



SOCIETA' DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES

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To:
Provincials

Copy to:
Provincial Formation Delegates
Novice directors
Prenovice directors
Aspirantate directors
Vocation animators

Subject: Seminar on Discernment of the two forms of the Salesian vocation, San Callisto, Rome, 26-29 May 2018

Dear confreres,

Within the space of two weeks from our seminar on meditation, we have concluded another seminar, this time on discernment of the two forms of our Salesian vocation. Once again, the seminar was hosted by our community of San Callisto, Rome, and led by Bro. Raymond Callo, FIN. The group was small: Horacio Barbieri, ARN; Adam Homoncik, UPS; Philip Lazatin, FIS; Angelo Santorsola, IME; the members of the Formation Department Cleofas Murguia, Silvio Roggia and Francisco Santos Montero; and Joseph Kunle, INC and Samuel Obu, UPS who helped us with translation.

The **objective** of the seminar was to clarify ideas about discernment of the two forms with the aim of helping formators in this regard. The idea for the initiative came from our earlier [seminar on the specific formation of the Salesian Brother](#) held in October 2017 at Genzano near Rome. We thought that a first step in this direction would be to gather a small group of confreres, especially those with experience of having been novice directors, in order to listen to their experiences in this very particular area of discernment which, as you will know, is something that our *Ratio* recommends be done during the novitiate (FSDB 371; cf. CN 7). The **method** was to listen to our experiences and illuminate them with the help of our tradition as crystallized in our documents, before putting together some suggestions and guidelines to be shared with initial formation guides, provincial formation delegates and provincials themselves.

I share with you some of the points that emerged during the seminar, in the hope that they will be useful for formation guides in the early stages of initial formation, but also for the provinces as a whole, given that the "culture of the province" is such an important element in the formation of our confreres.

Our common identity: the Salesian consecrated vocation

1. First of all, there was a very strong emphasis on our basic Salesian identity, or our apostolic consecration. The specificity of the two forms of our vocation can be understood only on this basis and within it. As the FSDB says, our **consecration** fully colours our being Brother / Priest (39, 40). The fact that we work in the EPC, with lay people who are often more competent than us, obliges us to clarify with even more urgency what it means to share Don Bosco's mission as consecrated persons. In the same way, the **mission** sets the tenor of our life (C 3). This means that mission cannot be reduced – in our formation houses, for example – merely to the weekend activity. It has to colour everything – the way we live the evangelical counsels, our community life, our study – because our mission consists in being “signs and bearers of God's love to the young,” and this is not a part time activity. The grace of unity is our particular gift. Fr Viganò spoke of the totalizing meaning of consecration and mission:

“With Don Bosco we want to testify to the mutual and inseparable permeation between ‘religious life’ and ‘apostolate,’ and vice versa, in a vital attitude of ‘supercomprehensive’ synthesis without the pitfalls of the antitheses. It is extremely important for us not to forget **the peculiar and totalizing meaning of each of the two terms ‘consecration’ and ‘mission,’** neither of which can be reduced to indicate only one particular sector of Salesian life. Our consecration is, in itself, apostolic; and the mission entrusted to us is, insofar as it is ours, religious.” (Discorso di apertura del Rettor Maggiore, 14 gennaio 1984, GC22 n. 20)

2. The Salesian is a man of *communio* and an animator of communion. The Salesian cannot think of his vocation without thinking of those others who are “bearers of the will of the Founder” (FSDB 35, citing SGC 151). His role in the EPC, the Salesian Family and the Salesian Movement is to maintain *unity* of spirit, dialogue and fraternal collaboration (C 5).

3. Discernment regarding the two forms presupposes, therefore, what we might call a “*charismatic evangelization*” or a *kerygma* of the charism. Discernment must be based on the knowledge of and ability to live the *Preventive System*. Here we can remember the Latin saying, ∴ We choose only what we love, and we love only if we know. How can we love if we do not know?

Specificity

4. We come now to the question of specificity: how might we understand each of the two forms of our vocation, the Salesian Priest and the Salesian Brother? This question should be answered not in terms of fields of work or activity, but with the help of the “typological ecclesiology” that was proposed by Fr Viganò and that has been developed in the three great documents on the states of life within the Church – *Christifideles laici* (1988), *Pastores dabo vobis* (1992) and *Vita consecrata* (1996). Typological ecclesiology shifts from “distinction by separation” to “distinction in relation.” Each state of life emphasises and gives visibility to some aspect of the Christian vocation that belongs to all. The laity remind all of us of the sacredness and value of the secular; the priest gives visibility to Christ's living and glorious presence in our midst; and the consecrated person is a sign to all that we are all moving to the life of the resurrection when there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, and we will be filled with the fullness of God. Thus we can speak of the Salesian Brother as giving visibility [1] to the lay dimension of the whole congregation, with our typical closeness to the life of common people and to the values of the world, where God's Kingdom is present and is unfolding; [2] to our fraternity, in the family spirit that deeply characterizes our Salesian Charism; [3] even more to the fact that we are all basically consecrated persons – which is our fundamental identity in the Church. In turn, the Salesian Priest reminds his Brother confreres that they are always and everywhere educators and pastors – that “like don Bosco, we are all called to be educators to the faith at every opportunity,” for “our highest knowledge ... is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery.” (C 34)

