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of St John Bosco

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	1.1 Fr Pascual CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA « <i>But who do you say that I am</i> » (Mk 8,28) LOOKING AT CHRIST THROUGH THE EYES OF DON BOSCO	3
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	2.1 Fr Giovanni MAZZALI Some guiding criteria for the formulation of the <i>scrutinium paupertatis</i> at personal level and at community level	42
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	(None in this issue)	
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major 4.2 Chronicle of the General Councillors	49 59
5. DOCUMENTS	5.1 Greeting-Message of the Rector Major to those taking part in the IV European Seminar of the ISS-ACSSA 5.2 " <i>Salesian Associations and Active Citizenship in Europe</i> ". Address of the Rector Major to those attending <i>Eurobosco</i> 2003 5.3 Letter of congratulations from the Rector Major to the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II for the XXV years of his pontificate – Reply from the Secretariate of State 5.4 New Salesian Cardinal 5.5 New Salesian Bishop 5.6 Postulator for the Causes of Saints 5.7 Our dead confreres	82 85 90 92 93 94 95

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“But who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8,28)
LOOKING AT CHRIST THROUGH THE EYES
OF DON BOSCO

1. Contemplating Jesus Christ from a salesian standpoint – 2. Jesus Christ in the life of Don Bosco – 2.1. The Christ of the Gospel – 2.2. Conformed to the image of Christ – **3. Jesus Christ “Apostle of the Father and the Good Shepherd”** – 3.1 Gratitude to the Father for the gift of the divine vocation to all men – “*Gratitude to the Father ...*” – “*for the gift of the divine vocation to all men*” – 3.2. Predilection for the poor and the little ones – 3.3. “*Zeal in preaching, healing, saving, under the urgency of the coming Kingdom*” – 3.4. Attitude of the Good Shepherd who wins others over by meekness and the gift of himself – 3.5. The desire to gather the disciples into the unity of brotherly communion – **4. Jesus Christ “our living Rule”** • in the realization of the *mission*; • in the life of *community*; • in the *evangelical counsels*; • in the *life of prayer*; – in *formation* – **Conclusion: “Let us be imitators of Don Bosco, as he was of Christ!”**

Rome, 25 December 2003
Solemnity of the Lord’s Birth

My dear confreres,

We are celebrating Christmas, when we commemorate the event of the Incarnation, in which God has made his own reality visible in the Son and has manifested his sharing in our human nature. It is something great and wonderful because this is the good news, this is *the Gospel* – to know that God is not a long way off but stays close to us, that after creating us he did not abandon us but became one of us, taking on our flesh and becoming man so that we might become his children. God-made-Man is the most complete revelation of both man and God, the definitive Word on man and on God; God, in fact, “in many and various ways spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets. But in these last days he has spoken to us by the Son” (*Heb 1, 1.2a*).

The Son of God willed to live our human experience and become part of our family; this has given him the name of Jesus and the countenance of the Nazarene, but it also made himself

similar and close to us. That is perhaps why the Christmas atmosphere is characterized by a strong sense of family and closeness. Houses are decked out in light; family memories come flooding back, we want to meet our dear ones, we like to be with our friends or at least make them virtually present through Christmas cards and good wishes. Christmas cribs have undoubtedly contributed to the creation of this atmosphere of human warmth, deep affection and family proximity.

Christmas is a great feast: the angels proclaim the joy of the birth of the Saviour and peace to men of good will. But the Gospels do not conceal the fact that the birth of Jesus took place in a stable, because Mary and Joseph could find no other place (*Lk 2,7*); neither do they hide the fact that his parents had to flee into Egypt, because Herod "was seeking the child to destroy him" (*Mt 2,13*). The message of Christmas is therefore both fascinating and tragic. With the incarnation the dignity of every individual has been raised to the divine condition which, however, is always exposed to the risk of refusal (cf. *Jn 1,10*): from the moment God willed to take the path of man, man has been the road for finding God, a road which is sometimes hidden, rough and uneven (cf. *Jn 19, 5*).

This is the context, dear confreres, in which I meet you again, in the first place to wish you a blessed Christmas and a happy New Year, filled with grace and blessings, especially those given us by God in the incarnation of the Son; and secondly to take up again the reflection on our vocation to holiness and on our consecrated salesian life as the specific way to attain it.

To this end I propose to consider how we should respond to the question put by Jesus to his disciples: "*Who do men say that I am? And who do you say that I am?*" (*Mk 8, 27.28*). These are fundamental questions for us believers and consecrated persons, but we cannot adequately recognize the identity of the One who has called us and whom we have committed ourselves to follow,

unless we live a powerful experience of faith and feel that he loves us. This is the sense of the words with which Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, responds to Peter's reply: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (*Mt* 16, 17). Luke too follows the same line; he locates the question in the meeting of Jesus with the disciples when he had taken them aside to pray (cf. *Lk* 9, 18), indicating in this way that only those enlightened by the Spirit can recognize who Jesus really is. "Both indications converge to make it clear that we cannot come to the fullness of contemplation of the Lord's face by our own efforts alone, but only by allowing grace to take us by the hand".¹

Mark, on the other hand, through a question repeated several times "Who then is this?" (*Mk* 4, 41; cf. 1, 27; 2, 6.12; 6, 48-50), seems to tell us that Jesus deliberately avoids giving a definitive reply and that man cannot grasp it once and for ever. Jesus can be fully identified only by God, as happened at the baptism in the Jordan: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (*Mt* 3, 17), and in the transfiguration on Tabor: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (*Mk* 9, 7). Jesus can be recognized as the Christ and Son of God only by believers; only those who live and profess the faith can truly "go to the heart and touch the depth of the mystery: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (*Mt* 16:16)."²

No different is the content of the Gospel which, in line with the first verse of Mark, could be expressed: "The beginning of the good news that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God". No different either is the purpose of the story related by the gospels: "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (*Jn* 20, 31).

A short time ago I said in my previous letter that "the real

¹ NMI n. 20.

² NMI n. 19.

challenge of consecrated life today is that of restoring Christ to religious life, and religious life to Christ”.³ Now “Christ gives a person two basic certainties: the certainty of being infinitely loved and the certainty of being capable of loving without limits”.⁴ Dear confreres, what great need we have of these certainties! “Through them, consecrated persons gradually become free from the need to be at the centre of everything and to possess others, and from the fear of giving themselves to their brothers and sisters. They learn rather to love as Christ loved them, with that love which now is poured forth in their hearts, making them capable of forgetting themselves and giving themselves as the Lord did”.⁵ This is why I want to point out to you the contemplation of Christ as the surest means for succeeding in this task: “The path which consecrated life is called to take up at the beginning of the new millennium is guided by the contemplation of Christ”.⁶

1. Contemplating Jesus Christ from a salesian standpoint

The contemplation of the face of Christ must be our first passion and concern, as is pointed out to us by our Rule of Life: “Our highest knowledge therefore is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery” (C 34). This text becomes all the more significant when we remember that it is found in the chapter of the Constitutions in which our educative and pastoral service is described. I invite you to undertake the wonderful task of contemplating the beloved *par excellence*, the One who has fascinated us and continues to do so, from a salesian standpoint, through the eyes of Don Bosco, so that with him and following

³ AGC 382 (2003), p. 16.

⁴ CIVCSVA, *Fraternal life in community*, n. 22.

⁵ CIVCSVA, *Fraternal life in community*, n. 22.

⁶ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 23.

him “in reading the Gospel we may become more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord” (C 11).

