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Pastoral Charity Core and synthesis of Salesian spirituality

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Previously we have seen how the "type" of spiritual person Don Bosco was: profoundly human and totally open to God; in harmony between these two dimension he lived out a plan of life that he had taken up with determination: at the service of the young. As Don Rua says: "He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young." [14] If one examines his plan for the young one sees that it had a "heart", an element that gave it meaning, originality: "Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls". [15]

There is therefore a further practical explanation for the unity of his life: through his dedication to young people Don Bosco wanted to give them an experience of God. On his part this was not just generosity or philanthropy but pastoral charity. This is called the "core and synthesis" of the Salesian spirit. [16]

"Core and synthesis" is a telling and demanding affirmation. It is easier to list the various features, even the basic ones of our spirituality, without committing ourselves to any sort of hierarchical relationship, which would choose one as being the principal one. In this case it is necessary to enter into the spirit of Don Bosco or of the Salesian in order to discover the explanation for his way of doing things.

To understand what is involved in pastoral charity we take three steps: we look first at charity, then at the specification "pastoral", and finally at the 'Salesian' characteristics of pastoral charity.

2.1. Charity

One of the sayings of St Francis of Sales is this: "The human being is the perfection of the universe; the spirit is the perfection of the human being; love that of the spirit; and charity that of love". [17] This is a universal approach that places four modes of existence on an ascending scale: being, human being, love as a form of being superior to any other of its expressions, charity as the highest expression of love.

Love represents the high point, the culmination of the maturing process of any individual Christian or not. The educational process sets out to lead a person to being capable of self-donation, to a selfless generous love.

It is psychologists, and not just Jesus Christ who say that a fully developed, fulfilled and happy individual is capable of generosity and can manage to live a love that is not just concupiscence, in other words for the personal satisfaction of being loved. Various forms of neurosis and personality disorders arise from being self-centred and all the usual treatments tend to open people up and to help them to concentrate on others.

Charity is then the main proposal in every spirituality: it is not just the first and the main commandment, and therefore the main programme for the spiritual journey, but also the source of the strength to make progress. There is an abundance of reflections on this especially in Saint Paul (2 Cor 12, 13-14) and Saint John (1 Jn 4,7-21). Let us take just a few of the main points.

The awakening of charity within us is a mystery and a grace; it is not a human initiative but a participation in the divine life and the effect of the presence of the Spirit. We could not love God had He not Himself loved us first, making us feel Him and giving us a taste and the intelligence to respond to Him. We could not even love our neighbour and see in him an image of God without having a personal experience of the love of God.

“The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us.” (Rm 5,5). On the other hand even human love cannot be explained rationally, and for this reason it is said to be blind. No one can say exactly why one person falls in love with another.

From its nature of being a participation in the divine life and a mysterious communion with God, charity creates in us the capacity to discover and to perceive God: religion without charity distances us from God. Authentic love, even that which is human, takes those who are at a distance towards the faith and a religious setting. The parable of the good Samaritan highlights the relationship between religion and charity to the advantage of the latter.

Saint John in his first letter will sum this up as he writes: “My dear people let us love one another since love comes from God; and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God, anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love” (1 Jn 4,7-8). In saint John the word “to know” means “to experience”, rather than to have precise ideas: whoever loves experiences God.

Since charity is a gift that allows us to know God by experience, it also enables us to enjoy Him in the beatific vision: “Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge that I have now is imperfect but then I shall know as fully as I am known” (1 Cor 13,12).

Therefore charity is not only a special virtue but the form and substance of all the virtues and that which constitutes and builds up a person: “If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels...if I have the gift of prophecy... if I give away all that I possess...if I have faith in all its fulness, to move mountains...but am without love it will do me no good whatever” (1 Cor 13,1-3).

For this reason, charity and its fruits are things that last, impervious to time: “Love does not come to an end. But if there are gifts of prophecy the time must come when they must fail, or the gift of languages, it will not continue for ever, and knowledge, for this the time will come when it will fail. But once perfection comes all imperfect things will disappear” (1 Cor 13,8-10). This applies not only to life but to our history. That which is built on love remains and builds up ourselves, our community, our society; whereas that which is based and built on hatred and selfishness destroys itself.

