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# ENCOUNTER OF THE SALESIAN CHARISM

South Asian Context

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by Dominic Veliath, SDB

The theme of this reflection, entitled: “*Encounter of the Salesian Charism: South Asian Context*,” is self-explanatory. Drawing out its implications, the topic can be articulated in three focal points, implied in the very title, that is, “Salesian charism,” “South Asia,” and finally, the issue of the “Encounter.” The method will be that of moving from one focal point to the other with the climax being that of “encounter.”

## The Salesian Charism

From a theological perspective, a charism can be understood as a free gift, a spiritual capacity, granted by God, to be used for the benefit of others, for the building of the community, with a view to enabling one to respond to the challenges which Christian vocation and ministry face in the context of living in the world.<sup>1</sup>

A religious charism is usually embodied in a person, such as in the person of a founder or foundress, and has an inner dynamism that unfolds as a result of the action of the Holy Spirit in response to the challenges posed by the context; and finally expresses itself in appropriate structures. As a consequence, a religious charism, inasmuch as it has its origin in and from God, has a perennial character; on the other hand, its concrete articulation can be expressed in structures that tend to be contingent in nature.

Delving into our origins as Salesians of Don Bosco, one *leitmotif* that clearly transpires in the life of Don Bosco is his intense sense of mission,<sup>2</sup> which expressed itself in a spirituality - the Preventive System - , accompanied by a certain pastoral pragmatism<sup>3</sup> which helped him to adapt, adjust and even

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1. Cf. Edward Malatesta, “Charism,” in Michael Downey, (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (TPI: Bangalore 1995), 140 – 143.

2. Cf. Pietro Braido, *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco* (PAS: Roma, 1964), 86 passim.

3. Cf. *ibid.*, 95.

skirt obstacles which came his way. We observe this in particular with regard to certain decisions and which were to have a major impact on his life.

### ***The Early Days***

From his early childhood, Don Bosco was firmly convinced that he was called to work for poor youth: starting from his dream as a young boy, his encounter with Bartolomeo Garelli in 1841 as a priest, till he finally settled down in the Pinardi Shed. What is remarkable is his resilience, his ability to overcome obstacles, to find alternatives. Driven from the *Rifugio*, he went to the Church of St. Peter in Chains; from there, to the Chapel of St. Martin, the Moretta house, and finally to the Pinardi Shed.<sup>4</sup> Succinctly, for Don Bosco, the mission was the driving force of his life and he allowed nothing to come in the way of what he thought was his life's work on behalf of destitute youth.

### ***The Founding of the Salesian Congregation***

We find the same motif present even with regard to Don Bosco's founding of the Salesian Congregation. Those were troubled days for Italy and much of Europe. The political climate was far from favourable to the Church in general and religious orders in particular. On May 29, 1855, a law was proposed by the minister Urbano Rattazzi and enacted by Parliament, whereby religious orders were de-recognized as moral bodies, except those involved in preaching, education and care of the sick.<sup>5</sup>

Appreciating Don Bosco's efforts on behalf of destitute youth, paradoxically, it was Rattazzi himself who suggested that Don Bosco should choose some trustworthy lay people and ecclesiastics and form them into a society, train them in his spirit, so that they could not only help him, but continue his work after his death.<sup>6</sup>

With a view to realizing this, Don Bosco followed the advice of Pope Pius IX, who, on the one hand, asked him to constitute his society in such a way that the government could not interfere with it; and, on the other hand, to assure a certain cohesion of the members among themselves, by binding them with simple vows.<sup>7</sup> It appears that Don Bosco did not have a preconceived notion of a religious Congregation, but was willing to do whatever was necessary in order to realize his mission.

4. Cf. *Memorie biografiche*, II, 183 passim.

5. Cf. Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*, I (PAS VERLAG: Zurich 1968), 129 – 166.

6. Cf. *Memorie biografiche* V, 696 – 699.

7. Cf. Pietro Stella, *op. cit.*, 143 – 144.

### *The Mission of the Salesian Congregation*

Don Bosco specified the mission of the Society he founded – the Salesian Congregation – in the Constitutions. Of the early versions of the Constitutions, there are four extant Drafts of the First Article, the earliest dating back to 1858 – 59.<sup>8</sup> Here one observes a very interesting change of emphasis. In the Draft of 1860, “Charity towards poor youth” was specified as the means whereby the members perfected themselves; instead in the Draft of 1864, it is no more a means.

This modification is to some extent explained by the fact that Don Bosco had to satisfy the requirements of the Vatican Dicastery, the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, which required that every new Congregation have both, a general scope – the sanctification of its members; and a particular scope – specific to each Institute, neither of which was to be subordinated to the other.<sup>9</sup>

Don Bosco manifested another instance of his pastoral pragmatism by modifying the text to meet the requirements for the approval of the said Constitutions by the Vatican Dicastery. Nevertheless, he did not give up his basic conviction, for, as late as 1874, when asked whether in his society, he looked for the good of the members or of the beneficiaries, he replied: “The scope of this society is the spiritual good of its members by means of charity exercised on behalf of one’s neighbour, especially poor youth.”<sup>10</sup> For Don Bosco, the *raison d’être* of the Salesian Congregation was basically the mission on behalf of poor and abandoned youth.