The contemplation of Christ is the starting point of the spiritual journey and pastoral programme outlined in the Apostolic Exhortation *Novo millennio ineunte*, which appeals to us to “set our gaze ever more firmly on the face of the Lord”.⁷ The Instruction *Starting afresh from Christ* takes up the same strategic objective and points out the various features to be contemplated and the places where experience of Christ may be obtained: “These are the paths of a lived spirituality, a priority commitment in this time, taking the opportunity to re-read in life and in daily experiences the spiritual riches of one’s own charism, through a renewed contact with the same sources which, inspired by founders’ and foundress’ experience of the Spirit, gave rise to the spark of new life and new works, the specific re-reading of the Gospel found in every charism”.⁸ In this way the contemplation of Christ places us, as Salesians, on the Church’s journey following the Jubilee and in the present-day commitment of consecrated life.

Contemplating Christ means knowing him more deeply, loving him more faithfully, and following him more radically. You cannot love him, in fact, without knowing him, and you cannot know him unless you follow him (cf. *Jn* 1, 38-39); and you do not follow him, unless you are in love with him to such an extent that you leave everything so as “to be with him” (*Jn* 21, 15-19). The knowledge, love and following of Christ are three inseparable realities which mutually lead to each other.

The two questions put by Jesus to the disciples – “Who do men say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” are directed towards this interpretation of the contemplation of Christ. They could be paraphrased as follows: “What do those

⁷ NMI n. 16.

⁸ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 23.

say who do not love me and so do not follow me closely and consequently *cannot know me?*” “What do you say, you who love me so much and, considering all else as dross compared with being my follower, are able to know the deepest identity of my person?”

The replies given by the disciples confirm this same interpretation: Christology is not only the fruit of knowledge but also of the love of Jesus and the following of him. In the opinion of the ordinary people Jesus is John the Baptist or the prophet Elijah or another of the prophets (cf. *Mk* 8, 28). In the course of history too, Jesus has been described in many different ways: he is a revolutionary, a romantic, a communist, a liberator, a superstar, a devout Jew, etc.; but none of these titles does justice to the mystery of the person of Jesus. Only the disciples can declare: “You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God” (*Mt* 16, 16). As time has gone by, believers too have tried to understand more deeply this confession of faith through theological reflection and the history of discipleship; those who know Jesus better love him the more and follow him more closely in an effort to become more like him.

It is not enough therefore to be ‘admirers’ of Christ, we must become ‘imitators’ of him. As one prominent theologian puts it, while “an imitator aspires to become what he admires, an admirer remains personally separated..., he does not see that the object contains in his regard the demand (or at least the aspiration) to become what he admires”.⁹

The contemplation of Christ, therefore, is not an aesthetic diversion; nor is it just a hobby, nor even an intellectual curiosity; it is rather a never satisfied passion, an urgent need for knowledge, love and quest: we want to contemplate more fully Christ to whom we want to adhere more closely, because “to adhere ever more closely to Christ” constitutes the “centre of consecrated life”.¹⁰

⁹ S. KIRKEGAARD, *Esercizio del cristianesimo*, in *Opere*, traduzione a cura di C. FABRO, Sansoni, Firenze, 1972, p. 812.

¹⁰ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 21

We Salesians contemplate Jesus from our own specific standpoint. Our form of life realizes the apostolic project of Don Bosco: "to be in the Church signs and bearers of the love of God for young people, especially those who are poor" (C 2); by carrying out this mission "we find our own way to holiness" (C 2). The salesian mission, which "sets the tenor of our whole life" (C 3), makes us more "aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord" (C 11), and brings it about that our contemplation of Christ and our Christian activities are permeated by zeal for God and compassion for the young. *We Salesians know, love and follow Jesus, while remaining among young people.* Immersed as we are in the world and in the concerns of the pastoral life, we learn to meet Christ through those to whom we have been sent (cf. C 95). Our access to Christ passes through the young. We Salesians cannot think, see, find, love and follow Christ without being surrounded by youngsters, or at least without being conscious that to them we are sent. Young people are our mission, "our portion and cup, the heritage that falls to us" (Ps 16, 6). Apart from the young we cannot *contemplate Christ*, or at least we cannot see the Christ contemplated by Don Bosco; the young to whom we have been sent are the place and reason of our Christian experience. This means that there is a *salesian way* of contemplating Jesus, and consequently of knowing, loving and following him.

Since Christology is the systematic reflection on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of God, it could be asked whether we can speak of a "*salesian Christology*" or whether Christology, to be authentic, must be without any qualifying adjective.

It is clear that, by its very definition, christological reflection must be faithful to its task, concerning the comprehending and understanding in faith of the real, concrete and historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, confessed to be Christ and Son of God. It must also remain faithful to the manner in which the normative Christian tradition has understood and explained such a figure through the centuries.

But this fidelity does not exclude different approaches to the person and work of Jesus, without ever exhausting its richness; the personal mystery of Christ indeed demands it and makes it inevitable. If it be true that no human person can be defined by a single phrase, nor be fixed by a single attitude, nor be seen from a single perspective, much more true is this of Jesus, son of Mary and Son of God, true man and true God. The closer we draw to it, the more we perceive the figure of Christ as a *mystery*. Hence the question put by Jesus to his disciples has lost none of its relevance or urgency, and he continues to put it also to us: “And who do *you* say that I am?” (*Mc* 8, 29).

Among the many factors which “diversify” the perspectives and hence *multiply* the replies to the christological question may be mentioned:

- the permanent *ecclesial profession of faith* which, for the past two thousand years, has made use of a variety of concepts and terminology for the understanding and expression of salvation in Christ, and in which appear more than the immutability of formulas the commitment to fidelity of the believers;
- the different *geographical and cultural contexts* in which faith in Christ has grown and developed, with attention also to popular devotion which, especially in the field of Christology, presents a very broad and inexhaustible variety of expressions and symbols.
- the *charismatic sensitivity* of consecrated life which, “inspired by the founders’ and foundress’ experience of the Spirit, gave rise to ... the specific re-reading of the Gospel found in every charism”.¹¹ Charisms, gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church, have at their foundation a “christological intuition” and tend to the following and imitation of the Lord Jesus from a particular perspective without any pretence to be either exhaustive or exclusive.

¹¹ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 23.

We are aware of this charismatic sensitivity and proud of it: “We know that the Gospel is one and the same for everyone, but it is also true that it can be “*read through salesian spectacles*”, from which derives a salesian manner of living it. Don Bosco looked at Christ so as to try and copy in himself those features which corresponded most closely to his own providential mission and to the spirit which must animate it”.¹² And does not this express perhaps the need to live our own proper and specific experience of Christ, born of the mission to the young, which when put into words necessarily becomes “*salesian christology*”? This very reason would seem to justify us in speaking of a “salesian christology”, one which highlights the “traits of the figure of the Lord” to which our mission has made us “more sensitive” (cf. C 11). On this salesian christological re-reading is founded a deep spirituality and an effective pastoral practice, completely centred on Christ and with a clear charismatic identity; in other words a contemplation of Christ is needed which is explicitly salesian, if we are to live a spiritual experience and carry out a pastoral praxis with a clear identity.

2. Jesus Christ in the life of Don Bosco

At the beginning of a charism that God gives to his Church, and through the Church to the whole world, there is always a *founder* or a founding community. And precisely because it is a gift that characterizes Christian life in a particular manner, the charism gives to the believer who receives it special and specific traits in his manner of understanding, loving and living Christ.

