

The Exercise for a Happy Death in Don Bosco's educational experience (3/5)

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2. The litany for a happy death in the context of the youthful spirituality promoted by Don Bosco

The litany for a happy death included in the *Companion of Youth* deserves a separate discourse. It was but one moment in the exercise, the emotionally more intense one. The heart of the monthly practice, in fact, was the examination of conscience, well-made confession, fervent communion, the decision to give oneself totally to God, and making good resolutions of a moral and spiritual nature. In the volumes or manuals dedicated to preaching, in previous centuries we do not find texts similar to this litany we find in the *Companion of Youth*, the composition of which Don Bosco attributes to “a Protestant woman converted to the Catholic Religion at the age of 15, and died at the age of 18 with a reputation for holiness.”^[1] He had drawn it from pious books published at that time in Piedmont.^[2] The prayer, “given an indulgence by Pius VII, but already circulating at the end of the 18th century”,^[3] could serve as an effective tool for moving the affections through the imaginative dramatisation of the last moments of life: it placed the faithful on their deathbed, inviting them to review the various parts of the body and the corresponding senses, considered in the state they would be in at the final moment, to shake them up, urge confidence in divine mercy and spur them on to resolutions of conversion and perseverance. It was an exercise in which the romantic spirit found relish and which Don Bosco considered particularly suitable on an emotional and spiritual level, as can be seen from some of his narrative texts. The formula was very popular during the 19th century: we find it reproduced in

various collections of prayers even outside Piedmont.[\[4\]](#) We find it interesting to reproduce it in its entirety:

Lord Jesus, God of goodness and Father of mercies, I approach you with a contrite and humble heart: to you I recommend my last hour and the decision of my eternal doom.

When my feet, benumbed, shall warn me that my mortal course is drawing to a close, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my hands, cold and trembling, shall no longer be able to clasp the crucifix, and against my will I am forced to let it fall on my bed of suffering, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my eyes, dim and troubled at the approach of death shall fix themselves on you, my last and only support, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my lips, cold and quivering, shall pronounce for the last time your adorable name, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my face, pale and livid, shall inspire the bystanders with compassion and awe, and my hair, bathed in the sweat of death, and stiffening on my head, shall forebode my approaching end, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my ears, soon to be shut forever to the words of men, shall be open to hear your voice pronouncing the sentence by which my condition is to be fixed irrevocably for all eternity, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my imagination, agitated by fearful and horrible spectres, shall be drowned in an abyss of anguish; and my spirit, troubled with the memory of my ill-doings, and the fear of your justice, shall wrestle with the powers of darkness, who will strive to take from me the consoling sight of your mercies and plunge me into the pit of despair, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my weak heart, weighed down with the pain of my illness, shall be overtaken with the horror of death, and be exhausted by the efforts it has made against the enemies of my salvation, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When I shall have shed my last tear, the sign of my

dissolution, receive it as a sacrifice of expiation so that I may expire a victim of penance, and then in that dreadful moment, merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.

When those present encircling my bed shall be moved with compassion for me, and invoke your clemency on my behalf, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When I shall have lost the use of my senses and when the world shall have vanished from my sight; when my agonising soul shall feel the sorrows of death, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my last sigh shall summon my soul from my body, accept it as a sign of holy impatience to come to you, and you, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When my soul, trembling on my lips, shall bid adieu to this world, and leave my body lifeless, pale and cold, receive this separation as a homage which I willingly pay to your Divine Majesty and then, *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

When at length my soul, admitted to your presence, shall first behold the immortal splendour of your Majesty, reject it not but receive me into the loving bosom of your mercy where I may ever sing your praises: *merciful Jesus, have mercy on me.*

Let us pray: Oh God, who have doomed all men to die but concealed from all the hour of their death, grant that I may pass my days in the practice of holiness and justice and that I may deserve to quit this world in your holiness and love. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord, who lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit ... Amen..[\[5\]](#)

Eighteenth-century rationalism and the Baroque taste for the macabre and funereal, still found in the *Preparation for Death* by Saint Alphonsus Liguori,[\[6\]](#) was surpassed in the 19th century by the romantic sensibility that preferred to follow the path of sentiment, which, “in order to reach the intellect, goes first directly to the heart, and by making the heart feel the strength and beauty of religion, fixes the intellect’s attention, and facilitates its consent”, as Monsignor Angelo Antonio Scotti wrote.[\[7\]](#) Therefore, even

in the consideration of death, it was considered an excellent thing to insist on the emotional levers and affections to provoke a generous response to the absolute gift of self made by the divine Saviour for the salvation of humanity. Spiritual authors and preachers considered it important and necessary to describe “the afflictions and oppressions that are inseparable from the efforts that the soul must naturally make in breaking the bonds of the body”,[\[8\]](#) together with the depiction of the serene death of the righteous. They wanted to bring faith into the concreteness of existence to stimulate the reform of morals and the purpose of a more genuine and fervent Christian life: “Certainly the hope of deserving a good few final moments and a holy death has been and always will be the most powerful incentive to induce men to abandon vice; as the spectacle of a wicked man who dies as he lived, is a great lesson for all mortals.”[\[9\]](#)

The litany for the happy death included in the *Companion of Youth* should be considered, therefore, entirely functional to the success of the monthly recollection and to the ideals of Christian life that the Saint proposed to the young, as well as being particularly suited to the emotional and cultural sensitivity of that precise historical moment. If the reading of those formulas generates a felling of disquiet today, as evoked by Delumeau and offers an “altogether distressing” representation of Don Bosco’s religious pedagogy,[\[10\]](#) this happens above all because they are extrapolated from their frames of reference. Instead, as can be seen from the educative practice of the Oratory and from the narrative testimonies left by Don Bosco, not only did those youngsters find pleasure and encouragement in reciting them, but they effectively contributed to making the exercise for a happy death fruitful in moral and spiritual results. To probe their educational fruitfulness, we need to anchor them to the whole of the substantial proposal of Christian life presented by Don Bosco and to the fervid and industrious experience of the Oratory.

The overall horizon of reference can already be

grasped in the small meditations that introduce the *Companion of Youth*, where Don Bosco intends above all to present “a scheme of life, brief and easy enough, which will enable you to be a joy to your parents, and a glory to your country, making you good citizens upon earth, and one day blessed inhabitants of Heaven.”[\[11\]](#) First and foremost, he encourages them to “lift up their gaze”, to contemplate the beauty of creation and the very high dignity of man, the most sublime of creatures, endowed with a spiritual soul made to love the Lord, to grow in virtue and holiness, destined for Paradise, for eternal communion with God.[\[12\]](#) Consideration of the boundless divine love, revealed to us in Christ’s sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, and of God’s special predilection for children and young people, must move them to correspond with generosity, to “direct every action” to the attainment of the end for which they have been created, with a firm resolve to do all those things that may please the Lord and to avoid “those things that might disgust Him”.[\[13\]](#) And since a person’s salvation “ordinarily depends on the time of youth”, it is indispensable to begin *serving the Lord* at an early age: “ if we lead a good life when we are young, we shall be good when we are old, and our death will be happy, the beginning of eternal bliss. On the other hand, if vice takes hold of us in youth, it will gradually grow in the course of the different stages of our life until death, which will be the terrible herald of a most unhappy eternity.”[\[14\]](#)

