

Journal of Salesian Studies

Spring 1999

Volume X

Number 1

**Institute of Salesian Spirituality
Berkeley, California, USA**

Salesians Beyond 2000

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For all the ridicule that we might heap upon the term "postmodern," we live and attempt to give life to the Salesian charism in a postmodern world with its sacramental sign: the Personal Computer. The written word, once so sacred and firmly fixed upon the page, comes and goes with a few key-strokes. By means of the Internet and a few good search engines you can move swiftly from the Vatican museum, to the latest sports results, to hard pornography, and so on. We correspond by instant e-mail contact. This collapsible vision of any number of worlds is on the desk in my office, or in the homes of the young people whom we regard as our special apostolic concern. We can fall into the trap of claiming adhesion to an external form of life which is marked by regularity and time-tested practices underpinned by never-changing truth while we give our lives to an increasingly fragmented world in which none of the fore-mentioned qualities are recognized. This is a first-class ticket to schizophrenia.¹

Contemporary western society is marked by high mobility, a fracturing of previously sacred barriers and a seeming relativization of all that was once regarded as permanent and sacred. We must accept this as a given. It is what was called by *Gaudium et Spes* as "a sign of the times," to be accepted and responded to creatively. This is not a simple task. It would be easier to wring our hands in disgust over the loss of the past and tremble with fear for the future. The most wonderful heritage left us by Don Bosco remains his joyful and courageous openness to everything that came his way: "Niente ti turbi!"

There are many aspects to the Salesian vocation and mission. My own 39 years of Salesian experience, for what it is worth, teaches me that there are three fundamental elements in our lives: God, community, and young people. I wish also to address what I suspect is a forgotten Gospel message. To put it in Jesus' words: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2:17). We are so obsessed by our responsibilities as shepherds of youth that we forget that we too are a broken people, in need of our own shepherding. In the highly fractured world in which we live, we are fractured. It is God who makes us whole. How are we to handle this reality in the new millenium? After some brief reflections on the questions of God, community and young people, I will devote

¹For a challenging reflection upon the need to recognise the complexity of our postmodern world, and some suggestions of how Religious Life might best respond to it, see Sandra M. Schneiders, "Congregational Leadership and Spirituality in the Postmodern Era," *Review for Religious* 57 (1998): 6-33. I suggest that this is "must" reading, however much one might accept the particular model (loosely based upon the "new science") adopted.

more time to the need for Salesians to rejoice in the fact that Jesus called not the righteous but sinners.

1 — God

Jesus of Nazareth is the very reason for our existence as a Christian people and a Religious Family which serves that people in our special way as followers of Don Bosco. But Jesus of Nazareth is part of a larger mystery, and we lose the sense of that larger mystery to our peril. Jesus is the sent one of God. Behind the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth lies the greater mystery of God. One of the most serious difficulties the earliest Church had to face was the absence of Jesus. It resolved the difficulty—over many centuries—by developing its theology, especially its trinitarian theology and its Christology, but also its ecclesiology and its understanding of the community's sacramental and prayer life. It is in these institutionalized beliefs and practices that we have the presence of the absent one until he comes again. The absence of Jesus has led to the intense institutionalization of Christianity. In more stable societies this response made universal sense and spoke eloquently. But many contemporary young people still deeply committed to the mystery of life, love, hope, death, and all those things that transcend us, are so switched off by the Churches. Are our present institutions the best way to respond to the absence of Jesus in our postmodern society?²

The New Testament makes clear on every page that Jesus made known a God who gives sense and direction to life. He revealed a God whom he called "Father" (see Mk 14:36; Mt 11:25-27; Lk 10:21-22), and his death and resurrection generated a new world where his disciples could call his God and Father their God and Father. As the risen Jesus says to Mary Magdalene who wishes to lay hold of him: "Go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (Jn 20:17). As we go into a more fragmented and less stable era, when "control" becomes less and less possible, perhaps we need to return to some fundamentals. We have our very being because of the creative act of the God of Genesis 1-11, a God who without any soliciting, creates out of chaos, punishes and saves.³ Adam and Eve sin and are banished from Paradise, but God gives them clothing and promises that the offspring of the woman will do battle against the serpent. The same rhythm applies across the story of Cain and Abel, the story of the flood and the Tower of Babel. This is the God of Abraham who entered into an "I-thou" relationship with human beings. God summoned us to take the risk of an unconditional commitment to a future that God would give, a personal God who is made

²See Schneiders, "Congregational Leadership," 18-28, for an important contemporary reflection upon the centrality of the search for God within a tradition.

³For a more extended treatment of the following paragraphs, see Francis J. Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets. A Biblical Model for the Religious Life* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), 19-31.

known to those chosen. They will discover the mystery of that God only in the loss of themselves.

