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Personal Accompaniment in the Salesian Educative-Pastoral Plan

*by Miguel Angel Garcia, SDB.
translated by Thomas Juarez, SDB*

“Climbing a mountain for the first time and without a guide is a risk that can cost one’s life.”

-Thomas Merton

In many a document the Church has defined the nature, goal and elements of youth ministry and has included it neatly in the methods of evangelization in its different stages. We can proudly say that the Salesian educative-pastoral plan has been, and continues to be, in line with the Church’s evangelizing mission. The following pages are meant to open a window through which we can see and examine the paths traversed by the many pastoral agents who offer this project to the youth of today.

This study revolves around a series of questions. The first is: “Why is personal accompaniment important in Salesian Youth Ministry”. The second deals with those involved: “Who are these young people, what is the profile of the mentor, and what is the situation? The third is much more practical: “In the Salesian educative-pastoral plan, what are the areas to be considered by the mentor”?

Faith Attains Spiritual Maturity with the Help of Accompaniment

A New Understanding of Faith

With the joy that springs from the Gospel, Pope Francis offers in his *Evangelii Gaudium* several key notions to guide the work of evangelization in our contemporary world. Inspired by him, we Catholics find ourselves in a privileged moment in which we can understand and deepen our faith in a cultural context in flux. The Pope invites us “to recover the original freshness of the Gospel”, to find “new avenues, new paths of creativity”, to “break through the dull categories with which we would enclose Jesus”. Pope Francis calls us to “a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things

as they presently are”; and “to reforming ecclesial structures... so that they become more mission-oriented” (*Evangelii Gaudium*).

The basic core of the faith does not change. Persons, however, do manipulate it, as does the milieu in which that faith must again be confessed and understood. In fact, in these times it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the first proclamation of the Gospel and the new evangelization of the baptized. The religious climate has undergone a great change even in the countries where the Church has been present for centuries.¹

Given this situation, we need a youth ministry plan which presents the core of the faith along with specific objectives, a plan which will lead the young to the heart of the Gospel, re-writing with them the Good News, unleashing new paths to authentic conversion and a deepening of one’s humanity. We must learn how to share our own faith in a way that is understandable in today’s youth culture.²

Because we are a religious family within the Church, we Salesians, place the evangelization of the young in the very heart of our pastoral activity because it is one of our most important priorities. As Salesians, we invite the young to encounter in the Gospel the true answer to their deepest yearnings. We believe that “the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.” With these words, Pope Francis’s begins the exhortation mentioned above. We do this at a historical moment, which is, one might add, difficult for the Church, and which is in constant transformation.

This current situation challenges us, raises differing reactions among pastoral agents; it changes our plans. If we wish to begin and to delve more deeply together with the new generations into the experience of the God of Jesus of Nazareth, we must recognize that the evangelizers must adopt a new frame of mind, with updated evangelizing strategies. Such strategies must be open to a lifestyle that makes them appealing to the young and must become models that challenge the idols of both the young and society in general. We need pedagogical and methodological alternatives within our pastoral work of evangelization if we are to come up with a new way to understand our faith, transmit it and live it. Years ago, that valuable and weighty apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), reminded us:

Evangelization ... for the Church is a question not only of preaching the Gospel ... but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gos-

1. Salesian Youth Ministry Department, Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference, (Rome: Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 2014), 167.

2. Frame of Reference, 167.

pel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.³

When we speak of pedagogical options, it means above all the attitudes and strategies to which we give priority when evangelizing the young; by methodological options, we refer to procedures and resources. One of these fundamental pedagogical-pastoral options is a personal spiritual accompaniment. This accompaniment is a relationship of temporary help. It is not meant to be for life because we give the young the necessary tools to empower them. The accompaniment offered is helpful, with four spiritual goals in mind: know oneself, accept oneself, enrich one's humanity, and present those Christian values which make one more Christ-like.

We say "spiritual" because spirituality is the way in which a person of depth lives, seeks authenticity within the self, with others and with God. The spiritual person goes to the heart and truth of himself. It is one's lifelong adventure, and one's inner struggle. It is a journey,⁴ which at certain moments requires the presence of a caring companion.

Here we see where a person recognizes a need, where his spirituality and ministry join hands to answer the call involving a qualitative leap in his life, namely to rediscover the value of the one-on-one dialogue as a method of spiritual accompaniment/direction. Just as the fish needs water if it wants to live, so youth ministry needs personal accompaniment for the life of the Christian; it is a necessary condition if the young are to examine their lives in the light of the Gospel. Should accompaniment be divorced from youth ministry, the evangelization process loses its power.

To interact with the young is a way to understand them better. We must convince ourselves that if we mean to come into contact with the world of the young in a hope-filled and honest way, we must rediscover the enormous possibilities that lie in personal accompaniment. So let us examine some possibilities or suggestions that might help in our outreach towards the young.

3. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 19. This apostolic exhortation takes a great step forward regarding evangelization. From the traditional concept which stressed the moment of proclaiming the Good News, it moves toward a more complex concept which embraces at least three stages: proclamation, witness, praxis.

4. See Richard Bergeron, Guy Lapointe, and Jean-Claude Petit, *Itinerances spirituelles* (Montreal: Médiaspaul, 2003).

An Environment with Many Options: Pastoral Accompaniment

Through the years Salesian youth ministry has developed different forms of accompanying the young. Despite the differences from one place to another, we can group them in three categories: *accompaniment in the milieu*, *existing groups*, and *personal accompaniment*.⁵ All of them can be found in our apostolic works and have helped in the formation of the young. Without a doubt and despite the many models, there has been an active Salesian presence among the youth. These three formative models are like interconnected rings which operate in the same young adult, but the how and the when are unpredictable because context and circumstances vary. One of the three models/experiences may be more predominant at a particular phase in the life of the person, yet to ensure success, that form of accompaniment must somehow include the other two.

The above three categories can be divided in different *levels* of accompaniment practiced in our daily pastoral action, all of them falling under the large “umbrella” which we call pastoral accompaniment, an expression with many connotations and which promises a vibrant youth ministry:

[a] In our Salesian praxis there is first of all the “*informal*” accompaniment consisting of those occasional gatherings which just happen, like conversations among friends. This simple accompaniment is the typical Salesian “assistance”. This kind of accompaniment may be a chance encounter that becomes prolonged throughout the day. It is a pastoral strategy. What might seem an irrelevant conversation may prove more valuable than a thousand lessons; the result may not appear until much later.

