

The joy of living in Christ, the core of the Salesian proposal of youthful holiness

A Salesian reflection on Phil 4:4

*“God is not envious, nor does he take joy from his children
but gives it where it is not,
strengthens it when it is fragile,
and ensures that it is an ongoing dimension of life”
(Benedict XVI).*

In this second year of three years of preparation for the Bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth the Rector Major has given us a Strenna which “aims to come to a better understanding of what he proposed in educational terms”, what Don Bosco considered he was offering the young and the method he used to open the door to their hearts, to win over their confidence, shape strong personalities from a human and Christian point of view. He says: “In practice we would like to *get closer to Don Bosco the educator*. So it is a case of understanding and updating the Preventive System. This is the theme of Strenna 2013”.¹

As usual, the Strenna is introduced by a biblical quotation: “*be always happy in the Lord, I repeat, what I want is your happiness*” (Phil 4:4), drawn from Paul's Letter to the Philippians.² While this Pauline line puts the joy we experience in serving the Lord at the centre,³ a belief very dear to Don Bosco,⁴ the Strenna aims at a deeper and more updated understanding of how to apply Don Bosco's educational system. To tell the truth, the biblical quote, title and theme of the Strenna point to two very different realities. However it seems to be understood that joy in the Lord is the essential element of the preventive system, an educational system which, under the banner of Don Bosco the educator, allows us to offer the young the ‘Gospel of joy’. In fact, Fr Chávez reminds us that “the Gospel of joy” characterises the entire history of Don Bosco and is the heart and soul of his many works. Don Bosco intercepted the desire for happiness in the young and spelt out their *joie de vivre* in the language of cheerfulness, festivity

¹ Fr CHÁVEZ, *Like Don Bosco let us offer young people the Gospel of joy through the pedagogy of kindness*. Strenna 2013, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma, 2012, 3.

² What draws our attention is the fact that of the 93 biblical quotations from the Letter to the Philippians found in Don Bosco's writings (F. PERRENCHIO, *La Bibbia negli scritti di Don Bosco*, LAS, Roma, 2010, 24), we do not find Phil 4:4. Cf. M. WIRTH, *La Bibbia con Don Bosco. Una lectio divina salesiana*. Vol. III: Atti, Lettere, Apocalisse, LAS, Roma, 2012, 365-385).

³ “*Servite Domino in laetitia* was one of his favourite sayings; this holy joy was for him the basis of his social edifice for a sure education of the young” (MB VI, 4). The phrase “characterised his entire educational proposal” (A. GIRAUDO, *Don Bosco, maestro de vida espiritual. Servid al Señor con alegría*, CCS, Madrid, 2012, 40) and is one of the “great values of Salesian holiness” (E. VIGANÒ, *Lettere circolari ai salesiani*. Vol. I, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma 1996, 536)

⁴ “Don Bosco knew how to see how joy worked in education and the life of holiness, and he wanted to spread cheerfulness and good humour amongst his own. *Servite Domino in laetitia* could be said to be the eleventh commandment in Don Bosco's house” (A. CAVIGLIA, “Il ‘Magone Michele’. Una classica esperienza educativa. Studio”: *Salesianum* 11 (1949) 466).

and the playground; but he never ceased pointing to God as the source of true joy”.⁵

1. The Pauline quotation

The Pauline sentence appears in the last part of the Letter where Paul focuses, usually, on his apostolic exhortation. After a long and bitter polemic against a not very well-defined group of Judaizing missionaries (Phil 3:2-21) – “dogs”, “mischief makers” he called them (Phil 3:2) – the apostle returns to a calmer but no less passionate exhortation: “My brothers and dear friends, do not give way but remain faithful in the Lord. I miss you very much my dear friends; you are my joy and my crown” (Phil 4,1).

1.1 The immediate context

Warnings, solicitations and reminders one after the other but without a great degree of internal cohesion (Phil 4:2-20). They regard practical issues of community existence and matters dear to the writer's heart (Phil 1:1.4.9). They contain a pressing appeal to a life of harmony and happiness in community (Phil 4:2-7), a singular appreciation of the praiseworthy moral values of the pagan ethic, but to be lived as believers following the example Paul has passed on (Phil 4:8-9) and, finally, a sincere profession of gratitude on his part because the Philippians have “shared in his hardships.. you have sent me what I needed” (Phil 4:10-20).

Within such a variety of topics, the Pauline command to live in joy comes as a surprise, a little isolated, even without reason. The joy we live in, then, does not always have reason or explanation: it is a state that must characterise Christian existence. Later the apostle makes a pressing appeal to his closest collaborators, “whose names are written in the book of life” (Phil 4:3), to live in harmony, helping one another: there is no room in the Christian community for dissension or conflict amongst apostles (Phil 4:2-3); Joy freely given “in the Lord” should reign there. This is followed by a more all-embracing exhortation the apostle addresses to the community, firstly, encouraging them to be tolerant to others, “which should be evident to everyone” (Phil 4:5), then, encouraging the community to have complete trust in God through prayer and request “in anything you need” (Phil 4:6). From the immediate context nothing seems to stand out that makes the nature, reasons or purpose of a life of joy more comprehensible.

1.2 Formulation

Not even the way the words are put together, at first sight, throws much more

⁵ CHÁVEZ, *Strenna 2013*, 19.

light on our understanding. Imperatives and their repetition, the most characteristic feature, are completely normal for an exhortation. Furthermore the apostle's invitation to live in joy is not something new in the Letter (Phil 2:18; 3,1).

However we need to keep the details in mind.

