VARIA 4

Start afresh from Don Bosco

Meditations for a Spiritual Retreat

Edited by **FRANCESCO MOTTO**

acssa
ASSOCIAZIONE CULTORI STORIA SALESIANA

Roma 2006

The invitation *"Starting afresh from Don Bosco"* is always relevant, as one knows in Salesian circles, and also in those of the "Church" given that the Pope Benedict XVI at the end of his first Encyclical writes: "Let us consider [...] the saints [...] The saints are the true bearers of light within history, for they are men and women of faith, hope and love" (*Deus caritas est*, Christmas 2005, n. 40). And among those he mentions is "our" dear Don Bosco, in whom the reader of these pages can discover certain charismatic features by reflecting on some decisive moments in his life.

FRANCESCO MOTTO (Missaglia/Lecco, Italy 1947), founding member and now a member of the board of the ACSSA, has been Director of the Salesian Historical Institute since 1992. He was also a founding member of the Institute in 1982 and coordinating secretary for the first ten years. He is managing editor of the half-yearly social and religious historical review "Ricerche Storiche Salesiane". Invited lecturer at the Salesian Pontifical University, in Rome, he is the author of books and articles on Salesian history; and is currently working in particular on the complete edition of Don Bosco 's correspondence, four of the expected eight volumes of which have already been published

ASSOCIAZIONE CULTORI STORIA SALESIANA

VARIA – 4

PRESENTATION OF THE COLLECTION

At the threshold of the "Fourth International Congress of the History of the Salesian Work", which will be celebrated in Mexico City in February 2006, the Presidency of ACSSA (Associazione Cultori di Storia Salesiana) presents to the members of the Association, as one more exponent of the work realized in its five year term which is about to end, the creation of a new historical collection, entitled VARIA ACSSA.

Its creation answers the aim of ACSSA: "to promote studies on Salesian History, favouring the research, the actualisation and the collaboration among its members"; to the necessity of offering a scientific course for spreading, through written publication, the results of the researches which the members of the association realize in their respective countries; to grant the opportunity for these works to be known by colleagues and whoever may be interested in them: Salesians, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the Salesian Family in its whole.

The collection is self-explanatory through its title, VARIA ACSSA, which signifies the amplitude and the diversity of the themes: sources, studies, notes, bibliographies, etc. At the same time it is also explained by its collaborators; it is reserved exclusively to the members of the ACSSA, in line with the ACSSA's statute, which differentiates it from analogous collections (like that of Salesian Historical Institute).

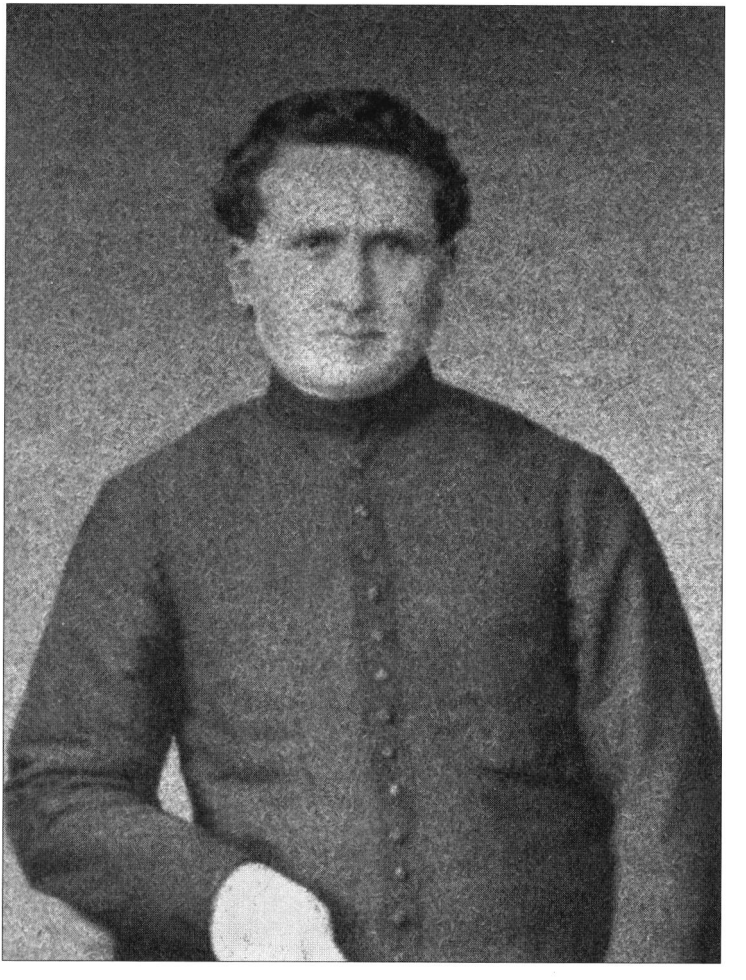
The Presidency is responsible for the concrete aspects of the collection VARIA ACSSA, as well as on the possibility of how determined works can be published also in other ways, given the non-commercial character of the collection. Moreover, the contributions are subject to the editorial norms of ACSSA's secretariat, which, however, respects the liberty of methodology of each country and its language.

The Presidency is very satisfied of having achieved this goal of creating this collection. It trusts that it may also be the realization of a desire, more or less expressed, by all the members of the ACSSA.

"To know history is to know life", an old proverb affirms. To spread the history of the two Salesian Congregations and of the groups of the Salesian Family is to make known the vitality, already secular, of its charisma, and the immense apostolic work realized, in all the continents, by those who preceded us. This is the task of ACSSA; it is also the aim of the new collection.

Maria Fé Nuñez FMA
President ACSSA

Rome, 4 November 2005



Don Bosco, the youngest-looking face we have (Chieri c. 1855)

ASSOCIAZIONE CULTORI STORIA SALESIANA

VARIA – 4

Start afresh from Don Bosco

Meditations for a Spiritual Retreat

Edited by FRANCESCO MOTTO

ROMA

PREFACE

Responding to the request of some confreres to have the text of these retreat talks on Don Bosco – preached first of all in South America (2004) and then in North America (2005) – I am happy to make them available in English. Who knows, they may also be of use to others, "Salesians in formation" and Salesians "already formed" in other continents.

The invitation "Starting afresh from Don Bosco" is always relevant, as one knows in Salesian circles, and also in those of the "Church" given that the Pope Benedict XVI at the end of his first Encyclical writes: "Let us consider [...] the saints [...] The saints are the true bearers of light within history, for they are men and women of faith, hope and love" (*Deus caritas est,* Christmas 2005, n. 40). And among those he mentions is "our" dear Don Bosco, whose face you can see in the photo the youngest-looking face that has come down to us.

Since it is a matter of simple meditations, so as not to make for heavy reading, the sources used are indicated in general terms – mainly *critical texts* edited by the Salesian Historical Institute – without indicating each time the precise location of the passage quoted.

A sincere thanks also goes in these pages to the various confreres, on both sides of the Atlantic, who have collaborated in the translation and the correction of the text.

Fr. Francesco Motto S.D.B.

Rome, 2006 24 June,
Traditional celebration of Don Bosco's "nameday"

"I take this opportunity to encourage you to always keep Don Bosco as your point of reference for the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the provinces". (P. Chávez, AGC 383, Oct-Dec 2003, p. 15)

INTRODUCTION

I am sure you will have noticed at once that the title heading these meditations is similar to that carried by the Instruction of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life of May 2002: "Starting afresh from Christ: (a renewed commitment to consecrated life in the third millennium)", a title which had already been found in the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio ineunte* of 6 January 2001.

At n. 21 of the Instruction we read: "Yes, one must start afresh from Christ because it was from him that the first disciples started in Galilee; from him, that throughout history men and women of every status and culture, consecrated by the Spirit in the strength of their call, have started out; for him they have left family and homeland, following him unconditionally, making themselves available for the announcement of the Kingdom and doing good for all (cf Acts 10,38)". But a little earlier (n. 20) the same Instruction says that it is a matter of grasping "a new opportunity to come into contact with the sources of one's own charism and constitutional texts, which are always open to new and more demanding interpretations".

This is precisely what we shall try to do, and the first source of our charism is Don Bosco himself. Following St Paul who says: "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11,1), Don Bosco repeats to us: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ".

And so the main object of our reflections will be the figure of Don Bosco, a figure we shall try to make contact with, not so much to understand his external actions which we all know about already, but rather to understand the conditions, the motivations, the spirit which led him to make specific choices, to work in a specific way, to write about particular matters, to reach a particular form of holiness which is specifically his own, different in some ways from that of other saints.

The urgent need for a deep but also a systematic knowledge of Don Bosco has been emphasized in recent years by official documents of the Congregation (cf art. 21 of the Constitutions), and by highly authoritative

declarations. Of these we may quote a recent one of the Rector Major, Fr P. Chavez, (AGC 383, Oct-Dec 2003, pp. 14-17):

> "Don Bosco moulded his Salesians by telling stories rather than by formal lectures [...] Nowadays, as indeed has always been the case, we need to fulfil our vocational and pastoral work and mould Salesians by «telling stories», with frequent and explicit references to Don Bosco, after the manner of Don Barberis, one of his biographers, who in narrating events of the «old days» of the Valdocco Oratory gave us also the underlying reasons: these instruct us in matters which are specifically ours, in our methods, in our family spirit, and at the same time they increase our sense of belonging, of membership of the family; they make us protagonists [...]. Remaining with Don Bosco does not exclude a priori a study of the times that modelled or conditioned him, but it requires us to live with his commitment, his options, his dedication, his spirit of enterprise and pushing ahead. [...] All this makes of Don Bosco a fascinating person and in our case a father to love, a model to imitate, but also a saint to invoke. We are well aware that the more the time separating us from our Founder increases, the more real is the risk of speaking of Don Bosco only on the basis of well known incidents and anecdotes without any real knowledge of our charism. Hence the need to know him through the medium of reading and study; to love him affectively and effectively as our father and teacher through the spiritual legacy he has left us; to imitate him and try to reproduce him in ourselves, making of the Rule of life our personal life plan. This is what is meant by returning to Don Bosco, to which I have invited the whole Congregation – myself included – from my first «good night», by means of a process of study and love that tries to understand, the better to throw light on our life and present-day challenges. Together with the Gospel, Don Bosco is our criterion of discernment and our goal of identification".

The thought of the Rector Major, who asked recently that some of the texts published by the Salesian Historical Institute be translated into the main languages, is close to the reflections of a superior of an earlier age, Fr Francesco Bodrato (the first provincial in Argentina, 1823-1880), who wrote in a letter to his novices on 5 March 1877:

> "But who is Don Bosco? I will tell you the answer to that question, just as I have learned it and heard it from others. Don Bosco is our most tender and loving father. This all of us who are his sons proclaim. He is a providential gift of God, the man of providence for the present day. This is admitted by all learned men. Don Bosco is a voluntary promoter of human welfare, as all philosophers agree. And after studying all that has been said by all of these, I can tell you myself that Don Bosco is truly the man whom Sacred Scripture calls a great treasure. And we have found this true friend, this great treasure. Mary most holy

> has given us the light we need to know him, and the Lord lets us possess him. So woe to anyone who loses him. If you only knew, dear brothers, how many people there are who are envious of us [...] And if, like me, you believe that Don Bosco is the «true friend» spoken of in Holy Scripture, you must make sure that you always possess him and try to copy him in yourselves".

Can you be any clearer than that? And now if our Constitutions in art. 91 point out three objectives of a Retreat (1. listening to the Word of God; 2. discerning his will; 3. purifying our hearts), we shall attain our goal especially through Don Bosco as our guide.

The old writings about Don Bosco that we sometimes read in community can, and indeed should, prompt and inspire our reflection. I use the term "old writings" deliberately because I want especially to put you in contact with him, the father and teacher of our Christian religious and priestly vocation. And therefore quite deliberately I shall not have recourse to the rich teaching of Rector Majors, nor to that of recent General Chapters, nor to the Constitutions, and not even to the other more or less well known texts of Salesian spirituality. We shall concentrate directly on Don Bosco.

I don't think any of you will be expecting from me any precise directives or programs of life and of Salesian pastoral activity. I could not provide them, because I don't know your situation, either personally or as a province, nor the civil, social, cultural or religious environment in which you work. And in any case those are not the objectives of a retreat.

And then as a scholar of history I shall try to stick to historical and spiritual aspects, and so our reflections will be aimed not so much at suggesting what should be done as interpreting correctly events of the past, so that being understood in their true significance they may prompt, motivate, inspire and enlighten your orientation for the future. If indeed at the end of the week you have gained a better understanding of who Don Bosco was in his own time and what are the enduring values of his spirit and charism, it will be possible for you to imitate him, though necessarily in your own way, in the XXI century, for the young people of your own country. If I might express a hope and wish, it would be that at the end of the week each of you could say: "I now have a better understanding of who Don Bosco was and what he wanted; now with my confreres I am determined to give effect to what I am as a Salesian (*Operari sequitur esse* – as classical philosophy used to put it), and to "update" the Founder's message. A hundred years ago we had a motto: "With Don Bosco and with our own times", still

valid at the present day. In any case Don Bosco himself told us that we must be adaptable to the times.

All that I shall say is obviously my own reading of the sources. I'll give you the pieces of a model, but you must put the model together yourselves; I'll give you the tiles of a mosaic, but it will be up to each of you to produce the masterpiece. You have to solve the puzzle or provide the artistic composition. And that evidently takes some of the responsibility off my shoulders and puts it on yours instead.

I'll try to resist the temptation of saying everything: if I do say everything what will there be left for the good Lord to do or say? The preacher has to launch the dialogue, but then it is God who continues it. The preacher suggests some themes for reflection, but his role is always secondary and must be played discreetly.

Seeking our true selves

What state of mind are we in right now? Perhaps our heart is as dry as dust; perhaps we are preoccupied about something; perhaps our mind is psychologically and spiritually empty. Perhaps I don't feel like making a Retreat; perhaps I'm sure the preacher is going to be boring; perhaps all sorts of things.... We must remember that God is stronger than we are; he is used to hard heads and stiff necks. He can raise up children of Abraham from the very stones.

We read in Luke's gospel (5,15-16): "But the news about Jesus spread all the more, and large crowds came to him to listen and be healed of their sickness. As for Jesus, he would often withdraw to solitary places and pray". And similarly in Mark (1,35-36): "Very early in the morning, before daylight, Jesus went off to a lonely place where he prayed". Simon and the others went out searching for him, and when they found him they said: "Everyone is looking for you. But Jesus, as John would later note (6,15), realizing that they would come and take him by force to make him king, fled to the hills by himself".

Jesus does not waste time, but he uses it in a different way. Precisely when the crowd is thronging about him, when miracles would seem for us not only useful but even necessary, Jesus moves elsewhere. It is a sign that to withdraw and pray is sometimes more profitable than other "signs", important though the latter may be.

There is a time each year for pause and growth. In 1996 Cardinal Martini wrote a book with the title: Finding oneself again; on the back page of the cover is printed: "to free oneself from the slavery of the daily grind, from the things that oppress us each day".

Don Lasagna wrote to Don Bosco on 3 September 1877: "Do you remember the wonderful time of the Retreats, when we were relieved of our yearly tasks and able to gather in joy and affection around you on the alpine slopes of Lanzo, to draw new strength from your holy advice and new zeal from your heart; in that fresh and pure atmosphere our failing strength recovered its enthusiasm and energy".

The Retreat is a time for listening, for meditation and contemplation, for prayer and review of life; it is a time for making efficacious and practical resolutions to free ourselves from inordinate inclinations, for seeking and finding God's will; a time for making contact not with the created things of God but with the God of creation who comes to meet us. Let us keep always in mind the truth and wisdom of the well known French proverb: "God comes to visit us, but most of the time we are not at home".

Let us not be discouraged if we are beset by distractions. The snare of sloth and worldly dissipation was noted even by the fathers of the desert. Two hundred years ago Kierkeegard bewailed the fact that the students of theology of his time could not remain in their own rooms for even a quarter of an hour. And it is quite true that in general we Salesians are distracted, we are immersed in the terrible mishmash of the daily life, to such an extent that we can never find time for a lengthy pause for contemplation, for speaking calmly with Jesus, for listening to him and conversing with him more intimately and with greater attention.

Our Retreats are a meeting with Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco, with the same enthusiasm we had on the wonderful day of our first profession or the stupendous day of priestly ordination. May we never lose this glorious opportunity, a real *Kairòs*; let us profit by it to make a deep revision of our personal life-plan within the educative and pastoral project of our community and the organic project of our province.

Right from this moment let us intensify our prayer. May the Blessed Mother help us, and may the Holy Spirit be the real protagonist inspiring our minds and opening our hearts to a dialogue with the Father and the Son.

THE FIRST DAY: FAITH

The creation of the world, the sanctification of souls and consecrated life all have their roots in the heart of God: the splendid "gift" of the Trinity to the Church, to the human race, and to the consecrated persons themselves. Despite all the misunderstandings, persecutions and oppressions, the Church has never waned. Of this Pope John Paul II reminded us in *Vita Consecrata*, while at the same time entrusting us with a task: "You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a «great history still to be accomplished!»". We shall talk about that this first morning.

When we study Church history we find that the religious life, in the intention of the Founders, has always been marked by a differentiating element coming from the Gospel. It is a life that is human, and indeed very human, but at the same time there is something different about it, something that tends to show that the impossible is yet possible, that what is utopian and quite out of place can nevertheless become embodied by the power of the Holy Spirit in a community of men and women who have vowed to be followers of Christ in an unceasing effort to conform themselves to him.

The history that the Pope urges us to build has no other foundation than faith in the truth of the gospel. Now:

a. faith consists not only in a sound knowledge of the mystery of God, of Christ and of the Church; faith is not just a matter of words. It is not enough to have clear ideas, otherwise theologians would all be saints, while on the other hand "*Theologus erat et fidem habebat: oh res miranda!*".

b. faith does not mean only defending the truth and doing everything possible to preach or sustain it; orthodoxy is certainly to be defended, but it is not yet faith. Otherwise all preachers, inquisitors and missionaries would be holy by definition.

c. faith is not measured by works; works are inherently ambiguous as indications. There are "works of law" and "works of faith", says St Paul, but he warns us that the former will not save us, even though they may seem to soothe our conscience.

And so it is not easy to examine the authenticity of our faith, though we must do it nonetheless. Otherwise we risk finishing in the lowest place and being unrecognized: "Many are called, but few are chosen". We must maintain with our life that God is absolute and is enough to completely fill our heart. Our Salesian life may be lacking in many things: works, personnel, social effects, but never in its basic orientation, in its determination to hold fast to the eternal values. By all means let us abandon forms that are obsolete and fossilized, but let us not change what in fact cannot be changed, let us not throw out the baby with the bath-water.

If we lose our faith in God, our life loses all meaning and becomes absurd. Faith is the centre around which all our existence revolves; take away the keystone and the whole building will collapse. It is a matter of believing in depth, of risking my life for God. If I begin to doubt the truth of the Gospel, my life has no further meaning; the vows become intolerable and without significance. My life is undermined from within. Crises of celibacy are in the first place crises of enthusiasm for the gospel. How can I make my life a sacrifice unless I am first convinced of the value of the Good News?

Let us do an X-ray of our life: the veins and blood-vessels are there, the tissues, muscles and flesh, but without the skeleton everything falls apart. Faith is this skeleton.

Religious life is of its very nature theocentric – centred on God. This gives meaning to its very existence before anything that it does. The theology of the religious life must not be played down: if it becomes too secretive and viewed too narrowly, it will risk making itself unattractive. Nowadays the most incisive ecclesial movements seem to be those that place greater emphasis on the values implicit in the break that faith involves.

Man is always tempted to identify the small daily responses called for in his life with the big absolute responses, and so he runs the constant risk of setting up idols in his life. The religious therefore must bring it about that men see that fundamental values exist which we associate with the name of "God".

We often speak of Don Bosco as being a "gift of God". This is a statement of faith, which means that we must consider Don Bosco as a means, an instrument, but not as the end itself of our experience of God. The gift must not make us forget the Giver. The function of the gift is to make us more and better aware of the one who gives it.

Spiritual specialists make us do some deep rethinking. The option for God also involves the renunciation of things that are perfectly legitimate and even sanctifying, as for instance the grace of marriage. But they are renunciations which should not lead us to think of ourselves as victims of the choices we have made. Among other things experience teaches us that asceticism is not an exclusive domain of religious; in fact asceticism is only one face of the medal – the other face is faith and enthusiasm for Christ.

Rightly has it been said that one of the first questions we have to ask is not *how* to be new religious, Salesian religious, but *why* we should be so. Religious are not born as such; they become what they are. Our greatest joy lies in allowing ourselves to be won over by the logic of the decision we have made.

There are two kinds of freedom: that by which we decide on the numerous individual things we have to do and the other by which we decide, by a single act of the will covering all our life, who we want to be. This is a deeper and truer kind of freedom, because what is at stake here is a choice about all future behaviour and attitudes. It is not just one decision among others, maybe involving a bit greater commitment, like the choice between religious life and priestly life. It is a choice that underlies all the others and gives sense and meaning to them; it is the golden thread that unites all of them, the project that turns a heap of stones into a house.

"Only two things are important: Christ and history"
(Giulio Bevilacqua, "spiritual father" of Paul VI and future Cardinal)

1

"LIVING WITHIN THE HISTORY OF DON BOSCO, IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST"

Introduction

At the Palermo ecclesial congress some ten years ago (1995), the Italian Church was asked to be faithful to its history, with love for the present day, for its country and for the civilization to which it belonged, and to esteem the history of freedom still preserved in it despite a thousand and one contradictions. And it was asked to do this without weakening its identity but rather starting from its identity and in virtue of it, i.e. because of its mission of salvation developed by God, in the course of time, in Christ and in the Spirit through the Church.

The same kind of thing is true also for the Salesian society. It is important to emphasize a risk which is greater today than in the past and will become greater still as time goes by: that of severing in some way the umbilical cord that keeps us united with the founder, and consequently of losing our identity. Well over a hundred years have now passed since Don Bosco died. Gone too are practically all the generations who had direct or indirect contact with him or who knew him. The chronological, geographical and cultural distance from the founder is increasing all the time; and from our houses are disappearing that atmosphere and close-knit psychological feeling spontaneously provoked by the sight of a picture of Don Bosco or a quotation from the Biographical Memoirs, so well known to everyone. What is left aside can easily get lost altogether. The living bond with Don Bosco can be broken. Once deprived of the founder and his spirit, the SDBs would have no rights as citizens in the Church – they would have lost heir roots. No roots, no lymph, no life.

In the hermeneutics of "Salesian sources" and at the same time of the "signs of the times" which are the renewed Constitutions, we find a pleas-

ant surprise. The name of Don Bosco appears directly some 40 times. In the first 17 articles he is present some 13 times, because even where he is not mentioned by name, there is constant reference to his thought, his practice or his writings. And remember that in the XIX century the Holy See forbade the mention in the Constitutions of the name and writings of the founder!

1. A struggling Church at the dawn of the third millennium

But we are now at the dawn of a new era in history. Hugely impressive phenomena (like globalization, international terrorism, cultural transition, supremacy of science and technology, informational techniques, new nationalistic movements, large scale human migration, the chaotic situation in poor and dependent countries, new forms of religious expression, etc.) make the traditional model of religious life and its theological underpinning seem like a cultural anachronism. We are at a decisive crossroads: symbols of the past are challenged: manner of dress, religious practices, iconography, explanations, motivations, activities, objectives, methods, everything.

The dawn of Vatican II has not yet reached full daylight for the universal Church. In spite of the great personal charism of Pope J. P. II, the Church is in crisis in respect of its relationship with the world; she is tired, because she has just emerged from a certain kind of Christian situation and now has to set up a new and previously unknown relationship with the world. Faced with a "new Renaissance", with a "post-Christian" era, with a "fourth man" (following on the Greek and Latin man, the mediaeval man, and the modern man) she now has to find a new theological vision. In fact:

a. the Church has for many centuries enjoyed a hegemony or dominant superiority ("we cannot fail to call ourselves Christians [in Italy]", declared the philosopher Benedict Croce); but now the instruments of this Christian "socialization" (schools, hospitals, printing establishments managed by religious) are passing into other hands;

b. for centuries too the Church has been identified with the task of christianizing structures; but today's pluralistic, multireligious, multiethnic and "personalist" culture does not adapt well to those old models of education, to the faith which implied action on a homogeneous group;

c. today the Church finds it difficult to define herself with relation to those outside it, to those at a distance, to the new political, economic and cultural institutions, and with the mass media, all of them more or less completely dechristianized;

d. the Church is engaged in a difficult search for a way to respond adequately to the new specifically religious needs of today's men and women, widespread as they are and difficult to define (sects, astrology, New Age, etc.).

2. Re-establishing the "minority" phenomenon of consecrated life

Within the Church (or rather, within some particular Churches) a progressive marginalization of religious is taking place: religious seem to count for much less than their numbers would suggest. Pastoral plans, diocesan synods, the ordinary macrostructures of the Church concede at the most to consecrated life a reminder of transcendent values. Their services are not always integrated: they are thanked for them and that is the end of it. Committed lay people too, who do voluntary work, sometimes seem diffident about religious institutions; people often accept services offered by religious (which are often better than those found elsewhere) but are not induced to follow the same kind of life and they look for inspiration elsewhere; movements and associations absorb religious rather than allow themselves to be influenced by them. And while all this is happening, new perspectives are coming in the Church itself, new doctrinal presuppositions are being discovered, with new methods, new languages, new operators etc.

For their part the religious feel the need to be continually justifying the reason for their own consecration. How in fact can one consecrate oneself to a service or a work which is always contingent? Quite reasonably religious wonder whether the charism is still active when a service they render is no longer useful; quite lawfully they ask whether a charism, culpably neglected, will not become frustrated and vanish in the course of time.

What is quite certain is that the *model* of consecrated life inherited from the past seems to have reached exhaustion, and (if it) frequently (says) next to nothing to those outside it; it often fails to express its significance for today's Church even to those within it.

It is a question therefore of seeking the particular meaning of the role we play for the cause of the Gospel and the salvation of modern man. Evi-

dence of this is the title: "Passion for Christ and a Passion for humanity" chosen for the preparatory document for the Congress on the Religious Life in Rome, which is in preparation at the time I write this (Sept. 2004).

But we must not forget that consecrated life always was and still is a minority phenomenon: only 0.12% of the baptized embrace it, 3 of every 4 are women; there are 1,423 institutes of women as against 250 of men. Among the religious themselves 82.2% are lay (women 72.5%, men 27.5%), and 17.8% ecclesiastics. And all this out of a total of about a billion Catholics in the world. Nevertheless it continues to occupy a great deal of space from both a religious and social aspect. So there must be something great in it, a common thread running through it, with the end held by God who gives effect to the project of his Kingdom.

3. The historical forms of consecrated life

It may be helpful to take a look at the history of consecrated life, i.e. at the "glorious history to be remembered", in view of the "great history to be built" *(Vita Consecrata).* Some recent studies have divided it up as follows:

a. *IV-VI Centuries. Era of the fathers of the Church: flight from the world*

The official epiphany or manifestation of consecrated life is found in the desert; there the monks discovered and bore witness to the absolute nature of God and of Christ his only Son, a unique model for the Christian; in the desert took place the conflict of Christ against the spirit of evil, the *mysterium iniquitatis.* The Church was enriched by the struggle against the radical powers of evil, in imitation of Christ. In the individual monks in the desert the battle was fought and won with Christ; in the individual hermits grew the level of the salvation of the world. Christian innovation therefore was not exhausted by what was visible and could be verified. The most important thing by far is invisible; it is the hidden life with Christ in God; it is a "mysterium".

b. *VI-XII Centuries. Era of monasticism: the monastery a new ideal – separated (but not too much) from the world*

In a situation of dramatic and civil involution St Benedict spread the humanizing force of the Gospel and laid the foundation of the mediaeval civi-

lization of Europe, of which he has rightly been named patron. He urged the wandering peoples of his time to settle down in some place and build *(stabilitas)*; he urged young people to take off the toga, lay down their arms and cultivate the land, so as to be of use to themselves and to others *(labora)*; and he urged everyone to come together around the altar to become brothers in prayer *(ora)*; in this way he changed the course of history.

c. *XIII-XV Centuries. Era of the mendicants: in the towns to beg for bread, to pray, to serve the poor, to study*

To a new middle-class intent on increasing its riches, St Francis (and the Mendicants) reminded everyone that in the last analysis everything is a gift of God, and that man's real richness is God himself. And to the Church which had emerged strong and powerful from the Gregorian reform he said that prestige and human riches were not enough; gospel humility was needed as well. For this reason he built fraternity as an essential element of the Church. And so it came about that around what the world considered "weak" values (i.e. the vows), there developed the renewal of the Church and of society in that era and those that followed. It will not be out of place to recall here that the IV Council of the Lateran prohibited any new religious foundations with new rules. Why? Because of the concern among conservatives at the increasing multiplication; and jealousy of the secular clergy against the monks who were competing for the parishes. That decree really meant only one thing: from then on, the charism of a founder would not be given to anyone, and if it were to be so given he would not be allowed to give effect to it. What are we to think of that? Today it would make us laugh, and I think the Holy Spirit must have laughed in heaven [more or less the same happened with the election of the polish pope in 1978: what will happen with the next?]. And in fact after that decree there came a very deluge of prophetic charismata: not only Franciscans, but also Dominicans, Carmelites, Marists, Augustinians, and others.

d. *XVI Century. Era of apostolic orders: well educated friars, zealous missionaries, totally involved in society and ideals of holiness*

This is the era of the "*dignitas*" and of the "*virtus*" of the newly born man of the Renaissance, and of the harsh Lutheran reaction which empha-

sized strength of faith as the only thing needed. For *Ignatius* – typical of all of them – the only real man is one who, with the support of grace, becomes a protagonist of a divine mission, i.e. the divine and human mission of the salvation of the world, the highest of all enterprises. With Ignatius consecrated life becomes linked with history and, in fact, becomes completly immersed in it; it re-orientates itself towards God so that everything can reflect his "greater glory". With Ignatius, his Exercises and his *Ratio studiorum*, an authentic leap forward was made in Church history. The period of Ignatius is also that of the Council of Trent. The time was ripe: the only thing missing was the right man. And he appeared: one who as a young man had sown his wild oats but to whom age had brought wisdom, Paul III Farnese, the Pope of Catholic Reform. But a Council was needed also, and another young man emerged, Charles Borromeo, aged 23 and a deacon, a cardinal by virtue of family descent and nephew of a Pope. He took the Council by the scruff of the neck and led it to successful results. And so Europe did not collapse under the terrible thrust of Lutheranism

e. *XIX-XX Centuries. Era of the teaching and nursing congregations (with particular ministries)*

To the suffering present in Christian society, often more concerned about political aspects and legal balance than about the extreme misery of the abandoned masses, and to the French revolution which had destroyed consecrated life, will respond the hundred or so new and modern congregations with hospitals, schools and plans for the instruction of people, assistance of the aged, formation of the clergy and care for society's outcasts. It was the prophecy of the indivisible unity of the love of God and love of neighbour that proved to be a stimulus to governmental organisms of the State to come to grips with such needs. Society would no longer be what it had been earlier, when the poor were considered an essential dimension of any social policy worthy of the name. To get back to Salesian aspects – we remember that the Salesian Congregation was born against the anticlerical ministers of the kingdom of Sardinia first and later against those of the Kingdom of Italy, against all the laws suppressing religious congregations and institutes, against the norms confiscating ecclesiastical goods – it became a model for many others and developed from nothing in a surprising manner. Many years later, a Cardinal would say: "If Latin America is Catholic, it is due in

part to the Salesians". And it could be added that in Turin and Piedmont, then undergoing a strong dechristianizing process, were then working some fifty people who would later be beatified or canonized.

4. Trends of change and the manner in which it took place

And so it is God who holds the threads of consecrated life; it is God who guides history, even though this may be made difficult by the betrayal of charisms left by founders and by the counter-testimony of members through blindness, ignorance, weakness, the defence of the previous regime (even in good faith), or in fidelity to the past. The fact remains that it is not enough to have merit behind us: the justification for our work and existence either exists here and now or it does not exist at all. We must be able to respond with facts to the old accusation: "First there was Christ, but then unfortunately there came the Church", which could be paraphrased for us as: "First there was Don Bosco, and then unfortunately there came the Salesians".

We need to know, therefore, how this passage in history from one kind of consecrated life to another took place. The following five ways have been detected:

a. *emergence*: consistent changes in society and in the Church give rise to new movements and the foundation of new religious communities; some aspects of the new communities become outstanding and lead to new images of consecrated life, different from preceding ones; they are welcomed by some, but by others considered as false;

b. *growth and success:* the new communities expand and the older ones copy them, thus achieving success themselves; the positive image attracts many members and becomes mature and then predominant, and so matters continue;

c. *decline:* the dominant image is subjected to deep questioning: consecrated life seems no longer suited to the aspirations of the time; communities lose their raison d'être, they fall into laxity and disintegrate. Some communities disappear, others lose many of their distinguishing elements;

d. *return:* a relatively short period follows of revitalization, in which arise new movements and new communities capable of responding to the

new needs of the Church and of the world. Variations of the dominant image of consecrated life appear, and one of them is chosen as the new prevailing image;

e. *growth and success* of the new image: once it has appeared it grows and influences all the others.

The cycle then repeats itself and eventually new images appear once again. Nowadays it seems we should consider ourselves at the end of an era, at a turning point in history (one of only 5 in the space of 2,000 years) and that in the future a different kind of consecrated life is going to emerge.

"What will Consecrated Life and the Church itself be like in the secularized and post-Modern Western society" was asked at the Congress in Italy in 2003 entitled "Consecrated Life 40 years after Vatican II". The response was: "Only God knows", though this was not put forward as an invitation to passive resignation but to trust in God and in intelligent and hard-working commitment on the part of religious. In its research consecrated life is "in good company" because in the rapid and unstoppable cultural change of the present day all societies and social, political or ecclesial parties or groups are rediscovering the crisis of their own traditional figure; if they want a future they have to create a meaningful space within present culture.

Four main trends are discernible:

a. An ever greater "incarnation": the spirit that transcends the world becomes embodied in a life that embraces the world. What religious are will be embodied in what they do. They will disclose the mystery of incarnation more than in the past. This is always true, even though many classical apostolic works be ever more guaranteed by the State (like schools, hospitals…).

b. *a surmounting of the dualism* of the millenial culture: body and soul, manual and intellectual work, the present and future worlds, the sacred and profane, lay and consecrated life (the latter is no longer the only way of perfection). The laity are called by virtue of their baptismal vocation to many tasks previously thought to belong exclusively to Religious Institutes, but now entrusted to lay people (with the result that many lay religious now run the risk of feeling themselves wrong-footed).

c. the challenge of *inculturation:* the charism must be reviewed in the light of particular circumstances which require the unity of certain principles but may allow for a pluralism in the way they are lived; it may not be out of the question to consider a renewal of all Religious Congregations, but not all in the same way; perhaps the change could take place at different speeds; perhaps the one charism could be lived in different ways within the Congregation itself, because each member has the right to serve God according to his own possibilities. Personal and provincial projects may not always fully coincide.

d. *insertion among the poor:* there is no single way to serve the poor, but it is an outstanding kind of activity. Although only a minority are engaged in it, this is a striking the conventional manner of being present in the Church and in society, especially in frontier areas and extreme situations.