The salesian spirit, that “original style of life and action” which “Don Bosco lived and handed on to us under the inspiration of God” (C 10), “finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father” (C 11). It is true that “we discover [Christ] present in Don Bosco who gave his life to the

¹² *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 168.

young”; but “to understand *the central element of our spirit* we must go beyond the person of Don Bosco and reach the Source from which he himself drew: the *very person of Christ*”.¹³

For this reason it is of concern to us to know and love the Christ that Don Bosco lived and thought about, to identify the traits of his personality of which as Salesians we “become more aware” (C 11), and so, captured and fascinated by him, we decide to follow him. And precisely because it is in Don Bosco that we perceive his way of knowing, loving and following Christ, it is also in Don Bosco, through his spiritual and apostolic life, that we are called as Salesians to draw near to Christ Jesus.

2.1. The Christ of the Gospel

More than the faith professed by Don Bosco and his christological beliefs, we are interested in recalling how he lived his faith and the fundamental attitude that characterized his personal relationship with the Lord Jesus; in other words it is more important to consider Don Bosco’s “*fides qua*” than his “*fides quae*”. From this standpoint it seems that his theological formation may have only a relative value as compared with his Christian experience.

For Don Bosco Christ was a *living person, present* at every moment of his life and activity; he was never merely an abstract truth or an ideal to be attained. I would say that the attitude that marks out his Christian faith is that of *relationship - closeness - friendship*. This can be verified in the first article of the Constitutions of 1858, where he had written: “The purpose of this Society is to gather together its members... to help them to become perfect by imitating the virtues of our Divine Saviour, especially in charity towards young people who are poor”.¹⁴

This relationship is characterized by the conviction that Jesus is the *Son of God become Man*; indeed, in line with the

¹³ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 166.

¹⁴ MB V, p. 933. Cf. COSTITUZIONI DELLA SOCIETÀ DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES, Testi critici, LAS 1982, p. 72

theology of his time, Don Bosco for practical purposes identified Jesus Christ with 'God', without detriment to the Trinitarian reality of the Divine Mystery; and so in Don Bosco the terms "Jesus Christ" and "God" became practically interchangeable.

Within this same idea of "contemporaneity" with Christ, we do not find in Don Bosco a sensitivity for the historical Jesus and hence a concern for reaching "Jesus of Nazareth", as modern exegesis and theology is trying to do. For him Jesus was always and simply the Lord Jesus of the Gospels.

2.2. Conformed to the image of Christ

To describe Don Bosco's attitude towards the person of Jesus Christ, I think it makes matters clearer if we recall the *dream of the ten diamonds* with which Don Bosco presented the "identity of the Salesian", as the recent GC25 reminded us.¹⁵ With Don Rinaldi we can assert that "all his life Don Bosco was the living embodiment of this symbolic personage!"¹⁶ But in the description of this symbolic model of the Salesian we find a difference between the front part of the mantle and the rear; in the latter are presented the *hidden* qualities, which in a certain way sustain and strengthen faith, hope and charity, in which *visible* testimony specifically consists.

In presenting the Lord Jesus to his boys and the people to whom his preaching and writings were always addressed, he emphasizes especially the *mystical* dimension of the contemplation of Christ, i.e. the inexhaustible *kindness* of the Master, his *mercy*, his *willingness to forgive*. In particular, in the "Lives" he wrote of the exemplary youngsters of Valdocco who died at an early age, he highlights a typically salesian trait: *friendship with Jesus*. An example of this is the phrase by which Dominic Savio on the day of his First Communion summed up his plan of life:

¹⁵ Cf. GC25 n. 20.

¹⁶ F. RINALDI in ACS 55 (1930), p. 923. Cf. E. VIGANÒ, *Profile of the Salesian in the dream of the personage of the ten diamonds*, ASC 300 (1981), p. 753-819.

“My first friends shall be Jesus and Mary”. This attitude forms, so to speak, the front part of the mantle.

On the other hand, in his writings for the confreres, beginning with the Introduction to the Constitutions and the Constitutions themselves, Don Bosco emphasizes the *ascetical* dimension, which involves the following and imitation of Jesus Christ in the various dimensions of the consecrated life and particularly in the evangelical counsels. The fact is so evident that, if you do not keep in mind the different groups he is writing for, you could get the impression that Don Bosco is contradicting himself.

For example, when speaking of obedience Don Bosco writes: in this “our example must be our Divine Saviour, who practised it even in the most difficult things, even to the death of the cross”. With regard to poverty he writes: the Salesian “follows the example of our Saviour who was born in poverty, lived deprived of everything and died naked on a cross”. And speaking of fidelity to one’s vocation, he gives this advice: “Let each one strive to persevere in his vocation until death, having always in mind those very serious words of the Divine Saviour... No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back, is fit for the Kingdom of God” (*Constitutions of 1874*, art. 21).

It must be clearly emphasized nonetheless that the following and imitation of Jesus Christ are not to be considered a painful renunciation but a free and joyful offering; not a detailed list of things to be done, but a *total* consecration. “We are not imitating just a virtue (obedience, poverty, chastity), nor an activity (education, the missions, etc.); we are following a Person whom we want to imitate in all his fullness, and a Gospel that we want to live in all its implications”.¹⁷ I wrote in similar terms myself a short time ago: “One does not become a religious “for the purpose of doing something” but “because of someone”, of Jesus Christ and the attraction he exerts”.¹⁸

¹⁷ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 167.

¹⁸ AGC 382 (2003), p. 16.

This apparent dichotomy disappears if we remember the intimate and inseparable relationship between gospel and life, between *faith and morality*, as it was understood and lived by Don Bosco. In his life and educative system morality is never an end in itself; the carrying out of one's duty, for instance, does not derive from a "categorical imperative" in the style of Kant, but from the desire for the sake of love to fulfil God's will in everything, even life's smallest details. Vice versa, this friendship with God never falls into a "camaraderie" that overlooks the keeping of the commandments; one who loves takes care to carry out the expressed will and even the hidden desires of the loved one. Jesus said so himself: "If you love me, keep my commandments" (*Jn* 14,15). This is what is expressed by the bower of roses, using a typical salesian image.

In particular, Don Bosco's insistence on the frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is very significant: it constitutes one of the pillars of his educative system. This is very evident in the "*Lives*" he wrote, in which he insists on it at times: trust in Jesus does not destroy the awareness of one's own moral frailty; indeed, the greater this awareness, the greater is the trust and confidence.

Finally, the relationship with the Lord Jesus that Don Bosco had and inculcated in others is inseparable from devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In reality, in his educative presentation of the faith, Grignon de Montfort's expression: *Ad Iesum per Mariam* became his sure slogan. In this connection, as in many other respects, the *dream at the age of nine* provides an example: Jesus and Mary appear together, but she is given to him as his teacher, precisely to help him to become "humble, determined and strong" and a disciple of Jesus.

3. Jesus Christ “Apostle of the Father and Good Shepherd”

After having considered at some depth the justification for a “salesian christology”, in the sense of a charismatic re-reading of some aspects of Christology and after a brief reference to the central position of the relationship with Christ and the importance of conformed to him in Don Bosco’s experience, it is now time to speak of the *specific points* we Salesians stress in contemplating Christ. We find it briefly but densely expressed in art.11 of our Rule of Life; “the strict linkage with the person of Christ with regard to the ‘charity’ of the Good Shepherd should be noted”.¹⁹

Although we are dealing with evangelical aspects that every Salesian must try to cultivate in his own “charismatic identity”, we meet them in Don Bosco in an almost “connatural” form which is extraordinarily characteristic. It is practically impossible to separate in him the wealth of the *gifts* of the Holy Spirit and the “human infrastructure” that sustains them. This is why we can speak of “a splendid blending of nature and grace” (C 21). In analyzing these traits I take for granted that they are central in the life of Jesus; it would be enriching to go into them more deeply in this regard, but here we are considering them *only as they were lived and reflected* in our Father and Founder, and so I limit myself to offering a simple comment.

