

Art. 41. A Way to Sanctity

Salesian Cooperators choose to share the Gospel way traced out by the present Project of Apostolic Life.

They commit themselves in a responsible manner to this way which brings one to sanctity: the Association of the Cooperators "is designed to shake many Christians from the languor in which they lie, and to spread the energy of charity."

The Lord accompanies with the abundance of His grace all those who work in the spirit of the "Da mihi animas, cetera tolle," doing good to youth and to ordinary folk.

CONSIDERATIONS

Core Theme

The vocation of the Salesian Cooperator brings one to sanctity: It is a free choice, passion for the *Da Mihi Animas; Cetera Tolle*, and the strength of the Grace which never abandons us.

Keys to Understanding

A. Called to Sanctity

The dignity of the Lay Faithful, is revealed in its fullness if we consider *the first and fundamental vocation* that the Father, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, makes to every person: the vocation to sanctity; in other words, the perfection of charity. It can be stated that the Saint is the most splendid witness of the dignity conferred upon the disciple of Christ.

Vatican Council II had the courage to give to all the members of the Church the irrepressible reality of the Mystery of the Church: She is the Chosen Vine through which the branches live and grow from the same holy and sanctifying lymph of Christ. She is the Mystical Body, whose members participate in the same life of sanctity of the Head, who is Christ; She is the beloved Spouse of the Lord Jesus, Who handed Himself over to sanctify Her. (see Eph. 5:25 and following) The Holy Spirit Who sanctified Jesus' Human Nature in the virginal womb of Mary (see Luke 1:35) is the same Spirit Who dwells in and works in the Church to communicate to Her the sanctity of the Son of God-made-man. (see *Christifideles Laici* 16)

The Salesian Cooperator in his secular lay state has personally received the call from God to be a saint. It is a matter of choosing a normal life in the world, where one's family, study, work, friendly social relationships, as well as professional relationships, and cultural ones, etc., find in Jesus Christ the fullness of their significance. (*Statutes* Art. 2) This vocation to sanctity sinks its roots in Baptism and is re-proposed in the other Sacraments, especially in the Eucharist and in Confession. One might say that here is where the Salesian Cooperator finds his strength, is configured to Jesus, and is enabled and given the task of manifesting the sanctity of his being in every action, with joy and optimism, in responsible service to and within the ecclesial community and civic society. (*Statutes* 13, 17, and 19)

The *Project of Apostolic Life* for the Salesian Cooperator becomes the sure path to reach sanctity. It is the "book of life" which guarantees fidelity to the original inspiration of Don Bosco; spiritual, theological, and pastoral harmony with Vatican Council II and the Magisterium of the Church; and the Christian and Salesian response to the new challenges of the world. From this arises the importance of

taking it on as a precious treasure which one must know, interiorize, love, and give witness to. In the *Project of Apostolic Life*, there is found delineated the profile of the Salesian Cooperator which makes him perfectly suited for his vocation and mission; in other words, to be a true Salesian in the world. (see “Presentation” of the *Project of Apostolic Life*)

B. Passion for the “*Da Mihi Animas; Cetera Tolle*”

For Don Bosco, this was the unifying idea of his entire life: the salvation of his young people – and it was the heart of his heart, it was his essential and un-renounceable core; the most profound root of his interior activity, of his dialogue with God, of his very work on himself, and of his untiring work in the apostolate. Truly, his heart beat always to the impulse of the *da mihi animas*. All his passion, his labors as a teacher, as a Shepherd, as a catechist, a writer, and a Founder were to bring his young along the way of salvation, to help them to be good, and to save them eternally; therefore, all the rest was considered only an instrument or a means.

His labors, his Institutions, the founding of the Salesian Society, of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and of the Salesian Cooperators – all have this as their supreme goal. The only goal of the Oratory is to save souls. And it is a goal that he knew he could not reach alone. For this reason, he gave the invitation to others to be united with him in spirit, to work for the greater glory of God and for the salvation of souls. And he was wont to say: “*The most Divine of all Divine things is cooperating with God for the salvation of souls and is a sure path to sanctity.*”

This article invites us yet again to shake the souls of the young who have “fallen asleep” due to so many proposals from society which draw them away from the road to sanctity.

It falls to us to live the *Da mihi animas; cetera tolle* with passion, making it a concrete reality by:

- Responding to the material and rudimentary needs of youth who are poor and abandoned to their own devices, offering a home, clothes, and food so as to help them become capable of earning their daily bread honestly through acquiring a skill and the job.
- Accompanying them with a wise pedagogy which has as its Center and summary the apostolic charity of Christ, along with that delicate process of their human, cultural, and moral transformation; enabling them to exercise a responsible freedom and to give of themselves; helping them to become aware of their role in life, in society, and in their neighborhood.
- Educating them in a Christian manner in the Faith, bringing them to live their Faith with growing intensity and to have a personal encounter with Christ, the Perfect Man, through listening to the Word, through prayer, through the Sacraments, and through love of neighbor.

In this summary, we find the mystic of the *Da mihi animas; cetera tolle* which indissolubly unites human promotion and supernatural promotion, with special insistence concerning the religious aspect. This intrinsic bond is repeated today in all the Magisterium of Pope Francis who invites us to go to the geographical and existential fringes of human society so as to respond to the deepest needs of the person and to offer them an authentic path to sanctity.

C. *The Strength of the Grace Which Never Abandons Us*

“Without me, you can do nothing”: the need for the Lord's help and the certainty of receiving the support of the Father's Grace are the two conditions which accompany every Salesian Cooperator along his or her entire life as an honest citizen and good Christian who gives all for the salvation of souls, with the certainty that God does not abandon those who offer Him their willingness to work in His Kingdom with Don Bosco's spirit, for the salvation of the young.

Let us listen to Don Bosco: *May God, so rich in grace and blessings grant many favors to all those who help to win souls for our Divine Savior, doing good to young people so much in danger, preparing good Catholics for his Church and good citizens for society, so that all may one day find themselves eternally happy in heaven. Amen. (Rule of 1876 “To the Reader”)*

And let us listen to the Lord: *Whoever would save his very life will lose it, but whoever loses his very life for Me will save it. (Lk. 9:24)*

References

Brocardo P., *Don Bosco profondamente santo, profondamente uomo*, pag. 111-118.

Chavez V. P., *Carta d'Identità*, art. 23.

Chavez V.P., *Attingiamo all'esperienza spirituale di Don Bosco, per camminare nella santità secondo la nostra specifica vocazione*. Strenna 2014.

Francesco, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 8.

Giovanni Paolo II, *Christifideles Laici*.

from The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco

Volume XVIII, p. 125. "The proposal made by the reverend pastor of the church of the Great Mother of God as an invitation to you to work for further growth of the Union of Salesian Cooperators is a very fine idea, because the Cooperators are the mainstay of the works of God, channelled through the Salesians.... The Supreme Pontiff Leo XIII is not only our first Cooperator, but our first active collaborator. It is enough that you look at the facade of the Church of the Sacred Heart! It will tell you that the work of the Cooperators and of the Pope has combined to shake so many Christians out of the listlessness into which they had fallen, and spread out the vigor of charity. Such an act today is of an exceptional timeliness as the Pope himself has said. Could any one man alone have accomplished what we have accomplished? No. There is no one who could have done it It was not Don Bosco. It was the hand of God who availed itself of the Cooperators! Listen! You have just said that the Association of Salesian Cooperators is beloved of many people, and I can add that it will spread in every country, wherever Christianity has penetrated. A time will come when the name of Cooperator will be synonymous with that of a true Christian. The hand of God upholds it! The Cooperators will be those summoned to promote the spirit of Catholicism. This may be a Utopian ideal on my part, yet I cling to it. The fiercer the attack on the Holy See, the higher the

Cooperators will exalt it. The more unbelief shall increase everywhere, the more the Cooperators will uphold on high the torch of their effective faith."

from *The Salesian Cooperator* by Fr. J. Aubry, SDB

Salesian Cooperators have existed in the Church for a hundred years. To be a Cooperator is a practical and up-to-date way of living the love of Christ and of participating in the unique mission of his Church.

If we are to set our examination of this vocation on a basis that is solid and clear, it will help to recall the teaching of the Council, viz., that every baptized Christian has a vocation and that the Holy Spirit invites each and every one to make this vocation real in a way that is both personal and practical.

Every Baptized Christian Has a Vocation

We can never ponder sufficiently these three fundamental truths of the Gospel; the Council has given them special prominence.

Holiness Is for Everyone – God “calls” us: this is the very meaning of the word “vocation.” We must not be tempted to think that he calls some to sanctity and allows others to live in mediocrity. What sort of a father would resign himself to the mediocrity of even one of his children? God our Father is infinite and has an immense ambition for each of us: “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). Our human vocation is to increase our humanity; our Christian vocation is to grow more and more as sons of God, other Christs. In view of our selfishness and weakness, this is a foolish aim; but the task becomes magnificent when the better part of our nature, hungering for the infinite, refuses to rest in the toiling ascent to find God at the summit. “In the Church everyone is called to holiness.... It is evident that all the faithful of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life.”

Holiness Consists in Love, in the Footsteps of Christ – God calls us because he is Absolute Love; he invites us to respond with love to his love (cf. 1 John 4:11, 16, 19).

Nothing is simpler than the definition of Christian sanctity: it is the practice of the one great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbor” (Matt 22:36, 40), in the footsteps of Jesus, who alone is holy: “This is my commandment, that you love one another *as I have loved you*. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12, 13). The way of Christian holiness is clearly traced out, but it never comes to an end, for we must never cease loving and imitating Jesus. And since there is one commandment, to love, so there is for Christians one sin, not to love, or not to love more, to halt in the way of filial and fraternal love. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection of charity, they must use their strength according as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. In this way they can follow his image, seeking the will of the Father in all things, devoting themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor.”

Holiness and Love Are Made Real in the Fulfillment of a Mission – This third statement is essential if we wish to get down to practicalities. How was Christ the “Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24) and our greatest example of love for his Father and his brothers? The answer lies in his fidelity to the mission that was given him; in fulfilling to perfection his tasks of Prophet (he revealed to the world God’s true name

and his design for mankind), King (he labored to establish his kingdom and to draw all men to his divine will) and Priest (his whole life was an oblation of love to his Father, and for his glory he established “the holy nation of the Covenant”). And in these labors for man’s salvation he expects the help of the Church and all its members, be they ministers or laity.

