

JOURNAL OF SALESIAN STUDIES

January – June 2015

Volume 16, Number 1

© 2015 – Salesian Society (SUO)

ISSN 2333–4061 (print)

ISSN 2333–4118 (online)

Subscription information and digital versions available online at:
SalesianJournal.org

A semiannual journal founded in 1990 and published by the

INSTITUTE OF SALESIAN STUDIES
DON BOSCO HALL | BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

*a work of the Society of Saint Francis de Sales
USA - West*

Editor in Chief

Emmanuel Camilleri, SDB

Editorial Board

Arthur J. Lenti, SDB
Francis J. Moloney, SDB
John Roche, SDB
Joseph Boenzi, SDB
Michael Mendl, SDB
Thomas Juarez, SDB
Thomas Prendiville, SDB

Design & Layout

PeerCreative.com

SALESIAN EVANGELIZATION

At the Threshold of the Bicentennial of Don Bosco's Birth

(Part 1)

by John Roche, SDB

A New Moment, a New Evangelization, a New Opportunity

As the Salesian world crosses the threshold of 2015 in its long pilgrimage to the bicentennial anniversary of Saint John Bosco's birth, the Salesian Family has gathered its many reflections and its collective demonstrations of beginning afresh from the Founder and Father to offer to the world a new lens: this is a new moment with a new Salesian Evangelization and an opportunity to share with the Church and the global community the precise and specific gifts that the Salesian Spirituality of Accompaniment offers the word of youth ministry and education. The new evangelization is an invitation into the mystery of Christ and his longing to become one with all those the Father has given to him. This new evangelization and this new opportunity has been on the rise since the opening of Vatican II and before, but it has received a tremendous articulation and urging from the Popes of Vatican II, specifically Blessed Paul VI, and in the recent pontificate of Saint John Paul II. More than a mere articulation, the Spirit has led the Church to a new threshold of understanding in a complex and complicated globalized world breathing life into the charisms and apostolic endeavors of its wide family. A new Pentecost emerges with the ability to speak to so many cultures, languages, and ideologies. Among these gifts of the Spirit arises the special gift of a Salesian Spirituality of Accompaniment making the invitation to evangelization vastly more than a restructuring of catechesis and more of a shared experience of the risen Christ for a spiritually hungry and confused world.

Defining Terms

Blessed Paul VI called for a "new evangelization" in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,¹ the Apostolic Exhortation promulgated on December 8, 1975. To be more

1. Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* AAS 68 (8 December 1975).

accurate, the Pontiff never referred specifically to a “new” evangelization as it is understood since the era of Saint John Paul II, but the implications of the exhortation are clear. Blessed Paul VI enunciated an examination of the mission of the Church at its core and called for a new emphasis and a revitalizing of that mission: to proclaim the Gospel to all the world. In his exhortation, he carefully distinguished between other efforts, social movements, and human efforts to work for justice and peace and defined the mission of evangelization apart from and alongside of such initiatives. By this, he outlined carefully what evangelization is and what it is not. This is an important starting point in any discussion on the mission of evangelization in the context of a Catholic Christian answer to the mandate of Jesus for global evangelization.

Saint John Paul II presented a new synthesis of the Church’s teaching about evangelization in modern times in his exhortation, *Mission of the Redeemer*. Here Saint John Paul referred to a re-launching of evangelization as the new millennium approached.

The moment has come to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all.²

The essential mission of the Church, according to Blessed Paul VI, is the task of evangelizing all peoples. His exhortation underlined that the vastly changing world demanded a response that is more urgent and immediate. This mission, he insisted, makes a return to the Church’s grace and vocation—her deepest identity.³ Saint John Paul II took up this call with emphasis upon the deterioration of western civilization and the weakening of the condition of the Church in a post-modern world. Therefore, this evangelization is not limited by any means merely to the proclamation of the Gospels to the unbaptized and unbelievers. This new evangelization is directed to entire cultures, to peoples of the world traditionally known as believers and Christians. Non-practicing Christians are given special mention in much of the work of Saint John Paul II giving way to new initiatives at re-evangelizing the Western world.

A new evangelization has essential characteristics, but it is not a new message. The message remains: salvation is in Christ. It is a gift of God offered to all people as a grace and a mercy. Saint John Paul II underlined that this gift is a gift of relationship with Christ. “It is not a matter of merely

2. Cf. JOANNES PAULUS II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 3.

3. Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

passing on doctrine,” he asserts, “but rather of a personal and profound meeting with the Savior.”⁴

In the Salesian tradition, a new evangelization prompts a deeper study of making this relationship with Jesus, this response to the call for conversion, an attainable reality in the lives of the young in every cultural setting. This demands a personal commitment on the part of the educator and minister that goes beyond, but is not exclusive of deeper theological training, catechetical readiness, and ministerial competence. It requires an inner conversion that is fed by a daily spirituality. This arises from the conviction that the Gospels and our own charism are up to the task of this new evangelization.

We are invited to look at the Salesian Spirituality of Accompaniment with new eyes. It is a particular means for living in a particular charism as a specific response to this mandate for a new evangelization. As we examine this new moment with all of its characteristics and ramifications, we will return again and again to the special gift God has given to us and to the world—a Salesian Spirituality—lest we run the risk of limiting its scope or diminish its significance at this crucial point of history.

A New Cultural Moment and a New Formation

Salesian scholar and religious, Giuseppina Del Core, has written much about the Salesian spirituality of accompaniment. It is her conviction that such a spirituality “emerges as a grace and a necessity” for the present times as the world and the Church face a “new moment.” Del Core states clearly that we are living at a time of vocational crisis and which, she suggests, is linked to a wider phenomenon of abandonment. She calls this a time of disjointed formation in which there is an evident lack of discernment and vocational accompaniment. In general, many persons feel distant from spiritual realities and indifferent to spiritual direction. Into this reality, Del Core suggests that the act of accompaniment “re-emerges as a grace and a necessity in the experience of the Church today.”⁵ As she describes this necessity, she offers various components which contribute to a definition of spiritual accompaniment. These components will be considered later in this text. Suffice it to mention that she admits that the terminology in this area of discussion is still evolving and cautions against a facile use of such terms. She

4. Cf. JOANNES PAULUS II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 3.

5. Giuseppina DEL CORE, *Lezioni, Discernimento-Accompagnamento 2005-2006 in Seconda Parte: L'Accompagnamento Vocazionale*, 60-107, text for “Il Corso monografico di Spiritualità giovanile” Università Pontificia Salesiana, Roma, 76. Cf. DEL CORE, *Accompagnare I giovani nel loro cammino*, in J. M. GARCIA (Ed.), *Accompagnare I giovani nello Spirito*, ROMA, LAS, 1998.

emphasizes the need to find a language that is not perceived as threatening to the present culture and one which will not be tempted to water down significance in the process.

What are most intriguing in her work are her identification of this necessity and the emergence of accompaniment as a sign of grace for this particular moment. Here is a translation of her writing on this point:

This is a new cultural moment—a new need for formation! In the secular age, there is a need for a word or a term that invites and addresses this need and takes it out of its trapped connotation (but whatever the term, it is still “spiritual”).⁶

The signs to which she points indicating and highlighting this moment are many: the spiritual transformations taking place among the laity who are asking for direction within special groupings, profound psychological changes taking place with certain urgency,⁷ the search for spiritual gurus and the spiritual hunger which that demonstrates, and a universal cry for communion all characterize this moment. Therefore, accompaniment, Del Core insists, must be *educative* if it is to provide assistance in making coherent and authentic choices within this tangle of quests for meaning. At this turning point, the roles of the confessors and the religious have shifted from central to marginal positions of influence and ministry. Del Core sees this as a shift in mentalities and realities. She calls this “a new moment within the Church” that is both an opportunity and a crisis.

To find a path out of the labyrinth is to focus on persons in all of their psychological and spiritual needs. Therefore, accompaniment, however it is defined, must be educative and respect the autonomy of the individual. In order to find a symbol adequate to describe the accompaniment needed in this moment, Del Core turns to the Gospel of Luke and the Emmaus Journey. She qualifies accompaniment according to this “experience” of the risen Christ. *Accompaniment is not an idea, but a person who walks beside us and urging us along the same path upon which the accompanier travels.* These are the characteristics of that model: accompaniment is a conversation about the

6. DEL CORE, *L'Accompagnamento Vocazionale*, 76.

7. DEL CORE, *L'Accompagnamento Vocazionale*, 76. Some of the profound psychological changes cited are new thinking for new forms of religiosity and spirituality investing the emotional and deeper parts of life, invasion of exotic ideas from the East, the quest for psychological confirmation of the future by means of astrology, magic, and card-reading, the fascination and the refuge of contemplative isolationism in the face of consumerism and technology, the disciplines a “fusion of spiritualities”, to the return of a spirituality labeled as “traditional.”

present moment in all of its reality, it is a destination, and it is a sharing of life and ultimate meaning.

Henri Nouwen echoes this model in his own attempt to walk with others in the secular world. He names the journey as one of being “taken, blessed, broken, and given.”⁸ He describes each of these steps in the journey carefully: the one baptized is taken—already chosen, already named for, already owned, already claimed as belonging to the Father; the chosen one is blessed as one with special uniqueness, unrepeatable value, worthy of the Father’s love; the chosen is broken and in need of the other and of God; and the chosen is sent into the world as gift. The entire process of spiritual growth toward a oneness with God and with others is offered in this brief description. Nouwen draws upon an important attribute of being blessed. He emphasizes the unique gift of one’s presence. *Presence* is that special quality that only one can choose to offer or withhold from another. This is the special gift and the call of accompaniment—a call to be actively present, radically attentive, authentically open to “hear” the other with a readiness to respond to the need of the other. For Nouwen, this is the least available gift in our world today, the mark of the secular age, *the* source of our anxiety and violence—the lack of presence.

