

# Contemporary Spirituality of the Salesian Family

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Francis Desramaut, *Les cent mots-clefs de la spiritualité salésienne*, in *Cahiers Salésiens* 38 (March 1998) 9-39 (Introductory Essay).<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction: Don Bosco's "Simple" Spirituality and the Spirituality of the Salesian Family<sup>2</sup>

**S**alesian spirituality such as Don Bosco knew it from personal experience was and remains a simple affair.<sup>3</sup> In addressing an audience of young Salesians around 1950, one of its most insightful interpreters, Father Alberto Caviglia, stated it as a simple decalogue.

What did Don Bosco want his Salesians to be like? Here is a simple gauge. A person who does not want to work is no Salesian. One who is not moderate in eating and drinking (*temperante*) is no Salesian. One who is not in reality poor is no Salesian. One who is not kind-hearted is no Salesian. One who is not pure is no Salesian. One who is disobedient (*indocile*) is no Salesian. One who is undisciplined (*libertino*) is no Salesian. One who acts without the right intention is no Salesian. One who does not possess a Eucharistic soul is no Salesian. One who is not devoted to Mary is no Salesian. Now rewrite these sentences as positive commands and you have the Salesian Decalogue.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Father Francis Desramaut needs no introduction to our readers. A noted Salesian scholar and the author of numerous books and articles, he has recently undertaken a work of major proportions, a dictionary of Salesian spirituality. The title of the work is: *Les cent mots-clefs de la spiritualité salésienne* (One Hundred Keywords in Salesian Spirituality). It is being published in installments in *Cahiers Salésiens*, the journal of the Center of Salesian Studies in Lyons (France), over which Father Desramaut presides. An introductory essay on Salesian spirituality serves as a preface the work—the essay which is here, given in English translation. We thank Father Desramaut for permitting its publication. [Translator's Note]

<sup>2</sup> For a description of Salesian spirituality as such, see Rector Major Egidio Viganò's remarks made at the Third Spirituality Seminar (November 3, 1989) held at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome. [*Don Egidio Viganò all'Università salesiana*, a cura di R. Giannatelli (Roma: UPS, 1996), 162-164]

<sup>3</sup> The followers and admirers of St. Francis de Sales will kindly condone our restricted use of the qualifier "Salesian" to refer to Don Bosco's spiritual family. The term "Salesian" is rightly claimed by all the followers of St. Francis de Sales. We will, however, have occasion to underscore the close relationship between Francis de Sales and his creative disciple, John Bosco.

<sup>4</sup> *Come Don Bosco voleva i suoi salesiani? Ecco: Chi non vuole lavorare, non*

Don Bosco was a practical man. He dreamt at night, but once out of bed he became the man of action. Metaphysics was great as long as it reposed quietly in its tomes. He did not indulge in speculations. In any case, learned sermons would have put his audience to sleep. So he discouraged his Salesians, would-be theologians and prospective preachers, from indulging in theological questions. His advice was: "Tell stories; present edifying examples; use simple, popular language, and don't waste your time. Both your young people and all other members of your audience will be the gainers."

Such a down-to-earth approach was bound to leave its mark on the spirit, and hence on the spirituality, which Don Bosco bequeathed to his followers and which was eventually passed on to the whole Salesian Family. Are this spirit and spirituality simplistic? Possibly, but not necessarily. Such a view would have to be carefully assessed. After all, the Gospel writers avoided the use of abstraction. After nearly two thousand years, the parables and the beatitudes with which the Gospel text is woven have provided spiritual nourishment to the most sophisticated and mystical personalities. Matter-of-fact simplicity is not to be equated with poverty of spirit. The living metaphor carries within it an evocative power which the purely abstract concept does not possess.

Father Caviglia identified the spirituality of the Salesians with that of their founder. But is Salesian spirituality as static as Caviglia would have us believe? It certainly did undergo considerable development through the nineteenth century. The question is, Has it now evolved to the point of practically conforming to "the present age," just as the Catholic culture surrounding it has to some extent conformed to the general culture?

Greater attention will be given later in this essay to this idea of a developing Salesian spirituality. In this essay we will look both at how this spirituality blossomed in the soul of Don Bosco, a nineteenth-century Piedmontese priest, and at the forms (perhaps unexpected) it has assumed through the years up to the dawning of the third millennium.

[The present essay sees the contemporary spirituality of the Salesian Family as firmly rooted in Don Bosco's own spirituality and in the school of St. Francis de Sales. But it also maintains that, much like contemporary culture and contemporary theology, it has been reshaped over the years in accordance with changing paradigms. This is how Rector Major Egidio Vigano, after Vatican II and Salesian General Chapter 23, states the case. The essay therefore, after offering a definition of basic terms and an initial proposal (I), ex-

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*è salesiano. Chi non è temperante, non è salesiano. Chi non è povero in pratica, non è salesiano. Chi non ha cuore, non è salesiano. Chi non ha purezza, non è salesiano. Chi è indocile, non è salesiano. Chi è libertino, non è salesiano. Chi non ha retta intenzione, non è salesiano. Chi non ha un'anima eucaristica, non è salesiano. Chi non ha divozione mariana, non è salesiano. Voltate la formola al positivo, e voi avrete il Decalogo del salesiano. [Alberto Caviglia, Conferenze sullo spirito salesiano (Turin, 1949), 13]*

amines Don Bosco's religious experience and spirituality as the root of any subsequent development in Salesian spirituality (II). It goes on to discuss the impact of St. Francis de Sales' school of spirituality on the spirituality of the Salesian Family in the perception of three rectors major of the Salesian Society (III). Next, looking more closely at the historic paradigm shifts at work through the twentieth century, the essay presents in summary the cultural developments that have shaped contemporary attitudes in all fields. In this context, the "sign of the times" as Rector Major Viganò perceives them are discussed (IV). Then the essay looks at the principal features of contemporary Catholic spirituality to provide a context for Salesian spirituality (V). Finally, a description of the contemporary spirituality of the Salesian Family is given as Rector Major Egidio Viganò propounds it in an important circular letter to the Salesians (VI)].<sup>5</sup>

## I. Starting Points

### 1. What Is Spirituality?

What does the expression "spirituality of the Salesian Family" really mean? The question is legitimate given the complexity of this organism, which comprises religious communities of men and women, as well as of lay people with or without vows.

#### (1) Spirituality and Spirit

First, a distinction should be drawn between "spirituality" and "spirit," terms which are related but whose semantic fields only partly overlap.

"Spirit" denotes the cluster of ideas and feelings which give direction to the life and activity of a group, whether the spirit be good or not so good. So Montesquieu writes: "The spirit of the monarchy is war for expansion; the spirit of the republic is peace and moderation."<sup>6</sup> (He was yet to live through the turbulent period of the 1892 French Republic.) A religious society too, like any other social group, lives by a spirit all its own. The Society of Jesus, as is known, is imbued with its own distinctive spirit. Blaise Pascal, back in the seventeenth century, was well aware of this when he quoted one of its members as saying: "No work is ever published by one of us that does not show forth the spirit of the Society."<sup>7</sup> The spirit of individual religious communities may indeed be distinctively characteristic, a fact that can be easily explained. For example, a common rule of life, common structures, ethos, models, and customs clearly set the atmosphere of the Jesuit world apart from that of the Bene-

<sup>5</sup> This is a summary statement by the translator.

<sup>6</sup> *L'esprit de la monarchie est la guerre et l'agrandissement; l'esprit de la république est la paix et la modération.* [Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, IX, 2]

<sup>7</sup> *Il ne sort jamais aucun ouvrage de chez nous qui n'ait l'esprit de la société.* [Blaise Pascal, *Lettres provinciales*, IX]

dictine world. The Rule of St. Benedict and the Exercises of St. Ignatius have, each in its own separate way, fashioned the life and heart of their followers. Religious, whether of the monastic tradition or of the active life, live by distinctive values and models that deeply affect relationships within the monastery or the religious house. Thus even the casual visitor to that community immediately feels the impact. This invisible driving force is at work throughout the fabric of a religious community, determines personal and communal ways of acting, and at times even affects the way a person looks. This force we call "*spirit*".

### (2) Religious Spirituality—Subjective and Objective

"Spirituality" (which is thematically derived from, and is therefore related to, "spirit") can have a variety of meanings, which should be carefully distinguished. We are not concerned simply with that "quality which defines 'spiritual' as opposed to 'material' or 'corporeal'," and which is the simplest meaning of "spirituality."

In our case the term is necessarily associated with religion. And this is in fact a first characteristic of spirituality, as the term is used here: we are speaking of *religious* spirituality. However, the meaning of the term needs to be further refined. Taken in a religious context, spirituality is used in two different (though related) senses in contemporary writing. It may be taken to mean, *subjectively*, the spiritual-religious life of a person or group; or again it may be taken to mean, *objectively*, the principles, beliefs, and practices which regulate such a spiritual-religious life. So, for example, in the former sense we may speak of the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi; in the latter sense, of the spirituality of the Franciscans, his followers.

### (3) Spirituality in a Christian Context

Before settling the issue, that is, before deciding which meaning is germane to our purpose, we must firmly set the parameters of any discussion of spirituality within the order of Christian existence. There is no religious life, and therefore no spirituality as we understand the term, apart from a relationship with God. The Christian is a *son or daughter of God by adoption*, but he or she meets God the Father only *in Christ*, the Incarnate Son, and through the moving power of the *Holy Spirit*. A Christian's spiritual life, and hence a Christian's spirituality, must therefore be rooted in the Holy Spirit. Any Christian whose soul makes the best possible response to the divine call is a mystic and lives by the Holy Spirit, in whom he or she discovers Christ. To be genuine a Christian spirituality must draw its principles, beliefs and practices from the Holy Spirit. In addition, it must flourish within the *life of the Church*. For because of the Incarnation the Holy Spirit is at work only in time, that is, within the Church and its mediation in space and time.



This seeming digression is not irrelevant to a discussion of the Salesian spiritual tradition, simple and down-to-earth though it be. Existing within the Christian system of grace (Church-Spirit-Christ-God), the "Salesian mystic" is not removed from the concrete and real world. On the contrary, as Henri Bergson suggests,

The true mystic, under the gentle and unhurried guidance of the Holy Spirit, possesses an exceptional and solidly grounded intellectual sanity. This quality is unmistakable and manifests itself in a taste for action and in an ability to adapt again and again to changing circumstances. It is strong yet pliant; and it is endowed with a prophetic discernment of what is and what is not possible. Its simplicity of spirit cuts through all complications; in a word, it evinces a superior common sense.<sup>8</sup>

Bergson's mystic bears a strong resemblance to our Don Bosco.

#### (4) Salesian Spirituality—Initial General Description

The term *Salesian spirituality* will not be used here (except indirectly) to designate the *Salesian spirit*, such as is in evidence in communities which take the Salesian name from Don Bosco. Nor will it be used to designate the *subjective spiritual life* (more or less successful) of individual Salesians. It will instead be used to designate the *mentality* that ideally and objectively guides their thought and action. In other words, by Salesian spirituality we mean the cluster of principles, ideas, feelings, and models of conduct that power the life of Don Bosco's followers in *fidelity to the Holy Spirit*.

Positing such a relationship to the Spirit should help elevate our discussion of Salesian spirituality above mere behavioral sociology. For, the Spirit active in the Church aids our understanding of its nature, even though this spirituality appears in continuous historical development as an imperfect, dynamic reality.

## 2. Salesian Spirituality—A Fluid Reality

The spirituality of a religious community, in spite of desires and efforts to define it once and for all, remains a *fluid reality*. Filled with reverential piety, a founder's spiritual children, especially the immediate ones, often fail to see that their spirituality is undergoing development, like it or not. Since spirituality is

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<sup>8</sup> [Jouit] d'une santé intellectuelle solidement assise, exceptionnelle, qui se reconnaît sans peine. Elle se manifeste par le goût de l'action, la faculté de s'adapter et de se réadapter aux circonstances, la fermeté jointe à la souplesse, le discernement prophétique du possible et de l'impossible, un esprit de simplicité qui triomphe des complications, enfin un bon sens supérieur. [Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (Paris, 1937), 243-244]

an integral component of the original form of the society, changes are seen as endangering its social structure; they are a painful experience.

In 1931 Blessed Philip Rinaldi, rector major at the time, was only too conscious of the problem. Only a few months before his death, he penned a circular letter entirely devoted to this subject, with the title, "Let Us Hold Fast to Our Traditions and Put Them into Practice." He wrote:

The natural attraction toward everything that smacks of novelty can cause us to neglect our traditions. Perhaps we fail to understand the difference between running after novelty and marching at the cutting-edge of progress, as Don Bosco did and as he wanted us to do. My dear [confreres], any progress that entails the abandonment of any of our best traditions, no matter how small, is not for us. If that should be the case, we should be happy to remain in the rear and so to guard our family's heritage. We shall be winners on all fronts.<sup>9</sup>

#### (1) Evolving Character of the Spirituality of a Religious Community

Spirituality in our understanding is an evolving complex reality. Driving ideas, principles of behavior, shared feelings and accepted models are inevitably subject to change with the passing of time, in accordance with the nature of individual religious societies. Some of these components die away; others acquire greater force; new ones appear. In all cases, their rank may be rearranged. The ship of the spiritual life moves on the changing sea of history.

