**SALESIAN WITNESS IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD**

**Challenges and opportunities**

1. **Towards a new geography of the ecclesial presence**

Speaking to the Roman curia in 2019, Pope Francis stressed “that what we are experiencing is not simply an epoch of changes, but an epochal change ... that rapidly transform our ways of living, of relating to one another, of communicating and thinking, of how different generations relate to one another and how we understand and experience faith and science.”

That is, we are facing transformations that require a willingness, as the Pope says, “to be challenged by the questions of the day and to approach them with the virtues of discernment, *parrhesía* and *hypomoné*.... (in the awareness that) God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history ... In this we are urged to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

In fact, it is necessary to have our eyes wide open to grasp the actual extent and depth of the transformations taking place in the Church, which are obviously connected to the broader set of processes that go under the name of globalisation. Indeed, we are currently in a situation where focus on the local, and self-sufficiency, are no longer the primary focus of most people’s lives. Instead, we find ourselves in a social environment where boundaries are constantly becoming more fluid, distances are shrinking, exchanges are on the rise, interdependence is growing stronger, and the diverse cultural perspectives of the world are being compelled to engage with one another.

An interesting point of view from which to grasp the dynamics that are giving a new face to the ways in which the Church is present in the contemporary world is to observe its geography or its presence in the different cultural areas of the world.

While maintaining the theological awareness that the gospel is proclaimed to all peoples, in fact until 1500, after the schism with the East, Catholicism ended up coinciding with the territories of what is ordinarily called Western Europe. From there, the Reformation cut off much of Germany, Scandinavia, and then England. Between the end of the sixteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century the universality of the Catholic Church coincided in fact with Spain, Portugal and their respective colonies in Latin America, France, the Netherlands, part of Germany, the Austrian Empire and Italy. Church and Europe overlapped not only territorially, but also in terms of ecclesiastical personnel, paths of theological reflection, and exchanges at the level of social culture. In the second half of the nineteenth century, we witnessed a strong resurgence of missionary endeavour in Europe, effectively intertwined with colonial expansionism. It was following this impulse to break free from the “historical” boundaries of Catholicism that “for the first time a global vision of a missionary project *to the ends of the earth* was developed, a project initiated at the end of the 16th century with the discovery of the Americas.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Thus began a process that in the space of a hundred years would profoundly change the face of the Catholic Church.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, 73% of Catholics lived in Europe and North America, but currently only 27% reside in those regions. This indicates a significant shift in the geographical distribution of baptized individuals over the past century, a trend that continues to evolve. For instance, the percentage of African Catholics was around 0.7% (just under two million) and has now grown to 20% of the total (over two hundred and seventy million). In Asia, the proportion has increased from 5% to 12%, and in Latin America, the percentage has more than doubled from 22% to 42% of all Catholics.[[3]](#footnote-4)[[4]](#footnote-5)[[5]](#footnote-6) As a catholicity is emerging that has never been so truly “universal”, two profoundly different and in some respects antithetical processes are unfolding. On the one hand, we have Europe and North America, which are going through a phase in which they are seeing the weight of their portion in the total number of the baptised decrease, while at the same time the number of those who ask to commit themselves to the diocesan priesthood or religious life, whether male or female, is drastically reduced. Meanwhile, in other continents such as Africa and Asia, there is a dynamic growth in the number of baptisms, conversions, and new vocations.

We truly are facing a change of epoch in ecclesial life where new and multiple processes are initiated, making it difficult to outline what the institutional structure of the Church might be in 20 or 30 years time.

Seventy years ago it could reasonably be said that the “centre” of the Church was in Europe where not only the majority of the baptised lived, but most of the Church’s personnel as well. European seminaries took in vocations in sufficient numbers to ensure not only an “internal” generational turnover, but also a strong commitment to evangelisation in other parts of the world. At that time one could speak of the Christian roots of Europe and, just as sensibly, of the European roots of the Church, a bond that is now rapidly loosening, although a certain European prevalence still remains with regard to Church personnel. It is a fragile primacy due to many elderly and few young people. The continent that for almost two thousand years has been the central space for Christianity, giving the Church testimonies of holiness, thinkers and theological schools, creative and daring innovators, receiving ideas and organisational models from it, is now uncertain, increasingly weaker in religious terms, less and less able to attract, to put forward proposals.

At the same time, there is no society or geographical area that can be identified as a new “centre” of Catholicism. There are countries that are undoubtedly vibrant in terms of their ability to proclaim and gather new believers; others are vibrant because of their vocational drive, some because of their theological reflection, yet in no case (at least not yet) can one say: this is the “centre”, this is the place where most converge and from which come projects, directions, ideas that are recognised as exemplary beyond their local context. The Vatican II Assembly was possibly the last experience of this kind. It may also be that in a world enveloped in the network of instant communication, in the scenario of globalisation, it is improper to seek a centre because there are so many such cetnres simultaneously; in a “multi-centric” reality, each node of the network can, for a certain time and period, become central.