The Father of Jesus is the God known to Israel as YHWH. This name tells us that God is not a noun, but a verb. Given the many possibilities of the Hebrew verb, and with a bit of poetic license, it means — at one and the same time—the one who is, the one who causes all things to be, and the one who will always cause all things to be. The name is a word we can articulate, a verb telling of God's presence, yet placing it outside our ability to objectify. YHWH is never a God to whom one can dictate terms, whom one can cajole and lead. Ultimately, YHWH is an Exodus God who calls those who entrust themselves to him away from themselves. "YHWH was a God far off, and a God at hand (see Jer 23:23). Israel's faith in God was, so to speak, suspended between the opposite poles of divine transcendence and divine immanence."⁴ God can be called upon by human beings, God is "there" for them, but when we find God "there," we find that God summons us into an Exodus experience. God transcends our petty plans, and — whether we agree or not — leads us into our future. We spend much of our "todays" planning our "tomorrows," and much of our "tomorrow" attempting to sort out the mess created by the fact that things have not turned out the way we had planned. This understandable anxiety can be eased and greatly lessened if we develop a deep commitment to a God who is the Lord of history. It is God who determines our "tomorrow," until we have no more tomorrow.

This could be frightening, until one turns to the further revelation of God that comes to us in and through Jesus Christ.⁵ "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:16-17). This is the radical newness of our era: God has been made known to us as a God who loves and saves. The verb "to be" which served as a basis for the Hebrew expression used to speak of God, has been transformed into the verb "to love" in and through the event of Jesus Christ. Each of the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline Gospel articulate this in their own distinctive fashion. But in the end, there is only one attempt in the New Testament to define Jesus. On two occasions in 1 John the author affirms: "God is love" (1Jn 4:8, 16). Jesus' task, to make God known (see Jn 4:34; 5:36; 17:4), is not accomplished till, lifted up on a cross he can say: "I have brought to perfection my task: *Consummatum est!*"

If Jesus perfects his task in making known a God who loves and is loved, then it is not surprising that he spells out the Christian vocation in the same terms. In the Gospel of John we find only these instructions:

⁴Henricus Renckens, *The Religion of Israel* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 139.

⁵For a more extended treatment of the paragraphs which follow, see Moloney, *Disciples and Prophets*, 32-45.

* "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:15),

* "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-35),

* "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (15:12),

* "This I command you, to love one another" (15:17).

Where is the institution and its hierarchy? Where are the doctrinal and disciplinary indications that are so much a mark of the Christian Churches and the Religious Life as we have come to know them? Many of us, fragile human beings, need doctrine and discipline to give support and direction to our lives; to give us a reason to get out of bed every morning. Those of you familiar with contemporary Johannine studies will be aware that precisely the lack of these elements generated problems for communities basing themselves on the Fourth Gospel.⁶ But these problems did not arise simply because of a lack of institutional structures. They arose then, and they continue to emerge within the Christian world because of the lack of response to Jesus' basic response. The breakdown of the Johannine community is evidenced by 1Jn 2:19: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been with us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that it might be plain that they all are not us." The Johannine Letters indicate throughout that mutual support and affection is failing. Within Christianity it must never be a question of "institution first—love later." In any authentically Christian presence the opposite is always the case, and our own Salesian history is evidence of this.

The command to love lies at the heart of Christian life. Unfortunately, it is often misunderstood as the weak side of the Christian message in our hard-nosed world. The stern calls to discipline one can find elsewhere in the New Testament are often preferred as the heart of Christianity. This is a dangerous temptation to be resisted. Christianity itself is at stake. The essential mission of Christianity is to make God and his rule known. We are told, "God is love" (1Jn 4:8, 16), but what is love: "Greater love hath no person but that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends" (Jn 15:13). It is the link between the cross and love which gives Christian love its unique strength in an ever-softening society.⁷

To find oneself, one must lose oneself—and this is true of a religion based upon the self-gift of Jesus of Nazareth as it is of genuine human love. In the end it is that which transcends me which makes me. It is not my ability as

⁶See Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina 4 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 1-6.

⁷See Francis J. Moloney, "God so Loved the World. The Jesus of John's Gospel," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 75 (1998): 195-205.

scholar, teacher, sportsman, craftsman, businessman, cook, or sailor that makes me. It is my ability to rest easily with what is profoundest in me, to respond to the divine dwelling in me, making me unique. It is here that the Salesian of the future will discover what lies behind the mystery of Jesus, the Church, Don Bosco ... and me: the mystery of a God who is love.

As the God of Israel could be called upon by human beings, the same can be said of the God revealed to us by Jesus Christ. God is "there" for us, but when we find God "there," we find that he summons us into our Exodus experience. God transcends our petty plans, and—whether we agree or not—leads us into our future. When this is translated into the vocation of responding to the reality of love (God) by taking the risk of loving and being loved, then we can only shake our heads and say: "This is impossible!" But do we not share something with the young people who are deeply committed to the mystery of life, love, hope, death, and all those things that transcend us? What we have in common is our sense of the mystery of God alive among us.

2 — Community

St. Paul often uses language which describes the Christian as living "in Christ" (see, for example, in Romans alone, Rom 6:3,11; 8:2; 9:1; 12:5; 15:17; 16:3-10).⁸ There are many discussions over the exact meaning of the widely used expression, but two famous passages use it with other images that clarify its meaning.

For as many of you as were baptized *into Christ have put on Christ*. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; *for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:27-28).

You have *put on the new man ... where* there cannot be Greek and Jew, uncircumcised and circumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free person, but Christ is all in all (Col 3:10).

