don Bosco showed Bartholomew Garelli, which consisted in making him 'laugh' by putting him at ease. This charity combines spiritual ardour with wisdom, pedagogical tact and practical sense, educational optimism and the patience of one who must sustain and cultivate the seeds of life. All this expresses what Fr Caviglia affirms and what John Paul II takes up again in *Juvenum Patris*: 'Don Bosco's holiness takes the form of educational holiness.'¹

Have you had the opportunity to see the prophetic zeal of certain preachers, generally non-Catholics, who go from town to town proclaiming God's command to convert, and announcing the end of the world? No one can deny that they have love and religious zeal. But neither can we say that this is the 'style' of the 'pedagogical' charity that listens, understands, helps and accompanies people.

Pedagogical charity shows ardour, but also tact, common sense, moderation and affection. In a word, it is the kind of fatherly wisdom that teaches us how to face life. The wealth of reflection and

1 JP 5.

experience on this form of charity is expressed in the Constitutions² with these words: ‘Under the guidance of Mary, his teacher, Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first oratory a spiritual and educational experience which he called the “Preventive System”. For him this was a spontaneous expression of love that is inspired by the love of a God who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side and freely gives his life to save them.

Don Bosco passes this onto us as a way of living and handing on the gospel message and of working with and through the young for their salvation. It permeates our approach to God, our personal relationships and our manner of living in community through, in the exercise of a charity that knows how to make itself loved.’

There are a number of points in this article that we shouldn’t miss.

- The Preventive System is called a ‘spiritual experience’ and not just pedagogy.
- ‘It is inspired by the love of God’: it is therefore not only the result of educational research, neither in terms of its foundations, nor in terms of its practice.
- The experience is born and develops ‘with the boys of the first oratory’. This constitutes the *humus*, the soil where the nutritive substances for this plant are found. The experience is not born and developed in monasteries, in libraries, in one’s room ...: which does not mean that all of these are is not also useful for the Salesian.

It is a question, then, of reflecting on the attitudes that such pastoral charity requires and creates, and on the practice it demands.

2. Attitudes of pastoral charity

Predilection for the young

The first attitude is one of *predilection for young people*. Every Salesian in whom charity is at work must be able to repeat with Don Bosco: ‘Here in your midst I feel completely at home; for me, living means being here with you.’

The concrete consequence of Don Bosco’s preference for young people was that he chose to work with them. As a priest, Don Bosco was offered other fields of work with considerable financial advantages, prestige, and in terms of his own self-fulfilment. The choice to stay with street children and with young workers, renouncing being an assistant parish priest, tutor to a wealthy family, college chaplain or moral professor, marked his entire subsequent journey.

The same thing happened to Mother Mazzarello. Her apostolic work with the young girls in her village created an affinity in her that led to a ‘spiritually warm’ encounter with Don Bosco, from which the feminine expression of Salesian spirituality resulted.

But this decisive choice had two consequences: *dedicating all her time to young people and taking on their problems*: poverty, work, lack of education, the difficulties of growing up, the absence of a family.

We too must be able to assert that we are not among the young ‘because of our timetable’, ‘because of our job’ or for financial gain; that we are not waiting for the moment to retire so that we can dedicate ourselves to something else that we like more, that we consider more serious and profound, and where we place our main pastoral concern, our moment of relaxation or the highpoint of our spiritual life.

² SDB Constitutions, C 20; FMA Constitutions, C 7, 66.

We don't spend all our time with young people just to then recharge our spiritual batteries at other times. We feel good with them... it is our spiritual opportunity!

In a modern version, the Salesian GC23 expressed it this way: 'We believe that God loves young people. This is the conviction which is at the origin of our vocation, and which motivates our life and all our pastoral activity.

We believe that Jesus wants to share 'his life' with young people: they are the hope of a new future and in their expectations they bear the seeds of the Kingdom.

We believe that the Spirit is present in them and that through them he wants to build a more authentic and human christian community. He is already at work in individuals and groups. He has given them a prophetic task to carry out in the world which is also the world of all of us.

We believe that God is awaiting us in the young to offer us the grace of meeting with him and to dispose us to serve him in them, recognising their dignity and educating them to the fullness of life.

In this way our work of education becomes the preeminent context in which to meet him.³

At the beginning of the Salesian life and while we ourselves are still young, being with and among young people is a spontaneous and even gratifying movement, especially if you are able to tune in and are easily accepted. Young people exert a certain attraction due to their liveliness, creative ability, desire to live and share.

But when the initial enthusiasm wears off, the decision to 'stay with young people' becomes a lifelong commitment and requires self-denial. At a certain point it starts to be difficult for us to be physically among young people; even more so to be psychologically and culturally with them, to prefer their world to other more friendly and formal environments.

Today it can even become difficult. Young people are staying at school for longer, they have more freedom, their behaviour is more varied and less regular, and dialogue is more open on all issues. This can cause a 'flight from', a gradual 'abandonment' of the youth field by many Salesians, under the impression of not being able to communicate with the language, the aspirations or the lifestyle of the new generations. Working in a community helps us to integrate everyone's contributions: those who are particularly gifted in their contact with young people and those who can only make a partial and limited contribution.

This is the good fortune and the distinctive feature of the Congregation. It is so characteristic of individual and community spirituality that everything the Congregation has done it has done *with and through* young people. The oratory and young people were the origin, at least in chronological order, of the other realities that today make up the great tree of the Salesian movement. The Congregation and everything else came from them... without them, nothing!

56 Salesian bishops were present at the celebrations in Turin in January 1988. Looking at them, we felt satisfaction for this qualified contribution of the Congregation to the Church, for the trust that this signifies on the part of the Church towards the Congregation, for the responsibility and love these confreres have for the Salesian community. But some of us commented: Salesian bishops, we said, are an excellent product of a pastoral work that begins and is constantly regenerated in the oratory and youth ministry environment. If the Salesians didn't have young people, they wouldn't even have bishops!

The place where the Congregation regenerates itself, where it produces new spiritual expressions and generates new members for itself, inspired by the Spirit, where it renews its enthusiasm and expresses its charismatic creativity *is among young people*. It is where we were born and continues to be

3 GC23, 95.

our mission and our promised land. Our spirituality would not find new expressions were the Salesians to distance themselves from it.

The expression in article 20: 'Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first oratory a spiritual and educational experience', is still valid today. Pastoral charity, as lived by the Salesians, therefore creates this fundamental attitude: a predilection for the young, which means 'being there', 'placing oneself in', 'returning' to the typical place of our experience of God.

Trust in the young

But there is a second attitude: it is *trust in young people*. Salesian charity begins not from those who stand out but with the least; not with the richest from a financial or spiritual point of view, who already have attention and services, but with those who do not know which parish they belong to or which school they should attend. It is in these young people that hope must be aroused and energy awakened.

This is why it is necessary that the Salesian, by virtue of his faith in God who wants everyone to be saved, believes what Don Bosco said: 'Even the most callous boys have a soft spot. The first duty of the educator is to locate that sensitive spot, that responsive chord in the boy's heart, and take advantage of it',⁴ and provides the energy that the young person needs to transform himself.'

Faith in God the Father and the event of Christ the Saviour tells us that no one is beyond being saved. Every young person bears within themselves the sign of the plan of salvation, in which there is a promise of a full and happy life for every individual.

The three exemplary Lives that Don Bosco wrote show how it is possible to bring the Christian life of those who are particularly gifted (Dominic Savio) to a high level; to rehabilitate those who have had a less favourable past (Michael Magone); to accompany those with normal resources to a satisfactory level of development (Francis Besucco). The spiritual satisfaction of the Salesian is not only that of proposing a goal to those who are able to fly high, but of 'saving', of taking someone from the lowest level and lifting them up, helping them to take a step. This is also the Salesian's participation in God's work, a participation that requires faith and hope. The constant exercise of the theological virtues, therefore, becomes the asceticism of the Salesian: the ability to sow without tiring and without narrow-mindedness, to always give a new opportunity, even when it seems that the results are not worth the effort, to see life in all its potential value as an unpredictable mystery, always awaiting the action of grace.

A good educator is one who is always capable of giving and creating new opportunities. He is someone who never says: enough! This is why we say that the three inner energies that a young person has – religion, reason, love – are also the three aspects and the three sources of growth for the educator. He must continually grow in faith, recognising the fruitfulness of what God has sown in the lives of young people through his words and presence; he must nourish his optimism, which is hope and trust in the future of his work; he must convert all this into charity, which is readiness and ability to intervene in favour of young people.

All this has led to a rethinking of the concept of *prevention* and *preventiveness*. Perhaps for many it meant only dealing with children and young people who have not yet been touched by evil. Anticipating is certainly a golden rule.

But 'preventing' also means preventing the ultimate ruin of those who are already on the wrong path but still have healthy energy to develop or recover. In current socio-pedagogical reflection, there is talk of a first and basic prevention, a second prevention of recovery and strengthening, and a final one that manages to stem the extreme consequences of evil.

⁴ BM 5, 237.

Love made manifest

Together with predilection for young people and trust in the grace of salvation at work in them, there is a third attitude: love made manifest in the form of affection.

True love refers to the absolute good of the other, who is desired and sought after as if he or she were one's own. This is the fundamental expression, not linked to mutual liking between those who love each other. But the love of the Salesian is, as Fr E. Viganò says, the kind of love that knows how to be reciprocated, because he has realised that this reciprocity helps the young person to grow. Feeling that he is respected, he learns to respect himself, to have confidence and to give freely.

We can recall from our own experience the ones who rekindled the desire in us to better ourselves and gave us the courage to measure ourselves against difficult goals: they are the ones who showed us respect, trust and affection. While those who neglected, ignored or devalued us awakened instincts of aggression and feelings of discouragement in us. Love creates the person!

This is the theme of the letter written from Rome in 1884. It is also a conclusion of Don Bosco's educational experience.

When he was a seminarian, during an epidemic, the Jesuits offered him the opportunity to be an assistant in a residence they had near Turin, to which they had sent their young boarders. Don Bosco accepted the invitation to occupy his time, earn a living and satisfy his natural inclination to be with young people. They were middle school pupils, and from well-to-do society.

Don Bosco had no difficulty relating to them. He gave them Greek lessons, helped them in their dormitories and, according to him, he had excellent friends in these young men who loved and respected him. But he noticed something: the difficulty of having a profound influence when the educational relationship is 'paid for' and the young person can say: 'You do your job well and I recognise that. But I'm paying for this service.' The relationship wasn't free. The young person experienced a 'good service', not being 'saved'. He then made a reflection for himself that his biographer has handed down to us: In Montaldo 'he learned that he could not exercise over them that influence without which it is impossible to help them spiritually. He became convinced then that his field of work was not among the children of the wealthy.'⁵

His way of educating didn't work well with those young people. There was a good relationship. But it was more about things than people. It was an exchange of money for services, both provided with perfect kindness and responsibility. The result was a relationship of respect and friendship but not of gratitude. Instead, the system he experimented with later was based on the reciprocity of affection given freely and freely reciprocated.

Knowing how to inspire trust is an aspect of our educational charity, because only where it exists is the work of education possible. This, as Don Bosco says, 'is a matter of the heart'.

Referring all this to spirituality, there is no one who doesn't see how much asceticism and purification is required to be available to children, not for one's own satisfaction but for their progress; how much faith is required to renew one's availability, to invent opportunities to meet them, to be ready for new forms of communication, to understand new situations in order to help them.

This is what Article 15 of the Constitutions tells us: 'Sent to young people by the God who is all charity, the Salesian is open and friendly, ready to make the first approach and to welcome others with unfailing kindness, respect and patience. His love is that of a father, brother and friend, able to draw out friendship in return: this is the loving-kindness so much recommended by Don Bosco. His

⁵ MB I, 294.

chastity and well-balanced attitude open his heart to spiritual fatherhood and give transparent witness to God's anticipating love.'

II. PASTORAL CHARITY IN THE WORK OF EDUCATION

Beyond the attitudes that pastoral charity establishes, there are some visible behaviours that constitute its practice. How does the Salesian show his predilection, his preference for young people? His trust in their resources, his ability to love them above spontaneous sympathy or their immediate correspondence?

1. The encounter with the young

A typical expression of pastoral charity is, first of all, the encounter... knowing how to meet young people and make real contact with them, taking the first step. Do you think this has something to do with spirituality? Of course! Where and when do we see the spirituality, for example, of a religious nurse, if not in the encounter with the sick? Where and when can we see the spirituality of the educator if not in the educational 'moment'?

Don Bosco was a specialist in making first contact with a young person. He was able to immediately arouse trust, eliminate barriers, and provoke joy. There are many of these encounters that he recounts.

Some of these meetings have gone down in history as 'founding' moments. Meeting Bartholomew Garelli in the sacristy of the church of St Francis of Assisi laid the foundations of the oratory.

In the Lives he wrote of young people, Don Bosco recalls with pleasure his meetings with them and lingers on these, reconstructing the exchange of words step by step. In the Life of Dominic Savio he reproduces the dialogue and encounter that took place in the parish house at Murialdo and in his office at the Oratory. In the Life of Michael Magone there is even a chapter, the first one, entitled: 'A curious encounter'.

Don Bosco not only relives these encounters, but proposes them as an educational norm. He almost shows off his ability to draw life from the boy. The encounter always begins with a gesture of absolute respect, affection, harmony.

Don Bosco immediately and easily gets to the important points in the life of his young interlocutor (religious education, work, parents, abandonment, vagrancy).

The dialogue, therefore, is serious in its content, although the individual expressions are full of joy and good humour. Because they deal with the hot topics of life and they deal with them seriously and joyfully, these meetings are characterised by an intensity of feelings. Michael Magone was moved, Francis Besucco cried with emotion, Dominic Savio 'Overjoyed and grateful beyond words, pressed my hand and repeatedly kissed it.'⁶

These feelings explain why the memory of the first meeting remained indelible even in the memory of the young people. Fr Rua never forgot the gestures and words of his first meeting with Don Bosco, when he was just a boy.

If this was the memory that the meetings left in his soul, if this is the importance he gives them in the Lives he wrote, to the point of making them the pivot of the narrative, it is because he was convinced that the quality of the educator and pastor is shown in personal encounter, and that this is the point to which the environment and the programme tend.

⁶ BM V, 80.

When a cardinal in Rome challenged him on his educational ability, Don Bosco offered him the spectacle and proof of a personal encounter and dialogue with the boys in Piazza del Popolo. They left together for the chosen place.

The carriage stopped near the square. The Cardinal remained in observation from a distance. Don Bosco approached a group of boys who were playing and shouting. They were certainly not delinquents, but they were rowdy and uneducated. This is a true episode but probably reconstructed as a 'demonstration or pedagogical lesson'. Rereading it, we find the narrative structure of all the other 'encounters': the first move to engage, the boys' initially wanting to run away, the overcoming of shyness, the serious yet cheerful dialogue, the emotional intensity of the conclusion.⁷

On the other hand, the encounter that inspires trust and awakens self-esteem is a gospel category. Jesus welcomes and goes out to meet all kinds of people: Zacchaeus, Levi, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the adulteress. And the encounter with him leaves its mark.

Perhaps there are some Salesians who have lost this ability. But on the other hand, in various parts of the world, we see some confreres and sisters who go out to meet young people that neither educational institutions, nor the police, nor social workers are able to reach. And they meet them on the street, under bridges, in the places where gangs meet. Talking to them, you realise that this is an act of charity.

All Salesians are faced with a dilemma: should they meet young people only in educational institutions or also in more free and open places? The former are increasingly reduced to teaching activities and time. And they are not the place where young people spontaneously reveal their personal problems. The latter do not have an obvious educational connotation and are difficult to manage.

In encounters within an institution, the initial relationship between young person and educator is protected by rules of behaviour. There can be correctness without trust. Outside educational institutions, our ability to show young people we are interested in their lives and to communicate with them is put to the test. Perhaps today the two meeting places should be taken into consideration by the community, even if not everyone will be able to act in the second kind.

2. Welcome and acceptance

A second practice of pastoral charity is hospitality. Knowing how to welcome the young person joyfully, as someone who is being graced by their presence.

It is not just a question of physical welcome, but of all that the individual brings with him as life's baggage: his legitimate tastes, his aspirations, his culture.

Perhaps some time ago the welcome given to the young person was above all an 'institutional one'. The boy fitted into one of our settings and felt welcomed, because being able to have such an educational opportunity was a privilege. The life of the institute, punctuated by the duty of study, daily prayer, play and various activities, was a real novelty for him. The institute was more 'interesting' than the village or his family.

In this context, the Salesians became close to him: the assistant, the teacher, the catechist, the rector.

We need to be aware of the marginal influence, and therefore the lack of attraction, that institutions have on young people today. Entering a solemn and orderly, but anonymous setting says nothing to the young person. On the other hand, a human and personal welcome, expressed with sensitive gestures of acceptance, has value. This implies understanding and empathy with all situations

⁷ BM V, 601.

and healthy youthful tendencies, both individual and in groups. The Constitutions recommend ‘a true understanding of the world of the young [which] unites us with them in all the healthy aspects of their restless energy’.⁸

3. Establishing an environment

The third way to show love is to dedicate oneself patiently and carefully to building an environment rich in humanity, which is already an expression and vehicle of values. The experience of the powerful role the environment played belongs to the first years of Don Bosco’s apostolate and was something he employed for the rest of his days.

He used to visit prisons at the time. It was on those occasions that he realised how many were brought to that place because they were left to their own devices. In his own words, ‘Who knows, if these boys had had a friend who had taken loving care of them by helping them and by giving them religious instruction on holy days, perhaps they would have kept away from wrong doing and disaster.’⁹

Don Bosco was a friend to many young people he met individually in the most diverse places; but he was also the leader of a community of young people, with its own characteristics and programme to be developed. Psychological, sociological and faith-based reasons confirmed his conviction that there was a need for an educational environment where religion and commitment were part of the air one breathed and where charity informed roles, relationships and the atmosphere.

So he didn’t just choose the environment, seeking stability for his oratory and drawing up a small set of rules, but he also stated a theory: ‘the fact of there being so many of you together is a great help toward producing this honey of cheerfulness, piety, and diligence. This is the advantage of being here at the Oratory. Your number alone makes your games more joyful, chases melancholy from your hearts, encourages many of you to bear the burden of schoolwork, and arouses competition and the sharing of knowledge. The good example of many helps us also spiritually without our even being aware of it.’¹⁰

The environment is not something generic. It has characteristic features. It is not a physical place where someone goes to entertain themselves individually, but a community, a programme, somewhere where one fits in to mature.

Pastoral charity and educational love lead us to spend time and energy, to take care of organising a large, positive environment full of activities, capable of welcoming many young people and offering them a positive experience of living together, of responsibility, commitment, the life of faith.

Those who see the Salesian, sometimes very tired, organising things, establishing relationships, holding meetings and decorating walls in order to create this atmosphere, are tempted to think: what is spiritual about this religious man sticking up posters and writing notices? Does this have anything to do with spirituality? And it’s true that if the Salesian is totally preoccupied with these things, and could be helped, perhaps he is misusing his time and abilities. But if someone thinks that all the worry about creating a positive environment for young people is a waste of time and has nothing to do with spirituality, then he should consider the thoughts of St Paul. According to the apostle, things are not spiritual or carnal. It is the person, motivated by instinct, selfishness or by charity, who confers qualities on the action and directs things towards the spiritual or the carnal.

8 SDB Constitutions C 39.

9 BM II, 49.

10 BM VII, 366.

4. A personal educative relationship

Together with the desire and the ability to meet young people, together with the welcoming, educational and religious animation of an environment, we have a final way of showing pastoral charity: the personal relationship that helps growth.

Welcome and acceptance perhaps only recall the first moment of encounter. Education then requires a calm but prolonged accompaniment. Nature provides for this in the father-son relationship. Here, biological generation is continued in the assistance to life through upbringing.

There are two particular manifestations in this regard: friendship and fatherhood. The first is very common in Don Bosco's narrations regarding his personal experience and educational practice. We have seen that friendship was a feature of his youth, demonstrating his ability to give and receive affection joyfully and always in a personal and profound way.

In education, deep friendship is born from gestures and the desire for familiarity, and it is nourished by this. In turn, it generates trust. And trust is everything in education, because only when a young person entrusts us with his secrets is it possible to educate him.

The concrete expression of friendship is assistance. This is understood as a desire to be with young people and share their lives. It is not, therefore, an 'obligation of status', but a certain passion for understanding and helping them to live their youthful experiences. And at the same time, it means being physically present where the young people are, interact or plan things; it is moral strength with the ability to animate, motivate and awaken. It takes on the dual aspect of prevention: protecting against early negative experiences and developing the potential of the person through positive proposals.

It develops motivations inspired by reasonableness (an upright life, an attractive sense of life) and conscience, while strengthening the ability of children to respond autonomously to the call of values.

The way we provide assistance has also evolved and gradually improved. The first model of assistance was the oratory model, based entirely on a relationship of friendship, collaboration and the desire to be together and help each other. Discipline and control were a minimum requirement.