1. **Towards a multicultural understanding of the Salesian charism**

The change outlined also affects and is transforming the geography of the Salesian presence (Table 1).[[6]](#footnote-7)

Table 1. Distribution of professed Salesians, temporary and perpetual, by continental area. Values are in %

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Continent | Year | | |
| 1971 | 1991 | 2023 |
| Africa | 1.0 | 2.2 | 14.4 |
| America | 29.4 | 26.6 | 19.2 |
| Asia | 9.9 | 16.9 | 32.8 |
| Europe | 60.7 | 54.3 | 33.7 |

Over a period of 50 years, the Salesian Congregation has been experiencing both the decline of its roots in Europe and in particular in Italy[[7]](#footnote-8) and at the same time a lively growth, including vocational growth, in Asia and Africa.[[8]](#footnote-9) The thinning of new vocations, as happens in Europe, does not seem to immediately lead to a crisis in the structures of our presence (communities and works) even if maintaining them involves increasing effort. In fact, improved material conditions have contributed to extending the average life duration by a few years and therefore the lower number of vocations has been compensated, immediately, by a prolongation of life. Certainly, living longer does not equate to becoming younger, and eventually we will have to come to terms with the reality that there are now insufficient human resources to sustain the Salesian presence that has been evolving since the era of Don Bosco until the latter part of the twentieth century. This is evident if we observe the considerable differences in the distribution of religious at the continental area level (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of temporary and perpetual professed Salesians by age and continental area

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Continent | Age | | | | |
| 20-40 | 41-70 | 71 and over | Total | Average age |
| Africa | 65 | 31 | 4 | 100 | 39 |
| Am. South Cone | 28 | 42 | 30 | 100 | 56 |
| Interamerica | 25 | 46 | 29 | 100 | 58 |
| East Asia-Oceania | 35 | 50 | 15 | 100 | 50 |
| South Asia | 48 | 44 | 8 | 100 | 45 |
| Mediterranean | 12 | 35 | 53 | 100 | 68 |
| Central/North Europe | 17 | 56 | 27 | 100 | 60 |
| Rome Gen./UPS | 5 | 79 | 16 | 100 | 61 |

It goes from 65% of young people in African provinces who have an average age of 39 years, to 53% of elderly confreres in the Mediterranean region where the average age is 68 years. We are in a congregational framework shot through with opposing tensions. The European provinces, which as a whole still have a good number with 4,394 professed religious, have to deal with growing ageing and insufficient generational turnover. Here it is a question of governing a phase of decline where the watchword is “downsizing“ or reshaping, paying attention so that processes of institutional disintegration do not take place. By this, we mean the risk of widespread demotivation (“there's nothing left to do”, “let us die peacefully”, “there is no future for us”") which, if not properly managed, would exacerbate tendencies towards disengagement, withdrawing into oneself, further weakening the vitality of Salesian action and witness. Ageing is not a fault, but with the passing of time physical strength and mental energy inevitably decrease. Not taking this into account could be a fault. Times, the pace and kind of work must be rethought, reducing or modifying these according to personal circumstances. Moreover, the elderly person has a “short” view of the future and generally finds it more difficult to accept changes, particularly those that challenge his knowledge, lifestyle and commitment to new projects. His gaze is more directed towards the past than the future, there is still a world in him that has now disappeared and therefore he is more exposed to regret. His utopia, his dream, lies in what he once experienced (often idealised), perhaps for the obvious reason that this was the time of youth, dreams, hopes. These are all lines of possible tension with the younger generation, which is increasingly in the minority, making internal dialogue difficult and disempowering any plans for innovation. A sort of paralysis ensues: changes are hoped for in words, new scenarios of apostolic engagement are outlined, but in actuality there is a standstill due to the lack of human resources. In this context, rather than thinking about changes, which are quite difficult to implement, one could more effectively focus on valuing the resources still available by nurturing the quality of witness. Even if mainly composed of elderly individuals, a religious community can continue to be a significant presence on what are now the unguarded frontiers of charity: the youth needs that institutions pretend not to see, the poverty that no one takes responsibility for. It is not about creating new works, but quite simply about being welcoming, hospitable, remaining sowers of hope, capable of generating life.