Galatians and Colossians come from quite different times in Paul's career, and are responding to different problems in different early Christian Churches. Yet these passages share a great deal, especially the "being baptized into" or "the putting on" Christ Jesus, with the consequence that this event leads the Christian into a new situation where accepted cultural and religious barriers disappear. It was an unquestionable fact of life that Greeks and Jews, uncircumcised and circumcised, men and women, slave and free person belonged to quite different worlds. No one in his right mind would suggest that they didn't. But Paul states as a central element in his creed: all accepted social, religious and cultural divisions are finished in an entirely new situation into which the

⁸For a more extended treatment of the New Testament understanding of community, see Francis J. Moloney, *A Life of Promise. Poverty, Chastity, Obedience* (Homebush: St. Paul Publications, 1985), 33-39.

Christian has entered. This "new situation" is not an attitude of mind. It is a place! Galatians speaks of baptism into Christ, and this is then further elaborated in Colossians as a place "where" there is not longer any division. This is a spatial concept. By becoming a Christian, the ex-Pagan has moved into a "new place," described as "one man" *where*—all division disappears.

This was a very real experience in the early Church. People physically "crossed the road" from one situation into another, through the waters of Christian baptism. The language represents a lived reality we lost as Christianity became the dominant cultural and religious paradigm. We need to look again at the uniqueness of the Christian situation pushed as it is today towards the peripheries of the dominant culture. Life in Christ is not a set of moral habits, or some sort of mystical experience. The divisions seen as "normal" in accepted culture and religion are *impossible* within the Christian community. Our divisions may not be "slave and free, Jew and Greek," but we have our obvious parallels. They have no place in a Christian community, as lives of others are an integral part of a Christian life. Our very existence as Christians is not something we personally possess. It is a radically new situation of life, love and faith into which we enter through baptism, and which we further reinforce by publicly vowing ourselves to the public living out of that reality within the prophetic phenomenon of the Religious Life.

To be a Christian means to participate in the lives of others, to share, to break down all the dividing barriers. One cannot be an autonomous Christian as the two terms deny one another. We exist and have our lives as Christians only in the profound openness to the sharing of life, love and faith with other Christians. It is only through unconditional commitment to others—however successful we may be in our day to day living out of that commitment—that we can justifiably claim to be living as Christians. Our Salesian community life is a privileged vocation to show that apostolic life, fired by the radical sharing of all that we are, do and have, is not only the pipe-dream of Jesus of Nazareth and a means of survival for the earliest Christian communities. It is a lived reality in the heart of the Church. It can be seen, lived in that street, in that house, among those young people by those Salesians. But this sharing must not be limited to one group of Salesians. It must be obviously present across Salesian communities in the one town, the one Province, the one Region, across the whole Society. The evangelical basis of our lives of poverty is lived out in our preparedness to share all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do.

As we translate this dream into the reality of our communities, then we may again be tempted to shake our heads and say: "This is impossible!" But do we not have something in common with contemporary young people who have their own peculiar commitment to a shared life, even though we are baffled by much of this sharing (the use of drugs and promiscuous sexual activity leaping immediately to the mind of the staid Salesian)? What we have in common is our sharing which makes manifest the mystery of God alive among us. However much we might disassociate ourselves from certain practices,

maybe we are driven by the same passion. Perhaps this is what has made Don Bosco's charism applicable to so many times and cultures.

3 — Young People

There is no longer a prevailing sense of religion or adherence to a belief system among young people.⁹ This does not mean that there is *no religion*. We are living through a period of transition from adherence to traditional religion to a non-tradition-bound religiosity sometimes referred to as "popular religion." Young people look at the world with increasing uncertainty. No traditional value system or life perspective is unshakable. A never-ending search has become permanent. There is no one identity against which to react, not even the institution of the Catholic Church whose teachings and practices are becoming increasingly unknown and irrelevant to young people. There is only a search for an identity that is unavailable — each one has their own truth or "anything goes." Young people cherish a deep distrust of the "great truths." They look upon these as they would consider hair growth medications for balding men: if a medication would have proven effective, then all the others would have disappeared from the market place. Rather than surrender themselves to one meaningful tradition, life-style or fashion, they combine fragments of an ever incomplete and temporary fashion into an unfinished whole—a collage identity. Perhaps the most outstanding symbol of this "collage" is the widespread use of Christian symbols, especially the cross, but also others, in fashions and body-marking.

Painting the broad picture, one would have to admit that there is a severe breakdown between traditional Christian faith and practice and contemporary young people. This is particularly clear in the areas of both sexual ethics and adherence to creeds. To ask that they limit sexual activity to one partner, and only after marriage, and for unconditional intellectual commitment to a man who is also divine, and a God who is three in one and one in three, is to ask the impossible. Yet if post-modernity is marked by a freedom which makes everything possible, there are—as we all know—a small number of young people for whom the faith remains important. But in their case, they are not Christians by birth. They are Christians by choice through conversion. It is here that we Salesians are challenged as facilitators of conversion.

For centuries Christian principles and practice were "taught." We heard them and accepted them intellectually. As the years went by we attempted to make them part of our life-style. We began with the head—principles—and gradually attempted to make these principles determine our experience and our hearts. We had mixed success, but we always had a sense of what was right or wrong, true or false, because the notions were clearly in our minds. This proc-

⁹I have been guided in these few remarks by the work of my colleague at Australian Catholic University, Dennis Rochford, "Postmodernity, Religion and Youth," *Compass* 32 (1998): 33-37.

ess has now been reversed. Young people will not simply accept principles as such. They do not start with their heads, but with their hearts. They must experience first. Gradually, on the basis of experience, they may come to develop a set of principles which are born from experience. This can sometimes be a rough ride, and lives are broken as the experience goes wrong. There are industries which thrive on the lives they break. Our industry is to generate an experience leading to conversion and making whole.

