

Discernment and Decision Making in the Process of Accompaniment

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I am grateful for the invitation to participate in the reflection of these Spirituality Days of the Salesian Family. We are reflecting on a topic of charismatic importance. Our call to holiness and our fidelity to God commit us to enter into a journey of growth in faith and vocation with young people.

I was asked to make a contribution on the "discernment and decision making in the accompaniment process", with the aim of finding paths of reflection on the *Strenna* of the Rector Major for this year 2018, and in the light of the upcoming Synod of Bishops "Young people, Faith and Vocation Discernment".

This intervention on the proposed theme is the result of personal reflection and the experience of a team, who form youth ministry agents for the accompaniment of young people.

The illustration will follow the order indicated in the "structure of the talk". The perspective is pastoral and formative, even if we cannot ignore a certain reflection with a glance at the foundation of this service for youth ministry. The material presented, with footnotes, is plenty, but the illustration will be shorter.

1. Setting the theme in the context of the *Strenna*

The Gospel story is appropriate for listening and discernment: "Let us cultivate the art of listening and accompanying", with the plea: "Lord, give me this water" (Jn 4: 15).

Jesus shows himself to be a master in the art of listening and of discernment through accompaniment. His eyes and ears reached the depth of the person. Jesus has the ability to see what we do not see, to hear what we do not hear and to clearly discern where we do not reach: "Do you still not perceive and understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear?" (Mk 8: 17-18).

In the Old Testament, prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel attribute this blindness and deafness to insensitivity, to the stubbornness and rebellion of the people to God (Jn 5: 21, Ez 12: 2).

When we speak of spiritual discernment, we recognize that:

- We are not up to this proposal: to listen, to accompany and to discern. Our ears, our eyes and our sensitivity must be transformed;
- But the Lord invites us to take off our shoes before his Mystery and before the mystery that is hidden in every person who opens his/her heart.

This mission of accompanying is a "holy ground" (cf. Ex 3: 5) of closeness which, at the same time, heals, frees and encourages the maturing of the Christian life of the young (cf. EG 169).

To address the issue, we have to start from some statements and questions, which can be further made more precise:

1. The exercise and the relationship of accompaniment are learned in action and prayer (Word), but require science, skill, art and wisdom. This ecclesial ministry involves the one who accompanies and the person who is accompanied, in a "differentiated unity".
2. Spiritual accompaniment is necessary and convenient today in the pastoral care of the "processes" and in the new paradigm of Christian initiation of the young, in vocation discernment and in the formation to the different states of life.
3. Basic aspects of accompaniment ("Spiritual Direction"):
 - a. the one accompanying ("authorized mediation"),
 - b. the person being accompanied (*willing* freedom),
 - c. awareness in both of the presence and the action of the Grace of God,
 - d. an honest "fair play" relationship,
 - e. the aim: to discern the growth of the life of God in the person, the decisions and the ordinary or fundamental options of life.
 - f. Accompaniment converts us to a correct relationship with God, with ourselves and with others.
4. In mid-twentieth century, "spiritual direction" went through a profound crisis, losing prestige and value in the conscience of believers. The causes that contributed to this were internal and external to the Church. In the past the authority of the "spiritual director" was important; today we choose to respect the person as a relational being and one open to transcendence.
5. The recovery and updating of "spiritual direction", like the wisdom of the Church, is a consequence of several factors, including the contribution of human sciences in the process of faith, the new unitary vision of the person of Vatican II, the renewal of biblical theology and exegesis and the needs of youth culture.
6. Cultural change requires the integration of faith as a gift and the demands of cultural anthropocentrism. The person with his/her freedom and responsible autonomy, with personal conscience (subjectivity) and with an ethical-moral sense, tends towards God. However, this human dynamism does not have the capacity by itself to reach the gift that God makes of himself to humanity and to every person in Jesus Christ.
7. The charismatic mission consists in educating and introducing young people to the life of God with the style of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. Our founders were able to make a proposal of "spiritual direction" with the practice of the Preventive System and with community and educative life, in a relational context that promoted the path to holiness. Personal attention was achieved in this context of "loving kindness" (*amorevolezza*).
8. The Salesian charism incorporates pastoral accompaniment to the creative and pedagogical dynamism of the Preventive System, at the service of the education and growth of the young person's Christian vocation, with concrete resources and attitudes: educating presence, solicitude for the good of the young and attention to him/her as a person, taking care of the "divine" life in them (cf. Wis 11: 24ff), a youthful family environment, relationships of trust, educative processes, creativity in making decisions, a rich pedagogy mediated by grace, etc.
9. Therefore, listening and discernment lead us back to the spirit of the Preventive System and the Oratory: to take care of the hearts of the young, to prepare them for the reception of God and to offer them the means so that grace may live in their lives which are filled with hope, and so that they can make choices and the most appropriate decisions in their lives.

2. Teach us to accompany the lives of the young!

With the Samaritan woman, we ask, "Lord, give us to drink the water that wells up to eternal life! Teach us to accompany, to be compassionate companions (*cum-pan-ire*) – women and men".

Accompaniment leads us back to biblical and ecclesial images with a strong charismatic resonance: God is the shepherd of Israel and Jesus the new shepherd of the Kingdom. In the Church, there are witnesses, companions and those who introduce in the mystery of God (mystagogues).

This ministry was practiced and transmitted by spiritual teachers (Saint Ignatius, Saint Teresa, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Francis de Sales ...). From their personal experience, they have implemented, in their time, what the masters of previous centuries had put into practice. Thus, "spiritual direction" belongs to the best tradition of the Church, preserved through history; and it was, together with prayer, the mediation most used towards Christian perfection and the search for God's will.

In this sense, we can see that in history there is a period "before" and one "after" the Council of Trent and the spiritual currents of the sixteenth century concerning discernment and spiritual direction.

This ecclesial ministry has these two blocks in time, which are now being considered; and perhaps we are forging a third historical block, updating it in the present.

In his dream at nine, Johnny Bosco heard: "Here is your field, here is where you have to work; grow humble, strong, and steadfast; and what you see now happening with these animals, you will have to do with my children".