[b] We have that *accompaniment which deals with personal problems*: maturity moments of crisis, studies, family relationships, friendship, dating, crises of faith, feelings of guilt, and so forth. Then there are those painful instances which leave wounds and require immediate attention. At other times we find ourselves with persons who must make difficult moral decisions or recommit themselves to their values.

[c] Then there is that *accompaniment needed when the person is dealing with an experience of profound significance* which affects his conversations and feelings and remains rooted in his memory, for instance, illness, wounds from one’s past that leave grief if not tended to. These are not easy to heal. We believe that God does not abandon us in our doubts, trials, the things that leave us confused. In such personal experiences, our accompaniment must find appropriate gestures and words which restore strength and courage.

5. Frame of Reference, 122-125.

[d] A very different model is *accompaniment in groups*, for example, young couples, families, persons involved in formation programs, et cetera. In this case, the pastoral accompaniment is done in a communal setting where the individuals have already established close relationships.

[e] The final level is the *holistic accompaniment*, going far beyond one's problems and situation. We are talking about everything that affects the existence of the young adults. This existence includes the personal history of their traumatic moments and wounds; their moral and spiritual development; their maturity; their affectivity, sexuality and interpersonal relationships; their commitment to their responsibilities and vocation; the prayer life of those who are searching for God through dialogue with Jesus. The young will not open themselves to another unless they sense genuine concern and are in a place which insures confidentiality.

All of these experiences are formative. *Personal spiritual accompaniment* in this last level demands a method, a pedagogical and spiritual itinerary, which ultimately leads to Jesus and to his Good News as a way to see and interpret reality. This personal spiritual accompaniment holds a place of honor in Salesian Youth Ministry. No experience, program or group activity can replace this person-to-person encounter. It is a unique space in which it is possible to detect and follow the work of the Spirit in the life of that person,⁶ guiding him in reading his personal story in the center of the history of salvation.⁷

A Spiritual Journey: A Pedagogical Plan

The spiritual accompaniment is the “art of arts”⁸ and the “science of all sciences, the guide of the human being who is the most original of all beings”.⁹ It helps the young person to experience and embrace his entire

6. See Guido Gatti, “La legge dello Spirito che da la vita”, in *Accompagnare i giovani nello Spirito*, Jesus Manuel Garcia ed. (Rome: LAS, 1998), 127-140.

7. William Barry and William Connolly define personal accompaniment as “the assistance which a Christian gives to another, the purpose of which is to make that person sensitive and attentive to God who speaks to him; this help prepares him to respond, to grow in intimacy with Him and accept the consequences resulting from this relationship. This kind of spiritual direction centers not on concepts but on spiritual experiences of the Divine Presence.” See William Barry and William J. Connolly, *Practica della direzione spirituale* (Milan: Edizioni O. R. 1990), 30.

8. Gregory The Great, *Regulae pastorales*, Liber I, I, 3: PL. 77,14. See John Paul II, *Letter to Priests*, Holy Thursday, 1979.

9. Gregory Nazianzen, *Apologetica*, II, XVI: PG 35, 426B.

being: his personal history, talents, defects, plans, limitations, illusions, fears and dreams. It affects and involves every aspect of his life precisely because it is the entire person whom God calls, and it is the entire person who chooses to follow Jesus. This accompaniment is meant to reach into the depths of the person, assisting him in recognizing, embracing and responding generously to God's call in such a way that it heals and makes one whole. This conscious acceptance of one's self together with one's limitations differs from what humanist psychology defines as "unconditional acceptance". Its aim is to energize one's life, not just Christian or spiritual life, but also life in its every dimension: we cannot *disassociate the life of faith from one's emotional, biographical and personal life experiences*.

This pedagogical and spiritual model, which is both the foundation and the guide of spiritual accompaniment, must include at least two closely bound elements: personalization and evangelical discernment.

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As regards "personalization", we must keep in mind that personal development involves, first and foremost, a relationship between the subject and God. The one who accompanies does not bind the other to himself, he neither seduces nor controls him. He invites the young person to entrust himself to him. In doing so, the one who accompanies will be helping him *to operate from within* rather than from outside himself. He also invites him to be faithful to the truth of his inner self; namely, to live in obedience to the workings of the Holy Spirit, who wishes the authentic transformation of the self in God's own time and through discernment of the choices to be made.¹⁰ The young adult is not someone already made; he must be molded, discovered throughout the process of personal transformation. In accompaniment, one is presented with a path beginning with his concrete reality, his gifts and the current state of mind, all of which suggest a series of steps to be taken leading eventually to complete development.

The spiritual accompaniment is a different way of saying "spiritual direction", but today the former is preferred especially in the area of youth ministry since it describes the relationship between one who "walks with" another, rather than one who gives direction to the life of the other. To dedicate oneself to the world of the young and to walk side by side with them raises countless questions in every educator. There is the need for the presence

10. See Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart. Discovering a Personal God* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1993).

of wise persons. We must understand and empathize with the young: see with their eyes, understand their mindsets and emotions. If we can do so, we will quickly win their trust.

Together with personalization, discernment *in line with the Gospel* is necessary.¹¹ The accompaniment is not a factory that produces answers. Rather it raises the questions that initiate the discernment process, a process that has profound theological import for the journey of the followers of Jesus. It is much more than ‘counseling’ or other such procedures.¹²

It is hard to live the values of the Kingdom in these times of such rapid cultural changes, conflicting value systems, and alternate lifestyles. Today’s pastoral ministry is more aware of one’s personal autonomy when confronted with many options and the enormous diversity of situations in which Christians find themselves. In our ministry of discernment, we must respect the individual’s understanding of the interior life, as skilled educators who can lead one to a gradual awakening of the faith. The bishops of Quebec wisely state, that “We must understand that for many young people, given the conditions in which they find themselves, this faith, fragmented and with little coherence, often represents the extent of their faith.”¹³

Discernment is an outlook on life and a requirement for Christian living. It is not a technique; rather, it is a permanent state of attention and the giving

11. Jesus Saster, *El Acompañamiento espiritual* (Madrid: San Pablo, 1994); Jose Ramon Urbieto, *Bajo el Impulso del Espíritu. Acompañar a los jóvenes en su crecimiento personal de la fe* (Madrid: SM, 1986); and by same, *Acompañamiento de los jóvenes: construir la identidad personal* (Madrid: PPC, 1998).

12. Giuseppe Mazzocato in *Scienze della psiche e libertà dello spirito: counseling, relazioni di aiuto e accompagnamento spirituale* (Padova: Messaggero - Facoltà teologica del Triveneto, 2009).

