

Giornate di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana 16 - 19 gennaio 2014

Pastoral Charity A consecrated form of freedom in the image of the Son of God

Alberto Martelli

The fascination of “res gesta”

Don Bosco’s life can be easily summed up by declining the verb ‘to do’ in detail.

From his dream at nine years of age right up to his worn-through cassock on 31 January 1888, the Saint’s life was an ongoing succession of things to do, fields to plough, freedoms to be brought into play, behaviours to pass on, teachings to give, to the extent that the easiest and most common way of discovering who he was, was to simply let the stories, anecdotes speak for themselves, and write up, as his first disciples did, the daily warp and woof of his life.

His days were like a river in spate, like a good farmer’s day, never idle, always caught up in a thousand things to do, and forever looking to what still needed to be done.

Don Bosco was a man of action. When he described himself and his work, or when he tried to translate that into teachings for his sons, his Salesians, he was only able to tell a story. But an idea, an intuition, a spirituality was both veiled and unveiled in those facts and lay behind them.

Maybe here too was where the fascination, the sway he had over his boys also lay: a Saint who was never still, just like kids are never still, who preached not so much *viva voce* but by what he was doing, and he caught them up in a story which little by little became their story, as it now becomes our story.

Don Bosco is a man who brought freedom into play, not just his own but his boys’. His educational approach meant setting up an environment where freedom could be exercised and in this way could grow into holiness. He was a preacher of life that had to be lived and played, where the rules for getting to heaven became so easy to follow, but they also shaped a young person’s freedom so that he or she could take on the life of the good Christian and upright citizen which can barely be fully described in words but needs to be seen and experienced.

He knew as few others have known, how to express the fundamental truth that Christ taught us, that truth is in the first place our freedom exercised for the Father; that is, it is not an idea we have to think about but a relationship, and an obedience to everything: freedom like Christ himself in person as the contour and example of all other kinds of freedom/persons in the world.

There he was at nine years of age, somewhat fearful, given the dream which was probably the most important in his lifetime, seeing himself being given a field to plough as a symbol of his future work as an educator. He was not given a book to read, no sermon to learn off by heart, or ideas to put into practice, not even simple commandments, but a “trade”, a craft, in the noble sense of a “vocation/mission” to be accomplished by the sweat of his brow and with the tenacity and humility that would mark him out for the remainder of his life as he abandoned himself to Providence.

Again, this “doing” was even part of the way he saw God, felt him in his life, and was the way he experienced and lived his faith in the provident omnipresence of the Father who is precisely God’s ‘being there’ like the God of Moses in the burning bush; this being there of a freedom exercised for me, a fatherly ‘doing’ of God’s in my regard, a divine love not made up of empty words, because when God speaks he creates, and his presence is both effective and affective. God can in turn be love, forgiveness, reproof, call, presence, task, ...

Don Bosco’s sons too, were all caught up in this doing, which is not just activity without meaning or blind, enervating activism, but the noble acts of someone with true purpose, a truth to be spoken and to act on because it has its roots in the Providence which Don Bosco trusted in so much.

Like them, we too as a Salesian Family are caught up in this story. It is possible at times that we have given too much emphasis to anecdote, losing the true meaning of the simple deeds recounted, and deceiving ourselves by thinking that to tell the story of our founding father it might be enough to simply talk about what he did, lining things up one after the other, building up a triumphalistic pile of part truths and anecdotes.

The verb ‘to do’ is a dazzling and distracting one: it says everything but at the same time reflects a human freedom which is not fully transparent. Divine truth does not shine through, due to our sinfulness; our doing hides what lies behind it and can almost fool us into thinking it is “enough to be doing something” and that in such an exercise of freedom, this time without real meaning, there is everything.

The three years of preparation for the bicentenary we have been moving through have taught us instead that there is another way to go. We began with ‘doing’: Don Bosco’s life and passion for education, two different levels of activity which, if not well considered, always seem to be about external doing, what appears on the outside, his praxis for us to follow. But now by the third year we discover there is something much more than this, a spirituality. If we do not turn over the soil of Don Bosco’s life more thoroughly with our plough, going beyond first appearances, we will miss the best clods and pickings. We will stop at an empty moralism that will not bring holiness.

Pastoral charity: beyond doing

I have offered this rather long introduction because I believe we need somehow to recall the deeper roots of what I now want to say.

There is by now no doubt that pastoral charity is at the heart of the Salesian charism and of Don Bosco himself. It is what we now use to sum up everything he did, that particular kind of holiness he invented in the Church as he became the good shepherd for the young people he came across. It

is also the core and fulcrum of what he left to us, his sons and daughters, and what we need to imitate if we want to realise the founder's holiness today in this his bicentenary. The bicentenary is not a work of archaeology but an injection of life and holiness in our Family.

