

Salesian Mysticism:

Towards the Ecstasy of Action

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Introduction

The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all”¹ is a well known and somewhat well worn statement which hangs as both challenge and commentary on the state of the Christian life in our contemporary world. On first hearing or reading, the majority of committed Christians will know in their hearts that there is a profound truth in what the statement appears to be saying. They will admit also that within this truth lies an almost daunting challenge to those who call themselves Christian in these times of transition and uncertainty. The statement places before us a truth and a challenge within which there is something that disquiets us and has us take a long and loving look at who we are and what our lives are about.

The purpose of what follows is to assist that reflection. I am proposing that Rahner’s use of the word “Christian” be substituted for the noun “Salesian.” Such a substitution gives us permission to reflect on the truth within the context of our community and apostolic life and allow the challenge to shape our educational ministry to the young in a new and more vibrant manner.

Purpose: the Salesian of the Future

This reflection then takes as a given that “the future of religious life depends on its mystical force, its solid experience and clear witness to God.”² It accepts that there is always a delicately balanced relationship, an implicit even if somewhat subtle union in Salesian educational ministry between reflection and action,

¹ Karl Rahner, in the essay “The Spirituality of the Church of the Future” which is found in *Theological Investigations* vol. 20, 143-153.

² Pascual Chávez Villanueva, in the address of the Rector Major at the closing of the General Chapter 25 of the Salesians of Don Bosco, *The Salesian Community Today, Documents of the 25th General Chapter* (Editrice SDB, Rome, 2002), 147.

being and doing, prayer and presence, and I would propose also mysticism and consciousness. It then invites the reader to step out on to the tightrope of our pastoral action. It suggests we find the delicate point of balance and walk fearlessly towards the events and challenges of everyday life. As we walk this tightrope we do so always more conscious that the eyes of the young are upon us, desiring us to witness to them the experience of a God who loves them as they are and calls them to a similar journey of faith. Our God is indeed one who calls the young to experience God as God is, in their own hearts and lives and above all in the midst of everyday action and relationships.

A Challenge from Postmodernism

Recently an article appeared in a newspaper which talked about the principal actor in the now fully emerged trilogy of movies known as "*Matrix*."³ The article remarked that the actor had become something of a recluse as a result of playing the role of Neo in the movies. For those who have not seen the movies they are an exposition of postmodernist thought apparently promulgated in the writings of the French author, Jean Baudrillard.⁴ The movies are written by the Chicago born Wachowski brothers. One of the brothers, Larry, has described "The Matrix" as being about the birth and evolution of consciousness. It seems then that the key actor in the movie, having lived inside the 'persona' of the main character he portrays finds himself, in real life, withdrawing from the hustle and bustle of Los Angeles society as a result of the investment of his time and energy and expertise in the three movies. It is as if the movie character Neo, whose name is an anagram of "one," the messiah destined to lead the uprising against the tyrannical machinery, and free humanity from false consciousness, has reached a level of consciousness, of understanding reality which propels him on a journey in his real life into silence and seclusion. One is left wondering whether his action in some ways expresses a collective concern in the hearts of all at this time. His need to step away and see life as it really is begs a very pertinent question for our times. In a world overflowing with so much choice

³ The three Matrix movies are all released by Warner Bros Studios: *The Matrix* in 1999, *Matrix Reloaded* in May, 2003 and the final part of what was always conceived of as a trilogy, *Matrix Revolutions* in November 2003.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, notorious French sociologist, cultural critic, and theorist of postmodernity, was born in 1929 in northern France. Baudrillard's philosophy refers to the virtual or unreal nature of contemporary culture in an age of mass communication and mass consumption. He believes that we live in a world dominated by simulated experience and feelings and as a result we have lost the capacity to comprehend reality as it really exists. In maybe simplistic terms he points towards the real need in human existence at this time, as the need to become fully conscious once again.

and opportunity, how can we be more conscious about the real meaning and purpose of our human existence and make our decisions in accordance with the good of such existence? In essence the question is one of consciousness in a world where so often we are numbed by the demands of ceaseless activity, consuming technology and fleeting relationships.

