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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

***“Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6,69)***

THE WORD OF GOD AND SALESIAN LIFE TODAY

SUMMARY:

- 1. Contemplating Christ by listening to the Word of God**
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 - 3.3 Listening to the Word to *remain faithful*
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 - 3.4 Listening to the Word to become *apostles*
 - *Creation of environments with a strong spiritual impact*
 - *Provide pastoral processes for spiritual maturing*
- 4. “We welcome the Word as Mary did and ponder it in our heart” (C 87)**

Rome, 13 June 2004

Solemnity of Corpus Christi

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, the Lord's memorial, the mystery of his life offered on the cross and the sign of his unconditional love for us. It reminds us that the Church, as the authentic community of believers, is born of the Eucharist. We all remain wrapped in wonder at the unheard of plan of Jesus who became incarnate so as to become “food” for us and so communicate to us his own divine life.

Even though the readings of the liturgical cycle C for this feast offer us Luke's text on the multiplication of the loaves, we cannot fail to think about the eucharistic discourse of John which is the more penetrating. He shows us that the Word truly became flesh, and that we who hear what he said are invited today to eat at his table as was the case in the past.

It is my earnest hope that our eucharistic celebrations, in which Jesus feeds us at his table with the bread of his Word and his Body, may be a source of unity and fraternity in our communities, and a source of zeal for the salvation of the young. In this way we can give our life for them, so that they may have life in abundance.

This was the secret of the strength and the holiness of our newly beatified Fr August Czartoryski, Sister Eusebia Palomino, and Alexandrina da Costa; Alexandrina, in particular, lived the last thirteen years of her life without any food other than holy communion. The Eucharist was the source of the spiritual strength of our young saints Dominic Savio and Laura Vicuña; their fidelity to Christ was nourished by his Word and Body and led them to offer themselves for the benefit of others, even to the extent of giving their lives. And this is our path too, if we are to become genuine disciples of Jesus.

To be his disciples, to share his life and mission, is no easy option nowadays, it never has been. The four evangelists are unanimous in showing us that it was easy – even too easy (cf. Mk 1,16-20; Jn 2,1-11) – to call others to follow him, but he did not succeed in keeping them faithful to him for long (Mk 14,50, Jn 18,15.27).

The fourth gospel has left us a dramatic and unforgettable account of the difficulties that even the closest of Jesus' disciples found in staying with him. After the amazing multiplication of the loaves on the mountain before thousands of people (Jn 6,3-14), and after his unexpected appearance in the darkness to calm the stormy sea (Jn 6,16-21), Jesus presented himself in the synagogue at Capernaum to the crowds he had fed and to the astonished disciples, as bread of life come down from

heaven (Jn 6,35.41). He asked them to believe in his word and eat his body. For the first time, notes the writer, “many of his disciples drew back”, finding it a hard saying that scandalized them, “and no longer went about with him” (Jn 6,66; cf. 6,60).

In reply to Jesus’ question the Twelve, through Peter, expressed their determination to remain, not because they had understood all that Jesus had said, but because there was no one else with his authority to whom they could go; not because Jesus toned down his words in any way, but because they were recognized as the words of eternal life (Jn 6,68). And today as yesterday, his true disciples remain with Jesus, despite the hardness of what he says, because there is no one else who merits their faith and because his words alone give hope to their expectations and ensure eternal life.

Dear confreres, I wish so much that we could all listen to Jesus as did the Twelve, while we help him as they did to feed our young people with bread and the word of God. I would so much like us to listen to him, when as confused believers with our backs to the wall, he comes to us in our gloom and darkness. I yearn for the day when we could dedicate a bit more of our time to welcoming Jesus and hearing his word, “the only thing necessary” (Lk 10,42), because finally we have understood that no one else has the words that can give us hope and enable us to live now and forever. I invite you therefore to start afresh from Christ, the Word of God.

1. Contemplating Christ by listening to God’s Word

When I presented the Chapter documents to you – together with our commitments for the present six-year period – I wrote that “our future vitality depends on our ability to create communities that are significantly charismatic today”; and I added im-

mediately that “the essential basis for this is a renewed commitment to holiness”.¹ In fact, as John Paul II reminds us, “To tend towards holiness: this is in summary the programme of every consecrated life, particularly in the perspective of its renewal on the threshold of the Third Millennium”.²

And so I would like to take up again with you what I was saying some time ago about holiness, and I want to go a step further and this time dwell at greater length on the “central position of the Word of God in personal and community life”.³ The high level of ordinary Christian life, to which we are called, “is inconceivable unless we begin from listening again to God’s Word”.⁴ If then “God must be our primary concern” and if “it is he who entrusts young people to us”,⁵ we must have his Word “in our hands each day”,⁶ so that by learning from the sublime knowledge of Jesus Christ (Phil 3,8),⁷ “we may walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Lord” (C 34).

This letter is a continuation of the process I pointed out to you earlier.⁸ *Holiness*, which is our “essential task”⁹ and “the most precious gift we can offer to the young” (C 25), has as its primary mission that of *speaking of and giving God to the young*. Moreover ours is a *consecrated holiness*, i.e. a *living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting* as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren”,¹⁰ “the prolongation in history of a special presence of the Risen Lord”,¹¹ almost “a kind

¹ Presentation, *The Salesian Community Today*. Chapter Documents: AGC25, p. 20.

² *Vita consecrata*, 93.

³ AGC25, 31.

⁴ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 24.

⁵ AGC25, 191.

⁶ *Perfectae caritatis*, 6.

⁷ *Dei Verbum*, 24.

⁸ “Dear Salesians, be saints” (AGC 379); “You are my God, my happiness lies in you alone” (AGC 382); “Looking at Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco” (AGC 384)

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Discorso ai partecipanti al Capitolo Generale*, in “L’Osservatore Romano”, 13-04-2002, p. 5. Cf. GC25, 170.

¹⁰ *Vita consecrata*, 22.

¹¹ *Vita consecrata*, 19.

of Gospel spread out through the centuries".¹² In order to become what we are called to be, a living memorial of Christ, the sacrament of his presence in history, a manifestation of the gospel to the world, we must dedicate ourselves with a firm conviction and the use of all our resources to the contemplation of Christ.

In fact, "every vocation to consecrated life is born in contemplation, from moments of intense communion and from a deep relationship of friendship with Christ, from the beauty and light which was seen shining on his face. From there the desire to be always with the Lord – and to follow him – matures: 'how good it is for us to be here' (*Mt* 17,4). Every vocation must constantly mature in this intimacy with Christ".¹³

To meet with the Risen Christ at the present day is not an unrealizable dream – it is not a case of crying for the moon; it is a grace that is possible, a gift within hand's reach. We can all find him, "for *Jesus is present, alive and at work in his Church*. He is in the Church and the Church is in him (cf. *Jn* 15,1ff.; *Gal* 3,28; *Eph* 4,15-16; *Acts* 9:5). He is present in Sacred Scripture, which everywhere speaks of him (cf. *Lk* 24,27.44-47)".¹⁴

To meet us, "when the time had fully come" (*Gal* 4,4) God became man in Jesus of Nazareth; but first – in the beginning – "was the Word" (*Jn* 1,1). As the Word outside of time and as a man in history God came to meet us: in the Scriptures which are the "incarnation" of God's Word, and in Jesus who is the incarnation of the Son of God, we come into direct contact with God, without any further persons or intermediaries. The Bible and the biography of Jesus are only two aspects of the one incarnation: God's Word became flesh in Mary's womb and became the book of Scripture, "veiled in the first case by flesh and in the second by written words".¹⁵ Hence Scripture is "a unique book,

¹² CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 2.

¹³ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ecclesia in Europa*, 22.

¹⁵ ORIGEN, *Homilies on Leviticus* I, 1: SC 286,66.

Christ himself; because the whole of Scripture speaks to us of Christ and finds its fulfilment in him".¹⁶ Boldly did Ignatius of Antioch write: "I take refuge in the gospel as in the flesh of Christ".¹⁷ For this same reason St Jerome declares: "Anyone who is ignorant of the Scriptures does not know Christ".¹⁸

To get to know Christ we can do no better than approach the Word of God. Contemplation of Christ passes necessarily, even though not exclusively, through the knowledge of the Scriptures: an intimate and personal knowledge, which is acquired in the heart, because "only the heart sees the Word".¹⁹ When the heart that reads and the eyes that discern are those of a believer,²⁰ the written Word comes to life and gives rise to identification with Christ. And this precisely is *our first commitment*, as the Pope has reminded consecrated persons: "Every reality of consecrated life is born, and reborn every day, of the incessant contemplation of the countenance of Christ. The Church herself derives her impulse from the daily vision of the inexhaustible beauty of Christ her Spouse. If every Christian is a believer who *contemplates God's countenance in Jesus Christ*, you are so in a special manner. For this reason you must never grow weary of meditating on the *Sacred Scriptures*, and especially on the holy *Gospels*, so that they may impress on you the traits of the Word Incarnate".²¹

Prolonged listening to the Word is therefore a necessary condition for the contemplation of Christ, which leads us naturally to love, and this in turn to the free and necessary self-giving which is the beginning of exclusive acceptance. Martha learned from Jesus himself "the one thing that is needed": to give oneself to lis-

¹⁶ HUGH OF ST VICTOR, *De arca Noe morali* 2,8: PL 176, 642.

¹⁷ IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Ai Filadelfesi* 5,1.

¹⁸ JEROME, *Comm. in Is.* prol.: PL 24,17. Cf. DV 25.

¹⁹ AUGUSTINE, *Commentary on the Letter of St John* 1,1 in *Opere* XXIV/2, Città Nuova, Rome 1985, pp. 1638-1639.

²⁰ The figure is St. Jerome's, *Comm. in Is.* 15, 55: PL 24,536.

²¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Homily of the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord*. V Day of Consecrated Life (2 February 2001): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4 febbraio 2001.

tening to the Word. Here you have the best way in which to welcome God (cf. Lk 10,42). "If a man loves me", said Jesus to the apostles gathered in the intimacy of the Last Supper, "he will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him" (Jn 14,23). The familiarity stemming from a personal meeting with Christ is nourished by reading his Word and putting it into practice (cf. Lk 8,19-21), and leads us to identification with his person and mission. "Religious", as Vatican II had already told us, "*must follow Christ as the one thing necessary, listening to his word and full of zeal for the things that are his*".²²

Rightly has the GC25, in declaring that "for this reason our communities are called today more than ever in the past to make visible to young people, especially those poorest and most in need, the *primacy of God*, who has entered our life, won us over and placed us at the service of his Kingdom",²³ led us to place God as the unifying centre of our common life, and so "foster the central place of the Word of God in personal and community life".²⁴ This is the principal guideline running through the three fundamental aspects to which the GC25 drew our attention;²⁵ in this way it has urged the Congregation to accept the Church's invitation, so frequently repeated, to return to listening to the Word, so as to become familiar with Christ's demands and become God's family (cf. Mk 3,31-35).

And so, if "the spiritual life must be given pride of place" in our consecrated life; if "apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love of the poor, and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation depend on this priority and its growth",²⁶ there is no doubt that its primary source is the Word of God, "which nourishes a personal relationship with the living God and his will.

²² *Perfectae caritatis*, 5. (*Italics mine*).

²³ GC25, 22.

²⁴ GC25, 31.

²⁵ Cf. GC25, 5.

²⁶ *Vita Consecrata*, 93.

Meditation on God's word, and on the mysteries of Christ in particular, gives rise to fervour in contemplation and the ardour of apostolic activity".²⁷

2. Listening to God's Word as Salesians

We Salesians are firmly convinced that although "the gospel is one and the same for everyone, it is also true that it can be *read through salesian spectacles*, from which derives a salesian manner of living it".²⁸ Founders and foundresses were inspired by these texts in accepting their vocation and in discerning the charism and mission of their Institutes.²⁹ Don Bosco too "looked at Christ so as to try to copy in himself those features which corresponded most closely to his own providential mission and to the spirit which must animate it";³⁰ in art. 11 of the Constitutions are set out these traits of the Lord's figure of which when "reading the Gospel we become more aware".

We feel grateful to God, because we know that it is by a gift of the Holy Spirit that we have rediscovered these evangelical perceptions, i.e. the particular salesian manner of understanding the figure and mission of Christ³¹ as Don Bosco understood them. He "made a salesian reading for his own times; and after him, in his light and with a filial spirit, and following the same principles, we must make our own salesian reading of the Gospel for our life of the present day".³² This specifically salesian approach to the Word of God is part of that "charismatic sensitivity" of which, as I said

²⁷ *Vita Consecrata*, 94.

²⁸ *Project of life of Salesians of Don Bosco*. 168.

²⁹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 94.

³⁰ *Project of life of Salesians of Don Bosco* p. 168.

³¹ SGC, 89.

³² J. AUBRY, *Lo Spirito Salesiano*. Lineamenti (Rome 1974), p. 53.

on an earlier occasion, “we are aware and are proud”.³³ I would venture even further, and say in the words of the SGC: “our spiritual heritage lies first of all in this reading of the Gospel”.³⁴

A deeper knowledge of the Christ of the Gospel, in the way Don Bosco understood him, will ensure the salesian quality of our contemplation of Christ. This is precisely what I have been trying to inculcate recently by inviting you to live as Salesians “by looking at Christ through the eyes of Don Bosco”.³⁵ The personal experience of Christ as lived by Don Bosco is the salesian interpretation of God’s Word; this means that for us the life and work of Don Bosco are a “Word from the incarnate God”,³⁶ a living and charismatically compelling reading of the Word of God.

2.1 Don Bosco, “priest of the Word”

In Don Bosco’s time the Bible did not have a strong presence in the ecclesial and cultural context; the Scriptures were not considered the first among books about the faith. Though the Bible was not entirely absent from Christian life – it was attainable indirectly through the mediation of the Church – such mediation was almost exclusively liturgical or catechetical, and in its interpretation priority was given to its edifying application and the accommodated sense.³⁷

– *Biblical formation and personal ministry*

The religious teaching given by Mamma Margaret to young John, or better the religious atmosphere in which she brought him up,

³³ AGC 384 (2003) p. 10.

³⁴ SGC, 89.

³⁵ Letter of Rector Major, AGC (2003) 384, pp. 3-41.

³⁶ C. BISSOLI, “La Linea Biblica nelle Costituzioni Salesiane”, in AA. VV., *Contributi di Studio su Costituzioni e Regolamenti SDB*. Vol 2 (Rome 1982), pag 292.

³⁷ Cf. C. BISSOLI, “La Bibbia nella Chiesa e tra i cristiani”, in R. FABRIS (a cura di), *La Bibbia nell’epoca moderna e contemporanea*, ed. Dehoniane (Bologna 1992) 182-183.

even though it may have been without specific references to the Bible, was permeated by biblical notions and sensitivities, which expressed "the living sense of the presence of God, candid admiration of his works of creation, gratitude for his benefits, conformity to his will, and fear of offending him".³⁸ Don Bosco's God, like the God of the Bible, is a personal God who lies hidden behind the realities of which he is the origin and end; a God who is reached through events, referred to through recounting facts, and to whom recourse is had in daily life.³⁹

Of Don Bosco's biblical formation in his seminary years little is known and that not very helpful; the study of Sacred Scripture seems to have been of rather marginal importance. In the *Memoirs of the Oratory* Don Bosco lists a series of biblical readings with which he was engaged and speaks of his love for Greek and Hebrew;⁴⁰ of the results of this study the *Biographical Memoirs* bear witness here and there, perhaps with some exaggeration.⁴¹ In his writings numerous scriptural quotations can be found, usually for edifying purposes: "When Scripture is incorporated into a narrative as a reliable statement, it is generally used in a moral sense, often even in extended sense (...) or even daringly accommodated (...)".⁴²

Much sought after as a preacher because of his "great facility in expounding the word of God", Don Bosco tells us that in preaching "he used to begin with a scriptural text"; the effectiveness of what he had to say was due, in addition to doctrine and spiritual emphasis, to his custom of "basing himself on Sacred Scripture or on the Fathers of the Church".⁴³ It is important to recall that

³⁸ E. CERIA, *Don Bosco con Dio*. Ed. S.D.B. (Rome 1988), p. 37.

³⁹ Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Spiritualità Cattolica*. Vol. II: *Mentalità Religiosa e Spiritualità*. Ed. LAS (Rome 1981) pp. 13-27.

⁴⁰ G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, dal 1841 al 1855*, A. Da Silva Ferreira (a cura di). Ed. LAS (Rome 1991) pp. 106-108.

⁴¹ Cf. MB I, p. 395.423; II, pp. 510-511; XVII, p. 122.

⁴² Cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Spiritualità Cattolica*. Vol. I: *Vita e Opere*. Ed. LAS (Rome 1979) p. 239.

⁴³ G. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, ed. cit. p. 97.112. Cf. MB III, p. 62; IX, p. 342.

the grace he fervently asked for in his first Mass was that of efficacy in speech: "I think I can say", he wrote towards the end of his life, "that the Lord heard my humble prayer".⁴⁴

Though not excluding the fact that the Bible is the "word of God" par excellence, Don Bosco followed the custom of his contemporaries in using the expression to indicate the whole of the Church's teaching.⁴⁵ A Christian, he wrote, is one who has "the Divine Word as his guide".⁴⁶ "God's word is called light because it enlightens man and directs him in believing, working and loving. It is light because it gets into all the details and shows man what path he should follow to gain eternal life and happiness. It is light because it calms human passions, which are the real darkness, a darkness so dense and dangerous that it can be dispersed only by God's word. It is light because when it is preached as it should be it pours the light of divine grace into the hearts of listeners and leads them to a knowledge of the truths of faith".⁴⁷

– *Effective pedagogical application*

The relative importance given to the study of Sacred Scripture during his years in the seminary makes still more striking – and very indicative – the way in which Don Bosco was able to make good use of biblical data in his educational activity. In his pedagogy there is constant reference to the "word of God"; he built the holiness of his boys on a solid evangelization, based on and clarified by the "word of God".

⁴⁴ MB I p. 519. Cf. CERIA, *Don Bosco con Dio*, p. 173.

⁴⁵ A single quotation will suffice as a demonstration: "Just as a body without food becomes sick and dies, so the same thing happens in our souls if we do not feed it. The food and nourishment of our soul are the word of God, i.e. sermons, explanations of the Gospel and catechism" (Don Bosco, *Companion of Youth* (Turin 1885), in OE XXXV, pp. 145-146.

⁴⁶ J. BOSCO, *Il mese di maggio consacrato a Maria Ss. Immacolata*, Tip. Paravia (Turin 1858), in OE X, p. 356.

⁴⁷ J. BOSCO, *Il Cattolico nel secolo*. Libreria Salesiana (Turin 1883), in OE XXXIV, 369-370.

In his life of Dominic Savio, when Don Bosco is describing his spiritual growth, he notes at one point: "Rooted in his heart was the notion that God's word is man's guide on the way to heaven". Speaking of Dominic's concern to find an explanation for a part of the Scriptures that he had not understood, he added: "This was the starting point of that exemplary tenor of life, of the continual progress in virtue, of the exactness in the fulfilment of his duties, that could not be further improved".⁴⁸ And in fact, in the Rules of the Immaculate Conception Sodality drawn up by Savio, n.12 reads: "We shall take the greatest care of the holy word of God, and frequently recall the truths we have heard".⁴⁹

The work in which Don Bosco best exhibits his biblical sensitivity in an educative context is without any doubt his *Sacred History*. In the Preface to this he explains why he has taken a different approach to the subject and points to the others then in circulation: too long or not long enough, lacking chronological references or pedagogical sensitivity. And he sets out the positive qualities of his own text: the accurate presentation of all the most important information contained in the holy books; care not to arouse in the young ideas that are less opportune; availability of the text to any young person, so that he could say: "take it and read it". Don Bosco added that he had achieved this result following a long and practical experience of contact with the young, during which he studied carefully the reactions his presentation could cause in them.⁵⁰

Another text that reveals the importance Don Bosco attributed to the Bible is the *Companion of Youth*, of which it has been said

⁴⁸ G. BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*. Tip. Paravia (Torino 1859), in OE XI, pp. 188-189.

