



SALESIANI DI DON BOSCO
Capitolo Generale 28°

SPIRITUALITY DAYS
19 February 2020

THE PRIORITY OF THE SALESIAN MISSION AMONG THE YOUTH TODAY

Rossano Sala sdb

I wish you all a good day.

We will live together three mornings of spirituality, marked by the three main topics of our General Chapter. These are mornings of "spirituality", and therefore we must not produce anything special. Instead, we are called to do the most important thing, which is to *create the spiritual atmosphere* necessary to face the challenges of our General Chapter. We are called to make concrete, continuous and habitual that *openness to the action of the Spirit* without which any subsequent act will not draw from its own source and therefore will not bear the hoped-for fruits.

We are not gathered here to do pastoral marketing or even to plan our educational action. Nor do we have primarily to produce a document or to hold elections. Our primary task is to listen to the voice of the Father, let ourselves be guided by his Spirit and enter into the feelings of his Son. We are called to live Mary's attitude, so that we can be activated like Martha: "Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, listened to his word" (Lk 10:39).

Aware that every progress can only come from a renewed availability to the action of the Spirit, let us try in this first part of the morning to enter on tiptoe into the first nucleus on which we will have to deliberate in the coming weeks: *The priority of the Salesian mission among the young people of today*. It will not be an easy task, because we will need a careful look at the young people of today and a profound look at the essence of the Salesian mission: only afterwards will we be able to truly identify a few articulated priorities capable of restoring vigor to our educational and pastoral action with and for the young.

As the *Working Instrument* of our General Chapter suggests, I have chosen to tackle this first nucleus of the mission by letting myself be inspired "above all by the passages of the Gospel in which Jesus meets young people and by the passages of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* in which Don Bosco, in beginning his work, identifies the priorities of the mission". Let us therefore immediately seek "the inspiring criteria" for the action of Jesus and "the profound reasons" for Don Bosco's vocational choices.

1. THE CRITERIA THAT INSPIRE THE ACTION OF JESUS TOWARDS THE YOUNG

As Article 10 of our *Salesian Constitutions* well says, "The Salesian spirit finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, the apostle of the Father". And it goes on saying that

Reading the Gospel we become more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord: gratitude to the Father for the gift of a divine vocation offered to all men; predilection for the little ones and the poor; zeal in preaching, healing and saving because of the urgency of the coming of the Kingdom; the preoccupation of the Good Shepherd who wins hearts by gentleness and self-giving; the desire to gather his disciples into the unity of brotherly communion.

It therefore seemed useful and necessary to me to draw your attention to some of Jesus' encounters with young people, so that we can truly be in tune with the attitude, style and method of the "first and greatest evangelizer" (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 12; *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 7). I would like to take into consideration four meetings which in the synodal journey of the last three years have been valued, leaving each of you free to consider other meetings between Jesus and the young people narrated in the Gospels which he considers significant for himself and for the journey of the General Chapter which we are beginning.

1.1. The priority of the mission: Jesus' attention to the poorest and most abandoned young people
Jesus came so that we might all have life and have it in abundance (cf. *Jn* 10:10). For this reason He is not afraid to meet young people who live in a situation of degradation and death, to restore their life, joy and hope. Pope Francis, in n. 20 of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, addressing young people, stated: "If you have lost your inner vitality, your dreams, your enthusiasm, your optimism and your generosity, Jesus stands before you as once he stood before the dead son of the widow, and with all the power of his resurrection he urges you: "Young man, I say to you, arise!" (*Lk* 7:14)".

If we observe that passage carefully (cf. *Lk* 7:11-17), what really makes the difference is the compassion of Jesus, the empathetic listening to a tragic situation, which puts his heart in motion and disposes him to action. An only son of a widowed mother: "Seeing her, the Lord had compassion for her and said to her, "Don't cry!" (cf. *Lk* 7:13). He really suffers with this mother, he enters into that situation and makes it his own. He acts with mercy because he has a living and deep heart.

Let us ask ourselves: how many young people have lost their inner strength, dreams, enthusiasm, hope and generosity? How many young people are alive, but in reality they have died under the rubble of a society that kills their dreams and their expectations? We, like Jesus, are called to give more to those who have had less from life. To make gestures and actions of hope, especially for those who have lost all hope and stopped dreaming.

Another similar episode was well commented during the *Synodal Assembly* and helps us to recognize the intentions of Jesus, a man of great inner freedom and therefore capable of authentic *authority*. This is the episode of the possessed epileptic (cf. *Mk* 9:14-29), which helps us to recognize how much the power of Jesus is truly at the service of the full life of every young person. It is worthwhile to hear again n. 71 of the Final Document of the Synod:

In order to undertake a true journey of maturation, the young need authoritative adults. In its etymological meaning, *auctoritas* indicates the capacity for enabling growth; it does not express the idea of a directive power, but of a real generative force. When Jesus encountered the young, in whatever state and condition they might find themselves, even if they were dead, in one way or another he said to them: "Arise! Grow!" And his word brought about what he was saying (cf. *Mk* 5:41; *Lk* 7:14). In the episode of the healing of the possessed epileptic (cf. *Mk* 9:14-29), which evokes so many of the forms of alienation experienced by young people today, it seems clear that Jesus stretches out his hand not to take away freedom but to activate it, to liberate it. Jesus fully exercises his authority: he wants nothing other than the growth of the young person, without a trace of possessiveness, manipulation or seduction.

Here there are important things that concern us very closely: we are called to recognize the different forms of poverty and alienation of the young people of today; to verify whether the exercise of authority that has been given to us is really correct; to come out of every form of abuse (of power and authority, administrative, conscientious and sexual); to set our educational action in the logic of liberating the freedom of the young and not of chaining them to ourselves.

1.2. *The style and method of the mission: Jesus walking along with the disciples of Emmaus*

In the centre of this first part I will place the text that most inspired the synodal journey, that of Jesus walking with his disciples on their way to Emmaus. Perhaps there we do not speak directly about young people, because the two disciples are probably adults, but it is certain that this episode has really shaped the path of the Church with and for young people today during the whole synodal path. In fact in the Final Document, in n. 4, it is said that

We took the account of the disciples on the way to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35) as paradigmatic for our understanding of the Church's mission to the young. This passage expresses well what we experienced at the Synod and what we would like every one of our particular Churches to experience with regard to the young.

I invite you above all to meditate on the attitudes and behaviour of Jesus.

First of all, he *walks* with the two disciples who have not understood the meaning of his story and are moving away from Jerusalem and the community with sadness. The first step that Jesus teaches us to take is that of *empathetic listening*, that of entering into the feelings of these disappointed disciples, of making them our own, of seeking their reasons. Sometimes the young tell us that we are in "debt of listening" to them, that we find it hard to put ourselves before them with an authentic openness to their real questions and their concrete situations. Jesus invites us first of all to listen. And not only that: He invites us to walk with the young. Jesus first of all wants to be with them, without worrying about the direction of the journey. He is interested in not abandoning them, in being close to them, in creating a close relationship.

Then Jesus **takes the floor**. He becomes dialogue and proclamation. With affection and energy he offers them the correct keys to interpreting what they have lived and what they are living. He is not afraid to speak of the cross, which is the heart of his revelation: totality of donation for the life of all, incomprehensible reality for those who have a hard heart, apparent weakness of God who reveals the maximum of his love. The disciples are called - through the gestures of the Last Supper - to enter into the feeling of Jesus, to convert their positions, to embrace the logic of God, which is both overwhelming and enveloping.

And Jesus, like any true educator, at a certain point disappears from their sight with discretion and elegance, putting the two disciples before their conscience and responsibility. It is important to note that Jesus does not send the disciples back to Jerusalem, but it is they who *choose* to return to the heart of the community to share with them the joy of the Gospel. The presence of Jesus allowed them to truly become themselves, or missionary disciples of that good news that every young person is called to receive and give.

1.3. *Priority in mission: Jesus invites young people to total self-giving*

One of the biblical episodes that was most cited and commented on during the synodal journey was undoubtedly that of the "rich young man" (cf. *Preparatory Document*, II,1; *Instrumentum laboris*, n. 84; *Christus vivit*, n. 17-18.251). In this episode (cf. Mt 19:16-22; Mk 10:17-22) the love of Jesus emerges first of all: "Jesus, staring at him, loved him" (Mk 10:21). A love that surprises and amazes, pointing to the way of friendship as the royal way of a Gospel that does not require servants but friends (cf. Jn 15:15). A God who loves and who therefore calls: there is in fact no love that is not personal and personalizing: love is always love for a concrete person, for a person who is called to enter into friendship and to share a mission. For this reason, in the Gospels, love is always logically followed by a call by name and also by a call that changes the name.

For this reason, addressing the young people during the *Pre-Synodal Meeting* (March 19-24, 2018), Pope Francis expressed himself as follows: "God loves each one of us, and addresses a call to each one personally. It is a gift that, when it is discovered, fills us with joy (cf. Mt 13:44-46). Be sure: God trusts in you; He loves you and he calls to you. And there will never be any shortcoming on his

part, because he is faithful and truly believes in you". The "youth ministry" of Jesus is immediately thought of and implemented in a vocational key and oriented towards the total gift of oneself: to the rich young man Jesus proposes to pass from the logic of having to that of being; to pass from the closed and comfortable logic of the project to the open and risky logic of vocation, from the logic of keeping for oneself to that of giving with generosity.