5. Some fixed points

a. In the history of the Church, one of the best interpretive signs of the life of salvation traced out by Christ, after the apostles and martyrs, is provided by the founders. These have had so clear a perception of the mystery of Christ that they have become a sure example for others. In this way Don Bosco has offered us a reading of the gospel guaranteed as regards its objectives, its style and its spirit. We SDBs are a charism of the Spirit in the Church for the service of the world. This we believe by faith. You only need to read the first three articles of the Constitutions and n. 12 to see that this is true.

b. Don Bosco did not feel that he was Christ's only trustee, nor the greatest of such trustees. We are all aware that the most important elements of consecrated life, its ontological elements, are the same for all, common faithful and religious alike: baptism, a new life in Christ, and the following of Christ. But these same elements can be realized in different ways when it comes to details. For all Christians the following of Christ is carried out, so to speak, against the background of a life dedicated to work, to a chosen profession, to a family; for us it is the thing of greatest importance, the unique and only norm. Read what is said in Perfectae Caritatis: "since the fundamental norm of consecrated life is to follow Christ as taught by the gospel, this norm must be considered by all religious institutes as their supreme rule", a statement that is echoed by art. 196 of our own Constitutions.

c. It has been said that the life of St Francis of Assisi is a rule for the reading of Scripture, and we can say the same of Don Bosco without any hesitation. Don Bosco's life is a rule for reading Scripture, for giving effect to a typical way of following Christ. And this all the more so because Don Bosco is a saint who has had dozens of imitators. If he himself has been called "the St Vincent de Paul of the XIX century", and "the new St Philip Neri"; there are lots of towns in Italy and other countries that have linked his name with citizens who have done things similar to his achievements.

d. The Constitutions seem to have had almost a fear of using the terms "mystery" and charism; they have preferred the term 'project', but all the reality of faith is there. Mystery: something concerning God and sustained by him; charism: a gift of God determining the orientation of life. And this must be stated in the face of so many anthropological changes of tack, often ambiguous, and even in the face of certain harmful and pessimistic attitudes in some countries or equally harmful over-optimistic ones in others. At the beginning there was certainly a project of Don Bosco: "These rules have been practised since 1844", he wrote. Nevertheless we know that the human project develops in believers as an expression of Christ's plan, in the effort to translate the Lord's will manifested in the gospel according to the three classical elements: 1. the founder; 2. the prevailing circumstances; 3. the Church's legislation.

e. The Charism is alive in individuals and in the community. Conditions are contingent, but the gift is permanent. In *Mutuae Relationes*, a document of 1978 which is still valid, we read: "The very charism of the Founders appears as an experience of the Spirit, transmitted to their disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them, in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth" (n. 11). We shall return to this point later, but we may recall the well known conversation of Don Bosco with Don Barberis in 1865 about the final draft of the Constitutions. Take the case of Don Bosco sending some of his best sons to America at a moment when it was no longer certain that the Congregation would manage to survive in Italy. If at the beginning there was a charism, that of Don Bosco, that same charism is today in our hands; we must put it forward again with dynamic fidelity – as the phrase goes nowadays – in prophecy *here and now*, in our own surroundings, and pass it on to others in all its integrity, and enriched by our own personal growth in maturity.

Conclusion

It is a great responsibility that we bear. And it is not a matter of high-flown notions: it's enough to remember the talking that has gone on for years about "territory", about the inculturation of the preventive system and of Salesian pastoral work, about our option for the poorest of the poor, for street-children, for immigrants, and about the best missionary methods in various environments. But be careful: one can resist the spirit (1 Thess 7,51), one can quench the Spirit (Acts 7,51); the signs of the times are full of an ambiguity that can be overcome only by docility to the Holy Spirit: "veritas liberavit vos" (Jn 8,32).

As we move into the XXI century we are perhaps still at the beginnings: we have almost to create *ex novo.* Some of the clerics of Don Bosco's time saw that things were not going too well; they did not want consecrated life, but they were held spellbound by Don Bosco. This is what young people need today, wrote Paul VI – they need "witnesses".

Our mission as it was in the past may have come to a halt because the times have changed. We start again with the awareness of a new beginning: but always in the context of faith, hope and charity, and in the undying values of the preventive system. On 2 February 1876 Don Bosco told the Directors: "There has never been a change in the congregation that was not preceded by an indication from the Lord". Evidently the Lord's directives will be made known through various manifestations that require interpretation. It is readily understandable therefore that historians are not sufficient by themselves; also needed are the combined efforts of theologians, educationalists, organizers, and especially spiritual men sensitive to the things of God and to the things of the men that God loves.

For personal reflection

1. A clear charismatic identity is not afraid to find new ways of living this particular gift. What are these "new ways" as regards my own personality and that of my province?
2. A charism is incisive if it faces up to the knotty points of contemporary culture, with the prevailing norms of mentality and behaviour. What binding texts of contemporary culture and of the Church do I use as a serious guide?
3. As a Salesian (enthusiastic about my vocation, or resigned to the present state of affairs, or a bitter and dissatisfied critic of every situation, or a sceptical quencher of all enthusiasm or new proposals) I still need the *desert* to meet the Lord who speaks to me. Where and what is my "desert"?

Don Bosco: *"He lived as one seeing him who is invisible* (Cost 21; Heb 11,27).

2

DON BOSCO: SECRETS OF SUCCESS

Introduction

As an introduction to this second meditation let us look briefly at some salient points in the biography of Don Bosco. A consideration of this kind means recalling the words and deeds of someone which continue to have effects at the present day, someone who is still able to change our past activities into future ones that are different, so that he is not simply a figure in past history or a museum piece. There are indeed many religious congregations that envy us not only our founder but also our particular attachment to him. Don Bosco was:

- a country boy, a young student, a seminarian;
- a priestly educator of boys, especially those who were abandoned; a people's priest;
- a preacher in town or rural environments, writer of religious and catechetical material, author of educative material for the young and people in general in matters of apologetics and controversy;
- a publisher and promoter of printing and publishing establishments and of bookshops;
- a founder of newspapers and periodicals, of literary series for schools from light readings to theatrical presentations;
- a founder of educational and welfare works: oratories, hostels, colleges and schools (Sunday, day, evening, trades), junior seminaries, churches for the young and the poor, parishes;
- an organiser of initiatives for emigrants and the foreign missions, and of youth groups and associations of a religious, cultural, social and recreational nature;
- a promoter of a family type of educational system, about which he wrote explanations;
- to ensure that his work would continue, a founder of two religious fami-

lies (SDB, FMA), and of two organisms linked with them: the association of Mary Help of Christians for adult vocations, and the Cooperators;
- a mediator between Church and State in political and religious matters;
- a researcher into various social relationships: Popes, curia, bishops, priests, lay people of every kind of social extraction;
- a man able to mobilize and coordinate others, making use of historical and cultural conditions and the economic possibilities of the time;
- an educator with a highly sensitive intuition of the prevailing civil and political situation, of the problem of the moral and social regeneration of society, and of the education of the young;
- a Saint (canonized).

"Saints do not make history" wrote Albert Moravia, one of the best-known writers of Italian fiction, shortly before his death at the end of the last century. This hardly seems true, given that Don Bosco, for example, an authentic model of subalpine sanctity, has left his mark on his own century, and has also continued to be the object of books, studies and films. One of these indeed is appearing at this very time (22-23 September), a TV story of more than 3 hours duration, which is captivating Italian viewers.

Don Bosco's "success" is universally recognized, even though the secret of such success is assigned by different individuals to different facets of his complex personality: an able undertaker of educational works, a highly skilled educator and great teacher of youthful holiness, even an exponent of acrobatics and conjuring tricks. And we could go on with the long list of accomplishments credited to him on the occasion of the centenary of his death. But we may not be far from the mark if we discover his "secret" simply in the few but radical attitudes and convictions that governed his whole life.

1. A very high esteem of every individual called by God to salvation

Don Bosco placed God above everything else; he saw in man God's image and he thought of the young – and of people in general – as creatures to be nourished with the food of the religious and moral principles of Christianity. His anthropological vision was precisely that of the Bible and the Fathers; man is the masterpiece of the Universe, the image of God: from God he comes, and to God he is destined to return.

Don Bosco was not satisfied with the concept of man as a *thinking being* of Descartes: it was not acceptable because too static and non-stimulating. Nor was Duns Scotus' definition enough of *man as the solitude of being;* though it could be true and certainly more realistic than the other one, it was insufficient because it did not provoke any action. And just imagine if he had accepted the definition of Sartre that *other people are hell,* or something similar!

Prompted by theological charity – or pastoral charity as we would call it today – and convinced of the *porro unum est necessarium,* to this *unum* he gave his all. If he had an obsession it was that of souls to be saved (and sin to be avoided). *Da mihi animas coetera tolle* was his motto all through his life. To the God-who-saves Don Bosco lent his arm, his mind and his heart of an apostle of the young. The glory of God, the heavenly determination to save souls, were the fundamental option to which were directed his actions and aptitudes, his relationships and financial resources, all his physical, mental and moral energy.

At the centre of his spirituality was the knowledge, love and service of God as the way to his own salvation through the realization of a personal vocation: religious and apostolic dedication to the young, especially to those poorest and most abandoned, with a view to their integral salvation, with Christ the Saviour as his model and at the school of Mary most holy as his Mother and Teacher.

How very significant is the following confidence that don Orione (now St. Orione) shared with his clerics in 1934; (as a boy Orione had lived for three years with the aging Don Bosco):

> "Now I'll tell you the reason, the motive, the cause of Don Bosco's sanctity. He made himself holy because he made God the food of his life, because he made God the food of our lives. At his school I learned that the holy man did not fill our heads with foolish things or the like, but he nourished us with God, just as he himself fed on God and God's Spirit. As a mother feeds herself so that she can feed her child, so Don Bosco fed on God so as to feed us too on God. This is why those who knew the Saint, who had the tremendous grace of growing up in his proximity, of hearing him speak, of being able to approach him, of living in some sense the life of the Saint, took from such contact something unearthly, something more than human; something that nourished his own holy life. And he always directed everything towards God, he used everything as a means for raising our minds to heaven and heading us in he same direction".

In Don Bosco the cultivation of powerful values did not lead to exaggerated behaviour. He did not rush ahead of others, but neither did he remain behind them. Where a spurious mysticism would have come close to destroying the bridge with reality, faith compelled him to continue to fight for those in need, or at least for those he could reach. Where tiredness and resignation began to be felt he overcame them with the conviction of St Augustine: love teaches us to be solid with our neighbour: *amor vos plura docebit.* Paul showed him the way: *Caritas Christi urget nos* (1 Cor 5,14): a charity which did not give way in the face of difficulty: I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some (1 Cor 9,22 p. 58).

Rosmini wrote that if charity is to be complete, it must be practised at the physical, spiritual and intellectual levels. Don Bosco did this without putting it in writing. For him what have to be feared in the field of education are not defeats but inertia and lack of commitment.

2. Deep values expressed in social action

It is not easy to transform values into social deeds and concrete activity, but Don Bosco succeeded in doing so. Not only was he a high flyer when it came to the defence of deep values (Christian, priestly, religious educational and missionary vocations, etc.) – never did he fail to give support to such values – but he was able to express them in social activity, in practical ways without falling back on spiritual, ecclesial or liturgical considerations thought of as areas exempt from the problems of the world and of life. In this way the Spirit became practical life. Strong in his vocation as priest and educator, he cultivated:

- a daily lifestyle that was not without horizons and which embodied a dimension of value and ideal, i.e. an identity that becomes ever stronger and more consolidated;
- a daily lifestyle that was not closed in and afraid of open confrontation, but sincere in facing up to wide and diversified aspects of reality;
- a daily lifestyle that was not limited to the satisfying of a few needs and the almost mechanical repetition of traditional attitudes, but open to the acceptance of all kinds of tensions, to sacrifices that could be demanding, to risks, to the renunciation of pleas, to constant struggle.

I limit myself to just two of the innumerable quotations that could be given in this connection. The first one is very old; it is a letter written by Don Bosco in 1853 to the 41-year old Fr Vittorio Alasonatti, a priest in his native area (Avigliana, near Turin):

> "My dear friend, if you want to follow God's voice, turn off for now the voice of nature and the affections. Here God is waiting for you. I cannot promise you anything but work, but I will guarantee that you will have a great reward in heaven. Take courage therefore, follow the example of the apostles and come where the Lord is calling you... I do not have the authority to say to you «Follow me», but I do have the right to remind you that God needs you to come and serve him in Turin, for the benefit of these hundreds of boys who are waiting for someone to break for them their daily bread and the bread of the soul".

What a wonderful synthesis of a Salesian as one who provides for youngsters bread for the body and for the soul!

And the second, 31 years later, could appear – apart from one or two terms – as being from the present day. It is a reflection from the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Lucido Maria Parocchi, who in 1884 put the question:

> "What is so specific about the Salesian Society? I want to talk to you about what distinguishes your Congregation from others, what forms your character as, for instance the Franciscans are distinguished by their poverty, the Dominicans by their defence of the faith, the Jesuits by their culture. There is something in it that links it with the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the Jesuits, but is distinguished by its objective and the means to attain it... What is so special therefore about the Salesian Congregation? What is its character, what does its physiognomy look like? If I have understood it aright, if I have grasped the concept correctly, its specific character, its essential element, is charity practised in line with the needs of the century: nos credidimus Charitati. Deus caritas est. Only by works of charity can this century be enticed towards what is good. At present the world knows and wants nothing but material things; it doesn't want to know anything deeper about itself and about spiritual matters. It ignores the beauties of faith, knows nothing of the great elements of religion, repudiates the hope of a future life, denies even God himself. About charity the present world knows only its means and neither its beginning nor end. It analyzes this virtue but is unable to make a synthesis of it. «Animalis homo percipit quae sunt spiritus Dei», as St Paul says. To persuade men of today that «souls must be saved that are being lost, that it is imperative to instruct those who know nothing of the principles of religion, that almsgiving is needed through love for the God who will one day reward the generous»: these are things that people of today do not understand. We have to adapt ourselves to them, and they are for ever changing. God makes himself known to pagans through the natural law, to the Jews by means of the Bible,

> to Greek schismatics through the great traditions of the Fathers, to Protestants through the Gospel; to the present century through charity. Tell people of today: I am taking youngsters off the streets so that they may not be involved in traffic accidents or fall into the gutter; I am taking them into a hostel so that they will not ruin the freshness of their young lives by vice and debauchery; I am gathering them into schools to educate them so that they will not become the scourge of society and end up in prison; I am calling them and watching over them so that they are not at each others throats. And then modern men may begin to understand and come to believe". (BS 8 [1884] n. 6, pp. 89-90).

Cardinal Ottaviano Alimonda of Turin was of the same opinion. Speaking on the occasion of the "month's mind" of Don Bosco, 1 March 1888, he said that if the Gospel had divinized the world and the laws of nature with "divine charity", Don Bosco had used the same divine charity to divinize the XIX century, a charity inclined to one's neighbour, and one that believes that the goodness of God exceeds man's wickedness.

Various liberal newspapers acknowledged the same point at the time of Don Bosco's death. To quote just one of them, the "Corriere della sera" of Milan wrote: "Though we were a long way from agreeing with him in matters of politics, we cannot but admire the work he did. O that we could count on many such men in the liberal field, men with the great organizing ability of Don Bosco, sustained by the will power and perseverance which enabled him to undertake and successfully complete the most wonderful enterprises".

3. A clear priestly identity

But an indispensable condition for doing what Don Bosco did was a true priestly identity. In him it can be said that the mettle of the educator had been refined by apostolic zeal and the ability to meet the needs – and even the material needs – of his neighbour, in the sense that it obliged him to maintain a strict self-control that was the expression of an identity combining firmness with tenderness, solid religious principles with natural resources. Don Bosco was realistically inserted in the world of men by reason of his human sensitivity and priestly participation, in a blend of emotional outbursts of an almost biblical nature, practical and sometimes daring decisions, insistent supplication addressed to men with civil authority or to the heart of generous people. In difficult circumstance he was always sustained by an ardent higher faith.

The story has been told many times of "Don Bosco a priest at the altar, in the confessional, in the playground with the boys, at Turin and at Florence, in the house of the poor and in the palace of the king and his ministers"; but if, as appears to be the case, these are not the actual words of Don Bosco himself but the result of a later reconstruction, this does not undermine the basic truth that Don Bosco always lived by his priestly educative zeal and enthusiasm which he never concealed nor allowed to go by default.

As a servant of the gospel he too, like Primo Mazzolari, a well known Italian priest, fostered a deep conviction: "Just any kind of faith is not enough: we must work with Christ, according to *his* spirit and not according to ours. He must be with us as a guide, not as a hostage or prisoner; we have to commit Christ and ourselves with him; to jeopardize Christ is to jeopardize ourselves".

On October 25 1878 Don Bosco wrote to a priest:

> "Do not think of being relieved of your parish. There is too much work? Be prepared to die on the field of labour like a good soldier of Christ, You seem to be good for nothing? *Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat.* There are thorns? The Angels will weave them into a crown for you in heaven. The times are hard? That is how it has always been, but God's help will never be lacking, Christ yesterday and today".

When facing financial difficulties or problems in the organization of his works, as also when met by attacks and persecution on the part of enemies of the faith and anticlerical publication, even after the collapse of something he had built up with so much effort and sacrifice, Don Bosco never gave way to discouragement. He saw everything with the eyes of faith and taught others to do the same. He saw in what had happened a message of God, the positive aspect, seeing it as a means of reawakening faith, as a cross leading to glory, as an occasion for intensifying his love of God and confidence in him. God is a father and he will never abandon his children who promote his interests and dedicate themselves to his service.

Don Bosco did not have time to waste on long theoretical considerations; by his writings as well as his words and priestly dress, he preached the truth of Christ, exhorting without giving way to human respect, intervening directly even in circumstances which seemed in the eyes of some people to compromise priestly dignity. This particularly if young people

were at risk or their sacred rights violated, so that the poorer people and those not yet evangelized could know the truths of the faith and save their souls. He also had the certainty that God loved his congregation... His trust was not based on a false idea of providence. He acted as though everything depended on him, and hoped as if it all depended on God, convinced of the truth of the saying: "God helps those who help themselves".

4. The universal allure of his person

The great variety of those with whom he was involved and the esteem they showed for him – in beautiful and most moving letters – leads us also to reflect on Don Bosco's ability to attract others to his person, to his work and to what it represented.

Three centuries earlier Pascal, in the licentious Paris of those days, had discovered and practised the *art d'agrée* and the *art de persuader*, i.e. the art of being able to make oneself accepted in society, thus opening the way to men and women of all sorts of ethical and religious commitments. Because of the way the spirit works, to really know someone l'*ésprit de géometrie* is not enough; l'*esprit de finesse* is needed too. One must approach the other person using sympathy and empathy, promoting a dialogue of confidence, discretion and sincerity. With the other person there seems to arise a kind of interpersonal complementarity, almost *a dimidium animae meae* of Horace, since it gives rise to an osmosis of ideas, sentiments and style of life.

His personality was rich in an intense affection which, though always under control, was communicated and outwardly perceptible. Don Bosco was deeply loved by his boys: "no father received greater signs of affection from his children; they all want to be close to him, to speak to him, to kiss his hand", wrote Mgr. Gastaldi in 1849 in a newspaper article.

His sympathetic and attractive personality created an atmosphere of affection and confidence. "Education is a matter of the heart" was written in 1883 at Valdocco in his circular on punishments: "You need to make yourself loved... and make others see that they are loved", wrote Don Lemoyne in Don Bosco's name in the famous letter from Rome of 1884. Loving kindness is one of the three columns of Don Bosco's preventive system. Are not Salesians so-called because of the kindness and affability of St. Francis of Sales, whose name they bear?...

Let us listen to a past-pupil of the first Oratory who became a soldier and instructor in the army. At the age of 45 he is writing to his former Director, whom he had met a little earlier:

> "Beloved Don Bosco, you have good reason to complain about me, but believe me when I say I have always loved you and I always will. I always find in you a source of strength and admire from afar what you do; I have never spoken badly of you, nor have I ever let others do so; I have always defended you. I look to you who guided my soul in every circumstance; I was in turn confused, enraptured and thrilled with the talks you gave us; they were hard-hitting, made me feel disconcerted but I was amazed to see how deeply you loved us none the less – it is true, dear Don Bosco. I believe in the communion of Saints. No one knows me and my heart better than you do. No one can be more help to me. And so I conclude, asking for your advice and your love and pardon; please pray for me to God, to Jesus, to Mary most Holy. I kiss your hand as a sign of my love...".

The Countess Luisa Nerli complained to Federico Oreglia in the following terms that she had not been able to meet Don Bosco during his visit to Florence (18 December 1865):

> "I haven't seen Don Bosco... I was in pain and could not leave the house. Don Bosco went to a number of public places and was taken also to some private houses. Unfortunately no one thought of taking me to see him and so I have missed him... perhaps I did not deserve such a consolation, and I'm back in my customary resignation again. Please give him my greetings, kiss his hand for me and ask him to bless my little family".

On another occasion in 1883 Don Lasagna wrote: "so great was the esteem and enthusiasm the people of Rio de Janeiro had for Don Bosco that in their eyes it was sufficient to be one of his sons to make the person be thought a saint and highly talented!".

5. A great communicator of the youth problem

The historical importance of Don Bosco is to be sought primarily not in the so-called works, but in certain relatively original elements of methodology:

- in the sensitive intellectual perception he had of the overall theological and social implications of the youth problem, (i.e. the high percentage of youngsters who were nobody's concern, or who were badly cared for);

- in the idea he launched of the need for large-scale interventions in the civil and Catholic world, as a primary necessity for the life of the Church and for the very survival of the social order;
- and in his ability to communicate his ideas to large numbers of collaborators, benefactors and cooperators.

Precisely because he was a born communicator, he succeeded in his arduous enterprise despite the lack of financial resources (he never had enough money for all his initiatives); despite also his modest cultural and intellectual patrimony (at a time when responses were needed at a highly theoretical level), and that he was the product of a theology and social concept with strong limitations (and in consequence unfitted to respond to the process of secularization and the deep social revolutions that were taking place; think of Marx for instance).

About the problem of poor and abandoned youngsters he spoke with everyone, ecclesiastics and lay people, Popes and kings, the poor and well-to-do, noble ladies in their dotage and professional and business men, the rich and powerful, in Italy and abroad. The hundreds of letters and circulars he sent out in his efforts to raise money were bound to become directly or indirectly a challenge and moral condemnation of those who closed their hearts to the sad reality of their neighbour: those who found it more pleasant to live in the bourgeois respectability of the criteria of the licentious ethic: *audi, vide et tace si vis vivere in pace*!

6. Resurgence of holiness

Twenty years ago, the well known French theologian M. D. Chenu, O. P., in response to the question of a journalist who asked him to name some saints who had a relevant message for the new times, replied without any hesitation: "I would like to recall in the first place a man who preceded the Council by a century: Don Bosco. He is already, in prophecy, a model of holiness because of his work which is in striking contrast with the manner of thinking and believing of his contemporaries".

It would have been interesting to ask him what precisely he meant by these words, but it is a fact that there are dozens of authors, Salesian and others, eminent clerics and simple priests, lay people of various professions (writers, professors, politicians, journalists, etc.), men and women, admir-

ers and detractors, who have written about Don Bosco's holiness, from his own lifetime to the present Rector Major. In this context all I can do is refer you to them, but not without recalling that the first person to recognize his sanctity was another holy person (even though she has not yet been officially recognized as such). She was the Marchioness Giulia Barolo; she was concerned about Don Bosco's health and in 1846 wrote to Don Borel, the chief chaplain of her own works: "I have always liked Don Bosco from the first time I met him and found in him that air of recollection and simplicity which is a characteristic of holy souls".

We may wonder whether the ultimate purpose, the great organization, the personal gifts that made him a fascinating communicator, and his method of education are sufficient to explain the apostolic success of Don Bosco's work? Without his internal theological approach, would there not have been missing an element that prevents "ears from being deaf and hearts cold"? Without holiness would he not have run the risk of being merely a "blind guide leading the blind"? Surely this would have been the case. In the last analysis Don Bosco's holiness lay in the fact that he always thought, spoke and acted "in union with God": a "union" that was not that of a mere functionary, of one who thinks like an indifferent person, of the simple reader of a preferred daily newspaper, or of one who has just watched the last item on TV, but rather

- of one who lives an intense interior life in the midst of tireless activity (a contemplative in action or militant mystic);
- of one who dedicates himself constantly to generous apostolic work, rejecting comfort or the seeking of consolation in gratifying success, and accepts all the hard work involved (work and temperance);
- of one who is revealed in his love for the Eucharist, for Confession his devotion for the Blessed Mother, his fidelity for the Pope.

Conclusion

It is certainly not by chance that the noun found most frequently, for instance, in the third volume of Don Bosco's Collected Letters is *God* (414 times in 451 letters), especially when you keep in mind that these were letters of what we could call ordinary daily administration. Surprise continues when we pass to the more complex verbal forms. Heading the list is the

verb "fare" (to "do" or "make") which occurs 945 times. Even though it is a quite common verb, this seems to suggest something meaningful about the mind of Don Bosco. But still more surprising is the fact that the second place is occupied by the verb *pray* which occurs 343 times. If to these you add the 201 occurrences of the corresponding noun it takes the number to 544. And so we might well conclude that ten centuries after St Benedict Don Bosco was reproposing in his letters (reversing the order of the words) what had been the motto of the founder of religious life in he west: *ora et labora.*

For personal reflection

1. Today the priest is spoken of as being "fragmented", pulled in different directions, with multiple cultural terms of reference and without convincing responses. Is this true in my case?
2. If it is a fact that Don Bosco was successful, can the same be said of Salesians of the present day? And of my province? If not, what is lacking?
3. If I had to sum up Salesian holiness today, what adjectives would I use?

THE SECOND DAY: HOPE

Yesterday we reflected on faith. This morning let us reflect on the second of the theological virtues, that of hope.

History is the site of our responsibilities towards God. If it is true that we are what history has made us – children of the past in the sense that all we have, know and are able to do, are what we have inherited – we are also makers of history. Man has always tried to unravel the mystery of his own history; to find in it a meaning and direction that can be offered to others as a guide for self-construction and a hope about his final destiny. But history has always remained a mystery as tragic as it is inexplicable. Some of the greatest problems in the history of men of our own days have seen very little progress made during the last century and the beginning of the present one. Think, for instance, of the widespread hunger in the world, atmospheric pollution and ideological pollution which is worse, the numerous wars (declared or undeclared), the acts of terrorism on an international scale (the 9/11 atrocity, the Madrid train-bombings, the school at Breslan, etc.).

Two centuries ago Hegel defined history as a "slaughter-house", a long series of wars, of acts of genocide and cruelty, of suffering, stupidity and guilt. And in it we are all involved and responsible. Were the judges of Nuremburg any less guilty than the Germans with their treatment of Hiroshima, Dresden and Gulag? If everyone knew about the Holocaust why was Pius XII the only one thought to be responsible for it, at least indirectly? In the wars in the Middle-East, in the acts of genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia, there were neither winners nor innocent people at a moral level. St Paul, speaking of the massive heap of iniquity committed by humanity, spoke of the *misterium iniquitatis* operating throughout history, a *misterium iniquitatis* which always seemed to have the upper hand.

And so there is the risk that the old eschatological concept will regain its dominance, a concept that abandons the whole of history to the Devil, reserving salvation to a future completely divorced from history. This would be something totally irrelevant, nothing more than a scenario in which man plays his part and shows himself worthy or unworthy of the true world which is somewhere else, completely remote from this earth and its history.

No; history touches us deeply both as men and as Christians. We are irretrievably involved in it. The tragedies and victories of our fellow men are our

victories and our tragedies. As Salesians we cannot ignore them, we cannot live in a kind of ghetto with an impossible parallel history of our own.

The light of faith sheds a ray of hope even on human history through its ability to justify throughout history the commitment of the believer, and even imbue it with a decisive salvific quality. God maintains a mysterious grip on history and moulds it to his saving plan. He makes of it the setting in which he reveals his power and his love – a history of salvation which is also a salvation of history.

To a humanity which seems to be living at a lugubrious level devoid of all hope and immersed in a fear and anxiety for its own survival, John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* puts forward once again the "principle of hope", in the person and message of Jesus Christ, interpreted by the innumerable ranks of consecrated men and women of every tongue, people and nation.

Still earlier in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (n. 46) he had written that Christians, and especially religious, were called not only to provide signs of hope, but to exploit the signs of hope already present in today's world. "There is also need for a better appreciation and understanding of the signs of hope present in the last part of this century, even though they often remain hidden from our eyes". And this was before the outbreak of international terrorism that began with the event of 11 September.

Cardinal Martini, the former Archbishop of Milan, in an address on the feast of St Ambrose in 1996 and referring to the saint, spoke of "dreaming great dreams": "I would like these reflections to prevent us from becoming imprisoned by the weight of the present times and to make us more able to look to the future of man and God. It is not just by chance that I headed my address: At the end of the millennium let us do some dreaming". (And soon afterwards was published the Pope's book "Crossing the threshold of hope").

For educators, hope can never be lacking. Education is always an investment, a wager, a hope, because there are many unknowns involved, the variables are often uncontrollable, and the results cannot be immediately verified.

Convinced as he was that "God has created us to know him, love him and serve him in this life, and enjoy him for ever in the next life in Paradise", Don Bosco conceived life on earth as a pilgrimage through a valley of tears towards eternity, where the beatific vision awaits us. This kind of theology of the supernatural calling of man, drawing its inspiration

from the *unum necessarium* of the gospel, is the foundation of his apostolate. The objective of his hope is the greatest possible extension of God's kingdom.

But this primacy of the vertical dimension did not lead him to any diminution of the significance of the horizontal or earthly reality. His conviction about the fleeting character of the world and of history did not hinder him from his commitment to make the universe more habitable for young people and to do all he could for the benefit of human society in general. Aiming at Paradise did not make him forget earthly commitments, but was rather an incentive to become immersed in work, because he knew very well that, though a youngster is oriented towards heaven, he remains very much anchored to this earth.

Here then are the qualities of Salesian hope. It is:

- *firm* (not shaky): without any serious doubts, disturbance or anxiety of conscience; it is not discouraged; it becomes a source of strength and vitality;
- *well founded* (not superficial): it is based on motives of faith and experience; it sees everything in the light of God. "For in this hope we were saved" (Rom 8, 24-25);
- *filial*, i.e. with confidence in God and abandonment into his hands;
- *practical*: it hopes for everything from above, but leaves nothing undone; it seeks to overcome obstacles and practises apostolic zeal as a means of sanctity; it is not blind to the world's problems nor does it minimize them, but it does not give way to them;
- *enthralling* and exciting: it is always ready for the struggle, with the skill and diplomacy of a leader who brings security and incites fidelity and enthusiasm;
- *social:* salvation is individual, but hope has also a social dimension in its practical objective;
- *endorsed by suffering*: which gives solidity to hope. Not only because of the merited reward (2 Thess 1, 4-10), but also because it ensures we keep to the right path, the way of Christ (Phil 3.10.12);
- *joyful*: Jesus is the bearer of good news. Those who suffer can count on being cured; the excluded can count on reconciliation, and the sinner on pardon. If in the background there arises the theology of the cross, it is nevertheless a cross that is joyful and glorious.

"Taking lessons from the past will serve as a norm for overcoming future difficulties" (MO)

3

THOSE FORMIDABLE FIRST TWENTY YEARS (1815-1835)

Introduction

There are those who assert that experience includes only what happens, others say that it includes only what they are conscious of, while still others maintain that human experience alway presupposes language. We are going to talk about it today not in a scientific way but with a philosophy of common sense which allows us to attribute to experience seven elements we can juggle with: context, perspective, perception, value, desire, decision and habit or custom. This is true of Sacred Scripture, of literature, of the theatre and of history, and also of the *wonderful story of the young Don Bosco.* When we rethink our lives we cannot leave out the past, and indeed rethinking has to be done not only *sub lumine evangelii,* but also *sub lumine humanae experientiae* of Don Bosco.

Don Bosco not only offered his youngsters the "Lives" he wrote of several of them as models suited to their age and situation, but he presented also his own experience, i.e. himself as a paradigm for all Salesians. He received from the Pope a specific command to write the story of his own vocation: "You cannot fully understand how much good it will do for your sons". And so Don Bosco has left us the *Memoirs of the Oratory,* a book which for the Salesians is a combined reminder, apologetic and theological sampler and a source-book for programs. In other words, it is not an autobiography but an uplifting educational document: "It will serve as a guide for overcoming future difficulties by applying lessons from the past". In the *Memoirs of the Oratory,* written when he was 60, are combined three separate realities: things that had really happened in the past, things of the present which gave meaning and significance to past happenings, and elements for the future which would have to be built on the experiences so gained. This combination, though it makes analysis of the Memoirs a bit of a headache, is in fact a great and unhoped for advantage from the standpoint of the charismatic message, the "formative plan", the "values", the

social, religious, educative and moral convictions, and the ideal interpretation of the facts, that Don Bosco wanted to leave us – all obviously expressed in the framework of his own time, culture and mentality. We should be grateful to him. If Pope John XXIII wrote his diary to gather together all the messages God had given him through his Word, interior inspirations and the events of life, and so made him prompt in responding, Don Bosco did the same for the benefit of his sons.

And so, on the basis of the *Memoirs* let us analyze what kind of boy and young man Don Bosco was. His childhood and youth are of significance for us, and he himself intended that they should be so when he wrote the account of them, because time and again he went over the account to make corrections.

1. In his native surroundings (1815-1831)

1.1. *The family*

This we all know about: his father had died when he was only two years of age, and Mamma Margaret had to be both father and mother to him. From her he learned the meaning given to life by the Christian faith and practice. He tells us that his mother instructed him in his religion, taught him his prayers (recited in common with the rest of the family), prepared him for his first confession and assisted him at the important moment of his first communion. We cannot fail to see at once how much these fundamental childhood experiences of a family living by faith in all its expressions, including charity and trust in Providence, would serve him later as an educative model. It also enabled him to speak from experience when he would later be writing about mother–father relationships and those between parents and children, in the books he published. For Don Bosco a Christian family was the ideal situation for the development of a genuine Christian personality.

1.2. *The parish community*

"In the beginning there was the mother", wrote the Danish biographer J. Joergenson of Don Bosco in 1929. Perhaps it should be completed like this: "In the beginning was the mother, in the little village of Morialdo and the parish of Castelnuovo, Buttigliera". From these the young John acquired

the main elements of his spirituality: habits of prayer, of duty, of sacrifice, together with a bit of study (Fr Lacqua); here too he made his first confession (at the age of reason) and his first communion (at the age of discretion), and learned the catechism of that era. All of this moulded his personality and laid the elementary foundations for his later intense activity as a writer and religious educator of the working-class.

1.3. *Places of work and study*

His native village was also the place of his first lessons in reading and writing, especially reading. His commitment to study increased after his meeting with Don Calosso, the chaplain of Morialdo (1829-1830), with whom he had made an agreement for a program of study and work: he would study in the priest's house and as he walked to and from it, and for the rest of his time he would work. A similar combination would continue later when he went to school at Castelnuovo (lodging with a tailor who offered him a well-paid job, which John rejected in order to follow his vocation), and at Chieri (where he lodged with a baker and bar-owner who too offered him a good job, again rejected). This he later included in the *Memoirs* with evident formative intentions, even going into details about the places and the kinds and quality of the many kinds of work he did on a temporary basis. It was a distant preparation for his priesthood which was at that time a desire, an aspiration.

In the *Memoirs* Don Bosco records with deep emotion and significance his meeting with the humble chaplain of Morialdo, thereby introducing many elements of the spirituality of the priest and Christian educator. Here is a part of the dialogue:

> "Q. Why do you want to study?
> R. To become a priest.
> Q. And why do you want to become a priest?
> R. So that I can come close to my many companions, talk to them and teach them religion; they are not evil, but they become bad because no one takes care of them".

We know how Don Calosso offered to help him in the realization of his vocation, started him on the study of Latin and later gave him board and lodging. Above all he was a spiritual father, and Don Bosco says: "My

every word, my every thought and action, I promptly told him about". And we know too that soon afterwards this "stable guide", this "friend of his soul", died, and once again Don Bosco found himself alone in choosing a state of life.

1.4. *Spare time*

But there is another important facet of the life of the young John: that of festivity, of the joy of his spare time, which in no way conflicted with the realistic and Christian mentality of the boy, of the mother and of the Christian community. And so we have games and recreational activities, the antics of the acrobat, intermingled with religious expressions which herald the later "Cheerful club" and the ample space given to free time in the "spirituality of the preventive system". Moreover Don Bosco lived and presented a family style of life, rather than giving exact details of an objective situation (to be changed later): his intention was to highlight the vicissitudes of a boy who built up his own personal "vocation" on the basis of natural endowments, fostered by the wisdom of his mother who, although a peasant woman, was neither over-anxious nor over-protective with regard to her son.

And so Don Bosco lived his childhood and youth with great enthusiasm; he lived them to the full and infected all his close companions with his rich interior qualities. He wrote: "Everyone wanted me as a friend or arbiter; and for my part I tried to do good to all and harm to no one". Anyone who blasphemed, used bad language or refused to take part in religious practices, was excluded from the group.

From the story of his exploits among his companions under the loving and watchful eyes of his mother – omitting the story of his fall from the tree of the bird's nest which caused him injury – it is clear that John had a great love of life, even at an exterior level. He had no difficulty in either body or spirit, despite his uneasy family situation: without a father (substituted by an uncle as protector), and with a step-brother five years older than himself who looked with disfavour on his studies, he was compelled like so many boys of his age to seek employment away from home.

