

READING THE SALESIAN CHARISM TODAY NEW SCENARIOS - NEW CHALLENGES

THEOLOGICAL-PASTORAL UPDATING COURSE
FR. FABIO ATTARD, SDB, SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, 2021

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INTRODUCTORY PREMISE

The program that I propose for these days consists of three main parts. The first part will present a look at our time and our history. In this part, I will begin by offering a reading of the journey of the Congregation, the heritage that continues to grow and that continues to mature. Starting from my own experience as General Councilor, from that path I comment on some social and cultural dimensions that must be taken into account. These are dimensions that have a significant influence on pastoral processes and the choices that are made and applied.

In the second part, of a more reflective / contemplative nature, we take our own educational and pastoral experience as a "laboratory". We visit it in light of what I share in the first part. We interpret it in the context that marks the path of the Church and the Congregation.

In the third and last part, we look at our future, imagining it from the same figure and pastoral experience as Don Bosco.

PART ONE - OUR TIME, OUR HISTORY

(This FIRST PART (numbers 1, 2, 3) will be my summary after these years as Councilor of Youth Ministry. My idea would be to develop it in the form of an article(s). The way to teach the three sections will be dialogic, interactive, that is, with space for questions and reactions while the presentation is taking place. Possibly, with the text in your hands.)

1. A look at our "field to be plowed" and the history of our young people with empathetic charity and pastoral intelligence

We begin by collecting those objectives that have marked and continue to mark the path of our Congregation. Based on my experience as a Youth Ministry Councilor (2008-2020), animating and accompanying the provinces in the different processes of educational and pastoral proposals, I offer the cardinal points that have emerged as beacons and indicators that have guided us. Next, I comment on some characteristics that have marked and continue to mark the context in which we find ourselves. In the end, some challenges and calls will be identified that, in acknowledging them, we must take seriously.

1.1. The most significant of the journey

In April 2010, Don Pascual Chávez wrote Letter n. 407.¹ In it we have an outline of the pastoral journey lived by the Congregation since the Second Vatican Council. It is an important Charter because it offers a clear synthesis of the key moments and clearly identified objectives that have marked the progressive pastoral advance that the Congregation has matured and shared in all these years. The reference to this letter is due to the fact that in it we find explained very well how what we live today is the fruit of a careful, serious and constant commitment promoted by those who preceded us in the government and animation of the Congregation.

From this Letter I would like to highlight in a particular way some specific points, not because they are more important than others, but because they are points that contain that driving force that today, as in the past, we need to emphasize and jealously guard. These are objectives that have emerged as the fruit of decisive choices that continue to ensure the development and promote the significant growth of Salesian youth ministry.

Don Pascual Chávez lists 5 points as "great objectives of this journey." Here are some phrases for each goal in order to get a clearer idea of what these goals entail:

i. An ever deeper perception of the new situation of the young

Everything associated with society and the church has changed profoundly. Young people are living according to new values and have new criteria for their lives which constitute a culture that really is new; the traditional links in the chain for the transmission of culture and religion (the family, the school, the church ...) have become weakened and are often in

¹ Don P. CHÁVEZ, «Y le dio lástima de ellos, porque andaban como ovejas sin pastor, y se puso a enseñarles con calma» (Mc 6,34): La Pastoral Juvenil Salesiana, ACG 407, 2010.

crisis. The circumstances surrounding the work of education and the apostolate are very different and are constantly changing. Therefore, it is not possible to limit ourselves to small modifications or adjustments to our traditional praxis, nor to think in terms of a program for action which is the same for everyone...the need to re-think and examine more deeply the content and the structure of Salesian education and pastoral practice in response to the new situation of the young.

ii. An effort to re-formulate the traditional educative and pastoral contents and methods

“...the urgent need to seriously re-think the contents and the methods of education to the faith, in particular as regards certain key issues or fundamental points:

- above all the unity and completeness of the educative-pastoral project, overcoming the compartmentalization of a praxis which considers pastoral work as just one sector (‘the religious aspect’) which is added on to the other aspects of education, rather than the characterizing feature of the whole program;
- the close relationship between the four dimensions of Salesian pastoral ministry (educational dimension, evangelizing dimension, associative dimension and vocational dimension);
- the community sense of the Salesian proposal, which is born from a community and creates community;
- a planning mentality;
- a style of animation that, in the new youth situation, highlights some central elements of the Preventive System."

iii. Broadening the field for action in response to the new situation

With the crisis of the traditional educational agencies, new places and new experiences emerge which become significant for the young and capable of transmitting values and lifestyle. ... This new type of presence requires a new educational and pastoral approach, a new relationship with the ecclesial community and with the local area."

iv. Renewal of the structures of pastoral animation and government in the Congregation and in the provinces

“The guidelines and the general frame of reference need to be taken up by the Provinces in order to adapt them to their own circumstances, taking into account the social and cultural situation of the place.... Structural unity of Salesian pastoral practice in the apostolate requires that there be a single point of reference for the whole of the pastoral practice in its various forms and sectors, and this is the Councilor for Youth Ministry at world level and the Delegate for Youth Ministry at Province level."

v. The focal point for attention: the quality of the educative- pastoral action

In these last twenty years especially, there has been an insistence that, by preference, there should be concentration on improving the quality of the educative-pastoral activity... efforts have been made to concentrate all the energy of animation on quality, especially in these areas:

- **not being content with an apostolate of the first steps only**, of ‘keeping them amused’, of generalized projects for the large group, or of keeping administrative or management control of the activities, but rather concentrating what is being done on the objective of developing human maturity, and of education to the faith, with explicit and powerful projects;
- **ensuring a systematic process of evangelization** (the proclamation of Jesus Christ) and of education to the faith, capable of leading young people to a personal encounter with Jesus and with the Church;
- **developing the educational dimension** in our works and in our programs, so that values become a matter of personal conviction, and the Christian meaning of life is pursued;
- **involving with more co-responsibility and better preparation all those carrying out the apostolate:** the Salesian communities, lay collaborators, youth leaders, etc. to enable them to respond adequately to the educational and pastoral challenges presented by today’s young people and to live the mission with enthusiasm and dynamism."

In these five objectives we have a set of options that in these years have been increasingly consolidated as Salesian patrimony as well as in the Salesian educational pastoral proposal.

We can say that little by little, (a) although sometimes and in some places with no little effort, the conviction grows in the Congregation that we cannot live our mission as if it were an agency or organization which fell from heaven. We grow in the conviction that we cannot improvise by reacting to difficult situations or crises that come our way.

We are sent as educators with the heart of the Good Shepherd to young people with concrete histories that are not always easy. When we say that we go out to meet young people at the point of their freedom (cf. Art. 38), it means that our mission is incarnated, it is embodied in the experience they are living and does not arise from a subjective impression that we may or may not have. Attention to the life and situation of young people is not a detail, but a mandatory point of continuous dialogue and confrontation.

The same occurs with the theme of (b) the novelty of language, and together with it of the pastoral proposal. The phrase "we've always done it this way" no longer works. The reformulation of the contents is the order of the day because each generation is itself, the change belongs to it. The great challenge continues to be that of capturing the core of the pastoral educational message and knowing how to transfer it to daily life with the effort

and commitment that this requires. But it is an effort worth assuming and without which we will never intercept the true and real needs and questions of young people. Without this "reformulation" we would be living in a parallel world.

In addition to the novelty of the message, we must recognize (c) the novelty of pastoral spaces. We are realizing that within the same presences there are new challenges, new calls, new forms of poverty that require new understandings and new responses. They are not necessarily "new presences", but "renewed presences", that is, new ways of responding to the novelty of pastoral emergencies. We realize this in the spheres in which we usually operate and in which new forms of poverty, restlessness, marginalization and the search for meaning appear. These are not situations that necessarily require "new presences", but they do require new responses, new spaces and new ways of being present as pilgrims of young people, of families.

All of this has forced us to review our (d) governance and animation structures at all levels. I believe that here, in these decades after Vatican II, as a Congregation we have a path that has never been interrupted, it has known no compromise. Little by little the provinces are assuming the lines indicated by the General Chapters and carried forward with conviction by the Dicastery of Youth Ministry. More Salesians are preparing to take on the various tasks of animation. There is a growth in the commitment of the provinces in the formation of teams of Salesians and laity to animate and accompany the various provincial processes.