⁴⁹ *ibid* p. 229.

⁵⁰ He concluded as follows: "In every page the same principle applied: to enlighten the mind for the good of the heart and to popularize as much as possible knowledge of the Holy Bible, the foundation of our holy Religion, while giving dogmas and their proofs so as to facilitate moral and religious teaching, for which no other method is more useful and important than this" (J. BOSCO, *Storia Sacra*, in OE III, pp. 7-9).

that "in the field of ascetics it has a value equal to that of the preventive system in pedagogy", that it is a "proclamation of the programme of spirituality that Don Bosco gave to the young, and to which he remained faithful to the end of his life".⁵¹ Don Bosco himself presented it as a "book of devotion adapted to the present day"; "I have tried", he wrote, "to compile a book suitable for young people, based on the Bible and adapted to their religious ideas, which would express the fundamentals of the Catholic religion with the greatest clarity and brevity".⁵² In fact, an analysis of the recommendations given by Don Bosco to the young reveals that they are based on more than 40 biblical quotations, even though not all of them are explicit.

A particular fundamental "biblical slant" has been detected by one historian who is somewhat critical of Don Bosco's style of writing.⁵³ As a good educator and able communicator Don Bosco knew how to make imaginative use of the means of communication he had available: games, music, theatre, outings, liturgy, feast-days etc. One of these was the quotations from the Bible that he wanted posted up under the porticos of Valdocco. "It was his wish", said the biographer, "that even the walls of the house should speak of the need for saving souls".⁵⁴

But it would seem that the ultimate decisive factor for his recourse to the Bible in his work of education was the theological reason: the Bible is the holy book par excellence. Other weighty reasons were the education he had received in his own family, permeated with genuine devotion and hence substantially biblical; his mysterious encounters with the supernatural manifested,

⁵¹ P. STELLA, *Valori spirituali nel "Giovane Provveduto" di San Giovanni Bosco*. Extract from a doctoral dissertation (Rome 1960), p. 48. 80-81.

⁵² J. BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, ed. cit. p. 169.

⁵³ «How can one not be struck by the extraordinary similarity between some events recounted in the *Memorie* and well-known passages in the Old and New Testaments?» (M. GUASCO, *Don Bosco nella storia religiosa del suo tempo*, in *Don Bosco e le sfide della modernità* (Torino 1988) 22).

⁵⁴ MB VI p. 948.

for instance, in his dreams which were markedly biblical; his temperament and inclination for positive studies, whether historical or exegetical; and perhaps to a lesser extent the cultural climate and formative experience of the seminary. Recourse to the Bible had for him a moral and educative purpose: it guided man's response to the action of God.

As a priest and educator, Don Bosco placed the Word of God at the centre of his apostolic work, to such an extent that he became known as the "priest of the word". "A worker of the word", wrote Fr Ceria, "is one who by both taste and inclination makes the word his work; but a priest of the word, we would say, is one who makes the word a ministry, the *ministerium verbi*..., a sacred use of the word made in the name of God for the spiritual service of one's neighbour, because of a duty flowing from vocation".⁵⁵

2.2 Young people, the context and reason for our listening to God

Service of the Word as a vocational obligation! There you have an apt and well-chosen description of the objective and motive of *salesian evangelization*, which clearly requires a *salesian reading* of the gospel. We Salesians, "evangelizers of the young" as the GC21 calls us, "accompany our work by accepting as a necessary preliminary the *evangelization of ourselves*. Set in the midst of the world we are often tempted by idols and we know that we have a constant need to listen to the word of God and to be converted to it".⁵⁶

How are we to read the gospel and why are we to do it *as Salesians*? To read the gospel today as Don Bosco would do it and update its options, we must begin from within the salesian tradition that takes its origin from him; it was there that his evangelical intuitions were developed and maintained, analyzed more deeply

⁵⁵ E. CERIA, *Don Bosco con Dio*, p. 184.

⁵⁶ GC21, 15.

and realized.. “Our Congregation’s dynamic and living fidelity to Don Bosco’s mission in history”,⁵⁷ is the first and best guarantee to ensure that we are listening to the word of God in a *salesian* manner.

The salesian reading of Scripture depends not only on an accurate scientific exegesis, even involving the most up-to-date research, but more especially on renewed fidelity to our mission: to young people (C 3). It is their needs that prompt and shape our pastoral activity (C 7); and we “with Don Bosco reaffirm our preference for the young who are ‘poor, abandoned and in danger’, those who have greater need of love and evangelization” (C 26). The Salesian who wants to hear God’s voice through reading the Bible begins by listening to the voice of the young, their needs and aspirations, their silences and their hopes, their shortcomings and dreams; in effect, the young are the “other source of our inspiration in spreading the gospel”.⁵⁸

“Sent to young people by God” (C 15), the Salesian is present among them “with a fundamental disposition: an empathy with the young and a willingness to be with them” (C 39). The mission will prompt him “to go to them where they are to be found and meet them in their own lifestyle” (C 41); he will meet them “at their present stage of freedom” (C 38). This unfailing presence opens him to a “true understanding of the world of the young” (C 39); and so in this way the Salesian, immersed in the world and in the cares of the pastoral life, “learns to meet God through those to whom he is sent” (C 95) and “to recognize the action of grace in the lives of the young” (C 86), as Don Bosco did.

And so we can never detach our hearts from the young, nor abandon our work for those entrusted to us. They are “our destined mission field”.⁵⁹ They form part of our salesian ‘credo’: “We believe that God is awaiting us in the young to offer us the grace of

⁵⁷ GC21, 377.

⁵⁸ GC21, 12.

⁵⁹ E. VIGANÒ, *Consagración apostólica y novedad cultural*. Ed. CCS (Madrid 1987) p. 159.

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".⁶⁰ If we want to live contemplating God, if we are willing to hear his voice and listen to his Word, we must be with the young and stay among them. Then God will speak clearly to us. In fact, "we stay among the young because that is where God has sent us, and we examine the condition of youth with all its problems because that is precisely the channel through which *we are challenged by Christ himself*".⁶¹

Hence to be with God and hear his Word, there is no need for us to separate ourselves from young people affectively and/or effectively, and to abandon the salesian mission. When this is carried out by us as representatives of Christ and at his command, it is the best way for going to him and remaining with him. Not even in moments of deepest contemplation must the salesian community fail to keep in mind the vision of young people with souls to be saved!⁶² When Jesus welcomed back his apostles, full of enthusiasm after their first apostolic mission, before calling them to step aside and rest he let them recount "all that they had done and taught" (Mk 6,30). To be with the young, to feel their needs and share their requests, can never be an obstacle to nor an excuse for not seeking God and willingly accepting his Word. From whom can we learn compassion for young people who are poor, abandoned or in danger, if we do not contemplate how much Christ suffered for them and if we fail to hear the "many things" he has to tell us (cf. Mk 6,34)?

And so, the imitation of Don Bosco, minister of the Word, and the conviction that we are "missionaries of the young",⁶³ are the necessary preconditions for listening to God *as Salesians*, and

⁶⁰ GC23, 95.

⁶¹ E. VIGANÒ, "Confirma fratres tuos": ASC 295 (1980) p. 26. Italics mine.

⁶² *Project of life of Salesians of Don Bosco*. 671

⁶³ JOHN PAUL II: cf. GC22, 13.

for contemplating Christ. The SGC said the same thing already in other words: “to understand more deeply the Christ of the Gospels, and the way Don Bosco understood and imitated him; this enables us to *revive* the gospel intuitions of the salesian spirit and to *gear them* to the new possibilities and the immense needs of the world of today”.⁶⁴

3. “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God” (Acts 6,2)

I have always thought indicative and far-sighted the account in the Acts of the Apostles of the difficulties that arose within the first Christian communities and the immediate and classic apostolic reaction: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6,2-4).

The Church of Jerusalem, because of its recognized success in the work of evangelization (Acts 2,14-41; 3,12-26; 5,12-16), had very soon to face hostility on the part of the authorities (Acts 4,1-22; 5,7-33), and suffer severe internal problems that tested its fraternal life (Acts 2,41-47; 4,32-35) and even its very survival. The crisis within the community was in fact more dangerous than the persecutions: the clash that put at risk the ability of the two ethnic groups of believers – Hellenists and Jews – was in the first place of social origin (Acts 6,1). In the face of the threat of division in the community, the apostles decided to create something new, the *diaconate* – the first *ecclesial* institution – a service for the common meals that healed fraternity and strengthened unity.

⁶⁴ SGC, 89.

From then onwards, freed from the daily distributing of benefits, they decided to give themselves exclusively to apostolic concerns. In this way a community crisis led not only to a new ecclesial ministry on behalf of charity, but especially to a real “conversion” in the apostles, who were able to return to their more specific duties: the practice of prayer and the ministry of the word.

As well as providing an example for us, that apostolic reaction remains normative at the present day. We recall the account of the episode precisely because it is the word of God. One who in the Christian community gives himself to preaching preserves unity of faith by restoring charity, but then he must return to those activities which are his characteristics: praying and serving the Word. The apostles saw the threat to their efforts at evangelization and were compelled to return to the essentials; some offices could be delegated to others, but never prayer and preaching. Not even care for the common life can allow an apostle to neglect prayer and the word of God; any other concern, even though it be urgent, must be passed on to others. For the Twelve it became clear that their task was to guard and ensure the common life of the believers but without neglecting prayer and the Word, otherwise they would have betrayed the apostolic ministry entrusted to them.

