

THE SPIRITUAL PROFILE OF DON BOSCO EMERGING FROM THE COLLECTION OF HIS LETTERS

(Part 2)

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6. Don Bosco's art of discernment

Someone with a wise and understanding mind who deeply perceives and distinguishes between good and evil in life's daily circumstances and makes the right choices, truly possesses the heart of discernment. Being pleasing to God, such a person walks before God in faithfulness, righteousness, and in uprightness of heart (cf. 1 Kgs 3:6, 9, 11-12). The wise and the discerning mind seeks first not what is right before human beings, but what is righteous before God. That which is discerned as acceptable before God would naturally be just also before human beings whether it finds acceptance among them or not. Considered in this light, the Don Bosco of the *Epistolario* seems to shine brightly as a man of discernment.

Although Don Bosco does not talk directly about discernment, his words and the choices he makes prove his art of discernment. His decision-making process and his subsequent actions seem to include the following: considering deeply the actual situations of life; searching for the divine Will in everything; making the choices that seem appropriate; confirming through possible revelatory signs; committing himself entirely to the choices made; and finally, counting on God for protection and providence.

Don Bosco's style of dealing with the boys, particularly those who were difficult to handle, makes him a model for educators and pastors of the young.¹ Although such letters are not many in number, they bring out the themes that are dear to Don Bosco. In them, discernment is shown not only in matters concerning himself, but also in circumstances where he has to discern for others. Regarding Clodoveo Edoardo Comollo, we observe Don Bosco's insights on seeing the boy, his initial judgment of him, and his thoughts as to which studies or work would be suitable for him. Perceiving the actual and individual needs of the young is essential to those working for the young.² Pietro Luciano is perhaps a typical example of a boy whose attitudes do not change even after Don Bosco's efforts, as the negative elements in the boy seem to continue even as a cleric in later years. Observable in Don Bosco's dealings are the following: the efforts of the educator, the boy's response, the expectation from the educator, the boy promising to change but not proving it by his actions, the the boy's defects as underlined by Don Bosco (lack of confidence in the educator, not relating with others, wasting time on useless things, not showing proper concern even towards boys who are known for their good example). Then there is the concern shown by the educator despite the negative attitudes of the boy, in the hope that there would be a change, given the opportunities and practical suggestions offered. And finally, hope in God's grace and a prayer that the Lord may bless their efforts.³ Don Bosco calls a spade a spade when he observes the defects of Giovanni, son of Lorenzo

¹ For instance, Cf. E(m) I, 147, 225-226, 431, 276-277, 279, 324, 385, 431; E(m) VI, 512.

² Cf. E(m) I, 147, letter to Rosminian priest Francesco Puecher, on 16 February 1852.

³ Cf. E(m) I, 225-226, letter to Fr Pietro Durbano, on 6 April 1854. Also Cf. E(m) I, 431.

Turchi. The educator saint points out that the conduct of the boy was good earlier but had deteriorated after the vacation. This is the educator trying to prevent things from becoming bad, dealing with the boy just as a father does with his son, dealing with aspects that the educator saint considers to be bad conduct, and finally, when all efforts prove futile, it is Don Bosco who takes the decision.⁴

In another case regarding the nephew of a priest close to Don Bosco, we discover the following characteristics of the discerning educator: constant effort to assist the lad, including for the benefit of his soul. And if all efforts are in vain, then there is little choice but to make the hard decision.⁵ Francesco Rossi, recommended by Baron Feliciano Ricci des Ferres, is another example of the stubborn nature of boys who refuse to make amends despite the continuous goodness of the educator. Despite everything, some failures are bound to be part of the mission to the young. Educators face such challenges. In this case, Don Bosco's kindness was in vain. The unyielding nature of the boy makes Don Bosco feel sad at the inevitable consequences.⁶ Don Bosco's sadness at the unyielding or stubborn nature of such boys reminds us of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (cf. Lk 19:41-44; Mt 23:37-39). In the case of Peano, who was sent home for not following the rules of the house in spite of repeated warnings by his superiors, Don Bosco also mentions the difficulties created by interference from the boy's relative, stating that educators must be allowed to exercise the roles proper to them; besides, the boy is not in dire need.⁷ Thus, the ways in which Don Bosco deals with these boys who are difficult to handle, besides showing the attitudes of the educator, also reveal particular aspects of discernment.

Seeing everything in the light of God is the principle of his discernment. Reading the signs of the times and acting accordingly is a way of discernment. Being creative according to the times, particularly regarding the mission to the young, making right choices in the day-to-day events of life, helping others to discern in various circumstances in life, and finally insisting on resignation to God's

⁴ Cf. E(m) I, 276-277, 279, letters to layman Lorenzo Turchi, on 17 and 23 December 1855.

⁵ Cf. E(m) I, 324, letter to Canon Pietro Giuseppe De Gaudenzi, on 5 June 1857.

⁶ Cf. E(m) I, 385, letter to Baron Feliciano Ricci des Ferres, on 3 November.

⁷ Cf. E(m) VI, 512, letter to Cav. Carlo Fava, on 4 December 1879.

Will are ways of discernment one can constantly discover in Don Bosco. Having been requested to cooperate with a project to set up a library, he readily agreed to do all he could, because spreading good books was the need of the hour.⁸ Being a man of vision, he also proves himself to be a man of realistic views, but his hope lies in God always. On the difficulties of finding suitable personnel to set up a printing press in the missions, he writes that it is not possible to find personnel for printing. Those who are suitable lack the courage, and those who have the courage lack the capacity. But he adds that he is dealing with it and hopes that God will send them men who are suitable for the work and will place them in his hands.⁹

The urgent need to act when the situation warrants is seen when the good name of a person or the institution is at stake. When an article in the anti-clerical newspaper, the *Gazzetta del Popolo* said that a young man accused of immorality and being investigated by the Judiciary was a past pupil of the Oratory, Don Bosco checked the facts and immediately complained about the false information. He demanded that the news be rectified out of courtesy and love for truth, and without the need to have recourse to matters of law.¹⁰ With regard to the mission to the young, even when things are evidently fine, he seeks advice to improve and stabilize the work. Writing to the parish priest of Marseilles, Don Bosco asks his close collaborator to let him know what he has observed in the Salesian works as being good, mediocre or bad, so that things might be corrected in a prudent and efficient way.¹¹ To diocesan priest Eugenio Bianchi from Rimini who wishes to join the Salesian Congregation, Don Bosco suggests the various phases of discerning the “call within a call”. He invites the priest to attend the retreat at Lanzo so they might chat together, spend some time, and finally decide in such a way that is for the greater glory of God.¹² As for matters of conscience, he does not wish to offer counsel in his letters. In such circumstances he suggests the

⁸ Cf. E(m) V, 58, 61, letters to doctor Giovanni Mazzotti, on 1 and 8 February 1876.

