

**“Da mihi animas
cetera tolle”
Symposium**

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**Don Bosco Hall,
Berkeley**

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Back to Don Bosco: *Da mihi Animas*

Response of Fr. Savio Hon

Don Bosco Hall, Berkeley, Symposium

July 20, 2007.

My special congratulations to Fr. Arthur Lenti (hereafter Lenti) on his article! It is very well documented, succinct, and concise. In my response, I would like to focus on two points. One is to appreciate the sapiential dimension of the motto that has permeated all aspects of the life of Don Bosco and the Salesian Family. Another is to call to mind the inter-cultural aspect which deserves more of our attention nowadays.

Sapiential Dimension

Wisdom means intelligence, prudence, cleverness, shrewdness, practical knowledge, skill in administration, ability in arts and music, and above all the moral uprightness of life and the religious one-heartedness to God. Humanly speaking, all these elements could easily be noticed in that young priest Don Bosco who was wandering and looking for the disadvantaged young in the streets of Turin.

In the Old Testament, the Divine Wisdom does not appear something impersonal, in the form of "it," but as "someone" who summoned. In fact, this "someone" was presented as a beautiful lady (Wis 8:2). Only in the New Testament, the Incarnate Logos was identified with Wisdom. In his nine-year-old dream, Don Bosco saw Jesus who presented his Mother Mary to be his own teacher. What a coincidence! In a mystical way, the wisdom taught to Don Bosco is pregnant with religious overtones and blended with the male (Jesus) and female (Mary) components.

The formation of the Salesian wisdom results from human experiences, and in particular, those of the Oratory of St. Francis of Sales. Life was not easy in those days. When there is love, there is no hardship but real taste. “*Ubi autem amor est, labor non est, sed sapor*” (St. Bernard). The Latin word “*sapor*” (taste) is related to “*sapientia*” (wisdom). The Oratory was centered on love. It was with love that the life-issues were being tackled, such as, suffering and hope, fatigues and joy, homelessness and family spirit, indifference and care, human origin and destiny (*giardino salesiano*), good and evil, and so on. “*Si sapis, sis apis.*” If you are wise, be a bee. The exercise of happy death is to render life more tasteful. For Don Bosco the preparation for death is not exclusively a matter of soul, it touches the body and that is why he gave an extra treat to his boys after each exercise of happy death. Lenti is right to point out the integral and not dualistic approach of Don Bosco in his youth apostolate.

The “*sapor*” (taste or wisdom) was found in their prayers, class-room lectures, games, dramas, *cortile*, Marian Month, *paroline*, *buona-notte*, *passeggiate*, etc. The wisdoms were gathered in *Giovane Provveduto*, *Vita di Domenico Savio*, *Memoirs*, *Lettere* (in particular, that of 1884 from Rome), and so on. At the end they were condensed and expressed in the aphorism: *Da mihi animas et cetera tolle* (September 12, 1884, Lenti 30).

Lenti points out that this Motto comes from the Scripture and is used in a spiritual sense. It is the Word of God. Like a seed it grows with great vitality in the youthful heart of Don Bosco. It has turned Don Bosco into the Father of the Young (*Pater Juvenum*), a great Saint bearing the fragrance of Christ, a well-known educator inspiring the world with the Preventive System, and a giant standing firmly for the poor and the oppressed.

Like a fan that stirs into flame the gifts of God through the laying-on of hands (2 Tm 1:6), the motto has actively accompanied Don Bosco ever since his priestly ordination. The

growth of the motto is, as it were, not content with growth only in the life of Don Bosco. It grows into a big tree of the Salesian Family and bears a lot of good fruits.

The growth has been fast. A mysterious force lies behind. This is due to the spirit of Don Bosco and the spirit of Francis de Sales, as pointed out by Lenti. The Church canonized them and thus recognized that the Spirit of wisdom is at work in them. As pointed out by the Rector Major, the same Spirit of God is to renew the face of the earth (cf. Ps 104, 30), and “present at every moment of history, will make new our love for Don Bosco.” (RM 394) In fact, the Rector Major invited us to look upon the GC 26 (*da mihi animas et cetera tolle*) as “a new Pentecost in the life of the Congregation which, through the General Chapter, by ‘opening itself to the Spirit of the Lord seeks to discern God’s will at a specific moment in history for the purpose of rendering the Church better service.’ (C 146)” (RM 394)

Inter-cultural Aspect

The mention of the Holy Spirit is related to his role as the principal agent of the Church, and hence, of the Congregation. “The Spirit continues at the present day to inspire the advancement of the life and dignity of the human person; he opens the minds and hearts of men and women to God and to Christ; he is a gentle guest who works not by compelling but by convincing and asking for docility to his inspirations.” (RM 394) Lenti points out the use of spiritual and accommodated sense of Gen 14:25. The letter kills but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:6) The Word of God acts with freedom and power. Lenti has a strong Scriptural sense and he projects the biblical motto into Don Bosco’s life, or better, the motto is the life-long spirituality and educative program of our founder, and “in it is concentrated the charismatic identity and apostolic zeal of the Salesian.” (RM 394)

It all starts with the “inclination” of Don Bosco to serve the disadvantaged youth. It is an inner urge or a yearning from the heart. “Your being young is reason enough for me to love you very much.” The heart has a reason of which the reason does not know.