If accompaniment is the grace of God emerging in this moment and if that is the special gift of presence for a hungry age, it would seem that this is not a passing topic to be easily discussed and thrown aside. It is, in this discussion, the central issue for the moment. It is not simply the central issue for the Salesian, already called to offer a special presence and accompaniment to the young, but it appears as the special call of God to the whole Church. To expand on this notion, let us turn now to other prophetic voices and visions of accompaniment. Let us examine this moment and name it.

Responding to the Love of God in Christ

Embarking upon the call for a new evangelization and recognizing the gift of God in the signs of our times comes with both a mandate and a precaution. The mandate is to personal ongoing conversion, putting on the new person, putting on the mind of Christ. With this experience of transformative love comes the mandate of Jesus to go into all the world announcing the Good News of the Kingdom of God. The announcement is an announcement of love, the revelation of a God of relationship. It is the call to enter into oneness with a God desperately in love with his children—so in love that He gave his only Son that we might know that love. This message—this Good

8. Henri NOUWEN, *Life of the Beloved*, New York, The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992.

News is passed onto each generation by those who have seen with their own eyes and touched with their own hands the Incarnation in Christ. This is a testimony of love and relationship that makes one simple demand: that we love as Christ has loved. That love, however, is not merely a philosophy for living or the embracing of a social standard of kindness set by a teacher and mentor. It is a love that heals, makes whole what is broken, redeems what is lost and brings the loved and the beloved into a union that reaches into the meaning of existence and reveals eternal life. Therefore, the mandate to evangelize is a partnering with Christ to save the world, to bring meaning, and invite into eternal life.

This privileged call is not optional because it has as its goal the salvation of the world and this salvation is God's burning and everlasting desire—that none of these are lost. Yet, this evangelization is a far remove from assimilation into a particular culture. It is not a form of elitism that makes of the follower of Christ one that is better than or more worthy than those who have not known Christ or who have yet to embrace the Good News. In fact, the precaution is intricately woven into the nature of the Good News so that the proclamation of the Good News is always meant to liberate, to lift up, to give life. Any act of evangelization must reveal the God who loves without condition and reveals a love beyond human imagining. The encounter of Christ was not one that demanded cultural conditions or philosophical alignment. The Gospels reveal a mission without boundaries which shattered cultural taboos and revealed a hospitality that was in Jesus' time and culture scandalous to the teachers of faith. Jesus reached out to the sick, to the sinner, to the enemy, to the pagan, to the unclean, and even to the dead—without condition, without barrier. And that outreach was so transformative that all inhibitions dissipated. The Good News was truly Good News in that all are invited to the Kingdom.

An invitation is only an invitation if free choice remains. Thus, the centuries since the giving of the mandate, since the revelation of Good News, are rife with contradictions, distortions, and even violent manipulations of the call of Christ to announce Good News. In the name of that commission, much human selfishness and sinfulness has been foisted onto the human story. Yet, despite the reality of sin and decay, the true message of liberation has always touched and transformed the longing hearts of humanity. This is and will always be the work of the Spirit of God and will not be defeated. As John's prologue assures followers of Christ for all time, the Light has come into

the world and darkness shall not overcome that Light. In fact, to those who believe, a new relationship is inaugurated: we become God's own children.

So it is that we hold in tension two realities: the Good News is the revelation of God in Christ. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. It is only in Christ that one comes to the Father. It is only in Christ that one comes to salvation. Yet, the transmission of that Good News is an act of hospitality and love. It is an invitation to know Christ and to imitate his love for all. That act can never be one of coercion, rejection, or judgment upon any one person, faith, or culture. It must always be an act of welcome and invitation. And the strongest and most authentic invitation is one that is lived by example.

How Did We Arrive Here?

A major cultural shift is taking place: the world is shifting from a predominantly Western view to a global stance. This is not a small shift, but one which impacts every part of the human experience. It is not, on the face of things, necessarily or even logically a negative transition, as some in the West would tend to perceive. It has its drawbacks from a Western position because the centrality of financial and cultural power will no longer reside in one hemisphere. Yet, that reality is both inevitable and encouraging. It may seem to the power structures of the West a threat deserving every ounce of defense, and there are many institutions and corporations which are learning the language of global commerce in order to maintain their dominance, but this will not carry their primacy throughout the current upheavals and the redefining chaos rising in our time.

Albert Nolan has made an acute analysis of this shift in his book, *Jesus Today*. It is worth a close examination. In the first part of his text he offers four headings under which he dissects this global shift: *Hunger for Spirituality*, *The Crisis of Individualism*, *Globalization from Below*, and *Science after Einstein*. It is most appropriate that he situates these considerations in the deeper context of the human experience, beginning with a basic hunger for the spiritual. Such a hunger is and always has been worldwide. We may even venture to say that such a hunger has caught up with the empty promises of industrialization and capitalism, revealing the emptiness of these and other systems of governance and commercial pursuit. The Western vantage point has often buried this hunger—or has tried to do so with great effort. The recent history of spiritual movements in the West has been pointing toward this hunger for some time now in many varied voices from all corners East and West. Thomas Merton, the American Cistercian monk and author, embodied that hungering quest in his own auto-biographical sketch, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which surprised

the world and himself with its raging success in 1947. His story spoke to a hungering world. His testimony resounded throughout East and West in the details of his conversion and transformation. The world accompanied his anguished search long after the publication of his work and felt the pangs of emptiness at his early and tragic death—a death coming on the brink of his rendezvous with the East. It was to the East that this great mystic found a newer and more profound prism through which his vision of the world and its spiritual hunger could be seen with new clarity and insight. His shift was more than a surface embrace of other cultures or polite nods toward other spiritual ideas. His shift sought an integration that is still being pursued today: an integration between Eastern and Western world views, a new vision of God that pushes beyond the confines of a strictly Judeo-Christian construct, but a vision that gives new meaning to the Christian encounter with Jesus, the Incarnation. We can see other familiar strains rising from the longings of Jesuit scientist, Teilhard de Chardin and his vision of the convergence of all things in the resurrected Christ, to the world embrace of a prelate dismissed to Turkey destined to become the great John XXIII who would open the doors and windows to a new Spirit sweeping through the 20th Century, to the small diary of a sickly young woman who dreamed herself into missions all over the world and whose “Little Way” would make Therese of Lisieux a familiar voice throughout that world. It would seem that there has been a swell of voices in the last two centuries—voices announcing the arrival of a new world, a globalization to come with all its potential, all of its problems, and all of its hunger. To each of these potentials, problems and hungers, the Gospel rises ever new.

A Hungering World

Postmodernism has been defined in various ways according to the discipline within which the term is applied. In literature, the mark of postmodernism is the abandoning of the modern context of the larger narrative. In such a narrative, the protagonist, antagonist, and the struggle are known and the backdrop of the plot is always the resolution of the known struggle with its principal players. That resolution arises out of a worldview that has been woven from the larger cloth of culture. This cloth we might call the larger narrative. In such a narrative, there are expected outcomes: good triumphs over evil, honesty wins out in the end, love never fails to conquer. However, this modern view has slowly given way to a less stable and less secure view of the order of things. Literature has given rise to anti-heroes, difficult to define in either protagonist or antagonist categories. The contexts have shifted from larger narratives to flights of fancy unknown before. The narration of a modern epic invites the reader into a knowable context. The

reader journeys with the characters aware of the larger parameters of these players, thus prepared to hope and guess and discern with them. A post-modern narrative thrusts the reader into an unknown with little assistance. The reader discovers the context with the narrator. The narrator may adhere to known conventions or leave them completely, not really concerned how the reader will follow—if the reader follows at all. The struggle shifts from an empirical to an ontological one and there is no promise of any resolution. Often times, the resolution is the discovery of no resolution.

A wonderful example of such a novel is the recent New York Times bestseller, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*⁹, by the young New York writer Jonathan Safran Foer. In this novel, the reader is thrust into the wild musings of a nine year old boy trying hard to make sense of his world after the loss of his father at the World Trade Towers in 2001. But this context is never spelled out at any point in time, nor is the identity of the narrator ever explained. The reader must live in the skin of this little boy for many pages before letting go of expectations and seeing the world through this child's eyes. The reward is worth the struggle, but it is not the expected roadmap for any narrative. There is something to be said for employing this style after the world altering events of September 11, 2001. From a Western standpoint, things will never be the same. But from an Eastern standpoint, from a worldview often missed by Western eyes, some of these harsh realities about the violence of the world and the unrest of so many groups, radical or otherwise, are nothing new: providing evidence, once more, that a global viewpoint is rising, welcome or not.

The main character of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is Oskar Schell. Oskar goes out on a quest to discover whatever link he might find to a key mysteriously left behind by his father. The key stands for everything to this little boy, but he has no logical means to discover any link. Nothing about his quest is logical. Yet, somehow, the quest itself becomes meaningful for this little boy. Not finding a larger narrative, Oskar's own becomes the most important narrative. It is, in the end, a search for meaning in an adult world seemingly devoid of meaning. What is curious and touching is Oskar's observing the adults in his quest who—like the reader—are struck by the innocence and the illogical process of this little boy. Ironically, his quest becomes their own and they stumble, at least some of the adults do, into deeper meaning they did not even realize was ever missing. Oskar shows the adults their hunger without ever intending to do so. The novel is worth the

9. Jonathan Safran FOER, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, New York, Mariner Books (2006).

time—and the aggravation—for a good read and it is a wry commentary on the world today.

We can underline, then, that a watermark of a post-modern world is a new kind of hunger. Perhaps better put, it is an old hunger given more attention than ever before—almost as if the world has reached a place at which this hunger can no longer be ignored—in fact, will not be ignored by any cultural, religious, or social device. Nolan points to the global fascination with Dan Brown's mediocre novel *The Da Vinci Code*¹⁰ as evidence of this new hunger:

The significance of *The Da Vinci Code*, however, is not to be found in the accuracy or inaccuracy of its contents, but in the book's accuracy as a barometer of where we are today and what people are looking for. More and more people, and especially young people, have given up all the certainties of the past: religious certainties, scientific certainties, cultural certainties, and historical certainties. Everything is being questioned. They feel that one can no longer believe anything that authorities of any kind are saying and have been saying for centuries. Ours is an age of unprecedented skepticism. One opinion is as good as another. All one can say is that some opinions are old and boring, while others are interesting.