But when we start to speak of pastoral charity, legitimately asking ourselves what it is and how we should practise it today, thinking of it as facets that Don Bosco threw light on and how these today are still life and holiness for the Church of the third millennium, the discussion seems to slide almost too quickly into "what we have to do" — towards moral tendencies of pastoral charity which, if not kept in check, soon become unrealistic and a simple outward imitation of gestures and things which have little to do with the heart of the problem.

Pastoral charity isn't a heap of things to do or activities, is not a list of tasks to be completed or pastoral strategies or educational techniques; above all it is a person, the very person of Christ. Pastoral charity is a kind of freedom, the faith of the Good Shepherd which also took the shape of the faith and freedom of St John Bosco.

Fr Ceria has pointed out this difference clearly in his chapter "Man of faith" in what is probably his best-known book: "Don Bosco with God".

Every Christian is so by faith, and baptism is the door to faith. Faith is the basis of the supernatural life and what binds the soul to God; this faith is integrated by hope and charity. But it is one thing to be a believer, something else to be a man of faith. The believer practises his faith, more or less, while the man of faith lives by faith and lives it with the intention of achieving a deep and constant union with God. Don Bosco was such a man.

To be honest, everything we have seen up to now and much of what we have yet to see is this faith in practice: thoughts, emotions, undertakings, intrepid activity, sorrows, sacrifices, pious practices, his spirit of prayer were all flames springing from his faith which burned within; it seems then that we either have to repeat what we have already said or retract the idea that he is a leader in faith. Nevertheless in this extensive field there is still something to glean. Does not a life so constantly and intensely animated by the breath of faith offer reason for spending some time on the first theological virtue? There will be no lack of characteristic items worthy of highlighting.

Amongst all the items called in for the [beatification] process, we could say that those who had lived close to Don Bosco the longest were competing to highlight his faith. Their testimonies could all be focused in the following formula: our Saint was keen to know the truths of our faith, firmly believed them, was fervent in professing them, zealous in inculcating them, strong in defending them. Worthy of special note is the testimony with which Don Rua began his deposition. He put it this way: "He was a man of faith. Instructed as a child by his wonderful mother in the principle truths of our holy religion he was hungry for that faith" (Ceria, Don Bosco with God, Chapter 14).

"Thoughts, emotions, undertakings, intrepid acts, sorrows, sacrifices, pious practices, his spirit of prayer were all little flames of fire springing from the faith" that Don Bosco was "hungry" for.

In these short paragraphs Fr Ceria focuses precisely on the problem we are now facing. After dedicating earlier chapters to describing what Don Bosco did during his life, he now comes to the core of it and this is not just one more thing to do, but a faith to be lived: pastoral charity.

The problem is not so much one of identifying what are the things to do in order to somehow imitate the pastoral charity of Christ and Don Bosco, but what is the innermost shape, the most intimate form, let us say, of the freedom of the Saint and of the Son of God, so that it could then be expressed in such a way that charity is what we effectively see from the outside. A charity that becomes loving-kindness, which can easily be spoken of and imitated in episodes, rules, nice little tales which are simple enough to be seen, simple to do, easy to imitate yet so profound as to be indicators of the faith and spirituality that Don Bosco has somehow hidden therein, so intimately were they bound up with God.

The heart of pastoral charity, then, lies precisely in communion with God and the one who could teach him this was Mary most holy, as we see in the dream at nine years of age. It was not a case of copying her actions, which would be largely impossible to do anyway, but of learning that absolute intimacy with her Son which characterised her entire life.

Pastoral charity: the freedom of the new law

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep. The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep and runs away as soon as he sees a wolf coming, and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; this is because he is only a hired man and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock and one shepherd. The father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again; and this is the command I have been given by my Father. (Jn 10:11-18)

The way in which Christ describes his own pastoral charity in Chapter 10 of John's Gospel is exactly what inspires us to say that charity is not an assembly of deeds, but a way of life and faith.

This is a long way from giving his disciples a Rule on what it means to look after the sheep, but this does not mean that Christ's charity was any the less concrete. Jesus is far from the Ten Commandments here, far from listing laws to be executed — as far as the Old Testament Law is from the new law of the Risen Son. Imitating him does not mean practising a range of things, but taking on a kind of life, one of self-giving, which is the same life as the Father's in heaven.

This life can be declined in a thousand different ways, and this becomes even more evident than a list of things to do. The "imagination" in the gift of self is as enormous, as endless as is the Father's imagination, but the core of it is a particular way of involving the freedom of the individual in relationship with God: doing it in such a way that my freedom is exercised like the freedom of the Father and the Son crucified and risen for his brothers and sisters, for his sheep.

