

Prophets of Fraternity

Invitation to pray the Word

“Fraternal life lived in community is an alternative life-style, a counter-cultural proposal, and therefore it is prophecy. Widespread individualism, social exclusion, cultural acceptability are challenges to which the Salesian community responds, showing that it is possible to live as brothers, sharing ones life and communicating in depth... Living together in community is first of all a vocation and not a personal choice for convenience sake: we are called by God. Fraternal life needs to discover gratuity and an ability to relate. The young people who are drawn to consecrated life are fascinated by the way fraternal life is lived... Differences constitute a treasure to be recognised and appreciated also by the educative and pastoral communities, in which the various vocations are united in living and working together”.¹

“God calls us to live in community and entrusts us with brothers to love” (C. 50): community life, then, is, “for us Salesians a fundamental requirement and a sure way of fulfilling our vocation” (C. 49). With two lectio offerings G. Zevini invites us to turn our Salesian life into a prayer thus gratefully recognising it as a gift of God and giving witness to it as “prophecy in action” (VC 85), since “all of religious life's fruitfulness depends on the quality of fraternal life in common”.²

Analysis of two out of the three summaries relating to the life of the Jerusalem community is, logically, the first text to be prayed. Luke wanted to tell us that as the disciples, who shortly beforehand had betrayed their Lord, began to live together they could now ‘touch’ the power – the Spirit – who had raised Jesus from the dead. Fraternal life woven out of attention to the needs of others and detached from material goods, is tangible proof of a new life and is especially effective as a proclamation of the Risen Lord

The Spirit lies at the source of common life and its diversity. Paul had to explain to the Christians at Corinth that in their community, unity of life and manifold gifts come from a unique source, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus. The abundance of charisms and ministries were at the service of unity of faith and worship. Paul provides norms so that these gifts of the Spirit may be experienced in common, but he does not wonder that difficulties arise precisely because of these gifts. Having to take community crises into account could open our eyes to the presence of the Spirit in the community!

¹ An outline for reflection and work on the theme of GC27, AGC 413 (2012) 59

² John Paul II, Address to the Plenary of the CIVCSVA (20-11-1992), in OR 21.11.1992, no.3.

I. The common life of the first Christian community (Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-35)

Introduction

The attitude of communion and sharing in fraternal life as we find it in the Church's reflection today and the pastoral involvement we experience as a Salesian Family preparing for the Bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth, and, especially, as we Salesians prepare for GC27, deserves particular attention. In the light of the Church as "a mystery of communion" and related to events in the Church of this kind such as the Year of Faith and the Bishops' Synod on "New Evangelisation", the Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-35 text appears in all its current relevance to life. In reality, there is no religious community or Church group that would not find it interesting to meditate on this testimony of the apostolic Church, which continues to be normative for the Church in every era.

The biblical text

***⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need...
³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.***

Lectio, exegetical and spiritual commentary

We begin with the framework of reference Acts 2:42-45 and then tie it in with Acts 4:32-35. The biblical text offers a model of behaviour for every Christian community as well as for consecrated life. It is the first of a number of summaries where Luke presents a picture, somewhat idealised but "normative" nonetheless, of life in the Church. In other words the Evangelists lays out a situation with the important and necessary points for building up each community of faith and its spiritual life, meaning the ontological state of relationships amongst the early Christians: "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*" (v.42). There are four things then that every religious community must constantly do in order to remain faithful to the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus.

1. *Devote themselves to the teaching of the apostles.* We know that the *didaké* is different from the *kérygma*, the first announcement: it is a work of formation, deeper appreciation, of illustrating the person and mission of the Lord Jesus. Christians of this early Church listened to the teaching and the word of the apostles, and thus were introduced to knowledge of the Gospel so they could achieve maturity as believers and have a true experience of the Lord. Formation

and knowledge of the mystery of Christ, tied to a life of testimony and faith in the light of God's Word is a concern that has often accompanied the story and life of the Church, as also the life of various religious communities.