3.1. Gratitude to the Father for the gift to all men of the divine vocation

“Gratitude to the Father..”

Gratitude is one of the most noble and outstanding sentiments in Don Bosco’s human personality, which he wants to pass on in the highest degree to his sons. But it is a *derived* attitude, since it is a response to *gratuitousness* in both the field of human relationships and above all in relation to God. In the development of such an attitude the figure of Mamma Margaret was of

¹⁹ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 169.

great importance; it was linked, in fact, with the strong sense of *Providence* that his Mother inculcated in him in both the contemplation of nature and in the evaluation of his own life.

In the fusion of the human and Christian aspects “in a closely knit life project, the service of the young” (C 21), gratuitousness has an essential part. Article 20 of the Constitutions presents it as the first trait of the preventive system which for him “was a spontaneous expression of love inspired by the love of a God who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side and freely gives his life to save them” (C 20).

As a student of philosophy John Bosco had assisted some boys of well-to-do families at a summer camp of the Jesuits near Turin, to which they had sent some of the boarders from their schools during an epidemic. Although he had no difficulty in relating to them – indeed some of them were friends who loved and respected him – he became convinced that his ‘method’ was not compatible with a system of ‘mutual payment’. “At Montaldo [...] he came to know that he could not exercise over boys of this social class that influence without which it is impossible to help them spiritually. He became convinced then that his field of work was not among the children of the wealthy”.²⁰

The pastoral educative system of St John Bosco is unthinkable without the experience of gratuitousness on *both* sides: manifestations of the gratitude of his boys were moving and numerous, because they were thanking him not for what he was giving them, but because he gave them himself as an expression of the freely given and anticipatory love of God. And this is how, in fact, Don Bosco saw himself, as witness the *Biographical Memoirs* which tell us that 1859 gave himself as the Strenna: “Whatever bit of knowledge and experience I have gained, whatever I am or have my prayers and labours, my health and my very life, all of it I wish to use in your service...As far as I am con-

²⁰ BM I, p. 294.

cerned, I give you myself as a New Year's gift – a meagre gift perhaps, but a total one.”²¹

“...for the gift to all men of the divine vocation”

In the thought and educative and pastoral praxis of our Founder there is a basic presupposition: the certainty that every individual has not only rights and duties, or is the object of “horizontal” philanthropy, but that in every situation and despite all limitations, deficiencies and sin he is the *image of God*; all are God's children, *called* to his friendship and to eternal life. This conviction gave rise in Don Bosco to *hope*, understood as trust in every person, especially the young, which reawakens in them self-esteem and the power of doing good. This spark of goodness which he not only met but *took for granted* as present in every youngster, even in those considered by others as irretrievable, is the typical expression of his pedagogy. It is important that all of us in our educative and pastoral praxis believe in and apply this conviction of our beloved father, who used to say: “In every youngster, even the most wretched, there is a point which responds with generosity if the educator can discover and stimulate it”.²²

On the other hand, albeit within the limitations imposed by the ecclesiology of his time, this conviction was the source of Don Bosco's ‘ecumenism’ and *missionary* concern: he could not rest as long as he had not proclaimed to *all* men and women in the world, without distinction of race or language, the Good News of the Love of God in Christ which calls us to form the great Family of his sons and daughters which is the Church. This in fact was the source from which his tireless activity and his prodigious pastoral creativity arose.

It must be said that Don Bosco fully embodied the theological intuition of St Paul who reminds us that from the Father “all

²¹ MB VI, p. 202.

²² Cf. BM V, p. 236.

fatherhood in heaven and earth takes its name” (*Eph 3, 15*); he was able to be an exceptional channel of God’s motherly and fatherly love for those who felt least worthy of him or those who had never had a positive experience of a father or mother.

3.2. Predilection for the poor and the little ones

There is no need to demonstrate this attention to the poor and lowly, either with reference to the attitude of Jesus, because there are many relevant evangelical texts with regard to this point, or in reference to Don Bosco’s commitment. But we do need to note that the predilection in Don Bosco stems not only from the magnanimity of his fatherly heart, “great as the sands of the seashore”, nor from the calamitous situation of the young people of his time – much like that of our own – and much less from a social or political agenda. At the base of it there is a God-given *mission*: “The Lord made clear to Don Bosco that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young, especially to those who are poorer” (C 26). And it is well to recall that this took place “through the motherly intercession of Mary” (C 1); she it was, in fact, who “showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young and was the constant guide and support of his work” (C 8).

Normative in this sense, and not simply anecdotal, is the attitude adopted by Don Bosco at a decisive moment of his priestly life before the Marchioness of Barolo and her offer, certainly holy and apostolic as it was, to collaborate in her works and abandon his ragamuffins: “You have money and will have no trouble finding as many priests as you want for your institutions. It’s not the same with the poor youngsters ... I will resign from any regular responsibility and devote myself seriously to the care of abandoned youngsters”.²³

It would be very interesting to go more deeply into the typical characteristics of those to whom our mission is preferentially ad-

²³ J. BOSCO, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales*, Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle, 1989, p. 251.

dressed: “*the young who are poor, abandoned and in danger*”. Though we speak nowadays of “new forms of poverty” among young people the direct reference is to their social and economic situation; *abandonment* implies the “theological note” of lack of support through the absence of adequate mediation of God’s love; and *danger* refers back to a determining phase of life, adolescence, the time of decision after which habits and attitudes formed can be changed only with great difficulty. A deeper study of this kind serves as a starting point for deciding in each Province (cf. R 1) and community who are those to whom our mission is directed here and now, in the light of the criteria we have just mentioned.

Predilection is intensified in some contexts in which our mission is carried out where poverty, and especially poverty among the young, is most acute. The Salesian is the last person to engage in clashes or class struggles. Predilection is not just a choice or option: it presupposes a “universal love” which, however, implies certain emphases: it excludes no one, *but does not give preference to all* – that would be self-contradictory. What is important in our witness is that our predilection is seen to be *clearly evangelical*, which in practice means “*giving the most to those who in their life have received least*”. Salesian charity begins not with the first but with the last, not with the ones who are richer from an economic or spiritual standpoint (who already have care and attention), but with those who need us to kindle their hope and boost their forces.

3.3. Zeal in preaching, healing, saving under the urgency of the coming Kingdom

“*Zeal in preaching...*”

“Don Bosco’s interior life is an imitation and prolongation, especially for the benefit of the young, of the apostolic zeal displayed by Christ in his public life”.²⁴

²⁴ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 155.

Right away at the beginning of his Gospel, Mark tells us: “After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, *preaching the gospel of God*” (*Mk* 1,14). And though there are other texts in which Jesus’ activity is summed up in three kinds of action – preaching the Gospel, casting out devils, healing sickness and suffering (cf. *Mk* 3,13; *Mt* 9,35) – there is no doubt that his main mission was that of “proclaiming the Gospel, the joyful message of God”.

For Don Bosco this element was so important as to constitute his main request on the day of his First Mass: “It is a pious belief that the Lord infallibly grants the grace requested of him by a new priest at his first Mass. I prayed most ardently for *efficacy of speech*, that I might do good to souls. It seems that the Lord truly heard my humble prayer”.²⁵

This aspect is closely connected with the educative character of the preventive method, in particular with *reason* – part of the basic trinomial with *religion* and *loving kindness*. “The ‘reason’, in which Don Bosco believed as a gift of God and an un-failing obligation of the educator, indicates the values of what is good, and also the objectives to be aimed at and the means and manner of using them”.²⁶ It also prevents the living out of the Sacraments, a column of his educative and pastoral system, from degenerating into “*sacramentalism*”, but transforms it into a true life of communion with God.