Therefore charity is the greatest and the root of all the charisms, through which the Church is built up and operates. It is after having explained the purpose and the role of the various charisms that Saint Paul introduces his discourse on charity with these words: “Be ambitious for the higher gifts. And I am going to show you a way that is better than any of them” (1 Cor 12,31).

It is the principal charism, even when it is expressed in everyday things and has nothing extraordinary or showy about it: “Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous ; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish, it does not take offence and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins but delights in the truth. It is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes” (1 Cor 13,4-6).

For Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello, as for all the saints, charity is central. It is the constant guiding force of their lives. It is right to know this and to say so. Every so often in fact a member of the Salesian Family experiences this and discovers the importance of charity in an ecclesiastical movement after having lived for many years the spirituality of our Salesian charism. It seems as though before this they had never heard anyone speak about it effectively nor been able to live life intensely.

In the dream of the diamonds – which is a parable of the Salesian spirit – charity is placed in front and precisely over the heart of the personage: “Three of those diamonds he wore on his chest...the third over his heart bore the word Charity”.[\[18\]](#) In this dream what is placed in the front is the fundamental part of our spirit.

In addition, charity is recommended by our founders in a variety of ways: as the basis of our life in community, as a pedagogical principle, source of piety, condition for balance and personal happiness, the practice of particular virtues such as friendship, good manners, the sacrifice of one’s own interests..

Learning how to love is the purpose of consecrated life, which is nothing other than “a way that starts from love and leads to love”.[\[19\]](#) The combination of practices, and discipline, of norms and spiritual teaching is intended to obtain a single objective: to make us capable of welcoming others and putting ourselves at their service with generosity.

2.2. Pastoral charity

Charity has many expressions: maternal love, married love, charitable works, compassion, mercy, love for one's enemies, forgiveness. In the history of holiness such expressions cover all the areas of human life. We Salesians (SDB) and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) as in general all the groups of the Salesian Family, speak about a "pastoral" charity.

This expression appears many times in the Constitutions or Statutes of the various groups, in documents and talks. The meaning of pastoral charity is explained very well in the Second Vatican Council when referring to those who devote themselves to education to the faith it says: "They are gifted with sacramental grace enabling them to exercise a perfect role of pastoral charity through prayer, sacrifice and preaching...They are enabled to lay down their life for their sheep fearlessly and made a model for their flock can lead the Church to ever-increasing holiness through their own example".^[20]

The word "pastoral" indicates a specific form of charity; it immediately calls to mind the figure of Jesus the Good Shepherd.^[21] Not only, however, his way of acting: kindness, seeking the lost one, dialogue, forgiveness; but also and above all the substance of his ministry: to reveal God to every man and every woman. It is more than evident how different this form of charity is to other forms whose preferential focus is on particular needs of people: health, food, work.

The element typical of pastoral charity is the proclamation of the Gospel, education to the faith, the formation of the Christian community, bringing the yeast of the Gospel to the situation. This therefore requires being totally available, devoted to the salvation of humanity, as shown by Jesus: of all men and women, of each and even of a single one. Don Bosco, and our Salesian Family following in his footsteps express this charity with the phrase: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*.

The great Institutes and the major currents of spirituality have summed up the heart of their own charism in a brief phrase: "For the greater glory of God" the Jesuits say; "Peace and good" is the greeting of the Franciscans; "Prayer and work" is the programme of the Benedictines; "Contemplate and pass on to others the things contemplated" is the norm of the Dominicans. The witnesses from the early days and the subsequent reflections of the Congregation have led to the conviction that the expression that sums up Salesian spirituality is precisely "*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*".

Certainly the expression is frequently found on Don Bosco's lips and had an influence on his spiritual attitude. It is the saying that impressed Dominic Savio in the office of Don Bosco still a young priest (34 years of age) and moved him to make a comment that is still famous: "I understand; here you do business not with money but with souls. I hope my soul will have its share in this business."^[22] For this boy it was clear therefore that Don Bosco was offering him not only education and a home but above all the opportunity for spiritual growth.