So when God calls us (our vocation) and asks us to become holy and ever to increase our love, he does not withdraw us from the world or from the Church. On the contrary, he sends us forth (our mission) to be more deeply immersed in them; he asks us to enter their enormous and forceful growth, to be indeed the “cooperators” of his salvation plan (1 Cor 3:9). In practical terms, then, to strive toward holiness and charity we must be builders (each according to his or her own talents) of a Church and a world where God will be loved and our neighbor loved for God’s sake. It is not to be wondered at that the Church should make this statement:

“By its very nature the Christian vocation is also a vocation to the apostolate.... The laity derive the right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ their head. Incorporated into Christ’s Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself. They are consecrated into a royal priesthood and a holy people (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-10) in order that they may offer spiritual sacrifices throughout the world.... The law of love, which is the Lord’s greatest commandment, impels all the faithful to promote God’s glory through the spread of his kingdom and to obtain for all men eternal life.”

All Have a Vocation, Practical and Historical

Everyone has the duty of working out his vocation in a way that is personal and practical at this particular moment in the history of the Church and the world. “God calls me to holiness: he calls me this very day. How shall I express my love? What task am I to fulfill? What service can I render God and my brothers and sisters?” This means we have to do some *investigation*, for the practical ways are infinite in number and all valid in themselves.

Numerous Ways – We have to consider different methods and our attitude to them. We can attain holiness, love, and service in *different forms of life*: religious life, lay-celibate life, lay-conjugal and family life; and from another point of view, contemplative life, active life, and passive life of suffering (at least at certain times). We are capable of holiness, love, and service in various *careers and responsibilities*: those of the hierarchical priesthood, of the family, of professional, social, and political life; and those related to the more important functions of the Church and the greater requirements of its mission: such are the tasks of atonement, bearing witness, preaching, teaching, education, maintaining and increasing unity, helping those in wretchedness and need.... *Lumen Gentium* explains this at length in one of its most beautiful passages which ends thus: “All of Christ’s faithful, therefore, whatever be the conditions, duties, and circumstances of their lives, will grow in holiness day by day *through these very situations*, if they accept all of them with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father, and if they cooperate with the divine will by showing every man through their earthly activities the love with which God has loved the world.”

What Choice to Make – How shall I make my choice? In what form of life and in what responsibility will I find my own vocation? Here again the Council helps us with certain pointers. God gives each of us various indications through “the signs of the times,” i.e., those special situations and appeals made by

individuals or groups who call urgently for our help. But above all, and most decisively, God gives us his signs through the natural and supernatural gifts he accords us and through inspirations within the *deep recesses of our hearts*; sometimes these inspirations are strong and urgent, at other times they are a mere whisper. Sometimes they take the form of vivid realizations of Gospel values; a sensitivity to certain needs here and now or in this or that particular place: a deep desire or enthusiasm; an impulse or an act of generosity in the direction of a particular form of love and service. Here is a precious excerpt from the conciliar decree on the apostolate of the laity: “For the exercise of this apostolate, the Holy Spirit gives to the faithful special gifts as well (cf. 1 Cor 12:7), ‘allotting to everyone according as he will’ (1 Cor 12:11). Thus may individuals, ‘according to the gift that each had received, administer it to one another’ and become ‘good stewards of the manifold grace of God’ (1 Pet 4:10) and build up thereby the whole body in charity (cf. Eph. 4:16). From the reception of these charisms or gifts, including those which are less dramatic, there arise *for each* believer *the right and duty to use them* in the Church and in the world for the good of mankind and for the upbuilding of the Church. In so doing, believers need to enjoy the freedom of the Holy Spirit, who ‘breathes where he wills’ (John 3:8). At the same time, they must act in communion with their brothers in Christ, especially with their pastors.”

So it comes about that a Christian is inspired by the circumstances of his life, the signs of the times, and the Spirit of Christ and thus discovers the call of God to holiness, love, and service in the Church: he becomes an integral part of the great apostolate and spiritual movement set afoot by Don Bosco, and very much alive today; in this is his vocation: to live as a Salesian who is a Cooperator.

from the *Identity of the Salesian Cooperator* (pp. 42-49)

ONE SPIRIT

“It is necessary for us to have friends, benefactors, and people in the world who, while practicing the spirit of the Salesians in its totality, live in the midst of their own families, just as do the Salesian Cooperators.” (*Don Bosco. Plan to be deliberated by the General Chapter, 1877.*)

The Salesian Family has one spirit, received from the Founder of the charism, Don Bosco. The Salesian Cooperators, because of their own vocation, not only accomplish the Salesian mission, but they must also live the Salesian spirit and let it shine forth from their entire self, in their entire daily life: in their social and apostolic activities, in their relationships with others and with the members of the Salesian Family, in their most intimate spiritual life. This does not mean that they are cut off from the Church or the Gospel. On the contrary: in fidelity to the Holy Spirit, the profound inspirer of this spirit, the Church is enriched by putting *certain aspects* of its mystery and its life into high relief, and the Gospel is lived through *some of its values* being more particularly expressed. The Salesian spirit, included in our *concrete* Christian vocation, is none other than *our* way of living the Gospel spirit, the Christian spirit of our baptism, and the spirit of the Church.

The Witness of the Beatitudes (*Project of Apostolic Life* 7)

Describing in essential terms how one can be a Salesian apostle today in one’s own family, at work, and in the social and political reality, the *Project of Apostolic Life* centers its attention on the “personal lifestyle of the Salesian Cooperator” as it is imbued with the spirit of the Beatitudes. We are speaking of some

attitudes and behaviors which invest Christian life, and therefore, the Salesian Cooperator. In current language, the spirit of the Beatitudes indicates a quality of life, both of the individual and of the group, denoted by the Gospel as “blessed,” because it is the creator and source of profound serenity and genuine joy.

Lumen Gentium solemnly declared that all the faithful in the Church are called to sanctity and to perfect charity, even if through diverse paths and in different forms in life (LG 40a), and that all of Christ’s disciples have the “evangelical counsels” (as they have come to be called) proposed to them, even if different ways of expressing them, corresponding to the specific vocation of each individual, are employed when practicing them. When speaking of the “evangelical counsels,” the *Project of Apostolic Life* takes into account the distinct vocations and the different conditions of life as regards the possibility of their being lived by all the lay faithful. In short, it focuses on how the Gospel values, expressed in the Beatitudes, can be lived in a concrete way by “secular” apostles.

1. **The core element: dynamic apostolic charity** (*Project of Apostolic Life*, 7)

“The center of the Salesian spirit is pastoral charity, characterized by that youthful dynamism which is revealed so strongly in our Founder and in the origins of our Society. It is an apostolic thrust that makes us seek souls and serve God alone.” (SDB *Constitutions*, art. 40)

“God is love; he who lives in love, lives in God and God lives in Him.” (I Jn. 4:16) These words express with singular clarity the center of Christian faith: the Christian image of God and also the consequent image of man and of his path. Moreover, in this same verse, John offers us, so to say, a concise formula for Christian existence: “We have recognized the love which God has for us and we have believed.”

We have believed in the love of God – thus can the Christian express the fundamental choice of his life. There is no ethical decision or grand “idea” at the beginning of being Christian; rather, it happens in the encounter with an event, with a Person, who gives a new horizon to life and, with it, a decisive direction. (*Deus caritas est*, 1) At the center of the entire Christian life is *charity*; i.e., the love which exists in God, as is explained and lived by Jesus, and in which, through grace, all the baptized participate. At the center of every Christian group devoted to the service of their neighbor, *there is apostolic charity*; in other words, that aspect of Christian charity which is participation in the soul and mission of Christ and of the Apostles for the sake of the salvation of all men and of making the Kingdom of God the Father present. At the center of Salesian life, there is that apostolic charity *marked by a youthful and youth-centered dynamism*, with a joyous and generous thrust. In summary, the Salesian Cooperator is essentially someone who truly accepts loving and giving his whole life – joyously, as is pleasing to the Lord, according to the marvelous words of St. Paul: “He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly; he who sows abundantly will reap abundantly. Let each one give according to what he has decided in his heart, not in a gloomy or constrained way, for *God loves the one who gives with joy.*” (II Cor. 9:6+7)

Don Bosco lived this way. All his life was a testimony to the strength with which he was possessed by this most noble passion: apostolic passion. He expressed it in his motto: “Lord, give me souls!” and in this oft-repeated phrase: “Let us work for the greater glory of God.” If he was able to live such dynamic charity, it is because, through experience and grace, he made *three very great realizations*, he had made three fundamental discoveries.

First of all, he had understood vividly the incomparable *greatness of each person's human and Christian vocation*, even in the smallest one: every man is a freedom capable of loving, a “brother for whom Christ died.” (I Cor. 8:11)

With the same strength, he also realized *the immense misery of so many men*, for whom the realization of this so very great vocation is rendered very difficult or even impossible: all “the poor.” Taken over by compassion, he pledged to give his entire life to three categories of people: *the young*, above all the most abandoned; *the common folk*, ignorant and unappreciated; and *the pagans*, deprived of the Gospel.

Finally, he perceived *the enormous responsibility* that God leaves to the apostle, to his free choice, to his generosity. God takes our collaboration seriously: “If we do not burn with love, many around us will die of cold.” (F. Mauriac)

And so, let us love and let us work with our whole heart, with our whole soul, with all our strength, and with all our spirit, *to come to the aid of and to save the greatest possible number of our brothers*. This is the core of the Salesian spirit.

