

# acts

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of the Salesian Society  
of St John Bosco

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## 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

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### **“WHEN YOU PRAY SAY: OUR FATHER...” (Mt 6,9) The Salesian a man and teacher of prayer for the young**

**1. YOU ARE MY LIGHT...** - A look into our own heart. - Sincerity with God and with ourselves. - Ability for listening. - Savouring silence. - Discovering our weaknesses. - Approaching the Father with trust and confidence. - Journeying in prayer. - Letting God speak. - Receiving God's glance in the depth of our own being. - The experience of some of God's friends.

**2. THE PRAYER OF THE SALESIAN.** - The seeds: Mamma Margaret. - Don Bosco man of prayer. - Following St Francis de Sales. - The oratory hallmark. - A contemplative in action. - Some conditions: Interior attitude. - Intention. - Feeling ourselves God's instruments for the benefit of the young - Discovering the presence of the Spirit in the life of the young.

**CONCLUSION.** The prayer of our Saints. - The liturgy of life. - Introducing young people to prayer. - **Mary, personification of our prayer.**

Rome, 1 January 2001

*Solemnity of Mary Most Holy, Mother of God*

For the season of Lent 1999 a group of dioceses in Spain sent to the faithful a letter on Christian prayer at the present day with the title: “Your face, O Lord, I shall seek”.<sup>1</sup> Other Bishops have done the same thing.<sup>2</sup>

The Bishops were pointing out the disorientation of Christians with respect to the sense of prayer (why pray? is there still any sense in praying regularly?) and the sources and original forms of Christian prayer. There was also the fact of the progressive loss of the habit of prayer, because of the changes that were taking place in family life, in which days on end could pass without any sign of prayer in common. In the Christian community too, apart from Sunday Mass, other practices were going out of use with which Christian communities

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dioceses of San Sebastián, Bilbao, Vitoria, Pamplona: *La oración cristiana hoy: Tu rostro buscaré, Señor*. February 1999

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for example: *La prière nous ouvre à Dieu et au monde*, in *Le Livre de la foi*, edited by the Belgian Bishops, Brussels, 1987, *Our hearts were burning within us*, U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 1999; *Prayer, Contemplation and Holiness: the Church, Community of Christian Discipleship in its Service to Life*, Final document of Sixth Plenary Assembly of Manila 1995

through the years had been accustomed to express their fundamental relationship with the Lord.

At the same time was emphasized the multiplying of places and opportunities for a self-service kind of prayer, offered by various religious groups for anyone who wanted to make use of them, and the growing search for such places.

We have experienced the same kind of thing ourselves: we offer prayer evenings in our churches, we have very popular vigil services, our houses of prayer are growing in number – but not only things like these. Only a fortnight ago I was listening to an evangelical Radio which listed twenty places of worship in the city of Rome, with their respective timetables, for those who wanted to frequent them. In the backgrounds could be heard the words of psalms with electronic musical accompaniment and the involvement of the participants.

The Jubilee, with its moving prayer gatherings in St Peter's Square and the numerous celebrations, has also given emphasis to this expression of Christian religious feeling.

We are living in a globalized world, unique from a religious standpoint: it is both humanistic and secularized, almost unbalanced in asserting the right of the individual to make personal choices in every field and hence somewhat allergic to anything imposed on him from without – “savagely religious” about his privacy, you could call it. There are those who live as “agnostics” (in the sense of non-believers). There are those who practise religion after the manner of a snack-bar or a McDonald's, in line with their own selection and combination of times, places and formulas. There are even those who go in for esoteric religious practices. Sometimes the only one you will ever see praying in a railway compartment is a Moslem. In the airports rooms have been set aside for the practice of various religions.

From all this one thing at least is evident: whoever gets into any religious experience or emotional situation, discovers and accepts the fact that prayer is one of its main manifestations.

Requests made to the Lord, felt to be present, expressions of praise and thanksgiving, the desire for his company and protection, arise spontaneously and almost inevitably.

It is in no way strange therefore that young Christians, living in this atmosphere and in contact with us, feel an attraction towards Jesus Christ and the Gospel and have accepted the challenge of their deepest meaning, or have already expressed their deliberate choice for a living presence of faith, should wonder about the prayer of the Salesians. They wonder to what extent they feel it in their heart, and especially whether the Salesians are capable of launching them on a process of prayer which will traverse their whole life, giving rise to convictions and prompting experiences, so that prayer becomes a habit, something relished, support and light.

### 1. "YOU ARE MY LIGHT..."<sup>3</sup>

With young people you can experience extraordinary instances of solemn celebrations, well prepared from the aspects of content, symbolism and choreography. But with respect to ourselves the Constitutions, after putting forward all the community expressions, tell us: "We can form praying communities only if **individually we become men of prayer**. Each one needs to express his own personal and heartfelt way of being a son of God, expressing his gratitude, telling him about his yearnings and his concerns in the apostolate".<sup>4</sup>

It is one thing, in fact, to recite prayers or take part in collective celebrations, things which are certainly both useful and praiseworthy, but quite another to become praying individuals. We have heard this from the young people themselves and from commentators with reference to large scale events like the

<sup>3</sup> Ps 27, 1; cf. Ps 61

<sup>4</sup> C 93

Youth Forum and the Jubilee: without any doubt it all constituted a valid experience, but will it endure and develop further in life? What is at stake is religious education, follow-up, the interiorization following the extraordinary event, heartfelt communication with the Father after the manner of sons.

It is clear, in fact, that if our evangelization provides only explanations without creating a relationship of communion with the Father, it is empty and not much more than an ideology. The great work of Jesus was that of making the Father known, in the biblical sense, and of teaching the disciples to have recourse to him by listening to the voice of the Spirit, and the words and teaching he suggests to the heart.<sup>5</sup>

For this reason the Gospel is rich in teachings about prayer. The evangelist Luke, in chapter 11 of his Gospel, gathers some of these together: the unifying word "Father", perseverance and effectiveness of prayer. And it is in the Gospel that we find the explanation of our communication with the Father, and the presence of the Spirit who prays with Christ in us and for us.

It is not my intention at this point to speak to you of salesian community prayer. Enough has already been written<sup>6</sup> and there is sufficient animation in this regard, and efforts at improvement are clearly visible in the communities. There is no doubt that this well expresses the life of both individuals and communities, and is also a school in itself, as well as being a guarantee of richness, continuity, perseverance and ecclesial experience. The Salesian prays with the community and in the community.

What I want to do now is dwell particularly on the **personal process** which, with the help of the community, leads each of us to become a man of prayer, wanting and able to guide young people in that direction, and leading to levels of regularity and fervour those who show themselves capable.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jn 14, 26; Jn 16, 13; Jn 17, 3

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *The project of life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, Guide to the reading of the Salesian Constitutions, Rome 1986, p. 668-694

***A look into our own heart.***

The prayer of the Salesian, his communication and filial dialogue with the Lord, is certainly coherent with and reflects his life. But there are some "*clichés*" in that connection which are unlisted; just as there are real conditionings to be overcome before we can be men of prayer in the salesian manner.

Among these *clichés* is one that wants to see action at the centre of salesian life, not always understood as conscious saving activity but sometimes as action which is simply human, with all that this implies: movement, skill, the multiplying of environments, relationships and activities, etc.

In this case prayer becomes "relegated to certain times during the day", confined to some common moments. But the advice of Jesus the Good Shepherd was to pray "*without ceasing*": a conversation with the Father who comes to us in the Spirit and goes out from us in many ways: through thought and feelings, guidance of activity, relationship with our neighbour, sharing in the celebrations and life of the Christian community. And all this carried out with our eyes turned towards Him and with the desire to fulfil "God's good pleasure",<sup>7</sup> to use the expression of St Francis de Sales.

Another cliché is the interpretation of Don Bosco's words: "The active life towards which our Society specially tends, means that its members are not able to perform many practices of piety in common".<sup>8</sup> This is true, but we need to go back to his own time to grasp the implications of this statement, by comparing it with the prescriptions of other Institutes: to the daily morning and evening prayers were added triduum, novenas, and detailed practices of piety linked with the liturgical seasons. This is the context in which Don Bosco's words have to be read and interpreted. Common occasions must not

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Cf. Gen 28,16 PAPASOGLI G., *Come piace a Dio*, CNE 1981, p. 472 e s.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales 1858-1875*, Critical text, edited by F. MOTTO, LAS Rome 1982, p. 182-183

be confused with personal ones, even those occurring in poorly organized activity.

Among our typical *conditioning elements* must be included a certain natural exposure to the multiplicity of commitments that for some, ready to accept anything that crops up, can become a state of agitation. This not only leads to lack of sharing in community moments but also to the skipping of time that should be given to study, reading, the serious preparation for work of ministry or an educative task, which is becoming all the more complex from such aspects as the evangelical interpretation of life and the methodology of youth guidance.

We must recognize the fact that both the pastoral context, to which I referred earlier, and our personal reflection lead us today to specific conclusions concerning the conditions to be created for prayer.

It is possible to speak of prayer only by adopting the experience of Jesus, Son of the Father, re-expressed in his own life under the guidance of the Spirit. To speak of prayer is to investigate the most sacred and unifying element of our life.<sup>9</sup>

“Prayer is the synthesis of our relationship with God. We can say that we *are* what we *pray*, and *how* we pray. The level of our faith is the level of our prayer; the strength of our hope is the strength of our prayer; the ardour of our charity is the ardour of our prayer”.<sup>10</sup>

Praying and living become fused in a single reality in the conscience of one who prays. Until life itself becomes prayer, not even prayer itself will be alive and authentic.

