

## STRENNA 2014

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*«Da mihi animas, cetera tolle»*

**Let us draw upon the spiritual experience of Don Bosco,  
in order to walk in holiness  
according to our specific vocation  
*«The glory of God and the salvation of souls»***

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My Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Salesian Family,

We are concluding the three years of preparation for the Bicentenary of the Birth of Don Bosco. After having dedicated the first year to getting to know him in the history of his times, and the second year to recognising him as an educator and putting into practice his own educational method, in this third and final year we want to explore the source of his charism by drawing on his spirituality.

Christian spirituality has charity at its core, in other words the very life of God Himself Who is *Agape, Charity, Love* at the deepest level. Salesian spirituality is no different from Christian spirituality. It too is concentrated on charity; in its case it is a matter of “pastoral charity”, in other words that charity which urges us to seek “the glory of God and the salvation of souls”. “*Caritas Christi urget nos*”.

Like all the great holy founders Don Bosco lived his life as a Christian with a fervent burning charity, and contemplated the Lord Jesus from a particular standpoint, that of the charism with which God had entrusted him: the mission to the young. “Salesian charity” is pastoral charity because it seeks the salvation of souls. It is also educative charity because it finds in education the resource that allows it to help the young to develop all their energies for good. In this way young people can grow up to be upright citizens, good Christians and future inhabitants of heaven.

I am inviting you therefore, dear members of the Salesian Family, to draw from the wellsprings of Don Bosco’s spirituality, in other words from his educative and pastoral charity. It finds its model in Christ the Good Shepherd and its prayer and its plan of life in Don Bosco’s motto: «Da mihi animas, cetera tolle». Closely following this path we will be able to discover “Don Bosco the mystic” whose spiritual experience lies at the heart of the way we live our Salesian spirituality today, in the variety of vocations which take their inspiration from him; and we ourselves will be able to have a strong Salesian spiritual experience.

Getting to know Don Bosco’s life and his educational method still does not mean understanding his deepest secret and the real reason for his being so surprisingly relevant today. Being familiar with the various aspects of Don Bosco’s life and

works and even of his educational method is not sufficient. Behind all this, as the source of the fruitfulness of his activity and relevance is something that can even escape us his sons and daughters: his deep inner life, what we could call his “familiarity” with God. Who knows but maybe this is the best idea we have of him in order to love him, to pray to him, imitate and follow him so as to encounter the Lord Jesus and bring young people to this same encounter!

Today it would be possible to draw up a spiritual profile of Don Bosco, starting from the impressions of his earliest collaborators. We could then move on to Fr Eugene CERIA’s book, “Don Bosco with God,” which was the first attempt made to provide a popular account of his spirituality. We could then compare the various re-interpretations of Don Bosco’s spirituality offered by his Successors, before finally coming to the research that has marked a turning point in the study of the way Don Bosco lived his own faith and religious life.

These recent studies are more faithful in the way they are in touch with the available sources and are open to a consideration of the various spiritual perspectives that influenced Don Bosco, or with which he was in contact (Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Ignatius, Saint Alphonsus Maria Liguori, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Philip Neri, ...). However, they also help us to recognise that his was an original and creative experience. At this point it would be interesting to have a new spiritual profile of Don Bosco, a new hagiography, as this term is understood by spiritual theology today.

Don Bosco the “spiritual man” attracted and was of special interest to Walter Nigg, a Lutheran pastor and professor of Church History at the University of Zurich. He concentrated on the spiritual dimension and he wrote thus: “Describing someone while overlooking the fact that we are dealing with a saint would be like presenting a half truth. The category of saint has to take precedence over that of the educator. Any other ranking would falsify the hierarchy of values. On the other hand, the saint is someone in whom the natural borders on the supernatural, and in Don Bosco the supernatural is there in a remarkable way... We ourselves have no doubt: the real modern saint of Italy is Don Bosco”.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1980s this opinion was shared by the theologian Fr Dominique CHENU O.P. To a journalist who asked him to suggest some saints who might have a relevant message for our new times he answered: “I would especially like to recall to mind one who was the precursor of the Council by a century, Don Bosco. He was a prophetic model of holiness because his work broke with the way of thinking and believing of his contemporaries”.

In every cultural era and in every context we need to answer these questions:

- What did Don Bosco receive from the environment he lived in?
- How much does he owe to his surroundings, his family, the Church of his time?
- How did he react, and what did he give to his time and surroundings?
- What has been his influence on the times that have followed?

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<sup>1</sup> W. NIGG, *Don Bosco. Un santo per il nostro tempo*, Torino, LDC, 1980, 75.103.

- How did his contemporaries see him: Salesians, the people, the Church, lay people?
- How have later generations understood him?
- What aspects of his holiness seem of most interest to us today?
- How do we today translate the way Don Bosco interpreted the Gospel?

These are the kinds of questions that a new hagiography of Don Bosco will have to answer. It is not a matter of identifying a definitive, perpetually valid profile of Don Bosco but of providing one that is relevant for today. Naturally, certain aspects of each saint are emphasised that are particularly of interest for their current relevance, and others are left aside that are considered not to be so necessary at this particular time in history, or that are judged to be less relevant in identifying the saint's chief characteristics.

Saints, in fact, are a response to the spiritual needs of a generation, an outstanding illustration of what Christians at a particular time mean by holiness. And evidently the hoped-for imitation of a saint can only be proportional to the absolute reference point which is Jesus of Nazareth; in fact, every Christian, in his or her real situation, is called to incarnate in his or her own way the universal figure of Jesus, obviously without ever exhausting it. The saints offer us a concrete and valid path towards this identification with the Lord Jesus.

In the commentary on the Strenna which I am offering to the Salesian Family, the three key issues I develop are: features of the spirituality of Don Bosco; pastoral charity and the core and synthesis of Salesian spirituality; Salesian spirituality for vocations. At the end I shall propose more completely some practical tasks which I shall already anticipate here.

## **1. Features of Don Bosco's spirituality**

Coming to a precise identification of Don Bosco's spirituality is not an easy undertaking; it is not surprising that this aspect of his personality is the least explored. Don Bosco is a man fully taken up by apostolic work; he does not provide us with any descriptions of his interior development, nor has he left us any special reflections on his spiritual experience. He does not write spiritual diaries nor offer explanations for his inner motivation. He prefers to transmit a spirit by describing the events of his life, or through biographies of his boys. It is certainly not sufficient to say that his apostolic spirituality is that of someone who carries out an active ministry, a balance between a learned and a popular spirituality; rather it is necessary to identify what is at the heart of his spiritual experience.

This raises a serious question: given the real shortage of sources regarding his inner life, how do you investigate the spirituality of Don Bosco? We can leave it to spiritual theologians to delve into this methodological issue as we try to identify some of the fundamental aspects and the characteristics of his spiritual experience.

*Spirituality* is a characteristic 'feel' for Christian holiness and being inclined in that direction; it is a particular way of ordering one's life in order to achieve Christian perfection, and being part of a special charism. In other words, it is a Christian way of life in union with God which presupposes faith.

*Salesian spirituality* consists of various elements; it is a style of life, of prayer, of work, of interpersonal relationships; a community way of life; an educative and pastoral mission based on a pedagogical heritage; an approach to formation; a characteristic set of values and attitudes; a particular view of the Church and of society through specific areas of engagement; an historical patrimony of documentation and writings; a characteristic language; a typical set of structures and works; a calendar with its own celebrations and anniversaries...

In the general framework of a history of spirituality in the XIXth century, we can point out some elements which seem to us to be especially relevant in describing the spiritual experience of Don Bosco; they are his starting point, his deepest roots, the means he uses, his goal.