Happy to live as he did, because he accepted the situation in which life had placed him, he grew in grace. How different from the state of young people of today, discontented with their own body and looking for an unattainable perfection based on TV or cinema models!

2. Young student at the Chieri high school (1831-1835)

2.1. *School, college, educators*

From 1831 to 1835 Don Bosco studied grammar, humanities and rhetoric at Chieri High School. He passed from 17 to 20 years of age in this period which was an period of cultural maturing, with the explosion of social relations and a marked apostolic dimension and firm vocational choice. Here became clear certain traits of his future (youthful) spirituality:

a. In the first place the trinomial: study, devotion and cheerfulness, which will recur in later years in different forms in his letters.

b. In addition the care given to the promoting of culture and the acquiring of knowledge, so important in the future organization of colleges and essential for the regular courses in philosophy and theology in view of the priesthood.

c. Study: one of the main duties of a young person. The desire to study is one of the ruling passions of Don Bosco all through his younger days: it could be argued that study was the path through which God had given him growth and protection, and had accompanied him in the realization of his vocation. He used to dedicate a part of each night also to study, at the risk of ruining his health. The result of all this study was that his companions began to have recourse to him for what Don Bosco called "scholastic charity", i.e. he let them copy his "homework", until at a certain point this was forbidden; but he always helped in whatever way he could the young people with whom he lived.

d. In the writing of his *Memoirs* he is already a founder and formation guide of educators, and so he does not hesitate to express judgments on the teachers and educators of his college, emphasizing their good qualities and limitations. One, Prof. Banaudi, he praises for his method of education which resembles the one he himself would use in later years with the youngsters at Valdocco; another, Fr Maloria, he praises for his gifts as a spiritual director and for his work against bad companions. He appreciated other local priests of his neighbourhood too for their pastoral parish work, but regretted that he was never able to "achieve a familiar relationship with them". It was this that led him to say in his heart that if he ever became a

priest he would behave differently. Well known also is his conversation with the cleric Cafasso at the church door:

- My friend... the shows and spectacles for priests are the church functions...
- What you say is true, but there is a time for everything: a time to go to church and a time for recreation.

In his college life, regulated by precise norms, Don Bosco discovered the religious and moral foundation for life and study; the value of instruction and Christian religious practice; concern for order, discipline and morality (ensured by the "prefect of studies"); interior formation through "assemblies", spiritual direction and the use of the sacraments; the lightening of serious duty by the human character and interpersonal relationships between students and teachers and between the students themselves, the use of rewards and moderation in punishments.

2.2. *The Cheerful Club*

To this Don Bosco devotes quite a bit of space in the *Memoirs*. It was of prime moral and religious value, rather like a sodality and at the same time a kind of "culture club". An outstanding member was Comollo, the meek and docile youngster whom Don Bosco would meet again as a seminary companion; and there was the Jew Jonah (later converted), with whom he spent many a happy hour playing the piano, reading, exchanging experiences (another not indifferent method for coming closer in the spiritual practice of Don Bosco). The many pages in the *Memoirs* about his joyful and light hearted student-life recall what he wrote with emphasis in the *Notes of 1862* and the *Notes of 1874* (the latter contemporary with the *Memoirs*); in these games and pastimes – all of them in good taste (and he gives a list of them) – if he was not famous he was not far below it. It is almost certain that here he wanted to point to a style, or better a characterizing spirit, previously unknown in the field of educative and pastoral work.

2.3. *His relationships with companions*

If it is true, as it undoubtedly is, that man is a relationship, that human relations constitute the being of a person, we may ask how John got on with his companions.

a. It must be said first of all that Don Bosco did not just leave it to chance in the matter of his relationships; he chose his friends with care. One of his distinguishing characteristics was his interior clarity of mind in the midst of people. To some he said yes and to others no, because after summing them up he found that the first were positive and constructive but the second enslaved him. When much later he would write of boys of good, ordinary, or difficult dispositions and how to deal with each type, he had very much in mind his own youthful experience: "In the first four classes I had to learn for myself how to deal with companions. I divided them into three categories: good, indifferent and bad. The last group I completely avoided once I had got to know them for what they were; if I had to deal with the indifferent I treated them with courtesy; but when I got to know the good ones I cultivated their friendship".

b. Don Bosco also matured through his relationships as, for instance, with the young Braje, Comollo and Garigliano, with whom he shared recreation and school work. He emphasized the extent to which these friendships had supported him in his youth, once they had been carefully chosen. He was moreover very faithful to his friends; all his life, as long as he was able to do so, he made his confession regularly to Fr Giacomello who had been a seminary companion. For Don Bosco friendship was not something merely casual, an emotive hobby, but one of the fundamental perspectives on which to build his own life and later that of his boys. He would say of Comollo: "He was always my close friend, and I can say that it was from him that I first learned how to live as a Christian. I had full confidence in him, as he had in me".

c. Especially were his friendships mature and spiritual. We could quote many of his sayings in this connection: "We went together to confession and communion; we made our meditation and spiritual reading together; together we visited the Blessed Sacrament and served Mass". This level of confidence is not easily achieved, even for us who are religious, but it is a goal we must attain – Don Bosco considered it essential.

2.4. *Joy and happiness*

In his youth Don Bosco had an extraordinary concern about making others happy. Knowing that all youngsters are hungry for life, he saw in-

stinctively that to get close to them and become their friend he must himself have this hunger for life which is manifested in happiness. But what kind of happiness? The answer is in the rules of the "Cheerful Club".

a. In the first place it was a happiness that was willed, not arising from some chance situation but from a plan of life. He writes: "Each one is strictly bound to look for those books, those pastimes and topics of conversation that can keep us happy". This is a Don Bosco who always kept himself like that. "It was unbelievable – as Don Cerruti would say much later – how much work Don Bosco did to keep us happy; he invented so many things that his over-serious fellow-students thought he was mad".

b. It was a happiness that had to be defended: Don Bosco knew instinctively that happiness has enemies that must immediately be shown the door: "everything was forbidden that could cause sadness or depression, especially anything contrary to God's law". A happiness that was neither vulgar nor dangerous, as he could have experienced for himself at the invitation of some bad companions, an invitation he flatly turned down every time. Here we have the association between sin and sadness, and between happiness and grace, characteristic of the preventive system. If we don't understand this, we haven't grasped the reason for the great insistence on happiness through all Don Bosco's pedagogy. It is always a happiness that arises from the friendly heart of the Lord, a happiness that is of service in the evangelization of the young, i.e. in proclaiming that God is our happiness.

c. A happiness that calls also for commitment. The second article of the regulations said: "Exactness in the fulfillment of scholastic and religious duties". This was the proclamation of the pedagogy of duty that Don Bosco would use all his life. God does not ask for extraordinary things, but only that we be mature in doing what we are obliged to do, in the little things of every day. One need only read the biographies he wrote of three boys. That is how we become holy, and a witness puts it very well when he says: "We didn't notice Don Bosco's holiness because he was so simple in doing everything well. Only someone who knew the hard work he had to put in to do this every day, knew that to do it to the full you really had to be a saint".

d. And finally a happiness that evangelized. If it is true that this kind of happiness stems from a heart in love with God, it is also true that it must be cherished and spread amongst others. During the week the Cheerful Club used to meet in the house of one or other of its members to talk about religion, and there you have the beginnings of the Oratory. The happiness Don Bosco speaks of is the joy of one who believes. This is why those who approached him became so entranced: "I would be willing – said St. Orione – to do anything if I could only go back and live for a time with Don Bosco, as I did when I was a boy".

3. The vocational choice: summer 1835

"Everything began from a dream" one may read in many biographies of Don Bosco, and the statement is true enough on one condition: that it was only as an adult and not earlier that he understood that everything "had begun with a dream". What do I mean by that? Just this: that many times in his life Don Bosco felt anxiety, with doubts about the vocation he had chosen. The dream at the age of nine brought anything but certainty! He was uncertain whether to enter the seminary or become a Franciscan; whether to become a secular or a religious priest; whether to be priest at home or a missionary; whether to work in a parish or dedicate himself to some other kind of priestly apostolate.

However in 1835 when the time came for the first choice, the decision was made through a "pedagogical" process that he would later recommend to his boys: reflection, request for advice from some wise person, intense prayer, and then go calmly ahead following the advice from a priest-counseller. Let us examine the details of such a method of choosing.

a. The choice is always a harrowing process. Let's not kid ourselves: you cannot make choices without some suffering. At the age of 19, Don Bosco wrote: "My way of life, some habits of my heart (pride) and the complete lack of the virtues needed for the ecclesiastical state made me doubtful and deliberation very difficult". The dream at the age of nine, several times repeated in an ever clearer manner, urged him to choose the ecclesiastical state, to which indeed he felt a certain inclination. But the choice was still difficult.

b. The choice is born of a comparison: first of all with a spiritual guide. Don Bosco felt the lack of such a guide: "If only I had had someone to take

care of my vocation! What a treasure it would have been for me, but I didn't have one. I had a good confessor who was concerned about making me a Christian, but he never wanted to get involved in matters of vocation".

c. The choice is made in the face of God. Life choices are not made before men, but only before God. Don Bosco thought it over by himself, read a few books and decided on the Franciscan priestly life. He applied to the Reformed Conventual Franciscans, was accepted and was all ready to enter their convent at Chieri, when a dream about Franciscan life made him doubtful again about the step he was about to take. He sought a confessor once more but again got no help; he also sought the opinion of an uncle of Comollo who was a provost as well as a parish priest. The choice of a state of life is a very serious matter, as witnesses a strong and typical expression of Don Bosco, that he often repeated over subsequent decades: "I was convinced that on the choice of a state of life depended my eternal salvation or eternal perdition".

d. The choice also involves a comparison with others. Group experience is a help. In John's class in the seminary he had 25 companions, of whom three became medical practitioners, one a buiness man, and 21 became priests. We might wonder to what extent John's choice influenced his companions, given his undoubted characteristics as a leader among them. But we might equally wonder what influence his companions had on John's own choice, not to speak of the opinion of his companion Comollo, with whom he made a novena to ask God to inspire him in making the right decision. Just as it is evident this oscillation on the part of Don Bosco and his companions, so is it equally evident that our own choice is already a kind of "communication" that helps others to choose, and our own failure to choose can be a hindrance to others. We are in fact inserted in a channel of salvation in which everything we do becomes a message to others.

e. The choice implies a real conversion. Masters of the spirit tell us that in the life of the saints we usually come across a fact called a "second conversion". They give themselves to God, even with great generosity, for a certain time. Then, unexpectedly, there is an intensification of their spiritual life, as though they had engaged a higher gear. Don Bosco had this experience at the age of 20 when he decided to put on the cassock; it was a

manifestation of a fuller conversion to the Lord. He wrote: "After that day I became more concerned about myself; I had put on ecclesiastical dress, and my earlier life must now be radically reformed; in the preceding years I had not been a wicked person, but I had been proud and dissipated, occupied in trivial games, pastimes and such things which gave me momentary pleasure, but never satisfied the heart".

4. Consequences of the choice

Don Bosco had been a very good young man, but he was severe in his judgement of his past life.

a. He now decided on the way he intended to live his life in future, and imposed limits on his earlier youthful experiences: "1. In future I will no longer take part in public spectacles or fairs... 2. I will not do any more juggling or conjuring tricks. These things I think are contrary to the ecclesiatical spirit and decorum". In point of fact Don Bosco did repeat some of those things for his boys, not for his own pleasure, but so that the meaning of doing everything as an evangelizing activity would be understood. This reversal of direction is the sign of an austere conversion, the breaking with a former outlook on life so as to adopt a different one. "I will love – he wrote – and practise withdrawal from worldly things, temperance in eating and drinking, and also in sleeping". In Don Bosco's life the cross frequently assumed the form of "temperance", i.e. austerity in the practices of daily life.

b. The direction of his life is marked also by a careful vigilance as regards freedom of the heart: "Just as in the past I served the world with secular readings, so for the future I will serve God by reading about religious matters. I shall fight resolutely everything in thought, word and deed contrary to the virtue of chastity. And on the other hand I shall do everything, even the least thing, that can contribute to the preservation of this virtue". His conversion was marked by a deeper interior immersion in an atmosphere of faith. Don Bosco, who considered himself as having been dissipated in his liking for the classics and poetry, intended in the future to serve God by reading only religious material: "In addition to the ordinary practices of piety, I shall never omit some daily meditation and spiritual reading".

c. Once he had become enriched by this experience, he planned how he would express it every day. The last of the seven resolutions he made before his clothing ceremony and entry into the seminary was: "Every day I will recount some example or maxim for the benefit of the souls of others. I will do this with my companions, friends, relatives, and when I cannot do it with others I'll do it with my mother". He intended to express what he had within him, i.e. to "bear witness".

Conclusion

Reading between the lines in this story of Don Bosco's youth, we can already see the traits of the mature man and future educator. At the age of 20 he was already a man. There is a continuity between these experiences and those he would live afterwards. He never disavowed his youthful days. Youth is a grace, a period full of grace, and he teaches us to take it seriously. To be young is not a biological or chronological quality; it is a time for profiting by grace. It is up to us to see that our own youngsters respond to this grace by listening, by their commitment and by their fidelity. From Don Bosco we must also take a message for ourselves: choices and decisions must be made calmly and conscientiously in the presence of God. He will carry us, as the psalmist says, as a mother carries her baby in her arms.

For personal reflection

1. What significant elements of the childhood and adolescence of Don Bosco do you think have been realistically maintained in the pedagogy and spirituality of Don Bosco the educator?
2. In a world like ours, so different from that of the young John, which of his experiences still preserve their validity for education at the present day? Are you able to suggest them to your own youngsters?
3. In your experience as an educator, how do you try to identify and cultivate priestly and religious vocations? What personal and communal strategies do you adopt right now to promote vocations among young people with whom you are in contact?

"I know in whom I have believed" (2 Tim. 1,12)

4

TEN YEARS OF PREPARATION (1835-1844)

Introduction

This morning we have looked at the infancy, childhood and youth of Don Bosco. We have seen the early experiences that contributed to producing the significant elements and dimensions of what would later be the mentality, spirituality and pedagogy of the future educator of Valdocco. Following the same line of thought we shall now follow Don Bosco as a cleric in the Chieri seminary and as a priest in the Ecclesiastical College of Turin. And we shall add some suggestions from letters he wrote to the clerics and seminarians.

1. In the Chieri seminary (1835-1841)

On 25 October 1835 Don Bosco received the cassock and there was a radical change in his life-style; he adopted clerical usages and behaviour, appropriate to one with a renewed apostolic and ecclesiastical spirituality. He had been a model student in the schools of Chieri and now he will be a model seminarian during the study of theology, and then irreproachable as a priest at the College and in his charity at the time of the Pinardi shack.

The seminary years were a most important period of his life. His spirituality became clear and well defined in those years of ecclesiastical formation, though it obviously matured in the years that followed in the breeding-ground of activity and in the multiplicity of personal and cultural relationships. It was from his experience in the seminary that Don Bosco drew inspiration and acquired concepts that remained substantially with him throughout his later educational endeavours.

With the taking of the cassock another Don Bosco was born, very different from the former one. Helping in its production had been the well-remembered words of his mother: "1. It is not the cassock but virtue that gives honour to your state. Put it aside rather then disgrace it. 2. Be always

devout to our Lady; be always hers". His life in the seminary began with the spiritual exercises, and then he gave himself body and soul to the task of preparing himself intellectually and spiritually for the priesthood. So now we see him absorbed in the life of the seminary.

a. Prominent among his concerns were the practices of piety. Every morning – Mass, meditation and five mysteries of the rosary; edifying reading at table. Confession was obligatory every other week, but communion could be received only on Sundays or other special solemnities; sometimes he was able to receive communion during the week, by a means to which the superiors turned a blind eye. In this way he was able to receive communion frequently: he called it "the most efficacious nourishment of my vocation".

b. In the *Memoirs* he writes of the beginning of his philosophical studies (1836): "I took to reading the «Imitation of Christ» before the Blessed Sacrament, taking a few chapters at a time. When I thought over the sublime thoughts I found there and the clear and well-ordered but at the same time eloquent way in which they were expressed, I began to think to myself: «The one who wrote this was indeed a learned man». And as I continued frequently to read this golden little book, I soon came to realise that a single extract from it contained more doctrine and morality than I had ever found in the massive volumes of the ancient classics". As is well known the *Imitation of Christ* is a collection of reflections and instructions of a religious nature, expressed in brief statements intermingled with spiritual exhortations, to lead the reader to perfection through a devotional and ascetical process of conversion. The basic idea is the imitation of Christ, but an imitation in which the attention is directed especially to the example of the historical Jesus. Thirteen years later, in 1849, he will write in the *Key of the Kingdom* what amounts to a self-portrait:

> "The model every Christian must copy is Jesus Christ. No one can claim to belong to Christ unless he sets about imitating him. Hence in the life and actions of a Christian must be reflected the life and actions of Jesus himself. The Christian must pray as Christ prayed on the mountain, with recollection, humility and confidence. The Christian must be accessible, as was Jesus, to the poor, to the ignorant, to children [...] The Christian must deal with his neighbour as Christ dealt with his followers: and so his methods must be uplifting, charitable, serious but at the same time simple and kindly. The Christian must be humble as was Jesus. [...] The true

> Christian considers himself as less than others and the servant of all. He must obey as Christ obeyed. [...] The true Christian obeys his parents, his employers, his superiors. [...] The true Christian in eating and drinking must be like Christ at the marriage feast at Cana and at Bethany. [...] With his friends, the Christian must be as Christ was with St John and Lazarus. [...] The true Christian must suffer privations and poverty with resignation as Christ suffered them. He must be able to put up with contradictions and calumnies. [...] He must be ready to tolerate pain of the spirit. [...] The good Christian must be willing to accept with patience persecution, sickness and even death, as did Jesus Christ. All this so that he can say with the apostle Paul: «I live, no not I, but Christ lives in me»".

Evidently "imitating" Christ today does not mean repeating his physical gestures, He does not want copies or clones, but disciples who behave as though steeped in his spirit and supported by his great intentions.

c. Don Bosco established a good relationship with the Superiors, who were very kind to him, even though he could not speak with them to ask their advice when he would have often liked to do so. The future author of the *Memoirs* felt obliged to emphasize the distance there was between superiors and seminarians, but he was impressed by Don Borel, whose many traits he greatly admired: his cheerful disposition and humorous remarks, but always with solid moral underpinning; his serious preparation before celebrating Mass, his dignity and fervour in the celebration itself and in making his thanksgiving afterwards; his popularity, brightness, clarity and the fire of charity evident in his words – an exact image in fact of what Don Bosco himself wanted to become.

d. As close companions he chose clerics who were outstanding in virtue, noting that "quite a number of young men seem to enter the seminary, without giving enough thought to their vocation, and without either the spirit or the intention of being a good seminarian". These he considered dangerous, but by being cheerful, sociable and good-natured with all, and by doing odd jobs for them (like mending shoes, sewing buttons on, etc.) he made himself liked by all. And above all he kept up his deep and spiritual friendship with Comollo, with whom he had certain reservations about forms of penance but shared wholeheartedly his convictions about the duties of a good seminarian and the spiritual responsibilities of a future priest. They were all part of the "spiritual pedagogy" that he would advocate later.

Think, for instance – in connection with Comollo's death – of the concept that life is a preparation for death, with the evident salutary fear of the judgement of a just and merciful God, that led Don Bosco to include in the *Companion of Youth* the meditation on the four last things and the realistic monthly *Prayer for a happy death* (to say nothing of his later dreams about the last things and premonitions of death).

e. Vacation periods could be dangerous for a cleric. At such times Don Bosco used to read, write, study, work in the fields, and take catechism classes with children and adults. "I also began to give talks and homilies with the permission and assistance of the parish priest. I don't know what good they did. Everyone applauded me, but eventually I became disillusioned... The merciful God disposed that I should learn a lesson...".

f. Don Bosco took his studies very seriously: he studied day and night, never losing a moment. He read dozens of books, especially those dealing with the Church, Christianity and the Saints. He followed courses, but did a great deal of study on his own account. In moral he studied "probabiliorism", and in ecclesiology books dealing with attacks on papal infallibility; in pastoral theology he studied rigourism in particular, and in canon law Gallicanism and jurisdictional matters. He did not neglect secular culture either; he knew the Latin and Italian classics, and appreciated the beauty of ecclesiastical authors. At the end of his third year he asked permission to take also the examinations of the 4th year and so be dispensed from the latter – he studied intensively all through the vacation period and passed the 4th year exams. He was promoted with the assessment: "a zealous cleric of good promise".

Many other items about Don Bosco's period in the Chieri seminary can be found in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* and the *Biographical Memoirs.* It seems almost certain that he found the life difficult, given his extrovert temperament and his desires, which certainly clashed with the kind of regulations, study and monotonous life there in a system that seemed repressive rather than preventive. It is rather surprising therefore that at the end of his seminary course he said he was sad to leave. From the seminary, however, he acquired two items in particular: education to the sciences and the ecclesiastical spirit.

2. At the Turin Ecclesiastical College (1841-1844)

Here one "learned to be a priest", wrote Don Bosco. It was here, in the first place, that he became acquainted with St Alphonsus' concept of moral theology which bridged the gap between the rigourism of the Jansenists and a certain widespread reaction to it. But there remained a moral system based more on law than on conscience, which easily leads to conflict between law and freedom. Much attention was given therefore to the validity of the sacraments. Among the theological sciences emphasis was laid on sacred and ecclesiastical history, with an apologetic and uplifting approach – a history that interprets events from a theological, providentialistic, hagiographical and moral standpoint.

Moreover the figure of Don Cafasso gave added force to the elements of his spirituality: Christian hope, the sense of duty as a practical style of coherent religious life, the importance of the use of the sacraments in pastoral activity, fidelity to the Church and the Pope, orientation of pastoral work for the benefit of abandoned youngsters, the thought of the four last things (*novissima*) and the exercise for a happy death.

At the College Don Bosco practised the preparation of "meditations" and "instructions" for retreats and parish missions. His style was simple and unassuming, elementary as regards linguistic structure, without far-fetched illustrations; it was also elementary in theological and spiritual content, but very practical with respect to the objectives to be reached.

From the College too the young priests practised pastoral work in the prisons and in Lenten preaching, especially for immigrants. With Don Cafasso Don Bosco gained experience of the prisons (including religious assistance to a prisoner at Valdocco square condemned to death by hanging), and of teaching catechism to immigrants (Bartholomew Garelli). From his experience in the prisons grew the idea that it is better to "prevent" than "repress". From the catechism he taught at the Church of St Francis of Assisi, his later work took its origin; "at its beginning this Society was just a simple catechism lesson".

3. A new priest with a specific program

During the retreat in preparation for his priestly ordination on 5 June 1841 Don Bosco made some specific resolutions, those perhaps suggested

by the retreat preachers to all the retreatants. He transcribed them in his last memoirs as his "spiritual testament" (written in the '80s); they had evidently been present in his spirit all his life and to its very end. They come after what he considered the formal conclusion of the retreat:

> "No priest goes to either heaven or hell alone. If he has done well he will go to heaven with the souls he has saved by his good example; if he has done evil and given scandal he will be lost for all eternity together with the souls condemned through the scandal he has given.
> «1° I will never take walks for pleasure, but only when necessary for visits to the sick and similar reasons.
> 2° I shall be very careful not to waste time.
> 3° I will always and everywhere accept suffering and humiliation, and be ready to do anything when it is a case of saving souls.
> 4° The charity and gentleness of St Francis de Sales will be my guide in everything.
> 5° I shall always show myself satisfied with the food I am offered, unless it be harmful to health.
> 6° I will drink wine to which water has been added and then only as a remedy, i.e. only to the extent that health requires it.
> 7° Work is a powerful arm against the soul's enemies; and so I shall not take more than five hours sleep each night. During the day, and especially after the midday meal, I will not take any rest. I'll make an exception in the case of sickness.
> 8° Each day I will give some time to meditation and spiritual reading. In the course of the day I will make a brief visit or at least say a prayer to the Blessed Sacrament. I will spend at least a quarter of an hour in preparation for Mass, and a further quarter of an hour in thanksgiving afterwards.
> 9° I will not engage in conversations with women outside the case of hearing confessions or some other spiritual need».
> These memoirs were written in 1841".

It would be profitable to compare these texts with the "Confidential Recommendations to Directors" and the "Souvenir for Missionaries" (about which we shall talk later).

4. Don Bosco, priest and educator, writes to clerics

At this point I think it may be of interest and also useful to look at the way in which Don Bosco, as priest and educator, dealt with young aspirants to the priesthood and seminarians. For this purpose I'll make use of the letters he wrote to them.

4.1. *How does Don Bosco appear from such letters?*

a. First of all he appears as a friend and spiritual father, and is therefore willing to help each one to realize the vocation to which he has been called. He is very much concerned that they should achieve spiritual and temporal happiness and so, according to the mind of Don Bosco, attain eternal salvation.

The fatherliness of Don Bosco is entirely spiritual, based on unbounded confidence, affection and mutual prayer. This can be seen at once from the way in which he begins his letters: "My dear son...", "Beloved son, ever dear to me in the Lord...". It raises everything to a truly spiritual dimension in his relationships, in which familiarity and friendship do not stem from human feelings but have their root in Christ. And the same could be said for his conclusions: "Let us love each other in the Lord...; affectionately in Jesus Christ...; pray for me, your affectionate father in Christ Jesus...".

In effect Don Bosco is a friend of the soul, on whom the clerics can rely: "If you need anything..., if there is anything I can do for you, rely on me"; and with God's help he is always trying to ensure their eternal salvation: "Take courage then, dear Baratta, in one way or another and with the help of God I want to ensure that you are on the road to Paradise".

But Don Bosco shared with his clerics his concern also for the salvation of the souls of others: "You, my dear Passero, have always been the delight of my heart, and now I love you even more because you have dedicated yourself completely to the Missions", "You have given up everything to dedicate yourself to the saving of souls. So take courage, dear Passero, and prepare yourself to be a good priest, a holy Salesian. I shall pray very much for you, and please don't forget this friend of your soul".

To another cleric he wrote: "Never doubt that you are always Don Bosco's friend, and he wants you to help him to gain many souls for God. You have now put your hand to the plough, and so I pray to God that he may preserve you in your desire to be good and virtuous and help you to save your soul. You will never lack my good wishes and prayers. I am glad to hear of what you have done, so please continue to write to me frequently. Always remember that here on earth we are working for heaven".

The deep bond of spiritual fatherhood extended even to those personally unknown to him: "We have never met face to face, but we understand each other in serving God. The same Lord who has called you to be a Sale-

sian, but a fervent and exemplary Salesian, will help you to win many souls for heaven".

b. But mutual affection and deep friendship (both of them profound spiritual values) pass through human mediation, through a sincere and intimate relationship based on confidence and trust, given and received. Don Bosco lays great insistence on confidence, sincerity and openness of heart as indispensable conditions not only for friendship but especially for a deep spiritual dialogue.

To a cleric who had expressed doubts about his vocation Don Bosco replied: "We'll talk about it as soon as possible. At Lanzo we'll be able to open our hearts in all sincerity". To another he wrote: "If you tell me in words what lies in your heart, you will have in me a friend who will do for you all the good he possibly can". From the cleric John Cinzano he asked for complete openness of heart: "Always remember that you are with a friend, who wants nothing else but your spiritual and temporal good. This we shall achieve with God's help and by keeping our hearts always open".

To be Don Bosco's friend is synonymous with having full confidence, making known one's feelings, intentions and plans as the starting point for a spiritual orientation leading to earthly and spiritual happiness, which is always Don Bosco's ultimate objective; in a letter to John Garino he wrote: "As I told you last time, I need your unlimited confidence, and I'm sure you will give it to me if you remember the solicitude I have shown in the past and shall continue more and more in the future for everything that can contribute to the good of your soul and of your temporal welfare".

4.2. *Perseverance in vocation*

One of the aspects on which Don Bosco insisted when writing to clerics was perseverance in vocation. Many of his letters are replies about problems, doubts and situations put to him by clerics about their vocation. Often he himself takes the initiative in encouraging and stimulating them in moments of difficulty.

Writing to a cleric Bonetti, who was engaged in an internal struggle, Don Bosco urged him not to worry; he explained the reasons for the struggle and promised him support and prayers: "Don't let the problem about

which you wrote to me worry you at all. The devil sees that you are determined to escape from his clutches and so he is making every effort to deceive you. Follow my advice and go ahead in peace. In the meantime you can chase away gloom by singing this song with St Paul...".

To another cleric whom he had met personally and advised, but who had remained unsatisfied and sought counsel from others, Don Bosco wrote: "I repeat what I told you when we met. Continue in the ecclesiastical state to which God is calling you, and remember that by multiplying the number of those from whom you seek advice, you will only multiply your worries".

He went to a lot of trouble to remove and simplify the big and small problems that can impede the total dedication of life to the salvation of souls. His words were always of stimulus and encouragement: "Go ahead and don't be afraid". And then he recalled the objective: "Are you still doing well, dear Calcagno? I hope you are. Never look back. Keep your eye on the heaven that awaits you. A great reward is being prepared there for us. Work, win souls, and save your own".

He intervened at the appropriate moment, delicately but always firmly, respecting the rhythm of each one's maturing process and his freedom from interference in making personal decisions. Once the other had decided, Don Bosco was satisfied. "Your letter has removed from me a worry that was preventing me from doing what I wanted for your good. Fine! You are now in the arms of Don Bosco, and he will be able to use you for the greater glory of God and the good of your soul".

4.3. *Means for preserving the vocation*

Don Bosco's solicitude and action in preserving the vocation of clerics was not limited to the simple solving of problems, enlightening those in doubt and encouraging zeal; it was also aimed at doctrinal orientation and formation. He would point out clearly and precisely where the weak point was to be found, suggest an appropriate remedy, and urge the acquiring of certain virtues according to the needs of the individual concerned. He insisted above all on chastity, obedience, humility, work, witness of life, fear of God, and holiness. He would point out aspects that were not only adequate for perseverance in vocation, but were fundamental elements of the Salesian and priestly life. Let us look briefly at two of these:

Chastity

Humility, charity and chastity are the three precious stones with which a cleric should adorn his soul. Writing to the cleric Parigi, Don Bosco suggested to him the practice of these three virtues as a condition for spiritual progress in the growth of holiness: *"si vis progredi in viam mandatorum Dei, perge quemadmodum aliquo abhinc tempore coepisti. Quomodo si volueris animam tuam pretiosis margaritis exornare, amicitiam constitue cum humilitate, caritate, et castitate. Eo sanctior eris, quo strictior erit haec amicitia"*.

What are the means for cultivating the virtue of chastity? Don Bosco suggests temperance in food, observance of the prescribed fasting periods, promptness in going to bed and rising, commitment to study, flight from idleness, the sign of the cross, ejaculations, prayer, vigilance, and flight from dangerous occasions.

The means are simple and practical, but he considered them of use only if they were used well and perseveringly: "These diabolical disturbances will be put to flight by the sign of the cross, with the Mother of Mercy, with the living Jesus, and especially by contempt for them, by prayer and vigilance, and by flight from idleness and dangerous occasions".

Don Bosco considered chastity as a virtue, a habitual state, absolutely necessary for accession to the priesthood, a condition that could never be passed over. To a cleric who was close to ordination and told him about his difficulties in respect of this virtue, Don Bosco replied: "I have received your letter. Your frankness is praiseworthy and I thank God for the good will that inspired it. By all means, follow the advice of the confessor: *qui vos audit, me audit*, says Jesus Christ in the Gospel. Work hard to correspond with the impulses of divine grace which are entering your heart. Perhaps the Lord is calling you to a high level of virtue. But let us not deceive ourselves: if you cannot be victorious in this matter, do not go ahead; do not seek advancement to sacred orders until you have spent at least a year without falling". Then he speaks of the usual means: prayer, flight from idleness and occasions of sin, use of the sacraments, devotion to Our Lady and St Aloysius, and reading good books.

Some time later a cleric wrote to him about the same problems. Maybe Don Bosco knew him better, or maybe less, but the fact is that he sets a shorter period of trial and the tone of the reply is different: "To respond di-

rectly to your valued letter, I would need to know how long has passed since the last time you fell. My feeling, before God, is that you should not seek orders until at least six months of trial. But I do not forbid you to seek the opinion of others who have encouraged you to go ahead". In this second case the tone is less precise and cordial; while still delicate, it is more reserved and laconic. He limits himself to expressing his own opinion with great humility without taking a stand, and leaves room for the liberty of conscience of the individual.

Obedience

This is one of the aspects on which Don Bosco is most insistent. He presents it as the "holy virtue" which is the foundation and support of all others, a means for obtaining peace of heart and overcoming scruples, and as a necessary condition for being admitted to sacred orders.

Don Bosco does not speak of obedience in generic terms, but in relation to each individual. And so he writes to Luigi Calcagno: "Work wins souls and saves your own. Temperance and obedience are everything in your case". To another, while recommending him to be a model Salesian, he describes obedience as the first virtue in his particular case: "See to it that you become a model Salesian. Obedience is the foundation and support of every virtue".

Don Bosco demanded of his clerics a prompt and humble obedience, without limit, criticism or grumbling. To the cleric Guidazio he describes the cleric's own experience: "You will always be worried, and I would say unhappy as well, as long as you do not practise the obedience you promised and place yourself completely in the hands of your superiors. So far the devil has cruelly tormented you by prompting you to do the opposite. From your letter and from our earlier conversation I find no reason for dispensing you from your vows. If indeed there were any, I should have to write to the Holy See to which they are reserved. But *coram Domino* I would advise you to consider that *abneget semetipsum,* and remember that *vir obediens loquetur victoriam.* Have faith in my experience. The devil would like to deceive both of us; he has partly succeeded in your case, but in me he has failed completely in what concerns you. Trust me completely, as I have trusted you; it is not a matter of words but of facts, of efficacious determination, of humble, prompt and unlimited obedience. These are the

things that will bring to you both spiritual and temporal happiness, and to me genuine consolation".

Conclusion

We could say a lot more about Don Bosco's suggestions to young clerics. Nowadays we have the new Constitutions, the new criteria for admission to the vows, which take account of the progress in human sciences, in theological thought, of the experience of so many other Congregations and of the cultural context in which we are living. But I don't think that these things should distance us too much from the essentials of Don Bosco's thought. You need only read in our Constitutions the articles about the vows of obedience and chastity, and confidence in the spiritual director and the confessor. We'll say more about those later on.

For personal reflection

1. From the time of your first formation what relevant "values" do you still maintain, and on the other hand which ones have you unfortunately abandoned?
2. If Salesian life seems to be failing to attract the numbers of vocations that it did in times past, what explanation would you personally give for this?
3. Many young men leave the Congregation after having known it in the time of their initial formation, or even later. Why do you think this happens? Do the reasons lie with those who leave? or also with the Congregation? or with us?
4. In your own letters and conversations with young people, do you always touch on religious points? Do you ever get as far as suggesting the Salesian, religious or priestly vocation?

THE THIRD DAY: CHARITY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Sanctity is essentially identified with Charity towards God and neighbour. It has no other source but God himself: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4, 7.10). Man's love for God is the response to God's love for man, made possible by the infused virtue of charity and the action of the Holy Spirit. It is a work of God and free human cooperation, made possible by grace. The initiative is always God's and the Spirit is the principal agent of sanctification. The "interior man" is first and foremost the spiritual man who lives in Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is "the great unknown", or should we not rather say that he is "the great presence" in our life and in our "apostolic charity"? To a question by the well-known Fr Yves Congar (+1995), a future Cardinal, who in a meeting of the theological commission of Vatican II had said: "We must bring in the Holy Spirit, because he is the most important element, a fatherly co-worker", E. Tromp replied: "But we don't need the Spirit, because we have the Magisterium". Fr Chenu who recounted the incident made the comment: "That theologian believed that the Spirit was only in the Magisterium, but the Spirit is in all the people of God".

Though perhaps less visible than the Father and the Son, and consequently less known from a catechetical standpoint, he is not so in the reality of Christianity in pilgrimage. The Church, which is "holy" and the "city of the saints", lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, theologically present, though "theologically" may not be understood by all in the same way.

