

The background of the cover is a soft-focus photograph of an open book, likely a Bible, with its pages visible. In the background, a window with a grid pattern is visible, letting in natural light. The overall color palette is warm and serene, with soft blues, whites, and hints of green from the window's view.

THE PRACTICE OF MEDITATION IN THE PRAYER LIFE OF THE SALESIANS OF DON BOSCO

Proceedings of the Seminar on Salesian Meditation
San Callisto - Rome, 10-12 May 2018
Edited by Giuseppe Buccellato SDB

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Abbreviations and initialisms

ASC	<i>Archivio Salesiano Centrale</i> (Salesian Central Archives)
AGFMA	<i>Archivio Generale Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice</i> (General Archives of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians)
ch.	Chapter
C.	Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales
Cf./cf.	Confer, see
cit.	Work previously cited in notes
ed./eds.	editor/editors
Ibidem	In the same work previously cited
Op. cit.	In the same work and on the same page as previously cited
MB	<i>Memorie Biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco</i>
BM	<i>Biographical Memoirs of St John Bosco</i> (where the citation comes from the English version)
no./nos.	number/numbers
OEA	ST. FRANÇOIS DE SALES, <i>Oeuvres</i> , Édition d'Annecy.
[author]	Author not indicated on the cover



Introduction



We can form praying communities only if individually we become men of prayer.

Each one needs to express his own personal and heartfelt way of being a son of God, expressing his gratitude, telling him about his yearnings and his concerns in the apostolate.

For us mental prayer is essential. It strengthens our intimate union with God, saves us from routine, keeps our heart free and fosters our dedication to others. For Don Bosco it is a guarantee of joyous perseverance in our vocation. (C. 93).

THE PRACTICE OF MEDITATION *in the prayer life of the Salesians of Don Bosco* is the result of a small seminar on Salesian meditation organised by the Formation Department at San Callisto, Rome, from 10–12 May 2018. The aim of the seminar was to throw light on the place that meditation has in the tradition and life of the Salesians of Don Bosco and to offer guidelines for growth in this area.

The seminar came about through a suggestion by XABIER BLANCO, Rector of the Salesian House in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, offered to those involved in the Formation World Advisory Body in February 2016. During a Mass at which he was the main celebrant, Xabi surprised us by saying: “Why not teach us to meditate?” In light of the fact that we were reviewing the Salesian Prayer Manual at the request of the 27th General Chapter, we thought that a small seminar dedicated to this

theme would be more than appropriate. The Department team came together (Cleofas Murguia, Silvio Roggia, Francisco Santos, José Kuttianimattathil and myself) along with Eunan McDonnell, Giuseppe Buccellato, Giuseppe M. Roggia and Xabier Blanco himself.

The seminar developed in four stages: a sharing of our personal experiences of meditation; light shed on experience through the Salesian tradition; a time for exchange of opinions and dialogue; bringing the results together. A more detailed report on the seminar can be found in the seminar programme in the appendix. I restrict myself here to presenting the contributions by Giuseppe Buccellato, Eunan McDonnell, Giuseppe M. Roggia and Xabier Blanco, thanks to whose intervention the “light shed on experience” took place.

GIUSEPPE BUCCELLATO’S aim is to offer a “brief treatise” on *bosconian meditation*,



taking his cue from Don Bosco himself and from early Salesian tradition, especially notes by Giulio Barberis, the Congregation's first novice master. This brief treatise is presented in the form of a decalogue, a ten-point summary: the need for meditation; distinguishing between meditation and spiritual reading; meditation and progress in the theological virtues; the importance of morning meditation; the opportunity of making meditation in common; length of meditation; meditation, affective prayer and imagination; the importance and usefulness of a method; the *rendiconto* or friendly chat and meditation. Drawing on his vast knowledge of the sources, Buccellato shows that the method followed for meditation by the first Salesians was decidedly Ignatian. Don Bosco saw in meditation an intimate and personal conversation with God, in which the affective dimension was predominant, unlike spiritual reading, which mainly involved intelligence. Paul Albera, second successor of Don Bosco, did not hesitate to refer to meditation as an affective form of prayer that led to unitive prayer or "ordinary contemplative prayer", assuring us that "it was always his (Don Bosco's) desire to see his sons soar, through meditation, to that intimate union with God which he had so admirably brought about in himself, and he never tired of urging us to this on every propitious occasion."

In *Learning to meditate with Saint Francis de Sales*, EUNAN McDONNELL turns to our principal patron in person. Once again we find a strong emphasis on the affective dimension: meditation is the prayer of the heart, a response to God who has first loved us. The aim of Christian meditation is to encounter Christ and grow in friendship with him. Echoing St Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, Francis speaks

of meditation as a movement of joy or taking pleasure in God. McDonnell continues by offering a meditation method in six stages, but nevertheless insists with Francis on freedom of spirit: if God fills our heart with affection, we should be more than happy to just stay there, without worrying about "following the method". Worthy of note is the relevance of the Word of God (rather than of "doctrines" or the "truths of faith" or some spiritual book) and of a concluding resolution without which, for Francis, "meditation is often not only useless, but also damaging". Where our contemporaries tend to look with interest at altered states of consciousness or at "feeling good", Francis is clear about identifying the guiding criterion for prayer in "doing what love asks of us" or in other words, in the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). Also interesting is McDonnell's insistence on the usefulness of a diary to accompany our prayer journey; in my opinion, it is a further profitable means of promoting the "learning by experience" that is at the heart of our formation experience (cf. C. 98).

GIUSEPPE M. ROGGIA, who like McDonnell is an expert in Francis de Sales, speaks of meditation as *lectio divina*. He points to an important gift of Vatican II in what he shares: the shift from using spiritual books to the Word of God (*lectio divina*). Just the same, he insists on the fact that *lectio divina* must be specified "by" and "in" the charism, instead of remaining generic. This takes place mainly in *imeditatio*, which is the moment of face-to-face encounter with the living Christ, which involves not only a biblical echo but also a charismatic one: the Word challenges our reality and becomes the "leavening dough" of our experience. In the context of *operatio*, Roggia, like McDonnell, reminds us of Francis de



Sales insistence that meditation without a resolution is a sign of spiritual pride. A significant insistence on *collatio*, or fraternal sharing follows, because the Spirit is active in every disciple of the Lord and speaks to us through our brothers. This sharing is a formidable way of building a community capable of making discernment, truly living by the Word. As for exegesis and having recourse to commentaries on the Word of God, their place is in *preparatio* rather than in a *lectio* where it would end up taking over the room given to *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*.

Finally, we have XABIER BLANCO, who does us the great service of linking the theme of Salesian meditation to the contemporary search for silence and contemplation, a real thirst found in our time, as witnessed, for example, by the great interest shown in Pablo d'Ors *Biografia del silenzio* (Biography of Silence). D'Ors recounts his experience of learning to remain in silence and of how he encountered Christ precisely in this experience. Building on this core, Blanco describes Jesus as the man "of the three times" where action, prayer and community merge in an inseparable synthesis. Jesus was the most God-united person who ever existed. So why did he pray? This is a question that has always fascinated me, and I am pleased that Xabi's response is in tune with Eunan's: lovers do not ask why they should be together... Jesus felt the need to be alone with his Father. From what the Synod told us, it seems that today's young people feel this need, and certainly, today's Salesians cannot be insensitive to this cry. The interest that has arisen around Pablo d'Ors tells us that it is possible to communicate with the people of our times, and at the same time invites us to enter ever more deeply into

the practice of meditation in order to share this experience with the young and with so many who share Don Bosco's mission and spirit.

Here is what this book offers you: four contributions on meditation in creative and fruitful tension. We meet a Don Bosco who is deeply in tune with Ignatius and Francis de Sales in their insistence on the affective dimension of meditation, and perhaps also in the role assigned to the imagination. The post-conciliar recovery of the centrality of the Word of God is like a wonderful return to an insistence already dear to Francis de Sales. The integration of the "charismatic echo" within *lectio divina* is another important enrichment, because the Word of God reaches us in the concrete reality of our charism and mission. Fr Albera's intuition that grasps the opening to the "contemplative" in what is "affective", is certainly an invitation to pay greater attention to *contemplatio*. And *collatio*, or sharing, is deeply in tune with the recovery of the community dimension and the overcoming of an individualism that has not spared our prayer life. Finally, there is *operatio*, the ecstasy of action, where the "affective" leads to the "effective". Not only the daily resolution, but all of our prayer life extends out to and touches the reality of young people and the world of our time – if we were to only learn the art of staying still, remaining in silence, and if we were to allow ourselves to be led more by the Spirit!

Our little seminar has found surprising resonance among confreres actively involved on the fronts of youth ministry and formation, and perhaps this too is a sign of the times, or simply of the fact that the Father is always at work, drawing us to himself.

I hope that this work will also help us



to strengthen the pedagogical aspects of formation: It is urgent that we accompany those in initial formation in their prayer life, helping them to “experience” the values of the Salesian vocation, not only during the novitiate, but also throughout their formation. Perhaps it is more correct to say that our seminar has demonstrated the need for all of us to be accompanied throughout our lives. Meditation is growth in intimacy with Christ, and this growth certainly does not end with perpetual profession or priestly ordination. Let me suggest that the sharing our experiences of meditation – with which

our seminar began – is something truly precious, something to be valued. It is a simple way in which the confreres can continue to learn from experience in the different seasons of their lives.

A word of gratitude to those who offered these contributions, as well as to Jose Kuttianimattathil who coordinated the seminar, to the other members of the formation sector, to Gianni Rolandi and Joseph Kunle, who gave valuable help with translation, and to the community of San Callisto for their welcome and hospitality.





Notes for a “brief treatise” on meditation at the origins of the Society of St Francis de Sales

Giuseppe Buccellato SDB

Introduction

THE TERM “BRIEF, OR LITTLE TREATISE” (*trattatello*) is dear to the Salesian tradition, since it calls to mind the handful of pages in which Don Bosco outlined the main elements of his *preventive system*; we have “borrowed” the term here in an attempt to systematically but essentially pick up the *bosconian* concept of meditation, a practice of piety constantly recommended in the tradition from our origins and in the early Salesian magisterium.

Among the very many *spiritual writings* of Don Bosco there are no works that have the rigour of systematic treatment. He was never moved by literary or scientific motives when wrote, but only sought to spread the Church’s message, *good press*, in every social setting; his style is always simple and his approach “descriptive” rather than theoretical. Using Fr Caviglia’s happy expression, we can say that he “teaches through deeds to produce other deeds”;¹ certainly, this is why the literary genre he preferred was biography.

Nonetheless, it is certainly possible, based on some of his published and unpublished writings and from pointers he gave to the nascent Society of St Francis de Sales, to outline some of the traits and discover some of the constants that will allow us, *a posteriori*, to compile a kind of *trattatello* or *brief treatise on formal mental prayer* or meditation according to the bosconian tradition of our origins. The adjective “mental”, it is important to clarify, is not a reference to the *intelligence*, to the *mind* but, in the history of spirituality, is attributed to silent prayer that does not make use of words (vocal prayer), but involves human interiority, principally the *affective* sphere.

Our purpose, far from any “archeological” intent, is to highlight certain charismatic traits handed down as a precious inheritance to the spiritual family that takes its origins from him. Every authentic *memory* inevitably becomes a *task*...

¹ A. CAVIGLIA (ed.), *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco. Nuovamente pubblicati e riveduti secondo le edizioni originali e manoscritti superstiti*. A cura della Pia Società Salesiana, IV, Torino 1965, XXXIX.



In these pages we will also try to highlight some of the teachings of the first “canonical” novitiate which, under the watchful and loving gaze of Don Bosco, began in Valdocco immediately after the approval of the Constitutions of the Society in 1874. The first master of novices (or *ascritti* [enrolled members]) was Fr Giulio Barberis, who played a fundamental role in the birth and development of the new foundation.

Fr Barberis became master of the “*ascritti*” at 27 years of age and kept this role for more than a quarter of a century, until 1900; he was then provincial for nine years, and finally Spiritual Director of the Congregation, a role he held until his death in 1927. He saw the first novitiates of the Society as being the true *guarantors* of the founder’s spirit. He collected his meditations to the novices in any number of handwritten exercise books that are preserved in the *Archivio Centrale Salesiano* (ASC) and which we have had the good fortune to be able to draw from.

Drawing on his long experience and the ordered and meticulous note of conference he gave the *ascritti*, in 1901, in a two-volume work, he published the *Vade mecum degli ascritti salesiani* [Salesian Novices Handbook]² and the *Ammaestramenti e consigli esposti agli ascritti della Pia Società di S. Francesco di Sales* [Teachings and advice presented to the novices of the Pious Society of St Francis de Sales].

The *Vade mecum* dedicates two of its sixteen chapters in the second volume to our topic: *Della meditazione* [On Meditation] (XII) and *Del modo pratico di fare la meditazione* [On a practical way of doing meditation] (XIII). These two lengthy, valuable and well-developed chapters contain all the answers to the question we have posed for ourselves: what were the teachings that our early confreres received on the topic of meditation? What *method* did they use?

Since, however, it is appropriate that a *brief treatise* be complete in a few pages, we will attempt to sum up these and a few other contributions, most of them unpublished, that have been *handed down* to us by Don Bosco and the early tradition of the *Society*. It would be easy to demonstrate that our considerations are in perfect harmony with the two chapters of the *Vade mecum* which we warmly recommend that you read.

We have chosen to highlight some of the main understandings or characteristics of meditation at the origins of the *Society of St Francis de Sales*; a kind of small *decalogue* which refers to much more detailed information.³

² In subsequent editions beginning in 1905, the word *ascritti* was replaced with the term *giovani*, given that the author wanted to extend his teachings to the whole period of formation, not only the novitiate. *Il vade mecum dei giovani salesiani* was republished up until the second half of the twentieth century; the final edition in a single volume (1965), smaller than the earlier versions, has almost 1200 pages! In our opinion, it is the only true complete *manual of bosconian spirituality* ever written, even though many of its pages suffer from the limitations of the theology of time.

³ For a deeper study of the topic under discussion see G. BUCCELLATO, *Alla presenza di Dio. Ruolo dell’orazione mentale nel carisma di fondazione di San Giovanni Bosco*, PUG, Rome 2004.



1. The need for meditation in religious life

In Don Bosco’s handwritten notes in use at the retreat series at Trofarello (1866), the first such series of the nascent Congregation,⁴ we read: “Meditation. Be it shorter or longer, always do it.”⁵ “All those who gave themselves to the service of the Lord constantly made use of mental, vocal prayer, ejaculations.”⁶

For Don Bosco, the practices of piety are the nourishment that makes the soul of a religious strong. In the introduction to the Constitutions he wrote:

“As long as we observe our practices of piety, we shall live in harmony with everyone and we shall see the Salesian cheerful in spirit, and happy in his vocation.” “Let us be really solicitous never to omit meditation, spiritual reading, our daily visit to the the most holy Sacrament, weekly confession, the rosary of the Our Lady, the little mortification of Friday, and similar things. Although each of one of these practices taken by itself does not seem to be a thing of any great necessity, nevertheless they contribute efficaciously to the building up of our Christian perfection and salvation.”⁷

The *need*⁸ for meditation in religious life, as well as the *practical way of doing it* were, from the outset, the subject of Fr Barberis’ teachings throughout the first period of the regular novitiate; this is chronicled in his many notebooks over that time.

