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**General Chapter 28**

**Letter from Rome 1884: *The Gospel of Don Bosco***

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***A sort of introduction***

I thought of taking as the theme of this Ash Wednesday's retreat the letter from Rome of 10 May 1884. It seems to me, also from the letter of the Rector Major convening the General Chapter XXVIII, enlightening and stimulating, because at the level of the Congregation we want to bring out the desire to give a charismatic response to the young people of today, especially the poorest and most excluded. For this reason, there is a need for Salesians who are prepared and ready to work with Don Bosco's mind, heart and hands in the Church and in society, and who accompany young people in the world of work, in the digital world, in the defence of creation, etc.<sup>1</sup>. All this becomes a reminder of our origins. The letter of Rome is the "gospel of Don Bosco", it breathes the air of the beginnings, which continue to be 'normative' and not simply 'anecdotal', and invites us to conversion: spiritual (to God), pastoral (to the young), structural (making our presences more evangelizing so as to bring the young to Christ and the Church).

The danger of today, as yesterday, for which Don Bosco wrote that famous letter, is the loss of the physical presence of the Salesians among the children, of the almost connatural capacity to understand their culture, and the transparent, familiar, good love that reveals God and conquers them to God. It is a spiritual testament of his, so vibrant and heartfelt are the tones. And he does so in order to recommend precisely the presence among the young (rediscovering Salesian assistance), the familiarity of the past (accompaniment), that which must absolutely be recovered, that which is cultivated especially in recreation, in free time, in open structures, being among the young, sharing their lives and taking their dreams seriously, day after day (a rejuvenated youth and vocational ministry). These elements are all widely developed both in the Final Document of the Synod on Youth and in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Letter *Christus vivit*.<sup>2</sup> All this requires a Salesian in a state of ongoing formation, in a mission shared with the laity.

Well, as Don Caviglia notes, "the letter of 10.V.1884, does not deal only with the life of the Salesians in recreation. There was corruption in the young, unrest in the confreres, everything depended on the life of the playground. This life, as it is in the festive Oratories, where it constitutes the external essence of the work, is the one that gave the hearts of the young to Don Bosco. Everything was born from the life of the playground, that is, where the young person is released from the restrictions of regulations. So, Don Bosco and the authentic Salesians must be seen not in the corners, with the air of a school counsellor, but with the young people in the middle of the playground. This is the great secret, because the boy will forget everything: the school, the explanations, but he will not forget what he said and did in the playground, the goodness, the brotherhood, that heart to heart. There are many professors in the world, but there are few superiors who stay among the young in this world and the young do not forget them anymore.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Fernández Artime, *What Kind of Salesians for the Youth of Today?*, Letter convoking the 28<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, AGC427, Turin, 24 May 2018

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rossano Sala, *Fuori, dentro, dietro il Sinodo*. Interview PNG Sett-Ott. 2019 (Originale: *Misión Joven* 510-511 2019 5-16).

Don Bosco wants us to live with young people and he cannot conceive of Salesians who, while young people are free, stay elsewhere. All the staff, starting with the rector, must be among the youth; he says so in a note on the preventive system: "Let the rector stay among his young people...".

Hence the value of the "playground" understood as a category that includes all the activities that place the young person in an atmosphere of spontaneity, favouring their protagonism and free expression: because it is there that he manifests himself for what he is, thus opening the door of interiority, available then to welcome the stimuli that are offered to him; always on condition that there is the educator who, protagonist with him and spontaneous like him, opens his own interiority letting the vital goods that make him an adult, a believer and educator, flow. It is at this point that educational communication is triggered, from the educator to the young person and from the young person to the educator, realizing that prodigy which is, in both, an enrichment of humanity.

The playground of yesterday and today: that is where the Salesian pedagogy stands or falls and with it the mission; from there emerges one of the greatest challenges for educating today: in the family, in the school and in every other institution of formal, non-formal and informal education.

## **Letter from Rome 1884** ***The Gospel of Don Bosco***

I summarize from the introduction of Fr. Braido to this famous letter from Don Bosco: "In various documents the text of the letter in the wider drafting is preceded by a chronicle note by G. B. Lemoyne... It is worthwhile reproducing the important information in its entirety:

"Don Bosco, on those nights when he was unwell, had one of those milestone dreams. In several times he told it to don Lemoyne and then had him write it down and read it, correcting it... Since it concerned especially the members of the Congregation, a new work was necessary so that it could be read in public in the presence of all the young people of the Oratory. This letter was sent on May 10. Read in public by don Rua, it made a great impression. This was in the Oratory as a sign of reform. The first effect of this dream was that don Bosco knew the state of many consciences even of some who seemed very good, so that some were dismissed from the house".

P. Braido, at the end of a long critical exposition, writes that the "long form" of the letter was transmitted in two versions: the one endorsed by don Ceria in his Biographical Memoirs, and the one, less familiar but closer to the original manuscripts of Don Lemoyne, accepted in the Acts of the Superior Chapter of 1920 (see SPS p. 274-284).

