

THE MERCY OF GOD IN THE LIFE AND APOSTOLATE OF DON BOSCO

Jose Kuttianimattathil, sdb

When we consider the devotions of Don Bosco we normally think of the three devotions that he promoted: devotion to the Holy Eucharist, our Blessed Mother and the Pope. Undoubtedly these are the three main devotions that he propagated. But there were also other devotions close to the heart of Don Bosco. One such devotion was the devotion to the Mercy of God. He considered God as the God of Mercy and constantly encouraged people, especially sinners, to have recourse to the mercy of God.

1 The God of Mercy

Don Bosco thought of God mostly as Creator, Judge and as a loving and merciful Father. Of these, the image of God that dominates Don Bosco's life is that of a loving and merciful Father. Having studied Don Bosco's thoughts on God Fr. Stella says that for Don Bosco, "God is a merciful and provident Father, 'our compassionate Father in heaven.'"¹ Fr. Joseph Aubry points out that while

in the earlier editions of the *Companion of Youth* Don Bosco spoke of God mostly as Creator and Judge in the 1863 edition he made a significant addition, namely that God is "the loving Father."² Fr. Aldo Giraud notes that "at the heart of Don Bosco's spirituality is the thought of God, a merciful and provident Father, his saving activity reaching out in tender love to every human being. He unceasingly invites man to respond to his love and enter into communion with him."³ In the retreat that he preached at Lanzo in 1876 Don Bosco concluded his exhortation to the Salesians to be assiduous in observing the rules by saying that the Lord would keep his promises as he "is full of kindness and mercy and will give us much more than we could ever dream of."⁴ Don Bosco would reassure hardened sinners who feared whether God would forgive them by saying: "God is good and merciful, my friend. A single act of love can wipe away any sin."⁵

Don Bosco saw everything that human beings enjoy on earth as given



by God out of his mercy. In the booklet *Practice of Devotion to the Mercy of God*, which he wrote in 1846, he says:

All the earth, Scripture tells us, is filled with divine mercy, *misericordia Domini plena est omnis terra* (Ps 33:5). God's benefits are evident wherever our gaze should fall. The air we breathe, the sun that gives us light, the elements that sustain us, fire, water that serves for so many uses, the animals which are there for our comfort, whatever is beautiful to the eye, precious or magnificent everywhere, demonstrates divine goodness. How many accidents a man might meet with by day, by night, eating, drinking, on the road, at work and in anything else he does, but God has preserved us until now.

And that is what we see in temporal matters; so what can we say about what God is doing for us in spiritual ones? The intellect, by which man knows the truth, the reason by which he can distinguish good from evil, his will with which he follows the way of virtue and gains merit in the Lord's sight, his memory, the faculty of speech, reason, knowledge, in other words the *thinking* principle, the soul: they are all gifts the Lord has given us, and through his everyday kindness and providence preserves for us. Churches, Sacraments, all other spiritual comforts make this divine mercy for man's benefit so much more evident.⁶

As a response to his mercy God expects human beings to give up sin, become converted and surrender to him in love. Don Bosco invites us saying:

Let us ponder this divine goodness well, and how it is renewed each day on our behalf! Let us no longer be ungrateful; and if sin should ever distance us from God, let us detest it in the most heartfelt way and return to him as soon as possible. Since the sinner, after falling, does not usually think about returning to his Lord, let us today, especially enlightened as we are by God, prostrate ourselves before the throne of divine mercy and call on him to send his divine grace down on the obstinate sinner, to enlighten him so that he may return... Yes, my God, I thank you for all the benefits you have given me and continue to give me each day; in the past I ignored these, but now I love you with all my heart,... O my Jesus, pardon me and see that from today onwards I may love you alone, and live only for you who died for me.⁷

2 Don Bosco's Convictions about God's Mercy in His Life

Don Bosco was convinced of God's mercy and without being presumptuous believed that God would forgive him all his sins and grant him eternal salvation. John Cagliero, who was close to Don Bosco, testified: "During the thirty-five years I lived at his side, I never detected any sign of distrust in him, nor any expression of fear or doubt. I never saw him troubled by any misgivings as to God's goodness and mercy towards him. He never gave evidence of suffering distress of conscience.... He discussed heaven as a son talks of his father's house.



