 Reading time: 4 min.

The day after the solemn celebration of Don Bosco, I felt an intense emotion. After some rather strict controls, I crossed the threshold of the Ferrante Aporti Juvenile Penitentiary Institute in Turin, what used to be called La Generala.

On one of the walls there is a large plaque recalling Don Bosco's visits to young people in prison. How many times, with the pockets of his patched cassock full of fruit, chocolates, tobacco, he had passed through heavy doors like these, at the Senate, the Correctional Centre, the Towers and then here at the Generala, to visit his "friends", the young prisoners. He spoke of the value and dignity of each person, but often when he returned, everything was destroyed. What seemed like budding friendships had died. Faces had become hard again, sarcastic voices hissed blasphemies. Don Bosco could not always overcome his despondency. One day he burst into tears. In the gloomy room there was a moment's hesitation. "Why is that priest crying?" someone asked. "Because he loves us. Even my mother would cry if she saw me in here."

The impact of these visits on his soul was so great that he promised the Lord that he would do everything possible to ensure that the boys were not sent there. Thus, the oratory and the preventive system were born.

Many things have changed. The sons of Don Bosco have not abandoned the path traced by their Father. It is traditional for chaplains to be Salesians. Among the "historic" chaplains is the beloved Fr Domenico Ricca, who retired last year after more than 40 years of service. Another Salesian, Fr Silvano Oni, has taken his place, and the Salesian novices, under the guidance of the novitiate master, go every week to meet the young inmates of the Penitentiary Institute, with an initiative called "the courtyard behind bars". All the "inmates" are much younger than the Don Bosco novices. And the vast majority have no relatives.

That is why we Salesians love young people so much
Like Don Bosco, I let my heart speak. The educators who accompany these young people on a daily basis were also there. I greeted everyone, including the many young foreigners. I felt that communication was possible. Earlier, three novices had recited a short scene from Don Bosco's life. Then they gave me the floor and also gave the young people the opportunity to ask me three or four questions. And so it

was. They asked me who Don Bosco was to me, why I was a Salesian, what it was like to live as I do and why I had come to see them.

I told them about myself, my origin and my nationality. “I am Spanish, born in Galicia, the son of a fisherman. I studied theology and philosophy, but I know much more about fishing because my father taught me. I chose to become a Salesian 43 years ago, I wanted to be a doctor, but then I realised that Don Bosco was calling me to care for the souls of the youngest. Because there are no good and bad young people, but young people who have had less, and as our Saint said, in every young person, even in the most unfortunate, there is a point accessible to goodness, and the primary duty of the educator is to seek out this point, the sensitive chord of this heart, and to make a life bloom. This is why we Salesians love young people so much. We can all make mistakes, but if you believe in yourselves, if you trust your educators, you will come out better. My dream is to meet you all one day in Valdocco with the young people I greeted yesterday on the feast of our Saint.

During lunch, a young man asked me if he could ask me a question in private. We separated a little from the large group so as not to be interrupted. “Why are you really here?” he asked me point blank. I told him: “Honestly, both for nothing and for a lot. For nothing, because prison, internment cannot be a destination or a place of arrival, just a place of passage.” “But,” I added, “I think it will do you a lot of good because it will help you to decide that you no longer want to come back here, that you have the possibility of a better future, that after a few months here there is the possibility of going to one of the host communities that we Salesians have, for example in Casale, not far from here…”

As soon as I said this, the young man added, without letting me finish: “That’s what I want. I need it, because I have been in the wrong place and with the wrong people.”

We talked. They talked. And I realised how true it is that, as Don Bosco said, in the heart of every young person there are always seeds of goodness. That young man, and many others I met, are totally “salvageable” if they are given the right opportunity, after the mistakes they have made.

I greeted the young people again, one by one. We greeted each other with great warmth. Their looks were clean, their smiles were the smiles of young people beaten by life, young people who had made mistakes, but full of life. I perceived a

great sense of vocation in their educators. I liked it.

At the end of the appointed time – which had been agreed – I said goodbye and one of them approached me and said: “When are you coming back?” I was moved. I smiled and told him: “The next time you invite me, I will be here, and in the meantime, I will wait for you, like Don Bosco, in Valdocco.”

This is what I experienced yesterday.

Friends of the Salesian Bulletin, friends of Don Bosco’s charism, just like yesterday, today too it is possible to reach the heart of every young person. Even in the greatest difficulties, it is possible to improve, it is possible to change in order to live in an upright way. Don Bosco knew this and worked on it all his life.