

Anniversary of Salesian professions and priestly ordinations
Saturday, October 30, 2021

2 Cor 4.7-15
Matt 6.24-34

When we read the stories of Don Bosco, we usually get the impression of an amazing individual with extraordinary physical, moral and spiritual strength. Think of the speed and agility he had when he won the four contests against the acrobat in Chieri. Or how he could still beat the young people in races at the Oratory. Or the autumn hikes he would take with the boys of the Oratory which would last for days. We remember the strength of character and perseverance he exhibited in founding the SDBs, the FMA, the Salesian Cooperators and ADMA. We are familiar with the hours Don Bosco would spend hearing confessions after a long day of greeting visitors, writing letters and other administrative tasks. But this only part of the story of Don Bosco.

Having had the chance a few years ago to visit the Don Bosco museum at the Sacred Heart Basilica in Rome, and more recently the new Casa Don Bosco museum in Turin, I have become more aware of a more complete picture of Don Bosco. The SDBs who gave the tours at these places not only spoke of Don Bosco's strength, wisdom and holiness. They also told stories of his illnesses and suffering. In one of the rooms of the museum in Turin, there are several portraits of Don Bosco, most of them painted after his death in preparation for his beatification and canonization. The guide mentioned that the painting that more accurately portrays Don Bosco is actually in another Salesian house. It included the difficulties Don Bosco had with his right eye, which he attributed to the long hours of study with insufficient light while he was a student in Chieri. His sight got worse with age, to the point that he had serious visual impairments during his last visit to Rome for the consecration of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. Still, he sacrificed himself to receive benefactors and bestow upon them a blessing. The man who could beat young people in races, toward the end of his life had to be carried up the stairs to his room because of problems with his legs. The tour guide pointed out the room, with the desk, sofa and bed which Don Bosco used for decades, while he worked so hard for the Salesian mission to the young. The guide also recounts how Salesians would come to turn him in bed, or move him to another bed, so he wouldn't get bed sores in his final weeks of life on this earth. Above the place of where Don Bosco died, there is a small sky light, as if to say Don Bosco's suffering are over, and now he can enter into the fulness of life of the risen Christ.

Rather than the conquering march of Don Bosco, overcoming every difficulty with a smile on his face, we have a more realistic portrait of a man who understood suffering from personal experience, and so was able to sympathize with others who suffer. We can draw a close connection between the poverty of John Bosco's life as a child in Becchi and his mission to serve poor youth. He understood human frailty and limitations in 1846, when, after having settled the wandering Oratory at the Pinardi shed, he experienced a physical breakdown which caused him to return to Becchi and his mother's care for several months. The response of the boys, when they came to know of the delicate condition of his health, only reinforced Don Bosco decision to dedicate himself to their service. They were to share life's journey together. Don Bosco's weaknesses united him more closely to the poor youth in Turin, and also reflected the uncertainties of his undertakings with them. The frailties and weaknesses we have come to know

in this giant of sanctity help us to further see the mighty work of God in the life of Don Bosco, and the pastoral charity which filled his heart, driving him to fulfill God's will in the service of the young.

St. John Bosco would be able to identify with St. Paul when, in this Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul begins to list the sufferings he has endured so the message of salvation may be made known: being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, always carrying about in his body the dying of Jesus, being constantly given up to death, all for the sake of Jesus. Yet in the midst of all this difficulty and suffering, Paul points to the power of God at work, to the life of Christ being manifest through him and to the abundance of grace being bestowed upon more and more people. Paul confronts the difficulty that his present existence does not appear glorious at all; it is marked instead by suffering and death. However, he asserts his faith in the ultimate triumph of life, despite the experience of death. Both the negative and the positive sides of St. Paul's experience are grounded in Christ. His sufferings are connected with Christ's, and his deliverance is a sign that he is to share in Jesus' resurrection.

The personal testimony of St. Paul and the more complete picture of the life of St. John Bosco give a clear message to us today, as we celebrate the anniversaries of Salesian religious profession and priestly ordination. On a day like this, we might tend to exult the accomplishments of the jubilarians. In truth, they deserve to be honored. However, we remember that the instruments God uses are human and fragile, earthen vessels. This is not to discourage us, but to recognize more clearly the power of God at work in our lives and "cause thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God." After 25, 40, 50, 60, 65, and even more 70 years of religious life or Salesian priestly ministry, our jubilarians might share some of their successes in ministry. At the same time, the frustrations and failures, the aches and pains they may now feel, their limitations and disappointments can also manifest the life of Jesus in their mortal flesh.

With a certain fatherly tenderness that we find also in Don Bosco, St. Paul writes to the early Church in Corinth, "Everything indeed is for you..." This simple expression helps to clarify the Apostle's motive and renew his purpose. And I think we can find the same pastoral charity still burning in the hearts of our jubilarians. If asked why they put up with so much through all these years, they are likely to respond, "Everything indeed has been for the young." Or better, "Everything indeed is for the young," since the gift of oneself made by our confreres in their years of Salesian religious life and Salesian priesthood isn't over. Assignments may change, they may not be engaged in full-time active ministries, but the witness to the life of Christ can still be clear, as we have seen in the words of St. Paul and in the life of St. John Bosco.

Thank you for that witness to Christ. Thank you for giving of yourselves to the education and evangelization of young people. Thank you for inspiring in us a generous response to our own vocation. The abundant graces we have witnessed in you, and we have each received, cause thanksgiving to overflow in us to the glory of God!