

acts

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of the Salesian Society
of St John Bosco**

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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OUR PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

- Introduction. - The Holy Spirit is more powerful than secularism. - Initiatives for our prayer for vocations. - Special care to involve young people as well. - Themes to be included in our prayer.
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- Intensifying our explicit prayer. - We entrust ourselves to Mary.

Rome, Feast of the Sacred Heart
26 June 1992

My dear confreres,

Grateful and fraternal greetings from all the members of the General Council now gathered in plenary session. In the past months they have made visits of animation to many provinces in different continents. Affectionately they have given their health and their gifts of animation and sharing to you their confreres. It is an admirable thought to consider their service of communion in the charisma of Don Bosco as an act of selfgiving, made with joy and simplicity so that we may grow and bear common witness to the same pastoral charity in many different contexts.

In this plenary session of the Council you are in our thoughts and considerations, together with the state of your provinces and some particularly ur-

gent problems. We have also had a special meeting with all the Provincials of Europe concerning the challenges in new evangelization emanating from this dynamic continent with its many problems.

One of the most burning concerns throughout the Congregation continues to be that of vocations.

Quite recently I wrote a circular in this connection,¹ but I think it opportune to return again to the same topic, not merely for the sake of repeating exhortations, but to look more deeply at the most vital aspect of what we have to do.

¹ AGC 339

It has been pointed out to me that in the previous circular the theme of prayer for vocations was taken for granted rather than developed at any length. We are well aware, as I said in the previous letter, that among the basic principles which constitute the practical guidelines for every vocational commitment, "the first and foremost is that every vocation is an initiative on the part of God and the gift of his love; hence all activity must be supported by prayer, and its spiritual nature be never forgotten".²

² AGC 339, p. 19

And we have also reflected together on salesian prayer.³ The letter on "Charism and Prayer" could by itself be sufficient to shed light on how we pray for vocations.

³ AGC 338: Charism and Prayer

But we also have to recognize that circulars of past months can easily become so much water under the bridge, and I invite you therefore to reflect more attentively on our "prayer for vocations": let Provincials and Rectors help the confreres to be more aware of this.

I have finished writing this letter on the feast of the Sacred Heart, a feast which reminds us of how much Don Bosco wanted to do and did for the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and how he has taught us to

foster in ourselves the same sentiments of the Good Shepherd. Our formation communities used to have the Sacred Heart as their special patron.

The Holy Spirit is more powerful than secularism

In our present-day society, so obsessed with efficiency, little space is left for prayer, as though it were an unproductive activity, a kind of waste of time. Precisely as a reaction to this perverse mentality the Church has witnessed a notable reawakening of the practice of prayer. We too are called to give new life to our identity as consecrated persons by a powerful reawakening of salesian prayer.

We can say without fear of contradiction that without prayer any charism will lose its vitality. Hence the first strategic move to fight off secularism is the relaunching of personal and communal prayer. It is not a matter of simply fostering a kind of intimism, but of cultivating in ourselves a realistic sort of contemplation which puts us in dialogue with a God who is objectively present in creation and history, and who speaks to us in life's context; a God who never remains silent.

It is a question of being true "believers", of perceiving the Holy Spirit in our existence and in that of others, of being convinced that meditating on the interventions, small and great, of "Providence", as it is called by the simple faithful, is not something obsolete. It is distressing to see how some people smile and speak of "providence" as though it were a thing of the past. When one reads the Bible one becomes aware that the principal personage in history is God. Faith is wholly founded on the historical existence of Jesus Christ and the

events of his life: the Church is a Pentecostal reality continually renewed through the centuries by the Holy Spirit working in us.

In our own small world we need only think of the concrete happenings of our salesian origins: of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, and of their first collaborators; we find ourselves facing a vast number of facts and coincidences which constitute a real organic web woven by Providence. How could we fail to see, for instance, that the vocation of Don Rinaldi, guided in so unique and unusual a way by our Father, was the result of an intervention by Providence? Don Rinaldi knew it, though he was always discreet in speaking of it; sometimes he would refer to the phenomenon of Don Bosco's countenance – when he spoke to him of vocational discernment – which shone with a radiant light, both at Mirabello and at Borgo San Martino.⁴ St Paul has told us: "What I spoke and proclaimed was not meant to convince by philosophical argument, but to demonstrate the convincing power of the Spirit, so that your faith should depend not on human wisdom but on the power of God".⁵ Which of us has not felt himself to be an instrument of the Spirit in many ministerial activities, to an extent far beyond his own personal ability?

⁴ cf. AGC 332, p. 11

⁵ 1 Cor 2, 4-5

It is easy to dismiss as so many exaggerations many signs, big and small, of hidden interventions of the Spirit, so as to avoid seeming ingenuous and seeing the supernatural in everything – something to be avoided, but to fail to take account of such interventions of Providence is dangerous and smacks of a subtle pride.

