

Art. 9. The Task of Christian Education

§1. *Salesian Cooperators, like Don Bosco, bring the task of educating and evangelizing¹ everywhere, in order to form “honest citizens, good Christians, and blessed inhabitants of Heaven,”² who know that they are always on the journey to a greater human and Christian maturity.*

§2. *They share with the young their enthusiasm for living with authenticity the values of truth, freedom, justice, the sense of the common good, and of service.*

§3. *They educate the young to encounter the Risen Christ – in our Faith and in the Sacraments – so they may find in Him the meaning of their life so as to grow as “new men and new women”.*

§4. *They are committed to helping the young develop a life plan which will give witness to their Christian and Salesian presence in the Church and in society.*

CONSIDERATIONS

Core Themes

1. Educating and Evangelizing
2. They Share with the Young Their Enthusiasm for Living Values with Authenticity
3. They Educate the Young to Encounter the Risen Christ – in Our Faith and in the Sacraments

Keys to Understanding

If one situates him or herself within the Biblical vision and abides by the concept of the Church proposed by Vatican Council II, then, to every "mission" there is a corresponding "service". The Church participates in Christ's mission and is, by Her very nature, sent to the "service" of God and of man. This article describes the type of human and Christian service that the Salesian Cooperator carries out among those to whom their missionary service is directed in a privileged way. Said task of Christian education is considered in its essential aspects.

A. *Educating and Evangelizing: The Present Understanding*

The Preventive System brings one to make an intimate unification between evangelization and education.

Don Bosco, in fact, excludes in his pastoral-educational activity any division between education and evangelization. He wished to describe his practise with a kind of catchy slogan: ‘Evangelize by educating and educate by evangelizing.’ ‘We are well aware that education and evangelization are specifically distinct activities of their class, but nevertheless there is a strict connection between them on the practical plane of existence.’ (Viganò *Acts of the General Council* no. 290 28-29)

¹Egidio Viganò, SDB. [“The Salesian Educational Project.”](#) Trans. *Acts of the General Council*. 290.3 (1978) 27-39. Print.

²*Salesian Cooperators: A Practical Way...* Introduction: “To the Reader”.

- ***Evangelizing by educating***

Don Bosco's pastoral concern is characterized, and with consistent seriousness, by the choice of education as the field and the modality of his pastoral action; therefore, the Preventive System rests on the concrete fact of the existential co-penetration which exists between “evangelization” and “education” along the same lines as those indicated to us in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, nos. 31-36. Don Bosco speaks of "good Christians and honest, upright citizens" who seek "sanctity, wisdom, and health" and he proposes a style of life which includes “joy, study, and piety”. (see *Acts of the General Chapter XXI* 81) Thus his ministry is not reduced to catechesis or liturgy alone but branches out into all the concrete pedagogical and cultural commitments concerning the circumstances of the young. Rather, his ministry is situated within the humanizing process, without a doubt with a critical sense of its deficiencies but also with the globally-optimistic vision of human maturation, convinced that the Gospel must be sown precisely there so as to bring the young to get involved in a generous way in their story and their history. His pastoral action tended to be useful precisely for the building of a new society – so much so, that Don Bosco was able to present to some politicians his "system" as a genuine commitment to human promotion, even if they did not accept a faith-filled vision. Rightfully so, Don Bosco appeared to the world and to the Church as a "Holy Educator," or a priest who put his sanctity to work in education. On the other hand, if the Gospel is of salvific value in human growth and if the boys, girls, and teenagers live "an age of education", their evangelization will be most consonant if it accompanies them along an educational process in which Faith is integrated as the unifying and illuminating element of their entire personality.

- ***Educating by evangelizing***

The educational task of the Salesian Cooperator has as its goal evangelization. Our educational art is "pastoral", not only in the sense that it springs from and is explicitly and daily nurtured by apostolic charity on the part of the educator but also in the sense that the entire educational process, both in its content and its methodology, is oriented to the Christian goal of salvation and is permeated by Christianity's Light and Grace. Salesian pedagogy carries with it in its global nature the rather profound task of opening oneself and others to God's absolute values and to interpreting life and history according to the riches of the Mystery of Christ. It truly takes into account the power and the perspectives of the Resurrection and reflects seriously on the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world. This modality of "educating by evangelizing" also carries with it some concrete options regarding the educational process. Such options refer to the reality of the "person" of the one being educated, to the true and historic goal of his growth, to the content and means which he needs, and to the methodology which will be most beneficial to his maturation.