The same thrust and priority is manifest even with regard to the Salesian Family.<sup>11</sup> Already in 1841, when Don Bosco had begun his work for poor boys, he had gathered together a group of lay persons, who used to help him in various ways. They were known as the Congregation of St. Francis of Sales.<sup>12</sup>

When he first started thinking of his religious congregation in 1852, Don Bosco considered it as comprising of two categories of members; the interns

8. See in this regard, Francis Desramaut, “Il primo articolo delle costituzione salesiane dalle origini fino al 1966”, in *Fedeltà e rinnovamento* (LAS, Roma 1974), 119 – 136.

9. Cf. *ibid.*, 127ff.

10. *Ibid.*, 134.

11. Cf. Francis Desramaut, “La storia primitiva della famiglia salesiana” in *La Famiglia Salesiana.*, (LDC: Turin 1974), 14 – 44.

12. Cf. *ibid.*, 22.

who lived in community, and the externs who did not live in community. Hence, the Draft of the Constitutions that he presented to Rome for approval in 1859, had two articles which made allowance for those who could not live in community. "Such a person will not take any vows but he will try to practice that part of the Regulations which is compatible with his state and condition."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in 1872, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was founded and whose role was envisaged as strictly dependent on the Salesian Congregation.<sup>14</sup>

All the above seem to indicate that, for Don Bosco, belongingness to the Congregation, at least originally, was influenced far more by the ability of a person to share his mission than just his state of life. Don Bosco had an unshakable sense of his mission on behalf of poor and abandoned youth. Only with this in mind, did he want to found a congregation, whose structure would be subordinated to this mission. As a consequence, he was willing to include in the Salesian Family married people and anyone who could help him fulfil his mission on behalf of youth. True, the Church in her wisdom, made Don Bosco accept some modifications as far as the structure of the Congregation was concerned, but there should be little doubt as to where his own priorities lay. After the death of Don Bosco, there were fears that the Salesian Congregation had seen its day and would disintegrate. This can perhaps, to some extent explain, among other reasons of an ecclesiological, sociological and historical nature, the eagerness to be faithful to Don Bosco in structural (almost literal) terms. This is a trend which tends to be explicated in succeeding decades.<sup>15</sup> As far as the Salesian community is concerned, at the risk of overly streamlining issues, one observes: a process of separation of the community from its environment; an emphasis on regularity of religious observance; an insistence on uniformity of life; a tendency towards centralization. Added to this, the complexity of their institutions inexorably resulted in a widening of the gap between the Salesians and their field of mission.<sup>16</sup> It was at this moment in history that we have the convocation of the Second Vatican Council by St. John XXIII, which veritably proved to be a new springtime for the Church.

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13. *Ibid.*, 32-33.

14. Cf. *ibid.* 36ff.

15. Cf. Francis Desramaut, "Le Costituzioni Salesiane dal 1888 al 1966," in *Fedeltà e Rinnovamento*, 55 – 99.

16. Cf. Francis Desramaut, "Una nuova congregazione al servizio dei giovani del XIX secolo," in *Il servizio Salesiano ai giovani* (LDC: Turin 1971), 54.

### ***The Kairos of Vatican II***

Vatican II envisaged the Church as a fundamentally relational reality. In this vision, ecclesial authority is seen as being exercised within, and not above the Church. Different kinds of authority are exercised within the Church. There is an underpinning pluralism of authority in the Church: the authority of the Bible, the authority of the Whole Church as a body of believers, the competence of the Church's pastors, that of the laity and finally, the authority of the individual conscience.

All this presupposes that the Church is interactive and organic. While a pluralistic model of authority certainly acknowledges the special authority of the ecclesiastical Magisterium, it does not limit the activity of the Holy Spirit to the exercise of Church office. Vatican II affirmed the legitimacy of the episcopacy and papacy as essential structures of ecclesial authority. At the same time, it recognized that Church office and charism need not be in opposition. There is to be harmony between the Magisterium and the *sensus fidelium*.

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone, that is, to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome. However, the authority of the ecclesiastical Magisterium should be situated in the context of an understanding of the whole Church as the recipient of God's word. In other words, we must be able to speak of the whole Church as both a Teaching Church and a Learning Church.

### **Vatican II - A Renewed Articulation of the Church**

Joseph Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI, who was a peritus at the Council, once observed that the Second Vatican Council's statements were not merely a body of intellectual teaching; still less were they simply a collection of technical and pragmatic directives. They are rather the product of a spiritual process or movement, which can only be comprehended by participating in it, by a gradual, step-by-step, involvement in it.<sup>17</sup>

In the course of the Second Vatican Council, there emerged two widely differing understandings of the reality called "charism." On the one hand, charism was understood as an extraordinary miraculous gift granted by God in exceptional cases, a view advocated by Cardinal Ruffini; on the other hand, Cardinal Suenens advocated the view that charisms were understood as gifts of grace of all types oriented to the fostering of the growth of the Christian

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17. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, (Paulist Press: New York, 1966), 1.

people. Of the two opinions, the latter eventually prevailed.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, the Council distinguishes charisms from the graces that the Holy Spirit grants through the sacraments and the ministries of the Church. Charisms are special graces that the Holy Spirit distributes as He wills to make them fit and ready to undertake various tasks for the renewal and building up of the Church.