Don Bosco therefore invites the boys to give themselves “in time to God”, to commit themselves joyfully to his service, overcoming the prejudice that Christian life is sad and melancholic: “It is not true, the one who serves the devil will be melancholic, and however he tries to be happy, he will always have a heart that weeps, saying to him: you are unhappy because you are the enemy of God [...]. Courage therefore, dear boys, give yourselves in time to virtue, and I assure you that you will always have a cheerful and contented heart, and you will know how sweet it is to serve the Lord.”[\[15\]](#)

The Christian life consists essentially in serving the Lord in "holy cheerfulness"; this is one of the most fruitful and special ideas of Don Bosco's spiritual and pedagogical heritage: "If you do this, how many consolations you will feel at the point of death! On the contrary, if you do not expect to serve God, how many regrets you will feel at the end of your days." [16] He who puts off conversion, who consumes his days in idleness or in useless and harmful dissipations, in sins or in vices, runs the risk of no longer having the opportunity, the time and the grace to return to God with danger of eternal damnation. [17] Indeed, death may surprise him when he least expects it: "Woe to the one who has fallen out with God at that moment." [18] But divine mercy offers the repentant sinner the sacrament of Penance, a sure means of regaining grace and with it peace of heart. Celebrated regularly and with the proper dispositions, the sacrament not only becomes an effective instrument of salvation, but also a privileged educational moment in which the confessor, the "faithful friend of the soul", can securely direct the young person on the path to salvation and holiness. Confession is prepared with a good examination of conscience, asking the Lord for light: "Enlighten me with your grace, that I may know my sins now as you will make them known to me when I come before your judgement. Let me, O my God, detest them with true sorrow." [19] The regular celebration of the sacrament guarantees the serenity necessary to live a truly happy life: "It seems to me that this is the surest means of living happy days in the midst of the afflictions of life, at the end of which we too will calmly see the moment of death approaching." [20]

The friendship with God regained through Confession finds its summit in Eucharistic Communion, a privileged moment in which the young person offers all of himself so that God may "take possession" of his heart and become its undisputed master. In the act in which he opens himself unreservedly to the sanctifying and transfiguring action of grace, he experiences the ineffable joy that

accompanies a genuine spiritual experience and is led to ardently desire eternal communion with God: "If I want something great, I go to receive the holy host in which is found the *corpus quod pro nobis traditum est*, that same body, blood, soul and divinity, which Jesus Christ offered to his eternal Father for us on the cross. What am I lacking in order to be happy? Nothing in this world: I only lack being able to enjoy, unveiled in heaven, the one whom now with the eyes of faith I adore on the altar." [\[21\]](#)

Despite the strong emotional accent that connotes 19th century religious sentiment, the spirituality proposed by Don Bosco is very concrete. In fact he presents conversion as a process of appropriation of the baptismal promises, which begins at the moment when the young person, in a "frank and resolute manner", decides to correspond to the divine call, [\[22\]](#) to detach his heart from the affection for sin in order to love God above all else and let himself be docilely moulded by grace. Conversion thus translates into a hard-working and ardent living, animated by charity, in a positive and joyful striving for perfection, beginning with the small everyday things. The fervour of charity inspires a "positive" mortification of the senses, focused on overcoming oneself, reforming one's life, the punctual fulfilment of duties, cordiality and service to one's neighbour. Such mortification has nothing afflictive about it, because it is generous adherence to life with its unexpected events and difficulties, it is the ability to endure daily adversities, it is steadfastness in fatigue, it is sobriety and temperance, it is fortitude. Every occasion, therefore, can become an expression of the love of God, a love that drives the person to live and work "in His presence", to do everything and endure everything for His sake.

Charity animates prayer in a special way, since, through small practices, brief prayers, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and devotions, it nourishes the desire for affectionate communion, translates into unconditional self-offering, joyful adaptation to the divine will, desire for

mystical union and yearning for the eternal communion of Paradise.

Don Bosco summarises his proposal in simple formulas, but he does not lower the level, and constantly reminds the young people that it is necessary to decide resolutely: "How many things, then, do we need in order to make ourselves holy? Only one thing: you *must want it*. Yes; as long as you want it, you can be a saint: all you need is the *will*." This is shown by the examples of saints "who lived in lowly circumstances, and amid the travails of an active life", but sanctified themselves, simply "by doing well all that they had to do. They fulfilled all their duties to God, suffering everything for his sake, offering him their pains, their travails: this is the great science of eternal health and holiness."[\[23\]](#)

The experience of Michael Magone, a pupil at the Valdocco Oratory, is enlightening. "Left to himself," wrote Don Bosco, "he was in danger of beginning to tread the sad path of evil"; the Lord invited him to follow him; "he listened to the loving call and by constantly responding to divine grace came to draw in admiration all those who knew him, thus showing how marvellous the effects of God's grace are on those who work to correspond to it."[\[24\]](#) The decisive moment is when the boy, having become aware of his situation and overcome, with the help of his educator, the deep sense of anguish and guilt that was tormenting him, felt that "it was time to break with the devil" and decided to "give himself to God" through a good confession and a firm resolution.[\[25\]](#) Don Bosco recounts the teenager's emotions and reflections on the night following his confession: restored to the grace of God and reassured of his eternal salvation,[\[26\]](#) he experiences irrepressible joy.

It is difficult to put into words all that I felt that unforgettable night. I hardly slept at all. In some little time I dozed off but soon my imagination made me see hell open before me, populated with hosts of devils. I drove

that thought away as I reflected that all my sins had been forgiven. Then I saw a whole host of angels who showed me paradise, saying to me: See what happiness lies in store for you so long as you keep your resolutions!

About halfway through the night I was so overcome by emotion that I had to get up, kneel by my bed and say over and over again: Oh, how wretched are those who fell into sin! But how much more unhappy are those who live in sin. I believe that if they could only experience for even a single minute the great consolation that being in the state of grace brings they would all go to confession to placate the anger of God, to remove remorse of conscience and to experience peace of heart. Oh, sin, sin! What a terrible curse you are to those who allow your entry into their hearts. If I ever have the misfortune to commit even the smallest sin again I am determined to go to confession immediately.[\[27\]](#)

We find here the keys to interpreting the horizon of meaning in which Don Bosco places the pedagogical and spiritual function of the exercise for a happy death.

[\(continued\)](#)

[\[1\]](#) Bosco, *The Provident Young Man*, 140.

[\[2\]](#) We find the same formula, with minor variations, in an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Mezzi da praticarsi e risoluzioni da farsi dopo una buona confessione per mantenersi nella grazia di Dio riacquistata*, Vigevano, s.e., 1842, 33-36. Cf. also *Il cristiano in chiesa, ovvero affettuose orazioni per la Messa, per la Confessione e Comunione e per l'adorazione del Santissimo Sacramento*. Operetta spirituale del P. Fulgenzio M. Riccardi di Torino, Min. Oss., Torino, G.B. Paravia 1845, where the attribution of the sequence is, in the wording, similar to that of Don Bosco: "Litanie per ottenere una buona morte composte da una Damigella nata tra i Protestanti,

convertasi alla Religione Cattolica all'età di quindici anni, e morta di diciotto in istima universale di santità" (*ibid.*, 165).

[3] Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II: *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*, Roma, LAS, 1981, 340. Cf. also Michel Bazart, *Don Bosco et l'exercice de la bonne mort*, in "Chahiers Salésiens" N. 4, Avril 1981, 7-24.