Recently this has been particularly in evidence. It is a fact, and observers have unanimously noted it, that the life of most religious societies in the western world has undergone major changes during the 1970s. If proof is needed, one would only have to enter a Carmelite or a Visitation convent. What has become of the traditional black veils, or of the gratings, now merely suggested here and there by symbolic wickets? Spirituality has evolved in these communities. The principle of separation, or outright flight, from the world has undergone profound modification, as has the idea once formerly entertained of entrance into religious life. Certain austere ascetic practices are no longer in use. Once revered patterns of life have now fallen into neglect or have been completely set aside.

Is such a development a good thing? Is it for the better? One must guard against taking for progress what may just be a concession to human weakness. The historical record shows that numerous religious communities have needed

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<sup>9</sup> *Anche la naturale attrattiva verso tutto ciò che sa di novità può indurre alla trascuranza delle tradizioni, perchè non si riflette che altro è correre dietro le novità ed altro essere sempre all'avanguardia di ogni progresso, come faceva e voleva D. Bosco. I progressi che esigono la rinunzia di qualcuna delle migliori tradizioni, per piccole che siano, non fanno per noi, o miei cari. In simili casi restiamocene tranquillamente nella retroguardia alla custodia della nostra eredità paterna e ne avvantaggeremo per ogni verso.* [F. Rinaldi, "Conserviamo le nostre tradizioni," in *Atti del Capitolo superiore* 56 (April 26, 1931), 933-948]

reform when changes introduced into their religious life were recognized as unwarranted. We cannot anticipate, as the twentieth century wanes, what the twenty-first or the twenty-second centuries will bring. The fact is that today the spirituality guiding the life and work of many religious societies is no longer quite the same as in former times.

## (2) Salesian Spirituality also in Evolution

It would be quite extraordinary if the Salesian Family had escaped all evolutionary forces. After all, there are no monastery walls to shield it against a changing world. Its apostolic activity places it in close contact with the world and the Church at large. Being involved with the surrounding culture is for it an obligation, even when that culture stands to be judged and even condemned. Messages inviting change are continually received, and they may even come in the form of an order from the Holy See. This was in fact the painful experience of Father Michael Rua, the saintly Salesian rector major, at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

A book I published some years ago gave me an opportunity of looking into the spirituality that Don Bosco lived by and taught. Even a cursory examination of his stated views on such subjects as Bible, history, miracle, Church, world religions, sacraments, etc., revealed the distance between his perception of the world (including his religious perception) and that which has become the accepted view a century after his death. Salesian spirituality has necessarily evolved through the years. The spirituality we know today is no longer Don Bosco's spirituality. It is instead the spirituality of a community living a century after him, and this spirituality has a history that can be traced and studied from one generation to the next. We shall have more to say on this subject.

To sum up, by Salesian spirituality we understand that ensemble of living, and therefore evolving, ideas, feelings, principles, patterns of conduct, and models, by which the spiritual life of the family stemming from Don Bosco is more or less clearly and consciously guided.

## II. *Bosconian* Roots of the Spirituality of the Salesian Family

### 1. Don Bosco's Religious Experience at the Root of Salesian Spirituality

True it is nonetheless that the experience of the founder, Don Bosco, lies at the root of the spirituality of the later community. This relationship could never be repudiated. One cannot imagine Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans,

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<sup>10</sup> The reference here is to the Decree of the Holy Office *Quod a suprema* (1901) forbidding the superior of a Salesian community and school to hear the confessions of confreres and pupils. [Translator's note]

Jesuits, Oratorians, or Redemptorists studying and articulating their spirituality without reference respectively to St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Dominic, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Philip Neri, or St. Alphonsus de' Liguori. Founders have stamped their religious societies with a character that is essential to the members' identity. Failure to take this relationship seriously would be self-destructive.

Nevertheless, such a stamp may not necessarily be immediately evident or significant in every respect. For example, it was not until the work of Father Daniel Brottier (1876-1936) that a pattern of spiritual life could be noted in the Work of the Orphan-Apprentices of Auteuil, founded in Paris in 1866 by Father Louis Roussel. Don Bosco, on the other hand, has clearly imprinted his seal not only on the work that he created, but also on the spirituality of the subsequent Salesian Family. In fact, he is the founder of a "school of spirituality," as Father Egidio Viganò explained when he spoke of Don Bosco as the head of a school (*caposcuola*) and of a new style of holiness.<sup>11</sup> Now, it is maintained, this school of holiness rose not out of a doctrinal system, but out of a religious experience.

### (1) Religious and Spiritual Experience

Authentic religious experience is brought about through a freely given commitment or surrender to the divine Absolute, a commitment which is as varied and as rich as the texture of life itself. The human being is at once spiritual and incarnate, and marked by what has been appropriated from that person's environment and related experiences. Judgments and decisions rest on, and follow upon, varied data of experience. Religious experience is "the act, or the ensemble of acts, through which a person existing in a given environment becomes conscious of being in relationship with God."<sup>12</sup>

Three levels of the environment are at work in fashioning religious experience: the levels of nature, of society, and of the person. The first level is that of *native foundation*, which includes race, nature, heredity and temperament. Even without one's being aware of it, experience no matter how deeply spiritual is rooted in space and time. This is the zone of the "vital," where life itself is embedded. There is next the *social matrix of experience*, which is mediated

<sup>11</sup> *Un quarto richiamo di Don Bosco alla sequela del Cristo secondo il Vangelo lo possiamo vedere nella sua caratteristica di "caposcuola" di un nuovo stile di santificazione.* [E. Viganò, Letter to the Salesians, March 19, 1985, in *Lettere Circolari di don Egidio Viganò ai Salesiani* (Roma: SDB, 1996), 592 [Viganò, *Circolari*]; *Acts of the General Council* (Roma: SDB, in English since 1932) [Acts] # 313 (April-June 1985), 13]

<sup>12</sup> *L'expérience religieuse est l'acte — ou l'ensemble d'actes — par quoi il se saisit, ainsi environné, en relation avec Dieu.* These paragraphs on religious experience are based on two works by the personalist theologian, Jean Mouroux (1901-1973): *Sens chrétien de l'homme* (Paris, 1945); and *L'expérience chrétienne. Introduction à une théologie* (Paris, 1952).

by family, social milieu, school and profession. Such experience is composed of the influences to which one is subject and which impart direction to one's personality and decisions. But the most important component is the *personal accumulation of human experience*, built up from instinctive and deliberate choices, from a variety of reactions, from chance psychological events, from ways of acting, or of being, or of appropriating life's offerings.

These three components (the natural, the social and the personal) fill out the experience of the incarnate human being and determine a person's vision both of the Supreme Being and of other beings. But even the personal component does not yet carry with it an intentional thrust or freedom of judgment. "Occupying a kind of intermediate position between physical nature and human acts," this component is a burden as well as an asset. A person is kneaded by life's encounters but is never helpless or neutral when faced with truth and values. Habits are acquired that have power to direct and transform. They build up a store of spiritual dispositions that open a person up to, or that shut a person from, the Infinite. Within this already directed movement a person is confronted with the choices bearing on the meaning of one's existence and of all reality. And from such choices, made successively throughout one's life, a person's experience, religious experience in particular, is woven.

[Religious] experience is specifically spiritual when, confronted with the Infinite, it becomes a fully conscious act, an act which totally and radically affects the person's numerous constituent relationships. It is deeply and completely spiritual when it "affects the whole person with all its structural elements and all its active principles. It is then brought on and owned in conscious clarity," and it issues "from a self-possessing consciousness and from a generous, self-giving love. In a word, the experience is specifically and completely spiritual when it is totally personal in the strict sense of the term."

## (2) John Bosco's Religious-Spiritual Experience

John Bosco's deepest spiritual experience was conditioned by very ordinary factors. It is important, however, to give them serious consideration, if we are to understand his life-long experience and thus gain access to his personal spirituality.

### [i] Extraction, and Socio-Cultural Environment

The Piedmontese race, for this was Don Bosco's extraction, had much more the character of the industrious ant than of the musical cicada. A sharecropper's hard-fought-for goal was to become a small independent proprietor. Hard-working and persevering, and an achiever after a fashion, the Piedmontese peasant was also a pleasant and sociable person.

The Catholic faith had shaped Piedmontese history from remote antiquity. Religious dissidents (labeled "Protestants" without distinction) and pagans (globally regarded as "savages") were the object of haughty tolerance. The par-



ish priest was king in his village. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, new ideas stemming from revolutionary France were indiscriminately regarded as suspect and dangerous.

Thus, like all the Boscos of his ancestry, John would be smitten with a passion for work which, however, would in no way affect his gentle temperament and ready smile. And only with difficulty would he be able to conceive of salvation, and even less of holiness, outside the pale of Roman Catholicism.

### [ii] Family Upbringing

The Bosco household over which Margherita Occhiena presided after her husband's death (John was but 20 months old at the time) was devout to a fault. She trained her children to a life of hardship and mortification: extremely simple fare, hard straw-filled mattresses, and early rising. Above all, she took the greatest pains to teach the Catholic religion to her children, to train them to be obedient, and to assign to them tasks that were compatible with their age. The Bosco family prayed together morning and evening. Don Bosco writes:

When I was still very small, she herself taught me to pray. As soon as I was old enough to join my brothers, she made me kneel with them morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together, including the rosary.<sup>13</sup>

In those days, praying the daily morning and evening prayers together, as also the rosary in the evening, was the norm in Piedmontese families. Three times a day the *Angelus* in honor of Mary would be recited. Even though illiterate, Margherita knew by heart the main lessons of the diocesan catechism. As her biographer Giovanni Battista Lemoyne writes in his usual moralizing, but in this case truthful, vein:

Margherita knew how powerful a force in a child's life such a Christian education is; she knew that teaching God's law every evening from the catechism and recalling it often during the day is the best means of making children obedient to their mothers. She therefore rehearsed the questions and answers of the catechism over and over until the children committed them to memory.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Finchè era piccolino mi insegnò Ella stessa le preghiere; appena divenuto capace di associarmi co' miei fratelli, mi faceva mettere con loro ginocchioni mattino e sera e tutti insieme recitavamo le preghiere in comune colla terza parte del Rosario.* [Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815-1855*. Introduzione, note e testo critico a cura di Antonio da Silva Ferreira (Roma: LAS, 1991), 34. [MO-da Silva] English translation: *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855: The Autobiography of Saint John Bosco*, tr. by Daniel Lyons, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, Lawrence Castelvocchi and Michael Mendl (New Rochelle, New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1989), 9. [MO-English]

<sup>14</sup> *Margherita conosceva la forza di simile educazione cristiana e come la legge di Dio insegnata col catechismo tutte le sere, e ricordato di frequente anche lungo il*

Don Bosco himself confirms this and writes (referring to the time of his first Communion):

I had learnt all [the lessons in] the little catechism. [...] But because we lived far from the parish church and the parish priest did not know me, I had to rely almost exclusively on my good mother for my religious instruction.<sup>15</sup>

We may be sure that she began by teaching John the words and gesture of the Sign of the Cross, by which Christians of earlier ages began every important act. By these means, she imprinted on the minds of her children the idea of a personal God always present to them. God's constant personal presence would always be a deep-rooted conviction of Don Bosco. From that moment on, he began to live under the gaze of the God of the Lord's Prayer, a God of infinite majesty, but also an infinitely loving Father who gives us "our daily bread," forgives us our sins, and keeps poor sinners from falling again.

When John was 7 or 8 years old, Margherita carefully prepared him for his first confession. Sin took on a horrible and frightening aspect for him. During Easter of 1827, with even greater care she prepared the child for his first Communion. Three times during the preceding Lenten season she accompanied him to the confessional. At home she saw to it that he prayed or read a spiritual book, and she lavished on him her motherly advice. When the great day arrived, she kept him apart from everyone in silent recollection. At church she assisted him in his preparation and thanksgiving for Holy Communion, that is, she prayed with him the appropriate acts which the priest read aloud and had the congregation of communicants repeat.<sup>16</sup> Thus it was that under his mother's guidance young John had the personal experience of a quality sacramental life which later as a priest he would never tire of instilling in his followers.