### **Envisaging the Church as Organic Communion**

The mystery of the Church involves a mutual communion of life among her members. The life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit (Lumen Gentium 7) “builds up organic cohesion in Christ, He bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her; and He adorns her with His fruits” (Lumen Gentium 4). The elements, then, which differentiate the various members among themselves, the gifts, that is, the offices and the various duties, constitute substantially a kind of mutual complement and are actually ordered to the one communion and mission of the self-same Body (Lumen Gentium 7; Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 3). Consequently, the fact that, in the Church, there are pastors, laypersons or religious does not indicate inequality in regard to the common dignity of the members; rather it expresses the articulation of the joints and the functions of a living organism. Every sort of differentiation between the faithful, based on the variety of their charisms, functions and ministries is ordered to the service of the other members of the People of God. The ontological and functional differentiation that sets the bishops before the other faithful based on his reception of the fullness of the Sacrament of Orders, is a manner of being for the other members of the faithful which in no way removes from being with them. In the words of St. Augustine: “With you I am a Christian; for you I am a bishop.”<sup>19</sup>

This newness of the People of God in its two-fold aspect, as a visible social organism and as an invisible divine presence intimately united, is similar to the very mystery of Christ and confers upon the Church her special sacramental nature. All members -- pastors, laypersons and religious -- each in his/her own manner -- participate in the sacramental nature of the Church. Likewise, each one, according to his/her proper role, must be a sign and

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18. Cf. Albert Vanhoye, “The Biblical Question of Charisms after Vatican II,” in René Latourelle, (ed.), *Vatican II. Assessment and Perspectives. Twenty Five Years After*, Vol. I, (Paulist Press: New York, 1988), 442.

19. Aurelius Augustine, *Sermo 340, On the Anniversary of his Ordination*, 292.

instrument both of union with God and of the salvation of the world. All, in fact, have this two-fold aspect in their calling:

a) to holiness: “all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness” (Lumen Gentium 39); b) to the apostolate: the entire Church “is driven by the Holy Spirit to do her part for the full realization of the plan of God” (Lumen Gentium 17).

From this common baptismal vocation to life in the Spirit flow clarifying exigencies and productive influences with respect to the relations that must exist between bishops and religious. Therefore, the Church is an organically structured community that finds expression in the coordination of different charisms, ministries and services for the sake of attaining the common goal.

### **Situating the Religious in the post-Conciliar Church**

The Salesians of Don Bosco are a Religious congregation within the Church. As Vatican II would specify, religious state is not a kind of intermediate way between the clerical and lay conditions of life, but comes from both as a special gift for the entire Church. Religious life consists in the following of Christ, by publicly professing the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, and by assuming the commitment of removing all obstacles that could detract from the fervor of charity and from the perfection of total commitment to the Lord. A religious person dedicates not only himself/herself wholly to God, but also his/her supreme love to Him. In a new and special way he/she gives himself/herself over to God, to serve and honor Him; this unites the religious persons to the Church and to her mystery in a special way and urges them to work with undivided dedication for the good of the entire Body (Lumen Gentium 44).

It follows therefore that religious life is a special way of participating in the sacramental nature of the People of God. The consecration of those professing religious vows is especially directed to this purpose, namely of offering to the world a visible proof of the unfathomable mystery of Christ, inasmuch as in themselves they really present Christ in his different activities, but always in obedience to the will of the Father who sent Him.

Religious communities are called to give clear testimony in the Church of total dedication to God. This is the fundamental option of their Christian existence and their primary duty in their distinctive way of life. Furthermore, every institute exists for the Church and must enrich her with its distinctive characteristics according to a particular spirit and a specific mission. Every religious institute exists for the Church and must enrich her with its distinctive characteristics, according to a particular spirit and a specific



mission. Religious persons, therefore, should cultivate a renewed ecclesial awareness, by offering their services for the building up of the Body of Christ, by persevering in fidelity to their Rule or Constitutions, and by obeying their superiors (Perfectae Caritatis 14; Christus Dominus 35, 2).

Religious superiors therefore have a serious duty, their foremost responsibility in fact, to assure the fidelity of the members to the charism of the founder, by fostering the renewal prescribed by the Council and required by the times. They should strive zealously, therefore, to direct and continually animate their members to pursue this goal. They should, moreover, consider it their privileged duty to bring about fitting and updated formation (Perfectae Caritatis 2d; 14; 18). Finally, aware of the fact that religious life of its very nature requires a special participation on the part of the members, superiors should strive to encourage it, since “effective renewal and right adaptation cannot be achieved save with the cooperation of all the members of an institute” (Perfectae Caritatis 4).