Consecrated Life is overshadowed by the Holy Spirit in a particularly salutary way; religious live an extraordinarily pneumatic existence. He it is who forms and moulds the minds of consecrated persons, configuring them to the chaste, poor and obedient Christ and prompting them to make his mission their own (cf VC 19). There is therefore an undeniable harmony between consecrated life and spiritual life.

The risk we Salesians run is that of leading a morally honest life, of incessantly "planning and living" "pastoral charity", but without developing in ourselves the "life of the Spirit". Moral perfection – avoid evil and do good – is important for sanctity, but there is a condition involved; sanctity

consists in "being in touch with God", in "making God perceivable by others" in what he is and what he does. It is certainly not just by chance that the term occurring most frequently in Don Bosco's collected letters (I refer to vol. 3 published in 1996) is "prayer". In second place comes "work", (and third a similar word, the verb to "serve"!).

At the centre of Don Bosco's spirituality stands God alone, to be known, loved and served in order to attain salvation (faith) through the realization of a non-evasive personal vocation; material and spiritual charity towards the young.

This synthesis of a faith which becomes charity is recalled in Chap. 3 of the Instruction "Starting afresh from Christ", where we read: "Consecrated life today needs a spiritual rebirth which will help concretely to bring about the spiritual and evangelical meaning of baptismal consecration and of its new and special consecration" (n. 20).

Pastoral charity is in the first place a charity which designates the kind of love conceived and lived by God and by him transmitted to those who accept to live in him by his Spirit. It is not a human and selfish love, but one that comes from above; and so it is pastoral, i.e. a charity that participates in the mission of Christ the Shepherd, which embraces love for the Father and the seeking of his glory. Let us look at four possible profiles of the Salesian "good shepherd".

a. First of all, as St Augustine says, a shepherd is in the first place himself a sheep who must give an account to God of his own Christian and interior life, and then secondly he is a representative of the one true Shepherd, Christ, to whom he must render an account of his fidelity to his pastoral obligations. In Don Bosco's words: "The priest never goes to heaven or hell alone; he takes with him the souls that were entrusted to him".

b. Secondly this fidelity of the shepherd to the flock entrusted to him often implies a hard and ascetic life, the trampling on his own desires of popularity, of immediate success, of satisfaction. This is precisely what Mamma Margaret had in mind on the eve of her son's first Mass when she told him: "to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer".

c. Moreover leading the flock to God's pastures means that the shepherd must "bear a heavy cross", but carry it with love. It is not in fact the cross

that saves – how many were crucified before Christ without saving anyone, not even themselves! – but the love with which the cross is carried.

d. Finally this fidelity to the flock entrusted to him means that the shepherd must remember that the sheep are not his but belong to God and that consequently his attitude would be out of place were he to say: "I am the shepherd and I know what pastures are best for you". The prestige that a shepherd-educator can make use of stems from the moral superiority, culture and a certain personal ascendancy that must be put at the service of the man to be constructed (and not morally subjugated), of the freedom of the youngster and of his heart, of which God is the sole proprietor.

We are looking at a God who holds human vicissitudes in his hands, who does great things with the humblest of people, as history continually teaches us. Any comparison between God's works is distasteful and even false, but it is interesting to note that a person like Rosmini who had just about everything (holiness, culture, refinement, clear ideas, the support and praise of several Popes and eminent priests as collaborators) founded a Congregation which, humanly speaking, has shown little growth; and on the other hand that Don Bosco, a poor priest of the periphery, without anything to speak of going for him, started up what Paul VI spoke of with admiration as the "Salesian phenomenon", i.e. the rapid and unstoppable development of Salesian work in the world. It is a phenomenon of history that needs interpretation; a mystery of faith for us to contemplate.

"We should say little about Don Bosco but a great deal like Don Bosco"
(Fr Joseph Quadrio SDB, Servant of God).

5

THE FUNDAMENTAL OPTION: THE YOUNG (1844-1846)

Introduction

Once he finished his formal studies Don Bosco went immediately into action. In the brief space of two years he made the choice which was to endure for the rest of his life: work for the young.

In the autumn of 1844 in fact, after leaving the Ecclesiastical College, Don Bosco was given the post of chaplain to the St Philomena Hospice, about to be opened in the following summer by the Marchioness Barolo, for sick babies and young girls. In the meantime he continued the work with youngsters that he had begun at the College – collaborating with other chaplains at the Barolo "Refuge", which provided a protection service for girls at risk or who were already victims of violence.

From the Refuge was born the Oratory of St Francis de Sales, the patron saint of the future chapel of the Hospice, not yet built – who would give his name 15 years later to the Salesian Society. Affinity with the saint of Geneva, well known in the Chieri seminary, became consolidated here and contributed to the definition of the future Salesian spirituality, from the three aspects of apostolic charity as objective, gentle kindness as method, and burning zeal as the animating force behind everything.

And so, long before that day in November 1846, when he made the decisive move to Valdocco with his mother – after recovering from an illness that almost took him to the grave – we find Don Bosco as a priest of the Turin diocese and almost a religious, in so far as:

- he had already accepted a radical form of poverty; he had in fact already refused various offers of pastoral work within the structure of the diocese that would have brought him a lawful salary, and intended to rely only on charitable donations and offerings;

- he practised a chastity beyond all doubt: given that he was working with difficult youngsters who had frequently been victims of negative and unsavoury experiences with companions or with adults;
- he professed obedience to his Bishop on whom he depended in everything and for everything;
- he had a burning love for the young, to whom he felt called to dedicate his life.

In that November therefore of 1846 began the adventure that would conclude in early 1888. In a unique fragment of his "story of a soul", Don Bosco will later reveal (1854) the secret about why he acted in this way: "When I dedicated myself to this part of the sacred ministry, my intention was to consecrate all my efforts to the greater glory of God and the benefit of souls. I intended to work to make young people good citizens here on earth, so that one day they would be worthy to be inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to continue in this frame of mind until my dying day. Amen".

1. A fundamental document

A concise and essential text concerning those first fifty years – *A Plan of regulations for the boys' Oratory of St Francis de Sales in the Valdocco area of Turin* – which in fact Don Bosco never published, takes us back to the real origins of the first oratory, without all the embroidery, interpretations and comments added to succeeding texts prepared for publicity purposes both inside and outside the Salesian society. Because it expresses the intentions he had in mind and the initiatives he was going to take at the outset, without all the later realizations, it gives a better interpretation of the rich pedagogical and practical possibilities:

> "Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum. Jn 1, 52.
> It seems to me that the words of the holy Gospel which enable us to know the divine Saviour who has come from heaven to earth to gather together all God's children scattered over the earth, can be applied quite literally to the young people of our own days. «This most delicate and most precious part of human society, on which depend the hopes for a happy future, is not in itself inherently depraved. Were it not for the neglect of their parents, idleness, contact with bad companions (especially on Sundays and Feast-days), it would be quite easy to instil in their tender hearts the principles of order, good manners, respect and religion; if, as some-

> times happens, they are already corrupted at that age it is rather through thoughtlessness than deliberate malice. What these youngsters need is a kindly hand to take care of them, cultivate them and lead them to virtue and keep them away from evil. The problem lies in finding ways to bring them together, to be able to speak to them and teach them some moral principles. This was the mission of the Son of God, and only his holy religion can do it. But this religion, in itself eternal and unchangeable, which has always been and always will be the teacher of men, contains a law so perfect as to be applicable to the conditions of all times and adaptable to the different characters of all men»".

a. The preamble to the document and other central parts indicate at once that at the basis of the choice for the oratory was primarily the salvific will of God expressed in the incarnation of the Son, who was sent specifically to gather around him in unity men who were wandering in the labyrinth of errors and false paths of salvation. The Church is called to respond in time to this divine mission of salvation, made possible by a double process of reasoning: one of a theological nature (offered by the solidity and flexibility of religion), and the other of a pedagogical character, consisting in the fundamental educability of the young subject.

In this way the Oratory is inserted in the economy of salvation; it is a human response to a divine call, and not only a work founded on the good will of a person. Don Bosco, at the age of 40, was already aware that God had called and was still calling him to this mission among the young and was convinced, albeit belatedly, that in the Oratory lay the purpose of his life.

A good example in this connection is the brief life he wrote in the early years of his priesthood (1849) of St Vincent de Paul, which recalls what we were saying yesterday about the "Imitation of Christ".

> "To complete this picture of him one need only add that he took Jesus Christ as his model, drew from the Gospel all his moral principles, all his civil guidelines, all his diplomacy. [...] On one occasion he said «I find nothing I like except in Jesus Christ». [...] Vincent was convinced that the disciple was perfect only when he resembled his Master [...] whom he kept constantly before his eyes, [...] We must be resolved to imitate Christ and share in his sufferings; otherwise we shall never share in his glory. *Qui vult gaudere cum Christo oportet pati cum Christo*".

Together with St Francis de Sales, St Vincent de Paul was without any doubt a figure of the greatest significance for Don Bosco, not only at a theoretical level, but in practical daily life and in the realization of the priestly

ideal. He was a priest of tireless apostolic activity in all the many different situations of poverty and abandonment: "a father of the poor because of the promptness, extent and perseverance of his charity, but also because of the sentiments of tenderness and humility with which he accompanied it". It may be added that the same St Vincent "followed the example of St Francis de Sales, whose extraordinary gentleness and kindness struck him very forcibly the first time they met; through vigilance he eventually became so mild and affable that he would have been his century's leader in such matters, had it not been for the holy Bishop of Geneva".

b. But alongside the religious dimension the social dimension was equally outstanding: "to instil in their tender hearts the principles of order, good manners, and respect". Not for nothing had he written some years earlier in a circular letter of 1851: "And so while some of us are praiseworthily working to spread the light of knowledge, training in trades and education in high schools and colleges, in the modest Oratory of St Francis de Sales we are mainly engaged in giving religious and civil instruction to those who, though less endowed by fortune, have nevertheless the desire to be of use to themselves, to their families and to their country".

2. "The problem lies in finding ways to bring them together, to be able to speak to them and teach them some moral principles"

So wrote Don Bosco: he found difficulties in the apostolate, in financial matters and in the environment; he experienced objective personal problems in drawing up a list of regulations which could be reduced to "Unity of spirit and discipline" in various educative styles. We read in the document of 1851 from which we have already quoted:

> "Among the means suitable for spreading the spirit of religion in uneducated and abandoned hearts, the Oratories have a high reputation. They are places where young people can gather for peaceful and honest recreation after being present at the sacred functions of the Church. The support I received from civil and ecclesiastical authorities, the enthusiasm shown by many meritorious persons who came to help me by their toil and contributions, are a sure sign of the blessings of God and the public satisfaction of men. It is now a matter of drawing up some Regulations that can serve as a norm for the administration of this part of the sacred ministry, and as a guide for secular and ecclesiastical persons, many of whom work in this

> field with charity and zeal. Often I began to write [the Regulations], but I always gave it up because of the numerous difficulties that had to be overcome; but now, to preserve unity of spirit and consistency of discipline, and to satisfy several authoritative persons who have advised me to do so, I have decided to tackle this work, however it may turn out".

Here we may deduce at once a picture of the situation of the citizens of Turin in the 1840s: the parish model, inherited from a rural culture and in use at that time, was no longer capable of gathering together the masses of urban youngsters living mainly in the city's outskirts in a state of abandonment, often materially, but more frequently from a moral and religious aspect.

In consequence a new pastoral strategy was adopted, a kind of formation never tried before as a response to the radical transformation of the urban situation of Turin. Between 1838 and 1848 the population had increased by about 17% (from 117,000 to 136,000), and with a still higher percentage increase in dwellings (up from 2,600 to 3,200) and in the number of families (up from 26,000 to 33,000), without taking into account a large floating population of military personnel, students, seasonal workers, etc. Of the total population not more than 10% could speak and understand Italian correctly. 20% (22,000) were youngsters, increasing in number with the passing of time, especially because of their employment as cheap labour in the textile and building trades.

The response of the Christian community was often dogmatic, even when it did not go as far as outright condemnation of the immigration from the rural areas to the towns as a dangerous innovation, with the loss of the old system of reference points and hence also of faith and religious practice. The common opinion of the city was that it was an evil place which destroyed Catholic cultural values and prevented the simple personal relationships so much fostered and so useful in rural areas. In face of such a situation Don Bosco did not give in, but rather reacted strongly. Economic development is not in itself a cause of vice or a school of perdition; education of the lower classes – longed for by the liberals but regarded with apprehension in conservative circles – is not necessarily an evil to be exorcized but a valuable resource to be revised for the overall human and Christian advancement of the young.

But it was not so much the incipient trends of the liberal era that stirred up his apostolic zeal and his spirit of a "missionary of the young" who had

no parish, but the specific motivations of traditional Catholic charity, inspired by the gospel and solicitous for the material and spiritual needs of the poor, the orphans and the abandoned. Don Bosco was a son of his time and himself felt deeply this gospel call. He noted the fact that the ecclesiastical structures, as then organized, failed in confronting the social imbalance and cultural changes of the time; in agreement with the ecclesiastical authorities to whom he suggested new ways and more courageous educative perspectives, he tried new methods, opened new horizons for youngsters uprooted from their natural habitat and left defenceless.

3. Evolution of the Oratory: from the first festive oratory to a vast range of educational works in response to emergencies

It happened because the situation demanded it. The cultural poverty of the young provoked the opening of a school at an elementary level, first only on Sundays, then each evening, and then every day, especially for those who could not attend the public schools. Then came workshops for teaching trades, and little by little developed the complex annexed to the Oratory of St Francis de Sales. It had made remarkable progress: from a simple place where youngsters gathered on Sundays for a catechism lesson and games, it became the place of overall formation for a certain number of youngsters without means of support; it became a house in which a more complete program developed with the possibility of receiving the sacraments, of elementary religious instruction (with instructive readings), of relaxation (with games, sport and excisions), of arts like singing and music, of religious and civil festivities, of gifts (even a piece of bread could be a windfall). To the playground and church were gradually added other structures: classrooms and workshops to make it possible to learn a trade and at the same time avoid having to frequent places in the city that all too often were immoral and dangerous for youngsters who had experienced difficult experiences in the past. The Pinardi House was destined to become in a short time a complex work of various schools, humanistic enterprises and work, with the greatest concentration of youngsters in Italy (800 juveniles), limited by poverty of means and shortage of personnel, but unbounded in the plans and dreams of its founder.

But already with the first Oratory were present some important intuitions which would later acquire much deeper value. The Oratory in this early phase, though organized in a provisional manner and seeming from

some aspects to be a mere pedagogical episode of the time, already contained in embryo the germinal elements of Don Bosco's later more complex humanist and Christian synthesis.

a. The flexible structure he gave to the Oratory. not necessarily either parochial or inter-parochial, but a work of mediation between the Church, urban society and youth segments of the population. Precisely the "bridge" between church and world advocated in later years by John Paul II.
b. Respect for and appreciation of the importance of working-class neighbourhoods.
c. The place of religion at the foundation of education according to the norms of Catholic pedagogy acquired at the Ecclesiastical College.
d. The dynamic interplay between religious formation and human development, between catechism and education: as well as convergence between education in general and education to the faith (integration between faith and life).
e. The conviction that instruction constitutes the essential instrument for enlightening the mind.
f. Education, as also catechesis, developed in all its expressions compatible with the lack of time and resources: elementary education of those who have never had the chance to profit by any form of scholastic instruction, placing in employment, assistance during the week, development of group activities and those for mutual assistance (e.g. Conferences of St Vincent de Paul).
g. The full use of spare time and the exploitation of it for good purposes.
h. Loving kindness as a style of education and more generally as a Christian style of life.

Given the principle that the welfare and educational initiatives of Don Bosco for the benefit of the young took place without any regular frequency in time, the response given to problems as they arose could not be programmed and realized in conformity with a previous and organized overall vision of the social and religious framework of the 19th century and the particular social problem of his time. He was faced with a succession of particular local problems, each of which required an immediate response. Only gradually did the various youth conditions lead him to an overall view of the "problem of the young".

For a correct understanding of the sequence of events that characterized Valdocco, there is need to keep in mind the development of the main activities of a religious, social and educational character that took place there.

a. In the first years of the fourth decade of the century (1841-1846) the festive oratory became configured as a "school of catechesis and a playground", and a centre for elementary instruction in reading and writing, especially for immigrant or other abandoned youngsters, and particularly on non-working days.

b. This soon extended (from 1847) to the insertion also of other needy youngsters accommodated in a hospice at Valdocco: a centre which catered for boys looking for work or wanting to attend schools in the city; it became open in due time to other possibilities of assistance, professional and cultural training and general education.

c. The beginning of intense activity in the printing and publication of religious and apologetic matter (1845-1850) led to the publication and widespread diffusion of the popular *Catholic Readings* (from 1853 onwards).

d. From 1855 to 1870 the welfare and educational enterprises of Don Bosco took a decisive turn. With the gradual transformation of the Valdocco Oratory into a boarding school for artisans (1852-1862) and for students (1855-1859), a large number of activities developed which pushed the initial work of the oratory into second place, though it always remained the "primary" purpose at an ideal level. Soon were opened the first colleges at Mirabello (1863) and Lanzo (1864), followed by those in Liguria (1870-1871) and elsewhere. It was the phenomenon of the so-called "collegialization" (hostels and colleges for students, boarding establishments with trade schools, and later hostels and schools for day pupils). For at least a hundred years these would absorb the greater part of the best energies of the Salesian Society and would give it a "new look", a second typical version of the "preventive system".

e. A new and unusual initiative, not foreseen in the first constitutions approved by the Holy See in 1874, was the missionary enterprise (from 1875), begun in Argentina, primarily for the benefit of Italian emigrants to that country.

4. Types of young people cared for

Analogically with the kind of "works" developed at Valdocco (and elsewhere) we should keep in mind the kinds of youngsters that were looked after during the lifetime of Don Bosco:

a. Among the boys of the first Oratory were the *ex-corrigendi* (those who had already been in prison – probably few in number), young immigrants (strangers to the language and culture of the religious world of Turin – a larger number), and in general youngsters without any firm linkage with their respective parishes. With the exception of the first group, the same distribution was found in all the subsequent "oratories" (with Sunday, evening or day schools attached), mutual help societies, workers' societies and other associations of various kinds.

b. Of a similar social and cultural condition, but perhaps at a slightly higher level, were those admitted to the oratory or annexed hostel as students and artisans a long way from their homes, who came to the city to learn a trade or study for a qualification that would enable them to find employment.

c. To a certain number of youngsters belonging to this category or in particular difficulties, or who had greater financial resources and made the request to do so, the possibility was offered of learning a trade in workshops organized within the hostel, or to study in outside schools at a higher level. This population is usually included, in line with the regulations, in the two different social categories: the working class and the middle class.

d. Particular needs prompted also the opening of schools for day pupils (elementary and technical schools, agricultural and trade schools) even for the middle and upper classes, when it was a question of combating lay or protestant initiatives or of ensuring an integral Catholic education in line with the fundamental principles of the preventive system (as in Italy, for example, at Lanzo, Varazze, Alassio, Este etc. and elsewhere in South America).

e. A category on its own is formed by those youngsters who are the poorest of all and most in danger, those who do not have the light of faith; they are found in mission territories, immersed in the darkness of idolatry, considered in the thinking of the period as under the dominion of the devil.

This is the worst form of poverty, and those in this category included the sons of chieftains and even a son of the High Chief himself, as was Zefirino Namuncurá. Naturally, missionary activity did not stop at children but tried to involve the whole world surrounding them; it was not limited to strictly pastoral activity but extended to every aspect of their lives: civil, cultural and social. Don Bosco himself wrote in a letter of 1 November 1886: the aim was "to take religion and civilization to those peoples and countries who so far were ignorant of both".

f. Finally, boys who showed an inclination and suitability for the ecclesiastical or religious state, were accepted without regard to class distinction. This was the greatest contribution that could be made to the Church and to civil society itself.

5. Kinds of youngsters extraneous to the activities of Don Bosco

Evidently, even if we limit our analysis to nineteenth century Italy, there are enormous areas of poor and abandoned youngsters that remained outside Don Bosco's large and programmed sphere of influence. Amongst other factors, the limited forces of personnel available was itself an element preventing more widespread and heterogeneous enterprises. Examples of truly tragic human and social situations included the following:

a. the emerging range of young people becoming ever more involved in the new and growing industries, who were in need of assistance, protection and social formation, e.g. as regards trade-union operations;

b. the world of true and proper juvenile delinquency such as existed at Turin, as history shows us; as also works for the rescue and recovery of young delinquents, or of those threatening to become such. For some works of this kind, Don Bosco was already engaged in preliminary negotiations at various stages;

c. the vast extent of poverty and destitution not only in towns and cities but also, and sometimes to an even greater extent, in rural areas;

d. the huge area of illiteracy and of the upgrading of the social status of craftsmen and members of professions;

e. the world of unemployment and of the possible explosive consequences of emigration;

f. and there still remained the world of the mentally and physically handicapped.

Conclusion

It is significant that the preference we proclaim for the poorest of the poor was considered compatible with our massive commitment to schools and colleges for the "middle classes", not only at a practical level but also in agreement with the regulations.

Don Bosco did not refuse his help to any class of person, but preferred to work with the working and middle classes, as having greater need of help and assistance. But because of the requirement of fees that had to be paid it was not possible to do very much for the really poor, except for limited groups paid for by public or private funding agencies.

But in point of fact, in the face of a grim society bringing up its children badly, it seems that Don Bosco considered that all young people had a growing need of help; they were fragile, often "abandoned" (in the sense of being ignored or undervalued by their parents), and in danger or "at risk". All youngsters, today as yesterday, have come to be considered as "at risk", without distinction of economic, cultural and social levels.

On the basis of this kind of situation a particular method, which later would become known as the preventive system, proposed and adopted for the education and re-education of groups of every kind (young oratorians, students in public schools and colleges, those in reformatories and even prisons) became a widely publicized "system", put forward as a universal method for the education of the young.

For personal reflection

1. Do I understand the Operational Plan of my province, and the pastoral and educative project of my community?
2. To what extent am I available and ready to give my contribution for the full realization of each of them?
3. What are the new frontiers, the new modes of action, the new options indicated by the above Plan and project for my own personal life-plan?

"The purpose of this Society is the spiritual good of its members through the practice of charity towards one's neighbour and especially to young people who are poor" (Don Bosco).

6

THE VITAL CHOICE: CONSECRATED AND SENT FOR A COMMUNAL MISSION (1854-1874)

The option for the young, or in other words the Salesian mission, is necessarily built on the *humus* of consecration. Although Don Bosco never wrote a specific treatise on the spiritual theology of religious life – and how could he do so? – there is no shortage of items in this regard among his writings, and we shall use them as the basis of this meditation. Deliberately we shall confine ourselves to Don Bosco alone. I leave it to you to do the necessary updating explicitly called for by the numerous rich documents that have come from the Holy See and from the Salesian magisterium.

1. The two dimensions of the Salesian: consecrated and sent

In the first article of his Constitutions, Don Bosco emphasized the indivisible linkage between consecration and mission: "The purpose of this Society is the spiritual good of its members through the practice of charity toward one's neighbour and especially to young people who are poor".

Don Bosco's idea of the Salesian – a religious but at the same time consecrated to the young – is expressed in the clearest terms in the memorandum *Historical Notes on the Congregation of St Francis de Sales,* presented in March 1874 to the Roman authorities involved in the approval of the Constitutions.

For the obvious purpose of "training them in a religious manner", the Salesian congregation accepted virtuous and well-mannered individuals, wishing to dedicate themselves to the good of the young, especially poor children at risk. For this reason, beginning from the novitiate, the classical spiritual practices (prayer and meditation, ascetical and moral conferences) were integrated with what Don Bosco called "the most important part of the testing process", or in other words "teaching catechism", "assisting the

children in the house", "doing some teaching in the day or evening schools", and "preparing the ignorant for the sacraments".

A circular of 6 January 1884 is in effect a compendium of the doctrine on religious life characterized by the interplay of the two "consecrations", to God and to the young. "We have become religious not for our own enjoyment but to suffer and gain merit for ourselves for the next life; we are consecrated to God not to command but to obey, not to attach ourselves to creatures but to practise charity towards our neighbour, moved only by the love of God". Here we can detect a warning from the first draft of the Constitutions, preserved in subsequent editions: "Each one should be ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain whenever God's glory and the salvation of souls require it".

2. The two dimensions inherent in the choice of vocation

Fidelity to the double dimension of Salesian existence stems from the "fundamental vocational choice" we spoke this morning. In it Don Bosco emphasizes three basic elements: the reassuring response to God's concrete call to "salvation; the free and generous interior impulse of practical charity towards our neighbour, especially the young ones; the desire for self-realization, of our own possibilities through nature and grace".

a. In the Introduction to the Constitutions emphasis is laid especially on the first aspect, with the indication of almost a moral obligation to accept the vocation as a "special grace". It "removes us from the dangers of the world", where "everything is full of malice"; it offers tranquillity in the midst of life's storms; it is the Noah's Ark which liberates us from the three ways in which "the enemy of the human race exercises his evil designs against men", i.e. "the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life". And if the willing acceptance of the vocation seems for Don Bosco almost obligatory, it tends to become rather less so in daily life: God "lays down for each individual a way of life; if he follows it he will easily achieve his salvation"; if he did not follow it, "he would run the grave risk of not having the necessary graces to save his soul". It is not therefore the only way, but it is the way that is easiest and most secure.

b. But there is also a typically Salesian aspect to free choice, suggested by fraternal charity. The many things Don Bosco said about vocation to youngsters and to Salesians in formation, combine both "kinds" of salvation, the salvation of oneself and the salvation of others. But he warns against exerting any kind of pressure. "It is never a case of saying «be a priest or you'll be nothing at all»". What had to be given was proper instruction. What he recommended was "Find out which ones have an inclination and suitability for the congregation, but do not put pressure on anyone to enter". But it is not wrong to look for a happy state of life, where one can find peace and security, together with cultural and professional training, and a happy life in common.

For brother candidates he goes further. In the Chronicles of Don Barberis, after presenting the Salesian religious vocation to "anyone who wants to save his soul", he added: "Trusting always in the motherly assistance of divine Providence, I can assure you that we shall never lack for anything necessary in health or sickness, in youth or old age". And the Chronicle goes on to describe the wide possibilities for good work and for prestige acquired by lay Salesians in Latin America, who at the Oratory "had no outstanding qualities".

3. A strange omission: Don Bosco as a "Salesian"

Practically no one – not even Don Ceria in his "Don Bosco with God" – has written in any significant way of Don Bosco as a consecrated person, i.e. of his entering the religious life, professing the vows and living the religious life in common with the Salesians, sharing their devotions and life of charity as a consecrated individual inserted in the social and ecclesial context. And yet, in presenting the religious life to his followers, he lets us see, implicitly and explicitly, his own strong convictions, i.e. the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls in order to promote it; in other words: the imitation and reproduction in ourselves of Jesus Christ our Saviour, who "began to do and to teach", following him in his mysteries even until death. We talked about this on the opening day of the Retreat. Here we need only recall that the main objectives of Salesian religious life are the souls to be won for Christ by our activities. This is a task that cannot be fulfilled unless the Christian educator has personal holiness as his own goal.

Moreover the Heavenly Father, Christ our Master and our Blessed Lady "mother and support of our Congregation", were felt and indicated by Don Bosco as the protagonists in his own personal history and in that of the Congregation. He wrote in his Spiritual Testament: "The God of mercy and his holy mother came to our help in our needs. This was especially true whenever it was a case of providing for our poor and abandoned boys, and even more so when their souls were in danger".

With this conviction Don Bosco passed on to his followers in his will and testament the certainty that the presence of Jesus would never fail: "Your first Rector is dead. But our true Superior, Jesus Christ, will never die. He will always be our Master, our guide, our model. But remember that he, in his own time, will also be our judge and the rewarder of our faithfulness in his service". And similarly for the constant presence of Mary.

4. Conditions: the vows

At the origin of the "religious" option Don Bosco gave much importance to its "functional" aspect, emphasized in what Pius IX said to him: without vows there would be no effective bonds between the members, and between superiors and subjects. But noteworthy and even essential are the evangelical and theological references in respect of "consecration" and the "imitation of Christ". In the first place the vows break the chains that enslave us to the "world" (sensual satisfaction, pressure of temporal things, self-will, etc.); and secondly, they bind us closely "with the supreme head of the Church and consequently with God himself", detaching us from earthly things; in consequence they create compact community cohesion.

But the "consecration" of the vows brings with it radical enrichments at the level of grace: "the merit of our works is greatly increased", "our baptismal innocence is restored", "it is though we had suffered martyrdom", "because what the vows lack in intensity they make up for in duration". From all this follows the closing reminder: "In every assignment, in all our work, pain or sacrifice, let us never forget that we are consecrated to God, for him alone we are working and from him alone we look for our reward".

a. The virtue and vow of *obedience* require unconditional submission to God's will. Taking inspiration from St Paul (Phil 2, 3), this "ought to be after the example of our divine Saviour who practised it even in things

most difficult, even to the death on the cross; and should the glory of God demand as much from us, we ought also to be obedient to the sacrifice of our own lives". But since it calls also for great confidence in the superior, it has great practical possibilities as well. Individual selfishness gives way to a common seeking for the common good of the Congregation, considering the honour of one the honour of all, and maintaining a strong corporate spirit.

Don Bosco continually inculcated and praised a kind of obedience that had passed from a purely friendly and family practice to one that had become a real religious sacrifice. From this standpoint he declares emphatically, quoting Sts. Girolamo, Bonaventure and Gregory: "In the vow of obedience lies the complexus of all the virtues"; "the whole of religious perfection consists in the practice of obedience"; "obedience leads to the possession of all the other virtues and preserves them all".

At the Third General Chapter (1880) he lamented a certain laxity in obedience, declaring that it was "intolerable" that a confrere "without saying anything should neglect a task for which he was responsible", because this "would have caused immense harm to the Congregation". Obedience had to be absolute, beginning from the Superior Chapter and extending to "directors, prefects and all members of the congregation". And to one who said that observance of the rules was burdensome, he replied: "My dear brethren, do we want to journey to Paradise in a horse-drawn carriage? We have become religious not for our enjoyment but to suffer and gain merit for the next life; we are consecrated to God not to command but to obey; not to attach ourselves to creatures but to practise charity towards our neighbour, for the love of God; not to lead an easy life but to be poor with Jesus Christ, to be poor with him on earth so as to be worthy of his glory in heaven".

b. With regard to *poverty*, it is significant that the first General Chapter (1877) began the first partial publication of the Acts with the central theme of economy, i.e. of saving and austerity. We know of course that on the badge of the Congregation Don Bosco did not want the motto "work and prayer", but "work and temperance".

The text of the constitutions saw the virtue and vow of poverty rather from the standpoint of the common life, though still with a reference to "detachment from all worldly goods". Even the circular on poverty, sent to

the Salesians on the eve of the definitive approval of the constitutions, is made up only of practical norms about economy and saving, made necessary by the many expenses connected with the building of new houses and the "increase in all kinds of foodstuffs", with some alleviation in its final phrases.

But underneath it all there is the strong recall of the Gospel. In the Congregation the Salesian religious "is considered as literally possessing nothing, having made himself poor to become rich with Jesus Christ. He is following the example of our Saviour who was born in poverty, lived deprived of all things, and died stripped of his clothes on the cross".

There are, of course, other motivations. The Congregation and its houses live by charitable donations and have decided, constitutionally, to live in that way, without depending on secure sources of income, foundations, revenue and the like. "We live by the charity of our benefactors", and consequently: "It must be considered an inviolable principle that we do not maintain proprietorship of any property except for the houses and accessories needed for the health of the confreres or pupils. To keep property for financial gain is an insult to divine providence, which always comes to our help in wonderful and even astonishing ways". Later he hammers home the same point: "When we begin to give way to ease and comfort, our pious society will have run its course. The world will always welcome us as long as our concern is directed to the wild and unruly, to poor children, to those in society most at risk. This is our true happiness that no one will envy or want to take from us".

Finally the Salesian frees himself "by poverty from the burdens of temporal concerns", and makes his activities more straightforward and effective, to such an extent that Don Bosco intended poverty to be really austere, without any half measures or compromise: "For us, anything beyond food and clothing is superfluous and opposed to the religious vocation".

c. In the matter of *chastity*, even more than in the case of obedience and poverty, Don Bosco refers more frequently to the virtue than to the vow. His conferences and talks to the Salesians are all more or less similar, with some small changes when talking to novices, to young professed members or to young people in general. To the Salesians he always emphasizes the delicacy of their mission among the young, and this all the more so if the latter come from morally degraded environments.

In the introduction to the constitutions Don Bosco is lavish in his praise for the virtues and in warnings about dangers and cautions to be observed, partly present also in the constitutions themselves. He indicates therapies too, analogous to those suggested indiscriminately to all: the avoidance of familiarity with persons of the other sex, the avoidance of particular friendships with the young, keeping the bodily senses under control, and temperance especially in matters of food and drink; and the avoidance of worldly places, persons and situations.

In separate conferences for Salesians, young people and adults, he spoke of "positive and negative means" in terms analogous to those he used for the boys. The starting point consisted in the method of "flight". "I am always recommending you to stay in the midst of the young, and now I am telling you to fly from them. What I mean is this: we must be with them, we must be in their midst, but not alone with any one of them, not with one more than with another. We must face the fact: this has been the cause of the ruination of religious congregations dedicated to the education of the young". This is the paradox of Salesian chastity: with the most generous and affectionate co-involvement, with loving kindness, must be combined the most radical detachment; to emotive vulnerability must be added the rigour of self-discipline.

For the preservation of chastity Don Bosco spoke also of "positive means": "meditation, examination of conscience, etc."; and especially some "little things, easy to do but effective", summed up in the comprehensive program "the exact fulfilment of one's duties": study, assistance, teaching, punctuality at meals and recreation, adherence to the time-table.

Don Bosco was tireless in the battle for the preservation of morality. He wanted a general "personal and environmental atmosphere" which, in addition to chastity called for caution in behaviour, words, books and newspapers, decorations and theatrical presentations. "Let not even the smallest blemish ever appear among us", he insisted during the course of the second General Chapter (1880)

5. In community

Linked with substantially common structures, the religious community (immersed in the broader community of boys) lives as such especially through internal bonds between the members who "share the same ideals",

"have professed the same vows", "maintain a particular relationship with the superiors in virtue of religious obedience", and "have their own moments of reflection and religious formation but few particular times of prayer".

The first specific outline of all this was given by the *Deliberations of the First General Chapter* (1877) under five headings: study, common life, morality, economy, and regulations for provincials.

But above all everything had to be permeated by the "spirit", defined essentially in the Constitutions: "All the members shall live a common life joined only by the bonds of fraternal charity and the simple vows, which bind them together to form a single heart and soul to love and serve God".

The hierarchical relationships came later as a natural consequence, as also did obedience and charity. In the Second General Chapter Don Bosco endorsed the need to oppose any major changes, especially in schools, and to cultivate the spirit of charity and kindness of St Francis de Sales, which he thought to be declining, especially in the schools: pupils looked down upon, "not well treated", neglected, expelled from classrooms. Disagreements were springing up between teachers and the superior, if the latter tried to mitigate in repressive measures. He concluded: "It is my earnest wish that you all practise this true spirit of gentleness and charity, and that you do everything possible to spread it among the members of your houses". "I also want each Director to practise and spread abroad the spirit of St Francis de Sales".

In his *Spiritual Testament* Don Bosco dedicated a whole section to the familiar concept of *cor unum et anima una*. Following immediately on this he denounced as the most destructive evil – the "worst pest" he called it – criticisms, grumbling, intolerance; and he recommended the therapy of "union between superior and subjects and agreement between them", mutual advice and help, fidelity to respective duties. It depended also on the attitude of the superior, as he said to the members of the Fourth General Chapter: "Don Bosco recommends that everything be done in the name of the Superior, and that rules be observed not as a personal imposition but in virtue of the duty imposed by the rule itself. A «do this because I say so» approach ruins everything".

In a public conference given in February 1876, Don Bosco insisted that the Constitutions were like a codex that all, both superiors and subjects, must observe with a religious spirit. It was no longer a time for going

ahead with a traditional and almost patriarchal kind of government. They must now adhere to the recently approved regulations; they must know them, study them and put them into practice. This would bring with it two advantages: the work would be "collective and not just individual" and "the government of the director could remain paternal, as we so much desire". And so, as is evident from an intervention in the Second General Chapter, observance must involve the Salesian community at all hierarchical levels: it must "begin with the members of the Superior Chapter, so that it can extend from them to directors, prefects and all members of the congregation. He insisted on this with particular reference to the middle hierarchical levels, to the teachers and those in charge of workshops, who were inclined to become autonomous and disregard the orders of superiors".

