

DON BOSCO'S SENSE OF MISSION (MISSIONARY SPIRIT) 2013

I am grateful for this opportunity to meet with you on a day that is very much in continuity with 11 November 1875 when Don Bosco sent out the first missionary expedition. It is from this point of view that I would like us to put ourselves in line with what was Don Bosco's inspiration, his original inspiration, because the topic I have been asked to talk about is Don Bosco's sense of mission, his 'mission-mindedness' as we might say in English, the missionary dimension of his life but also his charisma, his mission, and therefore it is also the spiritual testament he has left us. This is also an opportunity to better understand the kind of response we are called to give today, because there is no doubt today that we have a different way of understanding the sense of mission, and of carrying out the "missio ad gentes".

So I would like to immediately tell you where Don Bosco's sense of mission came from, and the reasons for his immense missionary zeal.

There are 3 great elements and they need to be a point of reference for us all.

The *first* is *being obedient to the command from the Lord Jesus* who, at his Ascension, before leaving this world to return to the Father, told us "You will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth" (*Acts 1:8*). This means for believers like ourselves, for Salesians, FMA, members of the Salesian Family, young people, the first reason for being a missionary is obedience to the Lord Jesus. Described thus it should not be an extraordinary thing for us to be missionaries. Unfortunately it is becoming such, to the point where it is regarded as heroic while in fact missionaries are only doing what the Lord Jesus has asked them to do, to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, meaning that it is a task which will last till the end of the world. There is always room, then, for mission. We are all called to be missionaries and now, more than ever before, is a time to be missionaries.

The *second* element which lies behind Don Bosco's great missionary venture is his *belief in the leavening value of the Gospel*, that is, his belief that the Gospel is a leaven for every culture. In one of the most beautiful documents ever to come out of the Holy See, *Evangelii nuntiandi* in 1975, Paul VI said what on the one hand was obvious, that the Gospel can be inculturated in any culture, and that is true, that it can be expressed in different ways according to culture, but that the Gospel is also called not to identify itself with any culture. To understand why it cannot be identified with any culture it is enough to look at the cross. The cross blew Jewish culture wide open - it was closed in on itself and would not allow itself to be purified and transformed by Jesus and his Gospel, something we find reaffirmed in John's Gospel in Chapter 19 verse 6: "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die". The crucifixion seriously questions cultures for their lack of humanity, for everything that does not correspond with God's plan regarding the dignity of all people, whatever their culture, gender, race, or colour of their skin. The cross obliges culture, any culture, to take another look at itself: so there is no evangelisation unless the very nerve centre of culture is touched, the soul of culture, the decision-making heart of human beings. We saw an example of this in Rwanda and Burundi, two peoples who had received the Gospel already for centuries but who just twenty years or so ago witnessed a genocide which killed millions of people, most of them Christians. So what does all this mean? It means that the Gospel had not touched the nerve in their culture. Every culture is important because it is the place where people are born, grow, develop, learn to relate, face up to life, but every culture has so many limits. So here we have Don Bosco's firm conviction of the leavening power of the Gospel which is able to take on, yes, but, at the same time purify and uplift culture. Put in other words, the whole world needs the Gospel.

When we speak of a missionary sense we are not just thinking of Oceania, Asia, Africa, Latin America but also Europe. This culture of Europe today needs very much to be evangelised. So even if not everyone goes to the missions, everyone has to be a missionary there where they find themselves.

The *third* key and very specific element of Don Bosco's mission-mindedness is his *predilection for the young*, aware that they do not count in the social fabric of peoples and they seem to have to be resigned to being merely consumers of products, experiences and sensations, or being spectators of history rather than key players. But this does not correspond with the Gospel, or Jesus' idea and practice. When the question was put to him "Who is most important?", he called over a child and placed him in their midst. This means the young, children, teenagers must be at the centre: this is one of the richest elements of the Salesian spiritual legacy and one we should bring to all cultures we go to where often young people do not count for anything.

We began this meeting with a question as to whether you liked the RAI film on Don Bosco. I liked it very much and especially because of this, because it got us to see a man who was sensitive to the social situation, a man who saw in poor and abandoned youngsters a sign that God was pointing out to him as his mission, a man who sees that maybe he has to embark on new directions as a priest, a man who had no other reason to live other than for the young; a man who discovered that even if the young do not count in society they are the most delicate portion and so in need of great opportunities, resources and investment for their development; a man who knew how to believe in them and place his trust in their education in a truly innovative style, involving empathy, trust, friendship, love, that produced marvellous results as demonstrated by the fact that these were the very same boys who then wanted to share Don Bosco's passion for education and extend his work into the future. Young people are not only the future: they are also the present!

Let me now explain the 3 elements I have pointed out in more detail:

Obedience to Jesus' command: being witnesses of Christ.