2. Apostolic charity inspires different aspects of Salesian life

a) Our style of apostolic work

Actions carried out by each member of the Salesian Family have these three characteristics:

- *Untiring zeal and asceticism.* Salesian Cooperators give themselves to their mission with untiring effort. Apostolic work is their *mysticism* because they understand the Divine greatness and the pressing need; it is their asceticism because they accept its great demands.
- *Initiative and flexibility when faced with pressing needs.* Salesian Cooperators must be attentive to the signs of the times and know concrete reality, convinced that the Lord calls them through the most pressing needs of their time and place. These call forth their spirit of initiative, courage, and apostolic creativity; “in those things which are of advantage to youth at risk or which serve to win souls to God, I forge ahead even to the point of temerity.” (Don Bosco) The timely answer to these needs brings the Salesian Cooperators to a periodic verification of their action, by checking out the direction in which life is moving and by re-adapting continually, without falling, however, into a mania of constant change.
- *Sense of Church in its growth and unity.* As Salesian Cooperators, we see in the Church, the People of God, the center of unity and of animation and the communion of all of the forces which work for salvation. In particular, we must have special veneration for and bond of fidelity and love for the Successor of Peter; and to the Bishops, a “sincere charity and obedience;” and for the other Religious Families, profound esteem. We always collaborate with a concern that the Body of Christ might grow. “No labor is too great when it concerns the Church and the Holy Father.” (Don Bosco)

b) The Educational emergency (Project of Apostolic Life 9)

We can say what the educational emergency in which we find ourselves consists of. It stems from two factors. On the one hand, the generation of children demands – and it cannot not happen – to enter into a true, good, and beautiful universe; on the other hand, the generation of parents has become a stranger to

the universe of meaning: it no longer has answers. The educational emergency is this: the interruption of the story that one generation passes on to the next. It is the aphasia (the loss of the ability to speak) of a generation of parents and the inability of the generation of children to articulate even the question which tugs at their hearts. Parents make do not pass on traditions to their children because they have lost their memory of them, and they become witnesses to nothing and transmitters of rules. The children find themselves wandering in a roadless desert, not knowing any more from whence they come or where they are headed.

This educational emergency is a call to responsibility in certain areas of life which require a greater vigilant attentiveness and a more decisive commitment on the part of the entire Salesian Family.

What is the way out of this educational emergency?

At the root of crushed hopes stands the attempt *to make prevail an anthropology without God and without Christ*. This type of thinking has brought us to consider man as the “absolute center of reality,” thus artificially making him occupy God’s place while forgetting that it is not Man who makes God but God who makes Man.

Uprooted from the great traditions which have generated them, the young have found this most upsetting guest in their home: nihilism. Let us not fool ourselves: this is the condition of many young people today. And so? On one side it confirms an interpretation and an evaluation of the present situation of the young; and, on the other, we educators are called to read this same reality not only from the perspective of social psychology but also from a pedagogical one, having behind us the entire treasure of Don Bosco’s experience, of his Preventive System, and of its inculturation in the entire world.

Education and Culture (Project of Apostolic Life 7)

The primary and essential task of culture in general and of every specific culture is education. This consists in the fact that Man becomes ever more human, that he can “*be*” more and not only “*have more*,” and, that, consequently, by means of all that which he “has,” all that which the “possesses,” he knows that he is always more fully ‘*a human being*.’

Education is a specific journey in humanization; that is, of the development of the person. It seeks to construct man from the inside, freeing him from conditioning which might impede him from living his personal vocation fully and equipping him to expand his creative abilities. Man’s development as a person necessarily passes through *culture, understood, above all, as a way of relating with the world, with others, with himself, and with God*, but also understood as a personal encounter with the objective patrimony of all knowledge, goods, and values, and, finally, as a personal process of assimilation, re-elaboration, and enrichment.

Therefore, “*culture*” is not a static, universal patrimony, serenely accepted by all. Today we need to deal with an ever more complex society: one that is post-ideological and uncertain, but, above all, multicultural, with all the weight of ambiguity that this last term evokes as concerns openness to or refusal of diversity. *Then, too, we must keep before our eyes the reality of globalization, which mangles all identities and locals projects*. And so, the next challenge coming to education will be exactly that of facing globalization and interculturality, wherein the recognition of differences and the breaking-down of stereotypes will be a necessity and an educational resource.

Education is precisely the cultural mediation which is capable of making us confront the aspirations of and the situations which our young people live today, with the human experience which is expressed in the cultural patrimony and in the changes produced by globalization. Salesian education is founded on a hierarchy of values which express a particular concept of man:

- *the maturation of conscience* through the search for truth and the interior adherence to it;
- *the development of a responsible and creative freedom* through the knowledge and choice of the good;
- *the capacity for relationship, solidarity, and sharing with others*, based on the recognition of the dignity of the human person;
- *The enabling of historical responsibilities*, founded on a sense of justice and of peace.

Salesian works and associations are places of education and culture, in which are offered a knowledge which makes the young aware of the problems of today's world, sensitive to values, and capable of constructive criticism. Here the young acquire attitudes which permit them to act as free men and women, with an ability that makes them competent and efficacious in their actions.

The situation of unbelief in which the greater part of our young people grow up today is well known. Further, this unbelief *has extraordinary cultural relevance*. It is enough for us to look at the world of literature or cinema to see this. It is very difficult to find, in these last decades and in the more successful or more representative works, any production in which the main characters receive the inspiration for their life or for the dignity of their existence from Christianity. *The religious experience is presented, with pejorative and ridiculing tones, as an infantile phenomenon or as a sense of guilt*. Notwithstanding this, for us, Christ is the best news possible and the most precious gift that we can give to the world; in Him Man reaches his greatest dignity, in as much as he is recognized as a child of God and the frontiers of his existence open wide unto eternity.

It's not simply a matter of supplying an ethical animation to society; that is, of making the Church an agency of values in a society which knows the dramatic absence of solid, ethical moorings, and, therefore, of reducing the function of Christianity to that of "*civil religion*;" but, rather, of touching again our "roots": our faith in Jesus Christ, rediscovering the demands of the Christian vocation, and, therefore, succeeding in retelling the Gospel and giving credible witness to the Gospel.

Therefore, *the final objective of education is evangelization, as the marrying faith and culture, of faith and life*. Salesian educational environments seek to begin a vital dialogue and an integration of knowledge, education, and the Gospel. In the disparity between concept and planning, education takes its reference from Christ, as its criterion for evaluating, so as to discern which are those values which build up man and which are the counter-values which degrade him. In fact, it is, above all, *the irrelevance of faith to culture and in life* that makes the young indifferent and strangers to the world of religion; it makes the question about God insignificant; it empties religious language of its meaning; and it tends to make every commitment to holistic education and evangelization an effort expended in vain.

For many centuries, Christian faith has inspired thinkers' reflections, authors' works, artists' creations, and musicians' compositions. With great temerity (or, rather, cynicism, given that we are speaking not of ignorance) *today some attempt to deny the Christian roots of European culture*.

Unfortunately, it has been for a long time now that we have felt the *absence of a witnessing and efficacious presence of Catholics in the distinct areas of the creation and the diffusion of culture*. Politicians, authors, educators, doctors, poets, lawyers, journalists, and other professional Catholics are lacking. If the present state of disbelief has an extremely strong impact on culture in the western world, it is evident that the Catholic person, and, in particular, the Salesian Cooperator, must make himself present in his culture with commitment and witness. We need soldiers of Christ, Catholic leaven in the *world of art, of thought, and of social communication*; soldiers who are able to give new prestige, distinction to Christianity.

“The Church – said John Paul II – calls upon the lay faithful to be present in the teaching of courage and intellectual creativity, in the privileged places of the culture - which are the world of the school and of the university, the areas of scientific and technical research, the places of artistic creation and of humanistic reflection.”

The educator “according to the heart of Don Bosco” is aware that the educational process is the privileged place in which the promotion of the whole person happens and in which faith is proposed to the young. Teaching illumines human knowledge with the truths of the Faith, without detaching it from the objective which is proper to it and re-thinks, in view of education to the faith, both the complex meaning of culture, as well as the teaching of the individual disciplines and personal relationships, both in themselves and within the context of the group.

Therefore, in the educational process, one seeks to *develop the culture of the individual person in such a way as to give him the capacity of communion and of a “reading” of men and of events*, as a duty of service and responsibility towards others and not as a means of personal affirmation and enrichment. The Salesian educator *helps others discover the profound coherence between Faith and the values which their culture seeks*: it puts back the function of the Gospel in the culture: it elevates it in its authentic expressions, and regenerates and transforms its less-human aspects; it enables attitudes which predispose the young to a vital understanding of and favorable response to the Gospel.

Maybe now more than ever we realize that the handing on of Christianity from one generation to the next is not something we can take for granted and that it, in fact, implies today, just as yesterday, *the need for Christianity to be taken on anew by each generation*. This speaks to the freedom of each person’s conscience. And these, then, are the persons who help to form culture in their generation, creating a human environment which is inspired by lived faith.

There is, therefore, *an originality and a specificity* to strong fidelity to Christianity in each generation. There is a sort of *“re-inventing” of Christianity in each generation*, still with the bond of fidelity and the search for coherency with its origins. Tertullian had already affirmed this in the 3rd century: *one is not born a Christian, but a person becomes one*.

3. Apostolic charity inspires the Salesian educational method (*Project of Apostolic Life* 10)

The Salesian style of relationships concerns the way in which the Cooperator strives to deal with all those whom he encounters, whether on a regular basis or occasionally, and, above all, with the members of the whole Salesian Family. And so it is most important to add some precise guidelines on how to deal with those to whom we are sent in the Salesian mission: the young.

a. Education: interpersonal rapport founded on reason, religion, and loving-kindness

Education, or, better, *the educational process*, is presented thus as a dynamic, intentional rapport between persons, within the context of a place, of society, and of culture between an adult and a non-adult, oriented in such a way so that the young, while acquiring the capacity to act freely according to the dictates of reason (and of faith) receive a human ordering of their conduct, worthy of the human condition and proportional to their actual state of immaturity and the demands of the mature state to which they are tending.

And therefore, the young person is expected to be neither self-didactic nor merely the receiver of instruction from others. In the educational process there is the aspect of interior educational growth: *there is a true passage from the lesser to the greater* in the search for what is true, beautiful, and good - truth, beauty, and goodness.