One of Don Viganò's ideals was "the oratorian heart." I have a difficulty with this paradigm. Don Bosco could take it for granted that the young people he gathered at Valdocco came from an agrarian culture steeped in traditional religious values. I always think of Olmi's *L'albero degli zoccoli* ("The Tree of the Wooden Clogs") when I try to imagine the world of Don Bosco. The movie closes with an evicted family moving off into the darkness murmuring the rosary. No doubt the young people who came to the Oratory had abandoned much of what they had been taught. Don Bosco developed a system that led to "conversion," as the Mickey Magone myth has instructed generations of Salesians. But we are working with a completely different generation of young people. We must lead them to conversion, and we will only do this if we are able to appeal to their experience. I have no blueprint on how we should do this. I simply wish to say that my earlier reflections on God and Community are where we start. We are not to "teach" about the God of Jesus Christ, but show how our restless response to a God who is love touches our lives. It is our experience of God which will be "caught not taught." In the same way, it is the unconditional sharing of all that we are and all that we have which will touch hearts and may initiate a process of conversion. Our young people will ask, "What makes the Salesians different?" The answer must be seen and experienced in the way we live and love, not with high-sounding words.

But these very thoughts are "high-sounding words." Given our present forces and the difficulties we face, how is any of this possible? It is time to turn to a fundamental and rarely mentioned Gospel truth which should serve as a beacon as we cross stormy and difficult waters into the next millenium.

4 — Making Sense of our Nonsense¹⁰

The Salesian charism is an aspect of the greater mystery of the universal vocation to sanctity which flows from the Christian insertion into the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth through Baptism (see *Lumen Gentium* 40). It is from this point of departure that one can properly understand the vocation of the Salesian to the radical following of Jesus, so richly demanded by the *Constitutions* (see *Constitutions* 3, 30, 60, 71, 72, 80).

¹⁰What follows is a further development of an original Italian publication, Francis J. Moloney, "La sequela di Cristo," in *Parola di Dio e Spirito Salesiano. Ricerca sulla dimensione biblica delle Costituzioni della Famiglia Salesiana* edited by Juan José Bartolomé and Fausto Perrenchio (Torino: Elle di Ci, 1996), 69-76.

4.1 — A Vocation to Follow Jesus

Fundamental to the following of Jesus is the sense of having been called to this life-style. *Constitutions* 96 indicates that, as Jesus called his original disciples, "He calls us too to live out in the Church our Founder's project as apostles of the young." Behind this number of the *Constitutions* (cited in a footnote) is Mk 3:14-15: "And he appointed Twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons" (see also Mt 10:1-4; Lk 6:12-16). But behind this passage in Mark 3 lies another, more fundamental, vocation to discipleship, reported as Jesus' first public act in Mk 1:16-20 (see also Mt 4:18-22). In that passage Jesus is portrayed as on the move: "And passing along ... and going on a little further" (Mk 1:16, 19). From his restless response to the divine urgency, he takes the initiative, breaking into the lives of the people by the side of the lake. He sees (vv. 16, 19), and he calls (vv. 17, 20) people away from their every day duties (vv. 16-18, 19-20), their successful business (vv. 2, 18, 20), and even their family roots (v. 20), that they might "come after him" (vv. 17, 18, 20). Simon, Andrew, James and John set out on a journey, following Jesus into a future they cannot determine. They do not utter a word in their unconditional obedience and adhesion to the man who walks before them, responding to the will of his Father. Where Jesus will lead them, they must follow.

Luke's version (Lk 5:1-11), an elegant rewriting of the basic Markan story, is more psychological, but the results are the same. After an unsuccessful night's fishing, Simon is obstinate when Jesus commands that the nets be lowered. Jesus may be a wonderful preacher (see 5:1), but Simon is the fisherman (5:4). Nevertheless, he acquiesces to the word of Jesus (v. 5); the nets are lowered and the miraculous draft of fish results (vv. 6-7). Now aware of his sinfulness and his need for all that Jesus promises he is ready to become a disciple (v. 8). It is as such that Jesus transforms his life, sending him on another mission: "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching people" (v. 10. See Mk 1:17). Peter and his companions leave everything and follow Jesus (v. 11. See Mk 1:18, 20). The Johannine tradition, in its own way, also presents disciples gathering around Jesus during his first days (1:35-49). The Johannine disciples fail to understand the person of Jesus. They confess that he is "Rabbi" (Jn 1:38, 49), "The messiah and messianic son of God" (vv. 41, 49), "him about whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote" (v. 45), "son of Joseph" (v. 45), "from Nazareth" (vv. 45-46), "King of Israel" (v. 49). These elegant confessions are all part of their messianic expectation, but they are insufficient. As Jesus replies to Nathaniel, and then tells all the disciples:

Do you believe because I told you (singular: *soi*) that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these. And he said to them, Very truly, I tell you (plural: *uJmi'n*), you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (Jn 1:50-51).

Disciples are called to transcend their expectations, to reach beyond the expected. Then they will see the revelation of the heavenly in the life-story of Jesus.

