



INHABITING THE LIFE AND CULTURE OF TODAY'S YOUNG PEOPLE

CHAPTER

I

*“He had compassion
on them ...
and he began to
teach them”*

(Mk 6: 34)



The Lord made clear to Don Bosco that he was to direct his mission first and foremost to the young, especially to those who are poorer. We are called to the same mission and are aware of its supreme importance: young people are at the age when they must make basic life-choices which affect the future of society and of the Church. With Don Bosco we reaffirm our preference for the young who are “poor, abandoned and in danger”, those who have greater need of love and evangelisation, and we work especially in areas of greatest poverty”

[C. 26]



Look, she said... Here is your field, here is where you are to work”

[Memoirs of the Oratory, Introduction]

The first chapter is of an inspirational nature. As well as giving youth ministry a positive slant on the youth situation, it opens it up to all the young people's expectations, even those that are hidden and unconscious. Only by inhabiting their world can we come to really appreciate its potential. We need to abandon any form of ministry that is turned in on itself, and open our gaze with hope, always keeping in mind young people who are weakest and most at risk. New cultural paradigms and the challenges thrown up by different contexts call for specific attention and challenge the very meaning of ministry and of being Church. In this chapter we would like to focus on the motivation that drove Don Bosco and the Congregation during and after his time in their commitment on behalf of young people.

1

Here is your field, here is where you are to work

At home with his family and in the Becchi where he lived John Bosco undoubtedly spoke the Piedmontese dialect used by ordinary country folk. And it is our belief that Mary, the woman of majestic aspect in the dream at the age of nine must have used this same dialect when she spoke in a dream to young John. In the dialect of the time, in the words Mary used to point John to his future field of action, *it is not altogether accurate to use the verb "work" ("here is where you are to work"). It is more likely that the word Mary used meant to plough: "here is the field you are to plough."*

We are sons of a ploughman, and this is confirmed for us by the fact that the Salesian charism has a power in itself which sustains Salesian youth ministry. **It is the virtue of hope.**

The ploughman does not look back, nor does he measure his work by immediate results. In Piedmont the ploughman had to contend with rough stony ground, the cold soil of autumn still frozen solid at the start of spring. The ploughman does not have the vision of the sower nor the joy of the reaper. He has only hope and the certainty of the future that he can visualise in bloom, even though at the time of ploughing he sees only hard work and the sweat of his brow.

These are the virtues of anyone who wants to be an evangeliser and educator of the young. We have no time to waste. We cannot stand on

the road and contemplate the past, looking over our shoulder. Neither can we expect to see the result of our labour straight away. We need to hope, look to the future and know how to nurture the certainty in our hearts that what we are doing will bear much fruit, the fruit of holiness, the fruit of *good Christians and upright citizens.*



"In those things that are for the benefit of young people in danger or which serve to win souls for God, I push ahead even to the point of recklessness"

(BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS 14, CHAPTER 28)

We Salesians look at young people the way the ploughman looks at the field he is working in, with the tenacity of the farmer and the temerity characteristic of our founder when he saw that **his projects were from God**. Our eyes and our minds are on the present as the place of hope because now is the time of the young people. It may not seem so but the ground we are working on is already rich in holiness. All it needs is to be properly cared for.

2

Love for young people and a desire for contact with them

For Don Bosco as a young priest from the country, his arrival in Turin in 1841 meant the discovery of a youthful world that was new to him and quite unexpected, very different from what he had been used to. On the one hand, there were many boys and young men who converged on the capital of the State of Savoy in search of work and a future. On the other hand, Don Bosco discovered a more dangerous aspect of society, harsher and more cruel than what he had known at the Becchi or even in the small town of Chieri.



“It is enough that you are young for me to love you very much”

[COMPANION OF YOUTH. INTRODUCTION 'TO YOUNG PEOPLE']

Don Bosco found himself catapulted into a new world where there was no shortage of problems – social, economic, political and religious. There was a growing anti-clericalism. People of the upper classes, and many also in the Church, felt that these young people were not and never would be capable of civilised living. Many of them were illiterate, ignorant, given to robbery and crime, and they did not practise their religion. There was only one solution — the juvenile prison known as the *Generala*.