If we think about it well, it is a question of the full and profound meaning of education, which only in this way draws on its generative nucleus: many times, when we think of education, we immediately go to its maieutic and Socratic sense, to that of *educere* in the sense of "pulling out" from the young person something that is already within him, but that is asleep and passive, to bring out the talents that he already possesses. But Jesus, who is much more than Socrates, goes even deeper, without denying this maieutic dimension of education: he wants to pull the young man out of himself, he wants to help the young man out of his egocentricity, to invite him to go towards others, towards the Kingdom that comes, towards the logic of the Gospel, which is to give his life so that all may have life. So *educere* (*educating*) tells us first of all that we must get out of ourselves, out of our closures, that we must break down our inner walls that isolate us from others. Jesus knows more than anyone that narcissism is the cause of death and he pushes this young man out of himself to become a gift for others.

Pope Francis hits the mark when he tries to push every young person into the *ecstasy of life* (this concept of the "ecstasy of life" is very dear to us, because it comes directly from Saint Francis de Sales: cf. *Treatise on the Love of God*, VII, 6-8): "How wonderful it would be to experience this "ecstasy" of coming out of ourselves and seeking the good of others, even to the sacrifice of our lives" (*Christus vivit*, n. 163). It is the ecstasy of charity, of love as a gift of oneself! This thought is strong and propulsive, and it is then developed in the next issue:

When an encounter with God is called an "ecstasy", it is because it takes us out of ourselves, lifts us up and overwhelms us with God's love and beauty. Yet we can also experience ecstasy when we recognize in others their hidden beauty, their dignity and their grandeur as images of God and children of the Father. The Holy Spirit wants to make us come out of ourselves, to embrace others with love and to seek their good. (*Christus vivit*, n. 164).

It is clear that not only young people are called to the "ecstasy of life". Every Christian community, every local Church and the Church as a whole must allow itself to be reformed by this type of ecstasy, which has nothing to do with strange forms of spiritualism.

We too, as the Salesian Congregation, during this General Chapter, must feel called to embrace a pastoral style characterized by this type of ecstasy, because it is at the root of the life of Don Bosco, who kept nothing for himself, but gave himself all for the good of the young: "For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life" (*Salesian Constitutions*, art. 14). Precisely then we must return to Don Bosco, and so we go towards the second part of our meditation.

2. THE PROFOUND REASONS FOR THE VOCATIONAL CHOICES OF DON BOSCO

If on the one hand the *Working Instrument* of our General Chapter invited us to let ourselves be inspired "above all by the passages of the Gospel in which Jesus meets young people", on the other hand it impels us to review the "passages of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* in which Don Bosco, in beginning his work, identifies the priorities of the mission". Here too the choices could be many, because the text of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* is very rich in episodes from which to draw inspiration to identify today the priorities of the mission among young people.

I have chosen to enhance three points where Don Bosco, through a work of authentic discernment in the Spirit, identifies the priorities of the mission among the young people of his time: the first is the meeting with the young prisoners and the birth of the first idea of an oratory; the second is the dream of the shepherdess or of the three stops, which Don Bosco recognizes as a program for his

vocational decisions; the third is the comparison with the Marquise of Barolo and the definitive priority vocational choice of Don Bosco for the poor and abandoned young people.

2.1. The first idea of the oratory: the wisdom of Don Cafasso and the meeting with young prisoners

We know that the young John Bosco, after his priestly ordination, did not throw himself headlong into pastoral activity, but attended the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* for three years (1841-1844). Years of deepening moral theology in academic activity, time for targeted pastoral experiences designed for students, years of closeness to spiritual figures of impressive stature. Don Bosco would say, recalling that beautiful experience that forged his pastoral heart, that while in the seminaries dogma and speculation were being studied, at the *Convitto* "one learns to be a priest". Here Don Bosco completed his regular two-year study programme and then, under the wise advice of Don Cafasso, stayed for a third year. In these years, according to the Memoirs of the Oratory, the first oratorical experiences of Don Bosco began, his first "pastoral experiments" that gradually matured to become a school of holiness for young people and educators.

The first thing that emerges from the story is that, as always, Don Bosco does not act alone or with his own mind, but makes constant reference to a guide: "Don Cafasso, who had been my guide for six years, was my spiritual director, and if I did something good I owe it to this worthy ecclesiastical in whose hands I rest every deliberation, every study, every action of my life". He follows his teacher, living with confidence the experiences that this holy man makes him live. And for this reason he also goes to the prison:

It was he who first took me into the prisons, where I soon learned how great was the malice and misery of mankind. I saw large numbers of young lads aged from 12 to 18, fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind, but seeing them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me. Public disgrace, family dishonour, and personal shame were personified in those unfortunates. What shocked me most was to see that many of them were released full of good resolutions to go straight, and yet in a short time they landed back in prison, within a few days of their release. (*Second decade*, 11).

He sees the malice and misery of men, he is astonished at the health and ingenuity of these young people, he is horrified to see them unhealthy and gnawed by insects. He is moved by the unhappiness of those boys, who were just like sheep without a shepherd, with no one able to gather this scattered flock. And he studies the matter, realizes that there were good intentions in them, but not accompanied by anyone outside the prison. And he thinks, and prays. He does not improvise hasty solutions, but he puts himself in genuine discernment.

And here one sees how the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* was not only a place of pastoral experience, but also of pastoral reflection on the reality encountered. Don Bosco patiently and intelligently searches for the reasons for failure and also for the solution:

On such occasions I found out how quite a few were brought back to that place; it was because they were abandoned to their own resources. "Who knows?" I thought to myself, "if these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them religion on feast days . . . Who knows but they could be steered away from ruin, or at least the number of those who return to prison could be lessened?" I talked this idea over with Fr Cafasso. With his encouragement and inspiration I began to work out in my mind how to put the idea into practice, leaving to the Lord's grace what the outcome would be. Without God's grace, all human effort is vain.

And here is a first conclusion: the young Piedmontese priest finds some viable pastoral paths, confronts himself with his spiritual guide and follows his advice, starting to study and placing his commitment in the hands of God, who alone can make every human action fruitful. This is how the

first idea of a "Salesian oratory" was generated in Don Bosco's heart. Not in any other way: for us this is a method to be assumed!

2.2. *The programme of the mission: the dream of the shepherdess or of the three stops*

At the center of listening to the charism of this morning we put an important dream. It seems to me that this important dream lies right at the center between two great moments in the life of Don Bosco: the initial dream of the nine years - to which Don Bosco has always given central importance in his vocational life - and the final moment of the Mass among the tears celebrated at the Sacred Heart Church of Rome, where he thinks back to that first dream and sees it fulfilled in all his existential journey. I think that the dream of the shepherdess - called also "of the three stops" -, intensification and specification of that of the nine years, has the same meaning that the story of the disciples of Emmaus had in the synodal journey: that is, it gave the style and the method to the whole journey covered. Don Bosco himself, returning to it, says that it served him as a "programme" for subsequent deliberations.

Everything in those moments was uncertain: indeed, apart from Don Bosco's self-confidence and his confidence in the designs of Divine Providence, the texts of that period of his life speak of a great effort to recognize God's designs. Don Bosco, like Mary and like all the disciples of the Lord, had to walk in faith, which he sees only when he sets out with abandonment and availability. The evening before the communication of the umpteenth transfer of the Oratory, this time to Valdocco, Don Bosco goes to bed with a restless heart: and "on that night I had a new dream that seems to be an appendix to that made to the Becchi when I was nine years old".

We start from a multitude of animals of every race that frightened and made Don Bosco flee, while a Lady told him to go ahead with them, while she preceded them. Then three stops and "at each stop many of those animals changed into lambs, so that the number of lambs grew larger and larger". The first passage is clear, very similar to the first dream: "Four fifths of those animals had become lambs".

Then there was a new problem: there were many little shepherds who arrived, but immediately they left again:

Then something wonderful happened. Many of the lambs were transformed into shepherds, who as they grew took care of the others. As the number of shepherds became great, they split up and went to other places to gather other strange animals and guide them into other folds.

In the dream follows the vision of the Church with the inscription *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea* and the promise of understanding everything that was happening in the dream with the passing of time. The conclusion of the story is profound and important: "This dream lasted most of the night. I saw it all in great detail. But at the time I understood little of its meaning since I put little faith in it. But I understood little by little as the dream began to come true. Later, together with another dream, it served as a blueprint for my decisions".

In this dream there is the vocational key to Don Bosco's pastoral commitment, there is the beginning and the essence of the Congregation and of the Salesian Family: Don Bosco's vocation becomes for us a renewed *convocation* for the good of so many young people. From wolves, to lambs, to shepherds: this is the vocational journey that awaits us!

Above all, and once again, there is a Don Bosco who puts himself in the wake of obedience to Mary who, as in the dream of nine years, is without doubt the true Teacher of the journey. How can we be Salesians of Don Bosco without a renewed trust in Mary, without putting ourselves back at her school with humility and simplicity, without recognizing that "without Mary Help of Christians we Salesians are nothing", as the Salesian proto-martyr Luigi Versiglia well affirmed?

Finally, there is Don Bosco who allows himself to be guided by the spirit, that in his existence was manifested many times through dreams and visions, which even today we urgently need. Let us not give up dreaming of the great, especially in times of crisis, let us not give up daring to take new paths, because in a "change of age" like ours this is what God and his Church expect from us!

2.3. *The irrevocable choice: giving one's life for young people, to the last breath*

A third and final episode that I would like to draw to your attention is the dramatic and decisive dialogue between young Don Bosco and the Marchioness Barolo, at whose service he was at that time.

First of all, we note that this holy woman is sincerely concerned with the health and mission of Don Bosco among the young, so much so that she feels obliged to push him to a precise choice, because "You cannot possibly continue to direct my works and that of your abandoned boys, especially now that their number has increased beyond counting". The Marchioness's proposal is quite clear: she asks Don Bosco to "give up all care for the youngsters".

I repeat, the concern of the Marchioness is sincere, because

"I cannot allow you to kill yourself. Whether you like it or not, so many diverse activities are detrimental to your health and my institutions. And then there are the gossip about your mental health and the opposition of the local authorities, which oblige me to advise you. (...) Give up either the work for boys or the work at the Refuge. Think about it and let me know."

