

LA PAROLA E LA STORIA UNO SGUARDO SALESIANO

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PAOLO ALBERA: PRESENTING THE TEACHINGS OF SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES TO YOUNG SALESIANS IN FORMATION

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Paolo Albera (1845-1921) entered Don Bosco's Oratory at Valdocco in 1858 at the age of 13. He was admitted to the Salesian Society on 1 May 1860, which Don Bosco had founded less than six months previously. Paolo was only 14 when he became a Salesian, and 23 when he was ordained to the priesthood. In spite of many difficulties, he would remain with Don Bosco, who would entrust him with difficult but significant missions. He would head up Salesian efforts in France as the first provincial superior, and later serve on the Salesian general council for 18 years as spiritual director general. In 1910, Paolo Albera would be elected rector major of the Salesian Society and the second successor of Don Bosco.

Paolo Albera and his peers had been formed directly by Don Bosco, and modeled their apostolic and spiritual lives on all that they had seen the founder do. They had enthusiastically embraced the spirit and teachings of Don Bosco's model Francis de Sales, and strove to imitate the saint's virtues, particularly his gentleness and approachability while working among young people at risk. However, by 1893 when Don Albera took up his role on the general council, he was keenly aware that young Salesians had very different experiences.

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Don Albera and his fellow superiors faced the task of integrating the remote teachings of the community's patron with the contemporary instructions of the founder, and delivering a vital witness to the new generation of young Salesians who were quickly filling the ranks. Many of them had neither read the writings of the patron nor heard the voice of the founder. In his role as spiritual director general, Don Albera oversaw the formation of new members and coordinated the spiritual exercises for young and old alike. It was imperative that he articulate the Salesian spirit. He would begin to do so by preaching retreats.

Explicit references to the life and teachings of Saint Francis de Sales figure greatly into Don Albera's retreat instructions during the eighteen years he served as Catechist General. Although Don Albera quoted other writers more extensively, he developed a number of "Salesian" themes typical to the spiritual teachings of the gentle Bishop of Geneva. He complemented patron's teaching with ideas that he derived from the founder, that is, from Saint John Bosco.

Saint Francis de Sales provided the language for religious experience; Saint John Bosco provided a concrete example that translated faith into practice. The patron had a two-century head-start, and his teachings had influenced others who had already created a school of Salesian spirituality. The founder had only died five years earlier: every one of his houses and youth centers still lived off the memories of his recent visits, his encouraging conferences, his apostolic daring.

In this paper we briefly examine some of the essential elements of spirituality and religious life as Don Albera mined them from the writings and teachings of his patron and founder. From Francis de Sales he pulled the words "devotion" and "sweetness." From John Bosco he pulled the text of the Salesian Constitutions and the founder's concern that his sons faithfully observe its directives. How Don Albera integrated the teachings and examples of his spiritual mentors with his own experience was perhaps the most impressive gift he had to share with his confreres.²

² The Central Salesian Archives (Archivio Salesiano Centrale), Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma (=ASC), are the source for all of the unpublished documents cited here. I will cite principally from the following unpublished doc-

1. Devotion as Sweetness

The spiritual approach of Saint Francis de Sales is commonly depicted in terms of “devotion” and “sweetness.” Both nouns – “*dévotion*, *douceur*” – perhaps sounded better in seventeenth-century French than they do to contemporary English ears, and we risk being put off by what some would consider “sugar coated” Christianity.³ Be that as it may, we must point out that Paolo Albera readily used both terms when he preached to his confreres, whether speaking in French or in Italian. In the course of his retreats he developed both aspects of Salesian spirituality – *devozione* (devotion) and *dolcezza* (sweetness).⁴

uments, listed here in chronological order: Paolo Albera, “Tutto per Gesù: Istruzioni per gli Esercizi Spirituali” (All for Jesus: Instructions for the Spiritual Exercises), 4 notebooks, AMs, 1893, ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480111, B0480112, B0480113, B0480114 (=TG); “Raccolta di Istruzioni predicate dal Sign. Don Albera, Catechista Generale de’ Salesiani, in occasione degli Esercizi Spirit[uali]. Tenuti in Foglizzo agli Ascritti Salesiani il Marzo 1894” (Instructions given to Salesian Novices in Foglizzo, March 1894), Ms, 1894, ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480115 (=IA); Paolo Albera, “L’Esercizio della Buona Morte,” (Recollection Day Conferences, ca. 1896) AMs, 1896, ASC, Fondo Albera, B0480127 (=EMB); Paolo Albera, “Istruzioni Direttori” (Retreat Instructions given to Salesian Directors: Valsalice), 2 notebooks, AMs, 1903, ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480139, B0480137 (=ID); Paolo Albera, “Ordinandi,” (Retreat Instructions given to young Salesians preparing for Ordination: Valsalice, 9-16 September 1909) AMs, 1909, ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480137 (=IO); Paolo Albera, “Esercizi Direttori 1910,” (Instructions for the Spiritual Exercises preceding the Eleventh General Chapter of the Salesian Society), 2 notebooks, AMs, 1910, ASC, Fondo Paolo Albera, B0480137, B0480138 (=CG11).

³ Professor of linguistics and rhetoric Dennis Baron, in his study on male-female gender biases within the English idiom, documents that many men, including some prominent grammarians, tend to ascribe use of the word “sweet” to women; cf. Dennis BARON, *Grammar and Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 83.

⁴ If we try to render the Italian *dolcezza*, as Don Albera used it, in English, the direct translation of the term is sweetness, and it is given as a sensory word of a taste, as in “the sweetness of honey.” The second, figurative meaning in the dictionary is sweetness, gentleness, tenderness, goodness and kindness, meekness and mildness as applied to other senses. See: “Dolcezza,” in *Il Ragazzini 2017, dizionario inglese-italiano, italiano-inglese*, di Giuseppe RAGAZZINI, 4^a ed. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2016), 1758.

As rector major, he published his twelfth circular letter to Salesian provincials and directors “On Sweetness,”⁵ and brought up the topic of Salesian “devotion” in many of his other circular letters.⁶

To understand the meaning of “sweetness” and “devotion,” we must first turn to Saint Francis de Sales, who was ultimately Don Albera’s source.

“Devotion” is a dynamic reality for Francis de Sales, who uses this word to express “progress in charity,” and therefore the “perfection of charity.” It is a synonym for holiness, Christian perfection, or the perfection of Christian life. The term embraces both asceticism and mysticism, that is, all that we would speak of today as “spirituality.”⁷

It is difficult to tell whether there is a real difference between “sweetness” and “devotion,” for Francis compares devotion to “honey and sugar.” He uses images of sweeteners many times in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and these images usually describe devotion. For instance, he teaches that humankind can avoid spiritual death by accepting the nourishment of the sacrament of life that is Eucharist. To illustrate this point, he states that just as the most perishable fruits can be preserved in honey and sugar, so our delicate souls can be preserved from corruption by the body and blood of Christ.⁸ Later in the text, Francis tells how fresh fruit can be preserved in straw or even in its own leaves, but damaged fruit must be preserved in honey or sugar or it will be totally lost. In this case, the fruit signifies chastity, but the “honey and sugar” again describe devotion.⁹

⁵ Cf. Paolo ALBERA, “Sulla Dolcezza,” in *Lettere Circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani* (Torino: SEI, 1922), 280-294; see also pp. 67, 245, 348, 467, 505, 506.

⁶ Cf. ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 27, 100, 204, 266, 272, 366, 368, 437, 438.

⁷ Cf. Józef STRUŚ, “La spiritualità di S. Francesco di Sales,” in *San Francesco di Sales e i Salesiani di Don Bosco*, edited by Juan Picca, and Józef Strus’ (Roma: LAS, 1986), 65-68.

⁸ S. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Introduction à la Vie Devote*, Œuvres de Saint François de Sales, Evêque et Prince de Genève et Docteur de l’Église, édition complète, edited by Henry Benedict Mackey, Tome 3 (Annecy: J. Niérat, 1893), 116.

⁹ S. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Introduction à la Vie Devote*, 177-178.

1.1. “Sweetness” *Applied to Action*

Francis is serious about the nature of devotion. As he tells Philothea from the very start, true devotion consists of eminent charity. Sugar and honey are only images to make his readers understand that eminent charity, that is the love of God and neighbor, “enhances what is still raw” and transforms what is spoiled so that growth may become possible in our lives.¹⁰ Devotion brings out the beauty of each and every calling, as precious stones are seen to sparkle when dipped in honey.¹¹

If devotion is “eminent charity,” it is “douceur” that describes Francis de Sales style of practicing love of God and neighbor. “Douceur,” – sweetness, gentle kindness – is not an action but what can be applied to every activity, including prayer. Sweetness is an approach to devotion because it somehow involves relationships. It typifies Salesian dealings with “neighbor,” and is the sense that one has of how God deals with us. It is not charity but a way to make charity fruitful; it is not devotion, but results from devotion, as sweetness results from “honey and sugar.”

1.2. *Learning “Sweetness” from Experience*

Don Albera frequently raises the issues of devotion and “sweetness” in his retreat instructions. He may have had trouble defining these terms, but, as he told the delegates to General Chapter 11 (GC11), “sweetness” and devotion were not theoretical in nature. They were best known through experience.

It is hard to define. We have the beautiful face of sweetness clearly fixed in our mind’s eye. We know it is the fusion of piety, charity and goodness. We know that it manifests itself in different and truly fascinating ways. But to define it? We don’t know how.¹²

¹⁰ Cf. S. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Introduction à la Vie Devote*, 17-18.

¹¹ Cf. S. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Introduction à la Vie Devote*, 20.

¹² CG11 u1: “Non si sa definire. Ne abbiamo fissa nella mente la bellissima

An ensemble of piety, charity and goodness: this is the nature of “sweetness.” Don Albera admitted that this was more of a description than a definition. Still, this was enough to enable him to launch into a serious discussion, quite independent of source documents and more in response to lived experience. What concerned him most was that he and his listeners (who were his own confreres) should assimilate the Salesian principles of devotion and “sweetness.”

Don Albera picks up the image of sweetness and sweeteners, even citing Francis, but he feels free to change the context. For example, he cites the example of placing fruit in honey and sugar when speaking about a life of Faith. In a portion of the notes he prepared while preaching the retreat instructions prior to GC11 – notes that seem more of a brainstorming on paper than a prepared talk – he makes the following annotations:

Faith – to please God – Sweetness to please human beings. S. Bernard.
Life of Life: Faith
- Without it, actions have no merit: prayers, sufferings.
- Without sweetness, what will we do?
- Therefore there he practiced.
The *soul melts* in the mold of Jesus Christ.
Like water in the bronze vase, it assumes its image.
Green fruit, ripe fruit.
S. Francis de Sales: fruits placed in honey, in sugar.¹³

It would seem that Don Albera was preparing words to the effect that Faith must typify our relationship to God while “sweetness” must define our relationships with our neighbors. Just as we cannot advance in our Christian life without Faith, so our actions make no

fisionomia, sappiamo che è il complesso di pietà, di carità, di bontà. Sappiamo che si manifesta in maniere diverse, però tutte veramente seducenti. Definirla però non sappiamo”.