The Da Vinci Code is experienced as freeing the imagination to consider any number of other possibilities. It liberates the mind from what is perceived as the straitjacket of imposed certainties and dogmas. Academics call this attitude the mind of *postmodernism*...¹¹

Wiping Away the Horizon

Oblate priest and systematic theologian, Ron Rolheiser, has written a marvelous survey of Western spiritual history since the Renaissance entitled *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt-Presence of God*.¹² Turning history on its ear, he begins this study of changing culture with a metaphorical tale written by Friedrich Nietzsche. In the tale, Nietzsche describes a man running into the middle of a marketplace at the noon hour holding high a lit lantern crying out to the busy masses, "Where is God? Where is God?" The crowd pauses long enough to take in this strange spectacle and to ridicule him. The man smashes the lantern against the cobble stones and declares, "God is dead!" and he laments that he and the crowd are guilty of the murder, responsible for taking a sponge that has wiped away the horizon. Rolheiser

10. Dan BROWN, *The Da Vinci Code*, New York, Doubleday (2003).

11. Alber NOLAN, *Jesus Today*, New York, Orbis Books (2006) pp. 3-4.

12. Ron ROLHEISER, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt-Presence of God*, New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company (1994).

uses this story to point out that Nietzsche was less the father of modern atheism as one of the first voices to cry out to the believers for honesty. It was Nietzsche's deepest desire to know God, but he was desperately seeking him among the believing so-called religious people only to come away emptier than before. Thus, Rolheiser begins his survey of Western Spirituality asking what has happened to the honest experience of God that once so framed the whole of Western society. His survey is detailed and fascinating, but there are three characteristics upon which Rolheiser saddles the root causes of the disintegration of Western spiritual identity: narcissism, pragmatism, and unbridled restlessness.

Narcissism, he claims, is defined as limiting one's sense of reality merely upon one's own personal reality without any consideration of the larger realities around—including the realities of others. Pragmatism he describes as the evaluation of others merely in terms of production. A person is valued only by what they produce. And unbridled restlessness is the attitude that society has a right to any knowledge it has the power to uncover and utilize. If we have power to clone, then we must. If we have power to destroy, then we will. It is these three characteristics of Western culture and practice that Rolheiser claims have wiped away the horizon of the infinite—have made the experience of God almost impossible. The larger narrative of God's creation, revelation, and salvation have been removed. Post-modernism has neither a place nor an inclination for God or any part of the story of Salvation.

Defining a Western Context for a New Moment

As we can see, then, more than a few spiritual authors have claimed in recent years that the West is in decline. A shift is taking place. It may take many generations, but one of the consequences of a new globalization is erosion of power in the West. This shift has ramifications in every dimension of the human experience of life from the political to the economic to the profoundly spiritual. As the world becomes smaller, the shift is inevitable. For some, it spells the end of a world-view and the intrusion of unfamiliar and new world-views and cultural values. For others, the shift represents an opportunity for sharing the richness of other views and perspectives. On one side is a defensive stance prepared to fight for survival and on another side hands are reaching out for new synergies and shared possibilities.

A Period of Diminishment

From an ecclesial standpoint, many authors have defined the present moment as a period of diminishment. The Western Church, they suggest, is being purified by God. Here, too, there are definitely separate camps: one defensive, one welcoming. Those whose postures are defensive are neither

wrong nor right. They are simply caught in a strange countryside without a map. Those whose dispositions are welcoming are neither more informed nor more correct. They are as much in need of a compass as those preparing their defense. Both sides, in fact, would be wise to join hands on the journey into unfamiliar territory: one offering important links to historical and traditional foundations, the other exploring new possibilities without fear.

This shift has been long in the making and its arrival is not complete. This is a moment of transition. As such, this moment calls out for direction. It agitates and bubbles to the surface many questions of meaning. The possibility of ignoring this reality is gone. Spiritual author and Benedictine Sister, Joan Chittister asserts:

The spirituality of diminishment implies that we will go on without promise of success, with no memorials raised to our efforts, with no institutions to mark our accomplishments, with no respect for age, with no certainty that any one, at any time, will come behind us to complete the work. Given the decline in our numbers, we excuse ourselves from the struggle. Or we become cynical about new efforts, new ideas. Or we deny the present situations entirely and settle down to wait for another age. It is a serious moment in the life of the soul... The idea of starting over to do new work with new energy wearies us to the bone...

But this is a great moment for those whose souls are still alive with God. Diminishment requires more life of us than we have ever known before. It leads us to be ourselves, to give everything we've got, to know the power of God at work in us, far beyond our own strength, far beyond our own vision. Diminishment gives us the opportunity, the reason, the mandate to examine our lives, to begin again, to dredge up what is best in us, to spill it recklessly across the canvass of the earth. Diminishment throws us back, whole and entire, small and trusting, aflame and afire, on God. And a life in God is anything but dead. It is glory beyond glory beyond glory.¹³

In a Salesian context, the Western experience is varied. When the West is applied to the Salesian context, it can refer to the American continents, to the English-speaking countries, and to combinations of these. On the American continents, the Salesian experience is vastly different from one country and culture to another. In those territories defined as industrialized and progressive with English-speaking as the foundation of education and business, "the West" implies a link to a form of imperialism that connects with Western Europe in a post-World War II world. In other words, "the West" in this application refers to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, and other satellite regions connected

13. Joan CHITTISTER, *The Flame in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life*, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1995, 73, 76, 77.

by forms of government and economies. It refers also to the Allies of World War II in Western Europe. The Western world, then, is captured in this context as “the secularized world.” Even within this world there are vast differences in every dimension of life experience, but the common ground that is shared in all of these cultures is the long history of development, structures of education, and technological advancement which has, for better or for worse, led to a diminishment of the authority of religious faith within these cultures. Secularism is the new authority.

There is nothing simple about defining a context in the rapidly changing landscape of the world today. Juan Vecchi, Rector Major of the Salesian Society (1996-2002), recognized this and referred to many forms of poverty in the experiences of the young. Within his own Western experience from Argentina to Rome, he encountered the problems of globalization. What is important to underline is the fact that the Western world, for all of its contexts and varied cultural expressions, has had positive and negative influence upon the non-Western world. For example, Vecchi was heart-broken by his encounters with militarized youth in embattled, horribly under-developed countries of Western Africa. Though these contexts would not be considered “Western,” the impact of Western arms, Western drugs, and Western colonization has had far-reaching and catastrophic impact upon the youth of these regions.

Globalization Beyond a Western Lens

Therefore, it is difficult to define simply a Western context for a Salesian examination of the present moment. What can be said is that the Western World has, because of globalization, left its mark upon the entire world. In an essay on new evangelization, Robert Schreiter offered this thought on globalization:

Globalization, while providing some overarching understanding of the human being and society, is being found by many people to be grossly inadequate. It’s based upon largely consumerist models. Your value as a human being is determined by what you can make or produce and what you can consume, in the reverse order, actually.¹⁴

Asia offers a Salesian context that is, in some ways, radically different. The choice for the vocation of the Salesian religious is growing dramatically. Diverse works are cropping up all over Asia responding to newer and newer challenges. Houses for children of the street, hostels for young people looking for work, and educational enterprises of every shape and size are

14. Robert SCHREITER, “Pathways to Evangelization in the First World,” in Ron ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to our Children*, New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006, 109.

responding to the hordes of young people forming the major populations of these territories of the early twenty-first century world. Unlike the West, their cultural experience is widely diverse and their spiritual and religious context is anything but homogenous. Even economically, many places once considered among the most impoverished of the world are fast becoming centers of computer science development and engineering. This alone is shifting the economies of these traditionally poorer countries. While the boon can be considered a positive effect, the pace at which the vast numbers of poor are being offered decent living conditions and educational opportunities continues to lag behind incongruously.

New Heart, New Minds

One of the gifts of any exile is the longing for a homecoming. Inside of that longing might be found newer expressions of some very familiar ideas. These ideas may spark new life where apathy or fear may have come to inhabit the heart. There is a small, but powerful text that, for this work, has offered great insight while provoking a keen recognition of some old familiar friends in its presentation. Perhaps this is because this small text dwells upon the call of the priest for a secular world. It is a loving outreach to many presbyters who have found themselves in that new territory without the roadmap, who have awakened to a new world with a growing sense of isolation and uselessness. This text is called, *New Hearts, New Models*¹⁵ and is written by Irish theologian and teacher, Daniel J. O'Leary. This is a recent text that offers hope and insight to priests, especially diocesan sacramental priests, who look upon this moment in the history of the church as one that threatens them to the very core. This is a time of ministerial exile!

What O'Leary offers are some "new models" of priesthood for these changing times. Yet, what he offers fits very well into the heart of Salesian Spirituality. These models, then, do not apply simply or exclusively to ministerial priests. Their application easily translates into a Salesian spirituality for any Salesian educator because at their core, they are models of an educative and pastoral project, a plan of life, a spiritual accompaniment. These models, then, are offered here as new containers of old ideas, new models of a tried-and-true Salesian spirituality.

