

Don Bosco Man of Fire: A Contemporary Spiritual Hermeneutic

Jack Finnegan, *sdb*

Is not my word like fire (Jeremiah 23:29)?

Spiritual writings of the kind associated with Don Bosco, like many texts in mystical and spiritual theology, are normally descriptive, experiential, and performative. They are primarily reflective and meditative texts where rhetoric is not the issue. Mystical and spiritual writers tend to circle around sensitising or recurring images, returning to them frequently in order to express a vision, a value, an insight that is best understood by dwelling meditatively on the images rather than by textual or logical analysis.

Spiritual texts invite meditation rather than structural analysis or deconstruction. The concern is with spiritual theology as wisdom for life. The aim of the spiritual writing associated with figures like Don Bosco is to produce holy Christians rather than learned scholars. His spiritual writings tend to reveal a pastoral and pedagogical purpose. We are confronted with the reality of applied theology rather than speculative thought.

The critical study of Don Bosco's educative and spiritual texts requires a suitable method. The approach favoured here is grounded in Wittgenstein's notion of "aspect seeing" in the context of a *Weltbild*, a picture or conception or vision of the world. The method is helpful for at least two reasons. First, it describes a kind of seeing, a horizon of interpretation responsive to the rhythms of aspect change, a seeing that facilitates "a move from Saying to Showing to Acting"¹ the very qualities that are characteristic of Don Bosco's whole approach.

Secondly, attention to the dynamic nature of spiritual growth, of transformative moves, makes sense in efforts to explore the writing of an engaged pastoral mystic like Don Bosco, not least because the method is essentially experiential and performative, something embodied and lived rather than communicated in theoretical fashion. Don Bosco did write, but he lived and acted what he wrote. As a pastoral educator he is less interested in philosophy than in lived reality. At the core of his concern is a relationship with God that springs from the heart and gives rise to a love-wrought knowledge.

The approach is evocative of Ephesians 3:17b-19 which influenced St Bonaventure's approach:

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

In postmodern contexts such a method hints at allegorical and symbolic senses of spiritual and mystical texts, approaches informed by patristic and medieval visions of hermeneutics that date back to Origen and his somatic, psychic and pneumatic senses: the literal, the moral and the spiritual. Under the influence of Gregory the Great Origen's three became four, summed up in the celebrated verse composed by the Dominican Augustine of Dacia who died in 1282:²

Littera gesta docet, quod credas allegoria. Moralia quod agas, quo tendas anagogia. The literal sense teaches what happened, the allegorical what you believe. The moral what you should do, the anagogical where you are going.

¹ Peter Tyler, *The Return to the Mystical: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Teresa of Avila and the Christian Mystical Tradition* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011) x.

²² Quoted in Ewert Cousins, "The Fourfold Sense of Scripture in Christian Mysticism" in Steven T. Katz, editor, *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 118-137, 123.

Dante's description of the four senses in a letter describing how his *Commedia* should be read has influenced the use of symbolic methods in postmodern approaches to spiritual literature. Dante bases his description of the method on Psalm 114:1-2.³

*Now if we look at the **letter** alone, what is signified to us is the departure of the sons of Israel from Egypt during the time of Moses; if at the **allegory**, what is signified to us is our redemption through Christ; if at the **moral** sense, what is signified to us is the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to the state of grace; if at the **anagogical**, what is signified to us is the departure of the sanctified soul from bondage to the corruption of this world into the freedom of eternal glory. And although these mystical senses are called by various names, they may all be called allegorical, since they are all different from the literal or historical.*⁴

Applying the four-fold model to the images of fire, flame and furnace as they recur in Don Bosco's writings, especially when we understand them as qualities of the human heart, we unfold a series of aspect changes in the symbolism that suggest increasingly profound performative and experiential potentials, the very qualities Don Bosco sought to unlock in the lives of the young and in his Salesians. The literal or historical understanding confronts us with fire as an event and an awesome natural force. The moral or tropological understanding suggests the transformative nature of fire, an ecology of dynamic virtue constellated by the forces of charity and love; it also has pedagogical force because fire throws light on every action and behaviour. There are always new spiritual lessons to learn and self-appropriation of such lessons remains a spiritual challenge throughout life.

