

# Salesian Family Spirituality Days

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## A SPIRITUALITY WHICH IS INSEPARABLE FROM MISSION FOR DON BOSCO, YOUNG PEOPLE WERE “A THEOLOGICAL PLACE OF ENCOUNTER WITH GOD”

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### 1. Young people “the substance” of Don Bosco’s life

Don Bosco’s life project was very much a unified one: service to the young. He carried it out firmly and perseveringly amidst obstacles and labours and with the sensitivity of a generous heart. “He took no step, he said no word, he took up no task that was not directed to the saving of the young ... Truly the only concern of his heart was for souls” (C. 21) His life was completely directed and lived through the “da mihi animas... of the young”. This led him to bear strong affection for the young: “It is enough for you to be young for me to love you very much” (Introd. to The Companion of Youth.). Salesian Constitution 20 reminds us:

**“Under the guidance of Mary his teacher, Don Bosco lived with the boys of the first oratory a spiritual and educational experience which he called the "Preventive System". For him this was a spontaneous expression of love, inspired by the love of a God who provides in advance for all his creatures, is ever present at their side and freely gives his life to save them.**

### 2. Education as a theological mystery

So we can understand Don Bosco’s educational experience well it would help us if we understood the profound meaning of education: the “mystery of education”. The educational relationship – central focus of education – like all interpersonal, group, community relationships, finds its deepest reality in the mystery of life, of people, their “ineffable” inwardness, their

freedom and deep interpersonal dynamics (The human being is a hearth for freedom, and therefore remains obscure like the centre of the flame: E. Mounier) .

Don Bosco's educational and pastoral experience, interpreted in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation, allows us to understand the educational relationship more deeply.

It leads us to seeing and living it not only by having young people (student or students as partners; the individual, in the image and likeness of God, model of the "little ones of the Kingdom" which the Gospel speaks about), but more profoundly it invites us to see the educational relationship and then try to live it as a common way of living and growing together, teachers and students, inasmuch as we are all "sons and daughters in the Son": in other words seeing it as a relationship of Christian fellowship made possible by Jesus Christ (despite personal differences, differences of status, role and function) and as a realisation, in time, of the mystery of life and Trinitarian relationship: Christ in us and with us, through the Spirit, in communion with God the Father (cf. Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:14-17; 1 Jn 3:1-5; Jn 1:12) .

More specifically, it can allow us to see and consider the educational relationship and various kinds of educational communities as a communion of life and expression of the mystery of the Church, inasmuch as we are teachers and students, and all "members of the Body of Christ who is the Church" (as St Paul tells us in many of his writings) or another way of putting it, we are within it as the "sacrament of salvation of and for the world".

[Cf. The icon of the education game = a team game, all together, those educating and those being educated "in the game" of growing up, the other, in common, each with his or her own role and function (not so much the "centrality of the child" which risks objectifying them, preventing them from playing an active part in their own growth)].

Christian-inspired education does not diminish the consistency and validity of the "good life" project (Don Bosco's "good Christians and upright citizens"), indicated as the aim of our common educational activity, but integrates it and lifts it to the level of a complete model for humanity as presented in history through Christ, the incarnate and risen Word (cf. Eph 4:13 and no. 22 of GS); and recomposes our historical existence as being within the history of salvation, which finds its beginnings in God's creative plan and which, in the already, thanks to Jesus, the energy and hope of the world, reaches out towards the Kingdom of God, in which the human yearning for complete freedom, and communion with God finds satisfaction. The educational task becomes a specific way of achieving this at the level of personal formation, something we want everyone to have in its completeness.

### **3. The preventive system, "the golden way" of living the mystery of our filial experience**

When placed within this set of ideas, Don Bosco's preventive system becomes much more than an idea (= preventing and not repressing cf. Giuseppe Lombardo Radice) or a method (= reason, religion, loving-kindness).

It is these things. But for us who are Don Bosco's sons and daughters it is much more.

It is – C. 20 already quoted tells us – "a way of living and of handing on the Gospel message, and of working with and through the young for their salvation. It permeates our approach to God, our personal relationships, and our manner of living in community through the exercise of a charity that knows how to make itself loved".

If we live this in "the mystery of our sonship" then for us too it will be possible to be like Don Bosco was, "contemplatives in action", "living as "seeing him who is invisible" (cf. C. 12 and 21).

If it is true that "the Christian of the future will either be a mystic or will not even be a Christian" (K. Rahner, *Nuovi saggi*, Roma 1968, p. 24), then it is clear that for us Salesian men and women there is no escape: if we want to be Christians in this century in which we are living, there is no other "mystical way" for us: education, lived as part of the mystery of sonship and Trinitarian life in time and history, in acting on

behalf of humankind (= the young person) and for the salvation of the world: we today, like Don Bosco in his time. This is the personal and Salesian community style of the “grace of unity”.

#### **4. A renewed way of thinking, living and being formed in the “Salesian spirit”**

The Christian ethic is an ethic of sonship, of feeling that we are and acting as if we are “adopted” children: it is not an ethic of duty for duty’s sake, of the “politically correct”, of keeping to our agreement, but of living and acting as “children in the Son”, in love and mercy.

Christian sonship allows us to better understand, practise with some sense of satisfaction, and be formed joyfully in the kinds of things that are the cornerstone of the Salesian spirit, those attitudes and virtuous ways which are the substance of Salesian being and action.

Here too I come back to the Salesian Constitutions (Chapter 2, “The Salesian spirit” nos.10-21). After pointing out that the Christ of the Gospel is the source of our spirit, it indicates at the same time what these “virtuous” ways and behaviours are:

- ✓ reminding oneself of the divine dimension of one’s work (= the “theological nature” of our activity: what was traditionally known as “living in the presence of God” or put in other terms: “seeing, thinking, acting with God’s eye, heart, patience and mercy);
- ✓ having a sense of Church;
- ✓ a deep-down sense of our “predilection for the young” ( “For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, for you I am even ready to give my life”).
- ✓ practising’ “Salesian loving-kindness”: the Salesian is open and cordial, ready to take the first step and welcome the young in kindness, respect, patience and with foresight;
- ✓ acting and interacting in a spirit of family, as individuals in educative communities;
- ✓ being optimistic and joyful;
- ✓ practising Don Bosco’s request for: “work and temperance”;
- ✓ creativity and flexibility.

But before all this there is what C. 39 says: “The practice of the Preventive System demands a fundamental disposition on our part: an empathy with the young and a willingness to be with them: “Here in your midst I feel completely at home; for me, living means being here with you.” This is the basis for the “virtuous skills” listed earlier and is the prime strategy for Salesian educational activity.

#### **Conclusion**

An elderly Salesian, Fr Pietro Gianola, used say that we need “volere bene, volere il bene, volerlo bene, facendolo bene!” which is difficult to translate while retaining the play on words, but essentially means “love, love doing good, love it a lot, by doing it well.”

But this is also because the ultimate purpose is:

“Do you want to do something good? Educate the young.

“Do you want to do something holy? Educate the young.

“Do you want to do something very holy? Educate the young.

“Do you want to do something divine? Educate the young.

Amongst divine things this is the most divine of all!” (*Don Bosco, MB, XIII, 629*).

And the real and final end of all is “so that they may have life and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10)