The models O'Leary suggests are listed here to demonstrate the refining and redefining that is prompted at a time of diminishment. In fact, O'Leary wrote his text over ten years ago as the ministerial priesthood of Ireland began the slump that terrifies the local clergy in Ireland today. From holding the proud position as *the* Catholic country sending missionaries all over the

15. Daniel O'LEARY, *New Hearts, New Models*, Dublin, The Colombia Press (1997).

world, there are no vocations in recent years and the culture has turned an angry face to the Church in general. Into such a setting, many very faithful men who have given their lives for the Gospel are left to wonder about the value of their lives. Many are wont to close shop and retire to happier memories. Others are in deepest depression and permit their hearts to ask where God has gone in these turbulent times. Some are swept away in the culture and live a watered down or counterfeit Gospel of accommodation. O’Leary wrote to his fellow priests to bolster their courage and to assist them to see the workings of the Spirit even in this diminished period. He offers these models of ministry, which will be described in greater detail toward the end of this study: *Farmers of hearts, Ministers of beauty, Transformers of Fear, Ministers to Mystery, Weavers of Wholeness, Capturers of the Love of God, and Sacraments of Compassion.*

Secularity As a Complex Phenomena

The eighth successor of Saint John Bosco as Rector Major of the Salesians of Don Bosco, Juan Vecchi, stated that the work of Don Bosco was still very urgent in our day. He compared the original Oratory, the Oratory at Valdocco, to the world of today. While many of the same realities remain, there is a level of complexity that makes the work of Don Bosco—evangelizing poor and needy youth—more urgent than ever.

The new, postmodern Valdocco Oratory, according to Vecchi, was now world-wide and faced problems far more complex than any one location could ever imagine. It is for this reason that he called for the development of new mentalities and new strategies for living out a new evangelization.

Different Contexts, Different Phenomena

Our present context is a secular world where the western influence is in decline, the impact of the Church is falling, and a context in which spiritual hungers are crying out more than ever. For the most part, all of these conditions are rooted in the traditional “Western World.” That world is nuanced primarily by a pluralism borne of immigration. This is an important detail for defining a context. An overview of this Western World is necessary and calls our attention again to Robert Schreiter:

Secularization may represent what happens under particular social conditions that are not being produced in the same way in different parts of the world. So

people are engaging modernity and secularity in very different ways in diverse parts of the world.¹⁶

Robert Schreiter calls Europe the heartland of secularity because in Europe and Australia it is found in its strongest form. In Denmark, Sweden, and Norway there is a phenomenon he refers to as “believing without belonging.” It had grown into their custom to be members of their cultural church as a birthright, as part of a “folk church.” These cultures raised generations in school with religion but without any affiliation. He indicates that the place where this is most obvious is when any of these cultures tries to engage in biblical narrative; they become terribly confused.¹⁷

Turning his gaze to the Catholic countries of Europe, Schreiter finds a strong secularity which, he claims, grew quickly and even produced hostility toward religious institution. This hostility seems to be rooted in a desire for these countries to distinguish themselves from the institution, to be rid of its history and its link to their identities.

With the unraveling of communism and the fall of related dictatorships throughout Eastern Europe and between East and West Berlin, there are other signs of secularity already present. In Germany, for instance, there are two generations without faith at all. Many burials in Germany are without ritual of any kind and no markers are left to commemorate the dead. Poland is in the same situation. Its seminaries are dropping in number by 50 percent in the last decade. On the other hand, where religion was most brutally suppressed, there is a growing interest. So it is that in the Czech Republic and countries in that area of Europe, there is a renewed interest, but there is little return to what was traditional faith.¹⁸

Australia is a special case. Its secularity is very strong, but it lacks in hostility. Unlike Europe with cultural and historical ties to institutional religion, Australia was founded as a penal colony without attention to any attachment to such institutions. Because of this history, Australia has not been hostile to religion, but is not particularly engaged in its pursuit, either.

16. SCHREITER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 107.

17. Cf. SCHREITER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 107-108.

18. Cf. SCHREITER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 108.

Secularity has long been its guide for culture and the decision making process in every sector of life.¹⁹

Enlightenment from Different Contexts

The Europeans generally express surprise at the deep religiosity they perceive in the United States and in Canada. There is no established Church in the United States or Canada, but faith is stronger than it appears upon first glance. The memory of an established Church in Europe makes the evangelization effort nearly impossible. This is not a burden in the United States. In Canada, some of that burden has been felt culturally in Quebec, making it the closest link to Europe as far as its brand of developed secularity, but the western parts of Canada are more easily compared to the experience of the United States.²⁰

Even the effects of the Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th Centuries contrast dramatically between those of Europe and the United States. Schreiter makes the point:

A second feature is the Enlightenment. Europe was largely influenced by the French Enlightenment, where there was a tremendous struggle with the Church. Much of the Enlightenment in the United States was formed by the Scottish Enlightenment. Princeton University was staffed with Edinburgh graduates when it began. That's a much more relaxed understanding of reason, which is not necessarily hostile to religion. Moreover, many people who came to the United States at certain stages were victims of religious persecution. So holding on to faith was a much more important element of who they were.²¹

The United States has a special brand of secularity which spills over into its many forms of faith. Schreiter suggests bluntly that "everything in the United States gets turned into a market." The competing denominations offer over nine hundred types of Protestantism. Such competition is virtually absent throughout Europe.

Finally, we must ask what conclusions might be drawn from this glance at the various contexts of secularity and religiosity in the present world known as "the West"? Schreiter suggests that "migration is having an important effect." He continues:

Many of the poor in our countries, apart from first-nation peoples, are migrants. Immigrant religion shows that religion is an important bridge between where

19. Cf. SCHRETIER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 108.

20. Cf. SCHRETIER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 109.

21. SCHRETIER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 109.

people came from and where they are now, at least for the first generation. The second generation is more problematic.²²

Though immigration provides a necessary bridge, it remains subjected to many hostilities. Much of these can be identified with a “post-modern” world. This is largely a cultural response to what has failed in the promises of the “modern” world. Progress, as it was perceived 40 years ago, was much more optimistic and, perhaps, naïve. There was inherent in that grasp of progress the expectation that the world could be changed. The intervening events of history have tempered those expectations and, in some cases, even led to a darker view of the future. Schreiter identifies a “disjuncture of different parts of life caused by pluralism” in this point of cultural arrival. He calls this disjuncture by a generalized term, “post-modern” and in so doing indicates that there are different definitions for this term lacking a uniform prevalence throughout the first world. Overall, it is a reaction that causes people to become lost in a variety of choices, unable to find clear criteria for making these choices. In offering an explanation for this, he introduces an interesting insight. What marks those people and events characterized as “post-modern” is the “loss of the big narratives.” Without these narratives, people have tended to throw together disparate elements to give meaning to their lives. This results in multiple identities and to the degree by which this effects an individual indicates the extent of that individual’s involvement in the secular.²³

Erosion, Veneers, and Islands: Images of Secularity

Schreiter goes on to suggest three images of the secular. The first image is that religion is receding. He compares this to the erosion of a hillside. This indicates that religion is more and more privatized and slowly disappearing. The second image arrived as late as the 1990’s and suggests that secularity is only a thin veneer covering a teeming religiosity. The last image, the one he suggests needs more attention and exploration, depicts secularity as an island within religiosity. In this he mentions that political science is now turning to religion to explain world order and disorder, abandoning older models usually presented from the first world. Mr. Schreiter has offered these

22. SCHRETIER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 110.

23. Cf. SCHRETIER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 110.

three images of the secular as “strategic pathways” out of secularity for a new evangelization.²⁴ We will return to these images again.

Maintenance Versus Initiative: The Churched versus the Unchurched

In the Globalized Church, there are dramatic signs of a decline. More than a few contemporary spiritual authors have referred to this as the “graying and emptying” of the Church.²⁵ Much more than simply a reduction in church members, this is a shift of authority and the role of institution in the present day. This is evident in the increasing marginalization of religion and the role of church in public life and policy making. Being pushed to the margins, faith is often considered merely a private choice that has no right to suggest anything to anyone else. The once strong moral voice of the church seems to be gone in many parts of society and any attempt to lift that voice often leads to a cultural recoiling, even a counter attack on the institutional church. Very often, the response of the church and its ministers is to hunker down in denial or self-righteous indignation. In some cases, the response is one of waiting for a better age or a longing for an imagined golden era to reappear. These responses are wont to lay blame, as well. This is because the conclusions being drawn are too painful: the church has been better at keeping up maintenance than forging new initiatives. Daniel O’Leary draws a powerful metaphor of a pot-bound plant. Many ministers in the church are pot-bound. The plant is beginning to shrivel because its roots have not reached beyond its original confines. These roots have done their job, but to survive, they must burst out of the pot and reach out to fresh soil.

Ron Rolheiser gives an apt description as well:

The problem is not, it seems diocesan life or parish structure. We are doing relatively well here. Simply put, for the most part, we know what to do with someone who walks through our church doors, but we do not know how to get people (not least members of our own families) who are not already going to

24. Cf. SCHRETIER, *Pathways to Evangelization in the First World*, 112-115.

25. Cf. Ron ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children*, New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006, 22. This idea is also expressed in Daniel O’LEARY, *New Hearts, New Models: A Spirituality for Priests*, Dublin, The Columbia Press, 1997, 22 ff.

church to enter those doors. We are better at maintaining church life than at initiating it, better at being diocesan ministers than at being missionaries.

What is needed today in the Western World, it would seem, is a new missiology for our own highly secularized culture.

Moreover, the very word “missionary” itself no longer functions effectively within our secularized culture. We automatically link the word “missionary” to sending people to minister in places like Kenya, Burundi, Chad, and Bangladesh, but somehow we cannot form the same kind of concept for sending missionaries to London, Washington, Los Angeles, Paris, or Vancouver. For the most part, we lack the very concept for being missionary to the so-called first world.

What is lacking? What is needed?

We need to become missionaries again within our own culture, among our own children. Secularity is now the culture that, it would appear, the church must most address in terms of taking to heart Jesus’ parting challenge: “Go out to all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”²⁶

This conversation is not far removed by any means from the Salesian context. In fact, quite often this is the very discussion around which provincial councils and chapters meet. *Before we can accompany the young, they must come through our doors.* Even those young people who are part of a trapped audience by school enrollment do not guarantee their whole or willing attendance for all that is spiritual and rooted to the fundamental values of a Salesian mission.

The secular world is here to stay and the Salesian Family is part of it. This is the new missionary territory within a new evangelization. It requires, as Vecchi reiterated repeatedly, a new imagination and a bold faith in order to form an adequate response to its reality.

