

Experience in formation and accompaniment of the adolescents and young people

Pilar Lance and Alberto Sanz (Spain)

1. The presentation

(Sharing of PILAR)

Alberto and I are grateful for the invitation to participate in these Day of Salesian reflection and testimonials on the occasion of the Strenna of the Rector Major, Fr Ángel Fernández Artime: 'Let's cultivate the art of listening and accompaniment': Lord give me this water (John 4,15) The narrative of the Samaritan women does illuminate the message of the Rector Major.

The sharing will help us to be more aware about the importance of listening, discernment and accompaniment in the youth ministry.

Alberto and myself want to share with you our own experience, the journey and present situation of the accompaniment in Salesian way. First we want to introduce ourselves:

My name is Pilar Lance, actually working as a Director of Salesian Social Work (Piattaforma Sociale) in Lleida, in the Northern zone of the Mary Help of Christians Province of Spain.

My personal history and professional journey was always deeply lived a vocation to education, to the service for others and by tireless search of the face of God in myself and in other people.

My vocation was growing as educator with different religious congregations, so I get know many different charisma and slight education differences and this helped me get closer to the young people with whom I'm working now. The Salesian spirituality helped me to understand that in each fragile or wounded young person there is possibility to discover a future and that I need to look beyond my own eyes, listen beyond my own ears and reason beyond my own head. Indeed is important to approach the young people with my heart!

I was raised up in the Ignatius spirituality, which influenced my way of living and relating with God. For this reason I'm quite familiar with accompaniment and process of discernment. Today I'm able to perceive the life as a woman with a certain perspective, thanks to those who helped me to grow as human person and as a disciple of Jesus.

(Sharing of ALBERTO)

My name is Alberto Sanz, married with Anna, with two children, Pablo of 4 years and Lara of one year. I'm 40 years old and my whole life is connected with the Salesian Family. At the age of 12 I have enrolled in the Salesian school (Estrecho Madrid) and now I'm there the Headmaster (Secondary and Technical section), where I was in the past the Pastoral Coordinator.

From my childhood I was closely accompanied by many people: my mother, in the school, in the youth center – even after the graduation of my school I did continue to be involved in the Youth Center and my parish.

Now I'm a member of one parish group 'not-so-young' (groups of couples with children, 35-50 years old) and I'm very much involved in the Salesian Family. Also the Principal of our school is a member of our group.

We had always as a point of reference one Salesian who accompanied our group since ever, helped us, gave us necessary direction and helped us grow in faith, in fraternity and encouraged us also to be involved in the mission. We are part of some kind of 'missionary group', through a Salesian NGO 'Jovenes y Desarrollo' (Youth and Development) and we were involved also in some volunteer experience abroad. With my wife we were lucky to have a missionary experience in Guinea Equatorial with the Salesians for one full year.

2. How is born the need for accompaniment

(Sharing of PILAR)

The fact to be accompanied and to let me accompany was for me like an engine for my formation to accompany and form the others!

For me was very important to know myself in order to know, who I'm, whom do I believe, how do I believe, what do I want, what do I fear, what does not help me to grow as a person. In this way I was always more and more approaching to God and serve Him better in the smaller once. To be accompanied means for me to face the life, to choose freely what God is asking me, and if possible trying to correct myself.

I can't understand my vocation as educator only as one who does transmit the knowledge, capacity, ability, values or attitudes. I believe, that the young people who stand lonely, with few persons as point of reference, wounded as they are, they need to remade their own life project. As far as I know, nobody can make his own life project without being before looked with affection, being forgiven and forgiving, accepting the other and being accepted.

We are living in a society, where the narcissism, immediate drive and consumerism are really exaggerated. The image of the lasting happiness is what you have (possess) and the appearance without any imperfection is very important. Do you like to look inside to see the ugly image? We are not accustomed to look inside, where we can discover all the beautiful and ugly together.

So, what are we doing? The easiest thing is to change the cloth, the hair, the car, the mobile phone, the accessories... All what makes us a person, we would like to look like, but without any special effort. What is really difficult - it to look inside ourselves.