In this dynamic, we must always work for a single objective: (e) the quality of educational and pastoral action. We will have the opportunity to comment on this objective, its importance, but also the danger that this goal is managed with more partial criteria, that is, favoring the horizontal dimension, with the danger of not making a proposal truly our own, that is, comprehensive from the perspective of the Salesian charism. But we will talk about this later.

I wanted to start with a quick read of "our house" knowing that it is good that we begin to see some goals achieved. We are not doing it to fool ourselves that we are okay. We do it because the objectives achieved, although they contain challenges that are not small, and that we are going to see and study well, but the objectives tell us that there is a margin of positivity, a path that has a goal, which should not be underestimated. Although we must never lose our critical capacity, we cannot remain in a partial reading of reality, thus losing the value of the paths of growth that really exist.

1.2. The story of youth speaks to us

Let us now look at some aspects, neither exhaustive nor exclusive, that come to us from the world of youth and that must necessarily serve as lights on our path. The following reflections are drawn mainly from my reading of the European context with its particular challenges, the result of a historical process - religious and cultural - that gave rise to the current era.² I am

² Creo que es útil mencionar aquí el trabajo fundamental de Romano Guardini, *La fine dell'epoca moderna* (Morcelliana 200711).

referring to some authors who have a valid word for us today. I comment on four of these challenges.

i. The desertification of the spiritual and religious imagery in the social and cultural field.

At the end of the last century, 1996, Fr. Juan Edmundo Vecchi, our Rector Major, in a letter entitled "He felt compassion for them (Mk 6,34): New poverties, Salesian mission and significance,"³ commented on a phenomenon that has been verified and studied by many authors.⁴ Don Vecchi writes that "today there is a multitude of adults and young people lacking the fundamental goods to live, who move disoriented and wait for a sign of solidarity." Within this new scenario in which our educational commitment unfolds, Don Vecchi identifies as the main characteristic that of the "drama of spiritual poverty":

The scene is marked by a phenomenon: poverty. It is not only the condition of a few, it is the drama of humanity, a spiritual drama more than material. Worldwide it has tragic dimensions and its effects on individuals and peoples are devastating. With good reason, the highest scientific and religious authorities have repeatedly denounced them ... What is most impressive is the diffusion of a deep rootlessness that winds among young people and that is pushing towards forms of marginalization and renunciation of growth.⁵

To the reflection of Don Vecchi I add two other reflections that touch on the same pastoral challenge. The first was made by Pope Benedict at the beginning of his Petrine ministry. Commenting on the challenges of the ministry that awaits him, the Pope points out how "the holy concern of Christ is to animate the pastor", and continues:

It is not indifferent to him that many people roam the desert. And there are many forms of desert: the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst; the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of broken love. There is also the desert of God's darkness, of the emptiness of souls that are no longer aware of the dignity and direction of man. The outer deserts are multiplying in the world, because the inner deserts have spread... The Church as a whole, as well as her Pastors, must set out like Christ to rescue men from the desert and lead them to the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in fullness.⁶

It is not irrelevant that Pope Benedict, rich in his experience as a theologian, one of the most attentive and keen observers in history, sees in the image of the desert the key to

³ Don J.E. VECCHI, «Sintió compasión de ellos (Mc 6,34): Nuevas pobrezas, misión salesiana y significatividad, ACG 359, 1997. (VECCHI, ACG 359)

⁴ Sobre el tema del "desencanto" de la religión véase el artículo de Charles Taylor, "Il mondo ha bisogno di rincanto" in *Avvenire*, <http://www.gliscritti.it/blog/entry/1391>

⁵ VECCHI, ACG 359.

⁶ Papa BENEDICTO XVI, Homilía para el inicio del Ministerio Petriño del Obispo de Roma, Domingo 24 de abril de 2005, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/es/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html

naming the territory we must cross. We are pilgrims in the world to offer a vision that overcomes the feeling of darkness, emptiness and bewilderment.

The same theme is proposed again by Pope Francis in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*,⁷ when in Chapter 7, in No. 216, which specifically talks about youth ministry, he comments on the theme of the environments that must be cared for and which are places that communicate home, knowing that young people are sons and daughters, "orphans, our contemporaries." He writes:

We need to make all our institutions better equipped to be more welcoming to young people, since so many have a real sense of being orphaned. Here I am not referring to family problems but to something experienced by boys and girls, young people and adults, parents and children alike. To all these orphans – including perhaps ourselves – communities like a parish or school should offer possibilities for experiencing openness and love, affirmation and growth. Many young people today feel that they have inherited the failed dreams of their parents and grandparents, dreams betrayed by injustice, social violence, selfishness and lack of concern for others. In a word, they feel uprooted. If the young grow up in a world in ashes, it will be hard for them to keep alive the flame of great dreams and projects. If they grow up in a desert devoid of meaning, where will they develop a desire to devote their lives to sowing seeds? The experience of discontinuity, uprootedness and the collapse of fundamental certainties, fostered by today's media culture, creates a deep sense of orphanhood to which we must respond by creating an attractive and fraternal environment where others can live with a sense of purpose.

Do we not find here a synthesis that clearly explains the meaning or lack of meaning that many of our young people go through: a burnt world, a desert void of meaning, discontinuity, uprooting, the fall of basic certainties, a feeling of profound orphanhood?

In all this scenario, there are some fixed points that it is essential not to lose. Pope Francis remembers them in *Christus Vivit* when he asks:

Anyone called to be a parent, pastor or guide to young people must have the farsightedness to appreciate the little flame that continues to burn, the fragile reed that is shaken but not broken (cf. Is 42:3). The ability to discern pathways where others only see walls, to recognize potential where others see only peril. That is how God the Father see things; he knows how to cherish and nurture the seeds of goodness sown in the hearts of the young. Each young person's heart should thus be considered "holy ground", a bearer of seeds of divine life, before which we must "take off our shoes" in order to draw near and enter more deeply into the Mystery. (n.67)

⁷ Papa FRANCESCO, *Esortazione Apostolica Post-Sinodale Christus Vivit*, 25 marzo 2019.

Charles Taylor, in a recent interview, comments on the synthesis of his thinking in this time of great change. He asks us not to fool ourselves into believing that the time of spiritual search has disappeared:

The core of this new narrative is that the relationships between religion and spirituality have profoundly changed. We have to think about religion and spirituality together. Before, in our western world, this relationship was thought and realized in entirely Christian societies, not only in their common beliefs, but also in their way of doing politics and culture: it was a way of living religion as a whole, a kind of automatism. Today this image has disappeared, but spirituality, the desire to find something greater, the urge towards eternity has not disappeared. These things will never leave man. The point is that this desire has found another way to express itself. That is why I have distinguished three times of secularization. The first two are the division between Church and State, and the decrease in religious practice. The third era of Western secularization, on the other hand, is this new way in which people seek and come together guided by a certain spiritual "appetite" that is realized in many ways. The conditions of belief have changed ... The human being is constituted by his culture, his history and the society in which he lives. Therefore, it is not true that human beings have always been the same and that today they have lost their dreams. It must be understood that the man of today is different and lives his spirituality and his relationship with religion in a different way.⁸

ii. Intercept / find the hidden thirst and silent demand

In the same direction that the first aspect follows, a second is intimately linked to it. It is that of a search that contains thirst and hunger for the meaning of life. We are faced with a silent demand that assumes various spiritual forms and is marked by the diversity of religious experiences. It is a question that is rooted in a restless heart, which possibly does not want to abandon the search.

A reflection by Johann Baptist Metz⁹ helps us examine with what attitude we are called to intercept and grasp the contours of this challenge. At this point, what I would like to comment on is not so much the search for young people, which we know exists, but more importantly the desire and capacity of educators and pastors not to pass over this hidden and silent cry.

In his political theology that points to a "concrete and responsible spirituality", Metz speaks of a "mystique" that keeps his eyes open to reality. It is an experience marked by a "certain expectation, a well-founded tension, during which one equips oneself to fully live the divine encounter."¹⁰ A divine encounter that bears witness to a spiritual experience connected with reality as it is present and not as we want it to be present.

⁸ "Colloquio con il filosofo Charles Taylor: Secolarizzazione e cristianesimo", in Osservatore Romano, 10 novembre 2019, a firma di Luca M. Possati; <http://www.settimananews.it/profili/charles-taylor-premio-ratzinger/>

⁹ J. B. METZ, *Mistica degli occhi aperti. Per una spiritualità concreta e responsabile*, Brescia: Queriniana, 2013.