Some of you may point to a fact – not always noticed and even then not well understood – that would seem to contradict what I am saying: in our Constitutions, in fact, Chapter VII, “dealing with salesian prayer, understood in its deepest meaning of dialogue with the Lord”, is placed at the end of the second part, “as a concluding synthesis of the entire description of the salesian plan”.⁶⁵

Now, “it would be quite wrong to interpret this as any lessening of the importance given to prayer because it is treated ‘after’ the themes of the mission (chap.IV), the community (chap.V) and the evangelical counsels (chap.VI). Quite the contrary! By plac-

⁶⁵ *Project of life of Salesians of Don Bosco* p. 274.

ing prayer here at the conclusion, the GC22 wanted to make it clear that the salesian consecrated and apostolic life ... has a character so supernatural, so far above the capabilities of our good will, that it would not be practicable nor even possible without the Holy Spirit, without the grace of God... . It is suggested too that all the concrete commitment of the Salesian's life and activity are destined to 'blossom' into prayer and themselves 'become' a deep communion with God".⁶⁶

"Prayer is the soul of the apostolate, but the apostolate also gives life to prayer and stimulates it".⁶⁷ And so there is no conflict between mission and contemplation, between apostolic life and prayer life; on the contrary the former flows from the latter and is nourished by it; in fact, our project of life and our apostolic mission are born of God (cf. C 1), and in him are always reborn. Thus the life of prayer, which for us is a *gift* of God and a *response* to him (cf. C 85), maintains an intimate link with every element of our vocation and remains its permanent stimulus: one who neglects listening to God, one who has no time for him, will sooner or later leave the young aside from his pastoral activity, neglect the common life and community fraternity, and abandon the following of Christ by the evangelical counsels. Dear confreres, let us return to God "with the Sacred Scriptures daily in hand" (C 87), and the salesian mission will once again be our joy and the reason for our consecrated life.

3.1 Listening to the Word to *gain experience* of God

For believers, listening to God is not just a pleasant pastime or something to be done just occasionally, but an unavoidable necessity. The trait that best defines the true God is his will to manifest himself, his commitment to meeting man through his word,

⁶⁶ *Project of life of Salesians of Don Bosco* p. 662-663.

⁶⁷ *Vita Consecrata*, 67.

first and many times subsequently through the prophets, and then definitively in the Son (Heb 1,2). "Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (cf. Col. 1,15, 1Tim. 1,17) out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends (cf. Ex. 33,11; Jn 15,14-15) and lives among them (cf. Bar. 3,38), so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself".⁶⁸

The Word not only discloses God's existence, but is in the first place his very essence: God is the Word (Jn 1,1-4); he differs from the false gods "who have mouths but do not speak ... no sound comes from their throats" (Ps 115,5.7), the one God has a voice that is powerful and full of splendour, thundering and shattering (cf. Ps 29,3-9); he is different from the dumb idols (1Cor 12,2) who silence people and lead them astray; he gives speech to those who listen to him, and they become prophets! (Amos 3,8; cf. Jer 1,6.9; Is 6,5-7; Ezek 3,1). And while we await the day when we shall see God "face to face" (1Cor 13,12), we are spurred on by the certainty that we do not search in vain, as though he had spoken in secret (Is 45.19); rather do we reach God in his Word and meet him in his Son: "no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known" (Jn 1,18).

To draw near to and meet with the Word, some particular spiritual attitudes are needed: "presenting the Word in its bare objectivity is not enough to make present the very power of God";⁶⁹ the "obedience of faith is due to the God who reveals".⁷⁰ In order to meet God we need to submit ourselves to the discipline of listening, which involves two attitudes of faith little appreciated at the present day but which unfailingly ensure contact with the Word who is God: silent adoration as a precondition, and not trying to imagine what God looks like.

⁶⁸ VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum* 2.

⁶⁹ CARLO M. MARTINI, *In Principio, la Parola*. Letter to the clergy and the faithful on the topic: «The Word of God in the liturgy and in life» for the pastoral year 1981-82 (Milan 1981) p. 29.

– *Silent adoration*

“Keep silence and hear, O Israel” (Deut 27,9). The peremptory tone of the biblical command removes all doubt: one who wants to listen to God must love silence. St John of the Cross explains this rule of the spiritual life as follows: “The Father speaks one Word which is his Son, and repeats it for ever in an eternal silence; and so in silence it must be heard by the soul”.⁷¹ God’s supremacy is recognized and accepted by the believer before all else “in silent adoration and prolonged prayer”.⁷²

The comment on art. 87 in our Project of Life is quite explicit: “The first attitude of the praying community is not that of speaking; as in the case of every believer, it must be silent and listen”.⁷³ To remain in silence before God is not a waste of time, without either activity or meaning, but an expression of the wonder he provokes in us and a sign of the adoration and respect he deserves. Without external silence, the absence of voices, sounds and noises, and especially without that interior silence which quiets our desires and the will to live for ourselves alone, the Word of God can find in us neither space nor cordial welcome: the Master, as St Augustine used to say, speaks within the heart and teaches within the intimacy of our being, silencing all voices from outside.⁷⁴

If on God’s part in the beginning was the Word and in this Word we have been given grace and truth (Jn 1,1.14), on our part the starting point must be a reverent and welcoming silence. But it is an active silence, awaiting the desired Word and detached from all other voices; it is a complete silence that knows it is in the presence of the adorable God and remains as a servant with the

⁷⁰ *Dei Verbum*, 5. Cf. Rm 16,26; 2 Cor 10.5-6.

⁷¹ ST JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Sentenze*. Spunti d’amore, 21, in *Opere* (Rome 1967²) 1095.

⁷² Cf. CARLO M. MARTINI, *Il sogno di Giacobbe*. Partenza per un itinerario spirituale (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1989) p. 80.

⁷³ *Project of life of Salesians of Don Bosco*, p. 678.

⁷⁴ Cf. ST AUGUSTINE, *Meditation on the letter on love of St John* (Rome 1980³) p. 107-110.

eyes on his master (cf. Ps 123,2). "What God can say to man, with what intensity and communicative force, is not for man to anticipate, deduce or decide. The only anticipation or decision that is in man's power is that of a silence full of expectation, respect and obedience".⁷⁵ To live as believers at the present day we must be able to live with silence; filling one's life with noise and chattering is the road to incredulity: "each one is invited to rediscover in silence and adoration the fact that he is called to be a person before another Person who converses with him by his Word".⁷⁶

– Do not try to imagine what God looks like

"To whom will you liken God? Or what likeness compare with him?", asks Isaiah (40,18). Since God is Word (Jn 1,1), listening is the only way to find him, conversation is the way to treat with him. The true God does not allow himself to be seen, not even by his closest friends (cf. Ezra 33,18-20), those who like Moses were able to speak with him "face to face" (Ezra 33,11; Deut 34,10). Indeed the true God specifically forbids the making of images of him (Ezra 20,4; 2 Kings 11,18).

The believer is forbidden to make for himself images of God, either by his own hands or conceived in his imagination (Deut 4,16-18; 1 Kings 14,9; Hos 13,2), or sought after in his heart (cf. Ex 32,1); nothing made by human hand (Ps 115,4) can reflect the glory of the living God. To make an image of God is to convert him into a lifeless idol. To make a representation of God to fit one's own needs is neither liberating nor helpful (Ex 32,1-8), and indeed only increases tension. Israel wanted a god who would "go before it" (Ex 30,2), and was then obliged to carry one that had feet but could not walk (cf. Amos 5,26). There you have the tragic consequence of not accepting God who is Word: you end up by creating for yourself images of God and becoming, like the

⁷⁵ CARLO M. MARTINI, *La Dimensione contemplativa della vita*. Letter to the clergy and the faithful of the Archdiocese of Milan for the pastoral year 1980-81. Milan 1980, p. 20.

⁷⁶ CARLO M. MARTINI, *La Dimensione contemplativa della vita*, p. 27.

works you have created by your own efforts, dumb, blind and lifeless (Ps 115,8).

Anyone who wants to hear God must listen to him, i.e. must "perceive the Word" (cf. Deut 4,9), "looking on the Scriptures as God's countenance", "learning to recognize in them the heart of God".⁷⁷ The meeting with God in the Bible is an event of the senses, but not a visible one; those who succeed in finding God and developing an intimate relationship with him are not those who see but those who listen to the Word and preserve it. Saint Augustine declares that only the eyes of the heart can see the heart of the Word.⁷⁸ To guide us by his Word and feed us by his promises, God does not allow us to make figures of himself.

3.2 Listening to the Word to *become community*

"God brings our community together and keeps it united by his call, his Word, his love" (C 85). This statement of the Constitutions is a faithful reflection of a fundamental conviction of biblical faith, more explicitly repeated in art. 87: "The people of God are gathered before all else by the Word of the living God".

In fact when God speaks he gathers together those who listen to him; his people are born and convoked by the Word, and in listening to it they remain united. Before entering the promised land, Moses warned all Israel: "This day you have become the people of the Lord your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God" (Deut 27,9-10). And Jesus declared that the members of his family were not those who remained outside and called for him, but those who were around him, listening to him and doing what he said (Mk 3,31-35). Listening to God is the origin and reason for living together. We become believers by accepting the Word of God and we remain believers by living the faith in common.

⁷⁷ Cf. GREGORY THE GREAT, *Moralia* I 16,43; *Epist.* 31: PL 77, 706.

⁷⁸ *De Doctrina christiana* 4, 5: PL 34, 92.

– *Together because we are saved*

For God's people life in common is the way of living his salvation; living as a group means safety from evil and freedom from ourselves. Israel learned this through a bitter learning experience in the desert (Ex 17,1-17.25): in what was a 'no man's land' only God was able to keep them united and free (Deut 7,4; 8,14; 11,2-28); only the nourishment of his Word enabled them to survive (Deut 8:3); and when the prophets dreamed of a new salvation, they would proclaim a new and definitive gathering together of those dispersed (Is 43,5; Ger 23,3; 29,14; 32,27; Ezek 11,17; 34,14; 36,24), which would be accomplished when one man would die for the whole nation, "to gather into one the children of God scattered abroad" (Jn 11,52).

If from listening to the Word the people of God is born, no one can deceive himself that he has experience of God without feeling at the same time that he is a member of a community listening to him. Since listening to God's Word gives rise to the community, the best way of responding to God is to accept shared responsibility for the common life. This criterion prompts us to strengthen the feeling of membership of the community, which is "gathered together before all else by the Word of the living God" (C 87), and to meet him in the company of confreres so as to listen to him together. This can be achieved only in a community born of and maintained by God's Word. In fact, it is only in assembly that we believers confess that the reading of Scripture is the Word of the living God.

