

Prophets of Forgiveness and Gratitude

In these times, where day after day the news communicates experiences of conflict, war, and hatred, how great is the risk that we as believers end up being drawn into a reading of events reduced merely to a political level, or limit ourselves to taking sides for one faction or another with arguments tied to our own way of seeing things, our own interpretation of reality.

In Jesus' discourse following the Beatitudes, there is a series of "small/great lessons" that the Lord offers. They always begin with the verse "you have heard that it was said". In one of these, the Lord recalls the ancient saying "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Mt 5:38).

Outside the logic of the Gospel, this law is not only uncontested but may even be taken as a rule expressing how to settle scores with those who have offended us. Obtaining revenge is perceived as a right, even a duty.

Jesus presents himself before this logic with a completely different, wholly opposite proposal. To what we have heard, Jesus says, "But I say to you" (Mt 5:39). And here as Christians, we must be very careful. The words of Jesus that follow are important not only in themselves but because they express in a very concise way His entire message. Jesus does not come to tell us there is another way to interpret reality. He does not approach us to broaden the spectrum of opinions about earthly matters, particularly those touching our lives. Jesus is not just another opinion – He himself embodies the alternative to the law of revenge.

The phrase, "but I say to you," is fundamentally important because now it is no longer just the spoken word, but Jesus himself. What Jesus communicates to us, He lives. When Jesus says, "do not resist an evil person; if anyone slaps you on

the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Mt 5:39), He lived these very words himself. Certainly, we cannot say of Jesus that He preaches well but acts poorly in His message.

Returning to our times, these words of Jesus risk being perceived as the words of a weak person, reactions of someone no longer capable of responding but only of enduring. Indeed, when we look at Jesus offering Himself completely on the wood of the Cross, this may be the impression we get. Yet we know perfectly well that the sacrifice on the cross is the fruit of a life that begins with the phrase "but I say to you". Because everything Jesus told us, he ultimately took upon Himself fully. And by taking it fully, He managed to pass from the cross to victory. Jesus' logic apparently communicates a losing personality. But we know well that the message Jesus left us, which He lived fully, is the medicine this world desperately needs today.

Being prophets of forgiveness means embracing good as a response to evil. It means having the determination that the power of evil will not condition my way of seeing and interpreting reality. Forgiveness is not the response of the weak. Forgiveness is the most eloquent sign of that freedom which can recognise the wounds evil leaves behind, but those same wounds will never become a powder keg fuelling revenge and hatred.

Responding to evil with evil only widens and deepens humanity's wounds. Peace and harmony do not grow on the soil of hatred and revenge.

Being prophets of gratuity requires from us the ability to look upon the poor and the needy, not with the logic of profit, but with the logic of charity. The poor do not choose to be poor, but those who are well-off have the possibility to choose generosity, kindness, and compassion. How different the world would be if our political leaders in this scenario of growing conflicts and wars had the wisdom to look at those who pay the price in these divisions – the poor, the marginalised,

those who cannot escape because they cannot manage so do so. If we start from a purely horizontal reading, there is cause for despair. We have no choice but to remain closed in our grumbling and criticisms. And yet, no! We are educators of the young. We know well that these young people in our world are seeking reference points of a healthy humanity, of political leaders capable of interpreting reality with criteria of justice and peace. But when our young people look around, we know well they perceive only the emptiness of a poor vision of life.

We who are committed to the education of the young have a great responsibility. It is not enough to comment on the darkness left by an almost complete absence of leadership. It is not enough to remark that there are no proposals capable of igniting young people's memory. It falls to each of us to light that candle of hope in this darkness, to offer examples of humanity fulfilled in daily life.

Truly, it is worth being prophets of forgiveness and gratuity today.

Don Bosco with his Salesians

If Don Bosco happily joked with his boys to see them cheerful and serene, he also revealed in jest with his Salesians the esteem he had for them, the desire to see them form one big family with him, poor yes, but trusting in Divine Providence, united in faith and charity.

Don Bosco's fiefdoms

In 1830 Margaret Occhiena, widow of Francis Bosco, made the division of the property inherited from her husband between her stepson Anthony and her two sons Joseph and John. It consisted, among other things, of eight plots of land

comprising meadows, fields and vineyards. We know nothing precise about the criteria followed by Mamma Margaret in dividing her father's inheritance between the three of them. However, among the plots of land there was a vineyard near the Becchi (at Bric dei Pin), a field at Valcapone (or Valcappone) and another at Bacajan (or Bacaiau). In any case, these three lands constitute the "fiefdoms" as Don Bosco jokingly termed his property.

The Becchi, as we all know, is the lowly hamlet where Don Bosco was born; Valcappone (or Valcapone) was a site to the east of the Colle under the Serra di Capriglio but down in the valley in the area known as Sbaruau (= bogeyman), because it was thickly wooded with a few huts hidden among the branches that served as a place of storage for launderers and as a refuge for brigands. Bacajan (or Bacaiau) was a field east of the Colle between the Valcapone and Morialdo plots. Here are Don Bosco's "fiefdoms"!

The Biographical Memoirs say that for some time Don Bosco had conferred noble titles on his lay collaborators. So there was the Count of the Becchi, the Marquis of Valcappone, the Baron of Bacaiau, the three lands that Don Bosco must have known to be part of his inheritance. "For some time now he had been in the habit of jestingly conferring titles of nobility such as "Count of Becchi" or "Marquis of Valcappone" on his senior lay co-workers, particularly [Joseph] Rossi, [Charles] Gastini, [Peter] Enria, [Andrew] Pelazza, and [Joseph] Buzzetti, not only within the Oratory but also outside, especially when traveling with any of them during the summer months" (BM VIII, 101).

Among these "noble" Salesians, we know for sure, that the Count of the Becchi (or of the Bricco del Pino) was Giuseppe Rossi, the first lay Salesian, or "Coadjutor" who loved Don Bosco like a most affectionate son and was faithful to him for ever.

Once Don Bosco went to the Porta Nuova station with Joseph Rossi, who was carrying Don Bosco's suitcase. As usual, he arrived as the train was about to leave and all the coaches

were full. The windows were either closed or had passengers blocking the view to convey the impression that there were no vacant seats in their compartments. Turning to Rossi, Don Bosco rather loudly remarked, "My dear Count, I regret inconveniencing you. You shouldn't be carrying my suitcase." "Forget it. I feel honoured to be of service to you." At hearing this, the passengers closest to them exchanged surprised looks.

"Don Bosco!" they immediately shouted. "We have two seats here. Please come in!"

"But I wouldn't want to trouble you!" Don Bosco replied.

"Never mind! It's a pleasure to have you. We have plenty of room!"

And so the "Count of the Becchi" was able to get on the train with Don Bosco and the suitcase.

The pumps and a shack

Don Bosco lived and died poor. For food he was content with very little. Even a glass of wine was already too much for him, and he systematically watered it down.

"Often he forgot to drink, taken up by quite different thoughts, and his table companions would have to pour wine into his glass. If the wine was good, he then would instantly reach for water to dilute it and 'make it even better,' as he would say. With a smile he would add, 'I've renounced the world and the devil, but not the pumps.' He drank only one glass at each meal." (BM IV, 134).

Even for accommodation we know how he lived. On 12 September 1873 the General Conference of the Salesians was held to re-elect an Economer and three Councillors. On that occasion Don Bosco spoke memorable and prophetic words on the development of the Congregation. Then when he came to speak about the Superior Chapter, which by now seemed to need a suitable residence, he said, amidst universal hilarity: "Were it possible (he went on in a humorous vein) I would like to set up a shed in the middle of the playground for the chapter members so they could be isolated from all other mortals. But

since they are still entitled to live on this earth, they may choose to reside in whatever house it may seem best." (BM X, 464).

Otis, botis, pija tutis

Don Bosco also had a mysterious answer for a cleric or a student who asked him how he could know the future and guess so many secrets.

"I'll tell you," he would reply. "The key to everything is Otis, Batis, Pia, Tutis. Do you know what that means?"

"No, Father!"

"Pay attention. It's Greek." And slowly he would repeat: "O-tis, Bo-tis, Pi-a, Tu-tis. Is it clear now?"

"No!"

"I know those words are hard to understand. That's why I never reveal their meaning. No one knows it and no one ever will because it would not be wise for me to reveal it. It is the big secret to all my wonders. With this magic formula I can read consciences and solve any mystery. Let's see how smart you are. See if you can make something out of it!" He would then repeat the four words while placing his forefinger successively on the questioner's forehead, nose, chin, and chest, ending with an unexpected little tap on the cheek. The boy or cleric would laugh and, while kissing Don Bosco's hand, still insist, "But, Father, at least translate those words."

"I could, but you still wouldn't understand." And then playfully he would add in Piedmontese dialect, "When they give you a beating, take it like a man!" This conclusion would set them all laughing heartily. (BM VI, 236-237). And he meant that in order to become a saint, one must accept all the sufferings that life has in store for us.

Protector of tinsmiths

Every year the young boarders went on an outing to Monsieur Olive's villa, the generous cooperator already known to us. On this occasion, the father and mother waited on the superiors while their children waited on their pupils. They also

organized a lottery, giving a number to everyone of the superiors and boys so that everyone won something. In this way, the Olive family made a gift of their coach to the Oratory of St. Leo. This outing occurred during Don Bosco's visit to Marseille in 1884, and an amusing incident occurred. While the boys were playing in the gardens, a servant came running up to Madame Olive, greatly agitated.