¹⁰ G. RAVASI, "Spiritualità ad occhi aperti" in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 29 settembre 2013, <https://st.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2013-09-29/spiritualita-occhi-aperti-084646.shtml?uid=Ab1twQfi>

In our pastoral commitment, we assume the call of the educator-pastor who goes in search of the deep desire for questioning that lives in the hearts of young people. But, first of all, we perceive and take care of this tension on a personal level. Only in this way can this experience reach that "conquest of a global unity that manages to put together the scattered fragments of the experiences in a mosaic where even the black pieces make sense". Lived on a personal level, we can perceive it in the lives of our young people.¹¹

Metz continues his commentary on this "mysticism that seeks the face" by saying that such "(mysticism) leads first of all to an encounter with others who suffer, to an encounter with the faces of the unhappy and the victims. He obeys, first of all, to the authority of suffering."¹² These are words that we can easily apply to the pastoral mission as Don Bosco himself lived it and transmitted it to us.

It is no coincidence that during the last General Chapter 28 the young people present told us:

The world we live in is complex and it presents significant challenges. There is a difficulty in remaining authentic and because of this, we are afraid, confused, frustrated, and we need to be loved... As a result of our fear, we struggle with commitment... We believe that our society is individualistic and that we can be individualistic too..., We want to be able to return to the first love that is Christ through being the companion and friend of the young. Our search for spiritual and personal fulfillment worries us. We want to walk towards spiritual and personal growth, and we want to do it with you Salesians.¹³

iii. The value of prophecy that "dialogues" through testimony

A third aspect that the world of young people asks of us is the gift of prophecy and the witness that follows. From us, educators and pastors, they hope that we will give rise to an atmosphere of relationships and dialogue that takes root and matures against the background of an authentic and true witness. It is enough to read the document that the young people themselves offered before the 2018 Synod on Young People to see how this petition is at the top of their wishes. At one point they write that, from the Church, and consequently from its pastors, they expect people willing to assume and communicate an "evangelical style":

Today's young people are longing for an authentic Church. We want to say, especially to the hierarchy of the Church, that they should be a transparent, welcoming, honest, inviting, communicative, accessible, joyful and interactive community. A credible Church is one which is not afraid to allow itself be seen as vulnerable. The Church should be sincere in admitting its past and present wrongs,

¹¹ Idem.

¹² J. B. METZ, *Mistica degli occhi aperti*, p.20.

¹³ Carta de los Jóvenes a los Capitulares, CG28.

that it is a Church made up of persons who are capable of error and misunderstanding. (n.11)¹⁴

On this point I would like to recall a reflection that comes from the early 1970s and that is found in an essay by the young theologian Joseph Ratzinger.¹⁵ In discussing the future of the Church, Ratzinger says that the Church "will present itself much more strongly than before as the community of free will, which can only be accessed by a decision" (p. 115). But the fact that it is a small community corresponds more strongly and clearly to the initiative and strong witness of its individual members. Then, almost like a prophet, imagine this community with lines that we are noticing emerging in small doses and that are directly related to our reflection:

It will come out of an internalized and simplified church with great force ... (People) will then discover the small community of believers as something totally new. As a hope that worries them, as an answer to the questions that have always been asked in secret. (p. 116)

It is this same demand that lives strongly in the hearts of young people today. And let's be careful not to interpret their request as a mere display of their idealism. No. Their request is a cry to find and experience what their spirit longs for, but cannot find.

Within the framework of this reflection, I would like to offer a testimony that has always caught my attention due to its intensity, as well as its great relevance. It is the testimony of Simone Weil, which she wrote to her spiritual director. She comments on the way he accompanied her. In this letter, Simone Weil captures the deep and central value of that style, which is a combination of limpid testimony enriched by acceptance and respectful dialogue. This path that was offered to her was a gift because at that time Simone Weil was going through a complex and complicated period. More specifically, she was in a very delicate phase of questioning and search, with all that that experience always entails. In a few lines, she manages to collect and summarize the "greatest benefit" of a friendship marked by respect, patience, acceptance and authenticity.

But the greatest benefit it has provided has been of another nature. By seizing my friendship through a charity the equivalent of which I had never known, he provided me with the most powerful and purest source of inspiration that can be found in human things. For none of them is as helpful as friendship for God's friends.¹⁶

These two reflections by Joseph Ratzinger and Simone Weil offer us some guidelines for the anatomy of the pastoral challenge that we face. They invite us to look at the present with less pessimism and more hope. Not everything is pessimism and doom that change has brought and will continue to bring. Remembering that we live in a change of era, and not in a time of change, means going towards a complete paradigm shift with courage and

¹⁴ "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment" Pre-Synodal Meeting, Final Document, Roma, 19-24 Marzo 2018.

¹⁵ J. RATZINGER, *Fede e futuro*, (Queriniana 1984), pp. 112-117.

¹⁶ S. WEIL, *A la espera de Dio*, Madrid, Trotta, 1993, p. 44.

hope, without forgetting, however, that the solid points of the human heart have not disappeared.

Only to the extent that we serenely accept the challenge of living this time as the Lord offers it, can we move on to living it with a strong prophetic sense. A way of living this time that is not afraid of limits and apparent failure. We are always strong in knowing that ours is only one answer to his call.

iv. A meaningful and authentic "Word"

We come to a fourth aspect: a "Word." Young people want to "hear" and "hear" a good and kind "word" that we often manage to communicate in the simple everyday gestures of life, in the various forms and ways that we use. However, there is also a thirst for a "Word" with a capital "W". As in all things authentically true and profound, it is not a question of "selling" the Word here. Rather, it is about the challenge of fostering paths and routes in which the kerygma can find gradually, with patience and respect, the opening in the heart, although most of the time it is hidden and veiled.

It is urgent that we, the Salesians of Don Bosco, pay close attention to that effort that our Salesian magisterium continually gives us. The Rector Major, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, when he indicated to us the Action Program for the Salesian Congregation after the 28th General Chapter, put the following as the second proposal for the growth of the Salesian identity:

It is urgent that we give absolute priority to the commitment to evangelize the young with conscious, intentional, and explicit proposals. We are invited to introduce them to Jesus and the good news of the Gospel for their lives.

The Rector Major comments that "we cannot do without the essential and constitutive element that characterized Don Bosco's educational-pastoral action", and quotes Don Juan Vecchi who expressed it thus:

Don Bosco's pedagogy is a pedagogy of the soul, of grace, of the supernatural. When this energy is activated, the most profitable work of education begins. The other, valid in itself, is propaedeutic and concomitant to this which transcends it.¹⁷

We cannot fail to underline the deep connection that this insistence of the Congregation has with the path of the Church and how it is nourished by it. It is enough to read Number 214 of *Christus Vivit* where Pope Francis reiterates the theme of the kerygma, its indispensable centrality. In this n. 214 of *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis takes up this specific point that in *Evangelii Gaudium* had already indicated as an indispensable option:

This was something I emphasized in *Evangelii Gaudium*, and I consider it worth repeating here. It would be a serious mistake to think that in youth ministry “the

¹⁷ Don J.E. VECCHI, *Indicazioni per un cammino di spiritualità salesiana*, ACG 354, 1995.

kerygma should give way to a supposedly more 'solid' formation. Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation. All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma"[113] and incarnating it ever more fully in our lives. Consequently, youth ministry should always include occasions for renewing and deepening our personal experience of the love of God and the living Christ. It can do this in a variety of ways: testimonies, songs, moments of adoration, times of spiritual reflection on the sacred Scriptures, and even an intelligent use of social networks. Yet this joyful experience of encounter with the Lord should never be replaced by a kind of "indoctrination". (CV n.214)

In the light of these references, from the Church and the Congregation, I would like to recall an intervention by French Bishop Claude Dagens at the 2012 Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*. Bishop Dagens said that the Synod is a propitious opportunity, a *kairos*, to make us listen to the question: "Lord, what do you want from us? And, above all, to answer the question that Jesus continually asks us, as he did to his first disciples: "What are you looking for? (Jn 1.38)". He then comments on the apostolic character of the Church:

The purpose of the Church is not the Church, it is the encounter of men with Christ the Savior, and we are only the servants of this encounter, in the Church and with the Church. It is not enough, then, to be present in the world, as we sometimes say too easily. It is about being of God for the world, of being linked to the dead and risen Christ, participating, in the Holy Spirit, in his struggle, his Passion and his Easter.