The issues of choice and free will and existence in a continually more technologically driven society constantly disquiet us and turn us once more into seekers needing to experience God in a profound and meaningful way. In a strange and even convoluted manner the image Neo projected onto movie screens seems to have affected the real Keanu Reeves to such a degree that he sets out on a personal journey towards a consciousness that makes sense and gives meaning to human experience at this moment in history. This search, I believe, is a search for the mystical dimension of our humanity.

It would seem that whatever one makes of "The Matrix" phenomena at this time it does point towards a transition in our postmodern thinking. We are being called to pass from action for the sake of action to more purposeful or more conscious action. This is and continues to be a lesson that many apostolic religious also need to learn. It would seem that finally we are beginning to understand that even our apostolic action, without mystical consciousness, so easily becomes a conglomeration of multiple activities leading only towards burn-out. More importantly we seem finally to be learning the lesson that such burn-out prevents us being, in our world today, what we are called to be: images God's love and presence to others, especially to the young. Re-addressing the mysticism implicit in our apostolic activity will allow us to rekindle the fire of God's love once again in our own life and in our world.

Behind the Mystique of the Mystic

It is difficult to speak about mysticism in prose. Mysticism refers, in this instance, to what one writer describes as,

"...an attitude of mind; the innate tendency of the human soul, which seeks to transcend reason and to attain to a direct experience of God, and which believes that it is possible for the human soul to be united with Ultimate Reality, when God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience."⁵

It is difficult to find words to describe mysticism because to do so is to talk about that experience of God as God. We have few words, if any, that assist us in the task of describing God. This shrouds the idea of mysticism in mystery. Not finding words to talk about such an experience has also meant that many of

⁵ Richard Woods (ed.) *Understanding Mysticism*, Image Books, New York, 1980, 20.

us gently move the experience aside until it becomes not simply an issue that is not discussed but an experience that is not for us and not to be desired by us. After all we cannot force the mystical experience; we can only work at the disposition of utter openness and elevated desire that can create the conditions for the gift to be given. We convince ourselves that, in the last analysis, to experience God as God is gift of God and not of human making. Not being of human making however does not mean it is not possible to human experience

The next logical step is perhaps where the greatest trap lies. In the minds of some apostolic religious the mystical experience is left as the arena for the higher aspirations of the contemplative life while they get on with the work. What forms in many is the sense that a choice for the contemplative life is a choice of flight out of the world in order to experience a deeper union with God. As the world presents a constantly greater challenge to our relevance and demands of us an always more frenetic pace of work to respond to the needs of God's people, words like contemplative and mystical are suspect. Rahner's challenge, instead, is suggesting that it is precisely our present moment in history which needs the witness of Christian women and men who manifest in their lives and in the world the experience of profound union with God in a manner that is felt and experienced and lived out of the very heart of human existence. The challenge is even more powerful to those apostolic religious women and men, the church's 'professionals of God,' whose lives are spent in the work of living and communicating this experience of God as God to all people.

The latter part of the twentieth century unfolded with the church accepting the fact that it had become out of touch with the people of God and the world and trying to respond to the challenge of immersion into human existence in a relevant and vibrant way. Apostolic religious were looked to as people at the forefront of this response to the cries of the modern world. Religious congregations were asked by the church to review their founding aims and objectives and recommit their energies to the needs of the people of God to whom they are called. Rules were revised, life styles were reshaped and prayer was examined. As structures and schedules crumbled in the face of a call to be at the frontline of church in the modern world, a tension emerged around the issues of the need to be among the people of God and the need to witness to the ascendancy of God and God's love in all things. In the first instance what seemed to arise was the problem of how the rhythm of our prayer could be such as not to get in the way of the intense call to apostolic outreach. Not for us the introversion of the contemplative, instead as we did our work of returning to our charismatic sources we bravely stepped out with still greater resolve into the field of action.