On the other hand, the situation in Africa, Asia and, in part, Latin America is profoundly different. Here the presence of new vocations, which must be welcomed and formed, outlines a growth phase to be accompanied mainly in terms of formation and then planning forms of presence that the charism certainly outlines, but then must be implemented in real terms, taking into account the social and cultural context in which they take shape. This balance between charismatic identity and attention to cultural specificity is not easy to achieve, but to the extent that the Salesian Congregation becomes multicultural, it is a subject that cannot be avoided.

Culture is the way of seeing reality and behaving in it that characterises the identity of every society and consequently that of every individual born and raised in it. Although over time cultural identity as learned is reinterpreted by individual subjectivity, it remains, in its essential traits, as a deep core of personality. As long as people remain within the context of their culture of origin, or move within the context of related cultures, differences can be traced to different ways of interpreting a shared “score” (as in a musical score). Problems arise and become more acute when the encounter is between different cultures or between individuals educated brought up in different cultures. The problem is as ancient as the history of humanity and finds a vivid representation in the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel.

To the extent that the Salesian Congregation is changing the structure of its territorial presence through downsizing and decline in Europe and a parallel growth and expansion in Africa and Asia, the issue of cultural differences arises and will arise even more in the future.

When the reference model and form of governance for religious institutes was European, becoming consecrated meant becoming culturally European. Differences, especially religious ones, were set aside as they were considered incompatible with Catholic tradition. There was only one way to be Christian (or Salesian) regardless of the cultural area from which you came or in which you worked.

Certainly, communion based on unity of faith facilitates dialogue, the acceptance of cultural diversity, creating an environment that is substantially open to acceptance. However, since the differences also concern religious sensitivity, the way of understanding and expressing spiritual experience will not always make it easy to find a point of balance.

The charism, as Don Bosco made it possible, was deeply indebted both to the spiritual sensitivity in which he grew up and to the social context, Piedmontese first and foremost Italian, in which he operated. As the institution expanded and established itself in culturally diverse regions outside of Europe in recent decades, it observed how uniform approaches ultimately diversified into a variety of interpretations and operational methods. In some cases, such as our witness to poverty or the methods in exercising authority, cultural differences emerge in lifestyles, in how roles are exercised, in relationships with the social environment. Giving space to cultures will mean reaching a plural understanding of the charism and, consequently, experiencing multiple spiritual life experiences. The eyes with which one looks at the charism of Don Bosco (and bears witness to it) can only be (also) those of the culture of belonging and of the social contexts in which one finds oneself acting. Reading the charism with new eyes reveals how there are depths and insights in it that remain to be discovered.

The openness to a multicultural understanding of the Salesian charism certainly has its own specific features, but it is also a participation in the instance of synodality that the magisterium of Pope Francis identifies as a point of balance between the autonomy of the different local (and cultural) realities and the instance of universality in communion. The goal to strive towards is that of a plural Catholicity in which different cultures contribute with equal dignity to create a new unity of faith.

The transition to a relational practice based on respect for cultural diversity has as its prerequisite the ability and willingness to dialogue, to confront each other, to accept the risk of a certain mixing, of a certain loss of one's “cultural” purity. It is a situation that we already experience here and there in our communities and we realise how much potential wealth of solicitude, stimulation, opportunity it brings. At the same time, we realise how this makes being together more complex: the risks of misunderstanding increase, memories of historical events of oppression and domination may suddenly resurface. Mistrust can stifle confrontation from the outset. Precisely because they have a history of clashes rather than encounters and dialogue behind them, they know how fragile and exposed to multiple possibilities of failure the path they have taken is. Yet we sense a profoundly evangelical value in fearlessly accepting the encounter with those who are different from me/us in spiritual sensitivity, worldview, lifestyle. There is a proclamation to be made, a testimony to be heard, a peace to be built together, a commitment to justice and respect for creation to be shared. We cannot let the sowers of enmity and fear rob us of the joy of contemplating the reflections of the Spirit in the multiplicity of cultures , the flame that enlightens and renews all. In societies that risk turning immigration, transition, encounter into factors of conflict and division, religious life can contribute to defining a different geography of the spirit: from clash of civilisations to cooperation, which is akin to moving from Babel to Pentecost.

