

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.

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