Efforts should be made to renew the bonds of fraternity and cooperation between the diocesan clergy and communities of Religious (Christus Dominus 35, 5). Great importance should therefore be placed on all those means, even though simple and informal, which serve to increase mutual trust, apostolic solidarity and fraternal harmony (Ecclesiae Sanctae I, 28). This will indeed serve not only to strengthen genuine awareness of the local Church, but also to encourage each one to render and request help joyfully, to foster the desire for cooperation, and also to love the human and ecclesial community, in whose life each one finds himself or herself a part.

### **The Special General Chapter**

This new ecclesial awareness had its impact also on the Salesian Congregation as manifest in the thrust of the Special General Chapter that was convoked in 1971.<sup>20</sup> One could say that at the time of Don Bosco, the Salesian community was characterized by a consciousness of its mission, and the period after the death of Don Bosco brought to the fore, certain structural elements of this community in mission. The Special General Chapter represents a synthesis at a deeper level of these two emphases. The Special General Chapter was convoked in the context of the renewal demanded by Vatican II and took into account the ecclesiology that has so influenced

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20. The Special General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco was convoked after Pope Paul VI invited all Religious Orders and Congregations to call a post-Council Chapter to renew religious life and bring it up to the new realities of the time. The Special General Chapter, had the aim to renew the Salesian Congregation by actualizing the spiritual gift of the Holy Spirit given to Don Bosco and to his Salesians.

the contemporary Christian mind-set. Some of its implications need to be underscored. The first implication was that the Salesian mission is entrusted to the whole Congregation as well as to the provincial and local communities, where the Salesian mission is lived out in a particular context.<sup>21</sup>

Second, this community, situated within the ecclesial community, consists of members who exercise co-responsibility, decentralization and subsidiarity, with a superior who exercises an evangelical authority of service in a “Salesian manner.”<sup>22</sup> A third implication was that the Salesian community, recipient of this mission, is a dynamic community, which becomes a community in its common response to the Lord in the Eucharist, to Our Blessed Mother and also in personal prayer.<sup>23</sup> And finally, that this community is open to the world, to others who share its mission – the Salesian Family.<sup>24</sup> In a nutshell, the Salesian community fulfils its mission by what it is and what it accomplishes. It is called to be a sign and bearer of God’s love to youth.<sup>25</sup>

### **The South Asian Context**

Coming now to the other focal point of our consideration: It is now more than a century since the Salesians of Don Bosco came to the Indian subcontinent. During this period, the Congregation has grown up to be an enormous tree in India, spreading its branches far and wide. Hence, it can be justifiably asserted that the Salesian charism has taken root in India; yet in another sense, the Salesian charism is still on a pilgrimage, in its ongoing encounter with the Indian psyche and ethos.<sup>26</sup> Every pilgrimage involves a certain amount of risk; at times one is challenged to venture along what may seem as yet an uncharted course as characterized by the specific South Asian context. The Salesian reality, which is expressive of a charism, a spirituality and a mission, has to be situated within, articulated and resonate with the

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21. Cf. *Special General Chapter*, 29.

22. Cf. *Special General Chapter*, 84, 85 – 105 and 713 – 725.

23. Cf. *Special General Chapter*, 523 – 555.

24. Cf. *Special General Chapter*, 152.

25. Cf. *Special General Chapter*, 16-22.

26. The entire history of the Salesian encounter with the Indian reality has been described in the two-volume study: Joseph Thekkedath SDB, *A History of the Salesian of Don Bosco in India from the beginning up to 1951-1952*. (Bangalore, 2005).

context of South Asia; this process brings along its own particular share of emphases, problems and nuances to the theme in question.

### ***Characteristics of the South Asian Context***

The Indian subcontinent has often been stereotyped, either as the mythical land of the maharajas or (to mention another extreme), a land beset by poverty and oppression – both of which are considerably less than half-true, and as such, caricatures.

One of the first characteristics is that of linguistic pluralism. In view of the generally recognized fact that language is not merely the external expression of a truth which had been apprehended, but is itself a *distinct way of experiencing reality* – and as such, an inchoate philosophy,<sup>27</sup> it is not extraneous to the issue to remember that, from a linguistic point of view, seventeen languages are officially recognized in the Indian Constitution, not to speak of the innumerable dialects.<sup>28</sup> The ethnic mosaic, is another characteristic of the South Asian context. The people of the Indian subcontinent are the product of successive migrations and invasions and constitute a mixture of Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Australoid and Negroid strains.<sup>29</sup> The Indian subcontinent is thus the birthplace of many religions: Hinduism, Jainism Buddhism and Sikhism. From the earliest times, India has also accepted other religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrianism. Furthermore, there are the tribal religions that abound in India. These religions propose themselves (and at times oppose one another) as different ways of experiencing and living reality according to diverse anthropological and soteriological paradigms.<sup>30</sup>

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27. Cf. for instance, the doctrine of Martin Heidegger. See also A. Peiris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation. Some Religio-Cultural Guidelines,” in V. Fabella, (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity. Papers from the Asian Theological Conference. January 7 – 20, 197, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka*, (New York 1980), 77. Also Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, (New York Ramsey 1987), XXIII – XXVII. IDEM, “Words and Terms,” in *Ermeneutica e Demitizzazione, Volume in onore del Prof. E. Castelli = Archivio di Filosofia* 48(1980), 117 – 133.