[4] For example, it can be found, with some stylistic reworking and minor amplifications, under the title "Gemiti e suppliche per la buona morte", in Giuseppe Riva, *Manuale di Filotea*. Twenty-first edition again revised and expanded, Milan, Serafino Majocchi, 1874, 926-927.

[5] Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*, 138-142.

[6] See for example the first consideration "Ritratto d'un uomo da poco tempo morto", in Alfonso Maria de Liguori, *Opere ascetiche*, vol. 8, *Apparecchio alla morte*, Torino, Giacinto Marietti, 1825, 10-19.

[7] Angelo Antonio Scotti, *Osservazioni sulle false dottrine e sulle funeste conseguenze dell'opera del Lauvergne intitolata "De l'agonie et de la mort dans toutes les classes de la société"*. Dissertazione letta nell'Accademia di Religione Cattolica in Roma il dì 4 luglio 1844, Roma, Tipografia delle Belle Arti, 1844, 3. Scotti disputes the French author, a physician and scientist, who believes the statement that only true Catholics die peacefully is false: atheists or adherents of other religions or even immoral and bad individuals can also die peacefully, while it happens not infrequently that holy men, people of great virtue and ascetics, especially among Catholics, suffer death throes that are agonising and desperate, since it all depends on the type of illness, cerebral lucidity, the state of physiological or psychic debilitation and the anxieties induced by religious

fanaticism, cf. Hubert Lauvergne, *De l'agonie et de la mort dans toutes les classes de la société sous le rapport humanitaire, physiologique et religieux*, 2 vols, Paris, Librairie de J.-B. Baillière et C. Gosselin, 1842.

[8] John Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, Tip. G.B. Paravia e Comp., 1859, 116.

[9] Scotti, *Osservazioni sulle false dottrine*, 14-15.

[10] Stella, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*, vol. II, 341.

[11] Bosco, *The Companion of Youth*, 7.

[12] Cf. *ibid.*, 10.

[13] *Ibid.*, 10-11.

[14] *Ibid.*, 6.

[15] *Ibid.*, 13.

[16] *Ibid.*, 32.

[17] Cf. *ibid.*, 32-34.

[18] *Ibid.*, 38.

[19] *Ibid.*, 93.

[20] Bosco, *Life of Young Dominic Savio*, 136.

[21] *Ibid.*, 69.

[22] Giovanni Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Torino, Tip. G.B. Paravia e Comp., 1861, 4-5.

[23] John Bosco, *Vita di santa Zita serva e di sant'Isidoro contadino*. Turin, P. De-Agostini, 1853, 6-7

[\[24\]](#) Bosco, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, 5.

[\[25\]](#) *Ibid.*, 20-21.

[\[26\]](#) “He made his confession with great feeling and many times broke down crying. Before leaving he said to his confessor: ‘Do you think all my sins have been forgiven? If I were to die tonight would I be saved’?

‘Go in peace’, was the answer. ‘The Lord in His great mercy waited until now for you to make a good confession so I am sure He has pardoned all your sins and if, in His adorable plan, called you to Himself tonight you are absolutely certain of your eternal salvation.’ (*ibid.*, 21).

[\[27\]](#) *Ibid.*, 21-22.

The Exercise for a Happy Death in Don Bosco's educational experience (2/5)

[*\(continuation from previous article\)*](#)

1. The exercise for a happy death in Salesian institutions and the centuries-old tradition of the *Praeparationes ad mortem*

From the very beginnings of the Oratory established in Valdocco (1846-47), Don Bosco proposed the monthly exercise for a happy death to his boys as an ascetic tool aimed at encouraging – through a Christian perspective on death – a constant attitude of conversion and overcoming personal limitations and ensuring, through a proper confession and receiving communion, the favourable spiritual and

psychological conditions for a fruitful journey of Christian life and the building up of virtues, in docile cooperation with the action of God's grace. The practice at that time was in use in most parishes, religious and educational institutions. For the people it was the equivalent of the monthly recollection. In the Salesian Oratories it was held on the last Sunday of each month, and consisted, as we used read in the *Rule*, "in a careful preparation, in order to make a good confession and communion, and to finalise spiritual and temporal things, as if we were at the end of our life."[\[1\]](#)

The exercise became common practice in all Salesian educational institutions. In the colleges and boarding schools it was held on the last day of the month, with teachers and boys together.[\[2\]](#) The Salesian Constitutions themselves, from the very first draft, established how it would be done: "The last day of each month will be a day of spiritual retreat, in which, leaving temporal affairs aside as far as possible, each one will recollect, will make the exercise for a happy death, arranging spiritual and temporal things, as if he were to leave the world and set out for eternity."[\[3\]](#)

The procedure was simple. The boys, gathered in the chapel, read the words together that were in the *Companion of Youth*, which provided the essential spiritual and theological meaning of the practice. First of all, the prayer of Pope Benedict XIII was said "to ask from God the grace not to die a sudden death" and to obtain, through the merits of Christ's passion, not to be taken "out of this world so much", so as to still have an appropriate "time for penance" and to prepare oneself for "a happy and graceful passage [...], so that I may love you [Lord Jesus] with all my heart, praise you, and bless you for ever." Then the prayer to St Joseph was read to beg "complete forgiveness" for one's sins, the grace to imitate his virtues, to "always walk on the way that leads to Heaven" and to be defended "from the enemies of my soul at the end of my life; so that comforted by the hope of flying [...] to possess eternal glory in heaven I might breathe my last

pronouncing the holy names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph." Finally, a reader read out the litany for a happy death, each element of which was answered with "Merciful Jesus, have mercy on me." [4] The devotional exercise was followed by personal confession and "general" communion. "Extraordinary" confessors were invited for the occasion, so that everyone had the opportunity and full freedom to settle matters of conscience.

Salesian religious, in addition to the prayers said in common with the pupils, made a more detailed examination of conscience. On 18 September 1876, Don Bosco explained to his disciples how to make it fruitful:

It will be useful to compare month to month: did I benefit from this month, or did I go backwards? Then come to the details: how did I behave in this virtue, in that virtue?

And especially let us review what regards the vows and the practices of piety: with regard to *obedience*, how have I behaved? Have I progressed? For example, did I do the assistance I was given to do? How did I do it? In that class, how did I commit myself? Regarding *poverty*, whether in clothes, food, cells, do I have anything that is not poor? Have I been greedy? Have I complained when I lacked something? Then come to *chastity*: have I given rise to evil thoughts? Have I detached myself more and more from the love of relatives? Have I mortified myself in gluttony, looks, etc.?

And so pass on the practices of *piety* and note especially if there was ordinary lukewarmness, if the practices were done without motivation.

