

THE SOUL OF INTEGRAL EDUCATION

Orientations for a contemporary interpretation of 'religione' in the Salesian pedagogical project

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Introduction

One of the essential pillars in the Salesian education project is religion (*religione*) beside — or rather along with — '*amorevolezza*' and '*ragione*'. With Don Bosco the Christian faith lies indeed at the foundation for his choice for young people, paying special attention to the vulnerable ones amongst them. His Christian faith as the anchoring of his educational interests was for him self-explanatory. That is not to be equated with thoughtlessness. After all, he had to struggle with the secularists in the Italy of the second half of the 19th century, who attempted to press on their points of view in social and political life. In our secular, post-confessional society it is no longer self-evident to raise religion as the essence of education. However, the present-day post-secular religious and ideological pluralism, namely the confrontation with new forms of spirituality and the rise of Islam in the West, among others, again puts on the map the question of religion and of identity, which ensues from it. In the same line the present renewed post-confessional attention to meaning and spirituality invites us not to shy away from Christian meaning as the soul and inspiration for the Salesian education project. On the contrary, we need to provide it again with all chances for success. Throughout our search it will be clear how the Christian faith is both the anthropological and theological foundation, as well as signpost, for an education in the spirit of Don Bosco.

1. Integral concept of the human with space for spiritual meaning and religion

Before we describe and analyse the particular religious approach of the Salesian pedagogical project, we first would like in a general sense to emphasise the essential character of the spiritual and religious dimension of meaning. An integral or holistic view on being-human avoids all reduction of the being-human to a mere inner-worldly dynamism whereby the human person is the only active creator of meaning. In line with integral personalism (Louis Janssens), the Salesian pedagogical project transcends such a narrow anthropocentric image of the human and pays homage candidly to human openness for the transcendent. And this openness involves the self-surpassing towards the other than oneself whereby this other involves not only a relative but also a radical otherness. We describe this dynamism as the metaphysical openness of the human person, in the sense that in its 'soul' the human is marked by the ability to transcend the physical, the empirical, the mere inner-worldly. The meaning that is thus aimed at involves the ultimate significance of existence in this world, even though that meaning surpasses the world. Moreover, this encompassing meaning displays a future-oriented character whereby ultimate meaning acquires an utopian dimension. With Schillebeeckx we can label this as a concept of totality that conveys a global horizon of meaning. Among others, it makes the human capable of finding a bearable way of dealing with experiences of suffering, fiasco, failure, guilt and death so that these do not have the final word (more on this later, where it will turn out that this describes but one

dimension of religion). Thus life becomes promising and people can experience it as meaningful, good, liberating and consoling.¹

Denying this openness for transcendence and encompassing meaning of human existence does injustice to the essential dimension of our being-human itself. This applies as well to education, which mutilates itself by approaching the educatee only as an earthly creature that in its relationship to itself and to the other is the first and last creator of meaning, the alpha and omega of sense and nonsense. The pedagogical project in the spirit of Don Bosco radically rejects such a closed image of the human. In contrast, it honours an integral or holistic image of the human whereby the existentially spiritual openness to transcendent meaning is not shied away but actually takes central stage. For Don Bosco its further elaboration was self-evidently Christian. Not only because he was born and raised in the Christian faith but also because it belonged to the cultural pre-giveness in the Italian society of the 19th century even though clear secularist counter-voices already arose.

Today in Western Europe we live both in a secularised and post-confessional situation as well as in a context of increasing ideological pluralism, not only with more religions but also with non-religious forms of spirituality. The perspective of totality on meaning expresses itself in and through a huge diversity of religions and non-religious views on life, world-views and general life theories. Humans attempt therein to express what ultimately inspires existence and what makes life worth living. Even so-called freethinking humanism is such a particular system of meaning and is not to be qualified negatively as non-religious or atheist. We also are cognisant today of forms of esoteric spirituality that provides people with perspectives and methods to discover their lives as meaningful or to make them so. All these modes of meaning, even the non-religious systems of meaning, reveal themselves more and more as a very particular form of faith. They are about convictions which, upon closer inspection, can never entirely be tested scientifically or rationally, although certain parts of the life-views demonstrate a certain plausibility. No one thrives without a form of faith! It is the ground of hope without which a humane and liveable human life becomes impossible and people end up in neurotic conditions or seek refuge in all sorts of *mirabilia*, horoscope, meditation techniques...

Hence the need today for interreligious and inter-ideological (inter-worldview or inter-convictional) dialogue, even in upbringing and education. This dialogue needs to take a double movement: *ad intra*, i.e. a loyal and critical conversation with one's own, *in casu* Christian tradition *and ad extra*, i.e. a candid but equally critical conversation with other worldviews and convictions, both religious and non-religious. Every religion is particular, and it is precisely out of this particularity that a religion accedes an other ideology or religion and enters in conversation with it honestly and courageously. It does not, however, allow one's own particularity to evaporate in a 'neutral universality' and likewise does not have the pretence to raise one's own particularity as the only universal truth to which the other particularities are then reduced. According to Levinas this conversation with the other needs to be a conversation without compromises and cheap concessions. It is a conversation that does not rest on strategy or cunning, tact or diplomacy, likewise not on formal tolerance, not even on sympathy and friendship. It concerns a dialogue that does not sacrifice one's own ideology to the interesting exoticism of the other, but that, starting from the conversation with one's own tradition, is based on attention and watchfulness to who the other truly is.

¹ E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx. Volume VI. Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, pp. 609-610.

Thus we can also better understand and deepen our own ideology. It likewise means acknowledging and naming that which is irreconcilable and irresolvable *and* preventing that this ends up in forms of violence, denial, domination. It concerns “the search for a proximity beyond the ideas exchanged, a proximity that lasts even after dialogue has become impossible”.² A true learning process that must transpire both courageously as well as non-violently.³

This means that in Don Bosco’s spirit, education takes seriously the dimension of meaning, spirituality and religion as an ‘anthropological constant’ (Schillebeeckx).⁴ One should not let this dimension be overpowered, under pressure from the present post-Christian mentality, by all forms of vague, horizontal and non-religious or non-Christian spiritualities. Such social and cultural correctness destroys the source out of which Salesian education derives its educational inspiration, as is summarised in the life-motto of Don Bosco: *Da mihi animas*. What ultimately concerns him is not only the material, affective, intellectual, professional and social well-being of his youngsters, but also and especially their spiritual development. For him an authentic religious life does not stand separated from all the rest. It actually forms the embedment and inspiration for the other dimensions of human well-being. One indeed also strives for and develops those other dimensions in the name of the Christian view on integral meaning and ultimate wholeness. Hence spiritual and religious upbringing belong to the essential goals of the Salesian pedagogical project. Cutting away upbringing from the spiritual, meaning, and religious dimension of human existence, as can be discovered today in various modern and postmodern pedagogical views, does fundamental injustice to the concept of integral upbringing that is so dear to Don Bosco and the Salesian tradition. Moreover, annulling the particular Christian interpretation of meaning, transcendence and religion in Don Bosco by reducing it to a general and neutral form of spirituality does equal injustice to the Salesian education project. On the other hand, this emphasis on the Christian particularity of ‘*religione*’ in Don Bosco does not mean that there would be no place in the Salesian pedagogical project for conversation with other particular systems of meaning (world views) and religions. Such place is present precisely on the basis of the Salesian thought on ‘assistance’, namely openness for and nearness to the young people the way they are and the way they come to us.

2. Bi-dimensionality of human religion: finitude and infinitude

In search of an interpretation-key for religion that can do justice to both Don Bosco’s concerns as well as to current challenges, let us find inspiration along with Levinas in an interpretation of human desire in line with Plato. He describes eros as a “child of indigence

² E. LEVINAS, *Alterity and Transcendence*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 87.

³ For further reflection on inter-religious and inter-convictional or inter-ideological dialogue, see our publication: “Dialogue of Transcendence: A Levinasian Perspective on the Anthropological-Ethical Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue,” in: *Journal of Communication & Religion*, 37 (2014), nr. 1, Spring, pp. 2-28.

