

## **St John Bosco: Charismatic Founder**

16 August 2015 marks a significant milestone in the Salesian story as we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of St John Bosco affectionately known to us as Don Bosco – ‘Don’ being the Italian title to refer to a priest. Don Bosco is the founder of the Religious Congregation of the Salesians of Don Bosco and also the wider Salesian Family or Salesian Movement which includes other Religious Congregations and many groups of lay collaborators. Salesian Spirituality and the particular Salesian charism which guides and underpins the Salesian work and mission has developed as a result of Don Bosco’s work, his mission, his insights, his teachings and his guidance.

An authentic spirituality and religious charism which has a focus on an apostolic ministry, and particularly a ministry to and for the education and evangelization of the young must, of its nature, be dynamic, one which speaks to new generations of educators and of young people, one which makes meaning and inspires the young and their teachers in our ever changing world.

The current Rector Major (Congregational Leader) of the Salesians of Don Bosco, Fr Pascual Chavez, has taken advantage of this particular bi-centenary commemoration as an opportunity to call for a renewed reflection on Don Bosco and his legacy to the Church, and also a renewal in the way we respond to and live out the ‘Salesian Spirit’ that Don Bosco has bequeathed to us. In a three-year program of preparation for the bicentenary, Don Chavez has guided the Salesian family, religious and lay, young and old, in a reflection on the three key elements which he identifies as integral to the Salesian charism (Don Bosco’s History, his Pedagogy and his Spirituality) with a view to a renewed commitment to living the charism in the new era and new places that the Salesian Movement now finds itself.

Don Bosco began his priestly ministry among the young (boys) on the streets of Turin in 1841. Many young men had come flocking to this rapidly developing and expanding industrial city, the capital of the Kingdom of Savoy, from the valleys and farmlands of Piedmont in search of work and a livelihood. It was in a period of great social and political upheaval in that part of the world. On Sundays and on other public holidays when these youngsters had nothing to do, nowhere to go, and with few family or other social structures to guide and support them Don Bosco would gather them together. He likened them to ‘sheep without a shepherd’ – falling into petty crime, victims of unscrupulous employers, lacking in education, and, certainly with little formal religious, spiritual or moral education or guidance. Don Bosco’s ministry began as a ‘roving oratory’ gathering the boys for games, fun, instruction and liturgical celebrations wherever he could find space – in squares, in courtyards, in Churches, in vacant fields, even for a time in a cemetery! The ‘oratory’ has

become the archetype for Salesian youth gatherings – a place of welcome, education, evangelization and play. Eventually Don Bosco was able to establish a permanent ‘home’ for his boys in the rough suburb of Valdocco on the outskirts of the city. It was here in the ‘Pindari Shed’ in Valdocco that the Salesian ministry of the ‘education of the young’ grew and developed, both as an educational enterprise, but more significantly, as a spirituality, as a ‘way of life’, as a means of bringing into being Don Bosco’s great dream – that all his students could learn to be ‘Upright Citizens and Honest Christians’ [Don Bosco 1854]. For Don Bosco education and evangelization were two sides of the same coin. Here we ‘educate by evangelising and we evangelise by educating’; meeting the human needs of the young and also their spiritual needs so that they truly could become upright citizens and honest Christians, and make a valuable contribution to their community and country and to the Kingdom of God.

From these simple beginnings the Salesian Family, the Salesian Movement has grown to become one of the largest group of educators of the young in the Church, spread through every continent and to the majority of nations. Whilst this ‘vast movement of peoples’ has many benefits and advantages, it also poses many issues for us as we work at remaining faithful to Don Bosco’s intent and dream, whilst also translating his spirit into the many different cultures and settings throughout the world, and meet the educational and spiritual needs of the young in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Re-imagining the Salesian Charism**

It is with this challenge in mind, the renewal of understanding and commitment to the Salesian Charism, that the Rector Major invited all those involved in the Salesian mission of the education and evangelisation of the young – Salesians, Salesian Sisters, Lay collaborators, teachers, and also (and especially) the young themselves – to prepare for this bicentenary in a particular way.

“It [the Bicentenary of Don Bosco’s Birth] is a very special event for us, for all the Salesian Family, and for the whole Salesian Movement, which requires an intense and profound process of preparation, so that it may prove fruitful for all of us, for the Church, for the young and for society.”

[Letter of the Rector Major 31/01/2001]

2015 is not to be just another significant anniversary marked by events, celebrations, gatherings, memorabilia and nostalgia. The Rector Major is insisting that this is to be a time of great renewal and recommitment to the Chrism and Spirituality we have received from Don Bosco, of discovering anew its beauty and richness, so that it can prove fruitful, so that it can inspire and bring life to the members of the Salesian Movement, the Church, the young and society in general.