13. Donaciano Martínez, Pelayo Gonzales, and José L. Saborido, *Proponer la fe hoy. De lo heredado a lo propuesto* (Santander: Editorial Sal Terrae, 2005), 173. In conclusion, it is important that we know of the many different methods of accompaniment, and to be aware that those in need of it are not living in a perfect state of Christian life: “The first step is to begin the journey towards a deeper Christian life; this is followed by a personal spiritual and deeper experience of God or when he surrenders to plot his future life and decides on his vocation; finally, this a now a new person, with a clear vocational choice, remaining faithful to his plan of life as a disciple of Christ. Rather than categorizing this person pulsating with life, we might better distinguish between a mentoring that molds the person, a mentoring that initiates spiritual growth, a mentoring that nurtures Christian discipleship (adult Christian living)”. Josep M. Rambla, *No anticiparse al Espíritu. Variaciones sobre el acompañamiento espiritual* (Barcelona: Cristianisme I Justicia, 2010), 4 -5.

of oneself. This state of awareness was the permanent disposition of Jesus, Mary and many others; *complete openness and total availability*. One of the results is, therefore, the *vocational question*.¹⁴ Discernment is not equivalent to applying laws nor making conjectures. Its aim is not to find one's place in life; rather, it is nothing more than loving and being available. It is not a question of arriving at a fixed point; instead, it aims to help one to establish his relationship with God, thoroughly aware of his limitations and at the same time banking on the grace given to him. So every decision concerning one's vocation is always preceded and nourished by discernment. In other words, there is an important connection between vocational choice and discernment. Moreover, when a person becomes more involved in an apostolic group and one of the Church's charisms, his sense of belonging and of discipleship are strengthened.

If the purpose of evangelization is meant to nurture the relationship between the young person and the Lord through personal, serious and meaningful dialogue, then the vocational dimension must be an integral element of Salesian youth ministry. Our mission as pastoral agents is to be *of service to the person who allows himself to be found by God* to find him, the God who knows each one by name and is actively present in each of us in an incredible and unique way. The pastoral activity must result in helping one find his place in the world and the Church. This aim is the final stage of all pastoral activity, one's life project.

Today, more than ever, it is necessary that we Salesians be convinced that in our ministry to the young two key elements must support the personal spiritual accompaniment we offer them: personalization and discernment.

Empathy Among Those Involved in Mentoring

In the process of accompaniment, one must know how to weave together the primacy of the action of the Holy Spirit in each young person, the responsibility of the young person, and the mediating activity of the one who accompanies.

Spiritual Guides Totally Open to the Surprises of the Spirit Rather than to the Activities

Throughout history, the Church has always offered spiritual direction as a privileged means for growth in the faith and the practice of discernment in the believer's journey to God. She has always insisted that one not put excessive trust in one's abilities and methods, but that trust should be placed in the Spirit who arranges, guides and gives life to all things, the Spirit who

14. Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference, 160-162

after all is the one who accompanies. We sorely need spiritual guides who are trained to detect the activity of God in the life of the young and thus can help them recognize the Divine Presence and allow themselves to be guided by God. Saint John of the Cross has these wise words to say:

Let those who direct souls be aware that in this business they are not the principal agent and guide and mover of souls; rather, it is the Holy Spirit who never abandons them. They should see themselves as mere instruments who help them remain firm in faith and to the law of God, according to the grace God gives to each one. So their concern is not to mold them as they see fit, as copies of themselves; rather they should recognize the path along which God is leading them. And if they are unable to do so, then they should step aside and not disturb them.¹⁵

It is the Spirit who confirms our condition of sons and daughters of God as well as our spiritual identity with Christ in the measure with which we place our absolute trust that He will take possession of and transform our lives. Our life as Christians does not originate in us nor does it end in us: it is born in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

If we do not want the Gospel to be silenced, then this ministry of accompaniment must enable *greater growth of the new creation in Christ*; facilitate one's transformation into a spiritual person (Rom 5:8); and identify with the direction given by the Spirit. As St. Paul says: "Whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (I Cor 6:17). All forms of spiritual accompaniment in the Church are but instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit who "conforms to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29), "until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4: 19). There is a question every believer ought to pose to himself: "Have I made the person of Jesus Christ, whom I love, the project of my life?"¹⁶

For us who exercise this ministry in the service of the Gospel, it would be wise to pause and reflect on what our heart is experiencing. We must not see this as "our work"; rather we must be re-evangelized. It is the Spirit who is our companion in our educative/pastoral work, *the one responsible for the formation of both evangelized and evangelizers*. The Salesian who accompanies must have deep spiritual roots if he is to be a life-giving person.¹⁷ The more

15. San Juan De La Cruz, *Llama de amor viva*, 3. 46.

16. "Ser cristiano", in *Concilium* n. 340 (April 2011).

17. See Andrea Bozzolo and Roberto Carrelli, edd., *Evangelizzazione e Educazione* (Rome: LAS, 2011), 469.

one is aware of the real presence of the Spirit of the Lord,¹⁸ acting in both the one who accompanies and the one being accompanied, the more we can speak of genuine “spiritual” assistance. The Spirit is constantly acting through the word (I Thes 1:5) and in the one who listens (Acts 16:14), nourishing the faith and most assuredly accompanying the believer in times of difficulty.¹⁹

During the period of accompaniment, there will be times, which we may not even be aware of, when the young person’s life may seem to be totally adverse to our expectations. Our mission is to plant seeds and not be discouraged by fatigue and failure. *Others will reap. In many cases, we will not see the fruit.* The accompaniment is a passionate and exciting task, but the results cannot be measured; we do not always see fruit when we would expect or need to see it. We find comfort in knowing that part of the seed will never die. Such is the mystery of the heart of the listener, but it is also the mystery of the secret and living power that is hidden in the seed, which can germinate whether the person is asleep or awake, and can grow far beyond our expectations.

Adopting a New Approach to the Formation of New Generations

The world of the young, be it at continental or national level, is not the same for all. It is the world that resembles an archipelago dotted with so many islands each different from the other, each with its value system. Today, we must admit that it is hard to classify the young within a certain generation. We meet this in our educative and pastoral activity and have found how difficult it is to accompany them, given the many differences that exist among them.

Moreover, we know for certain that *the world of the young is a world lacking in evangelization.*²⁰ Some young people are totally indifferent and have never given religion any importance in their lives. Many have had few opportunities to encounter Jesus Christ in others and to hear the Good News in group gatherings. There are others who have a knowledge of the fundamental teachings and demands of the Gospels, but these have not taken root in their hearts. As a result, they do not question their lifestyle or commitments. Others have had no one to help them to consider an authentic conversion of heart and to plan not only their personal project of life but their Gospel way of life.