⁴ The anthropological constant refers to the essential dimensions of the human person adequately and integrally understood. Cf. D. MINCH, “Re-examining Edward Schillebeeckx’s Anthropological Constants: An Ontological Perspective,” in: S. VAN ERP, C. ALPERS, C. CIMORELLI (eds.), *Edward Schillebeeckx and the Theology of Public Life*, London, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016, pp. 27-30.

and abundance".⁵ This suggests that eros as desire is driven by a double movement, namely need and lack on the one hand, and fullness and abundance on the other. At first sight our human striving from the experience of shortage and lack, namely from the negativity of what we do not have and yet need: "appetite".⁶ Hence we do not remain affixed in ataraxia or in an unmoved manner coincide with ourselves, but in a dynamic way — avid and passionate, driven — go in search for that which can resolve and fulfil our shortage. Plato, however, also discovers in human eros another movement, namely a fullness that strives to 'pour out' itself. Desire does not lock itself up in itself but moves outwards, not because it is need of something else, but in order to give itself to the other. Levinas characterises this as the "insatiable desire — not because it corresponds to an infinite hunger, but because it is not an appeal for food. This desire is insatiable, but not because of our finitude".⁷ This desire beyond need "is a more within a less that awakens with its most ardent and most ancient flame a thought given to thinking more than it thinks. Here is a desire of a different order than that of affectivity or the hedonic activity by which the desirable is invested, attained, and identified as an object of need (...). The negativity of the 'in-' of infinity hollows out a desire that could not be filled, that nourishes itself from its own growth, that exalts itself as desire, and that grows distant from satisfaction insofar as it approaches the desirable. A desire that does not identify as need does. A desire without hunger, and also without end [*sans faim et aussi sans fin*]; a desire for the infinite as desire for what is beyond being, which is stated in the word 'dis-inter-estedness'. This is transcendence and desire for the Good".⁸

The paradox, however, according to Plato, is that in both forms of eros, poverty and wealth go together. Not only is it actually about two forms of desire, but both are also marked by poverty and wealth, meaning to say by an interaction between both albeit in different ways. In its reaching towards the other, desire is also a way of enjoying, namely a way to acquire independence via dependence. In the relationship to the object that must offer solace, desire likewise finds satisfaction. Desire fulfils itself as the wealth of poverty. We enjoy what we eat, we savour what we need in order to live and live well. I am happy with my needs, I live of my needs and my needs themselves provide me with pleasures and gratifications as well. Without hunger you cannot enjoy delicious food. Perhaps we deplore our neediness, but this sadness is not final because it is transformed into the pleasure of devouring the other in and through that devouring itself. In other words, finitude is at first sight perhaps negative, but upon closer inspection again not. We are not merely 'thrown', as Heidegger suggests; our finitude is not without delight. The striving that ensues from finitude does not only express emptiness but also the fullness of the striving itself.

On the other hand, as child of wealth eros is also marked by need and thus by the coincidence of wealth and poverty but now as the poverty of wealth: "Need is the poverty as source of riches, in contrast with desire, which is the poverty of riches",⁹ "the indigence of wealth itself".¹⁰ The wealth of desire that is insatiable manifests itself as the need — the

⁵ E. LEVINAS, *Proper Names*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 113.

⁶ E. LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 30.

⁷ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity. An essay on exteriority*, The Hague/Boston/Londo221n, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979, p. 63.

⁸ E. LEVINAS, *God, death, and time*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 221.

⁹ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 115.

¹⁰ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 63.

inner impulse — to develop oneself and to give to the other to which it reaches: As insatiable longing it strives not for gratification of itself, since it is a “desire without deficiency”.¹¹ Well then, precisely as desire that is not directed at gratification of itself, it can direct itself entirely to the other than itself for the sake of that other. “The desire without satisfaction hence takes cognisance of the alterity of the other”.¹² This is also a form of hunger, albeit a special form: “The desirable, namely the other, does not satisfy my desire, it hollows me, nourishing me somehow with new hungers,” namely the hunger to be for and with the other. Here, desire turns out to be disinterestedness, goodness, radical generosity, “insatiable compassion”, as Marmelodova in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* looks at Rakolnikov, the murderer, in his despair.¹³ This desire as a need, which needs to go beyond every need, is “burning with a fire that is not need extinguished by saturation”.¹⁴ “The relation with the other challenges me, empties me of myself and keeps me on emptying me by showing me ever new sources. I did not know I was so rich, but I don’t have the right to keep anything anymore”.¹⁵ Because of this surplus, Levinas calls this goodness full of desire a hunger that never ceases, rather a hunger that infinitely increases: “the marvel of infinity in the finitude”.¹⁶ Thus insatiable desire is a fullness that is at the same time need and necessity, namely a fullness that is not fullness enough, a nearness to the other that is never near enough. This infinite desire — a desire that ‘infiniteises’ itself — thus reveals an inverted world: the emptiness of fullness, a fullness that bursts open, a fullness that does not take delight in itself and thus does not suffocate but turns itself ‘extra-versively’ towards the other than itself, without stalling. And this not because it needs the other but because in all its wealth it attunes itself — rather because in all its wealth, in spite of itself, it is attuned — to the other than itself with the intention of acknowledging, confirming and promoting the other. Hence this desire never rests in itself but it deepens itself time and again: every end is a new beginning!

This analysis of the double dimension of eros, with its paradoxical relationship between poverty and wealth, can simply be applied to religion. With this we go against the often used thesis, namely that religion would be a doctrine or system of doctrines and thus would be true. This thesis is criticised and rightly so. The positive reverse-side of this critique is that religion primarily has an existential significance in the sense that it is anchored anthropologically in the desire of humans, in their viscerality, in their emotionality. Then only afterwards can it develop into a ‘system of doctrines’ or a ‘world view’. And according to the bi-dimensionality of human desire, as we have sketched above, we can state that religion is also bi-dimensional. On the one hand, religion is the answer to our finitude, or rather a way of dealing with this finitude making use of all sorts of stories, symbols and rituals. Religion thus as a “need for salvation”.¹⁷ The paradox is that this need-religion, just as this applies to all human need, is equally a source of gratification. Even though we are dependent on salvation, in and through our striving for and our experience of salvation (by

¹¹ E. LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other*, p. 29.

¹² E. LEVINAS, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in: A. LINGIS (ed.), *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, 47-59, p. 56.

¹³ E. LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other*, 27, 30.

¹⁴ E. LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other*, p. 33.

¹⁵ E. LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other*, p. 30.

¹⁶ E. LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other*, p. 34.

¹⁷ E. LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other*, p. 29.

God, Christ... as Saviour), we also reach independence and fullness — call it ‘heaven’ if you will — not only as a reward but in and through the experience of salvation itself, already now in this world as a ‘valley of tears’. This will be made even clearer in the next part of our argument. Experiencing religion also as need likewise brings forth joy: the wealth of poverty.

On the other hand, religion likewise gives expression to our infinitude that we have discovered in the infinitising of desire. For Levinas it is even so that eros as the ‘sublime desire’, i.e. as desire for and dedication to the other than oneself, puts us precisely on track to the Infinite, *in concreto* to the transcendent Other as the Infinite. The inter-human desire of the one for the other is, for him, literally “à-Dieu” – “unto God”.¹⁸ “The idea of the Infinite, that is, the Infinite in me”,¹⁹ is already God breaking up the consciousness beyond myself, towards – for – the other. The idea of the Infinite, literally the non-finite within the finite, is the idea of the Good in me: “a passivity, or passion, in which desire is recognised, in which the ‘more in the less’ awakens with its most ardent, most noble, and most ancient flame”.²⁰ Below, we shall encounter concretely this religion, this self-surpassing desire, in Don Bosco’s Christian faith in divine love, the *agapè*, which has been poured out into our soul by the Holy Spirit and thus inspires us. This reveals how the human person is a soulmate of God, without thereby losing sight of the fact that the human person substantiates this ensoulment as a finite and sinful being — which precisely sheds light on the need of the human person for salvation and healing. We should likewise not lose sight of the fact that this proximity, or rather this intimacy and immanence of God as the Spirit-of-Love-in-us, also remains transcendent, wholly other and inaccessible. In other words God keeps on withdrawing into God’s invisible mystery.

Before we further go into the double dimension of religion, just as Don Bosco has made it the inspiration and animation of his life and of his pedagogical project, we pose one more consideration. However clearly distinct the two forms of religion may be, based on human finitude and infinitude, in the concrete forms of religion — in our case, of Christianity — they cannot be separated. All expressions and shapes of religion, i.e. all narratives, forms of prayer, symbols and rituals, including the truths of faith or the so-called ‘dogmas’, are marked by both dimensions. They give shape to both the dimension of finitude as well as of infinitude in religion, even though the one form expresses more and the other form less depending on the circumstances and the context wherein the religious form is experienced. In all forms of meaning, spirituality and religion, however particular they may be, there remain aspects of emptiness and fullness, *and* of their mutual connection: the wealth of poverty and the poverty of wealth. Hence in what follows on our discussion of the Salesian pedagogical project we cannot — and shall not — separate the religious forms but treat them as integrated, paying attention to how both relate to the finitude as well as to the infinitude of human desire.

3. Religious meaning out of human finitude

Since the human person is a needy being, not only materially, relationally and socially, but also on the level of meaning, the different forms of spirituality, religiosity and confessionality present themselves as attempts to provide for the existential and spiritual neediness of the

¹⁸ E. LEVINAS, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. XV.

¹⁹ E. LEVINAS, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 63.

²⁰ E. LEVINAS, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 67.

human person. Religions explicitly want to give an answer to human finitude that shows itself especially in all forms of powerlessness and suffering, including mortality and death, that seem to question all endeavours for happiness and meaning. At the same time, there likewise is moral imperfection or 'guilt' and 'sin', as the traditional Christian jargon has it. Not only as creatures, and thus as finite beings, are we imperfect; likewise on the level of morals are we fragile and imperfect.

3.1. Religion as salvation

Religion has always been an answer to human needs, however great or small. People travel to pilgrimage places to pray to Mary to intercede for them, to spare them from danger and sickness, or to heal them, not only bodily but also in their relations and last but not least spiritually. They go and pray for themselves and for others, in the awareness that there is much that they need and that they do not have the power to provide for it themselves. They are aware that they are in need of help and salvation; they feel 'salvation-needy'. Hence they — humbly — step out of themselves and turn towards the 'other' — supernatural — world to find solace there for that which lies beyond their own power.

Unfortunately, some believers and often unbelievers or especially post-believers have looked rather contemptuously at this 'need-religion' as if it were an inferior form of religion. They actually find that in such a need-religion God is reduced to a 'problem-solver', a magical power, or a means and an instrument of one's own self-development. This critical approach through 'religiously correct' thinking certainly has its merits, as will be made apparent below, but it can also be an expression of haughty arrogance. From their exalted ivory towers they think they know better... until they naturally are affected by one or the other disease or major accident whereby they end up in misery and defeat. And then they often find it no longer beneath them to light candles before the image of Our Blessed Lady on the mantel or in a chapel.