Then came the school 'model'. The fulfilment of duty, the prevention of disorder, and discipline took over. Personal relationships and spontaneous communication lost ground. Today the dimension of accompaniment is being recovered, help given freely, proposals made, and youth activities organised. Therefore 'assistance' is also provided outside our works.

Welcome, friendship and assistance culminate in a very special manifestation: fatherliness or motherliness. It is more than friendship. It is an affectionate and authoritative responsibility that offers vital guidance and teaching and demands discipline and commitment. It is love and authority. It is the characteristic that distinguishes the person primarily responsible for a programme. It extends to the individual and to the group, and within this group it must be protected, defended and emphasised.

It manifests itself above all in the ability to 'speak to the heart', in a personalised and personalising way, because it draws on the issues that currently occupy the lives and minds of young people; knowing how to speak, revealing the scope and meaning of what is happening to them in such a way as to touch their conscience, their depth, and help them acquire a wisdom with which to face joys, problems and trials: in a way of speaking that communicates the art of living.

Friendship and fatherliness establish a family atmosphere where values become comprehensible and needs become acceptable.

In this way a line is drawn between authoritarianism, which risks having no influence, and permissiveness, which fails to transmit values and in which friendship is an insubstantial pastime that doesn't help you grow.

5. Conclusion

Our pastoral charity has its own specific character: it is *pedagogy*.

It includes inner attitudes, daily practices, work habits, organisational criteria, etc.

Everything is imagined and put into practice in order to reveal to young people the taste of fully human life and the love of God: we want to be 'signs of God's love'.

In this sense, our educational work also constitutes our typical spiritual experience. When we want to show someone Benedictine spirituality, we take them to the 'monastery'; if we want them to directly experience the high point of Focolare spirituality, we invite them to the 'Mariapolis'. To see Salesian spirituality in action, *in vivo* and live, you have to go to the playground or observe the Salesians *among* and *with* the young.

8

Educators

1. Salesians are educators

The many articles of the Constitutions that describe the attitudes, practices and works of our pastoral charity, alongside the word *evangelise*, include another: *educate*, educators. The same happens in the authoritative writings and documents on our spirituality, to the point of coining a slogan, the precise meaning of which is still to be clarified: ‘Evangelise by educating, educate by evangelising’.

One of the aspects of Don Bosco's personality, mission and spirituality – and the same can be said of Mother Mazzarello – that history has emphasised the most is his *attention to the field of education* and his *pedagogical genius*. Indeed, we can say without a shadow of doubt that these have been emphasised more than all the other aspects. The majority of conferences and congresses, both ecclesiastical and secular, held in various countries to celebrate the centenaries, chose the educational-pedagogical theme as the one that best spoke to our contemporaries.

Some Salesians even had the idea of asking for Don Bosco to be declared a ‘Doctor’ of the Church. Not for his ‘theological’ doctrine, but for his inspiration and educational practice. The Pope’s Letter ‘Father and Teacher of the Young’ is all about Don Bosco’s service, dedication and educational ability.

This aspect of Salesian spirituality was presented to us during the beatification of Mother Maddalena Morano (30 April 1994): a school teacher by vocation before entering the Salesians, her religious life was characterised by enthusiasm, service and educational creativity.

This interest is nothing new. On the contrary, perhaps it is this aspect that has attracted the most attention from the very beginning and that has been emphasised most in the very first biographies, by Don Bosco’s own choice. And it is easy to understand why. The mere fact of a priest going out onto the streets in search of young people and adapting to their language and their tastes would be a theme for a film even today.

In chapter 12 of his biography, the chapter dedicated to ‘Don Bosco the educator’, Fr Auffray gives an evaluation and a piece of information. ‘If some are born poets, others artists, others scientists, Don Bosco was born an educator. It is as if, by entrusting him with a very specific task, God had also given him the means to carry it out so fruitfully. Circumstances and apostolic zeal led Don Bosco to deal with an incredible number of problems: it can be said that few men, in the Church and outside it, have done so many and such different things. Yet, being an educator was the vocation he felt was his more than any other. On the passport issued to him in 1850 for a trip to Milan, the profession declared by the Saint is very eloquently, “primary school teacher”.’

These assessments gave rise to a discussion: whether his vocation as an educator or as a priest came first and was stronger in him. Fr Pietro Braido follows the intertwining of both during the course of his life and concludes that the priestly vocation is primary and inspiring and finds its field in the education of youth. This explains our current dedication to education with pastoral aims.

The Decree of Beatification speaks of Don Bosco as ‘an eminent educator (*princeps*) who opened definitively valid paths to Christian pedagogy’.

The SDB and FMA Institutes have experienced times of enthusiasm and almost of exaltation for this aspect of their work and have expressed it in various ways. For many years they have given preferential development to the various educational sectors: scholastic, professional, agricultural,

creating structures and roles at every level. They have directed the majority of their personnel to these sectors and have prepared them with qualifications and titles. They sought to present themselves and establish themselves in civil environments as people interested in cultural growth and the promotion of young people and people in general. As a culmination of all this, they created two faculties of Education Sciences, which were a novelty in Pontifical Universities. In fact, education sciences were not considered 'ecclesiastical' or 'pastoral'. Time and mediation were necessary to include them as faculties in a pontifical university. Lastly, they willingly entered into dialogue with governments and particular Churches to respond to urgent educational problems.

This enthusiasm simultaneously included *human education*, that is to say the cultural growth of the person in his or her own environment, and *Christian formation*, that is to say the development of the person as a child of God and a member of the Church. In previous eras, the two aspects were united, interpenetrated, almost fused in educational programmes and institutions and also in the intentions of the users.

This origin and this tradition have left their mark on our identity. In the Constitutions the terms *evangelise* and *educate* form an indissoluble pair. There is an original relationship between the two. The aim is unique: to enlighten, to help grow, to equip for life, to enable the use of freedom, to give young people a taste for values.

However, there is a subordination of value between the two terms: we are convinced that in Jesus Christ we find the meaning, the light and the strength to orientate our lives. Everything tends to make him known, even if we respect the times and the journey of each individual.

Education and evangelisation are two programmes that, without being the same, communicate with and complement each other. Our way of evangelising tends to form a person who is mature in every sense. Our education tends to open people up to God and to the human being's eternal destiny.

The Salesian is not only a catechist or a pastor, but an educator. The FMA are not an institute of parish catechists, even if they also do this. They make education their practice of charity. 'Don Bosco appears before the world and the Church as a holy educator, that is, as one who has committed his holiness to the task of education' (Fr E. Viganò).

2. Education and experience of God

What does this involve in terms of spirituality? Is it just a professional occupation added to one's spiritual life, or does it shape one's spirituality?

Recently, many studies have appeared on religious educators. In all of them, one sees the concern to confirm the apostolic and charismatic nature of the work of education. At the same time, they prevent the risk of 'professionalism', that is, the separation between the professional work of education and the experience of God. It is not acceptable that a religious should not be able to express their consecrated life through their educational role; that they should care more about being and appearing to be a 'principal' or 'teacher' than a man or woman of faith.

These studies also try to stem a possible sense of frustration due to the poor results obtained in educational structures regarding faith. And finally, they encourage the renewal of pastoral care in educational environments, adapting to the times, starting from our attitudes and mentality in a pluralistic, secular society in which educational activity is autonomous from confessional concerns, and yet can and must communicate with faith.

It is a question of undertaking the work of education, seeing it as a collaboration with God in the growth of the person.

In fact, Scripture presents the history of salvation as an educational process. God educates the individual and the people in a precise way.

First of all, he talks to them. They are his audience. They listen, but they also respond and ask questions. Job is an image of man questioning, seeking reasons and understanding. But Abraham also questions the Lord. Speaking is the characteristic of the true God, as opposed to idols that are silent. The dialogue between God and his people culminates in the Word made flesh.

But as well as speaking, the Lord *urges and almost obliges his people to have ever new and maturing experiences*, even though they are not easy: breaking their dependence on Egypt, venturing into the desert, forming a community in their own land, expressing their religious identity, accepting the law.

In this way he motivates and accompanies people and communities on a journey of liberation: liberation from human yokes and an opening up to God, obtained also through struggles and trials. In this way he makes them aware of who they are, of their destiny, which man by himself would not be able to discover: not slaves, nor subjugated to magical forces, but 'God's people', the object of his love.

The Bible not only describes God's actions in terms of the attitudes we attribute to an educator (respect for freedom, patience, new opportunities, tests); not only does it use the language with which we describe educational work (guiding, correcting, accompanying, chastising to save), but directly attributes to God the role of Educator ... using the Hebrew word 'Musar' which is translated into Greek as 'Paideia'.

'He sustained him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, bears them aloft on its pinions.'¹ This is the most tender and poetic text, but not the only one. One could find hundreds of short and long biblical texts on God's educational work with people in the same tenor: 'Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; ... I led them with cords of human kindness, ... I was for them like those who lift infants to their cheeks; I bent down to them and fed them.'² "Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you."³

God's educational activity is expressed in the demanding call to gradual growth, but also to unexpected breaks with the past and sudden departures towards new worlds and forms of life. 'Leave your land' is not just a word or an episode, but a constant in the relationship between human beings and God. All of this contributed to elevating the spirit and life towards a higher quality of mutual relationships and historical perspectives.

In light of this way of acting of God, one understands the style and educational responsibility of Israel, which is seen as an extension and mediation of God's work of education.

It is taken up and carried out jointly by the community, the family and the religious teachers, according to what is codified in tradition and in a wisdom literature full of advice, maxims and exhortations.⁴

It is a responsibility that goes beyond ensuring a future for one's child. It passes on the 'memory' of God's promises and the hope of their fulfilment from one generation to the next. This is why the Word of God suggests an unparalleled respect for the new generations to parents, educators and teachers: children are God's blessing, indispensable links in the development of humanity and in the realisation

1 Dt 32:10-12

2 Hos 11:1-4

3 Dt 8:5

4 Cf. Prov passim; Sir passim; Wis passim.

of God's plan; without children who know God there are no promises. Those who have been able to follow the concept that other peoples have of lineage and ancestry notice an enormous difference.

The Word itself therefore prescribes that they be educated in the covenant so that they have the kind of awareness that constitutes 'the people of God'.

This culminates in Jesus Christ. He presents himself as a Teacher. It is not difficult to glean educational hints and traits in the Gospel. Just think of the dialogues between Jesus with his disciples and the people who approached him: the open-mindedness he provoked, the invitations to reflect and understand. We can add the language of the parables, with which he made it easy for his listeners to understand the truth; and above all his invitations to go beyond the material questions that his interlocutors generally asked, and to move on to deeper questions, to the goods of the Kingdom.

His educational activity became systematic and daily with the apostles. Little by little, while they were preoccupied with their own advantages and eager for immediate results, he helped them to understand the value and the demands of a long-term community project.

He helped them to overcome fundamentalism and authoritarian zeal. They needed to learn to accept adversaries, rivals and people who thought differently.⁵

He taught them to see, to take an in-depth look at humanity's fundamental problems, for example, illness, unexplained catastrophes, death.⁶ They had to learn that there is no direct relationship between misfortune and sin.

He helped them shift from the viewpoint and interests of the 'village' to religious questions and the salvation of the nation and the world. They had to mentally leave the village and think in universal terms.

He also led them to be critical of certain aspects of religion that have worked against us: legalism, puritanism, the use of religion by those who govern, ritualism.⁷

He taught them to judge with prudence and finesse, to overcome superficiality and rudeness in their evaluations of people. Just think about the judgement of the woman who anointed his feet in Simon's house and the episode of the adulteress.

Even today, we hear harsh judgements from believers in similar situations.

God's work of education does not end here. St Paul sees it divided into *three phases* that are distinguished because each one influences the person more profoundly.

Israel is considered a child under the control of an external pedagogue: the *law*. The law shows Israel the way, but it doesn't give it the strength to follow it, nor does it provide it with an identity to pursue. In fact, the law is not the goal, nor the form, nor even less is it humankind's calling. The destiny of the individual on the other hand, is love and freedom.

The second phase comes in the fullness of time: *God sends his Son*. In him he instils in us the human form to which we are destined. This form is already shaped within our nature by the incarnation of Jesus and constitutes our genetic code by the grace of adoption. It is within us and must reveal and develop itself.

Finally, there is the third phase: *Jesus infuses us with the Spirit* who becomes our teacher and inner guide. It is the Spirit of freedom and generosity that drives us to model ourselves according to the greatness and depth that appear in Christ.

5 Cf. Mk 9:38-39; Lk 9:52-56.

6 Cf. Jn 9:1-4; 11:17ff; Lk 13:1-5.

7 Cf. Mt 12:1-11; 15:10-19; 13:13-20; Lk 13:10-16; Jn 5:9-18.

The educational function of the Church in the world should be seen from this perspective. The education of humanity is not an optional manifestation of charity, as it can be giving food to the hungry or giving rest to the pilgrim. It is the very heart of her mission. The Church is the mediator of God's activity in education; she continues the teaching of Christ and she is the sign of the presence of the Spirit in humankind.

Therefore, everything in the Church has an educational purpose: to make people aware of their existence and their destiny, to awaken their constructive energy and to help them discover the goodness, the nobility and the eternal which the Creator has placed in them. Some authors (Dietrich von Hildebrand) have dedicated themselves to studying the educational power of the liturgy with its gestures, rhythms, attitudes, words and meanings.

The Church will always support the bond or coherence that exists between giving birth to a child, educating the child, opening the child up to the knowledge of God, initiating the child into the mystery of Christ and to life according to the Spirit, in accordance with the words of St Paul: 'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'⁸

In the Church there would always be many educators of the people, as well as ministers of religion and preachers. Charismatic individuals would found educational institutions for all social classes and in every cultural context.

Many religious would dedicate themselves professionally to educational activities, making it the expression of a radical choice for God: not an aspect juxtaposed to religious consecration, but a unique way of expressing it.

In conclusion: *educating is participating in the work of God the Father* who creates us, of Christ who reveals that we are children of God and makes it possible to live as such, of the Holy Spirit who inspires from within the growth of freedom and the typical expressions of children.

An article in the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians expresses this with great courage and simplicity: 'Salesian assistance (our way of educating!) ... that makes us attentive to the Holy Spirit at work in each person.'⁹

3. Education and spirituality

We usually deal with the topic of education using three approaches. One is *lived experience*. This gives us a real idea of the difficulties involved, but also of the benefits that young people report. Educating is a difficult but irreplaceable art.

Another is the *professional approach*; it equips us with the knowledge and techniques to carry out the task of educating.

The third is *faith or a 'charismatic' approach* which reveals to us the value of the charity that our educational service has and the ultimate goals towards which it tends.

Well then, what grows in our spiritual life when we educate? What do we have to dominate and subdue? What personal dimensions do we develop?

The educator is called to contemplate the mystery of God at work in people and to place himself at their service: something similar to what Mary did with Jesus, until the human maturity of her son allowed the expression of the divine consciousness. Mary had to accompany and support him with

8 Phil 4:8

9 FMA Constitutions, C 67.

food, cleanliness, affection, advice, teaching the language and traditions, without knowing for sure what Jesus would become.

There is a secret and mysterious dialogue within each person. Little by little, they become aware of themselves, and develop a life plan in which they invest their strengths and possibilities.

Their future is unknown. The educator is called to offer everything they believe is appropriate and to respect the freedom of the individual in this dialogue, living with hope for the unknown future. Don Bosco, adapting a saying from the Scriptures according to the translations of the time, had a phrase written on the walls of the oratory that can still be read today: 'One cannot know the trace that the snake leaves on the stone, nor the path that a child will take in life.' Yet the educator is sincerely interested in the uncertain human being. In fact, through growth, God will be welcomed and will manifest himself with ever greater evidence.

Perhaps the religious wonders: what can I offer in education that is different from what a lay person offers? As for professional services, nothing. The consecrated person does and says what a lay person can say and do. But this kind of thinking reduces education to instruction, socialisation or vocational training.

If, on the other hand, we understand education as the blossoming of all the possibilities the human being has and opening up to the widest horizons of human experience, then the religious places the full weight of his or her radical choice on education. The closeness of the religious can say something about the values that the gospel proposes.

'In a world tempted by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possessions and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love, the urge to possess, and the freedom to control one's whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour.'¹⁰

Being an educator requires professionalism and patient application to the task. Education is a specific job for which good will is not enough. As with other professions, there is a whole science and accumulated practice. To intervene in an approximate or improvised way is like performing surgery in the dark or with an inadequate instrument. The history of psychiatry is full of traumas suffered during the educational period.

Today, more than ever before, education is complex due to many factors: young people receive many influences and it is difficult for them to make sense of all of them; there are many educational agencies and they are almost always unrelated; the messages are of very different kinds. Therefore, education has been defined as 'mission impossible'.

Educators are expected to be serious about their work and mentally alert. They must be aware of all the trends that influence young people and help them evaluate and choose. And this requires patience and love.

Finally, there is the ability to be a companion and to communicate. It is not enough to know, one must be able to communicate. It is not enough to communicate, you have to communicate yourself. Those who communicate a concept but don't communicate themselves are teachers but not educators.

On the other hand, communication is impossible without going outside of yourself. You have to love what you communicate and the person to whom you communicate it. It's not a question of using the best tools or techniques, but of going beyond canned lessons and 'frozen' speeches.

10 SDB Constitutions, C 62.

Megaphones, television, videocassettes and drawings certainly help conceptual clarity. But the fundamental point is to believe in what is offered, to be capable of rethinking what has become our wealth in the light of our current experience and culture, in order to share it with young people. This too obliges us to work at what is a true asceticism.

9

Evangelisers

1. Pastoral charity is what drives us to evangelise

Pastoral charity is pre-eminently active. It always expresses itself in service to the Christian community, or more generally to individuals. This service is not merely a form of work or a period of time to be made up with prayer, a kind of wear and tear of the spiritual life. But it is itself an experience of God and a path of growth in the spiritual life.

‘In these communities apostolic and charitable activity belongs to the very nature of the religious life, seeing that it is a holy service and a work characteristic of love, entrusted to them by the Church to be carried out in its name.’¹

In the common mentality, the ancient opposition between contemplation and activity, Mary and Martha, has not yet been dispelled. People continue to think that the former consists of stopping to pray or to store up energy, while the latter consists of spending oneself and being distracted by things. It is true that contemplation has primacy. But it is equally true that it also fits perfectly within action and is therefore not opposed to it.

The SDB and FMA Constitutions say that Salesians are evangelisers of the young, especially the poorest, and of the people. And they add that the Preventive System is their way of living and communicating the gospel.² Therefore, in this we not only spend time serving our neighbour, but we also seek our own sanctification.

Why *evangelisers*? The word is not found in the vocabularies of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. They talked about teaching catechism to boys and girls and preaching to the people. *Evangelise* is a term that prevails today in ecclesiastical language due to the current situation, that is, the majority’s distance from the Christian faith and the widespread belief that one can live without faith.

Let’s see what it means.

St Paul, speaking of the charisms as gifts of the Spirit to form the Christian community, lists five: apostles, prophets, evangelisers, pastors and teachers.

They were not the only ones, nor were they perfectly distinct then, and even less so today. But remembering how they functioned and coordinated helps us to understand the role of the evangeliser and our role as evangelisers of young people.

The *apostle* lays the foundations of the community and governs it. Through his connection with the Twelve, through apostolic succession, he guarantees the truth of the faith and communion with the universal Church. He may not be the most active or the most effective of evangelisers. His is the charism of foundation and communion. Not so much for his knowledge or his prophetic level, but objectively for his connection with the Eleven. Thus Christianity does not present itself as a religious doctrine in which the doctors prevail, but as an historical event, that of Jesus Christ, whose foundation is given by those who are historically connected to the apostles.

¹ PC no. 8.

² Cf. SDB Constitutions, C 20; FMA Constitutions, C 7, 66.

- The *prophet* interprets God's plans for the present moment of the community. He has little to do with predicting the future. Instead, he reads events and sees the signs of God's action in history.

- The *shepherd* guards, cares for, animates and makes progress in the already established community. His image is well represented in the one who has a flock, knows it and provides pasture and water; these two symbols still speak clearly.

- The *doctor* studies the doctrine he has received in depth. He extracts new meanings and teachings and compares them with the culture of the people and the wise.

- The *evangeliser* proclaims the gospel to those who have not yet heard it and where it has not been sufficiently announced. He brings the Good News, bringing new faithful closer to the community. He is a 'missionary', but not necessarily sent far away. He moves within his own city or environment, communicating Jesus and inviting others to participate in the community.

Evangelisers excel in initiative, drive, the ability to face new situations, to interpret the expectations of those who seem distant, to engage in dialogue with the indifferent. They go out to meet people rather than waiting for them in church. Being evangelisers of young people is similar to being 'missionaries to young people'; capable of reaching those who are physically, psychologically or culturally distant.

The image of the evangeliser in the Acts of the Apostles is the deacon Philip. 'Philip went through all the towns, preaching the gospel' (Acts 8:40). He travelled through the towns, spreading the gospel from one village to another, from one group to another. He was a specialist in proclamation, we could say in provocation.

He doesn't stop to consolidate the community or to provide it with material structures. His job is to till the soil. So Jesus had sent the disciples ahead of him to prepare for his coming.

