

Don Bosco, La Salette, Lourdes

In the month that recalls the apparitions at Lourdes for us, we take the opportunity to point out the error into which, some time ago, the author of a *negative life-story* of Don Bosco the Saint fell in his attempt to ridicule the devotion to Mary Help of Christians.

The essayist wrote:

“In such a saturation of Marian cult, history pretty much *sub specie Mariae*, it is surprising not to find traces in Don Bosco’s life of such important events as the apparitions of La Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1858); and yet everything that happened in France was resented in Turin, far more than what was unfolding in Italy. I do not understand this absence. Was it the mantle of Mary Help of Christians and the Consolata that formed a jealous barrier against other protections and appearances of the same figure?”

What is truly astonishing here is the surprise of a writer not unaware of Salesian sources, because Don Bosco spoke and wrote repeatedly about the apparitions of La Salette and Lourdes. In 1871, i.e. a good three years after the consecration of the Church of Mary Help of Christians and Don Bosco’s commitment to spread the devotion, he himself compiled and published as the May issue of his “Catholic Readings”, the booklet entitled: *Apparition of the Blessed Virgin on mount La Salette*. In this little volume of 92 pages, which had a third edition in 1877, Don Bosco described the Apparition in all its details, then moved on to other prodigious events attributed to the Virgin.

Two years later, in 1873, he published, as the December issue of the same “Catholic Readings”, the booklet entitled: *The Wonders of Our Lady of Lourdes*. The issue came out anonymously but was preceded by an announcement “To our benefactors,

correspondents and readers” signed by Don Bosco.

In the Biographical Memoirs

And that is not all. In the *Biographical Memoirs*, describing the first feast of the Immaculate Conception celebrated at Pinardi House in Valdocco on 8 December 1846, the biographer, Fr G.B. Lemoyne, asserts that the feast was “made more cheerful by information regarding an apparition of Our Lady in France at La Salette”; and he continues: “This was Don Bosco’s favourite subject, repeated by him a hundred times.”



To anyone who is supercritical, the expression “a hundred times” will seem exaggerated, but those who know our language know that for us it simply means “many times” (“I have told you a hundred times”). And “many times” does not mean “a few”, much less so “never”.

We find in the same Memoirs on 8 December 1858:

“Don Bosco was delighted with such encouragement as he celebrated the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. All the more so since in this year a portentous event had made the glory and goodness of the heavenly Mother resound throughout the world and Don Bosco had narrated it several times to his youngsters and later gave a report of it to the press.” Clearly this was about Lourdes.

There is more. A chronicle from 1865 reports the “Good Night”, or evening sermon to the young people given by Don Bosco on 11 January that year:

“I would like to tell you magnificent things tonight. Our Lady deigned to appear many times over a few years to her devotees. She appeared in France in 1846 to two shepherd children, where, among other things, she foretold the blight affecting potatoes and grapes, which did happen; and she was sorrowed by blasphemy, people working on Sundays, acting like dogs in church, that had kindled the wrath of her Divine Son. She

appeared in 1858 to little Bernadette near Lourdes, recommending that she pray for poor sinners..."

Note that in work had begun that year on the construction of the Church of Mary Help of Christians; yet Don Bosco did not forget the Marian apparitions in France.

Then it is enough to look in the Salesian Bulletin to find many references to Lourdes and Salette.

How can it be insinuated, then, that *"the mantle of Mary Help of Christians"* formed *"a jealous barrier against other protections and appearances of the same figure"*? How can it be said that traces of such important events as the Apparitions at La Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1858) are missing in Don Bosco's life?

Since we are always on the lookout for "curiosities", we also wanted to record this one, which reveals how certain non-fiction has very little to do with authentic and serious historical knowledge.

Connecting with the Millennial and 'Gen Z' mindsets

*Communication involves several components that we need to seriously consider: first of all, the **sender** who encodes the **message** by choosing the **medium** through which the message is relayed from the sender to the receiver. The **receiver**, in turn, analyses the message in his context and interprets it in ways both intended and unintended by the sender. Finally, the **feedback** indicates how well the message was received. Any attempt to communicate Christ today starts from understanding the mindset of today's generation of young people. This short*

essay will focus on this.

A generation is a group that could be identified by their year of birth and significant events that shape their personality, values, expectations, behavioural qualities, and motivational skills. Sociologists call **theBaby Boomer** generation those born between 1943 and 1960. **The Generation X** are those born between 1961 and 1979. **Millennials** (also called **Generation Y**) are those born between 1980 and 2000. The **Generation Z** are those born after 2000.

The **senders** are the Salesian pastor-educators and youth ministers. The **receivers** are the youth and young adults today who are mainly millennials and Generation Z. Hence, this presentation will focus on understanding their mindset in order to discover ways of communicating to them our **message**, Jesus Christ. We cannot close our eyes to the reality of the 'digital divide', which reflects the huge and growing social inequality between those who have easy access to the Internet and those who do not, especially many young people. Thus, an important response to this essay is to compare what is presented here with the reader's own context.

THE MILLENNIALS

Today millennials are about 41-20 years old. They learnt using technology and became dependent on it at an earlier age than other previous generations. Younger millennials could not even imagine life without smartphones and internet. They belong to a generation that is so connected through social media. They live in an age when one post could reach countless peoples across linguistic, cultural and geographic barriers. This has created in them the desire to have all the information they want that will provide instant answers and instant feedback.