B. They share with the young their enthusiasm for living values with authenticity

When analyzing the content of this Christian educative service, one stops to linger on certain Gospel values of a social nature: "truth, freedom, justice, a sense of the common good, and service." These are the great values proclaimed by the Social Justice documents of Vatican Council II: “The social order requires constant improvement: it must be founded in truth, built on justice, and enlivened by love: it should grow in freedom towards an ever more human equilibrium. An improvement in attitudes and abundant changes in society will have to take place if these objectives are to be gained.” (*Gaudium et Spes* no. 26) These are the same values which the individual Cooperator must bring to his or her social

reality. It is, therefore, natural that it must be "shared" with the young among whom one carries out his task of Christian education. At play here is a formation to a well-understood "social and political commitment."

- ***Educating to the Truth***

What characterizes our society are the enormous changes which are progressing at a dizzying rate. We no longer live in an epoch of change, but in *a change of epoch*. This is what characterizes postmodernity. Postmodernity is the result of a general disenchantment and of a frustration with the lack of success of the postulates of modernity. "Modernity" was, in fact, the time of great social utopias. It was the time of faith in many things: an unlimited faith in *liberty*, faith in *science*, faith in *progress*, and faith in the human being. People thought that human reason, knowledge, and progress would be the solution to all problems. They presumed that there would be an end to ignorance, slavery, superstitious religions, and that man would be completely happy. This, however, did not happen (note the two World Wars).

And then postmodernity sprang up as a reaction following, counter to, and beyond modernity. It was the exhaustion of reason, the renunciation of systems and ideologies, but also of ideas and of truth. Today we have an avalanche of information but are orphans as far as wisdom is concerned. We live in a "*fluid culture*." There is a diversity of ideas, values, cosmic visions, and lifestyles, but without any normative orientation due to the lack and negation of any kind of absolute. The postmodern ideas end in *nihilism* and create an environment of *relativism* and a polytheism of values, judged on the basis of *usefulness and functionality*.

- ***Educating to justice, the sense of the common good, and service***

The idea that the common good has been defined in its concrete forms, once and for all, without discerning the meaning that it takes on in the complexity of one's historical situations, is a mistake. The construction of a just social order by which each person receives that which is due him is a fundamental task that every generation must face anew. The task of the "honest citizen" as regards the common good is, therefore, more a style of life and a way of acting which are characterized by certain underlying choices, to be required of one who is involved in or wishes to be involved in politics. Let us summarize these choices in five points that seem indispensable for one who wishes to serve the common good:

First – The commitment to public ethics and social morality must be indissolubly linked with an ethical commitment on the personal *plane*: the logic of the "mask" – which joins "private vices and public virtues" – must be refuted. This carries with it the recognition of the *primacy of the conscience* when acting in society and politics and the right of each Representative of the People to *conscientious objection* on questions of ethical relevance. But it also means that the credibility of the politician is to be measured on the sobriety of his lifestyle, his generosity, his constancy in his commitments, and his fidelity, shown in his deeds, to the values proclaimed.

Second – In his or her relationship with citizens, the politician must follow the maxim: "*belonging to the masses and possessing the word*." This means that he or she must stay close to the people, listening to their concerns, and making him or herself heard on matters of justice for those who do not have a voice – so as to support them. We are not at the service of whoever is in power at any given time but, rather, of the people. In this commitment to the common good, may the poor, those without a voice, and those who

are socially weak be considered points of reference to whom listening and respect are due. Social status, education, and the safeguarding of everyone's health are not subjects open to discussion. They are *sine qua non* values to be kept safe and to be improved by liberating them from waste and excessive forms of State aid which do not truly serve the poor.

Third – The political dialectic must always be subordinate to *the search for possible convergences* so as to work together in the service of the common good: co-responsibility, dialogue, and participation are to be put before any preconceived counterproposal or a logic inspired by personal or group interests. The common good is always preferred to one's personal gain or to that of one's political party.