- 1st. The marked repetition of the verb *rejoice* in the imperative identifies the recommended joy as an imposed behaviour; it is not just an involuntary emotion or natural intimacy, but something that has been enjoined. Paul believes the Christian is obliged to be joyful: “be happy always” (1 Thess 5:16; cf. Rom 12:12; 2 Cor 13:11). If it has been imposed it can't be thought of as simply personal well-being nor can it be proposed as an heroic programme of life.
- 2nd. This joy has to be experienced *always* not just occasionally, that is not just because someone feels good or things are going well, but ceaselessly, without exception, at any cost. It is not ephemeral, just some everyday thing that does not depend on, since it does not come from, external motivations. It must also be expressed in difficult times. “Miserable, but always rejoicing”, Paul says about his apostolic ministry (2 Cor 6:10); and to the Christians in Rome: “we can boast about our sufferings” (Rom 5:3).
- 3rd. The joy which Paul asks his followers to have is to be experienced “in the Lord”. In other passages the apostle points to new reasons for the joy he asks for (Phil 1:18: proclamation of the Gospel; Phil 1:25-26: growth in faith of the community; Phil 2:18: the apostle's giving of his life for the faith of the Philippians; Phil 2:29: welcome given to the one Paul sends). Here Paul uses one of his most characteristic formulas (Phil 1:14: 2:24.28; 3:1; 4:2.4; 2,19), one practically unknown to other NT writers: “in the Lord”. Which makes this joy even more unusual: the Risen Lord is where it happens.

Be joyful – always! –, can it be mandatory?

For Paul joy can, indeed must always be asked of the Christian because it is something given in the first place; as a “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22; Rom 14:17), The Spirit is the way of making God present in the world, so joy is what this presence, felt and agreed to, produces in the believer:⁶ joy belongs only to the ‘saved’. Being able to feel joy is a way of knowing we are saved by Jesus Christ.

It is not just accidental that in Greek, joy (*chara*) and grace (*charis*) come from the same root.⁷ Joy is the Christian way of living in grace, that is, living reconciled

⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the 27th World Youth Day 2012*, n. 2. Cf. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/youth/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120315_youth_it.html

⁷ Paul uses the verb *chairein* 19 times, 10 of them in Phil (1:18; 2:17.18.28; 3:1; 4:4.10); and the noun *chara*, 21 times, 5 of them in Phil(1:4.25; 2:2.29; 4:1).

with God. This “central element of the Christian experience”,⁸ finds its roots, then, in the salvation won by Christ's death (cf. Rom 5:10-11); it is like a summary of Christian life (cf. 2 Cor 13:11), proof of its authenticity (cf. 2 Cor 1:24). Joy is the way of giving testimony of the salvation received, the encounter had with Christ,⁹ sign of a faith “that stays with you all” (Phil 1:25), visible from the outside and presented to the world. It is, I would say, the visible face of the life of faith in Christ.

The author of 1 Pt was right on the money when he wrote: “You did not see him, yet you love him; and still without seeing him you are filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described” (1 Pt 1,8-9). This joy can and must be enjoined just because it is to be lived “in the Lord”.

Joy in the Lord

“*In the Lord*”, along with “*In Christ [Jesus]*”, “*in Him*” are variations of the apostle's formulation, and one dear to him¹⁰, but somewhat rare, almost without parallel in contemporary literature.¹¹ What is surprising is not that Paul does not usually explain himself in such language, but that he uses it as a basis for argument (1 Cor 6:13-18; 10:14-21; Gal 3:14-16), taking it for granted that his readers understand it without the need for further explanation.

Even though the preposition *in* has a marked locative sense, with *Christ the Lord* it could mean place, manner, cause or instrument. The Pauline usage seems to favour the idea of association or belonging, solidarity and participation. It expresses the redeeming act that took place in Christ, the objective state of salvation, the new creature (2 Cor 3:17; 5:17) that divine intervention has already made possible and that is defined as an intimate and mysterious identification between Christ and the Christians.

The apostle makes use of it to speak of Christian life, understood individually or collectively (1 Thess 4:1; 1 Cor 3:1; 7:39; 15:58; 2 Cor 2:14) as the believer's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. The Christian is in Christ because he has already been saved in Him by God and because in Him he awaits his definitive salvation without fear. Being in the Lord is a stable reality that determines the life of the Christian until the Lord comes, the state that exists

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Message from the 27th World Youth Day 2012*, proemio. Cf. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/youth/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120315_youth_en.html

⁹ “Who ever comes to him and has experienced his love immediately wants to share the beauty of this encounter and the joy that springs from this friendship” (BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the 28th WYD 2013*, n. 3. Cf. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/youth/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20121018_youth_en.html)

¹⁰ Paul adopts the formula *in Christ* 34 times, once in Phil 1:13; *in Christ Jesus*, 48, four in Phil 1:1; 2:5; 4:7.21); *in the Lord*, 50, six in Phil 1:14; 2:24.28; 3:1; 4:2.4; *in Him*, 29.

¹¹ It does not seem that a formulation of the kind has antecedents or parallels in ancient times (M. Fr HOOKER, *A Preface to Paul*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1980, 43). Absent in the Synoptics, we find it only in 1 Pt (3:16.19; 5:10.14), and especially Jn (6:56; 14:20; 15:2.4-7; 16:33; 17:21; 1 Jn 2:5.6.8.24.27).

between the beginning of salvation and its much yearned for consummation.

Christ, more than being an instrument, is where salvation takes place,¹² the place where the effectiveness of the Resurrection happens and where the Spirit is at work: “there is no condemnation for one who lives in Christ” (Rm 8:1-2); “you are in the Spirit..., Christ is in you” (Rm 8:9-10). Christians are in Christ (Gal 1:22; 3:28; Phil 3:8-9) and Christ is in Christians (Rm 8:10; Gal 2:20): believers find their foundations in him and he is active in them (Gal 2:8; Rm 8:2.39; Phil 2:13; Col 1:29). Christ is the one who determines, directs, imposes and makes Christian life possible.¹³

The joy of being in the Lord is not, then, an emotional feeling, a salutary movement of the soul, not just a happy disposition of the believer's heart to obey his Lord always. It is rather a well-being that comes from allowing Him to be alive in us (cf. Gal 2:20). It is He the Lord, died and risen, who is the place where Christians are, feel and act: “In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). “So it is not a facile optimism which lies behind Christian joy but the awareness of being united to Christ and taking part in his life”.¹⁴

1.3 The concrete circumstance

We still need to refer to the concrete circumstance that led Paul to ask the Philippians to always live in joy. Misunderstanding the particular circumstances the apostle and the community were going through would not help for a correct understanding of how the apostle says it but also with regard to his real intentions.