An honest, and at the same time humble, interpretation of religion, however, is not ashamed of acknowledging this need-religion even though it is not given the final word (as will become apparent here below). This also applies to the Christian faith that is not ashamed of speaking about healing and salvation from God-in-Christ, with Mary and the saints as mediators and advocates. In his earthly life Jesus was indeed involved with the finitude, fragility and injuries of ordinary people. Hence he healed the sick and freed people from all sorts of awkward situations like possession by 'evil spirits' (cf. *infra*). It is no coincidence that Christ is called the Saviour in imitation of God who in the Old Testament is called 'goël', 'the one who disentangles'.

3.2. Don Bosco's Christian supernaturalism: Appreciative and critical questioning

For Don Bosco the Christian religion, just as he had received it in his youth and had deepened it during his theological training, was strongly characterised by what we today would call a form of supernaturalism. There, Jesus Christ as Saviour took centre stage as well as the perspective of eternal life to which people in this life were headed. The idea of eschatology or the ultimate goal of life is placed above or beyond this world in the 'supernatural'. The fullness of life is not of this world. Hence the emphasis on the 'the last things' of heaven and hell, and on the huge importance of moral life in this earthly valley of tears as

a way of not only anticipating but also deserving the 'life in God'. This gift of and the way towards supernatural life is mediated, moreover, by the Church and the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist and confession.

One notices how this religious supernaturalism, however positive it may be, is interpreted in a strongly individualistic manner whereby the category of salvation is at the same time elevated to a central category of Christian life, with the risk of one-sidedness and absolutizing. In the history of theology this tendency acquired the name *soteriologism* where its first traces can be found in Anselm's *Coram Deo* in his work *Cur Deus homo?* Essential to this approach is that, in order to be able to speak of Jesus as salvation, all emphasis must first be put on the radical situation of calamity of the human person. In this anthropology of calamity, all attention is focused on the sinful and lost person. That calamity does not only involve humanity in general, but also and especially every human person individually. However realistic and honest it may be, this supernaturalism leads inadvertently to individualism. Every person is as an individual sinful, powerless, inadequate, immersed in evil, in short a 'poor sinner' as it is echoed in the *Hail Mary*. But at the same time the relationship between God and humans is reduced to an opposition between human fragility and finitude, and God's divine power and mercy. Moral, inflicted evil is completely imputed on me as the first person. The entire life of faith comes to stand in the 'I'-form: I am the one who commits evil and falls short whereby I end up in deep misery. The only thing left for the person is to turn oneself in trusting faith to God and to surrender oneself unconditionally to God's saving grace that by the power of that grace can purify him from all sin. If this is the only way to experience the relationship with God and Christ, then it leads almost by itself to a fideistic experience of the faith. I am not capable of saving myself. From my naked, poor existence stepping before the presence of God, I am aware that I am and remain lost as long as I think and act of myself. That is meaningful as long as the person is not locked up in his lostness, linked to the cultivation of a 'mere sense of dependence' (Schleiermacher). Being a 'small soul' I can only entrust myself in an unconditional and humble act of surrender to God my Master and Saviour. Only thus do I arrive at my true existence 'before God' (*coram Deo*). And then it is God, and God alone, via the only mediator and saviour, Jesus Christ, who proffers me in an utterly gratuitous manner, without any merit on my part, salvation from my sin and healing from my despair. By means of participating in the sacraments as sources of grace I am elevated to that divine healing grace.

That connects directly to our finitude with all its existential and moral injuries and certainly offers a liberating contribution to our being-human. A religion of salvation arouses strength and trust and hope for the future in the finite and sinful person. But when all emphasis is placed on salvation and supernatural grace from God, an economic idea of religion predominates. The person is seen in the first place as an economic being, a being of deficiency that is in need of the others than oneself in order to develop and fulfil oneself. The negativity of existence takes place, moreover, in a context of shortage and deficiency, namely in a world as a valley of tears. On the religious level the person is in need of salvation and thus of an almighty, saving God. He is the saving answer to all our questions, if not in this earthly valley of tears than indeed after death in an immortal, healed and perfected existence. The risk of such a need-religion²¹ is that the person is reduced to one's smallness and lostness, possibly leading to a cult of self-humiliation and self-chastisement... And with it human responsibility, both for oneself as well as for the others and the world, disappears

²¹ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 102; ID., *Humanism of the Other*, p. 24-25.

entirely into the background. The person is reduced to an immature child that, in its situation of need out of which it cannot remove itself, can only look up in utter dependence and can open itself up without reserve, but also without any merit, to the grace that only God can give. Here, not only is the immaturity of the person emphasised but at the same time a very specific image of God's omnipotence and transcendence is put forth. God's power to face and meet the human need for salvation is inclined to become the measure of God's greatness and majesty. God's transcendence becomes locked up in the role of parent — at times strict, at times mild — towards the person as child. In this manner, injustice is done both towards God as well as towards humans. In a one-sided or exclusively practised need-religion with an economy of salvation, there is little room for God's glory in His creation, no less for the glory of humans as creatures. Where is the strength and the power of humans as the image and likeness of God (see Gen 1,26; Psalm 8), as God's co-creator and representative on earth, who can be approached for their responsibility and talents (see Mt 25)? Where is the special privilege of humans to live in a partnership of trust and covenant with God? Only when need-religion is coupled with a responsibility-religion do humans stand eye to eye with God, become partners of God who have an indispensable role to play in the covenant, now no longer only out of their bottomless emptiness but also out of their powerful fullness and 'divine infinitude' with which they are marked in their souls. We can label this as the need for a religion for adults. For free and responsible beings who stand upright before God and from that independence come to face Him, the others and the world.²² That is one of the essential goals of all education, certainly of religious education.

It is remarkable that Don Bosco did not fall into the trap of infantilising soteriology. That implies a clear link with his choice of a certain pedagogical model: the preventive system which he places entirely in contrast with a repressive system. His vision on the Christian religion as salvation thereby acquired a strong moral dimension. This is simply positive, as we will further make more explicit in this article. At the same time, we cannot deny that the moralistic side of supernaturalism, with its nearly absolute preference for salvation, also has a negative reverse-side. In the slipstream of the present secular resentment with regard to authoritarian and deductive clericalism in and of the church, we must in all honesty dare to acknowledge and criticise the negative effects of Don Bosco's supernaturalism, as a precondition and access to a more emancipatory form of religion that at the same time remains acknowledging the meaning of the soteriological order of Christianity (see the last part of this article).

The repressive system in education starts with the premise that the human person, *in casu* the child or the growing young person, is marked by sinfulness. Education then exists to act in a condemning way against all forms of moral deviation or sin. The preventive system seems to differ from this fundamentally, but that is only partially true. In terms of its approach or method, there is indeed a clear difference. One does not strive for a disciplinary restraining of all forms of debauchery, but rather for a more mild and kind, and at the same time sufficiently intrepid, prevention of misdeeds. Different means are deployed for that purpose: sports and games, music and theatre, studies and work, just as well as religious means like prayer and devotion to Mary, Mass and communion, and regular confession. All this in a context of assistance. The educators should not leave children and young people

²² E. LEVINAS, *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, Baltimore, MA, The John Hopkins University Press, 1990, pp. 11-23: "A Religion for Adults".

alone in their fickleness. They must be with them in order to prevent irregularities and evil and to accompany them along the way to the good. In terms of the fundamental view on the fragility and sinfulness of the educatee, there is actually not much difference between the repressive and the preventive systems. We should not forget, however, that the moral fabric of the preventive system in Don Bosco is wholly intertwined with his Christian supernaturalism as we have sketched above. We cannot deny that preventive education led Don Bosco to interpret the Christian religion in a very moralising way. Religion as a means and method to keep or to bring children and young people on the right path so that they can reach their eternal happiness and thus be saved. Think for instance on the way in which the feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 December) functioned in Don Bosco's educative actions. Not only from the beginning of his work among the youth did he link it with grace, but he also included it pedagogically to appeal to his youngsters to a pure and holy life. Moreover he warned, not without any threatening or moral pressure, that on that day Mary would expel any bad elements from the Oratory or the house.

That is the paradox: via his view on salvation from God for sinful persons, Don Bosco entered into the personal consciences of his youngsters. How often did he not speak during his evening conversations about sin and all the dangers leading to sin, or about the way to a good and pious life? We cannot deny that today we have much difficulty with that moralising claim on the educatee out of fear that such a moral or spiritual abuse of power may arise. Likewise is the memory not far off of what this moralistic claim has done to people in the past, in the name of obedience to the authority from the divine Saviour or of his representatives on earth, by limiting or even taking them hostage in their personal freedom. Today in any case we feel that this is an impermissible moral meddling that must be rejected in order to find the way towards a realistic and at the same time emancipatory thought on salvation.