Don Bosco **looked at this situation with a different perspective** under the spiritual and pastoral guidance of Fr Cafasso. He saw not just prisoners but possible future upright citizens, not just street boys but boys who could become good Christians. He saw the chimney sweeps and

other youthful workers as future saints, pillars of Church and society, now and in the future.

This is the great value of hope which is capable not only of loving (like charity), but of loving *what will be in the future*, not only of believing and knowing (like faith), but *knowing the future and believing in it*.

Don Bosco's way of seeing things is marked first of all by empathy and love. He was able to walk in the boys' shoes. During his years of formation he had learned to become the kind of priest who was close to young people, capable of empathy, of establishing immediate contact. He was able to feel with the young and ordinary people. The pastoral model that Don Bosco intuited, experienced and practised, under Mary's guidance, was that of a kindly priest – no fool, no hail-fellow-well-met, but one who makes you feel at ease right away, because you feel loved immediately for who and what you are.

Don Bosco's pastoral work, his decision to start with the young and his creative planning were not based on simple sociological research into the problems of society, nor on a psychological belief in the innate potential of the youthful stage of life, not even on the pure philanthropy of someone who is moved to action by unease at the situation of the people around him.

Don Bosco was moved by the heart of the Good Shepherd who sees a flock lost and astray, feels deep compassion and sets about preaching the Word to them, giving them something to eat to nourish both body and spirit for this world and for eternity. "As he went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (Mk 6:34).

The pastoral activity of the Congregation is, therefore, marked by a profound ability *to find ways of making contact, of getting close to the young and sharing life with them*. We go in search of the people to whom we are sent, and find them wherever they are, in the place where they are physically, in the things they are interested in (cf. C. 38). Like the Good Shepherd, the Salesian lets himself be moved by the confusion felt by those to whom we are sent and by their desires. He adapts himself to them, praying to the Holy Spirit for the gift of compassion, modelled on the meekness of the heart of Jesus (cf. GC20, no.100).

To do this, our pastoral activity must be done in a way that is professionally correct, making use of every help offered by the sciences and human wisdom. Above all, however, it must be guided by our **contemplating the youth situation through God's eyes**, a way of looking at things that Don Bosco had all through his life, starting from the dream at nine and lasting right to the end of his life. It demands prayer, entrusting our work to Mary, obedience to the Church, conforming our desires and sentiments to those of Christ: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).



"Let the superiors love what the young people like, and the young people will love what the superiors like"

[BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS 17, CHAPTER 3]

3

Discernment by educators and believers

Contemplation enables us to see things in all their depth. We are all familiar with Don Bosco's dreams where he describes his own work and the events of the Oratory as a struggle, sometimes even a bloody struggle, between good and evil, or better, between the devil and Jesus and Mary.

These scenes are not only studied from a pedagogical angle as a metaphor for the formation of the boys who were listening to Don Bosco in his Goodnights at Valdocco. They are also the understanding of one who contemplates life through God's eyes. The struggle between Jesus and the power of evil is ongoing – a struggle that has been won definitively (this is the basis of our optimism and hope) but is not yet finished.

Our pastoral activity is part of this ongoing struggle **for the freedom of young people from the very real slavery and the real evil which is sin.** Sin manifests itself in many ways – personal sin, the sin of the Church community, the sinful structures of society. Sin oppresses the

human person and obscures the horizon of salvation towards which they are already walking and which awaits them in Paradise.

It is in this struggle that our pastoral ministry takes place, addressing all its implications – spiritual, material, political, social, economic and legal – so that young people may attain to a life fully *worthy of God and the happiness intended for them*.

The Salesian takes on the task of listening to, observing and discerning the circumstances of sin in this world with a sense of responsibility (cf. C. 18) and with optimism and joy (cf. C. 17). He makes a daily effort, through personal and community action, to make use of all that can help to realise his mission – a happy life here and in eternity for all young people, even for those furthest away.

