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Characteristic Traits of the Spiritual Accompaniment of the Young

As an Integral Part of the Educational System of Don Bosco

Part 1

by Emmanuel Camilleri, SDB

Various authors have comprehensively treated Don Bosco's life, work, and spirituality. Such competent authorities have given to the Congregation and the Salesian world wide-ranging works and studies on most aspects of Don Bosco's life, history, educational system, and spirituality. There is no doubt that the figure of Don Bosco attracted, and will continue to attract, huge interest in his life, his educational system, and work. That is why there always remain new aspects and dimensions waiting to be discovered within a charism of such depth and magnitude. Any work, study or research on Don Bosco, is never exhaustive.

The following four-part article has as its objective a particular aspect of Don Bosco's charism: the spiritual accompaniment of the young. This theme, which is very relevant for today, is significant since it is fundamental to Don Bosco's educational system and it is a characteristic of us Salesians, as companions of the young.

While there is no doubt that Don Bosco conducted much of his spiritual accompaniment of the young during the sacrament of Confession, or during his long hours of presence in the playground, his writings are also a trove in which accompaniment features strongly. In a very simple manner, Don Bosco presents a *theology for a life's journey* that the young were invited to undertake. Every work he wrote and published, whether it was narrative, a pocket prayer book, biographies, rules and regulations were all aimed to help the young to feel accompanied. While he underlined the avoidance of taking life and events for granted, as he does in his narratives, he ushered them into a world of possibilities of how to obtain personal holiness and Christian perfection, even by performing their daily duties as underlined in his *Regolamenti*. This

four-part article will look into *some* of the published works of Don Bosco and will emphasize the theme of spiritual accompaniment these works.

We would like, however, that in this first part of this series of articles, to take a look at spiritual direction/accompaniment so as to help readers to have a comprehensive, although synthetic, idea of the dynamics of this important ministry within the Church. This overview will eventually help the reader to understand the dynamics of the accompaniment Don Bosco offered to the young people of his time. The aim of this contribution is to benefit us, Salesians, to continue exploring our discussions on the accompaniment of the young in today's world, without losing sight of what our Father taught us. While Don Bosco's world was different from that in which we live today, he remains our model and teacher. One thing, however, has not changed from our Founder's time: the young people's desire to be accompanied. Moreover, this desire of the young encourages us Salesians, to be attentive to their needs especially in their endeavors to grow into mature and responsible men and women of the future.

Spiritual Accompaniment

The Dynamics

The human person has always wondered about life's mystery, about his or her reality and the transcendental. Questions, which many times are left unanswered, will continue to capture the person's imagination, stir the spirit and urge him to continue to seek the Truth. Spirituality helps the person to look for the truth further. Furthermore, questions that attempt to find an answer to existential uncertainties are "not questions with simple answers but questions that lead us deeper into the unspeakable mystery of existence."¹ Spirituality identifies itself with a particular anthropological approach where it engages with the human person's limited existence and which refer to certain important core values which animate one's life and which are vital to one's way of thinking, feeling and acting.²

By nature, the human person is a spiritual being, and this dimension urges him forward to continue to search for this ultimate destination, which

1. Henri J. Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (London: SPCK, 2011), 9.

2. See Jesus Manuel Garcia, *Teologia Spirituale: epistemologia e interdisciplinarietà*, Studi di Spiritualità, nr. 24 (Roma: LAS, 2013), 43.

is found in the Mystery of God.³ Spiritual accompaniment or direction aids the person to enter into this Mystery and helps him to become a participant of the Trinitarian love.

Before moving further, we would like to clarify a key point. It has to do with the various terminologies used to describe spiritual direction. Some authors use the word ‘guidance’; others use the word ‘mentoring’ and others still use the word ‘accompaniment’. Barry and Connolly state that although ‘spiritual direction’ is a term

liable to misunderstanding, it is probably more descriptive of the experience it points to than “religious counseling,” “spiritual counseling,” “spiritual advice,” or even “spiritual companioning.” It is, besides, firmly entrenched in the tradition and is more widely and spontaneously used than any term that has been to replace it.⁴

Spiritual direction can be considered the “core form” from which the other forms of pastoral care radiate. Whichever name one attributes to pastoral care, the fundamental aim is, and remains, to help people to “center their lives in the mystery we call God”⁵ and to strengthen the relationship of each individual with Him. It also aims to help the person desirous of accompaniment or direction, to grow spiritually while remaining well-grounded in reality and everyday life.

André Louf uses the phrase ‘spiritual accompaniment’, which, in his opinion, is more often called “spiritual direction.”⁶ He further states that to “replace the once well-known phrase ‘spiritual direction’ the phrase ‘spiritual accompaniment’ has found favor with spiritual writers of the past several decades.”⁷ We are inclined, like Louf, towards the use of the phrase ‘spiritual

3. “Mystery” affirms David Benner, “will always be enigmatic. However, it need not be feared. A spiritual journey that seeks to eliminate all that is mysterious will never take us far enough from our comfort zone for genuine transformation.” David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2002), 31.

4. William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper One, 2009), 11-12. This work by Barry and Connolly is an excellent resource for those who would like to have better insights into spiritual direction. It is highly recommended.

5. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 11-12.

6. André Louf, *Grace Can Do More: Spiritual Accompaniment and Spiritual Growth* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications/Liturgical Press, 2008), 7.

7. Louf, *Grace Can Do More*, 43.

accompaniment' since we believe that this idea of *accompanying* contains in itself the element of *participation* in another's person life and the element of *journeying* together. In other words, we believe this word to be essentially Salesian. Henceforth, we will use the phrase 'spiritual accompaniment' rather than 'spiritual direction'. By using this phrase, in no way, we are attempting to undermine the other also essential phrase, 'spiritual direction'. Spiritual direction *was* and *remains* part of theology and, on its part, accompaniment was and is part of spiritual direction. They are inseparable.

Furthermore, in changing names or terminology one would risk that this important ministry of spiritual direction detaches itself from the Holy Spirit. There is the risk to place more attention and focus more on the 'human person' of the director, rather than on the Holy Spirit.⁸ The use of the phrase 'spiritual accompaniment' is neither intended to eliminate in any way the power of the Spirit. We will take this phrase *within the context* of spiritual direction and would like it to be seen as an integral part of this ministry, of the whole process and the whole journey undertaken by two souls in search of Christian perfection.⁹

Christian perfection is never achieved with one's own ability. There is always the need and presence of another Christian, who possess a strong faith in the belief that God acts in our life. In fact, the "fundamental requirement for true spiritual direction is belief and trust that the Trinity is at work in the world and in each of us *here and now*."¹⁰ Moreover, to help us to understand and to participate in this belief, we need a companion. Thus, spiritual accompaniment is essentially a dialogue between two persons of faith, that is, they both believe in the power of the Spirit of God who leads them understand and act upon the will of God. Barry and Connolly state that they

define Christian spiritual direction, then, as help given by one believer to another that enables the latter to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in in-

8. See Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità, sub verbum [s.v.] "Direzione Spirituale."

9. Although we would be referring to some definitions of spiritual direction, our intended aim is to underline spiritual accompaniment. The citations we use from some literature on the subject use the most traditional phrases used in spiritual direction. However, we will make use the term 'spiritual accompaniment' rather than 'spiritual direction'. Furthermore, we will also use 'accompanist', rather than 'director' and 'the person accompanied' rather than 'directee'. However, the concept will not change.

10. Gene Barrette, "Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition," in *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls*, eds. Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 56.

timacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship. The *focus* of this type of spiritual direction is on experience, not ideas, and specifically on the religious experience, i.e. that dimension of any experience that evokes the presence whom we call God. Moreover, this experience is viewed, not as an isolated event, but as an expression of the ongoing personal relationship God has established with each one of us.¹¹

This definition is impregnated with significance. The key word is ‘relationship’, a significant element in Salesian accompaniment. For Don Bosco, an authentic spiritual accompaniment was based on strong human relationships. Such relationships were founded in God, realized in the Mystery of the Incarnation by sending His Son to be God-with-us. The relationship between the accompanist and the person accompanied has its foundation in this relationship with God. It helps both the Salesian and the young person to respond to God’s call and moves them to answer to His will. It is also to be noted that, although Don Bosco believed that the relationship between the Salesian accompanist and the accompanied young person should be an open and sincere one, nonetheless, it must be one that should focus more on the individual’s relationship with God. In other words, the Salesian accompanist is there to help the young person to foster a deeper relationship with God. The personal, friendly relationship, which for Don Bosco never meant ‘special’ or ‘particular,’ is almost secondary in that it only serves as it intends to help the young achieve a deeper one with God. Indeed, spiritual accompaniment “has always aimed ultimately at fostering union with God and has, therefore, had to do with the individual’s relationship with God.”¹²

Another significant element of spiritual accompaniment is that it expresses the desire and the commitment towards holiness.¹³ The phrase ‘spiritual direction’ in itself points towards God or a stronger relationship with Him. Both “spiritual” and “direction”, however, can cause difficulty in today’s Western culture. This difficulty is understandable since the human sciences have made great strides where personal development and maturity are concerned.¹⁴ Thus, while ‘direction’ might indicate that one is seeking the

11. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 8-9.

12. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 9.

13. See *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, s.v. “Direzione Spirituale”.

14. Barry and Connolly assert that, “unavoidably, spiritual direction, “may suggest to people of our Western culture a spiritualism and an authoritarianism that sound theology and psychology must repudiate. We must remember that in all aspects of life human beings can act only as body-spirit, and any help toward personal development that overlooks this fact is likely to be more harmful than helpful to them. In the same way,

right path to arrive at a particular stage in life, spiritual direction can never be seen as handing one's life to another person. The person accompanied, must and should take responsibility for his human and spiritual growth. This responsible claim affirms our preference to use the phrase *spiritual accompaniment*. Moreover, the 'spiritual director' in the context of accompaniment is not only a spiritual friend but also a *companion* of another person's soul; he is the *accompanist*.¹⁵ He is a *companion* because he and the person accompanied undertake a journey together to seek the Truth.

Nouwen states that both persons embark together on a quest since spiritual accompaniment affirm "the basic quest for meaning."¹⁶ It is the search for meaning that binds the accompanist and the person accompanied and transforms them into *companions*. This quest is, therefore, a journey, one that in the end will lead to a personal transformation founded on one's personal relationship with God.

The term 'spiritual' refers to that which goes beyond a material search; it aims at the supernatural. However, by 'spiritual', we do not mean a life detached from reality and the world. In fact, the word 'spiritual' itself

Can rub raw our sensitivity to the precious and the artificial and connote thought and behavior that cannot survive contact with earth and full sun. For socially aware people it can suggest a preoccupation with introspection, with turning in one's own emotional and moral life rather than outward to the world where people are in need and the peace and justice of God's Kingdom must be advocated.¹⁷

Therefore, it indicates the profound relationship that a person has with himself, with God – who is the source of all holiness – and with others. If spiritual accompaniment does not transform into commitment towards

sound "direction" cannot mean that one gives responsibility for one's life to someone else. ... The person who receives direction must always retain personal responsibility, and the mode and content of sound direction will help a person to retain and develop personal responsibility, not make it more difficult." Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 10-11.

15. Louf states that, it is "obvious that other words could be used instead of accompanist: 'guide', 'master', 'director', 'father'/'mother', and such corresponding counterparts as 'disciple', 'directee', 'son/daughter', even if some of these words sound old-fashioned today. Each of these terms has a share of truth, but none of them completely describes the content of experience." Louf, *Grace Can Do More*, 44.

16. Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, 8.

17. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 10.

the spreading of the Kingdom, then it would be a futile exercise. Chester P. Michael writes, “spiritual direction will be concerned with the four basic relationships of love with which our life on Earth is involved. They are love of God, love of others, a proper love of ourselves, and a love for nature.”¹⁸ This concern underlined by Michael, is what commitment towards the Kingdom of God signifies, because, in itself, the Kingdom is relational. Moreover, Michael stresses, that if the person seeking accompaniment and direction does not show seriousness and effort towards growing in these four relationships, then it will be a complete waste of time.¹⁹

The spiritual accompaniment is not only intended to help the individual to increase his spiritual growth, but also to help the person to be like the seed that dies and produces much fruit, spiritual fruit. Moreover, this can only be attained through love. Don Bosco endeavored with the young under his guidance, to help them understand this concept. Also, through his endeavors the young came to know and understand the spirituality of everyday life, living their faith while working for the Kingdom to help create a better and just society. They were invited to love God and neighbor, to love themselves by being aware of God’s call to their individual conscience, and to look upon their bodies as a gift from God. Truly, spiritual accompaniment helps us to “fulfill our God-given destiny on Earth, to carry out the purpose of our existence, to fulfill all the duties of our state of life, to save our souls after death in heaven, and to become saints.”²⁰ Don Bosco believed this. That is why Don Bosco he strongly insisted with the young to choose the right companions and preferably companions who would become spiritual friends on this journey of transformation. David Benner states that the “essence of Christian spirituality,” is “following Christ on a journey of personal transformation.”²¹ Only companions with the same eagerness of being transformed can help us to undertake our journey of transformation.

Concerning the protagonists in this dynamic relationship, spiritual accompaniment can be seen as a communicative dynamic in which three persons take part: the person accompanied, desirous of holiness; the accompanist who helps him to achieve holiness; and the Holy Spirit, who is

18. Chester P. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 8.

19. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 8.

20. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 7.

21. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 26.

the true animator in this dynamic relationship.²² Barry and Connolly state ‘spiritual’

Does tell us that the basic concern of this kind of help [spiritual direction] is not with external actions as such, but with the inner life, the “heart,” the personal core out of which come the good and evil that people think and do. It includes “head,” but points to more than reason and more than knowledge. It also reminds us that another Spirit, God’s Spirit, is involved.²³

A fundamental element of Christian spiritual accompaniment is that it is part of the mission of the Church. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is responsible for the pastoral care of the people of God entrusted to her.²⁴ Spiritual accompaniment, therefore, is placed within other theological disciplines and falls in particular within the realm of pastoral theology. It is concerned with the practical application of theological concepts and it is precisely an art and a discipline in accompanying individuals to move towards Christian perfection. In doing so, it avails itself of other theological and humanistic disciplines.²⁵ Human sciences, such as psychology, should not be eliminated a priori from the spiritual accompaniment. They should not, however, take over and obfuscate the principal aim of spiritual accompaniment. Louf states that we make use of such sciences after recognizing “the absolute

22. See Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità, s.v. “Direzione Spirituale”. The phrases ‘spiritual director’ or ‘accompanist’ are improperly used since the Holy Spirit is the faithful and only accompanist and director and who guides the soul towards holiness. The director or accompanist is but a catalyst in the hands of the Spirit to guide the person under his spiritual care, to come to understand God’s will and how he must respond to that will.

23. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 11.

24. In spiritual direction, the human and the divine intertwine in a continuous dynamic relationship. This human-divine-interchanging takes place in particular contexts and a given time. It can, therefore, change its form according to the historical and cultural context. In the earliest recorded time, spiritual direction was ministered in the West, by the Desert Fathers and Mothers. People sought them out for their wisdom and holiness. However, it was more like people going to them to ask for advice, rather than to have an ongoing spiritual relationship. Later on, spiritual direction was more exercised within the monastic community where the superior usually took over the ministry of spiritual direction. It took many years for spiritual direction to evolve in the way we perceive it today. They were years of enrichment through the experience of great saints and personages. As time passed, “more active, non-monastic types of direction came into being, fluctuating between individualized and institutionalized models in tune with developing theologies of grace and what it meant to do God’s will.” *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, s.v. “Spiritual Direction.” See also Barrette, “Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition,” 57-59.

25. See Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità, s.v. “Direzione Spirituale.”

primacy of the Spirit's life within us." Only then it becomes possible for us to use "these sciences as objectively as possible and to the degree to which they can be useful to us."²⁶ Thus, the primacy of Spirit is of the utmost importance since one might run the risk of losing one's bearings. The Spirit's life in us can

Put us on the road to knowing our own self and our true destiny. Such knowledge implies an openness to obeying the Spirit's outpouring, the most intimate law of our being, so that, having become perfectly free, we can become persons we are called to be. Of this process of discovery and growth, the sciences we call 'human sciences' are the humble servant.²⁷

We cannot oversee the importance of human sciences that can be of help and resource in accompanying others, especially young people. We agree with Fr. Chester P. Michael when he says that

Grace and nature are not in opposition to one another but form a team to aid each of us on our life's journey toward maturity for which God has destined us. Therefore, any spiritual director today who would neglect to make full use of the findings of depth psychology in guiding persons toward holiness would be neglecting a very important aid in this whole process of spiritual growth.²⁸

Human sciences enhance spiritual accompaniment and help in transforming it into a *holistic* ministry, which helps both mind and spirit. Holistic spirituality

Opposes pitting the body against the soul, the sacred against the secular, "this world" against "that world", the spiritual against the material. It counters the dualism that has plagued Western, Christian spirituality over centuries. Holistic spirituality is rooted in the incarnational belief of the pervasive presence of God in all reality.²⁹

Don Bosco might not have had the psychological terminology or knowledge during his time. That field of human sciences was in its very beginning. However, he had the ability to observe and to analyze the actions of the young people under his care. He had the gift to see through the person and was able to use an approach that suited best the situation. That is why,

26. Louf, *Grace Can Do More*, 42.

27. Louf, *Grace Can Do More*, 42.

28. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 5. An interesting read about the subject is Josef Goldbrunner's *Holiness is Wholeness and Other Essays*, published by the University of Notre Dame Press, 1964. Another good read is Peter Madsen Gubi's *Spiritual Accompaniment and Counselling. Journeying with Psyche and Soul* (London/Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015).

29. Barrette, "Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition," 65.

we believe, he aimed at holistic spirituality as a means to form the young. He accompanied them in such a way to feel the presence of God in their life, in others, in creation, and in the environment where they played and studied, what Barrette calls the “pervasive presence” of God. Don Bosco believed that if they wanted to come to know God, then they must think of Him. It is an “attentive presence” within the human person.³⁰ It is precisely what Don Bosco desired of the young. His maxim “God sees you” was more of “God is present in you, in your life,” rather than a maxim that would instill fear in them.

Another aspect of spiritual accompaniment is that it has a biblical foundation. In the Bible we read that all initiatives come from God; he seeks to be closer to man and invite him to come closer to Him. In the economy of salvation, God himself indicates, through events and experiences that he would accompany his people and all of the humanity. Biblical texts, especially the Psalms, present God as the ultimate accompanist, the shepherd of his people, their guide, and companion.³¹

The idea, or notion, of accompaniment throughout the Bible, can be seen and experienced. One can find it, for example, in man’s call into existence; it is present in God’s call to partake in his project for the whole of humanity, and it is present in God’s invitation to participate in a mission with a particular purpose assigned to man. The calling is nurtured within a faith context in which God desires to interact with man and with the people he had chosen for himself. He invites the human person to listen to the Word, which he reveals through historical and personal events. God’s action invites the human person to become a collaborator, co-participant, and *companion* in His plan of salvation. This action is not limited or reduced to one single act.

30. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 33.

31. Henri Nouwen, expounding on the spiritual practices that are useful to the spiritual accompaniment, mentions that one of these essential practices is the “discipline of the book.” He asserts that scriptures help both the director and the directee to “listen in a very personal and intimate way the word of God.” Nouwen, introduction to *Spiritual Direction*, xvi. Nouwen uses the term “discipline” in the sense of “practices” as in “spiritual disciplines” or “spiritual practices”.

It is a continuous process, and it journeys, walks as it were, at man's pace. It accompanies man throughout his life events and sustains him in his growth.³²

Like spiritual accompaniment, biblical journeys all have a beginning, development, and a completion-fulfillment stage. We can also see that during each itinerary, similarly to what takes place in spiritual accompaniment, there were moments of difficulties and suffering.³³ Such itineraries aimed meant not only to aid the personal transformation of the people but also that of their leaders. God asked these individuals and others to be attentive to his Word. Similarly, in spiritual accompaniment, what one seeks is not only the transformation of the person accompanied but also that of the accompanist.

It is the Word that transforms the heart of both the accompanist and the person accompanied and inclines it towards God. Benner perceives the bringing the Word of God into spiritual accompaniment as an important aspect because Scriptures helps to attune the soul to God's revelation, and thus also to his will.³⁴ Henri Nouwen says that we look to God through the Scriptures. If one wants to embark on the journey of spiritual accompaniment, then the Scriptures must be at the core of this ministry. Scriptures help us to live a truly, active spiritual life. By meditating and praying with the Scriptures, we will "incorporate it concretely into our lives."³⁵

One can find various texts within the Bible in which the Lord presents himself as the spiritual guide of his people.³⁶ Zevini states that there is a founding principle on which the whole of Scriptures stand. This principle, on which the accompaniment paradigm also rests, is the certainty of the presence of God within history. The way in which Israel interprets reality is unique and singular. The different historical-vocational events presented in the Scriptures

32. See Giorgio Zevini, "Ti guido per la strada su cui devi andare. Icone bibliche di accompagnamento spirituale," in *Quaderni di Spiritualità Salesiana, Nuova Serie* no. 2 (2004):11.

33. See Zevini, "Ti guido per la strada su cui devi andare. Icone bibliche di accompagnamento spirituale," in *Quaderni di Spiritualità Salesiana, Nuova Serie* no. 2 (2004):12.

34. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 116.

35. Nouwen, *introduction to Spiritual Direction*, xvii-xviii.

36. For such texts, see Zevini, "Ti guido per la strada su cui devi andare. Icone bibliche di accompagnamento spirituale," in *Quaderni di Spiritualità Salesiana, Nuova Serie* no. 2 (2004):12-13 and 17-23.

are all shrouded by God's presence, and therefore, they are always interpreted in the light of faith. Zevini continues that is important to note that in the Bible, there are various vocational ways or paths, but only two major protagonists: God and man. Therefore, each circumstance of accompaniment is different, cogent and hence can never be reduced to a one-scheme-fits-all concept, a concept rejected by Don Bosco. Each encounter with God is personal and unique. God calls those whom he desires and man responds by exercising his liberty. It is within this context that God accompanies man towards a mature growth that aims at man's full integration.³⁷

The Bible reminds the accompanist to compare and contrast his companionship and guidance with the spirit of the Word of God. Inspired by the Scriptures, he becomes a true companion. He guides and accompanies the person under his care in the same way God guided and accompanied those whom he called and who are presented to us as models in the Bible. Indeed, the Bible is a school of spiritual accompaniment. Furthermore, when God called different persons in the Bible, he proved to be a patient educator, instructing, redressing, conducting and in doing so fulfilling his plan of salvation towards all. God's main aim according to the Bible is to reach man's heart. If taken as an itinerary, or a journey, the Bible affirms and shows that this was reached and fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.³⁸ Jesus Christ himself called his disciples and told them "Follow me..." [Mark 2:14] meaning that he wanted them to undertake a journey together with him. It was a call made not towards a destination. It was a journey of fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ himself.