All the reasons are against Don Bosco: his health, the lack of means, the rumours about his alleged madness, the lack of collaborators, the opposition of the authorities. But the Gospel – we know – at decisive moments is not reasonable, it is loving! Don Bosco, in reality, had already prayed it over and thought about it, and his answer is as clear as water and as hard as a diamond:

"I can tell you right now. You have money and will have no trouble in finding as many priests as you want for your institutes. It's not the same with the poor youngsters. If I turn my back on them at his time, all I've been doing for them now will go up in smoke. Therefore, while I will continue to do what I can for the Refuge, I will resign from any regular responsibility and devote myself seriously to the care of abandoned youngsters."

The vocational motivation is dictated by love for the young: if Don Bosco does not take care of the poor children no one else will do so in his place. This speaks of the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the vocation, which needs to be honoured in the first person singular and in the first person plural, because every authentic vocation will always and in any case become a convocation. Don Bosco's vocational motivation is clear: if he does not make this commitment - which in prayer he recognized as God's request for his life - young people will truly be abandoned to themselves. This is his vocation, and nobody else's. This is his singular and unrepeatable call, which he has the duty to welcome to the end, whatever it takes!

All the rest of the dialogue is a logical consequence of this *irrevocable vocational position*. Don Bosco will have, as Marchioness Barolo prophesied, problems of material survival, his health will be ruined, he will be full of debts, he will have difficulties with both civil and ecclesiastical authorities, and so on. The different threats and offers of this woman are to no avail ("I will never give you a penny (*soldo*) for your boys [...] I will continue to pay your salary, and I will increase it if you wish").

Don Bosco has nothing else to say but to repeat what he had already said: "I've thought it over already, My Lady Marchioness. My life is consecrated to the good of young people. I thank you for the offers you're making to me, but I can't turn back from the path which Divine Providence has traced out for me". The result was a dismissal on the spot: "So you prefer your vagabonds to my institutes? In that case, you are dismissed from this moment". After a brief dialogue, they decided to close it all in three months: "I accepted my dismissal, abandoning myself to whatever God's plan for me might be". And then the episode ends, logically, with Don Bosco considered crazy: he renounces to a comfortable and safe life to put himself on the street with his boys!

Here we have a Don Bosco who chooses, like the two disciples of Emmaus, to be on the side of the Lord, to take risks and dare to keep faith with the vocation received from the hands of the Lord

Jesus, who acted through the mediation of Mary. Like those two mysterious wayfarers, Don Bosco also enters the night to remain on the side of the Lord and of the poor and abandoned young people. A night that, we know well, will manifest itself in his life in many ways: misunderstandings inside and outside the Church, physical hardships and economic difficulties, abandonment and misunderstanding, and much more.

But nothing could ever really distract Don Bosco from his accepted vocation: "I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys". (cf. Salesian Constitutions, art. 1). This is what Don Bosco promised and did; this should also happen to every son worthy of such a great father; this should be promised before God and also reaffirmed in deed by our 28th General Chapter.

Translation by: Fr Franco Pirisi



SALESIANI DI DON BOSCO
Capitolo Generale 28°

SPIRITUALITY DAYS
19 February 2020

THE PRIORITY OF THE SALESIAN MISSION AMONG THE YOUTH OF TODAY

Texts for prayer and meditation

1

THE CRITERIA THAT INSPIRE THE ACTION OF JESUS

JESUS RAISES THE WIDOW'S SON AT NAIN (Lk 7:11-17)

¹¹ Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹² As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” ¹⁴ Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. ¹⁶ They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” ¹⁷ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

JESUS HEALS A BOY POSSESSED BY AN IMPURE SPIRIT (Mk 9:14-29)

¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. ¹⁶ “What are you arguing with them about?” he asked. ¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.” ¹⁹ “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” ²⁰ So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. ²² “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” ²³ “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” ²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?” ²⁹ He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

JESUS ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS WITH THE DISCIPLES (Lk 24:13-35)

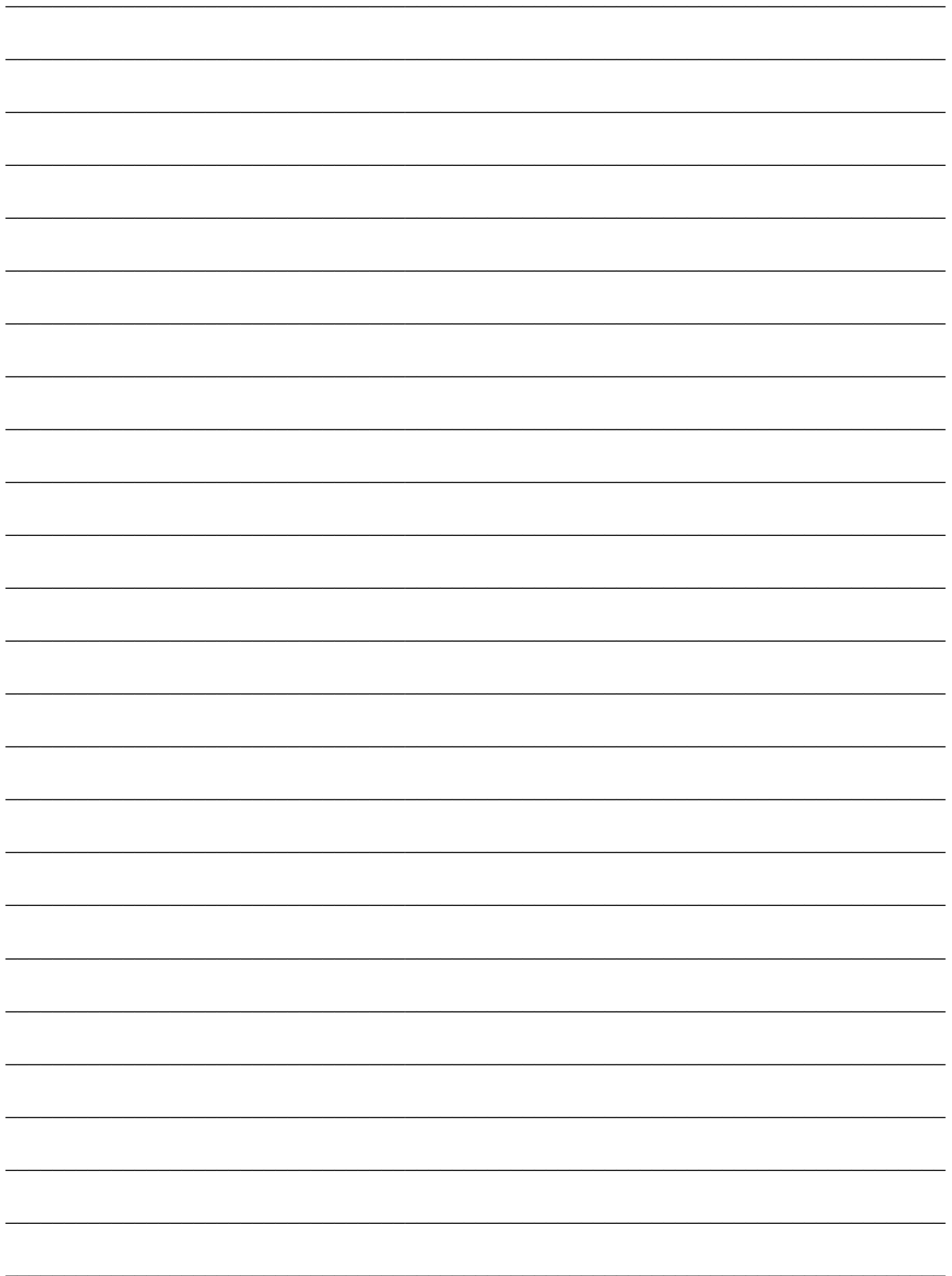
¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” ¹⁹ “What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.” ²⁵ He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. ²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” ³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

THE RICH YOUNG MAN (Matthew's Version: Mt 19:16-22)

¹⁶ Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” ¹⁷ “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸ “Which ones?” he inquired. Jesus replied, “‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” ²⁰ “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” ²¹ Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” ²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

THE RICH YOUNG MAN (Mark's Version: Mk 10:17-22)

¹⁷ As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” ²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” ²² At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.



THE PROFOUND REASONS FOR THE VOCATIONAL CHOICES OF DON BOSCO

The texts are taken from: *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales* from 1815 to 1855, in ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Fonti salesiane 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, Rome, LAS 2014, 1170-1308.