Our founders grew up in this spiritual *humus* of faith, under the protection of people who respected the work of God in their lives. In this way, they have learned to be docile to God and to ecclesial mediations. Thus, being accompanied [themselves], they learned filial and fraternal affection, while as people who accompanied [others] they exercised spiritual fatherhood and motherhood.

Until the Second Vatican Council, spiritual direction was a pastoral ministry exclusively for priests, as the expressions "caring for souls" and "spiritual father" reveal. Most of the times, it was joint to the sacrament of Reconciliation. In the Salesian tradition, accompaniment was a privileged element; it was present as a genuine characteristic of the pedagogy and spirituality of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello; and it was introduced into youth ministry with different names: 'spontaneous quality encounters', educative colloquy, accompaniment in the youth group, spiritual direction, sacramental encounter...

This vital root is a river of "living water" that reaches us with the fragrance of ecclesial faith. We can affirm that we are in a moment of giving new meaning to accompaniment and spiritual discernment in our culture and history.

This ministry comes to us after a long journey, as a Salesian Family.

Where are we? What has been the path in recent years?

It can be said that, during the twentieth century, spiritual direction was present in the pastoral imagination, but it was not a well-cared-for and renewed practice. The pastoral care of the environment, the educative, cultural and sacramental care have been at the centre of the pastoral task; and, in some places, the itineraries of faith have been present in a brilliant way.

Personal accompaniment, however, has been neglected, coming to consider it foreign to the Salesian charism. Nevertheless, there has always been a good practice, even if reduced to a small scale, within the Salesian Family, of this ecclesial ministry linked to specific people and environments.

In our opinion, the "X Week of Spirituality of the Salesian Family" (23-29 January 1983) was the first serious and explicit setting of this theme after the renewal of the Second Vatican Council and GC XX of the SDB. The reflections published responded to the *Strenna* of the Rector Major: "We promote the Christian maturing of people and of the community by renewing and intensifying, with Salesian style, the formative experience of Spiritual Direction". The contributions highlighted the pastoral intervention of spiritual direction as an original formative experience of the Salesian spirit and as a necessary help for Christian maturity in the daily life of all young people. The application of spiritual direction to the Preventive System, with a plurality of forms and degrees of intensity, is the original characteristic of the Salesian charism. However, it was stated that Spiritual Direction requires a high degree of spiritual life and pastoral zeal for communities and members of the SF.

Later there was a period of lethargy, more or less conscious and with occasional exceptions within the Salesian Family, up to the last two General Chapters of the SDB (XXVI and XXVII) and of the FMA (XXII and XXIII), and the renewed Apostolic Project of the Salesian Co-operators. The four seminars of the Youth Ministry Department of the SDB, the actions of the *Ambito* for Youth Ministry of the FMA, the new "Frame of Reference of Youth Ministry" and other local initiatives have been and continue to be a promise for the updated recovery of Spiritual Accompaniment of the young in the Salesian charism. For sure, the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS), the Pontifical Faculty of Sciences of Education "Auxilium" and other university and pastoral organs of the Salesian Family gave courses and published precious reflections, which we have not always taken into consideration and been able to utilise.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the canonization of Dominic Savio, in 2004, Fr Pascual Chávez proposed a real challenge in the *Strenna* of 2004: "We propose to all young people the joy and commitment of holiness as a high measure of ordinary Christian life". In the commentary, he stated:

"We have to shift [...] from proposing models to accompaniment as true guides in the spiritual life of young people; from accompaniment to assistance creating personal and environmental conditions, like a microclimate, where great life choices can germinate, mature and bear fruit. The personal conviction of Don Bosco was that without spiritual direction he would not have achieved anything good. For this reason he wanted to be a spiritual guide for his young people, one who was enthusiastic, pointed out values, invited to commitment, guided and corrected them".

The pedagogy of accompaniment, in the context of the Preventive System, gives us greater clarity and evangelizing quality. In our opinion, the reflective efforts, formative initiatives and pastoral experiences of the last ten years provide us with a real frame of reference to give space to "pastoral and formative accompaniment" with creativity and depth in the vast and varied field of the Salesian Family. Salesian Youth Ministry is particularly stimulated by this awakening of the Spirit.

3. About what accompaniment are we talking?

However, what accompaniment are we talking about? Of course, it is not any accompaniment. In our charism we speak of educative, formative and spiritual accompaniment: it is educative in so far as it is spiritual and spiritual in so far as it is educative. It is formative inasmuch as it con-forms the faith structure of the personality. But what defines the spiritual and educative accompaniment is its **theological** meaning and orientation.

The structuring and essential centre of accompaniment and spiritual discernment is the Mystery of the Trinitarian God, with the consequent understanding of the human person in His saving economy. God gives himself and is incarnated in the human person, his image and in the likeness of the Son, as Grace and experience of faith, in the merciful and healing love that communicates the Holy Spirit.

Educative and spiritual accompaniment is a meaningful mediation of this event of the Mystery of God, fully revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and is realised in his people through the action of the Spirit. The Church is the custodian of this gift, so that accompaniment takes place in her name, and is a visible expression of her evangelising mission at the service of God's plan of salvation.

But we also start from the person as a mystery of love, created in His image and in the likeness of the Son. That is, we start from the mystery of God and from the mystery of the person at the same time. Because human life is a privileged platform for faith, "Without this, life cannot exist, because neither meeting, nor friendship, nor reconciliation, nor love, nor anything that is most important in our existence would be possible".

Therefore, we accompany the young person as a mystery of love, called to communion, with the innate tendency towards realisation and with one's desire projected towards happiness.

When we use the adjective "spiritual", we are pointing to the content and orientation that it pursues: understanding life in the light of faith and responding to God's call. Therefore, educative-spiritual accompaniment helps the young person to understand one's life starting from faith and making decisions in response to God's call and to one's human maturity.

From all this, we can affirm that accompaniment can be considered as a relationship of spiritual help, fundamentally asymmetric and friendly at the same time, whose goal is to promote the process of discernment, in order to personalize the faith and the "becoming human" of the person who is accompanied, as an answer or assent to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and which arouses the Holy Spirit in the concrete structure of the young person; in a climate of respect and trust, and in the search for the greater good for the young man and woman of today.