Pascual Chavez identified three key aspects of the Salesian Charism which he believes need to be reflected upon if we are to understand and live the Salesian Charism in its fullness: Don Bosco's History, Pedagogy and Spirituality. Each of these three key aspects is integral to the Charism. Firstly, it is important to study the History of Don Bosco, to know his story, the origins and location, the formation and situation which gave birth to the charism. Secondly, as an educator, Don Bosco's Pedagogy, his style of educating, his way of ministering is a fundamental element of the Salesian charism. And thirdly, his Spirituality and Theology which give the truly Christian and Gospel based inspiration to the charism.

And so for each of the three years leading up to 2015, the Rector Major has asked all members of the Salesian Movement to study and reflect on one of these key aspects:

- In 2012 the focus was on 'Don Bosco and his History'
- In 2013 the focus was on 'Don Bosco and his Pedagogy'
- In 2014 the focus was on 'Don Bosco and his Spirituality'

Various resources, materials and reflections, both formal and informal, have been prepared or recommended to guide the study and reflection in each of these three key aspects.

One of the resources Pascual Chavez specifically used was the annual 'Strenna' (a traditional 'new years' message or annual motto provided to the Salesian Family by the Rector Major each year) and its accompanying letter of introduction in each of these three years to highlight the theme to be studied and reflected upon. I will use these three Strennas here as an illustration of the importance of the three key aspects to the Salesian Charism and as an example of how the members of Salesian Family and Movement were asked to reflect upon them in the current time and context in order to make them relevant, alive and pertinent for today.

### ***Don Bosco and his History***

The Strenna for 2012 was:

**Let us make the Young our life's mission by coming to know and imitate Don Bosco.**

*'I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep' (John 10:11)*

The 'history' of Don Bosco – his story, his actions, his context, his life – were to be studied, not with the purpose of just knowing what he did, or where he worked, or how he educated and ministered, or for whom he undertook his ministry. The invitation was to imitate him. For the Charism to be both true to the founders intentions and also respond to needs of the young of today the study of Don Bosco's history should lead us to imitate him with minds and hearts clearly focused on the young, who are to the subjects of the mission of the Salesian Movement.

The scriptural quotation which underpins the Strenna provides us with the image of the Good Shepherd. Don Bosco, as any saint or founding figure of a religious Charism, was not just an educator, not just a social worker, not just a builder of community, but was first and foremost an evangelizer, and an evangelizer whose fundamental motivation was to imitate the Good Shepherd: laying down his life for his boys, leading them to fresh waters and green pastures, protecting and nurturing them, calling each by name.

“The study of Don Bosco is an essential condition in order to be able to communicate his charism and propose his current relevance. ... If we do not know Don Bosco and we do not study him, we cannot understand his spiritual journey and his pastoral decisions; we cannot love him, imitate him, and invoke him; in particular, it will be difficult for us to inculturate his charism these days in the various contexts and in the different situations in which we find ourselves.”

[Letter of the Rector Major 2001]

### ***Don Bosco and his Pedagogy***

For 2013 the focus was on ‘Don Bosco and his Pedagogy’ and again the Strenna brought to our attention the key elements.

**Like Don Bosco the educator, we offer young people the Gospel of Joy  
through a pedagogy of Kindness**

*‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice’ (Philippians 4:4)*

Don Bosco brought to the educational world of his day new pedagogical insights which were not based so much on theory, but in practice which he developed over a lifetime as an educator. In fact his educational method only found its way into written form towards the very end of his life in the 1880s, however it had been practiced for decades by Don Bosco and his followers in the many and varied educational enterprises he established. Known as the *Preventive System* Don Bosco’s pedagogy was often more ‘caught’ than ‘taught’.

This pedagogy, the *Preventive System*, is both an ‘educational method’ AND a ‘way of life’ – a spirituality; it is both a way of educating the young in spiritual and temporal matters as well as a way of living out our relationships with God and with others. With its three key components – ‘Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness’ – the fundamental premises of the Preventive System are:

- love of the young person: ‘that you are young is enough for me to love you very much’ [Don Bosco 1847],
- respect for the young and their particular culture: ‘love what the young love and they in turn will come to love what you love’,

- an environment of joy and kindness: ‘here holiness consists of happiness’, and,
- a family atmosphere: ‘the youngsters should not only be loved, but they should know that they are loved’ [Don Bosco 1884].

The Rector Major challenged us:

“A deeper study of Salesian pedagogy is certainly necessary, on the one hand so it can be updated according to the sensitivity and demands of our time. Today in fact the social, economic, cultural, political and religious contexts in which we find ourselves living out our vocation and carrying out the Salesian mission have altered profoundly. On the other hand, to be faithful to our Father’s charism, it is necessary to make the content and approach of what he offered in educative and pastoral terms our own. In the context of today’s society we are called to be holy educators like he was, giving our lives as he did, working with and for the young.”

