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SHARING THE SALESIAN CHARISM AND MISSION

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I have been asked to reflect on the role of the SDBs and the members of groups of the Salesian Family regarding the sharing of the Salesian charism and mission with followers of other religions. Can the charism and mission of a Congregation be shared with those who are not members of the Congregation, even Catholics? Can it be shared with followers of other religions? I will try to respond to these questions.

1. Charism

Charism comes from the Greek word used in the New Testament for 'favour' or "generously given gift" from God. The term is not used in the Gospels and in the other New Testament writings, except mainly in the Pauline writings and in 1 Pt 4:10. Paul used *charisma* (from *charis*, "grace") meaning "generous gift" in the general sense, but he used it only in reference to the free gifts given by God which are generally spiritual gifts. Hence, charisms are special spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit to build up the Church (1 Cor 14:1, 12). However, Paul does not offer us an exhaustive list of charisms nor give a comprehensive explanation of the gifts of the Spirit. Instead, his emphasis is on the initiative of the Holy Spirit on bestowing a diversity of gifts on all believers (1 Cor 12:4-11) to build up the Church.

Thus, Paul encourages believers to desire charisms eagerly (1 Cor 12:31) yet underlines the need to discern the veracity of charisms (1 Cor 12:10) to ensure that they are not extinguished (1 Thess 5:19-22). Paul also used charism in the restricted sense of being a free gift given to one person or another which allows him to accomplish through the Spirit activities suited to the community's good. This is clear in the two pastoral letters to Timothy (1 Tm 4:14; 2 Tm 1:6) where he connects charism with the 'office' through the laying on of hands.¹

To explain the necessary presence of the diverse gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Church, Paul compares them with the different functions of the human body where he shows diversity as both necessary and productive, hence, not to be considered an anomaly to avoid. This diversity of the parts of the body makes possible the fulfilment of diverse life-giving functions (1 Cor 12:12-26). Paul expresses the divine origin of these diverse gifts in different ways: according to some texts they come from God (1 Cor 12:28; 2 Tm 1:6; 1 Pt 4:10); from Christ (Eph 4:7); and from the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-11). Paul expresses great concern that charisms be used in building up the Christian community: "Let all things be done for building up" as well as for the common good (1 Cor 12:7) because the majority of charisms he mentions, even if not all, are mainly for the benefit of all. This relation of charism to the community is at the heart of Paul's teaching on charism. However, he puts a higher value on those gifts which can build up and strengthen the whole body to explain and proclaim God's message to all over personal gifts. Thus, he lists apostles first, followed by prophets and teachers (1 Cor 12:27-30).²

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- 1 X. Leon-Dufour (ed), "Charism," in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Seabury Press, New York, 1973), 69; X. Leon-Dufour (ed), "Charism," in *Dictionary of the New Testament* (Harper and Row, New York, 1980), 131; Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity, "Do Not Quench the Spirit": *Charisms in the Life and Mission of the Church* (Report of the Sixth Phase of the International Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue [2011-2015] (2015), n. 19-24.
 - 2 M. Lemonnier, "Riflessioni per una teologia dei carismi," *Rivista Vita Spirituale* (Gennaio-Febbraio 1972) 12; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter "Iuvenescit Ecclesia" to the Bishops of the Catholic*

Paul's theology of charisms hinges around some fundamental principles: The Holy Spirit is the principle of unity (*koinōnia*) amidst the diversity of charisms; all charisms are intrinsically dependent on and founded on charity; the unity in variety of charisms; the dependence of all charisms on the judgment and interpretation of those in authority; they are given for the common good and the building up of the whole community.

Charism and institution mutually complement through a healthy tension.