1. **Difficult perseverance**

The Salesian Congregation has been devoting particular attention to the question of perseverance and departures for some time, confirmed in Marco Bay’s recent research: a very detailed work both in terms of the documentation offered and in the reflection that accompanies it. In addressing this topic, it is useful to recall what Fr Giovenale Dho wrote in his analysis of departures that occurred in the years 1972-1976. He drew attention to the fact that every person who leaves has “a history that starts from the family and from early upbringing and that has roots in early Salesian formation, in the socio-cultural and religious environment, in the particular situations of the Salesian community and in the crises that agitate society and the Church ... Often there is a strong temptation to try to identify ... the main causes ... very often ... resorting to preconceived and simplistic interpretative schemes ... I believe that this induction is not possible unless in a very generic and cautious manner ... (indeed) the complexity of the connections of the various reasons should be considered without often being able to establish a causal order among them ..... Giving up the claim to identify the real root causes of the departures crisis ... does not detract from the fact that we can achieve a certain degree of understanding of the phenomenon and that we can identify some ways to intervene.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

We should never forget that a religious institute is only partially comparable to an organisational structure aimed at achieving a shared goal. It is above all a place where one lives the personal relationship with the Lord Jesus by following the particular inspiration of evangelical testimony contained in the founding charism. A strong and intense relationship that ordinarily lasts “forever” or for life, and this is what happens in most religious, but in some cases it ends after a certain period. Interpreting this event of “departure” as a personal or institutional failure does not always seem correct to me. First of all, because although the data is analytical, there is always a “beyond” that escapes analysis, that is, the spiritual intimacy of the person, his relationship with God, his freedom.

The fact that “in the many cases in which there is a written request, a formal request to superiors, to the Pope, to the Rector Major, in almost all cases there is a profound and genuine, not just formal, thanks from the applicants for the many things and so much good that they have received”[[10]](#footnote-11) speaks of the positive nature of the experience, so that interpreting it as a “failure” would be a denial of the evidence of the good that it contains. It is true that (so far) in the spiritual tradition of consecrated life it is only thought of as a commitment made forever, but perhaps one could think of it as an experience that, while maybe initially begun with the intention of being definitive, reveals itself as it develops to be temporary instead, limited to a phase of one’s life. A temporariness that is, however, fruitful for good insofar as it guides one to grow in one’s relationship with the Lord and in the witness of charity. It seems to me that such an interpretation is not entirely unrelated to Don Bosco’s actions. He “blessed those who bid him farewell, so they would continue on the path of virtue and succeed in doing good to souls... even after leaving the Oratory... he never stopped loving the ungrateful, inviting them to visit the Oratory, and on occasion, continuing to be their benefactor.”[[11]](#footnote-12)

When assessing the significance of departures, we must bear in mind that they have different levels of significance.

Novitiate is a time specifically dedicated to the discernment of vocation and should have the highest incidence of departures. Although we lack specific figures, it can be estimated that they are around 15-20%.

With temporary profession there should be, and in general there is, greater stabilisation with higher perseverance. In the period from 2016-2023, the number of those who left compared to the total number of temporary professed was around 5-6% (Table 3)

Tab. 3 Percentage of temporary professed who left compared with the total of temp. professed.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| % of departures | 6.7 | 4.8 | 5.7 | 6.8 | 5.8 | 5.6 | 6.1 | 6.1 |

Through perpetual profession the religious makes a definitive commitment to the Church. He declares that he wants to follow the Lord “forever” in accordance with the tradition of holiness that has Don Bosco as its point of reference and inspiration. In the face of the definitive nature of a commitment freely undertaken, every departure raises questions about deficiencies or shortcomings in the conduct of the formation process and community integration, as well as about inconsistencies, contradictions, but also the incapacity and fragility of individuals.

While leaving before perpetual profession is in some respects an option to be taken into account due to the fact that the gradual nature of the spiritual and juridical commitments that are being undertaken entails the possibility of rethinking and questioning orientations that are still being defined and specified in all their multiple implications, leaving “after” is a symptom of a difficulty that needs to be interpreted.

Table 4. Percentage of perpetual professed who leave compared with the total of perpetually professed.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
| % of departures | 0.89 | 0.90 | 0.87 | 0.78 | 0.5 | 0.78 |

The incidence of those leaving (Table 3) among perpetually professed members in the period 2018-2023 ranges from 0.5% to 0.9%. Basically in line with the dynamics of the other institutes.[[12]](#footnote-13) These values were decidedly lower than those recorded at the beginning of the 70s last century when, in the immediate post-conciliar period, departures were always recorded with reference to Salesian priests in perpetual vows, with values ranging between 0.93% and 1.39% .[[13]](#footnote-14)

While the number of those leaving is rather limited as a whole, the picture is different if we look at the age at which they occur (Table 4).

Table 4. Age of those leaving the Salesian Congregation. Period 2016-2021. Values in %

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Age when leaving the Institute | | | | | | Total |
| Up to 25 | 26-35 | 36-45 | 46-55 | 56-65 | 66 and over |
| Temp. Prof. | 7.3 | 80.0 | 11.7 | 0.5 | 0.5 | --- | 100.0 |
| Perp. Prof. | --- | 5.7 | 27.4 | 36.0 | 19.6 | 11.2 | 100.0 |

A first element that can be seen is the profoundly different dynamic between temporary and perpetual professions. The former have the crisis point between the ages of 26 and 35 and for the most part in the first years after profession (Table 5), while at the level of perpetual professions the crisis is slower and more delayed over time.