[Letter of the Rector Major 2012]

### ***Don Bosco and his Spirituality***

The third and final aspect for consideration during 2014 was ‘Don Bosco and his Spirituality’ and again the Strenna draws our attention to the significant elements of it.

*‘Da mihi animas, cetera tolle’*

**Let us draw upon Don Bosco’s experience so we can walk in holiness according out our specific vocation.**

*“The glory of God and the salvation of souls’*

The Latin motto that begins the 2014 Strenna is the motto of the Salesian Congregation which translates as ‘Give me souls, take away the rest’. Don Bosco’s total focus was to ensure that the souls and lives of the young were to be totally connected with and committed to God, both in this world and for all eternity. And so, whatever he did – whatever tasks he undertook, whatever projects he initiated, whatever programs he conducted, whatever decisions he made – were all done to ensure that the young developed their knowledge of, relationship with and love of God. Don Bosco developed his spiritual understanding gradually, bit by bit, throughout his life (as he did with his pedagogy): formed by his experiences, shaped by his encounters with others, deepened through his study and reflections, honed through his prayer and devotions.

Don Bosco’s spirituality draws heavily on that of St Francis de Sales, his patron and from whom comes the term ‘Salesian’. St Francis’ spirituality can be characterized as apostolic, pastoral, optimistic, charitable – the foundation of Christian humanism. Don Bosco’s ‘Salesian’ spirituality comes out of a pastoral and an educative charity – pastoral charity because it seeks the salvation of souls, and, educative charity because it finds a resource in education that

allows it to help young people to develop all their energies for good. The motivation underpinning Don Bosco's spirituality are his passion for God and his passion for the young.

One of St Francis' de Sales great legacies to spirituality in general (and there were many others besides) and to which Don Bosco fully concurred, was his belief that each and every person could find God and develop a deep relationship with God within the normal course of one's life and the particular vocation to which one is called, *whether one is a gentleman, workman, servant, prince, widow, maid or married woman* (cf St Francis de Sales *Introduction to the Devout Life*). God is to be found in the everyday events and activities of life. Don Bosco fully believed this was the case also for the young and so tailored his spirituality toward a youth spirituality.

Again the Rector Major challenged us to consider Don Bosco's spirituality from a very wide perspective:

"Salesian spirituality is made up of various elements: it is a lifestyle, prayer, work, relationships with other people, a community way of life, an educative and pastoral mission based on a pedagogical legacy, an approach to formation, a characteristic set of values and attitudes, a particular focus on the Church and society through specific areas of involvement, an historic inheritance of documents and writings, a characteristic language, a typical series of structures and works, a calendar of festivities and celebrations that are proper to this spirituality ..."

[Letter of the Rector Major's 2013]

Salesian spirituality has many facets, and they all need careful consideration when pondering the spiritual legacy of Don Bosco and bringing it to the lives and faith of the young today.

### **Vibrant living of the Charism**

The invitation by the Rector Major to all members of the Salesian Movement to participate, over three years, in a deep period of reflection, consideration, renewal, study and prayer on the fundamental and foundational aspects of our Salesian Charism is most timely and significant. It is an undertaking across the whole Congregation, the whole Salesian Movement, educators and young people, in and for a whole range of contexts, cultures and settings. The program also assumes that the Salesian Charism is by nature dynamic, vibrant, evolving and adaptive. The world of Don Bosco and the young to whom he ministered is very different to the worlds of the young spread across our globe in 2015, and yet his Charism, his pedagogy and his spirituality need to speak as loudly today as then, they need to be a vehicle for the young of today to also become 'upright citizens and honest Christians'.

## **Salesian Charism: An Australian Educational Reflection**

As we approach 2015 the great challenge for those involved in the Salesian Educational mission in Australia (there are eight schools and one specialist educational facility who formally belong to the 'Schools in the Salesian Tradition', and there are also Primary Schools that were under the care of the Salesian Sisters, and Primary schools in parishes administered by the Salesians) is how to take the beauty, insights, foundations and spirit of the Salesian Charism inherited from Don Bosco and present it and live it in a way that is both relevant to and challenging of the young and their educators in educational settings in Australia.

Every two years a Salesian Educational Leaders' Conference is held for the Leadership Teams of the Salesian schools. The theme for each Conference explores some element of the Salesian Charism with a focus on how to interpret and inculcate that aspect into the current situation and time.