### [iii] Growing Spiritually as an Adolescent

In spite of such early training, John Bosco's spiritual life still lacked depth. But as an adolescent he had the good fortune of meeting a priest who helped him grow inwardly. When, at the age of 14, he had almost despaired of finding

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*giorno fosse il mezzo sicuro per rendere i figli obbedienti ai precetti materni. Essa quindi ripeteva le domande e le risposte tante volte quanto era necessario perchè i figli le mandassero a memoria. [G. B. Lemoyne, Scene morali di famiglia esposte nella vita di Margherita Bosco. Racconto edificante ed ameno (Torino: Scuola Tipografica Salesiana, 1886), 18-19]*

<sup>15</sup> *Sapevo tutto il piccolo catechismo.[...] Io poi per la lontananza dalla chiesa, era sconosciuto al parroco, e doveva quasi esclusivamente limitarmi alla istruzione religiosa della buona genitrice. [MO-da Silva, 42; Mo-English, 32]*

<sup>16</sup> Paragraphs adapted from my recent work, F. Desramaut, *Don Bosco en son temps (1815-1888)* (Torino: SEI, 1996), 18-19, 25-26.

a way to begin his studies for the priesthood to which he aspired, Father Giovanni Calosso, the local village chaplain, offered to help. He provided that sustaining fatherly presence for which John had all along unconsciously yearned in vain. The aged priest also provided him with spiritual direction. He encouraged him to go to confession and communion regularly, and to set aside a little time each day for some "meditation," that is to say, for a short spiritual reading. John's religious life, up to that point pretty typical, began to acquire a specifically personal character. Don Bosco writes: "It was then that I began to savor the spiritual life; up to that time I had acted in a rather material way, like a machine which does not know why it's acting."<sup>17</sup>

*[iv] Struggle and Growth through Secondary School and the Seminary*

John's secondary and seminary studies and formation were conducted in the time and under the system of the Restoration. It was a time when very strict moral standards were officially in effect and were stringently enforced both on the young people and on their teachers. John's spiritual life is revealed to us, not directly but through the models that he admired and that he strove to reproduce in himself. Foremost among them were Luigi Comollo and Father Giuseppe Cafasso. Our comments here have only the former in view.

Luigi Comollo, approximately the same age as John (just 2 years his junior) was John Bosco's companion first in secondary school and subsequently in the seminary. His temperament, however, was the opposite of John's. Bosco was a solid young man with a temper and a love of sports, if not of "combat;" Comollo, on the other hand, could suffer insults without flinching. Bosco was happy with the exercises of piety prescribed by the regulations; Comollo was fond of visiting churches for long periods of adoration. Bosco would add nothing to the customary acts of mortification; Comollo fasted rigorously beyond what was appropriate for his age, etc. The friendship that united their hearts caused John to defer to Luigi and accept all his suggestions, so that it was gradually transforming John's taste. John was having an experience of authentic piety.

As he was preparing to enter the seminary, John took a number of ambitiously austere resolutions. He brought to them all the impetuous fervor of a young man of 20. Don Bosco writes:

My life in past years had not been wicked, but I had been dissipated and proud, addicted to sports, games, acrobatics, amusements, and other such things. These pursuits gave me passing pleasure, but left my heart unsatisfied.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Da quell'epoca ho cominciato a gustare che cosa sia vita spirituale, giacchè prima agiva piuttosto materialmente e come macchina che fa una cosa, senza saperne la ragione. [MO-da Silva, 47; MO-English, 36]*

<sup>18</sup> *Negli anni addietro non era stato uno scellerato, ma dissipato, vanaglorioso, occupato in partite, giuochi, salti, trastulli ed altre cose simili, che rallegravano momentaneamente, ma che non appagavano il cuore. [MO-da Silva, 88-89;*

He would no longer attend public shows at fairs and market places; he would not again be seen at dances or at the theater, nor would he any longer, if at all possible, take part in banquets on feast days. No longer would he indulge in conjuring tricks, sleights of hand, exhibitions on the tight rope; no more violin playing, no more hunting for him. "All these things I regard as contrary to ecclesiastical dignity and spirit."<sup>19</sup>

Seminarian Bosco would henceforth be leading a retired life, practicing temperance in eating and drinking, and allowing himself only such bed rest as was necessary for bodily health. He would serve God by reading religious books, putting aside the profane literature to which (in his judgment) he had been too addicted. He would shun with all the strength he could muster thoughts, words, deeds, and whatever might endanger chastity. He bound himself to make some spiritual reading daily, and likewise every day to relate some edifying story, even if only to his mother. He wrote these resolutions down, so Don Bosco tells us, and then in order to fix them firmly on his mind he went and knelt before an image of the Virgin Mary, read them to her, formulated a prayer, and promised "to observe them at the cost of any sacrifice."<sup>20</sup> "Temperance" would be one significant trait of his spiritual experience.

[v] *Alphonsian Benignism*

In spite of such austerity, he would never treat the lowly physical body as an enemy. As a newly ordained priest in Turin he witnessed the conflict which divided the theologians of his day into two opposing camps. By choice he sided with the followers of St. Alphonsus de' Liguori, against the "Probabiliorists," who because of their rigorism were labeled "Jansenists." He fully espoused the compassion of the gospel in preference to a juridical, inhumane approach. Alphonsus de' Liguori would be his moral theologian and spiritual master, even though on occasion he would have to modify some of Alphonsus' solutions.

[vi] *Gift of Self in Service*

In his earliest years, as described above, Don Bosco was initiated into a spiritual experience in the proper sense of the term. While still a child a certain type of human existence was placed before him as an option. He chose to give himself to God, or more exactly to Christ and Christ's Mother whom he thought to have seen in a dream. The dream he had at the age of nine, in which two noble figures urged him to go in and help a crowd of more or less foul-

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MO-English, 122]

<sup>19</sup> *Queste cose le reputo tutte contrarie alla gravità ed allo spirito ecclesiastico.* [MO-da Silva, 89; MO-English, 122-123]

<sup>20</sup> *Osservarle a costo di qualunque sacrificio.* [MO, da Silva, 90; MO-English, 123]

mouthed children, set his life's course. (No judgment is passed here on the dream beyond that which the dreamer himself conveyed as he repeatedly recalled it.) As he faced a large number of wild animals, Mary told him: "This is your field; this is where you must work. Make yourself humble, steadfast and strong; and what you are now seeing happening to these animals is what you must do for my children."<sup>21</sup> As he turned to look, the beasts were replaced by gentle lambs, which seemed to vie in greeting Jesus and his Mother.

John's gift of self, reaffirmed over the years and definitively perfected through the priestly ordination, was whole-hearted. He never looked back, and his vocational course was set. It was apostolic from the start, even though questions remained as to the precise form it would take: whether it would be as a diocesan priest or as a religious. He had given himself over to Christ and to Mary with all his physical, intellectual and affective powers. He was strong, intelligent, and endowed with great sensibility. To spare himself seemed to him to be a questionable evasion, especially in the case of a priest. Nor was he content with pious desires; he looked around, saw the need and went into action.

His gift of self to the Lord was to find expression in service to people, especially to the young and the poor. To such as these he would eventually consecrate his whole life. His motto would be, "Give me souls!" It is for "souls" that in spite of many painful trials he founded two religious societies, the Salesian Society in 1859 and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in 1872. He then proceeded systematically to add to the force a great company of "cooperators"—committed Salesians even if not bound in common life or by canonical religious vows. To these sons and daughters, for whom he became the model for life and action, Don Bosco transmitted his spiritual experience.

Such then were the choices which Don Bosco made in freedom "for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls," a catch phrase that was dear to him. In all his undertakings he experienced the favor of the Virgin Mary and the support of Divine Providence. He was for God and God was for him. Without tiring he would repeat: "God is for us; he is present to encourage us on the way." Don Bosco's religious experience was deep and totally involving, a reality that accompanied him through life.

## 2. Don Bosco's Spirituality

Don Bosco's fundamental religious experience, just described, shaped his life as a spirituality in the sense defined above, that is, as a set of principles, ideas, feelings, and models of conduct powering life and action in fidelity to the Holy

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<sup>21</sup> *Ecco il tuo campo, ecco dove devi lavorare. Renditi umile, forte, robusto; e ciò che in questo momento vedi succedere di questi animali, tu dovrai farlo pei figli miei.* [MO-da Silva, 34-37; MO-English, 18-21]



Spirit. It will now be our task briefly to discuss the components of this spirituality.<sup>22</sup>

### (1) Starting Point

Over the years Don Bosco's spirituality acquired the form of an *original, moderate humanism*. He was born into the very conservative world of the Restoration, but his natural wisdom, life's real demands, and the movement of the times challenged him to come to terms with the society in which he lived. His love of literature, of sports and of spectacles might have made of him a humanist in the old tradition of his region. But an ideology related to that of the *Imitation of Christ* intervened to temper his youthful enthusiasm. Subsequently [in the seminary] his formation passed into the hands of rigorist priests who to a greater or lesser degree were under the influence of Jansenism. But the schools of [Alphonsus de'] Liguori and of ultramontane theologians, as well as important spiritual and doctrinal elements drawn from St. Philip Neri, St. Francis de Sales, St. Vincent de Paul, and others of like orientation, attracted him and eventually won him over completely. These were the influences that were at work in the Church by the time of the First Vatican Council [1870]. Under these influences Don Bosco became a firm believer in the redemptive and sanctifying power of apostolic activity, and went on to found congregations whose members approximated, as far as possible, the pattern of common Christian associations. To all his followers, children and adults, lay and religious—in a word, to all those whom he could reach by his institutions, his talks, and his many writings—he proposed a special way of Christian life, a spirituality marked by specific features.

### (2) Features

#### *[i] Don Bosco's Optimism Tempered by the Recognition of Human Ambiguity*

The human being [Don Bosco believed] is created good but is marred by ambiguity, weakness and evil. A person's existence in this world is God's wonderful gift, but fulfillment may be found in God alone, and only in an after-life. God wants everyone to be holy. Unfortunately, "unbelievers" abound, their life bearing no relation to Jesus, the one source of salvation. The Christians who lose their way in life are numerous. Therefore Don Bosco's optimism with regard to human nature was only relative. In his view, life was a journey toward death, and its very purpose, fulfillment in God, was always liable to fail-

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<sup>22</sup> This paragraph is based on the closing comments of my earlier work, F. Desramaut, *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle* (Paris, 1967). English edition: *Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*, translated by Roger M. Luna (New Rochelle, NY: Don Bosco Publications, 1969).

ure. Blessed indeed, however, is the one who journeys toward God with undivided mind and heart, for such a person will find salvation! If one practices "virtue," one may even "become a saint," as was the case with Aloysius Gonzaga and Dominic Savio!

*[ii] Religious Outlook Sustaining the Spiritual Journey*

Don Bosco's spiritual world, his spirit, was filled with the presence of supernatural powers. A just and loving God, Christ the friend, model and source of life, the Virgin Mary radiant with holiness and inexhaustively gracious, and the great throng of blessed spirits, were present and real to him in the Church here on earth. Those were the powers that propelled him and his followers toward a type of holiness understood as the heroic practice of Christian virtue. A spiritual person's progress was in effect sustained and furthered by such a beatific environment, invisible as well as visible.

Thus Don Bosco journeyed in a concretely religious world which was indeed that of his homeland, but which was also that of his personal religious experience. He lived in the presence of a God who was both just judge and loving father. He walked in the company of the gentle, loving, real Christ of the Gospels and of the Eucharistic Christ "present in the tabernacle." He experienced the presence and protection of the Virgin, Immaculate Queen and Help of Christians, "awesome as an army in battle array." He could count on the guidance of innumerable angels and of the saints who modeled the way of salvation and of perfection for people of every age and condition. The formation he received, the air he breathed in that historical time and place, his hearers' or his readers' needs, in a word, his world of relationships, might provide some explanation. But his religious experience was essentially the result of a fundamental choice, to live for God. He had the sense of the real presence of God, of Mary and of the Saints at his side. Such was the world in which Don Bosco lived and which consequently defined his spirituality.

*[iii] A Practical, Goal-Oriented Approach to Spirituality*

Don Bosco was a practical man, more interested in modes of execution than in speculative reasons for the attainment of a goal. Once the goal was set, his agile and extremely resourceful mind concentrated directly on the means he might adopt to ensure success. The goal might be an "oratory" to gather young laborers. It might be workshops intended to remove the lads from the dangers of the city and thus provide for them a human and religious formation. It might be a network of volunteers for publicizing and extending the circulation of his periodical publication, the *Catholic Readings*, throughout Italy. It might be the Association of Salesian Cooperators designed to unite people of good will in his own country, in Western Europe, and even perhaps throughout the whole world.... How could the goal be achieved? That was Don Bosco's practical problem. One should not be surprised then to see him adopt the same prac-

tical approach in matters of the soul. How could the soul be helped? In the journey of life a soul needed enlightenment, guidance, nourishment and exercise. To this end appropriate helps and means had to be found. Don Bosco certainly believed in ascetic practice as he also believed in holiness to be achieved through charity. (This will be emphasized below.) However, he gave executive priority to specific means: the enlightening power of the word, the sustaining power of the sacrament of penance, the [sanctifying] divine power of the Eucharist, and a variety of practices and devotions to keep the soul spiritually agile.