The motto is a condensation of the Salesian “charisms” which are the gifts of the Holy Spirit endowed on the Church for the benefit of the humankind. Lenti has focused well on the different layers of Don Bosco’s understanding of the motto from which some expressions of Salesian charisms have taken shape, such as, salvation (of soul) and not sin (in flesh), union with God and social concern, life after death, option for the poor, home (family spirit) and education, grace and optimism, work and prayer, life and worship, humanness and holiness, honest citizen and good Christian, and so on. All these expressions find great resonance in our tradition and in the formulation of the latest Constitutions and Regulations.

Lenti does not mention inter-culturation explicitly, but furnishes not a few good insights of it. For the implementation of the biblical motto, Don Bosco was wise and had a very strong accommodated attitude (Lenti 38). The motto indicates a value but not a method. Don Bosco had to create one out of his social context. The Valdocco Oratory experience thus emerged. Such an experience was an amalgamation of values, traditional practices of piety and spirituality, learning methods, skill training programs, games, and so on. Of course, Don Bosco in his vision of expansion and mission did not just want to multiply Valdocco as such or to produce its facsimiles all over the world. Valdocco by itself had also many limits. There was room for improvement. It is only one of the social contexts in which the motto was realized with great success.

The interaction between the permanent values in the motto and the elements of a context constitutes a practical concept of inculturation. When the early Salesians came to China, for example, they installed a work that should transmit values or spread charisms. Their intention was not to propagate

the contextual elements in which the values were embodied. Sometimes contextual elements were counter-productive. In practical terms, the values or Salesian charisms at the Oratory should be normative for Salesian work everywhere.

The Oratory, however, has never been purely a bunch of "values" disembodied from their social context. Thus, the inculturation inevitably involves a process of bringing together the two different social contexts (e.g. Italian and Chinese). Each context due to its distinctive culture has its own way of prioritizing and expressing values (Motto). In turn the way chosen would shape people's attitudes, behavior-patterns, customs, languages, symbols, artifacts and traditions etc. The encounter of different cultures always leads to an inter-cultural process which may result in conflicts and mutual enrichment. Everyone wants to reduce conflicts and to enhance mutual enrichment.

What, then, is the criterion? The motto itself is the criterion. A Salesian work has on one hand to make the Salesian charism more tangible and relevant to life in line with the purpose of *da mihi animas* (positive elements of education and evangelization), but to take away or to purify the negative elements related to the context in line with the availability of *cetera tolle* (preventive measures of removing hindrances). Sometimes it is easy to distinguish value from contextual elements. Friendship is a value and Italian food like salami is contextual element. In some contexts a piece of salami is an embodiment of friendship. Another example is about power and virtue. From honesty (virtue) there derives the power of the personality. Don Bosco taught this. A recent report from the Taiwan government says that the educative reform in the past ten years failed. One of the reasons commonly accepted is that power has eclipsed virtue. Honesty disappears in the system and power has become the goal to be achieved by fair means or foul. This is a clear example of the negative elements to be purified.

Many times there is no clear-cut distinction. Let us quote an example. In the China province to ask student-boarders to

recite the Rosary was a form of piety brought and established by the early missionaries because Don Bosco treasured it very much. It was gradually left aside when there were no more boarders (from late 70s to early 80s). Is the rosary a value or just a contextual element? The answer is relative and depends on also other questions such as: For whom? Is it relevant to pagan students who are of a great majority? Is it obligatory? Is it educative at all? A few years ago, I came to know that a Rector (aged over seventy) could manage to gather around 60 boys out of their choice to say the Rosary in the lunch break in the chapel in the Marian month (of May). Most of them were not even catechumens. It was done almost daily not necessarily. Anyone is welcome to join in. The Rector has certainly taken Rosary as a great educative value (aiming at honest citizen and good Christian). The argument certainly lies in the beholder and may not be cogent to all. What, then, is cogent? It is the *Da mihi animas* that goes beyond all the discussable. If it is good, then do it. But it is not enough just to do it. One should do it gracefully removing all the hindrances.

Lenti obviously convinces me that there is a lot we could learn from Don Bosco. It is thus in line with necessity of “the return to Don Bosco.” (RM 394) It consists into two parts. One is about the Evangelization and Recruitment (*Da mini animas*) and another is about the “evangelical poverty” and “new frontiers” (*Cetera tolle*).

In the inter-cultural process, we should not lose sight of our charismatic identity. In the blending of the elements of the different contexts, Salesian values should occupy a special role, as suggested by Lenti, like education and evangelization, honest citizens and good Christians, working for the disadvantaged young, family spirit, community for the mission, consecrated life (for some members of the Salesian family), and prayer life.

In sum, Lenti has gathered the texts from the source and put into evidence that the motto as a seed of the Divine Word has grown into the life of Don Bosco. The return to Don Bosco for the SDB is to re-find the taste or wisdom of life so as to

revive the charismatic identity and apostolic zeal. As Don Bosco was guided by the Spirit of Wisdom, so are we. When the growth of the motto moves from one context to other into our life, certain inter-cultural or cross-cultural sensibility is required. *Da mihi animas* is the guide and *cetera tolle* is our availability to let go.