On the other hand, Sacred Scripture and ecclesial tradition are full of the prayer of the poor who turn to God in the spirit of Jesus like children. The way must be simple, and the communication childlike in the Spirit.

Some attitudes can be listed that foster personal prayer.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the experience of Moses in Ex 3

<sup>10</sup> Cf. CARRETTO C., *Lettere dal deserto*, La Scuola Editrice, Brescia 1964, p. 47

### ***Sincerity with God and with ourselves.***

Sometimes when we speak of God, with reference to ourselves and still more in religious discussions with others, we put on a mask, we adopt a terminology suited to the occasion, and we use words that are exact and well stated.

These masks do not correspond to what we really are. They represent insuperable barriers to a deep sharing with God and to an open dialogue with him.

God wants to communicate with us on the wavelength of sincerity. And this is by no means something that happens at once: it usually requires grace and time. This is why the Jubilee has called us to conversion, to start again from God and re-plan our journey. It has been first of all an invitation to conversion of heart, even though the celebrations transmitted by television may have conveyed a different idea.

There are many ways and types of prayer, depending on whether feeling or meditation, set formula or spontaneity, is the prevailing factor. In the last analysis each one has his own way of praying, just as he has his own way of walking or of self-expression. But there is always in prayer the desire for a communication which aims at being filial, direct and deeply felt. Whatever kind of prayer has been reached, its essence is the desire for a sincere sharing of oneself. This is how Jesus expressed himself: "I thank you, Father";<sup>11</sup> "Keep in your name those you have given me";<sup>12</sup> "Let them be one as we are one".<sup>13</sup>

### ***Ability for listening.***

For us who are educators, the ability to speak about God and with him depends in the first place on our ability to listen to him. He, who spoke at creation's beginning, has said a great

<sup>11</sup> Jn 11, 41

<sup>12</sup> Jn 17, 11

<sup>13</sup> Jn 17, 21

deal to us in the History of Salvation through words and events, and has recounted everything in Christ. Now he speaks to us through the mediation of the Church and daily happenings, he makes the voice of his Spirit re-echo within us and reveals new things for new times.

The believer is one who before all else *listens to the Word, as Mary did*. "Listening means not only being intellectually conscious of the presence of the other, but willingly making space within oneself for such presence so as to welcome it and enjoy it".<sup>14</sup>

It is not always easy to distinguish the voice of God from that of men. For this we must lend a willing ear, as in the episode of Samuel,<sup>15</sup> to the one who speaks, to educate ourselves and those for whom we work, to listen to the Truth: "Speak, for your servant is listening". We must be always on the alert, to lead our young people towards the Truth, urging them to listen to Him who has the "words of eternal life". This is one of the aims of education. The laws and precepts, the Word of the Lord, are presented as the source from which comes in a mysterious way a complete and deep knowledge, intelligible to the simple but superior to anything produced by the keenest human thought.

On the part of man, this readiness to obey and listen to the Word constitutes the indispensable condition for discovering the plan which God entrusts to every individual, in the time and place where he has been called to live, and will also be the fundamental condition for the continual renewal of his commitment to conversion to God: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that

<sup>14</sup> E. BIANCHI, *Le parole della spiritualità. Per un lessico della vita interiore*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1999, p. 75-76

<sup>15</sup> 1 Sam 3, 3-10.19

goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it".<sup>16</sup>

The best place for listening to and hence meditating on the Word, is that of Mary at Bethany, "who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching".<sup>17</sup> Everything begins therefore with attention directed to the Word, which is then developed in meditation, prayer and contemplation.<sup>18</sup> Listening to God,<sup>19</sup> with its aspects of silence, centering on Him and not on ourselves, becomes an act of welcome or, rather, of the revelation in us of a presence more intimately present to us than we are to ourselves. "Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! For behold you were within me and I outside; and I sought you outside and in my ugliness fell upon those lovely things that you have made. You were with me and I was not with you. I was kept from you by those things, yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all. You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness: and you sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness: you breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and do now pant for you: I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you: you touched me, and I have burned for your peace".<sup>20</sup>

Not only did Vatican II open a happy period for returning to the Word, but we ourselves are witnessing a new taste for it felt nowadays among young people. It is a new kind of meeting of the young with the Word, and has been encouraged in his Exhortations by John Paul II with respect to the *Lectio divina*.

<sup>16</sup> Is 55, 10-11

<sup>17</sup> Lk 10, 39

<sup>18</sup> On relationship between Word of God and Spiritual Exercises cf. C.M.MARTINI, *La Parola di Dio negli Esercizi Spirituali*, in *L'ascolto della Parola negli Esercizi*, Leumann (TO), Elle Di Ci, 1973, p. 27-31; F. ROSSI DE GASPERIS, *Bibbia ed Esercizi Spirituali*, Borla, Roma, 1982

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gen 28,16

<sup>20</sup> AUGUSTINE (S.), *Confessions*, X, 27,38

**Savouring silence.**

Silence is the special characteristic of the Word. Silence and the Word are complementary and mutually strengthen each other. Without silence it is difficult to attain self-knowledge or to discern God's plan for our own life. Silence gives depth and is a unifying element.

Salesian moderation in speech implies neither distance nor artificial self-control; it means that our attention is always given to the other person, with understanding and the desire to give and receive. In this way we pass to an internal aspect, to being at peace with ourselves, to taking a calm view of persons and situations, to an internal peace and tranquility which enjoys the other's presence.

This leads also to an attitude of self-control and resistance which silences disordered sentiments towards others, arbitrary ideas about oneself, rebellions, rash judgements, grumbling and gossiping which spring up from the heart. A controlled silence is the guardian of the internal self and makes it possible to listen willingly to the one who is speaking. The God we are trying to find is within us, not outside.<sup>21</sup>

The internal self needs time and space to examine and judge. As regards the first we should not be afraid to reserve in our daily timetable some periods for personal meditation, study and prayer and – why not? – contemplation: that total attitude as though mesmerized by truth or beauty.

The Gospel advises us to “go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret”.<sup>22</sup> It is a matter of choosing a place where attention and spirit find fewer obstacles in reaching God. Without any doubt the church or chapel are the most suitable places for “silent prayer”, but not the only ones. “For prayer our Saviour chose solitary places, those which would not attract the senses too much but lift up the

<sup>21</sup> Cf. BIANCHI E., *Le parole*, 142

<sup>22</sup> Mt 6,6

soul to God, like mountains (which rise from the earth, and are usually bleak and bare with little to attract the senses)".<sup>23</sup>

Walks and rambles, for example, can acquire a new meaning: they can become a means of discovering the presence of the Lord who – in the poetical words of St John of the Cross – “passed swiftly through these woods, and by his very glance adorned them with every beauty”.<sup>24</sup>

The individual therefore does not look to see whether the place for prayer has this or that facility, because that would mean he is still attached to the senses: he should be concerned above all about interior recollection; for this purpose he leaves all else aside and finds for the purpose a place least encumbered by attractions of the senses; he detaches his attention from all such things so as to better enjoy his God in the solitude of created things.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Discovering our weaknesses.***

The Spirit works in us and sanctifies us in the measure of our openness. This involves the conversion of resistance on our part to a docile and filial openness to the Father and to the love of our neighbour rooted in the heart. Our interior feelings must be educated, our love purified and our relationships made more respectful. It is a question of unmasking the dynamic elements that lurk within us and prevent us from giving ourselves freely and wholeheartedly.<sup>26</sup>

We must have the courage to single out and identify our weaknesses and the negative traits that mark our life; we must

<sup>23</sup> JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in ID., *Opere*, Postulazione Generale dei Carmelitani Scalzi, Rome, 1992, p. 327

<sup>24</sup> JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Spiritual Canticle B*, in ID., *Opere*, p. 493

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Cf. C.M. MARTINI, *Uomini e donne dello Spirito. Meditazioni sui doni dello Spirito Santo*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato (AL), 1998, p. 15. In these pages Card. Martini gives a brief introduction to retreat: objectives, theme, method, attitudes, manner of communication.

know our own points of resistance so that we can share them with the Father. We must accept the patient work that is needed if we want God's will to shape our thoughts and our conscience. There is no man of prayer who has not felt the need and advantages of internal and external asceticism.

Anyone with a little experience in the spiritual life knows that this process demands patience and perseverance, that it is not a path he travels alone for the Spirit both precedes and accompanies him. As he goes on his way he will gradually come to know also the fruits of a growing interior peace and degree of freedom, of meekness and charity, which are also the consequences of a process of prayer.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Approaching the Father with trust and confidence.***

This is suggested by St Paul,<sup>28</sup> and is the indication of Christ himself.<sup>29</sup> The Lord accepts formal worship, but as a means and condition for spontaneous and transparent trust.<sup>30</sup> There are times when we can pray without words, but we can never pray without a deep desire to be with the Lord and stay with him. "Your face, Lord, do I seek"<sup>31</sup> is already a form of prayer. There is a frequent desire nowadays for those moments of enjoyment and emotion which are experienced only rarely or under the pressure of powerful stimulants. They are a grace with which the Lord sustains us, but not one on which we base our relationship with God. We are living in times when religious emotion is the order of the day, when there is a desire to try out something "further", something that lies beyond the world of the senses. This is true also for young people, for whom authenticity and feeling go together also in religious experience.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. BIANCHI, *Le parole...*, p. 41

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Heb 4, 16; 2 Cor 3, 4; Eph 3, 12

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Mt 6, 25-31; Mk 11, 22

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Jn 4, 10

<sup>31</sup> Ps 27, 8

Friendship with God requires that our desire to meet him be enshrined in prayer, and this in turn enshrined in life as a practical guideline. "O God, you are my God, I look for you at daybreak".<sup>32</sup> It is not, therefore, a matter of wanting to fulfil obligations of prayer, but of an intense yearning for the Lord's presence and his friendship.

