

“YOUNG MAN, I SAY TO YOU, RISE!” (Lk 7:14)

The Salesian option for young people at high social risk as a commitment to justice, peace and care for creation

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Turin, 8 September 2022

Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

“Don Bosco saw clearly the social implications of his work. We labour in economically depressed areas and for poor youth. We collaborate with them, educating them to a sense of moral, professional and social responsibility. In this way we contribute to the development of both people and environment. We share in a way appropriate to religious in the witness and commitment of the Church to justice and peace. While not getting involved in ideologies or party politics, we reject everything that encourages deprivation, injustice and violence. We cooperate with all who are trying to build a society more worthy of man’s dignity. The advancement to which we dedicate ourselves in the spirit of the Gospel makes tangible the love of Christ which makes men free, and is a sign that the Kingdom of God is among us.”¹

¹ C 33.

INTRODUCTION

Dear confreres,

The immense gift that our charism represents in the Church has had a marked social character from the very beginning. The fact that Don Bosco is recognised as one of the social saints of 19th century Turin manifests the identity and intention of a particular mission carried out by the Salesians over the years and across five continents through a wide variety of pastoral settings.

The Gospel example of mercy embodied by Jesus led Don Bosco to fix his gaze on the poorest and most abandoned children and young people, those without a family, without a roof over their heads, the illiterate and unemployed, those lacking religious and moral formation, the weakest of the weak... In a word, on all those who are considered “excluded”, easy prey to a despair that can lead them to forms of delinquency or to being abused by unscrupulous exploiters. Hence, individuals who run the risk of being discarded by society, of losing their dignity, of not experiencing the beauty and goodness of being free children of God the Creator Father.

Once he had understood that the mission entrusted to him by God was not among those who were already in prison, rotting away in desperation, Don Bosco grasped the fact that his system had to be truly preventive, and as a result he channelled his pastoral intelligence into preventing the risks run by young people in 19th century industrial Turin and other cities.²

Together with his spiritual director he underwent a journey of discernment of his vocation and, open to the action of the Spirit, over the course of his life he discovered how to win souls over to God among those who seemed condemned to obscurity.

² Cf. SALESIANS OF DON BOSCO, “What kind of Salesians for the youth of today?”. *Post-Chapter reflection* Editrice S.D.B., Rome 2020, p. 74 no. 7. Henceforth GC28.

The result of this discernment was translated into an educative, evangelising and charitable proposal. Every personal encounter, every project undertaken with his Salesians and co-workers were nothing but proof of God's love for his favourite children: the little ones and the poor.

This charity was translated into an integral experience of accompanying young people, strengthening their personalities so that they could reach maturity as free and autonomous individuals. They were all interventions to help them prepare for life.³ It is therefore understandable that the concept of the salvation of souls in Don Bosco's ministry was not an abstract argument but a concrete response capable of taking in each individual with the loving attention of a family which takes care of the basic needs of the little ones, educates them with appropriate skills so that they can earn an honest living, and helps them open up to relationships with others and with God so that they can find their "place in the world", their place in society and in the Church.

We *sum up* the totality of these educative and evangelising experiences that we discover in Don Bosco's life and the life of the community at Valdocco as the "Oratory criterion". With this same criterion, opening ourselves to the realities of our time, we Salesians continue to respond to the various forms of youth risk that can lead to situations of social exclusion.⁴ Forming good Christians and upright citizens among those whose human rights have been violated produces remarkable results in every part of the world where we are found. Even in the most radically secularist countries, our Salesian contribution to the most needy is positively recognised by civil societies and various governmental bodies as a positive proposal for building social cohesion.

Indeed, in many Salesian presences in the world, those who work in our Educative and Pastoral Communities (EPCs) in the

³ Cf. C 40.

⁴ Cf. CG28, pp. 73-74, no. 6.

social domain have established partnerships with local Churches, private associations,⁵ with regional and even national state governments, giving rise to strategies, intervention tools and structures that allow us to be credible and appreciated for the work we do.

Convinced that working with the young and with communities at high risk is one of the most beautiful kinds of sanctification that we have inherited from our Founder, we recognise, in all humility and without triumphalism, that we are called to continue to work with evangelical spirit and professionalism within these social works and services: it is the Salesian contribution to building up the Kingdom of God. As part of this same dynamic we are called to open up spaces for dialogue with non-believers from the perspective of what Pope Francis today calls “social friendship”,⁶ the point of convergence of all human efforts in building justice and peace: “Goodness together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realized each day.”⁷

Undoubtedly, among the various settings of our Salesian Youth Ministry, the one known as “*Salesian Social Works and Services*” clearly shows the merciful gaze of Jesus, because there we encounter the various dramas of children, adolescents and older young people in high-risk social contexts that can lead them to multiple life-threatening situations. They live in impoverished communities where their rights are violated, forgotten on the invisible frontiers of today’s human geography, with little or limited access to education, health care and healthy food; where the possibility of employment is sporadic or non-existent and where the absence of quality of life is a common denominator.⁸

⁵ Cf. SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY DEPARTMENT, *Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference*, Editrice S.D.B., Rome 2014⁵, p. 111.

⁶ FRANCIS, *Fratelli tutti*, 2; 5; 6; 94; 99; 106; 142; 154; 180; 233; 245.

⁷ FRANCIS, *Fratelli tutti*, 11.

⁸ Cf. GC28, p. 104, n. 2.

As we have learned from the spirit of Valdocco, breaking the circle of poverty implies accompanying the young on the path that in today's language, in Pope Francis' words we call *integral human development*. This evangelising movement of *Salesian Social Works and Services*, born from the heart of the Church's Social Doctrine, has been the precursor of a community on the move, the same one that sets out and goes in search of those who are left behind in society, in order to recover them and, as far as possible, restore their dignity and future prospects.

The journey which the Salesian Educative and Pastoral Project (SEPP) aims at for this setting sees to the articulation of its four dimensions with true apostolic zeal, so that by accompanying the educational process of young people in relation to their family (if they have one) and their environment, a true redesigning of culture takes place, mitigating the devastation of social evil found in their personal story. In our ecclesial commitment for the salvation of humanity, we strive to build processes of reintegration of these young people once left on the margins, excluded from society, to return them to it as people capable of autonomous development, as active and believing citizens – with absolute respect for their freedom.

Thus, by consolidating the Social Works and Services setting in our Congregation with renewed spirit, a safe path opens up along which we can walk without fear, with Salesian identity, with the methodology of social development and with the awareness of being a spiritual family that reaches out to the young people most in need. It is, therefore, an invitation to return to the sources of the charism and to be more daring and merciful, in the style of our Master, Jesus, in the Gospel.⁹

⁹ Cf. *The Rector Major's Guidelines for the Salesian Congregation after GC28*, in AGC 433 (2020), pp. 35-38 (priority no. 5).

In tune with the direction taken up till now by the Congregation

Already during the Salesian Special General Chapter 20, when the Congregation was doing an excellent job of adapting to the renewal demanded by the Second Vatican Council, we find pages which exude a great sensitivity and concern for the poorest young people, and in particular for those living in the harshest situations of marginalisation caused by a world that changes at great speed and often overwhelms the most defenceless in these changes. An authentic priority in Don Bosco's charism: "Don Bosco used this expression frequently, particularly in Art. 1 of the Constitutions. It is therefore *a priority among priorities: help to the most needy.*"¹⁰

In 2010, the Rector Major, Fr Pascual Chávez, dedicated one of his Letters to Salesian Youth Ministry, and in one of the sections in it we find an expression of concern for the world of youth marginalisation in the Congregation's journey. "Attention to young people in situations of risk has always been a characteristic of the Salesian apostolate. The new situation of our societies challenges us to find new solutions."¹¹ In the same text Fr Chávez expressed his concern about an ever-increasing poverty that is becoming a tragic reality affecting people and social groups, including many young people. It becomes a structural and global problem. "For this reason, during the last fifty years there have been many projects initiatives and works with the intention of responding to this situation and of offering young people a fresh opportunity to build their lives in a positive fashion and to take their place in society in a responsible way."¹²

Continuity of this journey undertaken by the Congregation

¹⁰ SGC (1971), no. 48.

¹¹ P. CHÁVEZ, *And he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he set himself to teach them at some length (Mk 6:34)*, in AGC 407 (2010), p. 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

and the steps taken even over the last twelve years, beginning with the text I have just referred to, is what led me to consider it timely, after General Chapter 28, to turn our gaze towards this growing and increasingly significant educative and pastoral field of our Congregation. The fact that there are more than 1,100 (one thousand one hundred) specific Salesian social works and services, together with the strong teaching of Pope Francis in recent years regarding the field of the excluded, the marginalised and the discarded, makes it very opportune, in my opinion, for a Salesian reflection on this field of educative and pastoral activity today.

1. JESUS' EDUCATIVE AND PASTORAL APPROACH IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

Our charismatic patrimony teaches us, from Don Bosco onwards, that to accompany the young it is necessary to establish approaches that allow for an encounter between educator and young person, and among these is the educative and pastoral community where the family and the various representatives of the social system meet.

One of the aspects of Luke's Gospel that strikes me most is precisely the 'encounter'. An encounter that generates joy and life, an encounter that creates expectations, an encounter that leads one to sense the presence and action of the Spirit of God in the history of every individual, every family, every group, every people.

Pope Francis speaks about a "culture of encounter" so that we can cultivate merciful attitudes towards others. It is "an invitation to work for 'the culture of encounter', in a simple way, 'as Jesus did': not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying 'what a shame, poor people!', but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion; and then to draw near, to touch and to say: 'Do not weep' and to give at least a drop of life'"¹³.

¹³ FRANCIS, *Morning meditation in the chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae. For a culture of encounter*, Rome 13 September 2016.

In the last General Chapter, GC28, listening to the young people present we perceived that they no longer asked us for building or structures but *only* for our physical presence. They asked us to be with them and among them, to share their life,¹⁴ to meet with them and be mutually enriched; to be with them. Because it is they who, thanks be to God, give meaning to our vocation and encourage us to discover pathways to travel together.

