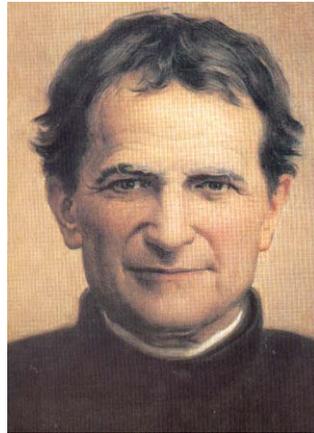


## *Don Bosco*

### *A Man with a dream*



*"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams" (Eleanor Roosevelt)*

Back in the early decades of the 1800s social problems abounded in the city of Turin and its hinterland. Wars, epidemics and famines were the order of the day. The industrial revolution had begun and urbanisation was gathering pace. Young people were flocking into the city looking for work in the fledgling factories. There wasn't work for everybody and many were disappointed. Industrial legislation was still minimal, and youngsters were often used as cheap labour. Money was scarce, accommodation was dreadful and crime escalated. The prisons were filled with boys and young men disillusioned by shattered hopes and abandoned dreams. Only the elite could afford education and in 1848 there were, in the city of Turin, 30,000 illiterate young people - about 40% of the population.

Into that situation came a young priest called John Bosco. Part of John's work as a priest was to visit the prisons around Turin. Here he experienced first-hand the misery of many defenceless and vulnerable teenagers. Their plight made a deep impression on him. Intuitively he knew

something had to be done about the situation. But what and how?

## **A dream recalled**

John's visits to the prison revived memories of a dream he had at the age of nine. He tells us: "In my dream, I was playing with my friends near home when an angry quarrel broke out. I rushed in with my fists flying. All of a sudden a strange man appeared and rebuked me. 'No, no, not that way. Be kind and gentle'. As he pointed to a majestic lady he told me his mother would always be my friend and guide."

In retrospect the prison visits began to shed light on the dream. A new understanding began to grow. John felt strongly called to work for these abandoned young people. But what was he to do? Difficulties, crises, and circumstances would play their part in determining his eventual strategy.

He adopted a novel approach. He mixed with the roughest of young people. He played cards with them in pubs and invited them to be his friends. This scandalised many of his more sedate fellow priests. Some of them actually thought his behaviour so insane, that on one occasion, they tried to commit him to an asylum. Overcoming problems and prejudices took time.

## **Living the dream**

However, the growing realisation of what the dream, at the age of nine, was about and his unique ability to be at ease with the young who were homeless, illiterate and in need, spurred him on. He progressed from Sunday catechism classes in a local-field, to a daily trade school in an adapted shed. Young people flocked to him for education and shelter. He fought for the rights of, and proper working conditions for, apprentices. His fame and his work spread. Acceptance replaced rejection and people began to see John Bosco not

as someone deranged, but as an extraordinarily holy man. He was making the seemingly impossible, possible.

As his work grew many young men came forward to help him. They became the first members of his religious congregation known as 'Salesians'. These young men became the core group who would further his work. John had wanted everybody who helped him, whether lay people or religious, to be part of his 'congregation', but Church regulations, regarding the setting up of new religious congregations, partly thwarted his dream.

### **Why the name 'Salesians'?**

John Bosco had a great admiration for St Francis de Sales (1567-1622). Francis, who was born near Geneva, 21 August 1567, was patron saint of Piedmont and Savoy and much loved by John Bosco. He admired his joyful, optimistic spirituality and because of the gentleness of his approach, he chose him as patron of the Congregation. He wished his followers to be filled with the spirit of Francis de Sales - a kindness that was all-embracing, a gentleness that was strong, a love that was humble and a faith that was steadfast.

For Francis there was no 'religious elite'; holiness was possible for everybody no matter their position, stage or career in life. Francis used a simple metaphor to sum up his work when he said: 'you catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than a barrel full of vinegar.' In other words: Love is stronger than violence or force of any kind. John Bosco fully agreed and he named his Congregation after Francis de Sales, hence the name 'Sales-ians'.

### **Educational Approach**

For them 'the heart' was the centre of education. They believed that education would flourish in an atmosphere where friendship and kindness abounded. Prevention, supportive help to forestall problems, rather than oppressive

means or punishment was central to their philosophy. Rules, when necessary, were to be reasonable and understood as such by the pupils. Corporal punishment or the shaming of young people anywhere was not tolerated. Praise and reward were the tools to bring out the best in young people. Their way of educating was holistic. Sport, drama and music were to be an essential part of their programmes in schools and youth centres. Many of the psychological maxims we take for granted in today's educational system were identified and intuitively practised by John and Mary in the nineteenth century.

They believed that young people had the capacity for deep engagement with their inner spirit, with their source, with their God. The spiritual life of the young was of paramount importance to them. They injected youthfulness, creativity and joy into religious practices.

John Bosco adapted the attractive spirituality of Francis de Sales to suit the needs of young people. Both were profoundly aware that God was to be found in the 'bits and pieces' of everyday life. Living those moments with love and awareness of the presence of God was the way to holiness. "Here (in this school) we make holiness consist of always being happy" - these words were uttered by Dominic Savio, who was a pupil in Don Bosco's school, to a newcomer.