Let us flip through, *passim*, some of these very well ordered notes he used for conferences to the novices. “Mental prayer is completely necessary to understand the things of God, to penetrate their marrow, to show that we are filled with the Holy Spirit.”⁹ “Nothing is more necessary to a man than meditation. And J.(esus) C.(hrist) gave us this example in the first place. *Erat pernoctans in oratione Dei*. He preached throughout the day, healed etc., throughout the night he meditated, and note well: everything that J.C. did is an instruction for us. He spent forty days in continuous meditation and silence.”¹⁰ “St. Ignatius of Loyola: what was it that brought about his conversion, that lifted him up to so much life? Meditation!”¹¹ “Meditating rekindles fervour like a fervent plain of fire. But does meditation really have this virtue? Is it so useful? So necessary? Oh, this is exactly the case, exactly the case! The Lord assures us ever more of this through David in the Psalm: *Beatus vir qui in lege Domini meditatur in die ac nocte.*”¹²

⁴ This is the first experience of the Society’s “self-run” retreats, which were held at the house in Trofarello which Don Bosco dedicated especially to this purpose. In the perception of the first Salesians, these retreats marked a new beginning in the life of the Congregation. As we read in the minutes of the First General Chapter: “We have seen that here it can be said that the Congregation took on a somewhat more marked development from the time they purposely began to hold their own retreats” (ASC D 578, 304).

⁵ ASC A 225.04.03; cf. MB IX, 997.

⁶ *Op.cit.*

⁷ [G. Bosco], *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales. Secondo il decreto di approvazione del 3 aprile 1874*, [Tipografia dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales], Turin 1875, XXXII-XXXIV.

⁸ Here we are talking about a need that belongs to the moral order. On this topic see the text by G. LERCARO, *Metodi di orazione mentale*, Ancora, Milan 19693, 5-6; 11-114.

⁹ ASC B 509.03.01.

¹⁰ ASC A 000.01.08.

¹¹ ASC A 000.01.08.

¹² ASC B 509.03.01.



Even more explicit is a passage from 1882, taken from cleric Ducatto's notebook and relating to an *instruction*¹³ given by Don Bosco during the retreat that year:

My dear confreres, meditation is a practice of piety that I would say is not only important, not only very useful, but, I am about to say, is something necessary for us religious. Now, it is not my task to speak to you about this importance, about this necessity; but I see that it cannot be done without it, so I hope to speak to you about it purposefully in some of the upcoming instructions and meanwhile I will speak to you about the need we religious have to do it, of the great benefits it brings us when it is well done and how one must regulate oneself to do it really well.¹⁴

2. Meditation is to be distinguished from personal spiritual reading

Personal or community spiritual reading, insofar as it is reflection on a written text, involves the *intelligence* in the first instance, and is not, in a strict sense, prayer, mental prayer, intimate dialogue with God; here the main role is assigned to the *affections*.

This distinction clearly emerges in Don Bosco's teaching and in the practice of the nascent Congregation. And this difference is even always evident in pointers he gave to the youngsters. In his *avvisi per le vacanze* [holiday notices] given to the boarders since halfway through the 1850s and constantly repeated in the years that followed, Don Bosco advises them: "Every day: serve holy Mass if you can, meditation and some spiritual reading."¹⁵

Writing to Cavaliere Ugo Grimaldi from Bellino in 1862 he said: "Every morning, Mass and meditation. After midday, some spiritual reading."¹⁶ He wrote to Fr Giovanni Anfossi, a past pupil of the Valdocco Oratory, in 1867: "Meditation and the visit to the Blessed Sacrament will be two very powerful safeguards for you: make use of them."¹⁷ "I recommend three things to you" he wrote that same year to cleric Luigi Vaccaneo: "attention to morning meditation; mix with companions who are more inclined to piety; temperance with food."¹⁸ To another friend and benefactor of the Oratory, Cavaliere Federico Oreglia, in 1868 he would write: "Never forget to make your meditation every day and your spiritual reading."¹⁹

In the dream he recounted on 3 May 1868, Don Bosco dramatically described the murky scheming of the enemy of God who "laid traps so my boys would fall into hell."

Looking even more closely, I spotted knives among the traps. A providential hand had put them there for cutting oneself free. The bigger ones, symbolizing meditation, were for use against the trap of pride; others, not quite as big, symbolized spiritual reading well made. There were also two swords representing devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, especially

¹³ During the retreats in those years, a morning *meditation* and an afternoon *instruction* were offered. Don Bosco usually chose to reserve the afternoon instructions for himself, and dedicated them to the essential structures of religious life.

¹⁴ ASC B 509.04.12.

¹⁵ *Fondo Don Bosco* 446 A 3.

¹⁶ G. Bosco, *Epistolario*, Introduction, critical texts and notes by Francesco Motto, LAS, Rome 1991, II, 526.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 446.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 458.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 494-495.



through frequent Holy Communion, and to the Blessed Virgin. There was also a hammer symbolizing confession, and other knives signifying devotion to St. Joseph, to St. Aloysius, and to other saints. By these means quite a few boys were able to free themselves or evade capture.²⁰

The distinction made here between meditation and spiritual reading, also made in many other texts, allows us to understand that neither in the way he felt nor in how his listeners felt, was there any theoretical or real confusion between the two *practices of piety*.

In Don Bosco’s mind, due to the formation he had received at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* [Ecclesiastical College] in the wake of the Ignatian tradition that he had experienced for over thirty or more years of retreats at the *Santuario di Sant’Ignazio sopra Lanzo*, meditation was *mental prayer*, an intimate and personal conversation with God, and could not be confused, as perhaps happens today, with reading a text, no matter how useful and *spiritual* it might be.

3. Meditation and progress in the theological virtues

Meditation is recognised as the task of fostering progress in the theological virtues. The *Biographical Memoirs* tell us about an *instruction* of Don Bosco’s at the conclusion of the Trofarello retreats in 1867.

Our examination of conscience resembles this [referring to meditation]. Before retiring, let us check if we have practised our resolutions on some specific fault; let us ascertain our gain or loss in a sort of spiritual auditing; If we discover a failure in our resolution, let us renew it the next day, until we have succeeded in acquiring the virtue we are striving for or shall have destroyed or avoided the fault we wished to correct.²¹

Notes by Fr Gioachino Berto, Don Bosco’s secretary at the time, relating to the founder’s *instructions* during the retreat that same year, even more explicitly substantiate this conviction of the founder: “If someone has faith, and makes this visit to J(esus) S.(in the Blessed Sacrament) and makes his meditation every day, so long as he does not do so for worldly ends, then it is impossible for him to sin.”²²

The same teaching once again finds correspondence in the teachings of the novitiate: “What is more important for us religious,” writes Fr Barberis in 1875, “for us who tend to perfection by profession, is that without meditation one cannot even understand what perfection is, speaking in practical terms; on the other hand, it cannot be the case that someone who meditates well and does not give into temptation, does not tend seriously towards perfection.”²³ Writing some years later, Fr Barberis says:

Therefore, in the morning, when making meditation, no one should go to his work unless he has first impressed some of these truths on his mind and has firmly resolved to remember

²⁰ MB IX, 169-170 (BM, 9, 88).

²¹ MB IX, 355-356. (MB, 9, 167).

²² ASC A 025.01.03.

²³ ASC B 509.03.01.



them well during the day that is about to begin and to observe them punctually. Each lunch time, when we go to make a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, then at the foot of the altar let us renew the morning resolutions, recall the maxims we learned, the truths we came to know, and ever convinced of the great good that Holy Meditation has brought us, let us resolve ever more firmly that we want to regulate ourselves better during the rest of the day, ending it in the grace of the Lord, carrying out all those acts to which we are bound by duty. Then in the evening after supper, when we have said our prayers, on hearing these words: 'Let us pause for a few moments to consider the state of our conscience', let us immediately recollect ourselves, think of our meditation in the morning, let us mentally go over all the resolutions taken and remembered after lunch, and if in this examination we see that we have put them into practice, let us continue to do the same in the future.²⁴

This practice had to have been a particularly considered one among the early Salesians if cleric Pietro Scappini's biographer wrote in his necrology:

In a special way the daily meditation of eternal truths helped him to progress on the path of virtue and to remain constant in his vocation. He used to say that without meditation he would never have been able to overcome his many deep-rooted faults. The practice of this exercise cost him a great deal of effort, because his lively imagination naturally led him to other thoughts; but with perseverance he was able to do it so well that he could say that he spent many meditations without any distraction.²⁵

Similarly, we read in the small biography of cleric Giacomo Vigliocco:

It was in frequent Communion and meditation that he learned to overcome himself so much that his companions and superiors could not find even the smallest thing to pin on him! It was from these two sources that he drew such a love of scorn that not only did he not take offence when he was insulted or despised, but he was asked several times by his teacher for permission to do something odd so that he could suffer scorn for it from his companions.²⁶

4. Importance of meditation as a daily practice

To be effective, mental prayer needs to be *daily*. The loss of this *habit* can have serious consequences for religious life.

The minutes of the Third General Chapter tell us about this belief of the founder of the Salesians. According to the minutes by the secretary, Fr Giovanni Marengo, Don Bosco said in the third of his six final recommendations:

Nemo repente fit summus, nemo fit malus. So, attend to the principles to prevent the great future evil. Experience tells us this. If someone has placed the Dir.(ector) and the House in a difficult position, he has begun to leave aside medit(ation), the practices of piety; then some newspapers, some particular friendships, in short, general turmoil.²⁷

²⁴ ASC B 509.04.12.

²⁵ [G. Bosco], *Società di S. Francesco di Sales*. Anno 1880, Tipografia Salesiana, Torino 1881, 51.

²⁶ [G. Bosco], *Società di S. Francesco di Sales*. Anno 1877, Tipografia Salesiana, Torino 1878, 43- 44.

²⁷ ASC D 579. This is page 2 of the minutes sheet entitled *7 Settembre sera. Ultima conferenza.* (7 September, evening. Final conference.)



According to Fr Berto’s notes, he had said some years earlier at the Trofarello retreat: “By prayer we mean everything that raises up our affections to God. Like morning meditation. This is the first. Let everyone always made it.”²⁸

Fr Barberis’ teaching follows the founder’s thinking: “You are almost all Salesians or about to enter, and here we do meditation. Good then, do it gladly. But there are some who are not [Salesians] and who are free [to organise their own time] or will be: are they interested in going to paradise? Do they want to live a Christian life, and have no regrets when they die? Let them also do some daily meditation.”²⁹

5. Convenience of doing meditation in the morning

It is convenient for meditation to be done in the morning before starting one’s daily occupations. Fr Barberis’ *cronichetta* tells us of this opinion of Don Bosco’s:

It is true that there are many good Christians in the world but there are also many dangers, and how many difficulties one has to overcome to do a bit of good! For example, let us look at Christians who do meditation, of whom there are very few in the world, but let us look at which Christians can do it better. Here, fortunately, we have the holy custom of doing meditation, but if we want to do it all together we just have to get up early in the morning. We get up at five o’clock and do it all together without anyone disturbing us. In the world, on the other hand, it is not possible for many people to do it; during the day they don’t know what time to do it because housework is pressing from all sides. We don’t talk about getting up early – some wait till 7 or 8 o’clock or even 10 o’clock.... If we were to do this, what would happen to meditation? There would be no more talk of meditation!³⁰

St Vincent de Paul’s long letter, attached for the first time to the Italian edition of the Constitutions in 1877, is confirmation of Don Bosco desire to insist on this principle.

This letter has practically disappeared, over the years, from the Congregation’s memory, although it remained linked to the Salesian Constitutions for the whole of the founder’s life and for about thirty years after.

By Don Bosco’s express wish, it was located in a “strategic” position, right in the centre of the Rule book, between the introduction *To the Salesian confreres* and the text of the rules. “Put it after the introduction and before the text of the Rules”,³¹ Don Bosco wrote in his own hand on the handwritten copy prepared by Fr Barberis for the printer, also coining the title to accompany the printed edition of the Constitutions: *Letter of St Vincent de Paul addressed to his religious about all getting up at the same time*. The letter’s message, which Don Bosco clearly made his own, is a simple one: fidelity to religious life depends on morning meditation, and meditation on everyone’s willingness to get up at the same time. Let us look at a passage:

The grace of vocation is linked with prayer, and the grace of prayer to that of getting up. If we are faithful to this first activity, if we come together and before Our Lord, and together

²⁸ ASC A 025.01.10.

²⁹ ASC A 000.01.08.

³⁰ ASC A 000.04.06.

³¹ ASC D 473.04.01.



present ourselves to him as the early Christians did, he in turn will give himself to us. He will enlighten us with his lights and will do the good in us and for us that we are obliged to do in his church. And he will finally give us the grace to reach the degree of perfection that he desires from us, so that one day we can possess him fully for all eternity.³²

In order to strongly insist with his Salesians on the importance of meditation, Don Bosco invokes the authority not of a mystic but of an apostle of charity. This choice is certainly surprising and increases the objective value of the indications that Don Bosco's letter and exhortation contain.

6. Meditation in common or in private

The practice of meditation as a practice of piety to be done in common became the rule probably from the 1870s. A few years earlier, again at Trofarello, Don Bosco had said: "Whoever can do so, let them make this visit and reading in common; whoever cannot do it in common, can do it in private. Meditation could also be done in your room."³³

Some of the novitiate's teachings stress, in addition to the importance of meditation, the need to do it in private when it could not be done in common with others. We read in Fr Barberis' notes from 1877:

After rising, we come together to do our meditation; and let us do this well. Some people will not yet know how to do it; this will be learned as soon as possible; but the commitment should be seen now and done gladly and as well as possible. It is a rule of thumb that everyone does [meditation] for half an hour a day. Let those who can, come and do it here with the others; let those who cannot do it in common, see how to find the time to do it in private; but always do it.³⁴

And again on the same theme:

Indeed, there are very many occupations that Salesian members have to attend to in the individual houses; some teach, some assist in the workshops, and some assist either in elementary or lower or upper secondary classes; there are those who have to go out to do things and others who work as artisans...; and so it follows as a consequence that not everyone can conform to one and the same timetable, given that needs have their strong demands, therefore the rules do not oblige all individual Salesian members to always participate together in every individual practice of piety. For example meditation is done in the morning after rising, or at nine; spiritual reading at 2 of an afternoon, the exercise for a happy death at the end of each month; well then there will be someone who cannot go to meditation perhaps because he feels unwell; nor can he go at nine since he has to teach, assist in the workshops, go out for tasks and so on... Well, that being the case, not having the necessary time, not being able to practise this or another practice of piety in common, can one then let all of them go, I ask? Certainly not; because if we keep to the spirit of the rule, it warns us that if we cannot fulfil the practices of piety in common, we must do them privately, each one by himself as soon as he can and never omit them.³⁵

³² [G. Bosco], *Regole o Costituzioni...*, [1877], cit., 47

³³ ASC A 025.01.03.

