

HOLINESS AT THE SCHOOL OF DON BOSCO

ALDO GIRAUDO

To understand the idea of holiness Don Bosco had, we cannot help but refer to an episode he narrated in the Life of Dominic Savio.

A young man, who had just arrived in the community of Valdocco, was in recreation watching his companions' games. He was Camillo Gavio. He had a fragile appearance, a pale face, a serious look. He suffered from heart problems and was convalescing. Dominic, caring, approached him, began to talk to him, asked him the reason for his melancholy. "I have had a palpitating illness, he replied, which brought me to death's door, and now I have not recovered from it. "You want to be healed, don't you?" Dominic resumed. "Not so much, I desire to do the will of God". It was an unexpected statement that revealed to Dominic the spiritual maturity of his companion. So, he went on to say to him: "Whoever desires to do the will of God, desires to sanctify himself [cf. 1 Th 4:3]; do you therefore have the will to become a saint? "This will is great in me [...]; but I do not know what I must do". "I will tell you in a few words", Dominic replied: "Know that here we make holiness consist in being very happy" (Vite, 84).

When we quote this episode, we ordinarily stop here. We like this beautiful and significant affirmation, this joyful accentuation of Salesian holiness, and we think it is sufficient on its own to express the type of Christian perfection promoted by Don Bosco. But, Dominic's words continued, suggesting a very articulated and demanding program of holiness:

"We will just try to avoid sin, as a great enemy who steals from us the grace of God and peace of heart; we will try to fulfil our duties exactly, and attend to things of piety. Begin today to take it for yourself: Servite Domino in laetitia, let us serve the Lord in holy joy". (Vite, 84).

In these expressions we have condensed all the spiritual teachings of Don Bosco. In fact, he was convinced that "being very happy" was the fruit of divine grace that floods and moulds the heart and mind of those who decide to put God at the centre of their lives, in the radical gift of themselves, inspired by charity, so that not only are they concerned to avoid any sin, but they are vigilant and active in always discerning and fulfilling the divine will and in fulfilling with love all their daily duties - those specific to their state of life. He carries out these duties with the solicitude, precision and kindness that derive from a real detachment of the heart from the "world", from his own interests, in order to be able to give himself in full freedom to God and to his brothers and sisters, always available and happy to do "what pleases God" (as Saint Francis de Sales would say), to serve him with love and spiritual joy. Only those who are regenerated and united inwardly by charity can serve in *laetitia*, like the Virgin Mary - "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38) - and like Christ, who gave himself up for the salvation of humanity - "Behold, I come to do your will, O God" (Heb 10,7). Dedication to God, the source of all good, is the source of full and lasting happiness.

In short, Dominic Savio's beautiful affirmation acquires its full meaning only when we place it in a broader context: that of all the contexts of dialogue in which it was pronounced, that represented by the personal spiritual journey of the young saint, that of the articulated formative

proposal made by Don Bosco to the young and that of the fervent educational environment of the Oratory of those years.

Although inspired by various Christian spiritual traditions, especially St Francis de Sales and St Alphonsus de Liguori, the holiness taught by Don Bosco has its own unmistakable connotation and is the result of a spiritual process characterized by progressive steps, in increasing longing towards the fullness of charity and marked by some decisive moments and dynamic characteristics: the baptismal decision, simplicity, mortification of oneself, living in the presence of God.

1. "Giving oneself to God" in time, with totality

Already in the first edition of the *Giovane provveduto* (1847), we see the effort of Don Bosco to teach the boys of the Oratory so that they are truly happy, developed in all their potentiality, they give themselves to God, that is, they convert to Him totally and "in time", without leaving conversion to old age, because "if we begin a good life when we are young, we will be good in later years, have good death and will have the beginning of an eternal happiness" (GP 6-7). "Therefore, my dear friends, courage, give yourselves in time to virtue, and I assure you, that you will always have a cheerful and happy heart, and you will know how sweet it is to serve the Lord". (GP 13)

"To give oneself to virtue" (that is, to a good and holy life) and "to serve the Lord", are above all the fruit of an awareness, of an inner enlightenment and of the consequent decision to move away from apathy, from mediocrity or from the habit of sin, to change one's life and to behave as authentic Christians, as true disciples of Christ. Don Bosco put all his resources into practice to sow this desire and this determination in the hearts and minds of young people. In fact, without such a decision, without such a radical passage from the old man to the new man, there is no Christian life and no progress can be made on the path of evangelical perfection. Don Bosco felt that this was the essence of his own mission, a mission he had received when he was a child, as we read in the narration of the dream at the age of nine: "Immediately instruct them on the ugliness of sin and on the preciousness of virtue"; "with meekness and charity" (MO 62).

