

Giornate di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana

16 - 19 gennaio 2014

A spirituality well-grounded in mission

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The topic I was asked to speak briefly about might initially sound a little strange. It would appear to upend the logic we are usually asked to consider when thinking of contemplation/action; consecration/mission.

But actually our perception of reality, conditioned as it is by linear and temporal logic, does not help our understanding. It is dominated by complexity and what is happening around us. The better approach seems to be a systematic one, interpreting reality by observing the relationship between the things that make it up and the transformations happening when one thing influences the other, and vice versa.

If we filter Don Bosco's spirituality and mission through this new way of looking at things it can help us see new links which we can offer the men and women of our time who are looking for a unifying principle for an often fragmented and disordered life.

It is also useful to clear the ground of preconceptions tied to the two terms spirituality and mission, almost as if they were opposed to one another. In reality, when we talk of spirituality from a Christian point of view we refer to a life style, a way of thinking of ourselves in relation to God, others and the world. Spirituality is a way of understanding our life within a framework that is bigger than us and goes beyond us. It is "being" (=spirituality) that is not opposed to "doing" (=mission); on the contrary it contains it and justifies it. This, it seems to me, can be the context in which Don Bosco's educative spirituality best fits.

This brief talk does not allow me to do more than provide some brief hints, a simple rough outline whose boundaries are even difficult for the experts to determine. Scholars of the saint note how exploring Don Bosco's spirituality is anything but a simple operation. He could be compared to the ocean deeps, easy to navigate on the surface but whose depth is hidden to anyone approaching from the outside. We are left dazzled by its awe-inspiring works or results, and do not make the real effort to penetrate the solid and profound spirituality behind them which justified their origins and style.

It is only by beginning with the relationship between Don Bosco and God that he can be understood, since he belongs to that rare category of men and women whose activity in the church and the world depends totally on their being anchored in eternity, in communion with God, which gives stability and consistency to their life.

*Peter Stella, tells us that God is the noonday sun that shines on Don Bosco's life, dominates his mind, justifies his activity. Whatever his state of mind, he senses and contemplates God as Creator and Lord, the beginning of and reason for everything. It is God whom he first presents to young people in his Companion of Youth and to adults in the Key of Paradise.*¹

Don Bosco's God is a Father, rich in prevenient and provident mercy, who never abandons his children. Don Bosco is absolutely certain of being loved and guided by the divine action, and therefore the instrument of the Lord for a mission that is not his but comes from on high.

It is here that we find the link between spirituality and mission, almost a fusion inasmuch as mission – being the instrument of God for the salvation of the young – is a source of joy and trepidation for him, just as it was for the biblical prophets who could not avoid the divine will, not only out of reverential fear, but also because they were convinced of God's goodness towards all his children.²

The mission understood thus becomes the unifying principle in life because it brings together emotional, intellectual and volitional energies, along with physical strength, directing them to an ideal, the fulfilment of the revealed project. This is the strategic meaning of the vocational dream at nine years of age, and which Don Bosco repeated at important moments in his life and which seals his life at the end when, in the Sacred Heart Basilica in Rome, he "understands" the deep meaning of all the events in his life as a pastor and educator of the young.

*Fr Michael Rua knew the deepest movements of Don Bosco's heart and contemplated its beauty, transparency, summing it up wonderfully in these words: "Don Bosco took no step, said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young. He let others store up treasures, seek pleasures or chase after honours. Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls, and he pronounced the da mihi animas by deeds, not just in words."*³

The *da mihi animas*, then, is Don Bosco's breath of life, the fixed melody in his continuous prayer. It reveals his style of relationship with God, his filial and familiar relationship with Him, meaning it was possible and indeed essential for him not only to speak of God but with God about things closest to his heart and with which He (God) was most bound up with, being the Creator: humankind, or the most special portion of humankind which is youth.

Don Bosco's religious spirit is pervaded by faith and trust in God, who is full of mercy. His seeking souls expresses his desire to deal with young people, not only to give them to God, because in reality God already possesses them, but rather to make them aware of their deepest identity as children of God, revealing to each of them the immense love of predilection with which God loves them. More than handing them over to God, he wants them to give themselves to God in mutual love.

1 Cf. STELLA Pietro, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica II. Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Roma, LAS 1981, 19.

2 Cf *ivi* 24-26.

3 Letter of Fr Michael Rua to Salesians, 24 August 1894, as quoted in *SDB Constitutions* C. 21.

This explains why, as Don Bosco often said, without religion the Salesian mission cannot be realised according to God's will. Before being something of human initiative, education is the work of God's grace which, through the sacraments, regenerates the young person, conforms him to his entire truth as someone called to live this way, but in the expectation of a future life. The expression "saving souls" can only be understood in this spiritual context where salvific action is always and only God's action, and all human activity is in service of that.

The choice of "the only concern of his heart" leads Don Bosco to "pronounce the *da mihi animas* in deeds" and not only with words, that is, to embody his faith in life, his spirituality in mission. Thoughts, words, gestures, works are all oriented to the salvation of the young and a unifying and harmonising activity involving all dimensions of his being, thus expressing the mystical aspect of the mission from which it springs, without interruption: let others accumulate treasure, seek pleasures, chase after honours.

Rooted in the fullness of God's being, Don Bosco goes beyond having, power, knowledge and appearances. They have an attraction for those who allow themselves to be dominated by the 'old' man. He shows how his being is the dwelling place of God. He learned from Cafasso, his guide and teacher, that an apostolic person, before speaking about God or doing things for God, must live for God. His being is for God, a total gift of himself into the hands of the One whom he trusts unconditionally.