³⁴ ASC B 509.03.02.

³⁵ ASC B 509.04.12.



The practice of the Salesians too had to be geared to this principle if what the biographer writes about Giovanni Battista Caraglio is true: “He never omitted Meditation and saying the holy Rosary; and when he became a priest, when his occupations did not allow him to take part in common he never failed to make them privately before going to rest. He used to say that Meditation and the Holy Rosary are essential practices for the Religious and the Priest.”³⁶

It seems that we could say that in the common feeling of the founder and the Congregation, meditation in common was, however, to be preferred, probably also due to a healthy “prudence”, or the custom of reading the *points* for meditation from a single book that not everyone had. This idea is contained in *St Vincent de Paul’s Letter*, already mentioned. In one passage from this, St Vincent says that he had identified the reason for the decay of some of the houses of his Congregation precisely in the loss of the *habitus* of meditation in common:

To discover it, a little bit of patience and attention on our part was necessary; finally, God has shown us that the freedom of some to sleep more than the rule agrees with has produced this bad effect; so that more than not being at prayer with others, they were deprived of the advantages had from doing it in common, and rarely or never did they do it in private.³⁷

The desire to maintain the practice of meditation in common is also testified to by some deliberations of the Fourth General Chapter in 1886 concerning the timetable to be followed in parishes. In order to save the opportunity to participate together in this practice of piety, it was decided to place it in the afternoon or at any other convenient time.³⁸

7. Length of meditation

The length of meditation prescribed by the Constitutions was finally established by the text approved in 1874: *Singulis diebus unusquisque praeter orationes vocales saltem per dimidium horae orationi mentali vacabit, nisi quisquam impediatur ob exercitium sacri ministerii.*³⁹

A clarification from Fr Barberis that goes back to 1882, explains what the Constitutions say: “Article Three of Chapter XII speaks about mental prayer, otherwise called meditation, which we are to do at least half an hour of every day. This ‘at least’ indicates that we can also do more, depending on how we feel, but we are not bound to do more; however, everyone should do at least half an hour every day.”⁴⁰

Once again, a look at what was done in practice could be useful. Fr Luigi Deppert writes about cleric Giovanni Arata his companion in first year philosophy:

³⁶ [G. Bosco], *Biografie dei Salesiani defunti nel 1882*, Tip. S. Vincenzo, S. Pier d’Arena 1883, 49.

³⁷ [G. Bosco], *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales. Secondo il decreto di approvazione del 3 aprile 1874*, [Tipografia dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales], Torino 1877, 43-44.

³⁸ Cf. ASC D 579; *Fondo Don Bosco 1865 D 10; Deliberazioni del terzo e quarto Capitolo Generale della Pia Società Salesiana tenuti in Valsalice nel settembre 1883-86*, Tipografia Salesiana, S. Benigno Canavese 1887, 7.

³⁹ G. Bosco, *Regulae seu Constitutiones Societatis S. Francisci Salesii juxta approbationis decretum die 3 aprilis 1874*, Augustae Taurinorum 1874, 185.

⁴⁰ *Op.cit.* Here we have used the first translation in 1875.



As busy as he was, he never ever omitted daily meditation for a good half hour. Oh! How often did I see him closed in his workshop all absorbed in deep meditation! And to concentrate more and more on the things he read, he always kept a small crucifix in front of him, blessed by the Pope, and from time to time he looked at it, his eyes wet with tears.⁴¹

8. Meditation, affective prayer and imagination

The final quotation from the preceding paragraph introduces us to a reflection on the role of the affections in “Salesian” meditation.

“*In meditatione mea exardescet ignis* (Ps 38[39]:4). While I mused, the fire burned.”⁴² This belief, expressed by Don Bosco in his handwritten note for Trofarello is often repeated in the earliest Salesian literature, assigning to meditation the specific role of *exciting the affections*. We read in Fr Gioachino Berto’s notes taken during one of Don Bosco’s *instructions*:

We also need to excite the affections of love, of gratitude, of humility towards God; asking him for the many graces we need; and asking him with tears for the forgiveness of our sins. Let us always remember that God is our Father and we are his children. Therefore I recommend mental prayer.⁴³

In the Ignatian meditation that was taught in the novitiate at Valdocco after the approval of the Constitutions,⁴⁴ the role of the affections is particularly emphasised. Fr Secondo Franco, one of the Jesuits invited to the First General Chapter, after speaking of the role of the *intellect* and *memory* in meditation, writes: “Behind all these considerations finally, comes the will, which must burst forth in affections proportionate to what has been meditated upon, and in generous resolutions about what we must practice in the future. This is the most important part of meditation.”⁴⁵

Awareness of this influence runs through many of the teachings of Fr Giulio Barberis: “Isn’t our soul in the same circumstances? Why is it desolate, why does it have no virtue, why does it have so many imperfections? *Nemo est qui recogitet corde*. So what do we do to become fervent? David tells us in his Psalms: *In meditatione mea exardescet ignis*, In my meditation a fire shall flame out.”⁴⁶ On another occasion he wrote:

Let us remember those words: *In meditatione mea exardescet ignis*; in meditating, the fire of my spirit grows ever brighter... It would be advantageous to take ourselves in spirit to

⁴¹ ASC B 196.33.01. This is a letter on a single sheet of paper, written on three sides and dated 21/1/79, bearing the letterhead of the *Archconfraternity of Mary Help of Christians*.

⁴² ASC A 225.04.03; cf. MB IX, 997. Note however that the translation in English here is from the NRSVACE, the New Revised Standard Version Anglicised Catholic Edition.

⁴³ MB IX, 355-356.

⁴⁴ See the lengthy 1875 conference by Fr Giulio Barberis on the way of making meditation in ASC B 509.03.01.

⁴⁵ S. FRANCO, *Istruzioni per le religiose in tempo di esercizi*, Tipografia Pontificia ed Arcivescovile, Modena (year of publication is lacking). This is the twenty-third volume of the collection that brings together the works of Jesuit Fr Franco, who took part in the First Salesian General Chapter in 1877 together with another Jesuit, Fr Giovanni Battista Rostagno. Fr Ceria tells us in the *Biographical Memoirs*: “(Don Bosco) had conferred several times with them before the chapter opened so as to plan things in conformity with Church law and the customs of religious congregations” (MB XIII, 253; BM, XIII, 185).

⁴⁶ ASC B 509.03.01.



Mount Calvary, when Christ is hanging there on the cross in the midst of two thieves, laden and covered with wounds, crowned with thorns, pierced by a thousands and thousands of wounds, bloodied on every side, so that, oh, no longer has the appearance of a man; and then let us say to ourselves: My soul, your God is hanging from the hard trunk of a cross; and then meditate on why.⁴⁷

This latter teaching of Fr Barberis also offers us the possibility of highlighting the role assigned to the *imagination*, another characteristic feature of meditation according to the method of St Ignatius. “We need to imagine we are present to the Mystery,” Fr Barberis taught in 1875 in one of the first conferences for the 1875–76 novitiate year, “and consider the people, actions, words that intervene or are said when pondering that Mystery.”⁴⁸

The *taking ourselves in spirit to Mount Calvary*, clearly aims at moving the will and the heart, as well as keeping all our other powers focused. This is the so-called *composition of place* that Ignatius speaks of in his *Spiritual Exercises*.⁴⁹

Cleric Giacomo Vigliocco’s meditation appears to put these teachings into practice. The effect reported by the biographer is, once again, a growth in the theological virtue of charity towards God and neighbour.

One of his secrets for doing meditation well was this: at the beginning, placing himself in the presence of God, he imagined that Jesus Crucified appeared to him visibly, and that he was observing him from the Cross. He did so with all possible commitment... The continuous thought of Jesus Crucified in his meditations was what made him take great practical resolutions, which he then tried with all his might to carry out. This made him scrutinise every hidden closet of his heart, to see if there was still the germ of some vice to be eradicated, or what virtues he needed most to enrich himself with. Oh how often, not being able to contain the fullness of his heart, he would then cry out to his master, indicating his desire to give his life to save souls; his desire to suffer for the love of Jesus Christ, more than all the people in the world; his desire to launch out among people and bring about their conversion!⁵⁰

9. Importance and usefulness of a method

A method, essential but well-structured in its parts, was suggested as early as 1867 by Don Bosco to the young Salesians at Trofarello: we read in Fr Berto’s notes that: “Meditation could be done this way. Choose the topic consciously, first put ourselves in God’s presence, then meditate on it well, then arrive at choosing things to apply it to ourselves, coming to the conclusion, that is, to resolve to leave aside faults or practise virtues, excite the affections. Then thank God and practise or avoid throughout the day what we resolved to do in the morning.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ ASC B 509.04.12.

⁴⁸ ASC B 509.03.01.

⁴⁹ Cf. IGNATIUS LOYOLA, *Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 194-197.

⁵⁰ [G. BOSCO], *Società di S. Francesco di Sales. Anno 1877*, cit., 43- 44.

⁵¹ ASC A 025.01.03.



The teachings of the first canonical novitiate would then give ample space to instructions on *how* to do meditation. Fr Barberis' texts, from the outset, are of obvious Ignatian derivation.⁵²

In fact, the First General Chapter would indicate, in relation to the method of doing meditation, a common theoretical reference in the long introduction to the text of meditations by Jesuit Fr Luis de la Puente (1554–1624).⁵³ We read in the minutes:

It was then asked which book was known to be the most suitable for beginners for doing meditation. Among others there is Da Ponte and one can continue with that immense material, and when finished one can start again, over and over. (Meditation) is nothing more than an exercise of the three faculties of intelligence, memory, will, as Da Ponte himself teaches in his introduction. An introduction that should be read a hundred times and learned by heart because it is worth its weight in gold. Those who follow what is said in the introduction will find the way of doing meditation immensely easy; but one must be patient; beginners must be taught well; one must see to it that they all have the book in hand, and make them learn according to that method.⁵⁴

The cited *Introduction*, which *should be read a hundred times and learned by heart since it is worth its weight in gold*, in the Italian Marietti 1875 edition, is a good thirty-six densely packed pages. It is a true and proper treatise on mental prayer, following the method of St Ignatius.

Another text that would be disseminated in the Congregation in the following decades would be the *Exercise of Perfection and Christian Virtues* by Jesuit Alfonso Rodriguez (1541–1616); a text that Don Bosco had used when writing his introduction to the Constitutions of the Society, *To the Salesian Confreres*.

10. The *rendiconto* (friendly chat) and meditation

One of the points that had to be the subject of the regular report of the Salesian to his superior, according to the first General Chapter, is “how (he) describes himself at prayer and meditations”.⁵⁵

Similarly, in the first draft of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, that goes back to 1871, we find:

In order to advance on the path of virtue and religious perfection, they will benefit greatly from a great openness of heart with the Superior as the one who is destined by God to lead them on the path of perfection after the Confessor. Therefore, at least once a month they will

⁵² Cf. ASC A 000.02.05.

⁵³ His widespread *Meditaciones de los misterios de nuestra santa fe, con la práctica de la oración mental sobre ellos*, published for the first time in Valladolid in 1605, saw many editions in many languages. His surname was also mistakenly translated in various editions that followed: “Da Ponte” in Italian or “Dupont” in French. Marietti Publishers in Turin, just two years before this First Salesian General Chapter, had published an eighth edition of this work, translated from the Spanish by Giulio Cesare Braccini and corrected by Fr Giacomo Bonaretti.

⁵⁴ ASC D 578, 116-117.

⁵⁵ *Deliberazioni del Capitolo Generale della Pia Società Salesiana tenuto in Lanzo Torinese nel settembre 1877*, Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, Turin 1878, 49-50.



manifest their inner self with all simplicity and clarity, and they will receive instructions and advice for succeeding in the exercise of mental prayer, in the practice of mortification and in observance of the Holy Rules of the Institute.⁵⁶

A “*rendiconto*” of Giovanni Arata’s, made in writing to his Rector, Fr Giulio Barberis, confirms the fact for us that daily meditation was, in practice, the subject of periodic review. He writes:

The things I remember, and they seem to me to be suited to the importance of the monthly *rendiconto*, are the following. To tell you the truth (I don’t know for what particular reasons, but it will certainly be due to my negligence) I am not happy with how I have behaved this month. What pains me greatly is the distraction I have had in my prayer. At meditation I cannot recollect myself except without great difficulty, truly consider myself in God’s presence, think seriously about the matter, carry it out, and what is more, I am not very moved by the subject I meditate on. I do not think I have gained much from meditation; and perhaps this has a lot of influence on it that I rarely remember what I meditated on in the morning.⁵⁷

Conclusions

Certainly, the active life which the *Society of St Francis de Sales* pursues, implies the fact that Don Bosco did not prescribe many *practices in common*, but among them he did constantly recommend *formal mental prayer* or meditation. Very much indicative of this is the fact that the teachings in the early months of the novitiate in the tradition of our origins were dedicated to its importance and to the method for making one’s meditation profitably.

Well beyond the perspective of *obligation* what emerges from the founder’s proposal is that he is moving towards the notion of a prayer life that encourages *extensive* mental prayer, continually thinking about God, affective and silent prayer “not limited by time”; Testimony to this is the role assigned to prayer in the many Lives written by Don Bosco.⁵⁸ “Vocal prayer without the intervention of mental prayer”, we read in the handwritten notes prepared for the retreats at Trofarello, “is like a body without a soul – one of the Lord’s complaints: *Populus hic labiis me honorat: cor autem eorum longe est a me* (Mark 7:6).”

In this contribution of ours we have tried to make the most of *unpublished* texts. Better than any theoretical treatment, in fact, they can give us back the *lived experience* of our Congregation, how the first generations of Salesians felt, the actual practice, the founder’s “tastes”.

It would be of great interest to continue our research to investigate the magisterium of the first successors of Don Bosco; we would discover in their writings the same sensitivity

⁵⁶ [G. Bosco], *Costituzioni Regole Dell’Istituto Delle figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice. Sotto la protezione di S. Giuseppe, di S. Francesco di Sales e di Sa. Teresa*, in the General Archives of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (AGFMA), *Regole manoscritte, Quaderno n. 1, 42*.

⁵⁷ ASC B 196.33.01.

⁵⁸ On this, other than the study already cited, see the entry by G. BUCCELLATO, *Giovanni Bosco: il geloso custode della sua vita con Dio*, in L. BORRIELLO – E. CARUANA – M.R. DEL GENIO – R. DI MURO (eds.), *Nuovo Dizionario di Mistica*, Vatican City 2016.



as the founder and the living testimony of the importance he gave to meditation. We report here only two fragments of this precious magisterium.