⁹ Cf. E(m) VII, 281, letter to Salesian missionary Fr Luigi Lasagna, on 31 January 1881.

¹⁰ Cf. E(m) V, 428, letter to the editor of *Gazzetta del Popolo*, on 15 August 1877.

¹¹ Cf. E(m) VI, 390, letter to Fr Clément Guiol, on 20 May 1879.

¹² Cf. E(m) VII, 174, letter to diocesan priest Eugenio Bianchi, at the beginning of August 1880.

individual open their heart to their confessor and follow their confessor's advice.¹³ Experience and prudence form part of any process of discernment or spiritual direction.

Don Bosco's excellent ways of discernment in difficult situations personally – particularly with his Archbishop Lorenzo Gastaldi – reassure us that the saint has mastered the art of discernment. Don Bosco's methods and choice of words are sure to serve as a beacon to those willing to learn from him. His way of reasoning in particular issues, having the love of God and love of neighbour at heart even when surrounded by other problems, and never losing sight of the essentials of charity amidst personal issues, are all wonderful lessons for an enquiring mind.¹⁴ The necessary internal attitudes are also evident in his words. He indicates that he had written a particular letter with the sole desire of telling the recipient what could help both of them and would be useful for the glory of God. However, if some inappropriate word has slipped out, he humbly begs forgiveness.¹⁵ The awareness of being accountable to God for all of one's actions, and having God's glory as the common ground for resolving conflicts, are shown to be the essential aspects for decision-making in Christian life.¹⁶ When all human wisdom has been brought to bear and if one still does not know what to do in spite of discerning with God's help, Don Bosco then introduces resignation to God's Will, for he is convinced that God knows better. The saint leaves everything to God and waits for God to act and inspire further.¹⁷

While Don Bosco emerges as a man of deeper perceptions in life, what sums up his discerning ways in every sphere of life is to know what God requires of him. With this consistent preoccupation

¹³ Cf. E(m) VII, 199, letter to young man Giorgio Borello, on 7 September 1880. Also Cf. E(m) VI, 241, letter to cleric Antonio Massara, on 26 September 1878.

¹⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 96-98, 143-144, letters to Archbishop of Turin, Lorenzo Gastaldi, on 14 May 1873 and on 12 August 1873 respectively.

¹⁵ Cf. E(m) IV, 98, letter to Archbishop of Turin, Lorenzo Gastaldi, on 14 May 1873.

¹⁶ Cf. E(m) IV, 144, letter to Archbishop of Turin, Lorenzo Gastaldi, on 12 August 1873.

¹⁷ Cf. E(m) IV, 415, letter to the Bishop of Vigevano, Pietro Giuseppe De Gaudenzi, on 7 February 1875.

he continues to do good, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God (Cf. Mic 6:8).

7. Don Bosco’s denial of self in order to desire God

Denying oneself means saying “No” to oneself and “Yes” to God. For Christians, this is an essential aspect of being disciples or followers of Christ: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk 8:34; Mt 16:24). Denial of self includes other factors in life such as the renunciation of persons, things and the world. Self-renunciation – pushed if necessary even to extremes – for the sake of the Lord is an indispensable condition of discipleship (cf. Lk 14:26-27). Don Bosco’s emphasis cannot be different from that of Jesus. We note his insistence in what he wrote as general advice for faithful Christians: “Whoever wants to save himself has to put the thought of eternity in his head, God in his heart, and the world under his feet”.¹⁸ Such insistence by Don Bosco helps us to know his mind, and to correctly interpret his life and words in his letters.

Don Bosco’s priority in life – of being God-centred and leading a life oriented towards the Lord of life – naturally leads him to consider everything else as secondary. In the *Epistolario* aspects of his asceticism are often seen in his exhorting others and affirming his thoughts when others speak of or practice such ideals, besides following aspects related to the evangelical counsels in his life.

“Detachment from the world” or “aloofness from the world”, “despising the world”, “withdrawal from the world”, “resignation”, and “attachment to God” are expressions found sporadically in the letters which speak of radical detachment from self, others, and the world as insisted on by Don Bosco.¹⁹ Giving oneself to God and His Will is not just a principle but the fruit of his spiritual practices as

¹⁸ Giovanni BOSCO, *Porta teco cristiano, ovvero avvisi importanti intorno ai doveri del cristiano acciocchè ciascuno possa conseguire la propria salvezza nello stato in cui si trova*, Torino, G.B. Paravia e Comp., 1858, 7.

¹⁹ Cf. E(m) IV, 114, 467. 499; E(m) V, 113. In Italian, “Distacco”, “Disprezzare il mondo”, “Rassegnazione”, “Ritiratezza”, “Attaccarsi unicamente quelle del cielo” are words that specifically relate to asceticism in the *Epistolario*.

well. The radical reform and disciplined austerity of his life become evident in the significance of the clerical habit as total belonging to the Lord. When Count Carlo Cays, at the age of 64, is aspiring and preparing to be a Salesian priest at Valdocco, Don Bosco writes to him: “Well, I believe that you can take the measurements for your cassock, and thus on my arrival we can have *the ceremony through which you totally belong to the Lord*”.²⁰

Giving up everything for the sake of God and keeping in mind the vanity of the world makes Don Bosco happy, and expresses his inner conviction too. When layman Angelo Lago, who owns a pharmacy, decides to sell his possessions and give away everything for charity and consecrate himself to God, Don Bosco is well-pleased. Giving up the material things early in life for the love of God is better than doing it at the end of one’s life, perhaps by force and without having any other choice. Expressing happiness, Don Bosco affirms that his thoughts too are the same:

