

The Spirituality of Salesian Presence

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Abstract

Salesian spirituality is not characterized by long hours of prayer or rigorous fasting and abstinence. It is rather a life style called the Preventive System. Salesian Presence, which includes as its essential element physical presence, is an essential aspect of this preventive system. This calls for a lot of sacrifice – of one's own time, energy, desires and concerns. The aim is not to be an authoritarian figure that the youth should fear but to be a loving brother among them taking care that they do not fall down. This is purely a Biblical concept. In the Old Testament we see God being with the Israelites throughout their journey in the form of cloud and pillar of fire. Don Bosco understood this Biblical fact in a profound manner and developed his theory of the Preventive System wherein the Salesian assumes the role of God being with the pupils, day in and day out. In the present article, the author discusses at length the role of presence in Salesian spirituality and thereafter examines some of the main characteristics of the presence.

1. Introduction

It is not easy to define spirituality. Anything that we do with a God consciousness can be considered as a spiritual activity. It is not an ideology but a way of life. A pious person can be a spiritual person. But a spiritual person need not be a pious person. Being spiritual is a journey that one embarks to attain a holistic vision of reality and harmony with the entire cosmos. A spiritual person is a relentless seeker, a seeker of God. He/she is not lost in the rituals and rules of the religion. He/she encounters God in the Cosmos and also in his/her fellow human beings.

Salesian¹ Spirituality, the spirituality of presence, is a call to love. He/she personalizes and practices the gospel charity of Christ, the Good Shepherd. Inspired by the charity of Christ, Don Bosco has said: "I have promised God that I would give of myself to my last breath for my poor boys." It is an interior disposition that urges one to be present in someone's life and give meaning for their life with his/her nurturing presence.

2. Presence - A Path to Holiness

Our time is marked by a revolutionary transition. It is a rapid change from theocratic world to a technocratic world. The term godless world is not a utopian concept anymore. In the West, the number of people who do not want to be part of any religion are increasing day

¹The term 'Salesians' is used inclusive of both the genders; it represents all those who live the educational spirituality of the preventive system.

by day. At the same time it is interesting to know that the craving for spirituality is all the more than before. Trends like clericalism, the complexity of the hierarchy, individualism tend to cause decline of the taste for religion among the people. And we also need to take into consideration the issue of the effectiveness of the religions of today in proving spiritual experience for its followers? In this context let us analyze the spirituality of presence and also discuss whether it quenches anyone's thirst for transcendence.

2.1. Presence in Perspectives: Philosophical and Theological

The term "presence" reminds us of the other. It speaks about the social and interpersonal nature of our existence. When we analyze the term in a deeper manner, we can understand that there can be two types of presence. They are active and passive presence. The active presence builds inter-subjectivity whereas the passive presence eliminates the cordiality in the relationship. Let us analyze the philosophical and theological perspectives of the notion of presence.

2.1.1. Marcelian Perspective

Gabriel Marcel (1881-1973) was a French existential philosopher. He was also a French play writer. He served as a Red Cross volunteer during the Second World War. This experience of being in the battlefield, carrying the wounded soldiers as well as dead men made him to think about the purpose of human existence and the relationship that exist among human persons. This philosophical quest helped him to understand the notion of Presence and Intersubjectivity in a deeper manner. He defined human existence as 'to exist is to co-exist.'²

Presence and Intersubjectivity are possible among persons and not between signs, symbols, or ideas. We cannot claim for someone's presence through technology or by one's voice etc. It demands one's subjective quality. One would call this subjective quality as 'availability.' Therefore, it is the availability of someone for the sake of the other and being present actively and physically that builds and nurtures interpersonal relationships.³ He states that we establish intersubjective relationships only through the means of love. He emphasizes his existential philosophy in this statement 'being with and for others.' We find meaning for our life by being present in the life of others as well as allowing others to be present in our

²Dennis D. Cali, "The Ecology of Presence and Intersubjectivity in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel," <https://www.academia.edu/16916593/Intersubjectivity/Presence/in/Gabriel/Marcel>, accessed July 18, 2018.

³Cali, "The Ecology of Presence and Intersubjectivity in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel," 111.

life. This mutual availability and reciprocated presence leads us to enter into communion with each other.⁴

2.1.2. The Biblical Perspective

The Bible cannot be considered as a mere historical book. Certainly, we can observe similarity with the historical events. The Bible is the account of God's love for His people. It is an unfinished love letter written by God. Each and every page of Bible gives witness for God's ever abiding presence with us.