Sometimes we are afraid of getting too close to God, or that he will make known his will too clearly. A thousand questions invade our mind: what will God ask of me? where will he lead me? The stakes are high: my whole life is involved. All I have done may have to change direction; I could be called upon to reconsider all my values. It happened to the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the saints, who in this matter of prayer are outstanding examples. It happens also to us, through unforeseen events which can change the course, rhythm or tenor of our life.

With others, each of us enters into dialogue on equal terms. But with God it is quite different. He says to me: "I am the Lord, your God".<sup>33</sup> Einstein once remarked: "when I come close to this God, I have to take the shoes from my feet and walk on tiptoe because I am on sacred ground". And yet we are not in a distant area and one of fear, but in a filial relationship, that of the Spirit, who is mysterious and inexhaustible: from him always comes something new on the part of the Father, and on our part too, as life proceeds.

### ***Journeying in prayer.***

In prayer too there is a process of formation and continued growth. No one, as an adult or in old age, prays as he did when a child, even though some personal traits may persist, matured by life. Prayer not only enriches us; it moulds us through what it stands for, and through the events of our life that we interpret in its light. Some of us may have shared the experience of

<sup>32</sup> Ps 63, 2

<sup>33</sup> Ex 20, 2

monks who have led a life of pure prayer. But even with our own confreres, who have reached maturity in age and suffering, dialogue on prayer is interesting and fruitful.

When I take on the commitment to prayer, I entrust myself completely to God and place myself in his hands. It is God whom I welcome; to him I give myself; with him I intend to journey, and from him receive myself back again, always renewed by his gifts and his love.

Contemplation provides the loftiest moment of prayer. But, as *Vita Consecrata* tells us, it is not the privilege of a certain state, but an essential dimension in those who feel their life "transfigured" in Christ.<sup>34</sup> It is the vision of faith, enjoyed in its unifying quality, that radiates light and beauty.

Understood in this fashion, prayer becomes the adult action through which is opened up my personal relationship in God's regard, conscious of my unquenchable thirst for him as also of his loving search for me.

Prayer supposes also the safeguarding of sufficient time for the act of prayer to become deeply rooted in me and find its highest expression. If I want to attain to a living and life-giving form of prayer, which is an experience of love with my one and only "partner", I cannot fail to reserve some space in my life and consecrate it to being on close terms with God.

Perseverance in this pure and unalloyed act of faith, at a moment without haste or thought of personal advantage, given over to simply remaining in the presence of God the Father (he is looking on me, loving me and working in me during these deep moments of solitude), when I have the feeling of being bereft of words and wasting my time: there you have the demand and guarantee of an adoration in spirit and in truth. It is interesting to examine the journey of prayer of our Servants of God, where we always find three characteristics: participation in the community practices, eagerly sought personal moments, and union in life.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. VC 29. 35

While it is true that prayer can bring interior peace to my life, serenity of spirit and effectiveness in activity, the principal objective will not be merely to seek such advantages but, if I want to meet in prayer the Father of Jesus and our Father too, the experience of freely given love.

In giving to the Lord my human time, without asking for anything in return (by way of extraordinary effects, notable and rapid spiritual progress, etc.) I leave myself exposed to the very sun of divine gratuitousness. This is the grace par excellence that follows commitment to prayer: to become educated to free self-giving in a society like ours in which everything is subject to trading. To possess the unquestionable wisdom of being loved by him and to love him in return is the greatest richness of our life and makes all others with their allurements appear secondary by comparison.

This is the blessedness of a life of prayer! Anyone who knows how to spend his time with the Lord, learns to give his life for his fellowmen with self-sacrificing generosity, forgetful of himself. Prayer, like love, has no need of justification.

Since it is the Spirit who prays in us and from whom we learn to turn to the Father, it is more important to be in harmony and union with him than to know exact definitions of prayer. These latter, nevertheless, help us to a greater knowledge and process of purification. We may take some fundamental elements in this connection, drawing on the experience of Christ, of the Church and of those who have contemplated him more closely and followed him.

### ***Letting God speak.***

“I take delight in your statutes”.<sup>35</sup> We must allow God to tell us what he knows will be of benefit to us.

He pronounces the Word. Jesus reveals himself as the Word,

<sup>35</sup> Ps 119, 16

the eternal Word of the Father. The Word is something new and still remains so. That is how charisms come into existence: prophetic movements which develop only in listening to God in a world of monotony and routine. And so listening to God is always for consecrated persons a new and sustaining grace. In point of fact we usually seek in our prayer words that we want to hear, with the risk that we shall not hear what God really wants to tell us, his Truth. Jesus himself advises us: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases".<sup>36</sup>

The time we dedicate in a planned period of silence or in a retreat to overhaul our life is not a waste of time; rather does it become the recovery of a space open to a visit of God. To cultivate a method for creating an area of silence and make good use of it, is a way of expressing the commitment without which no one can bring to maturity the consummate fruits of the reflection of faith, of prayer and of contemplation.

When we are able to maintain an interior silence in the midst of the inevitable hubbub of modern life, and in our heart the need to speak and communicate, the commitment we have taken on by prayer will have produced in us one of its most excellent results: we shall be individuals who are mature and level-headed without getting sidetracked, masters of our own internal ego. It is not a matter of a silence merely ascetical in nature, but of the expectation of and attention to a word of love. The Salesian expresses all this without any pretence: temperance comes naturally to him, with reason linked with religion, an optimistic but not naïve kindness, and with his gaze and hope fixed on the redemptive power of Christ.

### ***Receiving God's glance in the depth of our own being.***

God's glance has a rich significance in the Bible and in the Gospel. It implies his benevolent will, fatherly attention,

<sup>36</sup> Mt 6, 7

predilection and vocation. The gaze of the Lord is often linked with a dialogue, which is already a calling to a program of life.

Prayer does not remain external to the one who prays. There is no separation between prayer, the relationship with God and the one praying. Although it is a gift, it becomes such a blend and foundation with the mode of being of each one who prays as to become the purest expression of his individuality. What I am before the Creator, that is my prayer.

The light-giving gaze of God penetrates to where no other glance can reach. He sees me and teaches me to see myself as I am. To pray, therefore, is to feel and welcome this paternal gaze of God, without obstructing it in a vain effort to do everything by myself.

My life is at one and the same time a gift and a task: a gift which develops only in dialogue with the giver. To assert one's own participation in God's love for men, in a concrete destiny and a particular slot of human history: that is prayer.

I think we may sum up like this what is perhaps the most valid aspect of the personal experience of prayer: it is the on-going practice which leads to the embracing of the Father's will with filial joy in the events of daily life. The practice of prayer enables me to read my personal history – insignificant as it may in fact be, and absurd or contradictory as it may seem to me – as a revelation of the love of God within the coordinates of my existence and of the world. Nothing that happens in my life and in my world is extraneous to God's love.

God is love: by letting him love me I become a mysterious instrument of his love in the world. By opening myself to his initiative, I discover a God who is solid with and committed to the progress of humanity, and in particular with the sorrow of those who are suffering.

The third millennium: a time for mystics! It will be the depth of men and women moved by the Spirit that will save the meaning of life and challenge the limitations of our human vision.

### ***The experience of some of God's friends.***

Prayer is “expressive” of life in the best sense of the word. And so what is told us by those who lived intensely in both love and sorrow is of great use to us. Let us listen to some of the significant things they say.

- “Prayer is like a conversation between one friend talking to another, or a servant and his Master: now asking for some favour, now confessing to some shortcoming, now talking about his own affairs and asking for advice about them” (*Ignatius of Loyola*).

- “Here there is nothing to fear, but everything to hope for, (...) for me mental prayer is nothing else but a relationship of friendship, a frequent finding of myself alone with one whom we know loves us” (*Teresa of Avila*).

- “Prayer is nothing else but union with God (...). In this intimate union God and the soul are fused together like two bits of wax that no one can ever pull apart (...). We had become unworthy to pray, but God in his goodness allowed us to speak with him (...). My little children, your hearts are small, but prayer stretches them and makes them capable of loving God” (*Curé of Ars*).

- *Saint Augustine* wrote to Proba: “Let us always desire the happy life from the Lord our God and always pray for it. But for this very reason we turn our mind to the task of prayer at appointed hours, since the desire grows lukewarm, may grow chill altogether and may be totally extinguished unless it is repeatedly stirred into flame.

It is certainly not wrong or useless to pray even for a long time when there is the opportunity. I mean when it does not keep us from performing the other good and necessary actions we are obliged to do. To pray for a longer time is not the same as to pray by multiplying words, as some people suppose. Lengthy talk is one thing, a prayerful disposition which lasts a long time is another. Excessive talking should be kept out of

prayer, but that does not mean that one should not spend much time in prayer as long as a fervent attitude continues to accompany it. To talk at length in prayer is to perform a necessary action with excess of words.

