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SPIRITUALITY DAYS

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Together with the laity in mission and formation

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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)

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