4. Religious meaning out of human infinitude

The question, however, is whether in Don Bosco no indication is to be found for a less moralising thought on salvation that makes less of a moral claim, and that then connects both finitude and infinitude with each other. A thought on God's benevolence and grace that beyond a one-sided and reductionist salvation-religion does not morally tie up but rather brings the human person to freedom. Fortunately we do find in Don Bosco this other trace. From his own experiences in his youth and from his involvement in youth, he has indeed anchored the whole of his thought on education in *agapè* or *caritas* as the core of the Christian faith. He thereby overcomes the risk of a one-sided and narrow-minded finitude-religion. *Caritas* or *agapè* is after all not an expression of human finitude but of divine and human infinitude. To be sure, religion is always a search for an answer to human deficiency, which likewise takes shape in the symbolic order of signs and rituals, *in casu* the sacraments, as was made clear above. But religion, in particular the Christian religion, is not to be reduced to that. Not only God is the Infinite, but even the human person is marked by and is bearer of infinitude. Religion — and Christianity — should give and want to give expression to that reality. As creature and image of God, the human person is not only marked by all sorts of forms of fragility; humans are just as much ensouled by the Infinite. Thanks to this divine élan, the human person is in this world a representative and sacrament of God. This means that religion does not only have to do with human weakness but also and especially

with human strength: in the finite person resides the Infinite in such a way that the Infinite moves the finite beyond itself towards another, the other.

4.1. *Amorevolezza anchored in caritas*

What stands out in the study of what Don Bosco understands with religion is that he does not speak first about God and the supernatural but about love, *caritas*, or the love of neighbour. As a believer it is clear to him that education does not primarily ensue from his own choice and preference, but rather goes back to the Biblical revelation and inspiration. Education is an expression and realisation of the calling towards love of neighbour.

This emphasis on *caritas* is, moreover, not coincidental due to another reason. He indeed links it with the pedagogical *amorevolezza*. In order to be sure that *amorevolezza* would not be misunderstood as sentimental love, with all its possible perversions and deviations, he anchors it directly and completely in the love of neighbour. The *affective* love of *amorevolezza*, with its tangible and perceptible expressions of cordiality, friendliness and tenderness should not be detached from *effective* love: doing good, or the commitment to do good, to children and youngsters. Don Bosco literally means the benevolence (*benevolenza*) that expresses itself in the good treatment (*buon trattamento*) of the youngsters and children entrusted to him. *Amorevolezza* runs the risk of being perverted into formalism or hypocrisy if it is not incarnated in good will and good deeds. This is undoubtedly connected to ethics that emphasises *beneficentia* that flows forth directly from *benevolentia*, which in its turn surpasses affective love. It ultimately concerns the doing of the good to and for the other. Beneficence should not be merely external or for the show, but should be inspired by the will to do good. This choice of the will for the good stands at the same time for the appeal to integrate and to expand affective love. That is precisely what Don Bosco wants to emphasise with his internal linking of *amorevolezza* with *caritas*.²³ For that purpose he refers to the hymn to love in the first Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 13): ‘The practice of the preventive system is based entirely on the words of Saint Paul: Love is patient; it does not insist on its own way; it bears all things; hopes all things, endures all things.’²⁴ The criteria for judging the practice of *amorevolezza* as a pedagogical treatment does not flow forth from *amorevolezza* itself, but rather from the love of neighbour which should inspire and orientate it.

From the Biblical tradition two mutually complementary aspects of the love of neighbour can be indicated. On the one hand, there is the golden rule: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ (Mt 7,12a).²⁵ We can call the golden rule the minimum form of the love of neighbour. From the narrative of the Good Samaritan, on the other hand, the perspective of an exuberant but at the same time realistic and feasible love for the other is opened. Mercy that not only reveals one’s being touched and moved by the suffering of the other but that also expresses itself earthly and bodily in forms of nearness and decisive assistance, and that moreover appeals to the innkeeper — a professional with provisions and organisation, namely his inn — and by means of money makes services and goods

²³ See among others R. BIESMANS, *Amorevolezza*, Brussel (Sint-Pieters-Woluwe), Don Bosco Provincialaat, (s.d.), pp. 31-33.

²⁴ G. BOSCO, *Il sistema preventivo*, 84/429-432. Cited by R. BIESMANS, *Amorevolezza*, p. 32.

²⁵ In its negative formulation: ‘And what you hate, do not do to anyone’ (Tob 4,15a).

negotiable.²⁶ Connected to this and inspired by the last judgement in Matthew 25 (in line with Isaiah 58), the Christian tradition developed the seven bodily works of mercy: to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned, to bury the dead. Parallel to this the Christian tradition also developed a list of seven spiritual works of mercy: to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to admonish sinners, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences willingly, to comfort the afflicted, to pray for the living and the dead. Unfortunately these are now less, or almost no longer, known. But perhaps they offer unexpected possibilities for a Christian inspired education of *amorevolezza* anchored in *caritas*. Six of the seven render the sensitivity of a concrete loving treatment of young people and children in all spiritual needs: to educate the weak within society and families; to assist in word and deed youngsters in doubt and in search of answers and not abandon them to their fate; to provide shelter, support and comfort to disadvantaged youngsters; to try and bring back wayward youngsters (truancy, alcohol and drug use, petty criminality) on the right track; to offer chances through thoughtful tolerance to unruly and difficult youngsters and not simply write them off; to look for forms of rehabilitation, forgiveness and reconciliation for youngsters who make life difficult for their educators due to their indifference or bullying and not simply send them away (cf. infra). Upon closer inspection the spiritual works of mercy, applied to an education context, puts us on the track of Salesian reasonableness. It is a way of concretising *amorevolezza* with common sense and patience with young people who, as a result of their difficult circumstances in life and psycho-affective vulnerability, do not benefit from unrelenting hardness. They require counselling that is adapted and tailored to their needs and that takes into account emotionally and practically their inabilities and abilities for growth, i.e. not only their finitude but also their infinitude.

4.2. Anchoring pedagogical love in God's love

With this, however, not everything has already been said about the anchoring of *amorevolezza* in the love of neighbour. *Caritas* after all is in its turn anchored in the love of God. Here we arrive at the religious root of pedagogical love. In the Christian context, entirely in the spirit of Don Bosco, it has to do with the faith in God, the Infinite. This does not mean that whoever does not believe in God cannot experience nor substantiate the pedagogical *caritas* and *amorevolezza*, since it is about fundamental human possibilities and skills. But for a Christian, the love of neighbour in itself is not a mere human reality. It is after all the reflection and concrete earthly realisation of its own source: the love of God for humans and the love of humans for God that ensues from it. As answer to God's love, the love of neighbour loses its first place and it receives a responsorial structure. The love that comes upon us, literally 'comes towards us', both from the other as well as from the wholly Other, immediately implies the calling not to keep that love to ourselves but to let it flow out to others. The extravagant love of God becomes the appeal and the model for the love of human persons in this world. The appeal to love our neighbour flows forth directly from the confession of faith in a God who has created us with His grace of an exuberant and

²⁶ For further deepening in the narrative of the Good Samaritan, see among others our publication: "The Bodiliness of Love. The Narrative of the Good Samaritan Gives to Thought on Our Responsibility for the Other," in: R. BURGGRAEVE, *Each Other's Keeper? Essays on Ethics and the Biblical Wisdom of Love*, Trichur (Kerala, India), Marymatha Publications, 2009, pp. 49-99.

totally disproportionate love. Or as John puts it: 'Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another' (1 Jn 4,11) and 'Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or a sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God most love their brothers and sisters also' (1 Jn 4,20-21).

This implies that the Christian religion, as source and embedment of *amorevolezza*, can become a form of deep emotionality (an expression analogous to deep ecology). For Don Bosco that was unambiguously so. The deep religious emotionality of God's love wherein we are and live forms the soul and ensoulment of pedagogical love.²⁷ Educators are called to imitate God's love. That makes a Christian-inspired Salesian education into a pedagogy of imitation, in the awareness that that imitation often runs through the crooked paths of imperfection and ethical failings. Moreover, we can state that the goal of education flows forth from the divinely inspired love. In and through pedagogical love, children and youngsters are initiated into the discovery of the meaning-fullness of love and are called upon to substantiate it. For that they are presented with inspiring examples, not only the saints but also ordinary people, like Mama Margherita (Don Bosco's mother who assisted him in his pedagogical work in Turin). It is no coincidence that Don Bosco wrote for his youngsters accessible biographies about his paragon boys: Domenico Savio, Michele Magone, Francesco Besucco.²⁸

This link between love of neighbour or pedagogical love and the love of God presupposes a certain conception of God. In the Bible, God is referred to in exalted ethical terms — a unique means to indicate infinitude in a qualitative way. The Infinite One in the First Testament is spoken of and professed as the Merciful One and the Just One. That is precisely why God reveals Himself to Moses as 'I am who am', as the One who walks along with Moses to liberate his people from slavery and alienation (Ex 3,13-14), the Infinite One who saves the finite from its subjugation. In the Second Testament, Jesus neither speaks in a neutral nor non-committal manner about God but qualifies Him by means of linking His Name with the idea of kingship and lordship (the Reign of God). He then attributes to this lordship a paradoxical meaning by turning it around, as it were, and connecting it with a serving and liberating approach towards people. Through this ethical *Umwertung* of the power category 'lordship' Jesus announces no exalted, majestic and almighty God who sets his foot down on the world at will. He speaks of a God who comes near and who rids Himself of his terrifying majesty and engages Himself with the poor, those who weep, the hungry (cf. de Beatitudes). Thus Jesus announces the Infinite One as a kind and merciful God. It is moreover apparent in the Gospels that Jesus not only proclaims this kind Infinite One, but that he also substantiated his own message. He did not so much as added deeds to words, as a kind of exemplification or illustration of his word, but before everything else he acted and

²⁷ In the thought, life and pedagogical deeds of Don Bosco, the Holy Virgin Mary, Immaculate Conception (8 December), Mother and Help of Christians, played an important, even essential, role. Certainly as a form of religion that tends to the finitude of human persons (cf. supra). At the same time, the reference to Our Lady as Mother of God and our Mother can be seen as an understandable expression and concretisation — in the nineteenth century — of the deep emotional religiosity of God's love that creates, embraces, both heals and perfects as well as inspires and arouses every child, every youngster, every educator, every person, towards love that infinities itself.