The Holy Spirit equips the Church with both institutional and charismatic gifts (1 Cor 12:28). The institutional dimension of the Church is the Holy Spirit working through the leadership structures established by Christ. The charismatic dimension is the Holy Spirit working among believers of every rank continually, spontaneously, and often unpredictably. These two dimensions are co-essential to the Church and are complementary. The institutional is charismatic in that it is animated by the Spirit and must rely on the Spirit, and the charismatic is institutional in that it must be discerned by the Church and rightly ordered in the service of the Church.³

In the early Church, the Fathers did not deepen Paul's teachings on charism, associating it with what is miraculous or extraordinary. It was only in the 13th century that St. Thomas Aquinas made an important contribution to the theological progress of the doctrine of "charism." He distinguished charisms from actual grace and sanctifying grace. He also described charisms as "*gratiae gratiae datae*" (graces freely given) independent of the personal moral life or behaviour of its possessor and stressed on their usefulness for spreading and confirming the faith. Tridentine and post-Tridentine theology did not deepen Thomistic theology on charisms. We will have to wait for the Second Vatican Council for a renewed insight on charisms.

Pope Pius XII's encyclical, "Mystici Corporis Christi," described the structure of the Body of Christ, the Church, as both hierarchic

Church Regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church (2016) n. 1-8.

- 3 Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity, "Do Not Quench the Spirit", n. 27.

and charismatic which is “enriched with the abundant gifts of the Paraclete”.⁴ This was a step forward which paved the way for the Second Vatican Council. In fact, one of the main themes of Vatican II is the diffusion of the gifts of the Spirit. Charisms are special graces distributed among the faithful of every rank to make them fit and ready for various tasks required in the renewal and building up of the Church. These “special graces” include charisms that are both remarkable and those that are simpler and widely diffused.⁵

One of the ways the Holy Spirit is outpoured upon the Church is through charisms. It is the Holy Spirit who distributes these gifts for the welfare of the entire Body.⁶ Since all members of the People of God share in the gifts of the Spirit, “every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and living instrument of the mission of the Church.”⁷ These charisms instil in the Church the same motivation which inspired Jesus Christ himself.⁸ Therefore, charisms bear witness that the Holy Spirit is acting in and through the Christian for the whole Church and for the world: “From the acceptance of these charisms, including those which are more elementary, there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of people and the building up of the Church, in the freedom of the Holy Spirit who ‘breathes where He wills’ (Jn 3:8)”⁹

Today we understand charisms as “graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of people, and to the needs of the world”.¹⁰ They are gifts of the Holy Spirit given to all believers (1 Cor 12:7, 11). The sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation are the foundation for

4 Pius XII, *Encyclical Mystici Corporis Christi*, (1943), n. 31, cf. 2, 17.

5 Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ‘Lumen Gentium’* (1964) [LG], 12.

6 LG n. 7.

7 LG n. 33.

8 LG n. 8.

9 Vatican II, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity ‘Apostolicam Actuositatem’* (1965) [AA] n. 3.

10 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 799.

receiving spiritual gifts which are essential both for the life of the Church and for her evangelising mission. They are expressions of God's love for his people and manifestations of his living presence among them. Freely and sovereignly bestowed by the Holy Spirit, charisms equip believers to participate in God's saving plan and to praise and glorify God.¹¹

2. The Charism of the Founder

Since the Council of Trent the documents of the Church and the statements of the Popes have affirmed that individual founders acted under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Popes Paul III and Julius III both stated that St. Ignatius of Loyola and his companions were "inspired by the Holy Spirit." In 1791 Pope Pius VI was the first modern pope to affirm, as a general principle, that the formation of a religious order or congregation is always a divine inspiration. Pope Pius IX recalled that these founders acted under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a statement repeated by Pope Pius XI in his letter *Unigenitus*.¹²

However, Vatican II did not treat the specific charism of those founding a community. Rather it pointed out that consecrated life, situated within the Body of Christ, reveals a "great variety of gifts,"¹³ and needs to be renewed under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church.¹⁴ This will be done by Pope Paul VI through his decree "*Evangelica Testificatio*", asking religious to adapt and renew by deepening their fidelity to Christ and to the charism of the founders.¹⁵

One of the main characteristics of the charism of the founder or foundress of a religious community is that it develops and gradually unfolds over an extended period of time, marked by his/her human qualities and failings, strengths, and weaknesses. Across the ages

11 Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity, "*Do Not Quench the Spirit*", n. 9-10.