This examination, whether longer or shorter, should always be done. Since there are several who have occupations from which they cannot exempt themselves on any day of the month, it will be lawful to keep these occupations, but let each one on the said day make it his own [duty] to carry out these considerations and to make special good resolutions. [5]

The aim, therefore, was to encourage regular

monitoring of one's life to improve oneself. This primary role of encouraging and supporting virtuous growth explains why Don Bosco, in the introduction to the Constitutions, said that the monthly practice for a happy death, together with the annual retreat, is "the fundamental part of the practices of piety, the one that in a certain way embraces them all", and concluded by saying, "I believe that the salvation of a religious can be said to be assured if every month he approaches the Holy Sacraments, and examines his conscience, as if he had to depart from this life for eternity." [\[6\]](#)

Over time, the monthly exercise was further refined, as we read in a note inserted in the Constitutions promulgated by Fr Michael Rua after the 10th General Chapter:

a. The exercise for a happy death is to be made in common, and in addition to what our Constitutions prescribe, these rules are to be kept in mind: 1) In addition to the usual meditation in the morning, a half hour of meditation is to be done again in the evening, and this meditation is to reflect on the *novissimi* [the last things]; 2) It is to be done as a monthly review of the conscience, and the confession on that day is to be more accurate than usual, as if in fact it were the last one of your life, and Holy Communion is to be received. 3) After Mass and the usual prayers, the prayers indicated in the manual of piety are to be recited; 4) One should think for at least half an hour about the progress or regression that one has made in virtue during the past month, especially with regard to the intentions made in the retreat, the observance of the Rules, and make firm resolutions for a better life; 5) All, or at least part, of the Constitutions of the Pious Society should be reread on that day; 6) It will also be good to choose a patron saint for the month that is about to begin.

b. If anyone is unable, because of his occupations, to make the exercise for a happy death in common, or to perform all the aforementioned works of piety, he shall, with the permission of the Rector, perform only those works

that are compatible with his role, postponing the others to a more convenient day.[\[7\]](#)

These indications reveal substantial continuity and harmony with the centuries-old tradition of the *preparatio ad mortem* widely documented by books since the beginning of the 16th century. The evangelical calls for vigilant and real expectation (cf. Mt 24:44; Lk 12:40), to keep oneself prepared for the judgement that will determine one's eternal fate among the "blessed" or the "cursed" (Mt 25:31-46), together with the Lenten admonition "*Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*", have, over the centuries, constantly nourished the considerations of spiritual teachers and preachers, inspired artistic representations, been translated into rituals, devout and penitential practices, suggested intentions and loving longings for eternal communion with God. They have also aroused fears, anxieties, sometimes anguish, according to the spiritual sensibilities and theological perspectives of the various times.

The learned reflections of Erasmus' *De praeparatione ad mortem* and other humanists,[\[8\]](#) imbued with a genuine evangelical spirit but so erudite as to feel like rhetorical exercises, had gradually given way between the 17th and early 18th century to the moral exhortations of preachers and the meditative considerations of spiritualists. A pamphlet by Cardinal Giovanni Bona stated that the best preparation for death is the remote one, carried out through a virtuous life in which one daily practises dying to oneself and avoiding all forms of sin, to live according to God's law in prayerful communion with him.[\[9\]](#) He urged constant prayer to obtain the grace of a happy death; he suggested devoting one day a month to preparing close to death in silence and meditation, purifying the soul with a "most diligent and sorrowful confession", after an accurate examination of one's state, and approaching Communion *per modum Viatici*, with intense devotion;[\[10\]](#) he then invited people to end the day by imagining themselves on their deathbed, at the moment of their

last moment:

You will renew more intense acts of love, thanksgiving and desire to see God; you will ask forgiveness for everything; you will say: 'Lord Jesus Christ, in this hour of my death, place your passion and death between your judgement and my soul. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Help me, O saints of God, hasten, O angels, to sustain my soul and offer it up before the Most High.' [...]. Then you will imagine that your soul is being led to the dreadful judgement of God and that, by the prayers of the saints, your life will be prolonged so that you can do penance: therefore strongly proposing to live more holily, in future you will consider yourself and behave as dead to the world and living only for God and for penance.[\[11\]](#)

John Bona closed his *Praeparatio ad mortem* with a devout aspiration focused on the longing for heaven permeated with intense mystical inspiration.[\[12\]](#) The Cistercian cardinal had been a student of the Jesuits. It was from them that he had drawn the idea of the monthly day of preparation for death.

Meditation on death was an integral part of retreats and popular missions: death is certain, the moment of its arrival is uncertain, we must be ready because when it comes, Satan will multiply his assaults to ruin us eternally: "What consequence then? [...] Get good habits now in life. Do not be content merely to live in the grace of God, nor to remain a single moment in sin; but habitually live such a life, by the continual exercise of good works, that at the last moment the Devil will not have the temptation to make me lose myself for all Eternity."[\[13\]](#)

From the 17th century onwards and throughout the 18th century, preachers emphasised the importance of the theme, adapting their reflections according to the sensibilities of the Baroque taste, with a strong emphasis on the dramatic aspects, without however distracting the

listeners' attention from the substance: the serene acceptance of death, the call to conversion of the heart, constant vigilance, fervour in virtuous works, self-offering to God and the yearning for eternal communion of love with him. Gradually, the exercise for a happy death took on an ever-increasing importance, until it became one of the main ascetic practices in Catholicism. A model of how it should be carried out is offered, for example, in a 17th-century pamphlet by an anonymous Jesuit:

Choose one day of each month which is the most free from all other business, on which you must with particular diligence engage in Prayer, Confession, Communion and Visitation of the Blessed Sacrament.

The Prayer of this day will need to be two hours over two sessions: and the subject of it may be the one we will mention. In the first hour, conceive as vividly as you can the state in which you find yourself already dying [...]. Consider what you would like to have done when you are dying, first with regard to God, secondly with regard to yourself, thirdly with regard to your neighbour, mixing in this meditation various fervent affections of repentance, intentions, and requests to the Lord, in order to implore from him the virtue of amending yourself. The second Prayer session will have as its subject the strongest motives that can be found for willingly accepting death from God [...]. The affections of this Meditation will be an offering of one's life to the Lord, a protest that if we could prolong it, beyond His most divine blessing, we would not do so; a request, to offer this sacrifice with the spirit of love which requires the respect due to His most loving Providence, and disposition.

You must make your Confession with more particular diligence, as if it were the last time that you have gone to wash yourself in the most precious blood of Jesus Christ [...].

Communion, too, must be done with more extraordinary preparation, and as if you were taking Communion

for Viaticum, adoring the Lord whom you hope to have to adore for all Eternity; thanking Him for the life He has granted you, asking forgiveness for having spent it so badly; offering yourself ready to end it, because He wants it so, and finally asking Him for grace to assist you in this great step, so that your soul, leaning on its Beloved, may pass safely from this Desert to the Kingdom.[\[14\]](#)

The commitment to spreading the practice of the happy death did not limit the considerations of preachers and spiritual directors to the subject of the *novissimi* (the last things), as if they wanted to base the spiritual edifice solely on the fear of damned eternity. These authors knew the psychological and spiritual damage that the anxiety and anguish over one's salvation had on the most sensitive souls. The collections of meditations produced between the end of the 17th century and the middle of the 18th century not only insisted on God's mercy and abandonment to him, to lead the faithful to the permanent state of spiritual serenity that is proper to those who have integrated the awareness of their own temporal finitude within a solid vision of faith, but they ranged over all the themes of Christian doctrine and practice, of private and public morality: truth of the faith and evangelical subjects, vices and virtues, sacraments and prayer, spiritual and material works of charity, asceticism and mysticism. The consideration of man's eternal destiny expanded to the proposal of an exemplary and ardent Christian living, which translated into spiritual paths oriented towards personal sanctification and the refinement of daily and social life, against the backdrop of a substantial theology and a refined Christian anthropology.