Challenging Today’s Ministries: Jesus versus Church

It has been said already and bears repeating that the emerging cultures of the western civilization is one in which religious faith is shunned more and more but the hunger for meaning and spiritual things increases. In Dan Kimball’s recent book, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*²⁷, this reality is described in direct terms. It is not Christian faith or doctrine that needs updating or replacing, it is the

26. ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 16-17.

27. Dan KIMBALL, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan (2007), see the Introduction, pp.11-21.

Christian imagination and the way the believer interacts with the world that needs a radical revision. This secular moment, this neo-globalized reality needs evangelizers who are willing to find away to communicate the person and message of Jesus to a world both East and West that is in the midst of immense and rapid change.

According to Kimball, the largest segment missing in Church participation today, globally, is the present generation that has come of age in 2000. This group has been labeled “The Millennials” and they are generally defined as those born after 1983. While this group might be easily corralled in the West, there are parallels drawn in the East as well. This is the generation that has grown up in a computerized world that has eliminated many of the traditional boundaries of East and West. Perhaps the rapid expansion of the computer industry in India is a keen indicator of this new globalized reality. This is a generation that has been very much aware of their world and their own generation across the span of cultures and languages. What they all seem to share is a longing for deeper connection and deeper meaning. It seems common to this generation to put the highest value upon personal experience even above the traditions and cultural guidelines of their own time and place, family, faith, religion, and social norm. The old rules and boundaries are disappearing rapidly.

How, then, do ministers and evangelizers in this setting find the words, the imagination, and the tools of communication to bring about the experience of Christ to such a generation? This question begs other more pointed pastoral questions. Dan Kimball writes:

I built a case for our need to think of missionaries not only as those you send overseas somewhere but as ourselves here in our emerging culture in our own towns and cities. I then pleaded with pastors to consider how we might spend our time and how our lives might change if we saw ourselves as missionaries. I explained that it might mean we would do what any missionary would do: be out listening to what non-Christians, especially those in their late teens to thirties, are saying and thinking about the church and Christianity. Why this age group? Because generally it is the largest segment missing from most of our churches, and so as we look at the future of the church, it's an age group we really need to pay attention to. I pleaded with them to awaken to the fact that most people in our emerging cultures are not listening to us anymore. I explained that they are disappearing from most of our churches,

and that we need to rethink what we are doing as church leaders in a changing culture.²⁸

The danger for ministers and evangelizers in this time is to become so preoccupied by maintaining the work of the ministries that we fail to hear the cry of these emerging voices. In Dan Kimball's reflections, he recalls desperately calling himself and the pastors he had been addressing "weaklings." He came to this conclusion as he became more and more aware of the fear to enter into this new reality with blinders taken down, without a willingness to let go of old procedure and methods of evangelization. The end result of this stubborn and timid behavior is a fear for embracing the challenge of the moment and the challenge to find any means to enter into dialogue so that Jesus might become known. Like missionaries of romantic memory, the task becomes similar in that the evangelizer is called to live in the reality, nomenclature, and culture of those who feel so disconnected. Living in that milieu can lead to an understanding of the hungers and the questions and invites the minister to evangelize less with word than by the gift of caring presence.

Dan Kimball quotes from one of his favorite authors, Reggie McNeal, in his recent study entitled, *The Present Future*.

We are witnessing the emergence of a new world...The phenomenon has been noted by many who tag the emerging culture as post-Christian, pre-Christian, or postmodern. The point is, *the world is profoundly different that in was at the middle of the last century* and everyone knows it. But knowing it and acting on it are two different things.

...So far the [North American] Church largely has responded with heavy infusions of denial, believing the culture will come to its senses and come back around to the Church.²⁹

The new imagination to which evangelizers and ministers are called in this moment is a missionary imagination. Ron Rolheiser calls this "missiology." Dan Kimball calls it "missional." Whatever term is chosen to describe this new mindset, it must push beyond the old definition and romantic notions of evangelization. This is a call to walk into a new world armed with hope, confident in faith that the grace of God is at work in the chaotic hungering of these emerging generations, and adaptable to the demands of this generation in flux. To be "missional," according to Dan Kimball, requires the Church

28. KIMBALL, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, p.12.

29. Reggie MC NEAL, *The Present Futre: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, Jossey-Bass, 2003, as quoted in KIMBALL, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, p.18.

to see itself as being missionaries rather than having a mission. It requires that the Church ministers must see themselves are true representatives of Christ sent into communities according to God's mission. In this place, the Church is not a place for worship, but a way of being at all times. It is the understanding that Jesus is not brought to others but discovered at work in the cultures emerging. To be missional recovers the meaning of the traditional notion of Christians being in the world but not conforming to its standard. It is a stance of service and relationship. Being missional is rooted in prayer, faith in God's Spirit at work, close to the Scriptures, and relying on the prayers of the community.³⁰

A Secular Age

Charles Taylor & Three Malaises

In recent years, a prominent voice has been raised in the debate regarding the present moment and the defining of our culture as post-modern, post-Christian, and other such attempts to grasp the reality shaping the way the world is shifting. Charles Taylor is emeritus professor of philosophy at McGill University and has made significant strides in re-interpreting the present times with a surprisingly positive assessment of what is "authentic and valuable in modern culture." Instead of beginning with "subtraction" as the starting point of cultural analysis, Taylor sees the present moment as a point of arrival for human culture expanding the capacity to understand more deeply.

Michael Paul Gallagher, a Jesuit scholar and dean at the Gregorian University in Rome and celebrated theologian and author from Ireland has more recently taken these insights of Taylor and made them accessible. For example, the classic tome entitled *A Secular Age*,³¹ by Charles Taylor, is heralded as his defining work. It is a profound analysis of the history of secularization of the Western World as well as a description of what it means to inhabit a secularized world. In this 874 page work, Taylor examines that story of human progress which has led to a new sense of the self in relation to community. What may appear at one level to be pure narcissism could be, he suggests, a new level of self awareness and autonomy never experienced before leading to a new capacity that is anything but narcissistic or self-serving. Michael Paul has offered a digestible article summarizing the major

30. KIMBALL, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, p. 20.

31. Charles TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007.

contributions of this work as well as Gallagher's own take on the present moment.³²

The contributions of both Charles Taylor, Paul Michael Gallagher, SJ, and a few related voices will be added to our discussions. Without these contributions, any discussion of Secularity and Evangelization remains incomplete. In similar fashion, the voices and ideas of such authors and Paul Lakeland, Scott Kopp, and Mark Patrick Hederman are added to this ongoing conversation demonstrating a hopefulness and a call to action for the shaping of the present culture by adhering to the nudgings of the Holy Spirit—which many of these scholars suggests gives evidence for the fashioning of the human spirit at this time in history.

The Many Faces of Secularity

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the provinces of Canada made a bold choice in the 1980's. After generations of very established ministries in higher education, they called themselves back to their roots and decided to withdraw from these safe and successful institutions, to leave them in the care of trained professionals sensitive to their educational charism, and reach out to the identified poor on the margins of Canadian society. For them, this entailed the choice of moving into the reservations of the indigenous peoples of Canada known as the native peoples or native Canadians. This was a decision to move away from seminaries, high schools, colleges, and other ministries which were and remain very important and well defined and, instead, turn toward the communities plagued by many dramatic forms of poverty from political isolation, institutional racism, and the deadly and pervasive disease of alcohol and substance abuse. Inevitably, these ills of their society have reached far and wide into regions of crime, imprisonment, corruption, exploitation, physical and sexual abuse. This was a bold and sweeping choice at what would appear as a most illogical moment in the Canadian Church, still trembling from the explosive sexual scandals which raged across the country in the 1980's--which nearly decimated the Irish Christian Brothers from east to west. It is from that context that the Oblates

32. Paul Michael GALLAGHER, S.J., "Charles Taylor's Critique of "Secularisation," in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, JSTOR volume 97, number 388, (Winter 2008), pp. 433-444.

See also Paul Michael GALLAGHER, S.J., "The Challenge of Evangelizing in a Secular Culture," in Keynote Address in Dublin, 2012.

Cf. turned their gaze upon another form of cultural poverty touching upon every reality in Canada and beyond: secularity.

Ron Rolheiser, a respected spiritual author, lecturer, and member of the Superior Council of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate was instrumental in calling together a symposium which led to a series of symposia on the subject of evangelizing in the first world. Drawing upon respected authorities on this subject from all over North America, these symposia led to an important publication to which we make reference here, *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to our Children*. Rolheiser proposes that the first step for moving from fear to action, from discouragement to faith, is to name the reality in which we live and to which the Gospel is more than adequate to respond.

Our faith, moreover, gives us confidence that the Gospels are more than adequate to the task of engaging secularity. Again and again, indeed in virtually every theophany in scripture, the first words that the divine messenger addresses to us are: “Do not be afraid! Be at peace!” Those are important missionary instructions. We must engage in secularity without fear, confident that our truth, our Gospels, and our God are up to the task. Too often there is an unconscious fear that our scriptures, church, and God are not up to the task and that they must be protected from the secular world. That fear masks a lack of hope. The Gospels still work!³³

And so, these symposia named the context as secularity. Ron Rolheiser shares four conclusions about the general nature of secularity in the opening chapter of this text. Let us examine these four points.

The first point these symposia offered is that *secularity is a complex phenomena which needs to be respected in its complexity*. Offering a definition pertinent to the present context, the term refers to the tendency to ignore or deny the principles of supernatural religion. Clear examples of this are found in the government takeover of hospitals and universities founded and once operated by members of religious orders or extensions of the church. This transition constitutes a move from religious to non-religious hands. Yet, this definition needs a link to a historical context. Western Philosophy tends to divide history into the categories of *ancient, medieval, modern, and post-modern*. Secularity is identified, the symposia indicate, with the third category of modernity. Modernity is defined as that period in which human reason became the final authority. Descartes is considered the Father of Modernity, which dismantled the ages

33. ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 46-47.

of reference to higher and spiritual authorities. The effects of this shift still resonate everywhere in the Western World today.³⁴

Rolheiser cautions that this is not a monolithic reality that threatens faith. In fact, there are many positive transitions and contributions from this shift. Witch burning, once part of the world view and a defense of faith, is long gone. Yet, there is widespread godlessness where God once reigned. In France, the Enlightenment was hostile. In North America, it fostered tolerance and the breaking down of denominational lines of division. Therefore, this complexity is to be respected.