In the Gospel passage about the “raising of the son of the widow of Nain” in Chapter 7 of the Gospel according to Luke, we discover what could be understood as a beautiful approach proposed by Jesus, full of compassion and mercy in the face of the situation of the death of a young man, the disintegration of a family, the loneliness of a poor widowed mother and the impotence of a social group. In the light of this Gospel episode we can interpret our youth ministry as a ministry to family yet a social ministry at the same time, since the ultimate effect will be a community that generates dynamics such that its members live with dignity, in the freedom of the children of God

1.1. Crossing the borders of unknown cultures

“Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain” (Lk 7:11). Jesus goes beyond the Jewish geographical and cultural boundaries of his time. This time he goes to Nain, a place where even the trade routes of the time did not pass through. Nain is perhaps a region without hope. Jesus leaves the borders of his homeland, accompanied by people who are most likely unaware of the scope and reasons for his journey.

This novelty that bursts forth in changes and new forms is also found in the Church of our time, and has been strongly recalled since the Second Vatican Council and in recent decades. In an attempt to renew itself and respond to the new times, to move out of its “known territory”, as if going to another Nain, our Con-

¹⁴ Cf. GC28, pp. 72-73, no. 5.

gregation has responded to this call to renewal by also turning its gaze to the least, with a more decisive commitment to those most in need. Already in the middle of the last century, in many provinces, Social Works became important, and from which the decision to respond to the phenomenon of marginalisation and poverty arose. These differed from the Oratories, Schools and Vocational Training Centre settings – all undoubtedly wonderful services for young people – in responding with special attention and priority to the specific condition of their beneficiaries. Specialised and specific programmes were developed to assist street children and young people, some of whom had come out of the old orphanages; health care centres were opened even in very remote places for the most destitute; soup kitchens and food distribution centres were set up to help families with limited resources; even the missionary presence among native peoples created its own strategies and specific activities to better accompany and serve the most vulnerable communities and peoples.

There were Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who gave impetus to this kind of work with a social vision. These men and women full of faith, courageous “dreamers”, together with an innumerable and perhaps invisible multitude of lay people – women and men committed to dealing with the pain of others – have taught that alleviating the suffering of the little ones, the ignored, those who do not count, is an expression of divine mercy and a concretisation of Don Bosco’s charism and his *preventive system*.

This has allowed us as a Congregation to be ever more *signs of a Church going forth* towards the existential peripheries of humanity, where we find those who do not fit into the categories of utilitarian economic systems of exclusive economic advantage, and where we experience the joy of encountering those most in need. This undoubtedly gives strength to our charismatic identity and our awareness of serving the Kingdom of God. We also know that some of them – Salesians and lay people – have even been deprived of their lives to defend this cause.

On the road to Nain, Jesus is *accompanied by “his disciples and a large crowd”* (Lk 7:11). Jesus’ disciples had been drawn to him, had abandoned their earlier life and followed him; they had committed all their efforts, heart and whole being to the Master’s project. He had called them by name, and sent them to cooperate in proclaiming the Gospel and they followed him.

Jesus was also accompanied by many people who were fascinated by some aspect of his personality. They joined him along the way, saw the wonderful works he had done: he had healed some, had cast out demons from others, He taught many the Word of the Father with authority; many were filled with the multiplication of food, and so on. This multitude has discovered the immense benefit of being with Jesus. From here, new disciples will arise in the future – like the seventy-two he will send out two by two.

Others who have become part of this crowd will abandon Jesus: some will go away with a sense of gratitude in their heart and will certainly be witnesses to Jesus in other places; others will leave without even a goodbye or word of thanks. But all, in general, will have been looked upon with mercy by Jesus.

This is the pastoral condition in working with the poorest and most abandoned. Many vocations of all kinds and for all forms of Christian life have arisen from Salesian social works and services. In many of the contexts in which we find ourselves working, where religious denominations other than Christianity are dominant, we have experienced the joy of contributing to the formation of a beautiful human family with those who are welcomed into our presence – at times with their families – and have shared the many values we live by from the Gospel. The language of charity overcomes the barriers of beliefs and political structures, leading us to work alongside those who are concerned about building peace.

It is necessary to recognise that the pastoral option in the social field entails many difficulties and that the effort to find the

human and financial resources to support it represents a major challenge for those who carry out these programmes, since it requires strengthening “initiative and apostolic creativity”,¹⁵ characteristic qualities of the life and mission of our Founder. In any case, it is all immensely important and gratifying at the same time.

The needs of the young affected Don Bosco’s heart deeply, and he developed numerous initiatives with an inventive and enterprising spirit. These prophetic initiatives drew the attention and respect of many people from different social classes in Turin at the time. Even today, as Salesians in the Church, through the educational, evangelising and charitable dimension both in our social works and services and in the other settings in which we provide educational and pastoral services, we want to show that the Lord is present and that all our activities are an expression of God’s love for the least. An urgency as alive today as it was in Don Bosco’s time.

1.2. Bearers and sowers of hope amid a culture of death

“Hope is the smallest but the strongest of virtues.”¹⁶ *“As he approached the gate of the town”* (Lk 7:12). The Gospel narrative identifies Jesus’ action by pointing to a concrete place: the town gate. Jesus, who has crossed the borders of Galilee to go to pagan lands to bring the good news of the Kingdom of God to those who want to receive it, stops precisely at the town gate of Nain.

The image of the town’s gate allows us to think about and be aware of the many people, groups or populations who are not only distant from God for geographical reasons, but because walls have been erected around them: walls that condemn entire societies to stay away from social welfare, to shut themselves in because of racial status, or even to be isolated in refugee camps

¹⁵ C 19.

¹⁶ FRANCIS, *Angelus*, 15 November 2015.

that act as containment walls against the advance of what are considered unwanted migratory masses. The walls that enclose these people are sometimes invisible and can also be found in our cities. This is when we classify people according to social affiliation. Obviously, such walls not only enclose those who are “unwelcome”, but even make them invisible with the consequent dulling of the conscience and sensitivity of all others.

The gate in the Gospel account is the place of a very special encounter. Indeed, it will not be just an everyday event that happens at Nain, but something extraordinary and salvific. Interestingly, in the text of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is also given authority in Nain, an unknown and pagan town. An action, his, realised by the very power of God. This manifestation will not be a “circus act”, nor the expression of empty demagoguery of some jumped-up politician. On the contrary, it will be the most evident manifestation of a God who loves his children.

“A man who had died was being carried out” (Lk 7:12). The image this scene offers us has much to say to our Salesian charism. On the one hand we see the group of followers accompanying the Master; and on the other, at the town gate, people walking amid tears and grief because they are saying goodbye to a young man who has died.

This scene continues to be reproduced day after day. It shows the encounter of life that brings hope and joy in the face of situations of despair and death in every corner of the earth.

The Salesian proposal in the social field seeks to be a sign of hope and life capable of encountering on a daily basis the cruelty carved on the sad faces of so many young people wounded by misery, violence, ignorance, exploitation and other types of abuse. Salesian social works and services aim to serve and restore dignity to those who have lost it and, in the name of the Lord, to transform mourning into joy. This is the conviction that accompanies so many educators and pastoral workers who, on a daily basis in Salesian houses, grasp what is happening beyond the

“walls of our conventional activities”, and allow themselves to be challenged by the situations that affect so many oppressed adolescents and young people, individuals and groups, among whom the most common victims are always the youngest.

1.3. God’s love is also a mother’s love

The young man who had died was “*his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town*” (Lk 7:12). It is a painful scene, almost a cruel one. We see a mother who has lost her beloved son. We know that it is not “natural”, in the cycle of life, for a son to die before his parents. Besides, this suffering is not just any loss that can be understood by reason. Here the evangelist offers those who know how to interpret the Word as believers a direct connection with the deepest fibres of love, the love of God which, being immeasurable, in human language is comparable only to the love of a mother for her children. This is how God loves, with a paternal and maternal love. Unconditional. At birth, children’s umbilical cords are cut, but a mother’s bond with her children never fails. There are sons and daughters who, in the course of their lives, may forget their mother and father, but God never forgets his children.

General Chapter 27 offered important reflections on Salesian fatherliness and reminded us that “work and temperance”¹⁷ are, for us Salesians, an expression of our disinterested dedication and love for the young. As happened to Don Bosco, feeling and knowing that we are truly “*fathers*” urges us to dedicate our best energies to them so that they will be good, so that they will achieve their objectives. From our understanding of Don Bosco’s paternal identity, we Salesians feel the pain of so many young people who suffer; we are saddened by their suffering because they are our children. It is no coincidence that we say that Don

¹⁷ C 18.

Bosco always felt that he was the father of his children. He himself expressed this many times in writing.

It is necessary and urgent that, as religious, we discover more and more that our chastity is fruitful and that it must generate life in caring for those to whom we are sent, especially in those who have no one to care for them. In this respect, one of the most beautiful lessons that we consecrated men and women can learn from the laity who are employed in our works and who are often fathers and mothers of families, is the special sensitivity that many of them have for the situations of injustice that assail many of our children, adolescents and young people. We Salesians cannot live without feeling that we are educators, friends, brothers and fathers of our young people. And it is clear that one of the most opportune places to strengthen this dimension of our vocation is our work with young people at high social risk, those who walk “between life and death”.

“But it was precisely this experience of emptiness that would make the young priest Don Bosco aware of the difficulties of his own children, of the human and spiritual qualities that he himself would have to learn to take on in his own life in order to be the father of those who did not have a father and who would see him as the one who would let them savour life, in every way.” “The paternal void in Don Bosco’s life is transformed into a fruitful womb, rather than a trauma.” His family experience “would leave an indelible mark on his vision of life and his idea of education and evangelisation of youth.”¹⁸

In the knowledge that we are educators and fathers, Salesians and lay people, we can learn to meet young people in their world, in their environment, in their digital culture which is becoming more and more complex and which is getting a little (or a lot) out of hand for us adults. Sometimes, with their vulnerability, they

¹⁸ SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY DEPARTMENT, *Youth Ministry and Family*, Editrice S.D.B., Rome 2021, p. 18-24.

find themselves in the social networks of video calls and instant messaging, frequenting playgrounds such as Triller, Houseparty, Tik Tok, Genies, Lomotif, Bunch, Discord, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc. On these virtual meeting and entertainment platforms, many of them express their emotions, exhibit themselves to the world and share their daily lives trying to attract the attention of new friends. In light of this reality, it is important to emphasise that unaccompanied teenagers and older youth often become victims not only of media addiction, but also of many criminals who contact them through these media, exploit them and enslave them in various forms of illegal trade. Many minors, in search of easy money, fall victim to these situations. Many of them do not have adequate educational spaces in the family or at school and experience multiple situations of orphanhood and violation of their rights that have deprived them of social welfare. The pain and tragedy of these children cannot leave us indifferent.