Philippians gives us an idea of a community in which Paul has placed all his trust (Phil 1:3-11; 2:12; 4,1.16) and which he felt loved by (Phil 1:7.27; 2,12.18.24). He returned this affection with sincere and concrete dedication for his beloved Philippians (Phil 1:7: “You have a permanent place in my heart”). In fact it was the only community from whom he accepted some financial assistance, on a number of occasions (Phil 4:15; 2 Cor 11:8-9). Philippians is probably the calmest of the Letters (Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; 4:15; 3:2), the most personal (Phil 1:7-8; 2:18; 4:1.14), the least dogmatic to come from Paul's pen. The apostle reveals his himself and his most intimate thoughts in it, and reveals in detail and with a rare transparency his personal encounter with Christ (Phil 3:2-16). It would seem then that the joy of being an apostle (Phil 4:1) and remaining Christian (Phil 1:25) is to be at home in the Philippian community.

¹² In the apostle's thinking the community or church is not the sum of individuals but something altogether ‘in the Lord’. All believers make up the sovereignty where Jesus is believed in and called upon as *Kyrios*” (T TRILLING W., *Conversaciones con Pablo*. Un recorrido original por la obra del Apóstol, Herder, Barcelona 1985, 155).

¹³ Cf. F. NEYRINCK, “La dottrina di Paolo su “Cristo in noi” – “Noi in Cristo””, *Conc* 5 (1969) 2025-2038.

¹⁴ G. BARBAGLIO, *Le Lettere di Paolo*. Vol. 2, Borla, Roma, 1980, 586.

When Paul writes to the Philippians towards the year 56, he is a vitally mature human being, grown to maturity through apostolic work..., and a prisoner: he is “in the praetorium..., in chains for Christ” (Phil 1:13), uncertain of the destiny awaiting him, but certain that whatever the result of his imprisonment may be, the cause of the Gospel will be strengthened (Phil 1:12). Although he nurtures the desire to return to see them in person (Phil 2:24), he does not hide the fact that this probably will not be possible, not knowing if he will get out alive or die in prison; what is decisive for him is that “Christ will be glorified in my body, whether by my life or by my death” (Phil 1:20). Further on he will tell them of the intimate drama of his ministerial experience, caught between two kinds of fidelity: one to Christ his only gain (Phil 3:7-11) and the other, his beloved community, his joy and crown (Phil 4:1): “I am caught in this dilemma: I want to be gone and be with Christ, which would be very much the better; but for me stay alive in this body is a more urgent need for your sake...to progress in the faith and even increase your joy in it” (Phil 1:23-25).

We must not forget then that his imperious appeal to live in joy comes from a prisoner whose fate is in the balance: if the Philippians will no longer see him, they will be able to recall that the apostle found joy in writing to them from prison (Phil 4:1) and that always being happy in the Lord (Phil 3:1; 4,4; cf. 1:25; 2:28.29) was his final exhortation.¹⁵ The joy he wants to reign amongst his faithful is the joy he experienced when thinking of and praying for them (Phil 1:4).

Not even the circumstances at Philippi are good for the community there; it was the first fruits of Paul's work in European territory. Paul arrived there for the first time in the year 49 with Silvano, Timothy and probably Luke (Acts 16:16-17). They did not remain there long it seems; after undergoing some difficulties (1 Thess 2:1-2), denigrated, mistreated and imprisoned (cf. Phil 1:7.30; 2 Cor 11:25; Acts 16:26-34), he had to leave the city for Thessalonika (Acts 16:40-17,1; 1 Thess 2:1-2), leaving behind a small community, for sure, but one strengthened in faith (Phil 1:27-30) and strongly tied to him in affection (Phil 1:10; 4:10; 2 Cor 8:1-5; Rm 15:26; Acts 26:17).

Not everything was for the best however. There is the personal rivalry Paul notes in some preachers while he is in prison (Phil 1:15) and “they make my chains heavier to bear” (Phil 1:17)¹⁶; the appeal to harmony in feelings and humility following the example of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:2: “..common purpose and a common mind...would make me completely happy”); the heartfelt public invitation to Evodia and Syntyche to “come to agreement with each other in the Lord” (Phil 4:2); and principally the evasive presence of Judaeo-Christian propagandists acting “as enemies of Christ's cross” (Phil 3:18), involved as they were in a contra-mission demanding that believers be circumcised (Phil 3:2-19), demonstrated that there was no lack of misunderstandings, personal conflicts and serious disputes. Moreover the community in turn had suffered for Christ (Phil 1:29: “you have been granted the grace not only of believing in Christ, but

¹⁵ J. GNILKA, *Der Philipperbrief*, Herder, Freiburg – Basel – Wien, 1980³, 169.

¹⁶ The comment he adds is significant: “But what does all this matter? So long as in every way... Christ is proclaimed, that makes me happy” (Phil 1:18). The apostle's joy does not come from personal success but from the fact that the Gospel is proclaimed.

also suffering for him”) to the point where Paul could claim that they had sustained him in his own suffering (Phil 1:7.27.30).

The Christian community which receives the mandate to be happy in the Lord is, then, a community which has been tested, that knows internal dissension and persecution from without, but is faithful to the apostle (Phil 4:10.14) and faithful to the Lord. The joy of living the faith does not come from his judgement, nor does it come from satisfaction in life; it does not die under suffering nor does it feed on triumph. According to Paul, it can and must flourish because it fights “unanimous in meeting the attack with firm resistance, united by your love for the faith of the Gospel” (Phil 1:27-28). Elsewhere he proposes himself as an example: “In all our trouble I am filled with consolation and my joy is overflowing” (2 Cor 7:4). Only joy that can live in peace and coexist with trial can be Christian (cf. Mt 5:11-13).