The centrality of this journey, therefore, is the person of Jesus Christ. This Christocentric vision brings man closer to God because Christ is the point of encounter. God, in fact, is revealed to us through Jesus Christ. Benner says, "as with the journey Abraham was asked to undertake, it is impossible to specify precisely the route that has to be followed in a soul's journey to transformation. This is because rather than following a map, in this journey we follow a person – Jesus."³⁹ In spiritual accompaniment, one does not follow

37. See Zevini, "Ti guido per la strada su cui devi andare. Icone bibliche di accompagnamento spirituale," in *Quaderni di Spiritualità Salesiana*, Nuova Serie no. 2 (2004):13.

38. See Zevini, "Ti guido per la strada su cui devi andare. Icone bibliche di accompagnamento spirituale," in *Quaderni di Spiritualità Salesiana*, Nuova Serie no. 2 (2004):23.

39. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 27.

other individuals, but rather is *accompanied by* others. Following others can be an impediment to making spiritual progress. Benner asserts that a

Christian spiritual journey requires us to overcome the temptation to follow other people rather than Jesus himself. If we are blessed, we will have experiences of seeing him in spiritual friends or other Christians who share our journey. In these circumstances it is sometimes tempting to think that following them is following Jesus. But it is not. Spiritual friends help us most when they make clear that their job is to point the way, not to lead the way. And the Way to which they should point is Jesus.⁴⁰

This is where the accompanist comes in: in accompanying the soul to clear doubts and to be firm in the face of such a transformational invitation that Christ extends to each one of us. Where does this journey lead? Benner says that

The distant land to which we are called is not heaven. Nor is it some external, physical place. The distant land is the new creature into which Christ wishes to fashion us – the whole and holy person that finds his or her uniqueness, identity and calling in Christ. ... The soul's journey in Christian spirituality is a journey of becoming, not simply of doing or even being. That is why it gives priority to the inner self. The transformation that occurs in Christian spirituality moves from the inside out.⁴¹

Furthermore, the terms such as 'accompanist', 'accompanier', and 'accompanying' in essence indicate that a journey takes place in the company of others. It means more "than the accompaniment of the Spirit of God" because it "also includes the accompaniment of fellow pilgrims."⁴² It is true that each person is to undertake his particular unique journey; each one arrives at the same destination that is in God, but in different ways, taking different paths. Still, "none of us is intended to make that journey alone." The idea of a Christian journeying alone "flies in the face of everything the Bible teaches about the church as the body of Christ. We are parts of one body as we follow Christ on the journey of personal transformation."⁴³ Accompanists who

40. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 27.

41. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 26-27.

42. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 40.

43. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 40. Benner states that one of the ideals of spiritual friendship is accompaniment. Others listed by Benner are love, honesty, intimacy, and mutuality. He placed these principles within the context of spiritual friendships inspired from the Bible, like the friendship between David and Jonathan in the First and Second Books of Samuel; the friendship between Ruth and Naomi in the Book of Ruth; and various examples from the Gospels of the friendships that Jesus himself had. He states that

desire to help others on their journey of life are *sacred companions*, as Benner rightly describes them. These “sacred companions” have a “supreme gift” in that they help others to “live life more aware of the presence of God” and help them to “hear his voice, be aware of his presence and see the footprints” as they walk “through life.” An accompanist who journey with others in this way, makes the “journey sacred.”⁴⁴ This is precisely what the patriarchs and the prophets did, throughout the journeying of the people of God.

Don Bosco was this model of accompanist. He indicated the way that the young had to undertake. His vast usage of Bible texts and quotes in his writings, indicate his biblical spiritual foundation.⁴⁵ His spiritual pedagogy became the pedagogy of God the Father and through which he wanted to educate the heart of the young so that they could be able to work for the Kingdom and help to spread it. It was evident in his desire also to make of them “honest citizens”, meaning not only to be citizens who would bring honor to their country, but also honest citizens of the Kingdom which was already present amongst them.

As for indicating Christ as the way, although the young were ‘attracted’ to his personality and surely were influenced by it, Don Bosco never meant to place himself at the center of attention. He would let the young know that the search to do God’s will through Jesus Christ was the hallmark of his accompaniment.⁴⁶ On many occasions, when he saw that some of the young were indecisive whether they should stay with him or not he would encourage them to go and follow their calling elsewhere. It was the case, for example, with many young priests. He also manifested a sense of freedom

the first invitation, which Jesus extended to his disciples, was to join him on a journey. Speaking about the disciples, Benner says that the best thing about accepting Jesus’ invitation “was that he then accompanied them on their journey.” It is the same with us, those who seek direction, and as “Christ followers we participate in his life, but he also participates in ours.” Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 62-77.

44. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 19.

45. Don Bosco used and quoted Bible texts profusely in his writings. A study published in 2010 shows that the biblical citations in our Founder’s writings, amount to 6,929. From these, 4,662 refer to the New Testament while 2,267 refer to the Old Testament. See Fausto Perrenchio, *La Bibbia negli scritti di Don Bosco*, Studi di Spiritualità 20 (Roma: LAS, 2010), 17.

46. His numerous citations from the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel according to John show how much he valued the person of Christ and his teaching. These citations are larger in number than those taken from the Old Testament. See Perrenchio, *La Bibbia negli scritti di Don Bosco*, 21-23.

exercised in his accompaniment and how much he respected this freedom. He would never permit himself to become an authoritarian accompanist.⁴⁷ His only aim and desire were to bring all the young to Christ and help them establish a life-long friendship with the Lord. For him, it was not important that many young men he had personally formed and helped did not stay with him as Salesians. What was of utmost importance for him was that they followed Christ and in doing so, did the will of the Father.

For Don Bosco, the accompaniment was an integral part of everyday life. He saw in it a holistic constitution that would help the young not only to make progress in spiritual life but also to integrate this life with everyday duties and activities. He saw in spiritual life an integration of all that constitute man, that is, body, mind, and spirit. Therefore, he accompanied the young to integrate well the spiritual with their daily living. Lola Arrieta gives a definition of accompaniment in everyday life as a

relationship of complete, and spiritual help and which augur that the person grows and matures in his awareness, responsibility, and freedom, to discover in

47. Concerning authoritarian spiritual directors, see *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, s.v. "Direzione Spirituale." Still, we have to make a distinction between an "authoritarian" director and a director who exercises his authority well. Establishing oneself in "authority" in spiritual accompaniment is an important aspect so as to build a stable reciprocal relationship. Being in "authority" implies that the accompanier is capable in assuming full responsibility his role as a guide. He is the one who should know best and who should have experience in the field of spiritual life. In this way, he can explain why one should live with certain values and follow certain obligations, an accompanist who can help the young under his spiritual care to find the right answers for questions that may arise and to clear any doubts or problems that one may encounter in spiritual life. This authority pertains to the accompanist, and he should use it and use it well. In other words, the 'authoritative' accompanist, is similar to a parent who have learned to strike a balance between direction and freedom. A parent who knows when to guide, support, sets limits and when to stimulate a sense of initiative in his son giving him all the free space needed. This authoritative approach can constrain the director to adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude, wanting to project himself as the "good friend" and thus avoids all responsibility in giving the right guidance on confronting, motivating and explaining spiritual acts and living. See Raffaele Mastromarino and Mara Scoliere, "La relazione nell'accompagnamento spirituale. Approccio psicologico," in *Quaderni di Spiritualità Salesiana*, Nuova Serie no. 2 (2004): 66-67.

his life the will of God and to be concretely committed towards the respect for life and towards the building of the Kingdom.⁴⁸

What Arietta states, reflects how Don Bosco viewed accompaniment in the life of the young. While completely respecting their freedom, he guided them towards the Kingdom and towards being active Christians, committed to helping bring about justice within their environment and within society.

Returning to the notion of journeying, Benner summarizes this idea in spiritual accompaniment and compares such journey-accompaniment with the Biblical journeys, especially with the one undertaken by the people of God, following Him in the wilderness. The people of God

thought that their call was simply a deliverance from Egypt to the Promised Land of milk and honey. But while God did indeed have in mind their deliverance, his plan was for deliverance from much more than the Egyptians. God had in mind their deliverance from themselves. They were called to a journey of transformation, not simply to another country in which to live.⁴⁹

Moreover, this is precisely what spiritual accompaniment aims at, a deliverance from the self, which sometimes, if not always, hinders spiritual growth. Ego-centrism, pride, narcissism, stubbornness, and the inability to live one's faith with stronger determination, are all hurdles that manifest themselves through the self. When the self is purified and attuned, then spiritual growth will eventually become a reality.

Only Jesus Christ can purify the self. Following him leads to one's personal transformation. In following Jesus Christ, the distant land one is called to arrive at, is neither a physical place nor heaven itself. The "distant land is the new creature into which Christ wishes to fashion us – the whole and holy person that finds his or her uniqueness, identity and calling in Christ."⁵⁰ If Jesus Christ, then, wishes to transform us into new creatures, he must be the "essential object of spiritual accompaniment."⁵¹ Only if he is the

48. Lola Arrieta, *Accogliere la vita: l'accompagnamento nella vita quotidiana e spirituale*, Quaderni di Formazione Permanente 8 (Bologna: EDB, 2008), 51. "Con accompagnamento nella vita quotidiana intendo una relazione di aiuto totale e spirituale, nella quale ci si augura che la persona cresca e maturi la propria consapevolezza, responsabilità e libertà, per scoprire nella sua vita il volere di Dio e concretizzarlo in un impegno orientato al rispetto della vita e alla costruzione del Regno." [my translation].

49. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 26.

50. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 26.

51. Louf, *Grace Can Do More*, 44.

object of such accompaniment, can we be transformed and become Christ-like.

Surely, Don Bosco desired to lead the young to heaven; however, he endeavored, first, to help the young to be transformed in Jesus Christ, to imitate him and be like him in words and actions. Don Bosco invited the young to heed this call. Heaven was a natural consequence of this Christ-like transformation. Moreover, for Don Bosco, education was a matter of the heart. He believed that, once the Salesian accompanist captivated the heart of the young, then he could help them to move on the path of this transformation. This transformation in Christian spirituality “moves from the inside out.”⁵² Don Bosco knew very well that once the heart is transformed, then the whole person will be open to transformation.

The Word Incarnate is the way to Christian perfection and thus to holiness. Christ, being the revelation of the Mystery of God, is the way, the truth and the life, the “ultimate source of spiritualisation, interiorisation, and sanctification; the one who from his fullness pours God’s love into human hearts by giving us the Holy Spirit.”⁵³ Garcia states that the ultimate reference point of such a spiritual experience is Jesus Christ. The figure, the person and the presence of Jesus Christ are the Father’s Revelation. He is the Word of God made flesh, and thus the person of Jesus becomes the norm. Consequently, we are called to undertake and imitate his life and his deeds. In the Christian tradition, Jesus Christ can lead humanity to encounter God to experience his presence and enter into communion with Him without God losing his transcendence.⁵⁴

Spiritual accompaniment, therefore, aims at obtaining Christian perfection, which has its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Jordan Aumann defines spiritual direction as

The art of leading souls progressively from the beginning of the spiritual life to the height of Christian perfection. It is an art in the sense that spiritual direction

52. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 27.

53. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, s.v. “Spiritual Direction.”