[iv] *Heaven and This World*

Don Bosco's spirituality was not suspended somewhere between heaven and earth with the result that he forgot earth for love of heaven. He frequently celebrated human nature in his books. Likewise, he did not allow the multitude of sermons, sacraments, devotions and pious exercises to turn his followers away from the world and its joys. The good things of this world could even contribute to their peace and happiness, things which the master thought very important. In this respect, he seems to have departed from [Alphonsus de'] Liguori's tradition, from which he otherwise took inspiration for ascetic practice. His thinking in the matter seems to be closer to the Oratorian tradition of St. Philip Neri, and through it to the Italian Renaissance as a whole.

A simple adverb gives us the measure of Don Bosco's difference from St. Alphonsus, who seems to have acknowledged no other end of the human being than the other-worldly end. St. Alphonsus, apparently regarded worldly goods as given to a person only "as means toward the great end," for he writes:

You were not born, nor must you live, for the sake of having enjoyment, and accumulating riches and power, nor in order to eat, drink, and sleep like the brute beasts. No, you were born, and so must you live, only in order to love your God and so assure your eternal salvation.

True, Don Bosco did not go so far as to posit distinct purposes of human existence. In fact, in using St. Alphonsus' lines for the Companion of Youth (*Giovane Provveduto*) he even states at one point: "The only purpose God had in creating you is to be loved and served [by you] in this life." But then he adds in somewhat contradictory fashion, perhaps by way of correction:

Hence it is that you are in this world not *only* for the sake of having enjoyment and accumulating riches, or in order to eat, drink, and sleep like the brute beasts. Your purpose [in life] is to love your God and save your soul.

By adding "not only" Don Bosco joined the natural purpose to the supernatural one (the only one apparently acknowledged by St. Alphonsus).<sup>23</sup> Don Bosco

<sup>23</sup> Alphonsus writes: *Non sei nato nè dei vivere per godere, per farti ricco e po-*

thereby gave his boys a way of life (that is, a spirituality) that would enable them "to be the joy of their parents and the glory to their country, [and to live as] good citizens upon earth and one day [as] blessed inhabitants of heaven."<sup>24</sup>

This way of spiritual life, then, was not just concerned with the other world. Don Bosco sought the fulfillment of his spiritual children's legitimate desires and happiness both in the order of nature and in the order of grace. The world is for people to have and use, up to the moment of death. Consequently, Don Bosco's great concern was to make a person happy in body and soul in this world. This meant allowing and encouraging the exercise and development of both physical and moral powers. But at the same time he never lost sight of the essentially religious nature of the spiritual life. He taught what he firmly believed—that happiness could not be attained apart from God and an authentic relationship with God.

### [v] Christian Asceticism

Giving priority to God calls for renunciation. Ascetic striving was an integral part of Don Bosco's spirituality. "Work and temperance" was one of his watchwords. Above all, one must renounce sin, and therefore its blandishments. In this respect, one of Don Bosco's constant preoccupations was that his boys should preserve the virtue of purity (though he preferred to use the less suggestive term "modesty"). Peace of heart is assured to those who practice ascetic renunciation, and *a fortiori* ascetic acceptance. "God knows how to reward generously the sacrifices made for the sake of obeying God's holy will.[...]"<sup>25</sup>

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*tente, per mangiare, per bere e dormire come i bruti: ma solo per amare il tuo Dio e salvarti in eterno.* [S. Alfonso de' Liguori, *Opere ascetiche*, t. II (Turin, 1846), 473] Don Bosco writes: [...] *e l'unico fine per cui ti credi si è per essere amato e servito in questa vita, per renderti poi felice in Paradiso. Sicchè non sei al mondo solamente per godere, per farti ricco, per mangiare, bere et dormire, come fanno le bestie; ma il tuo fine si è di amare il tuo Dio e salvar l'anima tua.* [(Bosco) *Il Giovane provveduto* [...] (Turin, 1847), "Sette considerazioni," 32. English edition: *The Companion of Youth* by St. John Bosco, edited by the Salesian Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Wabbourne, 1938), 36-37]

<sup>24</sup> [...] *vi presento un metodo di vivere breve e facile, ma sufficiente perchè possiate diventare la consolazione dei vostri parenti, l'onore della pairia, buoni cittadini in terra per essere poi un giorno fortunati abitatori del cielo.* [*Ibid.*, 7 and (English) 4]

<sup>25</sup> *Dio sa largamente ricompensare i sacrifici che si fanno per obbedire alla sua santa volontà [...].* [Don Bosco's Good Night, May 20, 1875, in Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Angelo Amadei, and Eugenio Ceria, *Memorie Biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco*, 19 vol.: 1-9 (1898-1917) by Lemoyne; 10 (1939, by Amadei); 11-19 (1930-1939, by Ceria), [IBM] XI, 243; English Edition of volumes 1-16: *The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, ed. by Diego Borgatello (New Rochelle, NY: Salesiana Publishers, 1965-1988 [EBM] XI, 224.

*[vi] Prayer and Apostolic Action*

Finally, all genuine spiritual life must be at the service of God's greater glory. God is served through prayer and action.

Don Bosco's prayer was both simple and dignified. He never neglected prayer, nor (worse) did he forget it. Nevertheless he was strongly drawn to action—above all, to apostolic action, which is the heart of charity and has the neighbor's total good in view. The follower of St. Benedict will give priority to prayer; the follower of St. John Bosco, to action. Apostolic action released a kind of ecstasy in him, a phrase which Rector Major Father Egidio Viganò borrowed from St. Francis de Sales.

Don Bosco's *style* of apostolic action draws on his educational method (the "preventive" system) for its guidelines. Nothing excessive ever entered into Don Bosco's style of action. Gentleness, cheerfulness, and (whenever possible) affection characterized his and his faithful followers' way of acting. He loved to quote St. Paul's words in praise of charity: "Love is patient, love is kind[...]" [1 Cor 13:4ff.] From the time of his first acquaintance with St. Francis de Sales, not only was Don Bosco filled with admiration for the doctor of love, and therefore of "goodness," but he also took him as a model.

*[vii] A "Modern" Spirituality*

We see in Don Bosco an extraordinary richness of mind, heart and soul, coupled with a penchant for action and with refinements inherited from the best humanism of the sixteenth century. Don Bosco's spirit (and therefore his spirituality) invites a comparison with that which has conquered the Western Christian World (all to the good, at least in the optimistic view) during the second half of the twentieth century. Wholeness of body and spirit, the joy of living, "de-mystification" of prayer for a strengthening of apostolic action, acceptance of pleasure, humility free of masochism, closely personal love.

But Don Bosco's spirituality also included safeguards against possible deviations. In this respect, it exhibited important traits. One may mention its deeply religious character, its genuine and all-embracing spirit of renunciation, and its eschatological orientation. Remarkably enough, this last feature easily went hand in hand with a sense of "incarnation" in the actual present, a genuinely Catholic sensibility to the living and sacramental presence of God in the world. These and other precious values in Don Bosco's spirituality acted to correct or complete certain contemporary tendencies that do not hold the promise of eternal life. For in any century genuine Christian holiness cannot be found except in Christ's cross and resurrection.



### III. Salesian Roots of the Spirituality of the Salesian Family

#### 1. St. Francis de Sales in Don Bosco's "School of Spirituality"

Don Bosco has his own school of spirituality. It is a way of holiness which he bequeathed to his followers or, to use Pope John Paul's words, a "living letter" written in the hearts of the young. In the homily delivered on the occasion of Laura Vicuña's beatification (September 3, 1988), the pope said:

This "letter" makes a particularly clear and eloquent statement in that from generation to generation new saints and blessed continue to arise out of this heritage. We are familiar with the splendid retinue of chosen souls formed in Don Bosco's school. We may mention Saint Dominic Savio, Blessed Michael Rua, Don Bosco's first successor, the blessed martyrs Louis Versiglia and Callistus Caravario, Saint Mary Dominica Mazzarello, co-founder of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and young Laura Vicuña, who today, on the occasion of the Salesian jubilee, is raised to the glory of the altars.

Don Bosco's school of spirituality has a place within a tradition of long standing. He himself recognized the masters who were his models, for example, Philip Neri and Alphonsus de' Liguori. Among such masters, Francis de Sales was destined to acquire ever greater prominence over the years. This "Salesian" connection deserves our attention.

It was by a happy coincidence that between 1844 and 1846 Francis de Sales was adopted as the titular patron of Don Bosco's early oratory. The event took place first at the Marchioness Barolo's institution and later at Pinardi's in the Valdocco district of Turin. As Don Bosco relates the events in his *Memoirs of the Oratory*, it was with pride and pleasure that he made this choice, because by it he was offering his collaborators a model of goodness, gentleness and zeal completely germane to his educational ideas. Some fifteen years later, the titular patron of the oratory became, as a matter of course, the titular patron of the new religious family, the Society of St. Francis de Sales.

The founder could not foresee all the consequences of this choice. But by it he was placing his school of spirituality, still in embryo, in the wake of the Salesian tradition properly so-called. Don Bosco had been acquainted and had been interested in Francis principally as a historical figure. From then on, however, Don Bosco himself and his followers after him would look for inspiration not only to the historical person but also to the writings, at times truly admirable, of this seventeenth-century Savoyard saint. Don Bosco's followers began to study this saint. They did so all the more eagerly since, in spite of differences, the similarities between Francis de Sales and Don Bosco are numerous.

## 2. St. Francis de Sales' Influence on Don Bosco's Spirituality in the View of Three Rectors Major

Three Salesian rectors major have tried to articulate the significance they saw in the patronage of St. Francis de Sales. Father Paolo Albera raised the issue in 1921, as part of the preparations for the third centenary of the death of the saint. Father Luigi Ricceri did the same in 1967, for the fourth centenary of the saint's birth. In 1990 Father Egidio Viganò took up the subject in his letter *Salesian Spirituality for the New Evangelization*.<sup>26</sup>

### (1) Father Paolo Albera

Father Albera begins by saying that "we must make our own not only [St. Francis'] heart but also his spirit, and have an obligation to be first in the worthy celebration of the centenary." He goes on to note that the providential choice of the Salesian name by Don Bosco is a sign that the Salesian mission is "the result and, as it were, the continuation of that which Francis de Sales began more than three centuries earlier." He adds that the third centenary of the saint's death should encourage all Salesians to deepen their knowledge of the saint's life and writings. The study of his writings should bring out their relevance for the work that bears his name.

[Because of this connection the Salesians are] called to spread and make known among the people by all available means the saint's spirit and doctrine. Don Bosco personally and perfectly appropriated this spirit and this doctrine and then creatively transfused them into his educational method.<sup>27</sup>

This last statement is certainly overly generous. Father Albera's earlier and more modest statement merely situated Don Bosco's message in the tradition of the saint. It simply urged Don Bosco's spiritual children to make the spirit of St. Francis de Sales their own,

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<sup>26</sup> E. Viganò, *Spiritualità salesiana per la nuova evangelizzazione*. Letter to the Salesians, August 15, 1990, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1043-1077; Acts # 334 (October-December 1990), 3-46.

<sup>27</sup> Noi, che da lui [Francesco di Sales] dobbiamo non solo prendere il cuore, ma altresì lo spirito, abbiamo il dovere di precedere tutti gli altri nel celebrarlo [il Centenario] degnamente. [...] come un riflesso, o meglio una continuazione di quella iniziata più di tre secoli fa dal Salesio. [...] e per ciò destinata a diffondere e popolarizzare, con tutti i mezzi di cui dispone, il suo spirito e la sua dottrina, già perfettamente assimilati da Don Bosco e da lui genialmente trasfusi nel suo sistema educativo. [P. Albera, Letter to the Salesians, September 21, 1921 in *Lettere Circolari di don Paolo Albera* (Torino: SEI, 1922), 504-506] [Albera, *Circolari*]

## (2) Father Luigi Ricceri

In 1967, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of St. Francis' birth, the then rector major, Father Luigi Ricceri, devoted a letter to the patron of the Salesian Society. Francis de Sales, he wrote, is for us Salesians in spirituality a master, in education a model. This he is by reason of the climate of freedom, of dialogue and of loving-kindness (*amorevolezza*) which he constantly celebrated in his writings.

Father Ricceri was a staunch defender of the apostolate of the press in all parts of the Salesian world. In the second half of the letter, he reminds us that Francis de Sales was for Don Bosco a model for this kind of apostolate, and such he continues to be for Don Bosco's followers.<sup>28</sup>

## (3) Father Egidio Viganò

Father Viganò stressed the importance of Francis de Sales for Salesian spirituality, and did so in words even more eloquent than Father Albera's seventy years before. When we qualify the spirituality of our religious family as Salesian, we pledge ourselves, so he wrote, "to restore to St. Francis de Sales his rightful place and the importance he deserves in our spirituality." The doctrine of this saint enriches in depth and content [Bosconian] Salesian spirituality, and imparts a particular orientation to it.

*[i] Francis the Doctor of Pastoral Charity*

Father Viganò goes on to explain his statement by recourse to a favorite theme of his: "apostolic charity." He writes: "[Francis] is the doctor of pastoral charity, and pastoral charity is the 'center and epitome' of our apostolic spirit."