Action, work and still more work had always been signs of the 'good' and truly apostolic religious. Unfortunately we were finally faced with the fact that

there was “a price to be paid for this excessive and restless activity and it was paid in terms of our inner lives”⁶ in what I suggest is the aspiration to and experience of God as God. It was paid and continues to be paid in terms of the mystical dimension of our lives. It seems that the more we extended ourselves out to mission the less were our energies available to be given to our inner lives. At some point it was as if we decided to leave mysticism to the mystics and get on with the business of living and ministering, in our case, to the young in the day to day situation. After all our spirituality is a spirituality of everyday life and we are called to immerse ourselves in the lives of the young in order to meet them where they are and then walk with them in their journey to God. We continue to convince ourselves that it is in the everyday that our experience of God is played out. This is true and would be exactly what is being asked of us if not for the fact that we do this at times forgetting that we need to first experience God as God to effectively communicate God as God to others.

There are, however, signs of a shift beginning to take place in this regard.⁷ It would seem as we continue more deeply into the twenty-first century that gradually we are discovering the nature of our call to be ‘contemplatively active.’ It is a call to unity of life and action. It is a call implicit in our Salesian charism, a call and a reality that interestingly enough we are finally beginning to understand as our response to “the emerging need to educate ourselves and others to reflective living, listening and silence, thus strengthening the contemplative dimension of our lives.”⁸ Suddenly it seems that we are beginning to grasp that the way forward is not through more work, but through greater awareness of who we are called to be as we do what we do. In a very real and deeply challenging way our tendency to separate into neat time slots when we pray and when we work and when we rest is being transformed into a call to union and communion, with God, with others, and within our own lives.

The Marriage of Contemplation and Action

It is still, however, so much a part of our human nature to live a constant either/or existence. It seems ironic that in a time of multiple tasking such as our own we have a tendency to feel we can do only one thing or the other, and to work at each separately. It is a little like someone attempting to master the

⁶ Michael J Cunningham, *Within and Without*, Don Bosco Publications, Bolton, England, 2003, 16.

⁷ The last two General Chapters of the SDB (GC25) and FMA (GC21) Congregations in 2002 emphasize respectively the ‘primacy of God’ in our lives and the ‘choice of discernment’ as the way to transform our lives into communion with God and with service to the young.

⁸ “*Living communion on paths of Gospel citizenship*” in the *Acts of the XXI General Chapter of the FMA*, Rome, 2003, 21.

delights of the piano keyboard. Once the stronger hand has learnt what it has to do then the other hand has to be put to work. Separately they learn the skills and actually become proficient. The real test is when the music is played. True music only emerges when both hands can work together, when both hands work in unity with one another. Music arises, one could say, out of the communion of the two hands. The person can be called a pianist only when the action of the two separate hands is unified. As the hands come together, and only when they do come together what is heard makes the work of one hand inseparable from the other. The music emerges from the unity and union of both hands and from one who, having practiced the skills, lets the music take over. There is something to be learnt from this analogy.

Contemplation and action are like the two hands playing the piano. The music we play for the young is the music of the heart. It is the music of God's love, God's desire to 'wrap'⁹ us in a life-long loving embrace. Contemplation and action are not in competition. One is not more important than the other. Rather one needs the other in order to make the apostolic work we do a real experience of God for the young people we serve. It is almost as if God resides for us neither in the contemplation nor in the action alone. God resides in the marriage, the point of union of the two, even if there seems to be an implicit contradiction in trying to unite the two. Perhaps this is best explained by the use of mystical poetry. Mystics often speak in mystical hyperbole or apparent contradictions. In so doing they try to express what cannot be expressed in words or in rational thought. The poet TS Eliot writes for example:

In order to possess what you do not possess,
You must go by way of dispossession,
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.¹⁰

These lines speak the truth, but it is a mystical truth that the intellect alone cannot grasp. Indeed the contradictions work in these lines to silence the

⁹ The subtle allusion here is also to a music genre, popular since the 1970s called "Rap" music. The word "Rap" was applied to an evolving style of music characterized by, among other things, beat-driven rhymes of an often improvisatory nature. It is extremely popular among young people today and often used as, among other things, a form of political and social statement. The inference is that we need to learn to become so enraptured in God that what raps in our lives becomes the very heartbeat of God.