It is true that Don Bosco did not use the word “evangelize”; he spoke, in fact, of teaching catechism to children and preaching to the people. By this he intended what Paul VI defined as the Church’s *raison d’être* (cf. *EN* 15). And it is in this same sense that the concern of our Founder has been expressed in our Rule of Life in an article that begins by citing his own phrase: “‘The Society had its beginning in a simple catechism lesson’. For us too evangelization and catechizing are the fundamental characteristics of our mission” (C 34).

²⁵ BM I, p. 386.

²⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Juvenum patris*, n. 10.

“... healing...”

There is no need to emphasize the central nature of this aspect in the life and practice of Jesus; it is enough to recall his reply to the messengers of John the Baptist: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Mt 11,4-5). In John’s Gospel too, the whole of the first part is centred on Jesus’ “signs,” of which the majority are of this kind.

While not forgetting that Don Bosco had also from God the charism of healing, it is not to this that art. 11 of the Constitutions refers, and still less does it apply to the work of his sons; we are not a Congregation dedicated by preference to the sick.

This, nevertheless, is an essential point of our charism, and it emphasizes two dimensions. In both the psychological and medical fields at the present day, the concept of ‘health’ or ‘healing’ has been broadened; there is no doubt that those to whom we are *primarily* sent are, in general, boys and girls who are ‘sick’ because of the fact that they have been abandoned in ways ranging from traumas in infancy to physical dependence or psychosomatic addiction. “All of this”, wrote Fr Vecchi, “has led us to re-think the concept of *prevention*. For many it could mean, perhaps, being concerned only with youngsters still untouched by evil. Anticipation is certainly a golden rule; but ‘prevention’ has the added meaning of preventing the ultimate ruin of those already on an evil path but who have still some healthy energy to develop or restore. In current social and pedagogical reflection consideration is given to a first prevention (which is basic), a second prevention (consisting in recovery and strengthening), and a third and ultimate action that checks the worst of the evil consequences”.²⁷

On the other hand we must not overlook what is *signified* by

²⁷ J. E. VECCHI, *Spiritualità Salesiana*, LDC, 2000, p. 114.

Jesus' miracles. One of the leading specialists in this field writes: "A miracle is directed to the *salvation of the whole man*: his heart and his body. By pardoning and healing man's wretchedness Jesus makes him aware of his impotence in the face of sin, illness and death [...] A miracle is a concrete sign of what Jesus is for man: the one who saves totally, both physically and spiritually"²⁸.

This is the complete backdrop to the salesian charism. With the application of the "oratory criterion" Don Bosco seeks the *total* well-being, of his youngsters. Those who deny the reality of miracles frequently do so in the name of "spiritualism", as though God were concerned only with "the soul" and religious activities.

"... and saving ..."

The three verbs "preaching, healing and saving" form a clear progression, moving towards a climax: the *salvation* of the youngsters, which was the peak of Don Bosco's attention, as Don Rua testifies: "He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young... Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls"²⁹.

If we forget that the ultimate purpose of salesian work is salvation following the example of Jesus, we fall into a reductionism which represents a betrayal of the preventive system. In line with what we have said above, the aim must be one of *total* saving which is made concrete in the fundamental slogan "*da mihi animas*". The term does not imply any dichotomy but is used in the figurative manner of metonymy: for Don Bosco 'anima' ('soul') signifies the whole person, in the context of God's plan; and holiness, which becomes synonymous with *salvation*, is the realization of the divine vocation of every human being.

Driven on in our educative and pastoral work by this integral anthropological concept, we can never remain only on the threshold of evangelization, but in every circumstance we must

²⁸ R. LATOURELLE, *Milagros de Jesús y Teología del Milagro*, Salamanca, Sígueme 2^a, 1997, p. 288.

²⁹ M. RUA, cited in Cost. 21.

try to open the young to religious transcendence, which is not only applicable to all cultures, but can also be successfully adapted to non-Christian religions.

“... under the urgency of the coming Kingdom”

On this point, which is central in the preaching and practice of Jesus, we cannot say that Don Bosco insisted *explicitly*: it would be anachronistic to expect from him an emphasis that was adopted only in the twentieth century, and even then more in exegesis and theology than in the ordinary life of the Church. But it is not just a matter of a form of words: the fundamental intuition implied by the Kingdom is to some extent present in Don Bosco and in his charism with other words and other ways.

Let us take one of the more important of the gospel texts: the Sermon on the Mount (*Mt 5-7*). From a *formal* standpoint it includes various literary genres: beatitudes, norms, new respect for the Old Law, the prayer of the ‘Our Father’, etc. But the whole is unified by the central position occupied by the Kingdom: for this reason it has been called the “*Magna Carta of the proclamation of the Kingdom*”. It is a Kingdom in which the fatherhood of God is not characterized by his dominion, but rather his dominion is governed by his fatherhood, so that in the “Kingdom of heaven” there are no slaves, and not even servants, but *sons and daughters*.

If we lose sight of this perspective, all its elements come apart. Even the proposal of Jesus, in contrast with the Old Law, becomes a burden that cannot be borne: if the latter *kills*, the former *obliterates entirely*. It is what one writer calls “the theory of the *non-realizability* of the precept”, represented by Lutheran orthodoxy. “Jesus demands that we free ourselves completely from anger: even a single hostile word deserves death. Jesus demands a chastity that avoids even an unchaste glance. Jesus demands an absolute truthfulness, love of our enemies”.³⁰ Accord-

³⁰ J. JEREMIAS, *Abba. El Mensaje central del Nuevo Testamento*, Salamanca, Sígueme 4^a, 1993, p. 240.

ing to this way of thinking, the New Law has been given to us solely so that we can really understand that we cannot keep it, and that in consequence we may have recourse with humble trust to God's mercy.

When, on the other hand, everything is centred on the Kingdom, we understand in what the "joyful news" of Jesus really consists: "The Kingdom of God is at hand" (*Mk* 1, 15). It is a *new situation*, the *gift* of God with human collaboration, which has deep roots in *metanoia*. To the extent that the fatherly dominion of God (Abbà) becomes a reality, and we human beings live in it as brothers and sisters, utopia too becomes a reality. The kingdom is not "built up" by assembling pieces of the Sermon on the Mount; it arises from the proclamation of the Kingdom as from a nuclear source.

Is not this perhaps what Don Bosco was trying to create in his works and which goes by the name of "*environment*"?³¹ It is a matter of a situation made up of persons, resources, values and activities, which allow youngsters – even the poorest and most abandoned – to experience "the beauty of virtue and the ugliness of sin". It helps us to understand Don Bosco's famous phrase: "place the young person in the moral impossibility of committing sin", not by curtailing his freedom but by strengthening "affectively" his Christian life and will, so that he can live with full freedom his characteristic as a child of God with brothers and sisters. The significance of this educative and pastoral '*ecology*' could be the salesian translation of the centrality of the Kingdom and of the urgency of its coming.

3.4. The attitude of the Good Shepherd who wins others over by meekness and the gift of himself

The symbolic character of the figure of the shepherd is obvi-

³¹ J. BOSCO, *The preventive system in the education of the young*, in *Constitutions and Regulations*, p. 249.

ous when applied to persons who have the responsibility of caring for others, with the ambiguity implied in such a figure: one can serve others or be served by them. Such an ambiguity is found also in Revelation, even from the Old Testament. One of the most important texts in this connection, presented incidentally in a messianic key, is that of Ezekiel 34, which in some of its verses seems like a quotation from the beginning of the Constitutions. It is boldly applied to Don Bosco, called to be “shepherd of the young”, and hence is applicable to every Salesian called to make Don Bosco’s mission his own: “I myself will search for my sheep and will take care of them... I will set up over them one shepherd... he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (*Ezek 34, 11.23*).