This is why, like the ministry of the Good Shepherd who gathers his sheep and leads them to rich pastures, **Salesian ministry is both evangelisation and education**. It aims to transform the entire life of the young person. It seeks to listen and to know in depth the situation in which we live, in order to transform it in accordance with God's design (see Chapter 3).

In this way, the Salesian mission in the mind of its Founder coincides with the whole person and the whole world. Don Bosco's *missionary zeal* cares for the whole person in all aspects, personal and social, and for all the young people of the world. It is here, right at the start of the Congregation, that the decision was born to reach out to young people in the situations and places where they are to be found, to share the Gospel with them.



4

Communion with others in love

We bring about in our works the Educative and Pastoral Community. In it and through it we Salesians are **signs and bearers of the love of God for young people** (cf. C. 2, 47).

This dual reference point sheds light on and gives meaning to our mission.

In the first place, our mission takes place in the context of Christ's own mission. He came that they might have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10), not any life, but his own life. He is the life and the truth that lights up the way to reach it (Jn 14:6).

The divine life which Christ incarnates and makes visible on earth, and bears witness to by his death on the cross, is the very life of God, the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a single movement of communion and love.

We are therefore, first of all firmly convinced that the ultimate purpose of our mission in the Church and the world is to **offer young people, especially the poorest of them, the very life of Christ**. This is a life of relationship, love, Trinitarian communion with the Father, who is the ultimate goal of our existence and the source of our happiness in time and in eternity.

Young people can find the true meaning of their lives only in full communion with God, the Trinity of love, in the form of the Son who became man. This means fulfilling in the concrete circumstances of their daily lives, the truth that God has in store for them – the fullness of life and happiness.



“Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission”

[CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI 32]

This personal fulfilment cannot be achieved alone. Right from the beginning it is rooted in the Trinitarian communion which characterises us as human beings, children of God. The human being is created in the image of the Son and is created for communion. Fostering this spirituality of communion is the educational principle in all the settings where the human being and the Christian are formed (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 43). This is why our mission is not primarily about organising works and projects but about giving life to **Educative and Pastoral Communities which reflect here on earth the Trinitarian community of heaven where we are called to dwell.**

We are certain that the love of God which we bring to the young develops in their lives through joy, mortification and the sacramental life which combat the sins of individualism, loneliness and self-sufficiency. We are called to communion in love with one another. We carry out our mission in community and we try constantly to give life to communities that live here on earth as God wants us to live in eternity.

5

Salesian Youth Ministry is the primary expression of the Salesian mission

The Salesian Mission, which sets the tenor of our whole life, specifies **the task we have in the Church and our place among other religious families** (cf. C. 3). It is expressed in practice in the projects and works, the educational environment, the places of formation and evangelising activities which all come under the title of 'Salesian Youth Ministry'.

Salesian Youth Ministry does not, however, exhaust the abundance of the mission of the Congregation. The mission is, in fact, a theological reality strictly linked to the very vocation of the Congregation and of each of its members. However, the mission can only be expressed through

specific activity. Youth Ministry is the primary and typical expression of the mission.

It is pastoral because it is, in the first place, a *multifaceted expression of an ecclesial community* in which, alongside our lay collaborators, the community of consecrated Salesians is present as the animating nucleus (cf. GC25). Together they make up the community of the Church in a particular place distinguished by the Salesian charism which, in turn, expresses its evangelising mission through the educative and pastoral works undertaken from time to time.

It is youthful because *young people, especially the poorest of them, are at the centre of all our activity*. We go in search of young people in the real situation of their lives, with their resources and difficulties. We try to discover the challenges presented by the cultural, social and religious contexts in which they live. We dialogue with them and, through a pedagogy of accompaniment, we invite them to undertake a journey that leads to a living community encounter with Jesus Christ (cf. GC20, no.360).

Finally, it is Salesian because it finds its principal point of reference in *the charism of Don Bosco, following the inspiration of the educative love of the Good Shepherd*. It finds expression in preventive education, based on love and trust, and always ready to dialogue. These qualities constitute the criterion of genuineness and the yardstick for planning and activity.