¹³ CG11 u3: “Fede – per piacere a Dio – Dolcezza per piacere agli uomini. S. Ber. – Vita della vita la fede – senza di essa, non han merito le azioni – le preghiere – i patimenti – Senza dolcezza che faremo? Quindi egli la praticò ». “*Âme liquéfiée* dans le moule de Gesù Cristo. Come l’acqua nel vaso di bronzo – Ne riporta l’immagine – Frutti verdi – frutti maturi – S. Franc. S. frutti messi nel miele, nel zucchero [*sic*]”.

headway unless we cultivate “sweetness.” We can only learn to live by Faith and devotion by “dipping” our hearts in the honey of devotion, so to speak; this is where the Salesian imagery enters.¹⁴

“Sweetness” is born in joy and gratitude that we experience when we reflect that the Lord has conquered sin, misery and death and given us a share of a better life. When we recognize that we can and must live in the Spirit, when our lives, like Saint Paul’s, are rooted in Christ – *mihi vivere Christus est* – then we put away tension and begin to breathe easier. “This is true life,” Don Albera says, and it is this recognition, this gratitude that is the source of peace, gentleness, and “sweetness.”¹⁵

1.3. “Sweetness” as Strength

On the other hand, “sweetness” is not a weakness. It is the Lord who calls himself “meek and humble of heart.” This gentle meekness bolsters character and arms Christ’s disciples, as it were, for battle against the enemy. Fully conscious of the difficulties for the Church in his day, Don Albera reminded his confreres of the need to be battle-ready under the banner of meekness.

It is an outstanding favor that the Lord has done for us by placing us under the banner of that master of meekness that is Francis de Sales. It is almost as if he were telling us that the weapon most apt to fight our enemies in these times is sweetness. And it is as if to make the teaching of this great saint more authoritative, the Church has declared him Doctor of the Church. How many signs of affection did the great Pontiff of the Immaculate Conception show us! Nor does his most learned successor Leo XIII love us any less.¹⁶

¹⁴ Don Albera toyed with these images for some time. While they only appear in seminal form in his retreat notes, he would spend time developing his thoughts until he was able to offer a more complete commentary in 1919, when he published his circular letter “On Sweetness.” Cf. Paolo ALBERA, “Sulla Dolcezza,” in *Lettere Circolari*, 280-294.

¹⁵ Cf. TG 1:84.

¹⁶ TG 1:93-94: “È pure un favore segnalato che ci fece il Signore coll’averci posti sotto la bandiera di quel maestro della mansuetudine che è il Salesio, quasi a dirci

In order to be spiritually fit, then, Don Albera prescribed “sweetness.” It is a powerful virtue, but one accedes to it in small steps.¹⁷ In fact, “sweetness” is not something that we forge by our own strength: it is a gift from God. Who can outdo God in generosity? God alone is the object of grateful adoration and whole-hearted love. For, as the Salesians and their youngsters prayed daily in that era, it is God who “created me, made me a Christian, and preserved me in life...”¹⁸ It is this same God, Don Albera would remind his confreres, who invited them into his house and into consecrated life. How they should rejoice! How they should rejoice as did the Psalmist at the beauty of God’s dwelling place! How they should love their calling as did the holy religious of earlier times! God has called them, and this is “sweetness!”¹⁹

1.4. “Sweetness” is God’s Gift to the Faithful

God’s own sweetness is the first recompense given to us,²⁰ for the Lord is a loving God. Here is a practical application of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, which Don Albera endorsed so vigorously. The Sacred Heart reveals the mystery of God’s love. Jesus is the source of all grace, of all virtues. Living in union with the Heart of Jesus empowers Christians to learn gentle goodness, and to live humbly, charitably and meekly.²¹

che l’arma più atta a combattere i nostri nemici in questi tempi si è la dolcezza – e come per rendere più autorevole l’ammaestramento di questo gran santo, la Chiesa lo dichiarava Dottore della Chiesa. Il grande Pontefice dell’Immacolata quanti segni d’affetto ci ha dati! Non meno ci ama il suo dottissimo successore Leone XIII”.

¹⁷ Cf. TG 2:9; IA, 35.

¹⁸ Taken from the introductory prayer for morning and evening services printed, “Signor mio, Dio mio, io vi adoro...” in Giovanni Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de’ suoi doveri negli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell’uffizio della Beata Vergine e de’ principali vespri dell’anno, coll’aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre ecc.* (Torino: Paravia, 1847), 77; 32d enl. ed. (Torino: Tip. dell’Oratorio di S. Franc. di Sales, 1873), 82.

¹⁹ Cf. TG 1:105-7.

²⁰ Cf. TG 2:9.

²¹ Cf. IA, 124-125.

“Sweetness” grows out of a pure lifestyle, for only the virtuous can approach all people with a gentle, evangelical charity.²² It requires commitment. In baptism, Christians vow to renounce Satan and live a faith relationship with the Trinity; through their profession, religious pledge to follow and imitate Christ more closely, making him the center and pivotal point of their lives. To fulfill this commitment, Salesians must practice the virtues of humility, mortification, charity and “sweetness,” Don Albera teaches. Yet, how hard it is to keep on this path! Resolutions easily made fizzle within days. That is why it is vitally important that Salesians renew their resolutions and strive to practice these virtues.²³

1.5. *The Bosco Dimension*

Don Albera and his confreres had met the sweetness of Saint Francis de Sales’ spirituality through their experiences with Saint John Bosco. It was Don Bosco who fathered them in the faith; the spirituality of the founder colored how they themselves would live out the spirituality of their patron. There was, so to speak, a “Bosco Dimension” to the Salesian virtue of “sweetness.”

To be Don Bosco’s sons, Salesians must not only remember his tenderness and “sweetness”: they must strive to practice these same virtues. Each must bring his own personality into this practice, adapting himself to the needs of those he serves within the context of the times in which he lives. Nevertheless, these virtues lie at the basis of Salesian educative ministry. The “preventive system” demands a healthy dose of patience, which means that every Salesian educator must approach his ministry with the same devotion to the young that Don Bosco exhibited.

²² Cf. TG 3:56.

²³ Cf. EBM, 9. Don Albera describes “good resolutions” as essential components of the Spiritual exercises (EBM, 1). A strong sense of resolve is a sign of gratitude for God’s call (TG 1:25), and every delicate conscience, he says, takes seriously the making and keeping of good resolutions (IO Q3:108), for one *must* be resolute if a retreat is to make a difference and bear spiritual fruit (TG 1:53, IA, 69).

What is said for Salesian educators in general holds especially true for the director. His role as animator of the community requires the ability to build healthy relationships. Becoming a gentle leader can be a continual battle.²⁴ Still, this remains an important dimension of Salesian pastoral animation. The director strives to imitate the “goodness” and “sweetness” of God so that he may better serve his confreres and the young people entrusted to his care.²⁵ As Don Bosco displayed “sweetness” in his use of authority,²⁶ so too the director learns to love all equally. He shows no favorites: such behavior would betray Don Bosco’s spirit.²⁷ He receives confreres for direction in a comfortable setting, and treats them with affability and sweetness as did Don Bosco.²⁸ He gently corrects the faults of his confreres, always giving hope for growth, always reaffirming his trust and respect for each brother.²⁹ In this way he fosters a spirit of openness: spiritual direction and the sacraments are not tedious burdens but “sweet” comforts in life for all his confreres.³⁰

Don Albera does not confine his discussion to vague, theoretical exhortations. As we have seen, he asserts that one learns “sweetness” from experience. This is why he cites Don Bosco’s experience as essential in the reflection of the Salesian. The Founder’s extreme effort to remain calm in adversity demonstrates that John Bosco, like Francis de Sales before him, had to exert great effort to acquire this virtue.

Ever the master storyteller, Don Albera used the following anecdote to press his point.

You needed to spend some time with Don Bosco and you would have seen how much it cost him to always keep calm and gentle. The story is told how once there was a woman who regularly disturbed the Oratory very much, because she had a tavern nearby. And there she gathered so many poor young people, but when it came time for church services, she would block them from

²⁴ Cf. CG11 u1-2.

²⁵ Cf. ID Q1:31.

²⁶ Cf. ID Q1:21, Q3:25.

²⁷ Cf. ID Q3:45.

²⁸ Cf. ID Q3:23.

²⁹ Cf. ID Q3:25.

³⁰ Cf. IA, 59, 75.

going. Plus, things used to happen there which were a lot worse than eating and drinking. Now Don Bosco found the means to buy that house, and therefore to send the woman on her way. When she knew that her tavern had to close down, she went searching for Don Bosco. He was with a group of boys, because he was always among the young in the early years. Well, she started in on him and covered him with insults. Those who were near to Don Bosco assure us that first he turned red, then he became pale, then red again, but he said nothing. Finally, when the woman had vented completely, Don Bosco told the young people: "Please accompany her as far as the door." He did not even wish to reproach her for her bad manners. My dear brothers, what does it mean that he changed color? It means that he was making a great effort to control himself.³¹

"Sweetness" transforms human beings. Even those who are vulgar or tactless become almost godlike when treated with gentle concern and respect. In a faith perspective, it is a sign of the Messiah's coming. Thus, when Christians strive to show respect and gentleness to others, they imitate Jesus Christ and create a family spirit where once there was only suspicion or disdain. Is it any wonder, then, that directors must always strive to practice and live by sweetness?³²

1.6. *The Jesus Dimension*

The example of the saints, especially of the patron Francis de Sales and the founder John Bosco, are crucial to understanding the depth

³¹ IA, 119-120: "E con D. Bosco stesso bisognava che foste state qualche tempo, ed avreste visto quanto gli costava l'esser sempre calmo e dolce. Si racconta che una volta c'era una donna che disturbava molto l'Oratorio, perché aveva una bettola vicino al medesimo. E là radunava tanti poveri giovani ed impediva che andassero alle funzioni; e là si faceva peggio che mangiare e bere. E D. Bosco trovò mezzo di comperare quella casa, e quindi mandare a spasso la donna. La quale quando seppe che la sua bettola doveva chiudersi, andò a trovare D. Bosco, che era in mezzo ad alcuni ragazzi, perché era sempre coi giovani in principio; e gliene disse di tutti i colori. Assicurano quelli che erano vicini a D. Bosco, che prima venne rosso, poi pallido, poi di nuovo rosso e non disse nulla. Solamente quando l'altra si ebbe sfogata bene, D. Bosco disse ai giovani: accompagnatela un poco fino alla porta; e non volle rimproverarla nemmeno della cattiva sua educazione. Cari fratelli, che cosa vuol dire quel cambiar colore? che egli faceva grande sforzo a se medesimo."

³² Cf. CG11 u2-4.

of the spiritual tradition that makes “sweetness” a pastoral way of life. Yet, this virtue would be reduced to a crafty technique unless the Salesian were to root himself in Jesus Christ. In his “sweetness” Salesians and indeed all Christians find the path to the fullness of life.

Jesus’s “sweetness” is transformative. If in earlier passages Don Albera offered Christ as an example, he is also not afraid to speak of his Lord with an apocalyptic flare. Jesus Christ saves humankind through his gentle humility as God’s servant and our brother.