In churches there is, and there must be, a right balance between pastoral care and evangelising zeal; and the same goes for Congregations and individuals.³

Church and evangelisation today

The Church today is experiencing a 'time' of evangelisation. Well-cared for communities become evangelisers, they go out to others. If they did not do so they would be reduced more and more and in the end we would be 'barricaded, as one author says, 'in the last church'. Ours, therefore, is a time in which the first place is given to evangelisation, to proclamation, to dialogue, to going beyond one's own borders with the novelty that the subject is the whole Church, no longer just some of it; those who are more gifted are charged with moving the Church, with motivating, accompanying, pushing it forward. And this happens everywhere, but in a particular way in the Western world. The evangeliser's charism seems to fill everyone else and come to the fore. The most important mission of believers today is to proclaim the gospel and arouse the desire for faith. For this reason, we speak of the parish as a missionary community and we also speak of educational communities as missionary communities, both inside and outside the parish.

The word 'time', in the historical sense, also indicates the set of opportunities, events, choices and challenges that characterise a segment of human history: we say that we are living in a time of transformations, a time of violence, or difficult times. We refer to the time of Don Bosco or of John Paul II. The days and months that follow one another are characterised by an event, a person, a concern. This does not mean that other favourable or adverse events don't occur, but personal and community attention is substantially dominated by a phenomenon that is experienced with particular

3 Cf C.M. MARTINI, *L'Evangelizzatore in San Luca*, Ed. Ancora, Milano 1986, pp. 18-19.

intensity, as a source of anguish or joy, a point where efforts and questions converge. This phenomenon marks the passing of days. In this sense we say that the Church is experiencing a time of evangelisation.

The proclamation of the gospel, in truth, has always been such an important task that it has been identified with the very mission of the Church.⁴ However, in the history of the Church there are periods in which other concerns emerge: organisation, internal discipline, the defence of Christianity. We talk about the time of the Crusades, the time of the great cathedrals, the time of the Counter-Reformation.

On the other hand, there are periods in which all energies are directed towards spreading the pure and simple proclamation of the gospel and forming Christian communities. We can go back in our memory to the time following the Council of Jerusalem.

The apostles spread out to bring the core of the message to the world of that time. Above all they tried to help those who converted to live according to the gospel in a very different environment.

Our time is similar to that of the apostles. It began with the Second Vatican Council, in which the Church faced modernity in a positive way, without ceasing to be healthily critical. The condition of modernity is considered not contrary or hostile, but rather as the dough in which the Church must act as a leaven. In the Spirit that guides it, it senses the irreplaceable service it must offer in this climate of humanity.

Ten years after the Council, a Synod and Pope Paul VI drew up a pragmatic document, considered the most lucid and decisive of the end of the century, the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975). This was followed by meetings and documents at a continental level, including the document of the Latin American Episcopate *La evangelización en el presente y en el futuro de la América Latina* (1979).

The movement consolidated with the fourth assembly of the Synod, which focused attention on the evangelisation of young people, giving rise to the Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis (1979). Finally, in the 1990s and on the threshold of the third millennium, the Pope launched and relaunched the ‘new evangelisation’.

The time of evangelisation

If we wanted to characterise our time with one word, if we wanted to define the main challenges, the concern that is most evident, the direction in which resources are concentrated, the most appropriate term would be ‘evangelisation’: ‘a time of evangelisation’. The exhortations of Paul VI and the current movement of the new evangelisation are proof of this.

But why is this a ‘time’ when the urgency and also the task of evangelisation stands out? In our time, we can see some phenomena which challenge the credibility of Christianity.

First of all, there are *large, open geographical areas*: Africa is a new land; Asia is a large continent where we have not yet made inroads against the great religions, there is only a small seed; America is a large continent that has been baptised, but must be evangelised; with a great popular religiosity in which the moral and social consequences of Christianity have yet to be assumed. Europe itself is a continent that increasingly perceives a progressive distancing from Christian references and also from references to churches and Christian communities. These are the symptoms that we perceive most and that make us recognise the urgency of evangelisation.

Alongside this, there is the *search for meaning in life*, which many people sense after the decline of political utopias and scientific explanations. Can the gospel provide this meaning? And is it real and

⁴ Cf. EN no. 15.

practicable, or is it idealistic and useless? From these questions themselves it emerges that there is a new demand for meaning and for the gospel.

There are *problems of conscience* that individuals and society are facing regarding life, death, love, family and sexuality. Is Christian morality adequate? Christian morality is being questioned for a new orientation, a new ethical sense.

Then there is the coexistence of *different religions and many sects*, alongside the culture of difference. Is faith necessary and is the Christian faith the only true one... or the best one?

Then there are the *new phenomena*, such as the promotion and liberation of women, the situation of young people, the unstoppable impoverishment of many people and populations, all of which require attention and evangelical enlightenment. And there are ancient realities (education, culture) that distance themselves from the gospel, but at the same time raise important questions that call for the gospel to enlighten us once again.

For all these reasons we can say that we are living in a 'time' of evangelisation. This means three things:

- For the Church it is an *'historic' opportunity*; it is strongly challenged, but a new concept of life is maturing (think of ethics, of individual freedom), a new form of social relationships and political management, a new approach to education. What is lost today may be lost forever. Could it be the gospel? Religious feeling? Faith? What is sown today may become ripe fruit tomorrow.

- Every initiative and presence is now measured by its *capacity to evangelise*. Evangelisation is the yardstick for all organisations and communities. Evangelisation is not only the goal, but also the path; it is not simply the end, but also the means. This means that today, ecclesial initiatives must be evaluated on the basis of their capacity to bear witness and proclaim the gospel. When examining their own validity, ecclesial associations must ask themselves if they help their members to live the gospel more deeply and if they proclaim the message of Jesus without reduction or masking, not taking their own religious or Christian characterisation for granted. Sanctuaries, ecclesial structures, educational institutions, religious life, etc., today need to be redesigned, taking the quality of their evangelisation as a criterion. Religious signs and gestures of worship are of little use if people do not have the key to interpret them. Evangelisation, therefore, is not a particular aspect of pastoral care, but its preferential channel through which everything else flows.

- The Spirit raises up *charisms* and gives *specific graces*. Such are the taste for the Word of God, which manifests itself in Christian communities, missionary activity which has never been so intense as in our times, the commitment of the laity, the spiritual and apostolic movements which have arisen in recent years.

We are living through this 'time' among young people. We feel their distance from the Church and, at the same time, their search for a subjective religious experience.

We see that in youth culture the religious aspect is irrelevant. Young people are focused on survival (work) and on fitting into a society that favours the immediate and the visible.

Communication with the ecclesial community is difficult for them: after the first catechesis and, for some, preparation for confirmation, a silent distance. Meanwhile, the environment offers the most varied messages and explanations of existence and of every single aspect of it.

This motivates us to commit ourselves strongly to evangelisation and to seek our spiritual experience in communicating the Gospel, in kindling the desire for the Gospel and giving a glimpse of how much light, how much wisdom, how much trust comes from Jesus.

2. Evangelisation shapes our spirituality

Our identity as ‘evangelisers’ and the ‘time’ in which we live urge us to seek the depth of our spiritual life in our passion for the gospel, and therefore to cultivate certain attitudes that are characteristic of the evangeliser.

The passion, the enthusiasm for communicating the gospel as witnesses rather than professionals, comes more from a personal experience of Jesus Christ than from a mastery of concepts and techniques. This was the case with the apostles, as John himself admits: ‘We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our [a] joy may be complete.’⁵

Passion, then, is revealed as a *profound joy* in revealing the riches of the mystery of Christ to whoever will listen. Rather than giving ‘lessons’ in religion, it is a question of introducing others to an experience that attracts and fascinates us first. Rather than an obligation or a job, it is an irrepressible inclination. St Paul compares it to the act of ‘giving birth’, a process that involves suffering, but is driven by passion. At the same time, he connects it to a vital responsibility that he could not escape, because it concerns something too precious for those he loves: ‘woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel!’⁶

Paul VI reminds us of this with his usual effectiveness in a page of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: ‘Let us therefore preserve our fervor of spirit. Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us – as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other apostles and for a multitude of splendid evangelizers all through the Church’s history – an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench. May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world.’⁷

This experience (knowledge of Christ and the joy of communicating it) leads us to give priority to proclamation in our lives: ‘we are all called to be educators to the faith at every opportunity.’⁸ Not necessarily ‘preachers’, catechists or teachers of religion. There is no division between tasks of evangelisation and others, between religious and secular work.

In any place or role one can say a word, make a gesture, establish a relationship that opens up to faith.

Let’s remember Don Bosco on one occasion on a journey, sitting next to the coachman who was annoyed and blasphemed. After having asked him about the animals and other things in his life, he brought up the conversation about his religious past and about God, and ended up hearing his confession.

5 1 Jn 1:1-4.

6 1 Cor 9:16.

7 EN no. 80.

8 SDB Constitutions, C 34; FMA Constitutions, C 70.

What is given priority in organising our activities must correspond to the priority of evangelisation in our thoughts and hearts. It is the fundamental dimension of our works, indeed their purpose.⁹ This priority must be seen in the concerns of each individual person, in the distribution of time, in the inspiration of themes, in the use of resources. Perhaps this means reviewing some educational approaches at a personal and community level.

Here is another point that belongs to spirituality.

By evangelising, we enter more deeply into the knowledge of Christ and therefore grow in him. Christ does not live primarily in things, nor even in sacred things, not even in dogmatic propositions. He lives especially in the minds and hearts of people and in the vitality of the community. When you enter into this mind to say something, but also to detect a reaction, it is there that you see how the mystery of Christ is at work in human beings and at work in communities. It is in life that evangelisation happens; all the others are ways to get to that point.

In one of his books, Paul Ricœur assures his readers that all the topics he deals with have been previously presented and discussed with his students. He has therefore verified that what he says is understandable and felt to be true, and that his words are appropriate. This is the experience of all those who communicate.

They realise that they say many things without really feeling them and are impelled to reflect on them again; that there are things they do not fully grasp and need to look into them more deeply. But then in the effort to express them they discover new meanings, and in listening to those they are talking to they catch a glimpse of new resonances and applications. This is the experience of those who comment on the gospel in basic ecclesial communities.

But St Gregory had already told us this when he observed: ‘Many things that I did not understand on my own, I understood when listening to the people’. Evangelising is not an activity in which we expend all of ourselves, but an activity in which we are spiritually enriched, and enriched in our understanding of the mystery of Christ.

It is the advice that Paul gave: ‘Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.’¹⁰ This can be understood to refer to material goods, but why not spiritual ones too?

3. Some of the evangeliser’s attitudes and practices

All the studies and documents focus on presenting the attitudes of the current evangeliser. In fact, he may be shocked by the irrelevance of faith in a developed world, or have the impression that the proclamation has no convincing basis in a world dominated by a scientific mentality, or even that his efforts have little effect due to the impenetrability of the environments in which Christians are a minority in diaspora.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*¹¹ highlights the following attitudes of the evangeliser, who:

- relies on the breath of the Spirit,
- is an authentic witness,
- becomes a builder of unity and a servant of truth,
- works with love and the fervour of the saints.

Let’s highlight some of these that can shape a Salesian spirituality.

9 SDB Constitutions, C 6; FMA Constitutions, C 70.

10 Gal 6:6.

11 EN, nos. 75-80.

- Firstly, a *personal relationship with the Word of God*. We need to read and study the Holy Scriptures, especially the gospel. It contains the experience of God that humanity has had and is still capable of inspiring and illuminating this experience.

Today various forms of approach to and meditation on the Word have been developed and are practised: in addition to the Divine Office and liturgical reading, 'Lectio' has become common, with its four moments: reading, understanding and gaining a deeper appreciation of the text, personal meditation, sharing.¹² Before the word is spoken, it must become 'fire in the belly and honey on the lips'.¹³

Jesus is our model in this, as in his discourses he refers to the Scriptures and shows his knowledge and respect for them; and we can also look to the great evangelisers as our model. Meditation on the Word, continually revisited, had become second nature to them. St Augustine says that when he went to visit Bishop Ambrose he would find him with the book of Scripture in his hand, reading and meditating with his eyes closed. For us it is essential to read and understand the message, comparing it with current situations and the challenges young people face.

The fundamental question is this: when we do not communicate the gospel, is it because of a lack of time, of role or of means, or because the Word has not yet struck us as an unusual light, as wisdom, as an open path?

In the first place, therefore, we must re-establish a deep and vital contact with the gospel.

- A second attitude is *confidence and serenity in the face of the 'times'* we have to live in and evangelise.

Accepting and loving it ('God so loved the world!'¹⁴), without being naive about it but also without a negative spirit that emphasises the limitations and does not discover and enjoy the enormous possibilities. Of course it is easier to preach the gospel in a 'confessional' or simple setting where the response is numerically abundant. But it is not necessarily more useful or more fraught with consequences for the future than preaching it in a less predisposed context.

'[Jesus] went down to Capernaum.'¹⁵ In this statement, Cardinal Martini sees Christ's movement towards the places of secular life which have no religious references.

Unlike Nazareth and Cana, which are rural villages, Capernaum represents the urban environment. Compared to Jerusalem, the place of the temple, Capernaum is the city of military garrisons, commerce, administration and political power. Jesus' ministry took place there, with preaching in the open air, entering people's homes (for example, Peter's), meeting with the sick and the possessed, as well as giving talks in the synagogue.

In each current challenge there is a new opportunity for the gospel. 'The hour has come for us'. This is the time that God offers us, the time we must rise and transform. It is useless and harmful to think of a better past or future. 'Living in permanent disagreement or in discomfort with the reality and culture in which we are immersed leads to bitterness and a lack of inner peace. This prevents the realisation of a personal project and pollutes the sources from which our daily life springs'.¹⁶

In fact, the evangelisation of some groups and phenomena seems to us to be slow. Hope can be a sign of mental health and a difficult exercise of faith.

- A third attitude is the *meaning of sowing*.

12 'lectio divina' is also mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* no. 94 as a source of spirituality and as a way for religious to communicate with each other.

13 Cf. Rev 10:9; Jer 5:14.

14 Cf. Jn 3:16

15 Lk 4:31

16 Conference on evangelisation, Spain 1985; cf. Ecclesia no. 2237 (21.09.1985).

The Kingdom, goodness, the Word of God are always compared to small things that have an internal energy: yeast, seeds. The absolute absence of large material realities as a term of comparison or explanation of evangelisation is striking. The task of those involved consists in introducing these small and fertile elements into their own environment, almost like an injection. Then, as we read in the Gospel of Mark, 'as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.'¹⁷

It is up to us to sow the seed without being miserly, paying more attention to what sprouts than to what is lost in time and words. Even in nature there is a great deal of waste. Only a few out of many seeds overcome the difficulties of growth and become plants. But it is these that ensure the species and life.

- Lastly, the spirituality of the evangeliser requires that he *improves the quality* of his service.

It is a profession like any other. It requires knowledge of the subject and the ability to communicate. Qualification concerns all evangelisation services: from homilies to children's catechesis, including the ability to offer young people a message or an opportunity for meditation, such as retreats.

A politician once said: 'Only the Church can have an audience every Sunday like the one that gathers for Mass. When all the priests preach well on a Sunday, in my city (a medium-sized city) you can feel the influence.' The possibilities we have together are enormous. Sometimes they are wasted due to improvisation or our lack of depth in our acceptance and proclamation of the Word.

¹⁷ Mk 4:26-28.

10

Reconciliation

It is impossible to outline the characteristics of our spirituality and of any apostolic spirituality without referring to the sacraments.

In pastoral work everything is a sacrament. Pastoral work in fact recalls an invisible reality that can only be perceived through signs.

Consecrated life is a 'sign' for us and for the world, a sacrament. We try to bear witness to an invisible reality through certain choices and ways of life.

Furthermore, as educators, we rely on a very profound dimension of the person that Don Bosco called 'religion'. That is, the awareness of the presence of God in one's life. We are therefore as if immersed in a sacramental atmosphere.

Time allows us to meditate only on one of the sacraments: Penance. It concerns us closely in two senses.

- *As 'consecrated' persons:* around penance there is a cluster of themes that are fundamental to life in the Spirit, without which the gospel is unthinkable: conversion, the sense of sin, reconciliation, mortification, compunction (sorrow for offending God), 'taking up the cross'.
- *As educators:* reconciliation is linked to many aspects of the Christian maturation of young people, but above all to one that is crucial: the formation of conscience.¹ The preservation and development of faith depend on this formation. Faith is confirmed and nourished by an enlightened and upright conscience, while it is blocked, disappears or remains marginalised from life, when one does not act in conformity with it.

For us, the two aspects are closely linked: if educating and evangelising does not mean giving lessons but communicating a life experience, only having had an experience of reconciliation ourselves can enable us to introduce young people to this fundamental aspect of Christian life.

This relationship is expressed in a beautiful text by St Paul referring to the Church: 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us ... we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.'²

The two things are connected: personal experience and the service of reconciliation.

Our reflection focuses on four aspects:

- being realistic educators and evangelisers;
- being people reconciled with God and with life;
- being penitents... in simplicity and joy;
- being educators and ministers of reconciliation.

¹ Cf. GC23 182-191.

² 2 Cor 5:17-20.

1. Educators with a sense of reality

Having a sense of reality means recognising the presence and dimensions of evil, knowing that there are facts that endanger life and that one must also resist these things in the world.

Maturity of judgement consists precisely in perceiving the possibilities that life offers and the corresponding risks that hang over it. To grasp only one of these dimensions is a visual distortion and, ultimately, childishness.

Every good has its opposite that opposes it in the depths of our being and in the world around us: love and hate, commitment and indifference, righteousness and disloyalty... basically, light and darkness, life and death.

Militia, drama, struggle is humanity's life on earth. Nothing is more immature than eliminating the awareness of a possible failure. In Don Bosco's pedagogy 'the last things', 'the eternal maxims' recalled this 'at risk' condition of the human person.

The macro-consequences of evil are pointed out in the most recent documents of the Church : the violation of human dignity, racial, social and religious discrimination, the arrogance of political and economic power, violence and aggression in war, the exploitation of the poor, the unjust distribution of wealth, corruption in the administration of common goods.

We see similar effects in young people: evil (escapism, libertinism, lack of commitment) destroys their best energies. Thus, their life is caught up in the ephemeral; their vitality is applied to worthless things, and many end up in alienation and despair.

To be aware of the destructive power of evil is to have a sense of sin.

It has been said that: 'the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin' (Pius XI). And consequently: 'The restoration of a proper sense of sin is the first way of facing the grave spiritual crisis looming over man today'.³

It must be said that the formation of conscience and a sense of sin will not be gained by preaching that simply denounces and blames, but by education in the faith that is more attentive to the ethical dimension.

Forming a sense of sin involves:

- *perceiving 'moral evil' as destructive* of the person and of relationships, whatever the immediate advantages it brings: why is it evil? ... life as a responsibility and a mission and not only as a pleasure and a right;
- *identifying evil*: what is bad ... where the boundary lies between good and evil: liberalisation, subjectivisation, relativisation;
- *relating it to freedom and personal responsibility*: tendency to diminish personal responsibility or to place evil outside the person;
- *grasping the reference to the will and love of God*: difficulty in thinking about transcendence.

In fact, the environment and culture in which we are immersed lead us, almost without us realising it, to feel the presence of evil less, and therefore to be less vigilant.

All sorts of things are going on and nobody pays much attention. We have become so accustomed to the fact that everyone can choose their own morality as long as it doesn't violate the rules of coexistence and the rights of others. It can happen that not even religious are impressed by deformed behaviour and pay little attention to an austere moral orientation.

There are many causes.

³ Apostolic Exhortation on reconciliation and Penance, 18.

Current ethical judgement is often based on immediate reasons: the opinion of the majority that appears in statistics, advantages, personal situation.

The sense of God is weak. His image has almost been erased from our personal and social consciousness. This makes it difficult to think that our actions have anything to do with his will. We take care not to clash with our neighbours and not to offend those around us. Invisible or distant characters do not determine our behaviour.

The analysis of cultures has shown how much many rules that were believed to be absolute depend on them: the sense of modesty, respect for authority, a certain form of marriage, the expression of sexuality. It has relativised them, judging them to be changeable and not obligatory.

The study of human behaviour attributes 'feelings of guilt' to personality type, family upbringing and social environment. The emphasis is more on conditioning and the urgency to free oneself from it than on personal responsibility.

A disconnect has arisen between 'private' and 'public' morality. This doesn't help to support moral criteria. Many things are now left to individual choice: abortion, euthanasia, divorce, homosexuality, fertilisation. In society and in education there is an awareness of all this, but it only concerns the risks and advantages; it doesn't offer a solid ethical foundation, even less so with a transcendent reference.

All this affects young people like a toxic cloud.

It is not surprising that they show a set of symptoms and reflections of the culture they breathe. Their moral formation is fragmentary. It looks more like Harlequin's costume than a reasonably designed picture.

In fact, they take criteria and rules from different sources: from family and school, from magazines and TV, from friends, from their own reflection. The choice is dictated by subjective preferences.