Table 5. Years of profession in the Salesian Congregation at the time of leaving. 2016-2021

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Years of profession | | | | | |
| Up to 4 | 5-9 | 10-14 | 15-19 | 20 and over | Total |
| Temp. Prof. | 66.9 | 33.1 | --- | --- | --- | 100.0 |
| Perp. Prof. | --- | 26.5 | 34.5 | 17.7 | 21.2 | 100.0 |

In terms of age, most of those who leave do so between the ages of thirty and forty, after about ten years of profession. This suggests a gradual and silent development in detachment from and disillusionment regarding the charism of the Congregation. The process that leads to the crisis matures over time, day after day, in small steps. There is a time in which one continues to experience religious life, but instead of strengthening motivations, it leads to a growing disillusionment (and disenchantment). There are many possible reasons for this detachment, and it is difficult even for the individual concerned to pinpoint an initial moment. Not always, in fact, do the interweaving of expectations and motivations underlying vocational interest emerge clearly in the awareness of those approaching religious life and perhaps also in the initial discernment phase. Alongside reasons that are easy to explain (search for God; desire for commitment to serving the Church; dedication to the education of young people; etc.) there may be others that remain hidden perhaps for the simple reason that they are linked to self-image and subjective expectations of fulfilment that an individual nurtures or receives from the social environment in which he lives.

The formative years should help with clarification and ensure that the desire, often undefined intuition of a vocation, becomes awareness of a call capable of transforming subjectivity through the conscious and free acceptance of a lifestyle, obligations, and values that outline a new identity (a Salesian identity) with a consequent way of understanding, interpreting, and positioning oneself in reality.

All this is possible to the extent that the individual makes himself available for formation. In fact, it is not enough that instructions, information, operational indications are given (by the formators) if they are not accepted and made their own by the individual concerned (formee). The process of discernment and accompaniment in consecrated life, according to the Salesian style, produces lasting effects and real changes only if the person is willing to question himself and activate processes of change.

The centrality of the vocational question, both as spiritual intuition and in terms of adopting a particular lifestyle, finds detailed confirmation in the main reasons for departures, especially at the level of temporary professions. At the moment of leaving, 48.7% attributed the reason to the gradual loss of a sense of vocation, while another 21.6% acknowledged that there was never a real vocational calling from the beginning. Then among the recurring reasons there is the constellation of difficulties in adopting a lifestyle consistent with the requirements of religious consecration, primarily tensions and discomfort in community relationships (28.7%), a problematic relationship with authority regarding obedience (16.7%), and observance of celibacy (20%), in a context characterised by a decrease in spiritual energy (27%).

The motivational framework regarding perpetually professed who leave is a little different. Firstly, there is the difficulty in observing celibacy (44.2%), followed by a set of tensions regarding commitments related to religious life (27.4%) and more specifically community relationships (22.1%) and obedience (23%), but here too there is the fading of spiritual energy (19.5%) in the background.

In the case of transition to pastoral ministry in dioceses, the motivational framework is polarised between the desire to live the priestly identity without the constraints of religious life (53.1%) and discomfort in community life (45.4%) together with detachment from Salesian identity and mission (32.1%).

To summarise, three problem areas can be identified as being at the source of departures: an insufficient awareness of the commitment that the vocational choice entails (and this is particularly true among novices and those in temporary vows), tensions in community life, and difficulties in living according to the style of life that is proper to Salesian religious consecration.

The fact that in almost all cases the separation takes place in an atmosphere of serenity and respect for choices that have matured over time, does not detract from the fact that from a relational point of view there is suffering and discomfort in losing confreres with whom one has prayed, sharing aspirations, pastoral commitments, and varying intensity of aspects of personal life. This displeasure becomes more acute when a confrere well endowed with skills and abilities leaves. The discomfort that becomes more acute when we take into account that the majority (69%) of those who leave are between the ages of 26 and 55, therefore still very useful individuals, so their decision does not go unnoticed: it leaves its mark, sometimes an open wound, perhaps sparking recriminations, attitudes of mistrust, feelings of disappointment that in turn weigh upon interpersonal relationships. However, we must also consider that every institution has always been aware of the reality of detachment, of people leaving it. Sometimes it is precisely the most generous people who, in giving themselves to pastoral commitment, do not pay sufficient attention to nurturing the primarily spiritual motivations without which it is difficult to take on commitments that last over a long period of time.