Therefore, the accompaniment relationship should help the young person:

- towards the true knowledge and acceptance of oneself and one's environment, history, possibilities and limits;
- towards the process of being and becoming an independent, free and responsible person;
- towards the articulation and deepening of one's Christian experience, above all, discovering as a vital experience who God is and what he, the Father of Our Lord, means to him/her;
- towards the formation of the moral conscience and the experience of prayer;
- towards the discernment of the will of God in one's life and the reality that surrounds him/her;
- towards the realization of a project of responsible life and in faith;
- towards the process of a decision about one's vocation based on truth, justice and love.

Evidently, in the Salesian charism the "educative and pastoral accompaniment" is meant for all young people, at different levels of intervention. Therefore, we place ourselves within the personal accompaniment of growth processes. It is true that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of discernment, but the centre of attention is in the person who is accompanied and in his/her process of transformation, when s/he places him/herself with sincerity before him/herself, before reality and before God. Although this is not always clear for and reflected upon by adolescents and young people, the one accompanying is certain about it thanks to one's faith and personal experience. Therefore, this is a special relationship of help because it incorporates discernment in the process of transformation of those accompanied and in the experience of the one accompanying them.

[Picture: La vida de Dios autodonada (gracia)]

This drawing helps us to understand that it is people who are involved in accompaniment, and the two aspects we will focus on: **relationship** and **discernment**.

4. Pastoral relationship

Accompaniment with the Salesian charism takes place in daily life, in the educative setting of a relationship of total and spiritual help in which the young person grows and matures in identity, responsibility and freedom to live as a child of God, and to direct his/her life towards the generous commitment of a vocation project.

According to Bruno Giordani, accompaniment is a dialogue between two persons, a helping relationship in which growth towards the full maturity of Christian life is sought. Thus, a healthy relationship is the starting point for a good accompaniment and the key to discernment.

The quality of relationships brings out the best of the person, and is able to cure pending issues; this issue cannot be neglected in the processes of discernment.

To this end, we who accompany must ask ourselves about the quality and significance of our past and present relationships. Because this quality and meaning will be present in the practice of spiritual accompaniment.

The relational dimension of accompaniment is a broad topic that we cannot afford to treat. However, I will limit myself to offering a scheme that helps us to orient ourselves vis-à-vis discernment, which is the theme of our conference.

It should be noted that the relationship of help in accompaniment has its own technique, which everyone who accompanies must learn and respect. This cannot be improvised.

The specific accompanying relationship differs from the colloquial and ordinary relationship with young people in the environment and in group dynamics (which is usually polluted by certain relational "vices"). The relationship of help includes three important aspects:

- **KNOWING:** Theoretical basis and its relationship with accompaniment.
- **KNOWING HOW TO BE:** Interiorising of vital attitudes for a healthy relationship of listening and discernment (existential stand of the one who accompanies).
- **KNOWING HOW TO DO:** Use of appropriate techniques and specific skills, in order to arouse and give quality to discernment within the relationship.

[Cf. drawing: La relación de ayuda en el proceso de acompañamiento]

We shall follow this scheme, which is surely known by a good group among you, or by readers, but we cannot and should not ignore it.

- **Theoretical basis and its relationship with accompaniment (knowing)**

Humanistic psychology provides us with valid and proven tools for spiritual and pastoral accompaniment. These skills and tools have been present in the healthy spiritual tradition, and in the pedagogy of the Preventive System, as well.

The helping relationship has a positive view of the person, who is provided with an innate tendency to survival, growth and self-realization. The person harbours the necessary resources for one's better functioning and to be able to discern one's life.

From this point of view, a hypothesis is established: if an adequate relationship is created, the person will discover in oneself one's capacity for growth and individual change, in relation to oneself and to others.

The helping relationship is a science for the one accompanying and a benefit for the one who is accompanied, in the service of the discernment of God's will.

- **Vital attitudes of a healthy relationship (knowing how to be).**

A relationship of spiritual help requires internalising and spontaneously acquiring certain vital attitudes on the part of the one who accompanies:

- Authenticity, sincerity and congruence.
- Unconditional acceptance, appreciation or positive consideration.
- Empathic understanding (the result of deep and active listening). This empathic technique is a demanding attitude, and becomes spontaneous with practice and training.

- **Appropriate techniques and specific skills (knowing how to do)**

The one who accompanies has skills provided by human sciences; but he/she also has other skills that are proper to spiritual wisdom in order to discern God's will. Discernment begins with the very relationship and its skills:

The most important ones are summarized in this outline:

- WELCOMING skill (attitude of unconditional acceptance)
- LISTENING skill:

- Internal and external listening
- Active and empathetic listening
- RESPONDING skill:
 - Empathetic response
 - Reformulated response (mirroring responses)
- PERSONALISING SKILL:
 - Knowing how to ask (help find solutions and seek discernment)
 - Helping to identify, formulate and internalise
 - Identifying the fruits (connection with spiritual discernment): self-confidence, humility and truth, acceptance of reality, self-control, good works, increase in listening to God, improvement in virtue ...

'Active listening' is an act of love that heals wounds, helps overcome difficulties, motivates self-knowledge and leads to a greater discernment of one's own truth. The one who is listened to feels recognized and can initiate a healthy process of self-awareness.

The acceptance of the person and the listening enlarge the heart, in which desire and nostalgia for God are inscribed. When the person feels heard, s/he gains autonomy and identity: this way one will be able to solve for oneself one's pending questions, crises, vocation development ... This is prior to discernment, but it also prepares towards it.

In spiritual listening, the saving dynamism of God takes place, because in the depths of the human heart there is much of God that needs to flourish.

These psycho-pedagogical techniques do not act as therapy in the accompaniment, but rather as quality of relationship, mediation for the action of the Spirit, at the service of the spiritual process of the accompanied person and for the improvement of the one who accompanies.

The helping relationship is applied in the pastoral and other professional fields; but in accompaniment, it is carried out in the *interview* or *personal talk*, as the main tool. When the 'discernment of spirits' comes into play, other skills and attitudes are required, related to the 'working' of God, as we shall see.

5. Teach us to discern your presence in the life of young people! Lord, may young people seek to discern your presence and friendship in their lives!