The expression has been taken up in the Liturgy: "inspire us with that same apostolic charity to seek the salvation of our neighbour and so serve you the one and only good."^[23] And this was quite right given that Don Bosco had this intention in mind with the foundation of his institutes: "The purpose of this Society as far as its members are concerned is nothing other than an invitation to come together urged on by a saying of Saint Augustine: *divinorum divinissimum est in lucrum animarum operare*".^[24]

2.3. Salesian pastoral charity

In Salesian history we read: "On the evening of 26 January 1854, we gathered in Don Bosco's room and he suggested that with the help of the Lord and St Francis of Sales we should first test ourselves by performing deeds of charity toward our neighbour... From that evening on those who agreed – or would later agree – to this were called Salesians."^[25]

After Don Bosco, each of the Rector Majors, as authoritative witnesses has reaffirmed the same conviction. It is an interesting fact that all of them have been concerned to repeat it with a unanimity that leaves no room for doubt.

Don Michael Rua affirmed at the canonical process for the beatification and canonisation of Don Bosco: "He left it to others to accumulate wealthand to chase after honours; Don Bosco really had nothing other at heart than souls: with deeds and not only his words he said: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*".

Don Paul Albera, who spent many years with Don Bosco and knew him well, declares "The driving force of his whole life was to work for souls to which he devoted himself entirely...The salvation of souls one might say was his only reason for living".^[26]

Even more tellingly also because it highlights Don Bosco's profoundest motivations, Don Philip Rinaldi saw in the motto "*Da mihi animas*", the secret of his love, the power and the ardour of his charity".

As regards current awareness after the re-thinking of Salesian life in the light of the Council, as the Rector Major Fr Egidio Viganò declares: “It is my conviction that there is no brief expression that sums up better the Salesian spirit than that chosen by Don Bosco himself: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*. It indicates a fervent union with God which enables us to penetrate the mystery of His trinitarian life manifested in history in the missions of the Son and of the Spirit as the infinite Love *ad hominum salutem intentus*”.[27]

Where does this expression or motto come from, and what precise meaning can it have today? I say ‘today’ because nowadays the word ‘soul’ does not mean nor give the same idea as it did in previous ages.

This motto of Don Bosco is found in Genesis, chapter 14, verse 21. Four kings form an alliance and wage war against five others, among whom is the king of Sodom. When the city was being sacked Lot the nephew of Abram and his family are among those taken prisoner. Abram is told about this and having armed the men he sets out with his tribe. He defeats the invaders, recovers the loot and rescues the people. Then in his gratitude the king of Sodom says to him: “Give me the people the rest is for you.” The presence of Melchisedek, a priest whose origin is unknown, gives a particular religious and messianic significance to the story, especially on account of the blessing he gives to Abram: a situation therefore anything but “spiritual”. However, in the request of the king there is a clear distinction between the “people” and the “rest”, the things.

Don Bosco gave the expression a personal interpretation according to the religious-cultural view of the last century. “Anima” indicates a man’s spiritual quality, the centre of his freedom and the reason for his personal dignity, where he is most open to God. When Don Bosco gives the biblical text an accommodated, allegorical, prayerful, liturgical interpretation, the expression from Gen. 14,21 takes on particular characteristics: *animas* are the men and women of his day, they are the real youngsters he is dealing with; *cetera tolle* means detachment from things and creatures, a detachment which in him is certainly not equivalent to the annihilation of self, the annihilation in God, as for example the contemplative theologians or mystics understand it. For him detachment is a state of mind that is necessary for the most absolute freedom and availability with regard to the demands of the apostate itself.

The links between these two meanings, that of the Bible and that given by Don Bosco, in our own culture point to very practical choices.

In the first place pastoral charity takes the individual person into consideration, and is concerned with the whole person; first and foremost it is concerned with developing all the person’s potential. Giving “things” comes later; providing some service is in view of the development of the person’s conscience and sense of his own personal dignity.

In addition, a charity which above all considers the person is guided by a “vision” of that person. who does not live by bread alone: he has immediate needs but also infinite aspirations. He wants material things but also spiritual values. According to the expression of St Augustine “He is made by God, athirst for Him”. Therefore the salvation that pastoral charity seeks and offers is that which is full and definitive. Everything else is ordered in relation to that: charitable works to education; this to religious initiation; religious initiation to the life of grace and to communion with God.

In other words it could be said that in our education or development we give the first place to the religious dimension: not for the sake of proselytism, but because we are convinced that religion is the deepest resource for a person’s development. In a time of secularism, this approach is not easy to implement.