On the affective plane, virtuous qualities are born, therefore, from the progressive and gradual exercise of concrete actions, in some way permeated by rationality, adapted to create the habitual capacity of living a moral life, where the pedagogy of virtue becomes the pedagogy of freedom or of liberation. Education develops, therefore, in the inseparable and classic trinomial of reason, religion, and loving-kindness.

b. “I care”: caring for the growth of the adolescent with loving-kindness (Project of Apostolic Life 10)

Education, *in the first place amounts to “caring for” man, humanly and with loving-kindness*. Any aloof, bureaucratic, or functional education creates loneliness, while an education full of love and concern allows one to breathe and to open up to interpersonal dialogue. This evokes from the educator the self-realization of his fatherhood/motherhood towards the younger generations, the realization of his identity as a man, and of feeling himself alive because he has aided the right of every adolescent in his growth as a human being.

Indeed, at the center of one’s attention as an educator stands the person of the adolescent as the ideal point of reference. He is the one who is to be taken care of with love, and from whom to “e-ducere” (lead out of, literally) all that which is positive, in its embryonic state, in him so it might blossom fully.

c. Concerted collaboration in solidarity and networking: the educating community

Today, no one educates alone.

Our present society, due to its complexity, demands that we produce a multiple and differentiated kind of education. It urges us to *rethink education as a communal undertaking, and the educational system as one of “networking,”* in which diverse educational subjects are involved and interact (the family, the school, the ecclesial community, the different societal groups, the mass media, and the place where they live) all cooperating and co-responsible, each in its own originality and uniqueness.

There opens up along this road a space in which to recognize that *education* is a relational good to be promoted and realized making use of every means possible because it constitutes a true and veritable *social wealth*, whose beneficiary and administrator indeed is not the State, as an institutional apparatus, but rather civil society understood as a community of persons.

Education is the most precious resource which a society can have as regards its future. When this comes to be stripped of its qualification or denatured, the sad effects are immediately and tragically felt, especially by the new generations; therefore, *it will be necessary for education to take priority over all the other various types of formation: both sector-based and scholastic.*

To achieve this, while considering the truly legitimate request for didactic innovation, instruction, and professional competence, it is imperative that we leave the prison of planning, still prevalent today, which exacerbates the problem of education as regards the methods, techniques, and curriculum, so that we might look together with others in the network – and, above all, with the parents and families – to the centrality of the person and to form the mature man, more than being concerned about specializing in varied competencies.

The Salesian Cooperator teacher thus becomes the true master, the one who, by combining both cultural and professional competency with human sensitivity and educative passion, becomes the wise guide in life, a credible and imitable reference point, a plausible orientation in the uncertainties of various choices. In this way, he can make up for the lack of societal models to the point of bringing and supporting the adolescent in his processes of growth towards that maturity of moral conscience which is expressed in his capacity to discern that which is true and good.

d. Integration between instruction and education (Project of Apostolic Life 9)

With such a procedure, *an integration of education and instruction* becomes necessary, one which can be expressed in the following passages concerning pedagogy:

- *educating by instructing* means educating through culture. It is a passage which fundamentally signifies two things:

- *first of all, it means helping the person to go out of his individualistic self to face the universality of thought*, which is expressed in the patrimony of the culture (included herein is the educational force and value of instruction). School has its own originality because it contributes to education by means of cultural mediation and the mastery of competencies and knowledge. Instruction, therefore, constitutes part of the educational process and is one specific part of it;

- *favoring a structured (formalized) vision of the understanding of reality, which rises above the disordered stock-piling of facts and ideas so as to offer a unified vision* of the human condition and to avoid establishing the dominion of “it’s a given” or provoking the atrophy of critical and evaluative judgment, besides not making the “need to be” disappear from the person’s vision. This would produce devastating effects on the formation of man, left to the mercy of the chaotic disorder of information, deprived of the possibility of ordering it according to the necessary criteria of values and priorities;

- *but also instructing by educating*

The post-modern fragmentation into micro-knowledge specialists causes us to lose the connection with the great truths and reduces the capacity to see things as a whole and to unify, which bring the various parts to unity. To continue to furnish information without succeeding in building a compass which will give the young direction reveals a foundational problem: the absence of critical parameters of reference and of assessment, and where to situate the information that is received.

From these challenges is derived the necessity to abandon *the false myth of the “neutrality of education.”* Moreover, we know very well that today neutrality does not exist: neither in the society, nor in education. The idea of “neutrality” is a false myth which carries with it a serious risk: that of simply training the young in practical techniques and to a sterile and indifferent pragmatism, which does not educate personal choices or to responsible commitment.

The Salesian spirit is capable of inspiring in the Cooperator the attitude which is appropriate in every situation. A precious article from our Constitutions can sum it up: “A loving presence in solidarity.” (SDB Constitutions, art. 16. *May every Cooperator meditate on these words: presence, knowledge, and solidarity.*)

from the Charter of the Charismatic Identity of the Salesian Family

Art. 23. Collaborating with God the Father

Putting God as the unifying center of one’s life, the source of fraternal communion and the inspiration for one’s activity, pre-supposes a certain image of God. Not the distant God, totally immersed in His solitary state and imperturbable silence with no interest in the earth, but God-Love (cf. NM 4,16) who gives Himself totally to humanity, a «Father who goes on working » (Jn 5,17) sharing the life of his children, engaged in responding, in practical ways and with infinite love to peoples’ expectations; a God so involved in our history as to lay himself open to man’s freedom, accepting the risk of rejection, always giving himself as love which forgives (agape).

Silently but effectively working within history, this God associates with himself active and busy co-workers, who in the practical circumstances of life, devote all their energies to proclaiming His love and undertaking good works, drawing from Him the strength to love, to give and to serve.

For the Salesian Family and its members, «living in the presence of God » means cultivating an intense and constant loving relationship with Him (“union with God”); feeling oneself therefore filled with a love similar to His, that which gives itself in a loving and selfless way and freely spends itself for the special beneficiaries of the mission; it also means knowing how to see and to respond to the signs of his mysterious presence in the expectations and the requests of the men and women of our day.

It is to this God, the merciful Father that Don Bosco addressed his heartfelt prayer: «Da mihi animas, cetera tolle». To all his disciples, men and women, Don Bosco repeats: «The most divine of all divine things is to cooperate with God in the salvation of souls, and it is a sure path to the highest holiness».

from Evangelii Gaudium 8

Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?

from Strenna 2014: “Da mihi animas, cetera tolle” *Let us draw upon the spiritual experience of Don Bosco, in order to walk in holiness according to our specific vocation* “The glory of God and the salvation of souls”

My Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Salesian Family,

We are concluding the three years of preparation for the bicentennial of Don Bosco’s birth. After having dedicated the first year to getting to know him in the history of his times, and the second year to recognizing him as an educator and putting into practice his own educational method, in this third and final year we want to explore the source of his charism by drawing on his spirituality.

Christian spirituality has charity at its core, in other words the very life of God himself, who is *Agape, Charity, Love* at the deepest level. Salesian spirituality is no different from Christian spirituality. It, too, is concentrated on charity; in its case, it is a matter of “pastoral charity,” in other words that charity which urges us to seek “the glory of God and the salvation of souls.” “*Caritas Christi urget nos.*”

Like all the great holy founders, Don Bosco lived his life as a Christian with a fervent, burning charity and contemplated the Lord Jesus from a particular standpoint, that of the charism God had entrusted to him: the mission to the young. “Salesian charity” is pastoral charity because it seeks the salvation of souls. It is also educational charity because it finds in education the resource that allows it to help the young to develop all their energies for good. In this way young people can grow up to be upright citizens, good Christians, and future inhabitants of heaven.

Therefore, dear members of the Salesian Family, I am inviting you to draw from the wellsprings of Don Bosco’s spirituality, in other words from his educational and pastoral charity. It finds its model in Christ the Good Shepherd, and its prayer and plan of life in Don Bosco’s motto, “Da mihi animas, cetera tolle.” Closely following this path, we will be able to discover “Don Bosco the mystic,” whose spiritual experience lies at the heart of the way we live our Salesian spirituality today, in the variety of vocations which take their inspiration from him; and we ourselves will be able to have a strong Salesian spiritual experience.

Getting to know Don Bosco’s life and his educational method still does not mean understanding his deepest secret and the real reason for his being so surprisingly relevant today. Being familiar with the various aspects of Don Bosco’s life and works and even of his educational method is not sufficient. Behind all this, as the source of the fruitfulness of his activity and relevance, is something that can escape even us, his sons and daughters: his deep inner life, what we could call his “familiarity” with God. Who knows but maybe this is the best idea we have of him in order to love him, pray to him, imitate him, and follow him so as to encounter the Lord Jesus and bring young people to this same encounter!

Today it would be possible to draw up a spiritual profile of Don Bosco, starting from the impressions of his earliest collaborators. We could then move on to Fr. Eugene Ceria’s book *Don Bosco with God*, which was the first attempt made to provide a popular account of his spirituality. We could then compare the various re-interpretations of Don Bosco’s spirituality offered by his successors, before finally coming to the research that has marked a turning point in the study of the way Don Bosco lived his own faith and religious life.

These recent studies are more faithful in the way they are in touch with the available sources and are open to a consideration of the various spiritual perspectives that influenced Don Bosco, or with which he was in contact (St. Francis de Sales, St. Ignatius, St. Alphonsus Maria Liguori, St. Vincent de Paul St. Philip Neri, et al.). But they also help us to recognize that his was an original and creative experience. At this point it would be interesting to have a new spiritual profile of Don Bosco, a new hagiography, as this term is understood by spiritual theology today.

Don Bosco the “spiritual man” attracted and was of special interest to Walter Nigg, a Lutheran pastor and professor of Church history at the University of Zurich. He concentrated on the spiritual dimension, and he wrote thus: “Describing someone while overlooking the fact that we are dealing with a saint would be like presenting a half truth. The category of saint has to take precedence over that of the educator. Any other ranking would falsify the hierarchy of values. On the other hand, the saint is someone in whom the natural borders on the supernatural, and in Don Bosco the supernatural is there in a remarkable way.... We ourselves have no doubt: the real modern saint of Italy is Don Bosco.”¹...

