

2. GUIDELINES AND DIRECTIVES

2.1. Renewed Commitment to Religious Discipline

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Constitutions assert that the Vicar of the Rector Major “is particularly entrusted” with “the care of religious life and discipline”¹. Starting from this constitutional statement, I was wondering what is to be understood today as religious discipline and what commitment is to be promoted in this regard in the Congregation. This is required, among other things, by the project of the Rector Major and of the General Council for the 2014-2020 period; in fact it requests to “make Provincials and Provinces responsible for the care of religious discipline by fostering a culture of *vocational fidelity* and of prevention of lapses in religious discipline”.

Religious life and discipline are not separated from one another; rather, they are realities that recall and integrate one another. Religious life is the hidden treasure and the pearl of priceless value; in its turn, religious discipline is the investment to make so as to obtain them, selling whatever one has². Religious life does not subsist without religious discipline; neither does the latter have any meaning without the first. In fact, the witness of consecrated life requires a constant commitment to discipline, and vice versa discipline aims at showing the charm of consecrated life.

The awareness of the identity of Salesian consecrated life has grown during these past years. It is “a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting”³ in the footsteps of Don Bosco. In our General Chapter 27, this identity is seen in its testimonial relevance and is deepened in its threefold mystical, prophetic and diaconal dimension. Salesian consecrated life is more and more understood and lived in the totality of its aspects as “*confessio Trinitatis*” (*confession of the Trinity*), “*signum fraternitatis*” (*sign of fraternity*) and “*servitium caritatis*” (*service of charity*)⁴; and the Salesian is more aware to commit himself to be mystic in the Spirit, prophet of fraternity and servant of the young.

Nevertheless, the sense and practice of religious discipline must still grow. At present, Provinces are committed to living vocational fidelity and to preventing lapses in religious discipline; they pay more attention in accompanying the confrères who are experiencing difficulties in living their Salesian vocation; they try to solve irregular situations. Because of this there is a greater responsibility today with regards to an authentically lived consecrated life, and therefore the need is felt for a renewed commitment to religious discipline.⁵

¹ Const. 134

² Cf. Mt 13:44-45

³ JOHN PAUL II, *Consecrated Life*, Vatican City, 1996, n. 22.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁵ It is important to resume what Rector Major Fr. Egidio Viganò had already proposed in a letter of his; Cf. E. VIGANÒ, *New Commitment in Religious Discipline*, in “Acts of the General Council” n. 293, Rome 1979. See also these other letters of his: *Saint John Bosco*, in “Acts of the General Council” n. 310. Rome 1983; *Be on the Watch, With Your Robes Hitched up and Your Lamps Alight*, in “Acts of the General Council” n. 348, Rome 1994.

1. Discipleship and Discipline

The word “discipline”, from the Latin verb “*discere*”, means learning, drill, instruction, training. “Discipline” is necessary in all sectors and walks of life: at school and at work, in the family and in the office, in sports and in social relationships. In order to learn music, a craft or a foreign language, the “disciple” must obey certain rules, follow the advice and corrections of their instructor, do an exercise that implies repetition, fatigue, sacrifice, patience and perseverance. At the beginning, discipline is mainly an exterior practice, but it is gradually interiorized until it becomes self-discipline and a life-style.

Also in the life of faith there is a journey of learning and a discipline that accompanies it. In the Gospel, the disciple of Jesus is presented as the one who sits at the feet of the Teacher and listens to his teaching, so as to walk later after him faithfully following in his footsteps. However, at the school of Jesus one does not learn only a world vision or a religious wisdom. In fact, He is a particular Teacher because the contents of his teaching coincide with His person. He himself is the Word to welcome, a Word that is the way, the truth and the life. The “discipline” we learn from Jesus is therefore an initiation to the mystery of God, to Whom he gives us access, allowing the disciple to live not only *like* Him, but *in* Him.