2.1.2.1. The Old Testament

The history of Israel is nothing but an account of Yahweh's unfailing presence with the people of Israel. In the book of Exodus we read: "He guided them during the day with a pillar of cloud, and he provided light at night with a pillar of fire."⁵ Again in Exodus 40: 34-38 we read about the Ark of the Covenant. A cloud always covered the Ark of the Covenant. This cloud was a symbol of God's ever abiding presence with them. The book of Exodus narrates to us the travelling mercies as well as the travelling presence of Yahweh with the people of Israel.⁶ As we glance through each of the books of the Old Testament we come across the steadfast and tender compassionate love of God for the people of Israel. Though their moral fragility and infidelity to the commandment of Yahweh create stumbling blocks in this relationship, Yahweh accompanies these people with His shepherding heart.⁷ The Psalmist praises God: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me."⁸ The Israelites considered themselves as the chosen ones not because of their wealth or military power but because Yahweh, the Creator of the entire universe was present with them. This 'Yahweh consciousness' inspired them to live in the presence of God.

2.1.2.2. The New Testament

The New Testament assures the constant presence of God in salvation history. In the Gospel of Mathew we read: "Look virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"⁹ In Jesus, we encounter the fullness of God's love and fulfillment of His revelation. The entire teachings of Jesus'

⁴Ibid., 112.

⁵Ex. 13:21-22 NLT.

⁶Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," in NIB, vol.1 979, quoted in Kenneth Pereira, *Nurturing Presence: A Spirituality for Educators Based on the Pedagogical Insights of Don Bosco and Carl Rogers* (Mumbai: Tej-Prasarini, 2012), 40.

⁷Ibid., 41-44 *passim*.

⁸Ps. 23:4 NLT.

⁹Mt. 1:23 NLT.

parables, analogies that Jesus used had only one message that God is ever present with us and loves us unconditionally. Christ has promised his ever abiding presence till the end of the world. He was always present with the disciples and taught them with His life examples. Even after His resurrection He accompanied them. The disciples, who went back to Emmaus, thought that the story of Christ is over but Christ accompanied them with His presence. Christ promised His Holy Spirit and on the Pentecost day the disciples received the Holy Spirit and till date we experience the presence of God in our lives through the active presence of the Holy Spirit with us.¹⁰

2.2. Don Bosco-An Apostle of Presence

Every saint is raised by God with a particular mission or destiny to fulfill. The first article of Salesian constitutions speaks about the divine call of Don Bosco. It states: “Through the motherly intervention of Mary, the Holy Spirit raised up St. John Bosco to contribute to the salvation of youth.”¹¹ John Bosco lost his father at a tender age and he had to face lots of challenges as he grew up. But he was immensely blessed with a wonderful mentor, his own mother Margaret. She moulded John to live in the presence of God. Her constant reminder ‘God sees you’ was more than a fearful dictum, it was a reminder to live in the presence of God and later on he was described as one with constant union with God.¹²

The dream that he had at the age of nine left in him an indelible memory of his future mission. Though it was very vague, he was convinced that he is called to be present in some one’s life as sign and bearer of God’s love. As he grew up this dream became clearer to him and he was convinced that he is called to present in the life of youngsters especially those who are poor and marginalized. It was a historical epoch, wherein the society that was based on agricultural background had to face the challenges of the advent of industrial revolution. As a matter of fact, many youngsters were forced to migrate to the cities to cope with the challenges of this social change. In this situation, their morals, customs and values were compromised. Many ended up in addictions, ill health due to exploitation and in prisons due to various crimes. At this juncture, Holy Spirit inspired Don Bosco to read the signs of the times and to be present in their life as a close friend.¹³

¹⁰Kenneth Pereira, *Nurturing Presence: A Spirituality for the Educators Based on the Pedagogical Insights of Don Bosco and Carl Rogers* (Mumbai: Tej-Prasarani, 2012), 46-51 *passim*.

¹¹*Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2009), 1.

¹²Joseph Dass, “Seminary Days of Don Bosco,” *Preventive System Spirituality: A Seminar* (Madras: Salesian Publications, n.d.), 27-28.

¹³Dass, “Seminary Days of Don Bosco,” 29-31.