The thought of possessing God inflamed him more than God's promise of heavenly reward."⁸

He believed that God wanted everybody to be saved. If anyone asked him, whether they would be saved, he would reply, "Of course; wouldn't it be awful if you went to hell? My great desire is that we be together for ever in heaven! Do your part, and trust in God's infinite mercy. You may be sure of eternal salvation, as long as you cooperate with the graces that God offers you each day."⁹

3 Confession – A Great Channel of God's Mercy

Don Bosco spoke of God's mercy mostly in the context of receiving forgiveness for our sins. We are in need of God's mercy because we are sinners and need forgiveness from God.¹⁰ According to him, "In the Sacrament of Confession we have one great act of God's mercy towards the sinner."¹¹ And through this sacrament God has made it easy for us to receive forgiveness for our sins.¹² It should be a great consolation for every sinner that he does not "need to lament much: at the first tear, at the first words of 'I repent', the Lord is immediately moved to mercy, *statim ut audierit, respondebit tibi* ("when he hears, he will answer" Is 30:19); as soon as you repent and ask his forgiveness, he immediately pardons you."¹³

The sinner need not fear that the justice of God may override his mercy.

Don Bosco assures:

Perhaps timid souls will say it is true that the Lord's mercy is great, but no one can deny that he is also a just judge who will deal with our sins as they deserve. Unfortunately there are many sinners terrified of finding the severe judge in God and do not dare return to him. Such are the judges of this world who treat miscreants according to the seriousness of their misdeeds. But, we repeat, God does not deal this way with sinners. Sometimes he applies justice, but only to correct the sinner and get him to return to the fold; he is terrible, but for the one who returns he is all-loving, all charity, *Deus caritas est* ("God is love" 1 Jn 4:8)... Jesus Christ is our judge, but he is also our friend,... So away with any fear of divine justice; let us rather thank our good God for the many benefits he has given us in our lifetime especially when he waited for us to repent.¹⁴

In fact the gravest sin of all is "lack of confidence in His (God's) mercy."¹⁵

Although Don Bosco spoke of God's mercy in such an appealing way, he did not refrain from presenting God also as a severe judge. A sinner had time till the moment of his death to ask God for his mercy. But that possibility ended with death. The time of mercifulness ended with death.¹⁶ Describing the judgement scene of one who dies in sin Don Bosco says in *The Companion of Youth*:

Your soul will look for help to the divine mercy, and there will no longer be any mercy for it, because the time of



mercy ends with death. Your soul will look for help to the angels, the saints, Mary Most Holy. In the name of them all, she will reply: “Now you ask for my help? You did not want me for your Mother in life. Now I no longer know you for my child: *nescio vos*.” Finding no escape, the sinner will cry for the mountains and rocks to cover him, but they will not move. He will invoke hell and see it open: *Inferius horrendum chaos*. At that moment the inexorable Judge will deliver the terrible sentence: “Faithless child, get far away from me. My heavenly Father has cursed you. I curse you. Be off into eternal fire...”¹⁷

The Jesus Christ presented here is a fearsome and terror-inspiring Christ. Don Bosco presented Jesus Christ in this way to create horror for sin in the mind of those listening to him and in order to lead them to ask pardon for their sins through confession. Although he spoke of Jesus as such a stern judge, he held that even an avowed enemy of the Church like Voltaire could have been saved and we are certain of no one having been condemned to eternal damnation except perhaps Judas.¹⁸