As a Salesian, I believe I have been sensitive and attentive to the reality of youth exploitation to date, and as Rector Major I have promoted the openness of our communities to the presence of those young people who need us most, convinced also that they give us the possibility of exercising true fatherhood like Don Bosco, and of having truly profound concerns for which to “consume” our lives.¹⁹ I am certain that the provinces that have seriously chosen to work with the most fragile young people, those most deprived of support, are moving to strengthen their identity and ensure their significance. Young Salesians must also learn to be educators, brothers and fathers of the young to continue to ensure that the charism of Don Bosco, father of youth, is implemented in our Congregation. Together with the laity, a careful look at today’s contexts helps us to discern the kinds of assistance we can offer to ensure that young people have experiences that make them feel the love of a family.

¹⁹ *The Rector Major’s Guidelines for the Salesian Congregation after GC28*, in *AGC 433* (2020), pp. 35-38 (priority no. 5).

The story told in the passage of the widow of Nain presents us with the dramatic situation of a mother who lost her son and who was also a widow, having lost her husband. She could not count on the social support of a man to protect her, in a culture in which women had no autonomy as citizens. This woman could not even reach old age in the bosom of a family, could not reach the end of her life receiving the love of a son, could not aspire to a dignified death. The social system of the time (and the Mosaic law itself) determined mutual responsibilities in families, with the stronger taking care of the weaker. Parents cared for their children and children, as they grew up, cared for their parents in old age; this was the social basis of the fourth commandment “honour thy father and thy mother”, which responded to the cycle of life. We see in the gospel text how Luke, in so few lines, narrates the drama of the disintegration of a family and gives us a glimpse of the social consequences. The father had died off-stage; the son had died and, as a result, the mother was left alone and unprotected. Jesus knew well what could have happened to this widow.

In our case, our preferential option for the poorest young people means we must necessarily look at the different environments they come from. So the focus of these social works and services demands reflection and interdisciplinary intervention which offers processes of accompaniment for young people, their families (when they have one) and their core social group. This says that situations of poverty, wherever they arise, must be analysed seriously and in depth. It is clear that we must have as much preparation and expertise in accompanying people and communities in situations of vulnerability just as we do in the other “common and traditional” areas of our pastoral work, where we take care to respond to various needs with professional and quality offers. Charity and quality must go hand in hand when planning social works and services for young people at risk, because if we are not clear about this, we risk being *insignificant* in the face of the violation of these people’s rights.

1.4. An educative process

In the situation he encounters in Nain Jesus does not give superficial answers, but every word that comes out of his mouth, every gesture and every movement has a precise meaning and intention, as we see in Luke's account.

- a. *“When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’” (Lk 7:13).*

Where Jesus is present, everything will be permeated with his love, and he cannot pass through people's lives without radically changing things in them.

Serious biblical studies agree that the adjective most frequently used in the Holy Scriptures to describe God – the attribute that best indicates his way of acting – is “mercy”. Jesus loves each person with the same mercy of the Father, who created all things and each person with tender love, because each person is part of his plan of salvation. When Jesus “sees” he perceives the evil that causes pain to this poor widowed mother; and it is she, the widow, for whom Jesus feels mercy, initiating the action that follows.

Jesus does not hold back and tells her: “Do not weep”. How is it possible for a stranger to tell a mother not to weep for the son she has just lost? Jesus tells the woman “do not weep” because he feels, in unity with the Father, that he can change that sorrow into joy and gladness. His words are not empty consolation. He acts, he intervenes because human grief must be accompanied and consoled.

How important it is for us to experience this same divine mercy, to let ourselves be challenged by the evils that afflict so many people everywhere. This question will hardly enter our lives as consecrated men and women if we remain sheltered within the safe walls of our houses waiting for good young people to come and register or participate in our initiatives. In the manner of Jesus, Pope Francis reminds us that it is we who must go out to meet the other in order to create communion, to bring about social change that allows us to participate in the living community of the Lord.

- b. *“Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, ‘Young man, I say to you, rise!’” (Lk 7:14).*

Jesus approaches, he does not stand off at a distance, does not remain calmly in the comfortable atmosphere of his group of followers and disciples. He knows what his mission is and why he was sent into the world. Coming close allows him to enter into a relationship, be challenged by others, to get to know their situation and love them as they are. Jesus’ action requires his presence and decision.

Going to meet a young person who is in a situation of death is a bold and courageous act; the only certainty lies in the knowledge that there is a young person there and that it is worth being at his side and doing something for him.

Jesus takes a further step. He goes further. As he did with the widowed mother, Jesus does not merely observe what is happening, but enters into communion with the young man: “He touched the bier”. There is no life without communion with the Master. Jesus’ touch is not indifferent. In fact, his hand reaches out to the bier and in that mutual contact he transmits, passes on the gift of life.

In our case, inhabiting the culture of youth means being attentive to the elements of death that may surround them, but above all knowing what generates life.

In the experience of meeting young people at risk, the support and offer of help are a salvific experience both for the young person and for the educator – lay or religious – who feels increasingly touched, committed and involved in the existence of the other where there seemed to be only death or no hope.

Of course, the process of changing a young person in the daily dynamic of Salesian social works and services is slow and difficult: sometimes discouragement can appear in those who invest their maximum energy every day. But it is also true that observing the change that God works in the lives of these boys and girls is the greatest reward one can experience as a Salesian educator.

Then, according to the Gospel text, Jesus says the words:

“*Young man, I say to you, rise!*” Once again, when Jesus speaks he generates life. His is a way of speaking and saying things with authority, an imperative that is, however, given in a loving way, with the offering of the hand to the young man so that he may rise, so that he may rise again.

This solemn process aimed at restoring to life so many young people who are dying all over the world is carried out in our Congregation, in the name of the Lord, by thousands of people passionate about humanity who are proud to work in the Salesian social sector and continue to think about formative approaches that help young people to consolidate their personality and become aware of their situation and reality.

Don Bosco continues to reach out to so many young, continues to extend his hand and offer opportunities for “resurrection”, and he does so through the many lay people who collaborate and support social works and services with their goods. He does so together with the many Mamma Margarets represented by educators of all kinds, fields and disciplines, who intervene in our projects for the accompaniment of young people at high risk; he does so through the response of so many Salesians who have found the concrete possibility of expressing their vocation in pastoral work and social education;²⁰ and he continues to do so also through the very many “collaborative networks” that his sons and daughters weave together for the good of others. Jesus continues to say to many today: “*Young man, I say to you, rise!*”

c. “*The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother*” (Lk 7:15).

We are witnessing the raising up of the young man, a raising up that – as we have said – is no magic act but a merciful act in God’s name.

The young person becomes self-aware and is thus able to relate to others: “And he began to speak”. If speaking is an expression of life, we can understand that not speaking, the lack of com-

²⁰ Cf. GC28, pp. 74-75, no. 8.

munication, is an expression of death. Many young people live in situations of death because the channels of communication with their parents, with the whole family and with their roots have broken down. As long as there is communication between people it is possible to accompany them on their journey through life. By approaching the young person and touching his reality of death, Jesus also knows what his possibility of life is.

Jesus has truly ended the woman's grief because he has brought an end to the situation that had caused it.

If the young man grows up, the family is re-established; by re-establishing the communication links between mother and son, the journey to the cemetery no longer makes sense and they set out for home again.

"He gave him to his mother": the young man can continue to grow, mature and take his place as an adult in society, a society that will no longer allow a helpless widow to be left alone to beg. No, because there will be a son to take care of her, who will guarantee her a dignified old age. In this way, social order will also be safeguarded.

This is the great miracle of this resurrection story: the presence of a God who accompanies his people, who restores hope and life to people, and who generates unity in families and society.

As the Salesian Congregation, we witness daily how the Lord continues to raise up thousands of young people and their families. In the different environments in which we accompany young people, we have the great mission of getting to know and inhabit the culture of young people, especially those who live in difficult situations that put their personal development at risk. Consequently, **it is clear that our Salesian social option runs cross all pastoral settings**. Directing our SEPP to this choice means offering services or programmes that open the doors to the less favoured with an oratory criterion²¹ that helps our EPCs not to get lost in the monotony and indifference that

²¹ Cf. CG28, p. 79, no. 13e.

becomes complicit in the various forms of injustice suffered by so many people. This option of ours makes Salesian communities authentically salvific.

Along the same lines, but with a specific SEPP,²² the Salesian social works and services setting responds to these situations of social evil that put young people at risk, violate their rights and those of their communities, and marginalise them from society. The impact of this Salesian setting facilitates the timely reintegration of children and young people into their families and their environment, with its own methodologies that aim at restoring violated rights, healing the various wounds that have lacerated the life of each individual, and enhancing capacities that guarantee them the full use of their freedom by giving them full meaning. It is the miracle of bringing young people back to life, which happens to the extent that we are able to implement the preventive system.

All this prompts us to engage more and more in processes of education and evangelisation through the social response of our presences, which adopt multiple legal forms of civil or ecclesiastical recognition as a requirement to be able to offer their services in different countries in a professional and transparent manner.

Our face in this sector is therefore one of Associations, Cooperatives, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Independent Businesses for Humanitarian Aid, Joint Agreements for the concerted provision of specialised services, Social Centres that provide psycho-social and health care in general, and which are also employment agencies, etc. As in other areas of our youth ministry, what distinguishes us from other similar organisations is this: we Salesians evangelise through the provision of social services, offering everyone a search for meaning and an openness to transcendence, while respecting the freedom of each individual.

To meet these needs, Don Bosco set up a Congregation at the

²² Cf. *CG27*, no. 78.

same time that religious orders were being expelled from Piedmont. Before civil society, in fact, the Congregation appeared as a charitable association of citizens. Thus he was the first in the Church to found a Pious Society and a Work of Men of God. This double dimension continues to enrich our works and social services and, at the same time, gives them an original and specific charismatic identity.

