

Servants of the young

An invitation to pray the Word of God

The most beautiful gift we can offer the young is the possibility of an encounter with the Lord Jesus; it is the offer of an education inspired by the Gospel and opens for the young the door to the faith. Sometimes there is the danger that we feel ourselves to be more masters than servants; that we are more servants of the works than of the young and of the gospel. We dedicate ourselves to the mission with tireless energy taking care to do everything with simplicity and moderation (C 18), following the example of the Lord Jesus who like the Father is always at work and imitating Don Bosco who spent himself until his last breath. Apostolic work sometimes requires self-abnegation, fatigue and sacrifice, which make sense if directed towards a greater good: the glory of God and the salvation of souls.¹

The mission identifies us in the Church as persons consecrated to God and to the young and "sets the tenor of our whole life" (C 3). "By carrying out this mission we find our own way to holiness" (C 2). F. J. Moloney offers us two reflections for our prayer. In the first, we contemplate our service to the young as a service to Christ in the very first place, and in the second, our apostolic ministry as a service without measure.

The episode of the first multiplication of the loaves describes Jesus being moved by compassion to feed the crowd and paying little heed to his disciples' unavailability. Only when they put at his disposal the little they have, Jesus works the miracle: the scarcity of food is no excuse for not feeding a multitude. The disciples have to learn that in order to serve people they have to give Jesus everything, however little it might be, so as to enable him to give it all to others.

The apostolic ministry, as Paul confides to the restless Christians of Corinth, requires the total gift of oneself. And to give oneself totally, the apostle has to be totally free. To maintain the gratuitous nature of his message, the messenger has to give up even his noblest and most inalienable rights. His honour and his salary consist in his being able to work for the gospel: being an apostle is a task and a recompense, a responsibility and a reward. Preaching is not an option but an inescapable obligation. Since he is bound inseparably to the gospel, he must proclaim it, forgetting about himself, provided he can gain someone (!) for Christ.

¹ An outline for reflection and work on the theme of the GC27, ACG 413 (2012), 65.

I. Jesus feeds the multitude: Mark 6:30-44

Introduction

The theme of service of the young, so central to the Salesian vocation, has been singled out by the Rector Major as one of the thematic nuclei for GC 27. A careful Salesian *Lectio* of Mark 6:30 -44 provides a basis for this theme. In any Christian initiative, the believer must recognize that the *ÖmissionÖ* to serve has its origins in God through his Son, Jesus Christ. This passage indicates the initial reluctance of disciples to feed the multitudes. Jesus empowers them, using their poverty to feed a great multitude. The Lord leads us sometimes reluctantly - to draw upon our poverty and give it entirely to the young.

Biblical Citation

³⁰The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.³¹ And he said to them,

“Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.”

For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.³² And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves.³³ Now many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them.³⁴ As he went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

³⁵ And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said,

“This is a lonely place, and the hour is now late;³⁶ send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat.”

³⁷ But he answered them,

“You give them something to eat.”

And they said to him,

“Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?”

³⁸ And he said to them,

“How many loaves have you? Go and see.”

And when they had found out, they said,

“Five, and two fish.”

³⁹ Then he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon the green grass.⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all.⁴² And they all ate and were satisfied.⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. (Mark 6:30 -44 RSV)

Exegetical-spiritual Exegesis

A feature of the Gospel of Mark is the two accounts of JesusÖ feeding the crowds (Mark 6:30-44 and 8:1-10). They play an important role in the development of MarkÖs presentation of Jesus and his disciples. The first is set in Israel, on the Jewish side of the lake of Galilee. Between the first and the second feeding miracles Jesus encounters

rejection from the leaders of Israel, and he speaks strongly against their attitudes (7:1 - 23). From there, he leaves Israel, moving to Tyre and Sidon (vv. 24 -30) and then into the Gentile Decapolis (vv. 31 -37). On the other side of the lake, now in a Gentile region, he again feeds the crowds. There can be no mistaking Mark's message: Jesus, through his disciples, nourishes both Jew (6:30 -44) and Gentile (8:1 -20).