¹⁰ TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., New York, 1971, 29.

intellect and in so doing point towards a deeper experience of the truth. Contemplation and action work in the same way as a kind of contradiction in our lives. It is within the union of both that we will begin again to become the experience of God for the young. For it is in the union of our action and our contemplation that God ceases to become an object and indeed becomes the experience of God as God. Out of the ecstasy of such union God is communicated to the young as God is. Anything less than union risks falling short in our desire for the young to know and be loved by God, as God is, in and through us.

This is what is implied in the maxim that lies at the very heart of our Salesian educational action where our energies are centered on loving the young people and enabling them to know that they are loved. Love is not known in the mind, it is experienced in the heart and, as such, can only be communicated by one who tastes and experiences such love. The love that best communicates God's love to the young is experienced in the first instance by the educator. I would like to suggest that in order for it to be God's love for the young the educator has to experience this love as union of contemplation and action, as a conscious union of mind and heart which then begets the energy needed to love with God's own love. I believe this is what makes our Salesian educational spirituality somewhat unique among other charisms. We find God in the young because God is just that experience in our own hearts. The young find God in us because God desires to be in their hearts. The same movement of God's love is at work as we work for the young. It is this that makes our being with the young a prayer, and our prayer an active presence among the young.

Ecstasy in Action

So the action we speak of in terms of our ministry must be filled with more than good intentions. Our work, by the same token, is not simply the fruit of our prayer, but part and parcel of the same movement as our prayer: an expression of the ecstasy born out of the experience of being taken up in God. Francis de Sales writes:

"If we see someone experiencing raptures in prayer, being carried out of self into God, and yet experiencing no ecstasy of life—in other words, failing to live a life that is self-sacrificing, devoted to God, by renouncing all worldly lusts, by mortifying all desires, all natural tendencies, by an inward meekness, humility, but most of all by unceasing charity—depend upon it, Theotimus, all those raptures are extremely dubious, fraught with danger. Raptures of that kind pander to human wonderment, but do not make for holiness. What is the

good of being rapt in God at prayer, if our lives, our activities, are rapt in love of earthly, shallow, natural things?"¹¹

The way Francis uses the term 'ecstasy' points towards what he saw as the goal of our prayer. In the spirituality which has been given the name 'Salesian' after him there is a most definite mystical dimension. It is however a mysticism with a twist. The one who prays is to aim towards that attainment of a direct experience of God where God becomes, no longer the object of our prayer, but the experience of God in us and around us. It is an experience which Francis suggests draws us out of ourselves. To this experience he gives the title 'ecstasy.' What is most interesting however is his insistence that this is not truly the experience of God as God if the same person is not manifesting "ecstasy of life," that is, similar ecstasies in his or her ordinary life. The experience of God then, in Salesian terms, is always verifiable in action. In the same way it could be said that the ecstasy, to be real, is to be played out in ordinary life. The mysticism then that is being suggested is one of everyday life, it is 'grounded' or made visible in the everyday actions of the person or else it is not true.

Whether this is true of all mysticism is not at issue here.¹² What is significant is the fact that "Salesian mysticism is a mysticism of the synthesis of interior life and action; one is the soul of the other and each is reinforced by the love which unites them to the glory of God, for love is indivisibly affective and effective, contemplative and active."¹³

At the very heart of the ecstasy of Salesian mysticism then is unifying love. It is this love which embraces the apparent opposites of action and contemplation, of prayer and presence and brings them together in a vibrant and life giving, yes and even God-giving dynamic. It is love that enables us to work tirelessly for the good of the young. It is love lived and experienced as rapture in God which gives us the energy to be effective in our actions, to be rapture for one another.

¹¹ Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book VII, Chapter VII, found in *Selected Spiritual writings of Francis de Sales*, Joseph Power (ed), New City Press, New York, 1993, 105-106.

