

SALESIAN SPIRIT  
Fr. Pathiaraj Rayappan SDB

**O**ne of Don Bosco's qualities, identified and extolled by some of his contemporaries, especially in the funeral eulogies, was his 'intimate union with God'! Fr. Perotti, Pastor of Moncrivello said: "... no one who had lived in such intimate and loving union with God during his mortal life could be ever separated, even for a single moment, from Him in the hereafter." Msgr. Fabre, Vicar General of Nice, affirmed: "Everyone must have noticed Don Bosco's inner serenity and tranquillity which permeated his demeanour, and were clearly evidenced by his speech, his attitude, his whole appearance. Who could ever have suspected that a man of such evident serenity was actually overwhelmed by so many problems? To me, this is the seal of a truly elect spirit, living in an intimate union with God, and therefore above the anxieties of daily existence." Yes, Don Bosco was united with God always. This is another important Salesian characteristic: Union with God.

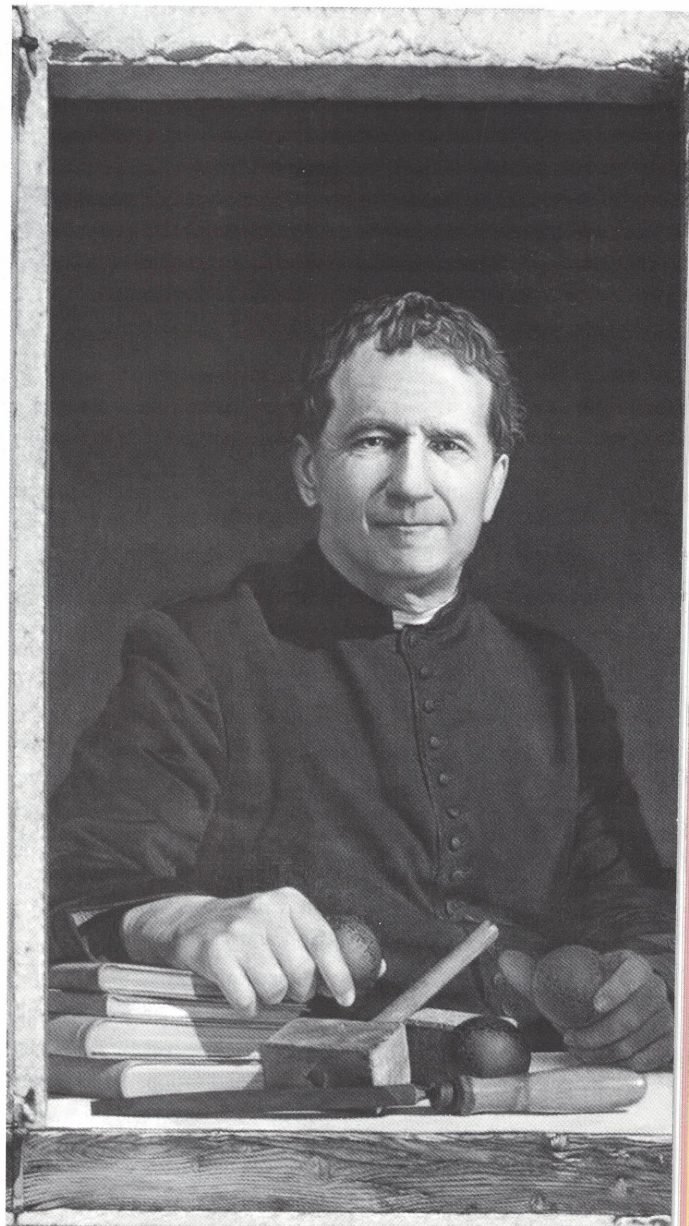
#### What is union with God?