This goal guided him throughout his life and he passionately sought to achieve it:

- i. *illuminating the minds of young people through instruction, reasoning, explanation of the Word of God and spiritual reading;*
- ii. *winning their hearts with a loving and cordial welcome, true friendship and affection shown, with a disinterested, expressive love and with educational commitment;*
- iii. *attracting them with the fascination of his compelling personality, his successful humanity, the shining example of his own life, unified and strengthened by charity;*
- iv. *placing them in positive, fervent and pleasant educational environments, in welcoming, serene and stimulating youth groups, adapted to the needs and concrete expectations of young people;*
- v. *making them experience concretely, through the sacrament of confession, the joy and beauty of the life of grace;*
- vi. *supporting them step by step with attentive, common and personalised assistance, with effective educational and spiritual accompaniment, on the path of purification of the heart and mind, by building up virtues, a taste for prayer and union with God, by transfiguring communion with the Eucharistic Christ, by affectivity and sacrifices in relationships and of human activity.*

In this way they truly experienced and understood the beauty and joy of being Christian, the "preciousness of virtue", of a holy lifestyle as opposed to the "ugliness" of a mediocre, petty and sinful experience.

What Don Bosco was trying to start was, therefore, a process aimed at the full realization of their personal vocation, on the human as well as on the interior level, that would succeed in overcoming inner resistance and blocks, at the same time in releasing spiritual and moral energies, in giving a solid balance and in favouring the full expansion of all potential.

In this way, Don Bosco helped young people to enter decisively into a baptismal journey by making their baptismal promises their own, with firm will and generous enthusiasm, making them so effective in daily life: through the renunciation of Satan, of all his works, of the seductions of sin, of the attractions of evil, and faith in God the Creator and Father, in Jesus the Redeemer, teacher and model, in the Sanctifying Spirit. In this way, he taught them the concrete meaning of the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God, you will have no God but me"; "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind" (Mt 22,37). He helped them to make God truly the unifying centre of their whole being in the following of Christ.

Michael Magone's life shows well the effectiveness of this Christian pedagogy: the sympathetic encounter with Don Bosco who welcomes him lovingly and offers him the opportunity to get out of a situation of poverty and danger; who places him in a positive, stimulating and lively environment; who respectfully helps him to untie the knots of a "tangled" conscience; who shows him the simplest and most effective way to take charge of his own life and put his own house in order. All this, progressively and gently. In this way, Michael opens himself to conversion; the determination to "break away from the devil" (Vite, 122) and to "give himself" to God is born in him; he comes to taste the joyful experience of the life of grace which, little by little through an active correspondence, will mature and transfigure his personality. Michael Magone's conversion marked the beginning of a radically new and holy living, animated by a generous and impressive desire.

In the life of Dominic Savio, the baptismal commitment is widely documented. The proposals of First Communion, which culminated in the radical decision: "Death but not sin" (Vite, 46), were taken up again and confirmed on December 8, 1854 - "Mary, I give you my heart; make it always yours. Jesus and Mary are always my friends, but because of mercy, let me die rather than the misfortune of committing a single sin happening to me" (Vite, 57). These intentions become the substance of his prayer - "Yes, my God, I have already told you and I tell you again, I love you and I want to love you till my death. If you see that I am to offend you, send me death: yes, first death, but not sin" (Vite, 90). They will be reconfirmed on his death bed: "I repeat and say this thousand times: death rather than sin" (Vite, 98).