1.5. Spreading the good news

We know that the Kingdom of God grows in the midst of the world in a silent and discreet manner and that we are part of a Church that works generously for the good of the people. It is in this context that the Social Works and Services setting of the Congregation has been formed and strengthened in the various provinces, faithful to the charism of Don Bosco. With this same attitude of grateful humility, but convinced that we are witnessing a moment in history that requires the witness of charity, it is urgent that we develop an increasing ability to communicate in order to give visibility, in an exercise of transparency, to our actions and the good that is being done, and that we tell the world about the human fruits of the work we do.

It is striking that Jesus does not ask to be alone in Nain with the bier to carry out this raising up, nor does he do so in the privacy of the young man's family. This action takes place before the eyes of everyone. He communicates the power of God's love to everyone, without discriminating against anyone. This caused the witnesses to tell what they had witnessed everywhere; they themselves were the spreaders of the good news, and "this word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country" (*Lk* 7:17).

The Kingdom of God produces radical changes in those to whom it is announced and Jesus, in this event at Nain, does not impose silence or prevent others from communicating it. Moreover, in the following verses the Master himself will say: "Go and

tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (*Lk* 7:22). Sharing the faith is the result of walking with Jesus; celebrating it expresses the joy of belonging to the group that walks with him, and seeking social justice is one of the most important commitments of a Church that embraces the teachings of its Master.

In his two social encyclicals *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis teaches that the contribution of the whole Church to human development is integral; that working for justice and peace also requires care for creation, which is our common home. Similarly, our Salesian pastoral action in every local community and in every province is called to be an integral pastoral action that is preferably addressed to young people, even if it is not limited to them. To really help them, we must look at their families (again, if they have any) and their social groups.

Integral human development is also directed towards establishing a dialogue with other faiths, with governments, social institutions and with all men and women of good will who unite their efforts in defence of human dignity. As Salesians, we participate in the construction of *social friendship*, expressing it openly and with concrete methods of intervention through the setting of social works and services. This setting is not new in our charism, since it responds to the founding inspiration, and it is for this reason that I invite all the confreres, the provincials and their councils, the rectors and their communities, as well as the educative and pastoral communities, to be courageous and to listen to the cry of the young – a cry provoked by social sin – and, therefore, to offer proposals that respond to this structural

damage of today's culture. To do this, we must "see the other" and feel compassion for him or her; only then will we find a way out of ourselves and see how to allocate the human and financial resources that will guarantee the implementation of solid accompaniment approaches for young people and communities at risk.

"Yet they [the excluded] are the majority of the planet's population, billions of people. These days, they are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one often has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a question which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage."²³

This is also an invitation, addressed to us Salesian religious, to learn to be very free and modest, not to accommodate and respond to the adverse circumstances of life. We must also learn to translate our religious languages into those of civil societies and engage in the necessary dialogue. It is, therefore, an appeal that in the charismatic option for the social works and services setting we move towards a convergence of criteria which, while respecting the experience and work of every Salesian presence in the world, safeguards our evangelising and charismatic identity, to tell the world, with humility, simplicity and transparency, the impact of our presence in the social sector as a response to the love of Jesus.²⁴

2. THE OPTION FOR THE POOREST²⁵

With the language and methodologies of his time, Don Bosco proposed a new way of caring for teenagers and older youth. It was precisely the choice of the poorest that would guide all his

²³ Cf. FRANCIS, *Laudato si'*, no. 49.

²⁴ Cf. FRANCIS, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 95.

²⁵ *The Rector Major's Guidelines for the Salesian Congregation after GC28*, in AGC 433 (2020), pp. 35-38 (priority no. 5).

action and the consequent consolidation and expansion of the Salesian Congregation, a Congregation that he himself founded, accompanied by some young men who lived and learned at Valdocco what it was to know and love Jesus and to want to serve the young people they met there. This led them to mature and dream “their own life project” (in today’s words), at the service of the mission of which they were the fruit. Being with the poor stems from Don Bosco’s own conviction, which he maintained faithfully throughout his life.

The young people who came to the Valdocco Oratory felt truly at home because there was room for everyone, without exception or discrimination. They all arrived with dreams, joys, frustrations, sadness and many of them were victims of the many harmful forms of social poverty. They all found the possibility of starting out on or resuming a path that ensured them a dignified life and a future they would have access to in order to achieve their goals. In his direct relationship with each one of them, Don Bosco allowed his heart to be moulded as an educator/pastor, and he bequeathed this characteristic to his sons, so that in any part of the world, and at any time in history, it is their poverty that would continue to inspire them to feel the need to be fathers, educators, brothers and friends. It is our attitude of faith that leads us to accompany children and young people in the difficult situations in which they live. Rather than responding to the cultural emergency of the times before us, we try to walk with young people on a path that gives them dignity and new opportunities.

Our Constitutions summarise the choice for the poorest young people²⁶ and show us the way to sanctify ourselves together with all the members of the EPC, a place where God asks us to be present in a family spirit, accompanying them in their daily lives. The capacity to be an “magnificent laboratory of youthful experiences” that characterised the *preventive system* of Don

²⁶ Cf. C 6; 26; 29 and 41.

Bosco which he lived and applied, has given rise, over time, to a rich heritage that feeds the pastoral life of the provinces and has been carefully collected in the *Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference*.

2.1. With a youth ministry for liberation and reintegration through our educational works and services

I think we would agree that the educational task with children and young people must generate life, open them up to life and form them to life. In many circumstances and places it will be necessary to offer young people the opportunity to reintegrate into the core group from which they were expelled or from which they had to flee. One of the many ways of reintegration has been to foster specific environments that remove young people from the risk or the very fact of the violation of their rights. In other cases, the task of reintegration has focused on building social cohesion, trying to educate them to overcome rejection and exclusion, xenophobia and racism, and even language barriers and the lack of vocational training to prepare them for work. The social curricula thus conceived go beyond traditional academic structures and must also focus on safeguarding people's rights, on seeking their emotional, physical and spiritual stability, on empowering them through the formation of the social skills that will be indispensable in their relationship with the world and in their integration into the labour market.

In many contexts, due to particular legislation, the moment of intervention with young people at high social risk is a variable that pushes us to be creative and to have the capacity to establish partnerships in order to carry out our task effectively, minimising any situation that might again violate their dignity. Therefore, the educational task in the social sector is broad and varied, and for this reason, besides the fact that the social option must run across all our pastoral settings, we recognise Salesian social works and services as a specific setting for the provision of ed-

ucative and pastoral services that can be conceived in various ways in both OPPs and SEPPs.²⁷

By way of example:

a. *Social programmes associated with other pastoral settings*

In many provinces there are educative and social services that function in the same structures as other pastoral settings, or that are a response to the social projection of a specific work.

In some of these cases, the idea is to educate people to spend their leisure time, or to offer academic complements and artistic or sports training workshops, for the promotion of civil coexistence, among others.

These are very effective ways in which our presences open their doors to the neighbourhoods in which they are located and bring them to participate in local life, making us close to the real situations of families and allowing us to get to know the sometimes very harsh reality of these boys and girls.

In other places, this service has developed through parishes, youth centres and oratories, where sensitivity has grown towards the inclusion of people with disabilities, children with learning difficulties, help for the advancement of women, help for families, multicultural and multi-religious encounters and the culture of non-violence.

In some countries, the provincials provide motivation and ensure the conditions for Salesians to have the opportunity to be integrated into social services; in others, the question of the “pastoral conversion” that motivates some confreres to want to live and serve in these peripheries is still pending. It is important for consecrated Salesians to be involved in these programmes because they are part of the preferential option of our mission, and for this reason we cannot abandon it, nor leave it to the laity alone, who sometimes feel and complain about the absence of the religious. This imbalance jeopardises the Salesian mission in the field of social service. Together we are called to revive, recreate

²⁷ Cf. GC28, p. 112, no. 45g.

and sometimes even re-found the spirit of Valdocco, in an atmosphere of mutual trust, since each is invited to contribute their own specific nature and qualities. Sometimes this can be a real return to the origins.

b. *Presences dedicated exclusively to the social works and services setting*

There are many provinces with Salesian presences whose dedication to the mission in the social sector is absolute. Because of the impact of the institutions in this sector, Salesian social works constitute a setting in their own right, as there are a series of charismatic factors, legal and regulatory requirements to which they must respond and which give them their own identity and dynamic. It is more and more common for this setting to be described and specified in the Overall Province Plans, with clear options and criteria for its development in the life of the province. In our Congregation we have simple social works and others that are more complex, both because of the number of programmes and services they offer, and because of their articulation and connection with other settings.

As in any process of growth and maturation of institutions, it is necessary to plan the future of these works, but always ensuring that they respond with quality and dignity to the needs of their beneficiaries. It is necessary to overcome the mentality, still persistent in some provinces, that causes there to be a gap and a difference between the buildings, equipment and profiles of the educators and operators of the works that cater to young people living without economic deprivation and those that cater to the poorest. This perpetuates the difference between those who have more opportunities and those who are less favoured and, to be faithful to the Lord Jesus and Don Bosco, we cannot allow this, because the poor deserve the best from us – as we learned from Don Bosco.

The situations in which the disadvantaged find themselves must never frighten us. On the contrary, every time we as Salesians meet these young people we must be enthusiastic about ac-

companying them in their process of preparation for life. Hence the need to be very professional in the formative processes we offer them, since each young person is a project of God that we have a responsibility to accompany.

Our strength as Salesians lies in letting ourselves be helped and also in learning from others. We cannot do good alone. For this reason, in the social works setting we must involve a large number of suitable people, trained in different areas of knowledge and disciplines, who can enlighten the reflection and action to be carried out on behalf of these young people and the communities they accompany. On the other hand, in the animation and shared governance of our works, we need to generate the necessary mechanisms so that the decision-making process is also shared with the laity and the culture of evaluating processes is established.

Of course, the question of profitability and economic sustainability of this type of work is always a concern. To ensure this, we have recourse to our pastoral intelligence and the ability to establish agreements with governments, regional or local administrations, private associations or organisations working in development cooperation, both nationally and internationally. What we must never forget is whose sons we are and what protection we have when working those he loved most.

A very important criterion to pay attention to at this point is the question of who to enter into partnerships with, so that in the search for financial resources we do not allow ourselves to be forced into actions that run the risk of selling out our identity. I must say that our evangelising intention in social works and services is non-negotiable. So the goodness of this setting lies in the fact that we sow the seeds of the Kingdom, even in non-Christian religious contexts, by our actions in the midst of the most disadvantaged communities, and always with respect and freedom for others, but without losing one iota of our Christian and Salesian identity.