12 J. M. Lonzano, "Founder and Community: Inspiration and Charism," *Review for Religious* 37 (March 1978): 219, 223.

13 Paul VI, *Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life 'Perfectae Caritatis'* [PC] (1965), n. 1.

14 *LG* 43-47.

15 Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation 'Evangelica Testificatio'* [ET] (1971), 11.

in the history of the Church, we can identify in the saints a very particular grace or charism. Instead, the charism of the founder or foundress is associated with specific activities of service he has inspired that reflect brightly the life of the Spirit and build up the Body of Christ. It is confirmed by the Church and belongs to the whole Church, as it is constantly reincarnated and adapted to different times, places, and people.

The faith-vision of a founder or foundress is the way he/she has personally appropriated the Christian faith considering several factors: his/her personal history, culture, socio-cultural context, ecclesial context, the theology of his/her time, etc. Understanding the “faith-vision” of a founder or foundress is important because it provides the “substructure” which gives coherence to his “charism.” In our case, we know that the heart of Don Bosco’s faith-vision is his profound grasp and understanding of the Good Shepherd’s love for all of the sheep with a special love and concern for those who are lost. A critical dimension of Don Bosco’s faith-vision is his concern, and compassion for those outside the fold, particularly the poor and abandoned boys.

The founder’s or foundress’ “spirit” refers to his/her interior, fundamental attitude in regard to God, to the Church, and to other members of the congregation. It “is an ensemble of aspects and values of the human world and Christian mystery which becomes our particular style of thought and feeling, of life and activity, centred on pastoral charity.”¹⁶ It is transmitted through the founder’s/foundress’ entire person, that is, his/her writings, personality, “faith-vision,” etc. This “spirit” gradually becomes a collective reality, the spirit of the congregation, as others join the community, and it provides a basis for unity and continuity in the history of the community. The spirit of a congregation defies description or definition; it is the *conditio sine qua non* that can be understood only through direct personal experience. On the other hand, “spirituality” is essentially a particular way of understanding Christian mystery and the coherent living out of this understanding in daily life. A founder’s or foundress’

16 24th SDB General Chapter (GC24), 88.

spirituality is the *humus* on which the spirit is planted, grows, and matures. It determines, to a great extent, the shape his “spirit” will take. On the other hand, the spirit replenishes and enriches the *humus* that nurtures it. Therefore, a founder’s or foundress’ spirit and spirituality are interrelated and mutually influence each other.

It is important to recognise that Don Bosco’s ecclesiology was not the ecclesiology of Vatican II. He started the Catholic Readings, built the Church of St. John in Turin, for example, to fight the ‘errors’ spread by other ecclesial communities of his time. As a student in Chieri he had a Jewish friend Jonah, whom he helped eventually to be converted to Catholicism. Hence, from the perspective of his ecclesiology, that he invited a Jew to become a Salesian Cooperator is more anecdotal than charismatic. In this light it is crucial and urgent that we know well the life, context, and writings of Don Bosco so that we may have a clear grasp of what are essential elements of his charism and what practices and traditions are tied to the culture, context, and traditions of his times. The Salesian Constitutions transmit to us the essential elements of our founder’s charism that need to be inculturated in different contexts that the Salesians are working in. The *Salesian Sources* published on the occasion of the 27th General Chapter provides us the essential charismatic writings of Don Bosco. Indeed, a superficial and anecdotal knowledge of Don Bosco is a great disservice to the process of inculturating and transmitting his charism.