### **1.1. Starting point: the glory of God and the salvation of souls**

The glory of God and the salvation of souls were Don Bosco's passion. Promoting the glory of God and the salvation of souls meant conforming his own will to that of God who obviously greatly desires the full manifestation of that goodness that He Himself is, in other words His glory which is the authentic achievement of what is good for man - which is the salvation of his soul.

In a rare fragment of his "story of a soul", Don Bosco will confess (in 1854) the secret regarding the purpose of what he was doing: «When I began to devote myself to this particular aspect of the sacred ministry I set out to consecrate all my efforts to the greater glory of God and to the salvation of souls, and to work to make good citizens on this earth so that one day they would then be worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to be able to continue until my last breath. Amen".<sup>2</sup>

In the same passage a few lines earlier he had written:

*"Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum. John. c. 11 v. 52.* The words of the holy Gospel which let us know that the Divine Saviour came into the world to gather together into unity the scattered children of God, it appears to me can be applied literally to the young people of our days. This, the most frail but most precious part of human society on which rests the hopes for a happy future is not of itself perversely inclined [...] The difficulty consists in finding a way to bring them together, to speak with them, bring them to lead a good life. This was the mission of the Son of God, only His holy religion can do this".<sup>3</sup>

At the basis of the decision to set up the Oratory there is the salvific will of God, expressed in the incarnation of the Son, sent to gather around Himself in unity

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. BOSCO, *Piano di regolamento per l'Oratorio maschile di S. Francesco di Sales in Torino nella regione Valdocco. Introduzione*, in P. BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore. Scritti e Testimonianze*. Roma, LAS 1997, 111.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 108-109.

men lost in the byways of error and mistaken paths to holiness. The Church is called to respond in its own time to this divine mission of salvation. So the Oratory fits into this economy of salvation; it is a human response to a divine vocation, and is not a work founded on the good will of an individual.

As confirmation of this, we can read in an account from 16 January 1861: “Questioned about his opinion regarding the efficiency of grace he replied: I have studied these questions a great deal; but my system is one that redounds to the greater glory of God. What is the point of me having a narrow system that then sends a soul to hell, or a broad system provided it send souls to heaven?”<sup>4</sup>

Similar is the explanation he gives on 16 February 1876 about the way he carried out his plans: “We always go ahead with confidence; before undertaking anything we make certain that it is God’s will that these things are done. We may meet a thousand difficulties on the way, but that does not matter. God wants it, and we are fearless in the face of whatever difficulties there may be.”<sup>5</sup>

Identical to the purposes of the Oratory are those of the “Work of the Oratories,” in other words of the Salesian Society, of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, of the Salesians Cooperators, of the Association of Mary Help of Christians; all of them are animated, motivated and guided by the same purpose. A few quotations regarding the Salesians from among the many one could cite will suffice.

In the introduction to the first draft of the Constitutions, Don Bosco declared that the first group of clergy collaborators had joined together “promising to occupy themselves only with those things that their Superior judged to be for the greater glory of God and for the benefit of their own souls”.<sup>6</sup> In the following chapter on the purpose of the Society he repeated: the Salesians “come together to form a single heart and a single soul to love and to serve God”.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, on 11 June 1860 in the request submitted to the Archbishop of Turin for the approval of the Constitutions one reads: “we the undersigned, moved solely by the desire to ensure our eternal salvation, have come together to live a common life and so more easily give our attention to those things that concern the glory of God and the salvation of souls”.<sup>8</sup> Then on 12 January 1880 he wrote to Cardinal Ferrieri saying that the aim of the Salesian work was still the same: “I believe I can assure your Eminence that the Salesians have no other aim than to work for the greater glory of God, on behalf of Holy Church to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the Indians of the Pampas and in Patagonia.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> D. RUFFINO, *Cronache dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, n. 2, 1861, 8-9.42.

<sup>5</sup> G. BARBERIS, *Cronichetta*, quad 4, 52.

<sup>6</sup> Bosco Giovanni, *Costituzioni della società di S. Francesco di Sales [1858] - 1875*, Testi critici a cura di Francesco Motto, Roma LAS 1982 70-71.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 82.

<sup>8</sup> *Epistolario*, ed. Motto, vol. I, 406.

<sup>9</sup> *Epistolario*, ed. Ceria, vol. III, 544.

Indeed, Don Bosco had already mentioned the same purpose of the growing Society of Saint Francis of Sales, writing on 9 June 1867 to the Salesians in a circular letter, two years before the approval of the Congregation: “The first aim of our Society is the sanctification of its members [...] Everyone should enter the society guided by the sole desire to serve God with greater perfection, and for his own good, and it goes without saying that the real good for himself is his spiritual and eternal good.”<sup>10</sup>

### **1.2. At its heart: union with God**

The *unum necessarium* is at the heart of his interior life, of his dialogue with God, of his work as an apostle. There can be no doubt that holiness shone out in Don Bosco’s works, but it is also true that his works were simply an expression of his faith. It is not the works he accomplished that make Don Bosco a saint as Saint Paul reminds us: “*If I have all the eloquence of men ...but without love then I am nothing at all* (1 Cor 13); but it is a faith enlivened by practical charity (cf. Gal 5:6b) that makes him a saint: *you will be able to tell them by their fruits* (cf. Mt 7, 16.20).

All Christians are called to a real and not merely psychological “union with God.” Union with God means living one’s life in God and in His presence: it is the divine life that is within us by participation; it is the exercise of faith, hope and charity, to which necessarily follow the infused virtues, the moral virtues etc. Don Bosco gave an evangelical zeal to his whole life, making his whole purpose in life the transmission of faith in God, in living out the theological virtues: with a faith which became a fascinating example for the young, a hope that was expressed in words that were a shining light for them, with a charity which became an expression of love for the least and neglected ones.

Don Bosco was always faithful to his mission of practical charity: where a disincarnated mysticism would have run the risk of his being detached from reality, faith obliged him to keep his feet firmly on the ground so as to keep faith with those most in need; when he might have been overcome by fatigue or tempted to give up, hope sustained him; when there seemed to be no solution St Paul’s way ahead urged him on: “*Caritas Christi urget nos*” (1 Cor 5,14). Don Bosco’ charity did not falter when faced with difficulties: *I have made myself all things to all men in order to save some at any cost* (1 Cor 9,22). It was not conflicts that were to be feared in the field of education but, lack of effort and disengagement.

*Living by faith:* means abandoning oneself with joyful trust in God who revealed Himself in Jesus so as to be able to live in all situations in a salvific manner: in other words responding to all circumstances in such a way as to allow God to show in them His work of salvation. No situation corresponds perfectly to God’s will, but a person can act in each situation so as to always carry out God’s will.

*Living by hope:* means waiting on God each day so as to be able to accept His gift when it comes; it means waiting each day for God who comes through His created gifts: every day has its gift. So in all circumstances - even failure: “nothing can

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<sup>10</sup> *Epistolario*, ed. Motto, II, 386.

separate us from the love of Christ” (Rm 8,39).

*Living by charity*: means opening up the present moment to the love of God. In order to be able to live a spirit of sacrifice constant practice is needed; a stimulating context is needed: certainly, the Salesian mission is just that.

Don Bosco lived all this in a *spirit of genuine piety*. He did not leave any formula for practices of piety, nor any special devotion of his own. His approach is realistic and practical. Just the prayers of the good Christian, easy, simple but said with perseverance. What Don Bosco wanted was that the Salesians should consecrate their whole lives to the salvation of souls and sanctify their work offering it to God; prayer ought to take its place as the raising up of the mind and heart to God, as petition and as nourishment. In other words, the “practices of piety” had something of an ascetical role. The results of this in the life of Don Bosco are plain for all to see.