2.2. Pastoral care and accompaniment with suitable and prepared animators

Every programme, every service and every social work of our Congregation shows that in the various provinces and EPCs, consecrated individuals and lay people have experienced a great openness of heart in feeling sent to young people at risk; they have reflected on the best strategies to follow in order to propose the relevant accompaniment processes for them and have made the appropriate decisions to guarantee the continuity required by the projects. This is a courageous action, because it is not easy to pursue initiatives that defend those who “create problems and annoyances”.

At this point I would like to express a well-deserved acknowledgement to the many lay men and women who work at the various levels of our works and social services, both as educators, as service staff and as specialists in the various sectors (social pedagogues and re-education experts, social workers, psychologists, health experts, school teachers and workshop instructors, work placement staff, management and administration staff, directors). To all of you I say: Thank you, in the name of our Father Don Bosco, for your good work, because through the contribution of each one of you, children, adolescents and older youth and the communities and neighbourhoods where rights are violated find true fathers and mothers who care about them and who make them feel God’s care.

I know that many of you live your profession with deep passion to the point of taking it on as a true vocation. This makes you true apostles of the Gospel. Many of you, in so many countries of the world, come from cultures and religious traditions proper to their contexts, and this makes us even closer, because it is on the basis of the values we share that we recognise ourselves as members of the same family born in Valdocco.

I know that you, dear lay people, return home at the end of your busy days to continue the work of your beloved families,

and that you often sacrifice part of your personal time to respond to the call of the young people in Salesian work.

I also know that on some occasions some of you have experienced moments of misunderstanding.

I encourage you to go forward, knowing that in the certainty of the vocation you have received you will always find the strength for a sincere dialogue that will help you to grow and mature. Thank you for your life, your friendship and your accompaniment of the young people, of the EPC and of us Salesians.

And I also address profound recognition to my dear Salesian confreres, coadjutor brothers and priests, who with immense pastoral charity have given themselves, or continue to give themselves, to the service of the poorest.

Many of my confreres have sanctified themselves in silent obedience and communicated God's grace to the suffering, to those who are most afflicted and needy, assisting them, standing by their side, counselling them, offering them new possibilities in which to direct their gaze. Many have faced misunderstandings because we have not always nor everywhere been prepared to understand the educational and social proposals. Many Salesians find a vibrant dynamic of our charism in the methodology of social works and services, because they are spaces that move away from rigidity, offering freshness and launching bold pastoral missions.

I ask the Lord for the grace that many young Salesians, starting from the formation houses themselves, may become enthusiastic about apostolates in contact with the streets and depressed environments where, as happened to John Bosco as a young priest, they may be moved by the situations of degradation of humanity, and find happiness in the friendship and being with these young people.

Thanks be to God there are many confreres today who direct

their vocational life project to working in this setting that allows us to see the face of the Risen Lord without any veil. It remains a challenge for our processes of initial, specific and ongoing formation to offer the tools that will enable Salesians to know and love the social dimension of our presence, so as to be competent in this field and thus pertinently propose the pastoral action that it requires.

2.3. Ministry that takes the family into consideration

The family is the natural home of every human being. It is in the family that one learns to be a person and a citizen. Many of the dramas experienced by teenagers and older youth in social services have their origin in their family situation.

There are families that are harmonious, stable, welcoming and attentive to the well-being of each of their members, but there are also families, faced with the problems of one of their children, where they have neither the capacity nor the resources to facilitate the healing and reintegration process. Some of these situations are, for example, drug use, involvement in criminal or violent groups, threats to personal integrity from third parties or legal proceedings.²⁸ In some cases, families fall victim to external causes that break them up, and children are left without supportive ties and bonds to support them, as in the case of regions where there are situations of war, forced displacement due to violence, natural disasters and, in particular, all types of migration. The phenomenon of poverty, combined with the emotional instability of some parents, leads them to have behavioural problems that often affect their children. The family becomes dysfunctional and ends up being an adverse and even abusive environment.

“The reality has become so complex that today we cannot think of family in the singular, but in the plural. There is not just

²⁸ Cf. *GC28*, pp. 69-70, no. 2.

one family, rather there are families. Despite the various configurations of families, we can affirm that the family relationship is a component of major importance because for better or for worse, it is the only access to construction and development of one's own identity. The family is a relational context that supports transformation; it is in fact the institution that 'organises' the primary relationships and fundamental differences of humans... When it comes to caring for the family, first and foremost, this necessarily implies caring for the members of the family, in their diversity and in their dignity; no institution must be above people and their integral human development."²⁹

The re-integrative element of Salesian social pedagogy seeks to enable the young person, in their process of personal maturation, to rebuild the broken ties with their family. From this point of view, the recent Salesian document "Youth Ministry and Family" teaches us that since our ministry is addressed primarily to young people, we cannot isolate them from the world to which they belong, and we are therefore called to accompany family realities to guarantee them the right conditions, both for living together and for mutual support, from affective to economic stability. A fragmented family puts each of its members at risk, and social intervention aims to establish the causes of this malaise in order to activate in the young person the possible paths to follow so that they can reintegrate into it, being part of a welcoming, affectionate and formative environment of which they feel an important part, and which they can help consolidate.³⁰ In this same movement, it is ideal that families join in the reintegration process of young people as a sure key to their recovery.³¹

²⁹ SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY DEPARTMENT, *Youth Ministry and Family*, Editrice S.D.B., Rome 2021, p. 12.

³⁰ Cf. CG28, p. 81 n. 15.

³¹ Cf. CG28, p. 82 n. 15h.

3. COMMITMENT TO INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The social doctrine of the Church has inspired and continues to inspire Salesian work. Our educational proposals have a spiritual perspective because we act in the name of God and direct our actions towards him; but they also have a socio-political perspective, because we are committed to the transformation of reality, and in this same respect we accompany young people to commit themselves and be dynamic agents of culture. This change of mentality requires that we break with the logic that enslaves and people by offering them ideologies, and move forward together towards integral human development. This concept is tied to the idea of “growth”³² which for many years guided indicators that sought to measure the evolution of societies from a financial point of view alone. Church teaching leads us to understand that every beneficial change in the material and social dimension of people is directly linked to their transcendence,³³ and is a call to be truly human, for this is God’s plan for all humanity and also, of course, for believers who find in Christ the measure of the perfect man.³⁴

This process brings together many efforts for justice, peace and care for creation. Pope Francis has published his valuable encyclicals *Laudato si’* (2015) and *Fratelli tutti* (2020) around this proposal, and since 2016 has even set up a specific Dicastery to regulate and administer issues relating to migrants, the poorest, the sick, the excluded and marginalised, victims of armed conflicts and natural disasters, prisoners, the unemployed and victims of all kinds of slavery and torture; as well as the COVID 19 pandemic accompaniment programme and the coordination of integral ecology through the *Laudato Si’* platform. It is clear that we cannot speak of Salesian Social Works and Services without recognising that we are involved in this call to participate in

³² PAUL VI, *Populorum progressio*, 14.

³³ FRANCIS, *Laudato si’*, 225.

³⁴ Cf. *Eph* 4:13.

the path of integral human development to which Pope Francis has invited the Church and the world. It is, so to speak, the official agenda of the Church to which we are institutionally aligned as a Congregation. This adds value to the significance of our works, reinforces the charismatic identity of our educational and social intervention and enlightens us in our choice of allies and *stakeholders*.

3.1. The importance of works for young people at risk and social innovation

The Salesian mission, in all its institutional manifestations and in programmes of assistance to populations in situations where rights are violated, generates processes that start from respect for each individual, accompanying them to discover their place in the world in dialogue with the evangelical values of the Christian faith or their own beliefs. Development theory calls this phenomenon of change “social innovation”, which takes into account the wealth existing in a population, seeking to generate habits in people starting from their possibilities, so that they can find their own path towards a more dignified life. In this way, Salesian charism and social innovation are like two sides of the same coin: the former in the theological and pastoral and spiritual sense, and the latter in today’s academic and civil language, which seeks to indicate processes of cohesion within the culture, leading individuals and communities to integral human development and, hence, from our worldview of life, to transcendence.

Pope Francis establishes an important and necessary dialogue in his magisterium between the language of the Church’s social commitment, which defends human dignity, and that of international organisations that guarantee policies for the well-being of peoples.

In recent decades, there have been many agendas promoted by Church and civil organisations working in the field of development cooperation, most of which converge on the concept of

sustainability. An organisation, in this case a social work or service, is sustainable when it generates a healthy balance between fulfilling its mission, the impact it has on the environment and the financial sustainability that sustains it. From this point of view, it is interesting to consider sustainability as a component that helps to evaluate the meaning of Salesian works and social services. It is an opportunity to overcome the danger that exists in many social (and sometimes ecclesial) institutions of reducing the values of the Gospel and social doctrine to merely philanthropic actions, by drawing real processes of accompaniment to transcendence from our intervention plans.

3.2. Complementarity of Salesian know-how and institutions

The pastoral model leading to integral human development in the Salesian social works and services is enriched by the contribution of various disciplines, among which I would like to highlight the following:

a. *The Salesian contribution in the approach to human rights in our contexts*

Cultural plurality and legal requirements have led the Salesian Family to feel the challenge of having to respond in a particular way to the needs of young people at risk in every context. However, the phenomenon of globalisation is making the factors that cause social injustice and the violation of people's rights, as well as the strategies that are generated to combat them, increasingly common and similar in all societies and places.

Understanding the sociological keys of each historical moment in the various contexts is an opportunity to strengthen Salesian work in the Salesian social works and services setting, and is a concrete way of projecting it into the future to ensure its significance. This discipline provides us with the tools to ensure that our commitment to the young is ongoing, because society is always evolving; it helps us to be profound and passionate

in our work, because the more we are able to analyse the condition of human change, the more opportunities we will have to find the keys to the changes that lead to integral development.

Using an interdisciplinary methodology, by setting up observatories that facilitate a careful and constant sociological interpretation of the phenomena that drive the dynamics of children and young people, the way is indicated for configuring educational processes to be followed and entrance is given to various forums, such as those that are set up in every country and in every region to denounce the violation of the rights of minors. At the same time, the opportunity is offered to work for the defence of these rights. The task of observing these phenomena is essential in this setting, because in the formulation of the SEPP a proper analysis of the context will make the offer of our social services conspicuous and will keep us relevant among social sector institutions.