18. See Luis Maria Mendizabal, *Dirección espiritual* (Madrid: BAC, 1994), 27.

19. See Gabino Uribarri, *El corazón de la fe. Breve explicación del Credo* (Santander: Editorial Sal Terrae, 2013), 100-116.

20. Joseph Gevaert, *El primer anuncio. Proponer el Evangelio a quien no conoce a Cristo* (Santander: Editorial Sal Terrae, 2004), 23.

Finally, there are some who have allowed other beliefs and spiritualities to infiltrate their faith. Many of these have had their origin in the Far East, what one might consider a *Do-it-yourself*; that is to say, “bricolage spirituality.”²¹

We cannot overlook those young people who suffer from a profound emptiness and depression, seeing no purpose in their lives. Many are *disoriented and vulnerable*, living solitary lives, drowning in their possessions (or their poverty). No young person should be voiceless, tossed aside, without dignity. Although one’s life may appear to be in total disarray, he still needs our attention and friendship. These are precisely the persons who somehow are crying for our attention, in need of someone who will walk with them and restore their hopes.

In our pastoral ministry, we live among the young who come from diverse backgrounds and cultures, all of which have shaped their religious outlook. In any case, we as mentors are called to help shape the personal identity of the new generations identifying ourselves with the plan of the God to whom they pray and with the world in which they live. We can no longer present them with “*a model to imitate*”; today we invite the young to try, to “*experiment with Christian values*”. For some years now, in our method of accompaniment, we offered the young, only one model of Christian life; the values and conduct were the same for everyone. There were few teachings, and these were the intended for everyone. Today we must appeal to their feelings and emotions, to their hearts where they savor things. Only after they have “*found the treasure*” will they sell everything to find it; first, they must find it by themselves. Here we are dealing with a proven fact: unless there is a good reason, the young refuse to renounce what they perceive as part of their identity. A few examples are the things they love; their relationships; friends; caring for each other; deep sharing; and their concern for what happens to their companions.²² We want to help them come to taste the goodness of Jesus because we do believe this will lead them to taste the goodness of life.

21. Elisenda Ardèvol Piera and Glòria Munilla Cabrillana, *Antropología de la religión: una aproximación interdisciplinar a las religiones antiguas y contemporáneas* (Barcelona: Editorial UOC, 2003), 434-455.

22. See Maria Jesus Fuentes Rebollo and Maria Angeles Melero, “Evolucion y funciones de las amistades en la infancia y la adolescencia”, in Antonia M. González Cuenca, Maria Luisa De La Morena, and Carmen Barajas, *Psicología del Desarrollo. Teoría y practicas*, (Malaga: Aljibe S.L., 2006), 303-314; José A. Fuertes Martin, José L. Martínez Álvarez, and Amparo Hernández, “Relaciones de amistad y competencias en las relaciones con los iguales en la Adolescencia”, in *Revista de Psicología General y Aplicada*, 2001, 54 (3), 531-546.

When they experience the Lord Jesus in their life, they will reach out and open themselves to discipleship.

It stands to reason that we cannot rely on ready-made solutions. Whatever happens in their lives is a call from God to live their Christian vocation. The formation of the young generations is not, and cannot be, a linear, standardized, one-size process. This pastoral relationship must be adapted to the individual. While we may have a clear image of Christian living as presented in the Gospel, there are *other paths which can lead to the same goal*, with many *doors* through which one can enter and through which one can leave.

Just as the year has its cycle of seasons, so the life of a young person has different mood changes. The human soul must journey through various stages. So a youth needs a personal mentor who understands his cultural background and will not treat him as a subject of some well-planned experiment. What he does need is a mentor who helps him embrace his faith with courage and audacity. Of course, in this one-to-one relationship with the young, there must be some internal and spiritual discipline if one is to hear God's call and firmly believe that in his unfathomable love, God dwells in each of us. It is not a question of "copying and pasting" together many different emotional experiences from day to day that leave no imprint. A wise Salesian educator knows how to accompany and help his brothers see their life through God's eyes. This accompaniment is the best thing that we can offer in our pastoral ministry.

This type of accompaniment demands changes not only in the evangelizer but within every Salesian house as well. The reality of today's world is presenting us another challenge. It demands that our Houses offer opportunities for service and accompaniment. It is true that in our Salesian tradition there already exists in the group and the environment a certain level of accompaniment, but we *need to challenge every youngster, personally*. Our Salesian Houses do create an environment in which one breathes in certain values, attitudes and habits; but for the Christian identity to have profound and healthy roots, it must be a personal journey.

When there is openness in a relationship, the subjects can more easily share their life story with the greatest sincerity.²³ When this is absent, the

23. See "Compagni di viaggio", in *Note di Pastorale giovanile* 31 (1997) 4, monographic issue.

further growth of the person's world is left to the mercy of the other clusters that surround him: social networks²⁴, peers, and the streets.

Mentors Exposed to Vulnerability

The Appropriate Word: Witness

Without a doubt, we can describe the young as sociable and outgoing, open, at times even to the extreme. If we want to be on their wavelength, we must share the journey with them, “be there”, offer a presence that demands vulnerability and exposure to the winds of tomorrow.

The young must be able to “see” persons who are joyful, beautiful and attractive, within reach, who fascinate them. They are not attracted to abstract and distant ideals. They have experienced first-hand the untidy adult world; like radar, they detect our inconsistencies.²⁵ They are more understanding than we can suppose. We must expose ourselves to the winds of the moment, confident that we can be on their wavelength. We are aware that there will be successes and failures. At times the things they must put up with are beyond our grasp. They raise questions in our minds and force us to see things in a different way. We are called to live the theological virtues while walking with them,²⁶ above all by loving them, letting them see that we hope with them, sharing our faith with them.

We, educators, are not the principal agents; at times it is not easy for us to believe that the best advice we can give is our witness. It is contagious. It is offering, in a coherent and believable way, a liberating lifestyle, a message that can take flesh in the here and now. When visiting a museum or historical city, we know very well that our interest depends mainly on how passionate our guide is. Accompaniment will bear fruit if the mentor, not the structures, gives witness to his faith by his profound joy. To walk alongside another is beautiful and life-giving, for “one's person becomes a sign” of the Kingdom.

24. The Short Message Service (SMS) and Microsoft Network (MSN) were devised to improve communication in the business world, not for the young. Yet the younger generations have used them with great success in their hunger for communication and contact. The cell phone makes it possible to be in constant contact with someone. Indeed, this technology is not only for communication, it also helps one be part of the crowd.