Don Bosco did not spare any attempt to make this ideal a reality. In the dream that he had at the age of nine, he was instructed by our lady to teach the youngsters ‘the ugliness of sin and the beauty of virtue.’ He realized that in order to practice this principle one has to be present in the life of the young, just like a guardian angel. The spirituality of being present among the young to prevent them from falling into sin and any form of danger later on developed as the preventive system, the well-known educational method of Don Bosco. It is based on the three pillars, namely Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness. The term preventive is derived from the Latin root *prevenire* which means to set up before hand, to go before, to support, to provide or to foresee.¹⁴ It is a holistic educational system wherein every educator is an assistant or one who is actively present in the life of the educand. The educator understands his/her students by instilling in them values and sentiments of love and helps them to grow as good citizens and upright religious persons.¹⁵ Let us discuss some of the features of Salesian presence.

3. Characteristics of Salesian Presence

The characteristic feature of Salesian Spirituality is the Salesian Assistance or Salesian Presence. Salesian constitutions define assistance as follows: “An empathy with the young and a willingness to be with them.”¹⁶ Don Bosco lived this spirituality in its fullness by imitating the heart of the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. He says: “Here, in your midst I feel completely at home; for me, living means being here with you.”¹⁷ It is a clarion call to imitate Jesus who ‘pitched His tent among us,’ and like Don Bosco who created a real family with the young.¹⁸

3.1. Animating Presence

The presence of the assistant among the educand is always an animating presence. He/she is consecrated for their welfare.¹⁹ The assistant is expected to be present with the educand always, from dawn to dusk, and he/she animates and guides them in all their activities. Creativity is the hallmark of Salesian assistance. The assistant is not a person who oppresses or punishes rather one who radiates the cheerfulness through his/her words and deeds. The first task of the Salesian is to know the interests of the educand and create a

¹⁴John Morrison, *The Educational Philosophy of St. John Bosco* (New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1979), 206.

¹⁵*Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales*, 39.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 44-45

¹⁸Corcoran, “Pastoral Love as Active and Saving Physical Presence,” *Preventive System Spirituality: A Seminar* (Madras: Salesian Publications, n.d.), 218.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 215.

healthy ambiance to bring about the best version of their self.²⁰ The Salesian houses are different from other boarding houses because of the cheerfulness that one can sense in every nook and corner of the house. Don Bosco used to quote the maxim of St. Philip Neri: “Run, jump, have all the fun you want at the right time, but for heaven’s sake, do not commit sin.”²¹ The assistant plays a significant role in creating this cheerful atmosphere in the oratory. The means of music, theatre, band, games, excursions, outing, and solemn celebration of feasts were creative ways to animate and develop the potentials of the educand in a holistic manner.²² The assistant should have a vision about his role and dream about each of the educand entrusted to his/her care. The life of the assistant is that of an animator based on selfless service. He/she is not a person spending time in looking at the educand but looking after them.²³

3.2. Compassionate Presence

In the Gospel of Mark we read: “Jesus saw the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”²⁴ Like Christ each Salesian is called to imitate the compassionate heart of Christ. We are sent to work for the poor and the abandoned. This is not an easy task especially when the educand is not open to the loving kindness of the educator. It may not be because the educand is arrogant but because of his/her family and social background. First and foremost we need to accept the fact that we are sent by God to take care of them. It is possible only through the practice of gentleness and self-giving.²⁵ We need to cultivate the qualities of listening as well as accompanying. In order to understand their background and character we need to listen to them. Like Christ, we need to accompany these youngsters as a friend, teacher and guide. Our presence should open their inner eyes to recognize the presence of the Lord in their life and the marvels that He has done in their life. Like the disciples, they should go back to Jerusalem, i.e., a life of conversion, to an authentic life having recognized a compassionate God in our presence.²⁶

3.3. Friendly Presence

²⁰Ibid., 219.

²¹Lemoyne John, Eugene Ceria and Angelo Amadei, *The Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*, ed. Diego Borgateello and Vincent Zuliani, vol. VII (New Rochelle: Salesian Publishers, 2003), 100, quoted in John Morrison, *The Educational Philosophy of St. John Bosco*, 48.

²²Pereira, 78-79 *passim*.

²³Corcoran, “Pastoral Love as Active and Saving Physical Presence,” 219.

²⁴Mk. 6: 34 NLT.

²⁵*Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales*, 11.

²⁶Rosario Krishnaraj, “The Youth Quest God’s Own Answer the Salesian ‘Yes,’” *Preventive System Spirituality: A Seminar*, (Madras: Salesian Publications, n.d.), 218.