There is talk of young people's sensitivity towards new values.

But it is difficult to understand to what extent this constitutes a commitment rather than a short-term entertainment, a form of being together and motivating each other.

The central points of current moral sensitivity are: the person as a determining and almost absolute value; personal conscience as the ultimate norm; the situation in which they find themselves as an important factor in moral evaluation.

Similarly, the environment influences adults, religious and educators, unless careful reading of the Word of God and discernment keeps them vigilant. Sensitivity can be dulled. We thus swing, almost following the law of the pendulum, from a previous severe and guilt-inducing mentality to the opposite: 'cheerful' and indifferent; from seeing sin in everything to no longer seeing it in anything or anyone; from emphasising the punishments that sin deserves, to presenting a love of God without responsibility on our part: the fate of this person would be 'the same' regardless of the answer he gives to his Lord; from severity in correcting an erroneous conscience, to a respect that doesn't even bother to form it; from the ten commandments learnt by heart, to no longer teaching a coherent Christian morality.

Being 'adult Christians', 'true educators of the faith', realistic evangelisers, then means:

- not ignoring or hiding, but also not exaggerating the presence of evil in private and social life, and being aware of its destructive capacities;
- knowing how to identify evil at its roots, enlightened by the Word of God, in order to bring about regeneration;
- knowing that Christ has overcome evil, that our incorporation into his death and resurrection shows us that, in order to overcome it too, we must follow his same path: resistance, vigilance, intellectual, moral and spiritual struggle.

2. Profoundly reconciled

Such are the people who talk to each other and let themselves be talked to serenely, who do not close their eyes to their own attitudes and behaviour, who forgive joyfully and feel that they must be forgiven, and experience peace with God, with themselves and with their neighbours. In this way, they free themselves from evil by recognising the presence of God in their own poverty and by trying to direct their lives towards him.

St Paul tells us what this experience consists of in a text that we can focus on: 'For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.'⁴

The text speaks of peace, salvation, joy and life. Together with many others that we find in the Scriptures, it lends itself to many comments.

We are selecting just a few of these.

Reconciliation is an initiative and gift of God

In the gospel it is not the person, man or woman, who asks for or desires forgiveness, but Jesus who offers it.

The path of reconciliation never begins with the accusation of guilt, but with feeling recognised as a 'person', in a new and unexpected relationship that sheds light on life and allows us to see its deformities. And so Zacchaeus discovers his sin. It is Jesus who looks at Zacchaeus and invites himself to his house. It is Jesus who comes to the defence of the adulteress. It is Jesus who looks at Peter, already forgetting his infidelity.

At the origin of the desire for reconciliation there is always the impact of the word or the person who awakens us from our lethargy in an impoverished existence and invites us to overcome ourselves.

We need to go beyond the mentality that considers our breaking of the commandments or our failure to fulfil our resolutions as the main element of reconciliation. Instead, we need to look at our relationship with God: if he is very important to us, if we expect a lot from him, if we care a lot about not losing him. I have the image of couples in mind. When there is a loving relationship, we are happy to recognise our own small oversights and recognise the generosity of our partner; we are always willing to reconcile major differences. When the relationship of esteem, love and mutual expectations is consumed, it becomes disgusting and burdensome to apologise for trifles. The mere presence or thought of the other becomes annoying and unbearable.

The most important thing for us then, in regards to ourselves and our pastoral activity, is to recognise, savour and proclaim the mercy of God, and to focus our attention on him, Father of Jesus and our Father: this is the central theme of the history of salvation. God's mercy recomposes history that would otherwise fall apart, and continually re-establishes the covenant that our weakness and forgetfulness neglect.

Love of God does not come from our ethical perfection, but is at its origin. It is a gift of the Spirit. We don't love God because we are good, but vice versa.

⁴ Rom 5:10-11.

God works in us by giving us the Spirit

What God does in us is neither simply nor principally the elimination of guilt and punishment, which our human intelligence considers just. But he gives us the Spirit, creates a new reality in us, opens up a new horizon for us, gives us a new heart.

He doesn't make us go back to what we were before. What interest could it be for him and for us in making us as we were before some of our regrets? Instead he recreates us as his children!

The wonderful thing is that since our bad actions would consign us to a future of perdition, through reconciliation God doesn't bring us back to the starting point but places us in a new intimacy of alliance with him.

We need to rethink the whole scene of the return of the prodigal son.

Reconciliation is therefore not the sacrament of a person's past, as if it were a veil placed over his escapades or his desire to enjoy himself. Instead, it is the sacrament of his 'future', of new possibilities, of a new spirit, of a plan for the future.

We are led to give thanks

Reconciliation spreads through the grace received in all aspects of life: it resolves the tensions within a person, it leads to a more peaceful acceptance of God in life, it opens one to tolerance and teaches forgiveness. Zacchaeus, after being reconciled, is willing to give back more than he had stolen.

Therefore, the experience of reconciliation in the gospel is always one of joy and fulfilment. There is excessive celebration, to the scandal of respectable people. There is the pouring of expensive perfumes, to the annoyance of the thrifty. There is the wasting of food, and there are general invitations, to the complaint of serious people.

Its context is always one of praise and thanksgiving. Here we keep repeating what the psalms sing: 'O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever..' ⁵ 'Bless the LORD, O my soul ... who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.'⁶

The word of God expresses the reality of reconciliation with a symphony of metaphors and analogies: grace, new creation, regeneration, justification, liberation. One does not deny or oppose the other: each shows a partial aspect of what the person feels. They are not scientific definitions, nor descriptions of psychological states, but an effort to communicate what happens in the person when they discover that they have value for God and are loved by him.

The great meditation is Christ

The great mediation and instrument of reconciliation was and is the humanity of Christ. He has broken down all the walls and distances between God and humankind. With him, God's communication with us has reached the highest possible levels. I suppose that on hearing a similar expression, many of you thought that it was a theological statement, that is to say true but not practical. Instead it has extremely concrete applications in our praxis and in our life.

The desire for reconciliation is difficult to achieve without the human experience of acceptance and affection. The mediation of the fraternal community is indispensable. The pastoral practice of the Good Shepherd therefore suggests that we first show consideration, esteem and a willingness to listen to people. This is the way that leads to re-examining one's own life and the desire for change.

⁵ Ps 106 (105).

⁶ Ps 103 (102).

3. Penitents

We rightly distinguish between *penance as sacrament*, God's saving action through the mediation of the Church, and *penance as virtue*, that is, the inner attitude of conversion, the ascetic commitment to self-control, atonement and change that is prolonged in life and practised every day.

There must be a connection between the two if we don't want to make the sacrament a 'sacred and almost magical' gesture or life a purely voluntary effort without reference to God and his grace.

Today the risk is the opposite: that we become accustomed to the sacrament because there is no limit to its 'use' and we forget to lead a 'penitent' life.

Now the penitential dimension is essential to Christian maturity. Without it, both the beginning and the further journey of conversion are impossible: this consists in taking on something and leaving many others, choosing and cutting, destroying old or useless things or habits and letting oneself be rebuilt. In this sense, the stories of Abraham and the apostles speak to us.

Penance as conversion is the initial message, the main example and the constant recommendation of Jesus: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'⁷ 'whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.'⁸ For this reason it would be taken up in the Church in a public form by persons and groups as a special charism. Their function would be to make the imitation of Jesus in this aspect 'radical' and to remind the whole people of God of it.

Salesian spirituality incorporates this aspect according to its own vocation and style, and proposes paths for penance.

Work

Not simply occupying one's time with any activity but dedication to the mission with all one's abilities and full time. In this sense it includes not only manual labour, but also intellectual and apostolic labour.

The writer works, the confessor works, the preacher works, the student works.

The importance of work in our life is easily understood from two facts: its mention in the coat of arms and Don Bosco's last words: 'I exhort you to work, work, work!'⁹ But it also has a strong symbolic value: work is a manifestation of our poverty, it is a trait of the lowly class to which we dedicate our preferential care, it is the main content of our education programmes in professional and technical schools, it is the characteristic of one of the figures of our members, the brother; it is our way of fitting into society and culture.

The penance involved is clear if we think of the professional training and updating it requires, the personal tastes that must be controlled, the stamina and the hard work.

There is a spiritual motivation behind it: the Salesian knows 'that by his work he is participating in the creative action of God and cooperating with Christ in building the Kingdom.'¹⁰

Temperance

Temperance is the cardinal virtue that moderates impulses, words and actions according to reason and the requirements of Christian life. Around it gravitate continence, humility, sobriety, simplicity and

7 Mt 4:17.

8 Mt 10:38.

9 BM IV, 151.

10 SDB Constitutions, C 18.

austerity. In the preventive system the same realities are included in reasonableness. Its manifestations in daily life are balance, that is, moderation in everything, a suitable discipline, the ability to collaborate, inner and outer calm, a serene and authoritative relationship with everyone, but especially with young people.

Temperance is above all a permanent 'athletic state' for any request on behalf of young people; to become and remain free from overly conditioning ties, from the weight of personal tastes and needs that create dependencies.

Fraternal love

Fraternal love¹¹ implies self-control, the effort to pay attention, control of spontaneous feelings, overcoming conflicts, understanding the suffering of others. It is an exercise that makes you come out of yourself and change your orientation, with the commitment to demonstrate it in an understandable way.

All this seems too light and almost cheerful compared to the seriousness of penance and conversion. Don Bosco expressed this apparent contradiction with the dream of the pergola of roses.¹² The Salesians walk on petals.

Everyone thinks they are 'enjoying themselves'. In fact they are 'happy'. Stung by thorns they don't lose their joy. This too is asceticism: simplicity, a good face, not making a scene. It responds to the evangelical advice: 'And whenever you fast, do not look dismal ... put oil on your head and wash your face.'¹³

4. Educators and ministers of penance

We have heard many times that, according to Don Bosco, reconciliation and the Eucharist are the pillars of education. Perhaps we have not stopped to meditate on the full meaning of this statement. We have taken it as a suggestion to maintain religious practices rather than as a recommendation for a multifaceted and complex educational experience.

Certainly, in Don Bosco's life there are expressions that show the importance he attributed to the sacrament. In each of the three exemplary biographies (Dominico Savi, Michael Magone, Francis Besucco) there is a chapter that talks about confession. In the *Life of Dominic Savio*, which is the first in chronological order, the chapter deals with the two sacraments, penance and the Eucharist. In the *Life of Michael Magone*, on the other hand, there are two chapters, the fourth and the fifth, dedicated solely to confession. In biographical form, Don Bosco proposes a teaching method to help young people overcome their bad tendencies, to grow in humanity and orient themselves towards God through penance.

A Don Bosco scholar, Fr Alberto Caviglia, believes that the fifth chapter of this biography is one of Don Bosco's most important pedagogical writings, an outstanding document of his spiritual guidance.

There is also a photograph, which was already very popular during Don Bosco's lifetime and travelled around the world after his death. In it, Don Bosco is posing while hearing the confessions of young people. The boy Paul Albera is leaning his head on Don Bosco's, as if to confess his sins, while many young people are waiting their turn around the pre-dieu.

11 Cf. SDB Constitutions, C 90.

12 BM III, 25-28.

13 Mt 6:16-17.

This photograph was not taken by chance. It was chosen and prepared by Don Bosco with the intention of spreading it. It is a poster, a manifesto, a message. He intended to express, with an image, what he had said and written in words: 'Experience has amply shown that the greatest helps and aids to development in time of youth are the sacraments of Confession and Communion. Any boy or girl who receives these sacraments regularly and well, will develop in time of youth, reach great maturity and go on to old age, if God spares them, exemplifying a way of life which is an inspiration to all who know them. Would that all our young people could grasp this and try to carry it out; and that all those concerned with their upbringing and education could grasp it likewise, in order to help in its fulfilment in the young..'¹⁴

However, the most original thing about him was not his insistence on approaching the sacrament, but his ability to create an educational environment of reconciliation, so that there was continuity between life experience and the sacramental moment. At the oratory the young person felt accepted and appreciated in an environment of family and trust, stimulated to communicate and invited to progress, with relationships that invited him to grow. This became a genuine antechamber of reconciliation. It was experienced first in a human and immediate form. Not infrequently, young people went from a friendly conversation in the courtyard with Don Bosco to an act of penance.

Reconciliation, especially the extraordinary kind, was wrapped in a festive atmosphere, according to the evangelical style: the Eucharistic celebration, followed by something 'special' at the table, time for play, musical and artistic events accompanied and enveloped the forgiveness obtained. The young people could count on all the favourable conditions: time, place, people, invitations.

It was in this context that the number of Salesian priests who heard the confessions of young people increased, and they had a great influence on the vocations of both young men and young women.

Today we are experiencing a threefold phenomenon: the first is abandonment by the majority, the second is the quick confession that a number are accustomed to, the third, a positive one, is the request for spiritual direction by a group that is small in number but in search of spiritual quality.

The answer to this consists in retracing the educational path with the many, being available to the second group to support their still imperfect efforts, and also becoming capable of guiding the few who ask for more careful assistance.

¹⁴ JOHN BOSCO, *Life of Young Dominic Savio*.

The mature expression of pastoral charity: fatherhood

1. Priest educator

We have seen the complete picture of Don Bosco. Let's now see him 'in action': setting up a project, governing a community.

There are two main features, two major characteristics that remain in all the images we form of him. One is his vocation as a priest: his heart and his priestly ministry; the other is his educational genius, his affinity with young people, his ability to understand and relate to them. The most widespread iconography represents him well: a priest surrounded by children, affectionately turning towards them, holding their hands and listening to them. If any one of these were to be removed or even just weakened, his figure would be betrayed.

Educational originality has had more luck in history: from the beginning it has been more widely presented and commented on, to the point, in some cases, of allowing the other dimension, the priestly one, to be forgotten and left in the shadows. It has also been favoured in centenary celebrations. Reviewing the titles of the conferences, biographies and complete or sectorial monographic studies, one realises that the theme of 'Don Bosco the educator' is more often taken up: Don Bosco and vocational schools, Don Bosco and free time, Don Bosco and popular culture, Don Bosco and the promotion of marginalised and poor youth.

The person who looked particularly closely at the figure of 'Don Bosco the priest' during the centenary year was the Cardinal of Turin, Cardinal Ballestrero. He focused his retreat to the Provincials of Italy on the theme 'A priest for the young', emphasising precisely the word 'priest'. He then addressed a pastoral letter to his clergy entitled 'Saint John Bosco, priest of Christ and the Church'. And also in his homily at the Mass to open the centenary celebrations, he linked all of Don Bosco's educational endeavours to priestly inspiration.

Biographers have almost always dedicated a few chapters to 'Don Bosco the priest'. Fr Auffray, for example, in his book entitled *Don Bosco the educator* devotes a chapter on his role as a priest, but immediately goes on to show him to be a brilliant educator of young people. In his book *Don Bosco with God*, Fr Ceria focuses on Don Bosco as confessor and preacher, and at the end develops the chapter '*Gemma sacerdotum*' ('Pearl of Priests'), but concentrates on the ministerial aspects: preaching, confession, celebration of the Eucharist.

On the other hand, there are few complete and systematic studies on 'Don Bosco the priest', which link his educational ability to the grace of the priesthood and other aspects of his personality and work, such as the foundation of the Congregation and other ecclesial associations.

This is perhaps because the choice and the educational method since Don Bosco's time was an unusual expression of the priesthood and in the priesthood. There were many good priests; on the contrary, priests who were friends of street children, able to live with poor young people and prepare programmes for their recovery and growth appropriate to their condition, were few. Even today, it happens that good, normal priests are not talked about and instead those who have a unique apostolate

are favoured. This is also due to the Salesians and other admirers of Don Bosco who wanted to present him in a likeable and attractive way, not only in religious circles, but also to the world: this sensitivity comes from Don Bosco himself, who, as you remember, developed a 'secular' version of the preventive system.

With regard to the priesthood, we must focus our reflection on the consistency of his priestly identity, that is, the extent, the depth to which Don Bosco embodied his role as a priest to the point that he didn't feel like, didn't want to be and in reality wasn't anything other than a priest; consequently, he sought his fulfilment as a man and as a disciple of Christ by developing his priestly grace.

There is a fact that is purely an observation: the priest in him emerged in all aspects of the person and filled them. John Paul II reminds us of this in *Juvenum Patris* when he says: 'Don Bosco was first and foremost a true priest. The dominant note of his life and his mission was the very strong sense of his priestly identity: a Catholic priest according to the heart of God.'

His words are a comment on Don Bosco's words, familiar to us Salesians, but it is worth remembering and hearing again: 'I want you to know that Don Bosco is a priest at the altar, a priest in the confessional, a priest among his boys, a priest in Turin, and a priest in Florence. He is a priest in the house of the poor and a priest in the palace of the king!'¹ He didn't think he had to make people forget, hide or put him in the background when he dealt with secular affairs or presented himself in 'worldly' environments; on the contrary, the priesthood had to justify what he did and how he did it, and become a sign of the gospel and of the Church.

This biographical fact has been considered by all as the first and most important in interpreting Don Bosco. Fr Albera summarised it in the expression 'A priest always and at every moment'. And Fr Brocardo states: 'It is not possible to think of him as anything other than a priest'.²

We should remember it for two reasons.

The first is current ecclesial news. The *Synod on the formation of priests in the current circumstances* was faced with two possible directions for discussion: One emphasised 'the current conditions in which the priesthood must be exercised', taking for granted the acceptance of the so-called doctrine of ministry and dwelling on the difficulties and situations in which the priest must live; the other favoured a deeper study of 'the identity of the priest', as an idea or image of the priest to be interiorised in accordance with the word of God and the tradition of the Church.

The Synod and the corresponding Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* chose the second. The greatest risk would not be in the lack of adaptation of priests to some of today's particularities, but in not being able to take on, interiorise and totally identify with what the ecclesial tradition and the Word of God offer to the priest.

The second reason why it is urgent to meditate on this aspect is that we educators (headmasters, sports centre organisers and oratory directors) work in secular roles and it can be difficult for us to express this identity at all times: to be priests first and foremost, in all that we do, in all that we are. Fr Egidio Viganò expressed this when he said that there could be many priests in the Congregation and little priesthood.

This characteristic of Don Bosco, of always feeling and appearing above all as a priest, can be seen from another angle: the subjective one, that is, the satisfaction, the personal joy he experienced in being a priest.

1 BM VIII, 239.

2 Cf. P. BROCARDO, *Don Bosco: Profoundly Human - Profoundly Holy*, p. 87 in the English translation of *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Rome 1985, found on SDL.

This identity, joyfully possessed, is the fruit of grace, but also of a personal journey of identification: that identification that takes place through meditation, through the exercise of the ministry, through cordial participation in the concerns of the Church. We ask ourselves, then, with which type of priest Don Bosco identified.

In this regard there is another comment by Cardinal Ballestrero. Don Bosco identified himself with the priest of the best ecclesiastical tradition, not rigidly linked to any of the figures that were seen at the time: not to that of the parish priest, of the priest who takes on the spiritual care of a group of people or the chaplaincy of an institution; not that of the priest who plays a diocesan role, of the seminary or university professor. Even less dependent on political or cultural positions: the fundamentalist priest, the liberal priest, the 'modern' priest, the 'social' priest.

All these figures were widespread and represented by portions of the clergy. 'St John Bosco felt and knew how to be simply a priest at all times', with reference to the models that most emphasised pastoral work and charity such as Fr Cafasso, but going back from these models directly to Christ the priest and above all to the priestly sense of the Church.

But there is a second aspect to his particular style of fatherhood, which is not only spiritual and priestly, but also almost biological, deeply human: a fatherhood that supports the poor person as he grows from infancy.

They are his vocation, the genius, the 'educational' choice that emerge already in the first years of his life. They manifest themselves in a predilection for young people and in the desire to open them up to the fullness of life in its various expressions: to the awareness of their own dignity, to joy, to work, to friendships: all in the direction and under the light of eternal salvation. He had these tastes and aptitudes even before he was ordained a priest, to such an extent that someone said: just as some people are born artists, Don Bosco was born an 'educator'.

In his monographic study on the Preventive System, Fr Pietro Braido has this question: in Don Bosco, did the desire to gather children together first manifest itself in order to make them better, and did the idea of the priesthood mature in relation to this, or was his first desire and vocation the priesthood, even if imagined being close to young people?

After noting the different opinions, he shows that these two tensions are continually intertwined, almost without distinction, in Don Bosco's life; but that during, and above all at the end of the maturing process the priestly vocation acts as a source that generates attitudes and initiatives, while youth and education become the pastoral field in which to exercise the priesthood.

The pastoral choice of youth and education was not an easy one. There were many priests in Turin. Don Bosco complained about the scarcity of clergy due to the closure of seminaries. But in Turin in 1838 there was one priest for every 137 people, that is, 851 priests for 117,000 inhabitants.

There was the priest who wanted to carry out the ordinary ministry of the parishes in a conscientious manner and with good spirit. Don Bosco was offered a post as assistant priest, a post that brought in an income three times higher than that of a labourer, so let's say a financially convenient post. Some people acted as 'family' priests, and Don Bosco was offered the job of tutor, the teacher for a rich family. There were chaplains for institutes and Don Bosco was also offered this job. They were socially worthy jobs and 'secure' from a financial point of view.