The kingpin of everything was the figure of the director, who should be a "clone" of Don Bosco, director of the Oratory. To him and his duties were directed, in addition to the Confidential Recommendations, the various conferences, regulations, deliberations of General Chapters, and the directives and observations made by Don Bosco and Don Rua in official and private visits.

"The Director is the Superior of each house. He fosters the spiritual, scholastic and material progress of the house entrusted to him, and for this purpose he adheres to the rules laid down by Chapter X of our Constitutions". A more spiritual tone is reflected in the recommendations Don Bosco left to the director of a house and his confreres in the Spiritual Testament. He must be a model of patience and charity with his confreres, "and so he must assist them, help them, instruct them as to how they should fulfil their duties, but never with words that are harsh or offensive"; he must show that he has confidence in them, treat them kindly; not reprove them, advising them severely if necessary but "sempre in camera caritatis... even in the case of public reprimands or tellings off".

6. Two instruments of cohesion

The solidity and fertility of religious and educative community life, according to Don Bosco, could find particular support in two practices, entrusted in the first place to the director: the "rendiconto" (manifestation, friendly chat) and the conferences.

The text of the Constitutions on the theme of the rendiconto had under-

gone a laborious transformation from forms that were too invasive to one in harmony with canonical practice, resulting in the formula approved in 1874: "Let each one have full confidence in his superior: it will be very helpful to the confrere to give an account from time to time of his exterior life to the superiors of the Congregation. Each one should manifest with readiness and simplicity the exterior faults committed against the rules and also the advance he has made in virtue, so that he can receive support and advice and, if need be, also appropriate admonitions".

In the Second General Chapter, a whole session was given over to a reflection by Don Bosco on the unity of direction needed by a congregation in rapid expansion to ensure unity of spirit and action. It needed synergy between superiors and subjects. Directors and Provincials "must consider themselves as a single family, and as having a single common preoccupation of making every effort to see that it goes ahead successfully". "Let all members look upon the director as a loving father or an elder brother, who has been given the task of helping them to fulfil their own obligations well. Let them conceal neither good things nor bad things, but make known everything just as it is".

An impassioned warning is addressed to the director in the Spiritual Testament: "As far as possible, never omit the rendiconto and on that occasion let each director become the friend, brother and father of his dependents. Let him give them all the time and freedom they need to talk and express their needs and intentions. On his own side let him be open-hearted without showing any rancour and without bringing up past faults unless it be for the purpose of giving fatherly advice or a charitable reminder of duties that had been neglected".

A parallel insistence he places on the monthly conferences. He spoke about this in the First General Chapter. "The director should ask teachers to let him know what experience may have suggested to them, and consider such items in meetings. To this end he should give at least three conferences a year to the teachers". And still further in the Second General Chapter: "These conferences (every two weeks for the confreres) are like a second bond of union enabling confreres and director to form a single body and soul". In the Acts published in 1882, in the Regulations for the director, there was a short article that prescribed: "Let him give at least three conferences a year to all the teaching and assisting personnel. Let him never fail to receive every month the rendiconto of all the members".

7. Communities in development

The Salesian religious community is not a monastery or convent; nor is it a mere residence or operating centre; it is a family-community from both a pedagogical aspect (educative community), and because it consists in consecrated persons living together (a religious house of education). Life and work take place "in one's own house" with the greatest dedication, because everything is the combined work of all, including those to whom the work is directed. From this standpoint the community is capable of continual innovation and regeneration. It renews itself through the acquisition of new collaborators. Concern for the extension of the work in both directions is a further characteristic trait in the profile of the Salesian.

The seeking of vocations is the task of everyone, individuals and community, and Don Bosco urged the use of all the resources of the preventive system: sacraments, prayer, loving kindness, familiarity. In the Second General Chapter, in the face of some specific difficulties, he proposed the two classic remedies: "In the first place, I see that we need to treat each other with great charity and kindness, and that we do the same with all the members". "And the basis for vocations is morality". In this connection he deplored the spreading of immorality said to be present in children's homes where the inmates became involved in a chain of immorality even from four or five years of age.

He also suggested some means for promoting vocations, those of enduring validity: 1° Always speak well of priests. 2° Keep away from bad companions. 3° Keep away from bad books. 4° Let teachers, supervisors, and even directors from the pulpit, speak frequently of vocation and make it understood that this is the great step on which depends the whole of life. 5° Have our booklets read, e.g. the lives of Dominic Savio, Magone etc... 6° "A great deal of work on our part", so that we appear as Salesians everywhere, not only when preaching or hearing confessions but teaching in school and doing all the other things the Salesians are well known for.

In the Spiritual Testament he returns explicitly and with insistence on the theme of vocations as a distinguishing mark of the Congregation: "God has called the poor Salesian congregation to promote ecclesiastical vocations among youngsters who are poor and of humble condition. Wealthy families are generally too much immersed in the spirit of the world, and unfortunately their children automatically imbibe the same spirit and so

lose the spirit of vocation that God has placed in their heart". And he concluded: "Let us remember that we present a treasure to the Church every time we find a good vocation; it doesn't matter whether it be a vocation as a diocesan priest or for the missions, or for a religious institute. It is always a great treasure given to the Church of Jesus Christ".

Conclusion

And here we shall have to stop, even though there are some more interesting items we could talk about as, for instance, the Salesian as a religious in the Church and a free citizen in civil society. But what we have said will be sufficient. Let us do some summing up.

The religious spirituality of the Salesian is characterized by its being fused with the mission to the young characterized by the Preventive System. To the classical traditional concept of the religious as *homo Dei*, are combined in the Salesian the requirements of his condition as *homo hominum,* or better of *homo juvenum.*

The divine life, work and paradise are therefore the heart of Salesian spirituality, in which are lived in a harmonious synthesis activity and prayer, interior life and charity. Work is undoubtedly the pillar of Salesian religious existence, but it is founded on faith and permeated by the charity that moves us to love God and to love our neighbour because God loves him, and in the same way that God loves him.

The closing words of the Spiritual Testament provide the key to the interpretation of Salesian activity understood as total charity, even to the shedding of one's blood and to mystical union with God in a boundless self-sacrificing love. "When it happens that a Salesian dies working for souls, you can say that the congregation has won a great triumph and the blessings of heaven will descend upon it".

For personal reflection

1. How do I live and express my consecration? How do I live and express my mission?
2. How do I personally reconcile my mission and my personality?
3. Am I convinced that Salesian educative activity must be based as widely as possible on the community and not on individuals?

THE FOURTH DAY: PERSONAL RAPPORT WITH CHRIST

It is said that the world of today is a world without Christ, that today's youngsters are without Christ, but a first question we must ask ourselves is whether we ourselves are without Christ, given that both the Church (Setting out afresh from Christ) and the Congregation (Letter of the Rector Major, 2003) have given us reminders about this very point. And today is an appropriate moment to consider the matter.

Christ said that his disciples must model their whole lives not on his doctrine but on his person. He did not say: "This is the way, the truth and the life", but "I am the way, the truth and the life".

He promised to remain with them personally until the end of time; he said he himself was the salvation he proclaimed; he said that it was not that he practised justice but that he was justice itself; not that he merely preached liberation but that he himself was our freedom.

And so the Christian is one who has a personal rapport with Jesus, which is much deeper than being just his follower. It means living with him, through him and in him; it means putting him at the centre of our lives.

St Paul finds it difficult to describe such a reality. Read the opening pages of his Letters to the Philippians and to the Colossians: "God destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ... we have redemption through his blood, in him is our hope, in his grace we are saved, we are his creatures, he is our peace...". Paul even coins new expressions: "dying with Christ, buried with him, risen with him, sitting with him in the Father's glory". In a word: for me to live is Christ. "I consider everything as dross if I can only gain Christ".

Christ therefore is not a philosophical system but a person we must meet, and he has shown us personally how to do it through his relationship with Lazarus, Mary Magdalen and the Apostles. He always uses possessive pronouns, my, your, his etc. Just as in the Old Testament: "Yahweh is your God. You are his people" – a freely-given affiliation, one of predilection. Israel was nobody, but God chose him. The apostles were nobody and God chose them. Such affiliation put them in a condition to be offered a greet privilege: the confidence of Jesus.

But what are the characteristics of this love and confidence?

- There are no secrets between friends. "I do not call you servants; I call you friends, because I have made known to you all that I have heard from my Father".
- Friends want to be always in each other's company: "I wanted to eat this paschal meal with you... Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life".
- Friends suffer when they are not together: "How can the groom's friends be sad when the groom is with them? But there will come a time... and then they will mourn".
- True friendship always endures, even if the loved one is absent: "My children, I will not leave you orphans. I will come back to you... and stay with you". Friendship leads to cohabitation. "He who loves me keeps my word; my Father and I will come to him and we will take up our abode with him".
- An affiliation which implies separation from others: "You cannot belong to two masters... You do not belong to the world, because I have chosen you and set you apart from the world's power... For this reason the world hates you".
- Friends defend and plead for one another. "They were yours, these you have given me; I pray for them; I do not pray for the world but for those to whom you have sent me... consecrated in the truth; for them I consecrate myself... that they may all be one". And we know how he made us his own: on the cross: "There is no greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends".

The risk is that of obscuring such a personal rapport. We may often be absorbed by the great problems of the salvation of the world, of the spreading of Christian doctrine, of the recognition of theological or moral truth, of the desire to realize a model of behaviour or of the idea of society, that we do not have the decency to confess Christ and to put him at the foundation of our hope each day.

Can Christ be the ultimate meaning of my life if he is not allotted a suitable place and time, even psychologically? When Mother Teresa had a serious problem, she would add an hour's prayer; what SDBs would very likely do is organize another meeting or assembly.

Intimacy with Christ is a necessity. What is never spoken of does not exist. And if something like the soul does not exist, how can it animate

anything else? An inanimate thing is dead. How often do we say of a person that he really believes – as though to say that all the others don't. A phrase like that should put us on the alert: perhaps other people, perhaps our own young people, can read what is inside us better than we can... and they will condemn us, at least in their thoughts. We must get rid of a juridical mentality where Christ is concerned. God's word is not just a code of behaviour but a spark of love. We must eliminate a purely scientific mentality: exegesis and hermeneutics are necessary but they are not yet the "*lectio sacra*". Poetry is not the same thing as philology, or poetic technique. We must eliminate also the ideological mentality which sees Christ as an instrument to be made use of rather than as an incentive to self-judgment, a person to be met and loved.

Christ is a living person, he is the Word, one who converses with me and challenges me, and not just a response to my personal problems.

"Seek souls, and not money, honours or dignities" (Souvenirs for missionaries)

7

THE STRATEGIC TURNING POINT: THE MISSIONS

The Salesian Society was born of the missionary spirit of Don Bosco who, while still a diocesan priest, preferred to seek out those at a distance from the Church than the ordinary structure of diocesan pastoral work. His own "internal mission to the young" became in fact the ideal launching platform for foreign missions. The missionary turning point came, as we know, in 1875 when the "Congregation of the oratories" became also the "Institute for foreign missions" and the Salesian from being "missus ad juvenes" became "missus ad gentes".

a. Don Bosco's eager anxiety would not allow him to be satisfied with the objectives already reached; it prompted him to give new energy to his religious society by the adoption of new goals. "Speaking of the great need there is of missionaries and of the many millions who are still to be converted", notes the chronicler Don Barberis on 20 May 1875, "the talk turned to Asia (...). China alone (the Chinese empire) had nearly 500 million souls, and the India almost 200 million. We believe that there is already much work to be done in Europe, but the Chinese empire alone has one and a half times the population of the whole of Europe. We are accustomed to talking about Piedmont; we study its history and its positive and negative progress. But Piedmont is like a drop of water in the ocean. «And what a tiny spot does it make of our oratory here at Valdocco?», asked Don Bosco with a smile, «and yet it gives us so much work to do, and from this tiny corner of the world we can plan to send members here, there and everywhere»".

b. Moreover Don Bosco wanted to be free of too many local and legal restrictions, both civil and canonical. And to those who were afraid that extending the work overseas would diminish what could be done in Italy, he replied (according to the same chronicler): "They do not see that priests here are hamstrung. To get faculties for hearing confessions they have to

move heaven and earth; those who ask for preaching faculties find that they are given to only a very limited number. I need to find some place where one can work without so much frustration". In this context the American initiative became linked with the expansion of the work in France, going on at the same time.

c. At the head of the American enterprise he put some outstanding men: Fr John Cagliero, who later became both a Bishop and a Cardinal; the unassuming but tenacious and tireless Fr Francesco Bodrato; the lively and creative Fr Luigi Lasagna (who also became a bishop and died tragically in a train accident in 1895 at the age of 45); Fr James Costamagna (who became a bishop and vicar apostolic in Ecuador); Fr Joseph Vespignani, a prominent personality in the Salesian world of Latin America and in the Salesian Generalate.

From a historical point of view they were the ones who did the work on the spot, the laying and immediate management of the foundations, the pastoral activity and evangelization. But Don Bosco was always present at each stage. His was the initiative for the missions and he continued to give them his support to the best of his ability, despite his lack of means and personnel. He worked intensely to promote missionary vocations, provide the necessary personnel, and seek benefactors. He sent individual and collective letters of spiritual animation. He gave particular attention to the leaders (provincials and directors) but did not overlook individuals. He reserved too for himself the great work of keeping alive among the confreres and before the civil and ecclesiastical authorities on both sides of the Ocean the missionary reality of his enterprise. He even managed to give them a juridical foundation with the pontifical institution – albeit imperfect and not yet complete – of the first Vicariate Apostolic and Prefecture Apostolic in Patagonia and in Tierra del Fuego.

1. The missionary turning point of the congregation

Once the two works of pastoral activity and education in Argentina had been accepted, Don Bosco soon began to speak of the "missions". The circular letter to the Salesians of 5 February 1875 asks them individually to make themselves available. "Among the many suggestions that have been made for the opening of a mission in foreign countries, it seems that prefer-

ence could be given to the Argentine Republic. There, in addition to a part already civilized, there are also interminable areas inhabited by native peoples, among whom with God's grace the zeal of the Salesians could find an outlet (...) Now we have to prepare the personnel to send on this first experiment, and I want the choice to be of those confreres who go not through obedience but by their own free choice".

The motive of the missions became the theme dominating Don Bosco's propaganda, beginning from conferences to the Salesians at Valdocco and extending even to private correspondence. At the end of August in a request to the Prefect of the Congregation for Propaganda Fide he presented the management of the College of St Nicholas as "specially advantageous for the Missions". Then, after stressing that it was the first time the Salesian Congregation was opening houses in mission territories "he asked for all those favours, spiritual graces and privileges that the Holy See is accustomed to grant to religious who work in the foreign missions" and "those contribution in money, in books in Spanish, and in other things useful for Church or school".

In his farewell address of 11 November 1875 Don Bosco took as his theme the words of the Gospel: "Ite in mundum universum, docete omnes gentes, praedicate evangelium meum omni creaturae", and he declared: "With these words the divine Saviour gave a command, not a piece of advice but a command, to go to the missions and preach the Gospel". And he went on to say that in obedience to this precept "the idea of this Mission was conceived", and preferred to other "suggestions of China, India, Australia or other parts of America". "In this way we are beginning a great work – not that we have any pretensions or are expecting to convert the whole world in a short time – but who knows whether this departure, this little enterprise, will not be like a small seed from which a great plant will grow... I hope it will be so". Then he proclaimed them as being "sent" by the Church and its Supreme Head: "Go now, go and proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments in those far-off regions, but remember that the Church is one, the same in Europe as in America. The Providence that governs us here will govern you there. Jesus Christ is equally the Saviour of souls here as he is of souls there (...)". And finally he turned to those about to set out, revealing an interesting point about the famous "Souvenirs" he had written specially for them: "To each of you individually I have already said what my heart inspired and I thought would be useful for

you; to all of you I now leave in writing some general reminders which are my testament for those going to far distant places".

A "send off" of this kind was renewed in the case of the missionary expeditions of following years.

2. Features of "missionary spirituality" in the "Souvenirs for missionaries"

On leaving Turin, each missionary took with him a copy of the "Souvenirs". This synthetic document, the departure speeches and other later ones, provide the outline of a spirituality that is eminently Catholic and Salesian. It is an elaborate missionary spirituality, in which the requirements and qualities of those "missi ad juvenes" and those "missi ad gentes" are intertwined.

a. "Da mihi animas". "Seek souls, but not money, honours or dignities" stands at the head of the Souvenirs. The Salesian mission was born and takes place in vital continuity with "the precept of the divine Saviour to go and preach the Gospel". The element of linkage is the Pope and for this reason (quoting again the chronicle of Don Barberis) "as soon as we began talking about these missions we immediately asked the Holy See about them, and everything was done with the full knowledge of His Holiness; moreover, before leaving, all our missionaries went to the Holy Father to do him reverence and ask for his apostolic blessing". This is Catholic practice and entirely in tune with Salesian sensitivity: "My heart rejoices also with great consolation at seeing the kingdom of Jesus Christ extended, at seeing our Congregation consolidated, at seeing that in our own small way we too can contribute our small pebble to the great edifice of the Church" (Barberis).

In the address of 11 December 1875, from which we have already quoted, Don Bosco paints a vivid picture of the need for spiritual assistance felt by the priests in Argentina, and the attraction of huge numbers of natives to the Christian religion. "They are not ferocious by nature, and when they hear preached the religion of Jesus Christ they readily accept it": hence the need for large numbers of evangelical workers and of praying "to the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his harvest, workers according to his own heart so that the kingdom of Christ may be extended on this earth".

b. The twenty items of the Souvenirs summarize and reconfirm for the missionaries the fundamental traits of Salesian spirituality. They are addressed pointedly to those who may be working in particularly difficult environments from many standpoints: religious, moral, social, cultural or political.

- In first place is morality, referred to in at least four of the twenty items: 2. Be charitable and most courteous towards all, but avoid conversations and familiarity with persons of the other sex or with persons whose conduct is open to suspicion. 3. Do not go visiting, except for motives of charity or necessity. 4. Do not accept invitations to dinner, except for very grave reasons. In such cases arrange for a confrere to accompany you. 9. Shun idleness and disputes, and observe great moderation in eating, drinking and sleeping.
- Then come opportune recommendations for particular deference in foreign countries towards every kind of civil and ecclesiastical authority: 6. Show respect to all persons in authority, whether civil or religious. 7. On meeting a person in authority, take care to salute him with due respect. 8. Do the same towards ecclesiastics and persons belonging to religious institutes. 10. Love, reverence and respect other religious orders, and always speak well of them. In this way you will be esteemed by all, and will promote the good of our congregation.
- Among peoples in a state of development, but at the same time increased in number by immigration and with many natives, of particular importance is the commandment of poverty to those working for the native population. This is reflected in three further items: 5. Take special care of the sick, of the young, of the old and poor, and you will win the blessing of God and the goodwill of men. 11. Take care of your health. Work well, but do only as much as your strength will allow. 12. Let the world know that you are poor in clothing, food and abode, and you will be rich in the sight of God, and will win the hearts of men.
- To mould the Salesian for situations of unusual need, there are items that suggest personal and community behaviour enlivened by charity, nourished by devotion, and productive of vocations. Item 13 is a prompting towards charity: Love one another, advise one another, correct one another, and do not be carried away by either envy or rancour. Let the good of one become the good of all, and let the troubles and suf-

ferings of one be regarded as the troubles and sufferings of all, and let each one strive to banish or at least to mitigate the sorrows of others. Broadening the application to those for whom we are working, to this may be added item 19: Hear both sides before making up your mind regarding reports and matters in dispute.

- Four items are reminders about piety and devotion: 14. Observe your rules, and never forget the monthly Exercise for a Happy Death. 15. Every morning commend to God the occupations of the day, especially confessions, lessons, religious instructions and sermons. Constantly promote devotion to Mary Help of Christians and to the Blessed Sacrament. 17. Recommend to the boys frequent confession and communion.
- Concern for vocations is kept alert by item 18: In order to cultivate ecclesiastical vocations, constantly inculcate: (a) love of chastity, (b) horror of the opposite vice, (c) avoidance of bad companions, and (d) frequent communion. Always be charitable, gentle and kindly.
- The 20th and last item is an invitation to frequently raise thoughts and aspirations to the four last things: "In time of fatigue and suffering, do not forget that we have a great reward prepared for us in heaven.

3. Features of "missionary spirituality" in correspondence with superiors on the missions

The contents of the "Souvenirs" are further endorsed and enriched by letters to individual missionaries. They reinforce fidelity to the original vocation, works for the young; they encourage involvement in the ministry urgently needed among emigrants and people in general; and they insistently bring to mind the missionary dream with repeated exhortations to courage and sacrifice in the further spreading of the work.

The beginnings in Argentina and Uruguay were the launching pad for an unforeseen development in Latin America; The pioneers of activity in Argentina (1875) and in Uruguay from 1877, had to cope with nearly everything without adequate means or personnel. Big problems soon began to arise. But true and proper missionary activity got off to a relatively slow start through the inadequacy of some individuals, the maladjustment of others and some defections. But nonetheless, those who had grown up at the school of so courageous and far-seeing a man as Don Bosco, and were

buoyed up by the fascination they continued to have for him, addressed themselves to their work with an intense and productive rhythm.

Salesians overseas who had a prominent place in Don Bosco's letters were those destined to become provincials and directors.

a. In the first two years, considerable importance attaches to the correspondence with Cagliero, head of the missionaries, who continued to be a member of the authoritative "Superior Chapter". Some notes in this connection.

A letter of 12 February 1876 is of particular importance. In it Don Bosco shows his great regret because of a letter written by Fr Tomatis from St Nicholas, Argentina, to Fr Francesia, director at Varazze, "in which he says he cannot agree with a certain person, and that before long he is going to return to Europe". And he goes on to touch on two pre-eminent aspects of missionary spirituality: "Tell him these two things: 1. A missionary must obey, suffer for the glory of God and show the greatest earnestness in observing the vows by which he is consecrated to the Lord; 2. When he is unhappy, let him talk to his Superior about it or write directly to me and I will tell him what to do".

Later he wrote directly to Tomatis (7 March 1876). After expressing his regret at the letter written to Varazze, he outlined the profile of a missionary. "Listen to me, dear Tomatis: a missionary must be ready to give his life for the greater glory of God; and should he not therefore be able to put up with a bit of antipathy for a companion, even though the latter have many defects? So listen well to what St Paul says: *Alter alterius onera portate, et sic adimplebitis legem Christi. Caritas benigna est, patiens est, omnia sustinet. Et si quis suorum et maxime domesticorum curam non habet, est infideli deterior.* And so, my dear son, give me this great consolation, or rather do me this great favour – it is Don Bosco who asks it of you – in future make a great friend of Molinari; if you cannot like him because of all his shortcomings, like him for the love of God, love him for the love of God. You will do that for me, won't you? Apart from this, I am satisfied with you, and every morning in the holy Mass I'll recommend to God the efforts you make".

In another letter to Fr Cagliero (29 June 1876) he urges fidelity to the specifically Salesian mission: "This is what God is asking of us at this point in time! Unpretentious houses and colleges, shelters in which we can take in

primitive or semi-civilized youngsters if possible. And a great effort to promote vocations". Later in the same year (1 August) he wrote again, urging further missionary expansion: "In general keep always in mind that God wants us to direct our efforts towards the Pampas and Patagonia and to poor and abandoned children"; "there is great enthusiasm here for the missions: lawyers, notaries parish priests and teachers are all asking to become Salesians so that they can go to the missions. Do your best to find pupils or older men from among the primitive peoples. If any of them would like to come to Europe to study or learn a trade, send them by all means".

Meanwhile the "American dream" was expanding and with it, perhaps somewhat rashly, the "missionary dream". On 10 January 1877, writing to a certain Boassi, Don Bosco was glad to hear he had struck up a "favourable relationship with D. Pedro and his empress wife of Brazil", and he added "If you get the chance, suggest to them that we open a house in that vast country".

A month later, on 14 February, he entrusted to Fr Cagliero a starry-eyed plan for the future. It had been prompted, he said, by two suggestions of the Pope that he had accepted: "A Vicariate Apostolic in Patagonia at Carmen or Santa Cruz or Punt Arenas, or better a single Vicariate embracing all three". And what about Fr Cagliero? Don Bosco went on: "He can go to India. For the beginning of 1878 we are going to take on the Vicariate Apostolic of Mangalore in India which has some three million souls".

Naturally a brake had to be put on the plans for Asia (May 1878): "Because of the way the houses are increasing in number and the personnel consequently getting thinner on the ground, we shall have to suspend the plans for Ceilan, Mangalor and Australia, etc. until you come back". In August Cagliero returned to Europe, and others took on the responsibilities in Latin America. And in fact Cagliero remained in Turin, a kind of "superprovincial" for America.

b. The first local provincial in Argentina was Fr Bodrato, and he remained in office until his death on 2 August 1880. The very few letters Don Bosco wrote to him contain guidelines for the "fatherly" direction of the Salesians in his care: "1. Make every sacrifice to preserve charity and union among the confreres. 2. When you have occasion to give correction or particular advice, never do it in public but always «inter te et illum solum». 3. When you have given a correction, forget the fault and show the

same kindliness to the delinquent as before" (31 December 1878). On another occasion (17 April 1880) he wrote: "Recommend to our dear confreres: 1. Work to the extent that health will permit, but not more than that, but let each one be wary of laziness. 2. Recommend the observance of our Rules. Woe to us if we study them without putting them into practice".

In the last two letters he wrote to Don Bosco (1880), Fr Bodrato gave special emphasis to what the figure of the founder meant for him and for the Salesians in America, and to the relationship of filial devotion that bound them to the major superior. In a letter of 6 April the founder appears as a "living message" of their style of work. "Don Bosco is our norm of life". "We need to invert that phrase that says «Gloria Patris filius sapiens»". "Oh, if Don Bosco were only here, how much good he could do with his printing activities! We are still children, even though I have reached the age of 57". "From all I have said, you can easily deduce that the name of Don Bosco has something prestigious and mysterious about it that exerts a hidden attractive force". "Please keep me in mind on the happy occasion of your nameday. God alone knows my great desire and you, dear Father, know what Fr Bodrato is like – affectionately obedient to Don Bosco to death, and always receptive of his advice. Please consider me as one of your veterans, and make use of me for anything you think I can do". And he finishes on a note of suffering: "On the other hand I feel a great need to talk with you about some things which are difficult to put in writing because they are difficult to explain; they need to be discussed" (15 May 1880).

c. With the arrival in America of the members of the third missionary expedition correspondence grew between Don Bosco and Fr James Costamagna who, together with Fr Vespignani, was to rapidly become one of the leading lights in the Salesian history of America. At the end of 1880 he succeeded Fr Bodrato as director of the College of St Charles at Buenos Aires and provincial. Writing to Fr Costamagna on 31 December 1878, Don Bosco recommended: "Do what you can, but only what you can. Put your trust in God, saying with St Paul: *Omnia possum in eo, qui me confortat"*. "Foster charity among our confreres".

Solidarity, unity and courage were all recommended in letters written to America, especially after the death of Fr Bodrato. "Now you must be courageous – he wrote to Fr Vespignani (22 August 1880) – Patience, prayer and courage: that is our program at present; do all you can to en-

courage the confreres and keep them happy. Tell the students and aspirants that I am expecting great things from them. Morality, humility, study – that's the program for them".

In January 1880 five Salesians and four Sisters, headed by Fr Joseph Fagnano – who in November 1883 became a Prefect Apostolic – left Italy for Patagonia to begin the true and proper missionary work. In a letter to Fr Fagnano, a great worker but a bit of a wheeler-dealer and inclined to be autonomous, Don Bosco wrote on 21 October 1880: "At last I have received your letter of 6 September, the first I have had from you since you left for Patagonia". He assures him that before he was sent to Patagonia – an obedience Fr Fagnano had not wanted – the matter had been well studied. "I needed to send someone in whom I had complete trust, someone capable of handling business matters, someone safe from the standpoint of morality". Later he came back to the same point, prophesying what would happen on 31 January 1881: "The greatest enterprise of our Congregation is that of Patagonia. In due time you will come to understand everything, but I cannot hide from you the fact that a great responsibility lies on your shoulders". Earlier he had reminded Fr Fagnano (14 November 1877) of the motto that forms part of the Congregation's badge: "Always remind all the Salesians of the motto we have adopted: Work and Temperance".

d. On another matter he wrote to Fr Lasagna on 31 January 1881 to console him: "It has not been possible to send you any printers. Those with the necessary skill are lacking in courage, and those with courage don't have the skill". Equally brief and to the point was a reminder for Tomatis, sent in a letter to Costamagna (1 October 1881): "I cannot understand Tomatis. He is obliged to write, or to get someone else to write, to me about the personnel of his college, and tell me about its material and moral state, and about the hopes and fears for the future of our work. Without this information we cannot make plans – we can only go blindly ahead; and he sends me nothing". And he concluded: "God bless all of us, and may he make of the Salesians so many saints, and of you a super-Saint".

4. Fragments of spirituality in letters of animation

While a batch of missionaries were on their way to America, Don Bosco ended a letter to Cagliero with words that bear witness to his solicitude for them: "I recommend that each one take good care of his health.

When you write to me let me know whether anyone has been seasick and whether they are now in good health. When you give news to our other confreres, try if possible to get them to read together the Souvenirs I gave you before you left" (4 December 1875). In effect, the motives set out in the Souvenirs are frequently repeated in letters of direction and animation, enriched by other thoughts he had equally at heart.

To Taddeo Remotti he suggested (11 November 1877): "When the devil disturbs you in what you are doing, do the same to him with an act of mortification, or an ejaculation, or working for the love of God. I am sending you two companions with whom I hope you will be satisfied; show them a lot of patience and charity. With you yourself I am well satisfied. Stick at it. Practise obedience yourself and foster it in others – that is the secret of happiness in our Congregation". With the same Remotti, he rejoiced at the "frankness and sincerity with which he had often written", and he offered him some good advice: "1. Put up with the defects of others, even when they cause us difficulty. 2. Hide the shortcomings of others. Never make fun of anyone if you foresee that he will be offended. 3. Work, but work for the love of God; put up with everything rather than offend against charity". "We shall meet again on earth, if God so wills; and if not, heaven is waiting for us if God, in his mercy, allows us to reach it".

He recalled several things in a letter to Fr Tomatis of 14 September 1877: "Here are a few lines that I think you will be pleased to receive from a true friend of your soul (...). I give you as an order that you try to be a model to the newcomers in work and in mortification, in humility and obedience. I'm sure you will do this. But I would like you to send me sometimes a long letter, a kind of rendiconto about the spiritual exercises, and tell me frankly of your life and virtues and even «miraculous» experiences you have had in the past and look forward to in future. Will you do it? Dear Tomatis, love Don Bosco just as he has a great affection for you". To the same Fr Tomatis, newly appointed director at St Nicholas, Don Bosco gave on 30 September 1879, the advice he was accustomed to give to Directors: "1. Take care of your own health and of that of your subjects; See to it that no one works too hard but that no one is idle with nothing to do. 2. Try to outdo others in piety and the observance of our rules, and work to see that they are also observed by others, especially meditation, the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, weekly confession, Mass well celebrated and frequent communion for those who are not priests. 3. Heroism in putting up with the

failings of others. 4. Show great kindness to the pupils, and make it easy for them to go to confession".

On 12 June 1878, he wrote a strong letter to a Brother Scavini, who was tempted to leave the Congregation: "Don't take such a step. You, who are consecrated to God by vows as a Salesian missionary, who were one of the first to go to America, and in whom Don Bosco has great trust, do you now want to return to the world where there are so many dangers of perversion? I hope you won't make such a great mistake. Write and tell me what is worrying you and like a loving father I will give a beloved son advice that will make him happy in this world and the next".

Encouraging was the brief note of 12 June 1878 written to a young priest Valentino Cassini, whom he had learned was in delicate health: "I will do anything for your benefit. If need be, try to put yourself in the hands of Don Mazzarello for a while, and between the two you will kindle a great fire of charity that will engulf the whole college and beyond it. Never doubt my great good will for you and all my dear sons of America. As regards the matters of conscience, continue doing as you have written. After the storm will come the calm".

A cleric Antonio Passeri received a note written on 31 January 1881: "You, dear Passeri, are always the delight of my heart, and now you are even more so, because you have dedicated yourself completely to the Missions, which means that you have abandoned everything else to consecrate yourself completely to the saving of souls. Courage then, dear Passeri. Prepare yourself to be a good priest, a holy Salesian".

The same day he recommended to Calcagno: "Never look back. Let us keep our eyes on the heaven that awaits us. There we have a great reward waiting for us. Work, win souls and save your own. For you, sobriety and obedience are everything. Write often to me".

A note of good wishes of 31 January 1881 was received by Juan Pedro Rodriguez Silva, the first cleric from Uruguay, who later became a priest: "May the Lord who called you to be a Salesian – but a fervent and exemplary Salesian – help you to win many souls for heaven; you will do this by your good example and the exact observance of our Rules".

Finally he recalls a series of Salesian items to a director-parish priest, Fr Allavena: the observance of our rules in the first place: "In addition to the text of the rules, you will find it of advantage to read frequently the deliberations of our General Chapters ... But as a parish-priest use all charity to

your assistant priests so that they will help you zealously in the sacred ministry and take special care of the children the sick and the ageing. If in the Missions or in any other way you manage to spot some youngster who shows promise for the priesthood, know that God has put into your hands a real treasure. Every care, labour or expense for the fostering of a vocation is never too great. It is always well spent".

Conclusion

The Salesian missions were a source of good fortune for Don Bosco. The positive image spread abroad by the Salesian Bulletin gave rise everywhere to enthusiasm, vocations and financial support. Certainly not everything was always rosy. But in the end the Salesian society cast deep roots in Latin America and had far more successes than failures. But the story has still to be written, not least because too many important sources have still to be studied.

For personal reflection

1. Missionary expeditions are still taking place, but the style of the missionaries has changed almost completely: the great majority are now from outside Europe. This has certain consequences. What are they?
2. For some years now, as well as SDBs and FMAs receiving the missionary cross, there have been also lay volunteers, some of them even with their families. What does this imply for us?
3. Within a few years time, half the world's inhabitants will be living in big cities, especially in the southern hemisphere. It seems therefore that 'missions in the bush' and certain kinds of parish-based missions will be coming to an end, and the missionary Church will have to devise new processes for evangelizing the cities. What will be the main traits of this new pastoral work in "mission territories"?

"Do you want to do something good? Educate the young. Do you want to do something holy? Educate the young. Do you want to do something still holier? Educate the young. Do you want to do something divine? Educate the young. Of all divine things this, indeed, is the most divine. (Don Bosco to the Cooperators, Rome, 16 May 1878)

8

THE SALESIAN MISSION AT THE PRESENT DAY

After our rapid look at the story of Don Bosco up to his definitive option of work for the young, and the historical foundation of a society of "consecrated educators" for this purpose, let us now try to sum it all up in practical terms for today, as the title suggests.

1. Mission: *explicatio terminorum*

In the first place we have clarified what we mean by the term "mission". It is not a question of a group of people being sent to some foreign country for some business matter; nor do we use the term simply to mean a group of persons who leave their home for some place far away to convert others to a particular religion; we don't even mean a field of activity. We have to go back to the Latin word "mittere" from which "mission" is derived: to send someone on the part of someone else to do something. Summing up, the mission is to be understood in the following senses.

a. *Theological sense:* By the personal call he gives us, God consecrates us by the gift of the Spirit and sends us forth. Salesian service is one that is received and lived as a mission of God that demands to be "prayed" and "evangelized". The Salesian who serves others, but overlooks keeping in regular contact with God, certainly becomes a "man from amongst men for men", but not a "man of God from amongst men for men".

b. *Ecclesial sense:* our mission is part of that of the Church, which gives effect to God's salvific design and the coming of his kingdom. Ours is a service received and lived as a *missio Ecclesiae*, and in consequence is

carried out *in* the Church (fidelity to the Church), *with* the Church (in ecclesial communion), and *for* the Church (to foster its growth).

c. *Community sense*: a service received and lived as a *missio comunitatis* with two particular obligations: to safeguard fidelity to the founder's charism, and to realize the communion of the apostolate.

d. *Historical sense*: our vocation calls us to be solid with the world and its history: the needs of young people prompt and guide our pastoral activity.

e. *Mystical sense*: we work for salvation. The Salesian experiences God's fatherliness; he receives and makes his plan secure by drawing on the charity of Christ; he builds the unity of his life by basing every stress or strain in a spiritual project that identifies him with Christ the Saviour. Lack of spiritual depth leads to activism; without spiritual nourishment one cannot be "on God's side", assimilating the inspiring principles and criteria of judgement provided by the Gospel. God's primacy must be visible – and at Valdocco it certainly was so.

f. *Ascetic sense*: the Salesian gives himself to his mission with tireless application and self-sacrifice. We need only recall the Salesian Decalogue of Fr Albert Caviglia: "Anyone who does not want to work, who is intemperate, who is not poor in practice, who has no heart, who is not pure, who is not docile but a freethinker, who is not mortified, who lacks a right intention, who does not have a Eucharistic soul, who is not devoted to our Lady – is not a Salesian".

g. *Concrete sense*: he is sent with the necessary tools and means in hand.