Trust in God is the spiritual logic permeating the *Memoirs of the Oratory*, one of Don Bosco's most valuable autobiographical documents, through which he wants to instruct his sons on the relationship that people who consecrate themselves to the good of the young in a mission that is a genuine spiritual ministry, have with God.

For Don Bosco the true Salesian cultivates this profound connection with God through prayer and expresses it outwardly in kindness, permeating all activity with one great purpose: the glory of God and the salvation of souls. It is by virtue of this that all the rest is reshaped, becomes "worthless" by comparison with winning young souls for Christ.

Those who have best understood Don Bosco are those who have been able to penetrate the mystery of this vocational unity, the basis of Salesian spirituality. Fr Philip Rinaldi, for example, notes how Don Bosco had "identified perfectly identified his external, tireless, absorbing, vast activity, so full of responsibility with his inner life that began with a sense of God's presence and which gradually became so actual, persistent and alive that it was perfect union with God. In this way he realised in himself the most perfect of states which is practical contemplation, ecstasy of action, consuming him to the very last, in ecstatic serenity, for the salvation of souls".⁴

Ecstasy of action – a happy expression then taken up again by Egidio Viganò – expresses this successful unity between spiritual and apostolic life which is holiness and which becomes the purpose, content and method of the Preventive System. Don Bosco revealed God to the young because he was in God and those who approached him underwent the beneficial influence of his own being all caught up in God and at the same time he was present to them through his kind and loving attentiveness.

This "being with God" of someone who experiences ecstasy of action is no flight from reality and its problems. On the contrary it means living habitually in God and discovering the same reality in Him but at a higher, more profound level, where it can be held and transfigured.

This, in my opinion, is one of the meanings of the expression with which the liturgy celebrates Don Bosco's holiness; a pastor with a heart "as large as the sands on the seashore". His heart, habitually fixed

4 RINALDI Filippo, *Conferenze e scritti*, Leumann (Torino), Elledici 1990, 144.

on God, was continually open to the young, like a welcoming home in which they could find a father's embrace, a friendly look, a brother's word.

This heart we could say, was the true 'workshop' of the Preventive System, the secret of the Salesian *educere* meaning that any contact with his goodness and holiness sparked a desire in young people's hearts to be better, while through his pedagogical love he reawakened in them an awareness of their dignity as children of God created for communion and love, and set up the preconditions for personalities to grow that would be capable of engaging with the world responsibly and in solidarity.

We could go on with this kind of reflection because Don Bosco's heart is truly an unfathomable ocean of inexhaustible riches. But we have the certainty that the Father and Founder of our Family continues to live the *da mihi animas* for us and with us the so that in this prayer which then becomes life, lies the guarantee of evangelical authenticity of the Salesian charism for the Church, the inexhaustible source of identity and fruitfulness for Salesian men and women today.

The *da mihi animas* is an appeal to us to live our life authentically by unifying it around the ideal of the salvation of the young. It is not simply giving something of ourselves, some of our time, know-how and talents through professional education. It is not so much "giving what is ours", as it is offering ourselves to God for Him to use us as He wishes and, through Mary, to lead us to the field of our mission.

The *da mihi animas* lived in what we do, embodied in our life, protects us from the risk of becoming educational bureaucrats dominated by functionalism and efficiency, and confers on the Salesian mission the transforming effectiveness of authentic relationships so that today, as before, it may enlighten those who are zealous.

The *da mihi animas* is also the principle of ongoing conversion, the hidden spring that pushes us to leave it to others to accumulate wealth, seek pleasure, run after honours, and urges us to abandon compromise and mediocrity to be freer each day to live the Salesian mission in simplicity and temperance.

The *da mihi animas* finally, by becoming the unifying principle of our life, preserves us from getting lost in little things and confers solidity and depth on our spirituality, helping us to channel our efforts towards the ideal. The salvation of the young becomes our life's purpose, the source welling up in our tranquil way of doing things, pervaded by the kind of peace and serenity which shone joyfully from Don Bosco's face. The *da mihi animas*, while helping us rediscover the meaning of what we are doing, also shows us how to do it. It is a 'doing' that comes from 'being'. It is being present to ourselves, so that focused on the God who dwells in us we can at the same time be present to others – especially the young – with loving and respectful attentiveness, a profound listening ear and sincere benevolence; present to history so that we can contemplate in it the fulfilment of God's providential activity.

In a world dominated by communication which is as fast as it is superficial, where we are dispossessed by our capacity for attention to the present moment, always tending as we do to a near or remote future dictated by our calendars, the *da mihi animas* helps us to dwell in the fleeting moment but knowing how to give priority to whatever deserves it. If the young find this kind of person in us they will be less inclined to take refuge in virtual worlds in order to experience the warmth lacking in their empty homes, because they will have finally found a home, a new Valdocco inhabited by fathers and mothers, friends, brothers and sisters who live where they live, who go looking for them in their "boundary lives", experience the same crosses as they do, and bring them the Gospel of salvation, kindness and joy.

It is this, after all, that the Church, through our Holy Father Francis, asks of all Christians and consecrated people. It is this that Don Bosco, our Father and Founder, wants as we approach the bicentenary of his birth: that is, that he can bring about a rebirth in the hearts of his sons and daughters and, through their lives completely given to God for the salvation of the young, can shine out and set the world on fire.