

# Giornate di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana

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### **The Salesian charism shown through social networks**

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I was asked to tell you how I bear witness to the Salesian charism in the social network digital 'playground', so let me tell you of my experience in this arena. But firstly I would like to clarify something that many might take for granted, but I believe it is necessary to say: the playground with a capital P ('Cortile' or Courtyard would have been his term), so dear to Don Bosco, is primarily one of face to face relationships, the word in the ear, games, confidence. So I would never consider the world of social networks to be the only place for witness. Social networks for me are not a second life, nor are they something to be demonised. But they are a place I inhabit and which allow me to extend my witness beyond the oratory or where I physically live. And clearly it is always a good idea to pay good attention to the likely risks in this digital playground: spending too much time there, the amount of useless and even dangerous material found there, and the dangers that any one of us in daily life has to fight against. For us social networks are a tool with which we can be closer to young people in some way and by which we can bear witness, but this obviously must not take priority over face to face relationships; nor should we lower our guard where the pitfalls are concerned.

And just how do we get closer to young people through social networks? By seeing how important they are for them, paying attention to what they publish, reading what they say to their friends, looking at the photos they post. That is why I believe that for leaders and for whoever looks after young people, Facebook is important. From a sentence he writes, a link he publishes, or from his way of using it I can understand that 'piece' I am missing and that maybe in other day-to-day circumstances the youngster does not show me. I may understand that he needs to be helped to do things there a bit differently, and I can especially relaunch the relationship that I have with him outside Facebook.

Last year I was working for a cooperative in a project on youth activity, and I visited various senior high schools in the province of Venice. After we had finished the meetings at school many kids asked me to be friends on Facebook and I also asked them. This enabled me to see a slice of the younger population very different from the one I meet in the oratory or in my youth group. In particular I had something to do with a small group from Portogruaro whom I have continued to follow up on behalf of this project but only meeting them every fortnight for a couple of hours. Facebook has enabled me to discover some quite serious and worrying aspects of these kids' lives. It has let me see that this group is risking a lot by their lifestyle and amusements: alcohol, parties, and even problems with the local police... The photos that are tagged have let me understand things about them that I would have never understood by only seeing them every two weeks. It has launched a true and proper educational effort around these problems.

It has often happened that when I am working with a group of senior students, my hook into the relationship with some of them begins with something they have published – it might be a video of a song, a link to a telefilm. Don Bosco's line: "Love what the young love" fits the bill in these cases. The kids are hungry for confirmation by their elders and their peers and giving importance to what they publish is to respond at least in part, to this hunger. The aim is to look for a key to open the relationship. Obviously this relationship then has to be built up at the personal level but what is shared on the Web can be the departure point.

I mainly use Facebook and Twitter and I often think "What does someone looking at my account, my pages, think of me? Or better, does that person really understand me? Do they get a real and genuine picture of me?" This question of genuineness is fundamental: I would like to think that someone looking at my profile would have a clear idea of who I am, what I am involved in, my values, my life style. This is not just out of arrogance but to pass on the fact that this is what I experience, this is what I do at the oratory, this is why I choose social type studies, that I am happy. If the thing that marks us out as Christians and especially as Salesians is authentic joy and not just a passing moment of cheerfulness, then it is well that it should be transmitted through concrete things and through these tools too. I am firmly convinced that the Web is not an abstract place to be demonised and that it can be a place for apostolate. The Web is a place where I, if I choose the path of true authenticity and testimony, can make my voice heard. And perhaps with an intelligent little probe I can launch the discussion that, I must also say, is always best then taken up in person.

It is a challenge to successfully bear witness of Christian life in social networks. Here too Christian faith and the Church are under attack from links, videos, ideas that are often determined by false prejudices, some of which we are immersed in too. Unfortunately, given the speed of information and sharing times, these prejudices in digital space spread fearfully. My only hope is to be successful in saying, in my own small way, that there is something else, another way of seeing things. There is a fullness that we need to unearth. For example: some months ago I published the photos of the wedding of two of my dearest friends at the oratory, writing that their smiles were an expression of the happiness that comes from their faith as they went through engagement and now in their married lives. But their choice to spend their engagement in a deeply Christian way gave rise to many of the usual prejudices. But on the day of their wedding everyone recognised that their happiness came from the way they wanted to live this sacrament and that they were allowing themselves to be challenged by the Lord, accompanied by him and by the parish community. This is why I say that social networks help me to show that a life of faith and service is a happy life and they can help me provoke, in a positive sense, those who are still attached to the common ideas floating around in society today. Giving testimony means also getting beyond the fear of publishing things that are not politically correct, go against the tide, or are thought to be too explicitly Christian.

How can I bear witness to the fact that I belong to the Salesian charism? By doing what many others already do: I publish articles that make people think, I insert songs with words that get you thinking, I write down lines from books that tend to go a bit deeper, I connect with and share the status of those who give their lives for the young and the poor, I suggest links to organisations working in the missions, or pass on videos of some of the large Triveneto SYM gatherings and initiatives, or publish emails a good Salesian sends from Ethiopia, express my support and sympathy for the Pope. I don't deny that it can happen that I write insulting things about something going on at my University or against the political class or that occasionally I might write banal things about my day or what has happened to me. This is why I say that I am no different from many others who use social networks like me. What I consider important, however, is to succeed in my own small way in bringing a little bit of seriousness, along with the basic joy that must, in my view, characterise the Christian and especially a Salesian leader.

Who knows, though. Maybe a photo of a retreat with a group of superiors, rather than some serious article, might give rise to the desire to ask a question that goes beyond just common things. I place my presence on the Web before the Lord so that from some tiny seed I have tossed out, someone's curiosity may be aroused, and the desire to encounter Him.