Union with God is the inner attitude of one's total belongingness to God. It is the deep awareness of who one is and manifesting that consciousness in daily life:

- that I am a child of God
- that I belong totally to the Lord
- that God is my father
- that I am in the presence of God, that God is with me
- that God sees me
- that I am cooperating with God
- that I am redeeming the world with God
- that God is redeeming the world also through me
- that I am sent by God for this apostolate
- that in the poor youth I am serving God himself
- that through this apostolic work God is glorified
- that God is guiding me
- that without his help I will fail

This inner integrates unites into one both one's practices of piety as well as one's apostolate. Actually it provides unity not merely to one's prayer and work, but to one's entire life – likes & dislikes, needs & wants, relationships & abstentions, choices & renunciations, rest & leisure, pains & struggles, etc. All these spring from the one and the same source of that inner attitude of union with God.

# UNION WITH GOD





And when the Salesian cultivates this inner attitude, every activity of the Salesian becomes an apostolic activity. And we can navigate easily from one to another without any difficulty. And everything will have its focus and source in God. That's how we sanctify the apostolic activity. We have a practical example in Don Bosco. Though immersed in so many works, his mind was always attuned to God. The priests at the Oratory went to him for confession while he was busy, because they were unable to do it at any other time. Although engrossed in works, he listened to them and gave timely and inspiring advice. Priest penitents said that he would not have done better had he just finished saying Mass! Let us listen to Fr. Louis Piscetta: "Every word he spoke was about God. I never once approached him when he failed to speak to me about God and the things of God. The same was true of my fellow Salesians, as they themselves assured me. Thanks to his intimate union with God, he lived and worked in full trust of God's goodness." He was focussed on God and lived in his presence. Every work was equally holy and so he was able to move from one to another without difficulty.

Practising union with God means that we learn to see reality as God's handiwork. Let us learn from Don Bosco. Everything around him made him raise his thoughts to God and see the world as a manifestation of God's intervention. Don Rua in the Apostolic process of Don Bosco's beatification declared: "Everything helped Don Bosco lift his mind to God and holiness. Plants, flowers, fruits, birds, animals, and discoveries past, present and future – led him more and more to admire God's wisdom, power and loving providence. So spontaneously did he express these sentiments that it was obvious they sprang from a mind and heart constantly immersed in contemplating God and His attributes."

### **Feeling the need of God**

The two prongs of union with God are prayer and apostolic activity. One nourishes as well as is nourished by the other: mutual penetration of contemplation and action. The Salesian engaged in apostolic activity, feels the need of God; feels the necessity of being in contact with God, to be doing His will; so as not to drift away. And in prayer, the Salesian is

called to discern the divine dimension of his activity. We need to make it clear that not all activity is apostolic activity. It does not refer to any activity but the mission entrusted to the community, the daily work done in accordance with His will. Hence, no work detached from the mission confided to the community is apostolic activity.

### **Simple Prayer**

The Salesian dialogues with God without ceasing and with simplicity.

The Salesian's prayer is simple, without exaggerations. It is made up of essential elements. Salesians do not have too many exercises of piety in common but they fulfil perfectly the general duties of a good Christian.

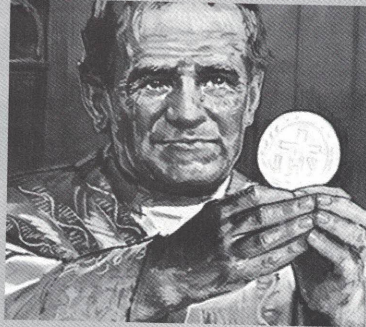
Simplicity in prayer is taking care to pray well. Don Bosco prayed not merely with his lips but with his whole being. He was recollected in prayer. He was absorbed in what he was doing. The way he conducted himself in prayer, kneeling, sitting, standing, reciting prayers, singing, celebrating Mass, giving instructions, ... manifested a sense of the sacred! He prayed in a loud voice, pronouncing the words with a slight tremble which revealed the fervour of his love. At Mass he was reverent, attentive and exact. He spoke the words with clarity and fervour. Fr. Piccollo who studied at the Oratory in 1876 gave his reminiscences: "Don Bosco always prayed. ... he at times looked like an angel when kneeling in prayer or celebrating Holy Mass. Such was

his walk, grave but serene; such was his conversation, for even in ordinary talk he knew how to raise our minds to God without becoming tedious or heavy. He did it all with incredible naturalness. One could have written in luminous letters around his head: 'our abode is in heaven'."