Perhaps an underlying factor in several cases is a different understanding of what it means to commit oneself “forever” to a vocation of ecclesial consecration. From the point of view of the Institute, and more broadly in the ecclesial tradition, “forever” means for the whole of life, unconditionally, and we could add in joy and in pain, in success and in failure, in youth and in old age. “Forever” often carries an unexpressed reservation, meaning: I say “yes” based on the experience I have had and the awareness I have reached, and “now” I feel committed “forever” (and I hope it stays that way), but if events occur that are completely unpredictable, it could happen that I might have to (or want to) reconsider the “forever”. If once upon a time the “forever” stood firmly at the beginning and founded subsequent choices, today more and more frequently one hopes, trusts, and wishes for the finality of a certain choice (work, marriage, religious vows, etc.) but only at the end can one truly say whether it was for real or whether in the flow of interactions, experiences, and changes that initial option has lost its force. Certainly, when one fits into a new environment, forms new relationships, or embarks on a strong spiritual experience such as asking to enter a religious institute, the individual’s expectation is that it can be “forever”. At first it is nice to think that this is the case, but it will be the course of events that will tell if things will really go as desired. Therefore, it is with increasing difficulty that choices are accepted that do not have a reversal option or that do not present some kind of exit strategy. So it is not that it is impossible today to make (or that there are not) final and unconditional decisions, but what is true is that this can no longer be taken for granted, as obvious, as something shared by all or by the vast majority and considered an appreciated value. On the other hand, it is not that the reversibility of choices mirrors just the culture of narcissism, the ephemeral, the fleeting moment, but there is also the experience of being caught up in a social reality traversed by rapid and multiple changes, a whirlwind of transformations that make daily life fleeting, unstable, provisional where the only thing that seems to be definitive is change. If definitiveness can no longer be taken for granted in all those who approach Salesian life, this means that people will have to be formed to appreciate it so that they have the cultural and spiritual resources to withstand the crises to which the unconditionally assumed directions will be subjected sooner or later.

However, there is also another element that changes the perception of “forever” as things stand today - we are living longer. Since the mid-twentieth century, the impact of scientific progress on medical care, improvement in conditions and lifestyles has reduced infant mortality worldwide, albeit with different intensity in the various continents, and increased life expectancy. While on the one hand the increase in average life span and the concomitant decrease in births has led, mainly in Europe, to a growth in the aged population, on the other hand it has changed the way of thinking and planning one’s life, including within religious institutes.

Until the 1900s, reaching a life expectancy of around sixty years, marking old age, was considered a significant achievement after overcoming childhood mortality risks. In the realm of religious life, a thirty to forty year span was seen as a challenging milestone to reach. However, in modern times, even with an entry point around thirty years of age, these goals are easily attainable, showing a widespread experience of extended religious life never witnessed before. The longer time span of life and the multiplicity of experiences within it makes it clear that only in a few cases can the initial motivations behind the decision to approach an institute last 40-50 years. It is necessary to confirm and re-express these motivations, and only through this process of re-working them will they be able to support the religious in persevering in a long and lasting commitment. Immersed in a world where everything is changing and cultural sensitivities and modes of ecclesial presence are profoundly altering, it is not reasonable to think that only religious and spiritual motivation can remain with the same formulation and understanding as it had at the beginning.

To leave is therefore the possible (or probable) outcome of a situation in which a “crisis” phase[[14]](#footnote-15) is activated, which questions what has been done up to that moment and questions the identity one has taken on, and this is a phase very open to different results. There is always a time of discernment in which options remain plentiful and open to different outcomes. This is the most delicate step, but also the most difficult to identify. Sometimes the individual feels a generic kind of being ill at ease, something they often struggle to focus on, regarding what they are doing, and they feel a need to disconnect from it, which can lead to detachment from the institution or even a reformulation of vocational motivations and ways of being present in the Congregation. Or it can crystallise into a state of being “at home but detached”. This is the situation of those who develop a certain spiritual and/or psychological detachment from their vocational choice, but then, due to various circumstances (difficulties in reintegrating, age, habit, inertia, etc.), prefer to remain within the institutional framework. Their discomfort and often the resulting inconsistencies and contradictions in behaviour end up being factors that depress the vitality of the settings in which they work, becoming a brake (if not an obstacle) on the strength of their witness, and possibly weakening the conviction and motivation of the confreres.

When it is said that to leave is neither the only nor the necessary outcome of a vocational crisis, attention is drawn to those religious who, despite facing serious moments of vocational crisis during their lives and having perhaps seriously considered leaving, have then decided to stay. It would be interesting to better understand the processes that allow one to overcome tension without leading to a break.