We said that young people look for, wait for a "Word" with a capital "W". A Word that is a Person. And that person is Jesus Christ. Young people seek it out, some consciously, but most unconsciously. They need "mediators" who know the way, what is the truth and what is life. They ask for the help of "adults in the faith" who have "heard" and "seen" him, as Saint John says in his First Letter (1 Jn 1,1-5). And we are those adults.

2. The concrete experience of Salesian youth ministry as a dynamic and fluid "polyhedron"

In his book "Urgenze Pastoral",¹⁸ the French Jesuit theologian Christoph Theobald titled the first part of his book: "Sedersi...Per una diagnosi del momento." He concludes this part by referring to the image of the polyhedron that Pope Francis uses in *Evangelii Gaudium*. (EG) Let's see how Pope Francis uses this image.

In the Fourth Chapter of the EG, *The social dimension of evangelization*, the Pope comments on "the common good and social peace" in numbers 217-237, describing this common good through four principles related to constant tensions present in every social reality... four specific principles which can guide the development of life in society and the building of a people where differences are harmonized within a shared pursuit." (n. 221). Let us remember the four principles, which are the following:

¹⁸ C. THOEBALD, *Urgenze pastorali*. (Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2019).

- Time is greater than space [222-225]
- Unity prevails over conflict [226-230]
- Realities are more important than ideas [231-233]
- The whole is greater than the parts [234-237]

The image of the polyhedron is commented within the last of the four principles: "the whole is superior to the part". Theobald wonders with what attitude we look at the territory to which the Lord sends us, where we assume our call as shepherds. He writes that it is important, first of all, to grasp "the need to consider a territory and its history as a gift from God" because it is "in this territory, loaded with memory and concrete, even spiritual possibilities, where it is a matter of announcing and letting the kingdom of God take place" (p. 98).

Starting from this deep "mystical" conviction, we are invited to always be attentive to new opportunities, new questions and new searches that we often encounter in a way that is not necessarily explicit or familiar. They are occasions, places and stories of people that surprise us because generally we are not used to finding signs of novelty in those circumstances that we think we know. We can say that the surprise is part of the overcoming of all reality already lived and visited.

The metaphor of the polyhedron is therefore opposed, above all, to any homogeneous monolithism and signifies a new way of managing the relationships between the whole and the parts, it honors above all - and this is the most relevant - experience and "discovery" without end of "the inexhaustible richness of the Gospel" (EG n. 40), precisely valued (...) by the diversity of cultural contexts (EG n. 133) and by the variety inherent in our ways of living and thinking (EG n.40). (p. 100)

This means knowing how to favor that open attitude to the new, to what is not yet known or experienced. It means placing ourselves next to our young people, where our presence is a sign, a message, a "sacrament" that arouses, through sheer attraction and empathy, the hidden good that can only emerge if we do not prevent it from arising. In this context there must be what Theobald calls "a pastoral dialysis", a disposition that avoids the "intoxication" of the repetitive, of what has already been seen, of the inability to allow ourselves to be surprised:

This work of pastoral "dialysis", typical of critical modernity in Europe, implies, with respect to the evolutions of our societies - secularism and secularization with their complexities -, a favorable a priori capable of taking advantage of the potential for creativity unleashed by them within of the Christian tradition (p. 102).

And here we cannot miss the call to see how we, Salesians of Don Bosco, have received in some way this DNA of Don Bosco. Our charism contains this ability to foster and encourage growth, to help a potential for creativity to flourish from all the circumstances in which the history of our young people inhabits. The "loving" gaze that communicates empathy, where the hearts of the young feel welcomed and understood, accompanied and loved by the heart of the good shepherd.

These are the signs that trigger dialysis processes. By purifying relationships, they strengthen and release kindness, trust, true and authentic friendship.

In the reality of the Salesian context, I believe that we have four real spaces, which we can also call experiences, that contain in their daily life and simplicity an enormous load of kind humanity, of sympathetic transcendence, of incarnated, concrete, accessible joyful spirituality. They are spaces, experiences, that our Salesian magisterium continually reiterates, urging us to evaluate in a prophetic way.

I would like to comment on them, basing myself in the first place on the legacy of our Salesian magisterium, to reaffirm once again that what we need we already have, but also enriching it with personal experience, fruit of the various opportunities lived during the years that I had to animate the sector of youth ministry of the Congregation. During these years I have been able to see how the journey of the Congregation, when it is accepted with humility and read with pastoral intelligence, becomes an extraordinary gift for young people around the world. Not accepting it hurts above all our recipients, those we are called to serve.

2.1. Salesian Community

I would like to start immediately with what seems to me to be foundational and fundamental: the Salesian community. I am more and more convinced of the reflection that Don Juan Vecchi has left us in the famous Letter ACG 363 entitled: Experts, Witnesses and Craftsmen of Communion: the Salesian community - animating nucleus.¹⁹ In this Letter, to which it would be good to return often, with great realism and prophetic clarity, Fr. Vecchi offers us those essential points that emerge from the experience of the Salesian community.

I dare to say that these are points that in the immediate future will have a much appreciated impact on the Salesian charism and, consequently, also on our Salesian way of being Church, of being pastors in the educational sphere. To explain it better, I would like to share only 5 indications that, over the years, continue to maintain their validity and inspiring force, at the same time educational and pastoral, pedagogical and spiritual.

i. Local communities are the place of our every day; there we express our consecrated life and the quality of our commitment to education.

The local community is not a "functioning structure", but rather a "presence", a sacrament, that is, a sign and a testimony of our identity as pastors and educators. Our consecrated life is not a "detail", that it can also become something optional. The consecration of the Salesians, their life in common, their being servants of the young is the source of who we really are. "Educators because pastors" and "pastors because educators" become an existential dialectic in which one cannot live without the other. This means that the abandonment or weakening of our consecrated life is simply and inevitably the prelude to the fall, in all senses and in all forms, of our educational proposal.

¹⁹ Don J.E. VECCHI, *Expertos, Testigos y Artífices de Comunión. La comunidad salesiana – núcleo animador*, ACG 363, 1998. (VECCHI, ACG 363).

For those who really have eyes to see, notice immediately how experience tells us in a clear and factual way that in those parts of the world where as Salesians we have abandoned our living together (communion) as consecrated persons (consecration), little by little the whole Salesian project (mission) has disappeared. In the name of a false and ideological understanding of modernity, we are witnessing the loss of the essential. Powerless, we have witnessed the fall of both consecrated life and the educational proposal.

ii. They (the communities) are in direct contact with young people and with people, they feel situations in their own skin and must think about the witness of life and apostolic initiatives with which to solve them.

When the local community is truly alive, it lives and thrives on its closeness to the people, especially the neediest young people. Its life and that of the young people turn into a symbiotic experience. It is a consecrated life embodied in the history of the people. It nourishes those it encounters. But it is also fed by them. Living this "sacrament of presence" leads us to respond to the needs of young people, to tap into their hopes, to make their own the desire for a tomorrow that must be built today for them, but above all with them. The community grows in the territory as a point of reference for all, without distinction. It also becomes a refuge that offers meaning, a future, especially for the poor and needy. This is not pure philanthropy, with all its positives. This is the living Gospel, which "communicates" the language of charity through the gesture of the servant who educates!

iii. The operating conditions have their testing ground in the local community; in it you can verify their validity and evaluate if they are feasible in our current conditions.

Only when the local community, only when the Salesians of Don Bosco themselves acquire and mature a personal and pastoral conviction of what the Congregation wants to promote, does their presence, their work, succeed in communicating the future in the present. All this becomes very clear when we meet Salesians who, with a healthy and authentic experience, come to make proposals that find consensus, collaboration and shared commitment. Then, the community not only accepts the indications, but refines them through its concrete and real experience. Yes, the community is the "testing ground" that is called to live the charism in order to offer it as a gift.

iv. There is another reason: Only by involving local communities can all or at least the greatest number of confreres be involved in the effort to reflect on a pedagogy of faith and a new community dynamic.

