

## **The Four Pillars of Salesian Spirituality Archbishop Angelo Amato, S.D.B. Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith**

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### ***THE SALESIAN MONTH OF JANUARY***

The month of January is particularly marked by Salesian holiness, as if to indicate the spiritual tone that should colour the flow of days and deeds in the New Year. This Salesian holiness shines out in some of the most important Salesian figures:

Blessed Luigi Variara (15 January), an example of a humble, brave Salesian missionary who was determined to give a genuinely Salesian approach to nursing the most marginalized sick people;

Blessed Laura Vicuña (22 January), a shining example of Salesian education who rigorously defended her dignity as a 12-year-old girl, as an offering for the conversion of those dear to her;

St Francis de Sales (24 January), the Patron Saint of Salesians who inspired Salesian virtues such as the gentleness and docility of Jesus, the Good Shepherd;

St John Bosco (31 January), our founder, teacher and father, and above all, our unexcelled model of holiness.

Like a complex prism with ever new facets and aspects, the year gradually unfolds its days and months, enriching the gallery of Salesian holiness with its most disparate interpretations.

The liturgy for the feast of Don Bosco calls him "teacher and father" to the young (Entrance Antiphon), and rightly so, for Don Bosco was a teacher, catechist, writer and founder of religious congregations dedicated to the education of youth.

Certain aspects of Don Bosco's spiritual pedagogy that are particularly appropriate today have been providentially treated in the recent Magisterium of the Holy Father, John Paul II. We refer in particular to the Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, the Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations *Ecclesia in Europa* and *Pastores Gregis*. In them we discover the four pillars that sustained Don Bosco in his pedagogy as a priest and Christian educator: devotion to Mary and to the Eucharist, the anchorage or pillar to which we should moor the ship of our existence; the virtue of hope that gives us *joie de vivre*; ready obedience to and communion with the Pastors of the Church.

#### **First pillar: devotion to Mary Help of Christians**

For Don Bosco, the Immaculate Virgin, Mary Help of Christians, was the ever-present Mother who helps her children daily, going to their rescue and leading them to Jesus. "Be devoted to Mary Help of Christians", he would habitually say, "and you will see what miracles are!".

For Don Bosco, Marian devotion had an intrinsically ecclesial dimension since he saw Mary as the powerful Helper who defends the Church and the Pope from every kind of danger. This is why in the Salesian tradition the daily recitation of the Rosary is not only an element of Marian devotion, but above all the contemplation of Jesus in the mysteries of his saving Incarnation.

#### **Second pillar: devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist**

The second pillar of Don Bosco's spirituality was devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist, which he saw as the heart of every Salesian house. He used to remind young people: "If you want many graces, pay many visits to Jesus in the Sacrament; if you want few graces, pay him few".

Don Bosco was a "vir eucharisticus", that is, a saint formed through and through by the Eucharist. He was so passionate about the Eucharist that he communicated his passion to the young people he carefully prepared for communion with the Lord through the sacrament of Reconciliation. For Don Bosco, Confession and the Eucharist were the two sacraments that inculcated in young people the Christian virtues and holiness.

On this topic he wrote in 1877:

"Frequent Confession, frequent Communion and daily Mass are the pillars that must support an educational building that we desire to protect from threats and scourges. Never force youngsters to receive the holy sacraments, but only encourage them and make it easy for them to do so" (John Bosco, *Il sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù* [1877], n. 4).

The 15-year-old St Dominic Savio is a shining example of this sacramental pedagogy which strengthened his virtuous habits and his union with Jesus, witnessed by his Eucharistic ecstasies during Holy Communion.

### **Third pillar: educational system based on joy, hope**

The third pillar of Don Bosco's spirituality was his educational system of joy and hope. Dominic Savio, who once said to Don Bosco: "I am the fabric, you are the tailor; make me into a beautiful suit for the Lord!", had fully grasped this when he suggested to his young companions: "Let's make holiness consist in being very cheerful!".