In Salesian terms: while there might have been literally dozens of rules Don Bosco put together during his lifetime to instruct his sons so they also could be good shepherds for so many youngsters, they can never exhaust the wide range of possibilities of love, the consecration of Don Bosco's freedom to Providence and that nobly dressed Man in the dream when he was nine. Pastoral charity was the everything that marked out his life, not made up of smoke and empty words but gestures and deeds. The possibilities for imitating Don Bosco's loving-kindness are as broad as Providence

wants the Salesian Family to be, but the core of these possibilities is for everyone and always the gift of self for young people and the ever new imitation of the Good Shepherd as he imitated him.

Pastoral charity, then, is the shape of God's life, of Christ's faith in the Father, of the freedom of the Son who gives himself to his own to lead them to God and save them from sin, because this was the way the Father always gave himself to Him, inspired by the Spirit. It is Don Bosco's way of acting for his sons, the root of his apostolic imagination and the liveliness of his days, but especially the heart of his being and living: his complete conformity to the Good Shepherd.

Don Bosco's pastoral charity then, which thanks to the gift of the Spirit is still part of the life and holiness of the Church today, has not yet exhausted the forms in which it can be embodied and in which it can give itself on the cross for its sheep. It is responsibility, a profound, intimate and spiritual response and therefore something outwardly evident, filled with activity and cheerfulness. It is also his intimate communion with the Father and the Son to whom his heavenly Mother, like the good teacher she was, led him throughout his life, to the complete giving of himself: "*A French medical celebrity in the 1880s, visiting him while he was ill at Marseilles, said that Don Bosco's body was a worn-out piece of clothing, worn day and night, no longer able to be patched up and fixed to preserve it as was once the case.*" (Ceria, Don Bosco with God, Chapter 8).

Pastoral charity: an exercise of consecrated charity

We need to thank Don Bosco: it would be impossible to list all the things we would need to do to become like him.

Whoever seeks to define his way of exercising pastoral charity by deeds alone will always be accused of leaving something out. Too numerous were the trades he learned, the activities he founded, the records he established, the letters he wrote. Too strong his physique, his moral intelligence, his occasions for prayer; too many are the volumes of the Biographical Memoirs for all this to be repeated in the life of just one person who follows after him.

Thank you, Don Bosco, for discouraging us from imitating you in doing, but encouraging us instead to imitate you in charity, which has so much to do before it consumes an entire life.

"In time you will understand everything": just as only Christ on the cross could do the Father's will and breathe the Spirit; just as only the Risen Lord could give peace, and the Gospels could only be written after Easter. In time: only after pastoral charity has been practised, meaning at the end of a life spent and given to the image of Christ crucified, would he understand that the field he ploughed was the right one, that the results truly came, that after the pergola came the garden without thorns and that the Family could now extend from Santiago to Peking.

Can we today, in our various forms of consecrated life, also be the Good Shepherd for the young people entrusted to us?

"Certainly", Don Bosco would say, and indeed he never tired of retelling the lives of people close to him in whom he had glimpsed Christ's concrete charity made part of their daily lives.

And yet Don Bosco always knew there was a core in all this variety of possibilities.

It is possible for everyone in the Church to imitate Christ and therefore for everyone in the Salesian Family it is possible to imitate pastoral charity in the style of Don Bosco's charism, but here too there has to be people who, in the real circumstances of living out of their daily existence, imitate and follow the life of Christ the Good Shepherd as closely as possible in concrete form and for its final end.

This is why, as the central nucleus of the Salesian Family, not for its own merits but in shared responsibility for the plurality of vocations, there is consecrated life, so that we never lose the

reference at the heart of everything which is the unique person of Christ in the concrete form in which he himself lived his way of life.

If Don Bosco's pastoral charity was in imitation of the Son's gift of himself in obedience to the Father and in the Salesian youthful style of our charism, it was evident for Don Bosco himself that this could be extended in a multiplicity of ways only to the extent that it was rooted in the unique form of the person of Christ. This is why he offered the same formula of holiness to all his boys but to some he offered it in the shape of consecrated life, so that the core would not be lost in the many, and the many would not forget that it was the unique result of Christ's unique charity.

On the evening of 26 January 1854 we gathered in Don Bosco's room: Don Bosco himself, Rocchiotti, Artiglia, Cagliero and Rua; and he proposed with the help of the Lord and St Francis de Sales that we engage, with the help of God and of St Francis de Sales, in an experiment in the practical exercise of charity toward neighbour, in order eventually to make a promise and later, if possible and appropriate, a vow of it to the Lord. [...] From that evening the name Salesians was given to those who chose and would in the future choose to engage in such an exercise (MB V,9).

Having its source in the communion of the Son with the Father in the Spirit and taking its concrete shape from the way in which such communion of love becomes the incarnate Son's gift of self, pastoral charity can only be a practical exercise of freedom recognised by a greater love which is able to give of itself in the thousand ways we need to do so in life, but, in its principal form, as a vow, that is as total consecration of self to being completely like Jesus and Don Bosco: the gift of oneself for the young.