

THE SPIRITUAL PROFILE OF DON BOSCO EMERGING FROM THE COLLECTION OF HIS LETTERS

(Part 1)

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The *Epistolario*,¹ or the Collection of letters of Don Bosco, is a privileged source of knowledge of the person of Don Bosco from close proximity, through the mediation of daily life events. As there is no particular writing of Don Bosco that would explicitly illustrate his spiritual journey in its entirety,² and given that the personal letters are authentic resources which are useful in the examination of attitudes and values of the persons concerned, the letters of Don Bosco become the documents that capture better the portrait of Don Bosco: his life, his overwhelming activities, the multiplicity of his relationships, his character, his thoughts, and his heart.³ Thus, it is possible to trace the characteristic patterns of the spiritual path trodden by Don Bosco

¹ “*Epistolario*” in Italian stands for the “collection of letters”, and is also the title usually given to such collections or works. In this study the word “*Epistolario*” refers to the collection of letters of Saint John Bosco. A practical point is deemed necessary: since more than 95% of the letters are in Italian, a language which is not accessible to most of my readers, I have provided an English translation whenever it seemed advantageous, particularly for direct quotes. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Italian and French contained in this paper are my own.

² Even the *Memoirs of the Oratory* – one of the most personal writings of Don Bosco, consisting of some autobiographical elements – was not intended primarily to be an autobiography. It was presented as the theological understanding of the origins and the early developments of the Oratory and the Salesian work. It was a project and a model for the future. For further clarity in this regard, see: Pietro Braido, “«Memorie» del futuro,” *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 11, 20 (1992): 97-127.

³ Cf. Pietro Braido, “Prospettive di ricerca su don Bosco,” *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 9, 16 (1990): 257.

through his written words where his authentic human nature and deeper convictions become evident in the ordinary circumstances of life and in his interaction with others.

The *Epistolario* of Don Bosco, edited by Eugenio Ceria,⁴ was the first attempt to gather together all the letters of Don Bosco and to publish them. More than five decades after the work of Ceria, the unearthing of more letters of Don Bosco and the necessity of scientific methodologies had naturally led to the recent publication of the critical edition of the *Epistolario* of Don Bosco edited by Francesco Motto.⁵ This is a valuable source that has been accepted by scholarly circles as more trustworthy and more scientific than those that were available for the scholars of yesteryear. The mere numbers of letters written by Don Bosco would take anyone by surprise. From E(m) I which was published in the year 1991 up to E(m) VIII published in January 2019, a total of 3955 letters have been published so far, covering the span of 49 years of the life of Don Bosco, between 1835 and 1883. Surveying the critical edition of the *Epistolario* – which is yet to be completed⁶ – this paper tries to examine

⁴ Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario di S. Giovanni Bosco*, Vol. I (1835-1868), lett. 1-717, ed. Eugenio Ceria (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1955); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. II (1869-1875), lett. 718-1387, ed. Eugenio Ceria (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1956); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. III (1876-1880), lett. 1388-2122, ed. Eugenio Ceria (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1958); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. IV (1881-1888), lett. 2123-2845, ed. Eugenio Ceria (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1959).

⁵ Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario*, Introduzione, testi critici e note a cura di Francesco Motto, Vol. I (1835-1863), lett. 1-726 (Roma: LAS, 1991); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. II (1864-1868), lett. 727-1263 (Roma: LAS, 1996); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. III (1869-1872), lett. 1264-1714 (Roma: LAS, 1999); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. IV (1873-1875), lett. 1715-2243 (Roma: LAS, 2003); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. V (1876-1877), lett. 2244-2665 (Roma: LAS, 2012); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. VI (1878-1879), lett. 2666-3120 (Roma: LAS, 2014); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. VII (1880-1881), lett. 3121-3561 (Roma: LAS, 2014); Giovanni Bosco, *Epistolario...*, Vol. VIII (1882-1883), lett. 3562-3955 (Roma: LAS, 2019). From now on, this contribution will be cited simply as E(m). As for the citations from individual letters, the method and the order followed would be: E(m), the number of the volume, the page number in the volume, the indication of the person with the name when available, and finally the date along with the month and year when available. Where there are more than two letters for a single citation, the names and dates may be left out for want of space, unless we consider them as essential for additional clarity.

⁶ The letters pertaining to the last four years and one month of the life of Don Bosco (i.e. from January 1884 to January 1888) remain yet to be published. Considering the frequency of his letters, we may expect an addition of at least six hundred letters. Motto expresses that the final possible total number of letters could be 4600, which would be about 1800 letters more than those found in Ceria's edition [Cf. Francesco Motto,

and summarize in brief the essential aspects of the spirituality of Don Bosco emerging from the vast collection of his letters in the light of the scientific knowledge imparted by the scholars in Salesian spirituality.

Don Bosco was an active person, and his spirituality was the spirituality of active life.⁷ Gleaning through his complex activities, we can presume the presence of an inner force that must have driven him. Although Don Bosco was not a person who would reveal his inner nature so easily, we do find him expressing it occasionally, in a natural and familiar way. This study is the fruit of the search to know his personality, his thoughts and vision of life, the charism and spirituality emerging from his written words or words uttered almost from his mouth. As we focus our attention on tracing out the figure of Don Bosco as a profoundly human and a spiritual person in the light of his correspondence with people from all walks of life, we delve into the “mystery” of his life which is yet to be explored⁸ and bring out some deeper insights on the spiritual characteristics of the person of Don Bosco. In other words, this paper deals with the reconstruction of the spiritual profile of Don Bosco through the prominent personal – spiritual characteristics that emerge from his letters.

Who is Don Bosco in essence in his letters? This is the question which will help us to draw a sort of “silhouette” of Don Bosco, as we concentrate more on what he reveals of himself in his letters – the idea that authors in Salesian spirituality often answer in the negative because of the nature of the person that Don Bosco is – and thus reconstruct his image from our study and findings. It could be pointed out that the aspects enumerated here are not exhaustive but are kept only to the essentials.

1. The Personal Vision of God and the “God-Synchronous Orbit” of the Spirituality of Don Bosco

The relationship with God is the foundation of all spiritual experiences. Prominent among the fundamental traits of the Christian spiritual experience is the explicit reference to Christ or Christocentrism for interpreting God and human beings. This is one of the essential characteristic nodal points for evaluating any authentic Christian experience in Spiritual Theology, even

“L’edizione critica dell’Epistolario di don Bosco,” *Ricerche di Storia Sociale e Religiosa* 88, 1 (2016): 293].

⁷ For the spirituality of Don Bosco being called a “spirituality of active life”, “spirituality of the man of action”, and “dynamic spirituality”, and for further clarifications, see: Joseph Aubry, ed., *The Spiritual Writings of Saint John Bosco*, trans. Joseph Caselli, 2nd ed. (New York: Salesiana Publishers, 2006), 13, 19, 25.

⁸ Cf. E(m) I, 7.

though there may be varying modes of living the Christian life and there might be various means of interpreting the spiritual life of individual Christians.⁹ Besides accepting the revealed truth, Don Bosco has the conscious realization that it is “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The dogmatic and catechetical elements of faith that Don Bosco imbibes from his childhood, those that he learns during his seminary training in Chieri and which matures at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, begins to blossom forth as his mission to the young takes firm roots at Valdocco. His consciousness of the presence of God in his life, his thoughts, and ideas on the person of God become further well-defined, which then are constantly communicated, either explicitly or implicitly, to those in touch with him. Don Bosco’s vision of God and his relationship with the divine are revealed in the characteristics such as the sense of God, the sense of the Word of God, and the sense of the soul. The consciousness of the Divine gives a particular orientation and a sense of being to Don Bosco.

The sense of God pervades the mind and the heart of Don Bosco such that his items of correspondence can never be devoid of a mention of God.¹⁰ The “all-pervading God consciousness” of Don Bosco is often evident. While it is natural to find references to God in the personal letters of a general nature as well as in correspondence of a specifically spiritual nature, and in the requests for charity, the same holds true even in the letters to state officials – however evident or latent the mention of God may be. For instance, the vicar of the city, Marquis Michele Benso di Cavour is told that the success of the work of the Oratories shows that “the Lord blesses His own work”, and that the protection sought for the Oratories is because they have no shadow of material gain in mind but only gaining souls for the Lord. The superintendent of studies in Turin, while given the explanations towards the accusations against the Oratories and the personnel, is also offered an appeal to the heart: “we can both deserve God’s blessings and the gratitude of human beings by helping poor youngsters and taking them off the streets.”¹¹

Evident to an attentive reader of the letters – particularly those letters dealing directly with the goodness and the holiness of the others – is the fact that as Don Bosco talks of the virtuous lives of others, his own ideals glow. In one of the earliest letters, where Don Bosco writes a detailed testimony of the life of cleric Giuseppe Burzio, whom he had observed closely when both were in the seminary at Chieri, we observe not only the cleric’s high ideals of the

⁹ Cf. Jesús Manuel García, *Teologia spirituale. Epistemologia e interdisciplinarietà* (Roma: LAS, 2013) 359-360; 362.