The latter is *quoted in the Constitutions and Regulations of the Society of St. Francis de Sales p. 245-254* (Editrice S.D.B., April 2015), and this gives it a paradigmatic value. This is the text I am reproducing.

Rome, 10 May 1884.

**My dear sons in Jesus Christ,**

Whether I am at home or away I am always thinking of you. I have only one wish, to see you happy both in this world and in the next. It was this idea, this wish of mine, that made me write this letter. Being away from you, and not being able to see or hear you, upsets me more than you can

imagine... And so, although I shall be back very soon, I want to send you this letter in advance, since I cannot yet be with you in person. These words come from someone who loves you very dearly in Christ Jesus, someone who has the duty of speaking to you with the freedom of a father. You'll let me do that, won't you? And you will pay attention to what I am going to say to you, and put it into practice.

"I have said that you are always and exclusively in my thoughts. Well, a couple of evenings ago I had gone to my room, and while I was preparing for bed I began to say the prayers my good mother taught me, and whether I simply fell asleep or became distracted I don't know, but it seemed that two of the former pupils of the Oratory in its early days were standing there before me. One of them came up to me, greeted me warmly, and said: "Do you recognize me, Don Bosco?"

"Of course I do," I answered.

"And do you still remember me?" the man went on.

"I remember you and all the others. You're Valfré, and you were at the Oratory before 1870."

"Tell me," went on Valfré, "would you like to see the youngsters who were at the Oratory in my time?"

"Yes, let me see them," I answered. "I would like that very much." Valfré then showed me the boys just as they had been at that time, with the same age, build and looks. I seemed to be in the old Oratory at recreation time. It was a scene full of life, full of movement, full of fun. Some were running, some were jumping, some were skipping. In one place they were playing leap-frog, in another a game of tag, and in another a ball-game was in progress. In one corner a group of youngsters were gathered round a priest, hanging on his every word as he told them a story. In another a cleric was laying with a number of lads at "chase the donkey" and "trades". There was singing and laughing on all sides, there were priests and clerics everywhere and the boys were yelling and shouting all round them. You could see that the greatest cordiality and confidence reigned between youngsters and superiors. I was overjoyed at the sight, and Valfré said to me: "You see, closeness leads to love and love brings confidence. It is this that opens hearts and the young people express everything without fear to the teachers, to the assistants and to the superiors. They become frank both in the confessional and out of it, and they will do everything they are asked by one whom they know loves them."

At that moment the other past pupil, who had a white beard, came up to me and said: "Don Bosco, would you like to see and know the boys who are at the Oratory at the present time?" This man was Joseph Buzzetti.

"Yes," I replied, "it is a month since I last saw them." And he showed them to me.

I saw the Oratory and all of you in recreation. But no more could I hear the joyful shouts and singing, no longer was there the lively activity of the previous scene. In the faces and actions of many boys there was evident a weary boredom, a surliness, a suspicion, that pained my heart. I saw many, it is true, who ran about and played in light-hearted joy. But I saw quite a number of others on their own, leaning against the pillars, a prey to depressing thoughts. Others were on the steps or in the corridors, or up on the terraces near the garden so as to be away from the common recreation. Others were strolling about in groups, talking to each other in low tones and casting furtive and suspicious glances in every direction. Sometimes they would laugh, but with looks and smirks that would make you not only suspect but feel quite certain that St Aloysius would have blushed to find himself in their company...

"Do you see your boys?" asked my former pupil.

"I can see them," I replied with a sigh.

"How different they are from what we used to be," went on the past pupil.

"Too true! What an apathetic recreation!"

"This is what gives rise to the coldness of so many in approaching the sacraments, to neglect of the prayers in church and elsewhere; to their reluctance to be in a place where Divine Providence heaps every possible blessing on their bodies, their souls and their minds. This is why so many do not

follow their vocation, why they are ungrateful to their superiors, why they are secretive and grumble, with all the other regrettable consequences."

"I see, I understand," I said. "But how can we bring these youngsters to life again, so that we can get back to the liveliness, the happiness, the warmth of the old days?"

"With charity!"

"With love? But don't my boys get enough love? You know how I love them. You know how much I have suffered and put up with for them these forty years, and how much I endure and suffer even now. How many hardships, how many humiliations, how much opposition, how many persecutions to give them bread, a home, teachers, and especially to provide for the salvation of their souls. I have done everything I possibly could for them; they are the object of all my affections."

"I'm not referring to you."

"Then to whom are you referring? To those who take my place? To the rectors, the prefects, the teachers, the assistants? Don't you see that they are martyrs to study and work, and how they burn out their young lives for those Divine Providence has entrusted to them?"

"I can see all that and I am well aware of it, but it is not enough; the best thing is missing."

"That the youngsters should not only be loved, but that they themselves should know that they are loved."

"But have they not got eyes in their heads? ... Don't they see how much is done for them, and all of it out of love?"

"No, I repeat: it is not enough."

"Well, what else is needed?"

"By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial, and so learn to do these things too with love."

"I'm afraid you'll have to explain that more clearly."

"Look at the youngsters in recreation."

I looked, and then asked: "Well what is special about it?"

"You've been educating young people for so many years and you don't understand! Look harder! Where are our Salesians?"