28. Cf. “India,” in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropaedia* 9, 285. The author observes: “A British authority, Sir George Grierson who compiled a monumental *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903 – 28) listed 225 main languages and dialects.”

29. Cf. *ibid.*, 285.

30. This was the theme of the *Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religions*, in the University of Oxford (1954-57), which were subsequently published as G.F. Brandon, *Man and his Destiny in the Great Religions*, (the University Press: Manchester, 1962).

Religious pluralism therefore, far from being merely an object of speculation, cuts deeply into the lives and attitudes of the people of the subcontinent.

Moreover, society in the Indian subcontinent is a composite society in cultural terms, a composite society in which various streams have joined together. A major strength of Indian tradition is this composite character, developed through interaction and synthesis.<sup>31</sup> The subcontinent is also a platform where economic disparity is strongly evident. India counts among its citizens, both some of the poorest as well as some of the wealthiest people in the world.

### ***The Contemporary Scenario in the India Subcontinent***

Paradoxically, three of the features which are said to typify the Indian subcontinent, viz., religious plurality, ethnic diversity and economic disparity are also the wellsprings of many of the problems that currently beset South Asia on the religious, socio-economic and political level.

The Indian genius and ethos has long been characterized by a certain attitude of holism. This has manifested itself in the traditional coexistence of religions. Religious pluralism, despite occasional conflicts, was a way of life, a praxis expressed in commitment (*karma*), and devotion (*bhakti*).<sup>32</sup> There was a mythos that sustained this acceptance; understanding by mythos, the collectivity of symbols presupposed and lived by a people. The mythos situates in reality, offering a framework of reference; the logos, instead, tends to demythologise reality.<sup>33</sup> While the mythos furnishes a margin of tolerance, the logos does not tolerate dialectical incompatibility. The transition from mythos to logos, to some extent, inevitable, has had its incidence on the coexistence of religions. One of its negative expressions has been the rise of religious fundamentalism in the subcontinent.

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31. See N. Panikkar, "What is Communalism today?" in P. R. Ram, (ed.), *Secular Challenge to Communal Politics: A Reader*, (Vikas Adhyayan Kendra: Mumbai, 1999), 46.

32. For an overall treatment of this topic, see S. Arulsamy, (ed.), *Communalism in India. A Challenge to Theologizing. The Statement and Papers of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association, Bangalore, December 28 – 31, 1987* (Claretian Publications: Bangalore, 1988).

33. See for instance, Raimundo Panikkar, *Myth Faith and Hermeneutics. Cross-Cultural Studies* (Paulist Press: New York 1979), 4-6.

Ethnocentrism has become another crucial issue for India.<sup>34</sup> Ethnic groups that during the pre-Independence colonial period, enjoyed a protected existence and a high degree of autonomy, have begun to resent and resist the new situation in which they found themselves as part of a newly independent nations. These groups tend to feel that their freedom and cultural autonomy have been curbed and undue demands are being made on them to share their natural resources. In some cases, intruding groups have not only exploited them in various ways, but have also threatened their traditional identity, the fabric of their social structure, their values and way of life.<sup>35</sup> In short, some feel that the reality of the Nation-State has not acknowledged or respected the experiences or self-perceptions of the various ethnic groups and what they consider to be their legitimate due.<sup>36</sup>

Economic disparity has been the bane of the continent. At times, poverty has been institutionalised and even received religious sanction. There have been moves to correct this imbalance; but at times they have been met with opposition. One observes an increasing number of instances where the repressed groups have begun to organize themselves assertively and demand their rights. And not infrequently this process has been marked by tension, resistance and violence.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, it has been compounded by the process of Globalization, and its implications on the subcontinent.<sup>38</sup>

However, this in no way implies that these problems are restricted to the context of the Indian subcontinent. Quite the contrary! It would not be unwarranted to assert that these very challenges characterize the entire world scenario. In concrete, the current widespread phenomenon of migration with the consequent intermingling of peoples has had its serious repercussions on several dimensions of human existence, especially on the

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34. Cf. for instance, Felix Wilfred, "Asia on the Threshold of the 1990's Emerging Trends and Socio-Cultural Processes at the Turn of the Centuries," in the *Position Papers* published by the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference*, 1990, n. 55, 4.

35. Cf. *Towards an Indian Christian Spirituality in a Pluralistic Context. Statement of the Indian Theological Association. Fourteenth Annual Meeting, December 28 – 31, 1990*, (Dharmaram Publications: Pune, 1990).