The Salesian Constitutions art. 31 captures Don Bosco’s charism in a nutshell: “We educate and evangelise according to a plan for the total well-being of man directed to Christ, the perfect Man. Faithful to the intentions of our Founder, our purpose is to form upright citizens and good Christians.” From the Salesian perspective, for this to happen, it is necessary that every educative pastoral community has an animating nucleus (*Reg. 5*) which is “a group of people who identify themselves with the Salesian mission, educational system and spirituality, and together take up the task of assembling, motivating and involving all those who are concerned with a work, so as to form with them the educative community and to carry

out a plan of the evangelisation and education of the young.”¹⁷ It is formed principally by lay people. However, the Salesian community remains its reference point because as a charismatic community “it is alive and it guards, deepens and constantly develops Don Bosco’s charism.”¹⁸ It lives the Salesian spirituality “with awareness and conviction, and expresses it with joyful spontaneity.”¹⁹ “Its spiritual heritage, its educational method, its brotherly relationships, and co-responsibility for the mission provide in each case a guiding model for the pastoral identity of the animating nucleus.”²⁰

The Church insists on dynamic “*fidelity to the founding charism*” of consecrated women and men who with enterprising initiative and creativity are asked to return to the sources of their founder or foundress and discern how to adapt the ways of fulfilling their mission to new situations and different needs, in complete openness to God’s inspiration.²¹ Don Bosco, in the light of the ecclesiology of his time, did not see the possibility of having collaborators who are followers of other religions or have no religion. Yet today this is a reality of many Salesians presences. It is for us now to discern with creative fidelity the way forward.

3. The Kingdom of God

Jesus was incarnated to save us from sin and invite everyone to be part of God’s kingdom. In fact, his whole ministry was centred on the proclamation of God’s kingdom. ‘Kingdom’ is the common English translation of the Greek word *basilea*. Bible scholars state that when the term *basilea* refers to the office of a king it should be translated as kingship. When it refers to the king’s exercise of his government, it should be translated as reign. When it implies the geographical territory over which a king reigns, it should be translated as kingdom. However, God’s kingdom is his sovereign

17 J. E. Vecchi, “The Salesian Community as Animating Nucleus,” in AGC 363, p. 9.

18 GC24, 159.

19 J. E. Vecchi, AGC 363, p. 24.

20 GC24, 159.

21 John Paul II, *Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata* (1996), n. 36-37.

rule over the hearts of people – not land. Although there is a risk of understanding kingdom as implying an archaic monarchic, authoritarian feudal system, modern English translations of the Bible tend to prefer the term kingdom to preserve the concrete social and political connotations of the biblical image, against tendencies to consider the kingdom as something purely spiritual as well as tendencies of separating God, Jesus Christ from the kingdom.

The Jews of Jesus' time understood the term 'God's kingdom' as a restoration of the power and glory that Israel enjoyed during David's reign. But Jesus preached a very different kind of kingdom that "is at hand". He preached a kingdom not only as coming in the near future, but also as already present in an incomplete manner, as sign, anticipation, and foretaste (Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20). This is realised when we surrender our hearts to God. It is God's grace that makes the seed of the kingdom grow (Mk 4). The kingdom of God is, above all, a gift, even if we may prepare ourselves for it (Mt 25:1-13) or seek it (Mt 6:33; Lk 12:31). This kingdom of God will be fully manifested only in Jesus' Second Coming.²²

Jesus revealed to his disciples the secrets of the kingdom (Mt 13:10-12). Similarly, he described it through such parables as the Good Shepherd, the seed sown in the field and the dragnet cast into the sea. His miracles were signs of God's healing presence in our world. But central to life in God's kingdom is the experience of God's mercy and compassion through the forgiveness of sin and healing. This kingdom of God represents justice, peace, joy, and fellowship (*koinonia*) that invites everyone to overcome passivity and quietism and to be part of it, emboldened by the commitment to correct social evils which is contrary to God's will. It is worth noting that the first beatitude (Mt 5:3; Lk 6:20) does not sentimentalise the poor as if they are morally better than the rich. Rather it underlines the connection between the kingdom of God and the poor of the world and takes

22 Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God. Report of the Third Phase of the International Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches [1998-2005]* (2005) n. 16-19, 27, 29, 38, 41, 42.

their situation seriously. Thus, every missionary disciple ought to see Jesus in the poor and help them for his sake (Mt 25:40, 45).