Jesus, who to those who listen to him speaks with authority and acts with power, lives in his conscience in an attitude of profound obedience to the Father and of full docility to the Holy Spirit. While he tells us “Learn from me”, he lets himself be led in the way of a demanding handing over of himself even unto the cross. Because of this, the letter to the Hebrews daringly asserts that, “though He was a Son, *yet* He learned obedience by the things which He suffered”.⁶ Jesus invites those who follow him to enter into this filial obedience; those who do not assume the demands of this call cannot be his disciples⁷. Therefore there cannot be any discipleship without discipline.

In the light of these considerations, we can understand that the most authentic nature of Christian discipline, of which religious discipline is a particular expression, is to be found in the Trinitarian dynamism of obedience and glorification that Jesus lived in his Passover of death and resurrection. By calling us to follow him and proposing the paradoxical discipline of life that it implies, Jesus initiates us into living as children who gratefully and humbly accept the sovereignty of God and who do not walk any longer under the burden of the flesh, but rather in the vivifying strength of the Spirit. The profound core of religious discipline is therefore becoming *docibilis a Spiritu Sancto (capable of being taught by the Holy Spirit)*, as was understood so well by venerable Fr. Giuseppe Quadrio, who made of this motto his programme of life.

Religious discipline is, therefore, an essential part of our “discipleship” in the following of Jesus. Nevertheless, this “discipleship” does not aim solely at our sanctification. The Church reminds us that “to some [...] *for the sake of all*, God gives the gift of a closer following of Christ in his poverty, chastity, and obedience”.⁸ And it re-affirms this in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, stating: “Thus, while those who follow the evangelical counsels seek holiness for themselves, they propose, so to speak, a spiritual ‘therapy’ for humanity, because they reject the idolatry of anything created and in a certain way they make visible the living God. The consecrated life, especially in difficult times, is a blessing for human life and for the life of the Church”.⁹ In fact,

⁶ Heb 5:8

⁷ Lk 14: 26-27, 33

⁸ CIVCSVA, *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to the Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate*, Rome 1983, 7.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Consecrated Life*, 87.

it is religious discipline inherent in consecrated life that demolishes the idols of pleasure, of possession and power, and gives witness to the world that God is the sole Absolute that suffices of his own.

2. Formative Commitment to Religious Discipline

It is difficult to accept the consequences that derive both at personal and community level from this evangelical vision of discipleship and discipline. The following of Christ, in fact, is always realised within well defined historical contexts, in which other styles of life are widespread, models in competition with the Gospel, different priorities by which to “discipline” one’s own existence. For example, in consumer society, the culture of liking prevails, and so does the culture of what gratifies in the moment and offers immediate satisfaction; those who grow in this context, find it difficult to understand the sense of sacrifice, renunciation, perseverance. On the contrary, in other cultures the burden of social conventions and the paternalistic use of authority may lead to a formal observance and to a formative style unable to foster personal responsibility.

The assimilation of religious discipline consolidates with the passing of time and requires a constant care for formation. In fact the loss of the sense of one’s own identity as a consecrated person, the shallowness of spiritual life and the weakening of apostolic passion often lead to an irregular life and to an exterior observance. Religious discipline is the sign of the vitality of a Congregation. Without religious discipline great things are at stake: prayer becomes sporadic, the practice of the evangelical councils minimalist, community life weak, and apostolate among the young loses momentum. In particular, the lack of fraternal life fosters individualism: the confrère takes distance from the community, lives in his own world, gradually shifts towards mediocrity and bourgeoisification, avoids asceticism and is in search of an easy life.