36. Cf. Felix Wilfred, *loc. cit.*

37. Cf. for instance, Walter Fernandes, "The Socio-Economic Bases of Communalism," in S. Arulsamy, (ed.), *op.cit.*, 54 – 89.

38. Cf. Walter Fernandes, "Globalization, Implications and Christian Response," in Thomas D'Sa (ed.), *The Church in India in the Emerging Third Millennium*, (NBCLC: Bangalore, 2005), 60 – 77.

religious, cultural and economic levels. On the religious sphere, one tends to encounter one of two attitudes: either a fanatic intolerance of the religion of another, or, at the other end of the spectrum, a syncretism which leads one to compromise one's own religious beliefs. True, the Church in Vatican II has steered a careful path, reaffirming her mission of both proclaiming Jesus Christ and entering into dialogue with other religions. But this stance has yet to filter down to the faithful at large. As for ethnocentrism, it has resulted in the grossly negative phenomenon of casteism in India, which has deprived the human person of his or her basic human dignity. This has at times assumed a racist physiognomy in some nations of the world, a discriminatory attitude based on color, caste or creed. And finally, there is the reality of economic oppression, leading to the economic deprivation and destitution of the "have-nots" – who are (which no one can deny) a reality present in every single nation of the world. And the prime victims in each of these categories tend to be the youth – who are also the preferential beneficiaries of the Salesian mission. Hence, it is not just that these are challenges faced by the Church, (and more particularly the Salesians in India); these refer to challenges faced by members of the Salesian Family the world over.

### **The Encounter of the Salesian Charism with the South Asian Context**

In the light of the above, the challenging question becomes all the more pertinent: How can we realize and make fructify the Salesian charism in South Asia? The subcontinent is moving fast on the road of industrial and technological progress. This brings with it many problems such as unemployment, competition and frustration. Hence the mission of the Indian Salesians can be articulated as involving catechesis, inculturation, inter-religious dialogue and human promotion - all these are to be seen from the viewpoint of youth, which constitute the Salesian perspective on the issue.<sup>39</sup>

On their part, the Salesians are situated in their identity at different levels: as a person, a Catholic, a Salesian and an Indian/Sri Lankan. Furthermore, there are the values pertaining to the different levels of belongingness on the one hand, and those demanded by the context in which the Salesian is called to realize his mission on the other. In the light of all this there is a need for the Salesian charism to creatively encounter and respond to the South Asian context.

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39. These were the issues underscored in the Asian Synod and expressed in the papal document: *Ecclesia in Asia*.

### ***The Undergirding Hermeneutics***

Generally speaking, it can be said that there are two focal dimensions of “situatedness” which characterize the Salesian in any context. A first dimension is constituted by his heritage as a Salesian in all its Christian and religious implications; a second is embodied in the challenges posed by the context. There is need for a creative encounter between the two dimensions of “situatedness.” Each of these dimensions of “situatedness” needs to be identified as to the set of values it is called to realize; likewise, all these aspects need to be integrated (and not merely juxtaposed), so as to constitute a single focus, and finally embodied in the Indian/Sri Lankan Salesian, if one is to revitalize the Salesian charism in the South Asian context. But, and here is the crux of the issue – How is one to realize this creative interaction?

In this regard, contemporary theology has something to offer, by furnishing a paradigm of interaction. Practically up to Vatican II, the concept of a “universal theology” (*theologia universalis*), was *the* implicitly accepted model of “doing theology” in the Catholic Church. But, after Vatican II, the Catholic Church found herself moving from a predominantly Greco-Roman outlook on reality into the era of a World Church, characterized by a variety of world-views, which brought with them a variety of new theological and pastoral problems.

While the basic purpose of theological reflection remained intact, much more attention was paid to how concrete circumstances influenced the response to the faith-experience. This new focus was expressed with terms like contextualization, indigenization and the like. One of the basic issues dealt with concerned on how the faith experience encountered the context.<sup>40</sup>

Contemporary theology envisages five models of encounter between the faith and context: (i) The Translation Model whose overriding concern is fidelity to the faith experience; with scant allowance made for the context; (ii) The Anthropological Model, at the other end of the spectrum, approaches the faith experience from the perspective of the context; (iii) The Synthetic Model tries to ensure a certain balance between the two; (iv) The Praxis Model with its concern only with praxis; and (v) The Transcendental Model, whose primary concern focuses on the individual in question.<sup>41</sup>

This paradigm *Mutatis mutandis*, can be applied to the encounter between the Salesian charism and the South Asian context. The Translation

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40. In this regard, see Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, (SCM Press: London, 1985).

41. In this regard, see Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (Orbis: New York, 2000).

Model would not respond to the situation. By not taking the context in any way into account, it risks becoming irrelevant to that very context. There is a need to articulate the Salesian charism in resonance with and in response to the context. The Anthropological Model, by going to the other extreme, risks depleting the Salesian charism of all its novelty and dynamism, by reducing it to ad hocism, or in other words, a knee-jerk response to the context. Hence, what is called for is an encounter along the lines of the Synthetic Model (a “both-and” model) – both the Salesian heritage and the South Asian context.