We approach this science of the heart in the depth of the mystery of the person and in openness to the life of the Spirit, with the plea of the Samaritan woman.

Discernment is necessary because existence is crossed by ambiguities and deceptive situations, but also by certainties of sense and moral convictions. Discernment is necessary not only to differentiate between good and evil, but between different goods; not all goods are to be exercised by the person, some are only to be recognised and admired in others. From God, life has its order and 'discipline'. However, discernment is also necessary to place mistakes and errors within God's will.

The one who accompanies teaches and helps to know how to interpret the feelings and the deepest motions of the Spirit of God. Discernment moves in internal turmoil (emotional and spiritual) in various directions, until one of them settles in consciousness (awareness) as one's own and best expresses the will of God.

On the other hand, the desire of God nests in human desires and, at the same time, Grace [does so] in the tendencies of human nature. However, Grace pushes and grows, like wheat with darnel.

Let us make it clear that discernment is a science of the heart, learned in listening to the Word of God, in meeting the Word and in interpersonal encounters.

Accompaniment is, in itself, **history of salvation** in which God seduces (cf. Jr 20: 7) and Jesus becomes the way, the truth and the life (cf. Lk 24: 17).

5.1 Approach to spiritual discernment

The action of discerning, from the Latin 'discernere', refers to analysing, separating, examining, differentiating and knowing how to opt for the object that is pursued. It is a rational and emotional operation in view of a decision.

The Greek term 'diakrino' (διακρίνω) means 'to realise', 'to determine', 'to separate', 'to distinguish' one thing from another in order to know how to act; from that word comes 'crisis'.

Paul often talks about scrutinising (examining) or pouring over the scriptures. He often uses the Greek verb *diakrino* to adhere to the revealed message (cf. 1Thes 5: 20-21; 1Cor 6: 2; 9: 3; 11: 31; 13: 11).

Discernment applies to the person, to the community, to a group and to pastoral action. Applied to the field of spiritual and vocation accompaniment, discernment can be defined as the art or science by which one seeks and recognises the divine origin (God's will) of what happens in a person or in a group, based on external signs, internal motions, on personal processes of growth or on signs.

The discernment we are talking about comes from the experience of faith and the hidden (but real) presence of the Mystery of God in the person. This presence is not static, but dynamic in the experience of the believer and in one's vocation history. "Spiritual discernment comes powerfully through as a constant in the life of the Christian in order to pass from the infantile age of faith to that of the perfect and mature 'man'".

The discerned existence leads to a Christian life shaped by the Spirit (cf. Rm 3: 6,8) and forges a personality moved by the theological life (cf. 1Thes 1: 2s; 5: 8-10; 1Cor 13: 13; Col 1: 4).

For Paul, discernment is not a matter of analysis, but of inner light. The causal analysis and rational search for the truth is not the most important nor the determining factor. The things of God are known from God and through a vital connection with the Spirit through innate knowledge (cf. 1Cor 2: 6-1). He who has known the love of God is able to discern because he lives in obedience to this love, which transforms him/her inwardly and, therefore, his/her conduct is born from this inner journey (cf. Rm 12: 1-2). The knowledge of God's will requires wisdom and spiritual intelligence, which surpasses all human calculation (cf. Col 1: 9b-11). But it is the Spirit who teaches to live in discernment, who communicates the theological life, that is to live out of faith, hope and love (cf. Hb 5: 11-14).

The one who accompanies spiritually lives in a discernment based on the experience of God in one's life. This is more important than knowing how to discern or what discernment is. Because the important thing is to be a mediator of the presence of grace and of the saving action of God.

The action of God in young people takes place, in many occasions, through this mediating presence.

5.2 Pedagogy of discernment. Issues to keep in mind

A community life and an atmosphere of faith, well cared for, with meaningful relationships and a solid spiritual life, are privileged areas of discernment.

This was, originally, the area of discernment preferred by Don Bosco. The young people came to the Oratory and experienced a crisis and personal transformation through an infectious lifestyle and [full] immersion. The educative system of the Oratory created an environment rich in human dynamism and grace (sacramental life and prayer), which acted as points of reference for discernment. Personal accompaniment in the Oratory arose within the rhythm of daily coexistence and with spontaneity. Obviously, this basic community experience is indispensable in the Salesian charism, when we speak of accompaniment and spiritual discernment.

a) The community promotes and cares for the ways in which people are accompanied

The ordinary life of the educative-pastoral community presents many ways and opportunities to accompany young people and educators.

We highlight three basic educative elements of youth ministry:

- The pedagogy (approach) of esteem, affection and trust, which are serenely manifested. Personal growth finds the necessary *humus* to grow in this style, which is characteristic of the Salesian charism. The climate of affection, trust and respect

is realised in the difference of roles and taking up the basic rules so that personal processes can take place. In these processes, the criterion of discernment is very important.

- The pedagogy (approach) of the 'itineraries of education to the faith' as the most appropriate community setting for personal accompaniment to arise, but above all in order to offer the experience of God in a community of youth. Many young people are accompanied through the experience of a youth group, with the support of friendship and the witness of faith of their peers and of adult points of reference in the faith. The 'itinerary of education to the faith', which follows the individuals' growth, and the 'itinerary of prayer' are of vital importance in Salesian Youth Ministry, together with the initiation into and celebration of the sacraments.
- The pedagogy of accompaniment is an aid to grow and to discern God's will regarding personal vocation and the Christian life in general, through the daily mediations of community life. Everyday life contains much information about behaviours, motivations, attitudes, openness and docility to God's initiative; and it offers opportunities to love and work in freedom, to live life as a mission in the style of Jesus.

Accompaniment in the community environment and in the different groups is as important as personal accompaniment. The community is a place of sanctification. The Salesian educative-pastoral model is aimed at the most vulnerable adolescents and young people. The mere fact of educating is an act of love; it is giving and bestowing life as a gift.

b) The young person must be prepared to recognise the passing of God through one's life

We move within an increasingly secular and critical culture, marked by functional thinking and religious pluralism. To this is added the crisis of institutionalised religions, especially the Church, and the narrowing of the existential horizon. Furthermore, in secularized societies, God is less and less useful.

However, God belongs to faith, to meaning and to the experience of connection and relationship.