¹⁰ For instance, among the emerging themes in the letters of Don Bosco for the four-year period of 1869-1872 in E(m) III, the word or the noun most frequently found - 414 times in 451 letters - is God (in Italian: *Dio* and *Iddio*).

¹¹ E(m) I, 66, 589-590.

state embraced, but that of Don Bosco himself. He makes it clear that while all the wonderful external qualities can make someone lovable by others, even greater should be the commitment to piety, which indicates the beauty of heart and which makes the soul dear to God. The hidden acts of the profound virtues are said to be manifested in the spiritual qualities such as, sanctifying oneself, fervour, piety, constancy, frequenting the sacraments, devotion to Mary, love for modesty, sincerity, purity of the soul, the custody of the senses, humility, and the consciousness of the sublime ecclesiastical vocation.¹² “Before becoming a priest, it is important that I become a saint,”¹³ is not only the earnest desire of cleric Burzio who, like the biblical figures of Abraham and Enoch, walked before the Lord – *Ambulabat coram Deo* (cf. Gen 17:1; 5:22, 24) – but also the inner longing of Don Bosco both as a cleric and when he learns to be a good priest at the *Convitto* in Turin.

The vision of God in Don Bosco is expressed first and foremost in terms of God as the Creator, and God as the Father. He who created all things and all beings, continues to provide for everyone at all moments of life. The personal experiences of the Provident God take on further insights as per the concrete situations in life, and are expressed on various occasions. Don Bosco is convinced that it is the Lord who inspires all good things, and all such inspirations from God would eventually lead to His greater glory, besides bearing good fruits in the lives of the people. He often exhorts people to follow the inspirations from God. He seems firmly persuaded to think and exhort that God inspires His people and they would do His Will if they follow those that they judge best in the Lord.¹⁴ The experiences of God’s providence in the past is for Don Bosco the assurance of God’s help in the future. Amidst the dangers and the extreme needs in which poor young people are placed, he is not worried about economic difficulties, but wants at any cost to come to the aid of needy young people. That is an absolute priority. The helps that he seeks are to save poor young people from the perils of immorality and heresies. He is ever ready to abandon himself and everything into the hands of Divine Providence which he believes will never be lacking, just as he had found in similar situations in the past.¹⁵

The goodness of God is visible everywhere. Such a consciousness leads Don Bosco to see the goodness in others. He sees God’s Providence revealed in the good-hearted nature of others. After the approval of the Constitutions, he expresses his heart saying: “everything regarding our Congregation ended on a happy note. I found benevolence in everyone, and the Holy Father was

¹² Cf. E(m) I, 49-52, letter to the Oblate priest Felice Giordano, on 16 April 1843.

¹³ E(m) I, 52, letter to the Oblate priest Felice Giordano, on 16 April 1843.

¹⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) II, 564, 577.

¹⁵ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 81-82, 155.

indeed the most affectionate father to me.”¹⁶ The belief in the all-pervading goodness of God makes him ready to receive even the unfortunate events. “If we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow too?” (Job 2:10), seems to be the attitude of Don Bosco too. The generous promise of Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti to share one tenth of his produce is reciprocated with another promise that God would use even more abundant measurements. But, if God in His immense goodness judged it better not to make the earth yield a rich harvest, and instead of temporal benefits grants spiritual blessings, even then Don Bosco would affirm that it is the holy hand of the Lord and he would be ready to share one tenth of the sufferings as well.¹⁷ Fortune or misfortune, Don Bosco is ready to receive anything from God.¹⁸ Keeping to the promise, when the Duke sends his contribution after a good harvest, Don Bosco gratefully prays that the same goodness of the Lord may continue for the generous Duke.¹⁹

The God of loving kindness is another characteristic of God in Don Bosco’s letters. In the narrations regarding a dying man, God is presented as giving chances to lead a life worthy of Christians and is pleased with the vows made to Him. If the promises are not kept, God sends warnings, and offers further opportunities to turn towards Him. Human beings, however sinful they may be, can be the receivers of the graces of God by means of the Sacraments of Confession and Communion. If one fails to listen to the warning signs, earlier or later, he or she may arrive at a point of no return. Thus the Lord forewarns, possesses fatherly affection, counsels, offers loving corrections, and speaks with the language of the heart.²⁰ In Don Bosco, there is a desire and the inner longing for God’s house. While he looks forward to visiting the “palazzo” of Countess Luigia Viancino to meet her in person, the desire of the saint is increased all the more when a chapel is added to the palace.²¹ The longing for the house of the Lord is similar to the desire of the psalmist: “*Domine dilexi decorem domus tuae et locum habitationis gloriae tuae*” (Ps 26:8). The zeal of Jesus for the house of the Lord (cf. Jn 2:17) seems to consume also Don Bosco.

No task is undertaken by Don Bosco without entrusting it first to Divine Providence. In any new undertaking for the benefit of the young, he is convinced that if it is God’s work, it will succeed. When things do not turn out

¹⁶ E(m) IV, 279, letter to Commander Francesco Clodoveo Monti, on 24 April 1874.

¹⁷ Cf. E(m) III, 88, letter to Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti, on 10 May 1869.

¹⁸ For Don Bosco, even grave disasters are the works of the merciful Lord. But the apparent temporal misfortunes would be turned into spiritual blessings by God: “God knows how to bring out good from the evil that human beings do” [E(m) I, 360, letter to Count Carlo Cays, on 18 September 1858].

¹⁹ Cf. E(m) III, 101, letter to Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti, on 24 June 1869.

²⁰ Cf. E(m) I, 71, letter to priest Giovanni Borel, on 31 August 1846.

²¹ Cf. E(m) IV, 307, letter to Countess Luigia Viancino di Viancino, on 8 August 1874.

to be a success, he assumes that his projects are not perhaps the Will of God.²² While he expresses his belief in these words, he already sees the marvellous ways of Providence even before the first Salesian missionaries set foot in Argentina. He recognizes the wonderful trace of God's help in the interest and the protection extended by the Mayor and the President of the Foundation for the school, in the missions at S. Nicolás in Argentina, as he exclaims: "How sweet are the ways of Providence!"²³ Such concrete experiences of the providence of God gives him the conviction not to undertake any new activity without that inner assurance. This inner attitude is expressed spontaneously: "Everyone knows that this poor person writing would not have begun the work, unless he trusted in the Lord's Providence and in the piety of those who have such a work at heart, which will be useful to religion and civil society."²⁴

Doing God's Will is the constant preoccupation in Don Bosco. Besides believing in Divine Providence, what is forceful and decisive is feeling the obligation not to transgress the Will of God, even at the cost of fighting against the devil – the personification of evil. Regarding the contract to buy a house at Nizza Marittima, he is convinced that it is God's work: "*God wants this work and we cannot refuse without going against his Holy Will, and if we cooperate, we will be sure of a good result.*"²⁵ Once the conviction is made, the firm decision to face any hardship is also made, because "*God wants it and that's enough*".²⁶ This is perhaps the indispensable criterion for Don Bosco in the mission to the young.

Giving oneself to God is imprinted in the mind and the heart of Don Bosco. The deep desire and the secret of his heart is revealed to Countess Girolama Uguccioni on 5 December 1877: "While going to Rome and on my way back, I hope to visit you in Florence. But *do not forget to pray for this reckless individual, who always speaks of giving himself truly to the Lord, but is always the same.*"²⁷ The resignation to God's Will, and the perseverance in

²² Cf. E(m) IV, 284, 329-330, 340, 342-343, 361, letters to the Rector of the Irish seminary in Rome, Toby Kirby, between May and December 1874.

²³ E(m) IV, 406, letter to José Francisco Benitez, the Mayor and President of the Commission for the foundation of the school in the missions at S. Nicolás in Argentina, on 2 February 1875.

²⁴ E(m) VI, 100, circular letter to the benefactors, in March 1878.