I agree with you: to dispose [of everything we have] and give all into the hands of the Lord, that is, for the love of the Lord. Many miserable people give at the end of their life but by force, and therefore the gift is worth a just peel; others, prudent according to the Gospel, offer and therefore [have] the one hundredfold assured. We wholeheartedly thank all those who helped you discover the vanity of the world, to break with it in facts and not only in words. This was always my thought: not to possess anything.²¹

Detachment from the things of the world as an attitude required of the followers of Christ is made clear in his letter to the religious superior of a convent. Such asceticism is the way by which religious can sustain themselves. This is what he tells to Mother Maria Veronica di Gesù crocifisso when the convent where she lived with her sisters was going to be closed because of the “subversive laws” against the religious orders. The anxious moment of facing expulsion is in fact a moment of realization. He says that the situation is

²⁰ E(m) V, 373, letter to Count Carlo Cays, on 3 June 1877 (italics mine).

²¹ E(m) IV, 226, letter to a layman, Angelo Lago, aspiring to be a Salesian priest, on 14 February 1874 (italics mine).

difficult since the testing time is approaching and adds that God wants them to keep away from the world and to lift up their hearts to Him with great sacrifices. Encouraging them to go ahead, Don Bosco affirms that faith and prayer can support them in overcoming every difficulty.²² In the circular letter to Salesians insisting on the austerity of life, he makes it clear that the vows help religious to be detached from persons through chastity, from earthly things through poverty, and from oneself through obedience.²³ Contempt for the world, as well as study and moral behaviour, is also recommended for those aspiring to the priesthood.²⁴

As for the laity or those living in the world, detachment takes the form of attachment to God and to things pertaining to heaven. Don Bosco's prayer and wish for the families to whom he writes is that they make proper use of material things in order to gain heaven. Writing on Christmas day to Countess Emma Brancadoro, who finds herself caught up with issues in the family, he assures her of his prayers that God may illumine their minds and grant peace as well as the grace of not getting lost amidst the things of this world but being attached solely to the things of heaven.²⁵ Marquis Giacomo Antinori is told that to do away with sadness in this world caused by human beings, one must be attached to the eternal good. This world is a valley of tears, an exile and a prison. Hence one cannot hope for real happiness here. The stable and the eternal good does not depend on the whimsical nature of humankind, but on virtues and religious principles. Frequent confession and communion are the most effective means to obtain peace of heart.²⁶ The joy of asceticism revealed in offering charity to the poor, which in turn is a significant form of detachment, is instilled in the heart of a thirteen-year-old boy who sends some contribution for the boys at Valdocco: "You will avoid the misfortune of those who at the end of their lives, find themselves with cash-filled boxes, but empty of merit for eternity".²⁷

²² Cf. E(m) VII, 219, letter to the Superior of the Franciscan Sisters of the Lily of Assisi, on 3 November 1880.

²³ Cf. E(m) IV, 114, circular letter to Salesians, on 4 June 1873.

²⁴ Cf. E(m) V, 114, letter to Salesian priest Luigi Guarella, on 16 April 1876.

²⁵ Cf. E(m) IV, 372, letter to Countess Emma Brancadoro, on 25 December 1874.

²⁶ Cf. E(m) IV, 132, letter to Marquis Giacomo Antinori, on 20 July 1873.

²⁷ E(m) IV, 123, letter to young boy Vittorio Cesconi, on 27 June 1873.

Resignation to God's plans and acceptance of the joys and sorrows of life is another dimension of asceticism practised and taught by Don Bosco. Leaving everything in the hands of the Lord is the final conclusion after planning and seeking help for his poor boys.²⁸ Don Bosco's total submission to God's ways is seen at the great loss of Fr Francesco Provera who died after a prolonged illness. The saint said that he had been preparing himself for a long time for this bitter loss, but all along it had been painful. While the Salesian Society had lost one of its best members, Don Bosco adds immediately that it surely must have pleased the Lord.²⁹ The sorrow and the acceptance of God's plan is evident ten days later when he writes: "thus it had pleased God, and so let it be".³⁰

Interpreting the Will of God for a pious young woman, Don Bosco assures her that the Lord has not forsaken her, indeed God wants her to be good, virtuous and holy, but with patience and resignation to His Will. The saint also promises her that he would pray for her so that she might continue to despise the world.³¹ An expectant mother, Countess Emma Brancadoro, is assured of his prayers and is exhorted to say particular prayers. Before being told to accept with resignation whatever God grants, there are two additional requirements communicated: "Also on your part two sacrifices are requested: greater detachment from creatures and things of the earth; and as far as possible and as much as your state allows you, give in charity".³²

Detachment from the world, from things and from persons, linked to the intimate following of Christ; deliberately abstaining from the satisfaction of the senses, charitable giving which indicates one's detachment, and accepting the Will of God in everything with resignation – all these, according to Don Bosco, are intimately linked to the teachings of Jesus. While he spontaneously distances himself

²⁸ Cf. E(m) IV, 76, letter to layman Bartolomeo Parodi, on 7 April 1873.

²⁹ Cf. E(m) IV, 277-278, letter to Fr Michael Rua and the Salesian Community at Turin, on 14 April 1874.

³⁰ E(m) IV, 279, letter to Commander Francesco Clodoveo Monti, on 24 April 1874.

³¹ Cf. E(m) IV, 467, letter to a pious young woman Carolina Marietti, on 29 May 1875.

³² E(m) IV, 311-312, letter to Countess Emma Brancadoro, in March 1881.

from whatever is contrary to the following of Christ, the primary reason for doing so is to conform to the person of Christ. The life of renunciation is about desiring the highest good. For Don Bosco, detachment is actually about being attached to God.

8. Don Bosco's virtues shine amid sufferings

The most inspiring letters for readers of the *Epistolario* are probably those written amid problems. In the midst of sufferings, be they physical or moral sufferings, virtues glow. As his perseverance in the practice of virtue becomes evident, Don Bosco's heart, faith, reasoning, discernment and deep spirituality seem to shine forth splendidly.