2. *Devote themselves to fraternal communion.* Fraternal communion (= *koinonia*) is the real community life understood as solidarity at a material level, as union of hearts and participation in common spiritual goods. Luke is very attentive to fellowship in all its dimensions, from finance to detachment from goods, to putting personal spiritual resources in common. Also important was the statement that goods were distributed “*as any had need*” (v.45), an ever present programme and constructive path which the primitive Church constantly walked.
3. *Devote themselves to the breaking of the bread.* This is the characteristic feature of worship meetings for the early Christians, where they repeated Jesus' gestures during the Last Supper. But it also indicates meals Jesus took with sinners and then as the Risen Lord with his disciples. It is a clear allusion to the Eucharist. This happened at home where they lived out their Christian life, where there was awareness that even the poorest Eucharist, if well-prepared and celebrated truthfully, was essential for the life of the first believers. True fraternal communion meant celebrating the Eucharist well, aware that they were living out their Christian life fully around the Lord's table.
4. *Devote themselves to prayer.* The term is in the plural because there were various kinds of prayer. They prayed in the temple, during meals or in secret in their own homes. Here Luke adds the element of “*devoting themselves (another translation is persevering)*” (v. 42), since it is one of the typical features of prayer “without ceasing” (1Ts 5,17). To understand this attitude of relationship with God we need to see it as part of the traditional spiritual teaching of the primitive community which, in various ways, followed this ideal: they were always at prayer, “at all times” (Eph 6:18), “in every prayer” and “lifting up holy hands” (1Tim 2:8). Naturally prayer was tied to charity to the point where Origen could say: “One is always praying if he joins prayer to works he must accomplish, and these works to prayer. Only this way can the precept to pray without ceasing be realised”.³ In these few lines from the acts of the Apostles we see an atmosphere of joy, the freshness of origins attained by the heart of someone who takes part in this “reconstruction” of a new humanity. It is an atmosphere which Christians of all successive generations have found enchanting.

But the heart of the discourse in this text is expressed by the words: “there was not a needy person among them” (v.34), because the community members “were of one heart and soul” (v.32), something the biblical tradition and secular culture had always dreamed of. In fact the eschatological community of the last times will be marked by the fact that “there will be no-one in need among you” (Deut 15:4) and the Greeks dreamed of having: “all things in common”. Every community that wants to be evangelical experiences detachment from material goods in its heart, an essential premise for harmony of spirits and achieving the goals of the spiritual life. The Jerusalem community is the definitive, perfect realisation of that. For other communities along the way, like ours, Jesus' prediction comes into play: “*for you always have the poor with you*” (Mk 14:7). Finally the text adds: “*With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*” (v. 33). It appears not to fit the rest of the context. But many exegetes have appropriately observed that Luke is saying that the power of testimony to the resurrection of the Lord comes precisely from community life. Attention

³ De oratione 12, PG 11,452.

to others' needs and detachment from material goods are basic elements for building fraternal community, and at the same time makes proclamation of the Word of the Risen Lord particularly effective.

Meditatio, applied to Salesian life

The event of the first Pentecost and the explosion of the Spirit and enthusiasm of early mass conversions, concludes unexpectedly: very different people begin to experience a fraternal lifestyle. With the coming of the Spirit the unrealisable dream of fellowship is made possible: knowing we are brothers and living as brothers. Of all the miracles, prodigies and signs, this one is the most impressive: people who do not know one another come to understand and speak the same language of charity, placing their goods in common. Something great has begun in the world: love of others becomes stronger than self-love. Fellowship, a miracle of Pentecost, manifests the Church's true face and becomes the driving force of the Church's expansion: freedmen and slaves, rich and poor, the schooled and the unschooled, all come together around the same table, a shared and Eucharistic event, to experience the new prophetic reality of the children of God, in Christ, in the power of the Spirit.

Nurturing our life as brothers is the first and most secure support for the Salesian mission in the Church, given that the surest result of the Spirit is to build up a fraternal community. An article of the early Constitutions written by Don Bosco says: "All of the gathered members will live in common bound only by fraternal charity and simple vows that require them to form one heart and one soul to love and serve God".⁴ The way of living of communities which stemmed from the apostles has always been seen as a point of reference for religious Orders and Institutes and for us Salesians. This ideal still fascinates today, even if there is no lack of sceptics regarding the possibilities for experiencing this kind of fellowship. So Christian fellowship is the first sign to present to evangelise the world and the young. It is not only a sign which acknowledges that we are disciples of the Lord Jesus (*Jn* 13:35), but it is also a sign that the Lord Jesus is the One sent by the Father (*Jn* 17:21), not one of the prophets, but The Prophet, the Son.