²⁸ A. GIRAUDO (ed.), *John Bosco's Lives of Young People. Biographies of Dominic Savio, Michael Magone and Francis Besucco* (Introductory essay and historical notes, by Aldo Giraud), Roma, LAS, 2004.

by means of his words he made clear what his actions and deeds meant, namely that God begins to reign when love begins to reign.

Jesus speaks time and again about God in terms of ethical excellence and not merely in descriptive, distant and abstract terms. God is not formulated in terms of alienating, theoretical and metaphysical categories or principles. God is always a Someone, a You, a person, who is understood as loving, literally 'infinite good'. He is touched by what affects and befalls people. This implies that God is sensitive and touchable and this in the depths of God's being. We can call this the sensitivity or the passion of God. He is no abstract-philosophical principle of explanation but rather a living Someone who is affected up to the marrow of his bones by what happens to people in the world and in their history. The God whom Jesus professed and proclaimed is no sacral nor numinous unknown that eludes all our apprehension as a transcendent explanatory principle. His transcendence is always marked by His ethical infinitude, namely His unconditional concern with people and with the world. The Biblical God is no 'unmoved Mover' (Aristotle) but on the contrary the Infinite One who is touched and moved *and* thus is touchable and affectable: the 'moved Mover', a 'Deus compassibilis' — an expression that Bernard of Clairvaux has bequeathed to us. That is precisely what lies expressed at the root of the word mercy, namely *ruchama*, that refers back to *rechem* or womb. God is the one who as 'womb' bears the other in oneself until it is born (and so that it be born): thanks to the goodness of the other I can be born and stand upright. God's being is in essence not closed upon itself but precisely open and turned outwards, dedicated to the other than itself: His creation and His people. God experiences birth pangs until His creation and His humankind come to life and development, to healing and perfection.

We can likewise call this the self-emptying or *kenosis* of God. The Infinite One does not boast of the glory and majesty of his loftiness. He makes himself so small, as it were, that He withdraws from his omnipotence and omniscience in order to unite Himself with small, injured people, including the slave (cf. Phil 2). His self-emptying is no masochistic self-humiliation but a descending to the level of the human person in order to lift up the crushed person above itself to divine heights. It is about an ethically qualified self-emptying up to the point of suffering. A suffering with and for the other, with an eye to the liberation and healing of the other. This self-emptying that binds itself with the vulnerable and injured person takes place, moreover, in all discretion without any outward display of self-aggrandising glory. God unites Himself *incognito* with the trampled and the humiliated. This self-emptying manifests itself as a true *anachoresis* or withdrawal. God is so modest and humble that He unites Himself imperceptibly with the poor, the widow and the orphan, the unsightly and the persecuted. His greatest infinitude is at the same time His humble smallness: binding Himself invisibly and without obtrusiveness with the other, His creation.

This brings us to an important and at the same time remarkable insight: the paradoxical relationship between ethics and grace. It is precisely the ethics of God that is for us grace. In Christianity our thought on grace is determined ethically. It is thanks to the ethics of the other that we realise what grace is: that which the other signifies for us and does to us. Consequently, grace is no mere lucky coincidence but is based on the commitment of someone who turns towards us and treats us with grace, meaning to say with ethical excellence. Hence in Christianity we link grace with the love of God (cf. supra). 'God is love', as we read in John (1 Jn 4,16), and that love befalls us as an awesome goodwill and grace: infinitude as a super-abundant gift. Moreover, God precedes us with his love just as John once again puts it: 'In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us' (1 Jn

4,10) (cf. 1 Jn 4,19b). The grace of God's ethics is therefore undeserved. It is proffered to us freely, without our having been able to make any claim to it beforehand.

That the other has loved us first makes us automatically think of the inter-generational relationship between parents and children. It is not the children who have chosen their parents and it is likewise not they who loved them first. In the children's birth and existence, they have been preceded by the love of their begetters and parents. In the relationship between the generations, love reveals itself as an asymmetry of the love that children receive because it is gifted by their parents. Only then are they able to give back love. The same fundamental structure can be found in the Biblical, Jewish and Christian, religion. God is qualified as Father, as the One who gifts life: 'ex abundantia cordis' as qualified infinitude. But God is likewise qualified as Mother, as the Merciful One, as was already discussed above. This asymmetry of the love of God, Father-Mother, that befalls us as pure undeserved grace, is reflected in the parent-child-relationship. It is then not coincidental that Don Bosco qualifies the educator as father wherein, at the same time, he also integrates all sorts of characteristics of the mother. His pedagogical love finds its source and inspiration in the infinitude of God's fatherly and motherly love.

4.3. God's love become flesh: an open revelation

The thought of Don Bosco on the religious foundation of pedagogical love, however, is not abstract thought on God but is explicitly linked with Christ, the Son of God.

God's love that precedes all things and brings all things to existence, is in the Christian religion still further extended in the insight and the conviction of the incarnation of God's infinite love in Jesus. 'God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him' (1 Jn 4,9). The Word of the Infinite One has become human in the finite and earthly, tangible, Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Christ or God's Anointed. Through this, God's touchableness by and involvement in the world and in humans are not only revealed but have also become an earthly reality, without however losing their transcendence. The greatest paradox of Christianity is perhaps indeed that in a contingent and historical — finite — human being, the Infinite One has descended. He himself has become history but remains at the same time eluding that history. The Infinite One is greater and always other than any form of history whatsoever.

The revelation of God in and through Jesus is not exclusive but an inclusive revelation. In the 'incarnational' being, words and deeds of Jesus lie his utter uniqueness, his radical newness and fullness, his irreplaceable and definitive significance. This uniqueness of Jesus, however, needs to be understood properly. It is all too often thought of and lived out in an exclusive manner whereby an isolated utterance of Peter (Acts 4,12) is cited and absolutized: 'There is salvation in no one else'. Uniqueness, however, does not need to be automatically understood as exclusivity; it can also be understood in an 'inclusive', worldwide and universal manner.²⁹ Precisely insofar as Jesus the Christ in his solidary humanity is the incarnation of the self-emptying and preferential Infinite One, his being-human provides us an essential criterion for a universal understanding of God's incarnation in Christ. Only a

²⁹ An inclusive interpretation of God's becoming human in Christ indeed promotes the dialogue with other religions for it can thus be acknowledged that God's love likewise seeks expression in the appearance, words and deeds of prophets and people other than Jesus, at least when authentic love is present.

'humane humanity', i.e. a radical association with vulnerable and injured persons, can be *le milieu divin*, the place where God reveals and incarnates Himself. From there we can derive that wherever this solidary humanity takes place, God's love is incarnated. Everyone who substantiates the preferential human kindness of Jesus allows God and God's Reign 'to be born'. That Jesus is revelation does not only mean that he incarnates and reveals God but also that every human being who in one's life praxis associates with vulnerable and injured fellow humans makes God and God's Reign present. In and through Jesus we discover this universality. Paul expresses this by calling Jesus Christ the 'new Adam', namely the new divine Human wherein all humans are included (Rom 5,12-21; 1 Cor 15,45-47).³⁰ Just like the old Adam of Genesis needs to be understood inclusively as 'every human', thus should the new Adam, Jesus, be understood as the inclusive human. He reveals how every human person in one's finitude is the bearer of the Infinite, with that difference that Jesus was without sin and that the human person is a 'fallen person'. By associating ourselves with Jesus' person, praxis and proclamation, we see that wherever liberating humanity takes place, God becomes human and makes history. To become Christian means that we are allowed to be, and that we must be, God's incarnation. We do so in all humility, in the awareness of our finitude and especially our moral fragility and imperfection. We may always rely on how "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5,5).

This certainly applies to pedagogical love as well. A Christian educator is allowed to experience this love as living and acting 'in Christ' and as a way of making God's love concrete for youngsters: incarnating a bit of the Infinite in the finite. Don Bosco understood this well. He regularly interpreted pedagogical acts as Christological acts. Pedagogical love is reflected in Jesus' love. At first sight, Jesus seems to be the foremost example of all pedagogical and humane acts. Upon closer inspection, the reference to Christ becomes more than Jesus as example, thus more than an ethical interpretation of Jesus. It is also and especially about the theological significance of Jesus insofar as he makes God's infinite love present in flesh and blood, to be sure finite and imperfect but still real. According to the Christian faith the educator becomes an *alter Christus*. In the way in which he makes his love for children and youngsters palpable, he gives a tangible shape to God's love just as it has found its definitive and unique expression in the human Jesus. It is no coincidence that Don Bosco time and again anchored *amorevolezza* 'in Christ' and thus links it with the incarnation of God's love in Jesus. We can call this the 'mystical' and 'spiritual' soul of pedagogical love.