Fourth – In service to the common good, it is necessary to know how to accept the *gradualism* required to reach goals: the populist logic of "instant gratification and everything I want" has often motivated promises that were not kept – if not violence and the failure of even just causes. It is necessary to focus on the goal with perseverance and firmness without yielding to immoral compromises and unjustified delays or by having recourse to sinful means. All choices made for the common good are not to be measured solely on immediate efficacy but, above all, on their worthiness and the educative role at the service of all: in particular, the commitment to the fundamental values of safeguarding human life at every phase, of promotion of the family, of justice for everyone, of the rejection of war and of violence in every form, and of commitment to peace.

Finally – The citizen who intends to work for the common good must consider the purpose of this service to be *the good of all* – even of political adversaries who, therefore, are not to be considered enemies or competitors to be eliminated but, on the other hand, are to be seen as a guarantee of a critical confrontation for discerning the best ways to reach the realization of each one's personal dignity.

This list of the most minimal rules for the common good remain fruitless if there is no assumption of morality which gives to everyone, especially the young, reasons to live and to hope! What is at stake is not the gain of some but a future which we will build together.

C. They educate the young to encounter the Risen Christ – in our Faith and in the Sacraments

The Vatican Council II Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, teaches that in the Church's mission to all men: "by the example of her life and by her preaching, by the Sacraments and other means of Grace, she may lead them to the faith, the freedom and the peace of Christ; that thus there may lie open before them a firm and free road to full participation in the mystery of Christ." (no. 5) The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* expresses this concept clearly, asserting that it is the task of the People of God to lead man not only to discover with their minds but also to perceive through experience what the meaning of life, of work, of death, of the present, and of the future are in the light of Christ so as to become "new men" in this way.

Don Bosco's example and instructions and Salesian tradition have seen the Salesian Cooperators dedicate themselves to such work with commitment and in many initiatives, consciously aware of the divine greatness of the service rendered to the young and to common folk. Dynamic fidelity to the mission received demands of the Salesian Cooperators to go forward in such a direction, keeping in mind the current context of the Church and of society.

References

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Viganò E., “Il progetto educativo salesiano”, in *Atti del Capitolo Superiore* n. 290.

from the *Original Rule of 1876* by St. John Bosco

Please see excerpts to the Preface of the *Project of Apostolic Life*

from the *Regulations of the Project of Apostolic Life*

Art. 2 Salesian Cooperators in Their Socio-Cultural Reality

§1. Salesian Cooperators make the educational solicitude of the Salesian charism their own in all areas of life. They are faithful to the Gospel and to the Social Justice Doctrines of the Church. They are attentive to the signs of the times; they continue God’s creative work and give witness to Christ with integrity, hard work, and coherence of life; through the educative mission and serious, up-dated professionalism; through sharing joys and sufferings in faith; and by being available to give service in every circumstance.

§2. Their aim is to form a mature critical conscience so as to participate responsibly in social life in the areas of culture, economy, and politics. They refuse all that which provokes and feeds injustice, oppression, marginalization, and violence, and they work courageously to remove their causes.

§3. They give attention to and value the ethical dimension of culture. They keep themselves constantly updated on the evolution of the means of social communication, above all because of the impact which these have on the formation of the young, of families, and of ordinary folk.

§4. They integrate themselves, according to their own capacities and possibilities, in cultural and sociopolitical structures and workers’ unions so as to develop and achieve the common good. They work, in conformity with the Gospel demands of liberty and of justice, for respect for human rights and, consequently, for the renewal and the healing of mentalities and customs, and of the laws and the societal structures of the areas in which they live.

from The Identity of the Salesian Cooperator

Educating to the truth (*Project of Apostolic Life*, 9)

What characterize our society are the enormous changes which have developed at a dizzying pace. We no longer live in an epoch of changes, but in a change of epoch. This is what characterizes post-modernity.

Post-modernity is the result of a general disenchantment, of a frustration at the lack of success of the postulates of modernity. Modernity, in fact, was the time of the great social utopias: it was a time of faith – unlimited faith in freedom, in science, in progress, in the human being; we used to think that human reason, science, and progress would be the solution to all of our problems; we presumed that this would be the end to ignorance, slavery, and religious superstitions, and that man would be completely happy. This, however, did not happen (but two world wars did).