In formation work, it is not enough to transmit enthusiasm for the ideals of apostolate or generically to appeal to the sense of responsibility of the individual. Adhesion to the Lord Jesus requires the *concrete assumption of a consistent style of life*, of which it is important to understand the profound motivations and to which it is necessary to be trained with commitment. What St. Paul affirms in the first letter to the Corinthians, when he compares Christian life to a race in the stadium, concerns us too; like athletes who train for the race, so as to win the prize, we too are in need of a formation and a discipline that enable us to the mission: “Everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for an imperishable crown*”.¹⁰

Among the most spread attitudes in present society that today mostly challenge religious discipline and lead to that logic of spiritual worldliness often denounced by pope Francis, we can indicate in particular three aspects, which require particular attention in initial and ongoing formation: the search for self-fulfilment, individualism and spontaneism. Obviously it is not possible here to give an adequate talk on each of them. It is however easy to understand that they respectively concern the way in which to understand personal freedom in the relationships with God, with the others and with oneself.

The narcissistic quest for *self-realization* is opposed to the evangelical logic of handing oneself over and of the free gift of oneself; it does not accept the paschal dynamics according to which life is found only by losing and donating it. It leads to self-referentiality, to verify the validity of the choices on the basis of immediate gratification, of personal results and success, and not on faith and the fecundity of the sacrifice done with love and out of love. It weakens the availability to let oneself be guided by God, the sense of renunciation motivated by love, the commitment to those aspects of the mission that are not gratifying, but require a humble, hidden and unselfish work.

¹⁰ Cf. 1Cor. 9: 24-27.

Individualism, in its turn, favours retreating into oneself and a scarce knowledge of the dynamics of the community. Community life is understood in an instrumental way, as a context or background of personal protagonism, and not as the place of the experience of God and the condition for pastoral fruitfulness. This attitude, which regrettably is well spread also among us, constitutes a distortion of the right esteem for autonomy and personal initiative that find their vital space in communion with the brethren and not in an alleged self-sufficiency.

Spontaneism, finally, is a feature of contemporary culture that, in its thirst for genuineness and the refusal of conventions, tends to confound freedom and spontaneity, considering as authentic only the choices that are done without any effort and with immediacy. In this way one forgets that true freedom is the fruit of a long journey of liberation from one's selfishness and of a patient learning the capability to choose the true good. For example, spontaneism leads to the illusion of being able to do a true journey of prayer without a serious commitment of fidelity to the times of prayer, without constancy in following a method for meditation, without respecting the moments of silence. In the apostolic field, one has the illusion of being an educator without patiently learning the Salesian art of assistance; it confounds creativity and flexibility with a shallow style of action, that does not reflect and does not plan nor verify; it lets one live under a constant improvisation, mindless of educative journeys and processes.

3. Spiritual Sense of the Norms

The discipleship of Jesus and the very structure of human freedom require, as was already said, a discipline that rules the existence, delivering it from the risks of improvisation. It must help to turn the divine gift of vocation into a coherent practical behaviour that is shared in the Congregation to which one belongs and that can be recognised and witnessed to in front of all. Religious discipline has a fundamental *pedagogical function*.

For this form of life to be possible, it is necessary that, besides inspirational documents and texts, the Congregation also have rules that translate into a normative way the demands of the common vocation. Feeling bound to their observance is a component of religious profession that cannot be underestimated, nor be reduced to simply organizational motivations. The law is not the foundation of faith, but it recalls and realizes the way to accept the gift of divine grace.

The observance of rules in consecrated life is a spiritual matter. In fact, only love can grasp the spirit of the law that no letter alone will be able to transmit. Love and law do not exclude one another and are not confounded, but they reciprocally call one another. No one who loves despises the law of God, neither in its highest expressions, like the ones contained in the Scripture, nor in its manifold historical translations, like the teachings of the Church, the rules of a Founder, the Constitutions of one's own religious Congregation.