54. See Garcia, *Teologia Spirituale*, 359.

is a practical science that, under the guidance of supernatural prudence, applies to a particular case the principles of the theology of Christian perfection.⁵⁵

We know how much Don Bosco endeavored with his young students on achieving Christian perfection in their lives. He strove for this not by using some form of eloquent theology or morality, but by accompanying them to embrace the virtues, to live these same virtues with an interior peace, and to make them reflect on their lives through their actions, words, duties, and responsibilities.

Salesian spiritual accompaniment, leads the young to obtain Christian perfection. Christian perfection “consists in *sanctifying grace*, since sanctifying grace is the very soul of the supernatural life.”⁵⁶ When it comes to operative perfection, that is, a perfection that seeks to reach a particular goal, this “consists in charity” as we know from the Scriptures and theology itself.⁵⁷ The Scriptures tell us that the whole Law and the Prophets depend entirely on the love of God and neighbor. The fundamental theological reason that charity is the measure of all Christian perfection is that it “alone unites us entirely with God as the ultimate supernatural end. The other virtues prepare or initiate that union, but they cannot complete it.”⁵⁸ Concerning the primacy of charity over faith and hope, Aumann states that charity

Relates to God and unites us to him as a principle. Faith gives us aknowledge of God that is necessarily obscure and imperfect, and hope is also radically imperfect, but charity unites us with God even in this life. Charity establishes the mutual love of friendship between God and ourselves. For that reason, charity is inseparable from grace. ... Beyond all doubt, therefore, charity constitutes the

55. Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 1980), 380. Henry Nouwen states that the “goal of spiritual direction is spiritual formation – the ever increasing capacity to live a spiritual life from the heart.” Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, Introduction, xv.

56. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 104.

57. See Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 104.

58. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 105. About the other virtues, Aumann writes: “The moral virtues bring us to God only indirectly, by establishing the proper order in the means that lead to God. Faith and hope unite us with God, since they are theological virtues, but they do not unite us with him as the ultimate end or as the Supreme Good infinitely lovable in himself- the perfect motive of charity”, 105.

very essence of Christian perfection; it is the form and director of all the other virtues.⁵⁹

The practice of charity in everyday life, in one's duties and one's desires, is an essential element of spiritual direction. However, although Christian perfection consists "especially in charity, it does not follow that the role of other virtues is purely accidental, or that they are not essential to Christian perfection."⁶⁰ The other virtues complement Christian life.

It is a known fact that Don Bosco gave much importance to virtues, and especially the virtue of charity. His own *Preventive System* was based and founded on charity. It was this approach that the Salesian accompanist was invited to use. Don Bosco believed that it was only through charity that he Salesian could captivate the heart of the young. Moreover, once the accompanist managed to do this, then the accompanying process would be fruitful.

The Accompanist

In his search for attaining Christian perfection, man seeks those who could accompany him to such perfection. Can a person obtain holiness and Christian perfection on his own? Aumann states that although "it is true that individuals have attained sanctity without a spiritual director – which proves that spiritual direction is not absolutely necessary – normally those who have reached perfection have had the counsel and advice of a spiritual director."⁶¹ When it comes to spiritual growth, Simon Chan is more explicit. He says that the

Nature of Christian life is such that no one grows spiritually without the help from others. Strictly speaking, there are no self-taught saints. To think that we can teach ourselves is the worst sort of self-deception. ... This learning process extends throughout life. Even the most mature Christian needs help from others from time to time. Spiritual direction is simply the formalization of this basic fact.⁶²

Christian perfection has its culmination in one's relationship with God. This relationship is more important than the relationship between the

59. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 105.

60. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 105.

61. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 380.

62. Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology. A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 225.

accompanist and the person accompanied. Surely, this latter relationship is fundamental too. Barry and Connolly assert that

The relationship between director and directee can be crucial for the development of the relationship between directee and God, but the latter relationship exists prior to and is independent to the former. Directors do not create relationships between God and their directees; they try to foster such relationship.⁶³

While God establishes a relationship with any individual, there are circumstances when the presence of a spiritual accompanist is necessary, since he undertakes the same transformational path of which he is leading the person accompanied. Some persons accompanied are not always aware of their relationship with God and need guidance to help them to be more conscious of this divine presence. The presence of an accompanist is also fundamental because he can observe what might hinder the person in his spiritual progress and his relationship with God. Louf states that the

Accompanist accompanies, that is, walks beside someone on the same path. The accompanist indicates obstacles and pushes them aside. It is not for him to precede nor to follow. His own personal path is often not comparable to that of the person he accompanies. Each path is very unique.⁶⁴

The accompanist is also significant since many young people are faced with questions to which an answer is not readily clear or obvious. Nouwen brings out the characteristics of the spiritual accompanist by making a series of questions, the answers to which are not readily found or given, if not by the help and the presence of the spiritual accompanist. He thus asks how

Do we know that we are not deluding ourselves, that we are not selecting words of scripture that best fit our passions, or that we are not just listening to the voice of our imagination? Who can judge their own heart? Who can determine if their feelings and insights are leading them in the right direction? It is too easy to make our heart's desires and our mind's speculations into the will of God.⁶⁵

Additionally, Nouwen gives great importance to the role of the spiritual accompanist. He further states that the accompanist

Helps us to distinguish between the voice of God and all the other voices coming from own confusion or from dark powers far beyond our control. We need someone who encourages us when we are tempted to give it all up, to forget it all, and to just walk away in despair. We need someone who cautions us when we move too rashly in unclear directions or hurry proudly toward a nebulous

63. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 31.

64. Louf, *Grace Can Do More*, 43-44.

65. Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, 22.

goal. We need someone who can suggest to us when to read and when to be silent, which words to reflect upon, and what to do when silence creates such fear and little peace.⁶⁶

It is this fostering of the relationship between God and person accompanied that is central to spiritual accompaniment that leads to Christian perfection.

Many would assume that a spiritual director is a priest. This assumption is the likely one people make because “priests and ministers stand out publicly in the churches as spiritual leaders.”⁶⁷ However, this is not always the case. We have many Salesian Brothers and Sisters who are good spiritual accompanists. Many lay people too, are capable of leading souls as much as any good priest. In this series of articles, we would be making quite a few references to Don Bosco. However, when we speak of the accompanist, the elements, and characteristics, we point to, are both suitable for a religious, lay or an ordained spiritual accompanist. Naturally, at times, we are obliged to make specific references to the accompanist who is a priest, especially when we refer to the sacraments, in particular about the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Don Bosco was a priest and his spiritual accompaniment mainly revolved around the sacraments. These were an essential element in his formation and accompaniment of the young. Nonetheless, what is of importance is *what makes* a good spiritual accompanist, irrespective whether he is ordained or not.⁶⁸

What are, then, the qualities that a spiritual accompanist should possess? Undoubtedly, an accompanist must be a person of prayer. He must be an individual who manifests “a certain holiness in life and a closeness and intimacy with God.” He must be a person who daily strives to grow in

66. Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, 22.

67. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 127.

68. A priest is well prepared and well read in theology and as a consequence has the aptitude of discerning between the honest searching for Christian perfection by the directee; there is no doubt about this. However, there are lay people, who are well read in theology and spiritual direction. In past centuries, for example, St. Catherine of Siena “became spiritual director to a circle of friends, her bella brigade, to whom she wrote numerous letters of guidance. Spiritual direction involved men and women, clergy and laity, educated and illiterate, young and old.” Keith R. Anderson and Randy D. Reese, *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1999), 25. Aumann asserts that there is “ample testimony in the history of the Church to justify such direction because of peculiar circumstances.” He names some examples of “the hermits in the desert and the primitive monks who were not priests, and the direction given by St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius of Loyola before his ordination, St. Catherine of Siena, and St. Teresa of Avila.” Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 380.

“holiness and wholeness.”⁶⁹ Personal holiness is an important characteristic for the accompanist. It is only through his experience of holiness can he then help the person accompanied to obtain this holiness. Don Bosco strove to attain personal holiness in everything he did or planned. This personal desire of his became a beacon that illumined the path the young. He led by example, by a life of piety and prayer, by a life founded on Christ-like actions, and by a life of suffering, trials, difficulties, grief, and failures. These were taken to be strengths, rather weaknesses, experiences that manifested the human dimension of Don Bosco, and thus avoided the idea that he was a sort of super-human. He considered these human dimensions as a resource through which he could guide the young – without imposing his experience – to choose that which is good and refute anything that could harm their body and spirit, and to never give up even when things do not turn out the way one desired them to be. Indeed, a

Spiritual director should be a person of experience who has struggled with the realities of life and who has experienced real suffering in life. Ideally such a one should have had the direct experience of failure, of not being able to attain all of one’s goals in life, yet humbly accepted the situation.⁷⁰

As Gene Barrette writes, the “director may be a powerful “wounded healer” because of his or her life experience of struggle, passion, conflict, spiritual darkness and light.”⁷¹ What Michael and Barrette are saying here, fits well within the characteristics, experience, and qualities of Don Bosco. After his life trials, especially those of his childhood and then those of his endeavors to open the first Oratory and finally, those trials he went through to finding the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, became an enrichment, a healing resource which helped him to accompany the young. Through his personal trials, he came to understand the trials and failures of his young people.

A spiritual accompanist needs to be a learned person. It is yet another important quality expected of an individual who is sought to accompany others on the path to holiness. Moreover, since spiritual accompaniment has a scriptural foundation, the accompanist must be learned especially in the Scriptures. He should be

Steeped in the scriptures and in the spiritual traditions of the past...should have a reasonably good knowledge of the Bible, especially of the Gospels, but also of the whole New Testament.... The director should know how to use the Bible in

69. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 38.

70. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 38.

71. Barrette, “*Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition*,” 67.

one's personal prayer in order to have an intimate relationship with God, and be able to transpose the insights of the Bible to the situations facing us today.⁷²

Besides being well-informed and have a strong understanding of the Bible, the accompanist must also be informed of "the faith of the church and modern theology because initial work in spiritual direction often involves the healing or correcting of false images of God."⁷³

A Salesian spiritual accompanist, who is molded and formed in the light of the Word, who is in love with the Word of God, is a sure guide to help the person accompanied, to become aware of his identity. He should help him to see God's image in himself and to help him discover God's plan. He can only achieve this by educating the young to a "pedagogical-spirituality" that is based on the listening of the Word of God and on life itself.⁷⁴

The accompanist should be well prepared in the theology of Christian perfection and should possess a thorough knowledge of ascetical and mystical theology. Knowledge is of utmost importance, according to Aumann. The accompanist "incurs a grave responsibility before God if he attempts to direct a soul when he lacks sufficient knowledge."⁷⁵ He should also abstain from giving the impression that he is an *expert* in fields that are not of his competence. A Salesian accompanist must keep himself informed and updated on theological issues, the current teachings of the Church and about the modern currents of spiritual theology. He must be informed, and participate, in discussions on youth ministry and relevant literature that can help him to absorb new ideas and open new horizons, which will enhance his knowledge in the field. To be ministers of the youth, it is not enough for us to be Salesians. We need to update our understanding of what is going on not only in the Salesian world but also within the Church.

Another important quality that the accompanist must possess is prudence. If he "lacks prudence, he is usually lacking several other virtues as well" since prudence "enables an individual to do the right thing under given circumstances." Moreover, because spiritual theology is concerned mainly with "the individual soul placed in concrete circumstances at a given moment

72. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 39.