I looked, and I saw that very few priests and clerics mixed with the boys, and fewer still were joining in their games. The superiors were no longer the heart and soul of the recreation. Most of them were walking up and down, chatting among themselves without taking any notice of what the pupils were doing. Others looked on at the recreation but paid little heed to the boys. Others supervised from afar, not noticing whether anyone was doing something wrong. Some did take notice but only rarely, and then in a threatening manner. Here and there a Salesian did try to mix with a group of boys, but I saw that the latter were bent on keeping their distance from teachers and superiors.

Then my friend continued: "In the old days at the Oratory, were you not always among the boys, especially during recreation? Do you remember those wonderful years? They were a foretaste of heaven, a period of which we have fond memories, because then love was the rule and we had no secrets from you."

"Yes, indeed! Everything was a joy for me then, and the boys used to rush to get near me and talk to me; they were anxious to hear my advice and put it into practice. But don't you see that now with these never-ending interviews, business matters, and my poor health I cannot do it any more."

"Well and good; but if you cannot do it, why don't your Salesians follow the example you gave? Why don't you insist, why don't you demand, that they treat the boys as you used to do?"

"I do, but unfortunately not everyone nowadays feels like working as hard as we used to."

"And so by neglecting the lesser part they waste the greater, meaning all the work they put in. Let them like what pleases the youngsters and the youngsters will come to like what pleases the superiors. In this way their work will be made easy... But now the superiors are thought of precisely as superiors and no longer as fathers, brothers and friends; they are feared and little loved.

And so if you want everyone to be of one heart and soul again for the love of Jesus you must break down this fatal barrier of mistrust, and replace it with a happy spirit of confidence...

"How then are we to set about breaking down this barrier?"

"By a friendly informal relationship with the boys, especially in recreation. You cannot have love without this familiarity, and where this is not evident there can be no confidence. If you want to be loved, you must make it clear that you love. Jesus Christ made himself little with the little ones and bore our weaknesses. He is our master in the matter of the friendly approach. The teacher who is seen only in the classroom is a teacher and nothing more; but if he joins in the pupils' recreation he becomes their brother. If someone is only seen preaching from the pulpit it will be said that he is doing no more and no less than his duty, whereas if he says a good word in recreation it is heard as the word of one who loves... One who knows he is loved loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young. This confidence creates an electric current between youngsters and their superiors. Hearts are opened, needs and weaknesses made known. This love enables superiors to put up with the weariness, the annoyance, the ingratitude, the troubles that youngsters cause. Jesus Christ did not crush the bruised reed nor quench the smoldering flax. He is your model. Then you will no longer see anyone working for his own glory; you will no longer see anyone punishing out of wounded self-love; you will not see anyone neglecting the work of supervision through jealousy of another's popularity; you won't hear people running others down so as to be looked up to by the boys: those who exclude all other superiors and earn for themselves nothing but contempt and hypocritical flattery; people who let their hearts be stolen by one individual and neglect all the other boys to cultivate that particular one. No one will neglect his strict duty of supervision for the sake of his own ease and comfort; no one will fail through human respect to reprimand those who need reprimanding. If we have this true love, we shall not seek anything other than the glory of God and the good of souls. When this love languishes, things no longer go well. Why do people want to replace love with cold rules? Why do the superiors move away from the observance of the rules Don Bosco has given them? Why the replacement little by little of loving and watchful prevention by a system which consists in framing laws? Such laws either have to be sustained through punishment and so create hatred and cause unhappiness or, if they are not enforced, cause the superiors to be despised and bring about serious disorders.

This is sure to happen if there is no friendly relationship. So if you want the Oratory to return to the happiness of old, then bring back the old system: let the superior be all things to all, always ready to listen to any boy's complaints or doubts, always alert to keep a paternal eye on their conduct, all heart to seek the spiritual and temporal good of those Divine Providence has entrusted to him. Then hearts will no longer be closed and deadly subterfuge will no longer hold sway. The superiors should be unbending only in the case of immoral conduct. It is better to run the risk of expelling someone who is innocent than to keep someone who causes others to sin. Assistants should make it a strict duty in conscience to refer to the superiors whatever they know to be an offence against God."

### **- *Some conditions for re-reading the letter***

Before recovering the most significant elements, it is important to see what are the *conditions*<sup>3</sup> for rereading the letter today:

First of all, it is obvious that ours cannot be a servile repetition of what Don Bosco did. We must have the courage to do, in the *changed historical conditions of today*, what Don Bosco did in his time. He made education in the service of 'poor, abandoned or young people at risk' a *choice of*. And today, never as before, we are called to do it or renew it, because it is urgent to make a *global*

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Carlo Nanni, *Il Sistema Preventivo di don Bosco*, LDC 2003

*compact on education*<sup>4</sup> if we really want to do good to young people and transform the prevailing culture and therefore the social reality.