The second consideration is, in fact, a nod to this complexity. *Secularity is mixed morally and religiously*. It is generally morally ambivalent. It is easy to demonize or divinize secularity, but it is neither a “culture of death” nor a “culture of life.” Rolheiser suggests that it is a phenomenon full of grace and simultaneously a condition that militates against faith and grace! While secularity insists upon freedom of religion, for example, it is also the attitude enshrined in much of the West that is better translated as freedom *from* religion.³⁵

The fingerprints of a Judeo-Christian culture are found all over secularity. In fact, secularity is its child, not its enemy. Yet, these symposia have suggested, every culture must be judged by its more noble expressions. Every culture and religion has its dark past, but they also have great moments of insight. In the act of judging this secular culture, though it is not found evil, it is found lacking. Cardinal Ratzinger, presiding at the funeral of Pope John Paul II, referred to the precarious nature of secular culture and its propensity to promote a “dictatorship of relativism.” Therefore, secularity is a morally mixed reality that must be challenged.

The symposia suggest that this is a moment of invitation to approach secularity with a biblical and Catholic attitude by loving the world as God loves it. This mandate is harder than it appears at first. This translates into loving a world with moral inadequacy and even when that world is hostile toward faith and religion. In imitation of God, we are to love despite sin. This is not a love based on right, entitlement, or worthiness. It is based upon the non-discriminatory love of God. As God incarnated that love, we are called to continue that incarnation in this secular world.

Jesus offered the key to this task: to be in the world but not of it. There are dangers on both sides present here. On the one side is over identification

34. Cf. ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 38-40.

35. Cf. ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 41-42.

with the world and on the other is a disintegration of solidarity with what is good in the world, where God can be encountered. The symposia suggested that this situation demands a “new maturity, a new inner directedness, that is strong enough to immerse itself in the world without losing its moral and spiritual salt because it is rooted solidly enough in something and Someone outside of the world.”³⁶ Because we are part of the world, children of this world, we are tainted by the same secularity, “inextricably bound up in our culture.” Therefore it is part of the task to assume that there does exist, in fact, good will and sincerity in this world and avoid an oversimplified dualism.

In fact, the symposia cautions against fighting God in fighting secularity. Catholic theology promotes the idea that God is the author of all that is good and that the basic nature of creation is good. The world is flawed but NOT corrupt. This is a classic and important distinction that sets the Catholic faith apart.

The last conclusion reached by the symposia is that *secularity is a non-negotiable given in which we live in the hope that the Gospels are up to the task of engaging this reality*³⁷. In the end, this is more of a choice “between faith and cynicism” rather than one between faith and secularity. Rolheiser quotes Jim Wallis, the founder and editor of *Sojourner Magazine* and whom he compares to Dorothy Day:

Prophetic faith does not see the primary battle as the struggle between belief and secularity. It understands that the real battle, the big struggle of our times, is the fundamental choice between cynicism and hope. The prophets always begin in judgment, in a social critique of the status quo, but they end in hope—that these realities can and will be changed. The choice between cynicism and hope is ultimately a spiritual choice, one that has enormous political consequences.³⁸

Through the Eyes of Immigrants

Benedictine, Mary Jo Leddy, is a prophetic voice who had been invited to research and speak during the symposia called by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate for addressing the call to evangelize within a first world secularity. She was invited because of her reputation as a spiritual writer and thinker,

36. ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 43-46.

37. Cf. ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 45-47.

38. ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel*, 47. Rolheiser cites from Jim WALLIS, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, 346.

because of her theology and ecclesiology, and because of her pioneering work for re-imagining religious life in the present context, something to which she has shown amazing insight and dedication in the last two decades. Out of her prophetic journey has come the Oscar Romero House she founded in Toronto, Canada. In that inner-city setting, she and a small community of strong Catholics recognized the very specific plight of immigrants who were refugees pushed to the edges of existence. This project was never set up as a top-down model of ministry but according to a daring model of immersion and service as shared experience with the poor. This ministry has given her a new set of eyes out of which she has reassessed the world, the church, the poor, and all that the Gospels mean in that reality.

In the symposia, she was called upon specifically to offer a perspective that is distinctly “North American” and she does that by speaking *alongside* and *with* the refugees in her life and in her community. Yet, the approach she offered was anything but arrogant or pretentious. In fact, she admitted that it is difficult to name a context while living deeply within it. However, she considered it a more treacherous place to ignore the realities, leave them un-named, and simply “go with the flow” of life. She cautioned that too often the church, in North America at least, has been perceived as a group of institutional professionals preaching about fidelity from a sinking ship while the people are searching for lifeboats.³⁹ She insisted that this is especially precarious for those living in “the most dominant culture in the world, which for want of better terms [she] will call America, the north, and the west.”⁴⁰

Leddy referred to the starting point from where she lived. She suggested that we can only speak from where we live. Living in and among the refugees in Toronto, she has gained the perspectives of peoples and cultures fleeing from ethnic and tribal warfare in their countries of origin. Their countries, for the most part, are torn apart by war, forcing them to run for their lives. Yet, in many cases, their situations at home were exacerbated at least, if not caused by selfish interests from the West, “craving for things like oil, like diamonds.” For all of their suffering, it is surprising to know that these refugees want to remain silent. They have already tasted the pain of speaking up. Leddy and the small community who gather among these refugees have felt their place to be that of Mary at the foot of the cross. She admitted that the suffering of these people is more than she could ever imagine or truly know and that all

39. Cf. Mary Jo LEDDY, “Naming the Context: Where Is Here? How Is Now?” in ROLHEISER, *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to our Children*, New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006, 135-150.

40. LEDDY, *Naming the Context*, 135.

she could possibly offer them would be a presence, a listening heart, a caring hope. She insisted that this suffering and displaced people offer a wisdom that is only available upon the cross.⁴¹ Their presence continues to be a cry to the world, “I thirst,” and “why have you abandoned me?” Looking into their faces, it is impossible, she asserted, not to feel the summons and the command to notice them and try to understand their suffering. She suggested that these faces judge our particular culture and force it to recognize two realities: “that we are worse than we know and better than we think.”⁴²

Leddy forces the question to the surface, “What is *good* about the Good News? What does the Gospel say to such suffering?” In offering the presence of her community in Toronto, she speaks about offering them assistance without strings attached. It is a witnessing of the Gospel that comes without condition. It is an accompaniment that asks for no compensation. And in the honesty of that experience, it reshapes both the “missionary” and the one accompanied by the radically free nature of the Gospel. The *good* becomes simply a testimony to this available presence. For many of these poor, this experience is the first and only kind of selflessness they have ever known.

Leonard Sweet, a popular spiritual author who refers to himself as a “futurist,” has an interesting take on the question of what makes Good News *good*. He has recently published a marvelous little book entitled *The Gospel According to Starbucks*. As superficial as the title appears, it is actually a profound examination of the present North American culture that offers a sharp and watchful eye for those things that seem to speak to the meaning in people’s lives at the present time. He suggests that evangelism has polluted real evangelization in North America. He states clearly:

Somehow the church lost touch with the meaning of *good news*. And why wouldn’t Christians lose touch with the heart of the Gospel? I have never met anyone who was energized by cliché and one-liners and sub-cultural kitsch. But offer people a meaningful, earth-changing mission and then just *try* to hold them back! The Jesus example of meaning and passion over duty and obligation moves people.⁴³

The shared journey is a shared experience of God. This was also the great narrative that formed the Salesian missionary response. In the Salesian

41. Cf. LEDDY, *Naming the Context*, 137.

42. LEDDY, *Naming the Context*, 137-138.

43. Leonard SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, Colorado Springs, Waterbrook Press, 2007, 14.

“greater narrative,” we see that Saint John Bosco’s journey with the young shaped *him* and shaped *them* simultaneously. Their status as the abandoned brought him into authentic encounter with the crucified one and this encounter continually transformed Don Bosco. His gift of loving presence shaped these broken lives with hope and faith. Don Bosco offered his young collaborators a meaningful, life-changing mission. The accompaniment was never a top-down, but a *with* and *for* experience of ministry.

Leddy’s experience is chosen for this essay because of the resonances with the Salesian story and its pastoral significance for the human experience today. Not only is her continuing work in Toronto an educative and caring outreach to the most marginalized and the displaced, it is also one she shares with youthful collaborators. Like Don Bosco, whose first Salesians were the young leaders with whom he worked at Valdocco; Leddy’s community is largely made up of college age young adults volunteering from all over the world. While they assist her and her community in their ministry, they are also the *object* of the ministry as well. *Their participation shapes them.* Very much attuned to what Sweet has suggested regarding meaningful experience, these young adults have touched the living Gospel in their experience, religiously literate or not. Leddy, like Don Bosco, values greatly their contemporary view of the world. In her symposia presentation, she made many interesting and insightful observations *about* them and *through* them.

Through the Eyes of the Young

Immediately, Leddy made the observation that these young adults were typical of most young adults in North America today: they are spiritually hungry, but religiously illiterate. The encounters these young people have made with the refugees force them to look for something to sustain them in their difficult work. Leddy suggested that they were looking for a spirituality to guide and strengthen them. Their good will, she asserted, needs to be channeled through forms of discipline and “practices for the long haul.”⁴⁴ Their schedule of daily prayer and communal practice is intentional for this purpose. It is the educative and formative accompaniment of their lives. In the act of serving, their priorities begin to shift. They see themselves not only sharing in the suffering of the refugees, but as deposits of hope for them and for the world.