The 'good news' that Jesus proclaimed demanded a completely new attitude as the appropriate response to God's kingdom: *Repent and believe the good news!* The synoptic gospels narrate that Jesus concluded his ministry by sending his disciples into the world to carry on his mission of proclaiming to the whole world the good news. Today people need to hear the good news Jesus preached and accept the salvation he brought about. Paul said that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14: 17). Thus, for Paul God's kingdom is not a matter of keeping ritual laws, but a matter of total renewal of life that brings about a new heart of love of God and faith in Jesus which leads his disciples to keep his commandment of love (Jn 14:23).

4. The Kingdom and the Church

The kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus provides the context for understanding the nature and mission of the Church. Mt 16:17-19 explicitly underlines this connection between kingdom and Church, and that Peter will hold the keys to the kingdom. The Church is "the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery".²³ The kingdom is truly already present in the Church and yet it is beyond the Church. The kingdom of God is broader than the Church, and they are not identical. The Church is meant to serve the establishment of the kingdom as a prophetic sign and an effective instrument in the hands of God. We are all aware that theologians continue to struggle to arrive at some clarity and balance regarding the relationship between the kingdom and the Church in the light of Scripture, tradition, and experience.

As part of the mysterious design of God for the salvation of the world, the kingdom of God is a multi-faceted reality that includes various tensions or polarities:

The kingdom is both present and future; it dwells in the hearts of individuals and transforms society; it is religious and spiritual but has secular and political consequences; it gradually grows but may also break out suddenly in a particular event. It is the work of God but is served by the

23 LG n. 3.

actions of human beings. The kingdom is present with a special force and power in the Church, whose first members were those who believed Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom and were sent to proclaim the good news of its expansive reality through his death and resurrection. At the same time, the kingdom is broader than the Church; it is present in a hidden manner whenever the Spirit of the risen Lord inspires individuals and communities to live according to the values of the Gospel.²⁴

The Church is the People of God who are called to live the values of the kingdom and become a sign of the presence of God's kingdom by breaking the chains of injustice, promoting reconciliation, forgiving and love. These are the signs of the presence of God's kingdom which may often bring it into conflict with the world. "The celebration of the kingdom of God occurs in worship and sacrament. In the breaking of the bread (1 Cor 11:23-26; Mk 14:12-26), and in baptism (Rom 6:1-11; Mt 28:18-20), the community's hope of the kingdom of God is experienced as a tangible reality. In worship and sacrament, the community celebrates and experiences the kingdom breaking into the community's life, which enables, empowers, and equips it for its mission of serving the kingdom."²⁵

The Church is a communion of people in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, that seeks the fullness of God's kingdom, as it bears the message of salvation in, with and for the world. It is the Holy Spirit who brings about conversion and renewal of life, thus actualising the redeeming work of Jesus Christ in the hearts of people. It is the Holy Spirit who leads believers in discerning in their specific situations what they ought to do to realise fully God's kingdom. It is the Holy Spirit who bestows God's grace in the hearts of all people of goodwill and "offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery."²⁶ Thus, the Holy Spirit is the principal agent in establishing the kingdom of God.

24 *The Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God*, n. 62, 163.

25 *Idem*. n. 46. See also n. 45, 62-65.

26 Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 'Gaudium et Spes' [GS] (1965) n. 22.

Vatican II underlined that “the Church, endowed with the gifts of her founder ... receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is, on earth, the seed and beginning of that kingdom.”²⁷ To understand the mission of the Church means recalling its *raison d'être*: to proclaim through deed and word the good news of Jesus Christ that the kingdom of God is present in our midst. Everything the Catholic Church is and does is at the service of this mission. Indeed, the Church “exists to evangelise.”²⁸ Every baptised is a missionary disciple of Jesus and is called, by virtue of the baptism received, to participate in the life and mission of the Church. Every missionary disciple patterns his/her life to that of Jesus: That is to say, like Jesus, strives to be intimately connected to the Father, as the centre of all he says and does and then speaks the truth of God’s love through every word and deed in one’s ordinary daily life. This is founded on a deeply held conviction that every human being deserves to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. In fact, a Christian, a Catholic, without a sense of mission cannot be described as Jesus’ missionary disciple.