If we avoid dialogue with confreres, if we withdraw from the common life, if we avoid the daily routine and common prayer, not only do we seem to be distancing ourselves from our confreres but God himself becomes more remote and finally of little significance. Very different is the experience of one who feels God close to him, because he feels himself to be a brother and is happy in the commitment to live together and listen to God. Genesis recounts how Adam's attempt to hide from God, refusing to meet

him and respond to him (Gen 3,8-9) caused him to experience the bitter fruit of the death of his dear ones and the break-up of the unity of his family. God and his Word make life together possible, because they lead us to discover our brethren. It is true that fraternal life depends on the good will and collaboration of all the members of the community, but especially on the fact that they listen together to what God is saying: “fraternity is not only a fruit of human effort but also and above all a gift of God. It is a gift that comes from obedience to the Word of God.”⁷⁹

– *Responsible for one’s brethren*

The community, the context in which we listen to God, is therefore also the place of fraternity to which we are invited and in which we are entrusted with brothers to love (cf. C 50). It is not surprising therefore that when God comes to meet us he asks us about our brothers, This was the experience of Cain (Gen 4,9) who, by rejecting the mission to take care of his brother Abel, rejected also the companionship of God (Gen 4,10), even though this did not free him from God and his demands.

By giving us “brothers to love”, God has entrusted us with the duty of taking care of them. Our obedience to God finds its acid test in our responsibility towards the confreres entrusted to us. On the one hand it is a fine thing that God takes care of us, placing us on the road of love as the way of growth, the most excellent way according to Saint Paul (1Cor 12,31). On the other hand, what happened to Cain is a warning: anyone who neglects his brother becomes a stranger in his own land and a fugitive from home (Gen 4,14).

If we give to our neighbour the attention he deserves, and especially to those who are or feel themselves to be at a distance, in addition to being good shepherds we shall find the time and words for conversing with God. In the Sermon on the Mount

⁷⁹ CIVCSVA, *Fraternal Life in Community*, 48

Jesus reminds us that a necessary condition for meeting God is a fraternity that is not broken or, if it should have been broken, has been subsequently made whole again (cf. Mt 5,20-24).

As John says in his first letter, “he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (4,20). The acceptance of our neighbour as someone who belongs to us, one to whom we must give our care and attention, disposes us to await God and receive the care he gives us. If we want to make of our common life the context in which we listen to God, it must first and always be an environment in which the brother is welcomed with open heart, accepted as he is, provided with what he needs, and sustained in moments of difficulty (cf. C 52).

3.3 Listening to the Word to *remain faithful*

“Faith comes from what is heard”, wrote St Paul to the Romans (Rom 10,17). A prayerful approach to God’s Word is “at the foundation of the Church’s spirituality and of all Christian spirituality, and is not exclusive to one or any other. A Christian spirituality not based on Scripture will find it difficult to survive in the complex modern world, so difficult, fragmented and disorientated”.⁸⁰ Even we Salesians will find it difficult to continue as believers unless we make listening to God’s Word the first concern of our life, and the source of our mission. The SGC already recognized this with bold sincerity when it noted that the Salesian, in the multiplicity of his concerns, can meet obstacles to such listening. “Although tempted to hurry and to be superficial he will find the secret of his renewal above all in a serious study of the word of God”.⁸¹

For the reawakening and nourishment of faith “It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-

⁸⁰ CARLO M. MARTINI, *Perché Gesù parlava in parabole* (Bologna 1985), p. 114.

⁸¹ SGC, 287.

giving encounter”, “one that draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives.⁸² “It is there, in fact, where the Master reveals himself and educates the mind and the heart. It is there that the vision of faith matures, learning to look at reality and events through the eyes of God, to the point of having “the mind of Christ” (1Cor 2,16).⁸³ What is faith if not the contemplation of oneself and an examination of reality as God sees it? And to see reality as God sees it one must accept his Word so as to know his mind. Once the Word is accepted, “living and active” as it is (Heb 4,12), it becomes our life and God’s promises are fulfilled in us, and through us in the world.

I offer you some brief comments on “the benefits of listening to the Word in faith”,⁸⁴ as presented in our Rule of Life (cf. C 87).

– “Source of spiritual life” (C 87)

“The Word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will”.⁸⁵ From listening to the Word flows life in the Spirit; under his action “they resolutely keep times for prayer, silence and solitude, and they never cease to ask the Almighty for the gift of wisdom in the struggles of everyday life (cf. Wis 9:10)”,⁸⁶ and in this way “consecrated persons discover their own identity and find profound peace; they grow more attentive to the daily challenges of the word of God”.⁸⁷

An exceptionally good instrument for growth in listening to the Word is the *lectio divina*; this is a believer’s method of reading

⁸² *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 39.

⁸³ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 24.

⁸⁴ *Project of life of Salesians of Don Bosco* p. 678.

⁸⁵ *Vita Consecrata*, 94.

⁸⁶ *Vita Consecrata*, 71.

⁸⁷ *Ivi*.

Scripture, used from the beginning of religious life in which it is “held in the highest regard. By its means the word of God is brought to bear on life, on which it projects the light of that wisdom which is a gift of the Spirit.”⁸⁸ Rightly does the GC25, in its first practical guideline about evangelical witness, exhort the salesian community “to place God as the unifying centre of its being and to develop the community dimension of the spiritual life by fostering the *centrality of the word of God in personal and community life through the lectio divina*”.⁸⁹

I hope that none of you will think that this guideline of the GC25 has introduced an element extraneous to our spirituality; “the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*”⁹⁰ has been at home in the religious life from its very beginnings, and at the present time is seen to be very necessary: “nowadays a Christian cannot be an adult in faith and able to respond to the needs of the contemporary world, if he has not learned the practice in some way of the *lectio divina*”.⁹¹

This is not the time to give a full presentation of this method of praying the Word of God, already so well known⁹² and used successfully even among ourselves. I would rather remind you of its fundamental purpose and refer briefly to the method as a pressing invitation to each of you to know it well so that you can teach it to others.

I would say that the objective of *lectio divina* is that of listening to God praying his Word, in order to see ourselves as he sees us, and want ourselves to be as he wants us to be. This is achieved through a sapiential approach to the written Word, which draws on the experience of those who have consecrated their life to

⁸⁸ *Vita Consecrata*, 94.

⁸⁹ GC25, 31. Emphasis mine.

⁹⁰ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 39

⁹¹ CARLO M. MARTINI, *Diocesan Pastoral Programmes 1980-1990* (Milan 1991), 440-441.

⁹² The classical presentation – and in my opinion, the best – is that of GUIGO II IL CARTOSIANO, *Scala Claustralium*: PL 184, 475-484. I strongly recommend that you read it.

listening to God so as to understand reality and themselves as words of God. In the *lectio* God's Word becomes the key to the understanding of ourselves; we try to let God tell us who we are for him and what he wants from us.

For us to be at home with it, the *lectio divina*, like any method of praying, needs practice, but it requires especially the will to listen and the willingness to obey. In its most traditional form it involves four stages or "spiritual degrees": reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*) and contemplation (*contemplatio*). In recent times, in an effort to up-date it, another stage has been added: action (*actio*). Often other elements are indicated as well (*discretion, deliberation, collation, consolation, etc.*), but in reality these seem to be nothing more than aspects of the fundamental stages.

- *Reading.* *Lectio divina* begins with an attentive reading, or better a re-reading several times, of the text in which we want to hear what God is saying. The chosen text may be easy to understand or well known – that does not matter; it needs to be read over until it becomes familiar, almost learned by heart, "emphasizing the main elements".⁹³ One must not pass beyond this first stage without being able to reply to the question: *what is the real meaning of this passage I have read?*

- *Meditation.* Once he has discovered the meaning of the biblical text, the attentive reader tries to become involved personally, by applying the meaning to his own life: *what is this text saying to me?* "To meditate on what we read helps us to make it our own by confronting it with ourselves. Here, another book is opened: the book of life. We pass from thoughts to reality. To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are able to discern them".⁹⁴

⁹³ CARLO M. MARTINI, *La gioia del vangelo*. Meditation for the young (Casale Monferrato 1988), p. 12.

⁹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2706.

The Word has been heard and calls for consent; it has not been accepted unless it reaches the heart and brings about conversion. Understanding the text leads to understanding oneself in its light; in this way the text that has been read and understood becomes a norm of life: *what must I do to put it into practice, what must I do to give its meaning to my own life?*

- *Prayer*. To know, guess at, or even merely imagine what God wants leads naturally to prayer; in this way a burning desire arises for what daily life should become. The one who prays does not ask so much for what he lacks but rather for what God has enabled him to see and understand. He begins to yearn for what God is asking of him; and in this way makes God's will for him the object of his prayer.

- *Contemplation*. The desire to do God's will leads gradually and unconsciously to adoration, silence, praise and to "the poor and humble surrender to the loving will of the Father in ever deeper union with his beloved Son".⁹⁵ From the contemplation of ourselves and our own world in the light of God we pass to the contemplation of ourselves as God sees us, to know that we are in the presence of him who is the object of our desire, the sole focus of our prayer. As distinct from the preceding stages, which are activities that require a force of will, "contemplative prayer is a gift, a grace",⁹⁶ neither normal nor in any way our due; we can long for it, ask for it, and welcome it if it comes, but it is never automatic.

I can reveal to you that following the decision of the GC25, I feel personally obliged to "keep on reviving and expressing the primacy of God in the communities", by fostering the centrality of God's Word in personal and community life, first of all "through the *lectio divina*".⁹⁷ This is a matter of great importance to me – I will tell you why in the words of Cardinal Martini – "because

⁹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2712.

⁹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2713.

⁹⁷ GC25, 30.31.

I shall never tire of repeating that the *lectio* is one of the main means by which God wishes to save our western world from the moral ruin that threatens it because of its indifference and fear of believing. The *lectio divina* is the antidote offered by God in these recent times to foster the growth of that interior consciousness, without which Christianity risks losing out to the challenge of the third millennium".⁹⁸

A particular and practical form of the *lectio divina* is the daily meditation (C 93).⁹⁹ Don Bosco recommended this insistently to his followers, even to the extent of writing in the confidential recommendations to the rectors: "Never omit the meditation each morning".¹⁰⁰ Taking up his thought, the Constitutions testify that "this indispensable form of prayer... strengthens our intimate union with God, saves us from routine, keeps our hearts free and fosters our dedication to others". And the article concludes by declaring that the faithful practice of meditation makes life joyful and is therefore a guarantee of our perseverance. I sincerely hope that the time has come for us to renew our esteem for meditation, which is not always and everywhere given sufficient attention.