It is on the basis of this fundamental call that the disciples are given the further privilege and responsibility of "being with him" so that they might do the things which he has done (see 3:14-15). They are associated with him in his mission as he sends them out to preach, to cast out demons and to anoint and heal the sick (see 6:6b-13. See also Mt 9:35; 10:1, 9-11, 14; Lk 9:1-6). In leaving their boats, their nets, hired servants and their father, they have committed themselves to Jesus. By "being with him" (see 3:14), they will be able to associate themselves with Jesus who has preached, driven out demons and healed the sick. They will be able to do the things Jesus has done, thus continuing his presence, bringing in the Kingdom of God. However, as the Fourth Evangelist will later make clear, implicit in this vocation to discipleship is the negative result of "not being with him": "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Salesians have been called "to live out in the Church" the project of Don Bosco, the ongoing presence of the Good Shepherd (see Jn 10:14-18) among the young (see *Constitution* 96), and apart from him, we can do nothing.

4.2 — The Cost of Discipleship

In their own way, each of the four Gospels tells of Jesus' formation of his disciples. It is necessarily part of the "following", the "being with him", that they accompany him to Calvary, so that they might share with him in his resurrection. But this is beyond the comprehension of the disciples. Nowhere has this theme been better traced than in the section of the Gospel of Mark which runs from the story of the curing of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mk 8:22-26) to the story of the curing of blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). The feature of this section of the narrative is Jesus' threefold prediction of his oncoming death and resurrection in Jerusalem (see 8:31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). But he must (*dei*) go up to Jerusalem, and the disciples are to follow him there. This "following" means that the disciple of Jesus must also be prepared to take up the cross, give his or her life for Jesus and the Gospel. In this way the disciple will share in the promised glory which will flow from Jesus' victory over death (see 8:34-9:1).

It also means that the disciple must be prepared to be receptive to the newness of God's ways revealed in Jesus: humble acceptance and service of the other (see 9:33-50; 10:13-15; 10:35-44), a recognition of the sacredness of marriage (10:1-12), the relative value of wealth and possessions (10:17-31). As the disciples themselves recognize, such a life-style is beyond their human capacities, but Jesus instructs them: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mk 10:27. See Mt 19:26; Lk 18:27). Jesus is asking his disciples to follow him into a total reversal of the estab-

lished order, where the last will be first and the first last (Mk 10:31). This reversal of the established order is the result of the action of God, and Jesus is the greatest witness to this action. He does not ask his followers to commit themselves to the wisdom of God which is human foolishness (see 1Cor 1:21-25) as some distant lawgiver. He asks them to follow him, "For the Son of Man also came, not to be served, but to serve, and to lay down his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). The loving self-gift of Jesus, and the loving self-gift of his followers is—in the end—the revelation of the power of God: "God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1Cor 1:25. See Phil 3:7-11; Jn 13:34-35; 15:12, 17).

The instruction of the disciples, as Jesus journeys fearlessly towards Jerusalem followed by his frightened disciples (see 10:32), takes place between two stories of blind men. One of these men comes gradually to sight (8:22-26), while the other leaps to his feet, leaving his few possessions in the gutter, comes to sight and follows Jesus down his way (10:46-52). Disciples fail. They are accused of being blind (10:14-21), and Jesus' predictions of his — and their—vocation to a total loss of self so that others might have life, are never understood or accepted. After each passion prediction, the disciples are portrayed as failing to accept or understand Jesus' words (see 8:32-33 [Peter]; 9:32-34 [the Twelve]; 10:35-37 [James and John]). Disciples of all times must learn that the journey to true discipleship can take time and effort, and that it will often be marked by failure.

The *Constitutions* insist upon the need for the Salesian to accept the radical life-style of Jesus of Nazareth, cost what it may: to "share more closely in his paschal mystery, in his self-emptying" (*Constitution* 60. See also 71, 80). These articles are found in the section of the *Constitutions* dedicated to "Following Christ, Obedient, Poor and Chaste", and this is the correct place for such insistence. I would, however, like to issue two warnings.

The Salesian finds on one occasion—as in *Perfectae Caritatis* 12 (Chastity) and 14 (Obedience)—the use of the comparative: "share more closely" (*Constitution* 60: *più strettamente*). Given the fundamental importance of the universal call to the perfection of love (see *Lumen Gentium* 40), such an understanding of our consecrated life as in some way "more", or "better", than some other form of Christian life should be carefully avoided. In contrast to *Perfectae Caritatis* 12 and 14, and in accord with *Lumen Gentium* 40, Salesian Obedience and Chastity is excellently set within the overall context of a universal call to sanctity in *Constitutions* 71 and 80. We are not called to be "better", but "different". Our vowed lives, our radical commitment to the following of Jesus marks us out in the Church as people who have responded to the irresistible call to follow Jesus along the way of Don Bosco.

This is a unique charism lived in the heart of the Church, and it is from within this "different" (but not "better") charism that "we follow Jesus Christ closely by choosing an intensely evangelical way of loving God and our neighbor with undivided heart" (*Constitution* 80). To use a Pauline image, there are many parts of the one body, and each part serves in its "different"

way, while no single part is "better" than the other (see 1Cor 12:12-26). What matters is the love and the intelligent response which motivates and directs the Salesian. It is self-gift that counts, with the greater dignity only measurable by the quality of its love: "I will show you a still more excellent way" (1Cor 12:31b).

