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GOOD NIGHT TALK

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Gratitude and appreciation in the Salesian tradition

Dearest confreres, members of the Salesian Family, friends,

On 24 June, in the Salesian tradition, we are not dealing with just any date. It is a day filled with memory, affection, and spiritual meaning. It is the feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, patron of Turin, but for us it is also the day that recalls the name of our Father and Teacher, Don Bosco, and that particular family experience which, at Valdocco, was expressed in such a simple and at the same time profound way: the desire of the young to say thank you.

The chronicles tell us that 24 June was for the boys one of the most eagerly awaited days of the year, because they felt the need to express to Don Bosco their affection, their gratitude, their joy at belonging to him. It was not only an outward celebration, nor a simple gesture of courtesy. In that gesture something much greater was revealed: an authentic educational relationship, a true spiritual bond, a family atmosphere in which the good received almost spontaneously became gratitude expressed.

This is precisely where I would like to begin this evening: from the conviction that gratitude is not an accessory element of Salesian spirituality, not merely an emotional ornament or a simple form of affective devotion. On the contrary, gratitude belongs to the very heart of

the Salesian charism. It is a spiritual, educational, and pastoral category of great depth. We could even say that gratitude is one of the names by which the Preventive System can be understood from within.

When gratitude is genuine, it changes the way we see life, read our own history, live our relationships, and exercise responsibility. For this reason, reflecting today on gratitude and appreciation does not mean stopping at a feeling, but entering into a vision of the human person, of education, of the charism, and of the mission.

Gratitude and charism

The first question we can ask ourselves is very simple: what should we be grateful for today? First of all, we are grateful for a charismatic, spiritual, and pedagogical heritage that has been handed on to us as a gift, but also as a responsibility. This affirmation is very important, because it prevents us from living the charism as a possession. None of us is the owner of the Salesian charism. We are all its debtors. We have received it; we have not invented it. It precedes us, accompanies us, and surpasses us.

To be grateful for the charism therefore means recognising that our vocation is born from a history of grace. Before being our choice, it was God's initiative. Before being a task, it was a call. Before being a mission entrusted to our abilities, it was a gift placed in our poverty.

Gratitude, in this sense, is an act of truth. A grateful person does not falsify his own history; he acknowledges it. He knows that his life has been prepared, accompanied, sustained. He knows that there are faces, encounters, mediations, providential events, words and even trials through which the Lord has woven his journey. A grateful person does not erase anything, but reads everything in the light of a greater presence.

There is a second aspect. We are grateful to Don Bosco not only for what he did, but also for the way in which he allowed himself to be formed. We recall in fact that Don Bosco, through Mamma Margherita, Fr Calosso, and Fr Cafasso, knew how to let himself be "educated". This is a point of extraordinary importance for us today. Don Bosco was not born fully formed. He became Don Bosco through a humble docility to the action of God mediated through people.

Here there is a precious lesson for us as well. There is no charismatic fruitfulness without filial humility. There is no true spiritual fatherhood without first having accepted to be sons. There is no evangelical authority without a grateful memory of those who generated us in faith, in our

vocation, in pastoral life. A confrere, an educator, a person with responsibilities who loses the memory of his mediators also risks losing the truth of his own mission.

A third aspect: we are grateful to Don Bosco because he knew how to respond in faith to the initiative of Divine Providence. Here too we touch a vital point of Salesian spirituality. Don Bosco did not found a work relying solely on human strategies. He certainly had practical intelligence, boldness, creativity, organisational ability, but all this was set within a deeper act of faith. He perceived himself as called and guided. He read reality with spiritual eyes. In young people he did not see a problem to be managed, but a call to be welcomed.

Gratitude is always born from this ability to recognise that God goes before us. Those who think they are the origin of everything easily become restless, possessive, harsh, or discouraged. Those instead who know they are preceded by grace can work intensely without absolutising themselves. They can give of themselves without feeling that they are the saviour. They can face difficulties without giving in to pessimism, because they know that the work belongs to God before it belongs to us.

Appreciation and commitment

Appreciation does not leave us where it finds us. If it is authentic, it translates into commitment. Gratitude is not sentimentalism, not nostalgia. Salesian gratitude is generative. It is not only remembrance of the good received; it is an industrious response to the gift received.

Don Bosco's ability to be grateful matured within his educational project. Don Bosco did not simply teach the young to say thank you. He built an environment in which gratitude became the form of relationships, the style of the house, the educational principle. The boy who was loved learned to trust; the boy who was respected learned to respect; the boy who was accompanied learned to recognise the good and, by recognising it, grew interiorly.

Gratitude educates, because it frees the heart from a sense of entitlement and introduces it into reciprocity. Ingratitude, on the other hand, narrows the horizon, makes everything seem owed, interprets every good as a right acquired. Where everything is claimed, nothing is received as a gift. And where nothing is received as a gift, a person gradually loses the capacity for wonder, for trust, for gratuitousness.

For Don Bosco, to educate meant to accompany the young person to discover that life is received and, precisely for this reason, can be given.

Here we have an understanding of life that is both human and spiritual at the same time. Human maturity does not consist in becoming independent from everything and everyone, but in freely recognising the good received and transforming it into shared good. A truly adult person is not one who owes nothing to anyone; it is one who knows how to repay creatively what he has received.