2. The Salesian way of "mediation"

To carry out such a *mission* – analogous to some extent for all institutes of consecrated active life – at least three options are possible, all of them realized in recent decades.

a. The "*diaspora*": after 1968 many religious have become immersed in the world, even to the extent of losing their visibility. Consecration has become for them a kind of secret patrimony: no uniformity of dress, no privi-

leges, no security for their institutions. They were to be recognized only from their style of existence, because they would reject any talk about structures or wearing a habit. This has led to the spontaneous increase in number of secular institutes, strong only in the witness they bear to faith and charity.

b. The "*pure evangelization*": reaction against the "domination" of monastic inspiration led to the abolishing of cloisters and enclosures, so that the absoluteness of God could shine through, solely by listening in faith and prayer to God's Word; a simple consecrated life without any direct admixture of pastoral activity. But this leaves the big problem that the founder's charism must have been expressed in perceptible concrete activity, and the result is that crises in the works often become crises in the right to exist, as we saw on our first day together.

c. the third way, which is our way, is "*mediation*": we cannot imagine that Don Bosco was first a religious who then happened to become interested in education. No; Don Bosco was a religious *because* he was an educator. We have seen how this was so. For us religious life is dedication to God and to the young, even though the way we work be continually changing and we don't know where it will eventually lead us. The choice of this third way rather than one of the other two is less certain, more problematic, perhaps less stimulating – but it is ours.

3. Phenomenology of attitude to what is "new"

We have already reflected on this issue on the first day. In the phenomenological history of religious Institutes you come across a curious paradox: while they have been raised up by God to perceive, to "read" and to prophetically interpret emerging novelties, nevertheless, there was a constant risk – and this is why there have been reforms and reformers – to give priority always to the dimension of tradition, as though antiquity were the sole criterion of truth. As the years go by the dynamism of being a so-called "prophecy of the future" becomes lost in settling down to the comfort of maintaining the past, and so risk losing sight of the reality of the present. In fact it is the essential linkage with reality that is the true foundation for the assessment of innovations.

A congregation that limited itself solely to the charism it had received would end up by collapsing. A province with works and structures for meet-

ing preconceived problems and replying to them finds it difficult to see beyond them, difficult to perceive the demands thrown up by new situations of youth poverty. All too easily it ends up by seeing only its own "poor" youngsters, i.e. those that can be fitted into its own works and is blind to the needs of any others. And so innovations there must be – not to be just up-to-date, nor even to satisfy public opinion, but because of dynamic fidelity.

Our works cannot be organized simply as a service to society, providing services that society itself should provide. The ongoing task of religious Institutes could perhaps be thought of (at a practical level) as being so many "provisional prophetic antennas" able to discover new horizons in youth poverty, able to devise new solutions, able perhaps to be protagonists in showing how to meet urgent and difficult situations, but provisionally, i.e. until society gets round to recognizing the problem as normal and providing the solution itself. The work of the institute is then no longer needed in that spot, and can be transferred to some other place that society has not yet reached.

We may rightly wonder: where is the element of risk, the courage, the creativity, the impact, shown by St Francis of Assisi and Don Bosco in their own day? What has happened to the prophetic stands they took in defence of human rights and those of God (prophecy, without arrogance but with determination)?

Nowadays the crisis for the Salesian is more likely to be one of credibility than of identity. I am speaking obviously of the western world, which is the one that I know. But it is quite clear that we are travelling in the slow lane, disregarded and underrated. We are in a stalemate situation. While convinced of the truth of the theological values with which our life is impregnated, we see also the difficulty of reaching the heart of the young; we are shattered by the irrelevance of faith in the building of their lives; we are aware of how far we are from being in tune with their world; we see that what we do and say seems to have no effect at all on their life.

Moreover, we are not always very clear about the role to which we dedicate ourselves; perhaps many of us are not convinced about the usefulness of our mission: perhaps we don't give it the commitment it requires because we don't seem able to reinvigorate and renew it; perhaps we feel trapped in a series of ever more urgent emergencies.

Again, in connection with our works, lay people often have a high regard for them only because of the rapidity and decisiveness of our inter-

vention, from the utilitarian standpoint of service. In them they can see only the philanthropic aspect and not charity or evangelical inspiration. Sometimes they consider them solely as money-making enterprises, or only as having prestige as opposing the welfare State.

Even the very believers often doubt the religious value of our works, even when they help them and use them; they assign the responsibility for them to those managing them on the spot and do not receive the inspiration of the religious experience of the Congregation.

4. Three innovations that require careful consideration

4.1. *Rediscovery of the Local Church*

Before Vatican II we used to speak of the Universal Church, but now ecclesiology is centred on the local churches and on the communion of the local churches. Religious, while remaining exempt, must adapt themselves to this new situation. Hence:

a. It will no longer be sufficient to attend only to what comes from General Headquarters; we have to live within the local Church, sharing in it, both by giving and receiving: our particular charism must be given as an inheritance to the lay people in the community of which we form a part. We cannot be *of* the Church without being *in* a church. It is not sufficient to *work for* it; we have to *live by* it.

b. But let us not deceive ourselves: it doesn't seem that our works do all that much to sensitize local churches. If at one time we lamented the separation of Religious within the Church, today it seems that a progressive marginalization is taking place. We risk being exploited as being able to give a helping hand to others rather than as having a specialized service to contribute. The fact is that the dominant parochialism of the clergy is trying to subordinate to itself all available energies, for the purpose of having many workers to further its own initiatives. Every charism is needed for this objective; a charism that lies buried is useless. Why are there so many difficulties about the application of the still valid *Mutuae Relationes*, which revised such relationships? Is it because of an unwillingness to agree about areas of intervention, or is it because of differing concepts of ecclesiology?

c. The SDBs belong to the priesthood as such, as well as to their own religious community; the apostolic subject is the community. Attention must be given therefore to the confrere working on his own, showing an exaggerated individualism rather than reflecting the voice of the community. There are religious who carve out for themselves a very significant place in pastoral activity, but without any reference to their community. The result is that their initiatives are seen as the work of a single person and no account is taken of his congregational identity.

4.2. *Shifting of the apostolic environment*

For some time now there has been a movement towards local pastoral projects, rather than those depending entirely on the Generalate or the Province. In the past we operated as a "house" within our own works, and the house was often an island: a reserved religious place of silence. Now we move ever more outside our works, in secular places where there is no religion at all.

Whether we are in our house or outside it, we are immersed in the world. And so it happens that it is the individual rather than the community that bears witness to the faith, even though the community as such plays its part. Moreover the individual does not always have the community at his back to defend and protect him, and make up for his shortcomings. Ability is required, and personal maturity, a professional approach, without anonymity but with a great deal of spirituality.

An example. For a long time poverty was considered as something individual within solid property; the principle of economy held sway: profit and savings were ploughed back into the works; little assessment was made of one's personal work. But now there has been an explosive change; each one's work is paid and we know how much he is worth – there are pensions and insurance policies. And the changed situation should enable us to get a better understanding of the anxieties attached to unemployment problems and the uncertainties of life.

4.3. *Collaboration with lay adults*

Don Bosco soon learned the art of involving others; we mentioned this on the first day. He found it a strategy that paid dividends. Think of the

spreading of the *Catholic Readings* and the lotteries he organized even in the 1850s. The number of people he got involved was incalculable.

But he was not thinking only of money, urgently necessary though it was. He was equally concerned about mobilizing the energies of these people "for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls" – the souls of the young and of the adults themselves. To realize his plans he had to be capable, ingenious, inventive and tenacious. He needed to have recourse to strong moral virtues of relationship, of adaptation, and of tolerance in the face of frustrations with persons such as the following:

- Ecclesiastical collaborators at the Oratory, and lay people too.
- Men and women to be brought back to the faith or to be strengthened in it *(Catholic Readings).*
- Men and women of societies for mutual help, of conferences of St Vincent de Paul, of lay people associated with the Catholic Readings.
- Men and women, Catholic or not, called to promote the lotteries or join in the incessant selling of tickets.
- Ecclesiastical and lay adults needed as leaders in activities of religious animation.
- Adults who appear in his books as defenders of religion and of the faith.
- Adults who formed a network of religious and social solidarity for the good of society, of public morality, and of the Church (the Cooperators Association).

Today the reasons for the insertion of lay people as collaborators in the work of our houses are the same as before, with the addition of a large number of new ones. In the first place the new awareness of the baptismal and missionary identity of the laity in the Church. Moreover the wave of lay volunteers in missionary territories has, by declericalizing the mission, made it clear that the development of peoples cannot be a task for priests alone. Collaboration is a widespread need; the laity cannot be regarded as auxiliaries or second-row workers; they must be animated and animators themselves. Paternalism is out of place, collaboration is needed on an equal footing. The centuries-old practice of seeing the position of the laity as being prevalently passive helpers, called in by obedience rather than for their creative ability, is now dead. What we have to fear nowadays is not a confrontation between different sensitivi-

ties, but a silent homologous uniformity, the presence of a laity that always says "yes".

It is evident that the Salesians will become less and less the "major shareholder" in face of the ever-growing number of lay people engaged in our works; but it is equally evident that a Salesian animating nucleus (not necessarily composed of consecrated Salesians) can never be wanting. It is significant that the best-known arrangement for ecclesial movements is that they be animated from within by particular nuclei which are there to shape and direct the whole free movement surrounding them. They form part of the group and are not an élite section separated from it.

5. Practical guidelines

a. *Return to the young.* To speak of Salesian mission is to speak of "predilection and consecration for the young". For Salesians the year of the young is every year. It was among youngsters that Don Bosco developed his style of life, his pastoral and pedagogical patrimony, his educational system and his spirituality. The true Salesian does not desert the field of youth: "Volver al patio" was the motto adopted some years ago by one of the provinces in Argentina: direct contact with young people, in the front line with them, in harmony with them.

It may be that the Church feels herself at a loss at times in face of the young; could it ever be so for Salesians? Don Albera once remarked that the gift of predilection for the young is the soul of our mission. It is not enough to feel for them a certain natural attraction – we must truly love them. In its initial stage this kind of predilection is a gift of God, it is the Salesian vocation; but it is up to us with our heart and our intelligence to develop it and bring it to perfection. A Salesian is one with a vital knowledge of young people; his heart beats in unison with theirs; he lives for them and for their problems; they give meaning to his life. He has also a theoretical and practical knowledge of them which enables him to discern their real needs and set up a youth pastoral work suited to their present circumstances.

Let us not forget the unique nature of Don Bosco's mission to the young. It was always true and genuine:

- even when for particular reasons he could not be in material contact with them. When he was travelling it was not only at their service that his journey was made but his thoughts continually turned towards them in his desire to be with them. A frequent item in his letters was the repeated request for news of his boys and their educators and the assurance that all was well with them;
- even when his action was not directed solely to their service. The option for the missions (or for parishes) was made by Don Bosco not least because of the young people in mission territories; the missionary dimension was fundamental for an education to human and ecclesial solidarity, for an education of the young to the faith;
- even when he tenaciously defended his founding charism for the youngsters of all the world – and not just for a small local Church – against pressure from ecclesiastics with more short-sighted views (Mgr. Gastaldi, Abbot Tortone, etc).

b. *Revise works and services* so as to move from an "emergency policy" to a "programmed policy" (the Provincial Operative Project). Criteria have to be drawn up for guiding practical choices in the light of the new and complex situations in which will be required a proclamation of Christ involving persons, structures and culture. In this way will be ensured the specific identity of our charism and mission. It implies for us a historic turning-point in the life of the Institute and of the Province. It is not a matter of a simple external adaptation but of entering freely into the dark recesses of history without dodging the issue. Creative solutions must not be limited to the individual member but must reach structural dimensions and responsibilities at the level of the Institute. It is a matter not of adapting a traditionalist Province, but of producing one with the strength of flexibility and pastoral creativity.

There are two risks to be avoided: that of losing the unity and identity of the Institute through trying to do everything and even abandoning stable arrangements for others not sufficiently well thought out, and so losing short-term resources. And the other is that of giving way to "fundamentalism" or, in other words, making absolute and untouchable aspects of the Founder that in themselves are limited and contingent, and so being satisfied with what we have already, with the things we know, with a fossilized tradition, defended (even in good faith) in the name of fidelity to the past.

Let us never forget how the Valdocco Oratory developed:

- various works grew from a single original stock (we have already spoken about this);
- personnel was in constant growth. Don Bosco's collaborators at the Pinardi house, were made up of some diocesan priests who came to help him when they could, some clerics (who did not persevere) and some laymen who helped from outside. From 1855 onwards he had young men he had formed himself and who in 1859 became Salesians to all effects. And the number of confreres at Valdocco increased in number and by 1872 had already reached the hundred mark;
- the number of youngsters increased as well. It passed from 3 new ones in 1851 to more than 400 in 1866; the few dozen of the 1850s became the hundreds of the 1860s and following years, and eventually reached about 850 (excluding the day oratorians) who, with those from the other oratories of Turin, took the number up to several thousands.

c. *Give fresh evangelical vigour to our own approach:* this means basing our own life on the revelation of God, which happens through the logical practice of the cardinal virtues, * with a good result of a gesture of love for the young, i.e. *charity*; * with a truth that becomes an enlightening word for the young, i.e. *hope*; and * with something beautiful that becomes a fascinating sign for the young, i.e. *faith*.

In the west we tend to be dismayed not only at the sight of the old world that seems to be returning to the vices of paganism, but also at the ageing of the Congregation, which is losing momentum. One has the feeling that something is on the verge of collapse. Yet faith tells us that tendencies to evil that lead to ageing and decay of the world can be overcome, that the Salesian can be renewed, taking up again his former youth and vigour, that history is moving on towards a renewed world. What is important is that we be firmly anchored to Christ (and in him to young people), and to our own charism.

d. *Become qualified.* It is evident that if fidelity to our mission is to mean anything effective we must come to grips with the knotty problems of today's culture, with the prevailing mentality and manner of behaviour. In the educational field alone we are facing colossal challenges which call for serious analysis, critical and pertinent observation, deep study, and the

ability to share psychologically in the situation. Otherwise we shall come up with responses which are hackneyed and irrelevant, insignificant and ludicrous. We shall return to this point later.

Think just of the educational processes and courses that need continual renewal, as the documents of our General Chapters ask us to do. We are still talking about the "youth condition" and "planet youth" in an almost mono-dimensional key, as though they were something static, forgetting that life is in continual movement and growth, following natural processes from within or imposed from without. And so we are faced by questions like the following, to limit ourselves to three groups:

- We could, and indeed should, ask ourselves: who exactly are the young people to whom we consecrate our life, both personally and as a community? What do they want, and what do we (and God) want from them? Do we really know today's youngsters?
- New generations of young people have new problems, and this means new responsibilities for the educator. Let us ask ourselves: What does our professional approach to pastoral work amount to at the level of theoretical reflection on educative processes? Is it on a level with our pastoral activity? Does not perhaps our "Salesian professional educational technique" find its acid test in creativity, versatility, flexibility and rejection of fatalism? One thing is certain: we cannot rely only on the documents of General Chapters or letters of the Rector Major. On the spot inculturation needs much more than this.
- Much the same can be said about working as a network. Today, much more than in the past, we find that responsibility for education must be collective; it must be shared in teamwork. We have to ask ourselves: what precisely is our point of contact with the network of relationships in which our youngsters live? What specific contribution do we make to sharing in that network and collaborating in it? Have we ever thought seriously about possible answers, or consulted others about the problem?

Conclusion

There is obviously no renewal without expense of some kind. There can be no new evangelization, no new education, no new preventive system without hard work and suffering. New wine destroys old wine-skins. We

have to proceed not by opposition but by synthesis. If we think such a change can be painless, we are kidding ourselves:

- institutionalists, traditionalists, conservatives and all who would like things to continue as they are now or as they were in the past, will feel disappointed because they find little support for their views;
- anti-institutionalists and renovators will be equally disappointed because they will continue to find institutions, behaviour convictions and attitudes which they had hoped would have disappeared.

The affirmation of positive principles must not be excessive or overdone. Two examples: affirmation of the community must not obscure the individual and obedience; and openness to the world does not mean the downplaying of precautionary measures dictated by traditional Salesian asceticism. Will knocking down the walls of the convent result in holiness coming forth or worldliness going in?

For personal reflection

1. Are we clear about the theological distinction between hierarchical and charismatic gifts?
2. Is the church in which we are working a true "school of communion" because of the plurality of vocations found in it, priestly, religious, lay and vocation for secular institutes?
3. Is my (and our) role clear about being the bearer of a particular educational charism?
4. Reply to the questions in n. 5 above (Practical Guidelines).

THE FIFTH DAY: SALESIAN HOLINESS

Don Bosco to Salesians in 1867: "The first aim of our society is the sanctification of its members; and so anyone entering the society should lay aside any other thought, any other concern. One who would enter looking for a tranquil life, convenience for study, to be free from dictates of parents, or for other reasons would have a wrong purpose in mind, and not that of responding to the «follow me» of the Saviour". Go and read over again the final dialogue in the profession formula. Don Bosco again: "No one with a right intention enters and remains in the society because he thinks he is necessary to it. Let everyone be very clear about this in mind and heart – no one is necessary to the society. Only God must be the absolute head!".

At Valdocco Don Bosco had planned to translate the Bollandists, i.e. the lives of the saints of the Church; he lived among saints (Cafasso, Cottolengo, Mazzarello, Allamano, Murialdo). He is in fact both the offspring and father of Saints and himself created a school of sanctity.

1. Present situation

Let us say at once that the present state of the Church and the Congregation is not a clear state of holiness. The reason: too much is said about it, which clearly proves the point. Some years ago Fr Viganò wrote a circular letter "Let us replan holiness". Pope John Paul II spoke about it to the members of the last General Chapter. The present Rector Major made it the theme of his first circular. Continual insistence on the point reaches the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and the whole Salesian Family.

Art. 25 of the Constitutions asserts that "the witness of our holiness is the most precious gift we can offer to the young". Articles 1 and 2 of the Constitutions are in fact acts of faith. The Church does not say: I permit you to live together; no, the Church commits herself: this is the way that leads to love and holiness. *Hoc fac et vives.* The final articles of our Rules are not a juridical declaration with a stamp and seal; they are a guarantee that the Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, expresses this vitality within us and the possibility of holiness.

2. Difficulties

a. It is said that the ideal of sanctity or holiness is more difficult nowadays than it was in times gone by; but there are those who hold the contrary to be true. Which are we to believe? On the other hand there are excellent motives for saying that the way of living a holy life today does not differ substantially from the past. A journalist once asked Mother Teresa: are you holy? She received the reply: "for us Christians holiness is normal. It is the gospel".

b. Perhaps it is thought that as far as one's own perfection in charity is concerned, the result is always below the ideal. So why bother? But no, that won't do. We must get over this culture of measurement, of being satisfied with less than the best; a powerful indifference and early discouragement must be overcome in a bid to reach the all-embracing totality called holiness.

c. Perhaps I think that God became man so that I could be more a man; that what is wanted today is a more human society, one that is less spiritualized. Woe to us if all the gospel be read in that key. No; sanctity must be gathered or deduced from above, from God and not from below.

Moreover:

a. We must also keep in mind not only whether works and laws are just but also grace, the grace which is born of faith;

b. we must be open to the mystery that is greater than we are, allow ourselves to be led into areas where our own unaided efforts are insufficient; and so let us remember that:

- without a gift, a higher ideal cannot be lived in a prudent way;
- rather than an effort to reach an objective on one's own, one must seek an ever deeper contact with the one who gives it to us as a gift; (*De verbo Dei numquam satis*): not with hand outstretched to grab, but always with hand open to receive;
- as regards solidarity with the needy, we come back to what Jesus used to do; but if approach to the poor is to be authentic, it must be the same as the approach to the tabernacle; the process of service is that of con-

templation; participation in man's destitution and squalor is an immersion in the light of God. "Don Bosco lived as though he could see what was invisible".

When are we to become holy? Let us leave past and future aside and grasp the present moment; it is at this instant here and now that holiness must be lived. Salesian holiness is a matter of every day, of life lived in the "profane" conditions of our daily existence. Living as holy people does not mean withdrawing from the present moment in expectation of some eschatological event. Last year's Strenna (2004) touched on this point.

Where? Right here in our own world; today's saints have to come to terms with the world; anyone who keeps in contact with God is exposed by him in this world, for which Christ gave his life. The world must shine with fresh creation: all humanity seeks and everywhere has need of the sacrament of love; never has there been so much space for a holy life as in today's world, where there is so much talk of religious spirituality, of marriage, of the lay person, of profession, of work and of voluntary activity in volunteer movements. But I cannot live a holy life if I live as though I alone existed. The love of God is for all, and my "yes" is sincere only if I say it while listening to the "yes" of others, if I say it as part of a chorus. True sanctity exits only in the Holy Spirit, between Father and Son. I am made holy by the same love that makes you holy also.

How?

a. Each of us can assess his own interior situation; there are areas of our soul where God holds sway without difficulty. This is shown by the ready docility and spontaneity, the kind of spiritual instinct about some points of our spiritual life in which the Holy Spirit has a kind of mastery over us from within.

b. But at the same time we find some hiding-places where we seem to be held bound and unable to escape. It may be forgiving offences, the service of our neighbour, pride, over-exactness in all we do, vanity, excessive self-concern, internal rebellion etc. All this is a testing-ground to verify whether there are still more steps to be taken, more terrain to explore, more doors to be opened to Christ, as the Pope would put it.

c. A superficial view of things that leads us to believe that we are acting for certain reasons, whereas we are really being moved by others, perhaps unconsciously. Philosophers like Freud keep us alert in this regard.

d. Struggle and perseverance; two most valuable words in consecrated life. They are not new words, never heard before, but they need to be kept in mind. Without them no interior progress is possible.

Union with God, an intimate rapport with him, spiritual marriage, holiness – they are all the same reality. It may be said that there are many kinds of consecration and holiness, but it is not true. In the last analysis there is really only one: to trust ourselves to Christ so that he may live in us; to entrust ourselves to him in our fellow-men.

3. Characteristics of Salesian holiness

I leave it to you to go more deeply into the characteristics of Salesian holiness. It is:

- *urgent and enthusiastic:* "I feel the need to become holy; if I don't become a saint I will have done nothing at all" (St Dominic Savio).
- *possible for everyone*: Don Bosco's sermon: "It is God's will that we become saints… it is easy to become a saint".
- *simple and normal*: nothing artificial or extraordinary about it; no special discipline needed.
- *apostolic*: by educating. Fr Caviglia wrote of Don Bosco: "his sanctity is that of a holy educator".
- *sympathetic, attractive, amiable, but demanding:* Don Bosco used to say: "No one goes to heaven in a first-class carriage".

"If the Gospel does not become political, it is no longer the Gospel" (M. D. Chenu)

9

IS THE POLICY OF THE *PATER NOSTER* STILL VALID?

Introduction

We shall try in this meditation to go more deeply into a particular aspect of our mission: education as a social and political option. Let us not take fright at these words: Don Bosco was a social and political worker, and this essentially through education, or in other words through the cultural, professional, moral and religious formation of the young. Once again we shall be guided by what he said on the matter.

1. The "political credo" of Don Bosco

Consumed as he was by zeal for souls, Don Bosco felt the drama of a people gradually losing the faith, the drama of their indifference to the young – the young, on the other hand, about whom Jesus was so concerned – and he reacted strongly; he found new ways to oppose this evil, resisting the negative influences of society and denouncing the danger and ambiguity of the current situation; in his own way he challenged the powerful forces of his time. With the scarce cultural and financial resources he had available, he joined in with the possibilities offered him at the time and did his utmost to develop them and give them greater effect.

For himself and the Salesians he obtained the dignity of autonomy. He did not want his work to be limited by unforeseeable changes in political regimes. In this connection, from the early 1860s he introduced in the Text of the Constitutions an article; "We have adopted the principle, and it is to be practised without any alteration by every member of this society, that we remain rigorously outside anything concerning politics, whether in speaking or in writing, books or printed matter; we shall never take part in anything that could compromise us, even indirectly, in matters of politics". He was convinced that this was the best way to realize the objective of religious educators outside party conflicts and totally embedded in the life of

young people, so as to prepare them for the concrete reality in which they would later have to assess and apply the validity of the human, moral and professional formation they had received and assimilated.

1.1. *Solid citizens in the earthly city*

The article concerned was struck out by the Roman ecclesiastical Authority, but it remained in spirit and with all its implications. Don Bosco's intention was to safeguard for himself and his collaborators the possibility of being fully inserted in the prevailing social and political conditions and, at the same time, of working in them with the utmost freedom without having to be associated with any particular political party. One could obey *etiam discolis* if this provided opportunities of working for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Of great value in this connection is the testimony of Joseph Vespignani, concerning his first meeting with Don Bosco in Turin. "As a good native of Romagna I tried to persuade Don Bosco of the need for a foundation in Bologna, our metropolis; I explained to him how very fitting this would be because there already existed in that city the «Catholic Youth» organization, made up of elements ready to fight for Catholic institutions and in defence of priests. Don Bosco heard me out and then replied with unruffled calm – We do not have this zealous fighting spirit; we do not concern ourselves with politics; all we want to do is work amongst young people, and we ask to be left free to do this. If we are invited or called for other purposes, outside our mission among youngsters, we shall not go, because we would be out of place".

In this sense was directed the profession of "political faith" he had come up with in various circumstances. It can be found in its essentials in a letter to the Minister for the Interior, Giovanni Lanza, of 11 February 1872: "I am writing with confidence and I assure you that while professing myself a Catholic priest and an affectionate subject of the Head of the Catholic Religion, I have always shown myself most affectionately disposed towards the Government, for whose subjects I have always done whatever I could, with my life and strength"; or again in a letter to the Minister for Grace, Justice and Cult, Paolo Onorato Vigliani, on 4 July 1873: "Although I keep outside political matters, nevertheless I have never refused to take part in those things that could be advantageous in some way to my country".

Along the same lines he explained his position to the Salesians in the First General Chapter of 1877 when he commented on "giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" and also in the final session of the Third General Chapter (1883) when he recommended: "we must know our times and adapt ourselves to them, i.e. show respect for men, and speak well of those in authority; if we cannot do so we remain silent or say what we have to say in private. And what is true for the civil authorities is true also for ecclesiastical authorities – we respect and support them and get others to do likewise, even at the cost of sacrifice...".

1.2. *Youth assistance as a policy*

In the first conference to the Cooperators of Rome in March 1878 Don Bosco explained that peaceful coexistence was possible between two "policies": that of those working for young people and that of professional civil servants. There was no danger of conflict – he assured those listening to him – "because the work of the Salesians and their Cooperators tends to promote good manners and lessen the number of the rebellious who, when left to themselves, run a great risk of ending up in prison. To instruct such people, find them employment, provide them with means and if necessary take them in as boarders, sparing nothing to prevent their ruination and make them good Christians and upright citizens – works of this kind, I say, cannot fail to be respected and even desired by any government, of whatever political colour".

According to Don Bosco's Salesian style, in fact, the task of the religious educator is to change consciences, to form them to human sincerity and honesty, to civic and political loyalty, and so bring about a change of society from within through education. Don Bosco was a priest, a moralist, but not a sociologist or economist or politician. There was no problem as to whether conscience could be formed in structured settings. He began from the idea that education can do a great deal in any situation, if it is carried out with the maximum of good will, of commitment and of the ability to adapt. Despite the "sad nature of the times", the political harassments, the innovations of the period, the society of Don Bosco's day was reliable, secure, well-ordered and not dangerously revolutionary nor violent. All you had to do was work with wisdom and intelligence – and may be a touch of wiliness and craftiness – in the existing order of things, without "revolu-

tionary" tendencies. Such a position is not without risks: adaptation can become acquiescence and opportunism and, at an educational level, can be the cause of considerable deficiencies in the social and political formation of the young.

His mentality is partly reflected in the souvenirs he left to the Salesians in the final *Memoirs*, concerning how to deal with *collaborators* and in times of difficulty. He suggested (MB XVII 268-270) flexibility and prudence: "With collaborators a great deal of tolerance is needed; we should be willing to suffer damage rather than begin quarrelling. With the civil and ecclesiastical authorities we should put up with all we honestly can, but we should not have recourse to lay tribunals"; it is better to make use of arbitration, which make it possible to avoid expense and preserve "peace and Christian charity". "Whenever in a town or country you meet with difficulty on the part of some spiritual or temporal authority, go in person to explain the reason for what you have done. A personal explanation of your good intentions does a great deal to lessen, and often will even dispel completely, the wrong ideas that may have been formed in the minds of others". If you are legally guilty "ask for forgiveness, or at least give a respectful explanation". "This way of acting is conciliating and often succeeds in converting adversaries into friends".

Here finally is his pedagogical credo, which he had lived and professed before its formulation in 1883 in a talk he gave to the past-pupils in 1883 about the separation of faith and politics: "We do not take part in the conflict between political parties... We do take part in politics, but in a way that harms no one and is in fact advantageous to every government; we aim at lessening the numbers of the drifters and rebellious, reducing the cases of minor delinquency, emptying the prisons. This is our aim in politics". Clearly the social and political perspective must be integrated with considerations on the salvific dimension of his educative activity (the well-known *unum necessarium*).

2. The present-day world

We all know that the world has become smaller – a global "village" permeated by great innovations in the fields of technology, mass media and globalization, and by cultural criteria to which these give rise: productivity, efficiency, planning and calculation, scientific reasoning and research, etc.

The framework of social phenomena has taken on planetary dimensions which have made the old interpretive categories no longer valid. It is significant that nowadays we hear talk of the "deconstruction of thought", of "anthropological mutation", etc.

Long ago in 1967 *Populorum Progressio* told us that the test for verifying whether an international economic system was valid or not was not a kind of trades-union convergence in our own areas but rather the international system that permitted an inhuman dependence of the South on the North. The result was works of charity carried out in line with narrow-minded local criteria that were merely pragmatic rough estimates and overlooked the wider dimensions of the common good at national and global level. This was a serious lacuna and one also at theological level.

The ethical maturing of the contemporary conscience has discovered the limitations of an excess of welfarism that by forgetting the political dimension of underdevelopment fails to get to grips with the causes of the world's evils, with the sinful structures that give rise to the oppressive state of things denounced by all (ever since the Synod of 1971). To conceive of charity as nothing more than alms-giving or emergency help, depoliticized welfare activity, that we are moving in a context of the Good Samaritan which, aside from good intentions, will end up by becoming still worse, based as it is on models of development that lead to the well-being of some and gild the bitter pill for others. It is a philosophy of help that leaves intact the privileges of benefactors and sometimes results in operations to their advantage: you give something and you get more back in return. Various humanitarian associations at world level seem to be agencies with large numbers of highly-paid staff that consume more than half of what ought to reach those for whom it is meant and who justify the existence of the agencies.

In the years since Vatican II the words "poverty of the Church" and "Church of the poor" have been given many different shades of meaning, some of them contradictory, but in that period the magisterium has certainly increased its attention to the third world. But there is a risk involved – the Church, as proclaimer of the Gospel, may tend to pay the price of reducing the gospel to a treatise on ethics, to be shared and listened to by all. The term "church of the poor" has been understood from an ethical perspective and has been stripped in consequence of its messianic content, or it has been taken in a political context to support a revolutionary task.

Rarely has it been used as a criterion for the discernment of ecclesial life and a setting for the reform of the Church. More often it has been reduced to virtues followed by some willing member without calling into question the concrete life of the community. In other words it suggests poverty as good advice for others, but it is not a sign of the church as such.

The fact remains that the gospel was not invented by us, nor did we invent its tragic impact on politics and the economy. Faith touches history, but is not reduced to it.

Has pastoral charity nothing to say in this connection? If not, what was Pope J. P. II doing travelling all over the world? If love of neighbour is not the whole of the Christian message, can it be denied that it is certainly central and essential to it? Is it not a fact that the social and political dimension is a structural requirement for individuals and a decisive dimension for the life of human society? What is urgently needed is to create conditions in which the economy is not quashed but restored to an end that is not exhausted in itself, in so far as the ultimate end of the economy is the human person in his integral and solid growth at global level. The Church, thinkers, theologians, professors, all of us – have we been giving too much weight to individual morality and not to a morality that is social and public, by privileging the observance of some commandments at the expense of others?

Again. It has been said and written that in face of the modern State, which has taken over the guardianship and welfare of its citizens, the Church has no place left for intervening in the name of charity and assistance. But today's reality gives the lie to this hypothesis which would nourish lay and secular ideologies. The Church very often becomes a point of reference even within the welfare state. For years we have heard it said that charity and welfare assistance were old instruments of no further use in modern society and the democratic state. And yet at the present day the social function of Christian voluntary work (of the so-called non-profit organizations) is recognized in the initiatives that take their rise from parishes, associations, and institutions of churches.

3. Some questions we can put to ourselves

A. In this connection the greatest and most revolutionary aspect of recent years was indicated some years ago by the GC23 (203-210-212-214)

which spoke of the "social dimension of charity", of "education of young people to commitment and participation in politics", "a sector somewhat unrecognized by us, and hence neglected".

We may therefore ask: Has there been some change perhaps in our system of limiting our political activities to those of the "Our Father"? Should we perhaps be speaking from the pulpit about everything: violence, terrorism, political rivalries, work etc.? Ought we to take up "Liberation Theology"? But which "liberation theology"? It seems reasonable to maintain that the initial educational option of Don Bosco and the consequent personal proposal of educators to exclude from their lives a militant approach to politics has conditioned and limited the social and political dimension of the formation of those being educated.

In addition to the objective difficulties created by the diverse political regimes with which Don Bosco had to deal, there were others arising from educators inclined to conformism or isolationism, ad those with insufficient culture or lack of knowledge of the historical and social context. Perhaps a solution can be found in the generic recourse to the formula *upright citizen* and *good Christian*, or to the other one, clearly more restrictive "upright citizen" because "good Christian".

In any case there is no doubt that that things have changed and are still changing, and while remaining faithful to the original spirit and to the renewed Constitutions, *some development* should take place, albeit with the running of certain risks, otherwise we shall go backwards, dropping out of history and betraying our mission. Silence would certainly please many, but it would be like the pleasure felt by the wolf at the silence of the guard-dog when it broke into the henhouse.

As educators we cannot ignore the fact that a billion people are today living in conditions worse than those of 15 years ago, that the situation in 89 countries is worse than that of 10 years ago, that 25% of the world's population are living below the poverty level, that 1.4 billion people are living on less than a dollar a day, that 1 billion persons are illiterate. 6.3 billion dollars would be sufficient to ensure elementary schooling for all the inhabitants of the world, while in the USA alone 8.4 billion dollars are spent every year on cosmetics.

As educators we cannot be indifferent to the eyesore of the megalopolis of the southern part of the world, the young people without a future, the betrayal of the lawful expectations of the poor, the hunger, pollution and vio-

lence – small-scale or institutionalized – the crisis of justice, generalized corruption, the persistence of a flourishing arms industry, and in brief all those elements that lead to tears, the shedding of blood and the death of millions of creatures every day. It is a civilization very far from that proposed by Pope Paul VI ("civiltà dell'amore") and endorsed by his successors.