Meanwhile, the city was exploding due to the new phenomena of immigration, poverty and child labour. The choice to throw himself not into a parish, not into a family, not into an institution, but onto the street, therefore without a fixed income and a recognised job, was a courageous and new pastoral choice. Don Bosco practically placed himself within the new pastoral currents that were forming in the Church of Turin. So, rather than 'being a priest' in a defined institutional role, he preferred 'being a priest' for the people and young people in the ecclesial community; without a rigid

role framework, but certainly in agreement with his bishop who at a certain point appointed him 'director' or person in charge of the oratory work.

In this contact with poor young people he had some typical experiences. One was the dazzling realisation of the relationship between faith that works through charity and the lives of young people, and thus the understanding of the function of total salvation that his priesthood had, different from the more limited function that consists of Christian initiation, teaching catechism or the religious attention typical of the parish ministry. He had to take care of the life and happiness of children, including saving them from prison, misery, ignorance, and unawareness of their own vocation and destiny.

The other experience is the urgency and effectiveness of giving human, sensitive and comprehensible expression to charity towards young people, in such a way as to make up for the affection of the family, recovering the affective dimension and making them experience, in a sensitive way, the fatherhood of God.

It is clear that the natural gifts present in Don Bosco since childhood, that is his innate ability to get close to young people and his deep human sensitivity for which he has been called 'a genius of the heart', were taken up, strengthened and transformed by his priestly calling.

2. Don Bosco's typical fatherhood

A characteristic of Don Bosco as educator, founder and superior that is much commented on and much desired today – his fatherhood or fatherliness – springs and develops from the fusion of these two traits, or if you prefer, these two energies of his personality.

The priesthood was his continuous source of nourishment, from which it flows like a powerful and uninterrupted spring; the choice of young people and the encounter with them for their fullness of life is like the mould, the imprint in which his fatherhood was given its typical shape, its tone and its expressions.

What is said in article 20 of our Constitutions about the Preventive System is true with regard to this fatherliness: it comes from the Holy Spirit through vocation, charism and the priestly ministry. 'The Spirit formed within him the heart of a father' (C 1); but it also shaped the typical gestures and expressions in the encounter and interaction with young people.

To simplify and just to explain, we could say: the priesthood provides the substance; pedagogy the method. Nothing specific and focused on Don Bosco's fatherliness can be said without taking these two aspects into consideration. If the first is lacking or diminished, the 'Da mihi animas' is lost; if the second is lacking, the Preventive System fails.

Thus he matures into a 'spiritual' fatherhood: the fatherliness of a priest who through baptism generates others to grace and through forgiveness leads them back mercifully to the Father. It is that fatherhood of which St Paul spoke to the Corinthians when he said to them: 'For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.'³ But there is also an almost 'biological' manifestation of fatherhood, which is taking responsibility for one's whole life, which reaches young people in a tangible way to the point of provoking a desire and enthusiasm for growth in them, an awareness of their own value, a new ability to understand life which they have yet to learn to feel and interpret.

3 1 Cor 4:15

Fatherhood is a recurring request. It seems to be one of the aspects most at risk from the 'project mentality' that can sometimes be 'entrepreneurial or managerial', from the multiplicity of occupations and also from the new relationship between individuals and superiors, between fathers and children. The very trait of fatherhood is at risk; but also its interpretation and realisation in Salesian terms. It is not only a request from those who are eager for attention and affection; it is a charismatic trait that affects the Salesian Family, because it constitutes its originality in the exercise of authority in harmony with all its other characteristic features.

The ordained ministry represents the concentration and expression of something that is widespread in the Church and in which we all participate: the priesthood of Christ. In the communion of the Salesian and educational community, each of the roles emphasises one dimension without denying the other. The superior is asked to base his ministry on the way Don Bosco exercised it.

3. Expression of Salesian fatherhood

Assuming that we are dealing with a priest and educator in whom fatherhood takes on a particular characteristic, we can ask ourselves what are the manifestations that flow from this, taking for granted that they will be similar, depending on whether it is expressed towards children or adults.

In general, when we talk about Don Bosco's fatherhood we focus on his gestures of reassuring and encouraging kindness, the affection that made the boys behave like children with him: affection and kindness inspired by the love of God and the meekness of Christ. This is a very real aspect which characterised his approach and is very much a part of our memory and our spiritual doctrine. John Paul II clearly emphasised it in the letter he sent us on the occasion of the centenary: *Father and teacher of the young*.

In his book *Don Bosco: Profoundly Human - Profoundly Holy*, Fr Brocardo brought together a series of unpublished anecdotes that elaborate on this theme with the recollections of elderly individuals on whom the fatherly image of Don Bosco had been engraved forever. They had been accepted by someone who had fully taken the place of their parents.⁴

Then there is the anthology of stories of Salesians in difficulty, tried and tested or inexperienced, or others who were lively and brilliant. They have left a picture of him as the head of a family capable of offering peace and happiness to the whole and of valuing each of its members, turning a blind eye, valuing spontaneity, proposing goals, inspiring ideals and expectations.

There is also a collection of texts in which Don Bosco expresses his feelings of compassion, emotion and tenderness for children in need. Think of the words commenting on his visits to prisons: 'I felt deeply moved seeing those young people, idle, bitten by insects.'⁵ A man who cannot remain indifferent in the face of a situation of unhappiness. But he expresses the same sentiment regarding the young people at the oratory who are in a more favourable situation, when he is away from them. We have read and reread the letter from 1884: 'My dear boys, I feel the weight of being away from you and not seeing you, not hearing you, causes such a pain for me that you can hardly imagine.'⁵ The expressions are repeated with regard to adult Salesians, engaged in important roles and in distant lands: "Always call me Father and I shall be happy!"⁶

He was a good man, and this was not just a feeling, but an effective desire for the happiness of others – 'I want you to be happy'. It was something which was present throughout his life and not

⁴ P. BROCARDI, *Don Bosco: Profoundly Human - Profoundly Holy*, pp. 31-40, in the English translation of *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Rome 1985, found on SDL.

⁵ BM XVII, 86.

⁶ BM XVII, 150.

just at special moments, applied to programmes and not just to relationships, and it produced what we call the 'Preventive System', given as a charismatic gift to all the Salesian generations that would follow. This goodness of his was protected and emphasised in practical terms through an organisation of roles that freed it from interventions that could compromise it, and it was emphasised in a celebration of gratitude and trust: two essential attitudes in the Preventive System. In the tradition we remember those who have been able to take it up again. To do no injustice to anyone, let me recall someone whose fatherliness, full of goodness and understanding, is recognised in the liturgy: Blessed Philip Rinaldi.

The trait of kindness, affection, tenderness and hospitality, however, does not sufficiently explain Don Bosco's educational fatherhood. This appears in all its clarity in two other elements. Don Bosco's fatherhood, like any other, is a perfect combination of affection and responsibility: he is in fact tender and understanding, but at the same time responsible for the 'life' of his children, capable of clarifying, proposing and demanding what would last in the long term. It was therefore not only 'oil' that soothed things momentarily, but energy that led people to the arduous aspects of real life. A father figure, both affectionate and authoritative. 'Everything about him was a father,' Fr Caviglia would say, 'he had everything: the tender and strong love for his adopted children, the resistance to fatigue and pain, the acute sense of responsibility as the head of the family and the limitless devotion that could be likened to a mother's love.' Don Bosco was an educator who not only welcomed, but also proposed; not only forgave, but also guided towards effort.

He was not just a 'nice man'; he had a rich and realistic idea of life. Just think of the whole matter of work, study and duty. The consequences extended to his educational perspective, to the community and to individuals.

This is where the priestly character of his fatherhood comes in. He wanted to open young people up to the mystery of God; bring them into contact with him; reveal to them the marvellous plan of salvation that God had for them and thus help them to be happy in this world and in eternity.

This way of conceiving and seeking the happiness of the young was the expression of his priesthood. If Don Bosco had been a good friend, but only concerned with teaching young people the noble values of natural life, he would have been no more than a good teacher. His 'pedagogical' loving-kindness, his style of goodness was instead linked to the 'desire', the 'longing' – as St Paul would say – to generate young people to the life of grace that comes from the priesthood of Christ, whose function is the revelation of the Father. His, in substance and method, was a pedagogy of the soul. Don Bosco looked after the soul, the grace, the life in God of the young and of his confreres.

The approach of his entire educational organisation and of each of its moments and factors was salvific. The purpose of everything (relationships, activities, environment) tended to give rise to and nurture faith.

Fr Braido's conclusion is: 'We are not surprised then that his educational system, although permeated with joy, cheerfulness and humanity, has "devotion" at its centre and fundamental inspiration.' Some may be disappointed, because his admiration for Don Bosco is linked to a different perspective. He thinks of him as a holy priest, yes, but of a new, human, 'modern' holiness, while everything in him is strongly rooted in religion, in faith.

Hence religious meaning did not just occupy one sector of his activities (for example, catechism or church services), but permeated all moments and all educational interventions: 'good education' has religious roots, duty is inspired by faith, obedience to superiors and friendship with companions are motivated by the gospel. The 'good citizen' is the good Christian.

What Fr Egidio Viganò liked to say, viz., 'upright citizens because good Christians', is not the most frequent formulation found in Don Bosco, but it is certainly the one that best represents his mentality: the best expressions of personal growth flow from the root of faith.

These comments certainly make us, as priest educators, think again, in an age in which educational professionalism doesn't seem to easily accept a confessional and priestly 'form'.

This is the first and most important aspect of the priesthood and priestly fatherhood. What does a father do? He gives birth to life and accompanies its growth. The life to which the priest refers is that which comes from Christ: 'That they may know you and the one you have sent.'

The second aspect that belongs to his priestly fatherhood is *absolute trust* (and I emphasise absolute) *in the transforming power of 'religion'* – this is what Don Bosco said and I use his term – of which the priest is minister and dispenser. Today we say that *religion* is one thing and *faith* is another, and it is good to distinguish between the two. In his language, religion includes the presence of God, first barely perceived, and then recognised and accepted, the illumination of the mind through the word, the formation of the conscience and the purification of the heart through the sacraments, the acceptance of grace, mysterious inner strength, life in the Church. In short, the whole universe of mystery, perceived and accepted at first, then enjoyed, and therefore desired to an ever increasing degree.

The consequence of this approach was the continuous and confident application of priestly ministries in the educational process and in the guidance of the religious and educational community. Similarly, for his collaborators, the priestly educational fatherhood was expressed in the ability to give birth to their charismatic vocation, to help them grow in the sense of consecration, to make them more and more open to grace until they achieved holiness.

Priestly ministry of the word

The priestly ministry of the 'word' has, as a paternal and educational characteristic, the ability to speak to the heart and in a very direct way about the points that concern the boy or his confrere, enlightening them, so that they have from Christ a stimulus to life and an encouragement to grow, just as a father does, who draws what he says not from a text on theology or pedagogy, but from lived experience and from a relationship of affection. This is perhaps the difference from other ritual forms of this ministry. Don Bosco, a priest and man of the word, had the ability to talk about the things that the boy felt were important and make the words of the gospel resound in his heart, translated into understandable language. It is a ministry that the priest-educator exercises at all times, and for which he does not need to climb into the pulpit. The substance of the ministry of the word is not the ritual framework, but the fact that it brings the light of Christ and makes his grace present.

The ministry of the word is the conversation you have in a personal meeting; it is the advice that is given even in passing. In Don Bosco it was the 'word in the ear', a personalised, direct and affectionate message.

A typical manifestation of the ministry of the word is the 'good night'. It constitutes the 'Salesian' model of speaking to young people: placed in a 'celebratory' community context from the family point of view, at an evocative moment at the end of the day, it is based on the father-son relationship and on the desire to communicate. Its pattern is extremely appropriate: it takes a situation in life, whether known or endured, and tries to shed light on it through common sense and faith, instilling joy and encouragement also through its easy and humorous tone.

These are the characteristics of priestly, paternal and educational speech. The 'good night' is to Salesian speech what the homily is to preaching: the prototype, the one that bears its fundamental characteristics.

Priestly ministry of sanctification

Don Bosco expressed his priestly educational fatherhood *in* and *through* the ministry of sanctification. He aimed to put young people and confreres in direct contact with God through their own conscience and the mediation of grace. Once this had been achieved, the function of the educator was secondary and complementary. Grace has its own paths. But the relationship and openness must be renewed and allowed to grow.

The most typical and personalised moment is the sacrament of reconciliation. It emphasised the desire for change and the intention to grow as a Christian. However, it was not isolated from other religious acts or from life. It can be said that Don Bosco was a mystagogue: he initiated and introduced the celebration and ensured its effectiveness through educational mediation. However, there was no clear break in theme or style between the conversation in the courtyard and the moment when the young man knelt to summarise the conversation about his life in a more profound way and to receive forgiveness.

Sacraments and exhortations to sanctify oneself and one's work led to a rethinking of attitudes and behaviour, an enlightenment of the conscience and progressive conversion. The same thing happened with his confreres. Don Bosco was attentive and encouraged their fidelity and urged them to holiness.

Priestly ministry of guidance

The third priestly ministry, guidance, is the power, the grace to gather the Christian community and guide it in faith, hope and charity, so that it may express the presence of God among human beings and thus become a sign and instrument of salvation.

Don Bosco's priestly educational fatherhood is manifested in his effort to make the whole educational complex *a family*, where the figure of the father (the rector) and the older brothers (the assistants) make everyone feel 'at home', in the shadow of the signs of the presence of God the Father; for this reason the chapel is within easy reach of the young people, prayers are said at the beginning of each activity, the day ends with prayer, the Eucharist is celebrated as a community and organisational and work issues are resolved from the perspective of God and of souls.

There is a widespread characteristic throughout the educational environment which is *familiarity*. It is not just an attitude of the individual educator, but is a feature of the organisation, of the rules, of government, relationships and language.

One thinks precisely of a family structure and not of an institution. There is also an atmosphere, which we have emphasised many times, of joy and trust. In this way the educational environment is created, understood not only as an atmosphere, but also as a fabric of relationships.

It would be interesting –I'm just mentioning it – to review the anthology of Salesian texts, to re-read the reality of this educational whole in all its details and nuances. I'll just remind you that Fr Braidò, who studies it from an educational point of view, dedicates two chapters to it, chapters 4 and 5 of the second part of his book on the Preventive System.

The whole effort to create a family atmosphere not only comes from Don Bosco's pedagogical intuition: young people in a setting characterised by affection are more open, they assimilate attitudes and proposals more easily; but it is connected to his priestly grace, that is, to the project of making them assimilate and feel the 'beauty' of Christian life and of holiness itself, which is inner peace, the joy of living together, enthusiasm for undertaking initiatives, hope in the future.

In its various expressions, the Salesian tradition has preserved these two personality traits of the superior: *care for the spiritual life* and *kindness*. In some, it is presented with a clarity that serves as an example to us. I am referring to the Blessed Philip Rinaldi, of whom it has been written: 'He habitually

presented God as a father, so that deep down he felt the need to feel and make others feel the infinite fatherhood that loves in silence, welcomes and forgives' (Fr Ricaldone).

Don Bosco's fatherhood was expressed in a context characterised by 'familiarity', that is, by the patriarchal family model, considered as the cell and prototype of all other social forms.

The principle that education should take on a paternal form was undisputed.⁷ Today, this reference involves values to be preserved and new attitudes to be adopted. The source and the style are unchanged: responsible love that opens up to life and care. The expressions, in adult communities and where shared responsibility is emphasised, may vary.

⁷ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, New Rochelle, 1996, p. 474.

Good servant of Christ 1 Tim 4:6

1. Unity between person and service

It is not unusual to meet people who say they don't feel comfortable in the place or job they've been given. Therefore they consider it temporary and carry on as if it were so. Not only that, but they look for some 'recuperation time', opportunity for greater legitimate satisfaction in some other activity.

Sometimes the superior himself, sensing the tension, suggests 'safe' outlets to them in the form of hobbies.

The division between *work* and *personal fulfilment* is a phenomenon of our culture and current situation. Many people are forced to do a job that doesn't suit them: they then take revenge on their frustration at other times. They work in one part, but 'live', what is really called living, in another. Work earns money or fulfils social and institutional obligations (in our case!); gratification and personal desires lie elsewhere.

Some believe that this division is natural. And it is. But it is too natural, especially when work is a 'mission' and when there is some indication of God's will involved. In the meantime it has consequences, at least limiting ones, both for personal growth and in how service is carried out. With regard to the former, the limitation consists in not being able to capitalise on the experience, even spiritually, that the situation entails. With regard to service, what is said is true: 'No one achieves the perfection of a job unless they feel pleasure in it.' Obligation alone does not lead to skill. The most serious consequence is not just the potential limitation in the time dedicated to service.

This happens often, but above all it is the skimping of personal resources: not functioning with all the potential one has; not being able to give oneself totally.

This can happen, and does happen, among those who are called to the responsibility of animation and government. Division, or simple separation, always involves suffering and relative ineffectiveness. The secret to serenity and also to good results lies in *building unity between person and service*. When we say *person* we mean heart, mind, desires, tastes, occupation, friendships. When we talk about *service* we mean coordination and formation, pleasant and difficult confreres, encouraging initiatives and annoying practices, community animation and the accompaniment of people entrusted to us, fraternal life and social and even bureaucratic relationships, planning and resizing, motivation and appropriate corrections.

The exercise of authority has difficult aspects that the Holy Scriptures describe in an incisive way in the parable that Jotham proposed to the lords of Shechem:¹ the vine, the fig tree and the olive tree are invited to be king of the trees, but they reply that they cannot bring themselves to give up their original qualities (sweetness, the ability to communicate joy, gentleness and peace) and start fighting with those who the ones they should be ruling. It is clear that taking on the responsibility of governing often means giving up cultivating and sharing what one considers most in line with one's nature. The bramble is then invited, and not only does it accept, but it promises that it will make itself respected.

The exercise of authority involves deciding and taking sides, something many have called 'odious': let's simply say it is 'arduous'. And in exercising power one can deviate towards forms of selfishness

1 Cf. Judges 9:7-15

and even violence. On the other hand, the full meaning of authority is provided by Jesus' words when he invites us to serve, and in the gesture of washing the feet of his disciples he reveals its meaning.

Unity demands that we overcome the attachment of the vine, the fig tree and the olive tree to their legitimate tastes and projects; to moderate, within just limits, the readiness of the bramble to use power and instead place everything under the sign of brotherly love that is shown to us in the washing of the feet.

There are some reflections that can help us build this unity.

2. "The call" to responsibility

The first consideration is the awareness that the invitation or the order to take on a role is a 'call from God' to participate more from within and with more responsibility in the construction of his Kingdom at a specific time and in a specific place. If this were not the case, our appointment would be pure 'chance', the result of friendship or, at best, only the result of a technical search to discover the best talents in the community.

Instead, it is an initiative of God linked to all the previous ones that have marked the emergence and maturation of our vocation.

At the congress of young religious, held in Rome in September 1997, the speaker who dealt with the subject of 'vocation' showed that God's calls or invitations follow one another, complete one another and become clearer in the course of a person's life.

We cannot know what we were meant to be, what we were called to, until we become this through successive generous and trusting responses to as many calls. He indicated, as steps along the way, the call to Life, the call to faith or to be a Christian, the call to consecrated life, the call to live in a certain Church and in a specific world that is ours. He also showed that the calls not only follow one another but also clarify and enrich each other. The vocation to faith does not replace that to life, but opens up new dimensions and horizons to it. The invitation to consecrated life does not replace the previous two, but takes them on, brings greater meaning and brings out new possibilities. The same can be said of the call to live as a person, a Christian and a consecrated person, in the Church of which we are a living part, and in our world today with its challenges, advantages and difficulties.

I would like to apply the same line of reflection to the call to take responsibility for the service of one's confreres and communities. These, as consecrated persons, are God's property. He cares for them and proposes certain people to them according to his providence. For whoever is sent this implies an initiative of God in line with the first and fundamental vocational call, and which fulfils it in its truest and most fundamental characteristics: to live the gospel radically and to collaborate with God in salvation. It is not beneficial for Christian maturity to imagine oneself free from community responsibilities.

And that is what happened to Jesus' followers. First they had the joy of meeting and getting to know the Lord and the privilege of being close to him on a regular basis, then came their partial participation in his ministry of service, which not only involved travelling and meeting all kinds of people, but also sharing in his suffering and death. In this the disciples showed limitations and misunderstandings that the Lord pointed out and corrected. Then, with the coming of the Spirit, they were given the task of evangelisation and of caring for the communities established in the name of Jesus. Not only the joyful proclamation, but also community life and witness: not only the word, but also the people and the organisation. Thus, like Jesus, they learnt to die to themselves and to live for others. 'Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will

fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.² Jesus introduces these words to Peter as an explanation, between two others: 'Feed my sheep' and 'Follow me' in a gospel story that is completely focused on the pastoral care of the community.