25. See Pedro José Gómez Serrano, *Nos sobran los motivos. Una invitación al cristianismo* (Madrid: Promoción Popular Cristiana, 2011).

26. Cf. Jean-Marie. Petitclerc, *Como hablar de Dios a los jóvenes* (Madrid: Editorial CCS, 2005).

All of the above is a reminder that every study shows that, for young adults, the relationship holds the absolute primacy of all their values. For that reason, dialogue and warm friendship become even more necessary precisely in those socio-cultural areas where human emotions have become the daily bread of television programs and magazines that cater to the masses. We do not need those frequent and superficial encounters that fuel one's feelings. Yes, brief daily encounters are of great importance especially when they are meaningful. We need those chance moments when we *listen with the heart, ask profound questions, and share our dreams*.²⁷ We can no longer do all the talking while the young person merely listens.

Don Bosco had his gaze filled with a fatherly love that won the attention of the youngster and conveyed acceptance and respect, and he showed it through his care, mannerisms, words, smiles. These daily expressions of Salesian affection are just as valuable today: don't be in a hurry, listen carefully, take their questions seriously. It is not enough to hear; we must give all our attention. As mentors, we cannot give the impression that we are like those businesspeople whose lives are controlled by timetables and tasks. The young deserve our time and attention. Listen to all their questions "because unless we have listened to them we will be unable to give answers. We cannot listen only to those questions for which we do have answers."²⁸ Furthermore, if our answer has no meaning for them, they will forget it. They are hungry for something we can give them: that we walk with them on their journey. Our Salesian literature has made frequent reference to the Emmaus text (Lk 24: 13-35), placing before us a method that facilitates spiritual growth, vocational accompaniment and training for one who chooses to be a mentor for the young.

The mentor's spiritual direction is not all that is needed. This direction only helps the discernment process, which implies that there will be difficult moments, crosses, pain, feelings of helplessness together with moments of enlightenment, and joy, all of which are an experience of the Paschal Mystery. Mentoring is not a question of reaching a finish line and winning the race.

27. See Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publications, 2000).

28. Louis-Marie Billé, "Conference d'ouverture" in *Des Temps nouveaux pour l'Évangile. Assemblée Plénierer, Lourdes 2000* (Paris : Bayard-Centurion/Cerf/Heurs, 2011), 21.

Offer Something New: Accompaniment is an Apostolate

If we are to be spiritual guides for the young, we need to deepen our spirituality. Ours must be a mature faith. To guide a young adult towards a personal faith, helping him to learn how to listen and discover God's plan for his life, is both an art and science. In his book *El Valor de Educar*, Francisco Sabater writes that the adult mentor is like the wall and the ivy: without the wall, the ivy will remain on the ground.

There are books and formation courses, but an experience is always the best teacher: "the spiritual journey is a life experience which can never be substituted by books".²⁹ In this ministry, *the mentor must have made his own journey through the twists and turns of life and faith*. Before undertaking this ministry, every mentor must ask himself: *Am I prepared to respond to a need, which I have already answered for myself: an honest searching for God? Am I willing to share my experience with total generosity, at the beck and call of the young? If I am to call on Jesus, should I have not hungered for him, searched for him, discovered him within myself before calling upon him?*

A pastoral agent must understand that accompaniment is a ministry of mercy and requires intellectual, emotional and moral flexibility. Above all, one must own up to his sinfulness and recognize how God has acted in his life. It is important that he see himself as a prodigal son (Lk 15: 11-32) who is returning to his Father's home without any merit of his own. We mentors must admit that we are more unfaithful than we think and that God is more faithful than we deserve.

As was mentioned above, accompaniment is an act of faith in the Holy Spirit, who is at work in the heart of both subjects. For that reason, he who places himself in the hands of the mentor is at the same time entrusting himself to his prayers. The mentor often prays, standing before God in grateful silence, seeing everything through the eyes of God, surrendering control, sharing in the difficult times, the dark nights, the weakness of the young. Silent prayer is not only important; it is essential. We must examine whether or not there is a strong connection between our life and our prayer. It is the prayer that sustains and nourishes an authentic, personal relationship with God and helps keep the flame of love burning. Whoever accompanies another's life of faith with mere techniques and emotional support rather than with prayer will be operating on the level of sound relational psychology.³⁰

29. Luis M. Garcia Dominguez, *El libro del discipulo. El acompañamiento espiritual* (Cantabria/Bilbao: Editorial Sal Terrae/ Mensajero, 2011), 14.

30. Jesus Diaz Baizan, *El acompañamiento espiritual de los jóvenes* (Vitoria: Frontera, 1999).

What is needed more than anything else in the mentor is a profound and transparent spirituality.

If we, as companions, are prayerful, we will be able to *share our place and time with the young* and offer something new. This sharing will not be just another activity, or a waste of time. Rather it is a genuine pastoral ministry, and not an extra activity. Our experience as Salesian shepherds tells us that when we open the window into our life, we will be surrounded by many people and will have to face lots of fatigue and struggles – but we will be filled with lots of oxygen.

It is in this sense that accompaniment is a service that we must make available to the entire Educative-Pastoral Community. To be successful, the Salesian or lay person must keep two things in mind:

[a] *Don't look for high numbers*; rather, be grateful for the progress made by those who come.³¹ We must look into the soul of our educative-pastoral presences. Our houses are not Salesian because of the significant numbers that frequent them, the number of activities, their advanced technology or their high level of performance. What makes them Salesian is the “why”, the motives, the purpose and meaning of what we offer to every person who enters.

[b] We are qualified not because we have good will and enthusiasm but because we *train ourselves for this specific ministry*. The accompaniment is also educative. It is true that the witness we give is of great importance; but we must also be aware that we are teaching, following a certain methodology, and possess the necessary teaching skills which make possible a careful reading of a person's life. One is not born a mentor; he becomes a mentor. One might possess the necessary skills, but of themselves, they do not constitute sufficient preparation.

Nor is “common sense” sufficient. We need a discerning eye together with knowledge of the human sciences, if we are to go beyond appearances and external motivations and behaviors. One must deal with human and spiritual dimensions in a way that leads to a mature response and clarifies one's motivations for opting for the Christian way of living. It is a question of helping a person to know his inner self, accept himself as he is, change what needs to be changed, and arrive at a maturity that is based on his real self, not on illusions. This passage requires a pedagogy that springs from “the heart.”