A second condition is an *educational re-reading* of the current context and condition of young people. Our world knows, and often endures, phenomena that Don Bosco could not even have imagined: the irruption into the life of all the mass media, computers, mobile phones; the swirling acceleration of change and innovation at all levels of private and public existence, pluralism; the crisis of the systems of meaning and of the agencies of social consensus; the crisis of traditional ethical values and certainties; the growing complexity of individual and social existence; the trend of cultural homogenization to which the international market and consumer needs lead; the depersonalization and extreme subjectivization of individual and social behaviour models; the crushing of thoughts and perspectives on the present with the consequent difficulty for a good memory of the past and for future projects with a long range; the secularization of family and social life; and so on. And many other positive elements that characterize young people today. (Cf. third chapter of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Christus vivit*)<sup>5</sup>.

This requires us to *perceive the novelties of the historical moment in which we are living*, the new problems, the new commitments, the new responsibilities that appeal to the conscience of citizens and to the faith of believers. More specifically, it will mean grasping the historical needs, exigencies, aspirations and disappointed expectations that demand to be fulfilled and not to be further mortified; both in general and in particular in the condition of youth. These have value as indications for "being more", for "a bit more of life", for "a bit more of humanity", for "a better quality of life" of each and every one: a good and full life. (Cf. chapter five of the Exhortation on what changes youth when it is enlightened by the Gospel).

At our Salesian level, it requires the *courage to be involved, to live among young people*, that is, without using fragile and false defences dictated by the fear of losing face and dignity; to renew certain educational traditions of dialogue and listening to the voices of the world of youth, as it is today, for better or for worse, with its own characteristics; to keep to the wavelength of the aspirations and problems that young people today express and propose, to study them with seriousness and passion, and to seek with them ways of translating ideas into operational terms. (Cf. the seventh chapter of the Exhortation dedicated to "youth ministry").

*To welcome people for what they are*, "in the state in which they are" and for what each of them can be, getting used to articulate and calibrate proposals and interventions tailored to boy and girl, and to particular situations. It is a question of seeking that rare balance between radical proposals of meaning and respect for the personal and collective dynamics that everyone needs to reach them.

*To start to the future, to the other, to the beyond, to the more*. It is necessary to know how to go beyond the surface of reality and reach those deep levels of life where needs arise, aspirations blossom and dreams bloom; where the limits of the present are forced and one ventures into the unpredictability of the future. It involves overcoming passivity and fatalism, seeking the common good, going beyond sayings such as "so does everyone" or "it has always been like this" or "we have the truth". (Cf. last two chapters of the Exhortation concerning 'vocation' [8] and 'discernment' [9]).

Let us now come to the *most significant elements* of the letter:

### ***1. Knowing how to use the language of love***

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Message of Pope Francis for the *Launch of the Global Compact on Education*. Vatican, 12 September 2019

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Esortazione Apostolica Post-sinodale *Christus vivit*, Loreto, 25 marzo 2019.

*"But how can we bring these youngsters to life again, so that we can get back to the liveliness, the happiness, the warmth of the old days?"*

*"With charity!"*

*"With love? But don't my boys get enough love?"*

*"I can see all that and I am well aware of it, but it is not enough; the best thing is missing."*

*"What is missing then?"*

*"That the youngsters should not only be loved, but that they themselves should know that they are loved."*

So it is not enough to love, it is also necessary to know how to use the language of love, without which there is no valid educational communication. This is certainly the most transparent meaning of the letter, an enunciation of the great principle that we could call the *"visibility of love"*. Today we are in the culture of visibility: what does not appear does not exist; but it is a visibility that hides, if not right away cancels, the being of the person; it is a deadly visibility; there is also a vital and life-giving visibility, which is that of charity; not for nothing, since the texts of the New Testament, love has been associated with light, the irradiation of the Light itself that is God. It is therefore necessary to verify, to learn, to invent the languages of love, so that it may be manifested to the outside world and become a gift, an invitation, a proposal. Certainly, there must be the root in the heart, a pledge of truth and effectiveness. But it is not enough: languages are also a cultural fact, subject to the evolution of time. One does not learn once and for all! The language of love is always the object of "assiduous study" in the sense that Don Bosco gave to this word: *concern, commitment, passion*. And our culture is also characterized by a lack of attention to the languages of love, even worse, by a distortion of the natural languages of love, the sexual, affective, friendly ones; so that a deep distrust spreads among young people: love is impossible, love is a fairy tale, love is a rarity that belongs to a privileged few.

The Salesian must be a passionate lover of the languages of love; a lesson that he learns not only by listening to himself but also by listening to the others: their needs, their sensibilities, their possibilities of expression and their ability to receive. Today, this is - it seems to me - the *fundamental challenge of the educator*: to make it clear that he really loves, that he loves forever, that he loves everything about that human being who appears before him and who reveals and changes with the passing of time; to show that he also loves in the face of rejection, forgetfulness, distortion or profiteering; and thus convince to love, that is, to give birth to the inner conviction that one is worthy of love, and, even more, that one is capable of love (and it is the perception of one's own inalienable value, it is the foundation of one's own dignity, it is the root of every authentic hope); and to make one realize (but this is also grace) that there exists a Source, which for me and for you is always open and available, never exhaustible in its inexhaustible richness.