Salesian spirituality has love, kindness and generosity at its core. It is a practical, service-based love of God and neighbour - especially those in need. It is creative, optimistic, joyful, encouraging and life-giving. The image of Christ the Good Shepherd is central. For John and Mary this spirituality coloured their understanding of God and deeply influenced the way they dealt with marginalised young people. God is ever faithful, rich in love and mercy.

Mary our Help, as mother and guide, is part and parcel of Salesian devotional life.

## **Community dimension**

For those in religious life, welcoming and supportive communities are central to Salesian spirituality. We become channels of the love of God for one another.

The need to belong is a fundamental drive in all human beings. Community life, when lived with warm generosity and welcoming openness, helps fulfil this need for belonging. There are, of course, no perfect communities; as there are no perfect families. They are always being built, never finished. But virtue is in the struggle.

## **The dream lives on**

A hundred and fifty years later the dream lives on. That gift or charism given by the Holy Spirit to John and Mary still flourishes in many parts of the world today. Salesian priests, brothers and sisters still take the spirit of John and Mary to the remotest places on earth. The charism inspires them to bring God's love to the young in a unique way, especially to young people on the margins, so that they can rediscover their dignity and uniqueness as children of God.

Today a vast variety of works - schools of all kinds; working with street children and homeless young people; youth clubs; missions, retreats, parishes, etc. - gives testimony to its power and inspiration. Today we try to dream their dream anew.

The Salesian way of life still attracts men and women to the religious life. Also many lay people from all walks of life are attracted by the Salesian spirit, and work with great generosity for young people in differing situations. They are all supported by the traditions, insights and stories of the congregations. Many young people volunteer to give one or two years working in Salesian projects throughout the world.

Together all these people make up the Salesian Family. Their lives are influenced by the gift given by the Holy Spirit to John and Mary.

## **Called to be...**

*"It is never too late to be what you might have been"*

*(George Elliot)*

*"Every human being searches for meaning and identity"*

*(Anon)*

*"I have come that you may have life and have it to the full"*

*(Jn 10: 10)*

"Who am I?" People have always struggled to find the answer to this important question. It is at the very core of our identity. The question is always present in our psyche but it assumes a far greater importance and urgency at certain stages in our lives, as, for example, in adolescence and mid-life.

We believe that we have been created uniquely in the image of a God who loves us. He calls each one of us to be a unique face of his love to the world.

## **Deciding my future**

Many of us 'drift' into a way of life. The values of our culture, market forces, the availability of work opportunities, carrying on the family business, examination results, parental and family expectations, can all determine what we do. We may end up years later feeling dissatisfied and unfulfilled. In a newspaper survey (*Irish Independent, 9 April 2004*), seven out of ten people would gladly change their present jobs if they could.

If I have missed my deepest calling, I may well live a life of some 'unease'. I may find that my heart is longing for something more and I don't know what it is. My spirit can feel restless as if searching for something different. If that is

the case then it is time to stop and reflect. My life may be tending towards a path of which I'm not yet aware.

## **Born to be**

From a very early age some people have a deep intuition of what they 'were born to be'. They are aware of a lifestyle and work that fits them like a glove and gives expression to who they are.

For example the famous cellist Jacqueline du Pré had, at the age of four, an intuition that she wanted to play the cello. She had heard a cello performance on the radio. She ran to her mother and asked what the instrument was and said she wanted to play it. As her life unfolded the world knew she was right.

In the film "Billy Elliot", the young Billy knew he wanted to be a dancer even though the whole culture of his coalmining background was against it. Despite difficulties and taunts he won out in the end. There are many people who instinctively know what they want to be. They have an innate sense of their own giftedness. For most of us, however, discerning who we are or what we are called to be is a more subtle business.

Knowing what we are meant to be, demands among other things, a sensitivity to the gifts we possess, a listening to what our lives and intuitions are saying to us. Maybe we could ask ourselves a number of questions like:

- What gives me life?
- What gives me a sense of fulfilment?
- What motivates me?
- What gives me a sense of satisfaction?
- What would make me really happy?
- What would I feel at home in?

The answer to these questions throws up clues as to what path I should take. It is important to be aware that the

Spirit who lives in our hearts will guide us if we are attentive and open to the Spirit's presence.

## **Living in an age of change**

Over the past number of decades the pace of change has been phenomenal. Older models of society, with their traditional institutions, respected professions, patterns of security, stability and strong sense of community have virtually disappeared. A new model of society has emerged. Market forces, supply and demand, relativism and individualism dominate our thinking and deeply influence what we choose to do with our lives.

There is little room for the idea of vocation of any kind in this modern model of society, and the word is vanishing from our vocabulary. Nowadays we are known more by what we do than for who we are. A job is just a response to a demand. Still, in today's world there is a great interest in spirituality.

## **Religious Life**

Christian faith proclaims that no one is created by God just to be a consumer or a worker, to be bought and sold in the marketplace like a slave.

