

BECOMING HUMAN LIKE DON BOSCO

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The greatest gift that we can give to others is our own sanctity. But let me pose this question before you: Are you afraid of becoming a saint? Though I am aware of the dichotomy between my words and deeds, when someone addresses me as a saint, I feel uncomfortable. I need to acknowledge the fact that it is not because of my humility but because I am afraid of isolation and stereotype as a special being one who is beyond ordinary human desires and little joys of life.

We have committed ourselves to live our Salesian charism according to the signs of the times. If so, what is our response to the God-less world that we encounter today? The greatest response that we can give in our times is to be apostles of universal holiness like Don Bosco. As Pope Francis would say we need to present a next door holiness, a possible way of living in holiness for everyone especially for the youth of today. To live a saintly life, one need not alienate oneself from his brothers and sisters. He says: “Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God’s grace.” Holiness is often misinterpreted as a striving towards moral perfection. The reality of being in a state of holiness is not that of a finished product rather of growing into the person of Christ day by day till the last moment of our life.

Let us try to understand Salesian sanctity in its depth and think about its relevance in our contemporary world. Did Don Bosco ask us to eliminate our human qualities and liveliness to become saints? The greatness of Don Bosco lies in the fact that at a time wherein sanctity was confined to the cloistered convents and monasteries, he could make it available to ordinary people like the urchins on the streets.

Don Bosco never presented sanctity, as something unattainable. He presented holiness as the most charming aspect of Christian life. What was the specialty of the path of sanctity tread on by don Bosco? It was a down-to-earth approach, he always believed in the principle that by becoming more human, we can be holy. He always kept his heart close to the following verse from the letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians: “Love is patient; love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.”

In the history of the church we see two theological principles that have influenced schools of sanctity. The Thomistic School teaches that grace builds on nature and the Franciscan School illustrates that grace depletes nature. Don Bosco’s approach was based on the Thomistic approach to sanctity. Don Bosco encountered every boy in his concrete life situation. He started his

evangelization from the stand point of the boy than that of his own. Later on, this enriching experience became the source of his educational system a splendid blending of physical as well as spiritual qualities of human person, which is the preventive system. For him education was a matter of the heart that helps a person to grow in his/her human qualities, to be a better human person than a mere intellectual development. We could perceive a threefold approach in the sanctity defined by Don Bosco. Some of the characteristic features of humanness of Don Bosco are his sensitivity, capacity of spontaneous forgiveness and a heart that is compassionate towards the other.

A down to earth human person would be sensitive to all those who are around him. I would like to narrate an incident that depicts the sensitivity of Don Bosco. One day a boy named Paulino came to the oratory. He joined for the games with the other boys. Then Mass was celebrated, many received the Holy Communion. Then all rushed for the breakfast but Paulino did not join with them thinking that he did not merit it. At once Don Bosco noticed this and asked his name and his whereabouts. Have you had breakfast? Don Bosco enquired. The boy replied: “No sir, I have not gone for confession or Communion.” Don Bosco Said: “confession and communion are not necessary to have breakfast.” The boy asked, what then the requirement was like? In his natural humour Don Bosco replied, to have a good appetite. Don Bosco led him to the kitchen and gave him stomach full of bread and fruits and then the boy joined with Don Bosco and played until dusk. From that moment and for many years, Paulino did not abandon the oratory and Don Bosco.¹

In Don Bosco, the readiness to forgive was unconditional. Though he used to be firm and demanding, he remained ever ready to forgive. All the prodigal sons encountered in him a prodigal father who awaited them with his loving kindness. They were quite sure that Don Bosco’s heart and doors of oratories were always kept open for them. Once C. Vigiletti, the young secretary of Don Bosco, out of his curiosity had read some of the confidential letters to Don Bosco. After a while, he felt remorse and revealed it to Don Bosco. What was the reaction of Don Bosco? He pulled Vigiletti close to his heart, grabbed all the letters on the table, confidential and others, and gave everything to him. Such spontaneous forgiveness of Don Bosco touched his students and they found in him the merciful face of God.²

To be human is to be compassionate. It is this quality of the heart that inspires one to partake in the sufferings of the other. In the gospel, we read Jesus was moved with compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The youngsters of his time saw the compassionate face of Jesus in Don Bosco. In return, Don Bosco recognized that in the midst of the turbulence caused by the

¹ Tersio Bosco, *Don Bosco* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2003), 143.

² Peter Brocardo, *Don Bosco: Deeply Human-Deeply Holy*, Trans. Abraham Kadaplackel (Madras: Don Bosco Publications, 2006), 41.

industrial revolution and urbanization these youngsters were like sheep without a shepherd. A man who was ready to be their voice especially against the injustice they experienced in the society. There was a time in the oratory, wherein, neither priests nor non-clerics were treated as servants or second-class members. John Buzzetti found it very difficult to accept this tragic change in the oratory. He realized that he had to obey those whom he taught how to blow their nose when they were children. He decided to leave the oratory and found a new job and approached Don Bosco and expressed his deep sorrow in leaving the oratory. At that moment, Don Bosco did not say, you are leaving me alone, and how can I manage without you? Instead Don Bosco asked him: Have you found a job, Is the pay good? Realizing that he had no money left with him Don Bosco agreed to meet his initial expenses. Then he opened the desk drawer and said: You know these drawers better than I do, take anything you need, and if it is not enough tell me and I will find it for you. I do not want you lack anything. Then he looked at Buzzetti with the fondness that he had for his boys and said we have been fond of each other, I hope you will not forget me. Buzzetti burst into tears. He wept for long time. No, I don't want to leave you, Don Bosco. I will stay forever and he stayed with Don Bosco forever.³

I think, today we need to be Salesians who are deeply human and rich in the qualities of the heart. Let us imitate the human face of his sanctity that was reflected in his sensitivity, forgiveness and compassion towards others. He was defined as deeply human and deeply holy. We shall grow in holiness by becoming more and more human.

³ Bosco, 252-253