Father Viganò then endeavors to present Francis de Sales as the initiator of a powerful spiritual renewal. As the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Francis in effect succeeded in making the practice of the gospel way of life appealing by recognizing the Christian value [and potential for holiness] of all situations and states in life. He reconciled interior life and external action; he showed the importance of every-day activity; he fought Rigorism; he vindicated the right of every individual to a real and personal spiritual life. He propounded a "devout life" which for all its mildness, ease and attractive quality, was neither mawkish nor simplistic.

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<sup>28</sup> Letter of August 21, 1967 to the Salesians, in *Lettere Circolari di don Luigi Ricceri ai Salesiani* (Roma: SDB, 1996), 99-114; Acts # 249 (August 1967), 3-17. The subtitles of some sections reveal the tenor of the letter: "St. Francis de Sales Master of Spirituality and Model for Education in a Climate of Freedom, of Dialogue, and of Loving-Kindness;" "St. Francis de Sales: Don Bosco's and Our Model in the Always Relevant Apostolate of the Press;" "St. Francis de Sales' Message to Don Bosco in a Dream."

Father Viganò then turns his attention to the *Treatise on the Love of God*. In his view, Francis de Sales constructed a "doctrine" (that is, a theology) of the "love of charity." The *Treatise* appears to him to be "a book drawn from life, practically an autobiography." It is the witness of a constant progress in a program of spiritual growth along a journey no longer monastic but apostolic. It is a hands-on exercise, a kind of *vade mecum* for the disciple who desires to live as a Christian in the world. Father Viganò loves to dwell on the initial sentence of Book II of that great work: "Man is the perfection of the universe, the spirit is the perfection of man, love is the perfection of the spirit, and charity is the perfection of love. That is the reason why the love of God is the end, the perfection, of the universe, and what is most excellent in it." For Father Viganò, though not for Francis, the charity extolled here is merely the charity of an apostle with heart afire. John Paul II had described Don Bosco as a "genius of the heart." In recalling the pope's words, Viganò adds by way of comment:

Now, St. Francis de Sales was one of the most sympathetic interpreters of the heart and of its natural affective riches brought to perfection by charity. He was also a profound observer of the "heart's beat," as it reaches for the highest summits of ecstasy in the gift of self through apostolic action.

[ii] *Francis' Challenge*

Bringing to a close his paragraph and with it his argument relating to the spirituality of the Salesian Family, Viganò writes:

Qualifying this spirituality as Salesian places on us the obligation of restoring in young people a taste for God, the celebration of life, a commitment to history, a sense of responsibility for [God's] creation, and a generous acceptance of co-responsibility in the Church.<sup>29</sup>

From such expressions, the last-quoted in particular, one can surmise the extent to which St. Francis de Sales' doctrine has been reinterpreted by the [Bosconian] Salesian masters and has served to reinforce their favorite ideas. It was natural, therefore, that over the years St. Francis de Sales' influence on the [Bosconian] Salesian spiritual tradition should increase considerably. After a century, Francis stands not just as a model of goodness, charity and zeal to be imitated by his [Bosconian] followers, but also as a revered doctor whose profound teachings in spiritual theology they are urged to make their own.

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<sup>29</sup> E. Viganò, Letter to the Salesians, August 15, 1990, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1058-1062; *Acts* # 334 (October-December, 1990), 24-28. [The present and the preceding Viganò citations]

#### IV. Developments in Cultural and Intellectual History through the Twentieth-Century in the View of Two Rectors Major

Fathers Paolo Albera and Egidio Viganò, the rectors major who seriously addressed the question of St. Francis de Sales' influence on the Society, were sensitive also to developments in Church and society which impacted the life of the Salesian Family during the twentieth century.

##### 1. Father Paolo Albera in Two Modes

Father Paolo Albera, and the whole congregation with him, had suffered much during the war of 1914-1918. Salesians working in different countries found themselves at war against one another; Salesian works were shut down or put at risk; numerous confreres, missionaries in particular, were actively engaged in battle at the front, and in some instances killed or seriously wounded. On another front, a new code of canon law was issued in Rome in 1917, a measure that would strongly affect the life of all religious congregations.

The rector major's assessment of how things were shaping up in the aftermath of the war underwent a radical change. While fairly optimistic at the onset of 1920, some fifteen months later he was expressing himself in strongly pessimistic terms. In a letter to the Salesian provincials dated January 1, 1920, he voiced his hope for the future.

Tremendous changes have taken place in the world, and these in turn have given rise to new situations, all of which affect the life and development of our Congregation. Consider, for example, the amazing activity of the Apostolic See. Its recent vigorous action will go down as a milestone in the annals of the Church's disciplinary reform. I am referring to the promulgation of the new code of canon law. Civil society also has undergone profound changes. Many social barriers have fallen; many of the old ideas have been left behind; new forces are stirring; everywhere new wholesome energies are being released. All this movement holds out the hope that, with the Lord's help new bright and beautiful days will dawn for the Church, and for all those who, with the Church and for the Church, work for the good of souls.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Quante nuove situazioni si crearono, nel mondo, che hanno un diretto influsso sulla vitalità e sullo sviluppo della nostra Congregazione! Basti accennare all'attività sorprendente della Sede Apostolica, accresciuta in questi ultimi tempi da quell'atto vigoroso, che rimarrà celebre nella storia della rinnovazione di tutta la disciplina ecclesiastica mediante la promulgazione del nuovo Codice di Diritto Canonico. E nella società civile, quante cose sono mutate! Molte barriere son cadute; molte concezioni sono sorpassate; nuove forze s'agitano, energie sane si manifestano dappertutto; e ciò, con l'aiuto del Signore, fa bene sperare che giorni belli e sereni abbiano presto a splendere sul cielo della Chiesa e di tutti coloro che, con la Chiesa e per la Chiesa, lavorano al bene delle anime.* [P. Albera, Circular Letter to Salesian Provincials, January 1, 1920, in Albera, *Circolari*, 295-296]



By contrast, on March 19, 1921, his brooding reflections on the public state of mind were dark indeed. With anguished heart he laments the insane egalitarianism and materialistic amorality gripping society. He writes:

We give thanks to God that the dreadful European war is over. But its many evil effects are still with us, and will be with us no one knows for how long. Most damaging among them is the overthrow of the principles that should at any time guide the course of human society. All authority, whether divine or human, is rejected out of hand; no longer are rights, rank, and status honored. There are those who would want everybody reduced to the same material and moral level. In effect no longer is any consideration given to moral values; only that which is material, indeed basely material, is of any account. This is the kind of air we breathe, and it is so completely saturated with these pernicious errors that even good people may finally suffer contamination. For one is always under pressure to conform to prevailing ways of thinking, and so to seek justification for one's defection from those Christian principles that ought to serve as norm for life and conduct.<sup>31</sup>

## 2. Father Egidio Viganò and the "Signs of the Times"

Twenty years later, the Second World War came again to jolt people's minds. But the cultural transformations that followed were not truly perceived by the Salesian leadership before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) brought out their significance, and the Church officially recognized their value.

Father Viganò attended the Council as a theologian in the service of the archbishop of Santiago (Chile). After such an experience, he made the Council one of the preferred themes of his rectorate. The phrase "socio-cultural transformations" appeared as far back as 1978 as the title of the first part of the keynote address delivered by him as rector major-elect, the address itself being entitled, "Not According to the Flesh, but According to the Spirit."<sup>32</sup> It is a time of crisis this in which we live, he stated; it is also a time of Pentecost. It is "the dawn of a new day, even though we cannot forecast what kind of a day

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<sup>31</sup> *È finita, grazie a Dio, la tremenda guerra europea, ma perdurano tuttora, e chissà fino a quando, gl'innumerevoli suoi effetti deleteri. Tra questi primeggia lo sconvolgimento dei principii che devono reggere l'umana società. Non si vuol più riconoscere autorità di sorta, né divina né umana, non più diritti, non più dignità né gradi: si pretende ridurre tutti ad uno stesso livello materiale e morale; anzi di valori morali non si parla più affatto, ma solo della materia, della sordida materia! Tutta l'atmosfera che si respira è così pregna di sifatte perniciose aberrazioni, che anche i buoni possono alla fine essere inquinati, conformando ad esse la propria condotta, o cercando di scusare o giustificare con esse le defezioni da quei principii cristiani che dovrebbero essere la loro norma di vita.* [P. Albera, Circular Letter to Salesian Priests, March 19, 1921, in Albera, *Circolari*, 391]

<sup>32</sup> E. Viganò, *Non secondo la carne, ma secondo lo spirito* (Rome: Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1978). [Viganò, *Non secondo la carne*]

it's going to be." The "signs of the times," evidence of society's "human growth," offer us a challenge.

The phrase, "signs of the times," as used in the Church at the time, usually referred to developments in major aspects of contemporary thought. Father Viganò recognizes a number of "signs" and sees them as affecting "the whole human being, a person's whole mode of existing, acting, and living with others." "They effect transformations in thought, life style, and methods of action."<sup>33</sup> The rector major goes on to list the "signs" as five on-going processes: (1) a process of historical acceleration; (2) a process of personalization; (3) a process of socialization; (4) a process of secularization; and finally (5) a process of liberation.

The inevitable effect of these processes on Salesian life needs to be recognized and clearly identified. The congregation's renewal is possible only if it is "in harmony with the real status of the human being of today and in harmony with the culture and the life style which surround us. Only this will enable us to be God's effective agents in history."<sup>34</sup> Obviously the rector major, fully aware of their origin in the instinctive desires of sinful human nature, was not duped by the "signs." After all, the same social sensitivity that was responsible for Lenin's revolutionary movement was also responsible for Cardijn's renewal program. Out of this clear perception, Father Viganò focused on those aspects of the signs that he perceived to be in accordance with God's will, that is, with the gospel message.

The language which he employed in his exposition of the "signs" needs to be carefully examined, for the "signs of the times" as understood by the rector major were destined to exercise a strong influence on his spirituality, and thereby also on the new spirituality of the Salesian Family.

#### (1) Process of Historical Acceleration

There has been great acceleration in the pace of history. Today, at the dawn of the third millennium, five years show greater progress than a century in former times. In a decade's time, one generation is replaced by another of widely diverging culture. Science and technology, as is the case in biology, computer science, information technologies, etc., are in continual evolution. So are political relationships, as evidenced by the end of the cold war and the collapse of Marxist communism.

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<sup>33</sup> *Se è vero che i segni dei tempi sono una crescita in umanità, sapete che cosa toccano? Tutto! E toccano tutto perchè toccano l'uomo nella sua maniera di essere, di agire e di convivere; quindi trasformano la mentalità, lo stile di vita e i metodi di azione.* [Viganò, *Non secondo la carne*, 131]

<sup>34</sup> *La genuinità del nostro rinnovamento nello spirito deve essere raggiunta in consonanza con ciò che è l'uomo d'oggi, con la cultura e lo stile di vita che ci circonda, per essere segni efficaci di Dio nel nostro tempo.* [Viganò, *Non secondo la carne*, 137]

In another field, formats developed to regulate the activities, say, of an apostolic group often become obsolete overnight. School organization changes, hospital ministry changes, young people's way of thinking changes, while parents' problems escalate from day to day. People in leadership roles must take such swift historical evolution seriously, and must seek advice and study ways and means of dealing with it. Anyone whose business it is to be active in society will have to be engaged in an ongoing search. Father Viganò through all the years of his mandate (1878-1995) was engaged in such a quest—searching to find a better way of articulating the great principles of Salesian spirituality for the religious family which was entrusted to his care.

### (2) Process of Personalization

By "personalization" is meant a "heightened sense of the dignity of the human person." Personal freedom, choices and decisions are henceforth regarded as a person's sacred rights. Thus a "subject" may argue a case with the "superior" and be proved right. Back in 1921, Father Albera without putting a name to it, deplored a similar development in society and condemned it as a rejection (a blind one at that!) of all authority. Sixty years later, authority alone, not backed up by competence, would command no better hearing than that claimed by mere power. In any case, not much thought was given to personal self-expression in the monasteries of yesteryear. The process of personalization has called authoritarian systems into question, systems in which the leader held all power, with little thought given to the subjects' legitimate needs.

### (3) Process of Socialization

The obscure phrase "process of socialization" as a "sign of the times" designates the empowerment of individuals for participation in the life of the community—in district or city, in such areas as politics, business, labor unions, in the political party, or in the religious institute. Such a process is clearly related to the process of personalization. As Father Viganò observed, the religious institute cannot any longer be considered the appanage of the "superiors." He called for an end of all paternalism, and thereby, in barely veiled words, he put on notice that fascist-like ideology which consigned societies into the hand of their chiefs—or of their "leaders," to use a term which will suggest to the reader its well-known German and Italian equivalents. This is the ideology that during the first half of the century made inroads even into the world of Salesian religious life.<sup>35</sup> The ongoing socialization demanded that each member be involved in the life of the social organism.