## ***2. Understanding young people***

*"No, I repeat: it is not enough."*

*"Well, what else is needed?"*

*"By being loved in the things they like, through taking part in their youthful interests, they are led to see love in those things which they find less attractive, such as discipline, study and self-denial, and so learn to do these things too with love."*

There is therefore *an element of rationality that must intervene*, that is, a need for knowledge that must take and guide the Salesian educator: and it is *knowing the young, understanding the situations, the questions, the needs to know how to deal with them*. A wide range of scientific and technical knowledge is required in order to interpret the series of values concretely available to and

assimilable by young people for a valid growth in the present and in the future. Too many educators insist on the negative, on the problematic, on the irrational, on the morally unacceptable; they so stand on the "no" to be firmly reiterated (often alternating with laxity) rather than on the "yes" to be proposed with intelligence (reason), intuition (love) and courage combined with prudence. Hence enmity, the distance of security, the failure to listen with a growing gap in the natural generational gap; the relationship becomes functional and institutional (when it still exists) or is openly or subtly rejected, with all that heritage of values that the Salesian has in himself and that he would like (as well as should) transmit, if you want and interpret as an educator.

*Understanding youth culture* is the basis of our commitment to ongoing formation that makes it possible to eliminate the inevitable distances between us and young people. It is that pedagogical competence which, matched with sympathy and assiduous attendance, allows us to live in harmony with young people, identifying the ways to penetrate their hearts and conquer life and joy. It seems to me that this is a rather lacking aspect in certain Salesian environments; it is enough to grasp the superficiality with which we comment on the conduct of young people: the desire for *intus legere*, to read within and beyond the data does not shine through; or it is enough to verify the difficulty that we find when we try to outline goals and to plan paths that fit as closely as possible to the concrete difficulties and possibilities not "of" young people, but of "those" young people. Because it remains true that if we do not know "*what pleases the young*", that is, what passes through their inner world as interest, attraction, desire, dream, it will be difficult for them to feel the value of the educational goals that we propose and that concern commitment, effort, dedication (all ingredients of true love!) precisely those that Don Bosco suggests when he speaks of study, discipline, mortification... "*and learn to do these things with love*".

### **3. To have happiness at heart**

*"Whether I am at home or away I am always thinking of you. I have only one wish, to see you happy both in this world and in the next. It was this idea, this wish of mine, that made me write this letter. These words come from someone who loves you very dearly in Christ Jesus, someone who has the duty of speaking to you with the freedom of a father. I seemed to be in the old Oratory at recreation time. It was a scene full of life, full of movement, full of fun".*

To truly love one must *never lose sight of the ultimate goal*, the most intimate vocation of each one, which is *the call to happiness symbolically represented by the ideal community dreamed of by Don Bosco*. And for Don Bosco happiness is a privileged way for evangelization ("*to see you happy in time and eternity*"). A recent study entitled "*God and happiness*" helps us to understand this: "In the instant full of a happy moment a superior reality shines suddenly and unexpectedly in the reality of life. A dimension endowed with an unconditional sense breaks into the conduct of man marked by many contingencies. In the moment of this happiness, man knows how to be safe in a good reality that looks at him with benevolence and experiences his life as a good and successful life. Only in this moment does he awaken properly to reality, a reality that has always surpassed what he imagined as happiness and that therefore puts his aspiration to happiness in a new light. It is an experience of transcendence that can be described as a manifestation of good. In this manifestation lies the answer to the question of the source on the basis of which man knows that infinite dimension of reality. Why does he feel touched by a transcendent sphere?"

In the vast panorama of religious experience, the lived experience of instant happiness is a possible moment in which transcendence is manifested to man. In the case of the experience of happiness, he joyfully feels being spoken to and questioned from somewhere, and perceives, feels, foreshadows something that goes beyond the dimension of the reality of his life. This irruption of transcendence does not necessarily present itself as a religious experience, but lends itself to a religious interpretation and, in particular, to a specifically Christian religious interpretation. The feeling of

being safe in reality for an instant is made to go back, in such a religious interpretation, to a personal foundation. The experience of transcendence is thus interpreted as an experience of God. When good manifests itself as it does in full moments, this manifestation is a form of encounter with God. God manifests Himself in the happiness of the moment to human consciousness, and this does not remain without consequences.

The experience of the full instant is a moment endowed with an existential depth; it opens up to man a knowledge that concerns his life and that deeply moves him. In this existential depth lies the connecting link, in which instant happiness becomes important for man's aspiration to happiness. In the fulfilment of a moment, man experiences that such fulfilment is of a different nature from what he had imagined. Of course, it can happen that the desires and plans that have become reality are inferior to previous expectations... He foretells that the success of his life is something more than the realization of his desires; he feels that his life is good without his help; he experiences in an existentially profound way that his happiness is greater than him, greater than his plans, his desires, his action, and this is precisely what transforms his desire".<sup>6</sup> If for Don Bosco happiness is a road that opens up to God, the Salesian must deal with this reality. He ceases to love who is not in search of his own and others' happiness. And this, today, is a serious problem, given the heavy misunderstanding that culture throws on happiness; given the eclipse of serenity, of the joy of living, of the simplicity that gives the taste for small things; given the spread of depressive syndromes, disorders of relationships, escapes from reality, neurotic compensations; given the obscuring of hope and anxiety about history that generates pessimism, defensive attitudes, refusal to live and enjoy. If he is not in love with happiness, how can the Salesian awaken this latent energy in every young person, educate them and direct them to the very source of happiness that is the God of joy?