Millennials want to be involved by being given the opportunity to share their thoughts because they like to share ideas and choose the best one. They want to be part of the conversation

by listening and speaking. When their opinions are listened to, they feel valued and will be ready commit themselves to something they feel part of. Millennials want their faith to be holistically integrated into their life, including technology.

Millennials are the app generation. Apps have become a means for them to communicate, process information, purchase goods or even read Scriptures and pray. They are tech savvy who use apps up to two hours a day. They want to be discovered. They are optimistic and desire to share, with preference to communicate with texts. They are focused on the 'now' but tend to be idealistic.

THE GENERATION Z

Today those of the Generation Z are those who are 21 years old and younger. They are the first who have the internet readily available to them. They are digital natives because they have been exposed to the internet, social networks and mobile systems from earliest age. They use social sites to socialize without distinguishing friends they meet on-line and friends in the physical world. For them, the virtual world is as real as the physical world. They are always connected; for them there is no offline anymore. They are vigorous contributors and high consumers of on-line content. They prefer on-line social sites to communicate and interact with people especially using images.



They prefer to participate and remain connected via technology at their fingertips. They are creative, realistic and focused on the future. They have a broad awareness about important issues and events and have a great desire to search for the truth. But they want to choose and discover the truth for themselves. In fact, the search for truth is at the centre of their characteristic behaviour and consumption patterns.

Those of the Generation Z use the social media networks like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, Tumblr to obtain information about the social concerns, health and nutrition, spirituality, etc. But they are also heavy users of anonymous social media platforms like Snapchat, Secret, Whisper, where any incriminating images disappear almost instantly. With vast amount of information at their disposal, they are more pragmatic and less idealistic than the millennials. Their high on-line reliance could risk to too much sharing of personal information in the virtual world and to internet addiction. Their character is moulded by what they post about themselves on-line and what others post and assess about them. A great majority of them in all continents declare themselves to be religious but not necessarily identifying themselves to a religion: they believe without belonging, others belong without believing. Those who claim not to belong to any specific religion normally come from families with no religious faith or who are lukewarm Christians. They are much less religious than the millennials.



THE SOCIAL MEDIA

It is true that the social media could in some way hinder authentic interpersonal relationships. These could also be used as a platform to distribution and access to materials that could cause moral, social and spiritual harm. The truth of the matter is that any medium has the potential to be used for evil. It is true that the social media has been used, for example, to globalise populism and to help spark revolutions like the Arab Spring and the yellow vest protests in France.

Yet, the social media has also allowed people to stay connected globally, empower each of us to update each other what is happening in our lives, share powerful ideas, and invite people to know Jesus Christ. The social media have

become our virtual courtyard. Therefore, it is important that we move from demonising the medium, to educating young people to its proper use and to developing its potentials to evangelise.

COMMUNICATING CHRIST

Credible witness is an important condition for communicating Christ. In the virtual world, witness implies **visibility** (we visibly manifest our Catholic identity), **truth** (we ensure that we are bearers of the truth and not of fake news) and **credibility** (the images we present reinforce the message we want to communicate). Faith needs to be presented to millennials and to the Generation Z in new and engaging ways. This, in turn, will open possibilities for them to share their faith with their peers. We should resist the temptation to bombard the social media with religious messages and images. This will actually drive away a big number of young people.

Initial proclamation is not about Christian doctrines to be taught. The adjective 'initial' is not to be understood in a strictly linear or chronological sense as being the first moment of proclamation because it actually impoverishes its richness. Rather, it is 'initial' in the sense that the term *arché* was understood by ancient Greek philosophers as the principle or the fundamental element from which everything has its origin, or that from which all things are formed. It is the foundation for a new evangelisation and of the whole process of evangelisation.

Initial proclamation is about fostering an overwhelming and exhilarating experience which is capable of stirring up the desire to search the truth and an interest in the person of Jesus. This, ultimately, leads to an initial adhesion to Him, or the revitalisation of faith in Him. Initial proclamation is that spark that leads to conversion. This choice for Christ is the **feedback** to the **message**. It is then followed by the process of evangelisation through catechumenate and systematic catechesis. Without initial proclamation that brings about a personal option for Christ, any effort to evangelise will be

sterile. Thus, the challenge for every Salesian pastor-educator, for every youth minister, of every missionary disciple is not making content for the social media. This is a temptation that has to be resisted strongly. The challenge is to train and accompany millennials and Generation Z themselves so that they can create faith-based content for themselves and their peers on the social media that can stir interest in knowing the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, today the social media is a privileged forum to communicate Christ to young people. It is up to each of us to use it with missionary creativity!

TODAY'S YOUTH VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

New insights from a missionary perspective

Survey conducted by Juan Carlos Montenegro and Fr Alejandro Rodriguez sdb, San Francisco Province (SU0), USA.

Jesus' command to 'Go and make disciples' (Matt 28:19) continues to resound to us today. Our love for Christ challenges us to go beyond our boundaries and reach out to people particularly young people of our society today. To do this we need to see reality from their perspective, understand how they process information, and how this information influences their behaviour. Nonetheless, our primary Salesian mission as educators-evangelizers to bring them closer to Christ and Christ to them.

Generational differences could be a challenge that does not help us transition from being "fully" present in this new courtyard where the young people have built their own language, they have developed their own rules, and they have created new different expressions and kind of significative relationships. This new playground is a virtual world where young people today live, interact, dream, engage, and suffer. The love and missionary seal of Don Bosco move us to embrace this new reality with hope, faith, and pastoral charity.