In our opinion, spiritual discernment requires preliminary minimal conditions for young people today. These preliminaries will be in proportion to the possibilities of each young person.

Spiritual accompaniment requires that we take seriously the pastoral care of "preliminaries" which prepares towards faith and equips the subject to accept God's offer. Secularity is positive and makes it possible to live a more purified faith. Faith must not deny anything of what culture offers as human, but find a new place for everything, purifying and transforming it.

These preliminaries start from and respect the situation and mentality of the young people, assuming:

- the demands of ethical humanism in regard to the subject with oneself and in relation, such as: the decision to be a person, the search for one's own truth, authenticity of life, respect for otherness, ethical values ...; and
- the freedom of God and his Grace: the gift that he makes of himself in Jesus Christ.

Those who accompany know how to recognise in the life of young people the manifestation of God's love. But they also offer the foundations of a Christian life and vocation: openness to transcendence, free disposition to the mystery, joyful acceptance of the asceticism that this approach to life entails, deciding to enter into relationship with God and with Jesus Christ ...

Therefore, the art of discernment is the most beautiful aspect of accompaniment and the speciality of this ecclesial ministry. The model and method of discernment can be considered from different approaches, depending on the type of accompaniment.

c) Discernment has its moment

The start of discernment has its moment, time and form in the personal history of the young person, with the bond of love that creates the Spirit, but it needs to be introduced.

Grace becomes present in human freedom, which moves between collaboration with God and the resistance to him being the personal centre and foundation of one's life.

The expression of Pope Francis is well known, "One has to keep watch over one's heart, so that evil may not enter in", which is applied to the importance of the examination of conscience. For the Salesian charism, this vigilance is prevention (it creates the right conditions) and promotion (it provides the pedagogical means for the development of human maturity and for the experience of God). Discernment moves between contrasts and internal tensions; that is why the personal self needs to be strengthened and prepared with an educative presence.

Faith is subject to much fragility, but endowed with inner strength. The more fragility in human aspects and in faith, the more accompaniment [is needed] (cf. *Amoris Laetitia* 291) with the law of gradualness, prudence and compassion about limitations (cf. AL 305).

The Salesian style relates the principle of the traditional "discernment of spirits" with the criterion of *preventive-ness* and with that of promoting the life of God in the young. The one who accompanies with the Salesian charism must be an expert in discerning the spirit of God and know how to promote it in the life of young people, as Don Bosco knew how to do so with Dominic, Michael and Francis, or as Maria Domenica Mazzarello knew how to guide the small group of five Daughters of Mary Immaculate in building their friendship with God.

6. Fundamental and basic rule (to observe and to centre the 'heart')

Sooner or later, in the process of accompaniment, the person has to discern the will of God, to decide whether God is the horizon of one's life, or make ordinary decisions in which one's own salvation and happiness are at stake.

The one who accompanies teaches young people the dynamics of inner listening (of aspirations, desires, fears, weaknesses...); so that they may learn to differentiate and interpret between the natural feeling of the self and the feeling of listening to God; between what leaves behind dryness and sadness, and what leaves behind joy and consolation, etc.

Don Cafasso used this method with Don Bosco, and Don Bosco did with Micky Magone and with many other young people, some of whom were his first children [at the Oratory].

Pope Francis frequently resorts to this wisdom of the spiritual tradition.

We offer here some basic guidelines to enter the path of discernment, applied to the educative and spiritual life of young people, whatever their personal situation may be.

The individual, with one's intelligence and with the light of the Spirit, can distinguish true from false, error from truth. To do this, we observe stimulus and response, attraction and desire, where they come from and where they lead (the consequences); and how the inner self feels [at the end of it]...

To begin with and to prepare the relationship with God, it is convenient (1st):

a) Learn to differentiate, know what this is about and where it comes from

- Focalise the issue and define what it is about (by exploration or awareness): the issues that come into play in the person's feelings. Listen to the feelings ...
- Distinguish and differentiate between the psychological (through self-observation) and the spiritual (through the action of God).
- Interpret what comes or stems from the tendency to selfishness or the tendency towards a more real love.
- Know what comes from reason and emotion alone, and what comes from the Holy Spirit in the matter of discernment and in the decision that follows it. Not everything belongs to the saving action of God, there are forces contrary to the Kingdom of grace, which they destroy; or, although they appear good, they move from the self to the self for its own 'glory' ...

However, how do we know where it comes from?

- What comes from the good, from God and from the Kingdom (reign of God) produces:
 - A state of peace, although it does not always leave total tranquillity because it establishes an internal struggle that makes one grow.

- Joy that comes from within; although sometimes with the loss of something that also attracts.
- Inner freedom, personal identity and authenticity; although with some pain for the separation from the opinion and esteem of others.
- Greater closeness to God and his love, to Jesus and his Gospel message; even if it is not lived up to the level of that perfection.
- Will and desire to offer oneself to others with generosity and to share the faith; although with some resistance.
- On the contrary, what comes from the psychological part and from rational calculation, from personal selfishness and from forces contrary to the good and to the kingdom, usually produces:
 - Deep sadness; although momentarily [it can produce] satisfaction and superficial happiness.
 - Remorse and some guilt; even though one tries to justify it by reasoning or imitation of what everyone does.
 - Falling under the spell of certain vices or habits that prevent living in freedom and authenticity.
 - Falling away from God, from the message of Jesus and from Christian charity.
 - Closing oneself more and more in one's own selfishness, darkness and closed mind.

To verify, on the side of the one who accompanies, the internal order of the one who is accompanied (2nd)

b) When is the person accompanied calm and 'orderly' in one's affections?

Normally the person

- experiences and expresses serenity and inner order when reason, affectivity and will are oriented to the same object and inclination; and
- experiences and expresses concern when there is a serious divergence in the direction or decision taken, or yet to be taken, between reason, affectivity and will.

The question, then, is to become aware of the following: Where is one directed: *What is one's focus?*

In order to do this, the one accompanying helps to listen properly and raises questions so that the person may find out where one's feelings of peace or concern come from and where do they take him/her; what thoughts are derived from them and where do they lead him/her; what motivations intervene and where they lead.