4.4. No Christian religion without sacramental, 'effective signs'

That in the historical human Jesus, God's Word has become flesh and lived among us (Jn 1,14) has led the Christian faith to call Jesus Christ the primordial sacrament of God (Schillebeeckx).³¹ By sacrament is meant a sign, a ritual or a symbolic act wherein by means of word, gesture and material elements (water, oil, ...) the infinite love of God for humans in their concrete life contexts becomes accessible. The sacrament is no extrinsic sign that refers

³⁰ See also: Gaudium et Spes, 22 (: "Only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light... Christ, the new Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear". Cited by Pope Francis in his post-synodal exhortation 'Amoris Laetitia', n. 77).

³¹ E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, Lunham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 1963.

to a meaning outside itself. On the contrary, it is an intrinsic sign that by itself incarnates its meaning at the moment of the ritual act and performs it to people. That is why in theology the sacrament is called an 'effective sign' (*signum efficax*). In its performance it makes true the meaning to which it refers. More specifically, the sacraments and also the sacramentals³² elevate both the person as well as the community who participate in them to the order of God's grace: His love that both shows kindness to and at the same time assists human persons. It is a blessing from God that in its heteronomous gift does not crush humans but arouses, heals and opens them up to a life of love. Human finitude is raised to God's infinitude whereby the finitude of humans is transformed and thus shares in God's infinitude. In that sense, the human person experiences through the sacramental signs in a very characteristic manner the wealth of one's poverty, thanks to the wealth of God's infinitude. In the sacramental signs and rituals, infinitude and finitude are confluent.

Sacraments and sacramentals directly evoke the concept of 'sacramentality'. In daily life, all sorts of forms and actions can acquire a symbolic meaning, in the sense that they have not only a direct, literal meaning but also refer to something other than itself. Thus that famous cigarette stub on the work desk of Leonardo Boff is more than what it is: as the remains of his father's last cigarette it refers to his father himself.³³ Thus the cigarette stub acquires a 'sacramental' meaning in the broad sense of the term: it makes present his father, even though he is no longer around. Even human behaviour, for instance a form of faithful love or an unselfish act of small goodness can mean more than what it is: It can evoke something 'higher' or 'deeper', namely divine love. Those human forms of love then acquire a sacramental meaning even though they remain a finite form of the Infinite. From their finite visibility they refer to the invisible Infinite One; stronger still, they express not only divine love in a tangible form, they are also borne and inspired by that divine love. It is not surprising that both in religious (namely, Christian) as well as in daily language use, the love of the other — *the Other* — is labelled a 'blessing': the infinite that befalls us in our finitude as gift, so much so that our finitude is raised up to the infinite. In conversation with Jacques-Marie Pohier, the French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto³⁴ explains how blessing and benediction are necessary and meaningful in human life, and how the sacramental forms

³² Aside from the sacraments, the sacramentals indeed need to be mentioned as well even though they often get no or (too) little attention. "Sacramentals are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments: they signify effects, particularly of a spiritual kind, which are obtained through the Church's intercession. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican II, December 4, 1963, n. 60). Examples of sacramentals are: foot washing, stations of the cross, veneration of the cross, sign of the cross, the use of holy water or blessed candles, processions, pilgrimages, exorcisms, and all kinds of consecrations and blessings... along with the blessings of persons, animals, buildings (schools, houses...) and objects (bicycles, airplanes...) that belong to the recognised sacramentals (cf. 'De benedictionibus', 1984). Aside from these, folk religiosity has seen the rise of all sorts of rituals and blessings that accompany and mark daily life. Here perhaps a plea is not out of place to make more use of the sacramentals in the educational context especially when youngsters as a consequence of secularisation or of another confession are not ripe or have difficulty in understanding the meaning of the Christian sacraments or in participating in them.

³³ L. BOFF, *Sacraments of Life: Life of the Sacraments*, Washington, Pastoral Pr., 1987.

³⁴ F. DOLTO (interviewed by Jacques Pohier), "The Power of Blessing over Psychic Identity," in *Concilium: International Journal for Theology*, 2(1985), n° 178, pp. 81-95.

give expression to that. We follow a few of her thoughts precisely because all education, both human as well as religious, is, or rather must be, a form of blessing.

To understand the scope of the blessing, she refers to its opposite, the curse. Along with Chertok, a colleague psychiatrist who treated people under hypnosis, she pointed out how the only one aspect that is not resolved by hypnosis is the curse. Especially the curse at birth, stronger still at conception, seems impossible to rectify. Such a curse exerts such a lasting influence on someone that no single hypnosis is able to do away with the curse. For instance, a curse of which a child has come to be aware via its parents, and which has been aimed at the progenitor or at the child itself, exerts an indelible influence on its entire life including the fruits of its work and its sexuality. In the force of the curse we learn of the significance of the blessing, says Dolto. The blessing of a child as an effective word also has a considerable force. As a form of infinitude, the blessing meets the finiteness and fragility of the child. For the child, it is the assurance of protection and stability in difficult times but also a promise for the future so that the finite is raised beyond itself into the infinite and thus also begins to share in that infinite. The blessing touches the very roots of human being. It is not something incidental but is so strongly interwoven with existence that the blessing determines existence's positive or negative meaning or direction. A blessing reaches farther than the possible intention of the one who pronounced it, farther than the possible expectation of the one who is blessed. A blessing can reach up to the next generation, or even further still. You can encounter people who have the radiant feeling that they may fully trust themselves and the future. Even though at that very moment they may not have so many reasons to believe in it, still they are convinced that the future will be positive because someone they trust has promised it to them. Thus their finiteness acquires a future out of infinitude, into which they are immersed.

A blessing not only accords trust but is likewise a source of strength for ethical actions. It awakens the finite to the infinite! The one upon whom a curse rests is thereby affected by it that one is inclined in turn to continue the curse further. Cursed people thus become cursing people. Likewise in the blessing such a rebounding force resides. The one who is blessed is, as it were, invited and enabled to be a blessing oneself to others. The grace of the blessing awakens in me the ethical appeal to be blessing. Ethics thus finds its grounds not in itself but in grace. The possibility and the appeal to a praxis of blessing is rooted in the emotion, which I experience thanks to the undeserved blessing from someone else. That is the reason why all education rests fundamentally on the emotionality of the blessing, which has a dialogical structure. Being blessed calls us in turn to give that blessing to someone else as grace, and thus as an expression of the infinitude of which we are bearers and which we at the same time receive. Grace precedes ethics while ethics is also itself grace from the one to the other.

According to Dolto, the blessing also bears within it a religious dimension. The one who blesses indeed calls upon the unconditional and the absolute, the divine, the Infinite One. It is then not surprising that in the Christian tradition the blessing has acquired a very important meaning because it is linked to the Infinite One who is characterised as faithful, merciful and loving. By means of blessing people in the name of that God, one tells them that God points to them, distinguishes them and chooses them. The one who blesses makes an appeal to God's grace and entrusts the one being blessed to that grace: 'God bless you and keep you'. This makes me think of my childhood, when before we went to bed we would ask and receive the sign of the cross. It makes me think of the TV-images of a Don Bosco nun who came to tuck the children in her care at the boarding school with the sign of the cross

and a kiss goodnight. Thus the finite human is entrusted to the Infinite One, thanks to the other finite person, the educator, who by means of the gesture of the blessing makes the Infinite One tangible and palpable. In the blessing from God the Infinite One enters into the existence of the finite person in such a way that the finite person is engulfed with divine infinitude!

4.5. The blessing of forgiveness

Whoever is a bit familiar with the pedagogical and Christian thought of Don Bosco knows that he attached much importance to the sacraments of the Eucharist and of confession.

The Eucharist certainly had for him a saving and healing significance. It met the finitude and vulnerability of the young person. In the forms of bread and wine Jesus Christ gives himself to us as strength and food: 'This is my body for you'. But also an ethical calling to love one another: my body is for the other. In that way the participation in the Eucharist not only lets people share in God's tangible infinitude but it also inspires them to that qualitative infinitude of self-sacrifice. This transformation of finitude into infinitude even goes much farther. The Eucharist is after all also a meal-event, both inter-human as well as religious. 'Eating together' is sublimated to a sacrament of sharing in the body of Christ. Thus the Eucharist becomes the effective sign of the covenant between God and humans, *and* of the brotherhood and sisterhood between people amongst each other, inspired for that purpose by the Spirit of Jesus with which the infinitude of the Three-in-One — God's inner relational life — takes shape in this world.