Fr Paul Albera, second successor of Don Bosco, wrote in a 1921 circular:

To the extent [...] that the power of the passions is diminishing in us and the desire for spiritual progress is becoming more alive and the love of God more ardent, the work of the intellect will play an ever smaller part in our prayer, while the movements of the heart, holy desires, entreaties and fervent resolutions will prevail. This is what is known as affective prayer, and which in turn leads to unitive prayer, called ordinary contemplative prayer by masters of the spirit. Some people may think that a Salesian should not aim so high, and that Don Bosco did not want this from his children, since from the beginning he did not even impose methodical meditation in common on them. But I can assure you that it was always his desire to see his sons soar, through meditation, to that intimate union with God which he had so admirably brought about in himself, and he never tired of urging us to this on every propitious occasion.⁵⁹

And Fr Rinaldi, in a circular to novice masters in 1930 now preserved in the *Salesian Central Archives*, wrote:

Without meditation one cannot properly understand and enjoy the spiritual life. And note that by meditation Don Bosco does not mean only recollection or focused prayer which dispels voluntary distractions: he is talking about meditation itself just as we do it now, that is, meditation which is made up of reflections and pious considerations on the truths of the faith, on the Life of Jesus Christ, on Christian and religious virtues, to draw devout feelings and effective intentions from them for a better life. And we know how he always continued to meditate, even amid the vicissitudes of those hard and difficult years.⁶⁰

We began, in the introduction, by stating that our intentions were not, in any way, historico-archaeological.

A few years ago, Salesian Fr Pietro Brocardo, at the conclusion of his study of the topic of the *rendiconto*, described it courageously as “an essential charismatic fact”,⁶¹ politely decrying those who too simplistically justified their abandonment of this practice.

We are convinced that a correct *hermeneutical* path would allow us to recover some fundamental elements of the precious legacy handed down to us by the founder.

We firmly believe that the future of our religious family depends on this careful research, animated by a sincere love for Don Bosco and by the belief expressed by the Council that “The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.”⁶²

⁵⁹ *Lettere circolari di Don Paolo Albera ai Salesiani*, SEI, Turin 1922, 406-407.

⁶⁰ ASC A 384.01.15. The Letter, entitled *Cari maestri degli ascritti* has no date, but can be placed between 1930 (it quotes a circular from Fr Luigi Tirone that year) and 1931 (the year Fr Rinaldi died). It is a precious personal testimony of the fourth successor of Don Bosco, as well as containing important indications and directives for novice masters.

⁶¹ Cf. P. BROCCARDO, *Maturare in dialogo fraterno. Dal “rendiconto” di Don Bosco al “colloquio fraterno”*, LAS, Rome 1999, 210.

⁶² *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.



We believe that fidelity to a method or to a particular school of spirituality is not an inescapable constraint; the changing conditions of the times, the importance given to Sacred Scripture today and the progress of theology can open up new paths for us. Perhaps the changed conditions of life could also open up a discussion on the concrete *possibility* of meditation in *common*.

Many other things could be discussed in depth. But the fact remains, that in our opinion the need for *formal mental prayer* or meditation in Salesian religious life remains, using Fr Broccardo's happy expression, an *essential charismatic fact*...





Learning to meditate with St Francis de Sales

Eunan McDonnell SDB

I shall never stop praying God to perfect His work in you, that is, to further your excellent desire and plan to attain the fullness of Christian life, a desire which you should cherish and nurture tenderly in your heart. Consider this to be a work of the Holy Spirit and a spark of His divine flame.¹

What is meditation?

THE WORD *meditation* itself has the same Greek root as medicine which points to our ability to attend to or to take care of. It follows that meditation is the effort we make to attend to something, to allow something to become our *focus*. It has been scientifically proven that there is a biological aspect to meditation which helps to reduce stress and the pressures of life. At a human level, therefore, it is good to meditate. However, when we speak of meditation within the Christian tradition we are not speaking about attending to something but *attending to someone*. Commenting on Salesian meditation,² Devasia writes,

Salesian meditation is a regular, systematic training of the attention to turn inward and dwell continuously on a single focus, Jesus. The aim is to become so absorbed with the person of Jesus that after many years of meditation and contemplation we totally forget ourselves.³

The role of delight or complacency is essential to this understanding of meditation that we are learning to rejoice in the mystery that is Christ. St Francis de Sales often speaks of delight. This delight is nothing but the way of the mind that releases itself to be caught up in the divine mystery. In Christian meditation, therefore, our aim is to attend to the presence of God dwelling within us. We also come to the realization that we dwell within God that we do not contain God; God contains us. Christian meditation “engages thought, imagination,

¹ St Francis de Sales *Letter to Jane Frances de Chantal*, 3 May 1604, OEA XII: 263-64. References are taken from *Oeuvres Édition d'Annecy* and abbreviated as follows: OEA, followed by the volume (Roman numerals) and page (Arabic numerals).

² The adjective *Salesian* is a reference in this article predominantly to the thinking of Francis de Sales; to highlight this, it will be in italics in the pages that follow.

³ D. MANALEL, *Spiritual Direction. A methodology*, SFS Publications, Bangalore 2005, 157.



emotion and desire” in prayer.⁴ Non-Christian meditation practices aim at *emptying the mind*, but Christian meditation *engages the mind in prayer*. The task is not to empty the mind but to fill it with “all that is true, noble and pure” (Phil 4:8).

As Christians, we believe that our true life is hidden in Christ that through baptism we now participate in his relationship with the Father through the Spirit. Meditation, understood as becoming aware of God’s presence dwelling within us, reveals a fundamental truth: *Meditation is not something we do, it is a response to God who has loved us first*. It is always God’s initiative when we pray because God is drawing us to Himself. Christ is already praying within us to the Father and we have access to this ceaseless prayer through the gift of their mutual love, the Holy Spirit, who has been poured into our hearts. We are tuning into God already praying within us. Consequently, when we don’t know how to pray “the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words” (Rm 8:26) because “the Spirit searches into all things even the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10).

Why do we meditate?

The simple answer to the question: *Why do we meditate?* is that we meditate so as to develop *friendship with Christ*,⁵ for God is the “friend of the human heart.”⁶ *Salesian* meditation highly recommends Scripture as a privileged means through which we encounter the person of Jesus. Accordingly, Christian meditation is relational because it is through the practice of meditation (*mental prayer*) that we develop and deepen our mutual love.⁷ St Francis de Sales continues, it is through our fidelity to meditation that we become transformed by love so that we draw the heart of God into our own.⁸ In *Salesian* meditation we never bypass the humanity of Christ, and He remains our constant focus:

I especially counsel you to practice mental prayer, the prayer of the heart, and particularly that which centres on the life and passion of our Lord. By often turning your eyes on him in meditation, your whole soul will be filled with him. You will learn his ways and form your actions after the pattern of his.⁹

This is more than an imitation of Christ, this is a transformative experience allowing Christ to live in us. He summarizes this succinctly in the phrase to ‘live Jesus.’ This living Jesus or letting Jesus live in us means we become another humanity where he can renew his mystery.¹⁰ He can live again in us and love through us.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2708.

⁵ Prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it “The Life,” Chapter 8 par. 5, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.D.C., ICS Publications, Washington 1976, 167.

⁶ OEA IV, 163-164. Cf. also IV, 295; IV, 319; IV, 331; V, 19; V, 196.

⁷ For a better understanding of Salesian prayer, see *Affairs of the Heart* in J.F. CHORPENNING – T. F. DAILEY – D.P. WISNIEWSKI (eds.), *Love is the Perfection of the Mind*, De Sales University, Pennsylvania 2017, 65-82.

⁸ OEA IV, 116. 162. 164. There are multiple references, in the *Treatise* which allude to God as the origin of the inspirations that he sends into our hearts. OEA IV, 117. 128. 230. 232. 234; OEA V, 89. 91. 100. 103. 344.

⁹ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part II, ch.1, nos. 1-2.

¹⁰ Cf. A. KANE (trad.), *Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, I, ICS Publications, Washington 1984, 183-184.



Following in the footsteps of St Bernard, St Francis de Sales maintains the distinction between affective love (prayer) and effective love (service). This encapsulates the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbour. They are not reducible one to the other. We express our love for God *affectively* through prayer and *effectively* through service of our neighbour.

St Francis famously said, we must learn to leave God for God. This implies that if we are disturbed by our neighbour while we are praying, then, we must learn to leave God whom we are worshipping in prayer and respond to the same God who now disturbs us in our neighbour. However, he also said that in the midst of our busyness we must learn to withdraw into our hearts to acknowledge God dwelling within us. Just as “birds have nests in the trees where they can seek refuge” or “deers hide, seek shelter and find the coolness of the shade in summer in thickets and bushes. Similarly, Philothea, our hearts must find and choose some place each day, to be near him. There we must seek refuge at every opportunity.”¹¹ In short, St Francis is encouraging us to become more aware of, and practice living in, God’s presence.

This is at the basis of the Salesian practice of making short spontaneous prayers throughout the day. The key term here is ‘withdrawal’ into our heart. Indeed, St John Bosco also advocated this withdrawal (*ritiratezza*) that “refers above all to the interior life, to a fruitful solitude that favours recollection and prayer.”¹² This withdrawal into our heart in the midst of busyness is only made possible if there is a foundation already built through the faithful practice of Christian meditation. This foundational practice of meditation is essential for our vocal prayer, as St John Bosco reminds us, because “vocal prayer without the mental is like a body without a soul.”¹³ St Teresa of Avila concurs with this because she states that proper attention to vocal prayer inevitably leads us into contemplative prayer as we become more attentive to God whom we are addressing.¹⁴ It is the lack of this attentiveness that makes our vocal prayer simply a matter of going through the motions. On the contrary, a personal relationship developed through meditation sensitizes us more to the presence of God even in vocal prayer. We become more aware of whom we are addressing.

If Jesus found it necessary to withdraw so as to be absorbed in loving communion with his Father, does it not follow, that we as his disciples must do likewise? It is this relational or affective quality of prayer that is encapsulated in the Salesian understanding of prayer as ‘heart to heart.’¹⁵

St Francis de Sales reminds us of the purpose of meditation which is to awaken in our hearts an affective love for God. True Christian meditation leads us on the path to move from *thinking about God* to entering into *loving communion with God*. We meditate so as to awaken

¹¹ F. DE SALES, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Bk.II:12.

¹² G. BUCCELLATO, *Notes for a Spiritual History of Father John Bosco* (Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2014), 46. Don Bosco writes in the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, ‘I will love and practice ritiratezza’ (MO,123)

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴ TERESA D’AVILA, *Via della perfezione*, in *Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, II, translation by K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, ICS Publications, Washington 1980, 152.

¹⁵ OEA V, 30. In the English speaking world this dictum ‘*cor ad cor loquitur*’ was popularized by Cardinal John Henry Newman, but originates from his reading of St Francis de Sales.



love, we contemplate because we love. Meditation which requires our effort, gives way to contemplation where God's grace takes over. St Francis de Sales communicates this through the following metaphor. When we meditate it is like rowing a boat, when we contemplate it is because God has filled the sails of our ship and rowing is no longer necessary.¹⁶ However, once the wind drops, we are required to start rowing again. The clear goal of Christian meditation is to encounter Christ, especially through his Word. This encounter leads us to an enjoyment of his presence (contemplative prayer) which is a gift from God and totally dependent on his grace. As our prayer deepens, there is less need for words and thoughts as we become present to God who is always present to us.

The practice of meditation

Meditation is concerned with encountering Christ and deepening our friendship with Him, awakening our love for God, and becoming attentive to God who transforms us through this loving encounter. The practice of meditation, therefore, is of supreme importance as it reveals our attitude to *give time to God*. The more "we give God our time, we will be able to find time for others, too. By paying attention to God, we learn to pay attention to others. Prayer gives us the grace to live each moment of life with ever greater fruitfulness."¹⁷

The problems we encounter with meditation are always due to "*heart problems*. Our heart is not in it, we make excuses. We don't come to it with longing, desire, enthusiasm, but begrudgingly... Two people who love each other deeply can hardly have problems thinking of how to spend their time together. It is enough to be together as often as they can! Unfortunately, we have not reached this point because our love for God is weak. We fail to engage our heart."¹⁸ Meditation is designed to awaken our love for God. Although it is very much a personal journey, meditating together in community or with others has a benefit for us as the body of Christ because "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am present in their midst" (Mt 18:20).

At the early stages of meditation, it is necessary to have certain guidelines like learning to play an instrument or any sport. The continued practice enables us to acquire the skill or art. Later, the scaffolding which was necessary for the beginning of the building can be removed and we can enjoy a "method-less method." As St Jane Frances de Chantal observes, "for the best method of prayer is not to have any method, because prayer is not obtained through a technique but through grace." Although we cannot rely on a method, there are certain interior attitudes or dispositions that can prepare us to receive the gift of prayer: Faith and trust; Fidelity and perseverance; purity of intention; humility and spiritual poverty, giving oneself completely to God.¹⁹

Salesian meditation requires a certain *liberté d'esprit* (freedom of spirit) which is why St Francis de Sales counsels that following guidelines in meditation must be abandoned should you find the Spirit of God leading you in a particular direction. He writes:

¹⁶ Cf. OEA IV, 234

¹⁷ J. PHILIPPE, *Time for God*, St Paul's, London 2005, 30.

¹⁸ E. MC CAFFREY, *Pray as you can, not as you can't, the best and only advice*, in *Mount Carmel* 59/3 (Sept. 2011), 66.

¹⁹ Cf. J. PHILIPPE, *Time for God*, cit., 30.



It may sometimes happen that immediately after the preparation you will feel that your affections are drawn wholly towards God. In this case, you must give them free rein and not follow the method I have shown you. Ordinarily, consideration must precede affections and resolutions. However, when the Holy Spirit gives you the affections before the consideration, you must not look for the consideration since it is used only to arouse the affections. In a word, whenever affections present themselves you must accept them and make room for them whether they come before or after the consideration.²⁰

If we have awakened love through meditation, then, we mustn't stay with guidelines but remain attentive to the presence of God. Taking this into consideration I will present some guidelines concerning *Salesian* meditation.

How do we meditate?

The following are six steps proposed as an aid for meditation:

1. Preparation
2. Place yourself in the presence of God
3. Focus on the Word of God
4. An attitude of listening
5. Conclude with resolutions and gratitude
6. Review of prayer.

1. Preparation

In an interview about prayer, Cardinal Basil Hume shocked his interviewer when he replied that he prayed only five minutes a day. He went on to elucidate that he spent fifty-five minutes in preparation for his five minutes of prayer! Just as any physical sport requires warm-up exercises so the discipline of meditation requires preparation. This preparation can be either remote or proximate. Remote preparation is to choose the passage of Scripture the night before and to familiarize yourself with it. One can choose the Gospel reading of the following day or the upcoming Sunday. It can be read, studied or explored with a commentary. It is particularly fruitful for meditation to read it before going to sleep as the subconscious will be working on it during the night.

Proximate preparation is the time immediately before we begin our meditation. It is important to arrive in good time for meditation so as to benefit from the preparation. At this point we can revisit the passage we have chosen and return to a certain word or phrase

²⁰ F. DE SALES, *Introduction*, Part II, ch.8.



that draws us, allowing this to become our focus. Such preparation can be a help against distractions which often arise when we lack focus and find it difficult to be attentive to God. An important part of meditation is the quieting or stilling of the mind, emptying our mind of thoughts, becoming aware of feelings and letting them go, so that we become more receptive to the presence of God. Meditation immerses us into the now where God is present. Our thoughts and feelings are often associated with what has happened (past) or what is going to happen (future) which prevents us from being present to God who is the eternal NOW. This explains why the early morning is often the best time for meditation before our mind has had the time to become engaged on its treadmill of activity.