Fortitude ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of good. Virtues grow not only through education, but also by deliberate acts and by perseverance in struggle. The joy of being with Christ, particularly in moments of suffering, manifests the presence of grace in the Christian.³³

The physical and moral sufferings encountered by Don Bosco, as are evident in the letters, help us to know him and his interiority better. Falling seriously ill soon after settling down at Valdocco in 1846 and recuperating from exhaustion, he is optimistic that his health will continue to improve, but the physical pain remains. However, he is sure that it hurts only for a while then goes away.³⁴ An attitude of acceptance, readiness to suffer inconvenience, and the likelihood that the disturbance will last long are evident in his words. In 1860, suffering for quite some time from illness connected with the lungs, stomach, and spitting of blood followed by some fever, Don Bosco writes on 9 November 1860: "From the feast day of all Saints, the usual spitting of blood manifested itself again, followed by some fever. My family ignores this discomfort of mine".³⁵ In

³³ Cf. CATECHISMUS CATHOLICAE ECCLESIAE, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, nos. 1811, 1837, 1839. From now on it will be referred as CCC.

³⁴ Cf. E(m) I, 71, letter to priest and collaborator Giovanni Borel, on 31 August 1846.

³⁵ E(m) I, 426, letter to the parish priest of Saluggia, Giovanni Battista Fontana, on 9 November 1860. Also Cf. E(m) I, 442, letter to Canon Edoardo Rosaz, on 15 March 1861.

December 1865, as his eyes do not allow him to write the letter by himself, he apologizes to the Archbishop of Florence, Gioacchino Limberti, for writing through his secretary.³⁶ When his eye-sight returns to its original condition after about three weeks, he tells the Archbishop that thanks be to God his eyes have regained their natural state of health, and so he can freely resume work at his desk.³⁷ In May 1867, he writes that his health is pretty good except for the dizziness he quite often feels.³⁸ In December 1867, physically affected by continuous vomiting for about two weeks, he writes on Christmas day that his health had been somewhat affected by the discomfort he had sustained in Mornese, with persistent vomiting. He is gradually feeling much better, except for a slight hoarseness which he hopes will soon gradually disappear.³⁹ In April 1868, he expresses his inability to visit Duchess Elisa Sardi Melzi d'Eril in Milan, the inability having been caused by toothache.⁴⁰ In June 1869, after about ten days of illness, he writes to thank Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti.⁴¹ Telling him that his health in 1869 has been somewhat altered, he gives thanks to God as he now finds himself much better.⁴² Faced with difficulty standing, in August 1871 he informs Michael Rua that he is going to punish his feet for failing in their duty. A few days later he he writes from Nizza Monferrato that his feet are once more failing in their duty, and that Doctor Fissore had advised him to stay there for a few more days. On the next day he writes that his feet seem to be better.⁴³ The acceptance of physical discomfort, and his light-hearted nature in dealing with it, are evident in his words.

³⁶ Cf. E(m) II, 193, letter to the Archbishop of Firenze, Gioacchino Limberti, on 27 December 1865.

³⁷ Cf. E(m) II, 198, letter to the Archbishop of Firenze, Gioacchino Limberti, on 18 January 1866.

³⁸ Cf. E(m) II, 366, letter to Cavalier Federico Oreglia of Saint Stephen, on 9 May 1867.

³⁹ Cf. E(m) II, 465, letter to parish priest of Mornese, Domenico Pestarino, on 25 December 1867. Also Cf. E(m) II, 453-454.

⁴⁰ Cf. E(m) II, 523, letter to Duchess Elisa Sardi Melzi d'Eril, on 12 April 1868.

⁴¹ Cf. E(m) III, 100, letter to Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti, on 24 June 1869.

⁴² Cf. E(m) III, 147, letter to Cavalier Tommaso Uguccioni Gherardi, on 12 October 1869.

⁴³ Cf. E(m) III, 361, 362, 363, letters to priest Michele Rua, after 21 August and on 24th and 25th August 1871.

Don Bosco believes that it is God who sends sicknesses and it is He who cures. His faith and hope shining bright during another serious illness are revealed in the letters after he regains his health. The second serious illness in life that occurred from December 1871 to February 1872 forces him to remain at Varazze for about two and half months. The seriousness of the illness, as well as his grateful heart, are revealed in his letter to Pope Pius IX, on 8 April 1872: “Holy Father, I am indebted to you for my health. The doctors did not give me any hope of recovery. But after I received your holy blessing I began to improve, and after a few days I had recovered and was able to go about my ordinary works”.⁴⁴ Sickness for Don Bosco is a time of God’s visitation, as he writes about the serious illness that it pleased God to visit him with.⁴⁵ Don Bosco also feels that sickness was the way God held him back from carrying out the plan of opening a house at Marassi, Genoa.⁴⁶ The way Don Bosco discerns, reads, and confirms God’s Will in every action is very evident in this letter. It is God who is at work and who directs every action, both in the life of individuals and in history. Thanking a priest for the prayers offered during his illness and praising God for having restored his health, he requests the priest to pray so that God might help him to serve Him well.⁴⁷

Health is a precious gift of God’s, and it is even more precious if used for serving God. Thanking his benefactor Count Cesare Luigi Balbo and wishing him the precious gift of good health, Don Bosco says that the far more valuable grace is to use good health always for things which contribute to the greater glory of God.⁴⁸ Continuing to experience some difficulties with regard to health in January 1873, he writes that the precarious nature of his health makes him unable to travel alone to Rome, and requests accommodation also for Fr

⁴⁴ E(m) III, 423, letter to Pope Pius IX, on 8 April 1872.

⁴⁵ Cf. E(m) III, 402, letter to Senator Giuseppe Cataldi, on 24 February 1872. Just as sickness is God’s visitation [Cf. E(m) IV, 236; E(m) VII, 364], so the death of someone is also God’s visitation [Cf. E(m) II, 140; E(m) IV, 363; E(m) V, 174].

⁴⁶ Cf. E(m) III, 409, letter to Marchioness Nina Teresa Durazzo Pallavicini, on 21 March 1872.

⁴⁷ Cf. E(m) III, 407, letter to Fr Claudio André of Tortona, on 18 March 1872.