The Holy Spirit is objectively active in history; even if he cannot be reached through specific scientific approaches, he certainly can with the eyes

of faith. He is present and active; is it possible that a believer can never be aware of it?

God makes his Providence known to us by means of the Spirit: "The Spirit (says St Paul) explores the depths of everything, even the depths of God. Now the Spirit we have received is not the spirit of the world, but God's own Spirit, so that we may understand the lavish gifts God has given to us. And these are what we speak of, not in the terms learnt from human philosophy but in terms learnt from the Spirit".⁶

⁶ 1 Cor 2, 10-13

If we are convinced of this constant presence of God and the permanent intervention of his power, albeit in a gentle and hidden way, we shall find it easier to feel ourselves moved each day to dialogue with God in prayer; and our prayer, therefore, will not be just subjective escapism, a kind of flight from concrete realism, but rather a dialogue instigated by the Spirit who is alive and present in persons and events; a contemplative attention to reality, and a collection of practical requests from every confrere who must feel himself to be the one chiefly responsible for an indispensable work for the promoting of vocations.

Initiatives for our prayer for vocations

One of the characteristic aspects of the intervention of the Holy Spirit in history is precisely that of vocations. No authentic vocation ever arises without the movement of the Holy Spirit. To recognize this by intuition of faith, and dialogue with Christ about it is at the foundation of prayer for vocations; not only as a general topic, valuable though that is, but also with concrete application to

persons and situations: a prayer which is a realistic encounter between living persons. The one leading off is the Holy Spirit; through him our faith is awakened to discern God's initiatives, and we learn to read the chronicle of daily events. First we become aware of God's proposals and listen to them, and then we engage in dialogue with him.

Prayer in general is a conversation capable of a thousand different perspectives, because it refers to a God who is wonderfully fertile in initiatives: in the immensity of the universe, as its Creator; in the complexity of human vicissitudes, as Saviour; in the creativity of the transformation of hearts, as Sanctifier.

Specific prayer for vocations has a specific objective in view – the seeking out and preparation of close collaborators of Christ in the building of the Kingdom. From this standpoint we are particularly interested in perceiving and fostering the Spirit's initiatives for the growth and ecclesial vitality of the charism of Don Bosco.

The first model of prayer for vocations we find in Christ himself; when he saw the crowds like sheep without a shepherd he said to the disciples: "The harvest is rich but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers to his harvest".⁷ Several times he himself has given us an example; so for instance when choosing the Apostles: "Jesus went on to the mountain to pray, and he spent the whole night in prayer to God. When day came he summoned his disciples and picked out twelve of them; he called them 'apostles'".⁸

⁷ Mt 9, 35-38

⁸ Lk 6,12

We should think frequently of this entire night of prayer before making a vocational decision: it is a fact of quite extraordinary significance which em-

phasizes the divine origin of the vocation and its importance for the mission of the Church.

Our prayer for vocations is not to be considered as a rather lame concern, an expression of *esprit de corps* for the social standing of the Congregation, but as a response to the explicit invitation of Christ and the convinced, joyful and self-sacrificing acceptance of the vast and urgent mission to the young and the poor given by the Spirit to our Founder as an apostolic gift for the whole Church. Prayer for salesian vocations is prompted by seeing, in the words of the Evangelist, the throng of young people hungry for the truth and the Gospel and wandering like sheep without a shepherd.

Prayer for vocations extends of its nature far beyond the growth of a particular charism: it has in view all workers in the Church. We know that Don Bosco wanted one of the main purposes of our Congregation to be that of a constant commitment for all vocations: "Let us remember", he told us, "that in securing a genuine vocation we are giving the Church a treasure. It is unimportant whether this vocation be for a diocese, the foreign missions or a religious order. What matters is the gift made to the whole Church". And to this end he exhorted us to accept sacrifice in order to foster good vocations: "Never turn down a promising boy for lack of means. Spend all you have; if necessary, beg; and if you are still hard pressed, do not be afraid, for the Blessed Virgin will come to your aid somehow, even miraculously".⁹

Hence salesian prayer for vocations is universal as regards its destination; it has particular characteristics in that it arises from a pastoral charity committed apostolically in a particular manner; it implies in us a sharing and almost a continuation of

⁹ BM 5, 257

the burning sentiments of salvation nourished by Christ in his own heart.