How apocalyptic? The image of Christ that Don Albera employs to stress his virtue of “sweetness” is not the Lamb led to slaughter.³³ It is the Lamb that confronts evildoers on that day when the “stars in the sky fell to the earth like unripe figs shaken loose from the tree in a strong wind.” This is the silent Lamb who confronts the “kings of the earth, the nobles, the military officers, the rich, the powerful, and every slave and free person” that were party to the slaughter of the innocent who had witnessed to God’s word. This is the silent Lamb who appears with “the one who sits on the throne” and who, in his great wrath, avenges the saints who have been persecuted. Christ is “sweet” with all, but evildoers will experience the silent sweetness of the Lamb as a frightening prelude of the wrath of God that will be unleashed against sin and Satan.³⁴

If “sweetness” of Jesus Christ is terrible for the rich and the self-righteous,³⁵ those who unite themselves closely with God taste the “sweetness of the Lord” and live in peace. They share all the “treasures” of grace that are the patrimony of the Church.³⁶ They become ever more intimate with the Lord Jesus who is the source of all sweetness, and his sweetness is the source of mildness, peace, life, Gospel wisdom.³⁷

³³ Cf. Isaiah 53:7.

³⁴ Cf. TG 1:54-55, building on Rv 6:12-17.

³⁵ Cf. TG 2:83.

³⁶ Cf. TG 1:90, 2:118.

³⁷ Cf. TG 1:84, 3:38; ID Q3:29.

2. Devotion as a Faith Response

2.1. “Devotions” as a Means to Inculcate “Devotion”

Don Albera is ambivalent in his use of the term “devotion.” If at times he speaks of devotion as that Salesian synonym for perfection and holiness, he also uses the word in its more common sense: a pious practice done in honor of Jesus, Mary or the saints. Yet, even here Don Albera’s inferences are more relational than praxis oriented. Thus, when he preaches about “devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament,” he will speak less of the how and more of the who. He speaks of devotion to *Jesus* in the Eucharist³⁸ – Jesus who chooses to be close to his people,³⁹ who loves to give of himself,⁴⁰ who makes it possible for the faithful to approach him with ease.⁴¹ And while the Eucharist and all the Sacraments excite faith,⁴² the Christian must do his or her part to respond through a life of faithfulness, reflection, prayer. Without reflection, he maintains, the relationship between the soul and Christ risks drying up; instead of devotion, religion becomes a burden.⁴³

An illustration of this concept can be found, once again, in Don Albera’s teaching on the Sacred Heart. He considered this devotion “most adapted to the times.”⁴⁴ Attachment to the Heart of Jesus fostered devotion in the hearts of others; Christ transforms his devotees, he paints his portrait in their heart.⁴⁵ It goes without saying that those who want to make Christ known, must themselves know Jesus intimately. Devotion to the heart of Christ allows them to find inner peace, and this truth was so profound that God waited until recent times to reveal it.⁴⁶

³⁸ Cf. IA, 108, 120.

³⁹ Cf. TG 1:89.

⁴⁰ Cf. ID Q3:30.

⁴¹ Cf. TG 4:69.

⁴² Cf. EBM, 15-16, 24, 25.

⁴³ Cf. EBM, 39.

⁴⁴ Cf. IA, 124; ID Q1:25; ID Q1:42.

⁴⁵ Cf. IA, 125; ID Q1:25.

⁴⁶ Cf. ID Q3:29.

For Don Albera, a life of devotion could never neglect the Virgin Mary.⁴⁷ Salesians needed to turn to Mary and ask her to stay in their midst, to renew their hearts and enhance their zeal, to ignite the spark of holy love within their hearts. Only then could they be empowered to live as “true religious.”⁴⁸ Just as, in the tradition of Francis de Sales, they were called to make the Heart of Christ known to the world, so, as children of Don Bosco, Salesians were called to renew the world’s trust in Mary as Help of Christians.⁴⁹ This can only happen if they nurture a tender devotion to her in their own hearts.⁵⁰ She, in turn, safeguards their dedication, their purity.⁵¹

All these considerations serve to bolster Don Albera’s teaching on religious life. The observant religious models himself on the obedient Jesus. Always ready to do the Father’s will and serve the faithful, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is, by definition, totally available to God and creation. Religious must live with the same attitude.⁵² In all things they must keep their eyes on the Lord.

This attitude of total availability in union with Jesus in the Eucharist is especially pertinent for the director of the Salesian community. He must be present in the community in the same way that Jesus is present in the Blessed Sacrament.⁵³ Furthermore, if he is to lead others, he must be a man of profound piety and deep devotion. He must turn to Mary to help him to imitate the virtues of her Son.⁵⁴ Indeed, the director who strives to practice virtue as he tries to inculcate it in others, will find his burden lighter. If he attempts to reach the heights of perfection, he will be able to elevate his confreres with him to a life of holiness.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Cf. IA, 125; ID Q1:42.

⁴⁸ Cf. TG 1:59-60; see also CG11 r2.

⁴⁹ Cf. TG 1:92-93.

⁵⁰ Cf. IA, 125-126.

⁵¹ Cf. TG 3:91.

⁵² Cf. IA, 105-106.

⁵³ Cf. IA, 103-104.

⁵⁴ Cf. ID Q1:16-17.

⁵⁵ Cf. ID Q1:26-27.

2.2. *Devotion as the Ideal of Religious Life*

Francis de Sales maintained that holiness is accessible to all. The crucial factor for leading a “devout life” is that each person does whatever is possible to correspond to God’s call according to the duties of his or her “state in life.” Francis therefore makes it clear that true devotion is not the preserve of the few: it is the birthright of the many.

Don Albera was certainly aware that the root of Salesian spirituality is this conviction that all people are called to holiness. As we have seen, however, he was apt to follow the “*fuga mundi*” mentality prevalent among the most prolific authors on religious life. He must then make a synthesis between Francis de Sales’ open approach and the structured path that his contemporaries tended to trace out for members of religious communities.

How did he address this topic? Understanding human weakness, Don Albera acknowledged that a truly “devout life” is possible to all the faithful, but since it is possible to stray from the path of perfection, one can mistake willfulness for piety and “devotion.” Religious life offers a surety. It is the Rule that sustains the spirit of “devotion.” When a religious makes the Rule his guiding light, he never goes off track. In the same breath, Don Albera affirms that the Rule must be practiced with “devotion”, for the Rule is a manifestation of God’s will. Through the Rule, God shows us his pleasure, as he did in ancient times for the people of Israel.⁵⁶

2.3. *Holiness Consists in Doing God’s Will*

Devotion is striving to lead a life in union with God: it is the human response to God’s invitation to holiness. Here, then is the link between the two terms, for all holiness consists in doing God’s will. According to Don Albera:

All holiness consists in doing the will of God. He is our Sovereign and Master. He commands and we should do naught else but obey, doing his holy will

⁵⁶ Cf. IA, 23.

in all things, even when this might be contrary to our own, even when there may be no conformity between our will and the will of God. For perfection consists in loving the Lord and doing all for love of him, who disposes all things for our good.⁵⁷

Devotion, holiness, perfection: these are three aspects of one reality, one relationship. God calls, the human being responds out of love, and does all for love of God. Working through his description, we see that Don Albera defines holiness as “doing God’s will,” and then defines perfection as “loving the Lord and doing all for love of Him.”⁵⁸

In the first instance, God is “our sovereign and master.” In the second, God “disposes all things for our good.” Far from being self-centered perfectionism, evangelical perfection, as Don Albera explains, is a call to simply live in intimacy with God – to live with an attitude of openness to God’s will as it becomes known in the events and challenges of daily life. Put succinctly, we can identify two essential elements of holiness: obedience and charity.

Obedience makes sense in the context of this relationship that we can call holiness or perfection. By living obediently, all Christians learn to seek God’s will before their own. This is because obedience grows out of gratitude to the Creator. The entire physical creation obeys His laws. This accounts for the harmonious order of the universe that so enralls the human observer.⁵⁹ So too, whoever wants to live in conformity with God’s will must learn obedience. This is the best remedy to unbridled willfulness and self-centeredness.⁶⁰

Applying these considerations to religious life, obedience is not submission to an arbitrary command by a superior. It is a commitment to live one’s life in accordance with God’s will. It is the most essential

⁵⁷ IA, 22-23: “Tutta la Santità consiste nel fare la volontà di Dio: Egli è nostro Sovrano e Padrone; ci comanda e noi non dobbiamo far altro che ubbidire, far in tutto la sua santa volontà, anche quando questa fosse contraria alla nostra, anche quando non vi fosse conformità della nostra volontà con quella di Dio: e la Perfezione consiste nell’amare il Signore e fare tutto per amore di Lui, che tutto dispone a nostro riguardo.”

⁵⁸ See also TG 2:21-22.

⁵⁹ Cf. TG 2:11.

⁶⁰ Cf. TG 2:19.

element of religious life, and in many ways, obedience includes all the other elements of consecrated life.⁶¹ How does a religious learn and practice obedience? Daily life is the school for acquiring this virtue, and the means is living by the Rule.⁶² However, it is Faith that enables religious to recognize the superior as God's representative. When they disobey the superior, they disobey God, but if they listen to the superior, they listen to God himself.⁶³

In other words, religious obedience cannot be reduced to a means of conducting a disciplined life. It grows out of the virtue of charity. Thus, a vocation to perfection resonates deep in the heart of the person whom God calls.⁶⁴ Those who harden their hearts against others effectively block their own path towards the love of God.⁶⁵ Striving for holiness renews the bonds of charity, and charity is the "stairway" to holiness and perfect observance.⁶⁶ Like obedience, charity is won through those small acts of love made each day in the fulfillment of one's duties.⁶⁷

2.4. *The Call to Holiness Comes from God*

If we return to the thought that devotion is striving to live in union with God, we find that Don Albera makes this his definition of holiness itself. Holiness, he states, is intimate union with God.⁶⁸ The way to attain holiness is by doing God's will, but it is crucial to realize holiness is not something Christians can reach by their own genius. They must constantly turn to God. The dynamic here is obedience that develops out of love. Love, in fact, enables us to find "a thousand ways" to observe the law, Don Albera says, adding

⁶¹ Cf. ID Q3:59.

⁶² Cf. TG 2:35.

⁶³ Cf. TG 2:48; IA, 102, 104-105, 112-113; ID Q1:8, Q3:60; IO Q3:91; CG11 Q3:129.

⁶⁴ Cf. TG 1:4.

⁶⁵ Cf. TG 2:76.

⁶⁶ Cf. TG 1:15, 19, 2:29.

⁶⁷ Cf. TG 2:47.

⁶⁸ Cf. TG 1:21, 3:22.

that if we all knew how to love truly, we would all be walking on the path to holiness.⁶⁹

Union with God is the essence and the goal of holiness, and it is easy to enter into this union if one has entered “this garden of delights” that is religious life.⁷⁰ Even here, Don Albera reminds his listeners that their religious vocation is God’s free gift. They can accept that gift by being responsive to his will. Though they do not see the entire plan, they can begin by trusting in God’s goodness. After all, God had already arranged that they should start off on the path.

You are not here by accident. It is Providence that leads you here. Therefore, you must do what you can to best correspond to the call of God, persuaded that the Lord in his goodness has called you here to save your soul and the souls of many others.⁷¹

These few words, offered during the introductory talk at the novices’ retreat, put the Salesian vocation into context. God calls. It is the Lord’s initiative and goodness that prompts the call. God calls so that many will be saved. Everything else that Don Albera will say about Salesian religious life can be read within these apostolic parameters. They only expound on the *Da mihi animas* that he had learned from Don Bosco, as we shall see below.

How does Don Albera describe God’s role in religious life?