Praying consists in knocking with a persistent and holy fervour on God's door. It is a task generally accomplished more through sighs than words, more through weeping than speech".<sup>37</sup>

According to these experiences, prayer is a friendly relationship which can be expressed by thought, action and gazing, silence, participation in the liturgy, rapid invocation or calm conversation after the example of Jesus: "I thank you, Father".<sup>38</sup> It is a relationship of friendship and love. And it introduces us appropriately into the topic of salesian prayer.

## 2. THE PRAYER OF THE SALESIAN

The prayer of the Salesian has a special reference to Jesus the Good Shepherd, and to Don Bosco, who is his living image among the young.

To understand its style and the way it has developed, it is enlightening to reflect in the Gospel first of all on the prayer of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, which culminates in the giving of his life.

Motives of space dictate that this reading, absorbing though it is, I must leave to you.<sup>39</sup> I want to dwell particularly on the typically salesian experience.

<sup>37</sup> From the *Letter of St Augustine to Proba*, CSEL 44, 60-63

<sup>38</sup> Mt 11,25

<sup>39</sup> cf. VECCHI J., *Spiritualità salesiana*, Temi fondamentali, Turin LDC 2000, p. 86-106

### The seeds: Mamma Margaret.

The first references to the process of salesian prayer we find in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*.<sup>40</sup> The account reveals a constant principle that accompanied Don Bosco all his life: the decisive role of the religious aspect in the environment in which he grew up and in its mentality. It led to the seeing of everything in many and various ways in relationship to God: from the contemplation of nature to the recital of prayers which had already become the heirloom of the Christian people.

It is especially to the figure of his mother and her educative activity that Don Bosco attributes the merit for having given deep root in him to the sense of God and a vision of faith about reality and history. Margaret formed him to the practice of the presence of God, showed him how to pray mentally and in words, and instilled in him the principles of Christian life, thus sowing abundantly the seeds of solid virtue. All this was a decisive contribution for his future mission as an educator and pastor.

From the faith of his mother the young John acquired the certainty of a God great in his love. He perceived the reality of an unbreakable link between our frail humanity and his merciful Love. He learned, existentially, that trust in God is never in vain, even in the most desperate moments. This was the root of his unshakeable faith that “could move mountains”, and of

<sup>40</sup> Don Bosco wrote the *Memoirs of the Oratory* between 1873 and 1878, a period which for him was both very important and painful. The Salesian Congregation was already an expanding reality, and the *Contitutions* were in process of being approved in Rome. In August 1872 the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians became definitive. For some time the Saint had been preparing the first missionary expedition which would take place in 1875. In the progressive clarification of the details of his project of the Salesian Society, the idea of the salesian laity developed with the constitution of the Association of the Cooperators and the realization of the *Bulletin*. At the same time Don Bosco was undergoing severe trials because of a progressive lack of understanding with his Archbishop which led to tensions and painful moments... In presenting the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, the Saint said he had written in response to exhortations he had received from various sources, especially from “a person of the highest authority, to whom any delay was out of the question”. Cf. G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*. Introduction and notes by A. DA SILVA FERREIRA, Roma 1992, I, p. 9-10.

the robust hope that prompted him to look beyond all human perspectives, and plan with a courageous daring what others would never have dreamed of doing. All this he discloses in the *Memoirs* and relates to us his readers.

Don Bosco's account is concise but very effective: "Her greatest care was given to instructing her sons in their religion, making them value obedience, and keeping them busy with tasks suited to their age. When I was still very small, she herself taught me to pray. As soon as I was old enough to join my brothers she made me kneel with them morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together, including five mysteries of the rosary".<sup>41</sup>

In the educational action of Margaret there is something more than ordinary religious formation. "God was always in the forefront of his thoughts", says Fr Lemoyne, and consequently was always on his lips (...). *God sees you* was the permanent slogan with which she reminded her children that they were under the eyes of the great God, who would one day be their judge. If she let them go and play in the neighbouring meadow, she used to say to them as they left: *Remember that God sees you*. If she sometimes found them looking worried and was afraid they might have on their mind some feeling of resentment, she would suddenly whisper in their ear: *Remember that God sees you, and he sees also your secret thoughts* (...).

She used the spectacular scenes of nature to remind them continually of their Creator. On a fine starry night she would point to the heavens and say: *It is God who created the world and put all those stars up there. If the firmament is so beautiful, what will paradise be like?* At the beginning of summer, looking at a lovely countryside, or a meadow studded with flowers, or at sight of a beautiful dawn or sunset, she would exclaim: *"What beautiful things the Lord has made for us!"*<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> BOSCO G., *Memoirs of the Oratory*, Eng. edtn..New Rochelle, 1989, p. 9

<sup>42</sup> LEMOYNE G.B., *Scene morali di famiglia esposte nella vita di Margherita Bosco racconto ameno ed edificante*, Turin 1886, p. 28-30

**Don Bosco man of prayer.**<sup>43</sup>

It would be historically inexact, however, to think that Don Bosco's prayer remained at this level. His educative and pastoral "oratorian" experience with poor boys and his young followers, brought about in him a leap towards an "apostolic prayer", towards contemplation in action and ecstasy before the action of God in the souls of the youngsters. And so began and developed that union between an attitude of prayer and an enterprising life, full of hope and daring, which at first raised doubts about his mental health, from the time when some thought him to be no more than God's building contractor, but he became the paradigm of prayer and life in God of the Salesian.

A method analogous to that of Mamma Margaret, matured through his pastoral experience and self-sacrificing educational service, would be subsequently used by Don Bosco with his own youngsters. In fact at the beginning of his prayer-book, the *Companion of Youth*, in a list of the *Things needed for a young person to become virtuous*, he begins with the *Knowledge of God*: "Lift up your eyes to the sky, my children, and observe what there is in the heavens and on earth. The sun, moon, stars, air, water and fire are all things which at one time did not exist (...). It is God who is all powerful who brought them into existence from nothing by creating them".<sup>44</sup> Both experiences were of use to him in introducing young people to communion with God.

Educated as he was to see the finger of God in nature and human events, especially with regard to the youngsters entrusted to him, Don Bosco formed them to take a "simple view" of things which revealed God's love. And so he became a keen observer of human and church history, which he was able to narrate very effectively to the boys. And the boys learned from what he said.

<sup>43</sup> In addition to the notes of A. GIRAUDO, *Itinerario spirituale*, I follow in this point the contribution of P. BROCARDO, *Don Bosco, "profeta di santità" per la nuova cultura*, in M. MIDALI (Ed.), *Spiritualità dell'azione*, p. 179-206

<sup>44</sup> BOSCO G., *Il Giovane provveduto per la pratica dei suoi doveri...*, Turin 1847, 9

The Saint tells a story of Michael Magone that took place during a holiday at the Becchi: "One evening when the boys were all in bed, I heard someone weeping and sighing. I crept quietly to the window and there at one side I saw Magone looking at the moon and weeping softly. "What is the matter, Michael?", I asked; "do you not feel well?" He was rather upset and did not know what to say, because he thought he had been alone and unseen by anyone. But when I repeated my question he said in these precise words: 'I am crying when I look at the moon which has been appearing regularly for centuries to give light to the darkness of the night without ever once disobeying the Creator's orders, while I who am so young, I who have the use of reason and should have been most faithful to the laws of my God, have disobeyed him so often and offended him in so many ways'. And with that he broke into tears again. I consoled him with a few words, whereupon he calmed down and went back to bed".<sup>45</sup>

Don Bosco comments with admiration on this ability of Michael "to see in everything the finger of God, and the duty of all creatures to obey him".<sup>46</sup>

### ***Following St Francis de Sales.***

All this is in line with the spirituality of St Francis de Sales who, in the second part of the Introduction to the Devout Life (where he lists "some advice for raising the soul to God") after presenting mental prayer, suggests five other brief forms of prayer "which serve as a prolongation of the longer prayer": morning and night prayers, the examination of conscience, spiritual recollection and aspirations made to God. To this last kind of prayer, made up of frequent but ardent ejaculations,

<sup>45</sup> BOSCO G., *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, in A. CAVIGLIA, *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di don Bosco nuovamente pubblicati e riveduti secondo le edizioni originali e manoscritti superstiti*, vol. V, Turin, 1965, p. 228-229

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

Francis invites the devout client: “praise His excellence, invoke his aid, cast yourself in spirit at the foot of His Cross, adore his goodness, offer your whole soul a thousand times a day to him, fix your inward gaze upon him, stretch out your hands to be led by him, as a little child to its father, clasp him to your breast as a fragrant nosegay, raise him up in your soul as a standard”.<sup>47</sup>

This type of aspiration is likened by the Saint to the thought of those who love each other: “their hearts overflowing with tenderness, and their lips ever ready to praise that beloved object (...), so those who love God cannot cease thinking of Him, living for Him, longing after Him, speaking of Him, and fain would they grave the Holy Name of Jesus in the hearts of every living creature they behold”.<sup>48</sup>

“And to such an outpouring of love all creation bids us”, writes again St Francis de Sales, “there is nothing that he has made but is filled with the praise of God, and everything in the world speaks silently but clearly to the lovers of God of their love, inciting them to holy desires, whence gush forth aspirations and loving cries to God. Here are some examples” (...).<sup>49</sup> The examples quoted are taken from the lives of the Saints and daily life, or from spectacles of nature. “A devout soul, gazing upon a brook wherein the starlit sky of a calm summer’s night was reflected, exclaims, O my God, when Thou callest me to dwell in Thy heavenly tabernacles, these stars will be beneath my feet (...). Another saintly soul, looking upon the blooming orchards, cried out, “Why am I alone barren in the Church’s garden!” Another, beholding a hen gathering her chickens beneath her wings, exclaimed, “Keep me, O Lord, under the shadow of thy wings”.<sup>50</sup>

This was the teaching of Saint Francis de Sales, and it was in the same way that young John was guided by his mother

<sup>47</sup> SFS *Introd Dev Life* #90

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* #92

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* #92

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* #96

and instructed in the ways of faith and contemplation. In this way he acquired the deep sense of the presence of God that was to be with him all his life. We know – as Saint Francis de Sales puts it once again – that in this simple exercise of contemplation and spiritual recollection expressed in short aspirations, good thoughts and spontaneous ejaculations, “lies the great work of devotion: it can supply all other deficiencies, but there is hardly any means of making up where this is lacking. Without it no one can lead a true contemplative life, and the active life will be but imperfect where it is omitted”.<sup>51</sup>

Don Bosco too was sensitive to the wonders of nature, but much more so to those of the soul of the young person who overcomes his evil inclinations, responds to the promptings of grace and opens himself generously to God.