²⁵ E(m) V, 99, letter to the Salesian director Giuseppe Ronchail, after 22 March 1876. (italics mine).

²⁶ E(m) V, 174, letter to the Salesian director Giuseppe Ronchail, on 20 July 1876. (italics mine).

²⁷ E(m) V, 517, letter to Countess Girolama Uguccioni, on 5 December 1877. (italics mine).

Don Bosco's expression, "giving himself truly to the Lord" finds its reflection at least on two occasions in the *Memoirs*: first, in the providential meeting with Don Calosso with reference to the sermon on "the necessity of giving oneself to God"; and the

prayer in order to seek God's designs remain constant also regarding the health conditions of Frather Buffa: "I regret that Don Buffa has not yet been given back complete health by the Lord. Does God want him in heaven? If that is the Divine wish, *fiat*. But we pray..."²⁸ Regarding the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome, priest Dalmazzo is told: "we have a great undertaking, but *God is with us, and so we have nothing to fear*."²⁹ While the role of divine Providence and the purpose of the greater glory of God are repeated often, the appeals for help in building the Church becomes an occasion to promote devotion to Jesus, Mary, and the Saints, with expressions such as, the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the source of all graces, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the inexhaustible source of graces and favours.³⁰

The Catholic Church teaches that the instinct of faith or the spiritual instinct which is linked to the fundamental truth of faith, helps the individual believer to spontaneously act in conformity with the Gospel and with the apostolic faith. Intrinsically linked to the virtue of faith, this spontaneous and natural knowledge of the individual Christian flows from, and is a property of faith.³¹ Reflecting in the light of this truth, we find one specific perception permeating the whole life of Don Bosco: the thoughts and his written words reveal the ever-present sense of God. Besides the fundamentals of faith that are often evident, there is a unique sense of the Providence of God. For Don Bosco, God the author of life is the one who leads history, guides the lives of individuals, and gives orientation to every event of his own life. Even the seemingly adverse circumstances and the temporal misfortunes are turned into positive spiritual blessings by the merciful God. The presence of God is invisible. But for Don Bosco, the invisible hand of God often becomes remarkably obvious. This perception of God leads him not only to live in the presence of God always, but also helps him to orient himself to the movements of the source of life. Having made the decision to follow God's designs, Don

second, on the day of the clerical investiture, "to give himself entirely to the Lord" (Cf. Giovanni Bosco, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*. Saggio introduttivo e note storiche di Aldo Giraud (Roma, LAS, 2011), 70; 102. For the English Edition, see: John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855. The Autobiography of Saint John Bosco*, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria Lawrence Castelveccchi and Michael Mendl, trans. Daniel Lyons (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1989), 35, 122). Such a resonance between the *Epistolario* and the *Memoirs* offers the scholars an opportunity for further clarity as well as a comparative study between the letters and the other writings of Don Bosco.

²⁸ E(m) VII, 314, letter to the master of novices, Giulio Barberis, on 11 March 1881.

²⁹ E(m) VII, 150, letter to the Salesian procurator in Rome, Francesco Dalmazzo, on 7 July 1880. (italics mine).

³⁰ For instance, Cf. E(m) VII, 382, 475.

³¹ Cf. International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (Philippines, Paulines Publishing House, 2014), n. 49.

Bosco keeps himself aligned towards God and His ways. Ever filled with the eager longing of the deer that longs for flowing streams, and of the soul thirsting for the living God, the heart of Don Bosco longs to live in the presence of God like the sparrows finding their home amongst the Lord's altars, ever singing the praises of the Lord (cf. Ps 84:1-4). It is such a decision, conviction, and the desire for living in God's presence that we find in Don Bosco in the letters. He is constantly and habitually oriented towards God, and the divine Will becomes his primary criteria of any discernment. Due to this spiritual identity emerging from the *Epistolario*, Don Bosco could be best described as a man in "God-Synchronous Orbit".³² God's Will is the only thing necessary, and Don Bosco longs to be in continuous harmony with God. This becomes the primary and the essential criteria of understanding and interpreting him. It is in the light of this God-oriented approach that Don Bosco is understood best in his letters.

2. The Primacy of Personal Salvation and Salvation of Souls

Don Bosco often identifies himself to his boys and to the Salesians as the friend of their souls. The self-descriptions as the father, brother, and the friend of the souls, bring forth the earnest and one of his deepest desires of the heart. The self-assertion remains the same even as he writes to lay persons: "Don Bosco is always the friend of the soul."³³ That souls have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ is the reason and the source of his love

³² "God-Synchronous Orbit" is an expression borrowed from an Indian author - A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, from the insightful statement found in his last book, published just a month before his death and titled: *Transcendence: My Spiritual Experiences with Pramukh Swamiji*. Summarising the ultimate stage of the spiritual ascent in his life, which began through his father and was sustained by remarkable guides, he states: "Now, finally, Pramukh Swamiji has put me in a God-synchronous orbit. No manoeuvres are required any more, as I am placed in my final position in eternity" (A.P.J. Abdul Kalam - Arun Tiwari, *Transcendence: My Spiritual Experiences with Pramukh Swamiji* (Noida, Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 50).

What is specific in the expression is the "synchronization" or the movement of a satellite in harmony with the Earth (Geo-synchronous orbit), and the Earth is the source of all life forms. Abdul Kalam (1931-2015), a noted Scientist and a former President of India, while describing his spiritual experiences, comes out with this original expression -- "God-synchronous orbit" -- to express the relation between God and himself, and his urge to be attuned to God continuously.

Though found outside of the context of Don Bosco and outside the Christian context, the spiritual essence that is evident in the expression leads me to use it – which in my opinion describes in a precise and fitting way what Don Bosco is in his letters.

³³ E(m) IV, 217, 278, 287.

for his sons as he clarifies: “my affection is founded on the desire to save your souls,” and the “good of our souls is the foundation of our mutual affection”.³⁴

Don Bosco is convinced that he is called to be God’s humble instrument for the salvation of the young. The only concern of his heart is the salvation of souls. To the boy Pietro who perhaps responded in a bitter or in an insolent way, Don Bosco explains his motive and appeals to the boy’s heart: “I have nothing against you. Don Bosco is always your friend, he always wishes good things for you, and he seeks nothing but the salvation of your soul.”³⁵ Affirming the single-minded purpose of all the members of the nascent Congregation, he instils the same objective in the mind of the young cleric Giovanni Bonetti in 1863: “Take heart! Let your efforts be directed towards preserving the unity of your Will with those of the superiors, because they all want only one thing --to save many souls, and among them their own souls.”³⁶

The realization of being an instrument in saving souls, urges him to transmit the same objective into the hearts of others. For Don Bosco, the one thing necessary is the salvation of one’s soul. The annual spiritual retreat conducted for the young girls, women, and the teachers at Mornese has the particular motive: “*Only one thing is necessary: to save our souls; porro unum necessarium.*”³⁷ Convinced of this singular necessity, he reminds the Salesians that the priests be in solidarity with one another in everything that concerns their eternal salvation and that of the young people.³⁸ The help requested from the Sister Enrichetta Dominici in the formulation of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, though it might be an annoyance for her, leads to assurance that the help would redound to the greater glory of God. If they succeed in winning over some souls, she would have played a major part.³⁹ The attitude of instilling the consciousness of the soul remains the same even amidst the fear of suppression of religious houses. He assures those affected by the issues, saying that as he prays that God may disperse the plans of the wicked and preserve the house of the Lord, he also affirms that in any case they would not have to fear the salvation of their souls.⁴⁰ Amidst the expulsion of religious from France, when Salesians and the Salesian houses are

³⁴ E(m) IV, 208, letter to Salesian priest Giuseppe Lazzero and the artisans at Valdocco, on 20 January 1874.

³⁵ E(m) I, 527, letter to the boy Pietro, before 2 October 1862.

³⁶ E(m) I, 628, letter to young cleric Giovanni Bonetti, at the end of the year 1863.

³⁷ E(m) IV, 476, circular letter for the spiritual retreat for women and teachers at Mornese, in July 1875. (italics as in *Epistolario*).

³⁸ Cf. E(m) III, 501, letter to the boys in the school at Lanzo, on the feast day of Saint Stephen, in 1872.

³⁹ Cf. E(m) III, 325, letter to the Superior of the Sisters of Saint Anne, Mother Enrichetta Dominici, on 24 April 1871.