2. Don Bosco, “messenger of joy”¹⁷

“God is the God of joy”, St Francis of Sales thought.¹⁸ Better still, in “God himself everything is joy since everything is gift”.¹⁹ Don Bosco, as an enlightened Christian educator, made joy “the constitutive *element* of his (educational) system, inseparable from study, work and piety”²⁰, “the result par excellence of authentic practice of Salesian pedagogy”.²¹

A fundamental need in life, an intimately felt desire during youth,²² cheerfulness

¹⁷ “Was berechtigt, diesen Pädagogen als ‘Botschafter der Freude’ zu apostrophieren? Seine eigene Frohnatur und ihre Entfaltung im Dienst an der Jugend sowie sein Gespür für die Bedeutung der Freude in der Erziehung und seine erfinderische Kraft, in der Erschließung ungetrübter Freudenquellen” (G. SÖLL, *Don Bosco – Botschafter der Freude*. Gedanken zu einem Grundzug salesianischer Pädagogik, Don Bosco Aktuell. Schriftenreihe des Kölner Kreises 11 [1977] 13).

¹⁸ Letter to President Brulart, Annecy, 18 February 1605, in *Oeuvres*, Vol. XIII, Annecy 1892-1964, 16.

¹⁹ PAUL VI, *Gaudete in Domino, Apostolic Exhortation*, 9 May 1975, conclusion. Cf. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19750509_gaudete-in-domino_en.html

²⁰ Fr BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*, LAS, Roma, 1999, 324. The success of education depends firstly on the climate in which it is realised: “Die Umwelt formt den jungen Menschen, die Persönlichkeit führt und erzieht ihn. Don Bosco kann als Paradigma für die Formkraft der Umwelt genommen werden” (F. Holiness EGGERSDORFER, *Jugenderziehung*, Kösel Verlag, München 1962, 82).

²¹ J. M. PETITCLERC, *La Pédagogie de Don Bosco en 12 mots clés*, Editions Don Bosco, Paris, 2012, 114.

²² “A yearning for joy lurks within the heart of every man and woman. Far more than immediate and fleeting feelings of satisfaction, our hearts seek a perfect, full and lasting joy capable of giving “flavour” to our existence. This is particularly true for you, because youth is a time of continuous discovery of life, of the world, of others and of ourselves. It is a time of openness to the future and of great longing for happiness, friendship, sharing and truth, a time when we are moved by high ideals and make great plans ” (BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the 27th WYD*, 2012, n. 1. Cf. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/youth/documents/hf_ben-

is, for Don Bosco, “the result of a Christian outlook on life... From the religion of love there cannot but arise salvation, grace, joy, happiness, trusting and positive optimism”.²³ It is for this reason that in Don Bosco's house, “cheerfulness goes along with holiness”,²⁴ as we see clearly in Dominic Savio's life²⁵ and in other of Don Bosco's writings: “The youngster” Fr Caviglia comments “who knows he is in God's grace naturally feels joy”.²⁶ Don Bosco knew that young people naturally tend to cheerfulness, and need games and amusements but for him true joy was to be found only in the person where grace resides.²⁷

This is the belief from which his educational project came. A year after the Oratory had been established firmly in the Pinardi shed, on the outskirts of Valdocco (12 April 1846), Don Bosco published the *Companion of Youth*,²⁸ where some of his basic ideas and educational choices already appear.²⁹ Although from appearance it is “a book of suitable practices of piety” helping youngsters to nurture virtue and religious sense, Don Bosco presented it “from the outset, in the preface *To Youth*, as ‘a Christian approach’”³⁰ which at the same time fosters piety and happiness: “I would like to teach you an approach to Christian living that will keep you happy and content, pointing out what the true amusements and real pleasures are, so that you can say with the holy Prophet David: let us serve the Lord in cheerfulness: *servite Domino in laetitia*. This is the purpose of this little book, serving the Lord and remaining happy”.³¹

xvi_mes_20120315_youth_en.html).

²³ Fr BRAIDO, *Il sistema preventivo di Don Bosco*, PAS-Verlag, Zürich 1964², 196.

²⁴ BRAIDO, *Prevenire*, 325. “The idea that Christian life consists in serving the Lord in holy joy does not have an immediate source; instead in its literary formulation it finds clear correspondence in a particular expression in the *Life of Comollo* that Don Bosco had published three years earlier... Here he presents it as one of the most fruitful and most particular ideas of Don Bosco's legacy” (STELLA, *Valori*, 84)

²⁵ “Sappi – fa dire don Bosco a Domenico Savio al suo amico Camillo Gavio – che noi facciamo consistere la santità nello star molto allegri” (G. BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell’Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Paravia, Torino 1859, 86: OE XI, 236).

²⁶ CAVIGLIA, “Il Magone”, 149.

²⁷ This Gospel of joy, whose approach is one of loving kindness, has as its goal, “holiness, which has joy as its point of departure and arrival” (I. REUNGOAT, “Il Sinodo: dono e responsabilità”, *Lettera circolare* 932 (2012) 7.

²⁸ G. BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de’ suoi doveri, degli esercizi di cristiana pietà, per la recita dell’uffizio della Beata Vergine e de’ principali Vespri dell’anno coll’aggiunta di una scelta di laude sacre ecc.*, Tip. Paravia e comp., Torino, 1847: OE II 183-532. “The saintly writer was already concerned with this for some years” (P. STELLA, *Valori spirituali nel “Giovane provveduto” di San Giovanni Bosco*, Roma, 1960, 3). regarding this edition cf MB III, 8s. On possible sources Don Bosco used to write it, see STELLA, *Valori*, 46-79.

²⁹ With J. AUBRY, *Avec Don Bosco vers l’ans 2000*. Vingt conférences salésiennes, Maison Générale Salésienne, Roma, 1990, 55, il tema della gioia nel pensiero e la prassi educativa di don Bosco dovrebbe considerare, oltre il *Giovane provveduto* (1847), le tre *biografie di giovani* esemplari (Savio: 1859; Magone: 1861; Besucco: 1864) e i due più importanti studi pedagogici: *Il sistema preventivo* (1877) e la *Lettera da Roma* (1884), “rédigés a trois moments-clefs de sa vie”.