Here we are entering a delicate matter, but also at a decisive moment. The pastoral journey that the Congregation is taking is not the result of work at the table. Nor is it a proposal marked by lightness and improvisation. The reflection and contemplation of the multiple educational and pastoral dynamics have their origin in the experience that the Spirit aroused in the Valdocco Oratory and continues to do so today through the commitment of

so many who, living the daily educational and pastoral experience, have the capacities and the gifts to make grow the reflection on the charism, to find new spaces for pastoral creativity.

This asks the Salesian community not only to work, but also to contemplate the pastoral educational scene. We are called to live in a permanent state of discernment so that the proposal that we promote and support is always in the light of the signs of the times. The community is called to take on the challenge of what it means today to communicate the Good News, how to promote an environment and proposals that have Christian roots.

v. Therefore, the community, especially the one under the direct gaze of the youth and the people, in which our life unfolds, is the point where the great expectations of significance and apostolic efficacy are concentrated.

The community that breathes the common air of young people and accepts to feel the pulse of the people, continues to be the place where history is built little by little. A history in which we are all protagonists: the Salesians, our young people and all those who share and live the Salesian mission. Our experience as consecrated persons, whatever form it takes, is never indifferent to those who come into contact with our communities. Even in the silence of our presence, in the smile of our fraternal greetings, we find a resource that calmly communicates what we are, the processes that we want to unleash.

Especially in these times marked by anonymity at all levels, by loneliness and the absence of significant adults, the Salesian house that welcomes, accompanies and proposes is increasingly a significant space, a space for the future and hope. We must be more and more convinced of this. It is urgent that we do everything possible to keep it that way.

2.2 Educational Pastoral Community (EPC)

It is logical that on the path of our charism there cannot be an authentic Salesian community if it does not live its mission together with many collaborators, as well as with young people, not only for them. The community is not a service agency. The community does not pretend to be a functional and efficient educational institution with the sole objective of guaranteeing results. The Salesian community with all its protagonists is a place for a comprehensive proposal.

Consecrated and laity, youth and adults, together, as a community, grow in communion. It is a community that embodies, witnesses and communicates the beauty of human life. It is willing to unearth and help grow the hidden and latent potential in the hearts of the young. It does not renounce the sacred and transcendent dimension, which is often neglected and underestimated, or even ridiculed, in a global vision.

This is the charismatic path that the Congregation, following the example of Don Bosco, continually proposes in an increasingly new world and time. I say a "charismatic path" because it is not a fabricated project or a printed plan. It is truly a path in which we all recognize ourselves and feel ourselves as protagonists, and in which no one is excluded.

I will mention three aspects that remain in my memory, since I have been a witness and also a participant in many experiences of commitment to promote the spirit and life of the EPC. These are three aspects that, obviously, we find commented on in different ways in our magisterium.

i. Accept the challenge of the pastoral educational process

Without a doubt, we are the center of the educational challenge. When I say "we" I mean all those among us who have discovered and joyfully accepted the call to be part of a Salesian educational project lived with the heart of the good shepherd. Saying it like that sounds very easy and light. On the contrary, we know that an authentic Salesian pastoral educational proposal requires people who, with conviction, listen first of all to the personal call assumed as a life project. But also a desire to meet and listen to young people, their history, the area in which they live. In other words, an EPC is authentic to the extent that it truly becomes a "listening server" rather than a distributing boss.

Only when an EPC reaches this awareness, the subsequent steps of a true Salesian proposal acquire their true consistency. I have matured the conviction that only to the extent that an EPC endorses this call, in the first place, can processes be initiated that have the pulse of the history of young people and dialogue with the territory. At the same time, there are also internal dynamics that show how the EPC, just as it is willing to look out with empathy, is also able to look and take care of its own needs inward: on a personal level as well as on a team level.

In this dynamic, the challenge of the pastoral educational process is confirmed in the synthesis of the professional dimension solidly integrated with the prophetic call. When the strictly pedagogical vocabulary is naturally combined with the charismatic and prophetic.

And here we return to the theme of the Salesian community already discussed earlier. Here we see the value and indispensable contribution of a Salesian community capable of fostering the fire of the charism in the educational furnace of our presences. The contribution offered by a community of Salesian consecrated men in this sense is a balm sought after and appreciated by those who are convinced that belonging to the Salesian educational and pastoral path is a beautiful path that offers a healthy and meaningful future to our young people.

ii. Believe in the future of young people today

A living EPC that is in full contact with reality - such a complex reality - comes to believe authentically in the future of young people. The issue of the future, or hope as we sometimes call it, is not just a chronological question.

We recognize that we live in times of paralyzing uncertainty. For many of our young people, the family situation, the stories of the adults they know or that they depend on, convey the feeling of a "tomorrow" that does not exist, that will never come.

Educating in times of uncertainty is further complicated by a fragmented view of life, a life made of pieces that are not necessarily connected. Just think of how our EPC and our presence can contrast with some of the family environments from which our young people come. The same happens with the presence of significant adults that young people meet in our presences and who blindly trust them, but do not always find “adults” in other places.

The commitment and dedication of the EPC is a simple but accessible and powerful testimony. We communicate to young people that in our daily being, with them, for them, we are always convinced and dedicated to their future, today. And we communicate this belief in their future in our willingness to welcome them unconditionally, in our selfless and serious commitment to teaching, in our brotherly and non-judgmental listening when they ask to be heard. It is a kind of "believing" that takes the form of constant daily proximity, always full of hope. It is a presence that is also capable and feels the duty to offer objectives, processes and proposals so that young people can take responsibility for a better future for themselves.

iii. In the diversity of actors, the unity of objectives

One last point about the EPC that I think is more central and urgent than ever. I see it in the fact that our EPCs are made up of people with each contributing a very personal and very different story. What unites this diversity - religious, cultural, ethnic - is the good of the young. The true conviction of this last objective serves almost as a unifying force that a valid proposal emerges from diversity. But for this to happen, we must seek and promote an environment that makes diversity a gift.

I have had the opportunity to meet members of the EPC who, in the diversity of their religious affiliation, or their different cultural and social origins, have found convergence in what matters: the comprehensive education of young people. To achieve this goal, they have been able not so much to overcome their differences as to unite their values, that is, to try to treasure what unites us and not so much what separates us. We strive to see how the deepest and most authentic good of each spiritual tradition and of each culture can converge towards the good of people, both those they accompany and those who are accompanied.

With full respect for the variety of subjects and young people, the members of the EPC, assuming with full freedom the identity of the charism, come to the emergence of an environment that aims at the good of the young. They are themselves agents who freely commit to helping young people grow and develop their talents and potential.

2.3 Family

We know that the Congregation has been paying increasing attention to the issue of the family for years.²⁰ I present some points in the form of a synthesis that I myself had presented at the Congress of Youth Ministry and the Family, held in Madrid between November and December 2017. On that occasion I had the opportunity to offer a synthesis of the responses that the provinces offered in response to the letter that the Rector Major had sent them. In that letter, the Rector Major had invited them to do an educational and pastoral reading on the family.

i. Involve the family

Involvement: this word has appeared several times as a primary need. There is a general conviction that we have a call and that we must accept it not so much at a functional level. We feel that this call is like an invitation to recognize and respond with intelligence and pastoral creativity to a silent and hidden cry of the family. If we are attentive, we listen to a real need, which is that of welcome. We can say that the family "seeks a home", seeks "to feel at home".

ii. Families as Protagonists

In general, our presence shows that the family is happy with what we give. However, there is also the desire that the family be seen as an active subject and not as a simple client. It is a subtle but recurring desire that we find more frequently as time goes by, and we notice it in the response we receive when that path and spaces destined for a greater prominence are available. It is up to us to commit ourselves so that this space becomes a true shared experience. This is where our capacity and pastoral creativity come into play in the way of proposing, living and accompanying the EPC, in the way of making the Salesian Pastoral Educational Project (SEPP) mature, which sees the family as a true "partner" in and of the educational and pastoral process.

iii. Accompaniment

The famous Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* is a synthesis and a map. It is a synthesis of some of the references made in our General Chapters and in the Letters of our Major Rectors. It is also a map that, in a social and cultural situation increasingly charged with new pastoral challenges, the family, with all the complexity that it carries in itself and in its own composition, increasingly asks to be welcomed, as it is, with its wounds, joys and hope. It also asks to be accompanied, to discern the options it must take and to integrate it. Our presences with their educational and pastoral experiences are an extraordinary opportunity for convergence spaces and integral proposals, to achieve the integral growth of young people and their families.