Let us listen to two witness statements. This is what a past-pupil forty five years of age, a soldier and army instructor from Florence wrote to Don Bosco in Turin:

“My Dear Don Bosco, it seems you were quite right to sigh over me, but you can also be sure that I always loved you, will always love you. I take every comfort from you, and from afar I admire all you do. I don’t speak ill of you, nor do I allow anyone else to speak ill of you. I always defend you. In you I see someone who wants my soul at all costs. I am confused, ecstatic, thrilled by your way of thinking; always firm and deeply felt. It disconcerted me and made me feel astonished to see that you always loved me so much. Yes oh dear Don Bosco. I believe in the communion of Saints [...]. No one more than you knows me and understands my heart and can decide. In conclusion therefore: advise me, love me, forgive me and commend me to God, to Jesus, to most holy Mary..I send you a heartfelt kiss and swear that I love you...”<sup>11</sup>

The second witness statement is a very moving page written by Saint Don Orione to his clerics in 1934, the year of Don Bosco’s canonisation:

“Now I shall tell you the reason, the motive, the cause for which Don Bosco became a saint. Don Bosco became a saint because he nurtured his divine life, because he nurtured our divine life, At his school I learned that this saint didn’t fill our heads with nonsense or anything like that but rather he nourished us with God, and he nourished himself with God, with the spirit of God. As a mother feeds herself so then to be able to feed her child. In the same way Don Bosco fed himself with God so as to feed us too with God. For this reason those who knew the saint and had the special grace to grow up close to him, to listen to his word, to be near to him, in some way to live the life of the saint, took from that contact something that is not of this world, that is not human; something that nourished his life as a saint. Then again, he turned everything to heaven, everything to God, and drew out from everything a reason to raise our souls to heaven, to turn our steps towards heaven ”.

### ***1.3. Means: unseen values translated into visible works***

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<sup>11</sup> F. Motto, *Ricordi e riflessi di una educazione ricevuta* in “Ricerche Storiche Salesiane”, 11 (1987) 365.

At the centre of Don Bosco's spirituality there is God alone to be known, loved and served for the sake of one's own salvation through the carrying out of a real practical personal vocation: religious and apostolic - charitable, educational, pastoral – for young people especially the poor and abandoned, for their total salvation, following the example of Christ the Saviour and at the school of Holy Mother and Teacher Mary. It is not without significance that the noun he uses most, for example, in one of the volumes of his letters is God, and the verb most used after 'doing' is 'praying'.<sup>12</sup>

In Don Bosco there was an active spirituality; he tended towards activity, hard work under the influence of an awareness of need and the consciousness of a heavenly mission. The choice of hard work gives a particular meaning to detachment, in the area of apostolic activity. Where in Saint Alphonsus detachment is above all an interior disposition in man, in Don Bosco it acquires more meaning in the context of hard work: detachment helps us to dedicate ourselves to the works God gives us to do.

In Don Bosco one finds the sense of the relative value of things, and at the same time the need to use them for the purposes he has at heart. He prefers not to be too firmly attached to any particular scheme of things; therefore an approach more practical, pastoral, spiritual, rather than theological-speculative. In him there is this specific originality: salvation is to be achieved by means of loving-kindness, meekness, joy, humility, eucharistic and Marian piety, love of God and of one's neighbour.

The relationship between the love of God and love for one's neighbour is identical for both the Christian and the religious. It is a matter of living a consecration to God and His greater glory in a total dedication to working for the good of souls, one's own and those of others. Likewise it is a sacrifice without keeping back anything for oneself, made in union with one's brothers and sisters, in the love of obedience and of shared solidarity.

Don Bosco, with true sensitivity and priestly zeal, engaged himself in society, witnessing to the faith, exhorting, without any human respect, becoming directly involved even in areas where to some it appeared he was compromising priestly dignity. He lived the strong values of his vocation, but he also knew how to translate them into social action, practical measures without retreating into the spiritual, into 'churchy things', into liturgical matters, understood as being cut off from the problems of the world and of life.

In Don Bosco the Spirit was alive. He did not race ahead; nor did he hang back. Secure in his vocation, his daily life was not closed in on itself without horizons; as though in a protective shell as if refusing to face reality in all its breadth and variety; in a world limited to a few needs to be satisfied; where there is an almost mechanical repetition of traditional attitudes; as a refusal to face tensions, demanding sacrifices, risk with no immediate success, but struggle.

Of interest, in this regard, is a quotation from 120 years ago which, were it not for some particular expressions could be considered of our own day. It is an "external" witness statement regarding Don Bosco. It offers us an interpretation,

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<sup>12</sup> F. Motto, *Verso una storia di Don Bosco piu documentata e piu sicura in Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 41 (2002) 250-251.



which others, perhaps also inspired by Salesians, gave to his work. It is that of the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Lucido Maria Parocchi, who in 1884 wrote:

“What precisely is specific about the Salesian Society? I want to tell you what is the distinguishing mark of your Congregation, what it is that forms your character, just as the Franciscans are distinguished for poverty, the Dominicans for the defence of the faith, the Jesuits for culture. You have traits similar to those of the Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits, but they are differentiated by their manner and purpose. ... What therefore is special in the Salesian Congregation? What gives it its character and physiognomy? If I have properly understood it and unless I am much mistaken, what gives it its specific character, its essential note and particular countenance, is charity practised in accordance with the world’s needs at the present day, *nos credidimus Charitati. Deus caritas est*”

Today’s world can only be attracted and drawn towards good by charitable works. Nowadays the world has no time for anything besides material things; it doesn’t want to know anything about spiritual things. It ignores the beauty of the faith; it knows nothing of the greatness of religion, it rejects any hope in a future life, it denies God Himself. This world understands Charity only as a means, not as the end and the principle. It knows how to analyse this virtue but not how to make a synthesis of it. *Animalis homo non percipit quae sunt spiritus Dei:* as St Paul puts it. If you tell people of this world: “It is necessary to save the souls that are being lost, it is necessary to teach those who do not know the principles of religion, and to give alms for love of that God who one day will reward those who are generous,” the men of this world will not understand. It is necessary therefore to adapt oneself to this world, which is in full flight. God makes himself known to pagans through the natural law; he makes himself known to the Jews by means of the Bible; to the Greek schismatics through the great traditions of the Fathers; to protestants through the Gospel, to the world today through charity. Tell this world: “I am taking youngsters off the streets so that they don’t fall under the trams, so they don’t fall down a pit, I will put them in a hostel so that they don’t waste the best years of their lives in vice and carousing, I bring them into schools to educate them so that they don’t become a prey on society, don’t end up in prison; I call them to me and I look after them so that they don’t poke each others eyes out,” then the men of this world understand and begin to believe.”<sup>13</sup>

With regard to our works we have to bear in mind that if *the secular world* appreciates our social services it often does so because of the way we become quickly involved and get on with things, because of the practical usefulness of the service provided, almost secularising the religious element in which they see only philanthropy and not love and the inspiration of the gospel. Sometimes our works are considered as though they were similar to profitable businesses or perhaps reputable ones when the social services of the State are lacking. Even *believers* often have their doubts about the religious value of our works, even when it helps

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<sup>13</sup> BS 8 (1884) n. 6, 89-90.

them and is of service to them; they give the credit to those managing them and are not inspired by the religious experience of the Congregation. Too easily they have little confidence in the relevance and adaptability of our works. That is something to make us think - and quite a lot!