⁴⁸ Cf. E(m) III, 458, letter to benefactor Count Cesare Luigi Balbo, on 12 August 1872.

Berto who will be his guardian angel.⁴⁹ The after-effects of the second serious illness continued to haunt him even one and half years later. Unable to visit a benefactress at Alassio, he states the reason on 22 July 1873: “Last year’s illness does not leave me in peace, neither during the day nor at night. Everything will pass”.⁵⁰ Feeling a little relieved, he senses that the fever he had experienced at night has now shifted to evening, though milder and with less headache, though the fatigue was still being felt in August 1873.⁵¹

“My ophthalmologists had these judgments: there isn’t much hope for the right eye; the left eye can be maintained in *statu quo* by restraining from reading and writing. Therefore, eat and drink, sleep and walk about, etc. etc. Thus, we shall carry on!”⁵² is the way he writes to “his mother” Carlotta Callori on 14 November 1873. Joseph Aubry notes that despite the eye problems that afflicted Don Bosco for the last fifteen years of his life, he never stopped his work.⁵³ The seriousness of these problems with his eyesight and the lack of time available during “the period of maximum intensity of action”,⁵⁴ seem to be obvious in the postscript to the letter to Archbishop Salvatore Nobili Vitelleschi on 28 April 1874: “Kindly offer sympathy for my poor sight: I took the sheet upside down, and wrote, ignoring or rather without realizing that it was a half sheet”.⁵⁵ Poor eyesight leading to bad handwriting is something he jokes about, asking the letter’s recipient to understand his “bad calligraphy”,⁵⁶ meaning decorative handwriting. Don Bosco’s humorous approach to his handwriting is also seen in his letter to Fr Giuseppe Ronchail in 1878:

⁴⁹ Cf. E(m) IV, 44, letter to the Bishop of Fossano, Emiliano Manacorda, on 25 January 1873.

⁵⁰ E(m) IV, 133, letter to benefactress Lorenzina Mazè de la Roche, on 22 July 1873.

⁵¹ Cf. E(m) IV, 135, 142, letters to Fr Michael Rua, at the beginning of August and on 10 August 1873.

⁵² E(m) IV, 177, letter to “his mother” Countess Carlotta Callori, on 14 November 1873.

⁵³ Cf. Joseph AUBRY (Ed.), *The Spiritual Writings of Saint John Bosco*, 215.

⁵⁴ Braido calls the period 1870-1882 as the intensive period of activities in the life of Don Bosco (Cf. Pietro BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, vol. II, Roma, LAS, 2009, 9). Also Cf. E(m) VI, 253; E(m) VII, 332.

⁵⁵ E(m) IV, 281, letter to Archbishop Salvatore Nobili Vitelleschi, on 28 April 1874. Cf. also E(m) IV, 332, 371.

⁵⁶ E(m) IV, 500, letter to Marquis Tancredi d’Ormea, on 10 August 1875.

“It will be a bit difficult to read. [...] Make an act of contrition and then you will understand easily”.⁵⁷ Describing himself as “half blind”,⁵⁸ but accepting the situation with a humble heart and realizing the difficulty recipients find in reading his letters, he requests patience, and that they understand his wish to write by himself rather than always seek the help of this secretary.⁵⁹ In July 1877, after accompanying the Archbishop of Buenos Aires and the other pilgrims for about three weeks, he was exhausted, and asked his dear boys to receive holy Communion for his health.⁶⁰ As his physical eyesight went from bad to worse, his eye of faith continued to shine bright when he said that while things were fine in general, his eyesight was getting dangerously worse. However, God was happy with this even though his eyesight did not serve him as it should.⁶¹ As he grows gracefully old, he is ready to suffer heat and cold, rashes or skin eruptions, sweating, and fever.⁶²

Moral suffering allows Don Bosco’s perseverance, positive attitudes, and God-oriented thought process to emerge. He does not give up amid difficulties, but finds ways of overcoming, provided good works can continue. These attitudes are manifested amid difficulties for the Oratory in the early years, in the issues faced by the fledgling Congregation, during the prolonged conflict with his Archbishop Lorenzo Gastaldi, during the closure of the school at Valdocco by state authorities,⁶³ and amid the difficulties faced by religious houses in France in 1880. His determination is that the work for poor boys and of the Congregation which is the work of God should not suffer in any instance. He feels the sufferings of the boys, the clerics, the seminarians, and of the Salesians to be his own, and hence always wants to come to their rescue. He considers himself as

⁵⁷ E(m) VI, 136, letter to Salesian director Giuseppe Ronchail, on 27 March 1878.

⁵⁸ E(m) V, 140, letter to Salesian director Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, on 7 May 1876.

⁵⁹ Cf. E(m) V, 244, 356; E(m) VI, 187; E(m) VII, 139.

⁶⁰ Cf. E(m) V, 403, 411, letters to priest Michele Rua, on 8 July and after 16 July 1877.

⁶¹ Cf. E(m) VI, 289, letter to Countess Carlotta Callori, on 25 November 1878. For further letters regarding Don Bosco’s poor eyesight and his positive attitudes, Cf. E(m) VI, 291, 294, 297, 298, 322, 327, 409, 490.

⁶² For instance, Cf. E(m) VII, 170, 177, 179.

⁶³ Regarding closure of the school at Valdocco, see for instance: E(m) VI, 250, 251, 262-264, 268-269.

a poor man who goes about looking for bread for his poor boys, and he makes others understand the situation of his poor boys. However, the constant thought is that the Master will give in the measure and in the time that He judges most appropriate for His creatures.⁶⁴ Don Bosco is convinced that sufferings inflicted by human beings are also moments for experiencing the hand of the Lord. During the Prussian-French war in June 1871, religious are consoled but are exhorted to adore the mercies of the Lord who sends scourges so that the world will know that God is the Supreme Master.⁶⁵ When the Sisters are saved from the dangers of war, he immediately recognizes the hand of the Lord. Expressing his joy and thanksgiving to the Lord and to Mary, he desires to know the minute details of the supernatural intervention so that he can preserve it as a monument to the glory of Mary.⁶⁶

Failures, discouragements and conflicts are accepted in faith and hope. When hard work is met with obstacles and projects cannot proceed for some reason, Don Bosco is not discouraged.⁶⁷ Occasional day-to-day problems, too, have to be faced: important letters go missing; letters are being opened amid calamitous times for the Church;⁶⁸ even as he struggles to raise money for the poor, the charity sent by the benefactor does not reach him;⁶⁹ a big sum of money meant for a holy cause is stolen by thieves;⁷⁰ and difficulties and heartaches are not wanting even from within the Congregation.⁷¹ Without brooding at length over difficulties, he seeks an answer in faith, and moves on. In the conflict with Archbishop Gastaldi, Don Bosco's faith, hope and charity are resplendent. His all-pervading awareness of God, his humility, patience, readiness to ask forgiveness, upholding the interests of the Church, seeking counsel,

⁶⁴ Cf. E(m) II, 496, 497.