²⁰ El material del Congreso celebrado en Madrid, en noviembre-diciembre de 2017, ofrece una buena oportunidad para hacer una amplia reflexión sobre el camino recorrido, pero también sobre los retos que quedan por delante. Consulte la página siguiente: <https://www.infoans.org/es/component/k2/item/6505>.

iv. Formation

Finally, in these decades the continuous call for formation has arisen, understood as part of a journey carried out locally and which is presented as a response to the integral growth of the family. Here, as already mentioned, the family looks very promising. Not only is it the family that asks to be formed, but positive experiences often emerge in which the family presents itself as an active agent in the processes of evangelization and education. Today, called to face a multiplicity of complex and complicated challenges, this new frontier has a very strong prophetic and providential value. If we pay attention, we realize that, in addition to the complexity of the different family situations, new plants that carry pastoral novelties are also growing.

2.4 An ecosystem of people who embrace life, giving it a future

As a final point, I would like to mention one aspect that cannot be encapsulated in a category or put into precise terms or words. But it is an aspect that has always caught my attention when I have seen it present. I am referring to the atmosphere that is explicitly breathed in some of our presences when certain common values assumed with freedom and witnessed with pastoral intelligence are immediately noticed. It is a topic that I will develop in more detail later. Here I just want to mention it with two brief reflections.

i. To join together ensuring life

It can be said that our being and sharing together in the Salesian educational and pastoral mission has the ultimate objective of giving our young people the opportunity to grow as "honest citizens and good Christians". We all want theirs to be a life that breathes a healthy human dimension with all that this journey entails. We make sure that they have a framework of values that illuminates their choices, values that go beyond mere justice, but include the ability to feel protagonists of the good and in the good, even if it costs them a lot.

We assure them a dignified life by offering them experiences on the ground, "in the yard", which gradually unleash processes of conviction and conversion that educating is an art and that true and authentic education is a work irrigated by love. That is why we speak of education as a "thing of the heart". The heart as the center of life, but also, and above all, as the source of life, of life that is reborn, that finds light.

The experience of encountering wounded, abused and weak people teaches us that the encounter with a loving heart is the first, fundamental and decisive step in a process of healing, of growth towards a life that is truly worthwhile. That is why it is important that we often remind ourselves that we unite to ensure life.

ii. To share our gifts and goods

We begin this part with the title "The concrete experience of Salesian youth ministry as a dynamic and fluid 'polyhedron'." And it is under the banner of this title that I would like to

conclude this part. The dynamic and fluid movement of the dynamic and fluid "polyhedron" really makes us see how "the whole is greater than the parts" (EG nn. 234-237). The human, educational and pastoral excellence of those who are called to be part of a community that educates with the heart of the good shepherd is not nullified, but quite the opposite. It is simply that each person, alone and together, realizes that their contribution is a gift offered to others in a spirit of gratuitousness, especially for young people, but not only. A gift that is not only "given" and offered, but shared. Educating, then, is not giving something, but getting the learner's heart to open up and set in motion before those who are accompanied.

On the other hand, we also realize that educating is at the same time learning, being surprised, even being shaped by those we accompany. We are and continue to be people who, in the face of the other, discover that we are facing a revelation. The story of each young person not only calls us to their service, but also makes us feel a healthy curiosity so that, when challenged by them, we become more and more servants and pilgrims.

3. The Salesian Educational Pastoral Project as an ecclesial experience

In this part I present some aspects that gravitate around the experience of the SEPP and I comment on them in light of and in relation to what we are experiencing as a universal Church. These are points that show a strong connection with the current dominant pastoral vocabulary and imagery which accompany us in this historical phase. The invitation we have is to "listen" and "interpret" in a contemporary way the central points of our charismatic heritage in tune with the current language around youth ministry.

3.1. The "family spirit" as "habitat": an indispensable condition

The first aspect I want to comment on is the issue of "family spirit". For us, this theme recalls the atmosphere of our presences, which is fundamental to all human relationships. For young people, the feeling of being welcomed and well received is not a detail, but an indispensable condition. It is from this feeling of being "expected" that the gear of a relationship of trust, of listening, of discovering one's life project is set in motion.

Don Egidio Viganò in his Letter in relation to the Synod on the Family,²¹ held in 1980, comments on the subject citing a very significant reflection:

Father Alberto Caviglia writes, "I believe that we shall never really fathom the fundamental cause of Don Bosco's educational system if we fail to take stock of its primary source, which was the memory, nay, the longing to relive those early days."²²

Those "early days" were those of a Valdocco led by Don Bosco with Mamma Margarita. Don Viganò writes that it was here that "the family environment matured (which later became) one of the fundamental postulates of loving-kindness in the Preventive System." Don Bosco refers

²¹ Don E. VIGANÒ, *The Challenge of the Synod 1980*, ACS 299, 1980.

²² A. CAVIGLIA: *Vita di Domenico Savio – Studio*, in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di Don Bosco*, vol. IV, Torino - SEI – 1943, p. 68.

to this "fundamental postulate" when in his Letter of Rome of 1884 he writes that "without familiarity affection is not shown, and without this demonstration there can be no trust. He who wants to be loved must show that he loves."²³

I invite us to see this our "family spirit" as a "habitat", a human and spiritual ecosystem that, when healthy and clean, makes the plants of the life of our young people grow wonderfully. However, when this "habitat" becomes contaminated, how much damage is done! How many lives do not grow, are destroyed!

3.2 "Synodality" as "habitus": consequence of the "family spirit"

If the "family spirit" is the "habitat", then the best way to live it is to walk together, in a synodal way. All the protagonists of a community that educates with the heart of the good shepherd assume this mission as a "habitus". The community itself becomes a subject and a message in its way of being for and with young people. This is how the Salesians and the laity translate being a family. We are not present to enjoy the environment, but to stimulate a good and positive environment so that gestures and proposals, processes and experiences contribute to the integral growth of young people.

And here I refer to a reflection that Pope Francis made on the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops.²⁴ It is an important discourse that not only marks a chronological stage, but above all confirms a path of gradual growth in the synodal sense. What interests us here are those cardinal points that the Pope underlines and which in turn illuminate the experience of our charism. And they are these:

i. The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. **It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.;**

ii In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I emphasized that "the people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible in credendo", (EV 119) and added that "**all the baptized**, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, **are agents of evangelization**, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients". (EG n. 120);

iii. **Our gaze also extends to humanity** as a whole. A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. Is 11:12) in a world which — while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration — often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups. As a Church which "journeys together" with men and women, sharing the travails of history, let us cherish the

²³ Fonti Salesiane, n. 153, pp. 447-448. (edición italiana)

²⁴ Papa FRANCISCO, Conmemoración del 50 Aniversario del la Institución del Sínodo de los Obispos, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

dream that a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity, and thus bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations. (EG nn. 186-192).

These are the three essential points - together, all of them, for the benefit of all. For us they are also extremely revealing; there is no other way than to strengthen the sense of community and communion. We all feel like protagonists because we all have a contribution to make and also to receive. Finally, we look at the world with empathy, especially that of young people, so that our presence is a source of change for each and every one of them, cultivating the dream that the rediscovery of inviolable dignity opens paths of full humanization.

3.3 Accompaniment as a "lifestyle" and not as a simple action or service offered and received

In Chapter V of the Youth Ministry Frame of Reference,²⁵ we have a reflection on the subject of accompaniment that is very current. A clear point, I would even say that it is urgent, is that the accompaniment must find within the EPC a terrain that makes it possible and helps it to grow and mature in a convinced way so that it can later be lived with and for young people.

The EPC, more than a structure or ready-made institution, is a living organism that exists as it grows and develops. Therefore, you should not only take care of your organization, but, above all, promote your life. In all EPC, the promotion and care of the many ways of encouraging and accompanying people must be ensured. (p. 114)

A community cannot educate if it does not experience the tiring work of being educated itself. Just as a community cannot help young people to grow if it does not feel what it means to be accompanied in its own experience. The daily experience of this growth, a natural consequence of accompaniment and animation, must be present and alive on several levels and at the same time.