31. Koldo Gutierrez, “Alegrías, tristezas y anhelos de un agente de pastoral”, in *Mision Joven* 332 (Septiembre 2004), 15-21

It is undeniable that we have not been trained to be mentors in a way that responds to the situation of today's young people. Much has been written, more than enough has been said, but much has yet to be done. We need more formation programs. The existing ones are not very well attended. We do not give sufficient time to train mentors for the times in which we live. We are too "involved" in what we are doing in the various activities we have with the young. We have to be convinced of the need and importance of formation, finding the times, places and programs so that we can be effective mentors.

Let us add one more reason to why mentors are exposed to vulnerability.

The Need to Avoid Burnout in the Mentor

The prevention of burnout in those involved in ministry is a huge challenge for all our Church's institutions. At times it appears that we are so preoccupied with the survival of our groups, the number of vocations, our apostolic works, the mission, that we forget or push aside the other objectives. We who are called to accompany others as they grow in their faith and humanity run the risk of neglecting ourselves. There seems to be a mechanism or barrier that prevents us from blending our Christian spirituality with love and care of ourselves, assuming responsibility for our physical, psychological and spiritual needs. This prevention points to a lack of integration between human and Christian maturity on both the theoretical and practical levels, which is not the same as minimizing the uniqueness of the Christian way of life, nor identifying the spiritual life with psychology. There still lurk in our memories some of the adverse effects resulting from the dualistic concepts regarding the spiritual life.

We do find in many pastoral agents an enormous lack of care for themselves and in many cases, lack of concern for the members of their community and associations, as if this concern were meant only for the persons beyond family and group ties, the people we minister to.

There is, then, the danger of losing awareness of ourselves, of what matters most to us, of a part of our deepest selves. Therefore, every educative-pastoral *Salesian presence is responsible* for evaluating and adapting the structures of the institution in a way that this self-awareness objective is met. Care for our evangelizers is as important as are the objectives of our mission. The young bring with them their problems, at times overwhelming, with no solution in sight. All this can be emotionally draining for the mentor,³² leaving him exhausted, falling into the trap of demanding of himself more than he can

32. See Monika Gruhl, *El secreto de las personas fuertes: la resiliencia* (Santander: Editorial Sal Terrae, 2012); Terry Hershey, *El poder de la pausa. Como ser mas haciendo menos* (Santander: Editorial Sal Terrae 2010); and Gabino Uribarri, *El mensajero. Perfiles*

handle. This excess of pastoral ministry can at times drown the “*music and the poetry*” which characterize our mission of evangelization, and there is the risk that it becomes sterile.

Enter as a Guest for Time

Every person whom we accompany has his dignity that must be respected as such. Consequently, our accompaniment aims to guide and to stimulate the young person to enhance his being and his way of life. This guidance must be done with full respect towards his liberty. Young people do not want to be manipulated; they want someone willing *to visit them in their heart as a temporary guest and not a permanent one.*

This spiritual accompaniment deals with what is most personal, intimate and sacred in the person, and so it does not exempt us from respecting his freedom.³³ *We are invited to enter with the greatest delicacy*; we enter humbly knowing that we were invited, and only as a companion along the person’s journey. As stated above, the Spirit is the source of life and the only guide of a Christian. It is the Spirit who indicates the path, leads and gives the needed strength. No one can replace Him. We are witnessing the realization of the story of salvation in a person’s history. For this reason in our pastoral activity, we must become individuals who are prudent and patient and know when to listen. These vital aspects will protect us from three temptations: a rigorism that discourages, childish complacency and paternalism that is intent on reproducing one’s life project in the other. The mentor is not a master; rather, he collaborates in the mystery of the young person’s life: “Not that we lord it over your faith; rather, we work together for your joy...” (I Cor 1:24).

From all of the above, it is clear that the mentor must make himself dispensable. His will be a brief moment in the young adult’s life; his mission is to enable the young person to become autonomous, able to assume responsibility for his life. The mentor must know when he is no longer

del evangelizador, Biblioteca Teología Comillas ed. (Madrid: Universida Pontificia and Desclée De Brouwer, 2006).

33. The call becomes one’s personal journey that requires accompaniment, the art of walking side by side, of knowing how to raise questions and search for the answers (See Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 69-173). There is need of faith-filled fathers and mothers whom others can trust, with authority, at the same time respectful of the person’s spiritual life; mentors who respect the “sacred ground” of the other and before whom they must remove their sandals (Ex. 3:5). Mentoring can possibly lead one to a faith experience, however it can never be forced upon the person. There is no life of faith that can be transferred to another. Each one is unique.

needed and how to bow out graciously. *This last step is not always a pleasant one*, but the mentor must know when to surrender to the Lord this task which he had fulfilled with all his heart.

Accompaniment in Salesian Youth Ministry: Many Different Paths

Our young people come from many different backgrounds and faith experiences and for various reasons. It is not enough that we implement various formation programs according to various age groups; we need to adapt them to fit each individual:³⁴ carefully thought out, appealing to the young, and updated.

There is a wealth of new materials and formats that are proving successful in leading a young person to greater maturity. The many movements in the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have shown the importance of their pastoral activity, each according to its charism, faithful to the Gospel. So, here we will focus on four key areas that are basic in all Salesian youth ministry.

Mentoring for the Salesian is an integral part of all those elements that constitute Salesian youth holiness,³⁵ a path that leads the young person to a full life, helping him to adopt a lifestyle that will bear the likeness of Jesus of Nazareth as we see it in Don Bosco. There are many priorities in the areas of education and ministry that merit our attention since they do enrich the growth process in the present generation. We will sketch just a few pastoral methods which we must hold dear; they have been tried, approved and seconded in our Salesian experiences. They are, as it were, a “treasury of the tried and true”,³⁶ available for everyone according to the distinctive needs of the individual.

Accompaniment: Exploring the Complexity of the Inner Life

When mentoring, we must find ways to involve the young in experiences which help mold their Christian person: initiatives and group activities which reach into their hearts, raising deep questions. Whatever we offer them must be crystal clear and challenging, reasonable, and attractive, yet in keeping with our objectives so that we can reach into their hearts. It is essential that we keep in mind and stress the value of the interior experiences of the Christian; these experiences free the individual so that he drinks from “his well.” In our

34. Frame of Reference, 107-111 and 293.

35. See “The Preventive System: A Spiritual and Educational Experience” in Salesian Youth Ministry. Frame of Reference.

36. Riccardo Tonelli, “Tambien la pastoral procede por proyectos y programaciones?” in *Mision Joven* 353, May 2006.

contact with the young, ours must be “a presence which does not violate their silence but makes them feel comfortable. Rather than draw them out from themselves, we give them the opportunity to listen to their own calling”.³⁷ As a help, we suggest three guidelines.