5. Among our documents, C 4, 44 and 45 and the relative commentary in the *Project of Life* are especially helpful, as also *Criteria and Norms* 84-87. However, we find it enlightening to place these texts in context. Thus it would be useful to read C 2-4, 44-46, 97-101, 113, 116, 123; R 97-98, 169; and

FSDB chapter 2: The Salesian Vocational Identity: Principle and Goal of our Formation, as also chapter 10: Specific Formation.

6. The recent document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The Identity of the Religious Brother in the Church* (2015), along with *New Wine in New Wineskins* (2017) from the same Congregation, could help us qualify further the specificity of the Salesian Brother. The Brother is an icon of fraternity, which is a central and constitutive element in religious life. Horizontal fraternal relationships are vital: "In the broader view of consecrated life since the Council, we have passed from the centrality of the role of authority to the centrality of the dynamic of fraternity." (*New Wine* 41) The Brother is "ferment in the mass" as expert and spiritual guide. He is a sign of the presence of God in secular realities. "Communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission" (*Christifideles laici* 32).

7. As far as the Salesian Priest is concerned, the theology of the "religious priest" is still being worked out, and the recent document of the Congregation for Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, does not enter into this important topic, despite the fact that a significant number of priests in the Church are consecrated persons. Certainly, our own *Ratio* insists that it is consecration that is basic, so that the priesthood of a Salesian must be totally coloured by it and lived from within it (FSDB 25, 38 and especially 39). Still, we need to spell out more closely how our apostolic consecration – mission, evangelical counsels and community – affects every aspect of our priestly ministry. It is clear, for example, that we need to avoid both apostolic individualism (since the mission is entrusted to the community) and pastoral genericism (not all kinds of ministry, therefore, but that which is in keeping with our mission).

8. We need to keep in mind something that in the recent international conference on *Consecratio e consecratio per evangelica consilia* (2018) was called *consecratio continuata*: the fact that some aspects of our lives as consecrated persons become clear in the process of living out our consecration. Our lives, in other words, have a narrative unity that unfolds over time, and not always "radical clarity" at the beginning. And this is quite normal: it is an aspect of being human. All of us grow in interaction with persons, communities, contexts, traditions, happenings and circumstances.

9. Given that the two forms of our vocation are essentially related to each other, they can be studied only together, in the context of community, and not separately. This means that both Brothers and Priests must know and love both the forms of our vocation. Lack of such love and appreciation would be a vocational counter-indication, in fact.

10. As far as signs of a Brother vocation or a Priest vocation are concerned, we have some hints especially in FSDB chapters 2 and 10, and CN 84-87. From the several things said in these texts, we could highlight perhaps *Christian initiation* as characterizing the vocation to the Salesian priesthood, and *evangelization in and of secular reality* as characteristic of the Brother vocation – through "an almost indefinite range of means which can be used for this purpose: explicit preaching, of course, art, the scientific approach, philosophical research and legitimate recourse to the sentiments of the human heart" (cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi* 51).

Discernment and setting the stage for it

11. The fundamental groundwork is done in the prenovitiate and even in the aspirantate, as the *Ratio* indicates: "The presentation of the two vocations to the Salesian life, already begun in the aspirantate, continues in the prenovitiate" (FSDB 2016, 345). The orientation and decision that will take place in the successive phases absolutely presuppose a meaningful previous space of familiarization with the two forms of our Salesian life. It is a process of discovery through appropriate input and readings, and even more through direct experience and interaction.

12. In the novitiate, which is the phase for discernment regarding the two forms of our vocation, all novices are helped in such discernment, and not only those who show signs of a Brother vocation. (FSDB 371)

13. The call of God is something intensely personal, a story of love that defies easy categorization. The individual and his choices remain in the realm of the ineffable, which is why the way is, precisely, that of discernment. Yet this discernment needs to be illuminated, and choices need to be “informed.” If candidates have never had living contact with both forms of our vocation, it is unlikely that they will be able to make a fair discernment between the two forms. Here is the whole discussion about visibility, credible models, witness, the *via pulchritudinis* or the way of beauty, the presence of the Salesian Brother in our formation communities....