Similar insights regarding the young adults in a globalized world today have been offered by others in various fields. To some of these resources we will turn in more detail at a later portion of this work. What seems to have taken place in the hearts of these young adults working among the refugees

44. LEDDY, *Naming the Context*, 139.

might be captured in the words of Sweet. He suggests that anyone can “drink in the life of God and immerse [him/herself] fully in what God is doing on earth. God offers arresting experiences that move [a person] from obligation to passion, spilling over to benefit the lives of those who will see God become visible in [that person’s] life.”⁴⁵

Leddy and Leonard Sweet have tapped into something too important to miss. It is close to the heart of Don Bosco and Vecchi. It is this: *young people are transformed by participation*, not by sidelining! Entering into ministry offers a young person the chance to co-create and co-operate with God. This is especially significant at the present moment. Sweet underlines this:

One of the greatest cultural shifts occurring on a global scale is the wikification of all aspects of life, which is fueling the social movement from representation to participation. Wiki is a kind of open-source server software that enables users to create and edit Web pages using any Web browser. It encourages democratization and decentralization and deprofessionalization, as anyone is free to shape the content without any controls other than the community that monitors the contributions...⁴⁶

Sweet goes so far as to claim that “interactive telecommunications is making everybody a lobbyist and politician. Interactivity is no longer an add-on or plug-in; it is becoming the center-piece of all we do, the fulcrum of the future.”⁴⁷

Perhaps interactive ministry is the new name for collaborative ministry or a better way of explaining spiritual accompaniment. We will develop such ideas as we continue.

Through the Eyes of Artists

If accompaniment can be understood as the task to awaken the experience of God already present in the other person’s life, and if this is a task that includes immersion into a given moment and culture, then the one who offers guidance must be attuned to the present moment in every way possible. John Buchanan, Presbyterian Minister, author, and Chicago radio host suggested that the best way to “hear God speaking” in any given moment is to draw near to the arts. It is his conviction that the arts are the most spiritual expression of the human person, regardless of culture or religious affiliation. Through the arts, the deepest questions and longings of the human experience

45. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 29.

46. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 70-71.

47. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 77.

are expressed. This is not to suggest that all communication is an authentic expression. Sin and corruption are present in these media as well. Yet, with a discerning ear and eye, a common voice will rise and very often, that voice is the voice of God. Buchanan suggests in his instruction for homiletics that it is the duty of the minister and the preacher to go diligently on a search for the living Word of God as it pulses in the present day and culture. Scripture scholarship, form criticism, and hermeneutical sciences form the other parts of the task, but only together with prayer and this search for the living voice of God can an authentic interpretation of God's Word be had.

Leddy drew near to the artists in her ongoing experience of ministry with and through the refugees in Toronto. She called the artists "insiders who are also outsiders—those who live with an alternative vision to the dominant culture."⁴⁸ She included in this category contemplatives and anyone who is a returning missionary—who has lived outside of the North American culture and has returned to it. She declared that the present moment, "this time and place" has a "geography of the spirit" which is offering nourishment for survival in the dominant culture with alternatives to that culture.⁴⁹

The insight of these persons, especially who operate beyond art for its own sake, is vital to a spiritual assessment and the reading of human hungers at a given moment. These persons are vital for naming a reality, though they are often ridiculed or ignored because of their hard messages. A song or a poem rises to capture a moment. A movement gathers around a banner or theme. The voice of God becomes alive and not easily ignored in a cultural cry. In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's in the United States, Black Americans found a voice in Martin Luther King. His "I Have a Dream" speech became a symbol, and the spiritual hymn of the south, "We Shall Overcome" became the theme song of many generations into this very day. Contemplatives and artists together spoke and speak a mighty Word of God for a moment in history.

The special contribution of these artists, contemplatives, and returning missionaries is their ability to call forth a new imagination to respond to a new situation. Sweet resonates with Leddy on this point. We are immersed in a culture that is saturated by images. This is precisely why many generations are quietly turning away from institution. They speak a rich and varied language of their generations which is a language of images and symbols that do not correlate to those offered by institution. The result is not a rebellion, but a failure to speak the same language. The subtle suggestion is that the

48. LEDDY, *Naming the Context*, 141.

49. Cf. LEDDY, *Naming the Context*, 142.

voice of God might often be obscured by those institutions and ministers entrusted with its care, simply because their means of communication have grown stale. Sweet writes, “Most of the church literature I read tastes overripe and stale. Overripe and stale makes God sick!”⁵⁰ Sweet bemoans what appears to him as a lack of beauty in presenting the Gospel. There is a lack of authentic human experience, a lack of adequate imagery, and a lack of beauty in what is packaged as the Good News for the present age. He insists, “To qualify for a hearing, the church must convert to beauty and learn the narrative of aesthetics that constitutes the Grand Design. This is not a ‘designer spirituality,’ but a spirituality of Grand Design.”⁵¹ This conversion requires an understanding of what beauty is and what it is not.

What, then, are the images that fit the present reality? What imagination is needed to bring life to the Gospels of life for the present moment? These are vital questions for those engaged in spiritual accompaniment, lest they find themselves operating within a language and within images which fail to communicate effectively, if at all.

Intersection of Culture & Communication

Images that Fit the Reality

The starting point is the same: the Image became Flesh. The encounter with Jesus was an intersection between the Word of God and history, the culture and language of a historical moment and the eternal plan of God. This is the starting point of the mission to secularity, the mission of the Gospel, the mission to awaken the incarnate Word inside of the experiences of the lives of the young. The experience of Jesus recalls that Jesus did not make use of abstract ideologies, but images familiar to his time and culture. This is the call of ministry at every moment of history since the encounter of Jesus. Erwin Raphael McManus offers a word of hope:

If God does reveal himself, and this I know to be true, then the message of Christ is a treasure we must not neglect to share with those so desperately in need of the love and life that come only in relationship to the living God. In the end, there is no greater demonstration of what the intersection of the people of God and culture is to look like than the person of Jesus Christ. His conversation with the masses was not simply an abstract intended to gather dust on the shelf of some seminary library. Jesus was a man of his times. He resonated with his culture and spoke in a language that was easily understood. He was a Jew among Jews.

50. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 60.

51. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 56.

Ministry that expresses this same texture is still possible today. It is equally important to be *in* the world as it is to be not *of* the world.

It is this tension that God calls us to—an intersection of culture and communication. Incarnational ministry of this magnitude can be done, done well and in a way that both honors and glorifies God. Jesus pulled it off—the Word of God made flesh walked among us. The God of creation became a Jewish carpenter. He was in culture, a part of culture, transforming culture, creating culture. Through the church he continues this journey today.⁵²

The danger for many educators and spiritual guides at the present moment boils down to a lack of adequate imagery and imagination. In this lack, there is a failure to make incarnate for the moment the living presence of God. Sweet suggests that this is a propensity to “trust facts and not parables, ideology and not imagery.”⁵³ However, the young people of the world today, raised in rich imagery, require a language they can understand. For them, images are more powerful than words. Maybe in this, our present moment is not so very distinct from the moment in which Don Bosco lived. His approach to the Gospels paid due attention to this need among the young. There was no catechism without a game in the field, an outing, or a good meal. The images of their lives became the stories he told and the lessons he taught. Don Bosco made incarnate the living Word of God in images familiar to the young people in that time and culture. Perhaps the most powerful images were those of the Salesians themselves, always present, joyfully assisting, immersing themselves in the studies and struggles, the hopes and the fears of these young people. Even cursory glances at the dreams of Don Bosco, the stories of his good nights, and other examples of his communications with his young people, reveal an amazing array of visual imagery.

Sweet issues this warning:

It’s correct to consider the image-rich Scriptures as the mind of God made available to us. The Bible “thinks” not in propositions and bullet points, but in images, metaphors, narratives, symbols, and song. Poetry is more the language of biblical faith than prose or philosophy. The church’s failure of imagination is

52. Erwin Raphael MC MACUS, “The Global Intersection,” in Leonard SWEET, *The Church in the Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2003, 257-258.

53. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 100.

directly attributable to its failure to take up the poet's tools: image and imagination, metaphor and stories known as parables.⁵⁴

Invoking images of a the film *The Decline of the American Empire*, Leddy makes a statement about the North American Moment's lack of imagery and imagination. The opening scene of this film depicts a jaded academic describing for a young radio interviewer the present moment as a time of political decline. The character asserts that there is no longer a social vision or a common project in which people invest their energy. The film goes on to pronounce judgment on this age stating, "We have no vision, no models or metaphors to live by. Only the saints and mystics live well at a time like this."⁵⁵ Yet, this is exactly the point! Without a spirituality, without assisting the other to discover God within personal experience, life will take on the images of a dominant culture, even if those images are not life-giving. Engagement and participation in the Gospel, however, is a prophetic stance in the midst of this decline and the very stance most desperately needed to provide a pathway out of the death-dealing images of secularity.

The one who accompanies spiritually must boldly stand in the conviction that the Gospels, as we said earlier, are up to the task. The images they offer are translatable to this age and offer true meaning in the chaos. The language of this imagination is found, as Sweet explains, "living at the intersection of faith and irresistible experience."⁵⁶ At this intersection are three "authentic passions." For the Gospels to live and speak today, they must speak to these passions. These tools of passion forge the imagination of the Gospel view of reality and deserve further attention. Sweet identifies these passions as "the passion of provenance and beauty" and the "passions of rarity and sharing the journey." We will consider these passions, but first we must listen to the voices of the emerging generations.

The Translatable Gospel

If we believe the Gospels are up to the task of speaking to emerging generations and cultures, then the task of a new evangelization must wrestle with this conviction. How do we un-pack the Gospels to speak powerfully to this present moment in such a way that the transformative power of the Word may lead the way? There is no one answer to this question, but there

54. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 113.