Saints, in fact, are a response to the spiritual needs of a generation, an outstanding illustration of what Christians at a particular time mean by holiness. And evidently the hoped-for imitation of a saint can only be proportional to the absolute reference point that is Jesus of Nazareth; in fact, all Christians, in their real situations, are called to incarnate in their own ways the universal figure of Jesus, obviously without ever exhausting it. The saints offer us a concrete and valid path toward this identification with the Lord Jesus.

In the commentary on the 2014 Strenna which I am offering to the Salesian Family, the three key issues I develop are the features of the spirituality of Don Bosco; pastoral charity as the core and synthesis of Salesian spirituality; Salesian spirituality for vocations. At the end I shall propose more completely some practical tasks which I shall already have pointed toward in these three areas.

Spirituality is a characteristic “feel” for Christian holiness and being inclined in that direction; it is a particular way of ordering one’s life in order to achieve Christian perfection, and being part of a special charism. In other words, it is a Christian way of life in union with God which presupposes faith.

Salesian spirituality consists of various elements; it is a style of life, of prayer, of work, of interpersonal relationships; a community way of life; an educational and pastoral mission based on a pedagogical heritage; an approach to formation; a characteristic set of values and attitudes; a particular view of the Church and of society through specific areas of engagement; a historical patrimony of documentation and writings; a characteristic language; a typical set of structures and works; a calendar with its own celebrations and anniversaries, etc.

In the general framework of a history of 19th-century spirituality, we can point out some elements that seem to us to be especially relevant in describing the spiritual experience of Don Bosco; they are his starting point, his deepest roots, the means he uses, his goal.

1.1. Starting point: the glory of God and the salvation of souls

The glory of God and the salvation of souls were Don Bosco’s passion. Promoting the glory of God and the salvation of souls meant conforming his own will to that of God, who obviously greatly desires the

¹ W. Nigg, *Don Bosco: Un santo per il nostro tempo* (Turin: LDC, 1980), pp. 75, 103.

full manifestation of that goodness that he himself is – in other words his glory, which is the authentic achievement of what is good for every person – which is the salvation of his soul.

In a rare fragment of his “story of a soul,” Don Bosco will confess (in 1854) the secret regarding the purpose of what he was doing: “When I began to devote myself to this particular aspect of the sacred ministry, I set out to consecrate all my efforts to the greater glory of God and to the salvation of souls, and to work to make good citizens on this earth so that one day they would then be worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to be able to continue until my last breath. Amen.”²

A few lines earlier in the same passage, he had written:

Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum. Jn. 11:52. The words of the holy Gospel which let us know that the Divine Savior came into the world to gather together into unity the scattered children of God, it appears to me can be applied literally to the young people of our days. This, the most frail but most precious part of human society, on which rests the hopes for a happy future, is not of itself perversely inclined.... The difficulty consists in finding a way to bring them together, to speak with them, to bring them to lead a good life. This was the mission of the Son of God; only his holy religion can do this.³

At the basis of the decision to set up the Oratory, there is the salvific will of God, expressed in the incarnation of the Son, sent to gather around himself in unity people lost in the byways of error and mistaken paths to holiness. The Church is called to respond in its own time to this divine mission of salvation. So the Oratory fits into this economy of salvation; it is a human response to a divine vocation, and not a work founded on the good will of an individual.

As confirmation of this, we can read in an account from January 16, 1861: “Questioned about his opinion regarding the efficiency of grace, he replied: I have studied these questions a great deal; but my system is one that redounds to the greater glory of God. What is the point of my having a narrow system that then sends a soul to hell, or a broad system provided it send souls to heaven?”⁴

Similar is the explanation he gives on February 16, 1876, about the way he carried out his plans: “We always go ahead with confidence; before undertaking anything, we make certain that it is God’s will that these things are done. We may meet a thousand difficulties on the way, but that does not matter. God wants it, and we are fearless in the face of whatever difficulties there may be.”⁵

Identical to the purposes of the Oratory are those of the “Work of the Oratories,” in other words of the Salesian Society, of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, of the Salesians Cooperators, of the Association of Mary Help of Christians; all of them are animated, motivated, and guided by the same purpose. A few quotations regarding the Salesians from among the many one could cite will suffice.

In the introduction to the first draft of the Constitutions, Don Bosco declared that the first group of clergy collaborators had joined together “promising to occupy themselves only with those things that their

² Cf. Giovanni Bosco, *Piano di regolamento per l’Oratorio maschile di S. Francesco di Sales in Torino nella regione Valdocco. Introduzione*, in P. Braido, ed., *Don Bosco Educatore: Scritti e Testimonianze* (Rome: LAS, 1997), p. 111.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

⁴ Domenico Ruffino, *Cronache dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, n. 2, 1861, 8-9.42.

⁵ Giulio Barberis, *Cronichetta*, quad. 4, 52.

superior judged to be for the greater glory of God and for the benefit of their own souls.”⁶ In the following chapter on the purpose of the Society, he repeated: the Salesians “come together to form a single heart and a single soul to love and to serve God.”⁷

In addition, on June 11, 1860, in the request submitted to the archbishop of Turin for the approval of the Constitutions, one reads: “We the undersigned, moved solely by the desire to ensure our eternal salvation, have come together to live a common life and so more easily give our attention to those things that concern the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”⁸ Then on January 12, 1880, he wrote to Cardinal Ferrieri, saying that the aim of the Salesian work was still the same: “I believe I can assure Your Eminence that the Salesians have no other aim than to work for the greater glory of God, on behalf of Holy Church to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the Indians of the Pampas and in Patagonia.”⁹

Indeed, Don Bosco had already mentioned the same purpose of the growing Society of St. Francis de Sales, writing on June 9, 1867, to the Salesians in a circular letter, two years before the approval of the Congregation: “The first aim of our Society is the sanctification of its members.... Everyone should enter the society guided by the sole desire to serve God with greater perfection, and for his own good, and it goes without saying that the real good for himself is his spiritual and eternal good.”¹⁰

1.2. At its heart: union with God

The *unum necessarium* is at the heart of his interior life, of his dialog with God, of his work as an apostle. There can be no doubt that holiness shone out in Don Bosco’s works, but it is also true that his works were simply an expression of his faith. It is not the works he accomplished that make Don Bosco a saint, as St. Paul reminds us: “*If I have all the eloquence of men ... but am without love, then I am nothing at all* (1 Cor 13); but it is a faith enlivened by practical charity (cf. Gal 5:6b) that makes him a saint: *you will be able to tell them by their fruits* (cf. Matt 7:16,20).

All Christians are called to a real and not merely psychological “union with God.” Union with God means living one’s life in God and in his presence: it is the divine life that is within us by participation; it is the exercise of faith, hope, and charity, to which necessarily follow the infused virtues, the moral virtues, etc. Don Bosco gave an evangelical zeal to his whole life, making his whole purpose in life the transmission of faith in God, in living out the theological virtues: with a faith which became a fascinating example for the young, a hope that was expressed in words that were a shining light for them, with a charity that became an expression of love for the most neglected.

Don Bosco was always faithful to his mission of practical charity: where a disincarnated mysticism would have run the risk of his being detached from reality, faith obliged him to keep his feet firmly on the ground so as to keep faith with those most in need; when he might have been overcome by fatigue or tempted to give up, hope sustained him; when there seemed to be no solution, St. Paul’s way ahead urged him on: “*Caritas Christi urget nos*” (1 Cor 5:14). Don Bosco’s charity did not falter when faced with difficulties:

⁶ Giovanni Bosco, *Costituzioni della società di S. Francesco di Sales [1858]-1875: Testi critici*, ed. Francesco Motto (Rome: LAS, 1982), pp. 70-71.

⁷ *Ibid.* 82.

⁸ *Epistolario*, ed. Motto, vol. I, 406.

⁹ *Epistolario*, ed. Ceria, vol. III, 544.

¹⁰ *Epistolario*, ed. Motto, II, 386.

I have made myself all things to all men in order to save some at any cost (1 Cor 9:22). It was not conflicts that were to be feared in the field of education, but lack of effort and disengagement.

Living by faith means abandoning oneself with joyful trust in God, who revealed himself in Jesus, so as to be able to live in all situations in a salvific manner: in other words, responding to all circumstances in such a way as to allow God to show in them his work of salvation. No situation corresponds perfectly to God's will, but a person can act in each situation so as always to carry out God's will.

Living by hope means waiting on God each day so as to be able to accept his gift when it comes; it means waiting each day for God, who comes through his created gifts: every day has its gift. So in all circumstances – even failure: “nothing can separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom 8:39).

Living by charity means opening up the present moment to the love of God. In order to be able to live a spirit of sacrifice, constant practice is needed; a stimulating context is needed: certainly, the Salesian mission is just that.

Don Bosco lived all this in a *spirit of genuine piety*. He did not leave any formula for practices of piety, nor any special devotion of his own. His approach is realistic and practical: just the prayers of the good Christian, easy, simple but said with perseverance. What Don Bosco wanted was that the Salesians should consecrate their whole lives to the salvation of souls and sanctify their work by offering it to God; prayer ought to take its place as the raising up of the mind and heart to God, as petition, and as nourishment. In other words, the “practices of piety” had something of an ascetical role. The results of this in the life of Don Bosco are plain for all to see.

Let us listen to two witness statements. This is what a past-pupil 45 years of age, a soldier and army instructor from Florence, wrote to Don Bosco in Turin:

My dear Don Bosco, it seems you were quite right to sigh over me, but you can also be sure that I always loved you, will always love you. I take every comfort from you, and from afar I admire all you do. I don't speak ill of you, nor do I allow anyone else to speak ill of you. I always defend you. In you I see someone who wants my soul at all costs. I am confused, ecstatic, thrilled by your way of thinking, always firm and deeply felt. It disconcerted me and made me feel astonished to see that you always loved me so much. Yes, O dear Don Bosco. I believe in the communion of Saints.... No one more than you knows me and understands my heart and can decide. In conclusion, therefore: advise me, love me, forgive me and commend me to God, to Jesus, to most holy Mary.... I send you a heartfelt kiss and swear that I love you....¹¹

The second witness statement is a very moving page written by St. Louis Orione to his clerics in 1934, the year of Don Bosco's canonization:

Now I shall tell you the reason, the motive, the cause for which Don Bosco became a saint. Don Bosco became a saint because he nurtured his divine life, because he nurtured our divine life. At his school I learned that this saint didn't fill our heads with nonsense or anything like that; rather, he nourished us with God, and he nourished himself with God, with the spirit of God. As a mother feeds herself so as then to be able to feed her child, so Don Bosco fed himself with God in order to feed us, too, with God. For this

¹¹ Francesco Motto, “Ricordi e riflessi di una educazione ricevuta,” in *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane*, 11 (1987), 365.

reason those who knew the saint and had the special grace to grow up close to him, to listen to his word, to be near him, in some way to live the life of the saint, took from that contact something that is not of this world, that is not human; something that nourished his life as a saint. Then again, he turned everything to heaven, everything to God, and drew out from everything a reason to raise our souls to heaven, to turn our steps toward heaven.