#### **4. To be present**

*"Familiarity with young people, especially in recreation. Without familiarity love is not shown and without this demonstration there can be no confidence. Those who want to be loved must show that they love. Christ made himself small with the little ones and brought our infirmities. Here is the master of familiarity".*

Therefore, *attention to needs no less than to the purposes*, becomes *total presence*, emblematically represented by educators as the soul of recreation; we would say the soul of pedagogical coexistence. It is the obvious application of the principle of visibility, not rhetoric, of love. *It is not enough to "be for", it is necessary to "be with" the young*. The distance between us and the young is certainly cultural when it is geographical, that is, when we distance ourselves from them because we are no longer among them. There is the risk coming from the difficulty of understanding and following them in the discontinuity of their tastes and attitudes, from the need to guarantee managerial and organizational roles, age and ailments, from the huge amount of work, from many factors that gradually take away our desire and extinguish the commitment to be with them, in their midst. The basic concept of *Salesian assistance*, understood not so much as an exercise in surveillance but as a cordial and at the same time vigilant and caring sharing, is in crisis. It creates a bond of familiarity between the educator and the one being educated, allowing for the help and support that are always necessary for a healthy path of growth towards maturity (a function of support proper to any true education).

*But to be with young people means to be there not only and not so much physically, but cordially, risking oneself in the dialogical relationship*. And dialogue does not mean simply talking to another person to expose one's convictions; it does not even mean discussing to affirm and defend one's

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<sup>6</sup> JÖRG LAUSTER, *Dio e la Felicità* – La sorte della vita buona nel cristianesimo, Ed. Queriniana 2006, 184-186

positions. Dialogue is the discursive practice of thinking together to find an agreement on a certain issue. Dialogue is a relationship of sincere confrontation with the young people entrusted to us and the ethical principle that inspires it, is the ability to cooperate. The truth that teaches us is that before we entertain a dialogue with young people, we are called to cultivate a deep inner dialogue with ourselves. What we must fear most is not disagreement with the young, but disagreement with ourselves. Being with the other comes from that "*secum stare*", from that being with ourselves that makes it possible to assume the grammar of communication, that which Manzoni summarized in five verbs: *observing, listening, comparing, thinking, speaking*.<sup>7</sup> Observing oneself so as to be able to observe, listening to oneself so as to be able to listen, thinking so as to be able to think, speaking so as to be able to speak. These are the keys to being present not only in physical reality but also and above all in human reality. *It is not enough to be physically in the midst of young people if we do not qualify for the ability to contact with this reality of theirs*; this is perhaps the first and main asceticism of the educator. Only from a cultivated interiority come the ability and willingness to dialogue with young people, to distract them from that superficiality that withers them and invite them to that depth that constitutes them, precisely thanks to exchange, confrontation, dialogue.

### **5. Overcoming formalisms**

*"Everything was a joy for me then, and the boys used to rush to get near me and talk to me; they were anxious to hear my advice and put it into practice. One who knows he is loved loves in return, and one who loves can obtain anything, especially from the young. This confidence creates an electric current between youngsters and their superiors. Hearts are opened, needs and weaknesses made known. Why do people want to replace love with cold rules? Why the replacement little by little of loving and watchful prevention by a system which consists in framing laws? Let the superior be all things to all, always ready to listen to any boy's complaints or doubts, always alert to keep a paternal eye on their conduct, all heart to seek the spiritual and temporal good of those Divine Providence has entrusted to him".*

If once regulation and discipline, misunderstood and mismanaged, could create coldness and distance between educators and young people, today it is exactly the opposite. There is a familiarity that has nothing to do with what Don Bosco meant because it is neglect, letting go, youthfulness, decline in taste, lack of respect. But it is a form of indifference that comes from the same root: to facilitate things by saving on educational effort. In this way, a new and no less disastrous distance is created because the educational relationship is altered, depriving the young person of the function of a guide and of the necessary role of authority that he needs for his growth. If significant reference figures are missing, the process of identification and therefore of maturation is compromised. Nor are group relationships enough: to make a group only to scream, to exchange one's homework, to eat a pizza, deprives the children of experiences, comparisons, stories, disappointments, hopes. The potentialities that the boys keep inside are enormous, but they are buried under the confusion of feelings, instincts, rages, dreams. This enormous confusion is partly amplified by the weakness of the father figures.