We have to be witnesses of Christ for Europe and the world to have hope, because it seems there is no more hope. It would seem that we have arrived at the conclusion that we can achieve transcendence, the infinite through technology and the economy, by awareness of the dignity of rights, but without transcendence however, locked into an immanence without a future, condemned like Sisyphus to carrying a heavy stone on his shoulders to the top of a mountain just to see it roll to the bottom again once he reaches the peak – and he has to start all over again..

We are witnessing the birth and development of a culture without a future because it lacks hope. Being Christians then means taking our chances on a world, on a Europe with hope.

What does this mean? John Paul II expressed it very clearly as giving back the Christian soul to the process of European integration. This is done not only by recognising Europe's past Christian roots, but especially by having Christians now who can give witness and say what it means for them to be Christians in a Europe that has decided to organise itself without God, like those who built the Tower of Babel and tried to reach heaven with their own hands, as if they wanted to wrestle heaven away from God and become God themselves. What does it mean to be Christians and give back a Christian soul to Europe? It means building a welcoming world. The world we live in is decidedly unwelcoming. It is enough just to see the increasingly burning problem of migration, people seeking refuge from wars and guerrilla movements, victims of natural disasters but also the result of sheer stupidity and injustice; it means taking our chances on a world which is more empathetic in a context of globalisation which gives prime of place to individual success, "being number one"; it means having a different idea of the person, community, social fabric, the world. It means building

a world which has more and more respect for diversity. That is why I was saying that this missionary expedition is in continuity with Don Bosco's first one in 1875 but is also different. We can no longer impose the Gospel today; we can offer it but not impose it. Nine years ago, when I received my Doctorate *honoris causa* from the University of Turin, Prof. Romano Prodi also received one, and in his keynote address he offered his experience as President of the European Commission. Amongst other things he told us that in its relationship with other nations Europe can no longer impose democracy anywhere in the world, but simply offer it. In parallel terms today neither can we impose the Gospel, but need to be respectful of cultural, religious diversity and cooperate in building a world which is ever more comprehensive and tolerant.

So this is what it means to be ever more obedient to Christ's command. It seems to me to be important give content to this, turn it into an educational programme, a pastoral one, otherwise it just becomes an advertising slogan without content.

The second point, that of the leavening value of the Gospel.

Here I would like to speak concretely of the problem of globalisation as it is understood and experienced in the economic sphere, implying nothing else than the movement from national to international markets, an all-pervasive phenomenon that we note happening everywhere. It is a process of planetary exchange which links economy, finance, countries, cultures, values, religions and almost homogenises them all. It is easy to understand and imagine the negative influence of globalisation on poor countries. There is an exploitation of peoples, control by multinationals, economic protectionism, crisis and fragility of economies, exclusion of minorities, and we could go as far as decrying the ways by which millions of men and women are humiliated in their dignity, and downtrodden rights.

I am certainly not condemning globalisation. It is a human reality, but an opportunity, not a destiny, which can also have positive results: broadening of horizons, exchange of information at a planetary level, awareness of situations of poverty and exploitation wherever they happen to be, setting up international cultural centres, awareness of international solidarity and openness to structural exchange. However, what do we mean by saying it is not a destiny but an opportunity? It means that it needs to be politically governed, positively guided in the direction indicated earlier of international solidarity. John Paul II insisted on the need to humanise globalisation, give it a human face. This is the real gamble of globalisation which involves all of us and remains a question for new generations especially. Because its greatest significance is not economic, not even social or political but anthropological.

The challenge, then, is that of guaranteeing a globalisation focused on the individual, who is the required element of a globalisation of solidarity, peace and human rights. Only by focusing on the human individual, young people, adults, the disabled, migrants, that is, beginning from the littlest and the least, can communion between individuals and communities be given their worth over and above any system, idea or ideology. I insist that the problem in the world is not poverty but the dominant culture, meaning our way of thinking, conceiving of the human person, organising the social fabric, international relationships that foster individualism, greed, selfishness, the prevalence of individual good of social good, exclusion, segregation. It is from this perspective that I am not convinced that the problem of the world at international level is not just one of "a new governance", as some claim, but that we also have a "new international order". We need concrete action plans, investment to create new work opportunities, the courage to shift from a scholastic programme of pure instruction to more holistic planning, aware that education is a priority for overcoming poverty and changing culture.

UNESCO, in the preamble to its constitution, says that the economic growth of a nation is necessary but not sufficient and that political development is essential but not sufficient, that true

welfare depends on the intellectual and moral solidarity of its society. So we need to try to touch the cultures that have been so affected by this globalisation, made hostage to the economy, with the power of the Gospel and our educative presence. To globalise solidarity, peace and human rights, we need to direct ourselves especially to educating the young. This is more than ever before an opportunity for us, us Salesians, FMA, Salesian Family, Salesian Volunteer Movement. It is also necessary and urgent to act because young people are the ones most exposed to the risks, unjust and evil power because they lack experience, preparation and are fragile. Young people are called on to enrich peoples, cultures, and transform them by their presence. This was Don Bosco's conviction. Young people are full of new life, and they bring joy and music to our hearts.