It is the same movement of totality that characterized the spiritual journey of Don Bosco himself, as we derive from the account of the Memoirs of the Oratory: when he describes his first communion and the recommendations of his mother - "I am convinced that God has truly taken possession of your heart. Now promise him to do all you can to keep you good until the end of your life..." (MO 69)-; when he reveals the inner fruitfulness of his reliance on the spiritual guidance of Don Calosso - "Since that time I have begun to taste what spiritual life is..." (MO 71) -; when, above all, he recounts the radical handing over of himself to God at the moment of the vestition of clerical habit:

On the day of St. Michael (October 1834), I approached the holy sacrament. Then the theologian Cinzano, provosto and vicar foraine of my place, blessed

my habit and dressed me up as a cleric before the solemn mass. When he asked me to take off my secular clothes with those words: "Exuat te Dominus veterem hominem suis", I said in my heart: "Oh how much old self there is to take off! My God, remove from me all my bad habits. Then, when he gave me the collar: "Induat te Dominus novum hominem, qui secundum Deum creatus est in iustitia et sanctitate veritatis!", I felt all moved and added to myself: "Yes, O my God, make me put on a new man at this moment, that is, from this moment I begin a new life, all according to the divine will so that righteousness and holiness be the constant object of my thoughts, my words and my works. So be it. O Mary, be my salvation. (MO 101).

The stripping of the secular habit to wear the religious one, the contrast between the old and new man, accompanied by the decision to begin "a new life, all according to divine will", that is, devotion to the complete fulfilment of God's will and constantly oriented to righteousness and holiness, are very effective calls to the change required by baptism and the following of Christ. It was a drastic breaking away from the previous way of life (which, as Don Bosco himself points out, was not bad but "dissipated, vain glorious"), made more evident by the disgust felt during the banquet to which the parish priest led him after his vestition: "What kind of society could be built with such people who on the morning of the same day wore the habit of holiness to give himself entirely to the Lord? (MO 102).

The decision of conversion alone, however sincere and total, is not enough. We must move on to the concrete moral reform of our own existence and a change of mentality. In Memoirs, Don Bosco is clear:

After that day, I had to take care of myself. The life that had been led until then had to be radically reformed. In the earlier years, I had not been a wicked man, but dissipated, boastful, occupied in sports, games, enjoyment other similar things that cheered me up momentarily, but did not satisfy the heart. In order to make my life consistent and memorable, I have written the following resolutions [...] (MO 102).

At this point, seven commitments or proposals were listed relating to those attitudes that Don Bosco considered indispensable for an effective totality of consecration: (1) Move away from the occasions of dispersion, dissipation and vainglory; (2) "retreat" practiced and loved (understood as recollection, interior spirit, modesty, aloneness and hardworking life); (3) temperance and sobriety; (4) commitment to acquiring a religious culture, as opposed to the worldly one as a way of "serving" the Lord; (5) safeguarding the virtue of chastity "with all one's strength"; (6) spirit of prayer; (7) daily exercise of pastoral communication for the building up of one's neighbour (MO 102-103).

The conclusion of the narration recalls the *Promise to imprint in the soul the purpose of serving God* that Francis de Sales places at the top of the path of purification to seal the choice of serving God alone: "So that [those deliberations] might remain well rooted in me - writes Don Bosco - I went forward to the statue of the Blessed Virgin, I read to her, and after a formal prayer I made a promise to that Heavenly Benefactor that I will observe them at the cost of any sacrifice" (MO 103). The Savoyan saint, in fact, outlined the conversion to the "devout life", to a radical Christian experience, as a personal acceptance and renewal "of the promise of fidelity made to God on the occasion of baptism". (Filotea, Part I, Chap. XX).

2. It is easy to become saints

In Don Bosco's theological anthropology, man is created by God for holiness and loving communion with him, a communion that will find its fullness in eternity but is already possible in this life. He was convinced that every person, even the poorest and least gifted boy, is called to holiness and can realistically become a saint. In the introduction to one of the first volumes of the "Catholic Readings", the Life of Saint Zita the Servant and of Saint Isidore the Peasant (1853), Don Bosco writes:

O all of you, who work, who are exacerbated by sorrow and travails, if you want to find an unquenchable source of consolation, if you want to make yourselves fortunate, be Saints! Become a saint! You will say, who can aspire to this? We should have time to stay long in prayer, and in church; we should be rich to be able to do great charity; we should be literate to be able to understand, study, and reason. Great mistake, our good friends, this is a dangerous illusion. To become saints, it is not necessary to be masters of our time, nor to be rich, or educated [...]

How many things, then, do we need to become saints? Only one thing: We need to long for it. Yes, as long as you want to, you can be holy: all you need is the will. The examples of the Saints, whose lives we are going to place before your eyes, are people who have lived in poor condition, and among the struggles of an active life. Workers, farmers, artisans, merchants, servants, and young people have sanctified themselves, each in his own situation. And how did they sanctify themselves? By doing well all that they had to do. They fulfilled all their duties to God, suffering for His love, offering Him their sufferings, their struggles: This is the great science of eternal health and holiness (Saint Zita, 6-7).

