

□ Reading time: 10 min.

On 27 September 2025, Father Fabio Attard, Rector Major of the Salesians, received honorary citizenship of Catania from the Mayor of Catania, lawyer Enrico Trantino, delivering a speech on the contemporary educational emergency. Starting from an analysis of Bauman's "liquid society", Father Attard denounces a culture that transforms young people from students into customers to be seduced, leaving them without reference points in an existential desert. Recalling Don Bosco's legacy, he emphasises how young people desperately seek authentic adults and comprehensive value propositions. The speech launches an urgent appeal to build educational alliances between civil and religious institutions, investing in the formation of qualified educators. He concludes by invoking the courage of hope to offer new generations dignified paths towards the future, defining this mission as an essential collective responsibility.

1. The educational emergency as good news

I am convinced that those of us who are engaged on the educational frontier, in various environments and paths, realise that times have changed. We do well to face this change and comment on it because this change brings with it very significant repercussions on daily education. One of the most attentive observers of today's society, the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, commenting on the cultural and social transition we are witnessing, writes:

The modern liquid culture, unlike that of the nation-building era, does not have people to educate but rather customers to seduce. And, unlike the "solid-modern" one that preceded it, it no longer wishes to gradually withdraw from the game, but as soon as possible. Its goal now is to make its survival permanent, temporalizing all aspects of the lives of its former pupils, now transformed into its customers.

I would like to begin from this reflection as a starting point because in the need and urgency to comment on current social situations as a whole, we especially need those lights that help us to recognise the current state of reality more clearly. When it comes to approaching the lives of our young people, this choice to know their history and their habitat becomes a categorical imperative.

We, Salesians of Don Bosco, have this natural tension in our DNA, that is, to go out and meet young people wherever they are. By its very nature, ours is a type of encounter with young people that does not presuppose prior conditions. We simply try to be close, to live an encounter without prejudice, without preconceptions. All

this, however, does not mean that we should not be equipped with a very clear vision and adequate formation. On the contrary, today we cannot meet young people in a healthy and healing way if we are not equipped with a solid and broad knowledge of the various elements that condition the social, family, and cultural life of our young people. Good will alone is not enough.

All of us, adults and pilgrims of young people, are asked to be people equipped with an integral formation. Anyone who truly wants to be a servant of young people, first of all, needs to question their own motivations, the deepest ones, those that inhabit the heart and that push them to be present with them, to act in their favour. In clear words, the reasons for our being educators must be strengthened.

This first step requires a second, that of questioning what are the sources and roots that feed these motivations.

We ask ourselves if it is truly loving young people to allow them all possibilities without limits and without a vision of where we want them to arrive. We ask ourselves if the sole objective, that young people only enjoy their time and feel emotionally gratified, is really seeking their true good? We ask ourselves if offering young people those opportunities and spaces where the superficial desire for the immediate can be gratified without 'ifs' and 'buts', is the right path? A society where adults look at young people as customers, is a society that has lost its compass towards the future, finding the shortcut of immediate utility and profit. A profit paid with the currency of educational failure.

Educational and political choices that consciously or unconsciously take this path, indirectly and subtly end up offering young people only the opportunity to consume the time of youth. But we are all aware that youth, as a time, is certainly not eternal. The beauty of youth, however, lies precisely in its being a phase of life that, anticipated by childhood and adolescence, becomes a womb that gives birth to adulthood.

A society that merely offers young people spaces and experiences where desire is simply satisfied, without the ability to be educated and matured, is a society that ends up consuming youth, making it lose the ability to be generative of a promising, dignified future. All of us, responsible in different ways, protagonists of social life, directly or indirectly linked to the educational planet, have this responsibility, to take care of this phase, seeing in it precisely as a womb that today holds the key to the future. In every educational path, the future is present; the future is in the present.

Rightly then, the philosopher Bauman himself questions how to call the current culture. He responds by asking us to listen to the warning if we too are complicit in

making this current phase of history: "Liquid like a department store."