But let us look at some initiatives of personal and communal prayer to be cultivated in our houses. It is indispensable that our concern for vocations find an explicit place in the moments of prayer we are accustomed to spend daily or in particular circumstances of our community life. This is something that must be fostered ever more at various levels. We can give examples, without pretending to be exhaustive, if we want to be practical and intensify our renewal in this regard. In many houses it is the custom to make such prayer in suitably but widely varying forms, which tend to make us become – as individuals and as a community – living promptings by the Lord who calls others through the witness we give “to be in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people”.¹⁰

¹⁰ C 2

At a personal level every confreres is called to be sensitive to the urgent need arising from the size of the harvest and the scarcity of workers. This will lead the Salesian to give greater space to prayer for vocations in the many moments of his day. It will be a concern that will accompany the whole of his union with God: in the moments of greater intimacy, e.g. during meditation, in the action of grace after communion, in moments of spontaneous conversation with the Lord, in visits, in the recital of the rosary (I know more than one confrere who every day offer at least one decade of the rosary explicitly for vocations), during apostolic work by means of ejaculations, and in the offering of personal sufferings and trials. Sick and aging confreres, who live in a kind of enforced Trappist's existence, can in truth do a great deal in this regard!

They form a reserve of prayer, a real hidden treasure of valid impetration!

At local community level each house will be able to think up its own concrete programme. Interesting examples already exist, e.g.: the choosing of a special day each week in which all the daily prayers of the community will be directed to vocations; a weekly period of eucharistic adoration; the daily inserting of a prayer for vocations in the invocations at Lauds and the intercessions at Vespers (there was a time – and vocations were not as scarce then as they are now – when after the community spiritual reading we prayed: ‘ut bonos et dignos operarios...’); the monthly celebration of the votive Mass for religious and priestly vocations; special celebrations of the Word; particular prayer-meetings with young people and the faithful in general, etc. What is important is the creation of a community climate with frequent commitments to special prayers for vocations. This aspect should be fostered particularly in houses of formation where great importance should be given to praying for vocations.

At Provincial level the preparation of programmes should be stepped up for sensitizing local communities, following them up, encouraging them in their initiatives, and leading them to convergent projects at particular moments, e.g. for the provincial day for vocations, for which special aides could be provided for the Eucharist or for a celebration of the Word; the same could be done for the annual salesian missions day, another occasion for planning communal prayer activity. At this level too what is vital is the sensitivity and animation that stems from a dynamic centre which reminds confreres in due time of the objectives of our mission.¹¹

¹¹ Cf. C 6. 28

At the level of the Salesian Family it is easy to facilitate the convergence of the various Groups in vocational initiatives. Special opportunities are offered by the feasts of our Saints and Beati: Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, Dominic Savio and Laura Vicuna, the martyrs Versiglia and Caravario etc. Prayer groups should be cultivated among the Clients of Mary Help of Christians, the Friends of Dominic Savio, the youngsters belonging to the Salesian Youth Movement, the special initiatives of prayer that arise in various places also among parents of SDBs and FMAs, Cooperators and providential groups for the purpose of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I think that much more could be done in this environment.

At ecclesial level we should willingly take part in initiatives of prayers for vocations of the local Church. We should not forget Good Shepherd Sunday (4th of Easter) which is the "world day of prayer for vocations" throughout the Church, and is always accompanied by a message from the Holy Father. So also the novena for the Holy Spirit, which accompanies his coming amongst us as the protagonist of vocations, makes us appreciate availability for his desires and helps us to discern them. The World Missions Day is another propitious occasion. These are all moments of prayer that need to be carefully prepared if they are to provide all their vocational potential.

This broad survey of examples and possibilities is a further reminder of the need for explicit prayer, both personal and communal, for vocations that need to be promoted with enthusiasm.

Special care to involve young people

It is particularly important and efficacious to be able to extend the commitment to prayer for vocations beyond the confines of the religious community, and involve other groups of the Salesian Family and of the faithful, especially young people. The vocational project is addressed primarily to the young and is of personal interest to them; it is an admirable means of interpreting life itself as a vocation, of helping them to discover their own place in the building of the Kingdom and taking it up with full and generous awareness. Through prayer the Word of God descends into the heart, and the movement of the Spirit renders it fertile: "The word of God is something alive and active; it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword; it can seek out the place where soul is divided from spirit, or joints from marrow".¹²

¹² Heb 4,12

It is precisely in prayer that the youngster learns to accept this Word, and apply it practically to his own person. It is in this that is verified what Don Bosco used to say, that "even the most callous boys have a soft spot, and the first duty of the educator is to locate that sensitive spot, that responsive chord in the boy's heart, and take advantage of it".¹³

¹³ BM 5, 237

This has been verified positively in the maturing experiences of what has been called the "school of prayer",¹⁴ in the meetings and encounters of the Salesian Youth Movement (at provincial and inter-provincial level), in the great youth concentrations with a spiritual content and the World Youth Days instituted by Pope John Paul II. These are true moments of grace in which young people come together to pray and publicly express their desire for christian commitment.