Don Bosco affirmed that everyone can and must become saints. It is enough to desire it; in every state of life this is possible; it is sufficient to "do everything well", that is, to live as good Christians in charity, to practice the evangelical teachings in daily life, bearing and suffering everything for the love of God and offering everything to Him.

This affirmation of the universal call to holiness and of the simplicity with which it could be realized deeply impressed Dominic Savio:

It was six months since Savio entered the Oratory when a sermon was given there on the simple way of becoming holy. The preacher focussed especially on developing three thoughts that made a deep impression on Dominic's soul, namely: it is God's will that we all become saints; it is very easy to attain it; there is a great reward prepared in heaven for those who become saints. That sermon was for Dominic like a spark that inflamed his whole heart with God's love (Vite, 61).

The particular interior conditions in which Dominic finds himself, who a few months before had renewed his donation to the Lord, explain the profound effect of that sermon. It was not only a matter of the enthusiastic reaction to a good sermon, but, as Don Bosco clearly suggests, of a mystical experience: "That sermon for Dominic was like a spark that ignited the whole heart with God's love". The dialogue that followed confirms this and the events reported in the

rest of the chapter show that it was not a passing enthusiasm or a voluntarism moved by the convincing arguments of the preacher. It was an inflow of the Spirit into Dominic's soul, an *incendium amoris* (to use the beautiful title of *De triplici via* di San Bonaventura), an uncontrollable overflowing of divine charity into a purified heart unconditionally available to the "works of divine grace". Dominic, therefore, not only felt "the desire" and "wanted", but he "absolutely needed" to become a saint, that is, he could not resist this powerful attraction of grace. Of course, it was a unique experience for him. It is also interesting to note how Don Bosco directed this irrepressible desire that the boy could not manage. To the question, "tell me therefore how I must conduct myself to begin such an undertaking", the holy educator answered, bringing it back to everyday life:

I praised the intention but exhorted him not to worry, because in the commotions of the soul, the voice of the Lord is not known; on the contrary, I wanted first of all a constant and moderate joy: and I encouraged him to be persevering in the fulfilment of his duties of piety and study, I recommended that he should not fail to always take part in the recreation with his companions (Vite, 62).

That is, even in this very special and privileged spiritual situation, Don Bosco reiterates what he used to suggest to everyone: holiness is not something extraordinary and difficult; it is built in daily life, living as good Christians, in the faithful and loving fulfilment of the duties of one's state - which, in the case of Dominic, were those typical of a young student of the Oratory: study, prayer, obedience, goodness towards all, purity, fraternity and joy among one's companions, spirit of charity and service. The same program is presented in the biographies of Michael Magone and Francis Besucco, in which it is summarized in a happy formula: "Cheerfulness, Study, Piety". This is the great program. By practicing it, you will be able to live happily and do good to your soul" (Vite, 195).

3. Mortification of the Senses and Apostolic Asceticism

Despite appearances, the proposal of "simple" holiness is not, for Don Bosco, a lowering of quality. In fact:

- i. it supposes, as a starting point, the conversion of the heart and the totality of "giving oneself to God";
- ii. it is characterized by a strong-will and attitude of determination;
- iii. it requires constant self-control through daily examination of conscience and regular and frequent practice of the sacrament of Reconciliation;
- iv. it implies a confidential openness to the "faithful friend of the soul", the confessor and spiritual director.

Asceticism as the way to holiness was proposed by Don Bosco to young people, in a perspective adapted to their condition, correcting the possible drifts of a misunderstood spirituality, and continually bringing them back to the concreteness of daily life, which should not only be accepted but embraced with joy, according to their own state of life. He took up again and applied to the condition of youth the humanistic sensibility and the teaching of Saint Francis de Sales. He thus presented a type of "positive" mortification from which intemperance and useless rigidity were eliminated while still demanding because it was all centred on situations of life, on one's duties of life.