⁶⁵ Cf. E(m) III, 333, letter to the Superior of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, Mother Eudisia Babin, on 2 June 1871.

⁶⁶ Cf. E(m) III, 337-338, letter to the Superior of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, Mother Eudisia Babin, on 16 June 1871.

⁶⁷ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 454-455; E(m) IV, 89.

⁶⁸ Cf. E(m) VI, 103; E(m) VII, 214.

⁶⁹ Cf. E(m) VII, 366, letter to a benefactor whose name is not known, on 31 May 1881.

⁷⁰ Cf. E(m) VII, 112, letter to Baron Aimé Héraud, on 18 April 1880.

⁷¹ For instance, Cf. E(m) VII, 278, letter to Salesian missionary Fr Giuseppe Fagnano, on 31 January 1881.

exhorting the Salesians to keep silent, to pray and observe the rules, and overcoming difficulties with goodness are all evident amid a scene of conflict. Don Bosco perseveres through any difficulty with the secret principle that roses bloom among thorns.⁷²

Physical and moral suffering as evidenced in the letters lead Don Bosco to grow and persevere in the practice of virtue, and offer him further opportunities to keep himself aligned to God and His Will. Even as he suffers personally he chooses to participate willingly in the sufferings of others, thus becoming a good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-37). He is sensitive to the sufferings of others and is moved by the misfortunes of others. He chooses to stop beside suffering people rather than pass by on the other side. Those occasions in a way become opportunities to experience the particular power that draws him interiorly close to Christ. In them he discovers or re-discovers his own humanity, dignity, and mission.

9. Don Bosco's joy and sense of humour as signs of holiness

“Happy are the people whose God is the Lord” is the exclamation of the Psalmist (Ps 144:15). The Apostle Paul on the other hand, invites Christians to “rejoice in the Lord always” because “the Lord is near” (Phil 4:4-5). While there are several degrees of happiness, “its most noble expression is joy, or happiness in the strict sense, when man, on the level of his higher faculties, finds his peace and satisfaction in the possession of a known and loved good”.⁷³ Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, speaking of Christian joy, says that while man experiences joy when he finds himself in harmony with nature, in a special way he finds joy in the encounter, sharing, and communion with other people. Even more does he know the spiritual joy or happiness when his

⁷² Cf. E(m) VII, 123, letter to the Secretary of the State, Cardinal Lorenzo Nina, on 7 May 1880.

⁷³ PAUL VI, Adhortatio Apostolica *Gaudete in Domino*, 9 May 1975, in “Acta Apostolicae Sedis” 67 (1975) 291. (We indicate page number, since no paragraph numbers are provided in this document). While “delight” can pertain even to irrational animals, “joy” pertains only to rational beings. The other words for “joy” pertaining to rational beings are: gladness, exultation, and cheerfulness (Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 31, a. 3).

spirit enters into possession of God, known and loved as the supreme and immutable good.⁷⁴ According to Thomas Aquinas, “joy is not a virtue distinct from charity, but an act, or effect, of charity: for which reason it is numbered among the Fruits”.⁷⁵ And “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).⁷⁶ The spiritual nature of joy derives its merit from being the gift of the Holy Spirit, and Christian joy in every sense is joy in the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷ The extent to which this spirit of joy is present in Don Bosco, and the lively way in which his holiness is manifested through his sense of humour are the objects of our synthesis now, as we try to elicit and complete the spiritual profile of Don Bosco emerging through the letters.

“Despite flux and reflux, what I find as extraordinary is that I am joyful more than I would wish”; “My present occupations are: eating, singing, laughing, running, roaming etc. etc.”; “Tell Peter to prepare good dishes for Fr Pacchiotti, so that on my arrival I might find him in good health and of good humour”:⁷⁸ these are words from a much younger Don Bosco, as he writes in October 1845 at the time of his first serious illness as recorded in the letters. As the result of his incessant activities for his poor boys, he is forced to retreat to his family home at Castelnuovo due to his poor health. Information such as the need to break his journey on the way home, stopping at Chieri – because unable unable to travel further immediately, and not being able to walk even after a week at home, reveal the seriousness of his health already in 1845. However, illness does not stop him from being joyful, and he wishes others the gifts of good health, good humour, and gladness. As if to prove that his joy and a sense of humour spring from God, while telling his boys of the interesting events that occurred during his journey to Lanzo Torinese in 1864,

⁷⁴ Cf. PAUL VI, *Gaudete in Domino*, 291.

⁷⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 28, a. 4.

⁷⁶ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* enumerating the fruits of Charity as “joy, peace, and mercy” (Cf. CCC, n. 1829), states as follows: “The fruits of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity” (CCC, no. 1832).

⁷⁷ Cf. PAUL VI, *Gaudete in Domino*, 292.