4 Don Bosco’s Efforts at Spreading Devotion to the Mercy of God

4.1 Efforts in General

Don Bosco was a firm believer in God’s mercy and encouraged people to trust in God’s mercy. From the time of

his ordination, “Don Bosco had helped to introduce into several religious institutions in Turin the practice of reciting certain prayers in honour of God’s mercy.”¹⁹ He always encouraged boys to trust in God’s mercy and go for confession if they had committed any sin. While preaching to the boys it was common to hear Don Bosco speaking in the following or similar words: “Have you unfortunately fallen into sin again? Don’t be discouraged! Immediately go to confession once more and with the proper disposition. The confessor has received from God Himself the power to forgive your sins, not only seven times, but seventy times seven. Cheer up, then; have trust and make a firm resolution. God will not despise a contrite and humble heart.”²⁰

Don Bosco was also fond of narrating stories of God’s mercy, especially those dealing with the conversion of sinners. And people noticed a special joy and unction in Don Bosco in narrating these stories.²¹

One of the strategies Don Bosco used for guiding young people and leading them on the right path was to give them short written notes. Among them we find notes like this: “One who abuses God’s mercy to offend Him does not deserve it.”²²

4.2 The Booklet *Practice of Devotion to the Mercy of God*

One of the first books that Don Bosco wrote as a young priest was a booklet titled *Practice of Devotion to the Mercy of God*. He wrote it for Marchioness Barolo



(declared venerable by Pope Francis on 12 May 2015) at the suggestion of one of his friends, Silvio Pellico.

Marchioness Barolo had been trying to spread a devotion to the Mercy of God through a six-day exercise, practised in her institutes. Since this produced many excellent results she wished to spread it also in the parishes. Therefore she got official approval for this devotion from Pope Gregory XVI. She also managed to get a plenary and partial indulgence attached to this devotion for those who participated in it on all days or only on one of the days. Many bishops and parish priests introduced this devotion in their dioceses and parishes. In order to make the devotion better known and more widespread she wanted to prepare a booklet on it and asked for suggestions as to who would be able to do it. Silvio Pellico, who was a friend of Don Bosco and who had known Don Bosco's enthusiasm to speak about God's mercy, suggested Don Bosco's name. However, the Marchioness did not want it to be done by Don Bosco. Probably she did not want to burden Don Bosco, who she knew was already overburdened with work. Or else she did not want to become indebted to Don Bosco with whom her relationship had by now become strained due to her views about Don Bosco's apostolate for the boys.

Although the Marchioness did not commission Don Bosco to write the booklet Don Bosco did it at the insistence of Silvio Pellico. And in order not to offend the sensibilities of the Marchioness

Don Bosco did not put his name on it. This booklet was very successful in making the devotion to God's mercy popular among the people.

The title of the booklet was: *Esercizio di divozione alla Misericordia di Dio (Practice of Devotion to the Mercy of God)*.²³ It was published towards the end of 1846. It is small in size and has 111 pages.²⁴ It begins with the request of the Marchioness to the Pope and the approbation of this devotion and the indulgences attached to it by Pope Gregory XVI and the confirmation of the indulgences in perpetuity by Pope Pius IX. The next section is titled: 'Practice of Devotion to the Mercy of God: During the Vigil'; after this there are six sections titled First Day, Second Day, etc.

The practice of the devotion was spread over six days, after a vigil prior to the first day. During the vigil a brief explanation was given about the purpose of the devotion and the way it was arranged. The first three days were dedicated to imploring God's mercy. And the next three days were dedicated to thanking God for his mercy. On each day the service began with an invocation, a short meditation (homily), nosegay (proposal of a devotional practice for the following day), singing of Psalm 51 (first three days), singing of the Benedictus (last three days), and the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

On the first three days the meditation began with the invocation "Oh, Mercy of God! We implore you not only for



ourselves but also for all humankind!” For the last three days the introductory invocation was “ Oh, Mercy of God! May you be thanked for all eternity for the favours bestowed on all humankind.”