B. In the light of all we have said, it would seem that today we should proceed in two directions: 1. an updated reconfirmation of the "social, political and educative option" of Don Bosco; 2. a more consistent practical embodiment of it in the specific sector of social and political education.

a. As far as the first point is concerned we emphasized this morning the historical importance of Don Bosco. It is to be found in the intellectual and emotive perception – and in the ability to communicate it to large numbers of collaborators, benefactors and admirers – of the overall theological and social implications of the problem of "abandoned" youngsters (the utopia of the universal cooperation of the faithful). This is a reality that nowadays has reached well nigh immeasurable dimensions with respect to Don Bosco, both quantitatively (with a swiftly growing imbalance and a rapid fall in the birth-rate), and qualitatively (with widely differing forms of social, economic and psychological inequality).

b. With respect to a reconsideration of the social quality of education – already immanent, though not fully realized, in the fundamental option for the young – Don Bosco's educational system has sometimes seemed weak (also from the standpoints of statements and formulas) in creating explicit experiences of social commitment in the widest sense, and also specifically in the political sense. A specific theoretical and vital commitment must be imposed, inspired by a broader vision of education itself, together with realistic and concrete applications. Proclamations, manifestations and slogans are not enough. Theoretical concepts and practical operational projects are also needed and must be translated into definite and detailed programs.

Let us face the question: Is the Salesian Congregation, the Salesian Family, our own Province doing everything possible in this line? Is our solidarity with young people only an act of affection, something we give them, or is it also a competent contribution, a rational adequate and pertinent contribution to the needs of the poorest youngsters and of modern society in general?

4. A first step forward: educate ourselves and others to political virtues

In general one may observe a lack of preparation in the Salesian of social, economic and political matters (I am speaking obviously of the part of the world that I know); his solidarity is an act of affection, but not a contribution of skill and competence. What is needed, on the other hand, is:

a. To have clear ideas about the field of politics*:* this is the starting point. The development of a sound way of thinking – said Pascal – is the beginning of all morality etc. It must be kept clearly in mind therefore that politics means the multiple and varied activities of an economic, social, administrative and cultural kind aimed at promoting organically and institutionally the common good (*Christifideles laici* 42); that politics is a way of living out the Christian commitment to the service of others; that politics is a duty which binds everyone in defence of the human person; that politics is of value because it is directly connected with the dignity and fundamental rights of human life. If it is a duty, it must be fulfilled; if it is a value, it must be expressed in corresponding actions and activities. Politics is not something intrinsically dirty, but it can become so like all human realities.

b. To overcome erroneous concepts*:* the political virtues are not the same thing as faith, but are not extraneous to it because they are human. At least among those indicated by CL 42:

- the will and ability to pursue justice, without discrimination or favouritism (hunger and thirst for justice) (Mt 5,6);
- a spirit of service which, combined with skill and efficiency, can make political activity transparent. The educator can choose certain fields, e.g. vocational guidance to political activity (encouraging and motivating those who show an aptitude for the management of public affairs and for the activities of political parties, trade unions, etc.)
- And moreover: there can be no solidarity without taking a stand for the weaker side. On whose side are we Salesians? in our manner of judging, of making friendships and in our talk? in setting priorities? in relationships with public structures? Are we with those who say: "The poor will always be with us", or do we ask ourselves how the parable of the Good Samaritan should be read at the present day?

5. A second step forward: educate ourselves and others to the Christian social virtues

Here there are at least two objectives:

a. To develop in our individual and collective conscience, and in those for whom we work, certain values they can quite easily lack, e.g. the will to emerge from their selfishness and open themselves to the needs of others; to share what is superfluous to their requirements (and even what they find necessary) with others who are suffering; to discover that we are one great family (of God), and therefore we are brothers with the same Father; to get to know the living conditions (often inhuman) of other peoples; to challenge their own system of life with its superfluous items; to discern the great problems of justice and peace that beset the modern world.

b. Secondly, to convince ourselves that life becomes changed through the things of every day, through our daily manner of living. It requires the daily practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, fulfilled personally without any compromise or evasion:

- at a personal level: cf. the Gospel "whatever you did to one of these little ones…";
- at a family and community level: is there an item "for the poor" in our family budget?
- at a provincial and national level; some years ago the Italian Bishops Conference adopted a program "partire dagli ultimi" ("begin from the lowest"). Did it remain anything more than a slogan? There are some who say that we got stuck at the "penultimi" ("next to lowest").
- at an international and congregational level: is there not the risk of limiting ourselves to good intentions, moralistic talks, and documents?

Conclusion

To this human advancement will follow (or it could even be accompanied by) explicit evangelization, especially for those who have had the satisfaction of having their primary needs satisfied. This could offer us several choices, including:

- the revision of works in line with criteria of spiritual effectiveness;

• the retraining of personnel to meet new needs (but discovering having to begin once again as soon as the re-qualification is finished);

• the use of property for educational and spiritual but not financial purposes, i.e. having the courage always to make decisions *in luce aeternitatis;*

• the celebration of the hope of a better world by bringing relief and comfort to those in difficulty. And one could continue by "confessing Christ" by recognizing him in the young, the poor and the suffering.

For personal reflection

1. What is my present position with respect to the statements in n. 5 above: educate ourselves and others to the Christian social virtues?
2. What is my present position with respect to the statements in n. 4 above: educate ourselves and others to political virtues?
3. What can we do, and how can we do it, at the level of the local, provincial and national Salesian Family?

10

DON BOSCO'S PREVENTIVE SYSTEM TODAY

I would like simply to present some of the "Relevant Elements of the Preventive System". I shall limit myself to speaking about several of the different aspects of the explicit and central pedagogical principles of the Preventive System. I shall first of all provide some historical background to these and then indicate the conditions necessary to implement them so as to propose a way of going beyond those elements which were relevant to Don Bosco's time but are no longer applicable today. It goes without saying that, with regard to the vast field of the Preventive System ancient and modern, we shall be referring exclusively to Don Bosco's Preventive System, that is the one thought out, practised and proposed by our Father and Founder.

1. Premise: relevant Preventive System because put into practice

Before going any further it is necessary to make another clarification. If it is true that history does not give us any recipe for the future (history isn't a project) it is equally true that implementation cannot make its own rules; it must have a link with history (implementation is not starting from scratch).

Now, as we all know, Don Bosco's Preventive System is decidedly "dated", appropriate and tailored to a world that no longer exists; that it is always up-to-date and relevant is not because it is constantly spoken about or written about everywhere, but solely in so far as it is seriously put into practice (renewed, "translated" decoded, inculturated, deepened, rethought, integrated, updated...), in the light of the modern educational problematic situations obviously unknown to Don Bosco.

This can happen under four conditions, two positive and two negative:

a. If the Preventive System is taken in its "historical" context, in reference to its time, and bearing in mind that the meaning we children of the

XXth century give to the XIXth century vocabulary of Don Bosco is almost certainly not that given and understood by Don Bosco, his youngsters or his contemporaries.

b. If one takes account of the progress made in the sciences which are involved, and especially of the many revolutions that have changed the world, and with it young people.

c. If it is not made into an ideology, that is translated into schemes which make absolute one aspect as though it were the whole thing: the Preventive System is spirituality, pastoral work, catechetics, social assistance, sport, pedagogy, educational assistance and many other things.

d. If there are not too many "practitioners", who "invent" it to suit their own uses or requirements, even perhaps on the basis of quite out-of-date biographies or bibliographies or even the tired repetition of simple formulas and sayings that are sometimes misunderstood.

To sum up, anticipating what I intend to say, it is a question on the part of workers in the field and scholars, to develop the great potentialities of the Preventive System, to modernise its principles, concepts, original guidelines, to re-interpret it on the theoretical and practical levels both regarding the great fundamental ideas of the Preventive System that we all know (the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls; a lively faith, a firm hope, theological and pastoral charity; the good Christian and the honest citizen; joy, study, and piety; the three S [sanità, studio, santità]; piety, morality, culture, good manners; evangelisation and civilisation...), and also the major guidelines regarding method *(make yourself loved before – if you wish, rather than - feared; reason, religion, loving kindnes*s; the father, brother, friend; friendliness especially in recreation; winning over the heart; the educator consecrated to the good of the pupils; complete freedom to jump, run and shout at will ...). And all of this for "new" youngsters, called to live in a huge uncharted sea of situations and problems, in decidedly changed times in which the human sciences themselves are going through a process of rethinking their own position.

2. Two versions of preventative education

For the first three key-ideas we will start from what Don Bosco wrote to the mayor and the city authorities in Turin in an unpublished letter of 1846:

> "In all these three places [in Turin] by means of instruction, lessons, and recreation good behaviour, love for work, respect for the authorities and the laws according to the principles of Our Holy Catholic Religion are being constantly inculcated: there are Sunday Schools for the principles of the Italian language, arithmetic and the metric system [...] There is the intention of opening a Hostel to receive 25 to 30 of the more abandoned and needy youngsters. So far everything is going ahead with the support of some zealous and charitable ecclesiastical and lay persons [...], with the aim [of this work] solely of preventing the young people from falling a prey to idleness, disorder and irreligion". ("Ricerche Storiche Salesiane", 43, 2003, n. 2 pp. 343-344).

From the very beginning, Don Bosco's whole approach demonstrated characteristics that were of a charitable, social and pedagogical nature. For Don Bosco the presupposition for any really authentic educational process is a concern to respond to and satisfy the basic needs of the young: food, clothing, lodging, safety, work, physical and mental development, a place in society, a minimum of values etc. After that – though the two things are not chronologically separable – comes the education properly so-called of the youngster aimed at the development and expansion of the aspects touching knowledge, affective and moral life: an ability to make decisions, to exercise moral and social responsibility, an indispensable basic culture and training, the conscientious fulfilment of religious duties, etc.

Therefore there are two distinct elements in the Preventive System: help in providing for primary basic human needs in an attempt to prevent possible dangers from straitened circumstances and every kind of human, cultural and social marginalisation; and a real educational (or re-educational) preventative intervention for the social, moral and religious maturing process of the young person.

This is all very relevant *today*, considering how, following the profound changes that have taken place in society, at present considerable emphasis is again being given to the social assistance aspects of the Preventive System as also those referring to a right appreciation of values, natural and supernatural, in the sphere of affectivity and emotional life.

In comparison with Don Bosco the conditions in which the Preventive System is able to be practised and the ways in which it is implemented have changed considerably. Don Bosco's educational purpose was translated into a variety of activities that differed from those of the present time (or at least were thought of differently from today) and in ways that required a different approach; but always within a society that was basically homogeneous or considered to be, so that it was not too difficult to transfer the system to worlds that were heterogeneous.

Today the educational role is becoming more broad-based and the tasks of the educator ever more difficult to carry out and to assess. If at one time there were just the playground, the church, the work shop, the classroom, today we are faced with different kinds of schools, of educational and therapeutic institutions, reception centres and hostels for youngsters in difficulty, care centres for drug addicts, counselling services, projects for street children, refugee camps with large numbers of children and young people, reception centres for immigrants... And all this in a society that is more complicated and cosmopolitan.

3. Greater "openings" for a preventative education

Don Bosco launched his project with the cooperation of large groups of people. In the utopia of a world-wide movement, he dreamed of the collaboration and the close involvement of all militant Catholics, and of all men of good will who were concerned about the future of humanity. In practice, however, his experience was, for the most part, that of the institution: an "institutional" system, closed, separate, non-political, and autonomous, where everything took place within a precise self-sufficient educational setting where the recognised teachers were Don Bosco and his "Sons" and where there reigned a single simple culture: that of the Catholic working classes, whose only aspiration was to be able to provide for their earthly needs, in anticipation of a heavenly reward for such a life.

Today, on the other hand, to be able to practice the Preventive System what seems to be needed is the maximum involvement, with the relevant moral responsibility, of all the educational "operators", hopefully, of all the adults who, in various capacities have an influence on the education of the young and on their ability to make decisions about their lives: parents, teachers, educators, assistants and social health workers, politicians, econo-

mists, administrators at all levels, educational agencies and organisers, people running the mass media, cultural, sporting, recreational associations, religions, churches.

To take full advantage of the educational role of such a galaxy of adults an educational project/plan is necessary, one that takes into account ethical guidelines, juridical structures, economic grants, structures capable of co-ordination, networking effectively, all the active forces ready to make their contribution to the human development of youth. Making alliances, sharing strategies, timetables, methods, all this creates not a few problems, bearing in mind the lack of homogeneity and the differences there are among the forces in question. But is a *conditio sine qua non* in order to gather the fruits of our educational efforts.

4. A new anthropological and theological foundation for "honest citizen and good Christian"

Don Bosco's Preventive System is based on a view of man, of the citizen and of the Christian that is traditional, simple, belonging to an historical era that is no longer ours and which today reveals all its limitations.

The *honest citizen* of the third millennium is no longer the sort of person understood by Don Bosco, a man of a time in which any kind of "political activity" was not dreamed of, except as the occupation of a rich and privileged minority, which the poor preadolescents and adolescents or the working classes in his houses would have undertaken with difficulty. Nor is it the sort of person who, in the analysis and evaluation of the problems of social need, tends, as Don Bosco did, to find the causes solely in the moral and religious responsibility of individuals and not in the conditioning and determining factors of an economic, political, social or juridical nature etc. Nor is it the person with the rather passive attitude who obeys the laws, doesn't cause any trouble to the authorities and is only interested in things that concern him. The transition from absolute monarchy to a liberal parliamentary system, first of all, and then to democracy; the rise of the "social question" with socialism, marxism, trade unionism, the social doctrine of the Church, the demand everywhere for an active and democratic citizenship etc have certainly left their mark. In a similar way that *nowadays* the implacable advance of pluralism, of globalisation, of modern information technologies and widespread multi-cultural situations are leaving theirs.

From the same points of view, it is clear that the *good Christian* of today is no longer the sort understood by Don Bosco and many others like him: with only a minimum of religious education, habitual reception of the sacraments, devotions to the saints as models and ideals of the Christian life, reading only "good" books, practising absolute obedience to the legitimate ecclesiastical authorities within the one ark of salvation (the Catholic Church), and a life of progress in virtue that would then be happily concluded with a virtuous death. A century of theological thinking and a Second Vatican Council would have come and gone in vain and the multi-religious and multi-confessional state of today's world would have made no impact if this were the case.

It is necessary therefore to accept that the well-known formula of "honest citizens and good Christians" *today* reshaped on both the anthropological and theological levels, has to be reinterpreted historically and politically.

A new anthropology would have to identify among the traditional values those which are to be emphasised in a post-modern society, and those new ones which, on the other hand, need to be proposed; a theological re-evaluation would need to determine the relationship between faith and politics, between different faiths; a new historical-political analysis would need to combine education and politics, education and social commitment, politics and civil society. In other words it would need to respond to the following questions:

- what does it mean, at the dawn of the third millennium, to be a "man", "woman", "young person", "Christian", "member of the church"?
- what does the concept going back two hundred years "duties of the citizen" mean today? Can the modern concept of moral and social "responsibility" be translated – and in what way - on a supernatural level?
- in a secularised, pluralistic, multi-ethnic and multi-religious context, is the subordination of temporal ends to transcendent ones, of the pre-eminence of individual values to social ones, of religious factors in relation to earthly ones, the Catholic element in relation to those simply Christian or not even Christian, of European "values" in relation to those belonging to other areas in the world still acceptable today?
- how does one overcome the almost total absence in Don Bosco's experience – who with the intention of forming good citizens tended to "re-

move" the pupils from daily contact with what was going on outside the Salesian house – of a real education in the "social" and "political" fields?

- how in this modern world does one fill in the evident gaps in Don Bosco's Preventive System in the question of educating young people in the area of *affectivity*, of *sexuality*, of *human love*, given that, according to the practice of the time it was being applied in a single sex environment, and there was always great emphasis on reticence aimed at simple self-control and "silence", even though "loving kindness" had been made one of its corner stones?

5. Pedagogical and psychological concerns

Looking back over 20 years working with the young, Don Bosco wrote in 1862:

> "To understand the results obtained from these schools, from the Oratories and from the house known as the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales it is necessary to divide the students into three categories: *difficult and disobedient, easily distracted, and good.* The good ones remain good and make remarkable progress. The easily distracted, those already accustomed to wandering about, working little, also make a success of things with care, assistance, instruction and being kept occupied. The difficult and disobedient ones then take a lot of hard work; if you can give them something of a taste for work, for the most part they are won over. Using the methods mentioned, results such as the following can be obtained: 1° they don't get any worse; 2° many of them become sensible and are able to earn an honest crust; 3° those who, while one keeps an eye on them, seem to remain indifferent, with time become more docile, if not entirely, at least to a fair extent. Time will tell whether they put into practice the good principles they have been taught". (Piccola Biblioteca dell'ISS, n. 9, pp. 74-75).

In describing the different kinds of youngsters Don Bosco normally makes use of the short formulae mentioned here, almost exclusively as the fruit of his own personal experience. Not being able to make use of the psycho-sociological sciences, then in their infancy, not having undertaken specialist personal studies on the subject, his frame of reference for the analysis of the society in which he lived was devoid of technical criteria. He was "consecrated" to the education of the individual youngsters, most of them brought into his institute and therefore "protected" on the physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual plane.

Today all those who wish to practise the Preventive System need to refer to *a theoretical framework* that is extensive and well organised, suited to the requirements of our days. One need only think of the areas that come to mind when one talks about: anthropological mutations, deconstruction of thought, a universal ethical code, tolerance, globalisation, interdependence, inter-culturation, pluri-ethnicity, new *paideia.*

Nowadays it is possible to have information about the youth scene/state of youth – changeable and diversified though the situations and problems may be – thanks to sophisticated methods of research, and of social and psychological analysis. This data tells us that the period of youth has become extended beyond measure, that given the present situation of young people and the context of conflict in which they are growing up, almost all the young people in the world could be considered "abandoned", "in danger and «dangerous» (= at risk)" as Don Bosco would say. One could say the same about the effective "potentiality" of the infant, child, teenager, adolescent, youngster, young adult for whom the educational process is intended.

It follows that there is the possibility of a greater individualisation process in relation to the effective "freedom" of the one being educated, to his demands for autonomy in choosing objectives and the means to reach them, to the "energies" with which he is endowed (vitality, ideals, desires, as well as anxieties, contradictions, rights, passions) which need to be respected and assisted to develop with helps and means adapted to the different stages of life. It is then always to be hoped that there will be a more positive appreciation and a more explicit use made of the inner energies of the young person, with greater recourse to the autonomy of the person and of the group in a process of educational cooperation. There would also follow greater attention being given to the educational pluralism in which the young people are growing up.

6. Holiness and salvation

In Don Bosco's pedagogical theology, the salvation of souls is the guiding force that is at the heart of his activities and his educational method, in complete harmony with the nineteenth century pastoral approach which made concern for salvation a categorical imperative in one's activities.

The ultimate aim of Don Bosco's Preventive System of education – which *today* we would describe as living a human life that is at the same time personal, social and religious - is historically expressed in the classic phrase "the salvation of souls". That is the goal of a long journey begun on this earth, through a life of grace which the Church guarantees, which can develop, even to heroic levels, in the love of God and of one's neighbour. In this case we find ourselves faced with a holiness worthy of the altars, canonised holiness.

But holiness, which is just as real and genuine and the most widespread, is that of someone who lives in an habitual state of grace because s/he has succeeded with their own efforts and with the help of the Spirit to avoid the sort of sins more commonly found among the young: bad companions, bad talk, impurity, scandal, theft, intemperance, pride, human respect, failure in carrying out one's religious duties... The ability to achieve this "salvation-holiness" is conditioned by the different dispositions or readiness of the different above-mentioned categories of youngsters "the difficult and disobedient, the easily distracted and the good". How wise therefore is the pedagogy of Don Bosco's Preventive System which, in relation to the different capacities for understanding, assimilating and living, adopts a graduated approach, one suited to the various levels, with different aims, programmes and recommendations!

But even straightforward "holiness" is not something proposed only to some "good" youngster, to some aristocratic *élite*, but to all the youngsters at Valdocco, students and young workers alike: "it is the will of God that we all become saints; it is easy enough to do so; a great reward in heaven awaits those who become saints". It is just that only the best took this vocation literally; one among them, Dominic Savio, living in the "little seminary of Valdocco" "I feel the need to become a saint, and if I don't do that, then I do nothing. God wants me to be a saint and I must become one". Others achieve it most laudably, (Francesco Besucco, Michele Magone), others as well as they can. It will be Don Bosco who gives each one an appropriate plan of life, from the highest forms of constant union with God to the more simple ones of carrying out one's daily duties.

7. The familiar trilogy

a. The educator following Don Bosco believes that *reason* is a gift from God, and it is thanks to reason, that one can discover the value of what is

good, set oneself a goal to aim at, and find the ways and means to reach it. To reason and reasonableness (which can easily become common sense, being realistic, having genuine respect for people) is linked the educator's ability to adapt himself to the different circumstances and situations in which he is called upon to work and to respond to the individual needs of different youngsters. In the Preventive System reason is a fundamental educational means in so far as it takes the place of any forced imposition of any unquestioning acceptance of orders. The power of reasoning also needs to be educated through study, teaching, instruction, respect for human and Christian values. In the introduction to one of his first books *Storia Sacra*, Don Bosco wrote: "On every page I always had this guiding principle: to enlighten the mind in order to make the heart good".

But reason, like the other words in this expression, should be considered in the light of the undoubted revolution in concept and mentality. In Don Bosco's time and for a large part of the following century Salesian "education" is seen to be very traditional, conservative, and even more very functional as suited to the practical requirements of the students or artisans; and the way this "education" was transmitted was prevalently authoritarian, closed to any wider reading, personal research, discussion and debate.

Today faced with technological rationality, with escape into the emotion of the moment, with the advent of "weak thought" and together with the demands of "critical thought" within a "fluid society," reason needs to recover its full significance and its role of: observing, reflecting, understanding, experimenting, evaluating, changing, adapting, deciding, developing, quickly and flexibly assimilating all the suggestions and proposals coming from the educational experience and from academic reflection.

And it is precisely with "reason" that an updated and integrated anthropology as mentioned above is put together, with which the educator attentively reads the signs of the times and identifies the emerging values that attract today's young people: peace, freedom justice, solidarity involvement, the promotion of women, ecological issues...

b. The highest form of the reasonable use of human reason is the acceptance of the mystery of God. For Don Bosco religion was the highest aim, the element that held his whole educational system together. Religion understood both as a *religious attitude* and as *positive religion* is the culmi-

nation of the educational process, and at the same time a means of education, leading to a Christian life directed towards union with God the Creator and Jesus the Redeemer. Don Bosco is convinced that a real education is not possible without its being open to the transcendent. It is not a question of a speculative or abstract religion but of a living faith, rooted in reality, consisting in a presence, in communion, in listening and in docility to grace. It is not by chance that the "pillars" of the educational edifice are the Eucharist, Penance, devotion to Mary, love for the Church and for her pastors. Education then is a "journey" of prayer, the liturgy, sacramental life, spiritual direction: for some a response to a call to a life of special consecration; for all the possibility and the achievement of holiness.

Don Bosco's concern at being faced with the phenomena of indifference, anticlericalism, irreligion, protestant proselytism, paganism couldn't have been very different from that of educators *today* who, however, need a much more solid cultural and faith foundation if only because between them and Don Bosco, as has been pointed out, there has been a century which has witnessed modernism, the liturgical movement, the foundation and the strong development of moral theology and spirituality, a return to the sources of the Christian message proclaimed in the Scriptures, the Second Vatican Council, ecumenism, the rediscovery of the role of lay people in the Church … and also, at the same time, wars and political and social revolutions on a planetary scale, the spread of a relativist mentality in the area of knowing and living, recurring fundamentalisms and short circuits between religion, the state, politics, crises of international law…

c. The term *Loving kindness* is found everywhere in Salesian literature even if understood in different ways. It consists in a genuine availability to the young, deep concern for their welfare, an ability to dialogue, goodness, kind-heartedness, understanding. Proper to the solicitous "preventive" educator, it translates into a commitment to being a person "consecrated" to the good of the students, always present among them, ready to accept sacrifice and fatigue in accomplishing one's own mission.

So we have arrived at another "classic" term: *assistance*, often only understood as a harassing constant physical presence defending a young person or protecting a weak immature one, without giving sufficient attention to the danger of blocking the natural and legitimate process of a development in autonomy.

In the context of loving kindness a special place in given to personal relationships. Don Bosco liked to use the term *familiarity* to describe the correct relationship between the educators and the young people. The framework of aims to be achieved, the programme and directives to be followed acquire practical and effective features if they are marked by a genuine *family spirit,* that is if they are lived in an atmosphere that is serene, joyful, stimulating. In this regard the ample scope and the importance given by Don Bosco to recreation, to games, to music, to the theatre and to the playground should at least be mentioned. It is in the spontaneity and the cheerfulness of these relationships that the wise educator finds opportunities to make his own contribution, through light-hearted comments that are none the less very effective in maintaining and building up a friendly atmosphere. And that without saying anything about the group experience such a fundamental aspect of Salesian pedagogical tradition.

Today traditional loving kindness needs to be rethought both as regards its foundations and as regards its form and expressions. This is necessitated by the new kind of relationships between adults and young people and by the self-awareness of the latter ever more on their guard against being "snared" in their affections and dangerously so by adults (pedophilia), by the critical situation of their families, characterised by a lack of a relationship with siblings (being an only child), the lack of the normal presence of the mother (out working) and the lack of long-lasting relationships between their parents (divorces, separations).

And as the "family spirit" itself, relived and put into practice, ought to overcome those forms of paternalism and similar attitudes belonging to the past in order to arrive at living out "free" and liberating relationships, which help the persona to grow, so too "assistance" understood as "keeping the doors and windows closed" where the youngsters are and the constant presence of the educator beside the youngster must take into account the youngsters who surf the net on their own, speak on their mobiles, watch hundreds of tv channels, meet one another where and how they want.

Similarly, to respond to the legitimate, explicit and ever more frequent requests for involvement, self government, self management, the Preventive System must profitably and within the limits of what is possible go along with them, appreciating them properly and satisfying them in the most appropriate ways.

8. Educator who is father, brother, friend

The effectiveness of the Preventive System is based on the ability of the educator to plan, put into practice, and assess what he actually does; in other words: to know exactly what he wants, what to do, what to look out for. In a certain sense one could say that the Preventive System is the educator. That might sound an exaggeration were it not that in Don Bosco's thinking the educator has the whole system in his own hands.

The first task of the educator therefore is to be there and not to be off the field of play. If it is true that in the one being educated there are all the necessary dispositions for living a full life, it is equally true that left to himself he could run the risk of not fully realising or implementing completely his potential for development.

Aware of his own role and responsibility, the educator who is sound and reassuring, authoritative but not authoritarian seeks to establish a genuine dialogue and a constructive debate with a young person. Vitally involved in the educational relationship, his personality, his own history, his own fears, anxieties, have their impact on the formation of the pupil. It is the person(ality) that educates.

Today, as has just been said, relationships between adults and young people have been profoundly changed compared with Don Bosco's day, which also means in this perspective a radically new way of interpreting and experiencing the idea and the role of the educator himself as "father", "brother", "friend". Above all it is necessary that, no longer considering himself the only operator and interpreter of the system, and therefore imposing or proposing certain preconceived ideas, he becomes capable of recognising those needs of young people that they themselves find it difficult to articulate, of accompanying them in the not easy search for answers to the fundamental challenges in life, of respecting their right to be and to feel themselves to be in charge of their own destiny, of limiting his own predominant contribution to learn himself while he is educating others either in the straightforward art of discussion or in the more difficult but equally useful one of dealing with inevitable disagreements.

In the educator the young person is no longer looking so much for a father who does his thinking for him, a friend who organises his free time for him, a brother who is interested in his development, an adult who gives the orders or the supervisor who threatens punishment, but a man capable of

standing beside him, more concerned about him as a person than about his overall educational needs, available to make a positive contribution to the development of his undiscovered talents, rather than being concerned solely to neutralise any negative or counter-productive elements.

Conclusion

It only remains to be said in conclusion that *today* it appears necessary not so much to recall and further analyse the basic concept of the Preventive System, as rather to recall and further analyse the idea of prevention as a process timely, considered and broad-based, which provides a series of initiatives aimed at guiding young people at various stages of development by means of attractive and useful projects giving them the opportunity to grow not only in their knowledge of the world around them – internet can do this and better – but above all in their understanding of life, a taste for what is good and worthwhile.

Educating in this sort of context, providing helpful and enjoyable experiences; helping youngsters in their development, using their own inner strengths and freedom to withstand unhelpful external pressures; "winning over the heart", of the young people to lead them gently towards good habits, correcting their bad ones; preparing them for their future combining theoretical and practical skills; entering into their hearts to help them develop their personalities so that they can confidently make decisions and choices; enabling them to become actively involved in the life of the church and of society: this is the difficult task of the educator who wants to be guided and inspired by Don Bosco's Preventive System.

The foundations are sound, the sources are clear and from them it should be possible to give life and a most promising future to that updated "New Preventive System" already hopefully anticipated by the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò, but not yet fully operational. It may come to fruition thanks to the combined efforts of SDBs, FMAs, Cooperators, Past Pupils, general groups of the family, with the assistance of historians, theologians, moralists, pedagogists, educators and pastoral workers. All together.

THE SIXTH DAY: ACCOMPANIED BY THE MOTHER

One cannot preach the annual retreat without saying something about one of the most fundamental themes of our spirituality: the presence of our Blessed Lady in our life. The renewed Constitutions deeply reflect the Marian component of our charism, by including a Marian article in the first and most important chapter of the text. All the Rector Majors have made it an object of meditation.

We have witnessed three Marian phases over the last 50 years: 1. the exuberance of devotion with Pius XII and the dogma of the Assumption; 2. Then came the crisis of the '60s, and even the Vatican Council – despite everything – did not give much impetus to Marian devotion, though Paul VI did give it a push; 3. The third phase was in the mid-80s which saw a deep and widespread upswing with biblical perspectives, historical and salvific aspects, ecumenical and hermeneutical elements, pastoral and missionary applications, and developments in the fields of pneumatology and anthropology. And this process continued only a year ago with an international congress organized by the FMA with the title: "I will give you a Mistress". Courage to educate at the school of Mary.

Like all Christians, religious look to Mary with the eyes of children on their Mother, and many religious in fact bear her name either individually or collectively. But for us Salesians the figure of Mary is not just a fact of protection, one object of devotion among others, but a foundational fact of Don Bosco's charism. We recognize Mary's presence in the life of Don Bosco and that of the Congregation, in our method of education and its objectives. We have only to think of the "dream at the age of nine", of the encounter with Bartholomew Garelli on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, of the foundation of the Salesians on 26 January 1854: "Our Lady wants us to form a society, We shall call ourselves Salesians", of the importance of the feast of Our Lady Immaculate at Valdocco and the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception. It was our Lady, in collaboration with Don Bosco's long pilgrimages and letter-writing activity, who built the Basilica; and Don Bosco went on to strengthen Marian devotion with various writings and with the foundation of the FMA and of the Association of Clients of Our Lady, all of which spread with great rapidity. In all this Don Bosco revealed an intuition and devotional trait which showed him to be 1. a

priest with an outstanding "Marian spirituality", 2. an educator of young people and a founder and maker of religious, to whom he passed on Marian devotion as one of the greatest goods after devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, and 3. a fervent member of the Church and devoted to the Pope, in awareness of the irreplaceable role of Mary Help of Christians in disastrous periods for the Church.

From the very beginning devotion to our Lady was constantly lived, proposed and spread by Don Bosco as a guarantee of salvation for souls and a sure protective power for the universal Church. With the Eucharist it is one of the famous two columns of the dream, to which the ship of the Church, with the Pope at its head, was safely anchored.

We read in the well known letter of 1884: "I put a final question to my friend: Have you anything else to tell me? Preach to everyone, young and old alike, that they must remember they are children of Mary Help of Christians. Tell them she has gathered them here to take them away from the dangers of the world so that they may love one another as brothers and give glory to God and to her by their good behaviour. Tell them that it is our Lady who provides them with bread and the means to study by endless graces and wonders... I declare before God that it is enough for a young person to enter a Salesian house for the Blessed Virgin to take him under her special protection".

From the foundational fact, therefore, stems the "mother and child" relationship, with children who acknowledge her as mother, children who are at home with her, and who know for certain that Mary has given them life and is always at their side.

To be her children means to have within ourselves the certainty that every day she generates us anew. And not only us here, but all Salesians scattered al over the world and so, as article 92 of the Constitutions says, we entrust ourselves to her, we contemplate and imitate her, we are nourished by her, etc.

Rather than list of Marian practices and devotions, it is more important to understand the sense of Marian devotion in our spirituality: contemplation of her faith, her solicitude for those in need, her fidelity in the hour of the crucifixion, joy in her wonders, security in her presence; cf Don Bosco to the FMAs at Nizza Monferrato: "No, no, Our Lady is truly here and walking among you".

When we entrust ourselves, therefore, or are entrusted to her, something

dynamic is taking place; it is not that we are taking refuge in her through fear. It is an entrustment for the service of the gospel, for pastoral charity, for a commitment to the needy. Entrustment implies something deep down, reaching the point where one can say: "I am yours, I love you, I am your son, you are my mother".

As for the future, let us recall what Don Bosco said in his spiritual testament: "The Blessed Virgin will certainly continue to protect our Congregation and our Salesian works if we maintain our trust in her and promote devotion to her, celebrating her feasts and solemnities, novenas and triduums, and the month consecrated to her. Let all these practices be encouraged in public and in private by means of leaflets, books, medals and statues, and the publication or simple recounting of the graces and blessings obtained at every moment for suffering humanity by our heavenly benefactress".

We must not on any account lose or diminish our Marian devotion; to do so would be a calamitous loss, a real betrayal of Don Bosco's charism. One convert, Lortizing by name, used to say: "The devil is a very good chess-player; once he has captured your Queen he has won the game".

11

FINAL HOMILY

In the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* we read (n. 109): "The world and the Church are seeking authentic witnesses to Christ. To bear witness to Christ by one's life, works and words is the particular mission of consecrated life in the Church and in the world.

You know the one in whom you have put your trust (cf 2 Tim 1:12): give him everything! Our contemporaries want to see in consecrated persons the joy which comes from being with the Lord. [...] Do not forget that you, in a very special way, can and must say that you not only belong to Christ but that «you have become Christ!»".

What would Don Bosco say to us today? We shall offer four different responses.

a. Don Bosco would say to you: become and remain a Salesian, so that like me you can provide a service for the young, for an apostolic mission; join this specialized body for a particular mission: you will be the fifth column of a powerful army called "Salesian" within the Church of Christ. You will be esteemed – and how! But... let me tell you that this should not be the deepest motive for your choice, the ultimate foundation and raison d'être for your decision to become a Salesian. Because you could begin to have doubts about your vocation when you come to realise that:

- political militancy of a party or trades union nature, or in various movements and ideologies, could be more useful at the present day in the human advancement of young people, the development of the poor, etc.
- our great institutions with the complex problems of every kind and degree to which they give rise (despite our best intentions) are perhaps reserved to privileged people, while on the other hand schools for the working classes and elementary education in general have in some countries a greater effect, as well as being more useful and more flexible.
- So far the religious institution as such has been a valid mediation for poor and abandoned youngsters in certain countries; nowadays it is

even better in our countries for the attainment of justice and dedication in the spirit of works of mercy.
- the further development of some under-developed countries leads to a sprouting of volunteers (even full-time) who do work that can be more satisfying than ours in the short term.
- religious life involves certain conditions, prohibitions and difficulties that may not be met with in other situations of life.

Bearing in mind that the vows, prayer and community are not to be measured solely by the apostolic efficiency (they reflect either to the Church or to the world) become and remain a Salesian nevertheless because of the mission offered to you.

b. Don Bosco would say to you: become and remain a Salesian to try to give greater authenticity to your apostolic commitment, to penetrate the gospel more deeply. My Constitutions in their renewed form will provide you with a means for giving a better quality to your love of God and neighbour. But... let me tell you that this is not to be the deepest reason for your choice, the ultimate reason and essential raison d'être for your option. Because you may begin to doubt about your vocation when you discover that:

- the prenovitiate, novitiate, studentate, ongoing formation and the Salesian house itself fall short of the level you were expecting.
- community life seems unreal and hard to live; sometimes overwhelming its members, making them less friendly and approachable, because ruled by mechanical time-tables.
- the apostolate may seem meaningless to you at times.
- the vows may seem to be lived in a juridical key and not as an expression of gospel values.

