

SALESIAN SPIRIT
Fr. Pathiaraj Rayappan SDB

PREDILECTION FOR THE YOUNG

Another characteristic feature of the Salesian Spirit is the predilection for the young: The Salesians have a very special love for the young people. It is the first charism of the salesian, a gift given by God. It has been given to us in our very vocation and it is an expression of our pastoral charity: love of the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep!

MEANING OF PREDILECTION FOR THE YOUNG

In an effort to understand what 'predilection' means, let us look up the synonyms. MS Word gives the following: fondness, liking, partiality, preference, penchant, taste, weakness, tendency. These words express different shades of meaning and help us to grasp the meaning of predilection better.

Predilection for the young means, for the Salesians, a preferential option for the young as our target group, for whom we resolve to live, to work and to offer our lives. It permeates the Salesian in his entirety and becomes his character-giving mark as a Salesian. We can describe it in the following terms:

- It is a special choice to work for the young.
- It is a passion for the welfare of the young.
- It is a passion to help the young.
- It is a life-dedication for their good.
- It is a will to be interested solely in their welfare; giving up everything else.
- It is a decision to do good to them.
- It is a desire to love them in the Lord, to save their souls.
- It is a concern for their happiness here and hereafter.
- v It is to be accessible to the young.
- It is not a superficial love but a deep love.
- It is not a natural attraction but a choice.



DON BOSCO'S PREDILECTION FOR THE YOUNG

Don Bosco is our example par excellence! His predilection for the young was revealed in his total offering of himself for the young; in his living for the young 24/7; in his avoiding everything that took him away from them - even if they were good ones; in his various initiatives on behalf of the young; and in his feeling at home with the young. Although his entire life was a manifestation of this predilection, we shall draw on some snippets from his life.

His predilection for the young is evidenced in his resolve to dedicate his life for the boys. After his miraculous recovery from a serious illness (1846), he appeared for the first time in the playground to the affectionate cheering of boys. He was moved and told them, "I am convinced that God granted



me an extension of life in answer to your prayers. Therefore, gratitude demands that I spend it all for your temporal and spiritual welfare. This I promise to do as long as the Lord will permit me to remain in this world." At the end of his life he could state that he had done just that. In the letter from Rome (1884) he affirmed that he had spent his entire life for his dear boys!

His predilection for the young is noticed in his writings. In 1847 he published *The Companion of Youth*. And in the introduction to this book Don Bosco wrote, "My children, you are very dear to me. To know that you are young is sufficient reason for me to care very much for your welfare. I am sure you will come across books written by people far more learned and virtuous than I, but you will hardly ever find one who has a greater love for you in Jesus Christ or a great desire for your true happiness." We see his affirmation that he loved the youngsters and desired their real happiness more than all others! In 1884, in the famous letter from

Rome he wrote, "My dear sons in Jesus Christ, whether I am at home or away I am always thinking of you. I have only one wish, to see you happy both in this world and in the next. ... These words come from someone who loves you very dearly in Christ Jesus." Truly, there was nothing else that occupied his mind and heart!

His predilection for the young is revealed also in his talks and conversations. Fr. William Garigliano, a fellow seminarian in Chieri, said of the way that Don Bosco, as a young priest, invited boys to the Oratory. As he walked along he would stop and introduce himself to a young man, "I'm a priest who likes young people. Each Sunday I gather boys in a nice place near the Dora, not far from the Refuge. I have presents for them, and let them have fun. They like me. My name is Don Bosco. But now that I have you who I am, will you tell me about yourself?" And the conversation would begin and the boy won over. In this self-introduction, Don Bosco describes himself as the 'one who likes young people'. That was his identity card or visiting card! No wonder he earned the title Father and Friend of Youth. Yes, predilection means to love young people. John Cagliero, one of the first boys of the Oratory, affirmed that Don Bosco enjoyed being with them. Occasionally Don Bosco used to visit some noble or prominent family. On his return he used to tell the boys, "I feel much more at home with you; this is really where I belong."

In August 1863 Don Bosco addressed the newcomers to the oratory, "... I am not here to make money or a name for myself. I am here only for your benefit. Mind, therefore, that whatever my worth I am here every moment of the day and night for you. I have no other goal than your physical, mental and moral welfare. ..." Predilection for the young means to be available to them day and night! In 1877 as the boys were going home for holidays Don Bosco spoke to them as follows, "Every dad worries some mishap may befall his dear ones when he must leave them or when they go on a long trip even though he trusts them and they know how to take care of themselves. ... He wonders if they are suffering discomfort and hardships while making a lengthy journey in bad weather or in an unfriendly environment. How long does he worry? When will he be at peace? Only when he can again hug them to his heart as they return to their father's house." Predilection is to love the young tenderly, as father loves his children!