¹⁴ cf. AGC 339, p. 27-29

In particular it is indispensable to involve in vocational prayer those youngsters who are more spiritually mature and show signs of being willing to make a more generous commitment to Christ.

But in this task one must give due attention to the style of prayer; it should be lively and modern from an ecclesial standpoint, based on the joy of being friends of Christ, showing forth the indispensable historical mission of Christ in the world, and will lead to generosity and availability.

To this end we will do well to listen together to some declarations of the last General Chapter.

"Prayer is the language given us by the Spirit to approach the Father. In times past it was expressed in forms pedagogically suited to the conditions of contemporary youth. Today there is an urgent need for a rethinking of the best times and forms of initiation to it".¹⁵

¹⁵ GC23 139

In the process to be followed for maturing in faith, "a more intense sharing in the mystery of the Church is realized through prayer, listening to the Word, and the celebration of salvation".¹⁶ It is in these moments of interior recollection that the young person can perceive the initiative of the Holy Spirit directed particularly to him; in fact "prayer and meditation enable one to pass from a superficial view of life to something deeper within it: the individual comes to grips with himself and feels more easily the call God is addressing to him".¹⁷

¹⁶ GC23 148

¹⁷ GC23 155

And so we must give to prayer with the young forms that are deeply genuine and pedagogically adapted to them, which will go to their heart; the Chapter emphasizes indeed that "salesian prayer is able to accept new styles which help youngsters to meet the Lord in daily life, i.e. it is flexible and

creative, and attentive to the Church's guidelines for renewal".¹⁸

Animators and communities that have experienced this involvement know that youngsters like it and that it has a deep influence on them, especially on the more committed ones. If in recent years in the Church there has been a return of young people to prayer, it is urgent that we be able to programme further initiatives to promote it. In the fervour of prayer it will be truly felt that the Holy Spirit is the great protagonist of vocations and that his presence is manifested in the "mystery of vocation", as an ineffable dialogue between God and the particular young person causing him to emerge from his superficial anonymity and his passing selfishness.

Themes to be included in our prayer

Salesian prayer cannot prescind from the practical initiatives already indicated, but its origin from pastoral charity compels us to go much further. As we have already seen,¹⁹ it becomes mature and perfected in the union with God that leads us live pastoral charity as hard-working witnesses for the Kingdom. Its horizons therefore extend also to us and our activities.

What precisely does praying for vocations mean for us in practice? Since we are apostles for vocations, it is of interest to us to be using an appropriate pastoral and pedagogical methodology. In this sense various reflections were put forward in the circular "There is still good ground where the seed can fall".²⁰ This is why we cannot be satisfied only with exercises of devotion – valid though they be,

¹⁸ GC23 176

¹⁹ cf. AGC 338

²⁰ AGC 339

but we must aim at concrete objectives which suppose a whole personal and community involvement to be put into practice. It will not be only a question of praying that we may have new vocations, but also of praying and working for the perseverance of vocations now come to maturity, beginning with those of the confreres in each community, and of committing ourselves to the ongoing formation which renews us in docility to the Holy Spirit.

For this reason it will be to our purpose to go back for a moment to the methodological guidelines given in the circular of 8 December 1991; the processes to be programmed need to be supported by intense and specific prayer for their concrete realization. And so those indications become particular themes of our commitment to be included in our dialogue with the Lord.

Let us recall them briefly:

— *being a calling community*: praying that the community may be a “sign” and “school of faith”; this brings together the vital spirituality of all youth pastoral work, emphasizing its inseparable vocational dimension. This theme can nourish personal and communal prayer, e.g. on particular occasions or during special periods, to the extent of bringing about in the confreres a true conversion;

— *personalizing the journey of faith*: this is where prayer turns our gaze and concern on the individuals one by one, to the need for personal contact of an apostolic nature, to spiritual direction, to the vocational use of the sacrament of Penance, to guiding the freedom of the young person towards growth in a convinced apostolic spirituality, suitably developing the 4th area of the journey of the GC23 “towards a commitment for the Kingdom”;

— *creating maturing experiences*: here prayer prompts a spirit of initiative and helps the concrete programming which helps the young person to grow in faith, in the choice of God, in apostolic and missionary commitments, and in group experience, renewing in prayer the oratorian mission;

— *being able to call and follow up*: certainly prayer first of all stimulates our courage to call in a delicate but penetrating way as an aspect inherent in the personalization of education to the faith, and then ensure a constant friendly follow-up, both for the purpose of overcoming various difficulties that will arise and of gradually maturing towards a christian ideal of existence;

— *those primarily responsible*: to pray for those who called in a special way to exert an educative influence on young people with signs of a vocation: for parents, for the rector, for the provincial and for whoever has the task of following the candidate more closely.