### ***Fostering this Creative Encounter***

In order to foster a Creative encounter, the Retrieval of the Indian Ethos as a Genuine Openness to the Working of the Holy Spirit ought to be ensured. The Scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages used to speak of the *potentia oboedientialis*. With this neologism, they intended to account for a certain “aptitude” on the part of certain created realities to the supernatural action of God.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps it would not be too much of an overstatement to affirm that Indian theologians, by and large, have felt that the South Asian genius in its authentic core has been blessed with a certain openness to the workings of the Holy Spirit.

### ***Suggestions for the Revitalization of the Salesian Mission in South Asia***

(1) Seek to ensure a Shift in Mindset which envisages the Salesian Mission not in terms of Dialectical Tensions but in terms of Creative Polarities. There is need for a change in mind set that will have its implications for the way the Salesian approaches his ministry on behalf of youth in the context of the three dimensions which characterize the Asian milieu, viz. the plurality of religions, inculturation and the abysmal poverty and oppression.

(2) Mind the Need to make the Implications of the Salesian Charism a Lifestyle for the Salesian. People in Asia, the home of the great contemplative traditions, want to see Christians as disciples of Jesus Christ, who reflect the person of the Master. This requires that those involved in the service of Asian youth have the mark of God-realized persons.<sup>43</sup> The Salesian charism in all its implications has then to crystallize in a life-style. A charism which deals only with structures, theories, ideas and shuns life, and avoids praxis is not only one-sided, since it leaves untouched entire aspects of reality, but in

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42. Cf. Rino Fisichella, “Obediential Potency,” in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, (eds.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, (The Crossroad Publishing Company: London, 1994), 742.

43. See in this regard, the intervention of Archbishop Daniel Acharuparambil OCD of Verapoly during the Asian Synod, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (29<sup>th</sup> April 1998), no. 26, 6.



addition, it also tends to make the charism an ideology. A charism cannot be apprehended, understood, realized in a single sector, or in only one of its dimensions.<sup>44</sup>

(3) Offer a re-presentation of the Salesian as a Sign and Bearer of God's Love for the Young. Towards the turn of the previous century, there was a considerable amount of literature dealing with what was called "The Myth of the Mutational Man" – a symbolic figure who existentially embodied in his person, the values and ideals that every human being is striving for. I believe that one of the challenges facing the Salesian is that he should become a "mutational man" for the youth. It is interesting to observe that Salesian tradition, in this regard, has particularly emphasized the model of the "Good Shepherd" (and not the "Good Goatherd!"). A shepherd leads the sheep (whereas a goatherd drives the goats); and as a consequence, encounters and experiences in himself the possible dangers encountered by the sheep – an insight which reflects the core of our Salesian tradition.

(4) Mature from Ad hocism to an Informed Pastoral Intervention on behalf of Youth. During period preceding World War II, Salesians had the reputation, in certain circles of being activists, who merely played it by ear. There is the amusing incident narrated by Professor Prospero T. Stella of the Pontifical Salesian University (Rome). On requesting admission to one of the reputed ecclesiastical faculties of the time, the authority concerned, observed with a laugh: "So! Finally the donkeys (asinelli) of Holy Mother the Church have decided to study!" However offensive and unjustified this remark may sound, it is a call to be more informed and competent in our service on behalf of youth in South Asia. This concern figures prominently in the final address of our Rector Major, Fr. Pascual Chavez Villanueva SDB, on the occasion of the Team Visit of South Asia in March 2005.<sup>45</sup>

### **Tracing a Tentative Profile of the Paradigmatic Salesian in India**

Presented below are ten traits that could perhaps be said to profile the "paradigmatic" Indian Salesian. They refer to convictions that should be present, qualities that are demanded by the very mission and should be assimilated; and specific attitudes and ways of responding to the challenges that confront us in our context.

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44. Cf in this regard Raimundo Panikkar who, however, is referring, not to the religious charism, but to one's world of beliefs and commitments (which he calls Primal Philosophy). See Raimundo Panikkar, "Philosophy as Life-Style," in A. Mercier, M.Svilar, (eds.), *Philosophers on their own Works*, (Herbert Lang; Berne, 1978), 197 – 198.

45. See "Final Address of the Rector Major," in *Team Visit of South Asia, New Delhi March 2005*, 4 – 5.

### ***Ecclesial Characteristics***

*Rootedness in Jesus Christ:* Christianity is essentially discipleship of Jesus Christ; hence it is obvious that Jesus Christ should necessarily be the central point of reference for the life of every Christian – the more so of every Religious - and all his/her perspectives. Furthermore, for the Salesian, this discipleship will involve a special focus – expressed in the preferential option on behalf of poor and abandoned youth

*A Sensus Ecclesiae:* The Catholic faith emphasizes the fact that each one of us is primarily a “person” (that is, interrelated in every fiber and at the very core of our being). As a consequence, in every Catholic (and particularly for the religious person), there is need for a “community mindset” which loves the Church, tries to understand the Church and defends the Church. In the final analysis, it is to be remembered that religious life is situated “within” the Church.<sup>46</sup>