⁴⁰ Cf. E(m) IV, 82, letter to the abbot of San Paolo in Rome, Francesco Leopoldo Jacobuzzi Zelli, on 21 April 1873.

saved through the providential efforts of the clergy and the Catholics of the city of Marseilles, Don Bosco is grateful to God, to Mary, and to those good-hearted persons, and his prayer is for the souls. He prays that God, who is rich in graces, may bless them all and grant them the singular favour of saving their souls, and the souls of all those whom Divine Providence sends under their care.⁴¹

When the soul is lost, everything is lost. Hence, it is important to live in the grace of God. Assuring his prayers both for the soul and for the bodily health of the person who is ill, Don Bosco does not hesitate to exhort that “if someone dies, they die only once, and it does not cost anything to place oneself in the grace of God; but losing the soul, everything is lost”.⁴² As for acquiring the little land containing an old building which he calls “the house of immorality”, which is near the square adjacent to the Church of Mary Help of Christians, though it costs much, he is sure that help would come, because the only intention is preventing offence to the Lord and to save souls.⁴³ The reward by the Lord for the charity done for the same intention is that if one has saved the souls of others, one would save one’s own.⁴⁴

Personal salvation has primacy over the mission towards the salvation of souls. The exhortation is the same whether they are Salesians or other ministers of God, or those who cooperate in this divine call. The salvation of souls – one’s own first, and the souls of others next, is the order of priorities. The preoccupation to save others must indeed be founded on the urge to save oneself. However, saving others remains an excellent way to save oneself. By saving a soul, one saves oneself. Don Bosco’s requests for charitable contributions towards the mission for the young must be understood in the light of salvation. He assures that the mission carried out is for souls and that the one who helps to save a soul secures their own salvation, as Saint Augustine says.⁴⁵

The consciousness of personal salvation lies deep down in Don Bosco. “Lest, after preaching to others I myself should not be castaway” (1 Cor 9:27), is the personal preoccupation of Don Bosco. Hence, he often asks others to pray that he might save his own soul. The boys and the Salesians in the school at Lanzo are recommended to keep him in their valuable prayers: “so that I may not have the misfortune of preaching to save others and then lose my own poor soul. *Ne cum aliis praedicaverim, ipse rebrobus efficiar.*”⁴⁶ Praying for

⁴¹ Cf. E(m) VII, 224, letter to Fr Clément Guiol, on 16 November 1880.

⁴² E(m) IV, 173, letter to a lady whose name is not known, on 20 October 1873.

⁴³ Cf. E(m) IV, 401, circular letter to people, on 19 January 1875.

⁴⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 403, 404.

⁴⁵ Cf. E(m) III, 406, letter to layman Biagio Foeri, on 13 March 1872.

⁴⁶ E(m) IV, 386, letter to the Salesians and the boys of the school at Lanzo, on 5 January 1875.

the salvation of the soul of Don Bosco is a way of loving him, as the young boy Victor Cesconi is told in January 1880: “May God bless you dear Victor, and free you from the dangers of the soul; and if you love me, please pray to the Blessed Virgin Mary so that I may save my soul.”⁴⁷

The mission towards the salvation of souls is a divine call which can never be transgressed, and to help those involved in saving souls is also a divine work. It is the most divine work to cooperate with God in the salvation of souls: “*Divinorum Divinissimum est ad salutem animarum Deo cooperari.*”⁴⁸ Reflecting further, aside from the *Epistolario*, we can affirm that Don Bosco is in harmony with the idea of Saint Philip Neri that no sacrifice is so pleasing to God as zeal for the salvation of souls. Don Bosco is convinced that the work for the salvation of souls is the holiest of holy actions, and that by saving the souls of others one could save one’s own soul.⁴⁹ In the *Epistolario*, Saint Francis de Sales is presented as the model for the spirit of gentleness, zeal for the glory of God, and for the salvation of souls.⁵⁰ Perhaps it is for all these reasons that Paolo Albera states that “saving souls was Don Bosco’s watchword”.⁵¹ While personal salvation is the constant preoccupation of Don Bosco, the salvation of souls is the *raison d’être* of his entire mission to the young. This sense of the soul that derives its motive from the salvation brought by Christ, remains the indispensable reason for his being, for his relationship with others, and the essential motive behind all his multifarious activities.

3. The Joy of Being with the Young

The heart overwhelming with love, joy and concern towards the young, immediately catches the attention of the reader of the letters. Reading the letters to the young – nearly 200 letters up to the year 1883 – which include the letters to the young clerics and seminarians, and addressed at times to the directors of the Salesian houses, one cannot but be captivated by the sincere heart of the writer. Whether Don Bosco addresses himself as a father or a brother or a friend, reading the contents, an emotional reader might even be fascinated and led to feel that he is being addressed too. “You are truly my delight and my consolation, and I miss one or the other of these two things when I am far from

⁴⁷ E(m) VII, 36, letter to young boy Victor Cesconi, in the beginning of January 1880.

⁴⁸ E(m) III, 83, letter to Marquis Antonio Gerini, on 5 May 1869.

⁴⁹ For further reflection on this passionate theme of Don Bosco based on one of his homilies - one year prior to the letter that we have mentioned just above, see: Giovanni Bosco, “Il panegirico di don Bosco in onore di san Filippo Neri (1868): Edizione critica a cura di Aldo Giraudo,” *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 34, 64 (2015): 63-107.

⁵⁰ Cf. E(m) V, 52, circular letter to Salesians, on 16 January 1876.

⁵¹ Paolo Albera, *Lettere circolari di D. Paolo Albera ai salesiani* (Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1922), 333.

you,”⁵² is the way the boys at Valdocco are addressed in 1861. The boys in the junior seminary at Mirabello are told in 1866: “I can certainly tell you that when you go elsewhere you will find people who are more learned and far more virtuous than I, but it will be difficult to find someone who seeks what is good for you more than I do.”⁵³ When he is away in Rome, the expression of love for his dearest sons in Jesus Christ is that even when he is far away from them, every moment he thinks of them, and occupies himself for them.⁵⁴ In 1877, after being away from Turin for little more than two weeks, Fr Michael Rua is told: “tell our youngsters that it seems to be half a century since I saw them”.⁵⁵ In the similar circumstances in 1880, he is impatient not to find himself among them and eagerly looks forward to getting back to Turin.⁵⁶ Such is the eagerness of Don Bosco to be with the young.

There are profound reasons for these expressions of love and the care shown towards the young. The love of the Lord and his love for their souls are the fundamental reasons for this exceptional love. The laywoman Giuseppina Pellico is told about her brother Silvio, that he loves the boy in the Lord and Don Bosco promises to care for the boy just as if he were his own brother.⁵⁷ Addressing his boys at the junior seminary at Mirabello in July 1864 about his arrival, he says that he is coming amongst them as a father, friend and brother and asks them to place their hearts in his hands for a while so that they would be happy. Furthermore he makes his deeper intentions clear, saying that when their souls are filled with the peace and grace of the Lord, he would be happy and would have the much-desired consolation of seeing them all friends of God the Creator.⁵⁸ That the young grow in closeness to the Lord is his wish and prayer, as he wants the Salesian director Francesia to communicate to the boys at Varazze that he loves them in the Lord and that he prays for them every day in the holy Mass asking for their stable health, progress in studies, and true wealth – the holy fear of God.⁵⁹

True happiness in God is what Don Bosco desires for the young. In order that they might attain such happiness and that he could help them towards it, he seeks their absolute confidence in him. Such a confidence in him is one of the dearest things in the world for him. In person or through the letters if one speaks to him with confidence, he is well-pleased. The young cleric Giovanni

⁵² E(m) I, 452, letter to the boys in the Oratory at Valdocco, on 23 July 1861.

⁵³ E(m) II, 280, letter to the boys in the junior seminary at Mirabello, on 26 July 1866.

⁵⁴ Cf. E(m) IV, 420, letter to Fr Michael Rua, after 22 February 1875.

⁵⁵ E(m) V, 321, letter to Fr Michele Rua, on 5 March 1877.

⁵⁶ Cf. E(m) VII, 65, letter to Salesian priest Celestino Durando, on 16 March 1880.

⁵⁷ Cf. E(m) II, 355, letter to laywoman Giuseppina Pellico, on 13 April 1867.

⁵⁸ Cf. E(m) II, 59, letter to the boys in the junior seminary at Mirabello, in the beginning of July 1864.

⁵⁹ Cf. E(m) V, 39-40, letter to Salesian director Giovanni Battista Francesia, on 10 January 1876.