Usually there are two poles to clarify: God and the *obtuse* self (clumsy and the centre of reality).

What is the fundamental orientation? To that effect, the person will have to see if one's thoughts, inner feelings and will lead to God, bottle up (tighten) the self or broaden one's view.

If there is a process, the Spirit leads eventually to the centrality of God in life, or to be founded on Him. Prayer, especially with the Word, and life will be decisive in this journey.

To continue moving forward in one's relationship with God (3rd):

c) Important issue: towards where and how is my fundamental orientation?

- **What moves me in life?** From *where* do I live? (What are my motivations?)
Differentiate: what I do, how I do it and where my actions come from (from my needs, from within, from the will of God, from the paschal dimension of Jesus, from the Spirit).
- **Two perspectives of orientation in spiritual life:**
 - **From and towards oneself**
How do opposite tendencies to the will of God work?
 - The self acts as closed and justified in its reason and narcissistic affectivity to continue in its own emptiness. The obtuse mind (the greatest enemy) will act on feelings and desires with affective compensations, identifying them with greater happiness. The mind and affection will give reasons to convince

[the person] that everything is fine, but justifying oneself while clinging to one's very self.

- The Holy Spirit will act in a very different way if the person opens him/herself to the love of God. The Spirit will point out lies and make the person see that s/he is not OK with oneself or with God. In this way, he will act on the reasoning and cause discomfort; even if the feelings remain scattered. If the person is authentic, s/he will not endure the onslaught of God that tends to take him/her out of one's comfort zones and shelters with the logic of the life of the Kingdom. If the person changes or modifies him/herself, s/he may experience a different kind of peace. The Spirit gives light to know how to distinguish between being complacent and living happily, between being satisfied and being serene in the truth, between experiencing gratifying love or real and true love. For the Saviour's passion is consolation.

➤ **From God and towards God**

How does the inclination that brings God closer act and how does the one that takes away from Him act?

- If the orientation is good, the action of the Holy Spirit (1st) maintains reason, feelings and will directed towards God. It will act on the feelings, nourishing them with spiritual consolation; on the reason, seeking understanding in what is being lived; and on the will, moving it towards actions of service and good. The person can continue to live from him/herself, but s/he knows that s/he is not the centre (2nd); God's will is oriented toward the sequel of and with Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God will lead to this humble sequel. However, one will find reasons and feelings that push the person away from this centre and foundation.
- On the other hand, the action of the *opposite spirit* ('*enemy*') separates mind, heart and inclinations (reason, affectivity and will) to break the right orientation and cause restlessness. It will act on the reason causing false reasoning, creating obstacles or increasing them; on affectivity by causing attraction for prestige and for personal 'idolatry'; and on the will orienting it to actions of appropriation and personal gain. These false 'goods' can be discovered by the fears, anxieties and dryness they sow in the soul or 'centre of interiority'. Its (i.e. of the enemy spirit and of the false goods) strategy will be to attract with initial questions, which cannot be considered before the action; other strategies will be to keep the person at the level of first impulses, or occupying one's mind (which is vague and superficial) with memories, people and known events ...

d) The journey is long, it's not "something" of one day

Discernment is not the result of a few moments of prayer and reflection, but of an inner process of comparison with reality, of analysis of the facts, of processes of human maturity, of confrontation with the Gospel, of a living relationship with the Lord and of contemplation of His mysteries. Discernment requires time and inner repose.

The guidelines given by the one accompanying are of decisive importance; above all, to propose to the person accompanied the 'instruments' necessary to acquire the wisdom of discernment in everything; and also to teach the prayer of discernment.

These 'instruments' are basic orientations based on feelings, thoughts and inclinations of the will. The tools that provide the same nature and spirit of God are many. However, the relationship with God, the listening to the Word and the reading of reality as a believer are central to spiritual discernment.

Christian life is lived in discernment; therefore, this never ends. However, let us bear in mind that the discernment par excellence comes from listening to the Word, and it is up to this Word to discern the reality and the life of the believer (cf. Rm 12: 2).

7. Signs of spiritual discernment. The ability to face life

Discernment is spiritual, and its art lies in detecting the action of the Holy Spirit in the experience of faith and in the ordinary life of a person with a [special] vocation.

In reality, the most important aspect of discernment is not the decisions to be made or the actions to be taken, but the effects of transformation that it leaves in the person and the change in [the level of] freedom that has been operated in him/her, so that one may live out in service, in humility and in one's availability to act well, as a fruit of love received. But the greatest fruit, effect and result is growth in the relationship with God and with our Lord Jesus Christ.

The truth of discernment is not in the rapid change, but in the transformation – slow but real – of the person within one's conscience. Decisions and behavioural change usually arrive later and they are the last thing that changes. Because, if the change is the fruit of true love, it comes from within and to the rhythm of the presence of God's love. A consistent human and spiritual process is a place and a sign of discernment.

In effect, every decision made after a discernment must be confirmed in time by the fruits or effects that it produces in the person. This confirmation of the initial "post-discernment" also requires a degree of fidelity and relationship with God.

The classic fruits of spiritual life are set forth by St Paul in the fifth chapter of Galatians; they are also called spiritual gifts: love, joy, peace, patience, forbearance, kindness, goodness, meekness, fidelity, modesty, continence, chastity.

We must bear in mind that spiritual progress is not objectively observable, though it is real. It means that spiritual life and union with God are verified in their effects and fruits. These come from one's way of thinking, feeling and acting. However, they are noticeable in the quality of relationships and in the change of motivations.

When it comes to adolescents and young people, these signs and fruits are also shown by the ability to deal with important issues of their life and person. That is, they affect the contents of accompaniment at the level and depth, in integrity and honesty.

It should be noted that accompaniment and discernment take place starting from the real, from what happens in the reality of life. Often, in the personal talk, we become abstract: we talk about desires, of what we think, of what we would like or not like, about other people...