One of the most eloquent examples is provided by the three volumes by Jesuit Giuseppe Antonio Bordoni, which collect the meditations offered every week for over twenty years to the confreres of the *Compagnia della buona morte*, which he established in the church of the Holy Martyrs in Turin (1719). The work was much appreciated for its

theological substance, its lack of rhetorical frills, and its wealth of concrete examples, and was reprinted dozens of times up to the threshold of the 20th century.[\[15\]](#) Also linked to the Turin religious environment are the *Discorsi sacri e morali per l'esercizio della buona morte* – more marked by the sensitivity of the time but just as solid – preached in the second half of the 18th century by Fr Giorgio Maria Rulfo, spiritual director of the *Compagnia dell'Umiltà* formed by ladies of the Savoy nobility.[\[16\]](#)

The practice proposed by St John Bosco to the students of the Oratory and Salesian educational institutions had, therefore, a solid spiritual tradition of reference.

[\(continued\)](#)

[\[1\]](#) John Bosco, *Regolamento dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales per gli esterni*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 44.

[\[2\]](#) Cf. John Bosco, *Regolamento per le case della Società di S. Francesco di Sales*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 63 (part II, chapter II, art. 4): “[...] Once a month the exercise for a happy death will be done by all, preparing for it with some sermon or other exercise of piety.”

[\[3\]](#) [John Bosco], *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales secondo il Decreto di approvazione del 3 aprile 1874*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana, 1877, 81 (cap. XIII, art. 6). The same was established in the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, with a very similar wording: “The first Sunday or the first Thursday of the month will be a day of spiritual retreat, in which, leaving temporal affairs as far as possible, each one will collect herself, make the exercise for a happy death, arranging her spiritual and temporal things, as if she had to leave the world and go to Eternity. Let some reading be done according to the need, and where possible the Superior shall

procure from the Director a sermon or a conference on the subject", *Regole o Costituzioni per le Figlie di Maria SS. Ausiliatrice aggregate alla Società salesiana* (ed. 1885), Title XVII, art. 5, in John Bosco, *Constitutions for the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* (1872-1885). Critical texts edited by Cecilia Romero, Rome, LAS, 1983, 325.

[4] Giovanni Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi obblighi degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'uffizio della Beata Vergine e de principali vespri dell'anno coll aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre ecc.*, Torino, Tipografia Paravia e Comp. 1847, 138-142.

[5] Central Salesian Archives, A0000409 *Prediche di don Bosco – Esercizi Lanzo 1876*, notebook XX, ms by Giulio Barberis, pp. 10-11.

[6] John Bosco, *Ai Soci Salesiani, in Rules or Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales* (ed. 1877), 38.

[7] *Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales preceded by an introduction written by the Founder St. John Bosco*, Turin, Tipografia Salesiana, 1907, 227- 231.

[8] Des. Erasmi Roterodami *liber cum primis pius, de praeparatione ad mortem, nunc primum et conscriptus et aeditus...*, Basileae, in officina Frobeniana per Hieronymum Frobenium & Nicolaum Episcopium 1533, 3-80 (Quomodo se quisque debeat praeparare ad mortem). Cf. also *Pro salutari hominis ad felicem mortem praeparatione, hinc inde ex Scriptura sacra, et sanctis, doctis, et christianissimis doctoribus, ad cujusdam petitionem, et aliorum etiam utilitatem, a Sacrarum literarum professor Ludovico Bero conscripta et nunc primum edita*, Basileae, per Joan. Oporinum, 1549.

[9] Giovanni Bona, *De praeparatione ad mortem...*, Roma, in Typographia S. Michaelis ad Ripam per Hieronimum Maynardi, 1736, 11-13.

[10] *Ibid.*, 67-73.

[11] *Ibid.*, 74-75.

[12] *Ibid.*, 126-132: "Affectus animae suspirantis ad Paradisum".

[13] Carlo Ambrogio Cattaneo, *Esercizi spirituali di sant'Ignazio*, Trent, by Gianbatista Monauni, 1744, 74.

[14] *Esercizio di preparazione alla morte proposto da un religioso della Compagnia di Gesù per indirizzo di chi desidera far bene un tale passo*, Roma, per gl'Eredi del Corbelletti [1650], ff. 3v-6v.

[15] Giuseppe Antonio Bordoni, *Discorsi per l'esercizio della buona morte*, Venice, in the printing house of Andrea Poletti, 1749-1751, 3 vols.; the latest edition is the Turin edition by Pietro Marietti in 6 volumes (1904-1905).

[16] Giorgio Maria Rulfo, *Discorsi sacri, e morali per l'esercizio della buona morte*, Turin, presso i librai B.A. Re e G. Rameletti, 1783-1784, 5 vols.

The Exercise for a Happy Death in Don Bosco's educational experience (1/5)

The annual All Souls Day commemoration presents us with reality that no one can deny: the end of our earthly life. For many, talking about death seems a macabre thing, to be avoided at all costs. But this was not so for St John Bosco; throughout his life he had cultivated the exercise for a happy

death, setting the last day of the month for this purpose. Who knows if this is not the reason why the Lord took him to be with him on the last day of January 1888, finding him prepared...

Jean Delumeau, in the introduction to his work on *LaPaura in Occidente* (*Fear in the West*), recounts the anguish he felt at the age of twelve when, as a new pupil at a Salesian boarding school, he first heard the “disquieting sequences” of the litany for a happy death, followed by an *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* “for the one among us who will be the first to die”. Starting from that experience, from his early fears, his difficult efforts to become accustomed to this fear, his teenage reflections on the last things, his personal patient search for serenity and joy in acceptance, the French historian drew up a project of historical investigation focused on the role of “guilt” and the “pastoral use of fear” in the history of the West and came to an interpretation “of a very broad historical panorama: for the Church, suffering and the (temporary) annihilation of the body are less to be feared than sin and hell. Man can do nothing against death, but – with God’s help – it is possible for him to avoid eternal punishment. From that moment on, a new type of fear – a theological one – replaced what came before and was visceral and spontaneous: it was an heroic remedy, but still a remedy since it introduced an exit where there was nothing but emptiness; this was the kind of lesson that the religious responsible for my education tried to teach me.”[\[1\]](#)

Even Umberto Eco recalled with ironic sympathy the exercise for a happy death that he was presented with at the Nizza Monferrato Oratory:

Ancient religions, myths, rituals made death, though always fearful, familiar to us. We were accustomed to accepting it by the great funeral celebrations, the wailing women, the great *Requiem* Masses. We were prepared for death by sermons on hell, and even during my childhood I was invited to

read the pages on death by Don Bosco's *Companion of Youth*. Hewas not just the cheerful priest who made children play, but had a visionary and flamboyant imagination. He reminded us that we don't know where death will surprise us – whether in our bed, at work, or in the street, from the bursting of a vein, a bad cold, a haemorrhage, a fever, a plague, an earthquake, a lightning strike, 'perhaps as soon as we have finished reading these thoughts.' At that moment we will feel our head grow dull, our eyes hurt, our tongue parched, our jaw closed, our chest heavy, our blood frozen, our flesh consumed, our heart pierced. Hence the need to practise the Exercise for a Happy Death [...]. Pure sadism, one might say. But what do we teach our contemporaries today? That death takes place far from us in hospital, that we no longer usually follow the coffin to the cemetery, that we no longer see the dead. [...] Thus, the disappearance of death from our immediate horizon of experience will make us much more terrified when the moment approaches, when faced with this event that also belongs to us from birth – and with which the wise man comes to terms throughout life." [\[2\]](#)

In Salesian houses the monthly practice of the exercise for a happy death, with the recitation of the litany included by Don Bosco in the *Companion of Youth* remained in use from 1847 until the threshold of the Council. [\[3\]](#) Delumeau recounts that every time he happened to read the litany to his students at the Collège de France he noticed how astonished they were: "It is proof" he writes, "of a rapid and profound change in mentality from one generation to the next. Having rapidly become out of date after being relevant for so long, this prayer for a happy death has become a document of history insofar as it reflects a long tradition of religious pedagogy." [\[4\]](#) The scholar of mentalities, in fact, teaches us how historical phenomena, in order to avoid misleading anachronisms, must always be approached in relation to their internal coherence and with respect for cultural otherness, to which every collective mental representation, every belief and

cultural or cultic practice of ancient societies must be traced. Outside those anthropological frameworks, that set of knowledge and values, ways of thinking and feeling, habits and models of behaviour prevalent in a given cultural context, which shape the collective mindset, it is impossible to adopt a correct critical approach.

