

I Walk in the Valley of Death

As I write to you, my heart is moved by the powerful words of the psalmist: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me” (Psalm 23:4). These words carry a message of profound hope and faith, which has echoed throughout the centuries in Christian spirituality and the Catholic tradition. In this circular, as we will remember our loved ones and our confreres who have gone to their eternal abode during this month of November, I wish to reflect with you on the theme of death, not as a reality to be feared, but as one that, in our Salesian vocation, we are called to embrace with trust and love in the Lord. The commemoration of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day are two rich and deeply meaningful liturgical celebrations in the Catholic Church, marking a time when the faithful remember the dead – both the saints in heaven and the souls still undergoing purification in purgatory. The Church recognized the need to honour all martyrs, including those whose names were unknown or not celebrated with a specific feast. By the 4th century, regional churches began celebrating a feast dedicated to “all the martyrs.” By the time of Pope Gregory IV (827–844), the feast was extended to the entire Church, making November 1st the official date for All Saints’ Day.

All Souls’ Day, celebrated on November 2nd, emerged from the Church’s growing awareness of the importance of praying for the dead. This day is specifically dedicated to the “faithful departed” – those souls who have died in a state of grace but still require purification in purgatory before entering heaven. The tradition of praying for the dead goes back to early Christianity. As early as the 2nd century, Christians were already offering prayers for the deceased. This practice is rooted in the belief in afterlife and the doctrine of purgatory, the intermediate state where souls are purified of their sins before they can enter heaven. The foundation for this doctrine can be found in Sacred Scripture, most notably in 2 Maccabees 12:46, which speaks of the Jewish practice of offering sacrifices for the dead to atone for their sins. The formalization of All Souls’ Day is attributed to St. Odilo, the abbot of Cluny in France, in the 10th century. In 998, he established November 2nd as a day of prayer and almsgiving for the dead, encouraging his monks to offer Masses for all souls in purgatory. This custom spread from the monasteries of Cluny to the rest of the Church and became widely accepted by the 14th century. Eventually, All Souls’ Day found its permanent place in the Church’s liturgy, setting the twin feasts of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day as a time of solemn reflection on the mystery of life, death, after life and the communion of saints.

The Church encourages us to pray for the dead daily, especially during the month of November, which is traditionally dedicated to the Holy Souls. The Eternal Rest prayer is often used: “Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.” We can also offer rosaries, indulgences, and acts of penance for the souls in purgatory. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that it is a duty and act of love to pray for the dead (CCC 1032). Visiting a cemetery is a long-standing Catholic tradition, particularly in early November. The practice of visiting the graves of loved ones or

even the graves of strangers is an act of respect, love, and intercession for those who have gone before us. We are encouraged to visit cemeteries to pray for the repose of the souls buried there. In fact, in the month of November, we can earn indulgences by visiting a cemetery to pray for the dead, going to confession, attending Mass, receiving the Eucharist and praying for the intentions of the Pope. However, the indulgences are plenary, meaning they are applicable to the souls in purgatory, each day from November 1st to 8th. These cemetery visits not only remind us of our own mortality but also of the hope of resurrection. St. John Paul II once said: “The cemetery is a place of silence and meditation, where the living and the dead meet, where death and life communicate.” It becomes a sacred place where we pray for those who have gone before us and reflect on our own journey toward eternity.

On All Souls’ Day, a unique tradition in the Catholic Church allows priests to celebrate three Masses. This practice was granted by Pope Benedict XV in 1915 during World War I, in response to the immense number of souls who died in the war. The three Masses celebrated on this day have specific intentions: The first Mass is offered for the particular intention of the priest. The second Mass is offered for all the faithful departed, particularly the forgotten souls in purgatory. The third Mass is offered for the intentions of the Holy Father. Attending these three Masses, either as a priest or a member of the faithful, is a beautiful expression of solidarity with the souls in purgatory, allowing the grace of the Eucharist to be applied for their purification.

In Christian theology, death and resurrection form the central mystery of faith, offering a profound message of hope to all believers. Death, while often perceived as an end, is transformed by the resurrection of Christ into a passage to new life. For pilgrims of hope, death is not an ultimate defeat but a gateway to the fullness of life promised by God. Christ’s victory over death reveals the depth of God’s love, affirming that suffering and mortality do not have the final word. Instead, through Christ’s resurrection, believers are invited into a new creation, where the brokenness of the present world is healed, and eternal communion with God is made possible. This hope is rooted in the promise of the resurrection of the body, as articulated by St. Paul: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5). Pilgrims on this journey of faith embrace suffering with the confidence that, through their union with Christ, they participate in His death and will share in His glory. Thus, death becomes a threshold of transformation, a birth into eternal life, grounded in the hope of resurrection. In this way, the Christian journey through life, marked by hope in the face of death, reflects the Paschal mystery—Christ’s passage from death to life, which illuminates the path for all believers, calling them to live in the light of eternal hope.