73. Barrette, "Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition," 67.

74. See Zevini, "Ti guido per la strada su cui devi andare. Icone bibliche di accompagnamento spirituale," in *Quaderni di Spiritualità Salesiana*, Nuova Serie 2, (2004):25.

75. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 383.

or even in a given phase of spiritual growth,” his role is “precisely to recognize the particular circumstances or a given situation and to give the advice needed at that moment.”⁷⁶ Prudence also assist him in not making hasty decisions. His advice needs to be cautious and to be able to do this he “must have the empathy by which he is able to place himself in the given circumstances and must have the patience to listen attentively.”⁷⁷

Patience is another important characteristic pertaining to the accompanist. Progress in spiritual growth takes time, and one should not expect those under his spiritual care to make huge spiritual progress after a few sessions. Gene Barrette says that patience “to respect God’s timetable for the seeker’s spiritual growth is very important in a director. A director has to know how to live in the *kairos*, God’s time, and not simply in the *chronos*, human time.”⁷⁸ Don Bosco understood this. He was aware that the young under his guidance, needed time to change, to make progress in their spiritual growth. Our Founder was patient not only with the rough and the tough but also with even the most saintly of all his boys. He was ready when they were ready. He understood one important principle: God’s grace was already in the young, and he knew perfectly well that only by being patient, one could see the spiritual fruits in the lives of young people.

There are circumstances when the spiritual accompanist demands ‘obedience’ from the directee. It should be demanded very prudently and the spiritual accompanist

Should never demand of a soul anything that is incompatible with its state of life or vocation, its strength, or present condition. He should realize that there are some things that can be demanded of advanced souls but could never be required of beginners. Excessive rigor does nothing but frighten souls and may cause them to abandon the road to perfection. There is, therefore, a world of dif-

76. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 383.

77. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 383. Aumann asserts that the accompanist should be clear in giving advice since in “order that he may be clear in his direction, he must possess clarity in his own mind. In speaking to the soul he is directing, he should avoid any vague or indecisive language, but should always express himself in concrete and definite terms. ... If a soul perceives that the director is not sure of himself, it will lose confidence in him, and his direction will lose all efficacy”. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 384.

78. Barrette, “Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition,” 67. Barrette lists other characteristics that should pertain to a good spiritual director/accompanist. He states that the accompanist must be a “person of love, broad human and spiritual experience, competence, prayer, insight, vision, balance, prudence, reverence, patience, compassion, trustworthiness, discretion, sympathy, sincerity, warmth, simplicity, encouragement, and lots of common sense.” See same, 67.

ference between firmness in demanding obedience and an excessive rigidity that discourages the soul of the penitent.⁷⁹

Don Bosco was against rigorous acts of piety; he would never demand the young to practice such acts. On the contrary, he would discourage them and demand that they should refrain from such acts of piety.⁸⁰ A good measure of common sense, together with prudence, is a requisite that a spiritual accompanist must possess. These two requisites will help him make balanced decisions and will in turn “prevent the directee from going to extremes and becoming fanatical.” An exceptional spiritual accompanist will know “how to tune down the excessive enthusiasm of the directee and thus prevent one from trying to do too much too quickly and then failing completely.”⁸¹

Don Bosco perceived this in many of his young persons. He would use different methods with different characters. He was perspicacious in planning the right path for each young person under his direction helping each one to achieve the fullness of Christian perfection. If one reads the biographies of Savio, Magone, and Besucco, one will discover that Don Bosco had one aim: leading each young person to achieve holiness; however, the method and journey were different. Indeed,

To attempt to lead all souls along the same path and to impose on them his personal experiences, however beneficial they may have been for himself. ... If, through a lack of understanding of the variety of divine gifts and the multiplicity

79. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 384. One should be careful what ‘obedience’ one demands of the person accompanied. Francis de Sales was against a determined type of ‘obedience’ demanded by some confessors and spiritual directors of his time. An important episode in the life of Saint Francis de Sales was his encounter with Jane de Chantal. Before she chose him to be her spiritual director, she was under the direction of another priest who was more of a dictator rather than a director. He demanded of her to make four vows that chained her and became for her spiritual shackles rather than a spiritual light. Francis de Sales on coming to know about this situation, he had asked Madame de Chantal to stop observing those vows, knowing well that these were shackles for her. Eventually, Madame de Chantal chose the Savoyard as her new spiritual director. See André Ravier, *Francis de Sales*, Sage and Saint, revised edition, trans. Joseph D. Bowler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 140. Don Bosco too believed this, and he practiced it during his spiritual accompaniment of the young.

80. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 385.

81. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction*, 40.

of roads to perfection, he were to force all souls to travel by the same road, he would become a veritable obstacle to the workings of grace in the soul.⁸²

Moreover, this is another important characteristic of the accompanist, that is, to be intuitive about the spiritual needs of the person accompanied under his care. Barrette skillfully surmises this by referring to DNA. He writes that it is also important “for the director to have a healthy respect for the unique shape of each individual’s holiness. As each person has a physical DNA, so too each has a unique spiritual DNA.”⁸³ Don Bosco had the ability to read the characters of the young like an open book. His approach was not a one-method-fits-all. He could perceive the needs of each one of his students and formulate a plan according that suited the individual young person, and not the whole group.

One aspect that we think a spiritual accompanist should possess is his zeal for the sanctification of souls.

Sanctification of souls is a natural consequence of his personal piety. Zeal, as St. Thomas explains, is an effect of intense love. ... God impels us to labor for the extension of his kingdom in souls, and the love of those souls enables us to forget ourselves so that we think of nothing but of sanctifying them in and for God.⁸⁴

Indeed, Aumann further asserts that if the director lacks in this “ardent zeal, spiritual direction will lose its power because the director himself will have lost the stimulus for persevering in his efforts in spite of any difficulty, and the direction will become an oppressive burden.”⁸⁵

We know how much Don Bosco strove to save and to sanctify the souls of the young under his care. In Salesian spiritual terminology, the *soul* becomes a foundational term. In Salesian environments, which permeated by the influence and spirit of Don Bosco, the term *soul* was referred to the *spirit*, as distinct from the body. The spirit was infused by God in the person and needed to be educated in the faith, to love God its maker, to be saved, to be valued and guided in gaining personal sanctification. *Da mihi animas caetera tolle* was indicative for Don Bosco and for the Salesians that spiritual guidance, accompaniment, and education had this one particular *orientation*: winning souls for God. Not only. Souls can only be won and saved through Christianity. Therefore, it was an orientation not only towards making of the

82. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 385.

83. Barrette, “Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition,” 67.

84. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 386.

85. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 386.

young “honest citizens” but most importantly to create and mold them into “good Christians.”⁸⁶

Finally, being a spiritual accompanist is a life-long process. It does not end with being *qualified* but it continues with each experience that the spiritual director encounters. He is called to continuous growth. An accompanist must keep himself well informed and up to date through theological, spiritual, and psychological studies. Surely, theology and experience are two important aspects in undertaking spiritual direction, but they

point to an ever greater God, and so spiritual directors can expect to be continually called for further growth. Their experience of other people in relationship with God will challenge them to prayer, deeper reflection, a fresh look at what they have studied, and further study. The adventure has no end in this life.⁸⁷

The person accompanied⁸⁸

As we have seen, spiritual accompaniment involves God, the accompanist and the person accompanied. What is of the essence here is that the soul relationship with God is of the utmost importance, and this relationship can grow and move on even without the help of a spiritual accompanist. However, if a person seeks accompaniment, then he must show an open disposition towards transformation. Spiritual accompaniment does not depend entirely on the accompanist, no matter how good he is or how great his qualities might be. Like in any other relationship, openness, sincerity, honesty and clarity are of great importance.⁸⁹ Thus, there are

Definite requisites demanded of the soul that receives the spiritual direction, and these requisites flow, first of all, from the nature of spiritual direction/ac-

86. See Desramaut, *Spiritualità Salesiana. Cento parole chiave. Spirito e Vita* 31, (Roma: LAS, 2001), 78-79.

87. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 141.

88. We shall here take a person accompanied to be a young person between the ages of eight and sixteen. The choice is deliberate so as to reflect the choices made by Don Bosco made when he showed a predilection for these age groups (eight-twelve and thirteen-sixteen age groups) to minister to, to help, to guide and to educate. However, much of what we will say in this part of the article is applicable also to young adults.

89. Benner states that because “friends desire each other’s growth and development, love demands honesty. It confronts illusions and dares to risk temporary discomfort by calling us to the truth.” Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 69.

companiment itself and, secondly, from the relationship of the person directed with the spiritual director.”⁹⁰

Spiritual accompaniment will completely fail in its aim if the accompanied person is not ready to open up. It will also fail if the accompanied person finds it hard to undergo the transformation needed for Christian perfection.⁹¹

Should spiritual accompaniment be sought as a problem-solving forum? The center of direction is one’s personal growth in his relationship with God; it is not a problem-solving exercise. However, Don Bosco’s encounters with the young of Turin usually started off with a series of questions inquiring about their family, their studies, and their spiritual life. Don Bosco himself recounts the material problems the young of his time had to face:

While we worked to set up ways of supplying instruction in religion and literacy, another crying need became evident; it was urgent to make some provision for it. Many youngsters from Turin and migrants [were] quite willing to try to live hard-working and moral lives; but when they were encouraged to begin, they said that they had no bread, no clothing, and no shelter where they could stay at least for a while. To accommodate at least some of those who in the evening knew not where to go, a stable was prepared where they could spend the night on a bit of straw. But some of them repeatedly made off with the sheets, others with the blankets, and in the end even the straw itself was stolen and sold.⁹²

Many of the young who sought him out did so because they did have a *problem* concerning food, shelter, and clothing or even were in need of

90. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 391.

91. Aumann lists various requisites that the person accompanied needs to have if he desires that accompaniment be a success. One of the most basic requisites of the person accompanied is sincerity. No accompaniment is ever possible without this quality. If one seeks help to gain Christian perfection one needs to open up to the person in whose hands he had placed his desire. The accompanist needs “to know all: temptations and weaknesses, desires and resolutions, good and evil inclinations, difficulties and trials, successes and failures. If he is to guide the soul to greater perfection, his hands are tied unless he has sufficient knowledge of the soul. Although the spiritual director need not also to be the confessor, it would be impossible to give any spiritual direction if the director were to know nothing of the sins and imperfections of the individual.” Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, 392.

92. John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855. The Autobiography of St. John Bosco*, trans. Daniel Lyons, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, Lawrence Castelvocchi, and Michael Mendl (New Rochelle, NY: Don Bosco Publications, 1989). 313. [Henceforth, MO]. In the Regole, Don Bosco writes that the first act of charity of the new Society would be to welcome the poor and abandoned young to teach them the Catholic religion. If however the necessity arises to

a job. Our Founder never denied any of these demands. He studied their needs, observed, listened and then found ways and means to address those needs, especially spiritual needs. The need and search for material help by the young served as an *initiation* process that Don Bosco would eventually use as a stepping-stone to start caring for their spiritual needs. He helped them to recognize that God is aware, like a genuine father, of these *material needs* and that he will provide for all. He would however not let the material problems remain the focus of their attention but rather he shifted the focus and importance on their spiritual progress and growth.⁹³

Age groups

Persons accompanied vary in both age and gender. In the majority of the houses opened by Don Bosco, the prevailing interest was in pre-adolescents and adolescents⁹⁴ who were attending activities at the oratories or were

give these young people a home where they can also find food and shelter, then houses could be opened for this purpose. However, one can see that in Don Bosco's mind, the first and ultimate necessity was the religious education of the young. The material needs of the young were catered for but within a context where religion education and the instruction in Christian perfection prevail. See Bosco, *Regole o Costituzioni della Società di San Francesco di Sales, The Aim of the Society of St. Francis de Sales*, articles 3 and 4, 53-54, in OE 29 [251-[252]. Henceforth, OE will refer to Giovanni Bosco, *Opere Edite, Prima Serie: Libri e opuscoli*, 37 vols. (Roma: LAS, 1976-1977). The numbers preceding the volume number, refer to chapter, number of paragraph (if any) and the page number of the original publication of Don Bosco. The number in [n] indicates the page number of the volume indicated.