The evangelical call "to follow" has a crucially important methodological and theological consequence, and this is my second concern. If the Christian is called to "follow" Jesus of Nazareth, then we must have a sound understanding of the human figure whom we, as human beings, are following. This is a very difficult issue. A great deal of Christian piety and practice is based upon fanciful and culturally conditioned readings of Jesus Christ. Following an older, uncritical tradition (the *Introduction to the 1875 Constitutions* is cited), *Constitution 72* asks us to follow "the Savior who was born in poverty, lived deprived of everything and died stripped on the cross." This description of the historical Jesus does not match the evidence of the Gospels. As our own Salesian historians have shown, the very language used reflects popular piety in the Piedmont of the second half of last century. To create this picture one must start from a partial and an over-historical interpretation of the birth of Jesus in a stable from the Lukan infancy story (see Lk 2:1-21). What of the possible allusion in Luke 2:7 to Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows its master and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand." What of Matthew, where Jesus is born in the home of Joseph, highlighted by a star, the receiver of rich gifts from the Magi (see Mt 2:7-12)? Similarly, there is abundant evidence in the Gospels that Jesus did not live "deprived of everything," despite his call to a radical relativization of all that smacked of the creation of an earthly paradise. He enjoyed meals (see Mk 2:18-22), the company of the rich (see Lk 7:36-50; 19:1-9; Jn 19:38-42), the fellowship of good friends (see Jn 12:1-2), the warmth of human affection (Jn 11:1-4; 12:1-2); but above all he lived from a oneness with his Father (see Mk 14:26; Lk 11:3). It was this relationship with his Father—not any imagined state of his living "deprived of everything"—which determined the life-style of Jesus.

I make these points because the Salesian called to follow Jesus of Nazareth must have a realistic portrait of Jesus of Nazareth! By this, I mean the pre-Easter Jesus, not the exalted Christ of the Church's proclamation, in whom we place all our trust and hope. The Christian life-style should be determined by that of the pre-Easter Jesus, who was dominated by his relationship to God whom he called Abba-Father (see Mk 14:36). We cannot "follow" the exalted Christ of the Church's proclamation. Ironically, there is a strong tendency within the Catholic Church today that joins Rudolf Bultmann in rejecting the importance of the historical Jesus. The only Jesus that matters, the argument runs, is the one mediated in the traditions, and many may regard my insistence on the importance of an understanding of the pre-Easter Jesus as unnecessary. It appears to me to be one of the most serious deficiencies in contemporary Christian spirituality. How does one "walk behind" the eternal Logos, the Son

of God, the Christ, the glorified Son of Man, the "I am He"? I could go further and wonder about the mediation of such devotions of the Divine Infant of Prague, or some other literary or artistic presentation of Jesus that catches one's imagination. All such mediations are necessarily culturally conditioned, and thus helpful but relative. Part of our renewal should be the development of a deeper understanding of the man who "In the days of his flesh, offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:7-8).

This, in fact, is what is requested in *Constitution 11*:

The Salesian spirit finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father.

Reading the Gospel we become more aware of certain aspects of the figure of the Lord: gratitude to the Father for the gift of a divine vocation offered to all; predilection for the little ones and the poor; zeal in preaching, healing and saving because of the urgency of the coming of the Kingdom; the preoccupation of the Good Shepherd who wins hearts by gentleness and self-giving; the desire to gather his disciples into the unity of community.

It is for these reasons that the Salesian is exhorted to have "the Sacred Scriptures daily in hand" welcoming the Word as Mary did, pondering it in our hearts, so that it may bear fruit and that we might proclaim it with zeal (see *Constitution 88*). To be a Salesian is to commit oneself to a profoundly biblical and theologically inspired lifestyle.

4.3 — The Mission of the Disciple

From the first moments of their vocation, disciples are associated with Jesus' mission. He bursts onto the scene, alone, announcing the imminence of the Kingdom (see Mk 1:14-15). Immediately he calls disciples and asks them to follow him (1:16-20). Together they go forth, as Jesus performs deeds which manifest the presence of the Kingdom, bringing God's power of goodness into the human story, but also creating division, as other kingdoms are threatened (1:20-3:6). He associates them explicitly with his mission by calling the Twelve "to be with him" so that they might do what he does (3:13-14), and then by sending them out, two by two, to teach, to heal and to drive out demons (6:6b-13. See Lk 10:1-12). The theoretical distinction which has sometimes been drawn between consecration and mission plays no role in the Gospel portrait of the disciples of Jesus. Their following of him means that they are not only to be like Jesus, but also to act like Jesus. It is this crucial oneness between being and doing which has been so well caught by *Constitution 3*: "Through our religious profession we offer ourselves to God in order to follow Christ and work with him in building up the Kingdom." Rightly does *Constitution 3* insist that our mission and our consecration are inseparable

elements, and that our uniqueness among other religious families — to which I would add other Christians — is determined by our mission as followers of the Good Shepherd (see *Constitution* 11).