MEMOIRS OF THE ORATORY, *Second decade*, 11 (pp. 1232-1235)

The "Convitto Ecclesiastico" of St. Francis of Assisi

At the end of the holidays, I had three situations to choose from. I could have taken a post as tutor in the house of a Genoese gentleman with a salary of a thousand francs a year. The good people of Murialdo were so anxious to have me as their chaplain that they were prepared to double the salary paid to chaplains up to then. Last, I could have become a curate in my native parish. Before I made a final choice, I sought out Fr Caffasso in Turin to ask his advice. For several years now he had been my guide in matters both spiritual and temporal. That holy priest listened to everything, the good money offers, the pressures from relatives and friends, my own goodwill to work. Without a moment's hesitation, this is what he said: "You need to study moral theology and homiletics. For the present, forget all these offers and come to the Convitto." I willingly followed his wise advice; on 3 November 1841, I enrolled at the Convitto. The Convitto Ecclesiastico completed, you might say, the study of theology. In the seminary we studied only dogma, and that speculative; and in moral theology only controversial issues. Here one learnt to be a priest. Meditation, spiritual reading, two conferences a day, lessons in preaching, a secluded life, every convenience for study, reading good authors — these were the areas of learning to which we had to apply ourselves. At that time, two prominent men were in charge of this most useful institution: Doctor Louis Guala and Fr Joseph Caffasso. Doctor Guala was the work's founder. An unselfish man, rich in knowledge, prudent, and fearless, he was everyone's friend in the days of the regime of Napoleon I. He founded that extraordinary seedbed where young priests fresh from their seminary courses could learn the practical aspects of their sacred ministry. This proved very valuable to the Church, especially as a means of eradicating the vestiges of Jansenism that still persisted in our midst. Amongst other topics the most controversial was the question of Probabilism and Probabiliorism. Chief amongst the former's advocates were Alasia and Antoine, along with other rigorist authors. The practice of this doctrine can lead to Jansenism. The Probabilists followed the teaching of St Alphonsus, who has now been proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. His authority can be called the theology of the Pope since the Church has proclaimed that his works can be taught, preached, and practised, as they contain nothing worthy of censure. Dr. Guala took a strong stance between the two parties; starting from the principle that the charity of O.L.J.C." should be the inspiration of all systems, he was able to bring the two extremes together. Things came together so well that, thanks to Doctor Guala, St Alphonsus become our theological patron. This was a salutary step, long de- sired, and now we are reaping its benefit. Fr Caffasso was Guala's right-hand man. His virtue, which withstood all tests, his amazing calm, his shrewd insight, and his prudence enabled him to overcome the acrimony that was still alive in some probabiliorists against the Liguorians. Dr. Felix Golzio, a hidden gold mine amongst the Turinese clergy, was also at the Convitto. In his modest life- style he was hardly noticeable. But he was a tireless worker, humble and knowledgeable; he was a real support, or better, Guala and Caffasso's right-hand man. The prisons, hospitals, pulpits, charitable institutes the sick in their homes, the cities, the villages, and we might add, the mansions of the rich and the hovels of the poor felt the salutary effects of the zeal of these three luminaries of the Turinese clergy. These were the three models placed in my path by Divine Providence. It was just up to me to follow their example, their teaching, their virtues. Caffasso, who for six years had been my guide, was especially my spiritual director. If I have been able to do any good, I owe it to this worthy priest in whose hands I placed every decision I made, all my study, and every activity of my life. It

was he who first took me into the prisons, where I soon learned how great was the malice and misery of mankind. I saw large numbers of young lads aged from 12 to 18, fine healthy youngsters, alert of mind, but seeing them idle there, infested with lice, lacking food for body and soul, horrified me. Public disgrace, family dishonour, and personal shame were personified in those unfortunates. What shocked me most was to see that many of them were released full of good resolutions to go straight, and yet in a short time they landed back in prison, within a few days of their release. On such occasions I found out how quite a few were brought back to that place; it was because they were abandoned to their own resources. "Who knows?" I thought to myself, "if these youngsters had a friend outside who would take care of them, help them, teach them religion on feast days . . . Who knows but they could be steered away from ruin, or at least the number of those who return to prison could be lessened?" I talked this idea over with Fr Caffasso. With his encouragement and inspiration I began to work out in my mind how to put the idea into practice, leaving to the Lord's grace what the outcome would be. Without God's grace, all human effort is vain.

MEMOIRS OF THE ORATORY, *Second decade*, 15 (pp. 1241-1242)

Another dream

In the second Sunday in October 1844, I had to tell my boys that the Oratory would be moving to Valdocco. But the uncertainty of place, means, and personnel had me really worried. The previous evening I had gone to bed with an uneasy heart. That night I had another dream, which seems to be an appendix to the one I had at Becchi when I was nine years old. I think it advisable to relate it literally. I dreamt that I was standing in the middle of a multitude of wolves, goats and kids, lambs, ewes, rams, dogs, even birds. All together they made a din, a racket, or better, a bedlam to frighten the stoutest heart. I wanted to run away, when a lady dressed as a shepherdess signaled me to follow her and accompany that strange flock while she went ahead. We wandered from place to place, making three stations or stops. Each time we stopped, many of the animals were turned into lambs, and their number continually grew. After we had walked a long way, I found myself in a field where all the animals grazed and gambled together and none made attacks on the others. Worn out, I wanted to sit down beside a nearby road, but the shepherdess invited me to continue the trip. After another short journey, I found myself in a large courtyard with porticoes all round. At one end was a church. I then saw that four-fifths of the animals had been changed into lambs and their number greatly increased. Just then, several shepherds came along to take care of the flock; but they stayed only a very short time and promptly went away.

Then something wonderful happened. Many of the lambs were transformed into shepherds, who as they grew took care of the others. As the number of shepherds became great, they split up and went to other places to gather other strange animals and guide them into other folds. I wanted to be off because it seemed to me time to celebrate Mass; but the shepherdess invited me to look to the south. I looked and saw a field sown with maize, potatoes, cabbages, beetroot, lettuce, and many other vegetables. "Look again," she said to me. I looked again and saw a wondrously big church. An orchestra and music, both instrumental and vocal, were inviting me to sing Mass. Inside the church hung a white banner on which was written in huge letters, *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea*.

As my dream continued, I wanted to ask the shepherdess where I was. And I wanted to know the meaning of that journey with its halts, the house, the church, then the other church. "You will understand everything when you see in fact with your bodily eyes what you are looking at now with the eyes of your mind." Thinking that I was awake, I said, "I see clearly, and I see with my bodily eyes. I know where I'm going and what I'm doing." But at that moment the bell of the Church of St Francis sounded the Ave Maria, and I woke up.

This dream lasted most of the night. I saw it all in great detail. But at the time I understood little of its meaning since I put little faith in it. But I understood little by little as the dream began to come true. Later, together with another dream, it served as a blueprint for my decisions.

MEMOIRS OF THE ORATORY, *Second decade*, 22 (pp. 1256-1258)

Good-bye to the Refuge • Fresh imputation of insanity

Marchioness Barolo became alarmed by all that was being said about Don Bosco, especially because the city council of Turin were opposed to my projects. One day she came to my room to speak to me. She began, "I am very pleased with the care you take of my institutions. Thank you for all you have done to introduce in them hymn-singing, plainchant, music, arithmetic, and even the metric system." "No thanks necessary. These are duties which priests must perform. God will repay everything. No need to mention it further."

"I wanted to say that I regret very much how your multiple occupations have undermined your health. You cannot possibly continue to direct my works and that of your abandoned boys, especially now when their number has increased beyond counting. I propose to you that from now on you concentrate just on your obligations, that is, the direction of my little hospital. You should stop visiting the prisons and the Cottolengo and give up all your care for the youngsters. What do you say to that?"

"My Lady Marchioness, God has helped me up to now and will not fail me in the future. Don't worry about what should be done. Fr Pacchiotti, Dr Borrelli, and I will do everything."

"But I cannot allow you to kill yourself. Whether you like it or not, so many diverse activities are detrimental to your health and my institutions. And then there are the gossip about your mental health and the opposition of the local authorities, which oblige me to advise you..."

"Advise me to do what, My Lady Marchioness?"

"Give up either the work for boys or the work at the Refuge. Think about it and let me know."

"I can tell you right now. You have money and will have no trouble in finding as many priests as you want for your institutes. It's not the same with the poor youngsters. If I turn my back on them at his time, all I've been doing for them now will go up in smoke. Therefore, while I will continue to do what I can for the Refuge, I will resign from any regular responsibility and devote myself seriously to the care of abandoned youngsters."

"But how will you be able to live?"

"God has always helped me, and he'll help me also in the future."

"But your health is ruined; you're no longer thinking straight. You'll be engulfed in debt, You'll come to me, and I tell you here and now that I'll never give you a *soldo* for your boys. Now take my motherly advice. I'll continue to pay your salary, and I'll increase it if you wish. Go away and rest somewhere for a year, three years, five years. When you're back to health, come back to the Refuge and you'll be most welcome. Otherwise you put me in the unpleasant position of having to dismiss you from my institutes. Think it over seriously."

"I've thought it over already, My Lady Marchioness. My life is consecrated to the good of young people. I thank you for the offers you're making me, but I can't turn back from the path which Divine Providence has traced out for me."

"So you prefer your vagabonds' to my institutes? In that case, you are dismissed from this moment. This very day I shall arrange for somebody to take your place."

I pointed out to her that such a sudden dismissal would give rise to conjectures that would do neither of us credit. It would be better to act calmly and preserve between us that charity about which we should both have to answer before the Lord's tribunal.

"In that case," she concluded, "I give you three months' notice. After that you will leave the direction of my little hospital to others."

I accepted my dismissal, abandoning myself to whatever God's plan for me might be.⁵

Meanwhile, the reports that Don Bosco had gone mad were gaining strength. My friends were grieved; others were amused. But they all kept far away from me. The archbishop did not interfere. Fr Caffasso advised me to bide my time; Dr Borrelli kept quiet. Thus all my helpers left me alone in the midst of about four hundred boys.

At this point I understood their game, and without letting on that I had them figured out, I walked with them to the carriage, insisting that they get in first and take their places. But instead of getting in there myself, I slammed the door shut and called out to the coachman, "Straight to the asylum with all speed. They're expecting these two priests there."

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



PROFILE OF TODAY'S SALESIAN

What kind of Salesians for young people today?

RECOGNIZE

Their eyes were opened and they recognized him (Lk.24:31)

A WORLD ON FIRE

“Today the World is on fire ... what are we doing about it?”ⁱ

These words are as relevant today as when they were spoken by St Teresa of Avila in 1577. Living at the time of the reformation, of changing political and religious landscapes, how did she respond? by igniting another fire, gathering around her women who lived a life of contemplation through developing friendship with Christ.

What kind of Carmelite was she looking for?

