

The Salesian Way of Life

The Salesian way of life is rooted in the profound spirituality and pastoral zeal of St. John Bosco, who drew inspiration from St. Francis de Sales. Our mission is characterized by a unique blend of educational and pastoral work, aimed particularly at the young and the poor. This way of life demands a deeper commitment to God, a staunch dedication to our apostolic mission, and a genuine love for those we serve. As 'pastoral charity' is the pre-requisite for the beginning of any charism or congregation or individual vocation or community life or dedication to the charism, I deem it necessary to deal with 'pastoral charity' more elaborately in this circular. In my view, the impressions of the extraordinary visitor are indicating that our pastoral charity as individuals or as community is either on its way to getting dried up or has already lost its fervour or its growth is hampered or impeded due to our selfish and egoistic choices and that there is an urgency for its reinvigoration. It could also be that our pastoral charity that is to be offered to God and to his people completely and totally is fragmented to the extent of edging God out.

Pastoral Charity

What is pastoral charity? For Pope John Paul II, pastoral charity is the virtue by which we participate in the very charity of Christ, who came to give his life for his flock. Pope Francis stresses that pastoral charity involves the readiness to meet people where they are, to understand their needs, and to accompany them on their journey of faith. Thomas Aquinas observes that pastoral charity is the love that seeks the good of the souls entrusted to one's care, aiming for their ultimate salvation. The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV) states that "the essential content of ... pastoral charity is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church, following the example of Christ. 'Pastoral charity is the virtue by which we imitate Christ in his self-giving and service. *It is not just what we do, but our gift of self, which manifests Christ's love for his flock.* Pastoral charity determines our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people. It makes special demands on us." (PDV 70)

Our rule of life says that "pastoral charity...is the center of our vocation" (C. 10). Pastoral Charity has its roots in the love of God and its model in the attitudes of Jesus Christ. For us Salesians, this implies an active, day-to-day involvement in the lives of the young, guiding them with fatherly care and creating a family-like environment where they feel loved and valued (C 16). John Bosco's zeal for souls (i.e., pastoral charity) led him to launch out into every kind of initiative that he thought necessary for the total development of his young people. His zeal was guided by an integral concept of a boy or a youngster he had formed for himself. For him, a boy or youngster is "neither an angel nor a beast but a living synthesis of spiritual needs and bodily functions, an individual destined for heaven but entrusted with a mission on the earth below, someone anchored in God and a future citizen of heaven but also solidly established in the society of human beings as a citizen of the earthly city." No doubt that St. John Bosco's Preventive System and its three pillars - Reason, Religion and Loving-kindness have their source and inspiration in pastoral charity. And as such, the three pillars become for the educator a way to his own sanctification, a path to achieve holiness. No wonder the Preventive System can rightfully boast of having made saints of both the educator (Don Bosco) and his pupil (Dominic Savio): it is more than a method of education; it is fundamentally a spirituality! The practice of this system is based on St. Paul's words: 'Love is patient and kind... Love bears all things...hopes all things, endures all things.'

Our constitutions express that pastoral charity envelops our whole life and all our activities. It is the pastoral charity that motivates and moves us. Let me cite a few articles to show how pastoral charity becomes the central point on which our Salesian life moves. Pastoral charity is “an apostolic impetus that makes us seek souls and serve God alone” (C 10). *Pastoral charity is not merely an emotion but an active, lived expression of love through service.* The one who burns with pastoral charity will pledge “himself to build up the community in which he lives. He loves it, despite its imperfections, and knows that in it he finds the presence of Christ.” (C 52). “Through our religious profession we offer ourselves to God in order to follow CHRIST and work with him in building up the Kingdom. Our apostolic mission, our fraternal community and the practice of the evangelical counsels are the inseparable elements of our consecration which we live in a single movement of love towards God and towards our brothers” (C 3). The love that enkindles a Salesian to give himself to God totally also leads him to love the young. “This love is an expression of pastoral charity and gives meaning to our whole life. For their [youngsters’] welfare we give generously of our time, talents and health” (C 14). The love of a Salesian is “that of a father, brother and friend, able to draw out friendship in return; this is the loving kindness so much recommended by Don Bosco.” (C 15). This approach stresses the importance of relational ministry, where Salesians engage with young people in their daily contexts, offering guidance, support, and encouragement. The pastoral charity gets manifested concretely when the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience are embraced as a radical following of Christ and dedicating oneself entirely to the mission (C 60, 63). The vows signify a total gift of self to God and the community, reflecting a deep trust in God’s providence and a radical dedication to the young. Pastoral charity is dynamic in nature and it acts spontaneously to the needs of others. For us Salesians, “the needs of the young and of working-class areas, the desire to work with the Church and in her name, inspire and shape our concrete pastoral activity so as to bring about a more just world and one of greater brotherhood in Christ” (C 7).