As far as the sacrament of confession is concerned, that has been quite heavily suppressed today. And yet we would like, a bit counter-intuitively, to direct our attention to the blessing or the grace of divine forgiveness, and in its slipstream of human forgiveness. Divine forgiveness is mediated in sign, word and ritual via confession and via reconciliation rites that today more and more complement or even replace confession. Yet confession remains valuable because of its outspoken personal character and as effective form of divine infinitude as mercy. Not only does it enter into the finite and sinful person but it transforms the person too towards participation in the divine infinitude. Thanks to forgiveness the weakness of the finite and sinful person becomes one's strength: literally the wealth of one's poverty, thanks to God's mercy. This does imply, according to Pope Francis, "that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy which spurs us on to do our best. A small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties. Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings".³⁵

In the confession and reconciliation rites we can distinguish an ethical and a grace dimension. In Don Bosco, in the light of his soteriological supernaturalism, the confession acquired a strong moral and moralising feature. For him it was an indispensable pedagogical means to form the conscience of his youngsters, with the risk of the moralistic claim already mentioned above, at the cost of the grace dimension. This does not mean that the ethical dimension of confession is wrong, on the contrary. It introduces in the one confessing the awareness of its human responsibility and thus of its human freedom that can be applied to

³⁵ FRANCIS I, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Apostolic Exhortation), Rome, Vatican, 2013, n. 44.

either good or evil. Here the confession broaches the dimension of infinitude in the (young) person. In that way both the sacrament of confession as well as the reconciliation rite surpass the thought on mere finitude that reduces all failings of the person to a form of failure and a form of imperfection whereby the ethical is actually eliminated. In fact, moral failing, in Christian terms sin, is a stronger confirmation of human dignity than the emphasising of human imperfection. By means of this infinitude, which marks especially our bodiless, we are affectable so that our capacity for freedom itself is threatened. Then again, our moral failing confirms that we are free and responsible beings. And that is precisely the dimension of infinitude in our finitude! There is no guilt without accountability, without free self-determination in order to be called to give justification. That we are able to do evil points to our human dignity, our being image-of-God, more than to the awareness that we can fail or remain beneath the measure of our task.³⁶

Still, the human person should not be reduced to one's moral responsibility and guilt, for that leads to moral overburdening and burnout. A moralistic view of the human that puts emphasis especially on the examination of conscience, guilt and confession, reduces the human person to one's ethical dynamism. Even in Don Bosco this was not absent, as we have seen. But at the same time he discovered, on the basis of his supernaturalist thought on grace, the aspect of God's mercy as grace in the sacrament of confession. The need for the trans-ethical is present in the ethically living person: the sublimation of the person into a transcending space wherein one is healed of one's guilt without destroying the possibility of one's being guilty. That is precisely the forgiveness that is proffered of which the confession is a 'densified', sacramental expression but not the only expression. Thanks to God's forgiveness the Infinite no longer remains external but the Infinite descends to the finite in order to lift it up from its finitude above itself into infinitude, precisely by means of healing in freedom and responsibility.

In the Christian tradition that integrates human experience wholly and thus always is a humanism as well, forgiveness is given both conditionally and unconditionally. On the one hand, both human and divine forgiveness is bound to the condition of confessing. This confirms human freedom and responsibility as expressions of the infinitude that the finite person bears within oneself. The guilty one must personally acknowledge and confess one's ethical failings and do so in an authentic manner. The person in failure, however, is faced with the temptation to flee from one's guilt, among others by explaining it away, obfuscating or ridiculing it, or by diverting it to someone else, a scapegoat. That is why the 'stumbler' must go through a process of healing so that forgiveness would become possible. The acknowledgement of the misstep as misstep and of one's own share therein, beyond every

³⁶ E. LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 237: "The will combines a contradiction: an immunity from every exterior attack to the point itself as uncreated and immortal, endowed with a force above every quantifiable force (nothing less is attested by the self-consciousness in which the inviolable being takes refuge: 'Not for eternity will I waver') – and the permanent fallibility of this inviolable sovereignty, to the point that voluntary being lends itself to techniques of seduction, propaganda, and torture. The will can succumb to tyrannical pressure and corruption (...). When the will triumphs over its passions, it manifests itself not only as the strongest passion, but as above all passion, determining itself by itself, inviolable. (...) The will remains on this moving limit between inviolability and degeneration. This inversion [from inviolability into degeneration] is more radical than sin, for it threatens the will in its very structure as a will, in its dignity as *origin* and identity".

facile self-deception as if one would only be a 'victim', must express itself in sorrow and compunction for the inflicted evil, and any possible damages incurred by the other.³⁷

On the other hand, forgiveness is unconditional whereby it belongs to the 'order of infinitude'. It is a gift, a grace, that cannot be coerced not even by confessing. Forgiveness surpasses confessing and the expression of sorrow and compunction precisely because it is as true gift unconditional. Thus forgiveness displays a paradoxical character. It is at the same time conditional for it can only work when the perpetrator confesses and shows sorrow *and* it is unconditional for it does not wait for the confession in order to offer its gift. Paul Ricoeur speaks of 'the logic of abundance that distinguishes love from the logic of reciprocity in justice'.³⁸ Forgiveness cannot be the result of negotiation and consultation, of give and take, of strict, calculable and manageable reciprocity. It can, according to Jacques Derrida, only be given freely and for nothing.³⁹

In this manner, forgiveness in fact makes confessing possible. Only the one who knows and may expect that he or she is forgiven, is capable of confessing. The one who fears that no chance of mercy exists, will do everything to conceal, explain away or justify the evil that was committed. In this regard, forgiveness is related to promise. It allows for the guilty one to expect and to wager that one can be lifted out of one's guilt above oneself. By means of confessing and expressing of remorse, one can bring forth one's guilt before the face of the other, who out of its promise of forgiveness not only stands open to the guilty one but also guarantees with its entire being that which it promises.⁴⁰

It is remarkable in the Biblical tradition how, alongside the conditional character of forgiveness, its unconditional character as well is brought to light as a form of divine infinitude which in its turn creates space for human forgiveness. God is revealed as the Merciful One *par excellence*: an infinitude that infinitises itself. Always and at every time, He regrets the calamity announced as retribution for injustices, even though His promise of mercy always calls for confession and conversion. His compassion is boundless, not only after committed sin and guilt, but also as a promise that will make everything new. That is precisely the grace, the ethics of the merciful Other, who in the ritual of the reconciliation rites and the sacrament of confession acquires a tangible form, and thus brings in the infinite into the finite. It is only against this background of the promise and the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation that we are able to understand why Jesus calls us to be unconditionally and gratuitously forgiving: 'Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful' (Lk 6,36). We are called to imitate God's infinite love or, as is mentioned in the Lord's Prayer, to forgive others their trespasses (Mt 6,12). But this imitation of divine infinitude is only possible when people are made capable of doing so through the grace of God's love. They are thus passively marked by infinitude in order to substantiate it actively. Even though in this imitation they will always remain below par, still they are not crushed by this guilt. The Christian always has something of a happy sinner. We can and 'must' have love and forgive because 'God first

³⁷ For a further deepening on confession as the condition for forgiveness, see: J. MONBOURQUETTE & I. D'ASPREMONT, *Demander pardon sans s'humilier?*, Paris, Bayard, 2004.

³⁸ P. RICOEUR, *Mémoire, oubli, pardon*, in: A. HOUZIAUX (red.), *La religion, les maux, les vices*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, p. 198.

³⁹ J. DERRIDA, *Le siècle et le pardon*, in: *Le Monde des Débats*, 1989, nr. 9, p. 10-17.

⁴⁰ H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, London/Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 236-238.

loved us' (1 Jn 4,19). It is precisely this original love and foregoing mercy that is expressed in the sacrament of forgiveness as an effective sign.

It is and remains pedagogically meaningful to give youngsters the chance to associate their growing freedom and responsibility with forgiveness and reconciliation. In that way, their ethical development is not only confirmed but also lifted up beyond itself: gift and task thanks to that gift. Thanks to divine forgiveness the Infinite One descends into the soul of the finite and sinful person, whereby the guilty one is lifted up (*Aufhebung*) beyond its ethical fragility and thus gives expression to the Infinite. The final word is not given to ethics, but to the trans-ethical that surpasses ethics and likewise provides a future: divine forgiveness as a re-creating infinity. This relationship between grace and ethics is of vital importance for a balanced education. I am not the alpha and omega; everything is given to me. That does not mean that I am able to live only in indolent surrender. What is given to me likewise includes the task in turn to give to others what I have received. There is no ethics without grace, that both precedes and follows freedom and responsibility. But there is also no grace without ethics, for otherwise the gifted infinitude remains invisible and ineffective in finitude.

5. Education as emancipatory salvation: the wealth of poverty

Our reflection on the sacramental mediation of God's love makes it possible to accord the Christian idea of salvation its proper place in education. In the conviction that only thus can justice be done to our starting view on religion as a 'child of poverty and wealth'. On the one hand, the poverty of finitude and moral vulnerability leads to the desire for salvation that brings the redeemed person to fullness. On the other, the wealth of infinitude leads, on the basis of love, to a unique form of poverty, i.e. to the awareness that that love is not loving enough and thus propels towards "a hunger which increases itself, infinitely".⁴¹

5.1. No salvation without ethics and vice-versa

Salvation is not to be absolutized but also not to be minimised. That was our thesis from the very beginning. Salvation can lead to infantilisation, even to ethical laziness, from the idea that we simply have to surrender ourselves to Jesus our Saviour. But it can just as well acquire a constructive and dynamic meaning, and thus become a form of the Infinite in the finite. We are convinced that an intimate bond exists between salvation and ethics, whereby we then indeed understand that bond differently and more broadly than the way moralising supernaturalism does. The idea of salvation can be so unrelentingly excluded from ethics that ethics ends up in inhumanity and terror. When ethics is raised to the 'Ein und Alles', whereby it is not only absolutized but also sacralised, it then is ascribed a salvific significance. Then from ethics and from ethics alone is all salvation expected. But as Pascal already stated: 'he who would act the angel acts the brute'. The challenge consists in lifting ethics up beyond itself and to save it from itself, without destroying its infinitude and strength.⁴²

In the radicalness of the Gospel, Christians are highly sensitive to what is humanly desirable or meaningful. Not one iota nor letter of this radicalness is to be done away with.

⁴¹ E. LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other*, p. 30.

⁴² B. STOECKLE, *Grenzen der autonomen Moral*, München, Kösel, 1974.