As the expression of ecclesial ministry in the style of Don Bosco, **Salesian Youth Ministry** sees evangelisation as its most urgent activity. Its most basic task is to invite all young people to live their lives as Jesus lived his, so as to get to know Jesus gradually, live their humanity to the full, and play a full and responsible part in building the kingdom of God in the world.

Salesian ministry is no different from that of the Church and is therefore an evangelising ministry. *It is characterised by a style of educative intervention and is a ministry carried out through the work of education.*



“We must have as our primary aim the care of youth, and any occupation that distracts us from this is not good”

[BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS 14, CHAPTER 11]

The people to whom we are sent first are the young people whom Don Bosco describes as the most delicate and most precious portion of all humanity and the delight of the Lord. The category “youth” inevitably suggests a stage in the age and growth of the individual, but it is not used here in a psychological or sociological sense. Youth is not to be understood only as a particular stage through which one passes with a view to becoming a “good Christian and upright citizen” in the future. It is to be taken in two ways:

- on the one hand it can be thought of only as part of an individual’s entire life, and cannot be understood except in relation to the age which precedes it and that which follows. It is part of a person’s growth to adulthood;
- on the other hand, we need to focus on what is unique to this stage, and which must be experienced in order to pass on to the next without missing out on something important.

The stages of an individual’s life do not follow one another in such a way that the new one simply means the end of the previous one. Youth represents a fundamental expression of human existence, a characteristic way human beings develop, part of their journey from birth to death. It is a way of feeling and a way of behaving in relation to the world.

In this way we discover that youth and the stage of adolescence that precedes it are **the most precious part of humanity** because they are the stage in life when people discover themselves, and recognise the emergence of freedom

as a task. It is the task of accepting the truth of who they are, marked by divine vocation and solidarity with others. It is the age for understanding and choosing their mission in life so that, after a trial period in which the individual visualises him or herself in various different possible future identities, he or she can take the first step in moving from a provisional choice to a definitive decision about life. This is the age when fortitude becomes the cardinal virtue *par excellence*. It is the stage of idealism when reality is challenged in the



“At the present time, youth is the most delicate and most precious part of human society, on which the hopes of the present and the future are founded”

(INTRODUCTION TO THE REGULATIONS OF THE ORATORY OF ST FRANCIS OF SALES)

“Remember, young people, that you are the Lord’s delight”

(BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS 3, CHAPTER 53)

name of the memory of their fathers and the strength of their choice for what is true and good. It is the time for courage in the mission, time to “cast their nets” on the promise of an authoritative word.

Salesian Youth Ministry engages in all this, not only on behalf of young people, but together with young people. Don Bosco was the first Saint to found **a Congregation not only for young people but with young people**. He valued, in a way previously unheard of, the unique part that young people could play and involved them actively in the adventure of their religious and human development. This is why Salesian ministry is essentially youthful, not only because we see young people as the beneficiaries of our ministry, but because they play an active part in it.

Their involvement is not blind. We overcome the generation gap and any tendency to paternalism in the ministry by engaging in a family style that involves honest and open dialogue and a shared educative responsibility. It values the responsible contribution of every member of the community, in proportion to their maturity. We are also aware that it is impossible for young people to play an active part in their own growth and relationship with God unless they are involved in the pursuit of holiness.

Finally, precisely because ours is a youthful ministry it is always, at one and the same time, both evangelisation and education. It is a method of evangelising that invites young people to live their lives in the way that Christ himself lived his. It also aims at the all-round development of the person, which is precisely what we mean by education.



Our fundamental task is then to “propose to the young with courage and joy that they live their lives in the way Jesus Christ lived his”

[GC26, NO.36]

Salesian Youth Ministry is therefore a systematic activity of the Educative and Pastoral Community which is motivated by a charismatic mission. It seeks to enable young people to grow to maturity, in a religious vocation, and to communion with Jesus Christ in the Church. Christ is seen as the one who gives the fullness of life and is the basis of this fullness. It helps young people, by means of educational activity, to become “upright citizens and good Christians”.