"Madame, the pot where the soup is cooking for the boys is leaking badly and there is no way to stop it. We will have to go without soup." The mistress of the house, who had immense faith in Don Bosco, had a sudden idea. She summoned all the boys and told them, "Listen, if you want to have some soup, kneel down here and say a Pater, Ave, and Gloria to Don Bosco, so that he may resolder the soup pot."

The boys obeyed and instantly the pot stopped leaking. This is an historical event, and when Don Bosco heard it, he laughed heartily, saying, "From this day on, people will say that Don Bosco is the patron of tinsmiths." (BM XVII, 36-37).

Cardinal Augustus Hlond

The second of 11 children, his father was a railway worker. Having received a simple but strong faith from his parents, at the age of 12, attracted by Don Bosco's reputation, he followed his brother Ignatius to Italy to dedicate himself to the Lord in the Salesian Society, and soon attracted two other brothers there: Antonio, who was to become a Salesian and a renowned musician, and Clement, who was to become a missionary. The college at Valsalice accepted him for his secondary studies. He was then admitted to the novitiate and received the cassock from Blessed Michael Rua (1896). Having made his religious profession in 1897, his superiors sent him to Rome to the Gregorian University for the philosophy course which he

graduated in. From Rome he returned to Poland to do his practical training in the college at Oświęcim. His fidelity to Don Bosco's system of education, his commitment to assistance and to the school, his dedication to the young and the amiability of his manner won him great acclaim. He also quickly made a name for himself for his musical talent.

Having completed his theology studies, he was ordained a priest on 23 September 1905 in Cracow by Bishop Nowak. In 1905-09 he attended the Faculty of Arts at the Universities of Krakow and Lvov. In 1907 he was placed in charge of the new house in Przemyśl (1907-09), from where he went on to direct the house in Vienna (1909-19). Here his valour and personal ability had an even greater scope due to the particular difficulties the institute faced in the imperial capital. Fr Augustus Hlond, with his virtue and tact, succeeded in a short time not only in sorting out the financial situation, but also in bringing about a flowering of youth work that attracted the admiration of all classes of people. Caring for the poor, the workers, the children of the people attracted him the affection of the humblest classes. Dear to the bishops and apostolic nuncios, he enjoyed the esteem of the authorities and the imperial family itself. In recognition of this social and educational work, he received some of the most prestigious honours three times.

In 1919, the development of the Austro-Hungarian Province advised a division in proportion to the number of houses, and the superiors appointed Fr Hlond as provincial of the German-Hungarian Province based in Vienna (1919-22), entrusting him with the care of the Austrian, German and Hungarian confreres. In less than three years, the young provincial opened a dozen new Salesian presences, and formed them in the most genuine Salesian spirit, raising numerous vocations.

He was in the full fervour of his Salesian activity when, in 1922, the Holy See having to provide religious accommodation for Polish Silesia still bleeding from political and national strife, the Holy Father Pius XI entrusted him with the delicate mission, appointing him as Apostolic Administrator.

His mediation between Germans and Poles gave birth in 1925 to the diocese of Katowice, of which he became bishop. In 1926 he was Archbishop of Gniezno and Poznań and Primate of Poland. The following year the Pope created him Cardinal. In 1932 he founded the Society of Christ for Polish emigrants, aimed at assisting the many compatriots who had left the country.

In March 1939 he took part in the Conclave that elected Pius XII. On 1 September of the same year the Nazis invaded Poland: the Second World War began. The cardinal raised his voice against Hitler's violations of human rights and religious freedom. Forced into exile, he took refuge in France, at Hautecombe Abbey, denouncing the persecution of the Jews in Poland. The Gestapo penetrated the Abbey and arrested him, deporting him to Paris. The cardinal categorically refuses to support the formation of a pro-Nazi Polish government. He was interned first in Lorraine and then in Westphalia. Freed by allied troops, he returned to his homeland in 1945.

In the new Poland liberated from Nazism, he finds communism. He courageously defended the Poles against atheistic Marxist oppression, even escaping several assassination attempts. He died on 22 October 1948 of pneumonia, at the age of 67. Thousands of people flocked to the funeral.

Cardinal Hlond was a virtuous man, a shining example of a Salesian religious and a generous, austere pastor, capable of prophetic vision. Obedient to the Church and firm in the exercise of authority, he showed heroic humility and unequivocal constancy in times of greatest trial. He cultivated poverty and practised justice to the poor and needy. The two pillars of his spiritual life, in the school of St John Bosco, were the Eucharist and Mary Help of Christians. In the history of the Church of Poland, Cardinal Augustus Hlond was one of the most eminent figures for the religious witness of his life, for the greatness, variety and originality of his pastoral ministry, for the sufferings he faced with an intrepid Christian spirit for the Kingdom of God. The apostolic ardour distinguished the pastoral work and spiritual physiognomy of the Venerable Augustus Hlond, who

took *Da mihi animas coetera tolle* as his episcopal motto. As a true son of St John Bosco he confirmed it with his life as a consecrated man and bishop, bearing witness to tireless pastoral charity.

We must remember his great love for Our Lady, learnt in his family and the great devotion of the Polish people to the Mother of God, venerated in the shrine of Częstochowa. Moreover, from Turin, where he began his journey as a Salesian, he spread the cult of Mary Help of Christians in Poland and consecrated Poland to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. His entrustment to Mary always sustained him in adversity and in the hour of his final encounter with the Lord. He died with the Rosary beads in his hands, telling those present that the victory, when it came, would be the victory of Mary Immaculate.

Venerable Cardinal Augustus Hlond is an outstanding witness of how we must accept the way of the Gospel every day despite the fact that it brings us problems, difficulties, even persecution: this is holiness. "Jesus himself warns us that the path he proposes goes against the flow, even making us challenge society by the way we live and, as a result, becoming a nuisance. He reminds us how many people have been, and still are, persecuted simply because they struggle for justice, because they take seriously their commitment to God and to others. Unless we wish to sink into an obscure mediocrity, let us not long for an easy life, for 'whoever would save his life will lose it' (Mt 16:25). (Mt 16:25). In living the Gospel, we cannot expect that everything will be easy, for the thirst for power and worldly interests often stands in our way... the cross remains the source of our growth and sanctification." (Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, nos. 90-92).

The Education of Conscience with St. Francis de Sales

It was most likely the advent of the Protestant Reformation that brought the issue of conscience—and more precisely, “freedom of conscience”—to the forefront. In a 1597 letter to Clement VIII, the Provost of Sales lamented the “tyranny” that the “state of Geneva” imposed “on the consciences of Catholics.” He asked the Holy See to intervene with the King of France to ensure that the Genevans would be granted “what they call freedom of conscience.” Opposed to military solutions for the Protestant crisis, he glimpsed in *libertas conscientiae* a possible way out of violent confrontation, provided reciprocity was respected. Claimed by Geneva for the Reformation and by Francis de Sales for Catholicism, freedom of conscience was about to become a pillar of modern thought.

The Dignity of the Human Person

The dignity of the individual lies in conscience, and conscience is first and foremost synonymous with sincerity, honesty, frankness, and conviction. The Provost of Sales acknowledged, for example, “to ease his conscience,” that the project of the Controversies had been somewhat imposed on him by others. When presenting his reasons in favour of Catholic doctrine and practice, he took care to specify that he did so “in conscience.” “Tell me in conscience,” he asked his opponents. A “good conscience” ensures one avoids certain acts that contradict oneself.

However, individual subjective conscience cannot always be taken as a guarantee of objective truth. One is not always obliged to believe what someone says in conscience. “Show me clearly,” the Provost said to the lords of Thonon, “that you are not lying at all, that you are not deceiving me when you say that in conscience you had this or that inspiration.” Conscience can fall victim to illusion, whether voluntarily or

involuntarily. "Hardened misers not only do not confess their greed but do not even think in conscience that they are greedy."

The formation of the conscience is an essential task because freedom of conscience carries the risk of "doing good and evil," but "choosing evil is not using, but rather, abusing our freedom." It is a difficult task because conscience sometimes appears as an adversary that "always fights against us and for us." It "steadily resists our bad inclinations," but does so "for our salvation." When one sins, "inner remorse moves against our conscience with a drawn sword," but only to "pierce it with holy fear."

A means to exercise responsible freedom is the practice of the "examination of conscience." Examining one's conscience is like following the example of doves that look at each other "with clear and pure eyes," "groom themselves carefully, and adorn themselves as best they can." Philothea is invited to perform this examination every evening before bed, asking oneself, "how one behaved at various times of the day. To make it easier, one should reflect on where, with whom, and in what occupations one was engaged."

Once a year, we must conduct a thorough examination of the "state of our soul" before God, our neighbour, and ourselves, not forgetting an "examination of our soul's affections." The examination—Francis de Sales tells the Visitandines—will lead you to "probe your conscience deeply."

How to lighten the conscience when burdened by error or fault? Some do so poorly, judging and accusing others "of vices they themselves succumb to," thinking this will "soften their conscience's remorse." This multiplies the risk of rash judgments. Conversely, "those who properly care for their conscience are not at all prone to rash judgments." The case of parents, educators, and public officials deserves special consideration, for "a good part of their conscience consists in carefully watching over the conscience of others."

Self-Respect

From the affirmation of each person's dignity and responsibility must arise self-respect. Socrates and all ancient pagan and Christian thought had already shown the way:

It is a saying of the philosophers, yet held valid by Christian doctors: "Know thyself"—that is, know the excellence of your soul so as not to debase or despise it.