Salesian holiness is the fruit of a pedagogy of joy based on Christian hope in the eternal joy of paradise. Hope, which the Holy Father has insistently asked the European Churches to recover, was for Don Bosco the virtue that spurred him to embark on the most adventurous undertakings, such as the construction of the Church of Our Lady Help of Christians in Turin and of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Rome, and the foundation of two religious congregations with barely a penny in his pocket, overcoming unspeakable trials. He placed full trust in the Lord's provident presence in the history of the Church and in his own life.

He often used to say that the saints, while taking the final judgment seriously, lived in supreme joy because they trusted in the goodness of a Father who has infinite good things in store for his faithful servants.

If Francis of Assisi made nature holy, Don Bosco made joy holy, remembering' what Philip Neri had said to his young followers: "Run, jump, amuse yourselves as much as you like, but for pity's sake, don't sin!".

Like hope, which is a disposition given by God, joy too was not so much a methodological expedient but rather a form of life, an evangelical constant that gives rise to happiness and optimism. He felt that there was an affinity and harmony between serene young people and Christian life — a mutual appeal:

"The young person who feels he is in a state of grace with God naturally experiences joy in the certainty that he possesses a good that is completely within his reach, and he expresses this state of pleasure in cheerfulness" (John Bosco, *Vita del Giovanetto Savio Domenico*, in *Opere Edite*, XI, p. 236).

For him, *Servite Domino in laetitia* was the 11th commandment.

### **Fourth pillar: devotion to Church and Vicar of Christ**

Don Bosco's fourth and last pillar is his devotion to the Church, to her Pastors and especially to the Holy Father. His love for the Pope was extraordinary and is an integral part of the Salesian formation and apostolate.

*Vivere in Ecclesia, sentire cum Ecclesia et agere pro Ecclesia* vividly captures the spirituality of Don Bosco.

With regard to the *sentire cum Ecclesia* that Don Bosco lived with a special reference to devotion to the Supreme Pontiff and his Magisterium, his second successor, Don Paolo Albera (1910-1912), wrote:

"Let us remember that in following in the footsteps of the saints, and especially in those of St Francis de Sales, Don Bosco was not content with a submission of the intellect restricted to *ex*

*cathedra* definitions, but wanted sincere submission to any teaching of the Pope imparted in any form. Nor did he merely follow his orders and have them followed, but regarded as law and as a gentle command every announcement, every piece of advice, every desire of the Vicar of Jesus Christ, and he wanted his sons to do likewise" (P. Albera, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani*, SEI, Turin, 1922, p. 102).

"Knowing, loving and defending the Pope" was the gift of 1949, written by Don Pietro Ricaldone (1932-1951), the fourth successor of Don Bosco.

Francis Desramaut, a French historian, synthesized this Salesian ecclesial dimension, a living legacy of Don Bosco, in the following way:

"The Salesian mingles unostentatiously with Christians who can speak lovingly of the Church, 'judging her fondly, almost as though she were a mother'. They are aware that they have received the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church and through the Church. They may well know her limitations, her wrinkles and even her scandals, but attach little importance to them. Instead, they duly evaluate the advantages of her presence for each person and for humanity: the beneficial energies she spreads, the experience of God expressed by the holiness she offers as an example, the wisdom that emanates from the Word of God, the love that unites and inspires solidarity beyond the boundaries of nations and continents, the sense of life she offers, the values she defends and the prospects of eternal life that she unfolds. The Salesian family loves and admires the Church of Jesus Christ" (Francis Desramaut, *Spiritualità salesiana*, LAS, Rome, 2001, p. 151).

### **Preventive system: based on reason, religion, tender love**

With these four spiritual indicators, Salesian education offers to society and to the Church good Christians as well as honest citizens.

The climate in which this educational project is put into practice is the so-called "preventive system", which attempts to prevent rather than to repress, and is based on the famous triad: reason, religion, affection.

These three words show that education is a task founded on sound reason, on the grace of Baptism, and above all, on the good, transparent heart of the educator.

May Don Bosco help us to preserve his precious heritage and to promote it with creativity in the cultural context of our day.

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