2. Recognising the search for meaning

As a first call, it is urgent that we, educators and protagonists of social life at all levels, realise that this is a generation that is searching. The paradigm shift in recent decades has been so strong that it has caused a true and profound earthquake in the collective social memory. From a monolithic society, with the same vocabulary, with well-established traditional institutions, such as the Church, family, and school, we have moved to a society marked by fragmentation and individualism. The image that often characterises youth is that of a generation of good and sincere young people, but who, in the name of a false conception of freedom and with the excuse that they should not be conditioned, we have left them without maps, without food, and without water, in the middle of the desert of our cities.

It is a true and real tragedy to see how from the words of the so-called prophets of secularisation, while announcing a new era of freedom from the heavy burden of religion, we have arrived at a situation of emptiness and meaninglessness. To proclaim that we are now free from superstitions and antiquated traditional cultural models, from an institutionalised vision that did not allow us to grow as we wanted, we realise that what is emerging is a scenario marked by disorientation and the loss of reference points that young people themselves are desperately seeking today. The imaginary of an unbridled and limitless freedom immediately struck, perhaps even enthusiastically. But we all know the reality that this illusion delivered. When our young people today look at us adults, they are not at all impressed. They feel that there is a lack of a generation of significant adults who ignite the energy of dreams, the power and enthusiasm of dedicating oneself to valid, just, and humanly enriching causes.

We must start from this urgent call, indeed from this strong but at the same time silent cry. Pope Francis first and Pope Leo now, position themselves in a space that is synchronised with the hidden and profound voice of young people. To this voice that seeks, these pastors respond with a language that young people feel is their own. They do not promise illusions; they do not offer emotionally gratifying solutions, but a healthy and healing call, a closeness that communicates a coherent testimony and a credible message. Their voice speaks to the restless heart of young people who are tired of false promises and eloquent emptiness.

3. Don Bosco - an integral project

In this sense, Don Bosco, in a historical context chronologically distant from

us, communicates an experience that is truly close to us affectively. He grasped this movement of the heart. It is a movement of the heart that knows no temporal, cultural or continental barriers. Don Bosco teaches us that the heart of young people has a divine substratum at its base; it feeds on mystical roots. It is the heart of every young person and of every time. A heart that singularly inhabits all contexts and all cultures and at the same time rises above them. That of young people, yesterday as today, is a heart that always dreams of the future in the present. Today, the difference is that this heart is crying out with a questioning gaze and a search marked by silent resilience. In a sloppy and flat context, today it is more palpable than ever that young people, who are born to look forward and upward, when they look around, when they ask for help, support, love, feel that their cry is a cry in the desert. To their cry, emptiness and silence respond strongly. Don Bosco understood this in his time and the first thing he does is to stand by them in the streets of Turin. A closeness that testified to his choice to be a pilgrim and servant. The fruit of a healthy and prophetic listening, from the movement of going out, incarnating himself in their history, a varied and multiple proposal followed. It was a human space where they could meet as friends; a home where they could experience the beauty of the family spirit; educational proposals that prepared them for a dignified future; valuable experiences that do not hide and are not ashamed to offer a spiritual proposal, rooted in a vision of a God who freely loves and abundantly forgives. With full respect for young people, their rhythms and their stories, Don Bosco understood how the present is precisely like a womb that generates life and, as such, must be taken seriously at all levels, with respect and love, in an integral way.

Yesterday as today, young people are looking for adults who have clean faces and healthy hearts. They are looking for adults who are pilgrims marked by healthy motivations. They do not want to be treated as customers; consumers consumed on the table of profit. To confirm all this is the testimony we still see today: valid experiences that show us that when they are in healthy environments, with authentic people and valuable proposals, young people gradually learn to trust and confide.

4. Educational alliances

Great is the responsibility of all of us in this historical phase. Now is the time when we are called to favour and promote the foundations for true educational and pastoral alliances. We cannot afford to look the other way, to remain closed and obstinate on choices that discard commitments and investments, of resources and people, in the educational field. Nor is it time to interpret and condition educational

challenges on ideological lines, now outdated because they have failed. In a global geopolitical culture, where investing in the economy of war is becoming more important than investing and feeding the poor and hungry, it is urgent and imperative to build and support educational processes that prepare for the world of work, to form young people to take on the good of society at a social, political, and religious level. Great is the responsibility we have before us.