The allegorical or typological understanding of fire and flame suggest the blossoming light and warmth of personal encounter with the living Christ; and in the realm of faith fire also infers a pedagogy of faith development and growth. Anagogy, or lifting up, represents the world of mystical meaning, or self-transcendent spirituality. It brings fire to the higher level of unitive experience, the level of passionate desire for God and union with God in every aspect of life.⁵ Movement between the different levels is quite fluid, especially when we are concerned with the symbolism of love and the heart, with the pastoral and spiritual passion that so characterised Don Bosco himself. In such a light it is not difficult to discern the brightness of transfiguration, the cleansing, forming, renewing encounter with the warmth of divine/human love in the heart of Christ: the furnace of spiritual life.

Within the Salesian tradition other images suggest themselves: the heart of Christ where two fires meet, or the transformative passion of the engaged contemplative self. It also posits a relationship between self, learning, community, ritual, sacrament and symbol, and whatever else is being experienced in time and place. Loving and knowing go hand in hand along the pathway to God.⁶ The best spiritual texts draw us beyond ourselves. By pointing the way towards the other/Other they bring us to places of fire. For such texts the living encounter with God is not a matter of deduction from first principles or of the fruits of logical synthesis and philosophical analysis. They tend to be practical, inductive, diachronic, and descriptive of experiences of God. They reveal the touch of the Divine in human consciousness and awareness.

Such imagery and metaphor is not original to Don Bosco who learnt them from the spiritual tradition he inherited through Don Cafasso who writes: "procuriamo che il nostro cuore sia come una fornace di amore, allora ci sarà facile con parole, con sospiri, con preghiere infuocate, infiammare anche gli altri. Con fuoco alla mano si può dar fiamma anche a una selva la più frondosa e verde, così se il nostro cuore, se la nostra lingua manderà fiamme di fuoco e di amore vinceremo, e daremo fuoco, per così dire, ai più ostinati e fermi." (*Esercizi spirituali al clero*. I: Meditazioni, 641-642). A review of Don Cafasso's writings confronts us with the paradox of fire: a fire that liberates the human spirit and a fire that imprisons the human heart. He also taught that the heart of the priest ought to be a furnace of divine love, living and breathing God's love, not a cistern of polluted waters (Ibid. 639-640). Don Bosco learnt the lesson well.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dante Alighieri, "The Letter to Can Grande," in *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri*, translated and edited by Robert S. Haller (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1973) 99.

⁵ See Ewert Cousins, "The Fourfold Sense of Scripture in Christian Mysticism", 124.

Similar usages are central to the writings of St Francis de Sales. The Salesian spirit celebrates a heart set aflame with God's love (See *Ouvres*, XIV, 81-82; Letter CDLXXXVIII). Acts of charity and humility, of true service of the other, are the wood that feed the fire of sacred love (Letter DCXXII). In Salesian spirituality the heart serves a number of purposes. It is a means of describing and understanding the life of God, of visioning God's heart as the source and sustainer of life. For Francis de Sales reflection on the heart of Christ opens two images: it is the womb of spiritual birth and nourishment and the means of access to the heart of God, an access full of the grace of unity and of unitive possibility. This is the fire Christ casts upon the earth (Luke 12:49).

Can you hear echoes of Don Cafasso's and Francis de Sales' vision in Don Bosco's words when he writes: Finalmente dal cuor di un Levita, dove annidi l'ecclesiastico spirito, esser non può, che come da ardente fornace, non erumpano fuori scintille di zelo, a procurar la gloria di Dio, e la salvezza delle anime. Fu questo il segno, che agli altri appose il suggello. (*Cenni istruttivi di perfezione*, 21). Here are some other examples: "incendio d'amore" "fiamma d'amore" "infiammandole il cuore di un amore ardentissimo", (*Cenni storici intorno alla vita della B. Caterina De-Mattei*, 22); "uno splendore di viva fiamma" (ibid, 33); "mi pare aver dentro di me una fornace ardente" (ibid, 40); "infiammata Carità" (*Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo*, 17); "carità infiammata" (ibid, 9), "infiamma la carità" (ibid,17); "con una torcia accesa in mano (simbolo della fede, di cui doveva infiammarsi il suo cuore)" (*Conversione di una Valdese*, 26).