And so, post-modernity later arose as a turning point against and beyond modernity. It is the exhaustion of reason, the renunciation of systems and of ideologies, but also of ideas and the truth. Today we have an avalanche of information, but we are orphaned of wisdom. We live in a “Kleenex culture” (throw-away). There is a diversity of ideas, of values, and of “cosmovisions” and styles of life. But every normative orientation is missing because of the lack of and negation of every kind of absolute. In the post-modern culture, people change opinion more often than they change shirts. Besides this, people can hold contradictory ideas and not feel the least tension. Post-modern ideas flow nihilism and create an environment of relativism and polytheism of values. Everything is seen as a function of what is useful.

The first problem of the educative relationship is, then, that of the truth. We are not speaking of diminishing the social and economic value of education. Nor are we ignoring the centrality of the relationship between school and work; but to see the school exclusively as a function of work risks making us lose sight of the richness of the educational relationship.

To educate is to help to be born (*educere* = to lead out); a metaphor from obstetrics according to the model of the Socratic maieutic (Socrates’ way of teaching by eliciting new ideas from another). And to be born brings with it an opening to reality which goes far beyond the category of utility. To educate is to form a person’s conscience to make it capable of making choices in the light of that which matters. One of the tasks of the school is precisely this: to teach how to discern between what is useful and what is important *per se*. This requires freeing the children from the influence of a subtly invasive publicity, which conditions both mentality and behaviors, killing these same questions that they carry within. The tragedy is not that they do not find answers; it is that they do not ask questions. In this context, the recovery of the concept of truth is decisive. Often truth is identified as an abstract and unattainable entity. To renounce helping the young understand what is meant by truth, not to educate them to the meaning of truth equals handing them over without any defenses to the pressure of illusions and of falsifications with which, from every side, the media circus of a consumer society assails them.

Mission to peoples not yet evangelized (*Project of Apostolic Life*, 9 §5)

Don Bosco cultivated the missionary ideal and participated in the missionary work of the Church of his time in a concrete way. By his explicit will, the missionary apostolate is an essential element of the nature and purpose of the entire Salesian Family. In fact, the Cooperators have given decisive aid to Salesian missionary work. Even in the missions, the actions of humanization, evangelization, and foundation of

the Church are directed, with criteria of preference and urgency, to poor youth and to lower classes. Today, missionary action assumes an increasing importance due to its direct ties with the most serious problems of our time: peace, development, solidarity, and the positive interactions between nations, races, and religions.

Elsewhere, the decisive orientations given by Vatican II as regards the missions, open up a vast horizon for action for the entire Salesian Family and urge it on to a profound renewal; in particular, for an increase in the different forms of missionary solidarity and in the growth of volunteerism and the cooperation of the young and the laity.

What do we mean by honest citizen and good Christian? (Project of Apostolic Life, 9 §1)

The idea that the common good is defined in its concrete forms once and for all, without discerning the meaning that it assumes in the complexity of historical situations, is mistaken. The construction of a just societal order, through which each person is given that which is due him, is a fundamental task which every generation must confront anew. The commitment of the “honest citizen” for the common good is, thus, more a lifestyle, a way of acting characterized by certain fundamental choices, to be sought by the one who is in public office or who wishes to assume political office. I sum up here these choices in five points which seem to me to be indispensable to anyone wishing to serve the common good.

In the first place, the commitment to public ethics and social morality must be indissolubly linked to an ethical commitment on the personal level: any fictitious mask is to be rejected for it unites “private vices with public virtues.” This carries with it not only the recognition of the primacy of the conscience when carrying out a social or political act and the right of each representative of the people to a conscientious objection on questions of ethical importance, but it also means that the credibility of the politician is measured by the sobriety of his lifestyle, on his generosity and constancy in his commitment, and on his effective fidelity to stated values.

In the second place, in his rapport with the citizens, the politician must follow this maxim formulated by Don Lorenzo Milani and by the boys at his school in Barbiana: “To belong to the people and to possess the word.” This means that to be close to the people, one needs to listen to their problems, make himself the voice in matters of justice for those who do not have a voice and to support them. We are not at the service of the one presently in charge but, rather, of the people. Within this commitment, in view of the common good, the poor, the voiceless, the socially weak are to be considered as reference points to whom we must listen and whom we must respect: the social status, the instruction, and the protection of everyone’s health are not a conquest open to opinion, but are irrevocable values, to safeguard and improve by freeing them from waste and graft which do not serve the poor.