#### **1.4. Goal: holiness**

Don Bosco is heir to the religious humanism of St. Francis of Sales, who proposes to all classes of people the path of holiness. However, the aspect emphasised by Don Bosco is a holiness common to all, each one according to his state of life. He did not think in terms of degrees of holiness, unwilling to be analytical in this way. He used scholastic schemes taken from the Catholic spirituality of the time. His is a Christocentric and Eucharistic, Marian theology, nourished by the practice of some virtues, especially obedience. Holiness does not exclude joy, cheerfulness, it requires not penitence but commitment, coming from a life of grace in the carrying out of one's duties.

To the classical term "devotion" used to indicate that state of love that makes us act promptly and lovingly for God, Don Bosco preferred the word holiness, that of the person who lives in a state of habitual grace because he has succeeded through personal effort and the help of the Spirit to avoid the normal sins more common to the young: bad companions, bad talk, impurity, bad example, stealing, intemperance, pride, human respects, neglecting religious duties ...

After Saint Francis of Sales and before the Second Vatican Council, Don Bosco teaches us that holiness is possible for everyone; to everyone is given sufficient grace to achieve it; that holiness depends greatly on a person's cooperation with grace. Certainly holiness is made difficult but not impossible, by various obstacles: imperfections, defects, passions, the devil, sin. Holiness is not impossible, given the many means at our disposal: the theological virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the moral virtues both infused and acquired, ascetical practices ...

Our spirituality runs the risk of being thwarted, because times have changed and because sometimes we live on a superficial level. To really bring it to life we need to start again from Don Bosco, from his spiritual experience and from his preventive system. Clergy at the time of Don Bosco saw what was not going well and did not want to become religious, but they were captivated by him. Young people need "witnesses" as Paul VI wrote. What is needed are "spiritual men", men of faith, sensitive to the things of God and ready to accept religious obedience in the search for what is the best. It is not novelty that makes us free but the truth; truth cannot be what is fashionable, superficiality, improvisation: "veritas liberavit vos".

## **2. Core and synthesis of Salesian spirituality: pastoral charity**

Previously we have seen how the "type" of spiritual person Don Bosco was: profoundly human and totally open to God; in harmony between these two dimension he lived out a plan of life that he had taken up with determination: at the service of the young. As Don Rua says: "He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young."<sup>14</sup> If one examines his plan for the young one sees that it had a "heart," an element that gave it meaning, originality: "Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls".<sup>15</sup>

There is therefore a further practical explanation for the unity of his life: through his dedication to young people Don Bosco wanted to give them an experience of God. On his part this was not just generosity or philanthropy but pastoral charity. This is called the "core and synthesis" of the Salesian spirit.<sup>16</sup>

"Core and synthesis" is a telling and demanding affirmation. It is easier to list the various features, even the basic ones of our spirituality, without committing ourselves to any sort of hierarchical relationship, which would choose one as being the principal one. In this case it is necessary to enter into the spirit of Don Bosco or of the Salesian in order to discover the explanation for his way of doing things.

To understand what is involved in pastoral charity we take three steps: we look first at charity, then at the specification "pastoral", and finally at the 'Salesian' characteristics of pastoral charity.

## **2.1. Charity**

One of the sayings of St Francis of Sales is this: "The human being is the perfection of the universe; the spirit is the perfection of the human being; love that of the spirit; and charity that of love".<sup>17</sup> This is a universal approach that places four modes of existence on an ascending scale: being, human being, love as a form of being superior to any other of its expressions, charity as the highest expression of love.

Love represents the high point, the culmination of the maturing process of any individual Christian or not. The educational process sets out to lead a person to being capable of self-donation, to a selfless generous love.

It is psychologists, and not just Jesus Christ who say that a fully developed, fulfilled and happy individual is capable of generosity and can manage to live a love that is not just concupiscence, in other words for the personal satisfaction of being loved. Various forms of neurosis and personality disorders arise from being self-centred and all the usual treatments tend to open people up and to help them to concentrate on others.

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<sup>14</sup> SDB Constitutions 21

<sup>15</sup> SDB Constitutions 21

<sup>16</sup> Cf. SDB Constitutions 10; FMA Constitutions 80

<sup>17</sup> Cf. SAINT FRANCIS OF SALES, *Treatise on the love of God*, Vol II, Book X, c. 1

Charity is then the main proposal in every spirituality: it is not just the first and the main commandment, and therefore the main programme for the spiritual journey, but also the source of the strength to make progress. There is an abundance of reflections on this especially in Saint Paul (2 Cor 12, 13-14) and Saint John (1 Jn 4,7-21). Let us take just a few of the main points.

The awakening of charity within us is a mystery and a grace; it is not a human initiative but a participation in the divine life and the effect of the presence of the Spirit. We could not love God had He not Himself loved us first, making us feel Him and giving us a taste and the intelligence to respond to Him. We could not even love our neighbour and see in him an image of God without having a personal experience of the love of God.

“The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us.” (Rm 5,5). On the other hand even human love cannot be explained rationally, and for this reason it is said to be blind. No one can say exactly why one person falls in love with another.

From its nature of being a participation in the divine life and a mysterious communion with God, charity creates in us the capacity to discover and to perceive God: religion without charity distances us from God. Authentic love, even that which is human, takes those who are at a distance towards the faith and a religious setting. The parable of the good Samaritan highlights the relationship between religion and charity to the advantage of the latter.

Saint John in his first letter will sum this up as he writes: “My dear people let us love one another since love comes from God; and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God, anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love” (1 Jn 4,7-8). In saint John the word “to know” means “to experience”, rather than to have precise ideas: whoever loves experiences God.

Since charity is a gift that allows us to know God by experience, it also enables us to enjoy Him in the beatific vision: “Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge that I have now is imperfect but then I shall know as fully as I am known” (1 Cor 13,12).

Therefore charity is not only a special virtue but the form and substance of all the virtues and that which constitutes and builds up a person: “If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels...if I have the gift of prophecy... if I give away all that I possess...if I have faith in all its fullness, to move mountains...but am without love it will do me no good whatever” (1 Cor 13,1-3).

For this reason, charity and its fruits are things that last, impervious to time: “Love does not come to an end. But if there are gifts of prophecy the time must come when they must fail, or the gift of languages, it will not continue for ever, and knowledge, for this the time will come when it will fail. But once perfection comes all imperfect things will disappear” (1 Cor 13,8-10). This applies not only to life but to our history. That which is built on love remains and builds up ourselves, our community, our society; whereas that which is based and built on hatred and selfishness destroys itself.

Therefore charity is the greatest and the root of all the charisms, through which the Church is built up and operates. It is after having explained the purpose and the role of the various charisms that Saint Paul introduces his discourse on

charity with these words: “Be ambitious for the higher gifts. And I am going to show you a way that is better than any of them” (1 Cor 12,31).

It is the principal charism, even when it is expressed in everyday things and has nothing extraordinary or showy about it: “Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous ; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish, it does not take offence and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins but delights in the truth. It is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes” (1 Cor 13,4-6).

For Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, as for all the saints, charity is central. It is the constant guiding force of their lives. It is right to know this and to say so. Every so often in fact a member of the Salesian Family experiences this and discovers the importance of charity in an ecclesiastical movement after having lived for many years the spirituality of our Salesian charism. It seems as though before this they had never heard anyone speak about it effectively nor been able to live life intensely.