Mark 6:30 closes the preceding episode in Mark's story, the return of the Twelve who had been sent out on mission (6:7 -30), and opens 6:30 -44. Between the sending out of the Twelve (vv. 7 -13) and their return (v. 30), the death of John the Baptist has been reported (vv. 14 -29). This episode is inserted at the heart of the account of the first mission of the Twelve to indicate a model of discipleship: it will cost no less than everything. In v. 30 the disciples return to Jesus, but they think that they have done everything. They tell Jesus, who empowers them (see 3:14), what they have done. The death of John the Baptist, side-by-side with the disciples' misunderstanding of the real source of their successful mission warns the Salesian reader that service of the young is not about the individual Salesian and his talents, but about preparedness to give oneself until death in mission, as Don Bosco's own life reminds us (Const. 1, 14, 21).

In v. 31 Jesus speaks to the disciples, asking them to come aside for a while, to go to another place to rest because many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat (v. 31b). Jesus and the disciples physically leave one place and go to a desert place by means of a sea crossing (v. 32), but to no avail. The attraction of Jesus is too powerful. Many gather, running on foot from all the towns. They are waiting for Jesus and the disciples as they arrive (v. 33). This enthusiasm from the crowds is in contrast to the disciples, who do not understand. Often disciples, including Salesians, do not recognize the miracle of being so close to the Lord. We become bored, merely doing what we have to do, unaware of the great richness that is ours to share. We thus join the disciples of Jesus in the story.

Jesus' sight of the large crowd, running from all quarters, arouses his compassion (v. 34a), and Mark uses the image of sheep without a shepherd to describe Jesus' sentiments (v. 34b). The attitude of Jesus recalls words of YHWH to Moses: the Lord's community may not be like sheep without a shepherd (Num 27:17). It also recalls an essential element of the Salesian: called to be a follower of the Good Shepherd, sharing his compassion for those in most need, especially the young (Constitutions 27, 95). As the account of the miracle proceeds, Jesus will command his disciples that they too must care for the flock (see vv. 37 -41). Against this background, Jesus taught the crowd many things. Like Moses, Jesus both taught and provided nourishment in the desert (v. 34c).

Jesus' fragile disciples remind him of the lateness of the hour and the loneliness of the place. They ask that the multitude be sent away to buy themselves something to eat (vv. 35-36). But Jesus invites them to share in his compassion, commanding them: You give them something to eat! (v. 37a). Called by the Good Shepherd to join him in his mission of caring for the needy, the disciples choose the easy way out: send them away (v. 36)! As the account of the death of John the Baptist tells us (vv. 13 -29), a follower of Jesus must give everything to live a life rooted in the Gospel: the evangelical radicalism that is at the heart of the summons of GC 27.

There is an urgent need to feed the people (vv. 36 -37). The sheep without a shepherd must be cared for, and we Salesians have been called by Jesus and the Church to do so (Const. 26, 31). The disciples respond to the command of Jesus in terms of money and bread (v. 37b). Is this our way: another building, another program, more professional staff, more of the latest expensive equipment? But Jesus looks to the poverty of the disciples, not their possessions. They tell him they only have five loaves and two fish (v.

38). It is what they possess, in this case the lack of possessions, that disturbs them. But that does not disturb the Good Shepherd.

The people are to sit upon the green grass (v. 39). This detail is not added for color. It recalls Ps 23:1: "The Lord is my shepherd, and nothing I shall want. In green fields he leads me." The Good Shepherd and Exodus themes continue as Jesus has the crowd sit down in companies of hundreds and fifties (v. 40). The numbers reflect the companies on the march in the desert, described in Exodus 18:21-25; Num 31:14 and Deut 1:15. It is as an exodus people that Jesus feeds the needy, and asks his disciples to join them in that restless journey into God's future. Jesus is in control, leading where he will. Neither the disciples, nor the contemporary Salesian leads the way (Const. 31, 34).