Besides its pedagogical value, the law also has a second function that, though subordinate to the first, is not less important. This is the *function of protecting the community from abuses and deviations*. If no norm can ever fully transmit the charm of the grace that is to be found in the event of the call and of the testimony of those who live it, its task is in any case that of indicating with clarity the borders out of which one is no more in the path of the charism and on the way to sanctity. The law must warn against deviations, point out dangers, indicate behaviours that are incompatible with the identity of a spiritual family and betray its spirit. Precisely in this time when the ecclesial community greatly suffered from the grave scandals of some of its members, it is again possible to recognize that a disciplinary norm constitutes, even in its most severe and sanctioning aspects, a gift that cannot be underestimated.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his homily on the Feast of the Sacred Heart at the closing of the year for priests, proposed a courageous reflection on this point. He affirmed: "Today we can see that it

has nothing to do with love when conduct unworthy of the priestly life is tolerated".¹¹ Discipline is important also in its dimension of control and sanction: as long as forms of concupiscence exist in us, it is providential that there be commandments that help recognize them and fight them off, even if it were also for some grave transgressions for which there is the threat of sanctions.

The rules of religious life, therefore, from the most severe and solemn to the most simple and wise ones, cannot be underestimated nor ignored. Even though they are not the foundation of consecrated life, yet they are the fruit of a consolidated wisdom. Those who truly love the Lord Jesus and the charism of the founder, know how to value them for what they are: a precious aid for liberty. However, those who follow them perfectly but without that interior disposition of the heart that is given by love, actually would only pretend to observe them.

Diverse are the *contents* of religious discipline and the sources from which it draws.¹² The first one of these is in the Magisterium of the Church; as part of our discipline we follow the indications that are given us in various forms: the Code of Canon Law, the guidelines of Vatican II, the teachings and decisions of the Pope, the documents of the Holy See, ... The Constitutions and Regulations are a second point of reference; in them we find ourselves in front of an original ascetical programme made of behaviours and attitudes, sensitivities and aspirations, moral qualities and virtues, that make it possible for a consecrated person to be recognised as belonging to a definite Congregation. General Chapters are another source of religious discipline; they are an exercise of discernment to discover what the Spirit indicates in a precise historical moment. Eventually, the Superiors help the confrère and the communities to know the will of God; the fraternal colloquy is also part of religious discipline, and requires openness and trust from the individual confrère and availability and welcoming from the rector; likewise, obedience to the decisions and dispositions of the superiors, active participation of the confrères in the meetings at community and provincial level are also part of religious discipline.

4. Salesian Charism and Religious Discipline

Each founder left to his spiritual children, together with the charm of his sanctity and the enthusiasm of his mission, also a peculiar vision of religious discipline that is consistent with the characteristics of his own charism. Don Bosco too, under the inspiration of the Spirit, elaborated his own concept of religious discipline; this however, before finding it in his teachings, is to be found in the example of his life. He was always concerned, for himself and for the others, with a strong pedagogy of self-control; in this way one can become an ascetic of daily life.

Even though the public image of don Bosco is characterized by his driving joy, there also is in his personal experience a consistent presence of that element of struggle and sacrifice that is a constitutive part of paschal dynamics. This is clearly testified to by those who had a close knowledge of him. Don Bosco expressed this vision, for example, in the dream of the pergola of roses: his life seems beautiful to the eyes of all, but the roses inevitably present hidden thorns, which can be trod on only with the spiritual combat of obedience and mortification. To those who have chosen Salesian life, he tells in this dream: "If you are out for a nice time, you had better go back. If not, follow me".¹³

The diverse testimonies of the first Salesians converge in showing that don Bosco had a very rigorous discipline of life and that the heroic renunciations to which he submitted himself were born from his zeal for the apostolic mission. Austerity to him was not a dimension added to his pastoral dedication from outside, but it was the internal condition to live it. In this sense, he identified the

¹¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart*, Vatican City, 11 June 2010.

¹² Fr. Gaetano Scivo, Vicar of the Rector Major, explained in an operational guideline the contents of religious discipline; Cf. G. SCRIVO, *Contents of Religious Discipline*, in "Acts of the General Council" n. 293, Rome 1979.

¹³ MB III, 34

core of Salesian discipline in the motto “*work and temperance*”, considering both work and temperance in a strongly apostolic logic: work is the service of God and of the young in the forms required by obedience; temperance is renunciation to all that opposes it.