Certain acts offend not only God but also human dignity and reason. Their consequences are deplorable:

The likeness and image of God we bear within us is stained and disfigured, the dignity of our spirit dishonoured, and we are made similar to irrational animals [...], enslaving ourselves to our passions and overturning the order of reason.

There are ecstasies that elevate us above our natural state and others that debase us. "O men, how long will you be so senseless," writes the author of *Theotimus*, "as to trample your natural dignity, voluntarily descending and plunging yourselves into the condition of beasts?"

Self-respect helps avoid two opposite dangers: pride and contempt for one's gifts. In a century where honour was highly exalted, Francis de Sales had to denounce crimes, particularly duelling, which made his "hair stand on end," and even more, the senseless pride behind it. "I am scandalised," he wrote to the wife of a duelling husband; "truly, I cannot fathom how one could have such unbridled courage even over trifles." Fighting a duel is like "becoming each other's executioner." Others, conversely, dare not acknowledge their gifts and thus sin against gratitude. Francis de Sales condemns "a certain false and foolish humility that prevents them from seeing the good in themselves." They are wrong, for "the goods God has placed in us must be acknowledged, valued, and sincerely honoured."

The first neighbour I must respect and love, the Bishop of Geneva seems to say, is myself. True self-love and due respect

demand that I strive for perfection and correct myself if needed, but gently, reasonably, and “following the path of compassion” rather than anger and fury.

There exists a self-love that is not only legitimate but beneficial and commanded, “Charity well-ordered begins with oneself,” says the proverb, reflecting Francis de Sales’ thought—provided one does not confuse self-love with self-centredness. Self-love is good, and Philothea is asked to examine how she loves herself:

Keep good order in loving yourself? For only disordered self-love can ruin us. Ordered love requires that we love the soul more than the body and seek virtue above all else.

Conversely, self-centredness is selfish, “narcissistic” love, fixated on itself, jealous of its beauty, and concerned only with self-interest. “Narcissus, say the profane, was a youth so scornful he would offer his love to none; finally, gazing at his reflection in a clear fountain, he was utterly captivated by his beauty.”

The “Respect Due to Persons”

If one respects oneself, one is better prepared to respect others. Being “the image and likeness of God” implies that “all human beings share the same dignity.” Francis de Sales, though living in a deeply unequal society marked by the ancient regime, promoted thought and practice marked by “respect due to persons.”

Start with children. St. Bernard’s mother—says the author of Philothea—loved her newborns “with respect as something sacred God had entrusted to her.” A grave rebuke from the Bishop of Geneva to pagans concerned their contempt for defenceless lives. Respect for a baby about to be born emerges in a letter written according to the Baroque rhetoric of the time to a pregnant woman. He encourages her by explaining to her that the child forming in her womb is not only “a living image of the Divine Majesty”, but also an image of its mother. He advises another woman:

Offer often to the eternal glory of your Creator the little creature whose formation He has wanted to take you as His cooperator.

Another aspect of respect for others concerns the theme of freedom. The discovery of new lands had as a disastrous consequence, the re-emergence of slavery, that recalled the practice of the ancient romans at the time of paganism. The sale of human beings degraded them to the level of animals.

One day, Marc Antony bought two youths from a merchant; back then, as still happens in some lands, children were sold—men procured and traded them like horses in our countries.

Respect for others is subtly threatened by gossip and slander. Francis de Sales insists heavily on “sins of the tongue.” A chapter in Philothea which deals explicitly with this subject, is titled Honesty in Words and Respect Due to Persons states that ruining someone’s reputation is “spiritual murder,” robbing them of “civil life.” When condemning vice, one should spare the person involved as much as possible.

Certain groups are easily scorned. Francis de Sales defends the dignity of common people, citing the Gospel. He comments that “St. Peter was rough, coarse, an old fisherman of low station; a trader of low condition. Saint John, on the contrary, was a gentleman, sweet, lovable, wise; saint Peter, instead, was ignorant.” Well, it was St Peter who was chosen to guide others and to be the “universal superior”.

He proclaims the dignity of the sick, saying that, “the souls who are on the cross are declared queens.” Denouncing “cruelty towards the poor” and exalting the “dignity of the poor”, he justifies and specifies the attitude to be taken towards them, explaining “how we must honour them and, therefore, visit them as representatives of our Lord.” No one is useless; no one is insignificant. “There is no object in the world that cannot be useful for something; but you must know how to find its use and place.”

The “one-different” Salesian”

The eternal human that has always tormented human society is reconciling individual dignity and freedom with that of the others. Francis de Sales offered an original solution by coining a term. In fact, assuming that the universe is made up of “all things created, visible and invisible” and that “their diversity is brought back into unity”, the Bishop of Geneva proposed to call it “one-diverse”, that is, “unique and diverse, unique with diversity and diverse with unity.”

For him, every being is unique. People are like Pliny’s pearls, “so unique in quality that no two are perfectly equal.” His two major works, *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Treatise on the Love of God*—are addressed to individuals, Philothea and Theotimus. What variety and diversity among beings! “Without doubt, as we see that two men are never perfectly equal as to the gifts of nature, so they are never perfectly equal as to the supernatural gifts.” The variety also enchanted him from a purely aesthetic point of view, but he feared an indiscreet curiosity about its causes:

If someone asked why God made melons larger than strawberries, or lilies bigger than violets; why rosemary isn’t a rose or a carnation a marigold; why peacocks are prettier than bats, or figs sweet and lemons sour—we’d laugh and say: poor man, the world’s beauty requires variety, it is necessary that in things there are diverse and differentiated perfections and that the one is not the other. This is why some are small, others large; some harsh, others sweet; some more beautiful, others less. [...] All have their value, their grace, their splendour, and all, seen in the totality of their varieties, constitute a wonderful spectacle of beauty.

Diversity does not hinder unity; on the contrary, it makes it richer and more beautiful. Each flower has its characteristics that distinguish it from all the others. “It is not exactly of the roses to be white, it seems to me, because those vermilions are more beautiful and have a better scent, which

however is proper to the lily." Of course, Francis de Sales does not tolerate confusion and disorder, but he is equally an enemy of uniformity. The diversity of beings can lead to dispersion and rupture of communion, but if there is love, "bond of perfection", nothing is lost, on the contrary, diversity is exalted by the union.

In Francis de Sales there is certainly a real culture of the individual, but this is never a closure to the group, the community or society. He spontaneously sees each person marked by their "state of life," which marks the identity and belonging of each one. It will not be possible to establish an equal programme or project for all, simply because it will be applied and implemented in a different way "for the gentleman, the artisan, the servant, the prince, the widow, the maiden, the married." It must also be adapted "to the strengths and duties of each individual. The bishop of Geneva sees society divided into vital spaces characterized by social belonging and group solidarity, as when he deals with "the company of soldiers, the workshop of craftsmen, the court of princes, the family of married people."

Love personalizes and, therefore, individualizes. The affection that binds one person to another is unique, as demonstrated by Francis de Sales in his relationship with Chantal's wife, "Every affection has a peculiarity that differentiates it from the others. What I feel for you possesses a certain particularity that comforts me infinitely, and, to say everything, is very fruitful for me." The sun illuminates each and every one, "illuminating a corner of the earth, it does not illuminate it less than what it would do if it did not shine elsewhere, but only in that corner."

The human being is in a state of becoming

A Christian humanist, Francis de Sales ultimately believed in the human person's capacity for self-improvement. Erasmus had coined the phrase: *Homines non nascuntur sed finguntur* (Men are not born but made). While animals are predetermined beings driven by instinct, humans, in contrast, are in perpetual

evolution. Not only do they change, but they can also change themselves, for better or for worse.

What entirely preoccupied the author of Theotimus was perfecting himself and helping others to perfect themselves, not only in religious matters but in all things. From birth to the grave, man is in a state of apprenticeship. Let us imitate the crocodile, which "never stops growing as long as it lives." Indeed, "remaining in the same state for long is impossible. in this traffic, whoever does not advance falls behind; on this ladder, whoever does not climb, descends; in this battle, whoever does not conquer is conquered." He quotes St. Bernard, who said, "It is written especially for man that he will never be found in the same state: he must either advance or regress." Let us move forward:

Do you not know that you are on a journey and that the path is not made for sitting but for moving forward? He is so made for progress, that moving forward is called walking.

This also means that the human person is educable, capable of learning, correcting themselves, and improving themselves. And this holds true at all levels. Age sometimes has nothing to do with it. Look at these choirboys of the cathedral, who far surpass their bishop's abilities in this domain. "I admire these children," he said, "who can barely speak yet already sing their parts; they understand all musical signs and rules, while I, a grown man who might pass for a great figure, would not know how to manage." No one in this world is perfect:

There are people naturally frivolous, others rude, others still reluctant to listen to others' opinions, and others prone to indignation, others to anger, and others to love. In short, few are free people are free from one or another of these imperfections.

Should we despair of improving our temperament, correcting some of our natural inclinations? Not at all.

For though these traits may be innate and natural in each of us, if they can be corrected and regulated through disciplined effort, or even eradicated, then, I tell you, Philothea, it must be done. Bitter almonds have been made sweet by piercing them at the base to drain their juice; why should we not drain our own perverse inclinations to become better?