Hence our dialogue with the Lord in response to his appeal to pray for vocations extends to very many practical themes. The latter broaden the content of our prayer for vocations; they serve also to show that for us prayer must be linked with vocational activity, so that both combine in a vital union to proclaim the truth of a union with God that explodes in pastoral charity.

But for all this there is need of a new sensitivity, of abandoning certain outworn practices that have become merely superficial, or rethinking and relaunching the charisma in depth, or in other words a spiritual and apostolic conversion.

"The Word of God", say the Constitutions, "calls us to continual conversion", and the frequen-

tation of the sacrament of Reconciliation becomes also a vocational commitment: "it gives us the joy of the Father's pardon, rebuilds brotherly communion, and *purifies our apostolic intentions*".²¹

²¹ C 90

²² C 95

And so our prayer for vocations, made concrete in fruitful youth pastoral work, truly leads us after our conversion "to celebrate the liturgy of life",²² or in other words to bring it about that our work for vocations becomes in truth the complete salesian prayer.

To prayer is added also the spirit of mortification which goes with fidelity to work; the truth of prayer is reflected in apostolic sacrifice. Don Albera, speaking of this need for mortification, used to say that the validity of supplications was ensured because "desires consisting in no more than words cost little and are of little value".²³ It is certainly a fine thing to talk about the theology of creation and the theology of the incarnation, but it is indispensable to add also the theology of the cross. We are invited to acquire an ever deeper understanding of the value, importance, and central position of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. Don Bosco lived this aspect with great generosity.

²³ Circulars of D. Albera, Turin 1965, p. 513

The phenomena of aging, of sickness, of such great suffering, could become a very fruitful treasure if lived in a prayerful attitude. The relationship between the theology of the incarnation and the history of salvation must be contemplated in the light of the paschal mystery. Speaking of mortification and the cross does not mean that we become pessimists or opposed to joy, but rather imitate and participate in the prayer of Jesus mingled with the realism of that hope which led him to his total self-donation on the cross.

The Salesian praying in the light of "Pastores dabō vobis"

Don Bosco used to say that prayer is the first of all works; it leads to union with God, from whom proceeds the intensity of pastoral charity with the vital gift of the "grace of unity". Without prayer there can be no synthesis between faith and life. Prayer, in fact, is a personal experience of God, it leads from listening to sharing; it lifts from meditation to contemplation; it unleashes an internal process by which love gets the upper hand and leads us directly to the heart of God, bypassing dialogue to become "unitive love".

We have already seen that St Francis de Sales is a master in this vision of prayer which leads the one praying to the liturgy of life. Unitive love is situated deeply within the person and permeates his entire being with its intrinsic practical force; it generates in the heart a spiritual dynamism, as "conscious participation in the very love of God through self-donation in practical availability for the work of salvation. It is an interior attitude of charity directed towards apostolic activity in which it becomes concrete, is made manifest, grows and is perfected".²⁴ Our prayer for vocations should reach this level, which is the level proper to salesian prayer which leads to the ecstasy of life and activity.

The Constitutions tell us that the salesian spirit is summed up and centred in pastoral charity,²⁵ the bearer of that uniting force which can transform our work into prayer: a pastoral charity that Don Bosco has taught us to express in the slogan "da mihi animas" and which Don Rinaldi has translated in masterly fashion as "thirst for souls".²⁶ To the

²⁴ AGC 338, p. 24

²⁵ cf. C 10

²⁶ cf. AGC 332, p. 37 ff.

level of this "thirst" we must lift our prayer for vocations, cultivating within us the sentiments of Christ's own heart. In other words, we are not speaking of a prayer that is limited to particular moments (indispensable though this is), but of one that permeates and incites the heart in such a way as to transform the whole of life into a joyous witness to one's own vocation, and all apostolic activity into a vocational commitment.

I invite you, dear confreres, to take the Apostolic Exhortation "*Pastores dabo vobis*" and read carefully what it says about pastoral charity.²⁷ In n. 21 and subsequent paragraphs the document offers us a valuable and authentic teaching on configuration to Christ the Shepherd, which constitutes precisely the ideal and soul of the salesian spirit of Don Bosco.

It is a wonderful and stimulating thing for us to see the spiritual life (and hence the practice of prayer) situated within apostolic commitment and to hear it stated that between consecration and mission (between prayer and work) there is a mutual organic compenetration: "Mission is not extraneous to consecration or juxtaposed to it, but represents its intrinsic and vital purpose: consecration is for mission. In this sense, not only consecration but mission as well is under the seal of the Spirit and the influence of his sanctifying power. This was the case in Jesus' life. This was the case in the lives of the Apostles and their successors".²⁸ The essential and permanent demand for unity between interior life and the many activities and responsibilities of the apostolate finds its full and adequate response precisely in the energy of pastoral charity, to which our prayer tends of its very nature.