A contemplative in matters of salvation, ecstatic at God’s work in life, full of admiration at the effects of grace in Dominic Savio, he could be deeply moved at the sight of youngsters in prison, at the sight of the natives of Patagonia he invoked the help of Mary Help of Christians, and longed for the evangelization of Asia.

### ***The oratory hallmark.***

In this kind of climate at Valdocco the spirit and practice of prayer was closely linked with educative charity. You could see it in the very countenances of those who lived there, many of whom were to form the first salesian generation. “We knew them”, Fr Ceria was to write later, “as men very different in talents and culture, so unlike each other in their habits, but in all of them shone certain common characteristics, which made them what they were. Calm and serene in what they said and did; kind and fatherly in manner and expression, but particularly with a piety that made it clear that they knew what made

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. #97

them tick, the central principle of the salesian life. They prayed a great deal, and they prayed intensely; they laid great insistence on praying and praying well. It seemed that they could not say more than a few words in public or private without mentioning prayer in some way. (...) And yet those men did not seem to enjoy any extraordinary graces in prayer; in fact we saw them fulfilling with candid simplicity nothing more than the practices prescribed by our rules or customs". They loved God, and in him they loved the young. That was the comment on the way they linked times of prayer with life, explicit prayer with the mission.

The kind of prayer that Don Bosco practised and tried to teach his followers is simple and straightforward in form, authentically complete and popular in substance and content, joyful and festive in expression. It is truly a prayer within the capabilities of all, particularly of children and the lowly, and has a rightful place in what he called the "practices of piety".

Fr Caviglia wrote that Don Bosco did not create any new or special form or practice of prayer or devotion, like the Rosary, Retreats, Stations of the Cross and so on. He was open to formulas and also, in a certain sense, to forms of piety of which as an educator he perceived the usefulness; he was a realist, with his eye on the substance, on the rapport with God and its reflection on life: to pray was to be friends with him which led quite easily to being alone with him and at his service in one's neighbour.

Fr Ceria is correct when he says that Don Bosco did not dedicate long periods to meditation, as did some other saints (the Curé of Ars, St. Anthony Mary Claret). But to have one's own way of praying is not the same thing as not praying at all or praying too little.

Don Bosco's prayer differed from that of other saints in both quantity and kind, but the facts make it clear that it was no less true and deep. Witnesses in the process of beatification and canonization revealed in Don Bosco an unexpected and exalted ac-

tivity of prayer. Despite the lack of external signs and striking gestures, prayer came in on all sides. "It can be said", declared Fr Barberis, "that he prayed always; I have seen him hundreds of times going up or down stairs and always praying. He used to pray as he went along the street. On his journeys, if he was not correcting proofs, he was always seen in prayer. On a train journey – he used to say to his followers – never be idle, but recite the breviary, say the rosary of our Lady, or read some good book".

Although in the last years of his life he had been dispensed from reciting the breviary, in reality he almost always said it and with great devotion; when it became physically too much for him he made up for it, as is clear from his formal and heroic promise, "not to do or say anything which did not have as its aim the glory of God".

For Don Bosco prayer was the "most outstanding of all works",<sup>52</sup> because prayer "obtains everything and triumphs over everything". It is "what water is to the fish, air to the bird, the spring of water to the deer, warmth to the body".<sup>53</sup> His institution was founded on prayer.

Don Bosco, who was able to contemplate God in the countenance and situation of the young, did not feel the need to impose on his followers practices of piety other than those of the good Christian, or of the good priest in the case of priests. It is a prayer which never forgets or leaves aside the youth situation which must be transformed according to God's plan, or that of men to be directed towards Christ: "*da mihi animas cetera tolle*". We have already recalled the text of the first draft of the Constitutions: "The active life towards which our society more especially tends, means that its members are unable to make many practices in common".<sup>54</sup> This expression contains the implicit statement that many other forms of prayer are both pos-

<sup>52</sup> MB XVII, p. 69

<sup>53</sup> MB III, p. 246. 613

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales 1858-1875*, Critical texts, edited by F. MOTTO, LAS Rome 1982, p. 182-183

sible and recommended. Among these Don Bosco attached great importance to ejaculations.

“Each one – we read in the same draft of the Constitutions – in addition to the vocal prayers, will make at least half an hour of mental prayer each day, unless he is prevented by the sacred ministry. In this case he will make up for it by more frequent ejaculations, directing to God with greater fervour those works which prevent him from performing the ordinary acts of piety”.<sup>55</sup> Ejaculations are easy and essential prayers which serve to keep alive the thought of God.

We may say that in Don Bosco there was a perfect rapport of identity between prayer and work. In this sense, but only in this sense, one can say that work is prayer. And this, according to Fr Ceria, was Don Bosco’s secret, his most characteristic trait: “The specific difference of salesian piety lies in being able to convert work into prayer”.

Pius XI has given solemn confirmation to this: “This, in fact, was one of his finest characteristics, i.e. that in the middle of everything, continually beset by a crowd, worried by all sorts of problems, with people on all sides seeking advice, his spirit was always somewhere else, above it all, where there was undisturbed tranquility, where calm remained always supreme, so that in him work was always effective prayer, and there was verified the great principle of the Christian life: *qui laborat orat*”.<sup>56</sup>

And so, just as Don Bosco became identified as the man of “union with God”, so the Salesian is characterized as being a man who is a “contemplative in action”.<sup>57</sup> The difficulty lies in the precise meaning to be given to this expression.

In the tension between prayer and activity, in fact, it is difficult to maintain a balance, not so much theoretically but in the

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Ibid. p. 185

<sup>56</sup> PIUS XI, at the reading of the Decree on the heroicity of virtues, 20 February 1927.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. C 12

practice of daily life.<sup>58</sup> The problem has been there since the beginnings of Christianity, and has been much discussed. It is in this connection that Augustine, commenting on Luke 10,38-42, writes: "The words of Our Lord Jesus Christ are meant to remind us that there is a single goal at which we aim while we labour in the various occupations of this world. We travel as pilgrims who have not yet reached the destination; wayfarers not yet in the fatherland; desirous but without the final enjoyment. Martha and Mary were two sisters, not only on a natural level but also on that of religion; both of them honoured God, both served the Lord present in the flesh in perfect harmony of feeling. Martha welcomed him in the usual manner for receiving pilgrims, and nevertheless received the Lord as a servant..."

For the rest, Martha, let it be said in all sincerity, you who were already blessed for your praiseworthy service sought rest as your reward. You are now immersed in many concerns, you want to refresh mortal bodies, albeit of holy persons... Up there above there will be no room for all this. And so what will you do? What Mary has chosen: there we shall not feed others but be nourished ourselves. And so will be completed and perfected what Mary has chosen here: from that rich table to collect the crumbs of the word of the Lord (who) will seat his servants at table and wait on them".<sup>59</sup>

Martha and Mary are an example of a radical unity in which active life and contemplative life are not opposed; together they represent an existence totally bound up with contemplative listening, especially when called to be involved in worldly matters. The radical unity between contemplation and action is found in the rapport and communion with God.

Let us see now how this tension between contemplation and action in the life of the Salesian can be unraveled, by dwelling

<sup>58</sup> Cf. VECCHI J. E., *Spiritualità Salesiana. Approfondimento di alcuni temi fondamentali*, Ediz.extracomm., SDB IVE-IVO, Venezia-Mestre, 2000, particularly p. 69-83.

<sup>59</sup> AUGUSTINE (S.), *Sermon* 103, 1-2.6, in *PL* 38, 613.615.

first of all on the expression “contemplatives in action”, before passing on to list some characteristics which define the life of the Salesian as a contemplative person in the service of the young.

### **“Contemplatives in action”.**

Contemplation, i.e. becoming intensely taken up in wonder and amazement for a long or short period, embraces and grasps in a single profound moment reality in its very roots and the subject in his many unified elements.<sup>60</sup> It is properly called an “experience”.

Christian contemplation implies a unified view which perceives in the sequence of events the fulfilment of God’s Kingdom and hence our participation in its construction. This is not brought about only in silence and solitude, as though apart from the aspirations and desires, joys and sufferings of the Kingdom, but also in the sharing of the things of life that Christ came to bring.