As far as we are concerned, Delumeau's account is a document of how anachronism not only undermines the historian. Even the pastor and educator run the risk of perpetuating practices and formulas outside the cultural and spiritual worlds that generated them: thus, at the very least, besides appearing strange to the younger generations, they may even be counterproductive, having lost the overall horizon of meaning and the "mental and spiritual tools" that made them meaningful. This was the fate of the prayer for a happy death that was used for over a century, for students in Salesian works all over the world, then – around 1965 – completely abandoned, without any replacement that would safeguard its positive aspects. The abandonment was not only due to its obsolescence. It was also a symptom of the ongoing process of the eclipse of death in Western culture, a sort of "interdiction" and "prohibition" now strongly denounced by scholars and pastors.[\[5\]](#)

Our contribution aims at investigating the meaning and educational value of the exercise for a happy death in Don Bosco's and the first Salesian generations' practice, relating it to a fruitful secular tradition, and then identifying its spiritual features through the narrative testimonies left by the Saint.

[*\(continued\)*](#)

[\[1\]](#) Jean Delumeau, *La Paura in Occidente* (14th-18th centuries). *La città assediata*, Turin, SEI, 1979, 42-44.

[\[2\]](#) Umberto Eco, "La bustina di Minerva: Dov'è andata la

morte?", in *L'Espresso*, 29 November 2012.

[3] The "Prayers for a Happy Death" are still to be found, with a few substantial variations, in the revised Manual of Prayer for Salesian Educational Institutions in Italy, which ultimately replaced *The Companion of Youth*, used until then: Centro Compagnie Gioventù Salesiana, *In preghiera. Manuale di pietà ispirato al Giovane Provveduto di san Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, Opere Don Bosco, 1959, 360-362.

[4] Delumeau, *La Paura in Occidente*, 43.

[5] Cf. Philippe Ariés, *Storia della morte in Occidente* Milan, BUR, 2009; Jean-Marie R. Tillard, *La morte: Enigma o Mysterio?* Magnano (BI), Edizioni Qiqajon, 1998.

Second Congress of Coadjutors of Africa

The Second Regional Congress of Salesian Coadjutors of the Africa-Madagascar Region was held from 24 to 29 May 2023 in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in the "Our Lady of Africa" Visitation of Equatorial Tropical Africa (ATE). The motto of the Congress: "Walking with Raphael and Tobias, pedalling with Artemis" guided the days of deepening the charism, aiming to promote the vocational identity of the Salesian coadjutor and to offer a vision that helps in ongoing formation. We present the talk by the Regional Councillor, Fr Alphonse Owoudou.

Introduction

General Chapter 28th set us an identity challenge in the form of a question: "What kind of Salesians for the youth of today? This question may come back to us during this Congress of

Salesian Brothers: What Salesian Brothers for the young people of Africa and Madagascar today? The various reflections that have fuelled these days give us reasons to constantly redraw the portrait of each of our lay consecrated confreres, and this is what we are going to contribute by contemplating a book of the Bible, the book of Tobit, an extremely prophetic, pedagogical and pastoral legend. We will see, through an analogical and slightly hermeneutical perspective, how and to what extent, like Don Bosco and particularly like Saint Artemide Zatti, the Coadjutor is called to become a spiritual parent and a competent companion for young people, not to say a true “sacrament of the Salesian presence”.

1. Walking with Raphael and young Tobias

The legend of Raphael and Tobias is a fascinating Bible story about a young man named Tobias and his guardian angel, Raphael. I'd like to sum up Tobith's life by giving him the floor: *“I, Tobith, walked in truth and did what was right. I gave alms to my family and to the Assyrian captives in Nineveh and I often visited Jerusalem for the festivals, bringing offerings and tithes. When I grew up, I married and had a son called Tobias. Deported by Sennacherib, I abstained from eating their food and God granted me mercy before him. Through my nephew Ahikar, I obtained a return to Nineveh where I helped orphans, widows and foreigners according to the law of Moses.”*

Accused by one of the citizens, Tobith is unfortunately ruined, and even blinded by a bird's excrement falling on his face. And we remember the quarrel with his wife (chap 2), who had brought in a sheep, and the blind husband thought she had stolen it, which made his wife angry and insulted her blind husband. Tobith had a son, to whom he had given his own name. The archangel Raphael appeared to this young boy in human form and offered him his help. Raphael accompanies Tobias on a difficult mission, a perilous journey to collect money for his family (chapter 4). During the journey, Raphael helps Tobias

defeat a demon that has killed the husbands of his future wives and cures Tobias' blindness. At the end of the journey, Tobias marries Sarra, the daughter of a distant relative, and Raphael reveals his true identity as an angel of God.

The lay Salesian Artemide Zatti was a religious and a man close to his brothers and sisters, especially those who were suffering. He dedicated his life to helping the sick and poor in Argentina. Zatti was a young man from a poor family who began working at the age of four to help his family. He later emigrated to Argentina with his family in search of a better life. Stricken with tuberculosis, he recovered and joined the Salesian order.

Zatti worked as a pharmacist and also ran a hospital, where he was described as being very devoted to the sick and poor. He was also involved in religious activities and was considered a potential candidate for canonisation. Zatti was known for his compassion and dedication to patients, his medical expertise, his work to expand the hospital and his lasting legacy. His bicycle became a symbol of his life dedicated to others, which he used to ride around the city visiting the sick poor. Zatti refused gifts for himself, preferring to continue using his bicycle, which he considered a sufficient means of transport to fulfil his mission of caring for the sick and serving others.

2. Pope Francis' two tweets and a bicycle

1. *Salesian Brother Artemide Zatti, full of gratitude for what he had received, wanted to say "thank you" by taking on the wounds of others: cured of tuberculosis, he devoted his entire life to caring for the sick with love and tenderness.*

2. *The Christian faith always asks us to walk together with others, to step out of ourselves towards God and our brothers and sisters. And to know how to give thanks, overcoming the dissatisfaction and indifference that make our hearts grow ugly.*

Pope Francis, speaking of Zatti, insists on "walking together", i.e. sharing and uniting through love to help those

who suffer. Zatti devoted her entire life to serving the most disadvantaged, using her bicycle as a means of transport to go to the poor districts of the city and help the sick. His bicycle thus became a powerful symbol of the values he shared: humility, generosity and simplicity.

Indeed, Zatti showed no particular interest in owning a car or even a moped when his friends wanted to give them one. The bicycle was all he needed to achieve his noble goal: to help those most in need of support. His choice of mode of transport also reflected another intrinsic characteristic of his personality: the unconditional love he distributed without restriction or condition to those who weren't fortunate enough to receive as much simply because their social or financial circumstances didn't allow them to.