We may note how the document presents this

²⁷ cf *Pastores dabo vobis*, 21 ff.

²⁸ PDV 24

famous pastoral charity. The model to whom we can look for an indication of its characteristics is Christ the Good Shepherd, who reveals the love of God by witnessing to it to the last extreme by his self-donation in service, humility and the most generous solidarity. Pastoral charity is a living participation in Christ's saving love: it is "a gift freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit and likewise a task and a call which demand a free and committed response".²⁹

²⁹ PDV 23

Looking at the mystery of Christ we can see very clearly that its essential content is the total gift of himself in the mission, a gift without limitations, a gift given with joy and cheerfulness, a gift expressed in empathy and amiability, because he loves those to whom it is given "with a heart that is new, generous and pure, with genuine self-detachment, with full, constant and faithful dedication, and at the same time with a kind of 'divine jealousy' (cf. 2 Cor 11,b), and even with a kind of maternal tenderness, capable of bearing the 'pangs of birth' until 'Christ be formed' in the faithful".³⁰ We may recall Don Bosco's words: "That you are young is enough to make me love you very much. For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life".³¹

³⁰ PDV 22

³¹ cf. C 14

Pastoral charity, says the Pope, "is not just what we do, but our gift of self, which manifests Christ's love for his flock. Pastoral charity determines our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people. It makes special demands on us".³² We may say that in a sacrificial sense it denotes our entire existence as consecrated persons for the salesian mission; in this way it finds its source and destination, its self-donation and ability to live it, in the Eucharist as the sacramental expression of our

³² PDV 23

existential incorporation into Christ.

If therefore our prayer for vocations is directed to the maturing of pastoral charity, it means that it must extend far beyond a practice of devotion. It leads us to work for vocations with widely varying initiatives (beginning with those already indicated in the themes mentioned earlier); it is a question of bringing them to a genuine pastoral charity in response to the appeal of Jesus for labourers for the harvest. And so every confrere and all communities are called to foster with greater apostolic conviction their activities and projects regarding vocational suggestions: "vocational guidance", in fact, "constitutes the vertex and crown of all our educational and pastoral activity. But this is not the terminus of the faith-journey; it is an element always present, and one that must characterize every stage and every area of intervention".³³

³³ GC23 247 ff.

If salesian prayer leads to pastoral charity and if the latter, by the power of the Holy Spirit, translates into life and action, it means that the authenticity of our prayer for vocations will be measured by the educative and pastoral quality of our life and activity. In other words, the authenticity of prayer for vocations requires endorsement by our daily witness, while on the other hand our vocational activity will be genuine and fertile only if it really stems from a living, personal and communal prayer which nourishes it continually through its serum.

This, I think, is the yardstick for measuring the sincerity of our prayer for vocations. To it must be applied the words of the Apostle James: "The heartfelt prayer of someone upright works very powerfully. Elijah was a human being as frail as ourselves; he prayed earnestly for it not to rain, and no rain fell for three and a half years; then he

³⁴ Jas 5, 17-18

prayed again and the sky gave rain and the earth gave crops".³⁴

Without prayer there can be no fruitful pastoral work for vocations. But prayer which leads to pastoral charity, by animation of the three poles of "individual", "community", and "ministerial presence",³⁵ becomes a daily commitment of life and action.

³⁵ cf. AGC 338, p. 26 ff.

It is symptomatic that Don Bosco said he had given the name of "Oratory" to his work to make it quite clear that prayer was the only power on which he could rely: his union with God was expressed in his oratory work!

Don Bosco's prayer for vocations

When did Don Bosco pray for vocations? One could answer the question by the famous assertion of Pius XI during the canonization process of our Father. To the objection: when did he pray amidst such active commitments, the Pope replied: "And when did he not pray?" The vocational activity of Don Bosco is the measure of his prayer for vocations.