In the preaching of Jesus such a figure occupies an important place, especially in the presentation of the Lord as the Good Shepherd in Jn 10, 1-18; 25-30, and also in the parable of the lost sheep in Lk. 15, 4-7 and Mt. 18, 12-24 with widely different literary and theological contexts.

Looking at these texts as a whole we come across some interesting characteristics of the Good Shepherd that Don Bosco assumed in his own following and imitation of Jesus Christ. We may recall that in the dream at the age of nine the image of the good shepherd shaped his vision of the mission to the young; this image would be repeated some years later in the second dream which was to include a mild reproof for not trusting sufficiently in God.

Jesus, the good shepherd is the *gate* of the sheepfold. The Catholic exegete Raymond Brown says that E. F. Bishop “gives us an interesting modern example of the shepherd who lies down to sleep across the gateway, so that he is both shepherd and doorkeeper for the animals”.³² We could put into the shepherd’s mouth and also on the lips of Don Bosco these words:

³² R. E. BROWN, *Evangelio de San Juan I*, Madrid, Cristiandad, 1979, p. 632.

“If they want to reach my sheep, they will first have to get past me”.

He *knows his sheep* and calls them individually by name; the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. This trait avoids the hoary old misunderstanding of herd-instinct and standardization or “submissiveness”. In an apt exegetical and spiritual commentary on the meeting of the Risen Christ with Mary Magdalen, another exegete writes: “But when Jesus turned towards her and said the word “Mary!”, it became her passover. We are reminded of Jesus’ words passed on to us by the evangelist: ‘My sheep hear my voice and I know them’ (...). There is no doubt that John wants us to ponder on these consoling words”.³³

Don Bosco achieved to an exceptional degree this personal knowledge of his youngsters, each of whom felt that he was *known* and *loved* personally, to such an extent that they argued about who was first in their father’s affections – they all felt they held that place. We remember the “word in the ear” and the knowledge of each one’s situation; “he could read our minds” said the youngsters, full of admiration. This was due in great part to his presence among them, a typical presence that goes by the salesian name of *assistance*: not only physical but more especially personal, affectionate and anticipatory; the human expression of “*God sees you*”.

He goes *looking in love for the lost sheep*. This is a typical and most ‘outrageous’ synoptic parable, with different shades of emphasis in Luke and Matthew. It expresses in Jesus two main characteristics among others:

- the “greater love” for those in greater need: the poorest ones, the outcasts, the sinners; it is not only the pastoral love called “*agápe*”; it is a more intimate kind of love: “*filía*”, which implies lovingly bearing the lost sheep on one’s shoulders, once it has been found;

³³ G. VON RAD, *Sermones*, Salamanca, Sígueme, p. 26.

- the “overturning” of the quantitative criteria because of the qualitative criterion of the situation of the one who is ‘lost’: “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (*Lk* 15,7); in Don Bosco such predilection is so well known that many examples could be quoted.

He *gives life to his sheep and gives his own life for them*. This may seem a simple play on words, but it expresses a twofold reality that is much deeper. Jesus came “that they may have life and have it more abundantly” (*Jn* 10, 10). But this fullness of life is inseparable from the *giving* of one’s own life: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life” (*Jn* 10, 17). This is the absolute antithesis of the hired shepherd, who does not seek the good of his sheep, and still less intends to sacrifice himself for them. These words of Jesus find a *twofold implementation* in the Paschal Mystery, in which Jesus *gives us the fullness of life by fully giving his own life for us*.

Very aptly have been applied to Don Bosco those words of St Paul: “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (2 *Cor* 12, 15). Don Rua’s words, already quoted (C 21) imply the same idea: “he took no step, he said no word, he took up no task...”. As he said himself: “For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am ready even to give my life” (quoted in C 14).

3.5. The desire to gather the disciples into the unity of brotherly communion

In all the Gospels, before or immediately after the proclamation of the Good News, Jesus “called to him those he desired (...) to be with him and to be sent out to preach the Gospel” (*Mk* 3, 13-14; quoted in C 96).

Interminable discussions concerning the meaning of the founding of the Church on the part of Jesus during his public life may lead us to forget the essential point, i.e. that the proclamation of salvation implies, in the words and practice of Jesus,

the *community* dimension. In this sense many of Jesus' miracles have also the function of *reintegrating persons* in the human, family, social and religious *community*, as in the case of demoniacs or lepers.

But it is especially in his relationships with his disciples, and in particular with "the Twelve," that this trait of Jesus appears most vividly, culminating in John's account of the Last Supper. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (...) No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (*Jn* 15,13-16a).

And subsequently, in the *Priestly Prayer*, Jesus asks: "Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am" (*Jn* 17, 24a); it would be hard to imagine a simpler or deeper expression of love than that of *being with* the one who is loved.

One of the biblical paradigms that best expresses salvation is precisely brotherly communion. In connection with Caiphas' "prediction", the evangelist says: "he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (*Jn* 11, 51b-52). Unfortunately an individualistic vision of salvation has obscured this perspective and has also reduced the ecclesial dimension to a juridical attachment, that can sometimes become exclusive, as happens at times in interpreting the aphorism "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*".

In Don Bosco all this is so evident that we cannot even imagine him on his own, except when he was praying; even though this was in reality precisely the time when he was least alone. By analogy, we can apply to our Father what Urs von Balthasar

says about the prayer of Jesus, thanks to which “he can become ‘the man for all men’ [...] If Jesus had not withdrawn into so profound a solitude with God he would never have become so deeply in communion with men.”³⁴

From this comes Don Bosco’s dedication to the young, so complete and extraordinary that he was made to say, in a hymn in his honour, that he could not stay in heaven without his youngsters, because it just would not be heaven. Although an exaggeration, this phrase emphasizes his passion for living in the midst of his boys and evidently for community fellowship with his salesian sons. If we refer back to Don Bosco’s comments about the “five defects to be avoided”, we find that the majority of them refer precisely to community life.³⁵

As we conclude the presentation of these salient traits of the figure of Jesus, present in the life of Don Bosco and in us, we must point out that they are shining examples of a radiant expression of the core issue: *pastoral charity* (cf. C 10). In their essential unity they can also be considered – following the lines of the GC25 – as *five schemes* for an outline of a “*salesian christology*”. From such a Christology emerges our religious life, a spiritual experience and a pastoral practice, centred on Christ and having a clear charismatic identity: “Jesus Christ is the living and personal law”.³⁶ He is “our living rule” (C 196).

4. Jesus Christ “our Living Rule”

“When the Church approves a form of consecrated life or an Institute, she confirms that in its spiritual and apostolic charism are found all the objective requisites for achieving personal and

³⁴ H. U. BALTHASAR, *Relación inmediata del hombre con Dios*, Concilium 29 (1967) p. 418.

³⁵ DON BOSCO, *To the Salesians*, in *Constitutions and Regulations*, p. 244-245. English edition

³⁶ *Veritatis splendor*, n. 15.

communal perfection according to the Gospel”.³⁷ Since no evangelical perfection exists other than “*being conformed to the image of Christ*” (Rom 8, 29), which implies the *following and imitation* of the Lord Jesus, an Institute’s Rule of Life must presuppose, at least implicitly, a *charismatic* christology. For us Salesians this has been specified in its essentials by Don Bosco in art.1 of the Constitutions of 1858, which we have already quoted. It is stated explicitly in the current text and is present in fact as a dimension running all through the Constitutions.