In the dream of the diamonds – which is a parable of the Salesian spirit – charity is placed in front and precisely over the heart of the personage: “Three of those diamonds he wore on his chest...the third over his heart bore the word Charity”.<sup>1</sup> In this dream what is placed in the front is the fundamental part of our spirit.

In addition, charity is recommended by our founders in a variety of ways: as the basis of our life in community, as a pedagogical principle, source of piety, condition for balance and personal happiness, the practice of particular virtues such as friendship, good manners, the sacrifice of one’s own interests..

Learning how to love is the purpose of consecrated life, which is nothing other than “a way that starts from love and leads to love”.<sup>19</sup> The combination of practices, and discipline, of norms and spiritual teaching is intended to obtain a single objective: to make us capable of welcoming others and putting ourselves at their service with generosity.

## **2.2. Pastoral charity**

Charity has many expressions: maternal love, married love, charitable works, compassion, mercy, love for one’s enemies, forgiveness. In the history of holiness such expressions cover all the areas of human life. We Salesians (SDB) and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) as in general all the groups of the Salesian Family, speak about a “pastoral” charity.

This expression appears many times in the Constitutions or Statutes of the various groups, in documents and talks. The meaning of pastoral charity is explained very well in the Second Vatican Council when referring to those who devote themselves to education to the faith it says: “They are gifted with sacramental grace enabling them to exercise a perfect role of pastoral charity through prayer, sacrifice and preaching...They are enabled to lay down their life

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<sup>18</sup> BM XV, 148 (The whole of the famous "Dream")

<sup>19</sup> Cf SDB Constitutions 196

for their sheep fearlessly and made a model for their flock can lead the Church to ever-increasing holiness through their own example”.<sup>20</sup>

The word “pastoral” indicates a specific form of charity; it immediately calls to mind the figure of Jesus the Good Shepherd.<sup>21</sup> Not only, however, his way of acting: kindness, seeking the lost one, dialogue, forgiveness; but also and above all the substance of his ministry: to reveal God to every man and every woman. It is more than evident how different this form of charity is to other forms whose preferential focus is on particular needs of people: health, food, work.

The element typical of pastoral charity is the proclamation of the Gospel, education to the faith, the formation of the Christian community, bringing the yeast of the Gospel to the situation. This therefore requires being totally available, devoted to the salvation of humanity, as shown by Jesus: of all men and women, of each and even of a single one. Don Bosco, and our Salesian Family following in his footsteps express this charity with the phrase: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*.

The great Institutes and the major currents of spirituality have summed up the heart of their own charism in a brief phrase: “For the greater glory of God” the Jesuits say; “Peace and good” is the greeting of the Franciscans; “Prayer and work” is the programme of the Benedictines; “Contemplate and pass on to others the things contemplated” is the norm of the Dominicans. The witnesses from the early days and the subsequent reflections of the Congregation have led to the conviction that the expression that sums up Salesian spirituality is precisely “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”.

Certainly the expression is frequently found on Don Bosco’s lips and had an influence on his spiritual attitude. It is the saying that impressed Dominic Savio in the office of Don Bosco still a young priest (34 years of age) and moved him to make a comment that is still famous: “I understand; here you do business not with money but with souls. I hope my soul will have its share in this business.”<sup>22</sup> For this boy it was clear therefore that Don Bosco was offering him not only education and a home but above all the opportunity for spiritual growth.

The expression has been taken up in the Liturgy: “inspire us with that same apostolic charity to seek the salvation of our neighbour and so serve you the one and only good.”<sup>23</sup> And this was quite right given that Don Bosco had this intention in mind with the foundation of his institutes: “The purpose of this Society as far as its members are concerned is nothing other than an invitation to come together urged on by a saying of Saint Augustine: *divinorum divinissimum est in lucrum animarum operare*”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> LG 41

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jn 10

<sup>22</sup> J. BOSCO, *Life of Dominic Savio*, in Dominic Savio ed T O’Brien Guild Publications London, 1969, chap VIII, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Prayer for the Liturgy on the Solemnity of Saint John Bosco

<sup>24</sup> MB VII, 622.

### 2.3. Salesian pastoral charity

In Salesian history we read: “On the evening of 26 January 1854, we gathered in Don Bosco’s room and he suggested that with the help of the Lord and St Francis of Sales we should first test ourselves by performing deeds of charity toward our neighbour... From that evening on those who agreed – or would later agree – to this were called Salesians.”<sup>25</sup>

After Don Bosco, each of the Rector Majors, as authoritative witnesses has reaffirmed the same conviction. It is an interesting fact that all of them have been concerned to repeat it with a unanimity that leaves no room for doubt.

Don Michael Rua affirmed at the canonical process for the beatification and canonisation of Don Bosco: “He left it to others to accumulate wealth .....and to chase after honours; Don Bosco really had nothing other at heart than souls: with deeds and not only his words he said: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”.

Don Paul Albera, who spent many years with Don Bosco and knew him well, declares “The driving force of his whole life was to work for souls to which he devoted himself entirely...The salvation of souls one might say was his only reason for living”.<sup>26</sup>

Even more tellingly also because it highlights Don Bosco’s profoundest motivations, Don Philip Rinaldi saw in the motto “*Da mihi animas*”, the secret of his love, the power and the ardour of his charity”.

As regards current awareness after the re-thinking of Salesian life in the light of the Council, as the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò declares: “It is my conviction that there is no brief expression that sums up better the Salesian spirit than that chosen by Don Bosco himself: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*. It indicates a fervent union with God which enables us to penetrate the mystery of His trinitarian life manifested in history in the missions of the Son and of the Spirit as the infinite Love *ad hominum salutem intentus*”.<sup>27</sup>

Where does this expression or motto come from, and what precise meaning can it have today? I say ‘today’ because nowadays the word ‘soul’ does not mean nor give the same idea as it did in previous ages.

This motto of Don Bosco is found in Genesis, chapter 14, verse 21. Four kings form an alliance and wage war against five others, among whom is the king of Sodom. When the city was being sacked Lot the nephew of Abram and his family are among those taken prisoner. Abram is told about this and having armed the men he sets out with his tribe. He defeats the invaders, recovers the loot and rescues the people. Then in his gratitude the king of Sodom says to him: “Give me the people the rest is for you.” The presence of Melchisedek, a priest whose origin is unknown, gives a particular religious and messianic significance to the story, especially on account of the blessing he gives to Abram: a situation therefore

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<sup>25</sup> BM V, 8.

<sup>26</sup> P. BROCARDO, *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Roma 1985, 84.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 85.

anything but “spiritual”. However, in the request of the king there is a clear distinction between the “people” and the “rest”, the things.

Don Bosco gave the expression a personal interpretation according to the religious-cultural view of the last century. “Anima” indicates a man’s spiritual quality, the centre of his freedom and the reason for his personal dignity, where he is most open to God. When Don Bosco gives the biblical text an accommodated, allegorical, prayerful, liturgical interpretation, the expression from Gen. 14,21 takes on particular characteristics: *animas* are the men and women of his day, they are the real youngsters he is dealing with; *cetera tolle* means detachment from things and creatures, a detachment which in him is certainly not equivalent to the annihilation of self, the annihilation in God, as for example the contemplative theologians or mystics understand it. For him detachment is a state of mind that is necessary for the most absolute freedom and availability with regard to the demands of the apostate itself.

The links between these two meanings, that of the Bible and that given by Don Bosco, in our own culture point to very practical choices.

In the first place pastoral charity takes the individual person into consideration, and is concerned with the whole person; first and foremost it is concerned with developing all the person’s potential. Giving “things” comes later; providing some service is in view of the development of the person’s conscience and sense of his own personal dignity.