If we don't know the new reality the youth is facing in the

virtual world, our proposal and accompaniment as educators-evangelizers will be insignificant and irrelevant. *The Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference (2015)* calls us to be present in the “new courtyard”. Now more than ever, we need to innovate and to adapt our Salesian style of being present among the young.

To understand what’s happening in this new virtual courtyard, the Missions Sector conducted an online survey at the Congregational level seeking to understand our young people, what they think, what they do, what they expect regarding the contents, possibilities and the use of the social media. The online survey in 6 languages involved 1,731 young people of our Salesian educative-pastoral communities who are between 13 to 18 years old from 37 countries and 6 different continents. This is important to keep in mind because the responses from young people who are not from the Salesian environment may differ.

Key findings:

- It is known that the greater use of the Internet is associated with a decline in the participants’ communication with members in the household, a decline in the size of their social circle, and an increase in their depression and loneliness. These are important topics to keep in mind regarding accompaniment in our pastoral planning.
- 91% of our young people use mobile phones to access to the social media. These devices are associated with behavioural problems and even possible health problems. Connectivity among the 75% of the sample is more than 6 hours per week but may be over 20 hours in some cases. The connectivity to the internet has a lot of implications, like the shift of social skills development, relationships, knowledge, etc.



- The youth interviewed perceive online bullying, paedophilia, fake news, predators, and hackers as the biggest threat in the use of the social media. While 26.40% of our young people

affirm that they have been bullied.

- Due to lack of supervision and/or formation and accompaniment young people are exposed to online adult content; the most urgent educative presence of adults starts with kids at the age of 11-13 years old because is the moment when, according to the survey, they are most vulnerable to surf on webpages with adult content.
- In regard to our presence with religious content, 72.56% of the young people who took this survey have been exposed to some type of religious content. 47.72% believe that the internet helps to develop their relationship with God.
- Our youth visit websites that are related to videos -music, games, tutorials, etc. The 88% of the sample prefer video as the type of content.
- Young people prefer WhatsApp (64 %), Instagram (61 %), Youtube (41%), Tik Tok or Facebook (37%), and Messenger (33 %). This information helps us to improve our ways of communication with young because adults may spend a lot of effort to be present in platforms where the young are not present. Maybe our channels for communication must be Facebook for parents, and Instagram for our young people.



This survey is a powerful reminder which challenges us educators and evangelizers of the young to be present among our young people in a relevant and significant way in the social media.

The cleverest son

Long ago there was a man who had three sons whom he loved very much. He was not born rich, but through his wisdom and hard work he had managed to save a lot of money and buy a fertile

farm.

When he became old, he began to think about how to divide what he owned among his sons. One day, when he was very old and ill, he decided on a test to see which of his sons was the most intelligent.

He then called his three sons to his bedside.

He gave each one five pennies and asked them to buy something to fill his room, which was empty and bare.

Each of the sons took the money and went out to fulfil their father's wish.

The oldest son thought it was an easy job. He went to the market and bought a bundle of straw, which was the first thing that came his way. The second son, on the other hand, pondered for a few minutes. After going round, the whole market and searching all the shops, he bought some beautiful feathers.

The youngest son considered the problem for a long time. "What is it that costs only five pennies and can fill a room?" he wondered. Only after many hours of thinking and rethinking did he find something that suited him, and his face lit up. He went to a small shop hidden in a side street and bought a candle and a match with his five pennies. On the way home he was happy and wondered what his brothers had bought.

The next day, the three sons gathered in their father's room. Each brought his gift, the object that was to fill a room. First the oldest son spread his straw on the floor, but unfortunately it only filled a small corner. The second son showed his feathers: they were very pretty, but they barely filled two corners.

The father was very disappointed with the efforts of his two older sons.

Then the youngest son stood in the middle of the room: all the others looked at him curiously, wondering: "What could he have bought?".

The boy lit the candle with the match and the light from that one flame spread across the room and filled it.

Everyone smiled.

The old father was delighted with his youngest son's gift. He

gave him all his land and his money, because he understood that the boy was smart enough to make good use of it and would take wise care of his brothers.

With a smile you can light up the world today. And it costs nothing.

Bullying. A new thing? It was also around in Don Bosco's time

It is certainly no mystery for those who know the "living reality" of Valdocco, so well and not only the "ideal" or "virtual" one, that daily life in a decidedly restricted structure accommodating several hundred youngsters of different ages, origins, dialects, interests 24/7 and for many months a year, posed quite some educational and disciplinary problems for Don Bosco and his young educators. We report two significant episodes in this regard, mostly unknown.

The violent scuffle

In the autumn of 1861, the widow of painter Agostino Cottolengo, brother of the famous (Saint) Benedetto Cottolengo, needing to place her two sons, Giuseppe and Matteo Luigi, in the capital of the newly-born Kingdom of Italy for study, asked her brother-in-law, Can. Luigi Cottolengo of Chieri, to find a suitable boarding school. The latter suggested Don Bosco's oratory and so on 23 October the two brothers, accompanied by another uncle, Ignazio Cottolengo, a Dominican friar, entered Valdocco at a fee of 50 lire a month. Before Christmas, however, the 14-year-old Matteo Luigi had already returned home for health reasons, while his older

brother Giuseppe, who had returned to Valdocco after the Christmas holidays, was sent away a month later for reasons of force majeure. What had happened?

It had happened that on 10 February 1862, 16-year-old Giuseppe had come to blows with a certain Giuseppe Chicco, aged nine, nephew of Can. Simone Chicco from Carmagnola, who was probably paying his fees.