¹² Francis de Sales points towards three "ecstasies," one is of the intellect or understanding, the second is of the affections and the third activity. He claims that the third is the crown of the other two and does state in the *Treatise* that "There are many souls in heaven who never had ecstasy, never experienced rapture in contemplation. History is full of martyrs, of very saintly people of both sexes, whose only privilege in prayer was to experience devotion and fervor. However, there has never been a saint who did not know the ecstasy, the rapture of life, of activity, by rising above self and its natural tendencies." id., 106.

¹³ E. S. Lajeunesse, *Saint Francis De Sales*, Volume II, SFS Publications, 1987, 393.

If we ponder for a moment the human experience of falling in love perhaps this idea of unifying love will become clearer. Two lovers are 'enraptured' by one another. Physical proximity to one another produces all sorts of verbal, but mostly non-verbal expressions of how the two delight and thrill and bring joy to each other. Even more important for our discussion is what happens in the absence of the lovers from one another. Physical separation does not stop the energy of that love being felt and manifesting itself. The two, almost miraculously even at a distance, are constantly thinking about each other, they are working with the other present to them. Continually, even in the absence of the other, they bring to mind moments of intimacy, moments of laughter, moments of playfulness and simple fun and through these memories they experience the energy of the loved one. Often the lovers will bring to mind a particular expression on the face of one or the other, a phrase or a word that the other uses in a special kind of way. In remembering such moments what wells up in the heart of the lovers is the energy that loving and being loved causes to well up and bubble over from deep within them. The energy they experience is like a vast ocean, there is always more and more.

The analogy with our Salesian work is interesting. It is love that unifies our prayer and our action, a love which emanates from having fallen in love with God and knowing the experience of God's love for us "leads to the loosing of the energy which is pastoral charity...the soul of the Salesian apostolate..."¹⁴ and we work with that same energy for the good of the young, and our work is then 'tireless' just as love is tireless. This opens up a whole new way of understanding the mandate that is ours to love the young and let them know they are loved. It further defines the mysticism of our action.

Once again it is confirmed, it is the same movement of love, of God's own love that enables us to love the young. Our capacity to work for their good then becomes the expression of how enraptured we are by God. It makes of our ministry much more than an education of the young that is highly relational. It means that through our educating we love God and God loves us. There is no division, no separation one from the other. The same energy which we experience as fire in our hearts becomes the passion we bring to our work with the young. It is difficult to express in words, almost as difficult as it is to live at times. It does seem to point to the fact that because our Salesian mysticism is educational then our prayer, our living out our spirituality, happens in the very act of educating the young. It means also that the act of educating the young carries with it the experience of God for us, which is why many Bosconian Salesians claim over and over again that the young and being present to and with the young continually 'energizes' them. The energy is the energy of love. The

¹⁴ Egidio Viganò, *Charism and Prayer, Acts of the General Council of the Salesian Society*, Editrice SDB, Rome 1991 N. 338, 20.

greater the love the more God is being made present and being presence in the love.

If this is not about love, then our work is nothing more than the extroversion of our need to be needed and as such does not bring energy, but more and more need. If this is the case then it follows that the effectiveness of our ministry will flounder. The work of 'saving souls' can only be undertaken by those engaged in the 'soul work' of seeking the ecstasy, the rapture of life, of activity and living from the center of such experiences. Perhaps questions about the relevance of our presence among the young today are not questions about the culture or about the times we are immersed in, but more about our need to find and live the ecstasy of life that is the true basis of Salesian optimism and joy.

Prayer and Presence: Love in Action

Prayer then leads us into the experience of God's presence and the experience of God's presence leads us to the young. However it is not as simple as one following on the other. There is no way that prayer comes first and presence to the young second, or even that our presence to the young prescind upon our prayer. There is a fusion of both in this instance. Perhaps such fusion is best played out in what we know of the lives of both Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello.