³⁰ Fr BRAIDO, *Don Bosco prete dei giovani nel secolo delle libertà*, vol. I, LAS, Roma, 2003², 227.

³¹ BOSCO, *Il giovane* 3-4: OE II 185-186. “But (some say) if we begin serving the Lord now, we become sad. That's not true, the one serving the devil becomes sad... So courage, my friends, be virtuous and I assure you that you will always have a happy heart and you will know how wonderful it is to serve the Lord” (o. c., 13: OE II 193).

In Don Bosco's thinking *The Companion of Youth* was not just another manual of prayer for young people³² nor alone could it guarantee the fulfilment of the purposes it proposed, that is “that you become the consolation of your parents, an honour to your country, good citizens on earth to then be the blessed inhabitants of heaven”.³³ Despite being for him a real educational proposal that his first boys had begun to understand and experience,³⁴ “in fact, the result of Don Bosco's first priestly and literary activity, we find he launched a programme of youthful holiness, one he had conceived and formulated”.³⁵ It is possible that not all the boys at the Oratory would have read the book from beginning to end,³⁶ but “the religious experience it proposed was tied up with the whole system and life style the boys were immersed in every day at the *Oratory*... [In the Oratory] those without a family found the nice things they might find at home, the safety of fatherliness and brotherliness in the director and other staff, joy of friendship, the thought of being able to fit in meaningfully to society with a culture and dignified capacity for work that could earn them something; all up it was a style of cheerfulness guaranteed by endless inventions of his educational genius: games, theatre, excursions, music, singing”.³⁷

Don Bosco, obviously, had not been the first “to note the connection between happiness and religion”.³⁸ It would also be anachronistic to consider *The Companion of Youth* to be a manual of youth spirituality *ante litteram*. Nor did he intend to sum up the entire educational experience at the Oratory, an institution that, moreover, was still at its beginnings. But it became a manual of prayer and a programme for life which remained substantially unaltered in the following decades in Salesian houses, read and re-read by generations of young people until the first half of the 20th century. Its success reflects Don Bosco's

³² “The basic code for practices of piety at the Oratory, both for boarders and externs, was the *Companion of Youth*: for youngsters and adults, lay people and clerics” (STELLA, *Don Bosco* II, 304). But thinking of it simply as a manual of devotion is “the first prejudice to disabuse oneself of” (STELLA, *Valori*, 80). P

³³ BOSCO, *Il giovane*, 5: OE II 187.

³⁴ “One is led to think of the *Il Giovane provveduto per la pratica dei suoi doveri negli esercizi di cristiana pietà* (1847) as a simple manual of prayer and devout practices, but Don Bosco really intended it to be a whole way of life; from a devotional point of view; but including the first instructional part about the religious way of understanding our existence, creation, how to grow up as a teenager, daily life...” (P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. I: Vita e Opere, PAS-Verlag, Zürich 1968, 235).

³⁵ STELLA, *Valori*, 81. A programme “which the Saint remained faithful to till the end of his days” (*ivi*).

³⁶ Cf. F. DESRAMAUT, “All’ascolto di don Bosco nel 1867”, in C. SEMERARO (a cura di), *Religiosità popolare a misura dei giovani*, Colloqui salesiani, 13, LDC, Leuman-Torino 1987, 103.

³⁷ BRAIDO, *Don Bosco* I, 229. According to A. CAVIGLIA Don Bosco had the originality to include “his triumphal novelty, open happiness and liveliness, including noisy liveliness, which the educator shares in” as part of education. (“An unexplored document. La ‘Vita di Besucco Francesco’ scritta da Don Bosco e il suo contenuto spirituale”: *Salesianum* 10 [1948] 655-656).

³⁸ Cf. Fr STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II: Mentalità religiosa e Spiritualità, LAS, Roma 1981², 187, that shows Don Bosco's dependence on a small book of ascetics for teenagers, the *Guida angelica, ossia pratiche istruzioni per la gioventù*. Opera utilissima a ciascun giovanetto, data alla luce da un sacerdote secolare milanese. Corretta ed accresciuta, Torino, Stamperia Reale, 1767; si veda pure, STELLA, *Valori*, 46-79.

educational perspicacity; he not only knew how to demonstrate the congruence between piety and cheerfulness, a life of faith and true happiness, but he also taught a concrete way of achieving it.³⁹

The Companion of Youth was not only well thought out and a very appropriate educational proposal for young people who could barely consider happiness while struggling to survive in a rapidly and profoundly changing society.⁴⁰ This “approach to Christian living” also offered some essential ideas on the spirituality of the priest-educator of the young who then became Don Bosco. His personal belief was that there was no conflict in serving God and living happily, and this was based on the intense love he nurtured for his youngsters since he loved them and wanted them to be happy now and in eternity, as he used often say. Thus, for example, he concluded his short introduction with: “My dear boys, I love you with all my heart, it is enough for you to be young for me to love you and I can assure you that you will find books by people much more virtuous and clever than I but it will be difficult for you to find someone who loves you more than me in Jesus Christ, and who desires your true happiness... Be happy, and may the Lord be with you”.⁴¹

Fruit and proof of Don Bosco's pastoral charity is, then, an educational system that has “cheerfulness amongst its prime factors”.⁴² Cheerfulness for Don Bosco is “not only recreation, amusement but authentic, pedagogical reality that cannot be done without”, “the special tone of his educational love”.⁴³

3. Points for further reflection

There is a great difference between the constant Pauline exhortations to the Philippians to live joyfully in the Lord and what Bosco offered young people at Valdocco as an approach to living happily in God's service. The Apostle from Tarsus makes a general appeal, apparently without a concrete motive; the

³⁹ “The *Companion of Youth* seemed to us to be an enlightened programme for happily holy youthful spirituality inspired by the Saint. The vitality of such an approach to life cannot be measured, because it translates the youthful soul in any era... An approach to life that did not fail and will not fail to attract young people to self-fulfilment and could rightly earn for Don Bosco the title of Teacher of youthful holiness” (STELLA, *Valori*, 128).