As a Church and as a Salesian Congregation, we recognise that human rights are a precious gift that we must defend and promote. Our local and provincial communities have come a long way in this regard. In 2009, with the *Preventive System and Human Rights* Congress, the Congregation made the choice that this approach run across all settings and levels of our structures in the world. In a special way, we look at the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* that the United Nations proclaimed in 1989 as a global agreement which gives importance to children as people who have the right to be educated in an integral manner, helping them to develop all their capacities and strengthen their personalities. In this way, a pathway is ensured through which humanity can safely advance towards the attainment of peace and human dignity, insofar as the new generations are respected and formed in this attitude.

It should reassure us to know that as religious and lay people of the EPC we take the necessary measures and develop the necessary tools to safeguard the integrity of children and the entire community, knowing that all its members must know, internalise, respect and observe them.

b. *Social pedagogy from a Salesian perspective*

When we speak of social risk, we mean the concrete possibility that people's human rights are affected or radically violated. In the most diverse human contexts we find many forms of poverty that affect children in general. However, contexts of high socio-economic poverty concentrate a large number of elements that put people's dignity at risk. There are many human peripheries that bring with them the marginalisation suffered by millions of people compared to some of the benefits enjoyed by ordinary citizens. In more scandalous and degrading cases, we see how millions of other human beings live in total exclusion, unable to have the opportunities that should be guaranteed in all societies.

Our charismatic option on behalf of the poorest demands that we commit ourselves, as far as possible, to help break cycles of poverty and exclusion, and we do this, fundamentally, through education. In most provinces that have social programmes there is the challenge of training social educators and social pedagogues, since it is not easy to find the right profiles in all contexts and, in many cases, there is not even an academic offer to prepare them as such.

From a lay perspective, social educators and social pedagogues are a very similar figure to the Salesian assistant that Don Bosco wanted for his settings. Through social pedagogy, we ask ourselves about the type of citizen we must accompany towards maturity, starting from the recognition of the uniqueness of the children, teenagers and older youth of these presences of ours.

Among the many valuable writings on social pedagogy, I would like to simply suggest the up-to-date reading³⁵ of the Preventive System offered by our Fr Jean Marie Peticlerc, who notes that there are three key moments in which Salesian social works and services currently propose accompaniment processes for

³⁵ Cf. PETICLERC JEAN MARIE, *I valori più significativi del Sistema Preventivo*, in AA. VV., *Sistema preventivo e diritti umani*, Roma 2009.

young people at risk: the pedagogy of welcome, the pedagogy of hope and the pedagogy of alliance.

- *The pedagogy of welcome* identifies the first steps that educators take to make contact with each individual young person. From there, the link is generated that will allow each of them to open up to the pedagogical proposals. This is possible because the young person recognises the credibility of the educator who accompanies him. Indeed, if trust is lacking, there will be no educational process.
- *The pedagogy of hope* allows one to see how educators and specialists from different disciplines propose approaches to accompany the young person, helping him (or her) to mature in an integral manner. One perceives that there is a path to follow, based on trust that will bear fruit.
- Finally, *the pedagogy of alliance* allows us to discover the network of networks that is being built and that must guarantee people, in this case young people who turn to our works and social services, the opportunities that will help them grow as citizens, exercise their rights and duties and participate in a healthy development of culture. This demonstrates the regulatory function of society as a guarantor of rights, channelled through the role of the state and public institutions, as well as the bodies that are supposed to ensure the well-being of citizens.

c. *Complementarity of know-how*

As I have already said, the pastoral and psycho-social model is based on building trust, hope and alliance. It is marvellous to observe how Don Bosco's Preventive System has the capacity to involve so many people – lay and consecrated – who enrich our presence with new languages, new educational experiences, new paths to follow in order to reach out to the young people most in need. In this work of complementarity, we consecrated Salesians also have the opportunity to contribute to the great wealth of personal and spiritual accompaniment of minors, their families and their neighbourhood or local communities.

In addition to a rich pastoral experience in our Congregation, we have an abundant intellectual patrimony that has given rise to schools, institutes, vocational training centres, centres for the care of minors, research groups and numerous scientific publications that make our Universities and Institutions of Higher Education true focal points enlightening reflection in the various spheres of knowledge, and that take on particular significance when this has an impact on the process of accompanying individuals and groups. This enormous capacity has been carried forward by Salesians and lay people who have offered, and continue to offer today, their intellectual capacities at the service of the mission.

Among the important higher education offerings, our Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, as a university of the Congregation, has seen significant academic productions in the fields of pedagogy and social pedagogy, psychology and sociology. We must continue along these lines and increase collaboration with other IUS (Institutes of Higher Education) and universities in the commitment to human development in multiple fields.

I appeal to the provinces, and to those who serve in social works, that in the midst of their intense apostolic work (educational and social), they perform a healthy exercise of pastoral intelligence so as not to give in to the tyranny of responding only to the urgent. We need to systematise our educational action and keep it constantly updated, with an ongoing analysis of reality, contexts and achievements that can make the mission meaningful. It is true that not all communities have the capacity to perform this task, so it is of great value to generate networks in this aspect too.

This is why I also invite our higher education institutions to ensure that much of their reflection on the social sector can come from the territories where our Salesian works are located and from the experience we undergo in them. May university research truly fulfil its social function of providing data and reflections that lead to a wise understanding of human and cultural phenomena, and may this enable the various social agents and

educators to make decisions, thus generating the necessary and even innovative actions for each environment.

Finally, I invite our Social Works and Services, our Salesian Universities, the Youth Ministry Sector, the Congregation's Missions and Social Communication Sector, the Mission Offices and NGOs of Salesian inspiration, and the Provinces to unite and coordinate more and more, and to work in multi-sectoral projects with a sense of communion and shared responsibility, to continue to offer the best possible and responsible responses to these minors and young people, and to their impoverished communities; and, all this, always in fidelity to the charism.

3.3 Involvement in active citizenship

From the logic with which I have presented the reflection up to this point, it is easy to conclude that it is not possible to have a proposal for integral human development that favours people without involving them in this very process, so I emphasise two very important aspects that help us to strengthen this purpose:

a. Formation to active citizenship

Active citizenship leads to the formation of people who are sensitive and attentive to the great challenges of humanity and the desire to do something to find common solutions.

It is very important to motivate and teach young people to reflect and propose paths, objectives and processes based on the value and wealth of the people in their place, territory and context. This will enable them to exercise leadership in the pursuit of the common good and the improvement of their own lives and those of others. From a faith and Christian perspective, this means preparing young people who will be true "missionary disciples" (using Pope Francis' words)³⁶ capable of being significant here and now.

There are specialised programmes for formation in active cit-

³⁶ FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 119-121.

izenship in a significant number of provinces, designed both to form young people and adults in this field and to generate projects that strengthen this dimension of active citizenship in the various pastoral settings.

b. Volunteering for building up social friendship

Volunteering is one of the realities found in Valdocco since the origins of the charism (even if it is a term more suited to our times than to those of that time). It was the young people themselves who wanted to help Don Bosco carry out his mission. From that experience some of them stayed with him, and with some of them Don Bosco founded the Salesian Congregation. It is beautiful to imagine what Mamma Margaret must have thought when Don Bosco asked her help to be the mother of his young people. She must have felt a lot of emotion and a deep joy in knowing that she was helping her son in something important. She may have felt nostalgia at leaving the house where she had lived for so many years: the land she had worked so hard for, her family and neighbours. She must have felt uncertainty in leaving for the unknown, as the life that awaited her at Valdocco was undoubtedly an unknown one. In spite of everything, she accepted her son's invitation and contributed to improving the lives of many young people.

The Salesian mission continued to spread throughout the world, fruit of the Holy Spirit (the true inspirer of the charism), and many people joined in. Like Don Bosco, we too need help today to continue building the Kingdom of God wherever the Lord has planted us. Like Don Bosco, we too can propose to young people that they be shepherds and educators of other young people, and one way of doing this, among the many ways of living and committing ourselves, is through volunteering.

We can promote a culture of solidarity through this experience, the opening of the heart's mind. Through encounters with others, in other cultures and geographies, the volunteer experience should offer people, especially young people who have been beneficiaries of our accompaniment processes in some Salesian

settings, an experience that helps them to gain a valid and rich perspective on their lives. The same Salesian presences that host volunteers are positively impacted by their presence.

There are various types of volunteer work in our youth ministry in which people generously donate their time, their work and their lives in Salesian houses or in the various services offered, which is also a very important indicator of these presences in the consolidation of integral human development. This experience, which takes place above all in our social and missionary works, is a gift from God that is lived in the Salesian world and has created bonds of friendship and belonging between volunteers, Salesians and young people in the works. The Salesian communities that welcome volunteers are also challenged by their very presence and often feel the challenge that contact and collaboration with volunteers represent in order to live being Salesians of Don Bosco in an ever more witnessing way.

3.4. Education to the faith and accompaniment in Salesian social works

At a time when Salesian social works seek above all to prioritise people (children, teenagers and older youth) rather than structures, services and management itself, we cannot forget that “for us evangelisation and catechesis are the fundamental dimensions of our mission”. Like Don Bosco, “we are all called to be educators of the faith”³⁷ on every occasion and in every context. Catechesis and education in the faith are not something we should offer only to the most fortunate, able and capable boys and girls. It is precisely those most in need who are the first to be enriched by the gift of the Lord’s presence in their lives, by the gift of faith – whatever their religion. *Let us not fall into the error of thinking that these privileged beneficiaries of ours are never sufficiently prepared to make this journey of Christian initiation or maturing in the faith.* This is why we wrote that “Don

³⁷ Cf. C 34.

Bosco passed on a passion for the salvation of the young, through his constant involvement in simple, essential catechesis adapted to the circumstances, age and culture of the young and linked with other educational and recreational offerings by the Oratory. Salesian catechesis does not happen as the end-point of a preparatory course but is implicitly at the heart of initial encounters and explicitly part of everything we offer. Don Bosco did not make a distinction between first proclamation and catechesis, but when he met a boy he immediately found a convenient moment to invite him to embark on a journey of Christian life.”³⁸

Faithful to the Salesian tradition, I believe it is essential not to overlook the fact that education in the faith and catechesis are placed at the service of the integral formation of the human person, always with respect for each individual.