“Determined women, so determined that they would frighten men” – after all, she writes, “it was women who remained faithful at the foot of the cross when most of the men had fled.”ⁱⁱ She knew they needed this perseverance and endurance if they were to take seriously the inward journey of contemplative prayer, understood as friendship with Christ. This Teresian understanding of prayer, as friendship with Christ, is the basis of a Salesian understanding of prayer as *heart to heart*. St Francis de Sales speaks of God as ‘friend of our heart’ⁱⁱⁱ and Don Bosco experiences *The Spiritual Exercises* as ‘a series of meditations and instructions that bring us into God’s friendship.’^{iv} It is this friendship with Christ that we are called to nurture and share with the young.

Today the World is on fire - We also live in troubled times where in the Western world a disturbing split has opened up between contemporary culture and our Christian faith tradition, described by St Pope Paul VI as nothing less than ‘the drama of our time.’^v This is eminently true in the rupture between our inherited religious vision and culture and the lived experience of many young people today. We are living in a time of rapid change, secularization and uncertainty. Many countries that were former bastions of Christian values have gone through such rapid change that ‘there is a profound redrawing of our moral landscape.’^{vi} The recent amazon fires capture vividly the threats to our world today: climate change, the displacement of peoples, refugees, political instability, ethnic cleansing, wars, religious persecution.

Recognizing this as the world of the young today, we ask:

What kind of Salesians for young people today?

GENTLENESS AND LOVING-KINDNESS

If ‘determination’ was the supreme quality required of Carmelites so that they would persevere on the road of contemplation, what is foundational for us as Salesians? Let’s return to the dream of nine: “you will have to win these friends of yours not by blows but by gentleness and love.”^{vii} The hallmark of Salesian spirituality is gentleness and loving kindness. (Working on the pre-chapter commission, I did a word search on the documents received from the provinces only to find one reference to gentleness. I found that quite interesting.) As Salesians are we rooted in gentleness and loving kindness or have we

become uprooted? Let us not forget Don Bosco's own pre-ordination resolutions: "may the charity and gentleness of St Francis de Sales guide me in everything."^{viii} He specifically chooses St Francis de Sales as patron "because those who intend to dedicate themselves to this kind of work should adopt this saint as a model of charity and affability."^{ix} Here we see how there is a spiritual affinity between the two great saints, an affinity which revolves around gentleness and loving kindness – Don Bosco resonates with St Francis de Sales which explains why it is not an arbitrary choice but a discernment of spirits, revealing that charismatic element that belongs specifically to the Salesian Charism.

As St Francis de Sales reminds us: 'there is nothing so strong as gentleness and nothing so gentle as real strength.'^x So, later in the dream when Mary counsels the young Bosco she states: "make yourself humble, strong and energetic.' In so doing, she teaches us the link between gentleness and humility. This is simply an elaboration of Salesian gentleness which takes its inspiration from Jesus as 'gentle and humble of heart' (Mt.11:29). St Francis de Sales states:

'Our Lord, had founded his doctrine on these words: Be my disciples for I am gentle and humble of heart. Why does God attract us? Because he is kind: The spirit of gentleness is the Spirit of God.'^{xi}

Salesian gentleness (*douceur*) is the spirit of the beatitudes, a gift of the Spirit that enables us to live in imitation of the humility and gentleness of Jesus. It is not, as sometimes misinterpreted, a way of being nice! Such gentleness requires self-mastery and discipline because it demands that "we suppress the movements of anger, that we are gentle, cordial, and full of meekness towards everybody, that we forgive our enemies, and suffer contempt." It is the gentleness of the Beatitudes. It is not surprising, therefore, that St Francis de Sales should conclude that such gentleness "is difficult, especially for one who is not a person of great prayer."^{xii} If there is an absence of gentleness in our communities, among the young and our co-workers, could this be a reflection of the lack of prayer? I simply raise the question. As Salesians, we are called to be gentle, humble and strong – is this possible without prayer? Gentleness, in short, is an attunement of our will to Jesus who is meek and humble of heart. Don Bosco writes to us:

My sons, in my long experience very often I had to be convinced of this great truth: [That] it is easier to become angry than to restrain oneself, and to threaten a boy than to persuade him.... We must be firm but kind, and be patient with them... This was the method that Jesus used with the apostles. He put up with their ignorance and roughness and even their infidelity. He treated sinners with a kindness and affection that caused some to be shocked, others to be scandalized, and still others to hope for God's mercy. And so, he bade us to be gentle and humble of heart.'^{xiii}

What would our Salesian communities be like if gentleness reigned over anger? What would our relationship with young people be like if they were marked by gentleness devoid of verbal abuse or uncontrolled and unprocessed anger? What would our co-operation with lay people be like without any angry outbursts or passive aggression? Let us make St Paul's prayer our own for the Salesians today:

Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. (Eph. 4:2)

INTERPRET

This is my beloved Son, listen to him (Lk.9:35)

What kind of Salesians for young people today?

If you expect me to give an answer to the question you will be disappointed! Like a good Irish man, we answer questions by asking more questions!!! Reflecting on the data received from the provinces on the profile of Salesians today, the commission noticed a twofold tendency or temptation:

- 1) Presenting an idealized view of the Salesian as a kind of superman, an impossible ideal that no-one could possibly reach;
- 2) or else, presenting quite a negative image which seemed to underscore our failures and inability to live up to the ideal.

As St Francis de Sales reminds us, the truth does not lie at extremes – we must have a balanced perspective which is derived from humility that seeks the truth – the truth is that we are both gifted and flawed, God has blessed us with gifts for his service but there is always room for us to develop and use those gifts more.

Let us not forget that the question:

What kind of Salesians for young people today?

is not addressed to us as individuals but, above all, as Salesians who are entrusted with a community-based mission for the young. ‘Each of us is called by God to form part of the Salesian Society... we put ourselves and our gifts at the service of the community and of its common tasks (Const. 22) ... Brotherly love, our apostolic mission and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the bonds which form us into one and constantly reinforce our communion. We thus become one heart and one soul to love and serve God and to help one another’ (Const.3 & 50). The question addresses us as Salesians living, working and praying together in community. It is not a question which is looking for the ideal Salesian (who doesn’t exist anyway); nor a Superman Salesian; nor is the question asking us to take a Salesian selfie! The question is not about image, the way we see ourselves or the way others see us. This question is very much a question about our identity as Salesians. It seems to me that there is a threefold emphasis in this question: ***Salesians - young people - today.***

Let us now return to the question: *What kind of Salesians for young people today?*

Are we asking the young? Are we asking our co-workers and members of the Salesian family? Are we asking ourselves? There are many responses and different expectations, but what about God? I honestly believe that this question is changed significantly, when we address it to God and ask:

Lord, what kind of Salesians for young people today?

At first, it may appear that I’m just playing with words, but it does change our focus considerably when we address the Lord with this question. Why? Because the focus is no longer on ourselves. We give the centre back to God and we are invited to listen and ponder, like Mary, so as to be taught by him. We are not being asked to come up with the answer, we are being asked to receive the answer from him. It puts us, like Mary, into the position of receptivity where we seek and surrender to his will. Just as Don Bosco was shown through Mary’s intercession in his dream of nine – ‘this is your field of work, make yourself humble, gentle and strong... etc. ***We, too, as Salesians of today, need to receive our mission from the Lord.*** No doubt there will be many opinions expressed during the Chapter, but let’s hope that we bring these viewpoints into prayer so that the Lord may surprise us with his perspective.

Lord, what kind of Salesians do you want for young people today?

What does God expect of us? Do we know what God wants us to be? Do we allow God to show us his field of work as he did for the young Bosco? When I bring this question into prayer, *Lord, what kind of Salesians for young people today?* I'm unable to arrive at an answer, but instead, I experience an invitation – *Come to me*. This makes sense because if we are to learn from *Jesus, gentle and humble of heart*, then, we must first respond to his invitation – ‘Come to me all you who labour and are over-burdened and I will give you rest’ (Mt.11:28-30). It is only then that we can learn from him. Responding to the Lord's invitation is the first, and non-negotiable step, in discovering *What kind of Salesians for young people today?* When I stay with this invitation – *Come to me* – there follows a deeper invitation – *Remain in me* – “make your home in me as I make mine in you” (Jn.15:4.) It is only if we are faithful to this invitation that, like Don Bosco, we will discover “it is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit, and then you will be my disciples” (Jn.15:8)

Biblically, it seems to me that there is a step always before we can see or recognize. That step is to listen to God's Word. If we take the two disciples of Emmaus, who are deflated because they had hoped and their expectations were not realized, they are unable to see or recognize the Lord. It is only when they enter into conversation with him, listening to the Word that they hear him and, then, ‘their eyes are opened and they recognize him’ (Lk.24:31). In short, we need to hear before we can see; we need to listen to the Word, only then can we interpret and understand.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Unless you undergo a *change of heart* and become like children, you will not enter my heavenly kingdom. (Mt. 18:3)

For us as Salesians, following in the steps of Don Bosco, the world of the young is a privileged place where we encounter God. It is our ‘burning bush’ where God reveals himself to us, but like Moses, we need to take off our shoes, turn aside from our own things to see God doing something new, “I will go and see this amazing sight?” Like Moses, we must allow ourselves to be drawn by God, to have a sense of wonder. This is why it is so important for us to listen to the young, but even more importantly, ***we need to listen to what God is saying to us through them.***

It is the young, especially the poor and those most in need, who teach us how to become childlike. If we are to ‘undergo a change of heart’ and ‘become like children’, then, we need to learn to receive from God. Our God loves to give. Let us now, revisit the question from a totally different perspective. What if God addresses us in the question:

My Salesian brothers, what do you want me to give you today?

What would you ask for? This is the same question that God addresses to Solomon ‘What am I to give you?’ (1kgs 3:5). I wonder how many of us would respond like Solomon: ‘Lord, grant me a listening heart ... so that I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil’ (1kgs.3:9). Without this “listening heart” we will be unable to enter into the realm of the Spirit; Without this “listening heart” we will be unable to see God's plan because if we do not listen to the Word, we will not see and our eyes cannot be opened.