Taking from the little that the disciples had with them, Jesus performs a number of actions: "taking," "he looked up to heaven," "blessed," "broke the loaves and gave," "set before" (v. 41). These actions have their origins in the early Eucharistic practices of the community (see Mark 14:22). Mark's words remind us of our own Eucharistic celebrations. *Notice that Jesus gives the blessed and broken bread to the disciples to set before the people. Despite their failure to understand their shepherding role, they are empowered to join Jesus' care for the needy.*

The comment: "And they all ate and were satisfied" (v. 42), returns to the shepherd theme of Ps 23:1 ("I shall not want"). The feeding of the five thousand and the Eucharist continue to be linked. The disciples gather broken pieces of bread and the remains of the fish, and fill twelve baskets. The Greek word used here (*klasmata*) appears in the early Church to speak of the Eucharistic bread (see John 6:12). An important theological link with Israel is made through the collection of the twelve baskets of broken pieces. The meal shared with the crowds that ran from all the towns of Israel (see v. 33) is still open, unlike the manna of the Exodus that rotted after one day (Exod 16:19-21). The bread provided by Jesus is always available in the twelve baskets. In this miracle, the number "twelve" is based in the original number of the Tribes of Israel, now embodied in "the Twelve" of Jesus. We are their heirs, summoned as disciples of Jesus to share in this meal, and to draw others into this sharing. This mystery lies at the Eucharistic centre of the Salesian life. There we draw energy and endurance in our work for the young (Const. 88)

The Word of God tells us that Jesus takes from the weakness and poverty of disciples of all times, and nourishes both Jew (6:30-44) and Gentile (8:1-10). Jesus nourishes the whole world. The Eucharistic background links this nourishment of all humankind with the central and universal mystery and mission of the Church. The ongoing presence of the disciples, the Christian Church, is called to nourish all peoples of all times. The Salesian vocation, now present in the four corners of the earth, unconditionally and tirelessly committed to the service of the young (Const. 1, 78), finds its evangelical and Eucharistic roots here.

Points for an application to life and prayer

! Do you recognize the importance of Jesus's words: "Come away by yourself to a lonely place, and rest a while" (v. 31)? Or do you find that the busy Salesian life you lead makes these occasions (see Const. 85-95) a waste of time? Do you do your best to avoid these community and personal moments? How important are our moments of prayer – community and personal? Do you need to pray more, or ask for help in this part of your Salesian life?

- ! Is your excitement and enthusiasm for the mission still as powerful as it was when you set out on your Salesian mission? Do you see the young as those who Òran there on foot from all the townsÓ (v. 33). In your reflection, call on the Lord for a passion for the service of the young.
- ! The presentation of Jesus as the Good Shepherd has become a central biblical image for the Congregation and its mission. What does this Gospel story say to you about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and about you as someone who continues the mission of the Good Shepherd? Ask the Lord for generosity of heart, tireless industry and courage to recognize that your mission as a Good Shepherd to the young will cost you no less than everything (Const. 95).
- ! Are you tempted to shy clear of our responsibility to care for those in need, sending them elsewhere? Do we sometimes spend too much time, money and effort on seeing that we have structures, organization, possessions, professional training, consultants, and other such things (Const. 77)?
- ! ÒYou give them something to eat. É Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?Ó (v. 37). Can you see that this is the wrong question? Bring the Lord your poverty, and he will turn it into an abundance that you can give to the young. Reflect upon this by listing the weakest parts of your person and your ministry, and asking that they be turned into service for the young.
- ! The feeding of the multitude prefigures the gift of the Eucharist. It is always open to the world (Const. 7). Is your Eucharist the driving force behind your gift of yourself to the young?
- ! Is the universal presence of the Salesians throughout the world in some way Eucharistic? Are you part of this presence?
- ! How does the Eucharist relate to your radical gift of yourself to the young? Is it just something we do together each day? Does it mean something more to me, and to my community? What does it tell me about my mission?
- ! Does reflection upon this Word of God draw us more deeply into the mystery of the Good Shepherd who calls us to be good shepherds to the young, giving ourselves without cost to those who need us most, like John the Baptist?
- ! We are called to *be Eucharist* and not just *celebrate Eucharist*. Ask the Lord for the courage to live the Eucharistic nature of my Salesian vocation with courage and conviction.

II. All things to everyone: 1 Corinthians 9:1-27

Introduction

Our first moment of prayer and reflection was dedicated to the disciples' learning from Jesus the art of total self-gift to his people (Mark 6:30-44). With that reflection completed, we turn to the Apostle Paul, to share in his passion to be an authentic disciple of Jesus. There are no limits to Paul's self-gift. Some who work for the spread of the Gospel do so with good intentions, but for self-fulfillment and personal achievement. Paul challenges the Corinthians and us. His is not the way of privilege. There can be no limit to the self-gift of anyone whose life is spent being and doing all things for everyone. The Salesian vocation of service to the young knows no limits: "I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys" (Don Bosco, *Const.* 1).