God calls. God takes the first step. He calls each individual personally, but he also calls into being each religious family in the Church. This he does by raising up the founder.⁷² But again, we return to the question of a call to holiness, which is a call to intimate union with God, that is, an intimate relationship. Here the Incarnation makes relationship and union with God easier to understand. Jesus makes it all possible.

⁶⁹ Cf. TG 2:55-56.

⁷⁰ Cf. TG 1:88.

⁷¹ Cf. IA, 18: “Voi siete qui, non per caso, ma è la Provvidenza che vi ha condotti. Dunque fate quanto potete per corrispondere bene alla chiamata di Dio, persuasi che il Signore nella sua bontà vi ha qui chiamati per salvarvi l’anima vostra e quella di tanti altri.”

⁷² Cf. IA, 8.

Jesus takes a direct interest in fostering the relationship that can be termed “a religious vocation.” He looks for his disciples, passing from town to town, as per Don Albera’s picturesque description, personally calling new apostles by name.⁷³ More specifically, it is Jesus himself who chooses young people to enter the Salesian Congregation,⁷⁴ and Providence that led them, urged them to follow.⁷⁵

3. The Rule

Jesus also took initiative in the case of the Salesians by preparing their Rule. Since Don Albera most commonly speaks of “the Lord” with reference to Jesus, we see him make an interesting observation:

Long before we ever thought of giving ourselves to Him, the Lord prepared the book of the rule for us. This book contains everything we should do in order to carry out his Holy Will. It contains everything we should do to please Him.⁷⁶

It is interesting that Don Albera does not see the Rule as coming from Don Bosco in this instance, but from “the Lord.” The Lord prepares the rule so that the Salesians may be able to carry out “his Holy Will.” But Jesus comes to do, in all things, the Will of the Father. Therefore, this phrase too holds a dynamic, spiritual motif: Salesians who follow the Rule, accomplish the Will of the Lord Jesus Christ, who seeks only to do the Will of the Father. This is the “imitation of Christ” translated into observance of the Rule; this is living by the Lord’s words, which can only be the Gospel. To live the Rule, then, is to live an evangelical life.

Just as the Salesian vocation begins with God taking the first step,

⁷³ Cf. TG 1:89, and TG 1:85, 97, 2:78,107; IA, 6-8, 111-112, 117.

⁷⁴ Cf. TG 1:3, 8, 18, 69, 92, 112; IA, 9-10.

⁷⁵ Cf. IA, 18. If we can understand “Providence” as Don Albera’s way of expressing the “Holy Spirit,” then this vocation to the religious life is interpreted as an initiative of the Blessed Trinity.

⁷⁶ IA, 23: “Il Signore già prima che noi avessimo pensato di darci a Lui, ci ha preparato il libro delle regole che contiene tutto quello che dobbiamo fare per eseguire la sua Santa Volontà; tutto quello che dobbiamo fare per piacere a Lui.”

so the Salesian constitutions are a gift. Don Albera may be speaking in a genre common to commentators on religious life in his period, but his affirmation is nonetheless quite powerful: “From whom does the Rule come? The Rule is given to each Congregation and ordinarily the founders composed them or received them from God.”⁷⁷

3.1. *Don Bosco’s Spirit and the Constitutions*

The retreat master offers a number of anecdotes from the lives of the great founders to demonstrate how much God’s hand is present in the writing of the Rule. He does this to reaffirm his point: “Our Rule, from whom does it come? We can say that it has been inspired by the Lord, who gave it to Don Bosco. This was his thought all his life.”⁷⁸

Don Albera offers no myth of divine dictation. God may have “authored” the Rule, but Don Bosco was the one who had to put in an extraordinary amount of effort to compose it! Yet, in the perspiration there was inspiration. The founder’s attentiveness makes the Rule a precious relic, a great gift, a most important counsel. “All Don Bosco’s spirit is contained in these rules, and whoever would not observe them cannot love Don Bosco.”⁷⁹

The zeal of the founders who wrote the rules for their communities is a strong witness that preempts the need of lights and miracles. Then, with the Holy See’s approbation of the Rule, religious can be certain that their way of life is grounded in God’s will. By fulfilling their rule, they do God’s will – and doing God’s will is the stuff of salvation and holiness.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ IA, 24: “E da chi viene la Regola? La regola è data da ciascuna Congregazione ed ordinariamente i fondat[or]i l’hanno composta o ricevuta da Dio.”

⁷⁸ IA, 26: “La nostra Regola da chi viene? Possiamo dire che è stata ispirata dal Signore a D. Bosco; questo fu il pensiero di tutta la sua vita.”

⁷⁹ IA, 26: “[Nelle regole] c’è tutto lo spirito di D. Bosco, e colui che non l’osservesse non può amare D. Bosco.”

⁸⁰ Cf. TG 2:21-22: “Quelli che scrissero le regole de’ varii ordini religiosi o le riceverettero da Dio stesso che loro le ha dettate, oppure uomini totalmente dati alle cose spirituali, diretti da uno zelo straordinario, scorti da un lume divino, hanno in esse inserito quanto avvi di più utile per condurre le anime alla perfezione. Ciò

For Salesians, the Founder's holy life and depth of spirituality guarantees the sureness of their own path. Don Albera reminded directors how Turin's Cardinal Gaetano Alimonda called Don Bosco the personification of union with God. This explained why Don Bosco's works prospered, because they were ultimately God's work.⁸¹ Later Don Albera would assert it is only by cultivating a fervent spirit of piety and intimacy with God that one can truly do the Lord's work. Again, Salesians should look to their founder. "Union with God" was the most salient feature of his personality. "It could be said," Don Albera wrote in 1911, "that the life of the Servant of God was a continual prayer: a never interrupted union with God."⁸²

Before moving on, allow me to make an observation. While seconding the tradition of divine inspiration for the Holy Rule, Don Albera offers a detailed glimpse of Don Bosco and his role of translating this inspiration into a code of conduct that could be understood and lived by his sons. Blessed Michele Rua describes the Rule as flowing from the heart of Don Bosco in his circular letter on religious observance, published on 1 December 1909.⁸³ That letter was written 15 years after Don Albera had begun to develop the same thought in his retreat instructions. We note this fact, not to determine who drew the idea from whom: that is really not the point of this reflection. What is striking, however, is that within five years of the founder's death, members of the core Salesian leadership team had already rooted themselves in a tradition that spoke of the Rule as the Founder's legacy – a tradition that was perhaps first voiced by Don Bosco himself.⁸⁴

noi possiamo credere con tutto fondamento delle nostre regole, specialmente dopo la approvazione della S. Sede. Dunque chi le eseguisce fa il bene che maggiormente è caro al Signore, adempie in tutto la Santissima volontà di Dio, e in ciò consiste specialmente la nostra santificazione, la nostra perfezione."

⁸¹ Cf. ID Q1:35.

⁸² ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 34; cf. 35-39.

⁸³ Cf. Michele RUA, *Lettere Circolari di Don Michele Rua ai Salesiani*, compiled, with introduction by Paolo Albera (Torino: Tip. SAID Buona Stampa, 1910), 409-410.

⁸⁴ Cf. Giovanni BOSCO, "Ai Soci Salesiani," in *Deliberazioni dei Sei Primi Capitoli Generali della Pia Società Salesiana, precedute dalle Regole o Costituzioni della Medesima*, (edited by Paolo Albera), introduction by Michele Rua (S. Benigno Ca-

3.2. Monastic Ingredients in a Recipe for Active Life

The most explicit comments on the Rule come in Don Albera's conferences to the novices. This is not surprising, since studying the constitutions or rule of life was high on the priority list for all novitiates. Certainly, Don Albera might justly suppose that the novice director would delve deeply into the topic,⁸⁵ so his own function was not so much to teach as to motivate. Accordingly, he leads his young listeners to view their novitiate experience in the context of Church's spiritual journey.

From the origins of monasticism in the West, religious life was governed by "the Holy Rule," Don Albera points out. He spends a good deal of time praising the Rule, describing it as the "Voice of God, will of God made manifest."⁸⁶ Don Albera draws from an old tradition that dates back to St. Benedict, whereby the Holy Rule is linked to "the call of God" and the "voice of the Lord inviting us" in his loving mercy to follow "the path of Life."⁸⁷ It does not seem

nave: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1894), 76: "Ricevete queste regole come testamento per tutta la Congregazione. Ricevete poi i pensieri che le precedono come ricordi, che qual padre, io vi lascio prima della mia partenza per l'eternità, cui mi accorgo avvicinarvi a grandi passi. Raccomandate al Signore la salvezza dell'anima mia, ed io pregherò costantemente anche per voi, affinché coll'osservanza esatta delle nostre Costituzioni possiamo vivere felici nel tempo e, per tratto della divina Misericordia, ci sia dato di raccoglierci tutti un giorno a godere e a lodare Iddio nella beata eternità. Così sia."

⁸⁵ In his twenty-first circular letter, dated 5 August 1900, D. Rua would give very clear instructions in this area. While every director was free to organize a program for the novices according to the needs of the group and the possibilities of the place, the rector major insisted that everyone must carefully "study to the letter" all the articles of the constitutions as well as the deliberations of the general chapters and the regulations for the Houses. He further recommended that the novices read the writings of the Founder, and that the houses sponsor public, even dramatic readings to highlight some works, that novices be encouraged to write book reviews and reflection papers. Cf. RUA, *Lettere Circolari*, 212.

⁸⁶ IA, 24; cf. ID Q1:36.

⁸⁷ Cf. S. Benedict, Abbot of Monte Cassino, *R[egula] B[enedicti] 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, edited by Timothy Fry (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1981), 160: prologus, 19-21.

that Don Albera took his terminology directly from the founder of Western monasticism, but his phraseology reflects similar concepts. It would seem logical that after reading the classic manuals on religious life, from Rodríguez and Saint-Jure to Alphonsus and Bishop Gay, many of the sentiments that originally derived from Benedict had now become part of Paolo Albera's spiritual patrimony.

There is a particular aspect of religious observance that Don Albera believes he must stress for novices. The Rule, he says, takes on immediate urgency through the daily time-table, and God utters his will through the sound of "the Bell." How the novice responds to the demands of the day is a concrete expression of his attitude to the call of God.

When you observe the rule, even the time-table established by the rule, we can say that every time we hear the Bell, we hear the voice of God: "The Lord calls you," as Saint Martha told her sister Magdalene when the Lord came to her house. We too can say with the Shepherds of Bethlehem: "This is the sign of a great king", and with Samuel: "Here I am, you called me."⁸⁸

The Rule is a "secure guide" and a "companion for life" that "sustains" the religious who strives to be faithful to its dictates.⁸⁹ In community or on his own, he is reminded by the rule that he has pledged to walk along the "path of perfection."⁹⁰

A lifestyle of ministerial Diaspora may have been a minimal threat for Salesians, Don Albera reflected, for they lived and worked in communities. Community fostered an environment that nurtured its members, creating an atmosphere of guidance. Thus, Don Albera regarded unity of life as an advantage in the joint work of the members, and encouraged Salesians to translate this joint-effort approach into their prayer life as well.⁹¹

⁸⁸ IA, 24: "Quando si osserva la regola, anche l'orario stabilito da essa, possiamo dire che ogni volta che sentiamo la Campana, sentiamo la voce di Dio: «Dominus vocat te», come diceva S. Marta alla sua sorella Maddalena quando il Signore era venuto in casa sua. Possiamo anche dire come i Pastori di Betlemme: «Hoc signum magni regis est», e come Samuele: «Ecce ego: tu enim vocasti me»."