[a] First of all, take care that the eyes of faith be opened to *the contemplation of beauty and the ability to wonder*. We must be able to appreciate the beauty of creation each day, how to wonder about the meaning of life; savor moments of curiosity and interest in world events, This attitude gives rise to sentiments of gratitude, knowing how to be grateful for so much that is freely given. Life itself is a gift given to us at our birth and a gift which at our death we must willingly give to the One who gave us life.³⁸

[b] Second we must make allowance for moments of silence,³⁹ for moments of soul-searching. Many young people who have never searched their soul, hunger for the opportunity to find the proper words, to put some balance into their lives so that they can know their inner selves and others as well, and to get in touch with the mystery of God, who is the “Greatest Love.” Since we live in a noise-polluted world, it is important that we learn how to enter periods of silence, difficult as that may be. Our culture has no tolerance for silence, which is sadly a symptom of spiritual emptiness, a sign of the inability of modern man to enter himself and wrestle with the question of the meaning of his life.⁴⁰ One current practice is that of putting on paper one’s history, including one’s thoughts and trying to find their meaning. Journaling is a private affair that reveals the history of one’s journey with God. This personal autobiography and life project are an entrance to flesh and blood spirituality and inner growth. Appropriate spiritual exercises give direction to one’s life and prepare the person to entrust himself freely to God’s will.

[c] Finally, give importance to the *personal colloquy*, an excellent part of pedagogy. It is a way to adapt the process to the individual, heal wounds, to help the young to hear the voice of the Spirit, and redirect his life’s choices. Because it is a personal relationship, it helps to avoid routine. It is not meant to waste time, nor to speak of trivial things. The focus of this moment must be the psychosocial, existential and spiritual formation of the person, all of

37. Marcel Légaut, *El hombre en busca de su humanidad* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 1973), 392.

38. See Salesian Youth Ministry. *Frame of Reference*, 103 and 172.

39. Benedict XVI in his Exhortation *Verbum Domini* reminds us that in our dark moments God speak in Mystery of silence (see n. 21).

40. See Francesc Torralba Rosello, *El silencio, un reto educativo* (Madrid: PPC, 1999).

it oriented towards God. As we have stated above, this ministry to the young whom we serve, if they are to grow in the faith, demands that we are present in their midst, be well-trained and know the workings of the human soul.

There is an urgent need for companions, who are capable of helping the young, to deal with the things that overwhelm them. For example, the emotional experiences that hurt and confuse them and the suffering and the death of a loved one. Also, the anguish caused by uncertainties and the need for answers; the need for solace; prayer that apparently no one listens to; the yearning and the deceit of their own heart; and failures that are both theirs and those of others.⁴¹ All of these problems are like swords which raise new questions, hunger, and hopes. It is precisely in this context that the faith of the young develops, changes, is assimilated, is strengthened or weakened. The nature of the Christian vocation, the uniqueness of the journey and the inevitable dangers require a guide, a mentor. It is, therefore, tough for one's faith to deepen without a periodic tête-à-tête conversation, nor is one possible without a mentor.

Accompaniment: Learning to Pray and to Celebrate the Sacraments

To *know* that God loves us is not the same as to experience that sentiment and to savor that love.⁴² Whoever has been blessed with the experience of God's graciousness finds it so easy to "surrender" and then become a prayerful person.

[a] Faith shows itself in various ways which are a faith-filled reading of one's life, always with God at the center even when it means embracing negative experiences. The fact is, the spirituality of Christian discipleship requires, first of all, that one makes his *a life of prayer* (not just brief moments of prayer) and in which God give life back to the dead (Ezek. 37:10). The mentor must then be always attentive to the different ways God speaks. This communication may occur through the Scriptures and the sacraments; in the newspaper as well as in the poor person, in the community, in the depths of one's own heart. In short, the mentor learns how to interpret life in a different way as a believer.⁴³

And so the voice of God heard in the prayerful reading of the Word is of great importance in this ministry. It means making the proclaimed

41. José Ramón Urbieto Jócana, *Exigencia y ternura* (Madrid: PPC, 2009).

42. See Salesian Youth Ministry. *Frame of Reference*, 50-52.

43. See Giorgio Zevini, "Educare alla preghiera 'in spirito e verità' ", in *Accompagnare i giovani nello Spirito*, Jesus Manuel Garcia, ed. (Rome: LAS 1998), 141-164.

Word come alive in the young, introducing them to meditation, which then becomes prayer and action, fruitful in the midst of the day's tasks, celebrated in liturgical and sacramental life, a gift of God, received in Jesus through his Spirit. The Word then becomes an integral part of one's history, affecting one's inner life and affectivity. We must help them learn how to listen in a way that makes the Word life-giving, avoiding superficial interpretations; give them the freedom to ask questions; walk with them as they enter the path that brings them to Jesus Christ. In other words, it is only the Word that can open the *door that leads to faith* (see Acts 15: 27).

The sacraments enjoy a privileged place. We know how much importance Don Bosco gave to the Eucharist and Reconciliation. For him, they were indispensable means for the education of the young to the faith. Through those signs, God's priceless action becomes visible in their life.

In Don Bosco's mind and pastoral ministry, *the Eucharist is the Bread meant for everyone*, a genuine encounter with Jesus. He encourages his boys to "greet" Him often, the friend who invites us to the table which satisfies our hunger (for friendship, inner strength, the answer to life's questions). Moreover, the Eucharist compels us to enter communion with everyone, to nurture an apostolic heart that reaches out in service to others. To draw near the Word and the Eucharist is to accept a commitment which embraces the entire day. The altar is just a starting point. The hands which receive that Bread must be transformed into tools that build the family, the community, the Church. We must work hand in hand if we are to understand that the Eucharist is not only a time for silence, reflection, and intimacy. It is also a celebration, music, and learning to live responsibly from childhood onwards. To this end, Don Bosco is convinced of the efficacy that a First Communion, well prepared and celebrated, has on the child. It was what he experienced with his mother.

For Don Bosco, the sacrament of Reconciliation has a powerful spiritual effect, which is why he insists that the boys choose a permanent confessor. He asks them to be honest, transparent, and trusting. He invites them to have this "loyal friend of the soul", to seek help and peace in this celebration of forgiveness and love. He was convinced that when Christ forgives a person his sins, there is a celebration. To be pardoned by the Lord *is a liberating experience filling the person with joy*: the joy of the forgiven, of those who have become reconciled, those who have been created anew, thanks to God' love.