To realise that these are initiatives and the will of God, it is helpful to offer a 'spiritual' interpretation of the steps that have led us to the situation in which we find ourselves. The Provincials need to believe that the community consultation, according to which they were appointed, is the result of discernment guided by the Spirit. The decision of the Rector Major and his Council is one of those mediations that we accept and almost agree on with the Lord in our profession. I like a comment by one author: 'Obedience is not a profession of suffering or endurance, but of joy in the certainty of God's will, which shows us where to use what he has freely given us.'

It is beneficial for the unity of feelings, desires and tasks to consider that the service of authority is a personal opportunity for us, a completely unique one, to grow in every sense. The Provincials says this to me in their letters.

Visits to communities and personal meetings with their confreres open up unknown panoramas of human variety and richness. Having to evaluate situations and enlighten communities leads them to deepen all the dimensions of their vocation and of Salesian spirituality. Having to participate in the responsibilities of the local Church or of the Congregation at large introduces them to broader horizons of evaluation and realisation. Having to resolve painful situations opens them up to understanding, compassion, respect for people and dialogue.

Often, when looking for someone for a delicate mission, the question is asked whether they have already carried out the functions of animation and government. This is considered a training ground and a test of certain qualities: the ability to judge events and people correctly, the capacity to establish good relationships with a wide range of 'types', the ability to cope with difficulties, the ability to keep a clear goal in evangelisation and education, and to develop new initiatives in relation to these goals.

Therefore, the Lord, in 'calling you' to take on responsibilities, is not so much asking you to make a 'sacrifice' as offering you a grace.

At this point someone might raise an objection: I'm not capable, I feel inadequate. This is a pertinent feeling. The type of work is such that no one can consider themselves totally up to the task. We feel confident when working with steel, when counting or exchange currency or when using a computer. When it comes to people, their choices and their relationship with God, everything depends on the unpredictable and on free reactions.

The feeling of inadequacy can be found in all the stories of a 'call' to responsibility by God. Moses, Gideon, Jeremiah, the Virgin Mary and Paul said so... to mention just a few. Those who are driven to prophesy feel exposed and weak; those who are called to speak know that they stammer and get confused; those who are called to work for people and for God declare themselves to be poor and inexperienced.

However, there is always an answer from the Lord. He assures us that he will grant us not general help, but specific help, proportionate to what he asks of us, to what we are and to the situations in which the beneficiaries of our service find themselves. In traditional theological terminology, and in our case, it is called the *grace of state*. It works in us, awakening potential energies and possibilities that were previously hidden. When we are our superiors' superior, we often dare, and are obliged to dare, to act beyond our abilities; we must act with a confrere or for an initiative lacking in sure indications of a good result. And we see that God comes to our aid.

The grace of state is also at work in the confreres and those to whom we are sent. Many of them cultivate expectations about our service, they value it with a spirit of faith above the value

² John 21:18

of our services, they welcome us as ‘representatives’ of God. Thus the Lord builds the community through their faith and through our inadequate mediation. This is my feeling and my conclusion after numerous meetings with my confreres and communities.

The grace of the state is at work in the communities as a whole and also at work in the institution, meaning not a set of cold instruments of government, but the organisation and the fabric of roles, purposes and instruments that the communities have given themselves in view of the authenticity and continuation of the charism. They give the person in charge an initial, almost blank cheque of trust and authority which, if not squandered but made to bear fruit, represents a totally reliable guarantee. When I was appointed a rector at the age of 33, an older confrere said to me: ‘Many know more than you and are more virtuous than you are. But rest assured that this benefits and facilitates your authority. They will accept you precisely because they are wise and virtuous and see signs of the will of God in your guidance. Your youth makes you even more acceptable because they see in you the fruit of their labour and the realisation of their hopes.’

One final comment: the grace and growth that come from the responsibility of governing leave their mark and remain with you for the rest of your life. It is not necessary to remain in office for a long time to continue to serve as a ‘Provincial’, that is, as a person who has learned to live for others, to discern and evaluate situations. A popular proverb says that those who have truly been kings, even if only once, never lose their majesty.

Service, or rather the role fully experienced, moulds us. Therefore we must overcome the feeling of experiencing something temporary that we want to get rid of as soon as possible, because our life, our preferences and our potential expression might lie elsewhere.

3. Awareness of being an “instrument”

It is true that the objectives and tasks of animation and governance are beyond us. There are many things to take care of. However, it is not only the multiplicity of things that causes problems. We are also overwhelmed by the quality that each of these tasks requires: we have to accompany people, consecrated people, in a vocation made up entirely of personal decisions, dialogue and freedom. Our ability to convince, to move and to touch, to guide towards holiness is put to the test.

Don Bosco said it: ‘God alone is the master of hearts.’ At this point we must tell ourselves out loud that no one has invited or called us to do this work alone, or even as the main agents, as the key players. One can be very responsible without thinking of or proposing oneself as the main actor or character.

The Holy Spirit is at work in each and every person from the moment of Baptism. He establishes a personal dialogue in the conscience, aspirations and intentions of each person. Confreres don’t come to ask us for many things; they come to tell us or to talk to us about them and we are like spectators, witnesses, friends of the Spouse. We are called to listen, to watch, to learn, to ‘gather’.

In the same way, the Spirit dwells in communities. In following the provinces, I have become convinced that many solutions and adjustments are not due to governance measures taken but to an inner conversion that has taken place after a search on the part of the confreres to overcome a situation: a change that has matured in their conversations or in their commitment to prayer.

The same Spirit is at work in the broader areas we must direct our mission to: our educational community or our neighbourhood, the larger territory where the province carries out its activities and the even vaster world where we participate in a service without borders. The signs of the presence of the Spirit are very visible in the Church. Starting from this we will learn to recognise his presence also beyond the Church.

We will need to meditate. We will need to establish a dialogue with the Spirit. Our judgements, our works, our relationship with people and reality will have to be conceived in the Holy Spirit, discerning his voice and following his directions.

We say of the Holy Spirit in the Creed: he is Lord and giver of life. This is the expression that John Paul II chose as the title for his letter. He is at work magnanimously, energetically and in the direction of life, happiness, meaning and dignity. He is not some poor devil ... who does not succeed; or some vague 'New age' type inspiration that makes people turn in on themselves and waste away in the pure agitation of sentiment. He is not there to entertain us or consume us.

Instead, he inserts us into a grand plan, a project greater than us, in which we are called to collaborate. If we talk about Salesian things, this plan is the Salesian charism and Family, a way of drawing closer to Christ and a revelation of the Father's love for young people through the group of people and initiatives that we call the 'Salesian Mission', and the attitude and practice that we call the 'preventive system'.

If we talk about the *Church*, the grand plan the Spirit introduces us to is the Christian presence in the world, brought about by the universal Church and, beyond it, by religious experience. Today this is included in the movement of new evangelisation. You don't act only in a small space: through the mystery of the vine and the branches, you cooperate in creating the fabric through which the Church is truly an instrument of universal salvation.

If we talk about *history*, the plan is the Kingdom. The Church is a sign of it, not the totality. The Kingdom is the approach to personal and social life that is inspired by our being children of God, called to his communion.

The plan or project is bigger than us. Even if we were capable of managing our own little boat, be it our house or our province, well, we would not have exhausted the needs and possibilities of the project we are participating in. There is always new potential to be extracted from it and there new areas to be worked on. We must have a sense of this, and make it a criterion for evaluation and decision. This is what the Salesian Spirit calls us to: to a magnanimous vision and sentiments. We are not only helped by the confreres who are close to us. We are supported by all those who are on the same wavelength and our connection goes as far as heaven, that is, with the saints, those declared and those undeclared, who have dedicated themselves to the charism, to the Kingdom, or to Goodness. So we are many and in good company.

This view of things translates into the certainty of having received from the Lord what can benefit the community and the Congregation in a specific phase of their life. In the community, many have worked before us and others after us will take steps that are perhaps more important than those we are called to take; we are at a stage that has been preceded by and will be completed by others. Consequently, this should be expressed in the joyful offering of our own possibilities and in a calm frame of mind in the face of our limitations in terms of temperament or ability. We do not have all the knowledge, resources and abilities that a community requires for its life in God and for its mission, but we have what is sufficient at this stage if it is combined with what other confreres who live with us have.

From these same convictions: leader, project, a network of technicians and workers, will come an attitude of gratitude for the confreres and a search for collaboration. It is a question of valuing the gifts of the community, both small and large: of the group that works with us but also of the Congregation, of how much it can give us in terms of experience, encouragement, and sense of the charism.

The defects that I have seen are more on this latter front than on the former. The large community is often thought of as anonymous and vague, an institution we belong to rather than a great communion of goods that the small group would not be able to develop, and therefore a reserve of energy, experience and orientation. We must overcome all the prejudices and all the reasons that limit

working as a team with the world community if we want to enter a wide network of communion and enjoy its benefits.

4. Awareness of being called to a “wonderful vocation”

There are jobs that are heavy, thankless and hard. In the world of organised crime, there is talk of ‘dirty jobs’: the masterminds keep their faces and hands clean, but they instruct others to eliminate people and carry out acts of sabotage. Even in civil life, there are noble jobs and those that only immigrants take on.

What kind of job is it to be a superior?

It is a high quality job. You can see it in the beneficiaries of your service. They are not just people, but people in whom the Spirit has carried out an entire work of sanctification from the moment of the first response to their vocation, and continues to do so. We say that formation is lifelong and that the first agent is the Spirit. We therefore have valuable material in our hands. This becomes even more evident when we consider the human and spiritual possibilities open to our confreres. We have seen these possibilities as they have grown before our eyes, especially if we have been in a formation community.

A scene comes to mind that is repeated in almost all films about saints: superiors who have them in their communities and don’t realise it. Relatively already ‘sanctified’ and on the path to being sanctified even more through consecration, the Eucharist, and the presence of the Spirit, are all the confreres and sisters and it is to them that our task as superiors is directed.

The job is to be valued not only because of those who benefit from it, but because of the work we are called to do and the results we strive for. A few years ago I was attending an ongoing formation course for rectors. The house where we were staying was opposite a barracks. Early in the morning, as they were going to Mass, we could hear the military sound of them getting up and, shortly afterwards, the sound of the non-commissioned officers giving commands: ‘At ease’, ‘Stand still’, ‘March’. We could even see the soldiers in the courtyard trying to carry out these orders.

Keeping a troop in line is also a useful job for society. But we commented with the rectors: ‘What a difference in content and purpose compared to what we do! In animation we work on the soul and the heart, on feelings and convictions.’

All this should lead us to work confidently, even in less than ideal, initial, precarious conditions. It is a question of sowing seeds. Of working the part of the field that you can. Sometimes it is a question of tilling the soil. There are people who are extremely concerned with their success in terms of controllable and showy achievements: they always lack personnel, time and means, but those who tend too much towards achievements end up sacrificing people. While our most desired achievements should be the offering to God of people, our confreres, as ‘pure and immaculate hosts’.

To work in this way, it is necessary to be able to recognise the signs of salvation, the richness of people, the opportunities that suddenly present themselves or, as article 95 of the Constitutions puts it, ‘to discover the fruits of the Spirit in the lives of people.’

We are always impressed by that page of the gospel in which Jesus discovers the widow who offers a penny, among the many people who could attract his attention because of their ostentatious offerings.³ Sometimes we are lost in our search for great talents and great opportunities and we fail to discover the value of what is available to us.

³ Cf. Lk 21:2

There is a form of asceticism to be practised: one of optimism, which consists in believing that the seeds of goodness will multiply and produce new resources, that the kingdom, not only at the time of Jesus, but also today, is like a small seed that will become a tree, like yeast that ferments the dough.

We are called to organise environments of hope: where hope is felt not in words, but because there are realities that attract, convince and make us dream.

We read in the Gospel: 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.'⁴

The word 'service' is one of the gospel's rich, strong and guiding words because Jesus referred to his own life and death almost as the main definition. Unfortunately it is at risk of becoming worn out and generic because it is overused: service to the country, say the politicians; service to the customers, say the salesmen; service at the altar ...

Authority is called 'a service' in the strongest evangelical sense, close to the life and death of Jesus.

This 'service' teaches us, in life, that:

- serving is a dimension of our entire life ('I have come to...'), not a fragment of our time and our actions. It touches on not only our duties, but also our thinking and reasoning. Serving is a way of existing. We must always question ourselves at this level;
- the style of service is clearly opposed to the logic of being served ('But ...'). It is useless to try to reconcile the two. Some endeavours cannot be lived as service while others are self-seeking. According to the gospel, those who are selfish are so in all aspects of their life, both private and public: they are self-centred;
- to serve means to feel responsible for others. 'Care' alludes to solidarity among close relatives. When a brother or sister is in need, we can't ignore it: it affects us and this is how we are called to live;
- service not only meets needs, but accepts the individual. The 'multitudes' for whom Jesus offers himself are neither 'problems' nor 'tasks'; they are people, faces. (The 'patience of the farmer').

⁴ Mk 10:45.

13

Marian Gospel Icons of Salesian Spirituality

1. The Annunciation: appeal and response

The story of the Annunciation to Mary¹ is one of the most beautiful in the Gospel of St Luke. It reports a real event and at the same time proposes its meaning for us and for the history of humanity. It does not only concern the past, but is a key to reading the present. In fact, the Gospel is not only history, but always a proclamation.

The story is constructed with references to the Bible that recall ancient hopes, express current expectations and anticipate man's dreams of salvation. Mary, who personifies humanity, feels all this within herself and is called to make herself available to God to realise it.

'Greetings, favoured one!': this is a greeting used by the prophets when they address the Daughter of Zion. It is not a polite way of introducing oneself, like our ordinary 'Good morning, hello'. Instead, it ensures special attention, the gaze of love, the benevolent will of God for a person and brings proof that can then be verified. It announces a choice that constitutes unparalleled happiness. 'For you have found favour with God.'

*'The Lord is with you.'*² It often appears when God calls someone to a mission; it is repeated in the stories of vocations that will have an important role in salvation. It indicates that God's attention and gaze translate into presence, assistance, companionship, and alliance.

*'For nothing will be impossible for God'*³ is what Sarah, Abraham's wife, was told in the desperate moment of her sterility, at the beginning of the generation of believers. It expresses God's decision to intervene in human affairs in favour of humanity, overcoming any limitation of nature or human freedom. And to do so through some people he has chosen. God can save, Bonhoffer said, with the Holy Scriptures or with a dead dog. The instruments are secondary.

We are faced with the announcement of an event of particular importance for humanity. We are faced with a 'vocation', a 'call', and with the response of the one who of this event was to be the instrument and human mediation.

She was therefore invited, first of all, to believe that the event was possible and also to believe in herself (and this is the most difficult thing!); then to accept committing herself and then again remaining faithful in her collaboration throughout her life. All this, however, was like an unconditional entrusting of self to God.

In the Annunciation there is *an image of God*. A controversial film has tried to explore it. It is a 'personal' God who follows human events and saves us by his love through recognisable interventions. It is interesting to see if we too have an image of God, formed through vocational dialogue, and if it coincides with that of the Annunciation. Or if we have none at all!

God sends an angel: that is, he communicates with us and lets us know his plans, not only, and perhaps not mainly, in solemn moments or in conspicuous ways, but in ordinary life: the

1 Lk 1:26-38.

2 Lk 1:28.

3 Lk 1:37.

Annunciation takes place in Nazareth, in a private home, to a young engaged woman who has the human experience of love, family and responsibility.

We will feel God within ourselves as life goes on and our commitments unfold. Seeing young men and women around us, we should think that a communication with God is taking place in their hearts. Not only does God communicate, but he waits for us to listen and for us to respond.

God has the mysterious power to make fruitful what, to the human eye, is sterile, limited or lost. And it is an uncommon, but precious fruitfulness, from which the children of God originate.

Artists, especially those who paint, but not only those, have shown a preference for this scene of the Annunciation. They always include it when presenting the story of salvation. Many have also left it to us enlarged and separate. When we stand before their masterpieces we remain ecstatic and thoughtful.

We would like to peer into Mary's soul through her demeanour and those delicately crafted facial features, to see something beyond the words and the external scene: we understand that the most important and mysterious thing happens in the heart and mind of Mary, a young unmarried girl, who at the time was between thirteen and fifteen years old.

Her conversation with the Angel, whether a revelation, vision, or just internal inspiration, is private and hidden. It is certainly attention to one's own life, careful listening in the form of discernment; it is a trusting dialogue with God about one's destiny; it is openness to God's proposal; it is entrusting oneself to him due to the realisation of what he is asking of us now, the intermediate stages and the final result.

In every life there is an annunciation, or rather several connected annunciations: they propose something new, they shed light on something so that it can be understood, and they invite us to open ourselves up to hope.

Our vocation was an annunciation. Our profession was inspired by an annunciation. We were called to positions of responsibility in which we must trust in God and await the future with confidence. The principle, condition and criterion of every spiritual journey is: welcome, trust, set out.

The Annunciation reminds us that our response to God, docile, trusting and continuous, is personal. Nothing that a man or woman produces has not been conceived and matured within. Thoughts, feelings, desires, plans, events are elaborated in our heart. This is God's sanctuary. From that sanctuary Mary confesses her intention of virginity, her availability, her entrusting herself.

There the grace and the Spirit are at work, making Mary inwardly Mother of the Word. He was conceived in her soul before he was conceived in her womb. It is a beautiful representation of the Annunciation that shows Mary with the scriptures on her knees as if she were reading them attentively. Serenely concentrated on this she absorbs the word. You can see on her face that she welcomes it and enjoys it.

Our active life, whether consecrated or lay, carries a tension with it: a personal relationship with God, that is to say, attention, dialogue, affectionate and grateful acceptance of the Lord; and, on the other hand, concern for the results of our activity. The latter challenges us and often tempts us. We always want to do more; and little by little we put so much trust in our means and activities that they end up emptying us, unless we continually connect them to the point from which they draw energy and meaning: God's invitation to collaborate with him.

Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. She gave Jesus not only his body, but also his human nature. If the incarnation was to be real, it was inevitable that Jesus would inherit his physical features, her manner of gesturing, perhaps the tone of her voice and the cadence of her speech from his Mother;

but also her way of thinking and reacting to people, problems and things. 'He is just like you in every way', his companions, young mothers, must have told her, looking at Jesus.

We know that Jesus grew in age, wisdom and grace. When he proclaimed his mission, he affirmed his freedom of expression and action even in the face of norms, traditions and family.

In order for Mary to be able to pass on a human nature capable of accepting and expressing the divine person, the Spirit had to work on her thoughts, her will, her feelings, her intentions, her relationships, and make them totally open to God and almost filled with God.

Not only that: the Spirit made Mary's traits and behaviour humanly praiseworthy, that is, capable of manifesting the best of humanity in terms of righteousness, goodness, energy, justice, beauty of words and gestures, sincerity. In fact, the disciples and the people came to recognise and confess the divinity of Christ through his humanity.

Thus Mary became the Mother of Jesus as she was understood yesterday and is still understood today: not an incubator or a breast to be borrowed, but truly the Mother, the one who conceives and gives birth, communicating nature as she possesses it.

The Spirit does not act by force or mechanically but by suggestion, inner dialogue, inspiration: he takes all the time necessary to do a complete and well-combined job calmly, at a human pace.

It is also our path and our story: to feel the call inwardly, to let ourselves be first fertilised inwardly by the Spirit and then shaped during our life and to generate apostolic fruits.

2. The Visitation: generous service

Mary's visit to Elizabeth⁴ seems like a snapshot of daily life: the gesture of solidarity and feminine finesse. Mary sets out to offer the services that a young woman can provide to an elderly relative expecting a child.

The ready departure, the long journey, the prompt and affectionate assistance, are gestures that the Church has preserved in memory and offered as a model. St Francis de Sales used the Visitation as the icon of his foundation: a charity that goes out to meet, enters the home and assists with thoughtful solicitude.

It was and is also common that in these meetings the future mothers talk about their expectations, their fears and their secrets. Mary and Elizabeth had a lot to talk about! The one because of the unique experience of her conception, the other because of the long wait for a child.

It is a delicate picture of intense humanity that writers and painters have allowed us to savour, completing it, for our delight, with picturesque details of the domestic environment.

All this is not marginal to Mary's experience and to our spirituality. These domestic and popular traits free the image of the Mother of Jesus from those superhuman and miraculous attributes with which our imagination conceives her, but which are far from the Gospel narrative.

It is also an indication for us: the call involves us in the life of people according to their needs and questions, even the most basic and natural ones, seen in a new light: love, service, compassion.

But if we limit ourselves to these details, we will not grasp the central meaning of this episode. The visitation is told as a revelation, as an *intervention by God* who spreads the news of his presence among human beings and fulfils his promise of the covenant through the conception of the Saviour in Mary's womb.

What was a secret for Mary is recognised by those who await this secret, personified by Elizabeth, the priest Zechariah and the precursor John. The news spreads throughout the region and is

⁴ Lk 1:39-56.

proclaimed throughout the world through the message of the angels and the revelation to the Magi. Everything begins and happens with and through the presence of Mary, always and in every passage, the image of the Church.

Charity and service always bring good news to mankind, whether or not they are accompanied by a 'religious' discourse.