4. THE SCOPE OF THE PREVENTIVE SYSTEM

The Preventive System, in which we find the Salesian educational and spiritual identity, takes concrete form in a very special way in the care of teenagers and older youth at social risk in different educational and pastoral models. Every pastoral setting must be able to give an adequate and specific response to the reality of the young people with whom we share our lives, according to the Oratory criterion as a permanent source of inspiration.

Salesian social works and services have a twofold task: to prevent situations that may violate the rights of children and young people, and to heal the wounds caused by the violation of these rights, which have led to painful conditions of marginalisation.

The defence, restitution and safeguarding of the rights of children, teenagers and older youth – as well as their families, groups and neighbourhoods – give the Salesian Preventive System a very

³⁸ SALESIAN YOUTH MINISTRY DEPARTMENT, *Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference*, Editrice S.D.B., Rome 2014³, pp. 150-153.

concrete characterisation and implementation. Mitigation of social risk, the restoration of rights, and reintegration into social life are the expected results of this pastoral action. Starting from our evangelising option, all our settings are called to have a social outlook in favour of the poorest and most disadvantaged.

We cannot judge young people only from their problems. It is true that it is not easy to work in the social works and services setting. Like Don Bosco, patience and a high tolerance of frustration must be enriched by faith and the certainty of working for the Kingdom of God. But at the same time, the enormous satisfaction of seeing the results in many of these young people, in each of them, each at their own pace and according to their own possibilities, each with their own gifts, continues to be a “sign of resurrection” as at Nain.

It is a joy that we experience as Salesians and lay people because we are certain that the option for Salesian social works and services reflects the very face of God.

4.1. A constant response

Don Bosco’s charism is a manifestation of God’s predilection for the young and, among them, for the least favoured. This is demonstrated by the multiplicity of projects that make up the Salesian Congregation’s social works and services sector in 134 countries. At present, Salesians and lay people in our presences care for children, teenagers, older youth and communities at risk in about 1,120 programmes in five continents, linked to the various pastoral settings of some works, or that make up educative and pastoral communities with specific projects based on the social model. These experiences are the result of many decades of generous work in which the local and provincial communities have responded with faith to the voice of the Spirit, reacting to the needs of the young people in their contexts and circumstances renewing and updating the way of interpreting and applying the preventive system.

In spite of the distances and cultural differences in which the various proposals were born, this setting is becoming increasingly consolidated, both because of the systematisation and professionalisation of the processes proposed in the face of the various youth problems, and because of the legislative evolution that has characterised the social sector (sometimes called the third sector). The phenomenon of globalisation has also standardised the problems that put people's dignity at risk and, in response to this, networking has led to responses that enable appropriate solutions to be offered.

As Rector Major I indicated the "absolute priority for the young, the poorest and most abandoned and defenceless" in my action programme for the Congregation after GC28 and I said with deep conviction that "if one day we were to leave behind the youngsters, older youth and, among them the poorest, our Congregation would begin to die".³⁹

I am very grateful to the Lord to see the progress made in many local and provincial communities. I now renew the invitation to continue to share the wealth of the charismatic heritage we possess, so that together we can continue to shape and consolidate the evangelising and educational identity of this important setting in which we are also witnesses of the Lord's love and goodness. In order to achieve this, we increasingly need to unify the languages that will lead us to understand each other and to dialogue about what we consider important in our proposals; we will thus be able to establish the minimum but common criteria that must guide the SEPP of this educative and pastoral setting in which we work with the poorest and most abandoned, and strengthen the networking among the provinces and regions within our Congregation. It is true that there are countries and provinces where this reflection is very advanced; in other cases it is proceeding more slowly, but significant steps are being taken.

³⁹ Cf. CC28, pp. 35-38.

With these words, I wish to accompany and support the efforts of many provinces that have decisively indicated the preferential option for the poorest in their OPP and dedicated all kinds of resources to this mission, and guarantee the sustainability of these programmes and services.

Likewise, I follow with great hope the consolidated work of some Provincial Conferences and Regions that have created coordination structures for the management, communication and formation processes of the social sector in their territories.

In this regard I would like to highlight the work carried out by Youth at Risk (YAR) in India; the Salesian Social Action Network in Brazil; the Salesians for Social Action in Italy; the Salesian Social Platforms in Spain and the experience of the Salesian Social Action America Network (RASS) which has been operating for more than 20 years of uninterrupted reflection and joint action and includes 18 Provinces from the 2 regions of the American continent. In all these experiences there are lines of action defined in quality action plans, consolidated youth intervention strategies, suitable technological support and joint formation programmes. Above all, I happily note the intense educational and evangelising passion on behalf of the poorest young people and those at risk.

A very significant part of these proposals is carried out together with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and other groups of the Salesian Family, where the significant contribution of each enriches the charismatic response of Salesian educational proposals in the world. This shared responsibility in the work of our family has been a source of revitalisation. And the commitment to working as a Salesian Family is a constitutive feature of our identity that makes our social works and services a true “theological place of encounter with God”.

There are also very significant cases where partnerships with other religious congregations and dioceses have come into being, making our work an increasingly ecclesial commitment.

4.2. New forms of mission

The World Consultative Council for Social Works and Services held in Rome in 2019, convened by the Youth Ministry Sector in the context of the Synod on Young People, ratified the path that this setting must continue to follow, in line with Pope Francis' proposal on integral human development. In continuity with the reflection carried out in 2019 and as part of *The Rector Major's Guidelines for the Salesian Congregation after GC28* I have considered it necessary to convoke an **International Congress of Salesian Social Works and Services** as a place for convergence of all the Provinces and Institutions to which they belong to pray, reflect, share and propose agreements and common actions that will consolidate this setting in our Congregation.

We live in an era of rapid social change and, for this very reason, social services are also evolving rapidly. In the face of this reality, this educative and pastoral setting must be defined not so much by the services offered, but by the method that leads it to impact, in terms of integral human development, on the lives of children, teenagers and older youth. The ongoing observation of social and cultural phenomena gives us the possibility of identifying which are the peripheries of the human situation and, therefore, of proposing new operational strategies to reach people. The ability to intercept all the situations that cause so much human suffering, so much marginalisation, and tend to create situations of "waste", especially among children and young people, drives us to provide concrete responses.

I cannot fail to mention, in this regard, at least three great wounds that afflict humanity at this time.

a. *The devastating effect of the COVID pandemic*

The arrival of the pandemic had dramatic effects on the world economy. Many production cycles came to a halt and the provision of services was reduced exponentially. However, our work in social works and services has been boosted by situations such as assistance to the sick, solidarity chains in the distribution of food

and other basic necessities. As for minors and young people at risk, at the time of the pandemic they were already there; that was their home, we could not turn them away and leave them on the street. Providence gave us the strength to accompany them and the resources to survive in the midst of the crisis.

As I write this letter, the scourge of the pandemic has not yet disappeared and the virus continues to mutate. The COVID 19 pandemic has affected all spheres and levels of society: both “affluent” societies and the poorest and those touched by misery. To the former belong the richest and most powerful of this world, who also have better chances of accessing treatment. However, we cannot forget that in the poorest and most abandoned places – in countries considered as “developing” – the health crisis caused by COVID 19 continues to be one of the most aberrant social injustices that exist today and to which many populations are subjected as a consequence of political negligence, corruption and lack of solidarity of one part of the world towards the other (the largest and poorest).

b. *The dastardly war in Ukraine*

As I have said in other texts, the dastardly war that led to the invasion of Ukraine has shattered many dreams of peace that had arisen over the past decades. Destruction, damage, deaths and families decimated by the loss of their loved ones are the first consequences of this drama. Our solidarity is with all the Ukrainian people and, in a special way, with our confreres and members of the Salesian Family who have not wavered in their mission to be concrete signs of God's presence – among the people.

We have witnessed many signs of unity and solidarity. Our Salesian provinces in Europe (both SDB and FMA) responded admirably, activating plans to take in thousands of families displaced by the bombing and destruction. In many cases, processes have been implemented to link them to the social systems of the various host countries and to ensure their well-being. Salesian houses in the countries bordering Ukraine, and beyond, have served as reception and distribution centres for humanitarian

aid from all over the world. We have seen how, in the different places where our Ukrainian brothers and sisters have arrived, the faith that impels us to act in solidarity and to be one family has been celebrated and shared.

c. *Other places of pain, death and hunger*

It would be a serious oversight on my part if I did not mention here the reality of pain, death and hunger in many other places where war between sister societies, civil wars and terrorist groups (many of them in Africa) continue to be a scourge that seems to have no end, and which are not visible to the media because they take place in areas that do not respond to the interests of the groups that control economic power on a global scale. There too, our brothers and sisters, together with other members of the Don Bosco Family, are present with proposals of resurrection and life in the midst of a culture of death.

4.3. Salesian social works and services among migrants and refugees

In his Message for the 2018 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis wrote that “Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age”.⁴⁰ He emphasised that in the face of this drama of millions of people forced to leave their lands because of wars, poverty and violence, our common response could be articulated around four verbs: “welcome, protect, promote and integrate”. As GC28 said, migrants cannot be a problem, they are a great opportunity for us Salesians today to meet Jesus.

The Pope encourages us to “touch the wounds” of the bodies of those who suffer; when this happens we become truly sensitive

⁴⁰ FRANCIS, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018, “Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees”*, Rome 15 August 2017.

to their pain and, as people of faith and pastors of the young, we are invited not to stand still in the face of this drama. The Salesian charism finds its full meaning in this field, which is the pastoral/social service that is growing the most in the Congregation, and in which we also develop proposals for accompaniment for the different types of migration, both within some nations and in the international migrations that a good part of the provinces deal with.

In this regard, I would like to emphasise our focus on permanent voluntary migration for economic, work or study reasons. We also deal with people in temporary voluntary migration, especially workers who enter seasonally to participate in the labour markets of developed countries. We accompany forced migrations undertaken by people fleeing their countries because of war, violence, epidemics or natural disasters. Some of these migrants are refugees seeking political asylum and many of them are forced to stay for long periods of time waiting for unsuccessful responses from governments. In this respect, I would like to thank our confreres for the great work done in the refugee camps of Palabek in Uganda, Kakhuma in Kenya and Juba (South Sudan), where, despite the difficult circumstances, our being there is a beacon of hope for these people.