We, as Salesians, are called by God to follow Him in the footsteps of St. John Bosco who “gave us a programme of life in the motto: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*” (C 4) and our response to him is revealed in the pastoral charity with which each one of us has committed ourselves to God and are still keeping the flame burning within for the mission entrusted to us. It is clear from the above texts quoted from our constitutions that a professed Salesian cannot but live only the Salesian way of life and there is no place for other forms of lives. We cannot make our own definitions of Salesian life for our convenience or to suit our whims and fancies or to defend our ministerial interests, which in reality are totally contrary to the spirit of our founder Constitutions and the Gospel. At times, under the guise of Salesian life some confreres live other forms of lives which are neither religious nor priestly. Let’s remember that our rationality may justify our imprudent desires and selfish choices, but we cannot fool God and the people to whom we are sent in His name. The right way of understanding our mission is that it flows from our Salesian way of life, that is, ‘doing’ flows from ‘being’. If a confrere, on a daily basis, does not live the Salesian way of life, how can the mission that he does be called Salesian? Is it not a contradiction? The report given by the extraordinary visitor not only strikes at the fundamentals of our Salesian life that get neglected and conveniently forgotten in our lives but also points to the rudiments of our Christian faith and wakes us from deep slumber. A continuous neglect of prayer or absence from the Eucharistic celebration, personal and community moments of prayer raises a fundamental doubt: whether or not a confrere has Christian faith. On the other hand, a confrere who is only concerned about his and others prayer life but fails to love his brother in the community or being broken for the people under his care is equal weak in faith, for true faith must lead to action.

If you look at our province, there are some symptoms that tend to reveal the lack of pastoral charity. According to the extraordinary visitor they also get manifested in following ways: telling the one in

authority, “send me to that place or give me this portfolio.” “Make me a Rector or Principal or Administrator.” “I don’t want that particular confrere in my community.” “I would like to work in the city”. “Send him to the rural area, he has never been there.” “Send me for higher studies.” “Place me in a school where there is good income.” “Why am I not sent to those schools? In what way am I lesser than others?” “When so and so is made a leader, why not I?” Along with these outbursts, there are some dangerous and divisive attitudes that come to the forefront in other forms which leads to unwarranted split in the normal living as brothers in the community. Dear Confreres, such type of limited thinking or malicious reasoning only shows that there is a serious flaw in our understanding of religious and priestly life. Moreover, the flaw could be extended to our own faith life, pastoral charity and religious education as well. It is not that the flaw lies in the system but that we have learnt it wrongly and keep on manipulating the system to create some attractive make-beliefs that go viral. Together with these, there is also the intrusion of the feeling of ‘us and them’ into the hearts of some confreres or a twisted understanding of pastoral charity that has given rise to a phenomenon of having power, remaining in position and taking pleasure in domineering attitudes.

In some communities, some confreres do not accept in faith and in obedience their Rectors and as the one sent by the Lord to lead and to animate them. As a result, they don’t even respect him. In our province, some confreres do not participate in any province level event and they alienate themselves from the communion of confreres. Some confreres are frequently out of their communities and are always on the move to attend all kinds of functions, as if it’s their only vocation. They manifest that they have lost the sense of community life and consider the community they belong to as a lodge or guest house. They seem to be more a voyager, tourist, passenger and journeyer than a vowed religious bound to a religious community. Indeed, they are like airport bishops, as Pope Francis would call the bishops who do not stay in their dioceses, but are always on a journey.

There is also a tendency of conveniently foregoing moments of prayer or totally avoiding the office of readings has given rise to the condition of some priests asking others: “what do you mean by the office of readings?” To those placed in responsibility, at times, some confreres respond: “don’t ask me about personal prayer, I pray in my room, I need not pray it in the chapel. Whatever concerns me personally, you better don’t interfere in it.” In addition to all these irreligious attitudes, there is also another important aspect that goes unnoticed, which the extraordinary visitor has pointed out as “lack of consecrated manners”, that is, we do not address each other properly. In our conversation with each other, our vocabulary at times lacks basic religious etiquette and manifests a sort of power relationships and clericalism, of which the Holy Father laments time and again.

There is yet another area that needs our attention, that is, the way we handle money. Some life styles and standard of living of some confreres and some communities reveal that the money spent for the mission target is lesser than what they actually spend for themselves individually and as a community. In some communities, where poor boys are catered to, the standard of living of some confreres is so high that it comes across as counter witness to religious life and Salesian preferential option for the poor. Our Father and founder says: “Let the world know that you are poor in clothing, food and abode, and you will be rich in the sight of God, and will win the hearts of men.” Furthermore, not giving proper accounts to the money received, consuming the province income for personal desires or mishandling money, swindling the money of the poor for selfish purposes and leakage of funds manifest that we are not good stewards of the Lord. In this regard, I would like to remind you dear confreres that the money you receive as mass intention, honorarium for seminars and pastoral services are to be given to the Rector and it is also a way of practicing our vows and being faithful to the Salesian way of life.

Conclusion

As we strive to live faithfully the Salesian way of life we have embraced, let us continually seek to deepen our relationship with God, nurture our fraternal bonds, and engage actively with the world in the spirit of service and love. May the values and ideals outlined in our Constitutions guide us in our journey, enabling us to be authentic witnesses to the Gospel and effective instruments of God's love in the lives of those we serve like St. Thomas the Apostle, our Patron and St. John Bosco our Father and founder.

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