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Some ideas on Don Bosco's spiritual sensitivity and keys for interpreting his teaching

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Don Bosco was a most prolific writer. But just the same, he is not considered to be a “spiritual author” in the specific sense of that term. Amongst the quantity and variety of his works and writings we do not find texts similar to the autobiographical works of Saint Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross or Saint Therese of Lisieux. Nor did he write treatises or handbooks of spiritual life like the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, the *Spiritual Combat* by Lorenzo Scupoli, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales, the *Exercise of Perfection and Christian Virtues* by Alonso Rodriguez or the ascetical works of St Alphonsus Maria Liguori. But it is just as certain that Don Bosco, Christian educator of the young, founder of families of consecrated men and women, was a man of profound inner faith and a true spiritual guide. Those who were formed by him recognise this. It is demonstrated by the broad and keen flourishing of Salesian holiness over time.

To be honest he has left us substantial testimony of his spiritual teaching found throughout any number of his writings and documented in recollections or notes collected by his disciples. This is why he can be considered a “teacher of spiritual life” in the specific sense of that word: due to his prolific activity as someone who formed saints, as a spiritual director of communities and individuals, founder of Congregations, someone who initiated a spiritual movement with very distinctive features and one that has become a fruitful school of Christian holiness¹.

¹ As for those he drew on and the originality of Don Bosco's spiritual teachings cf. Pietro STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II. *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Roma, LAS 1981. Amongst the more significant summaries of Don Bosco's spirituality other than by P. Stella, we recall: Francis DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*, Paris, Beauchesne 1967 (and other languages); Joseph AUBRY, “La scuola salesiana di don Bosco”, in Ermanno ANCILLI, *Le grandi scuole della spiritualità cristiana*, Roma, Pontificio Istituto di Spiritualità del Teresianum; Milano, O.R. 1984, pp. 669-698; Pietro SCOTTI, *La dottrina spirituale di don Bosco*, Torino, SEI 1939; Alberto CAVIGLIA, “Savio Domenico e Don Bosco. Studio”, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco*. Vol. IV, Torino, SEI 1943, pp. 5-590; ID., *Il “Magone Michele” una classica esperienza educativa. Studio*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti...* Vol. V, Torino, SEI 1965, pp. 131-200; ID., *Un documento inesplorato. La Vita di Besucco Francesco scritta da Don Bosco e il suo contenuto spirituale*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti...* Vol. VI, Torino, SEI 1965, pp. 105-262.

So I believe it is opportune to offer some considerations and six keys of interpretation that can help us understand Don Bosco's spirituality and, in particular, benefit from the anthology of texts prepared for the third year of preparation for the Bicentenary of our Father's birth.

Ideas on the specific nature of Don Bosco's spirituality

1. In the field of the history of spirituality, if we compare the obvious features of his teaching and practice with other schools of spirituality, we find it is clearly in harmony with the teachings of St Francis de Sales, and we find substantial elements assimilated from St Joseph Cafasso, the moral and ascetical teachings of St Alphonsus Liguori, as well as classical spirituality and Jesuit literature. Then in his apostolate, especially his outstanding family style of charity towards the young, we glimpse a number of contacts with St Philip Neri and other holy educators in the Catholic (counter)Reformation period.

Don Bosco ought not be confused with any of them, though. It is true that through his *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales passed on, redeveloped the substance of Italian spirituality in a devout form of Humanism, emphasising the beauty of piety as source of spiritual joy; he kept a balance between human will and grace; he loved to keep practices simple so they could be available to ordinary people. The Italian school of spirituality between 1500 and 1600 also had a vigorous approach coming from its awareness of a “double law” in force in the human heart, which is why it encouraged “spiritual combat”, mortification of the senses, prayer and sacramental practice aimed at growth in virtue and happiness (not in the mediaeval sense of *contemptus mundi*). Like Francis de Sales, Don Bosco looked optimistically at this struggle carried out with the certainty of victory, because of his faith in the power of sanctifying grace, in the effectiveness of the blood of Christ which makes human effort fruitful and makes it possible for everyone to pursue holiness, even children, the least in society.