He considered a very wide range of duties, all those linked to one's situation: "duties of piety, respect and obedience towards parents and charity towards all". (Vite, 208) Consequently, he suggested to the young students not the fasting and rigidity of their own choice but "diligence in study, attention in school, obedience to superiors, bearing the inconveniences of life such as heat, cold, wind, hunger, thirst", not taking them as imposition from an external force but serenely accepting them "for the love of God" (Vite, 207). At the same level, he placed the duties deriving from the evangelical precept of charity: to use "much goodness and charity" towards one's neighbour, to bear his faults, "to give good advices"; "to give guidance to his companions, to bring them water, to clean their shoes, to serve at the table [...], to clean in the refectory, in the dormitory, to carry the garbage, to carry bags, trunks". All these things, according to Don Bosco, must be done "with joy" and with "satisfaction". In fact, "true penance does not consist in doing what we like but in doing what the Lord likes, and which serves to promote his glory" (Vite, 207-208). Therefore, the spiritual value of these existential situations is guaranteed by the intention with which they are faced and by the purpose assigned to them: "What you should suffer necessarily - he reminded Dominic Savio - offer it to God, and it will become virtue and merit for your soul" (Vite, 75).

Don Bosco agrees with Saint Teresa of Lisieux in proposing perfection as doing charity concretely in the service of one's neighbour without selfish interests, living amiably and serene and being faithful to one's commitments even in contrary and difficult situation. The mortification proposed by Don Bosco, therefore, is above all an ascetic way of domination of instinctual impulses, the control of the senses, the correction of defects and the construction of virtues. It also has a mystical connotation. In fact, it grows in proportion to the degree of inner charity: "When the love of God takes possession of a heart, nothing in the world, no suffering afflicts it. Indeed, every pain of life is consoling to it. From tender hearts is born the noble thought that one suffers for a greater motive and that to the sufferings of life is reserved a glorious reward in blessed eternity" (Vite, 206-207).

The loving perspective in which Don Bosco proposes the asceticism of duties is rooted in "giving oneself completely to God" of which we have spoken, as an essential (baptismal) form of Christian life, with decision and momentum. From this inner movement necessarily springs an experience of joyful and ardent charity, an intense and serene living. This absolute determination of giving oneself which makes the Christian enter into that state of full obedience to the Father like Christ, in the condition of a servant freely assumed out of love, enlightens with the meaning and value of daily actions.

The experience of Michael Magone is exemplary in this sense: if earlier he left his much loved recreation with difficulty to go to fulfil his duties and felt as a burden (Vite, 119), later he would be seen as the first one "running to those places where duty calls him", with the desire to conduct himself "constantly well [...] with application and diligence".

Dominic Savio, strongly moved by the uncontainable inner experience inspired by the sermon on holiness and urged inwardly by the "need" to "be all of the Lord", felt led "to do rigid penances, spend long hours in prayer". Don Bosco instead exhorted him to maintain "a constant and moderate joy", "to be persevering in his duties of piety and study", "to always take part in recreation with his companions" (Vite, 62-63). At the same time, he directed him towards apostolic action: "The first thing he was advised to do to become a saint was to work to earn souls for God" (Vite, 63).

Like other nineteenth century saints, convinced that the action of grace pushes us towards a fruitful living of moral virtues, of holy activity and of works of charity, Don Bosco preferred voluntary commitment to do good, virtuous and cheerful deeds, live friendly and helpful

relationships and, above all, apostolic charity: "concern for the good of souls" and zeal to "instruct children in the truths of faith", to "earn all humanity for God".

However, this ascetic-operative tendency, this predilection for pastoral and missionary fervor in Don Bosco did not in any way oppose the interior communion with God. He did not neglect the prayer of union. On the contrary, he was docile to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in this prayerful climate formed his disciples.

4. Living in the Presence of God

This is where the theme of prayer comes in, understood by Don Bosco as a loving relationship, a communion of thoughts on and affections and feelings for God. He said: "To pray means to raise one's heart to God and to enjoy oneself with him through holy thoughts and devout feelings" (*Il cattolico*, 87). Therefore, the prayer he promoted had as its first objective the raising of the spirit and the invocation of grace to resist temptations, to detach the heart from sin, to grow in virtue. On this track, he developed a method of prayer that valued the common practices of piety as an effective way to arrive at the "spirit of prayer" (as he called it). Morning and evening prayers, frequent invocations or ejaculations throughout the day, spiritual readings, daily "visits" to the chapel, triduums and novenas, monthly retreats and spiritual exercises: all were exercises aimed at establishing and increasing a constant interior conversation and loving bond, nurturing a worshipping sense of God's presence to enter into a "state" of permanent communion.