Usually the new generations, in order to make room for themselves, would have to face their fathers through dialogue, discussion, or even struggle. This rebellion against fathers is therapeutic, liberating, and redeems children from childhood and meaningless self-harm. But we are witnessing

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<sup>7</sup> ALESSANDRO MANZONI, *I promessi sposi*, Cap. XXXI "Si potrebbe però, tanto nelle cose piccole, come nelle grandi, evitare, in gran parte, quel corso così lungo e così storto, prendendo il metodo proposto da tanto tempo, d'*osservare, ascoltare, paragonare, pensare*, prima di *parlare*. Ma parlare, questa cosa così sola, è talmente più facile di tutte quell'altre insieme, che anche noi, dico noi uomini in generale, siamo un po' da compatire" ("*However, one could, both in small and large things, avoid, to a large extent, that course so long and so crooked, taking the method proposed for so long, to observe, listen, compare, think, before speaking. But speaking, this thing so alone, is so much easier than all those other things together, that we too, I say we men in general, are a bit to be pitied for...*").

a widespread crisis of true fatherhood, that is, of authority and authority that intervenes when necessary. In the eyes of many children, fathers are no longer a wall but a soft cushion. For these children, it is we Salesians who have to take on the role of fatherhood in its reassuring function, but also as an interdiction in order to attain vital goods and values that we believe to be humanizing for us and for them. If teenagers are torrents in flood, it is not by lowering the banks that we will help them to descend towards the ocean, but by raising and strengthening them. Let us think of the value of the rules, of the limit up to the forbidden; a tiring task because it involves, at times, conflict, rejection, retaliation; but it will be possible and healthy if that decisive passage is made that goes from "loving me" to "loving my good" to "being good for me too". And this is possible only if the personal relationship and the educational environment are highly positive, what Don Bosco called "family spirit".

## **6. Sharing the action**

*"One could see that among young people and superiors the greatest cordiality and confidence reigned. Familiarity brings love, and love brings confidence. This is what opens the hearts of young people... they lend themselves docile to everything that the one from whom they are certain to be loved wants to command... Love was what we needed as a rule and we had no secrets for you... In ancient times hearts were all open to superiors, whom young people loved and obeyed promptly".*

Love becomes, in the two directions, encounter, trust, active and cordial collaboration. If we do not arrive at this collaboration (indicated by Don Bosco as obedience), at this involvement of young people in educational responsibility, at this guided protagonism, fruit of openness and confidence, this can mean that the dynamism of love is jammed and the young distance themselves from it because of a lack of trust. One of the parameters for describing the current condition of youth is that of confusion or that of uncertainty; elements that form that precariousness that gives rise to discomfort. But the only way out of uncertainty and confusion is the decision of the individuals to be themselves, through the convinced assumption of their own freedom and therefore of their own responsibility: to count, to be recognized, to be able to express oneself; and therefore to be accountable to oneself, before others, of what one is, what one does, what one plans, what one dreams of.

The educational accompaniment knows how to grasp this expectation, always fragile and contradictory, to encourage the youth movements of conscientization and commitment, the initiatives of awareness and mobilization, the desire to be present and active in their environment. When, instead, the desire to be and to do goes into crisis, and gives way to a world of appearances, forgetfulness, obliviousness of oneself, when the new generations do not feel helped and stimulated to act responsibly, the fear of not being up to expectations tends to prevail, and so do the anxiety not to stand up to competition, the tendency to blend into the crowd, not to expose oneself, not to try. A general condition of apathy and demotivation is created that opens the way even to the most devastating drifts (if "I am not worth it" - because no one has given me the opportunity to measure myself against myself and reality - then I throw myself away). The Salesian favours the youths' protagonism precisely because he brings into play the essential values of identification and self-planning, while he favours a sociality that becomes paradigmatic by creating mentalities and generating lifestyles, for that *good citizen* who goes hand in hand with the *good Christian*.<sup>8</sup>

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Giannantonio Bonato, Lettera '84, conferenza per professori.

Don Bosco's letter-dream, written by Rome in May 1884, makes clear the dialectic between the presence of the charism and the work of educational or social services. In Valdocco there was certainly a flourishing work, known and esteemed by all in Turin, with hundreds of young people and dozens of Salesians, but in that time the presence of the charism in its fundamental elements languished. On the contrary, many years before, in the atrium of the cemetery of San Pietro in Vincoli or at the Mulini della Dora or on the meadows of Valdocco it was not yet a work, but there was certainly a "presence" of life, of charismatic energy. We think with emotion of the hidden and heroic Salesian *presences* of the confreres of the East Europe or of other parts of the world, when it was not possible to express oneself in *works*.

That is why it is urgent to make our *works* real *presences*. *Presence* refers to something else that *makes itself present*. And what is this *something else*? It is the apostolic mission to which God sends us and the specific charism of the Congregation with which we carry it out. To have continuity and stability over time, to have visibility and expression, it must be incarnated in a *work*, in concrete, visible, recognizable *works*.

If this is true, it is not taken for granted, however, that a religious work, by the very fact of existing, makes the charism present, nor that the vitality of the charism is measured by the permanence of the works. The works can continue to proceed with an inertial motion, progressively losing their proactive capacity and significance; they can shine with past glory like stars whose light is still visible, but who have long since exhausted their energy; they can have a great story to tell, but no longer have a word to say in today's social and ecclesial scenario. This is why, in view of being Salesians for the young people of today, we have an absolute need for personal, pastoral and structural conversion.