And it's also true, that the young people are asking us to stay with them, to accompany them, lay and religious (as are saying the results of the Spanish survey for the 2018 Synod of Bishops). Most of the young have the need to be accompanied, but it's not easy to find some suitable person. They are looking after educators, lay and religious who would learn how to listen to them, how to UNDERSTAND them, their person, not to give them answer (maybe they don't

even need them!). We need to learn how to become the LIGHTHOUSE that will tell them about possible dangers, but leaving them to decide which journey to take in their life. This is really DIFFICULT.

(Sharing of ALBERTO)

I remember that when I entered the (Salesian) school, I came from an ordinary Catholic, traditional and not very practicing family, from very ordinary (public) school - I was really shocked when I met the Salesians, especially the younger ones who cared about us in many different ways. Some invitation to the Oratory, to participate in the band (I played guitar) beside all the ordinary good studies and good behavior.

But nothing special happened until when I joined the Confirmation catechism class. That time I start to feel 'being accompanied'. Yes, it was a beautiful environment, full of joy and close relationship in the Youth Center, I found catechists, animators and for them 'I was important'. They were interested in me and in my friends. With them was possible to talk about any possible even 'mysterious' things that we as adolescents start to feel. And always surrounded by my friends of the confirmation group, for me was easy to discover the desire to know more about Jesus and to understand God.

Many years later, living the 'ordinary life' with other companion of my journey of faith, I had always as my point of reference our catechist (I was always part of a group) and I was asked one day I would like to become a catechist. And I had the chance to share this ministry with many other animators among them also some Salesians in formation.

This was one of my most enriching life experience in my life. Later on I understood that the accompaniment was a great instrument. In that moment I realized what is the vocation discernment, when I was accompanied by one Salesian. In that moment I understood, that I should be formed more if I would like to accompany the others.

It was a very special moment in my life, that gave the strong foundation in my faith, in order to see with my heart, with more hope, to purify my view and I became use to see as God does in order to decide to put my life in His hands. It was not a psychological process, it was not a long path of reconciliation with myself (I'm an ordinary person!), but it was an experience to 'let me love more by God'. I became more aware about God's love towards me. But above all I was able to make one more firm step in my vocation as Salesian educator.

In different moments of my life I had a 'personal' spiritual accompaniment, especially in my journey of faith I was accompanied – by the catechists, by the Salesian priests in my Christian community.

3. Formation received

(Sharing of PILAR)

For me all the formation received so far was very helpful for my personal and deep journey, it helped me to face the life in a different way and it helped also to accept the necessity of the ongoing formation. Seven years ago I have started my formation in this field and I'm convinced that I don't know everything, because this is about human persons and about God... We will never know all, both are moving in this kind of Mystery that does not follow models, norms or regulations.

Hence I'm convinced that the most important learning was that each accompanied person is a Holy Land. More I will be formed more I will be accompanied, more I will be able to understand the person I'm accompanying.

(Sharing of ALBERTO)

The most important, is the accompaniment itself, but basically all courses received. In the first place, the formation as animator and the formation the School of Theology for the Laity in the former province of Madrid (SMA). But also I was helped a lot by the formation received in the School of Youth Ministry at the Pontifical University of Salamanca (Spain). It was a Master-course of Accompaniment offered by the Youth Ministry Delegate Office of Spain. I was invited and it was one of the deepest moments in my life of faith. It was an intense time of introspection and full immersion into my past and my present, a precious time to deepen my relationship with God, in order to know Him, or better, to have a clearer image of God and slowly purify this image and let Him become more my Life!

These two years of formation was not only time of some theory or techniques (there were many). It was more a time of discovery, how to approach the 'other' through the personal accompaniment, not only without my shoes (as Pilar is telling 'Holy Land') but it's about an experience of being accompanied.

4. Impact of the pastoral experience - reality (Sharing of PILAR)

Considering the reality of our provinces with less and less (religious) Salesians and where majority of them are not formed (prepared) for the accompaniment, I can say only that the formation for the religious and committed lay people in our works is an absolute need!