Don Bosco began the meditation given for the vigil in the following words:

In order to pray fruitfully, it is necessary to prepare oneself, it is necessary to recollect the spirit, the imagination, and the emotions at the feet of our adorable saviour Jesus Christ, it is necessary to ignite in oneself love for him, and speak to him with great faith, fully hoping in his love. Let us therefore place ourselves humbly and in deep reflection before him, and consider the nature of the devotion we wish to practise.²⁵

Devotion to the mercy of God was instituted not only for the benefit of each individual soul, but also as a means of recourse on behalf of all the nations on earth. Let us remember that we are all sinners, deprived of happiness on account of our sins, and in need of pardon and grace. We are all redeemed by the Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ and called to eternal salvation. If we are docile to divine inspiration, we will detest sin and with our whole heart obey God and the Catholic Church which He founded.²⁶

After explaining the purpose of the devotion, he went on to explain what indulgences are and the conditions to be fulfilled in order to obtain them.

The topics for the first three days of meditation were the following:²⁷

1. God is continually merciful toward the just and sinners alike. Everything that God gives to men, both in the spiritual and material order, is a manifestation of His mercy.
2. The marvellous mercy of God toward sinners is proven by examples taken from Holy Scripture.
3. Particular instances of mercy toward sinners on the part of our Divine Saviour are seen during His sorrowful Passion.

One notices that in these meditations Don Bosco makes use of Scripture very much.

The meditations for the last three days dealt with the reasons why we ought to be grateful to God.²⁸

1. The compassion God always shows to sinners.
2. The priceless gift of the sacrament of Penance.
3. The means of eternal salvation given us in the holy Catholic Faith.

At the end of each meditation he proposed a nosegay or practice to be carried out by those participating in the devotion. The first practice mentioned below was proposed at the end of the meditation during the vigil, and the subsequent ones on the following five days.²⁹



1. Encourage all your relatives and friends to take part, in whatever manner they can, in these devotions.
2. If someone has offended you, forgive him; the graver the offence you forgive, the more you may expect to be forgiven by God's mercy.
3. Give up something today to obtain God's mercy for all sinners, but especially for those who are about to die.
4. Make a contribution to charity according to your means. If you cannot, then recite five times the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Glory Be in honour of the five wounds of our Divine Saviour, with the ejaculation: "My Jesus, mercy."
5. Meditate awhile on the sins of your past life, and prepare yourself for a good confession.
6. Say the Hail Mary and the Glory Be seven times in honour of the Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin, that she may obtain for us true contrition for our sins.

At the end of the last meditation (6th day) Don Bosco did not propose any practice. Instead he suggested that they say "at least one Hail Mary, for the person who promoted this devotion,"³⁰ an obvious reference to Marchioness Barolo without mentioning her name.

Don Bosco concluded the booklet with the following aspiration:

Oh, may it happen that we, according to the hope given to us by faith, and

strengthened through this devout practice in contemplating the mercy of God, may be able to find ourselves, one day, in the kingdom of the blessed, in the company of the Blessed Virgin, the Guardian Angels, and all the men and women saints of heaven! And may it happen also that we may be able to find ourselves in that kingdom, not only together with our parents, relatives and friends, but also with an infinite multitude of the saved, as we have prayed for everyone with the yearning that all may stop sinning through the mercy of God, and that we, all together, filled with every blessing, may live eternally with the Lord. *Semper cum Domino crimus.* Amen.³¹

As soon as the booklet was printed Don Bosco gave a copy to each of the girls at the *Rifugio* and entrusted the rest of the copies, numbering a few thousands, to the Mother Superior. Before long he translated it into French.

Though she had not commissioned Don Bosco to do it, Marchioness Barolo came to know that the booklet was written by him. And through Fr. Borel she sent him some money with the instruction not to reveal the name of the donor.