The Church Fathers consistently viewed death through the prism of the Paschal mystery – the death and resurrection of Christ. Both Eastern and Western Fathers saw death not as an end, but as a transition or transformation, where the faithful are freed from sin and ushered into eternal life. For them, death had been fundamentally redefined by Christ’s resurrection. Through this lens, Christians are called to face death with hope and courage, knowing that it

leads to ultimate union with God. The Church Fathers invite us to view death as a part of the salvific process – a necessary passage that purifies and prepares the soul for eternal glory in God’s presence. Death, therefore, is no longer a finality to be feared but a moment of profound transformation, where the Christian’s pilgrimage reaches its ultimate fulfillment in the eternal embrace of divine love.

We as Salesians of Don Bosco, approach the reality of death with a blend of Christian hope, Salesian spirituality, and a deep sense of fraternity. This perspective is rooted in our founder, St. John Bosco, who encouraged us to live a life of joy and holiness, seeing death not as a moment of despair, but as the culmination of a faithful life of service to God, especially through our care for the young. Our understanding of death is imbued with a sense of trust in God’s providence, inspired by the Resurrection, and an assurance of eternal life. It is a moment where the confreres’ lifelong dedication to the mission – helping youth, especially the poor and abandoned – reaches its fulfillment, as they hope to hear the Lord’s words, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23) enter into the joy of your master.

Our Constitutions, express that life is a gift to be used for the service of others, particularly the young, in the spirit of St. John Bosco. This focus on service gives death a sense of completion rather than termination. Our Constitutions do not emphasize death as an isolated event but rather as part of the larger Salesian mission and a life lived in joyful fidelity to God’s will. They state, “We live and die at the service of God and of the young in the Salesian Society; our entire existence is marked by this loving service.” In this context, death is seen as the final act of a life-long offering, where the confrere entrusts himself to God with the same trust that defined his ministry. Our approach to death is closely connected to our spiritual motto: “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*” “Give me souls, take away the rest.” This underlines our conviction that the ultimate goal is the salvation of souls, and death is simply the passage to meet the One we have loved all our life and for whom we have laboured all our life.

Salesian fraternity plays a crucial role in how we support each other in life and at the hour of death. The Salesian community emphasizes a familial atmosphere – what St. John Bosco called the “Salesian family spirit” – which fosters a strong sense of mutual care and encouragement among the confreres. When a member of the community approaches death, the other Salesians accompany him with prayer, presence, and the sacraments, ensuring that he does not face the final passage all alone. The communal life of the Salesians fosters deep relationships, and when death approaches, it is within this shared life that they offer each other strength. The confreres gather around the dying member, often reciting the Rosary, the Litany of the Saints, and special Salesian prayers, reflecting the communal journey towards eternal life. Our Rectors Major, in the tradition of St. John Bosco, emphasized the importance of staying close to the dying through “an atmosphere of prayer and peace, celebrating the sacraments of Reconciliation, Anointing, and the Eucharist.”

The Salesian Constitutions also call for the confreres to remember their deceased brothers with affection and ongoing prayers. Each community maintains a strong connection to their departed brothers, offering daily prayers for the souls in purgatory and commemorating them during Masses. This deep-seated practice of praying for the dead is a testament to their belief in the communion of saints, where the bonds of fraternity extend beyond death into eternal life. In this, the Salesians reflect the broader Christian belief in the unity of the Church – militant, suffering, and triumphant – and the ongoing communion with those who have passed from this life. This communal sense of care and prayer also reflects the Salesian spirit of joy and hope in God’s providence. Death is not faced in isolation, but in the loving embrace of the Salesian family, who continue to support and remember their deceased brothers through prayers and Eucharistic celebrations.

However, deliberate deviations from the religious life by engaging in irreligious activities can profoundly distort a person’s understanding of death and the promise of resurrection. For someone who has vowed to live a life of holiness and service, deliberately choosing a path of irreligion – defined by moral compromise, rejection of divine law, and indulgence in sinful behaviour – represents not only a failure in their personal vocation but also a grave spiritual danger. Such choices can lead to the loss of the deeper meaning of death as a passage to eternal life and, even more tragically, the forfeiture of participation in the resurrection promised by Christ.