Whilst acknowledging that prayer is above all a gift of God, there are things we can do to make ourselves more open to receiving God's gift of prayer. St Francis de Sales compares us humorously to a clock that "no matter how good it may be, it needs resetting and rewinding twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening."²¹ Furthermore, in response to the question posed concerning those who are busy doing God's work, he quipped, "half an hour is needed but if you are busy, then, an hour." It is important to remain faithful to the practice of meditation and not to arise early from the allotted time.

2 . Place yourself in the presence of God

As we place ourselves in the presence of God, we allow our mind to work with us on the journey of meditation. We are consciously choosing to set aside this time for God and are engaging our various faculties (intellect and will) to enter into this spiritual journey. It is helpful to begin with an invocation to the Holy Spirit reminding ourselves that without the Spirit we cannot pray. The following invocations may be helpful:

- a. Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful, enkindle in us the fire of your love.
- b. Holy Spirit direct, guide and enlighten me.
- c. Come Holy Spirit come and make within my heart your home, to us your grace eternal give who of your being move and live.

Along with invocations to the Holy Spirit, Christian meditation requires that we gradually move inwards and downwards, letting go of thoughts and feelings, until we arrive at our deepest centre, the core of our being. There are various exercises like concentrating on our breathing or imaginatively moving from our mind (thoughts) through our chest (feeling) to the centre of our being (core). St Francis de Sales, in line with the Biblical tradition, refers to this deepest centre as our Heart. It is in this sacred interior space, where the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have already made their home in us, that we bring our attention to God's indwelling presence. St Francis de Sales remind us:

²¹ OEA III, 340.



*Considering this truth you will awaken in your heart a deep reverence for God who is so intimately present there.*²²

He relies on the image of the Jewish Temple to help us understand this sacred interior space.²³ Just as there were many exterior courts in the Jewish Temple, so too, we have to journey through different levels to arrive at the *Holy of Holies* within where God dwells in the centre of our being, our heart.

Once we have arrived at our heart, and become attentive to God dwelling within, one of the following phrases may be helpful:

1. Our Lord is not distant but very near to me.²⁴
2. God is not only near to me, but he is dwelling within me.
3. God looks at me and desires me.
4. God is present everywhere but most especially in my heart.²⁵
5. God has created my heart to be his paradise.²⁶
6. I love you too.
7. In God we live and move and have our being.

A lot of difficulties, especially distractions, emerge if we omit this aspect of our preparation. One of the main problems with placing ourselves in the presence of God is the mistaken belief that God is distant. Take for example, the phrase *I love you too*. In *Salesian* spirituality, it seems to me, that when it comes to God we can never really say *I love you* because he always gets there first; he is the one who has loved us into being. And so, I think that the appropriate, and only response, we can make to God is to say “I love you too”. This mantra has the effect of allowing us to tune into the love that God has already poured into our hearts *before* we turn towards God. Immediately, through this mantra, we are immersed into prayer as a response.

Through baptism, God has already made his home in us, and so, we are simply becoming aware of this fundamental truth that the kingdom of God is within. Remember the earlier caveat about guidelines, if at this point of our preparation, we become aware of God’s presence dwelling within us, then, have full *liberté d’esprit* (freedom of spirit) to remain attentive to God without feeling the impulse to complete what follows.

²² F. DE SALES, *Introduction*, Part. II, c. 2.

²³ St Paul succinctly describes this spiritual reality at the depths of the human person as follows: “You are the temple of God” (1 Cor 3:16).



3. Focus on the Word of God

Following on from invocation to the Holy Spirit, journeying to our heart and placing ourselves in the presence of God – the invitation now is to encounter the Lord dwelling within us. We re-visit the word or phrase from Scripture, that had struck us in our preparation, and we slowly repeat it like a mantra. The key is to stay with what has attracted us or drawn us. We *ruminate* on this Word until it generates an affective response. If good affections should rise up – e.g. gratitude for God’s mercy, awe at His majesty, sorrow for sin, desire to be more faithful – yield to them. Remember the aim of Christian prayer is not to think much but to love much.

In Christian meditation we prepare by becoming still interiorly, but we engage our faculties so as to meet the Lord in our thoughts, desires and feelings. To enable this engagement with the Word, St Francis de Sales recommends the Ignatian method that involves the use of the imagination. Remaining with the chosen Gospel passage, you visualize the scene and become present to Jesus either as an observer or as a participant.

An observer *observes*, watches or notices, what is going on. On the other hand, a participant *participates* by assuming some role, like identifying with one of the characters in the scene. Whether you are an observer or participant, you *look* at the persons, you *hear* what they are saying, and you *consider* what they are doing. You use your five senses to see, hear, taste, smell, touch. Sometimes, the story becomes your own story.

During the meditation period or before you take your leave, you make a conversation. This is a moment of I-Thou engagement; it is a direct meeting; it is a moment of intimacy; it may be with or without words.²⁷ The aim of Christian meditation is to bring us *from reflecting to relating*. Once we enter into conversation with the Lord we begin this stage of loving communion where meditation enters the threshold of contemplation.

4. An Attitude of Listening

The aim of Christian meditation is not to think about God but to become present or attentive to God, to move beyond words to an attitude of receptivity and openness to receive from God. We often complain that God does not hear us or we may mistakenly believe that we are talking to ourselves! Yet, the truth of the matter is that the problem lies not with God, but with us. “Too often our hearts are set for transmission only, and incoming calls are not received.”²⁸

Once we have silenced our mind and feelings, we have placed ourselves in an attitude of receptivity to God. We develop an attitude of listening more than thinking. We let go of words, thoughts, feelings and simply listen. When we listen, we are open to receive something new, we are no longer in control, we have an attitude of receptivity, which allows us to be surprised by the Spirit. We allow ourselves to be led by God. Just like any friendship,

²⁷ Cf. F. LYNCH, *When You Pray*, Messenger Publications, Dublin 2016.

²⁸ E. MC CAFFREY, *Patterns of Prayer*, Paulist Press, New York 2003, 29.



as the relationship deepens, we simply want to be in each other's presence without words and enjoy each other's company.

An important change takes place at this point in our meditation when the centre of gravity shifts from ourselves to being present to God. The emphasis is no longer on *thinking about* God but *being present to* God. We enjoy a communion with God and we become absorbed in God. In this state of receptivity and passivity, the invitation is to "let yourself be loved by God."²⁹ What begun as effort on our part increasingly becomes the grace of God as we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit into a deeper communion with God. St Francis de Sales terms this contemplative stage of meditation the *prayer of quiet*. The prayer of quiet is obviously wordless and expresses a communion with God exemplified by John the evangelist resting on the breast of Our Lord at the last Supper.³⁰ It is the prayer where we listen to the heartbeat of God.³¹

It is God who prays within us having poured his Spirit into our hearts, we are tuning into his prayer within us which begins with thoughts and words but moves us into silence and an attitude of listening and receptivity. This interior silence is a journey to our heart, understood as the deepest core of our being where God is already present. It was Paul who said: "I live no longer I, it is Christ who lives in me" Gal.2:20. He could just as truly have said: "pray no longer I, it is Christ who prays in me." Opening our heart to allow Jesus to pray there is what we mean by contemplation.³²

God as Spirit meets me at the level of my spirit, which is deeper than words or images. We no longer rely on the senses as we have moved into the realm of the spirit. This lack of feeling, dryness, darkness at the level of the senses indicates that the sensory part of the person (sensory gratification) is starting to dry up and the soul's riches are being transferred to the spirit. Rather than being an indication of diminishing prayer, this experience is an indication that God is becoming more the agent and the person more the receiver. It indicates a greater purity of prayer because our prayer is no longer dictated by what we get out of it as we seek 'the God of consolations and not the consolations of God.'³³ This is a normal development within meditation and we must not become fixated with the lack of feeling. St Francis writes: "Don't waste time during prayer trying to understand exactly what you are doing or how you are praying; for the best prayer is that which keeps us so occupied with God that we don't think about ourselves or about what we are doing"... don't be like "the bride who entertains herself by looking at her engagement ring without even seeing the husband who gave it to her."³⁴ When nothing much seems to be happening in our meditation, it is important to note the quality outside of prayer – e.g. am I becoming more generous, patient, accepting, forgiving etc. In this prayer, God is the one who is in control of this prayer state and this surrender is also happening outside of prayer in life. It is unselfish

²⁹ ELISABETH OF THE TRINITY, *I have Found God*, in *The Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, I, translation by A. Kane, ICS Publications, Washington 1984, 179.

³⁰ Cf. OEA IV, 332-333.

³¹ Cf. J.P. NEWELL, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, Paulist Press, New Jersey 1997, 1.

³² Cf. M.FALLON, *Yielding to Love*, at <http://mbfallon.com/prayer.html> [31/10/2020].

³³ OEA V, 142.

³⁴ OEA IV, 336.



prayer and overflows in qualities of life. It is a state which is not induced by methods, but given by God.

5. Conclude with Resolutions and Gratitude

We see clearly in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, how St Francis is anxious to transform Philothea's simple desire to live the gospel into a firm resolve to do so. This is why he underlines the necessity of resolutions that arise from the affections experienced in meditation. For such affections to bear good fruit, therefore, we must resolve to put them into action, otherwise, meditation risks becoming simply a time of self-absorption. Resolutions translate prayer into life. For example, resolve to be more faithful in prayer, or more ready to forgive, more eager to share the faith with others, or more determined to resist sin, in as practical and concrete a way as you can determine.

Most of all, after you rise from meditation you must remember the resolutions and decisions you have made and carefully put them into effect on that very day. This is the great fruit of meditation and without it meditation is often not only useless but even harmful. Virtues meditated on but not practiced sometimes inflate our minds and courage and we think that we are really such as we have thought and resolved to be.³⁵

Our good intention is not enough, we need to translate it into action. This is why St Francis is very wary about those who see spirituality merely in terms of an altered state of consciousness or of feeling good. We may not be able to control how we feel, but we can control how we choose to act. We do not have to *feel* loving to do the loving thing. Feeling good or having some extraordinary *religious* experience is not the criterion to judge the authenticity of one's spirituality. As if to ground us, St Francis reminds us that it is not the flight of mystical experiences that guarantee holiness, but rather doing the loving thing. Therefore, it is the person whom we love least that challenges us to love, rather than any *mystical feelings* we may have. In this respect, he is very much in harmony with St. Teresa of Avila who reiterates that it is not mystical experiences, which are the guarantee of holiness, but good works.³⁶

Resolutions are necessary so that prayer (*affective* love) affects our behaviour and choices that same day leading to service (*effective* love). St Francis de Sales counsels that we return during the day to what s'perfumed' by our mediation and 'in the midst of activity, we may belong to God.' Finally, he recommends that we end the time of meditation-prayer with expressions of gratitude to God for the light and affections he has given us in our time of prayer; then, an offering of ourselves to God in union with the offering of Jesus; and thirdly, a time of intercession for our self and others.

³⁵ Cf. OEA III, 83.

³⁶ St Teresa's highest mansion of prayer is identical with Francis' ecstasy of action through charity: "If the heart stays close with the Lord, it should forget itself entirely; so forgetful of self that one's mind is totally taken up with pleasing Him and with discovering new ways to express one's love for Him... this spiritual nuptial is constantly giving birth to good works. See *Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol 2, 446.



6. Review of Prayer

It is useful to keep a prayer journal so as to review the movement in your prayer. Over time certain patterns emerge and one learns truths about oneself as discovering how God is personally communicating with you. It also helps us to remember and deepen our relationship with God whom we have encountered in meditation. This is also useful for spiritual direction so that the Director can help with the deepening of a person's prayer.

A fundamental Question in the review is: *Did you meet God?* In other words, did you *move from reflecting to relating?* The Review of Prayer is not an exercise to evaluate the 'quality' of our prayer as good or bad. It is our Ego that wants to evaluate things as being successful. Its fruitfulness does not depend on what we feel or don't feel, sense or don't sense during prayer. What seems 'bad' to us may be more fruitful than we can imagine. Don't rate your prayer. What matters is our fidelity to meditative prayer. It is this fidelity which allows our relationship with God to grow. As St Francis de Sales says:

If all you do is return to God's presence after distractions, then, this is very good prayer. Your persistence shows how much you want to be with God.

In many of his parables Jesus emphasizes this attitude of perseverance, never to give up. Our focus must not be on what we are feeling or not feeling, on our experience during prayer because, if so, we have stopped praying and become caught up in ourselves. "If we seek our own satisfaction, we will abandon prayer as soon as it becomes too difficult, or when we feel dryness or discontent, or when we no longer draw from prayer the pleasure we had expected."³⁷ Love profits from feelings as well as dryness, from inspirations as well as aridity, from virtue as well as sin. As St Francis de Sales reminds us, even when we feel nothing and are in a state of aridity we can still exclaim: "Lord, I am no more than a dry log, set me afire."

³⁷ J. PHILIPPE, *Time for God*, cit., 21.



Questions to help the review

- How would I describe the movement in my prayer?
- Does anything help me to give prolonged attention to the Lord?
- Is there a word or phrase or desire holding me?
- Was there understanding or a felt understanding?
- Did I have a conversation with the Lord?
- How were God and I present/absent to one another?
- Is there anything I want to go back to?
- What resolution was I being invited to make?

For St Francis, prayer and life are one, much like how breathing out follows on breathing in. We breathe in the love of God through prayer (*affective* love) and breathe out love in serving our neighbor (*effective* love).³⁸ Genuine prayer quite naturally leads to selfless service, igniting a love that is true charity. Just like any human relationship, through prayer, we are transformed and shaped by God whom we are communicating with. “Prayer stretches us beyond our limits of loving and, in so doing, transforms us ever more into the likeness of Jesus, by uniting us with him.”³⁹ This explains why prayer is essential on the *Salesian* spiritual journey of letting “Jesus live” in us. Through prayer we are transformed in God through love, assuming the heart of Christ so that we can respond to life situations with the love and compassion of Christ. In *Salesian* terminology this ecstatic movement out of ourselves in love of others is called, the *ecstasy of action*.

Difficulties during meditation

Most of us give up prayer before we’ve really started because nothing happens, and we are too impatient to learn how to wait on God. The problem with waiting is not having all the details. From our perspective, we have everything figured out and we want God to move within our timeframe.⁴⁰ It is here that a person learns by practical experience that it is not they who are in control, but God. God comes when God chooses, not when we choose. Our task is to be ready at all times to receive God.

³⁸ Cf. OEA IV, 301-302.

³⁹ A. REGO, *Holiness for all: Themes from St Thérèse of Lisieux*, Teresian Press, Oxford 2009, 100.

⁴⁰ Cf. D. TORKINGTON’S, *How to Pray. A Practical Guide*, McCrimmons, Great Wakering 2002.



Why does God make us wait?

- To test our true motives: do I have the commitment to see it through?
- Waiting builds patience, usually challenging our expectations and changing our perspective.
- Waiting builds anticipation: we usually appreciate things the longer we have to wait on them.
- Waiting transforms our character.
- Waiting builds intimacy and dependency on God.