In the Salesian system the Friendly Presence of the assistant is considered as the supreme technique of the preventive system. An assistant should be friendly with all but intimate with none.²⁷ The presence of the assistant should be that of a friend who understands and cares for them. It shouldn't be like that of a strict disciplinarian.²⁸ Article 39 of the Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco states: "We are actively present among youth in brotherly friendship, helping them in their effort to grown in what is good, and encouraging them to cast off every form of slavery, so that their weakness may not be overcome by evil."²⁹ When a Salesian encounters youngsters he/she takes the first step to initiate a friendship with them. Our cheerfulness and joviality reduces the gap and the youngsters encounter a true friend on whom they can rely in any circumstance of their life. The youngster should feel at home with us. We interact with them and win their hearts with our genuine friendship.³⁰

3.4. Nurturing Presence

The presence of Christ amidst the apostles transformed them into authentic witnesses of His Gospel. They were from varied backgrounds. Some were fisher folk, tax collectors, a member of the zealot etc. But the nurturing presence of Christ gave them a new vision on building the Kingdom of God and till the last breath they worked assiduously to realize this vision. The Salesian presence is called to be a nurturing presence among the youngsters. In the dream that Don Bosco had at the age of nine, he encountered a group of ruffians but slowly his presence transformed them as meek lambs. Our mission is to transform them, ignite in them a passion for God and compassion for their fellow human beings. "Imitating God's patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom. We then accompany them, so that they may develop solid convictions and gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and men of faith."³¹ Therefore, like Don Bosco, we are called to imitate the pastoral charity of Christ who expressed tremendous patience and mercy in front of human weakness. It is not our lectures or punishments that transform them rather our loving and caring presence.

4. Relevance of Salesian Presence

In our times, the greatest difficulty that we face is the absence of physical presence. Technological advancement made work very simple but life has become a complicated affair.

²⁷Corcoran, "Pastoral Love as Active and Saving Physical Presence," 236.

²⁸Ibid., 238.

²⁹*Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales*, 39.

³⁰Corcoran, "Pastoral Love as Active and Saving Physical Presence," 232-233.

³¹*Constitutions of the Society of St. Francis de Sales*, 38.

The trend of individualism is creeping into our society in a dangerous manner. No one has time for the other. All are confined to their virtual world created by social media. Technology has reduced our communication and communion to a virtual level. Those who live under one roof have no time to be physically present for the other. Children get their consent from their parents or couples communicate the message or community members share news through whatsapp groups.

Marcel opines that the technocratic attitude of the mind causes depersonalization, the loss of availability and ability to love. It also induces loneliness and even despair.³² There is no doubt that technology has created lots of conveniences. But human life is much more than that. We are beings endowed with ability to love and enter into communion with each other and God. But Modern man/woman is not able to involve in the life of others due to varied reasons. Technology is only one of the reasons. The modern consumerist, utilitarian mentalities encourages a materialistic culture that treats human beings as mere objects. In this scenario what is the relevance of Salesian presence?

It is said that no one can give meaning for our life; we need to find meaning for our life. But I believe our nurturing presence in someone's life can give a sense of meaning and beauty for their existence. We have discussed about the technological advancement but technology cannot replace the love and affection of a human person. Modern man/woman is surrounded by the crowd but in the midst of these celebrations and fun he/she feels lonely. The interior realm of every person longs for someone to listen to him/her and accompany him/her with their concern and nurturing presence. It is required all the more when someone pass through eventualities such as sickness, loss of dear ones, failures etc. as a result they lack meaning for their existence. Our words of concern and encouragement can create a ray of hope in the life of the other.

5. Conclusion

Being present in someone's life is not an easy task. It demands a lot of sacrifice especially sacrifice of our personal time, enjoyment etc. It becomes a spirituality and way of life because of the element of sacrifice involved in this. Salesian Spirituality differs from the other spiritualities because of this unique nature. It is not celebrated with rigorous fasting, penance etc. But an authentic Salesian makes all the effort possible to be present in the life of those who are entrusted to his/her care. It is a call to feel with the other. It is a call to cry with those who are crying and laugh with those who are laughing. The charity of the Good

³²Cali, "The Ecology of Presence and Intersubjectivity in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel," 114.

Shepherd who wants to be with His sheep even at the cost of one's own life is part and parcel of this spirituality. The Salesian finds meaning in his vocation by being a nurturing presence. In this journey Salesians encounter the divine in the other and this leads him/her to enter into communion with each other and ultimately, the experience of the transcendence.

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