Maybe we stress, that we are good in animation of our environments, of many groups, of the youth meetings, but we miss very badly at the age of young adults an offer of specific path (itinerary) of faith growth or of groups where the young people can mature in their faith and not remain disappointed with it.

Sometimes I find very difficult to understand how is possible that young people who spend their whole life in the Salesian environment, suddenly refuse their belief. But this is for me only another push to be more committed! We can't live eternally with the faith received during catechism class years ago, we need to offer to the young individual spaces where they can go beyond.

The Youth Ministry need to be updated in order to help the young to mature in their faith. What is important is not only their participation, but especially their creative protagonism: we count on them to invent new ways and to overcome old pastoral ways of the past!

Any assembly, community, parish or youth center does need the young people in some way with more adult task and with the capacity of openness and service going much beyond the Salesian center of reference: "He sent them two by two in the cities and villages where he wanted to pass later on!"

In our communities, parishes and youth centers... from our part we need to be generous, we need to let the young people to go to see the world, other realities, other ways of doing and let them offer their Salesian contribute wherever they are and maybe in this way they will continue to make grow also the Salesian family!

5. Accompanying in the Youth Ministry and in the Accompaniment Formation (Sharing of ALBERTO)

At present we carry on a program of formation in accompaniment in the FMA and SDB provinces of Spain. It was a long journey up to this point. Three years ago was established the 'Plan of formation in accompaniment of the young people' in 4 levels. In this journey we can distinguish some period of history:

- 1) 2001-2006: The Delegates (SDB) or Coordinators (FMA) of the Youth Ministry organized every year a 'National Convention about Accompaniment' during a weekend, facilitated by a Jesuit Father Manuel Plaza. These encounters raised a great enthusiasm and many participants. There was also a strong demand for more consistent formation. Some participants did accompany the youth in the school, catechumenate group, youth groups or different journey of faith. Last Convention in 2006 was dedicated to Prayer and entrusted to a different facilitator. During these six years was raised the awareness and basic formation of the regular participants, some of them directly involved in accompaniment of persons or groups.
- 2) 2006-2007: The Coordinator for Evangelization of the Salesian National Center for the Youth Ministry met two SDB and two FMAs who completed the Masters in Accompaniment with the School of Formators in Salamanca (SJ – Jesuits). The group assessed the proposal to prepare a two year Course-Workshop or this formation. With the help of external experts the formation equipe was formed, presented to the National Delegate/ Coordinator of Youth Ministry and Provincial Councils of SDB and FMA who committed themselves to carry on this project and send the participants.
- 3) The formation started in February of 2008. In October 2017 was started the fifth batch of this Course with 25 participants. During past 10 years were prepared about 100 pastoral agents, some of them also from non-Salesian charism provenience.
- 4) 2014-2015: Years of reflection and re-thinking. This year was made an evaluation of possibility to have a wider plan and to prepare a Course for educators and teaching staff in our schools.

At present the Salesian Youth Ministry offers a project of formation in pastoral accompaniment of adolescents and young people at four levels:

LEVEL 1: Training module of 8 to 12 hours for teachers, animators and educators, in training courses organized by the YM commission at province and national level according zones.

LEVEL 2: Training module of 35 hours in three weekends, the spiritual accompaniment of young people introduced to teachers, leaders and educators, organized by provincial YM team.

LEVEL 3: Training module of 170 hours during two years for pastoral workers and educators with the vocation to accompany persons and groups, organized the Youth Ministry Delegates and coordinated by the team of level 3.

LEVEL 4: Module of ongoing training of one weekend a year, for those who have been trained in specific courses, seminars, exercise personal accompaniment and organized by team at level 3.

We are now aware that diversified accompaniment requires different approach in space and environments with a diversified and creative accompaniment.

So, now we speak about the Youth Ministry in the key of accompaniment, that is at the origin of the Salesian Youth Ministry. But the key of a good formation is the experience of being accompanied.