Turco is told: “Your letter made me very happy and I was so pleased that you talked to me with our old confidence, which for Don Bosco is the dearest thing in the world.”⁶⁰ That the openness of heart and the unlimited confidence on the part of the young pleases him and offers him a reason for joy is revealed to another cleric: “I really liked your letter. In it you make me know that your heart is always open to Don Bosco. Continuing like this, you will always be *gaudium meum et corona mea*.”⁶¹ In a similar situation, the young boy Antoine Homsy is told: “I received your letter, which pleased me very much, because you open your heart to me and I can give you good advice.”⁶² Besides confidence, the good conduct of the boys really pleases him and he considers it as a wonderful gift for him.⁶³ Through Fr Francesia he makes it clear to the boys that if they want to give something really pleasing to Don Bosco, it is by receiving a holy Communion according to his intention.⁶⁴

The joy of being with the young and being pleased by their goodness is similar also with his Salesian sons. Don Bosco is happy when he sees the eagerness to work for the young, to work in the missions, and when a Salesian has positive things to say about another Salesian. Fr Giacomo Costamagna is told about Luigi Lasagna: “He is really good. He speaks so well about everyone and particularly about you, and it makes me happy.”⁶⁵

For Don Bosco, words always turn into actions. Love for poor young people leads him to work for them in various ways. We see him happy and looking for ways and means to help when the young express their desire to follow the religious and priestly calling.⁶⁶ He is very expressive and pours out his heart of love when the boys express their love and their desire to join the Salesian Congregation. When the young man Benvenuto Graziano communicates to Don Bosco that after the period of his military service he would like to join Don Bosco, the latter expresses his great consolation at receiving the young man back, and leading him to fulfil the path that forms the object of their thoughts.⁶⁷ Young Tommaso Barale is told that his precious gift to Don Bosco is desiring to be among his Salesian sons for they could speak among themselves with words and paternal affection, and they would be of one

⁶⁰ E(m) II, 445, letter to Salesian cleric Giovanni Turco, on 25 October 1867.

⁶¹ E(m) IV, 404, letter to Salesian cleric Erminio Borio, on 28 January 1875.

⁶² E(m) VII, 442, letter to young boy Antoine Homsy, on 22 October 1881.

⁶³ Cf. E(m) IV, 436, letter to Fr Michele Rua, on 12 March 1875.

⁶⁴ Cf. E(m) V, 40, letter to Salesian director at Varazze, Giovanni Battista Francesia, on 19 January 1876.

⁶⁵ E(m) VII, 430, letter to Salesian Provincial of Argentina, Giacomo Costamagna, on 1 October 1881.

⁶⁶ For instance, see: E(m) III, 111, 123, letters to Pope Pius IX, in July and August 1869.

⁶⁷ Cf. E(m) V, 57, letter to young army man Benvenuto Graziano, at the end of January 1876.

mind in everything.⁶⁸ A specific insight that we find in Don Bosco is that he always gives some practical suggestions to the young, to perform or to do, in order to become apostles among others. One such action is making more people familiar with the *Catholic Readings*.⁶⁹

Don Bosco feels the urge and considers that his primary responsibility as a priest and as an instrument of God is to lead the young to God and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Giuseppe Roggeri is reminded of the contract made among them, of being friends so as to love God with one heart and one soul, and is asked to recite certain prayers if he wants Don Bosco as his friend.⁷⁰ Similar agreement is made with the young boy Victor Cesconi and the boy is reminded of it through his mother, Zeglia Cesconi. The pact is that Don Bosco would pray for little Victor every day during Mass, and the boy in turn must pray for Don Bosco every morning.⁷¹ The occasional contacts with the boy through his mother, and the later personal communications with the young boy, bring out the heart and the method of Don Bosco in forming the young.⁷²

Moving further from the initial familiarity of friendship and joyful expressions, Don Bosco gradually strikes at the roots of the relationship with God. The letters written to the boys collectively deal with both the spiritual contents and external behaviour. As he encourages the boys, he does not fail to admonish them saying that they are his consolation and that no one should pierce his heart with the thorns of bad conduct.⁷³ The letters to the boys in common contain various spiritual counsels to the young. In them he acknowledges the love of the boys for him and opens his paternal heart to them. Encouraging them for their expressions of faith and moral conduct, he often draws up a practical plan of action for them, insisting on avoiding laziness, frequenting the sacraments of Confession and Communion, and the devotion and frequent recourse to Mary the most holy mother.⁷⁴ Hence, for Don Bosco, human relationships begin from God and therefore must always end in God. The love of the young necessarily leads to the love of God.

How can we summarise the joy and the love of Don Bosco towards the young? Jesus in the Gospel declares his joy of being with the little children (cf.

⁶⁸ Cf. E(m) V, 334, letter to young man Tommaso Barale, on 28 March 1877.

⁶⁹ Cf. E(m) II, 502, letter to young boy Giovanni Pestarino, on 23 February 1868.

⁷⁰ Cf. E(m) I, 306-307, letter to young boy Giuseppe Roggeri, on 8 October 1856.

⁷¹ Cf. E(m) IV, 508, letter to the laywoman Zeglia Cesconi, the mother of Victor, on 15 August 1875.

⁷² For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 378, 393; E(m) IV, 104, 123; E(m) V, 55, 160, 276; E(m) VI, 70; 180.

⁷³ Cf. E(m) III, 501, letter to the boys at Lanzo, on the feast day of saint Stephen in December 1872.

⁷⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) I, 628-630; E(m) II, 97-98; E(m) IV, 207-208, 385-386; E(m) V, 38-39.

Lk 18:16), and desiring that everyone be saved (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4), and reveals his intention as the Good Shepherd who “came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Saint Paul, in his letter of joy, besides calling the Philippines his joy and crown, also indicates Christ as the source from which all can draw real joy (cf. Phil 4:1). Following Christ in the Gospel way, Don Bosco expresses his love for the young, and demonstrates his joy and the profound intentions of saving their souls through his actions.⁷⁵ Besides the joyful situations, even amidst difficulties and fatigue, the thoughts about his boys and his Salesian sons revive him.⁷⁶ Recovering from his serious illness and physical weakness in 1871-1872, he writes from Varazze to the boys in Turin about another weakness of his: “I feel a great urge to be there. While my body is here, my heart, my thoughts, and my very words are always with you at the Oratory. This is indeed a weakness which I cannot overcome.”⁷⁷ This weakness of Don Bosco which he cannot overcome is what characterizes his love of neighbour concerning his sons.

4. Gratitude: Multiple Reasons and Multiform Expressions

Gratitude shines resplendent in the letters of Don Bosco. In fact, the very first letter in the *Epistolario* shows the gratefulness of cleric John Bosco to the family of his friend Annibale, when he expresses that he could never forget the generosity towards him when he had gone to Pinerolo.⁷⁸ The sense of gratitude is often visible. Whether it is towards God or towards others, Don Bosco’s words indicate his heartfelt gratitude. Some might consider it as the natural consequence of receiving help from charitable people towards the mission for the young. Although the letters containing the sentiments of gratitude for all his benefactors might in fact be a considerable number, the similar attitude of Don Bosco towards others at various situations in life, and the manifold ways of expressing his gratitude, shed light on the nature of the person that he is. Gratitude is an evident sign of the spiritual profile of Don Bosco emerging from the letters.

Prayers, novenas, and the holy Masses offered for the benefits received on behalf of poor young people are the frequent signs of gratitude. The assurance of the prayers of boys is not just a promise, but an evident reality as evidenced by the specific descriptions of suffrages at the death of the

⁷⁵ Cf. E(m) IV, 244-245, letter to cleric Giovanni Cinzano and students at Valdocco, on 7 March 1874.

⁷⁶ Cf. E(m) V, 40, letter to Salesian director at Varazze, Giovanni Battista Francesia, on 10 January 1876.

⁷⁷ E(m) III. 395, letter to priest Michele Rua, on 9 February 1872.