⁷⁸ E(m) I, 61, 60, 62, letters to the mentor and collaborator, Fr Giovanni Borel, on 11 and 17 October 1845.

he has a wonderful conclusion to the perennial question as to which came first, the chicken or the egg. Saying that he would give the chicken and the egg to better hands – to a good cook – he concludes that be it the chicken or the egg, one must attribute them to God who had created both of them, including the chicken from which came the egg. Hence even when one goes from father to son, one must terminate the question with the man created by God.⁷⁹

His spontaneous humour is revealed when soliciting help from his priest friend and later Bishop of Vigevano, Pietro Giuseppe De Gaudenzi. The letter is in the form of a skit, and expressions such as how clever the person had been as to pluck the goose without hurting it, and that Don Bosco would be on Pegasus' back and be carried away away at the speed of the wind,⁸⁰ highlight his relaxed mindset. Amidst his playfulness, liveliness, and the liberty with which he writes to those who are close to him, Salesians and particularly the female benefactors whom he considers as mothers, the deep desire is that they always be filled with spiritual gifts. Addressing his “good mother” Countess Girolama Uguccione, he reveals his affection, saying, “if the body could fly with its thoughts, you would have at least one visit a day from this rascal”, and playfully writes: “by and large all our schools are filled with students, as many as six thousand six hundred. You are the grandmother of them all, aren't you? What an abundant harvest!”⁸¹

Joyfulness and playfulness are mingled with holiness in Don Bosco. The touch of humour and the sense of faith going hand in hand seems to be a special characteristic of Don Bosco. Informing Giovanni Bonetti about his visit, he tells the recipient: “Get ready with a pot of laments and a bag of money, I will take both”. But the thoughts that immediately follow are about the deeper realities of life: “Remember that we have no peace in this world, but continuous war. Some day we shall enjoy true peace, provided we combat

⁷⁹ Cf. E(m) II, 61-62, letter to boys at the Oratory at Valdocco, on 22 July 1864.

⁸⁰ Cf. E(m) I, 142, letter to Fr Pietro Giuseppe De Gaudenzi, on 24 December 1851. Pegasus is a mythical winged horse in Greek literature.

⁸¹ E(m) III, 470-471, letter to Countess Girolama Uguccione, on 9 October 1872.

strongly on the earth. *Sumamus ergo scutum fidei ut adversus insidias diaboli certare possimus*".⁸²

"Your Excellency might say that I have a poetic mind. It is true",⁸³ is how he discusses his plans and ways of carrying out the possible new mission in France. The plans might look imaginative and unrealistic for the recipient or the reader of the letter, but for the writer the assurance is that "God would inspire".

As for his poetic mind, this is also true in the literal sense. We see his skill as a poet on a number of occasions. While his Christmas greetings to Baron Carlo Giacinto Bianco takes on poetic form, his lament at not being able to write is also in poetic style.⁸⁴ Poetic verses of consolation and encouragement are directed to his Salesian sons in Albano, who find themselves overburdened with work and the lack of personnel. The poetic exhortations are as follows: to be at peace and to remain serene, for Don Bosco thinks of them; their worries are his own and he will send immediate help; all of them must be good, always cheerful, true friends and to live remembering that only a good life can make them happy.⁸⁵ The soothing effects on those burdened with work seem to be a balm even to weary readers. As for the lyrical verses to Fr Giuseppe Bologna who is learning other languages in preparation for the missions, Don Bosco playfully asks if the recipient is Spanish or French, German or British. While Ceylon is ready, and Mangalore awaits, the missionary should be ready to bring with him the crowd or followers of Saint Francis Xavier. Don Bosco reminds him that God is the final destination and that heaven is ready.⁸⁶

⁸² E(m) III, 349-350, letter to Salesian Fr Giovanni Bonetti, on 27 July 1871. The biblical quote referred is: "Take up the shield of faith, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph 6:16).

⁸³ E(m) V, 419, letter to the Bishop of Fréjus and Toulon, José Sebastian Terris, on 3 August 1877.

⁸⁴ Cf. E(m) III, 164-165, letter to Baron Carlo Giacinto Bianco of Barbania, on 24 December 1869; E(m) V, 309, letter to cleric Edward Mackiernan, on 22 January 1877.

⁸⁵ Cf. E(m) V, 264, letter in poetic form, to cleric Giovanni Battista Rinaldi, on 27 November 1876.

⁸⁶ Cf. E(m) V, 308-309, letter in poetic form, to Salesian priest Giuseppe Bologna, on 22 January 1877.

Besides showing his skills in poetry, Don Bosco teaches Italian grammar, too, through his letter on 21 November 1876. The actual expertise is not just the poetry or the grammar, but the instilling of confidence in the recipient and the inspiration for knowing the way to God. A humorous letter is the reply to one from young Salesian Fr Angelo Rocca, whose letter had contained quite a few grammatical errors. Don Bosco teaches him grammar, correcting the errors, with a fatherly heart. The recipient, while smiling, is exhorted to know Don Bosco's affectionate heart, but above all, to learn the infinite mercy and goodness of God, and the action plan is to keep the Rule as the standard code, particularly the practices of piety.⁸⁷

Don Bosco's light-hearted nature is put to use to encourage a sick benefactor, also reminding the recipient of an appointment on Trinity Sunday 1891, the writer's Golden Jubilee of Priesthood! Writing in July 1881, Don Bosco makes fun of the hot summer, it looks link ongoing steam baths, but with a little smile, Don Bosco adds that despite the high temperature, there was no news that anyone was cooked already. Then he encourages the benefactor, who wrote to him that he is unwilling to die, to stay alive because for the sake of the charitable works that were incomplete both of them had to collaborate together for quite some time."You accepted my invitation to attend my fiftieth anniversary Mass to be celebrated on Trinity Sunday of 1891. Do you want to miss an invitation made and accepted by you?"⁸⁸ His spiritual and playful nature emerges in the letter to Countess Carlotta Callori who has been ill. Although normally God grants extraordinary graces even for a single and a brief prayer, Don Bosco does not know the reason why the grace has not been received this time: "[...] And what had been obtained so far, I do not know. Poor Don Bosco! He has lost all his credit with the Lord".⁸⁹ Don Bosco does not mind making fun of himself or even calling himself the leader of his "troublesome" boys.⁹⁰

We can find some eighty occasions in the *Epistolario* where Don Bosco manifests his interior joy expressed as humorous

⁸⁷ Cf. E(m) V, 261, letter to young Salesian priest Angelo Rocca, on 21 November 1876.

⁸⁸ E(m) VII, 395, letter to benefactor Cavalier Carlo Fava, on 4 July 1881.

⁸⁹ E(m) VII, 400, letter to Countess Carlotta Callori, on 24 July 1881.