1. **Preventing departures: hypotheses for a long-term strategy**

In an institution of 13,727 religious such as the Salesian Congregation, it is logical to expect that every year there will be people who leave. A dynamic in which a limited “quantity” is accompanied by a higher “quality” (pastoral, intellectual formation, operational skills) regarding those who leave. When this happens in areas such as Europe and North America already marked by few vocations, then the effect of those who leave is felt more intensely and problematically.

Generally, when someone decides explicitly to leave, it is very difficult for them to retrace their steps. Ordinarily the inner, psychological and spiritual break has already occurred, and only the manifestation and legal definition of detachment remains.

More interesting, including for the purpose of containing departures, is to work in terms of prevention, identifying that “grey” area of dissatisfaction when an individual does not feel he fully, completely belongs and at the same time has not identified leaving as the only possible and viable option for responding to the difficulties he feels and experiences.

It is a disaffection that feeds on many small dissatisfactions in interpersonal relationships, ministry, in the mission of the institute that end up weakening the identification with the charism and weakening the motivations underlying a vocation. A process that drains energy from involvement in community life and gradually pushes one to the margins, triggering a dynamic where the “costs” of leaving (finding a job, redefining the network of relationships, detachment from the life choice that has absorbed various energies and resources, etc.) are starting to be evaluated against the “benefits” (regaining autonomy, perception of greater spiritual freedom, abandonment of interpersonal relationships now devoid of meaning, etc.).

To establish this work of prevention, it is important to work on two levels:

* strengthen the individual’s spiritual and charismatic motivations, in particular with regard to the sense of perseverance;
* improve the atmosphere of fraternal relationships in communities.

Any analysis of the dynamics of vocational motivations must take into account the factors that influence an individual’s activity in daily life.

* First of all, the difficulty in choosing.

Choice can be perceived not as a “gain”, the achievement of a spiritual or material goal that I consider positive and beneficial for me, or be experienced as a “loss": the moment I choose to “lose” other opportunities. This applies in particular in the West where an individual ordinarily has multiple existential options before him.

* There is widespread resistance to perceiving the positivity of a choice that is “forever”, i.e. to commit oneself without reservation to a prospect of finality and irrevocability. What is rejected is the unconditional “forever”, as previously stated.
* Therefore, “persevering” and perseverance are no longer facts, peacefully accepted conditions, but must become a formation goal to be pursued through specific educational activity. Persevering is possible only if we provide the motivation for which one holds to a decision even when it is no longer a source of immediate gratification. To persevere means going in the opposite direction to those who say that every relationship is born, grows, and then dies, and once it has given everything it could give, then another one opens up. In a reality where everything is mobile, it is objectively difficult to establish stability, but not impossible. Stability also has its undoubted advantages. The ability to remain unconditionally in a relationship “reassures” the individual, as it reduces the risk of being abandoned, isolated, exposed without protection to life’s adversities. However, in the vocational context it is much more effective to base perseverance on spiritual reasons. These are the ones that can in fact guide practical decisions. The Christian perseveres in those choices in which he expresses the acceptance of God’s presence in his life, because in doing so he “imitates” the actions of God. Human perseverance is an imitation of God’s perseverance in his promises and the witness that Jesus gave.
* Perseverance is not synonymous with immobility, fixedness, and it is not impossible to fully experience it even in a world constantly undergoing changes. This is achievable to the extent that individuals (and ecclesiastical institutions) have the capacity and attention to know how to rethink, reshape, and reformulate the initial motivations, finding ways and languages to bring back their vitality even when cultural sensitivities and relational contexts change.

This dynamic finds its form and mode of expression in ongoing formation. It is not just about updating what has been received in the early years, but it is about accompanying the processes of renewal of the spiritual and human motivations of a religious choice. Ongoing formation is, from this point of view, confrontation with life, with daily experience, in all its various aspects including the contradictions and difficulties encountered in Christian witness. If the initial motivations are not reaffirmed and deepened over time, they lose their power, making it difficult to counteract the sense of loss that is the context where detachment and disaffection towards the commitments assumed then grow.

Linked to the question of motivation is the spiritual life. Precisely because one recognises the centrality of the need to keep alive the reasons for one’s consecration, the importance of personal prayer, good sacramental practice, and fidelity to dignified community prayer follow. The trap that weakens spiritual attention, both individually and communally, comes from an excessive workload and habitual repetitiveness that ends up making both ministerial activity and liturgical practice banal and rushed. Without a persevering and shared confrontation with a faith-based view of reality, events (personal and communal) are observed and interpreted solely from an empirical or efficiency-oriented perspective, which is at best - when things go well - psychological.

