



SALESIAN SPIRIT
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FAMILY SPIRIT



Another characteristic feature of the Salesian spirit is family fortitude, i.e., the Salesians wherever they are, in all their relationships, not only in their communities but also in their Educative Pastoral Communities, spontaneously tend to establish a kind of 'family', a family-like way of living and working together. Don Bosco wanted this to be a special feature of the Salesians.

DESIRE OF DON BOSCO

Don Bosco desired that all his institutions and communities be like large families. His ideal was to create a family atmosphere in all houses. The biographer Fr. Eugene Ceria says, "A family atmosphere had always been Don Bosco's ideal. Children talk frankly to their father within the family circle, and the father does not take offence when they do, but rather is pleased and encourages such confidence. That was why his sons trusted him and very frankly and unhesitatingly asked for his advice on any subject." Another biographer Fr. Angelo Amadei says that the confidential souvenirs sent to all Salesian Directors in 1871 and in later years had this

purpose: "that the same warm, sacred family life of the Oratory be lived in all other houses." Don Bosco considered family spirit a very important heritage that he was leaving his spiritual children.

The Oratory of Valdocco was the model of family spirit, which Don Bosco wanted to replicate in all the Salesian houses. Biographical Memoirs describe the family spirit of the Oratory in several places: "this was not just a boarding school but truly a family cared for by a tender, loving father whose only concern was our spiritual and material well-being." "Don Bosco ran the Oratory as a large family and the boys really felt as if they had never left their homes." "Peaceful joy unmarred by worry ruled the Oratory, and family spirit brightened its life.

The boys were given all the freedom compatible with discipline and good conduct.”

Dominic Ruffino was a cleric doing first year of philosophy in Chieri seminary [1857]. He wrote to Don Bosco for his advice on some matters, including finance. Don Bosco invited him to stay at the oratory for vacation. He came to the Oratory. After a few days of stay at the Oratory, he wrote thus to his friend: “I am writing to let you know that I am spending my vacation with Don Bosco in Turin in order to enjoy greater peace and quiet and to study French. I can truthfully say that I feel I’m in an earthly paradise. Here all love one another as brothers and everyone is happy, but with a truly heavenly happiness, especially when Don Bosco is with us. Then hours seem minutes as he charms us all by his words.”

Don Bosco was happy about the family spirit that reigned in the Oratory and the other Salesian houses. He spoke thus to Fr. Barberis on the train journey from Villa Franca to Turin: “Presently our boys are just like sons, true members of our family. They feel that they belong to our Congregation. They talk about ‘our church and our schools at Lanzo, Alassio and Nice.’ Anything concerning the Salesians they call ‘ours.’” And in 1886 there was the fourth general chapter. The chapter members were gathered for the retreat at San Benigno Canavese along with some non-chapter members. When Don Bosco saw the superiors and subjects all mingled together and gathered around him to listen to him during some of the recreations, he remarked contentedly, “In this I recognize all of you as my sons. Always be like this, without striving for preference. I see here the directors, the preachers of the retreat, the members of the Superior Chapter, all united as one single family.”

THE NEED FOR FAMILY SPIRIT

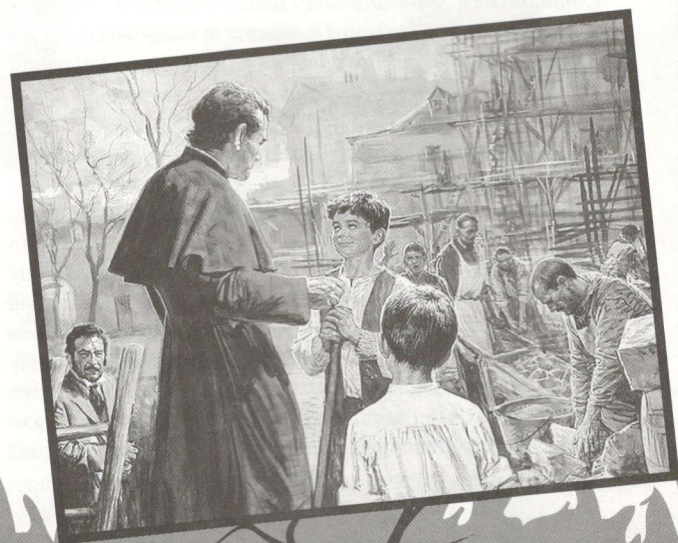
The dream which Don Bosco narrated in his letter from Rome is about creating a family like climate in our houses. The letter also describes the reasons why we need to create such a family atmosphere: “familiarity breeds affection, and affection breeds confidence. This is what opens up their hearts and the boys reveal everything to their teachers, assistants and superiors. They are frank in their confession and outside of it, and docile and obedient to anything they are told to do by someone they know is honestly fond of them.” And further on we read in reference to the changed situation: “And this does happen if familiarity is missing. If the Oratory is to return to its former happiness, the former system must come back. The superior should be always ready to listen to any doubts or complaints with all eyes to supervise their behaviour and all heart to look for the temporal and spiritual good of those entrusted to him by Divine Providence. Then the boys will no longer barricade their hearts.” His biographer Fr. Lempyne said of Don Bosco: “His example and method of education closely endeared superiors to boys. When any superior, even a young cleric, walked into the playground, he would be quickly surrounded by a cluster of small friends. Many boys unabashedly told their faults to their superiors

and often confided their innermost secrets to them while strolling along the porticoes during recreation.”