We have already listened to various voices during our provincial chapters, but God is inviting us *now* to listen even more deeply at this General Chapter. It is a “provocation” for everyone. It is the voice of the Spirit that impels us to ask ourselves questions, to “examine our own works”, to “revise”, to “repent and convert.” “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says.” It is the Spirit who speaks also to us and who invites us to listen (Cf. Rev. 2: 1-29).^{xiv}

Mary, Spouse of the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us as our mother and teacher is our exemplar. She teaches us how to prepare ourselves to receive a “listening heart,” because she pondered all these things in her heart. Let us pray that through Mary’s intercession we may receive wisdom from the Holy Spirit to guide us as “we bring out of our storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Mt.13:52).

It is interesting to note that Solomon receives his ‘listening heart’ when he is asleep; St Joseph discovers God’s will and changes his own plans when an Angel visits him in his sleep; We have countless examples of God revealing himself to Don Bosco in his dreams as he slept. Perhaps we should spend less time talking and more time asleep in this Chapter! It seems to me that when we are asleep, we offer God less resistance. Sometimes it may be our very words, and discussions that get in the way of what God wants to tell us. A “listening heart” enables us to set aside our agendas in order to receive God’s direction. ***If, and when, we listen to God the script changes.*** No longer do we go by our expectations, but discover, God is presenting us with even greater possibilities than we could have imagined. Possibilities that were never in our original script.

When we speak we already know what we want to say, but when we truly listen, we are changed, because we may learn something new. Salesian spirituality offers us the following challenge: *Do I listen to reply or to understand?* As Pope Francis reminds us:

Only if we are prepared to listen, do we have the freedom to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas... In this way, we become truly open to accepting a call that can shatter our security, but lead us to a better life. It is not enough that everything be calm and peaceful. God may be offering us something more, but in our comfortable inadvertence, we do not recognize it.”^{xv}

CHOOSE

His mother said to the Servants: “Do whatever He tells you” (Jn.2:5)

Mary is able to direct the servants because of her “listening heart” – she is able to ponder on the events of life, to see and respond with compassion to the married couple in their need, and direct the servants to their Lord and Master. It is the same pattern in Don Bosco’s dream when she shows him his field of work. Like Don Bosco, we are invited by her to cultivate a ‘listening heart’ so as to discern God’s plan for us. This period of waiting can be difficult for us as Salesians who like to be active. However, it is an essential passage in the discernment process to wait in this place of not knowing. In this place we ‘desire nothing, ask for nothing, refuse nothing’ (St Francis de Sales). However, having received the promptings of the Holy Spirit our listening heart, like Mary, begins to see and we are invited to respond with compassion. Our waiting turns into action as with the same zeal as the lover in the *Song of Songs* who will “run the way of the beloved” - the eager waiting is replaced by doing the will of God.

Let's return to an incident in the life of Jesus. The disciples come to him and they tell him – “Everyone is looking for you?” How does he respond? Not the way they expect – “Let's go to the rest of the villages so I can preach there also. This is why I've come?” Why does he not stay with those who have just received the good news – the answer lies in what *he did before he replied* to his disciples – “While it was still night, long before dawn, he got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed.” (Mk. 1: 35) It is prayer to his Father that allows Jesus to have “a listening heart”, to discern the Father's will and allow himself to carry out his Father's mission. Perhaps for us Salesians, we should never use the word discernment without it being prefaced with the word prayerful. After all, discernment is not just simply reasoned arguments. Gathering information, understanding the context, listening to and analysing the situation of the young is important, but it is not enough. We cannot arrive at God's plan for us at the purely rational level of reflection and discussion. It requires prayer. In particular, contemplative prayer from where our mission arises. Discernment, for us, is always *prayerful discernment*.

PRAYERFUL DISCERNMENT

Fidelity to prayer enabled Don Bosco to return to his heart and discern the inspirations that God's Spirit breathed within him. The recurring Shepherd dream was a touchstone of his spirituality but even after three years of ordination, in the last year of the Convitto, he nurtured the desire of entering the *Oblates of Mary Immaculate* and to dedicate his life to the preaching of the *Ignatian Exercises*.^{xvi} Giulio Barberis notes that he brings this plan to Don Cafasso for discernment who rejects his proposal outright. He experiences it as “a terrible blow.” However, Don Cafasso, also a man of prayer, has tuned into Don Bosco's deeper inspiration that has been surfacing through in his dreams.

Much earlier, in his very first year of philosophy, Don Bosco had brought to Don Cafasso a dream that perplexed him. He saw himself dressed as a priest in a tailor's shop, not sewing new clothes, but mending old ones torn and full of patches.^{xvii} Don Bosco had communicated to Don Cafasso his ‘inclination’ to work with the young as ‘an inner urge’: “I feel inclined to work for boys... At this moment I seem to find myself in the midst of a crowd of boys asking me to help them.”^{xviii} It is in listening to this ‘inner urge’ or ‘voice’ that Don Cafasso realizes he is being called by God to a specific mission (not to the Franciscans or Oblates of Mary Immaculate). The symbolism of mending old clothes is not lost on Don Cafasso who clearly sees in it, his call to poor and abandoned young people.

Let us not complicate matters. It is quite simple. It is very clear that Don Bosco participates in the mission of the Good Shepherd “to seek the lost who have strayed, bring back the scattered, bandage the wounded and strengthen the weak (Ezek. 34:16). It is the same Lord “who consecrated us through the gift of his Spirit and sends us out to be apostles to the young” (*Const.2*)

ACTIVE CONTEMPLATIVES

If you permit me, I will share with you a personal testimony. After my first year of finding my feet as a provincial, I undertook my annual directed retreat. (by the way, I would strongly recommend a directed retreat, in addition to our Salesian retreat, as a choice that would be extremely beneficial for ongoing formation). Not long into my directed retreat, however, I was disturbed by the following question:

Had I become more servant than friend of God?

A few days into the retreat, and having great difficulty trying to settle into a more contemplative mode, I went for a walk along the seashore. I caught sight of a dog on the strand, bounding up the steps in my direction and dragging his unfortunate owner behind him. He continued his journey, but I was left with the thought: ***Had I been like this dog for much of my first year as provincial?*** I continued to nurse this thought on my homeward journey, which was much more pleasant as I now had the wind to my back, coaxing me along. Suddenly, a small group of seagulls appeared gliding effortlessly just above my head. I admired, and even envied them. How easy it appeared for them to allow themselves to catch the breeze and allow themselves to be carried. What a difference to the panting dog on the leash. The contrast was not lost on me. I had spent much of my first year trying to make things happen, but busyness is no guarantee that you are doing God's will. There is no point at flapping wings frantically or pulling on the leash if one is going in the wrong direction. It provoked the following questions:

Am I truly following the Lord or am I rushing ahead and asking the Lord to follow me?

Whose kingdom is being built? Whose plans are being realized?

I realized instantly that I needed to get off the treadmill of Salesian activity where I was trying to make things happen and instead, learn to catch the breeze of the Spirit to let God's will be done. For this to happen, I had to make a choice: I had to choose to prioritize two periods of meditation every day, one in the morning and the other at night.

If we have been living off the fumes of analysis, planning and being goal-oriented, it is going to be much more difficult for us to catch the breeze of the Spirit. It requires a "listening heart", a contemplative spirit. We cannot make this happen, but we can dispose ourselves through meditation and contemplation to receive a "listening heart." ***Moving out of analysis into awareness requires a different interior space.*** It is a contemplative mode that will not be rushed, but learns to wait on God's rhythm and God's time. Without it, we run the risk of drawing up plans and goals that are ours and not God's. We do not do discernment out of our goals. It requires a listening space where, to our surprise, we discover God has his plans for us. When David said he was going to build the temple for the Lord, his prophet Nathan originally agreed. However, once he slept on it (notice again how God breaks through when we are less resistant) he delivered God's message – who are you to build me a house, I will build you a house for you and your ancestry (2Sm.7:10-11).

THE CONTEMPLATIVE CHOICE

As I indicated above, we cannot create a "listening heart" because it is a gift from God, the gift of contemplation, but we can prepare our hearts through meditation and contemplation to receive it. It is only in this way, as St Francis de Sales counsels, that we can "belong to God in the midst of so much busyness." If Jesus tired out by his mission felt the need to withdraw so as to commune with his father in prayer, then, surely, we need to do likewise? If St Francis de Sales from his early student days developed the contemplative practice of 'sacred sleep' so as to listen to the heartbeat of God, should we not do likewise? When asked how much meditation is needed if you are busy working for the lord, he answered, "half an hour is needed but if you are busy, then, an hour."

DON BOSCO'S TESTIMONY

What about Don Bosco? As St Philip Rinaldi reminds us: "If you want to live according to Don Bosco's spirit you must never lose sight of his interior life... continuously united to God in prayer." Don Bosco privileged times of solitary communion with God, encouraged retreats

and periods of silence among his boys, and undertook *the Spiritual Exercises* annually at the *Santuario di Sant' Ignazio*.^{xix} Cardinal Cagliero states eloquently: "The love of God shone in his face and from his whole person and from all the words that came from his heart when he spoke about God from the pulpit or in the confessional, in public or private conferences, or in friendly conversation. This love was the only yearning of his heart, and the most ardent desire of his entire life."^{xx}

When he spoke about God ... this love was the only yearning of his heart. It is obvious that Don Bosco communicated a living God because he was in a life-giving relationship with God. This is only possible through prayer as friendship with Christ which nourishes the fire between us. Without this intimacy nurtured by prayer, 'the more God vanishes into the distance. He slowly becomes a meaningless and lifeless "idea" ... if we stop praying for a long period of time, God "dies!" ... not in himself, but He dies in our hearts. God "dies" like a withered plant we have neglected to water.'^{xxi}

The inward breath of prayer and the outward breath of activity allowed Don Bosco to carry out the work of Martha with the heart of Mary.^{xxii} As his friendship with Christ deepened through prayer, his tireless activity increased as an expression of his love for God. I believe that our fundamental Salesian heresy is to look to Don Bosco in an attempt to imitate the work he did without having the union with God that he enjoyed. We, often, are simply active, whereas, for Don Bosco, his work was an overflow of his relationship with God (*ecstasy of action*).