The elements that characterize our presence correspond to the three fundamental aspects of consecrated life:

1. First of all, ***the persons of individual consecrated people***, "the tone of their lives, the tone in which they believe and for which they play, their choices in the face of the alternatives presented by our culture, what they propose to be and what they manage to communicate"<sup>9</sup>. We are consecrated people and not social workers!
2. Secondly, ***the life of the community***: its style of relationships, its capacity to welcome, participate and be involved in the context, its closeness to the people, the manifestations of its choice of God that can be interpreted by the people. In fact, the community is a sign of fraternity, of ecclesial communion, of the presence of God in the human family"<sup>10</sup>.
3. Thirdly, ***the type of service*** that we intend to offer, the mentality with which we lend it, the place in a cultural and social context, the means".<sup>11</sup> Ours is not philanthropy but revelation that God is love.

All this is in accordance with *"the criteria of Salesian action"*, as presented in articles 40-44 of the Salesian Constitutions, and should therefore make us aware and convinced that activities and works have an instrumental value. They are not the end, to the maintenance of which we sacrifice men and resources. They, in their plurality of forms (oratories, schools, vocational training centres, universities, boarding schools, parishes, missionary residences, the media, etc.) are a means of responding to the concrete needs of young people, especially the poorest. No work has an absolute value in itself. All of them make sense to the extent that they aim at the salvation of young people,

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<sup>9</sup> J.E.VECCHI, *Ridisegnare le presenze: criteri, prospettive, ristrutturazione*, in USG, *Per una fedeltà creativa. Rifondare*, Atti 54° Conventus Semestralis, Roma, 1998, p.86.

<sup>10</sup> ID., *ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> ID., *ibidem*.

according to the witness of Don Rua on Don Bosco (Const. 21), indicating that the activities and works, in short, should be multiform and alive presences of Don Bosco and his apostolic passion, shared today by a vast movement of laity (cf. GC 24,39) and realized with new models of management (GC 26,100).

In short, going back to Don Bosco's original inspiration, the one he recalled in his letter of 10 May 1884, means for each Salesian to draw from the pure water of the spring. To make our own, once again, his priority choices and his apostolic passion makes us what we must be: Salesians of Don Bosco. It gives us a clear identity and a recognizable face in the Church and in society as a Congregation for young people, and it makes our mission valid and meaningful and our vocational proposal coherent and viable.

The Spiritual Testament of our Father is explicit in this regard: "The world will always welcome us as long as our concern is for the under-developed peoples, for poor children, for those members of society most in danger. This is our real wealth, which no one will envy and no one will take from us.

Attention to the least, the most deprived, marginalized and excluded, can become a great resource for each confrere to rediscover "*the love of the time of youth*" (cf. Jer 2:2). As for Don Bosco, young people can become the masters, the custodians, the regenerators of our hearts and return us to a mature and fruitful paternity.

But attention to the poorest can also significantly renew the face of a province, if it becomes "an institutional sensibility that little by little involves all the works" and not only "a special sector, identified with some special work or animated by some confrere or other particularly motivated"<sup>12</sup>.

The letter of convocation of the Rector Major with the theme: "*What kind of Salesians for the youth of today*", more concretely, wants to put us in tune with the project of the Church of Pope Francis, and therefore have the courage to make our own his dream of "missionary option, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself" (EG27).

The episode of Emmaus, rightly taken as a model of approach to young people and accompaniment to bring them to a personal encounter with Christ and make them rediscover the Church as Mother in the Final Document of the Synod on *Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment*,<sup>13</sup> is very timely precisely for this contemporaneity with our spiritual situation. In fact, today young people share few things with those disciples, but perhaps none as much as the frustration of their dreams, fatigue and disenchantment in discipleship; following Jesus, they often think, is not worth it: a dead person, an absent person, is not worth their life. Our mission is precisely to proclaim to them that Christ is alive, that Christ loves them, that Christ saves them!

All this requires personal conversion (to God), pastoral conversion (to the young) and structural conversion (making our presences more evangelizing so as to bring the young to Christ and to the

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<sup>12</sup> P. CHAVEZ VILLANUEVA, *Discorso alla chiusura del CG 26*, CG 26, pp. 142-143

<sup>13</sup> Documento Finale del Sinodo dei Vescovi sui Giovani, la Fede e il Discernimento Vocazionale, 20.10'18, 4

Church), but it is in perfect harmony with the spirit of Don Bosco, to whom the identity, vitality and fruitfulness of the charism was much more pressing than the survival of the works.

Paraphrasing a quotation from Joel 3:1, much loved by Pope Francis and taken from facts in the Final Document of the Synod,<sup>14</sup> we can conclude, paraphrasing it:

***"Only if we, the adults and the elderly, dream, will the young be able to prophesy!"***

To Mary Immaculate Help of Christians we entrust this important and significant challenge of making the Salesian charism present, attractive and fruitful today.

Turin, 26th February '20

***Don Pascual Chávez V., SDB***

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*Translation from Italian by Fr Franco Pirisi SDB*

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<sup>14</sup> Ivi, 1