⁷⁸ Cf. E(m) I, 45, letter to layman Giuseppe Strambio, in 1835-1836.

benefactor, the Count of Antignano.⁷⁹ When Countess Girolama Uguccioni expresses her fears about her grandchildren, Don Bosco assures her of his prayers during Mass, and assigns six boys to pray and offer their holy Communion for her intention for two months.⁸⁰ On receiving an offering for the small bell for the new Church, Don Bosco asks his collaborator to visit the benefactress in person, to thank her and to assure her that on the feast of the presentation of Mary, all the boys would be receiving holy Communion for her intentions.⁸¹ This way of expressing gratitude with a special remembrance during the holy Mass is common in the letters.⁸²

Some of the expressions of gratitude in the letters are: “thank you for all your charity”; “thank you for the kind offering sent”; and, “you add charity to charity and we pray to God to add blessings upon blessings on you”.⁸³ While charity is described as precious charity in moments of difficulty, the benefactors Cavaliere Tommaso and Countess Girolama Uguccioni are described as “two treasures of beneficence and benediction for us”.⁸⁴ Count Annibale Bentivoglio of Rome who offers an ornament studded with gems for the raffle is thanked wholeheartedly for the new way of offering charity.⁸⁵ Don Bosco’s attitude on receiving any type of benefits from others for the works of charity seems to be: “thanks to God and gratitude to you”.⁸⁶ For him, gratitude should not be a fleeting sentiment, but a permanent remembrance and an attitude. Amidst difficulties involved in buying the property at Nizza, France, the Salesian Fr Giuseppe Ronchail is told to make a catalogue of the names of the benefactors who in any small way had contributed for the purpose, so that as long as the institution exists, there would be prayers offered for them in the morning and evening.⁸⁷

Gratitude has its roots in the blessings and the reward of God. This thought is reiterated while thanking people for the benefits received. Don Bosco declares that every small contribution has a great merit before the Lord, like the widow’s mite (cf. Lk 21:1-4).⁸⁸ It is God and mother Mary who would repay the goodness of the donors. Expressing that it is his duty to extend his

⁷⁹ Cf. E(m) I, 217, letter to Fr Pietro Giuseppe De Gaudenzi, on 31 January 1854.

⁸⁰ Cf. E(m) II, 364, letter to Countess Girolama Uguccioni, on 2 May 1867.

⁸¹ Cf. E(m) II, 451, letter to Federico Oreglia, on 18 November 1867.

⁸² For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 121, 127, 158; E(m) IV, 84, 157.

⁸³ For instance, Cf. E(m) II, 49, 50, 51.

⁸⁴ Cf. E(m) IV, 161, letter to Count Alessandro Arborio Mella, on 3 October 1873; E(m) III, 40, letter to priest Michele Rua, on 14 January 1869.

⁸⁵ Cf. E(m) II, 336, letter to Count Annibale Bentivoglio, on 16 February 1867.

⁸⁶ Cf. E(m) II, 340, letter to vicar capitular of Alba, Pietro Giocondo Salvaj, on 8 March 1867; E(m) V, 521, letter to priest Clément Guiol, on 12 December 1877.

⁸⁷ Cf. E(m) V, 108, letter to the Salesian director Giuseppe Ronchail, on 12 April 1876.

⁸⁸ Cf. E(m) VI, 101, circular letter to benefactors, in March 1878.

heartfelt gratitude,⁸⁹ he assures that the holy virgin would repay with coins that would never diminish,⁹⁰ and that God's reward will be the joy of being together as a family in heaven, with the celestial banquet.⁹¹ Prayers for the benefits received are for the blessings of God which are hundredfold in this life and eternal life later.⁹² The offerings in charity manifest one's detachment from money as demanded by the Holy Gospel, and generous sacrifices are the privations that deserve special graces from God.⁹³ The gratitude expressed particularly in later years include the precious gifts of both living well and dying well. He prays that everyone may obtain health and grace, and that God might bless and keep them all in His holy service with the grace of living well and dying well.⁹⁴

The sense of gratitude is further intensified when charity leads directly to the spiritual benefit of others – not only individuals, but also the Congregation and the Church as well. The overwhelming gratitude for helping to save the clerics from going to compulsory military service is expressed by stating that there is no doubt the clerics would pray all their lives for the ones who had snatched the weapons from their hands and replaced them with a breviary. Furthermore, the clergy, the Church and the faithful are grateful because the clerics who received the benefits would, as ministers of God, constantly invoke the blessings of God on all.⁹⁵ The more the need, the more the gratitude. When the Salesians in France are saved from being expelled and the Salesian house at Marseilles is saved in 1880, the joy and the gratitude of Don Bosco knows no bounds. Profoundly moved, and reciting a *Te Deum*, he expresses his gratitude – first to God, then to mother Mary, and then to the parish priest Clément Guiol and the Catholics of the city.⁹⁶ The heart of gratitude is manifested even beyond the shores of Italy and France for the manifold benefits extended to the Salesian missionaries in Argentina: “This is in capital letters! I must thank you, but I am thanked instead. It is indeed your exceptional goodness. In every way, it's all for the greater glory of God. Many thanks for the offer towards our missionaries.”⁹⁷ The duty to thank the people who have been good to the missionaries continues as another benefactor is

⁸⁹ Cf. E(m) IV, 390, letter to benefactress Anna Fava, on 9 January 1875.

⁹⁰ Cf. E(m) IV, 78, letter to benefactress Eugenia Radice Marietti Fossati, on 14 April 1873.

⁹¹ Cf. E(m) VII, 406, 418, letters to benefactress Emilia and Baron Aimé Héraud, on 29 July and on 4 September 1881 respectively.

⁹² For instance, Cf. E(m) II, 256, 259, 368; E(m) III, 435; E(m) IV, 68, 72, 516, 518; E(m) VI, 253, 469.

⁹³ Cf. E(m) III, 388, letter to Countess Emma Brancadoro, on 2 December 1871.

⁹⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) VII, 63, 108, 210.

⁹⁵ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 177, 181, letters to Countess Carlotta Callori, on 14 November and 26 November 1873.

⁹⁶ Cf. E(m) VII, 223, letter to Fr Clément Guiol, on 16 November 1880.

⁹⁷ E(m) VII, 35, letter to Countess Bosco of Ruffino, on 3 January 1880.

thanked, saying that he had always admired the charity of the benefactor in helping them establish and stabilize the houses and schools in “Buenos Ayres”.⁹⁸ Truly, Don Bosco shines out as a man of gratitude even beyond the shores of the sea.

The novel ways of expressing gratitude include obtaining spiritual gifts from the Pope for the individuals and their families. While special blessings are obtained for priests from the ecclesiastical authorities,⁹⁹ honorary titles are obtained from the Pope and from the State authorities for the benefactors as a sign of gratitude. An honorary title is sought for Doctor Albertotti, for the free service he renders to the boys at Valdocco. The titles sought are in recognition of the service of charity towards religion and towards the country. Don Bosco believes that such titles would also be an encouragement to others, for doing good and for the good of souls.¹⁰⁰ The goodness of men could be proclaimed as long as it leads to the glory of God and for the good of souls. Feast days and name feasts become opportunities to thank the good-hearted people. At times he invites them to take part in the feasts at Valdocco, and reminds the Salesians also to do the same.¹⁰¹ Popes and ecclesiastical authorities are thanked through prayers and offering of holy Communion for their intentions because, as it could very well be seen, the recipients of the benefits do not have other means with which to show their sincere gratitude.¹⁰² Gratitude is shown for the benefits received by the Salesians, for the hospitality shown to individual Salesians and to himself, and for the benefits received in the mission lands.¹⁰³

Gratitude takes on many forms such as poetry, humour with an offering, humour mingled with a holy desire, offering of the first fruits of the garden, and the gift of candies.¹⁰⁴ “Kindly accept these tomatoes. They are the first fruits of the first harvest at Alassio”,¹⁰⁵ is a sign of gratitude. The benefactress who is ill is sent some edible birds and is told: “Kindly accept these birds which, though they may not help you to fly, at least they may give you a little strength to walk.”¹⁰⁶ The heart of thanksgiving ever shines resplendent. Every benefit is received with gratitude. Don Bosco’s readiness to accept and correct

⁹⁸ Cf. E(m) VII, 291, letter to the benefactor of the Salesians in Buenos Aires, doctor Edoardo Carranza, on 31 January 1881.

⁹⁹ See for instance, E(m) II, 337-338, letter to Pope Pius IX, before 21 February 1867.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. E(m) III, 251, 256-259, 275; E(m) IV, 199-200; E(m) VI, 71-73.

¹⁰¹ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 357; E(m) IV, 260, 436, 438; E(m) V, 90; E(m) VII, 316-317.

¹⁰² Cf. E(m) IV, 585, letter to Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli, on 20 December 1875.

¹⁰³ Cf. E(m) II, 186; E(m) III, 65, 66, 68; E(m) IV, 532; V, 464, 465.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. E(m) III, 392; E(m) IV, 466; E(m) VII, 396.