### **Unceasing Prayer**

The Salesian should pray unceasingly. He should never stop praying.

Let us learn from Don Bosco the way to pray unceasingly: using short invocations. Once Father Merlone accompanied Don Bosco to the Refuge, an institute for girls. Before entering, he overheard Don Bosco whisper: 'O Lord, keep my heart and my body spotless in Your sight so that I may not be put to shame.' And he told Father Merlone, 'My friend, a



***The sisters told him that they did not quite understand how they could practice the rule which told them to live always in the presence of God and asked him to teach them how to live always in God's presence.***



priest faithful to his vocation, is an angel. Unfaithful, what can he be but an object of pity and contempt?" By this he manifests that he was aware of the situation, that he could be tempted, that he needed God's grace to help him, and he offered it all to God. Don Bosco, while speaking about sacraments as means to persevere in chastity, had this to say: "We cannot be merely satisfied with our routine practices of piety, no matter how well we do them, but we should pray frequently through the day to God and to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Let us call on Her with the invocation, 'Mary, Help of Christians, pray for us' - an extremely effective prayer in countless cases."

Don Bosco prayed always. But he did not make an external show of it. A true Salesian characteristic! Father Cerruti testified that the last few years of Don Bosco's life were practically one long and continuous prayer to God: "It is indeed true that if we entered his room to see him and speak with him, we always found him in an attitude of profound meditation, although he gave no outward sign, for his face remained cheerful, calm, and serene, just as any words that passed his lips were words of peace, charity, and faith" Fr. Rinaldi has told us that during his afternoon 'rest' Don Bosco was actually praying!

During the last few years of his life, Don Bosco would retire to his room every afternoon between two and three o'clock, after spending his mornings listening to people of all walks of life. The Superiors never allowed anyone to disturb him at that hour. Don Rinaldi was given special permission by Don Bosco to call on him at any time as he was the Director of the house of formation of aspirants to the priesthood. Several times Fr. Rinaldi knocked at his door between two and three in the afternoon! What did he see? "Whenever I did so, ... I always caught him unaware, rapt in meditation, his hands clasped." A good model for imitation!

### **Apostolate nourishes our prayer**

How does the apostolic activity nourish prayer? How does the apostolate become the soul of prayer? Apostolic activity "leads the salesian to thank God for the good and fine things he sees, to call for help in the time of suffering, to seek his pardon at once should he fall into sin, and to ask

for his support and for success for the efforts he makes". Don Bosco was united with God at the explicit moments of prayer. And he also filled every moment and every aspect of daily life with (1) thanksgiving to God (2) filial trust in providence and (3) conversation with Mary Help of Christians. A beautiful model for us to imitate.

### **Doing everything for God's love**

In 1877 Don Bosco visited the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians at Alassio. The sisters told him that they did not quite understand how they could practice the rule which told them to live always in the presence of God and asked him to teach them how to live always in God's presence. Don Bosco replied: "It can be done in this way: renew your intention of doing everything for God's greater glory every time you go from one task to another. ... So you see, it is not so hard to form the habit of keeping united with God."

Thus, the Salesian is in union with God if he does everything for God's love (not for himself or his own interests or to gain esteem)! In this way the Salesian sanctifies apostolic activity. The dynamics of contemplation in Don Bosco is found in the motto 'da mihi

animas caetera tolle' lived out in complete consistency. Don Bosco's conscious work for the salvation of souls, sanctified all that he was doing. If the Salesian is working for the salvation of souls, he is in union with God.

Accepting bodily sicknesses for the sake of God, is practising union with God! Don Bosco had his health problems. But he did not pray for his own cure! He permitted others to pray for him as an act of charity. Why? Because physical sufferings accepted with perfect conformity to the will of God are acts of great love for God and of voluntary penance. What great example! Let us imitate Don Bosco in accepting our illnesses for God's sake.

Union with God is to possess an attitude of total belongingness to God. It is to acknowledge our need of God. It is to pray unceasingly and with simplicity. It is doing everything for God's love.