⁸⁹ Cf. IA, 22, 24; TG 4:29, 38.

⁹⁰ Cf. IA, 24, ID Q3:5.

⁹¹ Cf. TG 1:49, 2:53.

Unity of life meant that there was also a community dimension to living by the Rule. Just as nations and empires needed laws to exist, so too religious communities needed a Rule. When an entire community lived by a Rule, this solidified the bonds that united its members on their journey along the “path of perfection.”⁹² Still, many times the Salesian must act on his own. He therefore needed to understand that in every situation, whether working as a team within community, or ministering on his own in a frontier post, or, God forbid, scattered by persecution, the Rule was his companion and guide.

How fortunate we are, my dear brothers! If we follow this road we will never run the risk of losing our way, for there are many dangers awaiting those who do not observe the Rule. By disobeying the Rule they disobey God. Let us think about this fact every once in a while, my dear brothers. This rule will be our sure guide for life, and even if we should be alone, thrown out there by Providence, we will walk along the good path. The members of certain Congregations are all scattered. How is it that they can continue to walk along the path of Perfection? This happens because they observe the Rule.⁹³

One could let his heart be “scattered,” and so continue to “sing in the choir while longing to shop.”⁹⁴ This is why Don Albera invited his young listeners to attach their hearts to God through abiding by the dictates of the Rule.

⁹² Cf. TG 2:13-14.

⁹³ IA, 24: “Fortunati noi, o cari fratelli, per questa strada noi non incontreremo alcun pericolo di sbagliare, perché vi sono pericoli per quelli che non osservano le Regole, disubbidendo essi a Dio medesimo. Pensiamoci qualche volta, o cari fratelli; questa regola sarà la nostra guida sicura per la vita, ed anche quando fossimo da soli gettati là dalla Provvidenza, cammineremo sulla buona strada. I membri di certe Congregazioni sono tutti dispersi: e come va che seguitano camminando nella via della Perfezione? Questo avviene perché osservano la regola.”

⁹⁴ PSEUDO-BERNARD, *Meditationes Piissime de Cognitione Humane Conditionis*, PL 184:498, quoted in S. Bonaventure, “Regula Novitiorum,” in *Selecta pro instruendis fratribus ord. min. scripta S. Bonaventurae una cum Libello Speculum Disciplinae*, edita a PP. Collegii S. Bonaventurae (Ad Claras Aquas - Quaracchi: Typ. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1898), 205-206: “Magna abusus est habere os in choro et cor in foro.” (The phrase is not found in Don Albera’s retreats, but is found in one of the sources with which he seems to have been quite familiar. In any case, it sums up his thoughts about religious letting themselves become “dissipated” or “scattered”).

3.3. *The Rule: The Book of Life*

The social aspect is important, but in the scheme of things, it takes a lower place to the true priority: learning and living by God's will. Don Albera puts great emphasis on obeying the Rule, for this is to obey God himself.

This is the sense that he draws from the Gospel saying: "Do this and you will live" – a phrase oft repeated by Don Bosco. Is the Rule a concrete list of "do's" and "don'ts" with a built-in "check-list" to be submitted to God? No, it is a guide to bring the Salesian to the fullness of life. To live by the Rule, the Salesian regulates his life according to the desires of the Founder.

How many times did we not hear from the lips of our most beloved Superior the recommendation to observe the Rule. He warmly taught us and prescribed exact observance. Do we not remember how he often repeated to us: *fac hoc et vives*, do what the rule set down and you will have eternal life? If we set little store on these rules, we neglect the intentions of the Superiors; it is as if we were to trample the desires of Jesus Christ himself; it violates the vow of obedience.⁹⁵

Disregarding the Rule is an affront to Jesus Christ, for ultimately it is he who commands "Hoc fac et vives."⁹⁶ Those who "hear the word of God and live by it," that is, fulfill the Lord's command, find eternal life.

We will not be his sons if we do not observe the rules that he has given us and of which the Lord says: "Do this and you will live." Those who do not

⁹⁵ TG 2:36-37. "Noi stessi quante volte non abbiamo sentito dalla bocca dell'amatissimo nostro Superiore raccomandata, caldamente inculcata e prescritta l'esatta osservanza della regola: non ricorda ciascuno di noi com'egli ci abbia spesso ripetuto: *fac hoc et vives*, fa ciò che prescrivono le regole ed avrai la vita eterna? Mettere in non cale queste regole è come tralasciare i desiderii le intenzioni dei Superiori, è come calpestare i desiderii di Gesù Cristo stesso, violare il voto d'ubbidienza!" See also: ID Q3:14; ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 70, quoting Giovanni Bosco, Torino, circular letter to the Salesians, 16 November 1873, later reprinted in *Epistolario*, vol. 4: (1873-1875), edited by Francesco Motto, (Roma: LAS, 2003), 177-180 (Letter 1867).

⁹⁶ Lk 10:28.

practice them will not have eternal life. Dear brothers, let us therefore resolve to observe them well in their entirety, even in the smallest details. By observing this rule we will avoid so many of the obstacles that could block our journey toward Perfection.⁹⁷

Comments such as these place the emphasis on movement and journey. Although the Rule traces out an orderly lifestyle that demands ongoing evaluation and self-examination,⁹⁸ it can never be reduced to an administrative code book. Instead, it is a type of road map, advice for spiritual travel. It allows the disciple to hear Christ's word and ultimately to have life.

This theme is not one of Don Albera's own creation. It is a concept that grows out of the most venerable of all traditions, for it is found in the Rule of Benedict.

First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection. In his goodness, he has already counted us as his sons, and therefore we should never grieve him by our evil actions. With his good gifts which are in us, we must obey him at all times that he may never become the angry father who disinherits his sons, nor the dread lord, enraged by our sins, who punishes us forever as worthless servants for refusing to follow him to glory.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ IA, 26: "Noi non saremo suoi figliuoli se non osservando le regole ch'egli ci ha dato e delle quali il Signore dice: "Fac hoc et viues". Coloro che non la praticano non avranno la vita eterna. Cari Fratelli, prendiamo dunque la risoluzione di osservarle bene in tutta la loro purità, anche nelle più piccole cose. Coll'osservare questa regola noi ci divertiamo da tanti ostacoli che ci impediscono il cammino verso la Perfezione."

⁹⁸ Cf. EBM, 42.

⁹⁹ Cf. S. BENEDICT, Abbot of Monte Cassino, *R[egula] B[enedicti]* 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, edited by Timothy Fry (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1981), 158/9: prologus, 4-7: "In primis, ut quicquid agendum inchoas bonum, ab eo perfici instantissima oratione deposcas, ut qui nos iam in filiorum dignatus est numero computare non debet aliquando de malis actibus nostris contristari. Ita enim ei omni tempore de bonis suis in nobis parendum est ut non solum iratus pater suos non aliquando filios exheredet, sed nec, ut metuendus dominus irritatus a malis nostris, ut nequissimos servos perpetuam tradat ad poenam qui eum sequi noluerint ad gloriam."

Is the Rule then the formal application of the commandments? If so, it carries the same logic for fulfillment, even though the final paragraph has a disclaimer about the Rule itself.¹⁰⁰ Yet, rather than identify the Rule with the Ten Commandments, it would be better to understand it in light of the Gospels. It is an expression of the “evangelical counsels,” and therefore it traces the path to holiness.¹⁰¹

This is to say that “the Rule” is more than a compendium of rules. For Don Albera it is a link with God. Religious will determine their own future – they will designate their own destiny by how they interact with the Rule. If they neglect the Rule, they risk having their names blotted out of the book of life; if they observe the Rule they will find consolation at the point of death and will find salvation.¹⁰²

3.4. *The Rule and the Word of God*

Don Albera offers a series of images that stress the personal help each religious who lives by the Rule will receive. The Rule is the “knight combatant” that saves hapless travelers from the clutches of ruthless highwaymen.¹⁰³ It is a program that lays out a sure pattern for a virtuous life.¹⁰⁴ Or, to use a biblical figure, the Rule is God’s gift by which he designates the religious as his consecrated, designated as his own. The Rule is a secret source of strength, as Samson’s hair was a sign and instrument of God’s power in his person.¹⁰⁵ The Rule is a treasure worth risking everything to possess.¹⁰⁶

The religious who abandons the Rule will cut himself off from the source of spiritual strength. Still, no one should ever harbor an ulterior motive when embracing consecrated life. Since God makes

¹⁰⁰ The Salesian constitutions ended with a canonical disclaimer to the effect that the rules in themselves were not binding under pain of sin: cf. “Regole o Costituzioni,” 136.

¹⁰¹ Cf. TG 2:28.

¹⁰² Cf. IA, 29-30.

¹⁰³ Cf. IA, 27, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. IA, 30-31.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. TG 2:23-24, 56, commenting on Judges 16:17-21.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. TG 2:25; see also ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 64-65.

known his will through the Rule, the only acceptable response any religious can make is to repeat with Jesus Christ: “Here I am, I come to do your will.”¹⁰⁷

Ultimately, religious must regard their Rule as a concrete expression of the Sacred Scriptures. Many of its maxims are straight out of the Bible, and so the Rule roots us in the deepest Christian values. Like the Scriptures, therefore, the Rule must be studied. Religious must read essays on the Rule as they comb the commentaries on the Gospels, for the Rule is tailored from the Bible. The Salesians, who have publicly vowed to live by these constitutions, must therefore approach the Rule as God’s Word for them.¹⁰⁸

4. Religious Life as a Lifestyle

4.1. *Religious Life as a Sacrifice*

“Whoever wants to live a natural life should remain in the world,” Don Albera reminds the GC11 chapter delegates. “Religious life is a school of abnegation and mortification. Woe to those souls who are too delicate.”¹⁰⁹

Abnegation includes self-sacrifice, self-denial, self-mastery. More pertinently, it means living by a spirit of sacrifice. The physical implications are readily apparent, but there are deeper issues that cannot be neglected. This is true even in the most obvious area of the evangelical counsel of poverty.

Religious life demands a spirit of poverty. To be poor in spirit demands that one live simply, but it also demands that one live without being embarrassed by inconvenience, necessity, and the lack of

¹⁰⁷ IA, 100, commenting on Ps 40:8 (Vg 39:9); ID Q3:49, commenting on Heb 10:7.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. IA, 30, 33-34.

¹⁰⁹ CG11 Q4:8: “Chi desidera vivere secondo la natura, rimanga nel mondo. La vita religiosa è scuola di annegazione e di mortificazione. Guai quindi alle anime troppo delicate.”

all the trappings that are associated with competent professionals.¹¹⁰ How many individuals lose their composure when events do not go as planned or because they must struggle with inconvenience! How easily some abuse the privilege of ministry to enrich their own families, all the time rationalizing that they are personally living a simple, detached lifestyle!¹¹¹ No. It is impossible to practice poverty as a virtue unless one is steeped in a spirit of abnegation and self-sacrifice.