In the scuffle, with lots of beating, the child obviously got the worst of it, and was seriously injured. Don Bosco saw that he was taken in by the trustworthy Masera family, to avoid the news of the unpleasant episode spreading inside and beyond the house. The child was examined by a doctor, who drew up a rather detailed report, useful “for those who had a right to know”.



The bully's temporary removal

So as not to run any risks and for obvious disciplinary reasons, Don Bosco on 15 February was forced to remove the young Cottolengo for a while, having him accompanied not to Bra at his mother's house (she would have suffered too much) but to Chieri, to his uncle the Canon. The latter, two weeks later, asked Don Bosco about Chicco's state of health and the medical expenses incurred so that he could pay for them out of his own pocket. He also asked him if he was willing to accept his nephew back to Valdocco. Don Bosco replied that the wounded boy was now almost completely healed and that there was no need to worry about medical expenses because “we are dealing with upright people.” As for accepting his nephew back, “imagine if I were to refuse” he wrote. But on two conditions: that the boy recognise his wrongdoing and that Can. Cottolengo write to Can. Chicco to apologise on behalf of his nephew and to beg him to “say a simple word” to Don Bosco for him to accept the young man back at Valdocco. Don Bosco assured him that Can. Chicco would not only accept the apology – he had already written to him about it – but had already

arranged for the nephew to be admitted "to a relative's house to prevent any publicity." In mid-March both Cottolengo brothers were welcomed back to Valdocco "in a kindly way." However, Matteo Luigi remained there only until Easter because of the usual health problems, while Giuseppe remained until the end of his studies.

A stronger friendship and a small gain

Not yet content that the affair had ended to the mutual satisfaction of both parties, the following year Can. Cottolengo again insisted with Don Bosco to pay for the wounded child's doctor and medicines. Can. Chicco, when questioned by Don Bosco, replied that the total expense had been 100 lire, but that he and the child's family were not asking for anything; but if Cottolengo insisted on paying the bill, he would redirect this sum "in favour of the Oratory of St Francis de Sales." And so it happened.

The culprit had repented, the "victim" had been well cared for, the uncles had come together for the good of their nephews, the mothers had not suffered, Don Bosco and the Valdocco work, after having taken some risks, had gained in friendships, sympathy... and, something always appreciated in that boarding school for poor boys, a small financial contribution. Bringing good from evil is not for everyone but Don Bosco succeeded. There is much to learn.

A very interesting letter that opens a glimpse into the Valdocco world

But let's present an even more serious case, which again can be instructive for today's parents and educators grappling with difficult and rebellious boys.

Here are the facts. In 1865 a certain Carlo Boglietti, slapped for serious insubordination by the assistant in the bookbinding workshop, cleric Giuseppe Mazzarello, denounced the fact to the Borgo Dora urban magistrate's court which opened an enquiry, summoning the accused, the accuser and

three boys as witnesses. Wishing to settle the matter with less disturbance from the authorities, Don Bosco thought it best to address the magistrate himself directly and in advance by letter. As the director of a house of education he believed he could and should do so “in the name of all [...] ready to give the greatest satisfaction to whoever required it.”

Two important legal premises

In his letter he first of all defended his right and responsibility as father-educator of the children entrusted to him: he immediately pointed out that Article 650 of the Penal Code, called into question by the summons, “seems entirely extraneous to the matter at hand, for if it were interpreted in the sense demanded by the urban court, it would be introduced into the domestic regime of families, and parents and their guardians would no longer be able to correct their children or prevent insolence and insubordination, [things] that would be seriously detrimental to public and private morality.”

Secondly, he reiterated that the faculty “to use all the means that were judged opportune [...] to keep certain youngsters in check” had been granted to him by the government authority that sent him the children; only in desperate cases – indeed “several times” – had he had to call in “the arm of public safety.”

The episode, its precedents and the educational consequences

As for the young Charles in question, Don Bosco wrote that, faced with continual gestures and attitudes of rebellion, “he was paternally and warned but without effect several times; that he proved not only incorrigible, but insulted, threatened and swore at Cl. Mazzarello before his class mates”, to the point that “the assistant, of a very mild and meek disposition, was so frightened by this that from then on he was sick, unable to resume his duties, and continues to be ill.”

The boy had then escaped from the school and through his

sister had informed his superiors of his escape only “when he knew that the news could no longer be kept from the police”, which he had not done before “to preserve his honour.” Unfortunately, his class mates had continued in their violent protest, so much so that – Don Bosco wrote again – “it was necessary to expel some of them from the establishment, and, sorrowfully, to hand them over to the public security authorities who took them to prison.”



Don Bosco's requests

Faced with a young man who was “disorderly, who insulted and threatened his superiors” and who then had “the audacity to report those who for his own good [...] consecrated their lives and their money, to the authorities” Don Bosco generally maintained that “public authority should always come to the aid of private authority and not the other way around.” In this specific case, then, he did not oppose criminal proceedings, but on two precise conditions: that the boy first present an adult to pay “the expenses that may be necessary and that he take responsibility for the serious consequences that could possibly occur.”

To avert a possible trial which would undoubtedly be exploited by the gutter press, Don Bosco played his hand: he asked in advance that “the damage that the assistant had suffered in his honour and person be compensated for at least until he could resume his ordinary occupations”, “that the costs of this case be borne by him” and that neither the boy nor “his relative or counsellor” Mr Stephen Caneparo should come to Valdocco “to renew the acts of insubordination and scandals already caused.”