In the third place, the political dialectic will always be subordinated to the search for possible convergences so as to work together in the service of the common good: coresponsibility, dialogue, and participation are placed before preconceived oppositions or logic inspired by personal or group interests. Common good is always preferred to personal gain or to that of one’s political party.

In the fourth place, when serving the common good one needs to know how to accept the gradual steps necessary to achieve the goal: the popular logic of “everything now” has often motivated promises which could not be fulfilled, and even violence, and the failure of even just causes. It is necessary to keep one’s eye on the goal with perseverance and firmness, without yielding to a compromising of one’s morals or

to unjustified delays, and never having recourse to sinful means. Every choice made in view of the common good is not measured only by its immediate efficacy, but, above all, by its value and the educative role of service to all. Thus, of particular importance is the commitment to the fundamental values of the protection of human life in all of its phases, of the promotion of the family, of justice for all, of the rejection of war and violence in every form and of the commitment to peace.

Last, the citizen who intends to work for the common good must consider the good of all as the goal of his service, even of that of his political adversaries, who, thus, are never regarded as enemies or competitors to be eliminated, but are seen, rather, as a guarantee of critical confrontation in view of the discernment of the best ways to reach the realization everyone's personal dignity.

This group of minimal rules for the common good will be meaningless if there is no moral leap which gives to all, especially to the young, reasons for life and for hope! What is at risk is not gain just for some, but the future which we will construct together.

The honest citizen and good Christian, today (*Project of Apostolic Life*, 9 §1)

The honest citizen

From what has been said, it becomes evident that the honest citizen of the Third Millennium is not the one understood by Don Bosco, the son of a time in which no such thing as "political action" was conceived, if not for the work of a rich and privileged minority. Neither is the honest citizen only that rather passive person who obeys the laws, doesn't give problems regarding justice, and who only "minds his own business."

If the Bible speaks of the poor and the oppressed, it does so in the name of a certain concept of God: a God who cares for the poor and who takes the defense of the oppressed. To oppress the weak is to offend his Creator, says the Book of Proverbs, because the Lord espouses the care of the poor (Pr 14:31). Maintaining justice and caring for those whom society tends to marginalize are not based only on the desire of harmony and concord or on just relations. It is founded on the will and the very being itself of God who is presented as a defender of the oppressed.

Thus is understood the framework in which one needs to read the invectives of the prophets against "exterior piety." Often, the contrast between the cult and prophecy, between the priests and the prophets, is underlined. In reality, the prophets do not cry out against the cult as such, but highlight their deficiencies and their caricatures; they deplore the formalism and ritualism of the cult practices.

In a still more incisive way, they insist on the intrinsic bond uniting religion and justice. Sacrifices, feasts, pilgrimages, assemblies, fasts, and all these institutions and practices serve precisely nothing if justice is not exercised and if rights are trampled upon. The celebrations and the practices of piety are only hypocrisy if they are not accompanied by justice and right. Amos, in the name of God, gives the tone to this criticism: "I detest, I refuse your festivals and I take no delight in your gatherings; even if you offer Me holocausts, your gifts do not please me and I do not look upon the victims fattened as peace-offerings. Rather, let right and justice run like a perennial torrent." (Amos 5:21-24)

From these words emerge strongly the task to re-visit our Salesian tradition to identify what are the values which we need to underline in our society and those which are, instead, to be newly proposed; a renewed

reflection which must specify the relationship between faith and politics. Analysis and reflection which ought to put together education and politics, education and social commitment, politics and civil society:

Good Christian: imagining the Church as a community of people

Faith is never a fact to be taken for granted. One becomes a Christian. Every generation has the task to re-elaborate and pass on the faith.

Let us begin again from faith

“Someone from the crowd said to Jesus: ‘If you can, have mercy on us and help us.’ Jesus said to Him: ‘If you can?’ Everything is possible for those who believe.’ The man responded aloud: ‘I believe, help me in my unbelief.’” (Mk. 9:22-24.)