Hence, the optimistic yet demanding conclusion. “There is no good nature that cannot be corrupted by vicious habits, nor any nature so perverse that it cannot, first by God’s grace and then through diligent effort, be tamed and overcome.” If man is educable, we must never despair of anyone and guard ourselves well against prejudice in regard to people:

Do not say: That man is a drunkard, even if you have seen him drunk; ‘an adulterer,’ for having witnessed his sin; ‘incestuous,’ for catching him in that disgrace, because one action is not enough to define a thing. [...] And even if a man were long steeped in vice, you’d risk falsehood by calling him vicious.

The human person has never finished tending their garden. This was the lesson the founder of the Visitation nuns instilled when urging them to “cultivate the soil and garden” of their hearts and minds, for no one is “so perfect as to need no effort to grow in perfection or preserve it.”

Don Jose-Luis Carreno, Salesian missionary

Fr. José Luis Carreño (1905-1986) was described by historian Joseph Thekkedath as “the most beloved Salesian of South India” in the first half of the twentieth century. In every

place he lived, whether in British India, the Portuguese colony of Goa, the Philippines, or Spain, we find Salesians who cherish his memory with affection. Strangely, however, we still lack an adequate biography of this great Salesian, except for the lengthy obituary letter written by Fr. José Antonio Rico: "José Luis Carreño Etxeandía, God's labourer." We hope this gap will soon be filled. Fr. Carreño was one of the architects of the South Asia region, and we cannot afford to forget him.

José-Luis Carreño Etxeandía was born in Bilbao, Spain, on 23 October 1905. Orphaned of his mother at the tender age of eight, he was welcomed into the Salesian house in Santander. In 1917, at the age of twelve, he entered the Aspirantate at Campello. He recalled that in those days, "we didn't speak much about Don Bosco... But for us, a Fr. Binelli was a Don Bosco, not to mention Fr. Rinaldi, then General Prefect, whose visits left us with a supernatural sensation, like when Yahweh's messengers visited Abraham's tent."

After novitiate and post-novitiate, he did his practical training as an assistant to the novices. He must have been a brilliant cleric, because Fr. Pedro Escursell wrote about him to the Rector Major, "I am speaking at this very moment with one of the model clerics of this house. He is an assistant in the formation of personnel in this Province. He tells me that for some time he has been asking to be sent to the missions and says he has given up asking because he receives no response. He is a young man of great intellectual and moral worth."

On the eve of his priestly ordination in 1932, the young José-Luis wrote directly to the Rector Major, offering himself for the missions. The offer was accepted, and he was sent to India, where he landed in Mumbai in 1933. Just a year later, when the South India Province was established, he was appointed novice master at Tirupattur; he was only 28 years old. With his extraordinary qualities of mind and heart, he quickly became the soul of the house and left a deep

impression on his novices. "He won us over with his fatherly heart," wrote one of them, Archbishop Hubert D'Rosario of Shillong.

Fr. Joseph Vaz, another novice, often recounted how Carreño noticed him shivering with cold during a conference. "Wait a moment, hombre," said the novice master, and he went out. Shortly after, he returned with a blue jumper which he handed to Joe. Joe noticed that the jumper was strangely warm. Then he remembered that under his cassock, his master was wearing something blue... which was now missing. Carreño had given him his own jumper.

In 1942, when the British government in India interned all foreigners from countries at war with Britain, Carreño, being a citizen of a neutral country, was left undisturbed. In 1943, he received a message via Vatican Radio: he was to take the place of Fr. Eligio Cinato, Provincial of the South India Province, who had also been interned. Around the same time, Salesian Archbishop Louis Mathias of Madras-Mylapore invited him to be his vicar general.

In 1945, he was officially appointed Provincial, a position he held from 1945 to 1951. One of his very first acts was to consecrate the Province to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Many Salesians were convinced that the extraordinary growth of the South Province was due precisely to this gesture. Under Fr. Carreño's leadership, Salesian works doubled. One of his most far-sighted acts was the establishment of a university college in the remote and poor village of Tirupattur. Sacred Heart College would eventually transform the entire district.

Carreño was also the main architect of the "Indianisation" of the Salesian face in India, seeking local vocations from the outset, rather than relying solely on foreign missionaries. A choice that proved providential, first, because the flow of foreign missionaries ceased during the War; then, because independent India decided to no longer grant visas to new foreign missionaries. "If today there are more than two thousand Salesians in India, the credit for this growth must be attributed to the policies initiated by Fr. Carreño," wrote

Fr. Thekkedath in his history of the Salesians in India.

Fr. Carreño, as we have said, was not only Provincial but also vicar to Bishop Mathias. These two great men, who deeply respected each other, were nevertheless very different in temperament. The archbishop favoured severe disciplinary measures for confreres in difficulty, while Fr. Carreño preferred milder procedures. The extraordinary visitor, Fr. Albino Fedrigotti, seems to have sided with the archbishop, describing Fr. Carreño as "an excellent religious, a man with a big heart," but also "a bit too much of a poet."

There was also the accusation of being a poor administrator, but it is significant that a figure like Fr. Aurelio Maschio, great procurator and architect of Salesian works in Mumbai, firmly rejected this accusation. In reality, Fr. Carreño was an innovator and a visionary. Some of his ideas, such as involving non-Salesian volunteers for a few years of service, were viewed with suspicion at the time but are now widely accepted and actively promoted.

In 1951, at the end of his official term as Provincial, Carreño was asked to return to Spain to work with the Salesian Cooperators. This was not the real reason for his departure after eighteen years in India, but Carreño accepted serenely, though not without suffering.

In 1952, however, he was asked to go to Goa, where he remained until 1960. "Goa was love at first sight," he wrote in *Urdimbre en el telar*. Goa, for its part, welcomed him into its heart. He continued the tradition of Salesians serving as spiritual directors and confessors to diocesan clergy and was even patron of the Konkani writers' association. Above all, he governed the Don Bosco Panjim community with love, cared with extraordinary fatherliness for the many poor boys, and once again actively sought vocations to Salesian life. The first Salesians of Goa, people like Thomas Fernandes, Elias Diaz, and Romulo Noronha recounted with tears in their eyes how Carreño and others would go to the Goa Medical College, right next to the Salesian house, to donate blood and thus earn a few rupees to buy food and other necessities for the boys.

In 1961, the Indian military action and annexation of Goa took place. At that time, Fr. Carreño was in Spain and could no longer return to his beloved land. In 1962, he was sent to the Philippines as novice master. He accompanied only three groups of novices because in 1965, he asked to return to Spain. His decision stemmed from a serious divergence of vision between him and the Salesian missionaries from China, especially with Fr. Carlo Braga, superior of the Preprovince. Carreño strongly opposed the policy of sending young Filipino Salesians who had just professed to Hong Kong for philosophy studies. As it happened, in the end, the superiors accepted the proposal to keep the young Salesians in the Philippines, but by then, Carreño's request to return home had already been granted.

Don Carreño spent only four years in the Philippines, but here too, as in India, he left an indelible mark, "an immeasurable and crucial contribution to the Salesian presence in the Philippines," in the words of Salesian historian Nestor Impelido.

Back in Spain, he collaborated with the Missionary Procures of Madrid and of New Rochelle and in the animation of the Iberian Provinces. Many in Spain still remember the old missionary who visited Salesian houses, infecting the young with his missionary enthusiasm, his songs, and his music.

But in his creative imagination, a new project was taking shape. Carreño devoted himself wholeheartedly to the dream of founding a Pueblo Misionero with two objectives: preparing young missionaries – mostly from Eastern Europe – for Latin America; and offering a refuge for 'retired' missionaries like himself, who could also serve as formators. After long and painful correspondence with his superiors, the project finally took shape in the Hogar del Misionero in Alzuza, a few kilometres from Pamplona. The missionary vocational component never took off, and very few elderly missionaries actually joined Carreño. His main apostolate in these last years remained that of the pen. He left more than thirty books, five of which were dedicated to the Holy Shroud, to which he was

particularly devoted.

Fr. José-Luis Carreño died in 1986, in Pamplona at the age of 81. Despite the ups and downs of his life, this great lover of the Sacred Heart of Jesus could affirm, on the golden jubilee of his priestly ordination, “If fifty years ago my motto as a young priest was ‘Christ is everything,’ today, old and overwhelmed by His love, I would write it in golden letters, because in reality CHRIST IS EVERYTHING.”

Fr. Ivo COELHO, SDB

The Seven Joys of the Madonna

At the heart of St. John Bosco’s educational and spiritual work, the figure of the Madonna holds a privileged and luminous place. Don Bosco was not only a great educator and founder but also a fervent devotee of the Virgin Mary, whom he venerated with deep affection and to whom he entrusted all his pastoral projects. One of the most distinctive expressions of this devotion is the practice of the “Seven Joys of the Madonna,” presented in a simple and accessible way in his publication “The Well-Provided Young Man,” one of the most widely circulated texts in his spiritual pedagogy.

A Work for the Souls of the Young

In 1875, Don Bosco published a new edition of “The Well-Provided Young Man for the Practice of His Duties in the Exercises of Christian Piety,” a manual of prayers, spiritual exercises, and rules of Christian conduct designed for boys. This book, written in a sober and fatherly style, aimed to accompany young people in their moral and religious formation, introducing them to a full Christian life. It also included devotion to the “Seven Joys of the Most Holy Mary,” a simple

yet intense prayer structured in seven points. Unlike the “Seven Sorrows of the Madonna,” which is much more well-known and widespread in popular piety, Don Bosco’s “Seven Joys” focus on the joys of the Most Holy Virgin in Heaven, the result of an earthly life lived in the fullness of God’s grace.