Keeping in mind that you may have to find another key to the discernment of your vocation, a still deeper dimension, become and remain a Salesian nevertheless because of this high quality of apostolic charity.

c. Don Bosco would say to you: become and remain a Salesian so as to practise the evangelical counsels. A Salesian religious could in fact be defined as one who practises the vows "in a Salesian fashion" and lives in a Salesian community. But... bear in mind that this should not be the deepest motive for your choice, the ultimate foundation and raison d'être for your

decision to become a Salesian. Because you could begin to have doubts about your vocation when you come to realise that:

- the distinction between precepts for all and good advice for some is not all that clear from an evangelical standpoint. "If you want to be perfect, go and sell what you have and give it to the poor then come and follow me" but the perfection of charity is for *all* Christians. The beatitudes are for everybody, Vatican II says so very clearly: "All the faithful are urged and obliged to pursue the sanctity and perfection appropriate to their state in life".
- all Christians have a common starting point: baptism; and they have a common finishing point too: the perfection of charity.
- celibacy can be just selfishness. Single people are in fashion nowadays. A celibate can be a lifeless lack of expression of the riches of sexuality recently discovered to be a source of true communion and service.
- poverty can be something merely exterior, reduced to nothing more than asking for permissions; and moreover a poverty laden with ascetical dimensions and beset by juridical worries, with little concern about the big social problems.
- obedience can sometimes be a consequence of timidity, of inability to accept one's own responsibilities, with an oligarchic structure involving little dialogue and little acceptance of responsibility.

But anyway, become and remain a Salesian and set about following Christ in a Salesian manner, keeping in mind that the *eros* can be made submissive to the *man,* that fraternity is a gratuitous love, without bonds of blood, race, tribe, or nationality; that poverty is an economy based on need rather than on profit; that effectively it is a contestation of consumerism and the acceptance of hard work, even of a physical kind; and that obedience is the daily acceptance of the struggle against oneself.

d. And so Don Bosco would say to you: become and remain a Salesian because you believe in God, because you want to love him and bear witness to him, because you want to become holy like me, like Savio, like Mazzarello, Don Rua and all the saints of the Salesian Family.

Become and remain a Salesian because from your mode of life and action young people may see that you are a man who converses with the God who is the saviour of humanity: a "sign and bearer of the love of God to young people".

Become and remain a Salesian because you want to be like me a monument, a sacrament of the faith, a specialist in things of God.

Become and remain a Salesian because you want to be able to put into perspective the mystery which rules and overturns your life, i.e. the mystery that God exists and has spoken to you.

Become and remain a Salesian because your encounter with the Lord in faith is so complete and all-embracing that you want to declare and proclaim it publicly by a life lived wholly in the Spirit. Anyone meeting you and getting to know you must be constrained to say: God exists; must be constrained by radiation from your life to think about the meaning of his own.

Salesian spirituality, like all spirituality consists in the practice of faith, hope and charity, or in other words in making the revelation of God the reason behind the personal life of the educator.

a. Practising *faith;* means the abandonment of oneself with joy and trust to God who has revealed himself in Christ, so as to be able to live every situation in a salvific way, i.e. to accept all historical circumstances in a manner that allows God to manifest his saving activity. No situation corresponds fully to God's desire, but man can live every situation so as always to fulfil God's will, being faithful to him in every situation. The existence of sin is a fact of life, but we can always live doing the will of God in all circumstances: injecting love into situations of hatred; introducing feelings of forgiveness where revenge is the dominant mentality; promoting generosity in situations of selfishness. In this way it is possible to fulfil God's will always and everywhere.

b. Practising *hope*: This means waiting on God each day, so as to be able to readily accept his future gifts. It means awaiting his daily coming to us, and he comes through created gifts – each day has its own gift. We are all awaiting something, though the expectations may be widely different: esteem, affection, concrete things; we pass from one disappointment to another. Eventually we discover God as the reason for our life. Each new day we wonder what new form of his love it will bring, of fellowship, of forgiveness, of beauty, of justice, to our existence. And this in all situations, even those of apparent failure. "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ" (Rom 8, 39).

c. Practising *charity:* the good effect of this gesture is that it fills all the space around us with God's love. It is a process we all have to undertake. From our birth we are selfish and possessive but we are asked to change this to an attitude of openness and self-giving, in which the underlying motive is not that we lack something but that we want to give something of the future to others. It is not something that takes place automatically. To achieve this kind of attitude continual practice is needed. A stimulating environment is required, and the Salesian mission provides such an environment without any doubt.

We Salesians (SDB) are consecrated persons, i.e. we represent a space or category reserved for God, persons destined for particular purposes, persons who have been purified and set apart from what is profane; we have a personal mission expressed in sacred functions, just as in Israel everything was sacred because everything was of God. Our consecration is the supreme act of love of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit: than this there is nothing greater. God says to us: you are the highest object of my love, despite all your weakness and shortcomings. You are destined for the kingdom, all of you with what you are; your sins and instincts will be filtered and made sacred for the kingdom. Everything in you and about you must be an expression of God's glory. Your religious consecration gives new life to your baptism; it is a liberation, a regeneration, an incorporation and mission. You have been freed from Satan and are in the bosom of the Church, configured to Christ, sent on a mission as a priest, king and prophet for young people.

St. Anthony of the desert used to say: "The time is coming when men will become mad, and when they meet someone who is not like them, they will say to him it is you who are mad, because you are not like us". Don Bosco was one of these so-called madmen, but he was successful.

At the end let us therefore rediscover the freshness of our vocation, and the enthusiasm of our first profession. Woe to us if what was then the flaming sword of Christ for the young as followers of Don Bosco, has subsequently become old and rusty. And yet it can happen; we can resemble one of those days when the morning haze heralds a splendid day; by noon the sun is shining in all its splendour, but in the evening dark clouds gather and threaten thunder and lightning.

No, our Salesian "day", of few or many decades, and whatever our responsibilities may be, must be always radiant with the Lord's light in the company of Don Bosco, of our saints and of all our confreres.

APPENDIX

AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION ABOUT CONGREGATION'S HISTORY

Introduction: Relevance of the theme

a. The Rector Major, Fr J. E. Vecchi, had already in 1997 emphasized the importance of the study of salesian history (cf Letter *For you I study*, AGC 361), and in 1998 he came back once more to the same subject. After a series of journeys during which he had taken part in many jubilee celebrations and, while expressing his satisfaction at the many publications produced on such occasions for recalling the past history of the various institutions, mainly for the benefit of the local people and those close to us, he also pointed out some further and precise objectives: "At the same time the need is felt of greater historical completeness and a better arrangement of studies which would render more adequately the picture of our insertion in a particular context" (Letter: Church and Family Events, AGC 364, p. 26). He could not have spoken more clearly. It was a precise invitation to undertake studies and research which in *method, content and style* would extend beyond *contingency* and *salesian settings*.

b. In July 1999 the General Council gave some time to a reflection on the Salesian Historical Institute and to the study of salesian history in general and endorsed the need for the "care of salesian *archives* and *libraries* and the preparation of *trained personnel*" (AGC 1999, n. 369, p. 61).

c. The Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church published on 2 February 1997 a circular letter with the title *The pastoral function of ecclesiastical archives.* Among other things, it recommended not only the careful preservation of archives, but especially their use at the level of research and culture. It concluded with the significant words of Pope Paul VI: "profound respect for these papers and documents in archives reflects respect for Christ; it implies a sense of the Church, the desire to have ourselves and to give to those who come after us the story of the different phases of the *transitus Domini* in the world".

d. The document *A pastoral approach to culture*, published by the Cultural Commission on 23 May 1999, recalled the importance of "encouraging the formation and multiplication of specialized libraries in the field of the Christian and profane cultural patrimony of every region, which provide the broadest possibility of contact with such patrimony to as many persons as possible" (n. 37).

1. At the Salesian origins

The implications of the well-known saying *historia magistra vitae* were undoubtedly very much present in Don Bosco's mind, and not only theoretically – Don Bosco had written a great deal of historical matter himself – but also with a view to the foundation and development of the Salesian Society and the associations which took their origin from it.

The starting up of such foundations imposes an obligation in the first place of the careful preservation and intelligent assessment of every kind of documentation and recollection that can bear witness in the future to the characteristic features of the salesian institutions, and can foster a dynamic continuity while safeguarding fidelity to the origins.

In particular the educative and charismatic dimension prompted a safeguarding of the legacy to be passed on to those continuing the work, so as to avoid the serious risk, through forgetfulness and lack of proper sensitivity, of improvisation or of innovations without the necessary roots.

In this connection it is enough to read what Don Bosco wrote in the introduction to the *Memoirs of the Oratory*:

> "Now, what purpose can this chronicle serve? It will be a record to help people overcome problems that may arise in the future by learning from the past. It will serve to make known how God himself has always been our guide. It will give my sons some entertainment to be able to read about their father's adventures".

What he had said was taken up again later at some of the most important moments of the Salesian Society, such as General Chapters. In the minutes of the 1st such Chapter, which took place only three years after the definitive approval of the Constitutions, we find the following:

> "We have now become aware that, with the definitive approval of the Congregation, we must lay down some norms for those who will come after us. When they see that we did things in one way rather than in another and with successful results, it

> will be an indication for them as to how they themselves should proceed. At this moment", went on Don Bosco, "I think that this is more important than anything else: and so I believe it to be necessary that each director should think about and study the best way in which this can be done, and that they should all write an *account of their own school or house,* and that this be continued each year by whoever is the director at the time. ... When these individual accounts reach us in Turin we shall be able to study them and draw up a brief description of the state of the Society as a whole, and thus produce little by little *a true history of the Congregation.* ... The Jesuits have someone appointed for this purpose in every house and he is listed in the printed list of the confreres (*Historicus domus* – the house historian)".

And in the following year's deliberations we read:

> "1. There shall be an analyst for each house of the Congregation. He will keep a written account of the year of the house's foundation, ... biographies of those members called by God to a better life, and any particular facts useful for a history of the Congregation.
> 2. There shall also be a *historian of the Congregation*, who will take care ....".

2. The function of History

2.1. *Some basic principles*

a. That a religious institute is ecclesial implies not only that it belongs to the Church, but also that it has a history behind it. "Religious life is a reality which is both historical and theological", we read in *Essential elements of the teaching of the Church on the Religious Life* (Rome, 1983). It could hardly be otherwise, since religious life "is at the very heart of the Church" (VC 3), for the understanding of whose mystery history and theology constitute the fundamental criteria. These cannot be separated or replaced by anything else: history without theology would reduce religious life to a purely social phenomenon, but theology without history would reduce it to an ideology tending to justify factual situations or gratuitous options.

b. At turning points in history a religious institute can survive only on condition that the charism be reinterpreted and not remain a precious relic of the past. The founders had an experience of the Holy Spirit in a precise historical context, and because of this the problem arises with respect to contingency, because the response to a contingent situation remains valid only as long as the particular circumstances persist. In other words the demands of

the ecclesial community and those of the prevailing social and cultural context cannot be considered as something extraneous to a religious institute.

c. At this point it becomes clear that it is not a question of studying Don Bosco alone, but also his "sons". Continued research into our particular identity and the formation of future SDBs necessarily requires the study of the "principle" but also of what follows from it, i.e. *tradition.* One may even say that it is tradition that helps to identify and express in modern language a "substance", an "essence", a "nucleus" of unchanging value within "historical" concepts, which are always contingent, as has been said, for the relative aspects of the social and cultural setting which has created them.

d. Founder, tradition and culture are known to us at the present day through two main instruments:

a. *the sources*: these do not change with respect to time and place of reference, which remain the same and so permit the avoidance of rhetoric, ideology, abstractions etc. The greatest effort has to go into their sound editing (in a critical sense), but one must also go more deeply into them so as not to be content with what appears on a first reading but delve further and get below the surface.

b. *studies:* i.e. the reflections of specialists in history, theology, hermeneutics, pedagogy, etc. These are obviously always provisional and subject to change with time.

Summing up: The criteria to be applied for the attainment of a correct understanding and development of the particular charism and spirituality cannot be of an exclusively psychological, sociological or cultural nature, but neither can they be of a solely theological order. There must be a complementary relationship between the human and theological sciences, between science and faith, between history and theology.

2.2. *The growth of historical sensitivity within the Institute is a "sign and instrument" of fidelity to the charism.*

a. It is now more than 30 years since Vatican II urged us to return to the *sources* so as to remain faithful to our charism (*Perfectae Caritatis, Ecclesiae Sanctae*).

b. "Finally, all these elements are united *in the dimension of the charism* proper to each Institute, as it were in a synthesis which calls for a constant deepening of one's own special consecration in all its aspects [...]. This means that each member should *study diligently* the spirit, *history* and mission of the Institute to which he or she belongs". (VC 71)

c. The culture of memory or remembrance is simply the culture and duty of its organization and possibility of fruition, and these have given a notable importance:

- to how we recall the inter-family collective memory which prompts us to rethink problems of the present day with a more mature awareness of the past;
- to how we ensure that the tone of salesian life, even though it will continue to see more changes from many standpoints – our present is the tradition of the future – will be the sure bearer of the charism of the origins and the vigilant guardian of a tradition. Clearly, awareness of the roots need not necessarily either enslave or condition us, but we must be able to distinguish critically between positive requirements and the essential historical meaning, so freeing it from gratuitous excesses and from arbitrary and unfounded subjective interpretations, and so avoid giving a historical and charismatical endorsement to statements and reconstructions which have little to do with real history and much more with the circumstance of the moment and personal foibles.
- to avoid getting carried away by lofty ideals, or becoming hypnotized by extreme idealistic exaggerations, which can have a disorientating effect when they meet with hard daily reality. Historical ignorance, in fact, could give rise to the risk of reading the life of the Congregation in a fundamentally mistaken perspective which sees today as being worse than yesterday and tomorrow will be worse than today. This kind of use of history is adopted all too often for sidestepping any serious problem in the historical framework.

d. In the reconstruction and interpretation of SDB history, *prudent discernment* is necessary. The past is certainly not be seen as gloom and darkness; there is nothing, indeed, to be exorcised as a dangerous antithesis for the most genuine aspirations, but the passion for truth is always present, and truth is reached through the daily toil of work and study. For us too the

advice of Pope Leo XIII will always remain valid: "Veritas non indiget mendaciis nostris", and also: "Primam esse historiae legem, ne quid falsi dicere audeat, deinde ne quid veri non audeat".

e. The care of historical instruments (archives, museums, libraries) moreover – a point already so obvious to those assigned to them and to the studious – is one of the most significant expressions of the ability to become inculturated, to dialogue with contemporary events, and for the evangelization of culture (VC 80, 81).

f. Among the tangible expressions of affection for those who have preceded us therefore, there are not only holy pictures and bigger paintings, statues, popular biographies, collections of thoughts and sayings, touching incidents of particular interest, but also *scientific study,* laborious efforts to discover the genuine meaning of the existence of those who have gone before us and of their offering of themselves to Christ in the Salesian Congregation.

2.3. *A charism viewed in a historical perspective to be offered to these ouside the Institute to promote cultural dialogue on an equal footing*

a. "Our" history is not really ours at all; it is *the history of the Church and the history of humanity,* and so it must form part of ecclesiastical history and of the civil history of the individual countries, and this with all the more reason since salesian history is a reality stemming from dynamic interactivity, relationships of dependence, of collaboration (and also clashes) with the social, political, economic, religious, educative and cultural fields. Now we cannot expect "the others" (non-Salesians and laity) to give any attention to "our" history if we do not provide them with modern and adequate means for getting to know it. Dialogue with others can take place only if we speak the same kind of language, using the same concepts, the same professional approach and skills; otherwise we shall be left on the fringe of society, remote from the historical and cultural discussions that are taking place; we shall be absent from those places where not only are facts documented and interpreted, but also where a lead is given in solving current problems.

Exclusion from the cultural debate and discussion going on in every country would also lead to:

- the lack of any historical significance of the Salesians,
- marginalization on a social level and on that of the salesian image,
- the complete absence of "our" proposals from the ideas-market.

b. *History is always contemporary* (B. Croce), in the sense that no period in history can be reconstructed without the study and help of the historian. This dictum of Croce is very relevant at the present day and contains much deep truth. It means among other things that.

a. Subjectivity (choice of arguments, ability to identify the problem, skill and patience in seeking documents useful for the search for a solution, without arbitrary choices and manipulations, and also without prejudice and ideological judgments, political passions, sympathies and antipathies, etc.) is fundamental and a *sine qua non.*

b. What distinguishes contemporary history (*our history*) from other kinds (ancient, medieval, modern) is its lack of stability, in the sense that it is more subject to the laws of events and to the luxury of an unlimited documentation. Contemporary history is continually assailed by new and insistent realities which can modify, correct, or integrate the perspective and formulation of research now in hand and of past studies.

c. The writing of history is a continual critical revision of judgments made in the past; a *critical revision* of this kind is necessary when we realize that the past cannot be left embalmed in a kind of monument only to be looked at, because fundamentally linked (as we have just said) to the personality of the person wanting to know it.

d. If it is true that *history is made by historians*, the kind of approach is being continually diversified:

* because of the personal *sensitivities* of the historians themselves,
* because of the incessant *pressure* of the new sciences which have become wedded, so to speak, with history. Not everything is to be explained, for instance, by the intervention of the supernatural, or better the supernatural cannot fail to take into account *natural elements and factors*; often such "facts" are not given adequate consideration in the writing of salesian history;

* because of the *new and innumerable objects of historical attention*: to the study of events, institutions and great personalities, it is now possible to move on to questions of mentality, values, sentiments, educative methods, forms of marginalization, socialization, basic cultural advancement, etc. One could take up, for example:

- The *history of salesian institutions with their social, political, religious and cultural consequences.*
- The *history of the forms of aggregation and socialization of young people; the history of the impact of salesian formation on young persons in specific periods of history.*
- The *history of religious facts and events of the Congregation in the different countries*, from a broader standpoint than a simply apologetic one.
- The *history of fidelity* to Don Bosco, seen through the various hermeneutics of his language and the different realizations of his charism, in the practical examples of our countries in the last hundred years?
- The further study of *quantitative history*, of *social history*, of the *history of instruction*, the *history of ideas and pedagogical doctrine in the Congregation*, of *the practice of spirituality as concretely lived in our houses.*
- And then there is *oral history*, through conversation with so many confreres who have lived through important periods of history in a country or under a regime etc., but are no longer able to leave an account in writing.
- All this, obviously, without forgetting the *history of a house or province*, the *biography of a confrere*, accounts of particular *experiences,* etc. and all the consolidated forms of minor historical writings which fall under headings like, *memoirs, chronicles*, and *annals.*

c. And so *history is a serious branch of study*, and it follows that:

- the personal good will of a person or the improvisation of others is not enough. An *adequate preparation* is indispensable.
- there is no place for amateurs: slapdash and haphazard methods will not do. There are *rules and methods* to be followed; intellectual honesty is needed, together with scientific exactness.

d. Among the reasons for interest in salesian history is also the role which has come to be assigned in recent times to *local history*, in which the presence of a salesian house in a specified area is now a motive of interest, as witness the continual requests for information which reach the Salesian Central Archives in Rome.

3. The present situation

3.1. *In term of historiographical production*

a. *A history of the Salesian Congregation* as such (and of the Institute of the FMA and of the Salesian Family) conceived in scientific terms, simply does not exist. The four volumes of the *Annali* edited by Fr E. CERIA (1941-1951) cannot be considered as belonging to this category, and not only for chronological reasons. On the other hand there do exist attempts at the deeper study of specific cross-sections of the history of the Congregation (pedagogy, missions, formation, various activities etc.) which are frequently founded, as well as on the wealth of unpublished documentation in the Salesian Central Archives, on *the Acts of the Superior Council*, the *Acts of the General Council, Circular Letters* of Rector Majors, documents of various Departments, etc.

b. The bibliography on the single salesian houses, however, tends to be more plentiful as a consequence of the celebration of anniversaries: of regional and local work, with some valuable monographs, informative articles and notes published in bulletins, local reviews, newsletters of provinces or houses, nearly always in extra-commercial editions.

But there do not seem to be many publications which can properly be described as "histories of houses". Often the title or sub-title is an acknowledgement that the work is incomplete – *Memoirs, outlines, special edition for the centenary or golden jubilee*; often they consist of a mass of dates and facts hinged around a series of provincials or rectors with perfunctory notes about the foundation, followed by a plentiful collection of photographs of illustrious persons and witnesses, the whole lot gathered from manuscript sources, generally scarce and unpublished and not subjected to any critical evaluation. The only thing present in abundance is the iconographic apparatus which adds notably to the printing costs.

Though the production of these publications has become a *model* for the celebration of continuing salesian anniversaries, the fact remains that they do not and cannot enter the cultural circle and history of a country. And there are even those who have written about salesian history and even presented doctorate theses in this field without ever being aware of the existence of the Salesian Central Archives. For its part the Salesian Historical Institute has published various methodological indications, in several languages, which do not seem to have caught the attention of salesian historiographers.

c. Even though some works which have recently appeared, based on more abundant sources and better methodological criteria, might suggest the opposite, there does not exist at the present day a complete *history of individual provinces.*

The history of a province, like its written presentation, passes through the houses. Naturally one cannot demand the previous compilation of 10, 30 or more monographs, one for each house. But it remains a difficult if not an impossible task to write the true history of a province (and consequently of the Congregation) until we have a consistent and competent number of monographs, at least of the houses more representative of the life and activities of a province.

Here we are not living in a cloud-cuckoo land invented by outstanding persons; it is a matter of the practical geographic territory of the houses, in which the salesian life is lived and comes to fruition. A house is essentially a point of reference and of educative, spiritual, apostolic and cultural radiation. The SDBs are called by the local people to be a public utility for them. And it is precisely this life and activity which must be documented and borne witness to in monographs, which can also serve as a recognition and homage to the local civil and ecclesiastical community.

d. A certain consistency attaches, on the other hand, to the bibliography on *outstanding persons* (major superiors, bishops, provincials, others), all gleaned from written sources, published or unpublished, but even in these cases frequently not critically evaluated. And so the works vary a great deal in value. We have thus been compelled to overhaul the *Dizionario biografico dei Salesiani* (Turin 1969), which is becoming ever less reliable.

3.2. *In terms of structures*

Although our Constitutions, Regulations and provincial Chapters lay down rules in this connection, and although general criteria concerning archives were offered by the Secretary General in AGC 351 (1995), pp. 34-45, we find for the most part a *widespread abandonment of archives, libraries and museums,* not only locally but at a provincial level; quite recently were sent for pulping the whole or parts of libraries containing valuable archival documentation of a great historical value for the study of a house or province. Obvious risks are run at the present day to such documentary patrimony with the closure of salesian houses, or rapid changes in their kind of work.

3.3. *In respect of persons*

The *shortage of serious students of salesianity* (full-time or almost so), or at least of salesian personnel keen on research in salesian history, is clear to the eyes of all. Our active salesian life, the continual demands and even emergencies which crop up, the lack of vocations, all seem unfavorable to study in general and to the study of history in particular – but in this matter things were little better in the past. It is not something new that there are few confreres specialized in civil and church history, or being trained in it, though this is a basic foundation for studies in "salesian history". Trained lay people, of the Salesian Family or not, who are concerned with salesian history are numerically insignificant. Efforts to involve non-salesian experts in salesian historiography are being made for the houses of Villa Sora of Frascati (Rome) and for Fr Carlo Maria Baratta at Parma.

4. For a renewed historiography, non contingent and of high profile

From what has been said so far it is not clear what policy the Congregation is following in the writing of history. It is therefore necessary and urgent that the Congregation as such develop such a policy and program it seriously. To the internal motives of the SDBs other external reasons may be added: requests from the social and ecclesial community, from developments in the sciences, from the dialogue needed with cultural institutions, from the adoption of new research techniques, etc.

My personal opinion is that in the Congregation (and in the Salesian Family):

a. The conviction needs to be spread in a better and more detailed manner that the preservation, promotion and exploitation of cultural values constitutes an *investment for the future*, one of the best means for keeping faithful to the foundational charism and for preserving the spiritual patrimony we have inherited.

b. Incentives should be provided for increasing *attention and sensitivity to the history of the Congregation itself and to our particular local history*, which seems at present to be limited in many provinces to the repetition of stereotyped phrases ("without the past there is no future" etc.), or to the conviction – evidently false as has already been said – that what has been written (even a long time ago) must automatically be always valid and relevant to the present day.

c. An effective plan must be set up for the *preparation of local experts* (at provincial level) in salesian history and a better coordination of research centres (far too few in number at present), enjoying proper freedom and autonomy in their options and study perspectives. The critical texts, the "sources", the resulting studies, must not remain only in the hands of the authors and local custodians, but must be widely diffused and used throughout the Congregation for the purpose of deeper study and ever more valid and richer interpretation. Is it necessary to remind ourselves that a history built on the shifting sands of partial, unreliable and uncertain sources has no value from the outset?

d. Serious consideration must be given to the *"salesian" preparation of the formative personnel,* who do not always have the practical possibility of adequate updating, and often do not know or do not have available suitable instruments for the purpose (for themselves and those they are training). In the Congregation it is not difficult to note unequal levels of "updating" in this regard, especially where Italian presents a serious problem. Suitable conditions are not always present for the realization *sic et simpliciter* of what is wisely prescribed (or can be prescribed in future) by the *Ratio*.

e. *Languages certainly cause a problem.* But it is also true that nowadays informational technology has reached a stage where it is sufficiently

easy and cheap to transmit and print *in proprio* facts, sources, texts and studies from other countries. But it would seem useful to have a stable *co-ordination and organization* of the efforts made in countries of the same language and available for local productions and for the translation of contributions coming from others.

f. It is desirable moreover that *updating in the facts of salesian historiography* be made available for rectors, retreat preachers, editors of salesian newsletters, bulletins and reviews, and those spreading information through the mass media. The production and large-scale diffusion of popular publications does not mean that their content be superficial, contain inaccurate and unscientific information about salesian history, and repeat past "facts" now known to be unreliable. Those who have the gift, duty or opportunity of speaking or writing, of forming and educating others, have *a duty to be always up-to-date* on the subject they are talking or writing about. Their working instruments (the library) of even those who write for children and ordinary people should not be of an infantile or popular level, but of high scientific quality and worthy of the greatest possible reliability.

g. Salesian *libraries, retreat houses, bookshops*, and selling points for books and religious objects attached to houses, churches and salesian sanctuaries should not confine themselves to selling the usual popular items like holy pictures, leaflets and medals, but should also have a section of greater cultural depth. Those who buy such items of salesianity are not always and only persons of little culture, and in any case it is a question of making it understood that the story of Don Bosco and the Salesians has a cultural depth and prominence which is often problematic and sometimes downright traumatic; it is not always a matter of amusing comic-strips or delightful little embellishments.

h. In the field of salesian historiography, as indeed in every sector of the salesian mission, all the various groups of the Salesian Family should work together, and in particular the *Cooperators and Past-pupils,* many of whom are already professionally prepared for carrying out research in the field of salesian history. The problem necessarily arises as to *who* can competently follow them up in their studies, and *how* the financial costs are to be met. Can special funds be set up for the purpose? Can formal collaborative rela-

tionship[s] be established with cultural centres and non-Catholic Universities (in Catholic areas or not) traditionally close to salesian work? These are questions which await a reply.

i. History needs documents: without documents there is no history. And the documents, for the most part, are to be found in the *archives (documentary, photographic, audiovisual and computers) and in libraries.* We can therefore rightly ask:

- What is being documented in our archives concerning the opening, closing and transformation of houses, changes in activities, the movement of lay and salesian personnel, the suppression of long-standing traditions? Are the reasons idealistic or contingent? Are they conditioned by legislative, educative or territorial considerations?
- With what precision are registers of Salesians, collaborators and pupils kept? With complete and exhaustive details? How are financial and scholastic registers kept, the minutes of community assemblies, and those of meetings of the house council?
- How and where is being documented the contribution made by SDBs to civil and ecclesiastical organisms outside the community, their participation in activities managed by others, their publications, radio and television interviews, collaboration with other religious institutes? Reasons, duration, content, names etc.
- What attention is given to the adequate preservation, maintenance, cataloguing and enrichment of the archived material itself (type of paper, magnetic, electronic and digital material, etc.)? Is a copy of the inventory of the archives deposited with the Salesian Central Archives in Rome? Does the Rector feel responsible for it, and has he had from the provincial secretary all the indications sent out by the Secretary General for the ordering and organization of archives?
- On the death of a confrere, what steps are taken to collect and put in order his manuscripts or the books preserved in his office or room?
- Is not perhaps the preparation of *obituary letters* sadly lacking from the aspect of historical documentation, given that they frequently constitute the only (or almost the only) source of information about the confrere. (It should be kept in mind that anything not preserved by document or testimony, published or unpublished, historically runs the risk of having never existed).

- To draw up the *chronicle of the house* is a truly intelligent thing to do. Maybe for some chronicles still applies what Fr C. Gusmano wrote in the name of Don Albera (who was making the Extraordinary Visitation in America) on 13 January 1902, to Fr Barberis: "Few houses have a chronicle, and for those that do it is almost as if they had none at all, because they make note of trifles of no importance and leave out necessary items: so that after plugging my way through 60 or 70 pages, I have picked up perhaps 4 or 5 lines of interest; it seems that the writer can think only of the times of church services and an occasional change in the house".
- The house library should contain in indexed fashion at least the fundamental books which constitute the historical documentation (scholastic teaching, pastoral, formative and educative) of the work. And in the case of the closure of the house, how is all that patrimony preserved?

Rome, January 1st 2000

Per sopravvivere abbiamo bisogno del nostro passato e di identità collettive in cui affondare le nostre radici, così come abbiamo bisogno di una identità individuale". (P. PRODI, *Introduzione allo studio della storia moderna.* Bologna, Il Mulino, 1999, p. 19).

INDEX

Presentation of the collection ..... pag. 2

Preface ..... " 6

Introduction ..... " 7

The first day: Faith ..... " 12

1. **Living within the history of Don Bosco, in the Church of Christ** ..... " 15
Introduction ..... " 15
1. A struggling Church at the dawn of the third millennium ..... " 16
2. Re-establishing the "minority" phenomenon of consecrated life ..... " 17
3. The historical forms of consecrated life ..... " 18
4. Trends of change and the manner in which it took place ..... " 21
5. Some fixed points ..... " 23
Conclusion ..... " 25

2. **Don Bosco: secrets of success** ..... " 26
Introduction ..... " 26
1. A very high esteem of every individual called by God to salvation ..... " 27
2. Deep values expressed in social action ..... " 29
3. A clear priestly identity ..... " 31
4. The universal allure of his person ..... " 33
5. A great communicator of the youth problem ..... " 34
6. Resurgence of holiness ..... " 35
Conclusion ..... " 36

The second day: Hope ..... " 38

3. **Those formidable first twenty years (1815-1835)** ..... " 38
Introduction ..... " 41
1. In his native surroundings (1815-1831) ..... " 42
2. Young student at the Chieri High School (1831-1835) ..... " 45
3. The vocational choice: summer 1835 ..... " 49
4. Consequences of the choice ..... " 51
Conclusion ..... " 52

4. **Ten years of preparation (1835-1844)** ..... " 53
Introduction ..... " 53
1. In the Chieri seminary (1835-1841) ..... " 53
2. At the Turin Ecclesiastical College (1841-1844) ..... " 57
3. A new priest with a specific program ..... " 57
4. Don Bosco, priest and educator, writes to clerics ..... " 58
Conclusion ..... " 64

The third day: Charity in the Holy Spirit ..... " 65

5. **The fundamental option: the young (1844-1846)** ..... " 68
1. A fundamental document ..... " 69
2. "The problem lies in finding ways to bring them together, to be able to speak to them and teach them some moral principles" ..... " 71
3. Evolution of the Oratory: from the first festive oratory to a vast range of educational works in response to emergencies ..... " 73
4. Types of young people cared for ..... " 76
5. Kinds of youngsters extraneous to the activities of Don Bosco.... " 77
Conclusion ..... " 78

6. **The vital choice: consecrated and sent for a communal mission (1854-1874)** ..... " 79
1. The two dimensions of the Salesian: consecrated and sent ..... " 79
2. The two dimensions inherent in the choice of vocation ..... " 80
3. A strange omission: Don Bosco as a "Salesian" ..... " 81
4. Conditions: the vows ..... " 82
5. In community ..... " 85
6. Two instruments of choesion ..... " 87
7. Communities in development ..... " 89
Conclusion ..... " 90

The fourth day: Personal rapport with Christ ..... " 91

7. **The strategic turning point: the missions** ..... " 94
1. The missionary turning point of the congregation ..... " 95
2. Features of "missionary spirituality" in the "Souvenirs for missionaries" ..... " 97

3. Features of "missionary spirituality" in correspondence with superiors on the missions ... " 99
4. Fragments of spirituality in letters of animation ... " 103
Conclusion ... " 106

8. **The Salesian mission at the present day** ... " 107
1. Mission: *explicatio terminorum* ... " 107
2. The Salesian way of "mediation" ... " 108
3. Phenomenology of attitude to what is "new" ... " 109
4. Three innovations that require careful consideration ... " 111
5. Practical guidelines ... " 114
Conclusion ... " 117

The fifth day: Salesian Holiness ... " 119

9. **Is the policy of the *Pater Noster* still valid?** ... " 123
1. The "political credo"of Don Bosco ... " 123
2. The present-day world ... " 126
3. Some questions we can put to ourselves ... " 128
4. A first step forward: educate ourselves and others to political virtues ... " 131
5. A second step forward: educate ourselves and others to the Christian social virtues ... " 132
Conclusion ... " 132

10. **Don Bosco's preventive system today** ... " 134
1. Premise: relevant Preventive System because put into practice ... " 134
2. Two versions of preventative education ... " 136
3. Greater "openings" for a preventative education ... " 137
4. A new anthropological and theological foundation for "honest citizen and good Christian" ... " 138
5. Pedagogical and psychological concerns ... " 140
6. Holiness and salvation ... " 141
7. The familiar trilogy ... " 142
8. Educator who is father, brother, friend ... " 146
Conclusion ... " 147

The sixth day: Accompanied by the mother ..... " 148

11. **Final homily** ..... " 151

Appendix ..... " 156

An invitation to reflection about congregation's history ..... " 156
Introduction: Relevance of the theme ..... " 156
1. At the Salesian origins ..... " 157
2. The function of History ..... " 158
3. The present situation ..... " 164
4. For a renewed historiography, non contingent and of high profile ... " 166

Index ..... " 171

ASSOCIAZIONE CULTORI STORIA SALESIANA
VARIA

1. Francisco CASTELLANOS HURTADO, *El Colegio Salesiano del Espíritu Santo en Guadalajara (México)*. Roma 2005.

2. Nestor IMPELIDO (ed.), *The Beginnings Of The Salesian Presence In East Asia. Acts Of The Seminar On Salesian History, Hong Kong, 4-6 December 2004. Part One: The Salesians of Don Bosco*. Hong Kong 2006 (in via di preparazione).

3. Nestor IMPELIDO (ed.), *The Beginnings Of The Salesian Presence In East Asia. Acts Of The Seminar On Salesian History, Hong Kong, 4-6 December 2004. Part Two: The Salesian Family (FMA, CSM, SIHM, DQUM, DBV)*. Hong Kong 2006 (in via di preparazione).

4. Francesco MOTTO, *Starting afresh from Don Bosco. Meditations for a Spiritual Retreat*. Roma 2006.

ALTRE PUBBLICAZIONI ISS-ACSSA

MOTTO Francesco (ed.), *Insediamenti e iniziative salesiane dopo don Bosco. Saggi di storiografia*. Istituto Storico Salesiano, Studi 9. Roma, LAS 1996, 595 p.

MOTTO FRANCESCO (ed.), *L'Opera Salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Significatività e portata sociale. 3 voll. Roma, LAS 2001.*

- Vol. I: *Contesti, quadri generali, interpretazioni*. Istituto Storico Salesiano, Studi 16, 469 p.
- Vol. II: *Esperienze particolari in Europa, Africa, Asia*. Istituto Storico Salesiano, Studi 17, 470 p.
- Vol. III: *Esperienze particolari in America Latina*. Istituto Storico Salesiano, Studi 18, 557 p.

Ricerche Storiche Salesiane, 44 (2004) 23-312: *Atti del IV Seminario Europeo dell'ISS-ACSSA. Vienna 30 ottobre – 2 novembre 2003.*

Proprietà riservata all'Associazione Cultori di Storia Salesiana
Via della Pisana, 1111 – 00163 Roma
Tel. 06/656121 – Fax 06/65612650 – internet: www.sdb.org/donBosco/ACSSA
E-mail: issasdb.org – fmotto@sdb.org

Stampa ABILGRAPH - Roma
finito di stampare nel mese di luglio 2006