⁹⁰ Cf. E(m) V, 310, letter to priest Michele Rua, on 22 January 1877.

comment regarding individuals and situations, which also reveal his essential sense of God.⁹¹ The joy referred to in such letters are by nature, deeper than mere happiness. Don Bosco's joy is rooted in God. Since joy comes from God, it is more serene and stable than worldly happiness which might often be merely emotional and momentary. The fruit of Don Bosco's joy is the awareness that God is his strength and protector. One need not think that when Don Bosco is joyful he is free from sorrow. On the contrary, it is in moments of physical illness, moral sufferings and heartfelt sorrow that his humour and Christian hope shine bright. Spiritual individuals never allow themselves to be drowned by the waters of sorrow, for beneath the external signs of sadness, they discover the solid rock that is God who waits with immense love to lift up the heart of His creatures.

From our brief synthesis of the role of joy and humour in Don Bosco's life as emerging from his letters, we might generalize and assert that, though "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord" (cf. Lk 2:10),⁹² the joy of the Lord fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus, and becomes exceptionally manifest in some. Since they accept Jesus' offer of salvation, they are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness, and with Christ their joy is constantly born anew. In them, God's voice is heard, the quiet joy of His love is felt, and the desire to do good becomes stronger. All these dimensions seem true in Don Bosco. Desiring God's Will, he lives in the Holy Spirit. The experience of God's love and the daily encountering of Christ bring him joy. He finds joy amidst the little things in life. His soul rejoices at seeing the marvels of the Lord (cf. Lk 1:47). Even in moments of great difficulty his joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of the personal certainty that when all is said and done, he feels that he is infinitely loved. As he shares the grief of people enduring great suffering, he lets the joy of faith slowly revive them too,

⁹¹ For some of the letters expressing Don Bosco's joy, besides his lively, light-hearted, and timely humour even amid various problems and fatigue, but all mingled with affection and the ever-present consciousness of God, see: E(m) II, 421, 431, 441, 451; E(m) III, 173, 331, 356, 376; E(m) IV, 141, 147, 158, 187, 210; E(m) V, 55, 155, 234, 310, 440; E(m) VI, 67, 136, 226, 505; E(m) VII, 36, 157, 253, 463; E(m) VIII, 129, 394.

⁹² PAUL VI, *Gaudete in Domino*, 297.

because his own firm trust remains constant even amid the greatest of distress.⁹³ It is for this reason that Pope Paul VI, while describing the joy in the hearts of the saints, places Don Bosco – as well as Saint Francis de Sales – among the saints who have taught the way to holiness and joy.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Through our efforts at providing a summary of the essential aspects of the person of Don Bosco emerging from the huge collection of his letters, we have pointed out the dominant characteristics we can perceive in them. In stating that three relationships, namely, the relationship with God, with neighbour, and with oneself constitute the spiritual profile of an individual, we have tried to show how true they are for Don Bosco. While an all-pervading God consciousness and sense of the soul mark Don Bosco's relationship with the divine, we believe that his God-oriented nature gives meaning to all of his life and activities. Such a foundation is affirmed also in his relationship with others through love and gratitude, particularly with his boys and Salesian sons who are truly his delight and consolation. As for the relationship with self, we have listed the dominant and unique characteristics that help us to better understand the person of Don Bosco through his written words.

The purpose of Don Bosco's letters is not interior self-revelation but the immediate day-to-day accounts of events, descriptions of gratitude, of guidance, and of the joys and sorrows of life. However, the unintentional self-revelation in these communications of a deeply spiritual person who is characterised by spiritual shyness or an extremely reserved spiritual nature, makes the emerging spiritual profile both notable and unique. The interiority of the saint intermingled with everyday affairs and strewn throughout the vast collection of his letters is a rich harvest that helps us gain pertinent insights into Don Bosco's spiritual profile.

⁹³ Cf. FRANCIS, *Adhortatio Apostolica Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 nov. 2013, in *AAS* 105 (2013) 1019-1137, nn. 1-4, 6.

⁹⁴ Cf. PAUL VI, *Gaudete in Domino*, 306-307.

What is the outstanding image of Don Bosco emerging from this collection of his letters? At the immediately visible level, shining ever brightly is the external image of a zealous priest who feels called by God for the salvation of the young. Don Bosco is firm and committed in fulfilling such a universal mission while reading the signs of the times in all the circumstances of life concerning the political, social, economic, cultural and ecclesial contexts in continuous evolution. At a deeper level, we discover the image of a person who passionately and continuously gives himself to God and His ways. Life in God, total availability to divine commands, continuous discernment of the Will of God, and being attentive even to the whispers of God characterize this profound image of Don Bosco. He is perceived to be in a “God-synchronous orbit”, as he is constantly and habitually directed towards God, and longs to be in harmony with Him. This is revealed to be the touchstone of understanding and interpreting the spiritual person of Don Bosco in his letters.

In conclusion, we can say that by reading the letters in chronological order, a reader has the sense of moving at pace with the current and the letters’ main protagonist. Even when one is not the addressee but a reader from another time, the letters make one feel that one is among the members of the fortunate audience to whom they are addressed. Now, what can the fortunate addressees see, feel, and learn? The Lord who has created humankind wants us to experience His love, providence, presence, and joy -- both now and in eternity -- made possible through His saving grace. God is the Father and the Master of everyone and of everything that exists. But when evil forces threaten to become the masters of the world, Don Bosco is sure that the prayers, the love of good people, and devotional practices work marvels. The Merciful God always comes to the assistance of His people, while Mary fights off evil forces. Whether the time is opportune or inopportune, one should worship Jesus in the most holy Sacrament, and continue to do works of charity. It is this theological outlook that Don Bosco communicates continuously. In everything that Don Bosco does and in whatever he communicates, one perceives the constant spiritual undercurrent lying beneath all human considerations and material preoccupations. If we miss this God-oriented perspective, we miss the real spiritual person of Don Bosco. But when one tries wholeheartedly to discover

the unifying force lying beneath his outward actions, one is sure not only to admire the beauty and the warmth of that force, but will also be led to experience that force and feel fortunate to be blissfully swept up in that spiritual undercurrent.