 Reading time: 5 min.

I had always admired Don Bosco, his passion for young people, his spirituality made of joy and concreteness, but I was unaware that there was a large Family around him. When someone spoke to me for the first time about the Salesian Family some time ago, he pointed to a large oak standing majestically in front of me and said: ‘Look at that tree. The Salesian Family is like that: it has a strong and solid trunk that is Don Bosco, well rooted to the ground, to the concrete reality of everyday life – the young, the poor, the challenges of every day that await answers, … – and it has many branches that look to the sky – the various Groups born from his charism. There are groups of religious and groups of lay people, men and women, as many as thirty-two that share the same spirituality, the same passion for the mission, but each one realises it in its own specific way!”.

I liked the image of the tree: the branches were close to each other, growing independently, but united to the trunk and nourished by the same sap of the plant. Together they made the tree leafy, lush, an exceptional shelter for the many birds that had chosen it as their home. It could have been a home for me too! I also liked the idea of ‘family’: it smelled good, of intimacy, of mutual support.

The first thing that attracted my interest was the fact that all the Groups together, despite their autonomy, form a large reality where an atmosphere of fraternity and joy, of closeness and trust is experienced. It is a style that characterises all the Groups: the Salesians of Don Bosco, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Cooperators, the ADMA Association, and all those which, over the years, have been founded by ‘sons of Don Bosco’, each with its own special character. There are Sisters who take care of lepers and those who carry out their mission in small centres where others do not come; religious who put themselves at the service of local peoples and others who take in children. Then there are groups of lay people, from those who evangelise through mass media to those involved in missionary activity *ad gentes* or who are committed to being active in the social sphere, bringing the values received in Salesian circles. Finally, there are also Secular Institutes for men and women, with consecrated lay people committed to becoming missionaries in the heart of the world.



A great variety of vocations united by the one charism, the one spirituality: that of Don Bosco.

I also wanted to enter this adventure. As I went along I understood what “belonging” meant: just as being part of a natural family does not simply mean having the same surname, but is also participating in its history, sharing its values, its projects, its labours, so it is for the Salesian Family. Belonging to it is a choice, a vocation to which one responds, and from that moment on we grow together, bonds are created and strengthened, we dream together, plan together, build together, support, LOVE. This is what making Family is all about!

Already in 2009, the Successor of Don Bosco at the time, Fr Pascual Chávez, said emphatically: ‘I make the pressing invitation to this Family to acquire a new mentality, to think and act always as a Movement, with an intense spirit of communion (concord), with a convinced desire for cooperation (unity of intentions), with a mature capacity to work as a network (unity of projects)’.

Not a mere aggregation of groups, then, which like live monads in a self-referential manner, ignoring others, but rather the response to a call to live in full communion,

bringing about a true Copernican revolution! It is a matter of being able to feel, when one joins a Salesian group, that one is not alone, that in the first place one joins a Family, a Movement of apostolic spirituality, which then becomes specific in a particular way of living the same gift. It is a matter of learning to recognise oneself as part of a whole and to understand that by walking and working together with others, we are all enriched and can achieve better results. It is a matter of learning to recognise the riches of the charisms of others, of committing oneself to the growth not only of one's own, but also of the other groups, and of building a communion made up of respect for the specificities of each one, of collaboration, of appreciation for all.

Don Bosco truly had an original and fascinating intuition: join forces for a more effective mission!

In a letter to Cardinal John Cagliero (27 April 1876) Don Bosco wrote: 'Once it was enough to unite together in prayer, but now that there are so many means of perversion, especially to the detriment of the youth of both sexes, it is necessary to unite in the field of action and work'.

And again in the January 1878 Salesian Bulletin, addressing the Cooperators: 'We must unite among ourselves and all with the Congregation. Let us therefore unite by aiming at the same end and using the same means to achieve it. Let us therefore unite as one family with the bonds of fraternal charity'.

This, "working together" does not always mean, however, working "cheek by jowl". It does not mean intervening in uniform ways. It does not mean all doing the same thing, but knowing how to interpret the personal and social contexts of young people together, knowing how to find potential intervention strategies to achieve shared goals – knowing how to coordinate together, mutually, with common as well as individual responsibility.

As in any family, everyone has their own role in the Don Bosco Family, but everyone is striving to achieve the same goals. Each group has its own specific character which must be respected and valued; it has its own characterisation that does not exhaust the charism that the Spirit has given through Don Bosco to the Church and to the world, but brings to light aspects of it that are always new and original. No one, on the other hand, can claim to be the 'owner' of the charism, but simply its custodian! In the Salesian Family it can be said that each group is incomplete without the other. All this makes me think of a face of Don Bosco made up of many

pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: if some pieces are missing, the features of the figure will be disfigured, the face will not be recognisable. The pieces put together will show a complete Don Bosco.

Together, in communion, living the mission! In this way all the Groups can collaborate in formation and appreciation of the charism. Starting from concrete situations, they can plan together and foster shared commitment in their neighbourhood, where each can offer its own “specialisation”. They can network in a fraternal spirit to be more effective.

We know only too well how urgent it is, today, to commit ourselves to a fairer and more humane world; how necessary it is to indicate horizons of hope to so many young people; how indispensable it is to bear witness to solidarity, unity, communion in a society constantly tempted to close in on itself.

Yes, this is truly a beautiful Family!

I want to sing my thanks to Don Bosco. Ever available to the Holy Spirit, he sowed a seed in the earth. That seed sprouted, it became a large plant with many branches, leaves, flowers: … one big tree.

Now I know that whoever feels the same passion as Don Bosco, the same desire to make himself a mission for the young, the poor, the least, will find a place among its branches and will contribute to making the world more beautiful.

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