What we are dealing with in the interactive imagery of fire, flame and furnace is mythopoeic metaphor, without which we are unable to understand and create visions of reality.⁷ There is in the symbolism of fire a longing for spiritual completion, for regeneration, for renewal, for shared participation⁸ in the divine, and for liberation from all the forces that diminish life, that block and hinder the touch of God's transforming love. In fact Edward Hussey identifies an intriguing cycle of associations of significance to processes of spiritual unfolding: wisdom-God-fire-soul-wisdom.⁹ Fire is the bridge. It also suggests the soul's highest destiny.¹⁰ Fire is spiritual because of its links to light, that ancient medium of divine communication and presence.¹¹

The furnace, on the other hand, is a symbol of spiritual gestation, a metaphor with implications of process, transformation and ascension. But it also represents the soul's own grace-touched fire.¹² In such a light it is possible to envision the *fornax amoris* as a metaphor that endows intimate inner worlds with sacred and cosmic proportions, and it should come as no surprise that for Aristotle the heart itself is a furnace. The furnace-heart hints at the holiness of fire and its potential for spiritual enlightenment, for deliverance from unitive ignorance and refusal in ways that illumine and touch the lives of others. Certainly as Don Bosco uses it the human heart as *fornax amoris* retains clear spiritual and pastoral-educative consequences. It speaks of passion for the better things. The furnace-heart is the engine that drives the spiritual project.

For Don Bosco, as even the most superficial reading of his writings makes clear, the heart is a complex symbol operating on many different levels, sometimes spiritual, sometimes pedagogical, sometimes pastoral but always central. In Don Bosco's spirituality the heart represents a core relational value. At one and the same time it is a centre of affectionate warmth, tenderness, trust, gentleness, wisdom, compassion, confidence, vigour, unity and closeness; and it is the source of all the best qualities of the human character, especially when they are touched by the expansive brightness of holiness and graced by divine presence. It is as if, in Don Bosco's creative mind, the Salesian stands

⁷ See Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 279.

⁸ On the participatory significance of fire in early thought see Geoffrey Noel Berry, *Under the Dominion of Light: an Ecocritical Mythography* (Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University, 2009) 68, 69.

⁹ Edward Hussey, *The Presocratics* (London: Duckworth, 1972) 58.

¹⁰ Berry, *Under the Dominion of Light*, 71.

¹¹ See Sergius Kodera, *Disreputable Bodies: Magic, Medicine, and Gender in Renaissance Natural Philosophy* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010) 146-147.

¹² See Hussey, *The Presocratics*, 56.

simultaneously before God and the young furnace-heart in hand, so that in and through the heart on fire motives and intentions are made plain.

Don Bosco's use of metaphor is creative and intuitive, revealing the basis of his spiritual and pastoral-educative vision. His favourite images, metaphors and symbols, especially his interweaving of heart, fire and furnace, allow us to trace the relationships and connections he perceived at work in the human spirit by using an image from the experiential world to map spiritual reality. Then intuitive understanding allows metaphor to unfold holistic representations of spiritual birth and growth. As an educator and pastor he clearly appreciated the creative side of his chosen metaphors and the powerful impact of their pictorial logic.

MORE ON FIRE

In its various expressions fire is a metaphor for powerful forces: love, energy, passion, transformation, purification, light and enlightenment. According to a story in the Hebrew Talmud the Pentateuch itself was written in two kinds of fire: a black fire and a white fire. More, the Pentateuch is sealed with fire and bathed in bands of fire. One way of understanding this paradoxical description, this wonderful metaphor of words and pages written and wrapped in fire, is to envisage black letters on a white background in which the black of the words and the white of the page are both fiery with meaning and divine possibility; and the white spaces between the words are bright flames too. There is here something of the mystery of divine holiness as Devouring Fire surfacing in the silence between and behind words. There is something hinting at powerful undertones, a subtle music bespeaking silences and spaces, like the spaces between breaths, pregnant with the creative potentials of holy fire and soul-making rhythms of passionate intensity.

God's silence is as profound and meaningful as God's words. God's passionate fire transforms and renews through words and silences that are equally infinitely eloquent, infinitely fluent; full of grace and gifts of lavish transformation. Without the silence and the white fire nothing can be heard, nothing can be read, nothing can be seen, nothing understood. The white fire makes the black fire visible, endows it with meaning, and makes meaning possible. What is God saying to us in the invisible language of white fire, in the unheard whispers of sacred eternity, in the music made by tongues of fire and the outpourings of divine Spirit playing in sounds and the rules of language? Part, at least of the answer is that Spirit ever seeks to open new ways to peace and love. The problem is, do we have eyes to see and ears to hear the music of divine fire?