So how do we help young people overcome the huge problems they need to tackle such as the desire to want things now, fragmented personality, a do-it-yourself ethic without values? I repeat that in this globalised world we need a new culture: a culture of responsible freedom. Victor Frankl used say that just as the Statue of Liberty had been erected on the East Coast of the USA, sent as a gift from France, so on the West Coast they should erect a Statue of Responsibility. We not only need a culture of rights but also one of duties, a culture of responsible freedom in the service of others that can help us overcome a culture of the logic of power, the prevailing individualism. And what do we need to create this new culture? We need to put in place an essentialist culture in contrast to the general impoverishment of spiritual and material goods. A culture of love in contrast to idolatry of the body and the prostitution of the spirit we see around us. It requires cultural honesty to call a spade a spade, call what is evil, evil, what is good, good, fearlessly denounce what is unjust, the violation of the rights of the weak without demonising or canonising everything and everyone. It implies overcoming the cult of the body (just look at the hours young people but not only young people spend on body building e fitness) to the point where it becomes idolatry. I ask myself where Mother Teresa found the light to see the needs of the poor and the energy to do something about it? Not from "body building", but from her heart. Health and caring for our body are ok, but we have to avoid 'corpolatry'. It implies the courage to be empathetic, to share our spiritual and material goods and struggle against wastage in nature, language, suffering. It means having the joy of love.

So good friends, this is what it means to be convinced as was Don Bosco of the leavening value of the Gospel. All cultures are to be accepted but also purified and uplifted.

Finally the third point: predilection for the young.

So what should we do? Believe in the centrality of the young, as Jesus said, placing a child at the centre. This means respect for the right to life, safeguarding family life. It means struggling against individualism, consumerism, ethical relativism, superficiality. More concretely it means looking after migrants, learning intercultural dialogue, putting more and more faith in education, formation, work, defending marriage, commitment to a much more active citizenship. We need to be builders of peace.

I would like to conclude with a letter I received from a young man, Nino Baglieri, who made the choice of becoming a Volunteer With Don Bosco. He had an accident which left him paralysed from head to foot. It is a letter he wrote to young people on 17 July 2004, when he made his perpetual profession and consecrated himself completely to the Lord even though he was 'nailed' to a bed. Look at what he wrote to young people:

My dear young people

Help me to praise and thank God for everything he has done in my life.

For 36 years I have been under the weight of a cross, but Jesus makes this Cross light and sweet and has turned my suffering into joy.

I am completely paralysed, and can only move my head, but my heart is filled with joy so much strength to give witness to the Lord throughout the world.

He allows me to walk through the world while remained fixed in my bed, and he helps me embrace the world even though my hands cannot move.



I am happy to be able to communicate the joy of the Lord to you; Jesus is true joy and I invite you to taste that joy, open your hearts to his love. Jesus is your companion in life, the faithful friends who will never abandon you, who will take care of each one of you, take you by hand and lead you along this world's paths.

Believe me that the world does not give happiness, flee those who peddle death: how many people get lost on this world's paths, through drugs, sex, power, amusements and pleasures that leave them empty and deluded. We are always looking for what can give us joy, but then it finishes and we set out looking yet again.

True Joy is within you, you just need to find it, Jesus is the true joy, so let yourself be guided by his love and it will all be easy. He will help you to overcome all the difficulties of life; nurture yourself with his Word which is light for our steps, approach the Sacraments often, especially Confession and Communion to have strength and to be authentic Christians, God's children.

Our hearts need to be open to Love, Charity to our neighbour. Be bearers of Peace, always ready to forgive everything and everyone. Do not ignore the problems of others but take up their suffering on yourselves.

Don Bosco said "IT IS ENOUGH FOR YOU TO BE YOUNG FOR ME TO LOVE YOU"

I love you and am close to you in prayer and my offering of suffering. Give witness through your life to God's Love for other young people. You need to be Light, Leaven and the salt of the earth. May the Holy Spirit give you the strength to be his witnesses.

We are all called to holiness, no one is excluded; it depends on us and how we give our "Yes" to the Lord. And if someone in his or her heart should hear the voice of the Lord inviting them to follow Him in consecrated life, have no fear in saying "Yes" totally; it is a Yes to life.

May Mary Help of Christians be your Guide and lead you to Jesus; may She be your Teacher and Companion in life.

Best wishes and pray for me...

Alleluia!

Nino Baglieri

Fr Pascual Chávez V., sdb

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