– "*Food for prayer*" (C 87)

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4,4; cf. Deut 8,3). In the Christian life, God's Word is nourishment "for life, for prayer and for the daily journey"; "Prayer and contemplation provide the ambient for the reception of the Word of God and at the same time they spring from listening to the Word".¹⁰¹ Not by chance did the GC25 speak of a certain weakening of faith present in our communities, manifested in the first place "in the abandonment of

⁹⁸ CARLO M. MARTINI, *Diocesan Pastoral Programmes 1980-1990*, 521.

⁹⁹ Cfr. *Project of life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, pp. 715-716.

¹⁰⁰ *Epistolario I*, lettera 331, p. 288-290

¹⁰¹ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 24.25

prayer”;¹⁰² in fact, “an authentic spiritual life requires that everyone, in all the diverse vocations, regularly dedicate, every day, appropriate times to enter deeply into silent conversation with him by whom they know they are loved, to share their very lives with him and to receive enlightenment to continue on the daily journey. It is an exercise which requires fidelity, because we are constantly being bombarded by the distractions and excesses which come from today’s society, especially from the media. At times fidelity to personal and liturgical prayer will require a true effort not to allow oneself to be swallowed up in frenetic activism”.¹⁰³

It is possible that the problems and challenges that our common life must confront at the present day – and the GC25 has drawn up an ample list of them¹⁰⁴ – arise in part from the inability to live the faith in a *liturgical manner* and to live as a praying community. Symptomatic of this is the fact that we usually fail to discern the “signs of the times”, to identify what God wants from us, when we do not live as a community he has called together. The lack of the sense of belonging to a praying community, the pretext of going to God on our own, do not allow us to meet God nor hear his Word. We were reminded of this by Vatican II: “prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together”.¹⁰⁵

The neglect of community prayer, that may exist in some communities or some confreres, makes more difficult the cordial and joyful active presence in the common life and makes us deaf to the Word God wishes to address to us. For the believer with an awareness of the Bible there is ordinarily a particular channel for the transmission of God’s Word: the liturgical community. A sincere searching for God’s will leads us to make the communi-

¹⁰² GC25, 54

¹⁰³ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 25.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. GC25, 54.

¹⁰⁵ *Dei Verbum*, 25.

ty liturgy the normal context and particular setting for listening to God. It is significant that in praying the psalms we frequently find God asking to be heard: "O that my people would hear me, that Israel would walk in my ways" (Ps 81,9; cf. 78,1). In the Bible, prayer is not only an occasion for the believer to make known to God his worries and personal needs, but above all an opportunity taken by God to speak make his will known. Anyone yearning to hear God's voice must remain with him in prayer, especially community prayer.

I would just like to refer here to two moments in our life of community prayer which are for us, "with the Scriptures daily in hand",¹⁰⁶ excellent occasions for practising listening to God's Word as we pray together.

The first obviously is the *celebration of the Eucharist*, "the central act of every salesian community"; in it "the hearing of the Word finds its privileged place" (C 88). This statement of our Rule of Life reflects a firm conviction of patristic tradition based on the teaching of Jesus, who declared himself to be the bread of life through his word and his body for those who believe in him (Jn 6,47.54): when we accept the Word we receive Christ, as we receive him in the Eucharist.¹⁰⁷ "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body."¹⁰⁸

In the Eucharist, which we celebrate every day, we are provided with this double source through the one bread of life. It is a matter of a grace similar to that of the disciples at Emmaus, which enables us to open our eyes and see the Risen Christ and recognize

¹⁰⁶ *Perfectae caritatis*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ JEROME, *Breviarium in Psalmum* 147: PL 26, 1334; AUGUSTINE, *Sermo* 56, 10: PL 38,381;

¹⁰⁸ *Dei Verbum*, 21. Cf. *Presbiterorum Ordinis*, 18; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 51

him as he breaks the bread (Lk 24,30-31). But for this to happen we have to walk with him and listen to him as he explains the Scriptures. Only in this way will we feel our hearts burning within us (Lk 24,32). The order is: first we listen then we see.

I am convinced that if we become more familiar with his word and his demands, it will be easier for us to recognize his countenance and discover him in our midst. But to hear him we need careful application and constant study as Fr Vecchi reminded us: "The Eucharist is totally permeated by the word of God, not only in the readings which are proclaimed, but because of the constant references to Scripture in the texts of the Missal. The richness of these in the eucharistic celebration cannot be understood without an appropriate introduction to the Bible".¹⁰⁹

The second moment of community prayer in which the Word of God is particularly present, is the *liturgy of the hours*, "the pulsating heart of the believer's day".¹¹⁰ The liturgy of the hours extends the grace of the eucharistic mystery throughout the day";¹¹¹ in it ... "the community praises and makes supplication to the Father, nourishes its union with him and *maintains an attentive attitude to the divine will*" (C 89. *italics mine*).

There is no doubt that "one of the most valuable achievements of recent decades has been the rediscovery of liturgical prayer by religious families". "Communal celebration of the *Liturgy of the Hours*, or at least of some part of it, has revitalized prayer in many communities, which have been brought into more lively contact with the word of God and the prayer of the Church".¹¹² And we are committed to celebrating it "with the dignity and fervour that Don Bosco recommended" (C 89).

¹⁰⁹ JUAN E. VECCHI, «This is my body, which is given for you», AGC 371, p. 51-2

¹¹⁰ AMEDEO CENCINI, «Preghiera e formazione permanente. Il respiro della vita», in *Testimoni* 4 (2003), p. 10.

¹¹¹ C. 89; cf. GILH 12.

¹¹² CIVCSVA, *Fraternal Life in Community*. "Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor", 14

To pray with the Church and in the same manner as the Church is already a good reason for giving ever greater attention to the daily celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, the source and field of spiritual formation.¹¹³ But I want to mention two other motives that I think it is important to keep in mind. In the psalms we find God's word addressed to us, because they are part of Holy Scripture; at the same time we find in them the word we can address to God as our own prayer; the same words serve both God and ourselves as mutual forms of expression. With the psalms we pray when God is telling us about himself, about us and others, about his plans; but we also pray in telling him what we want to say to him. Moreover morning and evening prayer, conveniently distributed through the working day, help us to find God again after seeking and serving him, and even unfortunately forgetting him, in our thousand and one daily concerns.

– *“Light to see God’s will in the events of life” (C 87)*

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12,2). Nowadays a great deal is said about discernment, and in my opinion rightly so. It is the result of listening to the Word with patience and docility. Through it we can find what God wants of us today, and how he wants it. To interpret the signs of the times in a reality such as ours in which areas of darkness and mystery abound, the Lord himself must be our travelling companion as he was with the disciples as they walked towards Emmaus, and grant us his Spirit. Only the Lord, present among us, can help us to fully understand and carry out his word; he alone can enlighten minds and warm hearts.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Cf. GC25, 26.31.61.

¹¹⁴ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 2.

In fact there have always been “men and women of prayer, those who truly interpret and put into practice the will of God, who perform great works. From familiarity with God’s word they draw the light needed for that individual and communal discernment which helps them to seek the ways of the Lord in the signs of the times. In this way they acquire *a kind of supernatural intuition*”,¹¹⁵ i.e. an outlook of faith without which “life itself loses meaning, the faces of brothers and sisters are obscured and it becomes impossible to recognize the face of God in them, historical events remain ambiguous and deprived of hope, and apostolic and charitable mission become nothing more than widespread activity.”¹¹⁶

Aware of the difficulties in the way of our community life being a “gift and prophecy of communion”,¹¹⁷ the GC25 asked local communities to “promote the practice of community discernment in the light of the Word of God and of the Constitutions”¹¹⁸ and to ensure the “necessary conditions so that every confrere can give a sense of deep unity to his being and working, by the practice of evangelical discernment as an attitude of searching for the will of God”.¹¹⁹

I must confess that I do not think true discernment is possible at either personal or community level without the daily practice of the examination of conscience.¹²⁰ What I mean is that life is a vocation; we exist because we have been created personally by God, “moulded and shaped by his hand” (Ps 119,73; cf. Gen 2,7); we are living, not because we wanted to, but because he wanted us, called us out of nothing (Gen 1,26); and precisely because life is the effect of God’s will it cannot be lived apart from or outside the

¹¹⁵ *Vita Consecrata*, 94.

¹¹⁶ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 25.

¹¹⁷ Cf. GC25, 13

¹¹⁸ GC25, 15. Cf. SGC, 287-288.

¹¹⁹ GC25, 32.

¹²⁰ Cf. SILVANO FAUSTI, *Occasione o tentazione? Arte di discernere e decidere* (Milano 1999).

divine will; if we do not exist by our own choice, neither can we live as we might freely choose: life, which has been a free gift to us, has limits that must be respected (Gen 2,6-17) and obligations that must be fulfilled (Gen 1,28-31).

It would be of little avail were we to recognize God and our obligations in his regard if we made no attempt to seek him in our life and organize this accordingly – St Ignatius of Loyola would call it *ordering* our lives to him.¹²¹ We must listen attentively to the voice of God to understand what he is asking of us today, to deduce what he wants to tell us (cf. Lk 1,26-38) through life's daily events. And so discernment is necessary, i.e. we must be "able to distinguish what in our actions is in line with Christ's Spirit and what is opposed to it", "not to act on impulse", and when we do act "to understand where the motive force comes from",¹²² what effects it has and where it is leading us.

How do we set about discernment? By means of the examination of conscience. This is something more than a formal element of evening prayer; it is a true means of spiritual growth. It teaches the user to look at the reality of both himself and others through the eyes of God and in his heart. The examination is a prayer in which the object is his own life and whose purpose is the clear recognition of God's plan for him and his responsible acceptance of it. To follow the mark of God's hand in the daily routine and in what happens each day is the matter for examination and its finest fruit. "This is the kind of examen that leads to the discovery of the sense and significance of living, and so it begins by listening to God who speaks to us through people, meetings, events and history".¹²³

As consecrated apostles, we Salesians should have the ability to construct life projects that enable us to make positive progress in

¹²¹ *Spiritual Exercises*, 1.