God’s self-revelation as a compassionate and merciful God culminates in the mystery of the incarnation. Jesus Christ embodies and personifies the compassion and mercy of God. Through the incarnation, the Son of God is both truly God and truly human, without compromise or alteration to either of his natures. Consequently, the mission of the Church has a social character because it is not, and cannot be, purely spiritual but includes also attending to real physical needs of people through spiritual and corporal works of mercy, promotion of the care for creation, advocacy, and solidarity. This urges us not to overlook situations that call for our involvement.²⁹

What is the mission of the Church? The Church is sent to proclaim “the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God” to all peoples.³⁰ This

27 LG n. 5.

28 Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation ‘Evangelii Nuntiandi’* [EN] (1975) n. 14.

29 Francis, *Apostolic Letter ‘Misericordia et Misera’* (2016) n. 18-20.

30 Vatican II, *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church ‘Ad Gentes’* [AG] (1965), n. 1; EN 22.

is the heart of the mission of the Church. We know that there are people who do not have the opportunity to know or accept Jesus or enter the Church due to their socio-cultural contexts. Since God offers the gift of salvation to all through Jesus Christ, in ways known to God alone, through the grace of the Holy Spirit salvation is made accessible to them even if they are not formally members of the Church.³¹

Similarly, the whole dogmatic constitution *Gaudium et Spes* underlines that the Church enters into solidarity with the poor and actively works to build a more just society; Finally, recognising that other religions “reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all”, *Nostra Aetate* (n. 2) defines the Church’s mission as engagement in dialogue and collaboration with their followers and with all people of goodwill “in order to preserve and promote spiritual, moral, and socio-cultural values found among them”. These elements are not distinct watertight compartments, rather they are mutually interrelated and are summed up with the term ‘evangelisation’.³²

5. Collaboration with Followers of Other Religions

Bringing about God’s kingdom is certainly a motive for dialogue and collaboration with followers of other religions, with those who have no religion and with all people of goodwill who seek to bring about a more humane world and foster the kinds of behaviour which Jesus spoke about when he proclaimed the kingdom in word and deed. “When those of other religions or even of no religious faith seek to reduce human suffering, to stand up for the rights of the oppressed, to advocate effective responses to such crises as natural disasters, famine, the HIV and Aids pandemic, to foster peace and reconciliation and to call upon governments and corporations to promote the care of our planet, then these are our partners. Out of our Christian faith we wish to obey Christ’s command ‘Seek first the kingdom of God’.”³³

31 John Paul II, *Encyclical Redemptoris Missio* (1990), 10; AG, 7.

32 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Doctrinal Notes on Some Aspects of Evangelization” (2007), n. 2-3.

33 *The Church as Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God*, n. 65.

The Church encourages all Catholics to join together in solidarity with followers of other religions as well as with those who have no religion in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation and the search for transcendence. This opens the way for collaboration and engagement in a more creative dialogue with them about fundamental issues of ethics, art, and science, and about the search for transcendence, as well as with any persons who seek to further the values of God's reign.³⁴

Don Bosco involved in his mission, through spontaneous or established forms of participation, many men and women, fervent Catholics, and anticlericals who admired the novelty of his work for poor and abandoned boys. Many of them offered to help him teach catechism, animate the playground, build schools and workshops, and even find upright employers who could hire his boys. He fostered creativity and involved everyone, yet he ensured unity in activity, harmony among individuals and consistency of criteria. Thus, right from the beginning, Don Bosco had unlimited openness to collaboration of various groups, with the specific aim of creating cooperation, solidarity, and communion. Today, in many of our Salesian settings, we also have collaborators who are followers of other religions or profess no religion. In fact, the 24th General Chapter pointed out that "lay persons too of other religions, those practising no religion, and non-believers all deserve our attention. Starting from their availability for involvement, they are called to grow in a valid, albeit only partial, sharing of our educative and social objectives."³⁵

Many of them have a great desire to belong to the Salesian Family or consider themselves part of the Salesian Family. Such cultural and religious pluralism in an educative pastoral context has a unique richness which can facilitate an exchange of gifts with mutual advantage among all the members of the Educative Pastoral Community (EPC). However, it can also give rise to a facile syncretism and can be a cause of tensions within the Educative Pastoral Community.³⁶

34 Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation 'Evangelii Gaudium'* (2013), n. 257.