In addition, a charity which above all considers the person is guided by a “vision” of that person. who does not live by bread alone: he has immediate needs but also infinite aspirations. He wants material things but also spiritual values. According to the expression of St Augustine “He is made by God, athirst for Him”. Therefore the salvation that pastoral charity seeks and offers is that which is full and definitive. Everything else is ordered in relation to that: charitable works to education; this to religious initiation; religious initiation to the life of grace and to communion with God.

In other words it could be said that in our education or development we give the first place to the religious dimension: not for the sake of proselyism, but because we are convinced that religion is the deepest resource for a person’s development. In a time of secularism, this approach is not easy to implement.

The saying “da mihi animas” also points to some form of method: in the formation or the re-generation of an individual it is necessary to re-awaken his spiritual powers, his conscience, his openness to God, thoughts about his eternal destiny. Don Bosco’s pedagogy is a pedagogy of the soul, of the supernatural. Once this has been realised the real work of education can begin. The rest is really background or preparatory work.

Don Bosco clearly says this in his biography of Michael Magone. This boy comes in off the streets into the Oratory. He is happy, and from a human point of view a good lad: he is spontaneous and sincere, he plays, studies and makes friends. There is only one thing missing: his understanding of the life of grace, of a relationship with God and how to achieve it. From a religious point of view he is ignorant or inattentive. He breaks into tears when he compares himself with his companions and recognises that this is missing. Then Don Bosco speaks to him.



From that moment the educational journey described in the biography begins: the awareness and the adoption of his own religious-Christian dimension.

There is therefore an ascetical process for someone moved by pastoral charity: “Cetera tolle”, “Leave all the rest behind”. One has to give up many things in order to preserve the main objective; many things can be entrusted to others, and many activities can be left to one side so as to have the time and be available to open up the youngsters to God. And this not only in one’s personal life but also in the programmes and the apostolic works themselves.

“Whoever examines the life of Don Bosco, following his thought processes and exploring the results finds a matrix: salvation in the Catholic Church the only repository of the means of salvation. He feels the challenge of abandoned, poor, aimless young people awaken in him the urgent need for education in order to enable these youngsters to take their proper place in the world and in the Church through methods using gentleness and love. Yet with a tension that has its origin in his desire for the eternal salvation of the young person.”<sup>28</sup>

## **2.4. Progress so far**

As a summary we can take up again the fundamental ideas of our reflection.

- Ours is an apostolic spirituality: it is expressed and grows through pastoral work.
- The apostolate becomes a genuine spiritual experience, and not merely the expending of energy, stress, and wear and tear, and is animated by charity; it is a source of effectiveness, confidence and joy in pastoral work.
- Charity gives unity to our personal lives; it resolves the tensions that arise between activity and prayer, between community life and apostolic commitment, between education and evangelisation, between a professional approach and the apostolate.
- The whole thrust of our spiritual life consists in revitalising pastoral charity, purifying and intensifying it: “ama et fac quod vis”.

## **3. Salesian spirituality for all vocations**

If it is true that Christian spirituality has common elements valid for every calling, it is also true that it is experienced through particular differences and specifics according to one's state in life: priestly ministry, consecrated life, lay faithful, family, youth, the elderly, ... they all have their typical spiritual experience. The same is true for Salesian spirituality.

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<sup>28</sup> P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II, Zurigo, PAS Verlag, Zurigo, 13.

### ***3.1. A spirituality common to all the groups of the Salesian Family***

There are elements of spirituality common to all the groups of the Salesian Family: they all draw inspiration from Don Bosco, who is the Founder of the Salesians, of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians together with Mother Mazzarello, of the Salesians Cooperators and of the Association of Mary Help of Christians; the other groups refer to their own Founders. These elements are listed in the “Charter of Identity of the Salesian Family”, which needs to be known and reflected on since it constitutes the frame of reference for our spirituality of communion and for our formation to communion.

The features that are characteristic and recognised by all the groups can be found especially in the third part of the “Charter of Identity”. They regard our life in relation to the Trinity, the links with Don Bosco, communion for the mission, the spirituality of everyday life, contemplation in action following the example of Don Bosco, dynamic apostolic charity, the grace of unity, a preferential love for the young and for the working class, loving kindness, optimism and joy, work and temperance, initiative and flexibility, a spirit of prayer, entrustment to Mary Help of Christians.

We should not forget that the Preventive System is an expression and practical application of this shared spirituality. It once again links us to the spirit, the attitudes and the gospel choices of Don Bosco. The «ingenuity» of his spirit is tied to the implementation of the Preventive System. It is a successful system, which is the model and the inspiration for many people nowadays who are engaged in education in the various continents, in multicultural and pluri-religious contexts. It is a model that demands from everyone continuous reflection so as to bring about more and more the centrality of the young as those for whom and with whom the Salesian mission is carried out.

### ***3.2. A spirituality proper to each group of the Salesian Family***

On the other hand each group of the Salesian Family has its own spiritual elements. Quite rightly, on account of their origin and development, the various groups have their own particular history and special aspects of the common spirituality that they have demonstrated in a special way or others that are original to them. These elements are the specific difference of each group; they need to be known and constitute a richness for the whole Family.

Variety is a gift of the Spirit, who does not like uniformity and standardisation; the differences and the specific features, however, must not become excuses for divisions or arguments but should enrich everyone and converge on a unity, which is communion to be welcomed as a gift and to be brought about by commitment. These identifying elements are present and made explicit especially in the Rules of Life, but also in the traditions of the various groups.

### ***3.3. Salesian youth spirituality***

As time passed a Salesian youth spirituality also developed. In addition to the three biographies of the boys Michael Magone, Dominic Savio and Francis Besucco, written by Don Bosco we can think of the pages he addressed to the young people themselves in the “Companion of Youth,” and of the “Sodalities” Don Bosco set up as an opportunity for them to take a spiritual and apostolic lead ...

It would be interesting to know the developments that have taken place throughout our history and tradition in Salesian youth spirituality, up to the present time when an official formal arrangement has been formulated and spread among the young through the Salesian Youth Movement. Spirituality is the basis of the Salesian Youth Movement, which grows with the commitment of the young people themselves and which needs the support of animation on the part of the various groups of the Salesian Family. The Salesian Youth Movement in fact is an opportunity, a gift and a task for all the groups of our Family.

Salesian youth spirituality is a spirituality suited to the young; it is lived with and for the young, planned and lived out as part of a young person's experience. It aims at creating a blueprint for today's young Christian living in and prepared for the world of today; offered to all the young because it applies to the “poorest” but at the same time capable of providing goals for those who make more progress; it also sets out to make the young person a role model for his peers and in the place where he finds himself.

#### *A spirituality of daily life as the place of encounter with God.*

Salesian youth spirituality sees daily life as the place of encounter with God. The basis of this very positive view of daily life and of life itself is faith and an appreciation of the Incarnation. In this kind of spirituality one shows oneself to be guided by the mystery of God Who with His Incarnation, Death and Resurrection affirms His presence in all of human reality as a saving presence

For a young person, daily life is made up of duties, socialising, sport, growing pains, family life, the development of personal gifts, future prospects, demands, aspirations. It is all of this that needs to be taken on board, reflected on and lived in the light of God. According to Don Bosco, to become a saint all that is needed is to do well what you have to do. He considers being faithful to one's obligations in life as the touchstone for virtue and as the sign of spiritual maturity.