For this reason we can speak of an original Salesian pastoral accompaniment. We accompany people at various levels, through the general environment of the EPC, groups, personal relationships and personal accompaniment. (p. 114)

It should not surprise us that this same theme was reiterated by the young people during the 2018 pre-synodal meeting. They have given the identity card of the person they are looking for to accompany them on the path of discovering their life project. It is no coincidence that Pope Francis cites reflection of young people in *Christus Vivit*, n. 246:

The same young people described to us the qualities they hope to find in a mentor, and they expressed this with much clarity. "The qualities of such a mentor include: being a faithful Christian who engages with the Church and the world; someone who constantly seeks holiness; someone who is a confidant without judging. Similarly, someone who

²⁵ Dicasterio papa la Pastoral Juvenil Salesiana, *La Pastoral Juvenil Salesiana. Cuadro de Referencia*. Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma 20133. Edición no comercial.

actively listens to the needs of young people and responds in kind; someone deeply loving and self-aware; someone who recognizes his or her limits and knows the joys and sorrows of the spiritual journey. An especially important quality in mentors is the acknowledgement of their own humanity – the fact that they are human beings who make mistakes: not perfect people but forgiven sinners. Sometimes mentors are put on a pedestal, and when they fall, it may have a devastating impact on young people’s ability to continue to engage with the Church. Mentors should not lead young people as passive followers, but walk alongside them, allowing them to be active participants in the journey. They should respect the freedom that comes with a young person’s process of discernment and equip them with tools to do so well. A mentor should believe wholeheartedly in a young person’s ability to participate in the life of the Church. A mentor should therefore nurture the seeds of faith in young people, without expecting to immediately see the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit. This role is not and cannot be limited to priests and consecrated life, but the laity should also be empowered to take on such a role. All such mentors should benefit from being well-formed, and engage in ongoing formation”.²⁶

3.4 Discernment

The challenge of discernment,²⁷ like that of accompaniment, acquires ever greater relevance in our mission. In the SEPP dynamics, we ensure that pastoral discernment consists of considering, knowing and contemplating the various dimensions of history and the territory where our young people live: their needs and their expectations. Naturally, we are also taking very seriously the different protagonists of the project, as well as the different dimensions of the proposal. Only in this way can we offer a comprehensive education path.

This helps us to discover how the path that leads us to the SEPP is that of pastoral discernment. It would be essential to realize that this process is a path worth living, certainly through dialogue, but it would be even richer if we live it in an atmosphere of faith and prayer.

If the objective of the SEPP is a humble but intelligent understanding of the reality to which the Lord sends us, so that our mission is an opportunity for growth for young people, the path we travel is together - synodality - in a family environment - " family spirit "- feeling accompanied while we accompany young people - accompaniment.

It is important to note here that in Chapter VI of the Youth Ministry Frame of Reference,²⁸ the main features of the SEPP are listed that are really like a guide for the discernment that leads

²⁶ Cita tomada del Documento de la Reunión pre-Sinodal in preparación al la XV Asamblea General Ordinaria del Sínodo de los obispos, 19-24 marzo 2018, n. 10.

²⁷ Cfr. M. GRONCHI, “L’esercizio del discernimento: indicazioni dottrinali recenti”, in <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/lesercizio-del-discernimento-indicazioni-dottrinal>

²⁸ Dicasterio para la Pastoral Juvenil Salesiana, La Pastoral Juvenil Salesiana. Cuadro de Referencia. Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, Roma 20133. Edición no comercial, pp. 137-142. Me gustaría señalar que en los siguientes párrafos cito repetidamente frases, cortas o largas, del texto del Cuadro de Referencia. No los he marcado con comillas (“...”) para no hacer más pesado el texto. Las páginas indicadas indican la fuente de las frases utilizadas.

to the SEPP. First of all, the SEPP is like a historical mediation and an operational tool that guides and accompanies the growth of the EPC in the territory in its call to embody the Salesian mission.

Its fundamental characteristics are the centrality of the person of the young person, especially of the poorest, in all their dimensions, their relationships, with themselves, with others and with history. Discernment takes into account these fundamental characteristics in relation to young people.

But the same must be considered in favor of promoting community dynamics. What are the options that favor a community process that generates an operational convergence around common criteria, objectives and lines of action.

Another characteristic of the pastoral discernment process lies in the desire for the presence to open up to the territory. Living the educational and pastoral process in a broad system of relationships pushes the EPC to keep the proposal alive for the good of many, making its presence mature as a center of aggregation and convergence, an agent of educational transformation.

3.5 Evaluation: an exercise in pastoral and professional honesty

From my experience visiting and accompanying various pastoral processes, I have the feeling that interest in arriving at the formulation of the SEPP is not always accompanied by a similar impulse to evaluate its implementation, to examine the points that have marked the way and those that have not. When this balance occurs, the evaluation exercise, carried out in the same environment that gave rise to the SEPP, is for the EPC a very enriching opportunity for discernment and also for examination of conscience.

The periodic evaluation, according to what is considered most appropriate, puts the EPC as a whole before the choices made and how they have lived them. If in a healthy ecosystem we have known and contemplated the history of our young people to serve it, the same happens with us: to have a sense of coherence, it is essential to recognize and contemplate what our response has been in the daily life of the educational and pastoral experience.

Evaluation is not an exam, which carries with it the fear of failure. For our part, who have freely assumed the Salesian mission, evaluation is a sign of honesty, educational and pastoral. Accepting to evaluate our own path is a testimony that we too, with hearts marked by the desire to serve, always remain students, open to learn, to learn to serve more and better.

3.6 On-going formation: an inalienable path

Previously we have approached the subject of formation in relation to the subject of the family. Here I just want to reiterate the invitation that each SEPP take this call seriously. It is very significant to see how the number of provinces that dedicate reflection, space and proposals to this need grows. In some regions and provinces we are witnessing a dedicated

and well-formulated project for the joint formation of lay people and Salesians. We can only incentivize this direction.

Qualitative growth in this field is one of the most obvious responses that testifies to some innovations that are still germinating. First of all, we are convinced that the mission is a community journey, not a pyramid. The laity are not "employed" with us, but share the mission with us. Their presence is part of the pastoral educational role, and is not limited to the need for trained personnel. The charism is a call that is offered to all of us, and is assumed and lived by all.

However, I believe that this attention to formation is also showing a progressive paradigm shift: ecclesial and pastoral.

Ecclesial in the sense that sharing responsibility overcomes a clerical dualism that only hurts. We do not live the charism from the state to which the Lord has led us, whether they be priests or non-priests, Salesians or non-Salesians. But starting from the baptismal call, which, as we have already mentioned in Pope Francis' speech, sees in "each baptized person, whatever his function in the Church and the degree of instruction in his faith, (...) a subject active in evangelization "(EG n. 120).²⁹

I see the change in the pastoral paradigm in the fact that the EPC, increasingly forming itself in the Salesian charism and in the vision and message of the Gospel, recognizes that it is itself called to live the pastoral proposal. We do not look only at what we can give and offer, only a proposal to the outside. But the same experience ad intra of the EPC becomes the proof of the pastoral proposal itself, living the call to care for and accompany people. The members of the EPC as pastors who guide and accompany, yes, but also pastors who allow themselves to be guided and accompanied.

²⁹ Papa FRANCISCO, Conmemoración del 50 Aniversario del la Institución del Sínodo de los Obispos, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

PART TWO - A REFLECTIVE READING

(This "SECOND PART" will be in the form of group work and "feedback" (n, 4). In a second moment (n. 5) I will present some reflections that have as their theme this pandemic time and the future.)

4 First of all, let us contemplate the pastoral experience that we have lived this pastoral year.

4.1 Let's identify the surprises we have encountered.

4.1.1 What has negatively discouraged us?

4.1.2 What has positively surprised us?

4.2 Let us identify new forms and pastoral methods that we have progressively been able to make "system".

4.2.1 What are the old and new spaces in which we have invested the most?

4.2.2 What options have become priorities?

5. Some reflections on the Church and the pastoral challenges posed by some observers

5.1 Pope Francis

Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Times of Epidemic

Friday, March 27, 2020

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith”? Faith begins when we realize we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we flounder; we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.

The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith. We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love. In the midst of isolation when we

are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side. The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. Is 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled.