93. To avoid any temptation to move into idealism, we can also observe that many young people sought Don Bosco only because they knew he would help them in their material needs. Indeed, many just passed through the Oratory and once they had their short-term needs satisfied, they moved on. On the approach Don Bosco used in the introduction to the young, see also Aldo Giraudo, "«Gli feci conoscere tutto me stesso»: Aspetti dell'accompagnamento spirituale dei giovani secondo don Bosco," in *Quaderni di Spiritualità Salesiana, Nuova Serie* no. 2 (Roma: LAS, 2004), 51-52.

94. During Don Bosco's time, and the terminology used to describe adolescents was 'giovannotti' or 'giovani' or 'ragazzi'. The term properly used for developmental studies was used much later than Don Bosco's time. Yet, the term adolescence had already "appeared in the fifteenth century. The term was a derivative of the Latin word *adolescere*, which means to grow up or to grow maturity. However, more than 1,500 years before this first explicit use of the term adolescence, both Plato and Aristotle proposed sequential demarcations of the life span, and Aristotle in particular proposed stages of life that are not dissimilar from sequences that might be included in contemporary models of youth development. He described three successive, seven-year periods (infancy, boyhood, and young manhood) prior to the full, adult maturity. About 2,000 years elapsed between these initial philosophical discussions of adolescence and the emergence within the twentieth

students at Salesian colleges and schools.⁹⁵

Braido states that Don Bosco's pedagogy is a youthful, juvenile pedagogy, a pedagogy that gave a wider meaning and connotation to terms such as "young" and "young people." Still, the main attention was centered on pre-adolescents and adolescents. If one looks, for example, at the various biographies or biographical narratives written by Don Bosco these were mainly addressed to boys between eleven and sixteen years of age.⁹⁶

Braido also refers to the *Regolamenti* for externs, that is, for those who attended the Oratory, and for Salesian houses. In fact, Don Bosco was very specific in these rules about the age of the young who should be admitted. He writes "We accept eight-year olds; therefore those younger boys who cause disturbances and who are incapable of understanding what is taught, must be excluded."⁹⁷ With this statement, we can perceive that Don Bosco considered the age of eight as the "age of reason", that is, when a child is capable to understanding that which is being transmitted and is able to comprehend its meaning. Younger children would "cause disturbances" because they are still unable to make a difference between various activities, like play and study.

century of scientific study of this period of life." Richard M. Lerner and Laurence Steinberg, eds. *Individual Bases of Adolescent Development*, vol. 1 of *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2009), 3. The "study of adolescent development is a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Until that time, adolescence as a stage of life was not formally recognized. Individuals passed from a short childhood into an early adulthood without the marginal in-between space called adolescence. Both with the spread of industrialization and urbanization in the late 1900s, many young people were removed from the work force and adolescence became a cause of major concern. The first conceptualization of adolescence occurred in G. Stanley Hall's monumental two-volume work, *Adolescence*, published in 1904." See *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, s.v. "Adolescent Development."

95. These two groups were at the center of Don Bosco's attention. Braido states that to be able to understand Don Bosco's Preventive System, one need to bear in mind the age bracket of the young people with whom our Don Bosco worked. He took it under his personal responsibility to see to the formation of the young especially in environments such as the festive Oratories, the Valdocco oratory and schools, the colleges at Mirabello Monferrato and of Lanzo Torinese, followed by those of Alassio and Varazze and others. See Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere*, 197

96. See Pietro Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*, Studi 11 (Roma: LAS, 1999), 198.

97. Bosco, *Regolamento dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales per gli esterni*, Second Part, Chapter 2, nr. 3, 30 in OE 29 [60]. "Si ricerca l'età di otto anni, perciò si sono esclusi i ragazzini, come quelli che cagionano disturbo, e sono incapaci di capire quello che ivi s'insegna." [My translation].

Definitively, Braido states, Salesian oratories, schools and colleges catered for boys aged between eight and eighteen with a probable prevalence of the ages between twelve and sixteen years.⁹⁸

While it is significant to underline the importance of the spiritual accompanist, and in our case, the presence of Don Bosco, in the person accompanied we should not overlook the spiritual development of the young person. The young person, as previously stated, does not come to the accompanist void of any spiritual experience. God precedes the accompanist in the life of the individual. Therefore, it is also important to look into the religious elements concerning the spiritual growth of the person accompanied. So, in the case of a very young child, who takes the first initiative towards this spiritual growth?

Eternal salvation is never conditioned or confined to a given age. Grace is a gift that the Spirit of God can give to every being even if this being has only just been conceived. It is the Spirit that helps the individual to participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.⁹⁹ Therefore, the first initiative comes from God himself. Through baptism, the child receives his supernatural framework; he is purified, and Divine grace is infused in him. Thus, his faculties are well equipped to become supernatural; in other words, the theological virtues are present in the child through this infusion of grace. Nevertheless, his faculties are dormant, and his supernatural gifts remain unused until such time when he can use both his intelligence and free will. It is precisely up to educators and accompanists to help the child to make good use of the grace received and to bring it to its full spiritual potential.¹⁰⁰ Still, it must bear repeating, that it is God who takes the first initiative. He “does not need anyone’s help to relate to people. But the human other does seek help to develop his or

98. See Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere*, 198. Concerning terminology, Braido states that both in the talks given and in his writings, Don Bosco fluctuated between various terms, varying from children to young people to adolescents. These terms interchanged regularly. It seems, however, that Don Bosco made a difference between the term “child” (*fanciullo*) and “young man” (*giovane*). The former was used to refer to young people between the age of 8 and 11 and the latter for those between the age of 12 and 16. See Braido, *Prevenire non reprimere*, 198.

99. See *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, s.v. “Adolescenza/Adolescente.”

100. See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, Ascétique et Mystique, Doctrine et Histoire*, vol. 4.1 s.v. “Enfant.”

her relationship with God.”¹⁰¹ The work of the accompanist is to help the individual to establish and strengthen this relationship with God.

Each person passes through different stages of a bio-psychological development. Some of these development periods take time, as in the case of physical growth; others are rapid psychological transformations. The Spirit of God introduces the human conscience to the participation of the Mystery, and it does this gradually, in segments so to speak, while it takes into consideration the present bio-psychological stage of each person. The Church, in fact, introduces the young Christian to the sacraments during such an age where the young person is presumed to be more inspired by God rather by his personal views, an age where he is self-conscious and thus can commit himself to spiritual growth. This self-consciousness helps him to organize his life in such a way that it aims at the transcendental, around which all his supernatural life revolves.¹⁰²

The age of reason is usually considered that age when a child is capable of employing his spiritual potentials. In fact, at this age, the child starts to act virtuously, as soon as he recognizes his love for God and that God is worthy of adoration. Consequently, the child is capable of moral discernment, able to tell right from wrong. At this age, he is also capable of abandoning his ego-centrism, which is common in young children and recognizes the fact that others exist too. Therefore, he nourishes a new behavior manifested in his respect towards other persons. This new behavior makes him capable of building relationships, and this nurtures in him a sense of obedience, acceptance, and self-giving. At this age of reason, the child is capable of sensing the real presence of God.¹⁰³

Not all young people, however, arrive at the age of reason at the same time. In many cases, particularly when there is a lack of parental education, some children lack any sense of respect towards others, and this leaves them lingering in an egocentrism where they see themselves as the center of everything and of everyone's attention. Such situations can delay the passage to the age of reason. On the other hand, children who are gifted and accompanied by their parents, arrive at the age of reason before the age of seven. St. Francis de Sales is one example of this early passage. He was very reflective, even at a tender age. Observing his parents, and especially his mother, the presence of God became something very personal for him. He

101. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 31.

102. See *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, s.v. “Adolescenza/Adolescente.”

103. See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, s.v. “Enfant.”

came to understand God's tender love and, although was still very young, he strove to please Him and to become a better person. Biographers assert that young Francis' first phrase was "God and my mother love me so much."¹⁰⁴

How can one discern the development of spiritual life in a child? Nobody can say whether a person received grace *in se* or not. However, this should not dishearten us. There are certain traits and signs through which one can presume that grace is present in a child. Such traits and signs would also be *indicators* of the progress of grace within the child. To be able to verify these advances, it is important to look for four major signs: the desire for God; the contempt for worldly pleasures and the absence of grave sin are the first three signs. The fourth sign to look for is a particular tenderness which is hard to find in others and which creates a sense of great joy and peace within the child.¹⁰⁵ On reading the biographies written by Don Bosco, in particular, those of Dominic Savio and Francis Besucco, one finds these signs present in their lives, even at an early age in their childhood and which Don Bosco noticed in both of them and which through his accompaniment became powerful means to achieve Christian perfection and personal holiness.¹⁰⁶

Still, one must be aware that a young child is unable to reflect and to express his feelings and perceptions. The signs that one should be on the lookout for, therefore, are those "silent signs" in the child's behavior. These signs are most revealing. For example, the desire for God is revealed in the child's predisposition towards meditation; in his serious attentiveness towards religious narrative; in his lighten-up facial expression during prayer; and in his hesitation on leaving a sacred place, like the church or the chapel.¹⁰⁷ As

104. See Étienne-Jean Lajeunie, Saint Francis de Sales. The Man, the Thinker, his Influence, 2 vols. trans. Rory O'Sullivan (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1986-1987), 1:20-23.

105. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, s.v. "Enfant."

106. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, s.v. "Enfant." While in the case of Savio and Besucco's this element of conversion seems to have come natural, in Magone it took a little longer. See Bosco, Cenzo biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales, 16-24, in OE 13 [170]-[178].

107. Dominic Savio was four years old and, according to the testimony given by his parents to Don Bosco, he was already able to recite his prayers with great devotion. They attested that there was no need for them to remind him of his piety. On the contrary, at that age, he was the one who invited others to recite the prayers with him. See Bosco, Vita del Giovanetto Savio Domenico, Allievo dell'oratorio di San Francesco Di Sales, 13, in OE 11 [163]. See also Bosco, Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d'Argentera, in OE 15, 10 – 11 [252]-[253], and 13-14 [255]-[256].

a child, Francis de Sales would frequently think about God and of how he could please Him and become a genuine person. Francis, at such a young age, had a natural inclination towards piety and those who closely knew him observed that this child was filled with the love of God.¹⁰⁸

Therese of Lisieux also seems to have begun contemplating God's love for her since an early age. One day a neighbor heard her and her mother talking about religious practices. The neighbor was intrigued to hear such a little child discuss religion and asked Therese's mother about the matter:

This poor little one is our happiness, she will be good, you can already see it coming. All she talks about is God; she wouldn't miss saying her prayers for anything. I wish you could see her reciting little fables; I've never seen anything so nice. All by herself she finds the expression that she needs to give, and the tone, but it's especially when she says, 'Little blonde-haired child, where do you think God is?' When she comes to 'He's up there in the blue sky,' she turns her face upward with an angelic expression. We never get tired of having her do it, it's so beautiful. There's something so heavenly in her look that we're quite taken by it!¹⁰⁹

When it comes to the contempt of world things, one can observe a particular sign within the child: that of a great sense of altruism. This altruism renders the child disinterested in possessing or to keep everything that he has himself. The manifestation of such a sign can be seen in the child's joy when a friend achieves something successfully or when he makes himself available towards the needs of others. Dominic Savio had a great disposition in helping his parents. He would wait for his father to return home from work and he would see to it that he takes his rest. At the age of five, he was already serving Holy Mass and after would remain praying in Church, which for him was an occasion of great, inner joy.¹¹⁰ We can apply the same thing to Francis Besucco. He too had nurtured a love for prayer and the Church from a tender

108. See Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales*, 1:17.

109. See Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, translated and edited by Robert J. Edmonson (Brewster, MS: Paraclete Press, 2006, 21-22.