In Christian tradition, in fact, one may speak of two great and preferential ways or methods of contemplation which are nevertheless not exclusive. In the first, the person becomes detached from “human things” to become immersed in God; in the second, it is precisely through those “human things” that he grasps the presence of God and his Kingdom, and he makes himself available to participate in the proclamation of salvation. “See, O God, I have come to do your will”.<sup>61</sup> In consequence he takes up his life as a union with God, in his zeal for the salvation of man.

The difference between the two is found in the different emphasis in the relationship between the Kingdom of God and human life. One who lives detached from things sees them by con-

<sup>60</sup> L. BORRIELLO, *Contemplazione*, in L. BORRIELLO et al., *Dizionario di Mistica*, Città del Vaticano, Editrice Vaticana, 1998, 338-344. At p. 348 there is an essential bibliography on the problem of action and contemplation.

<sup>61</sup> Heb 10, 7

templating them in God. The accent is on the recognition of the mystery of God, who is inaccessible, man's definitive place for rest and happiness. On the other hand he, who lives an active and responsible zeal for salvation, puts the accent on God's Incarnation and his participation in history. He contemplates God who offers his grace for the building of the Kingdom here and now; like Jesus he rejoices at the wisdom worked by the Father in the poor and lowly. In this way God is "understood" in the contemplation of things and in the various activities of the Kingdom.

Both these attitudes are important and neither can be renounced. It is a matter of an emphasis which has an influence on what we do with our time and on the style of life we adopt. It is said of the Salesian that his contemplation stems from and is manifested above all in his zeal for the life of the young; and so after perceiving the mystery of the Incarnation he tries to enter its depths.

"Contemplation in action" does not necessarily mean thinking about God in the midst of activity, but rather of being conscious of the fact that the building of the Kingdom is at stake in that human activity. Contemplation in action is a process which requires conditions similar to those for contemplation in silence and, even though it be a grace, it is acquired through the cross.

### ***Some conditions for becoming "contemplatives in action".***

Here I will summarize some traits which make it possible for the Salesian to contemplate God in life.

#### *a. Interior attitude.*

All spiritualities, even that of the contemplative in action, are valid only if they lead to the sanctuary of the heart, where Truth precedes us.<sup>62</sup> In religious formation we insist on interi-

<sup>62</sup> St Augustine warns us: "*Noli foras ire. In teipsum redi: in interiore homine habitat veritas*"

orization; in common religious thought we distinguish the emotion of a moment from a mature and personalized faith.

To become a contemplative in action, an *interior frame of mind* is needed, born of open faith and vigilance, of humility and patience, of fidelity to God and men, of self-control and openness to the horizons of eternity. The quality of contemplation in action is measured by the human quality of the act done and by the awareness, implicit but alive and deep in the believer, that the Kingdom of God is here and now, or that the Kingdom of God cannot be achieved in such a situation. In the first case one rejoices, in the second case he suffers. Suffering and joy are the fruit of contemplation.

Each one of us – the Constitutions remind us – “needs to express his own personal and heartfelt way of being a son of God, expressing his gratitude, telling him about his yearnings and his concerns in the apostolate”,<sup>63</sup> so that “all his life may be imbued with an apostolic spirit, and all his apostolic activity with a religious spirit”.<sup>64</sup>

At this point we may briefly recall the thoughts of Fr Cafasso, who was a sure teacher of prayer for Don Bosco; they indicate the best way to live a unifying and enlightening charity in action. What are of concern to us here are the fundamental attitudes, while their practice depend on the person and his era.

“The first secret”, says Don Bosco of Cafasso, “was his unflinching *serenity*. He always had in mind those words of St. Teresa: “*Let nothing disturb you!*” And so, with an unflinching smile, always courteous and with the gentleness that is proper to saintly souls, he tackled energetically everything he had to do, even though it might be tedious, difficult, and sometimes accompanied by thorny problems. But all this without getting worked up and without the number or serious nature of the things to be done causing him the least disturbance. This wonderful tranquility

<sup>63</sup> C 93

<sup>64</sup> PC 8

meant that he could deal calmly with many different matters without any becoming upset".<sup>65</sup> This is so different from the kind of worried apostle you can meet at the present day.

The second secret was long *experience joined with a great confidence in God*. "He would frequently repeat the words of David, the royal prophet: *Dies diei eructat verbum* (Ps 18, 2). What I do today serves as a pattern for what I shall have to do tomorrow. This maxim, joined with his prudence, experience and long study of the human heart, had made him familiar with the most complex questions. Doubts, difficulties and the most complicated problems faded away before him. When he was asked a question he needed only a brief outline of it, then he would raise his heart to God for a moment and reply with a readiness and precision which could not have been improved on by lengthy study".<sup>66</sup> It was ongoing formation in and through life against the background of the Word.

The third secret was the careful and *constant use of time*. "In the more than thirty years that I have known him, I do not remember a single moment when he could have been said to be idle. As soon as he finished one matter, he began another. How often he was known to spend five and even six hours in the confessional, and then go to his room where he began at once to receive those who wanted to speak with him, which could take several hours. How often too he was seen to return, almost exhausted, from preaching or hearing confessions in the prisons, and on being asked to rest a little before giving his usual conference replied: the conference will provide me with a rest".<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> BOSCO G., *Biografia del Sacerdote Giuseppe Caffasso esposta in due ragionamenti funebri*, Paravia, Turin 1860, p. 91-95. Cf.: OPERE EDITE, vol. XII, p. 351ff. In the *Appendix*, Don Bosco inserts the *Pensieri del sacerdote Caffasso Giuseppe per passar bene la giornata*: "1. Do everything as Our Lord Jesus Christ would have done it. - 2. Do everything in the way you would want to have done it if you were asked about it at God's judgement seat. - 3. Do everything as if it were the final action of your life. - 4. Do everything as if you had nothing else to do" (*ibid.*, p. 110).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

The fourth secret was his *temperance* which in him was a prudent penance, and which in Don Bosco reveals the consistency of the elements that make up salesian spirituality. *Without great sobriety*, he says, *it is impossible to become holy*. “Along these lines every day, every week, every month and the entire year, except for mealtimes, he was able to use every scrap of time for the benefit of souls.

With these four secrets – concluded Don Bosco – Fr Cafasso was able to do many different things in a short time, and so bring charity to the highest degree of perfection: *Plenitudo legis dilectio* (Rom 13,10).<sup>68</sup>

b. *Intention*.

It is not true that any activity whatever, no matter how it is done, can be a prayer. For our activity to become an occasion for a meeting and communication with God, it must be performed in accordance with God’s will and flow from intimate union with him.

The Salesian needs to set aside a specific time for personal and community prayer, not because he denies that daily life can be the place for meeting God in the young, or because he considers the only true kind of prayer to be that carried out in a church or chapel, but rather because he is aware of himself as a creature, and therefore as a sinner. For this very reason his attention can be sidetracked and he needs intimacy with the Lord to purify the motives for his activity, and so continue his relationship with God who wants to be present in his life.

Through explicit prayer, the Salesian searches in his inner self and purifies his fundamental option, reconfirming God as the Lord of his own existence, who guides his life and gives meaning to all he does. In explicit personal and community prayer, the Salesian recognizes the priority of the choice of God as the supreme love which excludes everything opposed to him.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

If this purification of the intention, which stems from intimate union with God, is lacking, activity – even of the kind we call apostolic – becomes a work of our own hands and therefore a cause of spiritual impoverishment. “The characteristic sobriety that Don Bosco wanted is to be interpreted therefore, not as a relaxed minimalism but in reference to the context. In this case to the rich and intensely supernatural atmosphere of the Oratory at Valdocco, as an irradiation of the sanctity of Don Bosco and as a result of the fervent environment he had created among the boys, in which without any doubt God was the centre of everything”.<sup>69</sup>

Transformation of the life of prayer presupposes, therefore, a deep union with God. Only then can explicit prayer diminish, so to speak, because the activity, transformed into prayer, springs from where the soul loses itself in God.<sup>70</sup>

c. *Feeling ourselves God’s instruments for the benefit of the young.*

Against the risk of the widespread unbridled search for efficiency and successful results, the Salesians feel the need in their work for an attitude of *radical humility*. It is a matter of remaining faithful to a mission they have received. Hence before one of giving, our mission is one of receiving. We are not proprietors of the Kingdom, nor of the task we have been given. The Vineyard has its Master. Work becomes prayer if it is done in a spirit of obedience and readiness towards Him who has sent us: “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake”.<sup>71</sup>

The Salesian behaves as a “mystic” in action when, though aware of his own weakness, he labours at finding out what is pleasing to God and allows himself to be guided by the will of Him who wants all men to be saved.

<sup>69</sup> RICCERI L., ASC 269, 1973, p. 45

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Ibid. p. 46

<sup>71</sup> 2 Cor 4, 5

The spiritual life of the Salesian consists specifically in allowing this divine love to fill his heart, so that he can spread it among the young. The “silence of all one’s being”, of which the SGC speaks, “is born from the need of always advancing in greater intimacy with God ‘loved above all and without limit’: a silence which can place us in the condition of really listening to God, and of identifying ourselves ever more with his plan of redemption”.<sup>72</sup>

The Salesian knows that he has been chosen to be the witness and instrument of this active presence of God in history. From this follows how his actions are preceded by and subject to a more powerful presence. For this he gives thanks and praise. Through his presence the youngster is touched by a new love, both powerful and transforming.<sup>73</sup>

Being a “sign and bearer of the love of God for young people, especially those who are poor”<sup>74</sup> translates for the Salesian into the triple attitude of compassion, closeness and intercession which leads effectively to salvation for the young.