The greatest site for abnegation is in the realm of the will. Resolute self-mastery confronts the weakness known as self-love, and mobilizes to conquer the passions.¹¹² It helps one to live humbly, seeking before all else to do God's will.¹¹³ The spirit of sacrifice begins by fighting off sin; it enables religious to seek guidance from their superior or spiritual director, and leads to a life of piety and prayer.¹¹⁴

On his part, the self-sacrificing superior will not seek honors for himself. He knows that authority belongs to God and is only extended to him by way of a loan. To put it another way, he has not been called to leadership to impose his own will: he only administers on the Lord's behalf. His position, then, is not an honor but a burden; it is not a reward for holiness but a penance for sins. The superior who truly understands his role will strive only to give honor to God by humbly serving those placed in his care.¹¹⁵

Ultimately religious profession is an act of worship. Those who lead a vowed life can find the most perfect model of self-sacrifice in the person of the "sacred victim" who renews his sacrifice "every day on our altars." Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, who saves sinners by the power of the Eucharist, dwells in constant union with his eternal Father.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Cf. TG 2: 96-99, 102-103, 112; IA, 14.

¹¹¹ Cf. CG11 Q4:11.

¹¹² Cf. TG 1:52.

¹¹³ Cf. TG 4:55; ID Q1:11; IO Q3:110.

¹¹⁴ Cf. TG 1:123-124. This progression was the theme of a triduum that Don Albera preached to the philosophy students in Valsalice for the opening of the 1894-1895 scholastic year: cf. ASC, B0320101, entry for 5 Nov 1894.

¹¹⁵ Cf. ID Q1:12-13, 17-18, 23, Q3:7, 16; CG11 Q3:132, Q4:9.

¹¹⁶ Cf. TG 3:4-6; cf. IA, 39, 76.

4.2. *Radical Basis of Religious Life*

Don Albera images Religious Life as “a penance for sins,” whereby Religious make reparation for their own sins and for the sins of the world.¹¹⁷ In many ways, he offers his confreres, particularly the novices, a hermitic model of life. If this would seem extraordinary for the Salesians, who from the beginning were an active and apostolic community, Don Albera points out to them that the whole logic behind embarking on the vowed life was to respond to the Call of a Saving God. Just as God chose the children of Israel in the Old Testament, so today this God chooses religious as his “chosen portion.” On the part of religious, they respond to God’s call out of a burning desire for holiness that translates itself into a commitment to strive for perfection.¹¹⁸ This desire and commitment explains the radical nature of consecrated life as Don Albera understands it. Religious vow to be obedient so that they may keep on the straight and narrow; they vow to live chastely so as to be wholly consecrated to God by giving their whole heart to God.¹¹⁹ For Salesians, he tells the novices, this discipline and intimate consecration is apostolic in nature, for the most sublime sentiment is the apostolic one. Don Bosco expressed this sentiment through his motto: “Give me souls.” When a Salesian is motivated primarily by this sentiment – this, says Don Albera, is the sign of a true vocation.

Dear Brothers, one has a true Vocation, then, when he enters Religion to save souls, saying: “Da mihi animas, cetera tolle.” What sublime sentiments! He does not search for wealth and riches, he does not seek honors, he does not look out for his own ease and comfort, he does make other considerations, but only thinks about saving souls.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Cf. IA, 14-15.

¹¹⁸ Cf. TG 1:86-87; IA, 15; ID Q3:5; CG11 Q3:138.

¹¹⁹ Cf. IA, 15-16; ID Q3:59.

¹²⁰ IA, 16: “Cari Fratelli, specialmente poi uno ha vera Vocazione quando entra in Religione per salvare anime dicendo: «Da mihi animas, cetera tolle». Quanta sublimità di pensieri! Egli non guarda a ricchezze, non guarda ad onori, non guarda a comodità, non guarda ad altre cose, ma solo pensa a salvar anime.”

Religious life essentially entails renunciation of the world, of family and temporal goods. This makes no sense unless the religious enters into an intimate and tender relationship with Jesus Christ.¹²¹

One enters religious life, Don Albera affirms, in order to find support in the incessant battles of interior life. This help comes primarily from Christ himself, and can be accessed through a contemplative approach to life. The community brings a different dimension to consecrated life, for it offers the individual many other advantages. It brings consolations that the world does not know how to give its own followers. However, a religious must be mindful that he is not called for himself, but for others. In difficult times, the preacher says, it is almost as if God were relying on religious to reach a hardened world: to carry the benefits of the cross to a world that hungers for salvation. Religious are sent as an army of apostles who do God's work in the midst of a world that has distanced itself from God. The apostolic aspect is most vital, most essential to the Salesian religious vocation, for, Don Albera will stress, Salesians are called so that many others may be saved.¹²²

As we have seen, Don Albera frequently made use of images that highlight the separation between religious and the world. If the Salesian Congregation seems like Noah's Ark, it is also true that God does not give out free rides. Salesians are called to bring many others to safety, to salvation. In fact, they will only reach holiness if they respond generously to God's call to be apostles.

The Lord in his goodness has called you here to save your soul and the souls of many others. The world seems submerged in the flood of iniquity and the Lord has called you here to climb aboard the ark, which has nothing to fear from the waves. Aboard this ship we will become saints, but the Lord wants a lot of generosity on our part. Woe to the one who does not respond generously to the Lord's call!¹²³

¹²¹ Cf. TG 1:86-88.

¹²² Cf. TG 1:95-96, 102; ID Q3:15.

¹²³ IA, 18-19 (cf. TG 1:80). "Il Signore nella sua bontà vi ha qui chiamati per salvarvi l'anima vostra e quella di tanti altri. Il mondo pare sommerso da un diluvio di iniquità ed il Signore vi ha chiamati ad entrare nell'arca, la quale non avrà a temere dei flutti. Noi in Essa ci faremo santi, ma il Signore vuole da parte nostra

The act of religious profession is a pivotal moment in the life of every religious. It is an event that one can never forget.¹²⁴ Even so, it is important to understand that religious life is not a magic carpet. The journey through life continues to be a struggle, and the Gospel continues to contend with an evil world. Religious are not exempt from the life-long battle.¹²⁵

Those who are aware of the need to do battle, are not afraid of it. Providence protects and arms them with Faith, and this carries, nourishes, sustains, heals and purifies them. But all virtue is rooted in God. Thus religious need to lead a life of union with God through prayer, meditation, confession and communion. Prayer and the sacraments enable Christians to relate more deeply to God, but also push them into deeper concern, deeper relationships with their neighbor. Faith cultivates integrity and life in God's presence until all one's actions assume a spiritual dimension; every relationship becomes a help for holiness.¹²⁶

4.3. *Spirituality of Daily Life*

It is all too easy, Don Albera reflects, to get caught up in the stories of miracles and startling heroics from the lives of the saints. The risk in that is to forget the spirituality of normal, day-to-day life. Simplicity and constancy in the fulfillment of one's ordinary duties: this is the secret to true holiness. "It is imperative that we remember that this holiness is molded out of acts of virtue that in no way appear extraordinary;" he instructed the novices in Foglizzo.¹²⁷

molta generosità. Guai a colui che non corrisponde generosamente alla chiamata del Signore."

¹²⁴ Cf. IA, 20.

¹²⁵ Cf. TG 2:122; IA, 40, 117, 120; EBM, 14, 19, 28, 53; ID Q1:6; CG11 Q3:138, u2.

¹²⁶ Cf. EBM, 19-20.

¹²⁷ IA, 35: "Voi non avete qui tanta occasione di praticare quelle virtù che fanno sbalordire, ma potrete tuttavia in parte ritrarre quella dolcezza di S. Francesco di Sales, la Carità di S. Carlo Borromeo e l'Innocenza di S. Luigi Gonzaga. Bisogna che ci ricordiamo che questa santità è formata con degli atti di virtù che non parevano

The Rule contains so many small details, but these are invitations to practice small acts of virtue that will eventually lead to true spiritual depth. Daily efforts to fulfill one's responsibilities are little seeds that grow into a robust hedge that becomes a defense; they are like the small steps and rises that become a staircase to holiness.¹²⁸ Or, to use another image, they are like small bricks that go in to build a tower of strength.

A high tower that resists the winds and the storms, is formed out of small bricks. Put together as a whole, they form a soaring bastion that challenges the imagination. In the same way the glory of so many saints has been built out of tiny virtues; the glory of religious will be built by observing the rules even in minute details.¹²⁹

To build a spiritual skyscraper, one must not neglect those small acts of goodness that are the fabric of daily life. If the Rule is a "little book," it ultimately outlines a "little way" to perfection, to sanctification.

5. Religious Observance

Like Don Bosco and Don Rua, Paolo Albera will increasingly concentrate on the theme of "religious observance." He will stress this with directors¹³⁰ as well as with his confreres in general.¹³¹

He urged youthful novices to make a habit of practicing the Rule from the time of their novitiate. Even though they were not yet bound

niente straordinarii."

¹²⁸ Cf. TG 2:46-47.

¹²⁹ TG 2:47-48 (cf. IA, 35): "Un'alta torre che resiste ai venti ed alle tempeste, è formata di piccoli mattoni: il tutto è una gran mole che spaventa il pensiero: Così la gloria di tanti santi si è fabbricata con piccole virtù, la gloria dei religiosi sarà fabbricata coll'osservanza delle regole anche nelle cose minute."

¹³⁰ Cf. ID Q1:46, Q3:5; ASC, Fondo Don Albera, B0480136, Direzione Generale Don Bosco, Roma, p. "X".

¹³¹ Cf. TG 2:18-19, 26-59; ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 34, 66, 76, 132, 144, 203, 299, 369, 403, 432, 437, 472, 474, 480.

by it, those who lived their novitiate by the dictates of the Rule would find it much easier to live a life of observance after profession. The Rule would even become for them a “sweet souvenir of the novitiate”.¹³²

5.1. *Observance and Community Bonding*

The Salesians, considered together, form a single body.¹³³ What can best unite them so that, from a collection of more or less enthusiastic youth workers, they can grow one in mind and heart? It is “observance” that unites them.¹³⁴

There are social and psychological elements at play when confreres make a mission out of adhering to the Rule. Interest in the text can help shape the common ideals of the group; eliciting strategies for implementing the norms of the constitutions can become one of those challenging projects that allows religious, especially religious men, to bond into a strong brotherhood.¹³⁵ On another level, observance

¹³² Cf. IA, 127; see also: IA, 30-31.

¹³³ Cf. Giovanni BOSCO, “Ai Soci Salesiani,” in *Deliberazioni dei Sei Primi Capitoli Generali della Pia Società Salesiana, precedute dalle Regole o Costituzioni della Medesima*, [edited by Paolo Albera], introduction by Michele Rua (S. Benigno Canavese: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1894), 74-75.

¹³⁴ The phrase “cor unum et anima una” from Acts 4:32 became one of Don Albera’s favorite themes when describing the observant Salesian community. See: Paolo ALBERA, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna: Memorie Biografiche* (S. Benigno Canavese: Scuola Tipografica Salesiana, 1900), 214; ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 14, 144, 244, 361. See also the transcript of Don Albera’s address to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians on the occasion of the announcement of his being named apostolic delegate to the Institute, 7 Aug 1917, at Nizza Monferrato, as reported in Giselda CAPETTI, *Il Cammino dell’Istituto nel corso di un secolo*, vol. 3: *Dal VI Capitolo Gen. - Straordinario al Giubileo d’Oro dell’Istituto: 1907-1922* (Roma: Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice, 1976), 118-119.