This is where we discover one of the features of his spirituality: children, teenagers are also called to a virtuous life and holiness. With a thought to their psychological make-up he was concerned with the small details, gave greater importance to inward mortification than mortification of the body; he appealed to joyfulness of heart and emotion in piety; he insisted that a life of prayer and activity be one; he educated to a spirit of adaptation and conciliation but without diminishing our total giving of self to God. And he especially broadened the horizons of meaning, be they earthly or eternal; they became fascinating and stimulating horizons.

2. For Don Bosco, “giving oneself to God”, which he insisted on with his boys, did not coincide simply with the traditional appeal to conversion by the preachers of his day (“Anyone who puts off his conversion is in great risk of not having enough time, grace or willpower” and risks eternal damnation: he had heard this as a boy at Buttigliera). Despite the way things were then, his invitation to conversion had a brighter feel about it: it was an invitation to open oneself generously to the primacy of divine love, offering ones life lovingly and unconditionally to God, overcoming attachments or pulling back, crossing the threshold of a myopic vision and small-mindedness. It was substantially a case of helping each individual to fully and definitively accept his baptismal promises, put them into practice, that is, in their situation as young teenagers, accept their baptism as a life style, follow Christ lovingly, enthusiastically, unconditionally. He encouraged them to put God happily and practically at the centre of their lives, their thinking, their affections and interests and allow themselves to be transfigured by his Spirit.

Our holy founder Don Bosco was convinced that this fundamental step gave rise to a powerful inner energy, the only one that could reawaken the individual's deeper energies, help them grow up properly and tranquilly. He believed that this energy produced daily spiritual results, triggered processes of purification and development in virtue and opened them up to a practical kind of holiness. This could be understood as a wholesome and happy kind of Christian living expressed through the habitual practical exercise of faith and charity in union with God. This individual would be faithful to his commitments and duties proper to his stage in life, fervent, joyful, relating well and fruitfully with others and zealous in looking to the perfect fulfilment in God of "blessed hope".

3. As we have seen in Don Bosco's life, in his sense of humanity and also from the experience of those who were entrusted to him, the consequence of this choice was the gradual maturing of strong, pleasant personalities who also demonstrated a free spirit and were faithful, obedient and happy. They were strong-willed and able to stand up to adversity, were pro-active and had foresight, the ability to look beyond. They were kind and loving, and ready to give of themselves for their neighbour.

This is all the result of accompaniment, of education to awareness including self-awareness (neither scrupulous nor anxious), of formation to self-control through constant effort – both combative and gentle – of self-sacrifice and service of ones neighbour. It was also the result of a balanced mortification of the senses, purification of the heart and the exercise of virtue. It was the result of a spiritual *mystagogy* which could introduce them to prayer and being inwardly affectionate with God. He would gradually form in them an attitude of joyful obedience to the divine will which then also translated into humble evangelical witness, the desire to be apostolic. And finally it led to vocational commitment and service of Church and society.

From this point of view then we could speak more of Don Bosco's ascetic approach than a mystic one, even though the central dynamic was purely God's love in practice, and even though the style of piety, devotion he fostered featured perfect unity of action and contemplation. It could not be otherwise given the very nature of this active but also contemplative apostle of modernity, given his aim to be salt and light, leaven of the Gospel in the earthly city in view of the heavenly one.

4. Whoever reads the anthology will soon notice certain things he insisted on, a number of recurring themes. They are distinctive features of Don Bosco, such as his “*servite Domino in laetitia*”; such as his insistence on the centrality of obedience as a way to be perfectly conformed to Christ through self-giving; such as his emphasis on the “beautiful virtue”, the virtue of chastity, pledge of human and Christian maturity and the way to achieve a general balance between emotions and a loving but real intimacy with God who is loved above all else. Then there is the pedagogical value he placed on the sacraments, the way he fostered devotion to Mary as being inseparable from a decisive inner orientation towards virtuous perfection in active correspondence to the work of grace. We can add zeal for the glory of God, a spirit of prayer, the exercising of daily virtues, zeal for the Eucharist and the apostolate, a devotion to Our Lady that could enkindle in a young heart the desire for the highest perfection, as Fr Caviglia wrote.