Conclusion

How the sad affair came to an end is not known; in all likelihood it came to a prior conciliation between the

parties. However, the fact remains that it is good to know that the boys at Valdocco were not all Dominic Savios, Francis Besuccos or even Michael Magones. There were also young “jailbirds” who gave Don Bosco and his young educators a hard time. The education of the young has always been a demanding art not without its risks; yesterday as today, there is a need for close cooperation between parents, teachers, educators, guardians all interested in the exclusive good of the young.

Discovering the missionary vocation

The experience of Rodgers Chabala, a young Zambian missionary in Nigeria, starting from the rediscovery of Don Bosco when visiting his places.

Young Salesian Rodgers Chabala is part of the new generation of missionaries, according to the renewed paradigm that goes beyond geographical boundaries or cultural precepts: from Zambia he was sent as a missionary to Nigeria. The missionary course he experienced last September was a powerful moment for him, especially the atmosphere he breathed in Don Bosco’s places: a true spiritual experience.



Don Bosco began his work with his own boys, realising that no one was looking after the souls of these young Piedmontese who often ended up in prison for theft, smuggling or other crimes. If these young men had had a trusted friend, someone to instruct them and give them a good example, they would not have ended up there and so Don Bosco was sent to them by God. We can say that it all began with the dream at nine years of

age which Don Bosco gradually understood over time, thanks to the help of many people who helped him to discern. His pastoral desire to care for the souls of the young reached the whole world thanks to the Salesian missionaries, starting with that group of eleven sent to Patagonia, Argentina, in 1875. Initially, Don Bosco did not have a clear intention of sending missionaries, but God in time purified this desire and allowed the Salesian charism to spread to every corner of our earth.

The Salesian missionary vocation is a “vocation within a vocation”, a call to missionary life within one’s Salesian vocation. From the beginning, Rodgers felt a strong missionary desire, but it was not easy to make others understand what his motivations were. At the time of his aspirantate, when he was still unfamiliar with Salesian life, he was greatly impressed by the testimony of a Polish missionary and began to reflect and struggle with himself to decipher the intentions of his own heart. When the missionary asked “who wants to be a missionary?” Rodgers did not doubt and began the path of discernment, starting with the Polish Salesian’s answer to begin by loving his own country. Obviously, many challenges began to emerge and moments of discouragement were not lacking. As with Don Bosco, for Rodgers the help and mediation of many people was essential to distinguish God’s voice from other influences and to purify his intentions. God speaks through people, discernment is not merely an individual process, it always has a community dimension.

Last September, Rodgers attended the formation course for new missionaries, which precedes the official sending out by the Rector Major. Arriving a few days after the others, he met up again, after several years, with some of his novitiate companions and his old Rector from the studentate of philosophy. He joined the group and immediately noticed a special atmosphere, smiling faces and real joy. The reflections on interculturality and other insights provided by

the Missions Sector were useful tools to prepare for the missionary departure. During the course, participants had the opportunity to visit Don Bosco's places, first at Colle Don Bosco and then at Valdocco. Fr Alfred Maravilla, General Councillor for the Missions, asked the newly appointed missionaries: "What effect do these visits to Don Bosco's holy places have on your life?" When one reads about Don Bosco's life in books, doubts may arise and one may even be sceptical, but to see those places with one's own eyes and breathe in the atmosphere of Don Bosco by retracing his story is something that can hardly be recounted. Besides the historical memory of what happened to Don Bosco, Dominic Savio and Mamma Margaret, these places have the capacity to reinvigorate the Salesian charism and make one reflect on one's vocation. The simplicity and family spirit of Don Bosco show how poverty is not an obstacle to holiness and the realisation of the Kingdom of God. When speaking of Don Bosco we often run the risk of omitting the mystical part, concentrating only on activities and works. Don Bosco was truly a mystic in the spirit who cultivated an intimate relationship with the Lord.

So we arrive at 25 September 2022: Fr Ángel Fernández Artime, today's Don Bosco, presides over the Mass with the Salesians of the 153rd SDB missionary expedition and the Sisters of the 145th FMA expedition in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, in Valdocco. Rodgers recalls meeting, a few days earlier, his new superior of the ANN province (Nigeria-Niger), and feeling the weight of responsibility for the missionary choice he had made. During the mass, says Rodgers, "I received the missionary cross and the desire to be a missionary largely became real."

"The missionary vocation is a beautiful vocation, once the journey of discernment is carefully completed. It requires an openness of mind to appreciate the way of life of other peoples. Let us therefore pray for all the missionaries of the world and for those who are discerning the missionary vocation, that God will guide and inspire them in their

lives.”



by,
Marco Fulgaro

St. Francis de Sales. Friendship (2/8)

[\(continuation from previous article\)](#)

ST. FRANCIS DE SALES AND FRIENDSHIP (2/8)

Having met Francis de Sales through the story of his life, let us look at the beauty of his heart and present some of his virtues with the aim of awakening the desire in many people to explore the rich personality of this saint.

The first snapshot, the one that immediately fascinates those who approach Francis de Sales, is friendship! It is the calling card with which he presents himself.

There is an episode when Francis was in his twenties that few people know about: after ten years of study in Paris, the time had come to return to Savoy, home, to Annecy. Four of his companions accompanied him all the way to Lyon and bid him farewell in tears.

This helps us to understand and savour what Francis wrote

towards the end of his life, giving us a rare snapshot of his heart:

“There are no souls in the world who love more warmly, more tenderly and I would say more completely and lovingly than I since it has pleased God to make my heart thus. But just the same I love independent, vigorous souls that are not effeminate; since such great tenderness clouds the heart, worries it and distracts it from loving prayer to God, it prevents complete resignation and perfect death of self-love. What is not God is nothing to us.”