¹⁰⁵ E(m) V, 53, letter to Count Federico Callori, on 18 January 1876. Also Cf. E(m) V, 53.

¹⁰⁶ E(m) V, 59, letter to Countess Carlotta Callori, on 3 February 1876.

the errors pointed out in his writings, brings with it his gratitude as well.¹⁰⁷ While paying back the loan lent to him, the expression is: “the debt of gratitude still remains, which I certainly cannot pay, except with prayers, invoking heavenly blessings on all those in your family.”¹⁰⁸ Don Bosco often remembers the servants of the Salesian houses, such as cooks and those rendering their services for the boys, and thanks them, and asks the Salesians to care for them.¹⁰⁹ He is grateful to his boys for their prayers, particularly during his serious illness.¹¹⁰ The words of gratitude to his patient secretary Gioachino Berto is that God might make him a saint like the biblical figure of Job.¹¹¹ Welcoming the Archbishop of Buenos Aires and the delegation from Argentina and accompanying them for more than a month in spite of his fatigue and immense activities, Don Bosco is happy because: “we have truly done as much as possible to show our benevolence and gratitude.”¹¹²

The letters of Don Bosco are strewn with words and signs of gratitude that his relationship with neighbour is marked by gratitude. An aspect so frequently and evidently surfacing, gratitude could be considered a special virtue practised by Don Bosco. It is habitual and is consciously exercised in various circumstances and in various forms. The presence of gratitude is in fact a sure sign of the presence of other values. In this regard, Anton Witwer says that, by thanking we remember not only all that others do for us, but also our dependence on them. Sensitivity to the love of others depends on the inwardly felt gratitude which is a fruit of the exercise of thanksgiving. Whoever gives thanks puts the other at the centre, and thus lays the foundation for a true relationship.¹¹³ It is for this reason that Saint Ignatius indicates as the first point of the method for making the general examination of conscience, to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits received.¹¹⁴ One cannot take for granted that thanksgiving is a common, spontaneous, and natural effect in everyone, for the benefits he or she receives. It is not so for all. In fact, Jesus Himself is surprised that out of the ten lepers healed, only one turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and prostrating himself at the feet of Jesus, thanked Him, making Jesus

¹⁰⁷ Cf. E(m) IV, 110, letter to the Archbishop of Urbino, Alessandro Angeloni, on 3 June 1873.

¹⁰⁸ E(m) IV, 147, letter to senator Giuseppe Cataldi, on 19 August 1873.

¹⁰⁹ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 47, 173, 179; E(m) V, 83; E(m) VI, 103, 123.

¹¹⁰ Cf. E(m) III, 395, letter to priest Michele Rua, on 9 February 1872.

¹¹¹ Cf. E(m) VII, 299, letter to his secretary, priest Gioachino Berto, on 10 February 1881.

¹¹² E(m) V, 404, letter to Salesian missionary in Argentina, Luigi Lasagna, on 16 July 1877.

¹¹³ Cf. Anton Witwer, “La mistagogia – problema odierno o sfida continua per il teologo spirituale. Alcune riflessioni riguardo alle possibilità dell’annuncio della fede e dell’approfondimento dell’esperienza di fede,” *Mysterion* 2, 8 (2015): 189.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elder Mullan (New York, P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1914), 14.

wonder: “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?” (Lk 17:16-17). Gratitude is an intentional act, leading to conscious efforts of being connected to God and neighbour. Don Bosco seems to possess it in abundance.

5. “Spiritual Shyness” of Don Bosco and His Unintentional Self-Disclosures

Don Bosco is said to be characterised by “spiritual shyness”, for he does not easily reveal his interiority.¹¹⁵ “Extremely reserved”, he rarely expresses anything of his personal spiritual experiences.¹¹⁶ In the *Epistolario*, while Don Bosco readily agrees and even advocates that the goodness of others be made known for the greater glory of God and for the benefit of human beings, he seems to prefer that the secrets of his inner world remain hidden forever. This is what he acknowledges in the preface to the *Memoirs* too.¹¹⁷ However, there appear to be some exceptions in the letters.

As fortunate as we might consider these letters to be, we do find certain instances – though not so often – wherein he reveals his inner nature, without being conscious of it. We might consider it a “happy fault” – *felix culpa*. The moments of such self-disclosures vary from the expressions just escaping his pen, to the revelations warranted by the necessity of the circumstances, particularly those involving the Oratory. Yet in other situations, the “first person statements” or the “third person descriptions” help the attentive reader to trace and track down the person of Don Bosco.¹¹⁸

The simplicity of life-style that Don Bosco wants to lead and his desire to be treated like a “poor mendicant” while he plans to visit Countess Gabriella Corsi, is revealed in his prior notice to her: “Please understand that I am a poor mendicant, and I want to be treated like one in matters of accommodation, meals, and all other things; whatever bread and soup I shall receive, let it be for the love of the Lord.”¹¹⁹ That he does not desire personal glory offered by his admirers, but is ready to meet people any time if it concerns the good of the souls or charity towards his poor boys for which he wishes to thank them personally is expressed thus: “I think we will have time to satisfy everyone.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Eugenio Ceria, *Don Bosco with God*, trans. Michael Smyth (Bengaluru, Kristu Jyothi Publications, 2014), 138.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Aldo Giraudo, “Echi della dottrina salesiana nell’itinerario spirituale personale descritto da don Bosco nelle «Memorie dell’oratorio»”, *La parola e la storia. Uno sguardo salesiano, studi in onore del Prof. Morand Wirth*, ed. Aldo Giraudo (Roma: LAS, 2017), 384.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855*, 3.

¹¹⁸ For instance, for the first-person statements, Cf. E(m) III, 70, 108; and for the third-person descriptions, Cf. E(m) I, 257; E(m) II, 61.

¹¹⁹ E(m) III, 356, letter to Countess Gabriella Corsi, on 12 August 1871.

[...] As for those who come to offer compliments, thank them and send them.”¹²⁰

Don Bosco asserts his identity as a Catholic priest and as the one who has consecrated his life to God for the benefit of the young, whatever the situation might be, even as he professes his love for his country.¹²¹ Amidst the struggle regarding the “temporalities”, as he comes forward voluntarily to play the role of the mediator between the Church and the State, he makes his stand clear: “Although I stand quite apart from political matters, nevertheless I have never refused to play a part in things that can be of some advantage to my country.”¹²² Regarding the Church-State relations he reveals his resolute stand of “give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt 22:21).¹²³ Thus, Don Bosco’s fortitude and the ever-present consciousness of his priestly identity is revealed.

The personal advice and counsel that Don Bosco ardently seeks from the Pope and the other ecclesiastical authorities in moments of conflict, particularly regarding the difficulties in his relationship with Archbishop Gastaldi, are evident in the letters.¹²⁴ The inner urge to open his heart readily to the ecclesiastical authorities in order to seek advice shows the reasons for his insistence with the boys and Salesians to place unlimited confidence in him and in the superiors. We see him practising what he keeps preaching in the letters. Amidst the difficulties with his Archbishop, Don Bosco pleads to be counselled and guided.¹²⁵ His overwhelming love for Pope Pius IX, to fulfil every wish of the Pontiff, and to obey without any reservations, is known when he is asked to deal with certain issues regarding the Congregation of the Sons of the Immaculate Conception or Hospitaller brothers of the Immaculate Conception: “Every thought of the Holy Father is for me an absolute command. If it seems to His Holiness that I and my Salesians can do something pleasing to him, we are ready without any reservation.”¹²⁶

Don Bosco’s preoccupation to make his confession is manifested in his little note to Fr Giovanni Giacomelli who had been his companion while

¹²⁰ E(m) III, 360, letter to Countess Gabriella Corsi, on 18 August 1871.

¹²¹ For instance, Cf. E(m) III, 398, letter to the President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Interns Giovanni Lanza, on 11 February 1872; E(m) V, 216, letter to doctor Lorenzo Peverotti, on 6 September 1876.

¹²² E(m) IV, 128, letter to the President of the Council, Marco Minghetti, on 14 July 1873.

¹²³ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 166, 167, 172. Also Cf. E(m) V, 338, 345.

¹²⁴ For instance, Cf. E(m) IV, 376-378, 464, 468.

¹²⁵ Cf. E(m) V, 478, letter to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Bishops and Regulars, Cardinal Innocenzo Ferrieri, on 12 October 1877.