We can also include here his insistence on frequenting the sacraments and on the role of the confessor-educator, the friend of the soul who, once he has earned the trust and confidence of the youngster, teaches him the art of examining his conscience, educates him to perfect contrition, encourages effective good resolutions, guides him along paths of

purification and virtue, introduces him to a taste for prayer and recognition of God's presence, teaches ways to strike up a fruitful communion with Christ in the Eucharist. Frequent Confession and Communion are intimately bound up with Don Bosco's spiritual pedagogy. Consistent and regular Confession fosters a life "in God's grace" and nurtures a potential for virtue which permits the individual to approach frequent communion more worthily. At the same time it creates a situation where God can directly take possession of the heart through Eucharistic communion because grace finds the inner ideal conditions for being effective, transforming and sanctifying.

These are features which permeate all of Don Bosco's spiritual magisterium. The spirituality of the Salesian Religious (male and female) is similarly permeated with this. The decisive giving of self to God which was proposed to young people finds in religious consecration its more radical, total movement, highlighting the absolute primacy of God and the concrete demands of unconditional following of Christ as expressed in the profession of the vows and a desire to conform oneself to the Christ who was both offering and sacrifice. The substance is the same.

Some keys for interpreting Don Bosco's spiritual view of things

Today's reader, tackling Don Bosco's texts, is aware that he was writing for the young people, adults and religious of his time. There is no doubt that it continues to be stimulating for us today too, but we sense the cultural and spiritual gap. The reading challenges our capacity for interpretation, stimulates our active cooperation, appeals to our historical, cultural, theological understanding... So to reduce the complexity, I believe it is convenient to indicate six *keys for interpretation* which can be of use for entering into Don Bosco's spiritual sensitivity and outlook and for helping today's reader to reformulate the identifying aspects of his spirituality within other cultural contexts and different theological perspectives.

1. First interpretative key: Don Bosco, (we see it in his writings and concrete choices), has *a religious notion of history*. In his way of seeing things, human history and the heart of each individual are the place for God's salvific action in an ongoing dialectic between time and eternity, grace and weakness, sin and redemption. The God of the Bible, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, *is not a distant God* looking down on events from on high: *he is close, active, involved* in human affairs; his Spirit fills the earth and gives it life, is at work in it, makes it fruitful. Don Bosco is also convinced that the blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ was not poured out in vain for the salvation of mankind. Grace and God's love for man are stronger than any kind of evil, resistance, opposition. Man, no matter how fragile and sinful he is has not been abandoned to his own devices. The Creator, in Jesus our Saviour and Redeemer, bends in our direction not only to save us but to sanctify us, transfigure us, unite us to himself in love. This is why Don Bosco has unconditional trust in God and the power of his grace: in the God who gave himself totally to us, who offers His Only-begotten Son as a sacrifice on the cross so that no one will be lost, and so that all may be his children. Therefore, do not doubt. He writes to a discouraged parish priest in 1878: [You say to me:] "Am I good for nothing? [And I reply:] *Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat*. ... are these difficult times? 'Twas ever thus, but God's assistance has never failed: *Christus heri et hodie*"².

2. Second interpretative key. From this theological perspective and undoubted faith in God comes his *trust in the human being's inner resources*, his *optimistic outlook on*

² SAINT JOHN BOSCO, *Teachings on spiritual life. An Anthology*, Bangalore, Kristu Jyoti 2013.

education and pastoral activity, and his outstanding *spiritual pedagogy*. The weakest, poorest, most difficult, distracted and boisterous lad in Don Bosco's view can keep intact the nature and heart of the God who created him in his image and likeness. Every young person can feel, deep within, a nostalgia for Our Father in heaven, and the need he has to respond to his appeals. As the creature of a God who is love, charity, every young person is ontologically (natively) open to love. The youngster has a huge need to love and be loved, is sensitive to love given freely, to sacrifice, disinterested friendship, kindness, personal attention and individual care, to positive human relationships. As an educator and pastor Don Bosco trusted this inner dynamic. It was on the basis of this certainty that he questioned himself, got down to work, experimented, never took a step back, never despaired, went out to meet, dialogue, propose, showed trust in, encouraged, was patient and also persistent, fought: or to sum it all up, educated, formed, instructed, accompanied, assisted.