⁴⁰ Cf. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I, 103-108. A. CAVIGLIA speaks of a *pedagogy of the poor*, which Don Bosco would have been “initiator and classic model” of: “an entirely systematic notion that starts from the life and psychology of the poor and becomes one with it, in order to raise up its moral and spiritual level” (*La Vita di Domenico Savio and “Savio Domenico e Don Bosco”*. Studio, SEI, Torino 1943, 75).

⁴¹ BOSCO, *Il giovane*, 5-6: OE II 187-188.

⁴² CAVIGLIA, “Un documento”, 656.

⁴³ BRAIDO, *Prevenire*, 328.183. “How can we bring these youngsters to life again so that we can get back to the liveliness, the happiness, the warmth of the old days? With charity. With charity? But don't my boys get enough love? ... I have done everything I possibly could for them; they are the object of all my affections” (Letter to the Salesian community at the Oratory in Valdocco, Rome, 10 May 1884, in P. BRAIDO (Ed.), *Don Bosco Educatore. Scritti e testimonianze* LAS, Roma, 1992, 380-381).

educator from Turin presents joy as the ordinary way of being holy and draws up a roadmap for achieving it.⁴⁴ However there are also profound correspondences that deserve not only to be briefly noted but are worthy of further reflection.

1. He wanted them to be happy as much as he loved them

“My dear friends” (Phil 2:12), Paul writes to the Philippians from Ephesus, “God knows how much I miss you all” (Phil 1:8), “dear brothers, my joy and my crown” (Phil 4:1). And Don Bosco: “Although I am here in Rome...,my thinking always flies to where I have my treasure in Jesus Christ, my dear children at the Oratory”.⁴⁵

It does not seem irrelevant to me that both Paul and Don Bosco wanted happiness for those for whom they had a special love of predilection. The command to be happy, in Paul, to serve God in joy as a ‘way of life’, in Don Bosco, have as origin and cause the impassioned love that both felt for their own: those loved by the apostle in a special way must be happy! First they feel loved then they feel happy.⁴⁶ which also means that only someone who loves can, like Paul to the Philippians, command someone to be happy and know, like Don Bosco, how to show the way to achieve happiness. Joy imposed or made easier is a sign and proof of a love that has been given, the love of apostles and educators⁴⁷

Therefore, so that joy is part of life's commitment, the community must know that it is deeply loved (cf. Jn 13:1). Paul and Don Bosco copied Jesus' behaviour, and made themselves his authentic apostles because “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love...I have told you this so my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:9.11).

2. The joy which the apostle commands, facilitated by the educator

“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord” (Phil 3:1); “I say again”, Paul insists further on, “rejoice” (Phil 4:4). Don Bosco, instead, writes: “I would like to teach you a way of Christian living which can be at the time happy and content., so you can say with the holy Prophet David: let us serve the Lord in cheerfulness”.⁴⁸

Exhorting to joy is a task for the apostles of Christ. While Paul can ask, and

⁴⁴ “Something certainly dear to Don Bosco is *to bring the boys into contact with the Scriptures*”, however the purpose is not Scripture lessons, “but to educate them through the Bible” (C. BISSOLI, “La Bibbia nel cuore di Don Bosco, in WIRTH, *La Bibbia*. III, 597.596).

⁴⁵ *Letter to Don Rua*, Jan-Feb 1870: OE II, 70-71. “I am here in Rome in the body, but my heart, thoughts and even my words are always at the Oratory, amidst all of you. This is a weakness, but I cannot overcome it” (*Letter to Don Rua*, 9 Feb. 1872: OE II, 193).

⁴⁶ In the Letter from Rome, 1884 “the reasons for the failure of education was this: not loving what the boys liked, a happy life especially, and more particularly in the courtyard”, BRAIDO, *Il Sistema*, 197).

⁴⁷ Don Bosco would have been “der Heilige der Erzieherliebe”. “Wohl niemand aber hat bewusster die gegenseitige Achtung und Liebe zum Fundament des Gehorsams und Erfolgs in der Erziehung genommen als Don Bosco. Nicht von aussen erwartet er sich alle pädagogische Wirkung, sondern ausschliesslich von innen” (EGGERSDORFER, *Jungenderziehung*, 246. 230)

⁴⁸ BOSCO, *Il giovane* 3-4: OE II 185-186.

expect his people to live in joy because they are saved in Christ Jesus, Don Bosco, perhaps with more practical realism and educational sensitivity, facilitates an appropriate climate⁴⁹ and precise approach⁵⁰ so his youngsters can serve God in cheerfulness. The final aim of both is the same, to live in the Lord, in Pauline language, that is, virtue or holiness, as Don Bosco prefers to say.⁵¹ The merit of Don Bosco,⁵² compared with Paul, is that he puts a programme at the disposition of his youngsters tailored for them, and an everyday experience of joyful holiness.⁵³

3. Joy to be always lived

“Rejoice in the Lord, always” (Phil 4:4) Paul exhorts. “Be cheerful”, Don Bosco often said.⁵⁴ And he reflects: “Wherever we see people living in God's grace, they are always happy, and also are content of heart amidst afflictions. On the contrary those who give themselves to pleasure are upset, and find it hard to find peace in their pastimes, and they are always unhappy: *Non est pax impiis*”.⁵⁵

A little before repeating his command to be joyful (Phil 4:1.4), Paul warned his readers to keep away from the ‘dogs’, preachers stirring up community life (Phil 3:2), true enemies of Christ's cross (Phil 3:17). Joy, when questioned or fought over in community, needs to be defended, because it is a gift to be preserved for the grace that it is. We should not let Don Bosco's insistence slip by unnoticed: people living happy or content, unhappy or angry; this is the radical difference between living with or without God. “Genuine and authentic cheerfulness is not possible for someone without peace of heart, while it becomes an effective reminder for someone who does not possess it: ‘the devil’ Don Bosco used say, “is afraid of cheerful people” (MB X, 648).”⁵⁶

In Don Bosco's words we see a deeply Christian experience: happiness is always a felt experience..., and sometimes a suffering one (cf. Mt 5:11): whoever lives in