¹²² CARLO M. MARTINI, *Essere nelle cose del Padre*. Riflessioni sulla scelta vocazionale (Casale Monferrato 1991), p. 81.

¹²³ MARCO I. RUPNIK, *L'esame di coscienza*. Per vivere da redenti (Rome 2002), p. 74.

our spiritual development; as educators we ought to have the courage to propose the examination of conscience as a method of prayer to be shared also with young people and with our lay collaborators. And when you come to think of it, this is something that requires only ten minutes a day – but every day – and yet when carried out faithfully leads us to find God in the ordinary course of our daily life, recognizing what he has done in us and for us (Rom 8,28)!

I suggest the following to you as a brief outline of an easy way for re-reading your own life in God's presence:

- *In the presence of God*: Before beginning, place yourself as consciously as possible before God who is looking at you and who loves you so much. Before looking into himself, the believer knows that he is in God's presence and becomes used to seeing himself and wanting to be as God sees him and wants him to be.

- *Thanksgiving* ("confessio laudis"). Begin the examen usually "by praising and thanking God for his gifts, for his loving design, and for the kindness he shows in the life of each one of us. In the light of his gifts our own correspondence with his designs can be expressed more accurately and with more personal truth",¹²⁴ without self-satisfaction, but also without self-pity.

Memory of the eucharist is the obligatory starting point for a recognition of the good things we have received; the believer recognizes that he is filled with grace rather than judged, loved rather than accused, provided that he has understood what God has done in him (1Thess 5,18) before accepting his own limitations. The first scrutiny to be made in God's presence must be that of the gifts received or needed (cf. Jn 4,10); renewing the awareness of these gifts makes the presence of the Giver all the more imposing, for he gives himself in his gifts.

¹²⁴ CARLO M. MARTINI, *Mettere ordine nella propria vita*. Meditazioni sul testo degli Esercizi di sant'Ignazio (Casale Monferrato 1992), p. 59.

- *Recognition of debt* ("confessio vitae"). Recognition of the gifts received leads automatically to the debt that is owed; the greater the grace received, the greater the responsibility contracted. To know how much is owed and to accept it is the grace asked for, because it is the beginning of the return to God – gift for forgiveness. To recognize a sin or defect, there is no need to be able to explain or justify it, nor to live in peace with it. The grace to recognize oneself as a sinner in God's sight is, in reality, the gift of knowing that one is first loved by him and this without limit. And so, to admit our sin makes us humble, makes us return to our origins, to the *humus*, to the earth not yet enlivened by the Spirit, without being condemned to live in humiliation. When we ask pardon from God, what we are asking for is really the gift of his love.

"Surprise at discovering that we are loved is the strongest and most radical factor in renouncing evil and embracing a life of virtue. Finding that we are loved moves us deeply, leads us to repentance, to the recognition of sin, to its confession and the request for forgiveness. And the love the Lord has for us is the strength with which we defend ourselves against future sin. The will to improve, to sin no more, the decision to completely renounce sin will be soundly efficacious only if it is founded on a love which surprises me and even moves me to tears at times. To discover one's sin with the eyes of the Lord upon us, or indeed to have the grace to see that God has taken it upon himself, leads to repentance... and repentance takes us home".¹²⁵

- *Commitment to conversion* ("confessio fidei"). When a sinner returns to God, he tries to remain with him; the gift of forgiveness produces the desire to let oneself be guided by him. The purpose of amendment is an effort that exceeds our own possibilities, nor will good intentions make up for all our defects. Correction will come from the contemplation of the grace with which we did not correspond; it is not the believer who determines the extent

¹²⁵ RUPNIK, *L'esame di coscienza*, p. 78.

of his conversion; at most he can only establish the goal and the way to reach it. The extent is decided by God who loves us so much and reveals to us what he wants from us. Through his grace and by his will, there is born in us the desire to return to him and stay with him. In this way the requested grace of conversion closes a process that began by us recalling the graces already received and experienced.

The purpose of the examination of conscience is not so much to analyze one's intimate feelings as to discover "God in everything and everything in God", to use the expression of one specialist in discernment. "Thanks to the familiarity with God fostered by the use of the examen, we succeed in becoming aware of how God manifests himself in us and of how we live in him, which truly matures our faith. The examen fosters the consciousness that we are always in his sight and what that relationship requires of us. This awareness of the presence of God is maturity in faith".¹²⁶

– *"Strength to live out our vocation faithfully" (C 87)*

"Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path" (Ps 119,105). The times in which we are living make us feel "the need for a continual change of mentality regarding lifestyles, educative and pastoral criteria and methods, and also of structures, in constant fidelity to the original charism".¹²⁷ This requirement comes down to us not only because we are part of a world which is changing nowadays at a frenetic rate, but because – even before that – salesian life demands that we be faithful to the world, i.e. a constant availability to respond to its challenges, and fidelity to our mission in the Church for the benefit of the young. As consecrated persons we shall succeed in remaining faithful if we are "capable of continually looking at ourselves afresh... in the light of God's Word".¹²⁸

¹²⁶ RUPNIK, *L'esame di coscienza*, p. 85.

¹²⁷ GC25, 51.

¹²⁸ *Vita Consecrata*, 85.

Living under God's Word means remaining in his presence just as we are, without any possibility of hiding from him (Gen 3,8-9; Ps 139,7). "The true light that enlightens every man" (Jn 1,9), his Word brings out in us the truth about ourselves, not always faced up to and sometimes even denied. The often dark corners of our heart are enlightened and take on meaning, because they enable us to see what there is in us opposed to the Word, the frequently unacknowledged roots of certain less evangelical traits, those subtle motivational tendencies which risk perpetual concealment and which – precisely because they are uncontrolled – radically threaten every option of an evangelical life. "And so, dodging a meeting with the Father's Word precludes all possibility of access to him, and of deciphering *oneself*, of being understood and pardoned, welcomed back and possessed, of being part of God's plan and of being loved".¹²⁹ Listening to the Word leads to the feeling of being loved by God, and so of remaining faithful!

Living under God's Word means, furthermore, watching in admiration as God reveals himself, gazing in wonder at his progressive daily manifestation in the world and in the heart of each one. When God speaks to us he reveals himself and, by showing himself, seeks us because he loves us and manifests a faithfulness which is "new every morning and never comes to an end" (Lam 3,23-23); he examines us and lays us bare (cf. Ps 138,11-12) and, despite our incredulity, reaffirms his loyalty (Rom 3,3). It is in this unbreakable loyalty, unbroken even by our abandonment, that we can think of returning to the covenant and knowing his fidelity again (cf. Hos 2,21-22). Listening to the Word allows us to experience God's fidelity and gives us the courage and strength to remain faithful to him. Personally I find it difficult to imagine a life of fidelity to God unless it is based on attention, solicitude and welcome acceptance of his Word.

¹²⁹ MAURO M. MORFINO, "Scoprire le tue Parole è entrare nella Luce". "La Parola di Dio informa la vita del credente", *Theologica & Historica*. Annali della Pontificia Facoltà Teologica della Sardegna (Cagliari 1999), 42.

3.4 Listening to the Word to become *apostles*

“That which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you” (1Jn 1,3). The Word we have heard must be passed on; it is not a gift to be jealously preserved for ourselves; obedience to God becomes a mission in the world because we are apostles. “Nourished by the word, made new, free and conformed to the Gospels, consecrated men and women can be authentic *servants of the Word* in the task of evangelization. This is how they carry out a priority for the Church at the beginning of the new millennium”.¹³⁰

In a world in which indications of God seem to have got lost – and as Salesians we are much concerned about this in the world of youth – what is expected from us is a witness that is persuasive because of the coherence between *proclamation and life*, and prophetic because it *affirms the primacy of God and of the good things to come*. Now “*true prophecy is born of God*, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God’s will, for self-giving, for unfailing communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth. It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God’s Kingdom”.¹³¹

As educators and evangelizers of young people of the third millennium, we have the apostolic responsibility of listening to God *on behalf of the young*, but also *with the young*. This is an indication to us of two tasks in our pastoral work for the young that must not be overlooked.

¹³⁰ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 24.

¹³¹ *Vita Consecrata*, 84.

– *Creation of environments with a strong spiritual impact*

The pressing appeal *to return to the young*, that I have been making ever since my first address as Rector Major¹³² and repeat wherever I go, is not prompted only by my conviction that “*God is awaiting us in the young* to offer us the grace of meeting with him”,¹³³ but also by the fact that today’s youngsters have an enormous need of God, even though they do not always know how to express it.

“Called to be educators to the faith at every opportunity”, we Salesians “walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the Risen Lord” to help them to discover “in him and in his Gospel “the deepest meaning of their own existence” (C 34). Building life with Christ as the fundamental point of reference is the objective of our pastoral work; if we want to help young people “to see history as Christ sees it, to judge life as Christ judges it, to choose and love as Christ does, to hope as Christ teaches him, to live in Christ the communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit”,¹³⁴ we must lead them to a personal meeting with the Christ who comes to us in his Word and in the sacraments (cf. C 36).

The Pope has spoken of the “need for a Christian life distinguished above all in *the art of prayer*”. “Is it not one of the signs of the times that in today’s world, despite widespread secularization, there is *a widespread demand for spirituality*, a demand which expresses itself in large part as *a renewed need for prayer*?”¹³⁵ Or is it not also our common experience, as it was of John Paul II, that youngsters are “yearning for prayer, meaning in life and friendship”?¹³⁶ It is therefore “essential that *education in prayer* should become in some way a key-point of all pastoral

¹³² Pascual Chávez, “Closing address to GC25”: GC25, 185.

¹³³ GC23, 95; cf. Cost. 95.

¹³⁴ GC23, 114. Cf. SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY DEPARTMENT, *Salesian Youth Ministry*. A basic frame of reference. (Rome 2000), 33.

¹³⁵ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 32.33.