Some of the topics of conversation in the process of accompanied discernment are:

- About what happened since the last meeting:
 - important facts,
 - most common thoughts and feelings (what goes on within),
 - sense of reality and what one does, thinks and lives.
- Reconciliation with past history: pending issues of reconciliation or that must be revised so that they acquire a new sense and meaning, in the light of the present.
- Affectivity and sexuality – past and present. Affections, attachments, affective processes.
- Relationships: family, friends, socialisation, recipients of the mission.
- Other aspects of maturity and personal change: development and moral conscience, solidarity ethics, quality of relationships, work ...
- Structural or area of consistency of the person: values, attitudes and needs; emotions, motivations and defence mechanisms...
- Life as a vocation, mission and creativity ... Appropriate intention in everything...
- Relationship with God: images and history of the relationship with God, the idea of Jesus Christ and relationship with Him, forgiveness in the name of Jesus, sacramental life ...
- Prayer: Introduction to the relationship with God, methods and pedagogy, examination of prayer and specific actions (recollections, Spiritual Retreats ...).

1st Remark: So that there may be a process of discernment, a contrast between poles must happen: the real and the subjective; the objective and the personal. For this, we have the analysis of reality and the guidelines of the Word. Trust is important.

The one who accompanies creates this contrast, listening to what happens in the subjectivity of the person (helping him/her to discern it) and, at the same time, offering objective content (of Christian doctrine and of analysis of reality). If the person enters the path of faith, the Word is an obligatory point of reference. Only the Word reaches the marrow of the soul (cf. Hb 14: 12).

2nd Remark: The one accompanying must know how to encourage the spirit of search for the truth, the beauty and the best aspect of life in the young person. To achieve this, the guide will address his/her noble heart and what God is awakening in him/her. Above all, the desire for 'holiness', the desire for an 'extra' of love and a certain theological intuition (to live out of faith in trust, out of love in gratuitousness, and out of hope in patience). The "ability to smell God" or theological sensitivity is very important; one can educate with magnanimity, gratuity in everything, total gift of self ...

8. Spiritual dynamics of the call (vocation)

Discernment is applied to Christian life, with regard to the call. When this happens in a specific way, discernment acquires a different dimension, according to the biblical dynamics of the call, from the spiritual structure of faith.

Every Christian vocation must be discerned from its spiritual origin, but also as a free and confident response. Every authentic vocation has its origin in the call and its effect on the response; therefore, it is discerned from this double dynamics.

The *vocation call* is a passionate response to the One who calls, who acts from within the personal nature. For this purpose, we point out its dynamics:

- *The initiative always comes from God: "No one can come to me, unless the Father who has sent me draws him"* (Jn 6: 44).
- *The person called by God allows himself/herself to be probed, ministers to the Caller and to what He calls for; therefore s/he is ready to discover this call both in his/her personal inclinations and in everyday history, as well as to choose with responsibility a certain lifestyle, by consenting to God.*
- *God supports and cares with the warmth of the Spirit, and He makes Himself perceived by the person. The perception of the 'mysterious presence of God' is discerned in good works; in the process of transformation; in internal motions; in serene and trusting availability; in inner freedom; in apostolic and charismatic zeal, and in the "intentionality of being". However, the most obvious form of perception is the infused presence of God, in some particular cases.*
- *The call challenges the person's own freedom and autonomy.* This does not happen in a miraculous way: each one assents, accepts, responds and expresses that response with motivations, thoughts, ways of being, and even in different circumstances; but there will be some dense and founding experiences that imprint the 'certainty' of the divine call.
- The answer is the fruit of Grace and the Spirit; it is neither the fruit of the will, nor of one's own merits. The response is generated to the extent that Divine Grace attracts in one direction and not in another. The most 'felt' attraction is accompanied by inner freedom and deep peace of heart, but it generates a response that to a large extent appears as 'obedience'. "No one can come to me unless the Father draw him" (Jn 6: 44).

The call (vocation) tends to awaken the desire for apostolic dedication, the dream of a project, identification with an ideal, imitation of reference persons ... All these are [positive] signs.

- A particular charism helps to identify the concrete ways of the response to the specific mission in accordance with one's spiritual attraction: "Here I am, send me" (Is 6: 8).
- The call and vocation response are made concrete in a way of life according to one's choice, in the acceptance of *a journey proposed by the charism and taking responsibility for personal formation*. A vocation or call is discerned in the learning

process, with one's eyes fixed on Jesus and on real life. God's will is discovered every day.

Thus, the objective dimension of faith (its content) is inserted into the subjective dimension of the young person, to the rhythm of his/her stages of maturity. The call is effective in everyday life, but life offers crises and stages of concentration in which a greater discernment and vocation evaluation is needed.

Those who accompany are witnesses of this dynamics that involves reflection and praxis. The person who is called is formed from within, in real life and in community interaction; and this entails an active and passive attitude at the same time.

9. Discernment require mediations and practical tools

Christian spirituality is an experience that is verified in the real life. God does not reveal himself directly, but He lives incarnated and He manifests himself through mediations.

This topic of mediations is a central point in the spiritual process, without eliminating the possibility of the immediacy of God's absolute free presence, in our finite freedom.

The infused experience of God must be very well discerned...

God desires and is able to communicate in an immediate way, but He usually does so through mediations. However, He gives himself well beyond them, since He is given as a gift and as grace. What is essential is our faith in Him, our love for His holy will and our willingness to obey.

Pedagogically, the one who accompanies knows how to propose instruments that help in spiritual discernment, in order to grow in one's life with God or in decision-making.

9.1. Mediations of the Spiritual Life

a) History of Salvation and Church Mediations

- Jesus Christ, the Lord: a mediation in which all the others converge. He is the centre. This principle cuts across the whole revelation and the gospels. Relationship with Jesus is a central theme in Christian Spirituality and, therefore, in accompaniment.
- The Eucharist and the sacraments.
- The Word (in the Holy Eucharist) and a preaching which is full of life.
- The Church as People of God assisted by the Holy Spirit (the *Magisterium* ...).
- The signs of the times (human history, the praxis of the Kingdom ...)
- The works of love: works of mercy, exercise of charity and of virtues...
- Aspects of charismatic spirituality.
- The accompaniment ministry is a mediation of the Church, a 'caring for souls' and a path of sanctification; but it has its appropriate moment in every believer.

b) Mediations from ordinary life and significant experiences

The mediations in daily life are many. But there are important mediations that are conducive to the experience of God, and to the deepening of personal life.