Troubleshooting

When Meditation is difficult ask:

- Do I rush in to meditative prayer unprepared?
- Am I simply going through the motions and I have forgotten to whom I am being attentive?
- Is there something inconsistent with prayer going on in my life?
- Has an area of woundedness surfaced that needs to be brought to the Lord for healing?
- Have I become the focus of my prayer?
- Despite the dryness or darkness, is there still a desire within me to remain in prayer?
- What is happening in my life outside of prayer?





Meditation as *lectio divina*: Sharing a simple experience

Giuseppe Mariano Roggia SDB

A small anecdote to begin

IT WAS 1965. A few months after my first profession on 16 August 1965 at Villa Moglia near Chieri, before Fr Luigi Ricceri, newly elected as Rector Major.

I began my postnovitiate at Foglizzo and the formators were concerned that we internalise the liturgical reform well; so they often invited liturgists to speak to us about formation.

The initiation into meditation received in the novitiate, very well handled by the novice master Fr B. Listello, was completely focused on meditation books, especially ones written by Salesians: other than writings by Don Bosco and the Rectors Major, the famous *Vade Mecum* by Fr G. Barberis, conferences on the Salesian spirit by Fr Alberto Caviglia, meditation books by Fr D. Bertetto; and naturally, the *Exercise of Perfection* by Jesuit Fr A. Rodriguez, the works of St Alphonsus Liguori and St Louis M. Grignion de Monfort.

The liturgists who came, especially Fr Giuseppe Sobrero, insisted in a particular way on the Council's dictum to place the Word of God at the centre, on the same level as the Eucharist, specifically the continuous daily Word according to the distribution of readings resulting from the liturgical reform. Personal meditation, too, was to converge on this rather than many *books of meditation*.

Personally, I was fascinated and thrilled. I went to the Rector (at the time it was not possible to make autonomous decisions of this kind) and asked him if I could put the meditation books aside and focus instead on the daily readings from the Word of God. The superior looked at me half seriously, due to the "strangeness" of my request, but given the big heart he had, he replied: "Go ahead, by all means go ahead! ... But you will quickly get sick of it and return to the meditation books..."

After 52 years of Salesian life I have to say that I never got sick of it and never returned to the former practice, with all due respect for the value of meditation books; on the contrary, my passion for the word of God and *Lectio Divina* gradually took root in me in exponential fashion, so it would make no sense for me now to base my daily meditation on anything



other than the Father's Letter of Love for the daily nourishment of his children, which is the Word of God of the day.

What kind of *lectio divina*?

Today we have a clear indication of the path for the entire People of God, with a *Lectio* which should contain not only the fundamental lines of the classical method but also the typical connotations of its charismatic spirituality. This is to be considered extremely important and significant. In fact, there cannot be a generic *lectio divina*.

The experience of these years, if we positively include a great interest in the Word of God and *lectio divina* (which has become one of the most widely used magical expressions in 'ecclesialese' and the jargon of consecrated life), has also highlighted two concerns that derive from it: the first is to have often turned *Lectio* into a kind of fashion that ultimately does not provide nervous energy for people's daily journey, and in many cases has reduced *Lectio* to a slavish imitation of monastic *Lectio*, resulting in controversy between supporters and opponents in Institutes and criticism, even harsh criticism from the monks themselves due to the superficiality and inadequacy of both the time given to it, and way that it simply "apes" them. Instead, given both the maturing of the Council's reflection and the intervention of the Synod, there is the realisation today that *Lectio* is neither monastic (despite the great merits they can boast of in this field) nor the monopoly of any other group of believers, but is simply a primary commitment of any serious Christian life. So let's put aside the argument and the various distinctions, and immerse ourselves in the importance of/commitment to *Lectio*, both because personally and as a community we are convinced of its relevance, and by going to find and experience the specifically charismatic in it, by contrast with any generic *Lectio* or one that has been "photocopied" from other charisms and spiritualities.

The *Lectio* journey is essentially an educational one

The method *Lectio* uses is already essentially pedagogical in itself, because we could say that it almost takes either the beginner or someone who has already started out in this school by the hand, leading them to the abundant wealth of nourishment of the Word, such that it can be perceived with the spiritual senses, the senses most suited to it, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and leading them to welcome the theophany of God and the anthropophany of themselves, others and the entire world.

It is therefore a methodological problem that needs to be taken seriously, right from the very first steps of formation. Very frequently, however, we find young religious, who at the end of their early formation journey, do not know how to make a true meditation and even less so a true *Lectio* or who still continue undaunted making meditation on other texts that are not the books *par excellence* for meditation, namely, the Holy Scripture.

We just want to underline a few things, among those that we all know and hope... we practice.

The first of them concerns PREPARATION: the rich tradition of consecrated life, following the best school of spiritual teachers, has always advised very careful preparation



for meditation. Where this is concerned I will not spend time on the need for silence, the discipline of timing, refraining from excessive or abusive use of and dependence on media... I think it is important, instead, to discover something else, which is to *take up the Word* for the following day on the evening before, perhaps with the use of some helpful aid and commentary, to put it in context and understand it from a literary and historical point of view.

Hence the 4 famous steps:

1. **LECTIO** (reading the text, picking up on the more meaningful elements, searching for some expression or words that “touches” me, moves me).
2. **MEDITATIO** (repeating/ruminating on this expression/word with a kind of *leavening dough* and understanding, offering a “close and personal” comparison with our own faith experience and existential situation).
An encounter with the living Christ (a Word that has changed from being something crystallised in writing to a word that is aglow and allows the person of Christ to shine through).
3. **ORATIO** (transformation into a prayer of praise, thanksgiving, repentance, supplication, ...).
4. **CONTEMPLATIO/OPERATIO** (touched by the mystery of God, we immerse ourselves in this and then translate meditation into a real resolution so we can live the Word throughout the day).

This is because *Lectio* is essentially in a circle of wisdom. It starts with the book, the written Word, then through *Lectio* and *Meditatio* it leads to me having a living encounter with the living Christ and, as a result, flows into prayer, translating what I have meditated upon into real life, so that my day, amid holiness, getting involved, frailty and weakness, becomes a journey forward in growth and maturity, making me ready for a further encounter with Christ through a new *Lectio*; a kind of *spiral staircase* of gradual assimilation to Christ himself.

The charismatic specific

It seems to me that the charismatic specific (here the intention is to refer to every charism of Consecrated Life) needs to intervene especially in two of the method’s stages: *Meditatio* and *Contemplatio*. Let us look at them briefly.

A. Meditatio

We were saying that the movement from the written word (through the phrase/word that particularly strikes me) to the personal close up and personal contact and living encounter with Christ comes through a kind of “leavening dough”. What is this? The Hebrew and



Christian spiritual tradition, especially of the Fathers, has always believed that the Bible should be explained with the Bible, before it is explained with commentaries and studies of another kind.

We can call this the *biblical* echo and it consists of the understanding of the Word, its aliveness that struck me through some of the other deeds and words in the sacred text (e.g. a particular sentence:

- **WORD:** JESUS continued preaching and announcing the Good News of the Kingdom of God.
- **BIBLICAL ECHO:** *Go and proclaim what I have told you – The kingdom of God must be proclaimed in other towns – Proclaiming the good news everywhere – Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to all creatures – Then they left and preached everywhere – Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel -...).*
- **CHARISMATIC ECHO:** Then the *charismatic echo* must also intervene, because the Christian vocation is expressed in an extraordinary number of particular vocations.

This means that a purely *biblical* echo is not enough. There must also be something that is, somehow, the translation of the Bible into this specific vocation. It is interesting to note that the monks themselves do *Lectio Divina* with the help of spiritual texts, especially from the Fathers of the Church (who were mostly monks) and from their same Order. Therefore, together with the *biblical* echo we will also need the *charismatic* echo of our “Charismatic Fathers”.

Who are these for us? The life of Don Bosco, our founder, and the text of our Rule of life. To these we can add, if we want, our Institute’s magisterium. Well then. After doing some *biblical echo* I will then do some *charismatic echo*, asking myself where and how I find the understanding of the sentence/word that struck me in Don Bosco’s life and the Rule of Life, and this becomes the particular contribution of my meditation to a comparison with my own life.

B. Contemplatio

At the school of S. Francis de Sales we are convinced that meditation that does not flow into a concrete resolution for life is a kind of academic pursuit with clear connotations of spiritual pride.¹ Our *Contemplatio*, then, needs to become ecstasy of action. This happens if I see to the *memoria Dei* during the day and live in a really committed way as a result of my meditation. Recalling that phrase or word from meditation often during the day, repeating it in my heart, will remind me of the presence of God, will keep the *right intention* alert, and will channel the resolution I need to apply throughout the day.

¹ Cf. F. DE SALES, *Introduction*, Part II, c. VIII.



Fraternal *collatio*

Saint Paolino da Nola had already said in the 4th century that it is important, when listening to the Word of God, to hang not only from the lips of God, but also from the lips of all the faithful, because the Spirit of God blows in every disciple of the Lord.² This is where all the richness of fraternal *Collatio* or community *Lectio* comes into play.

This is our listening to the Lord in common through which every brother or sister (of the community, the parish group, ...) is invited to show others in all simplicity of heart, their reaction to the challenge of the Word and also their progress with the method of *Lectio*. If it is true that life forms us especially through relationships, it means that this is the normal kind of daily meditation, the true relationship with God, since this is the way he continues to prolong the mystery of the Incarnation and reaches us through others, beyond all their limitations, shortcomings and disappointments. Fraternal *Collatio* seeks to be a listening to the Word of God that passes through the poverty of the human word, not only of those who preach, but also the brothers and sisters of our faith and charism.

It is a kind of “magisterium” of the brethren on whose lips, more or less no matter what, the holiness and grace of the eternal Word of God resounds. The intuitions of one, in fact, become light for all, and the fraternity – the community – thus rediscovers the educational and formative value more and more, through which each can enrich the other. Each becomes a witness for the other by recounting their own experience of *close and personal contact* with the Word. This has formidable repercussions for our ability to journey together, looking for what summons us and unites us beyond all community difficulties – the Word of God to be precise. And from this, as a very rich and valuable contribution for community discernment, community decisions, as well as for councils at every level (local, parish, provincial, institute...). *Collatio* then becomes not only an interesting exercise but a true methodology for a personal journey and for fraternal communities.

At least once or twice a week is a privileged time to share with with the confreres in our community the little fragments of the Word of God that have struck us personally. It is fundamental for us to have understood that frequent exchanges involving the Word increase my personal richness, the persuasive power of the Word and the unifying power of a deep relationship between confreres.

All this is just a collection of “openers”, a set of ideas dictated by years of experience more than anything else. And for us too they open an immense and fruitful work in progress based on the word of God through *Lectio Divina* that is truly and finally charismatic.

Some suggested formation paths

Here I am presenting just a few potential guidelines, little more than notes, all open to discussion, but with the concern that a serious and careful formation for *Lectio* is needed throughout early formation, so as to guarantee true readiness for a journey with the Word.

² PAOLINO DI NOLA, *Letter 23 to Sulpicio Severo*, in G. SANTANIELLO (ed.), *Lettere*, T.1°, LER, Marigliano (NA) 1992, 697.



A. In the various phases of early formation

PRENOVIATE: first exercises guided step by step by the formator on selected texts, preceded by a good presentation. Particular attention is paid to preparation and *Collatio*.

NOVIATE: systematic, complete and very careful initiation into the whole method. A good introduction to the Bible is assumed. Remote and proximate preparation for *Lectio* and *Collatio* (almost daily) to be well handled. Introduce frequent group reviews of people's experience with the method of *Lectio*.

POSTNOVIATE: review the method, also studying it using the numerous texts now available. Specific concern for the impact of the Word on the individual's personal life and conscience (hopefully well-formed and about to be even better formed), the world of culture involved in study, apostolic experiences or contact with society. For this reason, much focus on *Meditatio*. *Collatio* to also be frequent.

FINAL STAGE (theology/perpetual profession/orders): give a lot of attention to enabling discernment through *Lectio* and start doing guided exercises in *Lectio Divina* with the people and with young people. Frequent *Collatio* and exchange of experiences about this.

B. In ongoing formation

I wouldn't have many more things to add to what we have planned. I believe that we need to break the hard shell of the mentality that still offers much resistance and struggles to change past habits, so as to give real primacy and centrality to the Word, with privileged time for daily listening, *Collatio*, and to enter into the pedagogy of *Lectio Divina* in all simplicity. I believe that Community and Province leaders should devote special attention to insisting on this change of mentality, which is now unavoidable, and to offering opportunities for practical education and formation, at least as a fruitful commitment following the Synod on the Word.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with some of Cardinal Martini's thoughts taken from an interview: "I never tire of repeating that we must make the Word the principal formation tool for Christian life today. One of the most important gains of the Conciliar event and of all its assimilation by the Church has been the ability to take up the Word of God as a place and a training ground for Christian education, a formation tool that has complemented the more classical and traditional form of catechesis [...]; that it rediscovered the potential that the Word of God possesses in educational terms and for the maturing of the Christian faith, is certainly a precious gift, an intuition full of fruits."³

³ C.M. MARTINI, Interview by L. Bressan, in *Rivista del Clero Italiano* 10 (2008) 664.





Three perspectives on the importance of Christian meditation

Xabier Blanco SDB

1. Jesus, the man of “three times”

THE RENEWAL OF CHRISTIAN LIFE passes through the harmonious integration of the “three times” that marked the life of Jesus: action-prayer-community. Jesus is the man of three times. This is how Cardinal Martini described him.

In the Gospels Jesus appears speaking and acting, healing and coming out to defend and help the helpless. This is his “first time”. Without this “time”, Jesus would be unrecognisable to us.

But his life is not all contained there. The Gospels often present him praying to his Father, both while on the journey and when he draws aside on his own on the mountain to pray. This is Jesus’ “second time”. If we were to take this component away, Jesus would also still be unrecognisable. Praying to the Father is not just secondary, an additive; it is an intimate part of him.

And the “third time”? This is the time for community, for his disciples and friends, the time he dedicated to forming them, but also to rest and to relaxing with them... This is the time of his outings to Bethany. This third time too is an important part of Jesus’ life.

We wish to focus on Jesus’ prayer, which is his second time, but let me make an observation first. If Jesus lived like this, could we live two or even just one of these “times”? I don’t think so. These three times – action, prayer, community – are part of the structure of the Christian faith. *The life of faith could not be sustained for long without harmonising these three elements together properly and making them flow so that they nourish each other.* This is a first reflection.

We do not want Salesians pretending they are better than Jesus, and that they are living just one or two of these times. Like him we try to be “men of the three times”, and prayer, of course, is part of these. A prayer that connects us better Why does Jesus pray and what does he pray for? It is curious. Jesus is more united with God than anyone who has ever lived. He lives “of” the Father and with Him, acts in His name, feels anointed by the Holy Spirit to carry out the mission. So why does he go up the mountain all alone to pray if his entire life is on the same wavelength as the Father’s?