Of Don Bosco, Cardinal Cagliero writes:

"He was always in an intimacy of union with God. When he received people into his room, when he was at his desk intent on his work, when he interacted with us at moments of relaxation, when he prayed so fervently in the corner of the church before the Blessed Sacrament and certainly when he was at the altar. In whatever moment we went to him, he received us with incredible charity and with so much love. It was as if he was uplifted by the warmth and fire of an experience of profound prayer, or from a divine presence... What came back to me was something Cardinal Alimonda had said to me, namely that Don Bosco was always in an intimacy of union with God."¹⁵

It is almost as if the presence of God experienced by Don Bosco is a presence felt by the people close to him, the people he dealt with on an every day basis. This is called again and again 'an intimacy of deep union with God' and certainly creates for us a picture of one whose life was a constant prayer and whose prayer was a way of life. The beauty of such intimacy with God is that, rather than remove the person from those around them and the work in hand, it

¹⁵ Eugenio Ceria, *Don Bosco Con Dio*, Editrice SDB, Rome 1988, 288 (my translation).

seems to increase the quality of this presence to others. Prayer and presence are the same integral movement.

We are told by Don Egidio Viganò that Mary Domenica Mazzarello was able "quite naturally to make her own the secret of Don Bosco's apostolic interior feelings so clearly evident in the first piece of advice she gives her sisters as their new leader: pray by all means, but do all the good you can, especially for the young; grow in the exercise of the presence of God; love work; bring kindness and joy to everyone; be helpers in the church for the salvation of souls."¹⁶ This reflection on Mary Domenica Mazzarello points towards another dimension of the prayer and presence dynamic. Mary's advice talks about 'growing in the exercise of the presence of God.' Nothing is taken for granted in her advice. Her feminine intuition makes it clear that the capacity to be present to others with the presence of God is something that needs to be 'practiced,' it is something we grow into and continue to grow in.

There are many moments in our day when we have the opportunity to exercise this 'practice' of the presence of God. We do it most keenly and perhaps most enthusiastically with the young. With them our love pours out as the expression of our experience of God's love and presence. However without practice of this presence, ironically, we cannot arrive at the experience of God as God. Our personal moments of prayer are vital. Just as essential is our prayer together as a community. Our being present to one another as we practice this presence to God enables us to love each other with God's own love. So often we say that our prayer in common, for example, should be youthful and simple and joyful. We say this precisely because we have difficulty at times understanding what our community prayer is really about. Perhaps for many of us praying with one another is another duty to fulfill. If we make that appointment then well and good. If we do not manage to make it there, then it does not make that much difference. Such a conclusion runs contrary to what we are suggesting is the heart of our Salesian prayer: the experience of God as loving presence in and around us.

The real challenge is not in the prayers, in what is being said or even the way the prayers are being said. The real challenge lies in our understanding of the loving presence to one another that is being lost by our absence, and the growing that as a consequence does not happen as a result of this abstention. Perhaps here we need to begin to understand that Salesian mysticism, as suggested in this reflection, is one which is as collective as it is personal, as intentional as it is gift of God and as much about being present to others as it is about experiencing the presence of one who is totally 'other.'

¹⁶ Egidio Viganò, *Charism and Prayer, Acts of the General Council of the Salesian Society*, Editrice SDB, Rome 1991 N. 338, 25.

Women and Men of Fire

Usually the early years of formation to Salesian life and mission expend much time and energy on communicating the Salesian charism, and most especially the Salesian way of working with the young. Even today many Salesian men and women will happily and with great ease outline the main elements of Salesian educational method, the need to be relational in our dealings with young people, the need to meet the young where they are, the need to walk with the young and lead them to Christ and especially to do all of this in an environment which encourages their development, both human and spiritual. In terms of our action with the young, we do what we do very well indeed. What is more, the same Salesian men and women will manifest, in their concerns for the good of the young, a well thought through critique of present day society and its problems and ambiguities.

Ask the same articulate and 'in-touch-with-the-present-world' Salesian men and women about their prayer and suddenly there seems to be a language problem. Some may speak of personal prayer, some of prayers that are said in common but very few will actually engage in a lengthy discussion or go any deeper than explaining that we find God in life as it is lived for and with the young, each and every day. Very few will talk about their need for constant immersion in the presence of God and how this is arrived at through practice and continual struggle to find, stay in and act from a place of consciousness of God's presence and God's love in and around them.