110. The testimony given by Savio's parish priest indicates that divine grace could already be seen and observed in the young child. See Bosco, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico*, 12-17, in OE 11 [162]-[167].

age and had nurtured a great sense of altruism reflected in his love, affection, and attention shown towards his sick godmother.¹¹¹

One of the most distinctive signs, if not the most significant, which indicate the existence of an interior life in a child, is a certain degree of peace and joy. There are quite a few treatises written about the development of spiritual life in the life of many holy individuals. What is common in many of these treatises is precisely how spiritual life expresses itself in the life of young individuals. Writing with hindsight, Therese of Lisieux exclaims:

Oh, Mother! How happy I was at that age. Already I was beginning to enjoy life. Virtue had its charms for me, and I was, it seems to me, already disposed in the same way I am now, already having great control over my actions. Ah! How quickly they passed by, those sunny years of my early childhood, but what a sweet imprint they left on my soul!¹¹²

There also seems to be a pattern in the development of spiritual life in these young subjects. There is a moment of ‘conversion’ or rather one’s orientation towards God; the stage of contemplation, or rather the encounter with the Lord; discernment of one’s vocation or call; the struggling with disorderly inclinations; detachment from self; and helping others to find God and to serve Him. Conversion is an important indication of the presence of a spiritual life within the child. In the cases of those children with a ready disposition towards the Divine, this is verified at a very early stage. St. Therese of the Child Jesus revealed that since the age of three she never refused anything to God.¹¹³ However, in other children, conversion comes through a radical transformation. An example of this conversion is that of Anne de Guigné, who in her early childhood was known to be a capricious, jealous and spoilt child.¹¹⁴ At the age of four, she lost her father. The grief she experienced matured into a spiritual renewal. From this point onwards, her life was a life of charity towards others and in an intimate union with God.

Nonetheless, it is not always easy to discern such signs of holiness in children. According to some observers, virtuous, heroic acts are possible in a child even before the age of seven. Others affirm that this is not achievable

111. See Bosco, *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero Vita del giovane Besucco Francesco d’Argentera*, 12-13, in OE 15 [254]-[255].

112. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, 22.

113. Therese experienced this precisely in the year her mother died of breast cancer, in 1877. See Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, in particular, chapter 2, 24-46.

114. The Venerable Anne de Guigné born on 25 April 1911 in Annecy-le-Vieux, Haute-Savoie, France; died in Cannes, Alpes-Maritimes, France on January 14, 1922.

without an extraordinary Divine intervention. Still, one should not confuse this controversy of the possibility of heroic virtues within the child with the beginning of the age of reason. Before the age of reason, children are under the direction of the Holy Spirit, who leads them in their spiritual life. Childhood is an age to live in intimacy with God especially through the medium of prayer. Various published biographies confirm that between the ages of four and five there comes about in the child a complete self-consecration to the Lord.¹¹⁵ Therefore, during childhood, the Spirit of God can also incline the child's heart towards holiness and personal sanctification; holiness is not time/age-barred. The accompanist becomes the instrument and is obliged to facilitate such sentiments of holiness under the guidance of the Spirit.

The adolescent, on the other hand, is considered as being already capable of attaining holiness, an ability that differs from that of an adult. In the adolescent, holiness is more fragile and precarious because it is constantly engaged in trying to conquer other inclinations that surface during adolescence. Perfection in charity in an adult, therefore, would be more deeply rooted and enriched with more experience than that of an adolescent. While charity in the adolescent is still spontaneous, in an adult subject it would have reached a deeper level of asceticism. The adolescent is still in the phase, as it were, of the enthusiastic novice, embarking on a new experience.¹¹⁶

Dominic Savio had this innate desire, engrossed in his enthusiasm as he was, to become a saint. He acted in a natural way, as an adolescent would do, and many times left his enthusiasm to take over his reasoning. Here we need to underline Don Bosco's ability in guiding this young soul. He helped the

115. See *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, s.v. "Adolescenza/Adolescente." Such examples can be found in St. Therese of the Child Jesus, in Anne de Guigné, St. Gertrude (1256 – 1302), St. Catherine of Siena, St. Peter Faber, and St. Francis de Sales.

116. See *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, s.v. "Adolescenza/Adolescente." When a major event occurs in the life of the adolescent, this can be a turning point and his asceticism becomes strong and deep. Young models of holiness are still relevant today. We would like to offer just two examples that might help the Salesian accompanist as models in accompanying the young. Gianluca Firetti, a Salesian animator from the province of Cremona in Italy, who died at the age of twenty, is significant. He was brought up and educated within a Salesian environment. His determination to face the cruel fate of death, and his witness given with fortitude when he discovered that he was suffering from a sarcoma tumor, is an example of modern sainthood. Another model is that of Blessed Chiara Luce Badano (1971-1990). Chiara, an extraordinary young lady, was also diagnosed with cancer at a very young age. She too gave witness with her fortitude that can serve our young people well. Both Gianluca and Chiara left diaries written during their years of suffering and which can offer a good insight of their spiritual growth and especially in their strengthened relationship with Jesus Christ in their time of trial.

young person to strike a dialogue between his interiority and external actions and to prioritize that which pleases God. Moreover, he did this, without undermining the young Savio's enthusiasm.

Religious formation in early childhood is essentially a formation in prayer. In his infantile psyche, the child perceives prayer and religious or Christian life as one and the same thing. His religious ideas, in some ways, are influenced and determined by the experience of his parents and by the environment in which he is brought up.¹¹⁷ Thus, the child perceives the first image of God from those who surround him, especially if these significant others offer tenderness and love. The role and presence of the mother in the young person's life seem to be of utmost importance. In the development of his religious experience and life, the young child drinks from the source of his mother's own faith and witness. The figure of the mother is found at the first recitation of the first prayers, at the first confession, at the first Holy Communion, and at Confirmation. The mother also seems to give her child certain 'independence' in the practice of piety, although the young person remains very much attached to his parents.¹¹⁸ Mamma Margaret, had a profound influence on John Bosco's spiritual life, life of piety and life in general:

John modeled himself on his mother. Later, we shall see in him the same faith, the same purity, the same love of prayer. Margaret's patience, fearlessness, constancy, trust in God, zeal for the salvation of souls, simplicity and gentleness of manner, charity toward all, untiring diligence, prudence in managing affairs, careful supervision of dependents and serenity in the face of adversity will, in time, manifest itself in John Bosco. Margaret's personality was to leave its imprint on him just as an image leaves its likeness on a photographic plate.¹¹⁹

This behavior by the child's parents brings a sense of the presence of God within his perception. When he observes others pronouncing the name of God with a profound respect, he enters into the realm of the mystery of God.

117. See Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità, s.v. "Adolescenza/Adolescente."

118. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, s.v. "Enfant."

119. See The Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco, 16 volumes, ed. Diego Borgatello (New Rochelle, NY: Salesiana Publishers, 1965-1988). This work is the English translation of the first sixteen volumes from the Italian original, 1:31-32. [Henceforth, BM].

The spiritual life of the child also develops through his participation in the acts of piety practiced by his parents.¹²⁰

Subsequently, when the child enters into adolescence, he needs to be guided in practicing prayer. It would also benefit him spiritually if he understands his prayer to be theocentric. In this way, he will learn that God answers our prayer, even when there is no direct request, and that prayer is destined to assimilate his wishes and desires with the divine will.¹²¹

Do children experience a sense of asceticism? Children, in general, even those of a young age, do not experience inner struggles or the insight of having overcome themselves. However, their sense of mortification is saturated with such cheerfulness that austerity seems to be a joyful experience. Young children do not have the time to cultivate in themselves egoistic habits and passions are not as strong as they are in an adult person. Still, some young

120. See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, s.v. "Enfant." John Bosco had the same personal experience, as did Dominic Savio and Francis Besucco. The household environment in which they were brought up permeated with the presence of God. As young children, all of them learned their first prayers through observing their parents, or godparents and grandparents, for that matter. They perceived the first image of God, and thus, a taste of the Divine Mystery, through the observation of the behavior of their parents and their practice of the acts of piety.

121. See *Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità*, s.v. "Adolescenza/Adolescente." Don Bosco uses various examples of parents in his narratives to bring out the contrast between parents who sought the spiritual and religious of their children and others who were careless and the implications of such behavior in the life of the child/adolescent. See, for example, the case of Pietro in *La forza della buona educazione*, IV, in OE 6 [278]. The mother, in the case of Pietro, was the one who educated her son to the faith and resisted any attempt by her husband who wanted his son to work and was not bothered with his spiritual well-being. The same was in the case of Valentino in *Valentino o la vocazione impedita*, 3-6, in OE 27 [181]-[184]. After his mother's death, his father forced his son to concentrate more on his career rather on religious things, as his late mother had taught him. Because of his father's bad decisions, Valentino changed his life completely. In the case of Severino, it was the father who was his son's great model. The mother seems to have been too much preoccupied with worldly pleasures. See, *Severino ossia avventure di un giovane alpigiano*, 5-16, in OE 20 [5]-[16]. Severino himself tells this narrative, according to Don Bosco. It is written in the first person. The model of the kind mother is also highlighted in the narrative *Angelina o la buona fanciulla istruita nella vera divozione a Maria Santissima*, 35-61, in OE 13 [7]-[15]. These narratives were intended by Don Bosco to educate not only the young readers but also to educate parents. He will, later on, insist that the Salesian accompanist or educator, need to take the place of the parents, especially the role of the father, because he knew that many of his young students came from difficult backgrounds and with little parental education, especially were religious and moral issues were concerned. The Salesian accompanist was invited to pick up the pieces of any broken life he encountered, and rebuild it again.

persons do have a difficult character and carry with them the burden of this behavioral element that can result in jealousy and egocentrism. When a child grows, however, he becomes more aware of his defects, and he overcomes them through Divine grace and assistance.¹²² Subsequently, in adolescence Divine grace attracts the young subject to a life of asceticism, his fervor towards Sacramental life and to a life of prayer increase. Michael Magone underwent this transformation. His teachers observed a change in him, especially, an interior transformation that reflected on his external actions.¹²³

To educate the child spiritually, an essential prerequisite is a climate created and prepared by the accompanist. The desired climate that helps in the spiritual development of the child is an atmosphere of interior silence and a sense of interior peace. A child can only discover the 'invisible' world if he is helped to create within himself a sense of interior peace and tranquility. It can be further aided by a peaceful and calm environment.¹²⁴ The environment created by Don Bosco struck a balance between different times of the day. There were moments when the children were expected to run and to play, but there were also moments when they were required to be silent and calm. It was Don Bosco's manner of helping the children not only in developing a sense of balance in their lives but also to help them to reflect especially during studies and church celebrations. Needless to say, for Don Bosco each activity was permeated with the notion that God is present and that he sees everyone. Consequently, in all that which the young were invited to participate in, they were at the same time 'educated' that they were doing God's will if they performed it well, whether it was study, recreation or prayer.¹²⁵

Under the guidance of the accompanist, the young person's spiritual life becomes stronger through the dialogue he cultivates with the young. The point of departure should always be that God loves every one of us like a

122. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, s.v. "Enfant."