SALESIANS TODAY

Do we communicate the living God to others?

As Saint Pope John Paul II declares:

The future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God, and must be able to say with the apostles: "that which we have looked upon ... concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you (1 Jn 1:1-3)."^{xxiii}

Why is it so important for us as Salesians today to have a 'listening heart' or a contemplative spirit? Our world today values the human, but loses sight of the transcendental. Our Salesian tradition also cherishes the human and we believe grace builds on nature. That is why in much of the feedback received, we recognize the value and importance of counselling to respond to the difficulties that young people experience. However, if we remain at this level we will have failed the young people of today. The deepest thirst and hunger is spiritual. The psychological is important, but it is no substitute for the spiritual. If we do not make this journey within ourselves to the spiritual through prayer, meditation and contemplation we will be unable to accompany the young on their journey. If we fail in this respect, we will be judged by future generations as having mistaken the real and the spiritual by being in touch with the psychological and that is not deep enough.

This brings us back to ourselves as Salesians today. Are we, like Don Bosco, Spirit-led and Spirit-filled? It is from this "active presence of the Holy Spirit that we draw strength for our fidelity and support for our hope" (*Const.1*). What is important for us as Salesians is 'not to rush into a multitude of exterior works but to discover and to practice the attitudes and behaviours that open us up to the work of the Spirit. All the rest will flow from that, and we will be in a position to accomplish the "good works, which God prepared beforehand that we

should walk in them.” (Eph.2:10) The spiritual life is not so much about *doing* as *letting be done*, letting God act in us, work through us.^{xxiv} It is through union with God arrived through his fidelity to contemplative practice that “the Spirit formed within Don Bosco the heart of a father and teacher, capable of total self-giving: ‘I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys’”(Const.1).

Let us pray

Gracious Father, grant us a spirit of wisdom and perception to see, and respond to, the needs of young people today, especially those most in need.

Lord Jesus, Shepherd of our hearts, renew in us the same spirit of dedication which ignited the heart of St John Bosco, apostle to the young.

Spirit of Love, cover us with your shadow. Set our hearts on fire with your love filling them anew with the power and zeal of Pentecost.

Mary, Spouse of the Holy Spirit, obtain for us the grace to do the will of God and to become another humanity for Jesus where he can renew his whole mystery.

Live Jesus.

May Jesus live in us, work with us, and love through us, so that we may truly become signs and bearers of God’s love for the Young.

May the Father be glorified in the work he has called us to do through the power of his Spirit and in the name of Jesus, his Son.

Amen.

ⁱ *The Way of Perfection*, ch.1, par.5 in E. Allison Peers (trans), *The Complete Works of St Teresa of Jesus* Vol. 2 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 5.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 229

ⁱⁱⁱ François de Sales, *Oeuvres Éditions Annecy*, Vol. IV: 189. Hereafter, *OEA*.

^{iv} (Salesian Central Archives) ACS A 225.02.01. cited in Giuseppe Buccellato, *The Roots of the Spirituality of Saint John Bosco* (Bolton: Don Bosco Publications, 2019), 11.

^v *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.20.

^{vi} J. Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 50.

^{vii} St John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory* (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1984), 18.

^{viii} *MB*.1:518.

^{ix} *MB*.3:91.

^x *The Spirit of St Francis de Sales*, as cited by C. F. Kelley, in *The Spiritual Maxims of St Francis de Sales* (London & New York & Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954), 124.

^{xi} Adrienne Fichet, *Premier Proces Remissorial d’Annecy*, 32, as cited by Lajeunie, in *St Francis de Sales*, 2:133.

^{xii} *OEA* IV:303.

^{xiii} *Epistolario*, Torino, 1959, 4, 201-203.

^{xiv} *CG28 outline of reflection on the theme*, see 2.2.2. Preparation process for the GC28.

^{xv} *Christus Vivit*, n.284.

^{xvi} *Memorie Biografiche*, Vol.2, 203-207.

^{xvii} *B.M.*, Vol.1:285.

^{xviii} EBM II, 177.

^{xix} G. Buccellato (ed) *San Giuseppe Cafasso: Il Direttore Spirituale di Don Bosco* (Roma: LAS, 2007) 28.

^{xx} *Ibid*, 220.

^{xxi} Ignacio Larrañaga OFM Cap, *Sensing Your Hidden Presence: Toward Intimacy with God* (Quebec, Editions Paulines, 1992), 27-28.

^{xxii} See *Introduction to The Devout Life*, Part III, n.10.

^{xxiii} *Redemptoris Missio*, n.91

^{xxiv} Jacques Philippe, *Fire and Light: Learning to Receive the Gift of God* (New York: Scepter, 2016), 3.



SALESIANI DON BOSCO Capitolo Generale 28

Valdocco, 16 febbraio – 4 aprile 2020

SPIRITUALITY DAYS

19 - 20 - 21 February 2020

Together with the laity in mission and formation

Koldo Gutiérrez, Sdb

The Church of the XXI Century has rediscovered the **path of synodality**. Walking together is one of the great ecclesial challenges today, as was recalled in the last Synod. It is curious to see how the Synod, whose main theme was young people and youth ministry will be remembered for its insistent call to synodality. This word has an important ecclesiological meaning. In some way we can say that in speaking about young people the Church noted that above all she had to speak about herself. Young people are helping us to rejuvenate the face of the Church.

In this key of synodality, it is not strange that the General Chapter proposes that the Salesians and the laity walk together. This is the time to gather the seeds of synodality. **Nothing grows if it is not sown**. If we accept the challenge of sowing, we hope that much of the seed (of the sown seed) will fall into good and fertile soil.

A brief look at reality shows us that the relationship between the Salesians and the laity is different according to the **works, tasks and challenges**. In the collaboration that develops between the Salesians and the laity there is a **great diversity of motivations, modalities and convictions**. The motivation for collaborating together can be different: from sharing faith to solidarity in a common cause. The way of involvement can also be different: from voluntary work to a paid contract. And even religious beliefs can be different: from some strong beliefs of faith to a shared humanist feeling.

This diversity proposes to start from **respect for the situation and vocation of each person**, that of the consecrated Salesian and that of the lay person. We, consecrated persons, are not called to be masters of a mission that belongs only to God, and lay people are not called to be "consecrated Salesians on a small scale" but to live their lay vocation in all its greatness and fullness. It is fundamental to respect the paths that God has for each person. All this makes us see the complexity of the challenge that we face.

1. CULTIVATING DISCERNMENT

The best way to get closer to this complex theme **leads to God**. When we look at God, He makes us look at man. It is not possible to separate God from man. "Jesus clears a way to seeing two faces, that of the Father and that of our brother. ... For "what endures, what has value in life, what riches do not disappear? Surely these two: the Lord and our neighbour. These two riches do not disappear!" (GE 61). As we approach the theme of the relationship between the Salesians and the laity, what we do first is to look at God and He leads us to the life of men.

God is acting in history and in people. And since God is not idle but is acting, the mission of the Church is to do everything possible "to bring every man and every woman to meet the Lord who is already at work in their lives and in their hearts" (FD 105). This is the recommended way to understand the mission. From this perspective we must say that pastoral work has as its fundamental objective to help each person to encounter God who is already acting in history, in their lives and in their hearts. In this sense we can say that discernment is the heart of pastoral ministry.

Discernment is a great challenge for the Church and for the Salesian Congregation. It must be stated decisively that discernment is not a fashion or just a methodology but that above all it is an attitude that has its roots in an attitude of faith. And if we want to know how to walk "together with the laity in mission and formation" we need to cultivate an interior attitude strengthened in faith.

The Spirit comes to our aid. The initiative always starts from God who precedes us and accompanies us. Discernment consists in opening our hearts to God in order to "feel and taste" His presence and His action in us. Discernment also consists in letting the Spirit transform our senses, until it passes from "hearing and seeing" to "listening and looking"; it transforms our mentality to think in another way; it transforms our choices to walk not on our way but on His way. Ask the Lord to help you so that you can open your heart to His presence.

God is the first protagonist of discernment. The second is us, because **God has made us capable and trusts us**. In this way, discernment opens the way if we have the dispositions that allow us to desire, seek, accept and fulfill God's will. In this theme of walking together we can also ask the Lord to put good wishes in us, to enlighten our search, to make us docile to accept what He proposes, ultimately, to strengthen us to do His will.

2. WALK THE PATH OF HUMILITY

The process of the Chapter in which we have been involved for some years has been guided by this famous issue of the post-synodal EG exhortation: "We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God's plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also – and this is decisive – choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil" (EG51).

As Pope Francis proposes, the first step of discernment leads to recognition. **In order to be able to recognize we need humility.** When in the next few days we look with faith at the journey that we as Salesians have made together with the laity in recent years, we will discover results but also temptations and errors.

We are not afraid. Temptations and errors accompany the human being, the Church and, in it, the Congregation. We must be very clear so that we can recognize that we will never be totally purified. **There is always room in us for conversion.** We can always turn our gaze to God so that He may change our minds, purify our hearts and make us follow His path.