The Salesian community is founded on God, who is also its model: "God calls us to live in community and entrusts us with brothers to love" (*Cost* 50). Common life in fellowship, which from a Salesian perspective has love and service of God as its end, is carried out in mission towards the needy, especially poor young people relegated to the fringes of society. This life demands fraternal affection, sharing and spiritual union as it says in our Rule of Life: "This is why we come together in community, where our love for each other leads us to share all we have in a family spirit, and so create communion between person and person" (*Cost.* 50). Having one heart means, for us Salesians, having a single will and the same aims. Don Bosco once told a Salesian cleric: "You can and must study the way to fire up all the brothers in our Society with the love of God, and not stop until everyone is one heart and soul for loving and serving the Lord with all our strength for the rest of our lives. You will certainly give example of this *verbo et opere*".⁵

The more individualism increases, the more the community in its various shapes and forms will end up being unable to present itself as a fellowship. Fellowship is built through personal effort and happy proclamation of the Gospel, coming out of witness of life. The only ecclesial model that comes from the biblical texts is one of fellowship: it is not just a theological model, but a community model to be built up as the premise for

⁴ *Early Constitutions* ms. in ACS 022 (1), c. I *Forma*, art. 1.

⁵ *Epistolario. Introduction, critical texts and notes*. Ed. F. Motto, Roma, LAS, 1999, II 174

any other kind. Only the beauty of community fellowship will give back thrust and impact to the Salesian mission. And if this is true, the model cannot be dismissed as utopian or poetic or too vague, as one occasionally hears people say. This would see the triumph of a materialistic ecclesiology which, in the name of realism, is unable to see the mystery of fellowship, the great Christian novelty of our society.

Oratio, making things personal

Lord, the words about Pentecost remind us especially that the Holy Spirit alone is the basis of unity and harmony in the Salesian community, the criterion of communion in personal and community life. We know that he follows up Jesus' work in history, inspiring an existential hermeneutic of Christian life: involving the Church community, religious life, the life of each Salesian in a constant effort of renewal. This consists in creative and constant fidelity to the Spirit of Christ and Don Bosco which enlivens us.

Only this way can the Salesian community offer room for life, when the Spirit comes to free up each one's drive for intelligence, charity, freedom, creativity and give them reign in our communities and life together with others. then will the Salesian community show forth its prophetic calling: to be a sign of hope, opening horizons of meaning and liveableness to young people, pointing how how to achieve fraternal communion and communication amidst cultural and religious differences. The rediscovery of the centrality of God's Word and of the other's face, especially the face of the poor, someone who is different, the non-believer, someone who belongs to a different Creed, remind every Salesian of his vocation to listen to the world and the young. The Holy Spirit becomes one with these different faces and can be contemplated in his fruits, the fruits of holiness (*Gal 5:22*).

II. Common life and the variety of the Spirit's gifts (1 Cor 12:3-13)

Introduction

We are introduced to *lectio divina* through the words of H. Urs Von Balthasar: “The motion of love between heaven and earth is guided by the Holy Spirit, and he completes this relationship, established in Christ, with the Spouse: Sion-Mary-*Ekklesia*. The Christian exists at the heart of this event, which seeks to be a reality in and for him, through his loving devotion to love. His life must always be a creative translation, God's future forever in the Holy Spirit”.⁶ Then there are the words of our Salesian tradition which defines the Salesian spirit as “our own style of thought and feeling, life and activity, in putting into operation the specific vocation and mission which the Spirit does not cease to give us. More specifically, the Salesian spirit is the complex of elements and values of the world of men and the Christian mystery (before all else, the Gospel, Church, the Kingdom of God...) to which the sons of Don Bosco, gathering the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and by reason of their mission, are especially sensitive, as much in their interior disposition as in their outward behaviour” (SGC no. 86).

The biblical text

³Brothers, no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good: ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. ¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Lectio, exegetical and spiritual commentary

The experience of fellowship in community and that of the Spirit are a constant in the New Testament, but the form it takes may vary. These different forms are at the Church's origins, and God's Word clearly shows how the presence of the Holy Spirit works in the life of the religious community stamping it with unity and mission-mindedness.

The language of the Spirit and God's Word comes down upon us and leads the community of faith not to impose its own language, but to enter into the language of other human beings, to “speak of God” and proclaim the Gospel according to the

⁶ *Spiritus Creator*. Saggi teologici III, Morcelliana, Brescia 1972, 328.

possibilities of understanding the other has. This means that St Paul in his mission saw in the recipients of proclamation not just a simple passive receiver, but a theological being whose culture determines the shape and approach of the mission itself. Obviously all this has important implications at the level of community life and interpersonal relationships: loving the other means listening to the other, accepting him or her for their difference, in their otherness, entering into their sensitivity so as to communicate without violence, without imposition, but in charity and truth, that is opening ourselves positively to their difference. This, for Paul, is a spirit-filled activity, the work of the Spirit coming down from on high, a work which comes from God. Paul says that this Spirit is opposed to the “flesh” (cf. Gal 5:16-17), that is, to man's selfish tendencies, closing in on himself, rejecting encounter and communion with the other.