1.3. Means: unseen values translated into visible works

At the center of Don Bosco's spirituality there is God alone, to be known, loved, and served for the sake of one's own salvation through the carrying out of a real practical personal vocation: religious and apostolic – charitable, educational, pastoral – for young people, especially the poor and abandoned, for their total salvation, following the example of Christ the Savior and at the school of Holy Mother and Teacher Mary. It is not without significance that the noun he uses most, for example, in one of the volumes of his letters is *God*, and the verb most used after *doing* is *praying*.¹²

In Don Bosco there was an active spirituality; he tended toward activity, toward hard work under the influence of an awareness of need and the consciousness of a heavenly mission. The choice of hard work gives a particular meaning to detachment, in the area of apostolic activity. Where in St. Alphonsus detachment is above all an interior disposition in people, in Don Bosco it acquires more meaning in the context of hard work: detachment helps us to dedicate ourselves to the work God gives us to do.

In Don Bosco one finds the sense of the relative value of things, and at the same time the need to use them for the purposes he has at heart. He prefers not to be too firmly attached to any particular scheme of things; therefore, an approach more practical, pastoral, spiritual, rather than theological-speculative. In him there is this specific originality: salvation is to be achieved by means of loving-kindness, meekness, joy, humility, Eucharistic and Marian piety, love of God and of one's neighbor.

The relationship between the love of God and love for one's neighbor is identical for both the Christian and the religious. It is a matter of living a consecration to God and his greater glory in a total dedication to working for the good of souls, one's own and those of others. Likewise, it is a sacrifice without keeping back anything for oneself, made in union with one's brothers and sisters, in the love of obedience and of shared solidarity.

With true sensitivity and priestly zeal, Don Bosco engaged himself in society, witnessed to the faith, exhorted without concern for human respect, became directly involved even in areas where to some it appeared he was compromising priestly dignity. He lived the strong values of his vocation, but he also knew how to translate them into social action, practical measures without retreating into the spiritual, into "churchy things," into liturgical matters, understood as being cut off from the problems of the world and of life.

In Don Bosco the Spirit was alive. He did not race ahead; nor did he hang back. Secure in his vocation, he did not live his daily life like one without horizons; one kept it in a protective shell; one that refused to face reality in all its breadth and variety; as a world limited to a few needs to be satisfied; as a place for

¹² Francesco Motto, "Verso una storia di Don Bosco più documentata e più sicura," in *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 41 (2002), 250-251.

almost mechanically repeating traditional attitudes; as a refusal to face tensions, to demand sacrifices, to take risks, to forgo immediate success, to struggle.

Of interest in this regard is a quotation from 120 years ago which, but for some particular expressions, one would think came from our own day. It is an “external” witness statement regarding Don Bosco. It offers us an interpretation, which others, perhaps also inspired by Salesians, gave to his work. It is that of the cardinal vicar of Rome, Lucido Maria Parocchi, who in 1884 wrote:

What precisely is specific about the Salesian Society? I want to tell you what is the distinguishing mark of your Congregation, what it is that forms your character, just as the Franciscans are distinguished for poverty, the Dominicans for the defense of the faith, the Jesuits for culture. You have traits similar to those of the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits, but they are differentiated by their manner and purpose. . . . So what is special in the Salesian Congregation? What gives it its character and physiognomy? If I have understood it properly, and unless I am much mistaken, what gives it its specific character, its essential note and particular countenance, is charity practiced in accordance with the world’s needs at the present day: *nos credidimus caritati. Deus caritas est.*” [We believe in love. God is love.]

Today’s world can only be attracted and drawn toward good by charitable works. Nowadays the world has no time for anything besides material things; it doesn’t want to know anything about spiritual things. It ignores the beauty of the faith; it knows nothing of the greatness of religion, it rejects any hope in a future life, it denies God himself. This world understands charity only as a means, not as the end and the principle. It knows how to analyze this virtue but not how to make a synthesis of it. *Animalis homo non percipit quae sunt spiritus Dei*, as St. Paul puts it. If you tell people of this world: “It is necessary to save the souls that are being lost, it is necessary to teach those who do not know the principles of religion, and to give alms for love of that God who one day will reward those who are generous,” the people of this world will not understand.

It is necessary, therefore, to adapt oneself to this world, which is in full flight. God makes himself known to pagans through the natural law; he makes himself known to the Jews by means of the Bible; to the Greek schismatics through the great traditions of the Fathers; to Protestants through the Gospel, to the world today through charity. Tell this world: “I am taking youngsters off the streets so that they don’t fall under the streetcars, so they don’t fall into a pit. I will put them into a hostel so that they don’t waste the best years of their lives in vice and carousing. I bring them into schools to educate them so that they don’t become a prey on society, don’t end up in prison. I call them to me, and I look after them so that they don’t poke each other’s eyes out” – then the people of this world understand and begin to believe.¹³

With regard to our works, we have to bear in mind that if *the secular world* appreciates our social services, it often does so because of the way we become quickly involved and get on with things, because of the practical usefulness of the service provided, almost secularizing the religious element in which they see only philanthropy and not love and the inspiration of the gospel. Sometimes our works are considered as though they were similar to profitable businesses or perhaps reputable ones when the social services of the State are lacking. Even *believers* often have their doubts about the religious value of our work, even when it helps them and is of service to them; they give the credit to those managing them and are not

¹³ *Bollettino Salesiano* 8 (1884), n. 6, pp. 89-90.

inspired by the religious experience of the Congregation. Too easily, they have little confidence in the relevance and adaptability of our works. That is something to make us think – and quite a lot!

1.4. Goal: holiness

Don Bosco is heir to the religious humanism of St. Francis de Sales, who proposes to all classes of people the path of holiness. But the aspect emphasized by Don Bosco is a holiness common to all, each one according to his state of life. He did not think in terms of degrees of holiness, unwilling to be analytical in this way. He used scholastic schemes taken from the Catholic spirituality of the time. His is a Christocentric and Eucharistic, Marian theology, nourished by the practice of some virtues, especially obedience. Holiness does not exclude joy, cheerfulness; it requires not penitence but commitment, coming from a life of grace, in carrying out one's duties.

To the classical term *devotion*, used to indicate that state of love that makes us act promptly and lovingly for God, Don Bosco preferred the word *holiness*, the holiness of the person who lives in a state of habitual grace because he has succeeded through personal effort and the help of the Spirit to avoid the normal sins more common to the young: bad companions, bad talk, impurity, bad example, stealing, intemperance, pride, human respect, neglecting religious duties, etc.

After St. Francis de Sales and before the Second Vatican Council, Don Bosco teaches us that holiness is possible for everyone; that everyone is given sufficient grace to achieve it; that holiness depends greatly on a person's cooperation with grace. Certainly holiness is made difficult but not impossible, by various obstacles: imperfections, defects, passions, the devil, sin. Holiness is not impossible, given the many means at our disposal: the theological virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the moral virtues both infused and acquired, ascetical practices, etc.

Our spirituality runs the risk of being thwarted, because times have changed and because sometimes we live on a superficial level. To bring it fully to life, we need to start again from Don Bosco, from his spiritual experience and from his Preventive System. Clergy in Don Bosco's time saw what was not going well and did not want to become religious, but they were captivated by him. Young people need "witnesses," as Paul VI wrote. What is needed are "spiritual men," men of faith, sensitive to the things of God and ready to accept religious obedience in the search for what is the best. It is not novelty that makes us free, but the truth; truth cannot be what is fashionable, superficiality, improvisation: "*veritas liberavit vos.*"

3. Salesian spirituality for all vocations

If it is true that Christian spirituality has common elements valid for every calling, it is also true that it is experienced through particular differences and specifics according to one's state in life: priestly ministry, consecrated life, lay faithful, family, youth, the elderly – they all have their typical spiritual experience. The same is true for Salesian spirituality.

3.1. A spirituality common to all the groups of the Salesian Family

There are elements of spirituality common to all the groups of the Salesian Family: they all draw inspiration from Don Bosco, who is the founder of the Salesians, of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians together with Mother Mazzarello, of the Salesian Cooperators, and of the Association of Mary Help of Christians; the other groups refer to their own founders. These elements are listed in the "Charter

of Identity of the Salesian Family,” which needs to be known and reflected on since it constitutes the frame of reference for our spirituality of communion and for our formation to communion.

The features that are characteristic and recognized by all the groups can be found especially in the third part of the “Charter of Identity.” They regard our life in relation to the Trinity, the links with Don Bosco, communion for the mission, the spirituality of everyday life, contemplation in action following the example of Don Bosco, dynamic apostolic charity, the grace of unity, a preferential love for the young and for the working class, loving kindness, optimism and joy, work and temperance, initiative and flexibility, a spirit of prayer, entrustment to Mary Help of Christians.

We should not forget that the Preventive System is an expression and practical application of this shared spirituality. It once again links us to the spirit, the attitudes, and the gospel choices of Don Bosco. The “ingenuity” of his spirit is tied to the implementation of the Preventive System. It is a successful system, which is the model and inspiration for many people nowadays who are engaged in education in the various continents, in multicultural and pluri-religious contexts. It is a model that demands from everyone continuous reflection so as to bring about more and more the centrality of the young as those for whom and with whom the Salesian mission is carried out.