As far as the *following* of Christ is concerned, it must be remembered that “at the origin of religious consecration there is a call from God which can be explained only by the love he has for the one whom he calls. This love is entirely gratuitous, personal and unique. (...) Christ’s call, the expression of a redemptive love, embraces the entire person, soul and body, whether man or woman, in its unique and unrepeatable personality”.³⁸ And our Constitutions, in fact – referring back to Jn. 10, 3.14 – speak of the “predilection of the Lord Jesus who has called us by name” (C 196). This vocation is not given solely in view of the carrying out of a mission or of a task to be undertaken, but is mainly a calling to intimacy and community of life with Jesus: “he called his Apostles individually to *be with him* and to be sent forth to preach the Gospel” (C 96, quoting Mk 3, 14).

This *call*, given us by the Lord to respond to the “needs of his people” (C 28), and especially of young people in most need, and the *response* of the disciple who accepts the invitation find their highest expression in ***religious profession***, the sign of a loving encounter between the Lord who calls and the disciple who responds” (C 23).

In the formula of profession, which – let us never forget – is found in a context of *prayer*, it says: “In response to the love of the Lord Jesus... who calls me to follow him more closely” (C 24;

³⁷ VC 93.

³⁸ CIVCSVA, *Potissimum Institutioni*, nn. 8-9, quoting *Redemptionis donum*, n. 3.

cf. C 3); in this way is clearly expressed the call and response nature of the vocation, not as a particular event in the life of the Salesian but as a permanent situation that characterizes it. Our response is made concrete by following Jesus Christ “our living rule” and by practising the Salesian Constructions (C 196), which are our evangelical plan of life.

This call and response style is much better expressed in the formula for perpetual profession when, by the use of an expression with a wealth of biblical overtones, it is presented as a *Covenant*: which makes of our *fidelity* “a response we continually renew to the special Covenant that the Lord has made with us” (C 195).

As far as *imitation* of the Lord Jesus is concerned, in the context of our missionary work we find a very rich biblical reference which emphasizes the meaning of the way of the incarnation: “Following he example of the Son of God, who made himself in all things like his fellow men...” (C 30) seems to echo two paradigmatic passages on the self-abasement of Christ and his extreme solidarity with mankind (*Phil* 2, 7; *Heb* 2, 14-18; 4, 15).

The following and the imitation of Jesus Christ are put in practical terms in the different aspects of salesian life, as is seen in the current text of the Constitutions: *mission, community life, evangelical counsels, prayer and formation*.

■ In the first place we are involved in the fulfilment of the ***mission*** entrusted to us by Jesus himself, by collaborating with him in his plan of salvation. “The salesian spirit finds its model and source in *the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father*” (C 11); pastoral charity is its centre and sums it up (cf. C 10).

We work with him in *building the Kingdom* (C 3), which was the main objective of the life of Jesus and of his words and actions. In the first chapter of the Constitutions, where our identity is defined, we read in fact that we direct our pastoral activ-

ity to the coming of a more just and fraternal world in Christ, trying to respond to the needs of the young and of working-class areas, "with the desire to work with the Church and in her name" (C 7), contributing to the building of the Church itself as the Body of Christ, so that also through us she may really appear as the "universal sacrament of salvation" (C 6).

Herein lies the *mystical* dimension of salesian work: we know that by this work we are "participating in the creative action of God and cooperating with Christ in building the Kingdom" (C 18). This building of the kingdom of God is evident in the multiplicity of activities aimed at the total advancement of poor youngsters and working-class areas, in cooperation with those who are creating a society more worthy of man (cf. C 33), I like to emphasize that in this task the salesian Brother plays his own irreplaceable part, which should be esteemed and developed. His position as a consecrated layman, in fact, "makes him in a particular way a witness to God's kingdom in the world, close as he is to the young and to the realities of the workplace" (C 45).

The content of the mission is very clear: *to bear witness to the love of Christ*. While not forgetting that we are signs of a Triune God (cf. C 2) we are invited in practice to continue the mission of Jesus. After Mary's example and under her protection we are "witnesses to the young of her Son's boundless love" (C 8), a love which is authentic to the extent that it is manifested and is the more effective the more it is perceived as an expression of love by those to whom our mission is directed.

Salvation is not only a transcendent consequence of liberation, as though in this world we did not need to be deeply concerned about bringing relief to those suffering the consequences of sin, selfishness and injustice; neither is liberation merely immanent salvation, as though it were possible to work only to create a paradise here on earth. Our Constitutions make a splen-

did synthesis of these two elements when they say that the love of Christ is *liberating and salvific*. It is made concrete in the total well-being of our charges (cf. C 33), and so “we give effect to the redeeming love of Christ by organizing activities and works of an educational and pastoral nature” (C 41), centred on evangelization and catechesis, because “our highest knowledge is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery. We walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Lord, and so discover in him and in his Gospel the deepest meaning of their own existence, and thus grow into new men” (C 34).

This is both a *personal* and a *community* task: the community must as such be “a sign revealing Christ and his saving presence” (C 57), which frees us from selfishness and makes us brothers and leaven giving rise to the new humanity. The evangelical counsels too are at the service of the mission: by obedience “each one places his abilities and talents at the service of the common mission” (C 69); poverty “leads us to be one with the poor and to love them in Christ” (C 79), and chastity makes us “witnesses to the predilection of Christ for the young” (C 81).

Our mission is addressed to the young, especially those among them who are poor, abandoned and in danger (cf. C 2 and C 26). It was one and the same Jesus who, in the dream at the age of nine, showed young John Bosco his field of work: “The Lord made clear to him that he was to direct his mission principally to the young, especially the very poor” (C 26); and the same Lord Jesus “has given us Don Bosco as father and teacher” (C 21).

Finally the Constitutions urge us to keep always in mind that whatever activity we undertake, “we educate and evangelize according to a plan for the total well-being of man directed to Christ, the perfect Man” (C 31). This means that evangelization is a very special form of the humanization of the person,

precisely because education aims at the building up of the person through the development of all aspects of his personality, and is attained by the communication of values, feelings, convictions and ideals, as well as knowledge, attitudes and ability. On the other hand, evangelization implies the entire contribution of education as methodology, in the sense that what we are trying to help the young to absorb interiorly becomes part of them by way of their willingness, joyful experience, enlightenment of the mind, and predisposition of the will, until finally it becomes a natural way of thinking, Christian practice, membership of the community of believers and commitment in history. This is what is meant by Don Bosco's expression: "Education is a matter of the heart".

■ The central position of Jesus Christ is manifested also in **community life**. In the first place the community experience *as such* is based on Christ: the confrere loves his community, imperfect though it may be, because he "knows that in it he finds the presence of Christ" (C 52); Christ identifies himself with the weakest and most needy among us (cf. *Mt* 25, 31-46); as long as there is one among us in need, Christ will have need of us. The practice of the evangelical counsels also helps us to live in the community "as in a family which enjoys the presence of the Lord" (C 61, cf. *Mt* 18, 20). This experience of the community united in Christ (cf. C 89) finds its greatest expression in community prayer, because this makes visibly evident that it "is not born of any human will but is the fruit of the Lord's death and resurrection" (C 85; cf. *Jn.* 1, 13).

The very life of the community becomes *formative*, to the extent that it is "united in Christ and open to the needs of the times" (C 99). All the more can this be said of the formation communities, in which "our spirit is lived in a more intense manner; together the members form a family founded on faith and enthusiasm for Christ" (C 103).

Within the community, the one who exercises the charism of animation and government does so “In imitation of Christ and in his name, as a service to brothers” (C 121): “he represents Christ who unites his followers in the service of the Father” (C 55). To give life therefore to *authority* in the salesian community is to live as an icon or image of Christ.