The early Christian communities, in fact, had a joyful and lively experience of the Spirit and recognised the variety and wealth of the Spirit's manifestations and gifts. But they also recognised that these were not without ambiguity. Thus the certainty of the Spirit's presence in the community does not close off discussion in the community but opens a new and important one, about what is needed to guarantee that the various gifts in the community show fidelity to the tradition and an ability to help build it up together.

This was the experience of the Corinthian community. The community had many charisms and ministries, but equally many tensions and contrasts. When he intervened, Paul said that the variety of gifts comes from the Spirit who is manifold in his gifts and cannot show himself through just one. Uniformity is never a sign of the Spirit. But so that the variety of gifts can be a sign of His presence and activity three conditions are needed:

The first is the *faith* at the heart of which is the statement that: “*Jesus is Lord*” (v.3). Whoever says that Jesus is Lord, comes from the Spirit; whoever says the contrary cannot come from the Spirit. But what does it mean to proclaim that “Jesus is Lord”? Above all that Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified one, is Risen; that he is present and active now in the community; that his way, the way of the Cross, is the way his disciples must follow.

The second is that the variety of gifts finds its point of convergence in that *common building up*. Behind the variety each one has lies charity, the common and best charism of all. It is only with this condition that one can speak of the presence of the Spirit.

There is a third criterion for discerning the Spirit: charism is understood as function, as *service*, not as dignity. Charism is not the basis of dignity, or some greatness to be vaunted, but is a task to carry out, a service on behalf of others. This is the central, revolutionary statement that Paul develops with his allegory of the body and its members. A gift understood as a kind of dignity, something for itself, is one that is used to one's own advantage, and ceases to be a charism coming from the Spirit. The Spirit is where - and only where - the gift is a service and openness to one's brothers and sisters.

Meditatio, applied to Salesian life

The Church is a community, a rich communion of various charisms. Don Bosco the founder, in his times, did not speak of charisms although he was not without them. He often begged for particular graces from God and from the Help of Christians, and these were in reality charisms. It is enough to consider the gift of the word that he asked for and obtained on the day of his priestly ordination. Fr Ceria presents this through a very meaningful line: “*the grace of healings, discernment of spirits, the spirit of prophecy were*

charism that abounded in our Saint's life, and we never tire of recording the deeds, little by little that we come across them and can certify that they are true".⁷ With St Paul we call charisms the gifts of nature and grace at the service of the Church and for building up fraternal communion. We Salesians, like every religious institute, are asked to show "fidelity to the charism of the founder and its consequent spiritual legacy".⁸

Speaking of the charism of Don Bosco the founder, Fr E. Viganò recognised it in the source experience of the "new gift of Valdocco", enriched by the elements common to Christian holiness and apostolic zeal, generating a spiritual posterity. These are the essential elements of the Salesian legacy: an original option for alliance and union with the Spirit of God; active and affective cooperation with the Church's mission through a particular style of spiritual life; a typical style of Gospel living with a family style of relationships able to lead the young to Christ. "Don Bosco was inspired from on high to

Oratio, making things personal

“The Holy Spirit is the gift that comes into the human heart along with prayer. It shows up first of all and especially as “coming to the aid of our weakness”. This is the magnificent thought developed by St Paul in the Letter to the Romans (8:26) when he writes: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words”. So the Holy Spirit not only helps us to pray, but guides us “from within” in prayer, filling in for our insufficiency, remedying our inability to pray: he is present in our prayer and gives it a divine dimension. Thus “God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:27). Prayer by the work of the Holy Spirit becomes the ever more mature expression of the new being who participates in life through him.

"Our difficult age has a special need of prayer. In the course of history-both in the past and in the present-many men and women have borne witness to the importance of prayer by consecrating themselves to the praise of God and to the life of prayer, especially in monasteries and convents. So, too, recent years have been seeing a growth in the number of people who, in ever more widespread movements and groups, are giving first place to prayer and seeking in prayer a renewal of their spiritual life. This is a significant and comforting sign, for from this experience there is coming a real contribution to the revival of prayer among the faithful, who have been helped to gain a clearer idea of the Holy Spirit as he who inspires in hearts a profound yearning for holiness."¹¹

Giorgio Zevini, SDB

¹¹ John Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem*, 18 May 1986, no. 65.