2. The importance of the “time for prayer”

Why did Jesus pray and what did he pray for? This is curious. Jesus is more united with God than any other human being who has ever lived. He lives "of" the Father and with Him, acts in His name, feels anointed by the Holy Spirit to carry out the mission of the Kingdom of God, He is the One who is sent by the Father, totally and fully consecrated to that mission. Why then does he go to the mountain all alone to pray, if his whole life is already on the same wavelength as the Father's?

Jesus seeks to be face-to-face with He from whose bosom he was sent out into our world. He wants to meet up with him as a beloved 'You' from whom he receives the entirety of his being, wants to see his face, listen to his Word, feel his love and his being sent, and all this "live", face to face.

Jesus' prayer is apostolic, meaning that it has to do with his mission. It is curious to note that Jesus does not go up the mountain to pray when having nothing to do, but when he is immersed in so many needs or when there is something important to decide. And, as a man, he needs to share and discern the situations he is facing with the Father, and how to act in their regard. Jesus prays so he can see more clearly, so he can be confirmed before God in what God is asking of him. As one theologian wrote some time ago: "Jesus, who encounters God while pursuing his journey, sometimes leave the path to encounter God (in another way)."

In the midst of his intense activity as an itinerant prophet, Jesus always saw to his communication with God in silence and solitude. The Gospels have preserved the memory of one of his ways that left a deep impression: Jesus used to retire at night to pray.

The episode narrated by Mark (1:29-39) helps us get to know what prayer meant for Jesus. The day before had been a very busy day. Jesus "had cured many who were sick". We could say that it was a great success. The whole of Capernaum was in shock at what had happened: "The whole city was gathered around the door" of Simon's house where he was staying. Everyone was talking about him.

That same night, "at dawn", between three and six in the morning, Jesus rose, and without telling his disciples, withdrew to the open countryside "and there he prayed". *He needed to be alone with his Father.* He did not want to be overwhelmed by his success. *He seeks only the Father's will: to know well the road he needs to travel.*

Surprised by his absence, Simon and his friends run around looking for him. They don't hesitate to interrupt his dialogue with God. They want to bring him back with them: "Everyone is searching for you". But Jesus does not let himself be programmed from the outside. He thinks only of his Father's plan. Nothing and no one will take him away from his path.

He is not at all interested in staying and enjoying his success in Capernaum. He does not give in to popular enthusiasm. There are villages that have not yet heard the Good News of God: "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also."

One of the most positive aspects of contemporary Christianity is seeing how *there is an awakening of the need to see to our communication with God, of the need for silence and meditation.*



The more discerning and responsible Christians want to push the Church today to live in a more contemplative way. Surely even the most discerning and responsible Salesians will want the Congregation to live in a more contemplative way.

This is urgent. Like Christians in general we are not capable of remaining alone with the Father. *We theologians, preachers and catechists speak about God a lot, but speak with him only a little.* This way of Jesus did things has been forgotten for a long time. In the parishes there are many business meetings, but *we do not know how to withdraw to rest in God's presence and fill ourselves with His peace.*

We ourselves are less and less yet ever doing more things. The risk we face is to fall into activism, and end up being exhausted and falling into inner emptiness. On closer inspection, our problem is not having many problems, but not having the spiritual strength to face them.

3. Christian (and Salesian) meditation as a key moment in the time for prayer

Meditation is a practice that facilitates the “possession” of the spiritual strength needed to tackle life with all its joys and difficulties... Meditation helps create “contemplative” Salesians, as Don Tonino Bello would say.

1. The importance of “learning to meditate”. The testimony of Pablo D’Ors:

“I began by sitting down to meditate in silence, still, at my own risk, without anyone giving me any basic ideas or accompanying me in the process. The simplicity of the method – sitting, breathing, silencing thoughts... – and, above all, the simplicity of its claim – to reconcile man with what he is – seduced me from the very beginning. Being of tenacious temperament, I remained faithful for several years to this discipline of simple sitting and meditating; and I immediately understood that it was a matter of accepting with good grace whatever came, whatever it was.

“During the first months I meditated badly, very badly; keeping my back straight and my knees bent was not easy for me, and, as if that wasn’t enough, I breathed with a degree of agitation. I was perfectly aware that sitting and doing nothing else was as foreign to my formation and experience as, paradoxical as it may seem, it was natural to what I was deep inside myself. However, there was something very powerful that dragged me along: the intuition that the path of silent meditation would lead me to an encounter with myself as much as or even more than literature, to which I had always been very attached.

“For better or for worse, since my early adolescence I have been someone very interested in exploring my identity. For this reason I have also been an avid reader. That is why I studied philosophy and theology in my youth. The danger of such an inclination is, of course, being self-centred; but thanks to sitting, breathing and nothing else, I began to understand that this tendency could be eradicated not by struggle and renunciation, as I had been taught in the Christian tradition to which I belong, but by ridicule and exhaustion. Because all self-centeredness, including my own, taken to its most radical extreme, shows how ridiculous and impossible it is. Suddenly, thanks to meditation, narcissism also showed a positive side:



thanks to it, I was able to persevere in the practice of silence and quiet. Because even for spiritual progress one must have a good self-image.

“During the first year, I was very restless when I sat down to meditate: my back, my chest, my legs... To tell the truth, almost everything hurt. I soon realised that there was almost no time when I didn't feel pain somewhere in my body, but the fact is that only when I sat down and meditated did I become aware of that pain. So I got into the habit of asking myself questions like: "What hurts me? How does it hurt?", and as I asked myself these questions and tried to answer them, the pain would go away, or simply move away.

“I immediately drew a conclusion from this: pure observation is transformative; as Simone Weil would say – whom I began to read at the time – there is no weapon more effective than attention.

“The mental restlessness which was what I perceived immediately after the physical discomfort, was not for me a minor battle or a more bearable obstacle. On the contrary: endless boredom lurked in many of my sessions, as I began to call them then. I was tormented by some obsessive idea which I could not eradicate, or by some unpleasant memory which persisted in presenting itself during meditation. I was breathing harmoniously, but my mind was bombarded with an unfulfilled desire, with guilt for one of my many failures, or with my recurring fears, which presented themselves in new guises each time. I escaped from all this in a rather clumsy way: shortening my periods of meditation, for example, or compulsively scratching my neck or nose – where an irritating itch was often concentrated; imagining scenes that might have happened – because I am very imaginative; composing sentences for future texts – because I am a writer; drawing up lists of tasks to do; remembering episodes of the day; dreaming of tomorrow... Should I continue? I discovered that being silent with oneself is much more difficult than I imagined before introducing myself to this path. It didn't take me long before drawing a new conclusion: it was almost unbearable for me to be with myself, which is why I was constantly running away from myself. This perception led me to the certainty that no matter how broad and rigorous my analysis of my consciousness during my decade of university education, my consciousness remained, after all, a somewhat unexplored territory.

“The feeling was that of someone moving around in mud: it would take a while before the mud settled and the water started to clear up. But I'm a determined guy, as I said, and so I continued, and as the months went by I realised that when the water cleared up, it started to populate with plants and fish. With even more time and determination, I also realised that this inner flora and fauna gets richer the more you look at it. And now, as I write this testimony, I wonder how there could have been so much mud where I now discover such varied and exuberant life.

“Until I decided to practise meditation with all the rigour I was capable of, I had so many experiences throughout my life. I reached a point where, without fear of exaggeration, I can say that I didn't even know who I was anymore: I had travelled to many countries; I had read thousands of books; I had a diary with many contacts and I had fallen in love with more women than I could remember. Like many of my contemporaries, I was convinced that the more experiences I had, the more intense and dazzling they were, the sooner and



better I would become a complete person. Today I know that this is not the case: the number of experiences and their intensity only serve to dazzle us.

“Too many experiences are often harmful. I do not believe that man is made for quantity, but for quality. Experiences, if we live only to collect them, upset us, open Utopian horizons, get us drunk and confused... Now I would even say that any experience, even the most innocent, is usually too dizzying for the human soul, which only finds nurture if the rhythm of what is offered is slow.

“Thanks to this initiation into reality that I discovered through meditation, I came to know that the colourful fish at the bottom of that ocean that is consciousness, and that inner flora and fauna that I mentioned earlier, can only be distinguished when the sea is calm, and not with the waves and storm of experience. And I also knew that when that sea is even calmer, what you perceive is no longer fish but only water, the water itself. But for human beings, fish are usually not enough, and much less simply water; we prefer waves: they give us the impression of being alive, when the truth is that they are not life, but only liveliness.

“Today I know that it is good to stop having experiences, whatever their nature, and just to live: to let life express itself as it is, and not to fill it with the artifices of our travels or readings, relationships or passions, shows, entertainment, research... All our experiences tend to compete with life and almost always manage to disorientate and even nullify it. Real life lies behind what we call life. Not travelling, not reading, not talking... all three are better than their opposite for the discovery of light and peace.

“Of course, in order to catch a glimpse of all this, which is so quickly written down and so slowly learned, I had to become familiar with my bodily sensations and, what is even more difficult, to classify my thoughts and feelings, my emotions. Because it is easy to say that you have distractions, but very difficult to realise the kind of distractions you have” (Pablo D’Ors, *Biografia del silenzio*).

2. *The power of Christian meditation. Testimony of Pablo D’Ors:*

“Some of us have had what is called a mystical experience, a moment of contact with a supernatural sphere. The criterion for verifying the authenticity of such experiences is their power to transform one’s life. The recipient of such an experience is no longer the same person after it. Even this is not enough to prove its supernatural character, but it gives it great credibility. The first mystical experience I had – and the most fundamental one – was at the age of 19 and it prompted me to enter a religious congregation and, years later, to be ordained a priest.

“This spiritual experience was characterised by these three movements of the soul: the feeling of being recognised and loved (there was something or Someone for which I was really important); the need to give myself to that Source of meaning that united my life; deep joy. In short: the feeling of being loved; a burning desire to give oneself; the joy of being there, which is not just an inner movement of the soul.

“It is not difficult to interpret this experience with the categories proper to the Christian faith: the Father loves me; the Son urges me to give myself, to be another Christ for the



world; the Spirit infuses the joy of being. The power of Christian theology, however, is not so decisive as to condition the experience itself.

“I am trying to say that the Christian religion helped me to understand what I experienced, but not how I experienced it. It is very likely that throughout history there have been many who have had an experience very similar to the one described and who have not interpreted it from Christ, but from other gods, prophets or divine mediators.

“As for Jesus Christ, I must say that in no other figure in history have I found such a sublime and convincing bridge to the transcendent. Of no one but Him, have I had the perception that He was truly alive. And this is the second mystical experience to which I would like to refer, which is evidently a manifestation of the first: a person is to be loved and feels loved by this same person who was in this world and who now no longer inhabits it.”

“This is a genuine Christian experience, while the previous one can be had by almost any religious confession or without any apparent confessional belonging.

“There is another mystical experience that I would like to recount in this paper: that of silence. To be recognised and loved, to need to give oneself, to relate to Christ and to experience a profoundly spiritual joy... all this tends to be diluted and even to disappear if it is not nourished and enlivened in inner silence.

“We tend by nature to preserve what we have experienced through thought and action. But neither thought nor action can keep any spiritual experience alive and effective, for the simple reason that the experiences of the Spirit can only be kept alive by the Spirit Himself. To abandon everything at His feet, everything without exception, even poverty and absolute nakedness, this is what in Christianity is known as contemplation. And it is on this that the experience of silence and meditation is based.

“To conclude, I will say that in every spiritual experience there is a stage of the Father, who is the Origin of human adventure; a stage of the Son, who is the Logos – word – who gives himself to the world; and a stage of the Spirit, who renews life always in the silence of prayer, the only space-time that we human beings reserve exclusively for God. My experience of meditation is very simple and could be summed up in these three points:

1. It is not a technique but an *art*, which means that the method does not count as much as the purity or righteousness of the intention.
2. *Constancy and simplicity*: reciting a mantra with attention and love – they are enough to produce surprising effects, which, however, should not be sought or expected.
3. These effects are almost never perceived in meditation itself, but in *daily life*, and are: lucidity, courage and benevolence, i.e. clarity of thought, freedom of action and compassion for the human race.

Those who live in this way will experience the joy of being that I mentioned earlier. May these few words be a testimony of my humble but extraordinary experience as a child of God” (Pablo d’Ors, *La alegría de ser*).¹

¹ In <https://it.scribd.com/document/396270551/d-Ors-Pablo-La-alegria-de-ser-pdf> [31/10/2020].



Conclusion

Giuseppe Buccellato SDB

AT THE CONCLUSION OF THIS WORK, let me express our gratitude to the General Councillor for Formation, Fr Ivo Coelho, and his co-workers for having focused the Congregation's attention and, in particular, the attention of those involved in initial and ongoing formation courses, on a topic of extraordinary importance for the spiritual life and pastoral effectiveness of our communities.

The invitation that Fr Ivo himself addressed to us in the *Introduction* to "strengthen the pedagogical aspects of formation" seems to be an urgent one, especially, as he himself says, for those who have task of "accompanying those in initial formation in their prayer life, helping them to 'experience' the values of the Salesian vocation, not only during the novitiate, but also throughout their formation".

This invitation finds its roots in the awareness that, as Fr Chávez said in his letter *Witnesses to the radical approach of the Gospel*, the Salesian nowadays "is called to be a *mystic*: in a world which is feeling ever more clearly the challenge of secularism, we need 'to find a response in the acknowledgment of God's absolute primacy', through the 'total gift of self' and in 'permanent conversion in a life offered up as true spiritual worship'" (AGC 413). Many years before, another Rector Major, Fr Peter Ricaldone, hoped: "May the Lord deign to grant the grace of contemplation to many of Don Bosco's children, so that they may imitate their Father and Founder ever more perfectly by reviving the flames of their own zeal in contemplative prayer." (*Piety*, 185).

We entrust to the Help of Christians our small contribution to enhancing the role of daily meditation in Salesian life. May the *Virgin of Silence* help us to keep the Word in our hearts and make it bear fruit so that our life may become, from the very first years of our religious profession, a reflection of that grace of unity which has characterised the human and spiritual experience of our Don Bosco. May each of us be able to say, with our minds turned to the founder and paraphrasing the words of a beautiful poem by Liliana De Mari, *I look in the mirror and hope to see you...*



Letter of invitation



SOCIETA' DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA

Via Marsala 42 - 00185 Roma

Consigliere generale per la formazione
icoelho@sdb.org

Rome 9 January 2018

TO:

Cleofas Murguia

Eunan McDonnell

Francisco Santos Montero

Giuseppe Buccellato

Giuseppe Mariano Roggia

Jose Kuttianimattathil

Silvio Roggia

Xabier Blanco

SUBJECT: Study seminar on Salesian meditation, 10-12 May 2018

Dear confrere,

Fraternal and warm greetings from Central HQ in Rome.

Among the tasks entrusted to the Department for Formation in this six year term is the renewal of the manual for Salesian prayer. While this work is progressing we would like to dedicate a specific reflection on meditation, to be able to offer help and guidance in a special way to the houses of initial formation, without neglecting the other houses, so as to make the most of this fundamental moment in the prayer life of the Salesians of Don Bosco.

A first step in this direction would be to take a moment to compare experiences, to grasp together – starting from the personal experience of each one of us – what meditation brings with it in our charismatic tradition and in the journey that the Church, religious life and the Congregation have been making in recent years.