Today people speak of “reasons for believing.” Often, rationalizations constructed after-the-fact appear. This is a risk. The opposite risk: “Personal testimony” - much valued today. The risk is always wanting to call the shots and narcissism.

It is “immodest” to speak too easily about oneself, just like speaking too quickly about God. It is the triumph of egocentricity and idolatry; i.e., of that which is opposed in a radical way to faith and what faith seeks to combat and uproot.

Faith always brings with it, as inseparably connected, both an objective and a subjective dimension, one that theological tradition calls *fides quae* and *fides qua* (from: *fides quae creditur et fides qua creditur*: the faith which is believed and the faith by which it is believed). Besides this is the personal relationship with the person “believed”, i.e., Christ Jesus.

Speaking about faith does not mean speaking of God

Faith is a human, a very human, act which presumes a decided understanding of God, of the images of the God to whom one entrusts himself. Faith is one thing, faith in God is another.

There’s a truth about God that must be honored before all else and that is the one which St. Augustine expresses with the words: “*Si comprehendis non est Deus*” (“If you understand it, it is not God.”) That is, God is not circumscribable by our concepts, by our thoughts, and by our words.

Even the dogmatic definitions, the “truths of faith,” cannot be made absolute and confused with God. The linguistic definitions of truth are not that truth itself, but remain in the sphere of the search for the truth and cannot be considered anything but approximations, a “drawing near” to the truth, and, therefore, exhaust neither truth nor God.

This dimension of the Christian faith is called humility, too often forgotten in the history of the Church. To me it seems a *sine qua non* of faith in God who was revealed Himself in the incarnation, in His humbling Himself, even unto death, and, as St. Paul pointed out, not any kind of death, but the infamous “death on the Cross.” (Phil. 2:8)

This humility translates the paradox which is at the center of Christianity, the paradox of which the believer must always be aware. In a famous passage from Isaiah, the Servant of the Lord asks himself:

“Who will believe in this pronouncement?” Here it appears that the believer is the first to be aware of the incredulity, or, at least, of the absolutely scandalous character of his message: and the message of the Servant of the Lord is the pronouncement of a God who manifests His power through weakness, the bloody death, the injustice suffered by His Servant. It is the pronouncement of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of the Messiah. The paradox which is translated into the concrete life of the disciple, for the Christian faith asks him to love the un-lovable (the enemy), to hope against all hope (death does not have the final word), to believe the incredible (God made Man, the Man Jesus, and what is more, the “Crucified One).” (I Cor. 2:2) Paul remains so essentially disconcerted by it that that which was a “scandal or blasphemy” becomes for him the heart of the revelation.

This dimension of humility, the sine qua non for faith, regards not only its contents, but also its expression and form, and, therefore, also regards the believer and the style of his presence in the world.

Christian faith is a risk

It is here opportune to recall another aspect of Christian faith, which is not always captured and brought to light: Christian faith is a risk.

At times faith is presented as something reassuring, an inexhaustible reserve of certainties, a total assurance against every evil (arrogance, violence...). But faith is not identifiable with a “magic wand.” It is not the security which removes all doubt and exempts from searching. Even Jesus, on His Cross, didn’t have a dimension of “enigma”, of “incomprehensibility” taken away from Him. A dramatic “why?” cut through His relationship with God: “My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me?” (Mk. 15:34; Mt. 27:46) Faith, in this case, cannot be played against reason (whose limits and shortcomings post-modernity would have demonstrated). Even faith, in reality, does not remove the enigma and does not make everything crystal clear.

It is without doubt that faith gives birth to a security, a certainty, but this is not of the same order as rational or philosophical security: but we are never speaking of a conviction acquired by each person, by beginning from himself, or at the end of his own reasonings, but, rather, of a trust that is placed in another by oneself, and even more, in his promise.