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<sup>35</sup> *Una tale idea sbagliata [considerare un Istituto come una cosa esclusiva dei superiori], apparsa anche nei nostri ambienti a causa dello stile culturale della prima metà del secolo, non è più accettabile oggi. Un Istituto non può reggersi con stile fascista o paternalistico o maternalistico; è una comunità di fraternità con parteci-*

## (4) Process of Secularization

Secularization (advancement of the "secular") has a more familiar sound. What is meant here by "secular" is the non-sacral world of temporal reality. To it secularization acknowledges an autonomy which religion is no longer allowed to usurp. Here "temporal," "world," and "secular" are synonymous. The secularization movement dates back to the Middle Ages. In the western world the lay state arose out of the secularization movement. Thus politics became secular. The Church's attitude with regard to the world, and its consciousness in relation to the temporal, have undergone modification. Today, it's not just politics that is regarded as secular, but also all social and cultural reality, in fact the whole human construct. In this regard, Father Viganò remarked that education itself is not derived from the gospel: the school is a cultural institution and not, of itself, an ecclesiastical structure.

On such premises, the temptation to cut God and religion off from the "temporal," that is from the world, is real. A totally secularized world no longer recognizes God. At once one realizes that secularization gives rise to troublesome problems relating to mixed domains, such as morals or education. For example, during the latter part of this century, confrontations between Church and secular society in the area of bioethics have been frequent.

## (5) Process of Liberation

Finally, Father Viganò identified a fifth sign of the times in the process of liberation at work during the twentieth century. What's at stake here is not the liberation of the individual through personalization but the liberation of peoples suffering oppression from unjust structures. "Liberation theology" became an obsessive preoccupation for this rector major who spent many years in Latin America. At the time it was a question of the liberation of the Third World, but now he believed that the whole Salesian Family, the world over, should be involved in this process.<sup>36</sup>

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*pazione di tutti.* [E. Viganò, *Non secondo la carne*, 134]

<sup>36</sup> The expression Third World (coined by Winston Churchill during the cold war) originally designated countries that were not politically aligned either with the Communist bloc (Second World) or with the Western bloc (First World). The group was made up chiefly of Latin American nations and of new nations formed out of the old colonial structure. Later, however, the expression came to mean simply the underdeveloped countries of the world, and generally speaking it represented the claims of an impoverished South against an affluent, and allegedly neo-colonialist, North. [Translator's note]

## (6) Additional "Signs of the Times"

In the years following 1989, Father Viganò singled out additional, specific "signs of the times." For example, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the relative decline of Marxism with a concomitant expansion of liberal capitalism appeared as "signs." Likewise "signs" were discerned in the demise of a variety of political and ideological certitudes, as well as in the ushering in of an era of individualistic, pluralistic, and relativistic thought. In the area of religious experience, signs were seen in the substitution of ephemeral messianic claims with a secular morality, in the surge of fundamentalism and in the disintegration of regulated belief, and in new forms of religiosity flowering side by side with the great monotheistic religions. In the field of esthetic experience, beauty, goodness and generosity, with accompanying feelings and emotions, were admired and sought after. It was also the age of "re-enchantment." The need was felt to "restore enchantment to the world," where cold rationality, unchecked liberalism, and the failure of secular utopias often left people in a state of confusion. Why should one not dream of a moral recovery and of a more humane world?

In the midst of a general crisis of modernity, people went in search, if not of God as such, certainly of the "divine." Beliefs no longer functioned along the vertical axis of above and below, transcendence and immanence, but rather on a horizontal plane along which other polarities were at play. These were the recurring themes in the discussions of thinkers of the postmodern age: sense and non-sense, life and death, health and sickness, well-being and malaise, imagination and rationality. No longer was salvation sought in traditional beliefs; people now sought it in an astonishing world of "religions without God."<sup>37</sup>

## (7) Challenges to Salesian Spirituality

Salesian spirituality, that is, the cluster of concepts, principles and models guiding the spiritual life of the Salesian Family, could not but be affected by all these historic developments. It had to come to terms with the processes of historical acceleration, of personalization, of socialization, of secularization, of liberation, or again of re-enchantment, in which the contemporary person, whether alone or in society, whether religious or secular, whether fixed in tradition or moving with history, was involved.

The last years of this century were decisive for the Salesian Family, as it reviewed and reformulated all its rules of life. Now, in this effort at renewal Salesians have worked, more or less critically, in communion with, and within the horizon of, a renewed contemporary Catholic spirituality.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. "Le temps des religions sans Dieu," *Esprit* 233 (June 1997: 1), 329.



## V. Contemporary Catholic Spirituality—Characteristic Features

### 1. The New Face of Catholic Spirituality

In the first place, the accelerated forward movement of history was offering new challenges, and at the same time, new, powerful currents of thought were sweeping over the Church. Among them one may mention charismatic renewal, feminist ideology, acculturation, ecology, the quest for reassuring certainties and emotional supports, and moderate pluralism and relativism. These factors combined to confer a new look on Catholic spirituality.

Moreover, certain characteristic religious features came to be part of Catholic spirituality as a result of Vatican II. It now tended to be Trinitarian, Christ-centered, Church-oriented, biblical, liturgical, and ecumenical. It sought inspiration in Scripture and the liturgy, and its meditation centered by preference on the Holy Spirit and on Christ as universal Savior. Accordingly, its interest and prayer transcended the boundaries of the visible Church in an effort to be in communion with all people of good will.

True, some of the new orientations proved transitory, but in the main the new directions seem to have endured as permanent traits.<sup>38</sup>

It will be helpful at this point to consider a few of the tendencies and ideas that have determined the direction of contemporary Catholic [and hence also of Salesian] spirituality.

### 2. What Contemporary Catholic Spirituality Repudiates

Let's begin by looking at certain ideas which contemporary spirituality has rejected.

#### (1) Spiritualities of "Evasion"

On principle all evasion in the spiritual life is rejected. What's rejected is any spirituality that separates the spiritual life from a person's history. Involvement in society is urgently brought home to the Christian as a demand of the love of neighbor that Christ commands and Christianity extols. Liberation theology, which drew a large following in the seventies, exemplified the liberating nature of Christianity. Similarly now, at century's end, a passive, ineffective Christian spirituality, uninvolved in the human being's historical des-

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<sup>38</sup> For this paragraph on the Catholic spirituality of the end of the twentieth century, I have drawn on S. De Fiore, "Spiritualité contemporaine," in *Dictionnaire de la vie spirituelle*, ed. by S. De Fiore and T. Goffi (Paris, 1983), 1067-1077. Some phrases have been cited verbatim; certain other statements have been toned down, and yet others have been extended to apply through to the end of the century. I say this lest I seem to be improvising a spirituality for my convenience, and proposing it as contemporary.

tiny, appears unthinkable. A spirituality which soars high above historical reality is now regarded as nothing more than an ideology which helps maintain unjust systems presently in place and which is a self-serving flight from reality. Political neutrality and guilelessness are traps and decoys. Letting the world go its own way amounts to no less than collaboration with those who would maintain the status quo and with those who resist the transforming power of the Spirit. Spiritual individualism tends to reduce the Christian life to a series of pious exercises and cultic acts which are intended solely for the perfection of the individual and are cut off from the movement of history. Such an understanding of the spiritual life is regarded as suspect. Nor can a Christian's spiritual journey be defined solely in terms of interiority. The Christian, in today's understanding, must test his or her mettle against the real-life tasks of the human being, and must get involved on the battlegrounds of society and of the Church. Briefly put, one must unite worship and life, interiority and social concern, union with God and communion in the Church.

### (2) Dualism

Contemporary spirituality is also viscerally opposed to dualistic attitudes toward human reality, attitudes that are incapable of uniting in any significant way the various aspects of Christian salvation and perfection. Spirituality must distance itself from a dualistic anthropology that gives preference to the soul to the detriment of the body. The human being is not a fallen angel, but rather a composite of soul and body. Were it not for this unity, a person's historical dimension would be lost, as would a person's capacity to communicate collaboratively with others. The body's place in the spiritual life must therefore be rediscovered. The body must be reinserted into the process of salvation that is to culminate in the resurrection.

### (3) "Eschatologism"

Contemporary spirituality mistrusts otherworldly projections that relegate salvation and the kingdom of God to the hereafter. Present and future must be regarded as intrinsically connected, because the future is the definitive stage of realization of the spiritual salvation worked out in the present. Final realities are meant not to abolish but to sustain a person's engagement in history for the achievement of complete salvation. Up to the point of death, one is to remain firmly committed to this earth. Contemporary spirituality does not, of course, deny an "eternal life" (that is, an "afterlife"); it just does not focus its attention on it.

### (4) "Supernaturalism"

Finally, contemporary spirituality shuns any supernaturalism, that is, any Monophysitic tendency that would eliminate the human element in order to

allow divine grace to triumph. Obviously, it is careful not to set aside ascetic striving for the purging out of evil. It does not therefore accept nature without critical judgment or without struggle. However, it absolutely refuses under any guise, to conceive of the divine and the human in terms of radical opposition or rivalry. On the contrary, it believes that God's glory and human happiness are intimately related. Therefore human promotion and helping people to make a success of their lives is a sign of authentic spirituality.

### 3. Positive Features of Contemporary Catholic Spirituality

The positive acquisitions of contemporary spirituality are of even greater interest to us than are its rejections.

#### (1) A Spiritual Undertaking Open to All

In the first place, the spiritual life, that is, spirituality in the subjective sense of the term, is regarded as possible for every authentic person to attain. The authentic person is one who, faced with reality and history, has made a decisive, fundamental, and integrating choice that is capable of giving meaning to his or her existence. Such a person will then gain the experience of the Absolute, as described by Jean Mouroux in his discussion of religious experience referred to above. Here a person's relentless quest for the meaning of life joins with the creative plan of God. The quest can take a variety of forms, for the values apt to give consistency and unity to the course of events in a person's life are diverse. They range from artistic creativity to scientific commitment, from love of neighbor to struggle against injustice, to active participation in promoting a more humane society and holistic human development. Speaking on this subject, a philosopher remarks that a person's life finds its definitive consistency "in that mysterious reality hidden at the origin of existence and experienced as gift. This reality is none other than God the creator, and God's very existence challenges the human being to seek communion, freedom, and personal eternal life."<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, a more attentive study of salvation history has enabled theologians to acknowledge the working of grace in each human being, particularly in believing members of the many world religions. God is the loving Father of all, "who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). All of God's children therefore are given the help of grace so that they may find their spiritual dimension as they search for truth and love. Again, Christ died for all, and as the beginning and the end of the universe (Col 1:15-20) he is present to all people, especially the disadvantaged, for their salvation (Mt 25:31-46). Then again, every human being is created according to the same Spirit who is active not only in the Church but every-

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<sup>39</sup> A. Dondeyne, "God in het leven van de moderne mens," as cited in J. Gevaert, *Antropologia catechetica*. Instructor's Notes (Rome: UPS, 1997), 179.

where in the world. Therefore Christians can (and should!) regard non-Christians as people already graced, or capable of being graced in their deepest being by the God whose will it is that all be saved. Never should Christians look upon non-Christians as people who have chosen error instead of truth out of stupidity or callousness, or simply because they were less fortunate than they. The Biblical figures of Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20), Balaam (Num 22-24), Cyrus (Is 45:1), Cornelius (Acts 10:1-33) may be taken as proofs that authentic religious experience, priesthood, and prophetic inspiration, all true gifts of the Spirit, are to be found also among "the heathen." "[...] God shows no partiality, but in every nation everyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God" (Acts 10:34-35). "The wind [Spirit] blows where it chooses" (Jn 3:8).

Life acquires meaning in the experience of one's gift of self to the Absolute, no matter what form this surrender may take. But more blessed is the person who enjoys the advantage of faith in a loving God who is Creator and Father. The consciousness of possessing life as a gift from God, and even of having been entrusted with a mission in life, is for such a person a profoundly stirring and uplifting experience. Such experience in turn calls forth a profoundly moving and coherent response in the form of a positive option when confronted with God's revelation in history, in Jesus Christ the Savior.

## (2) Experience of God in History and Involvement with the World

### *[i] Experience of God in History*

Contemporary spirituality makes the point clearly: the spiritual experience of God the Savior takes place in history, that is, within the ever flowing movement of created reality in time. Since the human being exists in an essential relation with time, a contemporary person, just like the people of the Bible and of other great religious traditions, is attentive to God's action perceived in historical events. This was a constant theme in Don Bosco's reflection. To a person possessed of this understanding the presence of the Totally Other is revealed as the necessary condition for the success of the historical process. This Presence is the peace that makes our peace possible, the freedom of our freedom, the power enabling us to act and simply to exist in history.

For the Israelite people God's presence was manifested visibly in their historical existence, as for example in their liberation from slavery in Egypt. The Psalms make frequent and joyful reference to that event. For Christians the sign of this saving Presence is Christ in his paschal mystery, in which the resurrection is understood as an offer of salvation and of new and eternal life. Standing in this continuing faith tradition, the Christian experiences the living God through meditation on the revealed word, through participation in liturgical worship, through working for justice, and through obedience to God's will

as expressed in real-life situations.<sup>40</sup> Thus the Christian's spiritual experience has God both as its origin and its center of gravity. This kind of spirituality unites the prevalent horizontal dimension with the vertical dimension without which authentic Christianity is not possible. For, the spiritual life is a self-communication of God in time.