Video message of the Holy Father Francis on the occasion of the 75th General Assembly of the United Nations

September 25, 2020

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200925_videomessaggio-onu.html

The pandemic, indeed, calls us “to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing, a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not”.[2] It can represent a concrete opportunity for conversion, for transformation, for rethinking our way of life and our economic and social systems, which are widening the gap between rich and poor based on an unjust distribution of resources. On the other hand, the pandemic can be the occasion for a “defensive retreat” into greater individualism and elitism.

We are faced, then, with a choice between two possible paths. One path leads to the consolidation of multilateralism as the expression of a renewed sense of global co-responsibility, a solidarity grounded in justice and the attainment of peace and unity within the human family, which is God’s plan for our world. The other path emphasizes self-sufficiency, nationalism, protectionism, individualism and isolation; it excludes the poor, the vulnerable and those dwelling on the peripheries of life. That path would certainly be detrimental to the whole community, causing self-inflicted wounds on everyone. It must not prevail.

We never emerge from a crisis just as we were. We come out either better or worse. This is why, at this critical juncture, it is our duty to rethink the future of our common home and our common project. A complex task lies before us, one that requires a frank and coherent dialogue aimed at strengthening multilateralism and cooperation between states. The present crisis has further demonstrated the limits of our self-sufficiency as well as our common vulnerability. It has forced us to think clearly about how we want to emerge from this: either better or worse.

The pandemic has shown us that we cannot live without one another, or worse still, pitted against one another. The United Nations was established to bring nations together, to be a bridge between peoples. Let us make good use of this institution in order to transform the challenge that lies before us into an opportunity to build together, once more, the future we all desire.

5.2 Dominique Collins

The lockdown exposed Christianity

<https://rivista.vitaepensiero.it/news-dalla-rivista-il-lockdown-ha-messo-a-nudo-il-cristianesimo-5454.html>

Reduced to appearing as the spiritual arm of the governments and states and offering them its moral guarantee, Christianity has found itself faced with the risk of spiritual defeat. On the contrary, it is an opportunity not to beat your chest, but to renew yourself.

The blockade due to the pandemic has represented, both for the world and for the Church, an unpredictable *Tempus clausum* (this is how the "closed season" of Advent and Lent was defined in other times, during which public holidays were prohibited), whose effects have not yet worn off. The health crisis is a crisis of time: one of those rare moments, for so long and on such a scale, in which the present, lived until then as transitory, is presented to us as real or, in other words, it is presented to us in the mode of discontinuity. It brutally reminded us of the truth, obscured by the modern myth of progressive and cumulative time, that the unexpected, that for which there is no precedent, can happen. Every crisis is revealing. This shows us that, more than another virus, we are sick of the discordance of time: anguished by a futurism that does not promise anything good (prevailing catastrophism) and by a past that we have to face as if, by some kind of investment, it had occupied the place of the future (commemoration and repentance), we find ourselves confined in a present that has become the only available dimension of time, a present reduced to "presentism", an empty form of a present without presence. This is, schematically, the modern evil of the time.

5.3 Yuval Noah Harari

The world after the coronavirus

<https://www.attacmadrid.org/2020/03/27/yuval-noah-harari-el-mundo-despues-del-coronavirus/>

Humanity must make a decision. Will we travel the path of disunity or will we adopt the path of global solidarity? If we choose disunity, this will not only prolong the crisis, but will likely lead to even worse catastrophes in the future. If we choose global solidarity, it will be a victory not only against the coronavirus, but also against all future epidemics and crises that may plague humanity in the 21st century.

5.4 Susanna Tamaro

The covid and the strength of our kids

https://www.corriere.it/cronache/21_aprile_30/covid-forza-nostri-ragazzi-357cee18-a9e7-11eb-8b01-83c2a483d7f5.shtml

I think the virus has somehow put us against the wall, and this wall is telling us that the time has come to change course. But it can only be reversed by speaking of the true essence of the human being and not of the essence propagated by fifty years of servile nihilism. Because human beings are capable of abominable horrors, we know how to wallow in the most despicable baseness, but we are also capable of creating beauty, through music and art, of designing great works at the service of the common good and of illuminating the grayness of each day with our ability to love.

And love is not predetermined by a fragment of DNA but by an inner choice that has to do with the consciousness of good and the use of the will. I can do evil, because it is easier, more comfortable, more immediate, but I choose not to do it because I know how to recognize the fundamental importance of goodness.

The great deception, the great deconstruction, the subtle and indistinct force capable of eliminating the light from all gaze, is precisely this: to consider the equivalence of all things, their use only according to a selfish and primary need. There is no "we" in this fluid and borderless world, there is only the "I" with its arrogance, and it is an "I" increasingly outraged by the feeling of emptiness and hollowness of everything that surrounds it.

I like to think that the virus, in addition to sowing despair and death, has begun to open a crack in this wall that can make the wealth of "us" resurface in the face of the poverty of "me". And may this thin blade of light give us the courage to speak again about important realities, remembering above all that human beings only fulfill their destiny when they are able to choose, because in difficult times, as our Prime Minister Mario Draghi reminded us, April 25, there are times that "not choosing is immoral."

5.5 Massimo Recalcati

No to the Covid generation

La Repubblica, Monday, November 23, 2020

https://www.massimorecalcati.it/images/Massimo_Recalcati_-_La_Repubblica_-_23_novembre_2020_-_pdf

We have never been so aware of the importance of the school as when we were forced to close it due to the health emergency. Could more have been done?

Are there other possibilities? I note that the school has remained open despite being effectively closed. This opening coincides in the first place with the so-called distance learning. Strictly speaking, as all teachers know, this is a contradiction because teaching implies relationships, the presence of bodies, being together in a living community without the aseptic mediation that technology provides. Certainly, it would be possible to stop at the innumerable limits of this didactics, both for teachers and for students.

Obviously, it is not at all, as they say, ideal.

It takes an additional effort compared to face-to-face teaching without achieving the same results. But let's ask ourselves: when does a training process follow an ideal trajectory? Anyone who is dedicated to training, in any case, knows that what really determines our life is never in the order of the ideal. The greatest formative effects are not generated from successes or rewards, admirable performances or soft affirmations, but from falls, failures, defeats and losses. Isn't this what is happening under the terrible Covid 19 magisterium? Are our children not faced with the harshness of reality rather than the slightly muffled world of the ideal? Any authentic training process is never a linear path, free from interruptions or adversity, it is never like driving on an empty highway. The movement of any formation is spiral-shaped and refers primarily to responsiveness to injury and trauma: how do you get up after a fall? How to get back on track after losing your way? All training is made up of good and bad encounters, good and bad luck. However, contemporary parents (long before Covid) would like to exclude the experience of obstacles and the harsh impact of reality, suffering and frustration for their children. That is why today they can apprehensively mourn the trauma, worry about all the time irreversibly lost by their children, curse the renunciations to which they have been unjustly subjected. But in doing so they run the inevitable risk of victimizing their children and an entire generation.

If our children have not been able to benefit from face-to-face teaching this year, if they have lost many hours and important knowledge and relationship opportunities, it does not mean that they are facing an irreparable situation. Complacency has never made anyone grow up, on the contrary, it tends to promote only a developmental arrest in a childishly recriminating position. Counteracting the risk of victimization is the ethical and educational gesture of teachers who do cartwheels so that distance learning exists.

Teaching in front of a screen means not cowering before the need to find a new adaptation imposed by the adversities of reality, attesting that education is never carried out under the guarantee of the ideal, but always against the wind, with what there is and not with what should be and what is not. This is a lesson within a lesson that our people should take up, avoiding repeating the lamentations of their parents. There will be no Covid generation unless adults and, above all, educators insist on thinking about it and naming it that way, leaving our children the dark side of the victim: that of complaining, perhaps throughout their lives, about the opportunities that have been unjustly taken away. Courage guys, you are always on time even if you are late! After all, the same thing always happens in life for everyone: we are always on time even though we are always late.

PART THREE - A READING IN PERSPECTIVE

(This "THIRD PART" will be, again, in the form of group work and "feedback" (numbers 6, 7). The last section, number 7, will be a mixture of personal and group work. Consider the idea of keeping a small diary.)

6. How we view our charismatic challenge

6.1 We wonder if Don Bosco were here with us, what choices would he make?

6.2 What elements of the pastoral project would you insist on?

7. A perspective of final and personal pastoral education: what do we take away?

7.1 At the EPC level

7.2 In favor of the family

7.3 At the level of the challenge of welcoming, listening and accompanying