This devotion has ancient origins and was particularly dear to the Franciscans, who spread it from the 13th century onwards, as the Rosary of the Seven Joys of the Blessed Virgin Mary (or Seraphic Crown). In the traditional Franciscan form, it is a devotional prayer composed of seven decades of Hail Marys, each preceded by a joyful mystery (joy) and introduced by an Our Father. At the end of each decade, a Glory Be is recited. The joys are: 1. The Annunciation by the Angel; 2. The Visitation to St. Elizabeth; 3. The Birth of the Saviour; 4. The Adoration of the Magi; 5. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple; 6. The Resurrection of the Son; 7. The Assumption and Coronation of Mary in Heaven.

Drawing from this tradition, Don Bosco offers a simplified version, suited to the sensibilities of young people.

Each of these joys is meditated upon through the recitation of a Hail Mary and a Glory Be.

The Pedagogy of Joy

The choice to propose this devotion to young people was not merely a personal preference of Don Bosco but fits entirely within his educational vision. He was convinced that faith should be transmitted through joy, not fear; through the beauty of goodness, not the dread of evil. The “Seven Joys” thus become a school of Christian gladness, an invitation to recognise that, in the life of the Virgin, God’s grace manifests as light, hope, and fulfilment.

Don Bosco was well aware of the difficulties and sufferings many of his boys faced daily: poverty, family abandonment, job insecurity. For this reason, he offered them a Marian devotion that was not limited to tears and sorrow but was also a source of consolation and joy. Meditating on Mary’s joys meant

opening oneself to a positive vision of life, learning to recognise God's presence even in difficult moments, and entrusting oneself with confidence to the tenderness of the heavenly Mother.

In "The Well-Provided Young Man," Don Bosco writes touching words about Mary's role: he presents her as a loving mother, a sure guide, and a model of Christian life. Devotion to her joys is not merely a devotional practice but a means to enter into a personal relationship with the Madonna, to imitate her virtues, and to receive her maternal help in life's trials.

For the saint from Turin, Mary is not distant or inaccessible but close, present, and active in the lives of her children. This Marian vision, strongly relational, permeates all Salesian spirituality and is reflected in the daily life of the oratories: environments where joy, prayer, and familiarity with Mary go hand in hand.

A Living Legacy

Even today, devotion to the "Seven Joys of the Madonna" retains its spiritual and educational value. In a world marked by uncertainties, fears, and fragility, it offers a simple yet profound way to discover that Christian faith is, above all, an experience of joy and light. Don Bosco, a prophet of joy and hope, teaches us that authentic Christian education involves valuing affections, emotions, and the beauty of the Gospel.

Rediscovering the "Seven Joys" today also means recovering a positive outlook on life, history, and God's presence. The Madonna, with her humility and trust, teaches us to cherish and meditate in our hearts the signs of true joy, the kind that does not fade, because it is founded on God's love.

In a time when even young people seek light and meaning, Don Bosco's words remain relevant: "If you wish to be happy, practice devotion to the Most Holy Mary." The "Seven Joys" are, then, a small ladder to Heaven, a rosary of light that unites earth to the heart of the heavenly Mother.

Here is also the original text taken from "The Well-Provided Young Man for the Practice of His Duties in the Exercises of Christian Piety," 1875 (pp. 141-142), with our own titles.

The Seven Joys That Mary Enjoys in Heaven

1. Purity Cultivated

Rejoice, O immaculate Spouse of the Holy Spirit, for the contentment you now enjoy in Paradise, because through your purity and virginity you are exalted above all the Angels and elevated above all the saints.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

2. Wisdom Sought

Rejoice, O Mother of God, for the pleasure you experience in Paradise, because just as the sun here on earth illuminates the whole world, so you, with your splendour, adorn and make all of Paradise shine.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

3. Filial Obedience

Rejoice, O Daughter of God, for the sublime dignity to which you were raised in Paradise, because all the hierarchies of Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Dominions, and all the Blessed Spirits honour, revere, and acknowledge you as the Mother of their Creator, and at your slightest command, they are most obedient.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

4. Continuous Prayer

Rejoice, O Handmaid of the Most Holy Trinity, for the great power you have in Paradise, because all the graces you ask of your Son are immediately granted; indeed, as St. Bernard says, no grace is granted here on earth that does not pass through your most holy hands.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

5. Humility Lived

Rejoice, O most august Queen, because you alone deserved to

sit at the right hand of your most holy Son, who sits at the right hand of the Eternal Father.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

6. Mercy Practised

Rejoice, O Hope of sinners, Refuge of the afflicted, for the great pleasure you experience in Paradise in seeing that all who praise and revere you in this world are rewarded by the Eternal Father with His holy grace on earth and with His immense glory in Heaven.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

7. Hope Rewarded

Rejoice, O Mother, Daughter, and Spouse of God, because all the graces, all the joys, all the delights, and all the favours you now enjoy in Paradise will never diminish; indeed, they will increase until the day of judgment and last for eternity.

Hail Mary and Glory Be.

Prayer to the Most Blessed Virgin

O glorious Virgin Mary, Mother of my Lord, source of all our consolation, through these your joys, which I have recalled with the greatest devotion I could muster, I beg you to obtain for me from God the remission of my sins and the continual help of His holy grace, so that I may never render myself unworthy of your protection but rather have the fortune to receive all those heavenly favours you are accustomed to bestow upon your servants, who devoutly remember these joys that overflow from your beautiful heart, O immortal Queen of Heaven.

Photo: shutterstock.com

Family Conversation

Son: "Have you heard what happened in Ukraine?"

Father: "Bah!"

Mother: "Is the soup salty enough?"

Son: "That's a problem, isn't it?"

Father: "Yes."

Son: "Then what do you think?"

Father: "You are right, it lacks a little salt."

Mother: "Here, have some."

Son: "It's strange how it could have come to this."

Mother: "How much did you get for mathematics?"

Father: "I never understood anything about maths."

Mother: "It's cold tonight..."

A husband listens to his wife at most for 17 seconds and then he starts talking.

A wife listens to her husband for a maximum of 17 seconds and then she starts talking.

Husband and wife listen to their children for...

The festive oratory at Valdocco

In 1935, following the canonisation of Don Bosco in 1934, the Salesians took care to collect testimonies about him. A certain Pietro Pons, who as a boy had attended the festive oratory in Valdocco for about ten years (from 1871 to 1882), and who had also attended two years of primary school (with classrooms under the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians) on 8 November gave a beautiful testimony of those years. We excerpt

some passages from it, almost all unpublished.

The figure of Don Bosco

He was the centre of attraction for the whole Oratory. This is how our former Oratorian Pietro Pons remembers him at the end of the 1970s: "He no longer had vigour, but he was always calm and smiling. He had two eyes that pierced and penetrated the mind. He would appear among us: he was a joy for everyone. D. Rua, D. Lazzero were at his side as if they had the Lord in their midst. D. Barberis and all the boys were running towards him, surrounding him, some walking beside him, some backwards, facing him. It was a fortune, a coveted privilege to be able to be close to him, to talk to him. He strolled along talking, and looking at everyone with those two eyes that turned every which way, electrifying hearts with joy."

Among the episodes that have stuck in his mind 60 years later, he recalls two in particular: "One day... he appeared alone at the front door of the sanctuary. Then a flock of boys rushed to run him over like a gust of wind. But he held the umbrella in his hand. It had handle and a shaft as thick as that of the peasants. He raised it and, using it like a sword, juggled it to repel that affectionate assault, on the right, to the left, to open up a passage. He pointed it at one, then off to the side, but in the meantime the others approached from the other side. So the game, the joke continued, bringing joy to hearts, eager to see the good Father return from his journey. He looked like a village priest of the good-natured kind."

Games and teatrino

A Salesian oratory without games is unthinkable. The elderly former pupil recalls: "the courtyard was occupied by a building, the church of Mary Help and at the end of a low wall... a sort of hut rested on the left corner, where there was always someone to watch over those who entered... As soon as you entered the playground on the right, there was a swing with only one seat, then the parallel bars and the fixed bar for the older children, who enjoyed doing their spins and

somersaults, and also the trapeze, and the single flying step, which were, however, near the sacristies beyond St Joseph's chapel. And again: "This courtyard was of a beautiful length and lent itself very well to speed races starting from the side of the church and returning there on the way back. Barra rotti, sack races and a game called pignatelli were also played. The latter games were announced on the previous Sunday. So was the greasy pole but the pole was planted with the thin end at the bottom so that it would be more difficult to climb. There were lotteries, and the ticket was paid for with a penny or two. Inside the house was a small library kept in a cupboard."

As well as games there was the famous teatrino "little theatre" where genuine dramas such as "The Crusader's Son" were performed, Don Cagliero's romanze were sung, and musicals such as the Cobbler were presented by the legendary Carlo Gastini [a brilliant past pupil leader]. The play, attended free of charge by the parents, was held in the hall under the nave of the church of Mary Help, but the former oratory boy also recalls that "once it was performed at the Moretta house" [today's parish church near the square]. Poor people lived there in the most squalid poverty. In the cellars that can be seen under the balcony there was a poor mother who would carry her son Charles outside at midday. She had to carry him on her shoulders to sunbathe."