Here, too, our Founder insists on simplicity, inviting us to live the day with brief moments of prayer, from the morning alarm clock to the end of the day, so that every action "diligently" carried out may be "directed" and offered to the Lord (*GP 68-70*, 82). Scrolling through the pages of the *Giovane provveduto*, the Lives of his young, but also the regulations of the Salesians, of the daughters of Mary Help of Christians and of the Co-operators, we find nothing complicated and heavy, only sober and pleasant practices of piety, but characterized by fervour, surrender and loving offering of oneself: "Simple things that do not frighten or even tire the Christian faithful, specially the youth. Let us hold on to simple things, but let them be done with perseverance" (*Vite*, 136).

He took into account the youthful and popular feelings and therefore he focussed on the affectivity, on the friendship of Christ, on the maternal tenderness of Mary. He was convinced that it was the task of the Christian educator to work to "make the youngsters experience joy in prayer" (*Vite*, 204). For this reason, he guided them towards the thought of the "presence of God", the most loving Father; he invited them to raise their hearts and minds to the Creator from the beginning to the end; he encouraged them "to converse familiarly" with Him in any place following the example of Dominic Savio who, "even in the midst of the most sensational turmoil, directed his thoughts and with pious affection raised his heart to God" (*Vite*, 69). He also trained them on external signs (the sign of the cross, genuflection, the composure of the body during prayer), wanted a clear and calm pronunciation of words, gave great importance to music and sacred singing, took care of the beauty of the environments dedicated to prayer and the harmony and solemnity of the liturgies.

Through these simple means Don Bosco aimed, for himself and for others, at achieving an interior state of permanent love, such as to impregnate thoughts, unify affections, orient actions. The "state of prayer", in its way of seeing, is not only a "degree" of prayer, because it is always accompanied by a desire for moral perfection: detachment, effort to overcome and control oneself, patience, vigilance, fidelity and constancy in goodness, benevolence. It is a state of

mind recollected, in a modest lifestyle, focussed on the essential, hard-working and charitable, open to the inner action of grace that preserves from the dispersion of thoughts and the banality of fashions, without taking anything away from the joyful living of life. This creates an elevated interior dimension, the only one truly capable of transforming the playground, the school, the workshop or the office into privileged Salesian places of encounter with the Lord.

In this way the holy educator radically redefined the ancient concept of the *fuga mundi* in a context of modernity. Thanks to the spirit of prayer, the estrangement from the world and the immersion in the world are composed and harmonized in the offering of oneself, in a responsible assumption of life in Christian style. Prayer, apostolic commitment and mortification are the faces of a single attitude of consecration of the heart. A high exhortation made by Don Bosco not only to his Salesians and sisters in the consecrated life, to the adult Co-operators but also to the simplest children: "Courage, therefore, let us begin to work for the Lord without delay. It is up to us to suffer something in this world, and the reward we will have in the other will be eternal" (GP 73).

His spiritual direction also gave the utmost importance to reception of sacraments: "Remember, O young people, that the two strongest pillars in sustaining you and making you walk in the way of heaven are the sacraments of confession and communion" (Regulations 36). Don Bosco presented the sacraments from a pedagogical and spiritual perspective. The insistence on frequent sacrament was motivated not only by the awareness of human frailty and the need to sustain the will in order to stabilize it in goodness and virtue, but also by the conviction of the powerful transforming action of the Holy Spirit who, acting in the sacrament, carries out radical purification and creates favourable conditions for the Lord to "take possession of the heart" and shape it in charity.

Here we can see the reason for his insistence on the choice of a stable confessor, a friend of the soul, to whom to entrust oneself in order to be guided along the paths of the Spirit. In the confidential relationship, in fact, the confessor personalizes the spiritual program: he teaches the art of examination of conscience, inspires perfect contrition, stimulates effective purpose, guides on the paths of purification and virtuous exercises, introduces the taste for meditation and the practice of the presence of God, teaches the ways of a fruitful communion with the Eucharistic Christ. Confession and frequent communion are intimately linked in Don Bosco's spiritual pedagogy. Assiduous and regular confession promotes life "in the grace of God" and nourishes the virtuous tension that facilitates an increasingly "worthy" approach to communion; at the same time, through Eucharistic communion, the person fixes himself on Christ so that grace finds space to work deeply to transform and to sanctify.