Every gesture Zatti made resonated deeply with everyone, inviting everyone to follow his example. Walking together means being available psychologically and physically so that each person can feel supported by those around them, but above all serving others with kindness and compassion as he himself cared for them for so many years. These actions are a concrete reflection of the message outlined by Pope Francis about "walking together": reaching out to those who are suffering in order to collectively envisage an overall improvement in community well-being through a general attitude of greater solidarity and warmth towards others in our daily lives.

3. Our mission of accompaniment and synodality?

This story from the Book of Tobit is an excellent example of the importance and crucial role that accompaniment, synodality and solidarity play in our common mission of service to others.

Raphael accompanied Tobias throughout his journey, including accidents, adapting to each situation and taking the time to answer his questions, assist his companions and help those who were suffering. His role was to encourage, incite and push Tobias to rise to the challenges he faced so that he could

reach his destination. But he did more than that: he also gave him practical help in situations where he was powerless against the invisible forces controlling him.



What's more, Raphael didn't work alone during the journey; he worked hand in hand with Tobias to find solutions adapted to the circumstances. He understood that to be effective, he had to listen to the young man's requests, respect his personal leadership style and create a system of cooperation between them to achieve the ultimate goal they shared: to defeat Asmodeus and heal his father.

Raphaël and Tobias teach us that to provide real, useful, cost-effective and satisfying coaching, we need to be attentive to the needs of others, step out of our comfort zone if necessary, actively listen to what they have to say, show empathy, but above all work together so that each of us can contribute, according to our specific abilities, to achieving the common goals we all share. This learning is more relevant than ever, because without collaboration between people with common goals, their mission will be compromised.

4. A “medical” and pastoral vocation

Raphael, which means “God heals”, is known as one of the archangels of the Bible, often associated with healing and protection. Similarly, Zatti was considered a healer and protector of the sick and poor in his community. But this therapy took place on several levels. Zatti's love of poverty, his detachment from material things and his willingness to accept and even beg for what he thought was necessary for the well-being of his patients, are some of the traits that make him resemble Jesus – who was in reality a lay rabbi and healer. He was always available at all times of the day and night and in all weathers, and would travel in the old wooden carts of peasants if they met him on his way to a patient's

home. He was also humble and had a low opinion of himself, despite the efforts of his benefactors to elevate him in his own eyes and in the eyes of the world. The holy Coadjutor's strong interior life, filled with love for God and total trust in the goodness of divine providence, his regular confession and his love for the Blessed Sacrament made him resemble Don Bosco. He often read passages from the lives of the saints to the sick and, at the end of the day, gave them a little note for the evening. Zatti's good humour was also based on the solid foundations of his spiritual and consecrated life, and he always showed cheerfulness and goodwill in fulfilling his duties towards the sick and the unfortunate. He was also a peacemaker, helping to resolve conflicts between members of his staff and the doctors of Viedma and Patagonia. These characteristics of our holy Coadjutor are highlighted here because they are also a powerful antidote against the enemies of our three vows, against indifference and pastoral laziness, against the current distancing between the recipients and ourselves, and the royal road that leads us away from the careerism that disguises itself as clericalism in the religious world.

At the school of the angel Raphael and Zatti, we discover that for us, Salesians of Don Bosco, we too are bearers of the Good News, which often consists, as Jesus announced in the synagogue (Luke 4), in healing and restoring. This "medical" function is an important part of our mission to serve young people and the poor. And if "sickness", like poverty, can take on different faces, we Salesians in general, and the Coadjutor Salesians in particular, are known for our various struggles against ills and various forms of precariousness, hence our immense work in schools, orphanages, hospitals, oratories and the workshops and laboratories of our vocational training centres and technical colleges. And in our Region, as in the Congregation, several provinces, works and members of the Salesian Family are also involved in activities directly related to health, including hospitals, clinics and care centres for the elderly. Health is seen as an important aspect

of the well-being of young people and the poor, and we try, with Don Variara, with Zatti and others, to meet their needs in a total, holistic way.

Today, we need a generation of Salesians who are sufficiently rooted in heaven, like Raphael, and deeply attached to the challenges of earth, like Azarias, to concern themselves with reconciling the temporal good with that of eternity, fighting for all forms of illness and health, especially those that affect the most vulnerable in our society. We need angels and companions who can alleviate our physical, mental and emotional illnesses, as well as health problems linked to poverty, such as malnutrition and limited access to healthcare. We continue to work to meet these needs effectively and holistically, providing quality healthcare and working to improve the lives of the most vulnerable.

5. Metaphor of the educational and pastoral relationship

Azarias, the nickname of the angel Raphael, illustrates the perfect educational relationship between the Salesian coadjutor and the Tobias or young people of today. Especially when we know that the nickname Azarias actually means assistant, auxiliary, coadjutor. So, in the same way that an angel accompanied a young boy towards maturity, the Coadjutor can and must encourage young people to grow and mature in their relationships with their peers, in what are known as equal relationships, but also in their relationships and duties towards their family and parents, and the adult world in general, in what are known as asymmetrical relationships. I encourage us to reread this wonderful story from the Book of Tobit, and to make our own the wise advice of old Tobith to his son, and the lesson in life and religion that Azarias gives to the reconciled family, before going back to God – to the one who sent him. This is an important detail: going back and forth to God, the one who sent us, like those comings and goings on Jacob's ladder, where the angels shuttle back and forth between heaven and earth, as if to teach today's angels union with God and predilection for the poor of the earth.

Saint Artemide Zatti shows us how we can perfectly assimilate this role in our daily lives: dedicating his life to helping the youngest and poorest, he did much more than simply dispense moral teachings. He guided young people towards personal growth, recognising their inner capacities and showing them how to express them. He also set an example by showing compassion for the sick and the poor; demonstrating through his actions that it is possible to change the world around us through love, self-giving and sacrifice.

The Salesian Brother may be a minority statistically (in Africa 9% in the richest provinces). And yet they are in a privileged position to grasp this admirable model by flying to the outskirts of the mission with and like the guardian angel, walking the paths of the earthly and secular dimensions of life, and “cycling” with Zatti to the bedside of the needy, in all humility and without the arrogance of the big means and arsenal of some of today’s pastors. In this way, they can imitate the heavenly Guide provided by God in the story of Tobias: motivating gentle obedience towards his aged and blind father, initiating him in the face of the adversities of the journey, as well as courageously taking an important decision for his future, trust in God in decisive moments, in a word impressive courage and deep empathy that will allow the boy harmonious growth leading towards thoughtful autonomy, even though his parents, anticipating in their anxiety the parable of the prodigal son, waited for him every day with worry. But the text says that young Tobias knew his father’s heart and his mother’s worried tenderness.

Conclusion

“I am Raphael, one of the seven angels present before the glory of the Lord. Do not be afraid! Peace be with you and bless God for ever. Do not be afraid of what you have seen, for it was only an appearance. Bless the Lord, celebrate him and write down what has happened to you.”

At the end of the story, Raphael defines himself as a

sacrament of God's presence with Tobias. Exactly what Jesus did and was, what our founder Don Bosco illustrated, and what the Rector Major recommends to us in the third priority of this sexennium. To be a sign of elsewhere, "as if we too could see the invisible". The invisible in environments that are nonetheless very visible, in schools, in catechesis, in workshops, or, as Don Rinaldi used to say, in agriculture, where certain Brothers know how to cultivate and bring to fruition the earth and creation. The Salesian coadjutor is one of the two forms of the Salesian consecrated vocation, the other being the Salesian priest. According to GC21, it is not just individuals who spread Don Bosco's message, but his communities made up of priests and lay people, fraternally and deeply united among themselves, called to "live and work together" (C 49).



