



SOCIETA' DI SAN FRANCESCO DI SALES
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The Rector Major

Rome, 24 July 2017

LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR TO THE SALESIANS OF DON BOSCO

The Preparatory Document of the Synod of Bishops 2018
on “Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment”,
the compass for our journey.

Dear Confreres,

I am writing this Letter to you with the desire to exhort you to be aware that we are living at this time a *kairós*, a propitious time for our service and our communion with the Church.

In fact on 16 October 2016, Pope Francis announced that in October 2018 the **XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the subject: “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment”** will be held. It is the first time in the history of the Church that such an important and representative Assembly is dedicated in a direct and explicit way to the study of this subject. The Synod on New Evangelization (2012) and the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) have dealt with the issue of how to carry out the mission of proclaiming the joy of the Gospel in the world of today. To the accompaniment of families in their encounter with this joy, on the other hand, were dedicated the two Synods (2014, 2015) and the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (2016). Continuing along the same path, the Holy Father has decided that the Church should examine herself on how to accompany young people in recognizing and welcoming the call to love and to love to the full. He has also asked young people themselves to help the Church to identify the most effective ways to proclaim the Good News nowadays. On 13 January 2017, therefore, the Secretariate of the Synod of Bishops offered for the attention of the whole Church a *Preparatory Document* (PD), to launch “the phase of the consultation of all the People of God”.

As Salesians of Don Bosco we are called to offer to the Church the gift of our charism, together with our reflections and pastoral experiences with and for the young. For this reason, today I am asking you to join in the efforts of the whole Church in the study of this Document and in responding to the attached *Questionnaire*, allowing yourselves first of all to be challenged by this question: following the convocation of this Synod and the publication of this *Preparatory Document*, how do we feel challenged in our charismatic experience? I ask you also to share your reflections with the local Church in the knowledge that they are given not only to the young people and the educators in our Salesians centres, but above all shared and discussed with them and with many other young people and educators engaged in the youth ministry of local Churches.

With a view to our being involved in this we have asked all the Provinces to reply to the *Questionnaire* and to send their replies to the Youth Ministry Department.

1. The first essential step to take must be that of reading the *story of the young people* who have been entrusted to us. This step implies being familiar with the challenges and the opportunities of the area in which we are called to bear witness to the love of God for the young, especially the poorest ones. The whole of the first part of the *Preparatory Document*, in fact, is based on the importance of a reading of the contemporary situation of the young. In the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium* we are called to “go out” and to “listen”, so that we may then share the Good News. Knowing the real situation of the young people we meet is not a luxury we may allow ourselves but an obligation we cannot neglect. Not to do so would be a betrayal, turning our back on the cry of the young - often hidden but profound. The temptation of “we have always done it this way” together with the attitude “we already know the answer,” even if the question has changed, are the very real dangers that we have to recognize and overcome.

2. The second part of the *Preparatory Document* concentrates on the concepts of ***faith, discernment and vocation***. These are closely linked: faith is the source of vocational discernment, “It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God’s faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” (LF, 53). As Salesians we are called to recognise in this field some challenges and to confirm certain choices: our educative and pastoral proposal ought to offer to young people programmes that will bring them to live an integral human experience. This proposal therefore ought to help the young people to live life as a gift to be welcomed and shared, and for which to be grateful. Finally, as educators and pastors, we are called to accompany the young in discerning their own vocation, and therefore in the construction of their own plan of life, in the knowledge that “every vocation is directed towards a mission” (PD II, 3).

The topics of discernment and of accompaniment require a serious and well-organized human, spiritual, and charismatic preparation for all those, consecrated and lay, involved in the Educative - Pastoral Community. I invite you to reject two pastoral temptations.

The *first temptation* that we encounter here is that of stopping and realizing the shortage of time and of the necessary resources for a strong commitment to the accompaniment of the young. To this temptation we respond by offering ourselves in the first place to become true and authentic witnesses in allowing ourselves to be accompanied: “guided guides”, who themselves have personal experience of spiritual accompaniment and only then are in a position to offer it to others, setting in motion suitable procedures of training in accompaniment for the lay people co-responsible in the Salesian mission.