¹²⁶ E(m) V, 244, letter to the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, Cardinal Luigi Bilio, on 3 November 1876.

studying at Chieri and who became his regular confessor after the death of Fr Golzio. The preoccupation is almost that of losing his faith if he does not make his confession as he writes in the note: “Tomorrow between 10 in the morning and 12 noon, if you can take a walk this far, you would do me a great favour, otherwise I will become a Jew.”¹²⁷ Two more personal attitudes of Don Bosco are evident in his letter to another classmate and a friend: the first attitude is of keeping silent when needed, and the second, of not wanting to lose the friendship even amidst a personal misunderstanding on the part of his priest friend. Don Bosco’s letter to his friend amidst the issues regarding the closure of the secondary school at Valdocco, forcefully brings out the assertive nature of Don Bosco particularly when the priests of the Oratory are criticised negatively without proper foundation. Even at this moment the unwavering friendship he wants to extend proves his inner nature.¹²⁸

The secret of planning a project and carrying it out is revealed in the letter to a benefactress who asks for some ideas or ways of promoting the pious work and on how to procure the sources necessary. Exhorting her to pray and to invite others to pray to God, and to receive holy Communion as the most effective means of earning the graces of God, Don Bosco reveals himself in the first-person expression: “My unique support has always been the recourse to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians.”¹²⁹ The depth of Don Bosco’s prodigious zeal to serve the young is revealed to Carlo Vespignani, when the latter comes up with a project to help the young in need. Promising his readiness to make every effort and sacrifice to carry out a project that is directed towards poor young people, and believing in the inspirations and directions of God, Don Bosco reveals himself: “In matters which help the young in danger or serve to save souls, I rush forward to the point of temerity.”¹³⁰ The determination to make any sacrifice in this regard is affirmed again after few months: “For my part I will spare nothing, in order to attempt to gain some souls for the Lord.”¹³¹

The affectionate and the charming personality of Don Bosco is revealed in the letters. He also possesses the gift of striking immediate familiarity with others. In November 1877 while he informs and consoles the mother of the young priest Giuseppe Vespignani, who departs for the missions, Don Bosco writes: “Fr Giuseppe goes to America and Fr Giovanni will take his place. Will you permit him?”¹³² Such an affectionate nature is revealed often in his

¹²⁷ E(m) IV, 471, letter to Fr Giovanni Giacomelli, on 26 June 1875.

¹²⁸ Cf. E(m) VI, 443, letter to his classmate and priest friend Angelo Rho, on 24 July 1879.

¹²⁹ E(m) V, 343, letter to benefactress Marianna Moschetti, on 11 April 1877.

¹³⁰ E(m) V, 345, letter to layman Carlo Vespignani, on 11 April 1877.

¹³¹ E(m) V, 440, letter to Monsignor Santo Giuseppe Masnini, on 30 August 1877.

¹³² E(m) V, 516, letter to Maddalena Vespignani, the mother of the Salesian missionary priest Giuseppe Vespignani, on 30 November 1877.

relationship with some benefactors. While Tommaso Uguccioni Gherardi is addressed as good and dear father, the wife of the benefactor – Countess Girolama Uguccioni – is addressed as his good mother, and told that even when he runs short of time with a thousand and one things, he does not want to miss sending at least a filial greeting to his good mum and good dad, both of whom show great charity towards him so many times.¹³³ After Countess Carlotta Callori¹³⁴ and Girolama Uguccioni, Countess Gabriella Corsi from Nizza Monferrato too becomes a good mother to Don Bosco.¹³⁵ Addressing Countess Luigia Viancino as his good mother, and though feeling a little delicate, Don Bosco feels free to ask her if she could arrange for some means of transport in case the public means is unavailable, and comments: “see this son, with what liberty he speaks!”, and signs off as “the humble urchin”.¹³⁶

Visions and prophesy – in the sense of foretelling, and explanations about miracles do appear in the letters. Writing from Marseilles to the master of novices at Valdocco, Giulio Barberis, Don Bosco writes: “May God bless you all and grant each of you the grace of a good life and a holy death. May God grant this grace, especially to him whom I shall not see again when I return to Turin.”¹³⁷ In the letter to Fr Michael Rua on the next day, Don Bosco asks him to care for the health of the dear Fr Remondino, and again after about two weeks tells Rua that if the sickness of Fr Remondino worsens, to allow him to be admitted also to perpetual vows and to assure the priest of his prayers.¹³⁸ Aubry and Motto indicate that Fr Bartolomeo Remondino, a priest-aspirant passes away after about three weeks, and Don Bosco, after a long absence from Turin returns only later to Turin.¹³⁹ When Don Bosco is asked by Amelie Lacombe about certain revelations or supernatural communications, he seems to answer in a generic way.¹⁴⁰ But it is interesting to note that in his letter to Countess Marie Sophie Colle he mentions the vision he himself had, and concludes saying: “At the instance when God in His infinite mercy deigns to make known to us something, I shall promptly communicate it to you.”¹⁴¹ Another vision is described to the same Countess, after about two months,

¹³³ Cf. E(m) III, 327, 375, 389; E(m) IV, 371, letters to Tommaso Uguccioni Gherardi and Countess Girolama Uguccioni, at various times.

¹³⁴ Cf. E(m) III, 391, 392, 394, letters to Countess Carlotta Callori, at various times.

¹³⁵ For instance, see: E(m) IV, 68, 69; E(m) V, 118, 458, letters Countess Gabriella Corsi, at various times.

¹³⁶ E(m) III, 467, letter to Countess Luigia Viancino of Viancino, on 30 September 1872.

¹³⁷ E(m) VI, 324, letter to the master of novices, Giulio Barberis, on 10 January 1879.

¹³⁸ Cf. E(m) VI, 327, 334, letters to priest Michele Rua, on 11 and 28 January 1879.

¹³⁹ Cf. Aubry, *The spiritual writings of Saint John Bosco*, 326; E(m) VI, 324, 335, notes by Motto. Also Cf. E(m) VI, 13, 32.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. E(m) VII, 387, letter to laywoman Amelie Lacombe, on 1 July 1881.

¹⁴¹ E(m) VII, 392, letter to Countess Marie Sophie Colle, on 3 July 1881.

regarding the deceased son of the Countess, Louis Colle.¹⁴² The correct way of interpreting the extraordinary events in his life also seems to appear in his letters. While Don Bosco does not seem to deny such extraordinary events, he wants people to consider them as miracles of God rather than miracles of the human being: “How easily the common people allow themselves to be deceived! Everything is of the Lord, the effect of His immense mercy, but they would want to judge them as the works of man.”¹⁴³ About a year later, he explains the mystery: “God blesses our works, favours and protects them. But the works, not having the necessary means to support them, God Himself comes to the help, with graces and even extraordinary favours, [...] Thus, the mystery is explained.”¹⁴⁴

Don Bosco does not want the people to attribute to him – not even to his interventions – the graces obtained, followed by the blessings given by him. The generosity of the divine Providence is miraculous for him and the benevolence of the people surprises him. He is wonderstruck by the donations or charity given by the benefactors and the people in France, to pay the debts that he owes. Writing to Fr Giovanni Bonetti, Don Bosco exclaims: “Thank the Lord. I would not have imagined the number of blessings of heaven coming down so much abundantly as these days. Blessed be God. Keep on praying.”¹⁴⁵ He continues to marvel at seeing the hand of God, besides being assured interiorly, as he expresses to Fr Giovanni Cagliero: “Our things proceed well. God blesses us. Let’s go ahead.”¹⁴⁶

The profound humility practised by Don Bosco makes him not exalt himself at any moment, but rather leads him to give glory to the Lord always. It is this humility which is the reason for his “spiritual shyness”. Fortunate are we to have gathered the spiritual pebbles, either spontaneously expressed or consciously asserted due to compelling reasons. They help us to confidently point out his convictions that form part of his deep interiority. Revealed or concealed, his words and actions confirm one of the underlying principles of all his life that God must increase and be glorified always.

(To be continued.)

¹⁴² Cf. E(m) VII, 417, letter Countess Marie Sophie Colle, on 30 August 1881.

¹⁴³ E(m) VII, 61, letter to priest Clément Guiol, on 4 March 1880.

¹⁴⁴ E(m) VII, 313, letter to priest Clément Guiol, on 7 March 1881.

¹⁴⁵ E(m) VII, 318, letter to Salesian priest Giovanni Bonetti, on 20 March 1881.

¹⁴⁶ E(m) VII, 319, letter to Salesian missionary priest Giovanni Cagliero, on 20 March 1881.