*Awareness of the Presence of Mary:* Without entering into the intricacies of the Marian facets of our charism, the Salesian in India should be aware of the fact that our life has an inescapable Marian dimension. There is no gainsaying the fact that we are a Marian congregation. Mary is linked in a threefold relationship to every Salesian as Mother, guide and model.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Characteristics pertaining to the Charism***

*Mission on Behalf of Poor and Abandoned Youth:* The *raison d'être* of the Salesian Congregation was basically the mission on behalf of poor and abandoned youth. Probing our origins, one leitmotif which clearly transpires in the life of Don Bosco was his intense sense of mission, which expressed itself in spirituality – The Preventive System – coupled with a sane pastoral pragmatism which helped him to adapt, adjust and even skirt obstacles which came his way.

### ***Cultural Characteristics***

*Plurality of Religions:* The Salesian mindset calls for both loyalty to one's own experience as a Catholic religious and respect for the faith of another. Loyalty without respect would amount to religious fanaticism, whereas respect for another without being steadfastly loyal to one's own faith commitment in

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46. *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 6.

47. Cf. Dominic Veliath, “Mary and the Salesian Congregation” in Joy Kaipan, (ed.), *Mary Today: Fundamental Issues and New Directions in Mariology*, (Kristu Jyoti Publications: Bangalore, 2010), 201 – 214.

all its implications, would be tantamount to compromising our own Christian faith. Hence, both proclamation and dialogue are necessary.<sup>48</sup>

*Cultural Plurality:* Given the composite culture of the Indian subcontinent, what is called for is both rootedness in one's own culture (which is a God-given gift) and an openness towards the culture of another without any taint of superiority or discrimination.

*Poverty and Oppression:* The Indian Salesian should strive for a mode of existence which is able simultaneously both maintain a stance of prophetic critique in the face of anything which goes counter to the Good News; and yet somehow love the "so-called evildoer" – the one responsible for this state of affairs; to maintain dissent and still, somehow not hate the perpetrators of injustice.<sup>49</sup>

### **Human Characteristics**

*Knowledge:* In the context of the novelty of the situation that the Indian Christian youth are experiencing, the advice of St. Francis de Sales acquires a perennial significance for the Salesian: "I implore you to attend seriously to study because knowledge ... is the eighth sacrament of the Church."<sup>50</sup>

*A Listening Heart:* In the insightful text of I Kings 3:12, we read that God told young King Solomon: "I will give you a wise and discerning mind." This is the text as rendered by the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. However, leaving aside the technicalities of translation to Biblical scholars, there was another version of the text that strikes one as both enriching and evocative, while conserving the meaning viz., "I will give you a listening heart." Eliezer Shore observes in this regard: "The listening heart is always open, sensitive to the joy and pain of others, offering a space within itself for the other to enter. It gives each person what he so badly needs – an affirmation of his place in the world." This dimension aptly underscores the heart of the Salesian Spirituality of the Preventive System.

*Involved in the Dialogue of Life:* The Synod for Asia refers to the "dialogue of life," which has characterized the relationship of the peoples of Asia who belong to different cultures and different faiths. In Asia, people believe what

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48. This is highlighted by the document, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue & Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 1991.

49. Loving one's enemies is a non-negotiable of Christianity. See Luke 6:35.

50. Francis de Sales, *Exhortation to Clerics. That they Apply themselves to Study*.

they see. People value persons and relationships, especially those that embody respect, concern and compassion. “Asian ethos of humanity is the first invitation to begin our mission. When we relate to people, especially people of other faiths, with basic confidence in our fellow humanity, we discover people’s concerns, values, pains agonies, their love of peace and harmony of life and aspirations that they spontaneously share. It is here that we discover their search for meaning, their faith, their values and their yearnings. In this dialogue of life, we discern what the Spirit of God has been doing in them for ages before we encounter them. Hence in Asia, we need to begin with a discerned spiritual knowledge of what the Spirit of God has been doing. This we do in a dialstorogue of life.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Salesian Congregation has grown to be an enormous tree in India, spreading its branches far and wide. As such, it can be justifiably asserted that the Salesian charism has taken root in India. Yet in another sense, the Salesian charism is still on a pilgrimage. Every pilgrimage involves a certain amount of risk; at times one is challenged to venture along what may seem as yet an uncharted course. It is in this setting that every Salesian, including the Salesian in the South Asian context, confident in the abiding presence of the Spirit of God, rooted in the Salesian charism and in fraternal communion with the Salesian congregation at large, is called to continue his journey with a little of that trust which has so insightfully been described by the poet Antonio Machado in his poem *Caminante no hay Camino*: “Wayfarer! There is no way. The way is made by walking.

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51. Intervention of Archbishop Ignatius Hardoatmodjo of Semarang (Indonesia) during the Synod for Asia, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13<sup>th</sup> May 1988, no. 19, 11.