35 GC24, 113.

36 Ibid., 36-37; J. E. Vecchi, AGC 363, p. 11-12, 18.

6. Sharing Our Charism and Mission with Followers of Other Religions

Every educative pastoral community has an animating nucleus which is formed principally by lay people with the Salesian community as its permanent part and point of reference. The members “identify themselves with the Salesian mission, educational system and spirituality, and together take up the task of assembling, motivating, and involving all those who are concerned with a work, to form with them the educative community and to carry out a plan for the evangelisation and education of the young.”³⁷

Fr. Juan Edmundo Vecchi insisted that underlying the pedagogy developed by Don Bosco and passed on by him to his first Salesians was pastoral charity which is the missionary courage to lead young people to faith in Jesus Christ, the way, truth and life, making himself a sign and witness of Christ’s love.³⁸ Thus, Salesians are called to share with the Salesian Family and all the lay people, not only the daily management of our work but primarily the Salesian spirit, as sharers in the responsibility for the mission, in our works and beyond them.³⁹ “This means giving life to a work which raises questions, gives motives for hope, brings people together, prompts collaboration, and gives rise to an ever more fruitful communion for the realization together of a plan of life and action in line with the Gospel.”⁴⁰

On the other hand, a great number of Salesians are working in settings where the majority of youngsters and educators are followers of other religions. Their religions are strongly embodied in their culture. Thus, religion blends well with the life of the people, permeating the whole texture of society, often inculcating among their followers a spirit of tolerance which enables them to face up to the trials of life, of peaceful coexistence, of welcoming hospitality, despite occasional outbreaks of violence caused by intransigent

37 Ibid., p. 9.

38 Ibid., p. 37-38

39 GC24, 88

40 J. E. Vecchi, AGC 363, 22

tendencies. Many of them admire Jesus Christ, Don Bosco, the Salesians, and our work for youngsters but the majority do not embrace Christianity.⁴¹

The most effective response to the challenge of working amongst and with followers of other religions and with those who have no religion is sincere and practical dialogue, a deep and careful inculturation of the Christian faith and a courageous evangelisation of culture, and the witness of a Salesian community enthusiastically committed to self-sacrificing service in living the values of the Preventive System. In this context, our task is initial proclamation, which is helping them discover and increase their ability to open up themselves to God; distinguish what is true and authentic from what is false and deceptive; help them accompany the young on their path to a meeting of communion with God, using the good elements that already exist in their religion and their desires.⁴²

7. Collaborators and Mission Partners

Can we share the Salesian charism and mission with followers of other religions? This research seminar is meant to respond to the recommendation of the GC28 Post Chapter Document:

We note that there are different types of lay people: employees, volunteers, young adults, Catholic Christians or of other denominations, practising or more distant from the Church. The same word “laity”, which in ecclesial language indicates the baptised (*Christifideles laici*) is sometimes also used in reference to people who are involved in our Works but who belong to other religions. To avoid confusion or inflexibility, it is important to deal seriously with the theological and pastoral issues underlying such complexity. In this way, it will be possible to better illuminate the form which the educative pastoral community is called to take in multi-religious or secularised contexts.⁴³

In this context it would be very helpful to recall the different ways of membership in the Church outlined by *Lumen Gentium*: at its core are the Catholics, then other Christians, Jews, Muslims, followers of other religions; those who seek the unknown God in shadows and

41 23rd SDB General Chapter (GC23), 24, 27-28, 72-74.