This concern explains the loving climate in which Don Bosco envisaged Eucharistic devotion. During the offertory of the Mass, for example, he invited young people to reciprocate the sacrificing love of Christ crucified with the gift of themselves: "I offer you my heart, my tongue, so that conscious of the future, I may neither desire nor speak anything else, except that which concerns your holy service" (GP 88). So also, in thanksgiving for communion:

Oh, if only I could have the heart of the seraphims of heaven, so that my soul would always burn with love for my God! I long that you will always be my hope, my comfort, you will always be my wealth. I offer you myself completely; I offer you my will, that I may not want other things than those that you like; I offer you my hands, my feet, my eyes, my tongue, my mouth, my mind, my heart, all of myself I offer you; guard all these feelings of mine, so that every thought, every action may have no other aim than your greater glory and spiritual advantage for my soul (GP 101-102).

They are texts inspired by the devout literature of the time, but if we connect them with the formative initiatives made by Don Bosco, in particular with the specific model of holiness promoted by him, they acquire a unique value because they reveal to us the inner mechanisms triggered by the holy educator for the interior response of his young people in relation to the relationship with God and to Christian perfection.

Marian piety also acquires a clear pedagogical function in him while maintaining the typical characteristics of nineteenth-century devotion. We can see this in the biographical profile of Michael Magone where devotion to the Most Holy Mary culminates - as Don Caviglia says - in a "pedagogy of adolescence which is above all a pedagogy of chastity" (Caviglia, 162).

But it's not just that. In fact, Don Bosco tells us that Michael, in meditating on a biblical verse printed on an picture of Mary - *Venite, filii, audite me, timorem Domini docebo vos* - felt compelled to write a letter to the Rector in which he said "how the Blessed Virgin had made him hear her voice, called him to be good and that she herself wanted to teach him the way to fear God, to love him and serve him". (Vite, 33) A correct Marian pedagogy is able to make a distracted and dissipated boy perceive the inner voice of the Spirit, in order to induce him to a more intense spiritual activity and to ignite in him a desire for high perfection. In the life of Dominic Savio, the spiritual longing reached its peak with the formal and solemn act of 8 December 1854, when the boy renewed the promises of First Communion and repeated: "Mary, I give you my heart; make it always yours! Jesus and Mary, always be my friends! But for heaven's sake, let me die rather than the misfortune of committing even a single sin!" Taking Mary in this way to grow in the devotion to her - commented Don Bosco - his moral conduct seemed so uplifting and thus combined with such acts of virtue, that I began to notice them from then on never to forget them". (Vite, 57) They are expressions that reveal to us the dynamic significance of the Marian devotion taught by Don Bosco: a devotion not detached from daily life but permeated with it, capable of unleashing moral and spiritual energies for the practice of good, in a perspective of human and spiritual fullness - of holiness, precisely - that permeates the interior life and the daily living.

Conclusion

I dwelt on the dynamism of the proposal of Christian life and holiness presented by Don Bosco to young people. However, it is important to note that the same dynamism characterizes the spiritual teachings of our Founder when he addresses Salesians, salesian sisters and co-operators, always emphasizing Christian radicalism and apostolic intensity.

For example, the form of religious profession, included in the Italian edition of the first Salesian Constitutions (1875) is introduced by an affirmation that clearly illustrates the baptismal commitment of the Salesian consecration as Don Bosco intended it:

By professing the Salesian Constitutions, I intend to promise God to aspire to the sanctification of my soul by renouncing the pleasures and vanities of the world, by fleeing any possible sin and to live in perfect chastity, in humble obedience and in poverty of spirit. I also know that in professing these constitutions, I must renounce all the comforts and luxuries of life, and this out of love for our Lord Jesus Christ to whom I intend to consecrate my every word, my every work, my every thought throughout my life (Regulations 44-45).

Don Bosco wrote in his first circular letter to the Salesians (9 June 1867):

"Everyone must enter into a Society guided only by the desire to serve God with greater perfection and to do good to oneself, intending to do the true good,

spiritual and eternal. We take as our basis the words of the Saviour who says: whoever wants to be my disciple should go and sell what he possesses in the world, give it to the poor and follow me. But where to go, where to follow him, if he did not have a piece of earth where to lay down his tired head? Whoever wants to become my disciple, says the Saviour, follow me with prayer, with penance and especially deny himself, take up the cross of daily tribulations and follow me [...]. How long will it take to follow him? To the point of death and if it were a profession, even to the point of death on a cross. This is how he who toils in the sacred ministry, in teaching or other priestly exercise does even till a painful climax of imprisonment, of exile, of sword, of flood, of fire; so much so that after having suffered or died with Jesus Christ on earth, can he go to enjoy with him in heaven" (Salesian Sources 1, 822).