14. A guided (as opposed to sporadic or episodic) reading of the life of Don Bosco – the early years, the founding of the Oratory, the foundation of the Congregation – is helpful in the reading of one’s own vocation story in the light of our charism. The lives of Salesian Brothers and Salesian Priests illuminate vocation choices.

15. The culture of the Province is a most significant factor in the illumination of choices and vocation discernment regarding the two forms.

16. Another important area for the emergence of signs of the Brother or the Priest vocation is that of pastoral experiences, especially practical training. Periods of pastoral experience in regular communities have been found to be very useful in the phase of the prenovitiate. Obviously, experience or activity in itself is not formative. Learning by experience calls for presence and adequate accompaniment on the part of formators and directors. The charismatic importance of the role of a director of practical trainees cannot be emphasized enough. One very concrete line of action would be to implement the “overall evaluation” of the practical training mentioned in FSDB 2006, 439. Among the tools available is “Clinical Pastoral Evaluation” for the evaluation of pastoral experiences.

17. The congregation sees pastoral experiences as taking place in the educative and pastoral community (EPC), and such insertion also facilitates discernment regarding the two forms of our vocation. The way a formee interacts with lay mission partners comes to light, and the involvement of these mission partners in discernment could itself be made systematic. The EPC is also the place where several forms of the Salesian vocation find expression.

18. The concern for specificity should permeate the whole process of formation: “The perspective of ‘specific form’ and therefore, the characteristic features that derive from it, need to be presented throughout the whole discernment process and not only at its beginning or during the period of specific formation.” (CN 7)

19. Given that the discernment regarding the two forms can continue even after first profession, we ensure the continuity of the formation journey in various ways: strengthening the role of the Provincial Formation Delegate, as a reference person who fosters continuity in formation and sense of belonging, especially where young confreres move to other Provinces for some stages of initial formation; having a single Curatorium for the prenovitiate, novitiate and postnovitiate where possible; etc.

20. The place of Mary in the vocation journey is not forgotten. As representing the basic vocation of all Christians to personally correspond to God saving love, she precedes the Petrine dimension in the Church, which is at the service of that fundamental basic vocation of every baptized person, indeed of every child – what we all are, before any other difference. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 773) She is mother and teacher, woman of faith and hope; she teaches us to love as she taught Don Bosco, as indeed she taught Jesus himself.

Suggested lines of action

1. Formation of formators, spiritual guides and teachers for the postnovitiate and specific formation phases, with a special emphasis on the formation of Salesian Brothers in this area.

2. Supervision of formators and teams, e.g. by making more systematic the work of the provincial formation delegates.
3. Studying, in the regional and provincial formation commissions, how to give greater visibility to Salesian apostolic consecration and the two forms in formation plans at different levels, provincial, local and personal, one idea being to integrate the structure of our *Constitutions*, while not neglecting the “human and intellectual” dimensions of the by now classic four dimensions of formation taken from *Pastores dabo vobis*.
4. In order to ensure that the postnovitiate is truly a continuation of the formation begun in the novitiate (C 114), we balance our usually well-prepared academic plans with well-prepared local formation plans.
5. We ensure proper accompaniment of weekend pastoral experiences, and especially of the practical training period, by training pastoral coordinators and directors of practical trainees in this area.
6. We ensure that formators are familiar with the Salesian documents pertaining to the two forms of our vocation.
7. We share best practices online (please contact Francisco Santos Montero, fsantos@sdb.org, for uploading material to <https://formazionesdb.org/>).

As far as the Formation Department is concerned, these are some of the **steps** we intend to take:

1. A further study regarding discernment of the two forms of our vocation.
2. A multimedia instrument on discernment of the two forms, intended for novice directors, prenovice directors and vocation animators, as a tool for a good presentation of the two forms.
3. Handouts on discernment of the two forms for provincials and provincial formation delegates.
4. Working out ways of urging provincials to prepare formators, most especially Salesian Brother formators; we could think also of “Salesian Brother missionary formators.”
5. Some material from the seminar will be made available at <https://formazionesdb.org/>.
6. Fruits of the seminar will be disseminated during the forthcoming Regional Formation Commission meetings, for further dissemination through the work of Provincial Formation Commissions.

May our saintly confreres intercede for us – Stefan Sandor and Titus Zeman, Artemide Zatti and Giuseppe Quadrio, and the many lesser known but no less holy confreres led by Sima’an Srugi.

A happy feast of the Visitation to you – this wonderful feast where a simple sisterly visit of one woman to another becomes the icon of the Visit of God to his people. “Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel / He has visited his people and redeemed them.” May the simple things of our lives shine in like manner with the light of the rising Sun that comes to visit us from on high.

Affectionately,



Ivo Coelho, SDB