Biblical Citation

9:1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? 2 If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. 3 This is my defense to those who would examine me. 4 Do we not have the right to our food and drink? 5 Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? 6 Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? 7 Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? 8 Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law say the same? 9 For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? 10 Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of a share in the crop. 11 If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? 12 If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. 13 Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? 14 In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. 15 But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have any one deprive me of my ground for boasting. 16 For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in my preaching I may make the gospel free of charge, not making full use of my right in the gospel. 19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law -- though not being myself under the law -- that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law -- not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ -- that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. 24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 25 Every

athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.²⁶ Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air;²⁷ but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:1-27 RSV)

Exegetical-spiritual Exegesis

Paul had founded the Corinthian community (see Acts 18:1 -11), but he has heard of serious problems in this immature community. They are divided among themselves (1 Cor 1-4. See 1:11), they do not respect the Christian importance of the human body (5:1-6:20), there are problems with marriages (7:1 -9) and in sexual matters (7:17 -40). In a long section, he has to deal with the difficulties *from outside* as a minority group living in a world full of pagan cults (8:1 -11:1). This leads him to difficulties *from inside* the community, especially their liturgical life (11:2 -34) and use of the gifts of the Spirit (12 -14). Finally he deals with the issue of the resurrection from the dead (15:1 -58). In 9:1 -27, at the heart of his intense interaction with his community, he challenges them with the story of his own life. In prayer and reflection on this Word of God, we Salesians are drawn into his challenge, to be in the Church signs and bearers of God's love for the young (Const. 2).

Paul's passion indicates that some people do not like him. They are questioning his role among them. No less than fourteen times in 7:1 -18, he asks angry questions (see vv. 1 [4 times], 4, 5, 6, 7 [3 times], 8 [2 times], 9, 10, 11, 13, 18) to defend himself (v. 3). The Corinthians are dear to him, the result of his work, a sign before the Lord (vv. 1 -2). He is their apostle, deeply hurt because some doubt him. In these fierce questions one hears a passionate man who cares about his mission, in the name of Jesus Christ, and about the Corinthian community. Only thus can one be all things to everyone. The Salesian must be passionately proud to be chosen as an apostle to the young, live his vocation publicly, untiring in his commitment to the young, deeply hurt when it is questioned by others, or betrayed by our own.

An apostle is not forced into mission, but makes a free response to God's call (v. 1). But the unconditional commitment of the apostle can lead to a life-style that appears strange in our secular world. Paul freely renounces his rights to food and drink, to a wife, to work for the poor for a reward from the people he serves (vv. 4 -7). We join him in these counter-cultural gestures in and through our consecrated lives of Obedience, Poverty and Castity (Const. 60-84). The Salesian must show the young that he is an apostle *for them*, and not *for himself*. "That you are young is enough for me to love you very much ... For you I am ready even to give my life" (Don Bosco. Const. 14).

The Bible indicates that a worker deserves to gain something from his task (vv. 8 -9, with reference to Deuteronomy 25:4), that the plowman should receive recompense from the harvest (v. 10, with reference to Ben Sirach 6:19). Paul might justifiably ask for a reward as the result of his work among the Corinthians (vv. 11 -12). But this is not Paul's way. He is driven by his burning passion to share of the Gospel of Christ. Any idea of personal gain from the mission must be abandoned (Const. 73). Paul's life shows that he lives the Gospel he preaches. Salesians join him in this passionate commitment to living the Gospel without compromise, sharing more closely in the paschal mystery, in his self-emptying and his life in the Spirit (Const. 60).

Paul lives under a divine urgency and can do no other: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (v. 16). He does not want to boast of his virtues (v. 15), as there is only one thing that matters to him: preach the Gospel, driven by the overpowering sense of being an

apostle of the Lord. He serves the Lord alone, and never himself (vv. 16 -17). The most effective way of proclaiming the Gospel is "free of charge," gaining no benefit, but forming those to whom he is sent so that they might manifest Paul's "workmanship in the Lord" (v. 2). For the Salesian, "good Christians and honest citizens" are the sign of our living of the Gospel (*Const.* 34-36).