It will be difficult to find any Salesian man or woman who will share with you his or her ecstasy with regard to life and activity, or even use the word ecstasy in the same sentence as action. You will probably see such ecstasy coming from them in terms of their desire to engage in life, their enthusiasm about life and the energy they put into what they are doing. They will not use the word mystical and, for the most part they will shy clear of spending too much time expounding on the prayerfulness of their founder. They will tell you that Don Bosco was described as 'union with God' when the challenge was made that he could not have prayed because of the amount of work he engaged in. These Salesian women and men will not be able to expound on how he arrived and continued to maintain such union. It is a union, however, that you will experience in a very human way in their presence to you as you engage them in conversation. These Salesian men and women will be among the most fun loving and compassionate of people. They will be present to you with a genuine concern for you and deep interest in all that is for your good. They will do more than talk to you about God's love, you will experience from them an almost tangible sense of 'God with us,' of the word made flesh in who they are and in how they are with you.

They will be able to demonstrate as was said of their founder, "an incomparable ease in associating the most sublime mystic with the most practical asceticism, while their eyes penetrate the heavens, their feet are on the ground never losing contact with the earth."¹⁷ It is this love, this earthy mysticism that they bring to their life and ministry. The fact that this may not always be as visible as it needs to be could be due to many reasons. It is however important that these Salesian men and women continue to live in and out of such love. It is vital for them and for the young people they serve. This alone makes it vital also for the future.

Be Mystics or Die!

The words of Rahner come back once again. The Christian, and it has been suggested here, the Salesian of the future will be mystic or not exist at all because in our times the world needs, as Rahner explains, "...a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence..." and the reason for this he further explains is that:

"...according to Scripture and the church's teaching, rightly understood, the ultimate conviction and decision of faith comes in the last resort, not from pedagogic indoctrination from the outside, supported by public opinion in secular society or in the Church, not from a merely rational argumentation of fundamental theology, but from the experience of God, of his Spirit, of his freedom bursting out of the very heart of human existence and able to be really experienced there, even though this experience can not be wholly a matter for reflection or be verbally objectified..."¹⁸

The experience of God, of God's spirit, bursting out of the very heart of human existence puts a face on the kind of postmodern mysticism our present world is seeking. God desires to be experienced as love, irrepressible, not quantifiable, gratuitous love. Such love is begotten in the heart of one who is open and fearless. Such love is born in the heart of those who have the capacity to fall deeply, madly and passionately in love. Such love resides in those who continuously work at love, practice staying in love, so as to be always ready to experience the ecstasy of union of love with love, of loving and being loved. Incredibly God loves us as we desire to be loved and God is constantly seeking to be in union with us.

¹⁷ Eugenio Ceria, *Don Bosco Con Dio*, Editrice SDB, Rome 1988, 31 (my translation).

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, in the essay "The Spirituality of the Church of the Future" which is found in *Theological Investigations* vol. 20, 149.

If there is reticence on our part about declaring that such love has brought about an overwhelming certainty of the presence of love in life and in the young then perhaps it is because we who claim to love have not yet given ourselves totally to the union. For us the real mystical ecstasy is found not only in the experience of God as God in our own lives, but in the same movement of love, the same sighs and exclamations of joy we pour out on the youth of the world and on the world of youth, and on one another. God is to be found in the ecstasy of those who have not only felt the fire of love in their hearts, but have become the fire of love for all those they meet. It is the ecstasy of those who work in such a way that all who meet them experience and know they are truly loved. This is real mysticism in action. It is also ecstasy. It is the ecstasy experienced by those whose lives burn with the mystic fire of union. Such a fire is life and light and love in a world desperately seeking life and light and love. It is the same fire of love Christ brings to the earth. Our task is to meet the challenge of becoming fire. The call is to live the ecstasy in such a loving way as to become God's love burning long into the forever future.