⁴⁹ “S’il est un mot qui caractérise l’ambiance d’une maison salésienne, c’est la joie. Il s’agit, je pense, du meilleur indicateur d’une réelle mise en œuvre de la pédagogie salésienne. Se l’enfant se sent aimé, pris en compte de manière personnalisé, libre de s’exprimer, soutenu dans ses difficultés, reconnu dans ses talents, valorisé dans sa progression, alors la joie ne tardera pas à illuminer son visage (PETITCLERC, *La Pédagogie*, 109)

⁵⁰ “Il y avait dressé un programme spirituel parfaitement adapté à la jeunesse. Sa ‘méthode de vie’ correspondait aux désirs de l’âme jeune de tous les temps. Son idéalisme et son aspiration à la joie y étaient intelligemment combinés avec un style de sainteté détendue” (F. DESRAMAUT, *Don Bosco en son temps* (1815-1888), SEI, Torino, 1996, 249).

⁵¹ “I am happy that you are enjoying yourselves, playing, and that you are happy; this is the way to become holy, like St. Aloysius” (MB XI, 231; cfr. MB VII, 159).

⁵² AUBRY, *Avec don Bosco*, 58, lo considera “l’inspiration géniale de don Bosco”.

⁵³ “C’est pourquoi on ne peut pas concevoir un milieu vraiment salésien où ne serait pas faite sous une forme adaptée une ‘proposition’ de spiritualité juvénile, mais surtout où il n’y aurait pas effectivement ‘allégresse’... On ne peut concevoir une spiritualité salésienne de jeunes sans expérience de la béatitude évangélique reçue et communiquée” (AUBRY, *Avec Don Bosco*, 79).

⁵⁴ Cf. MB, VI 401; VIII, 92.751; IX, 7; XV, 830.

⁵⁵ BOSCO, *Il giovane* 28: OE II 208.

⁵⁶ *The Project of Life of the Salesians of Don Bosco*. Guide to reading the Salesian Constitutions, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma, 1986, 192.

grace has “a content heart even in afflictions”.⁵⁷ The mixture of affliction and happiness in good people is the price to pay: Don Bosco knew this well; just recall the Dream of the Pergola of Roses⁵⁸. Joy, Christian and Salesian joy, “is a joy that feeds on sacrifice, sometimes tough going, but accepted with a smile on our lips..., as something normal, without being either the victim or the hero”.⁵⁹ “In all our trouble I am filled with consolation, my joy is overflowing” (2 Cor 7:4), Paul admits to the Corinthians. And Don Bosco, to his trusted Enria: “Today Don Bosco is happier than usual...although today I have received some of the worst news I have ever had in my life”.⁶⁰

The apostolic defence of the believer's joy, then, makes it necessary – As Don Bosco warned – to be truly discerning of “what are the real amusements and pleasures”⁶¹. A tough task for the Christian educator today!: “The modern world offers young people many pleasures and amusements but little joy. The educator can claim to have made great steps forward in his educational practice when he has got people to understand, and better still, got young people to experience the difference between pleasure and joy”.⁶² It is no less urgent for being very difficult. But the Salesian educator – Fr Chávez warns us – has to help young people recognise and take advantage of their daily joys: “it needs strong patience in education to learn or learn again, to taste, simply, the many human joys the Creator places on our path daily”.

4. Only in the Lord is joy possible

“Rejoice in the Lord” (Phil 4:4). Don Bosco often told his boys “If you want your life to be happy and peaceful you have to strive to remain in God's grace”⁶³.

Don Bosco, as did Paul earlier, was convinced that full and lasting happiness is

⁵⁷ Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925) experienced many trials during his short life, including a romantic experience that left him deeply hurt. In the midst of this situation he wrote to his sister: “You ask me if I am happy. How could I not be? As long as faith gives me strength, I am happy. A Catholic could not be other than happy... The goal for which we were created involves a path which has its thorns, but it is not a sad path. It is joy, even when it involves pain” (*Letter to his sister Luciana*, Turin, 14 February 1925) (BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the 27th WYD, 2012*, n. 6. Cfr. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/youth/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120315_youth_en.html)

⁵⁸ MB III, 32-36. It calls attention to the fact that Don Bosco, even if he shows that he had this dream often, in 1847, 1848, 1856, told it “seventeen years after it happened”, in 1864, “to those who belonged to his Congregation”.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 193.

⁶⁰ MB XVIII 376 (Comment of Don Bosco's to Brother Enria, 15 August 1887, after hearing that Fr Dalmazzo had been relieved of his duties as Parish Priest at Sacred Heart, Rome, by papal mandate as well as by the Procurator General of the Congregation).

⁶¹ BOSCO, *Il giovane*, 2: OE II 186.

⁶² AUBRY, *Avec Don Bosco*, 79-80.

⁶³ MB XII, 133. “Only religion and God's grace can make man happy and content” (G. BOSCO, *La forza della buona educazione*. Curioso episodio contemporaneo, Torino, Paravia, 1855, 46). “Only the constant practice of religion can make him happy now and in eternity” (G. BOSCO, *Il Pastorello delle Alpi ovvero Vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argentera*, Torino, Tip. Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 1864, 180).

only possible by living in grace, acting as a Christian. Without excluding the pedagogical value of joy as a climate to be breathed in his works,⁶⁴ and its lack as an infallible criteria for diagnosing and judging their being ill-at-ease and the educational effectiveness,⁶⁵ for Don Bosco happiness is based in God:⁶⁶ “Don Bosco sees in it an essential manifestation of the life of grace... Life in holy joy is a way of Christian living that Don Bosco wants to offer his young people”.⁶⁷ This is why, beyond looking to every detail of other ordinary expressions of cheerfulness in the Oratory⁶⁸, Don Bosco put, and defended, sacramental practice as the ordinary and essential means for an all-rounded education: “They talk about what is needed for various educational systems, but I find no other sure basis, except frequent confession and communion”.⁶⁹ and in his pages on the preventive system, the short treatise which “confirmed his fame as an educator and pedagogue”,⁷⁰ Don Bosco puts it more forcefully: “Frequent confession, communion, daily mass, without threat or being forced, are the pillars on which education stands”. He then advises that young people be often told of “the beauty, grandeur, holiness of the Religion that offers such easy means so useful to society, peace of heart, salvation of the soul as are the Sacraments”.⁷¹

It seems worth saying often that Don Bosco saw confession as “the key to education”. He valued the same style of approaching the young that he used in the educational process: “it is the case of the same fatherliness, friendship and

⁶⁴ “La joie est la composante essentielle de cette ambiance éducative qui caractérise les maisons salésiennes, au point qu’on ne puisse concevoir une action éducative salésienne sans se préoccuper de la qualité de cette ambiance” (PETITCLERC, *La Pédagogie*, 112).