Accompaniment: Living the Faith within the Community

Jesus proposes to us in the Gospel is relational in nature (that is, to live as sons/daughters, as brothers and servants). Therefore, it is of extreme

importance that, within our religious community, we must be totally open to each other,⁴⁴ walking together, and united by the same faith. This way of living together, of course, demands respectful participation on the part of all.

[a] The community must create times and places for relaxation where through dialogue and sharing friendships are formed and strengthened, and mutual respect grows. The result is the opportunity for reflection, self-analysis, and personal growth.⁴⁵

[b] These moments, when frequent, enrich community prayer and ongoing formation and at the same time strengthen friendships. However, there is another goal, the practice of **communal discernment**: “Test everything; retain what is good” (I Thes 5: 20), as St. Paul says. This Pauline proposition is an excellent foundation on which any group can build. We must be clear as to what we want to achieve, which in Christian parlance is to know what God asks of us. However, the voice of the community must also be heard; this, of course, requires time and a method. We must examine ourselves in the presence of God if we wish to know whether or not our decisions are in compliance with our evangelical mission and if they are in tune with the mind of the Church, community life and the needs of today’s world.

Community discernment is an important practice in every faith community. It is a concrete and efficient expression of faith and essential if the community is to develop its belief further. To create community, a group or a parish has to be willing to share all doubts, weaknesses, defects, fatigue, oddities, hurts, traumatic experiences, egoism, and poverty. Through the centuries Christian tradition has adopted many practical aids for healthy community living: the a review of life, the Christian reading of the signs of the times, retreats, methods of discernment, get-togethers, et cetera. Community discernment becomes a **school of Christian life**, a path leading to brotherly love, corresponsibility, and involvement in the neighborhood. All of this

44. See The contributions by various authors in Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca – Instituto Superior de Pastoral, *Revitalizar las comunidades cristianas hoy*, XXII Semana de Teología pastoral (Estella: Editorial VerboDivino, 2011).

45. Jose Joaquin Cerezo, Pedro Juan Gomez Serran, *Jovenes e Iglesia: caminos para el reencuentro* (Madrid: PPC, 2006).

builds the Church into a community of brothers and sisters, all of them with the same dignity, but each with his talents and tasks.

Accompaniment: Experiences which Spur Us on to Service and a Love for that Which is of Essence

There remains one more matter to consider. The film *Of Gods and Men* tells the story of seven French Cistercian monks in 1996. Their community resides in a monastery that lies in the mountains of Algeria. They are a small presence of the Church in a land which is entirely Islamic. For decades they have been accepted by the people of the village, their presence appreciated especially because of their care for the sick, their visits to homes and their products sold in the market. In the midst of the burgeoning religious fanaticism in Algeria, one armed radical group begins to spread panic in the region, assassinating both foreigners and peasants. Every day the situation becomes more dangerous; as a result, the community senses that persecution is near. They prepare for the worst: the community prays and begins to discern what they should do. One night the radicals barge into the monastery for the second time and take the monks at gunpoint to what will be their final destiny. The outcome went viral on May 21 in that same year. What we see here is a tragedy embraced by the victims, who chose to be witnesses rather than to escape. The film shows how passion and fear mingle in the hearts of these God-fearing men who allow themselves to be swept by the current of history towards the precipice of a violent death. Well, what does this say to us?

One point for reflection: Everyone encounters all manners of difficulties. To surrender one's life in these cases does not involve choice or obligation. Whatever our response might be, it is not heroism; it means being authentic. It is important that we know how to distinguish between what is necessary for our well-being (not do so would be foolish) and what is *essential to the meaning of life*.⁴⁶ We live in a culture of passive consumers. For us, this is a challenge to plot out a path with the young towards the "*culture of what*

46. Consumerism is one of the pillars supporting today's world, and like the culture of the ego it is a god unto itself. With each passing day businesses and conglomerates view the young as a captive market. "Adolescents. The last Emperor" (2006) a study made by TNS World Panel, a business that specializes in panels dealing with consumerism, concludes that six years ago Spanish young adults spent two € 2,400 million on clothing and shoes, which is almost 10% of the entire Spanish market. Clearly the fashion is one of their priorities and a way in which they project their exterior image, and it is important since it defines the group to which they belong and in which they are accepted. The brand names define their identity.

is essential” and which keeps open the door to God’s Providence. That is, “the space” which God has reserved for our lives. If the Christian life is a “dream” far beyond the ordinary, then we need a faith which is more than the ordinary. One’s life of faith is not present only in the heart; it must be seen in one’s openness to what life presents.

Compassion is the criterion by which one’s inner life is judged to be authentic. Compassion is not a feeling. It is something much deeper, its roots in the depths of the heart. From a soul that is open to what is essential in life are born true Gospel experiences, missionary hearts, and actions with a social outreach and generous solidarity benefitting the poor. All of this activity will involve lots of people and real problems, whether personal or communal. The young must be deeply moved by the situation of the poor, do a group analysis of their condition and share their feelings and other possible activities. We are called to give life, “*build up hope*” in this world where death (of the human being and the ecosystem) leaves behind so much pain. Accompaniment (like the Gospel) is first of all a school for us humans, where we learn a new way to live.

Our mission as apostles of the young is to give life, protect it, defend it from so many threats, and struggle to secure the “quality of life” for everyone. We must ensure that all can “sit at the table of the Lord,” words uttered by one of the monks in *Of Gods and Men*. All of this has to do with the radical approach of the Gospel as the only way to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. This radical approach is not just a strategy useful for the formation of the young. It is the experience of Christian love shared in peak moments, in extraordinary acts of solidarity. It is the accompaniment of the new birth of a new apostle who is searching for Jesus, follows Him and remains at His side.

Conclusion

In these times, it is imperative that we train mentors for teenagers and young adults. Cardinal Godfried Danneels, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, described this beautiful charism as a one that creates occasions and the energy needed for accompanying today’s young:

The Christian in the world is like a trout caught in the current of a fast-flowing river: it always swims against the current and is the symbol of a counterculture. The trout remains in the water; it does not leave it. It endures in a state of continual resistance. It is not deterred by the struggle. The water is not a bother; in fact, the trout relies on the water so it can advance towards the source. The obstacles act like a trampoline. The Christian is another voice that clashes with contemporary culture: he does not sit comfortably at the water’s edge like a mere spectator. The Christian gets involved in politics, carefully selects his music and amusement, respects his sexuality, defends the family. He sees the value of

science and technology, believes in the future and has high hopes despite the obstacles. The Christian swims against the current.⁴⁷

47. Godfried Danneels, "La Evangelizacion de los jovenes" in *Documentos de Iglesia* 793 (2002).