Different forms of religious life have been a significant part of the Catholic Church from the earliest times. The earliest rule of St Benedict dates from the fifth century. Even today there is still a remarkable number of different orders and congregations doing a multiplicity of charitable works throughout the world, while others quietly pray, in solitude, for the needs of the world.

## **What does religious life mean today?**

All human vocations - doctor, teacher, social worker, etc. - say something about the fundamental human vocation which is the answer to the call of God.

Religious life speaks about that ultimate vocation in a particular way. It witnesses to life with God by living in a way that points to values beyond riches, wealth and material possessions.

Religious try to be a sign which says that all human identity is a surprise, a gift and an adventure. Far from being an escape from reality, religious life calls for a spirit of boldness to witness to realities that are often marginalised by society. Therefore it requires a willingness to give time to prayer and quiet reflection, to allow gospel values to permeate our lives.

It is an attraction to a life dedicated to the service of God and neighbour, to self-growth and fulfilment in the deepest sense. It is a call to availability, to be ready to witness to God's love. This is done in a community which encourages us and supports us in our quest. Each congregation, because it embodies a unique gift of the Spirit, offers its own identity. It is a particular way of following the Lord, a particular way of self-giving.

## **Commitment**

Like anybody involved in a committed relationship, a person entering religious life also makes a commitment, takes vows. People who get married make vows to each other and commit themselves to a family way of life. A person entering religious life also makes a vowed commitment, this time to a community with a mission.

Religious vows, like those of marriage, are taken as a way of life. They allow those who have chosen religious life a freedom to minister to a wide variety of people, and they give a freedom that permits them to engage with the world in a different way.

Vows, then, orient how we intend to live our lives. They are not first and foremost about abstinence or self-denial; vows are about taking a motivated risk for the kind of future we

wish to build and the kind of society we wish to live in. Vows in religious life are about a special passion for Jesus and the people he loves. For us Salesians, the passion for God we live in community, focuses our ministry in a way that favours the young, favours the future, favours the next generation.

## **Hearing the call to religious life**

There is no one simple answer. We are all unique and we are dealing with the mysterious relationship between God and his people. Each one hears the call in their own particular way. For some people the call can be clear from a very young age. For most of us, however, it is a search initiated by some inner feeling or suspicion that God might be calling us to this kind of life.

The call is often subtle and comes through the ordinary circumstances of our lives. The "still, small voice" is sometimes difficult to hear and is easily drowned out by the noises of society. It can be as simple as something we read in a book, see in a film, or a personal experience which in some way jolts us out of our ordinary way of thinking.

Down the centuries people like Francis of Assisi, Brigid, Therese of Lisieux, Ignatius of Loyola, Augustine, Mother Teresa, Nano Nagle, Catherine McAuley, John Bosco, Mary Mazzarello were called from very different backgrounds and lifestyles to preach the word in fascinatingly different ways.

The manner of their call was also unique. They all heard the call in the circumstances of their own lives. For some it came through illness or tragedy, a religious experience, the monotony and problems of daily life. The list is endless. God speaks to the heart in an infinite number of ways. But the call does ultimately require receptivity on the part of the receiver.

To join a religious congregation is to embark on a journey of faith. It is not something I determine myself - it is a

response to God's prior call. God chooses me and calls me. It is an invitation to live life in community. To live with the belief that life has an absolute value which transcends the requirements of the market place. This is a radical choice especially in today's western world.

St Paul says:

*"It is God who has called you to share in the life of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and God keeps faith" (1 Cor 1:9).*

## **Listening for the call**

*"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince)*

The process of searching for God's will and becoming aware of what God is calling me to do, is called discernment. Sometimes the call can lead a person towards priesthood or religious life. It is important to note at the outset that this is not a scientific process leading to mathematical certainty. You can never be 100% sure of what your call is. It is enough to be confident and willing. There may well be a certain anxiety and doubt about the path God has in mind for the individual. There is an element of mystery and grace which we never fully understand. Having said that, there are certain qualities and hints which enable one to set out on that journey.

The process (for one discerning priesthood or religious life) might involve reflection on some or all of the following:

1. **Listening:** to my life - my yearnings, my aptitudes, my gifts, my personality, what gives me life? What am I passionate about? Am I attracted by a life of service and a concern for justice? Am I attracted to a life of prayer and liturgy?
2. **Motivation:** what is my real motivation?

3. Are my **temperament** and **aptitudes** suited to the type of life I'm thinking about?
4. Am I attracted to the **spirit** and **lifestyle** of the congregation I'm thinking about?
5. Can I live a **celibate lifestyle** in a community, without the more intimate support of a wife/husband and family?

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less travelled by,  
and that has made all the difference.  
(Robert Frost.)*

## **Characteristics of a Salesian Vocation**

Some characteristics which might show evidence of a Salesian Vocation:

1. Ability to live and work in community
2. Feel drawn towards working with young people
3. A desire to spread the Gospel of Jesus
4. Good health and required educational standards
5. A sense of humour.

Do you feel interested or attracted by what you have just read?

Would you like to know more about the Salesians? Contact us through [www.salesianvocations.co.uk](http://www.salesianvocations.co.uk)