3.2. A spirituality proper to each group of the Salesian Family

On the other hand, each group of the Salesian Family has its own spiritual elements. Quite rightly, on account of their origin and development, the various groups have their own particular history and aspects of the common spirituality that they have demonstrated in a special way, and other aspects original to them. These elements are the specific difference of each group; they need to be known and constitute a richness for the whole Family.

Variety is a gift of the Spirit, who does not like uniformity and standardization; the differences and the specific features, however, must not become excuses for divisions or arguments but should enrich everyone and converge on a unity, which is communion to be welcomed as a gift and to be brought about by commitment. These identifying elements are present and made explicit especially in the Rules of Life, but also in the traditions of the various groups.

3.3. Salesian youth spirituality

As time passed, a Salesian youth spirituality also developed. In addition to the three biographies written by Don Bosco of the boys Michael Magone, Dominic Savio, and Francis Besucco, we can think of the pages he addressed to the young people themselves in the *Companion of Youth*, and of the sodalities Don Bosco set up as an opportunity for them to take a spiritual and apostolic lead, etc.

It would be interesting to know the developments that have taken place throughout our history and tradition in Salesian youth spirituality, up to the present time when an official formal arrangement has been formulated and spread among the young through the Salesian Youth Movement. Spirituality is the basis of the Salesian Youth Movement, which grows with the commitment of the young people themselves and which needs the support of animation on the part of the various groups of the Salesian Family. The Salesian Youth Movement in fact is an opportunity, a gift, and a task for all the groups of our Family.

Salesian youth spirituality is a spirituality suited to the young; it is lived with and for the young, planned and lived out as part of a young person's experience. It aims at creating a blueprint for today's young Christian who is living in and being prepared for the world of today; offered to all the young because it applies to the "poorest" but at the same time is capable of providing goals for those who are more advanced; it also sets out to make the young person a role model for his peers in the place where he finds himself.

A spirituality of daily life as the place of encounter with God.

Salesian youth spirituality sees daily life as the place of encounter with God. The basis of this very positive view of daily life and of life itself is faith and an appreciation of the Incarnation. In this kind of spirituality, one shows oneself to be guided by the mystery of God who, with his Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection, affirms his presence in all of human reality as a saving presence.

For a young person, daily life is made up of duties, socializing, sports, growing pains, family life, the development of personal gifts, future prospects, demands, aspirations. It is all of this that needs to be taken on board, reflected on, and lived in the light of God. According to Don Bosco, all that is needed to become a saint is to do well what you have to do. He considers being faithful to one's obligations in life as the touchstone for virtue and the sign of spiritual maturity.

What is needed so that daily life can be lived as a spirituality is the grace of unity, which helps to harmonize the different features of life around a heart in which the Holy Spirit dwells. This makes conversion and purification possible; through the power of the sacrament of Reconciliation, it enables the young person to maintain a free heart that is open to God and given to one's brothers and sisters.

Among the *attitudes and experiences* of daily life to be lived deeply in the Spirit could be considered: one's family life; love for one's work or studies, cultural development, and scholastic experience; the need to combine extraordinary experiences with the "daily grind," a positive and reflective view of one's times; the responsible acceptance of one's own life and spiritual progress day by day; the ability to guide one's life according to a vocational plan.

An Easter spirituality of joy and optimism

The decisive truth of the Christian faith is that the Lord has truly risen! Therefore eternal life with God is our ultimate goal, and it is already now our goal since it has become real in the body of Jesus Christ. Salesian youth spirituality is paschal by nature and is imbued with this eschatological reality.

The most deeply rooted inclination in the hearts of the young is the desire and the search for happiness. Joy is the noblest expression of happiness and, together with celebration and hope, is the characteristic of Salesian spirituality. Christian faith is the proclamation of supreme happiness promised and conferred by "eternal life." This is not something to be won, however, but rather a gift which shows us that God is the source of true cheerfulness and hope. Without excluding its pedagogical value, cheerfulness has above all a theological value; Don Bosco saw in it an essential manifestation of the life of grace.

Don Bosco understood and helped his boys understand that commitment and joy went hand in hand; that holiness and cheerfulness are inseparable. Don Bosco is the saint of the joy of being alive. His boys learned this lesson about life so well that they could say in terms typical of the Oratory that "holiness consists in

always being cheerful.” Salesian youth spirituality offers a path of holiness that is simple, cheerful, and serene.

The appreciation of joy as something spiritual, the source of commitment and its consequence, requires that certain *attitudes and experiences* be fostered in the young: an environment that fosters their full participation; friendly and fraternal relationships, with the joyful experience of affection; youthful spontaneous celebrations and group events; a sense of wonder and a taste for the joys that the Creator has placed on our path: nature, silence, things achieved together; the demanding joy of sacrifice and solidarity; the grace of being able to endure suffering under the sign and with the consolation of the Cross of Christ.

A spirituality of friendship and personal relationship with the Lord Jesus

Salesian youth spirituality is intended to lead the young person to an encounter with Jesus Christ and to make possible a relationship with him of friendship and trust, creating an enduring, trusting fidelity. Many young people have a sincere desire to know Jesus and try to respond to the questions about the meaning of life, to which, however, only God can give a real answer.

Friend, Teacher, Savior are words that express the central role of Jesus in the spiritual life of the young. It is interesting to recall that Jesus is presented by Don Bosco as the friend of the young: “Young people are the delight of Jesus,” he used to say; as the teacher of life and of wisdom; as the model for every Christian; as the redeemer who gave his whole life in love until death for our salvation; as someone present in the little ones and the poor.

Following the path of conformity with Christ requires that certain *attitudes and experiences* be developed: the participation through faith in the community that lives with the memory and in the presence of the Lord and that celebrates him in the sacraments of Christian initiation; the pedagogy of holiness, which Don Bosco demonstrated in reconciliation with God and with one’s brothers and sisters through the sacrament of Reconciliation; learning how to pray personally and with others, special moments in which to grow in love and in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; a systematic study of the faith, enlightened by reading and meditating on the Word of God.

A spirituality of ecclesial communion

An adequate experience and understanding of the Church is one of the points in the discernment of Christian spirituality. The Church is a spiritual communion and a community that becomes visible through shared gestures and works; it is service of men and women from whom it does not detach itself like a “sect” that considers good only those works that bear its own imprint. It is the place chosen and offered by Christ where he can be encountered. He has consigned to the Church the Word, Baptism, his Body and Blood, the grace of the forgiveness of sin, and the other sacraments, the experience of communion and the power of the Spirit, which move people to have love for their brothers and sisters. Among its household treasures, the Family of Don Bosco has a rich tradition of filial fidelity to the Successor of Peter and of communion and collaboration with the local Churches.

Precisely because of its ecclesial dimension, Salesian youth spirituality is a Marian spirituality. Mary was called by God the Father to be, through the grace of the Spirit, the mother of the Word and then give him to the world. The Church sees Mary as the example of faith. Don Bosco did so, and we too are called to do the same in communion with the Church. Mary lived her life as Mother of God and our Mother; as the

Immaculate One full of grace, totally open to God, to holiness, and to a Christian life lived with total fidelity; as the Help of Christians in the great battle of the faith and the building of the Kingdom of God. She is the one who protects and guides the Church. Therefore Don Bosco considered her “Our Lady of Difficult Times,” the support and buttress of the faith and of the Church. In Mary Help of Christians we have a model and a guide for our educational and apostolic work.

Therefore *the attitudes and the experiences* that need to be created are: making the practical setting of the Salesian house a place where one experiences a true model of the Church, one that is fresh, attractive, active, capable of responding to the expectations of the young; groups and especially the educational community, that unites the young people and the educators in a family atmosphere in a project of total education; participation in the local Church, where all the faith-filled forces of Christians come together in a visible communion and an evident spirit of service in a given locality; respect for and trust in the universal Church understood and expressed in love for the Pope; a special love for, devotion to, and imitation of Mary, the Immaculate Help of Christians; knowledge of the saints and of those other significant Christians distinguished by their thinking and achievements in various fields.

A spirituality of responsible service

Life lived as an encounter with God, the path of identification with Christ, the Church seen as communion and service where each one has a place and where the gifts of everyone are needed lead to and bring to maturity a conviction that life brings us into a vocation of service. Don Bosco wanted his young people to become “good Christians and upright citizens.”

Don Bosco, as a young man and an apostle, saw and lived his life as a vocation starting from his dream at nine years of age. With a generous heart he responded to the invitation: to be among the young in order to save them. Don Bosco used to invite his boys to engage in “a practical exercise of love for their neighbor.” Salesian youth spirituality is an apostolic spirituality because it reflects the conviction that we are called to collaborate with God in his mission, responding with dedication, fidelity, trust, and total availability. So apostolic vocations and vocations to special consecration should be proposed to young people.

Responsible service implies some attitudes and experiences that need to be fostered: openness to the real situation and to personal contacts; the promotion of the dignity and the human rights of the individual, everywhere; living in one’s family with a generous spirit and preparing to form a family on the basis of mutual self-giving; encouraging solidarity especially toward the poorest people; undertaking one’s work with honesty and professional competence; promoting justice, peace, and the common good in politics; showing respect for creation; fostering culture; identifying God’s plan for one’s life; coming gradually to mature and consistent decisions with regard to serving the Church and others; bearing witness to one’s own faith and living it in a practical manner in some sphere, such as educational, pastoral, and cultural animation, volunteer service, and missionary commitment; knowing about and being open to vocations of special consecration.

3.4. A spirituality of the laity and of the Salesian Family

The groups of the Salesian Family involve many lay people in their mission. We are aware that there cannot be total involvement without also sharing the same spirit. It is a fundamental task for us to communicate Salesian spirituality to the lay people who with us are co-responsible for the educational ministry. The Salesians, in conjunction with the other groups of the Salesian Family, undertook the task

of formulating a *Salesian lay spirituality* in the 24th General Chapter.¹⁴ Certainly the lay groups of the Salesian Family, especially the Salesians Cooperators and the past pupils, constitute a source of inspiration for such a spirituality.

Having become more aware that there cannot be a youth ministry without a family ministry, we are thinking about the right kind of *Salesian family spirituality* to elaborate and present. There are family-style groups which draw their inspiration from Don Bosco. In this area we are only at the beginning, but it is a way ahead which is helping us to develop our mission not only to the young but to ordinary people. We need to develop a family ministry and so share some spiritual experiences with families, with couples, with preparing young people to setting up their own families.