What is being said by marginalised people to the self-contented mainstems? What is the feminine spirit saying to the masculine? What is a child's smile saying in the magical stillness of a moment that stretches into eternity? What do lovers say in the bright silence of sunset? Is everything meaningful written? Can everything significant be uttered? Are overtones possible without undertones; are foregrounds possible without backgrounds? How is the word of God spoken to the universe? Is cosmic language one of light and fire? Is spirit a realm of fire? Who speaks the white fire, makes its potentials visible in our day? Those who are passionate will speak what the transformation of the world requires, those passionate about the world, passionate about their God.

Who is ready to embrace spiritual fire, white fire, black fire? Who is ready to embrace the sheer splendour of transcendent love? Is fire the realm where cosmos and humankind find common space? Is Jesus the Risen One, freed from the prison of Golgotha, revealed as the fire bearer, the giver of transformation? What happens when fire, mystery, passion are absent from our way of being in the world, perhaps even rejected? What happens when we forget to make room for light and fire, for mystery and passion in our lives because of the inward press of failure, the bitter gall of rejection and pain?

And where is the fire mystery played out if not in the human heart? In the fire mystery of God's word the fire mystery of the human heart is unfolded as soul fire, passion for Jesus, the passion that shaped and informed Don Bosco's pastoral heart. It unfolds in the light of the journey to Golgotha and beyond, the journey through the world's pain, the world's desert, the world's seeming abandonment

and loss. How can there be soul growth without soul fire, a fire set ablaze in stillness by divine fire? But divine fire represents a dangerous realm, one where we are no longer in control, no longer anchored in the apparent security of familiar comfort zones and collusive patterns. And therein lies the rub.

Fire is something numinous, something powerfully transforming, but also something destructive and devastating. It is numinous, a symbol of God's vibrant presence: God is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24; 2 Chronicles 7:1; Hebrews 12:29); and Moses encounters God in a flame in a bush that is not consumed (Exodus 3:2). God's word is fire (Jeremiah 23:29). The symbols of the covenant with Abraham are a smoking pot and a blazing torch (Genesis 15: 17-21) and the living creatures in Ezekiel's inaugural vision are like coals of fire or burning torches (Ezekiel 1: 13). But fire is also destructive. Hail and storm and lightening fall on the Egyptians (Exodus 9: 22-26). There is the fire of Gehenna; and the fire that falls on Moab and the strongholds of Kerioth (Amos 2:2) and similar places. There is also the pain of the refiner's fire (Malachi 3:2) necessary if the dross is to be removed and the silversmith produce something beautiful, full of integrity (Proverbs 25:4). There is the furnace of Egypt and the furnace of Babylon.

Fire is also transforming blessing. That is made clear in the Baptist's prophecy of baptism by Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16; Matthew 3:11) and in the psalmist's empowering image: God makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire (Psalm 104:4). Wind and fire also come together at Pentecost when the apostles were transformed and became messengers and ministers of life to the full (Acts 2:1-15). Is it any wonder John of the Cross turns to the imagery of flame and the fire of love? Is it any wonder he speaks of fire transforming the soul into itself until "the soul beholds itself as one immense sea of fire"?¹³

Transformed by love the soul takes fire, longing for God and passion for God become a flame within. It is not difficult to see in all of these instances of fire powerful intimations of God's Holy Spirit. Nor is it difficult to imagine the fiery impact of the Spirit in Don Bosco's life and mission. How can anyone become prophetic without transforming fire? How can they become a servant? How else is the Christian mystic formed except by entering the furnace of love? Except by becoming, like Don Bosco, a furnace of love. Are we ready to embrace its power?

Three Concluding Questions

How does the image of fire help us speak to the spiritual emptiness of our time?

How does it help us speak to the consumerism and materialism that has engulfed so many people's lives in postmodern and postsecular cultures leaving them spiritually dissatisfied?

Without the touch of fire how are we as pastoral educators to speak into the largely unprocessed nucleus of the human psyche where the unending struggle for a sense of purpose and significance goes on and where passion for the transcendent is born?

¹³ *Living Flame*, 10, 11.