And to a woman he spoke of his thirst for friendship:

“I must tell you these few words in confidence: there is no man in the world whose heart is more tender and more thirsty for friendship than mine, or who feels separations more painfully than I do.”



Antoine FAVRE – Portrait, private collection

Source: Wikipedia

From the hundreds of recipients of his letters, I have chosen three, writing to whom Francis highlights the characteristics of Salesian friendship, as he lived it and which he proposes to us today. The first great friend we meet is his fellow citizen **Antoine Favre**. Francis, a brilliant law graduate, had a great desire to meet and earn the esteem of this luminary.

In one of his first letters we find an expression which sounds like a kind of oath:

“This gift (friendship), so appreciable even for its rarity, is truly priceless and all the more dear to me in that it could never have been due to my own merits. The ardent desire to diligently cultivate all friendships will always live in my breast!”

The first characteristic of friendship is communication, the giving of news, the sharing of moods.

Francis' youngest sister, Jeanne, was born at the beginning of December 1593, and he promptly told his friend:

"I learn that my dearest mother, who is in her forty-second year, will soon give birth to her thirteenth child. I am going quickly to her, knowing that she rejoices greatly at my presence."

We are only a few days away from his ordination to the priesthood and Francis confides to his friend:

"You, honourable friend, seem to me to be the only one able to understand the turmoil of my mind since you deal with divine things with so much respect and so much veneration that you can easily judge how dangerous and fearful it is to preside at their celebration and how difficult it would be to celebrate them with the dignity they deserve."

Not even a year after ordination, we find Francis as a "missionary" in the Chablais: he communicates his fatigue and bitterness to his friend:

"Today I begin preaching Advent to four or five people: all the others are maliciously ignorant of the meaning of the word Advent."

A few months later he joyfully gave him news of his first apostolic successes:

"At last the first ears of corn are beginning to ripen!"

Another great friend of Francis was **Giovenale Ancina**: The two met in Rome (1599); they would both be consecrated bishops a few years later. Francis wrote several letters to him; in one he begged his friend, the Bishop of Saluzzo, to keep him "closely united with him in his heart and also deign to often give me the advice and reminders that the Holy Spirit will inspire in you."

Among the friends he met in Paris, his friendship with the famous Fr Peter de Bérulle, whom he met at Madame Acarie's group, stands out. Francis wrote to him a few days after his episcopal consecration:

“I have been a consecrated bishop since the 8th of this month, the day of Our Lady. This prompts me to beg you to help me all the more warmly with your prayers. There is no remedy: we will always need to be washing our feet, since we are walking in dust. May our good God grant us the grace to live and die in his service.”

Another great friend of Francis was **Vincent de Paul**. A friendship was born between them that continued beyond the death of the founder of the Visitation, as Vincent took the Order to heart and became its reference point until the end of his days (1660). Vincent always remained grateful to the holy bishop from whom he had received salutary reproaches about his impetuous and touchy character. He treasured this and little by little corrected himself and, thinking of his friend, did not hesitate to describe him as “The man who best reproduced the Son of God living on earth.”

Reading these letters we discover some of the qualities that must govern true friendship: communication, prayer and service (forgiveness, correction ...).

We now come across many men and women to whom Francis addresses letters of spiritual friendship. Some examples:

To Madame de la Fléchère he writes:

“Be patient with everyone, but mainly with yourself. I mean to say that you must not be upset by your imperfections and always have the courage to recover promptly.”



St. Vincent de Paul – Founder of the Congregation of the Mission (Lazarists)

Portrait, Simon François de Tours; Source: Wikipedia

To Madame de Charmoisy he writes:

“You must be careful to begin gently, and from time to time take a look at your heart to see if it has kept sweet. If it

has not kept so, soften it before doing anything.”

These letters are a **treatise on friendship**, not because they speak of friendship but because the writer lives a relationship of friendship, knows how to create a climate and a style so that it is perceived and bears good fruit in life.

The same applies to the correspondence with **his daughters, the Visitandines**.

To Mother Favre, who felt the weight of her office, he wrote: “It is necessary to arm ourselves with a courageous humility and to reject all temptations of discouragement in the holy confidence we have in God. Since this office has been imposed on you by the will of those whom you must obey, God will place Himself at your right hand and carry it with you, or rather, He will carry it, but you will carry it too.”

To Mother de Brécharde he wrote:

“He who can maintain meekness amid pain and weariness, and peace amid worry and over-whelming cares, is well nigh perfect. Perfect evenness of temper, true gentleness and sweetness of heart, are more rare than perfect chastity, but they are so much the more to be cultivated. I commend them to you, my dearest daughter, because upon these, like the oil of a lamp, depends the flame of good example. Nothing is so edifying as a loving good temper.”



Saint Jeanne François FRÉMIOT DE CHANTAL, co-founder of the Order of the Visitation of Saint Mary
Author unknown, Monastery of the Visitation of Mary in Toledo, Ohio (USA); Source: Wikipedia

Among the various Founding Mothers, a special place belongs to the Foundress, **Jane Frances de Chantal**, to whom Francis wrote from the beginning:

“Believe firmly that I have a living and extraordinary desire to serve your spirit with all the capacity of my strength.

Take advantage of my affection and use all that God has given me for the service of your spirit. Here I am all yours."