42 Ibid., 86.

43 GC28, n. 32.

images, those who sincerely seek God's will through the dictates of conscience, those who strive to live a good life even if they do not have explicit knowledge of God.⁴⁴ In this light we could also try to distinguish the different levels of sharing in our charism and mission.

Many teachers and staff in our settings who are followers of other religions or who have no religion share our commitment to poor and marginalised youth, they believe in the relevance of the Preventive System of education, and they selflessly offer their time and resources to help many youngsters in our settings. They admire our lifetime commitment to the young, but they do not embrace Christianity due to, among others, several socio-cultural factors. Some do not wish to embrace Christianity at all. Since the Church teaches that "through dialogue and *collaboration* with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, ... they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among them",⁴⁵ I propose that the followers of other religions or those with no religion could be called our '*collaborators*' in our Salesian mission. We collaborate with them, animated by the Preventive System of Don Bosco, in bringing about a more humane society, in fostering human values, in standing up for the rights of the oppressed and marginalised, in responding to such crises as natural disasters, famine, the HIV and Aids pandemic, in fostering peace, reconciliation and care for creation. However, they lack pastoral charity which is the missionary courage to lead young people to faith in Jesus Christ, the way, truth and life. The term '*collaborators*' could also be extended to Christians or even Catholics who selflessly share our commitment to the poor and marginalised youth and the practice of the Preventive system, yet do not practice their faith.

On the other hand, Catholics are an important part of the animating nucleus of every educative pastoral community. With them are also Christians who share our faith in Jesus Christ but are not in full communion with the Catholic Church. With other Christians we

44 LG n. 13-16.

45 NA, n. .2.

work together in spreading the Word of God, studying of Scriptures, common prayer, using common liturgical texts, catechesis, etc.⁴⁶ They could be called our '*mission partners*'. We partner with them in different forms of evangelisation.

To avoid confusion or inflexibility, I propose to use these two terms to clearly indicate the two levels of sharing in the charism and mission of the Salesians. They are our *collaborators* and *partners* in our evangelising mission. But why make the distinction? This distinction is important not as a way of exclusion but to avoid 'false irenicism'.⁴⁷ It is also important to consider things from the point of view of the followers of other religions. In the same way that Catholics or Christians work with us but do not want to be involved in our work of evangelisation, there are also followers of other religions who do not want to be involved in our mission of evangelisation, but they are committedly involved in the human and civil formation of our youngsters. But this is not a watertight compartment either. The Spirit can inspire some followers of other religions to be deeply involved in our mission, yet not opt to embrace Christianity or Catholicism. In fact, we have many examples of these. This distinction is necessary above all for us because it implies our expectations as well from our *collaborators* and *mission partners* in multi-religious or secularised contexts.

It is the task of the Salesian community, as the animating nucleus of every educative pastoral community, on the one hand,

46 Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993) n. 183-189.

47 It comes from the Greek word *eirene* meaning peace. Hence, false irenicism or 'false peace' is explained in the *Decree on Ecumenism Unitatis Redintegratio* n. 11 "Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false irenicism, in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss and its genuine and certain meaning is clouded." John Paul II stressed this in *Redemptoris Missio* n. 56: "Those engaged in this dialogue must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions, and be open to understanding those of the other party without pretense or close-mindedness, but with truth, humility and frankness, knowing that dialogue can enrich each side. There must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenicism...". He insisted on this again in *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 31.

to form our *collaborators* to work with us to foster integral human development of those entrusted to our care. On the other hand, our *mission partners* ought to be helped to grow in their awareness as missionary disciples who bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ in their ordinary daily lives and draw from Salesian spirituality as an inner force in being our partners in our Salesian mission.

Similarly, it is the task of the Salesian community to help our collaborators and mission partners break down the stereotypes of the “other” that exist within their religious traditions and groups by understanding their own religious beliefs and commitments. Being firmly grounded in their religious traditions, each one is open to listening and respecting the beliefs of other religions and collaborating with each other for the benefit of poor and marginalised youngsters in the spirit of Saint John Bosco.

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