In the Christian tradition, death is not simply the cessation of physical life but a transformative moment where the soul moves toward its final destiny – either eternal communion with God or eternal separation from Him. For the religious, death holds a special significance: it is the moment where, they hope to be fully united with the One whom they have served and loved through their vocation. This hope is grounded in their faithfulness to the teachings of Christ and the moral life that reflects their relationship with God. However, when a religious deliberately engages in irreligious behaviour they are essentially rejecting this divine relationship.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that serious, unrepented mortal sin leads to spiritual death because it severs the soul from the grace of God. In choosing sin over virtue, the person distances himself/herself from the very source of life – God Himself. St. Paul warns of this in Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.” Here, death is not merely physical but spiritual, representing the ultimate consequence of rejecting God’s grace. Those who deliberately persist in irreligious behaviour risk the tragic loss of eternal life, as their hearts become hardened and their capacity for repentance diminishes. Hebrews 10:26-27 warns, “For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment.”

As Salesians we are expected to live a life of consecration to God, following the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, while dedicating our lives to the education and evangelization of young people. Deliberate deviations could be seen as neglecting the values, practices, and commitments of our consecrated life. Here are a few examples of

potential irreligious activities that would contradict the calling and values of a consecrated Salesian:

1. **Neglecting prayer and liturgical obligations** – Skipping Mass, prayers, and the Liturgy of the Hours without serious reasons.
2. **Failing to live the vow of poverty** – Accumulating wealth, engaging in materialism, or living in luxury of the money given by God for the mission to the needy contrary to the vow of simplicity.
3. **Breaking the vow of chastity** – Engaging in inappropriate relationships, sexual misconduct, or scandalous behaviour that violates their commitment to celibacy.
4. **Disobedience to superiors** – Rejecting the guidance and authority of superiors within the Salesian congregation or the Church hierarchy.
5. **Gossiping or slandering others** – Engaging in harmful speech, spreading rumours, or damaging the reputation of others within or outside the community.
6. **Engaging in dishonest behavior** – Lying, cheating, or being deceitful in personal or professional matters, which compromises their integrity.
7. **Misusing community resources** – Using money, property, or time irresponsibly or for selfish purposes, against the principles of communal living.
8. **Indifference to the poor or marginalized** – Neglecting the needs of the poor, young people, or those suffering, which contradicts the Salesian mission.
9. **Harbouring resentment or lack of forgiveness** – Refusing to forgive or hold grudges against others, which goes against Christian charity.
10. **Participating in secular or immoral entertainment** – Consistently indulging in media or activities that promote immorality, debauchery, or degrade human dignity.
11. **Disregarding the sacrament of reconciliation** – Ignoring or avoiding the sacrament of reconciliation, leading to a life in unrepented sin.
12. **Scandalizing others through behaviour** – Acting in ways that cause scandal to the faithful, especially the young, by violating the values of our Constitutions and the Church.
13. **Neglecting spiritual formation** – Avoiding ongoing spiritual development, study, and growth in understanding our Salesian vocation and mission.
14. **Failing to support community life** – Isolating oneself from the religious community or avoiding participation in communal activities and responsibilities.
15. **Disrespecting authority of the Church** – Speaking out or acting publicly against Church teachings, the Pope, or Church leaders.
16. **Neglecting the formation of young people** – Failing to mentor, guide, or educate young people in the Salesian spirit of St. John Bosco, neglecting their growth in faith.
17. **Engaging in secular politics** – Actively participating in partisan politics or political campaigns in ways that compromise the neutrality expected of religious, distracting from their mission.