All migrants have in common the search for well-being, their own and that of their families, who have often remained in their place of origin and for whom reunification is generally sought. This leads us to discover that the “affective” value in migration is one of the components to take into account when pastorally accompanying a person arriving from afar. We must ask ourselves what the migrant we see passing by our door must feel in their heart; we must question ourselves about their loneliness and the circumstances in which they left their home, loved ones, village and people. We Salesians cannot consider migrations as a “statistical phenomenon” to be analysed on the basis of figures; on the contrary, we must face this drama with the hope of generating life, freeing ourselves from

the habit of “political correctness”. The Gospel does not include “political correctness”!

Many proposals underway in some Salesian provinces seek to offer alternatives that bring dignity to immigrants. It is true that working with the poor, who are also from another culture or religion, who do not speak our language and who may carry a heavy burden of social resentment, is difficult and unrewarding. But we might ask ourselves what skills Don Bosco developed when he faced these same challenges with the boys at Valdocco. In the different contexts of our educational communities, we can ask ourselves what we can do to improve the condition of migrants in our cities. In this way, parishes, schools, oratories and vocational training centres can determine the number of migrants with whom to interact and offer them a more meaningful space in which they can grow and better integrate into society.

5. SUSTAINABILITY OF SOCIAL WORKS AND SERVICES

It is clear that the sustainability of projects and actions in the social sector is important in order to be able to continue doing good. There are three criteria that international development cooperation agencies indicate when they think about the sustainability of these social interventions. Sustainability is guaranteed if they have the capacity to generate social equity according to their mission, if they are able to guarantee ecological sustainability and if they have the financial resources to support this mission.

The balance of these three criteria in our presences must be checked periodically by the EPC core team and must meet the objectives and indicators of the SEPP. In any case, we are convinced that working with this orientation is fully compatible with trust and abandonment to Providence. Because doing things well, with great transparency and communicating the good that one

does, opens the way for the generosity of benefactors who work with us on the basis of trust and credibility. This is a very important factor. Let us not forget to be very demanding of ourselves in terms of clarity, honesty and transparency.

In fact, it is up to the management bodies of each presence, project or programme in the social sector (depending on the situation in each place) to ensure transparent reporting with quality criteria, since the ability to negotiate resources, obtain contracts with the various state bodies, establish inter-institutional partnerships and to access national and international projects with cooperation agencies largely depends on this. It could even be said that in most of the countries where we work as children's rights defenders, this is precisely what we depend on to get the licences that accredit or authorise our institutions to provide the service.

All this involvement leads us to strengthen our efforts in a planning and project mentality, in total harmony with what is proposed to us in the *Youth Ministry Framework*. We must not be lazy but be well organised in our apostolic action; without falling into sterile efficiency.

Dear brothers and sisters, this work is certainly challenging, but not impossible. That is why it is necessary to understand the logic of the social or third sector and to choose critically the profiles of the people who join the mission and accompany us in the various tasks to which we must respond. The careful care of human resources involves listening to people, accompanying them in common formation, and guaranteeing the quality of the work, always giving priority to those for whom the mission is intended. By guaranteeing all this, we will always be able to make the most appropriate decisions.

I therefore believe I can say that sustainability and the pastoral sense of Salesian works are two terms that complement each other.

5.1. The organisational structure in Salesian development activities

When we have a clear approach to the roles and relationships to be established in this particular field of Salesian mission, we understand even more clearly the need to start from a systematic and process-oriented pastoral approach in which authority is conferred on the basis of service to the poorest. And this is much more important than occupying this or some other position.

At the local level, those in charge of social works or social programmes must ensure that the service provided is adequate, i.e. that the educative and pastoral action responds to the needs of young people and their communities.

At the provincial level, the Planning and Development Offices of each Province (PPDO) or Project Offices can support the work of social works and services in the technical formulation of these processes.

Development cooperation is a commitment of different social actors. These offices have evolved in provinces, helping to provide an increasingly systematic and process-oriented mentality, both in the provinces and in the local communities.

It is also necessary, in order to ensure the quality and future of these works, to look after the personnel, always being fair in the relationship with workers and all those involved. To this end, we must first of all ensure compliance with the labour laws of each country, making sure that workers receive a fair wage, in line with their performance, and that they have decent working conditions. And I say this thinking especially of those countries where workers' rights are poorly protected and legal requirements are lower. We must distinguish ourselves as a Salesian Congregation by a clear desire for true justice (which goes beyond essential legality); otherwise the good we can do for the most vulnerable boys and girls will not be full and something will always be missing.

At the international level, some Salesian institutions at the UN and in Brussels are very significant. So are many of our Non-Governmental Organisations for development cooperation and our Mission Offices. All these institutions facilitate the participation of our Salesian Congregation in cooperation for the development of peoples. This new culture of collaboration, donation and aid that we are trying to generate in turn leads to changes in mentality in the territories and among the people, helps to ensure the sustainability of projects and also gives greater charismatic meaning to our social works and services.

5.2. Decision-making process

The Salesian operational model proposes an integrated structure in the animation and governance of social works and services, and designates the teams and decision-makers who are called upon to make the most appropriate decisions to promote a real response to the most vulnerable in this sector.

From this point of view, I would like to make some recommendations that I believe are important to be more meaningful and sustainable in this environment.

1. We must have a vision of the future

In the provinces where we provide social services, we need to overcome the individualism and territorialism that isolate works and hinder the development of the social sector. We need to project ourselves into the future, so as to ensure the path towards sustainability. I insisted on the need to have teams dedicated to the observation of social phenomena and knowledge of the legislation of each place so that we always know where we are going, so that we do not lose presence, validity and meaning in the service of those who need us.

2. We must have an integrated vision

It is necessary to allow local, provincial and, if necessary, national social services to make the necessary decisions and,

to this end, an appropriate delegation of authority is indispensable.

Given the lack of knowledge on the part of many managers of the logic of the social sector and the legislation to which they must respond, there is an urgent need for a profound sense of institutional leadership and governance, that is, a collegial ability to make decisions (each according to his or her responsibilities), according to a common plan guided by specialists in the sector.

This governance mitigates the risk of each house or province interpreting aspects of common interest differently and autonomously. Not paying attention to this aspect would lead (dare I say it metaphorically) to institutional “pachydermia”, moving slowly, lost in inefficient bureaucracies, and jeopardising the most important thing which is the proper achievement of our mission.

3. Always with an overall perspective on things

It is necessary to safeguard the unity of criteria and commit to a vision that also benefits social programmes, both for people and for the economy as a whole, avoiding the temptation to have some works that are economically rich while others are so poor that they may fail from institutional neglect.

Where sustainability is not achieved through agreements with public institutions, the provinces should look for ways to guarantee the life of these works and services included in the OPP; works and services that are never economically profitable, but are intended for the “least”, those for whom we have predilection.

I consider it important that there be a reference for social works in the provinces: a member of the Youth Ministry team, lay or religious, with adequate skills both in knowledge of the sector and the policies to which they must respond and in the ability to work as a team, to ensure the harmony of social works with the provincial, national and Congregational project.

4. Let us keep our eyes always focused on the young

Understanding that the core of our action is not in the man-

agement or the structures, but in the young people, and that these things are only the instrument for educating and evangelising, helps us to have the same outlook as Don Bosco.

When young people occupy our hearts, personal and institutional prejudices are put aside and we become more courageous and creative in seeking the best alternatives to welcome them. Understanding the main phenomena of poverty and exclusion of teenagers and older youth encourages us to continue to make Salesian social works and services a concrete and beautiful way of giving our lives for the less fortunate.

CONCLUSION

Dear brothers, dear sisters, Salesians and lay people, uniting myself with the thinking of the Church's Social Doctrine which, in the Magisterium of Pope Francis, invites us to rediscover and enhance the social dimension of the Salesian charism,⁴¹ I would like to invite you to be fearless, courageous like Don Bosco in your choices on behalf of the least favoured, the most "difficult", the discarded, all those whose rights are violated. Our apostolic creativity must always have as its criterion the good of those for whom we were born charismatically from the heart of Don Bosco.

We find inspiring examples in our Salesian Family of a holiness realised in the option for social action and for the poorest.

The imminent proclamation of the sanctity of Artemides Zatti, who offered his life in Argentina for those who were excluded from the healthcare system, simply because they were poor and could not afford to pay for treatment, fills us with immense joy. This great Salesian coadjutor brother saint, an Italian migrant, exalts the deepest values of divine mercy, and is a marvellous testimony that God's presence among his

⁴¹ Cf. *Pope Francis' Letter to GC28*.

people overflows with generosity and kind hospitality to generate life in abundance.

Together with Artemides Zatti, we recognise the great gift for the Church and for our Salesian Family of figures such as Blessed Maria Romero and her work in the Citadels of the Poor in Central America; Blessed Maria Troncatti and her commitment to health and the defence of the integrity of the tribes in the missions in Ecuador; like the Venerable Simon Srugi who did not hesitate to work as a nurse for the most rejected sick in Israel; and likewise we remember Blessed Louis Variara who was the apostle of the most forgotten and isolated sick in Colombia, where he also founded the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary to continue to spread God's tender love among the weakest. In Amazonia we have the testimony of the work with the native cultures of Luigi Bolla in Peru and Rodolfo Lukenbein in Brazil: confreres who were true prophets of charity, of the option for the poorest and of care for their culture and natural environment.

Integral ecology, as Pope Francis teaches us, tells us that “everything is connected”, and the care of creation, of our common home, is intimately linked to that of human communities: “Today, however, we have to realise that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”⁴²

Our path of sanctification in the midst of poor and abandoned youth continues to be enriched by the self-giving of Salesians and lay people who, in choosing to serve the poorest and most excluded, and with the methods of social action that we know today, discover the full realisation of their lives, and the safe space of encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of life to the full.

⁴² Cf. FRANCIS, *Laudato si'*, n. 49.

I ask our Mother, Mary Help of Christians, to continue to take under her protective mantle the children and young people, families and marginalised and forgotten communities in the human and social peripheries and, thanks to her maternal heart, to continue to arouse in her Salesian sons and daughters and in the lay people with whom we share the mission, the same passion as Don Bosco for the salvation of souls.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ángel Fernández Artime". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Fr Ángel FERNÁNDEZ ARTIME, sdb
Rector Major

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