As already mentioned, preventing departures starts from the awareness that today it is no longer possible and reasonable to take it for granted that people understand and recognise stability and perseverance in life choices as values to be pursued. It is necessary, therefore, that from initial formation onwards, efforts are made to make individuals aware that the Christian view of life emphasises attitudes and behaviours that are alternative to the prevailing sensitivities in society. From a time in which the Christian vision of life oriented the whole of social life, we have come to a present in which the pluralism of ethical and moral choices makes the Christian proposal one among many. Ecclesial belonging is proper to a minority and it is not always easy to accept that one is no longer a majority without falling into sectarian retreat, i.e. a conflictual relationship with other parts of society. The gospel image of a minority Church is yeast, that is, a reality capable of influencing and guiding while remaining in a minority condition. The key is to initially commit to gaining a thorough understanding of the environment in which one operates, followed by putting forth proposals that are truly capable of presenting an alternative set of values, lifestyles, and behaviours. It is within this perspective that I would place vocational welcome and discernment: helping to understand the reasons why Christians are different from the prevailing culture.

In conclusion, a word about “grieving” for those who leave. This grieving is first and foremost something the person who leaves does. Ordinarily it is not an easy choice: it means admitting that one has made a mistake, that he has not properly assessed the difficulties, and there is the difficulty of leaving a well-known context to start a new, and sometimes uncertain, phase in his life. It is about accompanying the individual by showing trust, respect, gratitude for what has been done and witnessed to, helping them to interpret and recognise and preserve what has been positive during their years in the Institute . It is not easy because sometimes the individual who leaves, leaves behind difficult relationships, problematic situations.

It is also grieving on the part of the community which is impoverished in its human resources. This is a more difficult grieving to process also because it depresses pastoral momentum and community vitality. It would be important for the separation process to be shared, to accept the reasons together, to come to understand that it is indeed the best choice for the individual. But it’s not easy.

Nevertheless, leaving can be both a journey through death and a time for hope, potentially leading to a resurrection not only for the individual, but also for the community and the Institute by cherishing the lessons embedded in each instance of someone leaving.

Giovanni Dalpiaz

gdp947@gmail.com

1. It is important to recall this ability to persevere in growth or to tolerate and know how to wait because change does not take place without tensions, contrasts, suffering. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. J. Gadille, J.F. Zorn, “Le missioni cristiane in Africa, Asia, Australia e Oceania”, in J. Gadille, J.M. Mayeur (eds), *Liberalismo, industrializzazione, espansione europea (1830-1914)*, Roma, Borla, 2003, p.877. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. D.B. Barret, T.M. Johnsons, *World Christian Trends*, Pasadena. William Carey Library, 2001, pp.319-333. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae. 2022*, Roma, Vaticana, 2024, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Regarding this “measuring” of the expansion or contraction of the Church by observing the number of baptised, it should be pointed out that the question is not primarily theological, but practical. The number of baptised indicates only the set of those who have a theologically significant relationship, without deducing anything about their actual participation in ecclesial life. From a sociological point of view we could say that the baptised constitute the maximum theoretical expansion of the Catholic Church at a given historical moment in relation to the population in a given territory [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Here as in all other quantitative passages of the report, unless explicitly indicated otherwise, the data are taken from M. Bay, *Separazione dalla Società di San Francesco di Sales. Relazione sugli abbandoni dei soci nel periodo 2026-2021*, Roma, Pro Manuscripto,2022 and later updates. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. In 1971, 26% of Salesians were Italian, before dropping to 20% in 1991 and settling, for now, at 10% in 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. In Africa there is 1 Salesian in formation (novice or temporary professed) for 1 perpetually professed Salesian; in Asia the ratio is 1 Salesian in formation for 3 perpetually professed Salesians. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. G. Dho, *La riduzione allo stato laicale di sacerdoti nella Congregazione Salesiana (1972-1976),* Roma, Ed. SDB, 1977, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. M. Bay, *op. cit*., p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. M. Bay, *op. cit*., p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. It is difficult to make precise comparisons either due to the fact that the Institutes do not have the same way of calculating departures or due to the lack of regular and systematic information for all the Institutes. As an indication, a clue can be found in the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*, which for 2022 gives an incidence of 0.33% departures for all perpetually professed priests of male institute, while for the same year it was 0.39% among perpetually professed priests of the Salesians. Still indicative of a trend, among the Franciscans in the period 2010-2015 departures among priests was between 0.25 and 0.30. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. G. Dho, *op. cit*., p. 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. The term “crisi”, from the Greek *krisis,*  indicates the moment in which a discernment is made by examining and choosing between various possibilities, the time in which an event evolves in one direction or another. In the medical context it is the moment when the disease turns either towards healing or towards death, in the legal context it is a choice, a judgement. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)