6

Increase the number and improve the quality of the places where we encounter young people

Salesian Youth Ministry is by definition attentive to the signs of the times. Young people are not always the same. Their age and circumstances change. It is part of nature. For this reason, Salesian Youth Ministry is not afraid to *change its models and structures. It is in a constant state of pastoral conversion.*

The contexts in which we move are characterised by complexity and contradictions. This is a given fact that needs to be taken into consideration explicitly, more so now than ever before.

The religious experience of young people is **varied and even contains contradictory elements**. They have one experience after another and faith is not the pivot that gives meaning to their plan of life. For many young people, the Christian message is received sporadically. There is some continuity in catechesis or liturgical celebration, or through some Church initiative, but it does not impact much on their experience. It does not speak to the young in a way that influences the real problems they face in life. Sometimes the Christian message presupposes, if not an explicit interest in the faith, at least an openness to the religious dimension of life or an explicit questioning of the meaning of life. Many young people, however, are caught up in the difficulties they face in everyday life. They are concerned about immediate problems. They are in a different place, not only physically, but especially mentally. This leads to indifference in relation to faith. It should be noted however, that this indifference is towards the way the message is proposed and should not be seen as a complete rejection of faith, or of the presence of God, or the good news that gives hope and meaning to life.

This complexity is not limited to the world of the young. The Salesian Congregation is now firmly established on a global level. It is experiencing a fruitful and creative tension between fidelity to its identity and the way

it needs to express this in the very different and complex circumstances we find ourselves in.

It is in this varied situation of globalisation and structural change, which is not just superficial, that we Salesians are called to rediscover the force and the roots of our identity. We need to contemplate our pastoral projects in faith and incarnate our youth ministry with greater truth. Then our invitation to faith will be strengthened with new and up to date ways of proclaiming the good news of the Gospel.

7

Twofold Fidelity

Love for Don Bosco nowadays means being aware that we have to evaluate our pastoral activity to ensure that it is always guided by a twofold fidelity. We must be **faithful in listening to the feelings of young people**, to their deep desires, the cultural climate in which they live and in which we want them to be active participants and not just passive consumers and recipients. We must also be **faithful in listening to the Church**, to its evangelising mission. We must be able to live its mission in the present, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit, not just applying formulas from a past that is behind us, but as a truth that is forever new and fruitful, that renews us constantly and leads us to union with the Spouse (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 4).

In other words, we must live on common ground, in harmony with the young. This means being faithful to the kind of *assistance and sharing our lives with the young* which Don Bosco spoke about in the *Letter from Rome* in 1884. What is important is not just physical presence but also spiritual, cultural and



emotional closeness. This is not paternalism but an awareness of how young people live. It implies a strong desire to be close to the young in an educative relationship that helps them to discover the newness of God and his call, and to express and live the vocation of the Church in a way that is always new.

This twofold fidelity to the world of the young and the mission of the Church demands that we increase the number and improve the quality of the places where we meet the young people of our day. It also means that we need to discover, experience and propose new ways of listening to the young, sharing our faith with them and offering them the gospel. This is the pastoral conversion demanded of us today. Herein lies the pastoral creativity (cf. C. 19) which we Salesians cultivate in our works and programmes. This conversion is a **process of evaluation and a new beginning of our ministry, starting from fidelity to the world and to the Gospel**. It is not something static, but eminently innovative and missionary.

Here is the heart of the *New Evangelisation*. The Church takes up again the missionary mandate of the Lord Jesus. He has sent the Church into the world so that, guided by the Holy Spirit, it may bear witness to the salvation received and make known the face of the Father who is the first agent in the work of salvation. It is not only a renewal, a change of model or a new plan, but a real and proper conversion. It is a journey of holiness, a battle against sin and a constant effort to be ever more fully conformed to Christ the Good Shepherd.

We, Salesians and lay people, have been gifted with a charism and are called as an Educative and Pastoral Community to proclaim the Good News. We are particularly challenged by the urgency of the *New Evangelisation* which is a task for the whole Church today. This urgency motivates us to find, in renewed fidelity to our charism, a new apostolic thrust, a new urge to make contact with young people and, above all, to look again at our pastoral ministry. We want to become ever more effective in proclaiming the Gospel, in working for the coming of the Kingdom of God, and the formation of good Christians and upright citizens in the present and in the future.