The facts and the characters of the Old Testament that can be glimpsed in the episode lead to this interpretation. Mary is represented as the Ark of the Covenant, when David takes it from the land of the Philistines to solemnly bring it to Jerusalem. The expression that Elizabeth addresses to Mary reproduces David's words: 'How can the ark of the Lord come to me?'⁵ The exultation of the house of Zechariah recalls the joy of the king who danced, almost out of his mind, before the Ark and the celebration of the people at the arrival of the Lord.

Now the presence of God is no longer through signs, but in person. He became man. What contains and carries him is not a tabernacle, a tent or a material temple: it is humanity, particularly believing humanity, the Church, in the person of Mary. From now on, God's dwelling place on earth is no longer to be made of gold, wood or stone, but of faith, hope and love. The motherhood that is praised is not physical motherhood, but that which comes from faith: 'blessed is she who believed !'⁶

The other elements of the picture are built around this central point of attention, which is the coming of God the Saviour among us. Humanity rejoices in the one who will be the closest witness to the manifestation of Christ, John the Baptist. When a child stirs in the womb, the old wives said, it means that he is dreaming, foreseeing, predicting. This joy of John in his mother's womb precedes the manifestation of his intelligence. It is therefore the voice of the spirit in the depths of humanity that craves the presence of God.

The elderly Elizabeth represents the end of an era in decline: but one that does not end with death. She is given to see the dawn of a new era.

The Gospel leads us to a third perspective: *how this event will transform human life*. The 'Magnificat' is the canticle with which Mary gathers her lived experience and passes it on to all generations. It is anything but a poetic frame to crown the episode. On the contrary, it is a 'creed', Mary's personal profession of faith that encompasses the entire messianic people; Mary becomes the voice and heart of this people. It is the hymn of believing humanity of all times.

She does not give a rational explanation of God, but contemplates his saving works in the history of humankind, starting with the virginal conception and the announcement of the coming of the Saviour: 'He has done great things in me'.

Today he intervenes in an unexpectedly effective way and brings about a new world where the usual patterns of worldly history are turned upside down: those who matter to God, those who carry forward the plan of justice are not the proud and the powerful, but the humble and the hungry, who are the same as those who feel the need for God and for others.

This is the joyful mystery of the Visitation.

The Church relives it as an event that is realised today in the ecclesial community and in all those who await, seek or have accepted Christ. Mary sets out, unaware of the event that would take place in Elizabeth's home. In that apparently spontaneous departure there was the inspiration of God preparing his manifestation. Charity predisposes us to the manifestation of God, expresses it and illuminates it: it is preparation, the way, the sign and the effect of the announcement. It is spread in our

5 2 Sam 6:9.

6 Lk 1:45.

hearts by the Holy Spirit and is made available to others according to their human needs: as charity, assistance, education, accompaniment towards God.

3. The birth of Jesus

We are used to hearing the story of the birth of Jesus in the Christmas season.⁷ St Luke wrote it when there were no nativity scenes. And he would never have imagined that the sheep, the little houses, the lights, the stars could distract attention from the three characters – Jesus, Mary, the shepherds – around whom he builds his meditation.

In the Gospel, Mary, besides being the Mother of Jesus, always represents the Daughter of Zion, that is, the chosen people who give birth to the Messiah in human history. She is also the figure of the Church who carries Jesus in her womb, gives birth to him in the people, and makes him grow until he becomes visible through the life and witness of the community. It is the model of being a Christian proposed to Jesus' disciples.

The text presents the moment of the incarnation. Luke wants to give the idea that it is a real birth of a real man: for this reason he records the date, the historical era, the place, the circumstances of the birth, the care of the Mother.

It is an apparently insignificant event, that happens in a small country, not even in but in the outskirts of an unknown town, far from the places where the important things happen and where the decisions that influence people are made. Bethlehem is the opposite of Rome, Jerusalem or Babylon. The cave is the antithesis of a palace, a temple or a mansion.

And so the event would have remained forever hidden and insignificant. The angels' announcement, on the other hand, makes it "news" for the shepherds who hear not only the story of what happened, but its salvific interpretation: the child born is not just any man; he is the awaited one, the Saviour.

The shepherds, a symbol of all those who wait and are moved from within by God, come to the cave and there receive confirmation of the message received from the angels. Then they spread the news.

In this way Luke reproduces the nature of evangelisation. It is not a theory about God and the world, nor does it only teach religious or ethical truths, but relates events that really happened, highlighting their meaning for mankind and the message they contain. The light that emanates from the proclamation comes from God, but is contained and revealed in the facts of human history.

And here Luke emphasises the different knowledge that the various characters have of the incarnation and its meaning, which are like the key to living all the other events of personal and social life in faith.

The shepherds must go to the place where the incarnation happened and where they can have direct proof of it. They stay for a while and listen to Mary. Then they return and report what they were told about the child. They have no personal experience of previous events, such as the annunciation and the virgin birth, and they have not even witnessed the appearance of Jesus.

The people who listen to the shepherds are amazed at what they have to say. They have not yet expressed their faith, but are only prey to that initial interest, to that curiosity about the marvellous, in which faith can begin.

'[She] treasured all these things in her heart.'⁸ Mary doesn't have to go, like the shepherds, to the place where the incarnation takes place. She is already there, she is part of the event. She doesn't have

⁷ Lk 2:1-20.

⁸ Lk 2:51.

to hear from others how things happened and what their meaning is. She keeps the memory of all the promises made to humanity, as the Magnificat demonstrates, and is aware that the one who grew in her womb comes from the Holy Spirit.

Once she has seen the child, Mary does not leave the place of the event, unlike the shepherds. She stays. She cannot leave. Wherever Jesus is incarnated, she is indispensable. She doesn't yet understand all the meanings that are released, nor can she list all the energies that spring from the incarnation.

These meanings and energies will be revealed throughout the life of Christ and throughout the centuries. But Mary keeps the memory of the event in her heart, she cherishes it, she meditates on it, she is attentive to it and on occasion she knows how to think about it again to draw new consequences from it.

It is the figure of the Church and its relationship with the birth and growth of Christ in the world and in each people. The Church too is part of the event of the Incarnation and dwells wherever Christ is introduced and becomes good news. Even the Church does not yet know everything that time will reveal about Christ. However, it has in its heart and memory an event that illuminates it: Jesus, the Word of God who became man. It sees something of this event and glimpses something else, it understands something and something is still obscure to it, because it has yet to be revealed. This helps it to rejoice inwardly, to remain serene, to work, to orient itself. In the meantime, she does not distance herself from Christ, she talks about him, she bears witness to him, she proclaims him.

This is Luke's meditation. And it can also suggest some points for meditation on our pastoral spirituality.

'We cannot be mere visitors', tourists of the Word and the mystery of Christ. St Augustine, comparing the three attitudes we have spoken of, asks the Christian: Who do you resemble? Those who hear the announcement and are simply amazed? The shepherds who come to the cave, gather some information and set off to announce it, or Mary who grasps the whole truth of Christ, keeps it in her mind and meditates on it continually? The admiration of the first soon fades; the information of the shepherds, although dictated by faith, is imperfect and germinal. Only those who contemplate and internalise the mystery of Christ can extract new light and meanings for the times and for the people.

The history of the Church includes many outstanding evangelisers. They are all patient 'meditators' of the Word. What they have pondered in prayer and in study, they express in their preaching, in their writings, in their guidance of the Christian community, and in the direction of souls.

Communicating the event of Christ is our profession and the purpose of our vocation. We must be specialists in this, not so much through the use of technical means, but because we approach it calmly and with time, we draw light for our personal life from it, and as a community we compare it with what we observe in our environment: this is called *interiority*.

The Incarnation, that is, the saving presence of God in the life of mankind through Jesus, as well as being an object of meditation, *will also be a pastoral criterion for us*.

This involves three things:

- our willingness to readily accept the reality that we must evangelise, by becoming part of the people to whom we are sent and understanding their culture through faith;
- the conviction that in everything that grows from a human point of view there is a mysterious presence and action of God and that every revelation of God produces growth in humanity;
- the effort to identify the expectations and questions of individuals and peoples, for us above all young people, who long for the coming of the Redeemer.

4. The wedding at Cana: Christ, the key to life

‘Jesus revealed his glory and the disciples believed in him.’⁹ Thus ends the account of the wedding at Cana.¹⁰ Both St John and the Liturgy place this wedding among the main *revelations* of Jesus: first the Magi, then the Baptism, now the wedding at Cana.

However, this revelation has *something particular* with respect to the previous ones. It does not take place in a miraculous context or a religious circumstance like birth or baptism. There are no heavenly witnesses: angels, stars, mysterious songs or voices from heaven. There aren’t even any preachers or prophets.

It takes place at a family party, in the context of a popular celebration, at the heart of a joyful event: the love between two young people, their desire for happiness, their promise of fidelity, their will or instinct to continue their kind through their children, the joyful participation of their relatives and fellow villagers: a banquet where every effort has been made to satisfy the guests.

This already *suggests a thought to us*: Jesus, God, certainly reveals himself in moments of worship and prayer, but not only these: he is present in all our authentic life experiences, joyful or painful as they may be. Alongside the wedding at Cana we can place the experience of friendship, work, the effort to achieve something.

And this is because *the Word became flesh*: he entered into the heart of our experiences, taking them on and sharing in them in solidarity. Jesus is in our celebrations and in our sadness. The love presented at Cana is the greatest of human experiences and the prototype of all the others.

We have an indication for the Church and for every single Christian: to be in solidarity with and share in the joys and hopes of their fellow human beings; not to detach themselves, but to take on their worries and anxieties; and not as people who are ‘curious’ or researchers; but ‘sympathising’ and ‘rejoicing with’ them, sharing.

During the feast, however, *something happens*: the wine runs out. The joy is about to end; the company is about to break up. What the organisers of the feast had prepared, according to all the calculations and precautions that the case required, did not work.

This passage from the story also *corresponds to our experience*. Every human joy or endeavour left only to its natural dynamic, to human calculation and forces, is exposed to exhaustion and often also to corruption. At a certain point it seems to come to an end and can no longer give of itself: this happens with love. Think of the ardent loves that lose their intensity, and of couples who, despite having started out with sincerity and good will, end up finding neither reason nor pleasure in being together.

This also happens with generous intentions and with solidarity. We often warn young people about this risk when we see them spontaneously generous, but unaware of the perennial sources of generosity.

There is an interesting detail in the story: Jesus is there, with his disciples, but he is ‘mixed in’, almost ‘submerged’, ‘ignored’, ‘anonymous’.

He doesn’t stand out: he hasn’t been presented as the famous guest and he doesn’t even appear to be the life and soul of the party or the centre of attention.

He is just one of many therefore: no one thinks of him as the key man, nor would they ask him for the solution to the problem. Someone who already knows him needs to bring him out of anonymity, to point him out as the one who can solve the unfortunate incident of a party that is going wrong.

⁹ Jn 2:11.

¹⁰ Jn 2:1-11.

At this point, *the very gentle figure of Mary* enters the scene, an image of the Church and therefore of all of us. And that she is such is indicated by the detail, not just of the narrative kind, but symbolic and allusive, that Jesus was there 'with his disciples'.

She is *the first to sense* the situation, even before Jesus. She senses human situations almost instinctively. She didn't have to learn them: she was born and lived within the human condition just like us. She is not an incarnate divine being; she is a human creature, born and living in ordinary circumstances.

Mary doesn't criticise, not even as a mother might, those who have failed to calculate; she doesn't make comments as an 'expert' on family meals and parties, and she doesn't indicate technical solutions on how and where in the neighbourhood a solution can be found.

She *points to Jesus and turns to him*. To Jesus' reply that he doesn't want to be dependent on family ties, she plays another card: her faith: 'Do whatever he tells you.'¹¹

In this case too there is an indication of what the Church and we Christians, particularly those who have taken vows, bring specifically and decisively to the celebration of life: *the sense of God's presence, the experience of Christ, trust* in his heart and in his power.

And it is also a guide for the way we act: not as critics of the sad human condition, not mainly as 'experts' who show that they have a list of solutions, but as people who are supportive, willing to share what we have of faith and knowledge of Jesus.

It will certainly not escape you that the story is an *interweaving of symbols*: there is the wedding, which a long and uninterrupted biblical tradition sees as the image of God's love for humanity and of the historical covenant with the chosen people; there are the jars for purification according to Jewish customs, a symbol of outdated Judaism: they are made of stone like the tablets of the law and are heavy and immobile; they are also empty, containing nothing; there is a fabulous abundance of wine: 500 litres and not ordinary wine, but fine wine, for demanding connoisseurs. To emphasise the abundance, John tells us that the servants filled the jars 'to the brim'. There is therefore an air of celebration, of joy, of boundless abundance; there are the words of Jesus: 'My hour has not yet come.'

John wanted to show us the exhaustion of the Jewish religious experience and all other similar experiences, as far as the meaning of human life and the relationship with God is concerned. In Christ, on the other hand, there appears a possibility of communication and grace that is richer and more than what man could ever hope for.

In him the marriage of God and humanity has begun and this marriage has the Church as its Cana, the place of their celebration: the community that gathers around Jesus, where Mary and the disciples are also present. Like Mary, the Church reveals the mystery of his presence because she has direct experience of it: the disciples believe, that is, they are able to understand the meaning of the 'sign' because they have already met the Lord and form a family with him; the others, even if they are not aware of the miracle, receive its benefits: they drink the wine and continue the celebration of love and solidarity.

At the beginning and at every moment of our journey, *Jesus is always at the centre of our attention*. We get to know him, we spend time with him, we take him as the key to joy, we show him to young people as salvation, we proclaim him as the one who can bring the solution to human questions and beyond.

¹¹ Jn 2:5.

5. At the foot of the Cross: fruitfulness in the Spirit

Mary at the foot of the Cross¹² is an Easter icon. The 'tearful' representation has only prevailed in recent centuries. In the Gospel, on the other hand, there is no mention of tears or sadness. She was simply 'standing' there,¹³ consciously taking part in this supreme event of humanity.

For St John, the cross coincides with the glorification of Jesus; it is the culminating moment of his revelation, his going towards the Father. 'And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.'¹⁴ And it is also the moment of the gift of the Spirit.

From the Cross arises the community of believers, symbolised by the small group of the faithful gathered around it and symbolised also by the water of Baptism and the blood of the Eucharist issuing from Christ. On the Cross and from this group there arises the new unity of humankind which Christ is to realise in accordance with the messianic promise.

The words addressed to Mary are embedded in this scene representing the early Church, suggesting more a symbol to be deciphered, a mystery to be revealed, than the story of a filial gesture.

The gesture is at the centre of those final and supreme acts that the Christian memory of Jesus' death has been careful to hand down. It is preceded by the mention of the tunic 'seamless, woven in one piece'¹⁵ that the soldiers do not divide into parts, which is the symbol of humanity recomposed, of the people of God definitively reunited by the grace of Christ. And it is followed by the expression with which Jesus declares the fulfilment of the Father's plan. 'He said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.'¹⁶

In this light, John reports the dialogue between Jesus, Mary and the disciple.

Jesus addresses Mary first. We have the impression, and it is true, that it is not Mary who is entrusted to John, but that he is given to her as a son.

Mary is not called by her name, but always with the title of 'his mother'. This closely resembles the episode of Cana, of which John himself says that in it 'Jesus revealed his glory and the disciples believed in him'.¹⁷ Cana was the initial revelation of the glory of the Messiah, which has its highest point in death.

The title 'woman' also makes us think of the same episode, a symbol of the new marriage of God with humanity. And, further back in history, it makes us think of the woman of creation, temptation and God's judgement: Eve. We are at a new beginning for humanity.

On the other hand, the name of the *disciple* is never mentioned. He represents all Jesus' followers, all the disciples, the community of his faithful, characterised by the fact that they are friends of Christ, loved by him, faithful to him.

We are therefore not dealing with a family arrangement, but with a solemn and sacred entrusting, a will, a point of departure.

Jesus calls Mary to a new motherhood that originates from the cross and through the cross becomes fruitful. It is a new capacity to give birth to men through the Spirit. Mary will be the Mother of Christ, not only for having welcomed him into her womb, but because, identifying herself completely with the community that is born from the cross, she will continually conceive him in

12 Jn 19:25-27.

13 Jn 19:25.

14 Jn 12:32.

15 Jn 19:23

16 Jn 19:30.

17 Jn 2:11.

history in millions of people throughout the centuries. It is another annunciation; for us it is a representation of the Help of Christians.

Mary represents the universal Church and also the individual local communities. All were born at the foot of the cross, called to enjoy its richness signified by the water and blood, and to bear witness to it with the ardent fidelity of that first group.

For this reason, the community of disciples takes Mary with them. From then on, she is present wherever there is a Christian community: visibly through veneration and the signs of devotion by believers; more profoundly through her intercession, which always gives new and unpredictable signs. It is this companionship that we too feel in our communities and in our endeavours.

The cross reminds us of the value of offering oneself to God in pastoral charity. The attitudes and actions of Christ, which we often recall as exemplary (welcome, listening, support, enlightenment, mercy), have their crowning achievement, their explanation, their price in the cross.

The Shepherd, whom John presents in chapter 10, is the one who gives his life. If this were ignored, pastoral charity would become a technique of approach, public relations, a form of charity rather than salvation.

Mary, incorporated inwardly into this offering through Jesus' words, educates us in the sense of the mysterious fruitfulness of love. For her too, everything is fulfilled and everything is revealed in this moment. Her concern to make the Son of God grow takes on a different dimension from the one she had in Nazareth and during the earthly life of her Son: it passes from Jesus to the Church, the historical and concrete one, made up of men and events: from human fruitfulness to that of grace. Accepting it was a test of her faith, almost a leap in quality. It is the same for us.

Mary, at the foot of the cross, reminds us of the salvation of which we want to be signs and bearers: it is that which comes from the Redemption of Christ, which opens us up to God in order to receive from him the fulfilment of our existence. We implement many initiatives for the benefit of young people and adults. All of them are oriented towards that one main goal, all of them are inspired by that one goal expressed in our motto 'Da mihi animas': salvation in God, which is at the centre of Jesus' work.

With Mary, at the foot of the cross, we discover the energies for the transformation that God wants to work in us and in our communities: water and blood; Reconciliation and the Eucharist. The liturgy we celebrate is entirely based on sacramental pedagogy. The pages of the gospel and the liturgical itineraries propose this pedagogy in a thousand ways.

Mary, at the foot of the cross, reveals to us the value of the community in which our service will be realised, of that community which is present at the sacrifice of Christ in a unique way, different from other spectators. She is the bearer of memory and she alone understands its meaning. She is more than a 'group'. She is the space where God reveals salvation.

We think of the educational communities we lead, of the Salesian Family and Movement, of the Churches. We take care of their reference to Christ, their unity in love and action. With them we invoke and await the Spirit, we pay attention to his signs and 'set out' towards the beyond.

6. In the Upper Room: community with the power of the Spirit

The small group that represented the Church next to the Cross is presented in *Acts*, chapter 1, in Jerusalem, on their return from the place of the Ascension.¹⁸

¹⁸ Acts 1:14.

Jerusalem is the place of the events of salvation, the place where the earthly mission of Jesus is fulfilled,¹⁹ the starting point of the universal mission of the Apostles.²⁰

The community of the Risen One gathers together in the *Upper Room*, the place where the new covenant was proclaimed and sealed, where the ancient Passover Supper was filled with its definitive meaning, where the Eucharist was instituted, where Jesus appeared several times to the twelve together. It is a complete image of the Church!

In the text there is a concise and rapid succession of references to the main events in the life of Jesus: the passion, the apparitions, the discourses on the Kingdom, the promise of the Spirit, the ascension, the announcement of the last coming: remembered by the disciples, but not yet fully understood in their historical significance.

In this context, of a community gathered together in full, with a wealth of truth and with a mission entrusted to them, Luke notes: '*All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*'²¹

This is the only time that Mary is mentioned in the 'post-Easter period'. And it is also the last time she is mentioned in the whole New Testament. It is a very brief and fleeting mention.

Mary doesn't seem to be the protagonist of the scene! Before her, 'some women' are listed. These are the same women that Luke mentioned in the account of the crucifixion, the burial, the discovery of the empty tomb, the apparitions.

However, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is never included or mentioned among these women. It is striking that now, presenting the community of the Risen One in an orderly and complete way, the Mother of Jesus is only in the list with her name and title.

Here we have one of those passages that serve to give a quick summary of the life of the community. In fact, here, as in other similar passages, there is mention of harmony, of gathering together, of prayer. It is therefore not just a small item of historical information, congenial to the narrative, but a theological reflection.

The *women* together with the Apostles in the Upper Room are the sign of an unprecedented novelty in the Jewish context and represent the reversal that the passage of Jesus had already brought about: a community without discrimination or separation based on gender, condition or race. What essentially counts and unites them is that they were the object of Jesus' predilection and confessing witnesses of his life.

The mention of the women emphasises the fact and the importance of the presence in the community of direct and passionate witnesses of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, of which these women had been the first messengers.