I ask you to be willing to participate in the meeting that the Formation Department will dedicate to this topic between Thursday 10th May and Saturday 12th May 2018 (arrival Wednesday 9th evening; conclusion Saturday 12th with lunch). We are hosted by San Callisto community, in the catacombs of the same name, here in Rome.



Letter of invitation

Further details will be communicated to you later regarding the programme, together with some preparation sheets, in view of the sharing we intend to do.

We will be a dozen or so confreres; therefore a circumscribed work, which makes your presence even more important and appreciated.

I take this opportunity to wish you a Happy New Year on behalf of the members of the Department.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ivo Coelho', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ivo Coelho, SDB



Letter to Provincials & Formation Delegates



SOCIETA' DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

SEDE CENTRALE SALESIANA

Via Marsala 42 - 00185 Roma

Consigliere generale per la formazione

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Rome, 13 May 2018

Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord

Prot. 18/0202

TO:

Provincials

Provincial Formation Delegates

13 May 2018

SUBJECT: Study seminar on Salesian meditation, 10-12 May 2018

Dear confreres,

Greetings to you from Rome, where we have just concluded a small study seminar on Salesian meditation. The participants were Jose Kuttianimattathil INK (coordinator), Xavier Blanco SSM, Giuseppe Buccellato ISI, Eunan McDonnell IRL, Cleofas Murguia, Giuseppe Roggia UPS, Gianni Rolandi from the Missions Department, and Silvio Roggia, Francisco Santos Montero and myself from the Formation Department. The aim was to clarify the place of meditation in the Salesian tradition and life and to offer guidelines for growth in this area. I offer you this rather long letter as a way of sharing the fruits of our seminar.

The seminar originated in a suggestion by Xavier Blanco, Rector of the Salesian house in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, where we were meeting for the last "Consulta" on Formation (February 2016). During a mass at which he was presiding, Xavier surprised us by saying: "Why don't you teach us to meditate?" In the light of the fact that we are in the process of revising the manual of Salesian prayer at the request of GC27, we thought that a seminar dedicated to this theme would be more than opportune. The participants, we eventually decided, would be the formation team led by Jose Kuttianimattathil, Eunan McDonnell,



Giuseppe Buccellato and Giuseppe M. Roggia for their expertise in Salesian matters, and Xavier Blanco himself.

The seminar was hosted by the San Callisto community in the wonderfully peaceful setting of the catacombs of San Callisto, 10-12 May 2018. We began with a **sharing of our personal experiences** in meditation: our initiation to meditation, how we meditate, what impact meditation has on our life and apostolate, what difficulties we encounter.

The next step involved illuminating our experience with the Salesian tradition. Drawing upon his experience of forming and guiding generations of young Salesians, **Giuseppe M. Roggia** shared what he considered important elements in formation to meditation. **Giuseppe Buccellato** offered us amazing information about the role of mental prayer in the founding charism of Don Bosco, and how Don Giulio Barberis, the first novice master, dedicated the first two months of the novitiate to formation to meditation.¹ **Eunan McDonnell** drew upon Francis de Sales and his own experience to present first why we should meditate, and then some elements of the *how*. **Xavier Blanco** held up Jesus as the man of the “three times” in whom action, prayer and community come together in a wonderful way, before drawing upon the new thirst for silence and meditation that is manifesting itself in Spain, for example through the work of Pablo d’Ors.²

After a time of silence to allow things to sink in, facilitated by a guided meditative visit to the catacombs, there followed a moment of **diagnosis and brainstorming**: how is it that so many of us lose interest in meditation, even while in initial formation? Is there a specific Salesian method of meditation? Are there other methods that might be in harmony with our spirituality? What could we learn about meditation from the study of Salesian Personal Accompaniment conducted by the departments of Youth Ministry and Formation?³ What could be done to reawaken esteem and love for meditation among Salesians in initial and ongoing formation? What might be the steps for an efficacious initiation to Salesian meditation? How might Salesian meditation be related to other types of meditation such as the *lectio divina*, centering prayer and the Jesus prayer?

The final step was an effort to **gather the fruits** of the two days of study, prayer and reflection, and to see how to share them with the congregation. I put them down here by way of sharing, hoping that you will find something of use.

¹ See “Lettera di S. Vincenzo de’ Paoli indirizzata a’ suoi religiosi sul levarsi tutti all’ora medesima (15 gennaio 1650)” annessa alle *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales* dal 1877 al 1907; G. Barberis, *Manoscritto Barberis del 1875 dal quaderno delle istruzioni ai novizi*, Archivio Centrale Salesiano; G. Barberis, *Il vade mecum dei giovani salesiani*, nuova edizione riveduta e corretta (Torino, 1931), ch. 12: Della meditazione; G. Buccellato, *Alla presenza di Dio. Ruolo dell’orazione mentale nel carisma di fondazione di San Giovanni Bosco*, Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Spiritualità 9 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Gregoriana, 2004); G. Buccellato, *Don Bosco, Sant’Ignazio e la Compagnia di Gesù: storia di una relazione nascosta... ma non troppo*, in id., *Alle radici della spiritualità di San Giovanni Bosco* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013); G. Buccellato, “Giovanni Bosco: il geloso custode della sua vita con Dio,” *Nuovo Dizionario di Mistica*, ed. L. Borriello, E. Caruana, M. R. del Genio and R. Di Muro (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016); G. Buccellato, *Da due grani nasceranno quattro spighe. Piccola antologia di insegnamenti di San Giovanni Bosco sulla preghiera* (Torino: ElleDiCi, 2017).

² See Pablo d’Ors, *Biografia del silenzio* (Siruela, 2015).

³ See Marco Bay, *Giovani salesiani e accompagnamento: Risultati di una ricerca internazionale* (Roma: LAS, 2018).



Preambles:

- If we are convinced about the value and place of meditation in our lives, we will be certainly more inclined to be faithful to meditation and to learn how to grow in it.
- Praying together is linked to working together, and is therefore a charismatic element for us.
- At the present moment, many have little or no training to meditation. This is part of the general weakness of the pedagogical dimension of our formation
- In the initiation to prayer, we cannot presume that people have a relationship with God. If this fundamental presupposition is missing, we risk building without a foundation.
- If there is 'fear' in the phases of initial formation, meditation tends to become a formality rather than a conviction.

Meditation in the founding charism of Don Bosco:

- It has been amazing to see how much Don Bosco and the first generation insisted on meditation: see the additions to the Italian edition of the Constitutions, the attention given by Barberis to teaching novices the why and how of meditation, and the insistence of Rinaldi.⁴
- A good knowledge about our origins helps us see the importance and place of meditation in our charism.
- Given the fact that the principal inspirations of the Convitto Ecclesiastico were Ignatian and Liguorian, and given that Don Bosco continued making the Spiritual Exercises at Sant' Ignazio sopra Lanzo up to 1874, we could say that he learned the Ignatian method of meditation. Given that Francis de Sales himself draws upon Ignatius, however, we have a consonance of methods.

Why to meditate:

- First of all, in imitation of the one who has loved us and whom we love: in Jesus we see the unity of action, prayer and community.
- Without mental prayer, our relationship with God cannot deepen.

How to meditate:

- *Some method* is needed, at least in the beginning.
- There is *no one method* of Salesian meditation, though meditation is certainly something distinct from spiritual reading (as we see clearly in Don Bosco's life and writings). But some of what we say below will set the parameters and indicate some preferences.
- Method consists first of the right *dispositions of the heart*: faith, fidelity, trust and perseverance

⁴ A note from Rinaldi found by Giuseppe Roggia in the novitiate house of Pinerolo: "Are the novices learning to meditate? It is the most important thing."



- *Perseverance* is of the utmost importance, and is a word that occurs often on the lips of Jesus and in the New Testament. We learn to pray by praying, and it is important to 'be there,' day by day, for meditation.
- Moments of intense prayer (such as the Spiritual Retreat) and personal spiritual accompaniment can create a *good foundation* for meditation.
- *Preparation*, both remote and proximate, is of the utmost importance: the habit of reading the Word of God, the Constitutions and good spiritual reading, and the reading of the Word and perhaps a comment the previous day.
- The *Word of God* and the *Constitutions* are privileged texts for our meditation.
- *Christ* is at the centre of Christian meditation. He is, as Teresa of Avila and Francis de Sales insist, the door through which we enter; it is he who will lead us, if and when he wants, to wordless, affective, contemplative prayer.
- The word meditation comes from 'giving care to,' 'giving attention to.' We begin meditation by placing ourselves in the presence of God, *giving attention* to him who is always there and who desires to communicate with us.
- In the novitiate, it might be good to concentrate on a *single method*, such as that of the *lectio divina*.
- *Collatio* or sharing presupposes that one has already done *lectio* and *meditatio*, that one has been touched by the Word; otherwise, what is there to share?
- Keeping a *journal* is also useful, in order to see the direction in which God is leading me.
- A good meditation echoes through the day, gradually overcoming the 'parallelism' in our life and leading us to *unification* of our practices of piety, the sacraments, life and work.
- The *fruits* of meditation are seen in the transformation that takes place in life.
- *Salesian spiritual guides* need to ask about prayer and meditation, and should learn how to accompany confreres in this area.

Among the **steps** we want to take in the immediate future are the following:

1. An e-book of the material from the seminar, to be shared with all the confreres
2. A note on some methods of Salesian meditation to be inserted into the new manual of prayer, along with other material, at www.sdb.org
3. Animation of the provincial formation delegates during the various meetings of the Regional Formation Commissions 2018
4. Preparation of didactic material on meditation with the help of novice directors and those in charge of prenovices
5. Formation of formation guides in the area of meditation
6. Involving the various regional centres of ongoing formation by means of courses and other initiatives
7. Making meditation and prayer a theme in the work of GC28, given that the quality of evangelization is directly related to the quality of our prayer and meditation.

From the seminar itself we have learned that it is very fruitful, especially in the area of something like meditation, to begin by attending to our personal experience and by



sharing it with simplicity, before illuminating it with the tradition. We also realized that the dynamics of a small group are quite different from that of a larger one. This method itself might be something precious in our effort to make progress in meditation, given that it exemplifies the “learning by experience” that is at the core of C 98: “Enlightened by the person of Christ and by his Gospel, lived according to Don Bosco’s spirit, the Salesian... learns by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation....”

I end with a feeling of quiet gratitude in my heart for this little seminar that arose from the spontaneous request of a confrere. I would like to thank all the confreres who participated and made their contributions in a spirit of great simplicity, to Jose Kuttianimattathil and Silvio Roggia for their coordination and animation of the seminar, to Gianni Rolandi who so willingly joined us to help with translations, and the community of San Callisto that hosted us with such warmth and fraternity. One seminar, we might ask, what difference will that make? At least it made a difference to us who participated, I must say; and then, as Don Bosco said, if we accompany our work with prayer, two grains that are sown will give us four.

A happy feast of the Ascension of our Lord, the feast of Jesus “seated at the right hand of God” and at the same time “acting with us” in our proclamation of the Word and in the signs that accompany it (Mk 16,19-20), most especially the signs of our transformed lives. May our Lady of Fatima and Mary Mazzarello, with their spirit of contemplation, intercede for us!

Affectionately,



Ivo Coelho, SDB



Appendix

SEMINAR PROGRAMME

References:

1. *Constitutions* 93

“We can form praying communities only if individually we become men of prayer.

Each one needs to express his own personal and heartfelt way of being a son of God, expressing his gratitude, telling him about his yearnings and his concerns in the apostolate.

For us mental prayer is essential. It strengthens our intimate union with God, saves us from routine, keeps our heart free and fosters our dedication to others. For Don Bosco it is a guarantee of joyous perseverance in our vocation.”

2. *Regulations* 71

“Every day the members will spend in common at least half an hour for meditation and at least some time in spiritual reading.

It is for the local community to devise different ways in which this can be done and encourage the confreres in the fulfilment of this duty. “

Logistics

DATE: Thursday 10 May, Friday 11 May, Saturday 12 May 2018, until lunchtime.

PLACE: San Callisto Community (Catacombs), Rome.

AIM: To clarify the place and role of meditation in Salesian life and tradition and offer help and guidance for growth in the practice of meditation.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: around 10.

The six moments that mark the work of the seminar

1. Sharing of personal experiences (lived reality)

Each of the participants arrives ready for the seminar with a short paper (maximum two pages) with which they present their personal experience of meditation.

- How did your initiation into the half hour of daily meditation in common take place? (Reg 71).
- How do you meditate? What do you do during the half hour of daily meditation in common?



- What is the impact of daily meditation on your life and apostolate?
- What are the challenges/difficulties you encounter during meditation and concerning it

2. Salesian tradition

Contributions from individuals/experts with experience on the fundamentals and methods of meditation in the Salesian tradition [45 minutes for contribution and 45 for sharing] (“the ideal”):

EUNAN McDONNELL - Contributions focused on these two questions: a) From your knowledge of the teachings and spirituality of Francis de Sales, what would you consider as fundamental elements of meditation? b) What are the essential things a young person in formation should pay attention to in order to make meditation fruitful?

GIUSEPPE BUCCELLATO - An intervention focusing on these two themes: a) Fundamental elements of meditation in Don Bosco’s practice and teaching. b) Elements of Salesian meditation which must be safeguarded, while the Salesians make their way of meditating and the methods followed more in keeping with today’s culture and sensibility.

GIUSEPPE MARIANO ROGGIA - A contribution focusing on these two questions: a) On the basis of your experience of initiation into meditation and accompaniment by those who learned this art step by step, what do you consider to be fundamental elements in how meditation is done in the ordinary life of the Salesian communities? b) What are the common pitfalls in the practice of meditation, and what gaps/deficiencies in our formative process could be their main cause?

XABIER BLANCO - A contribution focusing on these two questions: a) Paying attention to the paths of renewal that are being implemented in Spain and the renewed interest in contemplation, what do you think are the main elements for doing meditation today? b) Some suggestions that you could offer to help the Salesians to make a fruitful meditation today.

3. Meditative visit to the Catacombs

Guided tour of the Catacombs, in meditative form ... walking, praying in the footsteps of millions of pilgrims.

4. Diagnosis – Brainstorming

- What drives many Salesians to lose interest in or give up meditation, even in the early stages of initial formation?
- Is there a specifically "Salesian-Bosconian" method of meditation?



- Are there meditation methods that are more easily in tune with Salesian spirituality? If so, what are they?
- Results/observations of the answers that emerged in the research on Salesian Personal Accompaniment (SPA).

5. Steps for improving meditation – Brainstorming

- What can be done to reinvigorate the esteem and love for meditation among Salesians in initial and ongoing formation?
- What steps can be taken to establish a good initiation into “Salesian” meditation for those who are going through the initial stages of formation?
- Salesian meditation among the various types of meditation (*Lectio Divina*, Centering prayer, Hesychasm or prayer of the heart...).
- Results/observations of the responses from the SPA.

6. Offering orientations and guidelines...

- Reaping the fruits of our sharing as it has developed over these days.
- Are we able to offer at least some preliminary guidelines or do we have to wait further?
- Next steps to take.