There are many times when Pope Francis speaks of the **temptations that threaten consecrated persons**. In fact, the danger that threatens us consists in putting ourselves at the center of the mission without taking into account that only God can occupy this place. In this way we understand the prophetic word of the Holy Father when he denounces clericalism. By clericalism we mean "the ministry they have received as a power to be exercised, rather than a free and generous service to be offered. It makes us think that we belong to a group that has all the answers and no longer needs to listen or has anything to learn" (ChV 98). It is possible that this evil is within us. But there are also other subtle evils that have in common the fact that they always lead us to ourselves and hardly direct us towards the Kingdom of God and His justice.

Let us not forget that we are only mediators. The problem of pastoral work is mediation. Mediations can be transparent but they can also be mediocre. **Mediocrity is one of our greatest temptations**, and this is where many of our evils come in. Mediocrity is accompanied by a lack of passion, it leads to living without motivation, it hardens the heart, it makes us insensitive to human suffering, and it does not make us vibrate before the good and the beautiful that there is in young people. Mediocrity enters our lives without warning and takes hold of us. Mediocrity is accompanied by sadness and heaviness.

Scripture speaks of John the Baptist preparing the way for the Lord. The Baptist himself is aware of his role and says, "It is fitting that he should grow and I should diminish" (Jn 3:28-30). Here is a description of what every mediator must do: **to diminish in order to let the Lord grow**. The way that 'the Baptist' walked was the way of humility. This way is the way Jesus walked. Saint Paul expresses this in a magnificent way in one of his texts when he proposes to the Christians of Philippi to have the same feelings as Christ. ("Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" Phil 2:6-8). If Jesus' path was the path of humility, the Church and, in it, the Salesian Congregation cannot follow another path. If we want to be good mediators, we must follow the path of humility in order to let the face of Jesus be seen with greater clarity.

This second criterion can be of great help when we want to walk "together with the laity in mission and formation". We will only be able to walk the path of humility if we are not placed in height and distance, but rather in closeness and collaboration. The path of humility ensures that God's forgiveness and mercy reach us; it proposes to make grateful memories of the path that God has made with us by animating collaboration with the laity; it invites us to be accompanied by the Church which today is proposing the path of synodality.

3. OPEN ONE'S LIFE BY VOCATION

Life is well rooted in God. Vocation is the gift that God gives us together with life. That is why it makes a lot of sense to live one's life by vocation. As if to say, it makes a lot of sense to live by who I am because this is what God dreamed of for me.

The theme of vocation is of great relevance in the Church of the 21st century. Following the path traced out by the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis proposes to place all vocations **in the light of baptism and within the holy People of God**. This people has been blessed with different vocations. "Ecclesial vocations are multiple and articulated expressions through which the Church realizes her call to be a real sign of the Gospel received in a fraternal community. The different ways of following Christ express, each in its own way, the mission to bear witness to the event of Jesus, in which every man and every woman finds salvation" (FD 84). This criterion makes us equal and at the same time differentiates us. We all have in Jesus our model and our form, but the Lord calls each of us to a concrete vocation.

The vocational discourse is one of the foundations of the **shared mission**. We will talk about this theme in the coming days. To arrive at this expression the Church had to go a long way. The Second Vatican Council asked for laity cooperation (AG 2), then there was talk of co-responsibility, today there is talk of shared mission (VC 55). The shared mission is becoming a reality in the different charisms, even in our Salesian Congregation. It is a great joy to see the presence of lay people who are vocationally committed to our own mission. We need each other, each with their own vocation, to carry out the mission.

"I chose you before you were born" (Jer 1:5). If we allow ourselves to be inspired by the prophet Jeremiah, we must recognize that our vocation is designed in our deepest depths. In this sense we understand well the expression of Pope Francis: "I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world" (EG 273). Approaching and touching this interiority allows us to discover and accept our own vocation. Vocation is a path characterized by a disposition that leads us not so much to say "I am" but to say "I am here". Scripture constantly reminds us of this.

Many Christians live their lives with this radicality, and also many of our Salesian brothers and sisters do. It is a blessing to share our life and vocation with brothers who have decided to live their lives from the vocation they have received to be pastors and educators of the young. This decision leads us to become aware of being **blessed, chosen and loved** by the Lord, in a personal way. This decision leads us to **go out of ourselves to be for others and with others**. This way of understanding life by the gift and as a gift has a prophetic character in a world that is situated in an anthropology of indifference: "we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own" (EG54).

It is not strange to understand **vocation as a path to holiness**, as the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our communities, because every life is a mission. "You too need to see the entirety of your life as a mission. Try to do so by listening to God in prayer and recognizing the signs that he gives you. Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you must make, so as to discern its place in the mission you have received. Allow the Spirit to forge in you the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today's world" (GE 23).

It is no exaggeration to say that the greatest service we can give to young people is **to help them discover the person they are and are called to be**. In the last Synod they spoke of the need for youth ministry from a vocational point of view. It is said that the first novice master of our congregation, Don Barberis, commented that Don Bosco used to repeat that the vocational moment is a decisive moment in the life of a young person. Without doubt Don Bosco would understand it with the theology he had in his hands, but we, with the theology of our time can say that if we help a person to be what he is and what he is called to be, we are giving him a great help. Every vocation is not for itself but for others.

4. LIVING AND SHARING THE TENT OF THE MISSION

Vocation and mission are inseparably linked, like heads or tails when you flip a coin. We must note with joy that in this time missionary awareness is growing in the Church and in our own Salesian family. We can never forget that vocation and mission are born of the Lord. We cannot consider mission as a generous concession of ours. What we can make our own is to live and share the tent of the mission.

The Holy Spirit wanted the Salesian vocation to germinate and sprout in Valdocco in favour of the poor youth. Don Bosco was able to accept that call and he was also able to share it with many young people and not a few lay people of different social conditions and states of life. In Valdocco many

consecrated and lay vocations flourished in favour of young people. Don Bosco used to repeat: "I needed everyone".

On the path of the post-Council, where **an ecclesiology of communion** was underlined, we are living a new stage characterized by a call to synodality. This sign of the times is now calling at the door of the Salesian Congregation. In order to walk together, as lay and consecrated people, it is essential that we **value the charism** that the Spirit gives us according to our vocation and the role that it proposes to us. At Valdocco we can breathe essential elements of our charism. Here we can also discover imprints of co-responsibility. The echo that invites co-responsibility can be heard in the playground, the Pinardi chapel, the chapel of Saint Francis de Sales, the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, the kitchen of Mamma Margherita, the workshop. Here it will not be difficult for you to ask the Lord what he is asking of our Congregation that wishes to "live and share the tent on the mission".

One of our characteristics is **the family spirit and the care of relationships**. The key is in relationships. We know from experience. We invest a lot in relationships. The mystery of the Incarnation is a mystery of relationship. Our charism is fundamentally relational. Valdocco is a beautiful poem about the family spirit. We can see it in Don Bosco, in the Salesians, in the collaborators, in the young, in the faithful people who approached Valdocco at the foot of Mary Help of Christians.

These words of the Synod are inspiring: "It is in relationships – with Christ, with others, in the community – that faith is handed on. For the sake of mission, too, the Church is called to adopt a relational manner that places emphasis on **listening, welcoming, dialogue and common discernment** in a process that transforms the lives of those taking part. (...) In this way the Church presents herself as a "holy tent" in which the Ark of the Covenant is preserved (cf. *Ex* 25): a dynamic Church, in movement, which accompanies while journeying, strengthened by many charisms and ministries. Thus, does God make himself present in this world" (FD122).

Today the mission has many challenges. I do not believe that this meditation is a place to concretize them. But there is a challenge that our Chapter wishes to face and it is walking together in formation. **We need a formation of the heart**. That is, formation understood as a continuous personal process of maturation of faith and configuration with Christ, according to the will of the Father and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, necessary to live the unity with which our own being as members of the Church and citizens of human society is marked (ChL 57 and 59).

Formation must involve both motivations such as vocation or skills. "It follows that every form of pastoral activity, formation and spirituality should be seen in the light of our Christian vocation" (ChV 254). In this sense we can say that today we should foster a formation that makes it possible **to form oneself united, to form oneself by one's own vocation, to form oneself for the mission**.

5. LIVING WITH JOY AND HOPE

Pope Francis speaks a lot about joy. When he does it, he speaks of Jesus and his Gospel. **The Gospel is always a message of joy**. The reason for Christian joy is not so much the Church but God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the cause of our joy.

We agree with this message because we see that sadness and sloth are gaining followers in our world, and who knows, maybe even among us. We are aware that when the challenges are greater than our strengths, or the tasks are heavy, when the future is dark, sadness can gain ground in us. Remember that in the book of Revelation the angel of God asks the Church of Ephesus that believes it has remained faithful to return to the first love. And to the Church of Laodicea, which had settled down and was very satisfied with herself, she proposes to be "fervent and repentant" (Rev 3:15-19).

Let us not forget that in Valdocco joy was lived with simplicity. Don Bosco knew how to communicate to his young people the importance of joy when the Christian life is centered on Jesus. This message was captured by the young people of the Oratory. It is not surprising that Domenico Savio, a fourteen-year-old young man, was able to sum up the source of Salesian pastoral work. "We make holiness consist in always being happy". They are not the words of a theologian but those of a boy. He wants to communicate to his companions the experience he is living. Life united to Jesus, the life of grace is accompanied by joy. We can still read in the porticoes of Valdocco: "Serve the Lord with joy".

We need joy and we need **hope**. In this life, joy and hope are an indissoluble whole. "The fundamental and decisive reason for our hope is the fidelity and love of God. He desires that all men be saved and reach the happiness of his glory (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). Only with hope can we live this process in which we desire to walk "united with the laity in mission and formation". The Holy Spirit continues to act in the Church and in the Salesian Congregation, rejuvenating it. Something new is being born, do you not notice it? (Is 43,19)

Translation: Fr Franco PIRISI, sdb