For this reason, today's celebration invites us to see our commitment as a call that urges us to respond as he did. Because when service is born of gratitude, its style also changes. We work with greater inner freedom. We accept the inevitable hardships of the mission without immediately turning them into bitterness. All this happens because we are inwardly rooted in a deeper source.

But appreciation is also a prophecy in the present for the future. Not prophecy only as denunciation, but prophecy of gratitude. It is the prophecy of those who, in a world marked by complaining, by the consumption of relationships, and by forgetfulness, continue to witness that the good received can still generate future good.

A community that is grateful is a prophetic community, because it does not allow itself to be imprisoned either by cynicism or by sterile nostalgia. It does not idealise the past, but preserves its fruitfulness. It does not deny the problems of the present, but does not allow them to occupy the whole horizon. It does not fear the future, because it inhabits it as a responsibility entrusted to it, not as an inevitable threat.

Style of government

Gratitude as the style of the Rector Major and of all those entrusted with governance. This is a point of great relevance today, because it touches on the way authority is exercised in the Church, in consecrated life, and in our educational communities. Normally, when we think of government, other qualities come to mind: clarity, decisiveness, prudence, firmness, vision. All necessary qualities. But without gratitude, authority risks losing its evangelical face.

Why? Because gratitude prevents the person in charge from feeling that he owns people, works, and the charism. It keeps him in the truth of his position: he is a servant of a good received, not the master of a good produced by himself. Authentic authority is not born from taking possession, but from being entrusted with a responsibility.

In this sense, gratitude is the fruit of being nourished by deeper roots. Those who are already inwardly nourished because they are solidly rooted

do not go in search of external gratifications. These are the great temptations of every responsibility.

Those who are rooted can exercise authority with freedom. They do not need to dominate in order to feel they are someone. They do not use their role to compensate for interior fragilities. They know how to listen, how to wait, how to correct without humiliating, how to decide without putting themselves on display. Gratitude makes this interior stability possible, because it reminds the person in charge that his identity does not coincide with the function he exercises.

Gratitude makes us appreciative of the good received and free to name the challenges that need to be faced. True gratitude is neither naivety, nor a decorative attitude, nor an incapacity for critique. On the contrary, precisely those who are truly grateful can look lucidly at shadows and problems, because they do not fear that recognising fragility will destroy everything.

Grateful people give thanks for the good, they safeguard it with love, but precisely for this reason they do not hesitate to name what must be purified, corrected, or relaunched. Authentic gratitude is not blindness; it is freedom of vision.

Genuine gratitude is a style that is visible in the nobility and elegance with which we treat people: free servants of all and arrogant masters of none. Gratitude emerges as a concrete form of relationship. It can be seen in the time given to listening. It can be seen in the way correction is made. It can be seen in discretion. It can be seen in the capacity not to humiliate. It can be seen in the respect with which we treat even those who are fragile, slow, tired, or not immediately aligned with our expectations.

In other words, gratitude shapes a style of governance that is humanly beautiful and evangelically credible. Where there is gratitude, there is greater spiritual refinement. Where there is ingratitude, hardness, impatience, and arrogance easily grow. True Salesian authority, instead, always has something of Don Bosco's fatherhood: firmness without rigidity, closeness without weakness, guidance without domination.

Appreciation emerges as a culture towards benefactors, while it educates by the example of sobriety and wise use of the goods entrusted to us. Appreciation does not concern only our internal relationships, but also the way we relate to the many who support the mission. Benefactors are

not simply funders: they are participants in a mission. Gratitude towards them is not diplomacy, but spiritual justice.

At the same time, precisely because we recognise that goods have been entrusted to us, we are called to use them with sobriety, transparency, and evangelical wisdom. Gratitude protects us from wastefulness. Those who are grateful do not squander. Those who recognise a gift, safeguard it. Those who know that what they have received is for the young and the poor do not appropriate it for personal convenience or prestige.

A final word

The motto of Carlo Gastini: “Here we are all Don Bosco’s” is truly a beautiful expression. It does not express only affective belonging; it expresses a spiritual and charismatic awareness. To say that we are Don Bosco’s means recognising that our history has been touched by a fatherhood that continues to generate life. It means recognising that we have not given ourselves our own identity. We are the fruit of a gift, of a living tradition, of a grace that has passed through generations.

For this reason, 24 June is not just the feast of a name. It is the celebration of a relationship that from Valdocco has spread throughout the whole world: the relationship between the Father of the young and his grateful sons and daughters. And it is a relationship that continues every time a Salesian, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, a lay member of the Salesian Family, an educator chooses to do what Don Bosco did: to love first, without reserve, and to teach the young that life is a gift to be appreciated and also to be given back.

In the end, then, gratitude and appreciation appear as the appropriate response to a grace received. They are the way in which the Salesian heart says its “yes” to the history of salvation into which it has been inserted. And in a time like ours, wounded by individualism, forgetfulness, and mistrust, gratitude can truly become an educational and spiritual path to foster the emergence of a healthier, freer, and happier humanity, that “magnifica humanitas” which Pope Leo invites us to deepen, live, and witness.

Thank you.