[ii] *Engagement with the World in Contemporary Spirituality*

The contemporary understanding of spirituality presented in the foregoing paragraphs has an important consequence: the idea of spiritual "perfection" and the concern for the means thereto, have receded into the background. In former times, Christian perfection might have been made to consist in flight from the world in order to give oneself up to divine contemplation. Today, on the contrary, it is rather through action in the world that one tries to achieve holiness. (Don Bosco's followers will find the idea both familiar and extremely reassuring.)

No longer, therefore, is work on the job on weekdays regarded as devoid of spiritual significance, as though religious experience were confined to Sundays. Nor is it necessary that such workaday labor be elevated by the intention of doing it "for the greater glory of God" (admittedly a laudable practice), in order to confer dignity on it, so to speak. Offering one's day to God in the morning is and will always be an excellent practice. Teilhard de Chardin urged Christians to work up a passion for the day's work ahead, with the understanding that by their activity they were helping to bring the world one step closer to its realization in Christ. God does not call us preemptively away from the very work that God has appointed to us, for in fact God is made present to us in and through the work itself. Thus activity itself becomes a means of communion with God, a "divine milieu" in which God is encountered.<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary theology acknowledges that through creation and Incarnation worldly reality is endowed with religious value. Contemporary spirituality fully accepts the validity of this doctrine. It rejects the idea that God and the human being in the world are in competition, as though a person had to restrict his or her activity so as to leave some place for God to act. Such a caricature of God never had any reality except in the imagination of the Existentialists. It would be no less of a caricature to reduce Christianity to a system of religious rites detached from life. It is life itself that must be turned into an existential liturgy, a spiritual worship pleasing to God (cf. Rom 12:1).

If, as noted above, merely to offer one's work to God with the right intention is not sufficient to achieve holiness, it is even less so to be satisfied with inserting into one's activity short prayers, or even quality times of spiritual retreat. One would thereby risk depriving of spiritual meaning almost the

<sup>40</sup> Cf. De Fiores, *Art. cit.*, 1070.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "La divinisation des activités," in *Le milieu divin* (*Oeuvres*, t. 4, Paris, 1957) 29-67.



whole of one's existence, and in fact having to admit that God may not be encountered except at certain privileged moments. True, the swing of the spiritual pendulum characteristic of the seventies was probably excessive. "Work is prayer" was the strident, vociferous claim of activists at the time. But by a stroke of poetic justice wisdom made a comeback. Charismatic leaders and evangelical life movements have restored and given contemplative adoration a place of honor in contemporary spirituality. A modern congregation such as Mother Theresa's can't conceive of charitable activity on behalf of the poor except within the framework of protracted, silent meditation. Times for recollection, for exodus or for retreat, continue to be regarded as necessary, in fact often indispensable. However, one point should be clearly understood: it is the whole of one's life with all of its incessant activities that has to be acceptable to God and thus become a source of spiritual vitality. This has been a constant emphasis in the spirituality of the second half of the twentieth century.

We are thereby brought back to a consideration of the very structure of human activity. Its uplifting effect is due to its essential internal order, to the fact that it is organically inserted within life's context and it is open to God's saving call. Professional activity and the competence of the person who is engaged in it are therefore relevant to the spiritual life. Work and earthly realities do contribute to its enrichment. Obviously, faith and morality must guide human activity so that its intrinsic order is respected, but of itself the engagement in action has almost unlimited scope. It is allowed to launch into fields of activity with no set boundaries, except the moral imperatives of justice, humanity, and Christian solidarity with brothers and sisters. Without in any way overlooking the encounter with God in worship situations, which in former ages appeared sufficient for spiritual progress, people today look for contact with an every-day God, the God of ordinary life. Stress is shifted from a sacral and separated religious life to one rooted in the quotidian. At the same time, the spiritual purview is expanded to include the universe. Every person, especially if in possession of a faith experience, should be able to transcend his or her specific individual tasks, and responsibly participate in the common project of building a better world.

#### **4. Spirituality of Liberation and Community-Building**

##### **(1) Spirituality of Liberation**

Contemporary Catholic spirituality also aims at liberation. As indicated above, the theme liberation pervades the whole Christian ideology. It has also affected contemporary Catholic spirituality, particularly in the Latin American context. There historically the situation was brought about by neo-colonialism, with its unjust distribution of material resources, its systemic underdevelopment, and its human exploitation. It has been characterized by the episcopal conference as a "situation of sin." "When we speak of an unjust situation we are referring to

actual conditions which express an existing situation of sin."<sup>42</sup> Crying injustices in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres, always imply a rejection of the Lord's gift of peace, indeed a rejection of the Lord himself. Access to salvation and to communion with God is made possible not so much through well worked out theological categories as through an attitude that involves life in a global and unified manner and that embraces the whole and every aspect of life—in a word, through a real spirituality. Such spirituality transcends the context of the situation in Latin America. However, the insights from the Latin American experience have provided inspiration for all believers who have felt the urgency of speaking boldly for the liberation of the oppressed.<sup>43</sup> (Obviously, one should refrain from using certain Scripture texts inappropriately, nor should one restrict Christian eschatology to the created world.)

The spirituality of liberation has called forth new fundamental attitudes. It calls for a renewed world order and for the creation of a new human being within it. It wants to bring about an evangelical community of brothers and sisters, and to establish a freer and more just system of relationships among people. Since love of neighbor as proclaimed in the gospels is central to Christian faith and ethos, the Christian can no longer think of pleasing God through an individual cultic relationship alone. Prayer and liturgy of themselves no longer appear sufficient. The Christian's concern, therefore, goes out to the neighbor who is suffering oppression, and this implies that he or she must set aside indifference and neutrality and adopt an overt stance in support of the poor and the exploited.

Such an option has made two demands on the Christian. The first enjoins the prophetic condemnation of social injustice, even at the risk of incurring hostile reprisals from the guardians of the established order. Preaching resignation to the poor in anticipation of heaven now seems an intolerable failure on the part of people in the Church. Given its mission of liberation, the Church would betray her mandate if it merely soothed the oppressed, lulled them to sleep in their enslavement, or allowed them to drift in resignation. After the example of the Israelite prophets, the Church has a moral obligation to defend the poor and to raise their consciousness by protesting injustice, which is the cause of their poverty.

The second demand calls for solidarity with the poor so that a total liberation can be effected from within. Since sin has infected also the social institutions, liberation entails not only extirpating evil from human hearts, but also removing or transforming unjust social structures. Thus Christian charity expresses itself through political involvement, and shows its genuineness by

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<sup>42</sup> *Al hablar de una situación de injusticia nos referimos a aquellas realidades que expresan una situación de pecado.* [CELAM II, Medellín, Document Paz (Montevideo, 1968), 35]

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the theme of Jesus' discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth, Lk 4:18.

going beyond, but obviously not excluding, the merely private or individual form of charitable activity.

This is a battling spirituality; but, far from fostering aggression and hatred, it aims at promoting hope and joy. Communion with the Lord and with all human beings fills the Christian's spirit with gratitude and trust. Since God is active in human history on behalf of the poor, the Christian cannot but rejoice with Mary in the experience of God as savior.<sup>44</sup> Confiding in Christ's promises, and in the power of the Spirit, Christians live and work in hope. They believe that liberation and the universal community of brothers and sisters can be attained, and they work, hope and pray for it. The goal, however, is not to wait for it to happen in a distant eschatological fulfillment (no longer a frequent topic of conversation, for that matter!), but to make it happen already in this world, even though only in a partial and conditioned manner. Such, in any case, is the cry of hope raised by contemporary spirituality.

## (2) Spirituality of Communion or Community-Building

Our world, the western world in particular, is terribly hardened in its individualism, the frequent claims to the contrary made in the media notwithstanding. Hence Catholic spirituality since mid-century has taken inspiration from the socialized way of life prevailing in socialist republics in order to develop and promote a model of spiritual life based on community. Vatican II, speaking from a strongly personalist position, stated that "by their innermost nature humans are social beings, and unless they relate themselves to others they can neither live nor develop their potential."<sup>45</sup> At that same time the mass media by promoting a sense of the unity of the whole human family, encouraging democracy everywhere, and calling for transcending the individualistic ethic, were in a measure transforming the world. [In the wake of Vatican II] Christians have become increasingly more sensitive to the community dimension of life. Ecumenical councils in the first Christian centuries focused their theological reflection on Christ; the Council of Trent was principally interested in the problem of the justification of the individual sinful person. Vatican II, on the other hand, focused its attention on the Church as the mystical body of Christ and as God's people gathered and bonded together in the love of the Trinity.<sup>46</sup> The Church therefore is a communion, that is, essentially a community of persons bonded in solidarity. Its unique founding principle is the Spirit of the risen Lord, through whom the members are inserted into the body of Christ.

This new perspective has worked changes in certain aspects of the earlier spirituality, because its religious vision is less individualistic and more community-oriented. "It has pleased God, however, to make human beings holy and save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Mary's *Magnificat*, Lk 1:46-55.

<sup>45</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, # 12.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, # 7-10.

making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges God in truth and serves God in holiness."<sup>47</sup> The verse of the hymn, "But one soul have I that must be saved and preserved from everlasting flames," is no longer "legal tender."<sup>48</sup>

The need to live as brothers and sisters united in evangelical communion has been strongly felt. It has stimulated the formation of communities patterned on the one described in the Acts of the Apostles in which "those who believed were of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). New communities came into being in which intense participation in the liturgy was designed to strengthen the bond. Community prayer also aimed at building up and at uniting the group in the Lord. A lively sense of the fatherhood of God was experienced through living together as brothers or sisters, through identification with Christ the model of filial living, through obedient listening to the Spirit, and through the exercise of the Spirit's charisms. We have here an updated revival of the monastic cenobitic tradition.

Nevertheless, these communities remained firm believers in the irreplaceable worth of the human person. Theirs was a personalistic humanism. In them there was to be an on-going effort to create a climate in which both personal and community aspirations could find fulfillment. To this end the art of dialogue was cultivated in such communities, as were unconditional mutual acceptance of persons, rational conflict management, mutual sharing of experiences and information, recourse to compromise so as not to break the unity of the group on its journey.

## 5. Critical Assessment of Contemporary Catholic Spirituality

Self-sacrificing love—this short phrase certainly sums up the best of such community-based spirituality. But are all the key-concepts of contemporary spirituality destined to remain unchanged? As mentioned above, this spirituality is professedly accessible for all; it is realistic, personalistic, involved, liberating, community-oriented, and well inserted into a person's history. It carries within it a wisdom that can lead into real religious experience and that can at the same time shape personality and culture in individuals that are fully modern, self-determining, and free. Furthermore, on close observation it could be shown that such wisdom is not all that new in the Church, for identical values were operative in lay associations (confraternities) of medieval times.

All these positive points being granted, it seems nonetheless that such wisdom lacks a dimension which restless spiritual people of the end of this century are eagerly seeking. Admittedly, by dint of bringing God down into the world, one trivializes the sacred. What became of Eucharistic worship is a case in point. A God who would be of one cast with the world loses divine identity.

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<sup>47</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, # 9.

<sup>48</sup> *Je n'ai qu'une âme qu'il faut sauver, de l'éternelle flamme il faut la préserver.* [in Desramaut's text]

Monophysitism lies in wait to ensnare the person for whom "everything is grace." A thoroughly divinized world tends to blur the reality of a transcendent God.

Perhaps at this point the Islamic faith can provide timely lessons for Christians. It could show Christian spirituality today a way to be both involved, community-oriented and liberating, etc., and also more resolutely and more truly religious. Would this not be a significant step toward filling the void which people, especially young people, experience in their search for the "divine"?

It is true nonetheless that in contemporary Catholic spirituality values which had faded from the human spirit, or had been neglected or forgotten, have staged a comeback. They are the same values that have served as points of reference to generous Christians of a former age in their effort to lead a fervent spiritual lives. In any case, today the Salesian Family has no other desire than to revive the inner flame.

## VI. The Spirituality of the Salesian Family in the Teaching of Don Bosco's Seventh Successor, Father Egidio Viganò

Salesian General Chapter 23 had discussed Salesian spirituality and had noted its close connection with St. Francis de Sales' Christian humanism and with the form this took "for Don Bosco through the oratory experience."<sup>49</sup> The general chapter then had urged the rector major, Father Egidio Viganò, to address this question expressly and, in a manner of speaking, officially. He complied by the above-mentioned letter of August 15, 1990.