Even when he addresses the laity, Don Bosco presents Christian perfection as a radical conformation to Christ. "No one in fact", he wrote in 1856, "can boast of belonging to Jesus Christ if he does not try to imitate him". Therefore in his life and deeds, he must reflect "the life and deeds of Jesus Christ himself": "he must pray, just as Jesus prayed"; as he must be "available [...] to the poor, the ignorant, the children", doing everything to everyone. "He must deal with his neighbour, just as Jesus Christ would deal with them"; "he must be humble" like him and consider himself "as the least and as a servant of all". "The Christian must obey as Jesus Christ obeyed, who was obedient to Mary and Joseph, and obeyed his heavenly Father until death, even death on a cross". The true Christian in eating and drinking must be as Jesus Christ was at the wedding of Cana in Galilee and Bethany, that is, sober, moderate, attentive to the needs of others.

"The good Christian must be with his friends because Jesus Christ was with Saint John and Saint Lazarus. He must love them in the Lord and for the love of God; he must cordially confide in them the secrets of his heart; and if they fall into evil, he will do all he can to make them return to the state of grace.

The true Christian must suffer deprivation and poverty with resignation, as did Jesus Christ, who had no place to lay down his head. He knows how to tolerate contradictions and slanders, just as Jesus tolerated those of the scribes and Pharisees, leaving it to God to judge them. He knows how to tolerate insults and abuses, just as Jesus Christ did when he was slapped, when they spat on his face and insulted him with a thousand guises in the praetorian.

The true Christian must be ready to tolerate the pains of the spirit, just as Jesus Christ when he was betrayed by one of his disciples, denied by another and abandoned by all.

The good Christian must be willing to accept patiently all persecution, all illnesses and even death, because Jesus Christ who, with his head crowned with prickly thorns, body torn apart by beating, feet and hands pierced by nails, commended his soul in peace into the hands of his Father. The true Christian must say with the apostle Saint Paul: It is not I who live, but Christ Jesus who lives in me (Chiave del Paradiso, 20-23).

Simple holiness is, therefore, holiness lived in daily life, with love and a smile on your lips. But certainly, a fruitful holiness is demanding.

Bibliography

- Il cattolico* = GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Il cattolico provveduto per le pratiche di pietà con analoghe istruzioni secondo il bisogno dei tempi*, Torino, Tip. dell'Oratorio di S. Franc. di Sales, 1868.
- Caviglia* = ALBERTO CAVIGLIA, *Il «Magone Michele»: una classica esperienza educativa*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco nuovamente pubblicati e riveduti secondo le edizioni originali e manoscritti superstiti*, a cura della Pia Società Salesiana, vol. 5, Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale, 1965, 129-247.
- Chiave del paradiso* = GIOVANNI BOSCO, *La chiave del paradiso in mano al cattolico che pratica i doveri di buon cristiano*, Torino, Tip. Paravia e Comp., 1856.
- Filotea* = FRANCESCO DI SALES, *Filotea. Introduzione alla vita devota*. Introduzione di Valentín Viguera; traduzione e note di Ruggero Balboni, Roma, Città Nuova, 2009.
- Fonti salesiane I* = ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Fonti salesiane I. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, Roma, LAS, 2014.
- GP* = GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri...*, Torino, Tipografia Paravia e Comp., 1847.
- MO* = GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*. Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraudò, Roma, LAS, 2011.
- Regolamento* = GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Regolamento dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales per gli esterni*. Torino, Tipografia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1877.
- Regole* = GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Regole o costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales secondo il Decreto di approvazione del 3 aprile 1874*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana, 1875.
- Santa Zita* = *Vita di santa Zita serva e di sant'Isidoro contadino*, Torino, Tipografia P. De-Agostini, 1853.
- Vite* = GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Vite di giovani. Le biografie di Domenico Savio, Michele Magone e Francesco Besucco*. Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraudò, Roma, LAS, 2012.