Mary

Let us now focus our attention on *Mary*, who is placed after the women, as if in a different category all her own. The text expresses first and foremost a conviction of faith: where there is the Church, the community of Christ, there is always Mary and vice versa, as in the conception and birth of the Messiah, as in the first revelations (to the shepherds and the Magi, to Zechariah and Simeon, in the temple and at Cana), as in the moment of total offering.

19 Cf. Lk 24:33.

20 Cf. Acts 1:8-12.

21 Acts 1:14.

It is an indication for our personal life, which has a decisive influence on our pastoral action. In the Churches and communities that we form and animate, there must be a distinct place for her, as company, memory, mirror and inspiration.

The mention of Mary is placed in the line of direct testimony. She knows, she has been an active part in the most hidden and mysterious, least known events, which are at the historical root of the most visible and marvellous ones that the group has seen: the incarnation, the birth, the growth in Nazareth, the beginning of the public life. She was with Jesus 'for all the time he lived among us',²² as Matthias would be required to do, chosen as Judas' replacement.

The image of Mary that Luke develops here is the same as the one he had traced in his Gospel. She wasn't a visible part of the group that had formed around the Messiah, nor was she one of the women who followed him. And yet she was the perfect spiritual disciple, unique in her category, in which total availability to God's will and trust in God's interventions to fulfil what he had promised, emerge.

In this sense Mary is like a rock, an anchor of hope in the time of waiting. The disciples feel orphaned by the visible presence of Jesus. They are sent on a mission into the world and they have but a vague idea of it: they don't know what it consists of, what the most appropriate ways are; they have no experience of its hidden power.

This is not only the circumstance of the first Christian community. All communities, up to our own and the universal Church itself, experience these impressions and hesitations. Mary's presence gives meaning to the wait, fills it with trust, and makes it a serene spiritual experience that was exactly what she had: to wait for the time of maturation without decay or failure.

But in the meantime, while waiting, the community of disciples, guided by the authority Jesus had designated, completes itself and prepares for the mission, choosing the missing member in the light of God's will. It discerns and purifies itself of personal interests and partisanship. It sincerely opens itself to the signs.

Furthermore, they persevere in praying together. These two words are important: prayer, together. The latter expresses the intention to maintain the spiritual and visible union of the community in moments of waiting, doubt and uncertainty. If our waiting times were like this, they would always be fruitful. And we are permanently waiting!

Finally, the community with Mary prepares to receive the Spirit and in fact receives him. In this way it becomes fruitful and capable of generating Jesus in the people. Mary had the experience of the Spirit and of his fruitfulness because she had been the first to be filled by him and to give birth to the Son of God in human history. She is our guarantee and our safeguard, enabling us to recognise and authentically interpret the working of the Spirit in humanity. By the power of the Spirit, the Church is called to continue the incarnation of Christ, to practise his love for humanity in a multitude of ways, and to renew his capacity for service.

Mary's feminine and maternal sense will not allow the truths of faith to become abstract formulations, but will translate them into concrete gestures of salvation, of transformation of life conditions, of love for God, of reform of customs.

In the same way, she, without any particular status, reminds the apostles that the 'privilege' of receiving the Spirit is not to place oneself 'above' others or 'outside' the common situation, but to mix, share, rise, serve.

Don Bosco taught us to feel this presence. He felt it first himself and he confessed it in his life and work. But he also gave it as a reminder to the missionaries: 'Leave everything to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians and you will realise what miracles are'.²³ This is also our task, in our spiritual journey, in our pastoral commitment, in our duty to animate the community.

²² Acts 1:21.

²³ Cf. BM XI, 369.

Two titles: a summary

In the prayer of entrustment we invoke Mary under two titles: *Immaculate, Help of Christians*. The same titles appear in the Constitutions with a very brief comment for each: *Immaculate*, model of our total consecration to the Lord and of our desire for holiness; *Help of Christians*, sign and inspiration of our pastoral commitment to the people of God, especially among the young.¹

The two titles were not chosen and juxtaposed at random, nor even out of pure liking or devotion. Instead, they reflect Salesian history and summarise the characteristics of the spirituality of our Congregations. Many other titles of Our Lady appear in the biography of the founders: Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of Consolation, Our Lady of Graces. It is therefore true that, above and beyond the different representations, they always looked to the person of Mary, Mother of Jesus, of the Church, of each one of us.

It is equally true, however, that the two images that recur most often and that have characterised our view of Our Lady are the unparalleled Immaculate Conception and the Help of Christians. In fact, the spiritual and apostolic experience of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello can be divided into three stages.

1. The oratory experience

The first is the oratory experience. Don Bosco carried it out with the boys of Turin. Mary Mazzarello with the girls of her town. The dominant concern was to educate the young people in their own surrounds. All the effort was aimed at giving them human dignity and opening them up to faith. There were few structures and means and, on the other hand, a lot of dedication and creativity. The young people became aware of who they were and of the life of grace. The educator showed a father's and a mother's care for them. It was the moment in which the preventive system was born and took shape.

There is one clear factor in these settings: Mary was felt by the educators and young people as a living, maternal, powerful *presence*. The titles given to her are of secondary importance. But it is true that during the Oratory period the figure of the Immaculate Conception dominated everything.

Don Bosco's preference for this image came from his youth. The Immaculate Conception was honoured in Chieri: the chapel at the seminary where he had studied had an image of the Immaculate Conception on the main altar, before which he prayed every day. Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary had spread from France to Piedmont. It was strengthened by the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the apparitions in Lourdes in 1858.

Some providential coincidences then led Don Bosco to attribute a particular intercession to the Immaculate Conception in the beginnings of his work: 'All our great initiatives,' he said, 'began on the day of the Immaculate Conception.' The model was the oratory, 8 December 1841.

The image also represents Mary as the conqueror of evil, with the serpent under her feet. This reminded him of the triumph of grace over the passions of the individual and the victory of faith over impiety and heresy in the history of the world.

¹ Cf. SDB Constitutions, C 92; FMA Constitutions, C 44.

Mother Mazzarello had a similar path with the Daughters of the Immaculate Conception, expressed more in lived devotion than in explicit formulations.

This deeply felt presence left its mark on the pedagogy of the Oratory. The celebration of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, with its spiritual preparation, became central.² And it continues to be so today, where there are oratory-youth centres.

The Oratory was also the birthplace of the Society of the Immaculate Conception, which corresponds to what we today call the group of young collaborators. It was the seed and the test of the future Salesian congregation. Nine out of sixteen members of the Salesian congregation that gathered with Don Bosco and Fr Alasonatti on 18 December 1869 (18 in total) were members of the *Immaculate Conception Sodality*.³

In this Marian atmosphere the most important themes of the education of young people matured: grace, purity, familiarity with the supernatural, love for Jesus. For the Salesians the preventive system took shape as maternal assistance and a path towards sanctity, with a need for generous dedication to God and to young people. Dominico Savio was a result of this environment.

A series of insights also developed on the pedagogical value of devotion to Mary. We must count on the maternal and invisible presence of Mary in our work. She loves everyone, but especially young people because she helps them grow as she did with Jesus. It is a truth of the Christian faith, but experienced in an uncommon way and transferred to the educational experience.

Young people feel Mary's maternal presence within them, and this instils in them a sense of security and hope, helping them to develop as people at a difficult and delicate time in their lives, due to instability, physical development and the questioning of their faith. Mary Immaculate, as an ideal of purity, attracts young people and gives them the desire to commit themselves to noble projects. Don Bosco's pedagogy has a certain aesthetic component. From the beginning he spoke of the beauty of virtue and religion and the ugliness of sin.

Furthermore, devotion to Mary helps one become familiar with supernatural realities and feel God to be a little closer and more incarnate. One thinks of her in relation to a woman who is always presented as our *Mother* and *Helper*. She is a spiritual motivation.

The Oratory catechesis therefore tended to encourage the acceptance and internalisation of this image, to the point of penetrating the lives of young people as a guarantee for future perseverance. Triduum, novenas, little acts of mortification, decorations, pilgrimages, trips to Marian places were all aimed at this. For Don Bosco, the 'oratory' stage lasted until Valdocco became organised; for Mother Mazzarello it lasted for the entire time of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate until the foundation of the Institute of consecrated life.

2. The sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians

Around 1862 Don Bosco felt the need for a bigger church. The one he had was too small for the young people and Salesians who had now multiplied in Valdocco. 'One Saturday in December' Fr Albera tells us 'perhaps the 6th, possibly the 6th, Don Bosco finished hearing confessions around eleven and went to the dining room for his long overdue supper. Don Bosco was deep in thought. He looked very pensive. Only Albera was with him. "There were a lot of confessions tonight," he suddenly remarked, "but truthfully I hardly know what I said or did, because all the time I had something on my mind

² Cf. BM VII, 194ff.

³ BM VI, 181-2.

which totally absorbed me. I kept thinking: Our church is too small. We have to pack in our boys like sardines. We must build a larger, more imposing one under the title of Mary, Help of Christians.”⁴

He also realised that it would be useful to give the people in the surrounding area a place of worship because Valdocco, once an almost rural suburb, had become an urban district. It was the same year that Don Bosco met Mary Mazzarello, the distant beginning of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

At the same time Don Bosco had an intuition, albeit still vague, about something that went a little further. It was the moment when the work at Valdocco was consolidated. The Congregation, founded four years earlier, already had an initial core group and Don Bosco began to see it as an expanding reality. He therefore thought of a real and symbolic ‘centre’ for this new Congregation. ‘But there is another reason. Can you guess it?’ he asked another of his clerics, Cagliari. ‘I believe,’ he replied, ‘that this church will be the mother church of our future congregation, the source of all our undertakings for youth.’ ‘Right!’ he exclaimed. ‘The Blessed Virgin is our foundress. She will also be our support.’⁵

Meanwhile in Italy people were talking about the apparitions that had taken place in Spoleto (a small town in Umbria), at a particularly delicate moment for the Church and the Pope. The idea of building a church on the site of the apparitions was spreading and contributions were being collected everywhere, even in Turin.

Taking these three impressions into account: the manifest presence of Mary in the Christian people, the dangers to the Church, the difficulties of the times, Don Bosco chose the title for his church and gave his reasons: ‘Until now we have celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception with solemnity and pomp and today we have begun our first works of the festive oratories. But Our Lady wants us to venerate her under the title of Mary Help of Christians. These are such sad times that we really need the Blessed Virgin to help us defend the Christian faith ...’⁶

Thus Don Bosco became the determined apostle of devotion to Mary Help of Christians.⁷

The construction of the church was more than a technical job, more than a concern for plans, materials and financing. For Don Bosco it represented a spiritual experience and a maturing of his pastoral mentality.

Don Bosco was around 45-50 years old, the years of his priestly maturity and his consolidated social standing, with some works already organised and others just starting. At the end of the construction something had been transformed in him. Why?

Firstly because the realisation surpassed the initial idea: from a church for his home, his neighbourhood and his Congregation, the idea of a sanctuary was taking shape, a destination for pilgrimages, a centre of worship and a point of reference for a spiritual family. The reality grew in his hands.

The financial problems were then resolved with graces and miracles that resulted in uncalculated generosity among the people. All this rooted the conviction in Don Bosco that ‘Mary had built her house’, ‘there was not a single stone in the church of Mary Help of Christians...which was not signed by some grace received.’⁸ The construction was completed in just three years and the expenses added to those necessary to maintain so many boys.

Unlike other Marian shrines, the Valdocco sanctuary did not have its origins in an apparition or a miracle. But the church itself ended up being a complex ‘miracle’.⁹

4 BM VII, 196.

5 BM VII, 197.

6 GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Meraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino 1868, pp. 5-7.

7 P. STELLA, *Don Bosco Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, 1996, New Rochelle. p. 162.

8 Cf. BM IX, 127; XVIII, 286.

9 P. STELLA, *Don Bosco Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, 1996, New Rochelle. p. 167.

A priest of the time, a certain Fr Margotti, stated: 'They say that Don Bosco works miracles. I don't believe it. But one has happened here that I cannot deny: this sumptuous church that cost a million and was built in just three years with the offerings of the faithful.'¹⁰

During the construction, Don Bosco's reputation as a miracle worker was born and grew, and his name began to spread beyond Piedmont: from a priest known only in his own part of the world, he became a symbolic figure of pastoral innovation in the Church. He felt the responsibility of this reputation as a 'miracle worker' and consulted a theologian, Bishop Bertagna, to ask if he should continue to give the blessing of Mary Help of Christians! The answer was affirmative.

The construction coincided with and was followed by the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. They represent the extension of the charism to the female world, with the consequent enrichment; just as another foundation, the Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians was, together with the Cooperators, the extension into the lay world.

The expansion of the Congregations then began. This was clearly seen in the missionary expeditions, which up to a few years ago all departed from the Sanctuary.

The result was the opening up of the apostolate: from an educational institute to a popular pastoral ministry with typical elements: preaching, the sacraments, the practice of charity through material offerings and participation in charitable activities. This was followed by a systematic effort for adult vocations called the 'Work of Mary Help of Christians'.

Without making the statement absolute, it can be said that Don Bosco began the construction as the director of a work and ended it as the charismatic leader of a great movement still in its infancy, but already defined in its aims and distinctive features; he began it as a priest from Turin and ended it as an apostle of the Church, moving from the city to the world.

While the experience of the oratory had had a positive result in terms of teaching methods, the building of the Sanctuary brought out in Salesian work a vision of the Church as the *people of God* spread throughout the world, fighting against the powers of evil: a perspective that he would present in another form in the dream of the two columns (1862), today represented in a painting on the back wall of the Sanctuary.

He forged a pastoral style based on audacity and trust: knowing how to start with little, daring a lot when it comes to doing good, moving forward trusting in the Lord. He instilled a belief at the heart of the Congregation: 'Leave everything to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians and you will realize what miracles are.' ...¹¹ in all fields: economic, social, pastoral, educational.

3. The foundation of Congregations

At the same time as these events, the two Congregations were born, grew and took shape. It was Don Bosco's greatest effort. Mother Mazzarello had to deal with domestic difficulties. In addition to these, Don Bosco had to deal with administrative procedures, obtaining approval from bishops and the Holy See. 'Had I anticipated the heartaches, toil, opposition and frustration that one must go through to found a religious society, I might not have had the courage to attempt it.'¹²

The *Daughters of the Immaculate Conception* became the *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, not without some small resistance and loss as the *Cronistoria* reports.¹³ This is demonstrated by the

10 Ordinary Process, I, p. 511ff; *La Madonna dei tempi difficili*, p.118.

11 BM XI, 369.

12 Cf. BM X, 298.

13 Cf. C. COLLI, *Patto della nostra alleanza con Dio*, Istituto FMA, Roma 1984, p. 446.

change in image alone. On the main altar of the Church of the house in Mornese there was a painting of Our Lady of Sorrows. The first effigy of the Help of Christians was placed on a pedestal next to the balustrade a few years after the foundation (1875).

The following year a statue was placed in the garden and the feast of Mary Help of Christians was celebrated. However, the first missionary expedition only brought an image of Mary Help of Christians bought by Don Cagliero.

The change was not due to enthusiasm of the moment. Instead it was a stance on the spiritual and apostolic style of the Institute. Being Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was not the same as being Daughters of Our Lady of Sorrows. Don Bosco, and after him his successors and superiors, spoke of 'a living and spiritual temple', of a 'monument of gratitude' to Mary Help of Christians. It is interesting to see what they meant. 'It is the name of an educational, catechetical and missionary congregation', said Mother Angela Vespa.¹⁴ It is the name of an Institute 'whose purpose is to educate young women in piety and virtue and to spread devotion to Mary throughout the world',¹⁵ 'the name of an Institute in which Mary must live again in her Daughters so that they may make her present throughout the world'¹⁶ and that each one of them may be a living copy of Mary.¹⁷

So even in the female branch the name of Mary Help of Christians emphasises the apostolic trait, the going out of the village and the service to the Church and to the world.

The foundation of the congregations left Don Bosco with the feeling of being the instrument of a project inspired and realised with the special mediation of Mary: 'Our Lady wants us to start a society... we will call ourselves Salesians', he said on 26 January 1854. He often repeated this. On his return from Spain he commented on the train: 'Everything is the work of Our Lady. Everything began with that Hail Mary said with a boy full of faith and hope.' Or even more so, when during mass in the church of the Sacred Heart in Rome, interrupted fifteen times by his weeping, he thought back over his life and recalled the words of his first dream: 'In good time you will understand everything.'¹⁸

Linked to this is the conviction of a special assistance and relationship between Mary and the Salesian Family beyond any title: 'I tell you before God. All a young person has to do is enter a Salesian house for Mary to take him under her protection'.¹⁹

From Mother Mazzarello, on the other hand, we hear it said again and again that the institute is nothing other than the family of the Madonna, the 'hearth' that she herself formed. That she is the superior and has a vicar who every night places the keys to the house at her feet.

4. Icon and text of our spirituality

Rereading the history of our Institutes and of the Salesian Family in the light of our faith, we see that Mary was the *inspiration behind our undertaking, and also the Mother of our community vocation and the Teacher of our spirituality*.²⁰

14 Circular of 24-10-1965; cf. C. COLLI, *Patto della nostra alleanza con Dio*, Istituto FMA, Roma 1984, pp. 455-456.

15 C. COLLI, *Patto della nostra alleanza con Dio*, Istituto FMA, Roma 1984, pp. 453.

16 Cf. C. COLLI, *Patto della nostra alleanza con Dio*, Istituto FMA, Roma 1984, pp. 454-455; cf. E. CERIA, *Vita del servo di Dio sac. Filippo Rinaldi*, SEI, Torino 1946, pp. 294-295.

17 MADRE LUISA VASCHETTI, Circular of 24-4-1942; cf. C. COLLI, *Patto della nostra alleanza con Dio*, Istituto FMA, Roma 1984, pag. 445.

18 BM XVIII, p. 289.

19 Letter, 1884; cf. also BM XVII, 93.

20 Cf. FMA Constitutions, C 4; cf. SDB Constitutions, C 1.

‘In her we find a living presence, and the help to direct our lives decisively to Christ, and to make our personal relationship with him ever more authentic.’²¹

Therefore we reserve a special place for her in our prayers: ‘Let us turn to her in simplicity and confidence, celebrating her liturgical feasts, and honouring her in those forms of prayer proper to the Church and Salesian tradition.’²²

All this leads us to feel that she is *present* in the education of young people and in pastoral care among the people.

Mary’s spiritual nature has been represented in the painting over the main altar in the Basilica.

Its history is well known. Don Bosco wanted a complete artistic representation of his thoughts on the Church, on Mary as Mother of the Church, and on the Congregation at the service of the Church. He presented his idea to artist Tommaso Lorenzone. He wanted to depict Mary Assumed into Heaven and crowned as queen. Around her, angels ... but then in other circles and groups the great figures and important moments in the history of the Church: the apostles, the martyrs, the prophets, the virgins, the confessors. Events in which Mary’s intervention was evident were also to be included ... as well as the peoples who invoke her.

The artist’s response was to create such a work that it would require an area as large as Piazza Castello. The painting ended up being a canvas seven metres high and four metres wide. In that space the artist tried to depict the essence of Don Bosco’s idea. When he finished it, he knelt down crying’.²³

The composition has *three levels*. The figure of Mary in heaven with the Child Jesus in her arms occupies the vertical axis and the upper half of the horizontal level. She is portrayed as the Mother of Jesus (incarnation) and of the Church. The sceptre and crown, rather than signs of power, are symbols of effective intercession and victory over evil, first in herself and then in human history.

In the upper level we can see the Father represented by an eye and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove: from the Father, through the Spirit, a beam of light is cast upon Mary: it is God’s choice and the action of the Holy Spirit that make her the Mother of Christ and of the Church. The choir of angels recalls heaven: the Assumption, her Easter, the beginning of her role as Help of Christians. All this also indicates the origin of the Church and her relationship to the mystery of the Triune God: from the Father, through the incarnate Son, in the Holy Spirit.

The middle level shows the Church in history: the twelve apostles, plus the two evangelists who are not apostles, plus Saint Paul. It is the foundation of the Church (the apostles), its energy in evangelisation (Saint Paul), the guide of the Church (Peter with the keys) and the Mary’s motherhood.

They all bear the symbol of their martyrdom, a sign of complete gift of self. It is the humus in which the Salesian charism is born: the Church, the apostolic mission, spiritual ardour.

The third level is developed at the bottom and in the background. It hints at today’s world, at the basilica and at what has happened around it as the centre of a movement of evangelisation and of service to the Church, inspired by the motherhood of Mary and entrusted to her powerful intercession.

The painting communicates well the unity between the sense of God’s initiative and our pastoral resourcefulness in our spirituality. Our vocation comes from the Father and through him we dedicate ourselves to the work of education. It also communicates the sense of service to the Church: we participate in the mission of the Church and work within it, attentive to its needs and directions. It also clearly depicts the missionary commitment to evangelisation, as well as the way in which we educate: in a maternal, protective and preventive way.

21 Cf. FMA Constitutions, C 79; cf. SDB Constitutions, C 98.

22 Cf. FMA Constitutions, C 44; cf. SDB Constitutions, C 92.

23 BM VIII, 3.