- **Ordinary life.** In the ordinary, the extraordinary is given. Ordinary life as a mediation of God is always newness and creativity, because God saves us in our history and in everyday life. The great challenge of accompaniment is to live in faith our daily lives.
- **The "Itineraries of Education to the Faith" and the "Itineraries of Prayer".** The EPC (Educative and Pastoral Community) and the local Youth Ministry are the privileged environment where young people have the opportunity to participate in faith groups and in the relationship with God. This option must be underlined and is important for personal follow-up.
- **Loneliness and silence.** Serene affectivity, reflection, the ability to be alone, working peacefully with others, intimate communion with the loved ones and with the community group; the presence of God; pastoral zeal; the intimate world...
- **Pastoral and ethical responsibility (work).** Work and love go together, as the capacity to assume and live daily reality without taking refuge in the imaginary, in

idealised desires or in fantasy and fears. Our responsibility for action is in the inner self.

- **Meaningful relationships.** Our relationship with God is based on affectionate and emotional connections, and it is developed and tested through healthy and meaningful relationships ('face to face').
- **Prayer** is a privileged mediation. It unfolds in itself both personal life and life with God (without feeding rationalisations, imagination or projected desires). True prayer is lived in emotional depths, in reconciliation with the reality, in gratuitous love and in the relationship with God. It is necessary to relate prayer and listening to the Word; prayer and self-knowledge; prayer and real life. There is [always] an important moment to introduce *Lectio divina* as a privileged method of prayer.
- **Challenging ("confrontation")** is wisdom of discernment, when it is well done. It requires trust and acceptance. It is hard and it sometimes hurts; but it gives peace and it opens up horizons.
- **Borderline experiences** that overflow and break, both in terms of fullness as well as deprivation such as: having a child; a deep experience of prayer; death; suffering; a failure ...

The one who accompanies knows how to take advantage of those experiences where the person is surprised and strongly affected. There are multiple mediations in ordinary life.

9.2 Tools to accompany discernment

a) The interview: a basic tool for personal accompaniment

The personal interview is the privileged area where the dynamics of the relationship and conversation are carried out, as well as the clarification and analysis of the discernment process.

The interview has its technique and requires training, trust and confidentiality.

The interview or personal accompaniment colloquy is a privileged encounter: what is the relationship established by the one who accompanies with the one who is accompanied and vice versa?

- **Hints for the one accompanying, before the interview:**
 - 1) Put aside time with long intervals, with a serene attitude and in an appropriate place.
 - 2) My personal preparation, which includes prayer.
 - 3) Read the previous notes about this person and remember his/her history [background]
 - 4) The room where we are meeting and privacy conditions.
- **Regular interviews:**
 - 1) Welcome, listen and understand the young person in his/her affections, feelings and motions of the spirit.
 - 2) Help the person accompanied to go deeper by means of concreteness, immediacy and exploration.
 - 3) You can offer some material about the topic, phase or circumstance lived by the person.
 - 4) Confrontation (a challenge) or interpretation will be offered, according to prudence.
 - 5) Make some proposals, in order to help the person to see options or take actions.
- **Interviews to finalize the accompaniment:**
 - 1) The one who is accompanied makes his/her own review of the journey
 - 2) The one who accompanies adds his/her own assessment.
 - 3) Try to open up to future experiences.
 - 4) Prepare the farewell and both (the one who accompanies and the one accompanied), place their affections in God alone.

b) Some working tools for the accompaniment

- **Notebook of the one who accompanies.** This confidential instrument is important for the one accompanying who takes seriously the life of those entrusted to him/her by the Lord. Meaningful aspects of the process of the ones s/he accompanies are written down on the notebook as well as the subjective aspects of impact and of personal work. It is also good to observe the possible instances of transference.
- **Personal diary of the one who is accompanied.** Some people call it a 'spiritual notebook' where those accompanied write the resonances, the discernment process, the concrete proposals, the decisions to be made and, above all, the relationship with God in prayer and in listening to the Word.
- **Personal Plan.** The personal plan belongs to the pedagogy of the person in process, aware of his/her possibilities and limits, discerning the work of God in his/her process of transformation.
- **Autobiography.** The autobiography is very useful for personal knowledge and for self-exploration; to interpret life in the light of faith and for discernment. The one who accompanies has this privileged tool to help the accompanied person to pause, reflect on his/her own life and take it responsibly.

10. Conclusion

The purpose of this conference was to provide some clues to reflect on "discernment and decision making in the process of accompaniment", in the context of the 2018 *Strenna*.

We started by praying with the Samaritan Woman. This story reminds us of another one, that of the Good Samaritan. I think the Lord wants to imprint a 'Samaritan spirit' on the members of the Salesian Family, to heal the wounded youth with the oil of compassion; to be hosts and healers at *Kingdom's Inn*, the Kingdom of mercy; or to set up tents in the cities, in remote and even hostile territories in search of lost young people. We are members of the great *hospital* that is the Church, shelter and refuge of the most fragile. He will repay us in His own time, when He will return.

We, the Salesian Family, are now concerned with accompanying the young people, making God known and discerning with them the most appropriate way, so that the promise of Salvation may happen in their lives and they may know Jesus Christ.

However, being witnesses of the faith, as well as educators and spiritual guides, requires a process of conversion and training. I wish to convey my concern for formation to this ministry. The Church asks us for it, and so do the young people. We are called to be guides and spiritual teachers, with our own inner life and being well trained.

The journey consists in recovering the spiritual experience of our founders and the genuine educative style of the Preventive System, with the apostolic zeal and the pastoral charity of the Good Shepherd. Let us become capable of enriching the educative mission when it is necessary at the service of God's experience in the young people; let us become capable to be competent guides in listening and in spiritual discernment, men and women of God, witnesses and teachers in the matters of the Spirit. This becomes an invitation from the Lord and the duty to give an answer to the young people of today, as well as to the concern of the Church.

We are all invited. Who is called to do it? Who lets him/herself be encouraged by the Spirit of God? Anyone?

With this talk, I hope to have enlightened, encouraged and helped you to discern the way ahead about God's will on this topic, at the personal and institutional level, in each one of the branches of the Salesian Family.

Thank you very much.

Juan Crespo, sdb