What is needed so that daily life can be lived as a spirituality is the grace of unity which helps to harmonise the different features of life around a heart in which the Holy Spirit dwells. This makes conversion and purification possible; through the power of the sacrament of Reconciliation it enables the young person to maintain a free heart that is open to God and given to one's brothers and sisters

Among the *attitudes and experiences* of daily life to be lived deeply in the Spirit could be considered: one's family life; love for one's work or studies, cultural development and scholastic experience; the need to combine extraordinary experiences with the “daily grind”, a positive and reflective view of one's times; the

responsible acceptance of one's own life and spiritual progress day by day; the ability to guide one's life according to a vocational plan.

### *An Easter spirituality of joy and optimism*

The decisive truth of the Christian faith is that the Lord has truly risen! Therefore eternal life with God is our ultimate goal and it is already now our goal since it has become real in the body of Jesus Christ. Salesian Youth Spirituality is paschal by nature and is imbued with this eschatological reality.

The most deeply rooted inclination in the hearts of the young is the desire and the search for happiness. Joy is the noblest expression of happiness and, together with celebration and hope is the characteristic of Salesian spirituality. Christian faith is the proclamation of supreme happiness promised and conferred by «eternal life». However, this is not something to be won but rather a gift which shows us that God is the source of true cheerfulness and hope. Without excluding its pedagogical value, cheerfulness has above all a theological value; Don Bosco saw in it an essential manifestation of the life of grace.

Don Bosco understood and helped his boys understand that commitment and joy went hand in hand; that holiness and cheerfulness are inseparable. Don Bosco is the saint of the joy of being alive. His boys learned this lesson about life so well that they could say in terms typical of the Oratory that 'holiness consists in always being cheerful' Salesian youth spirituality offers a path of holiness that is simple, cheerful and serene.

The appreciation of joy as something spiritual, the source of commitment and its consequence, requires that certain *attitudes and experiences* are fostered in the young: it demands that the opportunity for their close involvement is fostered; in friendly and fraternal relationships, with the joyful experience of affection; youthful spontaneous celebrations and group events; a sense of wonder and a taste for the joys that the Creator has placed on our path: nature, silence, things achieved together; the demanding joy of sacrifice and solidarity; the grace of being able to endure suffering under the sign and with the consolation of the Cross of Christ.

### *A spirituality of friendship and personal relationship with the Lord Jesus*

Salesian youth spirituality is intended to lead the young person to an encounter with Jesus Christ and to make possible a relationship with Him of friendship and trust, creating an enduring trusting fidelity. Many young people have a sincere desire to know Jesus and try to respond to the questions about the meaning of life, to which, however, only God can give a real answer.

Friend, Teacher, Saviour are words that express the central role of Jesus in the spiritual life of the young. It is interesting to recall that Jesus is presented by Don Bosco as the friend of the young: «Young people are the delight of Jesus» he used to say; as the teacher of life and of wisdom; as the model for every Christian; as the redeemer who gave his whole life in love until death for our salvation; as being present in the little ones and the poor.

Following the path of conformity with Christ requires that certain *attitudes and experiences* are developed: the participation through faith in the community that lives with the memory and in the presence of the Lord and that celebrates Him in the sacraments of Christian initiation; the pedagogy of holiness, that Don Bosco demonstrated in reconciliation with God and with one's brothers and sisters in the sacrament of Reconciliation; learning how to pray personally and with others, special moments in which to grow in love and in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; a systematic study of the faith, enlightened by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

### *A spirituality of ecclesial communion*

An adequate experience and understanding of the Church is one of the points in the discernment of Christian spirituality. The Church is a spiritual communion and a community that becomes visible through shared gestures and works; it is the service of men and women from whom it does not detach itself like a "sect" that considers good only those works that bear its own imprint. It is the place chosen and offered by Christ where He can be encountered. He has consigned to the Church the Word, Baptism, His Body and Blood, the grace of the forgiveness of sin and the other Sacraments, the experience of communion and the power of the Spirit, which move people to have love for their brothers and sisters. Among its household treasures, the Family of Don Bosco has a rich tradition of filial fidelity to the Successor of Peter and of communion and collaboration with the local Churches.

Precisely because of its ecclesial dimension, Salesian youth spirituality is a Marian spirituality. Mary was called by God the Father to be, through the grace of the Spirit, the mother of the Word and then give Him to the world. The Church sees Mary as the example of faith. Don Bosco did so and we too are called to do the same in communion with the Church. Mary lived her life as Mother of God and our Mother; as the Immaculate One full of grace, totally open to God, to holiness and to a Christian life lived with total fidelity; as the Help of Christians in the great battle of the faith and the building of the Kingdom of God. She is the one who protects and guides the Church. Therefore Don Bosco considered her Our Lady of difficult times, the support and buttress of the faith and of the Church. In Mary Help of Christians we have a model and a guide for our educational and apostolic work.

Therefore *the attitudes and the experiences* that need to be created are: making the practical setting of the Salesian house a place where one experiences a true model of the Church, one that is fresh, attractive, active, capable of responding to the expectations of the young; with groups and especially the educative community, that unites the young people and the educators in a family atmosphere in a project of total education; with participation in the local Church, where all the faith-filled forces of Christians come together in a visible communion and an evident spirit of service in a given locality; with respect for and trust in the universal Church understood and expressed in love for the Pope; a special love for, devotion to and imitation of Mary the Immaculate Help of

Christians; knowledge of the saints and of those other significant Christians distinguished by their thinking and achievements in various fields.

### *A spirituality of responsible service*

Life lived as an encounter with God, the path of identification with Christ, the Church seen as communion and service where each one has a place and where the gifts of everyone are needed lead to and bring to maturity a conviction that life brings us into a vocation of service. Don Bosco wanted his young people to become “good Christians and upright citizens”.

Don Bosco, as a young man and an apostle, saw and lived his life as a vocation starting from his dream at nine years of age. With a generous heart he responded to the invitation: to be among the young in order to save them. Don Bosco used to invite his boys to engage in “a practical exercise of love for their neighbour”. Salesian youth spirituality is an apostolic spirituality because it reflects the conviction that we are called to collaborate with God in His mission, responding with dedication, fidelity, trust and total availability. So apostolic vocations and vocations to special consecration should be proposed to young people.

Responsible service implies some attitudes and experiences that need to be fostered: openness to the real situation and to personal contacts; the promotion of the dignity and the human rights of the individual, everywhere; living in one's family with a generous spirit and preparing to form one on the basis of mutual self-giving; encouraging solidarity especially towards the poorest people; undertaking one's work with honesty and professional competence; promoting justice, peace and the common good in politics; showing respect for creation; fostering culture; identifying God's plan for one's life; coming gradually to mature and consistent decisions with regard to serving the Church and others; bearing witness to one's own faith and living it in a practical manner in some sphere, such as educational, pastoral and cultural animation, voluntary service and missionary commitment; knowing about and being open to vocations of special consecration.

### **3.4. A spirituality of the Laity and of the Salesian Family**

The groups of the Salesian Family involve many lay people in their mission. We are aware that there cannot be total involvement without also sharing the same spirit. It is a fundamental task for us to communicate Salesian spirituality to the lay people who with us are co-responsible for the educational ministry. The Salesians, in conjunction with the other groups of the Salesian Family, undertook

the task of formulating a *Salesian lay spirituality* in the XXIV General Chapter.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the lay groups of the Salesian Family especially the Salesians Cooperators and the Past Pupils constitute a source of inspiration for such a spirituality.

Having become more aware that there cannot be a youth ministry without a family ministry we are thinking about the right kind of *Salesian family spirituality* to elaborate and present. There are family-style groups which draw their inspiration from Don Bosco. In this area we are only at the beginning but it is a way ahead which is helping us to develop our mission not only to the young but to ordinary people. We need to develop a family ministry and so share some spiritual experiences with families, with couples so as to prepare young people for setting up their own families.

