

The Moderator's Goodnight ***"An experience of exercises of the Spirit, in the Spirit"***

A retreat (or 'spiritual exercises') is an experience where the initiatives of God's grace, Christ's proposals, the inspirations of the Spirit challenge us strongly. So therefore we ask ourselves what attitudes we have for beginning this spiritual adventure: are we tired, longing for something? Sad or happy? Disturbed or calm? How capable are we of being open to God's grace, courage, faced with what the Lord Jesus is proposing; are we available to the Spirit? Are we ready to tackle this experience openly, courageously, and with availability?

The spiritual life needs to be exercised. To gain a skill, a readiness, an attitude we need to be methodical, repeat the exercise, make a patient effort. Athletes and artists have to train or practise, try and try again, repeat their movements and their gestures so they can give a quality performance. This is also true for the spiritual life; it requires an ascetic approach, and that means exercise. For example, prayer is a gift, but it is also an art we must learn.

The experience that we have begun this evening is spoken of in the plural if we translate it from Italian, that is, 'exercises', because it presents us with various spiritual exercises we are meant to put into practise.

1. The first of these exercises is setting up the right conditions for paying attention: focusing, relaxing, converging. According to its Latin etymology, attention means "tending towards"; this is a movement of the spirit towards something or someone. Creating the capacity for attention is to grow in our personal unity. Our exercises have just begun; we need to "enter into them" immediately, allowing ourselves to get involved without being distracted, superficial, lacking in attention. Spiritual life takes place in the heart, the place where we have our desires and make our decisions. It requires that we go deep and go inward. So therefore we have to focus on our heart!

2. The second exercise is silence. The ascetical tradition recognises the essential need of silence for the spiritual life. "Prayer has silence as its father and solitude for its mother" Savonarola said. In the experience of love, silence is often more eloquent and intense than words. Unfortunately silence is rare today, deafened as we are by noise, bombarded by messages, overwhelmed by chatter. "In silence is the wonderful inherent power of observation, clarification and concentration on essential things" Bonhoeffer wrote. From silence can come the luminous word. Silence is the guardian of inwardness. Over these days together let us make them an exercise of silence. Let us seek out places to be silent. This will help us achieve that inner silence that goes on in our heart, the place for our spiritual struggle.

3. Another exercise is listening. Our ability to speak to God depends on our readiness to listen to him: faith comes out of listening. Prayer is above all an act of listening: listening to God through the sacrament of his Word which is the Scriptures; listening to God in history and in daily life; listening to God through the discernment which we have learned from our familiarity with the Gospel in "lectio divina". Spiritual life could be called an ascetics of listening, an art of

listening. We need to pay attention to who we are listening to, to what is heard, and to how it is heard. Listening demands a laborious effort to recognise the Word of God in human words, and constant discernment of his will in historical events. Listening leads the believer to say with Jacob: "Truly, the Lord is in this place but I never knew it" (Gen 28:16).

4. Finally, there is the exercise of prayer. "The most difficult work of all is prayer" the young monks used hear the elder monk say. Prayer is our response to God's decision to enter into relationship with us. According to the Scriptures it is God who seeks us out, questions us, calls us. Prayer is our response, in its various forms: giving thanks, praise, blessing, adoration; request, invocation, supplication, intercession. Prayer is seeking God, or openness to the encounter with him. The Psalms make this evident: "O God, you are my God, I am seeking you" (Ps 63). It is this relational dimension that best expresses the identity of Christian prayer; it immerses us in dialogue with God. In these exercises, over and beyond liturgical prayer, let us find time for personal prayer: "The Lord is here and he is calling us".

The Constitutions speak of these Exercises as a powerful experience. They "are occasions of spiritual renewal which Don Bosco considered the fundamental part and the synthesis of all the practices of piety. For the community and for every Salesian these are privileged moments for listening to the Word of God, discerning his will and purifying our hearts. These times of grace restore to our spirit a deep unity in the Lord Jesus" (C. 91).

Our Salesian life is subject to risk – of superficiality, activism and wear and tear. It is easy to be caught up in activity and not give time to God. Our Rule invites us to give importance to these occasions of the Spirit. Let us not give in to the temptation to turn them into study days or discussion. Let us give importance to listening to the Word of God, which will allow us to discern his will for the present moment And which will call us to purification of the heart.

Don Bosco did not hesitate to say: "The Retreat can be called the support of religious congregations and a treasure for the members who take part". And when he was drawing up the rules for the Retreat he wrote: "Our humble Society is in debt to it for its great development, and for many of its members the beginning of a better life will depend on the Retreats".