¹³⁶ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 9.

planning”.¹³⁷ Our communities, like every Christian community, must become “*genuine ‘schools’ of prayer*, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly ‘falls in love’. Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God’s plan”.¹³⁸

For this reason the GC25 has asked salesian communities to create strongly spiritual environments for our young people, many of whom are “in a secularized environment... which is looking for new spiritual experiences and feeling the irrelevance of faith”.¹³⁹ These “settings with a strong spiritual character” must in the first place propose and live “occasions of deep spiritual experience with young people,”¹⁴⁰ “leading, in ways proper to each person’s particular gifts, to setting up schools of prayer, of spirituality and of prayerful reading of the Scriptures”,¹⁴¹ which form in the young a permanent attitude of personal prayer, of contact with God’s Word and with the Eucharist.

We shall become “enthusiastic teachers and guides, saints and formers of saints, as was St John Bosco”,¹⁴² provided that our communities seek to be “places for hearing and sharing the Word, for liturgical celebration, for the teaching of prayer, and for accompaniment through spiritual direction”.¹⁴³ If as communities we open our heart to grace and allow God’s Word to pass through us to others with all its power, and if in an atmosphere of cordial welcome we offer to the young “valuable spiritual activities such

¹³⁷ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 34.

¹³⁸ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 33.

¹³⁹ GC25, 44.

¹⁴⁰ GC25, 47.

¹⁴¹ *Vita Consecrata*, 94.

¹⁴² JOHN PAUL II, “Message for the beginning of the General Chapter”: GC25, 143.

¹⁴³ CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 8.

as schools of prayer, spiritual exercises and retreats, days of recollection, spiritual dialogue and direction”, we shall be able to help them “to discern God’s will in their lives and to commit themselves to the courageous and sometimes heroic demands which faith makes of them”.¹⁴⁴ I could not wish you anything better, nor could I imagine a better apostolic service.

– *Provide* pastoral processes for spiritual maturing

“In the complex and fragmented culture of our day – asked the GC25 – how can the community carry out processes of discernment and pastoral conversion, and pass from a pastoral approach built around activities and needs to an approach centred on processes?”¹⁴⁵

A valid though incomplete response had been already given by the GC23, when it recognized that the Congregation had followed out a renewal process which had led it to take up once more the specific salesian mission (GC20), assumed by the community in a project (GC21) and lived out as an ardent desire for God in the midst of the young, even to the extent of wanting to make with them a pilgrimage of faith in their particular way.¹⁴⁶ In giving practical form to such a process, which is substantially what we call *salesian youth spirituality*, the chapter members decided to do “everything in imitation of the Lord and following the way of charity of the Good Shepherd *on the way to Emmaus*”.¹⁴⁷

The happy proposal to read over again the Emmaus story (Lk 24,13-35) is still a far-sighted one today, and is indeed essential for all who feel the need of the Word of God as a point of reference in providing a *model process* of salesian pastoral work for the young, in which are presented not only the goals to be reached but also the means to be used and the experiences to be

¹⁴⁴ *Vita Consecrata*, 39.

¹⁴⁵ GC25, 44.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. GC23, 1-10.

¹⁴⁷ GC23, 92.93.

lived; it is a matter of making once again together with the young the pilgrimage of faith, and of "leading them to the Risen Lord" (C 34).

"We take the first step in approaching the young and joining them (GC23, 93), as did Jesus with the two disciples of Emmaus, and we go to them as his representatives wherever they are to be found, taking advantage of whatever good the situation may present; we join them and accompany them (cf. Lk 24,15), welcoming them without prejudice into our environments and with solicitude into our hearts. We are not put off by their bewilderment or confusion; we accept them as they are, without judgement or discrimination and we accompany them along their path in life. Our friendly and close presence will lead them to discover that Jesus is alive and is concerned about them.

"We travel with them along the same road, listening to them and sharing their hopes and anxieties (CG23, 93). Personal accompaniment, even though cordial, is not enough by itself; dialogue is needed, conversation about what concerns the young person and worries him, getting to know from him directly and not by hearsay what are his needs and dreams, understanding how he sees things and what he considers important. If we want to be accepted, we must first accept his world and get to know his motives so that we can share them if possible and make them our own; "hidden in their expectations they bear the seeds of the Kingdom".¹⁴⁸ *"Going to meet the young where they are to be found, ... attending to their requirements and aspirations, are for us fundamental steps that precede any other stage of education to the faith".*¹⁴⁹

"We patiently explain to them the demanding message of the Gospel" (GC23, 93). After listening to what they say and getting to know their interests, what makes them unhappy and their bewilderment, we next have to convince them that Jesus is alive

¹⁴⁸ GC23, 95.

¹⁴⁹ GC23, 98. Il corsivo è mio.

(cf. Lk 24,23-24) and that what has happened is part of God's great plan. From what we have heard we pass on to its explanation in the light of the Scriptures (Lk 24,27): the problems experienced or still unresolved are filled with meaning and hope; wrong ideas or unrealistic plans take on a different aspect; "always and in every case we help them to be open to truth and to develop in themselves a responsible freedom" (C 32).

"And we stay with them, to repeat the gesture of breaking the bread and stirring up in them the ardour of faith that will transform them into credible witnesses and proclaimers of God's word" (GC23, 93). It will not be enough merely to talk to them of Christ; we stay with them and do not leave them until they have met him face to face. "With them we celebrate the encounter with Christ in word, prayer and sacraments" (C 36); "together with our young people we live a personal relationship with Christ who reconciles and pardons, who gives himself and creates communion, who calls and sends us, prompting us to become architects of a new society".¹⁵⁰

Once they have discovered Jesus, alive in his Word which fills life with meaning, and in his Body broken for all, young people will find their way to return to the believing community (Lk 24,33), where they can testify to having found him, and will remember that their hearts burned within them "while he talked to them on the road and opened to them the Scriptures" (Lk 24,32). In this way they will become evangelizers of other youngsters, apostles of their contemporaries and witnesses of the Risen Christ.

4. "We welcome the Word as Mary did and ponder it in our heart" (C 87)

Dear confreres, I cannot conclude this letter without passing on to you the pressing appeal addressed by the Pope to Christian Eu-

¹⁵⁰ GC23, 148.

rope to enter the third millennium with the gospel in hand: "In the careful study of God's word we will daily find nourishment and strength to carry out our mission. *Let us take up* this book! *Let us receive* it from the Lord who continually offers it to us through his Church (cf. Rev 10,8). *Let us devour it* (cf. Rev 10,9), so that it can become our very life. *Let us savour it* deeply: it will make demands of us, but it will give us joy because it is sweet as honey (cf. Rev 10,9-10). Filled with hope, *we will be able to share it* with every man and woman whom we encounter on our way".¹⁵¹

I myself, in presenting to you the documents of the last General Chapter suggested that we should "learn always to begin from the Word of God. This in turn means that we must make our own the attitude of our Blessed Lady in its regard: listen to it, obey it, make ourselves its disciples, and become believers".¹⁵² With these words I was only reminding you of the text of our Constitutions, which exhorts us to take daily in hand the Holy Scriptures, following the example of the Blessed Virgin: "We welcome the Word as Mary did and ponder it in our hearts, so that it will bear fruit and we may proclaim it with zeal" (C 87).

There is no better school than that of Mary¹⁵³ for introducing us to the contemplation and acceptance, to the preservation and proclamation of God's Word. "Having given her assent to the divine Word, made flesh in her, Mary is the model of the acceptance of grace by human creatures".¹⁵⁴ No other believer, in fact, was able to receive him as well as she did, to the extent of his becoming alive in her womb: Mary teaches us that the believer in the Word makes it his own flesh, that he who serves it with his life makes it his life itself, that he who obeys God (Lk 1,38) becomes his son (Lk 1,43). "Dare we perhaps call ourselves mothers of Christ?", wondered St Augustine; and unhesitatingly he replied:

¹⁵¹ *Ecclesia in Europa*, 65.

¹⁵² GC25, Presentation 2,2, p. 15

¹⁵³ Cf. *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 1

¹⁵⁴ *Vita Consecrata*, 28.

“But certainly we can dare to call ourselves mothers of Christ... Christ’s members are born by the spirit, as Mary bore Christ in her body: this is how we will be mothers of Christ”.¹⁵⁵

It is not therefore just an illusion to think that Mary’s happiness is within our grasp. Mary’s God continues to sustain projects of salvation in our own day; he continues to seek out believers attentive to his Word who are willing to welcome it into their lives at any cost; to us he has reserved an adventure and graces similar to those he bestowed on his Mother. To be blessed like Mary (Lk 1,45) and live in the fullness of grace (Lk 1,28), it is enough for us to believe as she did: to entrust ourselves totally to God and behave as humble servants. If we are able to give ourselves totally to God as she did, we shall come to proclaim as she did that the Lord has done great things also in us.

We must not forget that Mary’s relationship with God and with Christ was not always the same and unchanged: it was logically more intimate just before and after the birth of her son (Lk 1-2); it remained hidden during Jesus’ public ministry (Jn 2,1-22; Lk 8,19-21; 11,27-28), with a new and intense contact during the week of the passion (Jn 19,25-27). Precisely because in any relationship with God it is always He who takes the initiative and decides on times and means, the relationship is never always the same. Mary learned this very soon: from the moment she gave birth to her son, she did not understand what was being said of him (Lk 2,18-19); the more she heard of the future of her son, the less did it coincide with what she had been told at the annunciation (Lk 1,30-33.35). The loss of the child Jesus in the Temple was a warning sign of a still more harrowing future: she had to live in the same house as a son who knew he was God but was for a time still submissive to her (Lk 2,49-51). No wonder that Mary, who could not understand it all, “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2,19).

¹⁵⁵ AUGUSTINE, *Discorso* 72 A, 8, in *Opere di sant’Agostino. Discorsi* II/1 (Rome 1983), p. 481.

Dear confreres, with all my heart I entrust you to Mary whom we believe to be present among us (C 8), and I ask her, “the model of prayer and pastoral love, the teacher of wisdom and guide of our Family” (C 92), to teach us to accept the Word and keep it in our hearts “so that it will bear fruit and we proclaim it with zeal” (C 87). At her school, and beginning always from the Word, who is Jesus Christ, we shall be able to live and even rejoice in a life lived with zealous enthusiasm for God and for the young, just as Don Bosco did.

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