123. See Alberto Caviglia, "Il «Magone Michele» una classica esperienza educativa" in *Opere e scritti editi e inediti di "Don Bosco" nuovamente pubblicati e riveduti secondo le edizioni originali e manoscritti superstiti a cura della Pia Società Salesiana*, 6 vol. (Torino: SEI, 1929-1965), 5:150-151.

124. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, s.v. "Enfant."

125. Even the physical structures of the environment, like the chapel and the church, can serve as signs that have a spiritual value. One can also add the austere and the meager way of life that are lived within the environment where the child lives or attends school. The visible world is a symbol of the invisible one. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, s.v. "Enfant." This aspect of the austere, frugal and poor environment was the personal experience of Don Bosco as a young boy at Becchi. It was also the experience of Dominic

father does. To achieve this, the accompanist needs to know how to awaken interiorly those religious sentiments of the adolescent through docility, and through good and explained instructions. He should also bring in the spiritual relationship some concrete examples from daily life experience. He should make good use of stories, symbols and examples that awaken the child's interest and his pondering on the Mystery of God.¹²⁶ Don Bosco used this medium well and with a high-frequency awakening in his listeners and readers an awe and reverence towards the Divine. Indeed, his many books had this particular aim to love God with one's heart, mind, soul, and through imagination and creativity.¹²⁷ Sometimes the accompanist needs to illustrate a point through a narrative, which should not be too heavy that it will become difficult to understand, but simple, eloquent and clear.¹²⁸

The young person also needs to be directed well when it comes to speaking about the delicate subject of sin. The Divine law should be taught in the light of a loving and awesome God. The accompanist must bring the person of Jesus Christ into the equation. It is Jesus Christ who shows us the

Savio, Michael Magone, and Francis Besucco. All looked upon the poverty and austerity of their home environment as a means of detachment rather than as a means of desperation.

126. See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, s.v. "Enfant."

127. The director or educator should not only teach the child how to pray but should also join the child in prayer. Interior prayer, thus, will be aided through the gesture of the director. It is also aided through eloquence. Under the guidance of the director and the Holy Spirit, the child will come to know that Christ is the mediator as well as learning to be in communion with Mary Most Holy and the Saints. The first prayers taught, are also sometimes aided by readings from the Scriptures and episodes from the life of the saints. Scripture readings help the young Christian to enrich his spiritual life and to prepare him for various stages of the practice of prayer, that is, a prayer of adoration and of praise, prayer of reparation and of thanksgiving, a prayer of offering and of requesting. The practice and reciting of prayers also introduce the children to the sacramental life, especially in preparation for confirmation and the receiving of the Holy Eucharist. See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, s.v. "Enfant."

128. However, it bears repeating, that the accompanist should present these not as a personal experience. Once an accompanist starts talking about himself and his experiences, spiritual accompaniment is imperiled. The young person will get confused and will try hard to decipher the messages he is receiving. It will lead to a complete loss of trust in the accompanist on the part of the young person. The spiritual accompaniment is not a personal or particular relationship. Don Bosco was strongly against this. The spiritual accompaniment is based on a spiritual friendship and introducing one's life experiences and events, will not help in edifying such a friendship. The center of attention for the accompanist is the person accompanied, his life story, his life experience, his experience and relationship of and with God.

way to the Father. Thus, it is important to assert the essential moral teaching of Jesus Christ: to transform one's heart towards God by loving, and serving Him and by loving our neighbors as ourselves; and to love others as he, the Lord, loved us.¹²⁹

We tend to agree with David Benner when he states that spiritual accompaniment is not moral guidance.¹³⁰ There will be occasions when sin comes up in spiritual accompaniment, and yes, young people tend to ask quite a few questions about sin and moral issues. The accompanist needs to be very prudent and attentive not to turn spiritual accompaniment into a catechism lesson, which the young person might find to be uninteresting and monotonous. The accompanist needs to enter into dialogue with the young person. Salesian accompanists need to realize that they are spiritual pedagogues accompanying the young on life's journey and encounter with God. André Louf articulates this very well when he speaks of the faith of the person accompanied, which should not be reduced to a plethora of absolute truths. In that case the believer

Would be asked only to learn and memorize a certain number of notions, to be able to draw his own logically consequent conclusions. Then we would need a good theologian or an experienced catechist, not a pedagogue or someone to accompany our life!¹³¹

If Christian faith is to be considered as a code of moral laws, then it will be reduced to a *praxis* of a code of moral prescriptions and Christian experience

Would then consist fundamentally in the application of a morality founded on a certain number of sound, correct principles. Once again, we would need, not someone to accompany our life, but a convinced moralist, able to resolve by well-tested principles the moral dilemmas which would then present themselves.¹³²

Spiritual accompaniment, then, is an aid to help to explore the faith of the young in a deeper way. Faith needs to be seen in the context in which the young person is living, and the Salesian should accompany him how to live that faith, even if there are challenges to be faced and ways need to be changed.

How can one teach a young person a sense of detachment? The young, especially young children can be introduced to this subject through episodes

129. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, s.v. "Enfant."

130. Benner, *Sacred Companions*, 92.

131. Louf, *Grace Can Do More*, 34-35.

132. Louf, *Grace Can Do More*, 35.

from the Scriptures, especially from the Gospels. If one desires to follow the Lord, then one needs to know the teaching of Jesus himself when he spoke about the poor in spirit in the Beatitudes. Still, children tend to live a carefree life; they do not make any connection between what they have and possess and with gaining Heaven, between leaving everything behind and follow the Lord. Therefore, placing the Beatitudes in the context of the Commandments will help the child to understand. One can commence by inducing them to respect other people's possessions and property, respect for his person, the beauty of simplicity.

Of utmost importance is to teach the children to choose good from evil, to learn to be truthful and that their words reflect honesty.¹³³ In the case of adolescents, Scriptures is to be quoted not in sermon-style-kind-of-way but rather as a proposition for life. The young adult might be introduced to pray with the Word of God. A good way of doing this in spiritual accompaniment is to pray the Word of God together with the young person. It will also be helpful to ask him to reflect on a particular passage and to pray through it and during the next meeting, he and the accompanist might share with each other the richness of the text chosen.

The spiritual accompaniment focuses on the Spirit of God who speaks to us through the Word and through the signs of time. Christ's law, therefore, which was transmitted initially to the young person by his parents, will continue to be reminded of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of God that makes freedom from sin possible. The accompanist is the catalyst that the Spirit uses so that the child or the young person can purify his mind and thoughts. One cannot deny that each Christian is a sinner, even if he is only a child, and consequently is in need of God's mercy. It is in this light of God's mercy and his redeeming love that the discourse about sin should be explained. The young subject slowly and patiently should be introduced to make an examination of conscience. Through parables and other stories, the young person is helped to comprehend Divine Mercy, becomes aware

133. See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, s.v. "Enfant." Don Bosco, writing on how St. Aloysius Gonzaga viewed world possessions and his contempt for them, reminds the young that if they want to detach their hearts from the worldly possessions, they must start with those things that impede them from gaining eternal life and love those things that will help them achieve this life. That which is not eternal is null and void. This detachment from worldly possessions, Don Bosco writes, can be accomplished by frequenting the sacraments of confession and the Eucharist. These two sacraments are those that will gain other people's respect for the young and to help them detach themselves from earthly things and become attached to celestial possessions. See Bosco, *Il giovane provveduto*, First Part, The Six Sundays and the Novena of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, The Fourth Sunday, 61-62, in OE 2 [241]-[242].

of his fragility, and will accept failures.¹³⁴ Still, directing the young person to comprehend sin, failure, mercy, forgiveness and temptations is a long process. Don Bosco was quite aware of this, and his direction in these areas was patient and laborious.

Catholic spiritual accompaniment, apart from being done in the light of the Word of God, must lead the young person to see the sacraments as a significant event in his life. The two sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist as perceived and lived by Don Bosco, are grounded in Salesian spirituality. These two sacraments will, in a way, help the young person to spiritual maturity. The years that separate the First Holy Communion and Confirmation are significant years since it is during this period that the child will start to assimilate himself into the ecclesial community.¹³⁵

The Salesians should rediscover the period of years that separate First Holy Communion and Confirmation. It is the stage of transition, where there is fertile soil in which the accompanist plants the seed of spiritual life. We lose many young people after Confirmation because we lack in accompanying the young, during and after First Holy Communion. Sometimes we think that young children do not need the spiritual attention we usually give to adolescents and young adults. We are wrong. After their first reception of the Eucharist, the young need to be accompanied to continue to foster a relationship with God, with Christ and with the ecclesial community. The space separating the receiving of the two sacraments is the ideal period to initiate spiritual accompaniment.

Through the help of various means, both visual and symbolic, the child will enter into an age where he is capable of understanding God's action in the plan of salvation. At the same time, he will slowly enter into the spirit of the liturgy, learning its symbols and its acts, participating in a meaningful way in the life of the Church. The young person by now would have arrived at an age where he can become familiar with the Church's doctrine. It is also the time

134. See *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, s.v. "Enfant."

135. It is important to observe here, that spiritual accompaniment is done within a community. In the "Christian tradition what directors most basically bring to the relationship with directees is their membership in the Christian community and their sharing in the faith of that community. Whether or not they have special charisms, knowledge, and talents, they provide an opportunity for directees to look at their relationship with God and thread a path through their illusions with the help of a fellow member of the community. Even if directors say nothing, the fact that they listen enables directees to share their experience with the community and not close that experience in upon itself, where for want of air it could become crabbed and deluded." Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 128.

when the practices of piety and Christian life become established and become a part of life's program; they become a habitual practice.¹³⁶ The sacraments help the young to become more responsible. Personal responsibility and the spirit of Christ received through the sacraments must become the elements that animate each thought, each sentiment, free will, individual and social actions as well as spiritual actions of the young person. In this way, Christ, slowly but steadily, becomes the supreme form of every life.¹³⁷

The accompanist does not perform any spiritual miracles. He just induces the child or the adolescent to be aware of the transcendent. In many cases, the young person already perceives this Presence in him; the accompanist helps him to discover it more deeply. The greatest secret of the spiritual accompaniment of the young is to be attentive to the Holy Spirit, who guides each Christian – even the youngest. The accompanist helps to harmonize those external interventions to help the young person to heed to the call God is making through the Spirit.

Finally, the accompanist, besides cooperating with Divine Grace, should also be aware of the psychological development of the young person. Through this awareness, he can help the young person to go through the various developmental stages of childhood and enter adolescence without anxiety, especially without that stress which much of the time one encounters in the spiritual sphere where doubts, fears, and uncertainties can hinder their advancement in spiritual growth.

In the next part of the article, we will be discussing spiritual friendship and its meaning in accompaniment, experience and its role in the spiritual accompaniment of the young and at Don Bosco's personal spiritual experience, which becomes a model in Salesian accompaniment.

136. See Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, s.v. "Enfant."

137. See Dizionario Enciclopedico di Spiritualità, s.v. "Adolescenza/Adolescente."