His second successor, Fr Paul Albera, has left us two important circular letters which touch on our theme: one at the beginning of his period of office in May 1911 "On the spirit of piety", and the other, almost at the end of his term of office, "On vocations" on the Solemnity of Pentecost, 15 May 1921. In them one has a clear view of the heart of Don Bosco praying for vocations. "It could be said", wrote Don Albera, "that Don Bosco and continual prayer were the same thing, uninterrupted union with God. Whenever we had recourse to him for

advice, he seemed to interrupt his converse with God to give us his attention, and that all the thoughts and encouragement he gave us were inspired by God".³⁶

His expression "Don Bosco and continual prayer were the same thing" is a significant one. God certainly listens with predilection to the prayer that becomes transformed into self-donation in life and its activities; the one who prays shares in this way in the mystery of Christ, who became a priest and oblation in the concrete realism of his human existence. In Don Bosco there is no separation between prayer and action; together they constitute the beatings of his heart; but the source is his prayer that matured into unitive love. He showed his love for the Church by dedicating himself constantly, among other things, to the seeking and formation of vocations. He prepared dozens of them every year, and the total eventually reached thousands. Don Albera, recalling his example, wrote: "we should glory in being called 'beggars' or 'seekers of vocations' among the people".³⁷

In his life among youngsters he created an environment favourable to vocations; scrutinizing the boys one by one looking for vocational signs; he invoked the Holy Spirit for the light of discernment; he dedicated hours and hours to the ministry of the sacrament of Reconciliation, in which his spiritual guidance led so many boys to the ideal of self-donation; he inculcated enthusiasm for the great missionary horizons and committed himself to concrete apostolic initiatives; even during his famous autumn outings he was always alert to discover and encourage vocations. He sought them especially in poor christian families where the faith was practised daily.

³⁶ Circulars of D. Albera, Turin 1965, p. 37

³⁷ *ibid.* p. 498

He gave great importance to an atmosphere of piety; he was realistic in keeping at a distance certain worldly dangers and in fostering purity of heart; he considered morality as the seedbed of vocations. He prompted Dominic Savio in the foundation and development of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception. He steered the preventive system in the direction of vocational pastoral work. And he kept at all this with great solicitude and no discouragement, in the conviction that the Lord proportions vocations to current needs.

As we have seen, he would never repel a possible vocation because of the poverty of the candidate or his family, but always went himself in search of means of support. Whenever he wrote to his missionaries – Cagliero, Lasagna, etc. – he always insisted that they should seek out and foster vocations.

Perhaps the initiative which best manifests his dynamic prayer for vocations is the “Work of Mary Help of Christians” for so-called “late” vocations. This was a work begun under the auspices of Our Lady and the prophetic expression of a pastoral creativity which did not in fact meet easily with the support of others, and in particular of Archbishop Gastaldi; but Don Bosco was able to gain the support of the Holy Father and of various bishops, and he continued with the work amid sacrifices but with wonderful results. The older candidates ran into hundreds. He called them “Sons of Mary”, and they were the joy of his last years of life. Fr Philip Rinaldi, who had been one of the first of them and subsequently became their director, informed him periodically of their progress.

This initiative had been a daring innovation in vocational pastoral work of the time: it was an in-

novation as regards the age of the candidates, as regards their background ("between the hoe and the hammer", he used to say), their courses of study and their style of formation. But it became the source of excellent priests and scores of missionaries: "These young adults have good judgement", said Don Bosco; "and as soon as they are priests they will do a lot of good".³⁸ The work was flanked by an association whose members undertook to help to defray the expenses of the candidates by their donations and other means. All this gives us an idea of the practical nature of Don Bosco's love for the Church and of his pastoral charity: "God will help us", he used to say, "if we do all we can for vocations".

³⁸ cf. *Annali*, I, p. 212

If in union with God, the source of all pastoral charity, the most intimate and fruitful commitment is prayer, we must recognize the fact that the activity of our Father for the fostering of vocations is the most irrefutable sign that within him there was an incessant and most special prayer for vocations.

Intensifying our explicit prayer

There is no doubt that at the present day the Congregation must return to a greater intensity and authenticity of prayer for vocations. Insistence on the salesian characteristic of a prayer that leads to life is indispensable and helpful for the identity of our charism.

But taking for granted our awareness of this identity, we still have to reckon with the state of fervour and the depth with which this charism is being lived in the communities.

Why in recent years have we declared war on superficiality? Why did Vatican II remind us that consecrated life is ordered primarily to bringing its members to follow Christ and be united with God, and that they are therefore called at the present day to a strong spiritual renewal, and that this has pride of place even in external apostolic works? Is there not a danger that we shall get entrenched in work and action, with greater attention to the work of our hands than the vitality of our heart? "Ecstasy of action" and "excuse of action" are not the same thing at all. "Excuse of action" can be just a harmful trap; it is a caricature of the "ecstasy of action" described by St Francis de Sales and lived by Don Bosco.