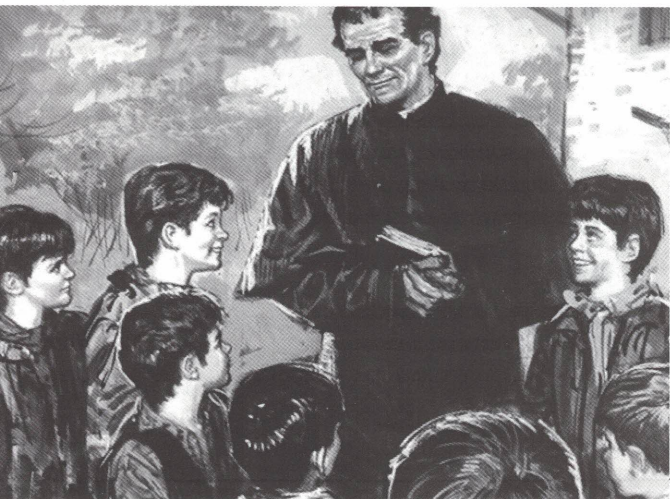
His predilection for the young is manifested also in his dreams: all his dreams were about his boys, the result of his constant thinking about his boys, day in and day out. Don Bosco had a dream while in Varazze in 1872. He narrated it in a letter introducing it as follows: "Throughout my illness you were always in my mind. Always, day and night, I

talked about you, because my heart was constantly with you. Even when I sleep, therefore, I dreamed about you and the Oratory. I paid you several visits, and consequently I can talk about your concerns even more knowingly perhaps than you can yourselves. ...” He was always thinking about his boys!

His predilection for the young is witnessed in his single minded devotion to this cause. He refrained from those works that did not cater to boys. He said in 1862: “The Lord sent me to look after boys. I must therefore cut down on other work and keep myself fit for them.” And in 1876 when some superiors complained that frequent trimming of Salesian personnel in some houses to open new houses or to strengthen others was detrimental to confreres’ health because in most places the confreres were helping out the local churches, Don Bosco lamented, “We already have too many things to do without going to look for more work -- especially because such commitments interfere with our duties and draw our hearts to certain outside works which boost self-complacency and make us neglect our own tasks. Even in South America our confreres overburden themselves with outside work. True, we aim at God’s greater glory, but it is also true that our primary goal is the care of youth, and consequently, every concern which draws us from that cannot be good. To let a boarding school run down in order to go and hear confessions elsewhere makes no sense.” Already in Don Bosco’s own time confreres were accepting pastoral works (such as hearing confessions!) outside the community to the detriment of the community apostolate and were reprimanded for it! It is for the same reason that he did not want to accept the Cardinal’s cap! In 1870 the Holy Father wanted Don Bosco at his side in Rome as a Cardinal [but did not insist] Don Bosco explained, “I love my boys too much to leave them.”

SALESIANS’ PREDILECTION FOR THE YOUNG

In 1875 at the end of the academy in his honour on his name feast, Don Bosco spoke thus to his boys, “Most



of you who read something concluded by saying, ‘since I have nothing else to offer, I give you my heart and promise from now on to make Don Bosco happy with my good behaviour’. Yes, this is exactly what I want. I ask nothing more of you than to let me take possession of your hearts. ... I have dedicated my whole life to you; and what I say about myself is to be understood as applying to all our superiors because they help me save your souls.” The predilection for the young is not to be thought of as restricted only to Don Bosco but to all Salesians with him and after him.

In 1871 in a conference to the Salesians Don Bosco said, “I cannot cease exhorting you to work. I myself shall spend whatever life remains to me solely for the welfare of boys. You all know I was supposed to die at fifty, but a group of boys prayed and prolonged my earthly stay. I thank the Lord for this grace, and I will spend my life for the benefit of those who got it for me from God. Do likewise yourselves, because ‘the harvest is indeed great, but the labourers are few’.” Don Bosco invites us to spend our lives for the young! That’s predilection for the young!

How should we manifest the predilection for the young in our lives? From the above citations about Don Bosco we gather the following as being manifestation of predilection for the young:

- **Offering our entire life to God for the young;**
- **Loving the young people just because they are young;**
- **Desiring and providing for their true happiness;**
- **Feeling at home with the young;**
- **Finding joy in being with the young (assistance);**
- **Having no other goal than the young peoples’ physical, mental and moral welfare;**
- **Living every moment of the day and night for them;**
- **Cutting down on other pastoral works out of our Salesian houses.**

Our Project of Life summarizes all these in the following words: “The Salesian, deeply moved by a passion for the welfare of youth, generously gives for them his time, talents, and health and maintains a permanent attitude of sympathy in their regard, a constant presence (assistance) and a continual interest in getting to know them and win their affection.”

CONCLUSION

Salesians are people who are madly in love with young people so as to offer their entire life, and every moment of the day or night for their welfare.