55. LEDDY, *Naming the Context*, 144. These ideas come from a film directed by Quebec film director Denys Arcand entitled, *The Decline of the American Empire*.

56. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 45-61.

are many rising voices from the recent past and new voices prophetically crying out today.

Daniel Kimball's book, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, offers a long list of perceptions and complaints from a generation looking for authenticity. It is worth a quick review of these ideas. We began by looking at the definitions of Globalization and Secularity. We continued to look at statistics and have waded through those details coming to the conclusion that this is an exceptional and a dangerous moment. But we have not heard the voices of the emerging generations on their own terms. The Gospel must be translated in such a way to speak to these many perceptions and complaints. It is not merely a task of arguing or crafting an apologetics that will paint people into a corner. It is a task of great reverence and respect to listen to the voice of God crying out in these new forms of wilderness in our time. It is, in fact, being faithful to the commission to read the signs of the times.

The Gospels Are Up to the Task: Passions for Ministry

The Passion of Provenance

"Provenance is the process of growing a soul that radiates such a beauty that it bears the Maker's mark and bares the Creator's signature."⁵⁷ This beautiful notion explained in the work of Sweet resounds with the very same notes from the symphony the Salesians would call the masterpiece of Don Bosco's pedagogy and spirituality. In this mission, Don Bosco was forthright. His was the business of shaping souls for holiness and his motivation was as direct: to lead all by example! So it is that Don Bosco presented living examples to his young people in the lives of Savio, Magone, and Besucco. These young souls did, indeed, radiate the beauty of their Maker and expose the Creator's hand at work in their lives. That was the sole purpose of Don Bosco's work in capturing their lives for the present and future generations.

This idea focuses on the goal of making a person better because of faith. It is the ability to say, " 'Yes, Christianity can make you a better person. That better person is Jesus.' Christianity promises a provenance that can be certifiably Jesus. Authenticity is not about being more relevant but about being more Jesus."⁵⁸

This process, Don Bosco would call, "becoming a saint." Today's parlance may say it differently, but the idea is exactly the same. This is not an agenda of seeking out the God-experiences in life, but the actual invitation by God to

57. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 48.

58. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 49.

become his presence for others. Don Bosco understood that. Savio, Magone, and Besucco responded to that invitation because of what they experienced in their encounters with Don Bosco and their lives gave living testimony of this style of living holiness.

There is a sea change here, a monumental shift in understanding the story of salvation, our shared larger narrative. This is a shift from perceiving revelation as things of God to revelation as Divine Self-revelation. This is a shift from propositional faith to interpersonal and relational faith. It is the touchstone of spiritual accompaniment!⁵⁹ Sweet elaborates:

It follows that our expression becomes our confession. A confessional faith is where we end up; it is where an authentic experiential faith that has become expressional takes us. True confessional Christianity is not propositional faith, but expressional faith. To know something, to communicate something, you have to become something. You have to establish provenance. The best things in life must be known firsthand, or not at all. Christians love truth like a person because Truth is a Person.⁶⁰

The Passion of Beauty

It is marvelous to come across authors who speak the language and experience of Don Bosco without knowing it. Such is the case with Sweet. He identifies the second passion as the desire to “grow a soul that is a beautiful work of art, a soul with such sensitivities that it can pick up signals of transcendence in the most unlikely places...”⁶¹ What an apt description of the recognition Don Bosco nurtured in his young people. We have already examined the models he set up for emulation. These very living and real young people became sources of beauty and connection to God for their peers and their families. Dominic Savio was lost in ecstasy before the Blessed Sacrament, Besucco brought his friends to make visits to the Blessed

59. Cf. Gerald O' COLLINS, *Foundations of Theology*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970. This same topic is treated and updated in O'COLLINS, *Fundamental Theology*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1981. See especially Chapter III, *Divine Self-Revelation*, 53-113, and Chapter IX, *The Inspired Expressions of Foundational Revelation*, 225-241. O'Collins offers a brief history of the commission appointed by John XXIII to study and update *Dei Verbum* before the start of the Vatican Council II. It is in this review that O'Collins suggests that a paradigm shift took place from a propositional faith to an interpersonal faith. Sweet, without reference to this work, uses the same terminology.

60. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 51.

61. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 53.

Sacrament, Magone became distracted by the desire to please God above all things. The examples are abundant and the motive for Don Bosco was clear.

Why are such examples necessary today? Why were they necessary in Don Bosco's time? In both instances, without these living reminders of the beauty and reality of God, we may end up enduring an existence that has lost contact with that reality. Sweet asks deep questions of the Christian ministers of today: "Why are we so reluctant to grow a soul that takes deep breaths of beauty? Why are we so afraid to experience love that beats on the heart like a bass drum? And perhaps the most perplexing question of all: why are we so afraid to experience Christ or to let the beauty of Jesus be seen in us?"⁶² Sweet warns that for us, too much of God is "only vaguely remembered and not vividly experienced."

In an analysis of the generation born before 1982, sociologists and authors William Strauss and Neil Howe suggest that there is a general distrust for anything that is not known by experience. However, in the generation they label as Millennials, those born after 1982, there is a new found trust in parental authority, institutional structure, and in shared experiences of faith. Theirs seems to be a generation anxious to experience all that they can and to help make a positive difference in the world. They are generally less angry and more willing to trust.⁶³ This trend tends to set in stark contrast the distrust of the Generation X young adults or the faded experiments of the Boomer Generation. Ironically, the generation graduating from high school and entering the college scene in recent years is a generation starving for depth of spirituality and deep and lasting connections with others. Such a generation seems open to the idea of beauty and sanctity. Much like the youth Don Bosco encountered, they seem to be waiting for accompaniment and guidance believing, for the first time in many generations, that they can be examples of something and Someone who is better and offers hope to the world.

This generation, suggests Sweet, wants lived experiences of beauty rather than experiments in thought. They desire to see themselves in the grand scheme of God's plan. They are anxious to define beauty in the highest meanings of that term. The embrace this generation seems to be extending to the generations around them has the potential for great healing, and not because that is their intentional political agenda. Instead, having been protected unlike any generation before them and having known myriads of

62. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 55.

63. Cf. William STRAUSS, Neil HOWE, *Millennials Rising: the Next Great Generation*, New York, Vintage Books, 2000. See especially Junior Citizens: Community, 213-237.

choices and images for which they seek help in discernment, they are opting to see beauty beyond the Hollywood standards and even beyond age and generational differences. Sweet suggests that this generation rejects “useful beauty” and seeks wonder. They are looking beyond the skin-deep variety of beauty for a beauty that is “soul-deep.” They seem to hunger for real spirituality and “a beauty that magnifies the message.”⁶⁴

The Passion of Rarity

This third passion has already been touched lightly earlier in this chapter when referring to God’s disdain for what is overripe and stale. The passion of rarity is “a unique-one-of-a-kind creation with the provenance and beauty to create stupor in the beholder.” This is all about the ability of the Christian to attract others. How was it that St. Dominic Savio attracted so many of his peers with holiness? How was Magone transformed by that same gift? How could a young Besucco be possessed by the desire to love and serve God even before he could read and write? The authenticity within these youth attracted imitators. Issuing quite an indictment on present day ministries, Sweet contrasts this contagious quality of holiness to the obsessing over mission statements. “The church has more than enough mission statements and not nearly enough mission relationships and mission movements.”⁶⁵

Vecchi issued a similar warning more than once. He feared an obsession with efficiency to the loss of authentic community. He feared innovation to the loss of depth. The plan of life was a special priority in his writing. Here he advocated a conscious living out commitment by co-creating with God. More than educational prowess or ministerial efficiency, this plan of life is an act of fidelity to the person and the call of Christ. He wrote about his concern that the act of accompaniment would not lead those accompanied to this level of commitment and planning, too lost in details of planning and organizing. In his letter regarding the commitment to ongoing formation, to study for the young, he wrote:

Just as in Houses of Spirituality we frequently find ourselves managing the structures without having available persons and teams capable of spiritual animation, it can also happen that in our university centers and hostels we may be provid-

64. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 53-58.

65. SWEET, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, 61.

ing structures and organization but not plans for life and the accompaniment of growth.⁶⁶

By contrast, the original call, he insisted, was an experience of the Transfiguration of Christ! He called upon the Salesian world never to lose sight of that beauty, that rarity, and that provenance which transfigures the Salesian into the person of Christ:

Some of these recall the personal experience of those who have felt called to this kind of life: the particular brilliance with which Christ has appeared to us and the fascination it has exerted on us, the rich nature of the perspectives it opens up to existence when concentrated in God, the peace which accompanies loving with an undivided heart, the joys of self-giving in mission, the privilege of enjoying an intimacy with Christ and consciously participating in the Trinitarian life. It is all signified in the icon of the Transfiguration of Christ in the presence of the disciples he had chosen to witness his glory.⁶⁷

[*Note from the Editor:* The second and final part of this study by Fr. John Roche, will be published in the next issue of the *Journal of Salesian Studies* (Volume 16, Number 2). Turning from the contextualization of our times, along with the suggestions of spiritual authors and educators, Fr. Roche addresses the task of “translating” the gospels for this period in human history, looks specifically at the “grace and necessity” of the Salesian Charism and its spirituality of accompaniment. In his final reflections, he invites us into a specifically Salesian pastoral dimension putting the task of capturing hearts at the center of the Salesian enterprise. In the second and final part of his article, Fr. Roche draws upon the work of Sr. Giuseppina Del Core, FMA while remembering fondly the energy and enthusiasm of the late Fr. Juan Vecchi. Fr. Roche points out Fr. Vecchi’s preoccupation at the end of his life was the urgent need for the Salesian world to accompany the young in many new forms of abandonment, lest we allow the ever-changing and complicated globalized community to offer them counterfeits of true meaning and peace.]

66. VECCHI, ACG 361, Rome, Direzione Generale Opere don Bosco, 1997, 34.

67. VECCHI, ACG 357, Rome, Direzione Generale Opere don Bosco, 1996, 5.