#### d. *Discovering the presence of the Spirit in the life of the young.*

The Constitutions speak of docility and readiness in the continual renewal of our attention to the Spirit: “Attentive to the

<sup>72</sup> Cf. SGC, 552

<sup>73</sup> As an example we have the testimony of Don Albera: “Don Bosco loved us in a manner all his own... I felt that I was loved in a manner I had never felt before, not even in the deep love of my unforgettable parents. Don Bosco’s love for me was something that surpassed any other affection... His love attracted us, won us over, and transformed our hearts! And it could not be otherwise because everything he said and did showed forth the holiness of his union with God, who is perfect love. He drew us to himself by the fullness of the supernatural love which he stirred up in our hearts... We were his, because in each of us was the certainty that he was truly a man of God in the word’s most comprehensive sense... In his sanctity lay the secret of the attraction which conquered us for ever and transformed our hearts. His preventive system was nothing else but charity, i.e. the love of God which reached and embraced all human creatures, especially the young and inexperienced”: P. ALBERA, *Circular Letter*, 18 October 1921: *Don Bosco our model*, Turin, Direzione Generale Opere Salesiane, 1965, 373-375

<sup>74</sup> C 2

presence of the Spirit and doing everything for God's love, (the Salesian) becomes like Don Bosco a contemplative in action".<sup>75</sup>

The Spirit is active in the depths of every human conscience. We must be able to discover and interpret this mysterious presence, recognize its signs, single out its particular applications, and the various manifestations of the Spirit in young lives.

With joyful surprise the Salesian finds God at work in a receptive heart, in an open group, in a commonplace or unexpected happening. For this reason he is ready to meet the youngster wherever he is to be found, conscious of interpreting in this way the meaning of the divine action so as to be its servant and visibly collaborate in it. And more particularly, he is convinced that God speaks secretly to every young person and earnestly prompts him to a Covenant dialogue in this particular and decisive moment of his personal history.

Rather than condemnation, the Salesian prefers discernment as an instrument for the reading of history from a Christian standpoint – a criterion which implies an acceptance of facts without either prejudice or naïveté; indeed, history is the place where you read the "signs", i.e. relevant meanings for the Christian faith (cf. Mt 16,4).<sup>76</sup>

To the diagnosis of the signs of the times corresponds the therapy of updating, so as to "lend an ear to the voices of the earth"<sup>77</sup> and thus establish a living and vital rapport with the past, present and future.

<sup>75</sup> C 12

<sup>76</sup> From the abundant bibliography on discernment, I quote some recent publications: J. M<sup>a</sup>. CASTILLO, *El discernimiento cristiano. Para una conciencia crítica*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1984; M. COSTA, *Sentire, giudicare, scegliere, nello Spirito*, Rome, CVX, 1995; M. RUIZ JURADO, *Il discernimento spirituale. Teologia, storia, pratica*, Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo, 1997; *L'attitudine al discernimento*, Milan, Ancora, 1998; E. FORTUNATO, *Il discernimento. Itinerari esistenziali per giovani e formatori*, Bologna, EDB, 1999

<sup>77</sup> JOHN XXIII, *Discorsi, messaggi, colloqui del Santo Padre Giovanni XXIII*, I, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1960, 10

In this way, contemplation has its part in the complete giving of ourselves in the service of the young and of people in general, by accepting its daily consequences after the example of the Good Shepherd: participating in God's fatherliness, working like him in favour of life from the most elementary forms (food, housing, instruction) to the very loftiest (revelation of the Gospel, life of faith).

The Salesian plays out his role as an "instrument of God's love for the young" in practical and historical terms: "The Salesian must have a practical sense and be alert to the signs of the times, convinced that God is calling him through the prevailing needs of time and place".<sup>78</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Up to this point we have been considering some points about the prayer of the Salesian. Using Don Bosco's words we may call it the *prayer of the "da mihi animas"*. It should permeate all salesian activity for the benefit of the young. Don Bosco insists that his followers link together in a single reality work (which can border on the hectic) and prayer, (which is to breathe God so that every action may be part of a "psaltery of good works").

We must remember that personal maturing and growth as a community are not mutually exclusive; indeed they must give each other reciprocal support and integration. "We can form praying communities", we are told by our Rule of life, "only if individually we become men of prayer".<sup>79</sup>

"The action of the Spirit is for the professed member a lasting source of grace and a support for his daily efforts to

<sup>78</sup> cf. J. AUBRY, *Al centro della santità salesiana: la carità apostolica. Abbozzo di una spiritualità dell'azione salesiana*, in M. MIDALI (Ed.), *Spiritualità dell'azione. Contributo per un approfondimento*, Rome, LAS, 1977, p. 207-228

<sup>79</sup> C 93

grow towards the perfect love of God and men. The confreres who are living or have lived to the full the gospel project of the Constitutions are for us a stimulus and help on the path to holiness".<sup>80</sup>

### *The prayer of our Saints.*

The testimony of our brothers and sisters on their way to the honours of the altar shows us that this form of prayer is not something fanciful and unrealistic, but has already been used by members who have lived it in daily life, as is confirmed by the experts who have examined their lives and virtues in the light of theology. It is interesting to look back on their lives as consecrated or lay people, because one thing appears in all of them: they always prize highly some explicit practices or moments, often with personal touches, and the confiding of their work and life itself into the hands of God.

Recently we celebrated the canonization of **Bishop Aloysius Versiglia**.

He once wrote to the Carmel at Florence: "Let us lift up our hearts ever higher, let us be more forgetful of ourselves and speak more of God, so as to serve him better, to give him greater consolation, for the saving of souls. You, Sisters, will be able to speak more easily to us of the delicacy of the love of Jesus, while we perhaps can speak to you of the wretched state of so many souls who are a long way from God and of the need to bring them back to him; we shall feel ourselves raised up in the love of God; you will find yourselves prompted to greater zeal".<sup>81</sup>

In connection with the Venerable **Artemides Zatti** we have heard in particular of his tireless charity.<sup>82</sup> The intensity

<sup>80</sup> C 25

<sup>81</sup> Letter to the Florence Carmel, Sal. Archives 9,3, Vers.

<sup>82</sup> *Positio*, p. 212

with which the Servant of God lived the sense of God's presence, led him to see Christ in the sick and the suffering, even to the extent of his manner of speaking: "Sister, please make a bed ready for the good Lord". We find this trait referred to frequently by witnesses during the process.

"The impression I received", said one witness, "was that he was a man *united with God*. Prayer was like the breath of his soul; everything he did showed that he was living the first commandment of God to the full: he loved him with all his heart, mind and soul".<sup>83</sup>

"It was evident", added another, "that the Servant of God *prayed continually*; on his bicycle he prayed while he pedaled, just as he prayed when looking after the sick [...]; with spontaneous expressions of faith, he used to repeat *phrases which lifted up the spirit, even with religious*".<sup>84</sup> And again: "As both a youth and an adult Zatti moved in a *supernatural sphere*, without any other concern than the glory of God and the salvation of souls."<sup>85</sup>

**Fr Aloysius Variara**<sup>86</sup> is also on the way to beatification.

The Christian and religious life of Fr Variara was characterized by an intense theological vision and constant priestly and missionary activity. The living faith, which was the source of his spiritual strength, was so simple and powerful that it left no room for tiredness or discouragement; and it was precisely through faith that he succeeded in overcoming all the obstacles that arose in his path, always and uniquely absorbed as he was in the love of God and his neighbour.

The love of Fr Variara for God is witnessed to by his manner of prayer, his eucharistic fervour, his devotion to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The kind of apostolate he carried out

<sup>83</sup> *Summarium*, p. 43, n. 160

<sup>84</sup> *Summarium*, p. 179, n. 731

<sup>85</sup> *Summarium*, p. 182, n. 743

<sup>86</sup> PINARTE E., Osservatore Romano 4.12.1997

constitutes the best testimony of love for his neighbour and of the heroic fortitude with which he carried it out to the last.

### ***The liturgy of life.***

To this brief reference to our Saints and Servants of God, which could indeed have been further developed, I add a description of educative daily prayer taken from the text of the GC23: "For the salesian, educating youth to the faith means 'work and prayer'. He is aware that by committing himself to the salvation of the young he is experiencing something of the fatherhood of God (...). Don Bosco has taught us to recognize God's operative presence in our work of education, and to experience it as light and love (...). We believe that God is awaiting us in the young to offer us the grace of meeting with him and to dispose us to serve him in them, recognizing their dignity and educating them to the fullness of life.

In this way our work of education becomes the preeminent context in which to meet him",<sup>87</sup> and of the contemplation of his work in the life of man.

The educator is called to recognize God working in the human person and to put himself at his service. This is something similar to what Mary had to do for the divine consciousness of Jesus to be manifested historically in his humanity. Mary had to accompany him and sustain him with food, affection, advice, the teaching of language and traditions, human relationships, how to use religious words and gestures, without knowing anything of what would later be revealed by this son of hers.

A mysterious dialogue takes place between every young person and what reaches him from outside, what arises within himself, and what he discovers through experience, grace or sense. He gradually acquires a full awareness of himself and

<sup>87</sup> GC23, 94-95

formulates a plan of life in which he wagers his strengths and tries out his possibilities.