The booklet began to produce spiritual fruits even before the printing was over. It was printed at the Botta Press in Turin. In the press, some of the workers began to read it aloud and make fun of it. But after the first few pages, the scoffers became silent. They were overcome with remorse, went for confession and gave up their unruly ways.³²



5 Dream and Apparition Related to the Mercy of God

5.1 The Dream of the Brilliant Globe³³

Don Bosco narrated the dream of the Brilliant Globe during the 'Good Night' on November 29, 1873. Don Bosco said that in the dream he found himself in the midst of the boys in a valley between two beautiful hills. Suddenly the sun became very bright and they had to bow their heads to protect themselves. Slowly the light faded and it became very dark. As they were wondering what was happening a beautiful rainbow appeared at one corner of the valley. While they were all admiring the rainbow, a gigantic globe, from which emanated blinding flashes of light, came floating towards them from the far end of the valley. The globe stopped about three hundred metres above their heads. Blinded by its glare, all the boys fell to the ground. Although Don Bosco himself was frightened seeing this strange phenomenon, he decided to examine the globe.

In spite of the globe being some distance away, by looking more intently Don Bosco noticed that the summit of the globe had the shape of a large sphere and bore an inscription which read: "The Almighty." The whole globe was ringed by several tiers of balconies crowded with people, young and old, men and women, who were very joyful.

Dazed by the brilliant light, as the boys had done, Don Bosco also fell to the

ground with the cry: "Let us invoke God's mercy!"

When he came to himself Don Bosco toured the valley to see what had happened to the boys. He noticed that all of them were prostrate on the ground, motionless in prayer. He prodded many of them with his foot asking: "What is the matter? Are you alive or dead?" All of them gave him the same answer: "I am imploring God's mercy."

But to his surprise, Don Bosco noticed that some boys, with their faces as black as coal, were gazing defiantly at the globe, almost as if challenging God. Don Bosco called them by name. But they gave no sign of life. Because they had not fallen prostrate to the ground and implored God's mercy, as their companions had done, they had become as cold as ice.

Just then a horrible monster appeared at one end of the valley. As it began to approach them, Don Bosco woke up the boys and looked around for some Salesian to help him to get the boys to the top of the hill for safety. But he could not find anyone.

When the monster was about to reach them, the brilliant globe, which till then was hovering overhead, came down, and placed itself between the monster and the boys, protecting them from harm. At that moment a voice thundered through the valley: "No treaty is possible between Christ and Belial" (2 Cor 6:15). This means that there is nothing in common between the children of light and the children of darkness, between the good



and the bad whom the Scripture calls the children of Belial. Hearing these words Don Bosco woke up in cold sweat.

Don Bosco did not explain the dream. But its message seems to be that as long as we are in this valley of tears, God permits periods of light and darkness to alternate in our lives. Those who withstand the darkness humbly and trustingly will eventually see light returning like a rainbow. And if they continue to remain faithful and keep their thoughts centred on God they will realize their own nothingness in the face of God's ineffable majesty and the great reward he has prepared for them. Furthermore they will feel that they should always fall prostrate before him and implore his infinite mercy.

Those instead who neglect their spiritual life and live a worldly life will soon lose God's grace and fall prey to the devil who goes around the world like a hungry lion looking for someone to devour.

5.2 The Apparition of Louis Colle

On April 30, 1882 Don Bosco had an apparition of Louis Colle, the seventeen year old son of Count Louis Anthony Fleury Colle and Baroness Marie Sophie Buchet, who had died the previous year. Don Bosco was standing in the sacristy of the chapel adjoining the new Church of the Sacred Heart, then being built in Rome, when he saw Louis drawing water from a well.

“Why do you draw so much water?” Don Bosco asked him.

“I draw for me and my parents.”

“Why in such quantity?”

“Don't you understand? Don't you see that it is the Sacred Heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ? The more the treasures of grace and mercy flow out from there, the more they remain there.”

“Why are you here?”