Hence, the family spirit makes the Salesian house a fertile place of formation for life. The boys have no fear or inhibition. They drink in all that the educators say and live by. They grow happily as if in a family.

ELEMENTS OF THE FAMILY SPIRIT

- (i) Mutual affection, mutual trust (confidence) and daily forgiveness
- (ii) Feeling at home and responsible for the common good
- (iii) Sharing everything: The goods a member possesses are made available to the others, in this way one enriches others and is enriched by others. Our Project of Life says that “the most important exchange is not of material good but of life itself and of good things more deeply personal (like thoughts and feelings; plans and interests, joys and sorrows). This is the meaning of opening the heart that Don Bosco used to speak of.”
- (iv) Personal relationships (brotherly, cordial): The relationship between the members of the community as well as between Salesians and youngsters should be ‘personal’ and not merely correct, bureaucratic and formal, i.e., relationships should not be governed by recourse to rules but by faith and promptings of the heart. The letter from Rome talked about cordiality in relationship between Salesians and youngsters as the difference between the Oratory of the earlier days and later days. In the earlier days “greatest cordiality and confidence reigned between youngsters and superiors.” In the later days cordiality was missing and many boys thought of their superiors “precisely as superiors and no longer as fathers, brothers and friends.”
- (v) Freedom and Joy: The climate of freedom and joy is a



sure sign of family spirit. Without constraint or fear, each one should be able to say what he thinks, make his own generous contribution and make his suggestions. Don Bosco used to say: "God does not like things done by force. As a loving God, he wants things done for love's sake." The following incident reveals the family spirit that united Don Bosco to his sons! On January 14, 1880 Don Bosco was in the Salesian house at Marseilles. In the evening Don Bosco, accompanied by Fr. Ronchail was leaving the house to call on a Count. Fr. Cagliero was just coming into the house from the station. Visibility was poor. But Fr. Ronchail recognized Fr. Cagliero, and greeted him in French, to which he too replied in French. At this Don Bosco asked Fr. Ronchail who the priest was. Fr. Ronchail thought that Don Bosco was joking and so went on to say that he was a good friend of the Salesians and that he visited them from time to time. Then Don Bosco said in French, that they would meet later. Then they parted. A little later Don Bosco asked Fr. Ronchail who the priest was. When he was told that it was Fr. Cagliero, Don Bosco said, "What Fr. Cagliero! I did not even recognize his voice!" And they had a hearty laugh! Their laughter continued when they returned home because Fr. Cagliero kept up his game!

FAMILY SPIRIT AND VOCATIONS

Family atmosphere attracts youngsters to follow the Salesian way of life. It is amply demonstrated in the case of the first Salesians. A great majority of Salesian novices came from the Oratory. Two thirds of the senior students entered the Novitiate! And in the major seminary of Turin in 1865, 38 out of the 46 clerics were former pupils of the Oratory; in 1873 this was true of 120 out of 150! In 1883, Don Bosco affirmed: "I'm happy now! I have had careful statistics drawn up, and we have found that more than two thousand diocesan priests have come from our schools." Then there were others who had joined religious Orders! This proves beyond doubt that there is a correlation between family spirit and vocation: family spirit gives rise to vocations.

THE PRACTISE OF FAMILY SPIRIT

Don Bosco gives the following suggestions to foster family spirit.

- Respect superiors in the manner of greeting them and trust
- Take no offence at trivial things
- Keep calm, bid time and investigate before giving importance to faults
- No words of contempt; no disapproval of any other confrere
- Cover each other's shortcomings and defend one another
- Do not criticise food or superiors' directives



- Faithfully attend to duties
- Monthly manifestation is important
- Not leaving house without Rector's permission
- Keep full confidentiality with any boy who has reported a grave transgression
- Love confreres' good name
- Do not look for preferences
- Self-sacrifice especially on the part of the superior
- No constraint: freedom to express one's view & suggestions
- Rules based on common sense
- Directors should never punish or reprimand or threaten the boys

A mention should be made about the Rector being the ordinary confessor in their houses. In Don Bosco's system, it had a lot to contribute to the family spirit. See what Fr. Angelo Amadei, the biographer, says, "We must bear in mind, though, that their purpose was to make of all the Salesian schools so many families in which the director was to be 'a father who could not but love and sympathise with his sons' who would in turn be as so many brothers, forming one heart and soul with their director. After the Holy See's decree of 1901, this family spirit, so cherished by Don Bosco, has unfortunately weakened here and there." Hence, we need to strengthen the practice of monthly manifestations at least.

CONCLUSION

Family spirit is the climate of freedom compatible with discipline; feeling of belongingness; treating everyone as brothers; looking upon the superior as a father; cordial relationships; sharing thought & feelings, joys & sorrows. We have a rich tradition. We need to preserve such a rich heritage.