¹³⁵ Don Albera described the dynamic of relationships in religious communities of men in a way that, 100 years later, we can trace a hint of what our contemporaries call “male bonding.” According to experts in the fields of social science and psychology, men form relationships differently from the way women do, and it is often necessary for males to share in a challenge, or a long range project before they can develop friendship for one another. This partly explains why “team work” has

also creates a mystical connection among confreres. It is the power behind a strong community life and the source of apostolic effectiveness. Even when one is not directly involved in ministry, observance is the spiritual link that allows his efforts to call God's grace upon the mission of his community. Thus, observance draws the community together. Members do an immense amount of good and their pastoral efforts bear fruit.¹³⁶

When a Salesian is observant, therefore, he not only fulfills his personal obligations before God, he offers a good example to his brothers. This is the social aspect of "observance." Concretely speaking, the good efforts of one brother inspire and silently instruct his confreres. True, the pride of one person can fester and compromise an entire community, but the concerted effort of the whole community to give good example can pull an arrogant or a discouraged member out of the depths.¹³⁷ Each member will do well, therefore, if he strives to build up the community through his own dedication and good example.

5.2. *Observance and Perfection*

Whoever neglects the Rule will soon transgress the commandments.¹³⁸ This warning is similar to what Saint Francis de Sales explained to the Visitation Sisters in his first of his *Spiritual Conferences*. Neglecting the rule, though it is not binding under pain of sin, leads to sin if neglect is born of despising the rule or the superior.¹³⁹

more significance for males in Western cultures than it does for women. In any case, Don Albera presents "joining together" in a common effort of mission and prayer as one of the great advantages of religious community; cf. TG 1:39, 85. For a more complete analysis of the phenomenon called "male bonding," see: John A. SANFORD, and George LOUGH, *What men are like* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 155-156; Joan SHAPIRO, *Men: a Translation for Women* (New York: Avon Books, 1993), 117-120.

¹³⁶ Cf. IA, 31-32.

¹³⁷ Cf. IA, 32, 48.

¹³⁸ Cf. IA, 33.

¹³⁹ Cf. S. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, *Les Vrays Entretiens Spirituels*. Œuvres de Saint

Those who have a true idea of religious life go beyond literal adherence to the Rules. They approach the deliberations and the wishes of their superiors with a readiness that grows out of total dedication and obedience. They make no hair-splitting distinctions between greater or lesser directives because they observe the Rule “in all its extension, all its force, all its integrity.”¹⁴⁰

Those who are observant are vigilant. They know that unless they constantly watch, unless they continually correct their own faults and defects, the good seed of grace will be choked by the weeds of arrogance, intolerance, and sensuality.¹⁴¹

It is easy to become comfortable with one’s failings and even with one’s sins. Even just keeping within the dictates of the Rule religious find themselves falling into many defects: distractions, negligence, omissions, weakness, sensuality, self-centeredness. Since, however, the Rule sets an evangelical course, it identifies those major roadblocks known as the three concupiscences: the love of riches, pleasures, and honors. It allows religious to know what their journey entails and to check their progress day by day. By evaluating their purposes and progress, they overcome the temptation to remain superficial. They begin slowly but surely to correct their faults and advance in virtue.¹⁴²

François de Sales, *Édition Complète*, Tome 6 (Annecy: Monastère de la Visitation, 1895), 5-7. As we saw above with regard to the constitutions for the Salesian Society written by D. Bosco and approved by the Holy See in 1874, so with all religious institutes: the Rule is not binding under pain of sin. However, Francis de Sales kept company with other commentators, including Thomas Aquinas, Alonso Rodríguez, and Alphonsus de’ Liguori, when he pointed out that a religious who disregards the rule has probably already sinned. For a sample of how Don Albera develops this theme in his retreat instructions, see TG 2:42-45; IA, 35.

¹⁴⁰ IA, 34: “Osservare quindi la Regola in tutta la sua estensione, in tutta la sua forza e d in tutta la sua purità, e non dire: «O ben! ci sono varie cose che riguardano ai voti e che sono importanti ed altre che non lo sono». Chi ha una vera idea della vita Religiosa, non fa alcuna distinzione, anche sulle deliberazioni capitolari e da a tutto una ugal importanza.”

¹⁴¹ Cf. CG11 Q3:136, 145-146, 149; EBM, 40.

¹⁴² Cf. EBM, 26-27; IA, 28.

5.3. *Observance and Filial Devotion to the Founder*

The theme of observance finds its place within a framework of life experience that stresses loyalty, family honor, gratitude, filial love. Don Bosco was the venerated Founder who wrote the Rule of Life for all Salesians. More pertinently, the youth worker of Turin had “fathered” the Salesian Family: the mature generation of priests and brothers had, for the most part, grown up in Don Bosco’s house; the incoming generation had grown up knowing his reputation as an educator, apostle for the young, and a holy priest. Those who knew him personally looked upon him with great affection; those who came later looked on him with great reverence. In the short time since his death, his reputation for holiness had steadily spread throughout the Church, and had become more deeply rooted in the consciousness of his spiritual family.¹⁴³

It is not surprising then that themes such as “fatherhood” and “sonship” blend with directives about the Rule, observance, and apostolic life. As we have observed elsewhere, Paolo Albera advocated that Salesians emulate their “father” Don Bosco and prove to be his “true sons.” He often returned to this theme in his writings¹⁴⁴ and this

¹⁴³ Prof. Mario Midali identifies the decades immediately following D. Bosco’s death as the Salesian Family’s “fascination phase.” All discussion of D. Bosco during this period was typified by a profound, respectful affection for the man, his work, his message. This was the period in which Don Albera functioned as a retreat preacher; cf. Mario MIDALI, “La Famiglia Salesiana: identità carismatica e spirituale. Note ad uso privato degli studenti, 1994,” TMs (photocopy), pp. 18-19, Roma, Università Pontificia Salesiana. For an account of how D. Bosco’s reputation for holiness grew in the years immediately following his death, see Pietro Stella’s analysis of the Diocesan Process for his beatification: STELLA, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*, 3:88-90.

¹⁴⁴ Don Albera often used the phrase “son of D. Bosco” to carry a weighty sense of heritage, duty, fidelity; cf. e.g. ALBERA, *Mons. Luigi Lasagna*, 283, 335-336, 344, 368; ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 53, 107-108, 110, 113, 146, 155, 163, 194, 214, 227, 228, 230, 240, 248, 260, 263, 264, 269-272, 310-311, 323-324, 330-331, 334-336, 358, 366, 368, 370-371, 379, 435, 438, 440, 470, 472; Paolo ALBERA, *Lettere circolari ai Salesiani militari*, 32 printed circular letters (Torino: 19 March 1916 - 24 December 1918, ASC, Fondo Rettori Maggiori, E223), 3:2, 4:2, 6:2-3, 10:1-3, 22:3-4.

concern was foundational to his understanding of his own identity as superior.¹⁴⁵

5.4. Salesian Characteristics in Don Bosco's Sons

Besides the frequent references in the course of his retreat instructions,¹⁴⁶ Don Albera's spiritual journal offers interesting allusions to this term. This affords an insight into how Don Albera defined a "true son of Don Bosco." During an "exercise for a good death" preached to the Salesians in Nice in the Autumn of 1898, Don Albera challenged the busy community to think of themselves as representatives of Christ, true religious, and sons of Don Bosco.¹⁴⁷

Implicitly or explicitly, this trinomial reappears, especially in occasion of retreats and feasts. To the Salesians gathered for the conclusion of the annual retreat in Lanzo on 23 August 1906, Don Albera proposes three areas of work for the coming year. "Love of our vocation and towards our Congregation; care of our perfection; zeal for the salvation of our neighbour."¹⁴⁸ As soon as that retreat concluded, Don Albera traveled to Valsalice where he directed the "directors' retreat." Ten days later, Don Rua gave the closing talk to these confreres, recommending the following practice: "Remember that we are religious; that we are priests; that we are the sons of Don Bosco."¹⁴⁹

The year after his election as rector major, he recalled Don Rua's "retreat souvenirs" for the 1906 directors' retreat. He intended to renew his predecessor's retreat proposal, but interestingly enough, he inverted the word order. What he offered directors gathered in Valsalice at the end of the 1911 Spiritual Exercises was as follows: "I am a priest – zeal; I am a religious – care for vocations; I am a Salesian:

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Joseph BOENZI, "Paolo Albera's Visits During Don Bosco's Last Illness," *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 5.2 (Fall 1994): 108-109.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. TG 3:74-75; IA, 27, ID Q1:21, 39, Q3:44, 45; CG11 u1.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. ASC, B0320104, entry for 9 Nov 1898: « Soyons des représentants de J. C., des vrais religieuses, des vrais fils de D. Bosco.»

¹⁴⁸ ASC, B0320106, entry for 23 Aug 1906.

¹⁴⁹ ASC, B0320106, entry for 1 Sep 1906.

chastity and sweetness.”¹⁵⁰ This change highlights Don Albera’s own understanding. He began with the most obvious reality: the directors were all priests, and priesthood was the prized vocation perhaps. The second point takes them deeper: they are not just priests, they are religious, called by God to perfection. More deeply still, they are Salesians, committed to a live of holiness that is typified by virtue, especially chastity and “sweetness” – virtues of such importance that he would dedicate a circular letter to each before the end of the decade.¹⁵¹

A variation on this theme is noted in a conference Don Albera prepared for the Salesians in Mathi on 31 January 1904. The community celebrated the feast of Francis de Sales that day, and Don Albera depicted the patron saint as a “model of *strength*, and *sweetness*: two virtues that are most necessary for a son of Don Bosco.”¹⁵²

Another characteristic of Don Bosco’s true sons is that they are “active,” always ready to give themselves to others through an apostolic life. Leaving active ministry cost Don Albera great personal sacrifice. First he was called by obedience to leave his beloved France and return to the mother house. This trial was aggravated by physical ailments that began to plague him in those years. In his prayer he asked God for the gift of patience, but he also pleaded for the grace to return to active ministry, for this was the vocation of Don Bosco’s sons. After a year that had brought him great physical pain, Don Albera penned in his spiritual journal: “The month of November finishes, and I am always in the same state of health. My God, give me the patience which is necessary, or return me to the active life of the Sons of Don Bosco.”¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Cf. ASC, B0320110, entry for 26 Aug 1911.

¹⁵¹ The rector major published his letter on chastity on 14 Apr 1916; his letter on “sweetness,” as we have seen, was published on 20 Apr 1919. Cf. ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 194-210; 280-294.

¹⁵² ASC, B0320106, entry for 31 Jan 1904.

¹⁵³ Cf. ASC, B0320106, entry for 30 Nov 1905.

5.5. Observance as Family Loyalty

Don Bosco was “family” for Don Albera. He was also his utmost model after Jesus and Mary. This thought gradually comes to the fore in his most significant preaching. Whereas in the early years, he may have centered the “souvenirs” or “closing talk” of the spiritual exercises around “the small virtues,” or the invitation to “study the heart of Jesus,”¹⁵⁴ by 1899 he modeled his encouragement around the figure of the founder. During the Lenten exercises of 1899, he instructed the novices from Ivrea to work through the remainder of the year until their profession in union with “Jesus, Mary, and Don Bosco.”¹⁵⁵

With this family image in mind, Don Albera could easily identify with religious life literature that depicted founders and disciples as fathers and sons. In his own writing and speaking, he would return to the theme of the “fatherhood of the founder” and the “sonship” of the member of the institute.