And he declared to her:

"I love this love. It is strong, expansive, without measure or reserve, but sweet, strong, most pure and most tranquil; in a word, it is a love that lives only in God. God, who sees all the folds of my heart, knows that there is nothing in it that is not for Him and according to Him, without whom I want to be nothing to anyone."

This God whom Francis and Jane intend to serve is always present, is the guarantee that their love would always be consecration to Him alone:

"I would like to be able to express to you the feeling that I had of our dear unity today, as I took communion, because it was a great, perfect, sweet, powerful feeling, such that it could almost be called a vow, a consecration."

"Who could have fused two spirits so perfectly that they were no more than one indivisible and inseparable spirit, if not He who is unity by essence? [...]. Thousands of times each day my heart is close to you with thousands of good wishes which it presents to God for your consolation."

"The holy unity that God has wrought is stronger than all separations, and distance cannot harm it in the least. So may God always bless us with his holy love. He has made us one heart in spirit and in life."

I end with a wish, the one Francis wrote to one of the first Visitandines, Jacqueline Favre:

"How is your poor and beloved heart? Is it always courageous, and careful to avoid the surprises of sadness? Please do not torment it, not even when it has played some little nasty trick on you, but gently take it back and guide it on its way. This heart will become a great heart, made after God's own heart."

[\(continued\)](#)

Vocation promotion at the heart of youth ministry

The greatest difficulty in the service of vocation promotion today lies not so much in the clarity of ideas but in three aspects: firstly, the approach to pastoral practice; secondly, the involvement, witness and prayer of the entire educative and pastoral community and, within it, of the religious community in a “culture of vocation”.

Given the change of climate in our societies, values shift, are transmitted and sometimes camouflaged. This change seems inevitable and irreversible. However, we feel the responsibility to be proactive and to generate educative and pastoral proposals to young people that encourage their free, authentic and determined response to God’s plan. Over the past few years, much has been said and written about vocational animation in order to revitalise our efforts, recognise the new movements of the Spirit, open ourselves to the Church’s reflection and develop new understandings of vocational accompaniment and discernment.

Today, many young people ask the same questions and do not always find room for examining and exploring them. The questions come from within, as inner movements that they often do not know how to interpret or recognise. Each of us has more

than once needed someone who could give us the necessary tools to move from this inner turmoil to confidence in a meaningful life project.

Similarly, by “culture of vocation” we understand an environment created by the members of an Educative and Pastoral Community (not only the religious community) which promotes the conception of life as vocation. It is an environment that allows each individual, whether believer or non-believer, to enter into a process in which they are enabled to discover their passion and goals in life. “*Feeling called to something*” means feeling called by a precious reality from which I can read and give meaning to my life. It implies not so much doing what we want, but discovering what we are called to be and do.

It can be said that this vocational culture has some *fundamental components*: gratitude, openness to the transcendent, questioning life, availability, trust in self and others, the capacity to dream and to desire, being surprised by beauty, altruism... These components are certainly the basis of any vocational approach.

But we should also speak of the specific *components of this Salesian vocational culture*. These are the elements which, among other things, encourage: the knowledge and appreciation of the God’s personal call (to life, to following him and to a concrete mission) and the paths of Christian life (in the world and in special consecration); the practice of discernment as an attitude of life and a means of making a life choice; the relevant aspects of the Salesian charism itself.



But what are the conditions for a “culture of vocation”?

1. Persistent prayer is the basis of all pastoral work for vocations. On the one hand, for pastoral workers and for the

whole Christian community: if vocations are a gift, we must ask the Lord of the harvest (Mt 9:38) to continue to raise up Christians with vocations to the different forms of Christian life. On the other hand, a fundamental task of all pastoral work will be to help young people to pray.

2. It is people who promote vocations, not structures. *There is nothing more provocative than the passionate witness of the vocation that God gives to each one, only thus does the one who is called trigger, in turn, the call-in others.* We Salesians must strive to make our way of living with the Lord comprehensible. All of us Salesians are heart, memory and guarantors not only of the Salesian charism, but also of our own vocation.

3. Another focal point of the “culture of vocation” is the renewal and *revitalisation of community life*. Where one lives and celebrates one’s vocation, fraternal relationships, commitment to the mission and the welcoming of each and every one, real vocational questions can arise.

4. With the three points above, our wish has been to say that pastoral action in this field that is not sustained by prayer and the witness of life is afflicted by incoherence, as it would be in any other area of pastoral work. Furthermore, since vocation requires resistance and persistence, commitment and stability, we must go beyond a vocational mentality or sensibility and have a vocational practice, a *vocational pedagogy* with gestures that make it credible and sustain it in time and place. This pedagogy has to do with the centrality of processes of faith in Christian initiation, with the proposals of accompanied community life and personal accompaniment; vocational animation within youth ministry.



5. If trust in God who calls functions as a lung that gives oxygen to pastoral work for vocations, the other lung is *trust*

in the generous hearts of young people. The hearts of our young people are made for great things, for beauty, goodness, freedom, love..., and this aspiration continually appears as an inner call in the depths of their hearts. From this perspective, we have been able to come up with two vocational approaches: the first approach focuses on the young people closest to our charism, i.e. those who, because of their links with Salesian communities and works are open to an experience of God, to meaningful community relationships and to service with the young; the second approach focuses on those who may be attracted to deepening their understanding of the Salesian vocation as a fundamental life choice.