Religious services and formation meetings

At the festive oratory there was no lack of religious services on Sunday mornings: Holy Mass with Holy Communion, prayers of the good Christian; followed in the afternoon by recreation, catechism, and Don Giulio Barberis' sermon. By now an old man, "Don Bosco never came to say Mass or to preach, but only to visit and stay with the boys during recreation... The catechists and assistants had their pupils with them in church during the services and taught them catechism. A little lesson was given to everyone. The lesson was required to be memorised every Sunday and then also an explanation." The solemn feasts ended

with a procession and a snack for all: "On leaving church after mass there was breakfast. A young man on the right outside the door would give us a loaf of bread, another on the left would put two slices of salami on it with a fork." Those boys were content with little, but they were delighted. When the boarders joined the oratorians for the singing of vespers, their voices could be heard in Via Milano and Via Corte d'appello!

Formation group meetings were also held at the festive oratory. In the house near the church of St Francis, there was "a small, low room that could hold about twenty people...In the room there was a small table for the lecturer, there were benches for the meetings and conferences for the older boys in general, and a meeting of the St Aloysius sodality, almost every Sunday."

Who were the Oratorians?

Of his 200 or so companions – but their number diminished in the winter due to the return of seasonal workers to their families – our sprightly old man recalled that many were from Biella "almost all 'bic', that is, they carried the wooden bucket full of lime and the wicker basket full of bricks to the bricklayers at the buildings." Others were "apprentice bricklayers, mechanics, tinsmiths." Poor apprentices: they worked from morning to night every day and only on Sundays could they afford a bit of recreation "at Don Bosco's" (as his oratory was called): "We played Asino vola, under the direction of the then Br Milanese [a future priest who was a great missionary in Patagonia]. Br Ponzano, later a priest, was a gym teacher. He made us do free exercises, with sticks, on the equipment."

Pietro Pons' memories are much broader, as rich in distant suggestions as they are pervaded by a shadow of nostalgia; they wait to be known in full. We hope to do so soon.

Nobody frightened the hens (1876)

Set in January 1876, the piece features one of Don Bosco's most evocative "dreams," his favourite tool for stirring and guiding the young people of the Oratory. The vision opens onto a vast plain where sowers are hard at work: the wheat, symbolising the Word of God, will only sprout if protected. But ravenous hens swoop down on the seed, and while the farmers sing verses from the Gospels, the clerics tasked with guarding it remain silent or distracted, letting everything be lost. The scene, brought to life with witty dialogue and biblical quotes, becomes a parable of the murmuring that stifles the fruit of preaching and a warning to be actively vigilant. With tones that are both paternal and stern, Don Bosco transforms the fantastical element into a sharp moral lesson.

In the latter half of January, Don Bosco had a symbolic dream which he mentioned to several Salesians. One of them, Father Barberis, urged him to tell it at a "Good Night" because the boys loved to hear his dreams, which greatly benefited them and made them feel closer to the Oratory.

"True," Don Bosco replied, "these dreams help a lot and the boys are eager to hear them. My only trouble is that I need lungs of steel. Truthfully, these dreams do shake people up because almost always they touch everybody and each one asks in what condition I saw him, what he is to do and how he should understand the different facets of the dream. They pester me day and night. All I need do to urge them to make a general confession is tell them one of my dreams. Well, let's do this. Next Sunday while I give the 'Good Night' to the boys, you ask me some questions and I then will tell my last

dream."

On January 23 he mounted the platform after night prayers, his beaming countenance revealing, as always, his joy at being with his sons. When everybody quieted down, Father Barberis raised his hand. "Excuse me, Don Bosco," he said, "may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"I heard that recently you had a dream about seeds, sowers, and hens and that you told the cleric Calvi about what you saw. Would you kindly tell us too? We'd like to hear it."

"Aren't you nosy!" Don Bosco replied in mock rebuke that provoked general laughter.

"I won't mind your calling me nosy, so long as you tell us the dream," Father Barberis insisted. "I think all the boys back me up, and I am sure that they are most eager to hear you."

"In that case, I will tell you. I had intended to keep it to myself because of some things which concern some of you personally, things which might even make you uneasy, but since you asked for it, I will narrate it."

"Oh, Don Bosco, if you have a hard knock in store for me, please spare me in public."

"I will tell things just as I saw them and let each one take what pertains to him. Before I begin, just remember that dreams happen during sleep when we have no control over our mind. If you find anything good in this dream, a warning or anything at all, take heed, but do not become ill at ease because of it. I said that I dreamed while I was sleeping because some boys dream while they are awake, much to their teachers' annoyance. [So, let me start.]

I seemed to be in Castelnuovo d' sti where I was born. Before me stretched a vast field set in a beautiful plain. The field was not ours, and I had no idea who owned it. Many people were working with hoes, spades, rakes and other tools; some were plowing, sowing, harrowing and doing other chores. Scattered foremen supervised the work; I seemed to be one of them.

Elsewhere a group of peasants were singing. I gazed in astonishment, unable to figure out where I was. Why are these people working so hard? I kept asking myself. Then I answered my own question: To provide bread for my boys. It was truly delightful to see these good peasants working so hard and pursuing their tasks with untiring zest and diligence.

A few, however, were having fun.

As I took in the scene, I noticed several priests and many clerics of ours, some close to me, others farther away. I must be dreaming, I told myself.

My clerics are in Turin, not here at Castelnuovo. But why am I wearing winter clothing? Yesterday the temperature was near freezing, and still these people are sowing wheat. I clapped my hands and began walking off, saying, I am not dreaming; this really is a field; that cleric over there is so-and-so; that other one I know too. If I were dreaming, how could I see all this?

Just then I spotted nearby a kindly old man whose countenance inspired trust. He was watching me and the other people intently. I went up to him.

"Tell me, my good man," I said, "what's going on over here? What is this place? Who are these workers? Whose field is this?"

"Fine questions you ask!" the man answered. "A priest, and you don't know these things?"

"Please tell me if this is a dream. I feel I'm dreaming and all I see is just unreal."

"What you see is quite real, and I think you are wide-awake. Don't you realize it? You are talking, laughing and joking."

"People can dream that they are talking, listening and acting as though they were awake," I objected.

"Forget that! You are here in body and soul."

"All right, if I am awake, tell me who owns this field."

"You studied Latin. Which is the first noun of the second declension that you learned in Donatus? 1 Do you remember?"

"Surely, but what does that have to do with my question?"

"A great deal. Now tell me what that noun was."

"Dominus."

"And its genitive?"

"Domini."

"Very good! Therefore this field is Domini, of the Lord."

"Ah! Now I see!" I exclaimed.

I was surprised at the old gentleman's explanation. Just then I saw several people carrying bags of wheat grains while a group of peasants sang, *Exiit, qui seminat, seminare semen suum* [The sower went out to sow his seed-Luke 8, 5].

I thought it was a shame to throw good seed into the ground to rot. Would it not be better, I wondered, to grind it into flour for bread or pasta? But then I thought: He who sows not, reaps not. Unless the seed is sown and rots, what can one reap? Meanwhile a large flock of hens were scurrying from all sides to peck at the wheat that was being scattered, while the peasants were singing, *Venerunt aves caeli, sustulerunt frumentum et reliquerunt zizaniam* [The birds came, ate up the wheat and left the cockle].

I looked about me and observed the clerics. One stood with arms folded, totally unconcerned; another was chatting with his companions; others shrugged their shoulders or looked the other way. There were some who laughed at what they saw and unconcernedly went on with their games or chores. No one tried to shoo the hens away. Resentfully I said to each of them, "What's wrong with you? Don't you see those hens eating up all the seeds and destroying the hopes of these good peasants? What kind of harvest are we going to have? Why do you stand there so mum? Why don't you shoo the hens away?"

Their only response was a shrug of the shoulders and a blank stare. Some did not even move. They had been totally unconcerned with what was going on in the field before I shouted at them, and they were paying no attention now.

"You are a bunch of fools," I went on. "Can't you see that the hens have had their fill? Couldn't you at least clap your hands to scare them off?"

As my words were ineffective, I began clapping my own hands, and this prompted some of them to begin chasing the hens away,

while I muttered to myself: Now they chase them away, now that all the wheat has been gobbled up!

Just then the same choir of peasants sang these words, *Canes muti nescientes latrare* [Dumb dogs unable to bark-Is. 56, 10]. Astounded and exasperated, I faced the kindly old man. "Please tell me what this is all about," I pleaded. "I can't make any sense out of it. What does the seed mean?"

"The seed is the word of God."

"What is the meaning of the hens gobbling it up?"

Changing tone, the old man went on, "If you want a full explanation, here it is. The field is the Lord's vineyard as the Gospel says, but it can also symbolize the heart of man. The farmhands are Gospel workers who sow the word of God, especially by preaching. This word can bear much fruit in people's hearts if they are prepared, but then birds come and pluck it away."

"What do the birds symbolize?"

"They symbolize murmuring. After hearing an inspiring sermon, one lad joins his companions and finds fault with the preacher's gestures, voice, or some word of his. He destroys the good effect of the sermon.

Another will point out a physical or intellectual shortcoming of the preacher or ridicule his pronunciation. Again the sermon is made fruitless. The same can be said about good books; finding fault with them destroys the good they can do. Murmuring is all the nastier because it is generally done on the sly; it grows and thrives where we would least expect it. Wheat, even when sown in a poorly tilled field, will take root, grow and bear fruit. When a storm breaks over a freshly sown field, that field becomes soggy, but it still yields a harvest. Even where the seed is not of the finest quality, it will still grow; it may yield less, but yield it will.