3. Third interpretative key. Don Bosco was also *convinced that he was called and sent by God for the salvation of the young*. We can be sure he had received a vocation for a special mission in the church and the world. A vocation that – as he often said when talking to his sons and members of the Salesian Family – is ours too. He felt that he was a humble but necessary and effective instrument of divine grace. And this is why he became Father, brother friend so he could get young people to see God as father, mother, friend. This awareness, this faith in the mission he had received gave him courage and hope, because he knew that the Lord's help would never be lacking: the call and the mission included the charism, the grace he needed to be effective. This awareness also infused in him a *strong sense of responsibility*. As he had learned from Fr Cafasso, the pastor and everyone who had received a vocation to be educator and evangeliser has to render strict account to God for the sheep entrusted to him or her. These are the reasons that induced Don Bosco to make himself unconditionally available as a tool in God's hands and to throw himself completely into the mission. He wanted to reach out to everyone. His idea was to communicate to each person the fire of faith and love that was in him. He wanted to win everyone over to God, convinced that this way he could cooperate effectively in transforming humanity, in being a Christian leaven in history and thus help “save” society as well as individuals.

4. Fourth interpretative key. Formed in a *strongly testimonial style of pastoral and educational activity*, Don Bosco knew through experience and taught that we can only communicate to others what we ourselves have. The educator and pastor, his or her faith, charity, hope, spirit of prayer, uprightness, moral example and holiness of life are irresistibly attractive, power channels for communicating an effective formative proposal. This is how he acted and this is what he taught his closest collaborators, adults or young people from the earliest moments of the Oratory.

5. Fifth interpretative key. Of course none of this meant he did not need to have a method, a pastoral strategy, an educational “system”. If Don Bosco insisted with his boys that they “give themselves to God at an early age”, and that it was wonderful to do so then and not wait till they were adults or elderly, he also told his educators and pastors that it is essential *to win over the hearts and confidence of young people by using all the resources of the Preventive System*. He also taught them that they should *not be afraid to immediately invite them*, but in a meaningful, fascinating way, *to live clearly as Christians, and offer them a substantial youthful spirituality*. So things had to be done gradually for sure; it requires a pedagogy of spiritual life. Favourable circumstances have to be created; shaping educational settings that are beautiful, stimulating, calm, full of invitations and good, lively human experiences adapted to making these invitations meaningful. Details,

the little things need to be looked after, important moments well-organised, significant experiences offered, structured processes and steps. Planning, organisation, regulation, scheduling, careful and timely evaluation are all important. And it is especially important to focus attention on the young person, put time and effort into personal relationships with the individual, look after the individual, and also look after groups other than the larger youthful community, guarantee effective assistance [as we Salesians understand it] and personalised accompaniment. Here we can understand his care in forming well-structured educative and pastoral communities, his insistence on the personal commitment of the educators and their zeal and hard work.

6. Sixth interpretative key. We also need to keep one other thing in mind, something very important in Don Bosco's time and which is critical today, especially in the West: *trust in and openness to the future, an inclination to succeed, and belief in transcendence and our ultimate destiny*. These were typical traits of Don Bosco's, his way of living his faith and planning his educational and pastoral activity, but they were also characteristic of the cultural setting and outlook of his boys. There was reliance in his time on the “magnificent and progressive (future)” – as poet Giacomo Leopardi puts it in his *La ginestra* [The Broom] (1836) – in other words there was belief in the possibilities and ability that man had to progress, improve, the tendency to achieve better social positions, and better circumstances in economic, moral, spiritual and civil life. There was undoubted faith in progress.

Don Bosco also shared this, but from an exquisitely evangelical point of view. He was convinced that every young person, especially if poor, could be educated to look ahead, hope, want to be redeemed morally and spiritually, to win out in the end, improve; each individual needed to be encouraged to be open, to face up to hard work, struggle, nourish hope in powerful ways; each one had to be educated to go looking for what was needed, go beyond self, get out of one's small personal world, limited horizons and head for something beyond, better, aim for tomorrow, a temporal and eternal paradise. But one needed to be especially open to the otherness of the Transcendent, the God who is love, for only he can help us realise our deepest yearnings and achieve salvation. Don Bosco knew very well how to direct them towards this, in terms of their religious leanings and also outright holiness, Christian perfection, as well as in secular terms of responsible and competent citizenship.

I trust that with these coordinates and these main interpretative keys reading Don Bosco's texts, his teachings on spiritual life can be a very stimulating thing for the Salesian Family.