6. Finally, to complete the map, let us not forget the *promotion of the vocation of special consecration*. In this proposal, a concrete aspect of vocational promotion is defined which seeks to awaken and accompany people called to a concrete form of life (the ordained ministry, their own congregation or movement), as a concrete way of following Jesus.

Today's Church also needs the vocation of the consecrated Salesian. Perhaps we should remember that the dynamic of vocational discernment is a spiritual task enlightened by the hope of knowing the will of God; it is a humble task because it implies the awareness of not knowing, but it expresses the courage to seek, to look and to walk forward, freeing oneself from the fear of the future that is anchored to the past and that is born from the presumption of already knowing everything.

A vocation is a lifelong process, perceived as a succession of calls and responses, a dialogue in freedom between God and every human being which takes the form of a mission to be continually discovered in the various phases of life and in contact with new realities. A vocation, then, is the

particular way in which a person structures their life in response to a personal call to love and serve; the way of loving and serving that God wants for each person.

Starting from Pope Francis' words (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 107), we can indicate three paths to follow for coherent vocational animation: living contagious apostolic fervour, praying with insistence, and daring to propose. In short: what can we do? Pray, live and act.

To find out more, click [HERE](#).

There is much more 'thirst for God' than you might think

Today there is so much need for listening, for free and open dialogue, for personal encounters that do not judge and do not condemn, and so much need for silence and presence in God.

Dear friends of the Salesian Bulletin, not so long ago I attended the funeral of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. It was he himself who wrote the magnificent Encyclical "Deus Caritas est" a year after the beginning of his service as Pontiff, and in it the following statement that seems to me to be the essence of the magnificent fragrance of Christian thought: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" ([*Deus Caritas est*, 1](#)). Certainly that Person is Jesus Christ.

And beginning from this Benedict XVI leaves us with statements like these:

– "Jesus Christ is the Truth made Person, who

draws the world to himself.

- The light radiated by Jesus is the light of truth. Every other truth is a fragment of the Truth that is him and to which he refers.

- Jesus is the North Star of human freedom: without him, it loses its orientation, because without knowledge of the truth, freedom is denatured, isolated and reduced to sterile arbitrariness.

- With him one rediscovers freedom, recognises it as created for good and expresses it through charitable actions and behaviour.

- This is why Jesus gives man full familiarity with the truth and continually invites him to live in it.

- And nothing more than the love of truth can propel human intelligence towards unexplored horizons.

- Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of truth, draws the heart of every man to himself, expands it and fills it with joy.”

There is a whole Christian teaching in these few compact sentences that is far from being merely “moral” or a set of cold and rigid rules devoid of life. The Christian life is first and foremost a *true encounter with God*.

And that is what I stated in the title of this message. In my opinion and deep conviction, there is much more “thirst for God” than we imagine, than there seems to be. It is not that I want to change the statistics of sociological studies or draw up some fictitious reality. I certainly do not intend to do so, but I do wish to make it understood that in the “*visa vis*” in the “face to face” encounter with the real life of so many people, of so many fathers and mothers, of so many families, of so many teenagers and young adults, what one finds, very often, is a life that is not easy, a life that must be “healed” daily, human relationships in which love is desired and necessary and which must be taken care of in every small gesture, in every small detail, in every action. And in this “face to face” there is so much need for listening, for free

and open dialogue, for personal encounters that do not judge and do not condemn, *and so much need for silence and presence in God.*

I say this with great conviction. Right here in Valdocco, Turin, where I am, it surprises me and fills me with joy when a group of young people take the initiative to invite other young people for an hour of presence, silence and prayer before Jesus in the *Eucharist*, that is, an hour of *Eucharistic adoration*, and a hundred or so people – so many young people – respond to the appointment. Or in Rome, at Sacred Heart, we used to meet on Thursday evenings, and young people and young couples, some with their children, and even engaged couples were present at this moment because they felt that their lives needed this encounter with a Person who gives meaning to our lives.



And I have experienced it as an example in many countries and places. That is why I am invite you here to do as Don Bosco would do. He did not hesitate for a moment to offer his boys the experience of an encounter with Jesus. And that God who is presence, who is God-with-us, as we celebrated at Christmas, is still the same God who calls, who invites, who reassures in every personal encounter, in every moment of rest in Him.



I remember one of Don Bosco's many "surprises" as he recounts in his Memoirs: "I was entering the church from the sacristy and I saw a young man raised to the height of the Tabernacle behind the choir, in the act of adoring the Blessed Sacrament, kneeling in the air, his head inclined and leaning against the door of the Tabernacle, in a sweet ecstasy of love like a Seraphim from Heaven. I called him by his name and he was soon roused and came down to the floor all upset, begging me not to reveal it to anyone. I repeat that I could recount many other similar facts to make it known that all the good that Don Bosco does he owes especially to his children."

Is it possible that Jesus is still the same God who wants to meet all of us today and many others, or are we ashamed and afraid to go down this road? Is it possible that many of us do not dare to invite others to experience what we are experiencing and that has been freely given and offered to us? Is it possible that because we are told that this is unfashionable and out of date, we believe too many negative messages and lose the strength to witness that many of us continue to enjoy every *personal encounter with the One who is the Lord of life*?

Pope Benedict was convinced that his life and his faith were “right” and **this is great, an encounter with his Lord**, and this is how Pope Francis bid him farewell in the last words of his homily: ‘Benedict, faithful friend of the Bridegroom, may your joy be perfect in hearing his voice finally and forever’. Let us therefore continue to promote, my friends, those encounters of Life that give us *profound life*, because there is more “thirst for God” than there is said to be or that we believe there is.