### **Practical Example – Charter for Salesian Schools in Australia**

For the 2003 Conference a very practical outcome was planned – to write a Charter for Salesian Schools in Australia. Up until a couple of years before this all of the schools still had Religious Principals and there was a community of Salesians working in each school. However, as times evolved, the Principalship of all schools has been transferred to lay leaders, and not all schools still have a Salesian on staff. Therefore the bond holding all the schools together as a Charismatic group was no longer the physical presence of Salesians in each setting. The idea of establishing a Charter which would be adopted by all the schools as a commitment to the continuing development of and involvement in the Salesian Charism was one practical (among others) element of ensuring the continuation of the Salesian Charism in a new era.

Constitution 40 of the Salesian Constitutions is in the Section 'Criteria for Salesian Activity' and it uses four wonderful metaphors to describe the characteristics of a Salesian ministry or activity if it is to truly reflect the Charism of Don Bosco.

*Don Bosco lived a pastoral experience in his first Oratory which serves as a model; it was for the youngsters a home that welcomed, a parish that evangelized, a school that prepared them for life, and a playground where friends could meet and enjoy themselves.*

*As we carry out our mission today, the Valdocco experience is still the lasting criterion for discernment and renewal in all our activities and works.*

*[Constitution 40]*

The four metaphors which give expression to the characteristics were adopted as the framework upon which the Charter would hang:

A **Home** that welcomes

A **Parish** that evangelises

A **School** that prepares for life

A **Playground** where friends meet and enjoy themselves

The welcoming 'home' represents family, nurture, safety, community and belonging. The evangelising 'parish' represents prayer, liturgy, catechesis, sacraments and church. The life-engendering 'school' represents learning, development, skills, commitment and endeavor, the vibrant playground (the genius insight of Don Bosco) represents friendship, fun, activity, acceptance and mutuality.

These metaphors are already a synthesis and recasting of the Salesian Charism, and for the Charter they would be given even newer, fresher and more specific focus.

The three days of the conference involved presentations, discussions, workshops and reflection on these metaphors and how they conveyed the key elements of the Salesian Charism. The Charter that emerged was the result of the input of many people, Salesian and lay collaborators, coming from all the different school settings in Australia. With the specific setting of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australian school as its focus the Charter gave expression to the Salesian Charism in our unique time and place. By its adoption each individual school community has committed to its implementation.

The shared reflections and wisdom of the group brought to life a new and distinct expression of the Salesian charism.



# Charter for Salesian Schools in Australia

## Preamble:

In keeping with the spirit of Saint John Bosco, whereby “education is largely a matter of the heart” that leads young people to “know that they are loved”, the Salesian school community of today is challenged to be:

- A home that welcomes
- A parish that evangelises
- A school that prepares for life
- A playground where friends meet and enjoy themselves

## A home that welcomes by:

- Being committed to the care and support of all young people, especially the poor and marginalised
- Cultivating relationships based on genuine affection, openness and acceptance of others
- Fostering a spirit of joy and hope, based on the ‘Good News’ of Jesus Christ
- Encouraging an attitude of optimism and a conviction that life is fundamentally worthwhile

## A parish that evangelises by:

- Having a strong and vibrant programme of religious education, liturgical celebration and sacramental encounter
- Addressing the spiritual yearnings of young people and adults
- Giving priority to the faith development and formation of staff
- Providing students with significant experiences of faith in action and apostolic involvement

## A school that prepares for life by:

- Encouraging a passion for life-long learning and a quest for excellence
- Developing a sense of meaning and purpose, which expresses itself in a spirit of service and self-giving
- Proclaiming the challenge of community building, commitment to others and responsible decision-making
- Cultivating resilience, resourcefulness and adaptability as important skills for life

## A playground where friends meet and enjoy themselves by:

- Being present to each other in an active, engaging and constructive manner, in fidelity to the Salesian Preventive System
- Building positive and inclusive relationships between each other
- Having a rich experience of interaction and sharing, especially between students and staff
- Creating occasions for celebration and festivity

Faithful to the tradition of Saint John Bosco, the Salesian school community is constantly challenged to re-interpret and re-enliven his educational vision in every generation and circumstance, according to the requirements of the contemporary situation and the needs of young people, to whom he once said: *“I have only one wish: that you be happy in this world and the next”*.

## Conclusion

The Salesian Mission entrusted to the Salesian Family by Don Bosco is the education and evangelisation of the young. The young live in a world that is constantly changing, as they grow they need to learn and adapt, their circumstances and experiences place before them challenges and opportunities. The Salesian Charism flowing from Don Bosco's History, Pedagogy and Spirituality must continually be renewed, revitalized and reimagined as each generation of young people and their educators encounter it.

The program of preparation for the bicentenary of Don Bosco's birth outlined by Pascual Chavez is an attempt by the Salesian Movement at the world-wide level to undertake this renewal across all cultures and settings. The preparation of the Charter for Salesian Schools in Australia is an example of an attempt within a particular culture and time to localise and personalise the Charism.

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