### 1. Viganò's Utterances before 1990

Father Viganò had already made incidental comments on the subject in earlier circular letters to the Salesians. He reminded the Salesians, for example, that Don Bosco's educational method (the Preventive System) can be understood as an authentic spirituality for apostolic action.<sup>50</sup> He saw the Salesian youth associations as imbued with Don Bosco's spirituality, which is a spirituality for young people.<sup>51</sup> He explained how the Dream of the Diamonds as narrated by Don Bosco offers a spiritual portrait of the Salesian.<sup>52</sup> He had comments on the unique specific features of the lay spirituality of the Salesian Cooperator.<sup>53</sup> He

<sup>49</sup> General Chapter 23, *Educating Young People to the Faith. Capitular Documents*, # 158; Acts # 333 (May 1990), 100.

<sup>50</sup> Letter of August 1978, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 39; Acts # 290 (July-December 1978), 13.

<sup>51</sup> Letter of August 24, 1979, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 103; Acts # 294 (October-December, 1979), 12.

<sup>52</sup> Letter on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, April 1, 1981, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 258-259; Acts # 300 (April-June 1981), 12-13.

<sup>53</sup> Letter on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 6, 1986, in Viganò, *Circolari*,



urged that the projected commentary on the constitutions be undertaken with a clearly defined concept of Salesian spirituality.<sup>54</sup> He argued that spirituality is a vital prerequisite for the Salesian religious community to function as the animating nucleus of the Salesian Family.<sup>55</sup> He made the point that, on the occasion of Don Bosco's centenary in 1988, the pope called on all Salesians to incarnate a missionary spirituality in the world of the young.<sup>56</sup> He reminded the Salesians that their credibility as educators of the young to the faith rests, as General Chapter 23 teaches, on the twin characteristic and complementary pillars of spirituality and the educational method.<sup>57</sup>

## 2. Letter of August 15, 1990

The Letter of August 15, 1990, is expressly devoted to the subject of Salesian spirituality. It should be understood at once that the subject is treated from Father Viganò's favorite point of view, and the letter is aptly entitled "Salesian Spirituality for the New Evangelization" (*Spiritualità salesiana per la nuova evangelizzazione*). Our presentation here makes no other claim than that of going no further than his statements.<sup>58</sup>

In writing this letter Father Viganò was not swayed by current fashion. Spirituality was not a frequent topic of conversation with him. But it was his basic conviction that "without spirituality we could not pursue our course as evangelizers." He adds that spiritual renewal without a spirituality is inconceivable, and that young people today, witness the recent general chapter, are calling for spirituality with increasing urgency.

### (1) Contents of the Letter of 1990—Overview

A quick overview of this densely written document is in order. The letter develops the following points in succession:

- [i] The rector major explains what he understands by spirituality.
- [ii] Spirituality in the Salesian is the indispensable requirement for accompanying the young on their journey of faith.

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693-694; *Acts* # 318 (July-September 1986), 26-27.

<sup>54</sup> Letter of December 6, 1986, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 723-724; *Acts* # 320 (January-March 1987), 5-7.

<sup>55</sup> Letter of March 19, 1987, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 767; *Acts* # 321 (April-June 1987), 39-40.

<sup>56</sup> Letter of December 8, 1988, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 909; *Acts* # 328 (January-March 1989), 24.

<sup>57</sup> Letter of June 10, 1990 (Preface to General Chapter 23, *Educating Young People to the Faith*), in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1039; *Acts* # 333 (May 1990), 14.

<sup>58</sup> This is said in reference to some people who have (between parentheses) put words, never spoken, into Father Viganò's mouth.

[iii] The contemporary situation may in certain respects seem discouraging to the apostles of the new evangelization, but the presence of the Holy Spirit, spiritual driving force par excellence, is for them a sure source of hope.

[iv] This spirituality, so necessary for the mission, is rooted in St. Francis de Sales and in St. John Bosco.

[v] Salesian spirituality possesses features which are peculiarly its own, and which are painstakingly noted by the rector major.

[vi] It calls for the formation of fervent evangelizing communities under the motherly guidance of Mary Help of Christians.<sup>59</sup>

## (2) The Nature of Salesian Spirituality as Expounded in the Letter of 1990

Let us preferably focus our attention on the nature of Salesian spirituality, as the rector major conceives it. Spirituality is an ensemble of guiding principles and certitudes which, when authentically lived, act as a force powering a person's journey toward the final goal. Along this journey, spirituality enables one to discern and attack problems that may arise, and fills that person's soul with the will and the drive to forge ahead toward the goal. Creative and daring, it is continuously engaged in a dialogue with real life. To be sure, it remains faithful to the values of its origins and of the living tradition, but by its very nature it is called to engage concrete realities. In this engagement it becomes a life-giving source enabling a person to make the appropriate response to those realities, and also to stand with the Gospel in opposition. Its strength is from faith, the power that energizes a person's history. As a progressive experience of God, it acts as a vital force in each person, to strengthen freedom, steady convictions, and direct conduct.

It may thus be seen that, in line with contemporary attitudes, Father Viganò propounds a spirituality that is incarnate in history, and consequently, a spirituality that possesses a strong "social dimension."

"Spirituality (as lived) is the way of acting proper of involved believers." "The faith that we are committed to extend does not stand apart from human reality, nor does it just exist side by side with human reality. On the contrary, it germinates within it and confers on it a new meaning (*re-signification*); it illuminates the human, transcends it, and extends its horizons beyond the historical." It is no "spiritualism in flight from the world," but "a spirituality engaged at the frontier, searching, full of initiative and courage; it is, in a word, a realistic spirituality."

By this description, Father Viganò takes over major traits of contemporary Catholic spirituality. Human maturity does not constitute a sector of human life isolated from a person's spiritual journey; on the contrary it is a

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<sup>59</sup> Letter of August 15, 1990, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1043-1077; *Acts* # 334 (October-December, 1990), 3-46.

"dimension" which is present at every step of the journey. When its meaning is pondered, life is perceived as a gift received and as a task to be accomplished—care being taken to recognize the emptiness of the idols which confront it. In his or her incarnation, the spiritual person maintains a critical posture.

### (3) Contemporary Problems and Challenges

Disappointments will not be wanting along the contemporary person's spiritual journey. Father Viganò's ears were still buzzing with the dispirited reports heard at General Chapter 23 from the representatives of the worldwide Salesian community. Secularization carries with it a store of both values and counter-values. Faith is difficult when dogmas are dispensed with. But "what's evangelization, if there are no truths to pass on?"

Problems arise from social contexts: consumer societies and poor societies; peoples out of former colonial rule or just out of totalitarian regimes; great national states and ethnic minorities; Catholic majority and Christian denominational fragmentation; atheism and great religions. Rarely do such situations favor an evangelizing spirituality.

Problems also arise in connection with educational institutions: the family, the school, youth associations, the mass media, centers for the training of young people for work and for taking their rightful place in a fast-moving world. All these related institutions are in crisis.

The young are "unsatisfied" in their search for values and new relationships. Many of them have strayed very far from the faith or are total strangers to it, while a good number among them are just indifferent. Others may be open, but their choices are erratically eclectic. One also comes across young people who are practicing Christians, but whose ideals are perhaps not very high. Finally there are some whose life is actually guided by faith and thus become a leavening presence among the rest. On such as these then must an evangelizing spirituality rely.

The challenges that follow from the above-mentioned situations are many and difficult. One may mention the challenge of the strangeness of the faith which is the very heart of spirituality, the challenge of poverty, the challenge of the seeming uselessness of faith for life and culture, the challenge of encountering other religions, finally and quite simply the challenge of life. To bring spirituality to bear on such a world is no pushover.

### (4) Specific Traits of Contemporary Salesian Spirituality in Viganò's Personal Vision

Finally Father Viganò endeavors to identify the characteristic qualities of the spirituality that he would want to see flourishing in the Salesian Family, among his own Salesians in particular. He begins with a thought borrowed (so he avers) from Father Philip Rinaldi:

St. Francis de Sales is the teacher of a spiritual doctrine that comes to throbbing life in his immortal writings. Don Bosco, on the other hand, has stamped his spirituality not on paper but on the Society he created. [...] The teaching itself then was already available; God called Don Bosco to put it into effect and bring it to life in the Family he founded for the salvation of the young.

Could this spirituality just be duplicated without change and carried over in the form it took for Don Bosco in the second half of the nineteenth century? Without saying it expressly, the rector major seems to have remained undecided at first. Then a passage from the Roman document *Mutuae Relationes* gave him a way out.

The charism of founders is manifested as an experience of the Spirit. The experience is then passed on to their followers so that they may live by it, preserve it, deepen it, and constantly develop it in harmony with [the life of] the Body of Christ which also grows continually.<sup>60</sup>

Father Viganò felt "authorized" by this statement to express his personal view in the matter.

In the first place, the spirituality of the Salesian Family is a spirituality of the young. The spirituality of Salesians is certainly different from that of their young people, but the two are closely related. This was the rector major's premise as was also the view of the general chapter just concluded. There was a time when Don Bosco's *Companion of Youth* (*Giovane provveduto*) was the one prayer book serving both the boys and their educators and teachers. Salesian spirituality therefore had to develop by stages, and at each stage [marked by a type of youth culture] it had to renew its spiritual catechumenate.

Secondly, this spirituality, in the rector major's view, may be described on the basis of six key concepts:

[i] A practical realism focusing on daily life, where one's duty at each moment of the day acquires a religious meaning.

[ii] An optimistic attitude founded on hope and filled with joy.

[iii] A real and close friendship with Christ, encountered and known in prayer, in the Eucharist, and in the gospel.

[iv] An ever greater sense of responsibility for, and the courage to be part of, the Church, both local and universal.

[v] A concrete involvement at the service of good causes, in accordance with one's assumed social responsibilities and with the spiritual and material needs of neighbor.

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<sup>60</sup> Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes, *Mutuae Relationes*, May 14, 1978, #11.

[vi] A childlike and trustful reliance on the motherly help of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

### (5) Father Viganò's Call to Salesians to Re-focus

Accordingly, the rector major urges his Salesians to re-focus on these vital points:

[i] To cultivate "interiority for the apostolate" for a personal synthesis of religious consecration and mission.

[ii] To make Christ the Good Shepherd the existential center of their life of consecration.

[iii] To view their work in education as an aspect of their mission.

[iv] To live consciously in the Church, and to be active with the Church to advance justice and community in Christ in the world.

[v] To foster joy in daily life in the conviction that the Salesian educational method, while not ignoring human frailty, believes in the natural and supernatural resources of people.

[vi] Finally, to give Mary her rightful place in the work of evangelization.

The rector major is thus pleased to conclude:

We have, therefore, a well-defined Salesian spirituality, real and substantial in all its aspects. On this spirituality we can well base and concentrate our programs of on-going formation both at the provincial and local levels. This should go hand in hand with a resolve to study Don Bosco's heart ever more deeply.<sup>61</sup>

### 3. Viganò's Later Utterances

As interpreter of Salesian spirituality, Father Viganò did not add anything new in his circulars written after the letter of 1990 and up to his death in 1995. He merely restated his views. Salesian spirituality is "dynamic interiority," stemming from the pastoral charity with which Don Bosco's heart was filled.<sup>62</sup> It is a spirituality for the education of the young.<sup>63</sup> Spirituality, quality pastoral

<sup>61</sup> *Abbiamo, dunque, una spiritualità salesiana ben specifica con degli aspetti assai concreti su cui concentrare la programmazione della formazione permanente nelle Ispettorie e nelle Case, proponendoci anche di scrutare più a fondo il cuore di Don Bosco.* [E. Viganò, Letter to the Salesians, August 15, 1990, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1070; *Acts* # 334 (October-December 1990), 37]

<sup>62</sup> E. Viganò, Letter to the Salesians, December 8, 1990, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1103-1104; *Acts* # 335 (January-March 1991), 39-40.

<sup>63</sup> E. Viganò, Letter to the Salesians, May 19, 1991, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1167-1171; *Acts* # 335 (July-September 1991), 39-43.



work, and vocational accompaniment of the young should come together as one in the Salesian's religious life.<sup>64</sup> Finally, spirituality should be regarded as an essential requirement for communion between religious and lay people.<sup>65</sup>

### Conclusion

Salesian spirituality as described by Father Viganò is clearly in line with contemporary culture, and is at the same time admirably responsive to Pope John Paul II's call for the new evangelization. In closing the Letter of August 15, 1990, Father Viganò urged his readers to bear in mind that for it to be authentically Salesian this spirituality must be nourished by Don Bosco's own spiritual experience. This contemporary rector major, writing under the goad of a thousand new trends in spirituality, took care not to cut Salesian spirituality loose from its humble roots in the preceding century.

Was Father Viganò's proposal faithful to those roots? Did his resolve to follow the theological models of Vatican II cause him to de-emphasize certain principles dear to the founder? Only a painstaking examination of his spiritual teaching as a whole can provide a satisfactory answer. A few selected excerpts can't do the job.

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<sup>64</sup> E. Viganò, Letter to the Salesians, December 8, 1991, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1215; *Acts* # 339 (January-March 1992), 17-19.

<sup>65</sup> E. Viganò, Letter to the Salesians, August 15, 1994, in Viganò, *Circolari*, 1517, 1520; *Acts* # 350 (October-December 1994), 29, 33.