## 4. Tasks for the Salesian Family

4.1. Let us commit ourselves to a better understanding of what **Don Bosco's spiritual experience** was; his spiritual profile, so that we can discover "Don Bosco the mystic"; in this way we can imitate him by living a spiritual experience with charismatic identity. Unless we make Don Bosco's spiritual experience our own we cannot be truly aware of our Salesian spiritual identity; this is the only way we can be disciples and apostles of the Lord Jesus, with Don Bosco as our model and teacher of spiritual life. Salesian spirituality reinterpreted and enriched through the spiritual experience of the Church after the Council and through reflection by today's spiritual theology, offers us a spiritual journey leading to holiness. We recognise that Salesian spirituality is a true and complete spirituality: it has tapped into the history of Christian spirituality, especially that of Saint Francis de Sales; it has its source in the specific and original experience of Don Bosco, has been enriched by the Church's experience and has arrived at the reinterpretation and mature synthesis that we have today.

4.2. Let us live the core and synthesis of Salesian spirituality which is **pastoral charity**. Don Bosco lived it by seeking the "glory of God and the salvation of souls" which became a way of prayer for him and a programme of life in the "da mihi animas, cetera tolle". This charity needs to be nourished through prayer and rooted in it by looking at the Heart of Christ, imitating the Good Shepherd, meditating on the Scriptures, experiencing the Eucharist, making time for personal prayer, taking on a mindset of service of the young. It is a charity which translates into and is made visible by concrete neighbourly gestures, affection, work, dedication. Let us take up the preventive system as a spiritual experience and not just as a proposal of evangelisation and pedagogical approach; it finds its source in the charity of God "who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side, and freely gives his life to save them"<sup>30</sup>; it prepares us to see God in the young and calls on us to serve Him in them, recognising their dignity,

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<sup>29</sup> GC24, *Salesians and Lay People: communion and sharing in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco*, Rome 1996, nn. 89-100.

<sup>30</sup> SDB Constitutions 20.

renewing our faith in their resources for good and educating them to the fullness of life.

4.3. Let us pass on our proposal for Salesian spirituality according to the **diversity of our vocations** especially to the young, to lay people involved in Don Bosco's mission, to families. Salesian spirituality needs to be lived according to the vocation each one has received from God. Let us recognise the common spiritual traits of each of the various Groups in the Salesian Family as indicated in the "Charter of identity"; let us make the witnesses to Salesian holiness known; let us invoke the intercession of our Blesseds, Venerables and Servants of God and ask for the grace that they may be canonised. Let us offer Salesian spirituality to the young we accompany. Let us offer Salesian spirituality to lay people who are committed to sharing Don Bosco's mission: and by focusing on family ministry, point to a spirituality for families that is appropriate to their circumstances. Finally, let us also invite young people, laity, and families in our educative and pastoral communities to have a spiritual experience, as also those in our groups and associations that belong to other religions or those who find themselves somewhat diffident about God; because a spiritual experience is also possible for them, there is room there for inwardness, silence, dialogue with their own conscience, openness to the transcendent.

4.4. Let us read some of **Don Bosco's writings** that can be considered as sources of Salesian spirituality. Above all I invite you to read again and to put into practice the "Dream of the ten diamonds" This offers to us a spiritual image for each one of us who draw our inspiration from Don Bosco. I then propose to you an anthology of the spiritual writings of Don Bosco's where he is a true master of the spiritual life.<sup>31</sup> In this way we can draw on some pages, less well-known but which speak to us directly about Salesian spiritual life.

## 5. Conclusion

This time I conclude the commentary on the Strenna not with a fairy tale but with the testimony and the message that Fr Pasquale Liberatore has left us. For many years he was the Postulator for the Causes of our Saints, and a saintly man himself. This is his poem entitled "The Saints".

It is a short personal "credo", which brings together everything about Salesian spirituality that can be seen being put into practice in a genuine and authentic way in the wealth and diversity of the fruits of holiness in the Salesian Family starting with our beloved founder and father Don Bosco. We found this poem in his office on the day he died. In it he praises the saints and uses a variety of images which we find very beautiful. Reading this poem we can almost reach out and touch the unmistakable and delicate human and spiritual sensitivity of our Saints, and sense their yearning for the fullness of life, love and happiness in God; we observe their interior strength and the spiritual experience we ourselves

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<sup>31</sup> Saint John Bosco. *Teachings on the spiritual life*. An anthology. Edited by A. GIRAUDO, LAS – ROME 2013



are called to live and to know how to present with passion and conviction to others, especially the young.

My first letter as Rector Major was entitled “Salesians, be saints!” and I saw it as setting out the programme for my period as Rector Major. Now I am happy that my final letter written as the successor of Don Bosco is a heartfelt invitation to drink deeply from his spirituality. This is really what I should like to be able to do myself and to propose to all of you, my dear members of the Salesian Family and young people.

## **THE SAINTS**

*“They shall be like the stars of heaven: they shall shine out like the firmament”*

### **Like the stars of heaven**

visible in their thousands to the naked eye,  
but infinitely more numerous  
to the telescope which views those without haloes.

### **Glowing volcanos**

like peep-holes  
into the mystery of the Fire of the Trinity.

### **Adventure stories**

written by the Holy Spirit  
in which surprise is the norm.

### **Expressions of the most varied literary forms**

yet always fascinating:  
from the style of a drama to the flavour of a fable.

### **Classics of the grammar of the beatitudes**

always convincing  
thanks to their joyful existence.

### **Cosmonauts in space**

to whom we owe the most astonishing discoveries  
only possible for those who distance themselves from the earth.

### **Giants as different from us**

as the genius always is  
yet made from the same stuff as ourselves.

### **Capable of mistakes and failures**

but always exceptional people:  
not to be under-estimated with the excuse of making them our fellow travellers.

### **Expressions of God's utter gratuity**

which enriches and raises up  
according to the mysterious criteria of his liberality.

### **They are dwelling in unchanging peace**

above the normal human conflicts  
yet always dissatisfied because they never cease to strive for even more.

**In orbit around the essential**

they are prophets of the absolute.

**Great artists**

in the forge of the Beautiful  
before which the human heart is ecstatic.

**Men and women fulfilled**

witnesses to the secret harmony  
between nature and grace.

**God's fools**

so much in love  
as to speak in disconcerting ways.

**The furthest removed** by instinct from every kind of sin,  
always the closest  
to every sort of sinner.

**The stages on which the Divine performance takes place**

and yet themselves humble spectators  
thanks to a merciless awareness of their own nothingness.

**Engaged in a continuous hiding of themselves**

and yet inevitably shining out  
like a city built on a hilltop.

**Bearers of eternal messages**

beyond time,  
progress, cultures and races.

**Fiery words**

which the Lord speaks to shatter our laziness,  
raps on the desk with which the Divine Master  
awakens us his distracted pupils.

**Living miracles**

before whom no experts are needed  
to acknowledge the extraordinary quality of the Gospel lived *sine glossa*

**Heroically detached from what is human,**

they are the supreme experts  
in human nuances.

**True masters of psychology**

who by the pathway of love  
reach the most hidden recesses of the human heart.

**Able to quicken our finest roots**

and touching ancient strings of harmony  
they instil homesickness for the future.

**Like the stars of heaven**

so different among themselves  
yet at heart lit up by the same fire.

*Fr Pascual Chávez V., SDB*  
Rector Major