“I came to visit you and tell you that I am happy.”³⁴

6 Conclusion

That God is a merciful Father who is ever ready to help us was one of Don Bosco's main convictions. And it would not be wrong to say that, in one way or the other, all his life's work was aimed at making people become aware of the mercy of God and experience this mercy. And this mercy, he hoped, would unite us all one day in heaven. In his “Spiritual Testament” he wrote: “I leave you here on earth, but only for a short time. I hope the infinite mercy of God will enable us all to meet one day in Heaven. There I wait for you.”³⁵ Don Bosco, indeed, was an apostle of God's mercy!

Notes

¹Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco: Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, 2nd rev. ed. (New Rochelle: Salesiana Publishers, 1996), 10.

²Joseph Aubry, *The Renewal of Our Salesian Life, Vol I, the Active Apostolate* (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Publications, 1987), 25.



³Saint John Bosco, *Teachings on Spiritual Life: An Anthology*, Introduction and Notes by Aldo Girauda (Bengaluru, Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2013), 101.

⁴*Biographical Memoirs* (henceforth *BM*), XII, 333.

⁵*BM*, VI, 19.

⁶[G. Bosco,] *Esercizio di divozione all misericordia di Dio* (Torino: Tipografia Eredi Botta, 1847), in Giovanni Bosco, *Opere Edite II* (Roma: LAS, 1976) 99-100. Henceforth referred to as *Opere Edite*. The translation of this is found in Saint John Bosco, *Teachings on Spiritual Life: An Anthology*, 101-102.

⁷*Opere Edite*, II, 106-108. See Saint John Bosco, *Teachings on Spiritual Life: An Anthology*, 103-104.

⁸*BM*, II, 123.

⁹*BM*, II, 124.

¹⁰Istituto Storico Salesiano, *Fonti Salesiane I: Don Bosco e la sua opera* (Roma, LAS, 2014), 889. *Opere Edite II*, 84-85. See *BM*, II, 427.

¹¹Istituto Storico Salesiano, *Fonti Salesiane I: Don Bosco e la sua opera* (Roma, LAS, 2014), 897.

¹²*Opere Edite*, II, 163.

¹³*Opere Edite*, II, 150. See Saint John Bosco, *Teachings on Spiritual Life: An Anthology*, 106.

¹⁴*Opere Edite*, II, 150-153. See Saint John Bosco, *Teachings on Spiritual Life: An Anthology*, 106-107.

¹⁵*BM*, IV, 115.

¹⁶*Giov. Prov* (1885), p. 499; *Maggio*, day 20, p. 118. Stella, *Don Bosco: Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, 98.

¹⁷*Giov. Prov.*, pp. 42-43. *Opere Edite*, II, 222-23. Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco: Religious Outlook and Spirituality*, 100-101.

¹⁸*BM*, VI, 19.

¹⁹*BM*, II, 427.

²⁰*BM*, II, 426.

²¹*BM*, VI, 16-20; II, 426.

²²*BM*, VI, 249.

²³The English translation of two chapters (1st Day and 4th Day) of this booklet are available in Saint John Bosco, *Teachings on Spiritual Life: An Anthology*, Introduction and Notes by Aldo Girauda (Bengaluru, Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2013), 101-108.

²⁴G. Bosco,] *Esercizio di divozione all misericordia di Dio* (Torino: Tipografia Eredi Botta, 1847), in Giovanni Bosco, *Opere Edite II* (Roma: LAS, 1976), 71-181.

²⁵*Opere Edite II*, 83-84.

²⁶*Opere Edite II*, 84-85. See *BM*, II, 427.

²⁷*BM*, II, 427-428.

²⁸*BM*, II, 428.

²⁹*BM*, II, 428-429.

³⁰*BM*, II, 429.

³¹*Opere Edite II*, 110-111.

³²*BM*, II, 429.

³³*BM*, X, 63-66.

³⁴*Memorie Biografiche*, XV, 83-84. *BM*, XV, 63.

³⁵“From the Spiritual Testament of Saint John Bosco,” *Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales*, 3rd ed. (Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2015), 271.