The ethics of the Gospel expresses the infinitude of the human soul and its 'divine ensoulment'. Ethically speaking, the Gospel is anything but minimalist, but rather appellative and demanding. Whoever follows Jesus is called to a fullness of life in love. At the same time, we pray in the Salve Regina that we live in a valley of tears and we acknowledge in the Lord's Prayer 'our trespasses' and our need for forgiveness. People often fall short in love, by means of incapacity and failure, through negligence and dereliction of duty, by means of pride and bad will. When the Christian faith is presented mainly and formulated normatively in terms of ethics, then an ethical narrowing of the faith inadvertently creeps in. This comes at the cost of the alpha and omega of the Gospel, namely grace and salvation.

Jesus did not present himself in the first place as a moralist who came to bring a normative ethics. Before all else he incarnated in his person and in word and deed God's liberating grace amongst people. That is why he travelled around and was present in concrete situations of calamity in order to save people from all sorts of diseases and ailments, from what held them captive, and what affected them from within. By touching them, they are healed not only in their bodies but also in their torn hearts and souls as such, that they again came to life and found their infinitude. That Jesus saves people means that he breaks through their sinful alienation and opens up their closedness to God, to people and to the world. Salvation makes the infinite emerge in the finite in such a way that the finite is transformed by the infinite. We can also call it an anthropological transubstantiation!

All this certainly applies to education as well, not only to the educators but equally to the educatees. What is central is not systems and normative views but people and their process of growth. The educator is faced with the challenge to meet youngsters in their brokenness and incapacity within the situation just the way it is. Christian movedness asks for real presence in order to be able to act in a healing manner within concrete and moral brokenness. Only thus can the finite transcend itself into the Infinite. Ethics and education that are inspired by the Gospel must not only be fragmentary and sporadic but integral forms of salvation. Attention needs to be paid to youngsters the way they are, but who also are able to move in growth towards a point that is achievable for them. Within this dynamism, ethics can and must be present not only normatively but also in a manner that is healing, curative and liberating. Only thus can the Infinite transform the finite and link it again with its divine, infinite source. Again and again the Gospel deals with the salvation of people. Many people are unfree, bound hand and foot to all sorts of powers and demons. Young people can be injured by all kinds of alienations. Precisely through their not-yet-being-adults, their *minoritas*, they are vulnerable. A healing nearness saves them from the unfreedom in which they are captive. Thus they can again engage in self-determination, take up their responsibility for their own lives and grow towards a meaningful life, i.e. living and acting in love. Salvation reveals not only human fragility but likewise enrobes it with divine infinity.

In other words, the Christian idea of salvation from our sinfulness and of the healing of our impotence and limitedness, do not per se lead to a one-sided and infantilising emphasis on human misery and smallness. Salvation can and must also mean that people are released from the alienating powers that grip them in order to become free once again. Salvation as liberation for freedom! It sets freedom again in movement and gives back its original dynamism, its infinite nature. The human person is then not only made competent in order to stand for oneself but also and especially in order to approach the other in responsibility, love and justice. By means of salvation, the fragile — finite and guilty —

person is made capable of doing that which one must do, and this without compulsions. The person is no immature, helpless child that can only surrender oneself in blind trust to grace. The person becomes a mature and responsible being that by grace — the divine infinitude — is made capable of striving for the good. Salvation is a source of strength and dynamism in order to grow towards adulthood and thus as a reborn person be able to substantiate the task of living and acting in love. Here, it becomes apparent how salvation liberates towards ethics, without making that ethics a moralistic claim. Thus salvation also creates space for the linking and interaction between finitude and infinitude, time and time again. It reveals the wealth of our poverty!

5.2. Ultimate salvation as ethical awakening

With this, however, not everything has been said about the relationship between salvation and ethics. In the Christian faith, mention is indeed also made of an ultimate salvation or eschatology. In supernaturalist jargon, this is about 'the last things': death, judgement, hell and heavenly glory. Our destination is heaven, that was Don Bosco's deepest conviction. Our ultimate goal is union with God in the afterlife. We are on our way to the eternal bliss along the path of an ethically excellent life, supported by the sacraments and helped by a warm devotion to Mary.

Just like the idea of salvation, eschatology, understood as the end-time, can also be interpreted positively. Jesus' profession of faith in God indeed implies a goal and orientation for human acts. When people profess faith in the God of Jesus, they can only do so in truth if they act in agreement with the deepest being of the Infinite One. This means in the direction of the Reign of love, mercy and justice — the qualified forms of its infinitude. Whoever desires to follow Jesus can only choose for the ethical good against evil, suffering and injustice in all its forms. Not just anything is good. Only that which proceeds in the direction of God's lordship. Believing in the God of Jesus is not possible within indifference or neutrality. It requires involvement in our fellow-humans. Whatever happens in this world in terms of suffering, evil and injustice should not leave us unmoved. It demands from us to go against evil and to commit ourselves to the good, in the direction of God's grand dream: His Reign. This is about the fulfilment of God's being infinite love, mercy and justice, until God has become all in all thanks to His grace.

For a Christian inspired education, this means that the reference to and the initiation in the eschatological perspective of the faith can never lead to ethical indifference or half-heartedness. On the contrary, education with and from 'the last things', to use Don Bosco's traditional language, provokes. It calls us to make a difference in this world between justice and injustice, between mercy and abuse of power, between truth and falsehood, between faithfulness and unfaithfulness, between peace and war. That qualitative value-difference likewise applies to education as relationship, system and provision. Not every form of education is equally humane, equally acceptable, equally good or good enough. The linking of eschatology and ethics makes it possible to appreciate the ethical dimension of traditional supernaturalism and at the same time to broaden it. The perspective of the afterlife surpasses not only our inner-worldly existence but likewise implies an appeal to an inner-worldly commitment. That commitment should not be interpreted individualistically as 'earning my heaven'. Striving for one's own salvation beyond death must be opened up to the salvation of the others in community. It concerns, in other words, not a solipsistic but a relational and holistic infinitude. Our salvation is not separate from but finds precisely its

place in and through the world as human milieu and as creation. We can link this socio-ecological broadening of salvation, and thus also of ultimate salvation, with what Don Bosco formulates succinctly as the goal of education: the formation of honest citizens and good Christians. Whoever wants to be a 'good Christian' and whoever believes in heaven and the afterlife must commit oneself ethically to become 'an honest and honourable citizen' within the family and society, and likewise for that purpose to create a good environment on earth. We can all this the paradox of a true Christian education: to believe in heaven, God's infinitude, means for humans that they (to be sure, finite and fallible) incarnate God's love in this world whereby they at the same time anticipate the promise of the coming eternal, full life. No heavenly transcendent infinitude without an incarnated infinitude in the finitude of this earthly world!

A 'pro-vocative' conclusion

In conclusion to our anthropological-theological reflection on 'religione' as an essential pillar in Don Bosco's view on education, we would like to pose a critical note on the way in which today, in our secularised and post-Christian society, the dimension of the Christian faith in various educational projects of a Christian signature are replaced by the more general and vague perspective on meaning detached from particular ideological and religious incarnations. With that, it indeed acknowledges that in human existence lies a striving for meaning and spirituality but the Christian-confessional profile is set aside. Or stronger still, this particularity is found to be irrelevant for it is only an expression of a private opinion that possesses no force of communicability anymore and thus no longer has any social and cultural relevance. This happens because people no longer believe in it or because its clients are far distanced from it or have become too pluralistic in composition. A Salesian education project that only takes to heart the creation of meaning and spirituality in general and synchronises its concrete expression to be 'in tune' with the client can actually not be called a Don Bosco project anymore. The pole of religion in Don Bosco has a clear Christian profile after all. Meaning is not procurable in itself, detached from a concrete particularity and a 'set of convictions'. Or rather, Christianity is only accessible as a particular form of searching for and of finding meaning. For the Salesian youth apostolate, that is no incidental matter. Hence the anchoring of the pedagogical *amorevolezza* (and *ragione*) in the Biblical love of neighbour and in God's love forms part of the Salesian identity. This uniqueness must manifest itself in concrete forms and shapes, symbols and rituals, feasts and traditions, convictions and views. Precisely in our secularising post-confessionality, a re-profiling out of one's own particularity is necessary without annulling one's own particularity into an inclusive universality, namely into the only and full truth that labels other truths as untruths or reduces them to oneself as parts of one's own truth. It is not only the attention to meaning but specifically to Christian meaning as well, without lapsing into fundamentalist closedness, that remains more than ever a task. Out of a Christian identity, anchored in the love of neighbour and God's love 'in Christ' sketched above, one stands open for the 'other': those of other faiths and convictions, the non-believers, the fragmented still-barely-believers, the indifferent a-believers... That respect and that acknowledgement, however, cannot mean that one levels away and reduces one's own Christian profile as if one should be embarrassed by it. The dialogue *ad extra*, with those of other ideologies, i.e. the inter-convictional dialogue, requires the dialogue *ad intra*: the loyal, at the same time critical, conversation with one's own Christian tradition. An open-minded, at the same time humble

and self-critical, profiling of one's own Christian particularity is more honest than a vague and general reference to meaning and spirituality, whereby one then still sneaks in stealthily one's own particularity. In this latter case, one no longer really knows what one can expect, while in the former one is transparent with a distinctly unique Christian offer, without standing in the way of the openness for the other and the stranger. Only thus does a qualified tolerance become possible: this is a huge challenge for the future of the Salesian works and pedagogical projects.

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