This is the logic of “*da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”, that our Constitutions reflect in article 18: the Salesian “does not look for unusual penances, but accepts the daily demands and renunciations of apostolic life: he is ready to suffer cold and heat, hunger and thirst, weariness and disdain wherever God’s glory and the salvation of souls require it”.¹⁴ Likewise in article 71 they recall the statement of don Bosco who tells us: “Substitute acts of penance with acts of obedience”.¹⁵ The Salesian lives the mystics of work and of “*da mihi animas*” and the asceticism of temperance and of “*cetera tolle*”; there cannot be one without the other.

Religious discipline for don Bosco consists in the observance of the rule. Because of this he insists on the concrete adherence to the Constitutions: “The observance of our Rule is burdensome. [...] And then, my dear sons, do we wish to go to Heaven in a carriage? We became religious not to enjoy ourselves but to suffer and to earn merit for the next life. We consecrated ourselves to God not to command but to obey; not to attach ourselves to creatures but to practise charity towards our neighbour, moved solely by the love of God; not to live a comfortable life but to be poor with Jesus Christ, to suffer with Jesus Christ on earth, to be made worthy of his glory in Heaven”.¹⁶

Already in his first circular letter he has stated clearly: “The first object of our Society is the sanctification of its members. Therefore each one on entering will strip himself of every other thought, every other concern. Whoever enters to enjoy a calm untroubled life, have comfort [...], would have a twisted purpose and his would no longer be that *Sequere me (follow me)* of the Saviour’s, since he would be following his own temporal interests and not the good of souls. [...] Our basis for this are the words of the Saviour who says: “[...] Whoever wants to be my disciple, [...], let him follow me in prayer, penance, and especially by denying himself, accepting the cross of daily tribulations and following me. [...] But how far does he follow him? Until death, and if necessary, even death on a cross”.¹⁷

As can be seen, religious discipline as outlined by don Bosco is a faithful echo of the Gospel, with the charm and scandal of its paradoxical demands. Don Bosco proposes it with the sweetness of him who made of the preventive system a true spirituality and intends to facilitate in the confrères the practice of good with loving kindness, rather than confining himself to repressing abuses. This paternal and respectful loving kindness however is not shallow or lax; it rather expresses the conviction that people have to be drawn on the way of good with goodness and with the strength of the example, rather than with coercion and imposition; with the medicine of mercy, rather than with the arms of rigour.¹⁸

Conclusion

As a Congregation today, we find favourable conditions to assume a positive vision of and a renewed commitment to religious discipline. The promotion of the culture of vocational fidelity, the prevention of lapses in religious discipline and the solution of irregular situations certainly favour this assumption; on the other hand this remains a challenge.

¹⁴ Const. 18.

¹⁵ Const. 71. Cf. MB XIII, 89.

¹⁶ MB XVII, 15-17.

¹⁷ MB VIII, 828-829.

¹⁸ JOHN XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, Speech for the Opening of Vatican Council II, 11 October 1962, 2.

However, due to frailty and weaknesses, we may sometimes find ourselves in front of lapses in religious discipline regarding prayer, the evangelical councils, community life, the apostolic commitment or economy. In such cases all of us, and especially those who exert in the community the service of authority, must keep vigil on the behaviour and style of life of the confrères and the communities through accompaniment and fraternal correction. In the case of grave faults against discipline, as for instance the “*delicta graviora*” (*more grave crimes*), these require to be sanctioned and to intervene promptly; in such situations, the responsibility is serious and we must pay greater attention to guarantee the personal and spiritual good of the confrères, to avoid the harm these behaviours may cause to other people, and to avoid discredit on the Congregation and its action.

Let us therefore together, as a Congregation, assume the commitment to religious discipline with a renewed spirit and with full awareness: we will thus be able to overcome the risks that even today threaten our vocation so as to live our Salesian consecrated life to the full.