We are called to educate the younger generations in an era characterised by a profound search for meaning. This represents one of the most complex challenges of our time. We are called to recognise that we are living in a world marked by indifference and 'disenchantment', where traditional systems of meaning have been questioned by modern rationalisation; where the liberal economic model is shifting attention from the person and their integral good, towards a frantic race for profit. As those responsible for the common good, what should make us think immediately is the fact that, not only do we risk forgetting the answers to the main questions about life, but worse than this, we risk forgetting the questions that drive us to act rightly. If we too, adults and those responsible for the common good in its various forms, educational, spiritual, cultural, and otherwise, also lose the ability to grasp the questions, especially those of young people, we risk communicating a defeatist vision, a future devoid of hope.

Don Bosco at this point leaves us a lesson that still stimulates and encourages us today. Every starting point, even one marked by poverty and misery, cannot have the last word. The face of young people, especially that marked by limitation and misery, is an invitation to create alliances. Those who care about the good of humanity must see in the faces of young people a human resource that asks to be helped so that it can become a protagonist.

If it is not permissible to look at young people as a problem, it is even less wise to look at them as poor beggars. They live in a space defined by profound questions. Starting from these questions, paths and journeys are built together for their good. Today, this basis of goodness that Don Bosco already recalled challenges us.

Young people have a fundamental tension towards goodness. Young people retain a natural openness to deeper values, even when they cannot articulate it conceptually. This is where the urgency of educators and formators comes in, who, knowing how to grasp the good that inhabits the hearts of young people, can foster spaces and experiences where this goodness emerges. Through projects, proposals, environments, and systematic experiences, good finds a systemic environment that favours its growth.

5. Formation of protagonists in the educational field

In this perspective, one of the challenges we have in the education of young people is to offer paths that form and prepare agents in the educational and pastoral field. The future of younger generations passes through political choices and formation proposals that first of all prepare educators and formators in all fields of an educational nature. This is a transversal challenge. Forming teachers, social workers, educators, and animators for young people, adolescents, and children, for the State as well as for the Church, is a challenge that looks at young people with a broad vision. Investing in the formation of protagonists in the educational field is a gesture of foresight that ensures honest citizens and people marked by transcendental and spiritual values in the future.

Fostering alliances in the territory, trying to work together for the good of young people, especially the most vulnerable, is not a partisan game, but a collective human duty. Studying the challenges together to be able to trace the steps to be taken is a path illuminated by dignity and compassion. In this logic shared by all, a logic that puts the good of our young people as a priority, the ideological reading that marked a good part of the last century in Europe is definitively overcome. The post-secular as the post-modern, nameless eras born from secularisation and modernity, find us all orphans, making us believe that we have evolved. Having swept away those reference points that served as a compass, we are now trying with great effort to recover in the midst of existential desertification what we had thrown away in the dustbin of history.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this report with a reflection made by Pope Benedict XIV when in 2008, he commented on the call of the educational emergency. At the end of his discourse, he writes, "how decisive the sense of responsibility is in education." Pope Benedict comments on the call to responsibility in these terms:

The responsibility is primarily personal, but there is also a responsibility that we share together, as citizens of the same city and nation, as members of the human family and, if we are believers, as children of one God and members of the Church. In fact, the ideas, lifestyles, laws, overall orientations of the society in which we live, and the image it gives of itself through the media, exert a great influence on the formation of new generations, for good but often also for ill. Society, however, is not an abstraction; in the end, it is ourselves, all together, with the orientations, rules, and representatives that we give ourselves, although the roles and responsibilities of each are different. There is, therefore, a need for the contribution of each of us,

of every person, family or social group, so that society... becomes a more favourable environment for education. (Letter of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the diocese and city of Rome on the urgent task of education, 21 January 2008)

We cannot afford to take the call we have lightly. Young people in various ways and with different cries ask us “today” to help them build “tomorrow”. To place ourselves as pilgrims with them and for them is the most urgent mission, the noblest choice, that as a city, all together, we can and must assume, for the young people whom Don Bosco called, “this most delicate and most precious portion of human society.”

I wish this city, its civil and religious institutions, its various NGOs, that you may have the courage of hope, so that together you can offer young people proposals for the future, paths that give them signs of a dignified future.