4. Tasks for the Salesian Family

4.1. Let us commit ourselves to a better understanding of what **Don Bosco's spiritual experience** was; his spiritual profile, so that we can discover "Don Bosco the mystic"; in this way we can imitate him by living a spiritual experience with charismatic identity. Unless we make Don Bosco's spiritual experience our own, we cannot be truly aware of our Salesian spiritual identity; this is the only way we can be disciples and apostles of the Lord Jesus, with Don Bosco as our model and teacher of spiritual life. Salesian spirituality, reinterpreted and enriched through the spiritual experience of the Church after the Council and through reflection by today's spiritual theology, offers us a spiritual journey leading to holiness. We recognize that Salesian spirituality is a true and complete spirituality: it has tapped into the history of Christian spirituality, especially that of St. Francis de Sales; it has its source in the specific and original experience of Don Bosco, has been enriched by the Church's experience, and has arrived at the reinterpretation and mature synthesis that we have today.

4.2. Let us live the core and synthesis of Salesian spirituality, which is **pastoral charity**. Don Bosco lived it by seeking the "glory of God and the salvation of souls," which became a way of prayer for him and a program of life in *da mihi animas, cetera tolle*. This charity needs to be nourished through prayer and rooted in it by looking at the Heart of Christ, imitating the Good Shepherd, meditating on the Scriptures, experiencing the Eucharist, making time for personal prayer, taking on a mindset of service of the young. It is a charity which translates into and is made visible by concrete neighborly gestures, affection, work, dedication. Let us take up the Preventive System as a spiritual experience and not just as a proposal of evangelization and pedagogical approach; it finds its source in the charity of God, "who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side, and freely gives his life to save them"¹⁵; it prepares us to see God in the young and calls on us to serve him in them, recognizing their dignity, renewing our faith in their resources for good, and educating them to the fullness of life.

4.3. Let us pass on our proposal for Salesian spirituality according to the **diversity of our vocations**, especially to the young, to lay people involved in Don Bosco's mission, to families. Salesian spirituality needs to be lived according to the vocation each one has received from God. Let us recognize the common spiritual traits of each of the various groups in the Salesian Family as indicated in the "Charter of Identity"; let us make the witnesses to Salesian holiness known; let us invoke the intercession of our Blesseds, Venerables, and Servants of God and ask for the grace that they may be canonized. Let us offer Salesian spirituality to the young we accompany. Let us offer Salesian spirituality to lay people who are committed

¹⁴ GC24, *Salesians and Lay People: communion and sharing in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco* (Rome, 1996), nos. 89-100.

¹⁵ SDB Constitutions 20.

to sharing Don Bosco's mission; and by focusing on family ministry, point to a spirituality for families that is appropriate to their circumstances. Finally, let us also invite young people, laity, and families in our educational and pastoral communities to have a spiritual experience, as also those in our groups and associations who belong to other religions or those who find themselves somewhat indifferent about God, because a spiritual experience is also possible for them; there is room there for inwardness, silence, dialog with their own conscience, openness to the transcendent.

4.4. Let us read some of **Don Bosco's writings** that can be considered as sources of Salesian spirituality. Above all, I invite you to read again and put into practice the "Dream of the Ten Diamonds." This offers to us a spiritual image for each one of us who draw our inspiration from Don Bosco. I then propose to you an anthology of Don Bosco's spiritual writings where he is a true master of the spiritual life.¹⁶ In this way we can draw on some less well-known pages, but pages which speak directly to us about Salesian spiritual life.

5. Conclusion

This time I conclude the commentary on the strenna not with a fable but with the testimony and message that Fr. Pasquale Liberatore has left us. For many years he was the postulator for the causes of our saints, and a saintly man himself. This is his poem entitled "The Saints."

It is a short personal "credo" which brings together everything that makes up Salesian spirituality; it enables us to see concrete examples, genuine and authentic, in the richest and most varied fruits of holiness in the Salesian Family, starting with our beloved founder and father Don Bosco. We found this poem in his office on the day he died. In it he praises the saints and uses a variety of images which we find very beautiful. Reading this poem, we can almost reach out and touch the unmistakable and delicate human and spiritual sensitivity of our saints, and sense their yearning for the fullness of life, love, and happiness in God; we observe their interior strength and the spiritual experience we ourselves are called to live and to know how to present with passion and conviction to others, especially the young.

My first letter as Rector Major was entitled "Salesians, be saints!" I saw it as setting out the program for my period as Rector Major. Now I am happy that my final letter written as the successor of Don Bosco is a heartfelt invitation to drink deeply from his spirituality. This is really what I should like to be able to do myself and to propose to all of you, my dear members of the Salesian Family and young people.

¹⁶ St. John Bosco, *Teachings on the spiritual life: An anthology*, ed. Aldo Girauda (Rome: LAS, 2013).

THE SAINTS

“They shall be like the stars of heaven: they shall shine like the firmament”

Like the stars of heaven

visible in their thousands to the naked eye,
but infinitely more numerous
to the telescope which views those without haloes.

Glowing volcanoes

like peep-holes
into the mystery of the Fire of the Trinity.

Adventure stories

written by the Holy Spirit
in which surprise is the norm.

Expressions of the most varied literary forms

yet always fascinating:
from the style of a drama to the flavor of a fable.

Classics of the grammar of the beatitudes

always convincing
thanks to their joyful existence.

Cosmonauts in space

to whom we owe the most astonishing discoveries
only possible for those who distance themselves from the earth.

Giants as different from us

as the genius always is,
yet made from the same stuff as ourselves.

Capable of mistakes and failures

but always exceptional people:
not to be underestimated with the excuse of making them our fellow travelers.

Expressions of God’s utter gratuity

which enriches and raises up
according to the mysterious criteria of his liberality.

They are dwelling in unchanging peace

above the normal human conflicts,
yet always dissatisfied because they never cease to strive for even more.

In orbit around the essential

they are prophets of the absolute.

Great artists

in the forge of the Beautiful
before which the human heart is ecstatic.

Men and women fulfilled

witnesses to the secret harmony
between nature and grace.

God's fools

so much in love
as to speak in disconcerting ways.

The furthest removed, by instinct, from every kind of sin,
always the closest
to every sort of sinner.

The stages on which the divine performance takes place

and yet themselves humble spectators
thanks to a merciless awareness of their own nothingness.

Engaged in a continuous hiding of themselves

and yet inevitably shining out
like a city built on a hilltop.

Bearers of eternal messages

beyond time,
progress, cultures, and races.

Fiery words

which the Lord speaks to shatter our laziness,
raps on the desk with which the Divine Master
awakens us his distracted pupils.

Living miracles

before whom no experts are needed
to acknowledge the extraordinary quality of the Gospel lived *sine glossa*

Heroically detached from what is human,

they are the supreme experts
in human nuances.

True masters of psychology

who by the pathway of love
reach the most hidden recesses of the human heart.

Able to quicken our finest roots

and touching ancient strings of harmony
they instill homesickness for the future.

Like the stars of heaven

so different among themselves
yet at heart lit up by the same fire.

“Salesian Cooperators: a Practical Way of Contributing to Public Morality and to the Good of Civil Society”

From the very beginning of the work of the Oratories in 1841, there were enthusiastic and keen priests and laymen who came forward to help - for there was a great harvest to be reaped among boys in danger of losing both faith and morals. These co-helpers, or Cooperators, were to be found throughout our history to support and sustain the works God gave us to do. All endeavored to work and fit into our way of life and customs, but there was a general request for a set of Regulations that would serve as a basis and a bond to help preserve uniformity and the spirit that prevailed in our institutes. We hope that this desire will now be satisfied by the present booklet. These are not rules for the Festive Oratories or for educational institutes (which can be found elsewhere): they are a bond by which Catholics who so wish may join the Salesians and work according to a uniform and stable pattern (thus preserving these qualities in the scope and traditional practice of their work).

Thus those who wish to practice charity in working for the salvation of souls will have the great reward promised by St. Augustine, "By saving a soul you have predestined your own"; they are also assured of a great spiritual treasure in these holy indulgences. May God, so rich in grace and blessings grant many favors to all those who help to win souls for our Divine Savior, doing good to young people so much in danger, preparing good Catholics for his Church and good citizens for society, so that all may one day find themselves eternally happy in heaven. Amen.

Christian Union for the Work of Charity

Good [Christians] have at all times seen the necessity of uniting in order to help one another in doing good and in avoiding evil. This is the example that the faithful of the early Church left us. Faced with impending dangers every day, they did not give up. United as one heart and one soul, they encouraged one another to be steadfast in the faith and to stand ready to overcome the assaults that relentlessly threatened them. This is also what the Lord taught us when he said: “Feeble forces that unite become strong. A single strand may be easily broken, but a three-ply cord is hard to break: *Vis unita fortior; funiculus triplex difficile rumpitur*.¹⁷ This is exactly what secular people do to further their temporal interests. Should then the children of light be less farsighted than the children of darkness? Certainly not! We who live as Christians in these turbulent times must likewise unite in a spirit of prayer, charity and zeal, using all possible means that our religion makes available to us. We must strive to stamp out, or at least diminish, the evil that puts at risk the moral life, without which civil society itself collapses.

Turin, 12 July 1876.

JOHN BOSCO.

[Despite its “antiquated language” and the changes made by the Church as regard Indulgences, the Rule (for this is how Don Bosco referred to it) preserves all its timeliness and has lost nothing of its freshness and clarity even at the distance of a century. Therefore, we Salesians, both Religious and Cooperators, must always refer to it, for it, best of all, expresses the genuine thought of our Founder. Furthermore, it will serve as a witness of the fidelity of the Project of Apostolic Life to “Don Bosco’s project,” even if they have been renewed in response to the signs of the times... Fr. Arthur J. Lenti, SDB]

¹⁷*Funiculus triplex difficile rumpitur*,” “A three-ply cord is not easily broken” is from Ecclesiastes 4:12 (Latin Vulgate). “*Vis Unita fortior*,” “Forces that unite become stronger” is a proverb from the classics.