However, when hens or birds flock and peck at it, the field will yield nothing at all. So it is with sermons, exhortations and good resolutions; if they are followed by distractions or temptations, their good effect will be lessened but not destroyed, but if there is murmuring or backbiting or some

similar thing, all is wiped out. Whose duty is it to sound the alarm, take a firm stand, cry out and make sure that murmuring and unbecoming talk are silenced? You know the answer."

"What were those clerics doing?" I asked. "Couldn't they have prevented all that?"

"Of course, but they did not," he went on. "Some just stood there watching; others paid no attention; some were unaware of what was going joined the murmurers and did their share to destroy the word of God.

You are a priest. Insist on this point. Preach, exhort, speak out, and never be afraid of saying too much. Make everybody understand that criticizing those who preach, exhort or give good advice is very harmful indeed. Furthermore, being silent and passive when a wrong is being done and one's duty calls for action makes one an accomplice in the evil deeds of others."

Deeply impressed by these words, I kept looking for other failings so as to shame the clerics into doing their duty, but they had already begun shoving the hens away. I took a few steps but tripped over an abandoned rake and woke up.

"Now let's draw a lesson from all this," Don Bosco said. "Father Barberis, what do you think of this dream?"

"I think it's a good reprimand. Let the chips fall where they may."

"It should certainly do us some good," Don Bosco went on. "My dear boys, avoid murmuring because it is a very grave evil. Shun it like the plague and try to make others avoid it too. At times even good advice and excellent deeds are not as effective as is the prevention of murmuring or of harmful talk. Let us bolster our courage and attack these evils openly. There is no greater misfortune than to rob one of the benefit of God's word. One utterance, one smart remark can do just that.

"This dream came several nights ago, but last night I dreamed again and I wish to tell you about it, too. It's only about nine o'clock, and I'll try to be brief."

I found myself somewhere else. I can't remember where. I know I was not in Castelnuovo, but I don't think I was at the Oratory either. Someone dashed over to me. "Don Bosco!" he cried. "Come quickly!"

"Why the hurry?" I asked.

"Don't you know what has happened?"

"No! Tell me!"

"So-and-so is very ill. He is dying. Such a fine, lively lad!"

"Are you joking?" I replied. "Just this morning I was talking with him while strolling about the porticoes and now you tell me he is dying!"

"Don Bosco, I am not trying to fool you. I must tell you the truth: that boy needs you very badly. He wants to see you and speak to you one more time. Quickly, or you will be too late."

With no idea of direction, I hurriedly followed the messenger and came to a crowd of people who in tears begged me, "Hurry! His end is near!"

"What happened?" I asked. I was taken to a room where a boy lay in bed, his face sunken and deadly pale. A racking cough and rattle in his throat barely allowed him to speak.

"Are you not so-and-so?" I asked him.

"Yes, I am."

"How are you feeling?"

"Very sick."

"What happened? Yesterday and today you were walking happily along the porticoes."

"Yes, but let's hurry. I must make my confession because I have little time."

"Do not be upset. You made your confession only a few days ago."

"I know, and I don't think I have any big sin on my conscience, but I want to be absolved again before I go to my Divine Judge."

While hearing his confession I noticed that he was rapidly failing. Phlegm nearly choked him. We must hurry, I thought, if he is still to receive Holy Viaticum and the Anointing of the Sick. Really, he will not be able to receive Viaticum

because it would take too long and his cough would keep him from swallowing. I must get the oil of the sick.

I left the room and sent someone for it. Meanwhile the boys around me kept asking, "Is he really in danger? Is he really dying, as people are saying?"

"Unfortunately, yes," I replied. "Don't you see how his breathing has become more labored and the phlegm is choking him?"

"Then it would be better to give him Holy Viaticum too, to strengthen him before sending him to Our Lady's arms."

As I busied myself getting things ready I heard someone say, "He is dead!"

I went back into the room and found the boy lying with his eyes wide open, no longer breathing.

"Is he dead?" I asked those who had been caring for him.

"Yes," they answered.

"How did it happen so quickly? Isn't he so-and-so?"

"Yes."

"I can't believe it! Just yesterday he was walking with me along the porticoes."

"Yesterday he was walking and now he is dead," they answered.

"Fortunately he was a good lad," I exclaimed. Then, turning to the boys around me, I went on: "See, he was not even able to receive the Last Sacraments. Let us thank the Lord, though, for giving him time to make his confession. He was a good boy and frequented the sacraments. Let us hope he has gone to a better life or at least to purgatory. But if this had happened to others, what would their fate have been?"

We then knelt down and recited the *De Profundis*.

I was about to re-enter my room when I saw Ferraris come in great haste.

"Don Bosco," he cried breathlessly, "do you know what happened?"

"Yes, unfortunately I do know? So-and-so is dead."

"That's not what I wanted to tell you. Two others have died."

"What?"

"Yes!" And he named them.

"When? I don't understand."

"Yes, two others died before you could get to them."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"There was no time. Still, can you tell me when the one you mentioned died?"

"Just a few minutes ago."

"Do you know what day this is and what month?"

"Of course! It's January 22, the second day of the novena of St. Francis de Sales."

"No, Don Bosco," Ferraris countered. "Check your calendar." I looked at the calendar and saw May 26.

"Incredible!" I exclaimed. "We are in January, and I am sure because I'm wearing winter clothing. No one dresses like this in May, and we would not have the heat on."

"I can't explain it either, but today is May 26."

"Just yesterday one of our boys died, and it was January."

"You are wrong," Ferraris insisted. "It was Easter time."

"That's even more incredible."

"But it was Easter time! He was far luckier than the other two who died in Mary's month."

"You are confusing me," I told him. "Explain things better. I can't make heads or tails of what you are saying."

"I am not lying. Things are just as I told you. If you want to know more and get a better explanation, take heed!"

He spread out his arms and loudly clapped his hands. The sound woke me up.

"Thank heaven," I said, "that it was only a dream. Was I scared!"

That is the dream I had last night. Make what you want of it. I don't care to give it too much importance. Today I checked out the boys who seemed to be dead in my dream, and I found them alive and well. It is certainly not advisable for me to tell you who they are. Still, I shall keep an eye on them and if necessary give them wholesome advice. I'll prepare them with caution and not make them aware of it. If death should overtake them, it will not find them unprepared. But let no one go about saying, "It could be this one or that one." Let

each one keep himself ready.

Don't let this dream frighten you. Its only effect should be that one which Our Divine Savior Himself pointed out in the Gospel: "Be ready, because at an hour that you do not expect, the Son of Man is coming." [Luke 12, 40] My dear boys, the warning the Lord gives us is a grave one. Let us always be ready because, when we least expect it, death may overtake us. The unprepared risk a bad death. I shall do my best to keep myself ready, and you should do the same, so that at whatever hour it may please the Lord to call us, we may be ready to pass into eternal happiness. Good night.

Don Bosco was always listened to in religious silence, but when he narrated these extraordinary things, not a cough or even the slightest shuffling of feet was to be heard from the hundreds of boys present. The deep impression he made lasted for weeks, even months, and radical changes were noticeable in the conduct of certain young scamps. Don Bosco's confessional would also be crowded. It never occurred to anyone that he might have invented these stories to frighten the boys and thus improve their conduct, since his predictions of forthcoming deaths always came true and the states of conscience which he saw in his dreams corresponded to reality. But was not the fear produced by such gloomy predictions a crushing nightmare? It does not seem so. In a crowd of over eight hundred boys the odds against being one of the doomed ones were too great for any one individual to feel unduly threatened. Besides, the general belief that Don Bosco prepared those who were destined to die without frightening them and that those who did die would certainly go to heaven helped to dissipate fears. Then, too, it is common knowledge that young people quickly change their mood. Momentarily they may be shaken, but they soon shake off their fears. Those who lived through those days have unanimously confirmed this.

After the boys had gone to bed, a few confreres gathered around Don Bosco to learn if one of them would be among those to die. Shaking his head with his usual smile, Don Bosco kept

them at bay, saying, "Do you really expect me to tell you who it is and risk having someone die before his time?"

Realizing that he would not disclose names, they asked him whether his first dream had shown him any clerics among the murmurers. Don Bosco, who had taken a few steps, stopped and, with a sweeping gaze at his questioners, smiled enigmatically, as if to say, "Yes, a few, but only a few, no more!"

They then pressed him to say at least if they had been among the silent observers. Don Bosco dodged the question, merely saying that they were to avoid murmuring and help others to avoid it along with any kind of wrongdoing, especially unbecoming talk.

"God help the priest or cleric," he said, "who is supposed to be in charge and sees wrongdoing and does not stop it. I want it to be known and borne well in mind that when I say 'murmuring' I do not mean merely backbiting, but every word and expression that may destroy the wholesome effect of God's word. In conclusion, I insist that it is a serious evil to keep silent in the face of wrongdoing, taking no personal action to stop it or have those in charge do so."

One of the bolder bystanders daringly asked Don Bosco, "How does Father Barberis fit into the dream? You said that there was something in it which concerned him, and Father Barberis himself seemed to expect a reprimand." When Father Barberis seemed to be pleased to have the secret revealed, Don Bosco said, "Well, Father Barberis does not speak enough of this topic; he does not stress it as much as is needed." The latter admitted that for two years he had not specifically dwelt on this topic with his novices.

He was therefore quite grateful for the observation and resolved to keep it in mind for the future.