18. **Neglecting the needs of one's own spiritual family** – Failing to offer support, companionship, or encouragement to fellow Salesians, weakening the sense of fraternity and community.
19. **Excessive attachment to personal agenda** – Prioritizing personal agenda or entertainments over prayer, community life, or apostolic work, creating imbalance in their religious life.
20. **Neglecting personal health in a reckless manner** – Failing to care for one's health in a way that impairs the ability to serve God and others, either through neglect or reckless behaviour.
21. **Failing to promote the Salesian charism** – Not embodying or sharing the specific Salesian values of joy, optimism, and kindness in daily interactions, especially with young people.
22. **Abandoning pastoral responsibilities** – Refusing or neglecting to provide spiritual guidance, counseling, or pastoral care when it is clearly needed for those we serve.
23. **Being indifferent to liturgical abuses** – Allowing or participating in improper or careless celebration of the sacraments, particularly the Mass, without showing concern for the sacredness of the liturgy.
24. **Lack of transparency or accountability** – Failing to be transparent or accountable in financial matters, responsibilities, or communal tasks, leading to mistrust within the community.
25. **Harbouring pride or arrogance** – Exhibiting an attitude of superiority, pride, or arrogance in dealings with others, which goes against the humility that is central to religious life.
26. **Misleading or manipulating young people** – Using influence or authority over young people for personal gain or manipulation, rather than for their spiritual and human development.
27. **Spiritual Sloth** – Failing to engage in personal prayer, spiritual growth, or the pursuit of holiness due to laziness or indifference, leading to a stagnation in one's relationship with God and diminishing the zeal for one's mission.
28. **Neglect of Devotion to the Eucharist, Mary, and the Pope** – Failing to show proper reverence and commitment to the Eucharist, disregarding Marian devotion, and neglecting respect for the Pope's teachings and authority undermines the core pillars of Catholic and Salesian spirituality, weakening one's relationship with Christ, the Church, and Salesian identity.
29. **Pharisaism & Rigid Legalism** – Failing to treat the confreres, especially the vulnerable and weak ones as human persons and proclaiming their limitations publicly as falling short of rules.

Based on some of the deliberate deviations that are reflected above, here are a few questions for our reflection. I invite you to find your own questions for reflection after reading this circular.

1. How does the Catholic and Salesian understanding of death as a passage to eternal life shape the way I live my consecrated life today? How can I better prepare myself spiritually for that final encounter with God?
2. Reflecting on our consecration and the moment of death, how does my life as a Salesian reflect the hope of resurrection, and what legacy of faith and love will I leave behind for those I serve, especially the young?
3. In light of the deviations spoken above, how am I being called to die to selfishness, indifference, or pride in order to fully live my vocation with zeal and fidelity?
4. How can I better understand life and death as part of a spiritual continuum, where each moment of living in Christ is a preparation for the final crossing into the 'valley of death' and a passage to eternal life?
5. In what ways am I called to experience a 'living death' to my ego, desires, or attachments in daily life, and how does this help me embrace the Salesian charism of self-giving love, while preparing for the moment when I will be fully united with God in eternity?

Let me conclude this circular with inspiring words of St. Teresa of Calcutta, who believes that anyone is capable of going to heaven. "Heaven is our home. People ask me about death and whether I look forward to it and I answer, "Of course", because I am going home. Dying is not the end, it is just the beginning. Death is a continuation of life. This is the meaning of eternal life; It is where our soul goes to God, to speak to God, to continue loving him with greater love because in Heaven we shall be able to love him with our whole heart and our soul because we only surrender our body in death - our heart and our soul live forever. When we die we are going to be with God, and with all those we have known who have gone before us: Our family and our friends will be there waiting for us. Heaven must be a beautiful place. Every religion has an eternity, another life. People who fear death are the ones who believe this is the end. I have not known anyone die in fear if they have witnessed the love of God. People die suddenly all the time so it could happen to us too at any moment. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow has not yet come, so we must live each day as if it were our last, so that when God calls us we are ready, and prepared to die with a clean heart." So dear confreres, let us remember to pray for the benefactors and all deceased members of the Salesian Family on November 5th. On November 25th let us pray for our deceased parents, when we celebrate the memory of Ven. Mamma Margaret, the mother of St. John Bosco, who is an example for a life of deep faith, simplicity, and devotion, guiding her son to become a saint. Her quiet strength and unwavering trust in God reflect a profound understanding of her journey through the "valley of death" as not an end but a passage to eternal life. Her earthly life was marked by sacrifice, love, and humility, preparing her and her family for the eternal life promised in Christ. In her, we see a model of Christian hope, where death is not feared but embraced as a gateway to everlasting communion with God. Faith admits us into death's secrets. Let us pray in a very special way for the canonization of Mama Margaret.

Dear Confreres, Death is not the end of the road, but a gateway to a better place. It is in this place that our noblest aspirations will be realised. It is here that we will understand how our experiences of goodness, love, beauty and joy are realities which exist perfectly in God. You – are on your way to union with him who loves you so. He knows the love which you had for others. God speaks now of his love for you. Our tears will not be bitter ones now, but a gentle weeping to rob our sadness of its agony and lead at last to peace - peace with God.

Yours affectionately,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fr. Don Bosco SDB', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Fr. Don Bosco SDB

INM Provincial

Date: 01.11.2024

Place: Chennai - 10

Source: INM-DBL-CIR 35/11-2024