The expression “I know in whom I have placed my trust” (II Tim. 1:12) shows that the certainty of faith is right in the middle of the risk of faith, in its “ecstatic” movement: in its being a going out of oneself to place oneself trustingly in God’s care. The believer finds his stability in this movement, which is a deadly risk: “If you do not believe, you will not have stability.” (Is. 7:9)

The beauty of this risk finds an attestation worthy of trust in the peril in which Jesus Himself lived, according to the Gospels, putting His entire existence on the line in the giving of Himself to God and to man. It is the beauty of the deadly risk of faith which echoes the words of the Gospel: “He who seeks to save his life will lose it; he who, instead, loses it, will save it.” (Lk. 17:33) Jesus’ life moves from action to passion: in Gethsemane, “He hands himself over” – these are the key words. Without this dimension, faith is suffocated in a sort of “insurance system” and loses its vitality, its character of adventure and newness, because it is too plastered in its own certainties which need to be defended and imposed at every cost. Without a true dimension of risk, of precariousness (a word which, significantly, derives its meaning from the word “prayer”), of entrusting oneself to God, becomes only a game of words.

Christian faith is faith in the Resurrection, not in immortality.

It cuts across the entire tragedy of death. In the Creed we say: “Christ suffered death and was buried.” We are immersed in the heart of faith, without any embellishment or any mystification.

Dostoyevsky, in his novel *The Idiot*, puts into the mouth of his main character, Myskin, these words: “That painting could even make one who looks at it for a long time lose his faith.” (Myskin pronounced these words after having seen the painting *Christ in the Tomb* by Hans Hiblein). Here it is, in the heart of this darkness, that faith manifests its light and descends as infinite compassion, as unlimited mercy, as charity to the point of giving one’s life for another; and, it is here that a word and a prospect of hope are born – a hope understood as an active struggle against the desperation of the very heart itself in the midst of hopeless situations – born as trust in the God who is close to the man who has descended to the depths of existence.

Faith in the Christian God, in the God narrated by Christ dead on the Cross and descended into the depths (eastern tradition), certainly does not constitute a solution to the problem of evil, and, perhaps, not even only a possible consolation, but, rather, becomes a womb which generates an attitude of limitless compassion, which approaches foolishness (how can we forget that prayer, which we find, above all, in Syrian Christianity, for the salvation of the devils?)

Faith as an act of liberty

The confrontation with the “non-believer” shows that faith is a free act. “Nonbeliever?” The dimension of faith, of entrustment, is an anthropological dimension, of man as such. We all, in some way or other, believe something and place our trust in someone.

One can certainly live without religious faith, but not without some form of entrustment, of faith. “Fides” is a root which has produced other words and expressions: “engagement,” “confidence,” “trust”... In personal relationships, trust is essential: “I trust you;” “I trust your discretion;” “I entrust myself to your goodwill.”

Faith and belief, express an existential given of a human being. It, therefore, is not only comprehensible even to one who does not share our Christian faith, but is a movement of the soul that can reveal to man something about man. The life of a baby is a natural act of entrustment to its mother. The humanity of faith makes it a movement which can be known even to those who do not reach to religious faith. Human, lay “alterity,” “otherness”.

But faith in God is more. There is a faith which has a more radical Otherness (alterity). God is not simply “another”: He is the Other who removes me from the possibility of considering myself or even anyone else as God; no, more – He is the one who puts rules on my relationship with others, preventing both voracity and aggression towards another or fusion and absorption by him.

In this capacity of faith to disarm me, there is something humanizing: it brings me back to my Personal Truth, which coincides with my oneness, uniqueness, with my radical and ontological poverty.

To recognize that one is “Creature” – as does the believer – means to understand that what God forbids man (Gen. 2:16+17) indicates what man becomes if he does not desire it all: he accepts as being part and

parcel of his liberty those limits which can take on a variety and number of forms in our personal lives. Limits are inherent in faith itself, which has a unique and specific competence, one not extendable to just any sphere of being human; the language and the capacity proper to faith are different, for example, than those of science.

The encounter with a non-believer underlines faith as an act of liberty. The very fact that there are non-believers is a grace which reminds us that the Christian faith is not totalitarianism, it is not imposing. The Christian God does not want to be borne with, but sought, loved freely, believed in, desired. The Creator God has subjected His own liberty to the constructive limitation of the freedom of His creature, of Man.

If man is *capax Dei* (capable of “being” God), then he is also capable of saying no to God. Taking seriously the “no” to God of the non-believer, and also the impossibility on the part of many men to accede to faith, means to highlight that the Biblical God does not wish to impose Himself as necessary on man. Faith is situated in the Book of Liberty, not of necessity. Our freedom always comes from within the limits and the inheritance which have been left to us by those who preceded us. “No one is born without baggage.” (Paul Ricoeur) We assume our liberty in taking on and working on that which we have been given.