⁶⁵ An outstanding example are the two letters from Rome, in Mayo 1884, “one of the most effective and richest pedagogical documents of Don Bosco’s” (STELLA, *Don Bosco* II, 469). Cf. Fr BRAIDO, “Due lettere datate da Roma, 10 maggio 1884”, en *Don Bosco Educatore* 344-390; J. M. PRELLEZZO, “La(s) ‘carta(s)’ de Roma (1884), *CFP* 17 (2011) 179-201.

⁶⁶ “Uomo allegro il Ciel aiuta” (MB IX 879). “Die Frömmigkeit des Heiligen war durch eine einzigartige Fröhlichkeit gekennzeichnet, eine dauerhafte Freude, die keinen launischen Schwankungen unterlag... Die Freude war bei dem Mann aus Turin der Pulsschlag seines Herzens, weil es eine ganz und gar in Gott gegründete Freude war” (W. NIGG, *Don Bosco, ein zeitloser Heiliger*, Don Bosco Verlag, München 1977, 133).

⁶⁷ STELLA, *Valori*, 84. “Persuaded deeply by personal experience that happiness and Christian life are not in conflict, he placed his concern as a Christian educator to provide teachings and religious practice of the young, to get them involved and always more mature in his belief that Christian living is not sad by nature, but also by nature leads expanding in joy” (STELLA, *Don Bosco*. II, 190).

⁶⁸ The games and recreations in the playground, gymnastics, feasts, theatre and reading out aloud, music and singing, outings, belong to his “pedagogy of joy”, which Don Bosco put in place: “these are most effective means for obtaining discipline, and help good behaviour and holiness” (G. BOSCO, *Inaugurazione del Patronato di S. Pietro in Nizza a mare. Scopo del medesimo esposto dal sacerdote Giovanni Bosco con appendice sul sistema preventivo nella educazione della gioventù*, Tip. e Libr. Salesiana, 1877, 28). Cf. BRAIDO, *Prevenire*, 324-337.

⁶⁹ BOSCO, *Il Pastorello*, 100: OE XV, 342. “There are two wings for flying to heaven with: confession and communion” (MB VII, 50).

⁷⁰ BRAIDO, *Don Bosco Educatore*, 205. Don Bosco loved the feasts at the Oratory “for the glory they gave God and the great good they produced for the young, especially for the Sacraments” (MB IX, 666).

⁷¹ BOSCO, *Inaugurazione*, 28. “The first way of educating well is to get them to make good confessions and good communions” (MB IV, 555). “When the holy Sacraments are overlooked in the houses they cannot prosper” (MB XIII, 643). Cf. MB III, 355; VI, 145; XI, 221.

confidence that awakens attention to the movements of grace in the young”.⁷² “The second support for youth is holy communion”, he wrote in the outline of Besucco's life⁷³. And in Savio's Life he has his chief character say “If then I want something great, I receive the Host... What am I lacking to be happy? Nothing in this world... Don Bosco comments that it was from this that his hilarity, heavenly joy shone through all his activity”.⁷⁴ There is no doubt that Jesus Christ, encountered in the Sacraments “dominates Don Bosco's spiritual life and the environment which has him at its centre”⁷⁵. Being with Him, in Him, is reason for joy.

“In fact, the obstacles to the new evangelization are precisely a lack of joy and hope among people, caused and spread by various situations in our world today. Often times, this lack of joy and hope is so strong that it affects the very tenor of our Christian communities.... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world”⁷⁶.

Salesians and Sisters, and other Salesian Family members, let us be proud that we have received from Don Bosco a pedagogical legacy that knew how to make joy not only an experience of daily life, but especially the Salesian path to holiness and God. It should not be strange then that the words “joy”, “joyful” should have an “honourable place”⁷⁷ in our Constitutions where they have been taken up as “a constitutive feature”⁷⁸ of the Salesian charism.

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Rome, 8 December 2012

⁷² GC21, 93.

⁷³ BOSCO, *Il Pastorello* 105: OE XV, 347. Fr Viganò comments: “Don Bosco considered Eucharistic pedagogy to be the high point of his educational practice” (E. VIGANÒ, “Spiritualità Salesiana per la nuova evangelizzazione”, in *Lettere Circolari*, Vol. III, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma, 1996, 1065.)

⁷⁴ G. BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, Paravia, Torino, 1859, 69: OE XI, 219.

⁷⁵ STELLA, *Don Bosco* II; 107

⁷⁶ SYNOD OF BISHOPS. XIII Assembly, *The New Evangelisation for the transmission of the Christian faith. Lineamenta*, Roma, 2011, n. 25. Cf. Paolo VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), n. 80: AAS 68 (1976) 75.

⁷⁷ F. DESRAUMAUT, *Spiritualità Salesiana*. Cento parole chiave, LAS, Roma 2001, 333. Cf. A. STRUS, “Ottimismo e gioia”, in J. J. BARTOLOME – F. PERRENCHIO, *Parola di Dio e spirito salesiano*, ElleDiCi, Leumann 1996, 283-296.

⁷⁸ C. BISSOLI, “Siate sempre lieti nel Signore, ve lo ripeto: siate lieti” (Fil 4,4). *Lectio divina (salesiana) sulla Strenna del Rettor Maggiore per il 2013*: NPG 46 (2012) 32.