The *second temptation* is that of being satisfied with a reductionist view of accompaniment, which seems to emphasise the individual role of the one who accompanies in this process. To this other temptation we respond offering to those young people in places where we find ourselves a progressive accompaniment on several levels: an accompaniment by the Salesian centre which welcomes the young and hands on to them a “family spirit”; an accompaniment by the educative-pastoral community which in its turn needs to be guided in co-responsibility in the Salesian mission and in the community discernment that precedes educative and pastoral planning; and a group accompaniment of the group to which the young person belongs, in a gradual process of learning and apostolate; finally, the personal accompaniment of the young person which is decisive for their vocational discernment.

The *Preparatory Document* tells us that the last kind of discernment is not a one-off but rather a “process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord, and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one’s state of life” (PD II, 2). In every young person educated in the faith the question arises: “How does a person live the Good News of the Gospel and respond to the call which the Lord addresses to all those he encounters, whether through marriage, the ordained ministry, or the consecrated life?” (PD II, 2). Mindful of the universal call to holiness (LG 40), we are called to accompany each young person, none excluded, in responding to this fundamental question, that is to say to the threshold of adult life, gradually but fearlessly proposing, as Don Bosco did, the goal of a high level of human and Christian life.

. The third part of the *Preparatory Document* brings together some suggestions regarding **pastoral action**, identifying those involved, the places and the resources. We are invited to “accompany the young”, with the three attitudes/ of “going out”, “seeing” and “calling”, which describe the way Jesus encountered the people of his time. This sounds familiar to us sons of Don Bosco, and represents a further appeal to listen to the young and to be totally available to them in their needs, aware that the relationship of spiritual paternity is an extension of educational paternity. From the encounter with the young, well represented by the practice of assistance, there can develop accompaniment in area of vocational discernment and the subsequent construction of the young person’s plan of life.

When the *Preparatory Document* invites us to consider as those to whom youth ministry is addressed “all young people, none excluded”, there echoes in us a conviction that we have, as did Don Bosco, for whom “*In every boy even the most wretched there is soft spot.*”. *In view of the high-quality pastoral service offered to young people with different needs therefore, there ought to be promoted* a clear and participative experience of all the subjects of the community that educates and evangelizes: the Educative - Pastoral Community. On the part of the local Salesian Community and of the Salesian Province leadership this requires a commitment, that is ever more serious, professional and well-planned, to the formation of the lay co-workers, also as regards the accompaniment of the young.

The co-responsible co-involvement of the various subjects of pastoral action needs to be accompanied by their understanding of pastoral work as not being limited to a generic pastoral proposal, but as including procedures of community discernment based on a shared understanding of a Educative-Pastoral Plan. Then in the course of pastoral planning it is appropriate that the processes followed aim as far as possible at seeing the young people as capable of developing a sense of personal responsibility in the course of their human growth and development in the faith, in which the idea of a progressive journey finds its place. In addition, I urge you to make an effort to provide lessons and experiences of prayer within the educative and evangelizing process, where the young people can have a taste of the value of silence and contemplation: “no discernment is possible without cultivating a familiarity with the Lord and a dialogue with his Word” (PD III, 4).

In the context of this letter, finally, I offer you **three questions**, that may guide your reflections on the challenges and the opportunities regarding the faith and the vocational discernment of the young nowadays. I am offering these three questions as material for reflection at the various Provincial Councils, at Rectors’ meetings, at meetings of Salesians in the quinquennium, and of those in practical training. I also ask you to consider the possibility of sharing these three questions with the different groups of the *Salesian Family*:

1. What are the proposals that at the level of the local Church we are making so that *Evangelii Gaudium* remains the compass for our pastoral journey?
2. What are the pastoral choices that we have in mind and/or could be proposing so that everyone - young and adults, parents and teachers, catechists and leaders, can feel part of a community that is educating to the faith, a community that is evangelizing?
3. What are the difficulties that can weaken the continuity and the consistency of the pastoral processes? What are the proposals to strengthen the continuity and consistency of the pastoral processes?

Following the invitation of the Holy Father (PD III, V), we entrust to Mary this process in which, together with the whole Church, we examine ourselves on how to accompany young people to accept the call to the joy of love and the fullness of life.

In Christ,

Ángel Fernández Artime
Xth Successor of Don Bosco