During the period between the first and second coming of Jesus his presence is to be found in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of his followers. A great amount of attention has been devoted to this aspect of the Christian mission by all Gospel writers. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew it is the followers of Jesus, although some of them are still doubting, who are sent out to make the universal authority of Jesus present to the ends of the earth in word and sacrament, confident that he will be with them till the close of the age (see Mt 28:16-20). The Lukan Jesus instructs the disciples that they have a mission of witness. They are to tell of the wonderful things they have seen, the mercy and forgiveness of God, demonstrated in the loving self-gift of his Son, to the ends of the earth (see Lk 24:44-49; Acts 1:6-11).

Despite the account of Christianity's relentless and successful march from Jerusalem to Rome found in the Acts of the Apostles, fragile men and women will go on repeating the story of their failure which has marked the events of the life of Jesus. For this reason Jesus promises (see Lk 24:49; Acts 1:5, 8; Jn 14:15-17; 15:26-27; 16:12-15), and gives his Spirit (see Jn 19:30; Acts 2:1-13). The Spirit of Jesus strengthens, forgives, instructs, encourages, and speaks on behalf of the disciples in all their difficulties and failures. It is in this Spirit that Salesians embrace their mission, crossing the barriers of race and culture which the world imposes (see *Constitution* 30), and working for "the well-being of all human beings, directed towards Christ, the perfect Human Being" (*Constitution* 31. My [inclusive] translation of the Italian).

4.4 — The Disciple as the Revelation of the Power of God

The disciples are Jesus' future betrayers and deniers, yet they are the privileged partakers in a meal in which Jesus tells them that he is about to break his body and shed his blood to set up a new covenant of love. They are instructed to go on doing the same thing, in memory of him (see Mk 14:17-31; Mt 26:20-35; Lk 22:14-34). The same point is made through the Johannine story of the footwashing of Peter and the disciples, and the gift of the morsel to Judas and the disciples in John 13:1-38. At the center of this dramatic presentation of Jesus' self-gift in love to those who do not love him as they should we find the words of Jesus: "I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I AM HE" (Jn 13:19). It is in Jesus' unconditional gift of self to his failing disciples that Jesus makes God known (*oJti ejgww eijmi*). The Lukan and the Pauline versions of the Eucharistic words (Lk 22:19; 1Cor 11:24-25) insist that disciples "do this in memory of me." They are to break their bodies and spill their blood in memory of Jesus. Continuing the Hebrew notion of "memory" (*zikkarÛn*), recalling a past event to make it present, Paul adds his comment to the eucharistic words: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim (present tense) the Lord's death

until he comes" (1Cor 11:26). It is in the broken bodies and the spilt blood of the disciples of Jesus that the death of the Lord is proclaimed until he returns.

The reader senses that, if the followers of Jesus are to respond successfully to his teaching and his demands, a reversal in their performance is called for. But the story gives little hope of any such event. At Gethsemane they abandon him (see Mk 14:50-52; Mt 26:56b), and he is alone on the Cross, watched from a distance by a group of loyal women (Mk 15:40-41; Mt 27:55-56; Lk 23:49). Only the Fourth Evangelist introduces the woman and the disciple into the Cross scene. They are united as Mother and Son, the believer and beloved, a symbol of the new family of God (Jn 19:25-27) upon which the Spirit is poured, unto which the gifts of Baptism and Eucharist are consigned (Jn 19:30-35).

The resurrection story changes all this. Most poignantly in Mark, but also in Matthew and Luke, the resurrection is reported as the action of God in the life of Jesus. Mark's story of the crucifixion of Jesus closes with the remarkable question Jesus poses to his Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34. See also Mt 27:46), and the reader waits for an answer to this dreadful question. It is found in the words of the young man in the empty tomb: "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here; see the place where *they* laid him" (Mk 16:7. See also Mt 28:5-6). At the cross Jesus' opponents appear to have vanquished the abandoned Son of God, but God has entered the story: He has been raised!

It has often been rightly said that the resurrection accounts in the four Gospels are more concerned with what happens to the followers of Jesus than with what happened to Jesus. The reader becomes aware that God has entered the story of Jesus, but what of his followers? In their different ways, all the Evangelists show that the disciples' failure is reversed, as God also enters their story. For Mark the women are sent to tell the disciples that Jesus is going before them into Galilee, just as he had said he would (16:7. See 14:28). The women, in their turn, fail to communicate the message (see 16:8), but the Gospel story itself is proof enough that Jesus has gone before them into Galilee, and they will see him.¹¹ Not even the failure of the women can thwart the designs of God to restore his ever-failing disciples in tangible proof of his never-failing presence and power. Although they do it differently, and the shape of their narratives has been determined by their own traditions and the needs of their own communities, the other three Evangelists make the same point about the restoration of a failing discipleship. Matthew, Luke and John report appearances to disciples who doubt (see Mt 28:16-17; Lk 24:13-35, 36-42; Jn 20:1-10; 24-29) and who are full of fear (see Lk 24:36-37; Jn 20:19-20). Their doubt and fear disappears like dew before the midday sun as the risen Lord sends them out to the end of the earth to preach, to forgive, to give witness, and to create a

¹¹For further detail on the ending of Mark and support for the interpretation of Mark 16:8 adopted here, see Francis J. Moloney, *The Living Voice of the Gospel. The Gospels Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 36-42.

new people of God (see Mat 28:19-20; Lk 24:47; Jn 20:21-23). It is not as if Jesus' followers succeed. Their return from failure, fear, flight and doubt is the fruit of the action of God. "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mk 10:27. See Mt 19:26; Lk 18:27).