Saint Francis Borgia exercised his role as superior of the Jesuits in a most fatherly way.¹⁵⁶ Saint Vincent de Paul, who was a father to the poor, knew how to treat his religious with all the affection and tenderness of a loving father; they venerated him and the rule he wrote with the same staunch but tender affection.¹⁵⁷ These founders model themselves after Jesus Christ himself, who taught his disciples with all the care of a father bringing up his young children.¹⁵⁸

The image did not always bring consolation. For example, Don Albera told a story of Saint Dominic that could curdle the blood of his listeners as well as would any ghost story. With gothic detail, he tells how the sainted founder repudiated a convent full of lax religious. They did not follow the Rule, and the saint solemnly sentenced

¹⁵⁴ *Prédications du Très Révérend Père Paul Albéra au Novciat des Filles de Marie Auxiliatrice* (Villa Pastié, Ste. Marguerite, 23-29 Sep 1892; 30 Sep - 5 Oct 1893), Ms. transcribed by Mother Amalia [Ripa] di Meana, p. 42, 76, ASC, B0330401; cf. IA, 124.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. B0320105: entry for 27 Mar 1899.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. IA, 27.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. TG 2:5, 7; IA, 26-27.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. TG 1:14.

them with the solemn phrase: “*Nec ego pater, nec vos filii* – I am not your father, nor are you my sons!”¹⁵⁹

Frightening stories are a negative reinforcement, and, as such, they do not have a great effect on changing behavior. Don Albera seems to know this, for he spends more time and energy on inculcating a family image that allows Salesians to feel pride. Their loyalty would do more to produce a sense of faithful observance than would guilt-producing examples from other eras. It is in this vein that Don Albera exploits a parallel image. He speaks of the Salesian Society as “mother.”¹⁶⁰

The Salesian Congregation is a “sweet” and “tender mother” who nurtures, guides and teaches her children.¹⁶¹ It is right and just that they should love her: after God, they owe all their affection to her.¹⁶² Affection by itself is meaningless, however, unless they are also determined to learn from her, to live by her spirit. The Salesian spirit which she teaches them must direct every one of their thoughts; regulate every action.¹⁶³ The reason is simple: this “mother Congregation” continually urges her Salesians to grow in holiness: she proposes the vowed life; to honor and adore God.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Cf. IA, 26. This image of an exigent Saint Dominic was not inconsistent with D. Bosco the founder, whose concern to preserve the religious and Salesian spirit in his fledgling congregation mounted during the decade 1875-1885. Don Albera would have heard him hammer away at these concerns very often, if not in private, certainly in public forums. For a description of D. Bosco insistence on obedience, observance, spiritual direction, apostolic zeal, with translations of his interventions at GC2 and gatherings of directors, see: Arthur LENTI, “Key-Concepts, Concerns and Fears of a Founder - Don Bosco in His Declining Years,” *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 7.1 (Spring 1996): 5-27.

¹⁶⁰ The Italian language produces feminine gender nouns for “congregation” and “society,” whereas English visualises these nouns as neuter. As often happens, Latin languages, with their grammatical genders, seem to lend themselves more readily to the use of personification than does English with its natural genders (cf. BARON, *Grammar and Gender*, 110). Be that as it may, Don Albera exploits this literary device. He takes the grammatically “feminine” subject “Pious Society,” identifies it as a proper name and personifies “her” as “mother.”

¹⁶¹ Cf. TG 1:103, 107, 108.

¹⁶² Cf. TG 1:109.

¹⁶³ Cf. TG 1:115.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. TG 2:70.

The theme of motherhood has implications for leadership within the Congregation. Whoever would take up the role of Superior has a duty to identify completely with the Society. This implies that a director's role is more comparable to that of a mother. Citing Saint Bernard, Don Albera tells superiors that they must be "mothers" to their communities.¹⁶⁵ They must "love" the community that has been entrusted to their care.¹⁶⁶

Those who are not superiors still must look to the Congregation with affection. The commandment to honor their mother applies: they are called to love and honor the congregation. This they do by a life of faithful observance. "Let us keep well in mind that the honor of the Congregation depends on our observing everything that the book of the Rules recommends," Don Albera taught.¹⁶⁷

Affirming the "motherhood" of the Pious Society, Don Bosco's fatherhood is likewise affirmed. Don Albera calls him father and founder repeatedly, but Salesians who do not live by his values, can they honestly call themselves loyal sons? Those who do not love the heritage he left behind may indeed compromise their relationship with him. Let whoever considers himself a true son of Don Bosco place great store on his teaching; let him love the Rule that Don Bosco had handed on so painstakingly.¹⁶⁸

5.6. *Living the Founder's Spirit*

Keeping the Rule makes little sense if one does not live the spirit of the Founder. Throughout his exhortations and retreat instructions, therefore, Don Albera made constant reference to Don Bosco. The purpose was not simply to propose a model or to remember the beloved and venerable priest that had changed his life and the lives of most of his listeners. Rather, Paolo Albera used the life and virtues of

¹⁶⁵ Cf. IA, 28-29; ID Q3:24.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. CG11 Q3:129.

¹⁶⁷ IA, 29: "Teniamo ben in mente che l'onore della Congregazione dipende dall'osservare tutto quello che raccomanda il libro delle Regole."

¹⁶⁸ Cf. IA, 26.

the Founder as a way to inculcate his spirit, which was rooted in the “Da Mihi Animas,” and in the binomial: “to do all for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”

This formed the basis of Don Albera’s definition of the Salesian spirit. The scope of the Salesian Society was the sanctification of its members by working for youth; the spirit of the Salesian congregation was “to serve God in holy gladness.” The first step in learning this spirit was to imitate Don Bosco by throwing oneself generously into a life of ministry among the young.¹⁶⁹

Years later as rector major he returned to this theme, describing Don Bosco’s spirit as “a powerful energy” that binds Salesians together in fellowship and moves them to apostolic action under the banner of the “Da mihi animas.”¹⁷⁰ He continued to develop his teaching on this point, and his words took on particular weight when he published a clear definition of the Salesian spirit in the lead article in the first issue of the *Atti del Capitolo Superiore*.¹⁷¹ “He was Father; he is Father: he was and is Father of a multitude of sons!” he wrote, going on to assert with all the force of his own patron Saint Paul, “We are his sons, and if we are sons, we are also heirs.”¹⁷² Within this family context, therefore, Paolo Albera defined “the spirit of our Venerable Father” as “a spirit of faith, a spirit of piety, spirit of sacrifice and of constant, unflagging work.”¹⁷³

To live by Don Bosco’s spirit, Don Albera wrote, it is crucial that Salesians know Don Bosco intimately. Hearsay is not enough. They must understand his thinking, imitate his example, make themselves

¹⁶⁹ Cf. EBM, 34-35. Here Don Albera bases his teaching on Ps 100:1, and on article 1 of the Salesian Constitutions: “Regole o Costituzioni,” 79: “Lo scopo della Società Salesiana si è la cristiana perfezione de’ suoi membri, ogni opera di carità spirituale e corporale verso i giovani, specialmente poveri, ed anche l’educazione del giovane Clero. Essa poi si compone di Sacerdoti, chierici e laici.”

¹⁷⁰ Cf. ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 296.

¹⁷¹ Don Albera’s first circular letter to be published in the “Acts of the Superior Chapter” – *Atti del Capitolo Superiore* 1.1 (24 June 1920): 3-9 – was later reprinted as “Il Monumento simbolo d’amore e sintesi dell’opera nostra,” in ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 321-328.

¹⁷² ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 321, 323.

¹⁷³ ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 324.

resemble their father as much as possible. They must become the sculptors and engineers of a living monument to the founder, which is nothing less than their own sanctification. This was Don Albera's message as rector major.¹⁷⁴ It was his message through many years as formator, retreat master, and spiritual director general. Yes, they must constantly strive to know the Rule,¹⁷⁵ they must recognize God at work in the souls of others.¹⁷⁶ Both aspects become real for Salesians when they learn to know the heart of Don Bosco: a heart that burned with love of God and neighbor; a heart consumed with zeal for the salvation of souls.¹⁷⁷

In those houses where directors and confreres strive to imitate the spirit of "our Venerable Founder and Father," "zeal for souls" takes precedence, piety flourishes, and the "fragrance of every choice virtue" pervades the house.¹⁷⁸ Yet Don Bosco's spirit is contained integrally in the Rule which he gave his Salesians. That is his greatest gift. When a Salesian loves the Rule and truly lives by it, he grows in the spirit of his holy and zealous Founder.¹⁷⁹

6. Conclusion: Articulating the Salesian Spirit

We have traced a round-about road that began in the hillside meadows that are "sweetness" and "devotion," and cross the seemingly arduous valleys of "obedience" to the shores of "observance" and back to the heights of "charity" and "zeal for souls." This is the "path of perfection," the "way to holiness" that Don Albera traces out for Salesian religious over the course of nearly two decades of retreat preaching.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. ALBERA, *Lettere Circolari*, 324, 329.

¹⁷⁵ Don Albera folds in this teaching from the Dominican Cardinal Hugo of Santa Sabina (ca. 1198-1263); cf. CG11 Q4:11.

¹⁷⁶ Don Albera picks up this phrase from the celebrated Archbishop François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon (1651-1715); cf. ID Q1:33.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. ID Q1:39.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. CG11 Q3:134, commenting on his predecessor's final circular letter, in RUA, *Lettere Circolari*, 408.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. IA, 26.

Little of what Don Albera presented about religious life was new. He took the perennial themes of the vows, community life, and especially the Rule, and wove them into his instructions. After all, these were customary themes for retreat instructions, and Don Albera committed himself totally to the task assigned him. Yet, even as he integrated a library of material from classic and contemporary commentators, he filtered all through a new experience. This experience was all that he had learned and lived in Don Bosco's house.

The principal models he highlighted when discussing religious life themes were the same as those we have seen earlier: Jesus Christ in the Gospels, in the Eucharist, in his Sacred Heart; Francis de Sales as "our protector," master of meekness, standard bearer, Doctor of the Church; John Bosco as the one who gave the rule, modeled its directives, communicated its vitality, and joyfully gave himself for the salvation of young people.

Jesus, Mary, Francis de Sales and the saints brought a personal dimension to what would otherwise be abstract considerations on religious duty. Saint John Bosco, however, occupied a special place in all Paolo Albera's discussions. He responded generously to his own vocation; he remained open to God's inspiration and strove to translate what he learned from God into a way of life for his "sons." Moreover, the family relationship between Don Bosco and the Salesians added a special imperative to the entire process. The Salesians were not simply part of a movement of apostolic educators; they were "sons" of an inspired, zealous, joyful, saintly father. What he became by faithful union with God, they must continue to be by faithful observance of *his* way of life – which, given the Church's approval of the Salesian Rule, was nothing less than an expression of the Gospel way of life.

Taken as a whole, then, Don Albera's retreat instructions effectively translated venerable expressions of religious life into terminology that could make sense to members of a young, apostolic community, "born only yesterday." This took much study on his part, as we have seen. Yet, in a personal and simple fashion, Don Albera was beginning to articulate the "Salesian spirit," or that which he termed the "spirit of Don Bosco".