The apostle knows no cultural or social laws and boundaries. Not only does Paul do without; he becomes a slave to all (v. 19). He is a Jew to the Jews, Gentile to the Gentiles, weak with the weak. There is only one law, and that is the Law of Christ (vv. 20-22). There is only one goal. No matter what its costs, it has Paul's unconditional commitment: to save those to whom he is sent (v. 22). If this is done in the name of the Gospel, Paul becomes rich in his blessings (v. 23). Salesians, called to the service of the young, especially those least privileged, "those who have a greater need of love and evangelization, ... in the areas of greatest poverty," share this commitment (*Const.* 26).

He turns to the Corinthians, asking them to forego the petty divisions and difficulties that have caused him to write this letter. They are straining forward in the race to attain the crown of their ultimate victory (v. 24). There can be no easy way, there can be no life without sacrifice, but we are in a race and a struggle that we understand, and we act accordingly (vv. 25 -26).

Paul leads the way, as must every apostle. Unless Paul embraces the life-style and the passionate gift of himself to everyone, his ministry will be in vain. This would disqualify him from this precious ministry (v. 27). As Paul asked of the Corinthians, he also asks of us: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (11: 1), lest we too be disqualified. The tradition continues, as each Salesian continues to imitate our founder and embody the charism of Don Bosco, "making the concern of Don Bosco our own" (*Constitution* 22).

Points for an application to life and prayer

Do you share in Paul's passion for your Christian and Salesian charism? Do you understand and share Don Bosco's tireless commitment to it?

- ! Reflect upon your practice of Obedience, freely embraced as a counter-cultural sign in your life. Is this central aspect of your Salesian apostolic vocation something that you embrace with joy, a part of your identification with Jesus Christ's relationship to his Father? Does it "set you free" to serve young people without reservations? To whom are your heart and your will submissive?
- ! Reflect upon your Poverty, freely embraced as a counter-cultural sign in your life. Is this central aspect of your Salesian apostolic vocation something you embrace with joy, repeating the simplicity and generosity of Jesus, in the way of Don Bosco? Does it "set you free" to serve young people without reservation? What is more important to you, the "things" in your life, or the young people you serve?
- ! Reflect upon your Chastity, freely embraced as a counter-cultural sign in your life. Is this central aspect of your Salesian apostolic vocation something you embrace with enthusiasm and joy? Does it "set you free" to serve young people without reservation? Where your heart is, there also is your treasure (see Matt 7:19). Where is your heart?
- ! How important is your status in the world, the Church and the Congregation? Do you pick and choose what you like to do with your life and your ministry? Ask t he

Lord to give you generosity, and enthusiasm to perform any task for anyone, as long as it is for young people, and in the service of the Gospel.

- ! Do you regard the young people to whom you have unconditionally given yourself as a Salesian as your Òworkmanship in the LordÓ and Òthe seal of your apostleship in the LordÓ (1 Cor 9:1 -2). Or is your success measured by criteria other than the young to whom you are sent?
- ! How well Paul understands the demands of the apostolic life when he describes it as a race in which all the runners compete (1 Cor 9:24). In a secular world many of the runners are attempting to win the prize of the hearts and lives of the young, only to destroy their spontaneity and beauty. We Salesians have joined that race in the name of Don Bosco. May we be the ones who receive the prize. We run that we may obtain the imperishable wreath of young people who are Ògood Christians and honest citizensÓ (Don Bosco).
- ! Ask the Lord for strength to overcome the fear and doubt that touches each one of us in the face of failure, criticism, and the failures of others. PaulÓs courage in defending himself and his Gospel (1 Cor 9:1 -4) should guide us in this.
- ! Be courageous and honest! Do we sometimes run aimlessly or box as one beating the air (1 Cor 9:26)? Recognise those elements in your Salesian life that bear no fruit, and are often sometimes a waste of a life that has been unconditionally and totally given to the Lord in the Salesian Congregation for service to young people, especially those most in need.
- ! Recognise the importance of Òimitation.Ó We are imitators of Christ, as Paul was. We are imitators of Paul, as he was, and we are imitators of Don Bosco. Everything looks back to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Recognise your dignity as the bearer of the Good News to the young. We run this race for the sake of the Gospel, that we may share in its blessings (see 1 Cor 9:23).

Francis J. Moloney, SDB