Why is there such a consistent portrait of failure across the Gospel traditions about the followers of Jesus? There are undoubtedly two reasons for this. In the first place, such a report reflects what actually happened. The first disciples had great difficulty in living up to the call to be disciples of Jesus. Secondly, the Evangelists have developed what had come to them in the authentic memory of the early Church's traditions about the disciples to speak to their own Churches. They recognized that they too were called to be followers of Jesus of Nazareth, in their own time and place, but that they also experienced failure. In telling a story of the never-failing presence of Jesus to a group of ever-failing followers, the Evangelists created a tradition which continues to speak to followers of Jesus of all ages. The failure of the followers of Jesus is not primarily about what happened to the disciples, but a message about the overpowering need for a radical dependence upon the goodness of God, revealed to us in the person of Jesus. The follower of Jesus may never succeed in a response to the call to lose oneself in turning the values of the world upside down. The follower of Jesus will always be a "follower" of Jesus, struggling down the way full of fear and wonderment, as the Master strides on towards the paschal events of Jerusalem (see Mk 10:32). Nevertheless, a vocation to live through the mystery of failure, depending only upon the even greater mystery of the love and power of God, stands at the heart of the Gospel message on the *sequela Christi*.

It is this overarching message, found on almost every page of the Gospel narratives, which encourages the Salesian to respond more generously, in the midst of personal and community failures and difficulties. The *Constitutions* recognize that all may not be well:

Sometimes obedience will clash with our own selfish attitudes and desires for independence, or may really test our love. This is the moment to look to Christ, who was obedient unto death: "Father, if this chalice cannot pass from me unless I drink it, thy will be done" (*Constitution* 71).

5 — Conclusion

It would have been possible to write reflections upon the following of Christ which were entirely exhortative in character. A selection of the more positive elements in the Gospels could have been used to make of this presentation a Gospel portrait. But it would have been an unfaithful portrait. One of the central themes that runs across all four Gospels is the failure of the disciples. I have highlighted its presence in the Gospel of Mark, but it is just as crucial for a correct understanding of the Gospels of Matthew (see, for example, Mt 28:16-17), Luke (see, for example, Lk 24:1-27) and John (see, for example, Jn

6:60-71). Things have not changed much from the Church's earliest days. Christian communities and the Christian mission are marked by heroism, but they are also marked by failure to abide by Gospel principles.

We should reflect realistically upon an uncomfortable fact. We live in communities and exercise our apostolic life marked by our failures. We are sinful, weak, aged, difficult, lazy, unprayerful, angry, dissatisfied, and sometimes psychologically unbalanced people, who struggle to make sense out of our daily life at its most fundamental level. There is some evidence of even more serious failure: ambition, lack of concern for the underprivileged, shameless attacks upon those who think and act differently, overindulgence in the good things of this life, an unwillingness to read the signs of the times when they subvert our comfortable and established ways. It must be remembered that the following of Jesus Christ, as it is portrayed in the Gospels, has an important word to say about the failure of the disciple which speaks eloquently to the way the Salesian life is (see *Constitution 71*), and not only to *the way the Salesian life should be*.

The word of God does not shy clear of the messiness of the human situation. "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). The full implications of this "dwelling" are often side-stepped, but our spirituality is greatly impoverished by our unwillingness to embrace the brokenness of the human condition as God was prepared to embrace it in the incarnation. Paul has vividly communicated his experience of this essential element of the Christian life in his remarkable confession: "A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient to you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:7-10). Pope John Paul II reminds the Christian Church of its need "to become more fully consciousness of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the Spirit of Christ and the Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulging in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal" (*Tertio Millenio Adveniente* 33). Due recognition of our failure does not lessen the importance of the Christian mystery in the world. It restates the words of John the Baptist, the forerunner who became the follower, that put it even more succinctly: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30).

My reflections set an agenda which can only be accepted by religious whose lives and ministries are theologically motivated.

When Peter, that first leader of the Christian community, asked Jesus for a clear fix on church order and ministry by inquiring what role his apparent rival, the Beloved Disciple, was to have, Jesus replied, "That's not your prob-

lem. What you need to do is follow me," that is, become a beloved disciple and thereby become capable of the ministry to which you have been called. Perhaps, for all of us it is both that simple and that difficult.¹²

We place our trust in the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus, who spoke to a sinful People of God through the words of the Prophet Hosea:

I will not give rein to my fierce anger,
I will not destroy Ephraim again,
for I am God not man:
I am the Holy One in your midst
And have no wish to destroy (Hosea 11:8-9).

We are called to admit our failures and thus accept our limitations, as we listen to a Lord and God who says: "If I thought you could do it, I would not have asked you. It is my work, not yours. You can only manifest what I have accomplished in you." It is time, along with Pope John Paul II, to join Simon Peter: "Depart from me, for I am sinful, O Lord" (Lk 5:8), so that we can better hear the Lord's response: "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching people" (v. 10). May reflection upon the *sequela Christi* among Salesians lead us beyond 2000 to a better appreciation of our place in God's design: failing, humble followers of Don Bosco who, like him, look to God as the one who makes sense out of our nonsense.

¹²Schneiders, "Congregational Leadership," 29. See also Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 542-44.