Then all went upstairs and, after kissing Don Bosco's hand, withdrew to their quarters, except Father Barberis who, as usual, saw Don Bosco to his room. Because it was still early and he knew that he was too deeply stirred by his own narrative to sleep, Don Bosco, contrary to his custom, invited Father Barberis to enter, saying: "It's early. Let's walk in

my room a bit.” For another half-hour they conversed. Among other things, Don Bosco said, “I saw everyone in that dream, and the part that each played. I use this knowledge when hearing confessions or when exhorting publicly or privately as long as I see it has a good effect. Years ago, I paid no serious attention to these dreams, until I noticed that, generally, they were more effective than a sermon, and in some cases even more effective than a retreat. Now I make use of them, and why not? Holy Scripture says: ‘Test everything; retain what is good.’ [1 Thess. 5, 21] I see that these dreams do a lot of good and are liked, so why keep them secret? In fact, I notice that they also help to make many boys fond of our Congregation.”

“I too have experienced the benefit and help of these dreams,” Father Barberis interrupted. “They are even helpful when told to others. Where people know you, we can say that they are your dreams; where you are unknown, they can be presented as parables. I wish that I could gather them together and present them in the form of parables. Both old and young, great and small would eagerly read them and benefit spiritually.”

“Yes, I also firmly feel that they would do a lot of good.”

“But I suppose no one has put them down in writing,” Father Barberis sighed regretfully.

“I have no time,” Don Bosco went on, “and some dreams I no longer remember.”

“I remember those concerning the progress of our Congregation and Our Lady’s mantle,” Father Barberis added.

“Ah, yes,” exclaimed Don Bosco, and he mentioned several such dreams. Then his countenance became grave and, almost in a worried tone, he went on, “When I think of the responsibilities of my position, I tremble all over.... What a fearful account I shall have to give God for all the favors He bestowed on our Congregation!”

(BM XII, 28-37)

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Salesian House of Castel Gandolfo

Amidst the green hills of the Castelli Romani and the tranquil waters of Lake Albano lies a place where history, nature, and spirituality converge in a unique way: Castel Gandolfo. In this setting rich in imperial memory, Christian faith, and scenic beauty, the Salesian presence stands as a steadfast point of welcome, education, and pastoral life. The Salesian House, with its parish, educational, and cultural activities, continues the mission of St. John Bosco, offering believers and visitors an experience of a living and open Church, immersed in an environment that invites contemplation and fraternity. It is a community that, for nearly a century, has walked in service of the Gospel at the very heart of Catholic tradition.

A place blessed by history and nature

Castel Gandolfo is a jewel of the Castelli Romani, located about 25 km from Rome, nestled in the natural beauty of the Alban Hills and overlooking the picturesque Lake Albano. At an altitude of about 426 metres, this place stands out for its mild and welcoming climate, a microclimate that seems prepared by Providence to receive those seeking rest, beauty, and silence.

Even in Roman times, this territory was part of the *Albanum Caesaris*, an ancient imperial estate frequented by emperors since the time of Augustus. However, it was Emperor Tiberius who first resided here permanently, while later Domitian built a splendid villa, the remains of which can still be seen in the papal gardens. The Christian history of the place began with Constantine's donation to the Church of Albano, a gesture

that symbolically marked the transition from imperial glory to the light of the Gospel.

The name Castel Gandolfo derives from the Latin *Castrum Gandulphi*, the castle built by the Gandolfi family in the 12th century. When in 1596 the castle passed to the Holy See, it became the summer residence of the Popes, and the bond between this place and the ministry of the Successor of Peter became deep and lasting.

The Vatican Observatory: contemplating the heavens, praising the Creator

Of particular spiritual significance is the Vatican Observatory, founded by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 and relocated in the 1930s to Castel Gandolfo due to Rome's light pollution. It testifies to how even science, when directed towards truth, leads to praising the Creator.

Over the years, the Observatory has contributed to major astronomical projects such as the *Carte du Ciel* and the discovery of numerous celestial objects.

With further deterioration of observing conditions even in the Castelli Romani, in the 1980s scientific activity shifted primarily to the Mount Graham Observatory in Arizona (USA), where the *Vatican Observatory Research Group* continues astrophysical research. Castel Gandolfo, however, remains an important centre of study. Since 1986, it has hosted the *Vatican Observatory Summer School* every two years, dedicated to astronomy students and graduates from around the world. The Observatory also organises specialist conferences, public outreach events, meteorite exhibitions, and presentations of historical and artistic materials on astronomical themes, all in a spirit of research, dialogue, and contemplation of the mystery of creation.

A church at the heart of the city and of the faith

In the 17th century, Pope Alexander VII entrusted Gian Lorenzo

Bernini with the construction of a palatine chapel for the employees of the Pontifical Villas. The project, initially conceived in honour of St. Nicholas of Bari, was ultimately dedicated to St Thomas of Villanova, an Augustinian canonised in 1658. The church was consecrated in 1661 and entrusted to the Augustinians, who administered it until 1929. With the signing of the Lateran Treaty, Pope Pius XI entrusted the same Augustinians with the pastoral care of the new Pontifical Parish of St. Anne in the Vatican, while the Church of St. Thomas of Villanova was later entrusted to the Salesians.

The architectural beauty of this church, a product of Baroque genius, serves faith and the encounter between God and man. Today, numerous weddings, baptisms, and liturgies are celebrated here, attracting faithful from all over the world.

The Salesian house

The Salesians have been present in Castel Gandolfo since 1929. In those years, the village experienced significant demographic and tourist development, further enhanced by the beginning of papal celebrations in the Church of St. Thomas of Villanova. Every year, on the Solemnity of the Assumption, the Pope celebrated Holy Mass in the pontifical parish, a tradition begun by St. John XXIII on 15 August 1959, when he walked out of the Pontifical Palace to celebrate the Eucharist among the people. This custom continued until the pontificate of Pope Francis, who discontinued summer stays in Castel Gandolfo. In 2016, the entire complex of the Pontifical Villas was transformed into a museum and opened to the public.

The Salesian house was part of the Roman Province and, from 2009 to 2021, of the Central Italy Salesian Circumscription. Since 2021, it has been under the direct responsibility of the Central Office, with a Director and community appointed by the Rector Major. Currently, the Salesians present come from various nations (Brazil, India, Italy, Poland) and are active in the parish, chaplaincies, and oratory.

The pastoral spaces, though belonging to the Vatican City State and thus considered extraterritorial, are part of the Diocese of Albano, in whose pastoral life the Salesians actively participate. They are involved in diocesan adult catechesis, teaching at the diocesan theological school, and in the Presbyteral Council as representatives of consecrated life.

In addition to the parish of St. Thomas of Villanova, the Salesians also manage two other churches: Mary Help of Christians (also called "St. Paul," after the name of the neighbourhood) and Madonna del Lago, desired by St. Paul VI. Both were built between the 1960s and 1970s to meet the pastoral needs of the growing population.

The parish church designed by Bernini is now a destination for numerous weddings and baptisms celebrated by faithful from around the world. Every year, with the necessary permissions, dozens, sometimes hundreds, of celebrations take place here. The parish priest, in addition to leading the parish community, is also chaplain of the Pontifical Villas and provides spiritual accompaniment to Vatican employees working there.

The oratory, currently run by laypeople, sees the direct involvement of the Salesians, especially in catechesis. On weekends, feast days, and during summer activities like Estate Ragazzi, Salesian students residing in Rome also collaborate, offering valuable support. At the Church of Mary Help of Christians, there is also an active theatre, with parish groups organising performances—a place of encounter, culture, and evangelisation.

Pastoral life and traditions

Pastoral life is marked by the main feasts of the year: St John Bosco in January, Mary Help of Christians in May with a procession in the St. Paul neighbourhood, the feast of the Madonna del Lago—and thus the Feast of the Lake—on the last Saturday of August, with the statue carried in procession on a

boat across the lake. This latter celebration is increasingly involving neighbouring communities, attracting many participants, including motorcyclists, with whom moments of encounter have been initiated.

On the first Saturday of September, the patronal feast of Castel Gandolfo is celebrated in honour of St. Sebastian, with a large town procession. Devotion to St. Sebastian dates back to 1867, when the town was spared from an epidemic that severely affected nearby villages. Although the liturgical memorial falls on 20 January, the local feast is celebrated in September, both in memory of the protection received and for practical and climatic reasons.

On 8 September, the patron of the church, St. Thomas of Villanova, is celebrated, coinciding with the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On this occasion, the feast of families is also held, aimed at couples who married in Bernini's church. They are invited to return for a communal celebration, a procession, and a shared meal. The initiative has been well received and is becoming a lasting tradition.

A curiosity: the letterbox

Next to the entrance of the Salesian house is a post-box, known as the "Mailbox of Correspondence," considered the oldest still in use. It dates back to 1820, twenty years before the introduction of the world's first postage stamp, the famous *Penny Black* (1840). It is an official mailbox of the Italian Post Office still in operation, but also a symbolic invitation to communication, dialogue, and opening one's heart. The return of Pope Leo XIV to his summer residence will surely increase its use.

Castel Gandolfo remains a place where the Creator speaks through the beauty of creation, the proclaimed Word, and the witness of a Salesian community that, in the simplicity of Don Bosco's style, continues to offer welcome, education, liturgy, and fraternity, reminding those who approach these lands in

search of peace and serenity that true peace and serenity are found only in God and His grace.