Like the Samaritan at the well.

Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn. 4:5-42) is illuminating. “There is no man or woman who, in his own life, does not find himself, like the Samaritan woman, next to a well with an empty amphora, in the hope of filling the most profound desire of his heart, that which alone can give full meaning to his existence (the amphora of wine at the wedding of Cana). Many are the wells that are offered to quench the thirst of man, but one needs to discern well so as to avoid dirty waters. It urges us to direct our search so as not to fall prey to delusions which could be ruinous. In Christianity, so rooted in history and in human flesh itself, there is the total valuing of the human being through which that which is authentically human is also truly spiritual, and the criterion of spiritual authenticity is the respect for the truth of man.

Faith as a journey of meaning: that is, as a grafting on man, as able to orient and to bring to full development that which there is most authentic in man. Humanity fully realized and lived in Christ is the truest foundation of man. Christ who dies on the Cross; who resides in that place of hopelessness; of human and Divine abandonment; of annihilation of the dignity of man; who lives all this with Love.

Many are more disposed to recognize the presence of God in the sacred, in the wondrous, in the miraculous, rather than in history, in human flesh, the only dwelling truly worthy of God.

Witness

The Church of tomorrow will bear the face of witness. It will need to point out paths and instruments to “imagine the Church” of the Third Millennium. “To imagine” means the ability to draw together a future dream and present reality, between a long-range vision and the patience to transform the deeds of the Church of today into a missionary perspective. The Church’s first steps at the start of 2000 will move in this direction.

A parish's priority choice to be missionary, with the accent placed on the first pronouncement of the Gospel, on Christian initiation, is to be united within the great desire to give an evangelizing face to ecclesial witness. In order to do this, the Church of these years has decided to privilege and to cultivate in a new and creative way its characteristic, "popularity" (being of the people). All of this is encapsulated in one indicative reality: the Church is caring for the person's conscience, for his growth and witness in the world. Christianity's focus on people does not mean choosing a "low profile" of a minimal Christianity, but, rather, the challenge of a faith which is present within a person's territory, and which is capable of reanimating people's daily life, of having significance in the fields of work and of free time, of molding cultural forms of civil conscience and in pointing out the ideal direction for a country. It is the "high standard of ordinary Christian living" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31) to acquire a greater Gospel wisdom of what is at stake in the day-to-day modes of Christian experience.

Witness as an "exercise" means that Christian life is a life of doing which knows how to assume the forms of human life like an alphabet in which it can speak and be realized. It would be an interpretation which misses the mark to imagine that the "world" is only the passive scene of a salvific action which the believer works in favor of others. The "world," when it refers to the ways with which the man of today desires, suffers, struggles, dreams, loves, and hopes is the alphabet of the proclamation of the Gospel. In the same way in which the parables offered similitudes of the Kingdom of God, taken from forms of the human experience. Jesus lived the reality of Nazareth and of Galilee for 30 very long years, immersing himself in human languages, so that in only three years those experiences and those languages could increase and expand, and could explode so as to speak the Gospel of God. In the end, we are speaking of recuperating in a correct way the rapport between human existence and divine wisdom.

The Salesian Cooperators can carry out two principle types of activities, both necessary since they respond to two needs and they complete each other, as the "Rule of life of the Companions of Emmaus of the Abbé Pierre" marvelously expresses: "Before every human suffering, for as much as you can, work not only to alleviate it promptly, but also to destroy its causes. Work not only to destroy its causes, but still to alleviate it promptly. No one is, truly good, just, or true as long as he is not resolved to consecrate himself as far as his means allow, with equal heart, with all his being, to both the one and the other of these tasks. They cannot be separated without being denied."

Still, in concrete terms, each one's personal situation permits him to commit himself above all in one of these tasks rather than in the other. Some Cooperators will be able to dedicate themselves to direct action, which regards people themselves and answers their immediate needs. Other Cooperators, in virtue of their situation or their responsibilities, will do well to take on an indirect action, eminently Salesian, which is exercised on the causes of the painful situations and which causes the economic, social, political, and cultural conditions of the classes in which the young and the poor live to evolve positively.