The educator is called upon to offer everything he thinks opportune, with a hopeful attitude as regards future unknowns. He takes a sincere interest in this as yet insecure human being who is maturing. In him, in fact, God will be received and will manifest himself ever more clearly as the child grows.

The educator therefore – whether he be parent, teacher, friend or animator – must keep alive the awareness that he is part of a festive encounter of God with the young. He is the friend of the bridegroom, not the protagonist but a help and active spectator, as Mary was at the marriage-feast of Cana.

Precisely in the faith which discerns the action of God, in the hope that looks forward to his manifestation in the life of the young, and in the charity with which he puts himself at the disposal of the young person and of the bridegroom, are sentiments developed and the moments of education lived as prayer in joy, expectation, pain, effort and apparent failure. Thanksgiving, rejoicing and sorrow are interspersed with intercession, desire and prayer.

The liturgical celebration has a *Kyrie*, a *Gloria*, a *Credo*, an offertory, an aspect of symbolism, a community, times of penance and exultation. In the same way the liturgy of life has moments of gratification and others of disappointment, of initiative and of waiting, of solitude and of company. Space is there too (playground, school, neighbourhood!), and there are people to love and receive our heartfelt collaboration (the educating community).

The whole of it, lived in the light of God's operative presence, becomes prayer and contemplation. It happens as in communication between persons who know each other well: feelings can be expressed by words, by gestures, by a gift or a glance, by silence, by a visit or by a telephone or fax message.

It is a matter, as St Augustine would say, of "taking in hand the Psalter of good works and using it to sing the Lord's praises".

But it must be kept in mind that there is a relationship between a continuous attitude of prayer and the exercise of prayer, between prayer in word and prayer in life, between prayer expressed explicitly in words and prayer diffused through the whole day, between the celebration of the liturgy and the liturgy of life. And it is perhaps in this relationship that difficulties lie, but in which is to be found at the same time the rich value for the Salesian, and hence a fundamental point in his spiritual and apostolic formation.

The two elements or aspects are important for one another, both for the stability and fullness of consecrated life. If one is left aside, the other goes with it.

Anyone who educates or advises others needs time for learning and especially for concentration. "Many think that prayer comes spontaneously and do not want to hear about how to do it, but they are mistaken".<sup>88</sup>

There is a need for a calm and progressive introduction to the different forms of prayer: vocal, mental, reading, silence, contemplation, use of formulas, creativity. They need to be practised at different times and in different situations, until they become so much a part of life that they automatically flow in and out of us in many ways and forms.

Practice produces a habit: regularity is a decisive factor; there is a time for all the important things in life, a moment specifically reserved for them; if something cannot be done at the customary time, we immediately fix another for it. So it is for eating, sleeping, ablutions.

The community practices are indispensable for us: places, times, forms, the community itself. I say "for us", because the community style covers all the aspects of our life. For other religious it may be different. But personal application is needed as well. The manner and results of this application vary. Each one has his own way of praying, just as he has his own way of

<sup>88</sup> GUARDINI R., *Lettere su autoformazione*, p. 91

speaking, walking and looking at things. In this key are to be interpreted greater or lesser feelings of emotion, distractions, preferences for reflection or formulas, and periods of tiredness.

With all this necessarily in mind, we must recognize that the prayer of the Christian is always a gift. Christ is the only one who prays. He incorporates us into his prayer in the Spirit. Of ourselves we know neither what to say nor how to say it. The Spirit puts on our lips what we should ask for: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God".<sup>89</sup>

"Often", writes one author, "books and guides talk about prayer as though it were an ability we must acquire by our own efforts like a science or a particular skill (...), but we get lost in the intricacies of the process and our desire to be able to pray is once again frustrated". "Lord, teach us to pray".

Our life needs to combine reflection and practice, study and activity, silence and being with others, even though in our case we are not tied to a rigid timetable. And this in the ordinary circumstances of life in which we are exposed to a multiplicity of factors, to stress and strain, to the piling up of commitments.

### ***Introducing young people to prayer.***

A last point, but by no means one of least importance, is that of introducing young people to prayer. As thanksgiving to God, a first general level is offered to everyone through catechesis, well prepared daily prayer, the celebration of the Eucharist and feasts.

<sup>89</sup> Rom 8, 26-27

Youth groups that follow Salesian Youth Spirituality are better able to integrate explicit prayer with the offering of themselves for others according to God's plan. In these groups emerge animators and leaders, who must not be mere managers or coordinators but true animators, according to their age and preparation, of a human and spiritual experience. It is a good thing if among the groups and for the members there are specific occasions and schools of prayer.

The participation of young people in our community prayer, when times and circumstances permit, can also be both a stimulus and a challenge. Let us not forget that from this can spring wisdom of life through listening to the Word, sharing, awareness of our particular kind of approach, and attention to the Spirit.

### **Mary, personification of our prayer.**

Mary is the icon, model and inspiration of this form of prayer: in the dialogue of the Annunciation, in the grateful joy of the *Magnificat*, the surprise in the temple, the attentive care of Jesus, and the following of him even to the Cross.

There is a specific moment when Mary's attitude appears in simple but essential splendour. The moment of the Incarnation is an event of little apparent significance, taking place in a small country, in a largely unknown town, away from places where important things happen and decisions are made which have a great influence on people. Bethlehem was just about the opposite of Rome, Jerusalem or Babylon. The grotto was the antithesis of a throne, a temple or a palace.

And the fact could have remained like that for ever: hidden and without significance. It was the proclamation of the angels that gave it its news value for the shepherds who heard not only the story of what had happened, but also its saving significance: the newborn child was not just any person, but the long awaited one, the Saviour.

Thus does Luke reproduce the nature of the evangelization. It is not a doctrine about God and the world, nor does it merely teach religious or ethical truths, but relates events that actually took place, showing the significance they have for man and the message they contain. The light shining through the proclamation came from God, but it was contained and revealed in the facts of human history.

And here Luke emphasizes the different degrees of knowledge which the different people had of the Incarnation and its meaning, which is like the key for living in faith all the other events of personal and social life.

The *shepherds* had to go to the spot where the Incarnation took place and could be direct witnesses. They stayed for a short time and listened to Mary. Then they returned and recounted what they had been told about the child. They had no personal experience of what had happened earlier, like the annunciation and the virgin birth, and had not even been present when Jesus first appeared.

The *people* who heard what the shepherds said were astonished at what they had to say. They did not yet express any faith, but were caught up in that initial interest and curiosity that follows a surprising event that can be the beginnings of faith.

“*Mary*, for her part, treasured all these things in her heart”.<sup>90</sup> She had no need to come, as the shepherds did, to the place of the Incarnation. She was already there; she was part of the event. She did not need to hear from others what had happened and its significance. She remembered all the promises that had been made to humanity, as is evident from the *Magnificat*, and was aware that he who had grown in her womb came from the Holy Spirit.

Mary did not leave the place of the event as the shepherds did, once they had seen the child. She stayed there. She could

<sup>90</sup> Lk 2, 51

not go away. Wherever Jesus is incarnate, she is indispensable. She did not yet understand all the significance stemming from the event, nor could she foretell all the force and energy that would flow from the Incarnation.

These were things to be revealed during Christ's life on earth and through the centuries. But Mary kept the remembrance of the event in her heart as something very dear to her; she was attentive to it and occasionally thought back on it and drew new consequences from it.

This is Luke's meditation, and it may suggest also to us some point of reflection on our pastoral spirituality.

It is not possible for us to be mere visitors, tourists of the word and mystery of Christ. Saint Augustine, comparing the attitudes of the three categories of persons of whom we have spoken, asks the Christian: Which do you resemble? Those who heard the proclamation and were merely amazed? The shepherds who came to the grotto, took note of what had happened and left to noise it abroad? Or Mary, who gathered the whole truth of Christ, kept it in her heart and meditated on it continually? The admiration of the first group soon wore off; the information of the shepherds, though dictated by faith, was imperfect and rudimentary. Only one who contemplates and makes his own the mystery of Christ can draw from it new light and significance for today's times and people.

Church history has many figures of first class evangelizers. They are all patient meditators on the Word and humble contemplators of the mystery. What they have reflected on deeply in prayer and study they express in their preaching, writings and their leadership of the Christian community in the guidance of souls.

To communicate the event of Christ is our profession and the purpose of our vocation. In this we must be specialists; by approaching it calmly and unhurriedly, we draw light for our personal life, and we compare it as a community with what we observe in our environment: this is what we mean by *interioriza-*

tion. It is not a technical operation but the effect of zeal: "I became your father in Christ".<sup>91</sup> We may say the same with respect to Christian education, where an expression of Don Bosco is very much *ad rem*: "I now see that we must safeguard the Congregation from spiritual coldness and decay by promoting the spirit of piety and religious community life".<sup>92</sup>

We are called upon to make the presence of God transparently clear wherever we are: this before all else, and the rest will follow as a consequence.

With my prayers for a New Year rich in graces and blessings, I send you best wishes for a growth in your experience of prayer in the salesian spirit, so that being strengthened internally we can in truth be "signs and bearers of the love of God for young people".<sup>93</sup>

With the protection of the Immaculate Help of Christians,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Juan Sueti". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" that extends downwards and to the left, crossing the baseline of the text.

<sup>91</sup> 1 Cor 4, 15

<sup>92</sup> BM XIV, p. 436

<sup>93</sup> C 2