The saying “*da mihi animas*” also points to some form of method: in the formation or the re-generation of an individual it is necessary to re-awaken his spiritual powers, his conscience, his openness to God, thoughts about his eternal destiny. Don Bosco’s pedagogy is a pedagogy of the soul, of the supernatural. Once this has been realised the real work of education can begin. The rest is really background or preparatory work.

Don Bosco clearly says this in his biography of Michael Magone. This boy comes in off the streets into the Oratory. He is happy, and from a human point of view a good lad: he is spontaneous and sincere, he plays, studies and makes friends. There is only one thing missing: his understanding of the life of grace, of a relationship with God and how to achieve it. From a religious point of view he is ignorant or inattentive. He breaks into tears when he compares himself with his companions and recognises that this is missing. Then Don Bosco speaks to him. From that moment the educational journey described in the biography begins: the awareness and the adoption of his own religious-Christian dimension.

There is therefore an ascetical process for someone moved by pastoral charity: “*Cetera tolle*”, “Leave all the rest behind”. One has to give up many things in order to preserve the main objective; many things can be entrusted to others, and many activities can be left to one side so as to have the time and be available to open

up the youngsters to God. And this not only in one's personal life but also in the programmes and the apostolic works themselves.

“Whoever examines the life of Don Bosco, following his thought processes and exploring the results finds a matrix: salvation in the Catholic Church the only repository of the means of salvation. He feels the challenge of abandoned, poor, aimless young people awoken in him the urgent need for education in order to enable these youngsters to take their proper place in the world and in the Church through methods using gentleness and love. Yet with a tension that has its origin in his desire for the eternal salvation of the young person.”^[28]

2.4. Progress so far

As a summary we can take up again the fundamental ideas of our reflection.

- ✓ Ours is an apostolic spirituality: it is expressed and grows through pastoral work.
- ✓ The apostolate becomes a genuine spiritual experience, and not merely the expending of energy, stress, and wear and tear, and is animated by charity; it is a source of effectiveness, confidence and joy in pastoral work.
- ✓ Charity gives unity to our personal lives; it resolves the tensions that arise between activity and prayer, between community life and apostolic commitment, between education and evangelisation, between a professional approach and the apostolate.
- ✓ The whole thrust of our spiritual life consists in revitalising pastoral charity, purifying and intensifying it: “ama et fac quod vis”.

[1] W. NIGG, *Don Bosco. Un santo per il nostro tempo*, Torino, LDC, 1980, 75.103.

[2] Cf. G. 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*. Roma, LAS 1997, 111.

[3] *Ibid.* 108-109.

[4] D. Ruffino, *Cronache dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, n. 2, 1861, 8-9.42.

[5] G. Barberis, *Cronichetta*, quad 4, 52.

[6] Bosco Giovanni, *Costituzioni della societa di S. Francesco di Sales [1858] - 1875*, Testi critici a cura di Francesco Motto, Roma LAS 1982 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.

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

[12] F. Motto, *Verso una storia di Don Bosco piu documentata e piu sicura* in *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane*” 41 (2002) 250-251.

[13] BS 8 (1884) n. 6, 89-90.

[14] SDB Constitutions 21

[15] SDB Constitutions 21

[16] Cf. SDB Constitutions 10; FMA Constitutions 80

[17] Cf. Saint Francis of Sales, *Treatise on the love of God*, Vol II, Book X, c. 1

[18] BM XV, 148 (The whole of the famous "Dream")

[19] Cf SDB Constitutions 196

[20] LG 41

[21] Cf. Jn 10

[22] J. Bosco, *Life of Dominic Savio*, in Dominic Savio ed T O'Brien Guild Publications London, 1969, chap VIII, 10.

[23] Cf. Prayer for the Liturgy on the Solemnity of Saint John Bosco

[24] MB VII, 622.

[25] BM V, 8.

[26] P. Brocardo, *Don Bosco profondamente uomo - profondamente santo*, LAS, Roma 1985, 84.

[27] *Ibid.*, 85.

[28] P. Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II, Zurigo, PAS Verlag, Zurigo, 13.

[29] GC24, *Salesians and Lay People: communion and sharing in the spirit and mission of Don Bosco*, Rome 1996, nn. 89-100.

[30] SDB Constitutions 20.

[31] Saint John Bosco. *Teachings on the spiritual life. An anthology*. Edited by A. Giraud, LAS – Rome 2013