This christological concentration in the articles of the Constitutions regarding the community is naturally insufficient to ensure its “Christian” identity. The latter always needs verification with respect to the central position really occupied by Christ within it, in its way of thinking, judging, evaluating, pardoning and loving, until it becomes truly the “body” of Christ.

■ There is no doubt also that the *evangelical counsels* present an explicit character of *conformity to Christ*. Indeed, without this christological reference they would have no meaning: “We follow Jesus Christ, who ‘virginal and poor, redeemed and sanctified mankind by his obedience’, and share more closely in his paschal mystery, in his self-emptying and his life in the Spirit” (C 60).

Speaking of *Obedience*, one article in two passages presents Jesus as a model: “Our Saviour assured us that he came on earth to do not his own will but that of his Father in heaven; (...) by carrying out the mission entrusted to us we relive in the Church and in the Congregation Christ’s own obedience” (C 64). And all this is summed up once again in the following paragraph: “We take the Gospel as our supreme rule of life” (C 64), which means, according to the letter to the Galatians, that it is important for us to “obey the law of Christ” or better still “have Christ as our law” (cf. *Gal* 6,2).

Our *Poverty* too manifests a form of the practical following of Jesus who “though he was rich made himself poor, so that

through his poverty we might become rich...; he was born in poverty, lived deprived of everything and died stripped on the cross" (C 72; cf. 2 Cor 8,9). In this way we are invited to share in the happiness promised by the Lord to the "poor in spirit" (C 75; cf. Mt. 5, 3; Lk. 9, 57-58).

Finally, through *Chastity*, "we follow Jesus Christ closely" (C 80) and through its practice we are able to "bear witness to the predilection of Christ for the young; it allows us to love them in an open and uncomplicated way, so that they 'know they are loved'" (C 81).

The christological view of the evangelical counsels does not destroy their anthropological significance and their humanizing potentiality; indeed they are strengthened, as is stated explicitly in art. 62 of the Constitutions: "In a world beguiled by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possession and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that his love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love and the urge to possess, and the freedom to control one's whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour". It is stimulating to find that what is affirmed of God is not detrimental to man, but rather that Christ leads man to his own fullness.

■ Also in the life of both personal and community *prayer*, beautifully described as a *dialogue with the Lord*, we meet with the fullness of our relationship with the Lord Jesus, as being "*sons in the Son*". Each of us "nourishes his love for Christ at the table of the Word and the Eucharist" (C 84); explicit moments of prayer, in particular, manifest intimacy with the Lord: they "restore to our spirit a deep unity in the Lord Jesus" (C 91).

As a manifestation of friendship with Christ, the Salesian is "aware of the need to pray without ceasing in a simple heart-to-heart colloquy with the living Christ" (C 12), This need is expressed in frequent visits to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament,

from whom “we draw energy and endurance in our work for the young” (C 88). And ultimately, as the greatest expression of our pastoral activity with the young, we accompany them to their meeting with Christ, in listening to the Word, in prayer and in the sacraments (cf. C 36).

■ Finally **formation** is seen as the ongoing response to this love of predilection of the Lord who calls us; for this reason the text of the Constitutions states that, since formation is gaining “experience of the values of the salesian vocation”, we commit ourselves to a process that continues all through life, “enlightened by the person of Christ and by his Gospel” (C 98). This allows us “to conform ourselves more closely to Christ, and to renew our fidelity to Don Bosco, so that we can respond to the ever new demands arising from the situation of the young and the working classes” (C 118).

“To look on Christ as a model means to have in mind that the path to sanctification to which we are called means that we have to ‘*put on Christ*’ (Eph 4, 19)”.³⁹ And this is the function of formation which, for the same reason, cannot be reduced to its initial phases, but must continue for the whole life of the Salesian in a process that never ends until we are totally in Christ.

In particular, *borderline situations* in our life are the occasion of a decisive and definitive conforming to Christ. Although the articles relating to this theme in the GC22 were transferred from the context of formation to that of community life, thus bringing about a slight change of emphasis, they do not cease to be *occasions* for personal formation.

Similarly, conditions of old age and sickness allow us to be “united with the redeeming passion of the Lord” (C 53). Death is characterized as the moment in which consecrated life reaches its highest fulfillment with the full entry into Christ’s paschal

³⁹ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 167.

mystery (cf. C 54). In this way, in both life and death (cf. C 94) we are signs of the power of Christ's Resurrection.

We can sum up this following and imitation of Christ, in which is rooted the *formative* character of our whole life, in the fine concluding article of the Constitutions, which says that they are for "us, the Lord's disciples *a way that leads to Love*" (C 196).

Our Constitutions help us, therefore, to carry out the following and imitation of Christ in every aspect of our vocation: mission, fraternal life, evangelical counsels, prayer and formation. With the certainty that comes from faith we can therefore profess that in our Constitutions we find that "the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ as proposed by the Gospel".⁴⁰ The same meaning attaches to the concluding programmatic article of our Rule of Life. This affirmation makes our life, which is essentially centred on Christ, more encouraging and binding. Nothing is more demanding than to profess that Jesus Christ is our "living rule". Nothing is more charismatic than the knowledge that "we find him present in Don Bosco who gave his life for the young". Nothing is more authentic than to "willingly accept the Constitutions as Don Bosco's will and testament, for us our book of life and for the poor and the little ones a pledge of hope" (C 196).

Conclusion

"Let us be imitators of Don Bosco, as he was of Christ!"

"The path which consecrated life is called to take up at the beginning of the new millennium is guided by the contemplation of Christ"⁴¹.

⁴⁰ CIVCSVA, *Potissimum Institutioni*, n. 8.

⁴¹ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, n. 23.

We Salesians are invited to contemplate Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco, who had no other aim than the salvation of the young. His apostolic "Christology" is also ours. We are sensitive to certain characteristic traits of Jesus, which were for our dear Father a programme of life. He wrote no tract on Christology, but if the term implies also the story of the following of Christ, he inaugurated by his life a particular path, one that by our profession we have publicly determined to follow.

At the beginning of this letter I said that the contemplation of Christ embodies three inseparable elements: knowing him more deeply, loving him more intensely, following him more radically. Without in any way belittling the importance of theological knowledge, and of Christology in particular, I want to repeat that following him is the most secure and irreplaceable way of knowing and loving Christ: for us these are requirements that are based on salesian history, i.e. through the following of Don Bosco.

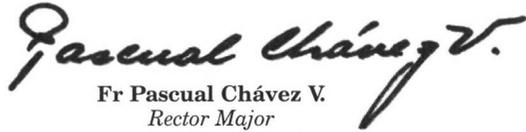
In 1986, the centenary of the historic photograph taken at Barcelona, Fr Viganò wrote the following dedication: "This is the best photograph of Don Bosco! One hundred years after his death, youngsters all over the world are waiting for the gift of the exciting salesian mission! *Let us be imitators of Don Bosco as he was of Christ!*".

Rightly do our Constitutions conclude with an article that provides a wonderful summary of this imitation of Christ through Don Bosco: "Our living Rule is Jesus Christ, the Saviour announced in the Gospel, who is alive today in the Church, and whom we find present in Don Bosco who devoted his life to the young" (C 196). It would be difficult to express in better terms our commitment and our reward.

To Mary I entrust each of you and the young people of the whole world. May she, who contemplated Christ through her

motherly eyes and heart, teach us to gaze on him until we are fully identified with him; may she help us to be like Don Bosco so that we may continue to be for the world's youngsters "signs and bearers of the love of God".

I wish you all a blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year for 2004!


Fr Pascual Chávez V.
Rector Major