Today the times demand a more explicit return to prayer. A reawakening in this regard can be seen throughout the Church, also among the young as I noted earlier. It is a kind of prayer that is in harmony with the reawakening of faith: to be committed believers and not just people of habit, implies a dialogue with the Lord which is more explicit, more frequent and more intense. In an atmosphere of secularism a pressing need is felt for meditation and a deepening of faith; many of the faithful, young people among them, are led to listen with greater attention to the Word of God and to converse more deeply with God himself. Religious, who are called to be in the words of Paul VI "specialists in prayer", must make every effort to grow in this their particular characteristic: "Mission requires, in fact, of all who are sent that they stimulate their love in the dialogue of prayer".⁴⁰

Well indeed did Blessed Luigi Versiglia, our bishop and martyr, write: "The missionary who does not remain united with God is like a channel

³⁹ cf. PC 2a

⁴⁰ MR 16

detached from the source: if he prays a great deal, he will also accomplish a great deal".

We must restore quality and priority to the moments of explicit prayer, fostering ways of renewal and suitably highlighting its importance. Such moments are a vital reserve for stirring up real enthusiasm for our own charism and contribute to making the confreres living suggestions of Christ to the young.

Precisely because our prayer leads naturally to witness in life and apostolic activity, we must take care that it be genuine, renewed, frequent and involving. Every confrere should feel himself directly challenged in this matter because, as I said once before, "without the individual there is no prayer".⁴¹

⁴¹ AGC 338, p. 29

But *Provincials and Rectors* are asked to take on special initiatives in this regard; their interest and interventions can bring about a true leap forward in this vital task. The GC23 commits the Provincial to making a practical evaluation, and asks him to appoint to the provincial team for youth pastoral work an animator who will shape, coordinate, promote and maintain the necessary linkages between vocational initiatives.⁴²

⁴² Cf. GC23 253

And the Rector is asked to develop and lead a new pastoral quality among his confreres, so that they may become animators of educative communities and the Salesian Family, ensure the functioning of the various roles of service, make vocational suggestions and follow up the more committed; and that the Rector himself may take up again the role of guide of the young through personal and group contact, and get them involved in specific moments of prayer.⁴³

⁴³ cf. GC23 218, 216, 232, 234, 243, 249

We entrust ourselves to Mary

Don Bosco experienced at first hand the efficacious motherly help of Our Lady in seeking vocations, in their discernment and in their maturing. To her he entrusted that original initiative of pastoral creativity that he called the "Work of Mary Help of Christians". He always cultivated an extraordinary trust in her solicitous intercession, especially in times difficult for finding vocations..

We must continually relive in the Congregation that solemn act of entrustment made by the GC22, in which we entrusted to her among other things "an increase in vocations",⁴⁴ in the conviction that with her we can undertake great things for the good of the young. In fact, as the Constitutions tell us, "we believe that Mary is present among us and continues her mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians".⁴⁵

In particular we are convinced that Our Lady, intimately united with the Holy Spirit, is in history also the mother and educator of vocations. She has been defined by the Pope as "the human being who has responded better than any other to God's call";⁴⁶ She nourished and educated Jesus, who we could say was the "vocation supreme". When in the Temple at Jerusalem Mary found the twelve year old Jesus and told him of the pain endured by Joseph and herself during three days of searching for him, she received the reply: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"⁴⁷ We can consider this response as the confidence of an adolescent son manifesting his vocation to his parents. How much

⁴⁴ cf. AGC 322, p. 15-22.

⁴⁵ C 8

⁴⁶ PDV 82

⁴⁷ Lk 2, 49.

Mary must have meditated on the vocation of Jesus, and on her own!

My mind was running along these lines when I chanced to hear a Marian hymn being sung by a group of young oratorians; the words ran something like this: "How much I would like to speak with you (Mary) of the Son you loved; I would like to hear you tell me of what you thought when you heard him say that you were no longer his alone nor he yours."

The generous acceptance and full realization of her own vocation made Mary happy and blessed in her heart, and made her a protagonist in the history of humanity, more important and beneficial than many wise and powerful personages.

Her hymn of the Magnificat reveals the personal joy and historical importance that accompanies a vocation; it is in fact the realization of a plan of God. God's plans are all of them expressions of love for the person he calls and are pledges of good for the fellowship and salvation of others. When in the "Our Father" we pray "Thy kingdom come", we are asking that we may be collaborators in his plans, as was Mary to the fullest extent. From her we learn to look upon a vocation as a treasure to be valued, proposed, defended and brought to fruition in every young person with whom we come in contact.

Let us ask Our Blessed Lady to be at our side as a solicitous Mother, especially in the intensification and improvement of our prayer for vocations, made with the same sentiments as were in the heart of Jesus Christ her son. Don Bosco reminds us that if we entrust ourselves to her we can undertake wonderful things.

Let us renew our prayer, dear confreres, for labourers for the harvest; it will help us to bear joyful witness each day to our vocation.

Affectionately in the Lord,

Don F. Viganò