At present, there is always more formation, because there is more interest and more felt need not only by the SDB and FMA Sisters, but by all lay mission partners involved in the youth ministry. Little by little in the schools we talk about accompaniment and opening of new pastoral experiences, where the young people would have the possibility to meet the adults able to accompany them in the faith journey.

At the local level of Youth Center: for example in my Youth Center all animators – catechists belong to a group of one animator already formed in accompaniment and all of them have already somebody who does accompany them at personal level. It's not only about the journey of faith, but also about formation that help them to make adult decisions really corresponding to their vocation of God's children.

Yes, during past few year, in reality, emerged many groups that were started from the personal experience and are committed to the community life.

6. New emerging needs (Sharing of PILAR)

- We need a good teams of formators and those who accompany us, to offer this service to educators, catechists, young people, Salesians SDB and FMA, lay people.. who would request this formation.
- To work on the awareness about importance of formation of educators & evangelizers
- Deepen some emerging themes from the four levels of accompaniment formation (1-4)
- Better qualification (specialization) for the not-yet-known fields of accompaniment: e.g. how to accompany between the youngster and young adults; how to face the variety of identity crisis during different phases of life; how to accompany different vocation options or vocation crisis (not only the religious vocation). How to accompany (spiritually) the young non-believers?
- How to make these program contents more 'Salesian', without losing the psychological and pedagogical foundations? We need a common – joint reflection of those are accompany with those who are involved in the ministry of accompaniment, in order to adjust the contents to our realities.

7. Fruits

(Sharing of PILAR)

In our Province of Mary Help of Christians (Spain – Seville) the most meaningful fruit is the joint formation of religious and lay people, that produces a personal process of each one. In this way everybody who undergoes formation for accompaniment becomes aware about the need to be accompanied, to come closer to God in a different way and confront his/her own life with God.

Last 3 years we worked on the accompaniment formation according 3 zones (level two) of our province and the vast majority of the participants always makes the same comment: I have

started this formation in order to learn how to accompany the young people, but I'm discovering that first myself have the need to be accompanied!

During this year we foresee to introduce the 'accompaniment formation level 1' for the directors of Youth Centers (free time facilities). We started to envision how to include these courses into the different pastoral projects. There are young people who started this process of accompaniment formation with some Salesians who are prepared for this ministry.

(Sharing of ALBERTO)

In no time, the level 2 was organized and carried out in three geographical zones of the SMX Province (Santiago El Mayor, St. James). The results are very positive – many animators, teachers and even social workers have been asking to start this process of accompaniment formation.

In our Youth Centers we start the process of accompaniment in more systematic way. Also in the schools is growing the sensibility for 'more personalized pastoral approach' – when we talk about life of faith and vocation journey.

The culture of 'accompaniment' is growing within the religious houses and among the lay people in many of our works. We feel co-responsible for this mission.

In a concrete way, in our parish 'Salesian Estrecho' the local Center of Cooperators and Group of lay people accompany during past few years some groups of catechumens, 19-24 years old). In the past, these groups were sustained by prayer, formation and life sharing. But recently we offer to these young catechumens more personalized accompaniment for the 'revision of life' or for their 'personal project of life' or help them 'how to read won life in the light of the Gospel'. But always this ministry is offered by somebody who is already formed (Salesian of Lay). This chain of accompaniment goes on and the young people discover the need to be formed in order to become animators, catechists and accompany other youth in their faith journey.

8. Possible difficulties or challenges (Sharing of ALBERTO AND PILAR)

- To be formed, but without any time for commitment. In this way the formation is useless.
- To be satisfied just with the initial formation and not deepen it later on.
- Leave on the Salesians this task of accompaniment, forgetting that also lay people can exercise this wonderful pastoral ministry.
- Without any effort, don't accompany
- Believe that only the Salesians are taking care about accompaniment of the young
- Transform the accompaniment in some kind of fashion and believe that anybody is qualified in the pastoral accompaniment. We would need to differentiate also the levels of personal (spiritual) accompaniment
- In some places there is a great difficulty of real absence of EPC (Educative – Pastoral Community) with a pedagogical style of the Preventive System (of Don Bosco), a real obstacle to accompaniment in the Salesian style.

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