The significant and complementary presence of Salesian clerics and lay people in the community is an essential element of its physiognomy and apostolic fullness. We are well placed this year, in the light of the Strenna of the Rector Major, to reiterate that the Salesian coadjutor is not a lay person like the other lay faithful of the Church. He is a consecrated religious. Of course, his vocation fortunately retains a real connection with the concept of secularity and only exalts it in its most beautiful expressions. In this sense, this second Regional Congress can legitimately consider each of our Salesian Brothers as that angel, that archangel described in the book Tobit, who stands ceaselessly before the face of God, and who travels the roads of the world, flying to the aid of those in need or on the way, and leading them to praise and thanksgiving. Each Brother is thus invited to contemplate Raphael who, in an admirable kenosis, renounces his angelic rank, and descends to tread the dusty roads to accompany Tobias on the path of initiation to adulthood. This metaphor

invites the Salesian Brother to accompany the young people of today towards full citizenship as citizens and believers, as our founder wanted: love of parents (Raphael urges Tobias to obey his father), social commitment (Raphael helps Tobias and supervises miraculous operations for the sick, chastity and love to marry Sarra, and loyalty to become heir to both his father and his father-in-law Raguel) and divine service (Raphael proclaims himself to be sent directly by God and gives advice on honouring and praising God, and loving one's neighbour).

Like the biblical messengers (angels) and apostles in the history of the Church, Salesian Brothers are called to be available, to serve Salesian unity and identity and apostolic fullness by participating actively in the life and government of the Congregation. Alongside their deacon and priest confreres, they accompany young people – and other confreres – in their consecration and in their educational commitments, integrating and celebrating diversity within the Salesian community. The Brothers, well gifted, trained and identified, are pillars for the young people in their often complicated and difficult life paths, just as the Archangel Raphael, alias Azarias, was a pillar, a social and spiritual reference for Tobias, who was thus able to fulfil his mission as a son and future father. The long journey of initiation of our young people from Africa to adulthood is already fruitful and will be even more so if they are accompanied by significant figures and trustworthy people like Azarias, true guardian angels, companions of Emmaus, capable – as in our houses of formation and in our institutions – of educating, forming and accompanying. As well as serving unity, Salesian identity and apostolic fullness within the Salesian congregation with all their talents, Salesian Brothers play a very important role as guides and mentors for young people who are still seeking their place in the world – a figure similar to Zatti or Raphael who can be seen as a spiritual parent.

The stork and its duties

The white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) is a large bird, unmistakable for its tapering red beak, long neck, very long legs, and predominantly white plumage, with black feathers on the wings. It is migratory by nature, and its arrival in spring in many countries of Europe is considered a good omen. As soon as they arrive, these birds start to make or rebuild their nests in high places, often in the same place.

In the past, when there were no electricity grid support poles, the highest places were the covered chimneys of houses, and the warmest ones were preferred by storks. And the houses that were also warm in the spring were those where a newborn baby was in need of a propitious environment. Hence the legend of the stork carrying babies, a legend that has become a symbol. In fact, even today, greeting cards to new mothers feature a stork in flight, with a bundle tied to its beak.

The Creator endowed storks with superior instincts, making them noble birds. And they are so faithful to the task assigned to them by nature that they deserve to be placed among the first in the “book of creation”.



The first thing that strikes one is that they tend to be monogamous: once a couple is formed, they stay together for life. Sure, there will be squabbles in their existence, but these never lead to separation.

They almost always return to the same nest, rebuilding and enriching it. They never tire of repairing it every year and improving it, even if this requires much effort. And the nest

is always high up, on chimneys, electric poles or bell towers, because they want to protect their offspring from wild animals.

Although no one has taught them, they manage to build wonderful nests that can exceed two metres in diameter with twigs and also with other materials they find within their flying range, even with textiles and plastics; they do not destroy nature, but recycle.

The female lays three to six eggs, not worrying about how she will support her young. Once the eggs are laid, she never neglects her duty to brood, even if she has to face bad times. If the nests are close to roads, the constant noise of cars, the vibrations caused by heavy vehicles or their dazzling lights at night does not make them leave. When the sun gets scorching hot, the stork opens its wings a little or moves occasionally to cool off, but does not try to get into the shade. When it is cold, especially at night, it does everything it can not to leave its eggs outside too much. When a strong wind comes, it does not let itself be carried away and does everything to keep still. When it rains, she does not take cover to protect herself from the water. And when even a hailstorm comes, it stoically resists at the risk of losing its life, but does not stop doing its duty.

And this behaviour is wonderful if we remember the basic instincts that the Creator has left to every living being. Even in the most basic organisms, the single-celled ones, we find four basic instincts: nutrition, excretion, preservation of the individual (self-defence) and preservation of the species (reproduction). And when an organism has to choose whether to give priority to one of these instincts, the preservation of the individual, self-defence, always prevails. In the case of the stork, the fact that it stays put to protect its eggs even in storms, even when there is a hailstorm endangering its life, shows that the instinct of preservation of the species becomes stronger than that of preservation of the individual. It is as if this bird is aware that the liquid in those eggs is not a generated product from

which she can separate, but that inside the egg is a life that she must protect at all costs.

The female alternates with the male while brooding. The male is ready to give his consort a change to allow her to get food and get some exercise. And this for the entire time, just over a month, until the eggs hatch and the new creatures come to light. After this period, the parents continue to take turns to provide a warm place for the young, to feed them for another two months until they begin to leave the nest. And up to three weeks they feed them with regurgitated food because their young are unable to feed themselves otherwise. They are content with what they find: insects, frogs, fish, rodents, lizards, snakes, crustaceans, worms, etc.; they make no demands for food. And by satisfying this need to feed, they participate in the natural balance, reducing agricultural pests such as grasshoppers.

They ensure the survival of their chicks by defending them from predatory sparrows, hawks and eagles, because they know that they are incapable of recognising aggressors or even defending themselves.

The young, once they have grown wings, learn to fly and look for food, and gradually leave their nest, as if they are aware that there is no more physical space for them, as the nest is limited in size. They do not live by weighing on their parents, but they get busy. They are non-possessive birds; they do not mark their territory, but coexist peacefully with others.

In this way, young storks begin to live as adults, even if they are not yet adults. In fact, to begin to reproduce they must wait their time, until they are 4 years old, when they join forces in pairs with another bird of the same temperament, but of the opposite sex, and begin the adventure of their lives. For this they will have to learn that in order to survive they must migrate even very long distances, struggling, seeking their opportunities to live in one place during the summer and in another during the winter. And to do

so safely, they will have to associate with other storks which have the same nature and interest.

The instincts of these creatures have not escaped human observation. Since ancient times, the stork has been the symbol of love between parents and children. And it is the bird that best represents the ancient bond between man and nature.

The white stork has a mild character and for this reason it is loved by people and is well liked everywhere; the Abbey of Chiaravalle even wanted it in its coat of arms next to the pastoral baculus and mitre.

Today it is difficult to see it in nature. It is not often you see a stork's nest and even less so up close. But someone came up with the idea of using technology to show the life of these birds by placing a live video camera next to a nest on a road. Watching to learn. The "book of nature" has so much to teach us....

